

Southeast Asian Literature in English: Gender and Political Issues in Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese Short Stories

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Article History: **Abstract.** In teaching Southeast Asian literature in English in Thailand, a lecturer presented a brief historical background of each country. After lecturing on each country's literature background, the students were assigned to write the reflection essays on short stories studied in class. Then, a lecturer summarized the issues discussed in class and from students' reflection essays. This article is resulted from the case study of teaching modern Southeast Asian Literary Works in English at IAC international studies ASEAN-CHINA program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat university, Thailand. A lecturer and students discovered gender and political issues in Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories. Laotian and Vietnamese short stories *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* and *The Khaki Coat* represent writers' attitudes towards their communist/socialist government. Laos and Vietnam share social problems such as poverty-famine, economic inequality and class struggle. Additionally, Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories also portray gender issues such as gender inequality, women's liberation movements, and the effects of war on women.

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INTRODUCTION

Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar are countries with rich literary traditions both oral-transmitted stories and printed works. These countries are rich with folktales, historical literature and religious short stories especially Buddhism Jataka tales. After WWII when Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar were decolonized, literature was raised up again. There were modern literary works with social issues and the printed literary works were circulated around the regions. Besides, the translation of Laotian, Vietnamese and Burmese short stories into English has expanded their readers from local readers to international readers. The English translated Southeast Asian short stories benefit Southeast Asian scholars since they can explore and analyze social issues, cultures, politics and economics through close-reading these short stories. In case of Thailand, in teaching subjects such as

Selected Modern ASEAN literary works, Southeast Asia through Literature, ASEAN Literature in English etc., a lecturer employs these English translated Southeast Asian literature especially short stories in order to expand students' knowledge both in mainstream historical works and literature as selective historical works. Koret (2020) said by studying English translated Southeast Asian literary works, the virtues of self-sacrifice, honesty, and morality to the common person can also be taught. Literature is not merely an entertaining way to learn about the region but also unique in its usefulness. Literature in translation serves as a looking glass.

Before the discussion of Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories in English, a lecturer presented brief literature background of each country. Firstly, Laotian literature background was divided into three periods: pre-independence 1955-1975 when Laos was under French colonization, post-independence 1976-1987 when Laos was decolonized and free from French and then new imagined or modern era 1985-now. Significantly, in the new imagined era, the Laos government aspire Laos to improve the modern images of the country, including more open-minded, less communist, and open-door policy in economics to form a modern country. In this era, as contemporary literature began, economic and political obstacles continued to limit the growth of literature in Laos at the end of the 20th century such as the cost in publication, the government's strong censorship and the very small group of readership (people tend to listen to the radio or watch television more than reading literature). However, the government's "New Imagination" policy of the late 1980s promised to liberate Laos society, but the truth was the government remained strict in its control of the printed works. Laotian writers still faced the state's censorship, and literary works printed in Laos were the government-propagandized works while the strong critical works towards government were banned. Despite these restrictions, Laotian authors produced significant and varied literary works.

For Vietnam, after Lae dynasty freed Vietnam from China, Vietnam developed their own alphabets and composed the original Vietnamese literary works. Under French colonization, there were nationalism literature, the influence of Western education and English literature. Vietnamese Literature during 1946-1954 supported their government's ideology in arousing nationalism and anti-French colonization. Besides, literature became tool for decolonization and the representation of Vietnamese bravery in anti-French wars. Around 1986-1991, Vietnamese reformed their Economic ideology under Doi Moi policy. In December 1986, the government mandated the Doi Moi (open door) policy, shifting from a centrally planned economy to a market oriented one, inside the frame work of state regulations. The main thrust of the Doi Moi is to promote a multi-sector economic system, emphasizing the state sector while encouraging the private sector. To achieve economic integration, the open door would be implemented gradually in order to stabilize the political and social situation (Tran Thi Que, 2003). Among Vietnamese writers, due to Doi Moi policy, they reconceptualized their literary works' contents. Vietnamese literature during Doi Moi to post-Doi moi era tended to reveal social problems, female problems, political corruptions and the effects of wars instead of tool for decolonization or socialist propaganda.

After WWII, Vietnamese writers represented their own experiences in wars especially American-Vietnamese war and civil wars. Famous writers who wrote

about war experiences and Vietnamese politics were Bao Nhin (*The General Retired* short story), Duang Thu Huang (*Beyond Illusions, Paradise of the Blind* novels) and Le Minh Khue (*The Distant Stars* short story). These writers experienced wars themselves by attending Vietnamese army during wars, and their works represented the effect of wars towards Vietnamese citizen. Their literary works were translated into English and were considered as Vietnamese historical short stories and socialist criticism.

In case of Myanmar, its literary circumstance began with oral-transmitted literature and poetry. Burmese literature represented local beliefs and religion such as Nat ghost and strong Buddhism. The printing house in Myanmar was established in 1870, and Myanmar was under British colonization around 1885. Under British, Burmese intellectuals were influenced by Western literary works. In 1920, Myanmar denied Western culture, and writers avoid the imitation of Western works. They went back to their folklore and aimed to create their original Burmese literary works. At the same time, the department of literature was established in Rang-Kung university. The university students composed literary works, and the most famous group was Khitsan group. Famous writers from Khitsan group were U Sein Tin, U Thein Han and U Wun. These writers represented simple villagers' ways of life, historical novels and peasants' lives including Burmese folklores in their works. Under Prime Minister U Nu's governing era, there were translation of political books from China and the Soviet Union in order to stimulate Burmese writers in socialism and anti-colonialism ideologies. Burmese literary works under U Nu's government represented the exploitation in Capitalism, socialist ideology and the effect of Colonization towards Burmese people such as Htin Patt's novel named *Nga Ba* (The Peasant). In Myanmar modern era (post U Nu's government until now), the state established literary prizes such as Sape Beikman Award and The Ethnic Literature Award. Myanmar attended The S.E.A. Write Award, or Southeast Asian Writers Award in 1998 (Sinbyu-Kyun Aung Thein was awarded). Even Myanmar has been under political turmoil, modern Burmese writers tried to represent Burmese ways of life, Buddhism and the effect of capitalism and globalization in their literary works. Due to the limitation of publications, international readers can access to English translated Burmese short stories through the website "Things Myanmar" under topic "Selected Myanmar Short Stories" (<https://sites.google.com/site/thingsmyanmar/selected-myanmar-short-stories>).

After lecturing on each country's literature background, the students were assigned to write the reflection essays on short stories studied in class. Then, a lecturer summarized the issues discussed in class and from students' reflection essays. This article *Southeast Asian Literature in English: Gender and Political Issues in Laos, Myanmar and Vietnamese Short Stories* is resulted from the case study of teaching modern Southeast Asian Literary Works in English at IAC international studies ASEAN-CHINA program, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat university, Thailand. Southeast Asian short stories in English which were discussed here: Laotian short stories *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* by Bounthanong Xomxayphol and *Heart's Refuge* by Thongbay Phothisane, Vietnamese short stories *The Khaki Coat* by Nhat Tien and *Distant Stars* by Lê Minh Khuê, Burmese short stories *Trio* by Moe Moe and *Once There Were Two Old Men* by Ma Sandar.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is the result teaching of Modern ASEAN Literary Works in English at the IAC international studies ASEAN-CHINA program, Faculty of liberal arts, Thammasat University in Thailand. The IAC program was established in 2013 as a response to the advent of the ASEAN Community (AC) and the expansion of China's economic, cultural and strategic rise, which has led to great changes in the Southeast Asian region and the global community. This transition at both the domestic and international levels led to the foundation of the International Studies (ASEAN-China) program. The program aims to enrich students' understanding of the various dimensions of the ASEAN region and China as well as to encourage students to identify as ASEAN and global citizens.

From the program's vision, one of the subjects is IAC 338 Contemporary ASEAN Literature which requires the students to study Southeast Asian literature in English. Most of the literary works were composed in their original language after World War II and then were translated into English later. The teaching methodology for Thai students: 1. a lecturer lectures them on literature and social background of each country; 2. a lecturer assigns them to read 2-3 short stories with different issues from each country; 3. after reading short stories, in class a lecturer analyzes and extracts social issues from short stories with them; 4. a lecturer assigns the students to write their reflection essays on short stories studied in class.

This article is the case study from teaching Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories in English to Thai students by employing close-reading methodology. After close-reading, a lecturer examines the students' knowledge from their reflection essay. This teaching methodology aims to see how the students can relate the information of political and social background of each country with its short stories. In writing the reflection essay on Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories, a lecturer can see what issues students extract from the texts assigned. By close-reading Laotian short stories *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* by Bounthanong Xomxayphol and *Heart's Refuge* by Thongbay Phothisane, Vietnamese short stories *The Khaki Coat* by Nhat Tien and *Distant Stars* by Lê Minh Khuê, Burmese short stories *Trio* by Moe Moe and *Once There Were Two Old Men* by Ma Sandar, the students discovered the issues of gender and political issues as follows.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Political Laos short story *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* and Vietnamese short story *The Khaki Coat*

One of the most important and outspoken Laos writers was Bounthanong Xomxayphol, whose novels, short stories, and poetry provide invaluable insight into Laos culture and society's rapidly changing realities under the communist regime. He also wrote several notable short stories in the 1990s, among them *A Bar at the Edge of the Cemetery* is a political one. This short story by Bounthanong Xomxayphol was written in 1992 and translated by Peter Koret. It appeared credited to Bunthanaung Somsaiphon in the anthology, *Virtual Lotus: Modern Fiction of Southeast Asia* published by University of Michigan Press, and recently in

his collection of stories *Freeing Birds* (Laodouangdeuane Publishing House, 2011). Xomxayphol has written thirteen books about, in his words, “the daily life of village people and what they are fighting for.” He is a former magazine and newspaper editor, and a founding member of four magazines as well as the Lao Writers Association in Laos. In *A Bar at the Edge of The Cemetery* he describes the dangers of public apathy in the face of corruption and political oppression. This short story reflects the hard-economic reality of postwar Laos and socioeconomic inequalities. The residual effects of the Indo-Chinese War years on the people and economics of Laos and also the political corruption. The story is narrated by an anonymous person who observed the illegal bar that opened at the graveyard by middle-aged woman and her teenage daughter. She opened an illegal bar with the helping from her daughter since the daughter quitted her job (a teacher). A middle-aged woman told a narrator in the story that “After several years of work, she (her daughter) could not afford even a single pretty silk dress” (Xomxayphol, 2019, p.43) while the government officer got high salary as she mentioned “you are government workers, you have money left over to see” (Xomxayphol, 2019, p.43). This can indicate the issue of government corruption in Laos since the only high-salary group is government officer. Even, a bar owner’s daughter was well-educated and worked as a teacher, she didn’t get enough money for her sweat and labor. A bar owner’s family was the example of people who had no choice due to the lack of economic power.

Once this family had farmed their own fields but they turned to open the bar since their farming was disrupted by natural disaster and they were deported from their own land by government officer. A middle-aged woman revealed the situation to a narrator that most of the illegal bars were shut down because owners rejected free drink to the government officers. They were accused of prostitution and human trafficking as mentioned in the story “the stores that were closed did not sell women; it was only that they refused to give free whisky to government officials” (Xomxayphol, 2019, p.42). From the evidence Xomxayphol (a writer) voices Lao citizen in the unfairness in doing business. The government controls laws and regulations and the citizen can’t protect themselves from the government officers’ exploitations. Under socialist government, the citizen can’t possess the land as demonstrated in the story “government officials have come here on many occasions to tell us to leave and make our living elsewhere.” (Xomxayphol, 2019, p.44). The quotation refers to the government’s exploitation. The citizen can be deported out of the land whenever the government officials want the land for themselves.

Xomxayphol created a middle-aged woman character in order to speak for the exploited people. A middle-aged woman named government workers as problem-makers as stated “Government workers, now they are the problem-makers” (2019, p.43). Meanwhile, people still face with poverty and they couldn’t get rid of it except doing unlawful things such as illegal bar, farming someone’s land, prostitution or migrating illegally to other countries to find a job. Xomxayphol also presented lifeless people who drank at the bar with the description “dead people that breath.” As mentioned in the story, “Dead people that breath is more frightening than ghosts” (Xomxayphol, 2019, p.47); it points out that people who live day by day without dream like zombies. Xomxayphol shows the hopelessness

of the citizen who ignore political issues. They lost motivation in life as stated “this type of person who remains indifferent and merely lives his life day to day, lacking in commitment and concern. In all that he does, his sole motivation is survival” (Xomxayphol, 2019, pp.47-48). These are poor people who live day by day and do not want to find out the cause of their poverty. Xomxayphol reveals hard truth to Laotian readers that the cause of their poverty and exploitations is the government itself.

Similarly, the history of Vietnamese literature is closely linked to the country's ongoing political struggles, class clashes, and economic problems that led to poverty and famine. *The Khaki Coat* short story was written by Nhat Tien, one of the best-known Vietnamese writers who lived in South Vietnam until a few years after the Communist take-over of the country successfully in 1975. In the late 1970s, he left Vietnam as a refugee, and he is now living in the United States. The short story reveals the hard truth of the communist government which fails to provide social and economic equality for their citizen. The khaki coat means the color of the soldier's uniform in Vietnam. The story is about a poor and uneducated girl who lived in poverty and famine, having to take care of her two sisters. She made a living by selling any objects she could dig up from the graveyard. One day, while she was selling a luxurious-looking khaki coat she dug up from a tomb she was arrested by police since the wife of khaki coat owner remembered her husband's khaki coat. This girl was accused of stealing khaki coat and selling goods in the illegal market.

A writer (Nhat Tien) criticized the government's monopolization of the market by the setting of illegal market. In contrast, Don Xuan market was the legal market controlled by the government but the citizen who couldn't afford buying the government's quota and couldn't sell goods at this market as stated in the story “The problem with the main market was that most of the displayed articles could only be sold to people with books of stamps; there were always more sales assistance than custom most people withdraw from the main market to form a society on the margin of society all the members of this society were ragged and dirty” (Nhat Tien, 1988, p.15). From the quotation, if people wanted to sell goods at the legal market, they had to get a book of stamps from the government. However, most people couldn't afford the stamps from the government. Consequently, they established their illegal marketplace around the muddy district and tried to create their own community. Both buyers and sellers in this illegal market were the marginalized people. They were left out from the state's consideration due to their lack of economic power. On the other hand, the government didn't provide them opportunity to make a living legally.

The khaki coat itself symbolizes the effect of wars and hierarchy in the society. After Vietnam War and civil wars, Vietnamese citizens devoted themselves by attending the army, but in the post-war era the state didn't recognize them. From the young girl's familial background, she was the victim of the socialist Vietnamese government's re-education since her father died in the re-education camp and her mother died within a few years as stated in the story “Because of his connection with the puppet government, her father had been sent to a re-education camp and there he had died and left her with two siblings.” (Nhat Tien, 1988, p.16); from this quotation, it refers to the re-education camps in Vietnam. Re-education

camps (Trại cải tạo) were prison camps operated by the Communist government of Vietnam following the end of the Vietnam War. In these camps, the government imprisoned up to 300,000 former military officers, government workers and supporters of the former government of South Vietnam. "Re-education" as it was implemented in Vietnam was seen as both a means of revenge and a sophisticated technique of repression and indoctrination, which developed following the 1975 Fall of Saigon. Thousands were tortured and abused. Prisoners were incarcerated for periods ranging from weeks to 18 years (Anderson, 2002).

This young girl character was the victim of the re-education camps without any compensation from the state. Not only the state didn't recognize the victim, but also prohibited them from making a living as the evidence of the khaki coat selling. The girl was prohibited from taking benefit from the rich soldier's possession as stated in the khaki coat description "The coat did attract people's attention. It was a Western coat made out of golden-colored khaki. Its long and roomy sleeves were so skillfully sewn to the two shoulders that no wrinkles were to be seen... The coat must have belonged to a prosperous person who a few decades ago had certainly been fashion-conscious. Because it had been well-cared-for it still looked quite new" (Nhat Tien, 1988, p.15). Due to its luxurious image, this khaki coat symbolized the difference between classes in Vietnam. The rich soldier who can possess luxurious tailored-made coat which implied to its owner's wealth and high position in the society and a very poor girl who had to dig up tombs for objects. Even he was dead and this coat was his leftover belonging in tomb but poor people were not allowed to take benefit from it.

The girl was arrested and she was released because she spoke out the truth in the court. She had stated in the story "I earn my living by my own labour. I do not live as a parasite, at somebody else's expense. I have only taken what was buried in a grave, i.e. what had been discarded by our society" (Nhat Tien, 1988, p.16). Nhat Tien criticized the Vietnamese government of being a parasite through the young girl's declaration. The girl who made her living by her own labor was accused of robbing while the government who took benefits from its citizen wasn't accused of any allegation. Moreover, Nhat Tien used the satirical tone in young girl's declaration in court. She stated that she was nurturing her two siblings who were the economic workforce of the nation, she said "Furthermore I have used the profit I made to bring up my siblings, which means that by this kind of labor I've reared two children who belong to the next generation and in whose hands will lie the fate of our socialist country. Therefore, I am totally innocent" (Nhat Tien, 1988, p.16). From the quotation, the girl satired the state of being ignorant its poor citizen. In contrast, the task of improving citizen's quality of life and nurturing the next generation were the government's responsibilities.

Nhat Tien employed the young girl character to remind the government of its duty. When she was arrested by the government officials, she stated "And don't "thou" and "thee" me. I am one of the masses. You serve the masses. You have no right to talk to me like that" (Nhat Tien, 1988, p.15). From the quotation, she satired the socialist ideology. According to Ho Chi Minh who was a Vietnamese Communist revolutionary leader, he stated "Socialism is about making people rich and powerful... Socialism is to bring the people with freedom, prosperity, happiness, and chances of education, medical care, and good accommodation.

Under socialism, children will be nurtured, and the elderly will be cared for.” Ho Chi Minh also indicated that socialism is not a complete model but a constant formula, so building socialism must be practical, consistent with objective conditions, must uphold the Law and must know how to apply rules in a creative way, avoiding literal dogma, and stereotypes (Nguyen, 2018). In contrast, this short story represented the differentiation between the government officials and the citizen. There was no freedom, prosperity, happiness, chances of education or medical care for this young girl character as she was one of the masses. Whereas, the masses in Socialism term was the main purpose of this political ideology.

In comparison between Laotian short story *A Bar at the Edge of the Cemetery* and Vietnamese short story *The Khaki Coat*, these two writers criticized their socialist governments. A middle-aged bar owner and a poor young girl characters from short stories revealed the government’s exploitation in terms of being problem-makers and parasite. The government officials didn’t help their citizen in improving their living or protecting their human rights. In contrast, the government officials exploited them by asking for free drinks, accusing them, deporting them from their land, restricting them in trading. Under socialism ideology, writers did not only represent their national values, culture, ways of life but also represented their readers what happened in their society and also voiced for their national fellows. Beside the political issues, Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories also represented gender issue especially female situation as follows.

“Portrayal of gender inequality” in Laos, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories.

A Burmese short story *Once There Were Two Old Men* was composed by Ma Sandar, who is a well-known Burmese writer. Her novel *Life's Dream, Flower's Dream* won the 1994 Myanmar National Literature Award for novel. Her short stories collection, *Short Stories Collection 3* won the 1999 Myanmar National Literature Award for Collected Short Stories. Another novel, *Hexagon*, won the 2002 National Literature Award for novel. A short story *Once There Were Two Old Men* represents the portrayal of gender inequality and social hierarchy due to one’s economic power. Ma Sandar created two old men with different social and financial status. One old man got married with rich woman and after his retirement he was a rich old man. His children grew up as rich kids and got married with rich men and women. He had no worry on his financial status and he planned to spend his pension on taking a young mistress. Another old man got married with poor woman and he was working at his sixties. After his wife’s death, his two daughters grew up inefficiently. Elder daughter had to work for a living and had no chance to further her study. This old man was worried of his financial status and his daughters’ future. Moreover, he had knee ache, but he had no money to pay for the medical treatment. At the end of the story Ma Sandar created the satirical ending. A rich old man took a poor old man’s elder daughter as his young mistress.

Not only the difference of social status but this short story also represents the different perception towards men and women in Myanmar. A rich old man compared himself as Yethaphan tree while his old wife was old hen as stated in the story “Men are like the Yethaphan tree, he wanted to tell her, the older they are,

the more fruit they will bear, but thinking it indiscreet he kept his mouth shut. If the wife, that old woman, heard him he'd be in for it, she'd cackle like an old hen." (Ma Sandar, n.d.). From this comparison, old man was a tree which could bear more fruit while old woman was an old hen which couldn't lay eggs anymore. This perception reveals the gender inequality. In old age, men can do what they want such as having young mistress, dressing like young men in contrast, women are declined and rejected from their husbands. In this short story, an old wife commented on her husband that "Now don't you go flattering your Dad like this, as it is he's not acting his age" (Ma Sandar, n.d.), but her husband was proud of himself instead of being embarrassed. While a rich old man was acting younger than his age, he presented his disgust towards his old wife as stated in the story "made him sick just to look at her. He just did not want to listen to her nagging", and he also compared her to "the fatty foods I get at home" (Ma Sandar, n.d.). The comparison of old wife to fatty food which he declined to eat can be imply to the sexual objectification.

Sexual objectification is the act of treating a person solely as an object of sexual desire. Objectification more broadly means treating a person as a commodity or an object without regard to their personality or dignity. Objectification is most commonly examined at the level of a society, but can also refer to the behavior of individuals and is a type of dehumanization. Many feminists argue that sexual objectification of girls and women contributes to gender inequality, and many psychologists associate objectification with a range of physical and mental health risks in women (Fredrickson, 1997). The sexual objectification can lead women to bad self-image in themselves. By naming his wife old hen and fatty food, it shows the dehumanization towards women. Not only his old wife, he sexually objectified a young girl by comparing her to a young gourd. As stated in the story, a group of old men were discussing on spending their money on young mistress "Why, of course I'd love some tender gourd; I'll exchange it anytime for the fatty foods I get at home," U Maung Maung Sein laughed softly to himself at his private joke "I've found one tender young gourd," U Han Win whispered to him" (Ma Sandar, n.d.). From this quotation, he objectified a young girl from a person to a young gourd. This refers to the perception towards women as something men can eat and buy for their pleasure.

Not only calling her by dehumanized term but he also judged a woman by her virginity as stated in the story "Are you sure it's quite tender, it might be rotten inside you know. Not too good if I have to be treated for..... let's say, indigestion, at my age!" "Now, now, I assure you it's quite fresh. But impoverished, so I thought only you could help out. You know I can't afford a lot." (Ma Sandar, n.d.). From this paragraph, a rich old man revealed his consideration towards women's virginity. He defined a woman who lost her virginity as "rotten inside" while a woman with her virginity was a 'fresh' gourd. This perception represents male-dominated value which leads to the gender inequality. In this short story, men are superior to women because of his financial power. Besides, by using verbs 'help out' 'afford' 'digest', women are inferior to men.

From a short story *Once There Were Two Old Men* Ma Sandar who is a female writer created two old men characters in order to reveal men's perception towards women. In case of another Burmese short story *Trio* composed by female writer

Moe Moe (Inya), it raised up from gender inequality to women's liberation movements in Myanmar. For a brief history of feminist movements in Myanmar, the Burmese Women's Association, established in 1919, was the first women's organization in Myanmar (then called British Burma) and led by the wives of officials and rich women entrepreneurs. Following in its example, many other groups, while based on religion, emerged to promote national handwoven cloth and to preserve the culture and Buddhism against colonialism. Grass-roots women found representation eventually after female farmers, workers, journalists and students joined in the independence movements, and from them emerged many female leaders. Generally during the colonial period, women who were not of the elite communities participated in few roles of prominence. Women's rights activists (both from the grass roots and elites) raised their voices successfully for special laws granting women equal rights with men in marriage, divorce and inheritance, and they protested for the removal of the "sex disqualification clause" in the law barring women from contesting elections. Women's organizations, like the National Council of Women in Burma (1926), extended their coalition with international women's organizations, such the National Council of Women in India, although alignment with the Indian groups became a divisive issue during the colonial period (Aye Lei Tun, La Ring and Su Su Hlaing, 2019, p. 7).

In the parliamentary era (1948–1958), women's participation in politics at last was somewhat accepted and their numbers increased. But women in leadership positions were there to maintain their husband's or father's status and power (sometimes taking the government position of their husband upon his death). After the military coup in 1962, the social and political movements of women across the country once again became limited. The military oppression of the many ethnic populations stimulated their political activism; however, the violence committed against the women became a point of rebellion, reducing women's issues to their victimhood. Unlike the traditional women's groups that formed on the basis of religion and nationalism, exiled women's groups, largely of ethnic origin, were more progressive, even introducing the concept of "feminism" to their sisters who remained inside the country. It is the women's organizations formed by activists, working women and students (not those organized by elite women) who have maintained their sense of sisterhood, coordinating in advocacy and to push for the empowerment for all women. Myanmar acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 (Aye Lei Tun, La Ring and Su Su Hlaing, 2019, p. 7).

A short story *Trio* composed by Moe Moe (Inya) in 1972 represents the feminist ideas in Burmese literary works. She won the Myanmar National Literature Award four times. She is considered one of the most influential Burmese women writers. She wrote 101 short stories and serial novels, 24 full-length novels and 55 articles. Under her pen name Inya, she began writing poems while attending Yangon University in 1964. In 1972, she wrote her first novel, *Pyauk-thaw-lann-hmar san-ta-war*, which received the National Literature Award in 1974. In 1980, 1982 and 1986, she received short story awards for her short stories and anthologies. From 1989 to until the period before her death, she worked as the editor of Sabel Phyu Magazine.

A short story *Trio* began with the discussion among three modern women on “Myanmar women enjoyed equal opportunities in education, business and inheritance and also enjoy fair division of property in a divorce. However, a Burmese Buddhist man could take on as many more wives as he wished or could support.” (Moe Moe, 1972). The characters were discussed on this issue because one famous man rejected women’s liberation movements in Myanmar. From the quotation, Burmese women are believed enjoying opportunities in education, business, inheritance and fair division of property in divorce but in familial relationship men are allowed to take on many wives. Due to these opportunities, a famous man in the story commented in public that feminist movements were not necessary in Myanmar. Moe Moe created three modern female characters with feminist ideas. Wa Wa character was described as “strong-willed and decisive”, Ni Ma was “languid” and Kyi Pyar was “looked feisty but she was a tranquil person”. They grouped together because their minds worked alike. They were described as non-traditional Burmese women as stated in the story “Ni Ma was amazed to see a very proud and willful woman living in a beautifully decorated house. She was doubly amazed that someone so unlike the traditional Burmese woman had prepared a delicious meal. And, the house of someone so apparently at home in the western world was filled with Burmese artefacts. The three of them felt free and happy in this little place of opposites for indeed they themselves differed from each other as to be total opposites” (Moe Moe, 1972).

From the excerpt, Moe Moe described her female characters in details such as how they lived, their characteristics, thoughts, their tastes and values. It shows the qualification of female writing as an action for women’s liberation movement. Ian McCormick stated about women’s writing and feminisms that whether the starting point for readers is literary and cultural studies, critical theory, or the canon of literary writings and its traditions, the agendas that have now been asserted by feminist theories and explored in women’s writings, cannot now be silenced or excluded. Yet we still inhabit a world in which the reality for many women is that they remain second-class citizens, and many women suffer terrible violence and injustice (McCormick, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, female writings represented women’s desire, thoughts outside male-centric construction. French critics and feminist philosophers such as Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous have examined the distinctive features of women’s writing as a challenge to phallogocentrism. *Écriture féminine* has emerged as the key term that celebrates and explores the qualities at work in women’s writing which are produced by the female body and by female difference.

In a short story *Trio*, Moe Moe created female characters who anti male-centric values. Wa Wa sent a letter to a man who was anti-feminist as stated “Wa Wa had enclosed a copy of an impetuously written letter she had sent to man who had stated that the feminist movement was unnecessary in Myanmar” (Moe Moe, 1972). It was a distinctive action in attacking back men’s patriarchal comment by using female writing (Wa Wa’s letter). Another character Kyi Pyar who had short haircut as rebellious action towards Burmese men’s preference for long hair women. After wearing short hair, she was bad-mouthed by male friends but she stated that “I am sorry I ever thought he was a decent chap. She could care less for the many men bad-mouthing her just because she is an independent woman. In this excerpt “As if I don’t know that long hair is more attractive and as if I so

desperately want a husband” (Moe Moe, 1972), it reveals that she disregards male expectation on women, and she dares to be herself.

Not only appearance, these female characters also rejected social expectation on female gender role. Gender roles in society means how we’re expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct ourselves based upon our assigned sex. For example, girls and women are generally expected to dress in typically feminine ways and be polite, accommodating, and nurturing. Men are generally expected to be strong, aggressive, and bold. In personality traits, women are often expected to be accommodating and emotional, while men are usually expected to be self-confident and aggressive. For domestic behaviors, some people expect that women will take care of the children, cook, and clean the home, while men take care of finances, work on the car, and do the home repairs. Additionally, for occupations teachers and nurses are assumed to be women’s occupations, and that pilots, doctors, and engineers are occupations for men. However, three female characters in Moe Moe’s short story declined both personality traits and expected occupations for women as stated “If it were Wa Wa, she would have immediately tackled the man face to face” (Moe Moe, 1972). For occupations, these three women rejected being a housewife. Wa Wa was an artist (painter) while Ni Ma was a traveler and writer, and Kyi Pyar was a journalist who loved writing poems. Their occupations represented freedom and out of social expected gender role.

A character Wa Wa insisted living alone with her dog and meeting with her two close friends was for “All the days that they met, they would talk about literature, arts, poetry, and what they planned to do next and would part only at dusk. Ni Ma always felt uneasy when it was time to leave, seeing Wa Wa standing there all alone in front of her house. But she is used to living alone, Ni Ma had to console herself” (Moe Moe, 1972). From the excerpt, these women didn’t talk about any household responsibilities or nurturing a child. It reveals that women have their own desires and dreams which are different from gender role expectation. Moe Moe represented Burmese female characters who were out of traditional norms. Even she didn’t present the women’s liberation movement directly but the female community and sisterhood in this short story which “They met to help each other survive in their respective fields, to continue creating, to face life with reason and sense; to laugh and have fun, free of guilt” (Moe Moe, 1972) was itself the action of feminist movement in Burmese literature.

Apart from gender equality and women’s liberation movement, in case of Vietnamese short story *Distant Stars* composed by Le Minh Khue it represents the effects of war on women. Additionally, this short story was derived from Le Mihn Khue’s experience in war. Dana Sachs provided the information of Le Minh Khue as sated “Vietnamese author Le Minh Khue began publishing stories as a young revolutionary soldier in the 1960s. Since that time, her work has undergone a dramatic transformation from wide-eyed idealism to cleareyed skepticism. This change in outlook parallels a pervasive sense of disappointment both among Vietnamese writers from the North and within post-war Vietnamese society as a whole” (Sachs, 1999, p. 2). In a short story *Distant Stars*, three teenage North Vietnamese girls detonate unexploded bombs and fill craters along the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the American War. Theirs is an uncertain existence. Explosions bury them in rubble. Bombs drop dangerously close to their hideout. But the young women approach

their duty with good humor and a love that is “selfless, passionate, and carefree, only found in the hearts of soldiers” (Le Minh Khue, 1997, p. 20). War, as seen through the eyes of these young women, becomes the noble struggle of people who fervently believe in its goals.

This short story reveals the effects of war on women since military and wars in mainstream history seems occupied my male heroic actions. Rachel Woodward presented the relation of Soldiers, masculinity and the countryside as stated “It is suggested that this conceptualization of the countryside contributes specifically to the construction of particular (hegemonic) notions of masculinity. The ideas of adventure and danger are particularly important in this respect. Third, the role of the body of the soldier in this process is examined. The construction of a specific gendered identity through a process of transformation from civilian to soldier is discussed” (Woodward, 2010, p. 277). In contrast, Le Minh Khue portrayed women who entered adventure and danger which were considered male gendered identity. She revealed that not only men but women also involved in national history as national defender and the victim of war. As Vietnamese female writer, Le Minh Khue emphasized women’s role and involvement through her short story. In Vietnamese history, The Northern Vietnam government, led by Ho Chi Minh, made a number of legal reforms in order to gain popularity and enhance social equity, such as new laws banning wife-beating, forced marriages and child marriages (McKeon, 2012). In addition, they also focused on the roles of women outside of the traditional home for the purpose of industrial growth and development. As a result of this, North Vietnamese women were seen as essential participants and were enlisted into the Viet Cong for the purposes of combat and manual labour, such as attacking and harassing American troops, being sent into the combat zone to lay booby-traps, and working as truck drivers and smugglers. Viet Cong women also played important roles in espionage against the Americans and the South Vietnamese as well as serving as liaisons to coordinate North Vietnamese squads and covertly pass information (McKeon, 2012).

Le Minh Khue presented the history of Vietnamese War in female perspective through young female soldiers. They were reconnaissance team in battle field but their description of war was not frightening as stated in the story “Our job was to sit there. Whenever a bomb exploded, we had to run up, figure out how much earth was needed to fill the hole, count the unexploded bombs, and, if necessary, detonate them. They called us the Ground Reconnaissance Team”. That title inspired in us a passion to do heroic deeds and therefore our work was not that simple.” (Le Minh Khue, 1997, p. 21). Even though she was taking a risk in battle field, she described her action as ‘our job was to sit there’, and it was ‘our work was not that simple’. It reveals that women whose expected personality traits are fragile, weak and easily panic are not these Vietnamese female soldiers. From the excerpt, they were fearless and ready for their work. Additionally, they were positive enough to tease themselves as stated “When we laughed, our teeth glowed out of our grimy faces. At those moments, we called each other the “Black-Eyed Demons” (Le Minh Khue, 1997, p. 21). This is the opposite image of women since women are normally compared to angelic images.

Le Minh Khue presented women in war in positive vision. They were in wartime but they still have their dreams to peruse after the war ended. A writer

revealed women's desires which couldn't be completed due to the effects of war as stated "As for Thao, she wanted to become a doctor or "She wanted a job in a big hydroelectric plant. She would work as a welder and play on the plant's volleyball team. Perhaps to become an architect? How interesting! A voiceover artist in a children's movie theater?" (Le Minh Khue, 1997, p. 23). Among three young girls, one of them wanted to be a doctor, one wanted to be an architect and another wanted to be a voiceover artist. In comparison with Burmese short story *Trio*, these female writings represent female image, values, desires out of ideal women norms. Each female character has her own specific dream, characteristic and talents. This is the presentation of women as a unique person which is anti the generalization of women.

Besides, three female characters in a short story *Distant Stars* also rejected the domestic responsibilities and marriage as stated "From now until we're old, we'll have romance but we'll never marry. Marriage would mean too much work. Diapers. Blankets. Mosquito nets. Sawdust. Fish sauce. There would be no time left for fun. In love, he'll take you to the movies. He'll be sweet to you when you sulk. You'll have plenty of time to read books." (Le Minh Khue, 1997, p. 23). In term of gender role, a female character revealed her desires which were opposite to female domestic behaviors. Household management and child nurturing are not every women's dreams. They considered marriage was a trap for much work in contrast they wanted to read books. From this representation, female writings produced the female body and by female difference.

Le Minh Khue even presents strong female characters who are brave, positive and strong-willed. However, these girls were looked down by male soldiers by calling them "Hanoi girls". With this term Hanoi girls, it refers to the bias between urban people and countrymen. The Hanoi girls can be implied to weakness and the preference of comfortable lifestyle. To anti the Hanoi girls' image, Le Minh Khue presented her characters as strong and nationalist women as stated in the story "She was in the same state of mind as me: loving everyone. That was the love of the people in smoke and fire, the people of war. It was a selfless, passionate, and carefree love, only found in the hearts of soldiers. I put my arm around Nho and squeezed her small, soft shoulder. We said nothing to each other. She was here, brave, gentle, from the same city as me and standing with me on this night on a hill covered by bomb craters near the front. We understood each other and felt completely happy" (Le Minh Khue, 1997, p. 27). From the excerpt, it reveals the devotion of women to the nation. They are compared to distant stars which are far away in the battlefields but they are still shining with hope and love. Although in mainstream history, women might not be mentioned as men but in female writings women's heroic action are represented and voiced.

As mentioned in the previous section, female writings represent the reality for many women is that they remain second-class citizens and many women suffer terrible violence and injustice. In Laotian short story *Heart's Refuge* composed by Thongbay Phothisane. He is Laotian male writer and a president of Lao Writers Association and Department of Heritage. A main character in this short story was Sompheng who was a young widow with a son. Her love life was related to the illegal deforestation since her ex-husband was a rich man whose businesses were smuggling and contraband. Phothisane presented female character as weak, fragile

and easy to deceive as stated in the story “a very rich man came to the village asked for her hand and married. A year later, rumors about Sompheng’s husband seeped through the village. He had already been married and had many children before meeting Sompheng” (Phothisane, 2008, p. 58). From the quotation, Sompheng character was represented the victim of capitalism. Her ex-husband who was a businessman deforested at her village and at the same time he deflowered a woman (Sompheng) too. A husband character was symbolized a capitalist who consumed labor and body of working class. Moreover, it also represented the danger of capitalism on Laotian up-country villagers.

Sompheng character was represented in the image of ideal Laotian women who were submissive and weak. Burke, Andrew and Justine Vaisutis (2007) described about Laotian women as stated “Many rural Lao women undertake a variety of semi-formal roles in their communities, including handicrafts, commerce, public health, and education, in addition to their traditional roles as homemakers and the caretakers of children. In the cities and at the government level, Lao women are underrepresented, particularly in high-level positions. In terms of wages, women typically receive lower salaries than men.” (Burke, Andrew and Justine Vaisutis, 2007, p. 301). In this short story, Sompheng lived in domestic area. She weaved at home and never went outside the village as stated “Sompheng was weaving under her house” (Phothisane, 2008, p. 56), and she was a devoted mother of her son as stated “she found that she loved him as much as she loved her own eyes”(Phothisane, 2008, p. 57). From the quotation, it represents the traditional roles and personality traits of Laotian women. However, in the portrayal of gender inequality Sompheng character was doubly exploited by two urban men. For the first time, a rich urban man deceived her and left her with a child. Next, due to road construction in her village, Damdy, who “is a young, active and cheerful driver” (Phothisane, 2008, p. 57) fell in love with Sompheng. From this point, each time an urban man came to the village (for deforestation and road construction) a rural woman was approached and exploited.

Sompheng was a submissive character and she never rejected a man. At the end of the story, even she was hesitated with Damdy’s approach but she didn’t reject him directly. In contrast, Damdy never asked for Sompheng’s permission. He made his own decision that Sompheng would be his heart’s refuge as stated “I’d leave my heart here with you, he said”. But Sompheng afraid to make the same mistake twice so “Damdy understand her words and meaning very well” and he wind up with the sentence “On my life’s road, I have traveled a very long way. I do hope this home will be place my heart settles, a refuge for my heart” (Phothisane, 2008, p. 57). From the excerpt, Sompheng didn’t say anything while Damdy made a decision that she was home for his heart and her house would a place for his settling. At this point, woman was represented in ideal feminine personality traits and domestic behaving norms. She couldn’t decline marriage and lived her own life which differed from female characters in *Trio* and *Distant Stars* short stories.

In contrast, this short story portrays the female inferior status and they are still under ideal women ideology such as women are home, women are men’s followers and women are men’s pleasure. The female character Sompheng is also the victim of development and capitalism. Under capitalism, her ex-husband exploited her virginity and naïve (along with the deforestation), and under the village

development (by road construction) as stated “Once the road is paved, electricity will surely come soon” (Phothisane, 2008, p. 57) also leads a new male-dominated situation to Sompheng (a new husband). Both Sompheng and her house are under male possession. In conclusion, by close-reading Burmese, Vietnamese and Laotian short stories in English a lecturer and students explored the portrayal of gender inequality especially female desires, problems and women’s liberation movement in literature.

CONCLUSION

This article is the case study from teaching Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories in English to Thai students by employing close-reading methodology. After close-reading, a lecturer examines the students’ knowledge from their reflection essay. This teaching methodology aims to see how the students can relate the information of the political and social background of each country with its short stories. In writing the reflection essay on Laotian, Burmese and Vietnamese short stories, a lecturer can see what issues students extract from the texts assigned. By close-reading Laotian short stories *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* by Bounthanong Xomxayphol and *Heart’s Refuge* by Thongbay Phothisane, Vietnamese short stories *The Khaki Coat* by Nhat Tien and *Distant Stars* by Lê Minh Khuê, Burmese short stories *Trio* by Moe Moe and *Once There Were Two Old Men* by Ma Sandar, the students discovered the issues of gender and political issues as follows.

In political issues, the Laotian short story *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* represented the government’s exploitation of the citizen. The government officials were presented as problem-makers instead of helpers. Under socialist political ideology, the citizen was expected to be the main consideration of the state. In contrast, the socialist government in the Vietnamese short story *The Khaki Coat* prohibited their citizens from trading because of the government’s market monopolization. A Vietnamese writer also reminded the readers of the re-education camps in Vietnam in which the victims of this event had never been compensated by the government. In both of Laotian and Vietnamese short stories the writers created a character who voiced for each country’s social problem. In *A Bar at the Edge of Cemetery* a middle-aged bar owner was a narrator for the government’s corruption and in *The Khaki Coat* a poor young girl questioned the socialist government in the court when she was accused of being a thief. The socialist governments in Laotian and Vietnamese short stories were represented as parasites who consumed their citizen’s sweat and labor.

For the portrayal of gender inequality, after studying Burmese short stories *Once There Were Two Old Men* and *Trio*, Vietnamese short story *Distant Stars* and Laotian short story *Heart’s Refuge*, a lecturer and students discovered two female images. The first one was submissive and weak and the other was strong-willed and decisive. In Laotian short story *Heart’s Refuge* and Burmese short story *Once There Were Two Old Men* women characters were presented as submissive, weak and easy to deceive. They both were sexual objectified by men. In *Heart’s Refuge* women were called home for men’s hearts and in *Once There Were Two Old Men* women were compared to old hen and young gourd. In contrast,

Vietnamese short story *Distant Stars* and Burmese short story *Trio* represented strong-willed and decisive women. Each female character had her own dream and unique characteristics. They insisted on living on their own instead of getting married. These female characters represented the opposite personality traits and domestic behaviors. At this point, female writings are for women and they represent women outside male-centric construction with language used by women themselves.

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