

## **CRITICAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS: GENDER CONSTRUCTION, IMPACTS AND PERCEPTION OF THAI WOMEN**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper will illustrate female gender construction within Thai society, as how it is built through state agencies and how they represent women in public. Additional purpose of this paper is to raise awareness and promote ideas based on critical feminism in Thai society. There have been concerns of representation of women and its relation to the national identity and state's construction of beauty that dictate women in their perception of being Thai women. It is relevant to contemporary social phenomenon, especially social discussion about roles and performance of women should take on in both public and private sphere. My analysis hence center on a process of gender construction where female gender is continuously served as images of the nation as well as portrayed importance of gender role regardless of real gender empowerment of women.

Key words: Women, Thailand, Gender Construction, Feminism, Gender Role, Representation

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

We all are familiar with the “Amazing Thailand” but how many would actually know the real “Amazing Thailand? As much as Thai people concern so much about their “faces”, Thailand encourage a cruciality of appearance and surfaces. These surfaces are often gendered and transformed through representation and practices focused on women as visual icons (Van Esterik, 2000). Van Esterik stated that gendered performs such as contests and state rituals fetishize national surfaces materialize the heart of Thainess, improving international images and tourist application. Therefore, surfaces and the country's images are extremely effective. The surfaces and images are taken for authentic without any critical analysis of

the discourse. You only see the Thai lady with smiley faces do the “wai” everywhere at tourist places. That kind of image becomes part of the “Amazing Thailand” program.

Gender construction and Thai female representation in Thailand are the main theme of this paper. They are the process of the state and society itself, and they are not static. These two processes change over time in accordance with governments' policies and Thai culture that evolves throughout history. Following the work of Penny Van Esterik, Materializing Thailand, I argue that gender construction and female representation are socially and culturally created by the state for its own purposes. We will look closely as to how women perceive and understand the concept of “Kulasatrii Thai” and what

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gender roles that woman adopt in which I believe it makes women remain inferior to men. Also, impacts on women by assuming such a mindset are to be studied to portray gender relations that artificially constructed by the state.

This paper illustrates how female gender is built and discuss how these representations of female gender by states have effects or impacts on Thai females. The author uses critical feminist theory to explain in order to understand gender roles, gender relations and gender inequalities of Thai society through the case study of National Beauty Contests.

### **I. Theoretical Perspective of critical feminist**

Critical feminist framework to some extent overlaps and many times draw on other critical approaches. Critical theory concentrates on thoughts and ideas on how injustice and subjugation shape people's experiences and understanding of the world.<sup>1</sup> According to Martin (2002), both critical and feminist theory share common interest in economic and social inequalities. Moreover, they both move toward an agenda in promoting change in society.<sup>2</sup> Although they share the common objective of challenging existing distribution of power and resource, what differentiates critical feminist theories from others critical agendas is the consideration on **gender equality**.<sup>3</sup> A Critical feminist will not only look at gender issues but also social inequity, and put the focal point on initiating change. Its unique strength is the

assertion to speak from women's experiences. According to Kushner (2003), critical feminist theory departed as "a normative concern with the status of women, and empirical focus on conditions that have produced domination in gender relations."<sup>4</sup> Critical feminist analysis is important not only to make girls' and women's perspectives visible, but also to interpret information from the standpoint of their diverse experiences in order to influence policymaking in regards to women's rights.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, critical feminist theory requires us to re-evaluate our understanding of power, knowledge, and space of empowerment. It provides various ways to consider about disturbing the principle, issue hegemonic understanding of oppression while also looking at other different ways and forms of resistance within each phenomenon as a way to think differently about social events and transforming gender relations.<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect of prime importance that critical feminists are conscious of, and sensitive to, is the fact that women's experiences can be different across time, culture, class, race, ethnicity and age. Therefore, no experience can claim 'universal authentic status.'<sup>7</sup> According to McKay (2004), critical feminist analysts accept that patriarchy privileges men, they also state that patriarchal societies may differ in Euro-American, non-western and other indigenous cultures, similarly, circumstances of women living in different cultures will also vary. It is equally significant not to representing all women as a group, either in the case of security needs,

<sup>1</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, "Feminist, yes, But Is It Evaluation?" *New Directions for Evaluation* 2002, 96. (2002): 97-108.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Martin, *Feminist theory and critical theory: unexplored synergies* (Stanford, CA: Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, 2002). 1.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah L Rhode, "Feminist Critical Theories," *Stanford Law Review* 42, 3. (1990): 617-639.

<sup>4</sup> Kaysi Eastlick Kushner, "Grounded theory, Feminist theory, Critical theory: Toward

Theoretical Triangulation," *Advance Nursing Science* 26, 1. (2003): 30-43.

<sup>5</sup> Susan McKay, "Women, Human Security, and Peace Building: A Feminist Analysis," *Conflict and Human Security: A Search for New Approaches of Peace-building*. (2004): 152-175.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer De Saxe, "Conceptualizing Critical Feminist Theory and Emancipatory Education," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 10, 2. (2012): 184-199.

<sup>7</sup> Rhode, "Feminist Critical Theories," 625.

or other fields. Women's experiences and worldview need to be understood with a reference of the context they live in. Hence, non-western women have criticized Western Feminists' perception as they speak on behalf of all women intentionally without considering different cultures or social condition.<sup>8</sup>

In this research paper, I will be looking at how the way Thai state actually constructs and portrays female gender effect on women's perception of themselves, in which, state seems to aims at empowerment of Thai women. We will look at the process of gender construction to prove that the Thai state does not empower but rather treats women more like sex objects through the case study of national beauty contest. If you look closely to the structure of Thai society, women empowerment by state is still low compare to other states of the West. Critical feminist theory will explain many issues of power relation between men and women as well as hegemonic culture that lies within Thai culture.

## II. Gender and National Identity

If nations and national identities are socially and culturally constructed, many agents of society, by all means, construct gender and sexual identity one way or another. Historically, there have been issues of representations of women in associate with Thailand's leaders who wanted to promote a civilized' image of Thailand. Consequently, women's identities became the public representation of Thai culture and are related to the concepts of national order symbolically.

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<sup>8</sup> Cheryl McEwan, "Postcolonialism, feminism and development: Intersections and dilemmas," *Progress in Developmental Studies* 1, 2. (2001): 93-111.

<sup>9</sup> Penny Van Esterik, "The Politics of Beauty in Thailand," in *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, ed. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York; London: Routledge, 1996), 203.

Van Esterik (1996) argues on the politics of beauty in Thailand, characteristic of gentleness and virtue are interlaced with elegance and beauty to construct a model of ideal Thai femininity. The Thai state has been involved in the preservation of this model and has been making use of it as part of building the nation through many projects since 1930s.<sup>9</sup>

States, most of the time, involve with the emergence and construction of gender. During the years from 1939-1944, gender ideology of female in the establishment of national identities was conceptualized into the ideology of 'Flower of the Nation' in the country. Thailand then was under military regime of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram. It is a booming period of Thai nation building with his policy attempting to build a 'new nation' with an ultimate goal of maintaining the country's independence throughout the threat of Western colonization.<sup>10</sup> The issues of women and the construction of ideal femininity was clearly one of the government's major obsessions in this the mission of building the Nation. The development of Thai beauty contest started since 1930s under the reign of Phibunsongkhram, the contest served to further his nation-building and political strategy and to provide a setting to display the new Western fashions he wanted Thai women to adopt in order to make Thailand become more modern.<sup>11</sup> The motivation behind the ideology of 'Flower of the Nation' was built upon the ideal of femininity, which appealed in the sense of nationalism and patriotism, in part through the construction of gender identities and the discipline of women's appearances and

<sup>10</sup> Paweena Subhimaros, . *Flower of the nation: representations of women and national identities in modern Thailand*. (Leeds: Center for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, University of Leeds, 2010), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*. (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 140.

sexual behaviors<sup>12</sup> which later came idea of “Kulasatrii Thai”. In this period of nationalism booming, the notion of masculinity mainly depended on an aggressive and militaristic nationalism. Therefore, the ideal of masculinity was expressed in the symbol of “Fence of the Nation,”<sup>13</sup> meaning that men’s roles are military struggles to defend their homeland and the sovereignty of the nation, while ideal feminine identities on Thai women were expressed behind the metaphor of “Flower of the Nation” – a feminine ideology is put forward as well as idealization of masculinity with the same goal; to build the nation at this time. A feminine ideal is pushed forward and women became symbolically part of the flower that they are so dear to the people of the nation as well as foreigners. This process creates images that women should be kind and lady-like and support men who are there to protect not only the families but also the nation. Men must be strong like “Chai chart taharn” ชายชาติทหาร implying “be strong like a soldier.” This is very patriarchal giving male more prestigious positions while women were only seen as weak, non-aggressive and need to be protected.

One of the evidences of this ideology is a song composed by Madam Laid Phibunsongkram, Field Marshal Phibunsongkram’s wife, called “Ying Thai Jai Ngam” (หญิงไทยใจงาม) – meaning kind-hearted Thai lady. The song indicates the beauty of Thai ladies on the appearances and emphasizes that holding additional virtue will make perfect ladies. Thai ladies are the Thai nation’s darlings and the prestige of the nation, which is already well

known all over.<sup>14</sup> The word “flower” has always been related with women in Thailand representing beauty, freshness and grace. Hence, it was not so surprising that this concept was used to metaphorically embody the images of Thai women strongly in this period. At that time, all these ideas and promotions were considered precious and influential for Thai women. Regardless of what role women should perform in the household, women were to be loved, precious and prestigious in the images of state level.

State representation of women during Sukhothai and Ayutthaya is not so distinct from women in later Thai nation or during Chakkri dynasty. Historically, if we traced back to those time of Sukhothai and Ayuttaya, we would find that representation of contemporary Thai women reflects selected and invented historical and literary pasts. Van Esterik stated that what strikes visitors to Thailand from the first foreigners recording their impressions of the Kingdom in the seventeenth century to the diaries of current tourists is the visibility of Thai women.<sup>15</sup> There were observations done by De La Loubere, who wrote of Ayutthaya, “the wives of the people, managing all the trade, do enjoy perfect liberty.”<sup>16</sup> These observations and frequently told myths from Thai history highlight that “women in Thai society are better off than in many other societies.”<sup>17</sup> Gender equality is a valued part of the myth of the golden age of Sukhothai. Historical overviews on Thai women stress that women and men were legally equal in the Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> “Nang Noppamat, asserted mate of King Ramkamhang, the warrior-king of thirteenth-century Sukhothai, is credited

<sup>12</sup> Subhimaros, *Flower of the Nation*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Subhimaros, *Flower of the Nation*, 3

<sup>14</sup> นาฏศิลป์ โรงเรียนเมืองหลังสวน. เพลงหญิงไทยใจงาม, <https://sites.google.com/site/ajanthus/rawng-matrthan/hying-thiy-ci-ngam> (accessed June 3, 2014)

<sup>15</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Simon De Laubere, *The Kingdom of Siam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Juree Vichit-Vadakan, “Women and the Family in Thailand in the Midst of Social Change,” *Law & Society Review* 28, 3. (1994): 515.

<sup>18</sup> Kornvipa Boonsue, “Gender Planning for Thailand’s Industrial Labour Force Development,” (Bangkok: Asian Institute of Technology, 1998), 6.

with developing rituals such as Loy Kratong, which glorify women's beauty and desirability.”<sup>19</sup> Women seem only to be equal in terms of social practices to a certain level but still not equal in many aspects. For example, the custom that has been practicing for a long time is to enter the monkhood or to become and ordained monks for sons; the sons are supposed to be ordained (บวช) to learn a profound Dhamma (a virtue code of morals) of the Buddha and this is considered as a highest compensation favor for the parents implying that by doing so would make merit for parents and they will be heaven after life, while at the same times daughters will not get the same opportunity to compensate for parents in ritual ways. Women can only become nuns, in which the level of ritual power is different from being monks in terms of power to enrich others to the ultimate point of end. The women are regarded as inferior to the men, and they do not have the same rights or position in society as men do.

In the past, there were images of women as war captives, tribute wives or concubines are the warriors: Queen Srisuriyothai of Ayutthaya (1548-1569) who fought against the Burmese; Khunying Muk and Jan (1785) who also fought against the Burmese; Khunying Mo who saved Nakhon Ratchasima from the Lao army. Feats of bravery by individual women stimulated the incorporation of these stories of powerful, military dominant women into Thailand's official historical narrative. Hence, Thai history has been recognized heroines of Thai state for a very long time. Heroines from the past re-emerge in the present through their mediums, beyond their positions in time and space. I've been growing up with these stories through both Thai history class in middle schools, which are mainly state educational institution, cartoon books and movies. According to Van Esterik (2000), as spirits, these historical figures can interfere in the lives of contemporary men

and women. It is overwhelmingly women, or men who appropriate femaleness through transgenderism who access the power of the past through mediumship.<sup>20</sup> Images of powerful women from the past are internalized in proverbs about women's ability to wield a sword as well as rock a cradle. However, they coexist with a more commonly cited proverb: “Men are the front legs of the elephant, women are the hind legs of the elephant”, cited to demonstrate Thai women's subordinate position or the complementarity of men and women, depending on the feminist political views of the speaker. While there has always been the promotion of heroines, such as the story of Queen Sri Suriyothai who sacrificed herself to protect her husband and for the state, it is portrayed as such an honorable action of the lady. Through the lens of a critical feminist, another message that could be understood from this action is that, women have to do every possible thing to protect what she loves no matter what i.e. children, husband and the nation. The question arises as to what are the roles of women now? Warriors just like those ‘fence of the nations’ or homemaker and kind mothers who shall be nice, graceful as the description of ‘the flower of the nation, or both? While women are praised as performing both roles, but men can only be praised when they perform masculine acts, not feminine acts.

### III. Construction of female gender roles by the Thai state

In contemporary Thailand, feminine beauty is both formal and informal export of images of Thailand to catch the attention of tourists and investment and to produce a complimentary opinion of the country in the perception of foreigners. However, its negative side of this is often seen as a sexualized national image. The way Thai people perceive their national identity, most of the times, associated with the way Thai

<sup>19</sup> Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 44.

state promote the country in an international level. Sadly, Thailand has got an inevitable impression on the popular imagination of the West as home to a widespread sex industry. This is an entirely distinct, yet, gender-related issues. As a consequence, beside a common representation of 'the Land of Smiles', Thailand has become another place called "the Brothel of Asia".<sup>21</sup> This is because prostitutions have largely become widespread in Thai society. This reputation seems to last since great numbers of tourists travel to Thailand are willing to explore these sexual enjoyments, which are explicitly publicized throughout the world i.e. Hollywood movie named the Hangover 2 is a great example. It is remarkably sad that this reputation adversely effects on the reputation of Thai women in general. While prostitution seems to have impact on the image of Thai women harshly, not much has been mentioned about Thai men who also involve in this kind of activities and business.

It is inevitable for women to escape from images in relation with sexual objectification. Gender stereotyping is still a common practice among Thai civilians and foreigners. This is due to the impacts from the cold war period where sex industry emerges as to bring wealth to the nation.<sup>22</sup> In the 1980, Thailand was advised by the World Bank to promote and improve tourism as a means of accumulating foreign exchanges.<sup>23</sup> A lot of entertainment places emerged numerously in Bangkok demanding male tourists. Sex tourism expanded in the 1970s in a form more blatant and diverse than anywhere else in the world. Even today, we still see that

many foreigners come to Thailand for this purpose of entertaining. Thai state cannot deny the fact that this industry has brought to the country a lot of capitals. This result directly to the women as women have always been the mascots of Thai tourism, apparently seen everywhere from the hotels to airports. The service type of jobs is offered more to women rather than men. Why women? It is essential to look at migration discourse that inevitably must focus on issues such as violence, poverty, and other factors; and linked to victimization of the migrants is often a focal point to the analysis.<sup>24</sup> Hemming and Piper (2004) argued that there are many conditions that can explain the fact that women migrate are given little attention and the concept that women make decisions based on choices is ignored. They further suggest that there should be an investigation on whether women, trafficked or prostitute, are unable choose and thus never able to exercise agency.<sup>25</sup> This led to a further question rose whether or not sex industry in Thailand is being protected, if so, by whom, for what reasons and how.

There is a concern with this issue by the state and private sector of Thai society. In an attempt to abolish this image in the popular perception of Thai women in the eyes of the world, Thai nationalist sector including the Ministry of Culture and other national institutions has focused on promoting the image of the morally and sexually 'good' women. Most Thai would prefer that foreign visitors recall the beautiful, graceful, polite and neatly dressed women as portrayed in the tourist industry promotion – women in Thai traditional dress and do the Wai with smiley

<sup>21</sup> The Curious Travel Bug, *Thailand... Behind the Postcard: Development and Impacts of the Sex Industry in Thailand*.  
<http://thecurioustravelbug.wordpress.com/thailand-behind-the-postcard/>

<sup>22</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Judy Hemming and Nicola Piper, *Trafficking and Human Security in Southeast Asia: A*

*Sociological Perspective*. Draft 2004.

[http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/piper\\_01\\_human\\_asia\\_0708.pdf](http://www.childtrafficking.com/Docs/piper_01_human_asia_0708.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Laura Ma Agustín, "Forget Victimization: Granting agency to migrants", *Thematic Section, Society for International Development* 46.3. (September 2003): 30 -36.

faces. This effort has not only been pushed toward tourist industry to re-create image of Thai women, it is put in a school curriculum and national education of the country to direct how women should behave, dress and express as well. This results in the continuous process to modernize Thailand and tourism became a prominent factor that is necessary and considered as a profitable avenue to bring in foreign currency, and women became part of the plan.<sup>26</sup> Subhimaros, states “Thailand’s need for a clear international image derives from a strong cultural tendency to bring only the morally acceptable into the public domain.”<sup>27</sup> She added that the Thai mass media endorse these images and attempt to produce a set of acceptable behavior of ‘women’. I found this is partly genuine that one hand mass media, through state agency emphasizes on image of a women, given example of Thai soap opera where there are always two types of women being portrayed of what is good and what is bad and how they will end up facing different paths at the end. This image of gender representation will always come with a sense of national identity of what it is to be “Thai women”. Pictures of the event “Kularatrii Thai Project” organized by Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Tourism and Sports (figure 1 and 2), in which come in a pattern of beauty pageant with a certain type of dresses i.e. traditional Thai dress and manners i.e. smiley faces, appropriately “wai”, walk, talk and calm.

There has been questioned where the essence of Thainess comes from. The Prime minister Phibun version of nationalism can explain very well that “Thainess” derives from state and process of the nation building, in which interestingly relates to the version of the King Rama VI. To be specific on gender affairs, the Thainess in women is promoted by the state. Van Esterik addresses that

there is the link between the representation of women and the presentation of the Thai nation state. This inevitably involves in terms of social class where we would find issues on gender and social inequality. Nationalism, politics and economics have been mostly male exclusivity because nationalism and national identity are often gender blind. Following Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, he notes on the absence of women, “women citizens of nations were neither imagined nor invited to imagine themselves as part of horizontal brotherhood.”<sup>28</sup> The process of nation building by Phibun provides evidences as he promoted women as beauty representation of the state, while men are encouraged to be involved in the state affairs noticeably. Phibun’s nation building strategy concentrates on developing ‘Thainess’ to strengthen the unity of the Thai nation. Women were received special attention to implement new Thai dress code; those of Western style and participate in Thai beauty contest. Thus, many of the modernization in the construction of Thai identity involved women, their dress, appearance and manner. Women in many ways were required to do such things in order to represent the greatness of Thai nation. It portrays apparently that these gender representations commemorate women as symbols of Thainess (Van Esterik, 2000). While the celebration of women representing Thainess, majority of Thai women in the rural areas cannot afford to do the same. The essence of Thainess represented the western fashion can only be offered by Thai elite women. More importantly, there is a relation between social class and Thai women representation.

Much of the idea of the proper Thai women is connected with those royal persons discovering difference among social groups. According to Kamphibol,

<sup>26</sup> Hemming and Piper, *Trafficking and Human Security in Southeast Asia*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Subhimaros, *Flower of the Nation*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London; New York: Verso, 1983), 50.

Phibun's policies were meant to upgrade Thai women to the status of women in the Western countries by promoting their education, guaranteeing their rights, setting up women's social groups and cultural clubs to manage charity events and welfare.<sup>29</sup> However, this does not apply to all classes of Thai women as to which Thailand is still highly hierarchical. It is to preserve Sakdina status, as elite women would raise common women's appearance by holding these bazaars. We can see that women play an important role in building the nation to become civilized and create 'modern' national identity. Apart from women's development in social aspects, these policies reflected the action of gendered-authoritarian as to Phibun was the main drive of the policy, not the women. By requiring women do such things, it serves the purpose of his legitimacy modernizing Thailand, yet putting women to be victims of arbitrary regulations. Women were not only promoted to transform physically but also mentally to being 'Thai women.' They need to serve their husbands properly while at the same times, men must give women control in the household.<sup>30</sup> There is not much gender analysis in the Thai social context, most of the time it is an influence of the Western critiques and feminism. Thus, appearance of women is continuously used to signify tradition and modernity of state.

#### IV. The Ideal Thai Women

There is no doubt in whether or not Thailand is a male-dominated, patriarchal society, as political, economic and social leadership has always been in the hands of

men. Even though elite women seem to be the groups portraying 'woman image' or those as 'flowers of nations' on the surfaces, the power of women, particularly in rural societies, places in their domestic role as the mother-nurturer.<sup>31</sup> The role of mother is perceived to be ideal. Women's dedication to nurturance is evident in the expression as of good woman who "wakes up earlier and goes to sleep later than men".<sup>32</sup> Many responsibilities are required for women once they become mothers in which entails endless household duties of women. Moreover, women in rural areas do not only work in the house but also in the field besides their husbands. "The mother-nurturer role is also idealized in the female code of social and sexual conduct."<sup>33</sup> The ideology of Thai traditional woman has defined as a 'Kulasatrii Thai', with the characteristics of proficient and sophisticated in household obligations, graceful, pleasant with modest manners and conservative in sexuality. Unfortunately, the concept of Kulasatrii Thai has not been discussed in the perspective of critical feminist much. Interestingly, I found that the idea, besides deriving from construction of national identity by the state, idea of gender relation and gender role emphasizing on women derive from religious context. By practicing the role over and over again, it has become social norms for women to behave like one, namely, Kulasatrii Thai. Even most contemporary women wholeheartedly endorse the Kulasatrii Thai impression without resentment and question as it a sign of honor and dignity. It has become a cultural identity for Thai women that they can be proud of.

<sup>29</sup> N. Kamphibol, Policy about Thai Women in the Period of National Construction of Marshal P. Phibunsongkram (1938-1944) (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1987) 67.

<sup>30</sup> Kamphibol, *Policy about Thai Women...*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> Charles F. Keyes, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand," *American Ethnologist* 11,2. (May 1984): 223-241.

<sup>32</sup> Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep, Eli Coleman, and Pacharin Dumronggittigule, "Thailand: Basic Sexological Premise," *The Continuum Complete International Encyclopedia of Sexuality*. Kinseyinstitute, 2004,

<http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/ccies/pdf/ccies-thailand.pdf>. (Accessed June 18, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Taywaditep, Coleman and Dumronggittigule, Thailand: Basic Sexological Premise, 1023-1027.

Thai society is extremely polarized even in terms of gender. If a woman does not act according to one kind, she would be perceived as another. Thai soap opera again emphasizes on the good women and the bad women, and at the end the good ones always win. Thai soap largely portrays the good women as weak, kind, passive and shall be preserved that at the end, this kind of women will win the man's heart. On the other hand, the evil one is portrayed as jealousy, dress appealing with fewer clothes, does not simply behave according to the idea of Kulasatrii thai. Therefore, this message sent to audiences, which are mostly housewives and young women who are free to watch after dinnertime. The ideology of being Kulasatrii thai embedded in women's mentality in which keep women inferior than men allow men to control over women socially, politically and economically. The only empowerment from this is only the power of the women to control within its household, yet decision-makings still centered around men within most Thai families.

Such ideology also restricts women's freedom of expression, and encourages inequality within gender roles. By enforcing a certain social expectation, through state policies, social norms derived from religious perspectives and Thai culture itself, that women must behave femininely, dress appropriately and maintain their status to be perceived as good beautiful lady limited women's freedom of expression and most of the time women became victims of it. Women's morality is often concerned in terms of dress code. Women supposed so cover their bodies and do not supposed to disclose too much of their skins as to prevent from getting raped by men. Thai society views dressing too sexy and disclosing too much of skin can arouse men's sexual temper. This extremely shows inequality of power relations between men and women. Thai society often suppresses women in a way of teaching women how to dress while at the same time ignore to teach men to respect

and not to rape. When there is rape crime occurs, which often makes Thai people become emotional about, many ask whether or not women dress is too disclosed but never ask 'why' men should rape at the first place.

Last but not least, gender roles of men and women are constructed differently in private sphere. Women are expected to belong to home, being a housewife and expected to do housework and even outside work in a contemporary Thai society. If women fail to fulfill particular job as men expected, women most likely to get condemned or feel shame of not being able to do. This kind of expectation and condemnation often comes from men rather women themselves. Given myself as example, I learn how to behave like "Kulasatrii Thai" from my father rather than my mother. My father would tell me importance of daughter duties, to eat quietly, walk slowly and etc. On the other hand, men will be specially praised if they can perform some of housework on their own and not condemned if they cannot do because they were not expected to do at the first place.

## **V. Literature as representation of Thai femininity through course curriculum of public education**

According to Esterik, representation of women in literature and theatre demonstrate obedient sacrifice, which has become rooted in Thai female mentality: do good things, maintain morality, and uphold truth. This instructive literature label expectations for women in Thai society, intensively in elite and middle-class females. The expectations include that: women should remain virgin until marriage, serve their husband faithfully, keep the house clean, work longer and harder and most importantly be good

mothers of children.<sup>34</sup> This mentality is quite similar in many other societies however; the level of sacrifice of Thai women is emphasized highly. Examples of literary discourse are *lakhon chatri* and *lakhon chakchak wongwong* (televised folktales), which are shown every weekend in the morning. It is portrayed as patriarchal control and glorified women's subservience and dependence. Among Thai elites and women in the palace, they are taught how to crawl, crouch, stand and walk appropriately and to be good, prestigious, polite and tidy woman. Hence, this representation of women through literature shapes Thai women mentality since they are at young age, from generation to generation.

After the end of the Second World War, there are significant lessons taught through arts and literature included those of social justice and equality. It was seen as a new radical thought among common Thai people during the time. Critical literature during the time emerged as radical dialogue in writing of Jit Phumisak (1930-1966) and many others.<sup>35</sup> Jit Phumisak interpreted Thai literature critically as a result of a "corrupt and oppressive autocratic ruling class", particularly sexual oppression of elite men. Jit was thinking ahead of his time offering new perspective moving away from feudalistic idea and argued that classical Thai texts in schools were outdated and lack of critical thinking.<sup>36</sup>

Classical Thai literature usually represent elite (*Puu dii*) images of women that women characters are often strong and complex, unlike the characters in more contemporary fiction where women are usually portrayed as helpless, vain and dumb. Harrison (1994) points out that classical Thai literature – 'literature for life'

fiction – articulated more socially progressive ideas where women writers wrote more of 'social equality and freedom' attempted to liberate women from 'traditional framework.'<sup>37</sup> Female figures in classical Thai literature are heroines portraying ideal women for her courage and noble activities, may be forced to acts against their ideal nature. Yet, many are written actively involved in complexities of life and plot, sometimes as men's equals.

A good example of a woman from Thai literature named 'Khun Chang, Khun Phaen' was 'Wan Thong'. She was a popular heroine yet a prototype of the indecisive woman, powerless to determine her fate and commanded by men. Her life has become prototype that Thai women should not imitate due to the end of her life is shameful and depressing regardless of thinking whether or not she deserves such death and reputation. Wan Thong's elements of life include: "1) a woman's consciousness of the misery she experiences and feels at the natural and unavoidable result of being born female; and 2) her desire to please everyone she loves, often to her own harm"<sup>38</sup> Kepner (2006) provided. By reading Khun Chang Khun Phaen, critical feminists would find that this particular literature is quite sexist and represents many gender inequalities; obviously, from the part that Wanthong was humiliated and put to death for the fact that she had two husbands as bad samples that no women should be like her, while Khun Phaen, a great warrior who was charming and justified to have many wives as much as battles he had fought. Wanthong's life story has been told through course of history and still visible in contemporary films and television shows or soap operas. This kind of literature has been molding

<sup>34</sup> Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Rachel Harrison, *A Drop of Glass and Other Stories; Sidaoru'ang* (Bangkok, Duang Kamon, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Mattani Mojdara Rutnin, *Modern Thai Literature: The Process of Modernization and the*

*Transformation of Values* (Bangkok, Thammasat University Press, 1988). 135.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Fulop Kepner, *The Lioness in Bloom: Modern Thai Fiction about Women* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996).

Thai women's mentalities of what women should be like and reinforce gender role of females until present days.

These types of literature are not only presented through media like TV series only but also enforced to put in school curriculum. Most of the readings students are required to read every term are penetrated with implication of gender roles and expectation. This can be seen as a tool to keep men in power by keep enforcing women to remain passive as social norms. Intentionally or not, I believe this tool of state is very effective and embed ideology of female gender proficiently from kindergarten through high schools.

## **VI. National Thai Beauty Contest: Femininity to build the nation**

Social phenomenon of Thai beauty contest created by the Thai state diffuses ideal beauty and objectifies females, which have a big impact on gender roles and social expectation on women, which conduce in inequality within female gender themselves in a large scale. The purpose of gender construction is varied, in this part, through national beauty contest and beauty pageant.

In the early period, beauty contest does not perform as a medium to promote femininity of women nor support gender equality in any means. In Thailand, the objective of the contest was to support the newly introduced model of democracy, to build the nation and to increase the status of women.<sup>39</sup> Ironically, while women are encouraged to be the nation's images of civilized society through the contest, how the contest would accomplish its objective the latter was never made comprehensible. In fact, the contest has become as a show that provide entertainment at fair. According to Esterik, the contest was expected to bring a joyful atmosphere to the

occasion. The candidates were chosen for their natural beauty and the judges would make sure that they are beautiful without make up and had good skin. The winners were primarily from the families of the government officials, and were likely to marry government officers.<sup>40</sup> During Sarit Thanarat regime, cleanliness and order (ความเรียบร้อย) is the main theme of Thainess. He expressed through his own life style acting with social properness.<sup>41</sup> He adopted the 'lady-killer' image enhanced his power and conformed to a dominant model of Thai masculinity as he was capable of acquiring movie stars, beauty queens and even young students as mistresses. Beauty pageant was also booming during his period.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, during the nation-building period, the beauty contest was meant to be a political strategy. During Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram, national beauty contest was more of domestic affairs. Later on in 1964-1972, it was getting down to business. The urban contests have inspired contests in rural areas. Changes emerged in the pattern where "Thepi Ngan Wat" (temple fair angel) did not only wear Thai traditional dress but also imitated the more Western-oriented style of dress. In spite of the expression about shifting the status of women, the government-supported beauty contests exhibited women, most of the times, in shorts. However, during the war years of 1941-1947 the contest went absent and resumed again when Phibun became the prime minister for the second term in 1948.<sup>42</sup>

The military government involved in not only promoting National Beauty Contest claiming to uplift women status as the nation celebrated democracy, but also this gendered discourse on militarization relies on the distinct notions about masculinity.<sup>43</sup> Besides having the queen

<sup>39</sup> Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 139.

<sup>40</sup> David K Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 285.

<sup>41</sup> Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 106.

<sup>42</sup> Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> William A. Callahan, "The Ideology of Miss Thailand in National, Consumerist, and

dressed in her military uniform broadcasting in daily TV video, women take action as girlfriends, wives and mothers to support the boys in uniforms. Women have more roles to play, and the state and business in Thailand have increased amounts of time and money to shape identity of 'Thai women' to meet their changing requirements.<sup>44</sup> While the official prototype of a Thai man is a soldier, a Thai woman's prototype characteristically is the beauty queen, and naturally become a housewife or a mother.<sup>45</sup> The Thai military leaders such as Sarit Thanarat and later General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh took nationalistic logic having a beauty queen wife to strengthen his heroic soldier in parallel with Ferdinand Marcos and his beauty queen wife, Imelda, who were national leaders of the Philippines for two decades.<sup>46</sup> From this point, we see that beauty contest does not only serve to truly uplift status of women, but it is treated as a mean for the Thai army leaders to uplift their images of heroes creating Thai women identity to meet their own interest. However, Callahan (1998) argues further that the institution of "Miss Thailand" does not simply confine women, but dynamically serve to establish a positive image of the Thai women for both at home and abroad. These beauty pageants do not only arrange in the city of Bangkok, but also in local communities. The Thai National Beauty contest will be broadcasting on TV once every year. By doing so, media has an effective role in constructing the 'ideal Thai women', that we can often see how television viewers consume not just entertainments and products but a particular image and hence choices for each individual viewer's national identity added Callahan (1998). Moreover, this shows the role of military in its hidden agenda measuring Thai female

beauty. It is a process between media and audiences influencing the way women construct their images. While media creates the image and idea of 'Miss Thailand', the massive audiences of Miss Thailand then help constructing the media, especially the television and advertisement industry. Therefore, the Miss Thailand or National beauty contest performs as an ambassador – medium in creating Thai identity for women. The gendered national identity is not static. The beauty pageants over time shifted from being showcase for men to being role models for women. The Miss Thailand is perceived as the Thai beauty ambassador to represent Thailand on the international stage. "Miss Siam is the representative of Thai women to show the world that Siam has Miss Siam who is as beautiful as the beauty queens of other countries", declared the international aspects by the Interior Ministry office.<sup>47</sup> This can be portrayed that Miss Siam is an element of the symbolic defense of the Thai nation.

On the surface, Thai women would look up and admire the miss Thailand who is not only beautiful, but also must be educated, and somewhat talented. By having media portraying appreciable roles of the Miss Thailand, many young Thai girls have been growing up with desires to become one. Young Thai women are encouraged to be Thai beauty queens as it is an honor and prestigious role for women to serve the nation. While men are still largely encouraged to do more important jobs such as soldiers, polices, doctors and politicians.

The government and media throughout history continuously support the Beauty Contest. As we see today that it has become a huge industry involves important sectors, specifically commercial television industry. Business industry through its

Transnational Space," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 23, 1. (1998): 1.

<sup>44</sup> Callahan, *The Ideology of Miss Thailand ...*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Saneepong Prombunson, *A Farce in Three Acts* (Bangkok, Nation, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> Barney Oldfield, "Miss America and the 301<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group," *Air Power History* 37, 2. (1990): 41-44.

<sup>47</sup> Callahan, *The Ideology of Miss Thailand*, 8.

marketing strategies has turned women into the primary consumers, especially the Miss Thailand's audiences between ages of eighteen and mid-forties. By all means, the Thai beauty pageant performs as a television in which its audiences mainly look for fashion tips along with imitating the beauty queens' characteristic. A part of men looking at women as of 'meat markets' for flesh values, women simultaneously join the show looking for the way to clothe their bodies.<sup>48</sup>

Critical feminists would argue that on the beauty contest stage, women are treated more of sex objects. It is very gendered that women are served as products promoting many products while also showing their bodies for the pleasure of men. The pageant contestants will be on the stage several times in order to show their bodies and the way they walk including their overall characters in which will be included in the total scores, judges included both men and women. Additionally, by televising this Miss Siam or Miss Thailand Universe is basically publicly showing women's bodies to reinforce a particular form of beauty for women who mainly consume this shows for fashion matters, while for men, is simply to enjoy the showcase with women parading in swimsuits on stage legally without being criticized by the state that it is inappropriate for Thai culture.

Although many would argue that this kind of activities provide more opportunities for women to gain greater control of their lives through this public medium. But it still reflects the struggle in feminism between public and private sphere. The Thai Beauty Contest evolves to become more international in many ways in which often contradict with the Thai tradition. Customarily, women are limited to the private sphere of home and emphasized to fulfill the biological duties of sex, mating and nurturing children. While men, on the other hand, present in

public sphere, taking more political duties of government and business and it is not difficult to observe that fact in Thai society. Additionally, the role of sex object is still relevant to this National Beauty Pageant, considering power of the ideology of virginity in Thai society and the limitation prohibiting marriage and children for the contestants Callahan argued. It can be concluded that women are only encouraged to perform less sophisticated and intellectual roles and involves more in materialistic and consumerist behaviors. This is a problematic path to empower Thai women. Even today, women often find themselves contradictory whether or not she should pay attention to her roles in private or in public more in order to achieve greater control of their lives. It is crucial to keep in mind that the beauty contest is an imported product, mainly from the United States that the Thai military government adopted to propagandize modernization and civilization of the country.<sup>49</sup> The quest of what is 'authentic Thai women' still remained unanswered.

We have looked at how the state constructed female gender through beauty pageants for several purposes, both negative and positive. Despite the fact that participating in beauty pageants can empower women more economically, it consequently brings women more confusion in what roles they should perform both in public and private. The idea of 'beauty', like nationalism is not a natural process but socially constructed and reconstructed for various political, military, economic purposes. It seems that today, there is this kind of activities for men to participate as well, but the mainstream of beauty and national identity is strongly laid in the hands of women. The public and government agencies seem to pay more attention and concern more of women than men. This is a clear evidence of hegemonic culture that men still have control over women in the national level, due to the fact

<sup>48</sup> Callahan, *The Ideology of Miss Thailand*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Callahan, *The Ideology of Miss Thailand*, 20.

that there are more numbers of men in the ruling position in public and private sectors.

## 2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, critical feminist framework is very successful as a practical research direction concerned with the viewpoint of women. As I have been exposed to feminist literature, it allows me to be able to vividly imagine other female individual lives and thoughts. In this paper, it partly proves that Thai state largely involves in the process of gender construction, through many activities, embeds the idea of Kulasatrii Thai and portrayed nationally that it is a value that Thai women should hold on to while at the same time demolish empowerment of women to be able to acquire more opportunities as equally to men, especially in political and economic realms. It was found a bit contradictory that Thai state tries to promote feminine values regarding to empower women democratically or economically while practically it does not result effectively in such a way. Thai women often found themselves in a cross road whether they should act more like 'Kulasatrii Thai' or they should be more independent in the century of globalization where women in many countries are encouraged to participate more in politics than in services and material promotions. As adopting feminist viewpoint, it is important to reinforce and be able to broaden this idea for Thai women, especially teenagers to be exposed to ideas that would empower them in more intellectual ways. The further study that could be done, it would be worthwhile to study how to improve and influence media to portray women as more of independent without being judged by society, or how to change the construction of gender in Thailand to make all gender become equally represented in as many aspects as possible. Gender differences shall not be the criteria to justify one's ability to do or perform their roles and in whatever ways

women should take pride while not just wait to be praised from others.

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