

Remembrances of Red Trauma (18) - Writing about atrocity, a challenge for Thai literature

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Duanwad Pimwana is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Thai literature. In her writing, the former journalist, whose real name is Pimjai Juklin, combines magic realism with incisive social observations. She is one of only six women to have received the Thai S.E.A Write Award and the first female Thai writer to be published in English.

At an [literary event](#) in Ubon Ratchathani in February, *The Isaan Record*'s Hathairat Phaholtap sat down with Duanwad to talk about the tenth anniversary of the crackdown on the Red Shirt protests, and the challenges Thai literature faces in dealing with the traumatic event.



Duanwad Pimwana: "The pain of being discriminated against, of being shot at, of being oppressed, is a feeling that doesn't go away. It just gets covered up." Photo by Adithep Chanthet

"In fact, I was very close to that event...", says Duanwad, and falls silent as if she is looking for the right words to describe the events from ten years ago.

She joined the Red Shirt rallies in April and May 2010 many times and listened to the speeches from the protest stages. The crowds consisted mostly of villagers and people from the grassroots, and there was an "atmosphere of participation," the 51-year-old writer remembers.

"Politics usually belonged to the elites, but that time it was different," she says.

Duanwad is sure it was no coincidence that Isaan people joined the protests in masses. The governments they supported had been overthrown several times, leaving them with the feeling that their voices were considered meaningless. But many of the protesters also had a simmering sense of being second-class citizens.

"They have been the object of verbal humiliation for all living memory," Duanwad says. "They're cowards, they're money-grubbing, they'll do anything for a politician's money. You name it, they've had every kind of demeaning word or slur thrown at them."

In clashes with the authorities and the bloody crackdown that ended the protests on May 19, Isaan people accounted for the largest group of those killed. Of the 94 casualties, at least 36 people hailed from the Northeast according to a [report by the People's Information Center](#) (PIC).

"Although more people from Isaan were killed than from anywhere else, the injustice and pain felt by people can't be classified by the victims' origins or by region," says Duanwad who grew up in the eastern part of the country, "because the pain of being discriminated against, of being shot at, of being oppressed, is a feeling that doesn't go away. It just gets covered up."



Duanwad Pimwana: "From the day the crackdown started, from the day that some became criminals, from the day that weapons were raised, and people fell, the tension hasn't gone anywhere. The battle lines that were drawn that day-they're still there today." Photo by Adithep Chanthet

Even ten years after the event, Duanwad is still haunted by the violence and brutality of the state's response to the Red Shirt protests.

"If you know that people died at the hands of the state, if you know they were shot with bullets paid for with our taxes, it's quite a different matter than being shot by a common robber," she says.

In the years after April-May 2010, the shock over the bloodshed for Duanwad gave way to anger and frustration over the lack of justice for the ones killed and injured in the clashes.

Meanwhile, many in society were seeking closure from the traumatic events even as none of the politicians and military commanders who ordered the crackdown, and the soldiers who carried out those orders, were made to take responsibility.

"I'm sure there are some people who...I don't know whether they can really forget it. Maybe some people really have forgotten because they never cared in the first place."

But Duanwad is convinced of the importance to not let memories of the atrocity fade away, and surrender to Thailand's deep-rooted culture of impunity.

"There were nearly 100 dead bodies," she stresses. "The ten years that went by haven't made anything disappear with time. Not truly-that would be impossible."

"The battle lines that were drawn that day-they're still there today. The din of battle is getting louder every day, but those who don't hear it, don't hear it," Duanwad says. "But those who do hear it know that it's been getting louder, year after year."



Duanwad Pimwana: "Writing is, in fact, waiting for its time. It is a seed. If you leave a seed there, it will grow eventually." Photo by Adithep Chanthet

Duanwad believes that literature has a role to play in coming to terms with the atrocities of 2010, in recording the tragedies of that period, and in reminding society that justice is still waiting to be served.

"Writing about the violence in 2010 is a literary effort that requires a lot of energy because instead of remembering what they did, the criminals used silence to erase all the images and memories of death," she argues.

Duanwad says it's regrettable that many contemporary Thai writers have shied away from dealing with events of 2010 in their works. As many authors receive support through public funds, she believes, they should also be writing about issues that are in the public interest.

But she also recognizes the constricted conditions that writers in Thailand have to navigate, especially when they write about politically sensitive issues.

"Even today, it is difficult to write and to truly speak out. We might be able to write but we can't express ourselves fully because it might impact our lives, and we might be dealt with through legal means," Duanwad says. "But for this kind of thing, writing, in fact, is waiting for its time. It is a seed. If you leave a seed there, it will grow eventually."