

Nature, Love and Enlightenment in Modern Thai Poetry

Suchitra CHONGSTITVATANA*

Buddhism as a Literary Influence

Buddhism has always been the most important influence in the creation of Thai literary works. Most classical Thai poetry has been composed from Jataka stories and has a ‘function’ of ‘teaching’ Buddha Dharma in the most impressive and successful manner. Therefore, one can say with confidence that most ‘didactic’ poetry in Thai is an expression of deep-rooted faith in the teaching of Lord Buddha.

In modern Thai poetry, the poets no longer compose long poems from Jataka tales, but they are still under the influence of Buddhist thought and value. The contemporary poets under this study are all modern Buddhists who convey the value of enlightenment as wisdom through their works.

Angkhan Kalayanapong: Love of Nature and Path of Wisdom

Like most of Thai poets from the past to the present, Angkhan is

*Director, Institute of Thai Studies Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
suchitra.c@chula.ac.th

very much inspired by the beauty and the marvel of nature. As a painter-poet he is capable of ‘painting’ nature with the beauty of the language as well as with the beauty of colors. Angkhan’s description of nature is vivid and unique. He uses a lot of personification to render more liveness and gentleness to nature. The poet declares in his masterpiece—*Lam Nam Phu Kra du’ung* that love for nature is the most important inspiration for him in composing poetry.

Thus ends my Nirat¹⁾ Phu Kra du’ung,
Composed from the deepest love for nature.
No matter how many existences to come,
The same love may I feel forever!
Humbly would I always recognize
The real value of the Earth and the Sky!

(Angkhan 1969:163)

His deep love for nature makes him admire the apparent beauty of nature he describes very vividly by creating beautiful images with details and colors.

Far beyond the wide horizons are the mountains lines,
With the cliffs and valleys intertwined.
Forlorn and lonely are the clouds uphigh,
And on each mountain shines the blue, pale gray divine!

(Angkhan 1969:121)

Flowering indeed are these wild green screens,
Full of buds and blossoms, yellow, red, white, and cream,
With young and tender leaves ravishingly adorning,
Thus render divine and beautiful the whole surrounding!

(Angkhan 1969: 121)

¹⁾ Nirat is a kind of poetry in Thai literature which is mainly a lamentation of love by the poet when separated from his love.

This soft golden moss, gleaming in orange beams,
Is like a magic carpet on the rocks' recesses.
Precious ornaments of the mountains are they all
With wonderful wild flower of every kind!

(Angkhan 1969: 98)

Besides, the poet also sees beyond the surface of nature to the spiritual beauty of nature normally overlooked by others. The poet looks at nature closely and gives equal value to all elements in nature for he sees that all elements are interrelated and interdependent.

Thousands of grains of dust and sand
Creating the Earth for us to live
Are, no doubt, more virtuous and precious
Than any gems or diamonds!
Why look down on small wild flowers?
Are they not the precious gifts from Heaven
To beautify and adorn this Earth?

.....

Without sand, stone and earth,
What is the value of gems and diamonds?
Even the lowest creatures, insects or worms,
Are worthy of our appreciation,
With the heart free from contempt,
We can learn the values of all things!

(Angkhan 1969: 14)

The poet clearly expresses his respect for nature especially when he declares that nature is in fact his great teacher or Guru.

My divine teachers are all over the sky
The Moon and bright Stars in heaven

Kindly tell me the wondrous mystery of Night
And various universes, glittering like diamond!
The Mountains teach me the taste of loneliness,
And the Clouds train my forlorn heart to wander.
The falling Dew teaches me how the heart can freeze
When love and hope fade away like Night.
The flowing stream, weeping to the pebbles,
Invites me to cry silently for my broken dreams!
For Cupid wakes me up to Love
Only to show me all its sweet sufferings!
Even the smallest wild flowers are like friends
Who help to enlighten and sharpen my mind.
Thus will I devote my life to all Nature Teachers
Trying to realize the divinity of poetry!

(Angkhan 1969: 101)

For the poet, nature is more than just beauty but a source of spiritual wisdom. The beautiful big trees in the forest never protest the cruelty of men who slaughter them. They only give fragrant flowers, fruits and even their lives to all men with out discrimination. In fact they are like a Bodhisatava who sacrifices all for the benefit of others.

Thus the poet believes that to learn from nature the way to live without greed would be the ideal solution to the crisis of modern men. If we appreciate and respect nature enough we could save all natural environments and know how to exploit nature within limits for the common good of all. If we follow the noble example of nature we will not only save our environment and our world but we will also save humanity from dehumanizing themselves.

Angkhan emphasizes that to be able to see and perceive the real beauty of nature is a basic quality of any human being. He persuades his readers to emulate the noble example of nature. He tries to ‘wake’ men up from their blindness and ignorance towards the invaluable beauty

of nature by advocating the teaching of the Lord Buddha as the ideal way of life.

Now awake, let us find the divine path
Of our noble and great Buddha.
With our whole heart let us sacrifice
And truly give for joy, day and night.
Come, let us change beliefs and ways of life
To create a heavenly world well-purified.
Pray, never kill, have mercy on others.
Instead use the blood to grow flowers!
Raise our heart as high as the bright stars
Let it be shining with brilliant noblesse
With bravery and sound wisdom,
And immortal heart, forever timeless!

(Angkhan 1969: 15)

Naowarat Pongpaiboon: Ideal Love of Nature and Selflessness

In the famous collection of poetry ‘The Flute Song’, Naowarat Pongpaiboon exquisitely combines the themes of love and nature and harmonizes them into a modern Buddhist poetry. The poet employs nature to evoke purity and beauty in the essence of true love that could lead to selflessness and finally precious wisdom of enlightenment. The two following poems are good examples.

The first poem ‘Loving You’ is an exquisite example of the ‘expansion’ of the conventional love poem where the poet would praise the ‘physical’ beauty of his beloved and how the beauty makes him so overjoyed or over-distressed. Here the poet expands the notion of ‘love’ for an individual beauty to love for virtues of his beloved. The virtues are the virtues of the **heart** not the ‘physical beauty’.

Loving you

I love you
Whispering in the veil of fading mist
I love to explore
To find the real you!

Not the greeting lights in your eyes
Nor the sweet silence of your mouth
Nor the crescent eye brows
Nor the soft consoling hands!

When injustice challenges, you respond
When problems loom, you fight
That is all I love you for
The exquisite virtues of your heart!

Alone I roam dense forests
Looking for your precious soul
Patiently I see days and nights
In my heart, faith shining bright!

Naowarat Pongpaiboon

The Flute Songs

After close reading, we will realize that the poet is trying to convey a ‘spiritual’ value of love as a virtue in the heart of those who care for others not only for themselves or their loved ones. Thus the poet is implying that love should not just separate two persons in love from the rest of the world. Love should expand our virtues in the heart so that we can care more about others.

This idea is more explicitly conveyed in the poem ‘Where is My Love?’ The poet asks a lot of ‘rhetoric’ questions to evoke the emotion of longing.

Where is my Love?

Where are you?
In the yond sky and sea?
In the shadows of mists
Or in the elusive dreams?

I meet you in the shade
In the dance of blowing winds
Our eyes meet in serene stillness
Perfectly still as deep water

Suddenly I realize
The second language of emotions
The poetry of the heart blooming
Into beauty and love!

Where are you?
Not even in the furthest horizon?
You convince me our love is strongest
Through forgetting our own selves!

Naowarat Pongpaiboon

The Flute Songs

The ending of the poem is evidently an influence of Buddhism. The poet claims that love is strongest when loved ones could get rid of their selfishness ‘our love is strongest through forgetting our own selves’. Thus this ‘Love poem’ seems to transcend the normal worldly love poem and becomes a ‘spiritual’ poem. According to Buddhist philosophy, all our sufferings are caused by our own craving. Therefore when we could release ourselves from the craving for our happiness we could cultivate a loving kindness or compassion for all human beings.

Therefore these two poems illustrate the mastery of the poet in harmonizing the themes of nature, love and enlightenment together in the most effective manner.

Paiwarin Kao-ngam: Where there is Love, There is Love:
Modern Buddhist Philosophy

In the collection of love poems ‘Where There is Love, There is Love’, Paiwarin Kao-Ngam is intentionally employing conventional Buddhist concept of love as suffering to express his views of the spiritual values of love and nature that intertwine and finally crystallize into a jewel of wisdom and understanding of life.

Paiwarin Kao-ngam tries to defy some ‘negative’ attitude towards love. In ‘where There is Love, There is Love’, the poet is alluding to a well-known saying in Buddhist teaching ‘Where there is love, there is suffering.’ The poet is trying to re-define this saying by clarifying the fact that love can bring both joy and sufferings depending on the wisdom of each person.

Where There is love, There is love

The sacred words of Buddha
Where there is love, there is suffering’
The clay of sufferings
Is the origin of a lotus of joy

Truth is a pass way of Life
Life is a pass way of Truth

Where there is love, there is suffering

Love creates suffering, suffering creates love
Where there is love, there is love!

Through my experiences
All hope is lost thanks to humanity
All hope is kept thanks to humanity

In myriads of relations
I suffer because of human beings
I enjoy great love because of human beings!

1. Paiwarin Kao-ngam

Where There is Love, There is Love

By contrast, in ‘My Love, Still to be Known’ the poet exclaims his love for great Nature as a great teacher for those who are looking for love.

The poet shares the same idea with Angkhan in claiming nature as a great teacher for those who are looking for true love.

My Love, Still to be Known

The Sun paints a radiant rainbow
To greet the fields, mountains and forests
Like a divine Melody flowing down
Whispering the glorious music!

Awake, my Love, listen
Kiss the glorious Earth
Adorned with music and perfume
Drink the love ambrosia!

Yonder the silver clouds on mountain high
Enhancing the new morning with dews
Children's songs still echoing afar
Delightful dance of the green grass!

The tree forests are friendly
Giving life, giving food
The fields and mountains still remain
The streams and waterways are just and fair

Freedom reigns still there
Friendship covers the grass you tread
Love lingers in your remembrance
And rainbow dancing with the Sun!

My Love, take a step out
To get to know the outside World
Passing from one place to another
Crossing an ocean of illusion to reality

I love seven radiant rainbow colors
The pearl-dew drops rolling
The dreamlike morning so charming
They are friends of the soul!

My Love, though I know you not
I love you so deeply
Listen, my Love, the Heart of Universe
Calling still in your heart!

Paiwarin Khaongam

Where There is Love, There is Love

The poet encourages us to search for the meaning of life and universe through our loving heart. The following poem also conveys this value of love.

Life, Time, Roses

We exchange roses you and I
I and you, we desire Dream-Time
You and I, we long for Eternity
I and you, forever in love with Eternity

Just because you and I believe in Roses
Roses are life in time of despair
Roses are heart and soul in bloom
Their petals dancing in farewell melodies!

My roses scattered, falling in your heart
Your roses scattered, falling in my heart
Cold, Silent, Slow
Slow, Silent, Cold

My roses given in the Name of Love
Your roses for Love and sorrowful goodbye

Once our roses were blooming consolation
Now beyond consolation, they die!

Paiwarin Khaongam

Where There is Love, There is Love

In 'Life, Time, Roses' the poet employs 'roses' as a symbol of love. He is trying to convey the message of the fleeting nature of love and

how we can reach 'eternity' through our faith in love. This seems a bit rather un-Buddhistic but quite understandable because the poet is trying to re-define the concept of 'love' not only as a desire or passion but as a faith in the power of love that can make us realize the meaning of 'eternity', though very short and momentary.

In the next poem 'Life is not a Walk in Rose Garden' the poet re-emphasizes the same idea by employing the same symbol 'roses'. However, here the poet seems to be answering to a saying that life is not totally a pleasant experience yet by enjoying the roses or love, life is worthwhile living.

Life is not a walk in Rose Gardens

Life is not a walk in rose gardens
Yet the world is full of rose gardens
Roses blossoming, blooming, alluring
How can we resist such walking!

Life is not a walk in rose gardens
Yet the world has rose gardens for walking in
At certain time of love and sufferings
Some still love walking in rose gardens!

Life is not a walk in rose gardens
Yet the world has rose gardens to pass by
Wishing to make confession with roses?
The world still need rose gardens!

Life is not a walk in rose gardens
Yet I have my own rose garden
Blossoming with divine roses of the heart
Please, do come to enjoy my roses!

Paiwarin Khaongam

Where There is Love, There is Love

The message seems to contradict Buddhistic philosophy yet, on close reading; we would sense that the poet is expanding the meaning of love or rose gardens into a more universal sense. He is trying to convey a philosophy of universal love as a solution to the problem of the world. The poet insists that ‘the world still need rose gardens!

Saksiri Meesomseub: Simple Nature of Meditation and Wisdom

Saksiri is a unique poet who conveys ‘message of wisdom’ in a form of simple poetry. His poems describe the ordinary scenes in life yet he could lead his reader into ‘seeing’ beyond the surface of things and gaining a spiritual insight into various aspects of enlightenment.

Plastic Flowers

Plastic flowers never fade
Yet butterflies never come near
People love to grow plastic flowers
Which never rejoice at parties
Never cry at funerals
Know not how to love
Know not the kisses of the wind
Care not for the sun
Embrace not the rapport of the dews
Deliver not the prayer to Buddha
Oh... poor human
How you admire plastic flowers!

Saksiri Meesomseup

2. The Doll of Sand Shadow

The poem 'Plastic Flowers' is a good example of how the poet challenges us to observe the 'unnatural' quality of our modern life. The 'lifeless' nature of plastic flowers represents the 'artificialness' of modern life and the alienation from genuine nature. For the poet, this could lead to the most harmful separation between our awareness and nature around us. This separation will finally lead to the loss of spiritual wisdom.

The poet always emphasizes the importance of getting wisdom through observing the simple nature around us. The next poem 'The Clouds and the Sky' is a good example.

The Clouds and the Sky

When the sky is empty
The bird asks about the clouds
Do the clouds run away already?

The bird sees the clouds far-away
So he flies there
Once he arrives

He sees the clouds still clinging
To the sky!

Saksiri Meesomseub

The Doll of Sand Shadow

In 'The Clouds and the Sky', the poet is explaining the state of mind of a person who is trying to purify his heart to become like an empty sky. However, deep down the 'clouds' are still 'clinging' to the sky and not separated from the sky though no one could see the clouds.

This metaphor could be a suggestion of the fact that to purify one's own heart is not quite a simple task.

Nevertheless, the poet encourages everyone to try to attain self purification through loving kindness and compassion.

A Maiden in the Garden

Bushes are luscious green
The leaves are radiant
Bouquet of leaves
Bouquet of colors

In between each lovely bouquet
Hidden some rotten leaves
Various rotten leaves
Happily hidden inside!

Focus your heart on the leaves
You can see the rotten ones
Take them out carefully
Separate them from beautiful leaves

If all the leaves are beautiful
All bouquets of leaves will be beautiful
All bushes will be diversely green
The whole garden will be heavenly!

Go on getting rid of rotten leaves
Taking care of lovely leaves
Thus, dear maiden
Your smiles are so sweet!

Saksiri Meesomseub

That Hand is White

In 'A Maiden in the Garden' the poet conveys the importance of purifying our heart so that we can attain a loving kindness and be happy and kind towards others. The poet asks us to 'take care of good leaves' and 'get rid of rotten leaves'. But before we could start this 'purification' we need to concentrate on our own self. Once our heart is purified the whole world will become a better place for everyone.

This could be considered an influence of Buddhism that emphasizes the value of loving kindness or compassion as an essential quality for developing our minds towards enlightenment.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, it is clear that the works of these poets reflect the harmony between the themes of nature, love and enlightenment. The harmony reveals the pervading influence of Buddhism in various aspects.

Firstly, these poets follow Thai literary convention of employing 'nature' as a means to express their 'worldly' and 'otherworldly' sentiments. They praise the beauty of nature at different levels. They likewise contemplate on this beauty to see 'spiritual' message inherent in it. Thus, the beauty of nature moves these poets and enlightens them in a certain ways. The joy caused by the magnificent beauty of nature enhances the emotion of love, traditionally mingled with pain and sorrow and finally leading to the 'awakening' of wisdom, or the acceptance and the realization of 'truth'. This 'truth' is mostly but not exclusively 'Buddhistic'.

Some younger poets like Paiwarin questions and challenges the 'ultimate' truth - like where there is love, there is suffering. Yet it is obvious that the poet could hardly deny this 'truth'.

Secondly, the poets encourage the reader to cultivate 'wisdom' through their works as well as give a guidance on how to cultivate 'wisdom' through the contemplation on nature. Nature is even compared to a great Bodhisatva who could be an inspiration for the practice of Dharma. This 'message' reveals a strong Buddhist influence.

At the same time, the works of these poets seem to transcend the conventional 'didactic' nature of Thai literature. The subtle intertwining of the 'message' and 'form' of these works as 'love poems' and 'nature poems' as well as 'didactic poems' seems to render more accessibility to the modern mind. Thus, these works eventually function more as a source of 'spiritual guidance' in the modern world.

This, in turn, stands as a magnificent evidence of the Buddhist heritage in the age of globalized society.

Key Words : Modern Thai Poetry, Nature, Love, Enlightenment, Buddhism

Bibliography

- Angkhan Kalayanapong. *Kawiniphon kho'ng Angkhan Kalayanapong*. Bangkok: Su'ksit Sayam, 1964
- Angkhan Kalayanapong. *Lam Nam Phu Krad'ung*. Bangkok: Su'ksit Sayam, 1969
- Leaman, O. *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Naowarat Pongpaiboon. *The Flute Songs*. 4thed. Bangkok, 1992.
- Paiwarin Kao-ngam. *Where There is Love, There is Love*. Bangkok, 2002.
- Saksiri Meesomseub. *That Hand is White*. Bangkok, 1988.
- Saksiri Meesomseub. *The Doll of Sand Shadow*. 2nded. Bangkok, 1993.

<국문초록>

태국 근대시에 표현된 자연, 사랑 그리고 계몽사상

수찌뜨라 총스땃바따나
출라롱콘 대학교 태국연구소 소장
suchitra.c@chula.ac.th

본 논문은 불교에서 많은 영향을 받은 태국 근대시에 표현된 자연, 사랑 그리고 계몽사상의 조화를 연구하였다. 연구주제로 태국 근대시를 선택한 이유는 태국문학의 유산에 끼친 불교의 지속적인 영향을 조명하기 위함이다. 본 연구를 위하여 선택한 시들은 현대에도 많이 읽혀지고 있는 안칸 칼라야나퐁, 나오와랏 풍파이봄, 파이와린 카옹감, 그리고 삭시리 메숨수엵 등과 같은 작가의 작품들이다. 이 작가들의 시에 표현된 공통적인 특성은 자연, 사람, 그리고 계몽사상이라는 주제들 간의 조화이다. 모든 주제들이 절묘하게 엮여져서 본래 불교시였던 것이 인간의 보편적인 시로 변화되는 결과를 낳는다. 아라칸 칼라야나퐁은 종종 자연을 지혜와 연민을 표상하는 것으로 묘사하고, 자연에 대한 사랑을 계몽사상에 대한 도구로 주창한다. 삭시리 메숨수엵은 자연의 단순함과 고요함을 계몽사상의 지혜를 쌓을 수 있도록 유도하는 명상적 각성을 제공하는 자아발전의 수단으로 바라본다. 이들 근대 작가들의 교훈적인 시에 나타나는 자연, 사랑 그리고 계몽사상의 조화는 다양성 속의 지속적인 통합으로 상징되는 동남아 문화의 불교적 유산에 대한 명백한 증거이다.

주제어 : 태국 근대시, 자연, 사람, 계몽주의, 불교