

Hybridity in Rattawut Lapcharoensap's "*Farangs*" and "*Don't Let Me Die in This Place*"¹

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Abstract

Drawing on Edward Said's powerful critique of Orientalism, together with the approach to hybridity adopted by Homi Bhabha, Dean Chan, Jacqueline Lo, and Ien Ang, this article examines Thai-Western relationships portrayed in Thai-American author Rattawut Lapcharoensap's two remarkable short stories, "*Farangs*" and "*Don't Let Me Die in This Place*." The two short stories attempt to expose the racism at work in Thai-Western interactions and simultaneously draw attention to a form of hybridity that challenges a colonial mindset and racial stereotypes. Thai-Western relationships portrayed in "*Farangs*" are marred by unequal power relations but those relationships are not strictly confined to the domination-subordination models foregrounded by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Significantly, "*Don't Let Me Die in This Place*" depicts situations in which negotiations and compromises lead to the bridging of cultural divides. Furthermore, this story highlights physical and emotional entanglements or mutual cultural accommodations that echo Ien Ang's promotion of hybridity, not as an elitist posture, but as a useful and necessary tool to tackle the impacts of colonial legacy in contemporary post-colonial societies.

Keywords: hybridity; Orientalism; Thai-Western relations; Thai Writing in English

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Introduction

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is considered one of the most powerful critiques of Western representation of the East. In this thought-provoking book, Said seeks to define Orientalism and argues that any Western expert whose work is related to the Orient can be referred to as an Orientalist (p. 2). According to Said, the most important form of Orientalism emerged in the late eighteenth century and since then it functions as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, settling it and ruling over it" (p. 3). Importantly, he employs Michel Foucault's notion of discourse to identify Orientalism as he believes that without examining Orientalism as a discourse it is not possible to comprehend the way European culture during the post-Enlightenment period maintained dominance and control over it. To him, Orientalism has continued to impose limitations on thought and action on people dealing with the Orient, and the Orient has never been a free subject but has always been a Western construct that bears little resemblance to actual people living in that part of the world (p. 3). Essentially, Said describes the relationship between the Orient and the Occident as the one between the dominant and the dominated, and he argues that Orientalist ideas and stereotypes are still in circulation today (p. 5).

This article contends that Edward Said's valuable insights concerning East-West power dynamics as summed up above can be helpful in elucidating Thai-Western relationships depicted in the two short stories, "Farangs" and "Don't Let Me Die in This Place" by Thai-American author Rattawut Lapcharoensap. As Thailand is a country that heavily relies on income from tourism and has utilized exoticism as a crucial means to attract foreign tourists, the fictional world in "Farangs" that intriguingly brings to life the interactions and conflicts between the local Thais and Western tourists deserves vigorous academic attention from literary critics. The issue of cultural shock and family tension triggered by racial and cultural differences taken up in "Don't Let Me Die in This Place" is also vital in contemporary Thailand, where interracial marriages are not uncommon. Nevertheless, in approaching these two short stories through the critical perspective offered by Edward Said, the author of this article also takes into account an extraordinary and mixed response provoked by Said's critique of *Orientalism*. Among the criticisms mounted against Said's thesis in *Orientalism* are his essentialization of Europe, his arbitrary rearrangement of historical background and his failure to take account of some Orientalists' attack on colonial domination. Said's conception of the intercultural relations of East and West exclusively in terms of domination and subordination has also been challenged by a number of critics, such as Aijaz Ahmad, John Mackenzie and Michael Richardson, who argue against the reductionism and binarism of his thesis.³

³ In the mid-1980s, at a conference held at the University of Essex, Said looked at the issues raised by his book and strongly defended his original thesis although he admitted that he had yet to fully consider some of the criticisms of his work. In the Afterword of the 1995 Penguin edition of *Orientalism* Said also attempted to correct what he referred to as the misreadings and misinterpretations of *Orientalism* namely, the book's alleged anti-Westernism and support for Islamic fundamentalism. Said, however, acknowledged that after nearly twenty years of *Orientalism*'s first publication and so much attention and controversy it had raised, his work seemed to him a collective book that superseded him as its author much more than he could have expected when he began working on it (330). To date, the latest critique of Said's thesis in *Orientalism* is Ibn Warraq's *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (2008). Warraq argues that Said's methodology is questionable and that his historical understanding is erroneous and inadequate. He also criticizes Said for misrepresenting the works of many Orientalists, and that Orientalism has been used by Said's supporters to discourage and inhibit critical studies of the Islamic world. Said died on 25 September 2003. In order to honour his legacy as an activist and intellectual, a group of intellectuals who had been Said's long time friends and collaborators looked back at their past dialogues with Said and took up the issues that seemed unresolved or in need of further elaboration.

Another important critique of Orientalism is mounted by J.J. Clarke (1997), whose *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* acknowledges the value of Said's critique of East-West power relations, but simultaneously brings its limitations to the fore. While conceding that Orientalism is intricately linked with colonialism and Western imperialism, Clarke avoids regarding Orientalism as a mere mask for racism and a purely Western construct which functions to legitimise colonial domination. According to Clarke, in the West, Eastern thoughts have been used as a catalyst for self-criticism and self-renewal and Orientalism can be viewed as a counter-movement with the tendency to subvert imperial power (p. 9). He attributes the limitations of Said's critique to the inclination towards reductionism and the tendency to ignore the rich and complex nature of Orientalism (p. 8).

Homi Bhabha is also among the influential theorists who provide critique on the oversimplification of the supposedly binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized in Said's work. Bhabha has developed the conception of hybridity produced by the third space or the in-between space where there are negotiations between the colonizer and colonized and where colonial domination can be undermined through the deconstruction of essentialist identity and binary opposition (*Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 37). This conceptualization of hybridity thus foregrounds mutual contamination and ambivalence in cross-cultural relationships rather than regarding them as totally predetermined by the domination-subordination power structure. Hybridity makes it possible for a society to challenge and problematize existing verities and to reconstruct itself in a more liberating and creative way. Bhabha remarks:

for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace to two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211)

In the following section of this article, I seek to demonstrate that hybridity can be utilized as a critical concept that illuminates complicated experiences of East-West relations and interactions in our contemporary world. Nonetheless, the conception of hybridity should not be idealised or sensationally celebrated as utopian or unproblematic. As cautioned by Dean Chan (2000), we should be careful about the rhetoric of hybridity that unproblematically suggests a doctrine of conflation, equivalency and functions to package differences for popular consumption in the form of a sanitized and uncomplicated product. Chan warns against simplistic evocations of hybridity that do not sufficiently recognize the diversity of hybridity and draws attention to the rhetorical deployment of the term hybridity that overemphasizes its positive and creative side but obscures its colonial legacy (pp. 53-55). In this regard Edward Said's insights on the persistence of Orientalist ideas, stereotypes, and approaches in today's world prove to be particularly relevant.

It should be noted that the conception of hybridity is not equivalent to a fusion of unlike elements and the permeability of cultural and political boundaries at the cost of sensitivity to local specificities and unequal power structures. As observed by Jacqueline Lo (2000), a form of hybridization that bypasses the complexities and historicity of Bhabha's theory and focuses on the celebration of cultural difference that masks and preserves the status quo can be referred to as 'happy hybridity' (pp. 152-54). Lo raises questions about this

This resulted in a special issue of *Cultural Inquiry*, *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation* (2005), edited by Homi K. Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell. See also *Edward Said and After: Toward a new Humanism* (2007), a special issue of *Cultural Critique* which seeks to explore what Said's humanist legacy has provided to contemporary intellectuals especially after the increased policing of academic life that began shortly after September 11. See Abraham, M. and Rubin (2007) for more details.

kind of hybridity and argues that there is nonetheless, another approach to hybridity that is more useful, as it holds the potential to contest and destabilize hegemonic relations. Quoting Bakhtin's concept of hybridity, Lo illustrates that the form of hybridity termed by Bakhtin as 'intentional hybridity' is the one she finds most interesting as it can be used as an effective tool to disrupt and contest stereotypes and the status quo. According to Lo:

What distinguishes intentional hybridity from the happy hybridity model is its motivation and location within an identified field of contesting power relations. The happy hybridity model celebrates the proliferation of difference as unbounded culture. The end result is harmonious fusion, whereupon difference is reabsorbed into the status quo. In contrast to this, intentional hybridity stresses its strategic use as a mode of intervention and politicization. (pp. 166-167)

As with Lo, Ien Ang (2001) is concerned about the celebration stance of hybridity which has sparked criticism of the concept. According to Ang, many of the anti-hybridity critics regard the celebration of hybridity as an elitist posture promoted by those in the diasporas who are much more privileged than the general populace in developing countries (p. 70). Ang, however, disagrees with the restriction of hybridity to postcolonial elites and argues for the usefulness of hybridity for non-western societies. Commenting on the outbreaks of violence against Chinese-Indonesians by local Indonesians, she traces the history of relations between locals and the Chinese-Indonesians to colonial times and demonstrates how Western colonialism caused the conflicts between these two groups that persist into the present and continuously fuel antagonism and hatred between them. Ang (2001) stresses that in order to achieve social and political reformation, it is vital to begin at the local level by promoting the form of hybridity that allows for an accommodation of cultures and peoples (p. 71).

Drawing on the approach to hybridity adopted by Homi Bhabha, Dean Chan, Jacqueline Lo, and Ien Ang, along with Edward Said's insightful comments about the legacy of Orientalism in today's world, this article examines Thai-Western relationships portrayed in Thai-American author Rattawut Lapcharoensap's two remarkable short stories, "Farangs" and "Don't Let Me Die in This Place." The two short stories attempt to expose the racism at work in Thai-Western interactions and simultaneously draw attention to a form of hybridity that challenges colonial mindset and stereotypes. Thai-Western relationships portrayed in "Farangs" are marred by unequal power relations but those relationships are not strictly confined to the domination-subordination models foregrounded by Said in *Orientalism*. Significantly, Lapcharoensap's "Don't Let Me Die in This Place" depicts situations in which negotiations and compromises lead to the bridging of cultural divides. Furthermore, this story highlights physical and emotional entanglements or mutual cultural accommodations that echo Ien Ang's promotion of hybridity, not an elitist posture, but as a useful and necessary tool to deal with the impacts of colonial legacy in contemporary post-colonial societies.

"Farangs"

Set on an island beach, Lapcharoensap's "Farangs" (2005) is an amusing and thought-provoking satire that revolves around the love-hate relationship between local Thais and tourists who frequent their island. The narrator is a young man whose mother runs a small motel mainly catering for Western tourists. Although her major income is from the motel business, the mother's bitter experience with her former American husband, who deserted her, makes her dislike Westerners. She is also very keen to ensure her son shares the same negative attitude towards 'farangs'—the Thai word for Westerners in general, and forbids him from having relationships with young Western girls. To the mother, tourists who come to the island are purely pleasure-seekers who can spare no time for sophisticated things:

Ma says, “Pussy and elephants. That’s all these people want.” She always says this in August, at the season’s peak, when she’s tired of farangs running all over the Island, tired of finding used condoms in the motel’s rooms, tired of guests complaining to her in five languages. She turns to me and says, “You give them history, temples, pagodas, traditional dance, floating markets, seafood curry, tapioca desserts, silk-weaving cooperatives, but all they really want is to ride some hulking gray beast like a bunch of wildmen and to pant over girls and to lie there half-dead getting skin cancer on the beach during the time in between.” (p. 2)

Other islanders’ attitudes towards tourists are similar to Ma’s. They know that their island is simply an exotic locale where wealthy tourists can indulge in their desire for excitement and pleasure, and where their superior economic power can be affirmed. The islanders also learn to form their own stereotypes of tourists and use them to distinguish one nationality from another. Yet, in the end, all tourists are merged into the same category that Ma sums up earlier—they are all unsophisticated fun-seekers. However, the islanders cannot ignore those affluent tourists and have to do their best to cater to their touristic demands.

Although the narrator is aware that Westerners visiting his island are largely those searching for fun and nothing else, he is still keen to be close to them. He does not share his mother’s disdain for Westerners and usually falls for young Western girls. Being abandoned by his American father when he was a small child, the narrator seems to have a fixation on girls who look Western. Fantasizing and fetishising about Western girls seems to be his way of dealing with the absence of his father:

She threw back her head and laughed. I admired the shine of her tiny, perfectly even rows of teeth, the gleam of that soft, rose-colored tongue quivering between them like the meat of some magnificent mussel.... She smiled a close-mouthed grin, admiring my pig at play, and I would’ve given anything in the world to see her tongue again, to reach out and sink my fingers into the hollows of her collarbone, to stare at that damp, beautiful navel all day long. (pp. 4-5)

Yet the narrator’s fantasy can hardly be sustained. Although his father is American, he grows up as a Thai and is treated as a Thai by Western tourists, many of whom regard the locals as exotic commodities and display white supremacist behaviors and attitudes. The narrator’s love life is that of disappointment after disappointment. While Western girls enjoy his company and romantic attention during their brief holiday in Thailand, once they get back home, they all forget about him. The narrator’s unhappy relationships with American girls can be read as symbolic of the unequal power relation between the West and Thailand. In the world of globalization and mass travelling, less affluent countries like Thailand serve as a temporary pleasure zone for Western holiday-makers who, because of their economic power, have the ability to determine what sort of holiday or companion they want and for how long. The narrator in “Farangs”, has little power to determine his relationship with Western girls. Pondering over his heart-broken experiences, the narrator feels that all the girls use him and treat him little differently from toys:

I’m thinking with what I suppose is grief about all the American girls I’ve ever loved. Girls with names like Pamela, Angela, Stephanie, Joy. And now Lizzie. One of the girls sent me a postcard of Miami once. A row of palm trees and a pink condo. “Hi Sweetie,” it said. “I just wanted to say hi and to thank you for showing me a good time when I was over there. I’m in South Beach now, it’s Spring Break, and let me tell you it’s not half as beautiful as it is where you are. If you ever make it out to the U S of A, look me up okay?” which was nice

of her, but she never told me where to look her up and there was no return address on the postcard. (pp. 18- 19)

The narrator's latest affair with the American girl, Elizabeth, is no better than his previous affairs. Like other Western girls, Elizabeth acts like a typical tourist who has internalized the view that the locals are the Oriental Other who should not be taken seriously. Her treatment of the narrator reflects the attitude prevalent among Western tourists that a relationship with a Thai is simply part of a holiday fling, but never something permanent or serious. In the end, she leaves the narrator for her former American boyfriend, an arrogant and insensitive bully, whose company she finds less satisfying than that of the narrator and yet not the one to be easily discarded. The narrator's encounter with Hunter, Elizabeth's American boyfriend, brings him face to face with racial prejudice and discrimination. Hunter is rude and offensive, and appears to be the embodiment of white supremacy:

He just stares at me with that stupid white nose jutting out between his eyes. For a second, I think Hunter might throw the squid at me. But then he just pops the rest into his mouth, turns to Lizzie, and says with his mouth full:

"You fucked this joker, didn't you?" I looked over at Lizzie. She's staring at the table, tapping her fingers lightly against the wood. It seems she's about to cry.... Lizzie just keeps on staring at the top of the table. (p. 17)

Despite her shaken state, the complicity between Elizabeth and Hunter is discernable in the above excerpt and it can be read as her unquestioning acceptance of the West's neo-colonial relation to the East. Furthermore, the whiteness of Elizabeth and Hunter seems to be something that binds them together while simultaneously creating the division between her and the narrator, who is non-white and excluded from hegemonic masculinity. Intriguingly, what is also noticeable is Elizabeth's passivity and loss of agency when being confronted with Hunter's hypermasculinity. Their shared whiteness notwithstanding, Elizabeth's subscription to patriarchal gender roles appears to prevent her from exerting her agency.

The narrator's fixation with Western girls and his unfulfilling relationship with them reminds us of his mother's brief relationship with an American soldier who regards his marriage to a Thai woman as simply a relaxing break from his military duty. In her younger days, Ma's idealization of Thai-Western romance and life in the West led her to fall in love with an American soldier who married her and fathered her a child before abandoning her. In a way, the younger Ma's enthusiasm to form a relationship with an American man, acquire English and spend a new life in America with her American husband parallels the narrator's racial fetishization of 'farang' girls. The younger Ma and her son appear to associate the West and whiteness with desirable attributes and such association implies their acceptance of Western superiority.

The story nonetheless refuses to ascribe the role of passive discarded lovers to Thai characters. Although deserted by her American husband, the trauma does not ruin the life of the narrator's mother. Instead, she manages to regain dignity, autonomy and economic independence. She appears to us as a strong, resilient and practical woman who can take care of herself and her child without help from her absent American husband. However, her unhappy past experience has made her hold on to negative stereotypes of Westerners, and she strongly objects to her son's fascination with and attraction to Western girls. This reaction can also be seen as a result of her realization that her son is dominated by a similar kind of mindset that once made her yearn for the Western Other (who, like the Oriental Other, bears little resemblance to the actualities of people in that part of the world). The son, however, ignores the mother's reproach:

“Remember whose son you are,” she says through the day’s last light, standing in the office doorway with her arms akimbo. “Remember who raised you all these years.” “What are you talking about, Ma?” “Why do you insist, luk, on chasing after those farangs?” “You are being silly, Ma. It’s just love. It’s not a crime.” “I don’t think,” Ma says, “that I’m the silly one here, luk. I’m not the one taking my pet pig out to dinner just because some farang thinks it’s cute.” (pp. 13-14)

As the story progresses, the reader is more drawn to the hostility between the Western tourists and the local Thais once more. Disappointed and frustrated, the narrator loses temper when his beloved pet pig, Clint Eastwood, becomes a target of attack from Hunter and his friends. Hidden in a mango tree, the narrator and his friend throw mangoes at the Americans in an attempt to help the pig. While Hunter and his friends seem to represent the living manifestation of racism, the pig can be seen as representing those who are trapped and hurt by racial prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, at this point the narrator probably sees himself and his plight in his pig, who is being pursued by humans who want to harm him. Significantly, at this moment the narrator seems to realize that Elizabeth is not able to see him for what he really is, as she herself also holds colonial power and has internalized similar sets of racial stereotypes as Hunter does. She ceases to be his fetishised other or, to be more specific, the manifestation of his subjugation to colonial power. His infatuation for her seems to disappear. What matters to him the most is the successful escape of his pig, Clint Eastwood:

Clint Eastwood panics. He squeals. He starts to run. The American boy gives chase, trying to tackle him to the ground.... I follow Surachai’s lead, grab as many mangoes as I can. Our mangoes sail through the night air. Some of them hit their targets squarely in the face, on the head, in the abdomen. Some of the mangoes hit Lizzie by accident, but I don’t really care anymore... They all turn in our direction then, the four farangs, trying to dodge the mangoes as they come. It’s then that I see Clint Eastwood scurry away unnoticed. I see my pig running into the ocean, his pink snout inching across the sea’s dark surface, phosphorescence glittering around his head like a crown of blue stars, and as I’m throwing each mango with all the strength I have, I’m thinking: Swim, Clint, Swim. (p. 22)

The narrator’s physical and emotional entanglements with Elizabeth and other Western tourists are marred by power hierarchies and racial stereotypes and do not lead to genuine attachments or even friendship. Nonetheless, they apparently bring about the narrator’s ability to decolonize his mentality and overcome his racial fetishization of western girls. The story ends by highlighting the narrator’s active role in saving his beloved pet pig, suggesting his identification with the victim of those who feel entitled to wield power and inflict violence on others. Hunter and his friends’ bullying of the pig can be read as a metaphor for the aggression and violence of colonizing practices while the decolonizing process experienced by the narrator indicates a positive transformation of the colonized who are no longer content with a subordinate position but desire to fight back. Furthermore, the fact that the pig is described as swimming towards freedom with “phosphorescence glittering around his head like a crown of blue stars” evokes an uplifting mood that seems to herald political initiatives or strategies that can be employed by the colonized to expose, challenge, and dismantle existing and emerging forms of Orientalism.

In the next section of this article, I discuss Lapcharoensap’s other story, “Don’t Let Me Die in This Place”, which resembles “Farangs” in its attempt to draw attention to the issue of cross-cultural encounters and the ensuing conflicts. This story, however, ultimately affirms

that people are capable of reaching out to one another across cultural barriers and establishing understanding and affection.

“Don’t Let Me Die in This Place”

“Don’t Let Me Die in This Place” (2005) is told from the point of view of an elderly wheelchair-bound American who comes to Thailand to stay with his son and Thai daughter-in-law. The narrator’s first few weeks in Thailand are difficult for both himself and his son’s young family. Bangkok’s heat and humidity coupled with his poor health and homesickness render the narrator’s cultural shock all the more intolerable. The son’s attempt to arrange a sightseeing tour for him barely cheers him up. While outside, he feels that the Thais stare and gossip about him. He also misunderstands his Thai daughter-in-law as being patronizing and condescending. Moreover, he is hardly able to relate to his two grandchildren who speak little English and look very different from him. Their racial otherness is something he finds difficult to reconcile with and it seems to immediately prevent him from establishing a bond with them. In other words, he initially sees them as the Oriental Other, not as family members:

As always, it’s hot as hell. My stomach’s sweating clean through my shirt. For a while I just sit there and stare at the kids spooning clumsily at their fried rice and egg, talking to each other in Thai, the wife nodding now and again at something they say. Neither of the children looks much like me. I have to look real hard to find any resemblances. They have broad flat noses, long banana-shaped eyes, dark auburn hair, and clear toffee-colored skin....I have to remind myself sometimes that they’re not adopted, that these children are my own flesh and blood...even if I have troubled pronouncing their names and they have trouble pronouncing mine. (My name’s often times a verb on their tongues—Parry— sometimes even an adjective—Purry—like I’m a cat—so I’ve made them call me ‘Grandfather’ instead. I rarely say their names at all....the few times I tried calling them by their real names, ‘Ruchira’ and ‘Sornram,’ they’d both laughed insensitively at my attempts.) (pp. 131-132)

Gradually, however, the racial and cultural barriers between the narrator and his Thai daughter-in-law and grandchildren begin to break down. The narrator also becomes closer to his son and realizes the genuine love he has for his wife. He also learns that the couple’s marriage is by no means easy because there are discrimination and prejudice against their relationship from people around them:

Jack leads Tida to the dance floor. They’re the only people out there. It seems the whole place is watching them. Everybody looks up to watch my son—this tall, foreign man—dancing with his Thai wife I look around and see some of the men under the tent snickering in Jack’s direction. I notice, too, that the women are talking to one another sternly, peering at Jack and his wife. I can tell by the way they look at her that they think Tida’s some kind of prostitute and suddenly I’m proud of them both for being out there dancing, proud of my boy Jack for holding his wife so close, because their love suddenly seems for the first time like something courageous and worthwhile... (p. 144)

Of note here is that negative stereotypes attached to Western-Thai relationship are not something new in Thai history. A number of Thai novels depict Western-Thai relationships in an unhappy light due to parental disapproval and social discrimination (Reynolds, 1999, pp. 268-70). A classic example of this is Kukrit Pramoj’s *Four Reigns*, which was written in 1953. The novel revolves around the life of Ploy, a woman born in the reign of Rama VI who lived through to the reign of Rama VIII. One of Ploy’s sons marries a Western woman he met during his studies overseas. His father vehemently opposed the marriage, causing a rift and

pain between the father and son. Despite Ploy's sympathy for her foreign daughter-in-law, the young couple eventually break up due to their inability to come to terms with social pressure and cultural differences.

While Thai racism and discrimination against Westerners has a long history, it is not until the Vietnam War that Western-Thai relationships take a significantly more negative meaning. As Rachel Harrison (2001) remarks, during the war, Thailand served as a 'R&R' site (Rest and Recreation) for American soldiers on a break from war duty and this resulted in the mushrooming sex industry that catered and provided 'rented' wives for soldiers. While prostitution in Thailand could be traced to the time before the Vietnam War, Western and Thai discourses alike tend to see this war as crucial to the spread of the Thai sex industry (p. 142). Discrimination against Western-Thai relationships persists in contemporary Thailand, although, ironically, Eurasian looks are fetishized as evident from the popularity of many Eurasian beauty queens, models, actors and actresses in the Thai entertainment world (Reynolds, 1999, pp. 267-272).

Interestingly, Lapcharoensap's "Don't Let Me Die in This Place" attempts to counter the stigma attached to Thai-Western relationships by portraying Jack and Tida as two people who are unafraid to express their love for each other despite the prejudice directed at them. The depiction of Tida as a kind, gentle but also assertive, and strong woman makes her a fully-realized character, not a passive object of love or a projection of male fantasy. Significantly, Rattawut makes Jack fluent in Thai, and he uses Thai to communicate with his wife and children with ease. The story's refusal to make Tida give up Thai for the sake of her husband can be read as an attempt to lend power to her through the ability to maintain the command of her mother tongue within the household. The household can therefore be seen as resembling Bhabha's third space, as here mutual entanglements destabilize binary opposition and individuals (in this case, Jack and Tida) no longer subscribe to traditional gender and racial hierarchies. As noted by the narrator, by speaking his wife's language, Jack appears less as an American and becomes more Thai, thus closer and more or less equal to his Thai wife. Looking at Jack speaking to his wife in Thai, the narrator suddenly feels that his own son appears to him so foreign and unknown:

Tida's sitting at the dining room table doing the bills. Jack walks over and bends down and kisses her on the head. They speak to each other in Thai for a little while. It's strange and perplexing to hear Jack speak Thai. You grow old thinking you know your kid and then he starts speaking a foreign language and you never know him at all.... She and Jack start talking again. Jack's telling her some story, maybe something funny about his day, because she laughs every so often at what he's saying. They seem happy with their own company, so I wheel myself over to my room. (pp. 137-138)

While the use of Thai language within the household is crucial in maintaining Tida's autonomy and power as well as bringing her American husband closer to her and away from his American-ness, it seems to pose an obstacle to the narrator's access to the family, at least initially. Nevertheless, the story shows that with time, patience and effort from both sides, it is possible to reach mutual understanding. Language, however, is not the only means through which understanding and affection can be achieved. Expression of affection can also be conveyed through body language and gestures. In fact, it is the youngest grandchild who speaks the least English who is able to convince the narrator that he is seen as part of his son's family, not a stranger. By hugging the narrator tightly, the child unintentionally makes the old man feel that even though he is in a foreign country, he is, after all, with his own family although they speak a different language and do not look like him:

“Hey,” I say, turning the chair around. I wave him over. “Come here. Let me take a look at that nose.” He eyes me curiously, takes slow, cautious steps into my room. I reach out and hold his small chin up to the light with my good left hand... When I let go the kid reaches out and hugs me so hard I almost fall out of the chair. He squeezes me tight around the neck and I can barely breathe. When he’s done, he waves at me with both hands, says “Bye-bye,” and then runs out of the room like he can’t get away from me fast enough. I sit there listening to his footsteps pattering back to the dining room. A little later Jack pokes his head in the door and says, “Everything all right with the kid? Why are you sitting in the dark, Father?” and I say, “Yeah, Jack. The kid’s all right. I think we have an understanding now.” (p. 140)

The story further reveals that understanding and empathy produced within the third space trigger other positive things. The narrator’s realization that his daughter-in-law and grandchildren see him as part of the family enables him to explore new ways to live in an unfamiliar culture. His physical handicap does not worry him so much as before and he is prepared to enjoy life more fully. Going to a temple fair with his son’s family, the narrator insists on joining his grandchildren in a bumper car race. The story ends with the whole family’s excitement, exhilaration and relief after an exciting game in which they all eventually discover something in common to share:

The little boy starts giggling and I’m screaming through the laughter, saying, “Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha!”... I’m trying to find the wife and her daughter now. I see that they’ve been cornered by two of the teenagers, so I move over to the side of the pit and wait for an opening.... I saw them all laughing now, facing one another in their cars, and I’m circling them, planning my next line of attack. I’m going for the knockout punch, I’m aiming my car directly at both their bumpers.... A few more manoeuvres and the mirror ball’s off, the pit’s dark again, there’s no more music except our laughing in our bumper cars. (pp. 149-150)

The story can be seen as a work that reflects a form of East-West hybridization that contests Orientalist assumptions and racial stereotypes. The East-West interactions depicted in this story cannot be fully accounted through the domination-subordination lens and they reveal how contact between East and West can result in negotiation, compromise and accommodation for both parties. The story also challenges the Orientalist discourse and exemplifies Ien Ang’s (2001) argument that there is the need to start from ordinary personal and social relationships if one wants to disrupt hegemonic relations and challenge the status quo (p. 71).

Conclusion

Rattawut Lapcharoensap’s “Farangs” (2005) and “Don’t Let Me Die in This Place” (2005) reveal the author’s attempt to engage in a task to reorient East-West relations. The latter, in particular, conveys a message that cultural difference is not necessarily an impediment to genuine empathy and identification. The insights offered by Said regarding the colonial legacy and the persistence of Orientalist thoughts prove to be helpful in understanding the power dynamics involved in Thai-Western relationships depicted in both works. Also, the conception of hybridity proves to be a fruitful tool to shed light on the complexity of the Western-Thai encounters portrayed. Essentially, hybridization as captured in the two stories is fraught with issues triggered by racial stereotypes, neo-colonial impacts, and unequal power structures. Nonetheless, as suggested in “Don’t Let Me Die in This Place”, the third space has the potential to dismantle limiting stereotypes, destabilize hegemonic relations, and encourage the creation of bonds that can overcome cultural barriers.

As a final note, it is hoped that the approach adopted in this article can encourage a new reading of post-colonial critique in contemporary Thailand. It would also be worthwhile for researchers interested in hybridity to compare Lapcharoensap's short stories with other anglophone writings authored by writers of Thai origin such as works by Pira Sudham, an Isaan-born author who has chosen to write in English. While Sudham's writings tend to revolve around the dark side of power hierarchies in Thai society, many of his novels also take up the theme about cross-cultural encounters and draw attention to both the traumatizing experiences and intriguing development of characters who are caught between two or more cultures. Sudham's novel *Monsoon Country* (1988), for instance, shows how hybridization can transform the protagonist, who once occupied the lower rungs of hierarchies and felt disempowered, into an individual aspiring to become an agent of change. For literary critics looking for more recent Thai writing in English, Pitchaya Sudbanthad's *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* (2020) can be an interesting choice to examine through the lens of hybridity, as this novel features a wide cast of characters from different time periods and cultures; some of them uprooted from their origins and still pursuing a search for a place they can call home. The alienation from the place where they currently live and the obsession with 'home' is reminiscent of the narrator in "Don't Let Me Die in This Place", who initially yearns for a return to his home country, but whether the characters in Sudbanthad's *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* are fortunate enough to experience the third space that allows them to reconstruct and redefine the meaning of home and identity is worth investigating.

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