

THAILAND FOR TRAVELLERS: FROM EXOTIC FANTASY TO COMPLEX DESTINATION¹

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The renowned travel writer Pico Iyer asked recently how, in the twenty-first century, Westerners could better write about Asia without reverting to stereotypes (Iyer 2003). The article was a review in *Time Asia* magazine of John Burdett's first novel, the thriller *Bangkok 8*, set in the 'seedy underbelly' of a city more infamous than most for drugs, illicit sex and other vices – at least in what is written about it in literature and portrayed on screen. Films *The Beach* (2000), *Brokedown Palace* (1999), the sequel to *Bridget Jones's Diary: The Age of Reason* (2004) and mini-series *Bangkok Hilton* (1989) are examples of productions that depict that dangerous place located in Western imaginations somewhere between the triads of Hong Kong and the hippy heaven of Goa.

As Iyer says, the Bangkok of Western literature is a place 'only a *farang*, or foreigner, could love'. He asks: 'Is it too much to hope that someone might go past the "lavish hotels and low-life bars" (in the typically overheated words of a back-cover

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blurb) which leave the visitor “sucked into the jagged netherworld of Bangkok”?’ (Iyer 2003).

Iyer is probably best known for his 1988 travel book, *Video Night in Kathmandu*, documenting his travels through the so-called Far-East. The book, still in print, includes an essay about Thailand, entitled ‘Love in a Duty-Free Zone’, mostly comprising his observations of the sex industry. Fifteen years after writing that article, Iyer seemed embarrassed about that portrayal. He excused himself by saying he was young, didn’t speak Thai, hadn’t travelled to South-East Asia before and so ‘could not begin to know anything more than the hotel workers, tuk-tuk drivers and bar girls who clustered round me’ (Iyer 2003). Today, however, when more than six million tourists are travelling to Thailand annually, they should know better, he says (Iyer 2003).

In virtually every piece of writing about Thailand’s sex industry, whether ‘literary’ or not, lasciviousness and voyeurism combine to titillate the reader. One of the most compelling examples is Michel Houellebecq’s controversial 1999 novel *Platform*. This disturbing, uncompromising story about Westerners who buy and sell sex-tour package holidays, both parodies and exploits much of the gratuitous, pornographic material about the sex industry. The novel centres on the story of French Ministry of Culture civil servant Michel, who uses part of his inheritance from his murdered father to join a package tour to Thailand and to take advantage of its sex industry. On his return, he links up with travel agent Valerie, whom he met on the tour, and helps her and her boss to set up a more profitable enterprise, catering to sex tourists.

Platform is part of what Robin Gerster describes as the ‘revisionary impulse’ in writing that satirises male fantasies of Asia (Gerster 1995:358). Michel believes tourism is essentially a self-centered act, whether it be sex tourism or the pursuit of ‘historical’ sites such as the Death Railway at Kanchanaburi. It amounts to the same result: a penetration by the tourist, whether of prostitutes, land or culture. The tourist observes from a safe distance: Michel views the jungle from his hotel room vantage point, from which he contemplates the dangers that might lurk therein (Houellebecq 2002 [1999]:66-67). Later in the book, Houellebecq’s characters face the ugliness of real danger, as opposed to the manufactured tourist industry kind, when a bomb blast in a Krabi girlie bar frequented by Westerners kills Michel’s girlfriend (Houellebecq 2002 :331-333). The

scene is eerily yet unwittingly similar to the Sari Club bombings in Bali in 2002, the same year *Platform* was released in English. In the book, the terrorist bombing is used by the international media to provide a platform from which to lecture about the ills of sex tourism. One article is accompanied by a photograph ‘taken from the German advertising campaign’, an example of the ‘paradise lost’ approach (Houllebecq 2002:340). Another article is headlined ‘THE RETURN OF SLAVERY’ and uses the event to rail against the humiliation suffered by women forced to work as prostitutes (Houllebecq 2002:341). At the same time as it professes to care about these women, it mentions only the deaths of the tourists: ‘what do the deaths of a few of the well-healed matter’, it says, forgetting that beside the tourists were the Thai prostitutes (Houllebecq 2002:341).

Houllebecq presents Thailand as a sexual smorgasbord for European tourists. As another member of Michel’s group, Robert, says, ‘In Thailand...everyone can have what they desire, and everyone can have something good’ (Houllebecq 2002:74). Houllebecq intersperses comments about the sex industry with passages about the history of Thailand, much as a travel guide does, so that the sex industry becomes just another sight for tourists to tick off: the bridge over the River Kwai at Kanchanaburi, temple ruins at Ayutthaya, a sex show at Pattaya or Patpong.

In comparison to apparently vice-ridden Bangkok, the rest of Thailand is considered one big garden of Eden for tourists, a paradise for sale at a cheap package price. The idea of ‘paradise’ and the desire to discover it are important ingredients in the quotidian language of travel literature, including advertising, brochures, guides, and journalism. Of course there’s nothing wrong with a two-week holiday in a Thai beach resort, paying for the privilege of being waited on hand and foot. It’s the sense of ownership that’s not so charming, the sense that Thailand is somehow ‘ours’, that we’ve paid for a piece of it, and that it should become what we expect it to be – what the numerous travel guides tell us it is. It becomes that generic Western idea of ‘Orient’ as described by Edward Said: ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’ (Said 2003:1). It is the search for ‘Paradise lost’, Eden before the fall. Like Eden, the imagined pristine, lush, fertile landscape of Thailand awaits the traveller. And, as in Eden, seductions and dangers await.

Reportage in Australian newspapers of the tsunami of December 26, 2004 illustrates the extent to which Thailand often has been constructed as paradisaical. ‘Holiday playground turns to hell on earth’, Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* newspaper screamed on December 28. The article, by Danny Buttler, began by stating that ‘Thailand’s famed holiday playground of Phuket took just minutes to turn from paradise to hell’ (Buttler 9).

Acclaimed Australian cartoonist Mark Knight illuminated this construction in Melbourne’s *Herald Sun*. His cartoon of December 29 features swaying palm trees, quaint huts (labelled ‘human lives’, ‘economy’ and ‘tourism’), and stick figures running in all directions. At the centre of the sketch are two perplexed locals standing with a motorbike; behind the scene is a massive green wave; the caption reads ‘Paradise Lost’.

The language of tourism combined with the language of war reportage was popularly employed to describe South and South East Asia in the weeks immediately after the tsunami. ‘Tanned bodies, bagged bodies: the extremes of a tourist haven’ was the sub-heading on the front-page lead in *The Sunday Age* on January 2, 2005, without a byline. Meanwhile, the *New Zealand Herald* on January 3 proclaimed that while Phi Phi before the tsunami was an ‘isolated island paradise’ which ‘found fame in the Hollywood movie *The Beach*’, after the disaster ‘it resemble[d] a war zone’ (Masters & Phibbs 2005). Weeks later, Australian journalist Paul Edwards wrote of the ‘sands of death’ and ‘the fatal shores’ among interviews from South Asia travel industry specialists in Australia, who nevertheless declared Thailand a place that ‘still is the Land of Smiles’ (Edwards, 2005:6-7).

In an article titled ‘In death, imperialism lives on’, in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Jeremy Seabrook, author of *Consuming Cultures: Globalisation and Local Life* (2004), pointed out that the tsunami was more important to the Western media than other disasters because of the large numbers of tourists involved. Seabrook found a correlation between the language of imperialism and that of tourism and reportage of areas popular with Western tourists:

But when we distinguish between “locals” who have died and westerners, “locals” all too easily becomes a euphemism for what were

once referred to as natives. Whatever tourism's merits, it risks reinforcing the imperial sensibility.

For this sensibility has already been reawakened by all the human-made, preventable catastrophes. The ruins of Galle and Bandar Aceh called forth images of Falluja, Mosul and Gaza. Imperial powers, it seems, anticipate the destructive capacity of nature. A report on ITN news made this explicit, by referring to "nature's shock and awe" (Seabrook 2004).

Only weeks after editorial content in Australian newspapers was declaring 'Paradise lost', advertising – in a desperate effort by the tourism industry to regain customers – told us we could 'RE-DISCOVER PHUKET' and that Phuket was a 'PARADISE FOUND' (Thai Airways 2005). This indicates the idea of Thailand as always willing to be 'discovered' again by intrepid travellers following in the footsteps of the colonial trail-blazers. Seth Mydans's later *New York Times* article quotes a relief worker as saying visitors should return to Phuket in order to 'watch an event in history, watching how a place picks itself up' (Mydans 2005). He says that by watching this event, a visitor will become 'a traveler, not a tourist' (Mydans 2005) thereby, presumably, gaining credibility.

In 'Profit\$ of doom'[sic], an article examining the effects of the tsunami on international relations, Canadian journalist and anti-globalisation activist Naomi Klein maintains colonialism never disappears, it merely changes its form (Klein 2005:30-33). The new colonialism is masquerading in post-tsunami Asia as reconstruction, Klein claims. Instead of rebuilding coastal communities the way they were, 'governments, corporations and foreign donors are teaming up to rebuild it as they would like it to be: the beaches as playgrounds for tourists...' (Klein 2005:33). Klein quotes the Thailand Tsunami Survivors and Supporters group as saying that for business owners and politicians, the tsunami was advantageous because it 'wiped these coastal areas clean of the communities that had previously stood in the way of their plans for resorts, hotels, casinos and shrimp farms' (Klein 2005:33). An earlier article by Alisa Tang in the *Honolulu Advertiser*, published just nine days after the tsunami, quoted an American tourist in Phuket, Greg Ferrando, of Maui, who echoed that view in claiming the

disaster's positive side was in 'washing away rampant development' from beaches that had been 'swamped by development' (Tang 2005). The article also quotes an Israeli expatriate, Moriel Avital: 'Paradise should be paradise and should not become this civilized' (Tang 2005).

The print media's portrayal of the tsunami could be criticised as Eurocentric, patronising or neocolonial, yet the Thai tourism industry and media's portrayal differed little from that of Australia, Britain and the US. A post-tsunami Thai Airways advertisement for Australian audiences reads, 'THAI's Royal Orchid Holidays welcomes you back to this island paradise...'; over a picture of Phuket's Kata Beach with two Western couples walking along the sand, the headline is 'RE-DISCOVER PHUKET' (Thai Airways 2005). This is an example of the way Thailand has used the West's perception of it to its own advantage, coming up with its own Orientalist/colonial portrayal to entice tourists. In a post-tsunami edition of *Sawasdee*, the in-flight magazine of Thai Airways, the airline's then president assures customers that 'Thailand remains a tourism paradise' (Kanok 2005).

It is possible, however, to escape the hyperbole of advertisements and the Eurocentric hysteria of newspaper stories. Two years after the tsunami, Australian journalist Kimina Lyall published *Out of the Blue: Facing the Tsunami* (Lyall 2006). It is at once a compelling account of what it was like to live through the tsunami and a damning indictment of the way the press reports disasters. Lyall was working for *The Australian* newspaper at the time as its South-East Asia correspondent. She and her partner, JP, commuted to their house at Golden Buddha Beach on Koh Phra Thong off Thailand's west coast. Being the day after Christmas when the tsunami hit the island, Lyall and her partner, JP, were in residence. The tsunami killed 13 members of the community and destroyed many of the houses, although, miraculously, Lyall and JP's house remained intact. Lyall's story offers a raw look at the disaster from two opposing viewpoints: on one hand, she is a journalist doing a job; on the other, she is personally involved in the tsunami, its destruction and its aftermath. Lyall conveys how the disaster was unwittingly treated as just another story by the press and as a chance to feel charitable by the public:

One woman even said: ‘Oh, I must invite my friends around for dinner and you can tell us the whole story.’

Almost everyone we met felt some kind of ownership of the tsunami, as if it was their disaster, too. Perhaps it was because they had reached into their pockets, pulling out enough dollars to compensate for the hours they had sat in front of the television staring at scarred beaches (Lyll 2006:239).

Though of course, the post-tsunami aid from Western nations was mostly well intentioned, Lyll’s experiences reveal that it still carries the weight of the nineteenth-century ‘White Man’s Burden’. Six weeks after the tsunami, she meets a German aid organisation worker at Kurabari who is desperate to find ‘a school destroyed’ and asks for her help, to which she replies that there were many schools destroyed:

‘But they are all taken,’ he said, crestfallen. ‘We only just arrived, and we are too late.’

‘I’m sure there’s something else you can do with your money,’ I said.

‘No, it has to be a school. It has to be a school.’ (Lyll 2006:223)

Along the way, Lyll’s comments on travel in Thailand also make a worthy contribution to the discourse. In their search for ‘that ideal isolated beach’, she and JP come across Pakarang Cape, north of Khao Lak: ‘We were all but the only *farangs* (foreigners) there. Here was Thailand enjoying its own paradise’ (Lyll 2006:6). She is conscious of ‘that urge of all privileged Westerners on holiday, the endless search for the best it’s-bound-to-be-just-around-the-next-point beach’ (Lyll 2006:7). Ironically, of course, when she and JP do find that ideal beach and settle there, it becomes the opposite of the idyllic experience they had yearned for and expected.

As discussed above, Thais themselves encourage the Western view of their country as an escape to paradise. As Iyer says, ‘a skeptic might argue that Thailand has no one to blame but itself. The country is so expert at giving the foreigner what he wants and taking him in with charm that many a foreigner comes away feeling charmed and a

little taken in' (Iyer 2003). And, as one of Andrew Hicks's tourists, Stewart, says in the novel *Thai Girl*, rather unkindly: 'Sold for a serving of KFC' (Hicks 2004:261). Of course, Thailand's complicity in the sale of itself, particularly as promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, is nowhere near as simplistic as that. As Thai-American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap writes in his story 'Sightseeing', his mother has told him Thailand is 'only a paradise for fools and farangs, for criminals and foreigners...'. (Rattawut 2005:70). For those who live there permanently, it is the place where they live, nothing more and nothing less. Yet, as Salman Rushdie remarks in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), 'They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct' (Rushdie 1988:168).

A disproportionate number of books by Westerners about Thailand focus on the sex trade. This trend started with *A Woman of Bangkok*, by Jack Reynolds, in 1956, the same year the most famous film about Thailand, *The King and I*, was released. *A Woman of Bangkok* is about an English expatriate in Bangkok and his relationship with a Thai prostitute. The *Asian Wall Street Journal* named it as one of the '10 finest novels written about Asia' (Bishop & Robinson 1998:133). Today, all manner of seedy offerings are published and widely available in Thailand. The typical elements of these books – foreign men becoming involved with Thai women, danger in an exotic location, the perfect beach with white sand and palm trees and so on – are similar to those found in travel writing about Thailand. They are on the shelves of the many English language book shops in Bangkok and other tourist destinations, and are frequently bought by Westerners on holiday as 'beach reading', reinforcing their expectations of the country. Pico Iyer admitted in 'Love in a Duty-Free Zone' 20 years ago that 'Thailand offered a good deal more, of course, than just the sex trade'. Yet, he hints only briefly about what that 'good deal more' might be (Iyer 2001:317).

There are, of course, some books that refute this stereotyped genre of Thailand as combination of ideal beach and sex tourist paradise. For example, Hicks says that in his novel *Thai Girl*, he aimed to write not just 'another trashy Bangkok bar story' or about 'the older hoodlums of the typical sex novel' (www.thaigirl2004.com). The book is, he says, an answer to these types of books, one that is set particularly in Thailand, not in the generic 'paradise' of texts such as *The Beach*. *Thai Girl* has plenty of observations to

make about the sex trade, but its central story is a relationship between a tourist and a Thai woman who is not a prostitute, but makes a living by giving massages on the beach. It's more realistic, because the vast majority of Thai women are, of course, not prostitutes – not that you'd know that from the vast majority of literature about Thailand by Western men.

If we look at the writing of Western women we find many who present Thailand as more than just sex, sand and sun. Even women who do write about the sex trade do it in a different style to authors such as Reynolds. One example is Melbourne writer Angela Savage and her crime novel *Behind the Night Bazaar* (2006). The novel is set in Bangkok and Chiang Mai and its protagonist is an Australian private detective, Jayne Keeney, who is out to smash a prostitution ring. The difference in Savage's book is that there are no redeeming qualities in this sex industry. It is wholly exploitative, dangerous and is seen to promote corruption in all, no matter whether they are white or Asian.

Three female writers who have looked at Thailand in a wider context than the sex industry or as a location for a quest for the perfect beach are Carol Hollinger, Karen Connelly and Faith Adiele.

In 1965, American educator Hollinger wrote a book about expatriate life in Bangkok, *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind*. Its humorous, self-deprecating description of living and working in Bangkok is still relevant more than 40 years later. Her account takes her from culture shock through a valiant attempt to understand Thai culture, and she describes this journey with neither condescension nor rose-tinted glasses. She concludes that humans of different races, nationalities and socio-economic positions are more similar to each other than most people think:

There is no such person as a simple man. The pathos and absurdity of human life is as complex in a tribal village as it is on Fifth Avenue. The man who lives in a thatched house on stilts has wisdom and ignorance, love and death, mirth and tears, anger and peace, youth and age in his life as we do. There is no East, no West...there are people and no one of these people is a statistic to himself (Hollinger 1997:98).

Hollinger is open-minded but not blind to Thailand's faults, chief among them rampant corruption. She is rare for her time – she wrote the book during the Vietnam War – in that her experience in Thailand made her question what she thought she knew:

At first I thought smugly that I was bringing democratic freedom of speech to a group that knew only oligarchy and dictatorship, but as the classroom discussions deepened I found with enforced humility (I was clobbered) that somehow I had become the learner and my students were on the pedagogic end. (Hollinger 1977 [1965]:86)

Two decades later, in 1986, Canadian Rotary Exchange student Karen Connelly lived in the village of Den Chai, in Phrae Province, Northern Thailand. Her memoirs were first published in 1993 as *Touch the Dragon: A Thai Journal*, then republished with a new preface in 2001 as *Dream of a Thousand Lives: A Sojourn in Thailand*. Connelly makes some prescient points in this new preface about Western tourists' search for 'discovery':

[T]ourism certainly is a key industry in Thailand, so much so that it is now common to hear loud complaints from foreign visitors about how the country has been spoiled by "them", meaning other travellers, or tourists, meaning themselves. It has become popular for travellers and tourists – I no longer distinguish between these two words – to go out of their way to find "real experiences" of culture, as if the very roads they walk, wherever they are, were not constantly offering such opportunities.

Recently, a neighbour mentioned travelling in Vietnam and Burma. "I didn't even get to Thailand," he said, "because Western tourists have ruined it. I just wasn't interested"...In dispensing with Thailand, he wrote off a fascinating history, several languages, a great distance of fields, rivers, mountains, seas – not to mention nearly sixty million human beings, including the most remarkable motorcycle taxi-men on the planet. I wanted to reply, "I am sure Thailand wasn't interested in you, either". (Connelly 2001:preface)

Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun (2005), is the memoirs of American anthropologist Adiele, who was ordained as a Thai nun or *maechi*. Adiele, like Connelly, first went to Thailand as a Rotary exchange student, to Chiang Rai in 1979. The daughter of a Nigerian father and a white mother of Scandinavian origins, she says she was Washington State Rotary's first black ambassador to Thailand.

Ironically, Adiele sees herself as akin to nineteenth-century explorers:

And once I opened myself to the idea of some unknown country near Vietnam and Cambodia not yet on tourist maps, I too began to see the possibilities. This was virgin territory, literally uncolonized, unconquered, unexplored. (Adiele 2005:19).

In her early 20s, Adiele returns to Thailand on a 'Grand Fieldwork Project' and – for reasons she still cannot determine – decides to become ordained and live as a novice Buddhist nun for several months. She keeps a journal of her spiritual and physical journeys, which she draws on extensively for the book. Her experience goes beyond the touristic, allowing her to make some salient comments on the nature of modern travel, while conceding that she is still a participant in it:

Ever since my year as savior of Thai-American exchange programs, I had worked hard to distinguish myself as the Ultimate Traveler... We avoided tourist hangouts, instead cultivating Thai friends and practicing our tones and idiomatic expressions. We ate spicy food and sticky rice with our hands, ladled cold water over ourselves before meals and bed, tied sarongs when at home, bargained like mad at the market. We were Authentic! (Adiele 2005:173).

The narrative is an honest depiction of her emotional journey through a side of Thailand few tourists see. She presents Thailand as neither hell-hole nor paradise, but as something in between and with aspects of both.

Another group we should be looking to is Thai writers themselves. In the past, only a few very wealthy Thais travelled. Now, though travel is still out of reach of the majority of Thais, many more Thais are travelling and some are writing about the West as

well as about their own country. Their writing is becoming accessible to Westerners: Pira Sudham, Tew Bunnag, Rattawut Lanchaoerensap and S. P. Somtow, for example, write in English; and the work of many other Thai writers is being translated. By being aware of the trappings of Orientalism, and of the right of Thai writers for their voices to be heard, our perceptions of Thailand will become wider than the ‘paradise and vice’ of the past to give a more fully rounded picture. (It should be noted, though, that Thais who write in English are little read by Thais themselves, have often spent considerable time overseas and thus are often not thought of by Thais as speaking for them or of them).

Tew Bunnag’s short story ‘Epilogue: An Ode to the City’ is startlingly vivid as a foil to the countless descriptions of Bangkok in tourist brochures, travel guides and writing by Westerners (Tew 2003:131-136). The picture he paints is far from a Venice of the East or a centre of sensual delights, and at times it is ugly, tragic and unredeemable. Yet Tew comes closer to adequately describing Bangkok than many other writers, cleverly employing the familiar images of travel industry promotion to make his point:

Those postcard-pretty moments that smile out of the pages of tourist brochures – the gilded temple stupas, the riverside scenes of children waving, a corner of Chinatown in twilight, a colourful marketplace stall overflowing with tropical fruit – merely emphasise the honky-tonk mess of the rest of the place, which is not exactly picturesque. (Tew 2003:131)

The story appears in his 2003 collection, *Fragile Days: tales from Bangkok*. Another story in that book, ‘Jeed Finds Her Brother’, turns the viewfinder the opposite way to that which English readers are accustomed to. In this story, Thai rural woman Jeed, herself an outsider, observes Western tourists travelling on the Skytrain in Bangkok:

There were a few scruffy *farangs* as in Sukothai – the ones with the rucksacks wearing Thai fisherman’s trousers and peasant tops who went to visit the old ruins and the temples. It always disappointed her to see *farangs* like this. She thought that with their wealth they should always be dressed well, even the young ones. (Tew 2003:48).

The story is a comment on Thais' stereotypes of Westerners as all rich (though by rural Thai standards, anyone who can afford to travel overseas is rich). Money, of course, is always equated with ownership or at least assumed ownership. Thai writer Pira Canning Sudham, who also writes in English, says of Pattaya in his story 'Siamese Drama': 'The mighty mark-carrying Germans had colonized the town' (Pira 1983:37). Pico Iyer maintains colonisation is an issue with regard to Thailand. In that 2003 review of Burdett's *Bangkok 8*, Iyer ends with a comment that roundly criticises stereotypical writing about Thailand. As he says, despite a few wider ranging books by Westerners, 'it remains a curious – but telling – irony that the one country in Asia that boasts of never having been conquered is colonized in the imagination night after night after night' (Iyer 2003).

In my book *Imagining Siam: A Travellers' Literary Guide to Thailand* (Dann 2008), I discuss how Thailand can be represented as more than a tourist destination for sale, more than cheap sex and drugs, unlimited shopping and package holidays, although it is these things as well. But it is also a country as complex as any other, a 21st-century nation with a civilisation and culture that go far beyond the stereotypes. With the rise of this comparatively new Thai literature in English, perhaps foreign readers can come closer to Iyer's plea to move beyond the 'tawdry clichés' (Iyer 2003) towards a new understanding of the complexity that is any country, Western or Eastern, including Thailand. Said's description of how that understanding might be achieved could guide this new direction:

It is more rewarding – and more difficult – to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about 'us'. But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how 'our' culture or country is number one (or *not* number one, for that matter). (Said 1994:408).

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