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Excuses, Excuses: Rationalisations of Western Sex Tourists in Thailand

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This paper focuses upon the behaviour of heterosexual Western male sex tourists in Thailand. It is based on a review of the sex tourism literature and attempts to analyse the rationalisations that are constructed by these men in order to assuage feelings of guilt that are often felt from participating in Third World sex tourism. Therefore, these rationalisations potentially serve to allow for the continued patronage of Western men in commercial sex in less developed nations and thus perpetuate the sex tourism industry as a whole.

Keywords: sex tourism, Thailand, Western males, Third World sex tourism

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the sex tourism industry in Thailand and the various rationalisations that are constructed by heterosexual Western male sex tourists that serve to perpetuate the continued growth of the commercial sex industry. Whilst much of the literature regarding sex tourism focuses upon the experience of prostituted Third World women, there are few accounts which endeavour to explore sex tourism from a Western male perspective, apart from a wide range of fictional novels (Lyttleton, 2000: 151). Therefore, I wish to focus my attention on Western men and various issues that arise from their participation in sex tourism in Thailand. In doing so, I must firstly acknowledge that the sex tourism industry does not only involve Western men and Third World women. There have been many studies that examine the increasing phenomenon of ‘romance tourism’, where Western females engage in commercial sex with Third World men (Dahles & Bras, 1999; Herold et al., 2001; Pruitt & LaFont, 1995) as well as gay sex tourism (Jackson, 1999; Luongo, 2000).

It cannot be denied that the sex tourism industry has diversified beyond the traditional conceptualisations that label it as a predominantly patriarchal form of exploitation and leisure. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address each of the issues that are posed by the multi-faceted nature of the sex tourism industry in its entirety. In what follows, I analyse three ‘types’ of sex tourist that feature heavily in the literature on sex tourism in Thailand and the various ways these men justify their involvement in the commercial sex industry, thus perpetuating this industry as a whole. I have chosen to present my material in this way as I feel that it encompasses a wide range of ways in which Western men are motivated to engage in sex tourism. I do not assert that these typologies are necessarily all-encompassing for explaining the sex tourism phenomenon. However, it will be seen that these typologies are useful in analysing many of the motivations by which Western men engage in sex tourism that are identified in sex tourism literature.

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The Macho Lad, the White Knight and Men Looking for Love: An Interconnected Analysis

IT'S NOT PERSONAL, IT'S JUST BUSINESS (The Macho Lad)

There have been numerous popular accounts of sex tourism that examine the raucous behaviour of Western men abroad and their interactions with local women. Much of the literature regarding sex tourism focuses upon examples of sex tourists who exhibit extreme levels of anti-social, misogynistic and racist behaviours and attitudes towards Third World women. O'Connell Davidson (2000) terms these more extreme sex tourists ‘Macho Lads’, who she asserts are morally and sexually indiscriminate regarding the women that they contract for commercial sex. According to O'Connell Davidson, the ‘Macho Lad’ is a testosterone-fuelled, chauvinist who enjoys the abundance of cheaply priced sex that he can obtain from women in Third World nations during his holiday. As such, O'Connell Davidson asserts that the Macho Lad will usually not care about the women he beds, and is not interested in forming a long-term relationship. For example, one sex tourist of this ilk states:

I use them [Thai prostitutes] like I use any other amenity, a restaurant or a public convenience. It answers my needs. No questions, no answers, no future. It’s clean, it’s efficient, it’s over. I’ve never made the mistake of falling for them. Love in my book is a dirty word. Fuck isn’t. (Quoted in Seabrook, 1996: 33)

For the Macho Lad, it would seem that the desire for sexual gratification is his primary motivation for engaging in sex tourism. Additionally, the desire to atone for participating in the sex tourism industry appears to be of little concern. However, it is hard to believe that anyone wants to identify with the label of ‘sex tourist’ due to the negative stigmas associated with this label. The abundance of racist stereotypes that these men apply to Third World women has led me to conclude that some form of rationalisation is occurring that serves to facilitate their involvement in sex tourism.

The racist attitudes of Western men and the racial stereotypes regarding women from economically less fortunate countries are aspects of sex tourism that have been examined in the literature. The assumption that travelling to a Third World country allows an individual a greater amount of power and sexual access to local men and women is fuelled by deeply racist notions (Seabrook, 1996: 2). The most well-documented accounts of racism expressed by Westerners towards Thai women are from the military during the Vietnam War. Racist remarks and references to Thai woman as ‘LBFM’s’ or ‘Little Brown Fucking Machines Powered by Rice’ as well as crude humour regarding sexual acts with Thai prostitute-women have been noted in studies of military involvement in prostitution. Likewise, similar attempts to belittle female prostitutes can also be seen amongst Western sex tourists. For example, in Walker and Ehrlich (1992: 136) one sex tourist writes to his Thai prostitute girlfriend ‘I send (sic) you a bit extra than 300 baht because you had to wait for it. I think it’s around 500–600 baht. Ok? Now you owe me a free fuck. Haha.’

However, although racism is deemed to be a result of hatred and loathing of individuals who are perceived as racially inferior, it is interesting to note that
Racism has not diminished the incidence of Western men engaging in commercial sex with minority women, but has instead bolstered it (Shrage, 1994: 154). 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 (Shrage, 1994: 142). 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. In fact, many studies of tourism advertising support this notion (see Suaalli, 2000; Truong, 1990; Ungpakon, 1997). From the review of sex tourism literature, it is not hard to observe how racism is used as a tool which allows Western men to assuage feelings of guilt regarding their involvement in commercial sex with women from economically less fortunate nations.

The assumptions about a destination and its population can influence tourist behaviour whilst they are on holiday (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000: 886). The racial stereotypes regarding Thai women are varied and cover the full spectrum on a continuum from whore to saint. Thai women are perceived by some Western men as more affectionate and loyal than Western women, less sexually experienced and non-assertive (O’Connell Davidson, 1995: 57). Alternately, other men perceive Southeast Asian sex workers as women who love ‘booze, good times and lots of sex’ (Sturdevant & Stolzfus, 1992: 41). There is also a common belief that Thai women recognise the superiority of white men and that Thai women’s admiration of white skin stems from their desire to be white themselves (O’Connell Davidson, 1995: 56).

Furthermore, the perceptions that sex is more ‘natural’ for Third World women, and that women ‘grow up faster’ in Third World nations are commonly used by sex tourists as justifications for their participation in commercial sex (Seabrook, 1996: 93).

For example, in O’Connell Davidson’s study of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic, one sex tourist was reported as saying:

Sex is a natural thing [in the Dominican Republic]. They’ll do it with anyone, they do it with everyone, they don’t care who it is or how old they are. They’re like animals. Girls learn it’s the way to keep a man happy. It’s natural to them, it’s a natural way to please men. (O’Connell Davidson, 2000: 64)

From examples such as these, it is not unreasonable to suggest that these stereotypes reinforce the power dynamics of race that exist between Western men and Third World women and allow Westerners to rationalise their participation in sex tourism as justifiable. The racial stereotype that affirms that Thai women are naturally servile also reinforces the notion that to be White is to be served, envied and revered. Therefore, sex tourism becomes justifiable insofar as the submissive Thai woman simply knows her place in life and accepts her inevitable role as the inferior component in such interracial interactions. In terms of sex, she is expected to offer her bodily services and therefore she becomes a sexual object to be experienced, ‘rightfully’ subject to the needs and desires of Western men.
It is here that it becomes evident that the Macho Lad desires something other than sex from his involvement in sex tourism. I posit that these racial stereotypes that reduce Thai women to submissive, servile women who are designed for the pleasure of Western men are tied into the Macho Lad’s inability to deal with the growing assertiveness of Western women. Western women are now more autonomous and independent than ever, and for some men, this upsets their notion of masculinity (Ryan & Hall, 2001: 29). Ultimately, they desire a way to regain their patriarchal rights to women’s bodies and reclaim their power position over women. The desire to reduce women to submissive, servile entities, devoid of autonomy who are easily controlled by men is a common theme in the literature on sex tourism. As one sex tourist remarks;

“In a democratic relationship you have to be happy to compromise, and a compromise means neither of you are happy. It’s better to have a dictatorship. That way, at least the guy is happy.” (O’Connell Davidson, 1998: 188)

Additionally, there are many accounts of Western sex tourists comparing Western women in an unfavourable light to Thai women. These accounts particularly emphasise the servile nature of Thai women. For example, one American sex tourist in Bangkok states:

“American women are fucking bitches. You don’t want to deal with American women – these women [Thai women] are the best, their minds have the right attitude. There’s no girl in the world [other than in Bangkok] that will give you a shower, give you a blowjob, fuck your brains out and fold your clothes with a smile on her face.” (Manderson, 1997: 141)

The appeal of sex tourism for the Macho Lad is that in terms of assertiveness, female prostitutes in Third World nations, including Thailand, appear to neither challenge nor demand much from Western males except the provision of money (O’Connell Davidson, 2000: 44). Therefore, the prostitute is assumed by Western men to be non-threatening, non-demanding and non-committal (Boyle, 1994: 48). The prostitute’s perceived lack of autonomy also bolsters patriarchal concepts of ‘how a woman should be’ by removing the ‘threat’ that Western women pose to masculinity by exhibiting assertiveness and financial independence. Additionally, the exchange of money for sexual services makes it unlikely that a prostitute will reject a man sexually in contrast to non-prostitute Western women.

Therefore, it can be seen that sex tourism allows the Macho Lad to regain his sense of power over women. Sex tourism and his economic power in Third World nations provide the opportunity to engage in sex with numerous women, which in the mind of the Macho Lad, affirms that he is a ‘successful’ male. It is this machismo aspect of sex tourism whereby men can have unlimited sexual access to numerous women that increases self-perceptions of worth for many sex tourists’ (O’Connell Davidson, 1995: 54). However, the Macho Lad believes that he has found a whole lot more than just sex. In his mind, he has also found a nation of women who submit to his patriarchal power. He believes that he will never be challenged or opposed by Thai women, unlike women in his home society.
When the Macho Lad engages in commercial sex with numerous Thai sex workers, the negative stigma that exists regarding prostitutes: the perceptions of their low social worth, social status and the lack of dignity that is attributed to prostitution, makes his justification of their exploitation that much easier. These negative connotations and value-judgements regarding sex workers allow prostitute-users, including sex tourists, to dehumanise prostitute-women, reducing sex workers to a subhuman status. Since these women become labelled as a category of individuals unworthy of the same degree of human rights or respect accorded to their fellow human beings, their exploitation becomes an easier task.

In fact, clients of prostitutes often claim that one of the most appealing aspects of sex with prostitutes is that they feel they can do things that they could not with a ‘regular’ woman (McKeganey & Barnard, 1996: 50). In an interview conducted by Lyttleton (2000) one Thai prostitute-user claimed that the lack of consideration he needed to show towards prostitutes was an appealing aspect of commercial sex. Likewise, in O’Connell Davidson’s (1995) study of British sex tourists in Thailand, several respondents indicated that they had engaged in taboo sexual activities with Thai prostitutes that they would not engage in with a Western woman due to the racial inferiority of the former. These acts included sex with more than one partner simultaneously, allowing other male friends to videotape their sexual acts and sex with transsexual prostitutes.

Additionally, the dehumanisation of Thai prostitutes is facilitated by the size of the sex industry in Thailand. The tourist-oriented sex industry in Thailand has existed since the presence of the US military in Thailand during the Vietnam War and the foreign currency that prostitution represented had an undeniable influence on the commercial sex trade (Askew, 2002; Boonchalaksi & Guest, 1998; Hill, 1993; Leheny, 1995; Mullins, 1999; Zhang, 1997). The numerous go-go bars, massage parlours and extensive numbers of prostitutes convey the message that these women are mass produced and also highly standardised commodities (O’Connell Davidson, 2000: 62). The sheer number of women working within the red light districts of Bangkok and the tourist resorts in Thailand and engaging in commercial sex with foreign tourists allows Western men a virtual plethora of opportunities to obtain sex. Not only is there an abundance of commercial sex on offer, it is cheap. If one woman is not pleasing to the farang, her low cost makes her expendable and another woman may be easily bought. Within the go-go bars and brothels, the matching costumes of girls in the bars and the dozens of girls sitting behind glass windows in brothels with numbers pinned on their chests waiting to be selected by clients, indicates the consumeristic nature of the sex industry. Men can merely ‘order up’ girls as they please. Therefore, the Thai prostitute-woman is symbolically dehumanised and becomes an inexpensive commodity to be easily purchased, consumed and disposed of.

Finally, the act of travelling itself can also facilitate the ease with which Macho Lads can rationalise their participation in sex tourism. McKercher and Bauer (2003) posit that the act of travelling represents a symbolic liminal process whereby the tourist leaves a familiar place, arrives at a new destination and then returns to the familiar place. They claim that by entering the liminal state associated with travel, a person can express things that he or she would otherwise suppress (McKercher & Bauer, 2003: 11). Various studies have shown that for many travellers, feeling like a ‘different person’ whilst on holiday led to sexual
encounters with individuals other than their usual sex partner (Clift & Carter, 2000: 14). In Thailand, where the ease of obtaining commercial sex is internationally renown combined with the fact that tourists may believe that commercial sex as an accepted practice in Thai society proves to be a powerful force. The anonymity that is offered by this new destination, where an individual is not known by others facilitates the ease with which foreign men can engage in sex with prostitutes (McKercher & Bauer, 2003: 11).

Furthermore, if a tourist witnesses numerous foreign men propositioning sex workers, there is a larger chance he may be tempted to participate. The social psychologist Le Bon termed this phenomenon ‘social contagion’, where the ‘mob mentality’ may override an individual’s sense of ethics and morals (Taylor et al., 2000: 295). This attitude is often expressed by sex tourists, for example, in Bishop and Robinson’s study of the Thai sex industry, one sex tourist exclaims with enthusiasm; ‘You’re getting down and dirty and you’re lovin’ it. Admit it! You can’t do this at home’ (Bishop & Robinson, 1998: 154). Therefore, the sex tourist may rationalise that his own involvement in a morally questionable activity he may not engage in at home is acceptable in Thailand because numerous other men are also doing the same thing.

The Figure of the White Knight in Thai Sex Tourism

It is here that I move on to the next ‘type’ of sex tourist that features heavily in the literature on sex tourism. The term ‘White Knight’ has been used by various academics who have examined the attitudes of sex tourists (Hamilton, 1997; Manderson, 1995; O’Connell Davidson, 1998; Odzer, 1994; Phillip & Dann, 1998). From a review of the literature, it seems that the White Knight is essentially a sex tourist who identifies himself as a ‘good guy’ in comparison to other foreign men who travel to Third World countries to engage in commercial sex with local women. The heroic gestures of White Knights can vary anywhere from bar-fining women when they are ill or menstruating so that they can stop working for the night (Askew, 2002: 273), to buying a prostitute an entire rice farm and liberating her from the sex industry (The Good Woman of Bangkok, 1991).

The White Knight takes on the role of provider for these women, who in his mind, are helpless victims of circumstance and are devoid of autonomy. There have been numerous examples of foreign men who express pity and compassion for the unfortunate economic situation of Thai women involved in the sex industry. For instance, in the film The Good Woman of Bangkok (1991) a group of Western men in the red light district of Patpong state that they feel sorry for the women but take comfort in the fact that their money will be helping these women. One of the men remarks:

They are prostitutes and we feel sorry for them. They’re very poor but we love ‘em. I feel sorry for them because they have to resort to what they do. I think that it’s best that we do go with them because of what we give them ... it helps them ... if it helps them, it’s not so wrong. (Quote from the film Good Woman of Bangkok, in Manderson, 1997: 141)

The White Knight therefore complicates the stereotypical characterisation of a sex tourist. He is not the stereotypical chauvinist brute, an identity that often
constitutes the popular imaginings of sex tourists; however he still engages in
commercial sex with Third World women. This raises the question of whether
the sympathy that he claims to feel for these economically vulnerable women
makes his participation in sex tourism any more justifiable than that of any other
sex tourist. From review of the literature it is possible to surmise that the White
Knight desperately wishes to disassociate with the label of sex tourist. It can be
asserted that his rationalisations are constructed in order to assuage the feelings
of guilt that he supposedly suffers due to his involvement in sex tourism.

In order to disassociate with this label the White Knight relies heavily on the
negative stereotypes, behaviours and actions of other sex tourists. Seabrook
(1996) notes that this particular strategy, where the White Knight focuses on the
behaviour or actions of individuals who are seemingly ‘worse’, is a popular way
in which sex tourists may assuage feelings of guilt about their participation in the
sex tourism industry. This allows the White Knight to rationalise how his own
behaviour, which he frames in a positive light due to his compassion and good-
will towards Third World women, supposedly excludes him from this group of
‘bad’ individuals. The ability to focus on the negative behaviours of others is a
fairly straightforward task for the White Knight. He often asserts that sex tourists
behave abominably towards local women.

Furthermore, these stereotypes regarding other sex tourists are often racist.
Bishop and Robinson (1998) assert that 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
(O’Connell Davidson & Taylor, 1999: 44). This belief is bolstered due to the prev-
ance of Northeastern Thai prostitutes who have come from failed marriages
with Thai men.

In addition to this, the White Knight may also emphasise the number of
sexual partners he has whilst on holiday. Whilst ‘bad’ sex tourists are asserted
to have sex with countless women during their stay in Third World nations,
the White Knight often contracts fewer women for commercial sex. In the
mind of the White Knight, the fact that he sleeps with a smaller number of
women makes his behaviour less morally questionable. This can be attributed
to the belief that female sexuality should be protected and that one woman’s
sexual involvement with several men is harmful to her emotional, psychologi-
cal and physical well being (Shrage, 1994: 135). Additionally, within the clas-
sification system of Western sexuality, individuals are categorised into
groups based on their sexual behaviour, for example heterosexual, homosex-
ual, nymphomaniac and so forth. Each of these labels have positive or nega-
tive associations and the label of sex tourist would most definitely fall into a
group of individuals and a set of sexual behaviours that are regarded in a
negative manner like that of paedophiles, perverts and sexually promiscuous
women (Shrage, 1994: 127).
In review of the literature, the White Knight appears to perceive himself as an individual who does not engage in excessive amounts of sex and does not exploit women. Instead, he engages in consensual, heterosexual sex, with possibly one woman. Each of these negative stereotypes that focus on the behaviour of other individuals, whether these individuals are sex tourists or local Thai men, implies that these men harm women in one way or another. The sex tourist becomes characterised by the White Knight as racist, interested solely in sexual gratification with numerous women and may even physically abuse the prostitutes that he contracts for commercial sex. Additionally, it is not uncommon for White Knight to assert that Thai man ‘damages’ local women by mistreating them, causing them to turn to prostitution. These examples are used in contrast to the attitude, behaviour and actions of the White Knight, who is rationalised in a positive manner because unlike other sex tourists, he deeply cares about the women that he contracts for commercial sex.

The second way in which the White Knight will justify his involvement in the sex tourism industry as morally sound is by asserting that the money which he provides a woman in exchange for commercial sex represents a positive contribution to her well being (O’Connell Davidson, 1998: 179). The lack of other viable forms of employment for Third World women makes many of these women financially dependent on foreign men who contract them for commercial sex, without which they would have no source of livelihood. Therefore, White Knights often claim that they are using their economic power to help Third World women rather than to exploit and harm them (O’Connell Davidson, 1998: 179). Framing the payment as a way in which girls can be liberated from their prostitution helps Western men seeking commercial sex in Thailand disassociate with the label of sex tourist (Gunter, 1998: 77). Therefore these men are also ‘redeemed’ through their role as Provider and Saviour to these women. Taking on this line of argument seriously, it would appear that the White Knight believes that the payment he provides atones for any injustice done to the woman who is exploited (Seabrook, 1996: 36).

It is evident that agency is the key issue that arises from the White Knight’s view that Thai prostitute-women are in need of rescuing from both their unfortunate economic situation and from other men who exploit women. Prostitutes are often labelled as victims by members of wider society (Shrage, 1994; Van der Gaag, 1994) and if a prostitute claims that she enjoys her occupation she is often dismissed as ‘ignorant to her self-destruction’ (Ryan & Hall, 2001: 38). Some prostitutes assert that their involvement in the sex industry has led to their discovery that they are not victims of patriarchal power systems and indeed have a great deal of power over men (O’Neill, 2001: 20). Although, the unequal power relations between the First and Third World ensures that Third World prostitutes are unlikely to experience their autonomy, power and control in the same way as a high class escort in New York (Altman, 2001: 2).

However, many Third World prostitute-women often do not self-identify as victims. For example, Phongpaichit (1982) in her study of 50 prostitutes working under the guise of masseuses in Bangkok observed that these women’s income, job prospects and outlook on prostitution as an occupation varied greatly. At the top of the scale were women earning large amounts of money in relation to women in other occupations, who claimed to be having fun and leading a glam-
orous lifestyle whilst saving adequate money for the future. Therefore, while some Thai prostitutes suffer considerably due to the nature and negative social stigma attached to their work, many appear to regard themselves as financially independent women leading the lifestyle they desire (Cook, 1998: 270).

Furthermore, 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 (Law, 1997: 120). From Seabrook’s (1996) interview with EMPOWER, an organisation which is based in Patpong and works closely with Thai prostitute-women, he concludes that the women do not want to be seen as victims. The label of victim denies these women of the agency that they exhibit within their personal situation and although they are vulnerable, they are not passive or helpless.

However, there are numerous examples where White Knights receive the encouragement they need in order to continue justifying their exploitation of Thai women. For example, Manderson (1995) gives an account of an American bar owner in Patpong informing a team of documentary film-makers that prostitute-women are truly grateful to the client for the money he exchanges for her sexual labour. Fictional novels that are set amongst the backdrop of the Thai commercial sex industry often involve characters who fit the description of the White Knight, saving his main love interest from a life of prostitution (Hamilton, 1997: 150). Perhaps most famously, or infamously, is the film *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), where Dennis O’Rourke first exploits Aoi, a prostitute from Bangkok, and then buys her a rice farm (which she subsequently sells) in an attempt to save her from a life of prostitution. O’Rourke’s hypocritical behaviour exemplifies the deluded rationalisations of the White Knight, where he exploits Aoi sexually (and as a subject of his film) while simultaneously presenting his economic contribution as the key to her liberation from a life of prostitution.

Clearly, by labelling Thai prostitutes as victims the White Knight can rationalise his newly found role of Provider in a positive light. Many academics have questioned who exploits who in the relationship between Western male sex tourists and Thai prostitute-women. Several have concluded that Thai prostitutes who cater towards *farang* (Western) clientele show a great deal of autonomy even where dynamics of power are strongly in the favour of the sex tourist (Askew, 2002; Cohen, 1993; Law, 2000; O’Connell Davidson, 1998; Phillip & Dann, 1998; Ryan & Hall, 2001). Wilson states; ‘the interactions between workers and customers in Patpong allow for a fair amount of latitude, choice or play, however they take place within an already existing industry which is organised around male desire’ (Wilson, 1997: 211).

Examining the agency of Third World prostitutes dispels the strength of the White Knight’s rationalisation that his participation in the sex tourism industry provides local women with an escape from prostitution and the men who exploit them. However, it appears that some Thai women portray themselves as helpless victims, as a strategy to evoke sympathy from their clients to gain greater sums of money. Thus, the stereotype of Third World prostitutes as passive victims is reinforced. This in turn facilitates the White Knight’s ability to rationalise that his involvement in sex tourism is justifiable as he is helping a Third World woman escape poverty as opposed to exploiting her.
Love’s Easy Tears: Looking for Love in Thailand

Finally I wish to examine a group of Western men who claim to be looking for a meaningful relationship from the prostitutes they meet whilst on holiday in Thailand. It is from the analysis of this group of sex tourists that it becomes evident that sex tourists are often lonely individuals, seeking companionship and love. In fact, it is not uncommon for these foreigners to travel to Thailand with the sole intent to find a wife (Cohen, 2003: 62). It is this search for love, affection and social belonging which motivates such men to engage in the Thai sex tourism industry.

There is much evidence to suggest that Western men who engage in sex tourism are considered quite ordinary by Western standards, and may even be considered undesirable partners. Stearn states:

The average foreigner coming to Pattaya [one of the locations in Thailand that is well known for sex tourism] tends to be a European man in his late thirties or older, a bit overweight, a drinker with a failed marriage and possibly a couple of kids behind him. It will be his second or third trip to Thailand and he will scour the beer bars and the go-go’s for his ‘perfect match’. (Stearn, 2003: 50)

Cohen (1993), a sociologist who has researched the relationships between Western men and Thai women over many years, agrees with this depiction of sex tourists. He adds that these men are often so lonely and alienated from their own society that they feel the need to travel internationally and become involved in sex tourism in order to have their interpersonal needs fulfilled. It is not uncommon to find that these men have often suffered the breakdown of a marriage or are unable to maintain a long-term relationship in the West (Stearn, 2003: 50).

It becomes more apparent that the desire for sex is one mere part of the overall motivation to engage in the sex tourism industry. Sex tourism offers some men a form of positive reinforcement of their desirability, attractiveness and their bolstered position in what Kalmijn (1998) refers to as the ‘marriage market’. Kalmijn asserts that the ‘marriage market’ is a factor that influences an individual’s ability to find a mate. Western men, due to the economic status of Thai women, may find that the Thai marriage market allows them to reposition themselves as more desirable candidates for marriage than in the West. They are considerably more wealthy in Thailand, are often better educated and have greater employment prospects than many local Thai men. Therefore, Western men can easily step outside of their local marriage market and the constraints that hinder them in the West by travelling to a Third World nation, such as Thailand (Cohen, 2003: 78).

It is evident that the economic power and increased social standing that Western men have when they travel to Third World nations makes it likely that the women that they meet in the entertainment areas and resorts will respond favourably to them. The attention these men receive from Thai prostitutes, the gestures of kindness, the affirmations of love, and reinforcement that they are indeed attractive and desirable individuals, forms part of the appeal of sex tourism and an even larger factor in what motivates these men to travel to Thailand and meet women via the commercial sex industry.
It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that the bolstered status of Western men makes it easier for them to rationalise the occurrence of young, beautiful Thai women becoming romantically involved with them. In their minds, why wouldn’t these women want to be involved with a well-educated, financially secure man? However, these rationalisations are often not based on reality. As previously mentioned the fact that Thai prostitutes often stage affection and disguise the mercenary nature of the relationship with their clients also facilitates the belief that the farang has found the loving relationship that he has been searching for.

For these men looking for love in Thailand, they have found their paradise. Not only are beautiful, young women meeting their physical needs, but also their emotional quest for love and affection has finally ended. Needless to say, this is often not the case. Most importantly, 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.

Conclusion

It is evident that the interactions that take place between Western men and Thai commercial sex workers are varied and complicated. Throughout this paper I have used three sex tourist ‘typologies’ that are prevalent in the literature on sex tourism in Thailand. Admittedly, as with any analysis of human behaviour and social interaction, it would be unreasonable to suggest that every sex tourist falls into the typologies I have presented in this paper.

However, it can be seen that these typologies are useful in suggesting possible explanations for why Western male sex tourists engage in the Thai sex industry when they travel abroad. This paper has exemplified the varied ways in which many Western men rationalise their involvement in sex tourism and the ways in which these rationalisations serve to perpetuate the patronage of the Thai sex tourism industry as a whole. It is only through a better understanding of the ways in which the commercial sex tourism industry in Thailand is facilitated that a more complex explanation of this phenomenon can be achieved.

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Notes

1. His sexual access to numerous prostitute-women ironically bolsters his status as a male despite the connotations in the West that clients of prostitutes are ‘losers’ who cannot obtain sex without paying.

2. The effect of the liminal status also influences the movement of Thai women into the sex industry. The act of immigrating to urban centres, away from the watchful eye of their parents and local rural community, facilitates the ease by which women can begin working as commercial sex workers (Askew, 2002: 270).

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