

Jeremy Seabrook
Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and the Sex Industry
(London: Pluto Press, 2001, 175pp.)

Currently in Thailand, there is a proliferation of brothels, drive-in motels, massage parlours, hotels, tea houses, night clubs, discotheques, hairdressing saloons, beauty shops, escort establishments, restaurants, even golf courses which act as fronts for backroom prostitution business.

A Thai government study estimated that four to six million Thai men frequented prostitutes regularly, that is, at least once a month. In order to supply this vast sex industry, new bodies are always needed. Thus, women are trafficked from Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. There is also a dramatic rise in cases of child prostitution, in particular the sale and trafficking of ethnic minority children from the hill tribes and the ethnic minorities of Burma and China. Chinese girls, aged between 12 – 18, from Yunnan are trafficked by friends or travelling companions in conspiracy with prostitution agents.

Those who traffick women for prostitution are often also involved in the drug trade, crime and political corruption. These are intricate networks and intertwined interests of business and politics.

It is estimated that up to 95 percent of the men who frequent prostitutes are Thai. However, the image of Thailand, both by word of mouth but also tourism promotion brochures as a cheap sex heaven has led a good number of people to Thailand in the hope of sexual experiences. From Japan there are organized weekend outings of golf and sex, and from Europe and America, a more individualized hunt.

Jeremy Seabrook, an English journalist and writer, has looked at the Thai sex industry largely through the European and American men who have gone to Thailand in search of a sexual partner. The result is an interesting and at times moving account of men from one culture, often adrift in another culture with little understanding of the “rules of the game” or of the economic and social needs of women in the sex industry.

As Ms Siriporn Skrobaneh of the Foundation for Women in Bangkok writes in the Foreword “The book is not only about a sex industry in Thailand, but also a reflection of a human tragedy. Thailand is like a stage when men from around the world come to perform their role of male supremacy over Thai women and their role their white supremacy over Thai people... The solution to international sexual exploitation lies, not only in changing the commercialised pattern of relationships in Thailand, but also those between the people of the West itself; for the sake of liberation, both for the exploited of Thailand, and for the whole of humanity.”

Seabrook also stresses this broader context. “The people in Thailand concerned with the sex industry offer some insight into why sex tourism has become both a problem and a challenge: the mismatch of perceptions between clients and sex workers; racism; dissatisfaction with Western constructs of sexuality and personhood; the socialisation of boys which turns them into aggressive, predatory men; the unequal status between clients and workers; and the uneven development between countries which confers such power on sex tourists. At the same time, the rapid industrialisation of Thailand, the mass migrations, scattering of traditional communities, the resistance of family support systems strained as never before, urbanisation and the degradation of the rural areas, drive people to the cities.

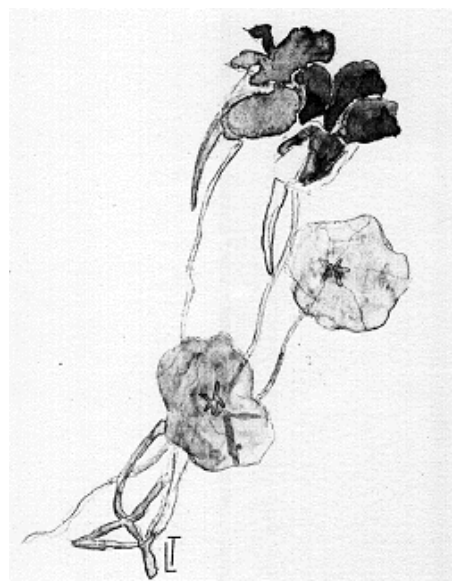
These migrants have a quite different purpose in being there from the men who have come on vacation to take advantage of cheap sex, for extended leisure, to run away from failed relationships, or even as a gilded form of exile. It is inevitable even as a gilded form of exile. It is inevitable that many of the encounters between these two vastly different and mutually uncomprehending worlds should so often result in break down, acrimony, and unhappiness.”

By stressing the Western “demand”, Seabrook overlooks some of the cultural background to prostitution in Thailand. In her paper on “Trafficking and Forced Prostitution of Chinese and Burmese Women in Thailand” (1993) Christina Mahoney noted “ At a subtle level, the Buddhist tradition found in both Burma and Thailand — Theravada or “small vehicle” Buddhism — encourages young women to feel responsible for helping their families financially. Theravada Buddhism strongly rejects the notion that women can reach enlightenment. Thus, contrary to Buddha’s teachings, only men are widely encouraged to pursue the spiritual life. Instead, women can gain merit by working to raise money for their poverty stricken families, which will help them to return as men in the next life. This is another reason why many women feel that they must make sacrifices for the benefit of their families, villages and Karma.”

Another contributing factor to increasing the demand for prostitution, and thus the amount of trafficking is the Chinese belief that it is necessary for a man to ‘deflower’ a virgin on a regular basis in order to slow down the aging process.

Thus, attitudes and mindsets, corruption and apathy are major obstacles. There is a need for strong will and participatory action to change social and ideological conditions. In particular, there is a need to provide psychological counselling and medical assistance to women who have been through the trauma of forced prostitution. Above all, it is the broad status of women which must change, and opportunities given for the full development of their personality.

Rene Wadlow



Painting : Lona Towsley