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Destigmatizing Queer Love: Sapphic Empowerment and Representation in Thai GL Series *The Secret of Us*

การลดทอนตราบาปความรักแบบเควียร์: การเสริมพลังหญิงรักหญิงในละคร Girl's Love ไทย เรื่อง ใจซ่อนรัก

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Abstract

This study explores the representation and empowerment of sapphic *(les)* identities in the *Thai Girls' Love* (GL) series; *The Secret of Us* (dir. *Sarassawadee Wongsompetch*, 2024). The term "sapphic" that broadly refers to women-loving-women relationships, and in Thailand it describes relationships between feminine-presenting women that do not fit the *tom-dee* (masculine–feminine) binary dominant in local LGBTQ+ discourse. Contrasting with the *tom-dee* model, "sapphic" and *"les"* identities in Thai media highlight gender fluidity and resist fixed gender roles. Despite the growing visibility of LGBTQIAN+ in Thai media in the beginning

of 2020s, some scenes in Thai drama series involving lesbian love still have been censored for unethical behaviour. This paper examines how *The Secret of Us* centres sapphic identities and challenges longstanding stereotypes by presenting an affirming love story between two feminine-presenting women. Employing thematic analysis, this research redefines queer female narratives in Thai mainstreaming media through themes of cultural and familial resistance, personal autonomy, and positive outcomes for queer relationships.

Grounded in representation studies and queer theory, the analysis demonstrates how *The Secret of Us* disrupts tropes of queer invisibility, portraying a sapphic relationship culminating in family acceptance, marriage, and mutual empowerment. The series aligns with global queer discourses by depicting queer love as resilient, multidimensional, and deserving of societal recognition. The study situates *The Secret of Us* as a cultural milestone in Thai media, marking a shift toward more inclusive and affirming LGBTQ+ narratives. Implications for broader media trends and future portrayals of diverse queer identities in Thailand are discussed.

Keywords: Queer Female, Thai GL Series, Thai mainstreaming media

Introduction

In recent years, LGBTQ+ representation in Thai media has gained visibility, with an increasing number of series and films exploring queer identities and relationships. *While Boys' Love* (BL) dramas, which centre on male-male romances, have experienced widespread popularity and international success, portrayals of queer women's relationships remain underrepresented. Certain scenes portraying lesbian relationships in Thai television dramas continue to face censorship on the grounds of perceived immorality (Sanmongkol & Tinnam, 2024). When included, such portrayals are often relegated to secondary roles or constrained by limiting stereotypes, such as unrequited love or emotional sacrifice.

Historically, Thai media has often framed female same-sex attraction within the *tom-dee* dynamic, where a *tom* is a masculine-presenting woman, and a dee is a feminine-presenting woman attracted to *tom*. This perspective, while

offering some visibility to women-loving-women, perpetuates heteronormative gender roles and limits the diversity of female same-sex relationships portrayed in Thai media (Jackson & Duangwises, 2020). The dominance of this binary model has marginalized *les* identities, women who do not conform to the *tom-dee* framework, leaving a significant gap in representation.

In Thai culture, lesbian identities are often referred to using the localized term *les*, derived from the English word lesbian. This term carries distinct cultural connotations in Thailand, referring to women who are attracted to other women but do not adhere to the masculine-feminine dichotomy of *tom-dee* (Sinnott, 2004). This identity emphasizes gender fluidity and individuality over fixed roles, reflecting a broader, more inclusive spectrum of female same-sex attraction. Despite increasing recognition of les identities, Thai media's portrayal of women-loving-women relationships continues to favor the *tom-dee* structure, leaving *les* identities largely invisible (Cholwilai, 2019).

Within this landscape, *The Secret of Us* (dir. *Sarassawadee Wongsompetch,* 2024) emerges as a groundbreaking work in *Thai Girls' Love* (GL) media, especially mainstreaming media such as Channel 3, offering an in-depth exploration of a *les* relationship between its protagonists, Fahlada and Earn. By centring on this les relationship and granting it a happy ending, *The Secret of Us* makes a significant contribution to Thai media, which has historically marginalized female same-sex relationships.

This paper examines the representation of les identity in *The Secret of Us*, focusing on how the series challenges traditional portrayals of women-loving-women and contributes to a broader understanding of LGBTQ+ identities in Thailand. Drawing on representation theory and queer theory, primarily through the analytical lenses offered by Butler (1990), Foucault (1978), and Ahmed (2010), this study analyzes how the series reflects and shapes cultural perceptions of gender and attraction. By addressing the gap in les representation, this research aims to highlight the cultural significance of *The Secret of Us* and its potential to influence future portrayals in Thai media.

Literature Review

Yuri, GL, and Sapphic Genres

Academic studies on women-loving-women (WLW) narratives have flourished particularly within Japanese media, where the *Yuri* genre emerged in the late twentieth century as a prominent cultural site for exploring romantic and intimate bonds between women (Maser, 2011; Fan-Ting Cheng, 2021). The term *Girls' Love* (GL), also originating in Japan, broadened the appeal and explicitly branded such works as centring feminine-presenting same-sex couples, distinct from more ambiguous or subtextual early *Yuri*. With the increasing international spread of Japanese pop culture, these genres influenced not only East Asia but also the localized forms of representation that would emerge in Thai media.

Since the 1960s, Thai society has experienced significant transformations in gender and sexual diversity (Jackson, 1997), laying the groundwork for today's contested and evolving media representations. Recent scholarship highlights that *sapphic*, referencing the classical figure Sappho, was re-adopted in global and Asian contexts as an inclusive umbrella for women-loving-women relationships that resist strict binaries, paralleling how *GL* and *Yuri* challenge normative gender roles and hetero-centrism (Ahmed, 2010; Maser, 2011).

Thai-Specific Terminology

In Thailand, the dominant historical framework for female same-sex attraction has been the *tom-dee* model in which a *tom* is a masculine-presenting woman, while a *dee* refers to her feminine partner. Scholarly analysis by Sinnott (2004) thoroughly documents the *tom-dee* structure's social histories, suggesting it provided both visibility and limitations for WLW identities. *Les* (derived from lesbian), meanwhile, is locally used for feminine-presenting women attracted to women who do not fit the tom-dee dynamic, emphasizing gender fluidity and breaking with binary gender roles.

However, Thai media has lagged in departing from the *tom-dee* binary. As Tularak et al. (2023) and Fongkaew et al. (2019) report, most literature and media focus on masculine-feminine couples, relegating *les* and *sapphic* narratives

to the margins. In Thailand, the adoption of Sapphic discourse is relatively recent and has been shaped by both global queer media circulation and localized gender and sexual identity frameworks. The visibility of Thai GL (Girls' Love) media in the 2020s provided a platform for the term to enter pop cultural and academic discourse.

However, Thai interpretations often integrate Sapphic themes without explicitly using the term itself due to the dominance of localized categories like "tomboy–dee" and "lesbian," which are embedded in culturally specific gender performances (Jackson & Sullivan, 1999; Sinnott, 2004). Nevertheless, Thai queer scholars and fans of GL culture have increasingly referenced "Sapphic" in online spaces, fan communities, and gender studies to emphasize inclusivity beyond rigid identity binaries.

Historical Development and Shifting Representations

Early portrayals in literature, such as *Rak Kaew* by *Krisana Asokesin*, often depicted *les* characters as psychologically or morally deviant, reflecting social anxieties about non-heteronormative relationships (Chongsomjit, 2007). Films like *The Last Song* (1985) reinforced the notion of WLW as tragic and isolated (Pongpanit, 2011). By the early 2000s, films like The Iron Ladies introduced more affirmative portrayals of LGBTQ+ identities. Beyond mainstream media, feminist and lesbian activism emerged through groups such as Anjaree, established in 1986, which advanced alternative terminologies like "ying rak ying" to challenge heteronormative binaries like "tom–dee".

A breakthrough came with *Yes* or *No* (dir. *Sarasawadee Wongsompetch,* 2010), which became Thailand's first mainstream film to highlight a *tom-dee* relationship in a positive light (Nukul, 2025). However, even this film reinforced the binary framework and did not fully represent the diversity and complexity of WLW attraction, leaving *les* identities largely invisible. In recent years, the rise of GL (Girls' Love) series has marked a cultural shift towards the mainstreaming of sapphic relationships in Thai pop culture, signifying both global influence and local adaptation (Li & Pang, 2024). These developments reflect growing visibility, though often still bounded by market forces and socio-cultural conservatism.

Recent Trends and Gaps in Research

There is a growing scholarly and public interest in *GL* narratives that centre feminine-feminine (*sapphic*) attraction and challenge traditional binaries (Bangkok Post, 2024). Yet, as synthesized by Jackson & Duangwises (2020) and the recent Gender of Siam (2019) volume, most academic inquiry still focuses on the *tom-dee* legacy or on imported *BL* (*Boys' Love*) dramas, to the neglect of *sapphic* or *les* narratives. Despite this increasing interest, only a handful of studies have interrogated the processes by which global *yuri* and *GL* genres are adapted within the specificities of Thai cultural and media landscapes (see Fan-Ting Cheng, 2021; Shi-Yan Chao, 2022). The literature too often neglects to analyze how local linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts shape, and sometimes inhibit the emergence of *sapphic* characters. Furthermore, there is limited scholarship on how these media representations intersect with evolving social attitudes, family dynamics, and ongoing debates over LGBTQ+ rights in Thailand.

This study, therefore, aims to address these significant gaps by offering a focused analysis of *The Secret of Us*, a Thai *GL* series that foregrounds a *sapphic*, feminine-feminine relationship. By situating this case within both global trends and uniquely Thai social, linguistic, and cultural contexts, the present research explores the ways in which *sapphic/les* identities are negotiated on screen that distinct from the dominant *tom-dee* and *BL* paradigms that have preoccupied previous scholarship. Drawing on recent developments in queer theory and representation studies, including Ahmed's work on queer happiness (2010) and Halberstam's exploration of queer temporality (2023), this article examines not only the narrative and visual strategies of the series, but also considers how broader factors, such as changing family structures, the evolution of public attitudes, and contemporary debates over LGBTQ+ rights, shape and are shaped by emerging *sapphic* media. In doing so, the study not only contributes a much-needed perspective on the transformation of queer representation in Thai media but also offers a template for future research on agency and acceptance in LGBTQ+ storytelling.

By positioning *The Secret of Us* as a case study, this article directly addresses the persistent scholarly neglect of *sapphic* relationships in *Thai GL*

media. In contrast to existing research, which tends to focus on the *tom-dee* binary or imported BL genres, this article provides the first in-depth analysis of a mainstream Thai series that centralizes a *sapphic* couple and grants them narrative agency and a positive resolution. Utilizing a contemporary theoretical framework—drawing from Butler's gender performativity (1990), Foucault's analysis of discourse and power (1978), Ahmed's theorization of queer happiness (2010), and more recent insights on queer temporality and resilience (Halberstam, 2023)—this study demonstrates how Thai media is actively transforming and localizing global genres to expand the possibilities for agency, visibility, and fulfillment for queer women. This approach not only departs from older, pathologizing or binary portrayals, but also offers a new template for understanding how positive, complex sapphic narratives can reshape public perceptions and scholarly conversations around LGBTQ+ representation in Thailand.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023) as its primary approach to investigate representations of *sapphic* (feminine-feminine) relationships in the Thai *GL* series *The Secret of Us*. The analytical framework is grounded in queer theory and representation studies, with particular emphasis on the works of Butler (1990), Foucault (1978), Ahmed (2010), and recent scholarship on queer temporality and resilience (Halberstam, 2005).

The research corpus comprises all episodes of *The Secret of Us*, each analyzed as part of a complete textual set. Scenes, dialogues, and visual sequences were systematically coded for content related to gender identity, sexuality, agency, family dynamics, and expressions of empowerment or resistance. Thematic coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) stepwise approach: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated viewing and memo-writing; (2) generation of initial codes marking recurring motifs (e.g., familial rejection, self-advocacy, reconciliation); (3) identification and clustering of candidate themes (such as complex characterization, familial/cultural resistance, positive portrayals of queer love); and (4) iterative refinement and interpretation of themes in relation

to the guiding theoretical frameworks. Coding and theme development were discussed and refined collaboratively by both authors to enhance analytical rigor.

Interpretation was guided by Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, which informed analysis of how protagonists enact and disrupt gendered expectations; by Foucault's (1978) theory of discourse and power, used to understand institutional and familial regulation of identity; by Ahmed's (2010) theorization of queer happiness, used to critique narratives of fulfilment and legitimacy; and by Halberstam's (2005) framework of queer temporality, applied to examine non-linear relationship development and alternative forms of resilience in the series.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive attention was given to potential researcher bias, and findings were cross-checked with existing literature to enhance credibility. By combining detailed thematic analysis with a robust theoretical apparatus, this methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how *The Secret of Us* both reflects and shapes the evolving discourses of queer female representation in Thai media.

Analysis

The thematic analysis of *The Secret of Us* reveals three primary themes that capture the series' portrayal of *les* identities and its disruption of conventional portrayals of women-loving-women in Thai media. These themes include: (1) Breaking stereotypes through complex characterization, and (2) Resistance and Empowerment in the Face of Cultural Expectations and (3) Destigmatizing queer women's love stories with positive outcomes. Each theme highlights the series' nuanced exploration of gender and sexuality, presenting a more inclusive representation of LGBTQ+ identities in Thai culture.

Breaking Stereotypes Through Complex Characterization

The Secret of Us marks a significant shift in Thai media's approach to queer female representation. While earlier portrayals of women-loving-women were either invisible or fitted into the *tom–dee* (butch–femme) binary, this series centres les identities that actively resist such categorization (Sinnott, 2004; Fongkaew et al., 2019). Typically, the tom–dee model legitimizes queer relationships

only when mapped onto heteronormative roles that the *tom* performing masculinity, the *dee* idealizing femininity. Those who do not fit, especially femme-femme couples that have historically been marginalized in both popular culture and national perception (Cholwilai, 2019). By foregrounding a love story between two feminine-presenting protagonists, Fahlada and Earn, *The Secret of Us* developed new representational ground, inviting viewers to perceive *les* identity as fluid, multi-dimensional, and culturally legible on its own terms.

Grounded in Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, *The Secret of Us* illustrates how *les* identity is not inherent but continually enacted through repeated gestures, choices, and negotiations. Fahlada and Earn "do" femininity outside the expectations of the *tom–dee* split, passing queerness not in binary resistance but in complex, everyday performances of care, desire, and vulnerability. This complexity is dramatized when Earn is forced to break up with Fahlada. Under pressure from Fahlada's family. Russamee, Fahlada's mother, learns that Earn's mother has been admitted to her hospital. Russamee's coercion, especially her warning to Earn, "Think of your mother's health," is not only personal manipulation but also stage-manages queerness as both risk and transgression. The camera's focus on Earn's clenched hands and anguished gaze at this moment visualizes the bodily burden of enforced conformity, translating discourse and power into embodied distress. Domestic spaces which are tight, surveilled, reinforce the omnipresent social gaze, suggesting that even outside confrontation, the protagonists are under constant gentle but persistent regulation. Foucault (1978) sharpens this analysis by revealing the family not as a private refuge, but as a disciplining institution that produces and polices sexual subjectivities. It is precisely in these intimate denials, muted gestures, and ambiguous alignments with femininity that the series constructs its female-female desire as *les* for both Thai viewers and the show's narrative world-building shared cultural meaning around sapphic identity outside the habitual scripts.

Earn, thus, is compelled to declare, in a trembling voice, "I don't like women... I like men." Here, Butler's insight is evident in which such denials are not admissions of "authenticity" but survival performances, showing how identity is governed by social expectation and discipline in critical moments of threat.

Years after this enforced rupture, when Earn and Fahlada meet again as adults at the hospital, their first exchange is marked by halting restraint. Earn greets Fahlada softly: "Hi... It's been a while." Fahlada, her body language closed off, offers no response, believing that Earn had deceived someone into falling in love and then abandoned her. This muted dialogue renders queerness as a lived emotional inheritance of shame and longing. Their silences, nervous glances, and cautious engagement embody what Ahmed (2010) describes as the "stickiness" of affect, showing that reconciliation and forgiveness are not instantaneous but slow negotiations of hope, pain, and dignity. Also, each restrained exchange is weighted with what Ahmed calls the ongoing "re-orientation of happiness" not a final state, but the hard-won, precarious product of emotional labour in a world oriented to disappoint queer desire.

Throughout their renewed relationship, *The Secret of Us* continues to disrupt expectations by presenting both leads as intelligent, ambitious, and emotionally rich. Fahlada's authority as a doctor, her calm in crisis, and Earn's public-facing role as a presenter are not simply background traits, they foreground the multidimensionality of their identities and push back against the stereotype that queer women's lives are defined solely by romance or tragedy. These scenes signal that queerness can and should be integrated into broader life achievements, ambitions, and subjectivities.

Crucially, the reconciliation between Fahlada and Earn is depicted as gradual and non-linear, refusing romantic idealization. For example, after a painful confrontation, Fahlada's initial coldness toward Earn-reflected in her reply, "I don't think there's anything left for us to talk about, Earn", signals a boundary and the emotional labour required for self-preservation. Over time, her eventual willingness to revisit trust embodies Ahmed's insight that queer happiness is a continual process of negotiation and not a stable endpoint. Forgiveness and vulnerability, in this context, become acts of agency rather than signs of weakness.

The show's approach also diverges from genre conventions rooted in Japanese *yuri*, where idealized or escapist narratives are common (Maser, 2011). Instead, *The Secret of Us* grounds its love story in familial obligations,

societal pressures, and professional lives. The inclusion of workplace conflict and family negotiations give the narrative a realism which Halberstam (2005) calls "queer temporality" by portraying *sapphic* relationships as enduring, cyclical, and open-ended rather than teleologically resolved.

Yet it is necessary to maintain a critical perspective. While the series advances the representation of complex, feminine *les* identity and disrupts present stereotypes, acceptance and happiness remain bounded to specific markers of social respectability—filial piety, professional achievement, and eventual family endorsement. This narrative treads carefully between transformation and assimilation, signalling *sapphic* happiness as both subversive and conditional. The model of happiness presented ultimately raises a vital question; does *The Secret of Us* offer genuinely new possibilities for queer life in Thailand, or does it subtly reaffirm the need for assimilation within existing mainstream norms? The answer remains ambivalent, pointing to both progress and the persistent negotiation between conformity and change that characterizes contemporary *sapphic* visibility.

Resistance and Empowerment in the Face of Cultural Expectations

After disrupting stereotypical portrayals through complex characterization, *The Secret of Us* turns toward the equally unsettling question of how queer women navigate family opposition, cultural duty, and the pursuit of self determination. Unlike the more common focus in Thai media on family conflict in male same sex narratives, the series foregrounds a persistent and, in many ways, more insidious form of marginalization, the invisibility of feminine queer love within both family and national cultural discourse.

In Thailand, family remains the dominant axis of social belonging and moral legitimacy. As many scholars have argued, familial approval functions as a crucial mediator between individual identity and public respectability (Jackson, 1997; Sringernyuang et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, the series positions the family home not simply as a private refuge but as the primary locus of resistance and regulation—a Foucauldian microcosm where power operates through everyday acts, norms, and sanctions (Foucault, 1977). Russamee's disapproval of her

daughter's relationship with Earn is emblematic. Her repeated insistence that the romance is "impossible" and that Fahlada must "let nature take its course" reflects a deep-rooted belief that female same-sex love is both unnatural and incompatible with maintaining kinship duties and lineage continuity. This is not just a mother's opinion; it is the articulation of what Foucault (1977, p. 23) calls a "regime of truth," in which certain relationships are rendered preferable, possible, and speakable, while others are cast as risk or transgression.

The stakes of this conflict are underscored in a domestic scene where Russamee confides to her husband about preserving the prestige of their family hospital. She declares that Fahlada, as its heir, "must not be flawed" and should marry the man she has selected for her. This logic reduces queerness to a liability and ties a daughter's worth to heteronormative fulfilment of economic and gendered roles (Van Esterik, 2000). Such framing demonstrates how institutional legacies which are business, reputation, inheritance, become vehicles for disciplining sexuality. From a Foucauldian perspective, Russamee's authority is not purely personal but a conduit for broader institutional discourses of legacy, propriety, and social reproduction (Bygrave, 2008).

The emotional and ideological rupture between mother and daughter is crystallised in a pivotal confrontation. Addressing Russamee directly, Fahlada states "You wanted the best for me by causing me pain and sadness? ... From now on, I'll choose what you think is wrong. I choose to love Earn, and Earn will be the most important person in my life." Russamee's immediate reaction, with a sharp slap across Fahlada's face, is both a literal and symbolic manifestation of what Sara Ahmed (2014b, p. 8) terms the "affective economy" of unhappiness, where deviation from norms is met with affective and sometimes physical sanctions. In this instant, maternal discipline becomes corporeal, marking the body as the site where cultural boundaries are enforced. The slap also enacts what Foucault (1975, p. 202) describes as "disciplinary power", a force that punishes transgression while attempting to correct it, reaffirming the heteronormative order.

Fahlada's response is decisive that she walks out of the family home and moves in with Earn. This relocation serves her dependence on the natal family and, in performative terms (Butler, 1990), stages her refusal to inhabit

the role of the compliant, filial daughter. Crucially, this is not only an act of romantic choice but also a public reframing of "wrong" as defined by her mother into "right" as defined by herself. The series invites the audience to read this as both a personal triumph and a challenge to the enduring value of *katanyu*, the Thai cultural principle of filial gratitude, which in conventional interpretation requires subordination of individual desire to familial harmony (Knodel et al., 1984).

Russamee's invocation of *katanyu* functions as moral leverage. By presenting non-compliance as ingratitude, she casts queerness as a moral failure as well as a social one. Within this framework, the queer daughter is, per Ahmed's analysis, positioned as the "cause" of family unhappiness (2010, p. 119), her very selfhood blamed for anticipated shame or reputational damage. The power of this framing is that it naturalises the parent's regulatory control, making resistance seem like selfishness.

By refusing this script, Fahlada enacts what Judith Butler (1990) might frame as a counter-performativity, reiterating her gender and sexual selfhood in ways that do not conform to the acceptable acts that constitute the role of a dutiful daughter. In doing so, she exposes the conditional nature of love and belonging in such familial structures, where acceptance is revoked when identities breach heteronormative boundaries.

From this moment onward, the arc of the series reframes empowerment as more than verbal defiance, it is about building an alternative structure of belonging. In relocating to live with Earn, Fahlada embraces what Weston (1991) and Pidduck (2009) have described as queer kinship, the creation of chosen families grounded in mutual care, reciprocity, and non-normative commitment. In the Thai context, where natal family is often the primary social and economic pillar, this act is radical. It does not romanticize chosen family as an easy substitution; instead, the series presents it as a deliberate, sometimes painful, re-securing of identity and support in a sphere where one's queerness is not only accepted but celebrated.

The series also stages empowerment in less dramatic but equally telling scenes. By stepping away from her prestigious medical career, a role that secured both familial pride and societal respect, Fahlada signals that self-worth is not

measured solely by professional achievement within normative context. In a society where women's social value is often evaluated by their occupational prestige and marital status, this rejection of external validation challenges what Foucault (1978, p. 146) would call the "normative" discourses defining a worthy life. Resisting the path that combined heterosexual marriage and a respected profession, she chooses a trajectory aligned with her own values.

Ahmed's (2006) critique of happiness as a social construct is particularly apt here. The series uses Fahlada's choices to question whether the happiness promised by conforming to family and social expectations is in fact happiness at all, or whether it is, in Ahmed's terms, a "straightening device" that aligns lives with dominant norms at the expense of authentic desire (ibid., p. 107). In prioritizing her relationship with Earn, Fahlada embraces a happiness assessed to her own affective life, even if that happiness entails loss of approval, security, or social standing.

Importantly, *The Secret of Us* does not present empowerment as absolute or unconditional. When the family eventually moves toward acceptance, that shift is depicted as fragile and contingent, hinging in part on Fahlada's continued demonstration of resilience, competence, and care for others. This reflects what Ahmed might call "conditional happiness" that inclusion is extended when queer subjects embody qualities deemed virtuous by mainstream standards (ibid., pp. 134–35). In other words, queerness is tolerated, even celebrated, when coupled with visible filial devotion and middle-class respectability.

This conditionality reveals the ceiling that the series itself acknowledges, albeit subtly. While it critiques the invisibility and marginalisation of *les* relationships, it also shows that full acceptance is still negotiated within, and limited by, the very structures it seeks to transform. By allowing the protagonists to succeed within, rather than entirely outside, the moral and social frameworks of family and class, the series treads a careful line between transformation and assimilation.

The tension between resistance and reconciliation that runs throughout *The Secret of Us* becomes one of the series' most compelling contributions to contemporary Thai queer representation. Fahlada's journey refuses the binary of total victory or total defeat. Instead, the series foregrounds empowerment as

iterative, situated, and often strategic, involving moments of confrontation. This portrayal recognizes that for many queer women, especially within the constraints of Thai familial structures and the cultural weight of *katanyu* (filial piety), resistance can mean continually renegotiating the conditions of belonging rather than severing ties completely.

Destigmatizing Queer Women's Love Stories with Positive Outcomes

Building on the resistance and strategic accommodation explored earlier, *The Secret of Us* moves toward a resolution that actively works to destigmatize queer women's love stories within the Thai media landscape. The happiness and stability granted to Fahlada and Earn in the final episodes feel earned precisely because they follow sustained conflict over autonomy, *katanyu* (filial obligation), and the terms of acceptance. In doing so, the series directly challenges Thai media's entrenched tragic lesbian trajectory, replacing isolation and loss with affirmation, continuity, and social integration.

For decades, queer female characters in Thai audiovisual narratives were rarely granted romantic fulfilment. As Vito Russo (1987) and Ahmed (2010) note in broader queer media contexts, such relationships were often scripted to end in separation, death, or resignation, making happiness for queer women appear culturally unrealistic or even inappropriate. *The Secret of Us* breaks from this legacy by showing that a *sapphic* relationship can survive familial rejection, societal pressure, and personal sacrifice, and still arrive at a future marked by *both* personal joy and public recognition. This is not a justified resolution, but its emotional impact stems from the earlier labour of resistance and negotiation.

The narrative turning point comes when Russamee, after her illness and the care she receives from Fahlada, visits Earn to apologise and to give her blessing. This act, publicly releasing her opposition, functions as a cultural pivot point. It suggests that traditional Thai family honour, symbolically guarded by the mother figure, can be expanded rather than destroyed by accepting a queer relationship. In the terms of Jackson's (2011) analysis, this moment represents a potential re alignment of familial respectability to include diversity in sexual

identity — a shift of particular resonance in a context where family approval remains critical to an individual's public and private legitimacy.

The reconciliation is presented not as a passive parental surrender but as a mutual recognition scene. Tears, apologies, and direct acknowledgement of past hurt, frame the acceptance as the result of personal transformation on Russamee's part, triggered by witnessing her daughter's unhappiness without Earn. This dramatizes Butler's (1990) notion of the performative, by speaking the approval aloud and altering her own role in relation to her daughter's identity, Russamee helps reconstitute the family structure in a more inclusive denotation.

The marriage that follows this reconciliation operates on multiple symbolic registers. Culturally, marriage in Thailand still serves as a socially recognized marker of adult legitimacy and stability (Meethaisong, 2024). By situating Fahlada and Earn's union within this institution, the series makes a claim for marriage equality not by abstract principle, but by showing it embodied in sympathetic, multidimensional characters. This aligns with Butler (1988)'s framing of marriage as a performative institution whose legitimacy derives from public recognition, and with Ahmed's (2010) observation that certain life milestones are framed as happiness indicators. By occupying these milestones without relinquishing their queer identity, Fahlada and Earn contest the assumption that such milestones can only belong to heterosexual couples.

The portrayal of their "dream house" extends this domestication of queer happiness into the visual register. Warm lighting, intimacy of space, and tangible gestures all communicate safety and belonging. In Ahmed's terms (2010, p. 28), it construes a "happy object" here, the home, but queers its meaning in which it is not simply a replication of heteronormative domesticity, but the product of a relationship that has survived and been reshaped by resistance. Moreover, its establishment *after* the rupture with the natal family and subsequent partial reconciliation embodies Weston's (1991) concept of families we choose, rooting domestic legitimacy in chosen kinship rather than bloodline alone.

Importantly, the series resists presenting this positive outcome as pure assimilation. While the final scenes show acceptance, they also carry the residue of earlier damage. Acceptance has been achieved, but on terms that still value

Fahlada's demonstrable resilience, professional respectability, and her partial re integration into familial duty. This corresponds with conditional happiness, extended to those who can fulfil certain norms alongside their difference (Ahmed, 2010). The wedding and home may be read as satisfying conventional respectability, yet because they are openly and explicitly *sapphic*, they also function as acts of reclamation that taking culturally valued symbols and re signifying them.

By foregrounding that this joy is the outcome of sustained struggle, *The Secret of Us* avoids the trap of the "happily ever after" that erases prior conflict. Instead, it offers a model of queer narrative closure that is both aspirational and honest about its costs, appealing to viewers who have experienced similar negotiations within their own families. For Thai audiences, the culminating image of a queer couple whose love is validated by both a chosen family and a transformed if still imperfect-natal family offers a vision of what gradual cultural change might look like.

The series' resolution therefore works on two fronts:

1. Destigmatization by showing lesbian love as equally capable of producing stability, care, and fulfilment, thereby dismantling the stereotype that such relationships are doomed or inherently disruptive;

2. Cultural negotiation by embedding this love within recognizable Thai social scripts (family duty, marriage, home) while inflecting them with queer agency and mutual choice.

This dual operation makes *The Secret of Us* a rare case in Thai *GL* main media where the positive outcome is narratively and thematically earned, not simply granted. It broadens the imaginative possibilities for queer women's futures onscreen, while inviting critical reflection on the conditions under which such futures are currently thinkable and acceptable in mainstream culture.

To conclude, the final turn of Fahlada and Earn's story does more than redefine the scope of queer women's love stories; it actively destigmatizes them, weaving joy, legitimacy, and public recognition from threads of resistance, reconciliation, and chosen belonging. By doing so, it offers both a progressive cultural resource for expanding acceptance and a reminder that such acceptance, in current Thai

society, often remains contingent, a future hope still bound to the careful, negotiated transformations of the present.

Discussion

While *The Secret of Us* is adapted from a popular novel and targets both general Thai audiences and devoted GL fan communities, this article argues that its true significance lies in its dual positioning as a tool for cultural dialogue. On one front, the series addresses broader Thai society, participating in ongoing debates about gender, sexuality, and the boundaries of acceptance, acting as a bridge between LGBTQ+ realities and mainstream cultural scenarios. On the other, it speaks directly to the girls' love (GL) fan culture that has become a vibrant force within the entertainment industry, setting new expectations for depth and visibility in sapphic storytelling.

Crucially, these spheres are not isolated: the series' success within fan communities directly informs its mainstream resonance, and its navigation of television norms feeds back into how GL fans articulate their own identities and desires. This dynamic means *The Secret of Us* does not simply reflect social change but actively participates in the convergence of entertainment, fan culture, and the broader normalization of queer relationships in Thailand. Its impact—and the interpretation of its representational ceilings—must therefore be read in the context of this complex media ecology.

Across its three themes, *The Secret of Us* demonstrates how a Thai *GL* drama can both broaden visibility for lesbian identities and push against inherited constraints. The series' trajectory resists the binary of total victory or outright defeat, portraying empowerment as an iterative and strategic process. Fahlada's turn shows that resistance encompasses both open defiance and measured negotiation to preserve stability and connection.

This balance is particularly resonant in Thailand's *katanyu* framework, where filial gratitude traditionally demands conformity over individual choice. By reframing familial duty as a site of mutual transformation rather than one-way obedience, the series offers a cultural imaginary in which family love can evolve to include queer lives without erasing the conflicts that precede acceptance.

The show's positive resolution is narratively credible because it grows out of these earlier negotiations. Here, the ending operates on two connected fronts:

1. Destigmatization: showing lesbian love as equally capable of producing stability, care, and fulfilment, dismantling stereotypes of inevitable failure.

2. Cultural negotiation: embedding queer love within familiar Thai scripts (family honour, marriage, home) while rewriting them through queer agency and mutual choice.

Seen through Butler's (1990) lens, this is a re-performance of kinship and gender norms that destabilizes their heteronormative frame. Through Foucault (1978), it is a momentary realignment of the family-as-institution's disciplinary power. Through Ahmed (2010), it models happily queer living—joy that is both inflected by and resistant to the norms that once constrained it.

Conclusion

The Secret of Us stands as both a landmark in Thai *sapphic* representation and a case study in the ambivalence of progressive change. It breaks from the *tom–dee* binary, rejects the tragic-lesbian trope, and integrates queer women into culturally milestones without erasing their difference. Its hopeful vision is hard-won, grounded in portrayals of rupture, emotional labour, and gradual reconciliation. Yet its acceptance remains conditional, tethered to respectability markers such as professional success, resilience, and visible continued care for family. As Jackson (1997) reminds us in tracing the evolution of gender and sexual identities in Thailand since the 1960s, such gains must be read as part of a longer, uneven trajectory of change.

As a cultural tool, the series works in overlapping arenas: engaging mainstream audiences amid shifting social attitudes and appealing to a *GL* market whose consumers actively shape which queer narratives flourish. This dual success reflects a careful balancing act of negotiating visibility across different publics. Ultimately, The Secret of Us suggests that in today's Thailand, queer joy is possible but still provisional achieved as much through navigation as through transformation.

By staging both the pleasures and the limits of inclusion, it points toward futures where happiness for queer women is embraced not despite difference, but because of the richer meanings and social possibilities that difference brings.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study examines *The Secret of Us* as a single case study, which, while rich in thematic and cultural material, cannot represent the full diversity of Thai queer women's experiences or the range of LGBTQ+ portrayals in national media. The analysis draws on the televised adaptation rather than its original novel, and no systematic comparison between versions was undertaken. Such intermedial analysis could show how adaptation choices-omissions, additions, tonal shifts reflect representational ceilings in mainstream television.

While the series is interpreted here as a cultural tool expanding visibility for *les* identities, this reading is based on textual analysis. Audience reception has not been empirically studied, leaving open the question of whether its primary dialogue is with Thai society at large, in the context of marriage equality and visibility debates, or more specifically with an established *GL* media market and its fan culture. These two spheres are intertwined yet distinct, and comparative reception studies could clarify how each interprets and values the series' messages.

The representation celebrated here also remains bounded by respectability politics which are the protagonists' happiness and acceptance are tied to professional achievement, resilience, and visible filial care. This conditional inclusion is both a gain and a limit, showing the current bounds of what mainstream platforms can imagine and embrace.

Thus, future research could address these gaps by comparing *The Secret of Us* with other recent Thai *GL* works to assess whether its strategies of resistance, negotiation, and conditional acceptance are unique or widespread. Cross regional or longitudinal studies could investigate how Thai portrayals influence, and are influenced by, broader Southeast Asian media trends. Empirical reception studies, across both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ audiences, could measure how such portrayals affect perceptions of queer legitimacy. Situating this series within a broader

historical context, therefore, could further contextualise its cultural significance. Finally, applying similar analytical frameworks to under represented identities in Thai media, while integrating intersectional factors such as class, region, and ethnicity, would help map a more complete picture of LGBTQ+ visibility and its cultural politic.

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