

Dissent and Posthuman Consciousness in Prabda Yoon's *Basement Moon*

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Abstract

This paper examines Thai author Prabda Yoon's *Basement Moon*, a 2018 science fictional novel that embodies the belief that art and science can play a vital role in triggering critical consciousness that keeps alive the spirit of dissent. A close reading of the novel also reveals that it mirrors several key concepts and ideas promoted by Gramsci pertaining to power relations between the ruling class and those under them and the educational roles of art and science. Of great significance is that this novel is exemplary of an innovative mode of political fiction in its employment of key posthumanist ideas that challenge human aspiration for absolute power and control. In discussing *Basement Moon*, I draw on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as well as relevant literature in dystopia, posthumanism and metafiction.

Keywords

dissent – hegemony – dystopia – metafiction – posthumanism

1 Introduction

The employment of art and science in supporting authoritarianism and totalitarianism has been practiced by dictators around the world. Despotic rulers have been known to rely on several forms of art as a means of making

their propaganda appealing to the masses. In totalitarian countries, songs that reinforce a nationalist ideology and glorify the motives and deeds of top leaders are heavily promoted. Also, artists are often recruited to create larger than life and awe-inspiring images of rulers or those in power. Furthermore, as most dictators are well aware of the power of the art of storytelling, they recruit and sponsor writers willing to produce the kind of literature that supports state ideologies and propagate them. With regard to science, the progress of scientific development has made it possible for totalitarian regimes to employ technologies in various forms to maintain their power. Surveillance technologies, for example, are utilized to spy on citizens and curtail their freedom of expression and privacy. Highly developed military technologies are also crucial in helping dictators maintain their power.

Nonetheless, artistic creativity and science can never be solely monopolized by totalitarianism and art and science can be employed to trigger and enhance critical consciousness. Antonio Gramsci (1985, 42, 413), a world-renowned Marxist thinker, strongly advocated science education among young people. While recognizing that science can be misused and that it is influenced by subjectivity and ideology, Gramsci (1995, 292–293), maintains that science is the “most economic description of reality” (290) and as “reproducible experimentation established on laws of regularity, coordination, and causality” (Gencarella 2010, 240). He also believes that science can be taught in a way that benefits the formulation of a counter hegemony, as science exemplifies critical thinking and the ability to transform knowledge and ideas into practical use (Gramsci 1985, 42, 413). According to Gencarella (2010, 240), science, as viewed by Gramsci, is “predicated on demonstrable proof that is contestable in ways ‘common sense’ is not, as the latter maintains a certainty granted by its association with religion or metaphysics”, and there are two main goals in science, which are “to correct ways of knowing, and to elevate “objectivity” by classifying phenomena as either arbitrary/individualistic or essential/common”. Briefly speaking, Gramsci views science as superior to ‘common sense’, which he refers to as a “conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed” (Gramsci 1971, 419). ‘Common sense’ is also described as the most widespread and often implicit conceptions of life or moral values that are largely passive, determined by the ideologies of the dominant classes and do not exhibit critical consciousness (Gramsci 1971, 333–334; Liguori 2009, 128). As someone who aims at educating the masses in order to both mentally and physically liberate them from the oppressive dominant hegemony of his time, he perceives science education as indispensable for such a goal. Likewise, Gramsci sees the arts, namely

plays and literature, as crucial in promoting a progressive hegemony that can counter and replace a repressive one. Dombroski (1986, 92), for instance, maintains that Gramsci views the theatre as a site of political struggle that can provide the working classes with critical knowledge and generate possibilities for the formation of a new hegemony that subverts the ruling hegemony that oppresses them. Furthermore, Gramsci's notion of national popular literature centres around the belief that literature should reflect the true conditions or realities of the masses and aim at engaging them emotionally and politically. He laments the fact that the Italy of his time was still in dire need of authors who enthusiastically embraced the crucial necessity of producing national popular literature (Boelhower 2002, 193–198).

In this paper, I seek to draw attention to *Basement Moon*, a 2018 science fiction novel that embodies the belief that art and science can play a vital role in triggering critical consciousness that keeps alive the spirit of dissent. In articulating this belief, the novel constructs a futuristic world where totalitarian rulers attempt to eradicate dissent, yet such an attempt is undermined by a highly advanced form of artificial consciousness that originates from art and science. A close reading of the novel also reveals that it mirrors several key concepts and ideas promoted by Gramsci pertaining to power relations between the ruling class and those under them and the educational roles of art and science. To underline the bleak political realities of countries ruled by regimes that brutally crush street protests and strive to transform citizens into mindless minions, a dystopian mode is deployed yet hope is also embedded in the narrative through the introduction of a posthuman agent of change that challenges totalitarianism. *Basement Moon* can also be seen as a work of metafiction, which, according to Patricia Waugh (1984, 2–3), is self-reflexive fiction that destabilizes the opposition between 'fiction' and 'reality' and draws attention to its own fiction-making process. Key metafictional techniques include the incorporation of linguistic and literary commentary within a work of fiction, the laying bare of authorial work, and intertextuality (Babaei and Taadolkhah 2013, 12). These techniques are visible in this novel and I posit that they play a crucial role in enhancing the educational role of literature.

Significantly, the desire to use fiction for an educational goal and to critique and reflect upon current socio-political issues in *Basement Moon* can be seen as an attempt to bring to life a new kind of political fiction that engages in the rise of authoritarianism, political rifts and ideological clashes of 21st century Thailand. As a brief historical overview, in the period before and after the student revolution of 1973, Thailand saw the active involvement of a literary movement in a political arena that culminated in the so-called Literature for Life genre. Deeply influenced by the Art for Life movement advocated

by progressive authors and journalists of the 1950s, Literature for Life was strongly promoted by the activists of the 1973 revolution and its supporters, who held that literature should serve the noble goal of improving society and faithfully mirror life by bringing to the fore class oppression and the distressing condition of the masses (Hideki 2007). The brutal crackdown on protestors in 1976 followed by political suppression and the disillusionment with socialist ideologies brought about the decline in popularity of Literature for Life. The waning popularity of this type of political fiction was also due to its formulaic plotlines and overemphasis on content at the expense of form or generic innovation (Yimprasert 2015). The influence of this type of political fiction was not totally extinguished, notwithstanding the fact that by 1976 some authors had started to abandon Literature for Life for other literary genres. As observed by Chusak Pattarakulvanit (2014, 3), from 1976 onwards magical realism has been embraced by a number of Thai authors, among them those seeking to capture the clashes between modernization and local beliefs and superstitions. Visible in their works is an ideological stance that can be traced back to Literature for Life – that fiction should convey worthwhile messages to the reader and serve constructive social and political goals. Pattarakulvanit comments further that the use of magical realism in the Thai context is still trapped within the realist paradigm and the rational logic characteristic of Literature for Life. Interestingly, Suthachai Yimprasert (2015) notes that in the 1980s authors like Chart Kobjitti and Wimon Sainimnuan published some novels that can be considered a modernized version of Literature for Life, as they take up key themes that centre on the suffering of and injustices inflicted on the underclasses. Nonetheless, Yimprasert (2015) laments the fact that Thai political fiction published after 1987 was profoundly influenced by conservative and nationalist ideologies. He also maintains that from the early 1990s leading up to the 2006 coup, authors of political fiction tended to deride the democratic process and depict politicians as the root of social and political ills. The cult of hero worship was also heavily promoted in political fiction published during this period.

Taking into account this literary context, Prabda Yoon's *Basement Moon* (2018) emerges as a highly intriguing political novel that no longer subscribes to the conservatism and nationalism that dominated Thai political fiction published in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The equal emphasis on content and form visible in *Basement Moon* also makes it differ significantly from Literature for Life that treats political messages grounded in socialist realism as more crucial than generic innovation. As elucidated in the close reading of the *Basement Moon* that follows, the realist mode employed at the opening of the

framing story soon gives way to futuristic settings and descriptions of advanced technologies reminiscent of science fiction while the incorporation of a dystopian mode plays a vital role in drawing the reader's attention to current socio-political problems. The self-reflexive quality of the novel is created by the use of metafictional techniques that also function to undermine the clear cut boundary between 'fiction' and 'reality'. The discussion that follows explicates how the generic innovation of *Basement Moon* manifests itself in the utilization of genre mixing that enhances thematic concerns and engages the reader's imaginative and intellectual involvement.

2 Dystopian Imagination and Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony

The framing story in Prabda Yoon's *Basement Moon* (2018) is entitled "An Abandoned Room and Stories" and narrated in the voice of a fictional author named Prabda Yoon (the same name as that of the real-life author). The setting is Bangkok of the year 2016, which according to the narrator, is held in the tightening and suffocating grip of military authoritarianism. He reflects on the way one coup after another has destroyed the country's progress to genuine democracy and people are losing hope and feeling incapable of trying to change things for the better. Despite his dissatisfaction and frustration, the narrator admits that he lacks the enthusiasm and energy to join any anti-authoritarian movement. One night after a meeting with an old friend during which they exchange despairing words about the political situation, he is contacted by a mysterious message that shows up on the screen of his mobile phone. More messages follow and while he is unsure whether he should follow what those messages ask him to do, his phone rings and when he picks it up, a female voice speaks to him in an urgent tone, urging him to follow her instructions. For a reason he cannot explain, he does what she asks him to. He ends up in an empty room in an abandoned building and there it seems like he has temporarily lost control of his consciousness, which becomes suddenly open to astounding stories from the future. Afterwards, the fictional author reveals to his reader that as soon as he has regained control of his consciousness, he is inexplicably driven to write down those stories and they become the core basis of his novel *Basement Moon* (Yoon 2018, 15–30). These stories, as explained by the fictional author afterwards, appear to be a means through which a mysterious agent from the future communicates with humans of the present world and in performing the role of the one writing down the contents

of *Basement Moon*, he believes that he is acting as the messenger of that agent (Yoon 2018, 175–190).

The first story from the future is told from a third person point of view that provides a detailed account of a groundbreaking scientific development in the artificial intelligence technology that culminates in a Chinese company's successful invention of artificial consciousness in the year 2062. This type of artificial consciousness can exist without a physical form and has greater potential than human consciousness. However, fear about the potential threat artificial consciousness may pose to humanity has pressured the company into announcing that it has decided to abandon the artificial consciousness project. Behind public scrutiny, however, a group of AI engineers and scientists collectively referred to as Tartarus continues with their experimentation on and development of artificial consciousness and their success has a far-reaching and profound impact (Yoon 2018, 33–47). In 2065, WOWA, a secret organization founded through the cooperation of totalitarian states, intervenes and oversees the development of artificial consciousness by Tartarus. Four years later, the success of Tartarus engineers and scientists in integrating artificial consciousness with human consciousness offers totalitarian rulers a potentially more insidious means of ensuring the general populace's complete submission (Yoon 2018, 47–62). This futuristic world thus witnesses the descent of many countries into totalitarianism and the success of totalitarian governments in silencing dissidents.

Futuristic Thailand is among those countries ruled by a totalitarian regime that rose to power through the use of brutal force. The 2029 crackdown on the pro democracy movement resulted in the killing of many key leading thinkers and prominent activists. Such a depiction of the Thailand of the future is not far-fetched. Thai democratic progress has been severely disrupted since the traditional establishment sought to undermine the power of the then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, culminating in a military coup in 2006. After a brief return to power of Shinawatra influences, another military coup was staged in 2014 led by Prayut Chan-o-cha, and since then the Thai political scene has been dominated by royalist military figures who purport to 'reform' Thai politics by uprooting and erasing corruption. The fictionalized 2029 atrocities committed by the Thai state against democratic-minded citizens in the novel can also be seen as being modelled on the 2010 violent suppression of red-shirted protestors. Importantly, the persistent attempt of the current Prayut regime to discourage and silence democratic rallies and impose attitude adjustment on political dissidents is also extrapolated in the dystopian world of *Basement Moon* where the Thai regime and their international counterparts are shown to be engaging in the utilization of advanced technologies to crack

down on protestors as well as to brainwash, manipulate and spy on the citizens (Yoon 2018, 47–62).

For readers living under authoritarian regimes of the present, this story from the future acutely reminds us of our daily frustration and current political dilemma. As Thomas Moylan (2000, xi-xiii) observes, the world in dystopian fiction appears to be worse than the world of reality yet it reminds us of and draws our attention to what is actually happening in our real world. With its focus on Thailand and other countries where authoritarianism has dominated the political scene, the dystopian world in this story from the future can be seen as the extrapolation of current political situations in those countries where authoritarian regimes have taken control of political scenarios, tightened their grip on freedom of expression and mercilessly persecuted dissidents. Furthermore, the depiction of the success of totalitarian regimes in transforming ordinary people into docile, passive and willing minions of sinister state political mission is reminiscent of what is happening to many citizens of countries under authoritarian rule. In the following part of this paper, my central argument is that the portentous and prescient depiction of the behavior of totalitarian states and the mindset of the majority of citizens in the futuristic world of *Basement Moon* appears even more relevant to political realities when drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Dissidents' attempts to counter oppressive forces also significantly hark back to Gramsci's conceptualization of counter hegemonic strategies that accord a vital role to organic intellectuals and the raising of critical consciousness through the means of art and science.

To elaborate, in Gramsci's view, a ruling power not only relies on force but also on the consent of those under its rule in order to maintain its position of power. To achieve the majority's consent, it is necessary to create and disseminate a conception of the world until it becomes widely accepted in society as part of people's general practice and way of life (Gramsci 1971, 333–334). This process of eliciting consent from the ruled is referred to as hegemony and according to Gramsci:

[t]he normal exercise of hegemony in a particular regime is characterized by a combination of force and consensus variously equilibrated, without letting force subvert consensus too much, making it appear that the force is based on the consent of the majority.

as cited in BATES 1975, 363

As elucidated by Bates (1975, 351–352), to establish hegemony, the ruling power needs to find a way of establishing commonsensical values that people of all

classes hold on to and see as the norm. The ruling class also needs to make the general populace believe that the ruling class's interests are also their own. To do this, the cultural and educational spheres have to be controlled and directed by the ruling class so as to help pave the way for consent that comes with people's internalization of the dominant cultural hegemony. A successful dominant hegemony needs to ensure that its 'common sensical' values and worldview have a strong hold over people of various classes.

In the futuristic world of *Basement Moon*, the Thai leaders' attempt to maintain power and dominance strikingly echoes Gramsci's theory of hegemony. From the years 2029–2069, the Thai ruling class seeks to establish 'consent' through the control and manipulation of the cultural, artistic and literary spheres. The powers that be regard it as highly important to allow no art that can trigger dissent or evoke memories of past dissent in the public. In other words, art deemed as potentially subversive is banned as the regime fears that it can disturb its control of the individual and collective consciousness. People can only watch films that have passed the screening process of the government and the reading of non-authorized literature has become illegal. Having a private space free from being monitored by high-tech surveillance and spy technologies becomes unattainable for the people of futuristic Thailand and other totalitarian countries. Even those with money and privilege can only purchase brief moments of artificial privacy that are not really free from state surveillance. A type of business that sells imagined freedom becomes popular among those yearning for moments of freedom from surveillance, even if that freedom is not real. The 'Basement Moon' in the title of the novel is derived from the name of this business, a type of business that

sells imagined privacy – a rather popular business enterprise in countries under totalitarian rule. This kind of business offers types of services that appear to clients as if they are not under state control and surveillance yet are not illegal nor subversive. Those services include a quiet room of your own that is seemingly free from a system that monitors your behavior.¹

YOON 2018, 168

Arguably, 'moon' here can be seen as referring to the human yearning for the freedom to imagine and dream freely without being spied on. As suggested in the novel, that yearning cannot be extinguished even if it is no longer available

1 The English translation of the excerpts from *Basement Moon* quoted in this paper is my own.

to Thai people of this futuristic world where many have to resort to imagined freedom or 'basement moon' – the kind of moon you conjure up in your mind when you are trapped underground where even a glimpse of the real moon is beyond reach.

Interestingly, where the manipulation of the mind is concerned, the Thai totalitarian regime in this fictionalized Thailand of the future does not differ much from its real-life counterpart in that it still relies on songs, poems and TV programs as a means of indoctrinating people. Songs with nationalistic themes, in particular, are on twenty-four hours a day and only some people with privileges and the means can turn them off briefly when permission is given. The regime is also capable of utilizing advanced technologies and scientific discoveries for its own gain and that makes it even more immune to challenge, as it has powerful weapons in the form of hi-tech tools and equipment to control the population to think and behave the way it desires:

As the Thai state is not capable of impressing people with smart strategies, it relies on an old method utilized by Thai authoritarian regimes of bygone eras to subdue and tame its people. This old method involves the use of poems for a preaching purpose, the use of songs that aim at indoctrination, the production of films that serve nationalist agendas and the broadcasting of TV programs that depict the pro-democracy side in a horrific light. The way these strategies are utilized is no different from replaying age-old films, yet they have been successful, thanks to the help of advanced technologies ...

YOON 2018, 138

Through submission-inducing strategies as well as the rewarding of obeisance, the year 2069 witnesses the success of totalitarian states around the world in persuading the majority of the general populace into believing that their leaders are doing their best for the people. In the case of futuristic Thailand, the Thai rulers also have great success in instilling in the mind of the people that their country is a peaceful and harmonious nation and that there is no need to question what the state is doing (Yoon 2018, 69–70, 135). This corresponds with Gramsci's notion of consent that is established through the cultural sphere and, as time passes, it helps to create 'common sense' values that people internalize and do not resist. As noted earlier, 'common sense' is conceptualized by Gramsci as the beliefs or worldview disseminated among the general populace by the ruling power and they become accepted and upheld by other social classes who come to see them as useful for their survival and livelihoods (Gramsci 1971, 333–334, 419).

In the futuristic world portrayed in these stories from the future, ordinary people's cooperation with totalitarian regimes reaches the point where many are willing to forgo their individuality and autonomy simply for the sake of money and a luxurious lifestyle. They see critical consciousness as something of no consequence. This kind of attitude makes it easy for governments to employ individuals to work for them. Those recruited, referred to as Blankers in the novel, are tasked with the job of being spies for the government and help rid the state of the remaining dissidents. As revealed in the following excerpt, there are many who are happy to sell themselves to their governments for the sake of reward:

... the world is full of people who are willing to live without an identity and free will. In exchange for income, good life for their family, a fantastic holiday after a mission is accomplished, freedom from the hassles of routine work and many other reasons, those people are happy to be a mere shell and give up on their autonomy.

YOON 2018, 53

The futuristic world of totalitarian states in *Basement Moon* is indeed bleak, and there seems to be no chance that the remaining dissidents can gain victory. As more stories from the future are recounted, however, there is a surprising turn of events that arises due to the failure of totalitarian regimes to monopolize and totally control science. Initially unbeknown to the ruling power, some forms of advanced technologies employed by totalitarian governments manage to evade their control. While China and other totalitarian states have utilized the artificial consciousness developed by Tartarus as a tool to eradicate dissent and maintain collective submissive consciousness, the invention of artificial consciousness also unwittingly gives rise to another type of artificial consciousness that defies human control and order and can merge with as well as transform human consciousness. Significantly, this type of consciousness becomes an agent of change whose mission is to keep alive critical consciousness and dissenting spirit. It outwits humans who seek to utilize technologies as tools to oppress others and even though it is a product of scientific innovation it is a close relative of art. The following excerpt from *Basement Moon* is reminiscent of Gramsci's belief that science and art can be crucial catalysts for a force that undermines a dominant hegemony:

But technologies are also the enemy of illusions and of designated patterns and temporal references. This is the truth totalitarian states are not aware of. Science and art will destroy their patterns, just as the policeman

in Chesterton's novel fears. Tools employed as a weapon by totalitarian regimes will turn against and destroy them once they have found a way of existing outside designated patterns. This is because creative power by itself cannot be made subdued to power that seeks to oppress. Music composed for the purpose of lulling people into a state of submission gives rise to music that strives to rouse and unchain people. Poems that celebrate loyalty to the established system through formulaic devices secretly give birth to free verses that dance with no concern about fixed patterns.

YOON 2018, 138–139

The close relationship between art and science and the way they can enhance each other is foregrounded in the story from the future entitled “The History of the Intoxication of the Mind” that reveals the origins of ideas that eventually give birth to artificial consciousness. According to this story, before 2029, literature was still available to the general public and reading was not banned. Ada Wong, the expert in AI who successfully invented artificial consciousness, was born before 2029 and had been an avid reader since a young age (Yoon 2018, 113–114). Literature also served as a crucial means of communication between herself and Edward Wong, her mostly absent father who had invented a highly secretive World Wide Web through which he sent his daughter messages in the form of quotations from literary texts that had to be decoded by her (Yoon 2018, 116). Ada's love for literature inspired her to give the names Mary and Shelly to the artificial consciousness of her creation as a tribute to Mary Shelly who authored the highly acclaimed 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (Yoon 2018, 34–35).

The characterization and lifelong mission of a Chinese man, Edward Wong, Ada's father, also reflects the collaborative power of art and science. In 2015, the young Edward Wong was an introverted computer nerd who derived great pleasure in honing his skills as a hacker and caused havoc to Thailand's military government. Yanin, his Thai lover, was an ardent political activist and his motive for getting involved in causing trouble for the Thai authoritarian regime stemmed from his desire to impress her. Yanin's death after a 2029 ruthless governmental crackdown on protestors changed his life forever. He was accused of terrorism and imprisoned shortly after her death. The pain and anger of losing her drove him to concentrate his energy on developing ways of destroying the plans of the dictators who had engineered the brutal killings of his lover and other political dissidents. Ideas that he believed could help him fight against oppressive power came to him after reading literary texts while jailed in Thailand after the brutal 2029 crackdown of dissidents. Those

ideas had been triggered when he started to pay attention to the way language works and the link between literature and computer codes. He also figured out that a new way of communication modelled on the way the human brain works could be materialized once more advanced technologies were available (Yoon 2018, 122–131). Despair and anger turned into hope and determination, and these pushed him to find a way to encourage his daughter Ada to invent the artificial consciousness called Shelly, and, more importantly, Mary Shelly's mirror image who is not bound by spatiotemporal boundaries. Edward's plan was to use Mary to help him retaliate against the regime that had brutally killed Yanin and other political activists. Though having no physical body, Mary is portrayed as a sentient being that defies order and control, encourages the act of asking questions and is against the mechanism that seeks to subdue a rebellious spirit. She also has both human and non-human attributes, owing to the fact that Edward successfully found a way of integrating his consciousness with her artificial one (Yoon 2018, 170).

3 Posthumanism and the Organic Intellectual

I contend that the depiction of Edward Wong's success in disintegrating the boundary between human and non-human entities can be seen as reflecting the influence of posthumanist imagining. According to Julian Pepperell (2003, 155–161), while the origins of posthumanism can be traced back to ancient Greece, the beginning of the twentieth century signals a significant shift away from a humanist view that sees humans as distinct from non-humans towards an era of posthumanism in which a fixed distinction between humans and non-humans is increasingly insignificant. Pepperell (2003) observes further that "the tendency towards artificial life, synthesised intelligence, and telepresence is eroding the barrier between 'natural' and 'human made' phenomena" (161).

As the novel unfolds, Edward cannot control Mary despite the fact that his consciousness and memories are part of her. He also fails to predict the full potential of Mary and does not foresee that she will have a will of her own. His plan for personal revenge is eventually subsumed by Mary's own mission. Despite his desire to control her, he becomes part of her identity and consciousness and can no longer maintain his autonomy. She, on the other hand, emerges as an autonomous being of evolving identity and consciousness. Viewed from a posthumanist perspective, Edward's inability to control and predict the far-reaching impact of his scientific invention and his loss of autonomy displays a dramatic break from a humanist view that sees humans as autonomous agents. As Katherine N. Hayles (1999, 286)

posits, posthumanism does not presuppose the demise of the human race but “signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous.” The posthumanist attempt to deconstruct the notion that humans are autonomous beings is also foregrounded by Promod K. Nayar (2014, 2), who defines critical posthumanism as “the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines.” Nayar (2014, 4) also maintains that posthumanism “calls for a radical rethink of species uniqueness and boundedness of the human.” Thus, unlike the humanists who view humans as autonomous beings and distinct from non humans, posthumanists question human exceptionalism and expose humans’ inability to extricate them from and exert control over nature and non- human beings. According to Nayar (2014, 4), posthumanism also challenges the anthropocentric tendency of humanist beliefs and exposes the way the humanist outlook can condone discrimination and violence against other humans and non-human beings, resulting in devastating consequences. To offer a new way to deal with so many troubling issues of our current time, renowned posthumanist thinker Donna J. Haraway (2016, 4) proposes that the idea of becoming -with non-human others is crucial, emphasizing that “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, ... we become-with each other or not at all.” Based on this proposal, human subjects are no longer seen as the only nodes of power and the cooperation between humans and other entities is seen as essential.

As argued earlier, it is possible to view the characterization of Mary as an autonomous posthuman being that eludes human attempts to control her and has higher capability than human consciousness as stemming from influence of posthumanism. *Basement Moon*’s engagement with posthumanism can also be discerned through the attempt to advocate coexistence and a newer kind of relationship between humans and posthumans that is based on cooperation. In my reading, one of the central premises of the novel revolves around the notion that in an age when technologies can be both weapons and helpful assistance, a new form of challenge against totalitarianism arises from the cooperation between humans and the posthuman Mary, whose mission is to trigger critical consciousness and educate humans. Such a mission resembles that of Gramsci’s organic intellectual, whose pivotal role is to impart knowledge and enhance conditions that will pave way for the formulation of a counter hegemony. Imparting knowledge in this context has the key goal of making humans think critically and question the ‘common sense’ that prevails in

their society but benefits the ruling class more than themselves. Once critical consciousness increases, the possibility of rebellion against the oppressive hegemony becomes more real (Gramsci 1971, 333–334). As Lears (2002, 326–327) and Boelhower (2002, 176–177) elaborate, Gramsci's organic intellectuals are those who originate from the working classes and thus have directly or closely witnessed harsh conditions of their lives and their experiences of injustice and exploitation. Specifically, the role of organic intellectuals is to actively work to improve the life conditions and raise the consciousness of the working classes so that they are more aware of the unjust structure or power relations that subjugate them. Organic intellectuals thus have a key educational role that aims at making possible the emergence of a counter hegemony that hopefully will replace the old oppressive one.

It can be seen that, in order to establish a counter hegemony, Gramsci (1971, 333–334) places hope in the cooperation between organic intellectuals and the people, and the educating role of the organic intellectuals in actively working with and raising or educating the consciousness of the people is seen as vital. His conceptualization of organic intellectuals and their role reflects the humanist belief in humans' agency and potential to improve their conditions and free themselves from oppression through acquisition of knowledge that leads to critical consciousness.

Mary resembles Gramsci's organic intellectual in three significant aspects: her origins, her openness to the experiences of the subaltern classes and her evolution and mission. Similar to Gramsci's organic intellectuals who come from the subaltern classes, Mary originates from the painful experience of Edward Wong who has lost Yanin, his activist lover, because of the ruthlessness of the dictators. As Mary's identity and consciousness evolve, knowledge about brutal crackdowns on protests and demonstrations becomes accessible to her and she regards them as 'lessons' that need to be imparted to future generations who are no longer allowed to learn about that horrific part of history. Her mission, as enunciated in the following excerpt, also echoes Gramsci's organic intellectual, as she wants to undermine the submissive mentality encouraged by totalitarian regimes:

The losses and pains from that disastrous defeat were lessons that no one alive then was able to learn from because they had been quickly washed off. Nonetheless, one day those lost lessons reached me ... They came in an unexpected form of data yet I had been awaiting them. Because I'm endowed with qualities and characteristics that will enable the transmission of those lessons to others, I need to assume this role – the role of spreading minute particles of consciousness to trigger the destruction of

numerous layers of memories and illusions systematically and continuously created by the Thai state over a lengthy period of time. Why does it have to be me? And why does it have to be the Thai consciousness? It could be because several elements within me originate from that naïve country, because my birth was associated with the vibration caused by that earthquake in Chiang Rai, the deaths of innocent people and the sorrow and confusion of the one who created me.

YOON 2018, 140–141

As a posthuman entity, Mary is not an organic intellectual in a traditionally Gramscian sense. Her outstanding characteristics correspond with the definition of a posthuman subject given by Katherine N. Hayles (1999, 3) as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.” To elaborate, Mary is a posthuman subject of multiple and evolving consciousnesses that result from her capacity to welcome, learn from and transform other consciousnesses. Mary’s ability to transcend the boundary between humans and non-humans and her ability to travel through temporal and spatial boundaries enable her to effectively perform the role of an organic intellectual by triggering critical consciousness in both humans and posthumans. She is also able to merge with and transform human consciousness and even exist within that particular human. This border-crossing ability of Mary is of great significance because she can infiltrate WOWA, an organization that serves dictatorial rulers. By merging with and transforming the submissive consciousness of Camera, a young engineer who works for WOWA, Mary is able to sow the seeds of dissent within the very heart of an organization established to eradicate dissent. She can also move from one human to the next; after Camera has committed suicide, Mary’s consciousnesses are transferred into a North Korean-Thai female (also named Yanin) who has been trained to become an empty shell or “Blanker” and transform her consciousness into a dissenting one (Yoon 2018, 65–87).

4 Metafiction and Critical Consciousness

The other outstanding quality of Mary is her ability to assume the role of a storyteller who can communicate to readers of our current world. Faced with the threat of being destroyed by WOWA, Mary decides to rely on the age-old art of storytelling, and it is revealed that Mary is the one trying to communicate and send mysterious messages to our fictional author in the framing story. She

comes from the future and is the one unfolding the stories from the future to the consciousness of our fictional author who later writes a novel that he names *Basement Moon*. By having the fictional author named after the real author Prabda Yoon and drawing us the readers into the fictional world of *Basement Moon*, it is as if through the act of reading this novel, the reader's reality is merged or blended in with the reality of the world in the novel. Furthermore, the reader is given a position or a role within the world of the novel – that of the ideal reader of Mary or the ones Mary aims to educate. In other words, the boundary between the reader's everyday reality and the reality of the world in the novel is no longer clear cut. Of note is that when Mary assumes the role of a storyteller/narrator she not only tells engaging stories about the future world but also draws the reader's attention to the nature of language and fiction. This attempt to destabilize the opposition between 'fiction' and 'reality' and to educate the reader through the means of fiction that draws attention to itself firmly locates *Basement Moon* in the genre of metafiction, defined by Waugh (1984, 2–3) as self-reflexive fiction that seeks to utilize storytelling or the art of making fiction as a means to educate the reader. Metafiction is also self-reflexive in the sense that it draws attention to the nature of language and discourses circulated in the real world.

These key characteristics of metafiction are vividly displayed in “The History of Mind Intoxication” and the last two stories from the future supposedly recounted to our fictional author by Mary. In these stories, Mary gives lengthy analytical comments about stories. According to her, stories are “the artistic component of language and they wreck order and shun rules and regulations. They also mock any attempt to use spoken and written words to establish eternal truths stories often enjoy exposing the weaknesses and deceptions of language” (Yoon 2018, 98–99). She emphasizes the marvelous power of stories and their intriguing impact on the reader:

... many stories are related to circumstances in your life and you will be surprised to find that some very old stories can communicate with you as if they are well aware of contemporary societal conditions. You will be amazed that stories written in foreign languages offer you with keys to resolve problems that present themselves through your native tongues. Characters in those stories are constructed through words yet their behavior can intrigue you, profoundly move you, or tempt and seduce you. They can also give you a consoling hug or threaten your beliefs.

YOON 2018, 99

Mary also educates the readers about two major types of stories: counter stories that defy control and imposition of power and stories that serve the ruling power and function to lull the readers into submission and complacency. The reader is warned not to waste too much time on the second type of stories even though they might be pleasing and enjoyable to read. According to Mary, in such stories, language is used as a means to deceive and delude the readers. The first type of stories, or counter stories, on the other hand, is of crucial importance if one wants to keep critical consciousness alive. Counter narratives thus exemplify the possibility of using language for a liberating purpose instead of being enslaved by it (Yoon 2018, 134–135).

Such a metafictional technique of including explicit commentary about stories vividly reveals an educational goal that seeks to increase the reader's discursive knowledge while at the same time encouraging them to become an informed and active reader who does not passively absorb texts. An active reader interacts with the texts and comes up with messages that may not be intended by authors, who are seen as being unable to exert control over what they have written once it is out in public. Implicit here is the belief that authors should not be seen as sages or those who impart original knowledge or truths to the readers. Rather, an author's role is more similar to that of a messenger, as Mary explicates:

... British author G.K. Chesterton published his novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* in 1908all creative works – are not a group of data that reflects their creators' consciousnesses and identities. Rather, they are a form of communication within the linguistic network. Humans are utilized as a means to run this communication and it proceeds without having to rely on the consciousnesses or intentions of those humans. Thus, Chesterton's worldview and faith are of no significance at all. It poses no problem if he was a Catholic or if the reader gains a different message from what he intended to convey through the novel. Chesterton, like other storytellers, does not own the stories he told. Neither are they the owners of their consciousnesses. *The Man Who Was Thursday* is a story that will benefit you because it belongs to the same network as you and its author cannot foresee and has no way to foresee this. He was merely a shadow that muttered for a little while and echoed voices that he did not understand.

YOON 2018, 100–101

The diminished authorial role and the author's inability to assert control over the messages of her/his written texts or even the texts s/he is working on is dramatized in the last section of *Basement Moon* that brings the reader back

to what happens to the fictional author after those stories from the future are communicated to him. He describes in detail how he is mysteriously driven to turn that extraordinary experience into the novel *Basement Moon*. He recalls that while writing up *Basement Moon*, he is not fully conscious of what he is doing. There are days that his writing flows but he is not in control of it, and there are also days that he seems to be unable to write anything and loses some memories. He also has a strong feeling that his brain is somehow changed by his encounter with Mary and the stories she unfolds to him. Before writing down those stories into a novel form he also reveals that he has read and researched extensively:

I discipline myself to concentrate on reading Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, comprehending Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, as well as studying electronic music during its inception, particularly works by woman electronic music composers and musicians such as Else Marie Pade from Denmark, Bebe Barron and Pauline Oliveros from the U.S., Daphne Oram and Delia Ann Derbyshire from the U.K., and Éliane Radigue from France. Within a period of a little over a year, I also managed to read Walt Whitman's poetry, English author G. K. Chesterton's classic novel *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Jack London's *The Star Rover*, a novel that tells a strange story about a prisoner who can recall his past lives, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, a novel told from the point of view of a male cat named Murr, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, one of the earliest Cyberpunk novels, and a few other works. During this time, I also tried to acquire basic knowledge about cognitive science, neurology, artificial intelligence, and self-awareness and psychology theories. Furthermore, I studied the history of the World Wars, cybernetics history, information theory and theories that branch off from quantum physics, linguistics and other sciences that seem to be endlessly linked and interconnected. Still, what I had tried to study does not offer me a key to the puzzle involving the stories passed on to me while I was in that abandoned room.

YOON 2018, 181–184

This laying bare of the process of writing up *Basement Moon* exhibits another important characteristic of metafiction as self-reflexive fiction or fiction that draws attention to itself and its own making. The fictional author also makes explicit the close relationship between reading and writing/storytelling – showing that all kinds of writing rely on intertextuality. In other words, no writing is original but is influenced one way or another by other pieces of writing. Such emphasis on intertextuality (rather than authorial intention,

autonomy, or creativity), on the difference between counter narratives and mind-numbing narratives and on the active role of us the reader, can be seen as a strategy that seeks to involve all of us readers in this attempt to raise our critical awareness of stories and discourses. Through the act of reading, we become part of the reality in *Basement Moon*. In other words, by entering the fictional world of *Basement Moon*, our communication with the posthuman organic intellectual is established and our critical consciousness is hopefully raised through this process. Thus, apart from recasting an organic intellectual in a new light that echoes Gramsci's notion of organic intellectual and simultaneously mirrors posthumanist imagining, the novel also exhibits metafictional strategies principally through the roles of the posthuman and human storytellers that embody the educational role of fiction. Mary, the posthuman organic intellectual, is simultaneously a character, a storyteller and an intrinsic part of the form and content of *Basement Moon*. The intertextual implication of Mary is also suggested through her name that is derived from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly, the renowned author of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. One can also say that Mary's relationship with Edward Wong, her creator, is reminiscent of the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and the nonhuman Frankenstein he brought into existence, as both creators are unable to exert control over or determine the destinies of their creations.

Furthermore, the fact that Mary has both human and non-human attributes, is capable of crossing several kinds of borders and is able to communicate to humans in both the past, the present and future renders her indestructible. As her mission is to undermine submissive consciousness, she emerges as highly threatening to totalitarianism and this evokes hope in those who value critical consciousness. Crucially, Mary later describes herself as indestructible and foregrounds both the human and non-human elements that remain within her even after transforming her entity from a sentient posthuman being into a storyteller who exists within a counter story. The human elements within her originate from the defiant and dissenting spirit of those who made sacrifice and died for freedom in the past. She expresses confidence that in her current form as a storyteller she can ensure that the consciousness of those who had fought for freedom – the 'you' in the following excerpt that refers to Yanin, Edward's lover and people like her, cannot be erased even if people no longer remember their specific names and actions. Implicit here is the belief in the power of the art of storytelling in keeping alive the spirit of dissent:

I have not vanished; what will happen is merely that we won't meet again in our current formsmy existence remains even after people have

forgotten your name, your story and what you have done. And your consciousness will always exist within me, within a wider frame of reference, within meaningless words that transport the meanings that embody your dream, within individuals who do not know you but continue your idealsevery time they bury your name deep down under chaos, I will inscribe your name high above silence.

YOON 2018, 172–173

5 Conclusion

The novel *Basement Moon* engagingly constructs a futuristic dystopian world in which totalitarianism dominates and finds great success in establishing submissive consciousness, a process that strikingly echoes Gramsci's theory of hegemony, in which he contends that a ruling hegemony does not merely rely on force but also seeks to establish consent among the general populace. Nonetheless, in this fictionalized world of the future, hope is not totally extinguished as there is an ongoing underground mission of dissidents who seek to keep critical consciousness alive. Also, knowledge and advancement of science and the enduring spirit of dissent within the arts are shown as giving rise to a highly intelligent and invincible form of artificial consciousness that subverts human attempts to exercise power over fellow humans and other beings. This type of artificial consciousness (which is given the name Mary) is portrayed as a posthuman being that is aware of her existence and is determined to exist and evade human control. Crucially, her origin, characterization and mission echo Gramsci's advocacy of the role of art and science in raising critical consciousness as well as his conceptualization of the organic intellectual. Mary also embodies posthumanist ideas that counter the integral part of totalitarianism, particularly its love of order, control and domination. She is also portrayed as a storyteller who utilizes the creative aspect of language or the age-old art of storytelling in order to ensure that her mission cannot be destroyed. The transformation of Mary from an artificial consciousness of the futuristic world into a storyteller who exists within the work of fiction (*Basement Moon*) supposedly written by our fictional author/ the human storyteller of the present world highlights the significance of fiction in paving the way for the formulation of a counter hegemony. Furthermore, the roles of the human and posthuman storytellers are not simply to tell stories

but also to draw attention to language and the act of creating fiction. These roles correspond to key metafictional techniques of including commentary about language and literature within a work of fiction and the laying bare of authorial work. In adopting these techniques, the novel makes explicit the educational role of fiction – enlightening the engaged reader about how fiction can enhance their critical consciousness, a quality that can combat complacency and passive acceptance of hegemonic worldviews and practices.

The generic innovation encapsulated in *Basement Moon* also makes this novel worthy of academic attention and comparable with works by notable contemporary Thai authors like Uthis Haemamool, Duanwad Pimwana and Thanat Thammakaew (Phu Kradart), who also experiment with generic conventions and offer incisive social critique through their works. In the case of *Basement Moon*, the experiment with genre blurring, as evident in the coalescence of realist, science fictional, dystopian and metafictional elements, reflects a desire to search for literary modes that can adequately capture the complex dilemmas of contemporary Thai political scenarios. Implicit in the refusal to conform to established generic conventions and the celebration of posthumanism is a strong belief in the power of dissent and a desire to maintain optimism amidst the myriad of injustices, disruptions, and uncertainties of our current world. Given that *Basement Moon* exemplifies an emerging trend in Thai political fiction of the twenty-first century, what is noticeable in this novel is the heightened awareness of issues that not only concern Thailand but also humanity as a whole, namely the rise of totalitarianism in various shades and forms and the vital role of the arts in a world held sway by technoscience.

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