

A Feminist Perspective in Thommayanti's *Song of Life*

Kosit TIPTIEMPONG

Introduction

During her lifetime, Wimol Siriphaiboon (1936-2021) was a successful Thai novelist. Since she began writing, at the age of nineteen, several of her works have achieved fame and have frequently been adapted into television dramas, movies, and musicals. Thommayanti is the best-known of her six pen names, which also include Rose La Reine, Laksanawadee, Kanok-rekha, Mayawadee, and Wim-la¹. Thommayanti, a well-known feminist author in Thailand, has created many remarkable female characters in her works, including the prostitute protagonist in *Roymonthin*, or *Trace of Stigma* (Thommayanti, 1993), which was the first time she used the pen name Thommayanti, and Angsumalin, the protagonist of her most famous war-torn romance novel *Khu-kam*, or *Sunset at Chao Phraya* (Thommayanti, 2004).

Concepts and characters in Thommayanti's novels have been the topic of substantial examination in Thai literature (Burkman, 2014; Chaochuti 2015). To discover how versatile she was as a well-respected novelist in the Thai literary world, it is also worthwhile to analyze her lesser-known works with intriguing subjects. In truth, Thommayanti has covered a diverse array of literary themes in more than a hundred works, including nationalism, reincarnation, family conflict, politics, and social difficulties. However, music is one of her rarest themes, as *Phleng Chiwit* or *Song of Life* demonstrates. In *Song of Life*, while maintaining her strong female heroine, Thommayanti chooses music, specifically lyrics, as a crucial element to enhance the image of her protagonist, rather than using generic poems as her usual rhetoric.

This study examines the lesser-known work *Song of Life* by Thommayanti, which portrays Iad, an intriguingly strong female figure. The version of the novel used here was compiled and published in 1993 by the publisher Na-Baan Wannakam, as it is the form that is most readily available, although this work was published multiple times prior to this edition. Using a feminist perspective for literary analysis, this paper has two primary objectives: 1) to examine how the family structure affects the life of the female protagonist; and 2) to explain how music, notably songwriting, serves as a coping tool for the protagonist to face life's obstacles and becomes a symbol of defying gender norms in a male-dominated sector.

The opening section will accomplish the first purpose while offering a succinct summary of the entire book. After a discussion of how the author uses poetry as songs in the novel, a description of the protagonist's compositions is provided. Before the conclusion, the discussion on breaking gender



stereotypes will be presented.

The unheard voice: A life from a domineering household

Iad, the novel's protagonist, relates the events of *Song of Life* in the first-person point of view. She battles with her life from a young age in her adoptive family and in her marriage. Her life as a young girl is profoundly influenced by her dysfunctional family, and her husband influences her subsequent life as an adult in an adverse manner. How a woman like Iad, who is not endowed with a wonderful family, copes with her miserable life is the central theme of the work. Considering Iad's life challenges, the main structure of the novel can be divided into two parts. In both of the parts, the family environment at the time either affects her life or forces her to make a certain decision. Each component will be analyzed here.

A child in a dysfunctional family

A family without children adopts the orphan Iad. At first her new parents value her the most. However, shortly after the adoption, the couple is blessed with a daughter, who becomes the adopted child's biological younger sibling. As they grow to love their new child more than her, the parents' affection for Iad begins to wane. Iad becomes isolated and unhappy as a result of the increased frequency and severity of her parents' disciplining. Even the housekeepers pay her little notice. In this seemingly happy house, her existence appears to be neglected, and her temperament becomes unstable. Her only relief comes from books and music. She once remarks, "In my ideal world, there were simply music and books, and I could imagine anything I wanted through them" (p.108)². Her household environment has worsened, and the family has become dysfunctional, as defined by contemporary psychology as a family with various internal disputes, domestic abuse, mental illness, or external factors influencing the family unit's basic requirements (Miller-Keane Encyclopedia, 2003).

In addition, Minullina (2018) explains that hyperprotection and hypoprotection, indulgence and neglect of the child's needs, excess and deficiency of requirements-responsibilities for the child, excess and deficiency of requirements-prohibitions characterize dysfunctional families for the child. In *Song of Life*, Iad's scenarios exemplify the characteristics of such a dysfunctional family. Iad loves music. She is also good at playing many musical instruments as she describes, "My strongest subject in school was music. I was always a passionate and successful student of the piano, violin, and guitar (p. 59)." However, her mother, in particular, becomes less appreciative of her and more authoritarian. She would expect something other than music even from Iad's studies, as Iad writes, "My music teacher was impressed with how quickly I was able to memorize the notes. Regarding the piano, I was able to play it because I poured my entire heart into it. My teacher made a joke that I should have been a pianist because I had such long fingers. However, Mom constantly said, 'Lazy people have long fingers'³. Only works of art will suffice for them' (p. 35)."

As dysfunctional as it is, Iad's family can be described as a controlling family in which, according

to Hunt (2014), the structure is excessively rigid, the tone is authoritative and dictatorial, the parents tend to be faultfinding and critical, and the children are task-oriented and their performance is valued. Iad once writes, "When my mother saw my progress report, she would always find something to complain about. 'In every subject, you never got far above fifty percent,' she would say. 'What type of learning are you ever going to be able to accomplish?' (p.59)"

As an orphan, Iad has no choice but to be patient and simply do what she can. What we notice here is that Thommayanti portrays Iad as a well-behaved girl in accordance with the Thai cultural value of being grateful to parents regardless of how harshly children are treated. It is a common type of conflict expressed in Thai literature, and Iad is written that way. This trait becomes much more apparent when she becomes a teenager and a man named Chum tries to court her, eventually resulting in their marriage, also due to Iad's mother's strong encouragement. Her life begins a new phase with her marriage, but it is not a decent one.

A struggling wife in a new family

Iad becomes a lonely teenager who abandons her plan to become a doctor in favor of a nursing job. Fortunately, her family continues to fund her schooling. Through nursing school, she is able to escape her harsh household environment, in which her younger sister is likewise mean to her. On the final day before she leaves home to live in the nursing school's dorm, her father emphasizes to her the need of being frugal with the family's limited funds and helping her sister in the future. Here, a complex emotion overpowers her. She is pleased to be leaving. On the other hand, she feels a sense of burden and isolation when she must leave her so-called home, "The last night I slept in the house—the house that was never warm enough for a child, but was the only home I ever knew and lived from childhood until adulthood—I couldn't help but become dismayed (p.242)."

When Iad begins her new life as a nursing student, Chum continues to pursue a relationship with her. In essence, Chum is the character that Thommayanti uses to illustrate how a woman is victimized by a man outside of her own family. In her many writings and even in her interview, Thommayanti typically states that women are exploited by men and society. This criticism can also be plainly recognized in *Song of Life*. For the role of a man taking advantage of a lady, Chum's actions are depicted shortly after their acquaintance. Iad writes:

Without my consent, he forcibly yanked my hand toward him so he could examine it closely. My entire body stiffened in shock, and I reacted by flicking away quickly. The expression on his face said nothing about his thoughts to me. His response was, "What? I just want to look at your fingers. You won't allow me to do so?"

[...] Every time he said or did something, it came off as funny. Long time afterwards, I realized that he had never taken anything seriously in his life. If he thought that he could lose something in case he helped someone else, he wouldn't even consider it. But if there was something in it for him to take an advantage of, he'd take it seriously. That is the complete opposite of who I am. And never in my life did anyone repay my generosity! (p. 143-144)

To make things worse, Iad's mother's insistence that she should formally introduce Chum, as her dating partner, to the family adds to the sense of a powerless woman who cannot choose her own life partner. Iad does not adore Chum. Instead, she harbors skepticism over Chum's personality; yet her family considers him to be a potential companion for her in a romantic relationship. They end up getting married, but only because Iad's mother puts a lot of pressure on them to do so. Since her nursing school years, Iad has been working as a songwriter. After graduating, becoming a nurse, and getting married, she continues to write songs. Unfortunately, marriage is only the beginning of Iad's life being damaged by a man, as Chum ends up being irresponsible, manipulating her income, and having affairs with several women. Her innermost desire for a happy life goes unheard.

The voice being heard: Thommayanti's rhetoric reflected in Iad's songs

Thommayanti's poems as lyrics

To be fair to the author, it is nearly impossible to write a novel that includes many songs with the intention of letting readers sing along and hear music in their heads. Typically, music is used in literature by quoting the lyric of a well-known song or mentioning a piece of music composed by a famous composer. Even so, there is no assurance that the readers understand the lyric or song as intended by the author. It is considerably more difficult to achieve this impact if a song in the novel appears out of nowhere or is composed by the novelist specifically for that novel.

As music is a major component of *Song of Life*, it is inevitable to include songs within the narrative. Thommayanti achieves this through composing new songs by employing her talent as a writer who enjoys poetry, and by using well-known melodies and poetry at the same time. In reality, the majority of Thommayanti's novels contain poetry, whether it be her own or that of others. She is likely the Thai novelist whose works contain the most amount of poetry. A prime example is that in her historical novel *Suryavarman*, the entire text is constructed of *Ray*, a style of Thai poetry (Thommayanti, 1996). In general, the manner in which she inserts poems is not always natural, but it has become her trademark and is appreciated by the vast majority of readers.

No matter how a song's rhythm or melody is expressed on paper, the musical effect would be limited. Therefore, presenting text or lyrics is the best approach. In this regard, Thommayanti routinely incorporates a variety of materials in *Song of Life*, including English lyrics, and she portrays her original poems as songs composed by Iad. The novel's narrative of music ranges from Thai traditional poetry to western music, such as *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and Thomas Moore's poem *The Last Rose of Summer*, which was eventually incorporated into the opera *Martha* by the German composer Friedrich von Flotow (p. 441).

The depiction of songwriting in the novel and the lyrical structure are two aspects to consider. First, in the novel, songwriting mostly refers to lyrics writing, not melody composition. Depending on the composer, the structure of a contemporary song may vary. Although melody is typically created first, followed by lyrics, sometimes lyrics appear first, and occasionally both melody and

lyrics appear simultaneously. As previously mentioned, due to the limitations of the novel, it is likely that when Thommayanti refers to Iad's songwriting, she means composing the lyrics, rather than the tune, even though Iad is capable of playing the piano which is very convenient instrument for composing a song. So, the musical effects in the novel originate from text, not melody.

Second, in the narrative about songwriting, Thommayanti composes her poems in a more or less conventional manner, as opposed to a melody-centric lyric style. Thai poetry and music have a characteristic of rhymed sound. Word count and exact rhyme (a pair of words with the same vowel and ending consonant) are required in Thai poetry. Similarly, although not as rigid as in poetry, rhyme is generally considered essential to the beauty of Thai music. While it is impossible to convey the sound of the music, the lyrics of the songs presented in *Song of Life* adhere to the traditional pattern of Thai poetry; for example, each line contains eight syllables and both internal and external rhymes with the following line.

The protagonist's reflection in songwriting

Thommayanti's portrayal of the protagonist is immediately apparent from the beginning of the novel. She contrasts Iad's unutterable cries as a lonely orphan with eventual success as a female songwriter, a career that is uncommon for women in Thailand, expressing her cries via lyrics. Iad expresses early on that she is a music-lover as a child, as she writes, "People thought I was an odd child since I liked listening to other people sing. Even if I heard a bird chirping, I would remain still and listen. I would rush around telling everyone to listen to the melody when the wind blew through the holes in the wooden wall" (6). Throughout the course of the story, hints are dropped that Iad takes solace in her songwriting.

Although Thommayanti is unable to provide a rational explanation for how music is able to mend Iad's broken heart, it is a widely held belief in today's society that music has the power to heal the heart and influence emotions, as evidenced by a number of studies that have been conducted on music therapy. To be more specific, songwriting serves as an emotional shelter for Iad, and there has been a significant amount of research conducted on the topic of how songwriting can help people deal with stress and despair (Lindberg, 1995; Silverman, 2020).

Iad believes that she has never been loved because of her family history. She claims that she has no idea how she gets through those hours and days in her life. However, the passage of time has led her to doubt that anyone will ever truly love her, that anyone will care about her, and that she will never get anything without ultimately losing everything (p. 59). Iad finds inspiration for her musical works from her loneliness and longing for love. The first song she composes, *Magic of the Moon* (p. 85), is one example.

I am delighted to observe the moon at night.
 My heart yearns for the revolving stars in the night sky.
 Oh, is it true that the moon would leave me behind?
 Oh, the moon's enchantment soothes my heart.

The moon is actually shackling the rabbit as if by magic.

Iad also uses songwriting as a means of self-expression. She expresses regret that she makes a terrible judgment and picks the wrong route by marrying the wrong man, Chum. Actually, a nice guy named Pong appears in the novel at the same time as Chum, but Iad chooses to marry Chum, only to encounter difficulties. She writes, “I should have loved Pong. Why didn’t I choose to fill my heart with that tenderness? Why didn’t I choose a man who was a good friend, brother, or even a father to protect me? Why did I pick the path that took me through the thorn forest? I hurt myself. I’ve been tired until now. It’s too late now. It’s too late to start over (p. 216-217). The song *Regrettable* is inspired by this sentiment (p. 217).

It is disappointing to fall in love.
It is sad to waste a swan’s dignity.
It is unpleasant to be overly obsessed.
It is unfortunate to take the wrong path.

It is simple for a man’s heart to fall in love.
It is as transparent as a flowing river.
If I were to cry, I would desire love.
I should therefore halt my heart.

When she is extremely weary of life, she also expresses herself in a song in a distinct and metaphoric manner. As a woman with the lack of true love, she compares life to a boat, a worn-out human vessel that will reach the pier of death one day. In the song *Human Boat* (p. 243), the lyric goes:

Oh, boat. It is the human boat.
Its length is decided by the lust that directs it.
Never know where the boat is heading for.
The emotions are the helm that makes the boat unstable.
The funeral pyre is the lonely pier.
The song of Karma will be played there at the end.

In a more practical sense, working as a nurse does not provide Iad with enough income. She must rely on songwriting to support her wedding and family, as Chum does not contribute financially. When Iad becomes a successful songwriter, however, Chum’s attitude changes and he comments that it is such a good work to write so little but get the money so quickly, without taking into account how difficult it is to get money from one’s creativity (p. 361).

Not only is songwriting a means of subsistence, but also a sign of achievement that celebrates the

resilience of a woman who is betrayed, emotionally devastated by her husband, and ridiculed by the music industry for being a female songwriter. The most notable song is *Song of Life*, which is also the title of the novel (p. 2). Actually, it appears at the beginning of the novel, but its significance is not made explicit. Iad informs the readers as the tale develops that she has composed *Song of Life*, but that it is unfinished. At the conclusion of the narrative, each component is added until the song is complete. It is nominated for the Golden Record Award, which is regarded as the highest accolade in the songwriting industry.

Fate...it is so unjust and harsh.
Injustice never ends.
Unjustness results in a wretched existence.

Destiny...it always takes me in the wrong direction.
It transports me to an inebriated swamp.
It always leads me down the wrong path.

Karma...makes things worse, when I make a mistake.
Karma in my life,
It is pursuing me and breaking my heart.

Life...it has no stable base.
Life travels. Even contemplating, it causes pain.
When life ends, so do happiness and misery.

In the novel, Iad is widely considered a talented composer who excels at composing melancholy songs, which are most likely the product of her harrowing life experiences. Her music has received widespread praise because of these qualities. It would appear that this is the point that Thommayanti wants to make: the success of a woman is less dependent on the support of her family and more on her talent and perseverance.

Iad accepts the Golden Record Award from the king. She goes out to celebrate with her friends while ruminating on the meaninglessness of her life: "I've always felt that my life had no purpose. Nobody knew the origin of my being. In the end, it would have no significance for anyone. Despite this, I now have a child. Despite being unimportant to others, I am the most important person to my child. The melodies of my life have taught me countless things that I will never reveal to my child" (p. 790-791). At the conclusion, it is evident that her innermost voice has been heard through a sad song, *Song of Life*, but her child will stay emotionally oblivious to it.

Discussion: Breaking gender stereotypes

Even with loud music, there is always a sound that goes unnoticed. Similarly, it is obvious that there is always an unheard voice among children, the impoverished, the oppressed, and women in any given society. The message that Thommayanti, as a feminist novelist, conveys in *Song of Life* may be summed up as a stark contrast between the unheard and heard voices exemplified by Iad and her profession as a songwriter, both of which to be highlighted here.

Iad is a prime example of how Thommayanti subverts gender stereotypes. This is probably the most conspicuous message in *Song of Life*. A gender stereotype can be defined as a preconceived notion regarding the qualities, characteristics, or roles that women and men should possess or play (United Nations). The complexity of this issue varies from society to society, particularly when social norms play a role. In this novel, it is clear that Thommayanti believes that families and men shape women's social presence. Even though *Song of Life* is a sad novel, Thommayanti writes a way out for Iad as a misfortunate woman by concluding that she finally divorces her husband, becomes a successful songwriter who is awarded the Golden Record Award, and is determined to raise her unborn child as a single mother.

According to Thai cultural values, children are expected to respect and obey their parents even when making a life-altering marriage decision. This is especially true for Iad, an adopted child, who cannot disobey her mother's wishes and must marry a man she despises. The author's feminist stance, however, demonstrates that even a vulnerable woman like Iad can be critical of men and male-dominated society. In other words, Iad defies gender stereotypes in at least three interconnected ways: criticism of men, devaluation of marriage, and reliance on songwriting for financial support.

To begin with, Iad is quite critical of men; for example, she says that the answer to the question of what comes first in the thinking of a man is "love for himself", suggesting her harsh stance toward men. She continues to say that, "Men typically lack compassion for those around them. They are solely conscious of the pleasure that they are experiencing. That is all there is to it" (p. 365). Later, she emphasizes her position by penning the song *Do Not Think You Know What I Think*, in which she asserts that men should not assume that women will always and indefinitely love them, should not assume women will love them forever (p. 589).

Next, the notion that a woman can be independent influences her decision to divorce an unfaithful partner. She realizes, "Just like everything I've lost along the way, marriage is a beginning and an end. I was disappointed because I used my heart to consider others, but no one cares about my heart" (p. 334). She decides to divorce her husband while pregnant, intending to raise their unborn child by herself.

The most important aspect is breaking gender stereotypes in women's careers. In a patriarchal society such as Thailand, it is difficult for women to compete with men, particularly in the workplace. In recent decades, however, educated Thai women have begun to use their newly acquired freedom to assume larger roles than they had previously (Klausner, 2017). As for the

Thai music industry, it is still dominated by men, especially in the songwriting profession. While songwriting is not a typical occupation for Thai women, Thommayanti creates a non-traditional protagonist with the ability to overcome life's obstacles in a non-traditional manner.

The ability to defy gender stereotypes as a songwriter does not guarantee a smooth career path. The majority of musicians in Thailand are poorly compensated and mistreated by record labels. In contrast to the increasingly popular and competitive *luk-thung* music, or Thai country music of the late 1950s, Iad is a popular music songwriter and she sometimes suffers from that rivalry. In addition to competition within the music industry, Iad faces prejudice as a female songwriter. She writes, "When I was at the height of my career as a songwriter, some journalists would sarcastically proclaim, 'This is supposedly the highest-paid female songwriter.'" (p. 170), indicating that a female songwriter has few opportunities for success.

In Thailand, songwriting is generally considered a male occupation, so women have few opportunities in this field. This kind of disparity manifests itself in a variety of ways, including the restriction of opportunities for female musicians. In contrast, Iad is portrayed as a successful songwriter in a novel written more than three decades ago, indicating that the author anticipates a greater presence of women in this industry. The success of Iad, as evidenced by the Gold Record Award in the fictional world, becomes more plausible in Thailand a few decades after the publication of the novel. Now Thai women are free to seek employment and have learned how to defend and care for themselves. As they have become more self-reliant, they have felt less of a need to listen to authority figures within and outside the family (Klausner, 2017).

Conclusion

Song of Life by Thommayanti can clearly be read as a feminist novel. Iad, the protagonist, is a vulnerable woman who has been influenced by her family and husband. Physically and socially, women are susceptible to more limitations than men. It is even more so in the case of Iad, as she is an orphan. However, Thommayanti, as a feminist novelist, creates Iad as a woman who does not surrender to her fate, despite the fact that she has few options for her life. In this way, the novel's feminist perspective is readily apparent: women can achieve success in a society dominated by men, even in a traditionally male-dominated profession such as songwriting. In retrospect, the fact that the status of women in Thai society was not elevated at the time this novel was published proves that *Song of Life*, as well as Thommayanti's other works, contained a progressive message.

Endnotes

- 1 The Thai script for each pen name is written as follows: Rose La Reine—โรสลาเริน, Thommayanti—ทมยันตี, Laksanawadee—ลักษณวดี, Kanok-rekha—กนกเรखा, Mayawadee—มายาวดี, and Wim-la—วิม-ลา. Regarding the pen name Thommayanti, according to the author herself, the correct reading is supposed to be *Tha-ma-yan-ti*, but the general public is more familiar with *Thom-ma-yan-ti*. In this study, therefore, ‘Thommayanti’ will be used to avoid confusion.
- 2 Because this novel has not been translated into English, the author of this paper has translated all citations for research purposes into English.
- 3 The underlined parts do not appear in the original text. Some texts are underlined here by the author of this for the analysis.

References

- Burkman, T. (2014). Can Nations Forgive? Japan, Korea, and China Remember the Past and Face the Future. *Review of Asian and Pacific Studies*, 9, 67-88.
- Chaochuti, T. C. (2015). For the Love of the Mother(land): Psychoanalysis and Nationalism in Two Thai Novels by Thommayanti. *South East Asia Research*, 23(4), 535-551. <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2015.0279>
- Klausner, W. (2017). Thailand needs urgent debate on female equality. *Nikkei Asia*.
<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Thailand-needs-urgent-debate-on-female-equality2>
- Lindberg, K. A. (1995). Songs of Healing: Songwriting with an Abused Adolescent. *Music Therapy*, 13, 93-108.
- Miller-Kean Encyclopedia. Dysfunctional families. (n.d.) Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, Seventh Edition. (2003). Retrieved November 6 2022 from <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Dysfunctional+families>
- Minullina, A. F. “Psychological Trauma of Children of Dysfunctional Families.” *The European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2018.
- Silverman, M. J. (2020). Therapeutic songwriting to address distress tolerance for adults on an acute care mental health unit: A pilot study. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 71(8), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2020.101716>
- Thommayanti (2004). *Khu-kam* (คู่กรรม). Na Ban Wannakam.
- Thommayanti (1993). *Roymonthin* (รอยมณฑิน). Na Ban Wannakam.
- Thommayanti (1993). *Song of Life* (เพลงชีวิต). Na Baan Wannakam.
- Thommayanti (1996). *Suryavarman* (สุริยวรมัน). Na Ban Wannakam.
- United Nations (n.d.). Gender stereotyping OHCHR and women’s human rights and gender equality. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/gender-stereotyping>

A Feminist Perspective in Thommayanti's *Song of Life*

Kosit TIPTIEMPONG

Summary

This study examines the renowned Thai author Thommayanti's novel *Song of Life*. Analysis of the protagonist, Iad, reveals that the novel contains a feminist message about a vulnerable woman seeking happiness. As an orphan adopted by a dysfunctional family, the protagonist turns to songwriting for solace. Thommayanti portrays her strong character as a woman who defies gender stereotypes by criticizing men, downplaying marriage, and becoming a successful songwriter, a traditionally male-dominated profession in Thai culture.

キーワード

トムマヤンティー 『ソング・オブ・ライフ』 フェミニズムの視点 機能不全家族 作曲

Keywords

Thommayanti *Song of Life* feminist perspective dysfunctional family songwriting