

## FEMININITY REDEFINITION IN THE CON HEARTIST: AN EMPOWERMENT OF THE NORTHEASTERN WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

Religious beliefs and patriarchal social structure of the Northeast, Thailand, caused the regional females who lived in this underprivileged area of the country to suffer a great deal from gender inequality since the beginning of the history. Using the locations in this part of Thailand to shoot the film, the Con Heartist, a romantic comedy, presents Ina Jitimaim, the lead female character who underwent monetary scams shammed by two Northeastern males. In this article, the exploration of femininities possessed by Ina who represented the Northeastern females were analyzed. The qualitative research approach was employed to investigate the embedded purpose and the results found from the investigation were presented in the form of descriptive analysis.

It was found that although Ina was initially constructed to be the typical Northeastern girl who submitted to her beloved younger male at the opening of the film, her characterization of womanhood was empowered to become the non-stereotypical, experienced, and strong Northeastern female at the second half of the film. It could be assumed that the changes that happened to the Northeastern femininities were derived from the endorsements from both the government and the private sectors' collaborations to strengthen the women in the region to be better educated and more capable.

**Keywords:** Femininity, empowerment, representation, stereotype, Con Heartist, Northeastern woman

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## Introduction

The issue of gender inequality has always drawn attention from scholars and critics. Historically, women had always been regarded as inferior to men because of patriarchy, the social system which allows men to dominate women. According to this social structure, men will take all privileges prior to women. They are endowed with primary power and predominant roles in the society. With their higher social status, they are entitled to be the first heir for familial properties. The fathers will be the heads whose commands and needs are obeyed and served by other members in the family. As for the economic sphere, men usually have higher opportunity to be chosen to occupy advanced positions of the company. In contrast, women are given less advantages than what are done with men. Their education, ownership of wealth, financial return for their work, chances to make decision or monetary gain, to name but a few, are limited (Mikkola, 2005).

Gender issue seems to be unchanged even today despite the long-lasting emergence of feminist movements. It was reported that inequality between men and women can be found in any public and social communication genres. Universally, as indicated in *Tackling the Underrepresentation of Women in the Media*, only 19% of the female experts were presented in the news items while merely 37 % of the global reporters were women. In addition, although diversity has always been given emphasis in either the workplaces in the United States or in Hollywood, the minorities, LGBT people, disabled characters, and particularly women have been less seen in the movies than men (Rattan et al., 2019).

Contemplating the social status of the Northeastern women in Thai society, the situation of these Northeastern females seems not to be better than those women around the world. In fact, their plight may even be worse since they inhabit in the region deemed the problem area of the country; the Northeast usually encounters drought, infertile soil, environmental degradation, and political controversy (Kaithong & Sawangdee, 2018). Unsurprisingly, with these unfavorable circumstances, the per capita income is low causing the Northeast or Isan to be the least developed and the poorest area of the country in spite of being the largest and most populated region in Thailand. As posited previously, being born as the woman in the Northeastern society could unfortunately be pitiful. When wedding, for instance, the bride was rarely allowed to move into the groom's house because the Northeasterners believed that she would bring disease, ghosts, and badness into the house. Moreover, based on Klong 14 or the Fourteen Moralities, the Northeasterners' daughters were comparable to the toilets built in front of the parents' residences (Clergyman Institute in the Northeastern Thailand, 1990). Furthermore, numerous Northeastern females who were married or remarried to foreign husbands were scornfully viewed as not being better than the prostitutes (Rambo, 2017: 6–7). All in all, being the Northeastern females could be infamous or a familial scorn. The women there are regularly insulted and not as well-accepted as men even by their own biological parents. It is undeniable that gender inequality is clearly noticeable in this region.

Conveyed by its title, the *Con Heartist* is categorized as a rom-com movie. Although the film-goers can be endowed with so much pleasure and relaxation from watching good romantic comedy film, being the rom-com film also puts the film at some undesirable situations. Besides being accused of presenting unrealistic and false relationship ideologies to the viewers, comedy is mostly overlooked and underrated by scholars and academic institutions (Arell, 2012). At the same time, as elaborated in Elizabeth Reid Boyd's *Romancing Feminism: From Women's Studies to Women's Fiction*, the genre of romance usually "reflected too many stereotypes of the patriarchal status quo that kept woman in powerless positions" (2014: 266). This was why the genre was vehemently attacked by the early feminists from time to time. Nevertheless, when cautiously examining the *Con Heartist*'s lead female character who represents the Northeastern women, the author found that the traditional feminine traits of the Northeastern women have been reconstructed in this film.

With Chinese and English subtitles available for foreign viewers, the *Con Heartist* features Ina Jitimaim (Pimchanok Leuwisetpaiboon), an originally stereotypical lead female who was left in debt by Petch (Thiti Mahayotaruk), her younger boyfriend. Due to poverty, Ina lives a poor and desperate life having only bananas for her meals. In order to retaliate, she manages to make Tower Suppapaisa (Nadech Kugimiya), a professional con artist, to swindle more money from Petch after learning that Tower has attempted to trick her for easy money. This is discernible that the second time that a man tries to con her, Ina can protect herself from the opposite sex's scam. In other words, Ina had been changed from the gullible to be a smart female. Plotting the scheme to take vengeance on the male demonstrates Ina's new roles of the Northeastern women. Based on the heroine's transformation from the traditional feminine norms, the paper aims to explore and interpret the Northeastern femininity which is embodied by Ina Jitimaim. Gender and power relations will be discussed to solidify the assumption of the study about how the lead female character of the film has been eventually empowered and tremendously changed.

## Aims

This academic article aimed at exploring the Northeastern femininity from the past to the present. Employing the feminist lens, the analysis was focused on examining and discussing how the lead female heroine of the film who represented the Northeastern woman was transformed after she had been unfairly treated by two male characters. Further exploration would present the underevaluation of romcom, the film genre. Then, gender stereotypes and the subversion of gender roles were discussed to interpret how the feminine transformation of the female lead character could convey and connote the changes of the Northeastern power gender relation. The qualitative research approach was adopted to investigate the embedded purpose. Results of the investigation were presented in the form of descriptive analysis.

## Results

### An Undervaluation of Romcom

Although texts, stories, narratives, plays, dramas or films can be seen to take part in either one or several genres, the *Con Heartist* has been categorized by the critics and audiences as a romantic comedy (also known as romcom), a combination of romance and comedy. The genre is a film which centers around the humorous plot lines concerning the love story between the opposite sexes. As defined in Celestino Deleyto's *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, this type of film can be seen as the intersection of the three, closely interconnected components, "... a narrative that articulates historically and culturally specific views of love, desire, sexuality and gender relationships; a space of transformation and fantasy which influences the narrative articulation of those discourses; and humour as the specific perspective from which the fictional characters, their relationships and the spectators' response to them are constructed embodiments of those discourse" (2009: 45–46). Based on its plot, tone and the aforementioned descriptions, the *Con Heartist* fits perfectly into the genre of romcom.

Since romcom is initially produced to create laughter and pleasure for the audiences, it will be rarely taken seriously by viewers or even by film critics. As confirmed by Elizabeth Reid Boyd's *Romancing Feminism: From Women's Studies to Women's Fiction*, it is understandable why even popular romance was specifically unpopular. Also, many stereotypical roles of women were presented in these romantic stories (2014: 266). Added by Michael Arell's *Why Are Comedy Films So Critically Underrated?*, the topics of comedy are mostly neglected not only by institutions. The academic investigations of the genre are hardly given attention or promoted into spotlight as well (2012). In general, it can be said that both romance and comedy or its mixture form, the genre of romcom, are oftentimes underestimated and neglected by the audiences, institutions and scholars. Nevertheless, examining the *Con Heartist* carefully, some elements of the film—the plot, characters, characterization and the lead female character in particular, the author posits that the stereotypical Northeastern femininities in the film have been subverted enormously.

The discontents of romcom films are evident in spite of the fact that the genre provides such great entertainment and amusement to the viewers. While comedy is mostly undervalued, the romance is not seen differently. Besides often being blamed for confining a woman to her traditional roles of being either a wife or a mother who willingly accepts the secondarily and unequally dependent social status, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* for instance, Pamela Regis asserts that although the stories always end happily, the heroine's freedom will be taken away for the woman will finally be locked up by her own marriage (Regis.D.2003). In the same vein, romance and comedy have been branded for portraying the characters (particularly men) who are clumsy, stupid, rude, and most of the time, embarrassing and flawed. Additionally, the events or actions are accused of being superficial, unrealistic, impractical and sometimes unethical and immoral as well. Of course, the author agrees that many scenes and the characters projected in the *Con Heartist* do contain these negative features. In

spite of its numerous negativities, if we examine the depiction and characterization of the film characters, we will discover that some stereotypically archaic traits and the social status between men and women tend to be switched and recreated.

### **Gender Stereotypes and the Subversion of Gender Roles**

Comparing between male and female characters, it is evident that all the men in the film have been deeply ingrained with wickedness and horridness. While Samson disgustingly spits excessive droplets of saliva when speaking, Tower, Petch, and Mr. Jone (literally means robber in Thai) or, in other words, all key male figures, are, by their nature, the swindlers who habitually deceive women for money. With his good looks, Petch sweetly talks to borrow money from Ina saying that he needs it to pay for his study. Certainly, when Ina tries to collect her debt from him, she fails to get it. Because of her love and trust in Petch, there has been no proof or financial paper to verify the loan agreement between them. The easy money cheating from Ina must encouragingly spoil Petch. He keeps on deluding another older woman, Khun Kanokpon—his boss, to buy him a luxurious car. As for Mr. Jone, after being released from the prison for the charge of committing the financial crime, he helped Ina and Tower to fraudulently trick Petch to get back more than the sum that Ina lent to Petch. Likewise, Tower attempts to perform con to get easy money from Ina. Being the ex bank employee, Ina checks the information and senses that she is about to be defrauded. She thwarts Tower's phone scam and negotiates with him she will not report to the police if Tower assists her to swindle Petch's money for her as a revenge. Under the course of their con scheme, Mr. Jone and Tower appear to betray Ina by leaving her with nothing from time to time and these two professional scammers will get away with all Petch's money. Nevertheless, when their scheme to con the money from Petch is accomplished, everyone gets the cuts. Eventually, Tower and Mr. Jone discard their con profession and have been turned to do the decent jobs at the end of the story.

On the basis of the Thai beliefs and patriarchal system of the Southeastern Asian countries Ina is initially constructed as a good Thai woman. As elaborated in many studies, women take the roles as the supporters and followers of men (Wongtes, 2006; Harrison, 1999). Since the first day they were born, women have been instructed and raised to obey and comply with the religious Buddhist ideologies, social regulations and traditions; men are placed at the top of the pyramid while women are below them. Abiding by such beliefs, Ina tries to help Petch with his education; she gives him the 500,000-baht loan without the signed legal paper when Petch borrows money from her. Of course, as previously told, Petch refuses to pay back his debt and sarcastically informing her how old and gullible she is. At this point of their relation, an awareness of falling in Petch's romance scam occurs to Ina.

Theoretically, in order to cope with anxiety, disappointment and sadness stimulated by the ill-treatment they received, various reactions can be expected from women who have been unfairly treated by men. As described in Phebe Cramer's *Protecting the Self: Defense Mechanism in Action*, it is rather common for normal individual to deploy defense mechanisms to tackle with stress and disappointment taking place in one's daily life (2006). Being called aging and financially cheated, Ina

must be very disheartened and disconsolate. Anyway, she has gained the new experiences of being betrayed and fooled by the beloved man. Unlike the fairytales or romantic fiction or films that most women like to read and watch, Ina's first love does not end happily ever after but bitterly ever after. Therefore, when she is about to be scammed one more time by Tower, Ina becomes more alert and cautious. Before she can be conned by Tower, she has double check the information, reconsider it, and think over the situation in order not to decide to transfer the money too quickly according to Tower's false claim on the phone. When she is assured that she will be deceived by the professional con, Ina who is now an experienced woman takes some time to scrutinize everything and creatively initiates the new plan to flip the fraudulent circumstances that those cheating males unjustly imposed on her naïve female life.

As a matter of fact, Ina does not have to lose even one baht by just ignoring Tower's phone scam. Instead, she takes the superior role of the male gender by threatening Tower that if he did not help her to swindle the money from her ex younger boyfriend, she would have him arrested and jailed. Forced by Ina's proposal, Tower has to plot a scrupulous and deceptive plan to scam another scammer, Petch. Thus, it is discernible that undergoing the scam has shaped and transformed Ina from a fragile and stupid woman to be a tough, experienced, and smart one. From now on, no males can overpower her. This time Ina is not only able to handle the bad male's scam. She is enabled and switched to take the higher leading role and function by changing Tower's fraudulent scheme to be her own. Unlike what quickly happened to her and Petch, after Ina and Tower have successfully swindled the large sum of money from Petch, this time Ina lets her affection and romance with Tower go slowly and mindfully. It appears to the audience at the end of the film that this time the love between Tower and Ina, the Northeastern woman, will end happily ever after.

Indeed, gender and power relations have been subverted in the *Con Heartist*. Referring to patriarchal beliefs, males are supposed to have better social status with the superior roles and functions. With their higher status, the fathers and brothers are expected to perform the ethical and heroic actions including to bring the money into the family so that they will be able to gain respect and give the orders to the females in the family. In contrast to the patriarchal norms, all male characters in the *Con Heartist* lead their lives and behave in the different directions. All of them cowardly lead corrupt life trying to victimize the female characters for their money. Instead of making themselves to be trustworthy and reliable for the weaker gender, Petch, Tower, and Mr. Jone live the loose and evil life allowing themselves to become the burden for all the innocent females who are in love with or close to them.

Previously mentioned, scholars and critics have expressed concerns about romantic fiction and films' adverse impacts on the audience. False conceptions on male and female relationships, unrealistic perceptions of marriage, fantasy and impractical ideas of love can be developed on frequent readers and viewers of the romance stories (Bun, 2007). Having these misconceptions in their mind, these careless and shallow people will do whatever it takes to find their true love. Unfortunately, such a quest to gain idealistically romantic relationship tends to take them to fall into the trapped hole dug by

the romance scammers. As explained by Tom Buchanan and Monica T. Whitty (2013), naïve and vulnerable individuals who are older, poorer, less educated and single are likely to be easily conned by love scam. At the beginning of the film, many traits of Ina coincide with these qualities: old age, singlehood, naivety, for instance. Thus, it is not surprising that she has become the target for Petch's false love scheme.

## Conclusion

Undergoing the loveless and dishonest relationships, Ina Jitimaïm, the Con Heartist's lead female character, must suffer a great deal. She seeks revenge against her younger boyfriend by making him pay her back many times more. To put it differently, we can say that the stereotypical roles and functions of the Northeastern women embodied in Ina have been redefined after her first deceived romance. Ina's new traits are derived from many factors. Actually, the place of the women in the Northeastern society or elsewhere in the other parts of Thailand is promoted a great deal since the democracy revolution in 1932. The equal rights of men and women were firmly penned in the National Economic and Development Plans of the constitutional monarchy (Yapparat, 2006; Thomson, 1992). Rights, respect, freedom and dignity of women have been embedded in Thai legislation, policies, and practices ever since. Many domestic and international government and private sector associations have also collaboratively joined hands to empower the women in the Northeast, Thailand. Nowadays, the women in this region have been better educated. A large number of them have enter the job market allowing them to be financially independent contributing considerably to the national economy (National Statistics Office Thailand, 2017). All things considered, it is undeniable to inferred that the conservatively supportive, fragile, foolish and submissive Northeastern females have been transformed to be the unconventionally radical, strong, smart, individualistic, insubordinate and capable persons. With the reconstruction of Ina Jitimaïm in the Con Heartist, it could be pleasantly concluded that the place of the woman in the Northeastern society has been raised satisfyingly.

## Recommendations

This film was analyzed by using the feminist lens. The expansion of critical thoughts as well as new knowledge body can be attained if the film comedy, other film genres, as well as other categories of the media are viewed and interpreted from different standpoints. Other film elements such as the lights, sounds, film scores, costumes or settings, etc., should also be meticulously explored and critiqued so that multiple perspectives from viewing this cinematic entertainment will be available for the film production development.

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