

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Rationale

One way to study and understand global cultures is through works of literature. Through the psyches of writers, literary works have been produced in different writing styles, reflecting different mental perceptions. Writers from politically powerful nations tend to create their literary works differently from those from less influential or powerless nations. From the age of colonization to the period of independence, writers from colonizing countries such as Britain and France tend to exercise their superiority and power through their literatures and propagandize their convictions globally. They formulated a way of thinking and perceived their colonized countries in Eastern territories or Asian continent as inferior, irrational, and sexually exotic. Such notion is termed Orientalism. Examples of famous Orientalism works are Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden, A Passage to India by E.M. Foster, Thousand and One Nights, and H. Rider Haggard's Cleopatra, all of whose authors were Westerners who deliberately targeted on the oriental cultures. The narratives of the "Orient" in these texts are presented from the authors' own perspectives rather than those of cultural relativism. According to Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), "The Orient was orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered common place by an average nineteenth- century European, but also because it *could be*-- that is, submitted to being--*made* Oriental" (5-6).

Though never been colonized, Thailand is geographically the “Orient” and much literature written about Thailand was therefore inevitably influenced by the notion of Orientalism. A novel compiled by an English author Margaret Landon entitled Anna and the King of Siam (1943) is a model for such influence. The novel is controversial as its content mostly describes the society and culture of Thailand or Siam at that time from a British woman’s perspective, Anna Leonowens who is also the protagonist in the novel. Siam was portrayed through Leonowens’ dichotomy of British vs. Siamese, echoing the colonizers’ superiority and applying the Western logic to Siamese culture. The division can be seen from the narration and details of the novel by Leonowens, an English governess, whose background and perception greatly affect her perception and her writing about Siam.

Anna and the King of Siam (1943) is a source for various types of adaptations including two film versions, two animated film productions, as well as numerous musical adaptations. In 1946, the first film entitled Anna and the King of Siam was produced. Though it obtained several awards, the film was not as famous as the second musical version which was reproduced in the meantime entitled The King and I, starring Yul Brynner as the King of Siam. The King and I was filmed again ten years later, starring Yul Brynner, Deborah Kerr, and Lita Moreno. This version was a phenomena of a success since audience around the world accessed the film more easily and since then the story of Anna as a Western heroine and the King of Siam as an aggressive ruler of a barbaric country needed to be civilized was on everyone’s lip and in their perception. The yearning for such sensation, particularly of the Westerners, appeared again in 1999 when Twentieth Century Fox planned to film Anna and the King by choosing Thailand as a filming location. In the same year,

censorship committee or Film Board in Thailand denied the request on the ground that it portrayed distorted portrayals of Siamese and dishonored the King of Siam. Such denial later caused a large controversy concerning the judgment of the Board and the accuracy of the story itself.

Though conflicts arose, it should be noted that Western perceptions of Siamese society and the popularity of the film itself have been greatly influenced by Anna Leonowens' portrayal and subsequent popular cultural renditions of her work. In her career as an author, she was believed to be a legitimate representative of the Western attitude of fulfilling one's righteous duty toward the Siamese. Literally, her work was believed to be an enlightenment of the Siam accounts as well as a useful historical record concerning the relation between the East and the West. Its success in terms of general public acceptance among European societies is not in doubt since the works appeal to the Western audience in a way that they agree with their superior attitude over Siam. Western people have taken turns in reproducing Mrs. Leonowens' story, which satisfied particularly Western audience for almost a century.

As a genre of media, the film reaches its audience effectively and apparently plays an important role in framing the perceptions of the audience. Produced by American filmmakers, Anna and the King reflects the American perception of Siam and its people. To make the film "appealing" and entertaining to Western audience, the characters were misrepresented and historical accuracy abandoned. In addition, a strong claim was made by Mrs. Chalermisri Chantasinh, who explored a reproduction entitled The King and I (1951), the musical version, that it also is a "misleading representation of Siamese people, culture, society, and especially the institution of the Siamese Monarchy"(iv).

## Theories

### Orientalism

It is indispensable to discuss the origin of the term Orientalism as a primary foundation of understanding. In Orientalism (1978), Edward W. Said, a Palestinian scholar, thoroughly explored the history of relations between Western and non-Western cultures through accumulated discourses. Specifically, his studies involved the literary works of both Western writers and non-Western counterparts dating back to the very beginning of imperialism up to the post-colonial period. He proposed the term “Orientalism,” which he himself admitted is a generic term which contained various meanings. This paper, however, draws some definitions and characteristics of Orientalism as frameworks for analysis.

**I.** According to Said, “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences (1). He further contends that Orientalism, particularly as practiced by the French and the British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is

a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other (1).

The Orient is then an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Therefore, Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and ideologically as a mode of discourse. In this sense, Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of

the time) “the Occident” (2). Contributors to this concept are novelists, poets, thinkers, imperial administrators, for instance. This becomes an academic “field” and gradually a discipline (3). Said’s binary opposition reflects the differences between the West and the East. Orientals are by nature mysterious, menacing, irrational, demonic and sexually corrupt whereas Occidentals possess the opposing traits. They are “rational, virtuous, mature, and ‘normal’” (40). Therefore, Oriental portrayal and how the East is orientalized can be analyzed by looking at these negative and inferior traits.

**II.** Orientalism is the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said 3). The two major definitions put above clearly show that when the West thinks or produces some cross-cultural discourses, particularly those involving the East, it is very difficult if not impossible for them to break or go beyond this traditional concept of Orientalism. By formulating the structure of thoughts through literature or entertainment, the Western culture gains in their predominant strength and identity over the East as such structure of thought is vital in establishing and confirming their importance and status. Orientalism therefore becomes a political and intellectual power the West exercises to dominate the East.

Orientalism creates stereotypical images of the Orient and, according to Said, such Oriental portrayal is repeatedly reinforced by famous writers of the Orient such as Renan, Sacy, and Flaubert. Macfie (2002) explains that “consciously or unconsciously, [these writers who] all contributed to the European, mainly British and French, project of regulating, codifying, classifying and reproducing the Orient – that



is to say creating a ‘reduced model’ of the Orient...” (91). This means that these Westerners deliberately create “the Orient” to merely suit their purpose of writing.

Apart from the concept of Orientalism, this paper also discusses how the film, as media, portrays Anna as representing the West and the King as representing the East. In this part, film-convention will be provided to illustrate how a film communicates to an audience which leads to the “preferred message” it conveys.

### **Film and ideology**

Film is among the powerful genres of media, which plays a vital role regarding audience perception affecting their attitudes and behaviors. Joseph Boggs (1996) simply puts it this way, “film speaks in a language of the scenes. Its flowing and sparkling stream of images, its compelling pace and natural rhythms, and its pictorial style are all part of this nonverbal language” (110). In this sense, film is an artistic way of communication. Yet, it is wrong to watch a film as entertainment only without realizing that other messages are being subtly communicated as well. In other words, film is like a literary work since they both can be enjoyed but at the same time communicate powerful ideas and values. The values conveyed in films reflect the mentality of their producers. A term ideology is then discussed here to see how it relates to film. Ideology, as defined by Louis Giannetti (1993), is

a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture. The term is generally associated with politics and party platforms, but it can also mean a given set of values that are implicit in any human enterprise-including filmmaking... In short, every film has a slant, a given ideological perspective that privileges certain characters, institutions, behaviors, and motives as attractive, and downgrades an opposing set as repellent. (374)

Regarding this aspect, through the characters and their actions, the ideology should be carefully considered as it reflects the perception and mentality of the filmmaker, especially what he values and what he opposes. Giannetti remarks on this point that “some filmmakers are so technically skillful that we can be swept up by a character’s values even when we don’t hold them in actuality... In short, ideology is another language system in film, albeit an often disguised language that usually speaks in codes” (378). This statement is interesting that codes are what appear on the screen or in pictures and how audiences can understand and interpret such codes. Giannetti explains that to analyze films it is important to understand Semiology (or semiotics) as he defines it as a study of how movies signify. General examples of signs<sup>1</sup> in a visual form are commonly seen. Hands gripping can be cooperation. Pigeon is freedom. Doors can be the signs of entering into a new world, new experiences, new knowledge. Ladders or stairs sometimes signify the shifting of status. Therefore, to understand a film, two things should be considered which are verbal and nonverbal languages. The nonverbal part can be understood as semiotics, signs or codes.

Anna and the King (1999) is a challenge to discuss as the concept of Orientalism is still portrayed in the film and as the filming techniques and ideologies allow us to understand the concept of Orientalism. It would, therefore, be interesting and worthwhile to examine the portrayal of Anna and the King as both of them represent different causes, cultures of the West and the East, in order to see to what extent the Orientalist portrayal is presented in the film and in what forms or through what mechanism the film creates such portrayal. Are there any attempts to challenge,

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Associate Professor Dr. Soranee Wongbiasaj for giving the thorough illustrations of signs used in the general media.

to re-interpret, to re-echo the existing perceptions of the East? Through the analysis of verbal and visual components, I would argue that the latest reproduction entitled Anna and the King (1999) is ambivalent as it contains what is considered Oriental portrayal yet there is an attempt to question, to reinterpret, or even to counter Orientalism can be observed. When the linguistic means and filming techniques are analyzed, it is expected that the understanding about ideology of the film with respect to Siam will increase. Also, such analysis will enable us to see if the film simply presents Siam with fixed Orientalist characteristics or not.

### **Purposes of the study**

1. To demonstrate the Orientalist stereotypical images in the portrayal of the characters in the reproduction of Anna and the King (1999) through the Orientalist framework of Edward Said and film discourse analysis.
2. To demonstrate an attempt to reinterpret the concept of Orientalism in the film Anna and the King (1999).

### **Education advantages**

This interpretive study of the film Anna and the King (1999) can create a better understanding of the Western portrayal of King Mongkut, his royal family, and his Siamese subjects. It will enhance mutual understanding between Westerners and Thai people, a cultural bridge between the East and the West. This study can also be used as an academic source for readers to understand the mentality of the filmmaker, the distortions and subtle methods of communicating.