Behind the sc(r)ene : Anna Leonowens and *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*

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Victorian women's travel writing has rarely been centre stage. As many critics have pointed out, women were usually discouraged from writing openly since it was not considered proper for a woman to enter into the public realm of publication. "To write is to come out of the wings, and to appear, however briefly, centre stage," Nancy Miller observes in her article "Women's autobiography in France: for a dialectics of identification" (quoted in Mills p. 41). In this paper, I would like to put the spotlight on one particular travel writer, Anna Leonowens, whose sense of theatricality helped produce texts which have adapted successfully to stage and screen. Her travel writings are the less visible side of the famous Rogers and Hammerstein musical, *The King and I* which tells the story of a young, beautiful widow who accepts a job as a live-in school teacher to the children of the King of Siam in the early 1860's.

The original stage version and the screen versions have been huge hits. The original Broadway show ran for 1246 performances from 1951-1954, winning 5 Toney Awards (Internet Broadway Database). The 20th century Fox film version, directed in 1956 by Walter Lang with Yul Brynner starring opposite Deborah Kerr, won 5 Academy Award (Internet Movie Database). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the initial texts. Much like the reverse side of a piece of cloth design, there is an intricately woven pattern that makes up the final piece. Let us just retrace the intertextual relationship : the film adapts a 1951 Broadway play of the same name, which adapts Talbot Jennings and Sally Benson's 1945 screenplay of *Anna and the King of Siam*, which adapts Margaret Landon's 1944 romance biography, *Anna and the King of Siam*, which adapts Anna Leonowens's memoirs, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *The Romance of the Harem* (1872).

The success of the Hollywood musical, *The King* and I, shows how it taps into Western fascination for the East as identified by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). We'll see how the Othering process takes on an interesting layer when the process is undertaken through the perspective of a woman in a case of "Othering the Other." The second part of this paper takes a closer look at the initial texts which indirectly inspired the stage, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *The Romance of the Harem* (1872) by Anna Leonowens. Our aim is to gain insight into their particularly intricate relationship to fictionalisation. Bearing in mind Sara Mills' observation that, "far more women's texts were accused of falsehood than men's" (30), we will endeavour to show how Leonowns navigates her work through the particular constraints that have been identified as having an impact on 19th century women's travel writing. The third part of this paper focuses on Anna Leonowens's representation of the harem, a recurring theme in travel literature and one that women travel writers have approached in a specific way. It is a theme which is revealing of the intersection of discourses on women, slavery and the European imperialist enterprise, drawing as it does on the parallels of the experience of oppression by coloniser and by male authority. For our particular study, it throws light

on the ambivalent voice of a woman both participating and distancing herself from the colonialist discourse.

Setting the scene

The Hollywood film musical, *The King and I*, was a smash hit in 1956 and continues to hold its place as an all time favourite. In 2006, the American Film Institute voted this Rogers and Hammerstein classic the eleventh best musical of all time. The top three were *Singing in the Rain*, *West Side Story* and *the Wizard of Oz*. Starring Deborah Kerr opposite Yul Brynner, it was nominated for nine Academy awards and won five, including best actor, best art direction, best costumes, best music and best sound.

Much of the fascination for this musical derives from its claim to be based on the "true-life story" of Anna Leonowens who became school teacher to the children of King Monghut of Siam in the early 1860's. The plot throws together a plucky young Englishwoman who struggles to westernise a despotic but sensitive monarch. She has been employed by the King to teach English to his family of many wives and 67 children. The opening scene shows her arriving in Bangkok by boat accompanied by her young son. She is filled with doubts about this venture, doubts that seem confirmed when she finds out that not only has the king chosen to forget his promises to provide her with accommodation in a brick house outside the palace, but also that the King's so-called belief in Western ideals does not prevent him from accepting a slave girl Tuptim as a gift from the King of Burma. Enchanted by the children, however, Anna decides to stay. She instructs the royal children, the King's wives, and sometimes even the king himself, in such wonders as snow, the western alphabet and individual freedom. In a key episode, Anna organises a European style dinner in order to entertain and impress an important British diplomat. The event is a great success with all the court in Western style dress, entertained by a ballet, a Siamese version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* devised by Tuptim the slave girl. The King and Anna congratulate each other and, caught in the mood of celebration, she teaches him to dance the polka (an iconic moment in the culture of musicals). However, they do inevitably come into conflict over the issue of slaves and Anna decides to leave. In a dramatically timed climax, her departure coincides with the news of the king's immanent death. The final scene shows her saying adieu to the king on his deathbed with the young prince pronounced king. Anna's teaching of western ideals has triumphed: the new king declares that his subjects need no longer prostrate themselves before him.

On a surface level, the undisputed place of this musical in 20th century American culture is easy to grasp. The exotic setting translates to the screen in the form of a grandiose, glittering set. Temples, gardens, animals, and costumes dazzle the eye in glorious Technicolor. Its iconography is firmly fixed in American cultural imagination whose fascination for the East has been fired by Hollywood sets from Rudolph Valentino's 1921 *The Sheik* to the desert settings and Nazi Arab villains of Speilberg's 1984 *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Bernstein and Studlar, 11).

Moreover, its success is largely owed to its deceptively simple binary structure. Many musicals operate on the setting up of conflicting contrasts and *The King and I* is no

exception: new versus old, freedom versus slavery, science versus superstition are all polarized here as West versus East. The exotic setting serves not only as entertainment but also as a mode of cultural representation drawing from a strand of colonialist discourse that has been identified by Edward Said as "Orientalism." A distinctive means of representing race, nationality and Otherness, this discourse articulates an absolute and systematic difference between the West which is represented as rational, developed, humane, superior and the Orient which is constructed as aberrant, undeveloped and inferior. In the musical – as in the memoirs – Anna's gaze is distinctly Western. The narrative structure follows her physical entry into the East from port to city to palace. Even though it is a relatively protected entry – her insistence on having separate living quarters confirms her will to keep a safe distance from the potentially menacing Oriental life – what is interesting is that it is a woman who penetrates this unfamiliar territory.[1] This makes for an interesting gender reversal of the Orientalist paradigm whereby it is usually the white Western male explorer figure who westernises the mysterious Orient: "The unveiling of the mysteries of an unknown space becomes a rite of passage allegorising the Western achievement of virile heroic stature". (Shohat, 27) Here it is a woman who adopts the role of the white imperialist, heroically enlightening the "ignorant" natives. In a striking variation on the pervasive model, it suggests that there is an alternate gaze to the predominately male perspective of the Oriental Other.

Behind the scenes

This variation on the model would suggest there is more to this narrative than meets the eye. Other strains of this divergence are to be found "behind the scenes, " in the original texts. As we saw in our introduction, writing for publication was not always considered an acceptable option to women writers. A look at how such parameters shape the text will also shed light on the writing strategy of creating a double-edged voice (Mills 44), one that conforms to the conventions of the genre, lending the texts an acceptability to their audience and another, less obviously audible, voice but one which expresses a dissonance with the dominant discourse.

How do the texts adhere to the conventions of travel literature? We are aware that travel writing as a genre with its own conventions is difficult to define. As many have said before, it is a multifarious form, or a collective term for a variety of texts with common practices rather than an unifying code.[2] Firstly, they posit themselves as memoirs, in the tradition of travel writing, and adhere to certain conventions of the genre. *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* opens with a dedication to a mentor and friend, Mrs. Katherine S. Cobb. It lends the text a certain ladylike respectability and suggests that the writing of the memoirs was motivated by this notable friend's request. The Preface includes a letter from the King of Siam offering Anna Leonowns the post of schoolteacher and laying out the conditions of her employment. It sets up not only a literal contract between employer and employee

[1] Moreover, the tight censorship ruling Hollywood production during the 30's, 40's and 50's meant that filmmakers favoured the exotic settings of the Orient as a more acceptable theatre of displays of passion and exposing (limited amounts of) flesh (Shohat, 46).

[2] see Jan Borm, "Defining Travel : On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology" in *Perspectives on Travel Writing*. Eds. Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs (Aldershot : Ashgate Publishing, 2004) and also Odile Gannier, *La Littérature de Voyage* (Ellipses, 2001).

but functions as well as the usual literary pact between reader and travel writer who declares in her preface that she will "give a full and faithful account" (Leonowens 4) of her experience. She positions herself in the community of travel writers who have already travelled to and reported on nearby Cambodia by acknowledging her debt to Henri Mouhot, A Bastian, and James Thomson. She expresses thanks to a certain Dr. J. W. Palmer whose "literary experience and skill" have been of such great service, the implication being that her artless materiel is essentially of documentary, rather that literary, value. Some dates, for example March 15 1862, the date of her arrival in Siam, lend it an air of a diary. The body of the text itself relates Anna's personal experience at the court, interspersed with chapters on life and customs in Siam, with headings such as " Siamese literature and art" and "Buddhist doctrine, priests and worship". All these features conform to the idea that the narrator is giving a realistic account of her experience and observations.

Romance of the Harem adheres less to the travel genre, locating itself more in the tradition of exotic tales. However, the author is again at pains to underline the authenticity of these narratives: "so strange will some of the occurrences related in the following pages appear to Western readers, that I deem it necessary to state that they are also true" (preface). In chapter VIII she refers to herself as a "faithful recorder of the facts" (74) and later sets herself up as a reporter/observer: "I hurried home and wrote down her narrative word for word, as nearly as I could." (144)

It has to be said that this attempt to convince the reader of accuracy has not always been successful. Popular in their time when published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 1870's, these texts underwent particularly virulent attack in the 20th century when Anna Leonowens's was denounced as a fraud. A.B. Griswold, one of her harshest critics, describes her to be "on the fringes of reality, often escaping into make believe" (Morgan xi). Ian Grimble who wrote a BBC radio play about Leonowens in 1970 described her as "a mischief maker, a squalid little girl …one of those awful little English governesses, a sex-starved widow" (reported in the *New York Times*, August 8 1970, 25. Quoted in Morgan xi). The implication is that she sexed up her version of her Thailand experience for self-seeking purposes. Of course, lying has been a consistent charge levelled at travel writing well documented by researchers but, as Sarah Miller has pointed out, women writers have been particularly targeted.

It is generally accepted now that Anna Leonowens rewrote her own life story to hide her lower class origins and to portray herself as an archetypal genteel well-educated English lady whose education and insight lifted her to become political advisor to the king. But then looking for factual truth in travel literature based on autobiographical experience is perhaps a vain exercise and rather misses the point. As Jean Viviès has suggested : "Le récit de voyage est un montage. Situé au point de rencontre ou de contradiction entre le voir et le savoir, l'inventaire et l'invention, le fragment et le tout." (160) It is this constructed version that interests us, as indeed how the constraints of production and reception participate in that construction.

What were some of the pressures that could be said to have had an impact on Leonowens's travel texts? Her initial motivation for writing her memoirs was certainly commercial. As a widow with no intention of remarrying she drew on her literary skills to provide a source of income. It paid off. She did make a living and became a minor literary celebrity. Even though critics have been divided on her literary merit, it has

been agreed that Leonowens knew how to craft a commercial success (Morgan xxiii). Initially published in magazine instalments, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* was then published in book form and the success of the first book encouraged her to write *The Romance of the Harem*. Leonownens certainly knew how to draw upon the nineteenth century fascination for the Orient. With a sharp sense of prevailing tastes, she seems to have struck a chord by combining powerful ingredients: adventure in an exotic backdrop with its whiff of a decadent corruption while at the same time arousing Victorian chivalrous sensibilities. It could be said that Margaret Landon had her work cut out for her when she adapted Leonowens's version into her own bestseller in 1944 which ran into 13 printings in 15 countries (Smith Dow, xii). By adding some biographical information to that basic formula, Landon produced the single semi-fictionalised biography that made the original story so famous.

Another constraint which most certainly had an impact on the production and reception of her texts is the fact that Leonowens was writing as a woman. As others before have pointed out, travel literature by women was not considered having the same legitimate status as travel literature by men. Perhaps most importantly, few plots were available to them. Apart from a few notable exceptions, the adventure / explorer narrative was not considered female territory, whether in actual journeys or in writing about them. The rather more domesticated accounts of missionaries or diplomats' wives were deemed more suitable. However, Leonowens seems to have overcome this particular constraint by constructing a strong female narrative figure among the few roles that were acceptable for women: the teacher. In narrative terms, this device covers interesting ground. Her mission as tutor affords the narrator figure in *An English Governess* a privileged insider's view of the court while at the same time remaining compatible with the traditionally nurturing role of women. Not only is she developing the minds of her young pupils, by imparting knowledge, but she is participating in the imperialist enterprise of spreading Victorian values. Leonowens reinforces the idea of woman as a specially civilising influence, so prevalent at the time.

Another interesting constraint is the unavoidable imperialist context in which the books are set. One quickly becomes familiar in the book with the imperialist voice which patronisingly describes the Siamese people as boorish and in dire need of enlightening by Westerners: "Dinner at the Premier's was composed and served with the same incongruous blending of the barbaric and the refined, the Oriental and the European." (22) However, it is not a monolithic voice. As Mills has identified, there is another discourse, one which includes different textual determinants: "To write with authority, women align themselves with colonial forces and thus potentially with a predominantly male and masculine force, but they are not in that move wearing a male disguise." (Mills, 44). She goes on to argue that to protect themselves from such accusations, women played up the femininity of their writing. Leonowens would seem to be no exception to this. She certainly plays up her feminine side, for example, in the self depreciation of her writing project or the suitably private orientation suggested by the diary form. Yet it is the feminine perspective that helps Leonowens to identify with the women in the court of Siam, seeing them as individuals as well as being symbols of an alien and barbaric "other". This gives a double edge, or unstable quality, to the colonialist overtones of the narrative voice. Leonowens's own movements in and out of the female and male spheres of the

palace reflect her shifting relationship to women she alternately embraces and dissociate herself from. A good example of this is the presentation of the harem.

Behind the screen

One benefit of being a woman traveller was to gain access to spheres of foreign life from which men were excluded, the most obvious example being the harem. For over 5 years, Leonowens shared the lives of the women of royal harem, Nang Harm (translated as Veiled women) who lived behind the walled city of the palace. Apart from the women and children of the royal family, Nang Harm contained the concubines, 35 wives who had conceived with the king and several consorts. Added to this were all the varied kinds of people needed to run such a community (domestics, cooks, even doctors and judges, who were all women.) The presentation of the harem is interesting in itself as a social document. According to Morgan, although Anna Leonowens was not the first Western woman to step behind the screen into this world, she was really the first to do so in terms of being admitted into the confidence and daily affairs of the harem women. For our purposes, it offers interesting material to understand further the double edged voice of Leonowens who navigates between the dominant colonialist discourse and the individual, personal voice that questions that discourse.

Leonowens exploits the mystery of the harem for narrative purposes. We can say that she taps into the contemporary fascination about this much speculated-on feature of Eastern culture. From the outset, she draws the reader by announcing the strangeness of her story in the title *The Romance of the Harem*. The English editor who brought the book out in 1873, a year later than in the United States, modified the original title, with the effect of making it sound less fanciful, *The Romance of Siamese Harem Life*. In *The English Governess*, Leonowens describes the prime minister's harem in terms that excite and titillate. Using the present tense she creates a dramatic tableau which she invites us to gaze upon voyeuristically. We peer "into the twilight studiously contrived, of dimly-lighted and suggested shadows" (35). The language becomes more and more suggestive : "long line of girls with skins of olive […] in transparent draperies with golden girdles, their arms and bosoms, wholly nude, flashing as they wave and heave" (35). Leonowens paints the women in a falsely demure pose which has an effect of emphasising their erotic nature, "heads modestly inclined, eyes droop beneath long lashes, lips parted, wild eddies of dance [...] fair, young fiends." (36)

Having stirred our interest in the harem, Leonowens then goes on to expose this place as an atrocious prison: "I had never beheld misery until I found it here; I had never looked upon the sickening hideousness of slavery till I encountered its features here."(75). She sees it as a world of suffering and despair where women's lives were being crushed in a form of sex slavery with all the humiliations[3]. It must be said that

[3] Said himself was to trace the parallels between the patriarchal domination of nineteenth century women and the colonizer's rule of its colonies: "We can now see that Orientalism is a praxis of the same sort, albeit in different territories, as male gender dominance, or patriarchy, in metropolitan socities : the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem and the despotic – but curiously attractive – ruler. Moreover Orientals like

Leonowens had understood the political explanation for the harem. There are pages on the subtle workings of the harem as a system for maintaining political unity but she still takes up the women's cause. Here, it is clear that Leonowens is not presenting the women of the harem as mere objects of westerners' gaze but subjects with voices. The various fables in the *The Romance of the Harem*, for example, include trial scenes and monologues which let these women tell their stories. Behind the romanticised screen, we can detect the voice of Leonowens, the anti-slavery protester. By playing into the myth of the harem, its demystification is all the more spectacular.

This attempt to go behind the scenes in order to understand better the successful Hollywood spectacle *The King and I* and its literary inspiration has given us an added insight into nineteenth century women's travel literature and the writing strategies that shape them. Our reading of *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* and *The Romance of the Harem* would suggest that Anna Leonowens taps into Western fascination for the Orient and plays on its allure by "othering" the foreign country as the male, colonialist discourse has tended to do. Moreover, by adopting the strong feminine role of the teacher playing out one of the few available plots to single women travellers, she adds another layer of acceptability and authority to her texts in a context where women travel writers were viewed with suspicion. Yet, it is possible to recognise another, feminine, voice in the texts, one that can represent foreigners (foreign women at least) with a certain sympathy, rather than as symbols of an alien otherness. This double-edged voice reveals something of the particularly complex relationship between race and gender when they are part of the female travel experience. Both texts - as indeed Anne Leonowens's own life - are veiled in ambivalence. A partial lifting of the veil is an invitation to penetrate the internal contradictions, tensions and excesses that permeate her world.

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