

WHITE GIRL IN ASIA:
MOBILITY AND SELF-REALISATION IN JUST JAECKIN'S
"EMMANUELLE" (1974)

Purabi Nandi

Department of English
Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University
INDIA

0purabinandi3@gmail.com

Abstract. From time immemorial, mobility has always played an important part in the lives of individuals. Some have migrated for health issues, some for various social and political ones, and some for a change in their daily routine. In this process, travel has not only fulfilled their primary aims but has also gifted various experiences which have helped them to relook, relearn and reconstruct their identity. Generally, when a Western traveller's encounter with Asian destinations gets portrayed in the media, many issues arise. Issues like 'Otherization', representations, or the Eurocentric gaze create huge buzz among the audience. Especially when the traveller is a female, these issues become more problematic. Things like Voyeurism and male gaze increase the list. Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974), loosely based on an autobiographical erotic novel by Emmanuelle Arsan, portrays these issues.

The plot of the book and film features Emmanuelle, a young, rich, and lonely housewife who undertakes a journey from Paris to Thailand and explores different spheres of sexual pleasures. Emmanuelle's journey is twofold. Firstly, it refers to her sexual mobility, from innocence to experience. Secondly, it shows her spatial journey, her transition from Paris to Thailand, from a studio-like, lonely apartment to the busy markets and a countryside villa. This article attempts to read how mobility transforms Emmanuelle, and how the interaction between global and local has been represented in the movie.

Keywords: Emmanuelle, mobility, transformation, Asia, cosmopolitan, local

EMMANUELLE'S SEXUAL MOBILITY: FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE

The film starts with a melodious song composed by Pierre Bachelet. It describes the lonely life of Emmanuelle and suggests

that she is young, twenty years old, almost like a child. She has only one lover, that is her husband. The song further suggests that her experience in relationships is not sufficient, and to be wise, she must explore the long journey of love with different lovers. The song shows the idyllic, luxurious life of Emmanuelle, whose day passes by making tea, snacks, reading magazines, and evaluating her nude photographs. She boards a flight to Bangkok, and her experiments with lovers begin. Her husband, Jean, a member of the French Embassy in Bangkok, is an advocate of polygamy and always encourages his wife to experiment with different partners. Emmanuelle's life starts transforming the moment after she leaves Paris. On the flight, she makes love with two strangers. After coming to Bangkok, she gets introduced to the elite lifestyles of the wives of foreign officials, their extramarital relationships, gossips, clubs, etc. There she meets Marie-Ange and Ariane. Marie-Ange initially helps her to come out of the guilt and hesitations regarding her interaction with the strangers on the plane. She introduces Mario to her, who plays a suggestively important role in the climax scene. In one of the parties, Emmanuelle gets attracted to Bee, an architect. This brief bond is probably the only relationship where she gives her everything to impress her. She leaves her costly villa, dress, high heels, sports car and happily accompanies Bee in her rural workplace. After spending two days in the lap of nature, Bee confesses to Emmanuelle that she likes her but does not love her. Emmanuelle's first time experiences rejection, cries her heart out in the rain and returns to Jean. After the heartbreak agrees to meet Mario to become an expert in lovemaking. But Mario takes her to unusual places like opium dens, gambling shops and forces her to physically interact with the natives from lower-class backgrounds. He even instructs two natives to rape her. Emmanuelle's adventure reaches its climax when, in the last scene, she is shown naked before the mirror, applying bold, exotic makeup with confidence. The makeup suggests her emotional maturity, and her understanding that in order to give pleasure to the body, she should not stop the quest

of making love. Pleasure and sexual partners should not be restricted to any phenomenon of class or gender. Alexander J. Klemm, in his article, “The Legacy of Emmanuelle: Oriental Desire and Interracial Encounters in European Films Set in Thailand 1974-1980”, comments on this scene:

The final impression indicates that Emmanuelle has grown as a person. She is now liberated from social conformity, taboos, and male definitions of her body and character. She has taken full control of herself and her future. In the spirit of the 1970s sexual liberation movement, Emmanuelle was viewed as an affirmation and a celebration of the female body. (Klemm)

This way, the film suggests Emmanuelle’s mobility. Her journey from innocence to experience. However, this journey presents many questions for the audience. Although Just Jaeckin, on the one hand, shows how one must explore all kinds of love for sexual fulfilment, he also criticises this attitude through the character of Bee. All the elite women, except Bee, do not do any work. All of them are financially dependent on their rich husbands. They spend time in spas, clubs, and others’ beds. Bee, on the other hand, does not have time for these adventures because she has to work and has tight schedules. She ignores Emmanuelle’s initial advances and rejects her proposal. As she is a working woman, the elite ones, except Emmanuelle, do not like her. Through this conflict, is it not the director suggesting that such sexual adventures do not possess any practicality in reality? Is not he suggesting that such explorations are limited only to a certain section of society, especially to those who do not have any work in their lives? Klemm goes on to comment that the entire film can be a dream sequence of Emmanuelle as it opens and closes, showing her in front of her mirror (Klemm).

EMMANUELLE’S SPATIAL JOURNEY: VOYEURISM, GAZES AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN COSMOPOLITAN AND LOCAL IN THAILAND

Voyeuristic male gaze refers to the practice of gaining sexual pleasure from watching others when they are naked or engaged in

sexual activity. Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, has discussed this phenomenon in detail. In the section “Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look”, Mulvey says that traditional film narratives represent the female body as an exhibition. The body thus becomes an object whose function is to provide visual pleasure to the subject, the looker. She decodes three mediums of looks that penetrate the female body on screen—the gaze of the camera towards the object, the gaze of the audience towards the object, and the gaze of the characters towards each other. While male gaze, in simple terms, refers to a male (subject) gazing upon a female (object), tourist gaze refers to a tourist gazing upon the exotic ‘other’.

The film *Emmanuelle* is set in Bangkok, infamously popular for being a hotspot of sex tourism. These destinations generally cater the western male tourists. They gaze and consume the ‘inferior’ exotic female other. Now, the problem is that the protagonist, the tourist in this film, is a woman. As the films fall under the erotica genre, creators have made a profitable negotiation. They have obviously shown the ‘exotic others’ as objects, but have also included the European heroine’s slender, white body in the package to enhance the sensational appeal of the final product. The solo traveller heroine is given some ‘adventures’ as well, which are designed to entertain the male audience or specifically the voyeuristic male gaze.

Emmanuelle’s experience in Bangkok presents the conflict between the cosmopolitan and local from the very beginning. In one of the initial scenes, John and Emmanuelle visit a local market to buy some flowers and a huge group of local children are seen begging to Emmanuelle with their chaotic voices. The men cutting the head of the chicken from its body scare her. She nearly faints and, in her hallucination, sees the huge crowd making faces at her, ready to attack. She says, “Let’s leave. It’s horrible. This boy with the chicken. This bagger! I hate this country” (Jaekin 8:34). The comment shows her hypocrisy and racial attitude towards the locals. She can visit a foreign country, can lead a high-class lifestyle,

and can have various food items made of chicken. But she cannot tolerate the way it is done. She cannot tolerate poverty!

John and Emmanuelle are shown to be open to extramarital affairs. This can be interpreted as an intentional attempt to show the liberal attitude of the European men in contrast to Asians. This becomes clearer in the first sexual encounter of the film between John and Emmanuelle. When the couple seems making love in their white bed, surrounded by a mosquito net, the native servants Ap and Noi peep through the window and enjoy the scene. The native man gets prompted by Emmanuelle's white figure and tries to take advantage of the female maid. The idyllic sensuality in the white, beautiful bedroom however vanishes and the scene takes a tensed turn when Ap chases Noi with all his power and goes on to rape her in an open jungle. The camera again focuses on the female maid's breast and genital but with a sheer contrast to the first one. Although the woman with her shy expressions and chasings seems interested in doing the intercourse, the man gives her no scope to open up. He is not interested in foreplay or anything. Rather he roughly tears her clothes with all his power and rapes her. The scene is a clear indication of the director's attempt to show that locals, more specifically Asians, are 'savages'. The scene also shows how women from the third world developing countries have a sharp contrast with the women of the European countries in terms of pleasure. And how their abilities depend on money, class and status.

The portrayal of the 'exotic other' should also be taken into consideration. All native women shown in the movie are either massage girls, bar dancers or maids. Native men are either drivers, servants or opium addicts. At the go-go bar, the local dancers undress themselves and the camera, again, pans around and zooms on their breasts, butts and genitalia. The most disturbing one occurs when, in the ping pong show, a woman penetrates a cigarette into her vagina several times to show the trick and 'entertain' the audience. Sylvia Kristel, in her book *Undressing Emmanuelle: A memoir*, has described how the infamous cigarette

scene was introduced by the producer, much against Jack Jaeckin's wishes, to attract wider attention from the audience, to include a 'shocking scene' like in *The Last Tango in Paris* (Kristel 141).

Leila Wimmer, however, in her article "Forever Emmanuelle: Sylvia Kristel and Softcore Cult Stardom", sees Bangkok as an empowering space. Wimmer says that "She begins her sexual and moral liberation from Western society's sexual taboos once she has travelled to the foreign space of Orient and is thus distanced and removed from home" (199). Although she fears the Orient—nearly fainting, hallucinating, and perceiving its people as 'others'—the final scene, in which Emmanuelle engages in a passionate encounter with a native Thai man, suggests the director's attempt to depict a union between the cosmopolitan and the local.

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