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Utsana Phloengtham's *The Story of Jan Dara* as a Buddhist modernist novel

Paul Lewis McBain

Utsana Phloengtham's The Story of Jan Dara *is one of the most widely known stories in Thailand. It is remembered as 'erotic fiction' as well as an 'immortal classic'. It has also been praised as a Buddhist treatise. Yet, despite being replete with Buddhist terminology and references, it has never been analysed in English as a work of Buddhist fiction. This article argues that* Jan Dara *is one of the very few examples of Thai Buddhist modernist literature, and a highly original and highly layered one at that. The novel employs a diverse number of techniques and concerns derived from modernist authors such as D.H. Lawrence to explore sexual life in an aristocratic mansion of the 1930s. Understood with reference to the literary modernist tropes it employs and the debates in Buddhist cosmology and morality at the time of writing, it can be shown to be a scathing indictment of old-fashioned moralistic 'hypocrites' who practice decadent lives 'while mouthing the Buddhist precepts'.*

The Story of Jan Dara (*Rueang khong Chan Dara,* 1966) by Utsana Phloengtham (1920–87) is the story of a boy's upbringing in the lascivious atmosphere of his supposed father's palace. It is easily one of the most well-known stories in Thailand. It could be called the Thai *Lolita* for, like Vladimir Nabokov's classic, *Jan Dara* was controversial when it was published and to this day is remembered both as 'erotic fiction' and as an 'immortal classic' of literature. It has been the subject of film and series adaptations, most notably Nonzee Nimibutr's *Jan Dara* (2001) and a film series beginning with *Jan Dara: The Beginning* (2012). The story is one of assignations, irregular births, and wicked stepsisters. The witness to all of it is a man haunted by the question of his origins and of why, much later when he comes to write the story, he has himself become so wretchedly decadent. It is also, seemingly paradoxically, remembered as a literary Buddhist treatise. One contemporary critic wrote, 'I would place this novel in the same shelf as other volumes of religious literature.'[1] In the first part of this article, I shall discuss why we should look at this as a Buddhist modernist novel as well as then detailing the literary modernist and Thai Buddhist contexts which are necessary to understand the novel fully. In the second part, I provide an analysis of the novel. I argue that *Jan Dara* can be shown to be

Paul Lewis McBain is a Lecturer in Thai Studies at Thammasat University, Thailand. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: mcbp@sas.upenn.edu. The author would like to thank Mark Bookman, Justin McDaniel, Joe Littler and Thomas Bruce.

1 Khomnai Tunlajit, 'Reun jarung klin tham nai heun khao haeng kamaa' [The enticing smell of virtue within the stench of sexual craving], *Thanon nangsue* [Book Road] 4, 9 (1987): 88–92.

a scathing indictment of old-fashioned moralistic 'hypocrites' who lead decadent lives 'while mouthing the Buddhist precepts' and, moreover, can be read as an oblique critique of the Buddhist and sociopolitical discourses of its time.

Why interpret *Jan Dara* as a Buddhist modernist novel?

The few scholarly articles on *Jan Dara* have tended to look at it as an erotic novel. Marcel Barang, in his afterword to Phongdeit Jiangphatthanarkit's translation, compares the novel to erotic scenes in classic works like *Lilit Phra Lor* and *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, as well as the work of Rong Wongsawan (1932–2009), the 'beatnik-come-playboy of Thailand' praised for his 'aerodynamic style'.[2] Rachel Harrison writes of the novel as being like a compendium of contradictory attitudes towards sex in Thailand 'that have evolved over a lengthy period of Thai history and across different social classes', vacillating between brutality and shame.[3] However, putting *Jan Dara* alongside other works of Thai erotic fiction assumes that there is a genre of Thai erotic fiction with enough consistent conventions or concerns to make comparison profitable. It also assumes to some extent that the 'erotic' was the main intention of the author rather than, as Barang briefly suggests, to write 'a Buddhist literary treatise'. It is, furthermore, difficult to parse or provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate whether the depictions of sexual desire are, as Harrison alludes, 'Thai' attitudes towards sex or Western ones or global ones.

Indeed, the problem of what can be parsed as 'Thai' or global or otherwise, as in the interpretation of many post-colonial or post-crypto-colonial cultures, is subject to debate in the study of Thai literature.[4] One way of situating Thai literature is to interpret by focusing on particular concepts or language through which the problems of modernity or other issues tended to be navigated. A consistent tendency in Thailand, as scholars such as Tamara Loos, Arnika Fuhrmann and Arjun Subhramanyan have shown, was for debates around important social, moral and political questions to employ Buddhist concepts and language.[5] Although these authors

2 Utsana Phloengtham, *The story of Jan Daraa*, trans. Phongdeit Jiangphatthanarkit, ed. Marcel Barang (Bangkok: Thai Modern Classics, 1995), p. 375. The first quote about Rong Wongsawan is from Marcel Barang and the second from an excellent article on this history of eroticism in Thai literature: Rachel Harrison, 'The disruption of female desire and the Thai literary tradition of eroticism, religion and aesthetics', *Tenggara* 41 (2000): 88–125.

3 Rachel Harrison, 'Sex in a hot climate: Moral degeneracy and erotic excess in The Story of Jan Daraa', in *National healths: Gender, sexuality and health in a cross-cultural context*, ed. Michael Worton and Wilson Tagoe (London: UCL Press, 2004), p. 129.

4 There is, for instance, a debate over in what ways Khru Liam's early novels *No Vendetta* (1915) and *Nang Neramit* (1916) are, despite being satires and faux-translations of European literary works, very much Thai novels. While Thak Chaloemtiarana points to the 'simultaneous corruption' and 'allure' of modernity and Western practices in the novel as 'quintessentially Thai', others have pointed towards Thak's 'anxiety' in stressing the fact that, despite these novels being translations or parodies of European works, they are original and Thai. See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Read till it shatters: Nationalism and identity in modern Thai literature* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018), p. 41; and Phrae Chittiphalangsri, 'The emerging literariness: Translation, dynamic canonicity and the problematic verisimilitude in early Thai prose fictions', in *Translation and global Asia: Relocating networks of cultural production*, ed. Uganda Sze-pui Kwan and Lawrence Wang-chi Wong (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2014), pp. 1–34.

5 There have been a number of insightful studies on the role of Buddhism and modernity in Thailand, some of which draw specifically on literature. Arnika Fuhrmann's recent publication *Teardrops in time*

focus on different eras and issues of modernity, a common point is that Buddhist terms and ideas remained key to staking claims about what 'Thai' or 'traditional' values are. Focusing on such terms can then give us a starting point for understanding how global problems or ideas were contested locally. Ayman El-Desouky, in an afterword to a collection of essays on Thai literature, *Disturbing Conventions*, argues for the importance of situating Thai literary production as emerging from complex interactions between the local and the international, of a need to be aware of the 'untranslatable' and to activate the 'un-homing' of the local and the un-worlding of 'the world'.[6] To un-home the local of *Jan Dara*, we might point to its use of literary techniques like an unreliable narrator, a deliberate layering of different interpretative layers via mythology, an interest in circular as opposed to linear time, as well as an exploration of Freudian psychoanalysis. These characteristics show that Utsana was inspired at least in part by European literary modernists such as James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence. But the un-worlding of the world would be to demonstrate that Utsana's literary modernism is not, like that of European literary modernists, writing against the values thought to inhere in the literary realism of, for example, the heroic and colonial ethics denuded after the First World War. Utsana's literary modernism, I argue, is experimenting with the epistemological and moral confusion wrought by debates in Thailand over Buddhist-inflected terms like 'birth' and 'karma'. Here I endeavour to show how a proper understanding of the history and debates of 'untranslatable' terms like 'birth' and *opapātikā* reveal *Jan Dara* to be not only a work of erotic satire, but one of the country's few highly layered works of literary modernism. The novel offers us a rare example of a literary modernist text written in a country where Buddhism was not only a 'contested social fantasy', as it has been argued to have often been in Europe, but a powerful mode of social and moral argument with often genuinely restrictive sociopolitical force.[7]

The author and literary modernism

Utsana Phloengtham lived through a time when Thailand was entering, for some in the capital at least, a 'jazz age'. Born as Pramun Unhathup in Bangkok in 1920 as

studies how the highly respected poet Angkarn Kallayanapong (1926–2012) adapts Buddhist temporal frameworks to create scale for critique, particularly of the vicissitudes of Thai cultural modernity. Tamara Loos in *Subject Siam* studies debates around legal definitions at the turn of the 19th century in Thailand and suggests that Buddhism and state power were conflated, and that Buddhism was frequently strategically employed politically in order to negotiate Siam's transition towards its own particular, non-secular modernity. Arjun Subrahmanyan's excellent dissertation 'Reinventing Siam' looks away from elite Thai historiography and focuses on how intellectuals and writers in Thailand around the time of the 1932 Revolution challenged elitism and worked to fashion a new modern social consciousness and identity, frequently with recourse to Buddhist terms and concepts. See: Arnika Fuhrmann, *Teardrops of time: Buddhist aesthetics in the poetry of Angkarn Kallayanapong* (New York: SUNY Press, 2020); Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, law and colonial modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Arjun Subrahmanyan, 'Reinventing Siam: Ideas and culture in Thailand, 1920–1944' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

6 Ayman El-Desouky, 'Disturbing crossings: The unhomely, the unworldly, and the question of method in approaches to world literature', in *Disturbing conventions: Decentering Thai literary cultures*, ed. Rachel V. Harrison (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 239–45.

7 Lawrence Normand and Alison Winch, eds, *Encountering Buddhism in twentieth-century British and American literature* (London: A&C Black, 2013), p. 14. The quote is by Henry Clarke Warren.

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the son of a civil servant, he quickly became enamoured of literature, particularly of foreign novels which since a young age he was able to read in English.[8] Having published a few short stories while still in school, he later became a well-known contributor to popular magazines like *Prachamit Bangkok, Siam Samai Saen Suk* and *Chao Krung*.[9] These popular illustrated magazines were an example of what Benedict Anderson dubbed 'the American age' in Thailand, an age where draconian dictatorship was coupled with a proliferation of movie theatres, dancehalls and diner bars.[10] Indeed, censorship during the 1960s military regimes makes the publication of *Jan Dara*, first serialised in *Siam Rat* from 1962–64, an unlikely feat, and one likely only achieved by the promotion of the novel by the famed writer, nobleman and future prime minister Kukrit Pramoj (1911–95). Pramoj, then the editor of *Siam Rat*, responded to the flood of letters accusing the novel of obscenity and immorality by publishing the simple retort: 'I like it.' Utsana also wrote short stories for *Siam Samai*, a magazine always covered with women with permed hair, red lips and scandalously short shorts. He contributed short stories with eye-catching titles like 'The Gun in Her Hand', 'The Punishment', 'The Knot of Death', 'The New Executioner', 'The Girl at that Table' and 'She Lies There (Awake)'.

Even though Utsana wrote in a popular format, as his story titles make clear, his use of language was both innovative and idiosyncratic. Utsana worked for a time, as did a number of future writers of the period, as an advertisement copywriter. Such writers developed an 'abnormal' (*waek naew*) style, which used inventive language to 'jolt' (*sadud*) readers' feelings. They mixed old Pāli and Khmer words from classical Thai literature, which created a sense of the unusual as well as writing in a way that 'emphasized movement and image'. It is sometimes called 'the language of swing'. A contemporary of Utsana, also known for his 'swing language', was Wit Sutthasathian (1917–89). Wit's story 'Manila Wanderings' (1943) features parties where the protagonist sings happy birthday around a grand piano, drinking beer and Coca-Cola, dancing the 'Sky High' and 'Cinderella' waltzes. He describes swing dances that 'shook your lungs the moment the trumpet opened the room with three notes', of dancers with their 'miraculous slow slow, fast fast spin of front-belly flesh'.[11] It is language that fizzes and pops, that slings same-sounding words together and ripples with the rhythm of the excitement and variety of the age. Utsana's language in *Jan Dara* bristles with the same kind of jumbled rapidity as Wit's, but unlike his contemporary's prose, not only brings about the excitement of the age but also its confusions, caught between old and new, between classical Thai poetry and English idiom and, as we shall see, between mythologies of *opapātikā* spirits and Freudian Oedipal complexes.

8 Utsana Phloengtham was his pen name and, because this is the name under which he published his short stories and his only novel, I refer to him by this name in this article. He published his translations from the English, such as of John Steinbeck's novel Tortilla Flat (1935), under his given name.

9 Vannaporn Phongpheng, *Wannasin thai ruamsamai yuk songkhramyen koraniseuksa wannakam kong Pramun Aunha-Thup* [Contemporary Thai literary style during the Cold War: A case study of Pramun Aunha-Thup's literary works], *Warasarn Manutsaat lae Sangkomsaat* 11 (2001): 114.

10 Benedict Anderson, *In the mirror: Literature and politics in Siam in the American era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985), p. 19.

11 Kampanat Phlangkun, ed., *Anuson ngan men wit sutthasathian* [Cremation volume of Wit Sutthasathian] (Bangkok: Dansuttha, 1990), pp. 138–9.

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Utsana's well-documented love of literary modernist literature is key to understanding the techniques he used in crafting *Jan Dara*. 'Literary modernism' is a contested term and did not really gain common usage until the 1970s, fifty years after its supposed heyday in the literary salons of Paris and London. Attempts at definition usually coalesce around famous representative authors such as Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner and James Joyce. Over the course of much debate, literary critics have pointed to certain key features. These include a tendency for poetry and fiction to be intended to be read 'spatially' (that is, in terms of synchronous layers and internal references) rather than chronologically, a deliberate subversion of literary realism and naturalism and their attendant 'prevalent social contracts of signification and communication' and, more generally, a will to erode received certainties such as that of a discrete, self-contained psychological self or a direct linkage between words and things.[12] In this article I take literary modernism generally speaking as a set of characteristic techniques and concerns used by Utsana—such as his use of an unreliable narrator and an allegorical use of mythology—that had not hitherto been employed extensively in Thai writing.

There is one key feature of literary modernism that I shall elaborate on here as important to understanding the novel: a heavy deployment of irony which works through allegories and cerebral puzzles. The framing of a novel is often much more layered than the surface text itself, or, for that matter, the thoughts of its protagonists. Joyce's layering in *Ulysses* (1922) of the heroic Greek myths of Odysseus and Telemachus onto the humdrum of early twentieth-century Dublin encourages the informed reader either to see where the modern protagonists are found wanting against their heroic counterparts or, perhaps more fruitfully, to ask what heroism really means in the modern age. Similarly, *Jan Dara* works on multiple levels, some of which are not available to the narrator Jan. Although the novel is narrated by Jan, Utsana works as what the critic Wayne Booth called the 'implied author'. This is not the actual author per se, but a sort of uncredited director behind the scenes who communicates with 'a nod and a wink' to the reader about the story that Jan, his narrator, is telling. As Booth writes, 'there can be no dramatic irony, by definition, unless the author and audience can somehow hold knowledge which the characters do not hold'.[13] For example, although Jan worries that he will be reborn as an *opapātikā*, and by this means literally being reborn in hell as a ghost-like being, it is clear through an analysis of the plot that the 'implied author' is fully aware that there are other more metaphorical ways to interpret this term available and that, by referencing these more metaphorical usages, the implied author is saying something with 'a nod and a wink' to the reader. What the full implications of this are we shall discuss later with reference to the novel itself.

12 A particularly helpful introduction to literary modernism is: Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2017). See further Astradur Eysteinsson, *The concept of modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), and the quote here about realism is on p. 5. See also Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds, *Modernism: A guide to European literature, 1890–1930* (London: Penguin, 1978). The first article to talk of literary modernism and reading 'spatially' is Joseph Frank, 'Spatial form in modern literature: An essay in two parts', *Sewanee Review* 53, 2 (1945): 221–40.

13 Wayne Booth, *The rhetoric of fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 175.

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Utsana was particularly engaged with the European modernist most famous for his provocative depictions of sexuality, D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930). Utsana wrote that Lawrence was the writer who had had the strongest influence on him, and he even earned the moniker of the 'D.H. Lawrence of Thailand' amongst local literary circles.[14] Utsana's first published short story, 'She Rode Away on a Horse' (1938), published when he was only eighteen, is an adaptation of Lawrence's story, 'The Woman Who Rode Away' (1925). Lawrence's story is about a woman who, married to a dispassionate businessman in South America, goes on a trip to see the indigenous Chilchui Indians. She is taken to a temple where she continually feels as if she 'dies', at one time while watching an orgy, a 'great stream of impersonal sex and impersonal passion', and is finally sacrificed. Utsana's adaptation follows roughly the same plot.[15] Unlike Lawrence's story, however, Utsana's female protagonist is never directly described as having sexual intercourse and finally leaves her den of newfound sexual exploration to return to her child and being 'a pointless wife'. Even while Utsana's adaptation of Lawrence's story is far less radical in its explorations of sexual possibility, it does present at least the possibility of searching for a new kind of personal authenticity via sexual exploration. Utsana would much later in *Jan Dara*, his only published novel, use sexuality to explore not the freedoms but the entrapments of desire.

Buddhist debate in 1960s Thailand

Utsana lived in a very different sociopolitical and conceptual world to those of his European literary heroes, one where many of the debates over how to live or even about the purposes of art were couched in Buddhist terms. The interpretation of terms like karma, merit and rebirth were heavily contested in debates by monks and laypeople alike. These debates play their part in *Jan Dara* and are necessary to understanding why, as I argue later, this was not only a work of satirical eroticism but, in its ironic usage of Buddhist mythology and terminology where the protagonist is only aware of one side of the debates about interpretations of Buddhist ideas and terms, was also a subtle attack on the Buddhist-entwined political discourse of its time.

In Ayutthaya and early Bangkok, Buddhism was concerned with merit (*bun*) more than anything else. Very generally speaking, rich and powerful people were understood to have been born so because of their good deeds in past lives. The king had a right to rule because of his supreme merit. To achieve a better birth in the future, one could make merit by, for example, making donations to temples and following the five Buddhist precepts. However, by the turn of the century, more 'rationalist' reinterpretations of what the historical Buddha had taught according to Pāli texts were gaining traction, particularly with the middle class and educated elites in the capital. Certain 'reformist' Buddhists sought a de-mythologisation of the religion's doctrines, rejecting the traditional Buddhist cosmology of continual rebirth in a universe of karmic moral cause and effect in favour of psychological

14 Harrison, 'Sex in a hot climate', p. 133.

15 Utsana Phloenghtam's story 'She rode away on a horse' is republished in Utsana Phloenghtam, *Cho Prayong* [A clusterful of algae] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2002).

interpretations. Rebirth, for instance, might not mean literal rebirth as a king because of one's past good deeds, but might instead mean the ways in which we are 're-born' psychologically from one moment to the next.

For an example of the conflict between literal and metaphorical interpretations of Buddhist terms, we need look no further than the first few pages of *Jan Dara.* Jan the narrator begins by referencing a seemingly obscure Pāli term, *opapātikā*, a term which he says will help the reader 'understand my background'. This term was in fact one of the terms taken up by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906–93), one of the chief living 'reformist' Buddhist interpreters at the time of the novel's composition. In Pāli scripture, the term refers to one of the four types of birth: egg-born (*aṇḍajā*), caul-born (*jalābujā*), moisture-born (*saṃsedajā*), and spontaneously born (*opapātikā*), without a mother or father. In Thai, the word tends to be synonymous with ghosts, or those born in heaven or hell. But Buddhadāsa writes that the term should be understood as a verb and not a noun. This is in contrast to more conservative interpreters of the time. The moral-crusading layperson Anan Senakhan in his *Heretical Teachings* wrote that he still wished to interpret *opapātikā* as actual spontaneous rebirth in a cosmos of moral cause-and-effect. Buddhadāsa, however, wished to metaphorise the entire cosmology, interpreting the notion of 'birth' (Pāli: *jāti,* Thai: *jat*) in the 'true language of dharma' as referring to the deluded idea of individuality. Demons and angels (*thewada*) do not exist, only as mental states.[16] To be an *opapātikā* is then for Jan Dara and Anan Senakhan a literal rebirth in a hell-realm for past misdeeds, but for Buddhadāsa it is more like a hellish psychological state caused by desirous clinging. The term *opapātikā* was then a flashpoint in Utsana's time for debates around the proper definition of birth, either cosmological or psychological. In the novel, the narrator and protagonist are only made aware of the literal interpretation of the term, but the implied author hints that more metaphorical readings—albeit not necessarily Buddhadāsa's—are necessary to understand the full significance of Jan's life story.

Interpretations of Buddhist ideas were never far away from politics. Against those who preferred more metaphorical interpretations, there were what Peter Jackson calls 'establishment' Buddhists for whom social seniority continued to mean moral seniority in the past, beliefs which tended to be held by those supporting authoritarian and centralised government. Such beliefs often went alongside 'royal' Buddhism which provided an interpretation of the cosmic and social orders that 'justified hierarchical and pyramidal structure of political authority'.[17] Others felt that the promotion of literal interpretations of terms like karma were simply a way to justify the status quo, an idea which found its way into literature. Published a decade prior to *Jan Dara,* Seni Saowaphong's *Ghosts* (*Pisaat*, 1953), a novel later celebrated by democracy activists in the 1970s, begins with a quote from the *Dhammapada* that, 'Only the self is the master of the self'. Throughout, the novel forces the reader to reconsider the traditional connection between karma or merit and social hierarchy. The story features well-born and traditionally respected figures such as the protagonist's former abbot

16 Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and modernist reform in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2003), p. 108.

17 Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation, and conflict* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1989), p. 42.

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and mentor who is now an avaricious landlord. The newly minted lawyer protagonist Sai must choose which 'ghosts' he owes his allegiance to, his old teacher or the peasants whom he now wants removed from his land. As Hiramatsu Hideki points out, Saowaphong makes a contrast between characters who yield to Brahma's karma (*prom likhit*) and those who have a self-determined existence (*kam likhit*) or, rather, those who understand the true meaning of Buddhist karma as something which can be changed by individual action.[18] In its pointed reinterpretation of the traditional meaning of karma, *Ghosts* gives the rather direct message that what is needed is a more critical and socially aware version of karma.

Jan Dara gives perhaps a subtler critique of such traditionalist understandings, which we shall examine below. The salient point, however, is that there was something of a two-sided debate between traditionalist, literal interpreters and various reformist interpreters. The reformist interpreters were a diverse crowd, with some favouring Marxist-inspired visions of social change like Saowaphong and others like Buddhadāsa who focused on promoting the reinterpretation of scriptures and insight meditation. Nevertheless, many launched their reinterpretations by attacking literal interpretations of terms like karma and birth and all encouraged, to varying degrees and to different ends, more reflective individual intellectual discernment than their more conservative counterparts. All considered these debates to be not only about religion but as having links to questions of individual and social responsibility in Thailand more broadly. Arjun Subrahmanyan writes of early Buddhist reformists like Buddhadāsa that they not only wanted to reinterpret their religion but to encourage individual growth as opposed to an 'ethics of obedience to inherited authority' and, moreover, that they wished to create 'a new moral subject that could refashion society'.[19] Buddhadāsa wrote in an early essay that, 'As the individual is, so will society be.'[20] Terms like karma, merit and *opapātikā* were heavily contested and had a political charge to them. The interpretation of these terms and their attendant cosmologies were then connected with different imaginings of social order and individual responsibility. As such, a work of literature which employed these terms creatively can be understood as saying something not only about Buddhist or moral discourse, but also about the sociopolitical discourse of its time. We shall return to some possible interpretations of *Jan Dara* in this light below.

While in his fiction Utsana never directly challenged authoritarian politics or literal interpretations of Buddhist terms, we can see hints in those few interviews that he gave of an affiliation to a Buddhism which prized unflinching honesty and individual discernment above literal understandings. In a rare interview many years after writing *Jan Dara*, when he said that he was 'good now only for sitting and chatting', Utsana compares his writing process to the meditation of an enlightened individual:

> I am a person who really likes to watch. From dogshit to cloud shit. But, having said that, there's nothing more fun to watch than people. When I say people, I mean all people

18 Hiramatsu Hideki, 'Thai literary trends: From Seni Saowaphong to Chart Kobjitti', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 8 (2007), https://kyotoreview.org/issue-8-9/thai-literary-trends-from-seni-saowaphong-to-chart-kobjitti/.

19 Arjun Subrahmanyan, 'Worldly compromise in Thai Buddhist modernism', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 50*, 2 (2019): 179–201.

20 These quotes originally appeared in the Thai journal *Buddhasasana* in Nov. 1934, cited in Subrahmanyan, 'Worldly compromise', p. 190.

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> including myself … My enjoyment in this business or my fascination in it, is just the same as the flavour of dharma for one who has arrived at the bright and unobscured dharma. Because dharma has many different pathways, coming from dogshit and from cloud shit just the same. That deliciousness I have in observing myself is just the same thing, just at a different level.[21]

This quote brings to mind Joyce writing, 'Some of it is ugly, obscene and bestial, some of it is pure and holy and spiritual: all of it is myself.'[22] Utsana is here also eschewing the need to separate the low from the high in honest writing, but justifies his depictions of seemingly low matters like sex with recourse to dharma, by which he seems to mean here the truth of reality as perceived in all phenomena. While this can hardly be described as a direct statement of affiliation with any particular school of Buddhism, it is clear that Utsana is more on the side of reformist interpretations of Buddhist terminology than of literal ones. Utsana writes later that his inspiration comes from 'the earth and sky together with my moods and sensations [*arom lae aawed*], mixing and mingling together, all shaking up a cocktail of some name in my own secret personal bar tab'.[23] Employing a similar idea of dharma as not restricted to moral laws but to understanding or depicting all phenomena, one of the novel's commentators Khomnai Tunlajit, defended the eroticism and immoral behaviour in *Jan Dara* by commenting that those who think that 'dharma' is pure do not really understand it. Because Buddhism is a creed of wisdom and not of belief, a book which describes the workings of desire and the suffering it causes can be a work of dharma too. This idea of dharma, one that stressed wisdom through individual reflection and discernment, was at odds with those which stressed literal interpretations of 'dharma' and 'rebirth' and tended to be more aligned with political conservatism as well as the interests of particular elites.

Jan Dara as a satire of Thai realist aristocratic novels

We can now turn to an analysis of the novel itself. On the surface at least, *Jan Dara* can be understood as a satire of a popular Thai genre of novels set in aristocratic households. While those novels, which we shall examine below, tended to paint a rather idealised picture of aristocratic households, *Jan Dara* presents us with the portrait of a mansion of lust, spite and complicated entanglements. The narrator Jan recounts the story of his life from his childhood to adult years. After his mother died while giving birth to him, Jan is left in the care of Khun Luang, His Lordship, who is Jan's supposed father. His Lordship bullies Jan and spends much of his time grooming his own servants for his numerous sexual affairs. There are two women that His Lordship treats as his common-law wives, Jan's Aunt Wat and a cosmopolitan lady named Khun Bunlueang. Aunt Wat acts like a surrogate mother

21 Utsana Phloengtham, *Rueang khong Chan Dara* [*The story of Jan Dara*] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2013), pp. 412–6. This is the edition that I have referenced and all translations from the novel are my own. This edition also includes interviews with the author, which were originally published separately: Utsana Phloengtham, '*Poet thep samphaat Utsana Phloengtham*' [A taped interview with Utsana Phloengtham], *Thanon nangseu* 3, 3 (1985): 28–34.

22 This is in fact a quote from one of Joyce's letters to his wife Nora, but could quite readily apply to his unwillingness to censor his literary works.

23 Phloengtham, *Rueang khong Chan Dara*, p. 414.

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to Jan and, when His Lordship kicks Jan out of the house, she sends him to stay with his grandparents. She also tells him about the mystery of his origins. It turns out that Jan is not the biological son of His Lordship but the product of his mother having been raped by a band of criminals. Eventually, Aunt Wat requests that Jan return to the palace in order to marry His Lordship's wicked daughter Kaeo, who is pregnant, in order to avoid a scandal. After his return, Jan continually undermines His Lordship's authority by resuming his love affair with Khun Bunlueang and taking ownership of the compound, replacing His Lordship as the patriarch. In short, Jan grows up amongst all kinds of sexual licentiousness at the palace, leaves, then returns. Readers familiar with Charles Dickens will expect the story of an orphan (as Jan turns out to be) bullied by his guardian to result in the morally unimpeachable protagonist eventually returning to get revenge on his erstwhile keeper. In *Jan Dara*, by contrast, Jan only returns to end up ruling over His Lordship's house with as much lustful tyranny as his supposed father had. Perverted, selfish desires in Utsana's novel do not reside in evil antagonists, like His Lordship, but run in circles.

European literary modernists were often writing against what they felt to be the staid, Victorian morality thought to be inherent in the fiction of realist writers like George Eliot. Similarly, Utsana can be said to be writing against the realist aristocratic fiction of novelists like Dokmai Sot (1905–63). *Jan Dara* begins with a warning, a warning which if examined in context, can demonstrate just how scornful the novel was of a particular kind of moralising. The foreword states that the novel is not suitable 'for children'. And that it will, furthermore, be 'even more harmful' for those types who 'hold the pestle and mouth the Buddhist precepts' (that is, hypocrites). Utsana was scornful of such people throughout his life. He responded to the charge of critics that his novel was a 'double-edged sword' and that it would seduce children to vice:

> I like a double-edged sword. I'll take it and I'll slice and stab at those 'highly' moral people and those who are 'responsible' towards society … In my experience, nothing seduces people to moral corruption [*kilet*] in an underhanded way more surely than the dizzy-headed protestations of that group of people who are 'highly' moral.

The opening quote of the novel begs the question: Who might these 'hypocrites' or 'highly' moral people have been? And what is this 'morality' that they professed?

For much of his life, Utsana simply wrote that the novel was based on 'somebody I knew' mixed with his own fantasies. Later he admitted that it was based on stories he had heard growing up, living behind the kitchen of Barn Mor Palace.[24] That palace had been owned at the time of Utsana's birth by Chao Phraya Thewetwongwiwat (1852–1922), an important civil servant during the reigns of Rama IVth and Rama Vth (King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn). Lord Thewet had been a connoisseur of traditional Thai theatre and an even greater connoisseur of the women who acted in them, accruing over forty of them as wives. Although Lord Thewet's children were tight-lipped about their father's behaviour, there are hints such as when one of his daughters talked of how her father tended to go 'a bit over … a little over the border'

24 Kamrop Nawachon, *Utsana Phloengtham lae Wilat Maniwat* [Life on a road of books: Utsana Phloengtham and Wilat Maniwat] (Bangkok: Thanaban, 1988).

in such matters, a cryptic phrase which may simply refer to the fact that, even by the standards of a Siamese aristocrat, Lord Thewet had many wives.[25] Lord Thewet's most significant legacy is to have fathered two well-known female authors, Dokmai Sot and Boonlua (1911–82), the former writing a genre of novels set in the aristocratic households which *Jan Dara* can be seen as problematising. Dokmai Sot was influenced by the sentimental novels which she read as a student at a Catholic convent school such as those of the French writer M. Delly, which acted as moral instructors for young women.[26] Her novels concern the multi-wife households of Thai aristocrats and are replete with moral lessons and Buddhist phrases and catechisms. One contemporary commentator, Khun Nilawan Pintong, wrote that Dokmai Sot's novels were 'a modern kind of jataka' and that the only difference between a preacher in the pulpit and the authoress was that you did not need to present her with incense or candlesticks.[27]

Dokmai Sot's most well-known novel is *A Person of Good Quality* (*Phu Di*, 1938), a story set in the aristocratic mansion of Wimon, a good-hearted young woman. The story concerns her struggles to keep the family house so that all of her siblings may stay rooted in their privileged social niche.[28] Each chapter begins with a translated verse or section of a Buddhist sutra, often ones about how to conduct oneself or about how one should respect one's parents and teachers or should only associate with the wise. The novel begins with the following:

> People are not wicked because of their birth, nor are they brahmins because of their birth. Those who are wicked, are wicked because of their karma (their behaviour) and those who are good, it is because of their karma.[29]

It is clear here that *phu di*, a phrase which can mean both 'persons of virtue' as well as 'high-born nobles', for Dokmai Sot should mean the former. However, one gets the strong impression in reading her novels that 'high-born nobles' tend to be 'persons of virtue' because of their strict and cultured upbringing. Arjun Subrahmanyan writes of Dokmai Sot's novel that duty and stewardship, twin pillars of the old elite, govern the reaction to social change, an attitude widely promoted in Thailand which he calls 'aristocratic Buddhism'.[30] In order to excavate the beginnings of 'aristocratic Buddhism', Subrahmanyan examines Thammasakmontir's *Thammacariya* (Ethics), a series of educational textbooks published from the reign of Rama Vth (r.1868–1910) onwards, to show how bourgeois values, including the accumulation of wealth and frugality, were situated in a Buddhist ethical frame. In this 'aristocratic Buddhism', social hierarchy is based on relative access to moral law and absolute truth, a position occupied by one's elders, teachers and social betters. This, as it

25 See Susan Fulop Kepner, *A civilized woman: ML Boonlua Debyasuvarn and the Thai twentieth century* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2013), chap. 1, 'In her father's house'.

26 M. Delly or Delly was the pseudonym of the French brothers Jeanne Marie Henriette Petitjean de la Rosiére (1875–1947) and Frédéric Henri Petitjean de la Rosiére (1870–1949).

27 Wibha Senanan, 'The genesis and early development of the novel in Thailand' (PhD diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1973), p. 240.

28 Translations of some extracts from the novel as well as a helpful summary can be found in: Susan Fulop Kepner, *The lioness in bloom: Modern Thai fiction about women* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 81–3.

29 Dokmai Sot, *Phu Di* [Persons of quality] (Bangkok: Silapa Bannaakaan,1973), p. 11.

30 Subrahmanyan, 'Reinventing Siam', p. 193.

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does in Dokmai Sot's fiction, also has the effect of buttressing the position of the elite while putting new values on a Buddhist foundation.[31] As Kwandee Rakpongse writes in her dissertation on Dokmai Sot's literary works, the latter does not perhaps successfully interpret the Buddha's words but rather proves the Thai saying that, 'Pure gold remains pure even when dropped in the mud.'[32]

Utsana once spoke in an interview of the disconnect between how Dokmai Sot's household presented itself and the rumours he heard growing up next to the palace's kitchen:

> I heard everything when they quarrelled. Oh—they came up with really juicy stuff, but then when you entered from the front gate it all looked ever so proper.[33]

His novel seems intent on exposing this disconnect between presentation and reality. Instead of possessing an inherent nobility, the aristocratic characters are caught in a cycle of craven appetites which seems endemic to the very setup of their household. While Jan struggles to understand the truth of his birth, his chief moral exemplar is His Lordship. Throughout the book, the narrator and protagonist Jan informs us of his love of making merit by giving alms to monks each morning. To his surprise, he finds that the personal library of His Lordship, his decadent supposed father, is filled with Buddhist tales and scriptures and moralising fiction. Such people, like Jan and His Lordship and Dokmai Sot, are more than likely those who 'hold the pestle while mouthing the Buddhist precepts' that the opening warns the novel is not suitable for. Seeing similarities in their depictions of moral hypocrisy, Khomnai compares *Jan Dara* to Albert Camus' *The Fall* (*La Chute,* 1957), titled *The Man with Two Faces* in the Thai translation.[34] Camus' novel concerns Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a well-respected defence lawyer, who congratulates himself on his pro bono cases as well as yielding his seat to strangers on the bus, giving alms to the poor and helping the blind to cross the street. After a series of dangerous incidents in which he reacts in a cowardly or small-minded fashion, Clamence comes to think of himself as duplicitous and hypocritical. Then begins his fall as he decides to live a life according to the dictum that 'no man is a hypocrite in his pleasures'.[35] Both novels, Khomnai writes, stress in particular hypocritical deployments of religion. In *Jan Dara*, Utsana provides us with a subverted, almost parodic version of the genre of fiction set in old aristocratic households, complicating the moral goodness of reciprocal relations and stewardship that such novels promoted as well as their implied ethic of elites maintaining social order by upholding anxiously guarded traditional values.

However, *Jan Dara* is not only satire. It employs many of the techniques of European literary modernists such as a deliberate layering of multiple levels of interpretation in order, I would argue, to force the reader to question not only the right and wrong of what Jan is doing but to direct attention to his language and process of reflection itself. One point of the novel where we can demonstrate this are the

31 Ibid., p. 77.
32 Kwandee Rakpongse, 'A study of the novels of Mom Luang Buppha Nimmanheminda (pseud. Dokmaisot)' (PhD diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1975), p. 274.
33 Phloengtham, *The story of Jan Dara*, trans. Jiangphatthanarkit, p. 381.
34 Tunlajit, 'The enticing smell of virtue', p. 90.
35 Albert Camus, *The fall* (London: Penguin, 2013). The quote itself is by Samuel Johnson.

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many interpretive meanings of birth which the implied author Utsana (but not the novel's narrator Jan) hints at to the reader.

Jan as an *opapātikā* in the metaphorical sense

The narrator Jan is obsessed with the question of his birth. He continually wonders where he comes from. He keeps questioning who owned the 'sperm' (Thai: *nam asuchi*, literally 'impure water') that created him. At one point he wonders if he was 'synthesised' by a scientist. When, having been thrown out of His Lordship's household, Jan receives his maternal surname and becomes Jan Dara, he describes this as a better identity than the one he received as the chance outcome of 'a spermatic chemical reaction'. This speaks to the multiple interpretations and markers of birth—scientific, official government name registration, paternal, inheritance, sexual desire—that complicate Jan's quest to understand where he came from and who he is. As we saw above, the rambling, forgetful narrator begins by referencing the seemingly obscure Pāli term *opapātikā*. As with many European literary modernist writers, like Joyce or Nabokov, the author invites us to solve a puzzle.

Although Jan is born of a (deceased) mother, the plot complicates the origin of his conception, such that he is implied to be like a self-generated being. Jan grows up alone and unloved by his supposed father, surviving only because of 'Glaxo powdered milk'. He suspects that His Lordship is not his real father and continually wonders about his real mother and true origin. After a heated argument, His Lordship reveals to the adolescent Jan that he is not his father. Jan later learns that he was likely fathered by a bandit who had abducted and raped his mother. Jan later learns that his father was not a single bandit, but any one of a number of bandits who had had their way with his mother. He is later asked to marry his spiteful stepsister Kaeo, who is pregnant, in order to avoid a scandal. Kaeo's child is born mentally disabled and Kaeo calls him 'ignoble child' (*dek apri*) and so he, like Jan, grows up on Glaxo powdered milk. But Jan pledges to take care of him, calling him 'Noble' (Pri). He later demands that Kaeo, his lawful wife, provide him with a child in exchange for allowing her to continue her lesbian affairs. She refuses and he rapes her and, when she becomes pregnant with Jan's child, Kaeo aborts the baby.

It is significant that none of the main characters in this plot actually manage to produce children who can produce heirs. His Lordship, Jan's supposed father, produces Kaeo who is a lesbian, a 'condition' which is described as 'sadly and quite hopelessly incurable'. His maternal Aunt Wat produces Kaeo, only to disown her saying to His Lordship, 'you stuffed this vicious brat into my belly by force and I pushed her out of me long ago'. Kaeo produces a disabled child who cannot reproduce. Jan's lover, his stepmother Khun Bunlueang, is sterilised and Jan's only legitimate offspring is aborted. This then is the irony of Jan worrying about being reborn in the world of *opapātikā*. The novel or, rather, the implied author strongly implies that he is already in that world, that he is already something like a spontaneously born being, one that has no clear origin and cannot reproduce in this world. All of the main characters are implied to have been engendered in their mothers' wombs against their wills, sires of perverse, continually recurring lusts rather than of love. Even Jan's mother implies that Jan is not actually her child, saying when she is about to give birth to him: 'This child is using my womb to be born, please bring him up for me'. On one

level, Jan's is the non-fantastical confession of a single individual's life in an aristocratic household. On another level it is the story of a self-generated *opapātikā* who, like an angel in Buddhist lore, lives in a heavenly palace or mansion but is nonetheless a slave to sensual desires. And the metaphor of *opapātikā* can be extended further. Marcel Barang writes of Jan's palace as giving the feeling of a 'closed microcosm' which is 'ruled by lust and self-interest'.[36] Indeed so closed off is the palace that one cannot discern the precise years in which the novel is set and, besides very brief allusions to the 1932 Revolution and the Japanese invasion of Thailand during the Second World War, there is almost no mention of events in the outside world. Barang attributes this partially to the political sensitivity of the period in which the novel was published, though Jan's disinterest in anything except his own birth, behaviour and desires also matches his status as an *opapātikā*. We begin to see the possibility that *Jan Dara* is not only a satire, but can also be read as the tragedy of someone who ends up repeating the sins of the fathers because, unlike the implied author and readers, he is simply unequipped to interpret his situation fully, which is to say metaphorically rather than literally.

Buddhist modernist and Freudian births in *Jan Dara*

Even as Jan ends up repeating the hypocrisy of His Lordship while 'mouthing the Buddhist precepts', he does on occasion employ Buddhist terminology in a metaphorical or psychological way. The novel and film version's most famous scene is of Jan being seduced by his father's wife Khun Bunlueang, a cosmopolitan woman who reads foreign books and orders all of her toiletries from Penang and Singapore. Khun Bunlueang tells Jan that she wishes to take a 'siesta' and Jan later finds her naked and face-down on a couch wearing only white satin shorts. She asks him to cool her back by rubbing ice cubes over it. Jan does so, tormented by lust. She turns around to him: 'The look on her face at that moment like that of a nymph [*nang phrai*] mixed with that of the mother of a monk.'[37] He leaves the room, only to be drawn back to her: 'I raised my hands in offering [*phanom mue*] and bowed down [*krab long*] upon the hills of her chest, those lofty promontories suffused with sweat'. The raised hands of offering is one of many parodies of Buddhist language and ritual used to describe sexual cravenness in the novel. But what is most striking about this passage is the significance that Jan ascribes to it:

> Khun Bunlueang was the single most important force all on her own in my second conception [Pāli: *paṭisandhi*] in this earthly continent of lust [Thai: *kam phop ni*]. My first conception haphazardly *caused* me to be an individual in this world. My second conception was that which helped me to clearly and ably understand that I *am* an individual in this world.[38]

The word Jan uses to describe 'conception' is also the word used by Buddhadāsa to describe the link between births or, rather, the rebirths that occur when one's notion of selfhood or self-identity shifts. The text is then operating on both levels. Implied is

36 Phloengtham, *The story of Jan Dara*, trans. Jiangphatthanarkit, p. 379.
37 Ibid., p. 129.
38 Italics my own.

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that Jan lives in a mythological-like mansion of *opapātikā*. But it also works on the level of birth as a notion of selfhood born from desire. Jan goes on to say that, without Khun Bunlueang, he would scarcely be human and more like 'some teddy-bear mole born out of a bamboo hole'. He compares himself to Sang Thong, the hero of an apocryphal *jātaka* tale, the *Suvannasankhajātaka.* Jan writes that Khun Bunlueang's lust is like the supernatural powers of the ogress Panturat whose magic well causes Sangthong's body to be 'golden, gleaming, gorgeous', another incident of 'second conception'. And Jan too, he who had been born as a 'teddy-bear mole', having 'bathed in the song of her lust', had arisen as a man. Jan later writes that the lust of Khun Bunlueang was like a 'a magic well that gave me purpose and inspired me to live on'. When he later succumbs to impotency, his life is 'without meaning' and he is like, 'a coconut-husk that's only good for floating to and fro in the vastness of the ocean, waiting for the circle of death and birth to begin again'.[39] In this reading, Jan is an *opapātikā* in something closer to Buddhadāsa's more psychological sense, a being who is born from its desires. Yet, although Jan at times narrates his life at times in the more metaphorical language used by Buddhist reformists, he is once again seemingly unaware of the full implications of this.

As well as this, Jan is seemingly unaware of yet another interpretative layer that Utsana the implied author places in the story. Towards the beginning of the story of his life, Jan describes his first memory:

> The world of a child. At that time of life, what is most clearly noticeable is the passage of time as it follows daytime and then night time …. Yet there was at one time a brightness which arose of a strange sort, entering and inserting itself between the darkness and light ….

In the lamp-lit half-light, the infant Jan is like a blank slate still trying to make sense of the world, or like a foetus entering the 'strange' light of the world. Startled to be awoken in this unfamiliar twilight, he looks across his bed to see an arresting sight—two adults, their bodies 'just like when children are going for a bath'. He feels sick at the sight, as if he had just encountered 'two adults playing at emptying their bladders over one another'. He sees His Lordship, his supposed father, making love to his maternal Aunt Wat who, in the story, is the closest thing Jan will have to a living mother. Aunt Wat realises that Jan has spotted them and wishes to stop but His Lordship, 'did not bring any halt to his naughtiness, nor did he take his eyes from me'.

This is a very clear telling of what Freud called the primal scene, in which the infant witnesses the father making love to the mother.[40] The excitement and confusion that this brings about in the child causes them to wish to kill his father and make love to his mother. Thanks to Utsana's clever plot contortions, this is actually what Jan achieves. Years after this incident, he convinces Aunt Wat to take pity on him, crying 'but I do not have a mother'. Aunt Wat lies with him and lets slip her shift saying, 'there Jan, there's mother's breast', causing his first ejaculation at the age of

39 Phloengtham, *The story of Jan Dara*, p. 377.

40 An interesting discussion of the Oedipal complex in Jan Dara as well as the political deployment of the complex by a Thai film director in his adaptations of the novel can be found in: Thosaeng Chaochuti, 'Oedipal desire in *Chua fa din salai* and *Rueang khong Chan Dara*: The politics of deferral, the deferral of politics', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 30, 3 (2015): 609–40.

ten. He later begins an affair with Khun Bunlueang, his supposed father's wife. This lustful affair goes on for many years but it is only towards the end of the story that His Lordship witnesses it. When Jan leaves Khun Bunlueang's bedroom, he finds His Lordship sprawled out on the floor in front of the room. Jan confesses that he had never intended to have such a perfect 'revenge' on His Lordship for all he had suffered. The story thus functions on an Oedipal level, with Jan witnessing the primal scene and finally managing to sleep with his (adopted) mothers and, in the process, paralysing his (supposed) father. This, then, is another interpretative layer of Jan's birth, his being born not as an *opapātikā* or from lust, but as being born psychologically from witnessing the primal scene he describes as like a 'time bomb some unknown person had set', like an oracular prophecy that must be fulfilled.

The use of unreliable, fraught narrators was one device employed by modernist writers who, inspired by developments in psychology, worked to erode the 'stability, substantiality, and discreteness', of the subjectivity of characters in earlier fiction.[41] In place of the aerial perspective of earlier realist literature, modernist writing tended to eschew any clear point of view on the story for the reader. Similarly, we are not so much *told* Jan's life story as made to peer out obscurely from the middle of his fraught telling of it. Towards the very end of the story, Jan reveals that he has been writing this on his doctor's orders, that it will be good for his psychological state and for his 'physical health' (that is, overcoming his impotence). Jan is then probably writing his personal account as something like a psychoanalytic 'talking cure'. As in another key early example of literary modernism, Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), who also relates that he tells his story 'to get it out of his head', Jan Dara frequently doubts the story he tells and frequently expresses himself as a lost being with no identity. Later in the story, he writes that, 'I still don't know who I am, except in a vague sort of way that I'm a human [*khon*].' Despite perhaps writing this as a psychoanalytical confession, he seems unaware throughout of how perfectly his story follows the Oedipus narrative. These three interpretative layers—of Jan as like a mythical *opapātikā*, a psychological being born from lust or as being born to act out an Oedipal narrative—all function to complicate Jan's search for his own birth and for meaning, all of which he is unequipped to understand as well as the 'implied author' and readers. However, while Jan is only dimly or completely unaware of these multiple causes of his birth there is one interpretative framework which Jan employs continuously and explicitly—that of merit and karma.

Jan's karma

The interpretation of 'karma' was, as we have seen, subject to contestation in Buddhist debates as well as in important Thai novels of the first half of the century, such as Saowaphong's *Ghosts*, which advocated a more socially engaged and individually active version of karma. Dokmai Sot's characters also make repeated appeals to 'karma', but these tend to be rather fatalistic—'It is our karma—what can we do?' —or sentimentally community-spirited— 'If the karma is undertaken by a man for the benefit and happiness of his fellow beings, then that karma is

41 Judith Ryan, *The vanishing subject: Early psychology and literary modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 11.

pure'.[42] Although the implied author and readers are aware that there are more metaphorical, discerning ways to understand his predicament, Jan is not. Jan takes up concepts like 'merit' and 'karma' literally in order to understand his own birth and behaviour. In particular, Jan frequently refers to himself as a karmic partner (*khu kam)* of His Lordship:

> As for this life, we are karmically fastened and tied together since the last life, which caused us to be born as karmic reflections of one another throughout our lives.

His Lordship may not be Jan's biological father, but is at least his karmic father. Like His Lordship, Jan marries so as to prevent a scandal and in order to inherit a house. He offers Khun Bunlueang, who can no longer be sexually satisfied by His Lordship, a place in his house if she becomes his mistress, caressing her as he does so with his hands like 'the heads of large snakes slithering in search of gaps in thick grass'. He later has sex with a servant on his wedding day in his library which, he later discovers, was also His Lordship's habit. His Lordship would sleep with servants in the library beneath the portrait of Jan's mother. His Lordship's portrait, like that of Jan's mother, stays on in the house long after he has left, in the same way his sexual habits survive in Jan. These portraits haunt Jan's sense of agency, implying that the law of Buddhist attachment to desire is stronger than his will to control his own destiny. In his translation Phongdeit Jiangphatthanarkit frequently opts to translate *wen kam* as 'retribution'. Jan, talking about how his having always been poorly matched with lust, is a 'retribution'. This, however, would imply a single biting back of fate, whereas the original Thai implies 'circles of karma', and this is closer to how desire and its consequences play out in the novel itself. In place of any suggestion of redemption for his protagonist, Utsana opts for a plot of circles, repetitions. The mansion in which Jan is raised is one of endless corridors that back onto one another. This is one point then where the Buddhist and the literary modernist converge. The novel is Buddhist because it is about karmic retribution, but it is modernist because it is an example of a novel that must be read 'spatially', with the linear passage of time deliberately subverted in order to portray the uncanny moral circularity of Jan and His Lordship. The karmic residue, the influence of the mansion's former inhabitants, haunts the present like the portraits still hanging on its walls. However, Jan's own explanations of his behaviour in terms of 'karma' and *wen gam* read like Dokmai Sot's sentimental and fatalistic appeals to karma.

Jan's closing statement would seem to stress that he is one who holds the pestle while mouthing the Buddhist precepts. Now sexually impotent, he writes forlornly:

> If you see a middle-aged man, good-looking … in a posh restaurant, the latest night-club or an expensive car passing by, please help by sending him some *metta*. Bye for now.

Although he asks the reader to send him some *metta* or loving kindness, he has in fact just confessed to having raped his wife Kaeo when she refuses to provide him with a child. He is ashamed of this, saying that nothing will 'torture my mind' as much as

42 These quotes are from Dokmai Sot's *Past karma* [*Kam Kao*, 1932] and *One in a hundred* [*Nung Nai Roi*, 1934], respectively. See Kwandee Rakpongse, 'A study of the novels of Mom Luang Buppha Nimmanheminda', pp. 181, 250.

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these 'karmic results' (*phon kam*). A decadent man who has confessed to rape going along in 'an expensive car' asking for our sympathy because of his bad karma is surely to some extent ironic. Jan's reflections on his wretched karma are perhaps little more than an excuse and his professed love of 'making merit' is little more than hypocrisy, a way to excuse his immorality by subscribing it to the tragedy of his karma and birth.

However, the extreme effort that Utsana put into a plot which can be read on many levels—which must be read 'spatially' in terms of layers and internal references—mean that simply describing this novel as a satire of hypocritical elites is inadequate. It is true that it is always risky to ascribe a 'message' to a complex literary work. The construction of different interpretative layers in the novel may simply be to demonstrate to the reader that, as Hugh Kenner described Joyce's 'most consistent' insight: 'people live by stories, but different ones'.[43] Or, as one commentator suggested of Camus' *The Fall*, that its purpose is to teach us not only to reflect on or judge the morality of the protagonist in relation to ourselves but to question 'the very process of reflection itself'.[44] However, with reference to the debates in politics and Buddhism and the censorious, neo-traditionalist politics of the time, it would appear to me that the message of the *Story of Jan Dara* is more trenchant than it is aesthetic. Jan is unequipped to understand why he has ended up just like His Lordship. That is the tragedy of the novel. But I would suggest it is also implied that this is the tragedy of Thailand.

The conservative political climate of 1960s Thailand was actively encouraging of those who continued to think of themselves and the nation in terms of 'karmic results' and 'circles of karma' and worry about being reborn as *opapātikā* hell beings. At the time of the novel's publication reformist, 'rational' Buddhism became officially suspect. The teachings of monks like Buddhadāsa were at this time attacked as threats to religion, nation and king, and a number of reform-minded monks were forcibly defrocked.[45] Authoritarianism, centralised government, censorship and neo-traditionalism were all in ascendance during the rule of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat (1908–63), who ruled as the novel was being written. Although Sarit's government was justified by appeals to 'traditional Thai political order', with a semi-divine king whose position at the apex of this order was justified by his immense store of past merit, soon after Sarit's death as a result of alcoholism he was revealed to have been immensely corrupt and to have bedded hundreds of women.[46] These revelations of hypocrisy, coming out at about the same time that *Jan Dara* was being published, shocked the nation and could only have made the novel's depiction of decadent, Buddhist-catechism-quoting elites more trenchant. But this is also the story of someone who lives in a complicated, modern reality that functions on many levels but, because he himself only understands his situation in literal and traditional Buddhist terms, is doomed in his ignorance to repeat inherited hypocrisy. At

43 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound era* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1973), p. 34.
44 Peter Roberts, 'Bridging literary and philosophical genres: Judgement, reflection and education in Camus' The Fall'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40, 7 (2008): 883.
45 Tomomi Ito, 'Discussions in the Buddhist public sphere in twentieth-century Thailand: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and his world' (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2001), pp. 130–40.
46 Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The politics of despotic paternalism* (Ithaca, NY: SEAP Publications, Cornell University, 2007), p. 111.

least at the official public level, the general populace of Thailand in the 1960s were not encouraged to trouble themselves to learn more critical, more metaphorical ways of understanding themselves or their society. And so, Utsana seems to imply, like Jan Dara they will go on being reborn only to end up living in the same house.

Conclusion

I have argued here for understanding a Thai literary work by focusing on Buddhist terms and ideas and their history in debates, a mode which reveals that Utsana works with several different strands of Buddhism—in particular, the debate between literal and more metaphorical interpreters of Buddhist terms available in Thailand—in order to make a critique of the Buddhism and, by extension, the social discourse of his time. Utsana writes in *Jan Dara* a tale which subverts the literary genre in which aristocrats maintain what was seen as traditional—often presented as 'Buddhist'—morality in the face of change. But the novel is not simply a satire of novels set in aristocratic households and the catechism-heavy Buddhism which they held. Like the work of European and American literary modernists, the work must be understood with reference to its own synchronous internal interpretative layers rather than only in terms of the linear unfolding of its plot. Jan the narrator desperately tries to make sense of his plight, his descent into the same decadence of His Lordship, in literal understanding of karma and merit and rebirth. But the implied author of the book makes it clear that there are many other perhaps more appropriate ways to interpret his situation. In fact, the reader is made aware that a more metaphorical reading of *opapātikā* would help Jan understand his predicament better, as would an understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis. But Jan is simply not equipped to do so. The introspective Buddhism promoted by Buddhist reformists in Thailand is unavailable to Jan, as is the vigorous individuality encouraged by writers such as Lawrence. Jan simply falls back on easy explanations of karma and merit and so is doomed passively to repeat pre-set patterns of circling desires. Such explanations were all too open to the hypocrisy that Utsana likely saw as endemic to the conservative intellectual landscape of 1960s Thailand. In contrast to the well-studied creative and polemical potential of Buddhism for writers across the globe, we have here a critique of how one local version of the religion could be morally and intellectually stultifying. While, as I noted above, there is the strong possibility that Utsana wrote so many interpretative layers into a novel about someone who only understands his moral situation in literal Buddhist terms, in order to suggest that what is needed is a Buddhism which encourages deeper discernment, the novel itself leaves the many questions that Jan has about himself open for interpretation. *The Story of Jan Dara* provides only a multi-layered maze with no easy answers to the questions it raises, nor any redemption for its protagonist. Only the sad story of a being who never really seems to accept full responsibility for his actions, nor comes to understand where he comes from or why he is like he is.

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