

REALISM AND VERACITY IN ATSIRI THAMMACHOTE'S SHORT STORIES

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As an introductory note to his book of short stories- '*Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*', the much celebrated Japanese author Haruki Murakami wrote, "If writing novels is like planting a forest, then writing short stories is more like planting a garden", while "A short story is like a kiss in the dark from a stranger", says Stephen King. Thus short stories though smaller in length when compared with a novel open doors of wisdom and reality and this is true of Thai writer Atsiri Thammachote's stories which were written during the last two decades.

Thailand was besieged with an uprising after 1976. A good deal of the literature after that point of time reflects Thai society realistically. It emphasizes the fact that literature is not necessarily a fantasy but something related to society and real life. Realism, thus, became one of the most popular modes in Thai literature. Among modern Thai writers, Atsiri Thammachot is one of the most renowned realists.

Atsiri Thammachot, winner of the Southeast Asian Writers Award in 1981, was born in Bangkok but grew up in Prachuap Khiri Khan, a seaside province, where his family had been grocers before investing in a fishing boat. He finished his primary and secondary education in Prachuap Khiri Khan before he came to Bangkok to pursue his education at the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

In the second year at Chulalongkorn University, he wrote his first short story, *The Elder's Realization*, which won him third prize in a writing competition of Literature Club, Chulalongkorn University. He then turned to write film reviews and articles on entertainment and politics both for weekly magazines and a daily newspaper, using the pen-name, Chalom, after the name of his eldest brother.

The political event of 6 October 1976, in which students from various universities were demonstrating against the return to Thailand of former military dictator Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, prompted him to resume writing short stories. The event deeply moved him as it was an attack on students and protesters. The story, *She's still alive at least in my heart*, was

first published in a Thai popular weekly magazine, *Siam Rath*. Two years later it was published under the title *Kunthong, you will return at dawn*: they would earn him the 1981 SEA Writers Award. Many of his stories were translated into English and other languages. Two of his short stories, *Blue World* and *Festivals in the fields* were awarded in National Book Fairs in 1986 and 1987 respectively.

After working as a journalist for *Siam Rath* for about seven years, he left to help launch *Matuphoom* and then the weekly *Soo Anakhot*, only to return eventually to *Siam Rath*. He was named a National Artist for Literature in the year 2000, and in the same year was honoured as an outstanding journalist by the Thai Journalist Association. He has also written screenplays for TV dramas.

Atsiri is renowned as exceptionally talented in terms of artfully created language. He is revered by Thai readers and critics as a master of the artistry of the Thai Language. His poetic prose style of writing makes him known as a “poetic prose writer” because of his stylish and eloquent use of language.

Realism in Atsiri’s stories

Atsiri’s materials are what he faces in his life. His work is not for mere entertainment or aesthetic pleasure but a reflection of real life and society. What he portrays in his stories are facts that help his readers to get to know reality and to experience “the real problems”, which engage Thai society realistically.

This reality is illustrated in *What’s Gone Is Gone*- Atsiri Thammachote’s soul searching saga of a young village girl who seeks love from her family after a particularly bad accident where she loses her hand. The young woman is working in Bangkok to support her poor family. After losing her hand in the factory accident she returns home expecting to find love and compassion from her rural family. Instead her parents and sisters are only interested in the money she has received as compensation and discuss schemes how to use the money. Only her grandfather understands and sympathizes with the young woman. One night robbers attack her house in search of the money and kill grandfather and the woman’s beloved dog. The next day at grandfather’s funeral the headman who had been given the money for safe keeping returns the money to the family.

The greed and avarice she found amongst her parents and only sister made her infinitely depressed. The story revolves around the young woman’s dis-illusion with her family as they discuss the money aspect and do not seem particularly sympathetic towards the loss of her hand and the ensuing trauma which it had caused her. Even the mother’s eyes shine with greed when the young woman opens her bag to reveal the bundle of money.

Secondly this story shows us the changing lifestyle among rural Thai people. The traditional way of life which was highly valued in the past has been compromised by the monetary system and materialistic values. Not only has the traditional way of life changed, but the values about relationships within a family have also altered. Economic gain seems to be more important than family ties. Though the young woman had worked hard and sent money home to the family, all they could think about was her money and what to buy with it: “We can buy things that we have never had. We can think of what’s left later.” says the young sister. (Thammachote, 116) Further, when the grandfather died the father said “Good luck comes together with bad luck.” (120) For him, ‘good luck’ was the money while ‘bad luck’ was the

death of the old man who had been heartlessly gunned down by robbers who wanted to steal her money.

This story took place in a remote village in Thailand. This rural village is seen as a place full of changes since traditional values are replaced by materialistic ones. Life in the village, which used to be peaceful, simple and safe, has changed to a dangerous one. The young woman's house was raided the same night as her arrival. Her grandfather and beloved dog lose their lives as a consequence. Thus simple rural folk have turned to materialism and values of love, care and trust have been replaced by the desire for money and what money can buy.

At the end of the story the young woman leaves the house boarding a bus not knowing where she was heading. Her dismay at her family's callousness and the untimely death of her grandfather fill her with despair and melancholy. This story is full of tender anguish, suffering and sorrow. It shows the unsympathetic attitude of the parents and sister who are more interested in the money. Money is the pivot which keeps people attracted. Love, empathy and tenderness are not to be seen even within the family. This augurs the breakup of family ties and loving relationships between siblings and even parental love and concern are questioned. It heralds a new note in family relationships.

This is Atsiri Thammachote at his best. A story which is simple in form but in-depth in the values questioned. Like many other countries Thailand has modernized in many respects. Old values are falling apart and new paradigms of relationships are emerging. It signals the end of the old era and the new dimensions of family, love and affiliations.

On the Route of a Rabid Dog is one of Atsiri's incisive stories even closer to reality which depicts two men: An old man trying to make love to his young wife and an alcoholic father trying to steal money from his son to buy a drink. The metaphoric implications of "a rabid dog" are evident; both men are akin to a rabid dog. The metaphor is very subtle and ingenious.

The first character is an old man. He is jealous of his wife's imagined infidelity. He tries to make love to her in spite of her pleading that she does not want to. However, the lustful old man repeatedly tries to make love to his young wife. After his efforts have proven futile, his wife "Looks into the depth of his eyes. They are staring aimlessly, empty of thought, but filled with senseless pain-like the eyes of the rabid dog! She thinks of the dog that ran past her on the laterite road..."(180)

The other man is an alcoholic father who runs after his son trying to get his wife's money from him-"Just enough for a little drink". (181) His craving for the liquor is strong and he loses control of himself. He is analogous to a rabid dog:

"As he chases his son for the money, saliva begins to dribble from his mouth, his swollen tongue appearing between his teeth. His breathing grows louder and he begins emitting low, animal-like cries-like the beast that has just passed out of sight."(182)

The story ends with the death of the rabid dog poetically. "The sun drops behind the mountains-and dig, men and the laterite road-all dissolve into the invisible flow of time." (182)

Thus the story deals with man's baser instincts, almost like an animal whether portrayed in the lust of the old man or the avaricious drunkard who craves for the clear liquid and who is ready to steal from his own wife and child for the same. The story is incisive, brutal and startling.

Veracity and Pathos in Atsiri's stories

Nightfall on the Waterway is a short story full of pathos which highlights the problem of moral values in the face of crushing poverty. The story illuminates the dilemma of a poor water melon seller who loves his family but is unable to provide them what they desire due to his abject poverty.

The story describes a water melon seller returning to his abode one evening after a visit to the market. The day had been disappointing for him because he was not able to sell his fruit to the wholesaler for a profit. The man is dejected since he cannot buy a small gift for his wife which he had promised her. All she wanted was a blouse, a trifle, yet the water melon seller; her husband could not fulfill the wish.

As he meanders down the *klong* paddling with the fading evening light casting an eerie ambience around him, the seller chances upon the dead body of a young child. The corpse is horribly bloated and has a strange hue having been in the water for a long time. Initially the water melon seller thinks of calling the police and sounding an alarm. But suddenly he spies a gold object glinting in the water. He was sorely tempted to keep what he had found. He could picture his wife's happiness when he bought her a new blouse and even a new *phanung* (cloth) to go with it. Moreover, "For the first time he would enjoy the happiness of spending without the twinges of pain that always came from the parting with hard earned money (157).

Steeling up to confront the mass of putrid flesh the water melon seller prods and probes till the chain of yellow metal is in his hand. He has to cut into the soft swollen flesh of the dead child's fingers. He gags at the stench but continues with the task, retching copiously.

As he paddles back home to his family his heart is filled with elation. His unexpected luck had brought him a windfall that could prove a boon for himself and his family. The child's parents were forgotten and so were the tricky aspects of truth, uprightness and honesty. His poverty had been debilitating in the past. His future was bright. His conscience was untouched.

This short story brings to light two aspects of life: poverty and moral values: When a completely poor man forgets moral values and rejoices in his unexpected find we as readers, can we find it in our hearts to forgive him? The question which arises here is whether it would have been right for the watermelon seller to inform the police and the parents of the young child regarding the child's unfortunate fate? Is the poor man who so wants to please his wife absolved of all civic duties and his action of claiming the gold chain as his own justified?

The story brings out the terrible suffering of poverty, the complete helplessness of a hard-working watermelon seller who had to sell his melons at a lower price to the wholesaler instead of losing out completely on his crop. The exploitative nature of his business is apparent and so is the grief and sorrow that go with it. His waiting wife and he would have to face "more back breaking drudgery, more stoic patience and above all, more waiting." (154) However the unexpected find on the lonely *klong* (canal) could buy them all they desired.

The story throws up a moral dilemma in its unexpected ending. It coerces us to think deeply about human values and dignity. We feel sorry for the plight of the young child lying limp and dead on the waters of the *klong* for days. Its fate is highlighted when the melon seller "was sharply conscious of the poignancy and of the sadness and loneliness of man's individual destiny." (156) The story brings out the inevitable abruptness of death which steals upon all mortals, often unsuspectingly. It emphasizes the fact that all mortals come into this world alone and pass away from it all by themselves, alone. Such is fate and human mortality.

Theme of Love in Atsiri Thammachote's short stories

Love has always been one of the most successful themes in literature. The theme of love has been a recurrent one in literature because people always seem to be interested in someone else's love life. It is so, perhaps, because they are pleased to know that there are people who have loved, lived and suffered just like them or like they wish they had. Despite being a realist, Atsiri Thammachote deals with the theme of love too. For him, love has been treated in various ways in his short stories.

Love of a parent is very prominent in his short stories. As Atsiri aims to mirror the life of the poor and the needy struggling for survival, parents in his stories tend to be poverty-stricken folks who are ready to sacrifice themselves for their families. In *Nightfall on the Waterway*, the watermelon grower excuses himself after he has cut the baby corpse's wrist to get a gold chain. He forgets about compassion he has felt for the baby corpse when he initially finds it. This is because he really wants to make his family happy. "He was elated by visions of his careworn wife wearing the lace blouse she had so long waited for... and he would get clothes for their child and for himself." (157) For him his family's happiness is blessing "as precious to his joyless live as a shower to a drought-parched paddy field." (157) The end of this story is therefore rather disappointing for the reader as the character tends to reject ethical values and does things only to make his family happy. "He no longer had any time for thoughts about the poor little corpse. He no longer cared where it came from or whether the parents would learn of their child's fate. The little human tragedy receded to the back of his mind where only a trace of it lingered." (158)

Love, sacrifice and duty are important for Thais. Children are taught to be grateful to their parents. In *What's Gone Is Gone*, the protagonist, the young woman, leaves home to work in a factory in Bangkok, where she is wounded, because it is the duty of Thai children to return gratitude to their parents by financially supporting them. "She has possessed the will to face the problems of the world and, most of all, to bear the responsibilities of supporting her very poor family." (118) However, her gratitude is not returned by love, understanding and compassion since when the woman comes home with pain, no one in her family cares about the loss of her limb but pays attention to the compensation for the loss of her hand.

Atsiri's stories are not romantic. However, it does not mean that he does not write romances at all. Atsiri's romances are unique as he presents romantic love in his own style. One of his romances is *Phi Hae and the Love Letters*, the story of an illiterate fisherman who falls in love with a beautiful lady. He keeps on sending her letters written by a young school boy he hires as a mediator. Finally, his love becomes unrequited. The sweet lady finds out later that he is illiterate so she considers their love impossible. Atsiri presents romantic description via a series of love letters which are so sentimental. "The letter talked wistfully about a young man pursued by constant sorrow and misfortune who had to endure the winds and rain, solitude and loneliness and live in the shadow of the sea... Would his love be in vain? Could he express his heart-felt feelings through this sad pastel pink sheet of paper?" (178) As a realist, Atsiri shows the conflict between reason and emotions. Fiction and imagination are not the same. No matter how much the man loves the woman, their love is not successful due to disparity in terms of education. Apart from romantic love in this story, it is believed that Atsiri wanted to educate Thais about the life of the uneducated which is not so complicated.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Atsiri has a unique way in presenting the theme of love with its different aspects. No matter in what aspect it is presented, Atsiri successfully proves that

he can make people in Thai society understand each other's lives, especially the 'small lives' of the poor and the underprivileged so that people will be able to establish love and understanding and will be able to help and assist one another.

Thus Atsiri Thammachote's short stories present elements of love, estrangement, sadness and the bitter sweet taste of life. They prod, pierce and cajole the sensibilities with their in-depth reality of men and matter. They are bitter and acidic at times but can be savored for the real picture they present about life in Thailand and the world. They remain classic for their poetic language and perspicacity.

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