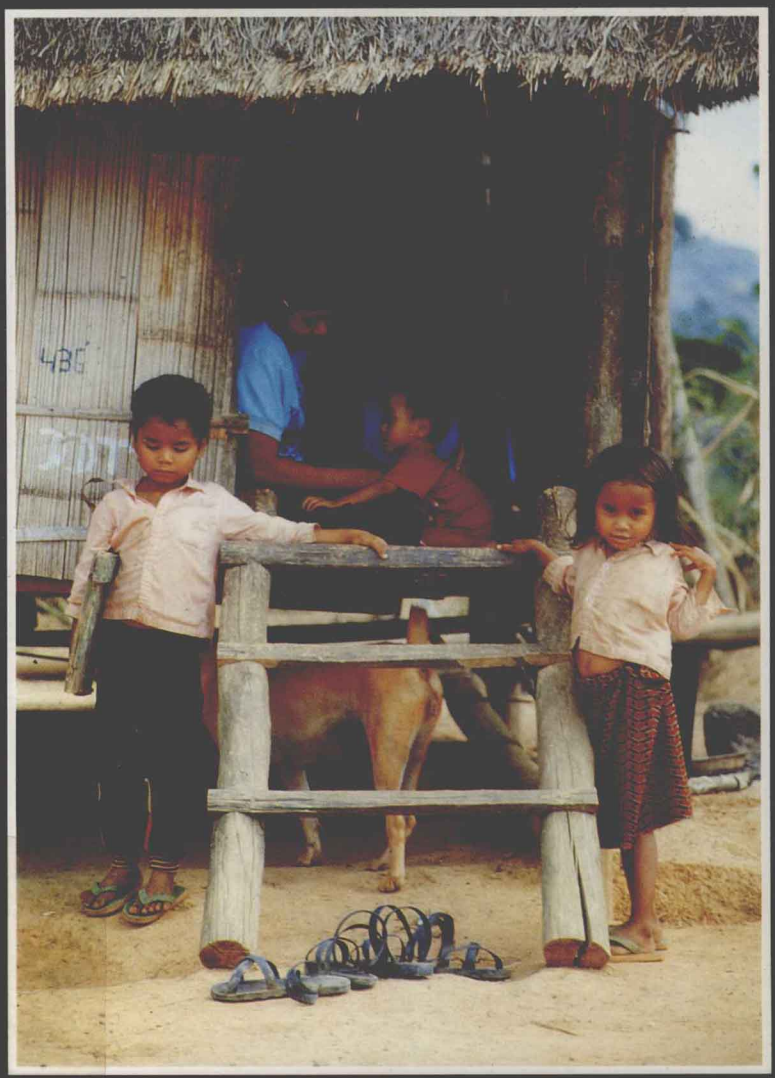
Pira Sudham

Monsoon Country



Rother

Monsoon Country

by

Pira Sudham

Rother
Rother at Bodiam, E.Sussex
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By the same author

People of Esarn
Pira Sudham's Best

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Monsoon Country

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Introduction

A way with words

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Pira Sudham, the author of *Monsoon Country,* is a most unusual writer. In the first place, although born, bred, and indeed still resident, in Thailand, he writes in English, not Thai. There can be few such.

Secondly, because his own pilgrimage through life has taken him from his birthplace, a Lao-speaking peasant village in northeast Thailand, to spend long stretches of time in cities of European culture far from it, he is in command of both Oriental and Occidental ways of looking at things. Even though these viewpoints must sometimes be at variance with one another, Pira Sudham seems comfortable with both.

A divalent world-picture is hardly unique, of course, but it is, perhaps, more unusual than it ought to be. For a writer, the double understanding it implies can be of value and Pira Sudham turns it to good account in *Monsoon Country.* In general it seems to make him more insightful, and at times it is the source of dramatic tension in the narrative.

Thus at one point Prem Surin, the principal character of the book, who also has experienced the two cultures and been drawn towards both, is made to resolve his own ultimate dilemma by choosing between Eastern personal detachment and Western

personal involvement.

Monsoon Country depicts the problem of social transition in present-day rural Thailand. This problem is complex and not dealt with in one incident, like Prem's choice, but a picture of it is built up cumulatively as the narrative returns again and again to touch lightly upon it.

Part of what is at issue is the encroachment of the tempting artefacts and expectations of the West upon the age-old and conservative patterns of the indigenous East. Both traditions have their attractions but it is uncertain in what way they may be combined, if at all, in the context of an impoverished peasant society. To the underlying question of what way the people directly involved should choose to act, there is, possibly, no simple answer to be given. Certainly I can read no strong attempt in this book to offer one. Rather I see the effective depiction of a poignant human situation, a depiction which draws much of its power from Pira Sudham's own dichotomous insights. He has experienced the pull in opposite directions; he has lived both lives. More fully than we who read his words in the West and more fully than those who are living through the dilemma in the East, he knows the rewards which both traditions can offer and he knows the bitter penalties which each will exact for those rewards.

We are moved to compassion as his gentle treatment, amplified with each successive vignette, builds our understanding and our empathy. We come to fear that, whatever the choices they elect to make, the foreseeable future will probably be bitter for the people in villages like Napo, that same Napo which, it is worth pointing out, is home both to Prem in the

book and to Pira in real life.

We should note even so that *Monsoon Country* is not an autobiography. But it is true that Pira Sudham's relationship with his narrative is a close and personal one. Only other writers who have also lived part of the story they tell themselves are as well placed as Pira Sudham to deal with their material.

Apart from his unexpected choice of English to write in and his cosmopolitan culture, there is another, a third, unusual aspect to the author of this book, and it is this aspect which intrigues me most of all, probably because I understand it least. This is Pira Sudham's actual way with words. It is like that of no other writer I know.

When one first begins to look at the writing in *Monsoon Country* simply as writing, it is noticeable that only a few sentences are "purple" rather than plain. The overall impression which the text makes is that it is both approachable and simple, the former because of the latter.

One may be tempted to see those few purple patches as mavericks which somehow escaped the pruning knife of authorial revision. But the temptation will not last long. If ever there was a writer whose every word was chosen and placed with careful deliberation, it is this one. Every word, plain or purple, is just what he intended it to be and creates the effect he calculated for it.

As the reader gradually becomes more familiar with the book and the way it is written, the feeling that the diction is approachable will remain. The feeling that it is simple, except in the most superficial sense, will, however, be overtaken by a realisation that it is both sophisticated and complex, although

not, perhaps, in usual ways.

It is true that the surface of the writing is most often quite straightforward, reminiscent in some ways of early Hemingway. For example, it is not difficult to find sentences which are just single principal clauses arranged in that most basic of all English sentence patterns - subject + verb + (optional) object; or even to find clusters of them. For example:

> The noisy ritual ceased suddenly. The stone, the fronds, the frogs waited. Dust began to settle. The air spoke of an intrusion.

At the same time it can be seen that the vocabulary comes typically from the standard register of the language and consists mainly of words of relatively high frequency of occurrence. It all adds up to a linear succession of familiar words in familiar places. The typical ingredients of the text are lines of prose which are not daunting. Neither are those other apparently simple lines daunting which are the ingredients of, say, a Picasso sketch.

In so much modern art a rich palette is not assembled. Modest ingredients are made to serve and used to create a whole which is vastly more than its parts. Total effects are what matter, not the nature of their constituents, and in the case of Pira Sudham, as in that of Picasso, these effects can be powerful. The few sentences quoted above, for instance, in context, shape an atmosphere of quite breathless anticipation.

Time and again as I read, I find myself pulled up to ask: 'Why was that so effective? How was that done?' The consistent cleverness of the writing forces me to pause, to savour at length and, inevitably, to

ask such questions.

Full answers to them seldom come back, of course, since they are in Pira Sudham's keeping alone, but it does seem to me sometimes that very much has depended upon the choice of the *mot juste,* no matter how apparently simple a word it may have been, or more probably on the choice of several of them. Such choices are not simple matters and cannot be lightly made. They presuppose a sophisticated and unusual sensitivity to language and to its resonances.

Accordingly it is no surprise that descriptions, overt or implied, are often brief but curiously effective.

Because the writing is so graphic, though sparse, we form vivid images in our minds as we read. For example, we come to think that we know - whether we are right or wrong does not matter - what the *monsoon country* actually looks like, or more accurately perhaps, what it actually feels like. We have experienced the coming of the rain on the parched plain. We have sheltered from its searing heat by sitting under a tree, and so on.

If we seek to understand why everything seems so immediate and vivid, it may be that we should look towards the innate sense of the dramatic which seems to be part and parcel of Pira Sudham's make-up. One notes that his "landscapes" always have people and his narrative moves forward by means of the interactions of these people. His novel is evidently a work of human response, just as any play must be. But there is this difference, namely, that we do not contemplate the players as figures on a stage but somehow magically enter into their skins. We then know what they see and also what they feel as they deal with each

other and with the physical environment about them. In part at least it is this which explains the first-hand quality of our impressions and why, more than in many an other novel, we have a real feeling of *being there.*

With this in mind, other qualities which we might associate with the drama come to attention. Consider the almost theatrical control of pace. At times the action moves along evenly and calmly. At other times the pace is more rapid. Usual enough, you might say. But there are other times again when the action suddenly hurtles forward, when it lurches without warning, taking the reader quite by surprise and inducing the same sort of frisson as a brilliant *coup de théâtre.* The audience in the one case and the reader in the other may be most pleasurably astonished by such unexpected and virtuoso effects, but, despite the rapidity of their happening, should not be left uncomprehending behind to wonder what has happened. Nor are they, as long as the writer knows his or her craft sufficiently well. Pira Sudham certainly knows his sufficiently well. In his writing lucidity is never sacrificed, whatever pace his action may take, unless he intends it to be.

That this may sometimes be the case occurs to us when we consider the tone of the writing. Usually it is plainly straightforward, even unremarkable. There is no use of devices like irony that I can recall and so words tend to mean just what they say. Nevertheless there is a whole crucial section in the second part of the novel which is rich in ambiguity and which operates with suggestions not clearly stated. This section corresponds to events in Prem's life which are traumatic for him and which leave him uncertain at

the deepest levels of his being about the rectitude of his own behaviour, both in the particular events in question, and, to judge by his subsequent actions, in his life more generally. The burden of it all upon him is immense and, in self-defence, he veils his own mind from himself and ceases his usual patterns of self-awareness.

Accordingly it is entirely logical that we readers, who have grown accustomed to seeing the world through the perceptions of Prem's mind and to following his reactions to these perceptions through his self-awareness, should find the situation in this part of the book somehow misting over and becoming obscure. We grow unclear even as to what Prem actually did at certain critical points in the story. His actions, as well as his responses and motivations, are for the time lost to us in greater or lesser degree.

It is, of course, all intended to be so - a cunningly contrived piece of mystification for our ultimate delight. Yet it is also psychologically sound. Who among us have not known occasions when the workings of our own hearts and hands would not comfortably bear too close a scrutiny and when we have therefore simply turned from their contemplation? Prem's failure at this time to face his reality, whatever it was, does not strain verisimilitude and it is handled so that we simply become more and more intrigued. "What can he have done?" we ask ourselves, hardly daring to breathe one dark possibility which has been made to occur to us.

As might be expected, the situation becomes clearer in retrospect as we read on further - though, perhaps as in real life, not entirely clear. It is all quite brilliantly done and our respect grows for that false-

simple diction of Pira Sudham with its supple power which seems to be equal to any challenge.

A weakish parallel with it might be found in the superficially plain language which T.S. Eliot adopted for so much of his play *The Cocktail Party.* Eliot's apparently pedestrian prose had within it the power to be imperceptibly transmuted into a poetic form appropriate for use at those parts of the play which called for lyrical outpouring. The parallel is poor because Pira Sudham's prose rises to its high points without apparent "transmutation". Would a better analogy be with the Thai kick-boxer whose impassivity at all times in the ring gives no hint as to when his left leg will flash around and up to deliver a stunning blow to his opponent's head? Perhaps Pira Sudham's prose is *sui generis* and no analogy is worth pursuing.

In any discussion of language use, it is unsatisfactory to divide things up so as to suggest that manner exists somehow independent of matter. It does not. Yet here, as so often is the case, this seems to have been done. Perhaps to some extent it is inevitable. But let us now belatedly turn to content, for most readers are likely to agree that the author of *Monsoon Country* is as interesting for what he says as for how he says it, perhaps more so.

Some people have seen the book as an exposé of certain aspects of Thai society. Certainly Pira Sudham does put clearly before us the plight of the peasant villagers among whom he grew up. These people seem to be as much victims of their own incapacitating philosophy of acceptance and obedience as of the cruel pattern of economic exploitation which is imposed upon them by others. The latter draws

strength from the former and between the two they are held hapless prisoners in a condition of grinding poverty and of deprivation, both material and personal, from which there seems to be scant hope of release.

How it all works in practice is clearly revealed to us as the action of the novel, moving rapidly over the years, impinges upon members of the Surin family, whose mental processes we come to know quite well; and in a less clear-cut way as it impinges upon the idealistic village school teacher, Kumjai. He becomes increasingly enigmatic to us as the story goes on, because Prem, through whose eyes we see him for the most part, is increasingly separated from him.

To many a Western reader these aspects of the book may well come as something of a revelation, an *exposé* if you will. At very least they are likely to cause an uncomfortable enlarging of the images of Thailand typically held in the Western mind, adding less romantic pictures to place beside those of exotic resorts like Phuket, and of golden Buddhas in scented temples.

While the revelation of this pattern of social evil has a precise local habitation, namely in and around the village of Napo, it is Pira Sudham's skill to make it not only distant and exotic but also familiar and applicable to settings we know much better. The heartlessness, and above all the greed, are the same unattractive coins as circulate in my country and no doubt in yours. As the story unfolds and they stand revealed, we recognise them as all too familiar.

This is no book of facile optimism. No easy solutions are advanced; nor is too much distraction from the problem of human evil allowed. Grim real-

ity claims the last page more firmly than it did the first and the reader must confront it.

But it would be entirely wrong to think of this as a book of dark tones only. There is a calming stoicism in the treatment, even humour, and, anyway, human virtues are as present as human vices to warm the pages. There is kindness as well as cruelty, idealism as well as cynicism. There is love beside indifference, generosity as well as greed. They are all given particular habitation, but are nonetheless universal in essence.

In a way the book is a treatise on the duality of human nature. It addresses the question of why some human beings are "good" and life-affirming in the main, while others are "bad" and life-denying. And if its observations bring no answer to the question for the present, and perhaps there never will be one, the problem it posits remains a reality which we must all attempt to come to terms with. It may be that this book can help us, for in it the human condition is accurately, compassionately, if a little sadly, presented. As the reader finally shuts it he or she will probably have a feeling of understanding life and its complexities at least a little better.

Pira Sudham is much too wise to offer pasteboard examples of the various vices and virtues he deals with. His characters, at least the more fully treated ones, have mingling in them ingredients of both kinds, as most of us do, but of course in by no means equal proportions. Perhaps because of this they seem to have a life of their own. Whatever they may typify, whatever lesson is to be drawn from them, they are individuals in whom we believe and in whom we become very interested. They cease to be Thai or

English or German, as all people do with whom we come to empathise greatly, and stand before us merely as particular humans, merely as themselves. One must be very glad that Pira Sudham chose to avoid the grotesques of satire and to bring to us credible creatures whom we can get to know well as they play out his drama and bring us his message.

Moreover, these individuals, these new acquaintances of ours, especially Prem whose story the book primarily relates, are set in a plot which, while admittedly gathering its interest somewhat slowly at first, ultimately develops a powerful fascination. In time, *Monsoon Country* becomes one of those books the reader just cannot put down, more because of a desire to know what happens next than to savour any of the other admirable qualities it possesses. The story even has a denouement which, at least for this Western reader, was totally unexpected. One wonders whether it would have been so for a reader of a different background.

It is a great skill indeed to make of such compelling interest a story which has to deal instructively in weighty matters both particular and general. When one considers also that there are so many other great skills displayed in *Monsoon Country,* it seems entirely appropriate that its author should have been recommended for the Nobel Prize in Literature. It is a very exceptional book. He is a very exceptional writer.

Monsoon Country: A Chronology of Change

Pira Sudham was born to a rice-farming family in impoverished, rural Esarn, northeast Thailand. He made his way to Bangkok at the age of fourteen to serve the monks as a temple boy, an acolyte, in a Buddhist temple. His departure from his village is similar to that of thousands of young boys from rural areas of Thailand to find lodging and food in order to be able to attain higher education.

"If I had not left my village then, I would have been another peasant. I would have been subject, like most villagers, to the mercy of nature: floods, drought, disease, ignorance and scarcity. With endurance, I would have accepted them as my own fate, as something I cannot go against in this life," says Pira.

Of his humble background, he says, "I owe a great deal to my early village life, spending years in rice fields of Esarn, so remote and neglected. I grew up with the good heartedness, the hospitality and illiteracy of our people, as well as the selfishness, cruelty, poverty and corruption. I know the arrogance of shopkeepers, of merchants who deal with villagers, and the helplessness of the farmers. What I saw and learnt in childhood touched me deeply. I won't cut off my roots, for without them I would not be able to grow. I see my literary works as a force emerging from the grass roots, from the poor of Thailand, who had no voice before, and have been left far behind in the accelerated development and industrialisation in our cities. Now the emergence

of peasants has to happen."

Asked why he writes, Pira Sudham replies: "In my mind I carry memories of childhood, of life in villages, much as a pregnant woman carrying a child. Every day these images grow, and I know that one day I shall have to give birth to them through the medium of writing. Besides, I don't want people in our villages, so far removed from other peoples because of distance and poverty, to be born, suffer and die in vain. They are my impetus, my incentive to write, my life force, my source of energy and power. For so long, I have suffered along with them. An oyster, after a grain of sand strays inside and causes irritation and pain, can secrete a substance which coats the source of irritation day by day, until it becomes a pearl. Like an oyster, I overcome the source of my pains with writing, with a hope that one day, what I write may become powerful enough to change people's way of thinking."

Would we be right in thinking there was both a hint of anger and a great deal of sadness in his books? The author admits: "When I was a child in Napo Village, what I saw and experienced moved me greatly. The poverty, corruption, lack of basic medical facilities, the purchase and sale of children and also many buffaloes combined to sadden me; I was angered by the injustice and the helplessness of the peasants. I remember how I wished to tell my parents and the other villagers what I saw and felt, and what I wanted them to see and feel. I wanted to take them by their shoulders and shake them to wake up