

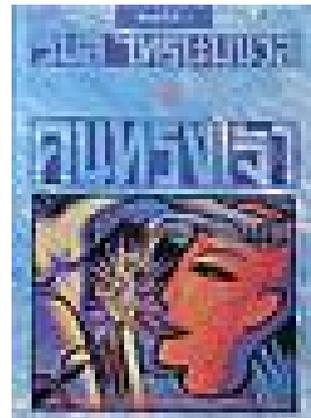
Thai Fiction

the medium

WIMON SAINIMNUAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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At first cockcrow, Kharm got out of his mosquito net and went outside to wash his face on the platform. Myriad stars still twinkled in the sky. The predawn air was crisp and invigorating. He smelt the sweet scent of the cold season coming with the wind from the river. When he had washed his face, he removed the piece of chequered cloth from round his neck and dried his face with it as he walked to the inner part of the veranda. He sat down, reached for the tin lamp by the central pillar of the house and lit it.

Ka-long pulled back the foot of the mosquito net and got out. The tousled long hair that framed her gaunt face made her look like a banshee. She looked at her husband for a moment then rose to her feet and took her pregnant belly to the back of the landing.

Kharm flipped the lid of his snuffbox open and took out a piece of dried palm and some tobacco to roll himself a cigarette while staring absentmindedly into the blur of dawn. When he had rolled it, he tightened it up with his fingers and clipped it between the straight line of his lips, lifted the tin lamp and brought the flame to the tip of the cigarette, one hand cupped against the wind. The heat

made him screw up his face; he narrowed his eyes and frowned. He drew two or three times on the cigarette and choked on the acrid smoke of the kerosene. When he had put down the lamp, he settled into his usual posture and smoked unhurriedly. His tense eyes were lost in the distance as if he didn't feel the taste of the cigarette. At times he let out sighs without realizing it and they were as sad and tense as his face and eyes.

The clatter of his wife lighting the fire to warm up the rice in the kitchen, the mumbling and tossing in his sleep of his four-year-old son, even the crowing of the cocks under the house failed to rouse him from his musings, until the stub burnt his fingers and he let it fall through a crack in the floorboards. He got up and walked off the platform, knotting his cloth trousers at the waist before going down the stairs and disappearing into the dim twilight. A moment later, the sound of logs being axed rose from the hillock at the back of the house. The noise woke up the birds, which started chirping in the bushes, and the chickens left their roosts under the house and came out to forage for food. The sow opened her eyes but went on lying on her side to let her young fall over themselves to reach her teats in a quaint concert of squeaks.

The stars were fading as the silver and gold rays of dawn spread in the sky. Straining and grunting, the sow got to her feet. Her flat snout shrank and dilated as it stared at the bright red eye rising from behind the treetops.

Kharm turned sideways to the pregnant sun and went on wielding the axe without paying attention to anything. By his side he had a pile of firewood already split. Behind him was a pile of round logs still to be split. In front of him a brown shorthaired dog with cocked ears sat panting, tongue hanging out, and quietly watched him cut the wood. Further out, there was the stable, whose two buffalo now stood staring at the sun, their tails occasionally flaying at the mosquitoes.

Kharm set in place a log as thick as his thigh, then straightened up and lifted the palm-sized blade of the axe high above his head and then, heaving, swiftly brought down the full weight of the blade, which caught the log right in the middle. The log snapped asunder. A flying shard caught the dog, which jumped with a yelp then, whining, hobbled around in circles for a while. When it was done whining, it went back to sit in the same fashion, but a little farther away than before.

The sun emerged from behind the treetops. Its orange light washed over the land, giving a mysterious green shine to the foliage and the grasses sprinkled with dewdrops and a sheen to Kharm's sweaty body, which glistened as if wrapped in cling film.

There was the swish of a dress coming close. Kharm knew it was Ka-long but he went on splitting wood. The swishing stopped by the pile of firewood and it was a while before her voice rose.

'Go have a look at the bank, will you.'

Kharm bent over to pick up a chunk of wood and threw it onto the pile of firewood. Then he pulled himself erect, the head of the axe resting by his feet. His right hand held the tip of the handle loose at waist level. His other hand scooped the sweat from his brow down to his chin then went to wipe itself against the hip of his baggy trousers. He heaved a tired sigh. 'What is it now?'

He sounded irritated. She wasn't surprised. He had been like this since they had set up together.

'The water – the water, you know. You should go have a look.'

Kharm looked beyond the house pillars at the riverbank and saw the current running swiftly. 'It shouldn't be coming up this fast,' he said, then resumed his wood splitting with a will. Ka-long began to tidy up the pile of split wood. She wanted to say that this year there was going to be a big flood again, but she didn't want to hear his gruff voice.

The young boy came running to his father to report, 'I'm up, dad.' Kharm stared at his son and saw his face was still wet, so he chided him: 'Why didn't you dry your face properly first?'

The little fellow wiped his left cheek and then his right cheek against the sleeve of his shirt then ran away. Kharm shouted after him: 'Don't go play anywhere near the river, you hear? A flood's coming and it'd take you away.'

'Do you think there's going to be a big flood this year?' Ka-long couldn't refrain from asking.

‘Can’t you see for yourself? It’s rising fast.’ His voice was harsh, his eyes still on the log in front of him.

‘What are we going to do if there’s a big flood?’

‘What can we do? We’ll get the things into the house, that’s what.’

‘And what about the pigs and buffalo?’ She motioned with her head towards the stable. ‘This hillock’s too small.’

Kharm was quiet, thinking about what his wife had said. The plough handle, yoke, harrow, shovel, hoe, spade, sickle, spraying machine, cast-net, bamboo coop and the other small implements could be kept up there in the house, but the hillock wouldn’t hold the pigs, buffalo, chickens and ducks. He thought of the Khoak Phranang temple: if he took the pigs and buffalo to the back of the temple, the hillock here would be large enough to hold the chickens and the ducks without a problem.

‘You don’t have to worry.’ His voice was no longer tense.

‘You’ll keep the buffalo at the temple, is that what you’re thinking?’ she asked as if she had read his mind.

‘Yep.’

Her face grew more alarmed. ‘Don’t you know the abbot has forbidden it?’

Kharm turned to look at his wife. ‘How can that be? We’ve always done so.’

‘Yes, but since Father Nian has come, he’s said it makes the temple dirty for the visitors. Last year some people

took their buffalo there. He said the temple wasn't a refugee camp for animals.'

Kharm's face tensed up. He went on splitting wood without saying a word. When he had got through the pile, he put the axe on his shoulder and left the hillock. Ka-long shouted after him: 'Where're you going now? The water's rising.'

'That's why I'm going.'

'Where to?'

'To find a place for the buffalo.'

'With flooding like this, no one will be spared.'

'I got my own idea.'

'So where is it you're going, then?' Ka-long asked, worry in her voice.

Kharm shouted back angrily: 'The hillock at the back of the ricefield, that's where.'

Ka-long stood up and stared at him as if she couldn't believe her ears. She felt like telling him not to, but by the time she had made up her mind, he was too far away.

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Wimon Sainimnuan, born 1958, is a foremost, if controversial, Buddhism-inspired Thai novelist and short story writer. Through his punchy writings, he pursues a double reflection on the nature of the individual and the social forces that mould and maim it. His novel on cloning, *Immortal*, won him the SEA Write Award in the year 2000. *The Medium* is the second volume of his Khoak Phranang quartet, which starts with *Snakes* and also includes *Khoak Phranang* and *Lord of the Land*, all available in English on thaifiction.com only.