



The Thematic Complexity of Poverty, Relationships, Political Turmoil in Thailand, and Students' Aspiration in Minfong Ho's *Rice Without Rain*

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explain the themes of poverty, relationships, political turmoil in Thailand, and students' aspiration in Ho's *Rice Without Rain* (1986). The essay focuses on the thematic aspects of the novel in order to demonstrate how it thematically reflects the contemporary national affairs, especially political upheavals and students' aspiration. The discussion of poverty, relationships, political turmoil in Thailand, and students' aspiration will be closely related to the way by which Ho perceives the economic deterioration of poor people; and how she offers viable alternatives throughout the narrative structure of the novel. These alternatives are the optimistic narrative events that convey the core of national prosperity by getting rid of political turmoil, and reinforcing students' aspiration. In doing so, the essay attempts to prove how the themes of poverty, relationships, political turmoil in Thailand, and students' aspiration could really contribute to the reconciliation of the past and current political unrest in Thailand. Thus, the study's methodology is descriptive i.e., it sheds light on the narrative description of poverty, relationships, and politics approached in the course of the novel.

Key words: Narrative; Politics; Poverty; Relationships; Students' aspiration

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1. INTRODUCTION

Minfong Ho's *Rice Without Rain* (1986) abounds with literary themes that reflect the essence of literature in Thailand. It is an incarnation of the literary time span during the 1970s when social welfare and economic were at stake. This is due to the fact that drastic and decisive political upheavals as well as environmental drought badly influenced people's lives. Through writing the novel, Ho offers a new literary perspective on these changes to insert her own optimistic tone to encourage people to strive for prosper and social stability. Therefore, the novel has universal themes regarding the achievement of staying firm and strong in the face of such challenges (Kintanar 36). Consequently, it reflects Ho's profound concern with reinforcing Thailand's national security and economic infrastructure.

The eponymous rain mentioned in the novel's title is about a natural catastrophe that worsens people's lives. People are shocked by harvest failure because they largely depend on it as a source of their food ammunition. The fictional people try to avoid the negative aftermath of this failure by being optimistic; and they practically respond to this crisis. Furthermore, the novel sheds light on contemporary political agitation that destabilize the entire society in Thailand. As such, it exposes the defect of such agitation in order to find proper solutions to them. To some degree, literature highlights the rejection of tradition (Abu Jweid, 2021d, p.9). Accordingly, such tradition is considered as one of the fictional milestones in Thailand as it exemplifies these themes in a conspicuous and pedantic narrative style; and the author tries to critique it. The thematic aspect of the novel is of paramount importance as it genuinely accentuates the contemporary political and environmental obstacles and how they could be possibly mitigated. As such, the aim of this study, therefore, is to tackle the themes of poverty, relationships, and politics from a narrative perspective.

2. AUTHORIAL BACKGROUND

Minfong Ho is a Chinese author. She is considered as a Chinese-American author since she writes in English. She studied at Tunghai University in Taiwan and, then, she enrolled in Cornell University / the U.S.A. When she graduated, she went back to Asia; and she worked as a journalist at The Straits Times in Singapore. Furthermore, she has a deep sympathy for the lower social class i.e., she sheds light on the issue of poverty and its influence upon people. The typical spatial settings vary among the Southeast Asian countries by which her writings are greatly inspired. Her writings expose the hard conditions of poor people and how they could hardly cope with their life requirements. This thematic feature embody the core of her writing topics and fictional plots (Kintanar 38). This is due to the fact that literary works reflect the environmental circumferences of the fictional characters (Abu Jweid, 2021a, p.32).

Ho's works are very realistic. That is, they depict real events, like the Cambodian refugees and Thailand student movements. In so doing, she exposed the real causes that put these people in such difficult situations. In this sense, her works serve as realistic documentations poverty-stricken people and the possible salvation from humanitarian catastrophes. Her writing style is lucid, concise and simple, which makes the reader more familiar with the facts that are being approached in the bulk of her works (Kintanar, p.39). Ho's fictional tone is strikingly optimistic. For this reason, she profoundly attracts the admiration of children as well as adult audience. She tackles very crucial and significant subjects that are set in the Asian regional milieu, especially Thailand. Therefore, she precisely introduces the social customs and traditions to the whole world. Her writing are abundant with the close depiction of the individuals' sufferings and plights in the face of a constantly changing world. As such the value of her literary compositions lies in their authentic and outright narratives events to provide the reader with comprehensive impression that they truly portray. Since literature attempts to create ambivalence between the characters and their subjective affairs (Abu Jweid, 2020a, p.8).

She won notable awards, chief among them are Gold Star Story Award, Parents' Choice Award, Ministry of Culture Short Story Writing Competition as well as Commonwealth Book Awards. Ho is a prolific novelist. Therefore, her literary legacy is rich with literary techniques and themes that brought her a world acclaim and reputation; chief among her works are the following: *Sing to the Dawn* (1975), *The Clay Marble* (1981), *Tanjong Rhu and Other Stories* (1986), *Rice Without Rain* (1986), *The Two Brothers*, with Saphan Ros (1995), *Hush!: A Thai Lullaby* (1996), *Maples in the Mist: Children's Poems from the Tang Dynasty* (1996), *Brother Rabbit: A Cambodian Tale* (1997), *Gathering the Dew*

(2003), and *Peek!: A Thai Hide-and-Seek* (2004). Such diverse achievement puts her on the first rug of the Asian-American literary scale; and she could become one of the most influential writers (Kintanar, p.42).

3. SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL

The novel focuses on the life of the protagonist, Jinda, a seventeen-year old female that lives in a secluded village near yellow rice fields. She is the only supporter of her family because her family members depend on her work to meet their expenditure income. The eponymous words "Rice Without Rain" refer to crop failure due to the lack of rain. As a result, she and her family could not pay the fares for renting the lands for growing rice because they do not have enough money. However, a group of young strangers come to the village and propose viable solution for the possible success of the harvest season.

Consequently, Jinda becomes very optimistic when she hears the strangers' hopeful proposals. She reluctantly begins to trust the strangers in order to have a fertile season. One of these strangers is Sri, who is very diligent and hard worker; this is due to the authors' predilection to provide a comprehensive image of their society through narrative repetition (Abu Jweid, 2021e, p.26). Sri has much knowledge and the practice of saving medicine and the feasibility of using them to improve the crops. Another one is Ned who encourages people to be responsible for their good destiny and never surrender to any obstacle. Jinda believes that her trust in Sri and Ned is wrong because they only focus on their interests. In this way, she exemplifies Thailand's confrontation with the ever changing rural life, and how such change must be faced with determination and self-reliance which are sometimes connected to the autobiographical features of the author (Abu Jweid, 2020b, p.6).

4. SETTING OF THE NOVEL: PLACE AND TIME

In literature, fictional works have typically two elements of setting, namely, time and place. Regional places indicate the spatial elements of the story, and time represent the temporal mode of the story (Ribó, p.94). As for the spatial setting (place), the novel parades several places in the course of the plot (Bushell, p.119). The novel is primarily set in Thailand's capital city, Bangkok. The plot specifically sheds light on Maekung village, which stretches fifty miles from Chiangmai. There is Outbound Path that connects the village to the adjacent big highway. The yellow rice fields are other notable places in the vicinity of Maekung village. This place is evident in this excerpt: "In the next few days, the villagers of Maekung talked of nothing else but the rent" (p.74). Consequently, Maekung village represents the novel's primary spatial

setting in which the major fictional events take place in displacement experience (Abu Jweid, 2022a, p.20).

As for time, the plot implicitly centers on the years of drought that really happened in 1976. Fictional plots accentuate the national attitudes of real people depicted in the course of narrative works (Abu Jweid, 2021f, p.52). By the same token, the drought hits the villages and leaves it barren. As a result, crops failed, and farmers could not stop the harvest continuous deterioration. It made the entire Maekung village dry and hot, which later resulted in lack of sufficient food supplies. The time appears in the time of environmental drought the stroke different places in the novel: "The years of drought had taken their toll, and it was much drier and hotter than she had ever remembered" (p.174). This drought resulted in harvest failure and agricultural crops could not meet the villagers' nutritious needs. The novel temporal setting symbolically incarnates the real environmental drought that resulted in harvest failure approximately fifteen years before publishing the novel. Being so, narrative description empathizes the identity of people in such conditions (Abu Jweid, 2022b, p.7). In this sense, they inspire Ho's to write about them but in a fictional manner in order to highlights their effect upon Thailand's society as fictional plots are –to some extent – haunted by fear mechanisms (Abu Jweid, 2020c, p.14).

5. OBJECTIVE

This essay tries to examine the themes of poverty, relationships, political turmoil in Thailand, and students' aspiration in Ho's *Rice Without Rain* (1986). The diagram below illustrates the relationship among the themes of poverty, relationships, political turmoil in Thailand, and students' aspiration:

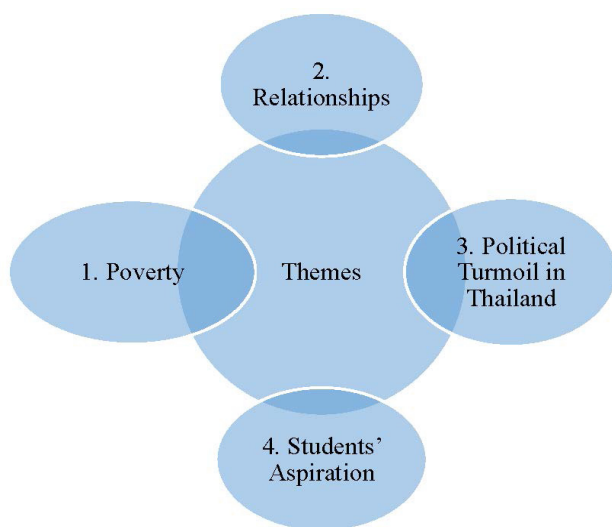


Figure 1
The relationship among the themes of poverty, relationships, and political turmoil

6. POVERTY

Through the theme of poverty, the novel unravels poverty as a result of drought and hunger. In fact, the theme of poverty relate to crop failure makes people poorer than ever. The novel shows how Jinda is fed up with her poverty because she is no longer able to support her family. When Sri comes to the village, she brings with her curative medicine, which makes Jinda an optimistic. However, Jinda does not initially appear optimistic because she truly suffers from poverty. Therefore, Sri claims that her medicine would be a remedy for the villagers' poverty; the theme of poverty appears in this quotation: "Can doctors heal hunger, Jinda?" she asked. "Will any amount of penicillin cure poverty? Jinda shook her head. She had not understood much of what Sri was saying, but in her heart she knew this much: little Oi was not going to get well. She felt angry and hopeless, but when she saw the bewilderment in Sri's eyes, she wanted only to comfort her friend" (p.49). This is because literature has some degree of allegorical descriptions (Abu Jweid, 2020d, p.93).

7. RELATIONSHIP

The theme of relationship is wide; and it is tackled in different ways in narrative works (Abu Jweid, 2021b, p.7). The theme of relationships is also clear in the novel because Ho deals with it in a realistic style. The main relationships connect the protagonist, Jinda with the strangers who come to the village. At the beginning, it is normal for the villagers to accept the presence of the strangers in the village. Accordingly, they feel that it is just a rumor about their imminent arrival in the village. However, they get accustomed to the strangers' as soon as they arrive; and they easily begin coping with them. In this case, the theme of relationships includes the villagers and their contact with strangers whom they think will bring happiness; and they might rescue them from the drought's aftermath: "The word which had lurked in every villager's mind as soon as the rumour spread that strangers were coming to Maekung" (p.24). The function of literature, in this sense, is to convey this relationship in reginal commitment (Abu Jweid, 2020e, p.209).

8. POLITICAL TURMOIL IN THAILAND

The theme of political turmoil in Thailand has a real historical background. In the 1970s, Thailand teamed with political turmoil. Accordingly, the novel indirectly depicts them. There are several textual allusions about such turmoil. They indicate the novel's historical appropriation of political unrest that took place before the novel's publication. Thailand, therefore, was divided into mini parties that hold contradictory political ideologies. The novel reveals two political trends, namely,

politicians and their communists that represent the typical contemporary political scene in Thailand. This refers to the fact of literature that exemplifies the identity of the characters (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.530). The narrator describes the contradictory prelateship between politicians and communists as a game that remains combating in the city. Yet, communists are more real than politicians because they lead rural life and genuinely experience its bitterness more than their political counterparts: "It was only politics, games periodically played by politicians who never left the city. But communists were more real than politicians: communists actually lived in rural areas, and ventured into villages" (p.24). This political aspect is tackled in the novel since literary works has intertextual affinity with society (Abu Jweid, 2021b, p.12).

9. STUDENTS' ASPIRATION

The theme of students' aspiration exemplifies the novel's optimistic ambition to recover from political turmoil and the environmental drought, which is a token of narrative dystopia (Abu Jweid, 2020f, p.104). Students' aspiration refers to their persistent search for prosperity and improvement. They attempt to improve the villagers' lives by offering them the suitable economic infrastructure, like developing the village's agricultural capacities. As a result, they arrive in the village and from a union network to jolt down plans to propose viable ventures for the villagers' cultivation. The students are representative of different universities from Thailand; and they gather to make a strong union to face national problems, especially the drought and political unrest. For example, Ned is a representative of Thammasart University. His main concern to spread awareness a through pep talk and encouraging the villagers to elevate their poor conditions by hard work and stamina. In this sense, these network unions in the village exemplify the theme of students' aspiration to make their country prosperous and more stable: "There, students who had been elected to represent each of the dozens of universities and vocational colleges all over Thailand, gathered. It was a tight-knit network, capable of mobilizing thousands of students into mass rallies at a day's notice. And Ned, as one of the representatives of Thammasart University, was pivotal in this network" (p.137). This indicate the nature of literature that provides critiques the negative aspects of society (Abu Jweid, 2021c, p.5).

10. CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed the themes of poverty, relationships, political turmoil in Thailand, and students' aspiration in Ho's *Rice Without Rain* (1986). It has focused on the way by which Ho perceives the social lower class in Thailand and how it suffered from poor life conditions. Furthermore, it has demonstrated the

novel's appropriation of the poor people's reaction to their relationships with other foreigners in the course of the plot. These relationships have been accentuated as a portrayal of the villager's acceptance of change and their ability to cope with it without and any obstacles. It has also revealed Ho's realistic depiction of political turmoil that dominated the contemporary status quo in Thailand's society. Thus, students' aspiration has been tackled as the core of change perceived in the plot because it exemplifies the author's conceptualization of optimist view of the future concerning the lives of poor people.

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