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## **Prostitution in Thailand: Representations in Fiction and Narrative Non-Fiction**

By Lisa Lines<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper explores problematic Western approaches to women working as prostitutes within the 'sex tourism' industry in Thailand through an examination of how their situation is portrayed in the various English-language fiction and non-fiction narratives written on this topic. The first half of this study focuses on the context, practices and working conditions of the Thai sex tourism industry. This is then used as the lens through which to analyse the approaches to Thai sex tourism in Western mainstream literature.

Four books were analysed for their depiction of Thai prostitutes, with a focus on the plots, themes and characterisations of the women they depicted. Troublingly, it was found that the fiction often dismissed or glossed over the problems faced by Thai prostitutes, going so far as to glamourise the profession and demonise the women. Conversely, the non-fiction works are less romanticised and provided more nuanced and complex pictures of the women working in prostitution. It is important that this dichotomy is addressed. The fictional works serve to perpetuate myths and negative stereotypes about the industry and the women who work in it, ultimately contributing to their further subjugation by normalising sex tourism.

*Key Words:* Prostitution, Thailand, Sex Tourism

### **Introduction**

This paper explores problematic Western approaches to women working as prostitutes within the 'sex tourism' industry in Thailand<sup>2</sup> through an examination of how their situation is portrayed in the various fiction and non-fiction narratives written by Westerners on this topic. It is all too easy to dismiss prostitution in Thailand as having limited international relevance with arguments that it is simply the product of a poor society and that Thai men are its greatest consumers. However, such an assessment obscures the complex issues relating to power structures and external forces (Truong 190). Given that there has been a lack of academic attention paid to sex tourism and the role it plays in perpetuating prostitution in Thailand as a

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'sex tourism' generally refers to tourists travelling to other countries specifically to purchase the sexual services of women (and men) there. It is a problematic term since it uses the word 'sex' while actually only referring to prostitution, but it is used in this article. Throughout this article, women working in prostitution will be referred to as 'prostitutes' instead of the popular euphemistic term 'bargirls', which has patronising and sexist undertones. Also, the terms 'sex industry' and 'sex worker' are avoided, in favour of the more accurate 'prostitution' and 'prostitute', respectively.

whole, this paper seeks to shed light on this through exploring both the factual context and Western perceptions through popular and literary writing.

The first half of this study focuses on the context, practices and working conditions of the Thai sex tourism industry. This is then used as the lens through which to analyse the approaches to Thai sex tourism in Western mainstream literature. The English-language fiction on the subject of prostitution in Thailand is dominated by male authors who are either existing or former sex tourists, or expatriates who have spent long periods living and working in Thailand. Most focus on the relationship between a prostitute and a *farang* (foreigner), usually a Westerner from a developed country such as the US, and seem to mainly revolve around whether relationships that arise out of such encounters ever have the potential to end happily—‘bargirl-done-me-wrong’ novels. A search on WorldCat and Amazon revealed that approximately 61 novels on the topic of prostitution in Thailand are currently in circulation. All of these are written by men<sup>3</sup> and the overwhelming majority of the 61 novels are popular (rather than literary) fiction,<sup>4</sup> which lends itself to stereotypes and oversimplifications due to a commercial imperative to entertain readers as opposed to conveying the harsh realities of sex tourism. This is not to say that literature should be a facsimile of reality; nevertheless, literature does reflect and perpetuate social attitudes, and such Western romanticisation and reductionism can function to enforce damaging imperialistic conceptions (Said). This is all the more concerning given that the above-mentioned literature is, as one author, Stephen Leather, admits, “especially welcomed by guys who are planning to visit Thailand for the first time” (Norbert).

The majority of these novels present a one-sided view of Thai prostitutes as the exotic ‘other’, biased towards a male-oriented, Western agenda—usually that of the Western sex tourist. Two novels were chosen for analysis based on their popularity and common themes they shared with the other fiction on this topic:

1. *Private Dancer* (2005), an erotic thriller by Stephen Leather, considered a ‘cult classic’ among Western sex tourists and expatriates.
2. *The Pole Dancer* (2004), a fast-paced action thriller by R. D. Lawrence (pseudonym) about a Bangkok prostitute and a rich, handsome Western stranger.

Two narrative non-fiction books were also selected to provide a comparison point from which to judge alternative and arguably less reductionist, Orientalised ways of exploring the topic. There is a paucity of English-language narrative non-fiction on the subject of prostitution in Thailand, likely due to the life circumstances of the prostitutes themselves and the shame associated with the profession, as indicated by two out of the existing three narrative non-fiction texts using pseudonyms to protect the identity of their protagonists. Further, socio-economic and legal vulnerability makes it unlikely that any prostitute would want to draw attention to herself publicly by writing about her situation or the sex tourism industry as a whole (Truong 156-7,

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<sup>3</sup> Two books that are partial exceptions are *The Road to Wanting* (2010) by Wendy Law-Yone (although it has a large section set in Burma and concerns a Burmese protagonist) and *Broken Halo* (2012) by Doris Kraushaar (a novel about child prostitution). They are written by women but do not precisely fit into the category of fiction that I am assessing here.

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions being Law-Yone, mentioned above, and the controversial *Platform* (2001) by Michel Houellebecq, much criticised for its perceived condoning and normalisation of Thai sex tourism.

177-80). This is an interesting contrast to the abundance of novels on the same topic. It appears as if the asymmetrical relationship that underpins prostitution is replicated here, in the narratives.

A survey of the published literature found only three English-language, narrative non-fiction books on the topic of prostitution in Thailand.<sup>5</sup> The work not chosen for analysis is *Only 13: The True Story of Lon* (2006), the biography of a young Thai woman who became a prostitute at the age of 13. Although it is one of the few books to reveal the identity of the protagonist, its narrative is repetitive and contradictory, and it has been criticised for its poor quality writing.

The remaining two non-fiction narratives that will be analysed here are based on background research and interviews with real-life subjects, which enable the authors to present complex, well-rounded characters and depict the lives of prostitutes in Thailand more realistically and avoid the oversimplifications, generalisations and negative stereotypes present in much of the fiction. These are:

1. *Miss Bangkok: Memoirs of a Thai Prostitute* (2007), an autobiography based on the real-life experiences of a prostitute, as told to Nicola Pierce.
2. *Mango Rains: The True Story of a Thai Mother's Lifelong Search for Her Abducted Daughter* (2010), a fictionalised biography of a mother and daughter who are both prostitutes, written in the third person by Daniel M. Dorothy and based on his interviews with the daughter.

The above four books were analysed for their depiction of Thai prostitutes working in sex tourism, with a focus on the plots, themes and characterisations of the women they depicted. Troublingly, it was found that the fiction often dismissed or glossed over the problems faced by Thai prostitutes, going so far as to glamourise the profession and demonise the women. Conversely, the non-fiction works are less romanticised (as established by the first half of this study) and provided more nuanced and complex pictures of the women working in prostitution. It is important that this dichotomy is addressed. The fictional works serve to perpetuate myths and negative stereotypes about the industry and the women who work in it, ultimately contributing to their further subjugation by normalising sex tourism.

### **Nature and Justification of Sex Tourism**

As the approach of the novels introduced above exemplifies, one of the most troubling elements of sex tourism is that many foreign men justify their exploitation of women, or choose to ignore it. This is due to a variety of factors, such as their not being the primary consumers, not visiting brothels, engaging in 'romance', and racist and chauvinist attitudes. While this research focuses on sex tourism, Thai prostitution is itself divided into different sectors that serve different markets and are differentiated by criteria such as the socio-economic status of customers, the nationality of both customers and prostitutes, and the perceived health risk of particular prostitutes by customers (Boonchalaksi and Guest 39). It is recognised that the chief consumers of the Thai prostitute industry are Thai men. It is estimated that at least 450,000 Thai men visit prostitutes on any given day (Fox 1; Kuo, Yamnill and McLean). Close to half of Thai

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<sup>5</sup> There is one other narrative non-fiction book available on this topic, *Tiger Claw and Velvet Paw* by Malee (a pseudonym; 1986). It was translated into English from Thai.

men lose their virginity to a prostitute and almost 95% of them admit to making use of prostitution services at least once (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 500). Nevertheless, the influence of sex tourism on prostitution should not just be measured in terms of numbers but also in terms of the perception among policymakers and politicians that it is a significant contributing factor in Thailand's ability to attract tourists and thus should be ignored or even supported (Boonchalaksi and Guest 16).

There is no denying the link between tourism and prostitution in Thailand, particularly in southern cities such as Bangkok and Pattaya. Despite the fact that it currently only accounts for 8% of Thailand's annual gross domestic product (*The Establishment Post*), the tourism industry continues to be a large generator of foreign exchange for the country (Nuttavuthisit). Thailand's association with sex tourism enjoys a high profile in the minds of foreigners, gaining much coverage in the international media (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 81). In 2013, the Thailand Department of Tourism recorded 26.74 million visitors to Thailand, which included 907,868 from Australia, 906,312 from the United Kingdom, and 826,350 from the United States. Of these, approximately 60% are males, 70% of whom are thought by NGOs to come explicitly to engage in prostitution (Renton; World Outreach International).

One of the reasons that foreigners may believe they are not exploiting prostitutes is because they are not visiting brothels per se. Rather, tourists are more likely to frequent the many go-go bars, sex shows and massage parlours situated in the red-light districts or open at night on the main tourist strips (Renton; Boonchalaksi and Guest 40, 47). In these establishments, it is common for there to be topless dance shows and a plethora of prostitutes available to chat with customers. Customarily, the women receive a small commission when a man buys drinks, after which sexual services can be arranged to take place either in the bar's back room or by the man paying a 'bar fine' to release the woman from the bar so that she can accompany him out, usually to a hotel room for sex (Boonchalaksi and Guest 48).

Another issue is the so-called 'girlfriend experience', when an encounter with a prostitute extends to a tourist's entire stay. The prostitute may dine with her customer and show him around the tourist attractions in much the same fashion as a 'holiday romance' (Pack). Many prostitutes actively seek this type of work, either for financial gain or with a view to establishing financial 'sponsorship' from a *farang*, or even marrying one, as a way out of prostitution (Garrick 507). This blurred line between love and money can lead to misunderstandings, and the men may forget they are engaging in prostitution (Pack 4).

It has been argued that the combination of travelling somewhere foreign and encountering women who look and sound completely different makes it easy for these men to justify any behaviour they may engage in while on holiday (Garrick 501-2; World Outreach International). Garrick suggests that these men are often motivated by deeply held chauvinistic and racist beliefs, noting that the general "popularity of interracial sexual encounters" has been discussed in sex research, indicating an "eroticisation of the cultural Other" and marketing of "racist stereotypes towards Third World women" (499). One attractive element of the 'otherness' of Thai women to foreign men is their subjugation, which allows men to feel 'authentic' in their masculinity (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 81). Renton claims that foreign 'sexpatriates' choose to permanently settle in Thailand in order to capitalise on Thai prostitution and revel in the patriarchal gender roles that are still very much alive there. As Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler argue, sex tourism in Thailand serves to fuel a male quest to reconnect with an idealised idea of hegemonic masculinity (86).

## Socio-Economic Context

In order to assess the novels and non-fiction works from a place of knowledge, it is important to understand the socio-economic context of Thailand and how it contributes to women entering and remaining in prostitution. In 2004, both Nitet Tinnakul from Chulalongkorn University and the Coalition against Trafficking in Women estimated that around two million women were working as prostitutes in Thailand. Some claim these figures are inflated. The World Health Organization in 2001 put the figure at between 150,000 and 200,000. As with any illicit practice, it is difficult to obtain exact figures (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean) and it appears there is no more recent research that has made an estimate.

Prostitution is illegal in Thailand and is regulated by two laws: the *Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act, BE 2539 (1996)* and the *Act on Entertainment Places, BE 2509 (1966)* (Fox 1-2). Nevertheless, it is clear that the government is often complicit in encouraging the growth of this industry. According to Lim, this “indirect patronage” has taken the form of protection and moral support (130-1). The close relationship between brothels and police, businessmen and politicians is widely known. (Fox 1).

The rise of prostitution in Thailand over the last two centuries has been attributed to a combination of the growing poverty of Thailand’s agrarian-based northern regions (Boonchalaksi and Guest 10; Tantiwiranond 185-7; Truong 55), “deeply rooted notions of social inequality” (Truong 129), feudal values and roots in a patriarchal past (Tantiwiranond 181-3). This has led to the economic and cultural marginalisation of Thai women by defining the social roles considered acceptable for them—obedient homemaker or sex object (Boonchalaksi and Guest 5-7), controlling how their sexuality is expressed (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 497) and limiting their access to education (Tantiwiranond 183-4). Women face a plethora of linguistic, cultural and religious barriers to economic emancipation and poorer women in particular are extremely vulnerable to exploitation (Tantiwiranond 191-2).

Thai attitudes to unmarried women and family duty also arguably contribute to the context of increasing prostitution. Women who have divorced or lost their virginity before marriage may be more inclined to enter prostitution because their sexuality has lost the value associated with the roles that are socially acceptable for women (as brides, wives and mothers), but retains an economic value that can be exploited (Lim 133). Further, the “dutiful daughter syndrome” causes Thai daughters, particularly from the north, to feel socially obligated to support their families financially (Angeles and Sunanta; Manopaiboon et al. 48-9; Muecke), especially in the absence of other ways of generating a sustainable living. Compared with other avenues of employment open to poor, uneducated women, prostitution provides relatively lucrative earnings.

In terms of individual motivations to enter prostitution, Manopaiboon et al. interviewed Thai prostitutes and found that many felt “trapped” into prostitution because there were no other options to meet their economic and social responsibilities (49). Some also had a strong desire to lead a comfortable, “materially successful” lifestyle—one in which success is measured in terms of home ownership and expensive possessions (45-6), while those working in high-class prostitution establishments went so far as to claim that they were earning “a salary equivalent to that earned by a young executive in Thailand” (Manopaiboon et al. 45-6). Consumerism is a new and pernicious factor that has begun to infect Thai culture and affect the decisions of Thai prostitutes and their families (Nuttavuthisit 24). Other reasons cited for choosing prostitution included a degree of economic self-sufficiency that allows them to lead a lifestyle free from

financial dependence on a husband or boyfriend, “feelings of opportunity, power and glamour” (Nuttavuthisit 23), and a chance to meet new people and have different experiences (Manopaiboon et al. 45-6).

While the above explains why Thai women may be attracted to the profession, there are different reasons for why they continue such work. Manopaiboon et al.’s study found that personal debt, whether to an employer or because of overspending by themselves or their families, was a major obstacle to women leaving prostitution (Manopaiboon et al. 44). Unfortunately, contracting HIV, largely seen as a by-product of prostitution, can also force women back into prostitution in order to save money to support their families after their death (Manopaiboon et al. 44).

### **Working Conditions**

Prostitution, no matter where it is practised, carries with it a number of risks. Reports about the working conditions of prostitutes in Thailand involve high incidences of violence, psychological damage and disease, including HIV. Thai prostitutes have also identified difficult factors such as sleep deprivation, skipping meals and expenses involved in buying suitable clothing. Some reported that their employers stole money from them. They also spoke of being unable to choose their clientele and being forced to sleep with drunk, old or abusive clients (Manopaiboon et al. 45-6).

Many Thai prostitutes consider violence to be a hazard of the job, reporting that it tends to occur most frequently when they ask for payment. Prostitutes are at risk of experiencing violence because of the illicit and morally dubious nature of prostitution, which makes it easier for men to justify abusing them and difficult for the women to complain or press charges (Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu 251). Some prostitutes prefer Western clients because they feel that they are treated more like equals than they are with local or other Asian customers (Sexwork Cyber Center). However, abuse and violent behaviour occur with both types of clientele and range from verbal abuse to being threatened with a weapon, being forced to perform oral sex or intercourse without a condom right through to attempted kidnapping and gang rape (Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu 257-8). Violence and psychological damage, including low self-esteem, depression and self-harm, may also be linked to higher incidences of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, possibly because of the decreased likelihood of condom use (Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu 251-2; World Outreach International).

The biggest problem faced by prostitutes in Thailand is HIV infection. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2009, 1.3% of the Thai population was estimated to have been infected with HIV, making it the fifteenth worst country for rate of HIV/AIDS infection, and around 6,000,000 people are currently believed to be living with the disease (1). As of 2012, the highest incidences of HIV appear to be concentrated in the highlands of Thailand—the same area from which many Thai prostitutes originate (UNDP 60). This has led to a perception that prostitution has been responsible for the spread of AIDS throughout Thailand and has therefore become the major focus of campaigns aimed at HIV prevention and treatment (Manopaiboon et al. 39).

## Sex Tourism in Western Non-Fiction and Fiction

Having established the grim realities of Thai prostitution, this paper now examines its depiction within Western novels and non-fiction narratives. This section explores the novels *Private Dancer* and *The Pole Dancer* and contrasts their depictions of women within Thai sex tourism with those of non-fiction narratives *Miss Bangkok* and *Mango Rains*. Generally, all of these works aim to reveal, in varying degrees of detail, and from multiple viewpoints, what it is like to participate in or work in the Thai sex tourism industry—some more accurately than others. The analysis focuses on how this is achieved in relation to plots, themes and characterisation.

### Plot and Themes

While most novels surveyed in this study are somewhat sympathetic towards prostitutes, they effectively whitewash the exploitation on which the industry thrives (Tantiwiramanond 191-2). While the narrative non-fiction contains enough harrowing incidents surrounding prostitution to indicate to readers that it is frightening, unpleasant and degrading, such details are conspicuously absent in the plots of the fiction, suggesting a romanticised othering (Said) of the female victims of exploitation that only perpetuates their disempowerment.

*Miss Bangkok* is a first-person novelisation of the life of Bua Boonmee, a poor Thai woman with no education. Her route to prostitution is gradual and the result of numerous failed attempts to support herself by other means, including attempting to work as a food vendor with her mother, which ends in a falling out; a failed marriage to Chai, who beats her; and working as a hostess in a karaoke bar. However, it is only once she has children with her second partner, Yuth, who refuses to help support the family financially, that she finally makes the decision to become a prostitute. Bua often contrasts her fate to that of her sister, Nang, who completes her education and goes on to study for a degree at college, enabling her to secure a job in a law company, marry a Norwegian widower and move abroad (Boonmee and Pierce 229). According to Bua, the main difference in their fates lies in this single factor: “Education was the difference” (Boonmee and Pierce 229).

*Mango Rains* uses a third-person narrative to recount the lives of two Thai prostitutes, who are used symbolically to convey universal truths about the working conditions and lives of women in the industry. It spans 21 years and is set in various locations across Thailand in the 1970s to 1990s. The story begins with Nid, who is forced to become a prostitute after her poverty-stricken and desperate mother, a widowed farm owner from Thailand’s north, is tricked into selling her daughter to recruiters for a local brothel (Dorothy 20). At the brothel, Nid is separated from her sister, becomes pregnant and is cast out (Dorothy 28), ultimately having her child, Lek, taken from her. After “months of begging, borrowing and doing whatever she could to survive”, Nid finds her way to Bangkok, where she once again turns to prostitution—“the only job she could get” (Dorothy 39). Nid eventually leaves the industry by becoming a singer, but only due to the patronage of some powerful men is she able to succeed.

Meanwhile, Nid’s daughter, Lek, continually returns to prostitution due to bad luck and the emotional scars inflicted on her, including separation from her mother at a very young age (Dorothy 43), the loss of her childhood sweetheart in a tragic train accident (Dorothy 277-8) and the death of a male mentor in a car accident (Dorothy 314-15). She is depicted as a damaged and broken woman who, after years of tragedy, becomes shallow and “obsessed with money”



(Dorothy 442)—a sad indictment of the effects that such a mercenary profession can have on young women.

By following the difficult and often tragic lives of Lek and Nid, Dorothy is able to show the reader how hunger and desperation can drive anyone to do things that they otherwise might not do. He depicts both women's attempts to survive outside of prostitution, thus demonstrating the many socio-economic obstacles that uneducated Thai women face within society, the options available to them and the difficulties involved in leaving the industry.

Like *Mango Rains*, the novel *Private Dancer* uses the personal to convey the universal. However, the book presents a large group of minor characters, all of whom offer a different perspective on prostitution and expatriate life in Thailand. Set against the background of Thai bar life in modern-day Bangkok, it centres on the romantic relationship between the archetypes of English writer Pete and manipulative prostitute Joy, exploring whether inter-cultural relationships between *farangs* and Thai women, prostitutes in particular, can ever work. It is a tragic story of jealousy, deception and mistrust that brings about the near suicide of Joy and the murder of Pete—a sex tourism morality tale.

However, unlike *Miss Bangkok* and *Mango Rains*, here it is the Western male sex tourists who are painted as victims. The Thai characters who are involved in prostitution are shown as materialistic, treacherous, untrustworthy and, ultimately, vengeful. Many derogatory statements are made about Thai people, from assertions that they are two-faced and only pleasant to get what they want—“In the main, Thais are not really nice people. Sure they smile at you a lot but as soon as they don't get their own way, the smile vanishes” (Leather 100)—to blatantly racist statements from characters such as Big Ron, a South African, who opines that Thais are like “pack animals” who need a pecking order and, like dogs, need to be kept in line by controlling, even violent, treatment (Leather 95).

Through the experiences of these men, the readers are shown that greedy Thai prostitutes will dupe you out of your money and break your heart, leaving you either jaded, jailed on false criminal charges (as in the case of Nigel) or dead from AIDS (Jimmy), suicide (Pete's boss) or murder (Pete) (Leather 278-287). In contrast, all the main Thai characters succeed. Joy briefly returns to the bars of Bangkok, meets an Australian and raises two children in Melbourne (Leather 286), while another prostitute marries an American and runs a successful restaurant in the US (Leather 285-6). No mention is made of the power imbalances between the prostitutes and their Western clients, which means that the issue of exploitation within the context of Thai sex tourism remains less than fully explored.

*The Pole Dancer*, told in the third-person, begins in the go-go bars of Thailand's red-light districts before shifting to other locations, including Kuala Lumpur, Krabi and the UK. It is an action-packed Western adventure novel that seeks to entertain by playing on exotic stereotypes. As a result, the reader does not gain any in-depth information about life as a prostitute in Thailand, though its female protagonist (also called Joy) is one. While there are some superficial references to the prostitutes' difficult lives, Joy is shown to be best friends with her *mamasan*, while her internal thoughts glamourise and glorify prostitution:

She began to reflect on those early days of a year ago when she first started working at the bar... How the bar and the nightlife had transformed her! Once a simple village girl; now a sophisticated dancer! (Lawrence 123)

Overall, in terms of plot and themes, the narrative non-fiction is a more constructive discourse that exposes the realities of Thai prostitutes working in sex tourism. Although *Private Dancer* does much to explore relationships between sex tourists and prostitutes, it does so in a stereotypical way and reveals much more about Thai expat life than it does about the struggles of Thai prostitutes. *The Pole Dancer* also fails to offer any real insight into the thoughts or experiences of Thai prostitutes and utilises Thailand's sex tourism industry as an exotic, titillating setting. Both novels have polarised plot endings, too—one tragic (*Private Dancer*), one happy (*The Pole Dancer*)—offering extreme views of Thai prostitution that reinforce the division between perceived Western complexity and Eastern simplicity. In contrast, the plots of the narrative non-fiction works *Mango Rains* and *Miss Bangkok* are much more nuanced, with bittersweet endings that are neither very happy nor very sad. Neither offers neat solutions to the problems and themes raised, thus acknowledging the complexity of sex tourism.

### Characterisation

The non-fiction and fiction narratives also characterise Thai prostitutes with varying levels of accuracy and complexity. In the fiction, the female characters involved in prostitution tend to fall into one of two stereotypes: either the scheming, materialistic and manipulative *femme fatale* or the vulnerable and helpless Cinderella who is the victim of tragic circumstances and waiting to be rescued by a strong, rich male. Conversely, the female characters in the narrative non-fiction are more multidimensional, giving voice to a range of conflicting emotions, doubts and fears—humanising insights that are not present in the fiction.

#### *The Femme Fatale*

A common figure in the novels about Thai prostitution is the *femme fatale* and this is certainly the case for the two discussed here. This character is usually depicted as extremely sexually desirable but damaged or dangerous in some way. She is therefore often manipulative or deceptive, using her feminine wiles, which may include sexual allure, charm and beauty, to encourage her 'victims'—usually foreign men—to do her bidding. Her motives are often hidden from the male protagonist and tend to include financial support or a marriage of convenience that would enable her to obtain foreign citizenship as a way of escaping her life.

In *Private Dancer*, Joy is depicted as a "beautiful girl" (Leather 11) with a "great body" (Leather 211) who appears to be "cute" and "childlike" (Leather 21) but is not entirely what she seems. Although she is "bright" and may have gone to university given different circumstances (Leather 20), Joy is also immature and lacking in emotional intelligence. She is also portrayed as hedonistic, shallow and materialistic, especially in her dealings with foreigners. For example, Pete gives her a bracelet made of gold hearts for her birthday. Keen to "make face", Joy she insists that he present it to her again in public to impress her family and friends at their joint birthday party (Leather 26). Despite the fact that Pete considers it to be a token of his love, Joy later pawns the bracelet for extra cash.

It eventually emerges that there are many reasons why Joy may have developed her defensive attitude, including her difficult childhood and the influence of her cynical sister, Sunan. Moreover, she clearly does develop romantic feelings for Pete. Nevertheless, Leather never allows Joy to display any conflicted emotions about her decisions and behaviour, or to show any doubt or remorse about her hurtful behaviour towards Pete. Thus, Joy ends up fulfilling the classic stereotype of the *femme fatale*, driving Pete to destruction.

In contrast, Bua in *Miss Bangkok* displays feelings of regret for leading on her Japanese patron, a businessman named Hiroshi whom she meets while working as a hostess in a high-class karaoke bar, and with whom she becomes good friends during their three-and-a-half-year acquaintance (Boonmee and Pierce 106). Bua is shown to have ambivalent feelings about Hiroshi and her role as a hostess, and also appears to grow and develop over time, taking personal responsibility for and learning from her mistakes. This has the effect of making her character much more complex and less a product of imperialistic ‘uniform’ conceptualisation (Said 98).

### *The Cinderella*

The second stereotype commonly employed, with varying levels of nuance and sophistication, is that of the Cinderella. Alluring, yet also tragic and vulnerable, she is a victim of difficult circumstances and helpless (to the point of contemplating suicide), unable to remove herself from her current predicament without a Handsome Prince to rescue her.

The Cinderella trope plays on idealisations of youth, helplessness and victimhood, characteristics that many sex tourists find extremely appealing—“Phuket-nightlife women are to be young and act even younger” (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 95). This may be because this fantasy allows foreign sex tourists to rationalise their use of Thai prostitution as a means of providing financial assistance without feeling that it is morally questionable or that their sense of masculinity has been threatened in any way (Garrick 502-3; Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 98–9).

When we meet Joy in *The Pole Dancer*, she has been working as a prostitute for less than a year, from which the reader is led to deduce that she has not had the chance to become hardened. This serves to make her relatively innocent and ‘worthy’ of rescue, effectively minimising the significance of her job as a prostitute, despite the fact it is unrealistic that a year in prostitution would not in any way damage Joy emotionally or affect her attitude towards relationships and money. Like Cinderella, she is of course “stunningly beautiful” and sexually desirable (Lawrence 54), with enough intelligence to avoid being an idiot, but certainly nothing to match that of the Western men: “it wasn’t as if Joy was unintelligent, far from it, but having missed out on a rudimentary education, there had never been the opportunity to learn to read” (Lawrence 17). The need for women to gain an education is then swept aside and undervalued by the following statement:

Joy cast aside such worries, for despite her rural background and lack of education, she had learnt how to purport herself, her walk and her looks...She knew how best to show off her good looks, with her hair and make-up just right.  
(Lawrence 49)

We are therefore left with the impression that the ability to carry oneself and dress in a way that is appealing to men is ultimately more important than education. Joy is also described as “childlike” (Lawrence 360), making her seem less powerful or threatening to men (Garrick 502; Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 99).

Thus, in many ways, Joy’s character fulfils the characteristics of a Cinderella, although this is a highly unrealistic depiction of the character traits of a real woman, let alone a Thai prostitute working in the context described earlier in this paper. Yet, despite her idealised portrayal, Joy is quick to take up with Jonathan, a British agent, and emigrate with him to the

UK, despite only knowing him for a few days, blithely leaving her homeland and family behind her, including her little boy.

By contrast, in the non-fiction, although the above-mentioned traits may be cultivated by Thai prostitutes in order to feed into the male fantasy, they are not presented as completely helpless or victims. We see this resilience in both Nid and Lek in *Mango Rains*. Overall, Nid is depicted as a self-made, independent and resourceful woman, who, despite being sold into indentured prostitution in a rural brothel as a young girl, which leads her to a teenage pregnancy, still manages to turn her life around thanks to her strength, a natural singing talent and the support of various benefactors (the Handsome Prince trope at play). She is not the inexperienced ingénue, but has “years of practice”, can “handle herself well” and is “good at her trade” (Dorothy 67). However, like Joy in *The Pole Dancer*, Nid is originally shown as uneducated and describes herself as “simple-minded” (Dorothy 114). The reader soon learns though that Nid has strong common sense and intuition, leading her to “come a long way from being just a little girl living on a farm upcountry to being a woman of standing in Pattaya” (Dorothy 124). Although Nid is naïve in many ways, she is not portrayed as innocent and helpless in the same way that Joy in *The Pole Dancer* is.

Helplessness is also explored through the female characters’ thoughts of suicide, where once again the relative complexity of the non-fiction is revealed in comparison with the fiction. In *Mango Rains*, Nid’s suicidal mindset is explored in depth (Dorothy 110-11):

She thought about Pom [who committed suicide] and how free she must be right now. No more lying, no more pain, no more bullshit. She wouldn’t have to wake up tomorrow wondering if she would be able to get enough money to eat. She wouldn’t have to go to bed with a stranger tonight. It seemed like a sure and easy way to get out of this mess.

Nid drained her third cup of whisky and looked around her room. No, suicide wasn’t for her. Either she was too afraid to try it or she was too brave to give up on this world so soon, she couldn’t decide which. Plus, the good Buddha said that suffering is a part of life, and that you must fulfil whatever karma your past lives have left you with. Suicide would only mean that she would begin her next life with the same fate, or worse. (Dorothy 111)

When this passage is contrasted with the apparent suicide attempt made by Joy in *Private Dancer*—“Was I trying to kill myself? I don’t know. I wanted to die but I didn’t want to kill myself. Does that make sense?” (Leather 267)—it is clear that Nid’s suffering is much more palpable and believable than what we see in Joy, even though we are told that Joy has suffered terrible hardships, including sexual abuse and self-harm (Leather 36).

Another way helplessness manifests in the narratives is in the Thai prostitutes’ relations with their Thai partners or relatives. Ironically, despite being shown to manipulate their foreign clients, both Bua in *Miss Bangkok* and Joy in *Private Dancer* are depicted as fairly powerless and weak when it comes to how they behave with their fellow citizens. Like Joy, Bua endures abusive relationships, which turn out to be the main source of her suffering. However, Bua does admit that she did not exercise the best judgement in choosing her partner, thereby revealing a level of self-awareness that is missing in Joy (Boonmee and Pierce 108). Although Bua seems to

feel powerless to change her situation, she is also a pragmatic realist, saying that she chooses to stay with Yuth because he takes good care of her children.

Bua is also shown to be waiting for her Handsome Prince, similar to Joy in *Pole Dancer*. She admits that she still harbours fantasies about being rescued by a rich *farang*, adding:

I don't even mind if he has a wife in his native country—so long as I can be honest with him about my children... I don't think I am asking too much—I'll forsake the white picket fences just to escape the red light district of Patpong.  
(Boonmee and Pierce 245)

Even Bua's educated sister, who secures a good job and becomes self-sufficient financially, shares this wish, and ends up marrying a foreigner and going to live overseas, indicating how strongly rooted this fantasy of social mobility may be within Thai culture. Thus, there may be some grain of truth in the wishful fantasies and stereotypes that we witness in characters like Joy in *The Pole Dancer*. However, the major difference seems to be that, unlike the reductive Cinderella stereotype, Bua is a more complicated, three-dimensional character who seems much more grounded in the gritty reality of life in Thai prostitution and is shown to grow and learn from her mistakes.

In this way, both the fiction and non-fiction narratives employ classic Cinderella stereotypes in their depiction of Thai prostitutes. However, while Joy in *The Pole Dancer* exhibits many of these traits as a way to fulfil male fantasies of the exotic, submissive 'other', the characters in the narrative non-fiction either attempt in some way to progress from this characterisation or at least show a deep sense of self-awareness that seem absent in the characters presented in the fiction.

## Conclusion

The position of women working in the sex tourism industry in Thailand is tragic and dangerous. This places something of a moral imperative upon authors writing from a privileged Western context to break from imperialist reductionism of the East and acknowledge these difficulties, particularly given that their works are likely to be read by other Westerners who intend to visit Thailand and possibly partake in sex tourism. Unfortunately, the novels explored here focused more enforcing notions of the exotic 'other' both through negative stereotypes and male fantasy wish-fulfilment.

The narrative non-fiction on this topic paints a more diverse picture of what life is really like for the women who work in the sex tourism industry, with plots including the abuse they endure from partners and clients, and the many challenges and dangers involved in performing this kind of work, from psychological damage to substance abuse as a way of coping. Further, the characterisation of the women in the non-fiction tends to be less stereotypical and humanises the Thai prostitutes, allowing them to feel and think, and justify their motivations for becoming involved in prostitution in the first place. Nevertheless, Orientalism can still be found in both works (Said). *Mango Rains* is well written but glosses over and thus romanticises some of the negative aspects of prostitution; *Miss Bangkok* is sensitively written but has an underlying Western bias and moral judgement towards its protagonist, which only serves to reinforce the problem of notoriety and public shame that may prevent many former or existing prostitutes from coming forward and telling their stories openly in a book without disguising their identities.

The English-language fiction on the subject of prostitution in Thailand is dominated by male authors. This may be due to the difficulty for women in accessing this world, since it is mainly men who visit Thailand as sex tourists and meet or hear the stories of these young women. Further, there is a certain salacious and sensational aspect to the subject matter that tends to attract a male readership and authorship, especially from those *farangs* thinking of visiting Thailand as sex tourists or who are looking for a way to voyeuristically experience what it would be like to be a customer, or even a boyfriend or husband, of a Thai prostitute—in effect, acting out an imperialistic role-play of West dominating East.

Orientalist othering pervades novels about Thai sex tourism, and their Thai prostitute characters rarely exceed reductionist stereotypes or clichés. The majority of existing novels are written by Western men, employ copious categorisation and present the Eastern female characters as manipulative, deceitful and victims of their own inadequacies. In short, they are sexist and, to extend the implications of Orientalism, racist. They have definitely not been written to help people understand the complexities of the problem of prostitution with a view to solving it. This is a significant gap in the literature that will hopefully be addressed in the near future.

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