

# An Overview of Contemporary Political Writings about the Mekong Countries

## ภาพรวมของวรรณกรรมการเมืองร่วมสมัยเกี่ยวกับประเทศในแถบลุ่มน้ำโขง

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### Abstract

This research article summarizes the exploration and examination of novels, short stories, and memoirs set in the Mekong region. The focus is on contemporary works written in or translated into English or Thai that reveal the authors' attempts to fight the abuse of power of the ruling class or to highlight the plight of those suffering from injustice, oppression, or exploitation. Based on the analysis of these writings, three main issues emerged which are the central concern of these authors: the use of nationalist ideology by the ruling class as a means to facilitate their abuse of power, the prevalence of male-dominated culture that relegates women to disadvantaged positions, and the treatment of ethnic minorities.

**Keywords:** Mekong countries, political writings, social injustice

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยชิ้นนี้สรุปผลการศึกษาวีเคราะห้วรรณกรรมประเภทนิยาย เรื่องสั้น และบันทึกความทรงจำที่มีเนื้อหาเกี่ยวข้องกับประเทศในแถบลุ่มน้ำโขง โดยมุ่งศึกษางานเขียนร่วมสมัยที่เขียนหรือได้รับการแปลเป็นภาษาอังกฤษหรือภาษาไทยที่แสดงให้เห็นถึงความพยายามของนักเขียนที่จะต่อต้านและวิพากษ์การใช้อำนาจแบบเผด็จการของผู้มีอำนาจในสังคมหรือพยายามสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความทุกข์ยากของคนที่ถูกกดขี่เอารัดเอาเปรียบหรือถูกปฏิบัติอย่างไม่เป็นธรรม จากการศึกษาวิเคราะห์พบว่า ประเด็นหลักๆ ที่นักเขียนเหล่านี้ให้ความสำคัญ

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มี 3 ประเด็น ได้แก่ การใช้ลัทธิชาตินิยมเป็นเครื่องมือในการใช้อำนาจอย่างมิชอบของชนชั้นปกครองหรือผู้มีอำนาจ วัฒนธรรมชายเป็นใหญ่ที่ทำให้สตรีตกเป็นเบี้ยล่างในหลายสถานการณ์ และการปฏิบัติต่อชนกลุ่มน้อย

**คำสำคัญ:** ประเทศในแถบลุ่มน้ำโขง วรรณกรรมการเมือง ความไม่เป็นธรรมทางสังคม

## Introduction

In modern functional democracies, we often assume that ordinary people automatically secure the right to criticize the establishment, and that writers and artists are entitled to the right to produce works which may convey messages critical of those in power. However, this is not always the case. Often, when the state feels that it is under threat of one kind or another, it can resort to restriction of the citizen's freedom in the name of national security. One good example is what happened in the US, Britain and Australia after the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre when 'security' is used as an excuse to restrict the citizens' freedom of speech, tighten border controls and impose harsh immigration rules. Of note is that, even though many in the mainstream population were persuaded by state discourses about the importance of 'security' and kept silent about conservative state policies, there were individuals who publicly voiced their disagreement when their governments pushed things too far. The so-called war against terrorism led to rallies and protests by several groups in cities across the western world. As Bernadette Brennan observed, in literary and media circles, there were also journalists, intellectuals and writers who came out to express the urgent need for the kind of writing which is independent and fearless, as they believe that such writing can serve as an important challenge to a state that makes use of its power to silence constructive debates and criticisms (Brennan, 2008: x-xi).

As someone growing up in Thailand, a country in the Mekong region, where the ruling class often employs various means to regulate the population, I am particularly interested in the relation between unjust state power and writing that challenges such power. This interest has motivated me to explore contemporary fictional works and memoirs set in the Mekong countries that seek to undermine the discourses that enhance, maintain or affirm hegemonic political, social, and cultural relations within these countries. Also under consideration are works that attempt to evoke sympathy for people who have been neglected, or taken advantage of, because they occupy a marginal place in society. As Rosie Scott observed, political writings do not have to be writing about political relations or politics in its strictest sense. She noted that the essence of political writing lies in its ability to make the readers empathize with the plight of the oppressed or those who suffer injustice or maltreatment (Scott, 2008: 34-35). When investigating these texts, I bear in mind key concepts in critical discourse analysis, namely the notion that discourse is neither neutral nor free from ideologies, beliefs or values and that discourse can either help maintain hegemonic social order or seek to undermine it (Orlowski, 2011: 37). I also take into account the Foucauldian premise of power as the root of discourse which is closely intertwined with daily interactions and actions rather than uniformly emanating from the centre and forcing itself on the periphery in a unidirectional way (Orlowski, 2011: 39). It should be noted, however, that this article only provides an overview of some of the most interesting memoirs and fictional works in or those that have been translated into English or Thai, and published since 1979<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed examination of these works, their representations of the downtrodden, and their critique of dominant state ideologies such as nationalism, see Pissa-ard (2013).

## Vietnam

The Vietnam War (1963-1973) was a devastating war and people in the region suffered immensely from this war. The communist victory and the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975 did not bring about immediate peace and reconciliation. After the loss of South Vietnam, many people from the South fled in fear, often in poorly equipped boats. Many died when their boats capsized in storms or from pirate attacks (Hoang, 2010).

In the mid 1980s, the Vietnamese government initiated the economic reforms known as *Doi Moi*, aiming to improve the stagnant economy and address problems caused by failed socialist economic plans. During this period, the Communist Party allowed freedom of expression which made it possible for a number of Vietnamese writers to publish stories about the dark side of the Vietnam War and the hardship suffered by ordinary people during wartime and in the postwar period. However, this period of liberalization did not last long, and Duong Thu Huong, one of the most outspoken Vietnamese writers who came out to criticize the government, was put in jail, creating international uproar against this suppression of freedom of expression (Dinh, 1996: xii-xvi).

While the period of liberalization was short-lived, the Vietnamese government continued to encourage the construction of infrastructure that facilitated economic growth. Modernization and development were seen as part of the nationalist campaign to make Vietnam a nation that could compete with other countries. Even though the country's economy benefited from this more open economic policy, the government's harsh control over freedom of speech created a stifling atmosphere. A number of Vietnamese bloggers, journalists and songwriters have been jailed for criticizing the government. In recent years, economic growth in Vietnam has significantly slowed down

and the country's banks have been overwhelmed by bad debts. Public discontent is on the increase and Vietnamese leaders are blamed for being inefficient and corrupt.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the most interesting works from Vietnam which mirror those important issues as outlined above include novels by the dissident Vietnamese writer Duong Thu Huong (1996), especially *Novel Without a Name*; In this novel, the author conveys messages highly critical of those with power in Vietnam who manipulate the mass to serve them through the use of ideology. Throughout the novel, the dark side of the Vietnam War and the role of nationalist ideology in creating circumstances in which human beings have to commit atrocities against other people are exposed. The author also attempts to show the close link between the exploitation of the people by the ruling class and the patriarchal culture that allows men's authority to dominate all important decisions.<sup>4</sup>

The portrayal of the war and its effects on ordinary Vietnamese in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* share similarities with that in *A Thousand Tears Falling* a memoir written by Vietnamese-American author Yung Krall (1995). The memoir is a moving account of the life of the author who grew up in Vietnam. The most interesting parts of the memoir are the ones that deal with Yung Krall's memories of her childhood, which was profoundly affected by the political rift and violence in Vietnam at that time. Throughout her memoir, Yung Krall raises the important question of the fight for 'the nation' and the fight for individual freedom and rights, and in the end, she decides to take an action which she thinks would help her defend her own and her family's freedom and rights by exposing North Vietnamese spies in America.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Brummitt (2012)

Also worth mentioning is “The Boat” a short story by Nam Le (2008) a Vietnamese-Australian writer, who currently lives in the United States. While Nam Le does not have direct experience of the Vietnam War, his short story reveals the author’s deep sympathy for war victims, especially women and children, and brings to life that period of Vietnamese history in a moving way. The story relates the ordeal of the Vietnamese refugees who fled South Vietnam a few years after the Communist victory in 1975. Told through the perspective of a young Vietnamese girl, this story can be read as the attempt to give voice to the suffering of women and children in South Vietnam both before and after the end of the Vietnam War. “The Boat” appears to be written for a Western audience so that they can gain an understanding of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers at a time when the issue is highly controversial in the west. Nonetheless, within the Vietnamese context, it can be seen as part of the counter-discourses that seek to challenge the official narratives sanctioned by the communist party in Vietnam.

Two other works of relevance I found during the course of my research are Doan Le (1999) two short stories, “The Real Estate of Chua Village” and “Sesame Seed”. The first story focuses on the upheavals in a remote rural village as a result of land speculation. The confusion and disorder portrayed in the story can be seen as a result of Vietnam’s shift to a partially free market economy and the enacting of new land laws in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this story, the author shows how land craze motivated by greed is able to turn the villagers against one another. Intoxicated by the dream of being rich and getting ahead of their neighbors, they fight over a small piece of land and try whichever way possible to make money from the land available in the village. The author not only focuses on

human greed, but also on the corrupt system that fuels human desire. While the villagers are by no means idealized and are shown as mere humans, their victimization is also spelled out. They are cheated because there are those who are more cunning than them and the system favors state authorities and those who are part of that network. The story seems to suggest that even when Vietnam becomes more economically open, the power relations do not change. Those who pull the strings behind everything are still those who hold power in the country.

The other Doan Le short story “Sesame Seed” reveals the author’s interest and deep sympathy for impoverished women. In this story, a successful and elegant woman attorney is forced to confront her sad past during her interrogation of a defendant, a woman accused of murdering a man who paid to sleep with her. The story suggests that the problems faced by poor women are more complicated than what the government tries to make out. Doan Le subtly criticizes the government for being out of touch with the harsh realities of Vietnamese women’s lives, with its mindless slogan repetition and useless campaigns blaming women for causing poverty for themselves and their family by having too many children.

The writings examined above represent some examples of works by authors who seek to challenge state hegemony and draw attention to the neglected and the exploited in Vietnam. These works mirror several problems afflicting Vietnamese society since the start of the Vietnam War and portray ordinary Vietnamese’s struggle to deal with them. Of note is that several issues taken up in the writings discussed earlier are common throughout the Mekong region.

## Laos

The United States' involvement in the Vietnam War led to its 'Secret War' in Laos, which ravaged the country. Because of this war, Laos became the most heavily bombed country, per capita, in history. In today's Laos, the deadly legacy of the war are unexploded bombs that continue to maim and kill villagers who accidentally come into contact with them.<sup>5</sup> While rich in natural resources, Laos is a land-locked country and this has caused a number of difficulties in terms of trade. Nowadays, however, Laos has attempted to promote itself as a land-linked country and tries to make its geography an advantage rather than a disadvantage (Santasombat, 2010: 12-40).

Similar to its Southeast Asia neighbors, nationalist ideologies played an important role in Laos' independence movement. Pathet Lao, a pro-communist movement, rose to power in 1975, and its political party, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, is still the ruling party under a single party socialist system. The party initially closed the country off from the world and limited its communication and trade to fellow communist countries. However, in the late 1980s, Laos began to open the country for foreign investment and relaxed capital controls (Koret, 1999: 21). In recent years, with the help of China, Laos has been promoting a new economic policy that promotes investment and tourism (Santasombat, 2010: 12-34).

Despite this new and more open economic strategy, the ruling party in Laos maintains severe censorship laws and does not allow freedom of speech or criticisms of its administrative policies (Evans, 1998: 5-6). In such a climate, it is not surprising that most writers refrain from producing works that risk offending authorities and largely take up lightweight subjects,

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<sup>5</sup> For more discussion of writings from the Mekong region that highlight the plight of women living under oppressive patriarchal culture, see Pissa-ard (2013).

or focus on didactic or pro-state strategies. Nevertheless, this does not mean that dissent is non-existent in Lao literary circles. Some of the works that voice criticisms of the ruling class can even come from writers who appear to go along with state ideology. Although these writers may not intend to criticize the government, their sympathetic portrayals of the problems affecting ordinary people make their works powerful in combating injustice. One good example is Outhine Bounyavong, a nationally recognized Lao author whose works have recently been translated into English. Outhine Bounyavong's writings reflect the change in the political and social climate of Laos remarkably well. While some of Outhine's short stories clearly promote communist ideology by portraying the working class as key to the communist revolution and encouraging people to make a sacrifice for the socialist state, there are other stories that focus on environmental issues and could be seen as indirectly criticizing the unequal power relations within Lao society. One of such stories is "The Eternal Pair of Birds" which subtly critiques the state's overzealous emphasis on development and modernization. Told from the point of view of a village woman, the story focuses on her concern for two hornbills which she observes flying past the top of a tree near her house every evening. The woman and her son are particularly fond of the two birds and they enjoy watching them from their porch. One evening, however, the two birds disappeared and the woman later hears from her husband that he saw two birds hanging from the back of the log-traders' trucks when they drove past him. The woman can be seen as representing ordinary villagers who are not able to exert any control over the rapid changes around them, nor are they the ones who benefit from these changes. The story ends on a pessimistic note, foreshadowing more drastic and unwelcome changes caused by the invasion of outsiders who want to make profits from exploiting natural resources. (Bounyavong, 1999)

Another significant work from Laos is “A Bar at the Edge of a Cemetery” by Bunthanaung Somsaiphon (2002). This short story is devoid of the nationalist sentiment or didactic tone common in state-sanctioned Lao writings, and is highly critical of the government and its bureaucracy. Dominated by a gloomy and rather pessimistic tone, the story opens with the narrator sitting in a makeshift bar by the side of a small street having casual conversation with the middle-aged woman who is the bar owner. Through the bar owner’s words, we get to know the hardships suffered by ordinary people, who are represented by the bar owner and her family members. Thus, unlike most pro-state stories which glorify communist victory and the success of socialist Laos, this story presents the real life experiences of small people, who always seem to be on the losing side. Readers confront the stark realities of living in a place where ordinary people have to struggle to make ends meet. The critique of people who abuse their power for personal gain is also explicitly conveyed.

Also of interest is *The Late Homecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, written by Kao Kalia Yang (2008) a young writer of Hmong ethnicity. The memoir recounts the story of the Hmong who fled Laos after the American defeat in the Vietnam War. During the war, the CIA had recruited many Hmong to help fight against communism, and because of this Hmong suspected of collaborating with the Americans were hunted after the communists had won. In the memoir, the Hmong are portrayed as the victims of war and revenge. The image depicted of Laos after the rise of the communists is not that of a utopian communist state which has bravely fought to free itself from western colonizers, but that of a state rife with violence and desire to take revenge on those perceived as ‘enemies’.

The ordeal of the Hmong after the communist victory in Laos is also portrayed in Colin Cotterill (2008) *Curse of the Pogo Stick*. Cotterill is a British-born author who spent several years in Laos and currently lives in Thailand. Although his writings belong to the detective/mystery genre, the author's concern for ordinary people who have to suffer under authoritarian rule is clear. As a foreigner who does not live in Laos, Cotterill is able to be much less subtle in his attack of the communist party's flaws and failings. In *Curse of the Pogo Stick*, and his other novel, *Anarchy and Old Dogs*, Cotterill's sympathy for ordinary Laotians and his cynical view of the communist authorities are clearly visible. Cotterill (2009)

Since the late 1980s when the Lao government started to adopt a series of economic and social reforms known as "New Imagination", Laos has undergone significant changes. Important problems facing contemporary Lao society are not merely political oppression and poverty, but also the destruction of the natural environment caused by the invasion of big business, and the big gap between ordinary citizens and those connected to power.

## **Burma<sup>6</sup>**

Burma's military regime has been regarded as one of the most repressive regimes in the world. The regime's power has been sustained by brutal force together with large income earned from selling Burma's rich natural resources to neighboring countries. Whilst the trade between the Burmese regime and neighboring countries prospers, this only seems to benefit the regime, not ordinary people (Santasombat, 2010: 49-50). Nonetheless, in 2003, the regime revealed a seven-point roadmap to

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<sup>6</sup> For more details, see, for instance, "Forty Years On, Laotians Tell of US War Legacy." (2013).

a “discipline-flourishing democratic state” (Holliday, 2011:12). This roadmap appears to suggest political development that purportedly paves the way for a democratic form of governance. The military junta finally released Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest six days after the 2010 election. However, not many are ready to believe that the regime intends to give up its power, as after the 2010 election twenty five percent of the country’s MPs are those connected to the army, and the constitution allows the military to take charge of the country’s political affairs in the name of national security. Moreover, the civilian government is not allowed to interfere with the military’s administration of its affairs and the Commander-in-Chief reserves the power to appoint the Ministers of Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. Yet on August 20 2012, Burma’s Press Scrutiny and Registration Board (PSRD) has announced that it would no longer require journalists to submit their writings to them before publication. Recently, the regime also announced that it would grant amnesty to a number of political prisoners and would negotiate with heads of ethnic groups in the hope of coming up with some agreements. Despite these signs of improvement, critics note that the military regime does not show any intention to abolish laws that authorize it to persecute writers and journalists whose works have contents deemed dangerous or threatening to ‘national security’. Thus, there are still many things to be done before censorship in Burma is totally eradicated. Whilst things are changing in Burma, the outcome is still unknown.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Burmese dissidents have continuously fought for freedom of expression and political participation. Among these dissidents are writers,

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<sup>7</sup> Although the military regime in Burma changed the country’s name to Myanmar in 1989, throughout this article, Burma will be used to refer to the name of the country to convey the author’s stance against the military regime’s arbitrary exercise of power and its lack of governing legitimacy.

many of whom have been imprisoned for expressing views critical of the state through their writings. Those who want to avoid prosecution have to be careful not to make their political message too overt. Works produced by some of these writers are included in a collection of short stories, *Inked Over, Ripped Out*, translated into English by Anna J. Allott (1993). In the introduction to this collection, Allott noted that Burmese writers had to struggle with the difficult decision about whether to make their political comments obvious or to resort to the use of metaphor, irony, symbolism and other forms of figurative speech to evade censorship and persecution (Allott, 1993: 1-2).

Another work worth noting is Daw Ohn Khin (1996) "An Unanswerable Question", which was published in a collection of the year's twelve best stories in 1996. The story depicts the life of a young Burmese illegal worker in Malaysia and the pressure imposed on him by his family and the circumstances in his home country. Ko Tut, the protagonist, is a university graduate but he cannot find a job in his country. Economic pressure and the desire to fulfill the expectations his parents place on him make him go to work in Malaysia. There, he finds that he has to work in poor living conditions and gets paid a minimal wage. While the story does not directly attack the military regime, it implies that Ko Tut's hardship is not the outcome of his own doing, but is more a result of the political system in his homeland that cannot guarantee a decent livelihood for its people. KoTut represents ordinary Burmese who suffer the painful repercussion of an oppressive and corrupt political system.

Two stories that focus on the lives of Burmese women and children who have to struggle with poverty without any help from the government are

Mong In (n.d.) “Gifts from the City”<sup>8</sup> and Lae Winjee (n.d.) “Incurable Disease.”<sup>9</sup> “Gifts from the City” tells the story of Aedeeda, a young girl who has to leave her rural village to help earn income for her poverty stricken family. Being young and naïve, she is seduced by a married man and ends up entering the sex trade. She soon finds that she has contracted HIV/AIDS and has to go back to her village. The girl’s passivity and lack of worldly knowledge are made clear throughout the story. The author also tries to portray how poor people like her are taken advantage of and exploited by those with more means and knowledge of the world. Of note is that “Gifts from the City” reflects the tragic plight of not only rural girls from poor families in Burma, but also girls from other poor countries who are forced by their family’s economic necessity to search for work in a big city. Poorly equipped, these girls are prone to abuse and exploitation. In countries where governments provide the less fortunate with virtually no social welfare or other forms of assistance, this problem seems impossible to resolve. In the other short story, “Incurable Disease”, the suffering of the poor is also the central theme of the story. The story revolves around the sad plight of a mentally impaired woman and her child. The mother is sexually exploited because she does not know how to fend for herself, and the child has to take care of her mother alone. While the author makes no overt social or political comments, the story individualizes the disadvantaged in society and shows them as real human beings who can be hurt and suffer from pain, no different than those more fortunate than them.

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<sup>8</sup> This short story was translated into Thai by “Numripan” and published in Salween News Online, 51 (Jan Feb 2009). The original publication date is unknown.

<sup>9</sup> This short story was also translated into Thai by “Numripan” and published in Salween News Online, 51 (Jan-Feb 2009). The original publication date is unknown.

While the lack of assistance and security for the less fortunate in society is something common in developing countries in the Mekong region, another important issue these countries confront is ethnic conflict. Burma, in particular, is a country with various different ethnic groups, most of which suffer oppression from the ruling military regime. Among the writings that highlight the plight of ethnic people in Burma are “Jama’s Grandfather”<sup>10</sup> and *From the Land of Green Ghosts* (2002). These two works reveal the suffering and discrimination endured by members of ethnic groups in Burma.

“Jama’s Grandfather” tells the story of Jama, a young ethnic boy, and his grandfather, whose lives are deeply affected by the regime’s racial discrimination. Jama’s grandfather is originally from India and fought bravely by the side of the Burmese when Japan invaded Burma. As the family has lived in Burma for a long time, they see themselves as Burmese. However, because of their darker skin and religious difference, they are treated by the regime as if they are illegal migrants. Jama’s grandfather was not granted an identity card that identifies him as a Burmese citizen; therefore, both of them lack opportunities in life. Through the depiction of the injustice imposed on Jama’s grandfather and Jama himself, the author criticizes the military junta for maltreating ethnic people and showing no recognition for the contribution these people have made for the country.

Similarly, *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, a memoir written by Pascal Khoo Thwe (2003), a writer of Kayan Padaung ethnicity, also seeks to expose the military regime’s racist treatment of ethnic groups in Burma. In this memoir, Burma under the rule of Ne Win is depicted as a country rife

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<sup>10</sup> The Thai translation of this short story was published in Salween News Online, 51 (Jan-Feb 2009). The original publication date is unknown. The names of both the author and the translator are also unknown.

with violence and mistrust among different ethnic groups. The regime is shown as ruthless and it resorts to every possible means to keep power in its hands and control people's thoughts and actions. The memoir describes the indoctrination process of the population as starting very early. At school pupils are lined up like robots every morning to sing the national anthem and they are expected to express absolute loyalty to the nation and respect to the head of the military regime. Pascal also emphasizes the way the regime tries to instigate hatred and mistrust among different ethnic groups to divide them so that it can maintain its power. Making use of people's gullibility, it succeeds in making negative stereotypes appear real to people of different ethnicities and create a sense of antagonism among them.

The depiction of the oppression and hardship suffered by ordinary Burmese and ethnic minorities in *From The Land of Green Ghosts* brings us closer to the realities lived by the people of Burma under dictatorial rule since the 1960s. This kind of work can play a role in calling attention to the severe oppression suffered by people in Burma. While other works discussed earlier are fictional, they also help convey powerful political messages that speak for those who suffer under the rule of the authoritarian regime in Burma.

## Cambodia

Cambodia is a small country which has suffered immensely from political conflicts and the ensuing wars. Many people remember Cambodia for the trauma ordinary people suffered from the brutality of the Khmer Rouge who ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 before being defeated by the Vietnamese armed forces. Even though many in the country, together with the international community, have tried hard to rebuild the country after the

atrocities, Cambodia today still suffers from several problems (Chandler, 2008). Within the domestic atmosphere, studies have found that there has been increased violence against women and children after the brutality of the wartime years. After thirty years of war, Cambodian women have lost significant power in the household arena and they are more prone to abuse by the male members of their families (Frieson, 2011: 178).

Land grabs and deforestation are also serious problems in Cambodia today. A large number of Cambodian farmers have been forced to give up their lands and the powerful few in the country have benefited immensely from government licensed land concessions. While in the past a climate of fear and complicity prevented ordinary Cambodians from protesting against the injustice inflicted upon them, Cambodian villagers nowadays have started to organize protests against the greedy appropriation of their lands and the exploitation of natural resources by state authorities and private companies. However, such a resistance often comes at a price. The recent murder of Chut Wutty, a renowned social activist and conservationist, exposed the painful truth about the horror and violence involved in land-grabbing and deforestation, and the shocking state of human rights in the country (Milne, 2012).

How are these problematic social and political issues mirrored in writings by Cambodian and foreign writers who are concerned about and have empathy for the plight of ordinary Cambodians? In my research, I sought out writings which portray the lives of ordinary Cambodians who are affected by various problems within the country. Some of these works also critique and condemn the corruption and abuse of power by the current government and the political violence of the Khmer Rouge era. The writings I found include Ho Min Fong (1992) “*The Clay Marble*”, which is set in Cambodia in the

period after the destruction and suffering caused by the Pol Pot regime. The novel poignantly narrates the lives of Cambodian war victims through the eyes of Dara, a little girl who, along with her family and other ordinary Cambodians, went through trauma as a result of Cambodia's political violence. Cambodia is depicted in the novel as a country devastated by men in arms who claim that they want to do good for the country, but ruthlessly destroy lives and inflict suffering on ordinary people. Depicting soldiers and their leaders as menacing and destructive, the novel suggests that the only hope for Cambodia lies in the courage of peace-loving people who refuse to be brainwashed by the propaganda of power-hungry leaders. Written for young readers, *The Clay Marble* conveys a powerful message that cautions against nationalist propagandas, which are often employed as a tool by ambitious leaders to manipulate and brainwash people.

The abuse of power and the suffering of ordinary people is also the subject matter of Pen Chhorn (2006) "Obscure Way", which is set in contemporary Cambodia. In this short story, class inequality, corruption and political oppression are the author's central concern. Told from the point of view of a young student, the story reflects the confusion of a member of the young generation who is not sure what contribution he can make to his homeland, which is still plagued with social and political problems. The narrator, a pensive young man often chats with an old man who works as a guard at a rich businessman's villa. Later in the story when the guard visits his village, he discovers that his land has been stolen by influential business people, leaving his family landless and penniless. The story ends with the narrator's comments about those who hold power in Cambodia, criticizing them as self-serving, exploitative and corrupt.

As with “Obscure Way”, in Somaly Mam (2008) memoir, *The Road of Lost Innocence*, political leaders’ lack of integrity is seen as an important cause of numerous problems within Cambodia. In this memoir, Somaly portrays Cambodia as a society in which the rich and powerful exploit and take advantage of those under them. Violence and exploitation seem to permeate all aspects of Cambodian life. In some families, parents abuse children and often daughters are sold into prostitution in exchange for money. The memoir not only describes how difficult and dangerous life is for ordinary Cambodians living under an authoritarian and corrupt regime, but also shows how those at the lowest rung of society, such as women from poor families and ethnic minorities, are the most vulnerable.

Two Cambodian short stories which take up similar themes to those in Somaly’s memoir are Mey Son Sotheary (1995) “My Sister” and Pollie Bith (2004) “Caged Bird Will Fly”. In “My Sister”, an eldest sister sells herself in order to make it possible for her younger siblings to pursue higher education in the city. The younger brother later discovers what his sister does to earn money. At first he is shocked, upset and becomes antagonistic towards her, however he eventually understands why his sister has to choose such a job. It is clear that the author of this story wants to encourage her readers to have sympathy for sex workers and highlights the way obligation towards family can force women to enter prostitution. “My Sister” ends with the brother’s regret for being cruel to his sister and he wants to apologize to her. This sentimental ending, however, is missing from “Caged Bird Will Fly”, a story about Kuntly, a poor village woman who contracted HIV/AIDS from her husband and is forced by prejudice and discrimination to leave her home village. Without any means to support herself, she has to become a prostitute. She eventually dies in a charity centre that cares for HIV/AIDS patients.

The story foregrounds Kuntzy's powerlessness and the way filial duty and the strong loyalty she has for her family traps and destroys her life.

Both "Caged Bird Will Fly" and "My Sister" depict the prostitutes in a sympathetic light, showing that they are forced by circumstances to enter the sex trade and are powerless to change their lives. These two short stories and Somaly Mam's *The Road of Lost Innocence* give voice to those at the lowest rung of Cambodian society, especially women who are forced to enter the sex trade.

In Cambodia today, there are a number of people who are trying to help others overcome being victims of violence and exploitation. A good example is Somaly Mam, who not only wrote a moving account of her traumatic experiences but also initiated fundraising campaigns that provide assistance to trafficked women and children. Efforts by ordinary Cambodians to do things for others and to stand up against injustice give us hope that things will eventually get better in Cambodia.

## Thailand

Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia which was not directly colonized by Western powers, nor fell under communism. In 1932, the country purportedly adopted representative democracy after the abolition of the absolute monarchy. While the Thai state officially regards itself as a democratic nation, there have been a number of problematic issues with the state of democracy in the country. Since 1932, Thailand has experienced 17 military coups, the latest being in 2006. Since the 2006 coup, which was staged against the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, there have been demonstrations and ideological clashes between the two political movements known as the 'Red' and 'Yellow' camps (Hewison, 2012).

In Thailand today, the Thai establishment often tries to suppress dissent by means of censorship and other forms of laws and regulations. The most controversial censorship law nowadays is the one related to *lèse-majesté*, and in recent years there has been a sharp increase in the number of people being imprisoned or charged with *lèse-majesté* (Hewison, 2013). However, what is even more effective than the use of overtly oppressive measures to suppress dissent is the Thai state's successful attempt to make the general populace identify with the concepts of Thai identity and culture, or 'Thai-ness', defined and shaped the ruling elites. As Michael Connors argues, Thai-ness is the crucial ideology highly useful for the ruling elite to "create a nationally identifying citizenry that can be mobilized" (Connors, 2005: 524). Connors also contends that Thai-ness is intricately linked with the nationalist projects initiated by the ruling class, which aims to call forth the people's loyalty, commitment to, and identification with the nation (Connors, 2005: 525). Unlike in Laos or Vietnam, where the modern concept of nationalism derives its legitimacy from social revolution, the official Thai nationalism revolves around the notions of nation, religion and monarchy. While Thai nationalism has undergone changes and adjustments to accommodate demands for democracy and diversity, the basic gist remains the same as this ideology still functions to solicit support from the people and regulate their conduct. As Connors maintains, nationalist discourses play a crucial role in sweeping under the carpet social issues and the harsh realities of Thai life as well as mask the disparities between the powerful and the powerless (Connors, 2005: 526).

Nonetheless, as with what happens in other Mekong countries, the attempt by the ruling class to impose restrictive measures, regulate and manipulate the general populace does not go unchallenged. Opposition and

dissent voices emerge and seek to resist coercion and hegemony and a number of writers, whether consciously or not, take part in this process. In the following section I sum up my examination of a number of interesting Thai novels and short stories which critique the unequal power relations in Thai society.

The first work is Chart Korbjitti (1982) *Kam pipaksa* [The Judgment], a moving portrayal of the tragic plight of a Thai village man whose life is destroyed by the lack of understanding and cruelty of people around him. The novel centres on the sad life of Phak, the son of a homeless man who stays at a temple and does odd jobs for monks and teachers at a nearby school. Phak's mother died a long time ago, and several years later, when Phak is in his early twenties, his father takes a woman much younger than him as a wife. The woman, Somsong, is mentally impaired and not long after she moves in, Phak's father passes away. Soon, by misunderstanding, there is a rumor spreading around that Phak has slept with father's wife, and this causes the whole village to look down on Phak and discriminate against him. Unable to endure the scorn and unkind words and gestures heaped on him day in and day out, Phak resorts to heavy drinking, hoping that it can help relieve his suffering. The novel ends sadly with Phak's death and Somsong being dragged away to a mental hospital.

While *The Judgment* may not appear political to readers looking for overt political messages, this novel can be read as a vehement critique of a community that quickly judges others and lacks sympathy for those with little means to fight back. The author also cautions the readers against seeing power and wealth as synonymous with virtue and reminds them to be kinder to the powerless and the less fortunate in society. The novel reminds us of "Caged Bird Will Fly" by Cambodian writer Pollie Bith, which also

captures the cruelty of village life and depicts the life of the outcast and the downtrodden in a highly sympathetic light.

Also worth paying attention to is Pira Sudham (1994) “A Thai Woman in Germany”, a short story about a Thai woman lured into the sex industry who suffered abuse and exploitation until she met a German man who married her and took her with him to his home country. As the story progresses, we get to know that it is not just selfish and exploitative individuals who take advantage of women like her, but society also allows such exploitation of women from poor families to happen. Born to a poor peasant family, the protagonist is a member of an underclass whom society regards as a source of cheap labor and even goods for sale.

While mainstream discourses in Thailand tend to depict the prostitutes as part of social problems and a blemish on Thailand’s image, “A Thai Woman in Germany” seeks to give voice to an exploited woman who wants to expose a corrupt social order that takes advantage of the poor. This short story bears many resemblances to Somaly Mam’s *The Road of Lost Innocence* and other stories from Cambodia and Burma which depict women trafficked or lured into the sex industry as victims of an unjust and uncaring society.

Three short stories by the Thai- American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap (2005) are also of interest. The stories are “Draft Day”, “Priscilla the Cambodian” and “At the Café Lovely”, which appear in Lapcharoensap’s much acclaimed collection of short stories *Sightseeing*, first published in 2005. At a surface level, “Draft Day” is a story about the friendship between two young men and how such friendship was eventually destroyed. At a deeper level however, the story poses a number of questions related to mainstream nationalist ideology, particularly how it functions to

serve the interest of the ruling class and their network, and help sustain unequal power relations within Thai society. Lapcharoensap's other two stories, "Priscilla the Cambodian" and "At the Café Lovely", may, at first glance, appear less political than 'Draft Day', but they also underline social inequality in Thai society and seek to give voice to those at the bottom rung of society. "Priscilla the Cambodian", in particular, also takes up the issue of racism in Thai society, and shows how fear and prejudice against the other can lead to unreasonably violent actions.

Samruam Singh (1979) "Necklace", which also deals with the issue of racism, tells the story of a Hmong couple who were deceived by the Thai government's campaign to move down from their village in the mountain and relocate among lowlanders. Told from the point of view of Lao Jong, the husband, the story reveals several problems faced by the Hmong couple when they resettle among the lowlanders. The author also makes a reference to the way the Hmong and other groups of hilltribe people in Northern Thailand are deprived of agricultural lands on the mountains as such lands become in more demand by lowlanders who migrate uphill in search of fertile lands. The story's portrayal of what happens to the Hmong couple parallels the representation of the plight of ethnic minorities in stories from Burma and Laos, such as "Jama's Grandfather", *From the Land of Green Ghosts*, and *The Latehomecomer*.

The Thai writings examined reveal to us that class inequality and the plight of the downtrodden are important concerns of many contemporary Thai writers. Some of these writings also critique the Thai state's manipulative and exploitative strategies, and how these strategies are also employed by privileged groups for their own benefit. As noted before, these issues are also taken up by writers in other Mekong countries.

## Conclusion

The writings examined reveal an important commonality of countries in the Mekong region, which is the misuse of power of the ruling class and privileged groups. Vietnam, Laos, and Burma (especially during the Ne Win years) went through socialist revolution and the discourse of nationalism and socialism has played a crucial role in supporting the ruling class's agenda. With its legitimacy grounded in socialist ideals, nationalist rhetoric in socialist countries celebrates the victory of the revolution and extolled the efficiency and virtues of the leaders. Against this master narrative, there are a number of writers who seek to depict the negative side of the socialist world and the harsh realities lived by ordinary people. One good example is *Novel without a Name* by Vietnamese writer Duong Thu Huong, which portrays how ordinary people are simply pawns for those in power. Lao writer Bunthanaung Somsaiphon's "A Bar at the Edge of a Cemetery" depicts Laos after the communist victory as a place where ordinary people struggle to make ends meet and corrupt authorities abuse their power. From Burma, Pascal Khoo Thwe's *From the Land of Green Ghosts* shows how the Burmese regime under Ne Win attempts to construct the image of Burma under the Burmese style of nationalism as the land of prosperity and happiness, which is totally opposite to realities of the Padaung and ordinary Burmese's lives.

At first glance, Thailand seems different from its neighbors as the country has not been under communism or socialism, and the state's nationalist discourse did not derive its legitimacy from social revolution. Despite these differences, when looking at Thai social and political history closely, it can be seen that there are a number of similarities shared between Thailand and its neighbors, and the writings discussed illustrate that no

matter whether living under a communist, socialist, capitalist or democratic system, an underclass still exists.

The other commonality in the region is the belief by ruling elites that the common folk can be coerced to conform to whichever narrative of national harmony and unity they espouse. Socialist states in the past sent political dissidents or anyone considered ‘reactionaries’ to ‘concentration camps’, or imposed ‘reeducation’ on them in the attempt to brainwash them. The goal is to make people conform and discourage them from thinking beyond the frame. In “The Boat”, a short story by Vietnamese-Australian writer Nam Le, the author depicts the distressing impact of harrowing experiences in a reeducation camp on some of his characters’ lives.

In Thailand from the past till the present, ordinary people are also expected to adhere to the norms set by the establishment. Most importantly, in contemporary Thailand, the grand narratives about the so-called ‘Three Pillars of Thai society’ have consistently been employed by the state to mould the general populace to think in the same way so that they would not question the hidden agenda of nationalist narratives disseminated by the ruling class. As discussed earlier, there are writers attempting to fight back against the repressive effects of these narratives. A good example is Thai-American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap whose short story, “Draft Day”, subtly attacks the Thai nationalist discourse that functions to maintain hegemonic power relations within Thailand.

In the 1980s, significant changes happened in socialist countries in the Mekong region as they began to open up for investment from other countries, and focus on economic prosperity and modernization. These countries are nowadays referred to as post-socialist societies as their economic policies are more capitalist than socialist. Like these countries,

Thailand has also embraced 'modernization' and foreign investment. Yet the influx of capitalism and 'modernization' does not always guarantee more political freedom, or a better life for ordinary people. Just like under a closed system where the powerful reap the most, it seems that only the powerful and the rich can make the best of the more open economic atmosphere. A number of literary works examined portray this inequality between the powerful and the poor, and how the latter are exploited and have little chance to win in the competitive and greedy world. These works include Vietnamese writer Doan Le's "The Real Estate of Chua Village" and "Sesame Seed", "The Eternal Pair of Birds" by the Lao writer Outhine Bounyavong, "Priscilla the Cambodia" and "At the Café Lovely" by Rattawut Lapcharoensap, a Thai- American writer. Short stories from Cambodia and Burma like "My sister", "Gifts from the City", and "Incurable Disease" also portray the poor, especially women, in a sympathetic light and show how these people have to struggle to make ends meet without any help from the state. Worse they are exploited by those more fortunate than them.

Additional problematic issues in the Mekong region are ethnic conflicts and the marginalized position of ethnic groups, notwithstanding the proclamation by governments in these countries to end inequality between ethnic groups and promote cultural diversity. In works like "The Necklace" and *From the Land of Green Ghosts* this issue is one of the main concerns of the authors.

On a more positive note, however, it seems that nowadays the marginalized in Asia have become more politically active and more and more are standing up to fight for their rights. In addition, because of the Internet, it is harder for the powers- that-be to manipulate, shut people's eyes, or constrain people's thoughts.

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