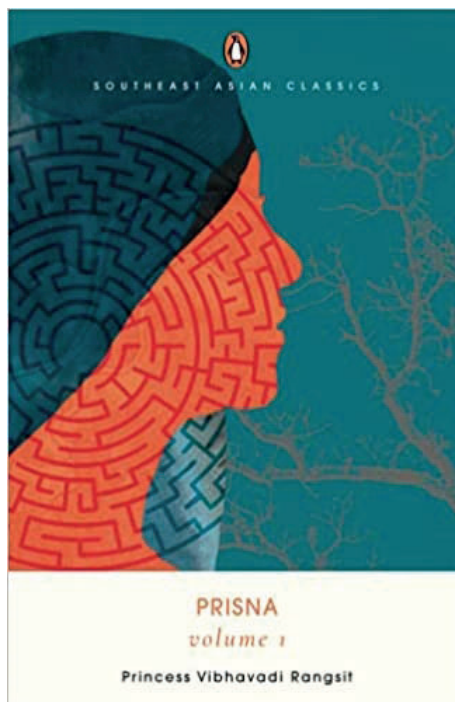


# The Puzzle of Prisma: A Meditation on Time and Translation

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Abstract—The Thai novel, *Prisna*, recently republished in English translation, has a history stretching over nine decades and two languages. This article treats the work as a time capsule, by examining the changing meanings of the work as it travels through the decades, through the changes in the social background, and through the translation from Thai into English.



*Prisna* (ปรีศนา) is a Thai novel set in the late 1930s, written in the 1940s, first published in the early 1950s, translated in the late 1950s, published in English in the 1960s, and now republished in 2020.<sup>1</sup> It is a time capsule. It is not possible to read the work without considering the changes that have occurred in Thailand since the book was created. The republication of *Prisna* in December 2020 is an exercise in post-modernity. On closer inspection, the multiplicity within the work continues to increase: Tulachandra's translation is itself a very different book from the original.

<sup>1</sup> *Prisna* by Princess Vibhavadi Rangsit, 2 vols, translated by Tulachandra (Singapore: Penguin Random House SEA, 2020). Vol 1 ISBN: 9789814914154, Vol 2 ISBN: 9789814914161 (paperbacks).

The appearance of this edition becomes an opportunity to freshly appraise the work and explore some of the underlying aspects of the book: the experiences of the two writers, significance and context of the original novel, the character of this translation.

*Prisna* is about the joys of youth, and tells the story of a girl called Prisna who falls for a prince. It was written during the Second World War, against the sound of sirens and bombs. Princess Vibhavadi had the idea for *Prisna* when she was still at school, but she did not start work on the book until the early 1940s. The book was due to be published just before the war ended. Its printing halted when an Allied bombing raid struck the Silom Road area and the printing press went up in flames. According to a famous anecdote, Princess Vibhavadi risked her life to rescue the manuscript from the burning building. Subsequently, *Prisna* languished in the back of a cupboard<sup>2</sup> until 1951, when it was finally printed. In the meantime, its author had married and had two children.

*Prisna* was to become one of the most famous and popular works of modern Thai literature. Incidentally, *Four Reigns*, MR Kukrit Pramoj's epic novel, another of the great works of post-war Thai literature, was also published in 1951, and also translated by Tulachandra (Chancham Bunnag).

### The meaning of Prisna

Immediately after the success of *Prisna* in 1951, Princess Vibhavadi set out to write a much darker book. Her novel, *Ni ruea chiwit* (นี่หรือชีวิต Reality Hits), would be a counterbalance to *Prisna*, in which the lives of three sisters do not turn out to be a fairytale. This was not as well received. Princess Vibhavadi then wrote a sequel to *Prisna*, called *Jao sao khong anon* (เจ้าสาวของอนอน *Anonda's Bride*), and *Ratanavadi* (รัตนาวดี), a spinoff about a character from *Prisna*. The latter was Princess Vibhavadi's favourite.<sup>3</sup> She felt it had more literary value than *Prisna*.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Thai literary tropes, the Prisna figure would grow up and change, as the country changed. Over the following decades, the female archetype would go from innocently adventurous to increasingly ambitious, worldly and ruthless. One example, among many, can be seen in Suwanni Sukhonta's 1970s novel, *Khon roeng mueang* (คนเรjingเมือง She Who Enjoys the City). Its amoral central character, Pring, is a product of Thailand's political and social turmoil, just as Prisna is the product of Siamese social transformation.

Princess Vibhavadi Rangsit (née Rajani) and Chancham Bunnag<sup>5</sup> were born in 1920

<sup>2</sup> This is recounted by Princess Vibhavadi in the preface to the 1970 edition; “คำนำ” ใน ว. ณ ประมวญมารค, ปรีศนา (กรุงเทพฯ : สำนักพิมพ์คลังวิทยา, ๒๕๑๓).

<sup>3</sup> From a talk by Princess Vibhavadi on “How I became a writer” at Wattana School on 7 December 1972; ว. ณ ประมวญมารค, เมื่อข้าพเจ้าเป็นนักประพันธ์ ประมวญเรื่องสั้น (กรุงเทพฯ : สำนักพิมพ์แพรววิทยา, ม.ป.ป.).

<sup>4</sup> Princess Vibhavadi was a prolific and very popular writer; in addition to the novels, she also wrote a detective story, radio plays, documentary articles and historical fiction. It is surprising that there is no readily available chronology listing her published works. The Thai editions to her books provide only their own publication dates, albeit with the names of various other companies that released editions, but they do not include dates.

<sup>5</sup> Chancham Bunnag, under her real name, was a reader at the SEATO Literature Award (of which Suwanni

and 1921, respectively. They witnessed the end of Siamese absolute monarchy, and experienced the pronounced cultural and social shifts of the 1930s. The fractious decade culminated in Siam<sup>6</sup> officially becoming Thailand in 1939. They both used pennames. Their pseudonyms were light-hearted devices, not tokens of a frustrated alter ego, or a means to shield, or liberate, the writers. Quite the contrary. V. na Pramuanmarg, or V. of Pramuan Road, the pen-name used on all her Thai-language works, reveals the Princess's home address, while Tulachandra, joins Chancham's husband's name, Tula, to the first part of her own, becoming the mellifluous "October Moon" in English.

*Prisna* is a playful title. *Prisna* is the given name of the novel's main character;<sup>7</sup> and can mean mystery, puzzle, riddle, question or paradox.

*Prisna* describes the life of a family, ostensibly, in Thailand in the late 1930s. Mrs. Samorn, a widow, and her daughters live a comfortable and modest life in Bangkok. *Prisna*, the youngest of four, has been away for many years, staying with an uncle in the United States. She returns to Bangkok, almost completely foreign. Her Thai is imperfect, her habits are Westernised, as is her outlook. She strikes up friendships with various men, who attempt to court her, until she finds herself shocked and puzzled by increasingly strong feelings for a young prince, Tan Chai Bojna. Well educated, a skilled doctor, wealthy: he is almost ideal. Tan Chai can also be aloof and arrogant. *Prisna* and Tan Chai intrigue and infuriate each other in equal measure.

The *Prisna* mystery is then, partly, about the confusion she provokes through her foreign ways; the flouting of convention; the competition she poses to members of the opposite sex; and her desire to be active and independent. But it will also transpire that the name is a rebuff to *Prisna*'s paternal grandmother, a stereotypically nasty mother-in-law. This lady, Khunying Devasutta, refuses to accept the legitimacy of *Prisna*, who was born after *Prisna*'s father, Phra Vinij Montri, died of a sudden illness.

The similarities of *Prisna* to Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) are evident: the absent father, the four sisters, their professional desires and fortunes of the heart. As is the resonance with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): the light satire, depiction of family life, and the love story involving the impossible Mr. Darcy. These comparisons are apt since Princess Vibhavadi rejoiced in literary cross-referencing and believed that the secret to good writing was diverse reading. Indeed, in *Prisna*, she names an English character "Mansfield", after Austen's *Mansfield Park*, cites Somerset Maugham, Shelley, Shakespeare and the Thai poem, *Inao*, and quotes the poem, *Gitanjali*, by Rabindranath Tagore, and lines by her father, Prince Bidyalongkorn.

While her world was literary, Princess Vibhavadi was not a plagiarist. The motifs from Western literature were inspirations for a diverting tale that would encapsulate the

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Sukhonta was a recipient) and translated poems and prose for the SEA Write Award, its later incarnation.

<sup>6</sup> The use of "Siam" in this article is not intended as a reactionary flourish, but rather as an indication of the changing circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s, and the confusions inherent at the dying out of an ancient system.

<sup>7</sup> The name, *Prisna*, gently echoes the Puritan tradition of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* with its characters named Timorous, Discretion and Prudence. It might be recalled that Bunyan is read several times in Alcott's *Little Women*. Such symbolism can be found in the Siamese tradition; for instance, the semi-mythological hunter named Bun, or Merit, who discovered the Buddha's Footprint in Saraburi.

observations she had of life, which was a Siamese one.

The novel deals with the comedy of the Siamese family, in disarray between the past and present. There is narrative fun to be had with cousins marrying, minor wives and attempts at climbing the ranks. These are not exotic details, they are plot points told from an insider's perspective. Princess Vibhavadi's own family was not devoid of Siamese complications. She was the child of a second wife, although, by lineage, her mother (a descendent of King Rama IV) "outranked" the first wife (a Bunnag, daughter of Chaophraya Bhaskorawong).

In the novel, Prisna's mother is not seen as a good match by her in-laws, who are high-ranking "commoners", referred to as "Chao Khun", translating approximately to "Lord". At one point it is revealed that a would-be suitor of Prisna is in fact, unwittingly, her uncle. To enumerate further: Pravij, one of the principal male characters, is a half cousin to Tan Chai, a Prince. However Pravij is from a minor wife, and has come under Tan Chai's patronage due to persecution from his father's first wife. Pravij's half sister, Ratee, is intended for Tan Chai, although they are closely related. There are ample examples of the way uncertain modernity must seek to coexist with faltering antiquity.

Behind the story, mutely, is the position of the aristocracy, many members of whom had been persecuted in the 1930s after the end of absolute monarchy, and had gone into exile. It is interesting to note that while it is evident that there are royals in the story, there is no hint of a larger institution behind these characters.

### The Pramuanmarg family

Princess Vibhavadi was not the child or grandchild of a king, as might be imagined.<sup>8</sup> Her father, Prince Bidyalongkorn, was the son of the last Front Palace King, an institution that was abolished in the late 19th century. Her last ancestor to have been king, through her paternal line, was King Rama II (reigned 1809–1824).

Although certainly privileged, this was not a family content with a life of leisure and luxury behind palace walls. They worked. Prince Bidyalongkorn (1877–1945) was educated in England between 1897 and 1899 and attended Cambridge University for three terms. He worked at the National Treasury (1899–1910), at the Ministry of Commerce (1913–1925), and on King Rama VII's committee for political reform (1927–1931).<sup>9</sup> He was also a celebrated man of letters. He owned and edited a newspaper, *Pramuansarn* (ประชาสาร), and was a famous poet under the pseudonym, "Nor Mor Sor" (น.ม.ส.). Princess Vibhavadi's mother was also a writer, who managed the publishing company and often worked as secretary to the Prince—a role Vibhavadi would take up in the 1940s.

<sup>8</sup> Princess Vibhavadi was born to the title "Mom Chao", which would customarily be accompanied by "Her Serene Highness", in English. Posthumously, for her services to the nation, she was elevated to the title of "Phra Worawongse Tue Phra Ong Chao", a rank higher than Mom Chao, with a prefix translated as "Princess".

<sup>9</sup> A conjecture, which emerged from a conversation with Thanpuying Tasnee Boonyakupta (who was a schoolgirl at the time), is that having been part of the monarchist administration of Siam, Bidyalongkorn directly felt the political pressure of the 1930s. His daughter faced it in her own manner—in response to the militarist injunction to wear hats (a modernising initiative), she made a hat for her dog to wear on their daily walks.



Figure 2. Princess Vibhavadi Rangsit at Mater Dei School (left: at centre; right: second right) (photos courtesy of the Vibhavadi Rangsit Foundation).

Her writing career started early. As a girl she was constantly in need of pocket money, so wrote her first book when she was fourteen to earn some extra cash.<sup>10</sup> It was a loose translation of the children's book, *Just William*, by Richard Compton, becoming in Thai, *Dek jom kaen*, and was published in her father's weekly newspaper *Pramuansarn*. It was a success, especially among the boys of Bangkok Christian College, a school close to her home.

Princess Vibhavadi lived in a large family compound off Pramuan Road, which runs between Silom and Sathorn Roads in central Bangkok. The property came to the family through her mother, Princess Bornbimolban, and it was the site of her father's printing press, and office, which were located in the old wooden house. There was an elegantly proportioned villa nearby where they lived.

## The War

Pinning down the creation of *Prisna* proved to be an arduous exercise. Conflicting sources give the date of the book's inception when Princess Vibhavadi was sixteen, eighteen and twenty years old, and the writing took anything from one to four years. However, there are various anecdotal wayside markers, which provide salient information. According to her own account, she wrote much of *Prisna* while working

<sup>10</sup> Princess Vibhavadi, "How I Became a Writer".

in her father's office.<sup>11</sup> She was “barely twenty”<sup>12</sup> and had recently completed the Mater Dei Finishing Course. Bangkok was under Japanese occupation, and there was nothing for her to do. Her father had lost his secretary, who had gone up-country to be with his family on account of the air raids. So she volunteered to assist her father, who was suffering from health problems and cataracts. He needed someone to take down dictation, and help to edit his column in his newspaper. At that time, he was also working on his epic poem, *Sam krung*. When she was not too busy, she worked on *Prisna*. Father and daughter would read their respective works to each other across the office, testing lines out. He provided her with the name of the school in her novel, *Sikkhalai*, and various small turns of phrase.

Prince Bidyalongkorn was a leading member of the *Wannakadi Samosorn* (Literary Society), an organisation founded by King Rama VI to protect and uphold a pure form of Thai literature, which was seen to be at risk from laxity and foreign idiom. Bidyalongkorn formulated a series of rules for the composition of poetry, dealing with matters of syntax, syllable usage, orthography, and rhyme.<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps ironic that *Prisna*, one of the most popular examples of 20th century Thai literary entertainment, emerged from his office, under his auspices.

*Sam krung*, the work Princess Vibhavadi was transcribing in the 1940s, refers to the three successive Siamese capitals of Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok. It was written between 1942 and 1944 and queries the nature of governance and leadership. The poem praises good kings, while admonishing weak leaders, singling out King Ekathat, who “lost” Ayutthaya to the Burmese in 1767. Prince Bidyalongkorn blamed Thai factionalism and disunity for the fall of Ayutthaya, mirrored in his own time with the fate of Bangkok. The poem is a thinly veiled criticism of the situation in Thailand. A decade after the change to a democratic system, with Thailand under Japanese Occupation during the war, *Sam krung* voices dissatisfaction with the current leadership and articulates great anxiety about Thailand's prospects.<sup>14</sup>

Although the political climate of the time should not be completely dismissed, *Prisna* was not a forum for Prince Bidyalongkorn's views. If anything, Princess Vibhavadi pointedly set out to create a safe and cohesive world far from the war and political troubles. It can be assumed that her reading public was grateful. To sketch out the context, between the end of the Second World War and the publication of *Prisna*, there had already been a coup in 1947, a slow burning attempted coup in 1948, street battles in Bangkok in 1949, and in 1951 another attempted coup, followed by fighting that saw 1200 people killed in the capital.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See the Princess' account in both the preface to the 1970 edition and “How I Became a Writer”.

<sup>12</sup> Princess Vibhavadi in the preface to the 1970 edition.

<sup>13</sup> Manas Chitakasem, “Poetic Conventions and Modern Thai Poetry”, in Manas, ed., *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* (London: SOAS, 1991), p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Yuporn Sangtaksin, “*Sam krung, wannakhadi wijan kanmueang: naew khit lae kolawithi nam seno*” [Sam Krung, Political Critique: The Themes and Techniques of Presentation], MA thesis, Kasetsart University, Bangkok, 1993; <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/kjss/article/view/243782/165673>.

<sup>15</sup> David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (Chiang Mai: Silkorm Books, 2004). p. 252.



Figure 2. *Prisna*, Thai edition by Odeon Store, 1964 (photo by Dimpy Kongsiri)

### The Prisna Type

The narrative fluidity, and authenticity of the experiences recounted in her book, resonated with people from the day it appeared in print, in the *Daily Mail* on 1 October 1951.<sup>16</sup> Princess Vibhavadi was living in Switzerland at the time and receiving reports that this Thai newspaper was having to increase its publication numbers to meet demand, and that across the country people were to be seen waiting at train stations to get the latest instalments.<sup>17</sup> *Prisna* was so successful that the newspaper launched a competition, in which people could send in for publication a picture of someone they felt was a “real” *Prisna*. The newspaper received thousands of submissions.<sup>18</sup>

*Prisna* was a character with whom people could identify, an open, unassuming and fun individual, much like her author. A teacher from Mater Dei School, Vibhavadi’s

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.reurnthai.com/index.php?topic=1399.0>

<sup>17</sup> Princess Vibhavadi, “How I became a writer”.

<sup>18</sup> อานุสรณ์ 20 ปี วิภาวดีรังสิต *Anuson 20 pi wiphawadi rangsit* [Twenty-Year Commemoration of Vibhavadi Rangsit] (Bangkok: Vibhavadi Rangsit Foundation, 1992).



Figure 3. *Prisna*, two early Thai editions (photos by Dimpy Kongsiri)

Alma Mater, described the Princess in words that could have been chosen for *Prisna*: “A tomboy, a writer, up to all kinds of mischief, she was outspoken, strong in her views, she could be led but not driven, loyal to her friends.”<sup>19</sup>

From the start, *Prisna* was held to be autobiographical. Like the Princess, *Prisna* is imbued with a determination to work; she becomes a teacher, and disdains Pravij, an admirer, for his indolence and lack of ambition. *Prisna*’s escapades, like riding a dangerous horse, belong to the real life girl who convinces a tram driver to let her take over, or loads up a boat with a gramophone, tea and cakes and has an impromptu floating tea party during Bangkok’s great flood of 1942.<sup>20</sup>

There is nothing so *Prisna*-like as Princess Vibhavadi’s own marriage. She met Prince Piyarangsit Rangsit at a party in the 1940s, where they danced. The couple were married on 6 May 1946. Coincidentally, *Prisna*’s wedding to Tan Chai occurs on the 5 May. It will always be remarked that Princess Vibhavadi found her very own dashing and talented Prince Charming.

There are many real details in the book. A male friend called Jit<sup>21</sup> seems to become *Prisna*’s buddy, Nobh. Miss Saluay,<sup>22</sup> the teacher of *Prisna*’s Sikkhalai, channels the name, and character, of a disciplinarian teacher from Princess Vibhavadi’s actual school,

<sup>19</sup> Sister Marie Gemma Feeny in *Anuson 20 pi*.

<sup>20</sup> อุบลสรณ์ ๔๐ ปี วิภาวดี รังสิต พระวรวงศ์เธอ พระองค์เจ้าวิภาวดีรังสิต *Anuson 40 pi phraworawongthue phra-ongjao wiphawadi rangsit* [A 40 Year Commemoration of Vibhavadi Rangsit] (Vibhavadi Rangsit Foundation, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> เกรส เปเรร่า Grace Pereira, “เสด็จพระองค์หญิง สมัยสงครามโลกครั้งที่ ๒” *Sadet phra-ong ying samai songkhrum lok khrung thi 2* [The Princess during the Second World War] in *Anuson 20 pi*.

<sup>22</sup> Her actual teacher was named Chaluy.



and her elder half-sister, Sasithorn, had a dressmaking shop called “Milady”, which like, Prisna’s sister, Siri, supplied gowns to the high society of Bangkok during the 1930s.

It is harder, however, to see Princess Vibhavadi in the minor character, Mom Chao Ratanavadi. This schoolgirl, with the rhyming name, Ratanavadi/Vibhavadi, is the younger sister of Tan Chai. In the story, Ratanavadi appears with her best friend, Vimol, tentatively associated with Vibhavadi’s neighbour, Grace Pereira, who was the book’s first critic and an essential sounding board.

Grace Pereira, the Princess’s best friend and classmate, lived behind Vibhavadi family compound. The girls visited each other, using a ladder to scale the dividing wall. They occupied a storage shed at Grace’s that they dubbed the Happy Hut. It was a small building with a tin roof and porch. They did their homework there, furnishing it with a desk, a sofa, and some pillows, which they sewed by hand.<sup>23</sup> Princess Vibhavadi would tell the story of *Prisna* to Grace at the Happy Hut as it progressed. If any idea hit a wrong note, Grace would cry out.<sup>24</sup>

These avatars of Vibhavadi and Grace, Ratanavadi and Vimol,<sup>25</sup> become small monuments against time; eternally at play, taken up with the innocent pleasures of midnight feasts and shell hunting on the sandy beach at Hua Hin.

There is a deep poignancy to *Prisna*: it was written when Princess Vibhavadi had her life ahead of her. Its joyfulness is a bulwark against the war that was raging at the time, expressing the feelings of a girl on the edge of adulthood, of responsibility and family. The autobiographical undertones evoke the Princess’s youthful potential, and prefigure her untimely and tragic death.

Princess Vibhavadi had a long and highly successful career as a member of the Royal Court of Thailand.<sup>26</sup> The final phase of her career saw her working on a royally sponsored development programme in the south of Thailand. In 1977, during one of her missions in Surat Thani Province, her team received word that Communist insurgents had attacked an army unit nearby. The Princess instructed her helicopter pilot to rescue the wounded soldiers. On their way to the area, the helicopter came under fire. Princess Vibhavadi was wounded and died an hour later.

<sup>23</sup> Grace Pereira, “The Princess during the Second World War”.

<sup>24</sup> Princess Vibhavadi in the preface to the 1970 edition.

<sup>25</sup> One more suggestion of the Ratanavadi/Vibhavadi identification comes with the later novel *Ratanavadi*, from the *Prisna* universe. The story follows the adventures of Tan Chai’s younger sister, in Europe after Prisma and Tan Chai’s honeymoon. Ratanavadi’s tour of Europe matches the itinerary of Vibhavadi and Prince Piyarangsit’s real life honeymoon.

<sup>26</sup> 100 ปีชาตกาล พระเจ้าวรวงศ์เธอ พระองค์เจ้าวิภาวดีรังสิต 100 pi chatkan phrajaoruangthoe phra-ongjao wiphawadi rangsit [Centenary of Vibhavadi Rangsit] (Bangkok: Vibhavadi Rangsit Foundation, 2020); ม.จ.วิภาวดี รังสิต MC Vibhavadi Rangsit, เรื่องตามเสด็จอเมริกา จดหมายถึงเพื่อนจากหม่อมเจ้าวิภาวดี รังสิต *Rueang tam sadet amerika jotmai thueng phuean* [The Royal Visit to the USA: Letters to a Friend] (Bangkok: Ruamsat, 1971); เสด็จพระราชดำเนินปากีสถาน สหพันธรัฐมลายา พ.ศ. 2505 *Sadet praratchadamnoen Pakistan sahaphanrha rachamalaya pho so 2505* [The Royal Visit to Pakistan] (reprint, Bangkok: Saengdao, 2012); her descriptions of visits to the north and south of Thailand in *Anuson 20 pi*.

## Chancham and Tulachandra

In 1938, when the novel is purportedly set,<sup>27</sup> Chancham Bunnag (née Indhusophon) left Bangkok for the United States. She was in the second group of women to be awarded government scholarships to study abroad; it was a tiny club. She had been an exceptional student at Rajini, a leading girl's school, but her family did not have the resources to send her abroad so the scholarship was essential.

Like Princess Vibhavadi, she came from a publishing background. Her mother's father, Lek Samitasiri, a second generation Thai-Chinese entrepreneur, had made his fortune in publishing. Practically orphaned at birth, as both of his parents died shortly after he was born, Lek was brought up by relatives and would eventually be ennobled with the title of Phra Sophon Aksornkit. His Sophon Press published many of King Rama VI's writings, as well as diverse works by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. He had an enormous house at the top of Silom Road, opposite today's Chulalongkorn Medical Centre, and the resources to support a theatrical troupe. Chancham's mother, a favourite, was given a fortune, which she lost gambling.



Figure 4. Chancham Bunnag in 1953 (photo in the possession of the author)

If not for Chancham's father, Lui Indhusophon, the family would have been impoverished. Lui was an official at the Post and Telegraph Department and rose to be permanent secretary at the Ministry of Communication. After the inheritance was gone, they made do on his modest salary. Lui also wrote and translated Macaulay's *Herodotus* into Thai in his retirement.<sup>28</sup>

Chancham had a reputation for wit and naughtiness that accompanied her throughout her life. At Rajini, her elite girl's school, she penned some comic verses about her teachers. The lines were a hit among her schoolmates, and resulted in her getting caned in front of the whole school as punishment. However, she excelled as a student.

She left Bangkok on 10 October 1938, departing from Hualampong Station. A large crowd of friends and family saw her off, and her father accompanied her on the train journey to Singapore, where they took a boat for France on the first leg of the journey to America. In the United States, majoring in English Literature, Chancham would meet her future husband, Tula Bunnag, the son of the Thai ambassador. They did not get on. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, she decided against staying on in the

<sup>27</sup> There is nothing in the English translation to suggest it was 1938, except for the promotional blurb on the 2020 version, which seems to have been written independently of the novel.

<sup>28</sup> The translation of *Herodotus* is found in the funeral book of Lui Indhusophon.

United States and, after a gruelling homeward journey, found herself back in Bangkok. Chancham and Tula met again, and by the end of the year they were married.

Chancham's life as a translator and her use of the name "Tulachandra" started in Bangkok at the United States Information Service, where she was employed after the war. Tulachandra's first work was a Thai language translation of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Like the original *Prisna*, it was serialised in 1951 before being printed in full in 1952.

Chancham's husband, Tula, worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, in 1954, the family, which now included two sons, moved to London on Tula's first and only overseas posting. Chancham's eldest son, Tej, remembers packing his two favourite books—*Prisna* and *Four Reigns* by MR Kukrit Pramoj. Chancham used Tej's copy of *Prisna* for her translation, which began in the late 1950s.

Chancham had known the Princess for many years, but it is not clear how or when the translation began. The manner of publication might provide clues. She sent instalments of her translation by airmail to be printed in *The Standard*, a weekly English language magazine owned by Prince Prem Purachattra, the elder brother of Princess Vimalachatra, Chancham's close friend and schoolmate. In 1961, Chatra Books, also owned by Prince Prem, published the complete translation. This contrasts with Chancham's work for MR Kukrit Pramoj. It can be surmised that Kukrit had read and approved of Chancham's version of *Prisna*. In his 1981 preface to the English translation of *Four Reigns*, Kukrit wrote that he was worried about "how to make foreign readers understand the book the way Thai readers do".<sup>29</sup> He didn't want a literal translation reliant on "footnotes and appendices". Kukrit and Chancham worked on the book for years, meeting frequently at Kukrit's house on Suan Phlu Road, where they discussed the work at each stage. Ultimately, it was released as an "English Version", with Tulachandra credited on the front cover.

### The Tulachandra version

Tulachandra's translation of *Prisna* was a thorough reworking of the original material. Princess Vibhavadi's authorial style in *Prisna* is considered to be highly accessible, affording space for the reader to colour it with personal experience. The Tulachandra English version runs with this idea. It is in Chancham's voice, in 1950s vernacular. Its exclamation, "Boy, oh boy!",<sup>30</sup> or the line, "They were prettily dressed and their manners were gay", are of their time, now faded.

Since the translation is so strongly flavoured, the Tulachandra *Prisna* becomes bound up with Chancham's own experiences: the innumerable personal details she must have drawn on, the underlying feelings she might have had of Siam in the 1930s before her departure for the United States. Perhaps, also, the Siam of her *Prisna* blends nostalgia with yearning. She was writing the translation from London in the 1950s, and did not return to Thailand at all for six years.

<sup>29</sup> MR. Kukrit Pramoj, *Four Reigns* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), first published in 1981.

<sup>30</sup> This Americanism is given to *Prisna* in the original, Tulachandra lends hers to Anonda. It was something she said herself in the 1950s, according to her son, Tew Bunnag.



Figure 5. Before the first edition appeared in December 1952, a search was made for a representation of Prisma. Princess Vibhavadi chose Wasna Krasaesin. After a photo shoot in Hua Hin, one of the pictures was adapted into a cover. (Photos courtesy of Tej Bunnag)

Chancham was a great admirer of C.K. Scott Moncrieff's (mildly divisive) English language version of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which he rendered as *In Remembrance of Things Past*.<sup>31</sup> Chancham had two copies of this multivolumed work in her personal library, and returned to it many times over the years. Scott Moncrieff's Proust, beyond providing entertainment, was indicative of Chancham's philosophy, in which to translate is to author, not transcribe. Evidence for this can be found throughout the book. Chancham took the liberty of adding details to the narrative regarding the parents' love story, the relationship between Prisna's father and uncle in the United States, why Prisna was sent away, and other areas—all of which are accompanied by fresh dialogue and observations.

For example, the final paragraph of the penultimate chapter is entirely new.

Prisna smiled through her tears, "because I'm so happy, mother." Smiling too, Mrs Samorn said, "You have a talent for happiness, I think. Or maybe you were just born lucky. But never take happiness for granted, darling. Work at it, build it up, give it away, and always, always be a little humble before it!"<sup>32</sup>

These lines of advice are in the voice of Chancham, who often quoted from D.H. Lawrence, "It's better to be born lucky than rich," always thought of herself as the lucky type, and habitually used the word, "darling".

Where the translation cannot convey the Thai, it shifts the emphasis and observation. Some of the immediate, and most apparent, alterations are in Thai wordplay. One example is in a passage in which Pravij, a male admirer, and Prisna converse using the feminine ending "ya". This underscores the rapport, comedy and slight flirtatiousness of the exchange. It cannot be expressed in English. Instead Tulachandra makes the boy's intention clearer:

[as they talk Pravij's] eyes were fixed on Prisna's face, but the girl only gave him a friendly smile.<sup>33</sup>

Since the storytelling is contingent on a basic understanding of Siamese culture, Tulachandra often fills in Thai nuances regarding feelings or social and cultural practices. These insertions are necessary. No local reading the book would need to understand that the seaside resort of

Hua Hin, even for a Siamese community, is a gregarious place, where a favourite holiday activity centres upon paying visits to one's friends.

Effectively Tulachandra's *Prisna* reframes the plot. She makes Prisna's character

<sup>31</sup> C.K. Scott Moncrieff published his first volume of *In Remembrance of Things Past* in 1922, and had not completed the work on his death in 1930.

<sup>32</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 2, p. 298.

<sup>33</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 1, p. 201.

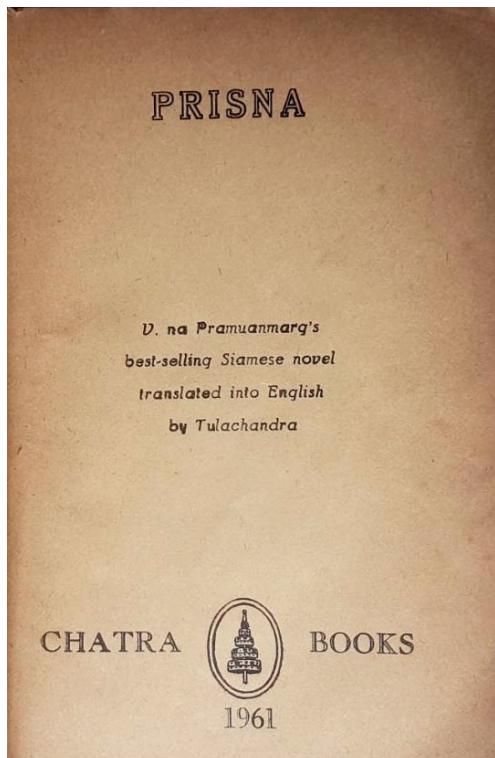


Figure 6. First English edition by Chatra Books, two volumes published 1961 and 1964, with author's name as "V. na Pramuanmarg" (photo by Dimpy Kongsiri)

more intelligible, through new dialogue and internal reflections, while sharpening the storyline. This amounts to more time spent with the sisters and their feelings, which are here better articulated. Since more energy is expended on the main characters, Tulachandra does not dwell on the minor figures, such as Sone, Tan Chai's butler, who was fondly observed in the original. Nor does the Tulachandra version elaborate on certain colourful details: for example, how the staff at one of Tan Chai's parties were the children of his father's domestic helpers, who had set out to make their own businesses but came back to the palace to help out when they could. By dropping some of the background detail and bringing the sisters' experience to the fore, she magnified the "coming of age" quality of the story. As is common to the genre, but not as clear in the original, the novel changes in tone over its length. Tulachandra's central figure transforms into an adult by the end,

which means she becomes a degree sadder. There is a heaviness to learning about life and loss.

## Movies

The new *Prisna* speaks to Chancham's fascination with cinema. Her *Prisna* comes across like a young Audrey Hepburn or Shirley Maclaine—those gutsy, feisty, fast-talking screen heroines of the era. This character has an affinity with Billy Wilder's 1954 "Sabrina".

Note the following in which Tan Chai makes his first clumsy proposal to *Prisna*:

"Sit down!" He commanded, thus making the situation considerably worse. "I haven't finished."

"As far as I'm concerned, you have!" Her eyes were terribly bright as she spoke.

"Thanks for telling me how much you can give me. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe what I want, you cannot give me because you haven't got it? You were about to tell me the extent of your estate; your great fortune. Well, don't bother! I'm already overwhelmed. Goodbye, Your Serene Highness!"<sup>34</sup>

All of which is absent in the original. Another of these additions, completely new to

<sup>34</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 2, p. 123.

the novel, depicts Prisna having just ridden a dangerous horse. Ratee is goading Prisna for not admitting that she could ride:

“How you go on Ratee! I was just showing off, don’t you know’. She said. ‘And you haven’t seen anything yet. Wait till we get to the palace. I’ll show you what a wonderful swimmer I am. You’ll be even more astonished. I can ride, I can swim – I can do just about anything and I love it when people are surprised and delighted to see me do it so well.’<sup>35</sup>

Cinema is not an accidental influence. It was the major entertainment of the era and a consistent feature in Princess Vibhavadi’s story, where her characters are constantly going out to watch films. The movies in *Prisna* are social events, and plot points. Prisna scandalises society by turning up at the cinema in tennis shorts. The characters use the cinema as an opportunity to spy on each other, or tease, or make someone jealous.

In the Tulachandra version, cinema, with its rule of “show don’t tell”, snappy dialogue and narrative pace, reaches out beyond the story, into the narrative fabric. An example of this can be found in a scene on a train en-route to Hua Hin. There is nothing so loved by cinema as a train journey. Note the difference.

*The original (my word for word translation):*

The train moved out of the station and Nai Samer stood watching until they were out of sight before he went home.

*Tulachandra:*

Siri nodded, smiling and remained standing at the window to wave to him. The train gathered speed; the figure of Samer became smaller and soon vanished in the distance, and it was only then that Siri went back to sit with her family.<sup>36</sup>

Siri, who is in love with Samer, reveals her emotions, becoming the main subject, rather than Samer. The emphasis will make her later heartbreak more apparent. The moment is richer visually. It might recall the last scene of the *The Third Man*<sup>37</sup> (1949) where the main character watches his loved one dwindle and disappear as he leaves.

On that train ride to Hua Hin, Princess Vibhavadi has Prisna and family seated in third class next to

a Chinese man and his family of two women and as many as seven children... an Indian with a huge turban... two brassy ladies wearing bright clothes... and a drunken looking fellow.

<sup>35</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 1, p. 138.

<sup>36</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 1, p. 200.

<sup>37</sup> *The Third Man*, from a script by Graham Greene, directed by Carol Reed, and altered by Orson Welles, is most “Tulachandrian”. Chancham loved small, well-timed interjections, and she was prone to them if she thought she could improve upon a story. Orson Welles’ famous improvisation in *The Third Man* was one of her favourites.



Figure 7. *Prisna* has been further translated into dramatized versions, including cinema films in 1955 and 1982, television serials in 1987, 1998, and 2013, and a stage musical in 2012. The title role in the 1955 film was played by Amara Asvanond (top left), who was the Miss Thailand runner-up in 1953 and Thailand's first entry to Miss Universe in 1954. The role in the 1982 film was played by Jarunee Suksawat (top right). The first television serial in 1987 launched the career of 16-year old Lalita Panyopas (left) as one of the most successful television actresses of the next two decades.

*In Tulachandra:*

a group of Chinese, consisting of a talkative man, two equally talkative women and seven screaming children of all sizes and ages... a turbaned Indian with his family... two youngish Siamese girls, whose giggles and chatter seemed to increase rather than diminish... accompanied by an excitable young man, who in spite of the early hours, showed signs of having had one too many drinks.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 1, p. 200. Volume 1, p 200.



*The original:*

... at first the four watched them bemused, but after a while it became bothersome.

*In the Tulachandra translation, this becomes:*

Conversation with her family was out of the question - it was difficult to think of anything to say, with the Chinese jabbering on their right, the Indian machine-gun chattering behind them and the girlish giggling and eye-rolling in front of them.<sup>39</sup>

### Anagnorisis

By its very nature, the reprinting of *Prisna* in this 2020 incarnation reconfigures the significance of the text. It brings to mind a story called “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” by Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>40</sup> In the tale, a literary critic sets out to rewrite Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* word for word, without looking at the original. Pierre Menard insists that his version is richer in meaning, since it must be considered in light of world events since the original was created.

The 2020 version of *Prisna* must comment on contemporary Thailand: the loss of those idyllic villages described along the Chaophraya River, the vanished Hua Hin of bungalows and sleepy lanes, and the wider socio-economic implications of these changes. If the story occurs in 1938, *Prisna* is also a return to, or denial of, the pre-war world that was hurtling towards calamity. The novel’s foreign visitors, those English gentlemen, will soon be battling in Trondheim, or pushed into the sea at Dunkirk, or falling out of the sky over Kent.

The 2020 printing of a 1961 *Prisna*, with its mid-century humour and dusty modernity, is a welcome anomaly, that revels in the idiosyncrasies<sup>41</sup> of its translation. I can hear two voices: one objecting to the changes, and then my grandmother, smiling, a hand poised for emphasis as she borrows a quip from Billy Wilder: “Nobody’s perfect”.<sup>42</sup>

### Acknowledgments

I have been accompanied by Dimpy Kongsiri, a granddaughter of Princess Vibhavadi, in my *Prisna* meanderings. Her research work for this article has been invaluable. We would both like to thank Thanpuying Tasnee Boonyakupta for her insights.

<sup>39</sup> *Prisna* (2020), Vol. 1, p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> In James E. Irby, *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

<sup>41</sup> Or imperfections, depending on which way it is considered, see <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-a-flawed-version-of-proust-became-a-classic-in-english>

<sup>42</sup> The last line of *Some Like it Hot*, directed by Billy Wilder in 1959.





