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The Politics of Representations: Thai Migrant Women's Negotiation of Identity

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ABSTRACT

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The notion that popular culture, such as television programmes, opens a space for women resistance to the dominant cultural discourse is remarkably held by feminist and cultural theorists. However, few considerations have been given to the specific group of women audiences who are in the margin of society in terms of class, ethnicity and gender.

This thesis explores the kinds of subversive meanings Thai migrant women of the urban poor construct and deconstruct from the dominant representations in television programmes; and how the women empower their negotiation discourse in order to define their preferred identities that connect to their ethnic culture and their everyday lives in urban slum culture. Thirty-four women living in Klongtoey slum, the biggest slum in Bangkok, Thailand, who migrated from the Northeast, the poorest region of the country, are the main population of study in this thesis. It investigates this through both textual and reception analyses with the theoretical framework of dominant representations and identity emphasising class, ethnicity, and gender.

To understand the negotiation and construction of identity, the method of ethnographic audience analysis is used in order to see this through the women's own experiences. This study also aims to assert the distinctive concept of ethnography within the Thai media academy which draws heavily on content analysis or quantitative audience analysis, while it remains ignorant of the 'real' audiences of marginalized groups.

Chapters One, Two and Three seek to locate the Klongtoey women's identities and their dominant representations in the various approaches to the study of the politics of representation. Chapter Four provides the research methods and examines how the transformation between rural and urban culture has affected the women's identities. Chapter Five discusses the patterns of media consumption and the construction of meanings within the women's contexts. Chapters Six and Seven analyse in more detail the ways the representations of class, ethnicity and gender are decoded and negotiated by the Klongtoey women and how this negotiation process reflects the women's formation of identities. Chapter Eight conceptualises the negotiation strategies that the women employ in the construction of their preferred identities, and concludes with a discussion of how this study contributes to theorising on the politics of representation.

Declaration

No part of this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for any degree or qualification of the University of Kent at Canterbury or any other institute of learning.

To my parents, Phongsak and Manorom Phiphitkul

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Contents

Introduction

This study is about Thai migrant urban poor[1] women and the negotiation of their identities in relation to the dominant representations of them in the media. It looks specifically at the interactions of class, ethnic minority and gender within the audiences' positioning, which empower them to negotiate meanings with the dominant power and to gain pleasures from this process.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how these marginalized positions[2] create a need and power for the migrant urban poor women to reinvent and redefine their identity and the significance of the women's negotiation of their politics of representations. The secondary purpose of this study is to advance a concept of ethnography in the field of media audience studies, which has developed recently in British cultural studies (see for instance Morley, 1980, 1986; Radway, 1984; Lindlof, 1987; Gillespie, 1995, etc.). My thesis, therefore, is one of the first few projects of qualitative empirical study to challenge the traditional audience analysis in Thai academia, which has been dominated by quantitative survey research. This study also contributes to the audience studies by proposing the link between the encoding of textual meanings and marketing production of the media text and the ways audiences decode meanings from the text.

The subjects of this study are the Northeastern migrant women living in the Klongtoey slum[3] in Bangkok, Thailand. My first reason for undertaking the study of Northeastern migrant women is they constitute the largest migrant group in urban slum areas and constitute a large part of the urban poor in the country. In term of migration, these women can be considered as one of the main agents of the urbanisation processes and are valued for understanding how they interpret their daily lives in an unequal society. Second, apart from the subordinate positions in terms of urban poor status and gender, Northeastern (*I-san*) ethnicity has secured the women's place at the margin of the dominant ethnic identity. It is precisely the work of cultural representations that have for a long time devalued the meanings and images of *I-san* ethnicity in comparison to other ethnicities in Thailand.

Third, it is the fact that most literature on slum people in Thailand has drawn mainly on the issues of economy, legal problems and health care with the conceptual framework of 'development', and ignores the dynamic interrelations of the macro contexts, such as class, race and gender and the micro contexts, such as the cultural perceptions of the slum people. Therefore, it is appropriate to explore other un-explored aspects of their daily lives in the slum, such as their relationships with the representations in the media and their formation of identity.

Fourth, similar to the narrow aspect of slum literature, these *I-san* slum people are completely ignored in the media audience studies in Thailand. Because of their limited power as mass consumers, the working class audiences are not regarded as the target group of the commercial media and, thus, never receive attention from academics. Nevertheless, I would argue that the working class audiences represent a great number of television audiences because television is significant to their leisure and pleasure in terms of entertainment, information and ideology. Therefore, it is academically important to extend the research boundary beyond a traditional practice of middle class audiences, and to allow the voices of the marginalized audiences to be heard. In this study, the Northeastern women of Klongtoey slum, adopt resistance to and comprise many different identities through the representations in the media terrain. Finally, as a Bangkok-born person who has a family origin from the Northeast region, I see myself involved, despite very little shared experiences, in a painful feeling with these Northeastern migrant women. I, therefore, aim to study the migrant women of Northeast region in order to learn from them: their interpretation of the relationship with the media in everyday lives and their negotiation of identity to the media.

The motivation to research women in a slum context was generated many years before this study started as my PhD project. I used to work as a volunteer, teaching children on a number of construction sites when Bangkok was booming (1984-85). My experience with children living as mobile squatters established the aim to contribute some benefits for slum people. However, it took me a pretty long time to develop the idea of basing research around slum people, and in particular women. My first fieldwork was carried out as an experimental small-scale project to evaluate the impact of traditional media performance on television programmes and slum women (1994). This present study is the most sophisticated and time-

consuming research that I have conducted based on slum women. The significance of this research to me is that it is my first experience of applying ethnography within other available methods of media research.

The fieldwork was conducted in 1998-99 and was split into two phases. The first phase was running between June – August 1998; the second phase was from January – March 1999. The break in the middle of fieldwork period enabled me to visualise the performance of fieldwork research and to pre-analyse the findings. During the first phase I introduced myself to a foundation working in the Klongtoey slum to learn about general slum daily life and culture, then I entered the selected community of my fieldwork and started conducting my field research. The main topics discussing with the Klongtoey women for the first phase of fieldwork included the general patterns of media receptions and the particular reception of the soap opera[4] titled *Nang Baab*. The second phase followed the performance of the first phase with a particular discussion on the soap opera titled *Huajai & Kaipuean*, which was shown at that time. The method of ethnographic audience analysis is used as my central approach together with an empirical method of data gathering and textual analysis of the text meanings and the audiences' preferred readings. The combination of these useful qualitative methods allowed me to understand Klongtoey women within the context of their own everyday lives and experiences.

This study considers the viewing and talking about television (TV talk) within the family and among the group of women as a prime reflection of how Klongtoey women decoded the textual meanings and how they set out agendas for counteracting the dominant representations of them. This TV talk also revealed the transformation process of Klongtoey women's identity, which involved construction, deconstruction, and hybridisation of class, ethnic and gender identities. In this sense, TV talk offered the women a power to speak and to negotiate within a safe space of popular culture and the feminine domain of talk. This feminine practice is highly regarded as the heart of feminist research, which emphasises the importance of reclaiming the voices of women. The principle notion of feminist ethnography on reflexivity (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Bell, 1993) which underlines the importance of doing women research *by* women because of the sharing particular experiences, is underlined in this study. The total number of the Klongtoey women participating in the general discussions and the pattern of media reception was **34**.

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This number was reduced to 30 when the particular topic on *Nang Baab* reception was discussed, and dropped to 21 when the soap opera titled *Huajai & Kaipuean* was considered. The reasons for these differences can be found in Chapters 6 and 7.

The study addresses two aspects of the negotiation of identity, namely, the reception or the decoding of dominant representations; and the oppositional reading by contesting or resistance to dominant representations. The main research questions are organised around these two aspects, which relate to the politics of negotiation. First, how do the Klongtoey women decode the dominant representations of themselves in television? Second, how are representations of these women assimilated, resisted or transformed? Third, what are the elements of their negotiation process? Fourth, what are the implications of Klongtoey women's negotiation of identity for the politics of representation?

To answer these questions, the theories of representation and identity emphasising class, ethnicity and gender, together with the theory of audience reception, are applied to explore the first aspect of how Klongtoey women decode the meanings of representations. The theory of counter-hegemony and the concept of contesting dominant representations are applied as the conceptual framework to explore the Klongtoey women's negotiation of identity.

The most significant factors to emerge from this study coincide with the cultural identity concept (Hall, 1990; Woodward, 1997) emphasising that the class, ethnic and gender oppression of the Klongtoey women empower them to resist the dominant representations of themselves. The findings show that these women contested the representations of 'what they *should* be' and replaced them with 'what they *want* to be'. However, this study argues that the articulation of various factors, for example, the link to their *I-san* culture value, the Buddhist moral concept, the long-term economic hardship and uncertainty, have impacted on the nature of the Klongtoey women's negotiation process. Following these interrelated factors, the Klongtoey women defined and formed their identities by blurring the boundaries that divide the dominant and subordinate of their representations as well as shifting the signifiers from those of class, ethnicity and gender to the morality of class and gender. These factors and the modes of identity formation are the specific elements of the Klongtoey women's negotiation which can be understood only within the context of the women's own experiences. Furthermore, since identity is not fixed,

the mode of identification, whether construction or deconstruction, can be altered according to the meanings that these women decoded from their representations. Therefore, this study proposes that within the specific context of the migrant urban poor women, the forms of hybrid identity and temporary identity which occur in a special terrain of media culture may be more relevant in theorising the politics of representations.

Outline

Chapter 1 sets out the theories and debates involved in the conceptual framework of this study. It maps out how the process of identification and the negotiation of meanings employed by the Klongtoey women have implications for the politics of representations. It explores the theories of representations with a particular aspect that representations work within a signifying system and, thus, allow deconstruction and construction to take place. Discussion of the concepts of identity and difference provides a useful framework for recognising identity as socially constructed. Similar to representations, identity constitutes symbolic meanings which are (re)produced through several contexts, such as class, race and gender. Thus, to theorise the concepts of representations and identities, the macro level of Klongtoey women that is the migrant urban poor of patriarchal culture needs to be taken into account. More importantly, the Klongtoey women have reasserted the fundamental concept of counter-hegemony, which relies on the power of marginalized groups to engage in negotiation and resistance within a cultural discourse.

Chapter 2 provides historical and feminist approaches to understand how Thai women's identities are racialised and constructed by the dominant power. It, then, looks particularly at the cultural stereotypes of the Northeastern migrant women, which have been, for a long time, represented, in the mainstream media. This chapter serves as the underpinning of the further analyses on the formations of the Klongtoey women's identities, which are developed, in the later chapters. Chapter 3 reviews the literature and concepts of the reception theories and ethnographic audiences analysis as well as methodology and epistemology of these concepts. It also recognises how the social positioning and subjectivity of the ethnographic researcher impact upon the production of situated knowledge. To avoid the overemphasis of audiences' experiences and imaginations as the prime research

approach, this study also proposes the method of textual analysis in order to understand how texts encourage audiences to make some certain interpretations rather than others. Chapter 4 is connected to the methodology review in Chapter 3 by drawing the research design from the conceptual framework of theories and methodologies. The transformative context between rural village and urban slum of the Klongtoey women is illustrated as a way to understand how the Klongtoey women position themselves and how they are positioned within the changing culture.

Chapter 5 explores the patterns of media consumption, in particular television, of the Klongtoey women and its implications for the ways the women construct their identities. The classification of Klongtoey women's television talk into the two categories of realism talk and fantasy talk provides a general analysis of how the women took class, ethnicity and gender into the encoding and decoding of their representations and identities. The main findings of this study are based on 34 Klongtoey women who participated in group conversations and interviews. These 34 women have made a great contribution to conceptualise the interrelation paradigm of audience reception and the formation of identities.

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate the ways in which the women construct meanings and identities around the text/ context relationship. The particular texts examined are two night-time soap operas—*Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* which were watched by the women in their own leisure time and space. It is of central importance of these two chapters to look at how soap operas can help construct hegemonic power for the Klongtoey women within the boundaries of class, ethnicity and gender. Concerning the significance of texts to the way the Klongtoey women's negotiation was empowered, the encoding process of textual meaning is emphasised by analysing the marketing policy, production and the textual narration.

Chapter 8 summarises the research findings, demonstrating that the negotiation strategies employed by the Klongtoey women have destabilised the fixed positions of their dominant representations. The demand of Klongtoey women to construct their identities within particular categories and by their preferred mode of identification reveals a major feature of Klongtoey women's politics.

In practical terms, it may take much more work to deconstruct the stereotypes that continually dominate the representations of the Klongtoey women. However, from a theoretical base, we can generate a politics that takes into account the negotiation power of marginalized women. Therefore, it is worth disrupting it from theories and, then, to practices. I hope the Klongtoey women acknowledge that their voices have been listened to and taken seriously in the academic sphere. This is an initial contribution that, I hope, will bring a change to feminist and media research in Thailand. It is, indeed, the aim of my doing research in this field.

Note

[1] In this study, the term urban poor suggests a more accurate description, in terms of their migrant living in the urban slum and in terms of their labour. Many of the Klongtoey women are unskilled-labourers, factory workers, domestic workers and work in the service sectors. Urban poor also retains elements of the political of class and ethnicity, which better reflect the contribution of these women make.

[2] Marginalization is used in this study to describe the social and material reality in the lives of the Klongtoey women. In terms of their social and economic status, they experience themselves as being at the margins of Thai society, which views them as inferior and as outsiders.

[3] Slum: 'a squalid and overcrowded urban street or district inhabited by very poor people.
    'a house or building unfit for human habitation'. [The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998]
This definition from The New Oxford Dictionary is an appropriate description of the Klongtoey women living condition, although generally speaking, individual householders do their best to improve the quality of their own homes.

[4] Significantly, Thai soap opera differs from British soap opera in terms of genre in which Thai soap opera has a certain number of episodes, generally containing 30-35 episodes, and offers more dramatisation than realism. In terms of its melodrama, the Thai soap opera is similar to American soap opera, which favours romance and escapist fantasy.

Chapter One

The Negotiation of Identity in Media Representations

The issues of identity and representation are political because they are central to the power to make some identities respectable while denying others. Therefore, according to cultural theorists and feminists, to gain power in describing oneself and others in subject positions is to employ the politics of representation, which is a constant process of struggle occurring in cultural discourse (see for instance, Mohanty, 1991; Dyer, 1993; Storey, 1993, Lewis, 1995; Hall, 1982, 1990, 1997). This thesis aims to understand the cultural politics that is taken up by the migrant women in Klongtoey slum whose identities are subjected to the dominant power. In order to explore the ways the women identified themselves and contested the meanings of the stereotypical subjects, this thesis engages with popular culture, particularly television, as the site of that identification and negotiation process.

This chapter reviews the theories and debates that underlie the main research questions. It draws on the ways in which Klongtoey women decode the dominant representations in television, the process of identification, the negotiation of meanings through the women's identities, and the implications of this process for the politics of representations. The theoretical approaches in this chapter are organised around four issues, which serve as the conceptual framework of the thesis. The first issue explores the concept of representations by looking at how representations work and constitute meanings within a signifying system. Since representations are symbolic culture, they can be constructed and deconstructed according to the power of each social group. In this sense, representations are political. The second issue centres on the definitions of identity and difference by pointing out that both are socially constructed through the practices of representations. Therefore, how Klongtoey women conceptualise their identities is certainly related to how they interpret the meanings and values of the representations. These theories of representations and identities are established here so that the identification process between Klongtoey women and their dominant representations can be analysed within this framework.

The third issue is concerned with the classic concept of counter-hegemony, which legitimises both dominant and subordinate groups to enter the politics of representations. The idea of counter-hegemony provides a basis for understanding the concept of negotiation, which is a core concept of this thesis. The fourth issue concerns the possibilities that dominant representations of multicultural groups can be negotiated or resisted by them. A focus on negotiation provides a useful explanatory framework for understanding the politics of representation that Klongtoey women deployed in the specific contexts of class, ethnicity and gender.

1) Theorising the Politics of Representations

The arguments of the politics of representation revolve around the social and political consequences of the construction and deconstruction of specific discourses. The work of cultural theorists in this field develops a more profound understanding of representation processes and the way in which they are connected to social, political and economic power. One of the aims of these studies is to analyse how specific texts and types of popular culture serve to reproduce the interests of dominant groups by looking particularly at what sorts of popular culture empower individuals for resistance and negotiation.

Morley and Robins (1995) apply the Foucauldian version of power/knowledge to explain the politics of representations 'as always involving a relation of power, as well as relation of knowledge, between represent and represented. As the authors emphasise:

> [T]he question is, of course, 'Who are we to represent them?'. We must
> always be sure to ask: 'Who speaks? When and Where? With or to Whom?
> Under what institutional and historical constraints? (1995: 134).

These kinds of questions have raised awareness in recognising media representations as a hegemonic tool for whoever has the power to speak, which is usually a dominant group. In this sense, the media representations are blamed as cultural products that are constantly re-produced to secure the place of dominant ideology. Kellner makes this point more distinct by clarifying that, 'The 'I', the position from which dominant [media] ideology speaks, is usually that of white male, Western, middle –or-upper-class subject positions' (1995: 60). Indeed, this is the position that assumes a signifying power to define other gender, races, classes and other

marginalized groups as inferior, subservient and without value in order to serve the interests and distinguish the identities of dominant groups.

A great number of postmodern theorists and postcolonial theorists, led by Edward Said (1978) for instance, criticise the media (especially the global media) arguing that, instead of improving inter- and intra-cultural relations, they reinforce cultural stereotypes and legitimise those of the privileged images. Using the concept of gatekeeping[1] in media analysis, Morley and Robins (1995) point out that the representations of the 'Others' are made present to 'us' in the sense of being filtered, with only certain selected images getting through. And, of course, these media agendas are firmly set by the social dominant groups of the particular time and space. Such representations, including those on global television, are constitutive of what, for example, race or class is. For example, for a typical case, black people have tended to be represented, in television, as the object rather than subject and are defined as representations of a contaminated alien culture. According to Hall (1997) and Barker (1999), this alien image is at the centre of a racial discourse, which gives intrinsic meanings to the essence of being black. For Lewis (1991), the most common portrayal of black people in British and US television programmes is as poor and criminal, associating them with violence, drugs, gangs, teenage pregnancy and family problems. Thus, the alleged criminality and pathology of black culture have become fixed stereotypes of British and US racism in the media.

The above example of black portrayal suggests that the representations in the media are framed by the history and politics of the dominant ideology, which rules the media at that time as reflected in the black stereotype as an aspect of colonial and slave history (Barker, 1999). The term 'representation', thus, requires much involvement in recognising the hegemonic power in a cultural system. How and why some particular groups, especially of a particular class, race and gender, are presented over and over again in popular culture, are the most crucial questions when dealing with the system of representations. To answer these questions, one needs to look beyond the arena of representations and analyse how members of groups see themselves and others, how they see their place, their time and their rights in society, how they see themselves being treated, and how they in turn treat others. The questions raised here contribute to one of the main approaches of my research framework which focuses on how the migrant women in Klongtoey slum recognised themselves through their representations in the media.

In his work on representation, Stuart Hall (1997) introduces the idea of the 'representational system', which involves a process of meaning. He argues that it is through the representational system that meanings are produced and circulated to enable people to build up a culture of shared understandings. Therefore, it can be assumed that representation in the media is a signifying practice to represent or express the thoughts, concepts, ideas and feelings of people in the society. More importantly, Hall emphasises that representation produces meanings in our minds because '[representation] enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meanings constituted' (1997: 4). This is to say that representation means something to someone because its meanings coincide with the norm and value that have already existed in the culture. The representation of gender is a good example of this assumption. Feminists persistently argue that it is the social, cultural and political discourses and practices of gender, which lie at the definition of being 'a woman'. Therefore, the answer to the question 'what is a woman?' is that 'woman' is a cultural representation of gender that constructs the boundary distinction to differentiate feminine from masculine, and, fundamentally, within the social framework of male dominance.

The proposition that representation is the production of meaning leads to three crucial aspects, which provide a basis for an analysis of representation. The first aspect suggests that representation involves the use of codes and conventions of available meanings, which sets limits and shapes the possibility for a particular representation. Thus, we look at black people within a certain framework because the racial meanings and values associated with them are limited and controlled by social culture. The second aspect, extending from the previous one, emphasises that people are all restricted by the presentation of meanings they have access to and by what representations are made for them. This approach seems to suggest that by being provided with limited meanings of black culture, we tend to accept the reality of these black images and locate them in our minds to see black people within these frames. Dyer (1993) describes this notion that reflects the power relations of representation that put the weight of control over representation on the side of the dominance.

The third aspect, noted by Dyer, is that 'what is represented in representation is not directly itself but depends on the way it is treated, delimited and enabled what people can be in any given society' (1993: 3). This last point suggests the case of

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marginalized groups, which are always represented in the media in similar ways according to how they are treated through the legitimised systems of society. For example, migrant people are likely to be seen as threatening the stability of society because they are given limited rights and treated as alien. These three aspects provide useful bases in my thesis to understand how the representations of the Northeastern migrant women are constructed and why they remain meaningful in certain characters.

While the subordinate groups seem to be objects in the systems of representations, Dyer proposes that the dominant groups (men, white, heterosexual) are not addressed in representational practices because they function as simply the human norm. However, based upon the concepts of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, it can be assumed that the dominant groups are also very much represented but through the modes of exclusion and/or comparison by devaluing others (subordinate groups). In fact, this devaluation strategy has been extensively highlighted by the dominant as a method to suppress and keep those of subordination (such as colonised culture). This strategy, which plays a significant role in the politics of representation, is termed, in cultural studies and its affiliated disciplines, "racialising the 'Other'", or "orientalism", or "ethnocentrism" (see for instance Said 1978; bell hooks 1992; Bhabha 1994; Lewis 1996).

As I have so far discussed the meanings and aspects of representation and the implications for subject positions, it is important to explore theories of how representation becomes political. There are a number of basic theories offering explanations of how representation works and empowers meanings. These theories can be categorised by four major approaches, namely the semiotic approach, the ideological approach, the psychoanalytic approach, and the discourse approach.[2]

The semiotic approach explains the system of representation as the work of 'signs', which signify concepts, which most people agree on the meanings or can connect the sign to broader themes of culture. It is also suggested that the symbolic meanings in cultural practice such as the media are maintained through binary oppositions in the creation of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Storey, 1993; Hall, 1997; Woodward, 1997). The ideological approach takes representation as a system of ideologies that works through the ways we experience the world and represents these meanings to ourselves and to others. This approach emphasises that

representation involves the production of connotative meanings, which will make sense only when people interpret through the wider realms of social ideology, such as beliefs, value, knowledge (Hall, 1996). Then, the psychoanalytic approach offers the explanation that the system of representation takes places in unconscious processes, which start in early infancy. And it is in this stage that the construction of a 'self' sets the meanings for all future identifications and representations (Storey, 1993; Curran *et al*, 1996). Finally, the discourse approach identifies the system of representation as the production of knowledge through language, which Foucault terms as 'discourse'. The Foucauldian approach or discourse analysis has enormous implications for a theory of representation by suggesting that the discourse constructs meanings and representations of the subject positions according to its rules. Therefore, individuals of different classes, races and gender will not be able to make meaning of their own representations or others unless they identify themselves and others with the positions constructed within the particular discourses (Foucault, 1976).

Significantly, these four approaches share the same basic conceptualisation of the politics of representation by marking the boundary between 'us' and 'other' which created hegemonic bond. As Dyer points out, racialising the 'Other' is the most important function of the politics of representation because it works 'to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who is clearly beyond it' (1993: 16). Work on the concept of racialising the 'Other' has burgeoned in the past twenty years following the work of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), and has become one of the most influential debates on the issues of marginalized and oppressed groups. Said's study offers a new way to conceptualise the relations between the West and the East by emphasising how the West constructed a stereotypical image and identity of the 'Orient' as inferior by comparison with the West. This is the discourse in which 'the West's knowledge about the Orient is bound up with its hegemony over the Orient' (1978: 3) This form of power is close to Foucault's proposition of 'power/knowledge discourse'. Foucault (1976) argues that all forms of knowledge are productive of power, therefore, to constitute someone/thing as an object of knowledge, is to assume power over it. Both Said and Foucault agree with the concept of hegemony, which states that power involves not only economic

constraint and physical coercion, but also knowledge, representation, idea, cultural leadership and authority (Said, 1978: 7).

In fact, what is established in Orientalism as knowledge is the system of binaries defined by the West. Morley and Robins note that it is the West that has given both existence and identity to the Orient, therefore, 'if the West did not exist, then, the Orient could not exist either' (1995: 135). This argument is also reaffirmed by Lewis (1996) in which he claims that the Oriental stereotypes do not only misrepresent the East, but also misrepresent the West 'by obscuring in their flattering vision of European superiority' (1996: 16). Here, these two statements seem to support my earlier argument that representations have also been employed to reconstruct the superiority of the dominant group, which, in turn, secures the distinction between dominance and subordination. Therefore, it can be said that Orientalist representations still exist and appear regularly in the media and popular culture, especially in visual forms by marking the differences between people of classes, races and gender, and put those subordinate to the dominant group(s) in the margins of cultural practices, such as television programmes.

From this review of Orientalism, we see, again, that the core practice of its politics is a set of 'binary opposition', which highlight the 'otherness' of marginalized groups from the social norm of the dominant. To maintain the binary distinction, a fixed identification process must be endorsed in the signifying systems of representations. Here, the foremost scholar in representations--Hall (1997) clarifies this binary structure by arguing that the black races are linked to 'Nature' or the 'primitive' which, by nature, are lazy and, therefore, best fitted for subordination to whites, while white civilisation is associated with 'Culture' that produces knowledge and overcomes 'Nature'. 'The link to nature, therefore, reduces the identity and representation of the subordinate to a fixed 'difference' and secures it forever' (Hall 1997: 245). This binary form is, in fact, established in the hegemonic ideology in which the dominant keeps on reinforcing the distinctive boundary of representations in order to secure its power and reduce the possibility of contestation.

It seems that the knowledge of representation and racialising the 'Other' strongly influences Black feminists' debates, which address this problematic issue. For example, taken from the words of bell hooks, the concept of binary opposition

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makes black people remain rather silent about representations of whiteness in the black imagination. 'Black people still feel the terror, still associate it with whiteness, but are rarely able to articulate the varied ways they are terrorised because it is easy to silence...' (1992: 345). Similarly Audre Lorde more directly blames the media in internalising the negative portrayal and suppressing the identities of black women. She argues 'We accept these images and comply to the myth that it makes us docile, loyal and obedient and as such accept our subordination' (1984: 58). Interestingly, while feminists are accusing representations for suppressing marginalized women, some cultural theorists, such as Dyer (1993) argues that it is not representation that should be blamed, but a group or groups who has/have the power to enforce and claim stereotypes as normality.

On this point, I rather agree with Dyer's argument because it coincides with the theory that representation is, indeed, a social construction in the power/knowledge discourse. Therefore, representation is always associated with the imbalance of power whereby the dominant transfers its ideology into the system of representation and the processes of identification. The politics of representations, thus, emerge along the distinctive borders that divide those of dominance and subordination. Because representation is highly politicised, there is no fixity in marginalizing the 'other'. Instead, a sense of politics has offered a space, within this representational system, for marginalized group to negotiate and, potentially, create their own representations to counter-act those of the dominant. This notion is central to my study, which explores the ways in which the migrant women in Klongtoey slum are more or less empowered in their negotiations with dominant representations of themselves.

2) Why Do 'Identity' and 'Difference' Matter?

In the previous section we have noted that representation signifies the ways in which people can make sense of their 'sameness' or their 'difference' to the social norm. That is to say that the system of representation constructs a place from which individuals can position themselves within the boundaries of the cultural hegemony (Woodward, 1997). The term 'representation', thus, requires an understanding of the complexities of 'identity' and 'difference'.

According to Hall (1990), identity should be seen as 'process', which is never completed and is always constituted within representation. Hall (1991) also

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emphasises that 'Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. Identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations, which define identities by marking differences' (1991: 21). The significance of Hall's statements rests on the connection between identity and difference, which involves questioning how identity is constructed through the politics of representation in which difference is deployed.

In a recent work on cultural identities, Barker (1999) reviews the basic concepts of identity, from the philosophy of the enlightenment, to sociology, and then to postmodernism. As an enlightenment subject, identity is defined as an essential centre of the self, a unified individual with the capacities of reason and consciousness. In this respect, an individual's mind is regarded as having rational capacities, which allow it to experience and make sense of the world. As a sociological subject, identity is conceived as a mode of thinking about ourselves and not a collection of traits. This concept corresponds to hegemony by underlining the situational power and specific cultural contexts as the resources that people bring to understand their self-identity.

The last and powerful concept defines identity as the postmodern subject in which self is decentred by shifting and fragmenting identities so that 'persons are composed not of one but of several, sometimes contradictory, identities' (Barker 1999: 16). Identity as fractured subject has been taken up seriously by a number of major modern theories, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and Foucault's discourse. Among these theories, feminism and discourse theories seem to have a great deal to contribute to this thesis. It is feminism's concern with how we are formed as gendered subjects by the distinction of sexual difference that denies gender identity as universal categories. In addition, gender identity, especially the notion of 'woman', is defined according to power positions in patriarchal society. This view is similar to discourse theory, which understands identity as a discursive construction. That is, identity generates meaning in relation to other signifiers, such as dominance is meaningful only in relation to subordination. In this sense, Foucault argues that identity is an outcome of particular historical and social formations. Both feminism and Foucault's discourse theories legitimise the idea that identity can shift as a consequence of the diversification of social relationships. Thus, because of shifting identities, the strength of counter-hegemony is raised within signifying practices. And this is the significant point that constitutes the main approach of this

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thesis in looking at how identities of Klongtoey women shift within the contested arena of dominant representations.

From the above concepts, identity is regarded as a conceptual target for engendering the hegemonic negotiation, however, at the same time, it is often seen as problematic. It is problematic because identity is located in the two binary axes of dominant and subordinate representations, which makes it difficult to deconstruct because it is usually secured by 'difference'. Thus, identity marks a significant comparison between social groups in which individuals can identify themselves the same as others who share similar categories, or differentiate themselves from those who do not (Skevington & Baker 1989; Hall 1990; Woodward 1997).

Although there is a strong refusal in conceptualising identity as essential biology, according to Woodward (1997), individuals are clearly born into a classification system, which already exists. And simply by virtue of their class, race, gender, they fall into one particular social identity, which may have a positive or negative value. For example, members of dominant groups always gain positive value because they possess a powerful status, while members of subordinate groups have lower self-status because of lacking the resources of power. This distinction makes identity clearly defined by the significance of 'difference' that is by 'what is not' included in the social majority.

One obvious example of defining identity with the significance of 'difference' is the construction of gender. As explained in Skevington and Baker's work (1989), women are the disadvantaged gender group simply because their social identity derives from comparison with male identity. The concern of the patriarchal bias on women's identification leads contemporary feminists to challenge the gender construction of identity. Here struggle over identity no longer involves questions of distortion (to find out what and how identity is distorted), but of the politics of representation by exploring strategies to negotiate the power that distorts women identity. This feminist movement makes a major change in the focus of women's oppression which shifts from a concern with gender divisions to a concern with gender identities, and places it at the centre of the current political and theoretical agenda (see Skevington & Baker 1989; Charles & Hughes-Freeland 1996; Woodward 1997).

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It is necessary to discuss here that feminist identity politics involves two major debates. One is the argument that women's identity is defined by biological functions that give features of identity to women, such as the claim on motherhood (Roseneill 1996). The other emerges against the former concept by refusing the notion of essential femininity and endorsing the thesis that gender is socially constructed (Woodward 1997). The latter group, which constitutes the third concept of identity as postmodern subject, argues that identity is fluid, contingent, changeable, and is often contradictory. Woodward emphasises that:

> One of the major contributions of identity politics has been to construct a politics of difference, which subverts the stability of biological categories and the construction of opposites (1997: 26)

This argument reinforces the view that the search for a universal explanation of women's subordinate identities is inappropriate. This standpoint can be seen from the feminist activities in the 1970s, which paid considerable attention to differences within the category and identity of women. One recognisable case is the politics of black and Third world feminists on demanding their own agenda because they claimed that only black/Third world women could understand the problems of black/Third world women (Mohanty *et al* 1991; bell hooks 1992; Maynard & Purvis 1996; Roseneil 1996).

The notion of difference in the social construction of identities of women and other marginalized group places the concept of 'difference' to the forefront of feminism and cultural studies. The useful concept of 'difference', which emphasises the diversity of people, is indicated in Hall's complete work on representation (1997). Hall argues that because people construct meaning through a comparative dialogue with an 'Other', therefore, without 'difference' the meaning of people's identities could not exist. He provides this argument with the example of racial identity that 'we know what 'black' means, not because there is some essence of 'blackness' but because we can contrast it with its opposite 'white'' (1997: 234-6). From Hall's discussion, it can be concluded that the marking of 'difference' is the principal practice in representational systems, which divides people and all their characteristics in such a way that we can assume to make sense of their identities.

More important to this thesis is the further development of the implications of 'difference' in the conceptualising of identity. The attention to 'difference',

consequently, has drawn two significant implications. First, as discussed already in relation to representation, by using the binary oppositions, difference can be constructed negatively as the exclusion or suppression of those who are different from the dominant (see for instance, Said, 1978; Hall, 1990, etc.). Second, on the contrary, difference can be celebrated as a source of diversity and hybridity (Woodward, 1997). This latter implication opens up new possibilities for subordinate groups to recognise their potential to emancipate themselves from oppressive identities. This perspective extends the concept of identity and difference to the issue of identity transformation, which has recently become a debate in the analysis of identity. Woodward describes the phenomenon of identity transformation as a part of global migration, the end result of which is a production of plural identities, most for migrants and less for native people. For example, as we have seen in British society, the South Asian migrants have been struggling to deconstruct their marginalized positions by connecting their traditional or 'back home' identities with the prevailing British which, in turn, constructs some new cultural identities, such as dressing in traditional clothes but performing lifestyles of British consumerism (see also Gillespie, 1995).

To view identity and difference in this way, the politics of negotiation can take place and empower marginalized groups to interact with the dominant group. Therefore being different from the majority does not always necessarily mean having a stigmatised identity, but the chance to selectively mix or transform parts of both identities into a hybrid one (Parker, 1995). The concept of hybridity enables us to recognise the new forms of identity along the axis of class, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on. It is more equally identifications and alliances rather than competitions or assimilations, and it involves other forms of activity apart from cultural practices. In her study of the relationships between ethnic business of Chinese immigrants and the formation of cultural identities of young Chinese people in Britain, Song suggests that these young peoples' identities 'were shaped not only by their socialisation in Britain or Hong Kong but also by their experiences of helping out in a family work contract' (1999: 173). Song's emphasis, in this study, is to pay more attention to forms of economic activity for the formation of individuals' cultural identities. To recognise the Northeastern migrant women's identity, it is also important to consider it as a transforming cultural practice between Northeastern

ethnicity and Bangkok identities in their marginal position of class, social and economic.

In fact, the hybridity concept is based on the assumption that identity is fluid and unsettled therefore, 'identity is a matter of becoming as well as being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past' (Hall, 1990: 235). The emphasis on transforming identity between space and time is further highlighted by postcolonial theorists as a solution to cease the problematic of identity (in search of the loss of identity). Bhabha (1994), for instance, suggests that a hybrid identity should be regarded as a unique 'third space' or 'in between' place that is inhabited by marginalized groups. The strategy of hybridisation, according to Bhabha, does not seek cultural supremacy or collaboration. It deploys the partial culture from which it emerges to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory that give the formation of identities to the minority position, or to the part in the whole (1996: 58).

Further to this point, some media and cultural theorists, such as Morley and Robins (1995), look at media space like television as a site that enables the transforming of identity. Both authors propose this argument in a book entitled *'Spaces of Identity'* which concludes that the media create new communities across the space of transmission and bring about a cultural mixing, thus, 'to watch television is to take in the common experiences and identities of here and there' (1995: 132). Concerning identity in the transforming space, Morley and Robins propose that 'Difference is confronted; boundaries are closed; cultures are mingled; identities become blurred' (1995: 125).

Put in this way, it is possible to regard media representations as a space in which both construction and deconstruction of identities can take place. And it is this concept that allows the dominant representations to be resisted and negotiated. This leads to the next theories about the politics of negotiation, which serves as the core concept in my theoretical framework.

3) Counter-hegemony as a Form of Cultural Politics

A crucial concept for understanding the idea of negotiation discourse is the notion of hegemony. The term has become important through the work of Gramsci (1971) who extends the notion of class rule from an existence in economic and political institutions to the form of experiences, consciousness and other aspects of individual

life. Used as a concept of ideology, hegemony refers to a condition in process which a dominant group does not merely rule but leads a society through the exertion of moral and intellectual leadership, winning, and shaping consent, so that the power of the dominant group appears both legitimate and natural (Ransome, 1992; Hall, 1997). On the other hand, hegemony suggests a society in which subordinate groups appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideas, and meanings of the dominant, which bind them into the prevailing power structure. This is achieved when the subordinate groups 'consent' to view the social system and its everyday embodiment that subordinate them as 'common sense' (Fiske, 1987; Storey, 1993).

It should also be noted that in Gramsci's formulation of hegemony, power is as much a matter of persuasion and consent as of force, therefore, it is never secured once and for all. Hegemony characterises social relations as a series of struggles for power, and, thus, hegemony's victories are never final. This notion of consensual form of power leads Gramsci to coin the term of strategy exercised by both the dominant and the subordinated as a 'war of position' which means a more gradual strategy to maintain the stability of the dominant, and, at the same time, to open up its contradictions and the struggle for power of the subordinated (see for instance, Fiske, 1987; Ransome, 1992; Storey, 1993; Brown, 1994; Hall, 1997).

Thus, hegemony suggests a complex field of competing ideas, which appears as fragmented discursive meanings of common sense located in a variety of representations. However, it is through common sense that people routinely conceptualise their experiences as a reality that causes them not to question unequal power relationships. In other words, hegemony naturalises dominance, such as ruling class, central ethnicity and patriarchy, and makes it appear to be general common sense. This means that the hegemonic struggle of the subordinate groups requires a transformative process through ideological and cultural discourse to create a site for negotiation. Thus, Gramsci's concern is the character of popular ideology or popular culture as the most significant site of power struggle.

Hegemony argues that the size and profitability of major media industries and/or the monopoly of state media, contribute to the control over productions, shaping reception of audiences, and more importantly, normalising the consciousness and identity of social groups through media representations. In this sense, media and popular culture are 'the consciousness industries that distribute

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products whose end result is not just a product but also an effect on the consciousness of those receiving it' (Real 1996: 149). Central to hegemonic concept is that it is important to see all forms of popular culture, and in particular television, as a site of contestation rather than a site of ideological manipulation. This is because audiences do not necessarily take up all the subject positions that media representations have offered, but select and contest those of bias. Consequently, audience reception studies have stressed negotiation between subject/audiences and text. Typical questions usually posed in reception studies from the perspective of hegemony include: Are certain meanings and ideologies favoured? Do women, minorities, ethnic groups, etc. have a say in how they are represented in the cultural products?

Television, then, plays a vital role as a site of struggle over meaning. The hegemony of the television text is never total, but always has to struggle to impose itself against the diversity of meanings that the diversity of viewers will produce. According to Fiske (1987), all meanings are not equal, nor equally easily activated, but all exist in relations of subordination or opposition to the dominant meanings proposed by the text.

Those using this negotiation approach sometimes are referred to as neo-Gramscian hegemony theorists. The core concept of this approach is 'counter-hegemony' or 'hegemonic negotiation', which focuses on representation as a domain of struggle to maintain or challenge the power structure by both dominant and subordinate groups. Fiske brings the counter-hegemony concept close to the pleasure of women's television viewing and opens up a space of negotiation within soap opera. He argues that the normative structure of soap opera needs not be seen simply as a textual transformation of women's powerlessness in patriarchy. 'It can be seen more positively as an articulation of a specific feminine definition of desire and pleasure that is contrasted with the masculine pleasure of the final success' (1987: 183). The specific feminine desire and pleasure are constitutive of the ongoing process of the serial rather than the serial itself because the feminine subjectivity is not bound by the final reward or punishment as appears in texts serving masculine pleasure. The directions of the camera also have specific meanings and pleasures for women viewers who bring the feminine skills of 'reading people' or sharing the emotion of the characters into understanding the facial expressions in close-ups (Modleski, 1982). Feminine viewing practice enables

women to establish their terrain of feminine culture in constant struggle against patriarchy. Although it may not challenge the patriarchal domination in a direct way, at best it provides a safe space for women to constantly assert their power and circulate their negotiated meanings.

Thus, it is through the establishment of a system of representations that a hegemonic power is exercised and it is this counter-hegemony that allows the subordinate groups to recognise their oppression and, in turn, empowers them to contest the meanings and representations of the dominant group. Furthermore, by being able to negotiate or criticise the meanings and values of dominant representations, subordinate groups obtain pleasures from this signifying process. And it is this negotiation between dominant and subordinated that makes representations political.

4) Contesting the Dominant Representations

I have argued that representation is invested with particular types of power including hegemonic and discursive forms. Thus, representation has its own politics which operates as much through culture and the production of knowledge. It can be assumed that, therefore, in order to politicise dominant ideology, the representation of the dominant (media) culture must become a space of struggle and negotiation.

Here, Gramsci's counter-hegemony and Foucault's discourse of power are the two remarkable theories, which offer the idea of the possibility for cultural and ideological struggle. As discussed earlier, these two concepts, particularly counter-hegemony, enable cultural theorists and feminists to rethink media and representation as negotiable and, thus, political. Both Gramsci and Foucault agree that power is dynamic and always bounded by resistance (see for instance, Storey, 1993; Curran et al, 1996; Lewis, 1996; Gledhill, 1997). At this point, Gramsci recommends that to conceptualise the negotiation of representation or identity in the media, the preliminary requirement is to acknowledge both the unequal power relations involved in the struggle, and the space for negotiation and resistance from subordinate groups. While Foucault proposes that a strategy of resistance should be based on an 'analytical of power' by asking how we come to understand ourselves in the discourse of power, and how we can deconstruct power and allow new forms of resistance to emerge.

When saying that representation becomes a place of struggle I do not mean only when people try to displace or contest it with a fully new identity, but also when people interrupt and try to transform its meaning by changing its associations or signifiers, for example, from the negative meaning of working class's personality to the positive meaning of working class's morality. In fact, this method is regarded as one of the most significant challenges offered by poststructural theorists and feminists. Its emphasis on the way individual people decode meanings of representations provides an understanding of how negotiation strategy is deployed and whether it is efficient or not. Richard Dyer (1993) terms this method as the praxis of decoding, which he has adopted from Stuart Hall's classic concept of 'encoding/decoding' (1976)[3], which emphasises the whole communication process from the moment of text making at one end to the moment of audience reception at the other (see more discussion in Chapter 3).

For Dyer, the ways that meanings of representations are decoded include three different types, namely dominant, radical and negotiated. The first decoding, the dominant type, accepts entirely the meanings of the dominant representations or the text's hegemony by enjoyment or involvement in the meanings. The second type, on the other hand, rejects the whole meanings of the text or representations by dislike or disagreement. And the last decoding, negotiated type, contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements as Dyer explains, '[I]t acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations while it makes its own ground-rules' (1993: 94). Here, it is the last type that has the most relevance to my approach of how the Klongtoey women decode the representations in Thai television because it is based on the concept of recognition and negotiation. Most interestingly, Dyer emphasises that in order to understand how individuals decode a given text, one cannot conclude merely from a person's social position, such as class, race, gender, or sexual orientation, but from their thoughts and feelings about their position. In this sense, the social position of the Klongtoey women as urban poor, ethnic migrants and women cannot be taken as dimensions to justify the ways they decode television representations without also investigating how the women associate themselves with these positions.

The above argument also draws from Hall's (1997) strategy on contesting dominant representations in the specific context of race. Hall discusses three possibilities of counter-strategies, which can begin to subvert the representation

process. The first strategy is to reverse the stereotypes from an extreme image of one axis to the other extreme axis. For example, some black people escape the extreme images, such as blacks are poor, subservient, deferential to whites, etc. to the other extreme images, such as blacks are motivated by money, perpetuate violence, crime and promiscuous sex. However, Hall does not agree with this aggressive strategy, he argues, 'it has not escaped the contradictions of the binary structure of racial stereotyping and it has not unlocked the discourses of power and subordination which are socially and culturally constructed' (1997: 270-1).

Then, he moves on to the second strategy, which concerns a substitution of a range of 'positive' images into negative ones. This approach emphasises the notion of difference and reverses the binary opposition by reading the negative positively. For example, a term like 'black is beautiful' is widely used to counter-act the myth of the universal beauty of whiteness. Nevertheless, though adding positive images into the fixed negative can increase the diversity of 'being black', it does not, Hall argues, necessarily displace the negative because the binary remains in place. This is to say that since the representations of black or any other marginalized groups take place within the social and cultural discourses in which the whole unconsciousness of race has been articulated, simply replacing the negative with positive meanings cannot stop the continuation of stereotyping and the way people decode race.

Therefore, Hall proposes a third strategy, which offers the way to live with the representations or stereotypes while contesting them in the representation process. Hall explains that this strategy accepts and works with the signifying, and enters into a struggle over representation by acknowledging that meaning can never be finally fixed, therefore, although the stereotypes remain, the value associated with the meanings is changed. This strategy, according to Hall, positively takes the body as the principal site of its strategies and attempts to make the stereotypes work against themselves in order to command the attention of and transform the perception of viewers. One relevant example is the performance of rap music by African-Americans that takes multiple forms of negotiation through language, music and style of expression. The unique presentation of rap music centres black identities into the entire meanings of the music, which creates special pleasure and a new signifier of blackness to the audiences. Moreover, the rebellious meanings and lyrics capture the imaginary perception of the audiences so that the existing stereotypes lose their influence. Hall notes, '[i]t makes elaborate play with 'looking'

to 'make it strong'--that is, to de-familiarise it, and so make explicit what is often hidden--its erotic dimensions... It is not afraid to deploy humour to laugh 'with' rather that 'at' his characters' (1997: 273).

The negotiation strategy is well recognised from feminists whose politics is to struggle within the dominant representations of patriarchy and to create women's own space in the signifying system (see Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985,1996; Gamman and Marshment, 1988; Gledhill, 1997). The prominent case of women's politics in cultural representation is seen in the women's consumption of soap opera and/or romance novel or so-called 'woman's genres' which is a type of cultural artefact historically aimed at and primarily consumed by women. Gledhill (1997), in her article on genre and gender, suggests that although soap opera is constructed within male-dominated media organisations, which reproduce the masculine as the norm, there is a space where women's different positioning in society is acknowledged and allowed a degree of expression. As has been discussed in an earlier section, one of the impacts of soap opera on gender structure is its continuous serial format, which appears to address women on a more equal footing with men and among women, as well as involving a variety of female representations. As pointed out by Gledhill '[t]hese differences of narratives resolution produce not only forms of psychological pleasures, but also forms of ideological movement and negotiation around femininity and masculinity they entail' (1997: 367). Further to this point of soap narrative, Fiske (1987) notes that the weaving together of multiple plots and the constantly interrupted storyline by another, offer their subordinated women viewers the pleasure of seeing the status quo in a constant state of disruption. Therefore, it is the recognition of interpersonal relationships, domestic concerns and so forth in the central themes of soap opera, together with the interruptions of genres that validate women's points of view and endorse women's pleasure.

Gledhill's and Fiske's ideas, indeed, reinforce many concepts of contemporary feminism on the issues of female pleasure within popular culture. Modleski, for instance, does not condemn soap opera or the women who watch it. Rather she proposes, 'it is time for us to stop merely opposing soap operas and to start incorporating them, and other mass-produced fantasies into our study of women' (1982: 114). Similarly, Hobson (1982) argues that instead of devaluing it as trash television, soap opera should be regarded as a special place in the lives of

female audiences that allows them to take an active role as well as competencies in allying domestic lives with genre knowledge. Other studies suggest that it is not only the competencies of female audiences in that particular genre that appropriates soap opera to women, but the emergence of a sense of collaborative networks of viewing generally that empowers a safe space in which women's concerns and pleasure can take place (Seiter, 1989; Brown, 1990, 1994).

There is also a recommendation that the female competencies in associating women's identity with those of soap characters offers considerable pleasure to women in selecting or controlling one's relationship with the fictional representations. However, this point contains an unresolved problematic because the identification process can serve as mere escapism into an imaginary world rather than achieving it in reality. Thus, the first view criticises it as the process whereby the values of the dominant ideology are naturalised into the desire of the individual. On the contrary, the second view argues that to identify themselves with a fictional character is a means of exercising power by making its meaning serve their own interests (see for instance, Fiske, 1987; Stacey, 1994). However, I would argue that the women's competency in identification with soap characters should not be dismissed as being injected with soap ideology, but an active interaction that demonstrates women's ability to construct their identities in relation to soap characters. In the mean time, this identification process may encourage a negotiating power, which women develop in order to select, resist or transform their preferred identities with the representations in soap opera.

Further to the problematic of identification with soap characters, some feminist critics of soap opera disagree on the extent of the soap text's subversive properties, which affect the way women audiences read the text. According to this viewpoint, Rogers (1995) argues that it is feminist textual critics of daytime soaps who are able to take advantage of the open form of soap opera to construct subversive readings, but actual viewers may simply fail to recognise latent discourses and fall into the patriarchal meanings that are overwhelmingly presented in soap story.

Nevertheless, my own view in light of this debate is that: first, I accept that the basic plots of soaps reinforce traditional feminine roles and relations to patriarchal culture, but the mixed messages (e.g. female rebellion, tragic problems in

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heterosexual relationships, etc.) and interrupted forms may allow female audiences to construct subversive readings. Second, this condition depends on the particular circumstances, for example, watching television soap with a group of women who share the same social situations and domestic problems may lead to the raising of female consciousness about patriarchal domination. Moreover, I believe that to alleviate this problematic, more studies of female audiences of soaps should be carried out to find other factors that may influence the way women decode meanings from soap opera. More importantly, I would argue that valid assumptions will appear only by undertaking the study of 'real' audiences within real settings, through the method of 'ethnographic audience analysis'. This is a justification that I offer in conducting the study of how the Northeastern migrant women interpreted meanings from television soap viewing in their domestic context.

While the debate on the contesting of representation through women's genres is going strong among Western feminists, the challenge to dominant representation is also emphasised from Third World feminists but with their own strategies. In a convincing book on the politics of Third World feminism, Mohanty (1991) argues that representational politics, for Third World women, has never meant bemoaning one's individual circumstances, or ranking oppositions, or defensiveness around one's issues. 'Rather, it means a politics of activism, a politics which seeks to recognise, name and destroy the system of domination which subjugates people of colour' (1991: 276). Therefore, in this view, to contest the dominant representations, women must not accept this oppressive subjectivity, but recognise it and persistently deconstruct it. Furthermore, Mohanty encourages Third World feminists to have certain narratives (including representation), which are encoded and decoded in their own ways, and best speak to their experiences of Third World women, not as universal women.

I agree with Mohanty's proposition and believe that these narratives are an essential context to challenge the dominant representation because they arise from the daily practices of women's resistance and the real experience of oppression in specific contexts. Thus, the narratives or representations that are effective for Third World feminists' politics should be the ones that can have an impact on the construction of meaning within the collective consciousness of women. This process suggests the involvement of negotiation with an emphasis that it should occur in both the decoding and encoding position. This means that women should be able to

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apply their own ways of decoding and encoding outside the parameters of dominance, either by patriarchy or Western concept of feminism. For example, Lewis (1996) asks for the attention of the work of Oriental women writers and artists as agents of negotiation to the stereotypes of Orientalism. She insists that we cannot read (decode) the counter-hegemonic texts without allowing its negotiation role to enter the encoding of social difference. This shows the demand in increasing the number of women entering the signifier-producing arena such as media organisations or alternative media in order to reshape the ideology that is transferred through encoding.

Another alternative way of challenging the dominant representation is suggested by Kellner, a cultural critical theorist. He encourages us to deploy the 'multicultural approach', which offers a serious scrutiny of representations of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other phenomena, which are often ignored in Western theoretical approaches to culture. Kellner's multicultural approach involves 'analysis of relationships of domination and oppression, the way stereotyping works, resistance on the part of stigmatised groups to dominant representations; as well as the struggle of these groups to represent themselves, to counter dominant and distorting representations, and to produce more positive ones' (1995: 95). The most explicit point in Kellner's idea is that the multicultural approach allows the subordinate groups to use cultural artefacts, including representations, to construct individual identities in their own everyday life. Furthermore, this approach helps create representations that strengthen the struggle of the oppressed against domination, and at the same time, attack representation that legitimises domination.

From these benefits, I accept what Kellner calls multiculturalism as 'pedagogy of the oppressed' because this approach 'helps the oppressed see their oppression, name their oppressors and articulate the goals and practices of liberation' (1995: 96). My argument is that multiculturalism is an appropriate tool to analyse the system of representation based on class, race and gender because it perceives the different forces of oppression, different strategies of exclusion and, then, different strategies of negotiation. This concept relates to the standpoint of Third World feminists, which opposes the 'sameness' of all women's oppression, while developing the counter-strategies based on women's experiences in a particular time and space.

Apart from emphasising the diversity of identities and the recognition of class, race and gender as the crucial factors, feminists and cultural theorists based on postmodernism have proposed the concept of destabilising identity as the contesting strategy to dominant representations. Kaplan (1992) explores the significance of Madonna's representations in music videos and argues that through Madonna's images, the essential or fixed identities of gender and ethnic norms are destabilised. She argues that Madonna's images empower women to control their identities by blurring the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, and by dressing in traditional ethnic clothing (e.g. Indian dress), her appearances deconstruct gender and ethnic identity. Kaplan's study, built on the concept of shifting identity, suggests that when the subject (representations) adopts multiple appearances, the identification between viewer and subject is dispersed and unstable, which constitutes the central of the politics of representations. This concept seems useful and applicable to explore the identification process and the construction of identity that is based on multiple modes of connections such as class, race, gender and other social contexts. By destabilising the boundaries that fix identities, new identities can emerge within zones of no distinctive boundary.

The emphasis in the arguments of multiculturalism, Third World feminism and postmodernism is on the discursive demand for direct independent self-definitions, not 'in relation to' or 'in opposition to'. Here, as Marshall (1996) suggests, black women need to negate the myths of their sexuality and try to empower the 'gaze': 'by not reinforcing the racial myths but let the others realise that the black images in the media are the wrong images' (1996: 27).

5) Conclusion

This chapter has concentrated on the theories of representation, identity and differences and the contesting of dominant representations, grounded in the concept of counter-hegemony. These theories and concepts are of great significance for my analysis of the way the Northeastern migrant women in Klongtoey slum negotiate their identities with dominant representations. The literature that I have reviewed has shown that identity itself is socially constructed, therefore, it allows negotiation to take place within the domain of representations. Thus, the struggle to control and construct representations is political. This contestation by counter-hegemonic

relations empowers marginalized groups to set their own frame of identification and define their self-images.

By emphasising Gramscian counter-hegemony theory, I have demonstrated how stereotypes and dominant representations are constructed, particularly in the binary oppositions between domination and subordination. This classic concept of counter-hegemony also provides possibilities for dominant representations to be deconstructed or resisted. Furthermore, some negotiated strategies offered by feminists and cultural theorists have been explored in order to find useful approaches to understand the negotiation strategies deployed by the Northeastern migrant women of this study. However, with the specific contexts of being urban poor, of inferior ethnicity, and migrant women in the slum, to understand Klongtoey women's use of negotiation and their desire for identities is to apply multiple modes of approaches and to be open for the new knowledge that may derive from the women's own experiences.

The call from feminists for a return to study media culture as a terrain for feminist politics is my own position in this thesis. In order to conceptualise women's emancipation from a patriarchal system, the signifiers of women in connection with class, race and other specific contexts need to be deconstructed and negotiated for the new identity. Therefore, representation is a political domain that feminists and cultural theorists can take into account for pursuing the resolution of the oppression of women and other marginalized groups.

In the next chapter, I will apply this conceptual framework to describe the Northeastern migrant women's identities and look at the ways the dominant culture has presented their images. The debates on Thai women's identities from some major perspectives will also be explored to provide a preliminary view for an understanding of Klongtoey women and the perception of their social positions with regard to their class, ethnicity and gender.

Notes

[1] **Gatekeeping**: By definition means the process that lets some information through while keeping some out in the formulation and editing of news reports. This is the basic idea of agenda setting, which is usually traced to a brief passage in a book by political scientist Bernard Cohen. In 1963 he wrote that "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*". Presumably the news media do so in

patterns that bring the public to attach the most importance to those given the most prominent attention in the press. An important part of the agenda setting function of the press is the process by which certain topics are selected by the media for presentation in news coverage from those available. Another important part is the way in which various factors in news organisations shape the nature of the final report to the public.
(Lowery and De Fleur, 1983, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*, New York: Longman)

[2] **Semiotic approach**: As elaborated by Hall (1997) the system of representation works through language, then, it comes to the term that language which is used to carry meanings is 'signs'. These signs represent the concepts and make up the meaning in our cultural practices. The system of signs is the principal in semiotic concept, a way of approaching texts and practices. The semiotic concept derives from the theoretical work of the Swiss linguist- Ferdinan de Saussure. He suggests that the meaning of a sign is the result of a process of difference and relationship between the two component parts of language: the signifier (the inscription) and the signified (the concept or mental image). Saussure explains that meaning can be changed by substituting certain parts of the sentence of new parts. For example, if we substitute 'anti-imperialist volunteers' for the word 'terrorists' we would have a meaningful sentence in different way (Storey, 1993: 70). Saussure's concept gives a basic concern for studying representation: a concern that meaning is always the result of the relationships of selection and combination made possible in one particular moment.

This initial proposition is further emphasised by Claude Levi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, in a study of myths. He argues that myths, which work like language are structured in terms of binary oppositions between similarity and difference. His structuralist analysis is useful as it highlights the cultural significance of symbolic meanings and suggests that cultural order is maintained through binary oppositions in the creation of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Storey, 1993; Woodward, 1997).

Roland Barthes, the French literalist, takes Saussure's idea of signifier/ signified and develops a level of signification which he terms 'denotation/ connotation'. Denotation is the primary signification where most people would agree on the meaning. And connotation is the secondary signification which is made up of signs of the denoted system and is connected to broader themes and meanings of our culture. At this second level of signification that people are beginning to interpret the completed signs in terms of the wider realms of social ideology, such as beliefs, knowledge, value systems (Storey, 1993; Hall, 1997). Barthes's essay *Mythologies* (1957) identifies 'myth' in a secondary signification, which works as an ideology and practice that defends and promotes the values and interests of the dominant groups. "To understand this aspect we need to be able to access the shared code conscious or unconscious, the operation of connotation, which might differ from one culture to another and is marked by difference of class, race and gender" (Storey, 1993: 81). Barthes's concept of myth helps us to see how representation works at this connotation level, for example the myth of Orientalism, and allows us to see the possibility of confrontation by counter-myth.

Ideological approach: Althusser's influential project is the theorisations of ideology which he defines as 'systems of representation- composed of images, myths, ideas or concepts'. In this definition, ideologies or the systems of representations are the systems of meaning through which the ways we represent the real conditions of existence (we experience the world) to ourselves and to others. This acknowledges that ideology is the result of social practices involved in the production of meaning. In this sense, there is no social practice outside of the domain of meaning (semiotic), rather every social practice is constituted within the interplay of meaning and representation and can itself be represented (Hall, 1996).

The important thing about systems of representation is that they are not singular, therefore, they associate with a whole chain of connotative meaning. For example, in any modern society, the notion of the dominant ideology and the subordinate ideology is in adequate to represent the complex relationship of different ideological discourses. Another crucial consideration for Althusser's concept is that: the systems of representation are profoundly founded on unconscious structure (Storey, 1993). This means that these systems of representation, chained with connotation, are neither open nor easy to change at the conscious level.

Psychoanalytic approach: The notion that ideologies as systems of representations are the product of specific unconscious processes brings the sense of psychoanalysis involved. Lacanian

psychoanalytic theory is particularly important here because of its emphasis on the symbolic of language and on representational systems, which take place in unconscious processes. It is quite clear that such processes do operate in early infancy, making possible the formation of relations with others and the world. (Storey, 1993; Curran *et al.*, 1996; Woodward, 1997).

According to Lacan, we are born into a condition of 'lack', and subsequently spend the rest of our lives trying to overcome this condition. The unified human subject, thus, is always a myth. A child's sense of identity or self to challenge the experience of 'lack' and fragmentation emerges during what Lacan calls the 'mirror phase': by looking in a mirror (real or image) and beginning to construct a sense of self. This stage follows the 'imaginary phase', which is prior to the entry into language and the symbolic order or precisely the realm of images, when the child still has no awareness of itself and attaches to the mother's body.

For Lacan, the first encounter with the constructing process of a 'self' or 'subjectivity' sets the scene for all future identifications and representations. The child reaches the sense of 'I' only through finding the 'I' reflected by something outside itself, that is by 'the other'. In this way, subjectivity is split but still longs for the unitary with the mother of the imaginary phase, this desire produces the tendency of identity itself with powerful and significant figures or the way in which we are seen by others.

It is at the Oedipal stage of the entry into language and symbolic systems that the child's fantasy and the desire for the mother is repressed into the unconscious by the entry of the father or what Lacan calls 'the law of the father'. As the child enters this language stage, the child is able to recognise sexual difference and is obliged to recognise the meaning of the phallus, the symbolic father, as the first signifier within language that introduces difference. Then, other differences are constructed on the analogy of sexual difference, which is one term, always, prior to the other.

Lacan's emphasis on the gendered differences which construct the symbolic systems or language and which develop through the unconscious process makes an understanding on how meaning in representational systems are constructed, particularly by the ways of difference. This notion of development through these unconscious stages, furthermore, provides the possibility of personal change as well as the changing in meaning of representation if there is fragmentation during the process of subjectivity.

Discourse approach: Whereas semiotic seems to focus on how the systems of language determines the social practice and seems to confine the systems of representation to language, poststructuralists like Michel Foucault are more concerned with the questions of how language is used and is connected with social practices. That is to say that what concerns Foucault is the production of knowledge, rather than just meaning, through what he calls 'discourse' which means a group of statements which provide a language for talking, a way of representing the knowledge, or in the short term, the production of knowledge through language (Storey, 1993: Hall, 1997).

His focus on how human beings understand themselves in our culture and how our knowledge comes to be produced in different periods, leads him to stress that knowledge is historically and culturally specific. That is to say it cannot meaningfully function outside specific discourse (e.g. objects, subjects, culture, period). Foucault does not believe that any form of knowledge can claim an absolutely 'truth' outside the function of discourse, in the same way that power is not the property of a ruling class. His rejection of the power of class in the traditional Marxist theory brings him closer to Gramsci's idea of hegemony. As Gramsci notions that particular social groups struggle in many different ways to win the consent of other groups; Foucault positions that knowledge, as a form of power is a strategic terrain for an unequal relationship between the powerful and the powerless. "Where there is power, there is resistance... Power should not be thought as a negative force, repressing what it seeks to control, power is also productive, it produces reality and rituals of truth" (Storey, 1993: 92). Foucault argues that knowledge linked to power does not assume that what is said is true but who is saying it, when and where, has the power to make itself true. This point is applied by Edward Said to analyse a Western discourse on the Orient, which has constructed 'Orientalism' as a knowledge to serve the interests of the power of the West.

Foucauldian approach on discourse 'knowledge/power' has enormous implications for a theory of representation by its suggestion that discourse constructs the subject positions (meaning,

knowledge) according to its rules. Individuals, though, different from their class, gender, race will not be able to take meaning of their own representations or others unless they identify themselves and other with those positions, which the discourse constructs.

[3] **The encoding/decoding model** is proposed in 1973 by Stuart Hall. It outlines a research agenda, which unites the two paradigms of structural-culturalism and European structuralism, and presents it by the model of sender-message-receiver account of mass communication. In 'encoding/decoding' model, class is the prime analytical concept. This model emphasises the importance of 'decoding' as a distinctive moment because in decoding, which is the interaction of reader and text, reproduction of the dominant culture is ensured.

Chapter Two

Northeastern Migrant Women and the Dominant

Representations

This chapter discusses how racial stereotypes of the Northeastern migrant women are presented in the representational system of the culture including the media, and how these may affect the identification processes of the Northeastern women. To achieve this, an overall identity of the Northeastern migrant women is examined within the contexts of their gender relations, migration experiences, and the slum cultural setting. Although an identity of the Northeastern migrant women requires specific contexts and approaches since no identity is universal, it is worth understanding the status of Thai women's identities in order to recognise those of Northeastern women. Some relevant literature on Thai women's identities is explored through historical and feminist approaches as well as the implications of conceptualising migrant women's identities.

1) Northeast Region and the Migration

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Northeastern Thailand is the geographical mobility of its people. The pattern of movement is oriented overwhelmingly towards Bangkok, which made the city's population grow from 781,700 in 1947 to 1,800,700 in 1960 and 5,572,700 in 1993[1]. More than one-fifth of the growth is a result of Northeastern migrants since the late 1950s. The Northeast faces some of the most acute problems of all Thailand's four major geographic regions[2]. The land is infertile, often flooded in the rainy season and extremely dry in the hot season. About 6 million (52%) of the country's 11.5 million rural people living in absolute poverty are from this region.

The Northeast is the biggest region in the country, and consists of one-third of the total population of Thailand. The average income in the Northeast is clearly the lowest in the country, and over the last three decades, this has steadily declined relative to the national average, and particularly in relation to Bangkok. The economic recession in 1997 hit this poor region of the country most severely. The average farmer carried around 10,000 – 30,000 baht debt per household. Even when

the country's economy has gradually recovered since late 1999, the situation in the Northeast has remained difficult. While the average household income of the country rose nearly 2 % after the recovery in 1999, households in the Northeast were more than 8% poorer than before the recession in 1997 (*Bangkok Post Review* 4-10/ 06/ 00). No matter what the state of the country's economy is, each year the people in the Northeast face varying degrees of hardship depending on the severity of droughts and the amount of rainfall, which damage crops. Additionally, local opportunities for waged employment are generally too scarce to satisfy the rising cash needs of the region's people. A shortage of income-earning opportunities locally, the constantly harsh realities of poverty, and the perception of abundant opportunities in Bangkok appear to be the main reasons for such a high and directionally specific level of mobility. Furthermore, it is also a work of dominant representation that prevails the villagers to live in awe of Bangkok—in Thai, *Krung Thep*, meaning the 'city of angels' which merely mentions of the name has a magical effect (Pira, 1983; Bishop & Robinson, 1998).

Like other neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, the changes in the pattern of migration in Thailand have been striking over the last three decades (Pasuk, 1982; Angkarb, 1992). Traditionally, the men would migrate for seasonal periods of short duration while their wives took care of the rural households. However, at present, more young women than men leave their rural base and most are concentrated in Bangkok where there is a great demand for certain kinds of young female services. A 1992 national statistic noted the 'feminisation' trend in the migration stream since 1976 (*cf.* Mills, 1996), which was a result of the shift from agriculture to industry and export. Generally migrant women enter the paid labour force at a younger age than men. Nearly 60 percent of women migrants from the Northeast region are under 25 years of age and find employment as domestic workers, petty traders, vendors in the informal sector, or as semi-skilled and unskilled manufacturing workers as well as in the entertainment services and the sex business of various sorts in night spots and restaurants (Suteera and Maytinee, 1995).

According to the theories of internal migration of women proposed in the early 1970s, the phenomenon of women's migration can be explained in terms of the political economy and social class paradigms. Boserup (1970) studied internal migration patterns in many major regions and identifies three factors causing

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women's migration. These factors include a decline in women's participation in the rural economy, the increase in economic opportunities for women in the urban areas, and the absence of socio-cultural restrictions on women's mobility. Later on Young (1982) added several more factors accounting for the permanent migration of young women from rural areas to urban cities, including the household's need for cash income and the growth of demand for young single girls as domestic servants or service workers in urban areas. Young also argued that daughters of large families were probably more vulnerable to the pressure to leave home. A study of daughters' contributions to household incomes in Hong Kong by Salaff (1981) also demonstrated that children in working class families, particularly elder daughters, often leave school early and pursue full-time employment in the garment or electronics industries (*cf.* Song, 1999: 14). Similarly, Thai daughters of rural families tend to enter the wage labour force earlier than men because they are no longer required for agricultural labour locally, and are less important than boys in terms of educational investment. However, despite women outnumbering men in migrant labour, they earn only two-thirds of what men earn because of their unskilled-work and their unequal value as female workers.

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that women's migration from the Northeast is not only related to factors of production, but also to social relations of gender and family culture. The male-dominant culture from India was superimposed on the indigenous folk culture and family tradition through Buddhism and social systems (Prani, 1990). Ancient Buddhist texts place women at the lower end of the spiritual ladder, which results in the belief that being born as a woman is a karma or bad merit (Thitsa, 1980). These factors reinforce a predominantly patriarchal society, therefore, privileges like education are frequently given to sons. Moreover, Thai tradition emphasises obedience and gratefulness in daughters. For example, despite being considered morally wrong, working in the sex trade is partly acceptable as it shows the obedience of the daughter. Thus, the widespread prostitution reflects a particular pattern of family loyalty and a privilege of males, which is deeply rooted in Thai culture (Bishop & Robinson, 1998).

2) Theorising Thai Migrant Women's Identity

There is much written about the characteristic adaptation of rural-urban in Thai lifestyle, which suggests that there is no unique difference between the two

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characters of different locations (Donner 1978; Thorbek 1994; Cole 1996, etc.). It is emphasised that Thai rural people are very capable in adapting their rural lifestyle to an urban environment because of the loose structure in Thai culture. This scholarship concludes that there is only 'Thainess' among Thai people, which must be observed and understood in the village context. However, in my own research, I am sceptical of this anthropological perspective, especially when looking at the identity of the Northeastern migrant women living in an urban slum. In this section I explain some of my analysis briefly, which will be explored through the literature in terms of its historical context and feminist approach that provide relevant knowledge on Thai women.

2.1) Historical Context

Traditional Thai culture values define 'good' and 'bad' women in terms of a primary duty to the institution of the family. In the 'good' woman cultural ideology, a woman's place lies firmly in the home (Amara, 1997). Therefore, the historical development of the Thai gender structure can be conceptualised through the pattern of the Thai family. The influence of Hinduism and Buddhism, which viewed the status of men and women as unequal was evident since the Sukhothai period (1238-1349). Among the upper class, the concept of a powerful patriarchy was gradually adopted. The Sukhothai laws did not treat men and women equally. Women were classified into a class depending on their marital status to husbands who were allowed to have more than one wife (Amara, ibid.). Having a number of wives required men to categorise wives and women into different classes with the endorsement of laws. Categorisation of wives became very clearly defined during the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767) where the code of law stated that women were men's property and could be sold by their fathers or husbands (Panit, 1999). The wives were categorised into three groups: major wife (mia luang), minor wife or concubine (mia noi) and servant wife (mia klang thasi) were reproduced and strengthened in the laws of subsequent periods up to the Bangkok/ Ratanakosin period (1767- present). This practice has had a great impact on the Thai perception of class and gender because it positioned women within a class establishment, while men could move beyond class existence by outstanding performance before the king. In addition, obtaining more wives as a king's reward or other reasons could easily shift the men's class. Since 1935, the Civil Code was enacted, and under

family law, polygamy was prohibited. Wives were declared free individuals and no longer husbands' property (Panit, *ibid.*)

The notion of male superiority, as pointed out earlier, has been emphatically constructed in politics (as shown above) and religion. Buddhist ideology has been manipulated through a male hegemony to oppress women via cultural and moral patterns in Thai society. This ideology was distorted by Hinduism's values, which restricted women to domestic life and subordinated them to male authority (Chatsuman, 1991).

Since men were very much in control of class and gender, both in the public and domestic spheres, most proverbs and literature were written by men, and functioned as an agent of controlling over women. For example, in *Tribhumikatha* of the Sukhothai period, the ideal qualities of women were those of *'nang kaew'* or 'perfect women', which revolved around servicing their men and putting their men's happiness before their own. And in the early Bangkok period, a perfect wife should have all the good qualities of a mother in looking after her husband, and the qualities of a wife for sexual pleasure and reproduction (Amara, 1997; Veerada, 1997).

Panit's (1999) study of stereotypical characteristics of women in Thai language from past to present, demonstrates the gender bias in connecting women with sexual qualities and feminine appearance rather than with other aspects. Some examples of positive words for women are: *onwaan* (sweet), *naraak* (lovely), *riaproy* (composed and proper), *rak nuan sanguan tua* (not a loose woman), *mae siruean* (home keeper). Contrarily, the negative words are: *laichai* (having many loves), *chaochu* (flirtatious), *khibon* (nagging). Words of positive and negative connotation place women in domestic confinement and repress their sexuality under men's control. This Thai literature, mostly written by men, could be held responsible for forging these stereotypes, many of which are still very influential in controlling women's role and status in contemporary society. This results in many conflicts of identities that Thai women are facing today.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier this gender bias has been particularly evident in the upper class. Available documents indicate that in rural Thailand, patriarchy has never been so prevalent (Potter, 1977; Chai, 1984; Prani, 1991; Amara, 1997; Veerada, 1997). Although rural families appear to be bilateral, they follow the practices of a matrilocal family pattern in which the woman is dominant

and plays the leading role psychologically, although not authoritatively. Family relationships in rural Thailand are more matrilineal where succession of land is presented to matriline. However, in practice, legal authority does not lie with women. It is with the men of the house and its succession goes from father-in-law to son-in-law rather than father to son. In this way, women remain core influences in the family of which husbands are required to pay responsibility and respect. This matrilocality of rural Thai families provides a key search for my analysis of migrant identity in which whether or not the changing of context from rural to urban may interrupt the transformation of this gender value. The concept of matrilocality will be brought forward to a later section on migrant identity.

2.2) Imperial Context

Although, historically and geographically, Thailand has never been directly colonised, the establishment of Western authority, which rested heavily on colonial discourses, has marked the differences between Thais and Westerners in terms of gender and sexuality. In the period of imperialism, western gender identities became part of 'civilisation', while the others (e.g. Thai gender identities) were represented as inferior and barbaric. Therefore, Thai gendered bodies are often constructed in an international context through an imperial framework.

In the nineteenth century, the Thai state was represented as feminine or improperly masculine because of the practice of polygamy and prostration (kowtow), and, therefore, naturally subordinated to the 'manly' Western states (Jeffrey, 1999). Indeed, the establishment of imperialism through gender construction was justified with the development of Enlightenment in which masculinity was marked by rationality to control feminine emotionality, and Western civilisation itself was defined in terms of a rational masculine character (Heckman, 1990; Connell, 1995). Thus, the rule of patriarchy was extended to the rule over racial 'Others', which were characterised as feminine and lacking the self-restraint of civilised manliness. To Westerners, Thai identity was linked with undesirable, sexual excessiveness and immorality. Thai women were clearly constructed as opposite to Western women (Jeffrey, ibid). Thus, the principle characters of proper sexuality and refined women were invisible in Thai women's identities, and needed to be governed.

It can be said that the imperial concept had brought with it a strong ideology of patriarchy that is still very much intact in attitudes towards Thai gender identities. Although Thai women have gone through many changes in order to be accepted as 'civilised', these remarkable changes are, in fact, outward and superficial as deep down Thai women's identities are still overruled by perceived stereotypes of imperialism and patriarchy. For example, Thai women are caught in between sexual repression and sexual exploitation because of the belief that they cannot control their sexuality, and, therefore, they become powerless in sexual negotiations to men and Western culture (Panit, 1999). In this globalisation of capitalism and consumerism, ideas about Thai women's sexuality remain unchanged and this sexual construction has spilled over into the entire identities of Thai women. These common prejudices about Thai women's identities, handed down through cultural traditions and sanctioned by imperial ideology, have profoundly affected Thai women's self-images and expressions of identities.

2.3) Thai Feminist Approach

Colonisation may have an impact on the way gender is represented, but it is a fact that Thai women were not directly oppressed as objects of colonialism as other colonised women were. Thus, the construction of Thai women's identities did not emerge from the struggle against colonisers, but from the struggle to construct Thai national identities amidst Westernisation and modernisation. This frees Thai feminist groups to selectively borrow from Western feminist discourse to resist male biases in religion and cultural ideology, and/or to take up a nationalist discourse to resist imperialism and universal Western feminism (Amara, 1997; Veerada, 1997; Van Esterik, 1999). Thus, Thai feminism can bring a unique perspective on postmodernism—one, which deconstructs universalistic knowledge and searches for previously silenced voices in the specific context and locality, to conceptualise the representations of Thai women's identities. However, according to postmodern feminism, the deconstruction and reconstruction depends on the concepts and tools used as well as who is doing it (Marchand & Parpart, 1995). In this sense, postmodern feminism has introduced 'empowerment' as a tool to change the perception of gender relations in Thai feminism, in the same way as Thai feminism has contributed to it.

One element, which supports the link between postmodern feminism and Thai feminism, is the recognition of women in Thailand (and other Southeast Asian countries), which is more significant rather than in other Asian countries (particularly South Asian countries). In Thailand, the concept of power and authority in a particular space has been recognised through the traditional matrilateral social system, where women seem to have authority in certain domains (Amara, 1997). Therefore, it would be a mistake to deconstruct Thai women's identities entirely because this means a refusal of the traditional values that sustain women's position in society.

With regard to the notion of patriarchy, Thai feminism seldom uses it as a totalising concept as Western feminism does, but rather articulates indigenous concepts, such as *barami* (perfections, merciful power) to specify instances of male power over women, which simultaneously acknowledges the existence of female and feminine power (Van Esterick, 1999). This concept of male's *barami* requires consent from women along the axes of gender relationships rather than coercion. Women do not always comply with men, especially at the family level (Thorbek, 1994).

However, although Thai women traditionally enjoyed several kinds of freedom and occupied a core position, the development process has had a contradictory impact on them. When the country became more modernised and capitalised, forms of gender inequality and sexual exploitation became more commercialised. A dramatic change in Thailand is the high tolerance of sex tourism, which is an outcome of the collusion of local and international patriarchies. The place of Thailand in the global context, and the rise in the economy increased the commodification of women as objects of sexual trade and unskilled-labour migrants (Veerada, 1997; Bishop & Robinson, 1998). Prostitution is one extreme example where many poor, unskilled- rural women often resist poverty, and abusive or dominating fathers or husbands by going into the potentially dangerous sex trade. Instead of withdrawing into self-pity, these poor women use this humiliating situation to earn money, hoping that they would come back with a new identity, e.g. as a dutiful daughter who raises her parents' and siblings' standard of living, or as a generous patron who donates to the temple. For Thai feminism, the effect of development on Thai women's identities and gender value requires multiple approaches to analyse and deconstruct. The range of theories, such as

postmodernism, postcolonialism, Third world feminism and indigenous Thai ideology, need to be recognised to identify the source of many transnational and transforming processes that exploit women as well as appropriate women in to new gender identities and relationships.

2.4) Migrant Women's Identity: Rural VS Urban

I argue that the position and identity of Thai women varies depending on what domain one considers (e.g. class, ethnic, politics), and how those domains are differentially valued. Therefore, to identify the status of the Northeastern migrant women, the comparison between rural and urban localities is recommended, together with looking at male ideology within these domains.

There are many common factors in the identities of migrant women living in Bangkok slum areas and of village women. For example, they are marked by poverty, uncertainty and the lack of future prospects. Their lives are also marked by the social perception that men are superior, that home and domestic work is women's responsibility, and that family sustenance relies heavily on the women's shoulder. However, there are significant differences in how women in the two areas perceive their own identities. The reason for this difference can be traced back to the development of the concept of gender. Prani describes that in pre-history and indigenous Thai culture, Thai women enjoyed a much greater social role until the influences of the external culture of Hinduism and Buddhism resulted in the regression of women. One example of the influence of Indian patriarchy is the concept of a 'good woman', who is defined as selfless with refined manners and total devotion to her husband and children. 'This is a value which society takes for granted as a woman's natural duty' (Prani, 1991: 29).

The transformations of Hindu and Buddhist cultures still impact powerfully on the identity and gender relations of Thai rural women. Although women's status is subordinate to men as is expressed in a proverb saying that men are the front legs of the elephant and women are the hind legs, the influence of the indigenous culture provides an interruption to patriarchal culture. There is still equal inheritance for boys and girls and the marriage and family life are inherited through women. The female line of descent is the nucleus around which the household is built (Potter, 1977). Such a pattern of kinship gives Thai rural women a certain position. Even though it is still the husband who makes the final decisions, while the wife has her

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parents and relatives living nearby, he must establish his circle of friends around this group as well.

Furthermore, the Buddhist concept that women are less spiritual human beings than men results in more freedom for rural women or women of the urban poor. For example, it is considered proper for working class women to work in production such as rice farming or waged work as well as domestic work. By contrast, the concept of virtue and refined manners requires upper class women to be submissive and confined to domestic caring work, which is similar to the concept of women in traditional Western culture (Mills, 1996). Another aspect of identity difference can be seen from Thai women's perception of sexual control, which was transferred from imperial stereotypes of Thai sexuality and its domination of male's superiority. Sexuality in the Thai context is believed to be a dangerous power, which must be controlled, and since the man is the more spiritual creature (in the same way as Western civilisation), he should control the sexuality of women. This belief strongly influences gender relations and women's position in the family. However, the attitude towards sexual control seems less strict among rural Thai women than urban women and, in fact, the rural women are considered perfectly capable of controlling their own sexuality. For example, it might be considered immoral if a young girl loses her virginity before marriage but it is accepted and not regarded as a reason for huge guilt for rural women. This also explains why many rural women make conscious and calculated decisions to go into prostitution.

While the indigenous culture of rural women can help them resist the gender repression to some extent, ironically, the advent of modernisation and the force of massive migration have led to the loss of their rural value of gender as a cultural stronghold. This loss has impacted on their identities. Nonetheless migrant women cannot claim to be the 'perfect' woman of urban culture as this implies the value of genteel virtue and the upper social level, which they never possess. On the other hand, they cannot identify directly with their 'back home' culture since it does not exist in the context of modernisation like Bangkok. This can be seen in the case of migrant women living in the Klongtoey slum who are not happy to call themselves Bangkokian, despite living for more than two decades in Bangkok. The women feel rejected by the wider Thai society. At the same time, some of the slum migrant women are reluctant to show their Northeastern identity in the public place especially their spoken dialect, which in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical

structure deviates from standard Central Thai. This identity conflict makes the slum migrant women feel that they are in opposition to the majority of women and to the society surround them.

The second impact of migration on their identity, nevertheless, is the dilemma of their local culture and beliefs. As waged work is not a prohibitive norm for their class, these migrant women are most exploited from industrialisation, which treats them as a desirable commodity. The degradation of their identity to a mere commodity is extended to their sexual identity, which tends to be commercialised. There are a number of slum migrant women who have experienced or are experiencing the sale of sexual service either as a prostitute, a bar girl, a waitress, a minor wife, or even as a wife. Thorbek writes in her research on gender and slum culture in Asia, 'The sale of sexual services by women illustrates the interplay between women's difficult economic situation, their economic dependence on men, their sexual subjugation and the social definition of women's sexuality. Almost all women in the slum were economically and socially dependent on men and on the sexual services they provide for men' (1994: 79). This explanation shows that poverty and the difficulties for migrant women of fending for themselves and their children, together with the dominant view of sexual control, are factors that drive migrant women to prostitution.

However, this identity conflict in women's sexuality is, more or less, viewed from outside of the slum context. For women in the slum, abstract moral norms of sexuality exist, but might take second place to personal sympathies in determining women's sexual morality. This can be counted as the third impact of migration on Northeastern migrant women's identity as they carry the perception of rural women's sexuality with them. A noticeable case is the different evaluations of women according to the type of relationships women have with men. For example, prostitutes are judged sympathetically if they do it for their economic dependents, but are sanctioned if they do it for sexual pleasure and their own needs. Similar to the secretly kept mistress or the so-called minor wives, people will feel sorry for them if they are forced or exploited by men, but they will be hated if they have intimate relations and capture the husbands away from family responsibilities. In fact, this oppositional judgement towards prostitutes and minor wives is widely adopted among Klongtoey women whose gender relationships are characterised by male's improper sexuality. Again, we need to keep in mind that this identification

of migrant women's sexuality is an interplay between their background of cultural moral norms and their new perception of sexuality as a commodity, in contrast to the sexual norms of urban women.

Last, but not least in the impact of migration on migrant women's identity is the ideal concept of matrilineal kinship that the rural women bring with them to the city. As has been emphasised earlier, rural culture is centred around female relationships, thus, the experience of childhood extends to their relationship with other people in the urban slum. Most Northeastern migrant women feel strongly about the values of cooperation and mutual relationships among female friends, which they hardly establish with women outside their slum culture. These female networks and ties, either as mother-daughter or sisters or friends, are visible in the urban slum because of the transformation of rural culture and value as well as the shared experiences in urban struggle. These networks inside a community are significant to the formation of the migrant women's identities compared to the urban women whose identities are more related with various factors and particular the consumption. Thorbek observes of Thai women's participation in slum life that '[W] omen form friendships and networks in the slum, and are active in the creation of new gender relations and of slum culture in the wider sense. Besides kin-based networks there are several fairly loosely structured grouping in the slum, and women take part in the formation of these' (1994: 224).

Being traditionally the core position of the family and kinship, the Northeastern women are able to negotiate their gender, race, and class politics, as well as other social politics. For example, a comparison study conducted by Flaherty and Jengjalern (1995) among women of Thai regions on the issues of forest management demonstrates that Northeast women, with more beneficial experiences of their core positions, suggest letting local people manage the forest, while women of other regions tend to allow the government to handle it (cf. Veerada, 1997). The ideological linkage with rural culture that values women's position and lessens sexual repression may have a significant impact on how the Klongtoey women are empowered in their negotiations when representing their identities in a specific context of migrant urban poor.

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3) Racialising Northeastern Migrant Women

The Northeast[3] region is known colloquially as *I-san*, a Pali-Sanskrit term meaning Northeast. This term reflects the marginal orientation of the region in relation to the social and economic centre of Thailand, the Central region and Bangkok. The majority of the population are ethnically distinct, Lao-speaking people who express a collective identity based upon domestic language, cultural practices and regional history distinct from Central Thai people. The integration of *I-san* within the Thai state since 1893 has largely resulted in its subordination both economically and socially (Mills, 1995). The process of this incorporation has been accompanied by ideological and cultural transformation and imposition. Central Thai culture is regarded as the 'elite' culture of Thailand and is legitimated as the national identity. The discourse of unified identity (representing Central Thai identity) functions as a hegemonic tool of the state to exclude and subordinate other ethnic groups. The dominant representations of the Northeast (both geographical region and the people) in government and mainstream media are constantly portrayed in terms of marginality and cultural inferiority. The modern, urban, educated, wealthy and progressive Central Thai are frequently referred to in order to contrast them with the traditional, rural, ignorant, poor and backward Northeast.

The discourses that constitute *I-san* ethnicity as subordinated and, therefore, should be governed by the dominant Central group are, more or less, the transformation of internal imperialism. The racialising discourse of *I-san* ethnicity complements Hall's (1997) theorising of ethnic identity in which a prime strategy of 'splitting' is deployed to divide the normal or the dominant from the abnormal or the marginalized. This binary opposition confirms the core concept of representation, which emphasises the imbalance of the power structure through cultural practice, such as the media. Therefore, what we view as the identity of Northeastern women may not always be a reality, instead, it is a representation made available by the prestige of high culture, the centralisation of mass media, and the so-called inferiority of their marginal culture. These are aspects of the imbalance in power relations that put the weight of control over representation on the side of the dominant power. The idea of racialisation suggests the way to look at the structurally subordinate position of *I-san* ethnicity by recognising that *I-san* ethnicity does not exist outside of representation but is formed in and by it, in a process of social and political power struggles. Consequently, racialisation is lived

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through the categories of *I-san* ethnicity. Although, the term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of identity, it is a fact that ethnicity is also placed within the discourses of historical, cultural and political struggles which define the context of power (Hall, 1996, 1997; Barker, 1999).

In a variety of ways, cultural representations within Thailand construct images of the Northeastern people or *I-san* ethnicity as very poor, uneducated, possessing a 'low' culture, and naïve. In addition, the natural hardship of the region has forged *I-san* images as very tolerant, enduring, and resilient, which apparently complement their physical strength, but, in fact, these images have dehumanised *I-san* people as the object rather than subject of society. By becoming objects *I-san* people are vulnerable to exploitation and treated in terms of their labour supply to the country, rather than as making any kind of cultural and intellectual contributions. Thus, the term *I-san* connotes labour or working class in the country, even though the entire labour force is not constituted of *I-san* people. *I-san* people, whether they live in rural or urban locations, are securely placed within the class boundary in which the majority of them are defined as working class or urban poor.

Thus, for Northeastern migrant women, the image of urban poor does not emerge because of their migration and living in a slum. It is already tied up with *I-san* ethnicity, which will always follow them wherever they go. An example of Northeastern women working in the service industry (such as restaurants, sexual services) in foreign countries provides an obvious case that place (in this case globalise place) does not help deconstruct the *I-san* working class or urban poor image. And for the Northeastern migrant women of Klongtoey slum, their representation seems 'doubly' denigrating because they are represented not only as the 'uncivilised' rural people, but also as the 'lowest' of the urban poor. Unfortunately, although the Northeastern women of Klongtoey slum inherited a matrilineal family pattern, the internalisation of imperialism and the devaluation of migrant people have imposed the authority of patriarchy within the once women's semi-autonomous power. Thus, it is not surprising that the representations of Northeastern migrant women are also degraded in terms of gender relationships. For example, in the context of patriarchal capitalism, the sexuality of Northeastern women is often considered as available and exchangeable for money. As a result, images of Northeastern women are often devalued and positioned outside the imaginative labels of 'good' and 'refined' women.

3.1) Stereotypes of Northeastern Migrant Women in Television

As suggested in theories of representations, questions of the centre and the margin are central concerns of the politics of representations, which includes television as a prime domain (Dyer, 1993; Gillespie, 1995; Hall, 1996, 1997; Barker, 1999). It is argued that what is represented as the 'margin' is not marginal, but constitutive of representations *vis-à-vis* the 'centre'. Discourses of centrality and marginality are the common identifications in television, which mark the differences among ethnicities and classes.

It is a fact that the Northeastern people constitute the largest number of migrants living in Bangkok where many of them are destined to live only in the urban slum. The mobility to exchange their labour and service in order to free themselves from the harsh realities of the Northeastern villages, is precisely the common image that television representations reinforce. Television usually places the images of migrant urban poor in a position of inferiority, which is required to be controlled, commanded or trained by the dominant groups of the society. The distinct stereotypes of Northeastern migrant women often found in television, which have origins in their class and migration images are:

- Domestic servants who are rather stupid and naïve, but devoted and subservient to the master family.

- Labour/ manufacturing workers who are physically strong but brainless and ignorant of safety caution in working conditions.

- Slum women who are aggressive and violent without proper feminine manners, such as using strong language and abusing male's sexuality.

- Slum mothers/wives who exercise no responsibility in the family, but drink and gamble.

- Slum women who have no taste in dressing, eating and other lifestyles.

- Prostitutes who are oversexed and involved in illegal drug dealing.

From these stereotypes, there are some particular points to be made further in this Chapter. The first point regarding the representations of Northeastern women on television is that they have, for a long time, simply been ignored. Compared to the Central Thai characters which have been seen more frequently and exclusively on

television, the Northeastern characters take up less than 5 percent of dramatic characters appearing in television programmes of 1995 (Chueanrudee, 1996).

Not only are they ignored through the low numbers of characters, the Northeastern characters are often placed outside mainstream narratives and irrelevant to the story. One of the Northeastern representations that is most frequently seen on television is the character of the servant, who usually appears as a complementary character to show the wealth of the main characters. Since their roles have no significant meaning to the story, they can appear and disappear easily without notice. These Northeastern servants are defined by distinctive signifiers to differentiate them from the main characters. For example, they dress in local style (simple T-shirt and long wrapped-up multi-colour body skirt). They have heavy and funny make-up, and are usually clumsy and make mistakes. Their manner towards the master is obviously polite and subservient, which is also presented through the proximity of the servant and the master. For example, the servant must always sit below the sitting level of the master and at a certain distance. Often, the servant role is used only to create laughter or reduce tension in the story. For example, the common character of Northeastern women servants in television soap operas or dramas is a naïve girl who tries to identify herself with the 'Bangkok' masters but fails because of her Lao dialect and her poor manners. Nevertheless, despite being in the margins of the television narrative, these types of characters usually serve as 'spice' for the story.

The second representation of these women concerns the experience of being alienated from Central Thai culture and politics. Although, the characters of *I-san* ethnicity are no longer uncommon within Thai media, stereotypes about them have separated them from the main culture and subsequently made them feel alienated. This ambiguous feeling that whether they are Thai or not is represented through many common words spoken by television characters, such as 'You are a stupid Lao', 'such an ugly Lao', ' shame to be Lao in Thai nationality'[4], etc. This alienating discourse does not appear only in television dramas, but also in newspapers, especially in tabloid newspapers. Sometime news headlines and stories use the term Lao/*I-san* to label the Northeastern migrants who cause trouble in the society.

The third representation on television defined as Northeastern migrant women is the stereotype of slum people, which is rather depicted from the points of

view of the outsiders, especially the dominant groups. These images include the image of unorganised and illegal occupants who simply claim ownership of land and who are very aggressive when facing eviction. It is also the image of aggressive people who are bound up with violent surroundings like crime, gambling, drinking, illegal drug using, and domestic battering. On the contrary, it is the image of people who are fun-filled, enjoy life and believe in fate rather than self-achievement. They are seen as drinking, gambling excessively or less disciplined with the accompanying term 'Chinese are good in hard-working, Thai-Lao are clever in eating and drinking'.

Finally, it is the image of sexual immorality, as most of slum women characters do not restrict their sexuality, as the 'traditional good' women should do. This is presented by emphasising the common occupation of slum women as prostitutes, and by showing their relationship problems, such as being secret minor wives, having children outside of marriage, as well as their easy attitudes towards illegal abortion.

It is believed 'that the constant portrayal of negative stereotypes of slum context is bound to enhance the idea of slum people's inferiority and marginality, or as termed by Lewis (1966), as a 'subculture of poverty inherent in slums' (*cf.* Cole, 1996). These representations on television, however, are connected not only to what the Northeastern migrant women feel they should take upon themselves, but to the way they interpret the meaning of their identity. Nevertheless, the case analysis of the Klongtoey women may reveal whether these prevailing stereotypes in the media lead them to hold such views of themselves, or empower them to deconstruct their representations. These discussions will be presented in Chapter Five, Six and Seven respectively.

4) Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a brief picture of the Northeastern migrant women and their identities, and demonstrated some sense of how these women are racialised in the representational system. It can be drawn from this discussion that change in the cultural, political and social relations through migration and development, has brought the loss of women's central position and autonomous identity. Migration, urban poor and gender discourses become the main bases for the representations of the Northeastern migrant women. These three discourses, which revolve around

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political, social and cultural contexts, have secured the positions of the Northeastern migrant women by marking them as marginal, or, in opposition to the centre.

The marking of difference has long been used by media like television to alienate the Northeastern people and lead them to accept their subordinate place. Representations of Northeastern migrant women on television often portray them in inferior roles, such as domestic servants or unskilled-workers, with negative qualities, such as stupidity, ignorance, or naivety, and in extreme manners, such as aggressiveness, or hyper-sexuality.

It can be said that these marginalized representations are privileged by the media in favour of the dominant culture, which in this sense means the Central culture or Bangkok. Therefore, in order to cease this kind of dehumanisation that has a great impact on the other ethnicities, identity and difference in the arena of representations, such as television, must be deconstructed. However, it is necessary to take precaution that deconstruction, like all other discourses, always serves the practitioners' purposes. Therefore, the 'preferred' deconstruction of Thai feminists, or other deconstruction theorists, may not coincide with the deconstruction politics that the Northeastern migrant women deploy. Without allowing their voices to be heard, the politics of representations would be just a politics of difference that secures the marginal place of the migrant ethnic women, and finally it would confine them within a culture of passivity rather than activity.

In order to know how the media representations interrelate with the women's own identities, we need to look at the process of the women's reception and interpretation of media texts. This requires critical analyses of audience and text receptions, which are theorised in cultural studies and empirical audience research. The following chapter provides the basic concepts and framework for studying the Klongtoey women as the audiences by exploring how the Klongtoey women deconstruct or reconstruct their identities based on watching their dominant representations on television. This chapter will lead to a discussion of the research design and method, which will follow in chapter 4.

Note

[1] This is the recent data of the Bangkok population from the National Census Bureau.

[2] Thailand is divided into four major geographical regions: Central, North, South, and Northeast. The Central region is the most developed and fastest growth region, where Bangkok, the capital, is situated. The North region is enriched with national forests, beautiful sceneries, and traditional cultures, which makes it one of the most popular tourist places in the world. The South region is mainly constituted of coastal areas and natural resources. In contrast, the Northeast region has very limited natural resources, which cause the lowest potential in agriculture and restrict the growth of economy, industry, as well as any kinds of development circumstances. According to official statistics (1982) levels of rural poverty in the Central region was 15%, relatively different than in the three remaining regions—the South was 33%, the North was 34%, and the Northeast was as high as 45%.

[3] The Northeast is the region where ancient civilisations flourished. These are dated by archaeologists as 5,000 to 7,000 years old, thus predating any hitherto recorded civilisation. The region was part of the Ancient Khmer Empire. This accounts for several important Khmer shrines being found in the Northeast. Most people speak a Thai-Lao dialect. They have unique age-old cultures and colourful traditions in their various communities throughout the region.

[4] Since Northeastern people are closely related to Laos and Cambodian in terms of ethnicity, culture and dialect because of their geographical proximity, they tend to be looked down upon by the more centrally situated dominant culture. This prejudice has its roots in Thai history as Laos and Cambodia were former colonisers of the Thai kingdom.

Chapter Three

Doing Ethnography and Listening to 'Real' Audiences

In this chapter I critically review some of the existing literature on the concepts and practices of audience studies by looking at its development towards ethnography. Then, a concept of ethnographic audience analysis will be explored and highlighted for its relevance to my study. However, being regarded as 'the new audience research' (Ang, 1996), ethnographic audience analysis cannot be foregrounded without problematising it. Therefore, some debates and limitations of this approach will be considered briefly in the light of what I see as important direction for critical cultural studies. If a central aim of ethnographic audience analysis is to understand the lived experiences of audiences, then it has to engage with the situational contexts in which the media are used and in which meanings are constructed. The emphasis on studying actual audiences is compatible with the standpoint of feminist research, which stresses the importance of doing research *on* real women (and *by* women) in order to make female experiences become visible. This is the commonly held belief of both ethnographic audience analysis and feminism.

As I suggested before this research is an attempt to link the concept of counter-hegemony based on class, ethnicity and gender with a productive method of ethnographic audience analysis. This study aims to make qualitative ethnographic research useful to the study of media audience analysis and to understand through ethnographic research what real audiences contribute to the process of meaning construction. However, the recognition of diversity derived from postmodernism, has made me realize that there is no single method that could complete a complex study of representations and audiences. Thus, a key concern of this study is that the use of ethnography may result in a one sided approach that relies too heavily on audiences' experiences and imaginations. To do this would be to ignore the fact that textual representations in the media are also socially and culturally structured. It is argued here that in order to understand how audiences construct meanings from media representations, the process of signification or the ways in which meanings are constructed around a particular text is necessary. This is the mechanism of

textual analysis, which assists an exploration of how texts encourage audiences to make certain interpretations rather than others.

I am convinced that one of the most promising ways to study how media audiences, particularly those of marginalized groups, contest representations in the dominant media is to apply both the method of ethnography and that of (con)textual analysis. This joint approach enables the researcher to understand the audiences and their relationships to the contextualised meanings of media texts.

1) Audience Studies: A Re-visit

In the first chapter, I situated representation and identity within cultural studies, which specifies the ways that cultural forms, e.g. media representations, serve to reinforce the dominant power(s) or to empower subordinate resistance. This term involves analysing the construction of meaning through specific processes like encoding and decoding. It also indicates the importance of understanding how audiences read the particular representations or texts, and how they make sense from the reading. In order to conceptualise audience reception for my study, I start with an assessment of audience reception theory since it was introduced in the 1980s. However, to demonstrate the ways in which this concept has been developed, I will turn back the clock a bit further to reflect its even earlier origins.

It is long before the mid-1970s that the mainstream model of audience research, in North America, had assumed audience as 'consumer' within only quantitative interests. While in British cultural studies, the category of audience had not been considered a significant factor in the same way as class had been. In the absence of culturally theoretical work, the research on audience was simply taken on the level of the 'individual' or as 'mass', rather than 'community' or 'institution'. Much of the early audience research considered audiences as passive consumers and tended to overestimate the power of the media, particularly television. A number of writers, such as McQuail (1975); Hartley (1978); Morley (1980, 1982); Hall (1982); Fiske (1987); and Lindlof (1987), began to challenge this view, particularly by insisting on the significance of audiences' differences and on different reception contexts.

This early concept of a passive and unifying audience was intensely criticised for this misconception of audiences as merely 'cultural dope', who were unable to perceive the difference between their interests and those of the producers

of the texts. This concept rather perceived audience as 'zombies' to fit the dominant ideology or consumerist's benefit. In other words, it saw audience as relatively powerless and undiscriminating between 'reality' and the texts that transfer dominant ideology (Hall, 1973, 1986; Morley, 1980, 1992, 1996; Fiske, 1987).

In fact there is no doubt that this previous claim of passive audiences is incapable of demonstrating the significance of the actual relationships between dominant forms of media and their audiences. For example, it dismissed a realism of audiences' pleasures and choices by endorsing such a presumption that the viewing pleasure is an outcome of consumption lifestyle. Even a quantitative researcher such as McQuail, a European scholar whose works influenced the contemporary American school, points to the problem that 'Audience research, as usually conducted, is a form of market research and hence represents the audience as market--a body of consumers of a particular product' (1975: 187).

In the 1980s, as problems with the static passive audiences became more evident, the search for ways of creating distinctions among active audiences was begun. The most significant development was the realisation that audiences, indeed, assimilate, select and reject media in specific personal contexts. This finding has led to the formulation of the 'uses and gratifications' model of audience studies. The classic and widely quoted notion of Halloran (1970) reveals the concern of this model: 'We must get away from the habit of thinking in terms of what the media do to people and substitute for it the idea of what people do with the media' (cf. Morley 1974, 1992; Brunt 1992). Actually, this concept had first been introduced in the 1940s but interest was shown only after three decades had passed. This approach, which was derived from Lazarfeld's study of radio soap opera listeners (1944), highlighted the important fact that different members of the media audiences may use and interpret any particular programme in quite different ways depending on their own gratification in the use of the media, such as for emotional release, companionship, or personal reference. In brief, contrary to the passive audience approach, this concept viewed the audience as fully active in the construction of meaning. This 'uses and gratifications' model has had a great impact on media theories because it reversed the communication hierarchy of 'sender-message-receiver' by insisting on audience orientation as an essential precursor to an evaluation of mass communication.

While the 'use and gratification' model has been one of the dominant paradigms in the study of media audiences, a number of limitations of the approach have been identified. Elliot (1974) has pointed out a number of serious problems. He has claimed that it is underpinned by a psychological framework of individual needs, abstracted from the social and cultural context in which these needs and desires are generated. This particular criticism can be illustrated by the study of McQuail *et al* (1972) in which an attempt was made to relate viewing gratifications to the social characteristics of the audiences. However, these correlations were not pursued or explained since the authors were not concerned with the social structural factors influencing viewers' needs and gratifications.

The British cultural studies school, led by, for instance, Hall, Curran, Morley, has criticised the 'uses and gratifications' model on the grounds that it tends to blur the questions of recognition, interpretation and responses of the audiences by overestimating the power of audiences in selecting every message they prefer. As Morley (1992, 1996) argues, the message is not simply a window of the world neither an object with one real meaning, rather, there are signifying mechanisms, which may promote a certain meaning, even one privileged meaning, and suppress others. In practice, the 'uses and gratifications' approach, fails to take into account the fact that television consumption is more a matter of availability of the message rather than of selection. To make it clear, audiences tend to select familiar texts because they already know the social meaning of that particular text given by culturally and socially dominant norms. The second problem is concerned with its emphasis on individual differences of interpretation and gratification. The criticism is that, although there will always be individual or as termed 'private readings', these individual readings, in fact, are patterned into cultural structures and other determinants, such as, gender, class and race (Morley, 1986, 1992, 1996; Moores, 1993).

The need to link individual differences of interpretation with shared cultural codes encourages analysis of environment-related factors, which influence the relationship between the media and the audiences. This also indicates a need to understand the cultural and social positions of the text, and the everyday lives of audiences in the forms of their experiences, interests, views, feelings and so on. Generally, this consideration leads to attention to the influence of social and cultural factors, especially the impact of gender and domestic relations on patterns of media

reception (Lull, 1990). In fact, this is a movement towards cultural studies in which the audience reception theory and the contextual signification of texts have been developed critically in British cultural studies.

1.1) Textual Analysis and Preferred Reading

The 1970s saw a great deal of textual theorising of the screen media and the messages they were assumed to communicate to audiences. There was a radical framework within which media/audience relations could be approached. Cultural theorists drawing on semiotics began to talk about the 'text', as a complex and structured process of signs rather than an empty vehicle for the transmission of information or opinion (Moores, 1993). In this respect, audiences became 'readers', and were believed to be relatively involved in the construction of a text's meaning (s).

The most significant example of this textual determinism was the approach to films and spectatorships described as 'Screen' theory. This theory is constituted of a great number of contributors, from semiotics, Althusserian ideology, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Central to this theory is the notion that the dominant narrative form of popular film, and especially Hollywood film, constitutes an ideological discourse, which defines a hierarchy of truth. MacCabe (1974, *cf.* Weaver, 1994) argues that it is impossible for any discourse to objectively represent what is 'real', therefore, what is represented in the text is the validity of ideology, and when audiences accept it, they become a subject of that ideology.

This clearly prompts questions about the ideological operations of film as a system of signification and its mechanism that lead audiences to see film as a 'window on the world', and not a representation of the world (Moores, 1993; Weaver, 1994). To clarify this argument, Moores quoted MacCabe (1974) in proposing that 'the classic realist text' works by constructing an illusion of transparency in which spectators imagine themselves to be gazing directly on a 'real' scene when the reality is that they are watching a film. Therefore, the spectatorial gaze is subjected to and controlled by the narrative vision of film. In this sense, whatever an audience reads is the meaning the film makes. It can be said that 'Screen' theory has taken a political perspective in disrupting the claim of realistic discourse in commercial and popular films.

However, by regarding audiences as ideological subjects, textual analysis seems to fall back into an abstract position and fails to consider audience as an empirical reality. The exclusive attention to textual analysis is seen to have created a new blind spot because it tends to ignore the social, political and ideological conditions under which meaning, encoding and decoding take place (Scannell, 1991; Lull, 1990; Morley, 1992; Ang, 1996). Although analysis of the text remains a fundamental necessity for reception theory, the text, as Morley argues, 'is only meaningful in its interaction with an audience' (1992: 21). This implies that in accounting for media audience analysis, rather than focusing on 'What is being read', it is more useful to investigate 'How texts are read'. Therefore, this approach is incapable of speculating on how different audiences might read texts in different ways and take different meanings from those texts (Morley, 1989). Furthermore, it is recognised that audiences play an active part in constructing meaning and a position for themselves within the text, and that they need not adopt the position ideologically structured by the text. As a way out, more and more theorists insist on the necessity of combining sociological and semiological insights (Ang, 1996).

Nevertheless, it is unclear how theorists can find answers to explain why and how, to some extent, a text can successfully encourage audiences to adopt a particular meaning, or how they can articulate an argument against the preferred meaning in the text. It yet needs to be examined how particular audiences bring in their social and cultural contexts to read the representations of the text, which are also constructed through particular signifiers and a series of social relations.

1.2) Encoding/Decoding Model

The view that the audience need not be the subject of textual determinism but, at the same time, not have total freedom in the selection of the text, was expressed in the encoding/decoding model of communication. This influential critical work was initiated by Stuart Hall in the early 1970s while he was at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Hall's encoding/decoding model seeks to combine semiotic and sociological concerns in the study of the construction of meaning. He argues that for any message to 'satisfy a "need" or be put to a "use", it must first be perceived as meaningful discourse and meaningfully decoded' (1973: 3).

The central theme of the encoding/decoding model is its situating structures of production, text and audience within a framework where each can be analysed in relation to each other. For Hall, the communication process has to be taken as a whole, with the moment of text making at one end and the moment of audience reception at the other. Within the encoding/decoding model, neither the text nor the audience assert a deterministic power of meaning over the other.

Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and later, concept of social semiotics[1], rather than on the fixed Althusserian notion of ideology, Hall's model provides space for meaning to be ideologically contested. Hall believes that the media producers, indeed, 'work in the main to prefer 'hegemonic meanings' (Moores, 1993: 17) and constrain the range of available readings. However, on the other side of the communication process, this model emphasises the selective reception of the audiences that accords with what audiences already believe; or forget if it does not fit their views (Hall 1973; Curran *et al* 1977; Fiske 1987). Yet, this creates the potential for a lack of fit between the meaning encoded into a text and the decoding of that text. In other words, this model advocates that the study of mass communication should not concentrate on matching the 'message' with the sender's intention and what the receiver's understanding, but should examine the forces at play in the moments when the 'message' is encoded and decoded.

Theoretically and politically, this degree of difference between media producers and audiences inspires media critics to acknowledge the fact that the existing factors rather than textual ones play a part in the way audiences make sense of a text. Hall suggests that in the discursive positions of producers and audiences, whether audiences adopt a preferred, negotiated or oppositional reading depends on their class position. Significantly, this opens up the possibility of thinking about audience reception as an arena of cultural struggle.

1.3) Audience's Reception and Negotiation

The encoding/decoding model, however, lacks sufficient understanding of the text and audience relationship. With the notion of 'preferred reading', it assumes that the audience inclines towards reading the text according to the interests of the dominant ideology. This in turn implies the same ideal as Screen theory which emphasises spectator and subject image on film. The encoding/decoding model also assumes the entire significance of class, which impacts on the production and

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reception of texts. It fails to recognise the possibility of other factors, such as race, ethnicity, and gender that might also affect reception. Therefore, a method that considers the empowerment of the audience and entails various factors surrounding the relations of audience and text, may provide a sophisticated understanding of audience reception.

The demand for an investigation of how audiences' social and cultural positioning impact on the reception of texts, brings in the establishment of the reception theory, and later on, the revision of reception theory. The ground theory of the revisionist audience reception derives from an elaboration of Gramsci's theories of counter-hegemony, which, indeed, is also the substantive concept of Hall's encoding/decoding (Lull 1990; Curran 1996; Morley 1996). In brief, the concepts of Gramscian theory enable us to understand the process of constructing meaning as occurring in the context of a set of power relations within any society. As the revisionist shifts its interests to the factors revolved audiences, questions of the influences of gender and race also begin to be further reconstructed. The two core groups of this emergence are the feminists and the anti-racist perspective groups. Both celebrate the notion of an active audience and its resistance to patriarchal values presented through the media (for example see the works of Modleski 1984; Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Bobo 1988).

A number of contemporary cultural theorists have discussed the idea of the audience's negotiation and its implication for the study of media power relations. The basis of reception theory is, in fact, established on Hall's revision of encoding/decoding (1980, 1982), which notes that the text meaning systems contain a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements. By situating the audience in relation to the hegemonic context, Hall assumes the role of audience not only to be one of terms of interpretation, but also negotiation of the text. Despite a lack of specific on audiences' surrounding factors, this revised assumption enables the revisionists to analyse the relation of the hegemonic text and its audience through the idea of 'reading competence' or so-called 'cultural competence', which concerns the factors that empower audience's reception and negotiation (Modleski 1982; Fiske 1987).

A great deal of literature on 'reading competence', involves the bringing of both textual and social experience of the audience, within the particular shared

interpretative frameworks, to decode signs and representations at the moment of reading. It also involves a constant and subtle negotiation of audiences derived from their lived experience in their engagement with the text. This concept implies that the audience's pleasure of reading results not only from the text itself, but also from the extension of the text into the thinking, communicating activity and skills of the audiences (Fiske 1987; Gledhill 1997). Therefore, the notion of 'reading competence' insists on the pleasure which can be found even in the structure of dominant texts, for example, the pleasure from soap operas within patriarchal context. Brunsdon (1989) argues in her study of soap opera that its pleasure, however, cannot derive easily, but requires of a viewer competent in personal relationships, in the domestic sphere. Discourses of femininity enable women to gain and share the viewing pleasure. Similarly, Fiske emphasises power in the concept of an audience's reading competence:

> Pleasure for the subordinate is produced by the assertion of one's social identity in resistance to, in independence of, or in negotiation with, the structure of domination. [...] The subordinate may be disempowered, but they are not powerless. There is a power in resisting power, there is a power in maintaining one's social identity in opposition to that opposed by the dominant ideology, there is a power in asserting one's own subcultural values against the dominant ones (1987: 19).

Nevertheless, some cultural theorists have problematised the overemphasis on audience's negotiated pleasure arguing that this idea easily leads to the legitimisation of an 'affirmative model'. This model, regarded as an extremely optimistic view, believes that 'media domination is weak and ineffectual, since the people make their own meanings and pleasures' (Brunsdon 1989; Curran 1990; Morley 1992). Based on this criticism, I wish to argue that the concept of reading competence exaggerates the empowering of the audience, which is not much different from the previous concept of 'uses and gratifications', which claims an active audience producing its own meanings.

Kellner warns against the tendency in cultural studies to celebrate audience resistance and pleasure that underestimates the production of culture and its political economy. He argues '[T]his approach, taken to an extreme, would lose its critical perspective and would lead to a positive gloss on audience experience of whatever is being studied' (1995: 14). Furthermore, a number of feminists raise the dangerous

point of overemphasising the virtue of audience pleasure without distinguishing between types and forms of pleasure. For example, pleasure from viewing violent texts should be considered as forms of brutal masculine behaviour or the restoration of male power, rather than a form of emancipation or progressive negotiation (Kellner 1995; Ang 1996; Nightingale 1996).

My solution for the insufficient explanation of reception theory is that we might need to combine several concepts of audience analysis into audience reception. For example, we cannot understand audience's decoding without making it relevant to the encoding aspect of the text. Because the experiences of making sense of a text, like watching television, usually happens as a natural practice in which some firm sets of meaning already exist. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that experience within the routine of everyday life has an effect on the ways in which audiences receive texts. In this respect, I would agree with Fiske (1987) and Ang (1990, 1996) that we need to discover audience's pattern of behaviour, decoding, resistance and pleasure from the 'actual' and 'natural' situations. This emphasis reminds us of the benefit of ethnography, which acknowledges people (audiences) in their own social and historical setting. Its value for media audience analysis noted by Morley is its account of moments of cultural subversion in the process of media consumption or decoding. He views ethnography as providing 'the power of viewers over the agenda within which that text is constructed and presented' (1992: 31). I will look into, more specifically, the concept of ethnographic audience analysis and some related works on television audiences as I expect to draw on the methodological framework for my study.

2) Approaching the 'Real' Audience: Ethnographic Audience Analysis

While ethnography has a very long history as the most basic form of social science research, ethnographic audience research has itself become a methodology in the late 1980s. However, since then, the ethnographic approach has gained popularity in both critical cultural studies and mainstream mass media studies (see Lull 1988, 1990; Radway 1984; Ang 1985; Lindlof 1987; Fiske 1987; Morley 1992). Some mainstream audience researchers are now acknowledging the limitations of the kind of data that can be produced only by large-scale or quantitative survey work, and believe that reality cannot be explained through quantitative methods alone. Since audience activities are so complex and multidimensional, therefore, as Ang says, 'a

move towards the ethnographic is desperately called for' (1996: 42). The efficiency of ethnographic audience research comes from its combination of various critical perspectives, for instance, ethnography, anthropology, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis and feminism; when combined together, these provide the researcher(s) with perspectives of gender, class, race and other marginalized groups.

2.1) Ethnographic Practice

Listening to and hearing others is at the heart of ethnography. And this is the strength of ethnography that, for those working in the field of media-cultural studies it 'has been championed as a research practice capable of overcoming the impasse of many audience studies' (Gillespie, 1995: 53). From this point of view, and especially as regards audience analysis, ethnography is entirely satisfactory and can be placed at the centre of research procedures. In this section, I shall begin by examining the concept of ethnography and its general implications for an understanding of media audiences.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson, ethnography can be understood as:

> [S]imply one social research method albeit an unusual one, drawing on a wide range of sources of information. The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned. ...[O]nly through ethnography can the meanings that give form and content to social processes be understood (1983: 2).

Ethnography highlights small-scale processes, rather than large-scale ones by focusing on an understanding of people's perceptions, thoughts and actions. One of the significant characteristics of ethnography is that it proposes to study the social world in the 'natural state, with no 'artificial' setting like experiments (Blumer, 1969; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; and Gillespie, 1995). Therefore, the ethnographer is required to adopt an attitude of 'respect' or 'appreciation' toward the social world. In other words, the ethnographer reads the world through the eyes of her/his informants as well as through her/his active involvement in and interpretation of the social world. Furthermore, ethnography rejects the way conventional sociology uses data and resource, provided by members of society,

only to describe theories as valid or invalid. It argues that data or people's accounts should be used and examined in close detail in order to understand how people talk about those accounts within their own experiences and backgrounds.

The two remarkable characteristics of ethnographic audience analysis that distinguishes this approach from the mainstream quantitative method are the concepts of 'symbolic interactions' and 'reflexivity'. The first concept strongly rejects the stimulus-response model or causal relationships between people and phenomenon by arguing that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings they interpret (Blumer 1969). The symbolic interactions researchers are attracted to the idea of active reception or participation because it allows them to focus on the personal activities of the people they research. The second concept, 'reflexivity' lies in the logic of ethnography, which acknowledges the role of the researcher as inevitably a part of the social phenomenon that is being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). This reflexivity – the significant involvement of the researcher in a research process – legitimises the means of the researcher's involvement and accepts the effects of the researcher in the research procedure. That means, how people respond to the presence or observations of the researchers may be as informative as any other kind of data that may be collected (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 15; Webb 1985: 3).

I am especially concerned with the concepts of interaction and reflexivity in which ethnography takes into account the study of social action. I agree with those who stand for a media ethnographic approach that these two core concepts make ethnography a key contribution to the study of media cultures, and particularly to the key theoretical debates in audience analysis. These two concepts, in other words, provide research strategies that enable the researcher to enter into the everyday life of the people and get to know them on their own terms. As suggested by Lindlof in studying qualitative research of media uses and effects, "ethnography and related qualitative approaches comprise a set of procedures that may be very well suited to the highly situated and rule-bound features of mediated communication, and make it feasible to gain access to the meaningful constructs of media users" (1987: 1).

This conceptualisation of ethnography enables us to pose some questions in order to understand the relationships between the text in the media and the everyday life of audiences, and in particular marginalized groups. For example, how do

women watch TV? How do gender, class, race, age, ethnicity in general affect the patterns and conditions of viewing and interpretation of meanings? How do they conceptualise bias in terms of a 'politics of representation'? How do they recognise real problems through their identification with the characters in the text?

2.2) Ethnography from a Feminist Discourse

The emphasis on doing research on women's experiences and feelings is regarded as the heart of feminist research. The various contributions from contemporary feminists, such as Stanley, Wise, Mohanty, Spender, challenge the conventional assumptions of social science research concerning the 'universalisation' of truth which, in turn, marginalizes 'unvoiced' women by legitimising male domains of experiences. The nature of universalisation, which has its origins in a quantitative approach, assumes that an existing reality or research knowledge of one circumstance can be applied in others, which are seen as the same. This assumption is objected to feminists using a qualitative approach who, in contrast, believe that knowledge is contextually specific and the researcher is the representation of the reality.

Nevertheless, feminist qualitative research has its own danger because it tends to locate the researcher as 'us' and the women researched as 'them' (e.g. Stanley and Wise, 1993; Back, 1993; Bell, 1993). This partition is most dramatically linked to the affirmation in some Western feminist orthodoxy that there is a universal women's point of view and women's experience of oppression. This affirmation distorts the feminist analysis of specific groups of women by implying gender as the main determining factor in shaping women's subordinated experiences and fails to recognise their differences based on race, class and culture. Unfortunately, this misconception is articulated within both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The common focus of this research philosophy, then, is on the position of women as objects of representations; as passive 'others'; as problem or even as target or recipient of development programmes. Therefore, the researcher using either of these approaches, tends to comment only on the presented 'deprived' reality of the women they research, while ignoring other social and historical factors rooted in their everyday lives. Moreover, as criticised by Riano, this kind of research approach reduces women to merely folkloric images. (1994: 36).

The problems of traditional quantitative and qualitative research mentioned above are recognised by some feminist social scientists, Webb (1985); Stanley and Wise (1983, 1993), for instance, who have attempted to challenge these assumptions. They have searched for an alternative approach that can facilitate the feminist researcher in seeing reality within the everyday life of those she researches or to interpret the world in the same way as the women researched do.

In fact, this philosophical approach confirms one of the key elements in feminist epistemology, which emphasises the researcher's role in the research process. As Stanley and Wise (1983, 1993) point out the feminist researcher must position herself as the person who can make sense of 'the world' and produce generalised knowledge. In order to achieve this, feminists' grounds for doing research and criticism must involve the feeling, belief, and experience of the researcher. It can be said that the emphasis on the researcher's involvement distinguishes feminist research from mainstream quantitative research, and brings it closer to the concept of ethnography.

In principle, both ethnography and feminist ethnography put reflexive practice at the centre of the research process. This reflects the feminists' emphasis on research *by* women, because women share a particular kind of interpretation of the experience of being treated as a woman (e.g. Stanley and Wise, 1993; Bell, 1993).

According to Stanley and Wise, ethnomethodology is the most important method for feminism as it concerns everyday life and emphasises how people construct and describe reality. 'Ethnomethodology takes the everyday and the personal as both a topic of its research and also the resource with which it works. It uses the everyday in order to find out about and understand the everyday' (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 141). Therefore, it encourages feminists to reclaim the voices of those women whose experiences, practices, feeling, thinking and being are absent from mainstream social science. A feminist perspective, in turn, helps transform ethnography from the model of a (male) universal that insists on the existence of a knowledge hierarchy to a model that more open and more flexible. As Bell puts it:

> Feminist ethnography opens a discursive space for the 'subjects' of the ethnography and as such is simultaneously empowering and destabilising (1993: 31).

In summary, it can be said that feminist ethnography, as a consequence of the interdependence between feminist epistemology and ethnomethodology, develops a discourse, which holds the promise of women-centred accounts and gendered knowledge as the most legitimate approach in social science research.

2.3) Ethnography of Everyday Media Consumption

Ethnographic audience research requires direct contact with research subjects through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and empirical research taking place in the 'natural' setting. As Lull (1980, 1990), one of the originators in this method, suggests what unifies the convergence between ethnographic and empirical is a common interest in the qualitative features and processes of communication activity, especially the interpretations and uses of media that are constructed by audience members. This shared research agenda has helped gradually to break down the distinctions 'historically held between mass and interpersonal communication, empirical and critical research, textual and audience studies, communication and cultural theory' (Lull, 1990:14).

It would seem that many early ethnographic audience researchers are oriented towards the reception of television in family contexts. Moores (1993) notes that the increasingly 'privatised' character of cultural activity means household leisure becomes more essential. I shall briefly present some projects of ethnographic audience studies, which have begun to explore the television audience from an ethnographic perspective. Major research projects undertaken by Morley (1980,1986), Radway (1984), Lindlof (1987), Lull (1988, 1990), Brunt (1992), Gillespie (1995) and some others reflect a trend toward ethnographic audience research taking place in the qualitative empirical contexts of the household and its reception.

Morley's widely cited work, *The 'Nationwide'* [2] *Audience* (1980), forms a major moment in the growing popularity of an ethnographic approach to media audience studies (Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1980, 1992; Groassberg *et al*, 1992; Nava, 1992; During, 1993; Ang, 1996). Morley criticises the heavily apply of textual analysis. He intends to demonstrate that the relations between texts and audiences are far more complex. The *'Nationwide'* project is designed to study the process of 'decoding' as an intersecting moment between the construction of meaning in the texts and the interpretation of meaning among the audiences, with different

structural variables like age, gender, race and class. His ethnographic approach contests the earlier study that often emphasised the important of large audiences. Its emphasis is more on the question of the audience's cultural participation in the meaning of media, rather than the media effect on audiences.

Morley himself, in his later works (1992, 1996), re-names his project an 'ethnographic of reading'. He suggests the three hypothetical positions of how audiences decode texts including: the 'dominant-hegemonic position', which accepts the dominant texts; the 'negotiated code', which contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements; and the 'oppositional code' in which the audiences understand the meaning but decode it in a contrary way (Morley 1992; During 1993; Ang 1996). These three positions of reading correspond with the identity concept of negotiation proposed by some prominent cultural theorists, such as Hall, Dyer (see Chapter 1).

Nevertheless, the issue that brings the *'Nationwide'* study into the methodological debate is the artificiality of the audience (see Fiske, 1987, 1990; Turner, 1990; Brunt, 1992). As Brunt argues, a problem occurs because his groups, which are formally categorised in terms of one homogeneous class identity, are not real participants. Rather, they have been reduced to mere research respondents who are formally treated as standing for a larger segment of society (1992: 73-4). Morley's references to 'demographic variables' and valid 'samples' are criticised as not different from the quantitative formation of the survey research. Nonetheless, Morley and some authors, later, attempt to create awareness of methodological choices. As Morley states in his revision work, "[m]y position is not only that no single method has a monopoly on virtue, but the choice of method, in itself, can neither guarantee a given study" (1992: 13). I would agree in principle with Morley's comment that there is no exclusive validity in any particular single method, as I have already mentioned in my discussion of the feminist approach to Thai women's identities (see Chapter 2). And as for the point of my own employment of the ethnographic method, I would accept Lull's notion of an appropriation of qualitative empirical research, which requires the fundamental collection of data and reporting typical of most anthropological and sociological ethnographic research (Lull 1988: 242).

Lull's studies of family television viewing since the early 1970s show his consistent use of ethnography in a qualitative empirical perspective. The emphasis in his studies is on the ethnomethodological features of television viewing, a micro level social analysis that situates television viewing within the normative contexts of everyday family life (1990: 22). Most of his studies employ the form of questionnaire items, the collection of data in the field and in-depth interviews, which synthesise qualitative and quantitative approaches. In fact, his projects are one of the few audience ethnographies to have relied mainly on long periods of participant observation (his first project in 1980 was taken during a three-year period). Lull's projects show how an ethnographic account can be developed to link family viewing practices with larger questions of politics, economics, and culture. Some major findings demonstrate that television viewing patterns are intimately bound up with social relations at home, and both of these considerations are influenced by matters such as gender, cultural values, employment status, or the composition of family membership (1990: 152-160).

I have shown above that the combination of various methodological choices is the heart of ethnographic audience research. This is similar to Gillespie's notion that merely employing one method in social science research, such as the in-depth interview, is not sufficient to claim it as ethnography (1995: 55). That is because ethnography requires long-term immersion, highlights the small-scale processes of people's perceptions and reads the world through the eyes of informants themselves.

Gillespie's study of the re-creative consumption of television among Asian youth in London underlines the politics and negotiation of ethnic identities within the pattern of family television viewing. Gillespie's work offers an insightful analysis of the 'migrant' experiences throughout contemporary media culture. Her use of ethnographic methods is based on both empirical data, 'to show the interaction of various social relations and processes', and quasi-empirical, 'to let the data speak', in the context of media consumption and reception (1995: 53).

Gillespie's fieldwork is characterised by a multiplicity of data-gathering strategies in a variety of contexts. She argues that ethnography does not lend itself to neatly systematic research designs, but rather it is based upon continually incoming data. Furthermore, Gillespie stresses that the very nature of ethnographic research depends on the ethnographer being surprised at certain moments. 'This involves

following leads that could not have been predicted, assuming roles that could not have been planned and witnessing events that could not have been foreseen' (1995: 61). The significance of unpredictable findings for ethnographic research is also noted by Brunt '[...] that of being 'surprised' of reaching knowledge not prefigured in one's starting paradigms" (1992: 71) (see also Willis 1981: 90).

Conducting a case study on media and public polls in Sheffield (1992), Brunt enables us to recognise that the issues of gender, class, along with other social determinations need to be thought of carefully. So that 'decoding' or interpretation of groups represents a real process. Brunt suggests that these factors (class, race, gender, etc.) are not simply acting as audiences' demographics that provide a 'common sense' data for the researcher. Instead, they identify possibilities of individual audience to reflect the reception on her/his own concern. It is only more recently that questions of class and gender have begun to be further reconstructed in a fundamental framework of media research (Bobo, 1988). Bobo's work seems to be one of the pioneers that specifically takes up race and gender into media research. Her analysis of black women as audiences of films, such as *The Color Purple,* reveals that in spite of 'its sometimes clichéd characters [...] a specific audience creates meaning from a mainstream text and uses the reconstructed meaning to empower themselves and their social group' (Bobo, 1988: 92-3).

Clearly, Bobo's work offers us a grounded analysis of the reception and response of specific groups, especially marginalized ones, to mainstream media like popular film and television. This connection allows us to explore the concept of 'negotiation' in the process of media consumption, or so-called decoding, through the approach of ethnography.

2.4) Some Debates on Ethnographic Audience Analysis

Theoretically and historically, most interdisciplinary works are always challenged and renewed from different views, and this is very welcome. The ethnographic audience analysis, since gaining highly academic attention in the mid-1980s, has witnessed a growing dissatisfaction with it in very recent years. One of the significant flaws lies in its methodology, which is based on interviews and some participant observation. There is a critique that ethnographic audience analysis is not real ethnography, as it is understood within cultural anthropology. In addition, some postcolonialists, who are uneasy about the knowledge claims of Westerners, view

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ethnographic research as an account of 'them' by and for 'us', which denies its own partiality and embeddedness in discourses of power (Nightingale, 1996).

The areas of ethnographic audience analysis that could be considered as problematic are: first, ethnographic audience analysis may be seen as merely legitimating politically motivated accounts of 'resistance' to dominant ideologies in the interpretative activities of media audiences (Curran, 1990). Second, its claim to speak *from* the position of the audience ignores the actual power of the researcher within the research context (Ang, 1996). And third, its limitation by small-scale selection of the vast media audiences cannot indicate a wide range of the effect of media culture (Kellner, 1995).

I will attempt to analyse each of these critiques and explore some solutions for my research project. For the first argument, I can see that the danger in overemphasising 'resistance' of audience activity is that it may result in a loss of radical critique. Because whenever analysing an 'active' audience, the phenomenon will slip into being 'resistance' or 'negotiation' or 'opposition' and will leave no room for any other options. With regard to this problem, I would like to draw on feminists' caution in defining female pleasure in arguing that we cannot take-for-granted that (subordinate) audience reception is always potential resistance. We need to consider the *'If'* notion, such as: What if audiences fail to analyse media texts as subversive meaning? Furthermore, we should keep in mind that people are not audiences by nature but by culture. This requires conceptualising audiences in certain contexts as suggested by Foucauldian's power discourse. Here, Foucault's remark of 'Where there is power there is resistance' recognises that 'power' rests on people's acceptance and understanding of the meaning and the existence of power. In other words, resistance or negotiation is not a natural process, nor is it bound mainly with ideology, but by learning process. On the same point, I am concerned about Ang's emphasis on the 'active' audience that does not simply mean that audience are 'free' or 'powerful' to resist in all circumstance. Yet she argues, '[...] that viewers decode a text in different ways and sometimes even give oppositional meanings to it, should be understood as a moment in an ongoing struggle over meaning and pleasure which is central to the fabric of everyday life' (1996: 42).

These ideas lead the researcher to recognise that audiences' reading of television is qualitatively different from reading the signs of a subculture like dress,

ritual, etc. as practiced in social ethnography. I would accept Ang's suggestion that the task of the cultural studies researcher is to develop strategic interpretations that can help make sense of how audiences read texts. For *media texts*, *which very much* involve institutionalised, commercialised and professionalised; to find an appropriate way of analysing reading audience reception will require efforts in integrating different approaches such as observation, interviewing and textual analysis based on socio-cultural contexts.

For the second criticism on the role of the researcher, I feel that there is a difficulty in avoiding the sensitivity of power relations between the researcher and the researched. As Nightingale points out precisely, '[E]ven though the researchers' voices and those of their interviewees were at times equally heard,... the pattern of quotation is like a dance--the researcher leads and the researched follows' (1996: 111). However, the best we can do is to accept this weak point and try not to overlook it by turning the audiences into just an object of the study. Again I would like to emphasise Ang's statement (1996) that critical audience studies should not pretend to tell 'the truth' about 'the audience', but should construct *interpretations* of certain ways to understand the audiences. At this point 'interpretation' becomes an important practice to theorise audience activity. Therefore, the material obtained from ethnographic fieldwork cannot simply be treated as critical facts, as in social anthropology, but should be treated as it is made sense of interpretation. Ang comments usefully 'the subjectivity of the researcher is not separated from the object she/he is studying. As an intellectual she/he is responsible not only to the Academy, but to the social world she/h lives in as well' (1996: 47). This argument, in fact, borrows from the notion of reflexivity, which acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process.

My final comment on the small-scale audience, however, is that I am not convinced that this is a problem of ethnographic audience research. I do believe that to conceptualise the 'real' audience, we cannot restrict ourselves to *merely* studying audiences. We need to engage with the structural and cultural process through which the audiences are positioned, such as their domestic lives. The activity of audiences need no longer be conceived as only responsive to the media, but as an interactive or cultural participation within the process. This finding cannot be achieved by approaching through a vast scale of media audiences. Nevertheless, I accept that the

researcher should not overlook this limitation and try to find a way that can help validate the study as much as possible.

Furthermore, in order to overcome the limitation of ethnography, I would consider employing a method of interpretation from the data offered by the Klongtoey women. According to Stacey's (1994) analysis of female spectatorship of Hollywood cinema, audiences' memories of Hollywood stars are specific kinds of texts produced within a specific set of conditions. Thus, Stacey argues that such a method of ethnography, which deals with conscious and easily articulated responses is inadequate because it ignores the contribution of unconscious process to the meanings made. Nonetheless, Stacey rejects the psychoanalytical approach to unconscious reading since it mistrusts audiences' accounts within real contexts. What Stacey strongly proposes is to combine elements of both ethnographic audiences analysis and psychoanalysis in order to access the cultural processes, such as those of memory, identity formations and fantasy, which are expressed through the conscious everyday meanings of spectators. This raises the consideration that reception research should be constituted of multiple methods in which the interpretation of in-depth interview, participant observation (of ethnography), and data gathering with the empirical method should coincide with each other.

3) What Do Women Audiences Say?

Survey statistics show that women watch more television than men do and that women all over the world have more access than men to watch their favourite shows during the day (Lull, 1990: 166). The positioning of women in the domestic sphere has implications for their media use. Some feminists hold the viewpoint that the leisure of television viewing for women is a form of emancipation from patriarchy. Hobson (1978) understands the family to be the place of women's subordination, thus, 'broadcasting is identified as her 'lifeline' contact with the world beyond the walls of the private sphere' (1978: 85). Hobson's work on housewives and the use of media is a major contribution to feminism and cultural studies in which gender has, for the first time, specific meanings in household contexts. Her research, focusing on working class housewives, indicates that women relate to the radio in a particular way. For those women who are isolated in the home, the radio and television are seen as an integral part of their lives and not as spare time activities. Despite its

usual status as background sound, the medium is a means of managing the many frustrations of their isolation in the home.

The departure point of Hobson's work is the 'uses & gratification' model (which emphasises the use of the media for company). She conceptualises the use of the media for these housewives in terms of social positioning (e.g. class, gender). This makes women's leisure in the domestic sphere a political issue.

A significant dimension of Hobson's findings was that the women divided television content into a 'private' and 'public' agenda. The women actively chose the programmes, which were understood to constitute a 'women's world' (e.g. comedy series, soap operas, quiz shows), and they completely rejected programmes, which were seen to belong to a 'men's world' (e.g., news, current affairs programmes, documentaries). These divisions, according to Hobson, related to a feminine realm of fictional programmes that connected with the personal and emotional concerns of everyday family life, while the factual reporting was either boring or depressive. It is, therefore, essential that the 'two worlds' of television are considered in opposition to each other (Moores, 1993).

At this point, we can begin to see that the relation between television or other media texts and audiences has created new areas of constraints and possibilities for structuring social relationships, identities, pleasure and desires, which are possible to be negotiated. For feminist cultural theorists, like Hobson, Ang and Radway, the pleasure of media texts demonstrates not only what women like, but also the ways in which women construct their identities around such texts. Thus, I have developed my thesis and my belief that the construction of identity is a (feminist) political issue.

3.1) Soap Opera as a Woman's Genre

Throughout the 1980s there was a strong tendency to regard soap opera as a 'woman's genre', the validity of which has never stopped being criticised (Allen, 1985; Weaver, 1994). This criticism can be traced back to text-based theories asserting that the melodramatic text represents patriarchal discourse, and that the continuous serial represents a woman-centred narrative featuring a feminine point of view and is expressive of feminine desire (Brunsdon, 1981 cf. Brunsdon 1997; Modleski, 1982). This has led to a high linkage between genres and gendered reception (see Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1987). Therefore, the notion of soap opera as a

'woman's genre' is first influenced by textual analysis, and then by feminist reception research, which tends to imply that only forms aimed at and focusing on women can be useful/ interesting to women and/or feminism (Weaver, 1994). To appreciate soap opera, thus, women have to possess a number of extra textual competencies, which are diverse amongst women. Without these competencies, identifications and narrative pleasures cannot be experienced.

Since soap opera has proved to be so popular with women, the central concerns addressed by theorists in this field are the ways in which soap opera constructs a female/feminine spectator, and the pleasures of the serial for female audiences. Modleski suggests that the characteristic narrative structures and textual operations of soap opera addresses the woman viewer as an 'ideal mother' who is ever understanding and always tolerant of the weaknesses of others. She maintains that the narrative patterns address a female spectator through foregrounding 'female' skills in dealing with personal and domestic crises (1982: 88).

Lovell (1981) argues that soap opera can actually subvert patriarchal values by presenting a sense of interruption of normal order in the genre. For example, the conventions of soap opera genre are those of broken marriages, temporary liaisons, availability of lasting romantic love, which are taken as an interruption of the patriarchal order of the 'happy' family. Lovell's theory views soap opera as political in that it challenges the ideological norms of society. This is, in fact, derived from the Gramscian concept of hegemony in which commonsense is taken as a war of position (see Chapter 1). Brunsdon comes to a similar conclusion, albeit on lesser political grounds than Lovell. Brunsdon (1981, cf. Brunsdon, 1997) sees soap opera as constructing its viewers as competent within the ideological and moral frameworks of marriage and family life, and, therefore, addresses both a feminine spectator and a female audience.

The first ethnographic study that gives attention to soap opera and women's competence is conducted by Hobson (1982) in her study of women viewers of the TV soap *Crossroads*.[3] Hobson visited the homes of several women who were regular viewers of the soap, and as a woman researcher and a fan herself, she managed to gain the confidence of and talk openly with the women interviewees. Hobson concludes that in the setting of the home and domestic engagements the

women arranged their viewing of *Crossroads* by incorporating their enjoyment of the soap into their daily home management (Hobson, 1982, Moores, 1993).

Probably the most influential ethnographic reception study on women is Radway's research on women's reading of romance novels (1984). By conducting extensive interviews and quoting the conversations among romance readers, Radway presents these women as an audience community, who are already there when the researcher sets out to investigate. Radway sees in the women's selection of certain novels, and their tendency to criticise masculine behaviours as a temporary escape from family demands on their times. She interprets their moment of pleasure as potential resistance to the patriarchal restrictions on their lives.

In quite a similar way, Ang's analysis of the pleasure involved in watching *Dallas* draws the conclusion that the women's pleasure is related to feelings of 'powerlessness' (1985). According to Ang, the melodrama *Dallas*, embodies the 'tragic structure of feeling', which is defined as 'the expression of a refusal, or inability to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born as a vague inarticulate dissatisfaction with the here and now' (1985: 79). In giving this tragic structure of feeling through identification with characters of the same feeling, viewers will find pleasure in *Dallas*. Ang argues that this pleasure is only achieved by viewers 'for whom a tragic look into doing life is in principle logical and meaningful' (1985: 61). Ang's research draws on a feminist theoretical agenda, which values women's popular cultural forms and attempts to replace masculine modes of research. She uses an ethnographic approach to define feminine pleasure in viewing the programme as well as analysing letters from viewers while ignoring some controversial aspects of mainstream research including the sampling and the stress in emotions of viewers.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the concepts and methods of audience analysis both in mainstream media studies and critical cultural studies. Some concepts hold the key to the development of my research design, for example, ethnographic audience study, audience reception and negotiation, and women's pleasure in viewing. Some problems of audience reception theory draw our attention to the fact that researching 'real' audiences requires an engagement of the researcher with the socio-cultural settings in which audiences are constituted. The emphasis on

perceiving and experiencing how audiences make senses of media texts in their everyday lives is highlighted as a distinct critical value of ethnographic audience analysis. It is precisely for this reason that I engage with ethnography and its implications for recognising the relations of audiences and media texts. I do believe that the potential of ethnography to represent realities from the concrete 'interpretation' of the researcher and women informants is necessary to explain the form of audience-text performance and audience's negotiation. Nevertheless, the fundamental method of ethnography makes it limited to some extent of audience studies. In response to these critiques, I have sought some solutions, which will be a guide in the development of my research design.

It can be concluded that different modes of viewing produce different kinds of pleasures among women audiences. Therefore, an attempt to understand these pleasures and the uses of media in the family and social-cultural dimensions requires participant observation together with empirical data-gathering techniques. Further, in order to consider how women's notions of their gender identity may be influenced by media representations, the researcher needs to pay attention to the way in which texts might signify special meanings to women, and how women negotiate these representations.

In the next chapter, I take all the concepts and methods I have revised here to formulate my research methodology in which I focus on women audiences of marginalized groups. The profile of the Klongtoey women before migration and their everyday lives in the urban slum will also be presented in order to introduce my informants and the setting of my research.

Note

[1] The concept of social semiotic was first introduced by Valentin Volosinov in 1929 in a book published in the Soviet Union, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1973). This argument concerned the multi-accentuality of a sign. He stated that there are no fixed meanings in language because the sign is continually the site of a class struggle, an arena for the clash of differently oriented 'social accents'. Therefore, in order to observe the phenomenon of language, both the producer and receiver of sound and the sound itself must be contextualised in a social atmosphere (cf. Moores, 1993).

[2] The BBC's Nationwide occupied a slot from six to seven o'clock in the British early evening schedule during the 1970s. The programme adopted a magazine format with human-interest stories from the regions and a 'down to earth' look at the major events of the day. Nationwide had a more direct commonsense tone – asking about the implications of complex issues for 'ordinary' viewers.

[3] Crossroads was one of the most popular soap operas on British television. It was first transmitted in 1964 in the ATV region of British Midland, and has been taken up by many other network companies

to broadcast countrywide since 1965 and has been on televising for more than 20 years. The *Crossroads* story is about the life of a middle class family who run a motel at the crossroad between Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon. Because of its popularity, *Crossroads* has been an important subject for soap opera study in contemporary popular culture and women's s studies.

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Chapter Four

Women in Changing Contexts: From the Villages to the Klongtoey Slum

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background on the Northeastern migrant women in this study, and to describe the research methods and fieldwork I used. First I introduce the research setting of the Klongtoey slum and a profile of the women informants. Particular women are presented as examples of the whole researched community and presented in more detail. Then, the research methods and the fieldwork process are presented within the conceptual framework of this study.

1) The Characteristics of the Klongtoey Slum

Life in the Klongtoey slum is full of contradictions, and as such generalisations are hard to apply. As the largest slum settlement in Bangkok, it is comprised of 100 communities, with an estimated 8 millions dwellers (Somphong *et al*, 1988). These communities have their own specific characteristics though they also share some similarities of setting and environment. Klongtoey is situated on the eastern side of Bangkok and is the major port of the country. It has become densely as a populated mostly residential area for migrant people in the last 50 years, when a large population of unskilled labourers was needed to work in the port. Some of these workers eventually settled on the empty land beside the port, initially in temporary houses. But after a few years the numbers of households and the population increased as a result of an influx of migrants. Klongtoey is considered a 'slum' because it is an undesirable habitation, with poor living conditions (Thorbek, 1987; Somphong *et al*, 1988; Richter, 1997). Most households have no documents of ownership and so do not possess the land. The ownership of the land is still uncertain but most of it belongs to the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT).

The community I have chosen as the setting of my fieldwork is named *'Chumchon rim tang rotfai'* or 'Railway Track Community', as the setting is parallel to a single railway track that has been used for goods delivery from the port to the City. My reasons for choosing the Railway Track Community are: First, it is the slum community with the largest population from the Northeast region; Second, despite it being a poor environment, every household has at least one television set,

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which serves as a communal place for the women who mostly stay at home during the day; Third, it is the only community in which women have active roles in governing the community; its leader is an efficient senior woman and its neighbourhood committees are all women in membership; Fourth, it was convenient and safe for me, as the households are situated along the rail track so I would be in the peoples' sight instead of being left alone in any one house.

The Railway Track Community, which I will call 'Klongtoey slum' for this study, has a very odd character in which households are located on the two sides of the track. The distance between the two sides is only a little bit wider than the width of a train, so that when a train approaches, the windows of many houses need to be shut, otherwise the train will pull away parts of the houses. It is also odd for me that whenever the signal of an approaching train is heard, people who are lingering along the track will jump back to one side and will return to the track again when the train passes. Most annoyingly, the train usually stops right in the middle of the community for at least 10-15 minutes (I do not know the reason), thus separating people from each other for a short while. The track does not only signify the character of the community, it is also the place for everyday cultural activities, such as the walkway for people, the place for gathering, and the playground for children.

Compared to other communities, households in the Railway Track are in better condition. In general, there are one-storey wooden houses with one or two small rooms inside, a corrugated zinc roof with, commonly, a patchwork of wood and billboards. There is no drainage and filling in of land. Sewage systems may exist in the form of septic tanks, but not as pipe systems. Most houses are connected to electricity, but in some cases illegally hooked up to the electric cables that hang dangerously low.

For the convenience of fieldwork, I have categorised the Klongtoey slum into three track groups according to the locations along the railway track, namely, the upper track group, the middle track group, and the lower track group. Although there are some similar settings shared among the three track groups, there are a few specific characteristics that are significant for the media reception of the women who belong to each track group. For example, as the setting of the upper track group connects to an outside market and leads to a main road, many houses in this area are used as places for gathering, which includes TV watching. The middle track group is

the densest area where a community centre is located. The daily lives of the people revolve around the community centre, which creates a sense of belonging, unity, and empowerment among the women members of this track group. These women's unity impacts on the way the women interpret meanings from media reception so that the women were more likely to negotiate and resist the dominant representations. The lower track group is quieter and had fewer passers-by than the others because of no connection to the public area outside the community. So there are fewer shared activities among the lower track neighbours who usually go out to work everyday, and they have less consensus on the major issues of the Klongtoey slum than those of the other two track groups. (see more details of the three track groups in Appendix 2).

Since 1998, the Klongtoey slum dwellers have faced the problem of relocation since the PAT has a project to develop new office buildings and new container yards in the area, where over 4,800 families are living (*Bangkok Post*, 14/01/98). Although the new housing location has been prepared for the Klongtoey people in suburban areas, they seem unwilling to leave. Most of them do not want to move because they cannot commute daily to their jobs, and as the urban poor, jobs go hand-in-hand with where they live. Either they cannot sell garlands, food, or do laundry service, or taxi and motorcycle service. In this urban slum, the Thai sense of community and kinship with others is so strong that many families resist leaving these fragile dwellings to accept free government housing elsewhere, unwilling to leave neighbours and neighbourhoods they have grown to love. And it is in the dark alleys and small shacks of the massive 'Klongtoey' slum that a *National Geographic*'s reporter sees the paradoxical spirit of the Thai people: 'hardship confronted by optimism, struggle countered by faith, hunger countered by generosity, bitterness and anger subdued by love' (Grove, N. *National Geographic*, 02/96: 101).

The notion that community serves as a basic human requirement is well documented among feminist cultural scholars. Geraghty, in quoting Suzi Hush, argues that community feeds the need for gossip, curiosity and sharing a problem (1991: 85). In the Klongtoey slum, women regularly drop in on each other or offer help to each other when a need arises. This reflects the cultural implication of gender, which identifies femininity with the values associated with community-

affective relations of care, mutual aid, and cooperation (see Gilligan, 1981; Young, 1990).

2) Migrant and Urban Poor Women in the Klongtoey Slum

This research is based on a sample of 34 women living in the Klongtoey slum. This total number is referred to when discussing the overall profile of the women and the general reception of television viewing and other media consumption. The 34 women in this study are comprised of 5 age groups: 14 women are in the age group of 45-54, 12 women in 35-44, 5 women in 55-64, 2 women in 25-34, and 1 woman is over 65. The reason for choosing a majority of women in their early thirties to mid fifties is because these are the age groups that have the most active roles in the family, as mothers, wives, and family income earners. Many of them take on the role of second-income earner, but some are the sole earners because they have been abandoned by their husbands, or have irresponsible husbands or chronically ill husbands. Of the total number, 28 of the women are married (including 3 re-married women), and the rest are separated, widowed or single. Thirty-two of the women migrated from the Northeast region, with only two from the provinces of the Central region. Of the Northeastern migrant women, the majority (27 women) are of Lao/Thai ethnicity, 4 women are Cambodian/Thai, and the other one is Chinese/Thai. The difference in ethnicity is related to the places of origin. For those who were born in the upper Northeastern provinces, which are close to Lao PDR, their ethnic origin is Lao, and for those who were born in the lower Northeast, their ethnicity is Cambodian or Khmer. Although both ethnicities share a very similar culture, there are a few differences such as the accent of their spoken languages. However, all the women prefer to call themselves *I-san*, rather than refer to themselves in terms of Lao or Khmer. This is because they regard the Northeast region (known as *I-san*) as the unified place of their origins.

The days of these urban migrant women are as busy as those of their rural counterparts. While at home, they have full responsibility for household work as well as income earning. Most of their jobs relate to their domestic skills such as selling cooked-food on street corners or having food stalls in front of their houses, making flower garlands, pasting paper bags, sewing clothes, running small grocery shops in the slum, and also working in the domestic service sectors.

At the time of writing and since 1997, the economic recession in Thailand has severely impacted on the livelihoods of the Klongtoey slum people. With more men being laid off and work for port labourers dropping by 70 percent, there is more and more of a burden on the women, who are usually keen to become the second-income earner using their unskilled labour. For migrant women who have no land in the village to return to, the only choice is to fight on. Economic hardship has also negatively affected their domestic harmony. There is more quarrelling and conflict in these families, and the unemployed men are driven to drink even more.

To understand and appreciate the everyday struggle of Klongtoey women, the adaptation of rural lifestyles to an urban slum environment needs to be taken into account. Some literature on slum migrants has similarly commented on the persistence of rural cultural traits, emphasising that these rural traits, values and beliefs are preserved in the slum and that slum dwellers often find the city to be lonely and callous (Thorbeck, 1987, 1994; Cole, 1996). The cases of four women in the sample will be discussed to illustrate the range of everyday life as experienced by the Klongtoey women.

2.1) Roy: the transforming role of motherhood

Roy, age 64, migrated to the Klongtoey slum in 1964 while she was still breast-feeding her three little babies. Her family decided to migrate because the village had nothing to offer them. Her husband has been working as a taxi driver since that time, while Roy herself made Thai sweets for sale on the street. Since 1985, Roy has stopped selling food and became a representative of a charity organisation working in the Klongtoey slum, for which she receives a petty salary. Because of her long-term stay in the Klongtoey slum, Roy's house is bigger than many others in the area, and she sub-lets 3 rooms in her house to assist the family income. Roy had a primary school education in the village before getting married, but her reading and writing skills improved when she started doing community work and had to contact many outside organisations.

Roy's leadership did not arise only when she started the community work. In fact, she had played a central role in her family since before migration and early settlement. Her husband had a quiet and introverted personality, so it was Roy who negotiated for land and all sorts of things for the family. Roy said that 15 years ago, there was no running water and electricity in the slum, everyone had to stand in a

queue to get water from only one public tap. Noticing the difference in other communities, Roy negotiated with the district office to provide an infrastructure in the slum. At first, the district office refused, claiming that no water and electricity could be provided where the households did not have a proper address. Roy did not give up but tried to meet many people and organisations, and she even went to Parliament to speak about her slum's hardship. Finally, the local MP (member of parliament) visited the slum and ordered the district office to provide it with basic facilities. Since then, Roy has not stopped negotiating with and requesting help from the authorities, and she has become well recognised among these officials. Roy said that whenever she demanded help for the slum, most of the men in the slum laughed at her. Roy reported: 'they seriously commented that we should ask for money from MP to buy whisky rather than buying bricks. It's true that MPs get used to giving money for rural people to buy drink, but it shouldn't happen here. We need to struggle for better living, not for temporary pleasure'.

'Many young people also comment that I shouldn't go out and represent the slum because I'm too old, and it's shameful for the slum to have an elderly aunty like me represent them!', Roy said. Nevertheless, most of her life, Roy has hardly sat down and only thought of herself. She keeps on moving forward and most of her concerns are for her community. The significant role and responsibility of motherhood and the rural value of matrilineal kinship strongly influenced Roy's aim in life. She uses to say, 'I don't want to be rich or pretend to be a Bangkok person. I'm happy to belong to the *I-san* ethnicity and to be a slum person in Bangkok that fights for the rights of the poor'.

Her leadership and frequently outgoing personality results in her husband's jealously. He claims that if it were not for his support, Roy would not have had the opportunity to be in this position. 'I'm so upset whenever he says this. I told him not even to think about this because whatever good or bad I have done alone without any support from a husband. I hate it when men always claim this'. Roy emphasises that women in the Klongtoey slum have taken up more responsibility than men, 'when the men come back, they are just engrossed with drinking, gambling or talking nonsense. They never pay attention to social issues, they only talk about the work they are doing. If they drive a taxi, they just talk about the taxi. I never see any men showing family concern when they talk in a group'. And that 'many young people tell me that they feel more comfortable and safe consulting their mothers than

their fathers. Because the father tends not to listen and even kicks them as punishment, but a mother always has sympathy and understanding without saying, only looking in the eyes'.

Her experiences in negotiating with men, both in the private and public spheres, enabled Roy to persuade many women in the slum to work for the committee, which was successful. Roy believes that only the empowerment of women can nurture and uplift the society. She believes that because women have consented to male domination, the country has never developed and so is vulnerable. 'I have seen many slum communities led by men being degraded day by day because those male leaders took money to buy their own pleasure. If we let our country rest on the male's hand, we're going to collapse!'

2.2) Mutcha: a hybrid generation with village ties

As the only daughter of Roy, Mutcha, age 36, has also made motherhood her central role. However, Mutcha has limited her contribution and responsibility to within the Klongtoey slum only. Mutcha believes that before offering help to outsiders, we must solve our own domestic problems and those inside the community first. Mutcha was 5 when her family had migrated, so she had grown up in Klongtoey and met her husband who was born in the neighbouring slum. Her identity and character reflected a kind of 'hybridity' rather than a single *I-san* identity. Mutcha cannot speak the *I-san* language well but can understand it perfectly. She never wears *I-san* traditional dress (long and narrow cotton-woven skirt wrapped around the body with a cotton blouse), but prefers T-shirts and loose short pants in order to move quickly and confidently. However, Mutcha's everyday food is the local *I-san* food and her beliefs are strongly based on *I-san* values and traditions, for example, the opposition to materialism and the sexual aggressiveness. Mutcha insists that she would prefer to call herself *I-san*, rather than a Bangkok person as she never feels that she belongs to the City.

Probably the main reason that separates Mutcha from identifying herself with Bangkok is her husband's behaviour. Mutcha blames her husband's bad habits on the fact that he was born in Bangkok. She says that, 'I was aware of his behaviour before we married but I didn't expect that he wouldn't be able to change. At that time I thought after marriage he would get better, then when I was pregnant with the first child, I thought it may be this time, but then when I had the second one, he was

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still the same!'. Mutcha's husband is a gambling addict and a womaniser. He never shows any responsibility for the family, never offers money for raising his two children, and comes back home only when the money is gone or when he has been 'kicked out' by one of his partners. Mutcha's only income is from her small grocery shop in the house, but it is never sufficient to raise two children. She is fortunate to have her mother, Roy, nearby, who sometimes provides petty cash for her daily expenses. Mutcha never visits her in-laws despite being within a walking distance, because she has the perception that his parents would not be any different from him. 'I don't want to ask any mercy from them who always claim themselves as Bangkok people. I remember they didn't approve of our marriage at first because they saw me as an *I-san* girl from a village. But I'm sure, my mother, a real *I-san* ethnic woman, is far more moral than all of them'.

Mutcha completed a secondary education but has never worked outside the home because of her children. She used to think about going out to work because that could help her to negotiate shared family responsibility with her husband, but she was afraid that it would not work out. 'Even when I left the children to follow my mother to a meeting, my husband would complain that I didn't have a sense of motherhood'. Mutcha's contribution to the slum is teaching an evening class to help women become literate, and as a representative of the slum education committee.

2.3) Panni: the case of a 'loose' woman?

As traditional Thai culture describes a woman who has many husbands as a 'loose woman' (Veerada, 1997), Panni may not be able to escape from this category. Panni, age 40, had migrated to Bangkok in her late twenties but had lived elsewhere before following her second husband to the Klongtoey slum in 1990.

Panni has an open personality. She is joyful and drinks and smokes, which she attributes to her migration to Bangkok and to her adjustment to her husbands. When Panni first came to Bangkok, she worked as a bar maid in a busy tourist nightspot. She claims that she had many foreign customers who taught her basic English. She talks about how the shift of her life from village to the City was a big shock. She migrated with her first husband who came to seek a fortune in Bangkok, but had fallen into huge debt through gambling. Panni had to go out and find work in a nightclub, which finally caused a break-up in her marriage. She took her only daughter with her and continued working in a bar to raise her child. Panni is

reluctant to reveal what she actually did when she worked at the bar; she only said that she did nothing but receive pretty good money. Although Panni quit the bar maid job 8 years before, and is now living in the slum as a housewife with a 7 year old son from a second marriage, she often meets her bar maid friends and some of her old customers, who give her some money.

Panni's life reflects that of many Thai village girls who come to Bangkok only to be exploited by men, either by their own husbands, boyfriends or city men. Because of poor prospects, these girls go against their traditional moral norms by going into prostitution with the hope that they can help rescue the family back home and enable themselves to survive in the city. Panni may have recognised her past experiences in the bar service as sexual promiscuity, but she will get upset if anyone calls her a 'loose woman'. She believes that every woman has her own reasons for leading her life, and sexual behaviour is not the only way to label women. 'If men and women are compared in terms of family responsibility, I think all men will fall into the 'bad' category more than women'.

2.4) Malee: recreating a village in a slum

Malee, age 58, had settled in the Klongtoey slum 23 years before, or in her words, 'since 1 kg. of chilli cost only 1 *stang* (the smallest Thai currency, which is no longer used)'. Although for Malee life in the village was full of scarcity and hardship, she has many good memories of it and is longing to return there. However, since Klongtoey has become her second home, the place of her income and of her children, she can only suppress her desire and position her life within the urban slum.

'I remember losing one of my earrings at the village well, I was crying and crying and at that moment I decided to go to Bangkok to find a job so I could buy myself some more earrings', Malee recalls the reason that prompted her to migrate. Malee had stayed with her cousin, who worked in a factory, and then she found a job as a domestic maid where she was provided with residence and food. That was the first time that Malee had experienced unfairness and humiliation from her mistress, the wife of a senior judge. Malee could remember every detail of her painful subordinated experiences and realised the differences in class, race, and taste, 'One day I did not iron her clothes properly, and she threw all her clothes from the first floor of the house onto my head'. Finally, Malee left the job and went to work in a

shoe factory. It was the double experiences of being exploited that Malee received because the work meant longer hours but paid lower than the minimum wage and there were no benefits. Malee says that 'at that time, I was so strong physically so they forced me to work more and to shift heavy boxes which was men's work'. The consequence of this hard work was that Malee gradually developed chronic back pain. She was made redundant after the factory replaced manual work with machines.

Malee went back to her village and accepted an arranged marriage, then Malee and her husband migrated to Bangkok again and made the Klongtoey slum their home. Since that time, Malee has never worked under other people. She took up self-employment, selling barbecue food at a mobile vendor, which not only provided the main income for her family, but boosted her subversive feeling towards dominant groups. So far, she has no plan to stop working although she has been caught by municipal officers, as it is illegal to sell food on the main street. Instead, Malee has developed her own tactics to avoid being caught or to negotiate with the officers. She has a group of very close friends in Klongtoey with whom she shares and sells food, and watches TV. Regular visits among female friends is what helps Malee remain happy in the urban slum. It is a style of living that resembles the culture of the village. And it is the recreation of the village in the urban setting that helps Malee cope with the oppressive dominant culture.

3) Research Design and Methods

This study is designed to investigate how the Klongtoey women negotiate their identities in relation to their dominant representations in television programmes.

The research methods and design are drawn around the four main questions of the research, which can be grouped into two categories. One deals with the questions of the signifying process of representations of the Klongtoey women in television and their decoding, and the other concerns the negotiation strategies that the Klongtoey women employ in constructing their preferred identities.

3.1) Phases of Fieldwork

In response to these questions, the main research method is an examination of the women's television viewing in their households, which involves patterns of viewing and socialisation that occurs in front of television sets. Furthermore, in order to

contextualise the relationship between television viewing and the women's everyday lives, I explore beyond the setting of television. In this study, the use of 'TV talk' provides an understanding of the consequences of Klongtoey women's reception of dominant representations on television in the formation of their identities (Scanner, 1991; Brown, 1994; Gillespie, 1995). Ethnography is employed to document the evidence provided by TV talk among these women. Apart from the main ethnographic fieldwork, the textual analysis of two selected television soap opera programmes is applied in order to relate them to the meanings that the Klongtoey women decode from the same texts.

Although this study employs multiple methods in its approach to the Klongtoey women as media audiences, the main methodology is ethnographic audience analysis. This makes use of four methods: 1) participant observation, 2) in-depth interviewing 3) informal group conversation and 4) empirical data gathering. I believe that these methods enable me as researcher to engage in the lives, concerns and perspective of the Klongtoey women.

Despite no neatly systematic research requirement, a strategic plan is certainly necessary for doing ethnographic research. In general terms, ethnographic fieldwork involves two distinct stages. First, the ethnographer enters into the field and participates in the daily routines of the people involved in the social setting. Second, the ethnographer writes down in regular and systematic ways what she/he observes and learns while participating in the field (Emerson *et al* 1995: 1). This study also adopts these two basic stages, however, I have paid particular attention to my first entry to the Klongtoey slum rather than reviewing the note taking stage.

The study was split into two periods, which ran from the summer of 1998 until the early spring of 1999. However, the fieldwork was not continuous. I first entered the Klongtoey slum in June 1998 and started to learn about the community and the people by collecting a range of data about their everyday activities. As I mentioned earlier, my previous experience as a volunteer working in a slum for a short period and my first experimental research of slum women, assisted my involvement in the community and facilitated the fieldwork.

First of all, in order to get involved with the community, I gained access through a non-governmental organisation working in Klongtoey. *Duang Prateep Foundation* (meaning flame of enlightenment) has run a service in Klongtoey for

more than 20 years, and is the only organisation that is operated by slum dwellers themselves and mostly by women. Its founder and director is a woman, named Prateep, who was awarded Asian Magsaysay (for Asian people who notably work for the benefit of society) for her efforts in helping slum people. She grew up in the Klongtoey slum and has been living there ever since. In fact, one of her mottoes is still in my mind: 'being poor, we need to make our voices heard'. It is her thoughts that encouraged me to make Klongtoey women more visible, especially since they are completely ignored in the media as an audience.

Although I began the research recognising that I shared some similarity as the daughter of a Northeastern father, who migrated to Bangkok for purposes of study and career, I did not assume that I could put myself in the Klongtoey women's place. However, the reference to my father's origin helped me construct an easy connection with the women, despite their comments that I was far more fortunate and of a much higher status than they occupied. My contact with the *Duang Prateep Foundation* was significant for this entire research. Being accepted by the Foundation's staff provided me with access and trust from my women informants. I spent about one month of this preliminary period positioning myself at *Duang Prateep Foundation*, which provided me with office space. I used this opportunity to study information and reports on the background of the Klongtoey slum in the Foundation's library, to join regular activities of the Foundation, like everyday home visiting, etc. I also spent my lunchtime chatting with the Foundation staff, as lunch was served at the canteen was free. In the late afternoon I usually met some mothers who came to fetch their children at the Foundation's nursery. By the end of the first month of fieldwork (July, 1998), I had visited and surveyed a few communities in the Klongtoey slum area, always in the company of the Foundation's staff.

I started introducing myself to the 'Railway Track Community *(Choomchon rim tang rotfai)* which I prefer to call 'Klongtoey slum' in this research, by explaining the objectives of my presence to the community leader, whom I call Auntie Roy. Because as a slum representative, Roy had experiences of dealing with outside organisations, she understood my work and offered her help from the beginning. From that day I knew that I would have good participation from the women throughout my fieldwork.

Although Roy had suggested that I should introduce myself as a volunteer of *Duang Prateep Foundation* doing research on women for the foundation, I felt that would be unethical. So I let women know that I was doing research for a PhD, but I also told them that I was also working voluntarily for the foundation. This introduction assisted me in two ways. First, it raised awareness of Klongtoey women as the focus of research work and not of official work, the purpose of which was usually to evaluate situations only to serve the purpose of government's policy. Some Klongtoey women mentioned that they never knew what the government would do with the surveys because they were just paperwork, but they felt that I would take my research more seriously. Second, I gained more acceptance and friendship from the women because they understood the relationship between them and me since I did not have any authoritative power to jeopardise their stay in the slum. I was aware that I could not put myself in their place because of the differences in our status and my appearance. Some women commented that my skin was very pale and that I looked rather delicate to come to a slum. But these comments faded away after a short time as they became used to me and saw that I could socialise with them. Indeed, I adapted myself to being more comfortable in the slum, such as practicing how to walk on the rough rail track quickly, learning when the next train was approaching and what to do (staying back from the track area as well as switching off the tape recorder), adjusting my taste to the local food, and so on. I recognised that my constant presence lessened the women's curiosity about me and helped them feel more at ease with me. Gradually, they accepted me as a person that they could talk to about their problems and opinions without worrying about being judged or corrected. However, this was also problematic because since I was regarded as a friend who would always listen to their problems. These women tended to talk about everything that depressed them. Some of the subjects of their talk was beyond the scope of my research interest and it sometimes took me a long time to bring them back to the purpose of my enquiry. Nevertheless, this abundant information was often useful to me when I started analysing the data.

During the first period of fieldwork (June – September 1998), I spent very long days in the community starting from early morning when the women were busy serving food and assisting their family members to go out to work or school. After the morning tasks were done, the slum became pretty quiet and the women started doing their household work as well as their own income generating work. During

this time my conversations with the women were broad and more general. It was not until just before lunchtime that I started joining or encouraging group conversations among the women as well as conducting individual interviews. Generally I ate lunch with the women by sharing their food or buying the food that they cooked for sale. I was aware that I should not be restricted to any particular women, even for taking lunch, so I had to make a rotation as a lunchtime guest or customer of many women. It is a Thai custom that to refuse any offer of a meal (without pre-invitation) means to reject the friendship. My activities in the afternoon usually included interviewing and talking with the women both in a group and individually while some of them were doing contract manual work for petty cash, such as making cloth stuffing for soft toys. It was very common for the women to turn on the televisions during their lunchtime. However, they were not able to pay full attention to it because of the work. I usually stayed in the slum until the women were busy again serving their families, and I often stayed until their favourite soap opera programme was shown on television, which was around 20.30 – 21.30 pm. This night-time soap programme was a significant time for my fieldwork because it provided the opportunity to understand the moment of the women's reception and the interaction with the television representations. However, since it was not convenient for me to stay late in the slum and because I could get more conversation and more thoughtful talk from the TV talk the following day, I stayed late into the night on only some days.

As discussed earlier, the total number of the women who participated in the first phase of fieldwork was 34. However, at the later part of the first phase when I started discussion of *Nang Baab*, a soap opera that I have chosen for textual analysis and contextual reception analysis, the number of women participating dropped to 30 because they did not follow the soap regularly (see more detail in Chapter 6).

During my fieldwork, I started recording some television programmes, and in particular the soap operas that the women were watching so that I could share their talk. These recorded programmes were used for textual analysis, some of which are presented as the main texts in subsequent chapters.

I returned to the Klongtoey slum in January 1999 after a short break. It may seem unconventional for an ethnographic researcher to interrupt her fieldwork in the middle because this may disturb the flow of data gathering as well as the fieldwork atmosphere. But as I was committed to multiple modes of research, I believed that

the break would give me the opportunity to analyse the performance of my research and the data I had got more carefully. My fear that the women might have forgotten me was unfounded. I received a warm welcome and even more friendship from the women. I was treated like a returning family member and my re-visit did not make them surprised or distant.

The second phase of fieldwork (January – March, 1999) was more intensive as I had become actively involved with many women and participated in some special occasions in the slum, such as the celebration of Children day for which I helped the neighbourhood committee organise the stage for the children's performance. During this period I conducted in-depth interviews and group conversations with 21 women. Although, in fact, I visited with more than 21 women, their conversations did not focus on the topic of *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the soap opera I had chosen for this second phase of study. The average length of each interview was from 1 to 3 hours, depending on the situation and how much time each women had. However, once I became a familiar visitor, I noticed that whenever I started interviewing one woman, other women tended to drop by or join in the conversation, which then expanded an individual interview into a group interview and group conversation. However, my experience from the first phase of fieldwork had taught me how to direct the conversation topics without making them feel manipulated. There were a total of 14 group interviews I had gathered for both phases of fieldwork. Of this number 4 groups represented the upper track group; 8 groups belonged to the middle track group; and 2 groups were from the lower track group. Overall, each group interview was conducted about 3 to 4 times during the fieldwork, except some interviews with the middle track zone that were conducted more than 5 times.

Most of the interviews and group conversations were recorded with an audiotape but only after the women became accustomed to my presence and the performance of my fieldwork. But in some cases, I used only short notes and wrote the details later when I had the time. I usually spent a brief break alone in the community centre revising my notes before I left the slum or at the end of the day. This depended on the situation. For example I did not use a tape recorder to interview one woman whose house was full of men (including one policeman) gambling illegally while the interview was in progress, and in another case when a group of strangers came to warn the women about eviction, while I was conducting

a group conversation. Subsequently, I transcribed all of the interview tapes in full, and developed an analytical and classification method to categorise and cross-reference the data.

I attempted to start the stage of 'writing up' while I was doing the fieldwork. Some ethnographers (e.g. Emerson *et at,* 1995; Gillespie, 1995) suggest that the advantage of writing up in the field is that informants can be included as part of the 'interpretative community', and become interactive in the process of writing. This suggestion had benefited me because during the fieldwork, I had been able to decide which television programmes were relevant to the textual and close reception analyses. Indeed, I had changed the textual programmes at least a couple of times since I had realised later while I was still in the field that some of those programmes were not considered sufficiently important by the women. And because the aim of my research was to explore and understand the ways the women were empowered through the negotiation of television texts, the programmes that encouraged more powerful negotiation were more useful.

As suggested in much of the literature, a set of potential problems may arise in doing ethnography, especially the researcher and the researched. I could not deny that I had grown up in a society that is surrounded by class, ethnic and gender bias. These cultural signifiers had, to some extent, influenced my understanding about other people. Therefore, I had to be mindful not to allow my own experiences, judgements, perceptions, or even bias, to disturb the research process. I remember one day in an early stage of fieldwork when I started relating more with the Klongtoey women. When I was walking back along the rail track and about to reach the main road when there was a light shower and when the road was full of water pools, a Mercedes came close to me with the intention of splashing water onto me. I heard many laughing voices from the car saying that 'slum people should keep themselves in their place', and in that moment I learnt the pain of being considered 'different'.

I found it emotionally difficult to leave the women when the time came. Many women asked me to come back and showed much eagerness to read my study (actually they meant their conversations in the study). Some senior women gave me merit prayers before I left, which still remain with me in my thoughts. However, this is the dilemma of ethnography and other long-term fieldwork that happens when the

researcher is immersed in the researched and the setting. However, I am aware that this is an aspect of ethnographic research that remains impossible to solve. In turn, I feel that the close relationship and the difficulties of detachment may help encourage the researcher to establish strong aims in working on the research, as has happened to me. In fact, this is the essence of ethnography, which relies on the goodwill of people to reveal themselves (Gillespie, 1995: 75).

Chapter Five

Watching TV: The Construction of Identity

This chapter considers the ways in which the media, particularly television, is consumed by and incorporated within the every day lives of Klongtoey women, and its implication for the ways they form their identities. The study explores the general characteristics of the media use culture of the women in the Klongtoey slum, especially in the domestic context. However, since the ethnographic setting of this study is a slum community, it is necessary to include the relationships between women and the community as a significant part of the women's culture of media consumption. Apart from this purpose, looking at the community activities of Klongtoey women also provides an opportunity to understand the women's talk about the media, which reflects both their experiences of companionship and their media reception practice. As emphasised in Gillespie's work on television and ethnicity, 'the embedding of television experiences in conversational forms and flows becomes a feasible object of study only when fully ethnographic methods are used in audience research' (1995: 23). And this is precisely the aim of my using ethnographic audience analysis: to document how the women construct and negotiate their identities, either as individuals or as a group derived from their talk about the representations of class, race and gender in the media.

This chapter serves as the preliminary analysis for the two case studies presented in Chapters Six and Seven, in which I will discuss the implications of negotiation and identities in further detail. In addition, this chapter attempts to combine an ethnographic description of television viewing in a domestic setting with a sociological interpretation of media reception. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section demonstrates the media consumption patterns of the women; how women organise their time of watching and selecting programmes, and how these viewing patterns fit into their women's culture as well as the sub-culture of Northeastern ethnicity in this urban slum setting. Then, the second section examines the meanings of women's television talk by taking into account both realism talk and fantasy talk. The final section offers a more detailed analysis of how media consumption, particularly television watching, is associated with the way

Klongtoey women perceive their ethnic identities by comparing and criticising the stereotypes of Northeastern (*I-san*) ethnic identities presented in the media.

Thirty-four Klongtoey women who are the subjects of this study were asked to talk about their daily routines of media consumption, the pleasure derived from their favourite programmes, and the link between the meanings of the programmes and the specific concerns of their lives. These concerns closely reflect the women's subjectivity in terms of class, ethnicity and gender, which in part is shaped by their experiences of being migrants living in the urban slum. Although both individual interviews and group conversations were guided by the method of semi-structured interviews, the women were given some scope to address their own agendas and concerns. Additionally, the relaxed atmosphere of interviewing, i.e. while they were watching television, eating or drinking, helped to create friendly and lively conversations, which in turn, gave me a tremendous opportunity to observe the way television is incorporated into their daily lives. In one group conversation of four women, I was told that it was the first time anybody had asked them about television viewing, and that it had made them realise the impact of television on their identities. They asked me whether or not I could use this information gathered in this study to change the representations of them in the media according to their expectations. Although I could not provide them with a satisfactory answer (and still can not), I assured them that their voices would be heard and valued as the 'real' audiences, which had been ignored elsewhere in the media.

1) Media Consumption and Everyday Life

As I have already described in Chapter Four, the Klongtoey slum is made up of a range of houses situated on each side of a single narrow rail track. The approximately 400 m. length of the track that runs through the community also divides the Klongtoey neighbourhood into three major groups; those who live along the upper track, those along the middle track, and those along the lower track. These divisions affected my ethnographic fieldwork because they defined the territory for television group viewing as well as group conversation. The women participating in my study are drawn from the three different area groups (see detail in Chapter 4 and Appendix 2).

It comes as no surprise to find that television is integrated into Klongtoey women's lives and routines. The most obvious reason is the possession of television

sets in each household. Of the 34 women informants, only one woman did not have a television in her home, which meant that she had to visit her neighbours when her favourite programmes were shown. However, the reason for not having a television was her current economic situation, which had forced her to pawn her television a few months before:

Lamai: I used to watch TV everyday, you know. I couldn't live without it. But I really can't afford it now. There is no work contract for my husband in the last few months, and my two children have to go to school. I don't dare borrow any more money, cos I'm really in debt. Everyone here is in debt, but mine is worse. So, I had to pawn my telly.

W.P.:   Will you buy it back when you get the money?

Lamai: Of course, it's not uncommon for us. TV is a kind of thing that you can use for barter when you've got no money. But I would not like to live without TV.

W.P.:   Do you feel okay about watching TV in your friend's house?

Lamai: Yeh, we usually watch together even when I had my TV. It's more fun to watch with a group.

The view expressed by Lamai, 36 years old, demonstrates the importance of television for Klongtoey women both as a source of enjoyment and as a commodity for trade when money is needed. Therefore, having a television is apparently a sign of the household's status, which also means the status of individual women in the community. This notion will be discussed later on in the chapter.

Thirty of the thirty-four women informants' households had one television set, while (3 households) had two television sets. The women who could afford more than one television set usually looked well off compared to the other women in the Klongtoey slum. Furthermore, every television set was large and coloured. The television set was, therefore, the focal spot of each household, and a valuable piece of furniture in the house. Among the 33 households that had televisions, 14 of them had television sets of 21" to 28" screens; and 19 households had television sets of 16" to 20" screens. None of them had a television set of any size smaller than 16". This finding surprised me (and most outsiders), because I entered the community with certain preconceptions about their living conditions. The number and the size

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of television sets make it crucial to investigate to what extent television, as well as other media, has meaning for Klongtoey women, as well as how television is used within their domestic context.

1.1) Women's Culture and the Domestic Context of Media Consumption

In general, houses in the Klongtoey slum have no more than 3 rooms, and the biggest room, which is situated in the front, serves multiple purposes. It is used as a living room during the daytime by lifting up giant doors like a garage door, so light and air can circulate through the house. This central space is also used as a bedroom in the night-time after closing the doors and putting mattresses on the floor. And in some houses it provides a space for cooking, preparing things for sale, and a place for selling food. Therefore, this versatile room is very important to the women whose daily lives revolve around this room. It is necessary to note that the remarkable value of this central room is ensured by the position of the television, which is usually situated right in the middle of the room facing towards the outside of the house.

In the Klongtoey slum, the television set is a symbolic object amongst the household furnishings, and its position in the household reveals its owner's wealth and tastes. The most dramatic factor supporting this observation is the size of television set, which has been mentioned earlier. Despite having such limited space, most Klongtoey women considered a big screen television as a centrepiece of family gatherings, and, perhaps, a signifier to compare 'power' among the women themselves. Therefore, to be able to serve as a host for a television viewing group among neighbours does not only reflect the women's generosity, but their popularity and acceptance within a group. Televisions were switched on especially during the daytime when only women tended to be present in the community.

Rung, 49 years old, whose house usually served as a gathering place for her upper track neighbourhood, reflected on the meaning of possessing a television:

Rung: I like to have many friends visit me. Normally we watch afternoon programmes together after finishing housework. Many times I cook for them but they also bring their own lunch too. Friends like to come to me because I'm not bossy like some people here. I never correct what they do. We're just here to chat and watch TV.

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W.P.: Is this why you have such a big TV? *(She had two television sets, one was 28" which was in the central room with two big speakers on the top, and the other one was 16 " which was in her daughter's room)*

Rung: Well, yeh. It's more pleasurable to watch a big screen, you know. My husband added the amplifiers so the sound is so real, like a cinema. My friends are impressed that we have such a good TV. You see we can afford it even in a slum. Don't think that we're too poor to have a good TV. What rich people have, we can have, though it is not a very expensive brand name.

W.P: So, you think TV is a symbol of your status.

Rung: You can say that. You know, it makes me feel good having something before others and when people walk past my house and show surprise. Although all of my friends have their own TV none has sense surround system, and none has two TV's. My daughter is studying in a university and TV is necessary for her. She doesn't like joining us or with my friends.

Rung's conversation depicts the symbolic function of television as an object for pleasure consumption (by group viewing and by better technology), and a display of status. This television becomes a matter of class and a factor for class negotiation. Rung's mention of 'feeling good when being looked at' implies her awareness of class divisions even though it happens within the boundary of her working-class neighbourhood. Furthermore, Rung's explanation of having another television set for her daughter who is studying also shows that the space for television viewing identifies class differences. As her daughter is an educated person, it is a privilege for her daughter not to have to share her space of pleasure consumption with other people in the slum (including her mother and her father). At the same time, having better domestic technology than the others increases Rung's potential to emulate people of the upper class. This potential to emulate privileged outsiders gives Rung the power to claim a central position in her peer group.

Since television is imbued with class attributes, it is regarded by Klongtoey women as one of the valuable commodities with which to barter for cash. Although not having a television can make some women feel inferior to the others, to be able to use it as an exchange commodity is also important. Generally, when facing a

financial crisis, Klongtoey women get a loan from a loan shark or the Community Saving Cooperative[1] as the first option, and pawn their televisions, as well as other valuable belongings such as their jewellery, as a second option. With its specific value, television seems to fit well with the up and down lives of Klongtoey women.

Of the 34 women informants, 21 had experiences of pawning their television for money, and 16 had pawned their televisions to solve financial problems more than twice. Financial crises usually take place during the period before the start of the new school year, which is in June. The deposit duration varies from 1 month - 6 months depending on the ability to repay. It was also common for the women to take a loan in order to redeem their televisions. They were afraid of losing their televisions in the pawning process. Since this is a widespread phenomenon in Klongtoey and in other slums elsewhere, there is less shame in this practise and, in turn, it increases the value of a television for the women.

One of the reasons that Klongtoey women do not want to lose their television is the fact that television is a major part of their socialisation. Television enables them to see other families, other societies and other cultures on the screen. This idea was illustrated by Toy, a 42-year-old single woman, a member of the lower track group, who tended to boast that she had a broader viewpoint than any other women in the slum:

Toy: For me television is a source for seeking new knowledge. I don't like watching rubbish programmes such as romance dramas. I like documentaries especially about foreign cultures. It widens my knowledge, gives me many ideas to improve myself.

W.P.:   Can you give me any example?

Toy: Like a health programme. Now I'm quite concerned about my health, the food I'm taking and the surrounding environment. I wish I could migrate abroad. I don't want to die in this slum. There is one programme shown about the countryside of Scotland, very vast green hills and herds of sheep. It's so beautiful.

W.P.:   So, you learn about foreign countries from TV.

Toy: Not only that. I have a friend living in England... in Sussex. She wrote to me asking me to stay with her. Maybe I go, who knows? My friend was married to an English man. When she first went to

England, she really suffered. She didn't know English, didn't know anyone. Her mother-in-law didn't accept her and threw all her belongings in the Thames river. She walked from Green Park to Piccadilly without warm clothes in the winter. Luckily, she found a job in a Thai restaurant in Kensington. Then her English husband divorced her, but she's survived on her own. Now she's moved to the South and works in a big hotel. She is fine and happy now.

The above remark was very astonishing in that Toy mentioned the names of places in England correctly and with confidence. She even talked more about some other places in England. However, I cannot assume that her story came directly from her friend, as opposed to shows on television. In this case, television consumption is clearly central to Toy's knowledge of the outside world. We can see that television provides the stuff of women's talk, family talk and neighbourhood gossip.

Klongtoey women were interested in talking and sharing their ideas about television viewing. It had become their morning activity, for the women who did not go out to work, to make up a brief chat group about the television programmes from the day before. Some discussions seemed so real that Roy, a senior community leader, once complained to me, "I thought somebody here has died... in fact it happened in TV soap!" When it was the government censure debate[2] presented live on television during my second period of fieldwork (February, 1999), it became a burning issue of the women's conversation. Klongtoey women formed social groups according to their viewpoints on each debate topic. I will return to this issue in the section on television talk.

As already discussed, Klongtoey women preferred to watch television, particularly daytime programmes, with a group. Therefore, the domestic area of these women is more like a social public space rather than a private space. And because the domestic sphere of a Klongtoey household is restricted by the physical environment and the high-density of family members, there is no real sense of personal space for Klongtoey women. Although sometimes the women may have the chance to watch a favourite programme alone because other family members are sleeping or not at home, they hardly ever experience the feeling of 'privacy'. Mutcha, 36 years old, who ran a small grocery shop in the community, expressed the

feeling that she lacked privacy, which could also apply to other women in Klongtoey:

Mutcha: Because I have to keep the shop open everyday till 9 p.m., I hardly have time to watch TV alone or without interruption. Either friends or customers come, so I never watch TV on my own. It's just simply can't happen. Even after I close the shop, the noise around here is so loud with shouting, drinking, laughing and also the noise of the trains passing. You won't believe it if I tell you that I never wear a nightie, it is no use here. I have to be alert and ready in case an unexpected event happens, like a fire or evacuation. You see, you can't think of having privacy or space at all.

Therefore, for Klongtoey women, television is not a site for personal pleasure and partition but a site in which public and private domains are merged together. The above case of Mutcha is a good example. Since her central room was used as a grocery shop, the position of the television set in front of the shop serves as an attraction for more customers (who drop in to watch TV and buy goods from her), and as a site for her own relaxation while keeping her eyes on the shop.

In fact, the lack of private space in the context of television viewing reflects traditional Thai culture, which has been dramatically affected by the replacement of Western concepts. Jetana Nakavajara (1989) argues that in the past, the concept of room partitioning never existed. Therefore, there was no division of public/private space within traditional Thai domestic space context. Nakavajara also uses the concept of boundless space to explain the Thai practice of group entertainment viewing. He argues that in the past Thai people were accustomed to stage watching which gave more pleasure when watched in a group. However, he suggests that the atmosphere of group watching offers an individual audience the capacity for imaginary escape among a group (*cf.* Salaitip, 1992). This seems to be a logical explanation of the way Klongtoey women watch television, which takes place in a domestic area but within a group setting. The following group conversation among Malee, Auree and Sayun, three friends of the middle track group, who always watched television together during meal times, supported this observation:

Malee: I can't watch TV alone. It's not fun.

Auree:	When there are many people watching, we tend to express ourselves if we are satisfied or disappointed. That makes it more exciting.
W.P.:	That means you get pleasure because of the group influence.
Sayun:	Of course. But I also relate to the characters in TV.

The three women had this conversation while they were sitting in front of the television in Malee's house. Each of the three women, at different times, interrupted the talk by shouting at the characters in the television programme or by turning their eyes on the television while continuing with their conversation. Their interaction with television while sitting in a group affirms the traditional Thai performance of group viewing, which also occurred in other groups in Klongtoey. The reason that the women enjoyed and preferred the pattern of group viewing, as had been practiced in the past, could be explained by looking at their rural backgrounds, which emphasises a familial support system, both in terms of domestic work and fieldwork. This sense of support and unity extends to the leisure pattern of rural people, which encourages group, rather than individual pleasure. It could be said that this group-viewing pattern was part of the 'back home' culture that the migrant women brought with them to Klongtoey.

The further point of blurring between public and private space of Klongtoey women's television consumption can be addressed in terms of gender relations in the domestic context. As widely discussed in feminist and media reception studies, men and women are positioned in fundamentally different ways within the domestic sphere (see for instance, Brunsdon and Morley 1978; Cowan 1983; Morley 1986,1992; Fiske, 1987, 1995; Lull, 1991; Wajcman 1996, etc). For men, the home is a site of leisure, an escape from the world of paid work, while for women the home is primarily defined as sphere of work and responsibility, whether or not they also work outside. This finding clearly demonstrates that television viewing is not regarded as ultimately exclusively leisure for women because women's viewing is usually interrupted with household work or demands for service from family members. However, with persistent interruptions, women develop a viewing practice which gains pleasure from this condition, for example by watching soap operas being interrupted by commercial breaks. This argument provides a contextual understanding of the gendered use of television. This also offers an account of the particular meaning of television consumption for Klongtoey women. The following

statements of two women, Wan, 42, and Sakorn, 33, who had a food stall in front of their houses, serves to illustrate this:

Wan: I leave the TV on while I'm preparing food to sell. But I never watch it properly otherwise I burn my food. I wait the night-time when I can sit down and relax in front of the TV. But still I can't stop thinking what I'm going to do next, what to cook for tomorrow. Sometimes my husband asks me to make food for him, but that's fine with me. I always tell him to wait till there is a break. I never want to miss the story. The breaks take quite long especially for Channel 7. He doesn't watch it with me, especially the soap operas. He usually takes a rest or drinks outside the house.

Sakorn: I watch only a few programmes during the day because I have to sit near the stall. It's only busy during lunchtime. In the evening, I'm already tired but I have to cook dinner, do washing, ironing·and help my children pack their school bag. So it's my husband and my son who usually control the TV. I just watch whatever they watch. Except my favourite soap on Channel 7, which I insist upon. But sometimes they watch it too, and they even tell me some parts that I miss.

Both women displayed the difference of gender positions in television consumption, which tended to favour male domination in the home rather than female. It is noted that, for Klongtoey women, daytime viewing had no significant meaning for them as they 'just turn it on while working'. Thus, it was the night-time consumption that provided women with a sense of relaxation and was a source of pleasure (by watching favourite programmes). Nevertheless, to achieve this the women must negotiate their leisure time and their choice of programme with their male family members, specifically their husbands. The above examples of Klongtoey women imply that women are not necessarily passive in the face of male control of leisure time as has been discussed in earlier media reception research (see for instance Morley, 1992). However, the demands made of their gender role and responsibility in the domestic context limit the power of women in night-time media consumption. In turn, the women transform this disadvantage into an advantage by demanding their own particular choice and time without any interruption from their families.

In contrast to the potential to negotiate their time and leisure in relation to particular television programmes, when it became a matter of sophisticated technology, or video, the Klongtoey women completely accepted the claim of male dominance. Out of the twenty-three women who had videos at home, none of them asserted the right to operate the video or choose the film. Their reasons for this were typically: "The video is for my husband (and my son/ sons) only"; "I don't know how to operate it"; "I'm afraid of breaking it"; "I don't have time to watch videos, it takes at least 2 hrs"; "I don't like what my husband (or my son/ sons) watches. It's not my taste". These reasons can be grouped into two categories; one is the lack of confidence in handling this technology, and the other is the lack of time and choice. These findings are similar to the feminist and media reception arguments on the gendering of domestic technologies. In *Inside Family Viewing* (1991), Lull argues that videos are seen as principally the possessions of fathers and sons, or a technology of the masculine domain.

I remember sitting with one woman outside her house, and when her teenage son walked past with a pack of videocassettes in his arm, she said to me:

Udomporn: He spends most of the day watching videos, normally with his friends. He can finish two or three films within a day. I don't mind as long as it can keep him in the house. It is better than hanging around outside and causing a problem.

W.P.: Has he ever caused any problems?

Udomporn: Oh, yes. He was taking drugs before. But he quit. I put him in a rehabilitation centre for a while. He promises me not to cause any more problems. I bought him this second hand video as he asked for it. He likes watching foreign films, those adventure things. The rental fee is pretty high, but as I said it's better than doing nothing.

The purpose of having a video for the above case was to keep her son at home. Udomporn reported that she never wanted to join her son in watching a video because she did not like the films and because she did not want to interfere with his pleasure. This scenario exemplifies the determining principle behind the women's alienation from the video. The women felt they had no place in sharing video watching with their families because it is men who identify the use and purpose of this home technology. In fact, the gender boundary of using video has less to do

with the women's competence, as the Klongtoey women usually take up more responsibilities in domestic management than men, and more to do with the ideological bias of technology, which associates the superiority of men with the sophistication of technology. The contrasting attitudes of the Klongtoey women about the television and the video suggest that the media consumption of these women is closely bound up with gender culture in their domestic and community contexts.

1.2) Media Consumption Pattern

As mentioned in the previous part, although television was on during the day, the Klongtoey women did not give their full attention to it until the night-time programmes were shown. This applied to all of the thirty-four Klongtoey women, whether they were working in the slum, or staying at home. As for the women who went out to work, weekend daytime programmes also received less attention than the evening and night-time programmes. The main reasons for this viewing time pattern ranged from being busy with housework and income work in the daytime, taking a rest (a nap) during the day, chatting in a group, to having no interest in the daytime programmes. The other minor reasons included being busy playing cards, gambling, or drinking. Therefore, the usual reason for turning the television on during daytime was to kill time or to make background noise.

Roy, a community leader who seemed busy with various forms of work most of the time, complained that leaving the television on was a waste of resources:

Roy: Electric power is not cheap *(2.45 baht per unit at the time of study /60 baht = 1 pound)*. I don't understand why nobody cares about this. Have you seen that group? *(pointing at a group, which is playing cards while the TV is on.)* It's such a shame that they put entertainment before their real need. But some houses never pay electricity. They connect a line with a public post. But that's illegal and they have to be aware every time if someone comes to check.

However, from my conversations with the women, most of them seemed concerned about the cost of electricity, but they did not seem to realise the consequences of their television viewing pattern. They just switched on the television because it was there, and because it was the time that they were freed from interruptions of the

family. However, as I discussed earlier, although the women were free from the family's demands they, in fact, let other activities, such as chatting, playing cards, or selling food disturb their viewing. The explanation for this phenomenon may not be clear, nevertheless, it seems to me that the address of media reception scholars to the context of family orientations towards time may provide a potential answer.

According to Anderson, to understand television viewing behaviour we need to see how 'families have negotiated different concepts of time and how TV viewing has become incorporated within those time concepts (1987: 167). In the case of the Klongtoey women, daytime was understood as a period, which women organised themselves. Being free from the interruption of family members, the women may feel less guilty to consume time, space and even cost in order to indulge their pleasure. The women's desire to switch on the television during daytime can be seen as a way the women negotiated control of the use of television, since the evening viewing time is usually dominated by the men. Further to this gender aspect, Modleski (1984) and Morley (1992), propose the very useful idea about the contrast between monochronic/ and polychronic viewing. Morley explains that 'the monochronic viewing mode seemed to be a characteristic of masculine styles of viewing (planned viewing, concentrated attention, single activity) and the polychronic viewing mode to be the corresponding feminine mode (unplanned viewing, concurrent activities, sporadic attention)' (1992: 264). Indeed, the viewing pattern of Klongtoey women, is towards a polychronic time orientation, which fits with their domestic work and income as well as their viewing practice, as has already been discussed. However, it is not my intention to further develop this analysis here. Rather, I will attempt to use these analyses to accommodate my framework for understanding the media consumption pattern of Klongtoey women.

We have seen that the Klongtoey women organised their media consumption time according to a variety of factors. However, there were some points in the day, such as breakfast and after dinner, which were closely bound up with certain television programmes. For the 34 women informants, a one hour soap opera on Channel 7 at 20.30 – 21.30 p.m. was a fixed point in their viewing. During the week, Channel 7 presented four soaps at this prime time hour, three of them were two-day episodes and the other, one. Thus, their viewing was more a matter of the women's schedules, and less a matter of choosing a particular soap story:

Sayun:	After the meal we watch the soap on Channel 7 every day. We're addicted to this soap time. We thoroughly relax, finish work and after this we go to bed.
Malee:	Except at the weekend when we stay up a bit longer for late night programmes.
W.P.:	Why only Channel 7, why not other channels, which show soaps at the same time?
Auree:	It fits with our taste *(laughing)*. Other channels always show something beyond our understanding. I don't like soaps on Channel 3 and 5. Most are for teenagers or people with modern idea, not us.
Malee:	Channel 7 is the most clearly received.

The above group conversation between the three women aged from their late 40s to late 50s exemplified the reason for choosing this prime time period for viewing their soaps. The justification of Channel 7 as their sole choice leads to further understanding that the feeling of belonging or fitting into the content is another significant factor in the women's choice of programmes. Another minor factor, which was repeatedly mentioned by many women, is the quality of the picture transmission. The Klongtoey slum is surrounded by flyover expressways and on the ground is a single railway track that runs along the slum. This setting affects television reception in this area, which also limits the choice of channels.

As the prime time soap opera was preferred by all of the women, it illustrated the gratification the women derived from melodrama or soap opera. This issue will be discussed later in the section on television talk.

For the women who were at home or had late morning work, weekly breakfast programmes on Channel 7 and Channel 9 were their favourites. The Klongtoey women said that they usually watched the programme before starting their routine work. This was one of the two scheduled programmes that received the full attention of the women. It was a programme for women, presented during 8-8.30 am. every working day. The programme on Channel 7 was called *'Krobkrueang Rueang Pooying'* (women's general issues) and the Channel 9 programme was called *'Kui Rueang Pooying'* (talk about women's issues). The content of the programmes in each episode included, beauty and health advice, cooking, shopping,

home decoration, and legal or domestic advice. Despite educational differences, the three women tended to show a similar appreciation of these women's shows:

Mutcha (with a secondary education): There are not enough programmes aimed at women, even the daytime programmes that are supposed to be watched by women. I would like to see more women's programmes like these two breakfast shows. I think they're very useful and I like it when they discuss issues, which really affect women such as breast cancer, rape and domestic abuse. If we don't know these, we will fall victims of men. I don't pay much attention to beauty issues, perhaps we aren't obsessed with these unnecessary things. Many women here say the same.

La-or (with a primary education): These are women's interest issues like health and living. I find some are very useful for myself, such as keeping the house clean and comfortable to live in or looking good. without spending money on beauty stuff. I like the programme host of Channel 7 *(mentioned the name)*. She looks so professional, confident and a really good housewife. The discussion on social problems is also interesting. It gives me advice on how to handle some family problems. Normally, it's women who worry about family problems.

Aew (joining an informal primary education class in the community which is offered by a voluntary group of university students): I like legal advice in the programme. I have many experiences of being exploited just because I didn't have an education. I really feel grateful to the programme because it gives me such information on these issues. And if I finish the primary class I'll start reading more legal books. I have a strong will to do this. And if I learn more, nobody can ridicule me, especially my *great* husband!

In general, all of the 34 women were eager to discuss their enjoyment of the women's programmes. One of the most emphasised points was the benefit they gained from the awareness of women's issues, particularly legal and social problems. This data shows the women's concerns with everyday problems they faced living in an urban slum. It also implies the needs for information and

knowledge for the Klongtoey women in order to empower them to be self-sustaining. Most of the women recognised their roles as a family upholder, mainly in terms of moral control, thus, they were seeking knowledge and examples that they could adapt for their own cases.

Apart from the soap opera and the women's programme, which were the favourites of Klongtoey women, news and current affairs were also often watched as part of daily viewing. Among all the 34 women informants, mention of news and current affairs programmes was common in the interviews and group conversations. However, it is noticeable that news programmes were watched while the women were simultaneously engaged in other household or income generating activities. Such viewing patterns must be seen in relation to the domestic patterns of women's every day life as has already been discussed. It is also the case that news and current affairs programmes were primarily regarded as men's programmes. The time for news bulletins, then, obviously fit with men's schedules, such as during women's cooking time or right after the mealtime. Although the Klongtoey women hardly watched these programmes properly, they stated the importance of news programmes for their every day lives. For all of the women informants, being able to keep in touch with daily news and current affairs was a valuable experience. Again, the women agreed on their judgements of rating news programme on Channel 7 as the best (apart from the clear picture reception and their husbands' choices) because of there were more reports on crimes, regional news and community problems.

Although the women could access news events from the radio and newspapers, they felt a more direct impact from television coverage. This is because television made them feel a connection to real events, seeing the events taking place, seeing the faces of newsmakers, and even witnessing the events from live coverage. In-depth and critical current affairs programmes were also valued by the Klongtoey women although they could not watch them regularly because of their late schedule. Some women said that they would watch it if they were not too tired and if their husbands were watching with them. Interestingly, nearly half of the women who talked about critical current affairs programmes (7 out of 18 women) did not remember the correct title of the programmes or the names of the presenters. For example, Malee, aged 58, tried to recall the programme she found informative, but she had difficulty in recalling the name until her husband, who was sitting beside her, said with annoyance that it was called 'Headline':

Malee:	Right, that's the one. Well, I don't understand why they use such a difficult name. My husband always tells me I'm stupid. But you know, I understand what they are discussing in the programme and I'm really interested.

It seems that, for the women informants, watching in-depth and critical current affairs programmes is associated with the image of personal intelligence. This may be the reason why some Klongtoey women who watched this type of programme intentionally showed their appreciation of the programme. Here we see another way of enhancing the women's negotiation of power in order to construct their desired identity by attempting to watch serious programmes. Their discussions in the television talk section will illustrate this in more detail.

In all, although the large majority of Klongtoey women remained in favour of the 'woman's genre' of romantic melodrama and women's special programmes, they did not reject the value of 'serious genre' like news and sports which are generally regarded as a 'male genre'. As demonstrated by the above examples, some women had attempted to enter male space by sharing their viewing preference for a serious genre with their male partners. This is clearly seen in the case of a Thai boxing programme shown on Channel 7 on Sunday afternoon. Before the programme started, groups of men who were drinking had been set up in front of the televisions which were moved outside the houses and turned on a very high volume. This caused excitement for everyone along the rail track so that no one could resist joining these groups. Shortly after the match started, food was served by the women of each group, and they shared the cooking. Then, the women also joined the viewing, and the cheering noises spread all over the slum. The excitement of watching, indeed, came from a gambling deal made by the men before the match started, which is called 'box gambling' among the slum neighbourhood.

Some of the women who stayed alone (who were abandoned or separated from their husbands), such as Charun and Samniang, and the women who contributed their time to community work, such as Roy and Mutcha, admitted that they felt irritated by this activity, but it was useless contesting it since it became an addictive practice of many men and women in the community. "All I can do is close my shop", said Mutcha, "Bring my children out for shopping and come back after it is over" And for the women who got involved (approximately 75 percent of the total

women informants), they found a great deal of pleasure both in watching the fight on the screen and watching the tension of the men in a group. The Klongtoey women developed their own ways of negotiating with their men, by including themselves in the male domain of media consumption. At the same time, some women opted for rejection by ignoring, escaping, and criticising men's media leisure as destructive.

1.3) Sub-culture and Folk Music Consumption

Whereas television was mostly communally enjoyed, radio music was consumed as a private activity. Quite often people's personal tastes competed against each other, when the sound of music exploded into the public arena. It is noticeable that although all of the women preferred country or folk music to Western pop/rock music, their taste in rhythms and lyrics was varied. These differences can be divided into two groups; one group favoured a slow rhythm expressing a peaceful and pleasant rural mood; the other preferred a fast rhythm with satirical allusions to class, gender, and politics. The major factors influencing this division are most likely associated with the women's ages and the length of time they had lived in the slum since migrating from the rural villages. However, these factors may not be applicable to every woman because some of them did like both types of music. Of the 34 women, 20 of them preferred the slow rhythms and rural meanings of country music, while the other 14 chose the second type characterised by a fast and ironic style. Nevertheless, as mentioned, this information is valid only with reference to the women's personal tastes because some of them could enjoy the other type of music when they were in a group of friends or in public.

The combination of both the rhythm and the lyrics offered special pleasures to the Klongtoey women because it required an involvement of the audience's background and ideology. Furthermore, much of the folk music was sung in the *I-san* (Northeast) ethnic language or the mixed-language combining Central Thai and *I-san*, as well as using the *I-san* folk rhythm (with special local musical instruments), which was familiar to the women. The slow rhythm of the *I-san* folk music mainly represented the ideological concepts of *I-san* culture and traditional practices of the *I-san* people. For example, the two songs, which were often played and talked about by the women were: *'Dok Jan'* (name of a special *I-san* flower) and *'Tam Khao Chao I-san'* (meaning: ask for *I-san* people). Both songs urged

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Northeastern people to remain faithful to their culture and beliefs. The following quotations explained the relationships of these two folk tunes and the *I-san* women of Klongtoey:

Roy: In *'Dok Jan'*, there is an emphasis on the value of *I-san* women for the family and culture. *I-san* women must protect their purity before marriage. They should be honest, humble, and self-sacrificing for the village. And in *'Tam Khao Chao I-san'*, there is a call for *I-san* people to go back to their land because *I-san* is not poor any more. These two songs are our favourite, you can hear them very often. They remind me of my happy life in the village and they raise my spirits up. Sometime I feel very down when facing many troubles in the slum, then I listen to these songs and I have more hope to stay on. No one here wants to lose our roots in *I-san* culture. We love being *I-san* and we will keep our valuable culture dearly.

Sai: I really miss my village. Listening to these songs can help me connect to the happy life I used to have over there. Living in Bangkok is like a hell, nothing compared with *I-san*, my real home.

The perception of the Klongtoey women who appreciated the fast rhythm songs expressing anti-social meanings was slightly similar to the first group. The folk music reminded them of their origin, their culture and their identity. What was different from the first type of folk music was that it brought an oppositional discourse to the dominant perception both culturally and politically by constantly challenging the institutions of power. For example, the imagery of the rich/poor, urban/rural, and government/villager polarities were central to the majority of the songs. The following group conversation between the three friends of the middle track group who migrated from the same province depicted the meaning of the fast rhythm *I-san* folk music in terms of their everyday living:

Panni: I like Sommai's song of *'Ng-uern Chuay Mai Dai'* (money can't help). It ridicules the power of elite people, especially those in politics, who are greedy and use money to pay for their mistresses. The song says that money can't make them immortal, and because of money their wives run away with other lovers. *(giggling with satisfaction)* It's so cool!

Chan:	Yeh, it makes these rich people feel shame.
Panni:	Only if they do listen.
Chan:	Well, they might hear about it. These songs are played everywhere and are top hits. I like every song of the *Rock OrYoh* band. It's new and a hit because it's a mixture between rock and *I-san* folk music. Wow! It just raises your blood.
Mali:	I like one of their songs that invite people to visit *I-san*. It compares many good things of *I-san* with the horrible traffic and pollution in Bangkok.
Panni:	It's cool. We like to play this cassette when we are in a group. And if I'm drunk, I love to dance when I hear these songs. *(cheering from the group because she was about to get drunk).*

The use of the *I-san* folk music by the Klongtoey women suggests the ways the women combined sub-cultural performance (in this case folk music) with mainstream media consumption. It was not difficult to obtain these *I-san* folk music cassettes as they were available on many music shops and street stalls. It was also often transmitted for visual pleasure on television, such as television music programmes and a live free folk concert on Channel 7 every Saturday afternoon.

On the whole, the reaffirmation discourse of ethnic origin and the oppositional discourse of class and race differences are interwoven within the performance of *I-san* folk music. It is certain that *I-san* folk music provides an arena for the Klongtoey women to accommodate their sub-culture within the dominant culture of urban slum living. This consumption helps ensure that the women maintain their connection with their 'back home' culture and values, which resists interference from the dominant culture. Although the women were exposed to other mainstream discourses, particularly through television, having an alternative discourse is a major factor in sustaining their sub-culture.

2) Television Talk

The general preference for the oral and visual media over the printed media, coincides with the women's education as well as with the centrality of an 'oral tradition' in the country. Having inherited the style of an oral tradition, the women were keen to transfer the oral and visual media texts into their discourse networks,

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or gossip networks. However, it is the negative connotation of 'gossip' that put the women's talk down and goes unrecognised.

So much ethnography has paid attention to women's gossip with the core argument that it serves as a form of social cement for women to challenge dominant discourses. According to Brown's study of soap opera and women's talk (1994), women's talk about soap opera is often circular, lacking a clear beginning, middle, or end. However, Brown argues that these conversations are important for women's resistant pleasures because '[they] provide outlets for a kind of politics in which subordinated groups can be validated and heard' (1994: 2).

It is this notion that I have applied in seeking to understand the interaction between the media texts and the Klongtoey women, which did not stop at the moment of reception but became a primary site of the women's construction of meaning. It is in this space that the women were able to talk about their lived experiences in relation to what they had seen and heard on television. The women's television talk also functioned as a facilitator for talk about their concerns about ideological issues such as class, race, and gender, which are hardly directly voiced in their patriarchal society.

In this section, the women's television talk is divided in terms of realism and fantasy. Nevertheless, the use of these two terms does not rest on the distinction that realist talk is serious and fantasy talk non-serious. Both realist and fantasy talk can reflect the critical views of the women on social and cultural as well as personal and family concerns in the community. The method of analysing the women's television talk is also employed in the further close analyses of the two soap opera cases in Chapters Six and Seven.

2.1) Realistic Talk

Most research in television studies use the term 'realism' to discuss the realistic text in the forms of genre and narrative. In this study, I attempt to locate realism within the domain of audience reception using the term to signify that the story is told and recognised as real. The idea of realism is often expressed by the metaphor of reflection. This metaphor defines realism as 'the belief in an objective reality that can be accurately experienced by the human senses' (Fiske 1987: 22). As applied in this study, realism is not a replication of reality but a reflection in which

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interpretation depends on individual experience, which is essential for making sense of the real.

The observation data showed that talk about news and critical current affairs programmes reflected the most realistic talk of the Klongtoey women. This can be roughly explained by the fact that the women never started their talk with the phrases such as 'If I were...' or 'I would do...' when talking about news and critical programmes, while these phrases were usually mentioned within the fantasy talk about soap opera. Interestingly, the majority of Klongtoey women (28 out of 34 women informants, the rest were those who did not comment) did not accept the word 'gossip' to explain the way they talked about news, but felt all right when using it for soap opera talk. This observation is very significant to the above explanation of women's oral culture. This is because although the Klongtoey women had enjoyed extensive talking about television, they accepted the rule of patriarchy in classifying the value of dominant talk. This suggests that, contrary to the arguments of feminists on women's talk as a resistant strategy, the way the Klongtoey women talk does not always imply a resistance to patriarchal modes of expression. The acceptance that 'realist talk' had a masculine value and fantasy talk reflected a feminine value showed the influence of gender hierarchy on Klongtoey women's perceptions of the value of discourse. This is the main explanation for why the Klongtoey women felt more important and acknowledged when talking about realistic issues.

As discussed in earlier findings, the Klongtoey women were unlikely to watch news with their full attention because of the demands of household. News watching (especially the prime time news bulletin at 7 p.m.) was part of the domestic routine of the family chosen by the father or another male family member. Therefore, instead of escaping from it, the women accepted the value of it because news watching was the men's choice and was considered serious. Competence in talking about news was, then, perceived as a signifier of being active, publicly oriented, and intelligent, all of which are seen as masculine characteristics, and as the opposite of passive, domesticated, and naïve, which are characterised as feminine.

In the Klongtoey context, competence in news talk is not only linked with gender characteristics and gender positions in the family, but also involves social

positions, or identities, of class and race. The Klongtoey women found that news has a formal narrative, a national interest, and authoritative address, therefore, news is a 'high-status television genre' as noted by Fiske (1987) or a 'middle class genre' as it is described by Gillespie (1995). By locating class in the news genre, the Klongtoey women recognised the value of it, though, in some senses, they did not feel that they fitted into this genre as comfortably as they did with soap opera. In terms of race, the women were aware of an imbalance of news coverage between central and rural regions. They perceived the news as relating primarily to central Bangkok people, and not to *I-san* people. The women considered news talk as a site in which to negotiate their identities by replacing the positive image (of news competence) over the negative one (see the discussions on Dyer, 1993 and Hall 1997 in Chapter One). The following conversation with two women who have primary education affirmed this statement:

Boonlom: I don't like watching the news casts of Channel 5 and Channel 11. They speak for the government. Channel 7 is okay, but I feel disgusted when it constantly promotes some politicians. I've lived here more than 10 years, and I hardly see any news about our slum.

Sakorn: Only when there is a disaster. Like when they report news about *I-san*, they always show the picture of very dry land, very poor living. I just want to know where that is in *I-san*. I came from the poorest province. To be honest I never saw anything like that, it's not as bad as they show.

W.P.: Has this bias made you stop watching news?

Sakorn: Oh no! I watch news nearly everyday. Though it's biased, it is something that I have to watch otherwise I'm left out of the world. I don't want anyone to call me stupid just because I'm in here.

Boonlom: We're not, are we? Though I don't know what happens behind the scenes in the government but I can see who is bad or less bad *(laughing)* from TV. We're not very naïve like village people. They *(politicians)* can't cheat us easily.

From the above women's points of view, it is clear that recognising the political bias of the news did not put them off from viewing it. Rather, the women found it more challenging to talk about the news content and its bias in order to increase their

knowledge and awareness of their surroundings. Klongtoey women, like Boonlom and Sakorn, admitted that without news, they would have remained ignorant and locked in the small and ill-educated community of the Klongtoey slum as it is perceived by outsiders. The women also noticed that possessing the competence to criticise the news could prevent them from being perceived as being inferior to the group of people who control the news.

By emphasising surveillance as a function of news competence, the Klongtoey women were not supporters of the government. As noted in Chapter Four, the fieldwork was conducted at two different times: the first phase was conducted during the summer of 1998, and the second was conducted during the early spring of 1999. During both periods, there were major crises in Thailand, which had a great impact on poor people living in urban and rural areas. The first event was a nationwide economic recession, where the economy took a severe tumble in early 1997. This had an effect on the entire society. The economy worsened early in 1998 when the government decided to take a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The second event was a big protest of farmers from the Northeast region who rallied in Bangkok to pressure the government to tackle these economic problems urgently. This event lasted for 2 months across the duration of the second phase of fieldwork. The third incident was the government censure debate, which took place in the first week of February 1999, when the second phase of my fieldwork was starting. These three major events raised enormous questions and criticisms about injustices to the poor, ill management of the government, and other stressful situations, which the women of Klongtoey discussed and reflected upon extensively.

The adverse impact of the economic slump suddenly struck the Klongtoey women when they realised that they had to pay much more for the same things just to make ends meet. Their suffering was added to by the loss of their jobs or their husbands' jobs due to the many redundancies, and the sharp decrease in earning due to buyers' low capacity. Talk about television news provoked their anxieties over the current economic situation and their fears for the near future. The feelings of ambiguity and confusion, which derived from their unclear knowledge and information about the situation, emerged during television talk. Because of uncertainty and insufficient information, the women's desire to talk more about these events with their groups increased. The following group conversation

highlighted the ambiguous attitudes to the government's performance among Klongtoey women. All four women below were working for the community: Roy, 64, was a community leader; Udomporn, 45, was a community vice-leader; Aew, 48, and Mutcha, 36, were members of neighbourhood committees. In this group Mutcha had the highest degree of secondary education, thus, she served as the source of information for the group. Their criticisms were quite strong as they felt they were talking on behalf of all slum people:

Roy: I don't know the IMF. What does that mean and why must we borrow from it? Why don't they use simple words so we can understand?

Mutcha: IMF is like a wicked moneylender, worse than a loan shark because it takes huge advantage of poor people like us. It preys on our blood. Its policy is to get its money back in time with high interest.

Aew: Why do we have to accept IMF's condition if it gives us more hardship?

Roy: The government never listens to our voices. Why must the poor shoulder all the burdens?

Mutcha: It's very unfair. From what I see on TV, this problem came from mismanagement of the financial sector. These are the people who enjoyed the...erm...bubble economy in the past, which never improved our quality of life. Have you seen in the news? When the economy collapsed, these people just ran away abroad.

Udomporn: Exactly, they don't care about the country. They just know how to take from it. I got very badly hit by IMF, now I'm jobless, and just have to stay at home. Who else cares about me or what I have left to eat each day?

Aew: That's what they said on TV, the IMF makes the poor get poorer. I've just stopped running my shop, no one can spend much money on food. I couldn't afford to buy many things in the market either. It's so expensive. Better to find small contract work.

Roy: You're lucky if you can find some. Many people here are jobless with no contract. You see more men staying at home now. Some of them have gone back to *I-san* as they couldn't live here anymore. At least in the village they can find food without buying.

Mutcha:	But *I-san* is the poorest region and the most vulnerable area. It's suffered so badly too. I just hope there is no more influx in migration.
Roy:	I'm afraid the government might cut budgets for poor people, and that will be hell.
Udomporn:	It's already hell! Look at the bus fare just increased yesterday. It's disgusting.
Mutcha:	The government and the IMF are hiding policies from us. We are not allowed to know any policy that matters to us. Like saying in the news, everyone just woke up and found that they are in debt.
Aew:	Did you watch TV two days ago? The Prime Minister asked us to be patient and sacrifice for the country. That's rubbish! Why don't they say that to themselves? We have been working hard all of our lives, and this is how the government repays us, by giving us the IMF!

Yet, the group's criticism revealed not only the confusion about the government's decision to take a loan from the IMF, but also the rejection of the government's economic rescue policy. The four women in this group, like every one else in the Klongtoey slum, called the economic recession situation 'IMF', even though none of them knew exactly what this abbreviation stood for. They felt it more appropriate to use the English word 'IMF' because they understood from watching television news that the situation had more to do with Thai currency in the foreign exchange market and foreign investments. Therefore, the word 'IMF' signified the uncertain situation that Klongtoey women, and the poor elsewhere, were facing. Because it connected the situation to an outside power, they felt more vulnerable, at risk, and less able to negotiate or fight back. The group's comment on the Northeast as the hardest-hit region and their fears of the new wave of immigration reflected their personal experience of migration and the connections to their home region.

Unfortunately, the concerns raised in the above conversation came true, this time not migration, but a huge rally of Northeastern farmers in Bangkok (January – March, 1999) one year after the IMF loan. As many as 50,000 farmers from the Northeast region seized Sanam Luang (the public main ground for the country's ceremonies), the Parliament, and the Government House to press the government to address long outstanding problems and to reveal the conditions of the loan package from the IMF. However, the protesters had no desire to create disturbances in

Bangkok. They only wanted to air their grievances and demand a response from the government. The claim that the demonstration aimed to obtain cooperation and support from the urban poor in Bangkok had stimulated the sense of belonging among the Klongtoey women who shared the same hardships caused by the economic slump. This is an extract from a conversation among the three middle-aged women of the middle track group, who came from the upper part of the Northeast region:

Wan: I feel pity for them. If they were not so desperate, these *I-san* farmers would not have come. Who likes to leave their home, their land and stay on the street like this? *I-san* people are the most patient and tolerant. We hardly make a noise like Southern people. This time it must be extremely unbearable for them.

Chan: Sure it is. Did you watch the news yesterday? A protest group leader said that each of the farmers carries a debt as high as 300,000 baht. With the IMF crisis, it's hard to pay their debts. No need to talk about their day-to-day struggle.

Panni: They are forced to come because of injustice in this country. Look, since IMF hit the country, I haven't seen the rich stop spending money. There is news about their parties every day.... I would like to go out and support the farmers. We can help increase their bargaining power.

Wan: I remember I was stunned by the news about one woman, who had a miscarriage during the protest, just in front of the Government House. It's a pity if the government doesn't understand what death means to the poor.

Panni: I think the government looks at the protest with distrust. They're afraid of losing power rather than being concerned about poor people.

Chan: If you want to go, you have to be careful. The government might send the police to remove the protesters. They're ruthless.

Panni: Bloody government! We have a life to live as well.

This talk reflects both sympathy for the protesters and anger towards the government. Panni felt the need to join the demonstration because she believed that a larger number of people could make their voices louder and more able to negotiate with the government. However, the three women, like other Klongtoey women, did

not believe that the protesters wanted to threaten the government's stability because they believed that Northeastern people were not aggressive. Here, the characterisation of Northeastern people as a 'compromiser and non-violent oriented' were clearly represented through the women's discussion and their attitudes towards the demonstration. This non-aggressive identity was also illustrated by Roy: "The aggressive approach would make more enemies and take the farmers nowhere. I guess they will opt for a hunger strike rather than making a blood demonstration." Roy's prediction was pretty correct because after the two month long demonstration, the farmers decided to head back to the Northeast region because they received a promise from the government to tackle their problems, and because they did not have enough food for a longer protest.

In fact, this demonstration of Northeastern farmers (the biggest ever) had created suspicions among Klongtoey women as to who was behind the protest:

Mutcha: They can't have money to come to Bangkok. There must be some one or groups supporting them. *I-san* people are not politically minded. They just stay quiet most of their lives. I'm afraid they are used by politicians.

Again, we see the uncertainty or distrust in the dominant powers from the news talk of the Klongtoey women. This is no surprise because the women constructed meanings based on their own experiences and the perceptions of their class position in the social context. Most of these Klongtoey women had witnessed unjust treatments due to the class differences, and these experiences have weakened their trust in the authorities.

The uncertain feelings about the government and those in power were shown throughout their discussions about the censure debate, which was broadcast live for three days. During my second phase of fieldwork (February, 1999), every single house in the Klongtoey slum turned to the channel of the live broadcast programme, and some women admitted that they kept on watching it until the debate closed as was indicated by this woman of 55, whose husband worked as a daytime security guard:

Chorn: My husband complained that I should stop watching. He said there is nothing constructive. They [politicians] are just spitting at each other.

But I want to watch it. Last night I watched until 10 pm. If they can talk that long, I can stay with it too.

Not only did they watch attentively, but it was also quite common to hear many Klongtoey women engaging in enthusiastic discussions about the debate. When asked about their views on the debate, most of their initial expressions were: "It's cool!; It's so satisfying; etc." However, their comments on the contents of the debate were opposite. For the women, the censure debate was a political game in which politicians merely tried to outdo each other. There was no serious implication of improving the status of Thai politics. The three friends who had a joint barbecue stall on a shopping street exchanged their views:

Sayun: It's ended just as I guessed. The three ministers survived the censure vote. I've heard people on the street complain that it was a waste of time and resources to bring it on air.

Auree: It was not a waste. At least we know their mistakes. Now I know why they're so rich and why we're so poor. They have taken bribes. They devoured everything. You see! The water pipes were left over there *(pointed at a pile of PVC pipe which were left more than a year ago)* because the money ran out. They just kept it in their pockets. So what we got was an unfinished project, or even a cheap one.

Malee: Today, you talk very brainy.

Auree: Well, perhaps after I had been watching the debate on telly. You see! At least it helps me know what they are up to.

It is not surprising, then, that the government had, indeed, failed in the eyes of the public after being excessively exposed in the debate. In particular, this debate was aimed at the government's mismanagement in solving the country's economic problems. Many Klongtoey women questioned the misuse of the government's power, at the same time, blaming the inefficiency of the opposition parties. A further set of accusations went to the rural people who allowed candidates to buy their votes. It is obvious that the Northeast is the biggest region of vote buying. Because of widespread poverty, people vote for candidates who give them money, regardless of their political ideologies. In their group conversations, many Klongtoey women were distressed by this fact. Some even accepted guilty that their families back home were involved in this process.

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The heightened sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that the economic crisis and its consequences (Northeastern farmers' protest, and the government censure debate) had provoked, were revealed through the women's ambiguities concerning the ability and sincerity of the government to address the crisis fairly. The fact that they never received clear messages from the government about this economic depression had reinforced their perception of class and identity differences. The Klongtoey women felt that their voices were never heard, even though they were among the hardest-hit victims of the crisis, and that, they were treated as 'other' under the government's views. Nevertheless, the Klongtoey women showed that their treatment as 'different' and as subordinate did not present them from feeling empowered to negotiate. Instead, their own alienating experiences increased their sympathy for the other urban poor and rural people, as well as their support for the farmers' protests. The women, then, felt ensured of the non-violent nature of the demonstration by expressing belief in their *I-san* non-aggressive identity. This demonstration incident, thus, in turn, reconfirmed the value of their ethnic identity. In all, we see the women's negotiating skills were developed throughout the process of television viewing and from their awareness of the centrality of class and identity differences.

2.2) Fantasy Talk

From the previous discussion on realist talk, we see that the Klongtoey women were active in circulating their opinions. In fact, this is the process that changes the position of the women from viewers to producers of meanings, which is essential for empowering them to negotiate. Through such realist talk, the Klongtoey women gained information about points of view towards particular events and their surrounding contexts. Respectable positions, as an intellectual or leader of the group, were also derived from realism talk. With fantasy talk, the women experienced enjoyment and, at the same time, the opportunity to extend the stories from television in ways that were relevant to their own lives. Talking about entertainment programmes, or so called 'soft programmes', such as soap operas, game shows, advertising, etc., creates pleasure, derived from exchanging views and opinions about programmes with friends. Indeed, it is often talk about programmes which influences the group to keep on watching the programmes so as not to be left out of

the everyday conversations (see for instance, Hobson, 1989; Brown, 1994; Gillespie, 1995).

'Fantasy' is, generally speaking, opposed to the term 'reality'. In theories of female spectatorship, 'fantasy' signifies the world of the imagination, the inner world of idealised scenarios, which refers to the psychic reality of the women (Stacey, 1994). In this sense, fantasy is associated with 'escapism' in which the female spectators leave their own lives behind and escape into other imaginary worlds for a short period of time. This definition of fantasy is, however, applicable to the study of audience reception in terms of individual viewing, but may not be sufficient to explain the fantasy process of group conversation about television. In this respect, the concept of fantasy as semiotic power proposed by John Fiske (1987) is more likely to apply within the framework of fantasy talk in this study. Fiske argues that fantasy has a socio-political dimension and is not merely escape from social reality, rather it is a direct response to dominant ideology. Fantasy is a means of representation that lies not just in the interior experience of the subject, but directly connects to the social experience. According to Fiske, this relationship between the interior and the social may serve the subordinated by producing resistance both at the social and fantasy level.

Within the context of the class, race, and gender positions of Klongtoey women, the definition of resistive fantasy offers a closer look into the ways the women construct meanings from fantasy talk. In this study, fantasy talk refers to the process of the women's responses to the representations of television programmes by incorporating their imaginations of utopian world into their real social experiences.

Talking about soap operas exemplifies the ways the women fantasised their preferred meanings in the process of talking. The following conversation among Mutcha, 36, Sakorn, 33, and Fongjai, 48, illustrates how talking about soap operas enabled them to evaluate the norms and values of gender relationships. Both Mutcha and Fongjai shared the same experiences of having womanising husbands, while Sakorn had a jobless husband and had been pregnant three times within two years:

Mutcha: I feel very hopeless and sorry for myself. Why do I have to bear this man who never shows any responsibility toward the family? Anyway, I think I can comfort myself, it's still within my capacity. Sometimes

when I watch soaps that show a wife taking revenge on her husband, I feel very good. But I'm not good at talking so I can't use my words to hurt him, not like in the soap. And I'm not a violent type as well, so I won't hit and chase him around like they've showed [in TV.].

Fongjai: Me either. When I discovered that my husband had another woman, whom I knew very well, I didn't say a single word. If my husband were worth even one percent of a hero in soap, I would have fought to get him back.

Mutcha: Soaps always show that having many affairs is a male thing. It's okay in soaps because at the end he always comes back having learnt a lesson, and that makes it more romantic. But in real life, my man keeps on wandering and never learns any lessons.... Some soaps gave quite a good trick on how to handle a womanised husband, like *'Pua Rot Manao'* (cunning husband). It makes me laugh a lot. I may consider using some tricks like putting a digestion pill in his drink. *(chuckle)*

Sakorn: Well, let me know if it works with you. *(they all laugh together)* I'll apply for me too... Some women are so lucky that they have husbands who help with their housework, look after the children, and earn money.

Mutcha: Just only in TV, perhaps. You won't find any man like that in this place. We don't have sex appeal and look delicate like the heroines, so our choice [for choosing a good man] is limited.

The connection between the image of the perfect marriage and the real experiences of these painful marriages discouraged the three women from expecting a successful married life. In the mean time, the women contested the traditional norm of Thai society that gives the right to men to seek sexual pleasure elsewhere. However, the three friends found enjoyment in exchanging their fantasy thoughts about the wife's trick, despite this happening in a very brief moment of their talk.

For the Klongtoey women, family and personal relationships seemed to be one of the common topics in their talk or gossip, which, in turn, reflected their concerns and problems. They used soap operas to work through some of the depression that arose from their miserable family lives by discussing it in terms of

fantasy talk instead of repressing it within themselves. Aew, 48, revealed her disappointment in her daughter by comparing her daughter's behaviour with a heroine of *'Look Sao Kamnan'* (district head's daughter):

Aew: I'm so unfortunate. I was abandoned when I was born, and now I am rejected by my only daughter. She has been missing for a few months. I have stopped worrying about her now. She has nothing to lose, not even her own virginity! She's so ungrateful! [...] Well... I would love to have a daughter like Tangmo *(a heroine)*, sweet, intelligent and grateful. You know, I'm very fond of girls, I still hold on to my dream of having my own lovely little girl. But it's just a dream. I'm scared of carrying a Satan in my womb!

This is an example of constructing a positive fantasy in order to pacify the real despair in her family. Fantasy talk about soap operas also worked in an opposite way by creating negative images of punishment for a failed mother. *"Soi Pratana"* (desire) was a sensitive soap that presented the fate of one ambitious woman who, at the end, failed in everything and suffered a mental break down. This soap had used presentation techniques that disturbed the feelings of viewers, such as dark tone colour and dim light. Although it was not viewed by many of the Klongtoey women, because of the depressing narrative, one woman recounted it as a punishment fantasy:

Sunvej (36, whose name means 'sorrow'): I felt scared when I watched this soap. It stayed on in my mind until I went to bed. The heroine was haunted by the ghost of her father who wanted her to achieve his goal. She attempted to commit suicide many times. She killed her baby because she saw her father's spirit. [...] Actually it's not a horror story because it's her imagination, her desire to get out of her father's control. [...] I felt very sad for her and felt very pained when she failed again and again. [...] It's not fair for one woman to experience all these traumas. But that's life. When I watch this soap, I feel better for myself that I have never gone through such severe pain, though I have never experienced real happiness. I'm afraid of being insane and ending up in hospital.

So far, fantasy talk about soap operas initiated the Klongtoey women into drawing on their imaginations for what they never experienced in real life. It could be either a reward fantasy that they were looking forward to obtaining, or a punishment fantasy that they were afraid of. Another significant finding revealed that fantasy talk had a huge impact on the women's curiosity to check whether the story in the soaps bore some similarities to real situations or not. This can be seen in the extensive gossip about one woman in the slum who had been released recently from prison. Many of the women informants were curious to know about the situation in the prison, how she was treated by inmates and staff. This gossip was a consequence of a hit soap, *'Kung Pad'* (female prison), which told about the imprisoned life of a heroine. This event shows that fantasy about unknown situations can lead to curiosity. The Klongtoey women did not necessarily fantasize about a positive dream, but also about a dreadful place they were afraid of. And talk about searching for evidence about this could confirm their fears, or, on the other hand, lessen their worry.

The other example of fantasy talk is the talk about a game show, which was usually presented on daytime programmes or weekend daytime programmes. All the Klongtoey women enjoyed watching game shows because it was exciting to cheer the players in the shows. Most of the women fantasised about having the opportunity to play in the shows and win a fortune. The following talk is an excerpt from the conversation of a group of 3 women. This talk reflected typical viewpoints of the Klongtoey women:

Auree: I wish that I would have a chance to play in one of these game shows. I may become a millionaire, if not I would have a chance to show off on TV.

Malee: It's a stupid daydream. They never allow us to play in their games. They only take TV stars.

This fantasy of being on television, especially by participating in game shows, reveals the unconscious need for upward mobility into the realm of social power and visibility. Indeed, it shows the women's recognition of the hegemonic structure of society in which 'luck' provides a chance for powerless people to rise up. In this sense, luck in game shows is often related to gambling, which is very familiar to the women whose everyday life is surrounded by the tension of gambling and unpredictable events. In his theory of television culture and power Fiske (1987)

offers a vital analysis of game shows as a woman's genre because it shares many characteristics with soap opera, such as widely devalued and high viewer participation. More importantly, Fiske emphasises that game shows 'make visible and validate many of the normally invisible everyday life-skills of women [...] and they appeal to the socially powerless' (1987: 280). However, most game shows on Thai television deny equal access by inviting only celebrities to participate, Klongtoey women, thus, could try their luck only in the fantasy world. Therefore, talk about game shows could only serve as symbolic opportunity for acquiring a fortune. In the mean time, the talk made them acknowledge the difference and unequal distribution of fortune in real society.

Apart from talk about soap operas and game shows, the observation data showed an interesting finding on the women's talk about television advertising. There has been considerable attention from cultural theorists about the relationships between television advertising and the social identities of consumers. For example, Gillespie's (1995) work on television and ethnicity demonstrates how young Asian people articulated their distinctions and aspirations as consumers through talk about advertising. The study concludes that the idealised global consumption culture was taken by these Asian teenagers as the desire to fit into a pluralistic society where the social implications of cultural differences are minimal. The relationship of ethnic identities and global identities in Gillespie's work has also appeared in my study of Klongtoey women, but in the sense of comparison and distinction, not in the sense of integration. There is also a strong resistance to the mythical construction of 'false need' amongst the Klongtoey women throughout the talk about television advertising.

Of the 34 women informants, none admitted that the images of advertising models, lifestyles, and products had any impact on their desire, either to spend money on the advertised products, or to copy the same 'look' as the models. This finding rejects the assumptions of mainstream media theories, which claim the direct impact of television advertising on the socialization of being 'feminine'. The reasons for this resistance was expressed in the following conversation, which took place among three women:

Kaew:	We can't afford to buy those advertised products, especially with this economic pressure. We don't need to look attractive. It doesn't make sense. My family's stomach must come first.
Rung:	Before I used to go to the hair beauty shop once a month. No more now. Our group has tried to make our own beauty products using local plants and herb. Yesterday we made shampoo from Aloe Vera. We don't need to spend money at all. Actually, there is local knowledge we have learnt since we were young. We should promote our local ways.
Meena:	Same as me, I have never had a washing machine and I don't need one. I prefer washing by hand, it's cleaner and I'm very satisfied. These ads never bother me, really.
Rung:	Whoever follows ads must be dumb. I mean us, not the rich people. Ads are only made for the rich. They never work out here. We already have good things in our hands.

Although advertisements on daytime television intentionally address housewives by emphasising domestic and beauty products (Modleski, 1982; Fisk, 1988; Tulloch, 1990), the above example affirmed that the daytime ads did not have particular meanings for the Klongtoey women. In addition, the women used resistive strategies to distinguish their identities from the 'mass' consumers by identifying the advertised product as an unnecessary commodity for their everyday living, and, instead, valued their own local products as more appropriate for them. It seems that economic and family sustainability are the major factors that define the women's tastes and desires in their physical and domestic needs. The data obtained from interviewing also demonstrated that Klongtoey women did not uphold conventional notions of beauty, which were characterised by refined skin and of good commercial products. Instead, when asked about this beauty myth in advertising, most of them laughed and made fun of what they called a 'nonsense' myth that applied to rich people:

Boonlom:	First, you must have very long, slim and white-skin legs, then you must buy good lotion, sexy stockings, a razor, and blah blah blah. Well, legs are for walking and working, not for showing. If we don't

work, we have nothing to eat. We don't have a 'golden leg' like rich people.

The use of such beauty products was also seen as an attempt to be 'white' or in the women's word 'foreigner', therefore, it was unacceptable for Klongtoey women and it was seen as a form of ethnic self-hatred:

Chorn: I don't like seeing women colour their hair blond or red. It's disgusting, isn't it? Some women on the high street do that. We're Thai, we should be proud of it. Why do we have to disguise it? Just colouring the hair does not make them become foreigners. As soon as they start talking, people know where they come from.

By arguing that the advertising message was not targeted at them, they reinforced a class boundary by associating the beauty myth with the upper class, and, of course, with negative connotations. This is clearly a contesting strategy to subvert the dominant myth of 'body' by disliking the 'global' representations of 'whiteness' and 'classiness', and ridiculing them with oppositional meanings. In this context, class and race play significant roles in determining the ways Klongtoey women read and talk about advertising texts (see Dyer, 1993; Kellner, 1995; Hall, 1997 in Chapter One).

Surprisingly, although all of the women objected to the representations in television advertising, only one woman argued that some concepts of keeping 'healthy' were sensible. Toy, with a college education and experience of working abroad, positioned herself as being different from the majority of Klongtoey women. Despite accepting her class identity and slum life, Toy insisted that living in the polluted area of the Klongtoey slum, made keeping in shape important:

Toy: What I would like to buy if I had money is fitness equipment *(stands up and imitates riding a bicycle)*. You know, it helps keep your body fit, and you can do it anytime at home.

W.P.: Is that unnecessary for you?

Toy: Well, kind of. But I said that if I had the money, I would buy it.

Toy's talk about fitness equipment shows her preoccupation and the link with the dominant representations of a 'fit and slender body', although she claimed not to be influenced by advertisements. Indeed, her concern implies the impact of the

imperialist imagination that defines the Western concept of health with the fit and slender body, and devalues the body of other cultures as weak and out of shape. Because Toy had migrated from the Northeast region when she was very young, and had lived in some other urban locations before settling down in the Klongtoey slum (such as Singapore) she was isolated from the other women in Klongtoey. By separating from the group, her sense of *I-san* ethnic identity was weak, and, thus, she was more likely to perceive the dominant portrayals as standard identities. These factors need consideration in order to understand her talk about foreign cultures, which was discussed earlier in the chapter. This is to say that the negotiating potential of oppressed groups relies on the strength and unity of a sense of 'community', which coexists with, crucially in the Klongtoey case, class, ethnic and cultural identities.

3) Television and Ethnic Identity

This section follows up the discussion of the previous section on television talk with a closer look at the representation of ethnic identities on television. The preference for *I-san* ethnic identities was stated throughout the talk of the Klongtoey women both in the realms of realism and fantasy talk. Significantly, television talk was deployed by Klongtoey women as a negotiating space for the construction or reaffirmation of their ethnic identities, rather than integrating with those of dominant identities. However, within the process of talking and contesting, it was unavoidable that the differences and stereotypes of *I-san* ethnicities would be recognised.

In a variety of ways, cultural representations within Thailand construct images of Northeastern or *I-san* people in relation to a series of problems, objects, and underdevelopment. They are characterised as unintelligent, passive, and unable to effectively think or act for themselves, only waiting for luck or destiny. However, in terms of strength, Northeastern people are stereotyped as a tolerant people, survival oriented, physically strong, and adaptable. Subsequently, with both the purported weaknesses and strengths of Northeastern people, they are needed for labour and un-skilled work to serve the people of Bangkok. While Northeastern people have been seen frequently on television, their roles, mostly as housemaids, security guards, workers, street vendors, are displaced to the margins, in comparison with the main representations of central Bangkok identities (see more details in Chapter Two).

Of the 34 women informants, 32 had migrated from the Northeast region. Therefore, in this section, the total number of women informants I refer to is 32. Of the 32 women, 23 of them did not like the representations of their ethnicity on television. Within this group, 15 of them expressed their strong disapproval about the characters and those programmes that represented them. Most of their criticisms were directed at comedy show programmes, which always made fun of *I-san* people, even though most of the comedians were *I-san* themselves. The following group conversation demonstrates the intense irritation towards these comedy shows:

Prani: It makes me upset many times. Why can't they find other gags to play? Sometime I just want to kick the telly.

W.P.: What do you normally do then?

Prani: I just shout at the telly and swear at them [the comedians], ask them to go to hell!

Lamai: I don't like it either. They make *I-san* people look so dumb and they earn laughs from that. I hate when these comedians speak *I-san* with a kind of dirty or slang words. It's shameful!

During the fieldwork, I had a few opportunities to watch some comedy shows with the Klongtoey women. All of the shows were presented on daytime programmes, usually during lunchtime, and often on Channel 7. It is certain that most of the comedians in each show (about 4-8 characters) were *I-san* people, and they were keen to insert *I-san* spoken language, songs and cultural performances within the play. Unfortunately, these were often used as the main gag to make the audience laugh. The following group conversation took place when I was watching one comedy show with, Malee, Sayan and Auree:

At 12.30 pm. the title music of the comedian show programme on Channel 7 was shown with the episode title 'job interviewing'. Malee got up from the floor, where the three of them were eating lunch, and said that she wanted to get some rice whisky to enhance her appetite. Malee came back within a few minutes, and the first commercial break had not finished yet. Her friends complained that it was too early to drink. The show started.

Comedian 1: (rings the office door bell) Are there any Laotians in this office?

Comedian 2: (answers to the intercom with an I-san accent) No Laotians allowed here, only pure 100% Thai.

Sayan:	That's not funny! I hate it when they call *I-san* Laos.
Auree:	We're not Laos. We speak Thai, we're born in Thailand.
Malee:	Hey! Laos or Thai does not matter. We're neighbouring countries. Don't blame other nations, yeh!
Auree:	We don't, but we don't wanna see them call *I-san* Lao.
[...]	
Comedian 3:	*(in a formal suit but wearing rubber slippers) I can do everything if you offer me a job, I'm very strong.*
Comedian 4:	*(laughs at his suit) You don't need to announce that you're I-san by putting on those slippers. Those are only used in a field! If you want to be Thai you have to wear a full formal suit and tie.*
Comedian 3:	*Well, let me show you how strong I am (rolls himself upside down on the floor). Sorry I could do that just once. I didn't take 'khao neaw' (sticky rice – I-san main food) today!*
Malee:	*(laughing while putting khao neaw in her mouth)* They like to call us *'look khao neaw'* (sticky rice survivor). What's wrong with *khao neaw*? It fills our stomach and lasts long.
Sayan:	Oh yeh! Better than...erm...burger. We're *I-san* so we take our *I-san* food. We should not feel ashamed of it. It's rather funny if we look *I-san* but eat a burger! It doesn't match.

The criticisms went on for another 15 minutes or so until Malee went out with a glass of whisky, and proclaimed that the show was rubbish and she better have fresh air. The show was distasteful to the three women because, first, it excluded *I-san* ethnicity from the Thai nation, which created a sense of alienation for the women. Second, it re-produced negative images of *I-san* people by showing their ignorance and their inability to fit into society (e.g. inappropriate dress). Finally, it devalued the everyday life of *I-san* culture (e.g. *I-san* food) and stigmatised it as the practice of an underclass. The three women's criticisms of *I-san* representations in a comedy show coincided with those of several other Klongtoey women. Similar situations happened when I watched the shows with other groups of women.

Surprisingly, although the women felt humiliated and although there were other choices of programmes from the other four channels, none of them decided to stop watching the comedy programmes. Three possible answers for this might be the

fact that, first it was shown in the daytime and the 45 minutes of the programme fitted in with the women's viewing schedule and available time. Second, Channel 7 was the most popular channel for the Klongtoey women compared to the others (the programmes of the other channels were, such as Chinese films or live reports from the Parliament or seminars, which took longer than 1 hour.). Third, it was evaluated by the women as 'just comedy', and 'don't take it seriously'. Therefore, the criticisms usually faded away when the show finished and nobody talked about it until the show came on again the next day. This type of temporary negotiation is not uncommon in reception theories, which suggest that resistance or negotiation of power is dynamic and likely to happen within a space of popular culture (see for instance Dyer, 1993; Storey, 1993 in Chapter One). Thus, the demand for negotiation, as in the Klongtoey women's case, is effectively raised whenever their ethnic difference is portrayed negatively.

It is also worth noting that the women's resistance to the representations of their ethnic identities on television was not universal. This means that within an oppositional judgement, women may develop an ambivalent criticism of given texts. Apart from the 23 Klongtoey women who expressed their dislike of the representations of *I-san* identities, the rest (9 women) revealed mixed feelings towards *I-san* images. This ambivalence could be seen when the women made an effort to construct positive meanings from the negative representations in television comedy shows and soap operas:

Panni: Isn't it good that *I-san* people become a focal point on TV, for laughs and discussion? Most popular comedians are *I-san*. They bring *I-san* identity up on the stage and in TV.

W.P.: Even though it is only to make fun of?

Panni: Yeh, even though. People from other regions are not known to be as good as comedians as *I-san*. I never care when people look at me and call me *I-san*. I like to be looked at as I am.

Another woman talked about the presentation of *I-san* characters in marginal roles, such as housemaids, which only served to bring humour to the soap narrative:

Sriwan: You see! Without an *I-san* housemaid, most soaps are plain. Every time they come out they make people laugh. I think that's it, that's

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fine. And it's true that if *I-san* people walk out of their jobs and go back home, the whole of Bangkok would be left in silence.

With these two examples, the stereotype of *I-san* ethnic identities was recognised, but was positively constructed by noting its function and prominence. This is, in other words, a celebration and acceptance of *I-san* identities by recognising the significance of their differences from others. Thus, Hall's argument about a politics of representation (1997) is profoundly pertinent to the way the Klongtoey women construct their identities. Rather than demanding positive images alone, Hall examines representations which themselves explore power relations and deconstruct the binary positions by taking the body as the site of principal negotiation. In this sense, the body (and performance) of the *I-san* comedian was a site for creating laughter, or it could be described as manipulating laughter and awareness, which empowered the *I-san* comedian to assert control over the audience.

Such arguments revolve around the *significance of the social and cultural* contexts of marginalized groups, in constructing specific discursive meanings. This is the site of cultural struggle over meanings in order to mark the status of the Klongtoey women's identities through their cultural representations on television.

4) Conclusion

This chapter has shown how social positions, cultural ethnicity and domestic relationships impact on the media reception of Klongtoey women. As urban poor, migrant women, television offers them not only a site for viewing pleasure, but also a status symbol and a valuable commodity with which they can negotiate their class and living positions. This finding adds to the academic accounts of the power of negotiation of marginalized groups in which both meanings of texts and the ways texts are consumed share significant roles in their empowerment. In particular, it is argued that the merging of public and private spaces in the slum context is a site for the construction and contestation of wider cultural identities including those of gender and consumerism.

These Klongtoey women were highly sensitive to issues of class, ethnicity and gender, which were deeply integrated in their conceptualisation of identities. Sharing the same roots of the *I-san* ethnic culture and an urban poor position, the Klongtoey women felt the need to unify as an ethnic group and to construct

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identities that proclaimed positive links between their ethnicity and urban poor identity. In doing so, viewing and talking about television and its representations, in the group and within the domestic space, were seen as empowering the women to appreciate the differences and define the meaning of their identities. It is argued that television realism talk provides a resource for enhancing self-awareness, surveillance, ethnic unification, as well as self-respect. On the other hand, television realism talk can increase their sense of uncertainty and make the women feel more vulnerable within a particular situation that has been manipulated from the outside world. It is also noted that television fantasy talk illustrates the centrality of class ethics, social morality, and gender status for the women's self-identities. The talk also constitutes a set of guides for the women to address their familial problems. Within these television consumption discourses, social morality and family responsibility are placed at the centre of the women's concerns.

Undoubtedly, their viewing and talking activities encouraged the women to empower their negotiation discourse, which, in turn, formed informed the construction of their identities. The skills involved in negotiating meaning from/of these representations are associated with the positions and experiences of Klongtoey women within the contexts of gender, class, ethnicity, and morality.

The following two chapters explore in more detail the women's negotiations, which took place in the most significant of women's genres—the soap opera. The two case studies provide a closer examination of the ways the women constructed meanings associated with their identities.

Note

[1] The Community Saving Cooperative is a local people's self management project runs by Roy, the leader of the community, and some committees, and is initiated by the *Duang Prateep* Foundation, which works for slum communities in Bangkok. This saving project works like a cooperative system handled by a committee of each slum neighbourhood. Customers must open a saving account with their own cooperative in order to take a loan, and they have to repay the loan with low interest within a certain period. The Coop also gives interest to the customer, who is a member of the cooperative. This project was in the initial stage but received quite good support from the Klongtoey slum people, especially among the women because its loan interest rate was lower than that of private loan sharks. However, there was some concern about the honesty and efficiency of the committees, which could affect the success of the project.

[2] The government censure debate is a democratic system in the House of Representatives. The censure debate, which usually is conducted like a no-confidence debate, allows the opposition parties

to expose and to impeach the government's mismanagement, which is set up for the special parliamentary meeting. Then, the government must respond to the allegations and clarify the charges. At the end of the debate, both the members of the opposition parties and the government parties will be given a vote. If the majority votes come out as no confidence, the government has a choice to reshuffle the cabinet or to dissolve the parliament. However, since the establishment of Thailand parliamentary system in 1932, there have been 43 censure debates but not once has the opposition succeeded in defeating the government.

Chapter Six

Nang Baab: A Negotiation of Class Identity

Soap operas have raised some key debates about the politics of viewing and pleasure. The notable idea shows that much of the pleasure in soap opera lies in the discursive network among women. This network is built around the viewing of a programme that is designed for women. This notion of feminist politics arguably relies on a concept of negotiated power and a discourse of resistance to the dominant viewpoint. This is a terrain of strength or what is called counter-hegemonic position that soap opera offers to women, especially those belonging to marginalized classes. Therefore, it is of central importance in this chapter to look at how soap opera can help construct hegemonic power for women within class, race and gender boundaries.

The night-time soap opera examined in this chapter called *Nang Baab* (meaning Miss Evil) is shown on Channel 7 at 20:30-21:30 on Wednesdays and Thursdays. This is the peak of prime time viewing and these days are most popular, according to many media surveys in Thailand (*Thairath* 12/02/99). Generally, people finish their household chores or reach home by 20:00 and midweek evenings are considered to be a time to relax and stay at home, rather than go out. *Nang Baab* is comprised of 30 episodes broadcast during July-September 1998, which was the time I conducted the first phase of my fieldwork in the Klongtoey slum.

Nang Baab is a romantic drama mixed with real life situations. Its theme revolves around love and acceptance between two lovers who have very opposite class backgrounds – rich and poor. This soap received strong criticism from audiences and media in that it was creating an impossible dream rather than representing the realities of life. Some critics argued that the storyline of 'prince charming courting the poor beautiful girl' should have gone from the screen a long time ago. Nonetheless, the one element, which is 'real' in *Nang Baab*, is the portrait of slum people in Bangkok, which not many outsiders would ordinarily see.

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Because the major scene in *Nang Baab* is a slum community, this night-time soap attracted a considerable number of Klongtoey women informants. Although the happy ending of the storyline was often criticised as an impossible fantasy among slum women themselves, *Nang Baab* could drew a great number of fans who were the usual soap fans of Channel 7, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Of the 34 women participating in the research, 30 were involved in the reception study of *Nang Baab*. The main reason why the other 4 did not take part was that they could not follow the soap regularly. Of these 4 women, 2 had gone to visit their families in villages, one had to keep on going to a hospital to look after her son, and the other one had a night shift at work. Thus, the findings in this chapter are based on the responses of 30 women only.

In this chapter, first I present the synopsis of the story to draw an overall picture of the soap. Then I examine the production and marketing contexts of *Nang Baab* and assess how this might affect perceptions of the soap and meanings constructed. The following analysis is of the narrative structure of the soap and close analyses of some episodes, which depict more relationships and class portrayals. The reception analysis is then applied by looking at the general responses to *Nang Baab,* how the women identify with the characters and how they separated fantasy from a realistic reception. Then, I focus on the text/ context relationship to investigate the ways in which the women construct meanings and identities around these textual signifiers. The conclusion will suggest how Klongtoey women are empowered in their negotiation strategy in relation to the representations in the soap.

1) Synopsis of *Nang Baab*

Cast of main characters and the relationships
Nakarin: the hero
Laithong: the heroine (previous name was Thongruam)
Lilayu: the villain, who is a friend of Chaisamorn and a former girlfriend of Nakarin
Rueanruang: the villain, who lives in the slum community and is a long-time rival of Laithong
Thad: Rueanruang's husband
Chaisamorn: Nakarin's wife

Rumpueay: Laithong's housemate in the slum community

Seng: the owner of a grocery and coffee stall in the slum community

N-geglung: Seng's wife and a rival of Laithong

Prakob: Nakarin's senior business consultant

The setting is a Bangkok slum environment in which Thongruam, an orphan and now a young woman, has lived since she was born shapes her personality and attitude towards life. Not different from her neighbours, Thongruam is an aggressive, quarrelsome, fearless and impolite person. Her physical charms bring her contempt and jealousy from female neighbours who always condemn her for luring their husbands. They call her *'Nang Baab'* or 'Miss Evil'.

However, Thongruam never thinks of taking other women's husbands. She has strong morals and virtuous beliefs, as opposed to her appearance and external behaviour. Thongruam is seen wearing semi-exposed dresses to attract male neighbours, since she thinks this is the way to survive in the slum. She gets help and care from Thad, a taxi driver, and gets some bargains from Seng, a grocery shop owner in the slum. This creates a strong conflict between Thongruam and Rueanruang and N-geglung. They usually clash either by strong verbal assaults or physical attacks, which always makes a good show for slum audiences.

One of the few friends who occasionally inspires Thongruam to uphold moral ideals is Rumpuey, a middle-aged woman working as a prostitute. Both share a shabby room in the slum. Thongruam tries to escape the stereotype of a slum girl and her cursed title 'Miss Evil' by taking vocational courses in adult education. She finishes her compulsory degree. After the first success, Thongruam changes her name to 'Laithong' as she believes this change can bring her good luck and can help he succeed in her attempt to be a 'good' citizen.

Her life starts to change after she gets an office job in a big company owned by Nakarin. On the day of the job interview, Thongruam assumes that she will not have a chance because of her limited qualifications and slum background. She then defends herself by accusing Nakarin of only giving opportunities to privileged applicants. But she is surprised when she receives a job contract from him. After a few days, she gets a promotion to be his personal secretary, despite her lack of work experience. This

promotion, according to Nakarin, is due to Laithong's self-confidence and courageous attitude.

Nakarin is married to Chaisamorn, the daughter of one of his company's shareholders. Their marriage is to boost the business relationship and social reputation. Chaisamorn welcomes her long-time friend, Lilayu, who has run away from her marriage problems abroad, and offers her a temporary refuge at their home without knowing of the past affair between Lilayu and Nakarin. Lilayu comes to Bangkok with a plan to destroy Nakarin's marriage. She thinks of manipulating Nakarin into divorcing his wife, so she can take Chaisamorn's place.

But Lilayu's plan meets with difficulties because whenever she visits Nakarin's office, she is obstructed by Laithong. Despite Lilayu's claims of a past relationship with Nakarin, she is not able to pass through Laithong's guard. Lilayu becomes angry and takes revenge by using Laithong as a victim in her plan. Lilayu creates a story about Laithong and Nakarin having an affair and tells this to Chaisamorn. Nevertheless, it does not initially affect Chaisamorn as she doesn't believe that Nakarin would be interested in a slum girl. Finally, after Chaisamorn realises that Nakarin has developed a real love for Laithong, she loses her patience and demands a divorce.

In the meantime, Laithong quits her job after Nakarin attempts to take sexual advantage of her, although his aim is to test her character. The slum neighbours accuse Laithong of destroying her boss's marriage since the divorce makes news in the papers.

Lilayu's plan is not fulfilled as Nakarin decides to pursue Laithong, rather than her. While Nakarin is going to ask Laithong to forgive him for the past attempt, Lilayu follows him with a gun. In the slum, a mad and frustrated Lilayu swears to kill Nakarin and points the gun at him. At that moment, Laithong jumps to protect him and gets injured. Laithong is sent to hospital, while Lilayu is put behind bars.

After the divorce, Chaisamorn meets a simple man with whom she experiences real love and new meaning to life. Nakarin confesses his love for Laithong and accepts that Laithong has brought him to appreciate the value of each human being – without the boundaries of class or race. He realises that what he actually needs is a sincere relationship with a woman he loves, not reputation or social status.

Main scenes

- Slum community with a poor cement walkway. The main scene is a coffee stall in a grocery shop where slum dwellers like to come to watch TV or have a group conversation and gossip. Outside the shop is a space that is big enough for the usual fighting between Laithong and Rueanruang as well as a group of spectators.

- Nakarin's house is made of marble, showing its expensive and well-decorated decor. Most scenes take place in the living room and in front of Nakarin's bedroom.

- Nakarin's office with a few details to illustrate a workplace. The scenes show only Nakarin's room and the office entrance door. There are no scenes which show any activity in his office.

2) The Production and Marketing Contexts

As broadcast on the commercial Channel 7, *Nang Baab* does have a need to attract both mass viewers and sponsors. *Nang Baab* is defended by Channel 7 as a realistic soap in terms of bringing the real lives of slum people to the screen. The Production Programme Manager explained that the decision to show the programme was to attract more viewers, not only from the urban poor, who may already experience living in the slum area (*Matichon*, 21/09/98). The hero and the heroine are played by popular stars, Sam Pamornmontri and Katarine English, who are both half Thai, half British. They were especially recruited to perform in this soap. When the promotion of this soap was being launched, criticisms were made about Katarine English who usually plays a high-class teenager rather than a poor slum girl. There was no explanation from the producer for choosing her, but it can be assumed that this was a strategic move to attract upper class audiences. Unfortunately, *Nang Baab* has failed to capture a wide audience. It was criticised for containing strong language and bad manners, which were considered fit only for urban poor fans (*Matichon*, *ibid.*). Although the producer's attempt to fill the class gap did not succeed, it did respond to the needs of its loyal fans (Klongtoey urban poor women) very well by offering them a chance to view the problems of the upper class as well as the potential for class mobility. This assumption will be discussed later when dealing with the reception analysis in this chapter. Channel 7 claims it was producing a quality programme by appointing a professional director to this soap. *Nang*

Baab was directed by Jaruek San-guanpong, a well-known director who transferred from filmmaking to television production. Jaruek gave an interview saying that *Nang Baab* represented his ideal of a utopian society where there was no class or differences among people, but rather love and understanding (*Star Lives*, 3/09/98). However, my analysis of audience reception among slum women did not show that Jaruek's ideal was well perceived.

3) The Narrative Structure

Nang Baab affirms the definition of soap opera as a 'woman's genre', which concentrates on domestic issues and foregrounds female characters (see Modleski, 1982). It is argued that soap opera offers, but not always, an understanding from the woman's viewpoint and that affects the judgements that the viewer is invited to make (Geraghty, 1991: 47). In this sense, the pleasure of recognising the 'self' among Klongtoey women is a crucial part, which the soap offers to the women.

The simple conventional narrative of *Nang Baab*, which follows the relationships among hero, heroine and villains, enables Klongtoey women viewers to identify the possible range of readings as well as the resolution of the storyline. Furthermore, the women are able to create their own perceptions of the issues of love and class which are the dominant themes of *Nang Baab*. Although these perceptions 'demand wider cultural competence' of their audiences, they constitute the normative genre which are 'those values, attitudes and behaviours believed by soap opera producers to be most clearly held by the 'average viewer' (Allen, 1985: 173). The fact that the struggle against class difference in *Nang Baab* is portrayed in the territory of love and pursued by a 'good girl', is significant to this normative genre. Conventionally, in Thai soaps, a woman can always upgrade her class position through marriage if she possesses good morals and, very importantly, beauty. As Kanjana Kaewthep puts it:

> The narrative of soap opera is one, which asserts the contemporary Thai society, which is patriarchal culture. Every single female character, no matter heroine, villain, mother or daughter, must subject herself to male authority and paternal protection. Her destiny is always under male determination particularly male production director. So the hero and heroine live happily ever after (1997: 217-8).

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Furthermore, a 'good girl' soap character must worship the virtue of virginity and be able to preserve her own only to present to the hero. However, despite following a conventional narrative theme, *Nang Baab* contains a major range of new agendas for Thai soap characters. For example, the aggression of the heroine, the material orientation of the hero, the sexual immorality of the rich, etc., are clearly presented in the storyline. These deviant characters lead to a variety of readings among the women viewers, which will be taken into consideration in the part of reception analysis of the portrayal of class identities.

In the following section I will highlight the textual meaning of identity negotiation narrated in *Nang Baab*. Before turning to this point, it is important to assume that as a prime time soap opera, *Nang Baab* combines the conventional narrative structure of melodrama and the ideological challenge of realism. Firstly, *Nang Baab* can be regarded as a melodramatic[1] form because the plot is so exaggerated (rivalry and jealousy among female characters, so many coincidences, last-minute rescues, etc.) so that the emotions in the storyline mark the significance of the narrative and make the soap easy to understand or predictable to audiences. The characters in *Nang Baab* are, therefore, a type of melodramatic representative whose every gesture and dialogue create meanings in terms of the narrative and represent the emotions of the audiences. Secondly, in terms of ideological realism, *Nang Baab* exposes the lives of urban poor people living in a slum area, the struggle for class identities and class mobility and, of course, gender bias and domestic problems which are experienced by a great number of Klongtoey women.

4) Textual Analysis

The characters in *Nang Baab* are obviously divided into two extreme classes – the upper middle class and the lower urban poor. The main characters of the upper class include Nakarin, the hero, and Lilayu, the villain, while Laithong, the heroine, and Rueanruang, the heroine's rival, represent the latter. The storyline runs through confrontations between these two groups as well as within the same group. Because of the excessive confrontations, the mise-en-scene of *Nang Baab* is dominated by dialogue rather than action, location or other visual components. Although dialogue is regarded as the narrative instrument of soap opera (Ang, 1985: 73), the dialogues in *Nang Baab* that the

characters have with one another are often overwhelmingly and very explicitly expressed in every single scene. In this sense the narrative dialogue in *Nang Baab* is different from the conventional narrative of soap opera in which Ien Ang suggests, the essence of the situation is not expressed, but lies as it were concealed behind the facial expression of the character' (*ibid.*). However, the characters in *Nang Baab* enjoy over-expressive conversations, each spoken word reflects the subjective inner world of the characters, which revolves around personal desires, moral conflicts, class preferences, etc. This kind of narrative dialogue also produces what Ien Ang terms 'the tragic structure of feeling' (1985: 46) accompanying the emotional ups and downs of the characters which are presented in a melodramatic way.

The following three sub-sections present analyses of some particular episodes and scenes, which are categorised by three main approaches including class, community and gender.

4.1) Nang Baab and the Representations of Class

As the storyline is based on class difference regarding the love relationship, most of the dialogue between the characters of these two class groups reflects the representation and ideology of class in Thai popular media. It is sometimes easy to assume that class differences are important in Thai culture as represented in Thai popular media, particularly in soap opera. However, class divisions in Thai society are not deeply rooted in the way that racial differences are manifested (Rabibhadana 1975, 1990). The Thai concept of class is not embedded in race, or so called 'God-given' features, but is a social construction within the injustice of feudalist and capitalist systems. Therefore, class in Thai culture is not fixed and can be acquired through the institutions of legal power such as authoritative position, education and wealth.

Theravada Buddhism, which is widespread in Thailand, is a faith that discourages class division or class struggle in an attempt to counteract caste conflict that came in the wake of the early Indian tradition. Not only does Theravada Buddhism disclaim individual difference, but also the quest for harmony is a crucial element. (Thorbeck, 1987: 143). Nevertheless, a marginalized class has always existed in Thai society as an outcome of imbalances in the political and economic processes. As already discussed in Chapters Two, Four, and Five, the Northeastern culture is marginalized and

deemed inferior to the central Thai culture which is regarded as the elite culture of the country. This kind of Thai discourse determines the way in which people are categorised and treated differently according to the groups they belong to. Northeastern migrant people living in Bangkok slums, therefore, feel themselves to be despised outcasts and feel strong opposition towards legal authority, the rich and the elite. This can be seen in the attitudes of and aggression towards society and the law, but at the same time, acceptance of where the power lies. These attitudes are well reflected in *Nang Baab,* as will be demonstrated in the following scene-by-scene analysis.

Most Thai soap operas using melodrama adopt the strategy of class division to mark differences among characters. Ironically, the representation of class in soap operas is often limited to only two class groups – the rich or the elite and the poor or the marginalized. There is no representation of working class and urban poor as such since the Western concept of working class in terms of trade unions and political parties is not well adapted to the Thai context. Rather, the working class or urban poor in slum areas means casual workers, the unemployed, small self-employed, street vendors and the like (Thorbek, *ibid.*). Furthermore, it is uncommon to present the marginalized class as main characters. Commonly, their function is only to add drama or scandal into situations, with no relationship to the main plot, and they can disappear conveniently when the situation is resolved.

Contrary to the above, *Nang Baab* has its own special storyline by providing the notion of slum culture, or the urban poor in its sense, as well as signifying the class differences as troubling. Generally speaking, there are very few situations in Thai soaps, which are based on class differences as adapted here in *Nang Baab*. The Klongtoey women may experience pleasure, as a result of seeing their own social class, having been ignored elsewhere, depicted on a popular media channel.

The class of the characters in *Nang Baab* is recognisable by their clothes, appearances, manners, accent, lifestyles and jobs, although the specifics of their jobs are rarely shown. For example, the rich are presented in expensive and fashionable clothes and are always seen with luxurious cars. For example, Nakarin (the hero) is always seen in a business suit and Lilayu (the villainess) is usually seen in very modern and sexy dress. Moreover, the rich are seen using mixed conversations and lifestyles combining Thai and Western languages and gestures, such as saying 'hello' as a greeting or

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exchanging a goodbye kiss. Contrary to the rich, Laithong and her female neighbours are seen in locally made cheap dresses, such as *pathung* (a one-piece cloth to wrap around the lower part of the body with a multicolour style) and a simple shirt. They are also portrayed as using heavy and cheap makeup, which makes them look funny rather than attractive. The conversation of slum people portrays their class location. They use slang and swear words, as well as talking in very loud voices.

For example, conversations between Laithong and most of her female neighbours are always presented as quarrelsome and rough, suggesting long-running conflicts in the slum. The first scene shows Laithong and Rueanruang (her slum rival) being arrested for physical violence by the police. Laithong pretends to sob to get sympathy from the police.

[Episode 1- scene 1- length 2 mins 15 secs]

Laithong: Sir, please have mercy on me. I'm such a poor orphan girl. Since I was born I never got love from anyone. I have to survive by myself... selling papers, seeking trash for food. Oh! my life is so unfortunate... please don't be harsh on me.

Sergeant Dab: Such a pitiful life! (Sergeant comments and gives Laithong a facial tissue to wipe her tears, which irritates Rueanruang).

Rueanruang: Huh!... everyone in the slum has a miserable life cos we were born poor. Not only E*Thong alone in the world who got misfortune! Don't use your damn tactic!

Laithong: (Suddenly changes her emotional tone and shouts at Rueanruang) Is this your business? Still not enough bruises!!?? (Then she turns to the sergeant, puts his hand on her face and pretends to cry again). Sir, look at these people. They always beat me. They don't want to see a little girl like me survive. If I could choose I would like to be born to be your wife so nobody hurts me. (Laithong's tactics help her and her rival to be released from detention).

*(*E-... is slang for Miss or Mrs, an impolite word to call a female).*

One characteristic most slum or urban poor people share is a lack of education due to their financial constraints. The lack of education becomes one of the stereotypes of slum

people presented through the images of unemployment, low-wage work, small self-income and low literacy. In other words, it is acknowledged that unemployment and poor lifestyles are the consequences of low education. It is, therefore, a strong belief that education is the means to social mobility. Since the *Nang Baab* storyline addresses class mobility, Laithong has to get herself an education and get a skilled or office job. Interestingly, although *Nang Baab* attempts to affirm that education is an attribution of class it fails to answer whether or not one's original class can be concealed after acquiring an education.

In the fifth episode, Laithong comes to Nakarin's office for a job interview. She gradually becomes awkward after seeing many applicants who are well mannered and good-looking. Nakarin starts commenting on her qualifications and raises doubts about her vocational school. With hurt feelings, Laithong complains angrily:

[episode 5 - scene 3 - length 1 min 16 secs]

Laithong: I see! Because I didn't study in schools that teach *Thai kum farung kum* (mixed Thai and English) or in schools where parents have to pay a hundred thousands baht to put their kids in no matter how far the schools are and how bad the traffic is. Give me my application... How silly I am! I shouldn't have come to let these elite laugh at me. Hey! Next time when you publish a job announcement, clearly say that only graduates from the well-known schools where rich kids study can apply, and those who come from an elite background will get special consideration!

Apart from using class as a narrative tool for the division of characters and the movement of characters' status, *Nang Baab* uses the concept of class to condemn the lifestyles of upper class people. Often their lifestyles are presented in terms of sexual immorality, a materialist orientation and an obsession with social reputation.

[episode 11 - scene 1 - length 2 mins 6 secs]

After being bombarded with a fake affair story from Lilayu, Chaisamorn raises this issue with her husband, Nakarin.

Chaisamorn: I hope it's not true that you stoop so low with that girl. Anyway, I'm not interested in your private matters; you always seek exotic pleasure! And that girl, your secretary, must not be different from any other poor girls who exchange their bodies just for the sake of money. Such a pity! Who wants to take a slum girl to high-class society except to bed?!

Nakarin: Please stop listening to this nonsense from your friend. You and I know that our business depends on each other's relationship. Please don't ruin it especially during this economic crisis. I don't want to see it failing.

[episode 17 - scene 3 - length 3 mins 35 secs]

Nakarin demands that Lilayu move out of his house but she refuses and claims that:

Lilayu: Why should I? Staying here is so wonderful, free house, free meal and free husband if I feel lonely. Don't try to stand over me. You can't command me, otherwise I'll let Chaisamorn know about our past affair and you... you're just dead!

Nakarin: (Yelling) you're a real witch! I can't believe it.

Lilayu: (Laughing) I'm afraid it's too late both for you and your wife.

Nakarin: Lilayu, the difference between you and Laithong is filth. Although she comes from the slum she doesn't have a filthy mind like you.

Lilayu: How dare you compare me to that slum girl! You know my body has an elite smell with the most expensive perfume, but that... that girl is just stale flesh!

Nakarin: Why? Some men may prefer a genuine fresh smell rather than expensive, artificial perfume!

From these two episodes, the portrayal given towards the upper class is clearly negative. It suggests that material greed will never bring ultimate happiness in life. Since happiness revolves around relationships, materialism cannot be the basis of a good relationship. The marriage between Nakarin and Chaisamorn, which is based on materialism or capitalist contract, is an example of materialist ideology. *Nang Baab* attempts to show this couple as victims of a vicious circle of materialism and suggests that their marriage is empty and meaningless. Both Nakarin and Chaisamorn are frigid, have very little physical or sexual contact, and have no respect for each other. Finally,

even after breaking up, the materialist ideology still plays a role between them by encouraging Chaisamorn to claim her right to assets and to bring the divorce case to court.

This ideology is seen in the following dialogue between Laithong's slum neighbours: 'Look at the rich, whenever they marry or divorce, it must be big, it must become news in papers... They have so much money and that causes them big problems when they want to end their marriage.' In all, *Nang Baab* represents the material greed of the upper class as problematic; a sign of moral failure that ruins human relationships.

The most significant narrative of class used in *Nang Baab* is the allowance of space for negotiation between classes. This resistive space makes *Nang Baab* distinct from other Thai soaps in which the possibility for the urban poor to negotiate some social mobility appears very limited. Kanjana Kaewthep suggests that Thai soap opera works within the old frame of ideology, continuing to present the concept of times-gone-by, in order to secure its production and marketing. 'Thai soaps are dominated by representations of the feudalist class rather than working class even though the latter are much greater in numbers than the former' (Kanjana, 1997: 214-6). Therefore, there are very few chances for the urban poor audiences to view the potential for negotiation or their potential to cross the class barriers. The narration of class negotiation in *Nang Baab*, however, challenges the old ideological framework of traditional Thai soaps. In every episode we see dialogues of negotiation between the two class groups in which, after all, the slum people appear to control the dialogues rather than the rich. For example, the slum people could force Lilayu out of the community after she had looked down upon them. More importantly, class negotiation between the hero and heroine is illustrated in romantic encounters when the heroine makes the hero realise that there can be real affection between human beings.

Class negotiation between Nakarin and Laithong often implies a polarised power relationship between men and women. Nakarin is seen as an innocent and soft person when interacting with Laithong while Laithong remains tough and rude, though not as rough as she has been with her slum neighbours. This kind of changing position suggests the possibility of negotiating power to the urban poor although it is only verbal power. For example, Laithong says sharply to Nakarin while they are talking on the golf course: 'Yes, the air around here is so nice; although it is only reserved for the rich who

can pay for it!' Again, Laithong takes the opportunity to condemn the upper class when Nakarin shows surprise at seeing the local *I-san*[2] food: 'Of course... how come you know it. This is genuine knowledge, the local wisdom of our poor generations... Well, it's not your fault. You should blame your elite class that makes you miss a lot of opportunities to learn good things about our own culture.'

As suggested above, *Nang Baab* creates space for class negotiation between the hero and heroine as a secondary narrative to the romantic encounter. There is also negotiation in protecting class dignity from condemnation by outsiders. This type of negotiation is often shown in dialogues between the heroine and villain.

[episode 10 - scene 2 - length 2 mins 8 secs]

Lilayu wants to show that she has the upper hand over Laithong by ordering Laithong to serve her a cup of coffee when she visits Nakarin's office.

Lilayu: One coffee... Use your hand to make the coffee, if you don't know!

Laithong: Well, I suppose so, as my foot is not available!

Lilayu: (becomes furious) Do you know who I am?

Laithong: I don't care. If you want to come here to exercise your power over human beings, please go back before you become the loser.

Nang Baab also allows other characters of the slum class to negotiate their power through identity with the upper class as well. Having the power to negotiate protects them from being the passive victims of demeaning class stereotypes.

[episode 25 - scene 3 - length 3 mins 2 secs]

After failing to fabricate a story about an affair between Laithong and Nakarin, Lilayu tries another trick, hiring Rueanruang to expose Laithong's fake dirty life to Nakarin. Rueanruang asks for more payment but Lilayu refuses.

Lilayu: I can give you only 10,000 baht. I know a slum woman like you won't be able to get a lump sum like this in life even by selling your body!

Rueanruang: (who gets upset but accepts the contract) Okay! I work for you... but don't put yourself over me, don't raise your voice to me just because you have a higher education, and belong to higher-class society. Huh! Rich or poor are not different, they are all fond of dirty sex!

To create a space for the urban poor characters to control and enjoy their negotiation particularly in the matter of identity is a radical move in Thai soap opera. Nevertheless, the assessment of the reception analysis later in the chapter will reveal whether or not this representation has any significant impact on the Klongtoey women or not.

The last representation of class in *Nang Baab* is, in more abstract form, that of 'class morality', which can be constructed and destructed. To define the term 'class morality', I draw on the idea by Mary Evans in her analysis of Jane Austen. Evans suggests that 'people could only be "good" if they both recognised their own needs and the rights of others to theirs' (1987: 84). According to this moral code, Evans proposes that human beings are people who must make choices about their actions with little consideration of the dictates of the market economy. Therefore, the concept of class morality deconstructs the boundary of class maintained by materiality, and substitutes it with the morality which reflects the real value of people. It is the same explanation that provides justification for the construction of class morality in *Nang Baab*. It appears that the common lives of slum people, in some parts, are praised as morally superior to the material lives of the rich. More than that, *Nang Baab* questions the value of wealth, representing it as a trap for both men and women while ruins the value of human relationships.

[episode 29 - scene 4 - length 2 mins 22 secs]

After hearing that Laithong was shot while protecting Nakarin from the attack of Lilayu, Chaisamorn visits Laithong in hospital. She comforts Nakarin who is still in shock from the event.

Chaisamorn: Maybe we should pray for her, but... such a shame! I don't even know how to pray! We're so busy in the material world that we have forgotten to do good things in our lives. What makes us like this? Money... money that we worship, money that takes our souls away.

Nakarin: (sobs at her words) I feel like a fool that I let these material things control me. Now I realise that I can find something that I never thought still existed in this world. This is love, faith and sacrifice... It's still here in this world, not only written in books. Only love for and faith in each other can protect this world from decay and immorality.

In *Nang Baab*, one's class position is no guarantee of being a 'good' or 'bad' human being, and true morality is regarded as necessary for building human relationships. Thus *Nang Baab's* narrative suggests that being wealthy involves a loss of community. In other words, there is no sense of community within the upper class. The next part of my textual analysis is concerned with the representations of community.

4.2) Nang Baab and the Representations of Community

Christine Geraghty suggests that the concepts of class and particular class position have been very important to the British soaps in building up a sense of community (1991: 148). We see, therefore, an adoption of community strategy to maintain the continuation of the British soaps such as in *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*. But in the Thai soaps, in general, the notion of community is not concerned or positioned as a central part of the storyline, compared with notions of the individual or the family. The Thai soaps generally present metropolitan family lifestyles, which are shown as self-sufficient rather than stressing interdependence among neighbours. Moreover, the storylines of Thai soaps are commonly based on romance and conflicts in the relationships of a few main characters, which do not require the signifier of community. Apart from this, as has been shown above, place is never acknowledged in Thai soaps. For example, a house is shown because it is a place where personal relationships develop and it is, usually, shown as a single complete 'house' that includes an extended family as well as a group of housemaids.

However, similar to the concept of class, the concept of community in *Nang Baab* offers new ground for Thai soaps in that this concept is explored in some depth. Here the community's identity is established to mark the differences between the 'insider' and the 'outsider' on the basis of class. Furthermore, the term community also carries connotations of ethnicity or race.

Therefore, when community becomes an important element of the narrative, as occurs in *Nang Baab*, it is defined by the concentration of urban poor and marginalized ethnic characters. In *Nang Baab*, the daily activities of the urban poor and *I-san* (Northeastern) ethnicity mingle with personal conflicts in the slum in order to provide characters' roles to play. In the following section, the way *Nang Baab* constructs a sense of community is illustrated through a close analysis of some remarkable episodes.

First of all, geography and everyday culture are, the important strategies for the establishment of the representation of community. The main setting of *Nang Baab* is a slum in the capital city, Bangkok, where a number of slum settlements share, more or less, a similar environment. This particular setting gives a sense of unified experience to urban poor and ethnic viewers and, at the same time, authenticates the realism of the (fictional) setting to general viewers. *Nang Baab* creates the sense of a slum community by using geographical representations such as public spaces: coffee stalls, narrow cement walkways and a small public ground, which is a key site of meeting among community members. In all, *Nang Baab* uses these settings to accommodate the lives of urban poor people, one which is urban, poor, and struggling on a day-to-day basis. The presentation of urban poor and ethnic members through speech, appearance, food and behaviour is the background through which the identity of this slum community is represented. Additionally, common problems of slum dwellers such as unemployment, domestic violence, illegal gambling, drug using, petty crime, spiral of debts and even imprisonment are often referred to throughout the episodes

[episode 6 - scene 3 - length 1 mins 32 secs]

When Rumpuey returns late at night she sees Laithong sitting sadly near the mattress. She asks Laithong what is happening to her.

Laithong: Who on earth can sleep? (The quarrelling voice of a husband and wife comes from a nearby shabby house). There is so much unpleasant noise around here.

Rumpuey: Just ignore it. This is slum life, it happens all the time and with everyone here. You know, because slum people are likely to have a partner by accident, by mistake, or just by lust. So they have got to bear it. They have got to accept what they choose.

Laithong: Have you ever loved anyone?

Rumpuey: Well, I can't even remember what love is. It can't feed you to survive, can it? Do you think you can find that 'love' in here?

The concept of community in *Nang Baab* is also clearly constructed by expressing a sense of belonging, togetherness and sharing. This ideal of community is described by Dorothy Alison as 'a shared feeling of belonging and merging, with an ecstatic sense of

oneness' (1978, *cf.* Young, 1990: 309). One significant scene that demonstrates this ideal of community is the daily gathering of a group of men and women in the slum. This is contrasted to the representations of the upper class which, whenever shown, is through individuals or a pair of characters and, usually, in unpleasant interactions or relationships.

In the slum community of *Nang Baab* we see people greeting each other when they pass by, stopping for a chat on the walkway and gathering around the television set in Seng's coffee stall. These slum people are always shown in groups, or becoming a group whenever an event occurs, such as fighting, quarrelling, complaining and talking about their daily lives. These kinds of community relationships create the sense of a common sensibility among the members, which encourages them to respond to a particular event or attitude in similar ways. For example, when a newspaper publishes a headline of a huge fire in one slum community, the slum characters get upset and accuse the authorities of planning eviction. They talk about putting the whole community on alert and keeping an eye on strangers. It seems clear that when the community is threatened, afraid or insecure, the sense of togetherness and belonging among them is heightened.

The sense of belonging is also a means of marking boundaries by defining them as adhering to a special code of conduct, or other words, an identity. In *Nang Baab*, two examples of this are the sharing of the common (favourite) food, local *I-san* food, and sharing local music which they like to play very loudly so that everyone in the community can enjoy it wherever they are. Therefore, to be in the community is to adopt a way of life and to possess a united identity. The sharing of *I-san* food and folk music in the fictional slum is apparently similar to the real culture in Klongtoey everyday life. As discussed in Chapter Five, *I-san* food and *I-san* folk music were the most common practices that brought the women of Klongtoey together, and reminded them of their ethnic roots.

Geraghty suggests that one strategy in creating a sense of community is to define the boundaries, to exclude those who do not belong and to clarify the difference between those inside the community and those outside of it (1991: 100). This strategy also appears in *Nang Baab* when Nakarin, the hero, or Lilayu, the villain, visits the community. Both are depicted as complete strangers and presented as uncomfortable

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when they become subjects of the gaze of slum people. In these events they are not seen as powerful, because of their wealth and class, but as outsiders who are given a hard time during their short visits.

[episode 18 - scene 3 - length 3 mins 12 secs]

Nakarin follows Laithong to her slum in order to ask her back to work after she quits. His visit surprises her slum neighbours, and they challenge him as if he is the representative of capitalism.

N-geglung: Wow! Wow! Wow! A high-class man dares to stand on our dusty land. He must be up to no good.

Seng: What do you mean?

N-geglung: Look! Is it not weird if he's coming only to plead with E-Thong to go back to work? He must have a dirty plan to take E-Thong for his own sexual pleasure. I never trust these rich people! They always treat us as their commodity.

Rumpuey: Perhaps he sincerely wants E-Thong to help his work. You know if an employer like him dares to come here, that means he appreciates our labour.

Seng: Yes, while it is a struggle to find a job, the employer still keeps a place for Thong. She must have proved to him the value of slum labour.

Rueanruang: I'm afraid he doesn't care for the value of our labour, but only for our cheap and free labour.

Like most communities, apart from insider/outsider polarities, there is always individualism within a community. It is in the nature of community soap operas that community is drawn from all sorts of characters and individual goals, but, after all, their desire for community helps them identify with a group. Therefore, Laithong of *Nang Baab* neither bothers to join the gambling group nor illegal activities. Instead, she aims for emancipation from poverty by pursuing education and skilled work. Similarly, Thad, a taxi driver, who is a sincere and simple person, never throws himself into gambling, while his wife, Rueanruang, is a severe addict. Nevertheless, in order to maintain a community identity, every slum member, despite having disparate personalities, shares similar concerns, a sense of belonging and the suffering from social discrimination. The

characters are seen working together, playing together, grieving together and so on. Thus, when Laithong and Rueanruang are put in jail, the female slum neighbours bail them out by collecting money. When Laithong suffers from her love for Nakarin, Rumpuey, her roommate, offers her a shoulder to cry on and encourages Laithong to better herself. In everyday group meetings, slum women regularly talk about family issues, economic issues and gender role issues that show the women's concerns about their community.

4.3) *Nang Baab and the Representations of Gender*

Typically, the storylines of Thai soaps revolve around the positions of the heroine as can be seen in the title of soaps in which the heroine's name or the heroine's character is often used, as seen in *Nang Baab* (Miss Evil). Despite the fact that the heroine may be the central figure, it is significant that her function is to assist the hero to establish his patriarchal power. In this sense gender representation in Thai soaps is, by no means, a major component of the romantic narrative in which a heterosexual, monogamous couple and the happy ending re-create a familiar utopian concept.

If the romantic utopia requires the transformation in behaviours and characteristics of both the hero and the heroine, *Nang Baab* achieves this process. At the start of the series, Laithong makes her first appearance as a very young, aggressive girl, an iron-hearted rebel with no affection in relationships. Although Laithong remains aggressive to nearly the end of the story, she gradually softens and develops an appreciation of love and femininity. On the other hand, the storyline portrays Nakarin in terms of a significant change from an arrogant elite to a down-to-earth person. Nakarin never stops his internal drive for love or for possessing the woman he loves. The last episode in which Laithong accepts Nakarin's proposal of marriage implies that his masculine tenderness has triumphed over Laithong's class-consciousness and her opposition to patriarchy, which, finally, turns out to be less important than having a heterosexual relationship.

The theme of romantic love as a basis for marriage and the means of a happy life is very well asserted in the gender discourse of *Nang Baab*. Therefore, the unhappy marriage of Nakarin and Chaisamorn must end since it is not established on romantic love. At the same time, the romance between Nakarin and Laithong leads, despite many

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obstructions, to marriage and, presumably, a 'happy family' ever after. However, in order to achieve the happy family, it is the responsibility of the female character to sacrifice herself for love either by divorcing, as with Chaisamorn, or by giving up her autonomy, as in the case of Laithong. Nevertheless, whether the women find ultimate happiness in marriage or not, no one knows, as the narrative ends at the point of marriage.

Since the concept of a good marriage in *Nang Baab* is emphasised as a romantic space that is free from material or money matters, the consequence of a materialist marriage is intentionally shown throughout the story. There are no happy moments in the marriage narratives of Nakarin and Chaisamorn, Lilayu and her ex-husband nor in the relationship of Rueanruang and Thad whose marriage is based on lust. In fact all the tragic problems in *Nang Baab* are the circumstances of unhappy marriages, which continually give rise to conflict and which pull Laithong, despite being single, into the disharmonious marriages of those three couples. As a consequence, women and men in *Nang Baab* can never be simply happy with the marriage positions they occupy and, therefore, they all seek to emancipate themselves from their destinies.

In spite of all the misery, these female and male characters in *Nang Baab* seem to believe in the traditional ideologies of heterosexual and monogamous marriages, which are, indeed, an expression of patriarchal ideology of the family. Thus, when the marriage of Lilayu breaks down, she tries in vain to look for another man who can offer her a financially secure marriage. Similarly in the case of Chaisamorn, as soon as her oppressive marriage ends, she finds another man who can compensate her lack of love and romantic passion. Despite being continually battered in her marriage, Rueanruang holds onto her husband tightly and never lets him out of her sight because of her belief in the longevity of marriage. As for Laithong, even though she lives with the stigma of taking other women's husbands, she has kept her virginity and has been waiting to present it to the 'right' man who can fulfil her need to marry.

The following three episodes demonstrate how the patriarchal status quo remains firm in the myths of marriage and how it shapes the women's destinies.

[episode 1 - scene 4 - length 1 min 34 secs]

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On the floor of their shabby house, Laithong and Rumpeuy are eating *I-san* food. Rumpeuy is blaming Laithong for causing conflict in the slum.

Laithong: I don't care even when they call me *'nang baab'* (Miss Evil). I'm ready to do anything that can make me survive.

Rumpeuy: E-Thong, this does not make sense. Being a woman, dignity is the most important 'cos it can bring you a happy marriage. Listen! Our ultimate goal is to marry a good guy.

Laithong: So, if that's good, why don't you keep dignity for yourself?

Rumpeuy: It's too late for me, I started my life with a big mistake and end up selling my body like this... But for you... you still have a future. Don't let anyone curse you as *nang baab* for life!

[episode 26 - scene 2 - length 4 mins 24 secs]

Nakarin's patience in the face of Lilayu's provocation finally ends; he drags her out of his house and demands that she leaves immediately.

Lilayu: No way! I'm not going anywhere else. You can't throw me out of your life 'cos you're the one that made my life hell! Now it's your turn!

Nakarin: I've never done anything wrong to you. It's you who left me to marry Michael. Huh! You always wanted to fly high!

Lilayu: You're wrong! (she is crying painfully.) Had you not introduced me to Michael that night I would not have married him. You know, I found out after the first night that he's gay! No woman can enjoy life with a sick husband who is sexually deviant. I had to respond to him the way he needed me. I was treated only as a slave, no better than an animal. My whole life was ruined because... because of you! I want my life back and I want to reclaim my right over you. It should be me who should possess your heart and your belongings.

[episode 15 - scene 3 - length 3 mins 12 secs]

Chaisamorn loses her mind after being bombarded by Lilayu's story. She insists that Nakarin tells her the truth.

Chaisamorn: Do I have to see both of you in bed so that I can believe it's true! I'm your wife, a lawful wife! A deserted wife who has not even been touched

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for so long. I've been put down like a piece of furniture only to show your wealth, your social status. You never know what a wife needs, you never understand!

Nakarin: So what do you need?

Chaisamorn: (crying) I need a real husband who cares for me, not for my money!

As we can see from the above, it is interesting to find that some feminist standpoints on women's sexuality and oppression are also recognised in *Nang Baab*. Here in some narratives, patriarchy is challenged and dismissed as the cause of all problems. The phallus becomes a symbol of sexual immorality and is brought down to ridicule by women. Unfortunately, these scenes are added in a few episodes without any particular purpose or with no rational link to the main theme. It seems that they are included merely to create a sense of conflict and violence in relationships, either between women and men or among women themselves, rather than to encourage women to resist the dominant power of patriarchy.

The two following episodes imply the problem caused by the phallus. They also signify the way the social construction of sexuality is deeply embedded in the sexual status quo. But as suggested, there is no consequence or link between these narratives and others. They are simply events in the narratives that show the aggressiveness in a slum community and the conflict-ridden relationships between Laithong and her female rivals.

[episode 2 - scene 4 - length 2 mins 32 secs]

After punching Rueanruang to the ground, Laithong announces this in the middle of a cheering group:

Laithong: I hit E-Rueang 'cos she has a mouth itch. Huh! call me evil... Hey! Listen everyone... if you don't want me to take your husband, why not chain your husband to you, or perhaps put a collar and owner tag on him, then I'll know whose is who. Or still better, put a marriage certificate in front of the house to announce that he is your legal pet!

[episode 20 - scene 1 - 4 mins 22 secs]

In another big fight between Laithong and Rueanruang, Laithong announces in public that she never had the idea of taking Thad because Thad is the silliest man in the world as he has chosen Rueanruang as a wife.

Laithong: A man like Thad is extinct a thousand years ago together with the dinosaurs.

Rueanruang: You! you curse Thad!!

Laithong: Why, if I want a man to be in my bed I won't go for a dumb buffalo like him. It's such a shame for a woman.

Laithong's reply makes Rueanruang scream so that Thad runs to stop both of them. At that moment Laithong grasps a knife nearby and walks threatening towards Thad. She is growling.

Laithong: If having this thing causes a lot of problems and creates chaos in this world, better not have it!

And before anyone realises, Laithong scratches the sharp knife at Thad's penis.

The cutting of the penis in the above act can be read as signifying a moment of women's resistance to the claim of essential masculinity and the privilege of universal patriarchy. Initially, this narrative might raise feelings of sexual violence and humiliation of male sexuality, falling victim to female aggression. Nevertheless, I argue that it suggests an attempt to examine sexual violence within the broader framework of feminist thought. As Adrienne Rich argues, heterosexuality is a social institution within which a variable range of forms of control, coercion and force are used by men to ensure sexual access to women (1980, *cf.* Kelly 1997: 346). In order to liberate themselves from this oppression, women need to resist being sexually available and transform their position into being sexual actors. In other words, the penis cutting narrative reflects the radical struggle of women towards the symbolism of male's manipulation. Thus, it can be seen as the way that women attempt to break out of their victimisation, not as the conquest of women over men.

The female characters in *Nang Baab* also reveal and mock the dominant sexuality of their male counterparts. These incidents emphasise the rejection of sexual immorality, particularly sexual seduction and illicit sex, in *Nang Baab*. Furthermore,

there are many episodes that open a space for female characters to deconstruct the symbolic gender hierarchy. The following three dialogues serve as examples of this.

[episode 4 - scene 4 - length 2 mins 8 secs]

Nakarin comes home late as usual but this night is different as Chaisamorn is waiting for him instead of sleeping in her room.

Nakarin: I hope you won't ask me where I went... I know what I'm doing and I don't like to be told what I should or shouldn't do.

Chaisamorn: I never care, really. Wherever you go, I'm sure, it's not different than that kind of place where all men are fond of going. Men are the same, whatever class they come from; they never stay away from their instincts, always seeking pleasure from something 'new' and 'exciting'.

[episode 18 - scene 1 - length 3 mins 16 secs]

On the night that Nakarin attempts to seduce Laithong, she punches him. He asks Laithong to forgive him and not to see him in a bad light.

Laithong: Okay! I can forgive you for not being able to restrain your instinct. But I won't forgive you for your thought that every woman is an object of pleasure for men, and that women can be bought or controlled at any time. I am quitting the job! I don't need your bloody money. I won't let you oppress me as you did other women.

[episode 18 - scene 4 - length 1 min 38 secs]

After failing to get Laithong back to work, Nakarin becomes frustrated and complains to his senior consultant.

Nakarin: Look, who I am and who is she! Do I have to kneel down and ask her for mercy? No! I will not go back again. What about my reputation... my face... my...?

Prakob: (interrupts Nakarin) I think our society is really sick! The way you're talking shows that you have never learned how to say 'sorry' or even feel 'sorry'. Anyway, I don't blame you, it happens with every man. We've never been taught to lower our heads to women.

Although there are attempts to ease classism, racism and sexism in *Nang Baab*, when it comes to the position of a female villain the significance of sexuality is highlighted in a more negative but an 'acceptable or suitable' way. What I mean by 'acceptable or suitable' is that the sexual aggression of a female villain is made so extreme that she simply incurs hatred from the viewers.

In *Nang Baab* the sexual immorality of the upper class is represented through Lilayu, the key villain of the story. By all means, her 'bad woman' characteristics – displaying sexual desire and sexual aggressiveness – are narrated as a comparative signifier to Laithong, a 'virginal good woman'. Lilayu's extreme sexual behaviour and attitude is interpreted as 'severely unacceptable' in Thai culture, where sexual desire is reserved for men. Therefore, when Lilayu displays her sexual desire, she sets herself up for punishment.

[episode 22 - scene 2 - length 1 min 15 secs]

When Lilayu hears that Nakarin and Laithong are missing, she runs to Nakarin's office and threatens the old man, Nakarin's consultant, to tell her where they are.

Lilayu: You have to tell me now! I'm sure you know where they are, you have been working with him for years. If you don't... I rape you now! (Lilayu uses her foot to close the door) Will you? Otherwise you lose your virginity today!

The consequence of Lilayu's sexual manipulation of men is, in the end, portrayed as insane and she is detained behind bars. Her effort to bring Nakarin back by attempting to use sexual force remains totally unsuccessful. As argued by McEwen, female sexual desire is seen as frightening because it threatens men's sexual power, undermines the fabric of patriarchy, and contradicts the role of women as nurturers and carers (1997: 15). Through her sexually aggressive and provocative manner, Lilayu is represented as insane so that men can be allowed to control her sexuality and re-establish the social norm.

As *Nang Baab* is a night-time melodramatic soap opera, the Klongtoey women are invited to find pleasure in the programme and perceive it as a melodrama that presents romance between the two different classes. However, as *Nang Baab* is also an

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attempt by the producer to project anti-classism and to call for social morality, the Klongtoey women may be encouraged to read this soap according to meanings encoded by the producer. Furthermore, as the soap is considered to be a woman's genre, it is possible that it might be decoded by women audiences in terms of gender and class negotiation.

There are a number of ways in which the portrayal of class identity can be read. One important way is to read it through the experiences of the women who are suffering because of their class and gender. In the following section, reception analysis of how the women migrants in the Klongtoey slum construct the meanings of *Nang Baab* will be presented within the range of possible readings which appeared earlier in my textual analysis.

5) Reception Analysis

This section is based on the discussion with 30 Klongtoey women about *Nang Baab*. The data came from semi-structured interviews, unstructured group conversations and observations that I made while watching some episodes with them, the day after the episode had been watched. By employing two distinct methods, namely (individual and group) interviews and participant observation, this reception analysis attempts to provide a comprehensive reading of the ways in which the Klongtoey women relate to *Nang Baab*.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the reception analysis tends to privilege the context over the text. By applying this concept, I was encouraged as the researcher to find out about what cultural meanings were made by the women in specific contexts. The benefit of reception analysis in this study is that, as in Chapter 5, it highlights the need to explore the competence of the Klongtoey women in negotiating meanings, identities and ideologies represented in the television programmes.

The latter part of this chapter explores and analyses the extent to which these women actively constructed meanings in the text *Nang Baab*. The selected areas of investigation included: 1) the general response to the programme in terms of the pleasures, of escapism and fantasy, and identification processes; and 2) the construction of meanings which will be categorised in terms of class, community and gender.

5.1) General Response

As emphasised in Chapter Five, watching prime time soap opera on Channel 7 was part of the everyday lives of the Klongtoey women. It was regarded as the only private and free time that the women had for themselves after finishing their waged work and serving their families. The general interviews with the women revealed that most of them even considered prime time soap viewing to be part of their domestic routine. As a consequence, any story on Channel 7 during this time was always welcomed by the women, whether they liked or disliked the programme. In this sense, *Nang Baab* was routinely, rather than selectively, watched by the women. However, because of the storyline that attracted much interest and involvement from the women, *Nang Baab* rendered an atmosphere of active rather than passive audiences.

All 30 women participating in this reception said they watched the programme regularly because it was shown on their favourite channel. Everyone expressed enjoyment in watching the soap because each episode contained different emotions, such as conflict, romance, or sensitive feelings. When discussing criticism of *Nang Baab* by television critics, fifteen women defended the soap but kept in mind the observation of some critics who objected to *Nang Baab*. The rest of the women were not particularly defensive although they liked the soap. The quotations below came from the separate interviews with three women, Wan, 42, Mutcha, 36, and Panni, 40, who usually shaped their groups' opinions in general conversation:

Wan: I thoroughly enjoy it. You know when *Nang Baab* comes on, the [slum] pathway is so quiet. It's about slum life. So it's very close to us. I'm sure some people don't like it 'cos the heroine is a slum girl and very impolite. But if they [TV critics] don't like it, they've got a choice: just turn the TV off.

Mutcha: It's a good story, good acting. You can see both good guys and bad guys in either rich or poor. You are not necessarily good because you're born rich. I like this concept in the programme. It's not only entertainment or low taste as criticised.

Panni: It's not common to have slum life on TV drama, so I enjoy it. But you know, it's commercial, so they must make characters so sentimental or

overacting. People who criticise it might not find it good as it's too far from their own sort of lives. But it's close to our lives here.

Here, we witness the acceptance of a television genre, which was perceived as semi-realistic and close to the women's own lives. In addition, because of their own involvement in the programme in terms of taking it as a reflection of slum lives, these women were less happy about the way the critics were criticising the programme. These examples further suggest that it was, indeed, enjoyment of the programme that kept the women attached to *Nang Baab* apart from the fact that it was on the screen at a convenient time. Therefore, there is evidence to indicate that the association of slum lives with the soap may impact on the women's reception.

5.2) The Pleasure of Watching Nang Baab

As part of commercial entertainment culture, *Nang Baab* was explicitly offered to the audience as a product for pleasurable consumption. And for the Klongtoey women whose daytime lives were so tiresome, *Nang Baab* offered the promise of leisure: a time for relaxation and resting after a hard day. Udomporn, 42, who had worked 11 hours a day as an office maid in one law firm (she was made jobless a few weeks later after the firm closed), described her pleasure in the programme:

Udomporn: It's so nice to be able to lie down and watch a good soap. As I'm so tired from work and housework, I need to watch a programme, which makes me relax, but it must also match my taste. Otherwise, I let TV watch me! [sleeping in front of TV].

Another 50-year-old woman who ran a gambling place at her house during the day, talked about the leisure she derived from *Nang Baab*:

La-or: At least I don't have to think much, its story is not too complicated and I don't have to keep my eyes open every second. Not like my job [gambling host] where I can't even go to the toilet. I am always happy when my husband comes back 'cos he takes the job from me, so I have my own real time with the programme I like.

Basically for the Klongtoey women, pleasure in *Nang Baab* was associated with the need for relaxation after the daily strain of their various social demands. In addition,

pleasure could also be derived from their talking about the soap during and after watching. From my observation, many Klongtoey women were excited to talk about the pleasure gained from viewing *Nang Baab* or particular episodes of *Nang Baab* although they found it difficult to explain it in rational terms. Aew, a 50-year-old woman who was always anxious about her neighbours' jealousy because of her work experience as an assistant cook in one four-star hotel, pointed out the pleasure of particular scenes when Laithong (the heroine) gets the upper hand over her rivals:

Aew: At least it makes me feel better. Living in this slum you need to be strong and sometimes ruthless. Although I have helped many people here, what I have received is only betrayal, jealousy and gossip. They think I want to distinguish myself from them because I have skilled work: I can cook Western food, I can deal with business. [...] It's just my misfortune that I never have gratitude from the people I help. It hurts, you know. Even my only daughter never returns any good deed. This drama [*Nang Baab*] gives me the strength and ability to cope with this disappointment. Though unlike Laithong, I don't appreciate fighting, I understand her situation. It's hard to control your anger if your mind is disturbed all the time. [...] Well, all I mean is that I enjoy seeing Laithong being tough and not caring about any gossip. It cheers me up, too.

Another 48 year-old woman who had been married three times, reported that the pleasure of *Nang Baab* came from her own experience of being called 'Miss Evil':

Prani: It [*Nang Baab*] reminds me of my past, I used to be called a name like that because I have had three husbands. The first one died, I have a daughter with him. But I was very young so my mom took her and brought her up as my sister. I wanted to get a better life in Bangkok and didn't want anyone to know that I had married. Then I met my second husband. He's not any good and had many affairs and never gave me money. So I divorced him and met my present husband. People accuse me of changing husbands like changing clothes. It's upsetting. If I were not strong, I wouldn't be alive today.

The above two cases indicated that pleasure from viewing the soap was connected to the recognition that the women and the soap characters had something in common. Pleasure occurred when women, such as Aew and Prani in this case, used the representations in the soap to justify their own situations or attitudes. As we see, Aew referred to Laithong to validate her own rejection of people's gossip and jealousy, and Prani confirmed that curses did not matter if women could resist them.

For some other women, seeing upper class people in trouble is another source of pleasure. This is because in the real world, it is not very often that the upper class or the dominant power will be challenged or brought down as easily as depicted in *Nang Baab*. Boonlom, 37, selling food in the slum with the help of her husband, and Auree 55, a food vendor in the shopping street, voiced their feelings in separate interviews:

Boonlom: You don't often see the rich in such chaotic situations. Look at Lilayu, so sexy but nobody chooses her and finally she becomes mad. When I see this I realise how lucky I am to have a good family and sufficient means to live day by day. I've never dreamt of being rich.

Auree: These rich people always bully us. They think we're dirty. Some of them really show it on their faces when they walk past us. Huh!... I know many of them are not that clean, perhaps they have dirtier minds than us. This drama is so good. It exposes the real faces of these ugly rich people.

Both Boonlom and Auree gained pleasure from seeing the negative or vindictive portrayals of the rich. The difference between the two women was that Boonlom felt lucky in her position, while Auree felt a sense of revenge in condemning the rich. In fact, Auree's pleasure in revenge was shared by most of the Klongtoey women (22 out of 30). However, although everyone liked *Nang Baab* and gained some pleasure from watching it, the separate interviews with two different aged women revealed their criticisms of the story as too aggressive and too contrived:

Toy (42, who always expressed opposite views to other women): Too much fighting, too much quarrelling, and too much hatred. I can't imagine who can hate each other as strongly as that. This is so old. Thai drama never changes its plot.

Kaew (25, the youngest informant who preferred 'quality' drama): The plot always has the hero bump into the heroine by 'accident', which then makes him interested in her. It's too coincidental and that makes the storyline too easy to predict.

Thus, deriving pleasure from the soap does not necessarily mean fully agreeing with the storyline. Sometimes expressing criticism while watching could provide the women with even more pleasure because they turned the role of viewer (receiver) into the role of critic (actor). It gives the women an opportunity to exercise their counter-hegemonic power over the old conventions of Thai drama, which is a reproduction of dominant Thai ideology.

5.3) Escapism

Generally, in discussing pleasure, the term 'escapism' is often asserted as one characteristic of pleasure. Although this term sounds rather more negative than positive, due to its association with a mass culture of soap opera that merely offers an escape to a fantasy world, it has significant meanings when situated in the real context of audiences. Using Dyer's model of escapism or utopian sensibility, Jackie Stacey suggests that there is a connection between pleasure and the historical and cultural locations, which produce particular forms of utopian sensibility. Stacey gives an example adapted from Dyer (1985) that marginal people in society may seek temporary relief through entertainment forms that can be read as, for example, abundance of enjoyment and material reality, potentiality of human power, a sense of togetherness and honest relationships (1994: 92-93). From this point of view, escapism operates throughout the relationship between the text and the living context of the audiences. Therefore, in this study the concept of escapism is associated with the pleasure in the text and the everyday lives of Klongtoey women.

In their day-to-day hardships, the double burden of women's responsibilities and domestic problems, the Klongtoey women experienced the pleasure of escaping into the fictional world of *Nang Baab*. What the women enjoyed in the utopian sensibilities of *Nang Baab* was not, however, a glamorous scene or luxurious lifestyle of the rich, which was totally lacking in their slum living. Indeed, the reward they received from escaping into *Nang Baab's* world was a psychic need, not a physical one. All of the 30

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Klongtoey women dreamt of possessing a more fortunate life so they could be free of the oppression they experienced—even if some women denied wanting to be rich. To elaborate on this assumption, two cases are presented below. Aew, who was illiterate and was learning how to read and write in her 50s, said that if only she had had education, she would have left her family a long time ago:

Aew: I appreciate Laithong. Though she's poor and has no parents, she tries to get herself an education, which finally gets her a good job and a good husband. For me, I'm an orphan with no education, so I have to endure my situation. I just hold onto my dream and wish that I were young again so I could start an independent life and be as intelligent as Laithong.

Sakorn, 33, who was 8 month pregnant, was still selling food at the stall near her house. Her husband had been jobless for a year and had done nothing to find a new job. She fed her second child, while talking:

Sakorn: It's impossible to dream about having a nice guy in our lives. But there is no harm in dreaming, so I'm happy when Nakarin approaches Laithong for marriage. It's her good luck. Here, in real life, men are so irresponsible and no good at all, especially after marriage.

The escapism derived from *Nang Baab* is understandable especially when looking at the psychic needs of the Klongtoey women who were seeking to 'fly away' from their unpleasant realities even for a moment. The momentary desire to submerge themselves in the utopian solution of a happy family or self-fulfilment was, by all means, a feminine desire. However, in this case the feminine desire of the Klongtoey women was not conventionally constructed within dominant cultural forms. Conventionally the desire for femininity involves 'the temporary loss of self to the cultural construction of femininity... to be successfully feminine, to produce themselves as visually attractive to others' (Stacey 1994: 124-5). This does not apply to the desire of the Klongtoey women whose preference was much more for a change of gender role in the family and equal access to social opportunities (i.e. education, job). The differences between the typical feminine desire in the soap and the Klongtoey women's desire was, I would argue, due to the particular social, cultural and gender contexts of these urban poor women who experienced inequality in all sorts of ways. Therefore, they would prefer to escape into a

world, which offered harmony and equal gender rather than luxury. This finding coincided with the findings in Chapter Four in which the women preferred to fantasise about solutions to their problems, which, in reality, they had not yet achieved.

5.4) Reality

Following the above discussion, the Klongtoey women recognised *Nang Baab* as offering a solution for emancipation from class and gender oppression. In this respect, they saw *Nang Baab* as 'realistic' because no single woman in *Nang Baab* passed through life without facing some problem and suffering. Furthermore, the Klongtoey women viewed the ways the female characters handled their problems as evidence that these characters were human beings and that they sometimes simply made mistakes. The following group conversation was among Malee, Sayun and Auree, the middle track neighbours who usually spent their leisure time together, as well as helping each other prepare barbecue to sell on the street. Their exchange in a group conversation illustrates how the Klongtoey women perceived *Nang Baab* as realistic drama:

Malee: I think it shows the real life of ordinary people. When Laithong quits her job she sells *somtum* [local *I-san* food] in the slum, just like many women here. She doesn't stop working, and lie down waiting for the hero.

Sayun: Yeah, I never ever stop working, even when I get sick. Many people need to be fed. How can I stop?

Auree: She [Laithong] doesn't care about that bloody office job, really. Neither do we. We won't let anyone bully us just because of money. I left the house where I worked as a maid because the master was bad. Look, now I work on my own and can earn more than being housemaid.

Malee: Exactly. Being poor, you have to work hard. But look at Chaisamorn and Lilayu, they never work, they just put on nice dresses and go out like those rich people. At the mall near the street where we sell food, I see lots of rich kids spend money like nothing.

Auree: Don't blame them. They never learn how to work or how to earn money for themselves. I think when the money finishes they'll just go mad.

Sayun: Yeah, like Lilayu.

This is a striking example of the Klongtoey women's perceptions of the realism of *Nang Baab*. The talk elicited women's opinions and experiences of what they might do if they were in the same situation as the heroine. Here we see the women sharing the same perception as offered in the text in which class differences were depicted through a comparison of working and spending. The three friends appreciated Laithong because of her industriousness and criticised Chaisamorn and Lilayu because of their shallow and extravagant spending. It is noticeable that the women's attitudes towards the value of work and the valuation of spending was reinforced, which, in turn, caused the women to regard at the soap as realistic.

Nevertheless, the findings showed that the perception of 'realism' was selective. Some parts of *Nang Baab* were criticised by the Klongtoey women as very unrealistic and, thus, unacceptable. None of the 30 women believed that the whole storyline was realistic. However, the findings suggest that the women tended to have a broad consensus in judging what was realistic and what was not. This may lead to the understanding that sharing the same everyday situations and similar migration backgrounds, the Klongtoey women were likely to show similar perceptions, which they brought to interpreting the text.

One crucial example is the women's rejection of the producer's attempt to construct a classless society. Though they recognised this producer's aims throughout the story, the Klongtoey women did not believe that it could be achieved in the real world. Instead, they saw this attempt as entirely fictional, and one which could only be achieved on the screen. The following two extracts were typical of all the women's views:

Mutcha: We're saying here that there's 0.001 percent chance of a slum girl being married to a rich and good guy like that. I don't believe any rich guy would look at us. There is no chance of bumping into each other in the real world. We'd never step into their place and they would never want to come close to us. So there is no way the two different lives could meet. It's just a fantastic dream, really. We can think about this, but only for fun.

And a woman leader, who had experienced many conflicts with authority, laughed at this classless utopia:

Roy: Don't even think about it. These rich people never want to mix with us. They have their own lifestyle. If we believed in this ideal, we would just do nothing. Then what would happen to us? I don't like TV programmes that give us foolish hope. It can affect young people, young girls here, you know? Have you seen many girls nowadays, look at their make up, their dress. They might think that if they dress like that they can attract some rich guys. I'm really worried for their parents. You see that girl? *(points at the girl who just walks pass)*, every evening she goes out on the street. Do you know what she is doing? She said she just goes for fresh air. But people know she wants to entice men, a kind of prostitute.

Another criticism about *Nang Baab* being unrealistic was the appearances of the characters, especially the heroine. Katherine English or Kat is a young pop star who is usually cast as a naughty young girl in a middle class family. *Nang Baab* was her first role as a poor slum girl. In an interview, Kat explained why she accepted this role: she wanted to make a change, and saw it as a challenge for her career (*Star Lives*, 03/09/98). Although her acting was good, her more Western appearance left doubts in the Klongtoey women's minds about her accurately representing a slum girl. This point will be discussed under the next heading.

5.5) Identification

In her work on female spectators, Stacey draws on the concept of identification as a set of cultural processes which describe the connection of differences and similarities between spectators/ readers and fictional others. She emphasises that identification is not a fixed process but involves many diverse meanings and, therefore, needs to be understood within a particular social context (1994: 130-6). Initially, for the Klongtoey women, identification that was based on difference or similarity, as Stacey suggests, did not seem applicable to the connection between the audiences and stars of *Nang Baab*. The simple reason was that they could not find any resemblance or connection between themselves and Katherine English, the heroine of *Nang Baab*. Furthermore, they saw Katherine as a fictional star whose life was well plotted in a fantasy screen. Therefore, it

was impossible to compare themselves with her. This view was common among the thirty women, whose comments ranged from strong to mild. Chorn, 55, mother of a teenage girl who was proud of her *I-san* identity made a strong remark:

Chorn: Many girls in the market [near the Klongtoey slum] colour their hair like Katherine's [walnut colour]. It doesn't look nice at all. I hope this epidemic won't spread into our slum. I don't want my daughter to follow that style. It's silly. I believe that the half-blood teenagers are the offspring of American G.I. who were based in *I-san* several decades ago. Being a child of a G.I. is nothing to be proud of.

And Panni, 40, who used to work in a tourist spot and had friends married to foreigners, made a less critical comment:

Panni: Look at her skin, so fragile and pale. Oh! if you are born in a slum your skin will tell you exactly where you belong. Anyway, the story doesn't say who her parents were. Maybe she was abandoned in a slum by a Thai mother who was pregnant by a *farung* (foreigner). If that is the case it makes sense. But still, if she grew up in this slum, she would not have that fine skin.

Then another woman in her early 20s, who was near Katherine's age, observed:

Kaew: Kat is a lovely star but I don't think she fits this role. When she shows aggression, it looks very unnatural like she has never experienced any rudeness in her life. It should be a star who looks tougher than her.

From the above remarks, the process of identification with the stars was directly connected to the real culture of their everyday lives in the slum, as well as their attitudes towards particular incidents or history in the country. Because of her fine skin and features, Katherine was considered inappropriate in slum culture, so only a 'tough' person was right for the role. At the same time, the negative perceptions of 'half-blood' teenagers, as appeared strongly in Chorn and more sympathetically in Panni, affected how the women evaluated the star's identity. Thus, for the case of the Klongtoey women, the hardships of their real lives meant that they were not able to relate to a star who looked so different from themselves.

This implies that the Klongtoey women did not identify with these fictional representations in *Nang Baab*, which were produced by the dominant culture. One of the reasons for (dis)identification was the strength of their ethnic identities and the common cultural practices of migrants living in the slum.

6) The Construction of Meanings

This section is primarily focused on the contextual side of the text/context relationship and investigates how the social and cultural contexts of the Klongtoey women determined their readings of *Nang Baab*. This was done by selecting specific topics, which are recognised as more significant to their everyday lives and then discussing them during the interviews and group conversations. These three topics include: class, community and gender, which have been mentioned earlier in the textual analysis part. However, although textual analysis offered some suggestions for the reading of certain issues, it was not used as the primary source to indicate the preferred readings of the women. The reception of the 30 Klongtoey women has been my core findings, while the textual readings are used as complementary analysis.

Since these semi-structured interviews had been done in a natural setting and involved participant observation, it was not an easy task to control the conversations within a relevant range of topics. However, since the women were not aware of my main research aim (they assumed that I wanted to learn about their everyday lives apart from their interpretations of television texts), they had revealed much of their own life experiences, which, in turn, enabled me to see the effects of their engagement with the soap opera.

6.1) Decoding Class

The theme of class differences in *Nang Baab* invited an extensive range of readings from the Klongtoey women. Since they had an intra-textual knowledge of classism, their readings were more likely to focus on the aspects of class difference and the possibility of class negotiation.

First of all, the portrayal of the urban poor was seen in terms of being biased or unfair to people living in the slums, particularly the lifestyles and appearances of the slum characters in the soap. Twenty-three of the women informants agreed that this

stereotype was wrong and distasteful, and the rest of the women (7 out of 30) saw it as incorrect but acceptable. Mutcha, who had followed her mother's (Roy) migration when she was very young and had been living in Klongtoey for 26 years, criticised the slum portrayals in *Nang Baab* with interesting details:

Mutcha: I think it exaggerates. Slum people are always shown in such funny dress. But if you look at us, not many women wear make-up. We don't care much. We don't have time to think about beauty. But it doesn't mean that we ignore our personality. At least we care about the cleanliness and proper dress. When we go out and mix with people on the street, no one can tell that we come from the slum. Not like those slum people in *Nang Baab*, who can be spotted very easily cos they look obviously funny and so cheap.

W.P.:   And they are shown as so aggressive.

Mutcha: Right, they always fight with each other. Whenever the scene comes, the first thing you see is slapping, beating. But here nobody hits each other like that. It's not correct that whenever you feel upset you just slap someone. No we're not uncivilized, we didn't come from the jungle.

W.P.:   What do you think about the depiction of gossip? Is it correct?

Mutcha: No. In here nobody pays attention to your personal matters and makes gossips like in the soap. Who cares how you wear today or where you are going? Everyone is busy, everyone has their own personal problems to solve. *It really makes us look funny and hateful.*

One woman even became furious when she described how *Nang Baab* reinforced the stereotype of the slum image, which was firmly constructed by the dominant culture.

Wan: Outsiders always have negative images of us in their minds so they will believe it even more when they see this again and again on TV. No one wants to enter into this slum because they're afraid of us. They think we're so cruel and criminal.

The following is an extract from a group conversation of women of the upper track neighbourhood. This excerpt involved: Somsert, 45, who sold *I-san* food in front of her

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house, and Rung, 49 and Meena, 41, who were housewives. Their talk revealed a selective acceptance of the slum representations:

Somsert: We're not as aggressive as shown on TV. We welcome every visitor, like we do for you [meaning me]. *I-san* has a tradition of greeting guests with our *I-san* food. It's such a friendly environment.

Rung: We hardly quarrel with our neighbours. Because we live wall to wall, we respect each others' rights.

Meena: The thing [slum representation] that is okay is the depiction of food. Our main food is *I-san* food, and there is nothing to feel ashamed about.

Somsert: It now appears on restaurant menus now. I think people like it because it tastes good, very hot. And it's nutritious; it has many Thai herbs.

Meena: *(mocking at Somsert)* But you have increased the price. Don't do it as if it is in restaurant. We're all *I-san*.

From the above criticisms, it seemed that the urban poor identities in *Nang Baab* served only to reinforce negative stereotypes, which are entrenched in the dominant culture. However, when *I-san* food was shown in the scene, the women had no objection to it because they did not consider *I-san* food as inferior to any other ethnic group's food. The food was integrated into their everyday lives and it signified the *I-san* identities of the women.

The rejection of the representations of the urban poor in the soap elicited oppositional readings from the women. It also showed the contrast between decoding and encoding in which the women did not read as the producer had claimed—to expose the real life of the urban poor on screen. In addition, it confirmed the status and ideology of cultural production that always remains hegemonic. This will be discussed later in the concluding part.

In discussions about class identity, the portrayal of the elite class or the rich had been raised as one of the most significant topics. Interestingly, none of the women disapproved of the representations of the rich, which were negative. Rather, the Klongtoey women engaged in discussion as an opportunity to devalue upper class identities either in the TV soap or in real life. The following lively conversation among the three friends of the middle track group illustrates this:

Sayun:	I really enjoy seeing the real lives of rich people. I think it's true. They're unmasked. *(laughing and spitting on the floor)* Now you see, these rich people are so immoral. They're never afraid of any sin. They play around, sleep with many people. I think they are crazy with sex, so disgusting.
Malee:	At least we kept our virginity till we were married. We never played around like them [the rich]. Aren't they afraid of AIDs?
Auree:	Well, they have money, so they know how to protect themselves.
Malee:	Anyway, it's wrong to take other peoples' husbands. They should feel ashamed.
Auree:	But many girls here are prostitutes.
Malee:	Hey, it's different. They're working for money, not for fun!
W.P.:	Do the rich in *Nang Baab* look so materialistic?
Sayun:	Yes. Like many rich people in a [Mercedes] Benz, they always sit upright, and look down on street people.
Auree:	We don't care, in a Benz or a foot, everyone comes to the same ending, in a small piece of ground. If you have more expensive things you'll be crazier, greedier. In here even when we leave the door open, nobody breaks in the house. So we're happier than them.
W.P.:	Does that mean the upper class images in *Nang Baab* are real?
Sayun:	Of course, I think so.
Malee:	I used to work as a housemaid. They have some problems like that. One daughter was pregnant before she was married and, another daughter was divorced. They didn't have smooth lives.

This conversation demonstrated the emotional engagement of the women with the particular representations of the upper class. The emotions arose when the three women recalled their experiences with rich people. Here, we see the women used their discussion to condemn the luxurious and immoral lifestyles of the rich. Although, they were all pleased with the negative picture of the rich in *Nang Baab*, one woman interpreted it as too exaggerated and overly dramatic. Koom, 50, who practiced meditation, and who claimed that she could purify her spirit, said:

Koom: I think it's a kind of drama, everything is over-acted. Everyone, no matter whether rich or poor, must have morals. But some might have fewer morals than others. Especially for Buddhist, we're taught not to be greedy or materialistic.

From Koom's remark, class may not be a determining factor for whether one is considered a good or bad person. Thus, it was interesting to find that the concept of human morality was defined as being class-blind here. This woman regarded morality as something built inside a human being, which reveals the value of each individual. On these terms class was not a matter for the determination of being a good or bad human being. This reading was relevant to the textual analysis, which emphasised morality as more important than the material, and real happiness as emerging from the virtue of morality, not from materiality. In this context, Klongtoey women understood the meaning of being materialistic in terms of consumerism that is the upper class people value judgements are made in terms of material possession and economic wealth. The reading of morality by these urban poor women was a significant finding in this study and will be discussed extensively in the next chapter.

However, when we discussed the possibility of being classless in Thai society, none of the women believed that it was possible. Instead, they firmly believed that class does exist in society. As a community leader who endured difficult experiences in fighting for justice, Roy's statement was a good example of this finding:

Roy: If there is no class why are we refused access to full rights, such as we can't own our land here. We might be evacuated at any time. We're seen as poor, as troublemakers. Nobody wants us to live here. So as long as there is a slum in the city, there are still class differences.

Although class difference was recognised, the Klongtoey women agreed that class was fluid and changeable, like identity. Nevertheless, they accepted that moving between classes was not simply a matter of changing appearances but depended on improving one's qualifications. The two quotations below revealed such views:

Wan (no education):   Laithong has education, so it makes sense that she can upgrade herself to another class. Nakarin would not have looked at her if she were still in a slum with no education. A girl near my house has typing

training [computer training according to Wan's description], now she's not here anymore. She moved to another place and took her mom with her. She has a good job. I think she works in a school.

Chorn (primary school):   Education is the most important way to upgrade oneself. Laithong has high ambitions, I mean in a good sense. I always like to see *I-san* people get more education. I'm so proud to know that there are many *I-san* people in high positions *(giving some names as examples)*. People can't condemn *I-san* as poor and low-class. If they say that I will ask them to look at those successful persons.

The belief in class mobility confirmed the previous finding in Chapter Five, as well as the encoded meaning in the text. It seemed that the Klongtoey women regarded the value of education as a ladder that could lift them up from their original class. Since education was perceived as the main way to achieve social mobility, the women found it rational that *Nang Baab* had a happy ending. No woman agreed with the view that accepting Nakarin's proposal, necessarily meant that Laithong gave up her class-consciousness. Many of them argued that though it was necessary for urban poor women to be cautious about rich men, if there was a sincere interest, which led to a happy marriage, it was acceptable, and, indeed fortunate. However, this good fortune was predicated on the belief that the woman must acquire suitable qualifications, such as education.

Following the discussion of class mobility, the Klongtoey women understood that there was a space for class negotiation. All of the 30 women agreed that watching *Nang Baab* encouraged them not to accept passivity and inferiority due to their urban poor position. This confirmed the women's beliefs and the text's meaning that a 'good' person was defined by morality, not by class identity. Therefore, class could be negotiated:

Sriwan: If they do good, they're a good person. Material things can't give you your class. It's in your heart. I'm never afraid of high-class people, and I know what class I am.

Panni: Why do we have to be afraid and let the rich laugh at us? When Laithong challenges Lilayu, I really enjoy it. [...] I used to go to have food in a

five star hotel [mentions the name] with a group of friends. We're all *I-san*. My friend's husband, who is a British, paid for it. Though many guests looked at us, it didn't bother me. We enjoyed ourselves and talked very loudly in our *I-san* language. No one asked us to leave. See! if they had asked, I would have reacted badly.

From the above extract from a group conversation, we see that the Klongtoey women did not see themselves as victims of classism, since they were not passive and they had learnt the potential for negotiation. The topic of class negotiation will be discussed later in the final part of this chapter.

6.2) Decoding Community

For the Klongtoey women, community was understood as more than a physical setting. It was the expression of a number of cultural practices that the urban poor women felt they shared in common with the characters in *Nang Baab*. Roy, a community leader viewed the concept of community in *Nang Baab* like this:

Roy: It's not bad seeing the image of a slum on TV. I think women here like the programme because they feel close to it. Although we know it's not the real slum, it is built up, but its setting is acceptable. I mean it doesn't look too poor or too dirty. It's quite organised like this slum. You see we try to keep it clean, we have running tap water, electricity, pavements. Our slum is an upgraded one. There are many people who live on trash mountains.

Such perceptions of a slum community reflected their involvement and sense of shared experience with the representations in *Nang Baab*. The above opinion shows a sense of pride in their community by comparing it to other more unfortunate places.

However, although the women could identify the fictional slum with the Klongtoey slum, a few women (8 out of 30) commented that the setting of the slum community in *Nang Baab* was too limited and showed only a few places. This is an example:

Boonlom: I see only Seng's coffee stall. In here, we have many coffee and food stalls for meeting, we don't need to go to the same place all the time.

Why don't they show other houses or communal places like we have here? [a community centre that serves as a place for meeting, evening classes, small library, first-aid, etc.] We are proud of our centre. I've heard Roy say that she would bring a video about *Dhamma* (Buddhist sermon) to show someday. It's a good idea.

Boonlom's description of the slum centre and some other places revealed her pride in the community and corrected the misperception of outsiders about it. Similar feelings were revealed throughout my discussion with the Klongtoey women. When we discussed the portrayal of personal conflicts in the slum, some of the women (12 out of 30) contested this representation and the implicit stereotypes behind it. For example interviews with 2 women showed:

Sakorn: I don't understand why they show so many conflicts in the slum. People might think that there is conflict going on all the time. It's not true, here we try to live as peacefully as we can. Because we can't avoid each other, our houses are so close, so it's better to be friends.

Mali: Most of us are *I-san*. We share the same culture, the same feeling though we didn't come from the same village. If you come here during festivals we have lots of fun, we dance, we sing and we eat plenty of food. You will hear *I-san* music from the upper track to the lower track. Oh! I can't think that we have any serious conflict.

However, in my conversations with the non-*I-san* group (2 women out of the total 34 informants), they reported some resistance to difference and conflict in community.

Nimsri, 76, was born in Bangkok and had been living in Klongtoey for 45 years. She settled there before the arrival of *I-san* migrants. She usually stayed in her house with her sisters and nieces rather than socialise with her neighbours:

Nimsri: Living here you need to be wise. If you shout at them they might hit you back. I don't want to associate with them but I'm not afraid of them. My leg is not good now otherwise I would go out. I never liked their food and never buy any food here. There is always conflict in the slum, like in that soap [*Nang Baab*], you know? Only that we don't make it visible.

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And from Aew, 48, the other woman who was not *I-san*:

Aew: I don't feel any different living with *I-san* people here. We're all Klongtoey slum people. I can cook *I-san* food even better than most of them. But I accept that there is some conflict. As I said before, I know that these women are jealous of me. They come to me only when they need help, but then they talk behind my back. I'm fed up with this.

In both cases, it was not denied that there was ethnic conflict in the Klongtoey slum. However, since the majority of slum dwellers were Northeastern or *I-san*, these women's different ethnic identities seemed significant for their perceptions. For example, Nimsri and Aew presumed that they were above their *I-san* neighbours because they were born in the Central region, so they did not want to create conflict with their neighbours. Although Aew was active in community work, she held the attitude that she knew better and worried about others' jealousy. As for Nimsri, she chose to stay on her own to avoid ethnic conflict in the dense area of Klongtoey. On the other hand, *I-san* women perceived less conflict in their community. However, since ethnic difference was not mentioned in *Nang Baab*, the women were more likely to focus on issues such as domestic conflict between husband and wife, rather than ethnicity:

Roy: Normally we don't intervene as long as they keep it within their home. Sometimes you hear shouting, fighting or crying. But what can we do about that? They don't go out and fight on the street like in *Nang Baab*. I think people feel ashamed about this, if you ask them on the other day they wouldn't like to tell you. I used to help one woman who was hit by her husband because she didn't cook proper food. I ran to help her in her house but when the fight was over they blamed me for interfering. I really learnt my lesson.

Based on the above reports, it was not unusual to see domestic conflicts and domestic violence in the community, except that it did not happen regularly or as aggressively as shown in the soap. Thus, the personal conflict depicted between Laithong and Rueanruang in *Nang Baab* was criticised for being so peculiarly violent, public, and shameless.

The construction of a sense of community in *Nang Baab* clearly demonstrated the close relationship between the location of the Klongtoey women and the setting in the soap. Based on the views of the women, a sense of community was bound up with mutual relationships among the women rather than from inside the family relationship. It implied the feminine concept of relationship and care towards others. This brings us to the discussion of how the Klongtoey women decoded the meaning of gender in *Nang Baab*.

6.3) Decoding Gender

As presented in Chapter Five, the Klongtoey women drew on their experiences of being urban poor and in a marginalized position. While similar reading processes were found throughout the reception of *Nang Baab*, as regards the construction of gender representation; differences in the women's own experiences, family relationships and understandings of gender norms shaped their perceptions of gender and their readings of *Nang Baab*.

Almost all of the women I interviewed in this reception study were married (29 out of 30). Many of them had marriage difficulties, not only in terms of economic problems, but also domestic problems derived from gender inequality. When the women read the concept of ideal marriage in *Nang Baab*, which emphasised romance and freedom from material needs, they perceived it as too idealistic. Panni, who had had two marriages, dismissed this concept by looking at her past failure in marriage:

Panni: I don't believe in romance, really. It can't feed you, right? My first marriage failed and it happened when I was young. I worshipped love but when hardship came, love was just gone. You have to listen to that music...love surrenders hardship... So for me, marriage is not built on romance but on the firmness of both sides.

W.P.: Do you mean sufficient means and materials?

Panni: Probably, but not too materialist. If you prefer material things to human beings, you won't get real happiness.

W.P.: Like the marriage of Nakarin and Chaisamorn.

Panni: Exactly. They just married because of family business, it didn't start from their understanding of each other. I've known some cases like this, where those rich families arrange marriages which end up in divorce.

Panni's rejection of love as the basis of marriage was supported by another woman whose husband had deserted her a few months before. Samniang's husband was working as a taxi driver and his new lover was a passenger he had picked up:

Samniang: Romance is not real, it is just a kind of word the man gives to you before he owns you. I left the village because I loved him. He promised to bring me all sorts of good things in life. We both started from nothing, we worked hard to make our family but after my husband got more money, that woman came and took him from me. *(sobbing)* So, no love, no money left...just pain, really.

This remark, again, reveals how uncertain the marriage relationship is, if it merely begins from romance and no firm commitment or readiness on each side. This attitude was shared by all 30 women informants, even by the woman who had never married, Toy, who admitted that this was the reason she did not want to marry. Therefore, when viewing the unhappy marriage text of *Nang Baab*, the Klongtoey women did not hesitate to blame it as the source of 'all tragic problems'. They explained their views through their own personal experiences. For example, an interview with Mutcha revealed her agony from her experience of marriage:

Mutcha: When I look at Nakarin and Chaisamorn, I knew from the first episode that their marriage was not going well and how it would end. Both of them have become so frigid and look very unhappy because they don't have a happy marriage. Then all the problems happen like the interfering of Lilayu because their marriage is not firm. Well, I say this because I'm in that kind of situation. I'm really fed up with my husband. I want him to get out of my life but he always comes back to me whenever he is thrown out by other women. You know I used to go to see one of his women and asked her to keep him forever. Can you believe a wife would do this, but I did and I'm gonna do this again? Bad luck for me nobody wants to keep him.

W.P.:   Have you ever thought of divorce?

Mutcha: He never cooperates. And if I were alone, I really don't care being called a widow. But I have children, and I don't want them to feel that they don't have a father. In fact, he hardly shares any responsibility in the family. Look at what happens to me now. I can't think of having a new life. Sometimes I tell my children let mama be happy then mama will take them to every place they like. My whole life has been so dull since I married him.

From the above few cases, it is hard to deny that many of the women in the Klongtoey slum were unhappy with their marriages, and that they had been seeking emancipation in their own ways. However, although they did not want to remain in problematic relationships, divorce seemed to be the last choice. There were many reasons for this. When I asked the 28 women (who did not re-marry) to explain why they did not divorce, the majority of the women (65 per cent) expressed concern about the psychological impact on their children. A fewer number of women (21 per cent) reported fear of another failure and being fed up with men. Yet a smaller group (14 per cent) reported that their reason was related to the cultural belief in virginity as a factor for starting a happy married life. Despite their different reasons, the Klongtoey women's priority seemed to the welfare of their children, over their own personal happiness. What follows is an emotional quotation from Charun, 57, who had been left alone with her children for more than a decade. She confirmed the point:

Charun: I don't know what other people think but for me divorce is shameful, a scar on your children. I could not stand seeing my children grow up in trouble. They know that their father has left them but they can accept it because they know we haven't broken up yet. They feel that their father may come back home one day. My eldest son told me not to divorce because he doesn't want the children of the other wife claiming full rights to the father. It helps him feel more secure. That is why I have never divorced though I no longer respect him. [...] I think it's not that easy when you want to divorce someone. Not like in the soap, where they just send a lawyer to negotiate it and that is that.

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It is interesting that although the women did not appreciate divorce as the first solution, they did not have negative attitudes toward re-marriage or starting a new relationship if a divorce occurred. Of the 30 women informants in this reception study of *Nang Baab*, 2 had re-married, and the rest made no comments when talking about this issue. Panni, 40, who had had two marriages and two children from each marriage said:

Panni: It's good for Chaisamorn that she finds the right man after the divorce. It's not strange to have another marriage if the first one fails. I'm not shy about telling people either. I didn't take another person's husband or have an affair. I'm a married woman. I never blame myself for the past. All my friends have the same feeling, you can marry again and again if it doesn't work. Why do we have to keep ourselves in pain? No, it's not my style.

Although there was no objection towards re-marriage, the women accepted that the decision, depended on whether there was a 'right' person for them or not. Following this idea, several Klongtoey women disagreed with the way women took revenge on a failure in marriage. Twelve women who talked about this issue believed that it was useless to retaliate by inflicting pain on their husbands or the woman involved with them. They criticised Lilayu for taking revenge on Nakarin and Chaissamorn. They did not see this act as a way to free themselves from marriage problems. Nevertheless, in their real lives, it seemed that Klongtoey women could not find solutions to their own problems. Therefore, discussing this issue assisted them in re-evaluating their own situations.

Apart from seeing an unhappy marriage as the cause of tragic problems, the Klongtoey women could draw similar textual meanings from *Nang Baab*, which portrayed patriarchy in problematic forms. Although the women did not use feminist terms in their discussions, they articulated forms of feminist thought. The two following statements from different interviews are good examples of the women's viewpoints:

Mutcha: All problems are created by male lust. Men never stop seeking their pleasure. I know this well. In *Nang Baab*, if Nakarin were grateful in his marriage, he wouldn't think of Laithong any further. I think when

women hate each other, men are always the reason behind this. If men stopped playing around, this world would be peaceful.

Aew: It's very unfair to women. Women are always blamed, not men. I tell you, men never stop looking for sex even when they are about to go to the grave. Men have a tendency to go wrong, believe me.

Sharing the above standpoints, the Klongtoey women found it appropriate and even pleasurable to see the scenes when male characters in *Nang Baab* were ridiculed or brought down by female characters. They viewed these scenes as an opportunity for women to win the struggle between the sexes. All of the 30 women agreed on this issue:

Orapin: I like it when Laithong challenges Nakarin or condemns other men. We should not allow men to stand on our heads. I never let my husband beat me. I hit him back or even threaten him before he does.

And another woman made the further comment:

Sriwan: It is quite harsh, but it really fulfils my expectation, when Nakarin gets blamed by Laithong or Lilayu, I feel like I've gained a victory!

The above quotations revealed the subversive feelings of the women that came out while watching the scenes of conflict between female and male characters. The readings of the women implied their pleasure in the way the women saw their gender oppression been transformed into a manipulative position through the soap characters. Within this oppositional reading, then, we moved to the discussion of the scene where Laithong scratched Thad's penis. The majority of the women (24 out of 30, the rest did not show a particular reaction) shared the same reading of this event-- that it was a women's radical resistance to male domination after being oppressed for a long time. Again, no woman perceived it as unwarranted woman's aggressiveness even though they felt some shock from viewing that scene:

Toy: I think she's really out of her mind because she has seen men abusing women all the time. If I were in her position I might do the same! It happens many times if you read the papers. It usually happens with a womaniser.

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The Klongtoey women agreed that the threat to the penis could be used as a negotiation strategy against sexually irresponsible men. Although the women had admitted earlier that they did not agree with taking revenge, they did not read this act as vengeful. Instead, the women interpreted the scene as contesting a masculinity that values the male phallus. One woman even commented that:

Lamai: If this thing had no value, then men would stop raping women.

As seen in Chapter Four and most of this chapter, the call for gender deconstruction was asserted throughout women's discussions of gender. The women were convinced that, in some parts, *Nang Baab* attempted to destroy gender hierarchy and to replace it with gender equality. One woman read this meaning from the episode when Laithong commanded gratitude from Nakarin after helping him win a business deal (by exposing her legs to attract the dealer):

Boonlom: I just laughed at first but now when I think again I can see the message. It's kind of showing that women can achieve big success, and can have as much ability as men. Because men cannot accept this, women's talent has always been hidden.

W.P.: Don't you think this scene exploits women by emphasising the use of women's body to gain success?

Boonlom: Umm...I don't think so. It just wants to ridicule the way men disregard women's ability.

This reading implies that the Klongtoey women understood that the differences in positions between women and men derived from men's intention to suppress women's ability, rather than from the inability of women. According to Roy:

Roy: You see more women than men both in TV [*Nang Baab*] and here. It's always women who help sort out community problems and give support. You can't wait for men otherwise...next year. I'm not joking. We should support more women to take up important positions like politics. I want to see more women politicians.

Another significant issue mentioned widely among the 30 women informants was the tragic consequence of Lilayu's sexual aggression. The women's reception of this scene

was varied. Nine women interpreted Lilayu's ending in insanity as an unfair punishment for women who deviated from the sexual norm, and, then, accused men of being the prime cause. Their reading was relevant to the textual analysis and could be read as women's negotiation of the dominant representation that works to maintain the status quo. The remarks from the two following interviews reflected this finding:

Sakorn: Men always have the right to seek sex, but when women do, it's a sin. They always show this kind of thing on TV.

Udomporn: Seems it's a woman's fault again. Actually Lilayu becomes like this because of her gay husband and Nakarin. Because she seeks love from men, she is seen as a witch. [...] Why don't they [producers] make a story that shows Lilayu as a victim, not a villain?

On the other hand, the rest of the women (21 women) presented opposite views to those above. The two statements below were extracted from a group conversation among 4 women:

Malee: Such a shameful woman. Look at her dress and her eyes, so seductive. I'm happy that she becomes insane at last. It teaches us that as a woman, you should control your sexual activities otherwise you always end up in a bad way.

Auree: I hate women like that. It's not appropriate in Thai culture. Women should not challenge men in sex. There will be only loss.

The factors, which account for the differences in these readings may be linked to the women's personal backgrounds and the exposure to social (feminist) debate on gender. The nine women who viewed Lilayu more sympathetically were between 25-40 years old and were educated. A few of these women who were over 40, and were more active in community roles. On the other hand, the twenty-one women who consented to the punishment resolution of Lilayu in the soap were likely to be in the older age group with no education, and/or were less active in community work. Therefore, it would seem that the ability of the women to apply the idea of negotiation to the controversial issue of sexuality depended on their exposure to wider social knowledge and attitudes towards gender identities, which could be acquired with education, media and

experience with non-governmental organisations that worked in the slum. Furthermore, it was also associated with the involvement of the women in the community-working group. This suggested the impact of group activity on women's concept of gender and gender relations. Some women's critical readings of Lilayu's behaviour clearly stemmed from their strongly held beliefs about the traditional conduct of a 'proper woman', that demanded the repression of women's sexuality under men's control. However, this difference in the women's reading was only relevant to the particular issue of the unfair punishment concerning female sexual transgression. This may not prove applicable to all of the women's attitudes on gender issues. In general, it would be difficult for the Klongtoey women to completely transform the traditional ideology of sexuality into a truly radical direction.

7) Conclusion: Discourse of Negotiation

Feminist research on women and soap opera suggests that the narrative of the soap and talking about a soap can provide tremendous pleasure to women by enhancing women's resistant readings (see for instance, Fiske 1987; Brown 1994). For the Klongtoey women, resistance or negotiation was revealed in part by women's decision to claim time for themselves: for watching a favourite prime time soap opera in their leisure time rather than taking care of others' needs. As also shown in Chapter Five, several women referred to their leisure time in front of the television set as something they deserved after a long day of hardship. Furthermore, the themes of *Nang Baab* relevant to their lives encouraged them to gain pleasure from a feeling of commonality and belonging that this soap gave. Watching a familiar story like *Nang Baab* was, thus, a form of silent negotiation within the constraints of everyday life in a patriarchal culture. It could be said that the women negotiated the realistic hardship by escaping momentarily into the fictional world that portrayed an urban poor girl who could emancipate herself from the slum through education and. However, there was no evidence to show that the women sought pleasure through escaping into the glamorous world of the upper class. Most women claimed no wish to be part of the upper class. This finding challenges the notions of escapism proposed by some feminists and media theorists.

Apart from this, the Klongtoey women exercised their negotiation through the marketing and production aspects of *Nang Baab*. Their criticisms of the programme

ranged from the selection of characters; the exaggeration of slum identities; the emphasis on melodramatic narrative that endorses a happy romantic ending as the ultimate resolution. However, Klongtoey women recognised the causes behind the production of these stereotypes. A major worry raised here was the domination of market forces that control the content and production of the soap opera. Realising this condition, however, the Klongtoey women did not think that they had the power to change the media direction, which serves the mass market rather than the needs of marginalized sectors. To some extent, the way that the women analysed and criticised the marketing aspect demonstrated the hegemonic potential of women's negotiation. Nevertheless, the presence of poverty, gender inequality, and class barriers in the soap were seen by the women as an opportunity to expose their class and community unity to the broader viewers but with the condition that more real and thoughtful representations were needed to correct the misperceptions of the wider audiences. One of the suggestions proposed by the women was to represent the community as a unified neighbourhood, with a sense of belonging and mutual care, instead of a place that was full of personal conflicts.

The most significant negotiation in the reception of *Nang Baab* was presented through the women's rejection of their urban poor representations and the conventional gender identities in the portrayed programme. The true images of the urban poor, according to the women, did not involve poor manners, cheap and funny dress, and, most important, aggressive and violent behaviours. The Klongtoey women supported this criticism by comparing it with their own behaviours and identities, which they regarded as representing the reality of urban poor women. Significantly, the women emphasised the centrality of morality over one's class position. This reflected the ways the women conceptualised and negotiated class identities by deconstructing the myth of class stereotypes and substituting them with this moral essence.

The anti-classism discourse of *Nang Baab* empowered the women to strengthen their beliefs in class negotiation. The Klongtoey women overtly projected their attitudes against the exploitation of class differences. One of the reactions to *Nang Baab* was to protect themselves from being victims of class bias. The women agreed that this could be done by various practices, such as not allowing the upper class to look down upon them and take advantage of them and not losing confidence in their ethnic identities.

Although the women were aware of class negotiation, they did not believe that class divisions could be eradicated in the present social structure due to their long-term experiences of subordination and power imbalance. In all, it could be said that the opportunity for class mobility was acknowledged through qualifications, and in particular on education. However, the possibility of a classless society was dismissed. The reinforcement of their urban poor stereotypes in *Nang Baab*, on the other hand, raised the women's consciousness to demand the significance of their real existence and the need to address their preferred class identities.

Following their resistance to urban poor stereotypes, none of the Klongtoey women showed any interest in identifying themselves with the idealised stars of *Nang Baab*. In fact, they could not find a valid connection between the reality of slum identities and the stars in the fictional slum. Although the majority of the women celebrated the class mobility depicted in the achievement of the heroine, most of them did not identify their own dreams with the heroine. On the other hand, the happy ending offered the women great pleasure, partly because they saw romantic love triumph, but also because the upper class was represented as defeated by the integrity of the urban poor.

Their own painful experiences of marriage enabled the Klongtoey women to contest the concept of an ideal romantic marriage. The women believed that a really happy marriage was established on the firm understanding of both sides and a commitment to build up a good family. In many feminists' work the desire for a happy family is considered a feminine ideal (see for instance Modleski 1982). It is also seen as an aim of the Klongtoey women, despite opposition to their real marriage relationship. However, claming that men were irresponsible in the family, most Klongtoey women opted to take the role of family leader to sustain their children's needs. Furthermore, the talk about gender meanings in the soap persuaded the women to disrupt patriarchal power both in the soap and in their own lives. The women felt the need to negotiate their gender identities by challenging men's irresponsibility in sexual behaviours, as well as conceptualising the images of gender equality and making women's ability visible.

Sexual pleasure was understood as more of a male than female prerogative. Most of the Klongtoey women accepted that, in relation to Thai culture, women should

not display their sexual demands or sexual acts towards men. They saw sexual transgression as a blemish on their gender identity, which required sexual decorum. Nevertheless, despite objections from the majority, a few of the women connected the punishment of female sexual aggression to patriarchal hegemonic culture and, then, negotiated this particular issue.

The above findings enabled us to understand that the Klongtoey women conceptualised their identities through various approaches that interrelated among the women's contexts of class, ethnicity and gender. One significant way was a feminist approach, which enabled the women to recognise their oppressive situations as urban poor women and ethnic migrant women. It is the recognition of their oppression that enabled the women to try to negotiate their representations in the soap. This confirms the argument proposed by feminists and cultural theorists that to theorise women's negotiation, oppressive contexts must be recognised first (see for instance Dyer 1993, Brown 1994, Hall 1997).

What can be seen in the Klongtoey women's negotiation discourse is that the perceptions of class, community and gender were extensively engaged in the ways the women constructed the meanings of *Nang Baab*. This suggests that the Klongtoey women addressed their identities in order to challenge their representations in the dominant discourse, which allowed them to engage in this political space. It is at this point that the space for negotiation opens up for the women.

Note

[1] Melodrama, despite not being highly regarded as culture, is often used as the aesthetic form of expression whose main effect is to engage the emotions of the audiences (see Ang, 1985; Geraghty, 1991; Gledhill, 1997 etc.).

[2] *I-san* food is usually regarded as a low cost and low class food. Usually the main ingredients are made from local vegetables, such as raw papaya, local herbs and lots of chilli, and accompanied by sticky rice to fill the stomach. Because it is inexpensive, it is popular mostly among urban poor people especially Northeastern people and immigrants.

[3] Richard Dyer (1993) proposes three types of decoding dominant representations, which he adopts from Stuart Hall's concept of encoding/decoding (1976): Firstly, the audience accepts entirely the meanings of the text by enjoyment or involvement. Secondly, the audience rejects the whole meaning of the text by dislike or disagreement. Thirdly, the audience combines the two above types and negotiates a given text according to their own construction of meanings.

Chapter Seven

Huajai & Kaipuean: The Pride of Being Urban Poor

As already demonstrated in the previous chapters, soap operas offer its women audiences certain 'structures of feeling', such as the pleasure in identification with the characters in soaps, or the pleasure in constructing preferred meanings. These structures of feeling are, generally, valued and recognized only in the domain of popular culture. Similarly in this chapter, we see *Huajai & Kaipuean* (meaning Heart and Gun) offering the Klongtoey slum women the pleasure of melodrama, as well as a celebration of the women's morality and recognition of their negotiation power. Relevant to the findings in Chapters Five and Six, the women's potential to negotiate their identities is derived from the connection they make between their everyday experiences and the representations of them in the soap operas. The levels of negotiation varied among different groups of women, depending on their perceptions of the soap operas.

Although *Huajai & Kaipuean* belongs basically to the crime and action genre, it is not a programme for men, as traditional crime series generally are. Its storyline and characters are constructed to appeal to women audiences by emphasising personal relationships. Additionally, the women can acquire more pleasure by entering the 'masculine' world of a crime story in an imaginary world on the screen. This issue will be discussed later on.

Huajai & Kaipuean was a night-time soap opera presented on Channel 7 during prime-time hours, at 20:30-21:30 p.m., on Wednesdays and Thursdays. This was the same time and the same channel as *Nang Baab*, and was shown two months after *Nang Baab* finished. *Huajai & Kaipuean* consisted of 30 episodes and was broadcast during late December 1998-early March 1999 while I was conducting the second phase of my fieldwork. Like *Nang Baab*, the reasons for choosing *Huajai & Kaipuean* for the second case study were because it was very popular among Klongtoey women, and because it portrayed the images of a slum community, in which both the hero and the heroine were situated. Nevertheless, compared to the previous case study, *Huajai & Kaipuean* was more popular than *Nang Baab*. It was watched by various groups of audiences, not merely the urban poor fans as was the

case *Nang Baab*, and it gained the highest ratings among other programmes that were shown at the same time on other channels (*Thairath* (12/02/99).

Through a textual analysis of *Huajai & Kaipuean*, I will attempt to analyse how this soap opera offers certain readings the class struggle over justice, the social moral order, and gender relationships. Following the previous format of Chapter Six, this analysis first considers the production and marketing contexts of the programme with particular comments on why the programme is more popular and how this might affect its reception, compared with *Nang Baab*. It is followed by an analysis of the narrative structure and a close scrutiny of the programme, paying particular attention to how the portrayals of class, morality and gender identities are represented. In the reception analysis, the range of the readings of this soap opera is, then, examined within the above framework of textual study. These readings are based on my conversations with the Klongtoey women both in group conversations and individual interviews, including some observations of my own while the women were watching the soap. Most of the conversations and interviews were conducted in the morning after the episode had been viewed. The findings of my reception analysis and the textual sections provide the main focus of the discussion of the negotiation discourse at the conclusion of the chapter.

1) Synopsis of *Huajai & Kaipuean*

Cast of characters and the relationships

Rachen – hero, a contract killer who wants to have a clean future

Chancham – heroine, a selfless girl who always stands by Rachen

Sarawat (inspector) Chaliang – a dutiful cop who has sympathy for Rachen but who competes with him for Chancham's attention

Chanayuth – a boy who escapes from the mafia gang and is under the protection of Rachen.

Chanchai – the main villain, an uncle of Chanayuth, who is behind the contract killing of Chanayuth's father

Wipa – Chanayuth's mother, the victim of Chanchai's greed

Sri – Chancham's mother, a gambling addict

Jead – Chancham's elederly advisor in her slum neighbourhood

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Rachen, who has the name 'golden trigger', decides to end his long-term career as a contract-killer after shooting an innocent girl by mistake. He takes his only son, still an infant, to stay peacefully in a Bangkok slum despite earning very little from a labourer's job in a nearby factory. Having left the crime network seven years before, Rachen devotes himself to his son in the hope that he will grow up as a good citizen.

Chancham, the girl next door, is the only one who offers him sincere friendship while others in the slum refuse to accept him because he keeps to himself, and because no one knows his background. Helping him bring up his son, Chancham realises that Rachen, indeed, has a very good heart and is a responsible person. She fully stands by him whenever there is gossip or accusation about his behaviour from slum neighbours.

However, Rachen's son becomes seriously ill from a kidney infection. To save his life, Rachen needs a huge amount of money. Finally, he is forced to accept an offer from his former mafia boss to kill a wealthy businessman on the condition that this will be his last contract killing. A fellow hit man, Khao, is angered by this offer, as he aspires to be the number-one killer.

At night inside the victim's house, when Rachen awaits his victim, the victim's son, a little boy of the same age as Rachen's son, enters the room. The memories of his past mistakes suddenly appear in his mind. As Rachen becomes reluctant to shoot, another undisclosed killer comes and shoots the victim dead. The killer then turns to the boy and Rachen. Rachen jumps to save the boy's life and runs from the scene with the boy in his arms. They go into hiding.

Meanwhile, Rachen's son dies in hospital before his father can obtain the money to save his life. Chancham, whose heart is broken by this death, arranges a simple funeral. She tries to contact Rachen through some of his old friends and gives him all her moral support as well as some money. Chancham sends a message to Rachen that even if he is a suspect in a murder case, as the media claims, she believes that Rachen is innocent and could not have committed the murder.

Rachen and the boy, Chanayuth, are hunted by the mafia as Chanayuth has seen the murderer and knows the man behind this contract killing through a conversation he has heard on the night of the murder. They must move from one

place to another. Rachen and Chanayuth begin to care for each other during this difficult time: both have lost their loved ones.

Not only are they being chased by the mafia, but Rachen and Chanayuth are also traced by the police, who suspect that Rachen has taken the boy as a hostage. Finally, Rachen manages to send the boy to the police. He requests the local police chief, *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang, who is his long-time rival, to let him free for a week and he will present the real murderer to them. During this time, upon Rachen's request, Chancham takes time off from her school job to take care of Chanayuth at home. Rachen's sixth sense warns him that Chanayuth is not safe. And it is true because the real man behind the contract killing is Chanayuth's uncle, Chanchai, who takes over the family business after his father's death. Chanayuth is threatened by his uncle not to expose the fact, otherwise he and his mother would be killed. The seven-year-old Chanayuth accepts the threat but with a plan in his young mind.

Rachen destroys the whole mafia, killing everyone, and surrenders himself to the police as promised. Chancham, who has persuaded Rachen to surrender, as she believes he can prove his innocence, convinces *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang of Rachen's innocence. Chancham is even willing to sacrifice her body to Chliang as she realises that he has desired her for some time. However, he refuses her offer, but promises to take care of Rachen's case.

In the courtroom, the trial does not turn out in Rachen's favour since there is no evidence to prove his innocence. Towards the end of the trial, Chanayuth offers himself as a witness and reveals the murderer, thus putting his uncle in jail. Rachen is acquitted of any charge, goes back to Chancham and decides to start a new life with her, despite unpleasant remarks from her mother and their slum neighbours. They have a very simple and private marriage by receiving a blessing from a monk at a temple and offering a small evening celebration in the slum community with Chanayuth and his mother as special guests.

The night before Rachen and Chancham leave the slum to settle down and start a new life in the province, Rachen goes to his son's grave to say his last goodbye. His fellow hit man, who has survived from his revenge killings, stands behind him and shoots him in the head. The last words Rachen hears from this man is: there is no new life for a killer except death!

Main scenes

- Slum community with a special settlement of wooden patch walkways and zinc dome roof connected throughout the community so that the sunlight hardly gets through. The congruent zinc squatters are settled along the walkway. The usual activity in this slum is gambling, and gamblers are often caught by the police. The slum dwellers are usually seen sitting aimlessly along the walkway. There are two drug addicts who love to tease Chancham and threaten to assault her whenever she walks past the group. There is a temple and a small canal nearby which Rachen and Chancham use as their meeting place.

- Chanayuth's family home in which expensive furnishings are shown. Most scenes occur at the dinner table.

- A police station, where most events happen either in the office of *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang or in jail.

2) The Production and Marketing Contexts

As mentioned earlier, most of the entertainment programmes presented on Channel 7 aim at commercial success. Nevertheless, Channel 7 attempts to balance the programme types by injecting issues of social morality into the main melodramatic theme in order to meet its policy requirement regarding the diversity and quality of the programmes (Siriporn, 1993). Here, *Huajai & Kaipuean* can be seen as one example of this attempt at thematic combination.

As the first production of a new production company, *Huajai & Kaipuean* proved a remarkable success both in terms of commercial and media acclaim. *Huajai & Kaipuean* was produced by Pao Jin Jong Company, owned by Noppon Komarachun, formerly well known as an awarded winning actor of both cinema and television. When this soap opera was first launched in late December, the name of Noppon already guaranteed the quality of the programme. Noppon claimed that his motivation to make this soap opera was that he wanted to show that good entertainment was able to inspire morality in the society in addition to pleasure for viewers. He criticised most traditional soap operas for overemphasising the tragedies of love and jealousy between women, which he argued affected the quality of soaps (*Star Lives* 27/12/98).

What makes *Huajai & Kaipuean* fascinating is its protagonists especially the male heroes. The director chose Ampol Lumpoon to play Rachen, the warrior hero and Suntisook Promsiri as the rival *Sarawat* (inspector). Both actors were film heroes who had received several awards. For Ampol, *Huajai & Kaipuean* was his comeback after a few years break from acting while on paternity leave. Indeed, his personal life as a devoted full-time father supported the integrity of the soap and suited his screen position as a single father who tried in vain to save his son's and other boy's lives. In her role as Chancham, Nuttiga Thampridanun, despite being a junior actress, surpassed her performance in previous television dramas. She was considered suitable for the portrayal of a self-reliant and humble urban poor woman. Apart from these main protagonists, *Huajai & Kaipuean* had many well-known actors playing slum dwellers.

'Jaew Rimjor', film critic for *Thairath*, considered *Huajai & Kaipuean* to be "made with great professionalism, brought up a new range of technical production to the television screen as if it is made for a movie" (24/02/99). However, it has been attacked by activists working on behalf of children for "showing violence on the screen and making the killer acceptable through eliciting sympathy for the hero" (*Matichon Weekly* 11/03/99). Another critic was disappointed because the show was said to lack realistic scenes: "Despite using the real courtroom, the process of the trial is so poor and without rationality. Why couldn't it be made like a Hollywood film with attention to every detail?" (*Thai Rath*, 19/03/99). Nevertheless, among the 21 Klongtoey women who participated in the discussion about this soap, 14 of them did not consider it a violent drama, and in fact, did not show their anxiety about this matter. The women believed that there were many other television programmes that presented more violence than *Huajai & Kaipuean*. The remaining 7 women agreed that *Huajai & Kaipuean* was an aggressive soap, however, they did not go on to criticise it on these grounds because they found enjoyment in this type of action genre.

In all, I would argue that *Huajai & Kaipuean* is a soap opera which caters for audiences who might want to engage with melodramatic themes of love, class, and morality, as well as for those purely interested in it as fast moving action entertainment. This observation encourages us to examine whether *Huajai & Kaipuean* is appropriately labelled a 'masculine' or 'feminine' genre. In addition,

the reception analysis will offer us insight into understanding whether the morality or crime theme is predominantly read by the women audience who, apparently, share some tragic aspects of the storyline.

3) The Narrative Structure

As suggested earlier, *Huajai & Kaipuean* does not strictly fit into any particular genre. It does, however, draw on the conventions of the 'woman's genre', as well as on crime and investigative genres which are classified as 'male'. The following analyses will explore this notion.

First, *Huajai & Kaipuean* can comfortably be called a 'woman's genre' because the main themes revolve around personal relationships, family conflicts, domestic problems, community and morality. More particularly, its core narrative is about personal lives, which is, in feminist terms, ideologically constructed as the feminine sphere within the realm of domesticity (see, for instance Geraghty 1991; Brunsdon 1997). Furthermore, this soap opera reflects various modes of women's talk, such as talk between mothers and daughters, and between women who share the experience of crime, etc. This mode of women's talk also emphasises women's relationships, and the importance of decisions which a woman makes within relationships.

Second, although relationships between women are significant in *Huajai & Kaipuean*, relationships between men also receive significant attention, and, indeed, are a major part of the storyline. However, the presence of men's relationships does not make it a masculine's genre; in fact, it reflects a component of a feminine soap. The reason is that male characters' relationships, especially the caring and sacrificial friendship between Rachen (the hero) and Chanayuth (the victim), are portrayed from a feminine point of view rather than from a masculine perspective. Moreover, Rachen is often presented as 'sensitive' and 'contradictory' whenever he is shown in a relationship, whether it is the heterosexual relationships between him and Chancham (the heroine), or the paternal relationship between him and Chanayuth.

Third, *Huajai & Kaipuean* develops its storyline through the thoughts and actions of Rachen. Since the narrative addresses the themes of revenge and male dignity, *Huajai & Kaipuean* has something to offer to male audiences as well. Therefore, I would argue that although it is a crime action drama, it attempts to

maximise the interest of its audience by creating 'gender' pleasure that is applicable to both men and women. More importantly, the action and conflicts in *Huajai & Kaipuean* are represented from the point of view of the 'personal' rather than the 'public', for example the cause that brings Rachen back to accepting the underworld contract is the need for money in order to save his son's life.

This argument coincides with Geraghty's assertion (1991) that in recent years the soap genre has undergone a process of 'defeminisation' to attract male and teenage audiences. To clarify this, Geraghty gives the example of the British soap *EastEnders* which combines feminine and masculine genres: '[it] is produced with every intention of challenging the assumption that soaps were a secure and safe place for women viewers' (1991: 173). In *Huajai & Kaipuean* personal and family conflicts extend beyond the private sphere into the public domain by bringing in the involvement of the underworld. This is similar to the narrative of *EastEnders* in that the conflicts in the Square encompass the power of outsiders and lead to many crime incidents. Therefore, *Huajai & Kaipuean* is, more or less, a compromise between a feminine and masculine genre, even though the narrative of romance and melodrama, seems to have greater emphasis.

Through its narrative structure, the action scenes, which take up two thirds of the narrative, help to sustain the interest of the women audiences because it is difficult for the women to predict the story. Along with the action and the fast moving pace, *Huajai & Kaipuean* emphasises the value of human relationships and class morality. Starting with the death of an innocent girl and later the death of Rachen's son, *Huajai & Kaipuean* involves tragedy and sensitivity throughout the story. This emotional narrative allows the Klongtoey women to empathise with the key characters and to share the experience of tragic with them.

The structure of this soap opera includes a twist at the end with the death of Rachen, the hero, just after his marriage when he is about to start a new life. This ending creates a shock and evokes feelings of sympathy for Rachen, who has never been given a chance to experience happiness in life. It also leaves a feeling of suspense about what will happen next to Chancham, the heroine, whether she will remain faithful to his soul or opt for marriage to the police inspector. This unfinished structure may have a significant impact on how the women read the meaning of the soap's resolution.

4) Textual Analysis

It is important to note that since the majority of narratives are shown through action or movement rather than through dialogue among the characters, there are less significant dialogues, which appear of prime importance to signify the textual meanings. However, it is expected that, in terms of reception analysis, the Klongtoey women may make meanings from decoding a variety of major scenes whether they primarily contain action or dialogue. In order to make the most of both textual and reception analyses, the issues that are of the concerns to Klongtoey women in everyday life are selected to match the key themes of *Huajai & Kaipuean*. These three key themes I discuss include class, morality, and gender, and will be presented in the following sections.

4.1) Huajai & Kaipuean and the Representations of Class

When compared with *Nang Baab*, *Huajai & Kaipuean* depicts class struggle in a less radical manner. The basis of this assessment is that *Huajai & Kaipuean* does not focus its narrative on contesting class differences, as appeared in *Nang Baab*. Instead, it attempts to celebrate the moral values of the urban poor. Though class is not explicitly discussed in *Huajai & Kaipuean,* as it is in *Nang Baab*, its narrative is moved forward by the movements of the protagonists who represent the urban poor. Similar to *Nang Baab*, this soap opera also uses a common narrative technique in making a distinction between the urban poor characters and those of the upper class. This analysis will begin by exploring first the representations of the urban poor, then the upper class, as well as the way the relationships between the two class groups are represented.

In *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the urban poor characters, who live in a Bangkok slum, are featured in terms of a typical 'slum identity'. They have poor manners, are heavy drinkers and smokers, as well as heavy gamblers, which often results in their imprisonment. The regular activities of this slum community are shown in every scene – people gambling; enjoying a gossip; or just sitting outside shabby houses teasing people who pass by; and simply wasting time. Some scenes tell us of the unpleasantness of slum life by persistently showing criminal activity: from petty incidents like pick pocketing to grave situations like attempted rape.

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The narrative deploys Chancham, the heroine who lives in the slum, as a critic of these wrongdoings in the community. Therefore, her role is to distinguish between 'good' from 'bad' behaviour in the slum neighbourhood. For example, Chancham always clashes with her mother, who is a gambling addict, and makes her mother feel guilty for not being a role model for her daughter.

[episode 3 – scene 4 – length 2 mins 24 secs]

When she sees Chancham about to leave the house Sri (Chancham's mother) raises her voice from a group playing cards on the floor:

Sri: It's nearly dark, where are you going?

Chancham: Huh! You never know whether it's day or night, you're too busy with your bloody gambling.

Sri: You go out a lot, like a pop singer on tour!

Chancham: But at least I don't keep on touring the jails like you do!

Another scene shows Chancham being annoyed by her neighbours' intrusive behaviour towards other people. She complains of this to her mother (with the intention of blaming her, too!).

[episode 19 – scene 4 – length 1 min 24 secs]

Chancham: I'm extremely bored with these gossip-loving people. They have a dog's mouth and keep on barking! If they've got nothing else to do, why don't they find a job and pay their debts. They really make this place a typical slum!

The above examples reveal that *Huajai & Kaipuean* re-produces the stereotypes of slum people in an urban area in which gambling and gossip addiction are highlighted. In addition, the attitude that one only gets poor if one does not work hard is targeted at the slum-dweller characters in this soap (except Rachen and Chancham). It can be said that the working class as well as urban poor in Thai soaps is depicted very differently from the working class in British soaps. In the latter, for instance *EastEnders*, most dialogues among characters occur while they are engaged in earning activities, such as at market stalls or in a pub or shop. This is contrary to Thai soaps, in which the source of livelihood for the urban poor people is totally invisible. As in *Nang Baab*, the urban poor is mainly represented through physical

appearance and manners rather than through their activities and ideologies values. This invisible phenomenon has something to do with the ideology of Thai soap opera or drama, which, in general, serves to reinforce the capitalist ideology of the country. Therefore, most of the activities in Thai drama scenes revolve around the dinner table, shopping area, or living room, and shows plenty of leisure time for the characters.

However, it is interesting to note that while other slum people in *Huajai & Kaipuean* are not seen working, the hero and the heroine do have jobs. Nevertheless, their earning activities are made known only from hearsay, not by demonstration. For example, we know that Chancham works as a schoolteacher but there is no scene that confirms this except by showing her in a uniform with some books in her hands.

Apart from class identities, the concept of class mobility is also presented in *Huajai & Kaipuean*, though it is not excessively emphasised, as in *Nang Baab*. This similarity between the two soap operas confirms the belief in the possibility of class mobility and the qualifications, which meet the requirements for upgrading.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that both *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* give their heroines the opportunity to gain further education and get skilled paid work, while their slum neighbours are left behind. In *Huajai & Kaipuean*, Chancham is distinguished from her slum neighbours by her possession of a degree from a teacher's college, and a job in a local primary school. However, although Chancham does not speak of her achievement as a means to class mobility, her mother, Sri, boasts of this new status in front of the whole slum community.

[episode 3 – scene 2 – length 2 mins 10 secs]

Sri: Look at my daughter, so smart. Teaching is such a dignified job. Well, I don't need to sell *somtum* (local *I-san* food) from now on. She's gonna get a rich man after this, I'm damn sure. Hey! Is everyone listening to me?

Chancham: Mom, don't show off like that. I don't want to be the topic of gossip for people here. Let me become prime minister first, then you can shout along the road.

In the following episodes, after Sri notices the regular visits of *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang, she announces to her slum neighbours that she is going to have a powerful person as her son-in-law. This way, her worries of being under police surveillance for her gambling will soon end. In fact, Sri's belief in the factors leading to class upgrading (education, professional job, marriage to a rich or powerful person) has appeared and been extensively reinforced in Thai soap operas whenever the issues of class are raised in the storylines. This confirms the ideology of Thai soaps that the possibility of class mobility is real, although such opportunities are likely to present themselves only to the hero or the heroine.

Following the opportunity of class upgrading by holding a set of qualifications, the urban poor protagonists in both soap operas are depicted as different from their peers in that they display a high level of morality. Laithong of *Nang Baab* refuses materiality, by insisting on the value of human relationships. As in *Huajai & Kaipuean*, Rachen and Chancham, are distinct from others because they are morally strict and they are not afraid of struggling to overcome hardship. Although they are shown working to survive within severe economic constraints and to improve society, they do not attempt to escape their urban poor backgrounds. As neither Rachen nor Chancham are ashamed of being urban poor, the women audiences are invited to understand, from the protagonists' points of view, that urban poor identity is not a stigma.

[episode 30 – scene 4 – length 2 mins 15 secs]

After marriage, Rachen and Chancham are ready to move to a remote place for a new life.

Rachen: Leaving Bangkok at this time is like starting again from zero. I feel guilty that I pull you down. I hope you will forgive me.

Chancham: Please don't say that. We both started from zero when we were born. I don't care if we need to start again. I'm never afraid of hard work. I have full confidence in you; I know you can lead our lives to a stable stage.

A core value of this soap opera is that it shows urban poor protagonists coping with familial and social pressures without losing their dignity. This is especially visible through the characters Rachen and Chancham. For example, although Rachen fails

to clean his hands of his criminal past, he stands by his principle of not hurting women and children, even to the extent that he provides protection to a boy at the risk of his own life. Their dignity is expressed by example: Rachen and Chancham never break their commitments to each other or to other people. Furthermore, with their sense of dignity, both the hero and the heroine do not feel inferior to powerful and authoritative characters, which is in contrast to their slum neighbours. The firmness of their dignity enhances their sense of self-fulfilment and pride, without needing to escape from or hide their urban poor identity.

The representations of the upper class characters in *Huajai & Kaipuean*, are quite the opposite. They are more vulnerable and fall victim to greed. Here, again, the main villain is from the upper class, which is similar to the plot in *Nang Baab*. Lilayu in *Nang Baab* hatches dirty plots and uses her body in order to win the hero's heart and his possessions, while Chanchai in *Huajai & Kaipuean* hires contract killers to pave the way for his business ambition. Both villains are not satisfied with the wealthy status they already have. The similarity in the representations of the villains in the two soap operas may be significant for the Klongtoey women's reading of the class representations, which will be discussed in the section on reception analysis.

In fact, major tragic problems in *Huajai & Kaipuean* occur within the upper class, particularly in relation to conflict involving a family business. Everyone in the family − father, mother and the son − becomes victim to their greedy relative, Chanchai, who wants to take over the whole business by immoral means, even to the extent of killing the head of the family. Through a crime narrative, *Huajai & Kaipuean* presents the upper class victims in vulnerable and threatening situations. In the meantime, it portrays the strength of the urban poor hero and heroine, Rachen and Chancham, who help the upper class victims counter and overcome the threat. Somehow, the narrative implies that despite being of different class backgrounds, people are likely to share the same tragedies or similar situations of victimisation. The unfolding tragedies that affect the wealthy family of Chanayuth, and the poor family of Rachen offers an identification process between the Klongtoey women and the characters in this soap opera, which will be discussed further in the reception analysis part. The following episode shows the same tragedies and intimidations being shared by both classes.

[episode 8 – scene 1 – length 3 mins 12 secs]

While escaping from the threats of the mafia, Rachen and Chanayuth exchange condolences and comfort each other after Rachen loses his son, and Chanayuth loses his father.

Chanayuth: Don't cry, please... You need to be strong. We can't bring them back.

Rachen: (recovering from sorrow after the boy's talk) You're right... Well! You and I are not different at all. We have both lost our beloved ones. Look, you had such a perfect life before, but you couldn't keep everything with you. And I... I committed a mistake believing that I could save my son's life by using money. I'm so damn stupid! ... At this time and place we have both lost our loved ones.

One significant theme used to signify the contrast between the urban poor and the upper class is the opposition in the personalities and moralities of Rachen and Chanchai. Although Rachen is marked as a criminal who uses extreme violence, he is full of sympathetic feelings at the loss of life. On the contrary, Chanchai, who masquerades his criminal wickedness as business ambition, is very ruthless. To pursue his greed, he sees the death of other human beings as just a simple act, which brings him enjoyment. Chanchai's character represents the typical villain of a crime drama in which the protagonists are rich, male, white (Chanchai is fair-skinned), outwardly respectable, sadistic, and neurotic (Sparks, 1992: 143). More importantly, it is noticeable that *Huajai & Kaipuean* attempts to suggest the difference between Chanchai and Rachen, who desperately seeks a miraculous power (to save his son's life) though he is from a powerless and marginalized class. Both are driven by an inadequacy, however, their motivations are based on different degrees of morality.

However, the opposition between the hero's and the villain's characters does not widen the gap between two class groups. Instead it helps bring cooperation among the victims of the villains. Sharing the same tragic situations and threats helps establish friendship and sincerity between Rachen and Chanayuht, as well as between Chancham and Chanayuth's mother. In the final episode Rachen and Chancham are invited for a special lunch at Chanayuth's house; followed by a visit by Chanayuth and his mother to their wedding in the slum. The wedding scene that

shows the mixture of the two classes, i.e. dancing together on the slum paved way, is intended to encode the possibility of ultimate friendship transcending class boundaries. Similar to *Nang Baab,* which confirms the happy ending of the upper class hero and the urban poor heroine, in *Huajai & Kaipuean* the celebration of the transcendence of class reproduced by the soap producer is endorsed at the end of the storylines to overcome the divisions of class that have been introduced at the beginning. Both soaps indicate that the class gap is filled by the realisations of human values and morality. Nevertheless, in the previous chapter, the 30 women, who participated in the discussion of *Nang Baab,* expressed their scepticism about the myth of classlessness, based upon their own experiences. The reception analysis later in this chapter assesses whether the 21 women viewing *Huajai & Kaipuean* will show a similar reading or not, and will lead to a discussion of the factors behind their readings of class.

4.2) *Huajai & Kaipuean and the Representations of Morality*

In addition to class differences, *Huajai & Kaipuean* also uses morality as a way of distinguishing and differentiating characters. As discussed earlier, although its storyline is based on a crime action drama, its emphasis on morality helps soften the violence to accord with the conventional woman's genre. Throughout the narrative, the issue of morality revolves around the plight of individual characters and deals with the private or personal sphere rather than the public one.

Rachen, the hero, occupies a central role as the guardian of two vulnerable young boys, one who is his own son and the other who is a victim like him. His relationship with the two boys provides him with the experience of fatherhood, which includes the role of protector of the moral order. The following episodes demonstrate the concept of morality that is presented through the relationships between Rachen and the two boys.

[episode 2 – scene 1 – length 2 mins 12 secs]

Rachen is putting a school uniform on his son, Badin; he comments that the shirt is too small for the grown-up boy.

Rachen: I'll buy you a new one soon; bear with this for a while, okay?

Badin: There's no need, dad. You've taught me that we need to save.

Rachen: Saving and necessity are different, son. I don't like to see you get laughed at. This will destroy your confidence and affect your life when you grow up. I need you to be as normal as others and be able to have strong morals.

Badin: But people around here always say that I'm not normal, that I don't have a mother.

Rachen: That's not correct! You will prove to them that you are higher value than them; only be firm in your morality.

[episode 21 – scene 2 – length 2 mins 20 secs]

Before Rachen transfers Chanayuth to the protection of the police, he communicates a moral thought.

Rachen: Everyone has two sides in their life: good and bad, like a coin. Please remember only my good side.

Chanayuth: Yes, you will always be my hero, who fights for justice.

Rachen: Thanks. And remember, you need to be strong; you must protect your mom. There is no place for the weak in this world; you have learnt that.

As a contract killer, Rachen accepts that he has committed a major sin; he has been haunted by this immoral act all his life. His way of coping with his own guilt is by sacrificing himself for his own son, and for poor Chanayuth.

In the last scene of the final episode, Rachen confesses his failure to hold on to his morality in front of his son's grave.

[episode 30 – scene 4 – length 1 mins 30 secs]

Rachen: My son, I have done many terrible sins in my life; I took other people's lives, and finally they took you from me. The grief that I couldn't save your life and couldn't be the model of a good father will stay with me forever. But... you can be sure that your dad won't do anything immoral again, I promise.

The meaning of a moral relationship is also represented through Chancham's sacrifices in her relationship with Rachen. This sacrifice is not merely because of

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love, but the trust and belief in Rachen's good morals. Despite several moments of personal loss and uncertainties, Chancham always hopes for happiness in Rachen's life. Her unflinching support for him in all situations has encouraged Rachen to attempt to say no to immoral offers and be firm in his moral judgement. This narrative signifies that belief in the virtue of human morality can support the moral resolve of the individual.

[episode 25 – scene 3 – length 3 mins 6 secs]

Rachen promises Chancham that he will surrender himself to the police only after he manages to bring the real culprits to justice.

Chancham: I believe you will do it. I've never seen you break your promise. I know you're not that 'devil' that others claim you are. A father like you has experienced the real softness and value of human morality. You didn't do anything wrong, you must get free if you surrender.

Rachen: Thanks... although my life is so empty, I know I have you at this moment. What happens next I really don't know.

Chancham: I'll always stand by you. My good feelings for you will stay with me forever.

It is important to identify the moral significance of *Huajai & Kaipuean* with the concept of what Robert Allen calls 'the naturalisation of the core discipline of the central value system' (1985: 173). Allen describes how this naturalisation is achieved: '...the social system is shown to be ultimately fair and just; virtue is ultimately rewarded and evil punished; and so forth.' It is precisely this naturalisation of the moral order that forms the basis of *Huajai & Kaipuean's* storyline. The social norm of what is good or bad and its consequence is underlined in the causal relations between each character. For example, Chanchai receives a cruel death even though his evil has already been exposed to the public and gets censure from the justice system. Similarly, the prevailing moral order has an effect on Rachen: despite attempting to do many good things to compensate for his past, he ultimately cannot escape death, which occurs in the same manner as he has inflected upon others. In this respect, *Huajai & Kaipuean* attempts to send the message that the moral order is more powerful than legal justice.

The following episode depicts an explanation of the above-mentioned concepts of morality versus legal justice in *Huajai & Kaipuean*.

[episode 6 – scene 4 – length 2 mins 40 secs]

Rachen reveals his agony to Chancham after receiving the news of his son's death.

Rachen: Can you tell me where justice is? How can it save my son's life? You cannot understand the feeling of a father who has lost his son! Listen to me... there is no real justice in this world; it's all constructed by people. I'll prove to you that with our strong moral code we can build justice.

Huajai & Kaipuean defines human morality as an important basis for the establishment of human relationships. It dismisses material influence by presenting the consequences of material greed through the death of Chanchai and the extreme violence he has been involved in. Significantly, as discussed earlier, this soap intentionally compares Rachen, who is a professional killer, with Chanchai, who is under the disguise of a respectable businessman. Both are responsible for the deaths of many people; but Rachen's reason for killing the criminals who harm society is different from Chanchai's reason for killing people who obstructed his greedy and dirty ambition.

If morality is one of the key concepts represented in *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the tragic ending with the death of Rachen, however, confirms the belief in the consequences of good/bad acts. The same resolution of the moral order is also used as the key narrative in *Nang Baab* in which Lilayu, the villain, ends her greedy ambition with a mental break down. It seems that the legal justice punishment that puts Lilayu behind bars is not sufficient punishment for her immoral acts, so that she has to become insane. In this way, these two soaps share the same moral themes. Thus, for *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the tragic ending is the solution of the main theme in which Rachen states that: there is no real justice in this world, except what we build. Therefore, although he can walk out free from the court, he cannot escape the death penalty of his own justice.

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4.3) *Huajai & Kaipuean and the Representations of Gender*

The flow of the narrative towards the more masculine genre has given weight to the male protagonists in *Huajai & Kaipuean*. However, as mentioned earlier, the causes and effects or the movements of each male character centre around personal conflicts which occur within the private sphere. Therefore, the Klongtoey women are invited to sympathise with the male characters' situations in the same way as for female characters. For instance, the financial and emotional pressures, which affect Rachen's pride at not being able to save his son's life, have been laid out to reveal the weak side of the hero and lessen the viewer's expectation of a conventional constitution of masculinity.

However, as it draws on the genre of melodrama, *Huajai & Kaipuean* reinforces the basic norms of society, one of them being the attributes assigned to gender. In this context, the essentials of masculinity and femininity are represented throughout the story. The character of Rachen, as presented to the audience, signifies strength, emotional control, sacrifice, protecting others and dignity, which are cultural notions of associated with masculinity. However, in the episode concerning the death of Rachen's son, the scene clearly shows Rachen, who first sobs for a few moments, struggling to suppress his emotions, reminding himself that men do not cry. The excessive actions between Rachen and the mafia may be considered as a way of reasserting patriarchal power. This is a case where power brings justice. Therefore, the masculine figure of Rachen is equipped with a proper patriarchal power, making him a rightful hero. On the contrary, Chanchai, the villain, is shown as thin, feeble, and having a feminine appearance enhanced by wearing silky dresses. However, the villain Chanchai uses those aspects of his weakness as weapons for manipulating other characters.

The ideal position for the patriarchal hero in drama is never achieved without the support or challenge from women. Chancham, the heroine of *Huajai & Kaipuean*, takes on feminine attributes by continually providing support, care, aid, and cooperation to Rachen. Her significant caring role identifies her with what Carol Gilligan (1981) calls the ethic of care. Typically this care is based on an ethic of sympathy and attention to the particular needs of Chancham's character. Her role is to facilitate Rachen's fight with injustice by taking responsibility for the private sphere, namely care of his son and, later on, Chanayuth. A sign of this ethic of care

appears in Chancham's willingness to 'be there' whenever Rachen asks, and in waiting - either for Rachen to come back, or to clean his hands after an act of murder.

[episode 27 – scene 2 – length 2 mins 12 secs]

Chancham promises Rachen that she will wait for him after he goes to confess to the police.

Chancham:　Don't worry. If they put you in jail, I'll wait for you no matter how long it takes. I have only you in my life and always will.

Rachen:　Thank you. You are the only reason that makes me want to live now. You bring meaning to my life. You're always beside me both in happiness or sadness.

Chancham's sincerity and sympathy for Rachen is deep enough to tolerate any disappointment and to sacrifice her happiness for Rachen without demands of her own. This type of traditional femininity is termed by Modleski as the 'ideal mother' who is 'understanding and sympathetic to both the sinner and the victim' (1982: 93). For Modleski, the goal of the soap opera mother is to see her family reunited soon and happily. And indeed this is the same goal that Chancham is determined to achieve by waiting for Rachen and hoping to start a happy family with him. As this ideal mother Chancham is even willing to sacrifice her body and her pride in order to protect Rachen from an unjust system. Chancham offers herself to *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang in exchange for the Inspector dropping the charges against Rachen. Although highly impressed by her willingness to sacrifice, the Inspector refuses her offer but agrees to treat Rachen's case with full justice. For a virgin like Chancham to present her body to a man for whom she has no love is to deprive herself of dignity. Therefore, her enormous sacrifice implies a sense of heartfelt motherhood towards Rachen, which is beyond the feeling of love and romance that a woman might have for a man.

Apart from gender attributes, *Huajai & Kaipuean* emphasises the gender roles of fatherhood and motherhood. Traditionally, Thai soap operas value this sense of fatherhood and motherhood, and have worked on the assumption that to make familial harmony everyone is required to fulfil these gender roles. In *Huajai & Kaipuean*, Rachen is a committed father who is devoted to his son, and even drops

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his desire to be a law-abiding citizen in order to save his son's life. Though he fails to fulfil his duty to his son, he compensates for this by providing protection for Chanayuth and acting as his father. Probably because of the experience and responsibility of fatherhood Rachen is represented as different from any other brutal and heartless killer. His paternal character evokes the sympathy of the female audience for his unfortunate past and for the reasons for his revenge killings. Although Rachen's background as a contract-killer raises some moral questions, his gentle manners and devotion to his son and Chanayuth make him fit the role of a soap opera father.

In the role of motherhood, *Huajai & Kaipuean* represents Wipa, Chanayuth's mother, as a vulnerable mother who, again, is willing to exchange her business for the safety of her son. Wipa has been under stress since her husband has died. She has to take on the burden of being both a mother and a company director. She feels guilty for having little time for her only son. She blames herself for Chanayuth being kidnapped. Her sense of motherhood reveals the typical Thai value and norm -- that of the mother's place being in the home. And for a working mother like her, there is a huge price to pay for such an unconventional step. However, as a single mother, Wipa needs to remain a stable centre for her child.

By contrast Sri, Chancham's mother, who is also a single mother, is condemned for irresponsibility, selfishness and failure as a mother. Negative remarks from her own daughter or her neighbours, such as 'what kind of mother is like this?' or 'what's a mother for...if she doesn't take up the role?' represents Sri as an immoral woman as well as a troublemaker for her own daughter. In turn, Chancham picks up her mother's place by developing into a strong mother and a provider for the family. In the following episode we see criticism directed towards Sri for neglecting her role as mother.

[episode 29 – scene 4 – length 3 mins 6 secs]

After their marriage in a temple, Rachen and Chancham come to Sri and ask for forgiveness. But Sri gets furious and refuses to accept their marriage.

Sri:	This is damn wrong. It's not worth my pain in bringing you out of my womb! Why didn't you choose Inspector Chaliang, for the sake of your mother?
Chancham:	Have you ever done anything for the sake of your daughter? You've deprived me of the feeling of having a mother. I've never received any love or care from you.
Rachen:	Please, we love each other and we really want to start a new life together. Chancham needs love and care, no matter how strong she is. I am sure I can provide that for her.
Jiad:	(a senior neighbour who witnesses the meeting) Sri, you're crazy. You should feel happy for them and feel good that they don't make you ashamed by just running away. If I were your daughter I would have run away with any man a long time ago. I would not tolerate a mother like you. Can you think about this and try to be a good mother, at least for today?

The other female character who is portrayed as an ideal mother is Chancham, the heroine. Even though she does not have a child of her own, an essential feminine experience of motherhood prepares her to fulfil the role of both wife and mother. This is no doubt a work of representation that creates symbolic meanings of 'mother' for women in general without their necessarily becoming real mothers. Statements from Chancham's neighbours, such as 'You're suited for childcare because you have a natural sense of nurturing and selflessness', suggests Chancham's competence as a mother. This motherhood character, therefore, invites her in taking on responsibility for Rachen's son and Chanayuth. Unfortunately, the death of Rachen does not allow Chancham to complete her real desire and identity as a mother.

The last gender representation to be discussed here is the presence of female characters as victims, which is inherited from the conventional narratives of crime dramas. In most crime genres, women are commonly presented as vulnerable and threatened by criminals or villains, to be rescued by the hero, if they are not murdered first. According to Tulloch, this type of genre, enables male fantasies 'to uphold the patriarchal order' (1990: 72). Although not a conventional crime drama,

Huajai & Kaipuean presents female victims selectively, therefore the degree of being threatened also varies. Wipa becomes the target of her brother-in-law's wicked plan because she takes up the business after her husband's death, and because she is the mother of Chanayuth who witnesses the murder. She is seriously injured by a shot from Chanchai's contract killer, but survives another follow-up when she unknowingly transfers the business to Chanchai. Another female victim of Chanchai who cannot escape death is Panit, the secretary of the firm. She is sexually abused and falls prey to Chanchai's tricks by helping him get into a powerful position. Her dream of marrying Chanchai collapses after she gains insight into his evil nature, but then it is too late for her. Presenting female sexuality as a threat is a common way of making female characters victims of the villain. However, since Panit's role is marginal, she does not survive or overcome the foul set-up.

On the other hand, Chancham has been threatened with rape by a gang of drug addicts living in her slum community. Instead of remaining fearful under the threat, Chancham challenges the gang by accusing them of being useless to society. In one episode, Chancham is attacked by the gang, but she manages to escape without getting hurt and puts all of them in jail. Although an attempt to rape her suggests that Chancham is a victim, being able to escape and gain the upper hand disrupts the suggestion of victim status for the soap heroine. Although the rape text is not significantly shown or made relevant to the theme, it enhances the sense of resistance to the patriarchal power order, which makes the female victim a sexual object.

The above analysis offers a detailed consideration of *Huajai & Kaipuean's* texts and its characterisations. What these representations mean to the Klongtoey women is examined in the following part. This explores how the women perceive this soap opera text as a drama featuring their identity, and what meanings they derive from the soap, in its presentation of class, morality and gender.

5) Reception Analysis

Portraying the issues of crime and violence, and the struggle of urban poor life in the slum, *Huajai & Kaipuean* encourages the women in the Klongtoey slum to gain pleasure and to construct meanings according to their own experiences. Compared to *Nang Baab,* the soap *Huajai & Kaipuean* received more attention and favour from

the Klongtoey women, although it was common for the women to watch *any* soap operas that came on during prime time at Channel 7. The reasons that the women preferred *Huajai & Kaipuean* to *Nang Baab* are discussed in subsequent sub-sections. The reception study of *Huajai & Kaipuean* was conducted during the last part of the soap and shortly after the final episode was broadcast. Of the 34 Klongtoey women informants in this research, only 21 participated in this reception study. The reasons for the reduced number of participants was the same as those in the reception analysis of *Nang Baab*, which includes the availability of women who could engage in long conversations with me; the number of women who were keen to talk about their television viewings; and the number of women who had followed every episode of the soap opera. Additionally, since this reception study was done during the second phase of my ethnographic fieldwork, some women who had participated in talking about *Nang Baab* had taken up jobs outside the community, particularly those who took contract work, and had less time to talk during the evening because of their household engagements. Although the number of women in the reception analysis was reduced, the total number (34) for general interviewing (as appeared in Chapters 4, 5 and 8) remained the same, as there was less time required, both in terms of watching and talking.

In documenting the Klongtoey women's readings of this soap, the responses to the production and marketing contexts of *Huajai & Kaipuean* are presented first. These are followed by a discussion of how the women engage their pleasure, fantasy and identification with the programme. The analysis then moves on to examine the ways in which the women interpret the portrayals of class, morality, and gender.

5.1) General Response

From conversations, group discussions and my observations while Klongtoey women were watching *Huajai & Kaipuean*, I gathered that this programme was perceived as a 'serious drama' and as an 'issue-based' soap opera. It was 'serious', according to the women, because it dealt with conflict and suspense, and because of its tragic ending. It was regarded as 'issue-based' because it raised the issue of morality significantly, which, according to the women, was fast declining in the society. In this context the intention of its producer was seen as asserting moral issues in an entertaining form. Twenty of the 21 women expressed their appreciation

of this. Their typical impressions of the programme are expressed in the following three excerpts:

Chorn: (55, with 2 children; her daughter was studying in secondary school)

I really like watching *Huajai & Kaipuean* with my daughter 'cos when something comes up I can tell her this is good or bad – don't do this and don't do that. And she listens, not like my son who's already gone too far. I have hope in my daughter and I want her to think about the importance of being a good citizen.

Koom: (50, with 3 children; but with one son in prison)

This programme really touches my heart. You know, it confirms my belief in morality and the consequence of moral decay. Any one with no direct experience would say like me. It may have violent scenes, but that makes it more real, doesn't it?

Wan: (42, with 2 children; both of her sons were sent to the province to study)

Yeah, people talk about it especially the next day after watching. It becomes a hot topic we like to talk about. We even try to guess what will happen next, although we can read the summary of each episode from the papers in advance, but... we enjoy talking about it. Well, sometime the violent scenes in slum disturbed my feeling so that I'm glad I have let my sons grow up in the province.

The above three examples demonstrate the positive responses of the women toward *Huajai & Kaipuean*'s moral content, and also because it was often talked about in the slum. The latter finding confirms theories of soap talk mentioned in Chapter Five in which being the subject of talk can create the popularity of soap. However, one respondent questioned why a soap opera needed to concern itself with social issues like morality or class conflicts. Toy, who always chose to have a different point of view from the other women in the Klongtoey slum, commented that:

Toy: It's true that I enjoy the programme, but I don't take it so seriously. To me, it's just another entertainment programme. Problems like that happen in real life. But who cares? Look at this place, there are many serious moral problems, but no one really pays attention.

Nevertheless, it seems that moral issues feature prominently in women's discussions about the soap. Although, entertainment is a major factor in the success of *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the Klongtoey women (20 out of 21) considered this soap to be a voice for moral issues rather than merely entertainment. Another factor that made the Klongtoey women like this soap opera was the name of the producer, Noppon Komarachun, whom these women had known since he was a film star. All 21 women linked the director's name with the quality of the soap. Roy, who was 64 years old, had a leadership role in the Klongtoey slum, noted that Noppon chose to play only serious roles and to produce good drama.

Roy: He is the kind of celebrity who is also a good citizen. I remember even when he appeared in his first film. His personal life is also very clean, not like many stars, you may know. It's his intention to make a good moral drama, I suppose.

Because of their impression of the 'serious' theme of morality and the quality of the production, all 21 Klongtoey women preferred *Huajai & Kaipuean* to *Nang Baab*. Although Toy was the only one who did not regard moral themes as her main attraction to this soap, she showed her preference towards *Huajai & Kaipuean* because of its quality. When I asked the women to compare the two soaps in terms of realism, moral concept, and the stars, 21 women agreed that they liked *Huajai & Kaipuean* better because it was more realistic than *Nang Baab* in terms of the storyline and the acting of characters. Nineteen of them also mentioned that the moral content in *Huajai & Kaipuean* affected them more. And 17 of them admired the stars in *Huajai & Kaipuean* rather than *Nang Baab* because the two male protagonists (Rachen and *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang) were award winning film stars. Another two women talked about the high production values of *Huajai & Kaipuean* (from the action scenes) compared to *Nang Baab*, which looked much cheaper in this sense.

5.2) The Pleasure of Watching Huajai & Kaipuean

From the above discussion, we have found that the discourse of pleasure for Klongtoey women is connected to a discourse concerning social issues, such as morality. This kind of link makes such pleasure in watching soap operas more comfortable and less guilty for the women.

Boonlom, 37, who sold *I-san* food at a stall in front of her house with the help of her husband, reflected the above thought, in her words:

> Sometimes I do feel guilty that I watch many unworthy programmes, especially those that my husband doesn't like. He's been so nice and helps me with my work during the day. I don't feel good if I annoy him during the night. But with this [*Huajai & Kaipuean*], it's exceptional. We both enjoy it because it's not rubbish. And it's good that I can watch it with him.

Here, we can see that the idea of 'TV's pleasure' for Boonlom meant that the TV programme could provide enjoyment that she could share with her family, especially a male member. As already discussed in Chapter Four, the television evening programmes were mostly decided and dominated by a husband or a son/sons, except the night-time soap opera on Channel 7 which the women could claim as their territory. But their watching was usually interrupted by the demands of male family members, or was complained about by the men. Therefore, to have a programme to 'watch together' was perfect for the Klongtoey women, as in the case of Boonlom. *Huajai & Kaipuean*, which contains a mixture of feminine and masculine genres, thus, offers pleasure for both genders since it is an action crime soap as well as an issue-based melodrama.

The two following quotations represent typical ideas of the nineteen women who preferred *Huajai & Kaipuean* because they found pleasure from getting some serious messages from their entertainment. Both of the women were working for the community and usually showed their strong viewpoints towards social issues:

Roy: At least it doesn't look to me like an impossible romance as in other soaps. It gives me something to think about. I like the characters' conversations. It is like a moral lesson.

Mutcha: It's a very good drama of a very good quality. I mean, it gives you some useful thoughts, and tells you what is good or bad. Not very often that we see such a good programme on TV soap. I really watch it with a good feeling.

The pleasure could also come from perceiving the tragedy of the characters. Six out of twenty-one women admitted that they experienced pleasure from shedding tears in front of television. Chan, 49, whose husband died about 10 years ago, is an example:

Chan: We always talk about the programme the next day. We feel pity for Rachen. Seems he never receives any happiness in return. Some scenes really make me sob a bit. It's so emotional. Friends in my group have the same feeling.

Some women (7 out of 21) simply saw the fast pace of acting and suspense as pleasurable. Kaew, 25, the youngest of my women informants said:

Kaew: I like the production technique, especially the fighting action scenes. It looks real, and not cheap... I mean, not low-quality production. When the gang chases Rachen and Chanayuth in a vast cornfield and burns it, it is just like the scenes that they show on the big screen. It's so exciting.

Overall, it is interesting that the Klongtoey women derived their pleasure in viewing from the moral messages they received or from scenes involving stirring emotions and excitement. Because of the moral messages in the soap, the women were not concerned about wasting time, and they actually found that talking about it was edifying

5.3) Escapism

Watching television soap opera is usually considered to be escapist entertainment. However, with its emphasis on issues of morality and its tragic ending, *Huajai & Kaipuean* may not offer escapism into a fantasy world for the Klongtoey women. In fact, it serves as a reminder of the consequences of good and bad behaviour, which is a basic belief of Buddhism. Many women found it difficult to talk about the escapism they gained from this programme. Nevertheless, when I referred to the concept of escapism in terms of something they wanted that their day-to-day lives did not provide, some responded.

Chawi: (45, who looked after her daughter's illegitimate child)

What I dream of is only to be reunited with my family. If I could I would have gone back to the time when my children were young and I would have taught them more discipline and morality. This soap allows me to prolong my dream because it shows the caring between father and son and the struggle of Rachen to uphold his morality for himself and his son.

Aew:(48, who always blamed her luck for having an unhappy family)

Well, it makes me want a moral and manly man like Rachen. It won't happen in real life, not because I'm too old to find another better man, but there is no such man like this in the world. I mean for a man who takes up a job killing people, he must have a cruel heart like any criminal, but Rachen isn't. Would you agree?

The significant finding from the above conversations confirms that the purpose and the style of escapism experienced by the Klongtoey women are different from the general arguments about escapism which assumes that female spectators choose to escape from their hardships to the glamour of film or drama (see theoretical detail in Chapter Six). This finding is similar to *Nang Baab* in which the women chose to escape from the real world of gender inequality and class struggle into the achievement of class mobility and negotiation of gender value that *Nang Baab* offered. With *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the women are encouraged to escape into the harmonious family, and to meet a man of morality to fulfil their ideal of family. This finding alters the general notion of feminine escapism that puts emphasis on dreaming of a glamorous world and a romantic relationship (see for instance, Hobson, 1982; Ang 1985; Stacey 1994). It is a fact that the hardship in the Klongtoey women's lives has prevented them from that kind of luxurious fantasy. In the meantime, the women's experiences of family problems, and gender and class discriminations have directed them to fantasize about the world of morality and equal opportunity for people of every class and gender.

5.4) Reality

With a storyline that revolves around personal relationships and moral conflict, *Huajai & Kaipuean* projects the realistic message that life is full of problems, and the possibility of unforeseen tragedies. In this sense, the Klongtoey women

perceived *Huajai & Kaipuean* as a realistic drama. Indeed all of the 21 women seemed to like it because it was so realistic. The example below is one woman's expression, which represents the general feelings of the women:

Wan: It's sad that Rachen dies but that's supposed to happen. It's the Buddhist fact of life that you get back whatever you've done. If he didn't die, perhaps he would be in jail. That seems realistic and it makes more sense to me.

Another woman of 50 who practiced meditation considered the soap realistic by comparison with her own lived experience:

Koom: Well, I find it interesting because it's happening around me. I suspect that my son is getting involved in an underworld group *(showing her son's photo and his letter from prison)*. He keeps on going in and out of jail. People here gossip that I'm the mother of a criminal, but to me, he's my son. I'm not gonna harm him, but I'm sure one day he'll receive punishment for the sins he has committed.

These two examples show that the women's judgment of realism is based on the belief that you will reap whatever you sow; if you harm others you will receive punishment in return. This perception provides the background to the moralistic readings of the Klongtoey women. Arguably this moral message was widely read among the women because it confirmed their beliefs and their faith in Buddhism, particularly because the women have migrated from a rural area where religious belief is stronger than in urban areas. Furthermore, the women also considered this soap realistic in terms of its presentation of the ordinary lives of the rich and poor and the various problems they face. Therefore, it can be said that labelling *Huajai & Kaipuean* a 'realistic' drama demands linking the women's real experiences and beliefs with the emotional realism of the genre.

5.5) Identification

In the work of feminist film critics, such as Laura Mulvey and Jackie Stacey, the identification process can be defined as a feminine competence to construct a relationship between the self and the idealistic image of femininity. According to both authors, the notion of identification can be criticised for confirming existing identities, and fixing the meaning of femininity within a patriarchal symbolic order

(Mulvey, 1980; Stacey, 1994). From my discussions with 21 Klongtoey women, they constructed a relationship with the female characters by searching for similar experiences they shared with the fictional characters, rather than imagining themselves as the ideal heroine. Furthermore, this identification process was associated with the social context of the women and varied according to the women's experiences. Mutcha, 36, talked about how she felt close to Chancham, the heroine, and the other female character:

Mutcha: I like her [Chancham] because she looks as simple as we do, nice but strong. She has education and she has a job, as a teacher. It's my dream to be a teacher but now I can only be a voluntary teacher in this community. The only thing I feel like blaming her for is her decision to get involved with Rachen, even though she knows that he's a criminal. A bit stupid, huh. She should go for the inspector. [...] The other character I like is Jiead [a senior slum neighbour]. She's so kind, polite and very good at advising. This is the kind of person I'd like to have in this slum. Perhaps I would like to be like her when I grow older.

As expressed above, although Mutcha identified with Chancham, she did not approve of Chancham's choice of relationship. Thus, identification with a fictional character does not have to encompass the total image of the character, but can also be a selective process. This may be illustrated by considering the experience of Mutcha, who had a womanising husband who took no responsibility for the family. Mutcha's significant marriage troubles shaped her idea of how Chancham should have chosen her man.

However, Kaew, who was younger than Mutcha (25 years old), held a romantic fantasy about relationships, and seemed to take up total identification with Chancham, especially in terms of the sacrifice of love.

Kaew: I prefer Chancham. She has all the things I hope to become. It's not too much to expect because she represents a simple girl living in a slum. She's very sweet and gentle to the man she loves, but is so tough with the man she doesn't like. She experiences many traumas, but she stands firm. I never see her frightened of anything. The great thing about her is that she loves Rachen because of his good morals.

She doesn't care about power or material things. She insists on having a relationship with Rachen even though her mother doesn't approve of it. She believes that he can come clean.

The above two examples reveal the different **degrees** of identification, in which Mutcha develops a partial or selective identification with the heroine character, while Kaew appreciates the total character of the heroine. In general, the Klongtoey women exhibited a selective, rather than total, identification with the fictional characters (19 out of 21). The two women, who preferred the total personality and ideology of Chancham, were Keaw (as discussed above) and Wan, who explained that she respected the honest and firm morals of Chancham.

It can be said that the women identified Chancham within the context of the Klongtoey slum, and their own experiences as women living in the slum. By comparison with their lived experiences, the women showed their competence in selective identification with their favourite characters. This finding coincides with Stacey's work on cinematic identification in which she argues that 'the process which involves reproducing similarity... takes place in the more familiar domestic context, where the star's identity is selectively reworked and incorporated into the spectator's new identity' (1994: 171). This approach contains both theoretical and political issues by considering the competence of the women viewers in selective identification as a way of constructing their own identity. It also provides a rational way of understanding how the Klongtoey women engaged in the process of identification. These findings showed the women's agency in selecting the identities that were either similar to their own or relevant to their desires.

6) The Construction of Meanings

This section explores and analyses the ways in which the Klongtoey women constructed meanings around the text of *Huajai & Kaipuean*. The particular topics selected for analysis include the decoding of class, morality, and gender, which are related to the topics already discussed in my textual analysis. Twenty-one Klongtoey women who participated in this reception research were invited to read the programme from class, morality and gender perspectives. To guide the women to talk within the range of these issues as well as other related ones, I used semi-structured interviews and group conversations, together with participant observation.

Although these three issues are inter-related and cannot be separated in the formation of meanings, I attempt to break down these issues in order to make them relevant to the textual analysis. It is also noteworthy that their viewing pleasure was influenced by the women's 'preferred reading' of morality, as discussed earlier, which affected their engagement with the soap.

6.1) Decoding Class

Huajai & Kaipuean invites the Klongtoey women to complete the process of constructing meanings of class in ways that are meaningful to them. The shared experience they have as urban poor women allows them to identify with the class identities of the fictional characters and encourages them to construct discursive meanings that fit with their own definitions of class.

The Klongtoey women seemed to view the class representations in *Huajai & Kaipuean* as a partial distortion of their reality as urban poor people. Nevertheless, the level of response here was less critical than appeared with *Nang Baab* when the Klongtoey women totally rejected its representation of the urban poor. The following arguments from different interviews support this observation:

Chorn: We're the real urban poor, no doubt about it. We work for a living and we work hard. But on TV [*Huajai & Kaipuean*], they show urban poor people as having nothing to do. They just spend their day chatting, gambling; we're not like that.

Udomporn: Many women here go out to work nearly every day. Only a few stay at home. You see, most gambling groups are full of men, not women. It's ridiculous that the soap presents us as gambling addicts who keep on going in and out of jail. It really looks down upon us.

Mutcha: It is not too bad, but not too accurate either. At least there are no scenes of slum women slapping each other, which usually appears in other dramas. [e.g. in *Nang Baab*] But it portrays slum people as lazy and without intelligence. You don't ever see them talking about politics or social issues or anything useful. It's a lie. The women here enjoy talking about politics, news and thought provoking things. Come see our evening class [literacy class for Klongtoey women], and you'll see.

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Chorn, 55, Udomporn, 45, and Mutcha, 36 were neighbours in the middle track group. Compared to the other two groups in the slum, this group usually had strong points of view on their *I-san* ethnic identities and the status of urban poor people. Both Udomporn and Mutcha were elected members of the community committee. Therefore, there is no doubt that the three women gave similar explanations of their disapproval of urban poor representations in *Huajai & Kaipuean*. The three women challenged the representations of the urban poor, and, at the same time, justified the real urban poor image by emphasising their hard work and their interest in serious issues. Significantly, the three women believed that the image of the urban poor as lazy and unproductive was totally distorted. It implies that the Klongtoey women were concerned about actively working, or contributing to the family and the community as the positive side of an urban poor identity. All 21 informants agreed upon the definition of the urban poor, as people who work hard for a living.

Contrary to the above representations, the idea of class mobility was accepted by the 21 Klongtoey women. This is similar to the findings in the reception study of *Nang Baab* in which the meaning of class movement was constructively read. However, in the case of *Huajai & Kaipuean*, there was more approval of the text because it emphasised education as the sole factor for class upgrading, while this was not read as a first priority in *Nang Baab*. The two women of the middle track group, in separate interviews, stressed education as a major attribute in changing one's class status:

Boonlom: Education is very important for class mobolity, I believe. If I had a degree I would not have lived in this slum. I would have an office job, and an honourable job like teaching.

Mutcha: I admire teaching as a profession. I think it's a good profession and it's not a urban poor job. I mean it's not unskilled labour.[...] That's why when Chancham gets a teaching job, her mother is so happy. It shows the attitude of urban poor people towards respectable jobs. Same as me and many people here.

Comments on the significance of particular professions, such as teaching or an office job, reflect their need to fulfil a status that they did not possess. It also showed the women's belief that the reason for remaining urban poor was their lack of education. This fact was reinforced by the women's attempt to keep their children,

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the second generation of migrants, in school as long as they could afford. What is interesting here, which was similar to *Nang Baab*, is that the women viewed skilled work or a professional job as a qualification for social mobility, rather than for mere appearance or for a material luxury.

Further from this point, defining urban poor identities through the value of work activities and a work ethic demonstrates that Klongtoey women did not regard being urban poor as a stigma. This respect was related to the representations of Rachen and Chancham who were seen to be proud of their hard work and their status as workers. Roy, who devoted her entire life to contributing to the community and other slums elsewhere [she also worked for one NGO that coordinated help to all urban slums in Thailand] made this statement:

Roy: What I want to be is a hardworking person. It doesn't matter if I'm rich or not. I'm proud of myself for working hard most of my life. I've always said that I prefer to be seen as a hard-working urban poor person living in the slum. We cannot run away from our poor status, but we can make it look respectable. There is no shame in the kind of work you do if it's not harming people. [...] This soap gives me pride in my class. I see that the hero and the heroine keep up their work and they're happy with that. Only the part I dislike is when it shows Rachen taking on the job of killing. He should stick to his intention to be a good urban poor person. [...] He should not see the contract as the only way to save his son. He could take a loan and work hard to repay it. This is what I attempt to tell the people here, work hard and save.

Another statement came from a woman of 48 who often said that she was happy with her life and enjoyed working as a food vendor at one of the busy shopping streets in Bangkok:

Sayun: I earn with my own hands and in a clean way. Because I never feel low, I'm not afraid of any powerful people, even the police.

W.P.: Do you ever worry about being fined for selling food on the street?

Sayun: No, I am aware of that. When the police come, I move my vending, and when they go, I move back. It's easy. I'm not doing anything wrong. These police only want to take money from us, they are

cheats. Even at this age I dare to challenge the police when they do things unfairly. [...] Like the heroine [Chancham], when she meets that police guy, she always gets the upper hand. So, no one can seduce or take advantage of her easily.

Another issue that came up in the conversation was the perception that neither rich nor poor could avoid trouble in their lives. It is interesting that the tragedies of the rich and the poor in both *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* were read by the women with this similar conclusion, although they also added that the rich may encounter more troubles because of their materialism. The attitude expressed below represents the typical viewpoint of all the women:

Wan: These soaps give us the message that rich and poor people are the same. Both are faced with personal and family problems. But rich people have more serious personal conflicts than those who are poor. Because they are greedy, and they are never satisfied with what they've got. Most of the corrupt people in this society are rich and powerful. We poor people don't have the courage and ability to cheat. We feel shame.

As said earlier, the women's judgements that the rich people tended to have more problems due to their excessive greed was similar to the reception of *Nang Baab*. By looking at the negative side of the upper class, the women felt less oppressed and less unfortunate in terms of their class position.

Another similarity with the finding in *Nang Baab* was demonstrated by the rejection of the ideal of classlessness, which was inserted in both storylines. Nevertheless, compared to *Nang Baab*, which established a classless utopia, the same concept was less prominent in *Huajai & Kaipuean*. All 21 women read this theme of classlessness as opposite to the textual analysis, which will be explained after this example. The three women of the middle track group exchanged their views on this concept by referring to the final episode that showed Chanyuth's family visiting the slum community of Chancham and Rachen:

Udomporn: I've never ever seen any rich people want to become friends with us. They might show their generosity towards us, might help us by

donating money. But they wouldn't want to join us or know us. It's only in TV soaps that we see rich and poor people mixing.

Sakorn: Exactly, that's only in drama. They [Chanyuth's family and the hero and the heroine] become friends because their lives are in danger. They fall into the same situation.

Sriwan: Of course, rich people wouldn't feel real friendship toward us. Only a feeling of sympathy, I suppose. They never realise that their lives would be in trouble without us. Who else would do cleaning jobs for them, sell them food and serve them? In fact, we live in an interdependent society, we depend on each other.

The above conversation provides an understanding of how the Klongtoey women rejected the idea of classlessness. Their experiences of being treated as 'different' or 'outsiders' from the dominant culture and central ethnicity (e.g. they were called Laotian or were looked down upon because of their *I-san* ethnicity both in the media and the real world) reminded them of the fact that class division firmly exists in urban society. Both Udomporn and Sriwan had experienced work as a cleaner or office-maid, which made them feel different from the majority in the work place. Sriwan said that she had thought of committing suicide once when she first came to Bangkok and was treated in an unfriendly way by her masters. Thus, for the women, classlessness exists only on television.

It is clear from these examples that the Klongtoey women critically assessed the representations of class from experiences of their everyday lives. The process of constructing meanings showed the women's competence in selecting the positive images of the urban poor, while rejecting or challenging the negative ones.

6.2) Decoding Morality

As discussed in the first part of the reception analysis, the dominant message about morality in *Huajai & Kaipuean* kept the Klongtoey women attached to the soap. Furthermore, since the moral message ran throughout the narratives of familial relationships and personal tragedy, it had an ordinary line, which was not beyond the women's understanding and experiences. Twenty-one Klongtoey women who took part in the discussion on *Huajai & Kaipuean* clearly read this soap from a moral perspective, especially from the Buddhist point of view. The two following

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examples describe how the women decoded the moral meaning of the text. The first example is an extract from the response of a woman of 50 who suffered from her son's involvement in crime and his imprisonment. The second quotation is taken from Roy, the woman leader, who often served as a moral leader for the Klongtoey people:

Koom: A person, who breaks the moral rule, must receive a dreadful punishment in return. We see it in the deaths of the hero and the villain. Chanchai's death especially is so horrible because he has killed many innocent people. [...] I'm worried about my son. He was a lovely boy before he met his gang. I try to help bring him out of hell. I keep on praying three times a day. I would be grateful if my virtue could help protect him from sin. I don't want to go to heaven and see my son in hell.

Roy: It is a fact that they put in the soap. Buddhism seriously prohibits us from committing sin by taking other people's lives. That is the biggest sin. It's a ruke we all know but we sometimes ignore it. It's sad that the morality of people is decreasing day by day. It's got to do with religion. It's so weak now.

In both statements, the women used the moral theme in *Huajai & Kaipuean* as a way of justifying the significance of Buddhist morality, which was the prevailing belief system among the Klongtoey women. This finding reveals the similar reading of the reception analysis and the textual analysis in which the normalisation of moral order has more effect than legal justice. In addition to constructing meanings from the soap, the two women raised their concern about the decline of social morals, especially as regards religious commitment, as evidenced by the weakening of Buddhist institutions such as monasteries. Therefore, the meanings that the women constructed from the soap and the extent of their discussion was related to the current problem of Thai morality, which they were taking up as their own concerns. Another case of a woman who derived moral meanings from the soap was Chawi, 45, who felt hopeless about all of her three children. Her two sons were imprisoned because of drug addiction and theft, and her daughter had run away, leaving a small baby with Chawi. These tragic incidents made Chawi sob many times during the interview:

Chawi: I think I took care of them so well. When they were in school they always had good things, they wore the whitest uniforms. But when they grew up, they became different. They followed the wrong role models in college. Nobody cared about studying at all. I used to cry a lot every night. I don't understand why they turned out like this. My husband and I tried to be good models for them. I never worked because I wanted to give them time. I wanted to teach them to be moral people. I failed. They claim that living in the slum has made them like this. It's not true. Many children here grow up fine. If they had looked at good examples like in the TV soap; they may have learnt something. [...] Yes, they should have at least learnt from this soap [*Huajai & Kaipuean*]. They should have been afraid of sin.

This emotional statement by Chawi articulates the belief of the Klongtoey women in the importance of morality and its consequences. She was certain that the moral message in the soap would have an impact on people if they took it seriously instead of following the wrong models. It can be said that, from the two cases above, those women who experienced serious difficulties and distress from family problems were likely to identify their situations with the moral message in the soap more directly than others who had not experienced such problems. Although all the Klongtoey woman had problems, not all of them were in a traumatic or disgraceful situation caused by family members. Of the 21 women who participated in this reception talk, only 5 of them exhibited the same emotional distress of Chawi.

Apart from reading death in *Huajai & Kaipuean* as a warning for maintaining moral standards, the majority of the women (15 out of 21) discussed the reasons for moral decline. Nine women mentioned materialism as one of the culprits. For example:

Boonlom: Nowadays, people are getting more and more selfish and greedy. Many are worshipping commodities like a god, such as cars, houses, or even money. I'm not surprised to hear that people kill each other because of money. Buddhism teaches us to be humble, but I'm afraid we've gone too far with materialism.

Another five women looked at poverty and depression as reasons for moral decay. Although the women insisted that being poor never affected their own morality, they accepted that it had impacted badly on many young persons in the slum. One of their concerns was the spread of amphetamines among slum communities in Bangkok particularly the drug, called 'Speed'. The number of youngsters in the Klongtoey slum arrested on drug-related charges had risen in recent years. Many children had started by earning petty cash through drug delivery and had become addicts themselves and subsequently involve in criminal rings. One woman who sent her sons to stay in the province pointed to drugs as the cause of poverty and moral decay:

Wan: It's awful. I don't want my children to grow up in this situation. I used to see a group of youngsters gathered behind my house smoking the drug. They walked out like zombies. It was scary for a mother like me. Because they are poor they couldn't resist the money offered from drug dealers who used them to deliver the drugs, and they were forced to take it too. These youngsters don't know what is right or wrong. They don't have a morality. But who should be blamed?

One woman went on to blame men's irresponsibility as the reason for moral decline. Aew, 48, who used to complain about men's behaviours in the slum as well as her own husband's, said:

Aew: Most criminals are men, you see. You don't even have to look far, many men here behave like criminals—beating women, taking drugs. It's only women who try to uphold the moral standards of this community, otherwise there would be anarchy.

It would seem, then, that all the women were aware of the importance of morality for maintaining the social order, and family harmony. The women indicated that materialism, poverty and men were the main reasons that reduced the moral standards of the society.

6.3) Decoding Gender

From the findings of my ethnographic audience research, noticed that the Klongtoey women watched the two soap operas, *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean*, from a

distinctly female perspective, or with a 'female gaze' to use the term of feminist film critics (see for example, Mulvey, 1979; Gamman & Marshment, 1989). There are several examples to support this. First, the Klongtoey women constructed meanings of gender by identifying the representations with their own experiences of class, race and gender within the domestic context or the slum community. Their readings were more related to their perception within the private rather than the public domain. Second, the women recognised that the representations they read were reproduced by dominant culture which could mean Central/Bangkok culture or male culture. The following analyses of the decoding of gender representations support these arguments.

Among 21 women informants, seven women marked the masculine and feminine figures in *Huajai* & *Kaipuean* in terms of the portrayals of gender. They viewed these gender representations as the reproductions of patriarchal ideology (*my word*) by reinforcing the stereotypes of gender roles and gender double standards. I refer to this group as providing an "oppositional reading" against the gender representations in the text. The rest of the women (14 of them), which I call the "negotiated reading" group, interpreted gender representations with selective acceptance and rejection in relation to the text. This latter group, which represented the majority of the Klongtoey women, viewed the gender representations in the soap as both acceptable and unacceptable according to their preferred meanings.

The quotations from two different interviews below present an example of "oppositional reading". Toy, was a single woman with a college education, and Panni, was re-married and used to work as a barmaid in a tourist area:

Toy: The hero is so masculine, strong, and brave, while the heroine is so feminine *(makes a ridiculous noise while saying this)*. It's a social expectation that women need to be soft, caring and sacrifice for their man, especially Thai women. Well, if this is an ideal of good femininity, I don't fit it. I am more selfish, I think of myself first. That's why I'm not married. I had enough suffering from my younger brothers who squeezed every drop of blood from me. I gave up my chance to study in college because I wanted my brothers to study. But they wasted the money. No one got a degree. I'm not gonna feed

them anymore. Now whatever I earn, I spend on myself. Women better think of themselves first, you know.

Panni: There are just so many requirements that are put on women's shoulders, and this soap represents that. We have to be a good wife, a good mother. Well, I'm a wife, a mother, but not a typical model. I love my family and I take care of them, but I also demand my own pleasure. I still love to go out to meet up with my old friends and drink till we all get drunk.

Both Toy and Panni criticized the idealised gender identities in the soap by comparing them with their own roles as sister, or as mother and wife. Because Toy experienced great disappointment with her brothers, she completely rejected a gender role that emphasised the feminine ideal of sacrifice. Toy's argument also dismissed the social standard that regarded men as breadwinners and leading figures. For Panni, her independent life before marriage(s) encouraged her to retain her own pleasure and needs rather than sacrifice everything, according to the traditional Thai norm. The other five women who interpreted "oppositional readings" had similar evaluations to those of Toy and Panni. Thus, all of the seven women of the "oppositional reading" group refused to accept the representations of gender in *Huajai & Kaipuean* because it was inapplicable to their real lives and because such gender representations would have stigmatised them.

On the other hand, the 14 women with "negotiated reading" had selective criticisms of the gender representations in the soap. Mutcha's statement was an example:

Mutcha: I admire Chancham but sympathise with her. Why does she have to sacrifice for a man like Rachen with a criminal background? Is that because love makes you blind? I am sympathetic to Chancham as a strong and independent character, but she becomes so soft and so cooperative with Rachen. Well, in real life, you won't find women like that, especially here. Look at Samniang [a woman in the slum who was deserted by her husband], she doesn't care and isn't waiting for her husband to return. She can survive by herself.

W.P.:	But Chancham doesn't need help from Rachen, she depends on herself.
Mutcha:	Well, but she lets him becomes dominant when they get married. Do you remember the words she said that she's ready to follow him anywhere?

The above "negotiated reading" illustrated that the heroine's personalities as strong and independent were more likely to be read positively, while the sacrificial role was criticized and opposed. This "negotiated reading" reaffirmed that the Klongtoey women constructed gender meanings from the soap within the context of their real lives. As already discussed in the sub-section on identification, the Klongtoey women appreciated the self-defence skills of Chancham because it was necessary for a woman living in the slum. That is why some gender identities were welcome and some were not. Further to this point, the women used their conversation to share their irritations at the idealised gender representations of society. Klongtoey women felt the need to construct their own image of 'a woman' in the slum environment, which was different from the conventional standards of traditional Thai women.

All 7 women of the "oppositional group" suggested that women in the slum should be independent from men in terms of financial, status, and moral support. This group argued that women should not allow men to oppress them merely because men were positioned as the family leader. Roy, the community leader said that 'generally, Klongtoey women are the prime earners of the family and they know how to manage the money. So, why don't we [the women] make the men realise and accept that we can be the leaders and the decision makers of the family'. Not only did they claim the family leader role, but this "oppositional reading" group also argued that the women must not surrender to domestic violence or male irresponsibility by resisting male desire (for violence and sexual demand) and making a strong network among women. Roy commented that:

> If the men learn that whenever they hit their wives they will be condemned by the whole community, the men might feel guilty and stop doing this. I used to think that domestic violence was a private issue, but it's not true anymore. Our women must be strong and should not allow men to exploit us.

Through their "oppositional reading", the 7 women of this group constructed their own representations of gender which were different from the dominant representations in *Huajai & Kaipuean* which emphasised the sacrifice of women to men. As for the "negotiated reading" group, the suggestions for the women's identities pointed directly to the role of a responsible mother in the family, who prioritised bringing up her children. This was demonstrated in the discussion on motherhood, which Sri, Wipa, and Chancham raised.

Mutcha: I don't like the kind of weepy mother shown in this soap. Mothers should be strong and be firm models for their children. Just look at me, although I am depressed with my husband's behaviour, I never ignore my children's needs. But I don't want them to feel inferior because they don't have father, so I have to maintain the image of the family even though my heart is asking for a separation.

Charun: There are some women here who behave like Sri. They're crazy about gambling. And their children are running around this railway track, it's dangerous. I think a mother's role is so vital, especially in a slum like this. There are many bad models around here. When my children were young I was so worried about this, I took them with me to the market where I sold food, so I could keep my eyes on them.

It is a fact that all of the Klongtoey women were the central figures in their families. Some were the sole breadwinners, and many were the decision makers as well as the role models for the family. The responsibility for bringing up the children totally rested on the women, while the men usually went out to work or sought their own pleasure outside of the home. Both Mutcha and Charun were examples of strong mother roles in the Klongtoey slum; Mutcha had an irresponsible husband who was only interested in his own sexual pleasure, and Charun was abandoned by her husband who had run away more than a decade ago. With these experiences, the women of the "negotiated reading" group agreed on the significant role of motherhood and blamed any woman who neglected this role (such as Sri in the soap). This group consensus showed the selective process in the formation of the Klongtoey women gender identities because they insisted on the importance of a responsible mother, while they rejected the traditional role of Thai women as primarily devoted to their men. Therefore, the desired representation of a woman for

this "negotiated reading" group focused on the ideal of motherhood, with a mother who is determined to bring up her children as good citizens.

Following both groups' objections to gender representations in the soap which persistently created the devoted heroine, the Klongtoey women speculated beyond the final episode about what Chancham should do after the death of Rachen. The women seemed to enjoy talking about and creating a narrative about Chancham. Ten of the 21 women said that Chancham should re-marry, while the other 11 insisted that she should remain single. The women who opted for her to re-marry were those who had experienced the desertion of their husbands, those who had re-married, or those who had friends who were re-married. The second group varied among women who had divorced or were separated from their husbands, those who had problem marriages, or those who had no serious problems. The following extracts taken from separate interviews came from the women who experienced abandonment from their husbands.

Charun: Chancham should re-marry *Sarawat* (inspector) Chaliang. There is no need to remain faithful to a dead husband. It may help her cope with the loss.

W.P.: Have you ever thought of re-marrying?

Charun: I have children to look after, and to be honest I am fed up with men.

And from Samniang:

Samniang: She should re-marry, perhaps with Chaliang. He seems to be a good guy and he loves her.

W.P.: Would you think like this for yourself as well?

Samniang: Maybe I won't marry again. I'm going back to my village very soon. I want to spend time with my kids.

The advice of the women who did not have the same experience of desertion was as follows:

Kaew: Chancham won't get married again. And she doesn't need to, she can depend on herself.

Boonlom: She won't look for another man. She doesn't like Chaliang. She doesn't like powerful men. She may go to the village that they had planned to settle down in after marriage.

The differences in reading possible narrative trajectories demonstrate how the women use their personal experiences to construct disparate meanings. It is noticeable that the women, who had experienced abandonment, felt discouraged to re-marry in real life but preferred the opposite decision for the fictional heroine. This shows the contradiction between the women's fantasy and their lived reality. However, the women's fantasies were based on the condition that the heroine should consider re-marriage only if there were a better person for her, while in real life they believed this condition never happened. Therefore, it cannot be read as the women escaping into an oppositional fantasy because it was conditional. The other women, who imagined Chancham's future either in a second marriage or as remaining single, based their ideas on their real experiences and their attitudes towards relationships with men. Interestingly, the reason the Klongtoey women gave for saying that Chancham should not re-marry was that they believed in her independence (without a man). It also confirms the viewpoints of the Klongtoey women towards the definition of a 'woman' within a urban poor context which stresses the self-reliance and strength of women.

7) Conclusion: Discourse of Negotiation

Crucial to the concept of oppositional reading is an emphasis on the audiences' power to resist the demeaning representations produced by the dominant culture. This theory is reinforced throughout my reception study of the Klongtoey women. In this chapter, the ways the women viewed and constructed meanings from *Huajai & Kaipuean*, have been analysed together with some significant comparisons with my textual analysis and the reception of *Nang Baab* in the previous chapter. These findings suggest that the pleasure in viewing and talking about the soap offered the women the space to exercise their power to negotiate their own meanings from the representations in the soap, which, in turn, implied the counter-hegemonic power of the women in relation to the dominant culture.

The negotiating strategy of the Klongtoey women in reading *Huajai & Kaipuean* can be divided into two aspects. First is the positive response when the women constructed the meanings in relation to the text. Beyond this response to the text itself, the women extended the textual meanings to conceptualise their own 'identities', which they recognised in the texts and from their own experiences. The second is a negative response in which the women rejected the particular meanings

in the text and constructed or re-created the representations that suited their own perceptions. Both types of negotiation involved the women's awareness of the representations of their urban poor and *I-san* ethnic identity that was reproduced in the media. The findings of women's discursive readings endorsed the concepts that support the resistance to the power of the oppressive group, which takes place in the realm of popular culture (Fiske 1987; Dyer 1993; Hall 1997).

First of all, in terms of resistant pleasures, several Klongtoey women accepted that watching *Huajai & Kaipuean* increased their ability to negotiate time and space for recreation with their husbands or their families. Since the women valued *Huajai & Kaipuean* as a 'not too rubbish' soap, they felt less guilty in taking time off from household engagements. Furthermore, the mixture of crime and woman's genres of *Huajai & Kaipuean*, offered the opportunity of watching together with the family which helped blur the gender boundary of television viewing. This compromise-viewing pattern coincides with the suggestions of the way television viewing is gendered (Modleski 1982, Morley 1986, 1992; Fiske, 1987, Lull, 1990). However, in the case of the Klongtoey women, the gendered compromise viewing depended on the classification of the programme or story, more than on the domestic schedule and gender relationships in the family.

The women demanded more 'serious' soaps like *Huajai & Kaipuean* with a storyline that emphasised social morality which provided useful and relevant meanings for their daily lives. Their desire to have more quality soaps of this kind reveals their wish to have their voice heard by those who control marketing and television.

Although *Huajai & Kaipuean* positioned both the hero and the heroine within the urban poor, the women disliked the overall image of the urban poor, which the soap presented, because it was distorted. They argued that the real identity of the urban poor applied to those who work hard for a living, and they believed that it was more women than men who were committed to work and to the family. This argument challenged the class stereotypes of slum people who were constantly shown as time wasters, lazy, and addicted to gambling. Compared to the reaction towards representations in the previous chapter, although both *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* positioned the protagonists within urban poor slum, there were a few differences, which made the women react to the stereotypes in *Nang Baab* more

strongly than they did to *Huajai & Kaipuean*. The emotional and violent behaviour of slum characters in *Nang Baab* was considered excessive in comparison with the depiction of characters in *Huajai & Kaipuean*. This violent image was heavily criticised by the women as entirely biased. The other minor element was the number of 'good' slum characters *Huajai & Kaipuean* contained at least three (the hero, the heroine, and the heroine's supporter), while only one role (the heroine) was seen in *Nang Baab*, and she did not even have a particularly refined manner. Therefore, the levels of resistance that occurred in viewing *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* differed according to some of these elements. However, despite some differences, both oppositional readings shared the fact that they were influenced by the reality of the ways the women conducted their every day lives and the economic factors that forced them to work for the survival of their families.

In *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the Klongtoey women conceptualised the meaning of working class by noting the positive connotation of 'working', which helped value their urban poor identity. While, in *Nang Baab* the strategy of replacing negative meanings with positive images was not clearly seen. The women only argued that the portrayal of aggressiveness was wrong. However, a similarity between *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* is the use of the same strategy to devalue the meanings of the upper class by connecting the problems of the rich with their material greed and immorality. Furthermore, by recognising the problems of the rich, the Klongtoey women concluded that the difference in class did not mean that upper class and urban poor people necessarily had totally different problems. This was the same reading that was obtained from the reception of *Nang Baab*. And by dismissing the suggestion of classlessness, which also happened in readings of *Nang Baab*, the women reaffirmed the divisions of class, but negotiated the meanings by attributing value judgements to class identities. The other point that the women decoded from class concepts of *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* was the potential of class mobility acquired through education. In *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the women emphasised that being urban poor was not a stigma and pride in this identity was represented in terms of hardworking and moral people.

As morality is a prevailing theme in *Huajai & Kaipuean*, the Klongtoey women took up the message to criticise the decline of the social moral order. The women laid the blame on the rampant increase in materialism among the rich, the

poverty that forced poor people to commit crime, and the negligence of men. By emphasising the significance of morality, the Klongtoey women claimed their class and gender positions as being more moral than those of the upper class or men. This coincides with the reception of the representation of class in *Nang Baab*, which suggested that the affluence of the upper class was not necessarily an indicator of being 'good', instead it was individual morality that mattered. In this respect, the upper class in *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* were devalued because of their lack of morality.

As for gender representations, the women refused to accept the feminine sacrifice for love as depicted in the soap. There were two types of readings on this issue, one was the "oppositional reading" in which the women strongly criticised the expectation that women sacrifice their own happiness for men, arguing that it was unrealistic and that it only reinforced gender stereotypes. However, for the "negotiated reading" group, the degree of resistance was lower due to their selective process of acceptance and rejection. In this group, the Klongtoey women accepted the important role of motherhood particularly in protecting children from the immoral surroundings of the slum.

In addition, by defining their own version of 'woman', both groups (oppositional and negotiated readings) of the Klongtoey women emphasised independence as a mark of their female identities. The re-conceptualisation of a female identity is similar to the identification process proposed by Stacey (1994) in which the star's identities were selectively incorporated into the women's new identities. The Klongtocy women selected only the identities that fitted well with the urban poor context, and rejected those of a fantasy world. This selective identification also appeared in *Nang Baab*, where the virgin heroine was appreciated while the sexually transgressive villain was disapproved of. A difference in gender decoding in *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean* was that in *Nang Baab*, the masculine signifiers were criticised and humiliated throughout the story, while this sense of gender condemnation did not happen in the reception of *Huajai & Kaipuean*. The reason for this difference had to do with the different narrative structures. In the action genre of *Huajai & Kaipuean* male protagonists drove the story forward more than the female characters. Therefore, the images of the male

protagonists were not as open for much criticism from the other characters of the storyline.

In the negotiation process of the Klongtoey women, Hall's (1997) emphasis on the self-acknowledgment of existing stereotypes before negotiating clearly operated. Here, the motivation for the negotiation of the Klongtoey women with representations in *Huajai & Kaipuean* and *Nang Baab* derived from the recognition of the dominant stereotypes that were reproduced in cultural products, especially television soaps. Thus, the ability to understand and to differentiate their identities from the stereotypes was, indeed, a crucial element in their power to negotiate their identities. Additionally, the resistance to the meanings in the texts in the television soaps could be pleasurable for the women. It was pleasurable and meaningful, for the Klongtoey women, in the sense that the dominant representations were constructed and transformed according to the preferred meanings of the women.

Chapter Eight

The Politics of Representations

Recognition of dominant and marginalized representations is a significant moment in the construction and deconstruction of identities. As we have seen throughout the findings of how the Klongtoey women negotiated the meanings of their representations, the women's awareness of how they could negotiate their identities was derived from recognition of their own oppression. That is because it is not possible to speak about being marginalized without taking into account how this term is defined by the dominant representations. This chapter summarises how the Klongtoey women recognised and conceptualised their identities. The negotiation strategies that the women used are classified into two groups. One is based on deconstruction and the other on the construction. Then, this chapter will discuss the possibilities of pleasure that the Klongtoey women derived from negotiation. This study concludes that pleasure is a political outcome of negotiation and resistance. The final section in the chapter considers how this study theorises the negotiation discourse of specific marginalized groups. This chapter focuses on the following main questions of the thesis:

First, it contextualises how Thai migrant women in the Klongtoey slum decode the dominant representations in television programmes; Second, it summarises the exploration of the process of identification, by defining which representations are accepted and which are rejected according to the women's perception; Third, it maps out how the meanings of representations are negotiated through the women's identities, and the elements of this negotiation process; and Fourth, it suggests what are the implications of the Klongtoey women's negotiation of identities for the politics of representations.

As stated in Chapter One, identity is fluid, and one's identity involves a never-ending process of constructing and deconstructing one's subjectivity. This means that every single subject position is constantly confronted with the cultural meanings and the marking of the boundaries among different identities. This task is not a simple one, especially in the case of migrant women living in the urban slum, who encounter identities imposed by the dominant societies. In this context, a vulnerable position deriving from slum living and a marginalized ethnic identity

creates a need for every Klongtoey woman to actively reinvent and redefine her identity to counteract the dominant representations. Therefore, being a Klongtoey woman can mean the adoption of, resistance to, and compromise, of many different identities. It is in this task that the media culture can play a distinctive role by offering an unconstrained space in which the defined identities can be adopted. This concept is based on Ang's (1990) notion that fictional media is a safe space because there is no punishment for whatever identity one takes up.

1) Deconstruction of Identity

The second wave feminism emphasising 'the personal is the political' provides a valuable means of exploring the ways in which the Klongtoey women took up identities from television viewing. For every individual woman, politics is often close to home and takes place in the context of everyday life. Therefore, viewing and talking about television in their leisure time is a reflection of how the Klongtoey women set out agendas for counteracting their dominant representations on television.

It is certain that representations in television are continually operated within a Central Thai - *I-san* binary in which migrant women of the Klongtoey slum are made inferior. Indeed, as we have seen throughout the findings, the cultural representations that existed between the two poles suggested that the category of '*I-san* women in an urban slum' was based on the differences of class, ethnicity, and gender. These three modes of difference had made Klongtoey women suffer 'triple discrimination': as members of the urban poor, as ethnic migrants, and as women.

The Klongtoey women perceived dominant class representations as very destructive and negative to their identities. Although all of the women recognised themselves as urban poor, they strongly criticised the distortion of their class representations. The label of urban poor that the women decoded from television signified poverty, dirtiness, stupidity, ignorance, violence, illegal involvement, and social problems. Through the work of cultural representations, these unpleasant identities were identified as related to the passive and lazy characters of the urban poor who usually leave their lives to luck and destiny. This condemnation was criticised by the Klongtoey women, who believed that the work of cultural domination was to keep the urban poor dis-empowered and unable to escape this stigmatised image.

Although Klongtoey women never employed the term 'dominant representations' within their interviews and group conversations, the notion that their identities had been dehumanised by the wider influence of media indicated this recognition. As migrants from the Northeast region, Klongtoey women saw themselves in the margin of the media, which accords with the dominant culture of Bangkok, and which has authority to speak for the whole nation. This suggests the same function described in Edward Said's classic argument on Orientalism, which states that 'the power of the colonizer is fundamentally constituted by the power to speak for and to represent' (1978: 6). Moreover, the dangerous impact of Orientalism discourse that Said and other postcolonial theorists point out is the process in which the stereotypes are transformed into the consciousness of marginalized groups so that they incorporate them as their self-images. This concept has been widely discussed and confirmed from many studies on identity crisis. For the study of the Klongtoey women's class identities, however, this internalised effect seemed only partially applicable to explain the identification process of Klongtoey women. The main reason is the resistance of Klongtoey women to dominant class, race, and gender discourses had empowered them to challenge their stereotypes, but in the mean time, their economic vulnerability limited their power and struggle for change. For example, the recognition of being treated as people on the margin, the Klongtoey women had established their discursive interpretation of identity and criticism of the dominant group. However, the hardship and the threat of an eviction had forced the women to admit their subordination in terms of economic dependence to the dominant group.

From interviewing, group conversation, and observation, it was interesting to find that the Klongtoey women saw most of the negative class representations as belonging to the male members in the Klongtoey slum rather than to themselves. One example was the agreement of all the 34 women on the issues of men's irresponsibility regarding the well being of the family, which came up when the representations of slum characters were shown in television. The women felt that they had less access to productive resources because the male family leaders had failed to work hard and had a tendency to be lazy. This finding can be interpreted as a deconstructive strategy. It shows that the Klongtoey women deconstructed the urban poor representations by connecting the negative images with a specific gender. This way, the women did not simply refute the existence of class

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representations but qualified them by associating those stereotypes with men. One example of this is that when the portrayals of urban poor were shown in the soaps of *Nang Baab* and *Huajai & Kaipuean*, several Klongtoey women responded in the same way, such as: 'men never take responsibility in the family and community', 'men never take up the initiative to do something for their families', and 'men just waste their time, drinking and gambling', etc. It seemed that the more the women discussed men's behaviour in the slum, the further they excluded themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with the urban poor.

. This strategy, in fact, is the basis of defining one's identity by excluding oneself from the stereotypes, or rejecting the stereotypes as not applicable to them (Hall 1990, 1997; Woodward 1997). Unfortunately, positioning the male urban poor into these stereotypes does not help the women escape from the stigma. At best, this kind of deconstruction rescues the consciousness of the women from a plethora of negative class representations.

Apart from a deconstructive strategy of class representation, the Klongtoey women took up the strategy of differentiating their urban poor identities from that of the upper class. Here, the negative connotations they identified with the upper class were worse than those of the urban poor. This may be called a defensive deconstruction in which the contrary representations are made more dreadful. One example of this strategy can be seen when the women accused the upper class characters in the soaps of being immoral and greedy, which was the cause of the upper class's problems. By deconstructing the identities of the upper class as immoral, the urban poor identities were protected and sealed with a moral barrier. However, this type of deconstruction is unlikely to change the stigma of being urban poor since the entire negative encoding remains. It works only to pacify the women's perception of class representations by seeing the other classes in a more negative way. Nevertheless, the consequence of attributing negative connotations onto the upper class identities reflected the women's beliefs in the existence of class divisions and their rejection of the fictional ideal of a classless society.

The second issue is focused on their representations of ethnicity, which was portrayed mainly in terms of *I-san* cultural identities. As discussed in Chapter Two, the binary distinction of high culture – low culture had been firmly rooted in the Thai ideological concept of race or ethnicity. Everything that is central to the Capital is categorised as high culture, while everything related to local areas or the

provinces is termed as low culture. Therefore, *I-san* ethnic culture is put in the margin of the central culture and is alienated because it has cultural connections with Laos and Cambodia rather than Central Thailand. It may be the fact that to secure the centralised system, the dominant power has created a strong barrier in which ethnic people of the other three regions (the North, the South, and the Northeast) are excluded from the central ethnicity. In these terms, the Northern people are linked with the Chinese and Burmese, the Southerners with Malay, and the Northeasterners (*I-san*) with the Laotians and Cambodians. Unfortunately, among these three links, the last group is associated with the lowest rank because of the low status of Laos and Cambodia (compared to Thailand), and the history of being colonised within the Thai kingdom. *I-san* ethnicity, thus, exists in a process of social and political struggles.

The television industry has a long history of presenting stereotypical images of *I-san* ethnicity. The findings in Chapter Five affirmed that the link of *I-san* ethnicity with Laotian and Cambodian ethnicities was viewed as very distasteful for the Klongtoey women. One of the programme types that clearly contained racism, and which received strong criticism from the women, was daytime comedy programme. The depiction of *I-san* people in such comedy programmes have become symbolic of the way in which *I-san* people are degraded through the use of stereotypical humour. The representations of *I-san* people in comedy programmes ranged from naïve, and uncivilized, to characterising them as having the ability for unskilled work, physical endurance, brainless, and as having funny appearances such as a flat nose, fat face, or 'village face', etc.

Since some parts of these ethnic stereotypes are related to physical appearances, it is a very painful task to deconstruct the negative meanings of *I-san* identities. The Klongtoey women admitted that their ethnic appearance did not fit with dominant notions of 'beauty', which valued a well-shaped nose and small facial features. However, the women distanced themselves from this concept of beauty by stressing the importance of survival rather than the luxury of a beautiful body. As has been shown in the women's talk on soaps, women's programmes and advertising, they agreed that beauty cannot feed their families and it would be foolish to waste money on expensive beauty products. Although the Klongtoey women did not deny their interest in beauty (by promoting local beauty products), they resisted the dominant concept of beauty, which accompanied mass

consumerism and the global representations. This mode of deconstruction may be called a justifying strategy in which their resistant attitudes are rationalised in terms of reality and concern for their families. Thus class and ethnicity played significant roles in readings of dominant texts of commercial programmes.

As for the alienating images of *I-san* ethnicity, the Klongtoey women reacted in a more radical way by condemning the ethnic link as illogical and politically hidden. The women insistently denied that *I-san* people were not Laotian or Cambodian, but Thai, because they were born in Thailand. Therefore, through a deconstruction strategy, the entire representation is demolished (Dyer 1993). However, some women would typically say: 'If we were Lao, we would be the high-class Lao' or 'If we were Lao, we would not be *'lao –tak- pa'* (means string for clothes hanging). In the latter term, although there is no relevant meaning between 'Lao ethnicity' and 'string', but the women referred to them merely because of the same vocal tone (Lao and *lao*). Certainly, this vocal comparison cannot be easily ignored. Instead, it reflects the deconstruction strategy that raises a positive feeling for the women when they refer to it. Here, we see that the deconstruction of identities does not necessarily deal with the representation directly, but can work as a symbolic language or signifier that helps remedy the humiliation within the level of consciousness. It also confirms the idea that identities are discursive constructions formed in language or symbolic discourse and therefore, they can be meaningful without essential substance (Hall, 1991).

The ways the Klongtoey women deconstructed the class and ethnic binaries in dominant representations of them were also similar to their deconstruction of gender. As has been noted in Chapter One, a stereotype involved the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, images to fix the 'difference' (Hall 1997). In this context, the gender representations in the media reflect male attitudes through the distortion of women's positions in the society. This can be seen through the textual analyses on gender representations in the two soap operas that set the binary images between 'good' and 'bad' women. The overall decoding of women's images by the Klongtoey women's television talk, included self-sacrifice, domestication, and sexual control associated with a 'good' woman, while selfishness, rebellion, immorality, and sexual transgression were defined as a 'bad' woman. This binary opposition made the women feel uncomfortable because they were caught up between 'good' and 'bad' women. Although the themes of sexual

morality and responsible motherhood were one of the women's key concerns, at the same time, rebelliousness was also appreciated. Furthermore, the social expectation that women should be wives ideal was criticised because it allowed men to be irresponsible, without any guilt. These gender perspectives demonstrate the strategy that the Klongtoey women employed in deconstructing gender stereotypes. By selecting their own version of being 'Klongtoey women' across the given representations, the boundary between 'good' and 'bad' women became somewhat blurred. In addition, the feminine role in gender relationships was deconstructed by demanding more responsibility from men. However, in connection to *I-san* culture, the Klongtoey women did not dismiss the boundary of sexual behaviour between good and bad women. Therefore, there were multiple modes of categorising women, which the Klongtoey women identified with under different circumstances. Within the context of slum living, a strong and responsible mother who could be rebellious toward men or authoritative power was considered to reflect the identities of Klongtoey women. At the same time, within the context of *I-san* migrant culture, sexual morality was a valuable symbol that confirmed the dignity of women's identities, and therefore, needed to be practiced.

Furthermore, as appeared in the earlier discussion on class deconstruction, the Klongtoey women blamed the male urban poor for the negative stereotypes associated with them. Thus the Klongtoey women attempted to deconstruct the superiority of men by humiliating men as troublemakers who were irresponsible, and passive. In this way, the women overcame gender hierarchy, but, as suggested, only through the women's subjectivity of representations, not through a radical reorganisation of hierarchy in reality.

More specifically, it can be said that the representations of class, ethnicity and gender are selectively deconstructed by the women with particular justifications. The women's negotiation strategy demonstrates the politics of symbolic resistance proposed by the multicultural theorists in which the negative representations are contested and politicised, instead of simply rejected (Kellner, 1995). The following dichotomies summarise the deconstruction strategy employed by the Klongtoey women:

Stereotypes	Deconstruction

class

- passive, lazy, not working — characters of the male urban poor.
- poor, dirty — better than immorality and materialism of the upper class.

ethnicity

- not beauty, 'village' feature — beauty is unnecessary for living, not central to the urban poor and I-san ethnicity.
- alienation — being Thai, born in Thailand, therefore, better than Laotian and Cambodian.

gender

- domestication, traditional femininity — motherhood is a replacement of men's irresponsibility in the family.
- strong, rebellious gender — requirement for survival in slum culture.
- sexually repressed — traditional value of *I-san* culture

In all, the above diagram illustrates how the dominant representations were challenged and deconstructed by the women. These deconstructive strategies were typical of all the Klongtoey women. Many of the issues were persistently emphasised whenever the topics of class, ethnicity and gender on television were discussed. The modes of deconstruction can be divided into three categories. The first was to remove their representations from the comparison and replace it with the negative representations of the others, such as the male and the upper class. A second strategy was to lessen the degree of bias by making it more rational, such as the justification of ethnic appearance and gender norm. A third was to re-value the negative representations with a cultural justification, for instance the positive stress on being sexually conservative. These deconstructive strategies were derived from the women's experiences of their class, ethnicity, and gender, which were very specific to the context of ethnic migrant women of the urban poor.

2) Construction of Identity

This section elaborates further on the deconstruction strategy adopted by the Klongtoey women. It also acknowledges the importance of multiculturalism and Third World feminism for understandings of identity negotiation, which are very useful in explaining the politics of representations in the case of Klongtoey women.

As has been reviewed in Chapter One, the multicultural approach and Third World Feminism share the same standpoint in promoting the different strategies of negotiation among different oppressed groups (Mohanty, 1991; Kellner, 1995). The two approaches suggest that in order to achieve this diversity, the negotiation should occur both in the decoding and encoding positions. In this study, the Klongtoey women constructed their identities partly through the meanings they had decoded and encoded from the dominant representations within consciousness level. Here, consciousness plays a significant role because it stresses that the decoding and encoding processes take place on discourse as formed by language and mind outside material objects and social practices. That is to say that the new identities or preferred identities of the Klongtoey women are constructed within the discursive discourse because their ethnic appearances, cultural practices, and economic status are, almost, unchanged. It is, in fact, the discursive meanings of identities in the perception of the women and others that are actually altered.

Take class representations, for example. Although the Klongtoey women were confined to a slum existence in the material world, and there seemed no logical opportunity for emancipation, in the symbolic discourse, the Klongtoey women were able to construct new urban poor identities to counterbalance dominant representations of them. The Klongtoey women conceptualised the new identities of the urban poor in three ways. First, they argued that being urban poor was not a stigma. Rather it signified hard work and independent people who lived on their own earnings. This identity was referred to by all of the women by comparing it to the negative class representations in television programmes and in the real world. For 29 of the 34 women who had incomes of their own, they stressed the pride they derived from their earnings or the fact that they had never cheated other people or, as many women said, corrupted the country (see Chapter Five for detail). The dignified depiction of the urban poor helped the women to overcome their sense of oppression and empowered them to negotiate with the stereotypes of the urban poor in the

media. It shows the related process of decoding and encoding in which class stigma is denied and, thus, class dignity is replaced.

The second way in which they negotiated their identities was to strengthen the value and meaning of class morality. The Klongtoey women defined the meaning of class morality as a positive attribution, which was opposite to material greed. Thus, through this decoding and encoding process, the position of class did not matter; instead, it was the moral achievement that indicated the value of class.

The third way was to identify education as the main means to class mobility. This mode of identification suggests that the Klongtoey women considered class as not fixed, and, therefore, could be shifted. For the Klongtoey women, education was a benefit and the most important means of mobility for the urban poor.

In terms of ethnic identities, the Klongtoey women classified the images of *I-san* identities into four constructive ways. A few identities were re-constructed from the dominant representations by encoding positive meanings onto the negative ones (Hall, 1997). First, by decoding the historical fact that the *I-san* regime was the former empire of the East (the Kingdom of Khmer) several thousand years ago, the Klongtoey women claimed the sacred meaning of being *I-san* people. This historical knowledge was not necessarily obtained from the classroom because there are many historical sites scattered around the *I-san* region, and this knowledge appears in many local tales and folklores. To re-claim *I-san* identities as an old civilisation, the Klongtoey women were likely to state things such as: 'We are the heirs of the emperor who built the Angkor Wat (the World Heritage in Cambodia); our wisdom is sacred because it is inherited from great ancestors, etc.' [excerpted from the interviews with Roy, a community leader, and Chorn who had a strong view on *I-san* ethnicity]. This ethnic idealism is also clearly seen from the women talking about the rich nutrition of *I-san* food when the food was mentioned in television programmes, such as in comedy programmes, in *Nang Baab* and in *I-san* folk music (see Chapter Five and Six).

Second, from the decoding that *I-san* people never involved in radical politic, the Klongtoey women prompted to encode the images of *I-san* as non-aggressive ethnic group. This construction process was noticeable when the women discussed news events that involved *I-san* people, and the misrepresentations of slum characters in the soaps (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven). The third way in which their ethnic identities were re-constructed was in terms of images of a tolerant

and strong body that is portrayed widely in the media. This ability is re-encoded in a positive way by highlighting its labour value and service to the country. All of the *I-san* women in this study boasted that Bangkok was built on the labour of *I-san* people, and that if one day they all left the city, Bangkok people would be in trouble. Furthermore, the physical endurance of *I-san* people was praised as a unique ability that made *I-san* people survive in all situations.

The last form of identified ethnic identity is linked to the comedians in television performance. Although only 13 women out of 30 viewed the images of *I-san* comedians in a positive way, it is worth noting this form of ethnic re-construction (see Chapter Five and the explanation of the number of women informants in this topic). To re-encode the positive meaning out of the negative images, 13 Klongtoey women asserted that *I-san* people were the best performers of comedy shows. Their acceptance of deploying humour to laugh with the ethnic characters is precisely what is suggested in Hall's work on representations (1997). Referring to this concept, the body is the principal site to be played against the stereotypes by enhancing the power to command the gaze, laugh and satisfaction of the others (see Chapter One). One example of positioning the ethnic body in a central gaze can be explained by looking at the image of the comedian character named Noi Pogam, a well-known female actress who had become a role model for many *I-san* women, as well as the Klongtoey women. Although Noi's appearance and performance were the major components that engendered people's laughter, her sincere personality was often seen in a positive way, which turned other people's ridicule into an appreciation of her ethnic appearance and her role. The recent advertising campaign on waste recycling that used Noi as a presenter became one of the most successful campaigns that impacted on the public, as well as in the Klongtoey slum where her messages (through song and speech) were often repeated and sung by slum people. The fame of some *I-san* characters, particularly Noi, empowered the Klongtoey women to conceptualise *I-san* identities as optimistic, friendly, enjoyable and peaceful. In fact, this light-hearted behaviour could be found in every Klongtoey woman who always gave smile, laugh, offered food, or teased me throughout my participating with them. However, I acknowledged the fact that my presence as researcher might well have impacted on the way they presented themselves to me. I do not want to romanticize the women by suggesting this cheerful, light-hearted attitude as typical. Of course there was as much diversity of

temperament among them as would be found among any group of people within a community. However, it is clear that they thoroughly enjoyed positive representation of the character of Noi.

The recognition that identity was socially constructed and was explicitly imposed by the dominant power was the most clearly debated among the Klongtoey women when discussing gender representations both in group conversations and individual interviews. The women attempted to decode and encode gender representations by looking specifically into two categories. One was to construct the idealised femininity of migrant urban poor without placing it in the masculine context. And the other was to construct the identities of *I-san* migrant women in the slum apart from the universal identities of women more generally. This multiple mode of construction reflects two significant strands of feminist thought which opposes the essential definition of feminine/masculine, and denies the category of women as a universal subject position. The overall findings in this study give an impression that the Klongtoey women felt the need to form their own gender identities, which, as they said, should fit into the slum and migrant contexts (see Chapters Five, Six and Seven). They shared experiences of domestic problems, such as Klongtoey women taking up the masculine role of breadwinner and family leader, as well as community leader. Therefore, in this context, the boundary between feminine and masculine identities became blurred, and the ideal woman was seen as somewhere between these two poles. Moreover, the Klongtoey women stressed the importance of shifting gender identities, which depended on the circumstances. For example, sexual repression was important for being a respectful woman, but in the mean time, decision-making and leadership were essential requirements to fulfil familial responsibility.

The Klongtoey women were conscious of their status as migrant and urban poor women. The Klongtoey women were determined to highlight their *I-san* ethnic identities through their own consumption patterns, such as wearing traditional dress (hand-made woven cloth), using local products, etc. In deed, *I-san* traditional dress was a very significant symbol in their encounters with the 'outside' cultures and for the solidification of *I-san* identities among Klongtoey women. Several women explained that *I-san* dress did not only give them pride, but also stopped them from wasting money on fashionable clothes. For instance, Roy, the community leader, had copied a poem to raise consciousness about the importance of *I-san* dress and

put it on the wall of the community centre. The meaning of the poem emphasised that 'being Thai people, the traditional dress is very significant because we are not slaves of the Westerners'.

In all, the ability to construct their own identities enabled the Klongtoey women to celebrate the value and practice of *I-san* culture together with the urban poor and gender cultures. We have noted a range of decoding and encoding processes that constitute the ideal representations of Klongtoey women's identities. Because identity is fluid and can be shifted according to circumstance, the women were likely to identify with multiple approaches. Some identities were taken up between the binary opposition lines of class, ethnicity and gender. Some identities were re-constructed from their negative stereotypes to be a focal point of outsiders. In this way, although the physical appearances of *I-san* people did not change, but the subjectivity and meaning were shifted into the more pleasurable of 'being looked at'. The crucial implication of this construction process was the recognition that the women's perceptions of being oppressive identities could change when they accessed a powerful role of actor in producing meaning. This is confirmed through the entire range of the women's awareness of their power gained by challenging the dominant representations with their new identities.

3) Pleasure of Negotiation

Negotiation is a concept that has been woven throughout the argument of this study. It is central to an understanding of counter-hegemony between the Klongtoey women's dominant representations and their being migrant urban poor in the urban slum where power is unequally distributed. The overall findings imply that negotiation is not only the means to gain power, but is a source of power in itself. It is the main element that provides power for the Klongtoey women, and marginalized groups elsewhere, to construct meanings, identities, and pleasure involved in the politics of representation. This is to say that the Klongtoey women realised that their potential power to negotiate was derived from their oppression and, more importantly, the understanding that popular culture, such as in television, was a safe space where the dominant power could be disturbed and challenged by a subordinate power. And this is why the consumption of popular culture is very important for the exercising of hegemonic power by a marginalized group.

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The above example of Klongtoey women's negotiation and pleasure can be well explained by Fiske's notion of popular pleasures (1987). His theory emphasises the tension between pleasures of power and pleasures of resistance by asserting that 'the popular pleasures of the subordinate are necessarily found in resisting, evading, or offending this [the social] power' (1987: 230). Therefore, it is assumed that when the Klongtoey women negotiated their representations of identities throughout their television talk, the power and the political resistance emerged which, in turn, brought out the pleasures of this empowerment. However, what Fiske intends to propose is not the power to obtain pleasure from the meanings that are made, but the power to make meanings and to gain pleasure from this process. These are some of the most significant findings in the reception study of Klongtoey women and their negotiation discourse. The presentations in Chapters Five, Six and Seven have demonstrated the pleasure Klongtoey women derived from the ability to deconstruct negative meanings and to re-construct their preferred meanings.

The feelings of pleasure were usually illustrated through the active participation of the women in the conversations about TV, the emotional response that reflected the deep involvement in the subject of their talk, the extensive talk beyond the subject in television (bringing in experiences and attitude), and the group talk that became part of their living culture. One of the examples to show the great pleasure derived from the negotiation power is when Roy, a community leader, seriously proposed to me an idea of filming the story of everyday life in the Klongtoey slum. Roy's purpose was to claim power by rejecting all kinds of mainstream media and having an alternative choice of their own. Even though it is merely a dream, Roy's idea reflected her awareness of access to power, and this encouraged her to seek more ways of enhancing this symbolic power and the pleasures beyond the offer of television. Since Roy had more experience working with other non-governmental organisations, she seemed to adjust well to the concept of grass root alternatives and collectives forums to voice their own needs and power. Therefore, her idea of making an alternative media that represented the desirable images of the slum neighbourhood showed her confidence in negotiation power and the pleasure derived from it.

Here, we see that one of the main elements to maintain and negotiate pleasure is a space that legitimises the values of women's talk, which allows the women to explore power relationships in a patriarchal society. This is precisely the

importance of political aspect of feminine oral discourse emphasised by several feminists and cultural theorists (see theory discussion in Chapter Five). The observation data from the fieldwork shows that when the Klongtoey women talked in a private environment, which was a domestic context and among female friends who shared social and class oppressions, their consciousness about political issues such as class, ethnicity and gender was very high. The Klongtoey women experienced the shifting of their roles as listeners and viewers into communicators and producers of meaning, which had been denied in the mainstream communication systems (see Chapters Six and Seven). Many women even referred to their group activities as something that encouraged them to feel less guilty or unapologetic in taking time off from family responsibilities. For example, the three friends of the middle track group, Malee, Auree, and Sayun, made remarks which were typical of all the Klongtoey women: 'We enjoy talking about the telly with no interference from our men. It's the only time that we can boost our energy before going back to work. It reminds us of the opportunity to have positive images of ourselves'.

From the above example, it shows that the pleasure of negotiation can come from various practices. First, it is the pleasure from being able to negotiate their own leisure time and space in watching television. In this context, pleasure is connected to the physical environment of television viewing as well as the hegemonic power to claim the use of television. From the findings in Chapter Five, the Klongtoey women had arranged to view a specific favourite night-time soap opera, which was safe from family intervention. In the mean time, watching together with a group of friends during the daytime, despite devoting less attention than to their favourite night-time programme, the women were able to find pleasure in establishing patterns of solidarity and socialisation with other women. Viewing soap operas also created a cultural space of media consumption which was different from that of men, such as the feminine mode of polychronic viewing, the participation in a group, the resistive mode of group talk against the ideological control by men, and the development of empathic feeling by being involved in the destiny of soaps characters.

Second, following the pleasure of occupying their own time and space, the Klongtoey women gained pleasure from defining the value of television for their livelihoods as well as class signification. The use value of television as an exchange commodity and household status empowered the women to deal with their existing problems and attitudes of outsiders. This pleasure can be read as the pleasure in

materiality in which possessing a television set could provide a specific meaning of one's status. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, the size of one's television set was significant for the family's status and for the women's respectability. Thus, for the Klongtoey women, an ability to be a host or a centre of television viewing among female friends meant the status of power and the pleasures in obtaining and demonstrating this power. Although pawning a television meant the interruption in seeking pleasure from watching television, the value of the exchange to the family's financial solution for release from economic hardship (without adding to more debts) was helpful. Because pawning a television was a common practice among the Klongtoey women, there was no shame in it. Indeed, Prani, a woman who was pawning her television, expressed that, 'don't take life too seriously, we can put TV in and out of the pawnshop as many times as we want. Sometimes I'm lucky. I got a better price than last time'.

Third, pleasure can be derived from subversive readings, which is the power to challenge the representations of the given text. Throughout the deconstruction process, the women found pleasure from reading discursive meaning and replacing negative meanings with positive connotations. For example, by shifting and focusing the negative associations of being urban poor on to the male urban poor, the Klongtoey women could distance their identities from this negative representation. Although it was a partial achievement, because the main stereotype of the urban poor was not refuted yet, the Klongtoey women could gain pleasure from this act.

Fourth, the genre of television soap operas and several other entertainment programmes enabled the women to view how other people's personal relationships and familial problems were handled and resolved. Although the findings demonstrated that the Klongtoey women did not directly identify their personalities and everyday lives with the soap characters, they could get pleasure from seeing the feminine competence being valued in the soaps, particularly the heroines who usually gained victory over the patriarchal power of the heroes at the end. In addition, the melodramatic narrative of soap operas and other entertainment programmes had responded to the feminine linear relationship in which 'wanting to know what happened, to see the truth unveiled, and to share the sympathy with other women' (Geraghty, 1991) were emphasised. This can be seen in several group conversations on the two soap operas (see Chapters Six and Seven), in which the

women stated that they enjoyed following the soaps' episodes because they did not want to miss the story or miss the talk among friends on the next day.

Fifth, the ability to enter the masculine world of pleasure and leisure was also pleasurable for the Klongtoey women. This pleasure seemed to be caught up in a double bind because the women did not confine themselves to the territory of woman's genres, but attempted to enter the male's territory by participating in watching the programmes such as news, critical current affairs programmes, and sports. It is a double bind because the Klongtoey women had proclaimed the pleasure in watching woman's genres; at the same time, they did not deny or resist the value of male's genres as more privileged and intellectual than that of the woman's genres. However, having been caught up in these two values, the Klongtoey women could establish pleasure from shifting their modes of watching between the two gender's genres, which men did not do. By watching soap opera, the women gained pleasure from sharing the tragic feeling with the soap characters, and by watching news or sports, the women gained pleasure from being 'up to date', showing intellectual competencies, and sharing the feeling of masculine excitement from watching a sports programme. This ability to switch pleasures between a soft genre and serious genre shows the women's competence in adjusting and connecting rather than being confined to rigid boundaries. This flexible advantage offers choices about pleasure for the women.

Finally, the women experienced pleasure in challenging the marketing and policies of the dominant media. Two examples of this were the women's criticisms of the production policy of television programmes that re-produced the old representations of class, ethnic and gender differences; and the resistance to the mass consumerism and centralised ideology presented through advertising.

This study has demonstrated that the value of pleasure lay in the Klongtoey women's ability to negotiate. Although the sources of pleasure could be diverse, it brought the unifying experiences of pleasure among Klongtoey women who shared similar kinds of class, ethnicity and gender identities. For example, in the case of reading sexual transgression in the soap operas, the majority of Klongtoey women were happy to see the female transgressor being punished because it was against their traditional beliefs about sexual morality. On the other hand, a few women took this opportunity to criticise patriarchal prejudice for always blaming women. This moment of criticism was pleasurable for this group of Klongtoey women because

the patriarchy was devalued even though it occurred in the safe space of women's talk. In another example, drawing on class issues, the Klongtoey women gained pleasure from ridiculing the powerful images of the upper class. This pleasure was particular for the Klongtoey women because it required discursive reading and experiences of being subordinated.

Moreover, the pleasure that derives from negotiation or resistance is, therefore, different from the pleasure that is gained from consensus and agreement. Although, abstractly, pleasure is pleasurable regardless of how it is felt (Harrington & Bielby, 1995), I would emphasise that, in practical terms, there is specificity among each social characteristics, such as class, ethnicity, and gender. As we cannot assume that every woman experiences the same oppression, it is the conclusion here that we cannot assume the universality of pleasure either. Therefore, pleasure is not a unifying experience, but varies according to an individual's context. However, individuals can develop the same pleasure with others when they have shared the various similar contexts, for instance not only by being a woman or being urban poor, but through similar interactions in various contexts.

In all, it can be said that the specific marginalized position of the Klongtoey women enabled them to gain pleasure from watching and talking about their representations in television. The women experienced pleasure because they had created a space in which they could constantly negotiate the meanings generated by patriarchy and dominant ideology, without being interrupted or corrected by those in power. In fact, the women gained pleasure not merely by negotiating with the meanings of representations, but also by becoming critics and encoders. In this sense, the space of viewing and negotiation provided both pleasure and politics for the women: they could laugh at the distortions while still enhancing a politics that criticised these distortions.

4) Rethinking Media Representations and Negotiation of Identity

This study has shown how the Klongtoey women negotiated their identities by challenging the dominant representations of them in the media. The entire result affirms the classic concept of counter-hegemony (see Chapter One), which emphasises popular culture as a significant space for ideological contestation allowing the dominant identities to be disturbed and negotiated. This study is also a contribution to the audience studies, especially for studying audiences in the specific

interrelations contexts of class, ethnic minority, and gender. It states the importance of conditions of reception or the positioning of audiences as a prime consideration for research method. Here, Morley (1986), the originator of studying audiences' context, is right in suggesting that we examine both the broader implications of the audiences (class, gender, and ethnicity) and the micro-levels of audiences' construction of meaning in order to understand how the latter are negotiated by the former. This study further proposes that to analyse how the marginalized audiences construct and/or deconstruct identities from the dominant portrayals, the links to the textual structure and the marketing policy of a media text must be taken into account. Indeed, it is in this dynamic interplay between text, audiences' context, and audiences' perception that meaning and identity are generated. This is to reinstate textual analysis back into audience study, which has been overlooked, since ethnographic audience analysis has been celebrated in this field. However, as this study has demonstrated, textual analysis should be carried out only for the purpose of comparison between text and context of the audiences or an understanding of the complete process of encoding and decoding, but not as the prime method for investigating audiences' reception. That studying audiences within the real setting of everyday life is still regarded as the most appropriate and valuable method has been confirmed in this study.

Understandings and experiences of class, ethnicity, and gender were completely central to the lives of the Klongtoey women. These are understood by looking at the way the women decoded meanings of their dominant representations as a form of intersection of class, ethnicity and gender. It can be summarised that these representations were decoded within the binary frame of oppositions between central civilisation and migrant 'primitivism'. Along these two extreme poles, the characteristics of class, ethnicity and gender were inserted to maintain a wide gap. Therefore, the representations in the media were always found, by the women, as distinctive stereotypes that originated from the two binary oppositions. For example, whenever class ideology was discussed in the women's talk, the dichotomous representations of the urban poor and the upper class reinforced the women's beliefs in the divisions between central Thai domination and *I-san* migrant subordination.

Thus, this study argues that the representations in the cultural discourse results in devalued meanings and negative traits associated with Klongtoey women. This argument confirms the idea proposed by many cultural theorists that

representation is significant and is a central element of identity (Dyer, 1997; Hall 1997, etc.) It is the binary mode of representations that made the women feel excluded or marginalized. This study suggests that to deconstruct the binary oppositions, the discourse of interpretation needs to be changed within both the encoding and decoding process. Otherwise, the discursive reading into the positive images of the Klongtoey women will be problematic because the binary opposition remains. Furthermore, without deconstruction, the women's negotiation would be constantly based on oppression, which may not leave much space for resistance.

However, the findings have demonstrated the difficulties in deconstructing these binary representations because the representations are constituted of several interrelations among class, race, gender and so on. Therefore, to deconstruct the class hierarchy or the oppositional images of the urban poor, Klongtoey women have to deconstruct the marginalized value of *I-san* ethnicity as well as the gender norms of masculine/feminine. With these limitations, however, the Klongtoey women chose to blur the boundary of oppositions rather than to destroy the representations altogether. For instance, the signifiers of Klongtoey women's identities shifted from the broader contexts of class, ethnicity and gender to the specific context of individual morality. In this way, the categories are reduced and give way to the emergence of new modes of defining identity. Here, the standpoint of feminist postmodernism on destabilizing of gender through representations (Kaplan, 1992) is illustrated by the blurring strategy that the Klongtoey women adopted.

Thus, despite the persistence of binary representations, its signification is devalued and alternative identities are possible because the space for negotiation is opened. This is the politics of representation that the Klongtoey women employed and which took place in the system of cultural discourse (languages, meanings, representations, and identities). In order to mark the fundamental concept of the politics of representation employed by the Klongtoey women, I propose the following framework to explain the negotiation strategies of the women, which were related to several factors within the women's contexts.

(The figure 1 is shown in the next page).

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Major oppressive factors   **Specific factors**

```
┌─────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
│                 │                    │   I-san culture          │
│   Class         │                    │   Buddhist morality      │
│                 │                    │   Economic hardship      │
│   Ethnicity     │                    │   Uncertain living       │
│                 │                    │   Women's networks       │
│   Gender        │                    └──────────────────────────┘
│                 │
└─────────────────┘
      negotiation & resistance              negotiation & resistance

                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
          ────────► │ : the blur of boundaries │ ◄────────
                    │ : the shift of signifiers│
                    │ : the hybrid identity    │
   Deconstruct      │ : the temporary identity │   Reconstruct
   : exclusion      └──────────────────────────┘   : strengthening
   : defensive                  │                   : justification
                                ▼
                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
                    │   The formation of KT     │
                    │   women's identities      │
                    └──────────────────────────┘
```
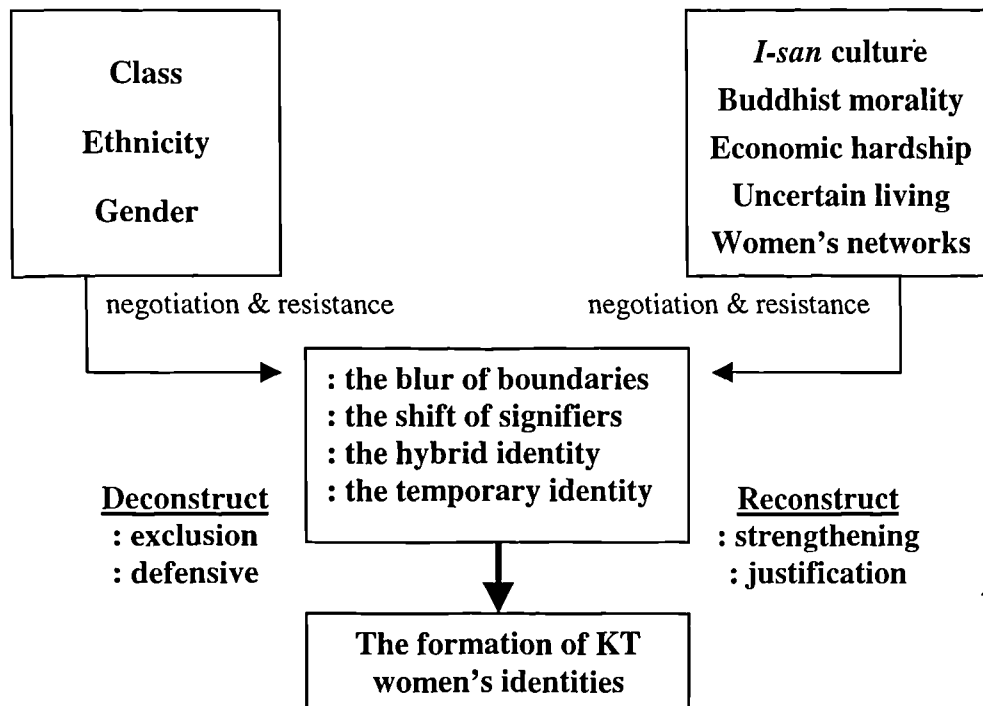
Figure1: A conceptual framework of Klongtoey (KT) women's negotiation and resistance

From the conceptual framework shown in figure 1, the major forces that enabled the Klongtoey women to negotiate with and resist their dominant representations were the women's experiences of class, ethnicity and gender as emphasised throughout this study. These major factors, or termed the macro-level of the Klongtoey women's context, must be considered together with the micro-levels of the women's everyday lives in order to understand the women's modes of negotiation. These specific factors included their ties to their I-san culture, their beliefs in Buddhism and morality, their struggle in economic hardship and uncertainty, as well as the shared experiences and friendships among the three track groups of the slum. The interrelations between the three major factors and these specific factors offered the women their own ways of negotiation, including the deconstruction mode of negotiation, the reconstruction mode of negotiation and the multi-interpretation modes that provide a new space for the women to form their preferred identities.

Through the deconstruction process, their dominant representations, which reinforced the negative stereotypes of the urban poor and I-san ethnicity, were rejected or read with oppositional meanings. Not only did the Klongtoey women

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exclude themselves from these stereotypical images, they also defended their identities by viewing the dominant meanings as biased social constructions. On the other hand, some representations, which were decoded by the women as positive meanings have been strengthened and applied to justify their own desired identities. These reconstructed representations were usually found in their ethnic identification with some *I-san* prominent figures, their connection to *I-san* culture and beliefs, and their belief in the potential for class mobility via education.

Between these two types of negotiation strategies, the oppositional boundary between Klongtoey women and those of dominant representations was blurred because the two modes of negotiations had destabilized the fixed positions of the women's identities, without erasing them. Furthermore, the address to morality was acknowledged as the women's attempt to shift the power signifiers of class, ethnicity and gender away from the women categories in order to construct the new frame of identity. Because there were limitations on how they should be or could be, the Klongtoey women deployed the value of morality as the core subjectivity to generate a sense of themselves. This is to reveal that the women were conscious of their marking by (working) class, (marginalized) ethnicity, and (subordinated) sexuality because these markers assumed the homogeneity of the identity '*I-san* migrant women in slum' as always oppressive. Their refusal to be fixed by the social positioning of main categories and their demand to construct themselves as particular sorts of 'moral women' was a major feature of the Klongtoey women's politics. Therefore, to move beyond a form of oppressive identity, the binary oppression that regarded their identities as the 'Other' needed to be deconstructed and the Klongtoey women needed to move towards a model of articulation of transformative practices. This is the model that transforms the fixity of a singular identity into a community of mixed identities. In this way, the Klongtoey women's identities were not viewed as entirely outside of and against a well-established structure of dominant identities, but as a common collection of an intersection of class, ethnicity and gender. This was a position that enabled a new form of hybrid identity to occur, which was the mixing of the cultural categories between the traditional identities of *I-san* ethnicity and the modern identities of an urban life in the slum context. The construction of hybrid identity was an answer to avoid identity conflict and a mobility of identity.

This suggests that we need to be more considerate about how we approach theories about the politics of representation. In fact, because representation is socially constructed, there is no single category that is applicable to conceptualise all women's identities. Furthermore, because the politics of representation occurred a system of cultural discourse, it enabled the Klongtoey women to seek a kind of 'temporary identity' that responded to their negotiation power in a specific form of time and space. For example, most of the women gained power to enhance their *I-san* identity from seeing their ethnic appearances as a site to command the gaze and laughter of people through the play of television *I-san* comedians. However, most of the women did not like being laughed at when they appeared in public areas. Therefore, this study suggests that within the specific context of the urban poor migrant women, an ideal of temporary identity may be more relevant in conceptualisations of the politics of representation.

The politics of representations should also entail the possibility of being different from the dominant representations and the former identities of the Klongtoey women themselves (e.g., traditional ethnicity). This study has emphasised that to achieve a positive identity or a new form of identity, it first has to go through the recognition process of their negative stereotypes established by the dominant powers.

Finally, since politics is understood in its broadest terms as anything to do with 'power', this study argues that to engender politics for the identification process of Klongtoey women, the other side of representation—the encoding process would need to be taken into account as another prime consideration. It is especially possible that the deconstruction of stereotypes can be used to put pressure on media organisations to support cultural diversity and pluralism of identities, which are accorded equal value and legitimacy. This is to suggest that the politics of representation should involve questioning how identities are produced and taken up through the encoding practices of representational systems. The call for the diversity of representations appeared throughout this study by the Klongtoey women. However, many studies concerning the politics of representation barely pay attention to media organisations, despite the fact that hegemonic cultural power lies in them. Therefore, it is necessary that the future study of representation and identity should also pay attention to the encoding processes of media organisations; to find where the dominant representations are constructed, and where the spaces for negotiation

(within the media themselves) can take place. This will bring a new approach for feminists and cultural theorists to broaden the way we understand representation and the negotiation of identity.

APPENDIX 1: Summary Profile of the Klongtoey Women

Name	Age	Marital status			Education	Occupation	Origin	Ethnicity	Years of stay since migration
		Married	divorced	separated					
Middle track group									
1. ROY ★●■	64	with4 ch.¹			primary	community leader	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	36
2. MALEE ★●■	58	2 ch.			no degree	food vendor	lower N/E	Cambodian/Thai	23
3. AUREE ★●■	55			3ch.	no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	25
4. SAYAN ★●■	48	2ch.			no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	20
5. CHORN ★●■	55	2ch.			primary	unemployed	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	20
6. KAMFONG ★	37			2ch.	primary	grocery owner	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	17
7. UDOMPORN ★●■	45	2ch.			primary	laundry service	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	22
8. BOONLOM ★●■	37	2ch.			primary	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	14
9. FONGJAI ★●	48	3ch.			primary	baby-sitter	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	25
10.SAKORN ★●■	33	2ch.			primary	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	20
11.MUTCHA ★●■	36	2ch.			secondary	grocery owner	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	26
12.AEW ★●■	48	1ch.			no degree	contract worker	central	Thai	32
13.SAI★	50	4ch. re-married	4ch. re-married		no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	21
14.MALI ★●■	43	2ch.			primary	office cleaner	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	28
15.CHARUN ★●■	57			4ch.	no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	30
16.SAMNIANG ★●	48			2ch.	no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	14
17.WAN ★●■	42	2ch.			no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	24
18.SRIWAN ★●	39	3ch.			primary	office cleaner	lower N/E	Cambodian/Thai	18
19.CHAN ★●■	49	2ch. husband died			no degree	garment factory worker	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	21
20.PANNI ★●■	40	2ch. re-married			primary (Eng. Beginner c.)	contract worker	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	9

¹ ch. is an abbreviation of children

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Summary profile (con')

Name	Age	Marital status		Education	Occupation	Origin	Ethnicity	Years of stay since migration
		Married	divorced separated					
Upper Track Group								
21.LAMAI ★●	36	2ch.		no degree	contract worker	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	20
22.PRANI ★●	48	3ch. re-married		no degree	contract worker	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	24
23.RUNG ★●■	49	1ch.		primary	unemployed	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	22
24.KAEW ★●■	25	1ch.		primary	shop worker	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	7
25.MEENA ★●■	41	2ch.		no degree	unemployed	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	6
26.SOMSERT ★●	45	3 ch.		no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	29
27.NIMSRI ★●	76		3 ch. husband died	primary	unemployed	central	Thai	45
28.KOOM ★●■	50	3ch.		primary	unemployed	lower N/E	Cambodian/Thai	33
29.SUNVEJ ★	36	2ch.		no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Lao/Thai	12
Lower Track Group								
30.LA-OR ★●■	45	2ch.		primary	gambling host	upper N/E	Laos/Thai	24
31.ORAPIN ★	40	2ch.		no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Laos/Thai	18
32.TOY ★●■	42		----single----	vocational college	vegetable vendor	upper N/E	Laos/Thai	25
33.RUT ★●	48	2ch.		no degree	food vendor	upper N/E	Chinese/Thai	7
34.CHAWI ★●	45	3ch.		no degree	food vendor	lower N/E	Cambodian/Thai	22

The total number of the Klongtoey women participants in this study is 34. 30 women participated in the reception study of *Nang Baab*, and 21 women in the reception study of *Huajai & Kaipuean*.

Those women who participated in the reception study of general TV viewing are indicated with (★) beside their name. Those who participated in the reception of *Nang Baab* are indicated by (●) and those who participated in the reception of *Huajai & Kaipuean* are indicated by (■).

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APPENDIX 2: Diagram of the three track groups and
The significance in women's reception

Track group	Setting	Significance to reception
Upper Track	Part of the area is traversed by an expressway, which covers the area in shade and increases pollution. However, in contrast to the two track groups, households in this area are bigger on average, and more permanently built. A paved way in this area is well maintained (clean cement) because it leads to a main road outside and a busy market. People in the slum usually use this way to commute to and from the slum.	Most of the people in this neighbourhood group migrated from the same or nearby provinces, so they share similar tastes and culture. Because the area is connected to an outside market and other public facilities (namely, bus stop, school, temple), people tend to drop by and gather in front of the houses, including watching TV.
Middle Track	The densest area in the slum. The roofs of every household are connected, and some households share the same wall. A community centre is situated in the middle of this area because it is close to Roy's (the community leader) house. This centre serves as a gathering place on special occasions, such as neighbourhood committee meetings, public hearings, evening literacy classes, health checks from a visiting group of midwifes and nurses every 2 months. There is one public telephone outside the centre, and a big speaker to call people who receive phone calls. Around the centre are many food stalls and small grocery shops. This area is busy most of the day. Some houses, which operate gambling, contain crowded groups of people.	The daily lives of the people revealed around the community centre and food stalls, thus, they are likely to gather in groups, share food, and watch TV together. These group activities influence their attitude towards many issues, which usually are presented in similar ways. All committee members of the Klongtoey slum live in this area, these people are more active and have strong viewpoints about authority, which creates a sense of resistance or negotiation among people in this area more than the others.

| Track group	Setting	Significance to reception
Lower track	Households are not too close. Though average households are not big (compared to the upper track), there are mostly 2 storey-houses, and more green (houses decorated with plants) more than the other 2 groups. The railway track, which serves as a walkway, connects this area to the outside road but no public place on the road. This area is quieter and has fewer passers-by than the others.	People tend to stay in their houses rather than gather in a group. There are fewer shared activities among neighbours than the others. One reason is the gap between houses, and the other maybe many people going out to work during the daytime. On only a few occasions do they watch TV together. Some people in this group became the topic of gossip among other people in the slum because of their isolation and closed-behaviour. In turn, they tend to have less consensus on major issues shared by the slum neighbourhood. For example, some of the people in this group are not satisfied with their situation and look forward to moving out.

1) The Klongtoey slum. The set showing a single rail track that runs in the middle of the slum. The railway track serves as a communal place for women when no train runs through it.
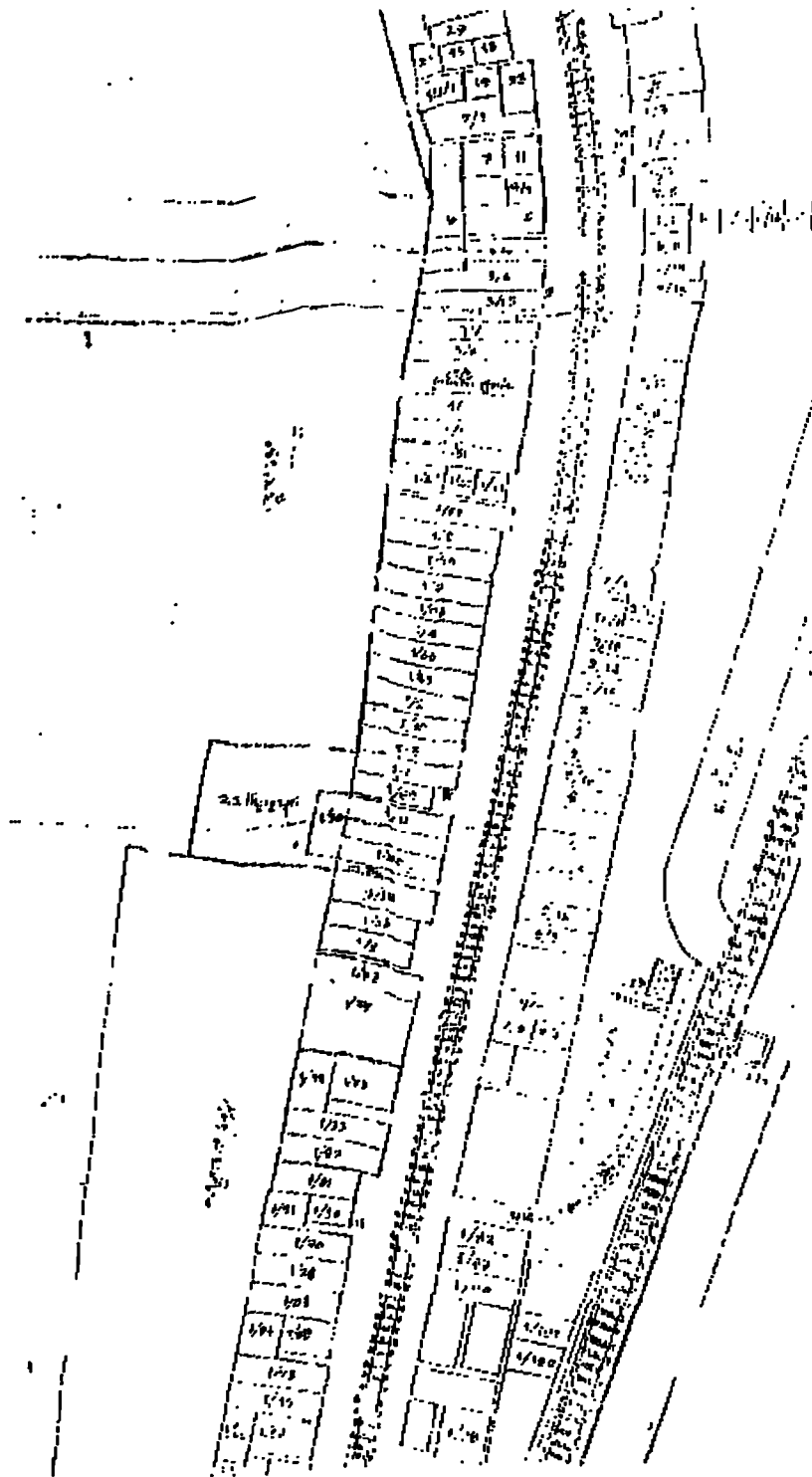

2) A train approaching the slum. The train, usually for goods delivery only, passes Klongtoey slum nearly nine times a day.
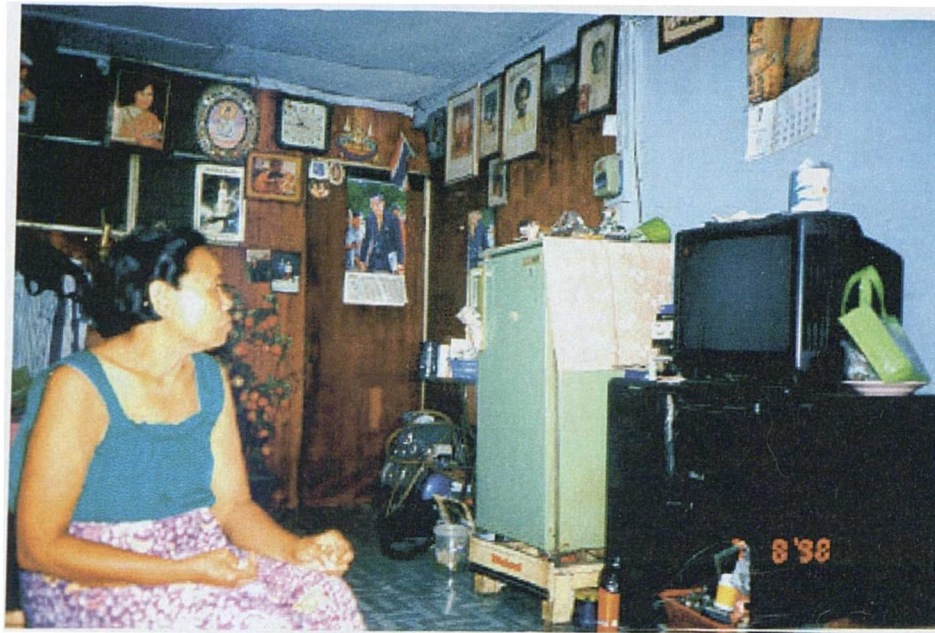
3) Roy, a community leader, is watching TV. in her house.

4) Some women of the middle track group are making cloth stuffing for toys. This is an unskilled, petty job taken usually by Klongtoey women as a source of additional income.

5) Small-scale map of Klongtoey slum setting, showing part of household locations between the two sides of the railway track.

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