

The Representations of Women in Thai Soap Operas: The Contestation of Gender Ideologies and Cultural Identities*

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This study examines representations of women in three prime-time TV soap operas in Thailand: Tom (Mud), Lhong Tang Rak (Lost in Love), and Kon Luang Rak (Guileful Love) with a focus on the relationship between the construction of women representation in the television drama series and Thai social ideologies in the context of Thai feminist/women's movement. By using textual analysis, in-depth interviews with soap opera producers, and fieldwork observation, results of the study suggest that representations of women in Thai soap operas and the ideologies surrounding their productions provide rich sites for the analysis of contestations and struggle of dominant gender ideologies and cultural identities in contemporary Thailand.

1. Introduction

Due to its popularity among female viewers, television soap operas have been devalued as a feminine genre (Allen, 1995). Consequently, they are seen as trash (Brown 1994, p.18). Thai TV soap operas are caught in similar fate; they are defined and condemned by Thai critics as “*lakhon nam nao*.” The word “*nam nao*” means in English “*rotten water*.” Fleet (1998, p.228) remarks ‘the term evokes the look and smell of stagnant water and rotting garbage, conjuring up images of modern Thailand’s polluted canals and waterways.’ According to de Lauretis (1987, p.18), however, such

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“lakhon nam nao” can be conceptualized as “technologies of gender” that carry “power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and “implant” representation of gender.’ TV soap operas cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to our understanding of public sphere, in fact, they are crucial to the ongoing processes of national and cultural self-definition (Goldsmiths Media Group 2000, p.45). Television soap opera as a technology of gender has become a major concern of feminism over the last 20 years with a substantial number of studies through a wide range of methodologies (Buckman 1984; Ang 1990; Geraghty 1991; d’Acci 1992; Nochimson 1993; Ang & Hermes 1996; Brunsdon 1997). In Thailand, textual and content analyses on portrayals and depictions of women and gender in soap opera are widely conducted among feminist and media researchers (Prakorbphol 1992; Daengchamroon 1995; Watcharadecha 1996). These studies offered similar findings that women are portrayed negatively as subordinated subjects and that they are dependent on men and limited within domestic sphere. The textual analysis on images of women found in previous researches are seen as problematic in terms of being framed under liberal transmission model and media impact theory (Kaewthep 1998, p.22). Within these mainstream communication theories, text carries only a unitary meaning; while men and women are seen as passive receiver of the media message.

Rakow (1996), as cited by Kaewthep (2001, p.295), argues that there is no use to request the text to reflect realities or to represent women and men’s images on the equal basis because such a request is contrary to the fundamental duty of mass media, that is, functioning as ideological apparatus of the society. She (2001, p.42) later affirms this in her article that ‘women not only are not “accurately” reflected in media content, they *cannot* be.’ For Rakow, the focus should be placed upon an investigation of “gender ideologies” in media to see what they are, how the mechanism works, and how the process is constructed, then fight and contest in the ideological level. Kuhn (1993, 484 - 485)

raises many challenging questions in her work; one of them is: “why not try instead to create alternatives to culturally dominant representations?” The answer she gives, which becomes a starting point of my present study, is “...analysing and deconstructing dominant representations may be regarded as a strategic practice. It produces understanding, and understanding is necessary for action.”

The present study examines the representations of women in three prime-time TV soap operas: *Tom (Mud)*, *Lhong Tang Rak (Lost in Love)*, and *Kon Luang Rak (Guileful Love)*. By employing politics of representation as theoretical framework and using textual analysis, in-depth interviews with soap opera producers, and fieldwork observation, thematic and thick descriptions of the analyses on the three soap operas are presented. In line with other recent feminist media and cultural studies work, this present study suggests that women and gender representations in Thai soap operas and the ideologies surrounding their production provide rich sites for the analysis of conflicts and contestations of dominant gender ideologies and cultural identities in contemporary Thailand.

2. Theoretical Framework: Politics of Representations

The politics of representation has become a major interest in the study of women’s representation in media. Representation is a site of contestation and negotiation in meaning-making process about gender ideology, occurring in public cultural discourses. Influenced by post-structural theorists, the meaning of ‘culture’ in this research has been expanded to mean more than ‘ways of life’ and to refers to ‘shared values’ of people. Stuart Hall (1997, p.3) points out that this ‘cultural turn’ provides new meaning of culture in terms of meaning production and circulation. Hall (1997, p.15) notes: ‘representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other

people.’ Culture, then, becomes a determining, productive field through which social realities are constructed, experienced and interpreted (Turner 1996, p.14).

In addition, representation is also involved a process of social construction and identity formation (Pollock 1996; Woodward 1997) and stereotyping (Hall 1997). Regarding the process of identity construction, Woodward (1997, p. 14) remarks that representations produce meanings through which we can make sense of our experience and of who we are. They establish individual and collective identities and provide possible answers to the question: who am I?; what could I be?; who do I want to be? Regarding stereotyping, Hall (1997, p.257 - 258) describes that stereotyping ‘reduce[s] people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature. This involves three important practices. First, stereotyping fixes “differences.” Second, it deploys a strategy of “spitting,” by separating the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal hence excluding or expelling everything that does not fit, everything that is different. Third, stereotyping tends to occur where there are unequal relations of power (Hall 1997 cited in First 2002, p.175). It is important to note that representation does not stand alone. It is interwoven within what Paul du Gay (1997) proposes as “the circuit of culture.” The circuit of culture contains five following fundamental elements: production, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation. Within this circuit of culture that representation is produced into the public sphere.

According to representation theory, the contemporary media do not represent reality, they constitute it (Harms & Dickens 1996 cited in Fenton 2000, p.728). Grossberg et al (1998, p.179) further that media representations involve making claims on and about reality. This makes them become powerful ideological institution and, therefore, ‘potentially a source of great conflict and struggle’ (Grossberg et al 1998, p.182).

3. Methods

To investigate the representations of women in TV soap operas, qualitative and interpretive textual analysis is employed as a central method. In-depth interview with soap opera producers and non-participant observation in the soap opera production sites were also incorporated in order to get a more profound and insightful analysis. Purposeful or purposive sampling (Patton, 1990; Rubin and Babbie, 1997) was applied in order to select the TV soap operas. In the sampling process, the researcher aimed to locate two samples that represents the extremity of Thai soap opera socio-economic polars, namely, those soap opera that are produced by Thai elitist culture as a teaching apparatus for the mass and those soap opera that claimed to produced by the industry to suit the “taste” of the mass. The third sample is something in between, a soap opera that is tailored for Thai middle-class cultural milieu.

According to this present study, selection criteria were: backgrounds and characteristics of the producers and the narrative or central theme of soap operas that are related to women and gender issues. Consequently, *Tom (Mud)* produced by *No Problem Company* for Channel 3, *Lhong Tang Rak (Lost in Love)* produced by *Dara Video Company* for Channel 7, and *Kon Luang Rak (Guileful Love)* produced by *Lenitus* for Channel 7 were selected.

It is important to note that due to the idiosyncrasy of *Tom* production constituency in terms of it being authored, directed and acted by the same individual, only *Tom* was analyzed through doubled lens of textual analysis and auteuristic analysis, which is ‘the analysis of all forms of signification... within the actual means and conditions of production’ (Williams 1981 cited in Kellner 1995). Bearing in mind the post-structuralist critique of intentionality upon individual orientation, and elite-cultural notions of autism, autistic lens help reveal the complexities of construction of representations of women in *Tom*. In addition, as Kuhn (1992, p.6) asserts: ‘meanings do not reside in images,

then: they are circulated between representation, spectator and social formation.’ Thus, besides the analysis of the televisual representations, the socio-cultural phenomenon of consumption of these soap operas were also scrutinized. Consequently, these particular cases provided more interesting and comprehensive analyses than the others.

4. Results: Contested Representations of Women, Constructed in Thai Soap Operas

4.1 *Tom*: An Unresolved Tension between Feminism and Buddhism

It is found that the mother character in *Tom*, Yai, depicts an unconventional representation of Thai motherhood. She represents “imperfect motherhood,” revealing an unresolved tension between two sets of ideologies: feminism and Buddhism. While it seems that counter-hegemonic representation of imperfect motherhood is dictated by feminism, which criticizes a family institution as the most repressive and oppressive institution and foundation of gender inequality, hegemonic representation of mother/nurturer dictated by Theravada Buddhism has highlighted functionalist and oppressive explanation of self-sacrifice motherhood and wifehood. Analysis of representations of women in *Tom* are investigated through a personal genealogy of the auteur and socio-cultural production context.

and contributions as a change agent within the Thai entertainment industry. Her past works on films and television productions are known for portraying strong female characters. They are well recognized for artistically and clearly challenge the oppressive patriarchal gender ideology in Thai society, that congruent with the standpoint of women's and feminist movements in Thailand.

However, her works in recent years have somehow shifted in that she has been injecting Buddhist themes and symbols into her productions and performances in a way that Ratanin (2003, p. 29) sees as 'an attempt in blending western and Thai arts and the new interpretations that are appropriate for new Thai generation.' This has made Mejudhon's identity and reputation as a respectable female director even more interesting and complex. While her mother is a famous figure in the first wave feminist movement in Thailand, she does not see feminism as an adequate framework to explain her works and is in fact critical of Western feminist discourses and their purported relevance to Thai context. Her denial of feminism and her embrace of Buddhism reveal a contradictory location given the competing claims and practices of these two ideologies. Mejudhon seems to be able to reconcile the two ideologies within her own identity. Despite the ongoing efforts of women and feminist theologians to find places for women in religious teachings, structures and practices, feminists still question and challenge Buddhism in term of its practices that marginalize women. Kirsch (1977, p. 249 - 250) remarks that Theravada Buddhist nuns in Thailand 'are not greatly respected, reflecting the relatively disadvantaged position of women in Buddhism.'

Since *Tom* production crews are mostly women, and its airing was timed for National Mother's Day special celebration in 2004, *Tom* can be hailed as a soap opera that is "produced/constructed by women, about women, and for women." Such a unique acclamation as a woman-centered, women-run production rarely occurs in the Thai soap opera industry that is largely

dominated and controlled by men. It seems that this unique context is a positive and hopeful sign for feminist and women's movement.

Male Chauvinism, Mother's Day and Thai Soap Opera

The fact that *Tom* is a television drama aired as part of Channel 3's celebration of National Mother's Day cannot be overlooked. As Kellner (1995, p.105) writes: 'the completing array of social discourses at a given moment is thus articulated in media culture which draw upon and in turn circulate competing social discourses of the moment, thus intervening within social struggles and conflicts.' It can be said that thematic interpretation of Thai national holidays and important days are sites where gender ideologies are circulated, reproduced, reinforced, reaffirmed, and contested under the Thai government's plan and management. For example, Valentine's Day provides the site where discourses about protecting one's "virginity" and female chastity are predominantly reproduced. Various forms of mass media, especially newspapers, usually report big campaign of so-called "Virginity Day" as part of Valentine events. But come March 8th, and November 25th, which are "International Women's Day" and "International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women" respectively, media coverage generally includes reports, seminars, and other activities by institutional feminist and women's groups that concern women, gender, and sexuality discourses. During the National Mother's Day on August 12th, coinciding with the Queen's birthday, Thai social institutions and public spheres produce a large number of paraphernalia and discourses of "Love Mom," "For Mom," "Mom is the Best," and "Gratitude for Mother's Breast Milk" supported by government policies, programs, and resources. Activities organized on this occasion, such as essay or motto contests, and rituals such as "going down on one's knee and pay respect" date back to the government of the Prime Minister General *Piboonsongkram* in 1950 (Tanakit 2000, p. 289). In fact, the National Mother's Day celebration was created and constructed by the Council of

Cultural Affairs in order to use the National Cultural Policies as ideological apparatus in nation-building mechanism according to *Piboonsongkram's* nationalistic ideology. (Witayasakpan, p. 2001). One can safely conclude that Thai Mother's Day tradition sprung from a male chauvinistic culture rooted in nationalism fervor that took hold of Thailand during the World War II. The well-received and popular nationalism campaign still leaves many of its remnants in today's Thailand cultural practices. It can also be said that mother-daughter relationship has been successfully homogenized. Such homogenization, however, also comes with many points of concerns.

For example, I myself used to struggle hard to establish my identity in the face of government-sponsored discourses associated with "National Mother's Day." During my childhood, my parents were working hard to provide stability to our family but I did not understand much. As a primary student, I was back then anxious whenever the National Mother's Day was coming. "Can my mom come this year? If not, before whom I should I lay prostrate in respect on this national holiday?" After years of anxiety, my close friends usually whispered to my ears that, "You can borrow my mom," whenever the "National Mother's Day ritual" started. Those anxious moments often made me question my mother's actions and expression. I had become increasingly angry only at my mother. My relationship with my mother during my teens was thus full of blames and reproaches thrown at my mother. I often questioned why she was not doing more for her "mother's duty." A part of my identity was thus based on a rocky relationship with "mother." A close observation on my own experiences shows that discourses associated with "National Mother's Day" have generated impacts on many dimensions. Firstly, they created "expectations." A mother was expected both by her children and the society to fulfill her role as a mother because "motherly love, motherly care and mother's breast milk" are eulogized. There were pictures featuring a baby in a mother's arms

all around. Given such, if any mother or any group of mothers failed to act as the discourses eulogize, they may be judged or labeled as “bad mothers.” This shows how socialization creates “motherhood representation” that does not address the complexity of gender dimensions and cross-sectional diversity among women in terms of social class and ethnicity. Secondly, children become preoccupied with the ample social discourses during “National Mother’s Day” so much that they expected their mothers to do exactly what the discourses recommend or portray. The children failed to think about “real life.” They only thought about “reality” created specifically on the National Mother’s Day and were thus “dissatisfied” with what happened in their everyday life (Messaris 1987, p.100 cited in Messaris 2001, p.187).

The Producer’s Conflicting Self: Feminism’s Self-affirmation versus Buddhism’s Selflessness

Contextualized within “National Mother’s Day TV soap opera” and Mejudhon’s personal genealogy in terms of shifting from being an avant-garde to a female producer who diligently studies Buddhism and applied its interpretation to her works. As *Tom* screenwriter/director, Mejudhon began her TV soap opera by challenging the norms of Mother’s Day TV soap opera that usually portrays ideal Mother as flawless and devoted mothers who are ready to self-sacrifice for their children. Despite its unusual beginning, the developments of *Tom* narrative still follow Thai society’s motherhood ideology and Buddhist’s “Karmic Wheel.” In the beginning of the story, a mother abandoned her child. Khun Yai, a main character in *Tom*, left her middle child to her ex-husband when they divorced. She only took with her two other children. This part of the story appeared to be based on feminism, which questions Thai social values that expect good women to avoid divorces almost at all cost. On many occasions, Thai society describes divorce rate as “an indicator” of social problems. This has in turn kept many abused women from seeking divorces despite

the fact that they suffer from domestic violence, emotionally and/or physically. They have tried to prevent themselves from aggravating social problems. Out of concern that their children may have broken-family problems, so many women endure being exploited by their husbands. However, *Tom* has portrayed the representation of a single mother.

By portraying a “suffering mother,” “bad mother,” and “single mother” in “National Mother’s Day TV soap opera,” *Tom* challenges dominant motherhood ideology on two fronts. First, *Tom* challenges motherhood ideology (what are expected of an ideal mother) that Thai society has long cherished. Second, *Tom* challenges the norm about the conventional portrayal of mothers in TV soap opera.

Interviewer: From what I see, your TV soap opera for the National Mother’s Day is much different from others because the story starts with a mother abandoning her son. Normally, we will see mothers who are so good from the start till the end. Have you intended to produce your TV soap opera this way?

Screenwriter/Director: Yes. I have intended to do so because after watching TV soap operas on the occasion of National Mother’s Day or National Father’s Day, sorry if I am not being polite, I am sick. I am a daughter and I am a mother. When I look at real life, I think mothers, both mothers and fathers, should take the flak for what the wrong things their children have done. The parents are guiltier than their children because the parents are the ones who have taught their children to be what they are. Even though the parents do not teach their children to do the wrong things, they are still to blame because that still means they fail to teach their children the right things. If parents teach too much or fail to teach their children properly, they have to share the responsibility. It’s time that we said clearly that mothers are wrong and thus they should make amends. This is because if they make amends, their children will become good. If the mothers do not change for the better, their children will be as bad as ever. (Screenwriter/Director of *Tom* TV soap opera, interview, 3 February 2005).

Here, Mejudhon has confirmed her intention to challenge the mainstream construction of motherhood. In the middle of the story, the character who earlier challenged the image of the dominant perfect motherhood has transformed herself to fit the stereotype of good/sacrificial mothers. She has come to possess the qualities of a good mother “who will sacrifice” everything for her own child. However, Mejudhon denies the concept of “self-sacrifice. She describes:

“It’s not a sacrifice. It’s just that she got what she sowed. The Karmic consequences, good or bad, must return to her. It comes from her own actions. Had she raised her child properly in the very beginning, she would have not suffered like this. The fact that she had to commute between her home and drug-rehabilitation centers and that she has to waste a lot of money are the results of her own actions. It’s that she failed to raise her child properly. It’s the result of her past action. Do not view this as a sacrifice. Do not see this character as a heroine. No, it’s not like that.”

The application of Buddhist’s “Karmic Wheel” to this soap opera significantly affects the representation of women as mothers on screen. From the feminists’ view, the explanation of what happens in life based on “Karmic consequences” is a mechanism or tool that will force human beings to accept what happen to them without questioning. This is a tool for silencing, something that feminist/women’s movements work against. They have worked on an un-silencing project (Benjamin, 2003, p. 2) to liberate women from the duty to keep silent in the face of injustices. The ideological conflict between feminism and Buddhism lies in the “self” concept. While feminism focuses and values “self-affirmation,” Buddhism advocates and calls for “selflessness” or “selfless sacrifice” (Keller 1993, p. 214; Keefe 1997, p. 71).

A solid proof of Buddhist theme in *Tom* is Mejudhon’s explanation that *Tom* is in fact adapted from the stage drama “*Paticca-Samuppada*” (a Buddhism term that means conditioned genesis or dependent origination). *Tom* was staged as an “experiment”

to apply Buddhist theme to TV soap opera (an observation note of *Tom*, 3 February 2005). The application of Buddhist theme thus defines a part of Mejudhon's identity. An analysis of a picture used to promote Tom TV soap opera as presented earlier reveals the use of metonymy. In the picture, there are lotuses that are closely associated with Buddhism. According to Buddhism, human beings are categorized hierarchically to four kinds of lotuses. A closer look at the picture shows that Mejudhon's autograph is put above a lotus that is higher than others, while the other lotus carries a framed photo of acting crews. Such a picture confirms that *Tom* is a part of Buddhism. This interpretation is in line with an interview given by Mejudhon to a TV Magazine (special issue for *Tom* 2004, p. 13).

In this story, *Tom* refers to mud underwater. Lotuses come from the mud. As they grow up, some lotuses rise above water level and experience sunlight. This means the mud gives lives. So, the mud can be compared to a mother in that it is not beautiful and it is unseen. However, if our hands reach underwater to touch the mud, we will find that the mud is cool and full of nutrients. It offers food for our heart, our brain and our lives. Here, I would like to remind all mothers of their duty, the duty that is often overlooked and is viewed as not important. Some people may think that we can assign others to do what a mother is expected to do. However, if nannies or any other person can do such duty and replace mothers, mothers become meaningless....

An analogy signifying mother as *Tom* or mud underwater reflects vividly a Buddhist notion of woman as mother/nurturer (Keyes 1984, p. 227 - 230). For Hobson (2003, p. 94), the representation of mother as mother/nurturer 'is considered a positive image and is often in contrast to the weakness of the children....' However, I would argue that achieving a successful mother/nurturer in reality is totally different from what is represented in the television drama. In the real world, to become a successful mother involves a series of painful moments as compared to the

ones in the symbolic world. In addition, the television drama's consideration is stemmed from relativism in which mother's qualification is inextricably tied to the masculine world. In conclusion, when polar ideologies of Buddhism and feminism are put together, the representation of women in *Tom* is diversified and contradictory as shown in Table 1:

Representation of Motherhood (via Khun Yai character)	
A mother who made mistakes in the past A single mother in modern society. She has a clear identity outside her home. She is economically independent and competent.	Still, her life is framed in patriarchal and Buddhist motherhood. Finally, she has done everything to correct her past mistakes.
Representation of Maids	
A group of uneducated maids are represented in <i>Tom</i> as thoughtful and having good social analysis.	However, <i>Tom</i> portrays some maids as bad influences on other people because of their drinking habit and the use of rude words.
Representation of Female Secretaries	
<i>Apinya</i> – she symbolizes a good, smart and intellectual, self-aware and helpful woman.	<i>Joy</i> – she portrays a clumsy, unintelligent, and often-scolded secretary.
Representation of Upper-Class Women	
<i>Bam</i> – She is a socialite who loves dressing, jazzing around, and comfort.	<i>Jenny</i> – She portrays an uneducated wife who loves dressing and is always described by her husband as stupid. However, after receiving advice from the mother character, she learns about patience, the need to wait and performing a good wife's duty. Finally, she has enjoyed happy family life.

It can be summarized that the representation of women in *Tom* are in line with the reality in a society that is full of human complexity and diversities. In the society, women can choose to identify themselves with various identities. However, polarization exists to clearly define the differences of “should/should not,” “good mother/bad mother,” and “good woman/bad woman.” The use of dualism in *Tom* is similar to Buddhist explanation about “goodness/badness” and “above-water lotuses/submerged lotuses.” In an interview, Mejudhon as the screenwriter/director of *Tom* talked about the use of comparison technique to show how one thing is better than the other thing. Mejudhon elaborates:

“Oh yes, in fact *Bam* has served many purposes in the story...um...um...Anyway, to ensure that the story has its focus, we use *Bam* in a comparison. With her, we can show the differences between two women in upper-class families. One of them or *Bam* is dressing herself so fashionably but she is self-aware. The other woman, however, is thoughtless. So, we can see the clear differences between these two characters. In other TV drama series, the thoughtless person is often a villain who stages bad situation. However, thoughtless persons usually put themselves in troubles and I think to highlight this fact is enough.” (laugh) (Screenwriter/Director of *Tom* TV soap opera, interview, 3 February 2005).

This technique can be referred to the work of Stuart Hall’s stereotyping as reviewed in the theoretical framework. It reinforces and highlights the dominant preferred images of women. The application of Buddhist theme in *Tom* is useful to the representation of women in that many female characters have “wisdom,” which deconstructs the discourse of Enlightenment dualisms. According to the Enlightenment epistemology, women are associated with emotions, feelings, and the lack of rational thinking, while men are associated with rationality (Hekman 1990, 30 - 31). In *Tom*, characters possessing “good qualities” also have “wisdom.” For example, *Apinya* has grown up amid bad environment. Her mother,

a prostitute, has contracted Aids. However, *Apinya* herself is a good and intelligent woman. She is thoughtful and always self-aware. Aside, some maid characters in *Tom* can properly analyze the contemporary and capitalistic Thai society even though they are uneducated. The overall representations of women in *Tom* thus deconstruct the long established essentialist explanation of womanhood and social classes.

It is worth noting that the predominant manifestation of dualisms in Mejudhon's works should be a product of her dichotomous identities between the East and the West as Diamond (2006, p. 136) makes a critical observation on Mejudhon that 'although [she was] educated in the West and trained in both Western theatre and Southeast Asian dance forms, [her ideology] juxtaposes a rather simplistic duality; the evil of so-called "Western" materialism is contrasted with the spiritual purity of Thai Buddhist culture.' Finally, Diamond (2006, p. 137) makes an interesting conclusion on Mejudhon's female characters that 'when they attempt to conform to Western images of femininity and Western notions of feminist empowerment; they are entrapped in a new duality that does not remove the traditional one but is superimposed on top of it.'

Textual Consumption: Female Audiences' Empowerment and Buddhist State Responses

Following the broadcast of *Tom*, there are two main social phenomena in terms of *Tom* televisual text consumption. Firstly, the representation of imperfect mother who did wrong in the past, generated through a marketing gimmick of Channel 3 TV station. This is a movement for mothers with past mistakes or records of abuses against their children to come forward. The gimmick featured the "Completing a Life at Its Origin" project in which former bad mothers were encouraged to join an essay contest and to write from their past experiences. The project had stirred up controversies. One of the clear examples was the At Ten TV program's decision to broadcast an interview with an alcoholic

mother who admitted that she once had her daughter do everything including selling sexual service to find money for her drinking habit. Such movement showed how individuals responded to *Tom* and employed such imperfect representation as a site of negotiating, redefining and empowering self-identity. At one time in history, Thai mainstream media, as an ideological apparatus, often condemn and stigmatize so-called bad mother who does not conform to dominant discourse of mother/nurturer. A linguistic repertoire including “mae jai yak” or a witch-hearted mother and “mae jai hoht” or cruel mother has been used to signify “bad” mother’s identity. Bad mother is normally treated by media as “voiceless” subject who never has a chance to explain her conduct. The news about bad mother is reported superficially on particular moment of (bad) action that mother has done to her child. However, after *Tom* phenomenon, bad mother is empowered and given a voice to retell her story to the public. As Benjamin (2003, p. 17) points out that ‘silencing is an aspect of power relations, unsilencing is necessarily a process of empowerment.’

Secondly, there was a movement at a policymaker level. With its Buddhist theme winning appreciation, *Tom* received several awards from government agencies. *Tom*, for example, was named “Creative Media for Social Development” by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Royal Thai Police and Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (Khaosod, 29 November 2004, 23). It is not wrong to say the success of *Tom* largely results from the fact that it was produced and broadcasted in Thai Buddhist society. It fits and meets the preferred meaning of the dominant religious ideology. Dialogues and languages heard at temples in everyday life are quite similar to what the audiences heard and saw from *Tom*. It is interesting to note that sermons delivered in *Tom* is done by women in this symbolic world of TV soap opera representations.

4.2 *Lhong Tang Rak*: Mass Entertainment and Heterosexim

An examination of the relationship between the women's representation and social movement in *Lhong Tang Rak* shows that a call for feminist/women's movement in Thai society is not able to compete ideologically with the mainstream compulsory heterosexist ideology. *Lhong Tang Rak* reveals a relationship of conflict and resistance between the oppositional social ideologies of the Thai feminist/women's movements on the one hand, and that of the producers of *Lhong Tang Rak* on the other. Formulaic genre of romantic comedy is a major contribution to the negative stereotypes of women and gender in this soap opera. *Lhong Tang Rak* televisual texts of women show illusive counter-representation of women in terms of portraying a first-half of heroine as being strong and playing stereotypical men's sports. The inclusions of representation of "fat woman" and "homosexual male" characters reflect even more patriarchal heterosexist attitudes of Thai society towards "fatness" of women and homosexuality. These two representation are constructed negatively: fat woman character is portrayed as having eating disorder behaviour, while the homosexual character is exaggeratedly portrayed as a deviance. They are ridiculed and devalued symbolically on screen to realistically create "laughter" from the off-screen people. Surprisingly, *Lhong Tang Rak* has shown striking and telling results on representation of Thai feminist. It should be noted that this is the very first visibility of representation of "Thai feminist" as televisual cultural product in entertainment industry. The inclusion of image of "Thai feministé" on this soap opera screen is considered an act of resistance of the producers towards feminist and women's movement by satirically stereotyping the Thai feminist as "the fore legs of the elephant," which is a Thai proverbial metaphor used to differentiate gender relations; it is traditionally applied to men while women are referred to as "the hind legs." The detailed analysis is presented in subsequent section.



Figure 2 Promotional Poster of *Lhong Tang Rak*

Lhong Tang Rak is produced by *Dara Video* Company for Channel 7, which is known widely as the most popular mainstream television station. Siriyuvasak (2000, p. 108) observes that intended viewers of Channel 7 include women, youth, rural and urban middle-lower classes. The promotional poster of *Lhong Tang Rak* clearly show the way symbolic components have been selected to communicate simplicity to its intended viewers. The poster is focused on “hero-heroine” and naïve cuteness of “children.” The font straddling across the poster is also arranged in a simple and old-fashion way to reach out to the viewers.

According to a fieldwork observation, *Lhong Tang Rak*’s production context is extremely different from *Tom* in terms of being constructed, produced, and controlled by men. Most of the production crews are men who evidently show heterosexist attitudes of Thai patriarchy through making jokes upon “other.” For in stance, a female homosexual couple who worked in the wardrobe department were mocked by other male colleagues.

The filming of *Lhong Tang Rak* began in late 2004 and was scheduled for broadcast in New Year period. The TV drama started to air while the shooting and editing of all episodes were not finished. Time constraint has made this TV soap opera even more categorized as low-budget soap opera production comparing to the other two: *Tom and Khon Luang Rak*. It was planned from the very beginning that this soap opera would be a “romantic comedy” because Channel 7 has a policy to “make all year-end TV soap opera romantic comedies” (*Kom Chad Luek* [online] 2005). *Lhong Tang*

Rak has key objectives of entertaining mass viewers and specifically providing first acting role to the “beauty queen” after signing acting contract with Channel 7. With the beauty queen as its heroine, *Lhong Tang Rak* chooses an immensely popular actor as its hero. It was understood widely that he was chosen because Channel 7’s policy-makers believed his popularity would promote the new beauty queen actress to be a new star. This reflects a key characteristic of Thai television soap opera, or even applied to other cultural products in Thailand, predominantly relying upon stardom system, which is very similar to the case of telenovela industry in Latin American countries. Thai audiences ‘easily recognize and identify television actors and stars, and enthusiastically await their appearance and fictional reincarnation in each new story (Fleet 1998, p. 221 - 222).

Lhong Tang Rak features the repetitive and conventional story about aggressive and badly-behaved domineering female character who was born in a rich family. She was planned by her mother to marry a male villain whose actual desire is to gain her wealth. Later, she has transformed into a good woman after losing her memory in an accident. When she becomes a good woman, she falls in love with the hero, who is a pretentious father of three children. After regaining her memory, she faces a dilemma of whether she will choose to go back to her old way or stick to a new life she has found. A male director has described extensively its narrative and genre in *Lhong Tang Rak* television special (TV magazine, special issue for *Lhong Tang Rak*, p.15)

.... *Lhong Tang Rak* is a romantic comedy. It features the story of a man and a woman who, despite in love with each other, constantly quarrel. We also include children, pastoral scenery, and a dairy farm. In this story, the hero and the heroine come from two completely different backgrounds. The heroine comes from an upper-crust family while the hero is rather rural in lifestyle. When these two characters meet, the story develops interestingly. At their first meeting,

the heroine was still a spoiled woman and the hero was not impressed. However, after she lost her memory, her personality has changed dramatically. She becomes gentle and family-loving. So, the hero lied to her that she was the mother of his children. In fact, the children who live with the hero are not his own children either. They are the children of his late elder sister. As the story develops, these two characters fall in love in the family-loving atmosphere. However, the heroine later regains her memory and returns to her real home. But after a while there, she thinks of the loving family she has with the hero and she returns to him. They have thus lived together happily.

For romantic scenes, we focus on lovely theme. Anyway, there are not many of these scenes because after the heroine lost her memory, she was taken into the hero's house as his wife. So, there are no scenes in which they romantically woo each other. Most of the scenes are about activities they do together and how their bond has developed. When they are together, the heroine is so nice. She is a good mother and the hero finally has seen so many good things in her. She has adopted the qualities she never had before the accident. Before her memory was lost, the heroine was spoiled, pampered, petulant and prissy. We have shot very beautiful pastoral scenes in which the leading characters are doing activities together. There are some difficult scenes in this series too. These include scenes about temple fairs, cow-milk contest, fashion shows, wedding ceremony and *Baisri* blessing ceremony. We have tried to present Thainess especially the Northeastern tradition here. We even have our research team for these scenes.

Popular genre of romantic comedy is deployed in order to meet the preferences and pleasures of Channel 7's imagined lower-class audiences (interviews of actors and actresses of

Lhong Tang Rak). Its classist imagined audience is assumed and defined as escapists from the suffering and difficult capitalistic reality in Thailand. Off-screen realities are visualized and transformed onto the screen to provide a new perception of stress-free realities. In *Lhong Tang Rak*, audiences see, “what seem exaggerated but yet they are something really happening in real life”. Makeup are intentionally too bright and too colorful. There is a scene in which a wedding ceremony is held amidst vast green fields, which is of course possible in today’s post-modern capitalist Thai society that has now seen exotic “underwater wedding” and “midair wedding”. A beauty contest to select the Cow-Milk Queen in this soap opera also reflects various beauty pageants held in urban and rural areas. A *Baisri* blessing ceremony that ends with a quarrel scenes between oppositional groups of people in the local community is not different or unusual from Thai physical reality where similar events are reported in Thai tabloids.

It is important to note that various public settings in *Lhong Tang Rak* is considered a deployment of masculine narrative where ‘masculine success needs public acclaim and visibility’ (Fiske 1987, p. 220). While a formulaic genre of romantic comedy has carried the two central ideological tenets of compulsory heterosexuality and the subjugation of women (Neale and Krutnik 1990; Rowe 1995 cited by Deleyto 1997, p. 92). With the fact that production process is dominated and controlled by men; all these production constraints have limited and circumscribed the representations of women and gender as presented in Table 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4.

Table 2 Representations of Heterosexual Subjects
in Patriarchal *Lhong Tang Rak*

<i>Lerlaksamee</i> – Heroine	In the beginning, she represents a spoiled and whining woman from an upper-crust family. The soap opera does not show whether this character has a work or not.
	After she had an accident, she becomes a conventional and stereotypical heroine in Thai soap opera.
Villainesses: They represent outspoken, self-righteous, manipulative women. Their desires for the hero is extremely exaggerated.	<i>Pimporn</i> – She represents a lower-class woman in a community who dresses herself excessively. Her makeup, attire and hair color are never in the same tone.
	<i>Rachawadee</i> – She represents a woman from a rich family who will do anything to get what she wants. She represents a woman who is sexually seductive and manipulative. Significantly, she proclaims and represents herself as a “feminist.”
	<i>Orn-uma</i> – She represents a “mistress who is jealous and manipulative. She also wants to take control of the heroine’s family assets by sexually manipulating the heroine’s fiancée.
Representation of a Mother	<i>Suraswadi</i> – She represents a woman who spoils her own daughter, but at the same time, she also tries to control her daughter’s life.
Representation of Stepmother	In this soap opera, the heroine becomes a stepmother after being deceived. She was at first hated, but finally becomes well-loved by the children.
Representation of “marginalized people”: Their roles are to “create laughter” in the society.	<i>Pipek</i> – He represents the homosexuality as a deviance
	<i>Pimporn’s friend</i> – Representation of a fat women with eating disorder.



Figure 3 Representation of a Woman
Based on Heterosexual Men's Point of View



Figure 4 Representation of Homosexual Men
Based on Heterosexual Men's Point of View

A closer examination of *Lhong Tang Rak*'s female characters reveals a more complex encoding practices in contemporary patriarchal society. In the past, most *nang ek* or heroines were portrayed as being gentle and submissive, carrying a message of

preferred qualifications of Thai femininity as being proper (*riaproy*), sweet (*onwann*), and not a loose woman (*rak nuan sanguan tua*) (Phiphitkul 2001). In *Lhong Tang Rak*, against the conventional stereotype, the heroine is “tougher than average women.” She is keen in Taekwondo, good at boxing, and capable to raise up to any heated argument with the villains. The heroine here is masculinized but she still has to maintain her gentleness and beauty. These contradictory stereotypes comply with Thai men desire in social reality. Thai women in modern and contemporary society are expected to perform well in both public and private spheres. Being a good woman nowadays means that she has to be capable of taking more roles and more burdens. Margaret Marshment (1988), as cited by Hollow (2000, p.194), further argues that ‘if an increasing number of women in “masculine” roles are seen as a sign of “progress”, this reproduces the idea that masculine values are fundamental human values.’

Lhong Tang Rak’s encoding practices can be a showcase scenario in terms of warning feminist scholars not to make a quick and optimistic judgement on temporarily symbolic visibility and inclusion of seemingly progressive, alternative, and counter-hegemonic representations of women and gender. Visibility and inclusion of alternative representations can be illusive and seductive. This can be seen clearly from *Lhong Tang Rak*’s representation of “feminist” by diminishing and signifying feminist as undesirable and unacceptable entity in the Cow-Milk Queen Contest scene.

It is important to note that the scene was shot around midnight on November 5, 2007, which was the same date I interviewed a leading actor in the evening. At one point, we had a chance to go through western feminist movement and Thai feminist critics upon Thai television soap opera regarding negative representations of women. The actor asserted that television soap opera must be taken as escapist arena for suffering audience in contemporary society. Although he agreed upon positive status of western women as having more freedom and rights, he implicated

that western feminist explanation somehow is unfit to Thai cultural context. After seeing this scene on the screen and due to improvisational technique often used in this type of comedic production, it is clear that this particular moment of feminist representation is inserted due to my intervention as a researcher with this production team. Thus, I propose the scene should be read and counted as an act of resistance of the cultural producers towards Thai feminist/women's movement.

In this scene, the female villain, *Rachawadee*, has to answer the question asked by a male spokesman: "How would you participate in promoting positive image of a Cow-Milk Queen?" The female villain gives the following answer:

Hmm.. A Cow-Milk Queen's image depends on the *quality... quality* of her milk. Yes, it will definitely affect her children who are going to be the future of our nation (The sound and video of audience's scolding her are being intercut with her speech), so a Cow-Milk queen's *image* has to be *positive* and all *naturals*, so a Cow-Milk Queen's image has to be a *Feminist*. Yes, I mean being *fem....* Oh Yes... being the fore legs of the elephant. (At this point, the audience becomes highly agitated, showing their anger towards her by waving their hands and shouting) (Italics are words that *Rachawadee* uses English loan words)

It should be stated that this is "the very first visibility" of the terminology and representation of "feminist" on the soap opera screen. It is indeed a rare occasion that feminism or feminist is mentioned and visible in Thai popular media. Unlike western society, Thai in general does not have widespread perception and knowledge of "feminism" as philosophical, social, and ideological movement. Thai rarely embraces the idea of "feminist" as individual or collective group who believe in addressing the imbalanced gendered structure and trying to reach an ideal of gender equality.

However, feminist representation here is portrayed negatively by replacing the production team's interpretation and assumption of feminist identity into Rachawadee character. The character is known as female villain who is sexually and habitually aggressive. Her speech contains irrationality that annoys the audiences. The way she pretentiously uses English loan words several times reflects a prominent impression of Thai feminist as a westernized woman. In short, feminist is referred to as "undesirable," "aggressive," "irrational," "westernized," and last but not least "pretentious." Park (2001, p. 20) gives critical observation on this point that soap operas 'tend to transform feminism from a set of political ideal and practices into simply a set of attitudes and personal lifestyle choices.'

Two important implications can be draw from constructed representations of feminist in *Lhong Tang Rak*. First, the "self" of Thai feminism and feminist is facing dilemma and paradox of representation; it is stigmatized and diminished as feminism and feminist worldwide does (Acosta-Alzuru 2003, p. 286 - 287). The "other" of the cultural text producers has intentionally and sophisticatedly resisted through symbolic utilization. This leads us to rethink politics of feminism as Hollows (2000, p. 203) proposed: "instead of popular culture being the object of a feminist "make-over", analysing "the popular" could teach feminists how to "make-over" feminism." Second, feminist criticism should not be lured and trapped within the terrain of visibility and inclusion of alternative representations, but should dig deeper and further analyze how those visible and inclusive representations are constructed. I would argue that we can be satisfied with the visibility and inclusion, but we need to contextualized them within the socio-cultural-political conditions, and then perform a praxis of ongoing decoding and deconstruction in order to comprehend how those new symbolic realities are constructed and propagated.

4.3 *Kon Luang Rak*: Homosexual Deconstruction of Compulsory Heterosexism's Femininity

An examination of relationship between *Kon Luang Rak*'s representations of women and social movement reveals a more supportive and complementary relationship that has developed in the course of interaction between the social ideologies of the Thai feminist/women's movements and gender consciousness and identity of the homosexual producers of *Kon Luang Rak*. From the producers' positionality of non-hetero identity, the representations of women in *Kon Luang Rak* have deconstructed and reconstructed the dominant representations of female sexuality on soap opera screen. As the conventional and hegemonic representation of female protagonist is insisted on being proper (*riaproy*) and sweet (*onwann*), and not a loose woman (*rak nuan sanguan tau*), *Kon Luang Rak* has offered a strong and intelligent protagonist with a more exposure of sexuality. In the past, female antagonist or villain was the only legitimate subject of sexual body and sexuality, while the female protagonist or heroine had to confine her sexuality to maintain a quality of good Thai woman. According to *Kon Tang Rak*'s narrative, "Woman" has been replaced by "Human." Being good or bad woman is not simplistically described and associated with a heterosexual frame of reference and male desire. Instead, the narrative implicates and emphasizes human choices as major determinant of consequences in life.

However, its deployment of melodramatic content which revolves around the journey of heterosexual love and romance, *Kon Luang Rak* uses an oppressive male fantasy of "rape," subsequently with "pregnancy" as the instruments of resolving heterosexual conflict between the heroine and the hero. An analysis of *Kon Luang Rak*'s representation of women and gender has proved that a vicious circle of women oppression in the symbolic world is insisted and maintained. *Kon Luang Rak* is finally fallen into patriarchal trap in marketing the myth of "Love+Sex+Violence."

This formula is constructed ideologically and worked realistically through symbolic socializing mechanism. It would be implausible for the social subjects to imagine whether there is Love and Sex without Violence.



Figure 5 Behind-the-scene shot of a slap-kiss in *Kon Luang Rak*

Source: <http://www.matichon.co.th>

Kon Luang Rak was produced by the *Lenitas* Company Limited for broadcast on Channel 7. The production started in late 2004 with a widely-known homosexual man as its director. The *Lenitas* has mainly produced melodramas featuring interesting heterosexual relationships such as *Kularb Len Fai* (Roses Playing with Fire) (This story depicts the relationships of a man with three women, who are best friends.) and *Nai Ruen Jai* (In the Heart). (This story shows a gentle, well-mannered female protagonist who married a womanizer while her heart is with the hero). Similarly, a melodramatic tale of *Kon Luang Rak* involves love, vengeance, and betrayal between the heroine and the hero. This soap opera was commercialized and promoted as the first “slap-kiss” soap opera of its director (*BangkokBiz News* [Online] 2005). Figure 5 shows a promotional behind-the-scene shot of a slap-kiss in *Kon Luang Rak*. A so-called slap-kiss soap opera have long gained vast popularity among female audiences in Thailand. Viewing a slap-kiss opera, audiences will see their hero and heroine quarrel, a heroine will slap her man, then they both reconcile sweetly through a man’s kiss. *Kon Luang Rak*’s narrative emphasizes on heterosexual love and romance of the two couples as described by its director (*TV magazine*, special issue for *Kon Luang Rak*, p.14).

I believe this series is one of the best non-polluted stories

that offer much fun. Aside from the fact that viewers will learn a lot from each episode of the series, they will enjoy romantic scenes featuring two couples. We have two heroes and two heroines. The first couple is *Ar-nud* and *Chompoo*, and the second is *Dan – Danai* and *Ploy*. These two couples are different. *Ar-nud* and *Chompoo* often quarrel despite being in love with each other. Their relationships are very colorful. For *Dan – Ploy*, they are a lovely couple and they are sweet...

It is interesting to note that the representations of women and other characters in this soap opera are constructed symbolically by the famous homosexual director, Marut Sarawat. The director's refusal of heterosexual differences plays a central role in depicting distinctively different representations of women, comparing to the other two: *Tom* and *Lhong Tang Rak*. A convention of portraying dichotomous representation between good woman and bad woman is replaced by representing both women and men as equal human beings who have both good and bad sides. This is evident by examining the two opposite heroines: *Rasita* and *Rinrada*. *Rasita*, an older sister, is portrayed as a tough, beautiful, and intelligent woman. She is also bold, decisive, and fearless. She is seen mostly in public setting. This character represents a counter-hegemonic representation of a modern, westernized, and educated Thai woman. For *Rinrada*, a younger sister, her portrayal is totally different from that of her older sister. She is gentle, quiet, and very reserved in showing her love for a man. She is seen mostly in a domestic setting. This character represents a conventional mainstream stereotype of Thai woman who is preferred to be proper (*riaproy*) and sweet (*onwann*), and not a loose woman (*rak nuan sanguan tau*). Their differences are not polarized into unequal relations of "good/bad," or "superior/inferior." Such unique portrayals of *Kon Luang Rak* has been observed by a critic who comments that: all acting crews are important. The heroes, the heroines, and other secondary characters

are equally important. All of them can be considered “leading characters”.... Most important of all, all characters are “very human.” None of them is extremely good or extremely bad. All humans have good and bad sides in themselvesé (Jongprasopmongkol [Online] 2005).

It can be concluded that the director’s denial of heterosexual differences is a mechanism that strengthen his seeing of human equality in terms of rationality and motive. The director is not chained by the traditional heterosexist signification about good/bad female subjects, as homosexuality itself is an act of resistance and challenge to the heteronormativity. It is his positionality that helps him creating and reconstructing new interpretations. Table 3 shows how women are portrayed in *Kon Luang Rak*.

Table 3 The Representation of Women in *Kon Luang Rak*

Counter-hegemonic representation of woman	<i>Rasita</i> – The heroine is portrayed as a modern woman with strength, intelligence, and self confidence.
Representation of conventional and mainstream Thai woman	<i>Rinrada</i> – <i>Rasita</i> ’s younger sister - who is considered the other heroine - is portrayed as a gentle and docile woman. She worshiped love so much that she was weak. She even wanted to change herself to get over her old self and her sister. In the end, true love she has found cures her weaknesses.
	<i>Sukumarn</i> – She is portrayed as a docile, gentle and good-hearted woman. She is a secretary who had been entrapped in a vengeance cycle and ended up being impregnated by a man who once planned to hurt her elder sister.
Villainess	<i>Jarawee</i> – She is portrayed as a vengeance-obsessed villainess. She wants to dominate all people around her. She is ready to use her beauty and feminine guiles to achieve what she wanted, even when it means that she had to marry an elderly man who is the heroines’ father.

In addition, female sexuality on soap opera is another area deconstructed by *Kon Luang Rak*'s producers. In the past, conventional heroine is supposed to conceal her sexuality and dress properly as a Thai good woman, while female villain is the only legitimate female subject to explore sexuality and use it to manipulate and challenge male power (Modleski 1979, p. 16 - 17). These conventional stereotypes reflect an oppressive connotation of patriarchy that good woman must be powerless so that she is easily controlled and dominated, while bad woman with power is undesirable and excluded. In *Kon Luang Rak*, power, through a control over one's sexuality, is more permeated and equally possessed by both female protagonist and antagonist. When female sexuality is set free, there appears female agency instead. Figure 6 shows similar portrayals of female protagonist and antagonist in terms of their sexuality. *Rasita*, a heroine is on the left, while Jarawee, a villain is on the right.



Figure 6 Similar Representations of Female Sexuality between Female Protagonist and Female Antagonist in *Kon Luang Rak*

Although it is evident that hegemonic representation of women has been deconstructed in *Kon Luang Rak*, an examination on gender issue of this soap opera shows an oppositional striking result of women's oppression and objectification. An inclusion of rape and pregnancy in the story has led to a serious question whether it is necessary to deploy rape and pregnancy (with the hero, or the

concept of legitimate pregnancy) as mechanisms in resolving conflict for sweet happy ending. Somsuk Hinwiman (2002, p. 216) observes that ‘pregnancy in soap opera is to socialize viewers, who are mostly women, that having a baby can fulfill her life but it also teaches her that she “must find” a father for her baby.’ Furthermore, the insisted reproduction of the oppressive formula featuring “Love+Sex+Violence” in TV soap opera is so prevalent and the features are mixed inextricably that it is hard to imagine about love that is free from sex and violence.

5. Discussion

While previous studies on representations of women in Thailand (Prakorbphol (1992; Daengchamroon 1995; Watcharadecha 1996) have been conducted by investigating how women are portrayed negatively and subordinately, this study is conducted by deploying cultural studies’s concept of representation as a key site of struggle (Hall 1997). With such conceptualization, this study has yielded further evidence that televisual representations of women and gender on soap opera screen reflect the repetitive and ongoing contestations and struggles of social and gender ideologies. While in the past, hegemonic representation of heroine was portrayed vividly as being gentle, quiet, and submissive to all forms of power, the present study shows that there are competing hegemonic representations of heroines who are now portrayed as being westernized, intelligent, fearless, and overtly sexual. At one time, motherhood within the realm of the National Mother’s Day was portrayed as perfectly flawless in terms of presenting female selflessness in serving reproductive duty; *Tom* reveals a striking counter-representation of imperfect motherhood. The TV show consequently introduces new and empowering motherhood discourse into the discursive field among female consumers of such representation, triggered by the soap opera. This paradigm-shift of representations of women on the screen coincides with the changing

and complex socio-cultural-political realities, running towards modern capitalist contemporary society.

This present study also affirms a linkage between representations and identities as Woodward (1997) has pointed out. Through such representations on the screen, soap opera consumers are provided with immense subjectivities and choices with which they can identify themselves. The repertoire of identities corresponds to the lived experience of social members, who not only come from various social and ethnic backgrounds but also have various personal preferences. Tom's reinterpretation of motherhood was used by the groups of imperfect mother to revisit and rethink about their past conduct. The interaction between the Tom's textual identities and audience's social identities has led to empowerment reading of the audiences in order to 'reconstructed and redefined' (Kellner 1995, p. 246) their identities. Similarly, the angle of Buddhist interpretation of *Tom* was responded highly positively by various Thai Buddhist state organizations due to their resemble identities.

The results of this study have unfolded three following important relationships between social construction of representations and social ideologies: (1) an unresolved tension between Thai feminism and Buddhism reflected through *Tom*; (2) a conflict and resistance between the oppositional social ideologies of the Thai feminist/women's movements, on the one hand, and heterosexist ideology of the producers of *Lhong Tang Rak*, on the other; and, (3) a more supportive and complementary relationship has developed in the course of interaction between the social ideologies of the Thai feminist/women's movements and gender consciousness and queer identity of the homosexual producer of *Kon Luang Rak*. These relationships implicate especially to Thai feminist scholars and practitioners that politics of feminism is now touched upon by more agents from the entertainment sector. People in the entertainment sector are generally perceived by Thai feminist scholars and critics as shallow, superficial, and ignorant. However,

this study has shown that they are more sophisticated than some Thai feminists and social critics have portrayed them. What I would like to further propose here is that the antagonistic attitude towards the entertainment people should be replaced by a more constructive attitude and theoretical framework of differences as West (2002, p. 12) has pointed out: 'seeing differences as sites and signs of struggle, as sources of conflict, also encourage multivalent forms of knowledge about "self" and "other."' This will help enhance more possibilities of change.

The above relationships further affirms that representation as signification and 'ideological field is always marked by contradictions and struggles' (Grossberg 1996, p. 159). Raymon Williams (1977 cited in One and Peletz 1995, p. 4) contends that hegemony as a lived system of meanings and values is 'always a process' and 'continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not all its own.' This is 'because different social interests intersect in the production, circulation and exchange of ideological signs, they accent meaning differently, that is, according to their contrasting positions in the social formation' (Volosinov (1973) cited in Rojek 2003, p. 116). Applied from Stuart Hall's dominant/negotiated/oppositional typology of encoding/decoding, this study has found four following processes of ideological contestation: accommodation, negotiation, resistance, and deconstruction. Within accommodation process, the intended meanings of dominant ideology are accepted as legitimate, natural, inevitable, and taken for granted (Hall 1973, p. 17 cited in Hunt 1996, p. 27). Regarding *Tom*, accommodation is evident in an interaction between the encoding of Buddhist explanations in *Tom* and the institutional readers of Buddhist state. In short, *Tom* shows accommodation and clear linkage to the dominant ideology of Thai state's Theravada Buddhism. While *Lhong Tang Rak* and *Kon Luang Rak*, in terms of their resemblance of narratives about heterosexual love, accommodate to many aspects of dominant ideology of patriarchy in terms of the signifying practice about

gender relation.

Negotiation is likely when individuals 'occupy a rather ambiguous region vis-a-vis the question of opposition' (Hunt 1996, p. 27). The ideological ambiguity and awkwardness of Tom's screenwriter/director leads to the negotiation process of ideologies. Namely, Tom has shown how the totality of Theravada Buddhism's mother/nurturer of selflessness and self-sacrifice is negotiated through the feminist explanation of self-affirmation. In other words, it is a negotiation between feminine accommodation and feminist resistance to the Buddhist conception of womanhood and motherhood. Resistance process is evident in *Lhong Tang Rak*'s construction of televisual feminist representation. By decoding the scene of feminist visibility in *Lhong Tang Rak*, it can be stated that it is an act of resistance in the name of heterosexist ideology of patriarchy towards the feminist ideology. Deconstruction involves practices of identifying the binary oppositions, looking for contradictions, reversing and dismantling binary thinking (Elam 1994; Lennie 1999). Boyne 1990 (cited in Hughes 2002, p. 19) remarks that its purpose is to lead to 'an appreciation of hierarchy as illusion sustained by power.' Practice of deconstruction is found evidently in *Tom* and *Kon Luang Rak*. In *Tom*, the Enlightenment dualisms of patriarchy is deconstructed by injecting "rationality" to female characters, while male characters are portrayed as having irrational behaviours. In *Kon Luang Rak*, female sexuality of patriarchy is deconstructed. The binary opposition between good and preferred woman with body concealment and bad woman (who deserves to be punished) with exposure of sexual body is deconstructed. The patriarchal power and hierarchy is challenged by signifying female protagonist to be overtly sexual as equal to a female antagonist. By doing such, the binary logic of patriarchy loses its power to control over female sexual body.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study help strengthen a more insightful understanding of representations of women as sites of ideological struggles and contestation. The analysis has unveiled a number of conflicting and competing ideologies imbricated within the televisual representations of women on the soap operas. In addition, the analysis also yields a fruitful result about dynamics of contestation covering four important processes: accommodation, negotiation, resistance, and deconstruction. The conception that ‘hegemony is never fully achieve – *it is always contested*’ (Jackson 1992, p. 53) has given hope and possibility for the politics of social change, even if there is no clear and direct relationship, as I already argued, between symbolic and social reality. In other words, putting effort on negotiating, resisting, and deconstructing symbolically through representations of women and gender does not guarantee any changes of gender relations and equality in social reality. Such efforts in women representation, however, still bare their significances and impacts for cultural and feminist critics. This is because they unmask and disillusion realities of the power. Within the quagmire politics of representations, it certainly always contains the politics of real people in the real world.

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