



## (De)construction of women's images in select literary pieces of (her)stories in Southeast Asia

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### ABSTRACT

Feminism draws attention to advancing women's rights and socio-economic development, more specifically, to obtain equality. However, this movement to exalt women's status is lacking in the experience of Southeast Asia (SEA) women. This study looks into the construction of women in selected short stories. The study design is qualitative within a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Norman Fairclough. To dissect the data, a literary analysis of the literary elements of short stories is the first step which directs its focus on women. Second, the women's image is constructed or deconstructed based on decolonial feminism. A decision method framework was created to construct the characters in the herstories and if there is a need to deconstruct due to misrepresentation. It is revealed that the experiences of these women narrate the condition they live in. It is also seen that image is constructed when the description and feminist perspectives (general feminism and Decolonial feminism) are similar, meanwhile, when it opposes, a deconstruction based on decolonial feminism is required. The study has limitations on the sample literary pieces studied and does not generally scope the overall SEA society, therefore, further studies on literary pieces or genres representing all the SEA nations can provide a deeper exploration of this topic.

**Keywords:** construction; decolonial-feminism; deconstruction; herstories; SEA women

### How to cite:

Pandapatan, A. M. (2025). (De)construction of women's images in select literary pieces of (her)stories in Southeast Asia. *Passage*, 13(1), 43–61.

### INTRODUCTION

Herstories center on the idea that women are the focus of discourse. In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it is a viewpoint that entails women's experience. It deviates from the male-centered lens in all disciplines, not a second class to men, but a contemporarily equal to men's stories. It is a feminine side of stories. Gonzalez and Sanchez-Lasaballett (2023) discussed the importance of storytelling in mapping the transformation of women. This is more than a representation, but a voice sought to speak of and speak for women's conditions. The decolonial minds present these voices to speak on the commodification of women in the system. The stories of women create a bridge

between the loopholes in the prevailing social divides. This brings notions that can be learned by current society and see the need for emancipation of a woman from the chain of restricted traditions, or even the absolute feminism of Western society. Through the literary outputs, and situations of herstories, the women, call for more specific and focused discourse in the regions (e.g. Southeast Asia or SEA).

Herstories, in the form of literary works, are stories about women. In hindsight, literature is anchored and inspired by social realities and history. It gives space for women's stories to discuss. Realities of women and their rich experiences are imbued in literature. Bahri et al. (2021)

elaborated that literary pieces have stories' facts and literary meanings that give impetus to social construct. The characters of the story present the undertakings of women. Female-centered advocacies are also drivers of the urgency of mapping properly the identity of women in certain areas or regions to justify their being and positions. Bong (2016) asserts that women's activism in SEA is growing and one of these is due to violence. Inequality and inequity remain an issue in SEA with respect to women's struggles and the need to homogenize human status. In the same mission to empower women, the new wave of feminism draws a space for women, for instance, being a passive victim under the patriarchal society (Purnamasari & Konety, 2023). Moreover, movements from different countries have emerged as solidifying the space for solidarity and aspirations that despite local empirical differences, women's activism is established to protect women's rights over inequality (Anderl, 2022). They resort to thinking about their roles and social values rather than following the whole belief of feminism in the Global North. While this is possible, producing more evidence through literary pieces highlighting women is necessary to establish contextualized feminism and constitute the SEA narratives.

Postcolonial feminism seeks to visualize the privileges of not only gender but also ethnicity. It defies the traditional concept into something more inclusive which pushes for a counter-discourse that challenges the traditional assumptions. This simply means that the ethos is to decolonize to resonate with the realities of Southeast Asian women (Bong, 2016). Moreover, postcolonial feminism is a decolonial feminism to resist the image provided by the status quo (Swastika, 2023). So to speak, carving the woman's identity can be constructed and deconstructed through the social status portrayed in her stories which integrates both local and global perspectives of women.

#### **Related Literature and Studies**

In the long history of SEA, women's roles in different times have been prevalent in the social construct of women's condition in the

region. They have played essential positions in society as evidenced in historical documents and academic discourses. In this part, the then and now conditions of women are presented chronologically.

In the pre-colonial narrative, women these times were not equal to men, however, women had specific roles in the community. It was found that women were believed to be given a generative role as powers (e.g. harvesting, weaving, etc.) which men believed to have not. Polygamy exists which was observed common among locals but monogamy was dominant (Chirino, 1890). Women participated noticeably in trade and there was a big percentage of women negotiating in trades. Even in diplomacy, they become translators and negotiators. Women were also combatants and key for the defense in SEA. They are also prominent artists as well as authors of different literary works. The most magnificent role they had was becoming leaders of some uninfluenced communities (Reid, 1988). In comparison to other Asian women, the SEA women regardless of religion and son-preference practice are liberal (Booth, 2016). Therefore, women were given privilege to share their abilities. This is a manifestation of giving power to women.

Women's empowerment is stated in the sustainable development goal five which is to achieve equality and empowerment of women. This constructs the women's role in the new milieu of society. Feminist scholars criticize the politicalization of women's empowerment which gives more remunerative activities and less for social activities. Meaning, there is unequal treatment and a glass ceiling for positions or roles. The kind of women's empowerment particularly related to economic development is part of manipulation. It fails to address the objective of the women's agenda to expand the opportunities for them and not a mere equality by number (Gerard & McDonnell, 2024). Practitioners of gender-based interventions to support women empowerment are lacking at the levels of gender experts, thereby a further investigation on the implementation of women empowerment in the organization is sought (Gerard, 2024). Empowering women

is lacking and retains the concept of politicking women in showing that there is gender equality per se, while it is not. Mason et al. (1995) cited the disagreement of observers on women's economic development. The sociocultural traditions of a particular country or region impact the status of women regardless of their conditions.

Yeoh (2016) studied the relationship of equality and how complementarity described the SEA men and women. There was a change but the incessant resistance in socio-cultural and economic development remained. According to a report by OECD (2024), the attitudes toward traditional gender roles that undermine women on their rights have worsened over the last two decades. This includes schooling being more important to men than women, social acceptance of violence, domestication being more fulfilling, discrimination against the right to abortion, etc. This permeates contemporary society even though social equality is advancing. Even in trade, women are also disadvantaged (Partzsch, 2023). Neglecting their agency can result in the repetition of imposition. If not avoided and recognized as a social problem, the men might continuously take advantage. While this might be true, an indigent social construct is necessary to be understood in the discourse.

Gerlach et al. (2020) attempted to highlight the decentred knowledge that comes from various stems of roots. This means that local knowledge or indigenous knowledge is generated from people wherein the concept is contextualized according to the local experience. This is how area studies speak on behalf of the community. Decolonizing knowledge is seen as valuable in this discourse. Critical knowledge productions come closer to addressing the needs of societies across the globe. It opens a new breath for compartmentalized concepts because the lack of a decolonial approach. However, the start of the decolonial-feminist approach links the missing piece in understanding the social structures. In addition, women can be understood through the lens of this area of study without the hegemonic influence of the

traditional mindset. Manning (2020) pinned the decolonial-feminists approach as a representation of 'other' over Western knowledge. It equally values the importance of knowledge and lived experiences outside the colonial sphere. With this, women are contributing to the knowledge. Datuin (1999) asserted that males also entail the presence of women. The new law of modernity is premised the equality of men and women given that women are still men regardless of biological differences. Assimilation of women into the domain of men is what can be the reason for invisibility especially in a political manner. Thereby, men and women are versatile in SEA whereas feminism as an ideology should not confine the ever-dynamic, multitude, and complex region. However, her study does not strongly defy the idea of feminism but rather motivates her to continually explore the feminist agenda to tackle the domestic and political status of women.

Social issues can be dug up to discuss the local lives that are absent in most written documents, if not it is lacking. Gender inequality has been observed when a Western feminist theory is the lens. The imbalance in treatment of women and men is seen not only in the roles and enjoying of freedom, but how they see one another. Usually in SEA families, men are regarded as superior while women are inferior. When Western feminism ideology comes in, there can be inequality at all. To more of these and beyond, looking at the women's courage and aspirations stimulates the positive outlook for women being relevant, empowered, and fighters in life. Therefore, literature can depict the social construction of women, especially in the SEA countries (Poonsri & Tuayrakdee, 2022).

Women's identity and role in SEA have been impacted positively or negatively with the touch of modernity. The unprecedented popular culture from external forces provides an inquiry into how women are shown in sociocultural trends (Kwon, 2019). The social construct of women's images is rooted in the dominating power of constructivist ideology from the Global North. Subjugating the women's image in SEA based on the standardized notions of

feminism disregards the existence of women in the Global South. Consequently, the intention to empower women and effectively realize the activism in this region is partially addressed. Due to this, the construction of women's image using the lens of feminism must be decolonized and deconstruction is needed. Bayazit (2020) explained that the portrayal of women as depersonalized in the stories, for instance in the advertisement, is criticized and argued. However, the reproduction of images of women must be based on the perceived social values of a particular culture and must not subject a specific culture as something cynical due to its different views and how women are positioned in their society.

**METHOD**

The research design is qualitative because it investigates the data through select short stories in Southeast Asia. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Norman Fairclough was used to look at the dynamics of language and power in the characters being studied (Bunda, 2023), at the same time, filter women as subjects of the study and their image is being presented in the texts. Analyzing the discourses of the women characters would tell what image is being portrayed. There were five short stories selected such as Her by Titis Basino from Indonesia, Two Cups by Watchara Satjasarrasin from Thailand, I am a Bird by Kathrina Haji Mohd Daud from Brunei, What a Beauty! by Uthin Bunnyāvong from Laos, and His Spouse by Zaw Gyi from Myanmar.

The reason for choosing short stories is due to the fact it has a concise nature, and specific themes, and allow people to observe the symbolism and narrative structure. The criteria for selection are, 1. It is a short story; 2. It depicts a story of a woman or her story; 3. It is anchored in reality and not fantasy; and, 4. It presents a social experience that is commonly observed in the region such as patriarchal social structures (Ong & Peletz, 1995), economic inequality (Visvanathan et al., 2022), sexual violence and reproductive rights (Tanyag, 2018), and culture and religion (Atkinson, 2019).

Data from the literary works are valid considering Barthes's (1997) and Foucault's (2002) argument that authors do not write outside of the text while contributing to the new historicism. To ensure the data analysis, a close reading was done to pay attention to the details provided in the texts and also analyze the literary elements and employ the decolonial feminism as a concept to show the two structures (construction and deconstruction of image) of Southeast Asian women. Constructionism is based on widely known knowledge, usually Western concepts, about something while deconstructionism is to reexamine a concept which creates a more accommodating idea, if the former idea does not make sense to a particular group (Boychev, 2015). The following table shows the decision method if the image is constructed or deconstructed. This method would allow the researcher to apply the local perspectives as a social construct of a particular society.

**Table 1**  
*Decision Method towards Decolonial-feminist's Image*

Description (D)	General feminism (GF)	Decision
Positive	Positive	Construct
Positive	Negative	Deconstruct
Negative	Positive	Deconstruct

To interpret the table 1, the following assumptions are used: Assumption 1: the character's description is positive and similar to GF, then the image is constructed. Assumption 2: the character's description is positive but opposite to GF, then the image is deconstructed. Assumption 3: If the character's description is negative but opposite to GF, then the image must be deconstructed.

Two positives mean the character's image and the general feminist perspectives are the same, so the image is constructed. When there is a negative either in the D or GF, a deconstruction of the image is required. There can be no negative D and negative GF due to the possible negation or rejection of the concept of decolonial-feminism. In order to obtain the essence of

decolonial-feminism in surfacing the cultural value of Southeast Asia, assumption 4 is denied. Nevertheless, this decision method can be modified with substantial arguments.

The premise of the study is to provide an equitable praxis of feminism in the context of SEA. The generalized idea in the analysis of elements of stories is a convergence of how the elements dramatically emphasize women towards understanding the feelings more. Following the three-dimensional CDA approach of Fairclough, text analysis was first employed to describe the condition of women in the literary pieces, the processing analysis was applied to interpret the conditions in the given context given the literature mentioned ahead, and lastly, the social analysis which extracts the experiences of the women characters and how the social implication has been seen. Hence, this leads to substantiating the women's image of the characters.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents two subtopics. The first subtopic is the literary analysis using the elements of the stories from a decolonial feminism perspective. The second subtopic focuses on the women's image and the construction and/or deconstruction that Southeast women are reflected in the literary forms.

### **Literary Piece in Southeast Asia**

The literary pieces were dissected using the elements of the story. The discussions therein are to determine how these elements help in highlighting the characters of the women as the subjects of the study. Moreover, it does not only include the main character as a reference but also gives space for other characters who are women as well.

First story: Her  
by Titis Basino (Indonesia)

Summary: The story tells the permitted polygamy in Indonesian society. The husband goes back and forth in two different houses because he has two families. The first wife is deeply wounded by the pain that never ends when her husband goes to his

other wife. She is dependent on her husband and has to make him happy despite the pain. The reason why her husband married another woman is because she has no time for leisure. She has to endure all the nights whenever they talk about the other wife and thinks of no point in arguing it. In the long run, she slowly accepts the situation. She and the second wife attended an activity one time where the second wife is living but they do not know each other faces. Unexpectedly, the host called Mrs. Hamid when the two ladies stood. The second wife showed high respect to the first wife and she sat to let the other lady take the podium to speak. At that moment, the first wife realized how good and ideal the second wife is to her husband.

Purpose: Married life is not always about being ideal. Affection fades once neglected.

Setting: The story takes place at home, the organization of their community, and another city that all women's activities involved. This helps in displaying the character how she had been through and the exposure of the woman to different locations or environments is something helpful.

Characters: 1. Mrs. Hamid: She is the first and plain wife who does all-around household chores and prioritizes taking care of the children. She does not want to do any activity outside the home but has decided to change for herself. She is not a martyr for love but she values the togetherness of the family. 2. Second wife: She is much younger and goes along with the man's desired activities. She provides the emotional needs and attention that her husband desires. She is full of morals by respecting the first wife even though they do not have interaction. Lastly, she has a good deportment that earned Mr. Hamid's respect and love.

Plot: It started with the narration of the first wife as she looked at her husband going to his second wife. She went back to the time when she learned that her husband got another wife without her consent. The resolution happened when she started to expose herself to join the organization in their community and the pain she suffered was slowly nonexactant and met the second wife at an event face to face. As her eyes followed the car of his husband, she knew

that her husband would be welcomed with warmth in another home. In the plot, the first wife wakes up to the reality that she has to be more generous to her husband while gradually changing over time.

**Conflict:** The conflict in the story is man vs. man and man vs. self. First, Mrs. Hamid tried her best to argue with Mr. Hamid about his decision to take another wife. She felt betrayed by the man who she loves most made her angry. She had been mad for quite a while. Second, she is having a hard time convincing herself that she can no longer meet the needs of her husband.

**Point-of-view:** The person who is narrating is the first wife. The point-of-view is coming from the first-person character. This is probably intended to inform the reader how emotional a woman is despite the resilience and firm action she shows in front of other people. Her point of view brings all genders to situate themselves in her shoes as a woman who gives everything for her family.

**Style:** The text is simply narrating the married life situation of the main character. It does not use more figurative speech to aesthetically describe the situation, and the choice of words is powerful to tell the readers about the feeling and position of the character (e.g. terrible loneliness, faithful husband, tremendous effort, etc). It does not also overpower the emotion of one character which is usual whenever a sad story is stressed. This is also a reflection of the writer's style of writing as a female.

**Generalized idea:** The pain of a woman (the first wife's pain) is metaphorical to the car. As it is staying before moving outward, the sound is too loud and noisy. As it drives away from the person, the sounds and the car fades. It takes time to heal and accept things. It is a process that must be going through and through until reaching the realization stage that married life is not definite and parallel. The ideal married life sometimes is a fantasy in a culture where polygamy is allowed. Karimullah (2024) reiterates that polygamy reinforces patriarchal power in society. The Indonesian law enacted a positive role for women if they agree to their husbands' request, however, it is the missing process. Hence, polygamy in a

feminist sense, is weak to protect women's rights. Strong policy implementation is required to protect women.

#### Second story: Two Cups

by Watchara Satjasarrasin (Thailand)

**Summary:** This imperfect married life talks about the gradual change of husband from an affectionate man to a drunken man who abused her when he got home. She remembered the time before they had their daughter, he was a man full of dedication and love. On the other hand, she is a mother pouring all her love into her daughter because it is the source of her happiness. She is distracted by the idea of how miserable married life is to her and it gets distracting when she cannot focus on her work as noticed by the housekeeper in her office. She became busy especially when she was called by the secretary general, her irritation in the morning subsided. She went back to her office and looked for the housekeeper. She felt that her life was worse than the housekeeper since the housekeeper's husband is the security guard who is responsible for their family. As her small cup was stuck into the bigger one, she asked the housekeeper for help. What the housekeeper did is to break the big cup so that the small cup can be used. When she heard the simple explanation of the housekeeper, she realized that she has choices in life.

**Purpose:** Every woman has a choice in life, the choice to choose herself or the choice to confine herself to a miserable married life.

**Setting:** One of the settings happened on the road where she was driving and pondering her married life. Some scenarios happened also at home where she is a wife and a mother. Another setting is in the office where she has to think about the work and her situation as a woman. These environments speak about the character and the struggles she is going through both at home and workplace.

**Characters:** 1. Lady Boss: She is the main character of the story. She is not happy about the thought of being abused by her husband who does nothing but cause domestic abuse. 2. Yot Narm: She is an

innocent daughter who does not have enough clue about how the relationship between her parents is going on. What she only sees is the spark of argument when his father is at home. This young girl might open her eyes to domestic violence either being a norm for a couple or learning to hate men.

3. Marlee: She is the housekeeper in the office and assigned to clean the office of her boss.

**Plot:** The story is linear. It started when she was traveling to her office while thinking of the misery she was into. The problem is exposed at the beginning of the story to tell what she is going through. The resolution came when she was in the office and the housekeeper uttered an important idea about making a choice in life. The story is hanging since it does not reveal the choice that the main character has chosen. The situation of the story enables the main character to lighten her feelings through the housekeeper's simple advice. Time and space are seen in the story to think and process personal problems.

**Conflict:** There is only one conflict in the story, it is man vs. man. It is depicted in the story how the main character's husband changed after they had their daughter. She cannot understand why the sudden change happened.

**Point-of-view:** The person who narrates the story is in the first-person point-of-view. She is a participant of the story and she is the main character's voice itching the misery of a woman. She is playing along with the other characters mentioned in the story. To leave the personal problem at home is hard when women do the all-around thing and dwell in three roles being a wife, a mother, and a working woman.

**Style:** The description of a morning full of emotions can be felt in the story. The lady is wearing her overwhelmed temper over the situation she and her daughter are in. This tells the vivid emotion that a lady's burden in her marriage life. There is wise usage of figurative language (e.g. boat of matrimony, roam in the head, playful eyes, etc.). Though the writer is male, the usual emotion of a typical girl who happened in an inharmonious relationship has been justified.

**Generalized idea:** A woman can stand in her vows when she is tied to a man and give her all to build the ideal family. She can play the role of a mother, wife, and boss at once. She has options in life when she has everything in her hands. In the end, a woman is fueled by her philosophy whatever choice she has to take as her next step. According to Laeheem and Boonprakarn (2014), domestic violence comes in different forms and it happens due to the belief that men are dominating the household or ruling the family. This pressing issue in Thai society reveals the importance of leveraging the power of women. Giving them the freedom to choose is a woman empowerment, however, it should be remembered the completeness of the empowerment they need and not just an instrumental for action (Gerard & McDonnell, 2024).

#### Third Story: I am a Bird

by Kathrina Haji Mohd Daud (Brunei)

**Summary:** The lady in the story flew to London to study and every academic year break, she flew back to Brunei. She is at ease when at home every time she lands in the airport of her country. She is amazed by how still the cultures in both places remain different from each other. She noticed that she could not see paintings or news that resembled her color as Southeast Asian, if there were, a dark tone-brown resembles the Pakistani and Indian skin color. There is an absence of representation of SEA. When someone tells her to marry her, she says no because of the difference, in culture and traditions. She can only love the person in that person's country but not in Brunei or vice versa, as she philosophized. She thinks that she belongs to her country of origin.

**Purpose:** The woman shaped by her own culture dictates to love her own without compromising herself to adapt to another or assimilate her identity.

**Setting:** Two areas are compared to the story, London and Brunei. Both places offer unique weather to their geographical zones. There is a difference between living in London and going back to Brunei due to the culture and privileges that the character feels. The emphasis of the two settings here is a manifestation of the ethnocentric

perspective of a person dwelling in both places. The treatment of women in her country is a bit different in London due to the kind of equality and liberalism that the latter has. Her identity is challenged when she looks at herself in the middle of society. It is how the West differs from Eastern culture.

**Character:** 1. Lady: She describes herself as a bird flying back and forth between two places. She understands the importance of retaining one's cultural roots while living abroad.

**Plot:** The story does not have a strong plot but can be considered linear because she is narrating her travel. There is no structured plot that can identify the climax, resolution, rising of the actions, etc., however, it still has a plot of a story. It also leaves the idea of always taking the truth from the heart, the solidity of her upbringing, and her own culture. Lastly, the story revolves around her because it does not give emphasis on other characters that can play a vital role in hyping the story.

**Conflict:** The conflict in the story is man vs. society. This shows when she had enough of the considered marginalization in London. Her experience of observing the absence of SEA culture feels different from her. The independence of every individual, particularly the empathy for old people seems to be pathetic to her. Liberalism and the domination of total equality are depriving.

**Point-of-view:** The perspective of narration in the story is first person point of view. The author directly addresses issues as probably her experience living in London and Brunei. She has to be direct in her words and probably this is due to the fact that the story is a travel story of a woman.

**Style:** The language style used is simple and direct. It allows the reader to clearly understand the flow in which the main character directs the attention to her point of view. She avoids the usage of high figurative expressions that can ruin her point in narration. However, it is notable the usage of descriptions to specify the thought (e.g. dazzled by tulips, smooth white marble, etc.).

**Generalized idea:** Culturalism is stressed in the story. Taking pride in one's own

culture is the appraisal that the writer is telling. It suggests that someone has to know her position in a multicultural society to retain her identity, especially a woman living abroad. As the writer metaphorically describes herself as a bird that can see the differences above, one must also see her worth as an individual. Abbasovna (2024) underscored the challenges faced by SEA people in a myriad of cultures abroad. The uniqueness of one's culture is threatening the formation of homogenization though findings showed that cultural hybridity is developing amidst cultural and global influences.

**Fourth Story: What a Beauty!**  
by Uthin Bunnyaṅong (Laos)

**Summary:** It tells a story about a lady who did not dance after twelve rounds because no one offered her a garland which is an invitation to dance. She listens to music even if it is loud just to avoid the embarrassment, letting the time pass, and she has nothing to do in her seat. She felt that she would be the target of the gossip and was described as the clown of the night. She cannot dance and wear the latest fashion style of clothes maybe because she is not an outgoing person. Her family is poor and she helps her mother in selling traditional pancakes while her father is a carpenter. The dance reached twenty rounds at around three in the morning. She wanted to go home but the organizers told her to stay because it was the festival in their village. On the twenty-first round, she could not believe that a young and well-mannered man approached her to dance. The man left after the round and she could still remember his face. A week later, the man visited her pancake stall. Two years later, the man came again to visit and explained the reasons why it had been a while of not meeting her. She is shocked when the man is wearing an army uniform. They started to have a good conversation and for the man, she was the most beautiful, admired, and respected woman.

**Purpose:** Women are not commodities of men nor do women use their beauty to please men. An ideal woman can present herself properly and does not allow herself

to be used for fun in festivities. They are also people who can be an asset to the government and the society.

**Setting:** Festival in the village in Lao. This is the usual setting wherein most of the people, particularly in rural areas, gather to have occasions such as dances and music. In common narratives, women are usually pursued by men on certain occasions such as festivities and the like. The dance festivity is cultural at the same time an avenue where men and women meet and get to know each other. As such, this place appears to exclude women without so much charisma and beauty. Therefore, it seems that festivity is a display of beauty to attract men.

**Characters:** 1. Phaengkham: She is the main character. She is not too beautiful and owns overused clothes. No one would like her because of her poor appearance except for one man. On the other hand, she is a principled woman and a leader. An asset to society and a figure to emulate by other women. 2. Laddapone: She is a beautiful lamvong dancer but snobbish. 3. Sohnapa: She is beautiful and graceful on the dance floor. 4. Farvichit: She is the center of the eyes of men because of her gracefulness among all. 5. Ohn Anong: She has a sharp nose and arched eyebrows which probably declares her as a star of the dance floor.

**Plot:** The story has a linear plot. It started with the dance until dawn, with no flashback or media res. There is only one girl who was not chosen by anyone. Phaengkham and the military man met after one week and after two years, the man went to see Phangkaem. This story develops as a story begins with humility and what she deserves as a woman of dignity. It can be seen that time and space did not change her until they met again.

**Conflict:** The conflict of the story is man vs. society. The standard of beauty marginalizes the other women who are deprived of wealth and exquisite beauty. Phaengkham dignified herself amidst the discriminatory remarks of other girls on the dance floor and she continues to believe in herself that she is not a woman for fun in the festivities.

**Point-of-view:** The person who is talking in the story is more of a third-person point

of view. The narrator tells the story of what is going on to the main character and how she maintains her composition after the tides of intimidation and teasing from other ladies.

**Style:** The choice of words is simple and more narration in style. There is no high usage of figurative language that can give clues to the mystery of one of the characters, referring to a mysterious man. The writer intends to make it easy to understand to convey the main idea it tries to express among the readers. Moreover, it is noticeable that the use of cultural terms such as Lamvong (cultural dance) and kanomkok (traditional pancake) is an appraisal of cultural identity.

**Generalized idea:** Respect is deserved by everyone who treats themselves well and presents themselves in a proper manner. Behavior as an internal character is also a beauty within. A woman with such behavior and separating herself to spotlight and attention would save herself from disrespectful treatment of men, particularly in areas where men can possibly do harm women. Purnamasari and Konety (2023), also in Bayazit (2020), explained the empowerment of women that leads to self-protection and confidence to resist any form of objectification. It is clear that most of the beautiful women in the story failed to realize their own agency, that the power is within them. Hence, they are discarded and re-educated when liberation tension happens. When they were given the chance to use their status to learn and participate in leadership, they ignored the opportunity. Apriani and Zulfiani (2020) stressed the requirement to have a leadership role and step to the agency is the availability of education and the privilege of belonging to a political family.

**Fifth Story: His Spouse  
by Zaw Gyi (Myanmar)**

**Summary:** The story revolves around a couple who have simple lives. The woman peddles her green vegetables in her tray to the village and her husband has to take care of the children, cook rice, and partially serve as a monk. His husband does not work and lives for leisure and the neighborhood interrogated him for not bringing food to his

family. Yet, he ignores it even though he gets hurt. He sometimes likes to be a full-time monk in order for him not to prepare food for kids. He also pitied her wife that when she dies, she will be entering the lowest worlds because of her uneducated status in the law or being illiterate. He left the house and became a monk. Her aunt who stayed for months asked her to tell her husband to return home. When her husband, a monk, visited their home together with their eldest son, she told him that she has to leave and live in another village together with her aunt because she could not do two things in a row. She granted the wish of her husband to be a monk forever and she will find someone to be with her. The monk realized how her wife and family needed him so he decided to return for them.

**Purpose:** The lady character understands her limitations under the dominating law in her country. She is obedient to his husband who gives her nothing. Her obedience and belief in the nobility of his husband's missions allow her to take the pain and sacrifices.

**Setting:** The setting happens in a village where they live together along with a few neighbors. It depicts life in the rural areas where most of the monks in the temples are visiting. It can also be seen the harmonious sound and peaceful environment therein. This typical environment shapes the image of most women living in villages and playing the roles of being wives and mothers. Living in villages also shows the stagnant situation and opportunities are less and limited for women.

**Characters:** 1. Ma Paw: She sells green vegetables every day to support her family. She loves her husband much and sacrifices are part of it. 2. Aunt: She helped in taking care of the children while Ko Hsin was in the temple to serve as a monk.

**Plot:** In the story, the flow is linear because it describes the characters and roles of Ma Paw and Ko Hsin and how they are in their daily routine. The middle of the story is the reflection of the husband if he ever becomes a monk and he will no longer cook rice for his family. He thinks of his convenience over being grateful as a house husband. The resolution happens in the end

because Ma Paw decides to let her husband become a full-time monk and she will find someone to love her and take care of the family.

**Conflict:** It is clearly seen in the story the conflict is man vs. man and man vs. society. The conflict between the aunt and Ma Paw shows how the family has to be addressed and resolve the decision of his husband to leave them. On the other hand, the neighbors' conflict, especially fathers who do earn a living for their family, tease Ko Hsin into work. These conflicts change the characters and test their patience as a person.

**Point-of-view:** The dominant point of view in the story is a third-person point of view, omniscient because it tells the mind of every character. To strongly show this perspective as the narrator of the story, there are lines that show the characters' point of view to show the authentic feelings that the characters are experiencing and to tell the reader how hard life is. The impeccable character of Ma Paw perhaps can be labeled as a fool, however her thoughts are clearly innocent and simple—to portray a responsible wife.

**Style:** The language used in the story brings the reader to a simple picture of scenes that the narrator wants to tell. It is not expressive but there are certain lines highlighted to understand the thought of the character (e.g. pleasure in his head, begging permission, etc.). Coloring the characters through these lines connects the reader to the purpose of the writer how Burmese culture is in the context of religion and family.

**Generalized idea:** The woman is an image of a faithful wife who, even though illiterate or ignorant of the law, follows her husband who has much knowledge. She is simple and her dream is to have a good family. When a woman looks for another husband after the first husband fails to give her protection and love, she opts to find a husband material that can provide this for her family and not for mere lust. Women participating in finding livelihood is evident in contemporary society (Booth, 2016). Even in the pre-colonial era, women were partners of men in trade (Reid, 1988). However, Nair

(2022) posits the unequal share of economic development for men and women in SEA and due to economic insecurities for women, they marry people who can elevate their lives (Mason et al., 1995).

### **Southeast Asian Women Characters' Image**

The image of women can be drawn from the perspective of decolonial-feminism (Swastika, 2023; Manning, 2020), local social values (Bayazit, 2020), and socio-cultural trends (Kwon, 2019) through literary social construction (Bahri et al., 2021; Poonsri & Tuayrakdee, 2022). (See the appendix, table 2.)

In the stories, varied women's images are seen. Characters such as Marlee (Two Cups), Lady (I am a Bird), Phaengkham (What a Beauty!), and Aunt (His Spouse) portray images that some Southeast Asian women can be labeled as liberal women because they did what they think they are capable of. They have their own decisions that keep them on track with their own lives without relying on other people. What is common among these women whose images are constructed in general feminist perspectives they exercise their agency. Meaning, they are empowered by themselves because they can freely do what is in their mind. Marlee has to help in working to provide for their needs but at the same time, she does what she thinks is right for her. She does not forget her rights. The lady who has a strong conviction of her culture emanates the orientation she has growing up. Instead of getting blind to other cultural powers, she remains true to herself and thrives to be a good example among Southeast Asian ladies. While there is a tendency to get used to dominating culture, she has still managed to position herself in a safe zone from the dominating cultural influence of the Global North. Phaengkham is one of the most vulnerable among the women portrayed because of her advantages in life. However, it is in her character that proves the power can be built inside and can resonate when used. She has been a leader and faced challenges. Valuing herself is what power means to a woman. She did not ask for validation because she knows herself well.

Even though requirements on the making of a woman leader must have a good educational background and support from the family as mentioned by Apriani and Zulfiani (2020), she surpassed this requirement. The aunt showcases the power of a woman who stood up for another woman, in fact, who is no less than her niece. Her appearance in the story might be short but the impact of her lines and resisting her niece's husband's decision is a power, though not a direct line she told to him but telling to her niece. This liberalism as an agency for women and empowering themselves are part of the movement to resist the power of inequality. Having a movement means empowering women (Anderl, 2022).

Meanwhile, deconstruction of characters is deemed necessary to address the decolonial perspective that allows the local culture or the cultural values of Southeast Asia in focus. Two deconstructions are observed. First, the local culture or cultural values is not adherent to the general feminist perspectives. The characters that can be seen in this type and characters that must be deconstructed are Mrs. Hamid (first wife) and Mrs. Hamid (second wife) in the story 'Her'. The main issue here is the acceptance and tolerance of polygamy as part of the social structure. General feminism invalidates such arrangements because of equality. It always sees that men and women can be equal at all footings. However, in the Global South particularly in some cases of Southeast Asia, some communities are allowing polygamy regardless if it Islamic community or not. For instance, some ethnic groups in the Philippines like the Higaonon allow polygamy given that the rules are followed (Pandapatan et al., 2024). In the pre-colonial era, Reid (1988) noted that polygamy was observed and the kind of treatment of both sexes was not equality but equity. Equity is the role-specific or privilege specific to a certain sex and deemed important in the structure of the society. Hence, it is apparent that the case of polygamy is not gender-bias nor inequality but equity as a response to the context of some SEA societies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, etc.

Second, the type of deconstruction of women's images is negative character descriptions in literary pieces. The general feminism and decolonial-feminism are linked into one purpose, to deconstruct the negative images that describe the characters to more culturally appropriate descriptions of women. The lady boss in the story 'Two Cups' shows an independent and empowered woman in the workplace, yet abused domestically when she is at home. Her positions inside and outside the home are not concurrently matched to say that she is empowered. An empowered woman is not violently abused in any space she is in. This is how the GF and DF come into one term. Violence is never been valid. It remains in society the inequality of genders in SEA is supposed to be not extant or lesser because the feminist movement has been improved (Bong, 2016).

The characters of Laddapone, Sohnnapa, Farvichit, and Ohn Anong of the story 'What a Beauty!' entail a discrepancy of beauty and worth. In the story, they are acknowledged for their physical beauty and talents that can catch men's attention. This is not totally negative in the sense that physical beauty is an asset and a positive attribute of humans. However, this attention is usually a form of desire. As common narratives, men are easily attracted to physical beauty. It is probably the nature of men. While this is true, women can be more empowered by putting much worth on their side. They should show more characteristics and personality that allow respect or veneration. This is the reason why the negative outlook based on the descriptions of their characters in the story must be deconstructed into women who have more beautiful assets intellectually like being educated, participating in civic activities, conversing with political topics, etc. Apriani and Zulfiani (2020) stressed the importance of factors that uplift the status of women through education and support from the family. Another precarious character in the stories is Ma Paw in the story 'His Spouse'. She is a mirror of a woman who struggles for her family but it is her happiness. Her consideration to his husband's wisdom of enjoying life because it is his reward due to

the service he did and the knowledge he has means a sacrifice on her part. However, this does not justify the passive behavior of man of being lazy and taking the easy responsibility. Therefore, the deconstruction of Ma Paw as a wife being abused socially in terms of roles should be created as an alternative image. There is a limitation to the sacrifices she has to endure because it is her right as a woman. In the OECD (2024), women's rights and equal opportunities are undermined and worse. This is alarming because society is not progressively encouraging a productive socio-economic lifestyle for some women in SEA. If there are opportunities in the region, women are disadvantaged and priority for a smaller salary. This is why, in a sad reality, women are instrumentalized in the industries without really given more avenues to be equal in the workplace (Gerard & McDonnell, 2024).

Decolonial feminist perspective offers more justice to represent the 'other' women of the globe who are absent in the movement and the streamlining of feminism for a long time. The construction and deconstruction of the identity or image of these women form a stronghold of a true picture of gender roles, equality or equity, and lived narratives through literature. It has to be noted that while decolonial feminism is applied in the selected stories, the characters used by the authors might be inspired by real people or fiction to expose their conditions which only the writers know otherwise directly revealed in the text, although authorship and authority of the writers are understood a contributory to the new historicism (Barthes, 1997; Foucault, 2002).

## **CONCLUSION**

Decolonial-feminism approach used to study the experiences in select literary pieces of Southeast Asia unlocked the realities of women. This shows how the current society treats women at the same time as how women have gone throughout times wherein their social roles have changed and improved, or might not. Through the literary elements, the women can be reflected and

how life shapes them. The focus on the social environment and what women go through in their lives, including the conflict within and from the outside, allows the readers to see the context of their success and failures, good and bad things, or survival and demise. It is possible to say that those images are what decolonial-feminist perspective sought. It has been evident that some women's experiences from Southeast Asia as part of the Global South have specific narratives and stories to tell which can lead to a more rational point of view in researching the social structure of the region. For instance, the women's roles as wives depict great responsibility and are crucial in the structure of a family. Despite the myriad of challenges to identity from the global lens of the West or the Global North, it is undeniably the springing of identities through a culturally accepted image. Therefore, the construction of culturally appropriated characteristics and descriptions is highly anticipated in representing the region. Deconstructions of characteristics and descriptions are subject to the generally accepted feminism and/or decolonial-feminism (which cleaves to the cultural values of Southeast Asia).

The characters and herstories are limited to claim the representation of all women's experience in Southeast Asia and to generally bring all the discourses of their lives in this paper, hence further studies on more literary pieces and genres such as novels, poems, and the like are recommended to reinvestigate the findings here.

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APPENDIX

Table 2

SEA Women's Image

Literary Piece	Character	Description	General Feminism	Construct or Deconstruct	Decolonial-feminism
	Mrs. Hamid (first wife)	She is the first and plain wife that does all around household chores and prioritizes taking care of the children. She does not want to do any activity outside home but realized to change for herself. She is not a martyr for love but she values the togetherness of the family.	In traditional society, a woman is expected to be a mother and a wife, and take care of the family when she chooses to stay at home and not work. She has the privilege and enjoys the vacant time she has. <u>She is the only wife of his husband.</u>	Deconstruct	A Southeast woman is a wife that usually takes care of the family because she knows that in her society, a woman who is a wife and a mother is responsible to be at home and prepares what her family is needing. She can be the only wife or one of the legal wives.
Her	Mrs. Hamid (Second wife)	She is much younger and goes along with the man's desired activities. She provides the emotional needs and attention that a man needs. She is full of morals by respecting the first wife even though they do not have interaction. Based on husband, she has a good deportment that earned Mr. Hamid's respect.	<u>She is illegal and considered to be a mistress in the dominant society. She is a homewrecker in the sense that she intrudes another family and causes emotional and financial distress to the original family.</u>	Deconstruct	<u>The culture of traditional Southeast Asia, polygamy is allowed for men. Moreover, Islam permits polygamy.</u> Hence, she is a legal wife and understands her responsibility as a second wife. She does not demand more attention because she understands the equal treatment among wives.
Two Cups	Lady Boss	She is the main character of the story. She narrates her life of how her family is no longer a home to both of her and Yot Narm. <u>She is not happy about the thought of being abused by her husband who does nothing but</u>	A career woman who is also a mother and wife deserves love and proper treatment from people she loves. She has the choices in her life and it is not necessary to impose herself to do things which she cannot do. She is	Deconstruct	A tradition in the region, a mother or wife is an ideal and primary task of a woman. However, she can also choose to work and provide for her family when his husband cannot do his duty due to misfortunate circumstances. <u>Additionally, she</u>

		<u>cause domestic abuse.</u>	empowered for her position at work and therefore, equal empowerment at home she must get.		<u>must not be maltreated at home nor abused. She must be empowered to do what she chooses.</u>
	Marlee	She is the housekeeper in the office and assigned to clean the office of her boss. Sometimes, she has to prepare coffee for her lady boss. She embodies a simple and poor woman who struggles to work and waits for fortune in the lottery so it can give her and her family a comfortable life.	A woman can work because she loves to do it. Her skills and talents can be used outside the corner of home where she is expected to be. She has freedom to do things like man because she is a free person and empowered. She has a freedom to speak by telling her opinions and feelings.	Construct	A woman can accept work that is outside her home. She is not required by her family to stay at home especially when she is able to help. She can enjoy her skills and talents while earning a minimum salary to contribute to her family needs. She can freely talk of things she has in mind and heard by people who surround her.
I am a Bird	Lady	She describes herself like a bird flying back and forth to two places. She justifies her own upbringing and culture to express her thoughts and feelings of not adapting to a new culture by marrying someone from a different culture. She understands the importance of retaining one's cultural roots while living in a multicultural context abroad.	A woman who wants to study can go to school and finish her education. She can also choose a career regardless of her gender. Moreover, she can choose to go abroad and earn the degree she is always wanting while learning the other culture. She is a liberal woman who aims for equality and equal respect from men.	Construct	A woman can earn education for herself as supported by her family most especially choosing to go abroad without anyone accompanying her living in a foreign culture. However, she is encouraged to bring her culture fully because of the influences she might get from socializing with other cultures. Hence, liberalism is pre-defined.
What a Beauty!	Phaengkham	She is the main character. She is not too beautiful and owns overused clothes. No one would like her because of her poor appearance except for one	A good woman is not defined by her looks such as natural beauty, clothes, make-up, and skills. She is a good woman because she can speak up her mind, present	Construct	She is a woman who knows herself more than the others. She appreciates her own qualities over mockery and judgement. She manifests to be a girl that has a

	man. On the other hand, she is a principled woman and a leader. An asset to society and a figure to emulate by other women.	herself with dignity, and be respectable. Furthermore, she has strong confidence in herself and thrives towards her goals in life.		strong personality that can attract men who look for a lady with dignity and self-preservation. A woman who has a mind and possesses leadership characteristics.
Laddapone	<u>She is a beautiful lamvong dancer but snobbish.</u>	She is socializing but knows her worth as a woman and not a mere lady who can be with every man. She is not an instrument for a party.	Deconstruct	<u>She is a lady who is approached by everyone because of her right behavior while maintaining her value as a woman and showing self-respect according to cultural standards.</u>
Sohnnapa	<u>She is beautiful and graceful on the dance floor.</u>	She enjoys her freedom to do activities that allow her to express freedom. She can dance by her will but not due to crowd pressure.	Deconstruct	<u>Her movements (dance) and beauty must not be the complete reason for men's attraction. She must be respected as a cultured woman.</u>
Farvichit	<u>She is the center of the eyes of men because of her gracefulness among all.</u>	A woman who is seen all her beauty in and out and not based on her ability to dance which attracts men.	Deconstruct	<u>To respect her as a woman, her behavior is in accordance with the description of a cultured woman and sees herself more than a festival dancer.</u>
Ohn Anong	<u>She has a sharp nose and arched eyebrows which probably declares her as a star of the dance floor.</u>	A woman that has beauty inside and out of her. She exudes beauty that is worthy as an example to her fellows.	Deconstruct	<u>The appreciation of men in the festivities must not rely on her beauty, but it is equally balanced with her refined attitude and brilliance.</u>
His Spouse	Ma Paw She sells green vegetables everyday to support her family. <u>She loves her husband much and sacrifices are part of it.</u>	She has the power to decide whether she wants to do the traditional assignment of husbands which is to provide food for the table or	Deconstruct	The right love for a woman is respect and provision of her needs. The basic social structure in Southeast Asian communities, men are the common provider for family,

		stay as a plain housewife.		however, it does not forbid women to do so. <u>She must be willing to work at her discretion.</u>
Aunt	She helped in taking care of the children while Ko Hsin was in the temple to serve as a monk.	A woman who is commissioned to do some help to her relatives can interfere in a family's arguments when necessary to protect other women's right.	Construct	A relative who is commissioned to help in taking care of the family has a choice to interfere because it is direct and included in the family matter particularly if it affects to her will of quitting.

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