

Orientalism and globalization in the international sex industry essay sample

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Global human trafficking is a modern day form of slavery. Human trafficking refers to the movement of persons across borders for forced labor, sexual exploitation or other illicit activities. Sex trafficking is the most lucrative sector of human trafficking (Polaris Project, 2003). Women smuggled into the U. S come primarily from Latin America, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe, and Russia. The global political economy, political corruption, human rights, gender and ethnic stratification, and migration are all related to human trafficking.

Human trafficking is strongly connected to the complex economic processes of globalization. In many developing countries globalization has brought masses of wealth to the elite at the expense of the poor. Consequently, many women of the poorer classes leave their homelands to find opportunities for employment. These women are disproportionately affected by poverty, lack of access to education, discrimination, racism, and lack of economic opportunities.

International migration is an important aspect of sex trafficking. Manuel Castells acknowledges that economies throughout the world have become globally interdependent (1996). While migration has always been a part of human existence it now exists as a more profitable network. We are living in a networked society in which globalization encourages the free movement of capital, the opening of borders for trade, and deregulation to facilitate increased trade. This makes it easier to transport goods, including human beings. Technological transformations have decreased the cost of travel and communication, increasing the number of networks and the ease of

information flows. Trafficking humans is so profitable because unlike drugs, one person can be sold over and over. These are some reasons why human trafficking is the fastest growing and third largest criminal industry in the world (Polaris Project 2003). Kevin Bales book, Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy, describes people in such conditions who endure modern forms of slavery, including sex slavery. The life narrative of a Thai girl named Siri, as told to Bales, illustrates how sex slavery happens to vulnerable girls and women.

Siri was born in Thailand to a poor farming family. Under the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the Thai government has taken former government subsidies away from rice farmers, leaving them to compete against imported, subsidized rice in a globalized economy (Bales 1999). Siris family could not make a decent living under these neo-liberal economic policies. When Siri was fourteen years old, her parents sold her to a woman who had promised to find her a good job. The woman then sold her to a brothel for \$4, 000, leaving Siri to pay the debt. She was initiated into prostitution by the pimp who raped her. Siri was strong-willed and resisted this oppression. After being abused by her first customer, she ran away. Unfortunately, a police officer brought her back. The pimp beat her and her debt was double from \$4, 000 to \$8, 000. Upon realizing that she would never be able to get out of debt, Siri stopped running away and tried to build a relationship with the pimp simply in order to survive.

Siris story illustrates the complicated dynamics of sex trafficking. Prostitution and sex work in general has become part of the global economy (Truong 1996). Some women choose to go into the sex industry while others are deceived or forced into it. Human trafficking networks usually use deception, coercion, or force to push women into sexual slavery. Some women migrate with the knowledge that they will be doing sex work while others are told they will be given legal jobs such as working as secretaries or housekeepers. Women often migrate with the intention of getting a non-sex job but then are forced into prostitution to pay off their smuggling debts (Kwong, 2001). Many governments have long promoted sex tourism as a way of generating revenue. Migration for commercial sex work rose significantly in the 1960s and 1970s, with the establishment of U. S military bases in Thailand and neighboring countries (Skrobanek, Boonpakdee, & Jantaeero, 1998).

As the U. S military bases extended into Asia in the 1960s women from poor families were encouraged to prostitute themselves for a source of income to support their families. In fact, some governments such as the Philippines encouraged women to do their patriotic duty to help the economy by prostituting themselves to military men (Truong 1996). There is also a booming prostitution industry surrounding U. S military bases in South Korea. It is not a coincidence that prostitution rose at the height of U. S military involvement in Asia. Sex tourism continues to be extremely profitable. In 1996 nearly five million sex tourists from the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and Japan visited Thailand. These transactions brought in about \$26. 2 billion to the Thai economy (Bales 1999). Many government officials

seem to view its women as a gold mine to be used, and depend on them for foreign exchange dollars to help boost their economy. Revenue from sex tourism can be used to pay debts from the World Bank.

Social structures are important in the trafficking of women. Castells theorizes that social structures are organized around relationships of production/consumption, power and experience (1996). Power is especially important in the trafficking industry. Traffickers often target people in their local communities because it gives them more power and control (Polaris Project 2003). In a familiar community, the traffickers know who the vulnerable people are. Trust is another good reason for traffickers to use people in their own community. Women are more likely to trust men from their own community so it is easier to deceive them. Traffickers use violence and threats as a form of power against women. They can threaten to hurt the woman's family members if she does not agree to the traffickers' demands. Because the woman knows the trafficker(s), she recognizes that the threat can easily be carried out. The trafficker(s) would know exactly who is in her family and where they live. Men who want vulnerable women are trying to establish power in a social structure. As a result of these social structures, many individuals benefit from human trafficking. The traffickers earn money while the customers get to enjoy a sexual experience. Even law enforcement officials, such as the policeman who brought Siri back to the brothel, often receive a percentage of the brothel's profits.

Many elements of human trafficking can be theorized in relation to Orientalism. Critical scholar Edward Said defined Orientalism with several

different approaches. Orientalism is a legacy of the Enlightenment, which focused on defining the world in strict dichotomies such as good versus evil. Said analyzes Orientalism as a tradition of theory and practice that has affected the way we think today. According to Said, Orientalism emerged in Europe as an academic tradition of teaching and writing about the Orient. Western scholars studied the Orient through ethnography, and the interpretation of its culture by reading and translating Oriental texts.

Orientalism is an idea constructed by the West and is also based on the distinction between the Orient and the Occident which leads to fantasies of the exotic other. The West sees itself as superior by comparing itself to the Orient. The Orient is childlike, exotic, backwards, and incapable of defining itself, while the West is progressive, active, and masculine. Because the Orient was seen as weak and inferior, colonization was viewed as a necessary to save them from their backwardness. Said analyzes Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (1978). Orientalist scholarship provided the means for western countries to take over Oriental lands and rescue them. In essence, it justified colonialism and cultural domination.

Though Said focuses on how European countries have interacted with Arab societies of the Middle East and North Africa, Orientalist ideology has influenced power relations with countries in the Asia as well. Although most colonies of the west are officially independent, Orientalist thinking continues to influence the dynamics of relations between western powers and their former colonies. The expansion of Europe and consequent colonization of the

Orient caused many countries to become economically dependent on the west and led to economic globalization. Orientalism is similar to the idea of the West and the Rest. When Europeans discovered the New World during their age of exploration they constructed it in relation to their way of thinking. Stuart Hall contends that the West is a historically constructed idea more than it is a geographic entity.

The word western refers to a society that is industrialized and capitalist. Japan, as Hall points out, is considered to be a westernized country. Flows of information have allowed westerners to construct images of the Rest and people of the Rest to construct images of the West. Hall points out that many societies aspire to become western- at least in standards of living. That is why so many people desire to migrate. The West is idealized as the developed world. Third World countries construct images of the west as a place of prosperity. For example, in China people who pay to be smuggled to America have come to believe that America is a land of opportunity, where anyone can work to pay off their smuggling debts and then by a business in a couple more years (Kwong, 2001).

Orientalism and imperialism are evident in global trafficking and the international sex industry. Sex tourism is an opportunity for white men to purchase exotic cultural experiences. Most of these tourists come from the United States, Australia, Germany, other European countries, and Japan (Skrobanek, Boonpakdee, & Jantaeero, 1998). Sexuality was a significant element of European construction of the Rest as a fantasy of innocence, domination and submissiveness. Advertisements for sexual services

emphasize the sexual and exotic characteristics of the other culture, feeding into western fantasies (Taylor 2000). Men in western societies are drawn to foreign prostitutes because they want someone who is submissive and exotic so they often idealize nonwhite women.

The tourists enjoy experiences with other women because they resent what they see as women's power in the West and feel threatened by their demands for equality (Taylor, 2000). In Hall's terms, these men are constructing themselves in relation to women of the Rest culture. Because they see women of the so called Rest as more gentle and submissive, they feel more powerful and masculine when they juxtapose themselves against a woman who is not white. Western sex tourists apparently feel they have a right to commodify women of other cultures, nationalities, and ethnic groups. They attempt to colonize the Orient by prostituting sex from Oriental women while happily reaping the benefits of racism, colonialism, global economic inequalities, and sexism.

Human trafficking has gained much publicity in the west in recent years. How does one analyze the person who was smuggled or the person who does the smuggling? What about the people who indirectly profit from it or the customers? How do Orientalist attitudes affect perceptions of women who are trafficked into prostitution? How ethical are efforts to help women in trafficking rings? Governments, activists, politicians, feminists, anti-trafficking organizations, and policymakers look at women through varying conceptual frameworks.

Some policymakers frame the issue in terms of illegal immigration. U. S legislation passed in 1996 to combat illegal immigration increased penalties for people who enter the country illegally (Kyle and Koslowski, 2001). Some U. S members of Congress point out that illegal aliens are criminals by virtue of illegally crossing borders (Koslowski 2001). Women who are caught in the U. S are often arrested for prostitution and deported, even if they got into that line of work against their will (Polaris Project, 2003). However, restrictive immigration policies make these organizations flourish. Traffickers can make more money because migrants will be willing to pay higher smuggling fees in order to get into other countries. Criminalizing the women who take part in trafficking does not address their motives for migrating. It fails to address gender and ethnic stratification and the economic inequalities that drive women to improve their lives. These conditions help make the human trafficking market possible. The trafficking of women needs to be reframed in terms of human rights and economics instead of an annoying problem of immoral immigrants. Once again the west is framing the other in racist terms.

Not all politicians want to criminalize prostitutes who are trafficked. Some sincerely want to help women who are in bad situations. In the fall of 1999, Representative Chris Smith introduced the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which focused on protecting women and children trafficked for forced prostitution and proposed to increase punishment for traffickers. Women in these trafficking networks are often starved, locked in cellars, beaten regularly, and threatened with work in a whorehouse (Kwong, 2001) so they

do need protection. Although these acts are well-intentioned, they also emphasize women in traffic networks as victims rather than people who live in conditions that often cause migration to be necessary. Like those who criminalize prostitutes, these politicians fail to address the effects of colonization and globalization or ask why so many people feel the need to migrate in the first place. Legislation designed to protect trafficked women is necessary but not enough. There is little evidence that tighter laws have been successful in stopping or reducing forced prostitution that many women face when they are smuggled across borders.

Ironically many anti-trafficking activists and feminists who claim to be progressive also subscribe to Orientalist beliefs, although in a different, more subtle manner. These people do not consciously desire to colonize women of color or frame them as barbaric others. However, they still construct themselves as being superior to women of color. Such organizations often portray the women as helpless, naive victims who should be pitied. Kathleen Barry, founder of Coalition Against Trafficking in Women is an example of an Orientalist feminist. When talking about Bengali women forced into trafficking she says, Illiteracy and rural village patriarchal feudalism abnegate human identity for many of these women (1995). Of Thai women says, In Thailand, religious ideology and patriarchal feudalism reduce the value of women's lives to that of sexual and economic property, which in turn validate prostitution (1995). Unfortunately some families in Asian countries do sell their daughters to brothels but western women are also not

free from oppression (Bales 1999). For example, many American women and children are forced into prostitution domestically in the United States.

Furthermore, the simplistic attitude that all non-white women or women of color are slaves to inherently barbaric, backwards cultures symbolizes Orientalism. Instead of recognizing forced prostitution as a result of a combination of social, political, cultural, and economic forces, Barry blames this form of oppression solely on the culture of the Orient. Barry's remarks characterize a rescue mentality among white feminists, another element of Orientalism. Like the Orientalist scholars who constructed themselves as being superior to the Orient, these feminists construct themselves as being more empowered than Asian women. Just as white male clients have sexual fantasies of Orientals, white feminists have fantasies of rescuing them from their evil, barbaric Asian men.

In condemning all Asian cultures as essentially patriarchal and oppressive, white feminists like Barry forget that many of the clients who drive the demand for international trafficking are white men from North America and Europe. It is obvious that racism exists even in so called progressive circles. This condescending rhetoric neglects to expose the Orientalist fantasies of these white men. Not only is it racist, but in the process they also ignore the real cultures of people who are different from them. They ignore women's movements and liberation movements that have occurred and continue to occur in other countries.

The racism of western feminists such as Kathleen Barry raises the question of how to help women without being disrespectful. It is important to respect the ambitions and strength of women who can survive such situations.

Contrary to popular belief, the women are often making choices based on their economic and social circumstances. Even the women who don't know they are going into prostitution are attempting to control their lives. Poverty has been an important motivating factor for many young women to migrate for prostitution for other forms of work (Skrobanek, Boonpakdee, and Jantaeero 1998). The decision to migrate is usually made when individuals or families see no way to improve their lives other than leaving their homes in search of work.

The decision is not taken lightly and does mean that such women are simply passive, naïve victims of white or Asian men. Rather, it shows that they are ambitious enough to improve their lives and that they have confidence in their ability to deal with the challenges and uncertainties of migration. But like any human beings who end up in unfortunate circumstances, they would benefit from the help of other people because criminal networks and the sex industries won't hesitate to exploit their ambitions for a better life. It is important for western feminists to realize that ability of women to survive harsh conditions can be seen as a sign of their strength and that privileged feminists never have to experience these kinds of struggles.

Although it's important to recognize that women in trafficking rings are not simply helpless idiots, one should be careful not to idealize them either.

Idealizing a culture is just as harmful as viewing a culture as barbaric

because it prevents meaningful dialogue and critique between different groups of people. It also prevents people from seeing problems in different cultures and working together for viable solutions. Orientalism is an important factor in the sexual exploitation of women of color but it is not the only one. It is not adequate in explaining all forms of oppression in international human trafficking because there are so many forms in the industry. Even though westerners make up the bulk of clients, a lot of trafficking occurs between countries that were once considered to be part of the Orient. African women are often trafficked to the Middle East. Thai and Filipina women often end up in Japan. Smugglers bring girls and women from Nepal to India. Many men and even women in assist in exploiting their own people. As mentioned earlier, the people who traffic women are usually from the same country as the victims (Bales 1999). Trafficking is not the fault of only one group of people.

Many actors are involved in these complex operations. Forcing women and children into prostitution is a terrible crime. Women and children should not be forced into prostitution or abused by their traffickers or clients. Activists do need to criticize Chinese men who force women into prostitution or Thai families who sell their young daughters to brothels because these acts violate human rights and cause human suffering. However, it is also essential to remember western men and their role in perpetuating inequality. The actions of some men in these Oriental countries do not give western feminists the right to insult entire cultures or project their superiority complexes on non-western women because it is just another form of

imperialism. White women need to change their Orientalist perceptions of women who are different from them. Most importantly, western countries need to recognize the economic effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Exploitation will not stop until people, governments, and other institutions address the roots of economic inequality.

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