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

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This article examines the nature and justification of Thailand’s sex tourism industry, how the country’s socio-economic state factors into that justification, and what that means in terms of working conditions for female prostitutes in Thailand. After an examination of these issues, the author compares 2 works of literary fiction and 2 non-fiction works, all of which focus on Thailand’s sex tourism industry, to see how accurately prostitution in Thailand is depicted.

Prostitution is extremely prevalent in Thai culture and the industry attracts natives as well as tourists in droves. “The chief consumers of the Thai prostitute industry are Thai men. It is estimated that at least 450,000 Thai men visit prostitutes on any given day” (Lines, 2015:88). Lines further illustrates this point by stating that “close to half of Thai men lose their virginity to a prostitute and almost 95% of them admit to making use of prostitution services at least once” (2015:89). Thai men may be the most prevalent patrons of their country’s sex industry, but the fact that the industry also attracts millions of tourists annually cannot be neglected.

In 2013, the Thailand Department of tourism recorded 26.74 million visitors to Thailand, which included 907,868 from Australia, 906,312 from the United Kingdom, and 826,350 from the United States. Of these, approximately 60% are males, 70% of whom are thought by NGOs to come explicitly to engage in prostitution (Lines, 2015:89).

While technically, there are laws in Thailand that deem prostitution an illegal act, they are not by any means rigidly enforced. As the industry generates large revenues, the government often acts to encourage its growth, unofficially (Lines, 2015:90).

Increasing poverty in Thailand is the most notable reason that women are resorting to prostitution to earn a living. Lines notes that this is especially the case in “agrarian-based northern regions” of Thailand where social culture is linked to “feudal values and roots in a patriarchal past” (2015:90). Some other notable reasons outlined stem from culture, such as a devaluation of an individual woman’s sexuality as a potential bride, if she has lost her virginity prior to marriage or the perceived obligation to one’s family, referred to as “dutiful daughter syndrome” which motivates young women to engage in prostitution to help earn money for an impoverished family (Lines, 2015:90). The author also notes that consumerism is a relatively new obsession in Thailand and as a result some women turn to prostitution for the economic comfort and independence it can provide (2015:91).

Prostitutes in Thailand face working conditions that are harmful and potentially deadly. Some have complained that they suffer from a lack of sleep, skipping meals, and “being unable to choose their clientele” (Lines, 2015:91). Situations these women encounter can range from “verbal abuse to being threatened with a weapon, being forced to perform oral sex or intercourse without a condom right through to attempted kidnapping and gang rape” (Lines 2015:91). Additionally they are at high risk for HIV infection. In 2009, A UN report estimated that 1.3% of the population were living with AIDS, which equated to Thailand ranking in with the 15th highest infection rate in the world at that time. (Lines, 2015:91).

It may not be surprising that when comparing the fictional and non-fictional works of literature, the author found that the non-fictional works more accurately depicted prostitution in Thailand. She criticizes the fictional works for ultimately perpetuating sexist and racist stereotypes and romanticizing prostitution. Lines writes,

In the fiction, the female characters involved in prostitution tend to fall into one of two stereotypes: either the scheming materialistic and manipulative femme fatale or the vulnerable and helpless Cinderella who is the victim of tragic circumstances and waiting to be rescued by a strong, rich male (2015:94).

It is important to note that all four of the books examined here were written from a Western perspective. Through this article the author intends to raise a question of morality. She devotes time to examining the social, economic, and political motives that drive the sex industry in Thailand and the experiences of Thai prostitutes, simply put, to demonstrate that the situation is bad. “This places something of a moral imperative on upon authors writing from a privileged Western context to break from imperialist reductionism of the East and acknowledge these difficulties” (Lines, 2015:97).