

Welcome

A Novel

and

Women's Rights and Prostitution in Thailand

An Exegesis

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Women's Rights and Prostitution: An Exegesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Story behind the Novel

In December 2007, I married my partner of four and a half years on a beach in Koh Samui, Thailand. I married him because it seemed like the thing to do and the time to do it. I married him in Thailand because it meant our wedding could be unique in a way it couldn't be in Australia. And cheap. Very cheap. We honeymooned on Samui for three weeks and visited Bangkok for a week before returning home. When it was time to leave, I didn't want to go. And it became harder to leave every time I went back after that.

That trip was the first of seven in only five years. It was the beginning of a deep connection and lifelong love affair, not with my husband, whom I divorced four years later, but with Thailand.

As with many love affairs, I didn't really know Thailand when I fell in love with her. My first trip, I saw all the women working in the bars, but I did not know that virtually all of them were working as prostitutes. I thought they were hostesses, in the strictest sense of the word. There only to provide company and encourage men to buy drinks. I was an academic with a PhD in history that studied women in combat in the Spanish Civil War. I was a Marxist feminist with a long history of involvement in the women's rights movement. But my research in the past had been focused on Europe, Russia and Australia. When I was planning our trip to Thailand, I was researching flowers, wedding cakes and hotels. I knew, of course, about prostitution and trafficking in South East Asia, but I did not have a solid grasp on the extent or complexity of the problem.

It was only after I fell in love with Thailand on that first trip, after I had seen things that made me realise there was more to what was going on around me than was immediately obvious, that I started to read and learn. What I first noticed that

December was a number of young, beautiful Thai women walking around holding hands with old, unattractive white men. No one seemed to notice them. This image made a significant impression on me, and Lara comments on it in the novel. When I went home, I started to research. Two years and two more trips to Thailand later, I began my PhD in creative writing.

I came up with the main characters and the overall plot for the novel while sitting through an all-day induction for the PhD. Having already completed a PhD, I was there only because it was compulsory. It would have been a waste of time except the boredom lulled me into a kind of meditative state and, in that state, my story came to me. I scribbled it down. By the end of the day, I had a fairly detailed plan, and I never really changed it much from there.

I spent the first year researching the issue of prostitution in Thailand and reading the mostly misogynist and badly written (pulp) fiction written on the subject in English. After an examination of the extant literature on Thai prostitution, I found only three narrative non-fiction works on the subject, and fictional works did not appear to be based on in-depth research. There is clearly a gap in the literature for a well-written and well-informed literary novel that accurately reflects the reality and complexity of Thai prostitution and the women who work in it. Consequently, I aimed to create an engaging story that allows insight into the true motivations, thoughts, feelings and experiences of Thai prostitutes and to avoid perpetuating myths or negative stereotypes about them.

As will be explained in Chapter 2, foreigners only make up a small percentage of the customers of prostitutes in Thailand. Prostitution aimed at the tourist or foreign market is only a small part of the problem. Poverty, power relations and the oppression of women are the largest part. While I have political convictions regarding how the world could solve those problems, my motivations for writing this book and hopes for what it might achieve are far narrower. I wanted to tell the story of these women's lives so that Australian tourists travelling to Thailand would have at least a basic understanding of the problem and know what they are looking at when they see women working in the bars. I hope that this knowledge might mean they will take some action to help improve the lives of Thai women working as

prostitutes. Any action at all, or even inaction, in the form of not patronising establishments involved in prostitution. I hope the book might be published and distributed in Thailand, through the English-language bookshop chain Bookazine, located in all tourist areas.

Regarding why I chose the medium of fiction to disseminate my research and tell the story of these women, as Raymond Williams states:

The most interesting and difficult part of any cultural analysis, in complex societies, is that which seeks to grasp the hegemonic in its active and formative but also its transformational processes. Works of art, by their substantial and general character, are often especially important as sources of this complex evidence. (113)

This quotation articulates precisely why I wrote the novel. I believe it provides a complex, general and individual insight into prostitution in Thailand, in a way that is more emotive and more reflective of the reality than a mere social survey.

In preparation for writing the novel, I read several books on techniques for writing novels. One technique described that I found very helpful was to write the first draft as fast as you could, on a schedule, never stopping to read back over what you had written. At the end of each day, you would plan the scene you would write the next, so you never lost momentum.

Proponents of this theory claimed it meant writers would not become bored with their stories, could not suffer from writer's block and would finish with a completed draft they could then improve in the editing stages. It appealed to me because, in a way, it was compatible with writing techniques I had learnt from Ernest Hemingway, my favourite author. He wrote of treating writing like a day job to be regimented and scheduled. When working on a project, he woke up and worked hard at writing every day. He didn't only write when the perfect creative mood struck him. I was heavily influenced by his concept of never letting the 'well' of your writing empty: 'I had learned already never to empty the well of my writing, but always to stop when there

was something there in the deep part of the well, and let it refill at night from the springs that fed it' (Phillips 45).

In fact, I was drawn to the idea of writing my first draft in this way, I only realised later, because I didn't have another choice, not because it was the best method for me. I wrote it in four weeks, 3,300 words a day, six days a week, in December 2010 because I had a solid four weeks during which I was free from other work. I didn't have the time or the space to write it in the way that would have worked better for me. But it was a valuable experience for the development of my writing.

I love Thailand because of the people, the culture, the history, the architecture, the jungle, the beach, the elephants, everything. The way the air feels. It's easier to breathe. I know I am in a position of privilege while I'm there, as a rich white woman. I know that's why I manage to escape the feeling of being judged that I experience in Australia. As a foreigner in Thailand, I don't have to conform to any standards for female beauty. My role is just to have money and spend it. And I am richer in Thailand than I am in Australia, which also makes life easier and more relaxing. The fact that such inequality exists is wrong. I know that and I don't forget it while I'm eating somewhere lovely, having a massage or looking out over the balcony of my deluxe hotel room. I remind myself I don't take anything for granted and I am actively doing what I can to end this kind of inequality. I am trying to help people. But it's a dilemma I haven't resolved, I can't resolve really, and Lara has the same unresolvable dilemma.

Lara has another dilemma in the story, but she doesn't yet realise it. Her relationship with her husband needs to end.

Lara is not me, but some of her experiences are drawn from mine, some I wasn't even consciously aware of. One of the most common comments I would get from people who read the novel was that they didn't understand Lara's relationship with her husband Aidan. It wasn't clear to them why they were together. I couldn't resolve that problem. I looked at it, but didn't know what to do about it. Looking back now, I understand that Lara's problems were mine and I couldn't solve them because I didn't want to acknowledge them. Lara is in a loveless marriage but she

doesn't know it because the relationship is still loving, in a way. Aidan doesn't challenge or inspire her. He doesn't connect with her on the most fundamental of issues. He isn't a feminist nor is he motivated to act to help people. At one very intense moment in the novel, after he finds out that the woman he has just been speaking with had been beaten up by a customer, he stands up, but then he sits right back down again. He does nothing. He is in Thailand because Lara is, but he goes home. He doesn't help. Lara and Aidan are best friends, but they are no longer lovers. They just haven't owned up to it yet. It is safer, easier and more convenient to continue as they are. The story of their relationship is the way it is because it is ending and they don't know it yet, and neither did I when I wrote it.

I decided to write the novel from Lara's perspective because I wanted it to be as authentic as possible. I am not a Thai woman and I did not want to write from the perspective of one and get it wrong. Having Salisa and Mali tell their stories to Lara, and having Lara retell them to the reader is authentic because that is the process I went through. I read, learnt and heard about the lives of prostitutes in Thailand then I wrote about it. That was also a valuable exercise for my writing. Since completing the novel, I've been told by Thai friends who have read it that I did manage to achieve realism in my writing of the Thai characters. I feel confident that next time I could successfully write in the first person from the perspective of a Thai woman.

Welcome was written to be as realistic as possible because the purpose behind writing it was to educate people, particularly Australian tourists, about what it is really like for Thai women working as prostitutes. It is also a realist novel because that is my favourite kind of writing. Hemingway wrote that '[a]ll good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened'. I like to think of it as being based on two million true stories; two million being a conservative recent estimate of the number of adult female prostitutes in Thailand (*see* the Introduction to Chapter 2).

Exegesis Structure

Prostitution in Thailand is varied and involves many types of people, including the famous ‘ladyboys’ (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 97). However, my research and my novel focus on women working as prostitutes aimed at the tourist market. 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 exegesis. Throughout this exegesis, women working in prostitution will be referred to as ‘prostitutes’ instead of the popular euphemistic term ‘bargirls’, which has patronising and sexist undertones. The terms ‘sex work’ (or ‘sex industry’) and ‘sex worker’ are avoided, in favour of the more accurate ‘prostitution’ and ‘prostitute’, respectively.

‘Sex work’ is not an accurate term to describe prostitution because prostitution does not concern itself with the product of a women’s labour, but rather with the use of her actual body and sexuality. Systems of exploitation that concern themselves with the use of the body, as opposed to the product of the body’s labour, are understood historically to be systems of slavery, not wage work. This categorical distinction is in line with the reality of prostitution as an industry in which the overwhelming majority of prostitutes are trafficked or operating under conditions of extreme coercion, whether physical, social or economic.

Chapter 2 examines the historical, social and legal context of prostitution in Thailand. It traces the history of the industry in Thailand from the earliest records of prostitution in the fourteenth century to the emergence and growth of sex tourism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It explains the socio-economic factors that contribute to prostitution in Thailand today, the legal status of the practice, the various sectors involved in the industry and the working conditions for prostitutes. It reviews the action taken by governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help resolve the problems of the industry as well as debates over legalisation. It highlights how the issue is further complicated by both Buddhist beliefs regarding the role of women and the influence of consumerism and materialistic attitudes.

Chapter 3 compares a selection of four narrative non-fiction and fiction works that have been written to date on the topic of prostitution in Thailand:

1. *Miss Bangkok: Memoirs of a Thai Prostitute* (2007), an autobiography written by Irish writer Nicola Pierce based on the real-life experiences of a prostitute called Bua Boonmee (a pseudonym)
2. *Mango Rains: The True Story of a Thai Mother's Lifelong Search for Her Abducted Daughter* (2010), a fictionalised biography of Nid and her daughter Lek (both pseudonyms), written in the third person by Daniel M. Dorothy and based on his interviews with Lek
3. *Private Dancer* (2005) by Stephen Leather, a novel that is considered a 'cult classic' among Western sex tourists and expatriates and soon to be adapted into a film
4. *The Pole Dancer* (2004) by R. D. Lawrence (pseudonym), which is a fast-paced action novel about a Bangkok prostitute called Joy and a rich, handsome Western stranger.

The two narrative non-fiction texts were selected based on literary merit (they are the best written out of only three existing narrative non-fiction texts in English on the subject) and the two novels were selected for their popularity and common themes.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the novel *Welcome*. It explains how this novel fills the gap in the extant literature highlighted by the comparative literary analysis in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Prostitution in Thailand

Introduction

In 1998, according to Boonchalaksi and Guest, and Hanenberg and Rojanapithayakorn (qtd. in Manopaiboon et al. 40), the number of Thai women working in prostitution was estimated to be between 150,000 and 200,000. Since then, reports from newspapers such as *The Nation* (e.g., ‘Prostitution’) and organisations such as the Coalition against Trafficking in Women have put the figure closer to between two and three million women. As with any illicit practice, it is difficult to obtain exact figures (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean).

This chapter examines the state of prostitution in Thailand, considering its historical, legal and social context. It begins with a discussion of the history of prostitution in Thailand. It then evaluates the socio-economic factors that contribute to the industry today, including prostitutes’ motivations for becoming involved in it. Next, it describes the legal status of prostitution in Thailand, the various sectors within the industry and the working conditions for prostitutes. Finally, it reviews the steps that have been taken by governments and NGOs to combat the problems of the industry.

The History of Prostitution in Thailand

The earliest historical records indicate that prostitution was recognised in the Thai region of Ayudhya as a legal profession and taxed by local authorities from as early as 1350 (Lim 130) until around 1767 (Boonchalaksi and Guest 2). During this period, as well as later during the reign of King Rama I (who ruled roughly from 1782 to 1809), it was closely associated with both slavery and the economic emigration of Chinese males, especially to cities such as Bangkok (Boonchalaksi and Guest 2–3). A tax on prostitutes is also recorded in certain regions of Thailand during the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910), including in Chantaburi, Trad, Chonburi and Samutsakorn, and was euphemistically referred to as a ‘road tax’ (Boonchalaksi and Guest 2–3).

In the twentieth century, prostitution became linked to the presence of United States (US) soldiers in Thailand. A 'special service industry' emerged in the 1960s, consisting of massage parlours, bars, brothels, nightclubs and hotels that were created specifically to cater for the so-called rest and recreation of US army servicemen. According to Tantiwiranond:

This new industry absorbed a large number of semi-literate and illiterate women to fulfil the massive demand of US servicemen. This demand matched the needs of poverty stricken villages of the north and northeast. The 'wages of sin' earned by rural poor women were enough to make 'selling the body' an acceptable means of income generation. (187)

According to Lim, historically speaking, 'Prostitution was not ... confined to serving the foreign communities. In addition to prostitution in the capital city of Bangkok, prostitution was well documented to be operating in regional centres' (130). Further, Lim argues that after the abolition of slavery in 1905, many women opted to become prostitutes and, as a result of its long history, prostitution became not only a profitable and legal activity but also came to be considered socially acceptable in Thailand to some extent (131).

Socio-economic Reasons for Prostitution in Thailand

Two main factors are generally considered to contribute to the continued existence and growth of sex tourism in Thailand during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The first is the relative poverty of Thailand's northern regions, such as Isaan, which tend to be agrarian-based economies. Unlike areas near larger towns and cities in the south of Thailand, including Bangkok, they benefit little from the growing trend towards urbanisation and the service, tourism and technology industries that have developed mainly in response to changing global economic conditions (Boonchalaksi and Guest 10; Petterman 183; Tantiwiranond 185-7; Truong 55).

The second major factor in the ongoing growth of Thai prostitution is what Truong has referred to as the ‘deeply rooted notions of social inequality’ (129) in Thailand. A hierarchical society with strong feudal values and roots in a patriarchal past (Tantiwiranond 181–3) has led to the economic and cultural marginalisation of Thai women by defining the social roles considered acceptable for them (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).

Tantiwiranond states that women face a plethora of linguistic, cultural and religious barriers to economic emancipation and that poorer women in particular are extremely vulnerable to exploitation due to class-based limitations (191–2). Such unequal gender roles are furthered by the practice of polygamy, which continues to be tolerated in Thai society:

The tradition of married men keeping ‘*mia noi*’ or ‘minor wives’ has existed in Thai society for generations. Such practices have played an important part in the shaping of local attitudes towards prostitution, helping to create an ambiguous view towards extra-marital relations, as well as prostitution in its broadest terms. (Fox 1)

Quoting social critic Sukanya Hantrakul, Hall also notes that, perhaps rather paradoxically, premarital sex between men and women is ‘strictly forbidden’ in Thai society, a ‘double standard that has helped to create the thriving sex trade’. Women are therefore seen either as sex objects or obedient homemakers in Thai society, making it difficult for them to escape traditional gender roles. This helps to keep them in positions of subservience and limits their economic prospects (Hall).

Such socio-economic inequalities among the genders and classes of Thailand are most clearly seen at work in the poorer regions of the country, such as Isaan. With fewer opportunities for social and financial advancement, many ‘daughters of Isaan’ are indirectly forced into prostitution or arranged marriages with foreigners.

The situation is exacerbated by certain aspects of Thai cultural beliefs and customs, especially what is known as ‘dutiful daughter syndrome’. This phenomenon has resulted in Thai daughters, particularly from the north, feeling socially obligated to support their families financially (Angeles and Sunanta; Manopaiboon et al. 48–9; Muecke) especially in the absence of other more obvious ways of generating a sustainable living. Angeles and Sunanta explain the reasoning behind this.

When compared with other avenues of employment open to poor, uneducated women from northern Thailand such as labouring in the rice fields, prostitution provides a relatively lucrative way to make a living: ‘Many women described feeling “trapped” in sex work simply because they did not know what other things they could do that would meet their economic and social responsibilities’ (Manopaiboon et al. 49). In their qualitative study carried out in 2003, Manopaiboon et al. also found that among the women they interviewed, there was a strong desire to lead a comfortable, ‘materially successful’ lifestyle—one in which women ‘can eat whatever they want’, and where success is measured in terms of home ownership and high-value possessions such as a car, high-end electrical goods or expensive jewellery (45–6). Those working in high-class 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 and choices of Thai prostitutes and their families (Nuttavuthisit 24). As Manopaiboon et al. comment:

Ironically, principles of a more modern, consumer culture in which wealth and money are respected regardless of how they are attained also supported women’s decisions to do sex work. As one woman in our study indicated, ‘people don’t care what you do as long as you have money’. (49)

Other reasons cited by prostitutes for choosing prostitution include 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), a chance to meet new people and have different experiences, and

seeing prostitution as an important service that enables customers to ‘release their stress’ (Manopaiboon et al. 45–6).

Manopaiboon et al.’s study, which tried to identify the reasons why Thai women found it difficult to leave prostitution, found that the overwhelming reason was economic. Debt, whether to an employer or because of overspending by themselves or their families, was a major obstacle to leaving prostitution for good (Manopaiboon et al. 44). Several participants described how supporting their families financially forced them into prostitution and then made it difficult for them to give the job up:

I wanted to quit but I couldn’t. My parents had debts. If your kid makes money easily, you spend easily too—a refrigerator, a TV, which made me have to continue the job ... When I went home my neighbours saw me carrying a lot of stuff, and I felt they were jealous (former call girl, age 24, HIV-negative). (Manopaiboon et al. 43–4)

Some prostitutes claimed that their employers stole from them or held them in financial bondage making it difficult for them to leave the profession (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).

Lim has pointed out that some women enter prostitution after divorcing or losing their virginity before marriage because their ‘sexuality had lost the value associated with socially accepted roles (as bride and wife)’ in Thai society, but it still retained an economic value that they could exploit through prostitution (133).

Overall, it is clear that the overriding reason why women become involved in prostitution is that they have limited economic prospects within Thai society. Most researchers disagree with media coverage and studies that have pointed to the apparent economic emancipation of many Thai women in recent times. Tantiwiranond states, ‘Even though Thai women are now more active in playing

many public roles, ranging from exercising power behind the throne to working in factories, the status of Thai women in general has not changed much' (191–2).

The Legal Status of Prostitution in Thailand

Although there have been times when prostitution was legal in Thailand, such as the twelfth and sixteenth centuries (Lim 130), as mentioned in previously in 'The History of Prostitution in Thailand' section, the practice is currently illegal 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)* (hereafter, the 'Entertainment Act') (Fox 1–2). The former legislation makes it a crime to perform an act that sexually gratifies another for money but only if the person in question does so in a 'promiscuous manner' (Fox 1–2). The act also prohibits people from fraternising with others in a 'prostitution establishment'. Those caught doing so can face a fine of up to 1,000 baht (AU\$33.93 at the exchange rate in April 2013) or a month's imprisonment. However, the definitions of the terms 'promiscuous manner' and 'prostitution establishment' remain ambiguous, which allows a large degree of latitude when it comes to interpreting and enforcing this law (Fox 1).

The Entertainment Act regulates establishments such as massage parlours, go-go bars and karaoke bars, which are often used as a front for brothels and prostitution. It issues licences and prohibits their use by minors—customers must be at least 20 years old and employees must be at least 18 years old. Although the law is supposed to help protect the public from immoral activity, it distinguishes between 'service partners', or 'bath service providers', who wear red disks with their employee numbers on them, and other (non-sexual) staff, who wear blue disks (Fox 1).

Thai law is particularly harsh regarding the prostitution of minors. Anyone found to be 'employing' or engaging in a sexual act with an underage prostitute faces a prison sentence of between three and six years, depending on the age of the minor (penalties are doubled if the minor is aged 15 or younger) and a fine of between 20,000 and 120,000 baht (AU\$678 and AU\$4,072). In such cases, consent and the need to define

the act as ‘promiscuous’ are not deemed necessary to secure a charge or conviction (Fox 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). This is supported by Fox, who writes that ‘[b]oth the international and local media [have] reported widely on the close relationships between brothel managers, local police, businessmen, and politicians’ (1).

The Different Faces of Thai Prostitution

Thai prostitution is 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). The most important distinction for the purposes of this research is between prostitution for the domestic Thai market and sex tourism.

Prostitution for Domestic Customers

Fox observes:

According to surveys, the vast majority of those that frequent prostitutes are Thai men and on any given day at least 450,000 Thai men partake in the services of prostitutes. In Thailand, it is domestic ‘consumption’ that drives and sustains the booming sex industry. (1)

This view is supported by Kuo, Yamnill and McLean, who cite two separate studies corroborating this figure. Kuo, Yamnill and McLean reveal that close to half of Thai men lose their virginity to a prostitute and that almost 95 per cent of them admit to making use of prostitution services at least once (500). In fact, visiting a brothel has become something of a rite of passage and a social activity, according to Hall,

forming part of a night out along with a visit to a bar and a restaurant. As a result, massage parlours and brothels for locals abound, some of which are owned by prominent members of Thai society, including politicians, as demonstrated by recent court cases ('Illegal Businesses').

Generally, it is believed that the domestic clientele tend to prefer brothels, restaurants and hostess clubs rather than the go-go bars or massage parlours that cater to sex tourists (Boonchalaksi and Guest). There are some reports that cheap hotels are used by low-income Thai men for paid sex, but such hotels seem to be largely declining in popularity (Boonchalaksi and Guest 40–1). The shift away from hotels and massage parlours since the 1990s has been attributed to TV advertising campaigns for health awareness, which led to their association with AIDS (Boonchalaksi and Guest 40–1).

According to Boonchalaksi and Guest, the increase in disposable income among Thai men in recent decades has led to an increased demand for sexual services and the advent of new types of sexual establishments, such as the 'member club', especially in larger metropolitan centres such as Bangkok (12). Generally considered more 'upmarket' venues aimed at businessmen, member clubs usually offer in-house dining and live bands, and the prostitutes that work there are generally well spoken and well educated (Boonchalaksi and Guest 49).

In rural areas, domestic customers continue to frequent traditional brothels, where trafficked or underage women—mostly girls between 12 and 16 years of age but sometimes as young as five, mainly from northern Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia—are more likely to be found (Boonchalaksi and Guest 12, 45). It is more difficult for them to escape from these institutions, which, according to one NGO, 'operate under prison-like conditions' (Coalition against Trafficking in Women; Renton).

Sex Tourism

There is no denying the link between tourism and the sex trade in Thailand, particularly in southern cities such as Bangkok. Despite the fact that it currently only accounts for between six and eight per cent of Thailand's annual gross domestic

product, the tourism industry continues to be a large generator of foreign exchange for the country. Images of its expansive white beaches and exotic landscapes are the aspect of Thailand that is most frequently represented in the media (Nuttavuthisit).

Thailand's association with sex tourism also continues to enjoy a high profile in the minds of foreigners, gaining much coverage in the international media (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 81), even though foreign customers only make up 'a small proportion of the customers of the commercial sex market' in reality (Boonchalaksi and Guest 16). This negative image led the Thai Government to take steps in 2001 and again in 2011 to re-brand the country, emphasising its natural beauty and family-friendly culture instead (Le Fevre; Nuttavuthisit).

In her seminal book *Sex, Money and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in South-East Asia*, Professor Tanh-Dam Truong points out the importance of international power relations, particularly the 'rich state: poor state' dichotomy, and their influence on sex tourism in Thailand. As numerous nationalities, not only Thais, benefit from sex tourism, Truong suggests that 'using poverty as a basis to explain prostitution conceals many complex relations pertaining to the local power structure as well as to external forces' (190). Hence, Petterman points out the lack of academic attention paid to sex tourism and the need to extend research beyond questions of poverty to an examination of the role sex tourism plays in perpetuating prostitution in Thailand as a whole (186).

Thus, according to Boonchalaksi and Guest, the influence of sex tourism on prostitution should not just be measured in terms of numbers but also in terms of 'the perception of policy makers and politicians that commercial sex is a major factor in bringing tourists to Thailand and therefore the sex industry should be at minimum ignored, and in some cases, supported, but not banned' (16).

Currently, researchers estimate that around 10 million tourists visit Thailand each year. Of these, approximately 60 per cent are males, 70 per cent of whom are thought by NGOs to come explicitly for sex tourism purposes (Renton; World Outreach International). Many of these tourists visit cities like Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya, areas known for sex tourism, frequenting 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). The same report by Renton states that foreign sex tourists are far more likely to visit a bar or massage parlour than a brothel—an assertion that is supported by a 1994 study that revealed that foreign sex tourists tend to visit go-go and bars as well as nightclubs looking for sex (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, some staff members receive a small commission when a man buys drinks for a woman he wishes to chat to, after which sexual services can be arranged. The parties may visit the bar's back room or a nearby hotel for a 'short time', or the man may offer to pay the establishment a 'bar fine' to release the woman for the night so that she can accompany him out, usually to his hotel room for sex (Boonchalaksi and Guest 48).

Many sex tourists who have visited Thailand talk of the 'girlfriend experience', when an encounter with a prostitute was extended to their entire stay there—the prostitute may dine with her customer and show him around the tourist attractions in much the same fashion as a 'holiday romance'. In his paper 'Where Men Can Be Men', Pack quotes an interview with a sex tourist, who describes the 'girlfriend experience' as follows:

I don't really think of them as prostitutes. It's not like that. They're more like a girlfriend—GFE or 'girlfriend experience' as it's called. Because it's not just about sex. These girls know how to take care of you and make you feel special. You wake up in the morning, and they're already making your breakfast or ironing your clothes. It's unbelievable! This place is like Disneyland for perverts! (4)

In fact, this view seems to be actively encouraged by some prostitutes, either for financial gain or with a view to establishing financial 'sponsorship' from a *farang* (foreigner), or even marrying one, as a way out of prostitution (Garrick 507). According to Garrick: 'It would appear that Thai sex workers regard themselves as much more than just prostitutes. Although these women do engage in commercial sex as an occupation, they often consider themselves to be city guides, translators,

potential wives and girlfriends' (505). However, it should be noted that even while engaging in what might appear to be a 'holiday romance', the prostitute expects to be paid for her time, which can lead to later misunderstandings, especially regarding the relationship between love and money. As Pack points out:

Because sex tourists do not have to enter into explicit agreements on the terms and conditions of the exchange and because Thai prostitutes make gestures and provide services that are interpreted as demonstrations of genuine affection, it is relatively easy for these men to forget that they are engaged in an economic transaction. (4)

It has been argued that the combination of travelling somewhere foreign and encountering women who look and sound completely different to those they usually encounter makes it easy for these men to justify any morally questionable behaviour they may engage in with Thai prostitutes while on holiday (Garrick 501–2; World Outreach International). Garrick goes further, suggesting that such actions are often motivated by deeply held chauvinistic and racist beliefs:

Racism has not diminished the incidence of Western men engaging in commercial sex with minority women, but has instead bolstered it. The desires of sex workers' clients and the popularity of interracial sexual encounters is noted in sex research where men seek the services of prostitutes whose nationality, race or class status is different from their own. It is therefore not unreasonable to assert that the industry thrives upon the eroticisation of the cultural Other and the racist stereotypes towards Third World women who represent the 'exotic' Other are used as marketing tools. (499)

This view is supported by Renton, a journalist who 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:

Some of these men see themselves as exiles, refugees from the 'feminazis' who are crushing the spirit of the western male. Here, the old order of the

sexes still reigns. Women know their place, they wash your feet before they have sex with you, they say thank you and help you in the shower afterwards ... It's the 'last place you can be a white man', says one bar-owning sexpat on his website.

Whether or not foreigners are driven by racism or deeply rooted feelings of chauvinism, the fact remains that sex tourism is very popular with visiting foreigners. Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler argue that, in reality, sex tourism in Thailand serves to fuel a male quest to reconnect with an idealised idea of hegemonic masculinity (86); one that does not really exist except in the realm of fantasy: 'Men travel to Thailand to rediscover their masculinity by participating in sex tourism. These men seek an authentic self-image, but this 'authentic' image is coloured by preconceived ideas about masculinity and the tourist destination—it is an imagined authenticity' (81).

Thus, the justification for engaging in sex tourism for these men is their failure to achieve either their idealised notions about "perfect" masculinity and/or to find "perfect" femininity at home—the perfect being impossible to find' (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 90). Thai prostitutes therefore become mirrors for these men's fantasies and projections about what constitutes the perfect women—one that is easy to maintain provided the encounter is a relatively short one. Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler suggest that this results in a double bind for the prostitute that arises out of a double standard constructed around contradictory, often hypocritical, beliefs about gender roles and behaviour.

Working Conditions for Thai Prostitutes

Prostitution, no matter where it is practised, carries with it a number of risks. Reports about the working conditions of prostitutes in Thailand differ little from those elsewhere in the world. According to one study, '[t]hose engaged in prostitution take huge risks: sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS/HIV, harassment from all aspects of the criminal justice system, violence and abuse from customers or pimps, and sometimes even rape or death' (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 493).

As well as finding it difficult to deal with factors such as sleep deprivation, skipping meals and the expenses involved in buying suitable clothing, some prostitutes interviewed by researchers also claimed that their employers stole money from them. They also complained about being unable to choose their clientele and being forced to sleep with drunk, old or abusive clients (Manopaiboon et al. 45–6).

Violence

Irrespective of whether their customers are foreign or local, 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. According to Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu, 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 prostitutes to complain or press charges (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, occasionally, gang rape (McGeown; Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu 257–8).

However, this does not stop both the customers and the prostitutes from forming opinions and racial stereotypes to justify their own experiences or behaviour. Garrick claims that unlike the bigoted ‘sexpatriates’ and foreign clientele mentioned earlier, whom he dubs ‘Macho Lads’ (498–502), there is a second type of sex tourist, the ‘White Knight’ (502–5), who romanticises the whole experience and sees himself as a benevolent ‘rescuer’ who treats the prostitute more kindly:

White Knights often claim that Japanese men and German men are aggressive and violent towards women, whilst emphasising that their own nationality (whether it be American, Danish or Australian) are known for their kindness and generosity. Therefore, following this argument, it is

better for the women to provide sexual services to them because they are generous with their money and considerate as opposed to 'those other men'. Local men are also commonly asserted to treat their women so badly that they turn to prostitution in order to be cared for by foreign men. This belief is bolstered due to the prevalence of North-eastern Thai prostitutes who have come from failed marriages with Thai men. (503)

As violence against prostitutes often goes unreported because of the illegal status of the work, it is difficult to assess the scale of the problem. As well as leading to psychological damage, including low self-esteem, depression and self-harm, violence may 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).

Health Problems: STIs and HIV

The biggest problem faced by prostitutes in Thailand is HIV infection. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2009, 1.3 per cent 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).

However, some argue that this is a misconception (see, e.g., Healy and Reed), especially since the inception of many government-based sex education campaigns, particularly those active during the 1990s, resulted in high rates of condom use and a decline in STIs within Thai prostitution (UNDP 22).

Measures Addressing Prostitution in Thailand

From 1994, in response to pressure from NGOs and AIDS campaigners, the Thai Government began to address the issue of prostitution actively, passing a number of Cabinet resolutions aimed at the prevention, suppression, protection, recovery and monitoring of prostitution. This section examines some of the key measures used to address the problem of prostitution in Thailand.

Sex Education and Condom Use

As evidence of a growing HIV problem began to emerge in the 1980s, the Thai Government decided to take action to control the situation. This resulted in the Programme for the Prevention and Control of AIDS (1989–1991), which introduced comprehensive measures to deal with the spread of the disease via ‘capacity building, medical treatment and care, and basic and applied research and development’ (UNDP 10).

As part of this three-year programme, free condoms were issued to prostitutes, and bar, massage parlour and brothel owners were encouraged by officials to ensure that their employees were regularly tested at STI clinics (Askew). A series of public health announcements, including TV and radio awareness campaigns, was also rolled out, which encouraged condom use among prostitutes to avoid contracting HIV and offered women tips on how to persuade their partners to use condoms (UNDP 14).

By 1995, these measures appeared to be working, as, according to the UNDP, ‘[i]ncreased condom use and fewer visits to sex workers had led to reduced incidence of STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] and lower HIV prevalence. The massive public information and education campaign seemed to be paying off’ (23).

Vocational Training Schemes

According to Kanchanachitra, several vocational training schemes aimed at providing alternative work options for women who want to leave prostitution have

been devised and implemented by both the Thai Government and a number of NGOs in different regions since 1993 (Manopaiboon et al.).

As part of its Prostitution Prevention Campaign, the Thai Government established the New Life Project for Women in Rural Areas Committee in November 1993. The committee set up the following subcommittees: Better Education for Better Life Project, Vocational Training Scheme, Campaign for Prostitution Prevention Project and the Women's Group of Mulberry Paper Production Project (Kanchanachitra, qtd. in Manopaiboon et al.).

Non-governmental efforts included the Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupational Development Centre, a collection of six refuges set up across Thailand in 2001 at which former prostitutes can receive medical care, counselling and vocational training to help them get out of the industry (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 502).

However, Kuo, Yamnill and McLean's research suggests that these efforts did little to encourage people to leave the industry: 'No matter what was offered, no one wanted to leave the profession' (501). More encouragingly, research indicates that such programmes helped to prevent economic migration by married women from the north to the south, allowing them to continue working within their local communities (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 502).

The findings of Manopaiboon et al. suggest that the effectiveness of such programmes would be infinitely strengthened if the organisations devising them would consider 'the influence of consumerism and the income gap between sex work and other alternative occupations' (50). They argue that such programmes could be enhanced further 'by the integration of Buddhist economic concepts emphasizing moderate consumption, simplicity and self-sufficiency that lead to wellbeing rather than to the satisfaction of desires', which could help to 'increase self-esteem and help reduce the impact of consumerism' (Manopaiboon et al. 50).

Prevention through Education

As part of the government's prostitution prevention scheme, since 1996, several scholarship programmes have been set up in addition to higher education assistance to help provide more economic opportunities to children in poorer rural areas (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 502).

One example that is often cited is the Better Education for Better Life Project, which was launched by the Thai authorities and NGOs in 1993 in order to encourage and support young women in impoverished areas to stay in school longer by providing three-year secondary school scholarships. According to a World Health Organization report, in the first two years of the project (1993–5), nearly 4,500 scholarships were awarded by the Thai Ministry of Education and several partner NGOs, with some success. According to the same report, very few dropouts were reported in the first two years (Kanchanachitra, qtd. in Manopaiboon et al.).

Legalising Prostitution

Some have argued for the legalisation of the industry—as in countries like the Netherlands and the US—and this would not be a new scenario for Thailand, where historically prostitution has experienced periods of legitimacy (Lim 130; Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu 267–8). In 2003, the Thai Government did consider holding a public consultation on the possible legalisation of prostitution, no doubt motivated by the prospect of obtaining extra revenue for the public purse ('Thailand Mulls Legal Prostitution'). NGOs such as Empower argue that this would improve working conditions, allow for better health education programmes to combat the spread of STIs and HIV (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 495), and decrease the likelihood of violence and the economic exploitation of prostitutes ('Thailand Mulls Legal Prostitution'). However, others argue that to do so is to ignore the 'dehumanizing and exploitative aspects of prostitution' and avoid the deeper societal issue of 'gender equality and respect for women's human rights' (Somswasdi, qtd. in Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 499). According to critics, 'rather than legitimize the illegal business, Thais should be thinking more about rehabilitation and human dignity' (Somswasdi, qtd. in Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 499).

Conclusion

While there are common economic and social factors that clearly serve to limit the choices of many Thai women and push them into the sex trade, including poverty, gender and class discrimination, and the ‘dutiful daughter syndrome’ (Angeles and Sunanta; Manopaiboon et al.; Muecke), it is also clear that the necessary wide-scale social and economic changes are difficult to implement because of the deep-seated patriarchal and feudal values embedded in Thai society (Tantiwiranond 181–3; Truong 40–8). Unless there are major shifts in Thai attitudes towards gender roles, sex and economic access, prostitution in Thailand is unlikely to diminish, irrespective of whether customers are local or foreign (Hall; Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 100; Tantiwiranond 191–2).

Over and above this, it is apparent that Western materialist values and consumerism have also had a negative impact on the prospects of many poor Thai women, strengthening their financial motivation for becoming a prostitute.

Prostitutes face an incredible amount of abuse and degradation as part of their job, including the ever-present fear of violence and, worse, of contracting HIV (Rathinthorn, Meleis and Sindhu).

The boundaries between what is and is not considered socially acceptable practice are blurred by related activities such as taking on a foreign boyfriend or husband mainly for financial gain. Often, this is motivated by the need to financially support a large extended family, and raises complicated questions about money, power and gender roles within Thai society and, on a more global level, the relationship between rich and poor countries and even the institution of marriage itself (Angeles and Sunanta; Van der Gaag).

When it comes to differentiating between the local and foreign sectors of Thai prostitution, one also has to cut through many myths, including the belief that the trade has grown up largely around foreign tourist patronage. In reality, local Thai men actually make extensive use of the service, in even greater numbers than

foreigners do (Fox; Hall). This raises questions about whether the practice would continue to exist without foreign tourists, as well as who is exploiting whom within the context of this type of inter-cultural exchange (Angeles and Sunanta; Garrick; Muecke; Van der Gaag). However, the government's policy of using tourism as a 'national development strategy' for countering national debt and rising unemployment (Petterman 185–6), as well as the strong links between general tourism and sex tourism in Thailand (Truong 158–90), suggest that sex tourism does play a major role in discouraging Thai officials from doing much to eradicate prostitution (Tantiwiranond 188). If anything, sex tourism continues to support a multi-million baht business largely run by men, which exploits the limited options that impoverished women have for economic and social advancement in Thailand and reinforces misogynistic and patriarchal values (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 99–100).

Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler argue that the Thai sex tourism industry is marketed by 'constructing a sexualized notion of Thai women that is based in male fantasy' (82). Thus, it has been suggested that the blurred lines between love and sex that arise out of sexual encounters between Thai prostitutes and their foreign clients such as the so-called girlfriend experience (Pack 4) rest on rationalisations born out of misguided male fantasies (Garrick) and idealised beliefs about 'perfect' masculinity and femininity (Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler). However, these fantasies and beliefs are embedded within a paradigm of unequal power relations between the sexes and between developed and developing nations, which is ultimately stacked in favour of the Western male. Thus, for Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler, Thai sex tourism 'is a world where women are disempowered by double binds and men are encouraged to pursue the traits of masculine hegemony' (99). Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler conclude, 'It is our belief that exploitation will continue as long as the relationships between women and men are guided by the inequalities inherent in patriarchy' (82). However, Garrick goes further, stating that 'the elevated social and economic status that Western men receive when they travel to Third World nations allows them to more easily rationalise their participation in the Thai commercial sex industry', thus helping to perpetuate the Thai sex tourism industry as a whole (507).

Chapter 3: Comparative Analysis of the Narrative Non-Fiction and Fiction

Introduction

The narrative non-fiction written about prostitution in Thailand depicts the reality of the situation more accurately than does the fiction, albeit with certain limitations. The fictional works reveal their authors' lack of in-depth research on Thailand's prostitution and mainly serve to perpetuate myths and negative stereotypes about the industry and the women who work in it. Further, much of the current popular literature written in English and available to foreign audiences prevents readers from gaining a better insight into the true motivations, thoughts, feelings and experiences of Thai prostitutes, who are usually referred to euphemistically as 'bargirls'. Consequently, there is a gap in the market for a well-written and well-informed literary novel that accurately reflects the reality and complexity of life as a Thai prostitute while also being an engaging story.

Narrative Non-Fiction on Prostitution in Thailand

Overview

There is a paucity of English-language narrative non-fiction on the subject of prostitution in Thailand. The reasons for this are most likely related to the life circumstances of the prostitutes themselves. Low levels of education (Boonchalaksi and Guest 66) and proficiency in foreign languages limit the ability of these women to share their stories in English. Long working hours and domestic responsibilities limit the time available to write or seek publication, even if the desire or ability to do so exists. Shame and a need to protect privacy may also be significant causes, as many women keep their profession as a prostitute secret. This is demonstrated by the fact that two out of the existing three narrative non-fiction texts use 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 themselves publicly by writing about their situation or the sex tourism industry as a

whole (Truong 156–7, 177–80) for fear of incurring the wrath of their former employers or corrupt Thai authorities.

Narrative Non-Fiction Texts

To the best of my knowledge, there are only three narrative non-fiction books on the topic of prostitution in Thailand. The two with the most literary merit were selected for in-depth analysis in this chapter.

The first text is *Miss Bangkok: Memoirs of a Thai Prostitute*, published in 2007 in both print and e-book editions. The book is written in the form of an autobiography, despite the fact that no real names have been used. It is a collaboration between Nicola Pierce, a freelance Irish writer and children's novelist, and Bua Boonmee (a pseudonym), a Thai prostitute whose real-life experiences provide the factual basis for the story. Although the identity of the author has been concealed, the story is rooted in a number of interviews conducted with Nicola Pierce. According to Pierce, Bua would visit the publishing house in Bangkok for an hour every evening to be interviewed before work.

The second text is *Mango Rains: The True Story of a Thai Mother's Lifelong Search for Her Abducted Daughter*, published in 2010. This is the fictionalisation of the biography of Nid and her daughter Lek (both pseudonyms), written in the third person by Daniel M. Dorothy. Dorothy states that it is based on his interviews with Lek, although he took 'plenty of literary license' in retelling her story (442). Dorothy is Executive Editor of Pattaya Mail Publishing, a newspaper company, and 'has lived for many years in Thailand' (Reid).

The third narrative non-fiction work, which was not chosen for in-depth analysis here but should still be mentioned, is *Only 13: The True Story of Lon*, the biography of a young Thai woman who became a prostitute at the age of 13 after running away from home, written by Julia Manzanares and Derek Kent and published in 2006. Lon told her story to Manzanares and Kent through a series of interviews and the book is written mainly in the first person from her perspective. Although it is one of the few books to reveal the identity of the prostitute whose life the book documents,

complete with photos of the subject at different points in her life, its narrative is repetitive and sometimes contradictory, and it has been criticised by many for its poor quality writing (Cox Clark).

The first two texts are based on background research and interviews with real-life subjects, which enable the authors to present complex, well-rounded characters that have an authentic feel to them. As a result, they tend to depict the lives of prostitutes in Thailand more realistically and avoid the oversimplifications, generalisations and negative stereotypes present in much of the fiction on this topic.

Fiction on Prostitution in Thailand

Overview

The fiction that has been written on the topic of Thai prostitution could be classed as popular male fiction written with a particular Western, male audience in mind. Most focus on the relationship between a prostitute and a *farang*, 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. They are commonly referred to as ‘bargirl-done-me-wrong’ novels. Some, though, fall strictly into the genre of love story while others have elements of journalism about them.

All of the fiction that exists within this genre seems to be written by men. I was unable to identify any that had been written by women. The author biographies of these books suggest that many of them are either existing or former sex tourists, or expatriates who have spent long periods living and working in Thailand.

Unsurprisingly, the judgements and perspectives that these authors present of Thai prostitutes in the plot and themes of their works tend to be based on a collection of their own and their friends’ experiences as well as anecdotes they hear in bars (Norbert). Given that the plots mainly concern love affairs and sexual encounters with Thai women, many of whom are prostitutes, the majority of these novels present a one-sided view of Thai prostitutes that is biased towards a male-oriented, Western

agenda—usually that of the Western sex tourist. As Stephen Leather admits in a promotional interview about his book *Private Dancer*, these books are ‘especially welcomed by guys who are planning to visit Thailand for the first time because it warns them of the dangers of losing your heart—and your wallet—to a bargirl’ (Norbert).

Narrative Fiction Texts

Two novels were chosen for the purposes of my research. Both represent slightly different variations of the most common plot within this particular genre. They were chosen out of a wide range of similar books because of their popularity and common themes.

The first text is *Private Dancer* by Leather, first published in book form in 2005 by Monsoon Books but available as a self-published e-book on Leather’s website from 2001. Leather is an English novelist who lives in Thailand, most well known for his international thrillers and his Inspector Zhang detective series. Considered something of a ‘cult classic’ among Western sex tourists and expatriates and soon to be adapted into a film, *Private Dancer* is summed up by the author as: ‘Writer meets Thai bargirl, falls in love, and lives to regret it’ (e-Books, Stephenleather.com). Leather states in an interview that the book is ‘a work of fiction, but based on events that have happened, if not to me then to people I know’.

The second text is *The Pole Dancer* by R. D. Lawrence, first published in 2004 and later released as an e-book in 2010. The author’s name appears to be a pseudonym, so no one is entirely sure of his identity or background. This is an action-oriented ‘lad’s book’, which begins with a fortune teller’s prophecy that sets in motion a fast-paced romance between a Bangkok prostitute called Joy and a handsome, well-heeled mysterious stranger who seems to be her ‘dream man’ but is not what he seems. Flipping between several sub-plots, and between the United Kingdom (UK) and Thailand, the story is almost Bond-esque in style with its secret agents, murder plots, industrial intrigue and fast cars.

Comparison of the Narrative Non-Fiction and Fiction Texts

Generally, both the narrative non-fiction and fiction 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. This section compares how accurately each book reflects the reality of prostitution in Thailand. The analysis has been divided into three categories: motivations for entering or leaving prostitution, characterisation, and plot and themes.

Motivations for Entering or Leaving Prostitution

When it comes to questions centred on motivation, particularly the women's motivations for becoming and remaining prostitutes, their goals and desires in life, and love versus economic motivations in relationships, there is a stark difference between the narrative non-fiction and fiction.

While the narrative non-fiction reveals more complex reasons behind each protagonist's choice to become involved in prostitution, beyond the usual academic explanations such as poverty, lack of education, failed marriages to Thai men, sexual abuse and familial obligations, the opposite is generally true of the fiction. Here, the prostitutes generally give standard reasons for doing so and do not appear terribly conflicted or ambivalent about choosing to become prostitutes. Nor do they seem to struggle to leave prostitution behind them, unlike some of the characters in the narrative non-fiction.

In *Mango Rains*, Nid 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 to recruiters for a local brothel (*songh*) in exchange for money to buy a water buffalo (Dorothy 20). At the brothel, she is separated from her sister, and eventually becomes pregnant and is cast out (Dorothy 28). Despite initially being taken in by a local farming family, she and her child are forced to leave soon after she gives birth in order to spare them any loss of face from malicious gossip concerning the paternity of her child (Dorothy 35–8). 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, which is described as 'the only job she could get' (Dorothy 39). Perhaps because she is so intent on finding her lost daughter, Lek, whom she is tricked into giving up as a baby, Nid is less focused on money.

Nid not only sheds her naïve country ways in becoming a prostitute but also gains the ability to handle foreign clientele with grace and dignity, while retaining her sense of humanity. Nevertheless, the toll on her self-esteem is palpable, as seen when she says goodbye to Bill at the airport. During their tearful parting, in which Bill is also said to have cried, Nid is described as being 'deeply moved over how much she seemed to mean to him, despite what she did for a living' (Dorothy 92). Clearly, Nid values herself very little to think that she is in an inferior position to Bill, both morally and socially, even though it is he who purchases her services.

Conversely, her daughter, Lek, keeps returning to prostitution again and again due to a series of episodes of bad luck and the emotional scars inflicted on her as a result of a succession of emotional losses, including separation from her mother at a very young age (Dorothy 43), the loss of her best friend and 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). Even after she is eventually reunited with her mother, who offers to support her, Lek eventually returns to prostitution. In the end, she is depicted as a damaged and broken woman who, after years of tragedy, eventually loses her soul, becoming shallow and 'obsessed with money' (Dorothy 442). She prefers to brag to her co-workers at the bar and her Thai dancing friends about her famous singer mother than actually have a relationship with her—a rather sad indictment of the effects that such a mercenary profession can have on young women.

Bua, the female protagonist in *Miss Bangkok*, manages to avoid succumbing to this loss of spirit and dignity, perhaps because, like Nid in *Mango Rains*, her main motivation for working as a prostitute is family; that is, to provide for her two children. However, Bua relates stories of other women who are not as fortunate, including her friend Priew, whom she once witnesses in a state of despair: 'Whereas

she learnt not to judge customers, be it on their looks or personality, she became highly critical of herself. Her self-respect dwindled with every customer she slept with' (Boonmee and Pierce 198). Later, she explains that Prieu copes by developing a mask of hardness, becoming business-like and fixated on how much money she makes (Boonmee and Pierce 199).

A similar fate befalls Joy in *Private Dancer*, who is portrayed as being quite deceptive and dishonest when it comes to her clients. For example, with her client Pete, the English writer and male protagonist of the story, she creates the impression that they are having an exclusive relationship, telling him that she loves him—'have you, only one' (Leather 90)—and accepts his money and attention. In reality, she is using Pete to obtain money to support herself and her Thai boyfriend, Park, who later becomes her husband—a fact that she never reveals to Pete. At one point, she also describes herself as behaving like an actress who knows 'when to laugh and when to smile' (Leather 22). When she is with *farang* men, '[i]t's like being an actress. We're all actresses and the bar is our stage and the *farangs* are our audience' (Leather 22). Joy is also shown to use manipulative emotional tactics like crying to solicit extra money from Pete and other clients, behaviour that she learns from her older sister.

However, it later emerges that Joy is a victim of a tragic upbringing and poverty-ridden circumstances. As well as having to support the male members of her family, who live in the poor province of Isaan and make very little money from their farm and charcoal business (Leather 44), Joy becomes a prostitute mainly as a result of the earlier sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of her father and brother (Leather 213).

She also appears to be fairly impressionable and admires her older sister, Sunan, who she describes as hardworking, shrewd, much stronger emotionally and better able to resist the advances of her father and brother (Leather 212). Joy appears to be quite happy to follow her sister's example in going to work in the bars and nightclubs of Bangkok that service foreign sex tourists. Like Prieu in *Miss Bangkok*, Sunan is portrayed as being very hard and business oriented, purely motivated by money. She thinks nothing of having several foreign 'boyfriends' at once, all of whom think she is exclusive with them and send her money every month. While not as cold as her

sister, Joy is described by Sunan as being a bit profligate and hedonistic, spending ‘a lot on drink and drugs’ and being ‘too generous with her friends’ (Leather 273).

Joy has an abusive boyfriend, Park, who is unfaithful (Leather 39) and lives off her (Leather 29), encouraging her to double-cross her clients and always pestering her for money (Leather 80). Along with the financial demands of her family, this relationship makes it difficult for her to leave prostitution behind unless she is able to find a willing (or unwitting) benefactor in the form of an unsuspecting *farang* ‘sponsor’ like Pete who will agree to support her financially.

Unlike Joy or Nid, but in a similar fashion to Lek in *Mango Rains*, Bua’s route to prostitution is gradual and the result of a number of 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. Although Bua is clearly self-aware, intelligent and someone with a great deal of emotional insight and maturity, she is never given a chance to make anything of herself because of her lack of educational qualifications, as well as her obedience to her mother, who is a gambling addict. 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).

In a similar fashion to Joy in *Private Dancer*, Bua also becomes a ‘master of manipulation’ as a prostitute. However, it is clear from what she tells us that, unlike Joy, Bua feels conflicted about such deceitful behaviour and adopts it eventually as a coping mechanism to avoid emotional suffering. The audience is shown how she eventually comes to behave in this way, including her initial feelings of ambivalence about working in prostitution, none of which is present in *Private Dancer*:

It took me a while to settle into life in the bar. During those first few weeks I would be overwhelmed with apprehension the second a *farang* so much as glanced in my direction. I gradually became more adept at flirting, but when it came to actually propositioning a man, I would freeze up. But I soon mastered the invaluable trick of detaching myself from the event as much as possible. I saw myself as an actress being paid to play a role, and the client was essentially my pay cheque. (Boonmee and Pierce 146–7)

In contrast, Joy, the main female character in *The Pole Dancer*, employs all the clichés when it comes to explaining her motivations for entering into the sex tourism business. Joy is a poor, uneducated farm girl from Thailand's north, who married and was then abandoned by her Thai husband shortly after giving birth (Lawrence 17). She is described as having tried various forms of menial, low-paid labour, such as working in rice paddies and in a factory, to support herself and her family (Lawrence 18). However, as a result of the 1997–8 financial crisis, Joy is forced to move to the tourist hotspots in the south where she takes 'the plunge' after seeing that her friends are 'financially solvent' and 'listening to them glamourize their work' (Lawrence 17–18). In essence, Joy's motivations are described through the filter of a Western male fantasy—she is a vulnerable young woman who is a victim of her socio-economic circumstances and is thus unwittingly forced into prostitution. Rather like her counterpart in *Private Dancer*, Joy seems resigned to her fate and does little to try to forge another life for herself. Instead, she just seems content to listen to the prophecies of fortune tellers (Lawrence 5) and wait to be rescued by a foreign man.

It is clear that for both main characters in the two novels, becoming a prostitute is motivated by genuine but fairly stereotypical reasons such as poverty, abuse or divorce by a Thai spouse and lack of educational or work prospects. Both characters also seem to find it very easy to leave the industry without any transitional problems and are only able to do so with the financial aid of a prosperous foreigner. In contrast, for the main characters in the narrative non-fiction, things are much less clear-cut and more psychologically complex. Not only can the world of prostitution be difficult to leave behind, as in the case of both Bua and Lek, but there are also additional factors to consider above those of lifestyle, including familial obligations and the desire to find a long-lost loved one. This makes the narrative non-fiction

much more believable and true to life than the fiction, and moral judgements about the characters become less straightforward.

Characterisation

Across the literature, Thai prostitutes are characterised 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 is just waiting to be rescued by a strong, rich male. Conversely, the female characters in the narrative non-fiction are often much more complex, giving voice to a range of conflicting emotions, doubts and fears—insights that are not present in the fiction.

The Femme Fatale

A common figure in the novels about Thai prostitution is the *femme fatale*. 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, judging by the way in which she chooses her Thai boyfriend (Leather 28), and lacking in emotional intelligence, given her decisions in relation to Park. She is also portrayed as hedonistic (Leather 273), 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 insists that he present it again to her in public in

order 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 for her, Joy later pawns the bracelet for extra cash, saying she needed the money for rent, which he describes as extremely hurtful: 'I was stunned. The bracelet had been made of inter-locked hearts. I'd spent ages choosing it in the jewellers, it was something that I felt showed how I felt about her. I had given her my heart' (Leather 79–80). Joy's response to this incident is as follows:

What did he expect? He'd left me with five thousand baht. I had bills to pay. Park was pestering me for money and Sunan said I had to send money back to our father. The bar was really quiet so what was I supposed to do? It's OK for Pete, he's a *farang*, he's got lots of money. (Leather 80)

The reader is given the impression that Joy has no compassion for Pete's feelings and does not appear to feel any ethical conflict or remorse about selling the bracelet. Instead, she simply uses her apparent poverty as an excuse to justify what appears to be quite mercenary behaviour.

In contrast, Bua in *Miss Bangkok* displays feelings of regret and remorse 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 believable.

In the case of Joy, it eventually emerges that there are many reasons why she 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, the author never allows Joy to display any conflicted emotions about her decisions and behaviour, or to show any doubt, regret or remorse about her hurtful behaviour towards Pete. Had the author allowed Joy to express some reservations about Sunan's advice or learn from her experiences, as we see Nid

do, then, rather than remaining a static character, Joy would have been much more realistic and believable as a fictional persona. Instead, Joy ends up fulfilling the stereotype of the *femme fatale*, by driving Pete to the point of obsession and exhaustion, leaving him incapable of making rational decisions because of mistrust and sexual jealousy, which, by the end of the novel, leads him to ruin his career (Leather 256, 281) and destroy his life.

The Cinderella/Pretty Woman

The second stereotype that is commonly found in the fiction is that of the Cinderella or Pretty Woman. Alluring, yet also tragic and vulnerable, she is a victim of difficult circumstances and helpless, unable to remove herself from her current predicament without the assistance of a Handsome Prince or White Knight to rescue her. Despite her unfair circumstances, she somehow remains a good person, unspoiled by her terrible, exploitative experiences. She therefore has an unreal or fairy-tale element to her character. It is clear that this stereotype is at work in both *Private Dancer* and *The Pole Dancer*, although it is Joy in the latter novel that most clearly fulfils this role more precisely.

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 has the effect of minimising the significance of her job as a prostitute—clearly, she is just biding her time until she is rescued. Joy's character is simply fulfilling a male fantasy, since it is completely unrealistic to think that her time as a prostitute has not in any way damaged her emotionally or affected her attitude towards relationships and money.

She is described as both 'stunningly beautiful' and sexually desirable, as well as 'intelligent' and in possession of 'a certain self-assurance' (Lawrence 54). Elsewhere, the narrator tells us that '[i]t 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). However, 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. Further, and perhaps rather tellingly, Joy is also described as ‘childlike’ (Lawrence 360), making her seem less powerful or threatening to men (Garrick 502; Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 99). Joy is also indirectly described as being kind and good.

Thus, in many ways, Joy’s character fulfils the characteristics of a Cinderella, or a Damsel in Distress, although this is a highly unrealistic depiction of the character traits of a real woman, let alone a Thai prostitute who may have been subjected to violence herself. Yet, despite her idealised portrayal, Joy is quick to take up with Jonathan, a British agent who rescues her from Simon’s clutches, 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.

Researchers have demonstrated that many sex tourists find the ideas of youth, helplessness and victimhood 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 sexual services as a means of providing financial assistance without feeling that it is morally questionable or that their sense of masculinity—even if it is only an idealised notion of masculinity—has been threatened in any way (Garrick 502–3; Hobbs, Pattalung and Chandler 98–9). However, although these traits may be cultivated by Thai prostitutes in order to feed into this fantasy, it does not mean that these women actually feel completely helpless or like 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 *songh* as a young girl, which leads her to a teenage pregnancy, still manages to turn her life around thanks to her resilient character, a

natural singing talent and the patronage and support of various benefactors. As a poor rural girl from northern Thailand, who loses her father at a young age and is enlisted into helping around the farm, there is an assumption that Nid has not had much education, although this is never overtly stated (Dorothy 20). At one point in the story, Nid describes herself as 'simple-minded' (Dorothy 114) and elsewhere in the book, she is referred to by Bill, her mentor and client, in rather naïve terms (Dorothy 66, 92), but it is unclear whether this means she is lacking in intelligence or is simply a little unsophisticated as a result of her country upbringing. The following quotation suggests the latter: 'She had 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). Nonetheless, Nid is certainly shown to be endowed with plenty of common sense, planning ahead and saving her money in order to further her search for Lek (Dorothy 115). She is also intuitive and clever about how she questions people who might know something about Lek's whereabouts (Dorothy 113–14). The author attributes this to 'years of practice' as well as Nid's having learnt to 'handle herself well' and being 'good at her trade' (Dorothy 67). The reader is therefore left to deduce that even if she is not conventionally educated, she is emotionally intelligent.

Thus, although Nid is childlike and naïve in many ways, she is not portrayed as innocent and helpless in the same way that Joy in *The Pole Dancer* is. Despite having definite moments of despair, at one point even contemplating suicide (Dorothy 110–11) after discovering that her friend has tricked her and sold her baby to a criminal who runs a begging racket, she still manages to find the strength to pick herself up and continue on:

The effects of the alcohol deepened her depression and made her think about what a lost cause she had turned out to be. 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 so-called 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 authentic and her despair 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). This may be partly because Nid is a much more rounded, fleshed-out character, and because the author spends more time crafting her inner dialogue and allowing the reader to gain insight into her thoughts and feelings.

In many ways, Nid's daughter Lek has led far more of a tragic life than either of the Joy characters in *Private Dancer* and *The Pole Dancer*. Losing her mother at an early age, Lek is kidnapped from an orphanage by a child-labour ring and forced to work in the red-light districts of Bangkok selling cigarettes to bar patrons. Later, she is accused of conspiring to murder a drug dealer and goes on the run from the authorities, eventually begging and stealing just to fend off starvation, and ending up working as a prostitute out of desperation. Despite this, Lek never appears to give up. Determined, feisty and resourceful, she manages to escape from the clutches of the kidnappers and later shows the initiative to become a professional traditional Thai dancer, going on to perform professionally in Japan. However, over the course of her story, the reader is led to understand the many disappointments that she faces and overcomes before eventually becoming hardened and materialistic. Both Nid and Lek are portrayed as essentially honest and persevering Thai women who suffer the most tremendous hardship due to the selfish and often exploitative actions of others, and end up reacting differently to their circumstances.

Ironically, despite the way in which they are shown to manipulate their foreign clients, both Bua and Joy (in *Private Dancer*) are shown to be fairly powerless and weak when it comes to how they behave with their Thai partners and relatives.

Like Joy in *Private Dancer*, Bua also endures abusive relationships, which turn out to be the main source of her suffering. This topic is almost totally absent from *The Pole Dancer*. Although Joy's husband abandons her, there is no hint that she has ever been beaten by him. Unlike Joy in *Private Dancer*, Bua does admit that she did not exercise the best judgement in choosing him as a 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 even though he still becomes angry and jealous of her work, and beats her occasionally.

What is interesting is that Bua does display an element of the wishfulness that we witness in the character of Joy (in *Pole Dancer*), admitting, rather ashamedly, 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)

Bua is one of the few characters in any of these books who takes responsibility for eventually choosing prostitution as a livelihood and for her choice to stay with an abusive man, relating that she made some bad choices in life, including her decision to 'admit defeat' (Boonmee and Pierce 21) with regards to how poverty affected her grades at school, eventually leading her to drop out of education—a move that she later calls her 'biggest regret' (Boonmee and Pierce 36). Ironically, though, even her educated sister, who secures a good job and becomes self-sufficient financially, also ends up marrying a foreigner and going to live overseas, suggesting that the urge to marry a *farang* is strongly rooted within Thai culture as a way for women to become more socially mobile. The difference between the sisters, it would seem, is one of freedom of choice: 'Educated and independent, my sister didn't need a *farang* to

rescue her, and yet one had come to take her to Norway while I remained stuck in Patpong with an abusive partner' (Boonmee and Pierce 229).

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 Damsel in Distress 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 summary, the fictitious character of Joy in *The Pole Dancer* exhibits many of the traits of the Damsel in Distress stereotype, including a sense of helplessness that serves the male fantasies of the target audience and does not reflect reality. In contrast, the characters in the narrative non-fiction, Nid, Lek and Bua, are much more resilient and exhibit an inner strength in overcoming their difficulties that is largely lacking in both the Joy characters in the fiction. The characters in the narrative non-fiction show evidence of individual progression, profound emotional suffering and a deep sense of self-awareness that seem absent in the characters presented in the fiction.

Plot and Themes

While nearly every text studied here is sympathetic to some degree towards the plight of prostitutes, not all of them read like truthful exposés of an industry that thrives on labour exploitation (Tantiwiranond 191–2) and personal risk-taking (Kuo, Yamnill and McLean 493)—a world in which deceit, abuse, hedonism and violence rule. Some of the novels, *The Pole Dancer* in particular, almost seem to romanticise sex tourism, making it seem like an easy, lucrative and even glamorous world in which to work. In contrast, most of the storylines of the narrative non-fiction contain enough harrowing incidents surrounding prostitution to make it clear to readers that it is scary, unpleasant and degrading. The fact that such details are conspicuously absent in the plots of the fiction reveals a lack of thorough, in-depth research on the part of the writers, some of whom do not appear to be interested in

realistically depicting the lives of the Thai prostitutes that feature as characters in their books.

In the case of *Mango Rains*, Dorothy has used the life story of a Thai to create what can best be described as a 'docu-drama', a fictional tale that is based on a true story. Employing a third-person narrative style, the two main characters of Lek and Nid, and a number of sub-plots based around characters whose paths all eventually cross, Dorothy is able to convey a complex yet realistic depiction of life in Thailand, including what it is like to work in prostitution. In terms of literary technique, Dorothy essentially employs the personal to convey universal truths about working conditions and the lives of Thai prostitutes. By following the difficult and often tragic lives of Lek and Nid, and outlining the challenging circumstances that led to each character's decision to enter prostitution, Dorothy is able to show the reader how hunger and desperation can drive anyone to do things that they otherwise might not do. He shows 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. Nid eventually leaves the industry by becoming a singer, but it is only because she enjoys the patronage of some powerful men who are willing to assist her that she is ultimately able to succeed.

For Lek, who has very little parental support for the first 21 years of her life, leaving the industry is shown to be much more difficult. Lek is described as being incredibly unlucky (Dorothy 126). This theme, present in the storyline surrounding Lek's character until the end of the book when she is finally reunited with her mother on her twenty-first birthday, is used to demonstrate how the line between leading a happy and secure existence and leading a difficult life filled with hardship is separated only by a few accidents of fate in Thailand. It shows that virtually any woman, if made vulnerable enough as a result of difficult circumstances, can be led to a life of prostitution. Not only does this resonate with the stories of many of the prostitutes who feature in the research summarised in the previous chapter, many of whom were forced into taking jobs in prostitution because of teenage pregnancies, failed marriages and poverty-stricken family circumstances, but it also serves to make Lek's story all the more tragic and affecting for readers.

What is also realistic about *Mango Rains* is the fact that Lek demonstrates enormous resilience and resourcefulness throughout her life: escaping from her captors who force her and several other children to work as child slaves in Bangkok, defending herself against a drunken rapist in Buriram, finding a job as a bus conductor in Korat, and, later, deciding to learn traditional Thai dancing and take it to a professional level, which finally offers her a way out of prostitution. Yet, despite this, readers are also shown how the emotional toll that her tragic life has taken on her makes it difficult for Lek to ultimately leave prostitution behind, even after being reunited with her mother, who is willing to support her financially.

Private Dancer has a similarly structured plot to *Mango Rains* in the sense that the personal is also used to convey the universal. However, the book is structured more like a Greek tragedy with a large chorus of different minor characters, all of whom offer a different perspective, both specifically about Pete and Joy's relationship, as well as more generally about prostitution and expatriate life in Thailand. However, unlike *Mango Rains*, which spans 21 years and is set in various locations across Thailand in the 1970s to 1990s, this novel essentially takes place in modern-day Bangkok and centres around the romantic relationship between Pete and Joy, exploring whether inter-cultural relationships between *farangs* and Thai women, prostitutes in particular, can ever work.

Set against the background of Thai expat and bar life, with all its archetypal characters, it is a tragic story of sexual jealousy, deception and mistrust that nearly destroys the two main characters, bringing about the near suicide of Joy and the murder of Pete. By the author's own admission, it is a morality tale designed to show the exploitative and potentially negative effects of sex tourism on both prostitutes and customers. When interviewed about the book, the author explained that he deliberately set out to write a novel that 'shows the same story from ... many different viewpoints', all of which are 'slanted but valid', allowing the reader to consider all sides of the argument.

However, despite claiming that it is neutral in terms of its viewpoint, the reader soon becomes aware that the author identifies quite strongly with the male protagonist's

perspective and, as a result, the Thai characters who are involved in prostitution are painted in unflattering terms as materialistic, treacherous, untrustworthy and, ultimately, rather vengeful. Throughout the book, 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 (‘without hierarchy, they are lost’) and, like dogs, need to be kept in line by controlling, even violent, treatment (Leather 95). Elsewhere, Jimmy, an expatriate who ‘runs a chain of furniture shops by fax’ (Leather 55) expresses that, when given a choice, ‘more often than not, Thais will take the stupid option’ (Leather 287).

As the characters are so stereotypical, including a racist South African, German academic, gullible American and several money-grabbing prostitutes, the book’s plot and storyline are not really designed to paint an in-depth or realistic picture of Thai prostitution, despite the fact that this is supposed to be a main focus of the story. Instead, it creates a rather one-sided view of what it is like to be a long-term sex tourist in Thailand and how, after having your heart broken and being duped by a greedy Thai prostitute who cons you into parting with a great deal of money, you end up either jaded, jailed on false criminal charges (as in the case of Nigel [Leather 287]) or dead from AIDS (as in the case of Jimmy [Leather 287]), suicide (as in the case of Pete’s boss [Leather 278]) or murder (as in the case of Pete [Leather 278]). These are all terrible ends that come about through interactions with promiscuous, double-crossing or vengeful Thais. In contrast, all the main Thai characters have happy endings by the epilogue: Sunan marries Vernon, an American, and goes to live in the US, where she establishes a successful restaurant and has three children (Leather 285–6), while Joy returns to Thailand after becoming homesick in America, briefly returns to the bars of Bangkok, meets an Australian who is the double of Pete and goes to live in Melbourne, where she has two children (Leather 286). 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.

Perhaps because it is a novel designed to be an adventure story about an international assassination plot, a fortune teller's prophecy and the romance between Joy and a handsome, rich playboy who also happens to be a mercenary, *The Pole Dancer* is not really designed to expose or accurately describe the working conditions or life of a prostitute or provide a full and accurate picture of the sex tourism industry. At times, a cursory or rather superficial reference is made to it, such as the brief explanation at the beginning of the story of the circumstances leading up to Joy's present position as a prostitute, as well as the occasional brief aside, written in italics in the form of Joy's thoughts, which suggests she would like to leave the business 'just in time, before the bar becomes my only life, before I become a real hard case' (Lawrence 123). However, this appears to be done simply to provide plausible explanations and justifications for the direction in which the plot unfolds and then the narration moves back to the action of the story.

Not only does this novel evade questions of morality, but it also glosses over the realities of life for the women working in these bars, including the fact that Joy sleeps with men for money 'on the side' once her dancing shift is over. We are not told a great deal about Joy's negative experiences working in sex tourism. By making Joy best friends with her *mamasan* and avoiding mention of the hazards of the job, the novel is able to gloss over the truly ugly side of sex tourism. If anything, the novel seems to romanticise her role as a dancer, and glorify prostitution, which the following extract makes plain:

During the journey, she began to reflect on those early days of a year ago when she first started working at the bar. As she looked back, she could only wonder at how she had survived at all. How the bar and the nightlife had transformed her! Once a simple village girl; now a sophisticated dancer! (Lawrence 123)

Although one of the central characters in the story is a prostitute and the plot begins in the go-go bars of Thailand's red-light districts, the action of the main story soon moves off to other locations, including Kuala Lumpur and Krabi, as well as flicking backwards and forwards between other sub-plots that are based in the UK, including that of 'Sir Dennis', a billionaire business tycoon with corporate investments

interests in South East Asia (Lawrence 19). As a result, the reader does not gain any in-depth information from this novel about life as a prostitute. Rather, it is an ‘airport novel’, designed for entertainment rather than educational purposes and is aimed mainly at men who like Bond-esque action books.

Overall, it is clear that, in terms of plot and themes, it is often the narrative non-fiction books, rather than the novels, that demonstrate nuanced plots that are subtle and true to life. Although *Private Dancer* does much to explore its central theme, that of 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 real-life struggles of Thai prostitutes. In many ways, *The Pole Dancer* does not offer any real insight into the thoughts or experiences of Thai prostitutes and is more of an action-oriented entertainment novel that merely seeks to use Thailand’s sex tourism industry as a titillating and sensational setting for what is essentially an action novel. It therefore tends to glamourise the industry and gloss over its dark side. Both novels have polarised plot endings, too—one tragic (*Private Dancer*), the other happy (*The Pole Dancer*)—both of which offer extreme views of Thai prostitution and do not seem realistic.

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. Moreover, neither offers nice, neat solutions to the problems and themes raised in each, which is probably more true to life, since the problems surrounding sex tourism are complex. They also address themes such as human trafficking, religion and the true nature of relationships between Thai prostitutes and their foreign clients in more depth than the fiction works. However, they too have some limitations in what they are able to achieve.

Limitations of the Existing Narrative Non-Fiction

The narrative non-fiction goes some way towards drawing attention to the plight of young, uneducated and poverty-stricken women, particularly from northern Thailand (Boonchalaksi and Guest 58), who are forced to turn to prostitution or marriages with

farangs due to their limited economic prospects and opportunities for social advancement. Further, the majority of the narrative non-fiction books on this subject reveal the complex cultural, social and economic relationships between a prostitute and her customers on one hand, and her exploitation by employers, family members, lovers or husbands, and Thai society on the other.

However, few of these texts seem to be able to look past the poverty argument to see the wider social and, indeed, global context of the issue of sex tourism, which involves deeply embedded national and international power imbalances, particularly surrounding the discrepancy between the economic and social power of developing-world Thai prostitutes and their developed-world clients. This is a major obstacle that needs to be overcome to avoid perpetuating the convenient explanations around poverty that already abound within the literature, which only serve to maintain the status quo (Petterman 186; Truong 190).

As mentioned earlier, the potential for future biographies or autobiographies that truly reflect the complexity of life and working conditions for Thai prostitutes is hampered by a number of other factors, including difficulties gaining access to truthful, first-hand information from prostitutes due to fear of public shame, loss of face, retribution or prosecution. It is somewhat ironic that the closer a book comes to the realm of non-fiction, the less it seems to be able to represent the facts. It may well be then, that fiction based on real people and events but altered for dramatic effect and to protect people's identities offers a better option. Given the structure of Thai society, including its demands for social respectability and the maintaining of 'face', and given the high level of shame that exists among many Thai prostitutes, well-written, well-researched literary fiction, free of negative stereotyping, could provide a better vehicle for exploring this difficult subject matter more thoroughly and in greater depth.

Mango Rains has made fairly successful use of this very technique. Although the plot of the novel tends to stray considerably from the facts of the two main subjects' 'real lives', it is a highly accurate portrayal of life in Thailand and contains a great deal of local colour and detail. However, perhaps because it was written by a man based on conversations that he had with 'Lek', this book does lack some of the grittier insights

into how difficult, degrading or dangerous prostitution can be for Thai women. In fact, all the scenes involving prostitute and client, particularly the intimate ones, are written more from the point of view of the male client. The book also glosses over many of the details of life within prostitution, choosing to focus mainly on the interactions of the prostitutes in public places, such as the coffee shop where Nid and her compatriots meet their clients. It also does not mention any of the risks or dangers that many Thai prostitutes face as part of the job description, including rape, violence and AIDS.

Conclusion

Overall, this chapter demonstrates that, of the narrative non-fiction and fiction that exists on the topic of prostitution in Thailand, it is the narrative non-fiction that paints a more accurate picture of what life is really like for the women who work in the sex tourism industry. This includes the social and individual circumstances that lead to their decision to become prostitutes, the difficult conditions they endure that come with their economic vulnerability and social powerlessness, and the damage this type of work does to them emotionally. This is true both in terms of characterisation, which tends to be less stereotypical and provides greater insight into how Thai prostitutes feel and think, and what their motivations are for becoming involved in prostitution in the first place. Further, through their better-researched and detailed plots, readers are able to gain more of an insight into what life is like for Thai prostitutes, including the abuse they endure from partners, moneylenders and even clients, and the many challenges and dangers involved in performing this kind of work, from psychological damage to alcohol abuse as a way of coping.

However, there are some definite limitations in the narrative non-fiction works that prevent them from offering a comprehensive, well-written, accurate and sensitive insight into the lives of these women. *Mango Rains* is well written but glosses over some of the negative aspects of prostitution; *Miss Bangkok* is sensitively written but contains a hint of Western bias and moral judgement, which only serves to reinforce the problem of notoriety and public shame that seems to 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 Western male authors, many of whom are expatriates living in Thailand. This may be due to the difficulty for women in accessing this world in order to conduct research. Alternatively, the reason may come down to the fact that men prefer to write novels set in Thailand because it is, after all, 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 Western *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. Thus, the books tend to be suggestive of sensation and be filled with sexual titillation. Many are also too poorly written to attract international interest and praise from literary critics.

Chapter 4: *Welcome*

Introduction

The literature presented in Chapter 3 demonstrates that currently it is only the limited narrative non-fiction that comes close to presenting the reality of the lives of women working in the sex tourism industry in Thailand, while the fiction is unrealistic, sexist and presents mainly myths and stereotypes. In contrast, *Welcome* is a work of literary fiction that is based on research and presents the reality accurately. This is reflected in the characters and their motivations.

The biggest difference between *Welcome* and other works on the same topic is that *Welcome* is written from the perspective of a woman rather than that of a man. The author and the narrator are both Western women. It attempts to depict the Thai sex tourism industry, characters and the setting realistically and does not glamourise or stereotype them.

My writing was certainly influenced by the fiction I read on the topic. I found it incredibly distasteful and difficult to read for many reasons, including the poor writing, flimsy plot devices, predictability and rampant sexism. I read widely but found that each book was almost identical to the last and eventually could take no more. The influence of these novels lay in teaching me what to avoid in my own writing.

The fact that my novel is written from the perspective of a Westerner makes it easier for Western readers of the novel to empathise with the narrator and see the other characters from her perspective. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator's initial reaction to prostitution, like many readers who are new to this topic, is at times critical, fearful or moralistic. The reader grows with the narrator and comes to a deeper understanding of their plight as the novel progresses. The novel weaves fact into fiction extensively, informing the readers about the backgrounds, motivations and different faces of prostitution in Thailand.

Characters

Salisa and Mali are depicted realistically as intelligent but socially disadvantaged women who try to make the best of their situation. They are not portrayed as 'victims'. Neither is entirely honest and 'pure'; they are not idealised in any way. However, their 'dishonesty' is contextualised, so the reader is led to empathise with the characters, and they are not the stereotypical *femme fatale*. They are shown to have strong feelings and are not motivated simply by money or greed. This is demonstrated repeatedly; for example, Salisa has protective instincts towards her sister, Mali desires to escape her life and Salisa dreams of romantic love. Salisa and Mali's enduring friendship is one of the best examples. Nor are they the stereotypical Pretty Woman or Cinderella figure, although they use this stereotype to their advantage at times.

The men paying Thai prostitutes for their services are certainly not glamourised in any way. Various kinds of sex tourists are described as Salisa recounts her experiences: older men, virgins, groups of young men looking to get drunk and hardened 'sexpats'. Mali's husband is the stereotypical White Knight/Man Looking for Love and Mali attempts to be a *mia farang* (wife of a foreigner). However, this husband is not just looking for 'love' but, in many ways, a cheap servant, which is probably why he is divorced. Salisa's first love also treats her badly. He probably would not have been so arrogant to an Australian woman, revealing the inherent racism in many of these men's attitudes to Thai prostitutes.

The complex relationship between Westerners and Thais is seen in Salisa and Mali's interactions with Dave and Lara. Lara cannot help being suspicious of Mali's motivations; for example, when she is asked to pay her bar fine and go to a different bar then later feels guilty when she sees that Mali is trying to help her; Mali and Salisa cannot help responding negatively to Lara's statement that the police would be quicker to respond to her. It is not a complexity that is resolved, rather it is just presented for the reader's consideration.

Motivations

Welcome is realistic in its depiction of Salisa's and Mali's motivations throughout the novel, particularly in relation to continuing to work as prostitutes. Salisa and Mali are from poor, agrarian northern villages in Thailand, where the majority of prostitutes come from. However, the novel does not imply that women's decisions to enter prostitution are so simplistic as to rest simply on poverty. Salisa overcomes some of the linguistic barriers by learning English at an early age (but only because, by chance, she is able to work as a maid for a woman in her village who has married an Australian, and he is kind enough to teach her—the novel does not imply that such opportunities are widely available); Mali has more trouble: fluency in English is shown to be an advantage throughout the novel. Education is shown to be a crucial factor in overcoming the disadvantages of a poor background, though something that is not easy to obtain. Salisa is highly motivated to earn enough money to ensure she can pay for her sister's schooling. She is adamant that Khwan must avoid leaving school to work, and must go to university in order to secure a respectful job.

Salisa and Mali are socio-economically disadvantaged in their villages. Class distinctions are obvious when Ma returns to Salisa's village. Salisa's family gradually moves up in the world as she sends more and more money home. Salisa is in awe of Bangkok when she first arrives, and she and Mali do not know much about the world (e.g., they didn't know what life was like in Phuket or that there were bars and prostitutes there as well and Salisa had never seen a sci-fi film). Having moved away from their villages, Salisa and Mali both try to distance themselves from their low socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, when Salisa's sister arrives in Phuket for their holiday dressed like a farmer's daughter, they quickly buy more modern, fashionable clothes for her.

The novel shows that it is not an easy task to escape one's background. Salisa and Mali, as daughters, are expected to take care of their parents, and Salisa and her sister hesitate to criticise their parents or their gambling-addict brother. Despite moving away, their lives and work are dictated by the need to send financial support home to their families. When Salisa makes the decision at the end of the novel to stop

supporting her parents and brother in order to protect her sister and ensure an education for her, it is not depicted as an easy decision, and it comes only after the hugely traumatic event of Khwan being kidnapped and held in a closed brothel, raped by a string of men. It is believable because she is portrayed throughout the novel as the more modern Thai woman, having learnt English from a young age, dreaming of a romantic relationship instead of settling for being a *mia farang* like Mali and refusing to take too much financial aid from people she considers her friends (like Dave and Lara).

There is psychological complexity in the depiction of characters and their actions: Mali's story does not end with her finding a rich *farang* who carries her off overseas to his castle. She is bored and terribly homesick in Adelaide, so much so that she even misses being a prostitute, in a way. This differs from other novels that end simply with a prostitute finding a better life overseas or with a rich Westerner, and never missing her life or friends back home. Financial stability is not the only thing that a person needs to be happy.

Conclusion

I often can't believe that there isn't another novel like mine that has been published already. To be sure, I checked again, extensively, just this week. Three years after I started this PhD, there is still no other work of fiction in English on the topic of prostitution in Thailand like mine. At least not one that I could find. There are no novels written on this subject by women. There is none that gives a realistic picture of what life is like for Thai prostitutes. None that shows them in an empathetic light, without stereotypes or clichés. The existing novels are written by men, employ copious stereotypes and present the female characters as manipulative, deceitful and victims of their own inadequacies. In short, they are sexist. They are certainly not socially progressive and they have definitely not been written to help people understand the complexities of the problem with a view to solving it one day.

Not only is it difficult for me to believe that my novel is unique in this way, it is also impossible for me to understand why this would be the case. Thailand is such a

beautiful, enthralling place. I can't conceive of why there isn't any literary fiction in the English language that is set in Thailand, period, let alone fiction that tackles important subjects like prostitution and trafficking, especially given that these are dramatic, devastating and involve so many women. It is everywhere you look in Thailand. I see it as rich ground for creative work. How can it be that writers, good writers, haven't plundered this area already?

Perhaps it is the inordinate amount of pulp and bad writing that has been produced on the subject already that turns real writers away. It seems like every other week, another Western man who has spent time in Thailand or, mostly, who is there still, self-publishes a trashy novel about the underbelly of Thai society, focusing on crime, prostitution and one Western man's adventure through it all.

Whatever the reasons behind it, the story of what it is really like to be a Thai prostitute has not yet been told to a Western audience through literary fiction and I hope that *Welcome*, and other novels on the same topic that I hope to write in future, will do so.

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