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**The Bitter–Sweet Portrayals of Expressing and  
Maintaining “Non-normative” Genders and Sexualities  
in Thai Mainstream Cinema  
from 1980 to 2010**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in 2011**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores and analyzes portrayals of Thai sexual minorities in relation to the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities. It examines how these practices affect the lives of sexual minority characters in three different genres of mainstream Thai cinema: tragedy, drama, and comedy.

In the category of tragedy, the “bitterness” experienced by sexual minorities as a result of expressing and maintaining their non-normative gendered/sexual identities is analysed in two mainstream Thai films: *Phleng sut-thai* [The last song] and *Pheuan...ku rak meung wa* [*Bangkok Love Story*]. The contrasting genre of drama reveals “bitter-sweet” portrayals of sexual minority characters who are provided with some degree of manoeuvre to pursue their non-normative gendered/sexual identities in which the outcome is not always tragic. Nevertheless, the case studies of *Beautiful Boxer* and *Rak haeng Siam* [*The Love of Siam*] remain heavily coloured by negative stereotypes, myths and stigmas. In the comic genre *Phrang chomphu kathoey prajanban* [*Saving Private Tootsie*] and *Plon na ya* [*Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*] permit sexual minority characters a “happy ending” and are defined by “sweetness” though characterisation remains coloured by stereotypes and stigmas. The “sweet moment” in the films therefore belongs primarily to the heterosexual/heteronormative spectators who enjoy watching the depiction of sexual minorities as a hilarious, abnormal, and inferior sexual “Other”.

These three different genres reveal the degree to which sexual minority characters experience problems in expressing and maintaining their non-normative gendered/sexual identities in the heterosexual/heteronormative space that dominates the cinematic contexts. While homophobia and social sanctions against sexual minorities in Thai society are not as overtly practiced as in some other societies, the analysis of the films in this thesis provides strong evidence of the difficulty with which sexual minorities are visualised positively. This reflects ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes towards Thai sexual minorities in mainstream/heterosexual/ heteronormative Thai society as a whole.

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### **Note on Transliteration and Referencing**

There is no generally agreed system of representing Thai in roman script, and all systems have some limitations because the 26 letters of the roman alphabet are not sufficient to represent all the consonants, vowels, diphthongs, and tones of Thai. In this thesis I have adopted a modified version of the Royal Institute system of romanising Thai. The system makes no distinction between long and short vowel forms; and tones are not represented. I differ slightly from the Royal Institute system in using “j” for the Thai “jor jan”, not “ch”. Dashes are used to separate units of compound expressions that are translated as a single term in English, such as *khwam-pen-thai* for “Thainess”. I follow the Thai norm of referring to Thai authors by given names, not surnames, and all citations by Thai authors are alphabetised in the bibliography and elsewhere by given names. I follow the authors’ preferred spelling of their own names in English when known rather than romanising names in keeping with my own transliteration system to maintain consistency.

“The processes of coming out becomes a journey out of shame that never occurs without struggle and pain. People who want to express their sexual orientations need two fundamental qualities in themselves which are the courage to suffer and the determination to endure before we can triumph over shame”

Kaufman and Raphael 1996: 14.

## Introduction

The dominance of heteronormativity in many or all parts of the world renders it undeniably difficult and problematic for those who choose to express and maintain their gendered identities and/or sexualities in ways that differ from the beliefs and practices which the heteronormative system treats as “normal”. Clear sanctions, mediated by religion, law, politics, medicine, education, and family institutions, operate towards sexual minorities, particularly within Western and Islamic societies, as Michel Foucault (1990: 92-102) notes, such belief systems create forms of “common knowledge” that in turn generate the power of control in society; and which can also be manipulated by the dominant powers. To be precise, the belief systems that create common knowledge become the source of power by which mainstream cultures oppress same-sex subcultures. When such power is exercised, it is utilised by the heteronormative system to control the knowledge that sharpens disapproval of same-sex behaviours. Sexual minorities are therefore more oppressed than the heteronormative majority by the relationship between power and knowledge.

Foucault goes on to explain, however, that power cannot exist without resistance; and that when power is exercised to oppress same-sex subcultures, there is thus a resistance that arises in the attempt to liberate them from oppression. Consequently, there has been a strong and continuous movement for the rights of expression of non-normative genders and sexualities and for sexual minorities to live without the threat of prejudice, discrimination, and homophobia. Nevertheless, it remains undeniable that the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative gendered and sexual identities in a heteronormative arena remain, to a great extent, problematic and can be defined as a “bitter-sweet” experience for sexual minorities.

While in Thailand there are no obvious sanctions from social institutions against sexual minorities, it is, nonetheless, one of the countries in the heteronormative world which is, as Peter A. Jackson (1999a: 226) succinctly phrases it, “tolerant but unaccepting” which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

With reference to mainstream Thai cinematic representations, the processes of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities have been portrayed

and frequently deployed as an important theme in films with both homosexual and non-homosexual foci. This thesis therefore undertakes as its key focus an exploration of how the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities are portrayed in mainstream Thai cinema and how these practices have an effect on the lives of sexual minority characters. In order to build a logical path through this research, I pose four principal objectives:

- a. To explore on-screen representations of the processes of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities and how these processes have an effect on the lives of sexual minority characters, within the period from 1980 to 2010.
- b. To explore on-screen representations of the processes of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities and how these processes have an effect on the lives of sexual minority characters in different genres; tragedy, drama and comedy, in mainstream Thai cinema.
- c. To ascertain the significant factors which affect the expression and maintenance of different gendered and sexual identities, as represented in the different genres of the selection of mainstream Thai cinema.
- d. To study whether there are any changes in the terms by which non-normative genders and sexualities express and maintain themselves between early and later Thai motion pictures. How have changing notions of genders and sexualities impacted on the processes of the cinematic expression of non-normative genders and sexualities?

### **Research Methodology**

All films selected for analysis in this thesis share a focus on the subject of homosexuality, and in particular on the expression and maintenance of non-normative genders and sexualities and how these processes have an effect on the lives of sexual minority characters. The films in question were produced over a twenty-year period, from 1980 to 2010.

In terms of theoretical approach, as cinematic diegesis is my primary concern, film theory and critiques will be used to analyse the films. Focusing on cinematic representations which are an audio-visual media, my analysis observes both audio and visual tracks because both have a significant impact on audience perception and appreciation.

Since the selection of the films is exclusively related to their particular themes – dealing with the issues of sexual minorities, gender and sexuality, homosexuality, gays, lesbians – theories and discussions of transgenderism, transexuality and homosexuality will be studied to provide a solid background against which to analyse the filmic texts. Post-colonial theory will also be discussed to strengthen the framework of analysis in terms of comparative cultural studies.

### **Research Structure**

This piece of research is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters provide the literature review and theoretical framework. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 comprise the analysis of a selection of the films representative of three different genres: tragedy, drama, and comedy. Chapter 3 focuses on a selection of films that belong to the genre of tragedy and which reveals the “bitterness” of being a non-heterosexual character. Chapter 4 moves on to a discussion of films that are in the category of drama/melodrama. In this chapter the portrayal of sexual minorities in terms of the expression and maintenance of their non-normative gendered/sexual identities provides a “bitter-sweet” mixture of experience. Chapter 5 concentrates on same-sex subcultures as represented in the genre of comedy which can be seen, if not by the sexual minorities, then certainly by heterosexual audiences, as “sweet” depictions of Thai sexual minorities. The final part of this thesis summarises and concludes the discussion and analysis of the portrayals of non-normative genders and sexualities in three different genres in mainstream Thai cinema.

## The Scope of the Study

### Why (Cinematic) Representation?

Since the mid-1960s, the term representation, building on the intellectual legacy of semiotics (the study of how sign systems are constructed and organized), has become key to discussions of all manner of elaborate theoretical investigations (Jay 1994: 9). The term has been used and interpreted in various academic fields including psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, reader-response critique, minority and postcolonial theories, and gay and lesbian theories (ibid.: 10). One significant problem in the study of representations, leading to a crisis of representation, is the relationship between the representations and their original. Although the notion of representations should be based on some thoughts of being true to their original, it is by no means guaranteed that it is always possible and Edward Said (1995) notes the inherent risks. To this he provides the remarkable and logical solution that:

We must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, interviewed, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides „truth’, which is itself a representation. What this must lead us to methodologically is to view representations (or misrepresentations – the distinction is at best a matter of degree) as inhabiting a common field of play defined for them not by some inherent common subject alone, but by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse. Within this field, which no single scholar can create but which each scholar receives and in which he then finds a place for himself, the individual researcher makes his contribution (ibid.: 272-3).

Said’s examination of the representation of the Orient illustrates a logical process in the study of representations and provides a useful framework by which to explore and discuss how the process of representation occurs when one culture with more power than another tries to represent what it thinks is true (or perhaps what it wants to be thought of as true) about the other on its behalf.

Employing Said’s concept of Orientalism, at least two significant questions should be considered; i.) the question of what things “really” are? (“reality”) and ii.) how things are represented? (representations). Gregory Jay (1994) differentiates between the nature of “what things really are” and “how things are represented”, noting

that the study of what things really are leads to the recognition and perception of something as existing or true. “Reality” thus belongs more narrowly to the philosophical discourse of the law and of rights. How things are represented, on the other hand, provides wider dimensions and a more comprehensive framework by which to explore other layers of existence or truth (i.e. the issues of knowledge, cultural identity, and politics). The study of representations therefore links the political and cultural domains. With the beginning of the question of how things are represented, it may lead to many other interesting questions, for instance, who represents what to whom; for what reasons; through what institutions; to what effect; to whose benefit; and at what costs? Or, what are the ethics of representation? What kinds of knowledge and power do authorized forms of representation produce? What kinds of people produce such representations? And who owns or controls the means of representation? (ibid.: 9-11).

Furthermore, Tom Boellstorff (2007: 213) states that in Southeast Asia, mass media, including movies, plays a crucial role in the formation of gay and lesbian subject positions. The study of the on–screen representations of sexual minorities therefore, provides an opportunity to explore how the portrayals of sexual minorities have an effect on the formation as well as social perceptions of sexual minorities’ identities in Thai society.

Another significant reason why I chose to explore the on–screen representations of Thai sexual minorities is the interesting yet manipulating relationship between images or representations and Thai society. In “The Thai Regime of Images”, Jackson (2004b) provides a useful, critical reading of Thai culture with an emphasis on how images or representations are conceptualised in the Thai context, demonstrating how representations have become key in enframing and controlling the overall appearance of idealized nationalist discourses in Thai society. Thai culture’s dominant concerns for a “smooth and calm” appearance (*khwam-sangop riap-roi*) and good representations (*phap-lak thi di*), which Jackson refers to as “the Thai regime of images”, are so important that any well-known truth or reality perceived as disrupting or destroying the good reputation of the nation (*thamlai phap-lak khornng prathet*) can be expelled or silenced by both the power of legal and cultural modes. In other words, images and representations are recognised as the essence of “reality” or public knowledge in Thai society. Any issue or content that represents the whole notion must therefore be

accepted and treated as an essence of “reality” or of public knowledge by mainstream Thai culture.

Accordingly, it is also evidently the case that the essence of “reality” or public knowledge can be read as an interpretation or a selection of only the suitable facts for the good images of the nation which is not totally “a raw fact” that presents every facet of the truth. In Thailand, the essence of “reality” becomes, to some degree, in Jackson’s terminology, “a statement of power”, not “a statement of truth” (Jackson, 2004b: 205). The phenomenon of “the Thai regime of images” is useful for the study of Thai same-sex subcultures in explicitly distinguishing the expression and maintenance of same-sex desire and behaviours between the Thai public domain (*satharana*), in which any statements and performances are extremely important and reflect the entire image of the nation; and the Thai private sphere (*suan tua*), in which the same statements or performances are cause for less concern, providing that they do not disrupt the proper image of the nation. The study of cinematic representation will reveal to what extent Thai society is tolerant to the portrayals of sexual minorities shown in the public domain (*satharana*).

Since gendered and sexual identities are complex, fluid, and performative (Butler 1990), the issue of subjectivity or individuality can become a massive obstacle in endeavouring to explain the overall phenomena of genders and sexualities at any particular time. Any study of images or representations therefore also equips the researcher with practical strategies and solutions to overcome the problem of fluid subjectivity by utilising the available resources that have already been portrayed in the public domain.

Given the above, I therefore emphasise in my research the exploration of cinematic representations rather than providing an analysis of actual events in day to day society. Nevertheless, I do contribute some discussions of actual same-sex subcultures in Thailand in terms of interviews with several “Thai *gay*<sup>1</sup> icons” and *gay* activists. These interviews are, however, only deployed as a limited qualitative study to further support and substantiate the primary theoretical arguments and analyses of this

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<sup>1</sup> The italicised term, *gay*, refers to male homosexuals in Thai society.

research.

### **Why 1980?**

Given that this thesis focuses specifically on Thai cinematic representations and that the very first mainstream Thai film to exclusively focus on the lives of both male and female homosexual characters was screened in 1985, I select films from mainstream Thai cinema from that period onwards. There are, additionally, some further reasons relating to the significant same-sex subculture movement in the Thai context in the middle of the 1960s. The obvious changes or movements in same-sex subcultures in Thai society that happened in the middle of the 1960s provide a rationale for exploring representations on screen of same-sex subcultures with a focus on the processes of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities.

In Thai society, according to Jackson (1998), there was a discernible increase in the number of gendered/sex identities in the middle of the 1960s. The issue of same-sex and transgender behaviours is openly referred to in Thai society from this time, such as in Thai bio-medical discourse, which aimed at controlling the proliferation of same-sex and transgender identities; and in the press, which reported gender and sexuality-related phenomena, albeit in a largely negative way.

As this thesis focuses on representations of the processes of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in a selection of mainstream Thai films, it explores films with a homosexual focus or homosexual characters, after the 1960s onwards, when there was a discernable increase in the number of gendered/sex identities which is directly related to the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in Thai society. The consequences of those sexual minorities' changes and movements have an effect on how mainstream culture should, and does treat same-sex subcultures; and how same-sex subcultures should, and do, treat themselves as members of society. At times when the attitudes of mainstream people towards same-sex desire and behaviours alter, it is interesting to explore whether this alteration has an impact on the representations of same-sex subcultures or not.

## Chapter One

### Literature Review

This chapter aims to explore literature on the issue of Thai sexual minorities in relation to the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explores texts on this issue produced by both Thai and non-Thai scholars. In section two, I further explore “human texts” on this topic via eight interviews with prominent *gay* Thai activists. Extended from these interviews, and in order to further illuminate the exploration of this issue in Thailand, the final section provides a comparison between the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in Thai and Western societies.

This literature reveals how the issue of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders/sexualities has been practised in Thai society throughout different periods of time and will subsequently reflect some of the social attitudes towards sexual minorities when they express and/or maintain their non-normative genders/sexualities in the public domain.

#### Section One: Texts on Sexual Minorities

The issue of sexual minorities has been studied and discussed by both Thai and non-Thai scholars since the 1970s. Nantiya Sukontapatipark (2005), in her MA dissertation, *Relationship between Modern Medical Technology and Gender Identity in Thailand: Passing from “Male Body” to “Female Body”*, has explored Thai research dealing with sexual minorities, finding more than 40 pieces from the period covering 1973 – 2003, most of which were conducted by graduate students. Those studies cover 16 fields including psychology, clinical psychology, psychiatry, public health, social work, comparative literature, sociology, anthropology, development communication, mass communication, comparative religion, development education, labour development and welfare, social development, history, and human rights.

Following her research, I further explore the studies dealing exclusively with notions and practices of expressing and maintaining one’s non-normative gender and

sexuality. The relevant research can be roughly categorised into four main areas according to gendered identities in Thailand. Those are: 1) male homosexuals; 2) female homosexuals; 3) *kathoey*<sup>1</sup>; and 4) transsexuals.

Some interesting and relevant research includes Bongkotmas Ek-eum's MA dissertation, *Gay: The Development and Maintenance Process of a Homosexual Identity* (1989). The author seeks to explore and explain how male homosexuals acquire and accept their homosexual identities and maintain them. In the same year, Chonticha Salikupot conducted her MA dissertation on *The Development and Maintenance Process of Lesbian Identity*. Her work is thus similar to Bongkotmas' but with reference to female homosexuals or lesbians. However, the gendered identities that have been studied more frequently are those of transgenders and transsexuals. The research varies from the causes of becoming a *kathoey* and transsexual and how they maintain their gendered identity in society, for example, Nantiya's *Relationship between Modern Medical Technology and Gender Identity in Thailand: Passing from "Male Body" to "Female Body"* (2005). Nantiya notes that modern medical technology available in Thai society, particularly sexual reassignment surgery and cosmetic/aesthetic surgery, assists male-to-female transsexuals to appear more like genuine women, having an effect on the formation/construction and expression of their gendered identity. Another interesting study is Watcharin Noosomton's *Life and Work of Sao Praphet Sorng*<sup>2</sup> (2003) whose study reveals that transgenders/transsexuals face more difficulties finding a decent job or having a successful career path compared to heterosexual men and women.

Some other resources that discuss the issue of expressing and maintaining one's gender and sexuality in Thailand include academic and non-academic books. For example, *Life, Identity and Sexuality of Thai Transsexuals* (Sitthiphat Boonyaphisomphan, Ranaphom Samakkhikharom, and Phimpawan Boonmongkhon 2008) which is one of the books from the Project for Constructing and Organising Knowledge on Genders and Sexualities in Thailand by the Institute for Population and Social Research at Mahidol University. It discusses the experiences of some transgenders and transsexuals in their expression and maintenance of their *kathoey*

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<sup>1</sup> *Kathoey*, in terms of modern understanding, is used to refer to the Western equivalents of transsexuals, transvestites and transgenders.

<sup>2</sup> *Sao prophet sorng*, literally means "second type of woman", is another term used to refer to the Western equivalents of transsexuals, transvestites and transgenders.

identities and shows how each interviewee faced their coming out process. Similarly, in *A Collection of Articles on Lesbians and Lesbianism in Thailand* (2004) by Virada Somswasdi and Alycia Nicholas, some lesbians shared their experiences of coming out and staying out as members of same-sex couples. While some couples are well accepted and supported by their families and in their workplaces, others have to remain in the closet.

Vitaya Sangaroon, a *gay* activist who works directly on the issue of coming out in Thailand and one of my interviewees in the second part of this chapter, wrote a book called *Loek aep sia thi* [Come out of the closet!] (2007). Vitaya collected some interesting stories from a column he had been writing for Manager Newspaper, *Loek aep sia thi*, that intentionally encourage people to express their gender and/or sexuality.

Additional written materials are produced by both organizations for sexual minorities and by individuals sharing their experience through websites and blogs. For instance, an article from the American Psychological Association about the difficulties of coming out was translated and posted on a website for sexual minorities in Thailand maintained by the well-known organization, *Sapaan*<sup>3</sup>. That website also provides an excellent selection of articles related to Thai sexual minorities both in the Thai and English languages.

In a personal blog by Pisces (2008), the owner wrote two entries referring to the issue of coming out. In the first entry, *Come out! Ork jak tu kan thoe* [Let's come out of the closet!], he explained two types of coming out i.e. coming out to oneself and to others with reference to the book by Rathus, *Human Sexuality in a World of Diversity* (2000). In the second one, Pisces (2008) wrote a *Handbook on Coming out* which again refers to a Western source, Signorrile's *Outing Yourself* (1995).

Reviewing these electronic resources reveals that some ideas regarding the practice of expressing one's non-normative gender and sexuality have been adopted from the West. Some recent concepts regarding expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities can therefore be treated as a Western import into a Thai context.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Cop\_Boy (*Sexuality: Questions and Answers about homosexuality*. Sapaan. Web. Accessed 26 June 2011.)

The issue of sexual minorities has also been explored by non-Thai scholars, most notably Peter A. Jackson. One of Jackson's groundbreaking articles about Thai homosexualities, which will be referred to regularly in this thesis, is "Tolerant but Unaccepting: the Myth of a Thai "Gay Paradise"" (1999a). In this article, Jackson unravels the paradox between the myth of a Thai gay paradise and the actual antipathetic character of Thai discourses on male homoeroticism and transgenderism (ibid.: 227). He notes that while homosexuality in Thailand is neither illegal nor immoral according to Buddhism – the religion of the state (ibid.: 227) – homoeroticism and *kathoeys'* effeminate gendered identity are often considered pathological and sources of shame (ibid.: 240).

Jackson observes that if one focuses merely on the repetitively negative attitudes towards homosexuality produced within discourse, whether academic or popular, then one will come up with an inaccurate and overly negative picture of the situation facing gay men and *kathoey* within Thai society. In the same vein, if one looks only at the everyday tolerance shown towards males who break heteronormative norms, one will receive an overly positive picture (ibid.: 240). Consequently, he cautions that any "account of the respective places of homoeroticism and transgenderism in Thailand must be sensitive to this pattern of discursive unacceptability yet practical toleration" (ibid.: 240).

In the same article, Jackson also provides another interesting observation about social perceptions of *kathoey* (effeminate male homosexuals) and *gay* men (masculine male homosexuals) in Thailand. He notes that "visible" *gay* men are more problematic than effeminate or transgender *kathoey* (ibid.: 238). He explains that the Thai sex/gender order is maintained so long as it falls within masculine-feminine binarisms that allow a male to uphold his status through the performance of masculinity, or assume the feminised status of a *kathoey* if he wants to give up his masculinity. A *gay* man's homosexuality therefore upsets this order. While *kathoey* effeminacy keeps the domain of normative masculinity free from the explicit taint of homosexuality, masculine male homosexuals link homoeroticism and masculine males together. The lack of a discursive place for *gay* men within the traditional system explains why the image of the masculine *gay* men disturbs and troubles many Thais (ibid.: 239).

With specific reference to the study of Thai cinema with a focus on sexual minorities, Jackson's observation on the different reactions/attitudes towards *kathoey* and *gay* men also resonate for cinematic representations of Thai male homosexuals. While there have been a good number of films portraying the image of *kathoey* characters (see Chapter 3), up to the present time of writing this thesis (2011), there are only two films depicting *gay* characters, *Bangkok Love Story* and *Seng pet* [*Boring Love*] (dir. Sarawut Inthornphom, 2009), which have been screened on the mainstream circuit.

Based on this sex/gender-centric phenomenon, Jackson (2004a: 208) further notes that in a Thai context the essentialist and biologicistic senses of "sex" are not distinguished from the cultural constructionist sense of 'gender' as they are in the popular understanding in contemporary English. Sex, gender identity and sexual identity are treated and understood as a combined, unitary issue in Thailand, which are therefore not clearly separable, and the term *phet* has been broadly used to refer to sex, gender, and sexuality (for further readings see Jackson 2003 and 2004a).

From a different theoretical perspective, Rosaline C. Morris (1994) argues that in pre-modern times, the system of gender identities was divided into three categories: male, female and *kathoey*<sup>4</sup> or *napungsaka*<sup>5</sup>; and that this tripartite *phet* system has given way to one of binary sex – masculinity and femininity – and four sexualities (ibid.: 38). This system can best be understood as one of overlapping binarisms in which a hierarchically arranged and biologically located opposition between male and female grounds a secondary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality which is similarly unequal as the former opposition (ibid.: 28). Similar to the system of the third sex, that of four sexualities still interprets the *kathoey* subject in a male idiom. Nevertheless while the tripartite system permitted maleness in two modes of expressions—masculinity and femininity, the system of sexualities considers both maleness and femaleness as natural identities which are either realized or transgressed in sexual practice. Sexual practice is thus related to sexual identity which causes surveillance that ranges from legislation to gossip when being brought into the public domain (ibid.: 28) (for further readings see Morris 1994 and 1997).

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<sup>4</sup> The term was used by the Central Siamese.

<sup>5</sup> The term was used by the *Lanna* or Northern people.

Whilst Jackson has observed that “sex” in a biological sense is not distinguished from “gender” in a cultural sense, as they are in the popular understanding in contemporary English (2004a: 208), Thai scholars such as Kanchana Kaewthep (2004) and Amara Pongsapich (2005) have articulated and contributed new understandings to modern Thai genders and sexualities. They suggest that these should be understood as a separate set of notions through separate terms; *phet saphawa/phet sathana* and *phet withi*. These terms convey and carry distinctive meanings of genders and sexualities similar to their function in the Western context.

While the term *phet* has been interpreted as all three English equivalents, sex, gender, and sexuality, showing that the notions of these domains are not different in the Thai context, *saphawa* and *sathana* have been added to the main morpheme, *phet*, to distinguish gendered identity from the rest of the combined notions. *Saphawa* and *sathana* are borrowed from Pali and Sanskrit meaning condition, state, or status. When combined with the morpheme *phet*, *phet saphawa* and *phet sathana* both indicate *phet* identity that has its own state or status and is conditional, in this case, to the sexed body namely, masculine and feminine. Thus, *phet saphawa* and *phet sathana* are the equivalent terms of genders or gendered identity in English.

Similarly, when *phet* is combined with the morpheme *withi* which means way(s) or path(s), *phet withi* means way(s) or path(s) of *phet*. Unlike *phet saphawa/phet sathana*, *phet withi* indicates more flexible and fluid identities of *phet* as there might be more than one way that *phet* could follow. *Phet withi*, therefore, is the equivalent of sexuality or sexual identities in the English language.

The discussion/debates on the system and notions of *phet* in Thai society by both Thai and non-Thai scholars will also be one of the key readings that illuminates the analysis of on-screen representations of non-normative genders and sexuality in mainstream Thai cinema.

Besides the work of Jackson and Morris, Susan Aldous (2008) (co-writing with Pornchai Sereemongkonpol) has written an interesting book, *Ladyboys: the secret world of Thailand's third gender*, focusing on the lives of *ladyboys*, which the authors, as well as Thai society in general, treats in terms of gender subject position as “the third sex [*phet thi sam*]”, considering that men are the first and women are the second sexes.

Graeme Storer (1999) also provides an interesting article on *kathoey* and *gay* in Thai society.

While research and studies of male homosexuality are dominant in Thailand, Megan Sinnott (2001, 2004) is one of a handful of scholars writing on the subject of Thai female homosexuality. Sinnott's main focus is on female same-sex desire and relationships, especially the emergence of "tom" and "dee"<sup>6</sup> as identity categories in the late 1970s, in relation to social, political, and economic factors in Thai society.

Among these sources of literature dealing with the issue of expression and maintenance of non-normative gender and sexuality in Thai society by both Thai and non-Thai scholars, Terdsak Romjumba's *Discourses on "Gay" in Thai Society, 1965 – 1999* (2002) is another excellent and extremely comprehensive piece that traces back the issue of being *gay* as it appeared in both mainstream and same-sex subcultures. In Terdsak's research, a wide range of data such as newspapers, text books and magazines were collected to analyse how the discourse of "gay" in a Thai context had been mentioned and discussed in Thailand. Although Terdsak sets the scope of his research on the discourses on *gays* in Thai society from 1965 to 1999, claiming that 1965 is the year that the term "gay" first appeared in Thai press, he also provides interesting information regarding sexual minorities in Thailand dating back to before 1868.

Terdsak's research reveals that from the pre-modern period to 1999, it was not without problem for sexual minorities to express and maintain their non-normative gender and sexuality in the heteronormative/heterosexual/public domain. Below I briefly select and further discuss some pieces of information presented in Terdsak's work which reveal the social perceptions towards sexual minorities in relation to their practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative gender and sexuality. Given that Terdsak's research only drew on sources up to 1999, I will also build on his findings by drawing on sources produced between 1999 and 2010.

In the reign of King Rama IV [1804 - 1868], there was a poem called *Phleng yao op-rom mom ham* [A poem to teach the wives], which was composed by the King to

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<sup>6</sup> *Tom-dee* is a paired expression of the female homosexual relationship. *Tom* is derived from the English term 'tomboy' and *dee* is from 'lady'. This type of relationship is similar to the 'butch-femme' relationship in the West.

warn his wives not to indulge in same-sex sexual relationships. The King used the term “*len pheuan*” to refer to same-sex behaviour among women in this text.

การสิ่งใดที่ไม่ได้เรามาชอบ	อ่อนวอนปลอบจางอย่าทำหนา
ก็ไม่ฟังขึ้นจักอัธยา	ยิ่งกว่าคอไม้ไม่ไหวคิง
ที่ขอใหญ่ชี้ให้เห็นเรื่องเล่นเพื่อน	ทำให้เพื่อนราชกิจผิดทุกสิ่ง
ถ้าจะเปรียบเนื้อความไปตามจริง	เสมอหญิงเล่นชู้จากสามี

(quoted in Terdsak 2002: 21)

[trans.] I (King Rama IV) am not pleased to see people misbehave. I have even begged them not to do it, but no one listens. Sexual relationships among women can also be treated as cheating and having an affair. It is really disturbing to me.

According to the poem, King Rama IV, having been a Buddhist monk for almost 30 years before ascending the throne in 1851, related the same-sex behaviours committed by his wives to the religious belief and cultural norms that the behaviours could be treated as a form of adultery in the same way as women having affairs with other men. It is interesting that while the King was not pleased about those same-sex behaviours, instead of using his absolute power to punish those wives who committed same-sex acts or setting some rules and punishments to prohibit the practices, the King used the poem to send a “warm warning” to his wives. While it can be interpreted that same-sex behaviour might not have been treated as a deadly sin or a serious illegal act that needed to be punished at that time, same-sex behaviours were clearly perceived negatively.

In the reign of King Rama VI [1881 - 1925], the appearances and roles of women and men were modified and distinguished according to the imagined Western notions, practices and standards (especially by the King himself, who had studied in the UK since he was young). An interesting piece of evidence from the newspaper, *Dusit Samit* shows that *kathoey* were mentioned and mocked by King Rama VI, who wrote a joke about *kathoey* that:

ถ . คนชนิดใดชอบรู้มากในทางฝั้วๆเมียๆ

ค . กะเทย

- ค . ทำไมกะเทยจึงรู้มากในทางผู้ชายเมียๆ
- ด . เพราะตัวเป็นไม่ได้ทั้งตัวทั้งเมีย จึงต้องพูดเพื่อตบตาคนอื่น  
(quoted in Terdsak 2002: 34)

[trans.] Q. What kind of people know all about both the husband and wife's business?

A. *Kathoey*.

Q. Why is that?

A. Because they can be neither husband nor wife so they have to pretend that they know well in order to **conceal themselves**.

In King Rama VI's joke, being *kathoey* is used as an element of fun and to ridicule. It is also the case that the practice of "being in the closet" has been evident since at least the time of King Rama VI (who was also regarded as an "erratic homosexual" (Stephen Greene 1971: 92)). Expressing and/or maintaining one's gender/sexuality beyond heteronormativity therefore seems to have been problematic in the public domain since the reign of King Rama VI.

The issue of same-sex behaviours began to be treated more negatively and as a social problem ("*panha sangkhom*") after World War II. The newspaper *Siam Nikorn* published an article about male prisoners at Bang Khang Roj prison. Yuwarak (1950), the author of the article, provides an elaborate explanation of how male prisoners engaged in same-sex sexual acts and relationships, believing this to be a social problem that occurs when people lack morality, leading them to engage in deviant sexual behaviours.

Medical discourse is another resource that has been used to manipulate the discourse of same-sex behaviours and homosexuality in Thailand. As mentioned earlier, to become more "civilised" and reach "imagined Western standards" to avoid colonisation, Siam (later Thailand) adopted or sometimes imported various Western notions including the knowledge of homosexuality.

After World War II, the relationship between the United States and Thailand became very close, the former offering help with financial and military support in the fight against Communism. The US also provided some scholarships such as from the Rockefeller Foundation to Thai doctors and teachers to study in the US. Consequently,

the discourse of same-sex behaviours and homosexuality was influenced by those who had studied in the US.

A number of doctors, psychiatrists and academic researchers conducted research on the issue of homosexuality. They diagnosed same-sex behaviours, transvestism and homosexuality as a psychosexual abnormality or mental illness, with reference to their Western knowledge, especially Freudian psychoanalytical theory, and held negative attitudes towards homosexuals and same-sex desire. They tried to explain the causes of the “syndrome” by following Freudian theory and some other explanations such as abnormalities in genes, hormones and poor upbringing in childhood. They also believed that the “syndrome of homosexuality” could be cured. However, their ideas were not widely discussed or referred to in the public domain (see Terdsak 2002: 41-54).

What was to bring the issue of *kathoey*, homosexuality and same-sex behaviours to the centre of attention in Thailand was the murder of Darrell Berrigan, the influential editor of the newspaper, *Bangkok World*, on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1965. Jackson discusses this case in detail in an article called, “An American Death in Bangkok: The Murder of Darrell Berrigan and the Hybrid Origins of Gay Identity in 1960s Thailand” (1999b).

In this case the police referred to the fact that the victim engaged in same-sex sexual relationships and linked this to one of the motivations for the murder. Thai newspapers covering the case thus focused more on same-sex behaviours and homosexuality as it existed in Thailand, as they sought to contextualise (and sensationalise) details of the trial. In the murder case, some terms were borrowed from the West and were coined to refer to same-sex behaviours. Besides the existing terms, *kathoey* and *lak-ka-phet* [gendered identity disorder], the term “homosexual” was borrowed and used in the news. The term “gay” was also imported but localised and at that time was only used to refer to male prostitutes. The term *kathoey* itself was also used more specifically by adding the terms “*chai*” (meaning masculine men) or “*num*” (meaning masculine young men) to differentiate masculine male homosexuals from *kathoey* or effeminate ones.

In response to the murder case, the newspapers wrote negatively about homosexualities. Pan Bunnak, a famous *kathoey* who lived at the same time as Berrigan’s murder, confirms how homosexuals, especially *kathoey*, were affected by the

news. Pan recalled that many *kathoey* beauty contests due to be held at temple fairs were cancelled by the police. *Kathoey*s were caught and fined even though they did not know why this was so.

Pan also provided information that is relevant to the practice of expressing one's gender and sexuality, especially for *kathoey*s. From his experience, "*kathoey thi taeng sao*" (transvestites) and "*gay thi mai sadaeng ork*" (masculine *gays* or "straight acting" *gays*) showed solid evidence that the practice of coming out or "being in the closet" had been exercised in Thai society. It is interesting that, according to him, *gay* who did not reveal their genders and/or sexualities had no problem being in an area well known to the police as a cruising zone. On the contrary, *kathoey*, especially those who went in drag, faced difficulties being in the same area and were arrested (cited in Terdsak 2002: 57). Since they behaved like heterosexuals, the police might not have been able to charge the masculine male homosexuals who were found in homosexual cruising areas. This reveals that at that time when homosexuals did not visibly express themselves or break social norms, they could still be considered a normal part of the society even though their "abnormal" sexualities might have also been acknowledged.

Newspapers provided an ever more popular space among Thai homosexual readers for in-depth discussions of the issue of homosexuality and same-sex behaviours. On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1972, the newspaper, *Thai Rat*, went to observe a *gay* bar and interview the owners, Yotsawadee and Pu. The newspaper described the bar negatively, writing that its clients could perform any sexual acts they wished to right on the dance floor. Yotsawadee thus complained that the newspaper report was inaccurate. The appearance of the interview with Yotsawadee in the press brought some new notions and practices of same-sex behaviours in Thailand to the fore. Firstly, Yotsawadee dressed up as a woman but preferred to call himself "*gay*" or "*gay queen*", but not "*kathoey*". He also introduced many other terms such as "*gay king*", the partner of a "*gay queen*". He referred to "low class" homosexuals as "*gay krai*" (degraded *gay*) (see Terdsak 2002: 87-90). Differences between the *gay queen* and *kathoey* were thus introduced. The two terms were not merely used to label gendered/sexual identities, but also contained connotations of social class.

In terms of labelling the gender/sex category of *kathoey* and *gay*, Jackson (2004a: 220) similarly observes the term *gay* becomes more relevant to the idea of

modernization to match “international” (*sakon*) or “imagined Western norms and standards”. However, Jackson also notes that there is still an indistinguishable tension between the terms *kathoey* and *gay*. Jackson (ibid.: 224) mentions that these terms “are not distinguished as a sexuality and a gender, respectively. Rather, these terms – together with “man,” “woman,” “*tom*” and “*dee*” – are collectively labelled as different varieties of *phet*”. Jackson further explains that not only does the term *gay* contain more modern and positive meanings than the term *kathoey*, it is also localised by combining with Thai terms such as “*gay king*”, “*gay queen*”, and “*gay quing*”.

According to these terms used to label sexual minorities, Totsaworn Maneesrikum (2002), employing Foucault’s *Power and Knowledge*, explores the process of making *gay* “the Other” in Thailand through the power of knowledge and institutions in setting up principles, regulations and social orders for *gay* which finally have an effect on *gay*’s identities. The language used in the Thai context is therefore one of the significant factors that manipulates “the order of discourse” related to *gay* people in Thailand which apparently creates normative judgments derived from the majority/mainstream culture (Totsaworn 2002: 33-47).

While *gay* discourse is used by same-sex subcultures to gain more powerful or some significant social statuses or identities, it may be used by mainstream subculture to “Other” sexual minority people by using the language belonging to the other discourse. In other words, the quick and broad acceptance of the term *gay*, borrowed from English, by mainstream culture might have been used as another strategy to designate *gay* people as “the Other” in Thai society. By borrowing from English, mainstream culture could distance itself from all of the non-normative forms of genders and sexualities as it can be seen that those abnormalities derive from other cultures. The murder of the expatriate American Darrell Berrigan in October 1965 and the increasing number of gay Westerners in Thailand also made it appear more convincing that homosexuality was “imported” from Western societies.

As the issue of homosexuality became more public, a number of psychiatrists and academics undertook and produced more research on homosexuality and same-sex behaviours in Thailand. They still treated homosexuality as an abnormality and usually attempted to explain the causes of being homosexual through reference to Western knowledge. Some assumptions, repeated *ad nauseam*, include homosexuality as a cause

of physical abnormality, wrong upbringing (i.e. sexual abuses), unhealthy family relationships, lacking gender role models (i.e. children with single parent), and having confusing gender role models (i.e. having a dominating father or mother in the family). As these explanations derived from trustworthy, eligible persons, the public domain perceived them as an absolute truth. The strong belief in these assumptions is reflected well in almost every Thai film with a sexual minority focus as the films repeat one or another of the assumptions. Psychoanalysis has therefore played a huge role in manipulating the discourse of what it means to be *gay* in Thai society.

With strong criticisms from society, particularly those which appeared in mass media such as newspapers produced by heterosexual writers, some *gay* magazines were created by homosexuals themselves to provide homosexuals with some space in mainstream culture to express themselves freely. These include *Plaek* (est. 1975), *G.L.* (1981), *Mithuna* (1983), *Mithuna Junior* (1984), *Neon* (1985), *Morakot* (1985) and *Midway* (1986). Such magazines also raised the issue of expressing one's sexual orientation more seriously. For example, Milinot, a columnist for the magazine *Neon*, refers to the aims of the magazine that are relevant to the practice of accepting one's homosexuality and being true to one's self;

แต่ความรู้สึกที่ต้องอดทนนี้จะไม่แปรเปลี่ยนเป็นความกดดัน ถ้าหากจะเริ่มค้นด้วยการยอมรับตนเอง  
ยอมรับว่าเป็นเกย์ยอมรับว่ามันเป็นธรรมชาติ ไม่มีปมด้อยว่ามันผิด และไม่มีปมเด่นกว่าคนอื่น...  
นี่อ่อนไม่ได้มีจุดประสงค์ที่จะให้ใครหลอกตัวเอง เราพยายามที่จะสนองความต้องการส่วนหนึ่ง  
พยายามเรียกร้องให้สังคมได้เข้าใจเกย์ให้สังคมยอมรับ แต่ที่สำคัญที่สุดก็คือให้คนที่ป็นเกย์ยอมรับ  
ตนเอง (quoted in Terdsak 2002: 58)

[trans.] All the pressures will be gone if one starts to accept that one is *gay*. It is natural and there is nothing wrong with being *gay*, but it is not a privilege either. *Neon* does not want to see people lie to themselves. We try to satisfy the need of people in society and make other people understand better what it is to be *gay*. However, the most important thing is that one accepts that one is *gay*.

Nevertheless, there were also people who disagreed with the idea of expressing oneself. Washington, one of the magazine's readers who wrote, *Jotmai poet phaneuk: i aep saep jing reu* [An open letter: is the closet case the worst?] to challenge an article

by Dr. Seri Wongmontha<sup>7</sup> entitled, *Or. i aep saep thi sut* [The closet case is the worst], does not think that coming out is important and that one should instead be primarily concerned with both the advantages and disadvantages of expressing one's gender/sexuality.

เกย์ธรรมดาซึ่งก็คือผู้ชายธรรมดาที่ชอบผู้ชายด้วยกัน บางคนอาจจะเปิดเผยตัวต่อสาธารณะว่าตนเองเป็นเกย์ แต่เขาเหล่านั้นก็ยังคงมีลักษณะของผู้ชายเต็มตัว ไม่ได้อยากเป็นผู้หญิง ทุกคนยังคงภูมิใจในความเป็นผู้ชายของตนเองไม่ได้เสแสร้งตนเองให้เป็นผู้ชาย ทุกอย่างเป็นธรรมชาติเนื่องจากยังมีข้อจำกัดทางสังคมพวกเราส่วนใหญ่มีสติสัมปชัญญะเพียงพอที่จะพิจารณาถึงผลได้ผลเสียของการเปิดเผยตัว ดังนั้นส่วนใหญ่จึงยังคงปกปิดความเป็นเกย์ของตัวเอง (quoted in Terdsak 2002: 162-3)

[trans.] *Gay* is just an ordinary guy who likes guys. Some of them express themselves as *gay* but they still look just like straight guys because they do not want to be women. They are proud of their masculinity. As there are still some limitations, we who are clever enough already consider the advantages and disadvantages of coming out. This is why many people are still in the closet.

According to the debates in these gay magazines, it is evident that the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative gender and sexuality have been discussed and debated in society. While some thought these practices important to *gay* life, others disagreed.

The epidemic of AIDS/HIV in Thailand from 1987 is another factor that has significantly fuelled negative attitudes towards same-sex behaviours. As it is believed that the first person who became HIV positive in Thailand was a male homosexual who became infected while studying in the US, homosexuals have been blamed as carriers of the virus, as in Western countries, and the disease has often been treated as a “gay cancer”. In an article for *Matichon Daily*, entitled *Matjurat AIDS sawan gay salai* [AIDS the killer: gay heaven vanished], the author referred explicitly to homosexuals as the carriers of the disease (cited in Terdsak 2002: 171).

This belief has a pronounced effect on sexual minorities in Thailand. For example, Dr Seri was criticized by Dr Wanlop for being a bad influence on younger generations that tried to imitate him. When Dr Seri argued back, the debate became of

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Seri Wongmontha is the very first *kathoey* university lecturer, academic, journalist, actor etc. who openly came out to the public as a *kathoey*. Later on in this chapter, Dr Seri is also interviewed regarding the issue of expressing and maintaining non-normative gender and sexuality in Thailand. His role as a *kathoey* character in *Saving Private Tootsie* is discussed in Chapter 5.

interest of to the media. Dr Seri was invited by *Channel Three* to talk about the situation. Dr Wanlop went further by holding a seminar on “*Khrongkan pongkan butlan pen gay thom tut di* (How to prevent children from being ,gay’, ‘tom’, ‘tut’<sup>8</sup> and ,dee’). According to this conflict, the director of national television and radio, Prathan Rangsimanon suggested that, although having homosexuals on screen can be seen as comic relief, and not always as a bad influence, it is highly recommended to note that they are not good role models and one should not follow their example (cited in Terdsak 2002: 172-3).

With such strongly negative attitudes expressed by mainstream society after the epidemic of AIDS/HIV in Thailand in 1987, a number of homosexuals who own *gay* bars and night clubs gathered together to try to delete negative images of *gayness* and produce positive ones. This can be seen as the very first (semi) official *gay* organization in Thailand. *Sen si-khao* (The White Line) was established by Nathi Thirarojjanaphong (who is also one of the interviewees in my thesis shown below) focusing on promoting knowledge to prevent AIDS/HIV among homosexuals. This organization later on developed into a more established *gay* organization, *Klum gay sang-san haeng prathet-thai* (Positive and Creative *Gays* Group of Thailand).

Since then, more organizations have been established for homosexual people and sexual minorities such as *Sapaan* (meaning ,bridge’), *Rainbow Sky*, *Bangkok Rainbow*, *Political Gay Group*, *Anjaree*, and *Thai Queer Research Centre*. With these organizations and devoted activists, it is undeniable that Thai society has become more open to diversity in terms of genders and sexuality than in the past. However, it is still the case that homosexuals in Thailand are still often subjected to teasing and insults and at most unequal social status or even discrimination which is evident when mainstream culture refers to homosexuality and same-sex behaviour. For instance, in 1996, National Teaching Colleges (*Sathaban Ratchaphat*), concerned that students would imitate “bad” examples, announced that homosexuals, especially *kathoey*, would not be allowed to study in their institutions, although later on this proposal was rescinded. In 1997 and 1998 there were two murder cases relevant to homosexuality and same-sex behaviours. The media reporting of these incidents was replete with derogatory terms highlighting

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<sup>8</sup> *Tut*, possibly from the term, “tootsie”, is a derogatory term to call *kathoeyes*.

the fact that that society still held negative attitudes towards homosexuality and did not accept it (see Terdsak 2002: 182-5).

In 1999, the Government Public Relations Department wrote a letter to all television channels in Thailand suggesting that they should be more careful in showing homosexuals on screen (Chanthana Raksayu<sup>9</sup>). In 2004, Kla Somtrakol, Permanent Secretary for Culture, gave an interview to *Thai Rat* on June 4<sup>th</sup> in which he stated that:

กระทรวงวัฒนธรรมจะรณรงค์อย่างจริงจังเกี่ยวกับพฤติกรรมรักร่วมเพศ แม้ว่าจะไม่สามารถไปไล่จับให้เข้าคุก หรือมีบทลงโทษทางกฎหมายเหมือนกับสื่อลามกอนาจาร แต่จะเรียกร้องให้ประชาสังคมช่วยกันต่อต้าน ไม่ให้ พฤติกรรมรักร่วมเพศแพร่ระบาดไปมากกว่านี้... ในส่วนของกระทรวงวัฒนธรรม จะมีการจัดระเบียบเจ้าหน้าที่ข้าราชการที่มีพฤติกรรมดังกล่าว ไม่ให้มีการเปิดรับผู้ที่มีพฤติกรรมดังกล่าวเข้าทำงาน... (จาก นสพ.ไทยรัฐ 4 มิ.ย. 2547)

[trans.] The Ministry of Culture will seriously monitor homosexuality in society. Although it is impossible to catch or punish homosexuals with any laws, as with pornography, we will ask for help from people in society not to let homosexuality increase any further. In our ministry, we will not allow homosexuals to work in our office (*Thai Rat*, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2004 quoted in Chalidaphorn Songsamphan<sup>10</sup>).

In 2005, the issue of same-sex marriage was widely discussed in society. Some politicians and academics supported it, including some senators such as Rabiebrat Pongpanit, Jon Ungpakorn and Mareerat Kaewka, a law specialist, Kittisak Prokati and the Ministry of Interior (2005), Dr. Purachai Piemsomboon. However, the promotion of same-sex marriage was turned down by the then-Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who believed homosexuality to be an emotional abnormality (see Chanthana Raksayu<sup>11</sup>). In 2007, transgenders also asked for legal permission to change their title from Mr. to Miss and vice versa. However, their request was rejected.

In a Thai talk show called *Sleepless in Bangkok (Ta sawang)* broadcast on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2007, some famous Thai transsexuals, including Toom Parinya

<sup>9</sup> The Law supporting same-sex marriage in Thailand. Sapaan Group: Alternative Media for LGBT., Web. Accessed 28 March 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The Culture of Homophobia. Sapaan Group: Alternative Media for LGBT., Web. Accessed 28 March 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The Law supporting same-sex marriage in Thailand. Sapaan Group: Alternative Media for LGBT., Web. Accessed 28 March 2010.

Chalernphon<sup>12</sup>, were invited to discuss the right of those who had undergone sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) to change their title in accordance with their gender identity/expression in official documents such as I.D. cards and passports. Toom explained that when travelling abroad she was frequently embarrassed by the reaction of immigration officers due to the fact that her physical appearance as a woman, did not match the title, Mr., in her passport. The other transsexuals on the show raised other difficulties with respect to finding employment, given that their official documents designate them as „Mr’. One transsexual pointed out that since she cannot change her title to Miss, she is not able to be legally married to her foreign partner and obtain a marriage certificate which would allow her husband to live permanently in Thailand and for them to build a family together.

Three years later, the issue was raised again in a talk show called Woody Talk (*Woody koet ma khui*), broadcast on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2010. The show invited three well-known transvestites, transgenders and transsexuals to discuss the term “transfemale” which has been translated and used in Thai society as “*phuying kham-phet*”. The main discussion was to define this new term, “*phuying kham-phet*” and to debate if a transsexual person should be able to legally change their title, either Mr. or Miss, to match their new physique. In that talk show, the audience, mainly consisting of transgenders and transsexuals, was invited to share their opinions on the topic. Many of them suggested that Thai sexual minorities should pay attention to more serious and important issues such as underage and illegal sexual operations, not just on individual gender expression and titles.

On 10<sup>th</sup> August 2010, the National Legislative Assembly considered a proposition that would allow transsexuals to use the title according to their gendered identity after having complete sexual reassignment surgery: but it failed. While in many countries such as the USA, United Kingdom and China, transsexuals have been allowed to change their title to match their new gender expression/identity, the Thai government has still not granted transsexuals the right to use their preferred title.

Consequently, it is undeniable that sexual minorities and same-sex behaviours in Thailand have not become totally acceptable. The practice of expressing and

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<sup>12</sup> Toom Parinya Chalernphon is the famous transsexual kick boxer whose life story was portrayed in the film *Beautiful Boxer* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2005). The film is analysed in Chapter 4.

maintaining one's sexuality remains difficult and problematic. It is the task of this thesis to study and analyse the practices of expressing and maintaining one's gender and sexuality beyond the hetero-normative system and how these practices affect the lives of sexual minority characters represented in a selection of mainstream Thai films.

To further strengthen the body of knowledge on the notions and practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in Thailand, I also conducted some interviews with well-known Thai *gay* activists and researchers to ask their opinions on these particular issues.

## **Section Two: Human Text – Interview with the “Vampires”**

The interviews with eight influential Thai *gay* activists and researchers from different occupations frame three main opinions towards the practice of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in Thailand. Compared to the range of the colours in a rainbow, the two opposite ideas, coming out pro and con, can be located at the two opposite edges of the rainbow, where the purple and red bands lie. The opinion that neither supports nor goes against the practice of coming out can be seen as the colours in-between the rainbow.

### **1. The Colour ‘Purple’: coming out Pro**

I place those interviewees who totally support the practice of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities, at the purple line, at the edge of the rainbow. There are two people who believe that coming out is a necessary process that one is encouraged to undertake because it helps an individual to live an authentic life and strengthen the rights of sexual minorities in Thailand. The opening interview is from Nathi Thirarojchanapong, the very first *gay* activist in Thailand who organised *The White Line* referred to earlier and who calls himself “*Gay* Nathi” instead of “Mr Nathi” to show how proud he is to have been born *gay*. Another interviewee is the Buddhist monk, Phra Child Woradhammo who tells of his experience of coming out as a *gay* person under the yellow robe.

#### **1.1 *Gay* Nathi: The Very First *Gay* Activist and *Gay* Politics**

Nathi Thirarojchanapong spent two years in the US studying jazz dance. He was forced by his Sino-Thai family to get married so he decided to relocate to a place he believed to be a gay-friendly society, i.e. the United States, the “Land of Freedom”. Nathi says that in the United States gay men are not obliged to be transvestites or pressured into behaving like women. Most importantly, homosexuals in the US can live their lives without a high degree of pervasive social insult.

Nathi realises that he may be too radical and extreme compared to other *gay* activists. However, he has been through a lot himself and seen many people suffer and hurt other people’s feelings because of deciding to remain “in the closet” [“*aep jit*”]. For him, after spending two years in the US, coming out was the only way that would spiritually free homosexual people and make the diversity of genders and sexualities more acceptable in society.

Nathi says he knows that coming out and staying out can have some negative effects. However, he would still totally encourage people to come out. He believes that these days society has already become more open to sexual diversity. For him, it is thus more about the courage of each person to come out and sacrifice what they have or get when they don’t reveal their sexual orientations, such as better opportunities and social status. He suggests that people should think more about the rights involved in the whole picture of the sexual minorities and less about their individual benefits.

## **1.2 *Gay Buddhist Monk: Phra Child Woradhammo***

Phra Child Woradhammo, a Buddhist monk who came out as a *gay* person, kindly shared his experience of coming out and staying out. He has been ordained for 19 years and came out 10 years ago. He first revealed his sexual identity in a workshop training people to become leaders and speakers. On the penultimate day, there was an activity called “expression line”. One of the staff members asked the participants questions and if the answers were yes, each participant had to walk out from the room and then come back in for the next question. One of the questions was, “if you are homosexual, please leave the room”. Without thinking, he said, he went out of the room and then walked back in. He still recalls the noises of surprise from the other participants as he left the room.

When he walked back into the room, he felt like he was going to faint and regretted what he had just done. He remembered that on the next day, which was the last day, no one, especially the monks, spoke to him at all. It took him three years to get over his coming out and he admitted that he became mentally ill as a result of his action. Finally he went to join the workshop again after three years. This time he had a chance to talk with the staff member who had directed the expression line activity three years earlier. He suggested that he talk about it to more people. Phra Child thus chose to tell one of his sisters about his sexuality whereupon he found out that his sister was also a lesbian and they become closer than before.

As a result of his experience, Phra Child thinks that the practice of expressing non-normative genders and sexualities is a long process. He believes that expressing one's gendered/sexual identity is a natural process and people should at the end of the day reveal their sexual orientation in some respects and he treats it as an "inner emotional growth". He believes when people start to tell others about their non-normative genders and sexualities, at least communication happens. This can erase loneliness and develop trust and emotional contact with other people. Expressing and maintaining one's gender and sexuality beyond heteronormativity also goes hand in hand with sexual minorities' rights. He believes the more people come out, the more it helps change people's opinions towards sexual minorities in Thai society.

## **2. „Red' Without Blue: The coming out Con**

### **2.1 *Gay* Activist in Chiang Mai: Phongphera Phatpheraphong**

At the opposite edge of the rainbow, on the red band where I put my interviewee who disagrees with the idea of expressing one's sexual orientation, is Phongphera Phatpheraphong, a staff member of an active organization for sexual minorities' health in Chiang Mai called "M Plus". Phongphera is the only person who does not support the notion. He states that these days it can be difficult and problematic to identify people's genders and/or sexualities with specific or fixed terms. He refers to his experience as a *gay* activist in Chiang Mai province in Thailand when he met two male to female transsexuals who were lovers. In this case, he questions how we can label or identify genders and sexualities given the limitations of existing terms.

Phongphera thinks that it is only possible to identify our genders and/or sexualities in the past and present, but not in the future as we will never know which genders and/or sexualities we will be. According to him, it is not important to identify what you are, but it is very important that you know what you are at the present moment and are happy about it.

He cautions that coming out can cause both beneficial and harmful effects, depending on each person's situation. He thinks that coming out is an individual choice and people who are not ready or do not want to come out and stay out should not be forced to do so. Phongphera does not believe that the increasing quantity or number of sexual minority people can gain social acceptance. He questions if the greater visibility of sexual minorities is negative and doubts if sexual minorities will become more accepted in Thai society as a result.

### **3. Somewhere in-between the Edges of the Rainbow**

In the remaining category of opinion, that of the majority of interviewees, while they think that expressing one's non-normative gender and sexuality is important, they do not support everyone doing it. The issue of individualism and the disadvantages of expressing one's sexual orientation become key concerns that give these people some reservations about supporting the notion.

#### **3.1 The *Gay* Pioneer: Dr Seri Wongmontha**

Assistant Professor Dr Seri Wongmontha completed his Masters and PhD in the United States and is the very first university lecturer, researcher, actor, film director and journalist to have come out and "stayed out" as a *kathoey*. He is a co-producer and actor in the film, *Chan phu-chai na ya* [I am a sissy man] (dir. M.L. Panthewanop Thewakol, 1987) which is considered to be the first Thai *gay* movie<sup>13</sup>. He has also appeared in some other *gay* films such as *Phrang chomphu* [*Saving Private Tootsie*] (dir. Kittikorn Leawsirikol, 2002). When I asked about the practice of coming out in Thailand, he replied that these days more people reveal their sexual orientations ("*perd phoei tua*") than before. He points out three interesting reasons for this. Firstly, there have been more homosexual people from many (respectable) professions, such as university deans,

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<sup>13</sup> *Chan phu-chai na ya* [I am a sissy man] has been analyzed in Oradol's PhD thesis (2008).

government agency directors and high ranking soldiers who have come out and are accepted by society. They have proved to the mainstream heteronormative society that even though they have different sexual orientations, they can become useful and efficient members of the society. Consequently, people may feel more comfortable and less intimidated about coming out when they see these examples.

Secondly, Dr. Seri believes that democracy also plays an important role in helping homosexuals to gain greater acceptance in Thailand and to feel more comfortable in coming out. As many issues linked with human rights such as children's rights and employees' rights have been raised in Thailand, homosexuals' rights became one of those issues being noticed and promoted by the people in the society.

The last factor he mentions is about the media in Thailand, especially films. Dr. Seri says that as we have a number of successful films showing positive images of homosexuals in Thailand, such as *Love of Siam* (2007) and *Bangkok Love Story* (2007), these films help change negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Moreover, in the Thai entertainment industry, there are a lot of homosexual "superstars" who are very successful and came out. These films and superstars become examples or models that encourage more people in society to come out.

However, he notes that until about ten years ago it was impossible for people to come out as homosexuals in Thailand. Many people who were homosexuals, especially those who were of high social status or held particular occupations, such as police men, soldiers, superstars and singers had no choice but to be in the closet because they were not sure how people would react if they came out.

Seri believes that the concern with image is an important factor influencing the practice of expressing or covering up one's sexual orientation. Interestingly, he divides sexuality into, in his words, "mental trip" (sexual preference) and "physical trip" (physically sexual pleasure). He believes that people can be sexually aroused by anyone or anything, regardless of genders (in his words, "when it gets touched, it gets excited"). Consequently, it is possible that a person can perform in both opposite sex and same-sex sexual activities. Many people who want to conceal their real sexual preference thus try to marry opposite-sex people and have children. He mentions that those who try really hard by sticking only to their "physical trip" as opposed to their "mental trip" to become

a heterosexual might be successful. However, for those who cannot, it might appear that they can have both opposite and same-sex sexual desire or activities. Seri therefore does not think that “sexual fluidity” really exists in Thailand yet, but that there is, rather, concern about personal image. Seri treats this as a performance, not fluidity.

In his opinion, “*kan poet phoei tua ton*” or “coming out” is an individual right and depends on each person’s decision about whether to come out or not, depending on their limitations or difficulties. Seri thinks therefore that coming out is an individual situation, not a universal one.

In terms of the movement of sexual minorities in Thailand, he agrees that coming out is important as the movement needs to derive collective power from sexual minority people. However, he does not think it is necessary that the movement only has homosexuals. He suggests that it is strategically important to develop alliances with supportive heterosexuals. When there is a good number of heterosexuals fighting for *gay* rights, then people who are in the closet would be more comfortable to join the ride as they do not have to come out or identify themselves as homosexuals. However, he also cautions that if we overreact or force having a *gay* rights movement in Thailand, it may provoke more widespread homophobia. More importantly, homosexuals might lose what they have so far gained from the society.

### **3.2 *Gay* Director and Mediator: Vitaya Sangaroon**

In keeping with Dr Seri, Vitaya Sangaroon, a *gay* activist, journalist, the author of *Come out of the closet!* and the filmmaker of a *gay* film, *Right By Me* (2005), claims that before and during the time he went to the US to complete his master’s degree in media and management about 5 years ago, there was no concept of coming out in Thailand at all. As part of his study project, Vitaya examined what Thai people thought about the idea of coming out by posting the issue on a *gay* Thai web board in Thailand and found that almost 100% of people who replied to his column rejected the notion of coming out. Vitaya explains that there are three main reasons why Thai people disagreed with the idea: firstly, they believed it was impossible in Thailand; secondly, they thought it insane; and finally, they saw it as sinful as one would upset one’s parents by coming out.

In Vitaya's opinion, coming out is an important concept, a choice and a pattern of life that one can follow if one wants to. He admits that to employ the whole concept of coming out from the West might be difficult for Thai people to accept mainly because of cultural differences. Accordingly, Vitaya has been trying to articulate the concept of coming out in Thailand by saying that coming out can be seen as an individual choice and right. People can choose to disclose or conceal their genders and sexualities whenever or wherever they want to. The most important thing is that they first have to know about the advantages and disadvantages of both coming out and "being in the closet".

### **3.3 The Director of a Gay Organisation, Bangkok Rainbow: Nikorn Artit**

Nikorn Artit, director of a well-known *gay* organization, Bangkok Rainbow, holds a similar opinion to Vitaya. He argues that coming out depends on the individual's decision as to whether s/he is ready or not to reveal her/his genders and/or sexualities. He further explains that for some people, especially *kathoey*, who are obviously effeminate, they may not need to come out as people can assume their gender and/or sexuality already. However, for some people who just realize that they have same-sex desire, it can be much more difficult for them to come out to their family and friends. These people thus tend to choose to be in the closet.

Nevertheless, Nikorn strongly believes that in general, people want to reveal their genders and/or sexualities to others, especially those whom they love, because they want to be accepted and loved as they really are. More importantly, he believes that Thai society, especially these days, is very accepting towards the diversity of sexual minorities. But again, coming out depends on each person's condition and situation and people do not have to do it or should not be forced to do it if they do not want to. They have to be ready first to face the consequences of coming out, which can be both positive and negative.

Nikorn also suggests that to come out, one does not need to tell people what one is by using the terms referring to people holding same-sex desire such as *gay*, lesbian, *kathoey* or whatever. One can simply reveal that one has same-sex desire. Having been working with sexual minorities for some certain years, Nikorn claims that people's genders and sexualities can indeed be fluid. It thus might be difficult and problematic to

come out to people by telling them what one is by using such fixed terms. However, coming out is still very important to Nikorn as it is the very first step that we need to start to tell others about one's sexual preferences that are different from heterosexuality. Once people come out, he believes that they will be free from social expectations according to the norms of heterosexuality. Then, if their sexualities happen to be fluid, just let it be.

### **3.4 Gay Police Officer: Sithiphat Chalermiyot**

Another interesting interviewee is Sithiphat Chalermiyot, a policeman who "came out" as a homosexual. Sithiphat points out that while the practice of coming out does exist its notion is not very clear in the Thai context as Thai people do not really understand the diversity of genders and sexualities. For example, many people still cannot differentiate between the terms 'gay' or masculine male homosexuals and 'kathoey' or effeminate homosexuals. Furthermore, as the issue of coming out has not been widely discussed and studied in the country, Sithiphat states that there is thus no model for the process of coming out. Consequently, expressing one's genders and/or sexualities beyond the heteronormative system does not seem to be positive or proper in Thailand. For instance, he cautions that many primary or high school students wear too much makeup and act hyper-effeminately which might not be suitable behaviour in schools.

For the process of coming out to be positive and constructive, Sithiphat suggests that people should understand exactly what coming out is and think carefully about both the advantages and disadvantages. He thinks that coming out is an individual right and is dependent on each person's situation, conditions and limitations. Therefore, they have to consider carefully whether coming out is really necessary in their lives. In terms of sexual minorities' rights at the societal level, Sithiphat disagrees that the more the people who come out, the more these people will gain acceptance. He states that sometimes being in the closet can be more powerful as a means of raising the issue of sexual minorities' rights and that it is strategies and not the number of people coming out that makes the most impact.

### 3.5 *Gay* Researcher: Naruphon Duangviset

The last interviewee in this section is Naruphon Duangviset, an academic researcher at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre and a PhD candidate (in Social Administration) at Thammasat University, and who has also come out as a homosexual. He explains that the act of “*kan poet phoei tua-eng*” or coming out in English with reference to the Western political connotation of the term does not exist in Thailand. In the Western sphere, coming out is a paradigm that has a long history. The notion and practice of coming out came with gay liberation from the 1960s onwards. At that time, gay activists wanted and encouraged people to come out because being in the closet meant one was accepting being a second class citizen. Coming out is thus not treated as a private or personal right as it is considered these days, but a public one.

In Thailand, there is no history of gay liberation as such. Consequently, Naruphon does not think that the notion and practice of coming out exists in Thailand, especially when we think of coming out as a Western import and as a political identity.

In the past, Thai society has accepted only *kathoeys* and there was no notion of being “gay”, another Western import. The turning point in the history of homosexualities in Thailand was in the 1980s when some people who had been in contact with the West tried to differentiate between “*kathoey*” and “*gay*” and identified themselves as *gay*.

Popular *gay* sites at that time, including *gay* bars, night clubs, saunas and public cruising zones in Bangkok, became sites of identity and reference that people used to construct *gay* identity in Thailand. Thai people had learnt how to become or identify themselves as *gays* from these sites and subcultures. Consequently, the act of coming out in Thailand does not derive from gay liberation as it has in the West. Instead, it comes from the consumption of *gay* night life, *gay* community and same-sex subculture. More importantly, coming out in Thailand is more about expressing or revealing one’s sexual desire so that one can achieve what one wants in sexual relationships. For example, some people identify themselves as “*gay king*”, “*gay queen*” and “*gay quing*” to have partners who are compatible with them in terms of their sexual roles.

Consequently, Naruphon disagrees that if more people come out the society will better accept sexual minorities in Thailand, because coming out in Thailand has nothing

to do with sexual minority politics. He notes that to raise the rights of sexual minorities in Thailand, one needs to look back at the root of the problem. It is important to understand culture as a way of leading to the possibility of changing people's attitudes towards sexual minorities.

While coming out is not important, Naruphon thinks that it is necessary that people accept their genders and sexualities. He mentions that people may not have to tell the world what they are, but they should not lie. Accordingly, coming out to someone else might not be as important as coming out to oneself.

The interviews above demonstrate the variety of understandings connected to the practice of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities. These understandings are very much informed by personal experience and knowledge. *Gay* Nathi strongly encourages people to reveal their sexual orientation because "being in the closet" causes suffering. He was once forced to get married to a woman by his Sino-Thai parents. He also experienced difficulties when homosexuals in Thailand were not accepted and were diagnosed as mentally ill. Coming out as a "good" *gay* is therefore a practical strategy for him that can help change negative attitudes towards homosexuals and gain more rights for them. On the contrary, for Phongphera Phatpheraphong, who was born when the society 'seems' to be more tolerated and permissive to sexual minorities, coming out might not be an issue for a 'new wave' *gay* activist like himself.

An interesting observation to be made is that all interviewees are familiar with, understand, and use the English term, "coming out". Three of the interviewees – Nathi, Dr. Seri, and Vitaya – have also been directly influenced by the notions and practices of Western coming out as a result of having spent some time in America.

Another important point is made by Naruphon Duangviset who does not think that the Western practice and notion of coming out exists in Thailand. Having shown earlier that the practice of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities does exist in Thai society, it is intriguing to further strengthen the body of knowledge concerning Thai notions and practices of expressing and maintaining one's genders and sexualities by comparison to the West to discover the unique characteristics of the Thai "coming out" and "staying out".

### **Section Three: A Comparison of the Practices of Expressing and Maintaining Non-Normative Genders and Sexualities in Thai and Western Societies (with the emphasis on the British-American contexts<sup>14</sup>)**

As will be discussed further below, the practices of expressing and maintaining one's non-normative gender and/or sexuality in Thailand has not been as widely, actively or systematically discussed as it has been in the West. One possible reason is that public space in Thailand allowing the discussion of genders and sexualities, be it to hetero- or homosexualities, is limited. Another reason is that the issues of human rights and individualism in Thailand are not as strong or active as they are in the West. Expressing and maintaining one's gender and/or sexuality which can be treated as an act of human rights and individual choice in the West, has not therefore been obvious in Thailand.

On the contrary, the practice and notion of coming out in the West has been intensively and systematically defined and discussed. In the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Dynes 1990), coming out is defined as "the cultural and psychological process by which persons relate to a particular model of homosexuality by internalizing a sense of identity as homosexual or lesbian" (ibid.: 251). Similarly, Gary J. McDonald (1982), in his article *Individual Differences in the Coming Out Process for Gay Men: Implications for Theoretical Models*, explains the process of coming out as:

a developmental process through which gay persons become aware of their affectional and sexual preferences and choose to integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives, coming out involves adopting a non-traditional identity, restructuring one's self-concept, reorganizing one's relations with others and with society...all of which reflects a complex series of cognitive and affective transformations as well as changes in behaviours (ibid.: 47-48).

There are also a good number of studies providing models for coming out or developmental stages of homosexual identities. Among those models, the Cass Identity Model by Vivienne Cass (1979) is one of the very first foundational theories that clearly explores and explains the steps occurring in the development of gender and sexual

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<sup>14</sup> This study emphasises the British and American contexts because of the cultural weight they carry in Thai society (i.e. Britain from the colonial era and American after World War II due to the financial and military support in the fight against Communism in Thailand).

identities by sexual minority people. Cass divides her coming out process into six steps, which are;

### **Stage 1: Identity Confusion**

At this stage, one may feel different from others, leading to a growing sense of personal alienation. The person begins to be self-conscious about his or her homosexuality. S/he does not usually disclose this inner turmoil to others.

### **Stage 2: Identity Comparison**

The person partially accepts their same-sex desire and sexual orientation. However, s/he will try to find an excuse to deny her/his gender and sexual identity. For example, one might say: "I may be a homosexual, but then again I may be bisexual," or "maybe this is just a phase." S/he will develop a sense of not belonging anywhere and think that s/he is the only one in the world like this.

### **Stage 3: Identity Tolerance**

At this stage, one begins to contact other people who also have same-sex desire in order to combat feelings of isolation and alienation. Here, one merely tolerates, but does not fully accept one's gender and sexual identity. The feeling of not belonging to heteronormativity becomes stronger. It is important for people at this stage to have positive contacts with other same-sex desired people who can lead them to a more favourable sense of self and a greater commitment to a homosexual self-awareness.

### **Stage 4: Identity Acceptance**

The person will continue and increase contact with other homosexual people at this stage. S/he will more positively accept rather than merely tolerate same-sex sexual identities. The earlier questions in stage one and two will be answered. Consequently, s/he will start to selectively reveal her/his sexual orientations to some significant heterosexuals.

### **Stage 5: Identity Pride**

The individual develops enormously her/his awareness of same-sex desire and behaviours and of society's rejection of these sexual orientations, leading the person to

feel angry with the heteronormative system and devalue many of their institutions (e.g. marriage, gender-role structures, etc.). However, the person continuously discloses her or his gender and sexual identity to more people, participates in and consumes products from same-sex subcultures (e.g. literature, art, films, and other forms of culture). The combination of anger and pride can also energize some people at this stage to become homosexual activists.

### **Stage 6: Identity Synthesis**

The intense anger at heterosexuals will be softened at this stage as the person realises that some heterosexuals are supportive and can be trusted. However, s/he will no longer be angry at those who are not supportive. The person's sexual desire will be integrated with all other aspects of self. Sexual orientation will become only one aspect of self that cannot capture one's entire identity.

According to the above, it is evident that whilst the issue of coming out has been taken seriously in Western societies, it has been studied to a much lesser degree in Thailand. Through the exploration of the historical background and the current discussion of both the notion and the practice of coming out in the West, conclusions can be drawn as to why the discussion has received more attention in Western academia than it has in Thailand.

### **Historical background and Current Discussions: Coming out in the British-American contexts**

In Western societies, there have been much more obvious sanctions against sexual minorities mediated by religion, law, politics, medicine, education and family institutions. As the above literature review has shown such sanctions against sexual minorities are far less apparent Thailand. When power is exercised to oppress same-sex subcultures, there is a resistance that tries to liberate same-sex subcultures from oppression. In both the British and American contexts where sexual minorities have been oppressed, there has been a long history of sexual minority liberation that plays a significant role in developing the practices and notions of coming out.

In the United States, the obvious and significant influence on the notions and practice of coming out are the events collectively called Stonewall which occurred in

New York City in June, 1969. This homosexual movement was primarily a small riot protesting against police harassment of the patrons of a gay bar. However, it directly led to a much bigger gay liberation movement fighting for homosexual equal rights as thousands of gay people across the country came out and joined what one of the most significant movements in Western gay history (Hunt 1992, 220). Another significant event happened in Washington DC, on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1987, when almost half a million lesbian, gay, transgender, transsexual and bisexual people and heterosexuals who supported homosexual rights convened and marched in the city to ask for equal rights and opened up the AIDS issue in mainstream society. One year after that event, Dr. Robert Eichberg and Jean O'Leary held an event to celebrate the Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Subsequently, October 11<sup>th</sup> has been celebrated annually as "National Coming Out Day" in the United States<sup>15</sup>. The primary objective of the event is to carry on the legacy of previous LGBT people who try to fight for their equal rights and to be able to live their lives in a spirit of openness, honesty and visibility. Other notable gay rights organisations include the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in New York City and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA).

In the British context, there has also been a long history of oppression of sexual minorities, especially by the law. Between 1885 and 1967, all same-sex behaviours, whether committed in public or private domains, were illegal. This formal legal position can be seen from a series of dramatic court cases, countless minor convictions, and the ever-present threat of blackmail and public disgrace that helped perpetuate an oppressively hostile public attitude (Weeks 1990, 11). However, the early 1970s is the turning point in the evolution of homosexual consciousness. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was the most dynamic of movements fighting for same-sex desired people's rights as citizens (ibid.: 184). The first meeting of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) took place on Oct 13<sup>th</sup>, 1970 in a basement classroom at the London School of Economics, held by Aubrey Walters and Bob Mellors, who had been influenced by the development of the GLF in the USA. The first ever public gay protest took place on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1970, when approximately 80 GLF members gathered for a torchlight demonstration on Highbury Fields, Islington. In August 1971, the GLF organised another public event when members marched along Islington's Upper Street back to Highbury Fields.

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<sup>15</sup> *Human Rights Campaign Announces National Coming Out Day 2007 – „Talk About It‘. Human Rights Campaign. 22 Aug. 2007. Web. Accessed 20 Dec. 2010.*

Although it was an exclusively GLF event, it led to the first real Pride in London in 1972<sup>16</sup>.

In the West, especially in the British and American contexts, the post-Stonewall activists, LGBT activists and liberationists have continuously supported the practice of coming out as they think that homosexual visibility in the heterosexual matrix is an important key to unlocking sexual minority people from homophobia and discrimination leading to the result of liberation for sexual minorities that Altman (1972: 83) explains as “freedom from the surplus repression that prevent us [homosexuals] from recognizing our essential androgynous and erotic natures”.

There are also some studies providing the conceptual problems in the acts of coming out which are derived from different geographical and cultural factors. In the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Dynes 1990), it states that in the industrialized countries of Northern Europe and North America, the practice of coming out begins when one has a substantial erotic interest in the same gender and it usually ends with one’s identification as a homosexual or lesbian. In much of the rest of the world, the coming out process is related more to those who are sexually receptive males than to active-insertive ones. This may lead to the result that the receptive ones identify themselves as quasi-female. It remains unclear, however, as to the extent that a corresponding process exists for females. In other cultures and in different periods of time, the question of coming out may not be raised where pederasty has been popular in particular areas (ibid.: 251-252).

Since the notion and practice of coming out is not simple and need to be culturally and socially nuanced, it is not every Western scholar that supports the practice of coming out. Some queer theorists, especially Judith Butler, are influential scholars who question the act of coming out. Butler’s primary concern about the practice of coming out is that it may put the subject into the position of being named and known. She proposes interesting questions about the coming out process, for instance,

Is the “subject” who is “out” free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once “outness” is claimed? What or

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<sup>16</sup> *Identity Statement*. Gay Liberation Front., Oct. 2000. Web. Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

who is it that is “out,” made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as lesbian?...Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure (Butler 1991: 15).

As she believes that genders and sexualities are performative and gender is not something that one is, it is something one does – a „doing’ rather than a „being’” (Butler 1990: 8-10), it is clear why she does not support the idea of coming out which implies a becoming, a construction of the self as people holding same-sex desire.

Steven Seidman also feels uncomfortable with the act of coming out and points out that:

To the extent that the positive effects of coming out have turned on announcing a respectable homosexuality, this politics has the negative effect of pathologizing all those desires, behaviours, and lives that deviate from normalized homosexuality – or heterosexuality. Such a relentless politics of identity – homos are really no different from straights’ – reinforces an equally relentless normalization of conventional sexual and gender codes. In other words, coming out is effective only if the homemade public is announced to be like the straight in every way but sexual orientation. Thus all the ways that homos may be queer – for example, those who like to cross-dress, role play, have multiple sex partners, or engage in commercial, rough, or public sex – are pathologized by the strategy of coming out as a respectable homo (1994: 170).

What disturbs Seidman seems to be the issue that the act of coming out itself may become a “respectable homo” weapon that homosexuals use to discriminate against other homosexuals who are not willing to adhere to the normalised sexual and gender codes which the demand for respectability entails.

According to Butler and Seidman, it is also undeniable that the coming out process implies a declaration and identification of the self as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual or whatsoever which may destroy the diversity of genders and sexualities and individual rights. Determination that one will no longer hide within the fiction of heteronormativity, nevertheless, becomes what Walters (2005: 20-21) called the merging with a profound sense of „revealing’ a „truth’ that one has previously hidden.

According to the above, it is evident that there have been strong sanctions against homosexuality in Western societies. Reaction against these sanctions led to the creation of liberation movements. The practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in the West have become inextricably linked with issues of politics, human rights, and individualism.

Looking back at some of the interviews in section two, Naruphon's argument that the lack of a gay liberation movement in Thailand means that the notion and practice of coming out does not exist in Thailand seems to carry some weight. Nevertheless, some other interviews, especially by those who have been associated with Western societies, such as Nathi, Vitaya and Dr Seri, the practice of coming out, similarly to that in the West, has also been regarded by these interviewees as the rights of an individual to decide whether to express or conceal one's non-normative genders/sexualities. The interview with Phongphera also reveals that Western notions of sexual fluidity have also been adopted in Thai society, leading him to caution against the restrictions implied in overtly expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities.

In both contexts, nonetheless, the notions of genders and sexualities have been inseparably involved with the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities. To further explore the issue of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in Thailand, it is thus also important to discuss the discourses of genders and sexualities produced in both the Thai and Western contexts.

### **Discourses of Genders and Sexualities in the Thai and Western Contexts**

The terms genders and sexualities become important keys to understanding why expressing one's gender and sexual identity can be so problematic. It is worth looking back at precisely what the terms genders and sexualities mean and how they have an effect on expressing one's sexual orientation in both Thai and Western societies.

### **Discourses of Genders and/or Sexualities in Thailand**

It needs to be borne in mind that gender and sexual issues have not been seriously discussed in Thai society until recently. When being discussed straightforwardly, sexual matters become socially inappropriate and overly solemn or intellectual. Sexual

education was introduced into Thai academia and placed on the curriculum in schools in 1978. However, it has been limited to discussions of reproductive issues and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially after the spread of HIV infection (Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep, Eli Coleman and Pacharin Dumronggittigule<sup>17</sup>). There are a number of Thai researchers and experts who have tried to put more comprehensive curricula in the educational system, with greater coverage of psychosocial issues such as the discourse on gender, homophobia, and sexual commercialism. They have suggested that sex education must be distinguished from the highly visible AIDS-prevention campaigns in order to avoid constricted scope and sex-negative attitudes.

In terms of the notions of gender and sexuality, as mentioned earlier, while Jackson(2004a: 208) notes that the notions of sex, gender and sexuality are not clearly separated as in the West, a number of Thai scholars, such as Kanchana Kaewthep (2004) and Amara Pongsapich (2005), have tried to articulate and contribute to new understandings of modern Thai genders and sexualities as evidenced by terms coined to convey and carry the different meanings of genders and sexualities as they function in the Western context which are *phet saphawa/phet sathana* and *phet withi*.

When Western notions of gender and sexuality have been brought into Thailand, these notions also seem to support the rights of sexual minorities as they try to provide more space to allow for the proliferation of gendered and sexual identities. This is evidenced by conferences and research have focused on issues of genders and sexualities beyond heteronormativity such as *Sexualities, Genders, and Right in Asia: 1st International Conference of Asian Queer Studies* (2005), *The Annual National Conference on Sexuality Studies* (2008) and *Journal of Sexuality Studies* (2010). Since Western notions of gender and sexuality have, to some extent, impacted on the respective notions within Thai society, it is also important to consider how gender and sexuality are understood within Western societies.

### **Discourses of Genders and Sexualities in the Western Sphere**

From a feminist perspective in Western society, the concept of gender refers to the social process of separating human beings and social behaviours into “sexed identities” or the division of male/masculine and female/feminine (Beasley 2005: 11). In other

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<sup>17</sup> “Sexual Knowledge and Education.” Thailand. Web. Accessed 15 July 2008.

words, it involves a distinction between socio-cultural meanings, namely masculinity and femininity; and biological meanings, namely male and female (see Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz 2000, Fausto-Sterling 2000, Humm 1995, and Pilcher and Whelehan 2004). Accordingly, while sex is treated as a biological fact that differentiates between male and female human beings, gender is treated as a social fact that differentiates between masculine and feminine roles, or men's and women's personalities (Connell 2002: 33).

While the two categories of masculinity and femininity are treated as distinct and opposed, they are also put into a hierarchy, namely patriarchy, in which one is typically cast as positive and the other negative (Beasley 2005: 11). Gender is the culturally variable elaboration of sex, as a hierarchical pair (where male is coded superior and female inferior) (Cranny-Francis 2003: 4). For example, the positive notion of the word „buddy’ is derived from brother, while the negative word „sissy’ is from sister (ibid.: 2). Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” in *The Second Sex* (1972: 295) also makes clear that gender is constructed and its differences are placed in hierarchical opposition, where masculine is in the priority position and feminine is the inferior one.

However, there are also a number of scholars who argue that sex and gender cannot totally be separated. Joan Scott is one who agrees with this school of thought as he declares clearly that the sexed body and gender cannot be separated by redefining gender:

[G]ender is the social organization of sexual differences. But this does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men; rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. These meanings vary across cultures, social groups, and time since nothing about the body, including women's reproductive organs, determines univocally how social divisions will be shaped. We cannot see sexual difference except as a function of our knowledge about the body and that knowledge is not “pure,” cannot be isolated from its implication in a broad range of discursive contexts. Sexual difference is not, then, the originary cause from which social organization ultimately can be derived. It is instead a variable social organization that itself must be explained (1988: 2).

Butler is another influential scholar whose theorisation about gender is arguably seen as the most radical of all. Her conception of gender, taking as she does a Foucauldian model, asserts that all identity categories „are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin’ (Butler 1990: ix). She argues further that „the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders’. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males; or that “woman” will interpret only female bodies (ibid.: 6).

According to these ideas, it can be concluded that the term gender has been defined in at least two different ways depending on how the relationship between sex and gender is interpreted. It is apparent that no matter which way the term gender is defined, it is related merely to the binary system of masculinity and femininity, the basis of heterosexual society or what has been called “heteronormativity” or “compulsory heterosexuality” by Adrienne Rich; “the heterosexual matrix” by Judith Butler; and “the straight mind” by Monique Wittig (quoted in Creekmur and Doty 1995: 1). This binary system is also put into hierarchy or patriarchy in which masculinity is superior to femininity. Obviously, within mainstream understandings of genders and sexualities, there is not much space at all for sexual orientations beyond heteronormativity. Commonly, social conditioning enforces an acceptance of genders that are within the heteronormative matrix, but a rejection and marginalization of people who express any other kinds of gender identities as “Others”.

Inasmuch as there has been discussion of genders, sexuality is another term that has been hotly debated. In his *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Foucault (1990: 105) explains clearly that “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct”. Weeks (1986: 25) also shares the idea that biological factors have an effect on sexuality. However, he denies that biology could cause the patterns of sexual life. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis also examine why sexual desire does not conform to a biological instinct that drives human beings towards perpetuating the species by explaining that:

If one sets out with the commonly held view that defines sexuality as instinct, in the sense of a pre-determined behaviour typifying the species and having a relatively fixed object (partner of the opposite sex) and aim (union of the genital organs in coitus), it soon becomes apparent that this approach can only provide a very inadequate account of the facts that emerge as much from direct observation as from analysis (quoted in Bristow 1997: 8).

With all the (re-)defining of the terms genders and sexualities, the rigid notion of patriarchy seems to be dismantled as they help people to realize the new meanings of genders and sexualities. It brings a new understanding that provides equal rights to all people regardless of their gendered and sexual identities. As a result, not only “the second sex” or women benefit from these ideas, but also people who have other kinds of gendered and sexual identities. The idea that the proliferation of gendered and sexual identities is not deviant has thus been articulated. It helps weaken the prohibitions against homosexuality by religions, law, medicine, education, family and other institutions and expressing one’s sexual orientation is no longer an illness but a political right, that people are entitled to choose their own gender and sexual identities.

One recent significant theory articulating the most radical deconstruction of the sex, gender and sexuality distinctions is queer theory deriving from Foucault’s and Butler’s ideas. Not only does queer theory provide a flexible space to accept all expression of sexual identities (Jagose 1996: 97), it also supports the coming out processes since visibility is one important strategy to acquire more space for sexual diversity. Furthermore, its approaches that follow the Foucauldian thoughts of the history of sexuality and bio-power upon the proliferation of sexual identities in the West help provide new sexualised understandings of self-hood and the basis for new forms of culture and social organisations (Jackson 1998: 2).

After reviewing the definitions of genders and sexualities in the Western sphere, it is clear that the notions of genders and sexualities are more or less constructed from the understandings and beliefs that are based on biological facts or the sexed body. Consequently, the gender system in Western societies is divided into two categories, which are masculinity and femininity. When there is no space in the system to accommodate any other gender/sexual identities, it is apparent why the processes of

coming out and staying out of the closet in the West have been more problematic and taken more seriously than they have been in Thai society.

Unlike Western societies, as discussed before, the categories of *phet* (sex/gender) had been divided into three which are male, female, and *kathoey*. It therefore appears that Thai society has already acknowledged and given some space for sexual minorities to express and maintain their non-heteronormative genders/sexualities in the public domain. Nevertheless, the review of literature from different periods of Thai history has demonstrated that it is not without problem for sexual minorities to express and maintain their non-normative genders/sexualities in the mainstream Thai sphere. This difficulty has also been reflected in mainstream Thai cinema which will be used as the primary source to explore the practices of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and/or sexualities and the consequences of these practices that affect the lives of sexual minority characters in the film contexts.

## Chapter Two

### Theoretical Framework

“That [colonialism]’s not relevant to us. We Thai have never been anyone’s colony”

(Nopphorn 2004 quoted in Jackson 2010, 38)

#### Introduction

Nopphorn Prachakul (2004) notes that the above statement repeats the most common initial reactions among Thai people when talking about colonialism (*ananikhom*) (cited in Jackson 2010: 38). This notion is a powerful instrument that strengthens Thai nationalist ideology deriving from the fact that the country has never been formally colonised by any Western nation, marking it as distinct from the other countries of Southeast Asia. In terms of academia, the dominant nationalist discourses of the country’s uniqueness as the only “non-colony” also causes a strong resistance to Western critical theories (*thritsadi tawan-tok*) and contributes to the theoretical isolation of Thai studies (Harrison and Jackson 2010: 4-7).

Nevertheless, there has been an increasing number of Thai scholars who have tried to employ Western critical theories in their research on Thailand. Yet, some of them are considered, nonetheless, particularly by nativists, such as Chetana Nagavajara, as having “set up theories of Western provenance as a kind of holy scripture” (quoted in Jackson 2010: 47). There is thus a notable tension in Thai academia between those engaged in theory-resistant traditional Thai studies and those Thai scholars whose analysis is driven by so called “Western” theories. The aim of this chapter is to clarify and explain how Western critical theories, particularly postcolonial theory, being used as a theoretical framework in my research, is applicable to read the cinematic depictions of same-sex subcultures in Thailand.

Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson (2010) provide an interesting solution to this conflict and ambiguity by treading a middle path, between these two domains – drawing on a key principle from Buddhist thought when they attempt to interweave Thai studies with Western critical theories. Jackson (2010) suggests that when trying to apply

Western critical theory to Thai studies, one needs to be mindful not to forget or ignore Thailand's specificity which might lead to over-generalisation. According to Jackson, it is impossible to:

redress the lack of theory in Thai studies by developing "local theory" in glorious isolation from the generalizations that have already been made on the basis of other international comparisons. Rather, the task is to meld the Thai empirical experience within those comparisons and critically engage the theory built upon them from a Thai perspective (ibid.: 47-8).

Harrison (2010) also highlights the necessity in applying theory (*thritsadi*) to Thai studies that "a theoretical approach is essential to the work of Thai studies to assure its capacity for contributing to broader comparative debates" (ibid.: 7). She notes that critical theory is another approach that will "open up the possibility of relocating Thai studies in a wider intellectual landscape, allowing for the inclusion of the Thai experience in comparative analysis of, for instance, literatures and cultural studies" (ibid.: 7).

With precise reference to postcolonial theory, Jackson (ibid.: 38-39) notes that while Craig Reynolds (2002), Thongchai Winichakul (2000), and Michael Herzfeld (2002) argues that the "colonised" versus "coloniser" model that underpins postcolonial studies does not fully capture the complexity of the Siamese/Thai situation, one set of theories, namely, postcolonial studies, developed to understand former colonies, also helps in understanding a society that was not formally colonised.

Similarly, I also find that the "colonised" versus "coloniser" model discussed in postcolonial studies provides a wider intellectual perspective that illuminates the study of the "mainstream heteronormative" versus the "sexual minority" model in Thailand.

### **Postcolonial Theory and Thai Same-sex Subcultures**

In their text on *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 136) state that "nothing can bring back the hygienic shields of colonial boundaries. The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion". This statement is given credence by the

various theoretical intersections between postcolonial studies and other disciplines, such as translation, postmodernism, feminism, and queer theory.

The considerable discussion of how to spell postcolonial, whether with a hyphen or without, also shows that postcolonial analysis is more complex than to merely involve the binary model of “colonizer” and “colonized” or the particular time during or after the colonial era. According to Susan Hayward (2006) one way to distinguish the usage is that the spelling “post-colonial” refers “to the historical concept of the post-colonial state”. Thus, it refers to “the period after official decolonization”. By way of contrast “postcolonial” refers to “varying practices that in some way are influenced by or relate to the post-colonial moment”. Therefore, it can refer “to theory, literature, cultural practice in general, to ways of reading these different cultural practices” (ibid.: 292-4).

In his *Post-Colonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, John Hawley (2001: 2) defines postcolonial in a similar way. He suggests that any definition of postcolonialism that focuses only on Eurocentric historiography may miss out the role of other countries, such as America and other powers in the world with major (and often imbricating) spheres of cultural and economic influence that continue the patterns of colonization established in earlier centuries by European powers.

The relationship between Thailand and America since World War II firmly evidences patterns similar to European colonization in the way that American culture and economic power has also had an obvious and strong influence on Thai society.

In terms of genders and sexualities in Thailand, it is also impossible to say that Western imperial and colonial powers have not had any impact on notions, beliefs, and behaviours related to genders and sexualities in Thailand. In order to remould the country on the model of civilisation and to respond to criticism from Western accounts of the barbarism of Siamese genders and sexualities, Siamese political elites paid enormous attention to the transformation of certain notions and practices linked to genders and sexualities. Heterosexual relations were promoted and represented as civilised. Thai people at that time (after 1940s) were required to fully clothe themselves in modern (Western) style. Male and female costume and appearance were also

distinguished to overcome Western criticism that it was difficult to differentiate between men and women in Thailand before 1940s (Jackson 2003).

Western understandings of these changes are most clearly represented in Margaret Landon's novel *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944) and by several film versions of that text: *Anna and the King of Siam* (dir. John Cromwell, 1946); *The King and I* (dir. Walter Lang, 1956); the animated film *The King and I* (dir. Richard Rich, 1999); and *Anna and the King* (dir. Andy Tennant 1999). Of particular relevance to this study on same-sex subcultures, it is noteworthy that sodomy and same-sex activities were also made punishable offences, in order to conform to European norms of civilisation. It should be noted however that there is no evidence for anyone ever having been prosecuted under these laws (Jackson 2003).

According to this brief historical background, it is clear that the patterns of imperial and colonial powers have had a significant impact on the notions of genders and sexualities in Thai society, forging an important link between postcolonial studies and Thai same-sex subcultures. Below, I employ four key concepts in postcolonial theory, namely representation, hegemony, ambivalence, and mimicry to read the on-screen portrayals of sexual minorities in Thailand. Each concept is discussed and explained in greater detail in terms of how it is applicable and useful for reading same-sex subcultures in Thailand.

### **Representations and Same-Sex Subcultures**

“What does need to be questioned, however, is the *mode of representation of otherness*.”

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994: 97)

The reasons for the intentional foci on representations in this research have already been discussed in the introduction. In this chapter, I further explore how the concept of representation, as understood through the lens of a postcolonial theory will illuminate the study of the portrayal of same-sex subcultures in Thailand.

In the opening of *Orientalism*, Said (1995: xii) writes his epigraph quoting from Marx's *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” Said's main discussion of representations seeks to question how the Other, namely, the Orient was represented by the imperial and colonial powers.

Said's study of *Orientalism* establishes how representations came to be controlled by the dominant power and longevity of colonial countries, in which "acceptable" representations are encouraged, but deviant (or different) ones are not (cited in Childs and Williams 1997: 104).

When films with a homosexual focus are directed by heterosexual film directors, it is therefore intriguing to explore how the portrayal of sexual minorities is represented through the lens of the dominant heteronormative power. To discuss this particular issue, Gramsci's notion of hegemony also provides a framework that helps develop the understanding of how the dominant heteronormative culture has an effect on the representations of same-sex subcultures in Thailand.

### **Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony as Hegemonic Masculinity, Hegemonic Femininity and Hegemonic Heteronormativity**

Hegemony is a key concept in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci saw hegemony as the „spontaneous consent" given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group. This consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci 1971: 12). In other words, hegemony is about maintaining the power of the dominant culture and leading the subordinate one without the use of direct threat or physical force. What becomes an essential part of the process for the ruling class to establish and maintain its domination is its ability to impose and formulate ideology that defines morality; norms and values that persuade the greater part of the population or the subordinate groups to follow these ideologies. The ruling class may impose and articulate these "natural", "moral", and "normal" ideals through the media, and other social institutions such as education and religion (Donaldson 1993: 643-7). Hegemony can thus be used as an apparatus that creates a new ideological terrain that determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge (Forgacs 1999: 192).

Feminist thinkers and gender theorists such as Mike Donaldson (1993), Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005), Melissa J. Hodges and Michelle J. Budig (2010), and Steve Garlick (2010), employ the concept of hegemony to explain the existence of male dominance over men themselves as well as women, which is

regarded as “hegemonic masculinity”. Like hegemony, hegemonic masculinity is a tool that creates the ideological terrain and decides a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge that men are supposed to aim for and women are supposed to follow.

The ideological term, “gentleman” representing the hegemonic masculinity, also appears in Thai society through the Thai term “*suphap-burut*”. Chusak Pattarakulvanit (2002) interestingly discusses the notion of “*suphap-burut*” in Thai society through a group of Thai writers chiefly organized by Kulap Saipradit in 1929 who called themselves, “*Khana suphap-burut*” (The Gentlemen). Chusak notes that the dress code of the group of the writers is an important signifier that (re-) establishes the meaning of *suphap-burut* in Thai society. Sor. Phlainoi described the dress code of *Khana suphap-burut* as well as *suphap-burut*/gentlemen in general in Thailand at that time that the costume looked very professional and stylish [1926] as follows;

คุณเจริญได้จัดการเบิกเงินไปตัดเสื้อนอกกระดุมห้าเม็ดให้ยาขอบตัวหนึ่ง ราคา 6 – 7 บาท เพื่อจะได้มีท่าทางเป็นหลักเป็นฐานขึ้นในฐานะที่เป็นผู้สื่อข่าวของหนังสือพิมพ์ธงไทย...สุภาพบุรุษที่แต่งตัวโก้ที่สุด ต้องใส่กระดุมห้าเม็ดแบบนี้ แล้วยังต้องมีกางเกงแพรสี รีดอย่างเรียบ ที่เท้าต้องสวมคอร์ตชูชด์มันที่ศีรษะอาจสวมหมวกหรือไม่ก็ได้

(quoted in Chusak Pattarakulvanit 2002: 77).

[trans.] Mr. Chawiang has asked for some money to make a five buttons “Western dress” for Mr. Yakhop costing 6 – 7 baht. Since Yakhop is a reporter at *Thong Thai News*, he should look more professional... The most stylish gentleman has to wear a shirt with five particular buttons with a pair of plain-coloured long trousers. He has to wear court shoes. He may or may not wear a hat.

Chusak (2002: 77) further comments that the dress code (called *chut ratcha-pataen* in Thai) which *Khana suphap-burut* wore to take a group picture also sends out the social status implication of the writers. The uniform was designed with a mixture of Thai traditional costume and Western one to be considered “civilised” and “modernised” in the reign of King Rama V. The dress was originally from the royal palace and therefore worn mostly by elites. Nevertheless, it was not forbidden for people from the other social class backgrounds to wear it. Bourgeoisies who were successful with their business were also able to afford to make *chut ratcha-pataen* and it became popular among them.

This uniform, according to Chusak (ibid.: 78), becomes “free-floating signifier” since it is ambiguous whether it represents elite class, wealth, or modernity. *Khana suphap-burut* “assimilated (*phasom phasan*), negotiated (*tor-rorng*) and stole (*yaengyeu yip chuay*) (ibid.: 77-8)” this ambiguous meaning of the uniform to establish the new meaning of the dress code that it was for professional freelance writers in order to make this profession more credible.

As a result, the notion of *suphap-burut* was defined and discussed in Thai society. Kulap Saipradit noted and described *suphap-burut* as follows:

ถ้าจะว่า ,สุภาพบุรุษ’ มีรูปร่างหน้าตาใกล้เคียงไปกับ ,ผู้ดี’ ดูจะไม่ค่อยมีข้อกีดกัน แต่จะต้องให้เป็น ,ผู้ดี’ ซึ่งคนสมัยนี้เข้าใจกัน ถ้าเป็น ,ผู้ดีเดิรตรอก’ อย่างสมัย 10 ปีก่อนลงไป สุภาพบุรุษของเราก็คงไม่มีโอกาสใกล้เคียงไปได้อีกตามเคย...หัวใจของ ,ความเป็นสุภาพบุรุษ’ อยู่ที่การเสียสละ เพราะการเสียสละเป็นบ่อเกิดของคุณความดีร้อยแปดอย่าง...ผู้ใดเกิดมาเป็นสุภาพบุรุษ ผู้นั้นเกิดมาสำหรับคนอื่น (quoted in Chusak (ibid.:79))

[trans.] If one says ,*suphap-burut*’ looks like ,gentlemen/elites’, I don’t think I have a problem with that. But, ,gentlemen’ has to be the term used and understood by people in the present time. If it means only for ,elites’ like 10 years ago, our *suphap-burut* do not have any chance to get any closer to that meaning...the heart of ,being a gentleman’ is to sacrifice since it is the origin of many other good deeds...people born as a gentleman, born for others.

According to Kulap’s discussion, Chusak believes that the reason Kulap named his group of freelance writers *Khana suphap-burut* was because he wanted to go against the rigid social class structure of elites in Thai society and to re-establish the term *suphap-burut* according to bourgeoisie’s perspective that people should be valued for their ability not their origin (Chusak 2002: 79). While altering the rigid social structure, the re-establishment of the notion of *suphap-burut* or gentlemen also sends out the codes of hegemonic masculinity or how a *suphap-burut* or gentleman should behave in Thai society. This notion of hegemonic masculinity is particularly illuminating to further focus on same-sex subcultures in Thailand.

In order to empower and strengthen the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Donaldson (1993: 647-8) notes that heterosexuality and homophobia seem to be the bedrocks of hegemonic masculinity in that they help demarcate masculine characteristics. Same-sex subcultures, especially male to female transvestites, transgenders and transsexuals, thus become counter-hegemonic as they are hostile to

and subvert the construction of male heterosexuality in that they are associated with effeminacy.

In Thai society, effeminate male homosexuals are also hostile to and subvert the construction of Thai male heterosexuality. Yet, it is interesting to observe that while they give up hegemonic masculinity, the fact that they follow the social spontaneous consent of how a Thai woman should behave highlights another aspect of hegemony in society which can be regarded here as “hegemonic femininity”.

*Kathoey*s illustrate well how hegemonic femininity plays a significant role in shaping the expression and maintenance of *kathoey* identity. Thai hegemonic femininity sends out the “spontaneous consent” that persuades *kathoey* to adapt, to adopt, and internalize for themselves female normative ideals. The notion of the “good” Thai women (*kunlasatri*) has not only been used to determine how Thai women should behave but also by *kathoey* who want to become women. The creation of the specific term, *sao praphet sorng* (the second type of women), specifically used to denote male to female transvestites and transsexuals, supports well the notion that Thai society considers real Thai women as a dominant group, the first (natural) type of woman, and *kathoey* as a subordinate (the second) one.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity and femininity thus has a huge effect on the act of expressing and maintaining non-normative gendered and/or sexual identities. Although the presence of sexual minorities may subvert heteronormative ideology and become a counter-hegemony, hegemonic masculinity and femininity manipulate sexual minorities into expressing and maintaining their non-normative gendered/sexual identities in limited ways permitted by the dominant cultures in order that they can be more widely tolerated by mainstream heteronormative society. While giving up one hegemonic thought, these sexual minorities conform to another one provided by the mainstream heteronormative society. This is therefore one of the possible reasons why homophobia is less obviously practiced and why Thai sexual minorities are more tolerated in Thai society than in some others.

The popularity of male to female transvestite night performances such as Alcazar Show, Tiffany's Show, Calypso<sup>1</sup> together with the national and international transsexual beauty pageants known as Miss Ladyboy and Miss Queen Universe in Thailand are vivid examples revealing that the more a *kathoey* looks and behaves like a woman, the more the dominant culture feels comfortable in tolerating these sexual minorities.

Representations of these particular gendered/sex identities being controlled by hegemonic masculinity and femininity are also evident in Thai films such as *Phleng sut-thai* [The Last Song] (dir. Pisaln Akkraserani, 1985 and 2006) *Phrang chomphu kathoey prajanban* [Saving Private Tootsie] (dir, Kittikorn Liasirikun, 2002) and *Beautiful Boxer* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003). The characterization in each film clearly portrays these hegemonic thoughts over gendered/sex identities which will be discussed in greater detail later on.

As mentioned earlier, mass media, which includes films, can become one of the modes that the dominant culture uses to impose and send out “natural” (*thamma-chat*), “moral” (*sinlatham*), and “normal” (*prakati*) ideologies. It is also interesting to further discuss when some of these films desperately try to portray an “ideally good image” (*phap-lak thi di tam udomkhati*) of sexual minority characters on screen, especially those who follow hegemonic masculinity and/or femininity. Do the films sincerely attempt to project the good image of sexual minorities or contain some hidden agendas trying to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and/or femininity on sexual minorities?

### **“Same-Sex Stereotype” as “Colonial Stereotype”: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse**

The notion of stereotype discussed in postcolonial theory further strengthens the notion of hegemonic heteronormativity in Thai society. Peter Childs and Patrick Williams (1997: 124) note that the colonial stereotype is a complex ambivalence according to Bhabha because, on the one hand, the colonised Other was represented as fixedly

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<sup>1</sup> Alcazar Show, Calypso and Tiffany's Show are male to female transvestite cabaret shows in Thailand. The first transvestite cabaret show in Thailand and perhaps in South East Asia is the Tiffany's show which been going strong for over 28 years.

unchangeable, known, and predictable. On the other hand, the Other was, at the same time, associated with another opposite set of stereotypes such as disorder, anarchy, and licence. Whilst colonial stereotype links or normalises that which is unfamiliar and disquieting (i.e. racial difference) with the familiar and accepted, it is still a fixation that vacillates between delight (in what appears either well-known and comforting or exotic) and fear or contempt (of what is either unknown or over-familiar) (ibid.: 125-9).

Bhabha's discussion of the construction of colonial stereotypes is applicable to illuminate our understanding of how certain gendered and sexual identities are recognized as different and rejected by the dominant heteronormative culture. The stereotyping of sexual minorities is a clear example of how heteronormative culture controls these gendered and sexual identities in Thailand.

Like the colonial stereotype, the same-sex stereotypes also link what is unfamiliar and disquieting (i.e. gendered/sexual differences) to what is familiar and accepted (i.e. same-sex stereotypes). The fixed same-sex stereotypes, especially of *kathoeyes*, in which they either have to be beautiful and able to pass as a woman or be funny, ridiculous and harmless, appear delightful to heteronormativity in the way that these elements are made to be familiar, comforting, exotic or even erotic. The popularity and the warm welcome of beautiful male to female transsexual celebrities such as Ma Onapha, Poy Thrichada, Film Thanyarat, and Emmy Ratchada (Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4) particularly in the entertainment industry and mainstream media in Thai society, provide solid evidence that Thai people generally feel comfortable about "seeing" sexual minorities when they follow/play along with these particular shades of the same-sex stereotypes.



Figure 2.1: Ma Onapha Khritsadi  
(Picture from  
<http://topicstock.pantip.com/chalermthai/topicstock/2007/09/A5784027/A5784027.html>  
Accessed 4 July 2011.)



Figure 2.2: Poy Trichada Phetcharat  
(Picture from MARS magazine, February, 2009)



Figure 2.3: Film Thanyarat Jiraphatphakon  
Miss international Queen 2007  
(Picture from  
<http://www.bloggang.com/viewdiary.php?id=fernja&month=11-2007&date=14&group=3&gblog=21>  
Accessed 4 July 2011.)



Figure 2.4: Emmy Ratchada Khutthamas  
(Picture from  
<http://www.manager.co.th/entertainment/viewnews.aspx?NewsID=9530000159826> Accessed 4 July 2011.)

In contrast, same-sex stereotypes can also prompt disgust and contempt in those aspects which are either unknown or over-familiar. For instance, while their gendered identity is somehow “tolerated”, same-sex sexual behaviours seem to be condemned, as is highlighted by negative attitudes towards anal intercourse, with derogatory terms such as *at tut* (literally meaning “attacking the anus” or sodomite in English) and *at thua dam* (literally meaning “attacking the black beans” which is a slang for anus) being used for what is considered to be an unnatural sexual activity.

Turning to cinematic representations, the popularity of “*kathoey* films (*nang kathoey*)” in Thailand provides further solid evidence of the notion of same-sex stereotypes. When films show the familiar *kathoey* stereotypes, as in *Satree lek I and II* [*The Iron Ladies I and II*] (dir, Yongyoot Thongkongtoon 2000 and 2003), *Wai boem...cheer kraheum loke* [*The Cheerleader Queens*] (dir. Poj Arnon, 2003), *Plon na ya* [*Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*] (dir. Poj Arnon, 2004), *Hor taew taek* [Haunted Sissy Dorm] (dir. Poj Arnon, 2007), they are popular and are welcomed by mainstream Thai audiences. By contrast, films that contain unfamiliar displays of same-sex behaviour such as masculine male homosexuality as in *Sat pralat* [*Tropical Malady*] (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004) and *Pheuan...ku rak meung wa* [*Bangkok Love Story*] (dir. Poj Arnon, 2007) were not accepted in the same way as those *kathoey* films on the mainstream Thai circuit. The acceptance or otherwise of *gay*-themed cinema is also linked to the rigid gender-centric notions of identity in Thailand that is accepting of gendered identities (i.e. masculine and feminine) but ignores or disavows the possible identities based on sexuality beyond heterosexuality.

Another repetitive same-sex stereotype derived from Thai Buddhist belief clearly supports how Bhabha’s colonial stereotype works to explain same-sex stereotypes in Thai society. Boonmi Maythangkool (1986), Mettanando Bhikkhu (2005), Peter A. Jackson (1993), and B.A. Robinson (2007) agree that sexual minorities are merely tolerated but not totally accepted in Thailand because of the belief in Thai Buddhism. Briefly, as one of the most important Buddhist thoughts is the belief in the law of *karma*, the cause of being a sexual minority in the present life is thus considered the result of moral wrong-doing in previous lives. Consequently, Thai Buddhist culture tends to feel sympathy for and to tolerate these gendered/sex identities.

The Buddhist discourse, utilising the law of *karma*, allows an explanation of the causes of being a sexual minority, becoming another efficiently fixed same-sex stereotype. This karmic law regarding sexual minorities provides the heteronormative system with a set of explanations of the cause of how one becomes a homosexual, dispelling the anxiety about gendered/sexual differences. It also differentiates heterosexual from homosexual people with that same-sex stereotype/belief marking them and their “sexual deviance” as distinctly “Other”. This Thai Buddhist same-sex stereotype/belief appears in almost every film referred to in this thesis and will be discussed in greater detail later on.

### **Mimicry: “not White/not Quite – not Women”**

The concept of mimicry in postcolonial discourse is another useful framework that is applicable to read Thai same-sex subculture. Mainly developing his idea from some works of Lacan (, *The Line and Light*, *Of the Gaze*), Fanon (*Black Skins, White Masks*) and Sartre’s existentialist theory, Bhabha (1994: 122-3) explains mimicry as:

The desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite* [...] Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers.

Accordingly, mimicry can be both a strategy that the colonized used to be accepted and approved by the colonizer (a strategy of authority/authenticity) and a weapon that the dominant culture used to oppress the colonial subject (a form of discriminatory power/knowledge). Mimicry can also become a menace as the “colonial stereotype” does. The only difference is that mimicry is produced by the colonized, not by the colonizer. In the particular gendered/sex identity of *kathoey* or *sao praphet sorng*, a transsexual in Thailand, it is interesting that this sexual minority repeats and represents the pattern of mimicry in postcolonial discourse. When Bhabha refers to the colonized who tried to become and behave like the colonizer as mimic men who can merely be the same but not quite or not “White”, *sao praphet sorng* or transsexuals in Thailand can be seen as “mimic women” who can merely be the same but not quite or not “women”. The

popularity among feminine male homosexuals in Thailand of having a sexual operation clearly indicates the desire for a reformed and revised *kathoey* who wants to become both physically and psychologically a woman to be more accepted by mainstream Thai culture.

A recent proposed bill on titles of respect prefixed to people's names in Thailand also supports how Thai transsexuals can only be “mimic women”, but not “legally real women”. The main purpose of the bill is to allow male to female transsexuals and vice versa to use the titles which are Miss and Mr. that match their new physical genders after the complete sexual operation. However, the bill was dismissed by the Thai government. One committee member of the National Legislative Assembly, Khunying Nuntaga Suprapatanun explains that:

การเสนอกฎหมายดังกล่าวไม่ได้คำนึงถึงขนบธรรมเนียมประเพณีที่ปฏิบัติกันมาช้านาน การออกกฎหมายดังกล่าวจะกระทบต่อกฎหมายอีกหลายฉบับ เช่น กฎหมายเกี่ยวกับทะเบียนบุคคล นอกจากนี้ยังอาจกระทบกับระเบียบข้อบังคับต่าง ๆ ในสังคม ซึ่งตนเห็นว่ารัฐบาลควรนำร่างดังกล่าวกลับไปพิจารณาอย่างรอบคอบ<sup>2</sup>

[trans.]The aims of the proposed bill do not consider the norms and traditions of Thai culture that have been cherished for a very long time. If the bill were to be passed, it could have a problematical effect on other laws and regulations in Thai society. The bill needs to be carefully reconsidered.

Another committee member, Amphon Jindawattana, M.D. shares the idea that if the bill were to be passed, it could help transsexual people to deceive their partners that they are real men or women and get legally married<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, from the viewpoint that follows the notion of colonial mimicry, it can be said that Thai society seems to have a strategy of superficially accepting transsexual people to some extent (such as their beauty or their ability to entertain) yet, nevertheless, transsexuals are treated as “inauthentic” women (or men).

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<sup>2</sup> *Senators protest the bill allowing transsexuals to change their titles according to their new gendered identities*. Department of Law, Rangsit University, Thailand. 2009. Web. Accessed 25 Oct. 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Senators protest the bill allowing transsexuals to change their titles according to their new gendered identities*. Department of Law, Rangsit University, Thailand. 2009. Web. Accessed 25 Oct. 2010.

The discussion on the notions of mimicry is applicable in *Phleng sut-thai* [The Last Song], *Phrang chomphu kathoey prajanban* [*Saving Private Tootsies*] and *Beautiful Boxer*. The notion of mimicry will be further employed when the research moves on to discuss each film.

In conclusion, following the above discussion, I have employed four applicable notions discussed in postcolonial theory to read same-sex subcultures which have strengthened my arguments by providing specific examples from Thai culture. This shows that it is possible to apply some Western critical theory in Thai studies. However, I believe that a key significant discussion is not the question of whether we should or should not employ Western theory in Thai studies. The main concern should be based upon reasonable and logical attempts that try to ascertain applicable Western theory to read Thai culture. The belief that Thailand has never been colonized, leading to a strong resistance to Western critical theory, is useful in a way as it reminds us not to unthinkingly follow Western theory. However, it is also disadvantageous if this rigid notion blocks opportunities when some Western theory can offer other interesting critical lenses by which to better understand Thai studies.

In the next chapter, I will begin to analyse and explore in depth the on-screen representations of expressing and maintaining non-normative gendered and sexual identities in mainstream Thai cinema based on the above literature review and theoretical framework.

## Chapter Three

### Bitter Queer Thai Cinema

#### Introduction

This chapter aims to explore these Thai films, within the tragedy genre, *The Last Song* (*Phleng sut-thai*) (dir. Pisaln Akkraseranee, versions 1985 and 2006) and *Bangkok Love Story* (*Pheuan...ku rak meung wa*) (dir. Poj Arnon, 2007). In order to build background knowledge, I also provide a brief overview of Thai cinema in general, followed by a more detailed discussion of Thai cinema with a particular focus on sexual minorities.

#### Brief Overview on Thai cinema

Thai people were first introduced to motion pictures in 1897 by the French movie exhibitor (*khon re nang*), S. G. Machovsky. At that time, Thai people called this brand new form of entertainment “*nang farang*” (“foreign films”) and also “*nang yipun*” (“Japanese films”). The first Thai film was made by a Hollywood filmmaker, Henry A. McRae in 1923 called *Nangsao Siam* [*Miss Siam*]. Subsequently the Wasuwats established a film company called Bangkok Film Company and in 1927 made a film utilising Thai filmmakers called *Choke sorng chan* [Double Luck].

Thai movies were warmly welcomed by Thai audiences as a new form of entertainment and reached their “*yuk thorng*” [golden era] from 1957 onwards. However, they also faced difficulties due to technical development (i.e. changing from dubbing to sound on film systems), political situations (i.e. War World II and political revolutions), high competitions from foreign films such as Hollywood and Hong Kong films alongside the economic crisis (i.e. “*Tom Yam Goong Disease*”<sup>1</sup>) in Thailand. Consequently, from 1990 – 1996 Thai movies had faced their “*yuk meut*” [the dark age] which can be seen from the number of films that had been dramatically decreased to

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<sup>1</sup> “*Tom Yam Goong Disease*” is the 1997 Asian financial crisis that started in Thailand, subsequently spreading to other Asian countries. Since *Tom Yam Goong* is a well-known Thai food, the financial crisis – started in Thailand – was also referred to as “*Tom Yam Goong Disease*”.

about 30 films a year while before that period, it used to be more than hundreds of films a year.

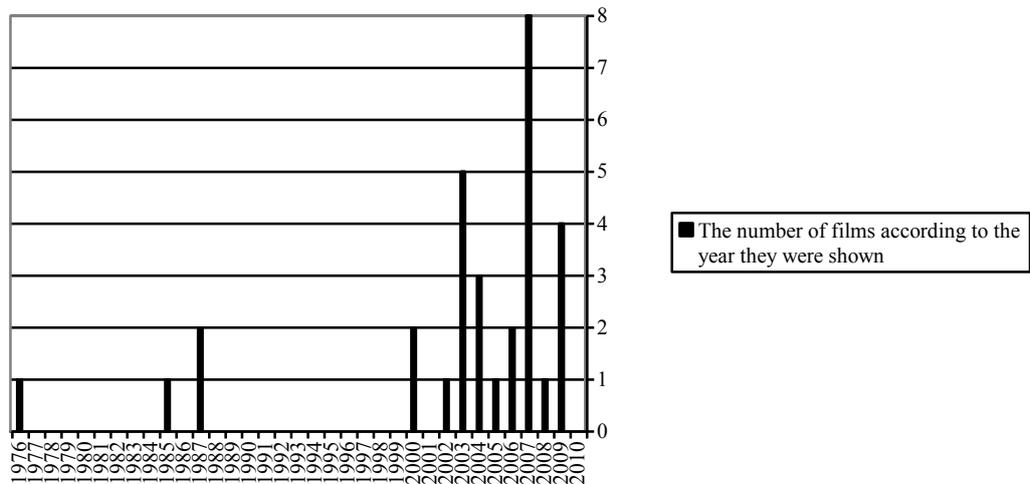
Thai movies experienced a “renaissance” in 1997. Both qualitative and quantitative scales of Thai films, regarded as “new Thai cinema” (Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2002 and 2006), May Adadol and MacDonald 2005, Sudarat 2007 and Farmer 2011), have increased and improved as evidenced by the number of films shown and their relative success worldwide such as *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), *Bang Rajan* (dir. Thanit Jitnukul, 2000), *The Iron Ladies* (dir. Yongyoot Thongkongthun, 2000), *Tears of the Black Tiger* (dir. Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000), *Jan Dara* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 2001) *Transistor Love Story* (dir. Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, 2001), *Ong Bak* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2003), *Beautiful Boxer* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003), *The Adventure of Iron Pussy* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai, 2003), *Tom Yam Goong* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2005), *Tropical Malady* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004), *Blissfully Yours* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2002), *Syndromes and a Century* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2006) and *Invisible Waves* (dir. Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, 2006).

Film making has become a film industry as a result of the profits it produces. There has been a good number of organisations established to directly work with and support Thai films and Thai film making, run by both the public and government sectors such as the National Film Archive of Thailand and Thai Film Foundation. After 2000, Thai “young blood” filmmakers have also tried to make films differently from those that Thai audiences predominantly view, such as art house movies and experimental movies in both long and short movie formats. However, the censorship laws in Thailand, following the regulations of the Film Act 1931 (written in 1930) is a powerful factor that controls and, as a result, limits the freedom of expressing some film makers’ ideas in their films. Although in 2008, the Film Act was rewritten for the first time in 70 years, Thai film makers see the new Film Act as a failure to grant more rights and freedom in producing films without being manipulated by the government. (see Khun Wichitmatra (Sanga Kanchanapan) 1998, Chamrermlak Thanawangnoi 2001, Pinyo Trisuriyadhamma 2003: 5-12, Dome Sukwong 2004, Sutthakorn Sunthithawat 2004, Dome Sukwong and Sawasdi Suwannapak 2001, Harrison 2005: 321-338, Boonrak Boonyaketmala 1992: 62-97, Marang Pisat 2008).

## Thai Cinema and Sexual Minorities

Sexual minorities, especially *kathoey*, have appeared in Thai cinema for more than three decades. From 1976 to 2010, the number of Thai films focusing on the issues of sexual minorities is at least 31 films (Diagram 3.1).

**Diagram 3.1: Thai Films with a Sexual Minority Focus (1976 - 2010)**



The diagram shows that from 1976 to 2001, there were not many Thai films with a homosexual focus had been made. However, after the year 2000, films with a homosexual focus have come out every single year to 2008. In the year 2007, seven films were released. Of these 31 films, the range of the themes of the films varies from drama, comedy, art house, and tragedy (Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1: Thai Films with a Focus on Sexual Minorities**

Years	Titles	Genres
1976	1. <i>Games</i> (Dir. Phatrawadi Michuthon)	Tragedy
1985	1. <i>Phleng sut-thai</i> [ <i>The Last Song</i> ] (Dir. Pisaln Akkraseranee)	Tragedy
1987	1. <i>Chan phu-chai na ya</i> [I am a Sissy Man] (Dir. Phanthewanop Thewakun)	Drama (Comedy)
	2. <i>Rak thoraman</i> [Tortured Love] (Dir. Pisaln Akkraseranee)	Drama (Tragedy)
2000	1. <i>Go-hok, plin plon, kalon, torlae</i> [ <i>Go-Six</i> ] (Dir. Poj Arnon)	Drama (Tragedy)
	2. <i>Satree Lek</i> [ <i>The Iron Ladies</i> ] (Dir. Yongyoot Thongkongthun)	Comedy-Drama
2002	1. <i>Phrang chomphu kathoey prajanban</i> [ <i>Saving Private Tootsie</i> ] (Dir. Kittikorn Lewsirikul)	Comedy-Drama
2003	1. <i>Beautiful Boxer</i> (Dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham)	Drama
	2. <i>Wai beum! Chia kraheum loke</i> [ <i>The Cheerleader Queens</i> ] (Dir. Poj Arnon)	Comedy-Drama
	3. <i>Kheun rai ngao</i> [ <i>One Night Husband</i> ] (Dir. Pimpaka Tovira)	Drama
	4. <i>Sayiw</i> [ <i>Sensation</i> ] (Dir. Keatr Song-sanan and Khong-dej Jaturunt-rusmee)	Drama (Comedy)
	5. <i>Satree Lek 2</i> [ <i>The Iron Ladies 2</i> ] (Dir. Yongyooth Thongkongthun)	Comedy-Drama
2004	1. <i>Plon na ya</i> [ <i>Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok</i> ] (Dir. Poj Arnon)	Comedy-Drama
	2. <i>Sat pralat</i> [ <i>Tropical Malady</i> *] (Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul)	Art House
	3. <i>Hua-jai thoranong</i> [ <i>The Adventure of Iron Pussy</i> *] (Dir. Michael Shaowanasai and Apichatpong Weerasethakul)	Art House
2005	1. <i>Rainbow Boys: The Movie</i> * (also known as <i>Right By Me</i> ) (Dir. Thanyatorn Siwanukrow)	Drama (Coming out of age)

2006	1. <i>Kaeng chani kap i aep</i> [ <i>Metrosexual</i> ] (Dir. Yongyoot Thongkongthun)	Comedy-Drama
	2. <i>Phleng sut-thai</i> [ <i>The Last Song</i> ] (new version) (Dir. Pisaln Akkraseranee)	Tragedy
2007	1. <i>Koi thoe gay</i> [ <i>Ghost Station</i> ] (Dir. Yuthlert Sippapak)	Comedy-horror
	2. <i>Khor hai rak jong jaroen</i> [ <i>Me and Myself</i> ] (Dir. Phongphat Wachirabunjong)	Drama
	3. <i>Khu rat</i> [ <i>Odd Couple</i> ] (Dir. Nopparat Puttarattamamane)	Comedy-Action
	4. <i>Tut su fut</i> [ <i>Kung Fu Tootsie</i> ] (Dir. Jaturong Mokjok)	Comedy-Action
	5. <i>Pheuan...ku rak meung wa</i> [ <i>Bangkok Love Story</i> ] (Dir. Poj Anon)	Tragedy
	6. <i>Fan phom pen phu-chai</i> [ <i>Boyfriend</i> ]* (Dir. Sarawut Intraraphrom)	Animation ("Coming out of age")
	7. <i>Rak haeng Siam</i> [ <i>Love of Siam</i> ] (Dir. Chukiat Sakveerakul)	Drama("Coming of age" and "coming out of age")
	8. <i>Hor taew taek</i> [ <i>Haunted Sissy Dorm</i> ] (Dir. Poj Arnon)	Comedy-horror
2008	1. <i>Chris ka ja ba sut sut</i> [ <i>Crazy Chris and Ja</i> ] (Dir. Karun Komanuwong)	Comedy
2009	1. <i>Seng Pet</i> [ <i>Boring Love</i> ] (Dir. Sarawut Inthornphom)	Romantic comedy
	2. <i>Na khana rak</i> [ <i>A Moment in June</i> ] (Dir. Natthaphon Wongtrinetkul)	Drama
	3. <i>Taew te teen raboet</i> [ <i>Sissy Football Players</i> ] (Dir. Poj Arnon)	Comedy
	4. <i>Hor taew taek haek krajoeng</i> [ <i>Haunted Sissy Dorm 2</i> ] (Dir. Poj Arnon)	Comedy

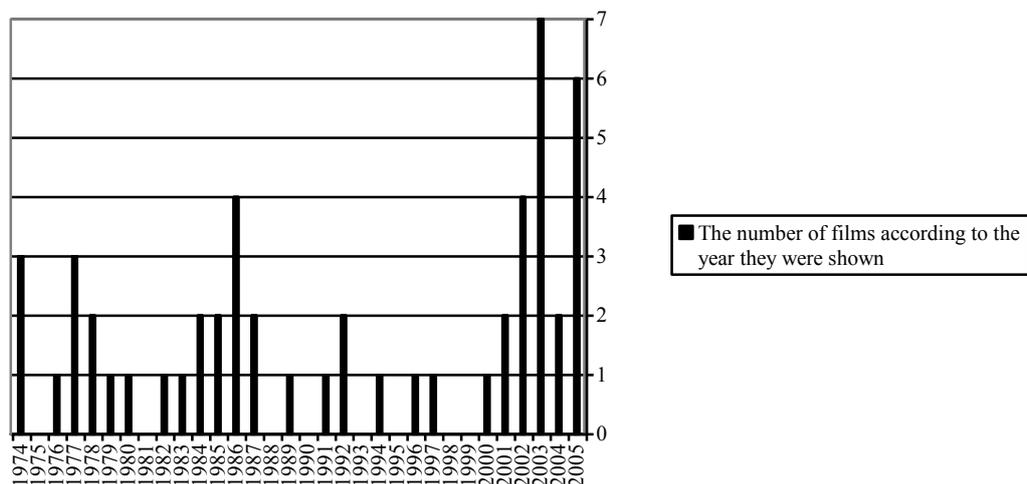
Note: The films with \* after the titles mean they were not shown in mainstream theatres.

According to the table, within the early period (1976-1987), Thai films that contained a homosexual focus, frequently involved tragedy. The tragic ending is directly derived from the key protagonist being considered "abnormal" in the context of the heteronormative system. From 2000 until recently, sexual minorities have been represented in more varying dimensions with some films even portraying homosexuals in a more positive light. However, presenting sexual minorities as comic relief by playing with the stereotypes such as effeminacy has been successful and better received

by Thai audiences than some other films with a focus on serious issues about the life, love and relationships of sexual minorities.

As noted above, there are still many Thai films that do not concentrate on sexual minorities but refer to the issue of homosexuality and homosexual characters. Taking together, Sanchai Chotirosseranees' personal research, Panchana Soonthornpipit's MA dissertation, *An Analytical Study of Male Homosexual Images in Thai Films from 1985 to 2005* (2007) and my own research, the number of Thai films that refer to issues regarding sexual minorities and to characters from 1974 – 2005 stands at least 80 (Diagram 3.2).

**Diagram 3.2: Thai Films with a Non – Sexual Minority Focus (1974 - 2005)**



From this diagram, the regularity of such films demonstrates that for almost every consecutive year, over a 30 year period, the characters and issues of sexual minorities have been referred to in mainstream Thai movies. The characteristics of sexual minority characters can be classified into three major groups: the first represents sexual minorities as people suffering from mental illness, being obsessed by sex and tending to cause problems, especially sexual harassment such as *Wai rian phian rak* [Too Young to Know] (Dir Phankham, 1985), *Ban teuk jak luk (phu) chai* [Boy's Diary] (Dir. Ruj Ronnapop, 1994) and *Transistor Love Story* (Dir. Pen-Ek Ratanareuang, 2001). The second characteristic is that of pathetic and hilarious characters who bring comic relief to the story such as *Phi mae mai* [Widow Ghosts] (Dir. Prawit Chumrit, 1990), *Phi hua khat* [Ghost without Head] (Dir. Khomsan Triphong, 2002) and *Jenny*

*klang wan khrap klang kheun kha* [Jenny only at Night] (Dir. Thirawat Rujinnatham 1996). The final characteristic is that of a supportive character, bringing reconciliation between the leading male and female characters or helps solve the conflicts or problems of others in the stories such as *Madam Yihup* (Dir. Kamthorn Thapkhanlai, 1982) *Nangsao Yenreudi* [Miss Yenreudi] (Dir. Kamthorn Thapkhanlai, 1983), and *Porp wit sayorng* [Body Jumper] (Dir. Haeman Chetame, 2001).

According to this classification, while the first two characteristics play with the stereotypes of sexual minorities, especially effeminacy, the last one is interesting in its demonstration that, to be acceptable by the mainstream society, the sexual minority characters have to be able to provide benefits or be supportive to the leading heterosexual characters. Once beneficial, their strong characteristics and same-sex desire may be expressed.

To support my observation on the characterisation and stereotypes of sexual minorities on Thai films, I provide a summary of a speech by Dr Seri Wongmontha given on the First Sexual Diversity Day in Thailand (November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008) regarding sexual minorities and the mainstream media in Thailand. Seri points to four phases that explain the development of the representations of sexual minorities in the mainstream media through different periods of time. They are 1) the Dark Age; 2) Defeating the Clouds; 3) Fighting with Endurance and 4) Until We Reach the Bright Sky.

In the first phrase, the Dark Age, Seri refers to the past when the mainstream media did not feel comfortable to see sexual minorities on screen. He explains that mainstream culture still treated homosexuality as a mental illness and disease that could infect other people, particular young children. Homosexuals were not, therefore, allowed to be on screen. He further states that during this time it was impossible for people to come out or reveal their sexualities in public.

In the second phrase, Defeating the Clouds, Seri refers to the time when there were more homosexuals who worked in the mainstream media and the entertainment industry. With the increased visibility of these people, mainstream culture began to refer to, or portray homosexuals on screen. However, the representations still clung to the homosexual stereotypes, which are mostly negative and included being obsessed with sex, behaving in a ridiculous manner, dressing up and wearing making up (“*ujat appalak*”), and displaying irritating and annoying behaviour (“*tham tua na thip na thornng*”).

For the third period, *Fighting with Endurance*, Seri refers to the period leading to the present when sexual minorities have been fighting to acquire space and positive or natural representations, and not stigmatization in the mainstream media. He refers to some films, such as *Love of Siam* and *Bangkok Love Story* (which are also discussed in this thesis), that try to portray homosexuals in a more positive light, something he considers to be a good start. However, Seri treats this phase as only the beginning and as a time when sexual minorities will still have to fight with endurance until we reach equal rights with other genders and sexualities in society.

In the last period, *Until We Reach the Bright Sky*, Seri discusses the bright future of sexual minorities and the Thai media. He suggests that, to reach that stage, homosexuals who have already come out, have to prove to society that their sexualities have nothing to do with being a good and efficient citizen so that they can promote a positive image for sexual minorities.

According to the direct experience and opinion of Dr Seri, who has been working in mainstream Thai media over 20 years, there was time when sexual minorities had difficulties being shown on screen in Thailand. When they were able to be on screen, they were first represented as pathetic or ugly hilarious characters which repeat the stereotypes of the effeminate male homosexual or *kathoey*. Only recently have some of the films, those mentioned by Seri, represented or produced positive images of sexual minorities in Thailand, something which Seri considers as only a beginning.

Nevertheless, after 2000, mainstream Thai cinema is not the only medium that Thai film makers use to represent a diversity of genders and sexualities. The off-mainstream cinema, otherwise known as “indie-film” (short for independent films) or alternative movies and even animation, become other ways of expression on this particular issue, particularly to avoid having difficulties with censorship. Short films have also become another interesting genre and there have been an increasing number of film makers who use this particular format to represent sexual minorities on screen. With the time and space limits of this thesis, I concentrate on the analysis of Thai films with a focus on sexual minorities from the mainstream circuit only.

As mentioned earlier, *The Last Song (Phleng sut-thai)* (dir. Pisaln Akkraseranee, 1985) and *Bangkok Love Story (Pheuan...ku rak meung wa)* (dir. Poj Arnon, 2007) will be discussed in this chapter. The analysis of these tragedies will reveal how the lives of

sexual minority characters are “bitter” as a result of expressing and maintaining their non-normative gendered identities and/or sexuality in the heteronormative arena.

### *The Last Song (Phleng sut-thai) (1985)*

“On the purple path of the third sex, it is difficult to find true love”

*(Bon sen thang si muang khorng phet thi sam yak ha rak thae khorng jai)*

*The Last Song* (dir. Pisaln Akkraseranee, 1985)

### **Introduction**

*The Last Song* ends with the tragic public suicide of Somying Dowrai (Somneuk Chatputsa), a *kathoey* character who shoots himself in the head on the stage where he performs his transvestite lip sync show after the man he loves leaves him for a “real” woman. In the closing shot of Somying’s dead body lying on the stage, some purple coloured text appears on the screen which reads, “on the purple path of the third sex, it is difficult to find true love”. The public suicide and the dead body of the *kathoey* character act as vivid and solid evidence in support of the film’s concluding statement that on the purple path of the third sex, it is “deadly” difficult to find true love.

*The Last Song* tells the story of Somying Dowrai, a superstar at a transvestite/transsexual/transgender night performance called Tiffany Show in Pattaya, Thailand. In Pattaya, Somying meets Buntoem Kabokyaw<sup>2</sup> (Bin Bunreurit), a poor rural rice farmer who has migrated from the countryside to find better jobs and opportunities in Pattaya. Buntoem at that time works in a garage where Somying takes his car to have it fixed.

Somying help out Buntoem financially by offering him a job as his personal helper and lets him move in to his place. They become sexual partners (at least Somying considers Buntoem to be his partner). Somying also helps Buntoem get a job as a male singer at Tiffany Show and allows Buntoem to share his surname, Dowrai, as his

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<sup>2</sup> Buntoem’s surname, Kabokyaw which means a long tube-shaped material, with its phallic suggestion strengthens Buntoem’s masculine role in his relationship with Somying. It is interestingly paradoxical when Buntoem who represents masculinity takes Somying’s surname, Dowrai, a *kathoey* who represents feminine role, to be his “performance surname”. On the one hand, allowing Buntoem to use his surname highlights how devoted and committed Somying is to Buntoem which intensifies the tragic effect when Buntoem leaves him for a ,real’ woman. On the other hand, the film shows that money and fame can encourage Buntoem to temporarily “perform” a new sexual orientation and subvert the power relation of masculinity and femininity. This therefore further supports the film’s concluding statement that same-sex relationships cannot be based on a true love, but merely financial benefits.

“performance surname”. Buntoem, as a singer at Tiffany Show, is therefore known as Buntoem Dowrai.

Somying introduces Buntoem to his best friend, Praew (Jirawadee Itsarangkun na Ayuttaya), a *tom* or butch or masculine female homosexual. Praew has a female sexual partner named Orathai (Wannasa Sriwichian) whom Somying considers as his own sister.

Nevertheless, Buntoem and Orathai fall in love and secretly see each other. They decide to leave Somying and Praew, choosing instead a “normal heteronormative” life and family which Orathai regards as “the bright way/*thang sawang*”. This drives both Somying and Praew to attempt suicide but only Somying succeeds. Somying chooses one of his lip sync performances at Tiffany Show called “The Last Song” (the same name as the film title) to end his life. Another important character, Pratheuang (Chalit Feungarom), Somying’s boss who owns Tiffany Show, also tries to commit suicide after his male blood sucker partner named Bodin leaves him for a female prostitute. Thus all main homosexual characters in the film, be they male or female, are abandoned by their partners to be replaced by new “heterosexual” partners. Same-sex relationships are portrayed as temporary, abnormal, untrue and impossible.

*The Last Song* is the 17<sup>th</sup> film of Pisaln Akkraseranee who is known and famed for his “sodomasochist style films” (“*nang top jup*” [hit-and-kiss films]) which can easily be recognised from his film titles such as *Fi rak asun (Fire Love of A Monster)* (1983), *Nang fa kab satan (Angel and Satan)* (1985), *Pitsawat satan (Beloved Satan)* (1986) and *Aung meu man (Devil’s Hands)* (1986).

It is an intriguing fact that *The Last Song*, the very first Thai film with a focus on sexual minorities, was highly successful and welcomed not only by Thai audiences, but also by audiences overseas as the film was selected to be screened at some major film festivals, including New York and Canada. The director said in an interview that the film was so well accepted in those Western countries that there were around four or five hundred people lining up to buy tickets<sup>3</sup>. The director assumes that in those Western countries (at that time) (sexual minority) audiences could not reveal their sexual preferences in public and *The Last Song* visualises how the Thai “non-straight” characters can openly live their lives in a public domain. Pisaln’s explanation therefore

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<sup>3</sup> “Early Tootsie films” Hamburger [Thai monthly magazine] Nov. 2002: 28 - 29.

conforms to the myth of a “gay paradise” in Thailand, especially perceived by the Western imagination.

According to Pisaln, because there is less obvious homophobia in Thailand (see Jackson 1995 and 1999a), sexual minorities, especially *kathoeyes*, might have been able to express their gendered identity in Thai society more freely than their Western counterparts. The famous transvestite/transsexual night performance such as Tiffany Show and Alcazar in Pattaya that have been both nationally and internationally successful for more than 30 years, certainly indicates that those transvestite/transsexual performers can freely express their non-normative gendered/sexual identities in public, or at least on the stage.

Paradoxically though, while the film reveals that it seems possible for sexual minorities to “express” their gendered/sexual identities, it is nonetheless impossible for them to unconditionally “maintain” their “non-normative” sexual behaviours/relationships or homoeroticism. In the film, all the partners of the homosexual characters are in same-sex relationships because of some limitations in life or being confused. Buntoem and Bodin only stay with Somying and Pratheuang because of financial support they receive. Orathai becomes Praew’s partner because she “misunderstands herself and gets lost into a wrong direction<sup>4</sup>” (“*khao jai phit long doen thang phit*”).

In my analysis of *The Last Song*, my discussion is divided into four sections. In section one, I provide background information on Thai traditional and contemporary tragedies that reveals some unique characteristics and repetitive motifs in Thai tragedy which also appear in *The Last Song*. I will also employ Western tragedy theory that, as I will clarify below, lends itself to a reading of the film and illuminates a possible explanation as to why the very first Thai *kathoey* film becomes a successful tragedy.

Section two focuses exclusively on sexual minorities, be they male or female homosexuals. The same-sex subcultures that are portrayed within the film setting, particularly Pattaya, will be discussed.

In section three, expanded from section two, Pattaya and its modernity in relation to the practice of expressing and maintaining non-normative genders and sexualities in the particular setting will be explored.

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<sup>4</sup> That same-sex love and relationships are considered a “wrong path”, also appears in *The Love of Siam* (further discussed in the next chapter), which was produced more than 20 years after *The Last Song*.

In the final section, I will discuss the director's 2006 remake of the film focusing on a comparison of the depiction of same-sex subcultures that has changed over time.

### **Section One. *The Last Song: the First Kathoey Thai Tragedy***

The term tragedy can be translated into Thai as *sokkanattakam* which, according to The Royal Institute's Dictionary (1999: 1107), means "[trans.] literary works, especially those ending unsatisfactorily. The leading characters normally die at the end of the story, for example, *Lilit Phra Lor*, *Sao Khreua-fa* and *Romeo and Juliet*". When looking at both Thai traditional and contemporary tragedies, "sexual abnormality" is one of the repetitive motifs that usually leads to the tragic ending.

For traditional Thai tragedy, some well-known tragedies such as *Lilit Phra Lor*<sup>5</sup> and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*<sup>6</sup> (which were all transformed into cinematic narration<sup>7</sup>) illustrate well that "sexual abnormality" brings tragic results, especially death, which can also be seen as a punishment, to the main characters.

In *Lilit Phra Lor*, the twin princesses, Phra Pheuan and Phra Phaeng, passionately fall in love with Phra Lor, the married king of a rival kingdom. On overhearing someone describe how handsome the king is, the two princesses decide to use black magic to make the king love them. Phra Lor, despite knowing that his strong passion for the twin princesses derives from black magic and that the princesses are the offspring of his former enemies, cannot control himself and finally leaves his wife for them. The three of them die in each other's arms, shot by hundreds of arrows from the soldiers who try to kill Phra Lor. The twin princesses, instead of running away from the arrows, use their body to cover the king and die together.

The three main characters explicitly exploit their sexual pleasure and break the social norm of sexuality by engaging in sexual relationships outside marriage as well as practicing non-normative sexual behaviour involving three people ("threesome"). Their

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<sup>5</sup> The Author and the year of the composition cannot be identified (see *Lilit Phra Lor*. Khlang panya Thai., Web. Accessed 28 Aug. 2009).

<sup>6</sup> *Khun Change Khun Phaen* was composed in the reign of King Rama II by various authors including *Suthorn Phu*, declared world poet by UNESCO in 1986.

<sup>7</sup> A film version of *Lilit Phra Lor* was made by director Thangai Suwannarat in 1968. Film versions of *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* were produced in 1952, 1953, 1961, 1982 and 2002 by various film directors.

death can therefore be seen as a punishment for their overly attached love and sexual abnormality/exploitation.

In *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, Wanthorng, the leading female character, also faces a tragic ending as a result of (being thought of) actions beyond sexual norms. Wanthorng is considered to be an untrustworthy woman who loves two men at a time. This is the reason why the king orders her execution. Wanthorng has also become a measure of female sexual mores in Thai society. Her name and the phrase, “*Wanthorng sorng jai*”, (literarily meaning Wanthorng who has two hearts) have still been used to condemn women who have more than one husband at the same time or who are deemed to be promiscuous. It is also apparent in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* that the main reason the female protagonist is put to her tragic death is because of her non-normative sexual behaviour by having two husbands at the same time (while Khun Phaen, the leading male protagonist, has four wives).

For contemporary Thai tragedy, “sexual abnormality” is also used as a key tragic motif. In *Sao Khreua-fa* (Prasert Aksorn, 1953<sup>8</sup>), the adaptation of Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madam Butterfly* (1904), Khreua-fa, the leading female character, commits suicide after her husband, Second Lieutenant Phrom, gets married to another woman. Even though Khreua-fa and Second Lieutenant Phrom get married to normalize their sexual relationship, it is considered unacceptable and unofficial because their marriage follows the *Lanna* tradition used in the north of Thailand which is different from the norms/standards used and approved by the people from the centre of the society, Bangkok. Khreua-fa (as a woman holding a lower position under patriarchy) and her *Lanna* tradition (a non-standard/non-mainstream Thai tradition) are therefore marginalized and limited to the periphery. This difference from the mainstream social sexual norms also results in Khreua-fa’s tragic end.

Similarly to *Sao Khreua-fa*, in Sri Burapha’s novel, *Khang lang phap* (1936 [1998]) [*Behind the Painting*], the main female character also commits suicide by rejecting treatment for tuberculosis after the man she loves marries another woman. The female character, Khunying Kirati, is characterized as almost 15 years older than the main male character, Nopphorn. They fall in love with each other while Kirati is still married to an old man who is as about the same age as her father and impotent. Given

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<sup>8</sup> For further detail about *Sao Khreua-fa* and its author see Vikorn (2011).

that she is already married, Kirati tries her best to control herself so as not to do anything (physically) unfaithful to her husband. Nonetheless, her feelings for Nopphorn develop into “a forbidden love” which, to a certain extent, can be seen as a “mental affair”. When Nopphorn decides to move on with his life by getting married to another woman who is more appropriate, Kirati’s “forbidden love” becomes an impossible love which eventually causes her to give up on life.

In *The Last Song*, it is also sexual abnormality, in this case same-sex desire, behaviour and relationships, which is the main reason leading to the tragic endings in the film. To further explore this repetitive tragic motif, I find Aristotle’s discussion on Western tragedy, particularly on characterization and the motif of “hamartia”, the mistake of judgement, applicable and illuminating to reading the tragic motif in *The Last Song*.

### ***The Last Song* and Western Tragedy**

Aristotle mentioned that in Western tragedy, the tragic effect will be stronger if the “tragic hero” is constructed in the way that he is “better than we are” in the sense that he is of higher than ordinary moral worth. Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of his mistaken choice of action, to which he is led by his “hamartia”, his “error” or “mistake of judgement<sup>9</sup>” (cited in Abrams and Harpham 2009: 370-4).

According to Aristotle’s discussion on tragedy, it is also the case that Somying is characterised as a good natured person who is above the ordinary people since he is a superstar at Tiffany Show in Pattaya, which intensifies the tragic results in *The Last Song*. While all of the other *kathoey* characters are represented as loud-mouthed, dirty-minded and obsessed with sex and men, Somying (literally meaning “lady-like”), as his name suggests, is a ‘proper lady’ who is kind, generous, caring and faithful. Being born as a boy, it is unlikely that Somying is the name he had been given at birth. After knowing that he is a transgender woman, Somying perhaps changes his old name and

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<sup>9</sup> From a Buddhist perspective, one of the noble eightfold path of the Buddha that helps people free themselves from suffering, including tragedy is “right attitude”. There thus seem to be a reciprocal relation between the Buddha’s “right attitude” and Aristotle’s “hamartia”.

call himself Somying and behaves himself according to its meaning which is a “proper lady”.

In terms of love and relationships, Somying is also characterised to stand above the other sexual minority characters as he seems to know better and be more mindful about the “nature” of same-sex love and relationships. Somying warns Praew that she loves Orathai too much and passes a judgement on Pratheuang’s relationship that Pratheuang expects too much from his same-sex relationship. As a *kathoey* who was born with bad *karma*, Somying believes it is wise to be with the present moment of the relationship and not to think too far ahead. Somying therefore declares that his view on having or being in a relationship is different from (and better than) Pratheuang’s.

Not only is Somying portrayed as a “wiser” person than the rest of the sexual minority characters, Somying is also characterised as a caring and supportive friend, especially to Praew. When Praew has problems and finally breaks up with Orathai, Somying helps Praew in every way he can to help her get over the trauma. Somying even offers Praew to stab him with a knife to stop her from committing suicide.

One question might arise here is why there is such a need to construct the *kathoey* character in such a positive way. To tackle the question, Harrison’s (1999) analysis of the characterisation of prostitutes in literary works by Thai female authors provides a useful framework to illuminate and understand the characterisation of Somying in *The Last Song*.

Harrison (1999) discusses the socially constructed dimension/tension between being “good” women (*ying khon di*) and “bad” women (*ying khon chua*), which appears in Thai novels and short stories with a focus on female prostitution in Thailand. She discovers that for prostitutes, to be able to “partially” escape from being stigmatised as “bad” women, it was essential that they attract the sympathy of the readers and to be represented as literary heroines (ibid.: 172), the characters had to be characterized positively and differently from all of the other prostitutes in the story.

Harrison (1999) uses the very first Thai novel that focuses on the issue of female prostitution in Thailand, *Ying khon chua* (K. Surangkhanang [1937] 1988) to support her argument. She mentions that while the female author reveals her undoubted compassion for Reun (the main female prostitute character in the novel), “the author nevertheless feels it necessary to mark her out as different from other women of her profession” (ibid.: 172). Reun is consequently constructed as a prostitute character whose “honesty, trustworthiness, selflessness, and, most importantly, her

conscientiousness as a mother, render her a “good” woman, whilst it is only the way in which she earns her living [as a prostitute] that makes her a “bad” woman” (ibid.: 172).

According to Harrison’s analysis on the characterisation of female prostitutes in Thai literary texts, despite having crossed the line from purity to promiscuity (ibid.: 171), the prostitute characters may somehow gain sympathetic and positive responses from readers by following some of the core moral codes of “good” Thai women as mentioned earlier.

In *The Last Song*, the characterisation of Somying also becomes a strategy that gains a sympathetic and positive response from the audiences. Somying, as mentioned above, is constructed positively and differently from the rest of the *kathoey* characters by conforming to the core moral codes of “good Thai women” or hegemonic femininity.

Nevertheless, being with Buntoem, Somying’s realistic thoughts and judgements on the “nature” of same-sex relationship that he uses to warn Praew and Pratheuang disappears. Somying ends up attempting suicide, and is successful. Somying’s “hamartia”, his mistake of judgement, therefore blinds his sensibility and renders him unable to cope when Buntoem finally leaves him.

Since Somying uses the Buddhist law of *karma* to explain the “nature” of same-sex love and relationship, that a *kathoey* who was born with bad *karma* should not expect too much from a relationship, the law of *karma* is thus (mis-)interpreted and utilised in the film to justify the misfortune of sexual minorities. Somying, as well as the other *kathoey* characters, similarly accept their interpretations of the law of *karma* that since they have made bad *karmas* in their previous lives, they have to be born as *kathoey*s and accept their misfortune.

The conversation in the scene before Somying commits suicide reveals the misinterpretation of the law of *karma* that has a direct effect on how *kathoey* characters perceive themselves. This particular scene can also be seen as a didactic moment that warns *kathoey* audiences to take Somying’s tragedy as a lesson.

*Kathoey* character I: Ying, we all love and feel sympathy for you. I understand you. I was hurt before. Drinking doesn’t help you at all.

*Kathoey* character II: Go fucking around! Fool them all!

*Kathoey* character III: Suck them dead!

*Kathoey* character I: Make the whole world yours!

*Kathoey* character IV: Seduce them!

*Kathoey* character III: Hit and run!

*Kathoey* character IV: Throw them away once we are satisfied!  
*Kathoey* character III: Fuck them and kick them out!  
*Kathoey* character II: Hide our traumas. Don't let anyone know we were born with bad *karma*.  
*Kathoey* character IV: Nothing we can do. We were born this way...as a waning moon.  
*Kathoey* character I: Use both sides then! The bright and the dark ones!  
 Somying: Worship to love and monogamy is a stupid *kathoey* and I am a stupid one.

Every *kathoey* character in the scene agrees that a *kathoey* should not be monogamous or serious about love and relationships. Somying condemns himself for his own stupidity for believing in “true love”. These *kathoey* characters also accept their inferior non-normative gender identity, directly influenced by the Thai misinterpretation of Buddhist “belief” that they were born with bad *karma* from previous lives.

The Buddha makes it clear that there are three philosophies which are considered as wrong view and must be mindfully differentiated from the notion of *karma*. The first one is the belief that all happiness and suffering arise from previous *karma* (past-action determinism). The second one is the belief that all happiness and suffering are caused by the creation of a Supreme Being (theistic determinism). The last one is the belief that all happiness and suffering are random, having no cause (indeterminism or accidentalism) (cited in Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto 1993: 82-4). The *kathoey* characters' belief that their suffering is caused from their *karma* in their previous lives is thus wrong.

The *kathoey* character's conversation above also becomes a totally verbal irony according to Buddhism when the *kathoey* characters find their solution of being born as a *kathoey* with bad *karma* in their previous life by being promiscuous. As the first three of the five moral precepts in Buddhism warn against sexual misconduct, being promiscuous and seducing a lot of men would not seem to be appropriate according to the moral precept.

On the one hand, the misinterpretation/explanation that a sexual minority has to unavoidably suffer because of his/her bad *karma* in past lives can be seen as a “same-sex stereotype” (in the similar shade of colonial stereotype explained in Chapter 2) produced in Thai society to passively/aggressively exclude and marginalise non-normative gendered and sexual identities from the heteronormative mainstream system. On the other hand, the misinterpretation/explanation can be seen as a “pathetic solution” or “desperate measure” that the *kathoey* characters have to use to hide their

unchangeably inferior and “incomplete gendered identity”. Being portrayed as a pathetic person might instill feelings of sympathy towards the *kathoey* characters and therefore gain more tolerance from heterosexual audience members.

Accordingly, when Somying tries to make his “abnormal sexual behaviour” possible, it results in the tragic ending that can be seen as a punishment for his non-normative sexual relationship. His public suicide scene is used as a cinematic device that intensifies the tragic tone in the film.

### **The Show within the Film: The Public Suicide in *The Last Song***

The literary device of a story within a story or a play within a play has proven very effective and been successfully employed in many novels and plays. *The Last Song* also uses this dramatic device to profoundly intensify the unfortunate love of Somying which significantly affects audiences’ emotions and gains their sympathy.

In *The Last Song*, the film ends with the show called, “The Last Song” (the same name as the title), which Somying requests to perform (in order to get a chance to commit suicide in front of his audience). In the show, Somying has to lip sync to a song also called, The Last Song, telling a story of a *kathoey* who is abandoned by a man. The *kathoey* describes how miserable he is to be born as a *kathoey* and to be left by the man he loves. The story of the song therefore mirrors Somying’s life. Somying, while performing this show, slowly removes his makeup and women’s ornament and finally dramatically tears it off to reveal his male body which is covered only with a strapless top and a pair of tights. The song ends with a question, “although my body is fake, my soul is real. Please answer me what did I do wrong?”.

The public suicide scene becomes an ironic situation as the diegetic audience understands that Somying’s suicide is part of his performance. The film’s audience, nonetheless, gets the upper hand by witnessing Somying’s suicide driven from his unfairly miserable love life. When the diegetic audience thinks that his death is just a part of his show, Somying’s death scene becomes more emotional since his tragic death is considered unreal. When the film uses the dramatic device of a show within a film to intensify the tragic results, Somying’s ‘real’ love life is also dramatised and transformed into a dramatic situation. The portrayal of the *kathoey*’s life, especially in front of the “public”, thus becomes “entertaining performance”, but not real.

While it is clear from the film context that sexual minorities are “abnormal”/“non-normative” and their same-sex love and relationships are deadly difficult to maintain, it is interesting to further explore how each non-normative gendered and sexual identity portrayed in *The Last Song* expresses and/or maintains their identities as well as their same-sex love and relationships in the film context.

## **Section Two. *The Last Song* and Its Sexual Minorities**

In addition to the film’s main focus on the lives of male homosexuals and *kathoey*s, the issue of female homosexuality is also mentioned and portrayed in the film. The depiction of both male and female homosexual characters in the film reveals some “same-sex stereotypes” and myths that strengthen the notion of binary oppositions in the heteronormative system in Thailand. Below, I discuss the depictions of female homosexual followed by male homosexual characters in *The Last Song*.

### **Female Homosexuals: *Tom-Dee***

Praew and Orathai represent the stereotyped relationship among female homosexuals in Thailand labelled as *tom-dee*. One of the *kathoey* characters describes Praew to be “handsome, has a good body, good at singing and rich. She can find a hundred wives if she wants to”. Undoubtedly, Praew is typically/stereotypically characterized as a masculine female homosexual or ‘*tom*’. The character herself also conforms to Thai masculine hegemonic thought and behaviours which can be seen from her masculine costume and her behaviours such as drinking (*kin lao*), smoking (*sup buri*) and being aggressive (*kao rao*) (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1: Praew, with short haircut, drinking and smoking, is talking to her best friend, Somying.

Praew's ("performing") masculinity is apparently compared to Buntoem's ("authentic") masculinity. In the scene when Praew, Orathai, Somying, and Buntoem go yachting together, Orathai accidentally hurts herself by stabbing a fishing hook into her hand. The scene reveals that even though Praew acts like a masculine man, she is still a woman who is weak and her masculinity cannot be compared to Buntoem's authentic masculinity. Since Praew cannot stand seeing blood, she is incapable of helping her lover. Buntoem is the one who has to step in and help Orathai. The "fishing" scene also indicates the myth of unsatisfying sexual behaviour between women that is inevitably inferior to when women have sexual intercourse with men.

"*Tok bet*" (fishing) in Thai is a pun for female masturbation. The fishing scene can significantly be interpreted that "*tok bet*" cannot be "achieved" between women but they need men to help "complete" it. When Praew and Orathai do the fishing alone, the "hook" gets stuck in Orathai's hand. As Praew cannot stand seeing blood, she becomes impotent in helping her partner release the pain and tension. Buntoem is the one who has to give them a hand by using his long and suitably phallic knife to cut the hook out of Orathai's hand. While putting his knife into Orathai's body, Orathai moans rhythmically with pain and then with relief when Buntoem finally uses his knife to get rid of the hook. While Praew is afraid of blood, Buntoem sucks the blood out of Orathai's hand to make the wound dry. Orathai explicitly shows her appreciation

towards Buntoem which serves as a turning point in Praew and Orathai's relationship since Orathai starts to have feelings for Buntoem.

Also, when Praew and Orathai go to a restaurant with Somying and Buntoem, they are teased by some men who say that Praew can only use her tongue and fingers with Orathai which cannot be as pleasurable as having sex with men.

Not only does Praew not physically satisfy Orathai, but she is also portrayed as inconsiderate and irrational. Since every single member of Orathai's family has negative attitudes towards female same-sex relationship, Orathai is caught between her family and her same-sex relationship with Praew. Praew responds to this by not being helpful or trying to understand Orathai at all. On the contrary, Praew gives Orathai a hard time by making her feel guilty.

Compared to Buntoem and his genuine masculine male heterosexual, Praew does not stand a chance, and therefore has to lose Orathai to Buntoem. The film shows that while being with Praew brings Orathai merely problems and misery, being with Buntoem helps solve every problem in her life and brings her a "normal" happy life under the aegis of heteronormativity.

The portrayal of male homosexuals in *The Last Song* also reflects interesting issues and perceptions towards male same-sex subcultures in Thai society which strengthens the normality of heterosexuality.

### **Male Homosexuals**

In the first scene where Buntoem and Somying meet each other at the garage where Buntoem works, Buntoem is verbally sexually harassed by Somying's *kathoey* friends. Buntoem complains to Somying that:

Buntoem: "gays in Pattaya are so crazy. I hope you are not one of them".  
 Somying: "No, because I am a *kathoey*".  
 Buntoem: "It is even worse then if you are a *kathoey*".  
 Somying: "Take a good look at my face and you tell me if I am a bad person. People might look similar but their behaviour is not the same".

From the dialogue above, it shows that Buntoem is unsure if Somying, who dresses in a female costume and wears makeup, is *gay* which can be interpreted as him possibly having thought that Somying is an "authentic" woman. Somying, nevertheless,

corrects him immediately that he is not a *gay* but a *kathoey*. Somying's declaration to Buntoem that he is a *kathoey* is therefore his "coming out" or self-identification/expression as a *kathoey* to Buntoem (perhaps as well as to the film audience). By expressing/identifying himself as a *kathoey*, not only does Somying reject the label *gay*, he also corrects Buntoem who might have misread him as a "real woman". Somying's self-identification as a *kathoey* shocks Buntoem who reveals his understanding of Thai male homosexuals that being *kathoey* is worse than being *gay*. This first dialogue in *The Last Song* presents the ambiguity in terms of labelling non-normative gendered/sexual identities as well as social perception/evaluation with regards to the terms *kathoey* and *gay*.

In Chapter 1, I have already discussed and explained that there is an ambiguity in labelling non-normative male genders and sexualities, apparently as there is no clear-cut definition that completely distinguishes between *kathoey* and *gay* identities. Furthermore, the term *gay* also conveys more positive/modern/Western connotations than the traditional Thai term, *kathoey*. These ambiguities regarding the terms *kathoey* and *gay* are also apparent in *The Last Song*.

In *The Last Song*, while Somying is clearly marked with a number of positive attitudes in comparison with his *kathoey* friends, as discussed above, there is little to differentiate him from the others in terms of appearance, especially with regard to their effeminate gestures, clothes and makeup (Figure 3.2). That Buntoem differentiates and excludes Somying from the rest of the *kathoey* characters thus evidently reveals the ambiguous labelling between the terms *kathoey* and *gay*.



Figure 3.2: Somying and his *kathoey* friends. Somying is in the front wearing a white dress.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that Somying is comfortable to label himself as a *kathoey*. Within the film's setting of Pattaya, it is also apparent that Somying and all of the *kathoey* characters feel free to express and maintain their non-normative gendered identities.

The next section discusses and explores how the sexual minority characters can freely express and maintain their non-normative genders and sexualities in Pattaya.

### **Section Three. The City and the Sex: Pattaya and Its Sexual Minorities**

In *The Last Song*, the non-straight characters who are performers at the transvestite/transsexual/transgender theatre do not seem to experience any difficulties expressing and living their “non-normative” gendered/sexual identities in Pattaya.

Pattaya is known as one of the most famous tourist attractions in Thailand where it has been used by the Thai government as a magnet for tourists, particularly Westerners to encourage the tourist industry. Any activities that can be used to attract tourists to the city therefore seem to be acceptable even though they might not be legal. As a result, Pattaya is well-known as one of the best destinations for sex tourism in Thailand (see Yodmanee Tepanon 2006).

Despite the non-normative gendered identities of the transvestite/transsexual/transgender performers, Prempreeda Pramroj na Ayutthaya (2003: 79-81) reveals that since those artists bring both Thai and international tourists to the city, thus encouraging economic growth, they are welcomed and accepted by the people in Pattaya. The “special” tolerance towards sexual minorities who are free to express and maintain their non-normative genders in public both in the film context and in Pattaya results from the financial benefits they are seen to bring.

Pattaya is also differently visualised from Bangkok and the other parts of Thailand in the film. Bangkok<sup>10</sup>, the capital city, is used as a setting in the film where Orathai’s heteronormative family lives and where Buntoem and Orathai accommodate their heterosexual relationship. The scenes in Bangkok present the normal Thai ways of life such as a common Thai family structure represented by Orathai’s family and a normal heterosexual relationship between Buntoem and Orathai who are free to express their love and relationship in public. The scene where Buntoem and Orathai decides to give up their same-sex relationship and start a normal heterosexual relationship in front of the huge Buddha statue in Bangkok (Figure 3.3) also links the heterosexual relationship to Thai nationality/identity by means of the national religion.



Figure 3.3: Buntoem and Orathai decide to give up their same-sex relationship and pursue their heterosexual lives as a couple together in front of a huge Buddha statue.

<sup>10</sup> The portrayal of Bangkok as the capital city of Thailand with its limitations to accommodate same-sex desire and relationships also appears in *Bangkok Love Story*, *Saving Private Tootsie* and *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok* discussed later on in this thesis.

In this scene, Buntoem and Orathai decide to leave Somying and Praew to build a normal heterosexual relationship and family together. In contrast with the homosexual relationships they are leaving behind, there is no difficulty in expressing their heterosexual desire in front of the Buddha statue. Notably, the song used in this scene is a romantic and cheerful love song, sung by male and female lovers with a meaningful lyric telling that their love is the best form of love. Accordingly, it is apparent from the film context that there are only two gendered identities, feminine female and masculine male heterosexuals, that are accepted within the heteronormative public realm.

Additionally, Pattaya is also depicted/visualised as a modernised/Westernised city. A distinct contrast is made between Buntoem's hometown and Pattaya. Buntoem's hometown is visualised as a rural agricultural site where buffaloes are still used to plough the rice field which represents a Thai way of life in terms of occupation, rice farmer. Pattaya, on the contrary, is portrayed completely differently as modernised and Westernised with modern technology, such as electricity (lively light and sound system at Tiffany Show), transportation (personal cars and concrete roads) and particularly people's life styles. There are scenes showing young teenagers doing Western style street-dancing, with one of the boys carrying a radio on his shoulder. Young girls ask for Buntoem's autograph in front of the theatre at night which seems inappropriate for women that age to be away from their house during nighttime. These scenes explicitly reveal that people in Pattaya are Westernised and their ways of life are different from the standard/mainstream Thai way of life. Pattaya in the film context therefore becomes a special setting that shows no link to mainstream Thai society. Pattaya's modernization/Westernisation becomes a key factor that distances/separates sexual minorities from the mainstream heteronormative Thai society which makes sexual minorities the "Other".

Following on from the success of *The Last Song*, Pisaln Akkraseranee made a film sequel called *Tortured Love* in 1989. He also remade *The Last Song* in 2006, and while the plot is still very similar, there are some differences between the original and the remade versions. In the next section, two versions of *The Last Song* will be compared, with a particular aim to highlight those significant alterations with regard to the representations of same-sex subcultures.

#### Section Four. *The Last Song: When the Last is not the Last*

Pisaln explains that he remade *The Last Song* having been inspired by a dancing trainer at Tiffany Show who wanted to see him make this film again. Moreover, he has stated that he wanted to explore the lives of “the third sex” people or *kathoey* in depth and in a realistic way as he thinks that recently the media has tended to portray third sex people in a negative light (cited in Anchalee Chaiworaporn 2004).

The main plot in the latter version is similar to the original. Somying financially supports Buntoem and helps him out of his difficulties due to his poverty. Once he is financially secured, he leaves Somying for a real woman which drives Somying to commit suicide. Nevertheless, there are two noticeable alterations that reveal some changes within the same-sex subcultures in Thailand through the different periods of time. The first difference between the first and second versions is the omission of the issue of female homosexuality. The second one is Somying’s characterisation, particularly in terms of feminisation/effeminisation.

#### Lesbians Out! Gays In!

In the 2006 version of *The Last Song*, the issue of female homosexuality has entirely vanished. The *tom* (butch) character, Praew, who is Somying’s best friend in the first version, is substituted by an effeminate *gay* male character, Wit. The *dee* (femme) character, Orathai, Praew’s partner, becomes Somying’s biological sister who is not a lesbian but a heterosexual. The film director, Pisaln explains that this cutting of the lesbian characters results from a desire to focus exclusively on *kathoey* and male homosexuals<sup>11</sup>. The film’s producer, Ake Tikridsanalerd also mentions that the change from the *tom* character to the male homosexual character intensifies and modernises the content of the film and makes the film more suited to be shown in the present time;

The change from the *tom* character played by khun Oi (Jirawadee Itsarangkun na Ayuttaya) to a *gay* character who represents love between men intensifies the story and modernise the content of the film (quoted in Anchalee Chaiworaporn 2004).

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<sup>11</sup> “Piak Pisaln making a new version of *The Last Song* hoping to please gay audience.” Banterng-Dara., 19 May 2006. Web. Accessed 3 May 2009.

The producer's explanation of the deletion of the female homosexual characters leaves some interesting issues that need to be further discussed. By saying that the issues of male homosexuals can intensify and modernise the content of the film, he is indicating that the issue of female homosexuality is out of date. The omission of the female homosexual characters in *The Last Song* corresponds with issues of "invisibility" or, to be more accurate, "less visibility" of female homosexuals compared to Thai male homosexuals in Thai society.

Took Took Thongthiraj (2004: 5) mentioned that she is concerned by "the multiple invisibility" of Thai female homosexuals which is reinforced by an unwillingness to explore same-sex relationships between Thai women. She claims that "many Western (often male) analysts of Thai sexuality and homosexuality have solely focused on the gay male subculture in Thailand". The invisibility, she claims, shapes how female homosexuals conceptualise their identities and change their positions (ibid.: 6).

Unchana Suwannanon, the leader of the first female homosexual organization, Anjaree in Thailand, also has the similar idea that female homosexuals are treated as invisible in Thailand. She supports her argument by saying that there is no term coined to refer to female homosexuals in the Thai language. Although the term, "*len pheuan*" does exist, she argues that it refers only to the sexual activities between women, not to same-sex desire or even to female homosexuals as a person. This, she believes, becomes an important political factor that leads to the invisibility of Thai female homosexuals (cited in Amara Pongsapit 2005: 300).

Nevertheless, Jackson (2004a) finds out that in the early 1970s, there was a number of terms referring to masculine female homosexuals in Thai society such as *lesbian* and *dai* (from the English term, dyke). The terms *lesbian* and *dai* were also compounded with a Thai term, *sao* (women) as *sao lesbian* (a young woman who is a butch lesbain) and *sao dai* (a young woman who is a dyke) (ibid.: 213). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sinnott (1999) states that there were the terms *tom* and *dee*, created to refer to the butch-femme relationship (ibid.: 98-99). Recently, the term *ying rak ying* (women who love women) has also been coined to refer to female homosexuals in Thailand (Jackson 2004a: 214).

However, judging from the number of terms being coined to refer to male homosexuals, together with the appearance of male homosexuals in mainstream visual cultures, as well as the attention from the mainstream media and academia to the issues

of male homosexuality, it is still the case that the issue of female homosexuality has been less mentioned or discussed in Thai society.

According to the above discussion, it is therefore of interest that in the 1986 version of *The Last Song*, the issue of female homosexuality was explicitly portrayed. Given that the film was the first mainstream Thai film that exclusively portrays the lives of sexual minorities particularly in Pattaya, the film director might have tried to reveal all of the diversity of sexual minorities that is not limited merely to male homosexuals in the society. Nevertheless, the explanation from the film producer for the omission of the issue of female homosexualities in the later version that the issue of female homosexuality is “not modern” strengthens the lesser visibility of female homosexuals in Thai society.

Looking back on the traditional Thai term used to refer to same-sex acts between women which is “*len pheuan*” meaning “playing with your friend”, same-sex desire and acts between women are not considered a serious action, but a “play thing”. Same-sex acts between women are also perceived as sexually impotent since they cannot be as fully satisfied as the sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Female homosexuality in Thai society has therefore been regarded as counterfeit, unserious and unreal. Patriarchy thus seems to become an explanation of the lesser visibility of female homosexuals in Thailand.

In a patriarchal society where the fathers/men are the supreme authority in the families/society, when male homosexuals, especially *kathoey*, give up their social constructed authority and privileges of being men, and instead, imitate the inferior gender’s roles of women, this may seem to be more problematic since male homosexuals and their effeminacy jeopardize the hegemonic masculinity. As a result, the society might therefore be more concerned about male homosexuals than female homosexuals who are not harmful to and do not have to be members of the society to help retaining the supreme authority and privileges provided for men.

Nevertheless, replacing the female homosexual characters with male homosexual characters, *The Last Song* version 2006 portrays and adds some interesting issues related to male homosexuality in Thailand.

### **Sexual Fluidity (?): My Husband Becomes Someone Else's Wife!**

In the new version of *The Last Song*, the issues of male homosexuality were much more intensified than the original. The film adds a couple of male homosexuals to replace the female homosexual couple in the former version to portray a relationship between male homosexuals who are not a transvestite or transgender like Somying. The male homosexual characters are represented as a “modern *gay*” in Thailand who tends to act in a less camp or effeminate way.

As mentioned earlier, Jackson (2004a), using sources such as the Thai press, popular magazines, and academic publications, has shown that from 1960 to 1985, the number of *phet* (gender/sex) categories for labelling distinctive types of gendered/sexed being almost tripled in number. (see Jackson 2004a: 211-12).

However, these terms were short-lived and replaced by the term *gay* borrowed from the English term, ‘gay’. It seems to have first emerged around 1965 to refer to masculine male prostitutes and their clients (Jackson 1999b). In the 1970s, the term *gay* was given further nuance to denote different gendered and sexual identities of Thai male homosexuals such as *gay king* (sexually insertive) and *gay queen* (sexually receptive). The terms *gay king* and *gay queen* have also been merged together as *gay quing* to refer to another gendered and sexual identity for those who are “sexually versatile”.

Nevertheless, Jackson (2001: 17) also note that while there have been an increasing number of those homosexual identities, he finds Thailand is greatly attached to the system of *phet*. Consequently, he disagrees that Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is applicable to the Thai indigenous category of *phet*. He states that “the new category has not been constituted as a consequence of the emergence of a new type of discourse *a la* Foucault, but rather by a process of multiplication within the pre-existing domain of *phet*”.

When looking at the diversity of male homosexuals in the new version of *The Last Song*, it is also the case that the film is attached to the pre-existing domain *phet* in Thai society. The film insistently portrays negative results when sexual fluidity happens beyond the pre-existing domain of *phet*. For instance, one of the *kathoey* characters, Ngek, tries to commit suicide after his “husband” cheats on him and change his sexual preference to be a wife of someone else. Another *kathoey*/gay character, Wit, Somying's best friend, kills his husband and the lover when he catches them having sex and his husband takes the passive role. Wit confesses to Somying later after he is caught

by the police that “nobody can stand what I have to witness. My husband has a new husband. How could I take it! I can’t stand it!”.

It is interesting that the motivation for committing suicide and murder result not only from their partners having an affair, but also that their “partners/husbands” change their sexual role from that of husband (insertor) to be that of wife (insertee). Further, sexual fluidity beyond the pre-existing domain of *phet* also leads to seriously destructive consequences.

The proliferation or explosion of Thai gender/sexual identities, as evidenced by the tendency of Thai people trying to pin down non-normative genders and sexualities with labels and categories discussed above, reveals that the proliferation of Thai gender/sexual identities can merely be an attempt to make “the unknown known” by giving it the names that can be associated with/assimilated to pre-existing domain of *phet*. The rigid notion of binary oppositions of heterosexuality/heteronormativity is so strong that the sexual “Other” is alienated and portrayed with negative/destructive connotations.

The new version of *The Last Song* is not only marked by an emphasis on issues of male homosexuality; there is also a significant change between the old and new versions how Somying is characterised. Somying’s characterisation in the new version provides a chance to discuss how Thai *kathoeys* (transvestite/transgender) are perceived in the 2000s.

### **The Mimicry of a Woman**

Compared to the characterisation of Somying in the first version of *The Last Song* made 20 years earlier, Somying in the second version is differently constructed in certain ways. While it is still obvious that the characterisation of Somying in the new version serves to add moral value to the *kathoeys* character, Somying is much more feminised, both physically and mentally. We can see this in two significant ways.

The first alteration is the self-identification/perception of Somying’s gendered identity. In the first version, as discussed earlier, Somying seems to feel more comfortable to identify himself as a *kathoeys*. Although dressing up as a woman and acting like one, Somying accepts the fact that he is a *kathoeys* and not a woman. In the second version, however, Somying considers himself as a woman and faces misery derived from a conflict between his sexed body and his desire to be a woman.

In the later version, Somying's family background and his family is mentioned while in the first version the audience is not told anything about his family. There is a scene in the later version in which Somying has an argument with his father. The scene makes it clear that Somying does not want to be *kathoey* and is miserable about it. He angrily yells at his father that "I couldn't choose to be born as a boy or a girl. If I could, I would not have been born to be a *kathoey* like this".

Not only does Somying feel unhappy to be born *kathoey*, he is also uncomfortable and ashamed to be called or seen as *kathoey*. Somying in the later version prefers people to consider and treat him as a real woman. He allows his sister, Orathai, to introduce him to her friends as her elder sister and feels more comfortable when Buntoem's parents call and think of him as a woman.

In the very first scene in which Somying appears on screen in the second version, similar to the original, we see him perform his lip-sync show at Tiffany Show. In the original version, Somying wears a luxurious long dress with long gloves and almost all of his body except his face is covered. In the second version, Somying is in his very tight "high-cut" female two-piece bikini. The camera intentionally pans from his head to toe to show to the spectators his body can completely pass as a genuine female figure. The high-cut thong revealing his bikini-line, showing the absence of his penis, as well as low-cut neckline on his cleavage, accentuating his breasts strengthens his femininity and leaves no trace of his formerly male body (Figures 3.4 and 3.5).



Figure 3.4: Somying in *The Last Song* version 1985.



Figure 3.5: Somying in *The Last Song* version 2006.

Not only is Somying's body much more feminised in the later version, Somying is also much more hegemonised by the moral codes of "good Thai women". The latter version even further constructs Somying as a better "woman" than Somying in the first version.

Somying in the later version strictly and properly employs and adopts all aspects of female language (such as female final particles, *kha*), gestures and behaviours which are noticeably different to the characterisation of Somying in the first version. He does not drink or smoke (except at the very end of the film after Buntoem leaves him) which again follows well the hegemonic femininity that Thai women should not (be seen to) drink (*kin lao*) or smoke (*sup buri*), whereas in the first version, we see Somying drink a lot. Somying is also portrayed as a good child who loves his family, especially his mother. Although he is thrown out of the house by his father after finding out that he is a *kathoey*, he still respects, loves and cares for his parents, especially his mother<sup>12</sup>.

More importantly, Somying's sexual desire in the second version is totally removed. In the first version, Somying explicitly asks Buntoem to have sex with him (Figure 3.6). In contrast, Somying in the second version refuses to have sex with him (Figure 3.7) and insists that he does not want to have sex without love. Somying in the second version therefore becomes a real Thai woman whose sexual desire is not supposed to be for pleasure (see Harrison 1999).

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<sup>12</sup> The relationship between mother and a *kathoey* son is also mentioned in *Beautiful Boxer* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003) but from a different approach. Nong Toom, the transsexual boxer, is supported and approved of by his parents, especially the mother. However, considering that Somying is already from a rich family, he cannot contribute anything to his parents. On the contrary, Nong Toom has to become a boxer because his family is poor and he wants to help his parents out. Nong Toom is therefore considered as a main financial supporter in the family rendering him in the position of a good child. This can be an important reason why his parents give him their consent and allow him to become a transsexual. This issue will be discussed further in the next chapter where *Beautiful Boxer* is analysed.



Figure 3.6: Somying in the first version tries to seduce Buntoem to have sex with him.



Figure 3.7: Somying in the second version tries to push Buntoem away when he tries to have sex with him.

While Somying in the second version is so determined to be a good Thai woman, especially preserving his virginity for the man he loves, there is a scene added in the new version showing Somying being raped by three ugly drunken men after being abandoned by Buntoem. His purity is therefore exploited and pushed across the line from purity/virginity to impurity (*mai borisut*) and he can no longer be considered a “good woman”. Committing public suicide therefore becomes Somying’s chance to purify himself and be adored again by the spectators as a good woman who worships his love and virginity/purity more than his life.

Regarding the changes in Somying’s physical representation, Nantiya Sukontapatipark’s *Relationship between Modern Medical Technology and Gender Identity in Thailand: Passing from “Male Body” to “Female Body”* (2005) is a useful

guide to explain how modern medical technology has made it more possible for a *kathoey* to pass as a woman. Nantiya shows how developments in medical knowledge and practice have manipulated the construction of *kathoey/sao praphet sorng*'s sexed bodies, gender and sexuality. The advances in medical technology, together with the "flexible" medical system in Thailand have helped *kathoey/sao praphetsorng* to transform their bodies to "be like women" more easily. The contraceptive pills and the female hormones in both tablet and ampoules are easily bought in drugstores in Thailand. There are also a good number of hospitals and clinics that provide breast implants, beauty surgery and sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). These make it possible for *kathoey/sao praphet sorng* to be more "like women".

However, under the heterosexual power structures and capitalism, medical power relations also become a strategy used to control and normalise *kathoey/sao praphet sorng*'s gender and sexuality according to its binary appositions in the heteronormative system. Having to depend on modern medical technology, the psychologists and psychiatrists have the authority to decide whether or not each individual *kathoey/sao praphet sorng* is ready for the SRS depending on how well each *kathoey/sao praphet sorng* asserts their feeling of being like women and qualities of being women, and negotiate for achieving ones. In order to be permitted to go for an SRS, *kathoey/sao praphet sorng* have to therefore behave and strictly conform to the hegemonic femininity in Thai society which, as a result, strengthens the rigid notion and practice of heterosexuality/heteronormativity.

In *The Last Song*, it is also the case that Somying in the second version is much more like a genuine woman than Somying in the first one. Medical technology seems to be the answer to the question why Somying in the later version can pass as a "beautiful" woman easily. The later Somying therefore asserts his feeling of being like a woman and qualities of being one to recreate his new identity in accordance with his "partly" transformed body.

Nevertheless, being left by Buntoem for a real woman, his sister, becomes a reality check to Somying to realise that he is not and cannot be a "real" woman. He therefore has to finally accept the fact that he is a *kathoey* (who is stupid enough to be serious in "single" love) and ends his *kathoey* life. Under the patriarchal system in Thailand, weakening himself by transforming from male to female body/figure, Somying therefore becomes the victim who is both mentally and physically taken advantage of and abused by men. More importantly, while patriarchy privileges men

over women, being nearly “the same (as women) but not quite” also puts the *kathoey* character into the lowest position in the power-relation in the rigidly culturally constructed system.

### Summary

In the first section of this analysis, elements of tragedy were employed to analyze the film, especially the characterization of Somying and his public suicide. Applying Harrison’s (1999) discussion of female prostitute characters in Thai literary works, it is clear that Somying was represented far more positively than the other *kathoey* characters, behaving and conforming to many of society’s norms, particularly those associated with Thai hegemonic femininity. The highlighted sympathy made the ending all the more shocking, in which the public suicide can be read as the punishment of sexual minorities for their sexual abnormality.

In sections two and three, the portrayal of male and female homosexual characters and their expression and maintenance of their gendered and sexual identities were discussed. The setting, Pattaya, was the main focus for the discussion showing that as those sexual minorities are able to provide some benefits to the city, especially encouraging tourism, this particular site becomes an exceptional area where sexual minorities seem to be more welcomed. However, the acceptance of sexual minority people in Pattaya represented in the film context should not lead to the assumption that sexual minorities are well accepted throughout the nation. It seems to be only Pattaya as a modern society confirming that the city has a unique relationship to sexual minorities leading to the “special” tolerance towards them.

The last section compared the two versions of *The Last Song*. Probably because of developments in medical technology, Somying is shown to look much more like a woman and to identify and behave him/herself as a real woman. Nonetheless, the later version of the film also shows that he can only be “the same as a woman but not quite”. His “unreal” gendered identity still becomes a burden in his life which is too great to overcome.

Accordingly, *The Last Song* in both versions does not seem to ask for more understanding toward same-sex subcultures. Instead, it plays with the stigmas, traumas

and stereotypes of sexual minority people to gain mere sympathy and compassion from the audience which possibly explains why *The Last Song* so appealed to heterosexual/heteronormative spectators.

Even though *The Last Song* concentrates on sexual minorities, the film strictly conforms to heteronormative expectations. It is inevitable, thus the characters of sexual minorities finally meet with tragedy, confirming that “on the purple path of the third sex, it has to be difficult to find true love”. The tragic ending in *The Last Song* therefore proves the myth of a “gay paradise” in Thai society to be illusory. According to the film context, Thailand can only be a “gay paradise” when sexual minorities have to be dead first to get rid of their abnormality from being non-normative sexual beings in order to reach a paradise, a place for dead people.

The next tragedy to be discussed is *Bangkok Love Story*. While *The Last Song* portrays both female and male homosexuals, especially effeminate ones or *kathoey*, *Bangkok Love Story* solely depicts masculine male homosexuals, rendering it the first Thai film that focuses on the love and relationship between male homosexuals who are not stereotypically characterized as *kathoey*.

*Bangkok Love Story (Pheuan...ku rak meung wa) (2007)***Introduction**

It is stated on the film posters as well as on the Thai-released version VCD and DVD covers that *Bangkok Love Story* is “the best “love” film by Poj Arnon<sup>13</sup>” (*phapphayon rak thi di thi-sut khorng Poj Arnon*). When released to mainstream Thai cinema, *Bangkok Love Story* became “the movie everybody has been talking about” (Kong Rithdee 2007). While it might not be the case, as I will argue, that *Bangkok Love Story* received such intense interest from Thai society because of its “best” quality, what does seem more certain is that the film caused nationwide controversy as a result of its explicit depictions of same-sex sexual desire, love, and relationships between the two lead homosexual characters.

*Bangkok Love Story* is the first Thai film to depart from the stereotypical representations of the effeminate homosexual or *kathoey* which has been more familiar to Thai audiences. Furthermore, unlike *The Last Song* which concluded that “on the purple path of the third sex, it is difficult to find true love”, *Bangkok Love Story* creates an idealised “true love” of homosexual characters that even the director alleges he does not believe could ever possibly happen (interviewed in the DVD special features). This may explain why the director ends the film tragically by separating the homosexual characters by death. Consequently, even though *Bangkok Love Story* suggests that on the purple path of the third sex (considering that heterosexual men and women are the first and second sexes respectively), it might be possible for sexual minorities to find true love, it is still impossible for them to maintain their “same-sex true love” until the end of the film.

*Bangkok Love Story* tells the story of an assassin named Make (Rattanaballang Tohssawat), meaning “cloud” in English, who is sent by his mafia boss to kidnap Eit

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<sup>13</sup> Poj Arnon is a director who is well-known from a good number of his *kathoey/gay* focused films. The other *kathoey/gay* films by Poj Arnon are *Go Six (Go-hok plin plon kalon torlae)* (2000), *The Cheerleader Queens (Wai boem...cheer kraheum loke)* (2003), *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok (Plon na ya)*, which is another film by this director that will be discussed in my thesis, *Hor taew taek* (2007), *Taew te teen raboet* (2009), *Hor taew taek haek krajoeng* (2009) and *Hor taew taek waek chimi* (2011). Judging from the number of these films, Poj is the only Thai film director who can be said to have been continuously producing mainstream *kathoey/gay* films.

(Chaiwat Tongsaeng), meaning “brick” in English, who is a policeman. Make has to become a gunman because he needs money to take care of his mother and younger brother who were both infected with HIV/AIDS by his sexually abusive bisexual stepfather.

Make cruelly takes Eit to his boss’ place which doubles as a store selling Buddha statues. But as a “moralistic” assassin, who kills only bad people, once knowing that Eit is a good policeman, Make refuses to kill him and instead helps him to escape.

The Buddha statue store becomes the scene of a gun battle after Make rejects his boss’ order to kill Eit and he is shot by his boss on his right upper arm. They finally manage to escape from the house and go to stay at Make’s safe house on the rooftop of an abandoned building. Eit, instead of running away from Make, devotedly stays with him and nurses him back to health, creating a strong sexual tension and bond between them, rendering finally a sexual relationship, emotional attachment and love.

Traumatised in childhood by his sexually abused and bisexual stepfather, Make cannot accept the fact that he is also homosexual. Immediately after having sex with Eit for the first time, Make forces him to leave by pointing a gun at Eit’s head.

After forcing Eit to leave, Make stays at the safe house for a while and then returns home. He does not know that on the day he goes back home, Eit has been following him. Being away from each other for a while brings Make to realise and finally accept the fact that he loves Eit. When Make becomes aware that Eit is following him, they run into each other and make love right in front of Make’s house in the middle of the street in the pouring rain. Make’s brother, Moke (meaning “fog” in English), his mother, as well as Sai, Eit’s fiancée who secretly follows Eit, witness their expression of homoeroticism and same-sex behaviour in the public space.

Make, all of a sudden, ceases making love to Eit and walks inside his house, leaving Eit alone on the street. Sai, meaning “sand” in English, being so shocked and angry, grasps a gun from her handbag and aims at Eit. There is a sound of gunfire but the film does not make it clear whether Sai fires the gun. Nevertheless, Eit is not hit and Sai drives off.

Moke, distraught at seeing his brother having sex with another man, fights with Make. Listening to her sons fighting, the mother blames all the misery and conflict on herself and decides to end her life by hanging herself from the ceiling. Make saves his mother in time and tries to take her to hospital. Waiting outside the house is a gunman

sent by the boss to kill Make, but as he is carrying his mother, her body protects Make from the bullet and she is shot dead.

Driven with rage, Make goes to his boss' house to take revenge. Make kills the boss and goes to meet Moke at a train station, planning to escape from Bangkok and start new lives in a provincial area called Mae Hong Sorn. However, Make is arrested by the police at the station.

Eit follows Make to the boss' house but arrives too late. He walks into the room where the boss's wife is carrying her husband's dead body and trying to protect herself, she uses her husband's gun and shoots at Eit. The bullets hit a clock next to him, shattering it to pieces, some of which hit Eit in the eyes blinding him.

Make is imprisoned for 20 years and Eit comes to visit him regularly. Moke who is sent to a special hospital for HIV/AIDS patients also hangs himself as he does not have any reason to live. When Make finishes his 20 years sentence, Eit goes to take Make home upon his release. Not far from the prison gate, Make is shot dead by an anonymous assassin. The last scene shows Eit living alone in a non-Thai space, possibly Korea or Japan, still being faithful in his love for Make.

An analysis of Make's characterisation shows that he, similarly to Somying in *The Last Song*, is special and of higher than ordinary moral worth. Despite being a gunman, he is forced into this path because he has to look after his sick and dependent mother and brother. More importantly, he is not just an assassin who kills other people for money but a "moralistic" assassin who eliminates bad people from society.

A comparison may be made with another Thai film, *Bangkok Dangerous* (dir. Oxide Pang and Danny Pang, 1999), a film made by the two Hong Kong brother directors. Both films tell the story of a man who, according to some inferiority/misfortune in life, has become a gunman. In each film, the gunman dies at the end conforming to codes of morality, especially in a Thai Buddhist context. Kong, the gunman in *Bangkok Dangerous*, blows his head off with a gun once he realises that being a gunman is wrong and faces his feelings of guilt. In comparison with Kong, by killing only bad people, Make's guilt is diminished and he is more sympathetic for the audience. Even though Make also pays for his bad deeds as an assassin in prison for 20 years, his same-sex behaviour still seems to be another "crime/immoral behaviour" that the character needs to pay off by ultimately dying.

When released to mainstream Thai cinema, *Bangkok Love Story* was "the film everybody was talking about" in both a positive and negative sense. One common

positive comment about Poj Arnon, the screenplay writer and director, was that he “dared” to show an explicit same-sex desire, love, and relationship in mainstream Thai cinema (see Vitaya Saeng-aroon (2007) and Kong Rithdee (2007)). The criticism is generally related to poor quality in terms of the film elements, especially the plot and story line, which make the film unconvincing and illogical (see Manofsiam (2007) and Nattana Prasannam (2008)). The film, however, won the prestigious *Supannahong* Awards for Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography and Best Sound Record.

Portraying Eit as a newly graduated police student, *Bangkok Love Story* also received strong criticism from some high ranking Thai policemen. The spokesman of the Royal Thai Police Department, Police Lieutenant General Achirawit Suwannaphesat stated in an interview to *Bangkok Today* (24<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> May 2006<sup>14</sup>) that:

ผมไม่ได้ต่อต้านหรือปฏิเสธเรื่องเกย์ ทุกประเทศก็มีคนประเภทนี้อยู่ มนุษย์เราก็คือเป็นแบบนี้ แต่ก็อยากให้เราอยู่ในสังคมของเขา แต่ถ้าคุณพจน์จะทำหนังเรื่องแบบนี้ เอาเรื่องคนในเครื่องแบบมาทำเป็นหนังเกย์ มันจะทำให้ภาพลักษณ์ของตำรวจเสีย ไม่เกิดประโยชน์...

[trans] I am not anti-homosexual. Every country has these kinds of people. This is human nature. However, they should be in their own community. If he insists on making the film, do not use police in a gay movie. It will destroy the image of policemen, which is not beneficial...

In the same article, Police General Wisut Wanitchabutr, the Assistant Commander of Crime against Child, Juvenile and Woman Department, also commented that:

ลูกผู้ชายจะมีอะไรกับลูกผู้ชายไม่ได้... ยกตัวอย่างข่าวตำรวจระดับสารวัตรที่เพิ่งถูกกะเทยฆ่าในม่าน รูด ซึ่งคนในสังคมจะคิดกันอย่างไรในการพากะเทยไปนอน คล้าย ๆ เป็นการเบี่ยงเบนพฤติกรรม มนุษย์เราชายต้องคู่หญิง แม้คุณจะทำหนังเกย์ก็ไม่ควรเอาตำรวจมาเกี่ยวข้อง แต่ตำรวจรักกับผู้ชายก็ไม่เหมาะสม และยังรักกับผู้ชายยังไม่ดีใหญ่ ยิ่งทำให้เกิดวิบัติตำรวจเสียหายเป็นทวีคูณ เป็นตำรวจต้องจับผู้ชาย ต้องทำตามหน้าที่อย่างเต็มที่ ไม่เช่นนั้นอาจเข้าข่ายฐานละเว้นการปฏิบัติหน้าที่ เป็นแบบอย่างที่ไม่ดี ทำให้สังคมเกิดความวุ่นวาย เป็นแบบอย่างต่อเยาวชนที่ไม่ดี ซึ่งเยาวชนอาจจะอ้างได้ว่า ที่ตำรวจยังรักกับผู้ชายได้โดยไม่เสียหาย ทั้งที่อาชีพตำรวจเป็นอาชีพที่เยาวชนใฝ่ฝัน การที่ไปรักกับผู้ชายอาจมีการช่วยเหลือให้พ้นคดีได้ เป็นการยึดความรักมากกว่าหน้าที่ และยิ่งทะเล้งไปรักเพศเดียวกันอีก ทำให้เยาวชนเกิดการเลียนแบบ

[trans] A masculine man cannot have sex with another masculine man...When there is news about a police gets killed by a *kathoey* in a motel, what would people think of police men?

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *Kill that gay film!*. Bangkok Rainbow Organization., 2008. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.

It's a deviant behaviour. As we are human beings, men have to be with women. Even though you want to make a gay film, it is inappropriate to use police men. Let alone a policeman falls in love with another man, this is the police man falls in love with a criminal. This is not a good example and can disturb the harmony of the society. It is also a bad example for children. They may make an excuse to commit crimes and assume that when policemen fall in love with them, they might help them out of the guilt...Children may copy that.

It is interesting that while the film also portrays a corrupt high-ranking policeman who explicitly destroys the great honour of the Thai police, the policemen do not seem bothered by that. Showing a gay policeman on screen seems to be more concerned by the Thai police officers that it can destroy the good image of the Royal Thai Police.

While domestically *Bangkok Love Story* was popular, it was not hugely successful financially. The film earned only 11 million baht in its five weeks theatrical run<sup>15</sup>, which is less than films depicting stereotyped *kathoey* characters from the genre of comedy released within the same year such as *Hor Taew Taek* [Haunted Sissy Dorm]<sup>16</sup> (dir. Poj Arnon, 2007), *Tut Su Foot* [*Kung Fu Toosie*]<sup>17</sup> (dir. Jaturong Ponlaboon, 2007), and *Kurat* [*Odd Couple*]<sup>18</sup> (dir. Nopparat Bhuddarattanamane, 2007). These *kathoey* comedy films earned more than 50 million baht in their first two weeks of release<sup>19</sup>. While *Bangkok Love Story* was the film that Thai people were “talking about”, not many people actually went to see it.

One apparent difference between *Bangkok Love Story* and those *kathoey* comedies is that the former puts its main focus exclusively on same-sex desire, practices

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<sup>15</sup> For *Bangkok Love Story*'s gross income see “Bangkok Love Story.” Deknang. Web. Accessed 21 Oct. 2009.

<sup>16</sup> *Hor taew taek* is an hilarious comedy ghost film directed by the same film director, Poj Arnon, about a group of middle-aged transvestites who own a dormitory haunted by a transvestite and a female ghost.

<sup>17</sup> *Kung Fu Toosie* is a comedy about a *kathoey* character who has to pretend to be his older twin brother in order to be a leader of a mafia gangster while his brother needs to recover from injury from fighting another mafia gang.

<sup>18</sup> *Odd Couple* is a comedy about a *kathoey* character who witnesses his *kathoey*'s friend being murdered by a homophobic serial-killer. He helps the police catch the murderer.

<sup>19</sup> For *Hor taew taek*'s gross income, see Anchalee Chaiworaporn 2004. For *Kung Fu Toosie* and *Odd Couple*'s gross income, see The total gross of Thai films in 2007. Siamzone., 3 Jan. 2008. Web. Accessed 21 Oct. 2009.

and love and immortalises them (if not physically as one of the main characters dies at the end of the film, then spiritually as the remaining character still perpetuates their same-sex love and relationship, perhaps reminiscent of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)). On the contrary, in those *kathoey* Thai comedies, same-sex desire, practices and love are hilariously and pathetically portrayed and cannot be “normally” survived at the end of the film<sup>20</sup>.

While in Thailand *Bangkok Love Story* was not particularly successful financially, the film was well received internationally. Within Asia, the film was distributed in Singapore by Golden Village Company, in Taiwan by Sky Films, and in Korea by Jin Jin Company. In the West, the film was awarded the Best Film at the 34th Brussels International Independent Film Festival in Belgium. In France, Optimale Company bought rights for the film, while TLA Releasing bought rights to market the film in the US and UK (Guillen 2007). *Bangkok Love Story* played at the London LGBT Film Festival 2008, and sold out weeks in advance of being shown.

Contradictory responses to *Bangkok Love Story* between Thai and non-Thai audiences also occurred with some other Thai films such as *Reuang Talok 69* [*Sixynin9*] (dir. Pen-Ek Ratanareuang, 1999), *Fah Talai Jone* [*Tears of the Black Tiger*] (dir. Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000), and *Sat pralat* [*Tropical Malady*] (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004). These films were similarly more successful internationally than domestically and have been regarded as “new Thai cinema”. Since *Bangkok Love Story* also shares similar characteristics to these films, I will employ the discussion and notion of “new Thai cinema” to analyse the film.

Furthermore, since the issue of HIV/AIDS is noticeably addressed and used as an important motif in the film, the Western notion of “New Queer Cinema” derived directly from the HIV/AIDS crisis will also be applied to illuminate the analysis of the particular issue which will reveal the ignorant and hysterical nature of the representation of HIV/AIDS in *Bangkok Love Story*. In the final part, when *Bangkok Love Story* plays vividly on symbols, I will also explore their meaning in the film.

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<sup>20</sup> It is the case that in *Odd Couple* the main *kathoey* character is proposed to and marries one of the murderers who transforms into a good person once he falls in love with the *kathoey* character. The ex-murderer is nevertheless characterised as a sadomasochist. Compared to the main heterosexual character with whom the *kathoey* character falls in love, and who is portrayed as good-natured, smart, protective, and handsome, the ex-murderer can be seen merely as a consolation prize for the *kathoey* in order to make their same-sex love and relationship happen. The “odd couple” referred to in the film’s title thus comprise a *kathoey* and a sadomasochistic former murderer. Even though the film ends with the scene that the *kathoey* character is proposing on the stage being witnessed by hundreds of his audience in public, their same-sex desire and love are still portrayed as “abnormal” and “imperfect”.

### ***Bangkok Love Story* as New Thai Cinema**

“New Thai cinema” refers to Thai films since the late-nineties with their resurgent output and popularity. There are many factors both internal and external contributing to the rise of new Thai cinema. In terms of domestic influence, the increasing size of the Thai middle class and the new wave of young cosmopolitan film people are key factors pertaining to the new genre. From the international perspective, the increasing pan-Asia cultural flow and transnational financing patterns, the popularity of international film festivals, and the exotic notion of “world cinema” also helped to construct new Thai cinema. (See Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2006), May Adadol and MacDonald 2005, Sudarat 2007, and Farmer 2011).

Films regarded as new Thai cinema usually negatively addressed the impact of modernity on Thai culture which can be read as the antithesis of transnational modernisation (Harrison 2005 and Anchalee and Knee 2006). Nevertheless Pattana Kitiarsa (2004) notes that while new Thai cinema concerns the “crisis of modernity”, it does not absolutely judge against modernity in favour of tradition although the traditional mode would appear to be in a higher position to and have controlling influence to the former.

The portrayal of Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story* also praises the anti-modernisation in the city by cherishing a primitive Thai lifestyle. Paradoxically though, it beautifully visualises Bangkok or *Krungthep*, which literally means “the city of angels”, the capital and the most modernised/urbanised city in Thailand, as a hyper-modern cosmopolis. This expresses some ambivalence over the setting which also reveals the ambivalent attitudes towards homosexuality in the film.

### **Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story*: The City of Ambivalence**

Winning the award for the best film from the 34th Brussels International Independent Film Festival in Belgium, Robert Malengreau, commented that:

[W]e will never forget the beautiful scenes of Bangkok by twilight. The capital city of Thailand has never been more beautiful on screen. It is like something that is impressively floating and circulating in the air. This deconstructs the rules of previous films that try to criticize Thai society. *Bangkok Love*

*Story* anyhow reflects both good and bad sides of Bangkok which make Poj Arnon's film becomes a black diamond that beautifully exists in the thoughts.<sup>21</sup>

Malengreau's comment on *Bangkok Love Story* reveals the ambivalent attitude towards Bangkok as the setting is regarded as a "black diamond" that bears both positive and negative connotations. I will begin by discussing the negative attitudes towards the setting in *Bangkok Love Story* and then I will move on to explore the part in which Bangkok is visualised positively.

### ***Hell-o Bangkok: Let me tell you something! Don't go to Bangkok!***

อย่าไปเลย บางกอก จะบอกให้  
 พี่เคยไป มาแล้ว นื่องแก้วเอ๊ย  
 จะบอกเจ้า เอานูญ คนคุ้นเคย  
 อย่าไปเลย บางกอก ช้ำชอก ใจ

[trans] Let me tell you something, my dear.  
 Don't go to Bangkok. I have been there.  
 Please don't go there or else you end up hurting  
 your heart.

This is the first stanza of a 1961 song called *Sawatdi Bangkok (Hello Bangkok)*<sup>22</sup>. The song explicitly articulates the negative notions towards Bangkok by warning how the city and Bangkokians can be both harmful and deceptive. The song suggests that it is wiser to stay in primitive rural areas.

Similar to the song *Hello Bangkok* and some other new Thai cinema as mentioned above, *Bangkok Love Story* also delivers a certain rejection of the modernisation of Bangkok.

Opening the film with an establishing shot of the inside of a 7-Eleven, the internationally franchised convenience store that has become incredibly popular in Thailand, modernity in Bangkok is already represented at the very outset in the film. The first scene shows two parallel stacks of various kinds of tidily arranged goods (Figure 3.8) visually representing the conformity of urban life under capitalism,

<sup>21</sup> Translated from Thai from Sahamongkol Film International. *Bangkok Love Story*. Thai Cinema., 23 Jan. 2008. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2011.

<sup>22</sup> The lyrics were composed by Arjin Panjapak and music by Uea Sunthornsanan from the ever-famous Suntaraporn Band.

materialism and consumerism. The products in the convenience store, tidily arranged according to a pre-determined pattern, symbolise urban people's lifestyle in Bangkok in the film context. They have to conform to prevailing economic and social patterns derived from socially approved standards, attitudes and practices.



Figure 3.8: the opening scene of *Bangkok Love Story* in a 7-Eleven convenience store.

As in many other projected urban cities, such as Seattle in *Sleepless in Seattle* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1993), Tokyo in *Lost in Translation* (dir. Sofia Coppola, 2003), and New York in *Sex and the City* (dir. Michael Patrick King, 2008), Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story* is also portrayed as a sleepless city where people seem to be perennially busy with their work and businesses earning a living. The modes of public transportation are never quiet or empty and people are encouraged to consume and purchase to maintain the capitalist system.

The opening non-dialogue scene inside the convenience store with no human dialogue also reveals the absence of human interaction leading to loneliness in urban society. The first element of speech in the film is Make's voiceover asking the film audience:

Have you ever felt this way? Seeing people being happy together, but it is only you walking alone by yourself on the street, in a car, on a boat or wherever. It might not be strange then to think that this world is such a lonely and depressed place.

Having to engage with the audience outside the film context, who can never respond or take part, therefore intensifies Make's loneliness.

The visual track which is a series of continuity editing also helps visualise Make's emotion. We see Make walking on the street, travelling on a boat and being surrounded by crowds of people. Bangkok, like many other urban cities in the world, is visualised as what Mark Twain (1867) described New York City as "a splendid desert – a domed and steepled solitude, where the stranger is lonely in the midst of a million of his race."

Louis Wirth's *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (1938: 1) also confirms the effects of urbanisation that leads to "individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship, the segmentalization of human relations which are largely anonymous, superficial, and transitory, and associated characteristics". Opening the scene with a non-dialogue scene among the characters also makes Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story* a site of lonely and despairing people.

While addressing the negative impact of modernity on Thai culture, Anchalee (2006) notes that new Thai cinema also cherishes the "romantic fantasies about a historical simplicity of Thai lifestyle and long for perfect family, home and the good old days". In *Bangkok Love Story*, it is also the case that the film cherishes and fantasises the simplicity/tradition of Thai lifestyle.

Make's younger brother, Moke, clings to the dream of leaving Bangkok for Mae Hong Sorn, a traditional northern province in Thailand surrounded by mountains. Being named **Moke** or "fog", the significant link between the character and the primitive city, Mae Hong Sorn, is created since the city is also called "*meuang sam moke* [Three Fogs City]" or the city where it is foggy in all three seasons. The non-metropolis city becomes the site to which the character feels a sense of belonging and can be a part of it (as bonded by his name), whereas he feels displaced and alienated in the modern city, Bangkok.

The film offers scenes showing Moke holding old photographs of the beautiful natural scenery in Mae Hong Sorn giving a sense of nostalgia. Make promises Moke that after he finishes his last job, which is to kidnap Eit for the boss, he will take Moke and his mother to live a happy family life there. After saying this, the first relieved smiles of the two brothers are delivered in the scene. Mae Hong Sorn becomes a site in the film context that helps fantasise the historical simplicity of Thai lifestyle. Even though Mae Hong Sorn is shown only through pictures in the film, its beautiful, clean and spacious scenery effectively functions as a romantic fantasy of primitive Thai lifestyle.

These fantasies are further reinforced by Make after he comes out of the prison. He still retains the idea of leaving Bangkok for a rural area (*tang jangwat*) and asks Eit to come and live with him. Non-modernised cities with a primitive lifestyle are therefore repeatedly used in the film as a place of fantasy for the characters. They are places where problems and mistakes can be solved and purified.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the setting in *Bangkok Love Story* also expresses some ambivalence about the capital city. Despite all of the negative attitudes towards Bangkok as discussed above, Bangkok in many scenes is also paradoxically beautifully visualised.

### **Oh! Bangkok. Heaven on Earth!**

โอ้กรุงเทพเมืองฟ้าอมร  
 สมเป็นนครมหานที  
 สวยงามหนักหนายามราตรี  
 งาม เหลือเกินเพลิดเพลินฤดี<sup>23</sup>

[trans.] Oh! Bangkok. Heaven on earth!,  
 No wonder it is the capital city.  
 It is so beautiful during the night.  
 It is beyond words to describe how beautiful it is.

Words from the popular song *Krungthep ratri* (1940)<sup>23</sup> [Bangkok by Night] that describe how beautiful Bangkok is by night also seem to echo in *Bangkok Love Story*. After the opening scene in the convenience store, parallel editing is paradoxically used to describe scenes of Make killing people with scenes of a beautiful firework display above the exotically magnificent Grand Palace located in the heart of Bangkok by night (Figure 3.9).

<sup>23</sup> *Krungthep ratri* was composed by Kaew Atcharyakol with music by Uea Sunthornsanan.



Figure 3.9: A beautiful firework display over the exotically magnificent Grand Palace in Bangkok.

The following early morning scene introduces Eit to the audience. His room is on the bank of the Chao Phraya river which further enhances the sense of a beautiful, bright, and lively morning riverside setting in Bangkok. Similar to the song *Bangkok by Night*, the scenes of the city in *Bangkok Love Story* make it “appear” to be a beautiful city.

The beautiful depiction of Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story* therefore presents ambivalence over the city which makes Bangkok, as Malengreau notes, “black diamond” that bears both positive and negative connotations. The ambivalent attitude towards Bangkok is paralleled by an ambivalent attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in the film.

### ***Bangkok Love Story: The City of Homosexual Ambivalence***

Given that *Bangkok Love Story* is the best “love” film by Poj Arnon, the film contains and cherishes some romantic moments of same-sex desire and love between Make and Eit. For instance, there is a scene showing Eit and Make in separate beds, when they accidentally exchange glances leading to an endearing awkward smile revealing Make and Eit’s feelings for each other. This can be viewed as Make’s “coming out” scene as it is the first time that he expresses his same-sex desire.

There are some other scenes in which Make and Eit’s love for each other is revealed such as those where Eit takes care of Make and the prison scenes in which Eit, even though he is blind, visits Make regularly.

Nevertheless, the film also sends out strongly negative attitudes towards homosexuality which express the ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. Freud stated that ambivalence is a universal phenomenon that is derived from irreconcilable impulses (quoted in Lorenz-Meyer 2001). In *Bangkok Love Story*, Make also experiences and struggles with the irreconcilable impulses derived from the trauma of sexual abuse at the hands of his step-father. For Make, homosexual behaviour is a disgusting disease that destroys his family. His experience and memory of homosexuality and his homosexual identity are therefore irreconcilable.

The characterisation of Make, a homosexual who suffered same-sex sexual abuse in childhood, also strengthens the heteronormative myth in Thai society, mentioned in Chapter 1, that people become homosexuals because they experience some “sexual abnormalities” in their childhood.

Accordingly, while attempting to portray both the “City of Angels” and the issue of homosexuality in a positive light, as further discussed below, the film nonetheless conforms fully to the myths and stigmas on homosexuality as being contagious, deviant, destructive, and violent in Thai society.

### **Can the City of “Angels” also be the City of “Fairies”?**

Whilst Bangkok, the “City of Angles”, is visualised beautifully in many scenes in the film, especially in the public sphere, the beautiful setting, to a great extent, can be seen as a border that separates the public/heterosexual domain from the private/homosexual sphere. Doubtlessly the spectacular public areas belong to heteronormativity while unclean, sickly and unlit places are used to accommodate same-sex behaviour and the consequences of such “deviant” behaviour in the film context.

The settings that are involved with or related to same-sex desire and practices are negatively visualised within a limited/abandoned area. Moke and the mother, the two characters suffering from HIV/AIDS, live in an old townhouse in an unpleasant area of Bangkok. The use of colours in the townhouse is muted, darkness and dirt prevails the scene. The narrow camera angle evokes a sense of suffocation, depression and confinement, which obviously reveals the ignorant and hysterical attitudes to the representation of HIV/AIDS as a contagious, hopeless, and dreadful disease/affliction.

In linking the issue of HIV/AIDS to homosexuality via the sexually abusive bisexual stepfather, homosexuality in the film is itself also negatively/stereotypically

depicted as an “infection” (*rok tit tor*) and as a “gay cancer”, which is harmful/dangerous/destructive since it completely destroys Make’s family. Make has to become a gunman to take care of his sick mother and brother, and, is filled with self-loathing, being unable to accept that he is homosexual. From an innocent young boy, after being raped by his stepfather, Moke also becomes aggressive and depressed and works as a prostitute to earn money and to take revenge by infecting his male clients with HIV.

The mise-en-scene in the safe house where Make and Eit seek refuge from the boss and accommodate their same-sex desire also expresses the sense of concealment, unsanitariness and loss of connectivity with mainstream society. The daytime scenes at the safe house are always unlit. The sky is full of heavy rain-threatening cloud. The atmosphere links and reflects Make’s feelings (his name also means “cloud”) and the cloudy atmosphere conveys the sense of instability and lack of clarity in the relationship between Make and Eit. It is true that the first sex scene between Make and Eit on the rooftop of the building is filmed with a wide, long open shot rendering a sense of liberation and freedom. The building is nevertheless an abandoned and unwanted space that loses its connection to mainstream heteronormativity.

The second sex scene in front of Make’s house where Make and Eit bravely make love right in the middle of the road also carries a sense of foreboding. The scene is set during the night and the threatening storm adds to the sense of darkness. Make is filmed from a high overhead shot minimizing his existence. The camera angle gives the sense that Make is being watched and followed by a higher power, adding to the atmosphere of insecurity. It turns out that it is Eit who is following Make and the two men start making out in the pouring rain accompanied by thunder and continuous lightening flashes. While the sex scene between the two male characters can again be seen as a liberal and celebratory scene because they break the norms of public and private spheres in terms of sexuality by exhibiting their same-sex behaviour in public, their non-normative sexuality merely leads to tragic and destructive results.

Same-sex desire also destroys Sai, Eit’s girlfriend, an innocent young woman and her heteronormative way of life. Sai is portrayed as an abused character who is used by her “closet” homosexual fiancé to cover his homosexuality. The scene when Eit takes her to see a famous traditional Thai puppet show not only exoticises the film, perhaps appealing to non-Thai spectators, but also becomes a symbol indicating that Sai

herself is merely a puppet being used by her fiancé to “perform” and conform to masculine heterosexuality.

As mentioned earlier, the plot in *Bangkok Love Story* has been heavily criticised, particularly because the captive happens to fall in love with his captor. Trying to make some sense of the plot, the love and relationship in *Bangkok Love Story* seems to derive from the Stockholm syndrome or the Hostage Identification Syndrome, an emotional attachment between captors and captives in hostage situations. Captives who exhibit this psychological process tend to think highly of their captors for sparing their lives and the strong bond that develops will often include an element of sexual desire.

In *Bangkok Love Story*, when Eit is closest to death, Make spares Eit’s life by not only refusing to kill him but also by saving him from being killed. After that Eit becomes a devoted partner to him which makes the Stockholm syndrome a logical explanation that rationalises the same-sex relationship. With the unconvincing and unusual way of how Make and Eit develop their same-sex love and relationship, *Bangkok Love Story* conforms to the repetitive portrayals of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema that their love and relationship cannot be “normal” or “natural”.

Same-sex desire and behaviour are also closely related to violence in *Bangkok Love Story*. The first same-sex act in the film is when the stepfather sexually abuses and rapes Make and Moke. Make and Eit’s relationship also begins with violence as Make is sent to kidnap Eit. In a number of scenes, Make and Eit help each other to kill other people in order to protect themselves. Same-sex behaviour and violence are thus inextricably linked in the film context encouraging another negative attitude towards non-normative sexuality.

Given that Bangkok (*Krungthep*) means “the city of angels”, according to the above discussion, the public/heteronormative/beautiful sphere in Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story* seems to be able to accommodate merely the heteronormative “angels”, but not those of the “fairies”, a slang term for homosexuals. While attempting to cherish same-same love and relationship, the film, nonetheless, still portrays the issue of homosexuality as being contagious, deviant, destructive, and violent.

Since the film also expresses its considerable concern regarding the issues of HIV/AIDS, in the next section, New Queer Cinema – the notion derived from HIV/AIDS related issues from Western perspective – will be applied to the discussion of the issue of HIV/AIDS in *Bangkok Love Story*.

### ***Bangkok Love Story* as New Queer Cinema**

While elements of *Bangkok Love Story* mean there is doubt as to whether it could be considered a part of “Western” New Queer Cinema, the notion of New Queer Cinema, as I will argue, is a useful tool in the analysis of the motif of HIV/AIDS in *Bangkok Love Story*.

Jose Arroya notes that films that constitute New Queer Cinema, which has a strong connection to the issue of HIV/AIDS, “utilises irony and pastiche, represent fragmented subjectivities, depict a compression of time with sometimes dehistoric results, and...are dystopic” (quoted in Pearl 2004: 23). Based on Arroya’s discussion, Monica B. Pearl (2004: 23-25) further mentions that HIV causes “disrupted identity” in the way that it cannot be explained by the “traditional” narrative of illness. HIV is a retrovirus that compromises the body’s immune system as it attempts to fight the alien infection. It fools the body so that it is unable to differentiate between itself and the virus. The retrovirus is not conquered by the antibodies as other viruses are, thus HIV does not follow the traditional narrative of infection. HIV/AIDS, therefore, affects patients, their families and their communities in the way that it causes illness and death and this, in turn, aggravates the sense of loss and discontinuity among small groups of individuals in particular communities.

Pearl finds that the narratives of New Queer Cinema resemble the narrative of what HIV does, or is perceived to be doing, with the body. The narratives in New Queer Cinema also present discontinuity and disruption. The films lack a coherent narrative, genre recognition and those familiarly fulfilled cinematic expectations. Pearl also notes that New Queer Cinema is embraced by the reassignment of responsibility, an anachronistic sense of time and a focus on death (ibid.: 23-25).

In *Bangkok Love Story*, it is apparent that the film breaks away from familiar cinematic expectations, particularly regarding the portrayal of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema, by presenting two masculine homosexuals. More importantly, HIV/AIDS is also presented as the initial cause of all the major conflicts in the film. The way the film engages with the issues of HIV/AIDS, death, responsibility, and fragmented subjectivities, as well as dystopia, make it challenging to read *Bangkok Love Story* as New Queer Cinema.

HIV/AIDS in *Bangkok Love Story* has an impact on everyone's identity in Make's family. The mother becomes physically and mentally weak and dependent. She blames herself for being the one who brings the stepfather into the family and she acknowledges her responsibility for this mistake by hanging herself. She therefore demonstrates responsibility by her death.

Moke's childhood, his young identity, is also destroyed and disrupted by HIV/AIDS. His obsession with Thai fighting-fish, watching them fight until one dies, represents the transformation of his identity from a young innocent boy to a depressed and aggressive young man.

While HIV/AIDS does not infect Make physically, it deeply infects him mentally. It disrupts his identity firstly by transforming him from a caring person into a cruel assassin and is also at the root of his self-hatred regarding his homosexuality. Make's family also becomes a place that represents dystopia, an imaginary state in which the conditions of life are extreme misery, oppression and disease.

*Bangkok Love Story* also focuses on death. Since Make is an assassin, death is repeatedly delivered to the film. More importantly, Make, Moke, and their mother – those members of the family who are directly connected to HIV/AIDS – also reach their deaths as a result of the consequences of the HIV/AIDS motif as portrayed in the film context.

Nevertheless, death can be seen as a strategy that helps immortalise the same-sex love between the two main homosexual characters. Branding itself as a love film by including the word "love" in both Thai and English titles, *Bangkok Love Story* therefore intentionally romanticises and idealises the love and relationship in the film. Many filmic devices are used to highlight the tragic/melodramatic emotions and sentimentality. One of the significant tools is the use of symbols in *Bangkok Love Story*.

### **Symbols in *Bangkok Love Story***

Symbols are intentionally used in *Bangkok Love Story* to intensify the love and relationship between Make and Eit as well as the characterisation. Three significant symbols used in the film are butterflies, a boy doll and a Buddha amulet.

#### **Butterfly: The Circle of Life, the Circle of (Gay) Love: Make It Short!**

Butterflies appear throughout the film. Make has a butterfly tattoo on his left upper arm. He also has a butterfly mobile hanging outside his safe house. Eit gives Make a butterfly ring to be representative of their love.

It is widely known that butterflies, like many other insects, have a short life span. Butterflies are also known as a creature with an amazing life cycle during which they transform themselves through many stages until they reach the final one as a beautiful creature. The butterflies used in the film thus firstly symbolise the short life of the same-sex relationship in the film context.

Moreover, butterflies struggle through many stages in life from eggs, caterpillars and pupa until they reach a stable stage when they can spread their extraordinary, beautiful wings and fly. Eit and especially Make also struggle to survive and maintain their same-sex relationship. However, when they finally have a chance to be together and carry on their same-sex relationship, Make is shot dead immediately after leaving the prison. Just as their same-sex love begins to fly, it perishes, evoking butterfly's life cycle.

Butterflies are also one of few creatures in the world in which differences between the male and female can rarely be distinguished (even though not with every species of butterfly). The similarity between male and female butterflies becomes another symbol of sexuality in the film where "same-sex" behaviour from "indeterminate" gender lies at the centre of the story.

More importantly, butterflies are also known for their ability to adapt their wings' colours and patterns according to their environment for the purpose of camouflage. The relationship between the two homosexual characters, as well as in almost every Thai *gay* film can be read as mimicry of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, particularly the roles of the male and female.

It is the case that *Bangkok Love Story* shows same-sex love and a relationship between two masculine men. However, the roles in the relationship of the two male characters are still divided into two binary opposites of masculinity and femininity in the heteronormativity. It is explicit from the film context that Eit is portrayed as an emotional and devoted “wife”. The scene when he takes care of Make at the safe house illustrates that Eit voluntarily devotes and plays perfectly well in the role of a good housewife. While their sexuality is undifferentiated as they both appear masculine, their gender roles are still stereotypically understood through the heteronormative roles.

Two other symbols, a boy doll and a Buddha amulet necklace, are also significantly used in the film. These symbols highlight Make’s characteristics and personality as a good-natured person which mark him as special, as less guilty for bad deeds as a gunman, and more sympathetic in the view of the audience.

### **A Doll and an Amulet**

A boy doll and a Buddha image amulet are used to symbolise and highlights Make’s personality, particularly his morality. Over the doll’s heart is marked “*look*” which means “son” or “daughter” in English. The doll symbolises Make’s role as a good and devoted son who will do anything to maintain his mother’s well-being.

The “boy” doll is also used as a “coming out” token for Make’s sexuality. Giving Eit his doll, Make expresses his same-sex desire and love to Eit even though Make is still struggling to negotiate his own sexual identity.

Similarly, the Buddhist amulet necklace is also used to symbolise Make’s morality; that even though Make kills other people (only bad people) for a living, he still believes in the Buddha and his religion. It is with regards to Buddhism that another ambivalence becomes apparent. In the film, the mafia boss’s house also serves as a store for Buddha sculptures. While the amulet and the Buddha images store are representatives of the Buddha and his teachings, they do not have any effect on developing the boss’ morality or stop Make from doing bad deeds which reveals a certain degree of faith crisis towards Buddhism in modern Thai society. This issue also appears in another film, *Plon na ya* [*Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*] (2004), which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

## Summary

*Bangkok Love Story* is a mainstream Thai film that focuses on homosexuality and ends in tragedy. Even though the film makes an effort to represent homosexual characters differently by not stereotyping them as effeminate/*kathoey* transvestites, the portrayal of homosexual characters is still full of ambivalence.

The notion of new Thai cinema illuminates the reading of *Bangkok Love Story* with a focus on its ambivalence in terms of the setting and the social attitudes towards the issue of homosexuality. While the homosexual characters are offered an opportunity to find true love, the film later on disrupts that potential by ending one character's life and sending another to live in a foreign country. Thus, the link between the existence of non-normative gender and sexuality and the mainstream heteronormative society is cut.

Applying New Queer Cinema/AIDS cinema to read *Bangkok Love Story* further reveals the ignorant and hysterical nature of the representation of the issue of HIV/AIDS as well as homosexuality since both are depicted as contagious, deviant and destructive.

What seems to be new and appealing about *Bangkok Love Story* to a mainstream Thai audience is therefore merely the portrayal of masculine homosexuals who are not effeminate or *kathoey* and their explicit same-sex sexual acts on the mainstream screen. Nevertheless when the homosexual characters express their non-normative sexuality, it cannot still survive and be maintained until the end of the film.

### Concluding Bitter Queer Thai Cinema

An exploration of the two Thai films, *The Last Song* and *Bangkok Love Story* reveals that even though the films were made 20 years apart, they similarly conform to the myths, stereotypes and stigmas about homosexuality articulated in Thai society.

The depiction of homosexuality in *The Last Song* to a certain extent can be seen as a “traditional non-normative gendered identity” since the film portrays the lives of *kathoeys* as well as *tom* and *dee*.

In *The Last Song*, the main homosexual characters do not face difficulties expressing their non-normative gendered identities in the setting of Pattaya (except Orathai whose family in Bangkok cannot accept her same-sex relationship with Praew). Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the “special” tolerance towards sexual minorities in Pattaya is from the fact that they can be financially beneficial to the city as their transvestite night performance is a magnet that draws both Thai and non-Thai tourists.

The film further reveals that even though both Somying, the *kathoeys* character, and Praew, the *tom* character, try to conform to the feminine and masculine hegemonic thoughts and behaviour in Thai society, their sexuality is still “abnormal” and the film literally and didactically puts a dead end to it. The film closes with the grim declaration that “on the purple path of the third sex, it is difficult to find true love”.

Unlike *The Last Song*, *Bangkok Love Story* made 20 years later focuses on the same-sex desire and relationship between masculine homosexual characters, neither of whom are portrayed as *kathoeys*. *Bangkok Love Story* also boldly deletes the curse from *The Last Song* by allowing the homosexual characters to find true love. Nevertheless, Eit and Make in *Bangkok Love Story* only partially escape from the curse. While the film lets the homosexual characters express their same-sex sexual desire and find true love with each other, it does not allow them to be able to maintain their same-sex true love until the end of the film. Their same-sex love ends with the tragic death of Make, just as Somying dies at the end of *The Last Song*.

In terms of expressing the main characters’ non-normative gendered identity, *Bangkok Love Story*, as discussed earlier, also intriguingly and paradoxically links the expression and existence of homosexuality to all symptomatic, tragic, unfortunate and deviant events in the film. Homosexuality is itself thus portrayed as contagious (*rok tit tor*), disgusting (*na rangkiat*) and destructive (*sia hai*).

Consequently, both *The Last Song* and *Bangkok Love Story* can be seen as a “bitter” depiction of sexual minorities on the mainstream Thai silver screen. While there is a significant shift in mainstream Thai cinematic representations of homosexuality from *The Last Song* to *Bangkok Love Story* which is the characterisation that presents more diversity of genders and sexualities from the “stereotyped traditional *kathoeyes*” to masculine male homosexuals or “modern *gays*”, both films still show that it is difficult and problematic for the homosexual characters to express and, especially, maintain their non-normative love, relationships and sexuality in mainstream Thai cinematic representations.

The next chapter will move on to explore portrayals of sexual minorities in the genre of drama. Two films, *Beautiful Boxer* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003) and *Love of Siam* (dir. Chukiat Sakveerakul, 2007), are selected to discuss how non-normative genders and sexualities are portrayed, expressed and maintained within the film contexts.

## Chapter Four

### Bitter-Sweet Queer Thai Cinema

#### Introduction

This chapter aims to explore two mainstream Thai films with a focus on sexual minorities in the genre of drama. The first film is *Beautiful Boxer* directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham in 2003. *Beautiful Boxer* is the first mainstream Thai film to be based on the true story of a transsexual. It tells the story of Parinya Chalernphon or Nong Toom, the first transgender/transsexual kick boxer in Thailand. The second film is *The Love of Siam*, directed by Chukiat Sakveerakul in 2007. This is the first mainstream Thai film to portray same-sex desire, love and a relationship between two young homosexual characters in their early teens.

Tim Dirks (2010) defines drama films as “serious presentations or stories with settings or life situations that portray realistic characters in conflict with either themselves, others, or forces of nature”. Cuddon (1998: 237) similarly refers to drama as “a serious play; not necessarily tragedy”. In *Beautiful Boxer* and *The Love of Siam*, the main homosexual characters, especially in *Beautiful Boxer* which is based on a true story, are also realistically portrayed and placed in serious settings and life situations derived from conflicts, both internal, and with their families. These conflicts are explicitly related to their non-normative genders and sexualities.

As dramas, neither film ends in absolute tragedy. Indeed, both films, as discussed below, even seem to provide some space for sexual minorities to express their gendered and/or sexual identities. Nevertheless, their same-sex desire, love and relationships cannot be maintained, and are instead deemed invisible and impossible in the heteronormative mainstream cinematic contexts.

In the previous chapter, I referred to the selection of mainstream Thai cinema from the genre of tragedy as “bitter” portrayals of sexual minorities since the main homosexual characters faced tragic endings and death. By way of contrast, in this current chapter which is concerned with the genre of drama, the main homosexual characters seem to be tolerated though not completely accepted, and the cinematic

representations of homosexuality reveal the “bitter-sweet” depictions of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema.

## ***Beautiful Boxer* (2003)**

### **Introduction**

*Beautiful Boxer*, Ekachai Uekrongtham's first film, follows the life journey of Nong Toom, or Parinya Chalernphon (played by first-time actor and professional kick boxer Asanee Suwan,), who achieves her goal of having male-to-female sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) and financially supports her poor family at the same time by earning money from being a professional Thai kick-boxer. Her outstanding talent in the male-dominated masculine sport of kick-boxing, together with her non-normative gendered identity as a *kathoey*/effeminate homosexual, brings her popularity both in Thai society and also worldwide.

*Beautiful Boxer* has already been discussed at length by Oradol Kaewprasert whose analysis is shaped by the fact that she is female and a Thai national. In her PhD thesis, *Gender Representation in Thai Queer Cinema* (2008), Oradol states that *Beautiful Boxer* breaks all stereotyped and clichéd depictions of Thai transgender/transsexual characters as effeminate camp, screaming, hilarious and loud (ibid: 135).

While I agree with Oradol that *Beautiful Boxer* does not rely on the negative images of transgenders/transsexuals typical of other mainstream Thai films such as *The Iron Ladies I* (dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, 2000) and its sequel *The Iron Ladies II* (dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, 2003), my analysis which is coloured by the fact that I am a Thai transgender, not a transsexual, finds that the film heavily conforms to concepts of Thai hegemonic femininity, an approved and accepted gendered identity in the binary oppositions of the rigid heteronormative system that decreases the diversity of gendered and sexual expressions/identities.

Since Oradol devotes an entire chapter to this film, I will not repeat what she has already said. Rather, my analysis will focus on other pertinent issues including; firstly, the ethical evaluation which will focus on how the life of a Thai transsexual can be described as a "beautiful boxer"; secondly, the misunderstanding, misreading and misleading representation of Buddhism in *Beautiful Boxer* and Thai society; and finally, the main transsexual character's process of expressing and maintaining her non-normative gendered and/or sexual identity in the film context.

### **The Ethical Evaluation: Why the life of a Thai transsexual boxer can be described as “beautiful”?**

Jackson (1999a: 226) observes that the attitude towards sexual minorities in Thai society is “tolerant but unaccepting”. Similarly, Jaray Singhakowinta’s PhD thesis, *Unimaginable Desires: Gay Relationships in Thailand* (2010) also finds limitations and difficulties in expressing one’s same-sex desire in a Thai context, both in the lived lives of *gay* men and in the representations of *gay* relationships in such media as cinema. Turning the focus towards male to female transsexuals, it is also the case that their non-normative gender is merely tolerated but not accepted by society.

Given the observation in Chapter 1 regarding the negative social attitudes/reactions towards sexual minorities, especially *kathoe*y and transsexuals in terms of their rights, particularly the issue of changing titles that match their new gendered identities/expression, it becomes interesting to ask how, and why, the life of a Thai transgender/transsexual in *Beautiful Boxer* can be described with such an admirable term as “beautiful”. Toom’s characterisation/construction as a “good Thai woman” even though she was born in a male body, and as a “good Thai child” who puts her family before herself, are key factors in making Toom’s life “beautiful”, as will be discussed below.

In *Beautiful Boxer*, Toom starts to narrate her story to a Western reporter who asks her when she realised she wanted to be a woman. Toom replies by recalling the first experience at a Thai temple fair when she was young. Toom was particularly impressed by the temple fair because there were “so many beautiful things in one place”. A flashback is used while Toom relates her childhood memories to the reporter. The scene at the temple fair distinctively reveals Toom’s overriding preference for femininity over masculinity ever since she was very young.

At the temple fair, Toom experiments with two activities; one, a gender-specific activity which is Thai kick-boxing, another, a Thai traditional play called *likay*. Toom explicitly expresses her fear and disgust towards kick-boxing when one of the boxers, injured and face bloodied, falls down in front of her. Toom runs away and finds *likay*. She is totally admiring and adoring of the leading female character in her beautiful dress and makeup singing solo on the stage. The temple scene shows Toom’s preference and keen interest in beauty, feminine activities and femininity, not masculine ones.

In terms of gendered identity and expression, as exemplified by this temple scene, there is a clear split between masculinity (through a “traditional” Thai sport, kick boxing) and femininity (through a “traditional” Thai play, *likay*). Thus *Beautiful Boxer* explores genders within fairly conservative and limited terms of heteronormative binaries – the clearly defined notions of masculinity and femininity.

The film further strengthens Toom’s desire to become a woman by using cinematic fantasy. Before undergoing SRS, Toom, every now and then, fantasises about an imaginary mysterious young girl. Toom first meets her at the temple fair. She curiously stares at and follows the girl but the girl disappears into a crowd of people. Knowing that Toom is a transgender/transsexual, it can be assumed that Toom does not follow the girl because she is attracted to her. Instead, the film reveals later on that Toom is interested in “being” or “becoming” her. The imaginary girl is therefore symbolic of Toom’s fantasy of her desire to have a female body.

The imaginary girl reappears in the film when Toom becomes a young teenager and starts training to be a professional kick-boxer. As part of her everyday training, Toom has to run to the top of a mountain. One morning, Toom fantasises about the girl again who is now about Toom’s age. She fantasises that she finally meets the girl face-to-face and finds that she is more beautiful than Toom had imagined. Toom softly rests her head on the girl’s shoulder and falls asleep peacefully in the pure and beautiful natural scenery of Chiang Mai. Toom wakes up and finds out that she was actually sleeping on a log and the girl is walking away from her, eventually disappearing from view.

That the film finally allows Toom to meet her fantasy of a female body on the top of a high mountain significantly symbolises the hardship that Toom has to face in order to change and transform herself into a woman, her ultimate goal in life. The first time that Toom has to run to the top of the mountain, it is so exhausting that she has to stop half-way. Her coach, Chart (Soraphong Chatri), tells her to imagine that the thing she wants most in life is at the summit. Toom then has the will-power to take herself to the top of the mountain and finally meets her imaginary female body.

It is intriguing that a Thai temple is located on the top of the mountain where Toom meets her imaginary female body. Thai temples, especially in the north of the country, usually have sculptures of nagas, a mythical animal in the form of a very big snake in Thai Buddhist belief, lying on each side of the stair bars from the very bottom of the mountain to the top where the temple is located. Oradol (2008: 148-50) reads the

nagas as an allegory of a naga in the time of the Buddha who transformed himself into a human being in order to be able to ordain as a monk. The naga was nevertheless asked to disrobe when the truth was revealed that he was not a genuine human being. Oradol finds the myth corresponds to Toom's life. Similar to the naga, Toom also has a strong desire to transform her male body into a female one.

Oradol's interpretation of the nagas can be developed further to consider that since the naga transformed himself into a human being in order to be able to be ordained as a Buddhist monk, and thus to reach *Nirvana*/Enlightenment, the stage that frees human beings from all suffering, Toom's ultimate goal to transform herself into a woman can also be seen to symbolise her *Nirvana*/Enlightenment, the stage in which she will be freed from the suffering derived from the conflict between her body and mind.

This myth of the naga carries the strong message that in order to reach *Nirvana*, or to free oneself from all suffering, one has to be in an accepted and approved genuine form. This further strengthens my argument that *Beautiful Boxer* explores gendered identities/expressions in the fairly conservative and restricted terms of heteronormative binaries.

While Oradol points to the appearance of the naga in the scene being allegorical, I find it interesting to also read the nagas in the scene as phallic symbols. The film makes it clear that what Toom wants most in her life is to have a female body and to become a woman. This, she imagines, is on top of the mountain. Thus, every step Toom runs up towards the summit shortens the length of the nagas. When Toom takes the final step and reaches the top of the mountain, no longer in sight of the "big snakes", she finally meets her female body. Finally, inside the mountain-top temple, a place where people go to find absolute happiness, the phallic symbol no longer exists. So too it is the place where Toom reunites with her imaginary female body, the form in which she finds absolute happiness.

After Toom finishes fantasising about her female body, she is brought back to reality by the fact that, as a professional kick-boxer, she has a well-built masculine body. The first conflict and collision between Toom's male body and the female psyche is poignantly delivered in the film. The scene follows Toom after taking a shower and catching sight of herself in a mirror. She aggressively rubs powder and perfume onto her male body in a desperate attempt to feminise it. Toom escapes her conflict and misery again by fantasising that she is a young child wearing makeup and doing a

traditional Thai dance like the leading female character she saw in the play at the temple fair all those years ago. Then, she fantasises that she herself becomes the leading female character in full costume, dancing beautifully in the ring that abruptly transforms into a stage. Toom is finally hit with reality again that she is a kick-boxer with a macho masculine body. She collapses on the floor and cries heavily about her unlikely-to-be-solved conflict.

The scene becomes one of the most sympathetic scenes that explicitly demonstrates the misery and conflict that Toom suffers as a result of gendered identity disorder (GID). While the film vividly reveals Toom's misery at being a woman trapped in a male body, clearly structured to evoke sympathy and compassion from the audience, it also allows for the construction of Toom as a "good Thai woman". This is one of the reasons, as I will argue below, that despite her transexuality, Toom's life, may be described as "beautiful".

### **Toom as a good Thai woman**

Rather like Somying in *The Last Song*, as discussed in the previous chapter, Toom in *Beautiful Boxer* is also depicted differently from most *kathoey* characters that appear in mainstream Thai movies. Oradol (2008: 135) notes that Toom's characterisation breaks all the stereotypes and clichés of *kathoey* characters who are usually portrayed as camp, screaming and loud.

Several scenes in the film show Toom behaving in ways which are essential in order to pass as a good Thai woman. For example, at the boxing camp, while the other trainee boxers spend their free time enjoying watching boxing fights on television, Toom escapes from the masculine/homo-social space into a kitchen to help the coach's wife prepare food. The film stereotypically shows that as a result of Toom's culinary skills, the wife comes to suspect that Toom is a *kathoey* since no masculine Thai man would be so skilled in the essentially female skills of cooking and food preparation.

Toom is also portrayed as a good Thai woman in terms of being self-conscious and protective of her body (*rak nuan sanguan tua*). The film shows that Toom is uncomfortable with living at the boxing camp full of men. Toom refuses to take a shower with the other trainee boxers since it is inappropriate for a good Thai woman to reveal her body in front of any men, especially those who are not her husband. Toom has to wait until everyone falls asleep and takes a shower alone so that no one can see

her naked body. When she has to be completely naked for a weigh-in at Lumpini Stadium, Toom cries and refuses to be naked in front of people until the judge allows her to wear underwear. There is also a scene in which one trainee hugs Toom in his sleep and Toom pushes him away in disgust.

Accordingly, instead of enjoying the opportunity to be surrounded by the masculine muscular bodies in the boxing camp, Toom conforms to the moral conduct of a good Thai woman who preserves her body and does not express or enjoy sexual desire in public. The reason Toom wants to have a female body therefore becomes clear. She needs a female physique in order to become a woman, not because she wants to use the female body to attract men and gain sexual satisfaction from it.

In an article entitled *Khon pen kathoey dai yangrai* [How Can People Be Kathoey?], Boonmi points out that:

Changing one's sex is not sinful (Pali: *ducarita*). Consequently the intention to change one's sex cannot have any ill karmic consequences. But sexual misconduct (Thai: *phitkam*) is sinful and can lead to consequences in a subsequent birth.

(quoted in Jackson 1993)

According to Boonmi, Toom's desire to have a female body is thus not a sinful thought or action. Given that Toom has no chance to reveal her sexual desire in the film context, she apparently cannot commit any sexual acts either considered right or wrong in Thai society. Rather, she strictly conforms to the Thai hegemonic ideas of femininity which dictate Thai women's approved and appropriate behaviour. Desperately trying to be a woman and behaving as a good one is therefore one significant reason why Toom, as a Thai transsexual, gains herself the title "beautiful boxer".

In addition to Toom's personality as a good Thai woman, another significant characteristic which earns Toom the admiration of Thai audiences is her fulfilment of the role of good and devoted child or *luk katanyu/luk thi di* in Thai.

### **Toom As a Good Devoted Child/*Luk Katanyu***

While the film uses every element to reveal Toom's inner gendered identity as a woman, another obvious identity/characteristic is as a good child, devoted to her family. While we are left in no doubt as to her negative feelings towards the aggressive sport of

Thai kick boxing, Toom nonetheless pursues her ambition to be a professional kick-boxer because she knows that it is a career where she can earn money to help her family.

When Toom, after winning a national fight at Lumpini Stadium, becomes famous, she is asked by a reporter if she wants to undergo male to female SRS. Toom answers that she wants to do it but only after she has enough money to secure the financial future of her family. It is therefore obvious in the film context that Toom puts her family's well-being and happiness before her own.

In Thai society, in order to be recognised as a good child, the most important duty of a child to its parents is to “*katunyu-katawethi*” or to return favours to their parents since it is they that have raised him/her. In “*Mongkhonlasut sam sib paet prakan*” [the 38 Conducts of a Moral Life] appearing in the *Tripitaka* (Vol. 25, line 41-72, p. 3-4<sup>1</sup>) and being widely practiced among Thai Buddhists, the 11<sup>th</sup> conduct states the roles of good children in that they have to take good care of their parents. The Buddha also mentioned that:

Even if a child puts his/her parents on each of his/her shoulder and feed them and let them excrete on the shoulders for 100 years, the child cannot still return all the gratitude to the parents who have raised him/her up<sup>2</sup>.

The characteristic of Toom as a good and devoted child thus conforms to social norms and the evaluation of moral behaviour of a child towards his/her parents.

Children can also earn themselves admiration when they are devoted to their parents. This appears in an old saying in the Buddhist texts that “when taking good care of his/her parents, people will praise and admire the child in the present world. Once s/he leaves this world, s/he will also be happy in heaven<sup>3</sup>”. In living up to the Buddhist belief regarding a good child, we can understand how it is that the life of a transsexual can be described with such an admirable term.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Thai in *Tripitaka* (No. 25. *Sutantaka*. Vol.17 ). <http://www.84000.org/tipitaka/>. Accessed 30 March 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Translated from Thai in *Tripitaka* (No. 20. *Sutantaka*. Vol.12 ). <http://www.84000.org/tipitaka/>. Accessed 30 March 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from Thai in *Tripitaka* (No. 20. *Sutantaka*. Vol.12 ). <http://www.84000.org/tipitaka/>. Accessed 30 March 2010.

Being a good devoted child also has nothing to do with her non-normative gendered identity. Rather, it reflects that she has a “beautiful” mind. The film thus does not merely focus on Toom’s attempt to transform herself into a beautiful woman, but also presents Toom as beautiful from within.

In relation to non-normative gendered identity/expression as a *kathoey*, “Thai Buddhist belief” is also explicitly used in the film to explain the causes and results of being a *kathoey*. The “Thai Buddhist belief” on transgenderism and transsexualism appearing in *Beautiful Boxer* is an intriguing topic that, as I will argue, reveals some false perceptions commonly ascribed to Buddhist thought in Thai society.

### **The “Thai Buddhist Belief” in *Beautiful Boxer*: Misunderstanding, Misreading, and Misleading Buddhism in Thai Society**

Pattana Kitiarsa (2004) refers in the introduction to his article, called *Faiths and Films: Crisis of Thai Buddhism on the Silver Screen*, to the fact that Thai Buddhism has experienced chaos and crisis since the 1980s and in contemporary Thailand Buddhism has become, quoting Nidhi Auesriwongse’s words (2003), an “alienated and unwanted surplus” (*suan koen*) in Thai life and society. However, he argues that in Thai popular movies, where he chooses three films for his case studies – *Fun Bar Karaoke* (dir. Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 1997), *Mekhong Full Moon Party* (dir. Jira Maligool, 2002), and *Ong Bak: Muay Thai Warrior* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2003) – these films do not reflect any crises concerning Thai Buddhism. On the contrary, these films send out a firm faith in Buddhist teachings and principles.

To support his argument, he interviews one of the most prominent film directors in Thailand, Prince Chatri-Chalerm Yugala, who has been made more than 20 films in a career lasting more than 30 years. Chatri-Chalerm mentions that the Buddhist notion of *karma* is the most crucial key to understanding the lives of people, especially those who are struggling, e.g., prostitutes, gunmen, HIV patients, taxi drivers, elephant keepers etc.

It is obvious that the director has consistently used the Thai Buddhist concept of *karma* in his characterisation and story-making. Chatri-Chalerm also expresses his belief that “you see what happened to them is their own *karma*, what happened to them in their last life. And now, if they make merit, in their next life it will be better” (quoted in Pattana (2004)). There thus seems to be a link between the religious element and Thai

cinema which makes Thai audiences familiar with Buddhist teachings, particularly the popular concept of *karma*.

In *Beautiful Boxer*, it is also explicit that the film places a heavy emphasis on “Thai Buddhist belief”, particularly as an attempt, if not a manipulation, to explain transgenderism/transsexualism in Thai society and that life has already been determined, particularly by the law of *karma*.

### **How One Become a *Kathoey*: Understanding or Condescending?**

The explanation of how one becomes a *kathoey* as derived from Buddhist discourse is generally familiar to Thais. Jackson (1993) mentions the oft-repeated belief in Thai society that people were born as a *kathoey* because they broke the third moral precept dealing with the act of sexual misconduct. These bad karmic results become a congenital condition that makes one become homosexual, something that cannot be changed in that person’s present life. Jackson notes that this Buddhist belief leads to a compassionate and understanding attitude from non-homosexual people to homosexual ones.

In *Beautiful Boxer*, deliberate reference is made to this belief in explaining Toom’s *kathoey* identity. The dialogue between Toom’s parents repeats this belief and explains why they become so accepting of Toom’s non-normative gendered identity.

The father:	How did Toom turn out this way?
The mother:	He is still young. He doesn’t know what’s right or wrong?
The father:	If he turns out to be a <i>kathoey</i> , what are we going to do?
The mother:	If it is his previous <i>karma</i> , there is nothing we can do to help.

The above dialogue confirms Jackson’s observation in the belief that one is born a *kathoey* because of one’s bad *karma* in a previous life (which also appears in *The Last Song* as already discussed). While the belief in the law of *karma* helps the parents understand Toom’s “abnormal” condition and to be tolerant of their son’s non-normative gendered identity, non-heterosexual identity in the film context is still perceived as wrong, abnormal and shameful.

Since Thai people believe homosexual identity results from moral wrong doing in previous lives, this becomes a crucial reason which explains why Jackson (1999a: 239-40) observes that sexual minorities in Thai society are merely tolerated though not accepted. Given this perception of past wrong-doing, sexual minorities are already prejudged by society; they used to be bad people and deserve to suffer in this life to pay back their bad deeds. While it is argued that there is no homophobia in Thai society as often occurs in Christian and Islamic societies, the “Thai Buddhist belief”, which seems to create sympathy, compassion and understanding from normative heterosexual people towards homosexual ones, actually creates a tolerance that might be seen as a condescending.

While the Thai Buddhist belief in relation to sexual minorities is a strong influence that manipulates how society perceives and reacts to non-normative gendered and sexual identities, another myth/belief presented in *Beautiful Boxer* that needs to be discussed is the Thai interpretation of the law of *karma*.

### **Active Teaching, Passive Belief: Buddhism in Thai Society**

As mentioned earlier, the law or theory of *karma* is a significant issue used in *Beautiful Boxer*. It is because of the law of *karma* that Toom’s parents become more tolerant of their son’s non-normative gendered identity. Toom also explicitly reveals her belief and (mis)understanding in the law of *karma* influenced by the fact that she had spent her childhood as a novice in a temple.

Toom believes that it is her bad deed in applying lip-gloss to her lips when she was a young novice that causes her family misery. As a novice, Toom has to take ten precepts, ten rules for novices. One of them is not to apply perfume or cosmetics. Toom convinces herself that since she has broken the precept, her sinful-lip-gloss becomes the reason for her parents’ misfortune. Her mother is accused by the police of using illegally obtained wood in building her cottage and her father falls down a hill and breaks his ankles.

As appears in the *Tripitaka*, the Pali Canon, the Buddha explains clearly that: “all beings have their own *karma*. We are the heirs of our own actions. Our own actions

are our origins...<sup>4</sup>”. While Toom’s parents seem to interpret the law of *karma* correctly according to the Buddha’s teaching that there is nothing they can do about their son being a *kathoey* as it is her own *karma*, Toom thinks that her application of sinful lip-gloss causes her parents bad fortune, revealing a misunderstanding of the Buddhist law of *karma*.

In my personal interview with Venerable Chao Khun Bhavanaviteht (Ajan Khemadhammo), the abbot of The Forest Hermitage in the UK, a branch of Wat *Norng Pa Pong* established by the late Luang Pho Cha’s principal monastery in N. E. Thailand, who has been ordained for more than 30 years in the Theravada Buddhist sect, he comments on this particular scene that “it is a complete misunderstanding of *karma*, at least as it is taught in Buddhism, although it is more or less how a lot of people in the East and in the West understand *karma* in rather vague and superstitious ways”.

He further explains that it is obviously mentioned according to Thai Theravada Buddhism that there are three main components of *karma* – intention, action and result – and each of these is personal. In other words, when a person intends to do something and then does it, it is only that person who experiences an effect. He mentions that it is the case that many times what people do can and often does affect others but their adaptation or reaction to what has been done will be conditioned by their own mind and intention. He illustrates this point by providing a situation that if a person deliberately tries to make another person angry, it remains up to the other person whether s/he allows her/himself to be provoked and made angry or not.

With specific reference to the scene in *Beautiful Boxer*, Venerable Chao Khun Bhavanaviteht comments that it is true that the boy novice character breaks one of his precepts when he applies lip gloss. However, it is incorrect to suggest that there is any connection between that and the misfortunes that befall his parents. He refers to the Five *Niyamas*, the five absolute laws of nature including: *Utuniyama* dealing with the natural law of the seasons etc; *Bijaniyama*, the law of seeds and fruit, genes and heredity etc; *Cittaniyama*, the law regarding the workings of the mind; *Karmaniyama*, the law of *karma*; and lastly *Dhammaniyama*, the law of nature that includes the previous four as well as the natural law in general. According to these five absolute laws of nature, the law of *karma* is just one of the five absolute laws of nature that the Buddha used to

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from Thai in *Tripitaka* (No. 14. *Sutantaka*. Vol.6 ). <http://www.84000.org/tipitaka/>. Accessed 30 March 2010.

explain how things occur in this world. The law of *karma* is therefore not the only factor that determines the life condition of an individual.

Another interesting scene that shows misunderstanding of the Buddhist teaching in *Beautiful Boxer* is when Toom as a novice asks the travelling monk whether she will be able to become what she wants to be (which is a woman) if she does good things.

Toom as a novice: Luang Pu, if I accumulate a lot of good deeds in this life, would I be what I really want to be in the next life?  
 The travelling monk: If they have already determined that for you, you might get what you want in this life.

In this scene, the answer of the travelling monk again presents another misunderstanding of the Buddhist law of *karma* and teaching. As mentioned above, the Buddha stated that each individual is responsible for his/her own condition in life and is the one who is the architect of her/his own fate. The answer from the travelling monk in the scene is thus incorrect since there is no notion of “fate” or “pre-determinism” in Buddhism. More importantly, when the travelling monk refers to “they” in his answer, it is also contradictory to the Buddha’s teaching since there is also no notion of “Supreme God” in Buddhism (Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto 1993: 82-4). While using an old serene travelling monk to deliver this notion which makes his answer looks solid and convincing, it is actually demonstrative of a common misunderstanding and misreading of Thai Buddhist teachings perceived in a film context.

Nevertheless, the appearance of the travelling monk who undertakes his journey in order to reach *Nirvana*/Enlightenment, the state in which he will be free from suffering, can be used to illustrate and emphasise Toom’s journey undertaken in order to reach a state of being free from suffering which is to have sexual reassignment surgery to become a woman to free herself from having gendered identity disorder.

Since *Beautiful Boxer* follows closely Toom’s unique journey to becoming a woman that drives her to “fight like a man to become a woman<sup>5</sup>”, it is interesting to further explore how Toom, a transgender/transsexual boxer, expresses and maintains her non-normative gendered identity in the film, especially when she places herself within a dominant hyper-masculine space.

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<sup>5</sup> This sentence appears on the film’s promotional poster.

### What does it take to “come out” and “stay out” as a “beautiful boxer”?

As already discussed, Toom has to struggle and be miserable to express her inner gendered identity as a woman which contrasts with her masculine physique. When she imposes herself into a hyper-masculine realm such as the world of Thai kick boxing, it becomes more difficult and problematic for her to express and maintain her non-normative gendered identity as an effeminate *kathoey*.

Pattana (2007: 14-15) refers to Toom in his “Muai Thai Cinemas and the Burdens of Thai Men” that his marginal position as *nak Muai kathoey* [*kathoey* boxer], “reveals the dark side of Thai men’s world, which is full of narrow-minded gender prejudice, exploitation of the weaker members of society, and personal rivalry. He was treated like a clown in the boxing ring rather than a serious contender”.

After Toom “comes out” to her coach, on the suggestion of the coach’s wife, Bua, the coach has an idea to make Toom distinctive from the other boxers by allowing him to wear makeup when fighting. In the first scene that Toom “comes out” as a *kathoey* kick boxer who wears makeup in the ring, the stadium audience laughs at her. Her opponent even refuses to fight with her and condemns her with a Thai derogatory term for a *kathoey* by saying, “be prepared to die, *e-tut*”! (the term can be translated as a faggot in English). The film, nonetheless, shows that after beating her opponent with her high skill and talent in kick boxing, thus performing well the act of hyper-masculinity, the whole audience starts to shout her name, *Nong Toom*, in admiration.

Toom continues to live in the training camp with the other male boxers after “coming out”. Even though Toom is clearly the most talented boxer in the camp, she is still teased and mocked, albeit in a joking and friendly way, by the other trainee boxers. In this respect, and given that so much of the joking relates to sexual performance, the film conforms well to one of the stereotypes that Thai people think of *kathoey* as having hyperactive sex drives.

Jackson (1993) notes that *kathoey*s are often regarded and stereotyped as untrustworthy prostitutes with hyperactive sex drives in Thailand. This belief also appears in descriptions of *pandaka* in Pali and early Buddhist literature. Zwilling (1992: 205) refers to this Buddhist view on *pandaka* (which is the Pali term that Jackson suggests that it can be translated into Thai as a *kathoey*) in his article *Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts*, noting that:

According to Buddhaghosa, *pandakas* are full of defiling passions (*ussanakilesa*); their lusts are unquenchable (*avapasantaparilaha*); and they are dominated by their libido (*parilahavegabhibhuta*) and the desire for lovers just like prostitutes (*vesiya*) and coarse young girls (*thulakumarika*) (*Samantapasadika* III, p.1042). Thus the *pandaka*...was considered in some degree to share the behaviour and psychological characteristics of the stereotypical “bad” woman.

In the scene when the trainee boxers are taking a shower and Toom walks in, Toom becomes the target, if not victim of teasing and mockery. One character in the scene makes a joke by asking Toom not to come too close to him because he is afraid that she would rape him. Another character invites Toom to have sex with him, yelling at her that he is ready. Toom is so embarrassed that she has to leave the room. While the scene can be seen as a friendly joke shared among the trainee male boxers and Toom, it shows that because of her non-normative gender, Toom is treated differently and disrespectfully.

In this scene, even though Toom covers her body, especially her breasts, with a towel to preserve her body as a “good Thai woman”, no one treats or respects her as a good woman, but rather she is seen as a sex maniac who might jump on any man at any time. The film also concludes this scene by showing that her non-normative gendered identity does not only bring embarrassment to her, but also shame to her brother. The camera ends the scene by focusing on Toom’s brother expressing his discomfort and shame about his brother’s non-normative gendered identity as a *kathoey*.

“Coming out” as a *kathoey* kick boxer, Toom also mentions that “the more she puts on her makeup, the harder her opponents kick her” and she “has to kick them back harder”. At one point a number of fight scenes are linked together, to show the adverse reaction of certain opponents towards Toom. One scene shows Toom fighting with an opponent who intentionally wears makeup and acts effeminately just to mock and make fun of her. Toom knocks him out after telling him that “a woman like you makes a woman like me disgraceful”.

Toom therefore has to face a variety of negative reactions ranging from mockery to disgust. The film also shows Toom’s first fight at the biggest kick boxing stadium in Bangkok, Lumpini Stadium. Toom cries when she is asked to remove all of her clothes for a weigh-in, as required by the regulations. She refuses to do this, revealing a display of modesty more normally associated with femininity. In the end the judge allows her to

wear underwear to the weigh-in. The scene is reflective of a story which attracted considerable media attention at the time. The story was reported in *The Nation*, 25 January, 1997, p. 1. (quoted in Storer 1999) as follows,

A transvestite boxer created a stir at Lumpini Stadium last night when he refused to strip for a weigh-in as required by regulations. Parinya Kiatbussaba [Toom], tears rolling down his cheeks, complained: "The rule is unacceptable. How can I strip in public?"...His opponent said the bewitching smile would not distract him. "I will not be shaken by his smile. I will give him a lesson so that he (Toom) will learn that Thai boxing is the game for a real man.

According to the various levels of negative reactions Toom receives, it is evident that her non-normative gendered identity as a *kathoey* is problematic, particularly when she tries to insert her "unreal man" or effeminacy into a "real masculine space" such as Thai boxing in Thai society. These negative reactions support Jackson's observation that "excessive effeminacy and cross-genderism are always ranked far below normative masculinity in the sex/gender hierarchy (1999a: 233)". The only thing that ensures that Toom is tolerated, even admired in the masculine space, is when she fights like a man or, in other words, when she strictly follows the masculine codes in terms of kick boxing. This principle is repeated on various occasions in the film through the two supportive characters, the coach and his wife, who confirm to Toom that it does not matter how she looks and she does not look ridiculous if in the ring she fights like a "man".

While Toom's coach trains her in kick boxing skills, his wife takes the important role of training and supporting Toom to be a woman and express her female identity. Another interesting point representing a significant perception of Thai people towards transsexual people is when Toom finally becomes "a beautiful woman".

The last scene in the film shows Toom already having undergone SRS being welcomed and well treated by the people in her hometown, Chiang Mai. She is invited by the governor to join a big local festival where she is offered to sit right in the middle between the governor and his wife. Toom is further honoured by being given a platform seat carried by men (Figure 4.1), historically the means of transportation considered appropriate to honour the royal family and members of the elite in Thai society. The scenes reveal that Toom's beauty gains herself power and respect.



Figure 4.1: Toom sits on a beautiful platform seat carried by men.

It is obvious in the film context that, only after she gives up her boxing career, and her male body, thus becoming a complete beautiful woman, will she be fully accepted and even honoured.

In Thai society, Jackson (1999a: 239) observes that:

based on a masculine-feminine binarism, the Thai sex/gender order is maintained so long as a male upholds his status through the performance of masculinity or, conversely, if he abandons his masculinity and assumes the feminized status of a *kathoey*.

According to the film context, as a result of fighting like a “man” to become a “woman”, Toom follows, conforms, and attaches herself to the normative codes for masculine-feminine binary opposition in Thailand. Her acceptance and admiration from heterosexual people thus actually come from behaviour which preserves and reinforces these binary notions of the heteronormative system in Thai society both as a man and as a woman.

At the end of the film, *Beautiful Boxer*, nonetheless, reveals how exactly Thai society gives space to transsexual people. Because of the consumption of female hormones, Toom’s body is weakened which has a negative effect on her performance as a kick boxer. She finally has to give up her kick boxing career. The film reveals that when Toom preserves her masculine body to be a talented kick boxer, her masculine

performance gains her far greater fame than when she decides to become a transsexual person who ends up being a “showgirl” (*nang show*) in a small night club in Bangkok.

### Summary

Mark Johnson’s questionnaire survey, which appears in his book, *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines* (1997: 147), elicited a response “that is the gay’s gift, to make things beautiful”. Toom in *Beautiful Boxer* also seems to possess such a talent, since she is capable of transforming even a talented male kick boxer to be “beautiful”. As discussed, Toom’s angelic characterisation, which is apparently different from the other stereotyped *kathoey* characters in mainstream Thai films, is the main reason why the life of a transsexual in a Thai context can be considered “beautiful”.

*Beautiful Boxer* also makes numerous references to “Thai Buddhist belief” which is indicative of both misunderstanding and misreading. It highlights the misleading application of core and essential Buddhist teachings in Thai society. The misinterpretation, especially in the law of *karma*, also leads to the false-perception that sexual minorities are merely sympathetic which causes what Jackson (1999a: 240) calls, “the pattern of discursive unacceptability yet practical toleration”.

Trying to be a talented kick boxer and, later, a good Thai woman, Toom does not upset or break but rather preserves both of the core essences of Thai masculinity and femininity. This is the significant reason why Toom is highly admired by the heteronormative mainstream society.

While *Beautiful Boxer* focuses exclusively on the life of a Thai transgender/transsexual, the next mainstream Thai cinema to be analysed in this chapter, *The Love of Siam*, portrays and follows two teenage male homosexuals as they handle their same-sex desire within a heteronormative realm.

## *The Love of Siam (Rak haeng Siam) (2007)*

### Introduction

*The Love of Siam*'s screenplay was written when the film director, Chukiat Sakveerakul, was completing his BA in Film and Still Photography at Chulalongkorn University. The "Siam" of the film's title refers to Siam Square, the most popular shopping and entertainment centre, particularly for teenagers, in Bangkok. Located near the director's university, it became the main site where he was inspired to write the film by observing various kinds of love and relationships that happened and ended there (cited in Anchalee Chaiworaporn 2007). The film's promotional poster (Figure 4.2), showing two opposite-sex couples of good-looking smiling teenagers with dreaming faces and glittering eyes, suggests a film that will be concerned with more than one relationship.



Figure 4.2: The film poster of *The Love of Siam*.

*The Love of Siam* indeed narrates various kinds of love and relationship. The film's narrative focuses on a same-sex friendship which later develops into a same-sex erotic relationship between Mew (Witwisit Hiranyawongkul) and Tong (Mario Maurer). Mew and Tong were neighbours and went to the same school when they were young. At school, Mew becomes isolated from the other boys and does not join in with any outdoor activities such as soccer. Instead, he is interested in music and arts. This makes him a victim of mockery and abuse since the other boys in school assume that Mew is a *kathoey*. Tong is the only one that protects and takes care of Mew. As a result, a strong bond develops between the two young boys.

While Mew lives alone with his grandmother since his parents have to work in another town, Tong has a complete and happy Christian family comprising his two parents and an elder sister. One day Tong's family decides to take a vacation in Chiang Mai. Tang (Chermarn Boonyasak), Tong's elder sister, asks for her parents' permission to stay longer in the town so that she can go camping with her friends in a jungle. Unfortunately, she gets lost and permanently disappears in the jungle. The father, Korn (Songsit Roongnophakunsri), decides that the family should leave their Bangkok home because he cannot stand living in the same house where his daughter's presence still lingers. When Tang disappears, tragedy affects the entire family unit which also separates Tong and his friend Mew and their blossoming friendship and relationship.

While separated, Mew and Tong become young teenagers. One day they meet each other again at Siam Square. They start renewing their friendship/relationship at once. Mew is a member of a successful band and he introduces Tong to June, the band's caretaker that the music company hires to take care of the members of the boyband. June happens to look exactly like Tang (and the film uses the same actress, Chermarn Boonyasak, to play these two roles). After meeting with June, Tong has an idea to help his mother, who has become the head of the family as a result of his father's emotional collapse into alcoholism after the loss of his daughter. Tong suggests that his mother hire June to pretend to be Tang to help his father get over the trauma from losing his daughter.

With the presence of the "fake" Tang, the father gets better and Tong's family becomes a happy one once more. Tong is very appreciative and gives Mew full credit for helping his family. Their relationship starts to develop in a direction that seems to be more than just a "friendship". The film fuels the suspicion by showing Mew expressing his feeling for Tong through a song he composed and sings for Tong at a welcome back

party for the “fake” Tang at Tong’s house. The two boys end up kissing each other once the party is over. Sunee, Tong’s mother accidentally witnesses the two boys kissing and on the very next day goes to Mew’s house and begs him to stop walking her son down “the wrong path” (*thang thi mai thuk tong*). This freezes the relationship between the two boys and both of them struggle and suffer from not being able to see each other again. The film ends with Tong telling Mew that he loves him but also saying goodbye to him at the same time since Tong decides to choose his mother and to be a good son.

Paying considerable attention to the family institution, particularly Tong’s family, it is apparent that other forms of love and relationships in *Love of Siam* are those related to the realm of the family institution, most notably: 1.) the love and relationship between grandmother and grandson (Ah Ma who takes care of Mew instead of his parents who live in another province); 2.) husband and wife as a couple and parents (Sunee and Korn); 3.) parents and children (Sunee/Korn and Tang (June)/Tong), and 4.) brother and sister (Tong and Tang (and June)). As will be discussed below, Tong and Mew’s same-sex relationship comes into conflict with the institution of the family.

When Sunee comes to beg Mew to stop the “wrong” relationship with her son, she is secretly witnessed by Ying (Kanya Rattanapetch), a girl who has been in love with Mew since she was little. Ying’s family moves in to Tong’s house after Tong’s family moves out. Ying (meaning woman in English) is devastated to discover that her secret object of her affection is *gay*. The same-sex desire thus destroys Ying’s heterosexual romantic fantasy.

Before reuniting with Mew, Tong also had a girlfriend called Donut (Aticha Pongsilpipat), a beautiful and popular but demanding girl. Tong is uncertain about his feelings for Donut. However, after he knows that he has feelings for Mew, he decides to say goodbye to Donut at Siam Square. Tong then goes to meet Mew back stage after Mew’s band makes its *début* appearance at Siam Square. He tells Mew that he loves him but he cannot be his boyfriend. Even though Mew is turned down by Tong, he still has his “heterosexual” friends in the band. Another type of love and relationship in *The Love of Siam* is thus a friendship that seems to serve as a consolation prize to compensate Mew for his unfulfilled/impossible same-sex love and relationship with Tong.

While the portrayal of the same-sex relationship between Tong and Mew is quite clear in *The Love of Siam*, there is no suggestion of the issue of homosexuality in any of the film’s publicity materials, such as its posters, teasers or trailers. This resulted in

strong criticism and even anger from certain viewers of the film, especially, it seems, male heterosexuals, who claimed that they had been deceived into watching a “gay film”, lured into cinemas by images promising a conventional heterosexual teen romance. Vitaya Saeng-Aroon (2007) particularly mentions these responses on the internet:

Many web posters - mostly male - accuse the studio, Sahamongkol Films Company, the promoters and the director of giving moviegoers "a false impression" in an attempt to lure audiences to “a gay movie”.

This also led to a heated debate among those who watched *The Love of Siam* as to whether it is a gay movie or not, especially on online web boards. There was even an online poll called, *khun khit wa phapphayon thai reuang rak haeng siam pen “nang gay” reu mai?*[Do you think that *The Love of Siam* is a “gay movie”?] on Pantip.com, the most popular and biggest web board for various topics in Thailand. The poll revealed that 60% of spectators understood it to be a gay film while 40% thought that the film is not a gay film<sup>6</sup>.

The spectators’ frustration at being lured in to see a gay film as well as the debate as to whether the film should be labelled as a gay film or not is an interesting and significant issue that, as I will argue, reveals a rigid notion of heteronormativity in Thai society. More importantly, despite all the severe criticism, *The Love of Siam* was ironically highly successful and welcomed by the Thai film industry as evidenced by its financial success and the awards it received from all major national film competitions in Thailand, including the Thailand National Film Association Awards, Starpics Awards by Starpics Magazine, the Bangkok Critics Assembly Awards, Star Entertainment Awards, and Khom Chat Leuk Awards by *Khom Chat Leuk* Newspaper. This further strengthens my argument and observation made in the analysis of every film so far that when a “Thai gay film” can find a way to conform or submit to Thai heteronormativity, it can be highly tolerated by mainstream Thai society.

Given that since same-sex love and relationship are considered “wrong” in the film’s narrative, it is also interesting to explore how Tong and Mew express and maintain their non-normative genders and sexualities in *The Love of Siam*.

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<sup>6</sup> <\_Eminem\_>. Do you think that The Love of Siam is a “gay movie”? Pantip., 16 Mar. 2008. Web. Accessed 26 Nov. 2009.

### **Is *The Love of Siam* a Gay Film or Not? It is not a Question but a „Problem“!**

*The Love of Siam*'s film director strongly affirms that his "movie is not all about gay characters. We are not focusing on gay issues. We are not saying, "let's come out of the closet", so obviously, we don't want the movie to have a „gay' label" (quoted in Vitaya 2007). The film director, nonetheless, admits that he was shocked when he went incognito to a movie theatre and observed the audience negatively reacting so strongly to the same-sex storyline in his film. He suggests that he might have been too optimistic in thinking that homophobia in Thai society had subsided (cited in Vitaya 2007).

Compared to some other societies, especially in the West where Christianity runs deep and homophobia has been obviously and violently practiced, it might not be possible to say that homophobia also exists in Thailand, especially when sexual minorities are already tolerated (even though they are unaccepted) (Jackson 1999a: 226). Nonetheless, regarding attitudes to sexual minorities, it seems to be the case that Thai society is so heteronormative that heteronormativity and patriarchy have to be prioritised above anything else. However, as long as nothing is done to jeopardize or harm the heteronormative system and its institutions, those minorities may "co-exist" or share a "provided space" by the heteronormative members within a Thai context.

The spectators' shocked reaction to seeing same-sex erotic desire and acts in *The Love of Siam* and the debate as to whether the film should be labelled as *gay* is evidence of the persistence of the problem of acquiring a space for non-heteronormative depictions in heteronormative mainstream media. The attempt to label the film also shows an obsession in labelling or making the unknown known in mainstream Thai society.

The negative responses and the heated debate towards *The Love of Siam* present an "aftershock" when the issue of homosexuality, without warning, is thrown into the mainstream Thai audience's face. The anger and frustration from the Thai audience point to the fact that Thai people are not ready to see same-sex behaviours on the mainstream screen without prior notice.

Brett Farmer has discussed the debate among Thai spectators as to whether *The Love of Siam* should be read as a *gay* film and suggests that:

It would be easy, and possibly even tempting, to dismiss such comments as blatant disavowals of the film's gay content

motivated either by homophobia or, in the case of the film's director, economic opportunism, but to do so would be to reproduce an unhelpful gay essentialism, assuming that „gayness' has an empirical constancy that is manifestly there or not in the film for all to see and/or that processes a uniform set of signifying effects... a more analytically profitable approach would be to take such comments at face value, accepting them as genuine, indicatively varied responses to *Love of Siam's* articulations of same-sex desire, articulations that are not reducible to a single reading but, rather, are open to multiple and competing meanings (2011: 90-91).

From his standpoint on encouraging multi or open readings/interpretations to *The Love of Siam*, Farmer takes *The Love of Siam* as a vivid example of “vernacular queerness”, a process of localising/articulating/negotiating Thai sexual modernities (whether modernised from Western or intra-Asian influences) into an accessible and legible form within the particular vernacular of the Thai context. He considers the ambiguity of the film's ending effective in performing as “vernacular queerness”. That the film does not put Tong and Mew in the conventionally legible figure of a gay couple leaves the essence of queerness “in definitional abeyance, open and fluid, an inessential sphere of possibilities with no singular form or necessary outcome” (ibid.: 98). Tong's decision of closure (that he decides to tell Mew he loves him but also say goodbye to Mew at the same time to retain his family and duties as a good son), according to Farmer (ibid.: 97);

allows the film to achieve its desired reconciliation between queerness and Thai familialism, showing that, far from being a dangerous other or external threat, queerness can exist and be happily accommodate within the space of Thai familial and national identity.

With his theoretical claims, he notes that *The Love of Siam* is actually trying to negotiate and disprove the popular misconception that queerness and the Thai family cannot mutually exist. The film, instead, shows that queerness “can be in fact reconciled and successfully integrated into the Thai national family without undue disruption or duress” (ibid.: 95).

In line with Farmer's suggestion, I agree that it is not beneficial to focus merely on whether or not *The Love of Siam* is a gay film. Neither is it profitable to reduce the

articulations of same-sex desire in *The Love of Siam* to a “single reading” but rather to recognise the possibilities of “multiple and competing meanings” (ibid.: 27).

Nonetheless, to ignore the rigid notion of the heteronormative system in the film might not be a practical approach since it will reveal and evidence the unaccepting attitudes of Thai society towards sexual minorities.

I do not think, as I will argue below, that the film’s ending is ambiguous. The film makes it clear that same-sex desire has to give way to the family institution, a reproduction of heteronormativity. Furthermore, the film strictly conforms to the familiar and repeatedly articulated stereotypes of homosexuality in Thai society, particularly with respect to the cause of homosexuality and the idea that same-sex love and relationships are impossible. Even though the audiences were shocked and furious with the explicit same-sex desire between the two young homosexual characters, finally conforming to the heteronormative way of life and getting rid of same-sex behaviour at the end of the film is one of the possible reasons why *The Love of Siam* was highly tolerated by the majority of the mainstream heteronormative audience.

### **Stereotyping Same-Sex Love in *The Love of Siam***

One recurring stereotype in many Thai gay films is the attempt to explain the causes of homosexuality. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a popular notion in Thai society, derived from Western medical and psychoanalytic discourse, that people become homosexuals because of some abnormalities in their childhood. In particular, there is a focus on the lack of a masculine role model and the detrimental effect of raising children in a contest in which gender roles are confused (see Sompot Sukhawattana (1973); Suwattana Aripak (1980); and Wantanee Wasikasin (1994)). In *The Love of Siam*, these tropes recur, leading to the interpretation that the main male characters become homosexuals because of a lack of masculine role models and being brought up in confusing gender role circumstances.

Looking first at Mew’s background, he only lives with Ah Ma, his grandmother, and a female housemate. There are no significant male characters in Mew’s life. Mew, as a young boy, is also portrayed as a sensitive, emotional and quiet child who is weak and incapable of protecting himself when being abused at school. Tong is the one who protects him. At school, Mew is also characterised differently from the other students in his same-sex school. While other students, including Tong, enjoy playing soccer, a sport

widely considered as a male sport, Mew separates himself from his school mates and enjoys painting and playing the piano.

With a personality that does not fit, indeed subverts the accepted masculine codes, Mew is labelled as a *kathoey* by his neighbours. Mew's characterisation therefore strictly conforms to the myth about homosexuality in Thai society that the lack of masculine role in one's childhood can make the person a homosexual since he can only imitate and adopt feminine gestures and behaviours including female sexual desire.

Tong is also shown to lack a masculine role model in his family and is brought up in a confusing gendered role environment. After Tang disappears, the father gives up on life and turns to alcohol. He leaves all of his responsibilities as a husband, a father, and a leader of the household to Sunee, a woman who has to replace her husband's roles and become the leader of her family. Thus we also see absence of masculine role models and the confusion in gender roles in Tong's family.

Prior to Tong's father's emotional collapse, Tong is proud of and imitates his father's behaviours. In order to hide the bruise on his eye he gets when protecting Mew in a fight at school, he wears sunglasses at home saying that he wants to be handsome like his father (*kor ja dai lor meuan phor ngai khrap*). He also imitates his father's treasure hunting game when he gives the wooden doll he bought from Chiang Mai to Mew.

After Tang disappears, the only imitation shown in the film between the father and the son is a strange but significant reaction when Tong sees his father sleeping on the sofa and having the hiccups. The next morning, Tong happens to have the strange hiccups as well. While hiccups are caused by an interruption of the respiratory system, the hiccups which happen to the father and son can also be interpreted as the interruption of their masculinity since neither of them can "perform" masculine heteronormative roles anymore. While the father gives up his masculine roles and men's duties such as a husband, a father, and leader of his household (*hua na khrorp khrua*) to his wife, Tong also gives up his opposite-sex desire for Donut.

While *The Love of Siam* interestingly depicts same-sex desire and a relationship between young teenage characters which has never been shown on mainstream Thai cinema before, the film closely follows and conforms to those same-sex stereotypes with which Thai society is familiar. The portrayal of homosexuality in *The Love of Siam* is therefore equated with "abnormality".

Another stereotypical Thai articulation of homosexuality that occurs in *The Love of Siam* is the conclusion that same-sex love and relationships are impossible and that they must be defeated by heteronormativity if they are to be tolerated by mainstream Thai audiences.

### **The Causes of Same-Sex Love Never Did Run Smooth and Succeed: Unlovable Love in *The Love of Siam***

The prominent Thai gay activist, Nathi Thirarojjanaphong (2008), has mentioned in his interview that *The Love of Siam* for only portraying negative aspects of same-sex love and relationships. He changes the film's title from "*Rak haeng Siam*" (*The Love of Siam*) to "*Rak haeng sayornng*" (*Scary Love of Siam*). The same-sex love and relationship in *The Love of Siam* seems to be indeed "scary" since it is traumatised and faces severe difficulties (as it has been traumatised in some other Thai films with a focus on sexual minorities discussed earlier, such as *The Last Song* and *Bangkok Love Story*).

Because of the mother's disapproval, Sunee, Tong and Mew decide to give up their same-sex love and relationship. The characterisation of and the casting for Sunee is interesting since she is the only character that is awarded the legitimacy to judge and prevent the same-sex love and relationship in the film.

Sunee is characterised as a devoted wife and mother who sacrifices herself to maintain and lead her family in the "right" direction. The visual track is interestingly and significantly used in the film to intensify Sunee's characterisation as a devoted wife and mother. There are repetitive scenes showing Sunee coming home from work in the middle of the day to prepare food for her husband even though he does not care to eat it, but drinks only alcohol. Sunee also takes good care of Tong. Several scenes show Sunee offering to drive her son to school or private classes, even though he is about 18 years old. While Sunee has to work to maintain her family financially, she also takes full responsibility for all of the domestic tasks.

Casting Sinjai Plengpanich, a veteran actress who has been named as "*chao mae drama* [the queen of drama]" (Gatunyū Boondej 2010) to play this role, Sinjai becomes the dramatic centrifuge in the film. As a modern Thai mother to three children in real life, Sinjai has also played the role of a devoted mother in a good number of Thai TV

dramas such as *La* [Hunting] (1994), *Saeng thian* [Candle Light] (1999), and *Numphu* [Mr. Numphu] (2002), and in movies such as *The Legend of Suriyothai* (dir. Chatrichalerm Yugala, 2001) in which Sinjai plays the role of a queen and a mother. Thus, in casting Sinjai as Sunee, her signature as a respectful idealised Thai mother strengthens the figure of motherhood in the character, Sunee.

It is also interesting that *The Love of Siam* makes Sunee a Christian in a Buddhist country. Her religious belief makes it more difficult for her to accept her son's same-sex desire, love, and relationship, which she deliberately considers as a "wrong path".

This combination of Sunee's selfless devotion to her family, the casting of Sinjai with her history of playing strong mother figures in Thai film and television, and Sunee's Christian beliefs, authorises Sunee to legitimately oppose same-sex desire since it destroys her beliefs in the socially approved heterosexual norms, familial and religious ideologies.

Given that Tong and his family are Christians, this also brings Tong into poignant conflict with his own sense of being. In almost every scene in which he appears, Tong wears a cross around his neck. He also has a poster of a cross above his bed saying "I believe [in God]". Since he was young, we also see that before going to bed, Tong prayed to God. The film shows that Tong is a strong Christian, making it more difficult for him to admit his homosexuality. At the end of the film, it is understandable why Tong can only say he "loves" Mew since it is encouraged by his religion to love other people, but he cannot commit to a same-sex relationship with Mew since it is considered a sin by his religion.

This portrayal of Tong's family as Christian may be taken to reflect the diversity and fluidity of identities, though not gendered and sexual identities, in the Thai context. In particular, it is interesting to note that while Tong's parents look Thai, he and his sister look Eurasian. In this respect we should also note Mew's Sino-Thai background. Mew is from a Chinese family but goes to a Christian school and has Chinese grandparents who are keen on Western music and instruments. Mew's grandmother also shows another fluidity of her kinship identity by calling Mew "*pheuan*" (means "friend" in English). While the use of the term may be taken to illustrate the close relationship between Mew and his grandmother, it also shows the possibility of fluidity in the kinship identities which are supposed to be fixed and unchanging.

The characters of Tang and June in *The Love of Siam* also raise the issue of fluid identities. June's identity is used as a substitution for Tang's to help save the father and with him the ideal family from collapsing. However, since June's identity as Tang is a false and ambiguous one, the film resolves this mystery/ambiguity by getting rid of June from the family at the end of the film. The family foundation is thus pure and is not contaminated by any false or non-normative identities (otherwise it can be seen from the film context that the family institution can comprise a non-genuine identity or a lie). Similarly to the "false/fake" identity of June, the "non-normative" sexual identities of Tong and Mew are not allowed to exist, be assimilated or associated with the familial foundation.

While all of the above identities can be seen to be fluid, gendered and sexual identities remain fixed. Even though at the end, Sunee seems to give Tong permission to choose whatever gendered and/or sexual identity he thinks is best for him, the film still ends with Tong's decision to save his family's integrity and give up his same-sex relationship with Mew.

While same-sex desire is negatively portrayed, so too it is undeniable that heterosexual love and relationships in *The Love of Siam* are also traumatised. The failure in performing masculinity is the main source of the problems that affect heterosexual love and relationships in the film, thus reflecting on the position of women in Thai society.

### **Heterosexual Love and Relationships and Women's Position in *The Love of Siam***

When Tong realises that he prefers same-sex desire, he ends his heterosexual relationship with Donut. Since Donut is characterised as a popular, beautiful, independent, and confident young girl, she is not too bothered by the break up. Nevertheless, her sense of self-worth is still assessed and affirmed by men and the existence of masculinity. One of Tong's school mates suspects that the reason why Tong does not want to see Donut anymore is because he has already had sex with her. Donut's value is therefore attached to her virginity that is valued by men. In the film, Donut is also characterised as a beautiful girl who does not seem to have anything else in mind but to have a handsome boyfriend to make herself more popular. Her value and confidence thus depends on men and masculinity.

Another female character, Ying, is also negatively affected by Tong and Mew's lack of masculinity and heterosexual desire. Further, Ying happens to know about the same-sex love and relationship between Tong and Mew. Unlike Sunee, Ying does not try to expel the non-normative desire and relationship. Instead, she seems to be sympathetic to Tong and Mew's situation. If a punishment for being sympathetic to homoeroticism/homosexuality is not too negative of a reading, Ying is the only character in the film that is not given any solution to her misery. Her last appearance in the film shows her covering her face with her hands crying for her impossible and unspoken love secret that she cannot reveal or share with anyone. Even though Mew's same-sex relationship also comes to an end, unlike Ying, the film grants him a close up shot to openly express the bitter-sweet situation in which he finds himself when the man he loves expresses his love for him.

Sunee is another female character whose life is ruined by the fact that her husband is incapable of functioning masculinity. Nevertheless, the film provides Sunee with plenty of chances to prove her love and devotion to her husband and family. At the end, Korn surrenders to Sunee's effort, love and care. He stops living in denial and hiding himself behind alcohol and accepts the fact that his daughter has already gone and gets over it. This leads to a resolution between Korn and Sunee who cry and console each other as they embrace (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: Korn and Sunee finally make up and hug each other in tears.

Regarding the issue of homosexuality, unlike Ying, when Sunee witnesses non-normative desire and relationship between her son and Mew, she immediately rejects it. The survival of the heterosexual couple in the film therefore reveals that only the

characters who remain loyal and devoted to the institutions of heterosexuality deserve a second chance to mend their relationship, in stark contrast to the homosexual characters or the character that being sympathetic to homosexuality.

Comparing Sunee's love and devotion to her family with Tong and Mew's same-sex love and relationship, it is also obvious that Sunee sacrifices herself not merely for her own satisfaction, but also to maintain the family institution. On the contrary, the same-sex relationship Tong and Mew try to pursue is purely for their own happiness. The heterosexual love in the film context is therefore depicted as more noble and selfless.

Accordingly, Tong's decision, at the end of the film, to selflessly sacrifice his same-sex desire to maintain his family, provides solid evidence as to why *The Love of Siam* has been so well accepted by mainstream Thai audiences. Similar to Toom in *Beautiful Boxer*, this moral dimension also provides the character with a precious opportunity to attract empathy and to be accepted as a good Thai son. Despite the fact that earlier on in the film he kisses another boy, he is able to function as a role model for young Thai audiences.

Since Tong prioritises the essential and cherished institutions of family and religion over his same-sex desire, he makes a certain statement that he chooses to be on the heterosexuals' side and literally turn his back on same-sex minorities. It is therefore no surprise to see *The Love of Siam* surviving on the mainstream cinema circuit since the film also demonstrates the victory of heteronormative conventions in Thailand.

When non-normative love and relationships are still portrayed with negative connotations in *The Love of Siam*, it is also interesting how the essence of non-heteronormativity is revealed and maintained in the film context; how Tong and Mew express and maintain their non-normative genders and sexualities in *The Love of Siam* becomes another interesting aspect to explore.

### **“Coming Out” and “Staying Out” (Inside the Closet)**

In *The Love of Siam*, Mew and Tong, as young teenagers, begin to experience and contemplate their sexuality. Living by himself, Mew seems to face less difficulties expressing and maintaining his gendered and sexual identity than Tong, who lives with his family. Nevertheless, Mew still has to express and maintain his same-sex desire and love within a private sphere in the film context.

When being confronted by Sunee, although denying that there is anything between Tong and him and insisting that they are just friends, the film makes it clear that Mew acknowledges his same-sex desire.

The night after Mew introduces June to Tong, Tong comes to stay over at Mew's house. They share the same bed like they used to do when they were young. They end up hugging each other after Mew expresses his loneliness that he has to live by himself since his grandmother passed away. This scene could have been read as a nice friendship between the two young boys who share both good and bad times. However, the next morning, after Tong leaves the room, Mew grasps Tong's pillow and squeezes it tightly to his body. While Mew never uses any terms to label his gender or sexuality, the film uses these gestures to reveal his same-sex desire. In this first scene, Mew expresses his same-sex desire in a totally private space, his bedroom, where there is only Mew who acknowledges it.

The setting of Mew's house further intensifies the sense of an unconventional lifestyle which can be seen as a mechanism to makes his character and his non-normative gender and sexuality "Other". From the outside, Mew's house is an ordinary townhouse typical of Bangkok and other big cities in Thailand. The interior design, however, is very postmodern, nostalgic, effeminate and thus unconventional according to normal standards.

We are first introduced to Mew's house in a close-up shot of a poster of a beautiful Chinese woman on a flowery papered wall. The camera then pans to show us more of Mew's house, allowing us to see a standing clock and a piano, a Western invention and musical instrument in a Chinese family household. Next to the piano is a standing lamp covered with a flowery light cloth material giving a sense of camp aesthetics/characteristics. Mew's house thus serves to accentuate Mew's identity and character. Just as the interior of the house is unconventional, so Mew's sexuality is non-normative. The camp characteristics also appear in both the house decoration and Mew's effeminate demeanour.

Mew reveals his sexuality again when he writes and sings a love song to Tong at the welcome home party for the "fake" Tang. The close-up shots are offered during the scene to deliver the characters' same-sex desire to each other. While Mew sings the song, his eyes fix on Tong to let him know that he is singing the song for him. Tong gets the message and embarrassingly smiles back at Mew (Figures 4.4 and 4.5). From the whole gathering of about 50 people, it is only June, the "fake" Tang, who witnesses

this same-sex sexual tension, and who is so curious and amazed about the way the boys look at each other romantically (Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.4: Mew romantically looks at Tong.



Figure 4.5: Tong embarrassingly smiles back at Mew.



Figure 4.6: June, "the fake Tang", is curious and amazed by the way the boys romantically looking at each other.

On this first occasion that the two male characters express their same-sex desire for each other in public, it is only June, who carries a false identity, who acknowledges it. The same-sex desire is thus invisible and unnoticeable by the genuine/mainstream members of society who are present at the gathering.

The kissing scene after the party is another significant same-sex erotic act that happens in the public domain in *The Love of Siam*. The scene reveals that once same-sex desire is exhibited in the public sphere and witnessed by an authorised mainstream heteronormative member such as Sunee, it has to be terminated. Sunee actively and elaborately teaches and corrects Mew to realise what “the ideally heteronormative pattern of life” is:

Tong is the only one we have left and I don't want to see him taking a wrong path. In the future, when Tong is graduated, he has to find a job, save money, and look for a good wife, get married and have a happy family where they take care of each other when they grow old. This is life, Mew. I tried to make sure he grows up that way. Do it for Tong, Mew. Stop this relationship that you have with him.

(quoted from the film's English subtitle)

Sunee becomes the “heteronormative mirror” that reflects to Mew that his same-sex desire is “wrong” since it does not fit the heterosexual frame which Sunee treats as a “right path”. After ending the intense conversation with Sunee, Mew goes into his bedroom and looks at his reflection in the mirror (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7: Mew contemplates his reflection on the mirror in his bedroom.

Mew's reflection shows his distress from being forced to realise and accept that his same-sex desire is “wrong” according to social heterosexual norms. His own

reflection in the mirror also confirms that he is processing a non-normative gendered and sexual identity. After seeing himself in the mirror, Mew makes a decision to cope with his non-normative identity by refusing to see Tong anymore. The mirror in the scene becomes a significant motif that further constructs Mew's gendered and sexual identity.

While Sunee gives Mew a hard time dealing with his same-sex desire, Tong is in a more difficult position since Sunee is his mother. Tong is put in a dilemma between being a good son and having a same-sex relationship with Mew.

### **To „Have' or To „Be' a Boy?: The Separation of Sexual Desire and Gender Identity.**

The film shows that in the beginning Tong is confused and afraid of being called *gay*. Tong even tries to prove that he is not *gay* by making out with Ying. Tong breaks down in tears when it becomes clear he cannot sexually perform with Ying. He blames himself for the hurt he causes other people which results from his own insecurities.

Tong eventually resolves the question of his sexual identity and the film interestingly expresses this with a significant symbolic interpretation. In the scene in which Tong helps his mother decorate the Christmas tree, he asks Sunee whether he should put a "boy" doll or a "girl" doll on the Christmas tree. He symbolically seeks his mother's approval of his sexuality by using the "boy" and "girl" dolls to represent same-sex and opposite sex desires. Sunee gets her son's message and tells him to choose "the doll" that he thinks it is the best for him. Tong grasps the "boy" doll much to Sunee's initial disappointment, though she soon smiles at her son implying that she gives her son consent and approval to choose his own gender and sexuality.

The "boy" doll that Tong chooses in front of Sunee seems at first to suggest to the audience that Tong decides to pursue his same-sex desire. However, it turns out that the boy and girl dolls also represent the gendered roles of masculinity and femininity. Tong decides to keep his gendered role as a normative masculine son to please his mother and sustain his collapsing family by getting rid of his same-sex desire which bothers his mother.

While Tong is an important element that sustains the ideology of the Thai family institution in the film, *The Love of Siam* also uses the element of fantasy, in the form of

the appearance of June who looks exactly like Tang, to ensure that heteronormative ideology survives in the film context.

According to the elements of fantasy and same-sex desire used in *The Love of Siam*, McGowan's (2007) analysis on the cinema of fantasy and of desire after Lacan's psychoanalysis on fantasy and desire becomes an interesting text that illuminates the analysis of the fantasy as well as same-sex desire in *The Love of Siam*.

McGowan notes that "fantasy functions most conspicuously in a conservative way, as a vehicle for depoliticization and acceptance of the ruling ideology. It provides an imaginary enjoyment that often persuades subjects to accept their actual immiseration" (2007: 35). McGowan further argues that the social law demands subjects who are obedient and willingly conform to it. Ideology plays a huge significant role here to be used as a rational reason that manipulates the subjects to follow the ideology which obviously maintains the social law (ibid.: 35).

However, conforming to ideology leaves the subjects in a state of dissatisfaction as ideology is in fact constitutively incomplete and limited. It can never provide all the answers for the subject (ibid.: 35-6). Ideology is always restricted because it functions at the level of the signifier which means it needs a signifier to give it power to constitute identity and to provide the totality of identifications that the subject can possibly adopt. Yet, this limits the ability of ideology to create a social reality complete unto itself (ibid.: 36).

Accordingly, ideology needs fantasy to offer the subject a way of accessing this illusory realm beyond the signifier. Fantasy makes the subject believe that "it can have that which is constitutively denied—the satisfaction that comes from having the impossible object" (ibid.: 37). Ideology thus needs fantasy to compensate for its constitutive incompleteness and limitation.

In *The Love of Siam*, Korn and especially Sunee are obvious examples of a dissatisfied subject who have a direct responsibility to maintain the heteronormative ideology, particularly their idealized family institution. Korn, with the guilt of giving his daughter permission to go to the jungle and disappear, becomes an alcoholic and lives in denial – refusing to accept the fact that his daughter is gone. Sunee also expresses her dissatisfaction at sacrificing her happiness for the sake of her family, a product of the "social law". Sunee easily passes and is justified as an ideal wife and mother who puts her family's needs before everything else. Nonetheless, Sunee becomes a dissatisfied

subject since the ideology she clings to provides her nothing but recognition as an ideally good and devoted wife and mother.

The reappearance of Tang, one of the signifiers of the ideal family, through June who is used as a substitution of Tang, represents an element of fantasy in *The Love of Siam* that brings satisfaction to the characters and perpetuates the familial ideology. The message that June tells Tong and writes for his family at the end of the film in the hunting treasure game before she leaves the family that his family “is the coolest” also evidences well that June provides satisfaction and convinces the family, regardless how miserable it is, that it is an ideal family.

Same-sex desire is also explicitly portrayed in *The Love of Siam*. Lacan mentions that “the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one’s desire” (quoted in Miller 1997: 321). Desire thus seems to convey negative connotations and can be harmful to the social order. McGowan (2007) further explains the relationship between the guilt and the desire according to Lacan that to surrender to one’s desire, the subject fails to accept the impossible dimension of the *objet petit*, an unattainable object of desire. When it peruses and follows its desire, all support within the social order thus disappears. The subject ends up facing “its existence alone, fully responsible and without alibi, which is, of course, a difficult position to sustain (ibid.: 81).

As discussed earlier, Tong and Mew also have to face difficulties in the process of sustaining their same-sex desire alone without any support from the rest of the characters who hold normative genders and sexuality. Nevertheless, when Tong decides to give up his (same-sex) desire, he regains support from the social order. After saying goodbye to Mew, it is the first time in the film that Tong and his mother expresses their love and hug each other. As Tong is held in his mother’s arms, a relieved smile leaves us in no doubt that he feels he has done the right thing by choosing his family over his same-sex desire. The scene ends with Sunee saying that “there will be only us from now on, son (*tor pai ni ja mi tae rao na luk*).” Tong is therefore taken back to the ideal heteronormative familial institution in which “fake/non-normative” identities are not welcomed and unaccepted.

Mew, on the other hand, by not giving up same-sex desire and non-normative gendered identity, ends up crying alone in his bedroom following his rejection by Tong. The remaining symbol that represents the same-sex love and relationship between the two characters is the wooden doll with a missing nose which Tong gave Mew when

they were young. As the film concludes, Tong can finally buy a new nose which he gives to Mew to complete the wooden doll on the same day he says goodbye to him. The wooden nose becomes a phallic symbol and the *objet petit a*, an unattainable object of Mew's same-sex desire, that eventually allows "(pseudo-) penetration" to happen in their same-sex relationship.

### Summary

Chris Berry (1997: 14), with references to Asian gay cinema, notes that the films do not always have to represent the gay cultures, but rather tell us how gay culture is being perceived in those countries. While *The Love of Siam* tries to portray the issue of sexual minorities with a new dimension which is young male homosexuality, the film is still overwhelmed with negative stereotypes, reinforcing much of the stigma towards Thai homosexuality.

The warm welcome and success the film received from the mainstream society does not mean that Thai homosexuality is more acceptable in mainstream Thai society. Same-sex desire and relationship in *The Love of Siam* do not survive at the end of the film and have to surrender and give way to the heteronormative institutions that are more "essential" and "cherished".

Reading *The Love of Siam* in the light of Lacan's theories regarding fantasy and desire shows that the ideology derived from the social order is dissatisfactory, and leads to a miserable life and relationships. This is depicted through the relationship between Sunee and Korn and their family. In the film, it is actually the same-sex desire and relationship between Tong and Mew that helps sustain the heteronormative familial institution, since the two boys introduce the "fake" Tang to be the subject of fantasy to maintain the familial ideology. Same-sex desire, love, and relationships are, nonetheless, considered a false hope and problematic in mainstream Thai cinema.

### Concluding Bitter-Sweet Queer Thai Cinema

Reading two mainstream Thai films from the genre of drama reveals the “bitter-sweet” experience of expressing and maintaining transsexual/homosexual identities in both films.

In *Beautiful Boxer*, in order to be able to be admired as a “beautiful boxer”, Toom has to strictly conform to both Thai hegemonic masculinity and femininity that constructs and visualizes her as a “talented Thai kick boxer” and a “good Thai woman”. By transforming her masculine physique to match her feminine psyche, Toom does not therefore break any norms produced by the rigid binary positions of heteronormativity. Toom also has to sacrifice herself to her family by putting her family’s well being ahead of her happiness. This makes Toom “a good Thai child” which gains her more admiration. The film also briefly engages with Toom’s sexuality and love. Her love is, nonetheless, fooled by a heterosexual man which strengthens the repetitive depiction that non-normative love is unreal and impossible in mainstream Thai cinema.

Similarly to *Beautiful Boxer*, in *The Love of Siam*, while the film allows Tong and Mew to express their same-sex desire and love to each other, the film ends with Tong’s decision to sustain his family’s integrity by turning his back on the same-sex relationship with Mew. In juxtaposing the essences of the Thai familial institution and same-sex desire together, *The Love of Siam* infers that same-sex love and relationships is inferior and must give way to heteronormative institutions.

Even though both films provide some space for the main transsexual/homosexual characters to express and maintain their non-normative genders and sexualities within the heteronormative cinematic context, it happens in a restricted circumstance so as not to jeopardize heteronormative institutions. This ambiguity and ambivalence regarding social tolerance/acceptance towards sexual minorities in the film contexts reveals the “bitter-sweet” depictions of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema.

While it is undeniable that the main transsexual/homosexual characters are somehow able to “express” their non-normative genders and/or sexualities within the mainstream heteronormative Thai sphere, they are heavily repressed and controlled by the hegemonic heteronormativity that forces them to strictly follow the heterosexual norms that do not allow them to “maintain” their non-normative sexuality or same-sex desire in the public/heteronormative domain.

The ambiguity and ambivalence towards sexual minorities in Thai society, whether intentionally or unintentionally, also becomes a passive/aggressive strategy that restricts the rights of Thai sexual minorities. The fact that Thai society has already been tolerant of, and even provided some spaces for, sexual minorities, regardless of how limited they are, makes it more difficult for sexual minorities to ask for their rights since majority people believe, presume, and assume that Thai sexual minorities have already been given enough spaces and rights to live their life as equally and fully as any other Thai citizen.

## Chapter Five

### Sweet Queer Thai Cinema

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the portrayals of Thai sexual minorities in two mainstream Thai films from the last selected genre which is comedy. The first film is *Saving Private Tootsie* or *Phrang chomphu kathoey prajanban* in Thai, directed by Kittikorn Liasirikun in 2002. The film is an action comedy showing how the characters of sexual minorities try to survive in a battle field. The second comedy is *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok* or *Plon na ya* (dir. Poj Arnon, 2004). The film follows how a group of *kathoey*/transvestites rob a bank to get money in order to pay their way out of a variety of life crises.

As comedies, both films are successfully able to bring laughter to the audience derived particularly from the hilarious/sympathetic/abnormal representation of *kathoey*/transvestite/transsexual characters. From the heterosexual/heteronormative viewpoint, these comedies can be seen as a “sweet” portrayal of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema since it brings laughter and amusement for heterosexual/heteronormative audiences. Nevertheless, even when sexual minorities are depicted in a funny and comic manner, both films still reveal stereotypes and stigmas relating to Thai sexual minorities.

***Saving Private Tootsie (Phrang Chomphu Kathoey Prajanban) (2002)***

“(Flamboyantly noisily camp. Shocking pink. Burst the jungle with laughter. This is the battlefield where you have to fight for your freedom and silicone)”

*Saving Private Tootsie's* tagline

**Introduction**

*Saving Private Tootsie* follows a spectrum that presents different shades of Thai male homosexualities through a group of five male homosexual characters which includes Cheery (Yolratee Chomkhlong<sup>1</sup>), Chicha (Khatthathep Iamsiri<sup>2</sup>), Jaew (Boriwat U-to<sup>3</sup>), Kasem (Seri Wongmontha<sup>4</sup>), and Somying (Onapha Khritsadi<sup>5</sup>). Kasem is the oldest, weakest, and most unattractive *kathoey*, while Jaew, the youngest transvestite, is noisy and annoying. Cheery is a young, beautiful, quiet, and kind pre-operative transsexual whose personality contrasts with Somying's (meaning “proper lady” in English). Unlike Somying in *The Last Song*, Somying in *Saving Private Tootsie* is a male to female transsexual who is bitter, selfish and always complaining. Chicha is a stereotyped *kathoey* who is excessively camp, loud-mouthed, dirty-minded and obsessed with sex. The group of *kathoey*s decides to go for a holiday together. Unfortunately, their plane clashes and goes down just outside Thailand's border where there are some minority tribes and soldiers in conflict.

After the plane clashes, the passengers, including the five *kathoey*s, manage to escape from the plane before it explodes and desperately search for help. It turns out they are harassed by a group of soldiers from a tribe of minority people who frighten them with gunfire, tanks, and bombs (Figure 5.1). Jaew crazily runs for his life into the jungle to avoid the gunfire followed by the rest of the *kathoey* characters. They end up getting lost in the jungle and run into Tai Yai<sup>6</sup> soldiers, another tribe of minority people, who decide to take the *kathoey*s back to their camp.

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<sup>1</sup> Yolratee Chomkhlong is a famous male to female transsexual model and actor.

<sup>2</sup> Khatthathep Iamsiri is a well-known *kathoey* comedian.

<sup>3</sup> Boriwat U-to is a young actor who also appeared in this director's previous film, *Goal Club* (2001). Boriwat is the only heterosexual actor playing a *kathoey* character in *Saving Private Tootsie*.

<sup>4</sup> Seri Wongmontha is a *kathoey* academic who is also a famous actor (see Chapter 1).

<sup>5</sup> Onapha Khritsadi is the very first well-known male to female transsexual model, actor and make-up artist.

<sup>6</sup> Tai Yai in *Saving Private Tootsie* is an imaginary minority group based on a real ethnic group called Shan, one of the members of the Tai speaking peoples who live in northeastern India, Burma and the

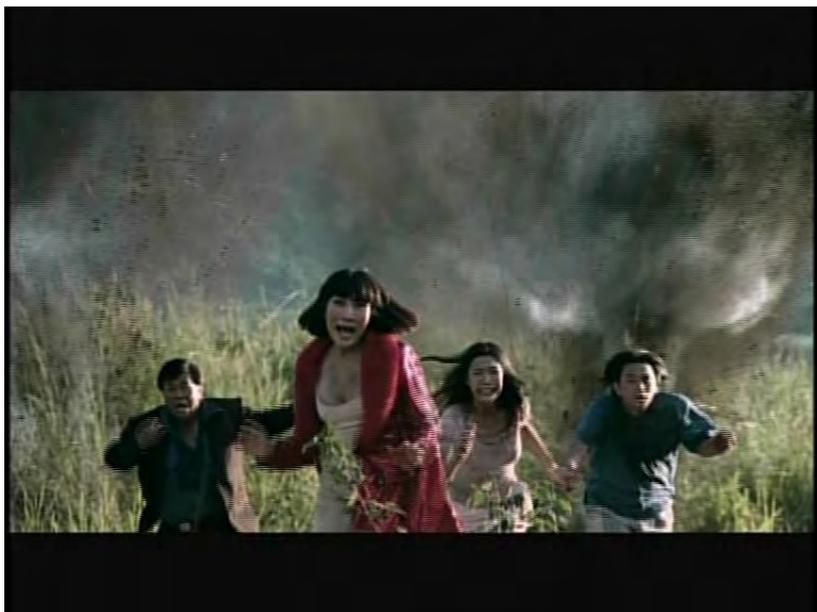


Figure 5.1: The *kathoey* characters run for their lives after being harassed by a group of soldiers from a minority tribe.

Knowing that there are some Thai citizens left in the jungle, the Thai government dispatches a band of off-duty commandoes to bring the group of *kathoeyes* back home to Thailand. The Thai government negotiates with the Tai Yai soldiers and asks for their co-operation in sending back the five Thai citizens to the Thai soldiers at a point near the Thai border.

When they arrive at the pre-arranged meeting point, another tribal group interrupts the process and attacks the Tai Yai from behind, causing the death of some of the Tai Yai soldiers, including a very young soldier of about 10-12 years of age. The Tai Yai soldiers have to run for their lives and think that Thailand has betrayed them. They start to hunt down the Thai soldiers and *kathoeyes* who have still not reached the safety of the Thai border.

The captain of the Thai soldiers calls the Thai military asking for a helicopter to take them back to Thailand as planned. It turns out that the military changes its mind and orders them to go back to Thailand by themselves. The reason why the government does not send the helicopter is explained by the captain who shouts in the *kathoeyes'* faces that “the government doesn’t include *kathoeyes* in its budgets” (“*khao mai mi ngop hai tu?*”). It is nevertheless unclear from the film context whether the captain’s assumption is accurate because there is no scene showing that the Thai government

knows beforehand that the Thai citizens who are left in the jungle are *kathoeyes* and change its mind about sending in the helicopter because of that.

Not only are the *kathoeyes* and Thai soldiers hunted by the two military troops, there is also a conflict within the Thai group itself due to the attitude of the Thai soldiers towards homosexuality. This is especially the case with the soldier named Roeng (Soraphong Chatri, the same actor who plays Chart, Toom's coach in *Beautiful Boxer*) whose deep hatred of *kathoeyes* is clearly linked to the fact that his only son happens to be a *kathoey*. Also, the *kathoey* characters themselves do not get along well, especially Chicha and Somying who fight each other over their differences in their gendered identities. Somying, regarding himself as a real woman since he has already had a sex change, condemns the other *kathoeyes* for being indecisive because they cannot decide whether to be men or women. Chicha argues back that neither is Somying a genuine woman.

Nonetheless, despite all the difficulties of being hunted in the jungle, and given that this film is part of the comedy genre which is supposed to have a happy ending, they finally manage to get back to their motherland. The film concludes with Cheery being interviewed in a talk show and saying that “we may be unlucky to be born as *kathoeyes*, but we are lucky to be born in Thailand/*chock rai thi koet ma phit phet tae choke di thi koet ma thuk thi*”.

*Saving Private Tootsie* is the fourth film of the director, Kittikorn Lewsirikul who won The Best Director in the Golden *Suphannahong* Awards (2001) for his film, *Goal Club (Game lom toh)*, which revealed the serious problem of football match gambling among Thai teenagers. His first two films are *18-80 (Pheuan si mai mi seu)* (1999), a comedy about an 18-year-old grandson and his 80-year-old grandfather who discover more meaning in their lives by spending time together on an island, and *Miracle Om-Somwang (Patihan Om-Somwang)* (1999), another comedy which tells the story of a superstar named Om and an ordinary man named Somwang who, by a miracle, swap their souls. Somwang in Om's body thus enjoys the life of a celebrity while Om in Somwang's learns how an ordinary civilian lives. Of the four films Kittikorn has directed, *Saving Private Tootsie* is thus the first “*kathoey* film (*nang kathoey*)” in which the director tells the story of some *kathoey* characters.

It is important to note that when it went on general release in Thailand, *Saving Private Tootsie* received mixed responses from the heterosexual/heteronormative and

*kathoeys/gay* audience. I will examine the responses from heterosexual/heteronormative viewers followed by those from *kathoeys/gay* respondents.

### ***Saving Private Tootsie* and the Audience Responses**

In terms of the reception of the film in Thailand, based on a number of websites and personal blogs that discuss the film, while a good number of viewers who posted their comments expressed satisfaction with the film, it also received strong criticisms from both heterosexual/heteronormative and homosexual spectators.

For heterosexual spectators (or, to be precise, those who do not identify themselves as homosexual when leaving their comments), there seems to be a high degree of tolerance and even acceptance as most of the spectators enjoy the film and find it funny. One male viewer comments on the film that “it is very funny. I really enjoy seeing *kathoeyes* run for their lives in a war”<sup>7</sup>. Another spectator even encourages other people to open their minds and go to see the film because it contains a lot of moral thoughts:

just open your mind and be more accepting of the minority people who never cause any troubles but are actually capable of doing many good things. The film delivers quite a few good points to take into consideration such as that people are tired because of their physical condition, not because they are *kathoeyes*. Just go and see the film<sup>8</sup>.

There are nevertheless a few criticisms that the film contains verbal violence. One spectator complains that it is “not funny at all as there are only *kathoeyes*’ catfights in the film<sup>9</sup>”. Another viewer interestingly makes the particular criticism that the film insults Thai soldiers:

It is funny that the film shows the *kathoeyes* help carry the wounded soldier who has actually been sent to rescue them. I think it is such an insult to Thai soldiers. Fellow soldiers never abandon fellow soldiers<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *Phrang chomphu* – Critic. Siamzone., 18 Dec. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

<sup>8</sup> *Phrang chomphu* – Critic. Siamzone., 29 Dec. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *Phrang chomphu* – Critic. Siamzone., 14 Dec. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

<sup>10</sup> *Phrang chomphu* – Critic. Siamzone., 17 Dec. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

From the *kathoey* community itself, there is also a mix of responses to the film. One commentator remarks; “it is a good film. I am a *kathoey* myself so I have to support this kind of film. I am going to be a soldier soon too. I will ,eat’ all the other soldiers up<sup>11</sup>”. Nevertheless, the film does receive some criticisms from *kathoey/gay* spectators, particularly because the film is judged to portray the *kathoey* characters negatively and stereotypically. One viewer mentions that the film should reduce the insults to *kathoey*s<sup>12</sup>.

There are also some personal blogs writing particularly on *Saving Private Tootsie*. A blogger named In Between Dreams writes an article called *Phrang chomphu: khae rap dai...mai phor* [*Saving Private Tootsie*: Just tolerance is not enough]. The blogger is concerned that while it seems that the film is “pro” *kathoey*s and against homophobia, the *kathoey* characters are portrayed as ridiculous and their love remains as just “the love that no one dares to mention (*khwam-rak thi mai kla oi nam*)”. Similarly, another blogger called Bee also writes about *Saving Private Tootsie* in his personal blog entitled *Phrang chomphu kathoey prajanban: khun khaojai hua ok “kathoey” jing reu?* [*Saving Private Tootsie*: Do you really understand *kathoey*s?]. He mentions that the *kathoey* characters who appear in the film are not “genuine” but just an “image” of *kathoey*s as seen by heterosexuals. As a gay person, Bee states that he rarely sees any *kathoey*s behave in such a rude or loud-mouthed manner as some of the *kathoey* characters in the film.

According to the internet-based comments on *Saving Private Tootsie*, the film seems to be enjoyed by most of its spectators, particularly the heterosexual ones. Nevertheless, criticisms made by some of the *kathoey*s/*gays* are that the film is being disrespectful to *kathoey*s and misrepresenting *kathoey* people to the public.

In terms of financial success and awards, the film earned the gross total of 40 million baht throughout the country. In comparison with other films shown in the same year, another comedy ghost film called *Phi hua khat* [Ghost without head] (dir. Khomson Trikhom, 2004) gained 80 million baht while yet another comedy called *Seua Tui ta thiing norng* [crazy Tiger Tui] (dir. Sitthiphong Mattanawe, 2004) earned 500,000 baht<sup>13</sup>. *Saving Private Tootsie* also won The Best Music from the 26<sup>th</sup> of *Phra*

<sup>11</sup>*Phrang chomphu* – Critic. Siamzone., 13 Nov. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

<sup>12</sup>*Phrang chomphu* – Critic. Siamzone., 19 Dec. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

<sup>13</sup> The total gross incomes of films shown in 2002. Siamzone., 10 Jan. 2003. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

*Suratsawadi Awards* (2002)<sup>14</sup>. Judging by the box office and the award, it can be said that *Saving Private Tootsie* was well received by the mainstream Thai audiences but not highly successful.

Internationally, on the contrary, *Saving Private Tootsie* is one of just a few Thai films (or one of just a few *kathoey* films to be precise) that has had its rights bought by an international company; the American-based Distant Horizon (Wise Kwai 2005).

Comparing the film to some other Thai *kathoey* comedy films such as *The Iron Ladies* (dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, 2000), the most successful *kathoey* comedy film both in Thailand and internationally, it is interesting to note that *The Iron Ladies* and *Saving Private Tootsie* share some significant characteristics as will be discussed below. Essentially, both films set out to represent the *kathoey* characters so that they are viewed from a more tolerant perspective by the mainstream heteronormative audience.

*The Iron Ladies*, released in Thailand in 2000, was an overwhelming success. While the plots of *The Iron Ladies* (in which a group of *kathoey* volleyball players who are struggling against homophobia both in the game and life finally overcome those difficulties and win at national level) and *Saving Private Tootsie* are different, a significant similarity in both films is that at the beginning the *kathoey* characters are shown to endure ongoing difficulties derived from their non-normative gendered identities. As the films progress, they go on to prove to the mainstream heteronormative majority that they are equally talented and similarly capable of making useful contributions to society. This helps them to gain the tolerance of the population at large. In *The Iron Ladies*, the *kathoey* volleyball players prove to the public that they are of exceptional sporting talent, and pose no threat to anyone. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, the *kathoey* characters are shown to be good-hearted and even able to support and protect the masculine soldiers.

In both films, there are also some *kathoey* characters who submissively accept the socially constructed myth that they are “abnormal” and “inferior” to the heterosexual people. In *The Iron Ladies*, Pia, the transsexual character, refers to herself and her *kathoey* friends as “socially orphaned children/*dek kamphra khornng sangkhom*”. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, Cheery refers to himself and his friends as being unlucky in having been born abnormally in terms of their gendered identities. Their submissive acceptance of the “myth” derived from the hegemony of heteronormativity that they are

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<sup>14</sup> The result of the 26th Suratsawadi Award. Siamzone., 23 Sep. 2002. Web. Accessed 11 May 2010.

“abnormal/inferior” and their own confession of it to the heterosexual majority are possible reasons why these two films, full of *kathoey* characters, are appealing to and tolerated by the heteronormative audience. Portraying *kathoey*s as pathetic characters therefore seems to be a repetitive strategy used in mainstream Thai cinema to gain more positive reactions from the heteronormative audience both in film and in social contexts.

What makes *Saving Private Tootsie* different from *Iron Ladies* is the way *Saving Private Tootsie* intentionally and intensively juxtaposes the essence of the *kathoey*'s effeminacy to the hyper-masculinity of the military/the soldiers. Moreover, the film also includes racial minorities and it even couples one of the “racial minority” characters, Yao, with one of the “sexual minority” characters, Cheery. The film therefore links together racial and sexual minorities. This stresses the binary oppositions between hyper-masculine heterosexuality/mainstream Thai nationality and effeminate homosexuality/non-Thai minorities. The clash and relationship between mainstream and non-mainstream identities as well as mainstream and marginal/liminal positions in *Saving Private Tootsie* are a significant issue worthy of further exploration. Thus, in the next section the concept of liminal space will be used as a theoretical framework for the discussion.

Another significant issue that needs to be analysed is how this *kathoey* film appeals to the spectators as being funny. Elements of comedy theory will be used to illuminate the reading of *Saving Private Tootsie*. Those comic elements which appear in the film need a system comprising signs (i.e. language (as used in jokes) and gestures (as used in gags)) to produce laughter or comic meanings. It also depends on each individual/spectator to decode the comic signs. The comic elements can therefore be read as a semiotic system. In this regard, semiotics after Ferdinand de Saussure will be used as another theoretical framework for the analysis of the comic elements in *Saving Private Tootsie*.

### **Part One. The Collision of Hyper-Masculinity, Mainstream National Identity and *Kathoey*-Effeminacy Minority Identities**

As an action-comedy, the film titles (in both Thai and English), tagline, and film posters serve to highlight the degree of comedy derived from a striking clash between hyper-masculinity and hyper-effeminacy in the filmic text. Looking at the film title, *Phrang*

*chomphu kathoey prajanban* (literary translated as Pink Camouflage: Fighting Fags), the term *phrang* or “camouflage” is associated with the military sense (as a camouflaged soldier) and the term *prajanban* or “ragingly fight” refers to a fight in a battlefield. The military and the war become the representatives of the dominant masculine realms. The effeminate element is nevertheless juxtaposed with masculinity via the term, *kathoey*, an effeminate gendered identity. It is this juxtaposition/contradiction/paradox between the hyper-masculine and the effeminacy which promises comic results in the film.

In the film’s posters, the pink tone, representing femininity, is also used as a background and one of the posters literally makes fun of the title by having the soldiers wear camouflaged uniform in pink (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2: The film poster of *Saving Private Tootsie*.

In the English title, the director intentionally mocks the American film, *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1998). The English title is thus not the translated version of the Thai title. Nonetheless, the paradox of masculinity and effeminacy is successfully maintained by juxtaposing the effeminate *kathoey* with masculinity and physical hardship so key to *Saving Private Ryan*. The name “Ryan”, the main character in the American film, is substituted with the name “Tootsie”, a term used to label *kathoey*s in Thailand. One of the versions of the film posters also intentionally parodies *Saving Private Ryan*’s poster by using the pink tone and having the *kathoey* characters

posted in an effeminate manner, in contrast to the strong sense of masculinity and soldierhood in the original (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3: The film posters of *Saving Private Ryan* (left) and *Saving Private Tootsie* (right).

The tagline on the Thai poster, “Flamboyantly noisily camp. Shocking pink. Burst the jungle with laughter. This is the battlefield where you have to fight for your freedom and silicone”, also keeps the paradoxical motif between hyper-masculinity and hyper-effeminacy by mixing terms which would not normally be juxtaposed such as flamboyance, jungle, battlefield, and silicone.

The clash/juxtaposition of the *kathoey*s’ effeminacy with the realm of soldier/manhood/masculinity is nothing new in Thai cinema and society. The issue has been popularly used in a good number of Thai comedy films telling stories about new recruits, including one or a few *kathoey* characters who are also recruited according to the Thai conscription law, living together in a boot camp, for instance, *Korngphan thahan mai* [New trainee soldiers] (dir. Prayoon Wongchuan, 1984), *Korngphan thahan ken+12 ton naew rak rim foot-bat* [Trainee soldiers boot camp+12 episode love on the footpath] (dir. Prayoon Wongchuan, 1996), and *Korngphan khreuk khreun tor. thahan kheuk khak* [Amusing boot camp and enthusiastic trainee soldiers] (dir. Bamroe

Phongintrakul, 2010). In these films, *kathoeys* characters, with their hyper-effeminacy, are often used as a focus of mockery and to bring laughter to storylines.

Not only is the issue cinematically represented, but Thai people generally find the co-existence of soldiers and *kathoeyes* astounding and funny as is demonstrated each year when transsexual or transvestite people have to begin national service. The appearance of *kathoeyes* at the draft draws massive attention from the media and the Thai people generally. *Khao Sod* (17 April 2010), a Thai newspaper, reports that “the second type of woman draws the most attention and amusement from people”. Similarly, in one of the most popular websites for Thai ladyboys, the webmaster describes the atmosphere of the conscription in 2010 and mentions how people make fun of *kathoeyes*;

With their female physique and among those manly men who came for their draft, the *kathoeyes* were looked at, looked down on and even laughed at which is very embarrassing<sup>15</sup>.

As these examples from films and news media show, Thai spectators are already familiar with the collision of hyper-masculinity (military) and effeminacy (*kathoeyes*) in the military space and the comic results which ensue.

A significant observation beyond the clash between hyper-masculinity and effeminacy is that in both societal and film contexts, hyper-masculinity is usually affixed to mainstream Thai national identity, while effeminacy or sexual minorities are marginalised or put aside as “the Other”. With reference to *Saving Private Tootsie*, the discussion below will be developed to show how hyper-masculine identities are easily assimilated and attached to Thai national identity while non-normative gendered identities and, especially sexuality, are treated as “sexual minorities” and left within the liminal space.

### **“Hyper-Masculinity”, Thai National Identity and Non-Normative Gendered Identities**

Thailand is one of the countries where the masculine male heteronormative individuals have been in many ways privileged under the patriarchal structure which is

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<sup>15</sup> When *kathoeyes* go for conscription. Bangkok Thailand Ladyboys., 9 Apr. 2010. Web. Accessed 15 May 2010.

strengthened by localisation, selectivity, manipulation, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation of Buddhism into the Thai context. These “Thai Buddhist beliefs” illustrate explicitly how a masculine male heteronormative person gains positive recognition from society whilst the rest of the gendered identities suffer from negative perception/recognition. Thai people believe that to be born as a man, one has to have accumulated enough moral/good deeds in previous lives otherwise one will be born as a woman (see Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1998 and Dungtrin 2004). Homosexuals are in the worst position of all. According to these beliefs, being a homosexual in the present life means the person has committed moral wrong doings, particularly linked to sexual misconduct, in his/her previous lives (see Jackson 1993 and Boonmi 1986: 120- 121).

This patriarchal value has been articulated in Thai society for a long period of time. It can be seen from some old Thai sayings which straightforwardly express the belief that being a masculine male heterosexual is better than any other gendered identities in society. For instance, if the parents have a son, the son will be able to ordain as a Buddhist monk and the parents can hold the edge of their son’s robe and go to heaven (*mi luk chai phor mae dai koe chai pha leuang kheun sawan*) (see Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1998). This old saying reveals that it is a huge good fortune for a family to have a son because he can make massive merit by becoming a monk for a certain period of time which will ensure the parents go to heaven after they die.

On the contrary, Thai society has another old saying for daughters that “having a daughter is like having a toilet in front of the parents’ house (*mi luk sao meuan mi suam yu na ban*) (see Sukamon Viphaviponlakol 2001)”. With the clear connotations of being unhygienic, dirty, and smelly, toilets are compared by Thai people to daughters in the sense that once the daughters grow up, they can easily be tainted and dirtied by having sex and falling pregnant outside of wedlock, thus bringing scandal on their families that destroying their parents’ reputation.

There is no old saying in Thai society mentioning how it would be for parents to have a homosexual child. However, effeminate homosexual sons, especially those who have already developed a female body with, for example, breast implants and feminized facial surgery, cannot be ordained since ordination is only allowed for men considered

masculine in appearance. Thus, *kathoey* sons are inevitably blamed and held responsible for being unable to redeem their parents' sinful acts and send them to heaven<sup>16</sup>.

As there is no notion that a daughter can become a monk to help her parents go to heaven, as by nature she cannot be ordained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand, the daughter is not responsible for her parents' well-being after they die.

The positive attitudes towards masculine heteronormative identity can also be seen through linguistic expressions, especially in terms coined to refer to the masculine male heteronormative members in society such as *chai chat thahan* or *chai chat nak-rop* (a man who is born to be a soldier/warrior), and *luk phu-chai* (manly man). These terms have positive connotations conveying a sense of strength, bravery, dignity and sacrifice and suggest that masculine heteronormative men are capable of protecting the nation.

While the status of women is lower and perceived to have some negative connotations, there are nonetheless terms referring to Thai women in a positive light and making them part of the national identity such as “*ying thai jai ngam* [Thai women with a good heart]”. There is even a song entitled *Ying thai jai ngam* composed by Lady La-eit Phibunsongkhram, the wife of the Prime Minister Field Marshal Por. Phibunsongkhram who, under his leadership, led a specific policy to build the Thai nationalism through “hyper-nationality”, infused with societal and cultural elements to strengthen the Thai identity and the nation.<sup>17</sup>

Comparing the term *ying thai jai ngam* to the terms referring to masculine Thai men mentioned above, especially *luk phu-chai*, it is evident that while a proper man is, by definition, a “manly man”, a woman has to earn the description “women of good heart” through her behaviour. The lexical expressions in the Thai language are therefore another indicator revealing the patriarchal system at work in Thai society.

It is interesting, accordingly, to observe that when the “good” essence of (hyper-)masculinity as well as femininity is practised, it is usually attached and affixed to mainstream national identity. Pattana (2005) discusses this particular issue in his passionate research re-examining and deconstructing Thai masculinities through the male-dominated sport of Thai Boxing. He provides solid evidence proving that (hyper-)masculine (as well as feminine) identities can easily and credibly be affixed and assimilated to national identity.

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<sup>16</sup> According to my own experience as a *kathoey* son in a Thai Buddhist family, my mother was also worried and upset that she might have had to go to hell when I refused to ordain.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on Field Marshal Pibul's nationalist policy see Thongchai Winichakul (2000); Reynolds (2002); Harrison and Jackson (2010).

Pattana tells the life stories of three professional boxers who won gold medals at the Olympic Games. On returning to Thailand, they were recognised as national heroes who had promoted the good name of Thailand and brought glory to the country. They were also appointed to and worked for the most male-dominated governmental agencies: Somluck for the Royal Thai Navy, Wijarn for the Royal Thai Police, and Manus for the Royal Thai Army. The success stories of Somluck, Wijarn and Manus (and some other boxing heroes such as Khaosai Galaxy) are therefore evidence of the masculine nationalist sentiments which link hyper-masculinity with national identity in Thai society.

Pattana also compares those Olympic champions with Thai winners of the Miss Universe competition. Pattana notes that by becoming Miss Universe, young Thai women become national heroines as, like the boxer heroes, they also bring glory and fame to the country. Apasra Hongsakula and Porntip Narksirunkanok are two Thai beauty queens who won Miss Universe in 1965 and 1988 respectively. Both of them received high admiration and social recognition as national heroines. Accordingly, the feminine nationalist sentiments from the two Thai Miss Universes also reinforce the idea that valuable hyper-feminine identities can be easily affixed to Thai national identity.

In terms of Thai cinema, films such as *Ong Bak* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2003), *Tom Yam Goong* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2005), *The Legend of Suriyothai* (dir. Chatri-Chalerm Yugala, 2001) and *The Legend of King Naresuan* (dir. Chatri-Chalerm Yugala, 2006), strongly portray both these masculine and feminine nationalist sentiments. The main characters in the films have all the physical and mental qualities required by the social standard of Thai masculine and feminine identities. In *Ong Bak*, *Tom Yam Goong* and *The Legend of King Naresuan*, the male characters have strong masculine bodies and demonstrate their prowess in protecting the community. In *The Legend of Suriyothai*, the female character is the perfect wife, mother, and queen. The essences of Thai masculine and feminine identities are affixed to Thai national identity by making the main characters responsible for the well-being of the state, valuable Thai cultural icons or heritage. In *Ong Bak*, the main character, Ting (Tony Jaa), has the responsibility for taking back the stolen Buddha statue, representing state religion. In *Tom Yam Goong*, Kham (Tony Jaa), has to fight to get back his stolen elephants: this animal represents the Thai nation and was used on an earlier version of the national flag. In *The Legend of King Naresuan* and *The Legend of Suriyothai*, King Naresuan and

Queen Suriyothai, as leaders of the country, defend their country in the wars with Burma.

It is interesting to note how the enemies in each of these films are constructed in such a way that they are excluded from the mainstream heteronormative national fabric. In *Ong Bak*, the antagonist is an evil disabled person. In *Tom Yam Goong*, the antagonist is a heartless, cruel, and greedy male to female transsexual. In *King Naresuan* and *Suriyothai*, the state enemy is Burma which is portrayed as a barbaric and abusive nation. It is thus evident that these films use the essences of the non-mainstream and racialised/ethnic “Other” as the enemy of the mainstream/state which accentuates the roles of masculine and feminine nationalist heroes and heroines.

While socially constructed (hyper-)masculinity as well as (hyper-)femininity can be easily affixed to the patriarchal system both in Thai society and in mainstream cinematic representations, sexual minorities experience difficulties in being accepted as mainstream members of the society and are thought of as off-mainstream and marginal identities. While winning the Olympic Games or being chosen as Miss Universe gains the male and female heterosexual subjects admiration, fame and prosperity from mainstream society, Thai *kathoeys* such as Trichada Phetcharat (in 2004) and Thanyarat Jiraphatphakon (in 2007) who won the Miss International Queen male to female transsexual beauty pageant, have not received the same level of recognition for their achievement from Thai society.

Turning to cinematic representations, in order to gain at least partial space in and acceptance from mainstream society, sexual minorities have to prove that, despite their non-normative gendered identity, they can be useful members of society. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, to earn the tolerance of the masculine Thai soldiers, the *kathoeys* characters have to prove that they can be helpful to them. More importantly, they strongly express their gratitude to the Thai nation which is also beloved by the majority of the heteronormative members. Proving their usefulness and expressing their love for the nation seem to be the strategies that help the *kathoeys* characters to step over the heteronormative threshold and assimilate themselves to mainstream society. To discuss the issue, liminal space thus becomes a useful approach, particularly when the *kathoeys* characters have to cross the boundary into their mainstream motherland.

### **Across the Threshold: Liminality of *Kathoeyes* and Minorities in *Saving Private Tootsie***

The discussion of the “liminal” or “liminality”, derived from the Latin term, “limen” meaning “threshold”, was introduced by Victor Turner whose interpretation was influenced by the notion of *rites de passage* by Van Gennep. Van Gennep describes *rites de passage* as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (cited in Turner 1969: 94). He divided them into three phases: i.) separation; ii.) marginality/transition/liminality; and iii.) aggregation.

For the first stage, separation, the individual or group detaches or is forced to detach itself from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both. The detachment leads to the second period which is “liminality”. In this phase, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous as s/he stays in a cultural realm where there are few or no connections to the past or coming state. In the third phase, aggregation, the passenger/ritual subject/individual/corporate is in a stable state again and obtains rights and obligations from a clearly defined and “structural” type. S/he, as a result, is expected to behave according to certain customary norms and ethical standards that bind the incumbents of social position into a system (Turner 1969: 94-5).

Turner exclusively focuses on and further develops the idea of liminality from Van Gennep’s second phase. Turner considers the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) as ambiguity because the condition or persons cannot be located in the network of classifications in cultural space assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As a result, liminality is usually likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon (cited in Alexander and Seidman 1990: 147).

In *Saving Private Tootsie*, the *kathoeyes* and Thai soldiers have to get across the river to get into Thailand. The river border becomes the liminal space for them as they have to step over the border/threshold of the non-mainstream/liminal stage to the mainstream status. The *kathoey* characters also experience the three phases of Van Gennep’s *rites de passage* during the passage of returning to Thailand. When the plane goes down outside the border of Thailand and while being held hostage by the Tai Yai soldiers, the *kathoey* characters experience the first stage of *rites de passage* which is

separation. They are detached and separated from their “fixed point in the social structure” as clients/passengers of the airline and as Thai citizens.

After being helped by the Thai soldiers but having to find their own way back to Thailand as the Thai government refuses to send help, they move to the second phase, liminality, which is the ambiguous stage as they are left in the in-between state where they do not know if they could make it back to the Thai border. In the third period, aggregation, the *kathoey* characters finally make it to Thailand and regain their stable state that comes with obligations as Thai citizens.

Genep (cited in Turner 1969: 95) notes that the subject in the final stage is expected to behave according to certain customary norms and ethical standards that bind the incumbents of social position into a system. *Saving Private Tootsie* also provides vivid evidence that some of the *kathoey* characters have to behave according to the certain customary norms of Thai heteronormativity. Cheery has to conform and perform masculine normative gender roles by using customary Thai male language when shouting to stop the Thai soldiers who are shooting from the river to prevent the minority people from setting foot in Thailand. With his beautiful female figure, he paradoxically shouts to the Thai soldiers in a standard masculine language with a male polite final particle, *khrap*, that “*ya ying khrap phom khon thai* [don’t shoot me. I am a Thai man]” which happens to be efficient since the Thai soldiers stop shooting and let them in. This becomes explicitly evident that to transform from the liminal to the stage of aggregation, the *kathoey* characters have to perform and follow the norms of mainstream heteronormativity.

The film also repeats this motif through the homophobic soldier, Roeng and his *kathoey* son. To be accepted by and reconciled with the father, his *kathoey* son also has to conform to the norms of heteronormativity. The *kathoey* son finally accepts the father’s request to go to the military school or do whatever the father wants him to do to be cured from the “*kathoey* disease”. In return, the *kathoey* son asks his father to promise not to go to war again because he is afraid of losing him. After hearing this, the father gets tears in his eyes, hugs his son for the first time in the film, and says he loves him. This scene therefore turns a shameful *kathoey* son into a good son who demonstrates his unconditional love and gratitude to his father. Similarly to Tong in *The Love of Siam* who gives up his same-sex relationship with Mew to save his family, the *kathoey* son also determines to give up his non-normative gendered identity to save his father’s life. It is thus apparent that to be able to be more tolerable, the *kathoey* son has

to try to assimilate himself by according with mainstream masculine heteronormative codes in the same way that the other *kathoey* characters in *Saving Private Tootsie* conform to the normative masculine ideology.

As the film spends almost 90% of the time following how the *kathoey*s and Thai soldiers survive and finally find their way back to Thailand, the liminal phase is the main focus of the film. Further discussion of this phase will reveal how the *kathoey* characters “stay out” in the particular circumstances with the hyper-masculine soldiers.

### **Multiple Unlucky: “Staying Out” as a *Kathoey* in *Saving Private Tootsie***

As noted in Chapter 3, the first Thai-directed and Thai-produced film was called *Double Luck* (*Choke sorng chan*) (dir. Luang Anurakrathakarn, 1927) and tells the story of a local governor who comes to Bangkok to catch a thief. It is double luck for him because he not only succeeds in catching the thief but he also finds himself a wife while in the capital city. While the first Thai film has a plot which concentrates on how lucky the main male heterosexual character can be, *Saving Private Tootsie* shows how a *kathoey* could be multiply unlucky and miserable living in the dominantly masculine heteronormative arena.

When Cheery mentions that he is unlucky to be born “abnormally” (“*koet ma phit phet*”) in terms of gender, the film illustrates and cinematically visualises how difficult it is for *kathoey*s to carry on with their lives bearing non-normative gendered identity. When they accidentally run into the Tai Yai in the jungle at the very beginning of the film, the Tai Yai soldiers initially judge them to be worthless. One of the soldiers suggests that they should leave the *kathoey*s to die in the jungle because they could not be used as a bargaining tool with the Thai government as the government would not care for *kathoey*s.

Not only are the *kathoey*s looked down on and dehumanised by the Tai Yai soldiers, the Thai soldiers are also verbally and physically rude and disrespectful to the *kathoey* characters. The Thai soldiers use the lowest and rudest collocation to the *kathoey* characters such as using the pronouns “*meung*” (you) and “*ku*” (I) as well as derogatory terms used to label *kathoey*s such as “*i toot*” (or “faggot” in English) when referring to the *kathoey* characters. Roeng, the homophobic father, also vents his anger and hatred on the *kathoey* characters, especially Jaew, the young *kathoey* who is about his son’s age, by physically abusing him.

Surprisingly, after all the abuse and severe insults from the Thai soldiers, the *kathoeys* characters are still willingly help save the soldiers. Even though he is so old and weak that he does not even have enough strength to walk, the elderly *kathoeys*, Kasem determinedly tries to carry a wounded Thai soldier shot by a Tai Yai soldier to the Thai border. Chicha, with her loud-mouth, tells Kasem off for trying to help others when he cannot even help himself. Kasem yells back “what is so funny and sick about a *kathoeys* wanting to help a soldier?” The rest of the *kathoeys*, after hearing that, work together to help carry the wounded soldier. Seeing the *kathoeys* harmoniously help each other, the other soldiers regain their hope and will-power to try to get back to Thailand. When Chicha helps carry his soldier friend, another soldier, who previously responded to Chicha’s request for a cigarette by stamping his cigarette out on the ground in front of him, offers Chicha a cigarette.

These scenes prove that underneath their non-normative gendered identities, they are morally good and can be useful and supportive to the heteronormative members. These help them be more tolerated in the heteronormative system.

Another outstanding moral characteristic in *Saving Private Tootsie* is the gratitude that the *kathoeys* characters express to the nation. This is one significant aspect that has never before been mentioned in any mainstream Thai films with a *kathoeys* focus. It is this issue to which I now turn.

### ***Kathoeys Love Thailand:* Thai Nationalism and Non-Normative Gendered and Sexual Identities**

Saying that he is unlucky to be born a *kathoeys*, but lucky to have been born in Thailand and to be a Thai citizen, Cheery is used by the film to praise the generosity and kindness of Thailand and to show that he, as a *kathoeys*, is also appreciated. He was born in the country and at least he can legally, freely and safely put his feet on the land and no one can force him to go away. When Cheery shouts at the Thai soldiers that he is Thai and they suddenly stop shooting and let him and his Thai friends get across the river and into Thai territory, the film shows that even though they were born as *kathoeys* and have been harassed by prejudice, they are still lucky enough to be born in a peaceful country such as Thailand where Thai soldiers will not kill a Thai citizen.

Considering the time of completing this thesis (2011) or even looking back at the time of major political crisis in Thailand such as October 14 (1973), the Black May (1992) and the “dispersal” of red shirt protesters by military force (2010), it does not

seem to be the case in spite of what is depicted in the film that Thai soldiers cannot or will not kill Thai citizens.

*Saving Private Tootsie* thus romanticises and idealises Thailand as a peaceful, harmonious and non-violent country. While praising the beloved nation for those ideologies that have already been familiarised and adored by the majority/mainstream heteronormative people, the *kathoey* characters are also portrayed as the ones who share and cherish the same national ideology. They are thus assimilated into the state's discourses, helping to normalise their non-normative genders and gain more tolerance from mainstream society.

Nonetheless, while the *kathoey* characters reach a happy ending as they finally return to Thailand, their motherland seems to welcome them only for their familiar non-normative genders, but not their non-normative sexuality. Like all the films discussed so far in this thesis, there is still no space for same-sex sexuality and relationships to survive in mainstream Thai cinema.

Despite all the misery he faces from the plane crash and in the battlefield, Cheery happens to find himself the love of his life. Yao, the Tai Yai soldier, falls in love with Cheery at the Tai Yai camp. At first Yao thinks wrongly that Cheery is a woman. Cheery explains to him that he is a *kathoey*. However, the fact that Cheery is a transvestite does not change Yao's feelings for him. They end up having sex at the camp in the jungle.

When the conflict between the Tai Yai and Thai soldiers begins, Cheery and Yao are separated. Cheery has to follow his *kathoey* friends and the Thai soldiers as they try to make their way back to Thailand, while Yao has to follow his leader to hunt down the Thai group. Yao begs his leader not to kill Cheery but his request is ignored. Cheery and his friends nonetheless manage to get back to Thailand before the Tai Yai soldiers succeed in their plan.

After crossing the river and laying himself down at the Thai border, Cheery sees Yao standing on the opposing river bank. Yao cannot get across into Thailand as he is not Thai. Cheery decides to run back to be with him. The film follows the two of them holding hands and running away together thus breaking all the traditions of mainstream Thai homosexual films that consider same-sex love to be impossible.

Nonetheless, the high degree of ambiguity and ambivalence towards sexual minorities is still present; their same-sex relationship is presented as disgusting when the two Tai Yai soldiers who seeing them having sex are sick, and ridiculous when one

of the Thai soldiers laughs at them when seeing them express their same-sex desire for each other. While the film follows Cheery, a transvestite who does not have sexual reassignment surgery, and Yao romantically holding hands and running away together, it does not show where they are heading nor does it show how their same-sex love and relationship can be accommodated. It therefore become clear from the film context that this kind of functioning relationship has no place on Thai soil.

When the film provides a possibility for a same-sex relationship to be successful, it is obvious that their same-sex love cannot survive or be accommodated in Thailand. Same-sex love and relationships also happen on the condition that Cheery, a sexual minority, can only be coupled with someone from a racial minority. Thus, his partner does not show any links to Thai national identity. Their sexuality also remains within the liminal space and cannot get across the mainstream heteronormative threshold into Thailand. The film therefore affirms that while mainstream heteronormative Thai space seems to open for *kathoey* non-normative gendered identities, their same-sex behaviours, practices, love, and relationships are still barred from happening in mainstream cinema.

The above discussion reveals how the *kathoey*'s gender and sexuality are excluded as being marginal and of liminal status in the film context. The next part will move on and focus exclusively on the cinematic genre as a comedy that decodes the social and cultural values with respect to the portrayal of sexual minorities in *Saving Private Tootsie*.

## **Part Two. What Makes This *Kathoey* Film a Comedy?**

To make a film a comedy, there are a number of important elements such as jokes (verbal) and gags (visual), plot, setting and characterization. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, the outstanding elements that make the film appear funny and comic to the spectators are also jokes, gags and characterization which make direct and exclusive reference to same-sex subcultures in Thailand. To explore and discuss some of the jokes and gags in the film, semiotics after Saussure offers a useful theoretical framework.

## Semiotics and Cinema

Semiotics is the study of how the structural relations within a sign system work to produce meaning. The term semiotics, was coined by C.S. Peirce, but the first linguist who initiated the concept of the sign system was Ferdinand de Saussure. In relation to film studies, it is also Saussure's theories that have had a greater impact than Peirce's. Saussure's main focus is on the study of language (one of the most obvious sign systems). What makes his studies on the language system groundbreaking is his approach that concentrates more on how language works and produces meaning rather than how it has evolved to the philology of language that has been explored and discussed by other linguists (Hayward 2006, 344-5).

Saussure mentioned that a sign system comprises two important parts, the signifier and the signified. They are arbitrary and have no necessary correlation to each other. The linguistic sign was therefore not a name that could be attached to an object but a composite of signifier and signified (word and concept).

Barthes (1957) developed more of Saussure's concept of signification by identifying two orders of signification which are denotation and connotation respectively. In brief, while denotation is the basic level of meaning of a sign or the surface literal meaning of it, connotation refers to the associative and evaluative meanings attributed to the sign by the culture or the person involved in using it. Barthes further mentioned that the co-working of denotation and connotation also produces another level on top which is "myth" that helps us understand a particular culture. This makes signs become the provider of cultural meanings (cited in Hayward 2006, 344-5).

Accordingly, semiotics becomes a fertile theoretical framework to be applied in film studies as it is concerned with attempting to explain the process of meaning production in a "sign system" (which includes cinema among other things such as language, sport, games, songs, dress-codes, literature, television, advertising, and so on). The Western notion of semiotics has also been discussed and employed by Thai scholars such as Chusak Pattarakulvanit in his book, *Choeng at wathanatham* (1996) [Footnotes of Culture].

In terms of film studies, semiotics helps expand the framework of film studies beyond the filmic text. Semiotics also concerns spectator-positions which is another significant factor that allows for multiple interpretations of the sign system in a film (Hayward 2006, 347).

To be precise, in cinematic comedy, the most important part which makes a film a comedy is the gags and/or jokes, a sign system in the filmic text. Palmer (1988, 42) suggests that a gag/joke results from a peripeteia (reversal), the Greek term being discussed in tragedy, which evokes both surprise and anticipation when a pair of syllogisms leads to a contradictory conclusion. Horton (1991, 6) further comments that a gag/joke concerned with the two syllogisms largely depends on the intersection of the plausible and the implausible. Reading those jokes/gags as a semiotic system, the pair of syllogisms can be viewed on many levels from denotation, connotation and myth that represent the cultural values of the particular society. The spectator can also be taken on board to examine the meaning-production derived from the jokes/gags that appear in the film. Below is the reading of some certain jokes and gags in *Saving Private Tootsie* from a semiotic approach.

### **„Fag’ Jokes and Gags in *Saving Private Tootsie***

In *Saving Private Tootsie*, at the beginning of the film when the main characters are introduced one after another, one provoking gag relating directly to the collision of a hyper-masculinity and hyper-effeminacy is in the scene when Roeng talks to his *kathoey* son (Figure 5.4 and 5.5).

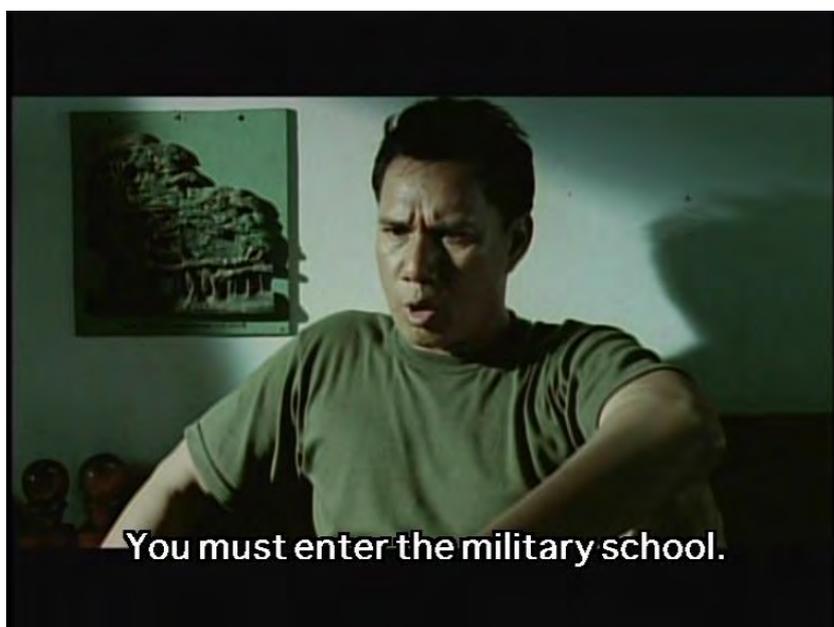


Figure 5.4: The army officer father is trying to persuade his son to join a military school.



Figure 5.5: The *kathoey* son responds to his father's request that he might go to join the military school if the father could find him a husband.

From the stills above, the father, Roeng, in his military T-shirt tries to convince his son to go to a military school in order to be “cured”. The medium close-up shot is used in the scene to show how the father is seriously worried. As the father starts to talk, we do not see the image of the son. There is a development of suspense as the audience wonders why the father is so serious and why a military school can heal his son. After the father finishes his dialogue, the camera quickly switches to the son who, as we can see in the still above, uses make up, wears female attire and acts effeminately. The son's effeminate appearance becomes a peripeteia which provokes both surprise and anticipation derived from the contradictory conclusion leading to the comic effect.

The gag provides a vivid intersection of the plausible and implausible elements by having silent pauses from both the masculine father and effeminate *kathoey* son. The moment of contradiction between the plausible and the implausible is thus highlighted for the audience. What is intriguing in this particular gag is how spectator-positioning according to semiotic reading provides potential for multiple analysis of the peripeteia in this particular gag. In other words, for the heterosexual and homosexual audiences, the plausible and implausible may not be derived from the same elements, even though both lead to comic results.

From a heteronormative point of view, the comic result might come from the fact that the father seriously tries to talk some sense into his *kathoey* son; to stop being a

*kathoey* and join the military school so that he can be completely “cured” of the “*kathoey* disease”. Consequently, the implausible is from the son whose hyper-effeminacy makes the father’s plausible reasons illogical. The laughter is from the extreme implausibility of the *kathoey* son who is portrayed as “beyond repair”. The son’s response that he might go to a boot camp if the father finds him a husband further intensifies the comic effect as the *kathoey* son is completely ridiculous and illogical.

On the contrary, from a *kathoey*’s point of view, the implausibility of the scene may come from the father who is so illogical, pathetic, and ignorant that he still hopes that his son might become straight. In this case, the surprise and anticipation come from observing the father’s reactions to the fact that his son is a *kathoey*. The *kathoey* son’s answer highlights the illogical nature of the father’s impossible request. The fact that the satire provokes the father’s madness only intensifies the comic effect when the audience observes the father being driven crazy by his *kathoey*’s son’s answer.

At the beginning of *Saving Private Tootsie*, when the main characters are introduced, some other significant gags/jokes which are repeatedly used in the film are those which refer to some parts of the *kathoey*s’ bodies, particularly, the anus and the penis.

The film consistently makes a joke at Chicha’s expense as someone who farts a lot. Chicha seems to lose control of his rectum which means he frequently breaks wind. The most significant scene which relies on this gag is when the Thai and Tai Yai soldiers are about to give up fighting each other. The soldiers from each troop start to lower their guns and nervously and slowly step back from each other. In the crucial moment of nervous silence, Chicha farts very loudly and scares one of the Tai Yai soldiers who accidentally shoots his gun, leading to an exchange of gunfire between the two groups of soldiers. One Japanese male flight attendant<sup>18</sup> who follows the *kathoey* group and some of the Tai Yai soldiers dies in the crossfire.

The specific reference to Chicha’s uncontrollable anus, which is presumably perceived to result from engaging in anal sex, has deadly and horrible results in the film. The film also straightforwardly looks down on and makes fun of anal sex. One of the Thai soldiers tells Somying off when he asks him why there are so many minority tribes. The soldier says that if male homosexuals can engage in abnormal sexual intercourse – anal sex, then it is hardly strange to have so many minority tribes beyond

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<sup>18</sup> Flight attendant is an occupation in Thailand and worldwide that is stereotypically thought of as a popular occupation for male homosexuals.

Thailand's borders. The soldier's response does not seem to make any sense, for there seems to be no link made between anal sex and minority tribes. However it seems to be saying that if male homosexuals are deviant enough to have anal sex, then nothing else is too strange to happen.

The film also makes some jokes out of the pre-operative transsexual character Cheery's having a penis. Before meeting Yao, she falls in love with his friend, a boxer named Sombat, who lives in the same camp as Cheery. The first joke shows Cheery revealing his breast implants to Sombat. While Sombat seems satisfied to gaze at the beautiful breasts, the camera quickly drops down and lingers on Cheery's penis under his tights. The penis becomes the peripeteia in this joke derived from the intersection of the juxtaposed shots of the breasts (femininity) and the penis (masculinity). Another scene implies Cheery is having sex with Yao, the Tai Yai soldier. While the audience is not allowed to see the sex scene, we can assume that the two characters are having anal sex because the film shows two Tai Yai soldiers, a boy and a man, secretly observe the couple and then throw up in disgust. The gags and jokes in *Saving Private Tootsie* thus straightforwardly reveal prejudice against the *kathoey* characters.

While the jokes and gags are significantly used in *Saving Private Tootsie* primarily to bring laughter to the film, they also convey some negative attitudes towards sexual minorities in Thai society. Another important element in the film that is also used to intensify the comic effect is the characterization.

### **Characterization of the *Kathoey* Characters in *Saving Private Tootsie***

In terms of characterization in comedy, Aristotle (1947, 12), in contrast to tragedy, describes a comedy as "an artistic imitation of men of an inferior moral bent" (quoted in Horton 1991, 2). In *Saving Private Tootsie*, it is also the case that this cinematic comedy intentionally portrays the artistic imitation of the *kathoey* characters as people whose morality is inferior to that of the heterosexual characters. Each of the *kathoey* characters is given one distinctive bad or weak characteristic. Cheery, of beautiful female appearance, is portrayed as a cry-baby, overly emotional, weak and unable to take care of or protect himself. Chicha is a loud-mouthed, rude, and dirty-minded *kathoey* whose uncontrollable farting provokes disaster. Somying, a male to female transsexual, is selfish and bitter. Jaew, the youngest transvestite in the group, is noisy, clumsy, annoying and irrational. The elderly *kathoey*, Kasem, played by one of the most

prominent *kathoey* academics in Thailand, Dr Seri Wongmontha, is characterized as weak and stupid.

From the characterization, the sympathetic laughter, particularly from the heterosexual audience, is probably increased by seeing these *kathoey*s as morally inferior and causing themselves unnecessary troubles because of their hilarious and ridiculous characteristics and habits.

The wide variety of appearances and characteristics of each *kathoey* character also provides an opportunity for the film to make another significant joke about the *kathoey*s' bodies and their attractiveness. The film utilises the difference between Cheery's beautiful female appearance and Chicha's unattractive male body as a gag when showing Cheery being helped by a Thai soldier when she walks down a rough path (Figure 5.6). When it comes to Chicha's turn, the soldier takes his hand back and allows Chicha to walk down alone by himself and he ends up falling down on the ground (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.6: Cheery is helped by the soldier walking down the path.



Figure 5.7: Chicha is left walking down the path alone, ending up falling down on the floor.

Another scene in which the film makes fun of the unattractiveness of the *kathoey*s' bodies is when all of the young *kathoey*s are forced to dance with the Tai Yai soldiers, but Kasem, the elderly fat *kathoey*, is tied up holding an eggplant in his mouth with the male flight attendant (Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8: Kasem and the flight attendant are tied up holding an eggplant in his mouth.

These scenes present a significant phenomenon in Thai society: about a *kathoey*'s genuinely feminine beauty which brings more tolerance in the society.

In a documentary called *The evolving situation for transgender people in Thailand*, Susan Aldous (2008) makes the following comment on *kathoeys* and beauty:

if you look at Thai society, beauty is everything. Beauty, money, power, what people think of you, your honour, how you present yourself. So it does not really matter what your gender is or what you do with it. People are willing to overlook at it because the means justify the end. The end is I am rich. I am powerful. I am successful. I look good. Regular women will be jealous of ladyboys if they look more beautiful than them.

According to Aldous, there is an obsession with beauty in Thai society, leading to a double standard being practised towards sexual minorities. *Saving Private Tootsie* (as well as *Beautiful Boxer*) obviously shows that the more the *kathoeys* characters look like genuinely beautiful women, the more tolerance they earn from the other characters.

Nonetheless, when Aldous mentions that beauty is so important in Thailand that a *kathoeys* can be accepted and successful if he is beautiful and rich, this seems to be an overstatement, particularly looking at the mainstream Thai cinematic representations of *kathoeys*.

*Saving Private Tootsie* contains two *kathoeys* characters who both look like well-off and beautiful women, Cheery and Somying. The film, however, shows that it is only Cheery who is treated nicely by the soldiers. Their beauty therefore does not seem to be the only factor that helps them gain tolerance from the other characters. The distinctive difference between Cheery and Somying is that Cheery is a humble, thoughtful and kind person while Somying is bitter and selfish. The film, thus, once again, tries to send a strong message that in order to be tolerated, *kathoeys* have to behave well and prove to the others that they are morally good members of heteronormative society.

## Summary

The juxtaposition and collision between masculinity and effeminacy in *Saving Private Tootsie* provides a useful case for exploring and comparing how non-normative gendered identities, *kathoeys*, and normative gendered identities, masculine men, maintain their gendered identities within the heteronormative sphere. It is obvious from the film context that the hyper-masculine Thai soldiers are connected with and a definite

part of mainstream Thai nationality. On the contrary, the *kathoey* characters are located within the liminal and peripheral space as a sexual minority.

The romance between Cheery and Yao that links a sexual minority and a racial minority also reveals that while the film offers a possibility for the homosexual characters to maintain their same-sex desire, love, and relationship in mainstream Thai cinema, those same-sex sexual behaviours must have no connections to the mainstream national Thai identity. More importantly, mainstream heteronormative Thai society cannot accommodate those same-sex desires and acts.

In terms of the cinematic genre as a comedy, *Saving Private Tootsie* also contains lots of “*kathoey*-related” gags and jokes that reveal the negative attitudes and prejudice towards Thai sexual minorities. Consequently, while *Saving Private Tootsie* is a comedy that could present a “sweet moment” for Thai sexual minorities, it might appear sweet and funny only to the heterosexual/heteronormative audience. For *kathoey* and *gay* audiences the film only serves to highlight the tremendous difficulties and sufferings that the *kathoey* characters have to face under the dominant masculine heteronormative order.

In the filmic text, while the heterosexual soldier characters only have to protect themselves from weapons to stay alive, the *kathoey* characters have to protect themselves from both the literal weapons that try to end their lives and the weapons of prejudice and discrimination that destroy their spirit. For the *kathoey* characters in *Saving Private Tootsie*, it therefore seems to be the case that, as Cheery remarks, “they are unlucky to be born abnormally in terms of their gendered identity as a *kathoey*”.

The final film for discussion in this thesis is also from the genre of comedy called *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok* or *Plon na ya*. This comedy offers an interesting plot telling a story of a group of *kathoey*s/transvestites robs a bank.

### ***Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok (Plon na ya) (2004)***

“The greatest bank robbery ever! Spicy beauty queen invasion!”

*Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*'s tagline

#### **Introduction**

*Plon na ya* or *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok* (hereafter referred to as *Spicy...*) is directed by Poj Arnon, a film director who is well-known for a good number of his *kathoey/gay* focused films, most notably *Bangkok love Story* discussed in Chapter 3. *Spicy...* follows four *kathoey*s/transvestites; Nice, Phrik, Sua, and Kop who decide to rob a bank because they desperately need money to ease their emergent life crises.

Nice (Khatthathep Iamsiri aka Thong Thong Mokjok<sup>19</sup>), a former transvestite beauty queen, is the character who initiates the idea of the bank robbery. He is head over heels in love with his husband who is an abusive blood-sucker. The husband tells Nice to rob a bank when Nice does not have any money to give him.

Phrik (Jaturong Phonlaboon aka Jaturong Mokjok), a middle-aged *kathoey* who owns a beauty salon, is a compulsive gambler. He is so in love with David Beckham, the British football player, that he bets on Beckham's side winning whenever he plays. Unfortunately, Beckham does not win every time and so Phrik loses a lot of money from his gambling habit. He needs some money to pay back his debts in order to prevent the gambling host from seizing control of his beauty salon. He therefore decides to go along with the bank robbery plan.

The third *kathoey* robber is Sua (Winai Kraibutr), a transvestite showgirl (or *nang show* in Thai). Sua decides to join the bank robbery because he needs some money to pay for sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). His desire for a female physique derives from two forces. Firstly, his boss at the small transvestite theatre where he works wants him to have breast implants so that he has a female physique to perform and entertain the clients. Secondly, Sua has been abandoned by his boyfriend for a genuine woman. He presumes that the reason why his boyfriend, Boy (Nikky Sura Theerakol), leaves him is because he does not have a female body (“*mai mi nom mai mi*

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<sup>19</sup> This actor also plays the role of Chicha in *Saving Private Tootsie*.

*jim meuan i chani*”) / I don’t have breasts and pussy like that bitch”). This gives further impetus for the operation.

The last *kathoey* character is Kop (Jareernporn Onlamai *aka* Koti Aramboy), a young transvestite who has a menial job in a small food shop run by an abusive owner. Fed up with being mistreated by the boss, Kop joins the bank robbery so that he can have enough money to pursue his dream of running his own noodle shop.

With their various difficulties and life-crises, they agree to rob a bank near where they live. Kop suggests that in case they are shot dead by the police on the day they rob the bank, they should be in disguise and look their best. Seua steals some female costumes (Figures 5.9, 5.10, 5.11 and 5.12) from the theatre where he works for everyone to wear. Interestingly, the *kathoey* characters choose to wear excessively flamboyant costumes to rob the bank in order to be in disguise and look their best.



Figure 5.9: Phrik



Figure 5.10: Seua



Figure 5.11: Nice



Figure 5.12: Kop

They successfully rob the bank and escape through the front door. Kop, who is responsible for leading the way to escape, then makes a stupid mistake by taking them back into the bank through a back exit. Once back in the bank, they unexpectedly run into a group of young teenagers who are also planning to rob the same bank on the same day. It turns out that the teenagers have been secretly hired by the greedy bank manager and his assistant who pretend not to know anything about the bank robbery but actually manipulate the teenagers from behind the scenes. The teenagers force the *kathoeyes* to give them the stolen money but the *kathoeyes* refuse. They end up fighting with each other. Being interrupted by the *kathoey* robbers, the bank manager and his assistant also reveal themselves to be dishonest bank robbers.

During the robbery, several customers are taken hostage. Among them is the daughter of an ambassador. The bank manager and his assistant use her as a bargaining tool to manipulate the police and force them to provide a bus as an escape vehicle. The bank manager's group and the *kathoeyes* get on the same bus and drive away from the police.

However, before getting on the bus, Kop finds out that one of the lottery tickets he had bought has scooped the first prize. One of the bank managers overhears Kop telling the great news to Seua. After escaping from the police, the manager forces Kop to give him the lottery tickets but Kop refuses and is shot dead. The bank manager is also killed by one of the teenagers and drops dead right after Kop.

The *kathoeyes* take Kop's dead body with them on the bus and keep on running away from the police. Sua finds out that Kop has hidden the lottery tickets in Sua's underwear. The *kathoeyes* become rich on the basis of the lottery ticket and fly away to New Zealand to start their new lives together. Phrik finally realises his dream and opens a very successful salon showing football matches and also establishes a noodle shop in memoriam to Kop.

Turning to the film's Thai title, it is interesting to note that, like *Saving Private Tootsie*, there is a juxtaposition of both masculine and feminine elements. *Plon na ya*, can be straightforwardly translated into English as "This is a hold-up!" suggesting that the film is about a robbery, an activity which for many will be generally understood as "masculine". What seems to be untranslatable from the film's Thai title is the "genderlect" which appears through the term, "*na ya*". *Na ya* is a Thai final particle which is generally used by women and *kathoeyes* to intensify familiarity between the speaker and listener(s) as well as the speaker's anger and satire. The use of *na ya* in the film's title thus has feminine and effeminate connotations.

*Plon na ya* is given the English title of *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*. While the English title preserves the senses of femininity and effeminacy from the Thai title, it ignores the paradox between masculinity and effeminacy derived from having the *kathoey* transvestites perform a generally male activity which is a bank robbery. Instead, the word choice in the English title suggests an attempt to catch the foreign audience's attention by using three elements widely perceived overseas to be symbolic of Thailand and its culture. While "spicy" reminds the audience of the popularity of Thai food as well as "Asian exotic sexiness", "beauty queen" reminds them of another stereotypical/exotic notion – the oriental female beauty. Finally, Bangkok is also one of the most popular capital cities and tourist attraction. The three popular elements which are food, exotic beauty, and the city in Thailand become the catchy terms that seem to be used to attract the foreign markets.

Given that the film portrays a group of non-normatively gendered *kathoey* robbing a bank in so doing breaking one of the five fundamental precepts in Buddhism, the film was remarkably well accepted by the Thai audiences. In the Bangkok metropolitan area alone, *Spicy...* earned 42.5 million baht making it the sixth highest grossing film of that year (Buffalooy 2007). It is interesting therefore to explore why this comedy telling a story of *kathoey* bank robbers proved to be popular with Thai audiences.

To structure my discussion, I divide the film analysis into four parts. The first part focuses on Poj Arnon's unique style in making his films. In theorizing Poj and his films with the emphasis on *Spicy...*, I draw on the notion of "the Theatre of the Absurd" to shed some light on the discussion. The second part explores the depiction of Thai transvestitism in the film. The discussion on drag practices as "gender parody" and "gender pastiche" are used to analyze the motif of cross-dressing dramatically used in the film. The next part further focuses on how the *kathoey* characters "stay out" with their remarkably non-normative gendered identities as "drag queens" in the film context. The final part discusses the essence of Thai Buddhism in *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*. The appearance of a Thai Buddhist monk in the film reveals some significant issues about Buddhism in the Thai context.

### **Part One. Poj Arnon and His *Gay/Kathoey* Films**

Poj Arnon is well-known from his *kathoey/gay* focused films and as one of a minority of Thai film directors who does not seem to conceal his "non-normative" sexuality. While both Poj and his films somehow manage to be popular in mainstream Thai cinema, his films often receive severe criticism from audiences and critics. Kong Rithdee, in his article "Populist and Proud of It" in *Bangkok Post* (November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009), notes that "Poj Arnon makes wacky movies deemed tasteless and nonsensical by many, but his enduring popularity earns him a unique place in Thai pop culture".

Judging by the financial profits of his films, it seems that despite the strong criticism, Poj's films have endured and some have even been successful in mainstream Thai cinema. Kong (2009) comments that, "Ironically or perhaps naturally, Poj's films almost always make money. Big money, in most cases". Why his films, with marginal and non-normative contents, have achieved such a unique place in Thai popular culture is an intriguing topic of discussion.

As mentioned above, to theorise my analysis on Poj's films in general and *Spicy...* in particular, I have drawn on the notion of the Theatre of the Absurd to illuminate my analysis. Given that the Theatre of the Absurd was produced within the Western world, it naturally reflects thoughts, identities, time, and space etc. in a Western context. Even though Poj's films are produced within a Thai context and

therefore reflect thoughts, identities, time, and space etc. as such, this analytical approach to reading Poj's films is still useful due to two solid fundamental similarities.

The first similarity is that both Absurd plays and Poj's films are considered nonsense but are still popular among the audiences. The discussions explaining why the Absurd plays have been successful and welcomed by the audiences will be beneficial in providing some possible explanations why Poj's absurd films have also been popular among the Thai audiences. The second similarity is the use of language that becomes a unique element in both the Absurd plays and Poj's films that distinguish them from other mainstream plays and films.

### **The Theatre of the Absurd**

The Theatre of the Absurd refers to the work of a number of playwrights, mostly writing in the 1950s and 1960s. The first outstanding characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd is its sensible approach that tries to highlight the senselessness of the human condition. The Theatre of the Absurd literally abandons the rational devices and discursive thought by the inadequacy of the rational approach (Esslin 1980: 19-24).

The second noticeably strong characteristic of the Absurd play is the language with its turn away from language that is used to convey the deepest levels of meanings and its tendency instead towards a radical devaluation of language (ibid.: 26). Culík (2000) points to the "conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which distorts, parodies, and breaks down". This helps people to see "the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically".

While Absurd plays are considered absurd and illogical, they are still welcomed and enjoyed by mainstream audiences. Culík (2000) interestingly explains this phenomenon as follows:

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language the absurd theatre is trying to shatter the enclosing walls of the human condition itself. Our individual identity is defined by language, having a name is the source of our separateness – the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In being illogical, the absurd theatre is anti-rationalist: it negates rationalism because it feels that

rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It offers intoxicating freedom, brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy.

According to Culík, due to the abandonment of the straitjacket of logic, social norms and conventions, the audiences gain a sense of enjoyment which results from this new sense of freedom. Culík's discussion of the positive reaction of the audience towards the Absurd plays opens up a possibility to explain the similar phenomena of Poj's *gay/kathoey* films that have also been criticised for being illogical and non-sense despite their popularity with audiences.

### **Poj Arnon's *Gay/Kathoey* Films: The Cinema of the Absurd**

It is also the case, as mentioned earlier, that Poj's films have also been criticized as absurd. Kong (2009) opens his article, "Populist and proud of it" written about Poj's films that:

The bottom line is: the man has been accused of making bad films. Stupid films. Of producing trash scoffed at by people of taste (taste?). Of promoting crimes against artistic integrity by giving birth to the cine-hybrid that can only be witnessed in Thai cinema: the homosexualised horror-comedy, featuring gays and ghosts and gags, inwardly multiplied among one another into a species that's garish, vulgar and, hell, fun. In sum, many of the negative clichés associated with Thai films of the past five years have had something to do with the movies by Poj Arnon.

(Kong Rithdee in *Bangkok Post* (November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009)

One of the reasons for the strong criticism aimed at Poj's films – generally seen as illogical and non-sensical – probably results from his unique style in making films. In describing his approach to film making, he explains that he never has written film scripts;

To this day I still don't write scripts. I have a rough idea in my head, and I explain it to my investors and my crew. When I arrive on the set, I just shoot what I see in my head, with minimum planning. I don't know how I have done that in all my films. I really don't know. But that's how I make films.

(quoted in Kong Rithdee (2009))

Some of the audience's responses to his films reveal how they fully realize that his films to be nonsense but they still enjoy watching them. A sense of the breadth of reaction to this aspect of the films can be gained from one particular discussion posted on Pantip.com which asked people in the cyber-community which of Poj's films they like the best (*chop nang khornng Poj Arnon reuang nai mak thi-sut*) (LOEWE 2009). One commentator named, Kra\_Arn, commented that, "the films don't demand you to think. You can't expect anything from the films. You don't need to care about the dialogue. Just enjoy the ridiculous". This idea is echoed by another respondent named Rerngruthai, who states that s/he likes a particular film called *Hor taew taek* because it is "nicely idiotic (*panya orn di*)".

According to these responses from the film audiences, similar to the Theatre of the Absurd, it is evident that while the audiences realise that Poj's films are nonsense and stupid, they still enjoy watching his films because the films liberate them from conventions, both the conventional pattern of Thai film making/watching, and also Thai social conventions. Poj's absurd films offer them a feeling of freedom that they can forget, ignore and throw away the straitjacket of logic while watching his films. This is therefore one of the possible reasons why Poj's films have almost always been popular among Thai audiences and made "big money".

The language used in Poj's films is another interesting and distinctive aspect that is similar to the language used in the Theatre of Absurd. The language used in his films also tends to go beyond the mainstream heteronormative pattern of language usage. The film titles from his *kathoey* films illustrate the absurdity and devaluation of mainstream language. For instance, in one of his films called, *Hor taew taek waek chi mi* (2010), the film title contains a trendy/slang word which is "*chi mi*", probably shortened from *chai mai* which means "isn't it?" in English. Even before the film was released, Dr. Trairong Suwankiri, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic affairs, expressed his concern that the film title devalued Thai language and suggested that the film should be renamed (*Reuang lao sao-atit* [Weekend News] 2010). A famous Thai news programme on channel 3 called *Reuang lao sao-atit* [Weekend News] responded to Trairong's comment by asking people to vote whether or not the term *chi mi* used in the film title devalued or destroyed the Thai language. The vote shows that 55% of the people

watching the programme thought it was a devaluation of the language while 45% disagreed. The word choice appearing in the film title *Hor taew taek waek chi mi* therefore reveals that the majority of Thai people think that it destroys mainstream/normative usage of the Thai language.

With reference to *Spicy...*, the language used in the film is also full of *kathoey* jargon and slang that vividly colours the *kathoey* characters' dialogues but breaks the normative usage of the Thai language. The non-normative language, nonetheless, brings laughter to the film. Similar to the loss of logical language used in the Theatre of the Absurd, as Culík (2000) observes, this opens up a glimpse of the infinite and "intoxicating freedom" that brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy. The non-normative language used in *Spicy...* also seems to open up the possibility to freedom (at least for *kathoey* characters and *kathoey* audience for not having to conform to the pattern of the heteronormative Thai language) and comic results.

*Spicy...* ignores not only the straitjacket of logic as discussed above, but also straight male jackets as all the main characters are *kathoey* transvestites. Cross-dressing becomes another vivid motif that undermines the "logic" of social heteronormativity and brings comic effects to the film. In this regard, the notion and practice of drag acts portrayed in the film is another significant issue to be discussed. In the following section, the notion of "gender parody" and "gender pastiche" will be used to analyse the drag behaviours depicted in the film.

## **Part Two. "Gender Parody/Gender Pastiche": Beauty "Drag" Queens in *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok***

*Spicy...* plays vividly on the practice of "drag" or "cross-dressing" which is one of the main sources of laughter in the film. Cross-dressing has long been familiar to Thai people through traditional cross-dressing performances such as *lakhorn nai*, in which female performers play both male and female roles and *lakhorn nork*, in which male performers play both male and female roles (Oradol, 2008: 38).

In relation to gendered/sexual identities, as explained in the literature review, there was a dramatic increase in the number of gendered/sex identities in the middle of the 1960s in Thai society (Jackson 1993, 1998, 1999b). Transvestitism and its drag or

cross-dressing behaviour has also become highly visible. The term, *kathoey thi taeng sao* (literally meaning a *kathoey* who dresses up like a woman) was coined to refer to male homosexuals who dress up in female costume. Another term which is *gay thi mai sadaeng ork*, which means masculine *gays* or “straight acting *gays*”, was also coined to distinguish between *kathoey thi taeng sao* and *gay thi mai sadaeng ork*. Terdsak (2002: 57) notes that in the 1960s *kathoey thi taeng sao* faced difficulties cross-dressing in public such as being arrested by the police. On the contrary, *gay thi mai sadaeng ork* did not face the same problem even though they were found in the same area as *kathoey thi taeng sao* which the police knew to be a site for homosexuals to meet up or go cruising.

More recently, *kathoey* transvestites have received higher levels of tolerance in Thai society. There have been a good number of *kathoey* transvestites appearing both in wider society and specifically on television and in film. Even though *kathoey* transvestites are not arrested by the police anymore just for their cross-dressing behaviour, the motif of cross-dressing and the *kathoey* non-normative identity, especially in mainstream visual representations, are still used as sources of laughter in Thai society.

In the Western sphere, the issue of cross-dressing or drag has received considerable scholarly attention. Esther Newton (1979 cited in Stott 2005: 72) considered drag as a two-tier “sartorial system”; 1) the visible layer of clothing that represents the “performing” or “acting” gender of the wearer and 2) the hidden layer, essentially underwear, that shows the true identification of the wearer’s gender. Newton accordingly developed the conclusive idea that:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, “appearance is an illusion.” Drag says “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.” At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; “my appearance / ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.

(quoted in Salih and Butler, 2004: 111)

Based on Newton’s work, Butler (1990: 137-8) suggests that “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity”. In this

regard, Butler proposes that drag becomes evidence that gendered social discourse may not exist or have a tenable foundation. Nonetheless, Butler also cautions that it is not simple to determine whether acts of gender parody are subversive, or simply images that have been “domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (ibid.: 139).

By contrast, Bruzzi strongly believes that drag is an explicit example of social subversion, arguing that it,

take(s) the form of an incitement to rebellion. It can express a desire to revolt against the most tyrannical of laws, the „natural’ link between sex and gender. This drag-as-rebellion, strange to relate, can even represent a rejection of the denigration of women’s bodies on the basis of lack (quoted in Stott 2005: 72).

Regarding the discussion of “drag” or “gender parody”, Jameson’s discussion of the term “parody” and “pastiche” in his *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* becomes another useful approach that helps describe drag acts in a wider perspective. He differentiates the meanings between the terms “parody” and “pastiche” that:

Still, the general effect of parody is - whether in sympathy or with malice - to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write. [...] Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor” (Jameson 1983, 114).

Borrowing the discussion of the terms “parody” and “pastiche” to read drag acts as “gender parody” and “gender pastiche” provides a useful approach to read the drag acts in *Spicy...* .

Referring specifically to cinematic comedy and drag acts, Garber notes that “a transvestite progress narrative is a plot that requires one or more of its characters to disguise their gender “in order to get a job, escape repression, or gain artistic or political “freedom”” (quoted in Stott 2005: 63). Transvestitism used in Western comedy thus

provides the character(s) with a chance to express and/or gain a space for their non-normative gendered identity.

In *Spicy...*, the main *kathoey* characters dress in the costume of members of the opposite sex in their everyday life. Cross-dressing becomes their usual habit and bears no connotation of the parodic or comic since the *kathoey* characters feel free and liberated to wear female costume. It is also obvious that the characters' drag is an incitement to rebellion that expresses a desire to revolt against the most tyrannical of laws, the "natural" link between sex and gender as well as the laws of the society. Since the *kathoey* characters agree to be in a fully fabulous drag costume in order to look their best in case they have to die during the bank robbery, their drag performance provides them a chance to gain artistic and political freedom to "stay out" or even die as *kathoey* transvestites.

According to the *kathoey* characters' drag behaviours, the *kathoey* characters thus seem to perform "gender pastiche" rather than "gender parody". While it is true that their cross-dressing behaviours are their "neutral practice" of female mimicry, they do not see themselves as hilarious in imitation of women. With the exception of Seua (whose desire to become a woman will be discussed later on), the *kathoey* characters express no latent feeling that women are normal and their imitation is ridiculous. Their drag performance thus can be read as "gender pastiche", a blank parody without humour.

By way of contrast, the non-*kathoey* characters in the film as well as the film audience find the *kathoey*'s drag behaviours unoriginal and hilarious. The film repeatedly delivers scenes in which the *kathoey* characters are mocked, looked down on and laughed at by the other characters. Due to the costumes they wear to rob the bank, they are mocked and labelled "strange animals from a zoo (*sat jak suan sat*)" and "monsters (*sat pralat*) (which reminds us to the title of the film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Sat pralat* (or *Tropical Malady*) (2004))". Their mimicry of women becomes absurd and the main source of laughter in the film. Their drag is thus considered by the other characters as a "gender parody" emerging from the realization that there is a loss of the sense of 'the normal'. In other words, there is a failure in that the *kathoey* characters cannot copy the original, a genuine woman, and embody themselves as women.

The drag performance by the *kathoey* characters can therefore be seen as both "gender pastiche" and "gender parody" depending on the gendered identity of the

beholder of the gaze. It is this which determines whether the drag acts are understood to be funny or not.

Based on the notion of “gender pastiche” and “gender parody”, it is also interesting to further discuss how the *kathoeys* characters maintain their non-normative gendered identity in *Spicy...* .

### Part Three. *Kathoeys “Stay Out” in Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*

*Spicy...* opens with a static long shot showing the cityscape of Bangkok as night falls (Figure 5.13).



Figure 5.13: The opening scene showing Bangkok being enveloped by darkness.

Right after the shots of Bangkok slipping into darkness, the film shows Seuá slowly putting on makeup to transform himself into a woman (Figure 5.14) which is similar to many other gay/transvestite/transsexual focused films from both Thai and Western cinema such as *Chan phu-chai na ya* (dir. Seri Wongmontha, 1987), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephan Elliott, 1994), *To Wong Foo Thanks for*

*Everything* (dir. Beeban Kidron, 1995), and *Transamerica* (dir. Duncan Tucker, 2005).



Figure 5.14: Right after the opening scene, the film shows Seu transforms from a man into a woman.

At the outset therefore, the binary oppositions of daytime/nighttime and masculinity/effeminacy are created within the scene. While daytime is considered the “official” hours, nighttime is considered as off-official hours where only the minority of people spend their lives. In the same way, masculinity is regarded as a normative gendered identity by mainstream heteronormative/majority people, while effeminacy is perceived as a non-normative identity. Nighttime and effeminacy/*kathoei* identity are therefore marginalized/excluded/unofficialised from mainstream society within the film context.

It is interesting, nevertheless, to note the positive and beautiful cinematic visualization of both the night scene and Seu’s drag act. In the sunset scene, Bangkok is viewed as a beautiful modern city capturing the different colours from the lights of the skyscraper buildings which make Bangkok by night so lively (which is similar to the beautiful portrayal of Bangkok in *Bangkok Love Story* discussed in Chapter 3). Seu also slowly transforms himself into a beautiful woman in gorgeous female costume. The film thus seems to send out a significant message that “drag” *kathoey*s and their “gender

pastiche” as well as the night are “beautiful” in their own light, even though they stand outside normative/mainstream/official spaces. Nevertheless, while the night is “natural” and “genuine”, drag *kathoeyes*, as discussed above, can be seen, especially by non-*kathoey* spectators, as mimicking and parodying genuine women or “gender parody”.

Nonetheless, given that *Spicy...* is a comedy, the film provides total freedom to the *kathoey* characters to perform their drag act. It even gives a happy ending to the *kathoey* characters; they are allowed to maintain their transvestite identities in New Zealand, a foreign country, despite their criminal/immoral actions in the bank robbery. Yet, in *Spicy...*, the *kathoey* characters still have to face some limitations, negativity, and stigmatisation as a result of being *kathoeyes* in Thai society.

To reach a happy ending, one of the *kathoey* characters, Kop, is shot dead and therefore becomes a martyr, freeing his *kathoey* friends from the guilt of bank robbery who still have to escape the illegal/immoral/non-normative deed by migrating overseas.

The *kathoey* characters’ occupations are also demonstrative of another limitation of the *kathoey* characters in terms of their career opportunities. All of the *kathoey* characters work in marginalized fields, for example, as transvestite showgirls or beauticians, and in menial jobs such as labourers which are not steady, mainstream or regarded as decent.

Nice and Sua’s same-sex relationships also repeat the stigma of the impossibility of same-sex love and relationships in mainstream Thai cinema. Similar to *The Last Song*, *Spicy...* depicts that no matter how much the *kathoey* characters love their partners and regardless of how nicely they treat them, the male partners still leave them for genuine women. The male partners merely stay as long as it is financially advantageous to do so.

In regard to the issue of *kathoeyes* and the genuine female physique, *Spicy...* also interestingly mentions this particular topic. Sua is the character that relates most clearly to this issue concerning *kathoeyes* and their desire of a female body.

The opening dialogue in *Spicy...* refers to the issue of sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) in Thailand. In this scene, Sua is persuaded by his transsexual friends who work at the same theatre to undergo SRS (Figure 5.15). The transsexual performers complain that it is expensive to have a complete SRS in Thailand and raise a significant issue that the government should financially support *kathoeyes* who would like to have a sexual operation.



Figure 5.15: The transsexual characters persuade Seua to go for a sexual operation to satisfy the owner of the transsexual night show.

Unlike some other countries such as Cuba and Brazil (see The Associated Press 2007) where governments offer free SRS for their citizens, there is no financial help from the government for SRS in Thailand. The issue has been hotly debated over the past few years with the TransFemale Association of Thailand trying to raise awareness among the general public. Despite this, Thai transsexuals still receive no subsidy from the government for SRS. One of the main reasons why people disagree with the idea is because they think that the need for SRS does not arise from a serious or fatal illness such as cancer that needs to be subsidised by the government. They treat SRS as the fulfilment of someone's desire to have another gender opposite to his/her own. The government thus should not spend the national funding on that (see Trong praden 2008 and NU\_Transgender 2009).

Even though there is no financial aid from the government to undergo SRS, there are still many Thai transsexuals who decide to undergo SRS. In her MA dissertation, *The Socialization Process Influencing Decision Making of Male Transsexuals*, Fonthong Puntuan notes that physicians point to three main reasons why people decide to opt for SRS: firstly, their own desire to be a complete woman; secondly, their occupations; and thirdly their lovers (1998, p. 59-60). In *Spicy...*, the two main reasons why Seua wants to have a sex change are also related to his occupation as a showgirl and his relationship with a male partner who has heterosexual desires.

However, given my argument that the *kathoeys'* drag performance in *Spicy...* can be read as “gender pastiche”, Seuá, as well as the rest of the main *kathoeys* characters, does not have any desire or self-motivation to become a complete woman. The film shows that when Seuá becomes rich and settles down in his new life in Auckland, his desire to have a female physique disappears as he does not have to work as a showgirl anymore. So too his need for a female body to satisfy his boyfriend vanishes.

Money becomes a significant resource in the film that empowers Seuá as well as his *kathoeys* friends to reach a happy ending and to “stay out” with their non-normative “gender pastiche” without the need to assimilate or transform their bodies into those of women in order to be more acceptable in the heteronormative world. They settle down with their transvestitism to express their femininity and beauty by wearing female costume.

Referring to *The evolving situation for transgender people in Thailand* once more, Susan Aldous makes the following comment regarding *kathoeys* and beauty in Thai society that:

If you look at Thai society, beauty is everything. Beauty, money, power, what people think of you, your honour, how you present yourself. So it does not really matter what your gender is or what you do with it. People are willing to overlook at because the means justify the end. The end is I am rich. I am powerful. I am successful. I look good. Regular women will be jealous of ladyboys if they look more beautiful than them.

In *Spicy...*, it also seems to be the case that when the *kathoeys* characters become rich, powerful, successful, and look good, the issue of gender is no longer of concern. Nevertheless, in the film it is significant to note that it is not in Thai society that the *kathoeys* characters are able to freely and unapologetically express their non-normative gendered identities as transvestites. Rather, they have to travel to a foreign land. When looking back to the mainstream Thai cinema with a *kathoeys* focus from 1987 to the present day, there has never been a film that portrays *kathoeys* characters as beautiful, rich, powerful, and successful. This might be a possible reason why *Spicy...* has to send its *kathoeys* characters to openly and freely express and maintain their non-normative gendered identity outside a Thai context.

Another interesting *kathoe*y character in *Spicy...* is Phrik who is portrayed as an individual obsessed with gambling on football. While his gambling reveals another absurdity in the behaviour of some Thai Buddhist followers, his obsession with football is another interesting characteristic which breaks the stereotypes of *kathoe*ys who try to pass as a woman in Thai society and therefore strengthens his “gender pastiche”. In Thailand, as in many other countries, football is a male-dominated sport and activity. Phrik is thus unique and different from the other *kathoe*ys in that he is obsessed with watching it. Phrik is also in love with David Beckham, although it is interesting that Phrik does not idolise him just as a sexy male pin up, but also because of his footballing skills – something which also subverts the idea of football as a heterosexual and male domain. Furthermore, using Beckham, a white Caucasian man, as a same-sex fetish/object, instead of handsome Thai football superstars such as Zico Kiattisuk Senamuang and Leesaw Teeratep Winothai serves two functions: firstly, it distances the strong expression of same-sex desire from those Thai icons that represent Thai nationality; and secondly, it addresses the desire to be modern by associating with the Western cultures in Thai society. The ending of *Spicy...*, which relocates the *kathoe*ys to New Zealand, a Western country, also supports the notion that non-normative behaviours as well as same-sex desire have to be separated from the mainstream heteronormative Thai system.

While money plays a huge role in *Spicy...*, it leads to another significant issue that relates money or capital to Thai Buddhism. The appearance of a Buddhist monk in *Spicy...* reveals some controversial phenomena about Buddhism in Thailand.

#### **Part Four. The Unhearable Voice of Thai Buddhism in *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok***

In *Spicy...*, there is one monk who first appears when Phrik offers food to him. Later on, we see the same monk in the bank and indeed he is taken hostage in the robbery. His presence, as a Buddhist monk, in the bank scene raises a controversial and significant issue about the livelihood of monks in relation to worldly business in Thai society.

The 10<sup>th</sup> of 277 precepts states that monks should refrain from accepting gold and silver (money) (see *The Ten Precepts: dasa-sila*). Thus, according to this precept, it

is unsettling to see a monk, who cannot accept money and thus should not have any money, doing business in a bank.

From the two scenes in which the monk appears, we do not see him say anything. The one-way conversation between Phrik and the monk while he offers food to him also reveals another misunderstanding about Buddhism in Thailand. Each time he puts food in the monk's bowl, Phrik makes a wish that the merit from offering food to the monk will make her beautiful and have nice, fair skin in her next lives. While the main purpose of practicing giving (*Dana parami*), such as offering food to monks, is to reduce selfishness and the most excellent motive for giving should be related to attaining *Nibbana*, which is free from greed, hatred, and delusion (see Bhikkhu Bodhi's *Dana: The Practice of Giving*), Phrik's purpose in offering food to the monk is completely at odds with the real purpose of giving according to Buddhist practice.

After offering food to the monk, Phrik also hands him some money. As noted above, monks are not permitted to receive money, and the scene therefore also shows that Phrik is quite unaware that he is forcing the monk to break his precepts.

According to these two scenes, the film explicitly points out two crucial problems in Thai Buddhist society which are leading to the decline of Buddhism in Thailand. Firstly, some monks, the closest representatives of Buddhism to the lay community, do not follow their own moral precepts strictly, leading to a crisis of faith for the whole institution of Buddhism. Secondly, Thai people do not understand or try to educate themselves about the *Vinaya* or the rules and regulations for monks and nuns so that they do not encourage monks and nuns to break their precepts (such as offering money to monks directly without realising that it breaks one of the monk's precepts).

The way that the film depicts the monk as visible but without voice connotes the crisis that currently faces Buddhism in Thailand. While Thai people continue to represent their nation as a Buddhist country (*meuang phut*) and themselves as Buddhist followers (*chao phut*), Buddhism is merely an image that has lost its core significance – the Buddha's teaching and practices<sup>20</sup>. The monk whose voice cannot be heard therefore reflects the situation of Buddhism in Thai society which exists but has lost its original meaning. Immediately after the scene in which Phrik offers food to the monk the film cuts to the *kathoey* characters planning to rob the bank, thus further strengthening the

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<sup>20</sup> The crisis of Buddhism in Thailand that has lost its core significance – the Buddha's teaching and practices – also appears in *Bangkok Love Story*.

idea that the existence of Buddhism has little effect in guiding the characters to follow the Buddha's practice and teachings, particularly those dealing with morality.

Using a lottery win to create a turning point in the film also reveals another contradiction between Thai Buddhism and Thai people's behaviour. Kop is characterised as a *kathoe*y obsessed with the lottery. While in Buddhism, lotteries, either legal or illegal, are regarded as gambling which is one of the six iniquities that the Buddha warned his followers not to conduct,<sup>21</sup> the film explicitly portrays the characters and Thai people generally as obsessed with the lottery. The film includes a scene in which all of the characters stop doing whatever they are doing just to listen to the radio announcing the lottery results. The obsession with the lottery in Thai society thus presents another contradiction between Buddhism and behaviour of the people in the society.

Accordingly, the *kathoe*y characters, who are already considered to be sexually non-normative/abnormal in the film context, are also used to engage with obsessive behaviour (most notably Kop and Phrik, with reference to lottery and football gambling) which is contradictory to the Buddha's teachings, the mainstream religion of the state.

## Summary

Watching *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok* with the notion of the Theatre of the Absurd in mind provides a possible explanation as to why a film showing a group of *kathoe*y characters robbing a bank was welcomed by Thai society. Similar to the Theatre of the Absurd, the positive responses might be due to the fact that the film breaks the conventions of Thai cinema and society, resulting in a pleasurable and liberating experience for the audience.

Whilst it is the case that the *kathoe*y characters are given a happy ending, the film cannot provide any space in Thailand to accommodate their explicitly non-normative gendered identity. Reading their drag act in light of notions of "gender parody" or "gender pastiche" reveals that their cross-dressing behaviour can be treated as "gender pastiche" since the main *kathoe*y characters do not see themselves as hilarious or as imitations of women.

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<sup>21</sup> The six iniquities includes (1) consuming intoxication, (2) go out at night (as clubbing), (3) gambling, (4) watching entertainments, (5) associating with immoral people, and (6) being lazy.

Their cross-dressing as “gender pastiche” becomes a significant factor that explains why the *kathoey* characters cannot express and maintain their transvestitism in Thai society. As discussed above, none of the *kathoey* characters have the self-motivation or desire to become complete women (including Sua, who eventually gives up the idea of becoming a complete woman). They thus discard the possibility of assimilation and reject the norms of the heteronormative system. Their liberated and unapologetic stance regarding their dramatic drag behaviour perhaps explains why the film cannot accommodate their drag act within the mainstream heteronormative Thai space presented in mainstream cinema.

### Concluding Sweet Queer Thai Cinema

This final chapter explores the portrayals of sexual minorities from the two mainstream films of the comic genre. Both *Saving Private Tootsie* and *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok*, focus on how the *kathoey* characters try to survive under specific situations raised in the film contexts. The juxtaposition and collision between masculinity and effeminacy become the main source of comedy in both. While in *Saving Private Tootsie*, the main *kathoey* characters have to deal with hyper-masculine soldiers and try to stay alive in the battle, in *Spicy...*, they decide to rob a bank, a deed that requires strength and aggression, qualities supposedly exhibited only by masculine men. Instead, they use hyper-feminine costume.

Given that the films are comedies, both lend their *kathoey* characters a happy ending. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, the *kathoey* characters manage to return safely to their motherland; and in *Spicy...*, they scoop first prize in the lottery, become rich and fly away from Thailand to start new lives in a foreign country.

Nonetheless, both films still portray the *kathoey* characters with some stereotypes, myth, and stigmas of being homosexuals in Thai society. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, while it is obvious that the Thai soldiers with their hyper masculinity have a connection with and form a definite part of mainstream Thai nationality, the *kathoey* characters are located within a liminal space as a sexual minority. The same-sex love and relationships in the film context also reveal that there might be a possibility for homosexual characters to survive their same-sex love and relationships, but the film shows that these cannot be accommodated within or have any connections to the mainstream Thai national identity.

In *Spicy...*, the main *kathoey* characters are also marginalized and stigmatized. Committing the bad deed of bank robbery, one of the *kathoey* characters dies in keeping with the immorality behaviour. The same-sex love and relationships in the film remind the audience of the stigma against them and the impossibility of their survival in mainstream Thai cinema.

While both films are from the genre of comedy and therefore portray some sweet moments experienced by sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema, these moments occur strictly within the “heteronormative comfort zone” that controls and manipulates how “sweet” the characters of sexual minorities can possibly get. The sweetness in mainstream Thai comedies with a focus on sexual minorities may therefore

primarily derive from the enjoyment and amusement gained by the heteronormative spectators when seeing homosexual characters being portrayed as inferior, abnormal, pathetic, hilarious and ridiculous.

## Conclusion

### I

This research has focused on the representation of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema. In each of the three film genres discussed, it has been shown that characters from sexual minorities face specific problems within the heterosexual/heteronormative film context, particularly with regard to the expression and maintenance of their non-normative genders and sexualities.

Two films from the genre of tragedy – *The Last Song* and *Bangkok Love Story* – were analysed in Chapter 3. In *The Last Song*, the male and female homosexual characters present “traditional Thai non-normative gendered identities” – *kathoey* and *tom* – which strictly follow the binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity and have long been familiar to Thai society. The film’s portrayal of both Somying, the *kathoey* character, and Phraew, the *tom* character, shows them mimicking and conforming to Thai hegemonic codes, thoughts and behaviours of femininity and masculinity respectively.

The setting in *The Last Song*, based on the real site of the Tiffany Show in Pattaya, reveals a “special tolerance” towards sexual minorities. As I have already argued, this “special tolerance” towards sexual minorities in Pattaya should not be dismissed as an acceptance of sexual minorities in Thai society generally. In Pattaya sexual minorities are specifically tolerated because of the economic benefits they bring to the city. This is particularly true for transgenders/transsexuals whose cross-dressing night performances are a magnet drawing both Thai and international tourists to the destination.

While the main homosexual characters in *The Last Song* do not seem to face difficulties in expressing their non-normative gendered identities, it is the attempts to maintain their same-sex love and relationship which bring deadly and tragic results. The three main homosexual characters - Somying, Phraew and Pratheuang - are all left by their lovers for new heterosexual partners prompting each of them to attempt suicide, though only Somying succeeds. Somying’s public suicide scene becomes a didactic moment in the film that vividly affirms the film’s closing message that “on the purple

path of the third sex, it is difficult to find true love”. This statement has been reiterated in almost every subsequent mainstream Thai film with a focus on sexual minorities.

Unlike *The Last Song*, *Bangkok Love Story* portrays a “modern gay identity” which is that of masculine male homosexuals who are not as effeminate as *kathoeyes*. While Somying tries to adopt and hold an effeminate/feminine identity and expresses his sexual desire to Buntoem who holds a masculine male identity, Somying as a *kathoey* subject presents his sexual attraction to the opposite gendered identity. In contrast, since Eit and Make in *Bangkok Love Story* are both portrayed as masculine men, their sexual desire presents their homoeroticism or sexual attraction to the same gendered identity.

*Bangkok Love Story* also boldly ignores the curse from *The Last Song* by allowing the two main homosexual characters to find love. Nonetheless, as in *The Last Song*, same-sex desire and love is not permitted to endure, and the film ends in tragedy. While non-normative genders and sexualities are not the main reason for the tragic results in *Bangkok Love Story*, it is still a violent death which leads to the separation of the gay lovers in the end.

At the same time as depicting a “modern gay identity” in Thai society, *Bangkok Love Story* also depicts some other contemporary issues deemed to be related to same-sex subcultures, especially the issue of HIV/AIDS. The film reflects the ignorant and hysterical nature of representation of HIV/AIDS in Thai society and inextricably links it with homosexuality. Within the film context, both are depicted as contagious and destructive.

The portrayals of sexual minorities in the genre of tragedy therefore offer a “bitter” depiction of sexual minorities on the mainstream Thai silver screen. While the earlier film represents “stereotypical traditional *kathoeyes*” the later one draws on imaginings of masculine male homosexual identities or “modern gays”. This represents a significant shift in the recognition of the diversity of non-normative sexual identities in Thailand. Nonetheless, both films are still closed to the possibility that homosexual characters may be successful in the enduring expression and maintenance of their non-normative identities, love and relationships within the heterosexual/heteronormative space that dominates mainstream Thai cinematic representations.

In Chapter 4, two mainstream films from the genre of drama were discussed and analysed, revealing a “bitter-sweet” depiction of transsexual/homosexual characters. In *Beautiful Boxer*, similar to Somying in *The Last Song*, the characterization of Toom

strictly conforms with ideals of Thai hegemonic masculinity and femininity. The character is constructed and visualized as a “talented Thai kick boxer” as well as a “good Thai woman”. Toom’s sacrifice and devotion to her family also renders her “a good Thai child”. Her moral and angelic characteristics become the key factor which help Toom, a transsexual, earn adoration and admiration as a “beautiful boxer” in the film context as well as in Thai society. Toom’s success in transforming her masculine physique to match her feminine psyche and become a good Thai woman as portrayed in the film context does not break any of the social norms demanded by the binaries of Thai heteronormativity.

While the film’s main focus is on the efforts undertaken by Toom to become a “beautiful boxer”, it also briefly touches on her erotic desire and emotional needs. In this respect the representation is negative since her love is exploited by another heterosexual male boxer. This further strengthens the trope in mainstream Thai cinema that, for characters with non-normative sexual identities, love is neither real nor possible.

By way of contrast, *The Love of Siam* allows the main male homosexual characters to express their same-sex desire and love for each other. Yet, similarly to *Bangkok Love Story*, the film ultimately destroys that same-sex desire, love, and relationship. Instead, it has to give way to the institution of the Thai family, the bedrock of the heteronormative system.

In both *Beautiful Boxer* and *The Love of Siam*, it is evident from the film contexts that the main transsexual/homosexual characters are only allowed to express and maintain their non-normative genders and sexualities within a restricted space. Most importantly such expression is only allowed to endure so long as it does not jeopardize or threaten heteronormativity. This highlights what Jackson (1999a: 226) succinctly phrases as the “tolerant but unaccepting” nature of Thai society. Clearly Jackson’s arguments regarding ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes towards sexual minorities are as relevant for the film contexts as they are for Thai society in general.

The genre of comedy was discussed and analysed in Chapter 5. *Saving Private Tootsie* and *Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok* similarly depict the efforts undertaken by *kathoe*y characters to survive in film contexts which intentionally juxtapose masculinity with effeminacy. The absurd paradox between the essences of masculinity and effeminacy becomes the main source of comedy in both films. Given that they are comedies, both films provide the *kathoe*y characters with happy endings. In *Saving*

*Private Tootsie*, the *kathoey* characters manage to get back to their motherland safely. In *Spicy...*, the *kathoey* characters win the first prize in a lottery, become rich and fly away from Thailand to start new lives overseas.

Nonetheless, both films still depict the *kathoey* characters with some of the stereotypes, myths, and stigmas connected with homosexuality in Thai society. In *Saving Private Tootsie*, while it is obvious that the Thai soldiers, with their hyper masculinity, occupy a defined space at the centre of imaginings of the mainstream Thai nation, the *kathoey* characters, as members of a sexual minority are located within a liminal space. While the same-sex love and relationships in the film context suggest a possibility for the homosexual characters to survive their same-sex love and relationships, the film shows that their sexuality cannot be accommodated within, or have any connections to, mainstream Thai national identity.

In *Spicy...*, the main *kathoey* characters are also marginalized and stigmatized. One of them dies as a result of her participation in the criminal and immoral act of robbing a bank. Unapologetically expressing and maintaining their non-normative gendered identity as transvestites which, I have argued, can be read as “gender pastiche”, the remaining *kathoey* characters have to leave Thailand and settle down with their non-normative gender in a foreign country. Same-sex love and relationships in the film are still deemed impossible and unreal, at least within the ideals of the Thai nation.

While both films are from the genre of comedy and therefore portray some sweet moments for sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema, the sweet moments occur strictly within the “heteronormative comfort zone” that controls and manipulates the limits of the “sweetness”. The sweetness in mainstream Thai comedies with a focus on sexual minorities is generally provided for the enjoyment and amusement of the heteronormative spectators who can be entertained by seeing the homosexual characters portrayed as inferior, abnormal, pathetic, hilarious, and ridiculous.

## II

Building on a small body of work on Thai cinema with a focus on sexual minorities, this thesis has addressed questions concerning the expression and maintenance of non-normative genders and sexualities portrayed in mainstream Thai cinema from three different genres from 1980 – 2010. The thesis is clearly marked by two significant

factors; my own Thai transgender identity; and a critical approach which has engaged with so-called “Western” theories.

Jackson notes that “the place of theory is to function as an effective and accurate tool which engages with, rather than erases, the specificities of local circumstance” (2003). He therefore cautions that the application of “Western” theory without attention to local specificities, “may reproduce at the level of theory the hegemonic violence that attends the history of imperialism” (ibid.). Nonetheless, Jackson insists the need for theory in his analysis of Thai culture as a “regime of images”. He notes that “by engaging critical theory, a re-imagined Thai studies can lift the field out of its essentialism and historical isolation (2004b, 213).

Harrison (2010: 6) further supports the place of critical theories in Thailand, noting that:

it is important to add, however, that this position is not entirely at odds with certain arguments made under the rubric of “Western” theory itself, a field which is in turn neither static nor uncontested. Nor is it beyond being able to deconstruct its own premises.

Some research by Thai scholars, such as Chonthira Satayawatthana (1969) who analyses Thai traditional literary texts from Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis and Chusak Pattarakulvanit (1996, 2002 and 2006) who engages semiotics, poststructuralism and postmodernism in his analysis of modern Thai fiction, have proven that the engagement to “Western” criticism does currently exist in Thailand and is beneficial to the study of Thai literary criticism in moving it away from a static position of veneration and opening up possibilities to analyse the texts in a boarder perspective (Harrison 2010: 9).

The so-called “Western” theoretical framework that has been drawn on in this thesis is also illuminating for the study of Thai cinematic criticism and provides a broader perspective to understand and explain same-sex subcultures as well as the social perceptions/attitudes/practices towards those subcultures in Thailand. The spirit of postcolonial theory – the tension between colonisers and colonised subjects – is intentionally and intensively applied to illuminate the analysis of the similar power-relations and tensions between sexual majorities and sexual minorities in Thailand.

The notion of hegemony is crucial in explaining why the characters of sexual minorities can be tolerated by heteronormative audiences. The films reveal that when the main sexual minority characters, notably Somying in *The Last Song* and Toom in

*Beautiful Boxer*, strictly conform to the hegemonies of femininity and/or masculinity, they are given a chance to earn social approval and consent. The expression of gender or *phet saphawa* by the main characters does not break the normative binary oppositions of femininity and masculinity – it in fact serves to strengthen it.

Nonetheless, the notion of mimicry complicates the acceptance of sexual minorities by heterosexual/heteronormative subjects. Even though sexual minority characters conform to hegemonic heteronormativity, their mimicry means that they are “the same but not quite” legitimate members of sexual majorities. Hence they are still seen in the eyes of the dominant culture as inferior, unsettling, inappropriate and sexually “Other”.

In each film discussed in this thesis, the characters of sexual minorities are loaded, at various levels, with same-sex stereotypes produced by Thai society. The discussion of stereotypes in postcolonial theory becomes another useful approach to analyse the representation of sexual minorities in mainstream Thai cinema.

The fixed same-sex stereotypes appear in cinematic as well as socio-cultural contexts. For example, *kathoeyes* have either to be beautiful and able to pass as a woman or be funny, ridiculous and harmless. Furthermore, the cause of being a sexual minority in the present life is considered to be the result of moral wrong-doing in previous lives according to the interpretation of Thai Buddhist belief in the law of *karma*. Thus same-sex stereotypes appear to be both delightful and comforting to heteronormativity through their reliance on elements which are familiar, exotic or even erotic.

Same-sex stereotypes in mainstream Thai cinema therefore resonate with the role Richard Dyer (1993: 16) describes for stereotypes, i.e. “to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit”.

The definitions and discussion in Chapter 2 of this thesis of the terms gender (*phet saphawa*) and sexuality (*phet withi*) in both Thai and Western contexts have also provided another useful theoretical framework for analysing the on-screen portrayals of sexual minorities. In her article, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (Rubin 1984; cited in Jackson 1999a: 3), Rubin suggests that gender and sexuality need to be analysed separately on the grounds that the hierarchies of dominance in these two spheres are separate, and one cannot be explained entirely in terms of the other. Nonetheless, Jackson (1999a: 3) argues that the applicability of

distinct categories of gender and sexuality and of identities based upon this differentiation need to be questioned in Thailand because the notions of gender and sexuality are rather complex and its distinction is unclear in the Thai case.

My analysis of mainstream Thai films with a focus on sexual minorities nevertheless reveals that the notions of gender and sexuality need to be discussed separately. While the characters of sexual minorities face fewer difficulties and are better tolerated by the heteronormative system when they humbly and apologetically express and maintain their gender in accordance with heteronormative binary oppositions, it is more problematic for them to express and maintain their sexuality since there is no socially approved pattern in terms of sexuality for them to conform to or follow.

Patriarchy becomes a key factor that explains the notions and practices of sexuality in Thailand. Harrison (1999) insightfully analyses women's sexuality in Thailand depicted through the characterization of the prostitute in Thai novels. She (ibid.: 169) notes that while "men's sexual mobility, expressed through having affairs and mistresses, not only goes uncriticized by Thai society but is positively valued", women's sexuality is limited merely to procreation and childbirth and is negatively valued when it is associated with sexual pleasure. For Thai women who have more than one man accessing their bodies, whether voluntarily or as a result of force, "the predominant Thai response is one of contempt" (ibid.: 168-9).

Building on Harrison's analysis of Thai women's sexuality, sexual minorities seem to be in the worst position of all in Thai society since their sexuality cannot be legitimated by the discourse of natural procreation; rather, it is merely associated with individuals gaining sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Thus, the portrayal of the sexual minorities' sexuality in mainstream Thai cinema cannot and does not survive in the film contexts.

Furthermore, given the argument that public space in Thailand is limited in its openness to the discussion of sexuality, be it hetero- or homosexual – since this remains a personal matter and should not be made public (Krittaya Archavanitkul (2009) and Nattaya Boonpakdee (2009)) – it is therefore more difficult and problematic to portray non-normative sexuality in a film context – which is inevitably public.

It is true that some of the films discussed in this thesis, such as *Bangkok Love Story*, *Love of Siam* and *Saving Private Tootsie*, portray and provide *withi* or paths that do not narrowly belong to the heterosexual/heteronormative one. Nevertheless, all of the

non-normative *withi*/paths of sexuality depicted in the films lead merely to dead ends which cannot be accommodated within mainstream Thai society.

Referring to Jackson's "Tolerant but Unaccepting: the Myth of a Thai "Gay Paradise"" once more, he suggests that:

if we focus solely on the often intensely negative attitudes to homosexuality expressed within discourse, whether academic or popular, then we will develop an inaccurate and overly negative picture of the situation of gay men and *kathoey* within Thai society. At the same time, however, if we focus solely on the practical, everyday tolerance shown towards males who breach sex and gender norms then we will develop an overly positive picture (1999a: 240).

Since mainstream Thai cinema is a form of popular discourse, it seems to be the case, according to Jackson's observation, that within popular discourse, sexual minorities are repeatedly represented inaccurately and negatively. My discussion of the films in this thesis corroborates this view. Nonetheless, it is not enough to simply highlight the inaccuracies and negative portrayals of Thai sexual minorities. The crucial question is why Thai society, whether within academic or popular discourses, has continuously reiterated those negative attitudes towards homosexuality. At least within academic and popular discourses, these repetitive negative attitudes actually reflect an accurate and realistic picture of the situation of sexual minorities in Thai society.

Jackson (*ibid.*) further argues that if focusing merely on the practical, everyday tolerance shown towards males who breach sex and gender norms, this will lead to an overly positive picture of the situation of sexual minorities in Thailand. While his observation is to some extent accurate, my literature review reveals that it is not without problems for sexual minorities to freely or unconditionally express and maintain their non-normative genders and sexualities. The fact that fundamental human rights, such as same-sex marriage and the change of title according to new gender expression/identity that have been granted to certain sexual minorities in some countries but not to Thai sexual minorities, is evidence that practical tolerance is not as entrenched as Jackson has argued.

I propose here the more accurate definition of Thailand as a site of "closet tolerance" derived from the fact that there is no "real active tolerance" in Thai society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This term, "closet tolerance" developed from a recent conversation with my supervisor, Rachel Harrison, on the broader topics of Thai politics and culture.

Rather, tolerance is a passive action used to avoid inconvenient truths or conflict situations due to the lack of mature discussion/debating skills.

Based on this notion, the social tolerance shown towards sexual minorities seems to be merely “closet tolerance” that is coated with condescending and sympathetic attitudes derived from Thai Buddhist belief that mark sexual minorities as a distinct “Other”. In Thai society, whether within discourse or everyday practice, the attitude towards sexual minorities should therefore rather be seen as “closet tolerance and unacceptance”.

While the analysis in this research has centred on mainstream Thai films with a focus on sexual minorities, there is an increasing number of off-mainstream Thai films as well as short films with a specific interest in sexual minorities. For further research, it would be intriguing to examine the variety of genres in those off-mainstream films. A comparative study analysing the representation of non-normative sexualities and genders in Thai films and foreign films with some cultural weight in Thai society and Thai cinema also presents interesting opportunities for understanding the place of Thai representations of sexual minorities within regional and global circuits of knowledge.

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(Note: The film titles have been alphabetised by their transliteration into English)

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