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“The other side of paradise”: Sightseeing, travel
and transition in Rattawut Lapcharoensap’s short stories

“Inna strona raj” — zwiedzanie, podróż i przejście w opowiadaniach Rattawuta Lapcharoensapa

SUMMARY

In the short story collection *Sightseeing* (2005) a young Thai-American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap attempts to give Western reader an insight into contemporary Thailand hidden beyond the stereotypes of the exotic paradise propagated by the tourist industry. The article focuses on three stories: *Farangs*, *Sightseeing*, and *Priscilla the Cambodian*, exploring their central themes: tourism and travel, post-colonial relationship between the natives and the visitors, transition from childhood to maturity. All stories are narrated by adolescent narrators trying to negotiate both their position in the family and their stance in relation to the Western values, practices and elements of popular culture. The Thai-American narrator in *Farangs* aspires to be treated as equal by the foreign tourists yet neither his perfect English nor familiarity with American cultural codes can guarantee that. For the characters in another story, a cultural practice alien to them – titular “sightseeing” – becomes a point of departure for a metaphysical journey in search of a new sense of life. *Priscilla the Cambodian* focuses on the tension and hostility between the Cambodian refugees and the local Thai community, showing how children, unlike adults, are able to go beyond fear and prejudice in their relations with the “Other”.

Keywords: modern Thailand, the stereotype of the exotic paradise, the tourism industry, post-colonial aspects of tourism, entering into adulthood, American cultural codes, metaphysical journey, the meaning of life

When in 2005 Rattawut Lapcharoensap, a young Thai-American writer published his bestselling first collection of short stories titled *Sightseeing*,¹ some re-

¹ Rattawut Lapcharoensap was born in Chicago in 1979, raised in Bangkok and educated in the USA. At present he lives in New York. *Sightseeing*, his collection of short stories, won the Asian American Literary Award and was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award. *Sightseeing* has been translated into twelve languages, including Polish and has been published under the title *Nie każ*

viewers were quick to point out that these stories take Western readers on a virtual tour through contemporary Thailand, showing them the country beyond clichéd stereotypes of the exotic paradise.² An insider's perspective seems especially valid, since, as one critic notes, "Thailand exists in Western countries only as a tourist brochure, an embodiment of hedonism and a promise for initiation into the secrets of the "Orient".³ The author himself explained what motivated him in one of the interviews: "Many of the stories were partly born out of a certain frustration with depictions of Thais and Thailand in contemporary English-language literature. The Thailand I often encountered seemed a far cry from the Thailand I thought I knew, the Thailand I loved".⁴ Thus, Lapcharoensap's collection is an attempt to give the readers an intimate insight into some aspects of the contemporary Thai life and culture. His role is that of the guide as well as interpreter, a position typical of a post-colonial writer "whose gaze is turned in two directions": towards his own people and towards Western readers.⁵

Travel in its various forms – as tourism, escape, exploration and a rite of passage – features prominently in several of the stories. In *Farangs* the author offers a satirical portrait of tourist-native relations. In *Sightseeing*, the titular story, a Thai businesswoman and her son go on a summer trip. "We'll be just like the tourists,"⁶ the mother explains, but in fact the journey becomes a liminal experience they both need to adapt to changes in their lives. In another story, *Priscilla the Cambodian*, two eleven-year-old boys from a poor neighborhood get on the bikes and go no further than a Cambodian refugee camp on the other side of the railway tracks and yet this trip is enough to bring them in contact with what their parents consider the threatening community of the "Other". Finally, in *Don't Let Me Die in This Place*, a half-paralyzed, elderly American travels between cultures, unwillingly changing a familiar world of American suburban life for a hot apartment in Bangkok where he finds it extremely hard to adapt both to a new place and to his son's foreign family. In all these stories Lapcharoensap's first-person narrators are in transit, both literally and metaphorically, negotiating their position between

mi tutaj umierać (Vesper, Poznań 2006). In 2007 Lapcharoensap was named one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists.

² See, for example: D. Strauss, 'Sightseeing': *Babes in Thailand*, "The New York Times Book Review" January 9, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/09/books/review/09STRAUSS.html?ref=bookreviews> (accessed September 15, 2011).

³ R. Tzanelli, *Real Western Fantasies: Portrait of a Tourist Imagination in 'The Beach'* (2000) "Mobilities" 1, no. 1 (2006), 126.

⁴ T. Hong, *Clint Eastwood, Summer Love and Cockfighting* January 21, 2005. <http://bookdragonreviews.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/asianweek-2005-01-21-rattawut-lapcharoensap-sightseeing1.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2011).

⁵ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London 2002, 60.

⁶ R. Lapcharoensap, *Sightseeing. Stories*, Grove Press, New York, 2005, 72.

the West and the East, moving from adolescence to maturity, traveling as tourists or acting as self-appointed guides. Thus, the stories explore the significance and transforming potential of travel which can jolt the characters out of the everyday routine and affect their future lives in profound and unexpected ways.

In the opening story of the collection – *Farangs* (a slang expression for foreigners) the author gives voice to those who usually remain silent in travel books written by white travelers for the white readers – the story is told from the perspective of a native teenage boy employed in the local hotel. This postcolonial perspective is the same as adopted by Jamaica Kincaid in her well known 1988 travel essay *A Small Place*, where she deconstructs tourists’ fantasies of her native Antigua and rejects tourism as another form of imperialism.⁷ Though more humorous and less angry in tone, *Farangs*, just like Kincaid’s book, shows how the natives perceive the tourists and how both parties are likely to misread/ misinterpret each other. The similarity between these two texts is not accidental since Lapcharoensap praises *A Small Place* in one of the interviews, thus indirectly pointing to a possible source of inspiration for his fictional rendering of the same problem.⁸ Both texts wish to make Western readers – potential tourists – open to another perspective, hoping such openness would encourage them to interrogate their own position as visitors to developing countries and would make them aware of power relations inherent in tourist industry.

The story opens with a presentation of foreign tourists who come to the Island where the narrator lives. Their appearance, their national characteristics and weaknesses have been neatly enumerated and mercilessly assessed.

This is how we count the days. June: the Germans come to the island – football cleats, big T-shirts, thick tongues – speaking like spitting. July: the Italians, the French, the British, the Americans. The Italians like pad thai, its affinity with spaghetti. They like light fabrics, sunglasses, leather sandals. The French like plump girls, rambutans, disco music, baring their breasts. The British are here to work on their pasty complexions, their penchant for hashish. Americans are the fattest, the stingiest of the bunch. [...] They are also the worst drunks.

Farangs descend upon the Island craving for sunshine, scenic beauty, exotic food, cheap sex and drugs. Like summer birds, they arrive at a strictly defined time in the holiday season, thus allowing the natives to “count the days” according to their arrival. It should be emphasized that in this humorous, quasi-anthropological description the roles get reversed, it is a native voice that offers us an appraisal of strange “tribes” and their “exotic” customs, thus subverting generic conventions of colonial travel writing. At the same time, the opening paragraph reminds the readers that every tourist is in fact a “stranger” in the anthropologi-

⁷ J. Kincaid, *A Small Place*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1988).

⁸ Interview with Rattawut Lapcharoensap, http://www.thejohnfox.com/bookfox/2007/05/interview_with_.html (accessed September 15, 2011).

cal sense, being “a temporary sojourner who does not share the essential qualities of host group life”.⁹ In their analysis of host-guest transactions, anthropologists emphasize that both guests and their hosts have a tendency “to generalize and categorize” each other “treat[ing] each other as types but also as objects”, an attitude which precludes personal involvement and may also lead to the abuse of power on the guest’s side, a mechanism familiar from the colonial times.¹⁰

Is modern tourism a form of imperialism? Speaking on the subject, Lapcharoensap says: “the genealogy you indicate is a kind of popular truism by now— first the missionaries, then the colonizing armies, then the tourists”.¹¹ Just like their 19th-century imperial predecessors, contemporary tourists act in their own self-interest, bent on satisfying their desires, whatever they may be. They are unlikely to go beyond stereotyped myths of Thailand as a sensual paradise – a legacy of the Orientalist discourse – and remain unmoved by the country’s rich cultural heritage. The narrator’s mother, who is a hotel owner, sums up her guest’s escapist fantasies in a caustic remark:

Pussy and elephants. That’s all these people want. [...] You give them history, temples, pagodas, traditional dance, floating market, seafood curry, tapioca desserts, silk weaving cooperatives, but all they really want is to ride some hulking gray beast like a bunch of wildmen and to pant over girls and to lie there half-dead getting skin cancer on the beach”.¹²

From the native perspective, the tourist attitude is offensive and demeaning. The narrator and his mother’s view of *farangs* invokes Kincaid’s vitriolic descriptions of a tourist as “an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that people who inhabit this place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness”.¹³

Direct involvement in the tourist services makes the natives painfully aware of incongruities and inequalities between themselves and *farangs*. The awareness of her subservient position makes the mother cynical and embittered but her son’s feelings are more ambivalent, ranging from envy to rage, which erupts in the final scene.

As a teenager and half-American by birth, the narrator is caught between his mother’s resentment of foreigners and his own fascination with the American popular culture and the ideals it promotes. “In the mid-19th century, the British fa-

⁹ V. L. Smith, *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1989, p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹ Interview with Rattawat Lapcharoensap, http://www.thejohnfox.com/bookfox/2007/05/interview_with_.html (accessed September 15, 2011).

¹² R. Lapcharoensap, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹³ J. Kincaid, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

mously sent their Bible and Shakespeare and cricket round the world; now a more international kind of Empire is sending Madonna and the Simpsons and Brad Pitt”.¹⁴ Though small, the Island is obviously within the West’s cultural reach. The narrator is a fan of Rambo movies broadcast regularly on local TV and he has even named his pet pig Clint Eastwood. The choice of idols speaks not only about the grip of American popular culture on teenagers in the global village but it also reveals how easily its icons are accepted as one’s own. Characters played by Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone embody the traditional ideal of an American white man who asserts his masculinity in combat. This is the ideal the narrator embraces, hoping, through exercise, to transform his “soft” and “skinny” adolescent body into “a pillar of strength and stamina”.¹⁵ But his admiration for lone fighters of American movies may also have a psychological dimension as an expression of longing for his absent father, who was an American soldier.

As a bilingual Thai-American, the narrator is heir to both cultures but mixed blood also makes him “a mongrel,” as his uncle calls him, affecting his position in the local community. His status throughout the story shifts between insider (Thai) and outsider (Thai-American); somebody who wants to find a place for himself in both cultures which occasionally leads to misunderstanding and even rejection. For example, when the narrator invites Lizzie, a pretty American girl, for an elephant ride, his uncle is offended by the fact that Lizzie is wearing a bikini. “Need I remind you, boy, that the elephant is our national symbol? Sometimes I think your stubborn farang half keeps you from understanding this. You should be ashamed of yourself”.¹⁶ Clearly, uncle Mongkhon dismisses Lizzie as another bad mannered tourist unaware of cultural differences between America and the country she visits. But he blames the narrator, who is definitely aware of the proper dress code and behavior, for not telling her how to behave. Such an attitude is read by the uncle as the subversive questioning of the Thai tradition, attributed to the influence of foreign blood.

The “farang half” of his identity manifests itself also in the narrator’s propensity to fall in love with pretty American tourists. In a sense, by getting involved with Pamela, Angela, Stephanie, Joy and Lizzie, the narrator repeats the family history and constantly reminds his exasperated mother of her own past mistake – falling in love with a foreigner who eventually abandoned her and a small son. On the one hand, the repetitive nature of his infatuations and the fact that he gets over them quickly, allows us to suspect that the narrator is simply capitalizing on the American girls’ desires to fulfill the “sex and elephants” fantasy. On the other hand, the narrator claims he keeps looking for “Romeo and Juliet love,” believing

¹⁴ P. Iyer, *Why we travel?*, <http://www.salon.com/travel/feature/2000/03/18/why> (accessed September 15, 2011).

¹⁵ R. Lapcharoensap, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

it might be his only chance to get away from the native island.¹⁷ Unwillingness to get romantically involved with Thai girls may also stem out of his identity problems: “Something about the way I look. I don’t think my nose is flat enough”, as he explains.¹⁸

In a humorous way, *Farangs* reminds us that both tourists and natives stick to certain stereotypical expectations about each other and these stereotypes actually prevent effective communication between them. Even the common language both parties use – English – becomes not a vehicle of communication but rather a tool for keeping up false appearances. For example, while asking Lizzie out, the narrator addresses her formally as Miss Elizabeth and uses old-fashioned language of a well-educated English gentleman, which sounds funny: “This may seem rather presumptuous, but would you like to go for an elephant ride with me today”.¹⁹ The narrator’s formal English stands in contrast to his friend’s pidgin: “Everything okay, madam. Don’t worry, be happy. My uncle, he just say elephants very terrified of your breasts,” and clearly indicates the narrator does not wish to be perceived as a typical native who speaks ungrammatically.²⁰ His uncle, on the other hand, deliberately leaves business advertisement grammatically incorrect – “Come experience the natural beauty of forest with the amazing view of ocean and splendid horizon from elephant’s back!” – because he knows his guests find it charming.²¹ Uncle Monghan believes that tourists do not expect their exotic hosts to be clever, witty or ironic, to speak good English or to know much about the world and so he conforms to the stereotype of a local simpleton, muttering sneering comments aside in Thai. In both cases, the manner of speaking or writing and the choice of vocabulary are tools used by the natives to create a certain image of themselves, a persona they could employ to their advantage in dealings with *farangs*.

A similar strategy has already proved successful when the narrator was eleven and invented a performance based on the myth of a feral child – Tarzan. Dressed only in loin cloths, he and his friend advertised themselves as Miraculous Monkey Boys and made money climbing trees to fetch coconuts for tourists who would marvel at their agility. “A product of our Island environment, they’d say, as if it was due to something in the water and not the fact that we spent hours practicing in Surachai backyard”.²² In a speech given before every performance the narrator explained in perfect English that he was the “American boy shipwrecked on the Island as an infant. With both parents dead, [he] was raised in the jungle by family

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

of gibbons”.²³ Adopting clichéd elements from American popular culture, the narrator and his friend created a profitable enterprise, thus offering tourists a version of the myth they could recognize and enjoy. In the colonial times such “process of symbolic exchange involving the reindigenization of imported forms”,²⁴ which has been also named “transculturation,” was a possible way of responding to the cultural dominance of the imperial, metropolitan culture. “While subjugated peoples,” according to Pratt, “cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for”.²⁵ The phrase “what they use it for” seems crucial in this definition, as the boys first employ their “Tarzan” skills to earn money but later on take advantage of them while attacking the tourists.

Surprisingly, a fantasy created to entertain white visitors is eventually used against them. When at the end of the story a group of drunk American youngsters, including Lizzie’s obnoxious boyfriend, attacks and chases the pet pig, Clint Eastwood, the narrator and his friend resort to Miraculous Monkey Boys skills and start bombarding them with mangoes.

Our mangoes sail through the night air. Some of them miss, but some meet their targets squarely in the face, on the head, in the abdomen. Some of the mangoes hit Lizzie by accident, but I don’t really care anymore, I’m not really aiming. I am climbing through that tree like a gibbon, swinging gracefully between the branches, grabbing any piece of fruit [...] that I can get my hand on. Surachai starts to whoop like a monkey and I join him in the chorus.²⁶

There seems to be a symbolical significance in the fact that in this final scene of confrontation with intruders the boys undress, climb the tree and start acting on well-practiced skills and instinct rather than reason. Paradoxically, they are “behaving like monkeys,” as if in confirmation of a racist accusation that was commonly used against native people in the colonial times.²⁷ However, this wild, “uncivilized” behavior finally liberates them from the subservient position of a smiling host, allowing them to express pent up frustration and rage with their “civilized” guests and their ways. Moreover, a sense of elation they feel while bombarding the Americans reveal that symbolically, the boys are finally paying *farangs* back for their racism, ignorance and impertinence.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁴ P. Holland, G. Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1998, p. 61.

²⁵ M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p. 6.

²⁶ R. Lapcharoensap, p. 23.

²⁷ In Kincaid’s book these words are spoken by an Irish schoolteacher to a group of native schoolgirls, p. 26.

Thus, the last scene of the story makes the readers aware that the natives in “Paradise” are not as happy as they seem, and they may in fact hold grudges against their economically privileged western visitors. As Jamaica Kincaid’s writes in *A Small Place*, “most natives in the world – cannot go anywhere. [...] they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go – so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you”.²⁸ Indeed, one of the characters in *Sightseeing* captures this sense of exclusion saying: “Thailand [is] only a paradise for fools and farangs, for criminals and foreigners”.

The story which gives its title to the collection – *Sightseeing* – focuses on a rare occasion when the natives become tourists themselves. Mother and son set out to see Koh Lukmak, the last of Andaman Islands, “a tiny fortress of forest and stone” famous for its lovely beaches and exotic fishes swimming in turquoise water.²⁹ The narrator explains his mother made this decision after years of looking at the picture of Koh Lukmak her boss had stuck on the office bulletin board. “If paradise is really out there, so close to home, she might as well go and see for herself”.³⁰ As we soon learn, the mother is going blind and this is her first and last chance “to see for herself” the beauty of her own country. So, even though she claims they will be “sightseeing [...] just like the tourists”, motivations and circumstances of their journey are radically different from tourists’ carefree pursuit of pleasure and rest.

Sightseeing is a story about looking and seeing, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Paradoxically, from an anthropological perspective, making somebody blind is the highest form of punishment as it excludes the criminal from the order of this world and symbolically puts him in the darkness of the underworld. On the other hand, blindness, which, in a sense, frees one from seeing everyday reality, hints at the possibility of acquiring an insight into another, spiritual or metaphysical, reality, into the sphere of *sacrum*.³¹ The mother’s illness is caused by the lack of foresight – as a workaholic businesswoman who disregards future consequences of her lifestyle, she has ignored repeated, heavy migraines which finally led to the irrevocable damage of optic nerves. As a result, she has been “punished” and her carefully constructed life is now breaking apart, which is symbolically represented by her faltering vision. “A cold white flash flooded her eyes, and when her eyes refocused, it was like the world was breaking into a million tiny pieces. She had to shut her eyes for a while before the shattered world rearranged itself”.³² As the blindness progresses, the center of her vision is obliterated by a

²⁸ J. Kincaid, p. 19.

²⁹ R. Lapcharoensap, p. 72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³¹ P. Kowalski, *Kultura magiczna. Omen, przesąd, znaczenie*, PWN, Warszawa, 2007), p. 387.

³² R. Lapcharoensap, p. 88.

black dot, compared to a black flower growing bigger every day. The growing black flower is clearly evocative of death and thus the end of her former life. Will the mother be able to look beyond “the black dot”, will she manage to reorganize her life priorities and find value in the life of the blind, will she allow her son to become her eyes? These are some of the questions which need to be resolved as the trip progresses.

Clearly, the fact of the mother’s approaching blindness makes their holiday experience laden with meaning absent from ordinary tourists’ trips. First of all, both characters realize this holiday would have never happened if their lives had simply followed their ordinary course. Secondly, they feel this journey is a chance for both of them to work out a new kind of relationship and accept the inevitable changes. Finally, the direction of this journey, from center to the border of the world, from metropolitan Bangkok to the island “so small it rarely appears on most maps” is also significant.³³ As it becomes clear towards the end of the story, mother and son leave the mundane reality and familiar world of home to reach its border and venture beyond it. Indeed, like *farangs* they are looking for a paradise but it is possible that their paradise is located not in this world but in another. Thus, a seemingly ordinary tourist trip takes on, at one point, truly mythical dimensions, it becomes a liminal experience to facilitate transition from one stage of life to another.

However, when the journey begins, both mother and son are unwilling to let go of the former selves, unwilling to part with dreams and plans for the future. For a successful and dedicated businesswoman, the loss of sight means the end of her professional career and, in the future, constant dependence on someone’s help. Her son, in turn, has been dreaming about an independent life in a small university college up north. Throughout the summer, he has been studying maps, brochures and course guides sent by the college. “I cannot look at those maps without imagining my mother blind and alone in the house, and I’m starting to wonder, for the first time in my life, about what kind of son I really am”.³⁴

Both mother and son embark on this journey burdened with a sense of loss, scared and uncertain how to behave and talk to each other. The son feels guilty for not paying attention to the first symptoms of blindness; he is silent and brooding for most of the time. The mother, in turn, continues to be bossy and patronizing, hiding her eyes behind the fake Armani sunglasses and her true emotions behind the mask of a professional woman who is always in control. A breakthrough in their relationship occurs when, in a bout of seasickness, she loses both a control of her body and the sunglasses, a symbolical representation of the mask of a tourist that she wears. Exposed to pitiful glances of *farangs* on the deck, the moth-

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

er, for the first time in life, admits her vulnerability and physical weakness and accepts her son's help.

When they finally reach Trawen – the last island before their destination, everything is exactly as they have expected: “the water like a clear skin stretched over the earth; the sand fine and white and soft as a pillow; the schools of tiny rainbow fishes moving in quick unison”.³⁵ The last scene of the story takes place in this idyllic scenery. The son wakes up at night to find his mother gone. He sees her in a distance, alone, an oil lantern in hand, walking through shallow water and shadows towards a small island with no name. According to local legends, this island is inhabited by the spirits of the dead who sometimes manifest their presence with tiny orange lights. “It's my mother walking on water (...) It's my mother on an island with no name” the son repeats to reassure himself he is not seeing a ghost.³⁶

The symbolical reading of this scene would suggest that the mother is about to enter another world, the world of the spirits, by crossing the boundary between life and death. Some evidence in the story leads us to believe that it may be a suicidal attempt which is to look like an accident. The mother considers herself a burden which needs to be removed from her son's life to make him free to choose whatever he wants. Earlier in the story the mother says: “It's enough that I'm going blind, luk. I don't want you to suffer, too. Besides. [...] I'm not dying here, luk. I'm just going blind. Just remember that. There is a big difference – a whole world of difference – even if both of those things happen to good people every day”.³⁷ This statement, however, leaves the readers unconvinced, since it reveals the mother is far from accepting her illness and, in fact, she may choose death as a final solution to her problem.

The characters never reach Koh Lukmak, the tiny island with no name becomes instead the final stage of their trip. It is at this point that the trip takes on a mythical dimension. The mother is sitting on the island, waiting to die or to be saved. The son needs to find a safe passage which connects the two worlds. “And then I see it. I see a thin luminous line *out of the corner of my eye*. I see a thread running faintly across the bay. An opaque sandbar stretched between the islands like an exposed vein” (emphasis mine).³⁸

Incidentally, this is not the first narrow path surrounded by an ocean that they take. The end of the story brings us back to the beginning, their first road resembles the last because when they have set out for Andaman Islands, the train has been going though a peninsula as thin as a needle. By looking straight ahead

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

they were able to see “out of the corner of the eye” two oceans at a single glance, a unique sight few people can enjoy in a lifetime.³⁹ The narrator reveals that in one hundred years, the road on the peninsula will be swallowed by the oceans. Thus, to see these temporary passages – the first one and the last one – you need to look in a special way and to enter them you need to be present at a precise moment in time. These qualities seem to suggest the sandbar may be read as a passage to another world. Like Orpheus who followed Eurydice to the underworld, the son has to save the mother by bringing her safely back into the world of the living and into his life. The story ends with these words: “I’m walking onto the sandbar, warm waves licking up across my bare feet, out to watch the sun rise with Ma, and then to bring her back before the tide heaves, before the ocean rises, before this sand becomes the seafloor again”.⁴⁰ Called upon to save a parent, the son answers the call in a conscious, mature way. Though the ending is open, the decided tone of the narrator’s words and his hope to watch a sunrise together, allows the reader to believe that he will succeed and what awaits them is indeed new life not death.

The mother and son in *Sightseeing* make a long and arduous trip in search of themselves but Lapcharoensap proves that broadening your horizons does not always necessitate going to a distant place. Just like any other developing country, contemporary Thailand is a place where different ethnic groups meet and clash when immigrants, exiles and refugees try to find a better livelihood among the Thais. This is a subject of yet another story in the collection, *Priscilla the Cambodian*, in which the author delves into gradations of poverty on the outskirts of a big metropolis. In this story, two eleven-year-old boys befriend a Cambodian girl from a nearby refugee shantytown. Ostensibly, the main conflict in the story is between the Thais and the Cambodians, but in fact it centers on the clash between childish curiosity and openness, which help to overcome cultural barriers, and adult prejudice and hostility, which leads to violence.

The Thais resist the arrival of refugees because they believe it will bring ruin to their community. “[W]e’d be living in the middle of a slum soon” predicts the narrator’s father grimly and the mother connects the presence of refugees with a decline of their housing development and blames them for a plague of rats. In fact, the presence of refugees underscores the existing problems of the host community. “By that time the prognosis was already bad. The factories had moved to the Philippines and Malaysia. Mother was reduced to sewing panty hose out of a Chinese woman’s house. Father carried concrete beams at a construction site for minimum wage”.⁴¹ Naturally, the Cambodians are not responsible for the economic crisis which affects the working-class Thais but their vulnerability makes them

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

a perfect scapegoat. Growing frustration and anger leads to a violent outbreak and the local men burn the Cambodian shantytown, driving the refugees out.

The adults of the host community perceive the Cambodians as uncivilized, dirty, and abject “Others”, and the children initially adopt the same attitude, based on fear and prejudice. The narrator wanders, for example, whether “Khmer Rouge” is a bad disease like cancer and dismisses Cambodian language as “that gibberish”.⁴² However, the situation changes when the boys befriend Priscilla, named after Elvis Presley’s wife, a daughter of a desperate dentist who preserved the family assets by covering the girls’ teeth in gold. “The only thing I ever learned about wealth was Priscilla the Cambodian’s beautiful teeth” says the narrator in the opening sentence of the story. Paradoxically, this poor girl, deprived of home and homeland, is richer than any of them. Unlike the Thai adults who are unwilling to share even the same land with the refugees, Cambodian mother and daughter invite the boys to their shack, offer them food and shelter. Priscilla’s generosity is best manifested in the farewell scene when she gives each of the boys a golden tooth as a good-bye gift.

This is a hard moment for the boys who came to treat her as a younger sister and who know perfectly well that all the wild stories about Cambodians breeding rats or “shitting and pissing wherever they please” are simply absurd.⁴³ Yet, for all his sympathy for Priscilla and her mother, the narrator could not find enough courage to speak out for them in front of adults, aware that would have changed the decision of angry, drunken men. When the refugees are leaving, the narrator gets on a bike and simply runs away, overwhelmed with powerful feelings of grief and shame. “I went farther from my house that morning than I’d ever been on my own”.⁴⁴

When he finally stops, he finds himself no longer “at home,” even though he has never left his home city. It was enough to go a few miles to enter a foreign world of business district where a poorly-dressed child is immediately classified as a beggar by elegant passers-by. Their condescending looks indicate the boy is not welcomed in this place, just like the Cambodians were not wanted in his own suburb. In fact, in the conclusion of the story the narrator himself is treated like “the Other,” and experiences first hand how easily one may become an outcast, as defenseless against hostility and violence among one’s own people as refugees are among strangers.

For all the differences, the lives of characters in *Farangs*, *Sightseeing*, and *Priscilla the Cambodian* have been affected by traveling or meeting those who travel. Natives and transients, parents and children play hosts to tourists or refugees or go sightseeing in their own country. Yet, they all are, to some extent,

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

people in a state of transition, trying to learn from travel experiences something about themselves and others. As the stories reveal, living in a country which is one of the world's most favorite tourist destinations can be both a blessing and a curse. These young Thais need to negotiate their position with reference to foreign visitors and the cultural luggage they bring. As the stories reveal, Western ideas, values, patterns of behavior and products of popular culture can be accepted or rejected, imitated, or even selectively incorporated into one's worldview.

As a Thai-American, the main character in *Farangs* occupies a peculiar position in between the two cultures, caught between adolescent fascination with American girls and movies and his mother's stern disapproval of both. In his case, the consequences of cross-cultural exchanges with *farangs* are of two kinds. On the one hand, tourists inspire the narrator to develop entrepreneurial skills and offer a chance, even if illusory, of leaving the island. However, his emotional involvement with foreigners brings also humiliation, frustration, and anger, so powerfully manifested in the final scene of the story. The narrator's status is no better than a position of a colonial subject, who has wholeheartedly internalized much of the colonizer's dominant culture and thus expects to be admitted into the colonizer's world on equal terms. The boy hopes that an American father, good manners and perfect English would be enough to win love and respect of any American girl. Such belief seems naïve; while he disregards his status of a “native” as insignificant the western girls keep it firmly in mind, treating an exotic lover as just one more holiday attraction.

The characters in *Sightseeing* adopt a different, more cautious, approach to tourists and Western culture they represent. The natives, mother and son, choose sightseeing – a cultural practice alien to them – not so much to imitate it but rather adapt it to their own purposes. In this case, a physical movement in space coexists with a metaphysical journey towards their destiny. The novel experience of a long and arduous journey towards a tiny island brings mother and son closer, breaking the defense lines they have constructed in former lives. Finally, they are made to face each other and their greatest weaknesses and fears. Thus, sightseeing becomes a point of departure for a voyage into oneself, into blindness and death, into another dimension and hopefully, beyond.

In *Priscilla the Cambodian* Lapcharoensap reminds his Western readers that in the contemporary world not all travel is voluntary or temporary, but, in fact, masses of people are forced to relocate and begin their lives elsewhere. The reasons may be political or economic but exiles, refugees or asylum seekers are rarely welcomed, wherever they appear. At the same time, their arrival in one's neighborhood can become an occasion for an authentic contact between the locals and the newcomers, provided both sides are willing to go beyond their fear and prejudice of the “Other.” Though their friendship is short-lasting, a sense of broth-

erhood with a refugee girl becomes a lesson in tolerance and the narrator's own involuntary trip into the alien world of inner city district completes his education on what it means to be an outcast. The narrator personally experiences a precarious status of a poor man anywhere in the world – even in his own country he is treated as a second-class citizen.

To sum up – reading the stories in *Sightseeing* is, for a Western reader, a chance to get to know “the other side of paradise,” to see glimpses of the 21st century Thailand beyond its exoticized stereotypes present in the tourists brochures. Lapchareonsap gives voice to the young Thais, who, surprisingly, speak in the same way as their Western counterparts, watch the same movies and buy the same products. However, it will be a mistake to assume that cultural export-import which affects these teenagers and creates the global village reality in which we all live simultaneously leads to a deeper understanding between people from different cultures. As Holland and Huggan point out: “media simulations and instant information transfer create the illusion that cultural distance can conveniently be removed; meanwhile, cultural products from both East and West circulate in the global marketplace, creating the further illusion that cultural difference, once consumed, is understood”.⁴⁵ Lapchareonsap's stories explore the consequences of this illusion, showing how the Westerners and the Asians remain, for better or worse, producers and consumers of each others' fictions, rarely determined enough to explore the depths of cultural difference. Yet *Sightseeing* also proves that inevitable collisions between East and West, parents and children, natives and visitors may occasionally lead to moments of real illumination and self-discovery.

STRESZCZENIE

Zbiór opowiadań *Sightseeing* (2005, wyd. pol. *Nie każ mi tutaj umierać*, 2007), autorstwa młodego tajsko-amerykańskiego pisarza Rattawuta Lapchareonsapa, jest próbą ukazania zachodniemu czytelnikowi współczesnej Tajlandii, ukrytej za stereotypowymi wyobrażeniami egzotycznego raję propagowanymi przez przemysł turystyczny. Tematyka trzech wybranych opowiadań: *Farangowie*, *Zwiedzanie* i *Kambodżanka Pryscylla* oscyluje wokół post-kolonialnych aspektów turystyki i problemów związanych z wchodzeniem w dorosłość. Nastoletni narratorzy próbują ustalić swoje pozycje w rodzinie, a jednocześnie odnaleźć się w rzeczywistości podlegającej stałemu wpływowi zachodnich wartości, praktyk i pop-kultury. Bohater *Farangów*, jako pół-Amerykanin, pragnie być postrzegany przez białych turystów jako im równy, lecz ani perfekcyjnie opanowany angielski, ani znajomość amerykańskich kodów kulturowych nie mogą mu tego zapewnić. Dla bohaterów innego opowiadania, zaadoptowana przez nich obca kulturowo praktyka zwiedzania staje się punktem wyjścia do rozpoczęcia metafizycznej podróży w poszukiwaniu nowego sensu życia. *Kambodżanka Pryscylla* ukazuje napięcie i wrogość między kambodżańskimi uchodźcami i lokalną społecznością tajską, wrogość, z którą są w stanie zmierzyć się jedynie dzieci, umiejące wyjść poza strach i uprzedzenie w kontaktach z „Innym”.

⁴⁵ P. Holland, G. Huggan, *op. cit.*, p. 62.