



Cultural Narratives and Identity Formation in Contemporary Thai Literature: A Humanities Perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of cultural narratives in contemporary Thai literature and their impact on identity formation in a rapidly globalizing world. Focusing on key authors such as Prabda Yoon, Chart Korbjitti, and Chakrabhand Posayakrit, the study examines how literature reflects the ongoing tension between traditional values and modern societal pressures. Through themes of identity crisis, urbanization, gender, and morality, contemporary Thai literature provides insights into both personal and collective identity formation. The paper also highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by Thai authors, particularly in the context of censorship, translation, and the rise of digital storytelling. As Thai literature continues to engage with issues of cultural identity, its future will likely be shaped by technological advancements, global recognition, and a continued negotiation between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Cultural Narratives, Identity Formation, Thai Literature, Globalization, Modernity

1 Introduction

Cultural narratives refer to the shared stories, myths, and symbols within a society that encapsulate its values, beliefs, and historical experiences. These narratives are deeply embedded in literature, as they serve to convey the collective identity of a culture. In literature, cultural narratives often explore the social, political, and ethical dimensions of a society, providing readers with a framework through which they can understand their own place within it. As a literary tool, cultural narratives help shape both individual and societal identities by offering a shared history, a set of values, and a sense of belonging. These narratives offer a lens through which individuals interpret their personal experiences in relation to broader societal shifts and historical events (Bruner, [1991](#); White, [1980](#)).

Through cultural narratives, literature plays a significant role in both preserving traditions and reflecting social changes. In doing so, literature becomes a space where societal norms and values are questioned, reaffirmed, or reimagined. For instance, in post-colonial contexts, literature often utilizes cultural narratives to reclaim identity and challenge dominant histories (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, [2000](#)). In this way, literature acts as both a mirror and a canvas, reflecting the world as it is while allowing for the reimagination of what it could be.

In the context of Thailand, contemporary literature plays a crucial role in reflecting and shaping both national and cultural identity. Over the past few decades, Thailand has





experienced rapid modernization, urbanization, and globalization, all of which have influenced its cultural landscape. Contemporary Thai literature reflects these societal shifts by exploring themes such as identity, modernity, and tradition. Thai authors use literature as a platform to address the complexities of identity in a society that is deeply rooted in tradition yet constantly negotiating the pressures of modernity.

Thai literary works often incorporate Buddhist teachings, folklore, and cultural symbols that reflect the nation's unique historical and cultural background. However, contemporary writers also challenge these traditional narratives by addressing the alienation and identity crises brought on by globalization and urbanization (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998). In this sense, contemporary Thai literature serves as a bridge between the past and the present, helping to negotiate the tensions between tradition and modernity.

Authors such as Prabda Yoon and Chart Korbjitti, for instance, use their works to explore these themes of identity, displacement, and cultural conflict, offering readers a nuanced view of the modern Thai experience. These works often delve into the struggles of individuals to reconcile their traditional values with the demands of an increasingly globalized world. By doing so, contemporary Thai literature contributes to the ongoing discourse on national identity and cultural preservation in the face of rapid societal change (Ruangcharoen, 2014).

This paper explores how contemporary Thai authors utilize cultural narratives to examine and shape identity formation in a society that is both modernizing and deeply rooted in tradition. By analyzing the works of key contemporary Thai authors, this study aims to demonstrate how literature serves as a tool for both preserving cultural identity and negotiating new social realities. Through an exploration of themes such as tradition, modernity, displacement, and identity, this paper will highlight how Thai literature reflects the complexities of a rapidly changing society and contributes to the ongoing formation of national and individual identities.

2. Historical Context of Thai Literature

2.1 Traditional vs. Modern Thai Literature

Thai literature has undergone a significant transformation over centuries, evolving from classical forms deeply rooted in Buddhist teachings and royal traditions to modern narratives that address political, social, and cultural issues. Traditional Thai literature was heavily influenced by religious and courtly settings. For example, classical texts such as *Traiphum Phra Ruang* were written in connection with the Buddhist cosmological worldview and served both religious and educational purposes (Ishii, 1986). Similarly, *Ramakien*, the Thai adaptation of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, became a key cultural and literary artifact, promoting themes of morality and kingship aligned with Thai monarchical traditions. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Thai literature remained largely confined to the elite, with royal court poets and monks producing texts that emphasized religious devotion and loyalty to the monarchy. However, as Thailand began to modernize, particularly under the reign of King Rama V, literature began to reflect the broader experiences of Thai society. Authors started addressing societal issues, moving away from the traditional religious and royal themes. The introduction of printing technology also democratized literature, allowing for a broader range of voices and themes (Thongchai, 1994). In the mid-20th century, Thai literature experienced another shift, with writers such as Kukrit Pramoj and Chart Korbjitti emerging as key figures in modern Thai literature. Their works often grappled with the impact of political unrest, the loss of traditional values, and the tensions between rural and urban life. Chart Korbjitti's *Khamphiphaksa* (The Judgment), for example, explored moral decay in modern society, symbolizing the transition





from a traditional worldview to a more fragmented, modern reality (Ruangcharoen, [2014](#)). This shift in thematic focus reflects the increasing engagement of Thai literature with contemporary social and political issues.

2.2 Impact of Westernization and Globalization

The influence of Westernization and globalization has significantly shaped modern Thai literature, introducing new themes such as identity conflict, cultural hybridization, and societal alienation. As Thailand opened itself up to the global community, especially during the post-World War II era, Western literary forms and ideologies began to permeate the Thai literary scene. This led to the adoption of new literary genres such as the novel and short story, which were previously uncommon in traditional Thai literature. Western philosophies of individualism and existentialism also found their way into the works of Thai writers, reflecting the growing tensions between tradition and modernity (Barmé, [1993](#)). One notable impact of globalization on Thai literature is the exploration of identity conflict. Thai authors such as Prabda Yoon, in works like *Multiple Personalities* and *The Sad Part Was*, often delve into the complexities of identity in a rapidly globalizing world. These stories feature characters grappling with the fragmentation of their identities as they navigate between Western influences and traditional Thai values (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)). This reflects a broader theme in modern Thai literature: the struggle to reconcile Thailand's rich cultural heritage with the pressures of modernization and Westernization. Cultural hybridization is another prominent theme in contemporary Thai literature. As Thailand integrates more deeply into the global economy and culture, Thai writers have begun to explore how external influences are reshaping Thai identity. This is evident in narratives that depict urbanization, migration, and the interaction between rural and urban worlds, which often symbolize the clash between tradition and modernity. For instance, the works of Duanwad Pimwana and Jiranan Pitprecha often highlight the dislocation and cultural hybridity experienced by individuals living in Bangkok and other rapidly modernizing areas (Morris, [2000](#)). Globalization has also allowed for the international recognition of Thai literature, with translations of key Thai works reaching a global audience. This has further influenced Thai writers to engage with global themes, as their works are now part of an international literary dialogue.

3. Cultural Narratives in Contemporary Thai Literature

3.1 Identity Crisis and Hybridization

Contemporary Thai literature often grapples with the theme of identity crisis, reflecting the tensions between tradition and modernity in a rapidly changing society. In many literary works, characters are depicted navigating the complexities of cultural hybridization, as they attempt to reconcile traditional Thai values with the influences of globalization and Westernization. These identity crises often manifest in stories where protagonists experience a sense of dislocation, both physically and emotionally, as they transition between rural and urban settings or encounter foreign influences. One prominent example is the work of Prabda Yoon, whose characters frequently embody the fragmentation of identity in the modern world. In *The Sad Part Was*, Yoon explores how individuals deal with the alienation caused by urbanization, technological advances, and global connectivity. His characters often reflect a duality, caught between their roots in traditional Thai culture and the pressures of modern life (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)). The identity crisis in Yoon's stories mirrors the broader societal experience of modern Thai people, particularly the younger generation, who must navigate a cultural landscape increasingly shaped by external influences. Additionally, authors like Chart



Korbjitti focus on the moral and existential struggles of characters as they face modern dilemmas, including ethical decay and societal fragmentation. In his novel *The Judgment*, Korbjitti presents the conflict between individual desires and societal expectations, depicting how modernization and the breakdown of traditional community structures contribute to personal identity crises (Ruangcharoen, [2014](#)).

3.2 Urbanization and Migration

Urbanization and migration are recurring themes in contemporary Thai literature, particularly as they relate to the shifting identities of individuals and communities. Many works portray the movement of people from rural villages to urban centers like Bangkok, highlighting the profound effect this has on both personal and communal identity. The dislocation experienced by characters in these narratives often symbolizes a deeper sense of loss, as they struggle to maintain their connection to traditional values and community life in the face of rapid modernization. In Duanwad Pimwana's *Bright*, the protagonist's migration from a rural village to the urban sprawl of Thailand's cities is central to the narrative. The novel explores how the protagonist's identity is reshaped by the new challenges of city life, including alienation, economic hardship, and cultural estrangement. The contrast between rural simplicity and urban complexity serves as a metaphor for the broader identity conflict facing modern Thai society (Morris, [2000](#)). Similarly, the works of Jiranan Pitpreecha often examine how rural-to-urban migration leads to the erosion of traditional family structures and communal bonds. The theme of dislocation is a critical element, as characters navigate the alien environment of the city while longing for the stability and familiarity of their rural roots. These narratives underscore the emotional and cultural toll that urbanization imposes on individuals and communities, reshaping their sense of self and belonging (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)).

3.3 Gender and Sexuality

The representation of gender roles and sexual identities in contemporary Thai literature has undergone significant transformation, particularly as authors challenge traditional norms and explore more diverse expressions of identity. In earlier Thai literature, gender roles were often depicted in alignment with societal expectations rooted in Buddhist and patriarchal values. However, contemporary writers have increasingly begun to question and subvert these traditional roles, offering more nuanced and progressive depictions of gender and sexuality. For example, in the works of S.E.A. Write Award-winning author Uthis Haemamool, the portrayal of sexuality is often fluid and complex, reflecting a departure from traditional Thai norms. In *The Brotherhood of Kaeng Khoi*, Haemamool explores themes of desire and forbidden relationships, portraying characters who struggle with their sexual identities in a society that still holds rigid gender expectations (Morris, [2000](#)). His works highlight the internal conflict experienced by individuals who do not conform to heteronormative roles, and they offer a critical perspective on the restrictive nature of traditional gender norms. Additionally, Thai literature has increasingly embraced LGBTQ+ narratives, which challenge heteronormative constructs and offer representations of diverse sexual identities. Works such as *Multiple Personalities* by Prabda Yoon feature characters who grapple with gender and sexual fluidity, reflecting broader societal changes in attitudes towards gender and identity. These works not only subvert traditional gender roles but also provide a space for exploring the complexities of modern sexual identities in Thai society (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)).

4. The Role of Literature in Identity Formation



4.1 Cultural Identity Reflection

Literature often serves as a mirror for cultural identity, reflecting societal norms, traditions, and the collective experiences of a nation or community. In contemporary Thai literature, writers delve into the cultural dynamics of Thai society, exploring how tradition, religion, and modernity coexist and conflict. Thai authors use their works to depict the complex web of cultural practices, beliefs, and values that define the Thai experience, offering readers an introspective view of their own identities in relation to these broader cultural narratives. For instance, in works like *The Judgment* by Chart Korbjitti, cultural identity is central to the narrative. The novel explores the moral decay of society in a rapidly modernizing Thailand, contrasting the protagonist's traditional upbringing with the ethical ambiguity of contemporary life. Through such narratives, Thai literature reflects the tension between preserving cultural traditions and adapting to modern societal changes (Ruangcharoen, 2014). This reflection helps readers confront the cultural shifts they witness in their daily lives, making literature a critical space for negotiating cultural identity.

4.2 Personal Identity Formation

In addition to cultural identity, literature plays a significant role in the formation of personal identity, particularly through the development of characters who grapple with issues of class, gender, and societal expectations. Contemporary Thai authors frequently use their characters to explore the nuances of personal identity, highlighting the struggles individuals face as they try to reconcile their internal desires with external pressures. Gender, for example, is a recurring theme in modern Thai literature, as writers challenge traditional gender roles and present characters who subvert societal expectations. In the works of Uthis Haemamool, characters are often portrayed as caught between personal desire and societal norms, particularly in their exploration of gender and sexuality (Morris, 2000). These characters provide a lens through which readers can examine their own experiences of identity, making literature a platform for personal reflection and growth. Class and societal expectations also play a crucial role in character development. In *Time*, a novel by Prabda Yoon, the protagonist's journey is one of internal conflict, as he struggles to define himself amidst societal pressures that expect conformity to traditional Thai values (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998). By portraying characters who grapple with these issues, contemporary Thai literature allows readers to see themselves reflected in the narrative, facilitating a deeper understanding of their own identity formation.

4.3 Case Studies

Several notable works in contemporary Thai literature provide rich examples of how cultural narratives are used to explore identity formation. Chart Korbjitti's *The Judgment* is one such example. The novel examines the life of a protagonist who is caught in a moral and existential crisis, representing the internal struggle between traditional Thai values and the pressures of modernization (Ruangcharoen, 2014). The cultural narrative of maintaining honor and the collective societal gaze is central to the protagonist's personal conflict, highlighting the societal influence on identity formation. Prabda Yoon's *The Sad Part Was* also offers a compelling case study. The stories within this collection focus on characters experiencing emotional and psychological displacement in a modern, globalized world. Yoon's writing often plays with fragmented identities, where the characters' sense of self is constantly evolving and influenced by both local culture and global forces. These narratives explore the tension between individuality and the collective identity, making them rich material for studying personal and cultural identity formation in modern Thai literature (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998). Additionally, Duanwad Pimwana's *Bright* provides a look at identity formation through the





lens of rural-to-urban migration. The novel delves into how migration affects both personal and community identity, highlighting the dislocation and alienation individuals feel when they leave behind their traditional lives for the uncertainties of urban existence (Morris, [2000](#)). Pimwana uses cultural narratives to depict the challenges faced by rural migrants in a rapidly changing Thailand, offering insights into how literature can reflect and shape individual identity.

5. Key Authors and Works in Contemporary Thai Literature

5.1 Chakrabhand Posayakrit

Chakrabhand Posayakrit is a renowned Thai artist and writer, celebrated for his efforts in preserving Thai cultural heritage through both literature and visual arts. He is best known for his watercolor paintings and puppet performances that reflect traditional Thai stories and legends, rooted deeply in Thai Buddhist culture and folklore. Chakrabhand's contributions extend beyond visual art; his literary works often incorporate the same traditional themes, focusing on the preservation of classical Thai narratives in the face of modernization. His notable works are heavily influenced by Khon, a traditional form of Thai performance art that portrays scenes from Ramakien (the Thai version of the Ramayana). Through these works, Chakrabhand contributes to the preservation and promotion of Thai cultural identity, particularly as modern Thai society faces increasing globalization (Smith, [2009](#)). His dedication to preserving these traditional forms ensures that future generations remain connected to Thailand's rich cultural past.

5.2 Prabda Yoon

Prabda Yoon is a contemporary Thai author known for his exploration of identity, particularly the clash between modernity and tradition in Thai society. His works often depict characters struggling to find a balance between their traditional Thai values and the rapidly modernizing, globalized world around them. Through fragmented narratives and experimental writing styles, Prabda Yoon highlights the confusion and dislocation that often accompany this cultural tension. In *The Sad Part Was*, Yoon explores themes of isolation, alienation, and the constant negotiation of identity in the face of global pressures. The characters in this collection of short stories often grapple with the overwhelming influence of Western culture on their everyday lives, struggling to maintain a sense of Thai identity while adopting more globalized attitudes and behaviors (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)). Yoon's writing style—marked by surreal, nonlinear narratives—reflects the fragmented nature of identity in a modern, urban setting. His works provide insight into the complexities of identity formation in contemporary Thai society.

5.3 Chart Korbjitti

Chart Korbjitti is one of Thailand's most esteemed authors, known for his thought-provoking novels that delve into the themes of morality, identity, and the changing nature of Thai society. His works are often rooted in the lives of ordinary people, reflecting the moral dilemmas and personal crises that arise as they navigate the tension between traditional Thai values and the influences of modernity. In his award-winning novel *The Judgment* (Khamphiphaksa), Chart explores the moral and existential struggles of the protagonist, Fak, as he grapples with societal judgment and personal integrity. The novel is a powerful commentary on how societal expectations and cultural norms can shape and often stifle personal identity (Ruangcharoen, [2014](#)). Through his exploration of themes such as morality,



social status, and identity, Chart Korbjitti captures the essence of the Thai cultural heritage while questioning its role in contemporary society. His works challenge readers to reflect on how tradition and morality interact in a rapidly changing world.

6. Challenges and Opportunities in Contemporary Thai Literature

6.1 Censorship and Self-expression

One of the most significant challenges faced by contemporary Thai authors is censorship, particularly regarding political and cultural critique. Thai literature, like other forms of expression in the country, is subject to strict scrutiny by the government, which monitors and regulates content that could be perceived as critical of the monarchy, political institutions, or national security. Under Thailand's lèse-majesté laws, for example, it is illegal to criticize the monarchy, and any literature that is seen as disrespectful to the royal family can be banned or censored (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)). This legal and cultural landscape often leads to self-censorship among Thai writers, who may avoid sensitive political topics or controversial social issues for fear of retribution. As a result, many contemporary works focus on subtler forms of critique, using allegory or symbolism to address issues such as corruption, inequality, or authoritarianism without directly confronting the political system (Kongkirati, [2016](#)). This form of indirect critique allows authors to explore pressing societal concerns while avoiding censorship, but it also limits their ability to engage fully in open political discourse. Despite these restrictions, there are still opportunities for self-expression in contemporary Thai literature. Writers often explore themes related to personal identity, gender roles, and social change, where the lines of censorship are less rigid. In this space, Thai authors can use their narratives to engage with cultural critiques that reflect broader social concerns, contributing to the country's literary and intellectual landscape.

6.2 Translation and Global Reach

The translation of Thai literature into other languages plays a crucial role in shaping global perceptions of Thai cultural identity. Historically, Thai literature has been underrepresented in the global literary market, partly due to linguistic barriers and a lack of international visibility. However, recent efforts to translate works by prominent Thai authors, such as Prabda Yoon and Chart Korbjitti, have expanded the reach of Thai literature, allowing a global audience to engage with the country's unique cultural narratives (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)). Translation presents both opportunities and challenges for Thai literature. On one hand, it introduces Thai literary works to new readers and contributes to a more diverse global literary scene. On the other hand, translation can sometimes obscure or alter the cultural nuances of the original text, leading to misinterpretation or a dilution of the work's deeper meaning. Translators must navigate these challenges carefully, ensuring that they retain the cultural integrity of the source material while making it accessible to international audiences (Smith, [2015](#)). The success of translated Thai works on the international stage also influences domestic literature. Writers may become more inclined to cater to global tastes, potentially adjusting their writing styles or themes to appeal to a broader audience. This could lead to the creation of works that highlight more "exotic" or marketable aspects of Thai culture, rather than addressing the nuanced social and political realities of contemporary Thai life (Ruangcharoen, [2014](#)).

6.3 Digital Platforms and New Literary Forms

The rise of digital platforms has provided new opportunities for Thai authors to share



their stories and reach wider audiences. In recent years, digital storytelling through blogs, social media, and online publishing platforms has gained traction in Thailand, especially among younger writers. These platforms allow authors to bypass traditional publishing routes and avoid censorship, providing a more democratic space for creative expression (Tan, [2018](#)). Digital platforms have also given rise to new literary forms, such as serialized web novels and multimedia storytelling. These formats allow Thai authors to experiment with narrative structures, blending text with visuals, audio, and interactive elements to create immersive experiences for readers. This shift towards digital storytelling reflects broader global trends in literature, where authors are increasingly exploring the possibilities of technology to expand the boundaries of traditional storytelling (McLuhan, [1994](#)). Moreover, digital platforms allow for immediate feedback from readers, creating a more interactive and participatory literary culture. Writers can engage directly with their audience, receiving real-time reactions to their work and adapting their narratives accordingly. This shift has led to the emergence of a new generation of Thai writers who are more attuned to the tastes and preferences of a digital-savvy audience (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#)).

7. Conclusion

7.1 Synthesis of Key Points

Cultural narratives in contemporary Thai literature play a critical role in shaping and reflecting both personal and collective identities. Through the exploration of themes such as identity crisis, gender roles, urbanization, and the clash between tradition and modernity, Thai authors offer a lens through which readers can examine their own societal and personal experiences. Authors like Prabda Yoon, Chart Korbjitti, and Chakrabhand Posayakrit use their works to depict the tension between Thailand's deep cultural roots and the forces of globalization. These narratives serve not only as a mirror for Thai society but also as a platform for critiquing societal norms and reflecting on how the country's cultural heritage interacts with modern influences (Phongpaichit & Baker, [1998](#); Ruangcharoen, [2014](#)). The identity struggles presented in these literary works, whether through the lens of characters grappling with rural-to-urban migration or facing issues of gender and sexuality, reflect broader social realities in Thailand. The shift from traditional values to a more globalized identity is a key theme in contemporary literature, providing readers with insights into the complexities of modern life in Thailand and the challenges of preserving cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

7.2 Future Trends in Thai Literature

Looking to the future, Thai literature is likely to continue evolving in response to ongoing globalization and technological advancements. As more Thai literary works are translated and shared on a global stage, international recognition may influence the themes and styles of contemporary Thai writers. The increasing prominence of digital platforms will also play a key role in shaping the future of Thai literature. Digital storytelling and multimedia narratives are likely to become more popular as writers experiment with new forms of expression that engage with modern technology (Tan, [2018](#)). Moreover, as political and social tensions in Thailand persist, literature will remain a vital space for political and cultural critique, even under constraints such as censorship. Writers may continue to explore identity issues, but with a greater focus on cross-cultural exchanges and hybrid identities. The blending of traditional cultural elements with global themes will likely deepen as Thailand becomes further integrated into the global economy and cultural landscape. Ultimately, Thai literature will continue to serve as a key medium for both preserving the nation's rich cultural heritage



and engaging with the realities of modern, globalized life (Smith, [2015](#); Ruangcharoen, [2014](#)).

Originality & Body of Knowledge

Originality: This paper presents a novel exploration of the role of cultural narratives in contemporary Thai literature, specifically examining how these narratives contribute to identity formation in a rapidly globalizing world. By focusing on key authors such as Prabda Yoon, Chart Korbjitti, and Chakrabhand Posayakrit, the study uniquely addresses the interplay between tradition and modernity, highlighting the complexities of navigating cultural preservation and innovation. The originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, blending literary analysis with cultural studies to reveal how Thai literature serves as both a reflection and critique of societal shifts. The emphasis on themes such as identity crisis, urbanization, and gender dynamics offers fresh perspectives on the evolving landscape of Thai cultural identity.

Body of Knowledge: This research significantly contributes to the understanding of contemporary Thai literature by situating it within the broader contexts of globalization, cultural hybridization, and digital transformation. It advances the field by analyzing how literary works reflect societal tensions, such as the clash between traditional values and modern pressures, and their impact on both personal and collective identities. The paper further enriches the discourse by addressing challenges faced by Thai authors, including censorship and the growing influence of digital platforms. By offering insights into how cultural narratives shape identity in a modern context, the study provides valuable frameworks for exploring literature's role in cultural preservation and societal critique, making it a crucial resource for scholars in humanities, cultural studies, and Southeast Asian literature.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical treatment of experimental subjects (animals & human): The research was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration regarding human subjects, so formal ethical approval was not required.

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