

# Uthis Haemamool's *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi*: A Gramscian Reading

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## Abstract

This article offers a Gramscian reading of Thai author Uthis Haemamool's novel, *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi*. It seeks to demonstrate that the novel can be seen as a work of 'national-popular' literature that gives voice to the subaltern classes, and to constructively critique and transform ordinary people's spontaneous philosophy, namely 'common sense' and 'folklore.' The article also examines the development of the protagonist-narrator whose role could be approximated to that of an 'organic intellectual' who renders subaltern experiences and lived conditions into a coherent and poignant narrative. The key Gramscian concept utilized as a reading framework of this article is the theory of hegemony, particularly the way it informs Gramsci's sociology of literature.

**Keywords:** Uthis Haemamool, Gramsci, hegemony, national-popular literature, common sense, folklore, spontaneous philosophy

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอการตีความวิเคราะห์นวนิยายเรื่อง *ลับแล, แก่งคอย* ซึ่งแต่งโดย อุทิศ เหมะมูล โดยใช้แนวคิดของอันโตนิโอ กรัมสซี บทความต้องการนำเสนอว่านวนิยายเรื่องนี้เป็น 'วรรณกรรมสามัญชนแห่งชาติ' (national-popular literature) ที่มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อถ่ายทอดชีวิตและประสบการณ์ของชนชั้นที่ถูกกดขี่หรือชนชั้นกรรมาชีพ แต่ในขณะเดียวกันนวนิยายเรื่องนี้ก็พยายามวิพากษ์และเปลี่ยนแปลงยกระดับ 'ปรัชญาของคนธรรมดาสามัญ' (spontaneous philosophy) อันได้แก่ 'สามัญสำนึก' (common sense) และ คติชน (folklore) บทความนี้ยังวิเคราะห์พัฒนาการของผู้เล่าเรื่องซึ่งเป็นตัวละครเอกของเรื่องว่ามีบทบาทที่สามารถเทียบเคียงได้กับ 'ปัญญาชนแบบจัดตั้ง' ผู้เรียบเรียงประสบการณ์และสภาพความเป็นอยู่จริงของชนชั้นที่ถูกกดขี่หรือชนชั้นกรรมาชีพ

ออกมาเป็นเรื่องราวที่สมจริงและจับใจ กรอบทฤษฎีที่ใช้ในการวิเคราะห์คือแนวคิดการครองอำนาจนำของกรัมซีในแง่สังคมวิทยาวรรณกรรม

**คำสำคัญ:** อุทิศ เหมาะมูล กรัมซี แนวคิดการครองอำนาจนำ วรรณกรรมสามัญชนแห่งชาติ สามัญสำนึก คติชน ปรัชญาที่เกิดขึ้นเอง

## Introduction

Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is notable for offering theoretical alternatives to orthodox Marxism and for his conception of hegemony. His keen interest in culture as terrain in which a new hegemony can be won has made his insights still highly relevant to modern issues. Gramsci's contribution to the field of cultural and literary studies is pivotally significant and has been explored vigorously (Williams, 1977; Hall, 1986; Dombroski, 1986; Boelhower, 2002; Buttigieg, 1983). This article seeks to offer additional evidence of the contemporaneity of Gramsci's thoughts as it focuses on the application of some of his key ideas in analyzing the Thai novel, *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi*. Before proceeding to examine this novel in detail, some brief background of the novel and its author needs to be provided.

Uthis Haemamool's *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* is set in Thailand in the 1990s and won the Seven Books Award and the Southeast Asian Writers Award (S.E.A. Write Award) in 2009. First published in 2009, and now in its 22<sup>nd</sup> reprint, this novel is remarkable in its ingenious representation of the interpolation and co-existence of superstitions and Buddhist beliefs and practices in Thailand. It has been highly praised for its unique use of language that reflects Thailand's regional cultures and its compelling and suspenseful narrative strategies. According to Assiri Dhammachote, one of the S.E.A. Write Award committee members, the novel's presentation techniques "not only continually depict the lively lives of the characters; a subtlety in the techniques of secret-deception-disguise is also portrayed. Upon finishing the last page, I sat like a half-dead person for a while." Soranat Tailanga, another S.E.A. Write Award committee member, found the novel "fun, gripping,

the sudden turn of events makes my jaw drop to the ground.” The committee’s announcement applauded *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* for its depiction of “a complex dimension of human existence, one that cannot be separated from origin, ethnic, community, belief and narrative...with subtle storytelling strategy employing simple yet powerful language to portray clear and beautiful imagery.”<sup>1</sup>

As a S.E.A. Write Award-winning work, the novel has drawn significant attention from Thai literary critics. One of the most intriguing reviews of the novel was offered by Soranat Tailanga (2009), who investigates the relations between narrative forms, voices and identity construction in the novel. Tailanga also explores the contestations of selfhood narratives and the way they are influenced by master narratives while simultaneously seeking to destabilize and break free from them. In sum, she convincingly argues that the narrative strategies employed in the novel contribute crucially to the destruction and reconstruction of the protagonist-narrator’s identities as someone who struggles to break free from the restrictions and oppression of patriarchy and heterosexual norms.

Tailanga’s insightful review sheds light on the way literary techniques employed in the novel help underline the protagonist’s conflicting selfhood and his struggles against patriarchal and heterosexual values. The present article, however, attempts to offer a different approach to the novel by utilizing a number of Gramsci’s ideas. My central argument is that some of the most outstanding aspects of *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* are its ‘national-popular’ vision that foregrounds the lived realities of ordinary Thais, and its development of a narrator who can be considered a potential ‘organic intellectual’ of the subaltern classes. The novel can therefore be viewed as an attempt to establish a dialogue between the aesthetic reality, in this case, literary creation, and the historical reality of the subaltern classes.

At the outset, it is important to outline Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which is the basis from which his comments on literature

<sup>1</sup> The above words of praise from the S.E.A. Write Award Committee are the translation by Peter Montalbano from his English translation of *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* (2012).

and literary criticism arise. Gramsci's theory of hegemony refers to the creation and dissemination of a conception of the world throughout society until this conception becomes widely accepted as part of the general practice and way of life of the people in that society. He maintains that

[t]he normal exercise of hegemony in a particular regime is characterized by a combination of force and consensus variously equilibrated, without letting force subvert consensus too much, making it appear that the force is based on the consent of the majority. (as cited in Bates, 2002: 256)

Hegemony also refers to a process in which a subordinate group transforms itself into a ruling and hegemonic group. This process involves political, ideological and cultural struggles that lead to the acquisition of a new consciousness, which transcends narrow economic interests and evolves into a more encompassing one that takes into account the interests of other subordinate groups. In other words, for a subaltern group<sup>2</sup> to become hegemonic, its consciousness needs to be transformed from "the purely individual to the economic to the political and hegemonic," or from "the particular to the universal" (Fontana, 2002: 69).

Gramsci's sociology of literature is intrinsically linked with the concept of hegemony, as he regarded the aesthetic sphere to be historically dynamic and open; therefore, extra-aesthetic values are inevitably embedded in works of art. For Gramsci, the premise of a new kind of literature for Italy, referred to as a national-popular literature, has to be historical, political and popular. It must aim at elaborating that which already is, whether politically or in some other way does not matter. What does matter, though, is that it sink its roots into the *humus* of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and tendencies and with its moral and intellectual world. (as cited in Boelhower, 2002: 193)

History, according to Gramsci, is essentially cultural politics involving the struggle of members of the subaltern classes, whose point

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, see Green (2002).

of view is described as national-popular (Boelhower, 2002: 190). He believed that Italian writers were detached from the people and had a condescending view of them. In other words, they did not have a national-popular attitude towards the people, and this resulted in their inability to represent the people as characters with inner life and deep moral personality. Thus, a new literature was needed and it had to be a kind of literature that sustains a dynamic relationship between writers and people who share the same worldview (Boelhower, 2002: 197-198).

Gramsci also argued that crucial to the success of the formation of a new cultural hegemony of the working classes is the role of the intellectuals who identify with the working classes. He referred to them as 'organic intellectuals' and emphasized that they had to align themselves with the subaltern classes and possess the national-popular attitude. In stressing the importance of organic intellectuals with regard to their pivotal role in 'organizing' the masses, Gramsci writes,

Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an elite of intellectuals. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is, without organizers and leaders. (Gramsci, 19714: 334)

Because of his conviction that Italy in essence lacked a national-popular culture, Gramsci was convinced that it had to be fought for and that organic intellectuals had a key role to play in this struggle. Gramsci also acknowledged that the masses tended to possess 'contradictory consciousness' that could lead to moral and political passivity. According to him, 'man-in-the mass' had

two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not

without consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of the will, with varying efficacy, but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity. (Gramsci, 1971a: 333)

Gramsci, therefore, recognized the importance of organic intellectuals or those who are progressive and have a critical consciousness of the world and who identify with or are from the subaltern classes. According to Gramsci, the role of organic intellectuals is to fuse theory with practice and to restructure society by questioning and finding ways to transform existing conditions. Organic intellectuals are also tasked with the duty of collaborating with the masses as well as enhancing and reinforcing emergent elements constructive to positive social changes (Lears, 2002: 326-327; Boelhower, 2002: 176-177). What organic intellectuals also do is to provide coherent narratives that reflect and resonate with the worldview of the subaltern (Crehan, 2009: 36-37).

Central to Gramsci's analysis of the consciousness of the masses was his critique of ordinary people's 'spontaneous philosophy' namely, 'common sense' and 'folklore.' He defined 'common sense' as the most widespread and often implicit conception of life and moral values, which do not remain rigid or static. However, this conception of life or world view is largely passive, lacking in critical consciousness and subject to the dominant classes' ideologies. He also regarded 'common sense' as largely fragmentary, even though it may give the illusion of being coherent. In his view, "common sense is an equivocal, contradictory, and multiform concept and that to refer to common sense as proof of a truth makes no sense" (as cited in Liguori, 2009: 128).

Furthermore, because of its conservative and pre-modern character, 'common sense' was seen as not constructive to revolutionary struggle. In Gramsci's view, 'common sense' has to be replaced by a new 'common sense' or a new perception of the world (Liguori, 2009:

124-127). However, as observed by Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, for this new conception of the world to be widely accepted, it cannot simply dismiss 'common sense.' Instead it must pay attention to 'good sense' or the 'healthy nucleus' of 'common sense,' which is regarded as more advanced than 'common sense' since it possesses greater capacity for critical thought (Gencarella, 2010: 231). In sum, Gramsci treated 'common sense' as part of ordinary people's spontaneous philosophy, which generally lacks critical consciousness and is often influenced by the dominant classes' hegemony. To compete with the ideologies of the dominant classes and create a new cultural hegemony, the subaltern classes need to rise above the level of 'common sense' (Liguori, 2009: 132-133).

Gramsci also offered a critique of folklore, or the ideology of the subaltern groups, by arguing that folklore, which in his view also includes practices such as magic, beliefs in spirits, superstitions, witchcraft, proverbs, fables and popular moralities (Gencarella, 2010: 225), was a human construction deeply influenced by historical factors that functions to provide the subaltern with a means to rationalize the world and cope with hardships (Landy, 2002: 175-177). However, Gramsci recognized the importance of folklore and his conceptualization of it could be seen as offering a significant contribution to folklore studies, particularly with regard to the potentially counter-hegemonic role of folklore (Gencarella, 2010: 237-238). Nonetheless, Gramsci contended that folklore lacks self-consciousness and because of this, it is inadequate. He therefore believed that raising the consciousness of the subaltern groups is essential to enable them to have a more critical and coherent conception of the world. Moreover, as mentioned previously, he saw 'organic intellectuals' as having a key role to play in transforming the subaltern's consciousness into a more critical consciousness or ideology (Landy, 2002: 175-177).

As stated earlier, in this article I seek to demonstrate that Uthis Haemamool's *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* can be considered a work of national-popular literature that seeks to give voice to the subaltern and to constructively critique and transform ordinary people's

spontaneous philosophy. Also significant is the novel's depiction of the development of the narrator whose role approximates that of an organic intellectual who renders subaltern experiences into a coherent and poignant narrative.<sup>3</sup>

### **Subaltern historical realities and consciousness in *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi***

*The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* is narrated from the point of view of a confused and traumatized teenage boy named Lap Lae. The narrative, largely told in flashbacks, revolves around the lives of Lap Lae and his family members, especially his parents, Pii Mai and Tip. Central to the novel's development are the experiences of subordination suffered by Lap Lae's parents and other people in their community as well as their struggles to fight against omnipotent forces to assert control over their lives and destinies. Arguably, Lap Lae's parents and Lap Lae himself can be seen as the representatives of the subaltern, as their trajectories are reminiscent of the collective experience of the oppressed in a specific historical and spatio-temporal context. Their mental and psychological states are also indicative of subaltern consciousness that mirrors the pervasive impacts of 'common sense' and folklore. The suffering and limited success of the main characters' struggles can be

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<sup>3</sup> Uthis Haemamool is not the only Thai author who can be seen as attempting, whether consciously or not, to establish national popular literature. Indeed, many S.E.A. Write Award-winning writers have sought to highlight the plight of the subaltern classes, social inequalities and other problematic issues in Thai society (Chanogkun, 2012; Chitchamnong, 2009). Nonetheless, what makes Haemamool unique is that, in his works, the nostalgic longing for and desire to bring back Thailand's 'pristine' past, 'folk wisdom' and 'lost spiritual values,' which is common among Thai Literature for Life authors with a seemingly middle-class outlook, appears to be absent. Furthermore, Haemamool's conscious attempt to avoid a didactic tone by refusing to grant his narrators/narrative voices the moral high ground, as well as his keen interest in experimenting with literary forms and intertextuality make his works impressively sophisticated. In *Juti*, his latest novel that came out in 2015 and was shortlisted for the S.E.A. Write Award, Haemamool's masterly use of literary techniques to convey thought-provoking messages is remarkable. *Juti* can also be seen as embodying a 'national-popular' vision as it centers on the lived realities, worldview, and struggles of ordinary Thais. More importantly, this latest novel encourages individuals to question, challenge and break free from the confinement of master narratives, including the ones propagated by means of state-sanctioned nationalist historiography.

seen as partly caused by their being anchored at the 'common sense' or folklore level.

## **Pii Mai**

From the outset, Lap Lae, the narrator, informs us that his late father, Pii Mai, had been the most influential figure in his life. By recounting to the readers Pii Mai's anecdotes about himself and his parents' trajectories, Lap Lae successfully establishes his father's identity as a member of a disadvantaged class who was shaped, trapped and exploited by powerful forces, and in the end was virtually deprived of his autonomy and voice. Pii Mai was initially constructed in a story told by Lap Lae as being a child brought up in an impoverished family of a couple who were war refugees from China. Fleeing the Japanese in 1941 in fear and possessing no valuable belongings, the couple had to rely on the sympathy of a generous orchard caretaker and his wealthy patron in order to survive in Thailand. They lacked security and did not even have Thai citizenship until years after settling down in Thailand.

When Pii Mai's father was fatally injured in a violent brawl, his wife and her young children had to struggle with more severe hardships. Pii Mai, the eldest son of the family, was born in 1943 and entered adulthood when Thailand was about to embark on a massive economic transformation (Haemamool, 2009: 18-27, 32). Lap Lae's narrative dwells on Pii Mai's dreams and aspirations to have a better social and economic status and his deep disappointment when things did not transpire the way he wished. Years of working for a cement factory in Saraburi province caused Pii Mai's health to deteriorate and he later died from cancer (Haemamool, 2009:56, 58, 150-151, 354-364). Significantly, that tragedy was grounded in the context of the Thai state's drive for 'modernization' and 'progress' when newly constructed and expanded highways made it possible to reach many parts of regional Thailand where numerous factories were built (Haemamool, 2009: 60-61, 130-132, 290-291). The implication is that in the name of 'development,' the lives of people like Pii Mai have been sacrificed and

his suffering is not merely personal; rather, it mirrors that of other subaltern members similarly victimized by self-serving capitalist forces and the state, which regard the lives of the masses as dispensable.

Despite Pii Mai's exploitation and defeat, he is not portrayed as a passive victim who shows no attempt to assert control over his own life or the lives of people close to him. As a parent, Pii Mai was strict, controlling and domineering and sought to inscribe his dreams and aspirations on his sons by forcing them to pursue his ambitions. His desire to force his sons to be an extension of himself and a mirror of his accomplishments is implied through the way he named them. Pii Mai chose to name his sons Lap Lae and Kaeng Khoi after the two towns he deemed most pivotal to his memories and trajectories and he showed no regard to objections raised by others, including his own wife, who believed that children should not be named after places (Haemamool, 2009: 60, 73, 150-151). Arguably, his sons' lives and the two places, Lap Lae and Kaeng Khoi, function as a space on which Pii Mai intended to construct a personal narrative based on his own memories, experiences, struggles and success. Nonetheless, Pii Mai's attempt failed. The town, Kaeng Khoi, instead of being the place that witnessed his success and prosperity, was the locale where the darkest and final chapter in his life took place. The fact that Pii Mai's land ownership in Kaeng Khoi gradually diminished, and that his youngest son defied him can also be seen as a metaphor for Pii Mai's defeat in his attempt to assert control over places and the lives of those close to him (Haemamool, 2009: 369-370, 375-376, 419-421).

Interestingly, the representation of Pii Mai's consciousness through Lap Lae's account indicates that he was profoundly influenced by 'common sense' notions – the most widespread conception of life or world view internalized by the majority of the subaltern classes. On a closer analysis, Pii Mai's characterization suggests that the 'common sense' notions he subscribed to comprised both new and older elements. The newer elements appear to be the impact of the zeal for 'development' and the prevailing belief that industrialization and new technologies could bring about wealth and happiness. The older elements

seem to be derived from the traditional patron-client culture that instills in the subaltern classes the conviction that the most viable means to secure a better life is by seeking the favor of powerful patrons. This type of 'common sense' led to Pii Mai's complicity in his own exploitation and the oppression of others. To illustrate, living in an era in which the Thai state fully embraced economic development and industrialization, Pii Mai was convinced that his job with a newly-established cement company, which signifies industrialization, would pave a secure future for himself and his family (Haemamool, 2009: 60-61, 207). He uncritically accepted the idea that a secure path to wealth and success is through technical skills and scientific knowledge, and forced his son Lap Lae to pursue studies in those areas in the belief that a bright future would await him (Haemamool, 2009: 150-151). Lap Lae, however, was unwilling to go along with his father's dreams and ambitions and in the end openly rebelled against his father, whom he saw as an oppressor (Haemamool, 2009: 329-334, 420-421).

Pii Mai's conception of life or 'common sense' was also influenced by old elements derived from the traditional patronage system. He perceived the cement company he worked for as his patron and expected protection and security from it in return for his loyalty and commitment (Haemamool, 2009: 60-61). Yet his expectations did not materialize, as the company treated him as merely another one of its dispensable workers (Haemamool, 2009: 360, 365-366). Pii Mai also regarded his relationship with the state as that between a client and patron. He appears to us as a model citizen who enthusiastically complied with the state's requirements, including its compulsory recruitment of young men to serve in its military forces (Haemamool, 2009: 33-34). Sadly, the state failed to protect his rights and even became complicit with capitalism in objectifying and exploiting him. When no longer considered useful, he was simply discarded. Lap Lae's pain and resentment when relating the appalling way his ill-stricken father had been treated by the cement company and afterwards, when witnessing his late father's identity being deleted from their house registration (and replaced by the word "deceased"), metaphorically articulates the

collective powerlessness of the exploited (Haemamool, 2009: 359-360, 366).

Of note is that earlier Pii Mai also had wanted to establish himself as a patron, seeing it as a way to gain recognition and respect from others in his community. This he attempted to accomplish by being cordial and generous to people in the same village and providing assistance to them whenever he could. During the prime period of his life, Pii Mai derived much satisfaction from other villagers' high regard for him and the honorary name the community members bestowed on him as their 'Father' (Haemamool, 2009: 215-218, 293-294). This recognition, however, gave him only temporary fulfillment as he later realized that he lacked the means to build up a strong network of 'clients' and was unable to compete with other 'patrons' in the community, particularly his more affluent friend Sert, and Sert's wife, Urai (Haemamool, 2009: 294-295).

It is apparent that what is absent is Pii Mai's class consciousness or an attempt to politically organize or bond with people of the same class to empower himself and others against oppressive forces. In the hope of accessing economic and social security, Pii Mai sought to fulfill the obligations imposed on him by his employer and the state, and to found a small-scale client-patron network to respond to his need for public recognition and respect. To apply Gramsci's idea to the analysis, it could be argued that Pii Mai's consciousness had not been transformed from "the purely individual to the economic to the political and hegemonic," or from "the particular to the universal" (Fontana, 2002: 69).

This arrested consciousness can be seen as the manifestation of the influence of 'common sense' on the subaltern's conception of life. The novel's depiction of others who live in the same community as Pii Mai reveals that they share the same conception of life or world view. The persistence of patron-client culture results in the inability of the people in the community to act in a way that politically and socially benefits the common good. The majority of them appear to concentrate on fending for themselves and their families, seeking patrons whom

they perceive can assist them or make their lives better (Haemamool, 2009: 295). Politically, they are powerless as they lack the class consciousness that would bind them together and motivate them to join hands to establish a new hegemony of the working classes. When some of them become economically successful, they are absorbed into the upper echelons of society and actively help sustain the ruling hegemony. Good examples are Sert and his wife, who took advantage of the economic boom and the real estate craze to enrich themselves and then made use of the patronage system to secure their wealth and social status. The couple's connections with high-ranking bureaucrats and powerful provincial figures immensely benefited their business enterprise and social status, and they kept a distance from others in the same community as they saw themselves as economically and socially superior (Haemamool, 2009: 177-180, 185-186, 295). Nevertheless, the possibility that the consciousness of a subaltern member can transcend individual interests to encompass the interests of other oppressed or exploited groups is also hinted in the novel through the characterization of Pao. A young man of rural origins, his political consciousness transcends narrow personal economic interest to include the interests of other maltreated and oppressed groups. This is evident in his empathy and active involvement in the fight against oppressive regimes and his willingness to help those in need without expecting something in return (Haemamool, 2009: 305-306, 388, 377-381).

In addition to subjecting the client-patron culture manifested in the subaltern 'common sense' to scrutiny, the novel also critiques other 'common sense' notions shaped by patriarchal values that sustain and promote male hegemony. Significantly, Gramsci recognized the parallel between the plight of women and other members of the subaltern groups, such as peasants and workers, and he was highly critical of the fascist ideology that emphasizes sexual differences and at the same time characterizes men as efficient, loyal and crucial in serving the state while assigning women domestic roles such as family guardian, nurturer and mother (Landy, 2002: 181). This criticism of gender inequality is also implied in *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* through the depiction of Pii

Mai as a product of patriarchal culture, and the oppression suffered by his wife, Tip, who can be seen as the victim of a society dominated by male hegemony. Before discussing the unequal power relations between Pii Mai and Tip, it is important to provide some background information about the latter.

## **Tip**

Tip's experiences mirror those of other subaltern members, especially women who do not belong to ethnically dominant groups. When recounting his mother's life, Lap Lae associates her with a well-known country song, "Sao Isaan Ror Rak" [Isaan Girl Waits for Love], implicitly suggesting that, as a young woman, his mother's presumed identity is shared by other rural Northeastern or Isaan women of the 1970s. The song's persona is an upcountry Isaan girl who expresses her loneliness and longing to have a lover, and at the same time emphasizes her lowly status and humility, as she is aware that rural Isaan girls tend to be looked down on and their dark skin is not considered attractive by mainstream Thai culture (Haemamool, 2009: 74-75). The song subtly reflects the traditional patriarchal norm that objectifies women and assigns to them a passive role—that women are merely objects to be chosen by men. The association of Tip with the song thus implies that Tip's life is subjected to subordination as well as the bias and prejudice against Isaan women. This is revealed when Tip visits Pii Mai's relatives in a Central Thai province and feels ashamed of her inability to pronounce certain consonant sounds of the Central Thai dialect (Haemamool, 2009: 93). Her embarrassment is symbolic of her perceived inferior status of Isaan people, whose dialect can be treated with condescension by those who constitute the dominant groups in Thai society. Tip's failure to master the type of dialect valued by the dominant groups also indicates her lack of access to linguistic power or privilege. Pii Mai also warned Tip not to talk to their children in the Isaan dialect, sarcastically predicting that if she did not stop doing so, their boys would grow up unable to speak the proper Central Thai

dialect and become 'Lao,' an identity he obviously looked down upon as it is stereotypically associated with unrefined and uneducated country folk (Haemamool, 2009: 97). Also, he often made it obvious to Tip that he was disdainful of her Isaan identity (Haemamool, 2009: 83, 104, 156). Interestingly, Gramsci's concept of competition among linguistic expressions, drawn from Bartoli, is pertinent to the perceived inferiority of the Isaan or Lao dialect. This concept highlights the tensions between linguistic expressions relegated to the margin and those regarded as superior or more privileged as the latter are promoted by those who are more politically and culturally powerful, or the ruling hegemony. This domination through cultural and linguistic influence is central to Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Gencarella, 2010: 230).

The image of the passive Khon Kaen girl in the song also foreshadows Tip's subordination to Pii Mai and their unhappy marriage resulting from Pii Mai's domineering and controlling personality and his subscription to stereotypical gender roles and relations dictated by patriarchy (Haemamool, 2009: 157, 174-175, 341-344). Despite her resentment against her husband's controlling personality, Tip also accepted patriarchal values and they appeared to influence and shape her world view or 'common sense,' leading to a 'contradictory consciousness,' which, according to Gramsci, deprives the oppressed of effective means to voice their experience of oppression and subordination, and eventually subjects them to passivity (Lears, 2002: 326-327). To explain, Tip publicly accepted the superior position of her husband as the leader and provider of the family. And while she complained that he did not treat her well, she was often unable to challenge her husband's authority and had to let him make important decisions about their family. Tip's solace mainly came from activities she engaged in with other housewives in the same neighborhood, such as playing cards, chatting and sharing the dishes she cooked with them. Being superstitious and convinced that spirits sometimes chose her as a medium to communicate to the human world, Tip often sought help from the spirits, hoping that they would bring her luck by revealing winning lottery numbers to her (Haemamool, 2009: 75, 77, 99-101,

155-156, 163-164, 247, 346-347 ). Significantly, when Tip could no longer endure the oppressive marriage, she became 'possessed,' which can be seen as an unconscious means to temporarily liberate herself from her husband's oppression. While being 'possessed,' Tip was able to deride her husband in front of other people and did not have to be confined to the role of submissive wife assigned to her by society. In other words, once 'possessed,' Tip could treat her husband as an inferior being who had angered the spirits and therefore deserved to be publicly humiliated and punished. Thus, while being 'possessed,' Tip held power beyond what is permitted in normal circumstances (Haemamool, 2009:348-352). However, while acting as a spirit medium offered her a temporary channel to release her anger and frustration, it could not really free Tip from her subordination and subjugation to patriarchal norms. As Gramsci maintained, despite their potentially counter-hegemonic role, folkloric practices such as superstitions and beliefs in spirits lack critical consciousness and have limited use. Thus, the subaltern needs to rise beyond spontaneous philosophy in order to achieve a viable strategy to fight against oppression and exploitation (Landy, 2002: 175-177).

In the novel, other people in the community are similar to Tip in their reliance on superstition as a source of psychological support, solace and resistance. The latter function was most evident when the villagers strived to preserve their traditional way of life against 'progress' and 'modernization,' which came in the form of expanded highways that led to the state authorities' decision to remove the community's gigantic tree. The tree was considered sacred by the villagers as many of them believed that the spirits residing in the tree could bestow good luck on them. Superstitious tales surrounding the supernatural power of the tree had been built up to the extent that the state authorities temporarily gave up the plan to cut it down (Haemamool, 2009: 136-139). Nevertheless, the villagers were not able to protect the tree despite their belief in its sacredness and it was eventually removed. The collapse of the tree, arguably, is symbolic of the villagers' defeat in defending their faith and traditional way of life,

and the limited usefulness of folkloric beliefs and practices in functioning as viable agents of resistance (Haemamool, 2009: 392-393).

The critique of superstition is also evident in the last section of the novel, which features Lap Lae's conversation with the abbot of the forest temple where he was sent by his mother. The abbot's views echo those of the renowned reformist monk, Buddhadasa, who sought to rid Thai Buddhism of its superstitious aspects and replace them with rational ideas.<sup>4</sup> According to the abbot, who once had sought immortality for the people he loved through superstitious means, superstitions are unable to offer a way out from human suffering. He had come to believe that rationalist or reformist Buddhism, which provides a clear and rational guideline for those who seek freedom from suffering, is much superior to superstition. When asked by Tip and other villagers to perform an exorcism on Lap Lae, whom they believed had been possessed, the abbot did not agree as he did not believe that Lap Lae was possessed by an evil spirit. However, in the end, he had to go along with Tip's request in order to relieve her anxiety and enable her to reconcile with Lap Lae. Afterwards, however, he explained to Lap Lae why he had to perform the exorcism even though he had no faith in it (Haemamool, 2009: 439-440). As the abbot is presented as a figure of respect who plays a pivotal role in helping Lap Lae overcome his personal turmoil and providing some resolution to the narrative, his critique of superstitious beliefs and practices significantly undermines such folklore. Nevertheless, there is the suggestion that, while the abbot is wise, his view about life and suffering is not the only correct one, and such a view can still be subject to investigation, as will be examined in association with Lap Lae's role as a potential organic intellectual.

### **Organic intellectuals and the forging of the aesthetic with subaltern experience**

In making Lap Lae recount the subalternity of his parents and people in his community, the novel also succeeds in establishing Lap Lae's

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<sup>4</sup> For more details about Buddhadasa and his reforms of Buddhism, see Jackson (2003).

identity as an aspiring writer. Lap Lae's developing ability and success in rendering the painful experiences of himself, his parents and some people he knows into a coherent and convincing narrative that resonates with the realities of the subaltern make it possible for us to regard him as a potential organic intellectual of the working class. That is, someone who is able to critique, transcend and transform the people's spontaneous philosophy into a more critical consciousness (Crehan, 2009: 36-37; Boelhower, 2002: 176-177). To illustrate, the novel opens with Lap Lae, the teenager narrator, relating to us that his mother is taking him somewhere against his will and he believes that she wants to get rid of him. It is clear that he resents the way his mother treats him and is upset that she seems to forget his late father and does not hesitate to have a new husband. Lap Lae soon realizes that his mother and her new lover are taking him to a forest temple to be taken care of by the temple's abbot. Once there, he is encouraged by the kind abbot to recount what has happened to him that eventually led to his mother's decision to bring take him there (Haemamool, 2009: 1-13). In the story told by Lap Lae, which constitutes the main narrative of the novel, he is the younger son of the family, and unlike his rebellious elder brother who is a few years older, he has tried his best to be an obedient son as he does not want to disappoint his father. However, as Lap Lae's narrative moves towards its ending, we become aware that Lap Lae has created an elaborate lie regarding the existence of his elder brother. This falsehood is exposed when Lap Lae's mother contradicts him by supplying the information that Lap Lae's brother died when he was very young; thus, Kaeng Khoi, the teenage elder brother in Lap Lae's narrative turns out to be a fictional construct (Haemamool, 2009: 415-422). Arguably, the contestation of Lap Lae's narrative provided by his mother helps reveal an important trait in Lap Lae—a 'contradictory consciousness,' which, according to Gramsci, is the contradiction between the conception of life imposed on the subaltern by mainstream norms and the subaltern's awareness of their real conditions arising from their lived realities (Lears, 2002: 326-327). To explain, in Lap Lae's account of his relationship with his father, he emphasizes the bond between the two of them and his attempts

to be obedient and to please his father. He also tries to distance himself from his mother and elder brother, always blaming them for disappointing his father (Haemamool, 2009: 157-158, 269-270, 273, 363). In other words, through his narrative, Lap Lae seeks to establish for himself the identity of a good son who conforms to the values that sustain male hegemony. It can be argued that, on one level, Lap Lae's narrative is his attempt to deal with guilt—to somehow redeem himself after rebelling against his father by creating a new identity for himself as a son his father has always wanted him to be, and constructing an elder brother as a son who challenges and defies his authoritarian father. On another level, it is also possible to maintain that, as a subaltern, Lap Lae initially lacks the language to express his desire to challenge domination and oppression of the patriarchy represented by his father. In spite of his deep-seated desire to fight against the tyranny of patriarchy, his consciousness, as reflected through his narrative, is still dominated by a patriarchal worldview. The result is a narrative that conforms to 'common sense' notions influenced by patriarchal culture and its rigid demarcation of gender roles and sexualities, more than reflecting the awareness of his oppressed stage. In order to adhere to this type of 'common sense,' Lap Lae needs to create another identity, that of an elder brother who fearlessly defies his father and in doing so radically challenges patriarchal norms, something Lap Lae does not want to accept that he himself is capable of doing. In Lap Lae's account, Kaeng Khoi was the one who refused to follow the study and career path his father had designated for him and later ran away from home (Haemamool, 2009: 333-334). Before that, Kaeng Khoi's reckless obsession with fun and sexual curiosity led him to trick their neighbors' daughters to join a game considered highly indecent by the adults, causing a serious conflict between his parents and the parents of the girls (Haemamool, 2009: 262-271, 312-323). Lap Lae also reveals that Kaeng Khoi had engaged in a homosexual relationship with his close friend (Haemamool, 2009: 402-403). According to Lap Lae, he sees his brother as a repulsive character who destroyed his own family, and he confessed to the abbot that he had killed his brother by pushing him off

a cliff as he could no longer stand him (Haemamool, 2009: 278, 404-405). Lap Lae's account of the imaginary Kaeng Khoi's personality and behavior and his act of murdering him reflect Lap Lae's desire to suppress the rebellious instinct within himself, and to conform to what mainstream norms and values, or 'common sense,' expect of him. Nonetheless, towards the end of the novel, Lap Lae's ability to supersede and replace 'common sense' with a more critical worldview indicates his significant development. His increased critical consciousness is suggested through his new perceptions of his parents. His resentment against his mother evaporates and he shows greater understanding and empathy towards her, acknowledging her resilience and ability to forgive and learn from what life has to offer (Haemamool, 2009: 434). Furthermore, Lap Lae's reflection about his father's tragic death, the cause of the death, and the way his father's illness and death are treated by those with power show his discerning ability to see how the state collaborates with big corporations to exploit and disempower members of the subaltern classes like his father (Haemamool, 2009: 365-366, 392-393).

Significantly, in this novel, we also see how the author seeks to forge the act of writing with the subaltern's lived realities; this corresponds with Gramsci's advocating of 'national-popular' literature that involves struggles of members of the subaltern classes (Boelhower, 2002: 190). The novel's national popular vision is discerned in the portrayal of Lap Lae as someone whose inspiration to experiment with narratives initially stems from personal suffering and his encounter with the oppression and exploitation of people close to him who belong to the subaltern classes. Implicit in the novel is also the suggestion that the role of the author of fiction is not simply to objectively represent the lived realities of the subaltern classes, but also to raise 'common sense' and folkloric conceptions of the world to a higher and more critical level. Throughout the novel, readers witness Lap Lae's development through his encounters with ordinary people's spontaneous philosophy, and, eventually, his ability to supersede it. This is most evident in the last part of the novel, a flash forward to ten years later, which dwells on Lap Lae's contemplation of his past experiences and the insights he

gains from them. Moreover, the flash forward lends authority to the older Lap Lae who has begun his career as a writer. Unlike his superstitious mother who is anchored to the uncritical conception of life or folkloric level, he recognizes superstitious fear as stemming from human emotional and psychological insecurities. And he realizes that his fear of the ghost Pret, experienced while residing at the forest temple, reflects his own suffocating guilt, shame and internal turmoil that struggle to find a voice and a channel of release (Haemamool, 2009: 113-114, 442-443). Crucially, the older Lap Lae is eventually able to transform the bereavement he has experienced into a crucial resource for his writing career, and in so doing find a voice to express not only his own trauma, but also the collective experiences of the oppressed classes. Additionally, the novel's attempt to establish a dialectical relationship between subaltern worldview, literary creation and a more critical and sophisticated conception of the world can also be observed in the author's ingenious use of the legend of Lap Lae town, after which the narrator Lap Lae is named after and the symbolic meanings conferred on him through his name. To explain, according to the old legend about Lap Lae town, the inhabitants were all women, who regard truthfulness as the most important value and do not tolerate lies. As men tend to lie and go back on their word, they had all been expelled from the town until one day when a lone traveler lost his way and accidentally wandered into the town. The traveler fell in love with one of the Lap Lae women and afterwards they got married and had a child together. The man promised his wife that he would never lie. One day, however, the husband was alone with his baby who was crying for its mother, and no matter how hard he tried to comfort the baby, it would not stop crying. Desperate, he told the baby that the mother had finally arrived home, although at that time the mother was nowhere to be seen. Soon afterwards this minor and harmless lie became known to others and the man was forced to leave the town as he had failed to adhere to the town's important code of conduct—that one must not tell lies. Before leaving the town, his wife gave him a cloth bag and forbade him to look inside it until after he got to his hometown. He promised her that he would do

as she asked, but his curiosity got the better of him and he broke the promise. As a consequence, he lost most of the hidden gold his wife had put in the bag as her parting gift (Haemamool, 2009: 43-44). The legend is clearly part of the folkloric belief system which aims to impart a moral lesson that cautions people about the adverse effects of telling lies and going back on one's word, with the meanings of truths and lies being extremely literal. In the novel, however, the meanings of truths and lies associated with the Lap Lae legend appear to be transformed. The narrator is named after the town Lap Lae, and, towards the end of the novel, he perceives his role as the "seeker after a place where bereavement leads to truth. And to a place where it is quite clear that I am not telling lies, and cannot be counted as the child or progeny of falsehood in any way it is commonly understood" (Haemamool, 2012: 484). Lap Lae's perception of himself defines and sums up the role of a fiction writer as a person who employs his/her skills to express their versions of truth—creating narratives that mirror what things should be, rather than simply mimicking realities, or, in other words, as a person who "sculpts out what is misleading, leaving only beauty" (Haemamool, 2012: 485).

## Conclusion

To conclude, *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi* can be seen as a narrative that gives voices to the subaltern, as represented by the narrator's parents and the narrator himself. In depicting historical realities from the point of view of subaltern members, the novel critiques the weaknesses and drawbacks of the subaltern's spontaneous philosophy namely, 'common sense,' and folklore, and foregrounds the importance of an organic intellectual who originates from a subaltern class and is familiar with the subordination as well as the limitations of his own class. The development of the narrator through the stories he tells about himself and his parents is metaphorically the maturing process of someone who has the potential to play the role of an organic intellectual, specifically that of a writer who renders the subordination and suffering of himself

and his class members into a coherent narrative. Significantly, the narrator's development is also shown as intricately linked with his contact with the subaltern's 'common sense' and folklore. Yet the narrator is also shown as someone who is eventually able to negotiate his own path through spontaneous philosophy without allowing himself to be trapped or arrested by it, and to reconstruct it into a modern mentality through a critical consciousness.

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