

**Invention and Reinvention: The Remarkable Stories of Anna Leonowens**

*Bombay Anna: The Real Story and Remarkable Adventures of the "King and I" Governess.* Susan Morgan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 274 pp.

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<1> In *Bombay Anna* Susan Morgan seeks to clarify and contradict certain myths concerning Anna Leonowens (1831-1915), a character perhaps most famously evoked in the Rogers and Hammerstein film musical *The King and I* (1956) starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr. In this fascinating biographical study, Morgan refutes such technicolored versions of Anna's life.(1) However, this is not a straightforward attempt to access the truth about one woman. In addition to unravelling fact from fiction, Morgan infuses the text with in-depth cultural, historical, and political knowledge of nineteenth-century life, particularly in India and Siam, and uses Anna's story to question the whole notion of selfhood and biography.

<2> In a fanciful manuscript that Anna Leonowens penned for the benefit of her grandchildren, she states that she was born in Wales, that she remained there as a child while her parents lived in India, and that it was not until after the death of her father that she went to live in the subcontinent. In true fairy-tale fashion, she then writes of a wicked stepfather and a romantic marriage to a charming officer without parental consent, the result of which was estrangement from her family. Sadly, as Anna reports, her husband died while they were both young. At this point, her narrative evolves into a colonial adventure, complete with shipwrecks and tiger hunts, until she accepts a job as the governess in the Royal Harem of Siam, a position she holds until the death of King Mongkut; after this she emigrates to the United States where she becomes an author and public speaker.(2) While there are elements of truth to this story, many of the details are entirely fallacious, but for a long time no one doubted its authenticity. Thus it was that in 1944, Margaret Landon reiterated Anna's history in her fictional retelling *Anna and the King of Siam*, a narrative that spawned various dramatizations.

<3> Morgan tells us that Landon was of Scandinavian origins, brought up in the Christian American Midwest. Along with her husband Kenneth, she became a missionary in Siam; it was there that she enthusiastically read Anna's books. Years later, she serendipitously met Anna's granddaughter Avis Fyshe, who persuaded her to write Anna's biography and presented Landon with the family papers. However, Morgan claims that not only did Landon's text entirely misrepresent Anna's biographical information, but that Landon also misinterpreted Anna's

beliefs and values, bringing to the project her own Christian mores and missionary experiences. The result is a familiar imperial narrative that recounts the exploits of an upstanding British lady struggling to civilize the “savages,” a reductive story of East versus West that Morgan hopes to resist by meticulously researching a woman who arguably defies such straightforward imperial binaries.

<4> From the outset, Morgan’s aims are made explicit: “Perhaps my main point in writing this biography is to present to my audience a woman who was extraordinary in her own right” (2); this is undoubtedly achieved. Yet, what truly enlivens this text is Morgan’s interrogation of whether biographical studies require the search for a “real” person. She questions whether there is a “truth” that can be found, and queries the extent to which the biological self is any more authentic than a performative identity. Ultimately, Morgan asks, is origin more relevant than a chosen path? “The truth is we all invent and reinvent ourselves, just as we all stand within historical contexts that bind and limit us” (2).

<5> Accordingly, chapters 2, 3, and 4 deal largely with Anna’s background, her ancestors and her early life. Importantly, Morgan traces Anna’s roots to the mixed-race union of her grandparents, William Glascott, a member of the Indian army, and an unknown Anglo-Indian woman. Their daughter, Mary Anne Glascott, married Thomas Edwards, who died not long after Anna was born. Mary Anne swiftly married another company soldier, Patrick Donahue. The lowly nature of these beginnings are emphasized by Morgan as she uses contemporary sources such as women’s travel literature and local newspapers to build up a picture of the life of rank-and-file European soldiers; in a sense this is necessary if we are to appreciate, as Morgan hopes we will, the full extent of Anna’s achievements:

This child of poverty and ignorance somehow metamorphosed into the highly literate and polylingual Anna Leonowens, genteel widow in Singapore, governess to royalty in Siam, musical duenna and Sanskrit scholar in Germany, travelling journalist in Russia and international author and public lecturer in the U.S. and Canada. It was a phenomenal, even dazzling feat. (45)

<6> The following two chapters take us from Anna’s marriage in 1849 to Louis Leon Owens, a middle-class Irish Protestant who emigrated during the famine, to her arrival in Bangkok in 1862 after her husband’s death. This period is short on detail, but we do know that most of their time was spent in Bombay. Again Morgan’s use of primary sources and historical research enrich our sense of time and place, despite our lack of direct information. The historical conditions are further outlined in the appendices demonstrating the extent of Morgan’s knowledge about life in colonial India.

<7> Morgan deduces that as a widow with two children, Anna was in a difficult situation. For those unwilling to remarry, the most obvious option was to gain employment as a governess. But Morgan claims this was not a possibility for Anna because British officers would not permit their children to be educated by a woman of mixed race. Not one to be defeated by racial prejudice or class hierarchies, Anna travelled to Singapore in 1859 with two children and a new identity. It is at this juncture that she rewrites her past, a move that enables her to work as a governess. Thus,

when King Mongkut of Siam advertises for a single English lady to educate his children without attempting to convert them to Christianity, Anna seems to fit the bill perfectly.

<8> Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 focus on Anna's time in Siam. Despite having warned readers of the various caveats regarding Anna's texts, Morgan draws much of her information about life in the Nang Harm(3) from these published testimonies.(4) At the same time, additional contemporary material is enlisted to support or refute specific incidents, such as the apparent struggle about where Anna would reside, an episode that was mythologized by E. B. Lewis with the aid of Kerr and Brynner. Morgan's understanding of colonialist discourse persuades her of the fallaciousness of Lewis's reports; but in her attempt to rescue Anna from such nineteenth-century bias, there is a sense that Morgan protests too much. In what she sees as an effort to provide a more balanced account of Anna's relationship with the Siamese people, an account that negates traditional colonial and gender binaries, Morgan seems a little over-anxious to absolve her subject from any imperialist condescension; this is evident in her attempts to explain away Anna's critique of the King's harem. She argues against the suggestion that Anna reframed "polygamy within western imperial discourses of civilisation,"(5) and suggests that Anna's criticisms had nothing to do with missionary prejudices against other religions or imperialist bias against other ways of life (125). Instead, Morgan asserts they were articulated as part of Anna's concern with the wider issues of slavery. However, by suggesting that Anna believed she "had been placed in the position of trying to help these lost women" (126), Morgan invokes rhetorically the "white woman's burden," a loaded colonialist discourse that is seemingly evident in Anna's writing, but that is not discussed here.

<9> The argument is that Anna's ideological position cannot easily be explained through western discourses because of her mixed-race origins and eastern upbringing. Nonetheless, despite Anna's more culturally integrated background, it seems apparent that her writing was continually informed by orientalist and imperialist discourses, even insofar as they were produced for particular audiences. One example can be found in Anna's comparison of Poona at night to a scene from *The Arabian Nights*.(6) Morgan reads this passage as a "virtual hymn" to the "beloved city of her childhood" (194). Yet, the comparison can also be read as the reiteration of a damaging romantic trope found repeatedly in women's travel writing of the period. Perhaps Morgan would better achieve an equilibrating study, and therefore produce a more balanced subject, by allowing us to see how Anna, like so many other nineteenth-century women travellers, was the product of conflicting ideologies and power nexuses.(7)

<10> The final chapters see Anna leave Bangkok, embark on several new adventures and become immortalized in Landon's text. In 1867 Anna departed from Siam. After a few stops along the way, she ended up in New York where she once again reinvented herself, this time as a public speaker, journalist, and author. Chapter 12 traces Anna's emergence as a writer during this period; it follows her association with Annie and James Fields and her eventual move to Canada with her daughter, Avis, and her son-in-law, Thomas Fyshe. As the penultimate chapter details, while Anna makes further journeys, she ultimately returns to Canada as a matriarch, a socialist, and a feminist.

<11> Rather than reading Anna's story as a typical colonial narrative, Morgan views her subject as standing for tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and cultural inclusion where east and west are fused (6) – a point that feels a little over-worked as Anna seems to have been given the benefit of a twenty-first-century outlook. Arguably, as Morgan suggests, Anna was less narrow-minded than many of her counterparts (126). To a degree, her story does challenge traditional binaries through a “highly flexible subjectivity” (46), which does not conform to conventional gender norms. Unfortunately, Morgan does not expand on the fact that this reinvention of the self outside of the metropolitan centers was in fact a common feature of nineteenth-century women's experiences. Away from the constraints of Victorian Britain, women could enact certain desires of sovereignty. Certainly, there can be no doubt that Anna did just that, as Morgan concludes rather elegiacally: “In re-creating herself, Anna had opened up for herself the richest engagement with the possibilities of her life. She had actively embraced those possibilities with energy, brilliance and verve. Not many of us could do, or could be, more” (206).

<12> The final chapter recounts Landon's role in the myth-making of Anna. By explaining the political and personal backdrop against which Landon wrote, Morgan goes some way to explain how Anna came to be constructed as the epitome of Victorian femininity engaged in a battle against eastern despotism. However, while Landon may be guilty of such refashioning, it would appear that Morgan is not blameless in this respect; and so, it seems we may be no closer to the “real story” of the remarkable Anna Leonowens.

#### Endnotes

(1)I refer to Anna by her first name because Leonowens is a name of her own invention, which she took after her husband's death; it refers to his middle name and surname.(^)

(2)In actual fact, Anna had left Siam prior to Mongkut's death.(^)

(3)Nang Harm is the word the Siamese used to refer to the both the place, the inner palace, and the people who lived in it. There is no direct translation (Morgan 118).(^)

(4)Anna Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court: Recollections of Six Years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok* (London: Trübner, 1870), and *The Romance of the Siamese Harem Life* (London: Trbner, 1873).(^)

(5)See Tamara Loos, “Sex in the Inner City: The Fidelity between Sex and Politics in Siam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 64 (2005): 881-909.(^)

(6)Anna Leonowens, *Life and Travel in India: Being Recollections of a Journey before the Days of Railroads* (London: Trübner, 1884): 227.(^)

(7)See Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991): 18.(^)