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# GROTESQUE PARODY AND QUEER FAILURE: RETHINKING FORM, GENDER, AND OTHERNESS IN RADEN LANDAI

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## ABSTRACT

*This article offers a critical re-reading of Raden Landai, a Thai satirical poem from the early Rattanakosin period, through the lenses of Camp aesthetics, Queer theory, Psychoanalysis, and Russian Formalism. Traditionally dismissed as comic literature, Raden Landai is here reconsidered as a complex text that parodies courtly literary conventions and reflects on gender, identity, and ethnic marginality. Through close textual analysis, the study identifies three aesthetic strategies: (1) parody of epic structure and poetic style; (2) destabilization of normative masculinity through exaggerated desire and queer misrecognition; and (3) stylized representation of ethnic otherness especially through the figure of the khaek. These strategies reveal how theatrical excess, grotesque imagery, and misaligned desire can operate as cultural critique rather than mere farce. Rather than rejecting tradition, the poem subverts literary expectations from within, offering a performative space where canonical forms are reimagined. By foregrounding failure, vulgarity, and comic exaggeration, Raden Landai presents parody not as trivial entertainment but as a vital aesthetic practice that interrogates cultural norms. This interdisciplinary reading contributes to broader discussions of gender, form, and marginality in Southeast Asian literature and repositions the poem within contemporary discourses on literary parody, queerness, and cultural representation.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Parody, Camp Aesthetics, Queer Masculinity, Grotesque, Thai Literature, Thai Poetry, Cultural Identity, Southeast Asian Literature.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Raden Landai is a canonical Thai satirical poem composed during the reign of King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) by Phra Maha Montri (Thrap), a renowned poet of the early Rattanakosin period. The poem is often categorized as a comic verse drama that playfully echoes the elevated tone and structure of classical Thai literature, particularly the revered court epic *Inao*<sup>1</sup>. It tells the story of an unconventional love rivalry involving a “Khaek”<sup>2</sup> (a Thai term historically used for non-Thai or ambiguously foreign individuals) and a woman named Nang Pradae who is, notably, already married. The narrative begins with Raden Landai, a fiddle-playing beggar, wooing Pradae through music and flirtation, leading to a case of mistaken intimacy in which he fondly embraces her husband, Thao Pradu, believing him to be Pradae. The ensuing events unfold as a street-level romantic triangle involving Pradae and Kraae, a jealous sticky rice vendor of Tavoyan origin. Populated by commoners and set in Bangkok’s urban periphery, the poem recontextualizes the tropes of epic literature substituting courtly grandeur with vernacular life, and reframing high romantic ideals through comic inversion and theatrical excess.

Although Raden Landai has long been appreciated for its linguistic creativity and comic appeal, it is often positioned on the margins of Thai literary scholarship as a humorous episode rather than a work of critical significance. Previous studies have explored its parodic engagement with *Inao*, its social commentary on class, and its use of informal language to subvert elite conventions. For instance, Buapim (1980) discusses how romantic tropes are inverted by replacing princes and princesses with beggars and market women. Romyanan (1995) highlights the use of theatrical excess and grotesque diction in contrast to the refinement of *lakhon nai*, while Klinchandaeng (2020) emphasizes distorted idioms and dissonant prosody that produce a carnivalesque effect. Collectively, these contributions have laid a strong foundation for viewing Raden Landai as a text that engages critically but playfully with the aesthetics of literary hierarchy.

However, many interpretations tend to focus on its surface-level inversion of form and language, without examining the deeper affective, aesthetic, and ideological dynamics that shape the poem’s humor and representational complexity. Parody is

often treated as a stylistic device rather than a cultural practice capable of nuanced critique. As a result, readings risk overlooking how Raden Landai constructs not just comedic play, but moments of meaningful dissonance where form, meaning, and performance interact in ways that invite reflection. In particular, elements such as the grotesque body, unstable masculinity, and stylized portrayals of ethnic difference especially the recurring figure of the khaek can be seen not merely as comic motifs, but as representational strategies that touch on questions of propriety, identity, and literary imagination.

These dimensions remain relatively underexplored within Thai literary criticism, despite offering fertile ground for understanding the politics of representation in early modern Siam. This article engages with these elements through four intersecting theoretical perspectives Camp aesthetics, Queer theory, Psychoanalysis, and Russian Formalism not as rigid frameworks, but as interpretive tools that help illuminate the poem’s formal and cultural intricacies. Through this approach, Raden Landai is considered not only as a parody of content, but also as a reflection on form, genre, and the act of representation itself.

Camp aesthetics, in particular, offer a productive way to read the poem’s exaggerated theatricality, stylistic excess, and ironic tone. As Susan Sontag (2018) observes, Camp celebrates “failed seriousness” an aesthetic sensibility that embraces artifice, contradiction, and overperformance, often overlooked by traditional standards of taste. In this context, the humor in Raden Landai arises not from vulgarity alone, but from its playful embrace of theatrical misrecognition, distorted poetic devices, and emotionally exaggerated expression. This sensibility enables the poem to simultaneously imitate and rework the conventions of Thai high literature inviting reflection on its forms and ideals through comic exaggeration.

The article thus proposes a close re-reading of Raden Landai through four interpretive lenses. Camp and Queer theory foreground the poem’s performative excess, its exploration of failed heroism, and the instability of gender roles. Psychoanalysis sheds light on the moments of erotic confusion and symbolic anxiety, while Russian Formalism draws attention to its defamiliarizing rhythms and fragmented metaphors. Rather than dismissing these features as simple comic flourishes, the analysis

<sup>1</sup>*Inao* is an adaptation of the Panji tales from Javanese-Malay traditions and was traditionally performed as *lakhon nai* (inner-court drama) for royal audiences. The most well-known and celebrated version in Thai literature was authored by King Rama

II, and has since become a standard model of literary and performative refinement.

<sup>2</sup>A term that historically marks ethnocultural otherness, often used pejoratively for Indians, Malays, or Muslim minorities.

situates them at the heart of the poem's aesthetic power. Raden Landai emerges as a work that not only entertains, but also reflects on literary tradition in unexpected ways inviting us to reconsider how laughter, failure, and exaggeration might participate in the ongoing dialogue between form, culture, and identity.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Satire literature in Thai contexts that presents queer characters or feminine otherness often navigates complex cultural and social landscapes, reflecting both traditional and contemporary influences. In Thai fiction of the late twentieth century, queer figures tend to appear through a patriarchal lens as deviant subjects subjected to correction by familial or societal norms (Gasigijtamrong, 2014). Such dynamics echo classical representations found in epic traditions like the *Ramakien*, where characters such as Mandodari reinforce elite Siamese patriarchal and sexual discourses (Kumhaeng, 2024). Recent media, particularly the Boys Love (BL) genre, marks a shift towards greater acceptance of diverse queer identities; figures like PP Krit Amnuaydechkorn embody "sissypheia" and tropicopolitan aesthetics that expand the space of LGBTQ visibility (Prasannam, 2024). Yet discrimination persists, particularly in digital discourse where queer self-representation remains subject to social scrutiny (Doungphummes et al., 2025). Cinematic portrayals of kathoey also reflect ambivalent cultural attitudes rooted in karmic Buddhism, where social visibility does not necessarily translate into legal rights (Expósito-Barea, 2012). Similarly, the emergence of tom and dee identities illustrates hybridised gender performances shaped by both local and global exchanges (Sinnott, 2004). Collectively, these works suggest that satire and parody in Thai contexts often function as critical tools for exposing, negotiating, and transforming the norms that structure queer and feminine otherness. This article contributes to this broader critical conversation by examining Raden Landai as an early Rattanakosin example of parodic intervention into gender and cultural identity.

Scholarship on Raden Landai has traditionally framed the poem as a parody of classical Thai court literature, particularly *Inao*, and emphasized its use of comic inversion to critique social hierarchy and literary decorum. Tangtawee (1985) notes the poem's linguistic play and humorous tone, highlighting the use of grotesque imagery and plebeian characters to subvert elite norms. Buapim (1980) interprets the elevation of a beggar to protagonist as a symbolic

inversion of epic conventions. Romyanan (1995) and Klinchandaeng (2020) further examine distorted diction, Javanese-influenced idioms, and musical elements that destabilize traditional forms, while Tanboon (2024) situates the poem's folk cosmology within the broader religious syncretism of early Rattanakosin society. These works have established a valuable foundation for understanding Raden Landai as a challenge to literary hierarchy yet few delve into the aesthetic, affective, and ideological mechanisms that structure its humor.

Meanwhile, recent studies in Thai literature and visual culture increasingly draw upon Camp aesthetics and Queer theory to examine alternative modes of expression and identity. Sontag (2018) famously describes Camp as "failed seriousness" an aesthetic sensibility grounded in artifice, flamboyance, and performative collapse. Far from mere irony, Camp operates as a mode of critique shaped by marginality, particularly within queer communities. Scholars such as Halperin (2012) and Cleto (1999) distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp, showing how its excess and contradiction destabilize bourgeois decorum. These dynamics resonate closely with Raden Landai's parodic world, where exaggerated similes, distorted prosody, and theatrical absurdity exemplify Camp's ironic embrace of failure as cultural resistance.

Within Thai studies, this intersection of aesthetics and gender has been developed by scholars like Fuhrmann (2016) and Jackson (2000; 2009; 2016), who analyze how Thai cultural forms construct and regulate queer identities beyond Western queer paradigms. Kang (2012) and Wisuttipat (2023) explore performative masculinity and gender fluidity in traditional and contemporary Thai performance, while Prasannam (2024) theorizes sissypheia in Boys Love media. These works position queer failure and gender instability not merely as social conditions but as aesthetic strategies insights directly relevant to Raden Landai's scenes of erotic misdirection and excessive masculinity, which align with Camp's aesthetic of theatrical collapse.

In parallel, studies of ethnic representation in Thai literature have examined how humor is used to mark and manage cultural differences. Chaloemtiarana (2014) explores depictions of the Chinese as the "Other Within," revealing anxieties about national identity and cultural purity. Takovski (2015) and Leveen (1996) investigate how ethnic humor oscillates between ridicule and conditional inclusion, while Grow (1995) and Watkhaolarm (2005) analyze the performative marking of ethnic boundaries through language and style. These frameworks

contextualize Raden Landai's portrayal of the *khaek* figure not as simple comic relief, but as a structurally marginalized body whose foreignness is stylized, exaggerated, and politicized through parody. The laughter they evoke is never neutral it participates in the aesthetic work of exclusion and cultural negotiation.

To deepen this historical understanding, recent research has drawn attention to the pluralistic realities of early Rattanakosin society and the cultural mechanisms through which ethnic identities were depicted. Julispong Jularat (2007), for instance, examines the *Khlong Phab Khon Tangphasa* inscription at Wat Pho, composed during the reign of King Rama III, which enumerates thirty-two ethnicities known in Siam at the time. The poem's inclusive listing suggests a growing awareness of multicultural presence, even as it organizes difference through stylized literary form. In a similar vein, Reeder (2021) identifies the period between the 1830s and 1850s as a moment of conceptual innovation, when artists and local scholars began systematizing comparative depictions of world populations. His analysis of painted shutters, sculpted figurines, and dictionary entries reveals how ethnic difference was increasingly portrayed through formal typologies suggesting both a cosmopolitan imagination and a move toward visual and textual fixation of identity.

Meanwhile, Yothasamuth (2024) examines how King Vajiravudh's 1911 adaptation of *Othello* into *Phaya Ratchawangsan* reinterprets Shakespeare's racial themes within the context of Thai–Malay relations. In this adaptation, the Moor is transformed into a Malay general (*khaek*) whose acceptance in Thai society is achieved through assimilation and devoted service to the monarchy. The article suggests that this reframing reflects an aspiration toward national cohesion and resonates with early twentieth-century discourse on ethnic integration. Although the work does not explicitly express racial bias, it may be seen as contributing to a literary pattern in which foreignness is framed as culturally compatible only when aligned with dominant Thai values.

Taken together, these strands from literary parody and gendered aesthetics to ethnic humor and historical representations offer a multidimensional framework for engaging with Raden Landai. Rather than treating the poem as a mere humorous pastiche, this study draws on these intersecting bodies of scholarship to suggest that its formal exaggeration, theatrical affect, and stylized comic elements may be read as cultural expressions with layered

significance. By situating the poem within both the creative play of parody and the broader discourse of difference, this analysis seeks to understand how humor, failure, and aesthetic excess operate within the dynamics of representation without presuming any intention on the part of the author to critique or diminish tradition. Instead, Raden Landai is approached here as a dynamic literary text one that reflects and reworks the values embedded in Thai literary imagination, while also inviting renewed conversations about form, identity, and cultural meaning.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual analysis of Raden Landai, a parodic Thai poem attributed to Phra Maha Montri (Thrap) during the early Rattanakosin period. Rather than relying on empirical data, the research focuses on the poem's original poetic form its language, imagery, structure, and intertextual references. For this purpose, textual sampling is purposefully limited to episodes where the poem's parodic logic is most pronounced, particularly scenes in which common or subaltern figures adopt courtly gestures or, conversely, royal protagonists engage in theatrically exaggerated and improper acts. These passages were selected because they exemplify how the genre emerging clearly under King Rama III reconfigures courtly conventions not to subvert them outright, but to signal a novel literary mode of playful critique. Particular attention is given to how meaning emerges through strategies such as exaggeration, stylized imagery, misrecognition, and parody. The analysis draws on four intersecting theoretical frameworks: Camp aesthetics, Queer theory, Psychoanalysis, and Russian Formalism. These perspectives are not applied as rigid analytical templates, but rather as dialogic tools that illuminate multiple interpretive layers. Camp and Queer theory offer insights into gender performance and aesthetic excess; Psychoanalysis informs the reading of affective tension and symbolic ambiguity; and Russian Formalism highlights moments of defamiliarization and formal disruption within the poetic structure.

The study also attends to the poem's historical and cultural context, particularly its relationship to *Inao* (Rama II's royal drama) and broader courtly traditions in Thai literature. This integrated approach combining close reading with theoretical reflection aims not to produce generalizable claims, but to foreground the interpretive richness of poetic form as a cultural space where questions of power, identity,



revealing that the gap between nobility and absurdity may be one of context rather than content.

#### 4.1.2. Defamiliarizing Epic Space: The Humble Dwelling as Palace Parody

This defamiliarizing strategy continues in the poem's reworking of architectural space. In traditional Thai court literature, descriptive attention to setting plays an essential role in elevating tone and prestige: natural landscapes are rendered with lush poetic detail filled with blossoms, towering trees, and songbirds while palace interiors are portrayed as grand, ornate spaces embellished with gemstones, carved motifs, and symmetrical halls that reflect celestial order. Classical poets employ such descriptions not only for aesthetic pleasure, but as markers of cultural refinement and literary hierarchy. In contrast, *Raden Landai* substitutes the humble dwelling of its protagonist a dilapidated house with sagging posts, blunt stumps instead of spires, and mangy dogs who serve (in parody) as royal guards undercutting epic decorum through comic inversion.

He lived in halls with stunted posts and blunt-tipped spires,

Surrounded not by walls but thorny wires.

His guards? No men in arms with martial pride,  
But barking dogs that paced and howled outside

A faithful troop that kept the foes at bay,  
Their snarls the signal: "Strangers, stay away!"<sup>4</sup>

Again, the poetic structure mirrors epic convention, but the content introduces a tone of comic reversal. What reads at first as royal description quickly collapses into absurdity. The poem's fidelity to poetic form highlights its playful critique of literary expectations. By rewriting space and symbolism, the text invites reflection on the ways grandeur is not only represented but constructed. The splendor of classical palaces, usually evoked through golden spires and divine symmetry, is here hilariously replaced by makeshift structures, suggesting that "royalty" may be as much a matter of performance as of architecture. In doing so, *Raden Landai* reveals that the epic environment is not an inherent marker of status, but a stage set one that can be mimicked, distorted, or emptied of authority once transplanted into a new social landscape. The

laughter that emerges from this spatial inversion signals not only aesthetic parody, but also a cultural awareness of how literary space participates in defining hierarchy and legitimacy.

#### 4.1.3. Mocking Classical Beauty: Parody of Idealized Femininity

Another target of parody is the classical representation of feminine beauty. Where court poetry often idealizes women through similes of radiant moons, lotuses, and flowers, *Raden Landai* describes Nang Pradae, the female protagonist, with grotesque physical exaggeration. The description is not merely comic it deconstructs the aesthetic frameworks through which femininity is traditionally rendered.

Tall and willowy, yet strangely twisted in her poise,  
She looked for all the world like a peculiar camel  
bred in far-off Kelapa.

From crown to sole her skin was dark and blotchy  
only the whites of her eyes shone pale.

Her cheeks bulged like rough-skinned noni fruit,  
ripe and knobbly.

Her brows didn't arch like noble bow-shapes, but  
bent like the bamboo bow of a cotton-carding frame,  
Her nose hooked sharply, recalling a crooked field  
sickle.

Holes gaped through her ears, her face skewed  
oddly,

Her neck thick and stunted, round like a chopped  
tree stump.

Two breasts drooped low like sagging drawstring  
pouches slung at one's side,

Their bases shriveled like boiled luffa left too long in  
the pot.

With betel-red lips smudged by flecks of tobacco  
clinging to her gums,

She somehow still tempted men to gaze upon her as  
though she were a celestial queen<sup>5</sup>

Susan Sontag's (2018) notion of Camp the exaggeration of stylized aesthetic codes to the point of ironic failure helps frame this parody. By grotesquely overstating courtly beauty tropes, the poem reveals their artifice and limitation. Linda Hutcheon's (2023) theory of parody as "repetition with difference" also applies: the poem mimics the stylistic excesses of idealization only to subvert them with burlesque detail. The effect is not a mere

<sup>4</sup> From original text "อยู่ปราสาทเส้าคอดอยอดด้าน  
กำแพงแก้วแล้วล้วนด้วยเรียบทนา ไม่ทธารหอนเห่าฝ้าในงาม  
คอยปรบปรามประจามมิตรที่คิดร้าย" (Phra Maha Montri (Thrap), 1960, p.1)

<sup>5</sup> From original text "สูงระหงรงเพรียวเรียวรุด งามล้มม้ายคล้ายอุฐะหลาป่า  
พิศแต่หัวลดดเทาข้าแต่ต้า ทั้งสองเก้มก้มย่าดังลุกยอ

ค้ากงเหมือนกงเข้าตีดฝ่าย จมูกกละม้ายคล้ายพร้าขอ หุกกลางดวงพักตร์หักงอ  
ล้าคอตีดันเส้นกกลม ส่องเด้าห้อยดุงดังคุณตะเคียว โคงเนี่ยวแห้งร่วนเหมือนบวนต้ม  
เสวยสลายจุกพระโอซูร์ม แม้น่าเชยน่าซมนางเหวี" (Phra Maha Montri (Thrap), 1960, pp.3-4)

inversion of “beautiful” versus “ugly,” but a revelation of how literary beauty is itself a performance contingent on metaphor, genre, and expectation. In making Pradae both grotesque and somehow desirable, the poem complicates traditional gendered poetics, suggesting that attraction may arise not from perfection, but from theatrical exaggeration and embodied presence. In this light, parody operates less as ridicule and more as a form of meta-commentary through which the text asks: what, exactly, makes a body “poetic” in Thai courtly literature, and who has the authority to decide?

#### 4.1.4. Camp Performance and Failed Seriousness in Courtship

In classical Thai literature, lyric song (especially *khab-saw*) functions as a high aesthetic ritual through which desire is refined and ennobled; in *Lilit Phra Lor*, for example, Phra Phuen and Phra Phaeng fall in love after hearing a court musician sing verses praising the beauty, virtue, and kingly grace of *Phra Lor*. *Raden Landai*, however, transforms this refined vocal tradition into farce. Instead of a royal bard, the singer here is a wandering fiddler-beggar who stops at people’s homes to “sing for rice,” puffing himself up with mock courtly airs. His performance collapses immediately into parody when it becomes clear he can remember only a single line from *Suwanna Hong*, an early-Rattanakosin royal dance-play repeating it without context like an illiterate street performer:

Suwanna Hong was speared, don’t tell anyone  
which he repeats without clear context or  
development<sup>6</sup>

There is no elaboration, no emotional arc just repetition and disconnection. Combined with eye-rolling, tongue-wagging, and clownish mimicry, the courtship becomes a theatrical farce. This aligns with Sontag’s (2018) concept of “failed seriousness” the tragic aesthetic pushed past its limits into parody. At the narrative level, the love triangle among a beggar, a sticky rice vendor, and a cowherd further displaces epic centrality from kings and heroes to society’s fringes. Yet the rhetorical tone remains elevated, creating a productive dissonance. Rather than expressing tender emotion, the poem exposes the mechanics of performance by which emotion is manufactured, recycled, and exaggerated in courtly verse.

Taken together, these parodic strategies reveal that *Raden Landai* is neither an assault on Thai

literary tradition nor a simple jest at its expense. Instead, the poem revitalizes epic convention through deliberate acts of defamiliarization: sacred rituals are enacted with everyday materials, palatial architecture is reimagined as a collapsing house guarded by village dogs, exquisite heroines are replaced with grotesque yet strangely alluring bodies, and courtly serenades become repetitive, nonsensical songs sung by beggars for rice. In each case, the formal scaffolding of the canon remains but its heroic content is exchanged for marginal characters, improvised settings, and comic misperformance. This productive dissonance exposes how poetic grandeur is socially and symbolically constructed, while also demonstrating that such forms are elastic, playful, and open to reinvention. Rather than rejecting the classical tradition, *Raden Landai* participates in it by revealing its performative artifice and capacity for transformation. Parody thus emerges as both a literary technique and a cultural practice a way of engaging the prestige of high poetry from the margins, using laughter not as dismissal, but as a means of reflecting on how power, identity, and beauty are staged through form.

#### 4.2. The Grotesque Male: Queer Laughter and the Aesthetics of Misaligned Desire

While *Raden Landai* parodies the stylistic conventions of high literature, it also offers a playful yet pointed commentary on the performance of gender and desire. Central to this dynamic is a recurring motif of masculine misalignment moments in which male identity, rather than being confidently asserted, becomes confused, exaggerated, or theatrically unstable. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, Jack Halberstam’s exploration of masculine failure, and Freud’s concept of castration anxiety, this section considers how the poem engages with and gently unsettles idealized notions of Thai literary masculinity. Desire, in *Raden Landai*, does not unfold according to the polished scripts of courtly seduction. Instead, it falters, redirects, or becomes a source of comic ambiguity. Masculinity, likewise, is not depicted as inherently stable or authoritative, but as something performed with awkward intensity sometimes overplayed, sometimes misdirected. These disruptions do not simply undermine traditional ideals; they create space to reflect on the expectations, limitations, and

<sup>6</sup> From original text “สุวรรณหงส์สุกหอกอ่อนอกไคร. ถูกแล้วกลับไปได้เท่านั้น” (*Phra Maha Montri (Thrap)*, 1960, p.4)

theatricality of gendered roles within literary representation.

The most striking example of this gendered misalignment appears in the well-known bedroom scene, where Raden Landai anticipating a secret romantic encounter with Nang Pradae accidentally climbs into bed with her husband, Thao Pradu. The moment borrows from a familiar literary trope: the clandestine courtship scene in which a nobleman slips into the heroine's chamber under moonlight. Yet in *Raden Landai*, this convention is reinterpreted through comic confusion.

The "lover" is misidentified, the sensual setting is replaced by situational irony, and the romantic gesture unfolds in unintended directions. Landai embraces the wrong body, mistaking the husband for the wife, and the encounter leads not to desire fulfilled but to mutual surprise and disorientation. This moment of misrecognition does not suggest the presence of same-sex desire *per se*, but rather illuminates how romantic scripts are vulnerable to disruption. In this scene, desire becomes defamiliarized not through rejection, but through a theatrical mismatch of roles, bodies, and expectations. The result is a form of queer humor: not aimed at gender or sexuality itself, but at the fragility of the performances through which they are made legible.

Then Landai unlatched the door with stealth,  
Slipped into the chamber, his heart ablaze with  
passion.

Mistaking the sleeping man for Pradae, his beloved,  
He mounted him gently like a lover in the night.  
The startled Thao Pradu, fully pressed beneath,  
Was groped, embraced, and kissed with fervor.  
Awakening in shock, believing he was being  
attacked by a ghost,  
Both fumbled blindly in confusion.

'This is no spirit!' one cried.

'Nor is it my wife! This chest is hairy as a beast!'  
Grabbing a club in terror, he shouted: 'Who goes  
there? A man!' <sup>7</sup>

This moment of accidental misrecognition carries more than comedic value it gestures toward deeper questions about gender and performance. As Butler (1990) argues, gender is not a fixed identity but an ongoing enactment a process of repetition and

citation that can succeed, falter, or misfire. In this scene, both Landai and Pradu find themselves caught in overlapping performances: one enacts the role of clandestine lover, the other unintentionally occupies the position of passive recipient. When the illusion breaks, the humor arises not from the presence of homoerotic contact *per se*, but from the fragility of gender roles when their theatrical nature is laid bare.

This thematic thread continues in Landai's public attempts to woo Pradae, particularly in the scene where he flatters her after receiving a handful of rice. He addresses her with grand metaphors, likens himself to a noble figure, and invokes the language of destiny and devotion all while dressed in tattered clothes and carrying the signs of his marginal social position.

The effect is less one of persuasive romance than of heightened theatricality. His overperformance of masculine charm accompanied by unsolicited gestures and overwrought poetic phrasing reveals a tension between the desire to be desirable and the inability to fulfill that role convincingly. Rather than presenting confidence, the scene dramatizes the labor of performing masculinity in contexts where the conventional scripts no longer seem to fit.

O beauty beyond compare, so bright and fine,  
This humble life of mine survives on your small  
grains of rice.

Surely heaven moved your hand in charity  
Sweet lady, your kindness makes you divine in my  
eyes.

Pray tell me, noble one of this grand kingdom  
What is your name and royal rank that I might  
know whom I now adore?  
Are you the cherished queen herself?  
Or a princess born of lofty, moon-touched  
blood?

Though your figure reminds me somewhat of  
a sailor's hefty wife,  
I must confess I've fallen hopelessly, hungrily  
in love.

He spoke thus while edging closer to her fair  
side,  
And the "royal highness" suddenly lunged to  
seize her hand.<sup>8</sup>

This is where Halberstam's (2005) concept of masculine failure becomes especially relevant.

<sup>7</sup> From original text “เมื่อันนั้น ล้านไกด้วงสักหักกอลอนไไว ปีกประดู่ชูเขื่องห่องเข้าห้องในเข้าห้องในไก่ในเดือนตุลาคม สมพาร์ทันยังลักษณะเข้าห้องนั้นแบบ ท่านจะรู้สึกเส้นทางอยู่อย่างไร พระรัตน์จะรู้สึกว่าไม่ได้วางของลงพื้นห้องแล้วลุกกลับ แต่เมื่อันนั้น ท่านจะรู้สึกถูกหักเข้าห้องไปแล้ว ค่าใจเสื้อที่ว่าเสื้อตัวเดียวค่าห้องบ้านที่รุ่นไป เอื้อเจตคิดแล้วมิใช่ที่ จะว่าพระรัตน์เสื้อที่นี่ไม่ใช่ ขอนอกหักทั้งว่าไง ตกใจพอตระหนงร้องว่า ‘คน’ ” (Phra Maha Montri (Thrap), 1960, p.21)

<sup>8</sup> From original text “ งานอย่างนั้นปีกอุด ชี้วัดที่นี่รั่วอดหัวเข้าหัวสาร เป็นกุศลคลิ่งเจ้าให้กับน า หมายถึงเมืองพระบูนนั้น ที่อยู่ด้านบนท่านเข้าห้องรูปไป ชื่อเรียงเดิมไว้ในชื่อเจ้าเชื้อพันธุ์พระมหาศรีที่รัก ถูกน าลงลักษณะเป็นราชนิค รูปร่างของว่ากอลานสี ที่ไม่ได้รักเจ้าหนักหนา ว่ากอลานเข้าไปแล้ว พระรัตน์จะรู้สึกว่าไม่ใช่ ” (Phra Maha Montri (Thrap), 1960, p.5)

Landai's masculinity is not merely unconventional it is consistently misaligned with the heroic scripts he seeks to emulate. He adopts the behaviors of epic protagonists declaring love, sneaking into bedrooms, claiming moral authority but these gestures are continually refracted through incongruous settings and outcomes. He is not a prince in a palace, but a street fiddler navigating improvised encounters. His language strains toward eloquence but often lapses into incoherence; his touch, meant to signify intimacy, is misread or rejected. Rather than commanding desire, he becomes the focal point of comic tension a figure whose masculinity appears more performed than possessed.

Another moment of gender re-staging occurs when Landai comforts Pradae after she is abandoned by her husband. He kisses her cheeks, praises her beauty, and compares himself to Inao the iconic romantic hero of Thai literature while casting her ex-husband as Jaraka, the foolish rival. On the surface, the scene follows the structure of epic romance, yet its delivery is layered with exaggeration and irony. The comparison to Inao is not persuasive; rather, it feels knowingly misplaced. In this context, Landai's courtly masculinity does not assert itself with conviction it unfolds as theatrical performance, knowingly out of sync with its model. Here again, the Camp aesthetic emerges as a frame for understanding these moments. As Sontag (2018) observes, Camp resides in "failed seriousness" when cultural performances aspire to gravity or beauty but reveal their constructedness in the process. In *Raden Landai*, such moments do not merely parody masculinity; they invite us to reflect on how gendered ideals are sustained through performance, and how those performances may fray at the edges.

Beneath these comedic misfires lies a psychoanalytic undercurrent. Freud's (1924) concept of castration anxiety the fear of compromised male authority can be traced in Landai's repeated moments of romantic misrecognition and public embarrassment. His attempts at intimacy are met not with validation but with confusion, his performances of masculinity elicit amusement rather than admiration. In this way, the poem offers a lens through which to consider the vulnerability of male desire when dislodged from its expected frameworks.

Rather than affirming patriarchal ideals, *Raden Landai* playfully unsettles them. The poem queers Thai masculinity not by reversing gender roles, but by revealing the theatrical fragility through which those roles are maintained. Drawing on Butler (1990), Halberstam (2005), and Sontag (2018), the analysis

highlights how gender in the poem is not a stable identity, but a precarious script one that may be misread, exaggerated, or exposed to comic effect. The laughter produced is not merely amusement; it reflects what Hutcheon (2023) terms "politicized pleasure" an aesthetic form of enjoyment that also questions the structures it inhabits.

The representation of the male body in *Raden Landai* further reinforces this interpretive lens. Unlike in classical Thai literature, where male protagonists are often idealized or left undescribed, Landai's body is presented in deliberately unconventional ways: unkempt, clay-covered, clad in mismatched garments, and accessorized with everyday objects like a soapberry necklace and a club. These physical details shift the male body from a symbol of power to a site of theatrical excess signifying not failure in a moral sense, but a departure from the codes of elite masculinity.

This bodily representation also intersects with class. Landai is not only marginal in terms of gender performance, but also in terms of social position. As a beggar and street fiddler, he lacks the symbolic capital land, lineage, linguistic polish that underpins courtly ideals of manhood. His attempts at romantic or poetic expression are filtered through the lens of his social position, often read as inappropriate or misplaced rather than persuasive. This resonates with Gramsci's (2020) notion of cultural hegemony, wherein dominant groups define not only political legitimacy, but also the aesthetic terms of credibility. Within this framework, Landai's masculinity is not simply less valued it is structured as unintelligible within the dominant literary imagination.

Humor, then, operates in the poem as both narrative device and ideological gesture. Scenes of romantic misdirection and exaggerated seduction serve not just as comic relief, but as moments of aesthetic and cultural friction. Laughter becomes a means through which idealized masculinity is reframed not destroyed, but rendered visible in its artifice and limitation. Through this lens, *Raden Landai* does not merely parody desire; it invites us to reconsider the performative labor and social conditions through which desire and gender are imagined in Thai literary tradition.

#### 4.3. Comic Otherness and Ethnic Margins: Laughter and the Aesthetics of Cultural Difference

In addition to its engagement with literary form and gender performance, *Raden Landai* also navigates questions of ethnic and cultural identity particularly through the figure of the khaek. Historically, khaek has functioned as a flexible and

multilayered Thai term used to refer to individuals perceived as non-Thai or ambiguously foreign, especially those of Malay, Indian, Arab, or Muslim descent. In Thai literary and cultural imagination, the *khaek* figure often represents a position of partial inclusion neither entirely outside, nor fully within the bounds of normative Thainess.

Within *Raden Landai*, such characters are not relegated to the background; they play central roles in the unfolding of the narrative. Yet their portrayal is often marked by emotional intensity, stylized speech, and exaggerated behavior. These traits are not presented with overt hostility, but rather through a familiar register of humor that gently distances these figures from the poem's imagined normative center. This section explores how *Raden Landai* uses comedic modes not to reject ethnic difference, but to frame it within stylized and culturally resonant forms. The result is a form of comic estrangement that, while entertaining, also reflects the symbolic boundaries and cultural frameworks through which ethnic identities were imagined in early Rattanakosin literature.

The titular character, *Raden Landai*, is himself portrayed as a *khaek*, and this identity subtly shapes his characterization from name to behavior. His title "Raden" suggests noble Javanese or Malay origins, yet within the narrative, he appears not as a dignified prince but as a street fiddler whose romantic and social aspirations consistently misfire. His physical description draws on common markers of foreignness such as darker skin tone, bushy hair, and non-Thai garments but these features are not exoticized in a romantic sense. Instead, they are stylized within a comic register, becoming part of the poem's broader strategy of exaggeration. His gestures are theatrical, his speech rhythmically awkward, and his music lacks polish. These elements collectively produce a form of aesthetic excess that frames his character as incongruous with the norms of courtly decorum. Rather than presenting foreignness as mysterious or idealized, the poem integrates it into a familiar structure of humor using stylization to gently displace the *khaek* figure from the symbolic center of Thai literary identity.

As Jularat (2007) notes, the proliferation of ethnic labels in early Rattanakosin inscriptions reflected not only diversity but also a growing tendency to categorize and aestheticize difference. This resonates with Chaloemtiarana's (2014) analysis of the "Other Within," in which depictions of ethnic minorities in Thai texts often combine familiarity with stylized distance. The representation of *Raden Landai*, then, may be seen as participating in this broader cultural

logic one that engages with ethnic identity not through outright exclusion, but through narrative forms of difference and displacement.

This stylized comic framing extends to the character of Kraae, a jealous sticky rice vendor of Tavoyan origin who occupies a key position in the poem's love triangle. As Pradae's rival and Landai's former partner, Kraae is depicted with heightened emotion and theatrical volatility traits shaped not only by her gendered role, but also by her regional and social identity. A particularly vivid moment arises when she encounters Landai with his new bride, Pradae, and erupts not in a plea for lost love, but in a furious demand that he repay a debt for rice he once owed her. The comedic effect here emerges from a deliberate mismatch of genre and tone: the scene adopts the emotional framework of romantic confrontation but substitutes it with a mundane, transactional dispute. This incongruity collapses romantic grievance into economic tension, producing humor through the shift in register. Kraae's Tenasserim accent and distinctive regional appearance further accentuate her role as a comic disruptor elements that, within the conventions of the poem, signal her distance from central literary norms.

Her portrayal illustrates how ethnicity and class are aesthetically marked, not through overt hostility, but through humorous stylization that situates her on the periphery of the poem's imagined social world.

As Takovski (2015) argues, ethnic humor often works by recasting cultural difference into comic relief, allowing dominant narratives to acknowledge otherness while managing it through laughter. Similarly, Leveen (1996) notes that ethnic comedy frequently straddles a fine line between inclusion and marginalization, functioning as both a gesture of familiarity and a tool of distinction.

Then, Kraae, Tavoyan woman grew furious with  
rage,  
Stomping on the porch with thunderous noise.  
Jealous, she cursed and mocked him out loud:  
'So this is you, Mr. Fancy-with-your-seven-scars,  
forgetting the one who fed you cooked rice with  
ease.

I trusted your face, thought you a man of honor,  
Sold to you on credit, yet never paid a coin.  
Such lies and puffed-up tales, all stitched together  
I'll shame you as you deserve, you crooked fraud.  
Still owe me two satang, and haven't paid a bit

I'm done with you, Raden Landai!<sup>9</sup>

This passage captures both the theatrical emotionality and understated absurdity that characterize Kraae's role. Her anger is sincere, yet the way it is staged through a public accusation over a trivial debt generates a comic dissonance that reframes emotional grievance as economic farce. Like Landai, Kraae occupies a liminal narrative position: neither fully comic nor tragic, neither noble nor plebeian, and shifting fluidly across gendered affects. Her role complicates the love triangle not only in terms of gender dynamics but also through the ways in which ethnicity and class become stylized vehicles for humor.

These representations resonate with Homi Bhabha's (2012) concept of "mimicry and mockery," in which cultural difference is acknowledged through resemblance yet marked by exaggeration. In Raden Landai, ethnic characters are brought into visibility through stylized distortion invited into the narrative not as neutral presences, but through aesthetic frames that render them humorous, excessive, and symbolically marginal. As Chaloemtiarana (2014) and Jularat (2007) suggest, such portrayals reflect broader patterns in Thai literary history, where figures of ethnic difference are both included and gently displaced.

Language plays a central role in these constructions. The khaek characters often speak in fragmented, overly emphatic, or phonetically marked ways, producing a stylized contrast with the refined diction of courtly speech. This linguistic exaggeration through repetition, mispronunciation, or unexpected metaphors translates cultural difference into auditory form. The act of speaking "differently" becomes a cue for aesthetic otherness, subtly reinforcing the speaker's marginal position.

Importantly, the text does not merely reflect ethnic stereotypes; it stylizes them in ways that both entertain and expose. As Benedict Anderson (2020) has argued, literary forms in Southeast Asia often function as sites for constructing national identity by contrasting the familiar with the foreign. In Raden Landai, laughter operates not as neutral amusement but as a boundary-making gesture one that helps define the aesthetic terms of belonging. Yet the poem's heightened theatricality also complicates this gesture: in drawing such vivid caricatures, it reveals the mechanics of their construction.

The result is a double movement. On one hand, the text reproduces familiar tropes of ethnic comedy; on the other, it lays bare their artifice. This duality invites a reading of Raden Landai not only as a comic text, but also as a work that stages its own anxieties about identity and cultural cohesion. The laughter it generates particularly toward characters like Landai and Kraae is not merely directed outward. It reflects inward, toward the cultural imagination that produces such characters. In this sense, the poem's portrayal of ethnic others is both a means of reinforcing literary norms and a mirror reflecting the tensions and instabilities at the heart of those norms.

## 5. DISCUSSION

To clarify the multiple dimensions of the poem's intervention, the discussion has been divided into four thematic strands: (1) parodic engagement with courtly tradition, (2) queer failure and gendered excess, (3) ethnic otherness and the politics of laughter, and (4) comic form as a device of political critique.

### 5.1. Parodic Engagement with Courtly Tradition

The findings of this study suggest that Raden Landai enacts a deep intervention into Thai literary tradition not from a position outside the canon, but from within its aesthetic and structural vocabulary. Rather than simply mocking courtly forms, the poem inhabits and mimics their tropes, metrics, and affective registers while simultaneously reworking their ideological meanings. Its grotesque parodies do not discard poetic conventions; instead, they repurpose them to question and reflect upon their symbolic authority. In this sense, the poem operates as what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls a "non-performative citation": it cites the conventions of Thai high literature with exaggerated faithfulness, but in a manner that reveals their performative fragility and constructedness. By foregrounding parody as an immanent aesthetic practice rather than a disruptive external gesture, Raden Landai situates its critique firmly within the literary norms it seeks to expose.

### 5.2. Queer Failure and Gendered Excess

Central to this aesthetic strategy is the poem's staging of queer failure. The repeated missteps in gender performance Landai's mistaken tryst, overwrought declarations, and awkward seduction reframe failure not as absence, but as a productive

<sup>9</sup> From original text “เมื่อันนั้น นางพากย์จึงพิโรธโกรธชี้ บีบกระเพี้ยบอกชานอยู่ตีต่อง วงศ์ที่งดงามทั้งทาง นี้ແย่ อ้ายส้ารีบเด็จะคุก มาก็มีคุณข้าวสุกเสิบง่ายง่าย ภูชื่อหน้ากิดว่าสุกสุข ก็งดงามดีดีก้าวงั้นเมื่อันนั้น ช่างโภกเพกอกมประสมประทาน จะประทานเสิบให้กับที่สัมปลัน

ແต่เมื่อขิดสองใจหงั้นไม่รับ ภูสุนั่นบันจือแส้ อ้ายสัมปลันได” (Phra Maha Montri (Thrap), 1960, p.30)

mode of resistance. Drawing from Halberstam's (2005) theory of failure, the poem renders erotic misrecognition and performative excess as tactics that challenge the norms of hegemonic masculinity. In contrast to the composed, articulate, and noble male protagonists of Thai courtly literature, Landai appears incoherent, impulsive, and grotesquely embodied. His masculinity does not merely falter it destabilizes under the weight of its own performance. Such failure is portrayed not as a comedic flaw to be corrected, but as a queer tactic that exposes the instability of heteropatriarchal literary scripts. Through this, the poem invites readers to reconsider not just the character, but the very scripts of cultural masculinity that he fails to fulfill.

### 5.3. *Ethnic Otherness, Laughter, and Representation*

Laughter, in this context, is far from neutral. The poem constructs ethnic otherness particularly through the figure of the khaek within a register of aesthetic excess. The exaggerated accents, stylized bodily imagery, and emotional outbursts mark ethnic figures not only as humorous, but also as distant from literary centrality. This echoes what Bhabha (2012) terms "mimicry and mockery," where difference is acknowledged through stylization that both resembles and distorts. In this way, laughter becomes a cultural gesture one that delineates belonging, but also reveals the mechanics of exclusion. As Chaloemtiarana (2014) and Jularat (2007) have shown, literary representations of ethnic minorities in Thai contexts often negotiate visibility through aesthetic difference, not direct antagonism. Moreover, the role of language and register is crucial in producing this effect. Characters marked as khaek often speak in fragmented or repetitive idioms, deploying rhythms and metaphors that appear excessive or out of place. These linguistic features while comic also encode cultural marginality. In contrast to the refined diction of Thai courtly verse, such speech acts highlight phonetic and rhetorical difference as aesthetic cues. Language here becomes a semiotic marker of the ethnic "other," signaling cultural dislocation even as it participates in the pleasure of parody.

### 5.4. *Comic Form as Political Critique*

Importantly, Raden Landai does not simply reproduce these tropes; it animates and exaggerates them to the point of self-exposure. As Benedict Anderson (2020) notes, Southeast Asian national identities were often constructed through print forms that define the nation by contrast. In this light, Raden

Landai may be read as a literary form that stages both the center and its margins making visible not only what is included, but how inclusion itself is structured. The laughter it generates is thus ambivalent: it entertains, but also unsettles; it marks difference, but also invites reflection on how that difference is produced.

Taken together, these dimensions position Raden Landai as a politically attuned work that disguises its critique through grotesque comedy. Its poetics challenge aesthetic hierarchy; its queer figuration complicates gender ideals; and its stylized portrayal of ethnic types draws attention to the structures of cultural representation. Crucially, its comic form is not a secondary ornament but the very mechanism through which critique becomes thinkable. This reading suggests the need to revisit how Thai literary studies approach parody, excess, and failure. Works once considered marginal or lowbrow may in fact provide vital insight into the mechanisms through which literature reflects, reproduces, and sometimes resists social and cultural authority.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Raden Landai is more than a comic curiosity in Thai literary history; it is a critical intervention that engages deeply with the aesthetic, gendered, and cultural norms embedded in the literary tradition. This study has shown how the poem addresses convention on three interlocking fronts: it parodies the formal structures of high literature through grotesque excess; it stages the repeated faltering of normative masculinity through queer misrecognition and exaggerated desire; and it represents ethnic otherness through stylized comedy that both reflects and reveals the boundaries of Thai identity. At the center of these engagements is the poem's deliberate use of distorted form and socially marginal figures to construct a world shaped by contradiction, excess, and performative instability. Through romantic confusion, grotesque imagery, and stylized difference, Raden Landai deploys the aesthetics of failure not as a rejection of tradition, but as a mode of critical reimagining. Parody here is not mere imitation or trivial play; it becomes a cultural strategy that invites reflection on how literary norms are constructed and sustained. By echoing the grandeur of epic forms while shifting their context and content, the poem opens a space for seeing those forms anew. A marginal, foreign-bodied figure speaks the language of heroism not to mock it outright, but to reveal its contingent and performative nature.

In doing so, the poem does not discard the canon, but dialogues with it from within mirroring,

amplifying, and subtly unsettling its ideals. Its grotesque poetics suggest that the authority of "high literature" does not rest solely on timeless value, but also on the framing and exclusion of the vulgar, the comic, and the othered. Ultimately, this study proposes that Raden Landai should be read not only

as a work of entertainment, but as a complex literary artifact whose comic form enables a deeper interrogation of tradition. Its playful distortions serve not to dismantle literary heritage, but to open new pathways for understanding how Thai literature negotiates identity, hierarchy, and meaning.

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