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Postmodernism in Thai Poetry: Saksiri Meesomsueb’s *Tukta Roi Sai*

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**Introduction**

At first glance it might seem incongruous to discuss postmodernism and Thai poetry. For one thing, postmodernism is a Western trend, which seems to be far removed from the context of Thai poetry. Of all the fine arts in Thailand, poetry is the one least affected by Western ideas. Unlike fields such as music or painting where the practitioners have opportunities to study abroad and to experience a wide variety of Western artistic expressions, contemporary Thai poets as a rule have seldom been exposed to the poetry of any other nations, let alone Western ones.¹ Music and painting seem to exist in “universal language,” so to speak; Thai musicians and painters merely have to listen to or watch the

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¹ The situation now is in reverse of what happened in the absolute monarch era, when most poets were of royal or noble origins and consequently enjoyed far better education than commoners. Education in that period was centered around the court, and even a commoner poet such as Sunthrn Phu was close to the court, as he spent some time in his life as a court poet in the reign of Rama II. Thus poets were among the most educated members of the society. This is not the case in modern Thailand, and poets today, like Angkam, Naowarat Pongpaiboon, Saksiri or Chang Sae Tang (the first three of whom received the SEA Write Award, an annual award given to writers of the ASEAN countries), typically are not among the educated elites of contemporary Thai society. An exception to this is 'Jiranan Pitrpreecha-- a female poet who was also a recipient of the SEA Write, who was educated abroad.
Western music and arts and find some ideas for adoption and creative transformation into their own work. However, this is not quite possible with poetry. The obvious reason is that in poetry the language presents an almost impassable barrier for understanding and appreciation. Few Thai people are educated enough to appreciate foreign literature fully, and in recent times most Thai poets come from middle or lower classes which do not enjoy the benefits of the best education this country can provide. This also holds true with Saksiri Meesomsueb, whose poems are to be investigated in this paper.

Nevertheless, it is my aim in this paper to show that, even considering the fact that modern Thai poets have not been directly exposed to Western developments in critical and literary trends, their work exhibits several defining characteristics of postmodernism in many ways. The phenomenon might be explained by a hypothesis that artistic development parallels developments in social, economic and political spheres. Indeed the two sides could not but go together, one side ineluctably influencing and being influenced by the other. Thus, one might examine one side in order to learn about the other; that is, if Saksiris poems show postmodern characteristics, then an avenue toward understanding contemporary Thai society and culture as also postmodern is open. Poetry as a part of artistic culture of a society, does not exist in a vacuum, but is deeply intertwined with the context in which it takes place. Hence, if Saksiris poems are indeed postmodern without the poet himself being aware of it, then these advances are not parochial ones. Therefore, advances in culture seem to be more universal that hitherto supposed. Advances in artistic culture as well as cultural and critical theory reflect and are reflected by advances in social, economic and political milieux of a particular cultural and political sphere. My position is, then, that postmodernism is a critique and radicalization of modernism; the former being a part of the latter, completing the unfinished project originated by modernism, and it is not a totally new type of social order. Thus,

to say that Saksiris poems show postmodern characteristics is to say roughly that his poems are a reaction against the modern, totalizing trend in Thai culture.

Before we go on to read Saksiri's poems, however, a few words concerning some methodological issues are in order. There is a tension in a critical work which tries to present a work of art as postmodern, whether the criticism is merely expository or evaluative and interpretive. My assumption is that these two strands of looking at art cannot really be separated. To present something "as it is in itself," according to postmodernism, is already to be committed to a set of ideologies which colors and shapes what is to be described in the first place. This is antamount to saying that there is really no way to get at reality as it is in itself without the intervention of the conceptual apparatus of the subject. Therefore, this paper does not aim to show that postmodernism is merely something to be discovered. Thai poets are typically not conscious of their work being postmodern as some more sophisticated and learned of their Western counterparts might do. Nonetheless, since both the poet and the critic are intertwined within the socio-economic and historical context which gives sense to both works, their works depend on each other, and for the critic to say that a work is postmodern is both to describe and to interpret it too. To describe a poem in historical terms is largely to locate the poem in a context which is already constituted by a set of assumptions, and to so locate the poem is already to interpret it. On the other hand, to interpret the poem is to locate the poem in historical context, since the reader does not stand outside the context of time and space in which he or she happens to be in. Interpretation is always historically situated.

In _The Consequences of Modernity_, Anthony Giddens makes a case for a distinction between postmodernism' and 'postmodernity.' The former, for Gidens, "is best kept to refer to styles or movements within literature, painting, the plastic arts, and architecture. It concerns aspects of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity." The latter, on the other hand, concerns "a new and distinct type of social order," characterized by the collapse of epistemological

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foundations, the exposure of history as being devoid of any meta-narratives (or in Giddens terms grand narratives),\(^4\) and an increasing awareness of an ecological way of thinking.\(^5\) Postmodernism represents a trend within the cultural sphere, and the trend might or might not be a part of a postmodern society. For Giddens, postmodernism in the arts might point to some sort of actual social change, but it need not do so. However, if it is really the case that as a part of culture, poetry is sensitive to the milieux in which it is materialized, then I think one could gain a better understanding of these milieux through poetry.

**Premodern and Modern Thai Poetry**

Before discussing postmodern Thai poetry, it is useful to contrast it with premodern and modern poetry. I have chosen two poems: “Ongkarn Chang Nam” (Proclamation Cursing the Water), as representative of a premodern poem, and Angkarn Kanlayanapong’s “The Poet’s Testament,” a modern one. The first was used in one of the most important ceremonies in Siamee court-the oath of allegiance ceremony. In the ceremony all of the Kings nobles had to be present, on pain of death, to swear their allegiance by drinking water laden with many kinds of fearsome weapons. The verse was written in ancient Thai language and was used continuously from the early Ayutthaya period in the fourteenth century until the oath taking ceremony was abolished in 1932 with absolute monarchy.\(^6\) The second poem, “The Poet’s Testament,” was first published in 1957 by famous contemporary Thai poet and painter who belatedly received a SEA Write Award for poetry in 1986.

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4. It was Jean-Francois Lyotard who showed that the postmodern period is defined by its distrust of any idea of history moving toward a rationally deliberated goal; that is, history is constituted by no ‘meta-narratives’ which purport to make sense of the whole thing.


Dated from the early Ayutthaya period, *Ongkarn Chang Nam* consists of a cosmological account in Hindu mythology, relating how the earth and heaven came into being and how humans populated the earth. The poem also tells how the monarch, described as an avatar of Vishnu, derived his divine right and dominion over his subjects. Then there is a series of gruesome depictions of scenes which await those who are not loyal to the King, such as the water drunk by the participants would cut their ithroat as soon as they even thought of being disloyal, and soon. This part comprises the main bulk of the poem. The poem ends with saying that all the good things in life, including women and other material treasures, are ready for those who devote their lives to the service of the King. It is apparent that the poem would not be effective apart from its setting of a solemn ceremony where all the gods are being invoked to bear witness to the event and where the poem is read out loud in a shrill voice by a Brahmin. Moreover, when Buddhism came to be Siam’s state religion, monks were also taken to join the ceremony by chanting while the ceremony was taking place. The chant, ironically enough, is on the value of truth. All participants could not fail to witness the awesome power of the monarch and some might even came to really believe that the King was indeed an avatar of Lord Vishnu himself.

That the poem was premodern is obvious from the fact that it was used as an integral part of an ancient ceremony based around a cluster of beliefs such as the beliefs in Hindu mythology, the King as Divine, and the power of the gods to severely punish those who are not loyal to the King. Without these beliefs, the whole ceremony crumbles and becomes theatrical. The poem was part of the scene in the same way as the text of the monks chant, or in the same way as the ornate decorations on the temple’s walls, roofs and ceilings all joined together

7. In his article, Jit said that the purpose of employing the monks was the same as that of employing the Brahmins; that is, religion was being used as a tool to preserve the feudal class structure. In ancient Siam there was no doubt who was the most powerful class; the Brahmins, the highest caste in Hindu mythology, served the interests of the reigning monarch. Jit relates that in the ceremony, the real purpose of the monks’ chant of the Pali precept. “Truth is immortal” is to reinforce the whole point of the ceremony; that of being “truthful” to the monarch. However, one sees an ironic point here where truth itself is used as a tool to preserve power. It is as if, even in premodern times, truth itself is something negotiated and infused with the political.
to bring the subjects closer toward Ultimate Reality. In the case of the swearing ceremony, Ultimate Reality consisted of the Hindu gods. In the same way, the mural paintings also pointed to Nirvana. Premodern poetry, then, does not exist by itself; it derives its being solely from its role within the ceremonies in which it has been designed to be an integral part.

Moreover, few Thai scholars have paid any attention to the fact that the *Ongkarn Chang Nam* is a poem with no author. It was not important who actually was the one who wrote the poem, because, like in the other premodern arts, the role of the artist was only to recreate the standard of perfection which had been set in advance. The actual writer of the *Ongkarn* might be a scribe or a Brahmin at the time, but he is of no significance. History did not record who he was because his job was merely to create something as a part of the ceremony. What was infinitely more important than the actual writer was the pantheon and the king within it. This effacement of the author is characteristic of premodern art. Thai people do not know, and have no means to know, who it was who created the majestic Buddha images in the Sukhothai period which hold us in awe. Thai people do not seem to care about this matter either; moreover, the artist himself did not think it important that his name should be remembered as the creator of a masterpiece. He invariably thought that his work was in service of something infinitely larger than himself.

This attitude of the premodern poet was in complete contrast with that of the modern. Here is Angkarn’s poem “The Poet’s Testament” in its entirety. This is one of Angkarn’s most famous and most remembered poems and the one most representative of him as an artist. The poem was translated by Sulak Sivaraksha and Hiram Woodward:

**The Poets Testament**

I wrap the sky around myself  
to keep away the cold  
and eat starlight late at night  
to take the place of rice.  
Dewdrops scatter below the sky
for me to find and drink,
and out my poems flow
to greet the morn, to last the age.

My heart, sacrificed to its grave,
gains unworldly powers;
the spirit flies to lands of dreams
the far side of the sky.
It seeks divinity in Heaven
and brings it back to earth
to soothe the sand and grass,
bringing happiness, bringing peace.

My purpose in composing poems
is to salvage the soul.
now lying upon the swift, bold
currents and waves of time.
Although this life, which is not long,
gets all used up so soon,
the hearts proclamations,
sparkling and divine, shall last.

Let your body burn away
in its crematorium
poems made with strength and sweetness
cannot be burnt away.
Whichever world the soul’s reborn in,
there will be floods
of precious holy rainbows,
flashing crystal and sparkling gems.

Stillness is spirited into joy
by the written word,
as Heavens precious heavy rain
extinguishes the heat.
The heart is swiftly blown away
to dream in other lands.
This life smells sweet. The next
will have reflections of its sweetness.

I’m willing to renounce my life
and to throw it away,
I only want valuable goods,
the twinkling and the new.
Poetry surely is the most
sacred art of all,
magic as sweet bouquets are
that, taken from a precious wood,
have fallen from the sky. 8

What is striking here is the role of the lyric speaker and the far flung hyperboles used throughout the poem. The lyric speaker is willing to sacrifice everything—food, wealth, honor—for poetry, which he takes to be “the most sacred art of all.” He does not care if he has something to eat and never succumbs to the power of the society that always tries to bend him so that he become like everybody else. The speaker cannot be like everybody else. The theme of an individual standing and resisting the current of the mass or the community is very prominent, and this poem is accordingly among the most powerful proclamations of individualism to be found in Thai poetry.

Hence, one can easily discern the differences between this poem and the premodern Ongkarn Chang Nam. The latter is a part of an ancient ritual deriving its meanings from a structure of beliefs in some cosmological reality. The verses sung by the Brahmins to condemn disloyalty do not stand by

themselves; the actual writer of the verses is not accorded significance. On the contrary, we find in Angkarn’s poem a typical modernist attitude of the importance of the creator. These two poems, then, typify the standard account of premodern and modern arts by Richard Kearney, who states that premodern art is *theocentric*, whereas modern art is *anthropocentric*.\(^9\) That is, premodern art is constituted by an ontological structure which accords primacy to some transcendent Reality independent of human cognition, whether that is named God, Nirvana or otherwise. Its epistemology, in Plato as well as in standard Indian philosophies, is founded upon such ontological structure, and the idea that the knowing subject is an integral part of the whole cosmos. Modern art, on the other hand, is centered around the epistemological foundation of Cartesian subjectivity. Thus, for modern art, as well as modernity as a whole, ontology becomes dissolved into epistemology of subjectivity—what is to be accorded the status of knowledge comes from the self's own conviction based on no ulterior foundation than the self's own awareness of itself.

**Postmodern Thai Poetry: A Reading of Tukta Roi Sai**

In "Postmodern Postpoetry: Tom Raworth’s *tottering state*"\(^10\) Peter Brooker states that postmodern poetry is characterized by its counterhegemonic and deconstructionist tendencies. More specifically, there are four main features by means of which one could tell whether a poetic text could be regarded as postmodern:

- **intertextuality** (beyond self-reflexive autonomy and the organicism of the 'well made' poem);
- **subjectivity** (beyond the centred, unifying consciousness of the lyric and 'egoism' of the modernist long poem);
- **narrative** (the (im?) possibilities of a long postmodern poem, and its


relation to the world); and politics (the above, including the question of a poems readers and readings). 11

All these topics have something in common in their distrust of the totalizing tendency, the centripetal force, of modernism. Postmodern poetry is intertextual, constituted by other texts beyond itself, a weaving and reweaving of texts pointing to nothing beyond textuality. The modernist claim to originality is thus deconstructed, and what is left is nothing but pieces of cultural artifacts jumbled together.

This is related to Brooker’s second point concerning subjectivity. If the claim to originality cannot hold, then subjectivity is nothing more than a simulacrum. The Self is dissipated and fragmented. Thus narratives are not, as in modernism, constituted by what Lyotard calls ‘meta narrative. Humans do not move toward some designated end, and history does not have a goal. An overarching scheme by means of which history is capable of being put in a totalized perspective is also deconstructed. All this resolves into Brookers last point. If the claim to meta-narrative is contingent upon the idea of truth as correspondence between words and reality and if such a view on truth breaks down, then it seems that the only way ones point can be put forward convincingly is through politics. This is an echo of the close relationship between truth and power in Foucault’s work. Therefore, these characteristics also accord with Kearney's idea of the postmodern as ex-centric, 12 since the center (if any) of the postmodern artifact is decentralized. Premodern art points toward some transcendent reality; modern art relocates that reality in an individuals self consciousness. However, postmodernism repudiates the very idea of there being a center or a central reality altogether.

Tukta Roi Sai (Sand Trace Dolls) is Saksiri Meesomsueb’s first published collection, appearing first in 1983. It then underwent a second impression in 1993, following the poet’s rise to fame after his reception of the 1992 SEA Write Award. The volume is illustrated with line drawings by Kittisak Meesomsueb, and the themes of the poems and the drawings are closely connected; thus a full appreciation and understanding of the volume requires one to take the drawings into account. The front cover features a painting by Saksiri himself who graduated from the famed Poh Chang Arts and Crafts School which is well known for the visual arts. In the picture four people, two adults and two children, are lying on the ground surrounded by a ring of diminutive houses, temples and pagodas. The ring is further encircled by radiant, colorful stones in red, yellow, green and black. In the background are several plants and trees. Beyond is an intriguing sun with yellow ring; the sun is painted in deep purple, which through its contrast with the sky looks black. The images of the black sun and of people lying under it are clearly the central images of the whole volume, and in fact the collection itself is bounded by the poem “sand trace dolls,” appearing as the first and the last of the collection. This is the core piece of the work, which will be discussed momentarily.

Saksiri introduces the volume with a short prose entitled “Suu Lan Sai” (To a Sand Field), in which he criticizes the consumerism and materialism of modern people. Humans today, says the poet, are in the age when matter controls the soul, and they allow their lives to flow along with the materialistic ‘System’ without pausing to reflect to see how the System carries all sorts of social ills in its wake. Humans are so adept and ingenious at controlling the material side of nature, but they don’t turn that tool to see their own deeper selves. They want to control nature, but instead they end up being controlled by their cravings and desires. The poet addresses this short note to “each and every sand trace doll:”

We tend always to look outside, whereas the truth once resided inside.
Let us turn back and study the inside of life. Try to get a complete understanding. Then arguments will lessen ... and we will be more sympathetic to one another. We can grow this level of mind
in ourselves, and we don’t need genius brains to do so. Only this ... are our souls to tally free? Or are they totally enslaved?

“O Souls...
Some have a chance to fight, but lose
Some can think, but have no chance to fight
Some neither have a chance to think, nor to dare.”

One can see that the figures on the cover of two adults and two children lying inside the circle of houses and temples are the dolls traced in the sand to which the poet is addressing. Their lives are nothing but mere traces in the sand, having no substance at all. They are not even made of shifting sand, but are only represented through the void created by scratching the sand. Thus subjectivity, the center of their being, for them becomes void too. The loss of subjectivity is one of the postmodern traits in the collection. Saksiri is showing that human life is insubstantial, even void and empty, and no traces of substance can be salvaged from it. Furthermore, the black sun in the front cover picture could be interpreted as a ‘decentralized center’ which can no longer serve as the hub of activities. In other words, the sun, which used to be the center around which all activities in the universe revolved, cannot perform its usual function anymore, since it derives its centerness solely from its being the source of power and energy and consequently of knowledge and truth. Since the sun is now ‘black,’ its role as the totalizing and centripetal agent, the source of light, knowledge and truth is now dissipated.

This is quite a pessimistic picture, but the poet also gives a chance that the dolls could gain salvation through reflection of their insubstantiality and start fighting against the System. The preface is a cry against material culture, which is an inseparable part of modernity. Thus Gidden’s dictum that postmodern art is an aesthetic reflection of modernity rings true here. The volume is a reaction against the relentless modern force which cannot but be felt in contemporary

13. Saksiri Meesomsueb, Tukta Roi Sai (Bangkok: Kiao Koi Press, B.E. 2526) p. v. All translations of Mr. Saksiri’s pieces here are mine.
Thai society. The people are being driven like slaves by empty promises of good life and development which successive governments and bureaucracies have imposed upon them. Young men toil in fields or industries with the belief that their lives will be better; young women are forced to trade their self respect to satisfy the carnal lusts of male consumers. However, their belief in better life for themselves is shattered by the social and economic conditions which do not give them dignity and any possibility of realization of their hopes and desires. Their lives become mere traces in the sand.

The following is the theme poem of the collection. No poems in the work has a title, as if to say that titles are a means of control and of grouping together disparate elements into neat units—a typical modernist strategy. The first poem in the collection is accompanied in the left hand page by Kittisak's drawing of a doll of a baby girl holding a small bucket, with an opened discarded tin can lying near her feet. Both the baby girl and the tin can are engulfed in transparent flames leading up to a figure of a small bird rising from the fire. Alongside the bird on both sides are small plants and above it is a thin line of a simple house closely surrounded by dotted lines. On the right hand page is the poem:

Sand trace dolls
Lying with eyes open;
Black sun shining down,
The dolls eat it lying.
   Sand trace dolls
   Lying with eyes open-
   Their foolish eyes
   Being buried by the wind-
   Die amidst the black sun.  

Intertextual connections penetrate both the poem and the drawing. The doll in the drawing looks like a real doll, not a sand trace one (or is she really a trace?), but the idea of insubstantiality carries on nonetheless. The opened can near her

indicates that she has just finished eating something, and after she has eaten everything is up in flames. In the poem the sand traces lie there eating the black sun; there is nothing in their lives of any worth, and even what they eat is the sun that has lost all its power and warmth. Instead of being the source of energy for all beings, the source of evil-dispelling light, the sun becomes black, assuming the role of the evil itself. There are, then, intertextual relations to the cultural context of Buddhism, which compares the Buddha’s Enlightenment with the turning of the Wheel, and with the origin of the Light which shows the Way for all beings. Or it is weaved also with the fabric of Christianity, with the idea of Jesus as the Light, the Way and the Truth. Since the sun is now black, however, that source of light showing the Way for beings seems to turn to the opposite, upside down, inside out. One can look at this situation as the modern condition of supplanting the old hub of activities the Buddha’s or Jesus teachings, for example—with the new one of selfish consumerism. All of the sand traces activities consist only in their lying and eating the black sun; in other words, their activities amount to nothing, for the black sun, being dark, cannot serve as a lighthouse for anybody. The power, in some convoluted manner, is still there, drawing everybody to greed and consumerism. Nothingness and darkness reigns and permeates the whole scene. The poem also harks back to the front cover picture painted by Saksiri himself. A strong criticism of the modern scene is thereby made: the lives of modern people, engulfed and manipulated by the forces of material worship, avarice and selfishness, competitive attitudes, become mere traces in the sand. Modernity may in fact bring about “good things to life,” as a well known commercial tells us, but these ‘good things’ also result in more and more people being sucked up into the whirlpool of nonreflective submission. Modern lives are enslaved lives. In the poem, the sand traces seem to be destined to live these worthless and meaningless lives.

However, the drawing next to the poem still affords a glimmer of hope. The doll, even though it is being engulfed in transparent flames, is transformed into a bird, a symbol of peace. The image is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Phoenix rising from the ashes, always renewing itself. In fact the bird could be the soul of the doll itself who might have fought but lost. It rises above the rays of the black sun and enters the spiritual house high above. However, no
A hint of this brighter picture is present in the poem. It is as if the poet and the artist present somewhat different pictures of the scene. In the poem the dolls "Die amidst the black sun," but in the drawing the doll seems to start a new and better life. In this way the poem and the drawing complement each other. The sand trace dolls die pointlessly, but if the meaning of the adjacent drawing is taken into consideration, the dolls do not merely die and vanish, but, like Phoenix, rise again, assuming a better life afterwards. However, the bird in the drawing is not like Phoenix in that the former does not take its former shape after the rise. Instead the bird seems to rise farther and farther up from the ground where the doll lives. Thus the drawing is an ending, a completion, of the poem. The two must be read together in order that a full understanding be achieved.

One can, in this case, see the postmodern conception of the ambiguity of the author. The volume is advertised as a collection of poems written by Saksiri, but inside the drawings by Kittisak seem to form an integral part of the whole work and much significance would be lost if these drawings are not taken into account. So who is the real author of the work? Here the modernist attitude of the significance of the author is parodied. The 'originality' of the whole work is apparently the effect of two persons working. This is unlike modern art where the identity of the author is unmistakable. The overall effect of the collection depends essentially on reading the poems and drawings together. The situation is unlike that of Angkarn Kanlayanapong and William Blake, both renowned painters as well as poets, where interpretations of their work could be derived from a single authorial source. In this case, on the contrary, the drawing and the poem are from different sources; hence the modernist attitude of trying to locate the authors self within the work cannot be fully applied.

One is reminded of the premodern way of several artists working together to produce a single work. For premodern Thai poetry, such as scripts for Khon mask dance or other kinds of dramas, many poets separately work at different chapters of the whole play, creating a long work comprising many different styles in the different chapters of the work. Here, on the other hand, the two artists work in different media and the effect is blended together not unlike
the works of Angkarn or William Blake. The premodern long narrative poems are analogous to the large mural painting inside the Ordination Hall of a temple, but the postmodern *Tukta Roi Sai* is like that paradigmatic art of the postmodern age—advertisement. A contemporary advertisement is not a work of a single author, but a result of collaboration of many people collaborating with an aim of selling a product. The mural painting is a patchwork of many artists working in different areas of the walls, but in modern advertising everyone is involved in every aspect of the work. In *Tukta Roi Sai*, likewise, the total effect is created by the work of two different artists, thus the modernist claim to originality, the claim that a piece of art is an original work of a single author, is muted. If the full effect of the volume would not be achieved if the drawings were not taken into account, then the idea of evaluating a work of art as a creation of a single and coherent artist is overturned. This is quite clearly an aspect of the works postmodern trait.

Other poems in the collection also illustrate a postmodern attitude. Almost all poems violate the canonical rules of Thai versification, but in many there are enough echoes of the old verses to enable the readers to hear them. The rules of traditional prosody are thus subverted. This characteristic marks one of the differences from modern Thai poems, like those by Angkarn, Jiranani, or Naowarat, which closely follow the canonical rules, and deviate from them only in a way which does not threaten the definitions of the forms themselves. However, since this matter requires quite a thorough understanding of the arcane matter of Thai versification, I shall not pursue this line of argument here. Suffice it to say that in matter of the rules of verse forms Saksiri deviates from them so much that his poems are not recognizable as belonging to either of the traditional forms. Even so, they still retain some passing hints of the old forms here and there, and some poems, such as the ones on pages 4, 46, 53, contain bits of many verse forms together in one piece. Thus the intertextual character of the poems is brought to the fore.

Here is another poem later on in the volume which also bears strong postmodernist traits. Surprisingly, this poem does not have an accompanying drawing, unlike most other pieces in the volume:
Bamboos refusing to be united in a clump,
Dragonflies asking for falcon's wings,
Butterflies attacking and tearing unblossomed flowers,
Streams not allowing their banks to embrace,
Looking at the Khon taking off a mask finding a mask taking
off a mask finding a mask,
The moon and the stars refusing to dim at dawn,
The swords handle becoming sharp,
Leaves quivering with no wind,
Table legs bickering noisily;
My two eyes are looking at the wall,
Right hand holding a fan, fluttering,
Left hand tearing another piece of calendar
out of months and years,
Throwing it into the dustbin of the past,
Throwing and almost missing its rim

What is immediately noticeable about this poem is the startling series of surreal images in the first stanza. Everything is turned upside down, and all order and expectation is destroyed. The picture of a stable, predictable and organized scheme of things is shattered. One does not know how to go about in a world where bamboos refuse to band together or where dragonflies demand falcons wings. The central feature of modernity, that of an overarching scheme making predictability and control possible is fragmented and dissolved. This could be looked at as a commentary on the situation where the promises of modernity that of unbridled development and material progress result in disillusionment. Moreover, the fragmentation of predictability has fatal consequences to the modernist belief in coherence, structure and truth as founded on such structure. If the moon and the stars refuse to dim at dawn, then how could the sun function, or are the moon and the stars substitutes for the sun, or do all of them

shine together with no single source of light? Then the idea of truth as founded on the bedrock of reality becomes just another source of light in the multifarious sources comprising the moon, numerous stars and the sun itself, which is deprived of its role as the only light giver. In addition, in the world where there is no difference between the Khon mask and the face behind it, where everything is equally either the face or the mask, then how could the paradigmatic modernist search for the underlying foundation of beliefs which depend on there being such a distinction possible at all? For postmodernism, truth is not something eternal nor universal. It is to be found neither within transcendent ‘reality’ nor within the subjectivity of the individual. There is also no clear cut distinction between images and reality. In the postmodern world, images could be regarded as becoming reality itself, and reality is nothing more than images.¹⁶ Truth in the sense of the property of timelessly true statements does not exist except within some philosophers conception of its need stemming from the requirement that without it total agreement necessary for objective knowledge would not arise. Instead, postmodernists use local truths; truths within a community or a language.¹⁷

The images in the first stanza, then, are a critique of the normal way of seeing things which tends to be passive and bland. The fresh perspectives thrust to us by the images force us to rethink and visualize the ‘reality’ that we have so long taken for granted. A new way of seeing is offered. This new way is no less true than the normal way of seeing. A question then ensues: What is the right version of things? Is it really possible that leaves could quiver when there is no

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¹⁶. For a stimulating account of the postmodern situation of confusing images and realities in the arts, see Richard Keaney, The Wake of imagination.

¹⁷. There is at present a vast literature concerning the problem of truth in philosophy. And an increasing number of philosophers as well as their allies in other fields are becoming more aware that the traditional idea of truth as correspondence with ahistorical Reality is not tenable. For an influential account of recent postmodernist or postphilosophical critiques of this central conception of epistemology, see Richard Rorty. Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
wind? The images force us to realize that what we have accepted as the true description of things is only a part of myriad possible descriptions, and there is no question as to which one is the True One, since the norm tends to hide significant 'truths' which could be found only in poetry. If things are not as expected, then we have to reconsider everything closely and attentively. Fragmented truths result in us having to be highly alert in order that we can make some sense out of them.

This theme of overturning of expectations leads in the second stanza to the image of the lyric speaker staring at the wall. The speaker is "tearing another piece of calendar/out of months and years,/Throwing it into the dustbin of the past,/Throwing and almost missing its rim." The pointlessness of time is emphasized. According to modernism, time is considered as always progressing, leading to more growth, more development. However, in the stanza time is just another piece of calendar to be torn off and thrown nonchalantly into the dustbin. The speaker is not concerned with how much time has passed, or how much time has been 'wasted.' For modern life, time becomes a commodity, quantifiable, insubstantial. It is a commodity to be sold by the second, as in television advertising, and is thus quantifiable as units of measurement used in calculating wages and fees. Here, however, the lyric speaker seems to live a space where time passes on with extreme boredom. She does not seem to do anything except floating in time. Her life becomes infected with boredom and worthlessness. The progress of time has no meaning; there is no goal to aim for. It is as if time could go forward, then backward, then forward again or go around in circles. It does not seem to make any difference. This is another postmodernist trait where the idea of the linear progress of time is deconstructed.

What thematically joins the first and second stanzas together is the idea of frustration of expectation or overturning of stability, which is one of the clearest postmodernist devices. In the second stanza stability is overturned because there is not any. Stability presupposes a common structure, which is possible only within a framework of time as a linear progress. But if time itself is deconstructed, so is stability. The poem overall then re-echoes the themes of the front cover. Humans become worthless pieces, and the only way to salvation seems to be the way in which the bird rises out of the transparent flames.
The poems discussed here might seem dark and pessimistic. But there are some which are indeed joyful celebrations of simple life in tune with nature, such as poems on pages 30, 31 (these two presumably form a set, for the themes and the rhythms do correspond to each other), and on page 91, a short lyric, not unlike a Japanese haiku, which talks about the loud noise of stillness after the crickets have stopped croaking. So there are indeed brighter notes in the poems themselves. However, the poems discussed in detail here are some of the pieces which clearly exhibit postmodern characteristics, and one should benefit in an attempt to understand contemporary Thai culture to read these poems closely.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that Saksiri Meesomsueb’s collection, *Tukta Roi Sai* clearly exhibits several postmodern characteristics, such as the fragmentation of the self, intertextuality and dissolution of the distinction between image and reality. Since this article is to be published in *The Asian Review*, there is naturally a question how these characteristics reflect or are reflected by the larger social context. This question, I believe, has been satisfactorily answered in the discussion of the poems as a critique of contemporary social conditions in Thailand. Furthermore, the poems are also a critique of a more fundamental problem affecting the modern situation as a whole.