



Contesting Racial Discourses in Thai Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Case Study of King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* (1925)

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Abstract: By paying attention to racism as one of *Phraya Ratchawangsan*'s themes via the theoretical lens of postcolonialism, the paper examines the ways in which King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI) adapted the plot of *Othello* in *Phraya Ratchawangsan* to reveal and challenge the ignored racial discourses in Siam (Thailand) in the twentieth century. As a result, I argue that *Phraya Ratchawangsan* highlights racial discourses in the same way as the colonial legacies in Shakespeare's *Othello* that have often been overlooked in the Siamese society at the time. Such discourses animalize humans of different skin colors and have been maintained by white supremacy. To contest such racial discourses, King Rama VI subverted the concepts of Siamese beauty and "Otherness" via the acts of Somdet Phra Wigromratchsri, the King of Sriwichai Kingdom. Consequently, by analyzing the Siamese dance drama *Phraya Ratchawangsan* with insights of postcolonial studies, one can see that the conception of class hierarchy and the haves and the have-nots in Siam are not the only crucial issues that need to be reexamined. The problematic, yet often ignored racial discrimination in Siam, now Thailand, should be discussed and investigated, especially when it intensifies power of the class hierarchy, widening social gaps in Thailand. By doing so, the unity of Thailand is perhaps strengthened.

Keywords: King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* (1925), postcolonial reading, anti-racism, Thai drama, Shakespearean adaptation of *Othello*

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Introduction

It is undeniable that Shakespeare adaptations are transformed according to individual cultures they have integrated. The ways in which people integrated Shakespeare's works into their literature are inevitably determined by cultural histories. According to Gillies, Minami, Li, and Trivedi (2002), while Indian and Filipino Shakespeare can be related to (post)colonialism, the insights from these adaptations may not be compatible to the Japanese or Chinese audiences. This is to say,

Shakespeare's presence in the former British Empire is more complex and often related to imperial legacies. However, Shakespeare productions of many East Asian and Southeast Asian countries had not been under control of Great Britain and thus they were not forced to appreciate Shakespeare works as part of the whiteness legacies and colonial empire in which the colonized had been forced to learn Shakespeare's plays.

In India, as a former part of the British empire, Shakespeare's works have often been localized by cultural traditions and language translations, especially since the 1960s (Singh, 2004). On the contrary, Shakespearean works have been more perceived as part of Western knowledge in Japan and China. As Levith (2004) argues, Shakespeare has been the most recognized and reputed foreign writer in China that "has been used to forward [Chinese] ideology rather than meet him on his ground" (p.137). Shakespeare's works in Japan have been analyzed in order to learn Western philosophy and due to his popularity, Shakespeare became a cultural figure in Japan and had been known as "Sao" in Japanese language (Kawachi, 2005). All these examples demonstrate that a piece of literature or performance is the production of a particular historical and social background. This is indeed the case of Shakespearean adaptation of King Vajiravudh or King Rama VI.

Shakespearean adaptations of King Rama VI have their own history that can be traced back to the time when Thailand was known as "Siam" (1826-1939 and 1945-1949). Shakespeare's works had been brought to Siam by him, who changed the name of "Siam" into "Thailand" in 1939 even though Siam had not been globally recognized as Thailand until 1949. King Rama VI was one of Thailand's renowned kings who introduced democracy as well as the sense of nationalism to Siam, leading to the change of its name into Thailand, which means "the land of freedom." He had been educated in history, administration and law at Oxford University, England. This was the time when he encountered Shakespeare's works and his philosophy that King Rama VI might find useful to be adapted in the Siamese culture.

King Rama VI was the first Thai writer who translated and adapted Shakespeare's plays. This included *Venit-Vanit (The Merchant of Venice)* in 1916, *Tam Jai Tan (As You Like It)* in 1918, *Romeo and Juliet* in 1922 and *Phraya Ratchawangsan (Othello)* in 1925. During his reign, these Thai adaptations of Shakespeare were limited to only those in and related to his royal court and after Siam had been changed into Thailand in 1949, Thai Shakespeare was performed for Thai "middle-class" public. Nevertheless, even until now Thai Shakespeare has never reached those, categorized as Thai "grass-root" due to the limited entries and high price of tickets. None of Shakespeare's works is in the curriculums of the majority of Thai public schools. At the university level in Thailand, studies and discussions of Shakespeare's works have also been limited to only English literature. Even if Thai Shakespeare has been confined and circulated only within certain Thai groups, it has contributed to shaping the development of Thai traditional drama, especially the first Thai Shakespeare adaptation, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*. By focusing on one of the play's themes, the paper explores how King Rama VI adapted the plot of *Othello* in his play as an act to contest the ignored racial discourses in Siam in the twentieth century.

Phraya Ratchawangsan: The History

Phraya Ratchawangsan is originally a Siamese dance drama script. It was adapted by using the approach called "relocalization." According to Wyatt (1975), this approach activates freedom of adaptation of Shakespeare's texts with a belief that modifying the setting of the original texts does not affect the characteristics of the play. According to Tungtang (2011), *Phraya Ratchawangsan* was performed in the form of Lakhon nok. Lakorn nok, as Carkin (1984) explains, is a form of Siamese dance that had been developed from the dance drama in the Siamese Royal Court with the focus on more comedy tone rather than refined dance movements.

With *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, King Rama VI transformed *Othello* into a version of Siamese dance drama whose philosophy was the combination between Siamese dance aesthetics and Western theories. As Wattasombat (1981) argues, Siamese dance drama aimed "to soothe, not stimulate" (cited via Tungtang (2011), p.101). This is to say, Siamese dance drama expressed narratives via graceful movement, outfits, background music, and settings, rather than on the plot and themes of the story. However, with King Rama VI's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* that reflects Shakespeare's *Othello* on a social reality, encouraging audience to look deeply into their own lives and social order, the importance of themes and plots has been introduced and added to the Siamese dance drama traditions while its original descriptions of beauty have still been maintained.

Postcolonialism as a Lens of Literary Analysis

Sustained by the critical whiteness studies, postcolonialism aims to reject the legacies of colonization and its imperial history in forms of whiteness, an origin of racism, which have been invented in Europe to mark European Christianity as norms and superiority, juxtaposing it with other races that were marked as close to nature and hence bereft of humanity. This is to say, whiteness was employed to justify colonialism and colonial genocide. After colonialism, whiteness was largely evaded. As Morrison (1992) argues, this very evasion empowers whiteness as an unmarked marker just as much as its ideology: racism. To name, is to undo white supremacy and racism. Postcolonialism then has been established as a scholarship, aiming to deconstruct the category of whiteness and racial otherness.

Ware and Back (2002) introduce this scholarship as "a new social movement that seeks to expose and dismantle the machinations of White Power" (p.13). This includes probing many facets of whiteness and racism, disclosing and questioning its hegemonic constructions, sustained by the historical and contemporary devices that maintain colonial systems and structures as well as institutions that serve to underpin the ideology and privileges of white power (Ware & Back, 2002). "Whiteness" has first been critically scrutinized by Dyer in 1988. In his analysis of the depiction of white characters in *Jezebel* (1938), *Simba* (1955) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Dyer declares "whiteness" as a cultural constructed subject, created by white people to establish their dominant images in the world and to shape the world to maintain their own images. This is to say, white people have established standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail (Dyer, 1997, p.9).

Kuchta (1998) reviews Dyer's works and appraises his insights as a valuable knowledge asset for the development of English cultural studies because he investigated the operations of whiteness in many disciplines of cultural inquiries. These critical whiteness arguments have also been supported by Morrison (1992) who considers the approach as a means to (re)investigate effects of racial hierarchy and racial exclusion, and how availability on non-blacks who held, resisted, explored or altered those racial notions has been limited and marginalized (p.11) within literature and literary imagination. Together with Dyer's study, a number of literary scholars set in motion the postcolonial reading, which seeks to explore the invisibility, privilege, normativity and hegemony of whiteness and racism (Allen, 2001; Roediger, 2007; Ware & Back, 2002).

The ideology of whiteness and its racism have also influenced even those who have never been colonized by sustaining particular racial differences. Rather than considering racial differences as individual uniqueness in terms of inclusivity, whiteness perceives the differences as undesirable and as inferior. The analysis of King Rama VI's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* aims to shed light on this problematic issue and subvert it to sustain the fact that skin colors and racial differences cannot determine any individual values.

“Racism” and its Subversion in *Phraya Ratchawangsan*

King Rama VI's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* mirrors the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*, including its characters with name changing and its tragedy. Moreover, *Phraya Ratchawangsan* represents racial discrimination as a theme and this theme is also centralized in *Othello*. This racial discrimination in *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, similar to *Othello*, is an outcome of culturally coded constructions of skin color that positions Phraya Ratchawangsan, the protagonist, as not meeting the Thai concepts of beauty and Thai aristocracy. Being affected by the racial discourse of otherness, Phraya Ratchawangsan, like Othello, is portrayed as having “darker skin color” reflecting on his ethnic origin, which is Indian-Malay.

In the play, his Indian heritage is represented by ascribing him with a darker skin complexion, marginalizing him as the “Other”. With his otherness, he is treated as being different, as a foreigner and sometimes he is even called an “animal” by other characters. As seen in the following excerpt in which Chote (Roderigo), who falls in love with Bua Pan (Desdemona), expresses his anger when he knows that Bua Pan has eloped with Phraya Ratchawangsan.

For the lady from a prestigious family,
It was a shame for what she has done.
To give her consent to the black man,
That ugly-faced animal.¹

Here Phraya Ratchawangsan is called behind his back as “that ugly-faced animal” by Chote regardless of his higher rank in the court. In Thai culture, when the word “animal” is used to refer to a human person, it becomes an insulting metaphor to negatively emphasize the differences of that person, resulting in alienating him or her from the speaker and the rest of the society. This is similar to the Western racial discourse in which those who are categorized as “other” tend to be animalized and directed with series of oppressive and insulting vocabulary. This tendency has also been proclaimed by Chang and Corman (2021) that “white colonialists and racists have historically justified violence [...] by positioning people of color in proximity to anyone or anything deemed 'subhuman'" (p.60). Phraya Ratchawangsan, like Othello, is deemed as a subhuman and then othered. He is treated with inequality and often without dignity as humans do to other beings or those categorized as “alien species”. As Jackson (2020) insists, animality and nature have been intertwined to maintain the production of racial difference. Therefore, it is unlikely possible to separate animal advocacy from calls for racial justice (p.24). Such belief has been reflected in the depiction of Phraya Ratchawangsan who becomes a susceptible racial victim, falling into Muen Srisithikarn's (Iago) evil plan, resulting in murdering his wife and, in the end, committing suicide.

Throughout the narration of the play, furthermore, Phraya Ratchawangsan neither has any chance to defend himself against the racial oppression nor can he voice out the negativity and the pessimistic sense, caused by racism, against him. This kind of narratives has been projected by Spivak (1988). As she claims, those who have been othered are often marginalized, forced to be silent by the epistemic violence. By referring to Foucault, Deleuze, and Said, Spivak insists that this is a matter of “the permission to narrate” (1988, p.25) which shares the racial prejudices against those who do not belong to colonialist elitism. Even if Siam (Thailand) had never been colonized by any Western countries, such racial prejudices have existed in forms of cultural heritages that have been divided into categories under the concept of the Self or solidarity of the Self. Spivak has posted the question whether or not the subaltern can speak, and she concluded that they definitely cannot

¹ The original text is

ถูกผู้มีตระกูลพุนชช

ช่างชั่วช้าสาหัสนาอคสุ

ให้อ้ายคำปล้ำเล่นไม่เอ็นดู

อ้ายชาติหมุชาติหมาหน้าอภัยร์ (Vajiravudh, 1925, p.10)

This English excerpt was originally translated by Tungtang (2011) from the Thai version.

do so under the standardization and regimentation of the socialized capital, sustained by the narratives of imperialism. In the case of Phraya Ratchawangsan in the dance drama, he also cannot speak as he has not been granted the permission to narrate by the sense of being Siamese. In the play, although he speaks in the Thai language and acts in the same way as other characters do, he is still perceived as an Indian-Malay who should be distrusted.

As a way to highlight the effects of the racial discourse in Thailand, King Rama VI bestows Phraya Ratchawangsan with a most honorable position for a commoner as “Phraya”. “Phraya” is an honored title that refers to the greatest among beings and in the Thai culture; it is only given to those who have sacrificed their lives for the country or respectful Thai deities. Phraya Ratchawangsan has received this title long before his mission and his marriage to Bua Pan. This implies that he has gained this title not by marriage, but perhaps by his abilities and good grace. Because of this reason, Phraya Ratchawangsan is self-confident and thus, dares to ask Bua Pan’s hand for marriage. Unfortunately, his marriage proposal is rejected by Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod due to his Indian heritage and his older age. This points to the fact that even if he is very much respected and admired by Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri the King who has bestowed him with this title, the effects of racial discourse that othered him remains unchanged. Phraya Ratchawangsan is trapped in the endless circle of racial prejudices that keep discriminating and oppressing him in the Thai setting as they also do so to Othello in Venice. As Arndt (2009) argues, Othello is imprisoned by *white* colonial fantasies and white society that denies him equality (p.221). This racial discourse has been sustained even until the post COVID-19 pandemic. As Chang and Corman (2021) argue, whiteness animalizes humans and nonhuman animals in the same way even in the era of COVID-19 pandemic. They are objectified in the Western narratives, being passive and stripped of their individuality. For instance, bats are demonized alongside Chinese people as the emblematic COVID-19 animals (Chang & Corman, 2021, p.65).

The contesting process against the racial prejudices in the play is stressed through the position of Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri. Among other characters in *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri is the only character that neither has any racist words in his speech nor shows any racial prejudices, unlike the Duke of Venice in Shakespeare’s *Othello* who also involves in racial practices, especially when he considers Othello that “if virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.290-291). By portraying Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri, The King of Sriwichai Kingdom, as uninvolved with the racial prejudices, he encourages Thai audience to reconsider the racial practices, because in Thai culture, the act of monarchs has been accepted as a better way of living and more likely to be followed. Apart from this, this depiction of Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri also seems to be a strategy to maintain the image of the Thai monarch, which has been believed to be absolutely virtuous. To do so, his counterpart in the play must be depicted as having good grace and not being contaminated by racial prejudices.

Conclusion

King Rama VI’s *Phraya Ratchawangsan* has managed to find its own way to express Shakespeare’s philosophy in Siamese culture and has become a sign of acceptance and unity with the English dramatic culture. *Phraya Ratchawangsan* is a significant Siamese dance drama that has influenced the development of Thai drama in today’s world and provided a space of literary imagination for King Rama VI to shed light on racial discourses that had often been ignored in Siamese society and even in the current Thai society although the racial issues have gained a lot of attention from those concerned. Even so, these racial discourses are not explicitly directed to “whiteness”, rather they sustain “whiteness” in forms of the collective sense of being “Thai” and what the Thai should be.

To contest these racial discourses and their legacies, like Shakespeare, King Rama VI destabilizes the patterns of considering the Siamese “self” and what is marginalized as “otherness”. Therefore,

by examining *Phraya Ratchawangsan* with insights of postcolonial studies, particularly the critical whiteness studies, I argue that the conception of class hierarchy in Siam, and even now in Thailand, is not the only problematic issue that needs to be (re)interrogated. The ignored racism in Thailand also has to be discussed, revealed and investigated, especially with respect to how it empowers the impact of class hierarchy. By doing so, the unity of Thailand is perhaps strengthened.

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