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SEXUAL UNDERREPRESENTATION IN ASEAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article is a part of the qualitative research entitled Gender and Sexuality in ASEAN Literature. The purpose of the article is to illustrate the underrepresentation of sexuality in the literature from one of ASEAN countries, Myanmar. The scope of the study was the SEA (South East Asia) Write Awarded Literature. The selected literature was analyzed by gender and sexuality framework. The study found that the SEA Write Awarded literature was expected to represent the ideological society realistically. Therefore, the issue of sexuality was underrepresented in this category of literature because sexual issue was perceived as nonsense and insignificant.

Keywords

Sexuality, ASEAN Literature, SEA Write Award

1. Introduction

According to Trisilpa Boonkhachorn, (2013), the uniqueness of the literature in Southeast Asia region is; they are divided into four literary periods; the ancient or pre-colonial period, the colonial or westernized period, the post-colonial period and the contemporary or globalized period (Trisilpa Boonkhachorn, 2013:2). Southeast Asian Writers Award or S.E.A. (South East Asia) Write Awarded literature was the contemporary one. The award was presented annually since 1979 to poets and writers of Southeast Asia. It was

sometimes given for a specific work by an author, or it could be awarded for lifetime achievement. The types of works being honored vary, and included poetry, short stories, novels, plays, folklore and scholarly and religious works (Wikipedia,14/05/2014 cited from Piayura,2014). In Thailand, the S.E.A. Write Awarded literature was highly accepted by academic institutions because of its realistic reflection of Thai society. The phenomenon was similar in other ASEAN countries.

This article analyzed the selected story from Myanmar. The analysis of the SEA Write awarded literature from Thailand, Laos and Vietnamese from this research was publicized entitled *Gender and Sexuality in ASEAN Literature: Thai, Lao and Vietnamese Contexts*. The conclusion from the previous article was Thailand, Lao and Vietnam were different in the ruling systems and some other aspects but the countries shared the similarities in the roles of gender and sexual values. Women in both Socialist and Democratic societies were submissive and had to be sexually behaved. The significant finding in this study was that men had to be sexually behaved, too, in order to be considered as ‘good men’ (Orathai Piayura,2012).

2. The Synopsis of Myanmar Literature: A Five Kyat Note

A Five Kyat Note was the S.E.A. Write Award winning short story written in 1999 by U Kyaw Aung. The story was about a man name Ba Sein. He was at the casino and lost all of his money that evening. He left the casino and wandered on the quiet street in late night because he had no money to catch a bus home. He happened to walk pass a girl who slept on the side of the street with a five Kyat note in her hand. Ba Sein wanted that money for gambling but he also felt sorry for the girl. He thought the girl must have begged so hard to get this money out of somebody’s pocket. There was a conflict in his mind that he wanted the money for himself but he also felt sorry for the girl. However, he decided to steal the money from the girls’ hand while she was still asleep. Ba Sein took the money to the casino. He gambled and made a lot of money from that five Kyat. He stopped gambling at dawn and walked back on the same route. He planned to bring the five Kyat back to the girl and gave her a lot more money to thank her. She should be very happy to get the money and invest it on some kind of small business. Unfortunately, when Ba Sein arrived, he found the dead body of the girl.

3. Sexual Underrepresentation in Myanmar Literature

The composition of the Myanmar S.E.A. Write Awarded literature had something in common with the S.E.A. Write Awarded literature from other countries in the region that the writing supposed to reflect the ‘reality’ of life and society. Most of the male characters were presented as workaholic or serious about life and things they do, as if it was accepted as a good a characteristic of men. Sexuality was not mentioned as important issue, or even hardly being mentioned about, because it was seen as ‘too little’ issue in human beings life and not a part of masculinity or behavior of maleness (Orathai Piayura, 2013).

Ba Sein, the main male character who was the narrator of the story was presented with the masculine quality as a gambler. According to Angela Goddard and Lindsey Mean Patterson (2000), ‘masculine’ was the quality or attribute of ‘man’ (Goddard & Patterson, 2000:2). Whitehead (2002) generalized that those behaviors of male that are violent, dysfunctional and oppressive are ‘natural masculine’ behavior. In ASEAN countries where women were primarily domestic gender, men were expected to participate in outdoor and public activities. Going out drinking and gambling were perceived as ‘masculine behavior’. Be Sein was described as a daring gambler as the following quote:

“Ba Sein has just left the Chinese gambling den. When he had entered that gambling place, he had 50 Kyates. When he left the gambling den, he even left his watch and necklace besides the 50 Kyates”.

(U Kyaw Aung(1999) cited from Nitaya Masavisut (et.al), 2013:111).

The above quotation illustrated the daring of the main male character of the story that he dare to gamble with everything he had. Apart from being a daring man on paying for gambling, he was presented as a brave man to walk along the quiet street in late night by himself as exemplified:

“The waxing moon seems to be glooming. Rangoon has fallen asleep under the waxing moon light...Ba Sein is walking steadily along the Latter Road towards Kyone Gyi Road...”

(ibid.)

Apart from trying to give masculine attributes to the main male character, the author

avoided presenting anything sexual. For instance, he described the scene of night life which had to involve night girls, he only made one sentence as the following paragraph:

“Sometimes the noise of the motor car engines can be heard from Dalhousie Road. The voice of the bus conductor for Insein is carried by the north winds. He could even hear the faint strides of prostitutes wearing slippers who are usually loitering around the down town area.”

(ibid.)

There was no further discussion or description about those prostitutes. The way the author chose to use the term ‘prostitute’ instead of ‘sex worker’ or any other terms indicating sexual business could be the illustration of the sexual underrepresentation in the story as the term rather implied social problem than sex itself.

When Ba Sein saw a girl sleeping on the side of the road alone in the mid of the night, the reader could presuppose of sexual plots because the readers were foregrounded with the description of a dark, quiet and cold night. The illustration of the scene was as follow:

“...He sees a girl sleeping in front of the school gate. Ba Sein walks up to her.

“Oh a young girl’s sleeping alone”

The girl lies curled up and sound asleep. In the coldwinds and the heavy mist, she is not wearing any blanket. Her left hand is on her head and she is asleep on her right side. There’s a tin bowl near her. She wears all ragged old clothes. “Is she a juvenile girl? No, absolutely not.” He accepts her as a poor beggar.”

(ibid.:114)

The main male character of the story saw a girl sleeping alone on the side of the road in the mid of the night and he only ‘accept her as a poor beggar’. He had no sexual desire for her because the author made him saw her only as ‘a poor beggar’ not ‘a juvenile girl’

Apart from being presented as somebody who was obsess with gambling, Ba Sein the narrator of the story was also being presented as a person who was not think about sexual desire. His mind was occupied with gambling as exemplified:

“Ba Sein has great experience in playing cards. He even dares to draw only one card

each to gamble. His greatest interest lies in playing a game of play cards.

“Sir, there is no more service to Insein.” says the bus conductor trying to take his hand.

But Ba Sein only saw the card of king with a big moustache in the hand of Chinese bookies...”

(ibid.:112)

When he saw a girl lying alone on the street with a five Kyat note in her hand, his reaction was as the following:

“At that moment Ba Sein can picture the smiling face of the King with a big moustache...”

(ibid.:115)

The above analysis illustrated the underrepresentation of sex in the story. The author made the male character to be determined in gambling and paying no attention to women and sex though he was at the gambling site and lived a night life.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the selected short stories revealed that Myanmar S.E.A. Write Awarded literature was like the literature from other ASEAN countries to share the characteristics of ‘S.E.A. Write Awarded literature’ that to be considered as a ‘good quality’ literature to suit the S.E.A Write award, the writer had to present ‘big issue’ like work or social problem, not ‘little’ issue like sexuality and love. However, the way the author made the main male character to be obsessed with gambling even implied that gambling was a bigger issue or worth mentioning than the issue of sex.

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