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SELF AND SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN FICTION

Thematic Explorations in the
Twentieth Century Fiction
of Five ASEAN Countries

The **Southeast Asian Studies Program** (SEASP) was established in December 1976 by a group of scholars from Southeast Asia. It aims at promoting comparative research and writing on Southeast Asia by social science and humanities scholars of the region. It is directed by a committee composed of representatives of various countries in the region, but it is based at and formally affiliated with the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

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SELF AND SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN FICTION

Thematic Explorations in the
Twentieth Century Fiction
of Five ASEAN Countries

Thelma B. Kintanar



SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES PROGRAM



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Published by
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 0511

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Cataloguing in Publication Data

Kintanar, Thelma B.

Self and society in Southeast Asian fiction: thematic explorations in the twentieth century fiction of five ASEAN countries.

1. Southeast Asian literature -- History and criticism.
2. Fiction -- History and criticism.

I. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

II. Title.

PL 3508 K51 1988

ISBN 981-3035-09-9

Printed by Kin Keong Printing Co. Pte. Ltd.

To my family
for their unstinting support
in this project, as in everything else

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FOREWORD

The Southeast Asian Studies Program (SEASP) was established in 1976 in response to a need to promote comparative research and writing on Southeast Asia by scholars in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Of particular concern was the lack of appropriate tertiary level teaching and reference materials pertaining to the region and written from local, though not necessarily nationalistic, perspectives.

Towards this end, SEASP initiated four activities: the first three of these focused on the preparation of a series of country-specific volumes on Politics and Government; History; and World-Views. The fourth comprised a scheme of Teaching and Research Exchange Fellowships. This scheme commenced in 1982 in response to a need for greater regional collaboration in teaching and research among and between scholars and institutions of higher learning.

The Exchange Fellowships have enabled not only qualified scholars to teach and undertake research in other Southeast Asian countries but also universities to acquire

the teaching and research services of scholars from other Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, each fellow has been required to complete his or her research during the period stipulated in the award. This publication grew out of this process.

Needless to say, this work could not have been completed without the co-operation of the host institution, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, and the home institution of the fellow, College of Arts and Letters, Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines System. We would also like to express our thanks to the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk for its generous financial support to the Teaching and Research Exchange Fellowships as a whole.

In thanking all our benefactors and the author, as well as others who have in one way or another helped to make this publication possible, it is clearly understood that the responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed in Self and Society in Southeast Asian Fiction: Thematic Explorations in the Twentieth Century Fiction of Five ASEAN Countries rests with the author, and her interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of SEASP or its supporters.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
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PREFACE

The need for Southeast Asians to understand each other's cultures and literatures is apparent and recognized. The formation of regional groups such as the ASEAN has further underscored this need, especially among its member-countries. Attempts have been made to forge cultural links in the form of conferences, regional literary prizes, and various forms of cultural exchange. But it seems to me that these have not been enough -- the lack of knowledge and/or interest in the culture of each others' countries is widespread in the region.

This study is, first of all, a personal response to a situation which has repeatedly faced this author. Travelling to or living in various Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, I marvel at the similarities: people who look so much like me that I am often mistaken for one of them; flora and fauna so like those in my own country; problems and frustrations of day-to-day life similar to those at home. Yet, in these seemingly familiar surroundings, I often feel like a stranger. In this situation, the need to

acquire a more profound knowledge of a culture and its people has never been more apparent. To meet this need, I have tried to study the literature of these countries as it reflects the people's values and concerns.

This study is, secondly, a small attempt to contribute to the research efforts of scholars who are engaged in the study of Southeast Asian literature. There are not too many, most of them coming from Australia, the United States, and Europe. Southeast Asian scholars are only now beginning to interest themselves in the literature of the region. There is no dearth of country studies, but Southeast Asian scholars and academics seldom look at the literature of Southeast Asian countries other than their own, or make an attempt to compare them directly. This is understandable, since there are very few translations available and to acquire even a rudimentary knowledge of the languages involved takes time.

Finally, this study is an attempt to interest not only academics but the general reader in the literature of Southeast Asia. Fiction seems a good place to start as it presents ordinary people working out their lives in everyday circumstances. Moreover, fiction is ubiquitous in the modern literatures of Southeast Asia. As in other parts of the world, much of it is written for cheap entertainment but much also deserves serious study.

This study makes no claim to being in any way comprehensive or exhaustive. In the comparative approach to the study of Southeast Asian fiction, it can be considered a small beginning. But beginnings have to be made, however limited in scope or tentative in nature. I therefore beg the reader's indulgence for whatever

inadequacies are to be found here. I hope, however, that this work will serve to awaken or heighten his interest in Southeast Asian fiction. As I try to demonstrate in the following pages, it deserves his attention.

Thelma B. Kintanar

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the following institutions:

The University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Philippines, for allowing me to go on sabbatical leave in order to undertake this study.

The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, for giving me a visiting fellowship and allowing me full use of its library and other facilities.

The Southeast Asian Studies Program based at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, for facilitating the Thai portion of this study through a Teaching and Research Exchange Fellowship.

Silpakorn University, Nakorn Pathom, Thailand, for welcoming me as a Visiting Senior Fellow and aiding my research on Thai fiction through interchange with its faculty and students.

The individuals -- friends, associates, and colleagues -- who helped make this study possible are too numerous to name here. To them, I owe what we Filipinos call utang na loob, a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid but is here gratefully acknowledged.