

# MODERN THAI POETICS: PRIDE AND PURPOSE IN MODERN POETRY

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## Abstract

The study aims to consider the nature of modern Thai poetics, in particular, poetry concerning the expression or declaration of the poet's sense of pride and purpose or role as a poet.

This type of poetry has been an important part of Thai literary convention since the Ayuddhya period (more than 200 years). Through the long history of poetry, this convention still holds an obvious influence over contemporary poets of today, as can be seen in the works of various major poets.

The study will cover the works of Ujjeni, Angkhan Kalayanaphong, Naowarat Phongphaibun, Phaiwarin Khaongam, Saksiri Misomsuep and Raekham Pradoikhom. These poets, despite their different world-views, compose poetry of 'declaration' in their works in various styles. Some poets emphasize their philosophy of poetic beauty and some emphasize their 'ideal' and 'pride' as poets.

Through an investigation of the works of these poets, we will see how the poets view themselves, what they consider to be

'ideal' in their works and their 'obligation' to others.

From a thorough study, we should be able to establish to what extent Thai poetics have changed and whether these changes affect the literary judgement of the readers, and in turn create a new foundation for a modern convention relative to the present and the future.

## Introduction

The paper aims to consider the nature of modern Thai poetics --in particular, poetry concerning the expression or declaration of the poet's pride and purpose or role as a poet.

The study will cover the works of prominent contemporary Thai poets Ujjeni, Angkhan Kalayanaphong, Naowarat Phongphaibun, Phaiwarin Khaongam, Saksiri Misomsuep and Raekham Pradoikhom.

## Classical Thai Poetics: The Importance of Literary Conventions

Students of Thai literature, when making themselves familiar with Thai classical poetry, soon discover the importance of literary conventions in the texts. This importance can be clearly illustrated through the texts of poetry from the early Ayuddhya period to the early Rattanakosin

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period (C15th - C19th). Both the form and the content of the work is highly 'controlled' by the conventions and yet it is surprising to observe how the poets seem to acquiesce to rather than rebel against these conventions.

It is believed that Thai literary conventions are much influenced by Indian poetics, i.e. by Pali and Sanskrit literature. However, it is not the concern of this paper to trace or to prove these beliefs.

Our concern here is the part of Thai literary conventions that relates to the poet's 'declaration' of his name, the purpose of the work and the pride of the poet as the creator of great work.

These conventions appear in masterpieces of Thai poetry such as works by Yuan-Phai, Lilit Phra Lo, Kamsuan Khlong Dan, Prince Thammathibet and Sunthon Phu.

If we trace back to the Pali literature, we may find the origin of this convention. It is a Buddhist custom for a poet to compose a *Pranamma Katha* as a prologue to his work, paying homage to the Three Sacred Gems and giving the name and position of the poet or some detail of the story of Lord Buddha's life. As an epilogue, the poet usually composes *Uthit Katha*, declaring the purpose of his work and expressing a dedication of the work.

It is believed that poets in the early Ayuddhya period may have been influenced by this Buddhist custom in Pali literature through the great poets of Lanna, as the two kingdoms of Ayuddhya and Lanna were closely related culturally throughout that period.

## Modern Thai Poetry and Modern Conventions

The focus of this study is to investigate the convention of modern poets regarding the 'declaration' of their pride and purpose in their works.

### Ujjeni: Poetry of Inspiration for a Better World.

Ujjeni is a senior poet in the domain of modern poetry. Her work, though not in abundance, is a strong influence on the younger generation of poets. In her unique and celebrated collection of poetry *Khop Fa Khlip Thong (The Golden Horizon)*, we find the poem "Higher Up". This poem is an exquisite description of the grace and the beauty of poetry in the poet's mind, as well as a proud declaration of the poet's commitment to others.

#### *Higher Up*

*Like a crystal stream of light  
Smiling to admire the radiant dawn  
A brilliant spring dancing up high  
Like a rainbow descending the sky*

*Higher up, higher up, undaunted,  
Devotion and passion immeasurable  
Under fierce sunshine or heavy rain  
The heart of lasting faith prevails!*

*The pure crystal spring smiling  
Dancing to the soft sweet breeze  
Delicate as a wild flower  
Listening to the breeze's lullaby!*

*When night falls with all stars a-shining  
The crystal spring overcomes the stars  
Glittering with divine radiance  
Mocking brilliant diamonds of the sky!*



*Its sweetness and gentleness  
A divine gift for the dark land  
Showering joys and delights around  
To quench and to cleanse all evils!*

*The pure heart of a poet  
As pure and as magnificent  
Aiming high for beauty and truth  
With integrity of a proud heart!  
Higher up, higher up  
Great goodness of sweet words  
A stream of lasting hope  
The poet's ever lasting love!*

Ujjeni  
from *Khop Fa Khlip Thong*  
translated by  
Suchitra Chongstitvatana

This text indicates that one of the main purposes of poetry is to use purity of the poet's heart to quench the thirst of the less fortunate and to cleanse all the evils of the 'dark land'.

The metaphor of poetry as a spring –so pure and powerful going up as high as heaven –is unique in Thai literary conventions and yet is not alien to the root of Thai culture where water is worshipped as the goddess of life– kindly giving to all with unbounded compassion.

This metaphor emphasizes the noble obligation of the poet to be an idealist with a brave virtuous heart. The creation of poetry, for the poet, is an act of benevolence to help change the world for the better.

When we consider the content of Ujjeni's works, we can clearly see that the message of benevolence is strongly conveyed throughout. She writes about the poor, the less fortunate and the idealists, using symbols from nature such as the sun, the

moon, the star, the rain, the wind and the rainbow. Through these symbols, Ujjeni inspires the idealists to go on fighting and at the same time she consoles the less fortunate to keep faith in goodness and justice.

The beneficial aspect of poetry in the ideal betterment of the world is also emphasized differently in various works of later poets. One poet who passionately believes in the benevolence of the art of poetry is Angkhan Kalayanaphong.

### **Angkhan Kalayanaphong: Poetry of Spiritual Salvation**

Among contemporary Thai poets, Angkhan is perhaps the most concerned about the commitment of poets and the 'sacredness' of the art of poetry.

He has composed a large number of poems with 'declarations' of his love and devotion to poetry. The following translation is from his first collection of poetry, *Kawiniphon Khong Angkhan Kalayanaphong (Poetry of Angkhan Kalayanaphong)*.

#### *The Poet's Resolution*

*The sky I wrap around me  
Keeping warm amidst cold nights  
The lights of glittering stars I savor  
As my daily bowl of rice  
The dew of heaven I drink  
To compose verse-streams  
Of ever lasting poetry!*

*The heart I sacrifice as a grave  
The soul roaming afar to heaven  
Searching divine bliss to the Earth  
To console the sand and the grass  
Rendering happiness and joys!*



*I write to salvage the soul  
Amidst the torrent of fierce Time  
Life is a fleeting illusion  
Still my heart will defy all  
Shining with ever-lasting bliss!*

*My body will be burnt away  
Yet my poesie will remain  
How many lives I am born again  
A proud poet I will always be  
Glittering like invaluable gems!*

*The dance of letters is a pure joy  
As heavenly rain soothing the heart  
The soul soaring high to lands of dreams  
Savoring fragrances of this world  
And the next world of no end!*

*Gladly I'll give up my life  
For a purely exquisite creation  
The art of poetry shall be sacred  
Like flowers of heaven falling down  
To ever charm the world of ours!*

Angkhan Kalayanaphong  
1959 Thonburi  
from *Kawiniphon*  
translated by  
Suchitra Chongstitvatana

This poem is perhaps Angkhan's most famous work, though he later composed a similar poem with the same title (yet in a different verse form) in 1970. We will concentrate first on this text of 1959 and then move on to consider other texts of the poet.

In the above poem, the poet describes clearly his pride and purpose or role as a poet. The beginning of the poem illustrates the poet's status as a 'non-ordinary' human being. Angkhan's poet

lives on divine and pure elements of nature such as starlight and dew, and his attire is simple and noble -the sky. He asks for no comfort but only for the freedom of his heart.

The reader is given the feeling that perhaps the poet considers himself almost as an ascetic who sacrifices and suffers for the good of others. He declares that his life is given to the art of poetry and he writes to 'salvage' the soul, perhaps his own soul, as well as the soul of humanity.

Yet the poet has a great pride for his devotion to being poet. He defies life and time with his poetry and aims at 'eternity' for his work.

As discussed earlier, it is not surprising or uncommon to wish for such 'eternity' as great poets in the past expressed a similar wish before in their works.

However, Angkhan may be the first poet to state explicitly that his poetry is so worthy of such 'eternity' because poetry is 'divine bliss' of heaven brought to the world by the poet. This 'divine bliss' is a gift for the world, especially for 'the sand and the grass' which are no doubt subtle symbols for the less-fortunate and under-privileged.

His passionate dedication is emphasized at the end of the poem when the poet declares that his life is a ready sacrifice for the 'sacred' continuation of the art of poetry.

The value the poet attaches to poetry is further emphasized in his later text (1975) of the same title when the poet proudly claims that he would refuse even to enter



Nirvana in order to remain on earth to compose poetry for the Universe.<sup>2</sup>

By referring to Nirvana the poet is indirectly equating the merit of composing poetry to the highest merit of training oneself spiritually to enter Nirvana. Thus the main purpose of writing to 'salvage' the soul is clarified. The poet may salvage both his soul and the soul of humanity at the same time through his poetry.

Poetry becomes a means of spiritual betterment, almost like a religion and the 'sacred' aspect of poetry is lavishly described in all Angkhan's works.

### Naowarat Phongphaibun: Poetry of Spiritual Sweetness

The poetry of Naowarat is the best evidence of the beneficial influence of 'conventions' on the creative works of modern poets. Naowarat makes perfect use of his admiration for great poets of the past especially Sunthon Phu and his distinctive style is appreciated in the exquisite melody and 'spiritual sweetness' of his works.

The following poem by Naowarat is a unique definition of what poetry is and how a real poet should write.

### Poetry<sup>3</sup>

*Poetry is*

*A moment of a flower bud blooming  
An inspiration, a dream, an ideal  
A perfect skill of a word creator  
A second language of emotions  
A recollected intensity of feelings  
A liveliness of Truth  
An exquisite and ever lasting  
remembrance.*

*You are a poet*

*You must know beauty and harmony  
Joyous and wondrous harmony  
And insight of spiritual sweetness  
You must create life from realities  
Create words with poetic magic  
Strongly rhyming hearts with hearts  
Enslaving not poetry merely to words!*

Naowarat Phongphaibun  
from *Phleng Khlui Phio*  
translated by  
Suchitra Chongstitvatana

The first half of the poem consists of a series of definitions of poetry. These definitions reflect a deep influence of Thai literary conventions combined with the romantic characteristics of the poet's works.

When the poet says that poetry is 'a perfect skill of a word-creator', he is echoing the traditional concept of a poet as a creator of language or a sage in language use.

The metaphor of poetry as a second language of emotions may very well fit the idea that poetry, first and foremost, is purely concerned with feelings rather than intellect. This emphasis on the nature of

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<sup>2</sup> See Suchitra Chongstitvatana "The Green World of Angkhan Kalayanaphong: A vision on Nature and Environment", in *Thai Literary Traditions*, Chulalongkorn University Press, 1995, p.153.

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<sup>3</sup> The original text has no title. This title has been given by the translator.



poetry is evident in all Thai poetry, especially classical poetry.

However, it is obvious that Naowarat is also influenced by the 'modern' ideology of his time when he says that poetry is 'a liveliness of Truth'. The Thai word for 'Truth' the poet uses here is '*Sajjatham*' which has been quite a cliché in poetic diction since 1973.

When Naowarat describes the qualities of a good poet, he emphasizes the spiritual aspect of poetry –sweetness and harmony both in the concrete form and the spiritual sense.

It is worth noticing that unlike Angkhan or Ujjeni, Naowarat's expression of the 'purpose' of his poetry is hardly explicit. Yet we can surely see the importance he attaches to the value of poetry -that it reaches beyond the beauty of words.

For Naowarat, a poet must have 'an insight of spiritual sweetness' which will enable him to express and create an 'essence' of poetry which is deeper and finer than the normal poetic beauty of words alone.

Thus, to a certain extent, it would not be wrong to say that the ultimate purpose of writing poetry is to perfect the poetic art - to become a real poet, free from the burden of poetical rules and yet capable of exploiting the rules for the ultimately pure beauty of the spiritual sweetness of poetry.

Though Naowarat is deeply concerned about the social and political problems of Thai society, his work is at its best when he is dealing with 'spiritual and philosophical' beauty. Examples of his best work can be found in *Kham Yad* (Sweet Words), *Phleng Khluai Phio* (The

Flute Song), *Chak Ma Chom Mueang* (City Sojourn on the Horseback).

## Phaiwarin Khaongam: Poetry of Loving Hearts

Another poet who seems to follow the 'poetic path' of Ujjeni, Angkhan and Naowarat is Phaiwarin Khaongam. The following two poems describe the philosophy of his work.

*Gracious is my mind  
Creating joyous good for the land  
I say my soul, making dreams come true  
Everything completed  
I explore myself, my life  
Giving light for dark nights  
Creating Today for Tomorrow  
Sprinkling love over the World  
Soothing sufferings, sorrows,  
Sharing, sharing all!*

### *More Than A Word Can Say*

*A life passing away  
A burning candle melting  
Giving light of faith unflinching  
One to another always!*

*A heart of love and faith  
Combining hearts to hearts  
Together they compose  
Poetry of loving hearts*

*My heart explores and questions  
With all my soul my life  
To know right and wrong  
To know joys and sorrows*

*Thus I can only speak these verses  
A truly genuine self of mine  
Beyond the land and the sky afar  
May my poetry remain with Time.*



Phaiwarin Khaongam  
from *Kham Dai Cha Oei Dai Dang*  
*Chai* translated by  
Suchitra Chongstitvatana

From these two poems, the influence of Ujjeni, Angkhan and Naowarat is quite evident. The poet values poetry as a divine gift that can soothe the world and, as an ever-lasting goodness that poets give to mankind.

In the poem *More Than a Word Can Say*, the poet emphasizes the word 'heart' or 'chai' in Thai. Thus the poet believes that the 'essence' of poetry lies in the noblesse and finesse of the heart when he says 'poetry of loving hearts'. This idea may be an echo of Naowarat's emphasis on 'spiritual sweetness' of poetry. Yet, Phaiwarin's metaphor of 'sprinkling love over the world' to soothe sufferings and sorrows is similar to the metaphors of Angkhan and Ujjeni.

The poet subtly expresses his pride in a conventional manner by wishing for his work to remain forever – "*May my poetry remain with Time.*"

### **Raekham Pradoikhom: Poetry of Desire's Fulfilment**

In his latest collection of poetry *Nai Wela* (In Time), Raekham opens his work with a prologue, expressing his pride and purpose or role as a poet as follows:

#### *Prologue*

*To fulfil my desire do I write  
With love and faith for poetic grace  
Though my work may not last till the  
end of time  
It will be of great power and virtuous  
charm*

*Enchanted with belles-lettres  
It's the heart that writes poetry  
It's the heart that labours  
To create poetry of life!*

*May this work be a consolation of age  
Let it be my work of pride  
To bless my own heart and my life  
I entrust this to the World of Letters!*

Raekham Pradoikhom  
from *Nai Wela*  
translated by  
Suchitra Chongstitvatana

Comparatively speaking, this prologue is the most conventional of all the texts discussed earlier. The poet expresses his love and his pride in a very explicit manner. He emphasizes the enchantment of belles-lettres which inspires the creation of poetry. This idea is expressed frequently throughout the long history of Thai poetry.

It is noteworthy that the poet expresses his pride in a disguise of 'modesty', a conventional manner employed by Thai poets in the past, especially those of the early Ayuddhya period.

The poet says that 'though his work may not last till the end of Time, it will be of great power and virtuous charm'. This is an echo of 'modesty' of great poets of the past.

Nevertheless, the 'purpose' the poet expressed here is twofold. One is to offer his work as a 'consolation' of the age. Another is to contribute to the world of belles-lettres or poetry.

The 'purpose' or role of the poet here seems to be quite 'natural' and 'personal' enough, yet it is still in line with the view



of the other poets discussed earlier. Therefore, if the ultimate goal is to create a great art to fulfill one's own desire and love for poetry, composing poetry or perfecting the art of poetry appears to be an end in itself.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Raekham's work is only concerned with the art of poetry. On the contrary, his poetry reflects a thorough observation of human nature in a very philosophical tone.

This can be seen even through the titles of his works such as *Nam Phu Rung* (Rainbow Spring), *Din Nam Lom Fai* (Earth, Water, Wind, Fire), and *Nai Wela* (In Time).

In *Nai Wela*, the poet observes human changes in various stages through time—birth, youth, old age and death and employs them as his theme. The philosophical tone in the work makes this modern collection of poetry rather solemn and the obvious influence of Buddhism appears in the rather conventional verse forms.

### Saksiri Misomsuep: Poetry of Purification

Saksiri is an outstanding contemporary poet because he seems to be alone in succeeding to establish the beauty of 'free verse' and he has gained wide recognition for his creation. In his most famous work *Mue Nan Si Khao* (That Hand Is White), he declares the main idea of his work that 'only clean hands can create a clean world'.

The following poem appears as an epilogue in *Mue Nan Si Khao*. It is worth noticing that the poet deliberately composes this poem in the imitation of Khlong, a very formal verse form steeped in Thai literary conventions.

### Epilogue<sup>4</sup>

*Why flowing downwards so low  
Aiming high to share heaven's delight  
Overflowing hills and wild plains  
The water's dream is to cherish the Earth*

*The cherished earth is for lovely trees  
The sacred sky is satisfied  
To see the abundance greens below  
To serve Spring passing by!  
A radiant light illuminates the Earth  
Glowing so divinely pure and bright  
To grand mountains and humble grass  
The secret of heaven's heart  
And the grass' remembrance*

*Will you reveal your heart?  
Silence and waiting in vain  
Can it really be that your life here  
Is only to satisfy your desires?*

*Leaves dancing to the song of breeze  
Gentle waves of forest melody  
Yellow leaves falling in melancholy  
Letting go is perhaps the best remedy.*

Saksiri Misomsuep  
from *Mue Nan Si Khao*  
translated by  
Suchitra Chongstitvatana

The content of this epilogue subtly reveals the strong influence of Buddhist thought on the poet's part. The metaphors from nature and of poetry as an inspirational force for contemplation reflects the poet's purpose quite clearly, though indirectly. The poet's concern with the purifying nature of poetry may be an echo of his own deep inclination as a teacher and a Buddhist.

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<sup>4</sup> The original text has no title. This title is given by the translator.



## Pride and Purpose as Modern Thai Poetics

From this discussion, it is clear that modern Thai poets' expression of pride and purpose in their works has been established as a 'modern' convention. Modern poets appear to take their role as poets very seriously. The pride and purpose they express in the work are inseparable.

This can be explained in two aspects. The first is the aspect of continuation of literary conventions of the past, where being a poet (in a written tradition) is a privilege of an elite who can read and write. Thus to create a literary work of value for specific purpose is naturally and rightfully a duty of any king or prince. Especially, if the 'specific' purpose of the work has something in connection with religious belief or a part of a ceremony or celebration, as is usually the case of Thai classical poetry.

If the work has religious influence, the poet usually views it as an offering and usually makes a wish of attaining 'Nirvana' as the highest rewards for his effort.

Thus it is understandable that poets of the past should take a great pride in their own privileged knowledge and in their artistic creation. This pride is rightly justified and can hardly be blamed (even by Buddhist standards of modesty) because it is a pride as a means towards a noble end.

On the other hand, one dominant purpose of poetic creation from the past to the present is perhaps to attain perfection in the art of poetry.

This dominant purpose can be seen even in the work of modern poets who have a very strong determination to better the world or to 'salvage' the soul.

Modern poets, in a society which is very different from the past, seem to share the same desire to immortalize the art of poetry through their works.

Though the status of modern poets today cannot in any sense be compared to that of the past, modern poets still view themselves more or less as 'sages' or 'spiritual leaders' of society.

By accepting these roles of prestige, yet without any patronage as in the past, modern poets are in fact in a very vulnerable situation. They cannot really work for material gain nor for any specific group of readers. They turn to their own ideals and their own inclinations as a refuge.

Thus, among modern Thai poets we see a variety of styles and expressions, but a shared view as to the ultimate goal of doing good for society.

The declaration of the poets' pride and purpose in their works appears to be an 'overture' for the reader, who will either be drawn to the poet or be put off by this poem of declaration.

As long as poets can uphold their prestige of working for their own spiritual fulfillment or their ideals alone, this 'modern' convention will still hold a strong influence in Thai literary conventions.

This convention could be a sacred means through which poets can preserve their 'pride and purpose' as poets. Consequently this convention could, in turn, cherish



pride and inspire purpose in the hearts and minds of readers of poetry in the present and future.

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