

คำว่า “บ้าน” จากเรื่องสั้นของ พีระ สุธรรม

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บทคัดย่อ

พีระ สุธรรม เป็นนักเขียนชาวไทยจากแดนอีสาน ผลงานของเขาเขียนเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ และได้รับการตีพิมพ์ จำนวนหลายเรื่อง ทั้งนวนิยายและชุดรวมเรื่องสั้น อนึ่ง บทความชิ้นนี้จะวิเคราะห์ที่ (ก) การใช้คำว่า ‘บ้าน’ (home) และ (ข) ‘อาการคิดถึงบ้าน’ (homesickness) ใน ‘A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver’ หนึ่งในเรื่องสั้นจากชุด “People of Esarn” นอกจากนี้ยังมีการเปรียบเทียบเนื้อหาและการใช้ภาษากับเรื่อง ‘Exiles in the Kingdom’ ซึ่งเป็นฉบับปรับปรุงของ ‘A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver’ เพิ่มเติมไว้ในภาคผนวก

คำสำคัญ : พีระ สุธรรม, People of Esarn, บ้าน, อาการคิดถึงบ้าน

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‘Home’ in a Story by Pira Sudham

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Abstract

Pira Sudham is a writer from the northeastern region of Thailand. He writes in English. He has published several novels and several collections of short stories including *People of Esarn* (1994). One of the stories in *People of Esarn* is ‘A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver.’ This paper considers (a) various uses of the word ‘home’ and (b) homesickness in ‘A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver.’ It includes an appendix comparing differences between ‘A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver’ and a later version of the story called ‘Exiles in the Kingdom.’

Keywords : Pira Sudham, *People of Esarn*, home, homesickness

Pira Sudham is a writer from the northeastern region of Thailand. He has published several novels and several collections of short stories in English, including his 1994 collection of short stories titled *People of Esarn*. In Thailand, 'Esarn' (or /i:sa:n/ in phonetic script) is a common designation for the northeastern region of the country. One of the stories in *People of Esarn* is titled 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver.' In 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver,' a food vendor is telling the story of how she came to be selling food on a Bangkok street. The story begins: 'Before I stood here, day in and day out, selling charcoal-grilled chicken pieces, rice and papaya salad, I stood knee-deep in water and mud planting rice in Ubol, northeast Thailand, 560 kilometres from here' (39). Married to a man who soon leaves her after giving her a child, she works on the land for a number of years until, unable to bear the stigma of being identified as a deserted woman any longer, she decides to make her way to Bangkok in order to search out her child's father (39-40). She finds work at first on a construction site, and then later on in a noodle-shop (40). After working at the noodle-shop for a while, she is befriended by a taxi driver who, one night, offers to drive her home to Ubol:

"Do you want to go to your home village in Ubol?" he asked one night.

"Yes, of course," I said quite readily without thinking. "I haven't been back for years, it seems."

"I can take you," he said, pointing at his old Toyota.

"That old and battered thing?" I laughed. "It wouldn't make it to Korat."

"You bet?" he sounded terribly serious.

"I bet."

I realized then that both of us were serious. (43-4)

For the food vendor, 'the thought of going back home in a taxi' proves 'irresistable' (44).

On the way to her home village, the following episode takes place. It is quoted in length due to several senses of the word 'home' used in it. 'Home' is used to refer to the land as directly experienced; to a region; and to a hut.

Somewhere lightning struck and the darkening land rose in storm. It was just like home during the height of the monsoon. My heart danced with the rains, wishing that the driver did not have to stop to sleep. Taking a good long look at him, I saw how old he was. His age had never entered my mind till then. His wrinkled face revealed that he must be well over forty-five years of age. This old man from somewhere in Yasothorn with eyes shut to the rains and storm looked old but peaceful.

After a moment of trying to find out how to open the taxi door, I managed it. "Why the hell are you getting out?" he shouted at me. But by then the rain had already overpowered me. I could see myself as a young girl in our rice fields, chasing after our herd of water buffaloes because they ran wildly under the influence of the monsoon. There, on the plateau of Ubol.

The old man came out of the taxi too, but he only got out to push me back into the car. "You'll die with a cold, woman!" he swore at me. He started the engine as soon as he could, and we slowly made our way home against the power of the skies.

Home is beyond the ranges, the great dividers of our lands. Beyond the mountains, lies the great plateau of Esarn. The flat arid land spread endlessly before us, making the cloudburst of the central plain we experienced an hour ago seem unreal.

The lee remained dry and hungry. My heart sank, knowing then what it would be like in Ubol. We stopped for gas in Korat, hardly exchanging a word. But then, at the gas station, I heard for the first time our Lao language. It was spoken by a tiny little boy who was trying to convince me with words and pleading eyes to buy grilled chicken on skewers. "Our bor kai yang kong koy saeb eelee day!" said he, thrusting a well-loaded tray of kai yang in front of me. I paid for two sticks and avidly ate one, not so much because I was hungry but more so because I was homesick. The taxi-man told me to eat the lot as he drove on. Outside Korat, we stopped again for him to eat at a rice-and-curry shack. He took his meal silently as I sipped my tea. I don't like tea, but I guess it's a habit from being with the noodle-shopkeepers.

Somehow I began to like him, watching him eat. He treated me as if I were a young girl needing protection. I didn't know exactly how he would react to me upon reaching a forlorn hut which is my home in a little village in Ubol Province.

Our shack and the village itself have nothing to boast of. (45-7)

'Home,' to start with, is associated with the land as directly experienced: the land rising in storm 'was just like home during the height of the monsoon.' Then, 'home' refers to a region: 'Home is beyond the ranges [...]. Beyond the mountains, lies the great plateau of Esarn.' This sense is repeated in the word 'homeland' later on in the story when the taxi driver takes the food vendor to visit an ancient Khmer shrine: 'We walked, holding hands,

for a while as if the ancient sacred ruin and the spirits of our forefathers bound us together as the children of Esarn returning to their true homeland after being lost in another country' (50). Finally, at the end of the extract, 'home' refers to a hut: 'I didn't know exactly how he would react to me upon reaching a forlorn hut which is my home in a little village in Ubol Province.'

In addition to 'home' being used in reference to the land as directly experienced, to a region, and to a hut, the word 'homesick' is used by the narrator: 'I heard for the first time our Lao language. It was spoken by a tiny little boy who was trying to convince me with words and pleading eyes to buy grilled chicken on skewers. [...] I paid for two sticks and avidly ate one, not so much because I was hungry but more so because I was homesick.' She misses home, which in this case may refer to the land as directly experienced, to a region, to a village, to a hut, or, perhaps, to all of the above.

While visiting the ancient Khmer shrine, she decides to kneel and pray, making a pledge that one day she will 'return home for good' (50). On arriving at the hut, or small house, she lived in, however, she discovers it is no longer her home: 'It did not take me long to realize that the house was no longer my home. It had become the house of my son and his wife who had been taking care of it, looking after the grandparents all the years I slaved away in Bangkok. I was so pleased to see my son who had grown into a fine young man with a good wife who showed me so much respect, which made me ashamed of my escape. But to live with them would bring some unhappiness later on, I knew. So before my dear old taxi man would depart from the village for Bangkok the next day I asked him to take me back' (51-2).

In Bangkok, she returns to the noodle-shop, where she works for a year, saving money to buy a pushcart from which to sell chicken pieces and papaya salad (60); she starts renting a little shack in Klongtoey slum (60). Although living and working in Bangkok, however, she still refers to her home as being in the Northeast. For, while she is working as a food hawker on the streets of Bangkok, 'there are passers-by whose features bearing the peculiarity of the Esarn people' remind her 'of home' (60-1).

Self-Deprecation and Homesickness

Both the food vendor and the taxi driver have experienced shame. When the food vendor first works at the noodle-shop in Bangkok, she feels ashamed of her origins: 'For a year, I worked in that noodle-shop till I got to know a taxi driver who often came to the shop

for meals. Well, I fell for his kindness. He tried to befriend me, asking whether I came from Esarn. He said he could see “Lao” in my features. And I laughed then, or giggled just like a young girl. Still I had not said one word to him for shame of being a Lao from Ubol’ (42). Later, when the taxi driver is telling the food vendor his life story, he says: ‘When I saw you in that noodle-shop, I could see in your features, your gait, that you are a daughter of Esarn, though you tried not to let a word of Lao escape from your mouth for fear of it being known that you come from the poorest part of the country. I knew that, for I used to be ashamed of it myself’ (54).

After visiting the food vendor’s village in Ubol, they travel to the taxi driver’s village in Yasothorn: ‘His village looked quite poor and deserted and no one shouted welcome at us when we finally stopped at an empty plot of land where mulberry trees grow wild. “I lived here for years”, he said and paused for a long while. A group of half-naked children began to crowd around us, looking curious and suspicious. He asked them what had happened to the house which used to stand there. They said they did not know’ (53).

The taxi driver suffers from homesickness. When he is telling the food vendor his life story, he mentions the village they visited in Yasothorn: ‘I wasn’t exactly born on that spot, he said. To tell the truth, I don’t know where I was born, for I was taken away from my real parents when I was a baby. A childless couple adopted me. During my childhood years, they moved several times from one village to another. The one we dropped by was one of them’ (54). He goes on to tell the food vendor: ‘The difference between you and me is that you have a village, and your people to go back to when you want to, but I haven’t. Yet I can feel that my heart is still in the Northeast. My wife and children share nothing of my past and they are well-rooted in Bangkok. They haven’t set foot on Esarn soil, and they don’t speak a word of Lao. I have been homesick for a home that I don’t have, and I envy those who, like yourself, when the time comes, can go back, to escape from the muck, the poisonous fumes, the traffic chaos and the struggle of city life’ (54-5).

It may be this homesickness that propelled the taxi driver to try and help a dancer in a Bangkok bar sometime before he met the food vendor. To start with, he became familiar with a certain bar: ‘I made a point of going back to that bar,’ he tells the food vendor, ‘when with a little bit of luck I had picked up more passengers than usual and had some cash to spare. In the bar, I picked a girl with pronounced Esarn features and I was right. She was from Udorn’ (56). One night, he bought her dinner in a nearby coffee shop:

She did not seem to care to talk about Esarn. And I thought she wanted to let the past be the past, for she quickly changed the subject.

[...]

While she ate, I tried to see what I could read from her features. I searched her eyes, her brow, her nose and lips so that the hand of memory could guide me back to the plateau of Esarn on which little girls and boys roam with their herds of buffaloes in good or bad years. After a while, I said:

"I came from Yaso, and perhaps if you want to go back to Udorn, I can drive you there. The taxi is my own and I can make it reasonably inexpensive, and I also want to visit my home." (57)

She accepted; and in driving her back to her home village, the taxi driver gradually felt closer to her: 'Gradually I felt closer to her, happy that I was saving her from a sordid life, giving her back to the fresh air of the rice fields of Esarn. [...] What I regret is that I am a silly old fool to think that I was rescuing her. For when we arrived in her village, she acted like a splendid well-off lady and treated me just like any taxi driver who drove her all the way home for her money. [...] The next day, before I knew it, a pretty little girl was to leave her village with us for Bangkok! How I cursed myself. I hardly spoke a word to them on the way back. So it was a game of life. And I am only a stupid old fool. I was so ashamed of myself that I never went back to that Patpong bar again' (58-9).

When he finishes telling his story to the food vendor, she wishes to console him, but does not know how: 'At the end of his story, I wanted to console him, assuring him that I did not try to fool or cheat him like that girl. But I did not know how to say it' (59).

After returning to Bangkok and setting herself up as a seller of papaya salad and grilled chicken pieces, the food vendor keeps in contact with the taxi driver, whom she has come to know as 'Thiang.' They grow closer, with the food vendor eventually becoming Thiang's second wife: 'Thiang has helped me a lot. He found me a little shack in Klongtoey slum for rent and he paid the rent for the first three months. At the end of my day, he helps load things in his taxi to take me back home, and he stays for dinner with me. We have been living like husband and wife for many years now' (60). The food vendor finishes the story she is telling by mentioning something Thiang said to her the previous day: 'Yesterday he said to me "You were born in Esarn. You're Esarn. My Esarn. In living with me, the only thing I'll ask from you is that you remain so"' (63). The taxi driver, it seems, identifies the region he comes from with the food vendor, and in doing so, has perhaps found a cure for his homesickness.

Conclusion

In 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver,' the word 'home' is used in various senses, to refer to the food vendor's village in Ubol; her direct experience of the land; the region she comes from; and the house in the village she used to live in. It also refers, once, to her rented shack in Klongtoey slum (60). For the taxi driver, a longing for 'home,' or the region he originates from, may have found its answer in the relationship he forges with another person: the food vendor.

Appendix

In 2008, Sudham published a revised version of 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver' under the title of 'Exiles in the Kingdom.' 'Exiles in the Kingdom' follows the same basic structure as 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver.' However, there are narrational differences.

1. A higher register of English: 'Exiles in the Kingdom' makes use of a higher register of English, employing, for instance, in its first sentence the words 'piquant,' 'shredded,' and 'stooped' (110).

2. References to famous people: 'Exiles in the Kingdom' includes a reference to Tiger Woods (122) and references to a politician (122, 128).

3. Criticism in terms of ethnicity: In both 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver' and 'Exiles in the Kingdom,' the narrator categorises Thai society by means of ethnicity, referring to herself as 'Lao' and to her employers in a noodle shop as 'Chinese.' However, in 'Exiles in the Kingdom,' she is more openly critical of the Chinese (113, 114, 117, 129-30).

4. How Esarn is influenced by global and national factors:

(i) Foreign job markets In 'Exiles in the Kingdom,' there is an extended account of the departure of the narrator's husband. This is from 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver:'

After the wedding ceremony, he moved in with us and began to work on our land, and later gave me a child. Then he left me. There were a few letters at the beginning, then nothing came. People said that he had become a soldier in Bangkok, moving up in rank.

Silently, I endured for the sake of the child and my parents, who were getting on in years. (39)

In 'Exiles in the Kingdom,' this has become:

After the wedding ceremony, he moved in with us, working on our land. A year later I gave birth to a son. Then my husband became restless, seeing several men, who had returned from working overseas, dismantle their weather-beaten shacks and build modern houses of bricks and mortar, and buy pick-ups, sound equipment and television sets. These returnees were the new rich of our district,

having earned high wages from their labour in foreign countries. We were told that a worker at a construction site in the Middle East earned as much as 300 baht an hour as opposed to 75 baht a day in Bangkok. So he hoped very much to get a job in one of those countries to become rich enough to set us free from the shackle of poverty.

When the hope of getting a job in a foreign land entered his heart, he looked for a way to raise 100,000 baht in order to pay an employment agency in advance and secure a passport, airline ticket and a job. My parents would not allow him to use the title-deed of our paddy-fields as collateral to borrow money from a loan shark for fear of losing the land, should he be swindled and so fail to go abroad. A number of job-seekers in our area had been cheated in this way before. Without a piece of land to live off, we might as well be dead. Hence, his dream of an overseas job dissipated into thin air.

He could see no other way to catch up with the new rich and escape from this wretched cycle of life in penury in Esarn, should he keep on tilling the sandy soil that was becoming less fertile as years go by. In contrast to those who had laboured in foreign lands, we appeared much poorer than before. Our hut looked more ramshackle and forlorn.

My husband would not accept that our struggle for survival in dire condition was our fate, that such subsistence living was a dead end, a no-win situation. Whether it was shame or extreme desperation that drove him away, it was not possible to tell.

At the beginning of one planting season, he left us for Bangkok, intending to accept hard labour even at a salary lower than the minimum wage. There were a few letters from him at first. Later on, nothing came.

Silently I endure for the sake of the child. (110-1)

(ii) A government project 'Exiles in the Kingdom' includes references to a government project. In 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver,' the food vendor explains to the taxi driver why she wishes to return to Bangkok:

I said that our family had only limited land to grow rice, and there was hardly any room for me in the hut or in the field. I would become only an extra mouth to feed, a burden on my son and his wife. "And besides, no man in the village or any nearby villages would marry this poor, ageing hag. I don't want to be an old maid here all my life." I sobbed. (52)

In 'Exiles in the Kingdom,' this passage now includes a reference to a government project:

I said that my family had a very small plot of land to till, and I would become a burden to my son and his wife. Soon, I feared, they might be evicted along with hundreds of other families and give up their paddy-fields to the authorities who wanted to build a huge dam at Pak Moon. Should that day come, I would have a head start, looking for a place to live and to work in Bangkok. "And besides, no man in the village or in nearby villages will marry me now, an ageing hag. I don't want to be an old maid here for the rest of my life." (119-20)

And later, when they are ready to leave:

When we were ready to drive away from Baan Yaka, almost all the villagers, young and old, came to see us off, wishing us a safe journey.

"Come back to see us again. Don't forget us when you are richer and richer!" were some of the parting words.

Little did we know that there would be none of our people or even the land for me to return to, after the eviction took place and the paddies on which we toiled year after year were submerged when the Moonmouth Dam was built. ('Exiles in the Kingdom' 120)

(iii) The Vietnam War 'Exiles in the Kingdom' includes a recollection by the narrator of the American presence in the Northeast during the Vietnam War that is longer and more detailed (120-2) than in 'A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver' (51).

5. Pride: By the end of 'Exiles in the Kingdom,' the food vendor has overcome the shame she feels at the beginning of the story because of her 'Lao tongue' (112, 113):

Tiang is not ashamed of his Lao name and origins any more. I dare say these days both of us are proud of having been born and raised in Esarn. We speak Lao in private and in public with pride. Just like you and I are doing now. (128) These differences (excluding perhaps the first one noted) make for a work of literature that is more easily classified as a piece of social criticism.

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