

Cultural Narratives of Resilience: The Role of Nang Kaew in Isan Folk Literature as a Model for Human Endurance and Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the role of Nang Kaew in Isan folk literature and its reinterpretation through choreographic performance, offering insights relevant to human resilience in health and disease contexts. The study: (1) examines twelve Buddhist folk tales to identify the archetypal figure of Nang Kaew, represented by Nang Phom Hom (the Fragrant-Haired Lady), who embodies the roles of mother, wife, and daughter; and (2) develops a choreographic performance titled Nang Kaew Jataka. Through literary analysis, creative choreography, and integration of costume, staging, and music, the performance highlights endurance, loyalty, and compassion. These traits—mirroring resilience in the face of adversity—illustrate cultural models of strength that resonate with contemporary health challenges, including chronic illness and cancer. The findings suggest that traditional narratives, when reinterpreted artistically, can enrich understandings of endurance and provide metaphorical frameworks for patient care, psychosocial support, and holistic treatment approaches.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role and status of women in Thai-Isan society have historically been framed by cultural foundations, customs, and Buddhist teachings, shaping ideals of endurance, morality, and responsibility. These qualities—expressed through the archetype of Nang Kaew—highlight resilience as a defining trait of womanhood. Nang Kaew embodies perseverance, loyalty, and compassion in her roles as mother, wife, and daughter, reflecting broader socio-cultural frameworks of strength under adversity.

These roles are deeply embedded in beliefs, religious teachings (especially Buddhism), values, social expectations, and daily activities, all of which contribute to the interpretation of gender roles. Such interpretations guide and influence human behavior in all aspects. The constructed roles of men and women reflect broader socio-cultural frameworks and the doctrinal principles of Buddhism. Resilience is not only a cultural ideal but also a vital theme in modern contexts, including medicine and oncology. Just as cancer patients and their families must navigate profound challenges, traditional narratives like that of Nang Kaew illustrate endurance, hope, and moral strength in the face of hardship. By examining Nang Kaew through Buddhist-Isan literature and reinterpreting her role in choreographic performance, this research contributes to understanding how cultural narratives of resilience may inform psychosocial and holistic approaches in cancer treatment and survivorship care.

To understand the status of women from a Buddhist perspective, it is necessary to examine the social context of India before and after the advent of Buddhism—specifically, the status of women within Brahmanical and Hindu societies, where the societal structure significantly influenced gender roles and perceptions (Phra Sripariyattimoli [Somchai Kusalachitto], n.d.).

Parents, particularly mothers and fathers, are considered the most revered benefactors of their children. As Prince Wachirayanwarorot (Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao) stated, parents are the first moral exemplars, bestowing upon their

children not only physical form but also the foundation to cultivate all forms of virtue. Even when parents do not actively raise their children, they are nonetheless recognized for their fundamental merit. When they fulfill their parental duties completely and wholeheartedly, their role becomes profoundly virtuous (Wachirayanwarorot, n.d.).

Within traditional Thai society, particularly in the Northeastern (Isan) region, Buddhist beliefs have significantly influenced the ideal roles of women. Women were expected to embody and uphold familial and societal duties—most notably as mothers, wives, and daughters. The Buddha's teachings liken these roles to that of a “precious jewel,” symbolizing purity, inner goodness, and moral behavior that radiates outward. This inner beauty, though often thought of as abstract, can be tangibly expressed through graceful manners, humility, and respectful conduct.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in his work *The Art of Living*, emphasized spiritual beauty over material aesthetics, stating that external appearance may be pleasing, but genuine beauty stems from virtuous behavior and spiritual discipline (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, n.d.). Buddhism assigns moral responsibilities according to social roles, yet its teachings ultimately seek to cultivate virtue in all individuals.

In the past, women in Isan society closely followed Buddhist principles, forming a cultural framework for their conduct and responsibilities. Over time, however, with changes in social conditions and modernization, Isan women have increasingly gained access to education and economic opportunities. This development has led to greater gender equality, allowing women to participate on more equal terms with men in areas such as education, livelihood, and household responsibilities.

In Buddhism, the mother is regarded as a figure of profound love, compassion, and mercy. She is considered the one who determines the child's life path. A child is born out of the mother's love and compassion, and it is she who nurtures and raises the child from infancy into adulthood. The mother not only provides for the child's physical and emotional needs but also passes down inheritance at the appropriate time and may even play a role in selecting a suitable life partner.

According to the Buddha's teachings, the duties of parents (both mother and father) toward their children can be summarized in five key responsibilities:

1. Preventing the child from engaging in wrongdoing
2. Encouraging the child to engage in virtuous deeds
3. Ensuring the child receives an education and training in arts and sciences
4. Arranging a suitable marriage for the child
5. Transferring wealth or inheritance at the proper time

A mother who performs these five duties is regarded as having adhered to the ethical code laid out by Buddhist principles. This practice of *dhmma* (righteousness) not only earns the love and respect of her children but also contributes to a harmonious and peaceful society (Wachirayanwarorot, n.d.).

In the context of marital life, Buddhism describes an ideal wife as a woman who is eager to learn, diligent in household responsibilities, respectful toward her husband, faithful, and supportive of her spouse's undertakings. The characteristics of a virtuous wife include:

1. Never belittling her husband, even if she is intellectually superior
2. Being industrious and constantly engaged in work
3. Maintaining herself with discipline and fulfilling her husband's wishes
4. Avoiding jealousy and speech that could disturb her husband
5. Honoring those whom her husband respects

Such a wife is not only diligent and generous to her husband's relatives and community, but also manages household resources wisely. A woman who behaves in accordance with these virtues is believed to attain the status of the *Manāpakāyikā deva* (heavenly beings of graceful form), as referenced in the Pali Canon (Royal Siam Edition, n.d.).

The creation of choreographic performance is a form of artistic expression that exemplifies the development of human capacity in aesthetics, creativity, and cultural sensitivity. It reflects innovative thinking informed by lived experiences, accumulated knowledge, critical problem-solving, social awareness, and cultural adaptation. Dance creation (*natyasila* or theatrical dance art) plays a pivotal role in fostering cultural flourishing and unity amidst diversity, especially in the context of contemporary global society.

The choreographic creative process is inseparable from adaptation—it draws upon traditional foundations and transforms them through new perspectives. This results in the generation of new knowledge and cultural forms. Creative thinking in dance involves inventing new forms, often inspired by nature, through a process of transformation, reduction, or enhancement, thus allowing expressions of emotion, meaning, personal sentiment (individuality), and imagination. Such

artistic creativity emphasizes key cognitive capacities: fluency, originality, flexibility, and elaboration.

Based on this conceptual framework, the present study seeks to examine the role of *Nang Kaew* (the virtuous lady or “ideal woman”) as interpreted through Buddhist teachings in Isan society. The research further aims to creatively reinterpret her role through choreographic performance, using the structural-functionalist theory of role analysis to understand the evolution and transformation of *Nang Kaew* from the past to the present.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1 To investigate the role of *Nang Kaew* as outlined in Buddhist teachings within the cultural context of Isan society.

2.2 To create an original choreographic performance based on the Buddhist role of *Nang Kaew*, showcasing her unique identity through refined and culturally distinctive dance movements rooted in the Isan tradition.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research titled “*The Role of Nang Kaew in Isan Folk Literature and Its Choreographic Reinterpretation*” was conducted through a structured framework, involving the analysis and synthesis of relevant data and presented in a descriptive-analytical format. The study was carried out in a systematic sequence of steps to align with the research objectives.

Two main target groups were identified for this study: those related to Isan literary sources and those consisting of individuals with scholarly expertise. For the Isan literature group, the study focused on content relevant to the research objectives to ensure clarity and comprehensive coverage of key themes. The data were drawn from Buddhist literary sources, particularly scriptures from the Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka) in the Thai-language edition published by Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, as well as academic texts that discuss the Buddhist teachings concerning the ideal roles and virtues of women.

The second group consisted of individuals recognized as experts in Isan literature. These were scholars with academic contributions and deep expertise in Buddhist literary teachings and moral instruction, particularly those that pertain to the conceptualization of virtuous women within the Buddhist tradition.

The conceptual framework derived from the study was applied to the creation of a choreographic performance based on the collected data. This performance was subsequently presented to panels of experts in various related fields, including specialists in Isan folk dance, Isan folk music, and Isan folk literature, as well as knowledgeable community members and experts in traditional Isan performing arts. These individuals were invited to critique and evaluate the performance, providing feedback, recommendations, and suggestions for improvement.

Based on their critiques, the researcher revised and refined the performance accordingly. The improved version was then re-submitted to the designated panel of experts for final consideration. Following this, the results were summarized and analyzed, and the study was documented in a descriptive-analytical research report. The process culminated in the public presentation of the final creative performance as part of the research dissemination.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The role of *Nang Kaew* as outlined in Buddhist teachings within the cultural context of Isan society.

The study revealed that there are three Buddhist literary works in which female figures serve as the titular characters. These works include *Nang Nok Kra Jok* (Lady Sparrow), *Nang Taeng On* (Lady Tender Melon), and *Nang Phom Hom* (Lady Fragrant Hair). The researcher examined these texts and analyzed their content through the conceptual framework of *Nang Kaew*, focusing on the idealized roles of women as mother, wife, and daughter. The findings from this analysis are presented as follows.

| <i>Nang Nok Kra Jok</i> (Lady Sparrow) | Roles Presented in the Narrative |
|--|---|
| As Mother | She has no children. |
| As Wife | She is the wife of Thao Worakit. |
| As Daughter | She is the daughter of the ruler of the city. |
| | |

| <i>Nang Taeng On</i> (Lady Tender Melon) | Roles Presented in the Narrative |
|--|--|
| As Mother | She is the mother of Prince Suriyong. |
| As Wife | She is the wife of Thao Mahawong. |
| As Daughter | She is the daughter of a crocodile couple. |
| | |
| <i>Nang Phom Hom</i> (Lady Fragrant Hair) | Roles Presented in the Narrative |
| As Mother | She is the mother of two children: the elder, a boy named Sila, and the younger, a girl named Chada. |
| As Wife | She is the wife of the King of Rattana (Phra Chao Rattana). |
| As Daughter | She is the daughter of Lady Sida and Phaya Chang San (the Elephant King). |

Based on the analysis of the table outlining the characteristics of *Nang Kaew* in Isan Buddhist literature, and using the framework established by the researcher, it was found that only one literary work fully embodies the qualities defined in the *Nang Kaew* archetype—specifically, the roles of mother, wife, and daughter. That work is *Nang Phom Hom* (Lady Fragrant Hair).

The researcher employed Role Theory, which is used to study individual "behaviors" as defined by the social roles they occupy. These include roles such as mother, wife, and daughter. Applying this framework, the researcher was able to delineate and analyze the specific social roles embodied by the character of *Nang Phom Hom*, as follows.

The character of *Nang Phom Hom* exemplifies profound endurance across all three traditional roles—mother, wife, and daughter—within the framework of Buddhist-Isan literature. As a mother to her children, Sida and Chada, her patience and love are especially evident in the scene where she must simultaneously prepare food—described in the literary idiom as "cooking rice and tending the fire"—while comforting her hungry, crying children. This image highlights the emotional and physical resilience of maternal care (Preecha Phinthong, *Nang Phom Hom*, 1991).

As a wife, *Nang Phom Hom* demonstrates endurance through her unwavering devotion to Phra Chao Rattana, her husband. This is shown during the episode where she is pushed into a river by a ghost (phi phong), who then disguises itself as *Nang Phom Hom* and returns to the city in her place. Despite the betrayal and hardship, *Nang Phom Hom* remains hopeful and loving, expressing deep longing for her husband and child. Even in suffering, she prays for their happiness and wellbeing, wishing them peace and prosperity regardless of her own distress (Preecha Phinthong, 1991).

In her role as a daughter, *Nang Phom Hom* is the child of Lady Sida and Phaya Chang (the Elephant King). Her endurance is revealed during her quest to find her father. While she successfully climbs onto his back, her younger sister, Loon, repeatedly fails to do so and is ultimately devoured by Phaya Chang. Despite her grief, *Nang Phom Hom* accepts the loss and follows her father into the forest, where she is taken to live among the elephants. There, the elephant retinue builds her a high palace in the forest. Her endurance and obedience lead her to meet and marry Prince Rattana, with whom she has two children—Sida and Chada (Preecha Phinthong, 1991).

Nang Phom Hom's endurance across these three roles enables her to overcome numerous hardships. Before becoming queen, she held no significant social status. However, through perseverance, intelligence, and moral strength, she transcends adversity and ultimately becomes Queen of Rattana, living in happiness alongside Phra Chao Rattana.

The analysis above serves as inspiration for a creative performance that highlights feminine strength and resilience. Choreographic movements can be designed to reflect inner fortitude, grace under pressure, and the pursuit of a better life despite adversity. Through such gestures, the dance emphasizes hope, endurance, and the dignity of confronting hardship while looking forward to a brighter future.

Table 2. Analysis of Nang Kaew's Roles in Isan Buddhist Literature

| Role | Observed Behavior | Socially Expected Duties in Isan Society | Moral Values / Key Attributes |
|-------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Mother | Cooking and caring for children; tending to them during late-night | A good mother must be patient and attentive, even in times of hardship | Compassion, self-sacrifice, strength, |

| | | | |
|----------|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| | crying episodes | | endurance |
| Wife | Serving her husband, preparing meals, remaining loyal during separation | A wife must be faithful, devoted, and provide physical and emotional care for her husband | Loyalty, gentleness, patience |
| Daughter | Venturing into the forest to find her father as an expression of filial devotion | Respect and care for parents is a foundational virtue of a “good daughter” in Isan cultural norms | Filial piety, sacrifice, perseverance |

Based on the study and analysis of the roles of *Nang Kaew* in Isan literature, it was found that the narrative of *Nang Phom Hom* most closely aligns with the conceptual framework of *Nang Kaew*. This is because *Nang Phom Hom* embodies the characteristics associated with the roles of mother, wife, and daughter, as outlined in the preceding analysis.

4.2 The creation of an original choreographic performance based on the Buddhist role of *Nang Kaew*, showcasing her unique identity through refined and culturally distinctive dance movements rooted in the Isan tradition.

In the creation of the choreographic performance, the researcher employed the creative dance principles developed by Surapol Virulrak (2004), which identify four key components essential to the effective structuring and execution of a performance. These components provide a framework that facilitates the inclusion of various expressive elements, contributing to a coherent and successful presentation. The performance was structured into multiple segments based on a review of relevant literature and conceptual frameworks. Through the analysis of these sources, the researcher identified creative strategies that guided the development of each stage of the performance. The resulting structure comprises: (1) the determination of the overall narrative framework, (2) the division of emotional segments, (3) the arrangement of gestures and spatial direction, and (4) the detailing of choreographic elements.

In summary, the researcher developed a performance framework inspired by the role of *Nang Kaew* in Isan folk literature. This creative process involved structuring the narrative, organizing emotional transitions, and designing movements that harmonize with traditional Isan music and rhythmic patterns. The performance also incorporated detailed choreographic elements that align with the expressive and cultural nuances of the source material.

Table of Narrative Structure and Emotional Segments of the Performance

| Segment | Narrative Structure | Emotion | Movement /Expression | Details |
|---------|--|----------------------|----------------------|---|
| 1 | Female characters from all 12 literary works appear to showcase the unique attributes of each character. | Joy, sacred presence | Graceful, elegant | Introduction of 12 female characters |
| 2 | The 12 characters narrate the virtues of <i>Nang Kaew</i> based on Buddhist teachings from the Tipiṭaka. | Happiness | Noble, gentle | 12 characters present their alignment with <i>Nang Kaew</i> values |
| 3 | <p><i>Nang Phom Hom</i>, the only character embodying all three roles of <i>Nang Kaew</i> (daughter, mother, and wife), is presented in solo. Her role is narrated as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – As Daughter: Her quest to find her father, the Elephant King, represents filial love and devotion. – As Mother: Her nurturing of her children in the forest reflects deep affection and concern. – As Wife: Her perseverance in love and loyalty leads to her rise as queen alongside King | Celebration | Aesthetic beauty | <p>Dance Together</p> <p><i>Nang Phom Hom</i> is the central figure, accompanied by handmaidens dancing together in celebration, symbolizing grace and endurance.</p> |

| | | | | |
|--|----------|--|--|--|
| | Rattana. | | | |
|--|----------|--|--|--|

Based on the above information, the researcher selected the costumes for the performance portraying *Nang Kaew Isan* and the twelve female characters drawn from Buddhist literary narratives. The aim was to visually represent the essence of Isan identity while integrating elements of Buddhist belief. The costumes of the twelve characters were designed with reference to the cultural contexts of their respective literary sources. Costume selection plays a crucial role in reflecting both the storyline and the atmosphere of the performance. Each costume component required a nuanced understanding of local traditions, cultural aesthetics, and ritual practices to ensure visual coherence and artistic beauty. Proper costume design, aligned with the character’s traits and the narrative’s cultural setting, is essential for conveying artistic, cultural, and performative authenticity.



Figure 1 *Nang Phom Hom*



Figure 2 End scene

The researcher choreographed the central dance formation by positioning *Nang Kaew* and King Rattana in the center, holding a poised and still posture. The surrounding characters were arranged in a circular formation, also holding static poses. This composition was designed to evoke a sense of grandeur and elegance, reminiscent of a classical mural painting, thereby emphasizing the visual symbolism and cultural depth of the performance.

5. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary

5.1.1 The role of *Nang Kaew* as outlined in Buddhist teachings within the cultural context of Isan society.

From the study and analysis of the role of *Nang Kaew* in Isan literature, it was found that the story of *Nang Phom Hom* most closely aligns with the *Nang Kaew* framework. This is due to the character embodying all three primary roles: mother, wife, and daughter, as previously outlined in the researcher’s analysis. The narrative of *Nang Phom Hom* can be interpreted

through the lens of resilience in the face of adversity and hardship.

In her role as a **mother**, Nang Phom Hom is the mother of Sida and Chada. Her maternal endurance is illustrated in the scene where she is responsible for cooking and tending the fire—a traditional idiom referring to preparing meals—while simultaneously caring for her two crying, hungry children. This dual responsibility reflects the deep love and strength she possesses as a mother (Phinthong, 1991).

In her role as a **wife**, Nang Phom Hom is married to King Rattana. Her loyalty and perseverance are portrayed during the episode in which she is pushed into a river by a *phi phong* (a malevolent spirit), which then takes her form and returns to the city. Despite being replaced, Nang Phom Hom waits faithfully for her beloved husband. Her emotional endurance and unwavering love for both her husband and children are evident in her expressions of longing and in her prayers for their happiness and well-being, even while she suffers hardship herself (Phinthong, 1991).

In her role as a **daughter**, she is the child of Lady Sida and Phaya Chang (the Elephant King). Her filial piety is evident in her journey to find her father and her successful ascent onto his back—a feat her younger sister, Loon, fails to accomplish. After repeated attempts, Loon falls and is tragically devoured by Phaya Chang. Despite her sorrow, Nang Phom Hom accepts the situation and follows her father into the forest, where she is honored with a high palace built by his elephant retinue. It is in this forest that she later meets and falls in love with Prince Rattana, eventually becoming his queen and the mother of two children (Phinthong, 1991).

Thus, Nang Phom Hom demonstrates remarkable endurance in all three roles. Her life before becoming queen was marked by hardship and low social standing. However, through intelligence, virtue, and perseverance, she overcame these obstacles and ultimately ascended the throne as Queen of Rattana, living in happiness alongside King Rattana.

This narrative provides the foundation for a choreographic interpretation that emphasizes feminine strength and resilience. Through expressive movement and gesture, the performance can portray stability, dignity in the face of adversity, and the persistent pursuit of a better life. Despite enduring many hardships, Nang Phom Hom remains hopeful and determined. This performance highlights forward-looking determination and the search for resolution through patience and hope.

5.1.2 The creation of an original choreographic performance based on the Buddhist role of *Nang Kaew*, showcasing her unique identity through refined and culturally distinctive dance movements rooted in the Isan tradition.

The *Nang Kaew Isan* dance performance was developed as a choreographic creation grounded in the study of Isan folk literature associated with Buddhist teachings. The researcher designed the performance concept using traditional Isan dance forms as a framework for the creative process. These forms were adapted and applied to the production of the *Nang Kaew Isan* performance. The rationale for employing Isan folk dance lies in the literary origin of *Nang Kaew*—a character found predominantly in Northeastern Thai (Isan) narratives. The characters and plotlines of these literary works are deeply embedded in the cultural and geographical context of the Isan region. Consequently, presenting the creative work through the idiom of Isan folk dance not only enhances the cultural specificity of the narrative but also highlights the characters' identities and regional heritage. Drawing from both role theory and *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) theory, the researcher analyzed the Isan folk tale *Nang Phom Hom*, selecting scenes that most effectively illustrate the comprehensive embodiment of the three core roles of *Nang Kaew*: mother, wife, and daughter. These roles were then interpreted through performance, showcasing their emotional and narrative significance.

The researcher structured the performance based on these roles, with attention to narrative sequencing, emotional dynamics, and movements that align with traditional Isan rhythms and musical patterns. Through this creative process, the *Nang Kaew Isan* dance performance emerged as an original work that draws directly from Buddhist-themed Isan folk literature, especially *Nang Phom Hom*, which clearly reflects the multidimensional role of *Nang Kaew*. By applying role theory and *rasa* theory, the narrative structure, emotional content, and choreography were carefully crafted and synchronized with traditional Isan music and rhythms. As a result, the performance not only expresses the unique identity of Isan literature but also contributes to the preservation and innovation of regional performance art through a culturally meaningful and aesthetically distinctive choreographic work.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 The role of *Nang Kaew* as outlined in Buddhist teachings within the cultural context of Isan society.

The portrayal of *Nang Phom Hom* in Isan folk literature offers a compelling lens through which to examine the intersection of gender, morality, and cultural values in Thai society. Drawing upon Role Theory (Biddle, 1986), which posits that individuals perform roles based on social expectations tied to identity (e.g., mother, wife, daughter), *Nang Phom Hom* emerges as a cultural exemplar of femininity rooted in Buddhist and Isan moral structures. Her behaviors—caregiving, loyalty, and filial piety—reflect internalized social scripts that align with traditional Thai gender norms.

As a mother, *Nang Phom Hom* embodies the nurturing and self-sacrificing qualities expected of maternal figures. Her ability to simultaneously fulfill domestic duties while comforting her children symbolizes what Chodorow (1978) refers to as the "reproductive labor of love," a culturally reinforced role that reinforces a mother's moral worth through endurance

and emotional labor.

As a wife, her unwavering loyalty to Phra Chao Rattana, even in the face of physical separation and hardship, illustrates Buddhist ideals of marital devotion and non-attachment (Keyes, 1984). This mirrors the doctrine of *siladhamma*, or moral discipline, which emphasizes patience, fidelity, and emotional restraint as virtues for women (Gross, 1993).

In the role of a daughter, *Nang Phom Hom*'s determination to reconnect with her father exemplifies filial piety, a Confucian value that has been absorbed into Thai-Buddhist culture. Her actions resonate with the Buddhist teaching of *kataññu-katavedī*, or gratitude toward one's parents—a value consistently highlighted in Thai moral education (Mulder, 2000).

The integration of these roles into a choreographic performance based on Rasa Theory (Bharata, trans. 2002), which emphasizes aesthetic emotion in Indian and Southeast Asian performance traditions, enables a rich, symbolic representation of emotional states such as *karuṇā* (compassion), *śānta* (peace), and *vīra* (heroism). The use of traditional Isan dance forms to convey these emotional tones allows the performance to simultaneously preserve and reinterpret cultural identity through embodied narrative.

Moreover, the aestheticization of *Nang Phom Hom*'s story into a performance medium provides a platform for cultural transmission and critical reflection. It celebrates the strength of women in traditional settings while also inviting discourse on how such roles may evolve or become redefined in contemporary Thai society. As Butler (1990) argues in her theory of performativity, gender is not a static identity but a set of repeated actions shaped by historical and social context. The performance thus serves as both a preservation of heritage and a site of potential transformation.

5.2.2 The creation of an original choreographic performance based on the Buddhist role of *Nang Kaew*, showcasing her unique identity through refined and culturally distinctive dance movements rooted in the Isan tradition

The creation of an original choreographic work based on the Buddhist role of *Nang Kaew* reflects a culturally embedded performance practice that serves both as aesthetic expression and as a medium of cultural transmission. Drawing from the Isan tradition, the choreography does not merely present narrative; it embodies values, identity, and historical memory through movement, space, and form. The conceptualization of *Nang Kaew*—as mother, wife, and daughter—offers a multidimensional representation of womanhood as interpreted through both Buddhist moral teachings and regional folklore.

According to Surapol Virulrak's framework for contemporary Thai dance creation, successful choreographic works in traditional contexts should integrate four interdependent elements: (1) narrative structure, (2) emotional segments, (3) gesture and movement, and (4) symbolic detail (Virulrak, 2004). In the *Nang Kaew* performance, these elements converge to present a character whose roles are layered with spiritual, familial, and social meaning.

From the perspective of Performance Theory, Richard Schechner (2006) emphasizes that ritual, storytelling, and theatrical performance are deeply linked in traditional societies. In this context, the choreographic representation of *Nang Kaew* can be seen as a performative ritual that reenacts and reaffirms Buddhist-Isan values such as compassion (*karuṇā*), filial piety (*kataññu-katavedī*), and resilience (*vīrya*). These values are not only narrated but embodied through stylized gestures, rhythm, and spatial design in the dance.

In addition, the integration of Rasa Theory (Bharata, trans. 2002) enhances the communicative power of the performance. This aesthetic framework identifies emotional states (*rasa*) such as *śṛṅgāra* (love), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *śānta* (tranquility) as the foundation of audience experience. In the *Nang Kaew* performance, these *rasa* are evoked through choreographic form and musical cadence, allowing the audience to emotionally engage with the protagonist's journey.

The use of embodied cultural memory in performance (Taylor, 2003) is also relevant. Through gesture and rhythm rooted in Isan folk dance, the performance becomes a repository of intergenerational knowledge. It both preserves and reinterprets traditional identity, positioning the female character not merely as a symbol of virtue but as an agent of cultural continuity and resilience.

Moreover, Postcolonial Performance Theory invites us to read the *Nang Kaew* performance as a reclamation of local identity in the face of dominant central narratives. By highlighting regional language, movement styles, and belief systems, the dance asserts the uniqueness of Isan aesthetics and epistemology.

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