

Representations of Power Relations in Thai Preadolescent Realistic Fiction About Karen People

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Books that depict ethnic groups in Thailand can be used as critical tools to help young Thai adults better understand their compatriots from different cultures.

SINCE OUR WORLD has become more diverse and connected, I maintain that a critical engagement with the representation of diversity in literature written for young readers will help them respect themselves and others. This is because reading books that represent their cultural groups allows young people to be proud of their cultural heritage and helps to change their attitude toward others. It is evident that throughout human history, discrimination has been based on differences in race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, religion, sexuality, and so on. Thus, it is crucial that young people living in all parts of the world, including Thailand, understand cultural diversity.

However, the official discourse of multiculturalism within Thailand has not been on the official agenda (Hayami, 2006; Jory, 2000). As a result, the term “multiculturalism” is hardly heard and used in Thai society despite the fact that it exists in all countries that contain regions with different languages and cultural heritages as well as when countries with different languages and cultures share borders (Saracho & Spodek, 1983). Multiculturalism does exist in the Thai context, but Thailand is domestically and internationally perceived as a homogeneous country. This perception might come from the fact that the majority of Thai people have something

in common: They speak Thai or standard Thai¹ as their national language. They follow the traditional customs such as way of greeting, respect for hierarchy, and cultural etiquette, to name a few. Over 90% of the Thai population identify themselves as Theravada Buddhists. Sharing language, religion, and customs, however, does not insulate Thailand from racial and ethnic power dynamics because in reality, the population of Thailand comprises 62 ethnic groups.

Thai is the biggest ethnic group, and Thai ethnicity is subsumed by region. The ethnic Thais are officially divided into four different groups based on the four geographical regions—the North, the Northeast, the Central Plain, and the South. A number of ethnic minorities, including Chinese, Mon or Raman, Vietnamese, Khmer or Cambodian, South Asian, highlanders, sea nomads, and Malayu-descended Thais, are scattered across the country.

¹ Many scholars use “Standard Thai” with the uppercase “S” to refer to Central Thai or Bangkok Thai, which suggests raciolinguistic ideologies. In my work, I use the lowercase “s” in “standard Thai” to signify that this is one variety of Thai but not the only one.

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The perception of homogeneity is a product of nation-state building that aims to promote assimilation of Thainess. The year 1939 is often noted as the turning point in Thai history, when the Thai government decided to change the country's name from Siam (Sayam) to Thailand. This change resulted in having all the people supposedly call themselves Thai, whatever their regional or ethnic origin might be. It also suggests that the Central Thais, whose language constitutes the national language, have higher status than any other groups. The Central Thai language, therefore, is recognized as standard Thai, which ethnic minority groups are supposed to learn. What is referred to as standard Thai is based on the idealized speech of the formally educated elite of Bangkok.

Their domination in Thai society lets the Central Thais tend to consider other Thais and most ethnic minorities as both different and inferior. As a result, a number of non-Central Thais sometimes feel inferior to the Central Thais, who represent privilege and dominant power in the nation. Though the country does not have any serious ethnic conflicts as in many other countries, ethnic differences and regionalism are socially and politically significant in Thai society. Studying diversity in Thai children's and young adult literature might offer some possibilities for understanding these histories and power relations.

Metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors have often been used to explore and emphasize the importance of diversity in books written for young readers (Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009). I argue that books that depict the ethnic groups in Thailand can be used as an effective tool to help young Thai people better understand their compatriots from different cultures and, at the same time, can also allow the youngsters from specific ethnic groups to see themselves in the books they read. Therefore, how these young people and their communities are portrayed in the books written for their ages cannot be overlooked, especially from a global perspective.

The metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors call attention to who is represented, underrepresented, misrepresented, and invisible in books. However, readers have to attend to not just *what* but also *how* to read critically in order to better engage with the texts and make meaning of them. Reading critically demands that young readers pay attention to how languages and images tell stories. It also asks the readers to read deeply by considering genre, point of view or focalization, interactions among characters, story closure, and characters' use of language. Additionally, it invites readers to read beyond the texts to explore connections to the historical and sociopolitical context (Botelho, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Power is very important in children's and young adult literature. As children's and young adult literature is evidence of the power relations of race, class, and gender (Botelho & Rudman, 2009), simply reading books without considering power cannot empower young Thai readers to critically engage with the characters in the stories, or allow them to understand the organization of Thai society. Therefore, a theoretical framing that considers power dynamics is needed as a thinking tool to read and analyze Thai children's and young adult literature.

The exercise of power is the main focus in Foucault's (1995) discussion about power. He thought of power as something exercised, but not possessed. "What is power?" is the question at the center of everything. Moreover, he emphasized that the question of "Who exercises power?" needs to be resolved, but cannot be resolved until the other question, "How does it happen?," is considered at the same time. By this, he meant that even though we know who decides something, we still do not really know how and why the decision is being made, or in other words, how power is exercised. Foucault stated that power is everywhere, everyone exercises and demonstrates power, and power is exercised within discourses.

Ideologically, Thai people do not view race as a power relation in their country because they have never experienced large-scale racial conflict as in the United States and other countries. However, ethnic diversity plays an important role in Thai society and shapes the country as it is today. Ethnicity, as a social construct, classifies people based on their shared culture and is shaped by historical and sociopolitical factors. This construct has become a way to talk about race in Thai society without using the construct of race. Like race in the United States, ethnicity has been a way to sort and marginalize people within and across Thailand's national borders.

Books that represent ethnic groups in Thailand are still few in number. Moreover, the research studies devoted to these books have been very limited. In this study, I

analyze books written for Thai youths under the genre of realistic fiction to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the mountain people (the Karen) represented in selected Thai realistic fiction for preadolescents?
2. How are the power relations of ethnicity, class, and gender implicated in these representations?

Review of Literature

There are a few studies that examined images and portrayals of youth characters. The small number of research studies suggests that the depiction of young characters in books written for young readers is not a major focus for researchers in the field of children's and young adult literature in Thailand. Only two studies were found, and they were conducted about 20 years ago. Namkhang (1997) analyzed images of children in 27 award-winning books in the National Book Fair of 1987 to 1993. Haruthai (1999) investigated the portrayal of youth through the forms and contents of 146 Thai and translated books for youth published between 1996 and 1998. Books that depict ethnic minority communities have not been of any interest to researchers in the field of children's and young adult literature until the early 21st century. The study by Pattrakwan (2011) seems to be a single study that I found through my literature review. This study examined the images of marginalized people in 20 youth novels, published between 1978 and 2009, that have a marginalized youth as the main character.

Overall, the majority of research studies on children's and young adult literature in Thailand were analyzed based on literary approach, which focuses on the aesthetic aspects of the text such as plot, characters and characterizations, setting, theme, and language use. The analysis based on this approach pays attention to just text while ignoring the outside factor sources such as the author's background as well as historical and cultural context, to fully understand the text. It is evident that most researchers applied the New Criticism in their analyses. This critical approach was a formalist movement in literary theory that was pervasive in the United States from the late 1930s to the late 1950s. The English critics I. A. Richards and William Empson as well as the English poet T. S. Eliot made contributions to the development of the New Criticism. It uses "close reading" to understand how various elements in a literary text work together to shape its effects on the reader. Actually, the New Critics focused mainly on poetry. They viewed a poem as an object in itself that was cut off from both the author and the world outside. However, in later times, the New Criticism was extended to include analysis of prose fiction (Carter, 2006).

Since most of the researchers did not view children's literature as a cultural product, they considered the texts in isolation from their contexts. The findings of my litera-

ture review clearly reveal that a decontextualized literary study is not sufficient for understanding children's books as cultural products.

Methodology

This study applies critical multicultural analysis as an epistemology to examine how power is exercised in Thai youth literature about the Karen people. Drawing on Foucault's key questions about power, Botelho and Rudman (2009) argued that critical multicultural analysis focuses mainly on reading about power and provides readers with the tools to understand "how power is exercised, circulated, negotiated, and reconstructed" (p. 117) as the characters use language and participate socially, and how the social construction of the text represents these relations. Critical multicultural analysis therefore provides readers with a multilayered lens to develop multiple analyses of texts. It asks readers to not simply read books, but also to consider the context in which children's and young adult books are written and published.

As stated by Guinier and Torres (2002), there is a zero-sum power. When an individual or group has more power, there is less for everyone else. Critical multicultural analysis theorizes that domination, collusion, resistance, and agency are the four positions that form a continuum of how a person or institution exercises power. Domination is power over someone or something. Collusion is internalized oppression or domination. Resistance is the act of challenging oppressive practices. Agency is power with someone or something.

According to critical multicultural analysis, the power relations of race, class, and gender need to be explored in books for children in order to understand how power works and what role language and other social practices have in its circulation, interruption, and reconstruction. Through this analytical lens, critical multicultural analysis pays attention to the focalization of the story, social processes among the characters, language use, closure of the story, images, genre(s), and the historical and sociopolitical contexts of the story.

As discourse reflects and circulates dominant ideologies that produce and reproduce power relations, it is imperative to analyze the characters' language use and its role in the social processes among the characters. The focalization of the text is considered by examining the point of view from which the story is told since it offers particular reading subject positions connected to race, class, and gender discourses and ideologies. The closure of the story is determined by considering whether the ending is ideologically open or closed. The examination of historical and sociopolitical contexts is required because they have constructed these texts (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

As race, class, and gender are constructed, circulated, and reconstructed through discourse, they are inseparable from discourse and power (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Discourses, in Weedon's (1997) interpretation of Foucault, are "ways of constituting knowledge together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them" (p. 108). According to Weedon, Foucault also argued that not all discourses have social power and authority, and the most powerful discourses in our society are institutionally based. The power relations of race, class, and gender need to be considered so readers become aware of how they exercise power as well as how power is exercised on them.

Botelho and Rudman (2009) have considered the power relations of race, class, and gender in U.S. children's literature because these three dimensions matter in shaping American people's actual experiences. However, in my study, which tends to examine the organization of Thai society through Thai youth literature, I look at ethnicity, class, and gender to see how they work together. I draw on critical multicultural analysis to analyze the categories described above, except just the categories of genre(s) and images, to examine the power relations of ethnicity, class, and gender in Thai youth fiction that portrays mountain people in Thailand.

In this study, I include two youth books that have a Karen child as the main character. I purposefully selected a genre of realistic fiction, which I think is the best literary genre to bring young readers up close to think and feel about the lives of the main characters and their microinteractions in the contemporary era. It is in this genre that young readers can see their lived experiences represented in books (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). I summarize the significant information about the two books in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Thai Youth Books About Karen People

Title	First Publication	Main Characters	Point of View
<i>Muban Apchan</i> [<i>The Village Under the Moonlight</i>]	1980	Nu Pho and Mo Ngepho / male	Third-person omniscient
<i>Luk Pa</i> [<i>Children of the Wild</i>]	1982	Yachi / male	Third-person omniscient

Note. The English titles of these two books are the author's translation.

Production Practices of Books About Karen People

Muban Apchan (*The Village Under the Moonlight*; 2014) is a story of two Karen boys, Nu Pho and Mo Ngepho, and their

community in the mountains of Northern Thailand (Figure 1). It was written by Mala Khamchan from his experience as a teacher in a village in Chiang Mai Province, where the villagers are from Karen and Hmong communities. However, he taught there for only one year before moving back to town due to his health issues. The book won the award for preadolescent fiction from the National Books Development Commission in the same year it was first published.

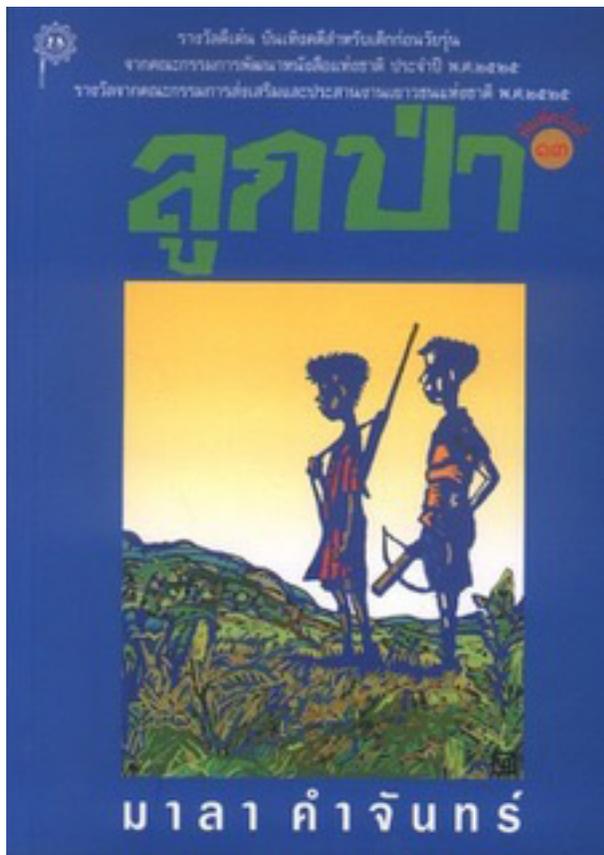
FIGURE 1
Muban Apchan by Mala Khamchan



Luk Pa (*Children of the Wild*; 2008) is another book by Mala Khamchan (Figure 2). It is a story about a Karen and a Northern Thai boy who are connected to one another despite their different ethnicities and socioeconomical statuses. Mala stated that this book was inspired by a government official in the Ministry of Education who persuaded him to write a story to promote ethics to Thai youths in the form of fiction. The book won the award for preadolescent fiction from the National Books Development Commission as well as the National Youth Bureau in the same year as its first publication.²

² This book award no longer exists after the National Youth Bureau was integrated with the Department of Children and Youth, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in 2015.

FIGURE 2
Luk Pa by Mala Khamchan



Historical and Sociopolitical Context of Karen People in Thailand

The Karen, most of whom live in Myanmar, have migrated to Thailand over the past 200 years because of political conflicts with the Burmese government. They have settled mostly on the Thailand–Myanmar border from Mae Hong Son Province in the north down to Ratchaburi and Petchaburi Provinces west of Bangkok. The Karen is the largest group of mountain people in Thailand, which makes up half of the total mountain people population of the country. Like most mountain people, the Karen do not speak standard Thai. They have their own language, different social and political organizations, unique customs, and independent religious beliefs. The Karen people are widely known as *Kariang* to Thai people no matter which specific group they belong to. They are also referred to as *Yang* by the Northerners and other groups of people (Kislenko, 2004; Tribal Research Institute, 1989).

Findings

Both of the books in the study portray the Karen people in similar ways. They live in rural areas that distance them from town centers. They also live very far away from the center of power, Bangkok in particular. This distance

seems to be a metaphor for their socioeconomic standing in Thailand since it limits their access to the fundamental rights, resources, and services provided to state citizens.

Moreover, most of them suffer economic hardship that impacts many aspects of their lives. The have-nots encounter serious problems like starvation and lack of opportunity to access education and medical care. Yachi has to drop out of school because his family cannot support him. Mo Ngepho does not even have the opportunity to go to school due to the responsibilities he must bear for his siblings after his mother's death. What happens to young characters like Nu Pho, Mo Ngepho, and Yachi clearly demonstrates that class matters as it further marginalizes underrepresented communities.

FOCALIZATION AND STORY CLOSURE

Muban Apchan and *Luk Pa* are told by omniscient narrators. This provides readers with a more powerful position to view the story since multiple subject positions allow them to learn more from multiple characters and do not limit them to identifying themselves with only a single character in the story.

Muban Apchan closes with the parting scene of Nu Pho and Mo Ngepho. The first one has to leave his home in the mountain for another place far away, which ideologically has a better life waiting for him. The latter has to stay in the same place to take on the role of a father and a mother for his five little siblings, while he himself still does not know what his future will be. The ending is fixed and suggests that only the haves would be provided with a better opportunity in their lives, while the have-nots never have the same options. The second book ends with Yachi's teacher's and father's words of support. Both of them encourage the young boy not to be regretful for missing the opportunity to further his studies, and express the hope that he will develop a new goal for his life and accomplish it finally. The ending is open for readers to question about Yachi's life. The fixed closure therefore provides readers with a sense of completeness and does not challenge them to construct alternative endings, while the open ending invites readers to question the significance of the story. These literary moves for closing a story have implications for how readers critically engage with power in the texts.

EXERCISE OF POWER

How the power relations of ethnicity, class, and gender are implicated in the representations of Karen people in the two Thai youth fiction books in this study can be considered by examining how each character exercises power along the continuum from domination and collusion to resistance and agency. The following thematic findings have emerged from my analysis (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Exercise of Power Relations in Representations of Karen People

Thematic Findings	Description
Central Thai domination	The Thai government exercises dominant power by means of the educational system and national curriculum.
Zero-sum power	When people in the ethnoregional group become the dominant group, they also practice dominant power over others.
A matter of class	People in the nondominant group who have lower socioeconomic status than others are always more marginalized.
Male dominance and patriarchy	Most fathers practice dominant power over their wives and children.
Maintenance of power structures	The characters exercise collusive power without realizing the oppressive practices. Or they might be aware of it, but still practice it to take advantage and to survive.
Challenge to oppressive practices	The resistive power is exercised by a few characters.
Scarcity of agency	The power of agency is not practiced by any characters.

CENTRAL THAI DOMINATION. As stated by Foucault, not all discourses have social power and authority, and the institution is the most powerful discourse in our society (Weedon, 1997). The institution, or the Thai government, which centralizes its authority in Bangkok, exercises dominant power in most books by means of the educational system and national curriculum that require all children to go to school, where standard Thai is used as the language of instruction. The system, on the one hand, might provide young marginalized people with an equal opportunity to have access to education as dominant youths; on the other hand, it is used by the Thai government as a tool for nation building and the promotion of dominant cultural values.

ZERO-SUM POWER. The analysis reveals that a nondominant group in one context can switch and become a dominant group in another context. The Northerners in selected books are marginalized and considered nondominant groups in the national context, but they turn out to be a dominant group in the regional context. What has happened is that when they become a dominant group, they also practice dominant power over others.

One of the most obvious ways that most dominant groups exercise power over nondominant groups is through

the use of derogatory exonyms to call those who do not belong to their cultural group. The Northerners refer to the Karen as *Yang*, a name that suggests that they are dirty savages, while the Karen people actually call themselves *Pga-gan-Yaw*.

Zero-sum power not only exists between different groups like dominant and marginalized groups, but it also occurs within intragroups when members from the same group discriminate against others, particularly those with lower socioeconomic status than themselves. This internalized oppression occurs within the Karen community in *Luk Pa* when Su Tho rejects his own cultural identity as a Karen and tries to bully Yachi, who is also a Karen.

A MATTER OF CLASS. Ethnic groups might be marginalized due to their ethnicity, but those who have higher socioeconomic status than the others within their groups are less marginalized. What happens to Yachi and to Su Tho in *Luk Pa*, and the situation of the two Karen friends, Nu Pho and Mo Ngepho, in *Muban Apchan* demonstrates very well why class matters. Young characters like Yachi and Mo Ngepho have less access to formal education because of their economic hardship.

MALE DOMINANCE AND PATRIARCHY. Male characters outnumber female characters in both books. Moreover, the female characters have very small roles. In *Muban Apchan*, Nu Pho's father practices coercive power over his wife by leading the family and reducing his wife's role to that of just a follower. Both Nu Pho's and Yachi's fathers exercise the power of domination over their children by controlling their lives, specifically their education.

MAINTENANCE OF POWER STRUCTURES. Most characters exercise collusive power for several different reasons. Both fathers in *Muban Apchan* and *Luk Pa* practice collusive power with the Thai government's educational system because they believe that education can give their children a better future. Nu Pho's and Yachi's fathers might collude without noticing the Thai government's oppressive practices; they just think of education as advantageous and life changing. Young characters like Yachi and Nu Pho exercise the power of collusion to support their fathers by going to school as their fathers want them to do.

When collusion is a way of survival, the Karen people have internalized these power dynamics by letting the dominant group take advantage of them. Nu Pho's father has to let the traders from the town exploit him by lowering the prices of his products. Even though the Karen people know that they are being taken advantage of, they have no better options due to the distance of their location to the

town. As a result, most of the Karen have to sell their crops for low prices and do not earn enough to survive.

CHALLENGE TO OPPRESSIVE PRACTICES. In *Muban Apchan*, the young character Mo Ngepho exercises resistive power by reacting to the old generation's concerns related to the extinction of the Karen. The male characters from the dominant culture, Bangkok in particular, also exercise resistive power; the monk and the doctor question Thai bureaucracy.

SCARCITY OF AGENCY. None of the characters in both books exercise the power of agency. The rarity of this position of power might be because a person or a group of people who exercise it need to take action to end oppressive practices. It thus is more complicated than practicing resistive power, which involves questioning oppressive practices. However, it is obvious that exercising resistance alone without taking action cannot bring any changes to society. Thus, the power of agency is needed to make a better world.

Conclusions and Implications

Reading Thai preadolescent realistic fiction about ethnic groups with a critical multicultural lens allowed me to unmask the embedded power relations in stories that were written for young Thai readers. Simply reading these Thai texts as realistic fiction might let young Thai readers learn more about the lived experiences of the ethnic groups in their own country and allow Thai Americans to understand the complexity of ethnicity issues. As the genre shapes readers' expectations and responses to the text (Botelho & Rudman, 2009), however, the genre of realistic fiction might limit the meaning that readers make with those texts because they might assume that everything written in the texts is plausible. Thus, the realistic portrayal of any cultural group alone is not enough to understand children's literature as a historical and cultural product. It is also important to critically analyze the representations of power relations in children's and young adult literature. The critical analysis of the representations of power relations in those books provides insight into how the dominant ideologies about ethnicity, class, and gender are embedded in Thai society. The critical analysis also creates a space to consider ways of resisting hegemonic relations in those stories as well as in Thai society.

The findings that revealed that none of the characters in the two selected books exercise the power of agency

are somewhat relevant to Shannon's (1986) study, which examined the social perspective of 30 random samples of young Americans' favorite books. The results in this study show that most of the sample books present an individualist social perspective that focuses mainly on the characters' concern with self-development, personal emotion, self-reliance, privacy, and competition. None of the books portray a collective perspective that emphasizes the characters' interest in the issues of social development, community services, cooperation toward shared goals, community, and mutual prosperity, and only a single book presents the main character with a balanced social perspective who is an individualist with a collectivist conscience. As stated by Kohl (1995), radical stories, which involve collective action that is centered on an issue of social or economic justice, are needed to empower young readers from across the globe to make a better world. The findings of my study as well as Shannon's suggest there is a small number of books published in Thailand and in the United States that have young characters taking action for social change. This is beginning to change. It is imperative that authors, educators, publishers, parents, and young people themselves do not overlook the crucial roles of radical storylines and help increase the quantity of good books that encourage children and young adult readers to think about solidarity, cooperation, group struggle, and other collective actions.

Young people should consider what to read, however; books alone do not necessarily awaken them. How they read those books is even more important. Both the *what* and the *how* thus need to be considered for the study of children's and young adult literature (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Young readers should be encouraged to read books critically in order to help them understand the power relations in storylines and the microinteractions between characters. This understanding is important because it can empower young readers to critically engage for social justice. Close reading as the main concept of New Criticism in many ways reproduces power relations because it ignores the historical and sociopolitical aspects of production and reception, which need to be considered to create a space for social re/construction. ■

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