Final Thoughts on Orientalizing the Sex Industry

In 2004, former U.S. anti-trafficking Ambassador John Miller stated, “human trafficking, especially for women and girls forced into prostitution, has followed demand where a multitude of U.S. and foreign aid workers, humanitarian workers, civilian contractors, and yes, U.S. uniformed personnel, operate.”¹ The foreign military male and exotic native female—exemplified by Giacomo Puccini’s Madame Butterfly trope—is one that has utilized a positive feedback loop throughout history. Within Oriental and Colonial/Neo-Colonial studies, it is insurmountable to escape the realities of women—and oftentimes men—like Cio Cio San, Butterfly, and U.S. Naval Officer Pinkerton. Though the sexual exploitation of both men and women of the Orient was, perhaps, aroused by the militaristic and imperialistic West’s first emergence in the Orient as a hyper masculine dominating force, I argue that the sex industry in the East has adapted in concordance with the shifting Orient and Occident relations and a capital skirmish between global masculinities. Despite the changing environment, however, Orientalist stereotypes still predominantly infiltrate the modern economies of sex.

Though the sexual exploitation of women has been chronicled since the days of Marco Polo, Gustave Flaubert, and before, I suggest that the utilization of women in the sexual culture of the East transcends the broad and problematic gendered domination over women by the phallus—this kind of dominance cannot be justified solely by the biology of the male because it lacks the political, economic, and social phenomena that are

¹“Sexual Colonialism and the Creation of the Asian Mystique.” Gender Across Borders. Gender Across Border,
inextricably linked. Thus, the specificity of the West’s domination and exploitation of Eastern peoples elicits an additional level of intersectionality in which race is profoundly associated with the militaristic rape and conquest of racialized Oriental women—a class of people doubly handicapped by their twofold minority status. One of the first manifestations of the Orientalist othering of Asian woman as hyper-feminine and hypersexual was prodded by the arrival of the United States military in 1939 upon a neo-colonial attempt to contain Japanese Imperialism; setting the stage in the East were an estimated 200,000 Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese Indonesian, Filipino, and Dutch “comfort girls” ingrained in the Japanese imperial culture that U.S. military personnel first interacted with on Asian soil. Thus, Americans extended the hypersexual and submissive stereotype of the comfort girl to the Oriental woman; hence flooding and perpetuating Western ideals, their assumptions were met and made a counterpart to the popular culture that yielded Madame Butterfly and the Orientalist works of Richard Francis Burton.

Nearly eighty years later and men are vicariously living this age-old trope but are no longer limited to military bases. Men, mostly, are partaking in the sex tourism of Southeast Asia are penetrating the Eastern border in search of the exotic land brought back to 20th century America in the form of stories, and often sexually transmitted diseases. Australian author and professor Damien Garrick theorizes about the nature of men piercing these boundaries today and concluded that three types of men exist within this sex market: The “Macho Lad,” “The White Night,” and the man looking for love—the machinist, the white

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
savior, and the antisocial divorcee. Thus, the motivations of sex tourists have changed with the changing global economies and politics; however, these tourists are reliant upon the tales of the East and its exotic mystique that have repeatedly been retold. Furthermore, a new form of exploitation has materialized through film, anthropology, and the ascending agency of the “White Knight.” Though physically and fiscally a part of the economy, the White Knight excludes himself from the label of sex tourist because he pities the prostitute. In Dennis O’Rourke’s Documentary Fiction, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* he reveals that these men apprehend the power dynamics intersecting between race and gender and, hence, view themselves as fundamentally superior and thus obligated, by the agency of their white skin, to be a liberator. Nonetheless, O’Rourke can hardly be excluded from the knighted figure who believes he is paying homage, perhaps in an act of chivalry, to the Thai prostitute he has paid to service him and his documentary alike. O’Rourke—who calls Bangkok the “Mecca for western men with fantasies of exotic sex and love without pain”—not only exploits Aoi through sex, but also through the creation of this film. Thus, the evolution of the sex industry travels further past its militaristic derivation and into the homes of Western citizens—what I argue is a new form of sexual exploitation and tourism. Though documentaries have a means of giving voices to oppressed peoples whose voices are otherwise silenced, as the subject and object of the film, Aoi speculates the exploitative

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nature of the O’Rourke and his film: “I think everything you do and say to me it to
manipulate me for your film... You are the sky and I am the ground... I am just trash.”

Nonetheless, as man’s relationship to the Southeastern sex industry is solely
conceded as the perpetrator, the Pinkerton, the Macho Lad, the White Knight, and the
exploitative Anthropologist, the positionality of man as sex worker is lost. As the Orientalist
narrative functions via the pigeon-holed role of the female Oriental submissive and
Western male dominant, Western men having sex with Eastern men is underreported
because it has a difficult time harmonizing with these entrenched power and gender
dynamics. In literature, men are habitually equated with the consumer. The author
of *Women are Victims, Men Make Choices: The Invisibility of Men and Boys in the Global Sex
Trade*, Jeffrey Dennis sampled 166 articles online about the sex industry at large and found
that 84% of those articles observed exclusively female sex workers, 10% detected males,
and 6% were written in regards to both males and female. Moreover, out of the 16% of
articles Dennis found on male sex work, only one of those articles scrutinized an Asian
nation. The “gender-polarized frame of Orientalism, the male-coded Europeanor American
exerting a controlling gaze over a female-coded native” neglects that fact Cambodia, China,
and Thailand have the largest populations of male sex workers in the world. Orientalism
capitalizes on the hyper-masculine Western man. Traditionally, the Asian male is
effeminized and stripped of his agency and power because, in Said’s discourse, femininity

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
resembles nonresistance and powerlessness. As this myth has unfolded, however, a power struggle for masculinities has transpired internationally.

Kimberly Kay Hoang concedes this historical contextualization of Western males as representatives of the “top echelon of global masculinities;” however, she believes the hegemonic discourse presupposes a currently dominant West. Effectively, it quashes the ascent of local elites in Africa, Asia, and Latin America by way of the 2008 financial crisis that concurrently wounded America’s global position; it forgets to offer recognition to the Eastern “masculinist resistance” to colonial and neocolonial influences. Hoang articulates her ethnographic research in the sex industries of Ho Chi Minh City and argues that men are not just purchasing women but are also “purchasing status and dignity, and working to protect their precarious positions in the global order.”

Thus Vietnamese nationals and Western sex tourists are using the capitalist notions of the sex industry to compete for a globalized masculinity.

Consequently, I have breached only a small portion of the literature, but I hope to have extrapolated on this particular fraction to depict the evolving industry of sex exchange between the East and West that is, largely, still reliant upon the originally Orientalist racism that allowed for the proliferation of militaristic rape and extortion. Nonetheless, Dr. Bandyopadhyay argues that an unparalleled degree of globalization has begun to trump Orientalist exchange and the implicit role casting of Eastern women; he claims that increasing numbers of Indian and Chinese men, with the image of the Western woman as

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unchaste and without morals, are partaking in the sex industry of the West.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps, however we are moving away from the Madame Butterfly trope as Asian men challenge the masculinity of Westerns and further our previously stagnant minds from this strict dichotomy that linearly relates power, masculinity, gender, and nationality.

\textsuperscript{11} Bandyopadhyay, Ranjan. "A paradigm shift in sex tourism research." Tourism Management Perspectives 6 (2013)
Works Cited


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