

**WOMEN'S BOUNDARIES IN «THE ENGLISH GOVERNESS  
AT THE SIAMESE COURT» BY ANNA H. LEONOWENS**

Women's boundaries in the Victorian era were blurred which is clearly manifested through confrontations between the English governess and the Royal Court as it is evinced in A. H. Leonowen's «The English Governess at the Siamese Court» (1870) [5].

Notwithstanding the fact that critics consider A. H. Leonowens to be a highly unreliable narrator her memoir is one of those works that focuses upon the woman question and proves the arising of the first wave of feminism [9]. It should be admitted that she was a feminist [2]. she deliberately interwove the canvas of her narrative with issues related to female dignity. On the surface, it might seem she tends to shed light on the subjugated status of Siamese women, however, when we plunge into speculation, it turns out that her intention concerns the generality of women. Thai historians claim that the women of the harem were mostly happy with their lot and slavery was a far more humane institution in 19<sup>th</sup> century Thailand than in the American South [9]. Those women were brought up so that they might not know their 'selves'; it was impossible owing to the fact that they were taught nothing else but obedience and readiness to meet men's wishes. In the Victorian era women's rights were extremely limited. Wives became properties to their husbands. Evidently, although female bodies were valued, they, essentially, did not belong to women and their inner world was neglected which meant «the consistent degradation of women» [6]. «Female bodies and health are essential aspects of both her dignity and our common humanity « [10]. Hence, women's situation in the Western world was similar to the one in the Eastern world.

The research endeavours to show the peculiarities of setting or even extending boundaries by a woman – a governess, in a highly male domineering society in Siam. The paper also examines the way these boundaries were violated.

Governesses were usually women from middle-class homes who had to go out to find work in order to support their families. This put them in a position where they could not get married [11]. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century governesses were in a vulnerable position since they were neither servants nor family members [7]. It must be highlighted that in contrast to the conventional image of Victorian governesses who, perhaps, due to their seclusion from society, were quite unprotected from men daring take liberties with them, the one portrayed in the book is a woman who, though implicitly fearing, ventured to stand her ground and expostulated with his Majesty as well as his other male subjects for she was unwilling to compromise her dignity. K. Rudolph stresses that women's dignity is ultimately about human dignity [10]. She is constantly referred to as «sir». K. Houston asserts that Anna is associated in traditional orientalist imageries with the Western male; she is by implication, rational, scientific, and thus masculine [4].

Rather than disappear, patriarchy appears to simply mutate and evolve, presenting itself slightly differently over time [8]. One of the key aspects of this research concerns the interpretation of the image of a house in A. H. Leonowens's memoir. The king promised the English governess, who was bound to educate his children, a house of her own. However, he was about to break the promise. Anna did not cease to insist on residing in a separate dwelling. Thus, a house is a symbol of a woman's own space, boundaries set by her, not the opposite gender. Almost sixty years later V. Woolf writes her essay «A Room of One's Own» where she speaks about a literal and figurative space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by men [1]. Both of these women underscore the importance for any woman to have her own space.

## References

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