



The King and Who? Dance, Difference, and Identity in Anna Leonowens and *The King and I*

by Sharon Aronofsky Weltman

Orienting Paradise: Western Projections of the East

The King and I (1956)

Director:
Walter Lang

Runtime:
133min

Country:
United States

Language:
English, Thai

AWARDS

BEST ACTOR IN A LEADING
ROLE (Yul Brynner)

BEST ART DIRECTION

BEST MUSICAL SCORE

BEST COSTUME DESIGN

Academy Awards 1957

BEST PICTURE

BEST ACTRESS

(Deborah Kerr)

Golden Globes 1957

In 1951, when the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I* premiered, the United States still occupied Japan and was already in Korea. Set in Siam (now Thailand), a south-east Asian country that, unlike its neighbors Viet Nam, Laos, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Burma, was never colonized by a European nation, *The King and I* negotiates the dilemma of twentieth century American imperialism by displacing it onto a Victorian stage and imagining a route toward global leadership that eschews violent take-over or direct control. In the process, the musical draws from nineteenth-century accounts to create both Anna, the ultra-Victorian English schoolteacher and advocate of human rights, and the King, a forward-thinking monarch who – of his own free will – brings his kingdom to the edge of liberty. The crown prince Chulalongkorn, educated in part by Mrs Anna, completes the task of ending slavery in Siam. As Christina Klein points out, in the era from Presidents Truman to Kennedy, cold war rhetoric employed metaphors of anti-slavery to justify anti-communism, and an important part of what *The King and I* presents is an American worldview in which the modernization and democratization of less industrial nations occurs through friendly although uneven exchange with the US. In *The King and I*'s mythologized Victorian milieu, the white British governess represents in part an idealized United States in the seemingly non-colonizing, non-militaristic role Americans generally find morally palatable, educating rather than conquering the East into Western democracy.

Yet this is only part of the cultural work that *The King and I* accomplishes. Both this classic twentieth-century American play and its ultimate sources, Anna Leonowens's *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *The Romance of the Harem* (1873), raise important issues regarding the roles of difference and conflict in identity construction through cultural texts across time. Leonowens describes the life of women in the Siamese harem as simultaneously more repressive and more open than life for western women, using nineteenth-century American tropes of slavery and women's rights to analyze Siamese culture. Further complicating the view of gender, race, class,



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and nationality is Leonowens's own presentation of herself in her writing as a refined English lady when, as has previously been hypothesized and as Susan Morgan has now proven in *Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of The King and I Governess* (2008), Leonowens was from a lower-class family, of mixed racial origin, born in Bombay rather than Wales. Certainly, Gertrude Lawrence in the original Broadway production of the play and Deborah Kerr its movie incarnation (1956) presented an Anna as English as the persona Leonowens not only invents for herself in her books but also successfully performed in real life. She passed as white, English, and middle-class from her third decade to her eightieth year, moving during that time from Singapore to Siam to the United States and finally to Canada. Yet while Leonowens's personal performance of racial and national identity is masked in her own books, the performative elements of these and other identity categories are made much more explicit in the way characters other than Leonowens are enacted in the musical play.

Successful in America, particularly among post-Abolitionist readers, Leonowens's books were less well received in England. In 1870 *The Athenaeum* regretted that her first book ever 'saw the light', citing Leonowens's inaccuracies about the Siamese language and culture and her unseemly criticism of King Mongkut. In reviewing her second book, *The Athenaeum* accused her in 1873 of outright ingratitude to her royal employer, perhaps suggesting that a British subject ought to be more respectful of monarchy in general. But the criticism has not been exclusively British or Victorian. Generations of Thai readers have even more emphatically repudiated her less than flattering picture of a revered king. Twentieth-century historians have also castigated Leonowens's books for numerous factual errors about Thai history. Most recently, feminist and post-colonial critics have pointed out ways in which Leonowens's books participate in the patriarchal and imperial projects of her time. She is reviled by many, for different and often conflicting reasons. Yet remarkably Anna Leonowens did serve as the governess to King Mongkut's children, including the crown prince Chulalongkorn, from 1862 to 1867, until shortly before he became king in 1868. She was the only British subject (or Westerner of any country) in the nineteenth century to gain intimate access to life in the Siamese harem and to write an account of it. She received letters expressing esteem from both her employer King Mongkut and her former pupil, King Chulalongkorn. The critical backlash against Leonowens makes her all the more interesting as she has modulated from the no longer accessible historical woman to the governess and social critic of her travel writings, to the sentimental Victorian heroine of Margaret Landon's 1943

novel, to the feisty powerhouse of Rodgers and Hammerstein, to the brave and loving schoolteacher in Jodie Foster's 1999 film *Anna and the King*, and most recently to the extraordinary figure in Susan Morgan's new authoritative biography, *Bombay Anna* (2008).

Leonowens's Siam books, particularly *The Romance of the Harem*, focus largely on Thai women. In describing their lives, Leonowens appeals to a readership of former abolitionists both by declaring that in Siam, 'woman is the slave of man', and by detailing the harem women's sexual attractiveness and the misery it causes, as in the story of the beautiful young Tuptim and the tragic result of efforts to 'render her a fitter offering for the king'. She links the plight both of the King's concubines and of their own female slaves to what American slaves had suffered. Portions of her books were first published as essays in the abolitionist magazine *Atlantic Monthly*, whose most famous contributor in the 1860s was Harriet Beecher Stowe. Situating herself within a long tradition of feminist Orientalism, which puts her in company with Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and Charlotte Brontë, Leonowens relies on her audience's stereotypical expectations about tales of Oriental potentates to help them accept and organize the information she presents about harem life as a feminist stance. Contemporary American reviews certainly received her books in that light; for example, in 1873 *The Princeton Review* praises *The Romance of the Harem*, commenting that 'no recent book gives so vivid a description of the interior life, customs, forms and usages of an Oriental Court; of the degradation of women and the tyranny of man', and in 1871 the *Overland Review* pities the women in *An English Governess in the Siamese Court* 'who languish out their lives in this splendid misery'. The same reviewer, far from making any connection between harem life and women's legal position in the United States without the vote or many other rights, simply concludes with a self-complacent Orientalist relief that 'we are heartily glad that we are not subjects of the Golden-Footed Majesty of Siam'. In contrast, Leonowens herself does not present polygamy as exclusively Eastern; in fact, she pointedly invokes Western polygamy when she derisively terms the Siamese Prime Minister's harem as 'his Excellency's private Utah'. While using erotic Orientalist motifs to promote a feminist agenda, Leonowens pushes her readers to recognize not only the differences between women's roles in America and Siam but also their troublesome similarities.

In *The King and I*, however, Thai women are generally depicted as enslaved wives or concubines for the sole purpose of serving the pleasure of and procreation with the King. Although luxuriously pampered, they are simply

without any rights at all, let alone opportunities to engage in a career as a judge or a shopkeeper. Female guards silently stand at the doors in many scenes, but they are generally unnoticed by the dialogue and many viewers would be unaware that these characters are women at all; the costuming, while not unisex, is in both the Broadway productions and the 1956 musical film sufficiently different from the rest of the women's alluring attire and sufficiently similar to the men's that audiences are likely to miss their gender altogether. There are no female judges in the musical. Far from successfully escaping and passing as a man, in the play Tuptim is caught trying to flee from the palace with her beloved, Lun Tha. After questioning by the musical's male Secret Police, her punishment is immediate and without trial: upon the King's order, she is about to be summarily whipped by male guards; the musical's King explains that this is what is usually done in such cases. No female-run system of justice operates here.

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