

**FEMALE SEX TOURISM IN THE CARIBBEAN – A “FAIR TRADE”  
OR A NEW KIND OF COLONIAL EXPLOITATION? – TANIKA  
GUPTA’S *SUGAR MUMMIES* AND DEBBIE TUCKER GREEN’S  
*TRADE***

**HILDEGARD KLEIN**

**University of Málaga, Spain**

**29071 Málaga, Spain**

**hklein@uma.es**

**Abstract:** *The above-mentioned authors offer a challenging and revealing study of the enjoyments and drawbacks of female sex tourism. I examine the interactions between white female tourists and local black men from the context of post-colonialism, asking whether these encounters can be considered a “fair trade” or whether they are the neo-colonising of people in this ex-slave society.*

**Keywords:** *Exploitation, fair trade, female sex tourism, neo-colonialism, slavery.*

## **1. Introduction – An outline of Female Sex Tourism**

“Thought it was just men who flew abroad for squalid sexual kicks?”  
Julie Bindel (2006)

Women’s entry into the growing markets of prostitution was fuelled by the sudden increase of trans-national leisure travel in the 1960s, with Northern European women heading towards Mediterranean beaches for sun and fun. Here we should mention the transforming experience of bored housewife Shirley Valentine, who left her family at home with a note “Gone to Greece back in two weeks”. Thus Shirley swaps domestic drudgery for

romance and sex on a Greek island. (*Shirley Valentine*, written by Willy Russell, was first performed as a one-woman show in 1986, followed by a successful film version released in 1989, starring Pauline Collins and Tom Conti).

Many independent professional women, rather than bored housewives, have progressed beyond the scenery of the Mediterranean to more exotic places such as East Africa, Asia or the Anglophone Caribbean. A report in the *Escape Artist Travel* magazine states that “[e]ach year as many as 600,000 women from western countries engage in sex tourism” (Bindel 2013:5). Negril beach with its seven miles of white sand, palm trees and crystalline sea is the destination of an estimated 80,000 single British women, who “flock to the island every year and use the services of around 200 men” (Martin 2006:1). Sex tourism has become part of the global economy and is expected to expand even more in years to come.

In an interview (Gardner 2006:2) the playwright Tanika Gupta regretted that female sex tourism was “a still largely underdiscussed subject”, which induced her to write *Sugar Mummies*. In recent years, however, this modern-day phenomenon has been discussed by journalists, academics, playwrights and film directors. The topic appears in Laurent Gantet’s film *Vers le sud* (*Heading South*, 2006) about sex tourism in Seventies Haiti, where a disillusioned single 55-year-old English professor “finds a new, more rewarding passion in the bodies of young black men which [...] can be bought for sums trifling to the affluent” (Martin 2006:2). Among writings on the subject one should mention Jeanette Belliveau’s book *Romance on the Road: Travelling Women Who Love Foreign Men* (2006) as it narrates her own experience as a former sex traveller.

Most women tourists are middle-aged single travellers from a variety of social backgrounds, yet they are always in a privileged economic position compared to the impoverished local men they *use* or *abuse* for their sexual pleasure in an exotic land. Brochures for the Caribbean promulgate “the image of Caribbean sexuality to seduce and entice potential clients” (Kempadoo 2004:134). Women’s sexual practice differs from that of their male counterparts, who as a rule use the services of an organised sex industry that offers sex shows, strip clubs and the like as a marketplace to pick their sexual partners. Instead, women look for a holiday experience on the beach with black men who know how to flatter and seduce them. This female sex tourism – intergenerational and interracial – is euphemistically classified as “romance tourism” since the women view their liaison with local males in terms of an amorous relationship rather than as a monetary prostitute-client transaction. In fact, the men are rarely referred to as “prostitutes” but rather as “beach boys” or “boyfriends”. Sánchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson suggest that the reason many female tourists are able to delude themselves into believing they are not prostitute users lies in their racialised power over the men: “Racist ideas about black men being hypersexual and unable to control their sexuality enable them to explain to themselves why such young and desirable men would be eager for sex with older and/or overweight women, without having to think that their partners are interested in them only for economic reasons” (in Bindel 2003).

### **1.1. Female sex tourism and postcolonialism**

In her study of female sex tourism in Barbados analysed from a postcolonial perspective, Phillips (2008:202) notes that this type of tourism “plays a great part in the othering and neocolonizing of people” and must be

understood from the context of postcolonialism. Gupta (Gardner 2006:4) expresses similar thoughts: “You can [...] see it as white people colonising and objectifying black sexuality. It’s almost like a return to the slave days, with white women checking out the men’s teeth, limbs and dicks before they buy”.

Kempadoo argues that “[t]oday’s prostitution in the Caribbean islands relates directly to their colonial history (1999:5 in Williams 2011:4), while Williams states that “[n]orth American and European imperialism – has played a primary role in the development of their sex trade industries” (4). Pratt (2009 in Williams 2011:9) introduces the concept of the contact zone, that is, the setting where the colonisers come into contact with the local people and where we can observe a gross imbalance of power, as the tourist has an advantage over the sex worker both economically and by their assumption of the label “tourist”. Undoubtedly, the major motivation of the sex workers, or beach boys, is the monetary aspect, but “postcolonial discourse – particularly as articulated by Fanon (1970) – can add a more pluralistic perspective that includes the sociocultural aspects of incentives” (Phillips 2008:206-207). Fanon maintains “that black men have long ago internalized their inferiority vis-à-vis their white counterparts” (207). Consequently, it is understandable that the black man’s striving for equality can take the form of his “sexual quest for white women” (207). Phillips explains further that “[t]he beach hustler as a black man has constructed a gendered identity that tends to emphasize his sexual prowess, his animalism, and his natural instincts” (207). “The awareness and employment of such power become even more significant within the context of a postcolonial society where race, status, color, and class are very much intertwined and where whiteness is accorded status and privilege” (207). Thus, “in a

postcolonial background, beach hustling may seem primarily a way to earn money, it can also provide an avenue for self-actualization and role liberation” (210), but “engaging in sexual intercourse with a white female tourist can (also) be seen [...] as a continuation of the dependency brought about by a (sexual) labor relationship” (Phillips 2008:209-210).

### **2.1. Tanika Gupta’s *Sugar Mummies* (2006)**

In this present study I focus on the subject of female sex tourism in two recent plays: *trade* (sic) (2004-5) by black British dramatist debbie tucker green (sic) and *Sugar Mummies* (2006) by Asian British playwright Tanika Gupta. In both plays the symbolic title hints at the subject matter: in tucker green’s play the title manifestly refers to the oldest trade/profession – the labour of prostitution – but as an inversion of the concept, since women (rather than men) are travelling to the former colonies to purchase men for sex. Furthermore, as Osborne (2010:47) has appropriately stated, “given the implied location, the Caribbean, the play’s title also reminds the audience of another, earlier trade in human bodies, the commerce relating to trans-Atlantic slavery”. The title *Sugar Mummies*, in turn, is “a gender take on the idea of the sugar daddy (while sugar also alludes to the British, colonialist slave trade of the Caribbean sugar plantations)” (Aston 2008:183)

Before writing the play, Gupta carried out some research in Jamaica to become familiar with the manoeuvrings of the sex industry. Taking a stroll alone down Negril beach, she was chatted up by a handsome 19-year-old local lad who refused to believe that she was not interested in a sexual liaison. At that time, in 2006, Gupta was forty-two years old. When she suggested he seduce a girl his own age he replied: “Me no want the kitten, I want the cat” (Gardner 2006:2). Gupta was impressed by all the chat-up

lines and left the beach thinking that she was “the most beautiful and desirable woman in the entire world” (2). In fact, “[a]ll forms of prostitution require the seller to flatter the buyer and to display enthusiasm for the transaction. Nowhere is the exchange so theatrical as the one between the beach boy and the female sex tourist” (Bindel 2006).

*Sugar Mummies* was performed at the Royal Court in London in 2006. It has a two-act structure and is written in a conventional realistic style, each act closing with an appalling episode. Gupta presents a double point of view, from both the tourist and the local position, “to show the desires and discontents of the ‘here’ and ‘there’ as constructed by the tourist gaze” (Aston 2008:184) The play presents a number of female tourists – Maggie, Kitty, Yolanda and Naomi – of different ages, social backgrounds and ethnicities. Through the sexual relations and monetary transactions between these tourists and the locals, again of different ages – Andre, Antonio (young and inexperienced), Sly (experienced, pretending to be young), and Reefie (the most experienced and the oldest) – the spectator gains an insight into the holiday sex trade. Apart from these local men, we meet a middle-aged Jamaican woman, Angel, who braids tourists’ hair and gives massages.

In the stage directions Gupta describes the tropical beach in Jamaica at sunrise: “*We hear the sound of the waves lapping gently in a calm bay [...] with white sands and palm trees* (Gupta 2006:17). This perfect beach, where the women are sunbathing under the constant eye and attention of the beach boys, is also the holiday place/space chosen “where to be gazed upon which, at the same time, produces an anticipation of looming pleasure” (Urry 2002:3). The prospect of sexual pleasure is expressed by Yolanda’s significant orgasmic sigh: *Yolanda, a fifty year old American woman, walks*

*out in a flashy swimsuit, looks out to sea and sighs deeply* (26). In this “perfect” environment the tourist women, here Maggie (*in her fifties*) and Kitty (*thirty-eight*), give vent to their fantasies about the hypersexual Jamaican men and their beautiful muscular agile bodies:

KITTY: Men here certainly know how to treat a lady. They love us!

MAGGIE: Least they *pretend* to.

KITTY: They’re so sweet.

MAGGIE: And really black.

KITTY: Blue black.

MAGGIE: Nice smiles – white, white teeth against black skin.

KITTY: Tall and strong.

MAGGIE: Big, luscious, kissable lips.

KITTY: Real men.

MAGGIE: Much bigger than white men. The Big Bamboo.

KITTY: Jamaican Steel. *They both laugh.*

And it’s not over in two minutes. They can keep going all night.

MAGGIE: And they’ve got the rhythm – so they can move – so athletic.

(Gupta 24-25; my italics)

The mythology “about male sexual prowess and penis size, (is) perpetuated by the beach boys themselves” (Bindel 2013:3) and by the Caribbean sex industry, since beach bars advertise stimulating cocktails such as “Sex on the beach”, “Big Bamboo”, “Dirty Banana”, and “Jamaican Steel”. On the front cover of Gupta’s play text we find a visual illustration of such a cocktail with a naked man in the shape of a cocktail stick poised on the rim of a glass. He is gazing at the beach, the turquoise sea, the deep blue sky and the arousing image of a woman’s bikini. In such an exotic holiday setting “tourist women indulge in sexual pleasure in ways that they feel that they are unable to, or, feel they are not allowed to, back home” (Aston 2008:185) Kitty: “Wouldn’t do this back home” (25). Frustrated with their lives at home, the women are likely to believe the amorous attentions offered by the beach boys. This is exemplified by lonesome schoolteacher

Kitty, who is besotted with and wooed by the artful and experienced sex worker Sly (note his meaningful name).

Like most of the impoverished sex workers – who live in shacks with no electricity or water – Sly dreams about leaving the island to look for a better life elsewhere. He tells Kitty that he has never left the island but “[i]n his head – yes” (74). This statement “points to the inequalities of social mobility” (Aston 2008:186), which is a privilege of the tourists who come to the exotic island the black men are eager to leave. Sly proposes to share his future with Kitty in England:

SLY. Me like to hear you moan an’ cry for more. An’ I can give you more. Muchmore den you ever dream of. You be my sugar mummy and I be your coochie daddy (Gupta 75).

Kitty, however, has woven a fantasy about a life with Sly in exotic Jamaica. This discrepancy leads to their extremely violent confrontation. Both have lied about their real lives – Kitty pretended to be content with her single life, and Sly to be young and unmarried (while he is older and married with three kids). When the truth is revealed, their ardent confessions of love break up into a verbal and physical outburst, with Kitty now calling him a prostitute and a “fucking black bastard NIGGER” and Sly asking: “What man would want a desperate, ugly, bitch like you?” (119), someone who has to “pay for every kiss, every whisper, every stroke, every fuck” (120). Sly ceases to be respectful to Kitty, and in the end the dormant issue of race and class comes to the surface:

SLY You tink me a savage, a house slave. You look at me and you is jealous of my skin, but glad you is white. You tink you is superior (119).

He raises his hand to hit her, but then decides against it and instead opens her purse, takes out all her money, pockets it and exits (120).



The play ends with the unravelling of the holiday romance, but the scene “which closes and climaxes the first act of *Sugar Mummies*” illustrates even more clearly “[t]he inequalities and violence of (the) racialised Othering (Aston 2008:190). Gupta shows veteran sex traveller Maggie’s disturbing abuse of the young, inexperienced Antonio. She embarks on her sexual seduction by asking Antonio to rub suntan lotion over her body, a request he uneasily complies with. Later on, the stage directions tell the audience that “[I]n the light of the full moon MAGGIE and ANTONIO have been trying unsuccessfully to have sex. Maggie “is pissed off and humiliated” (61). In revenge, Maggie gives vent to her personal frustration by stripping Antonio, tying him to a palm tree, beating him ferociously, viciously kissing and licking his face, giggling and insulting him, and finally throwing a handful of dollars at him. The scene is indeed the most shocking moment of the play, especially as it is a middle-aged white woman who wields this sadistic power over a young, innocent beach boy. Her action recalls the time of colonialism and slavery when black men were bought, beaten up and humiliated. Antonio reacts by shouting abuse at her to defend his dignity: “Wh’d wan’ fuck an ugly bitch like you? You a raas blood claat ...gorgon...bomba clawt...old duppy hag!” (67).

The disturbing scenes between Kitty and Sly, and Antonio and Maggie, show that below the cosy surface there lurks an unpleasant dormant racism. And beneath the sweet talk and flattery of the beach boys we discover a manipulative and misogynistic attitude that shows their real perception of the female sex tourist. Rather than seeing them as attractive women, they think they are all ugly and fat and are milk bottles that need filling.

In contrast to the abusive and coercive sex trade Gupta presents the option of a non-exploitative way of earning one's money through her portrayal of Andre and Naomi. Naomi, mixed-race, is not a sex tourist but has come to the island to search for her unknown father after her white mother's death. It is hinted that the pimp Reefie is her father, but he is too ashamed to reveal his identity. Naomi, out of love, proposes to support Andre's training as a chef so that he can keep his self-respect. Andre is Angel's son and he is in fact the only person who reprimands the beach boys for being "on sale". He berates Reefie for initiating young Antonio into the trade, turning him into a whore and postcolonial slave. Reefie has been Yolanda's regular boyfriend for the last five years, even if in her absence he has had sex with other tourists. Their "romance" has some stability and sincerity, but most of the relationships are faux romances, based on delusion. As Angel says: "Dem touris', dem buy fantasy wid hard cyash and tink it real" (Gupta 80).

## **2.2. debbie tucker green's *trade* (2005)**

The author is renowned for her unique theatrical collages; "they are poetry laced with shards of broken glass" (Gardner 2006). Using a minimalist set and hardly any stage action, the focus is on a pared-down dialogue and sound. The author's presentational style demands intensive ensemble-playing and inter-play as the actors in *trade* "must slide between sexes, ages, races, and nationalities" (Osborne 2010:46). Three black actresses interpret the key characters of the play, the Local (a black woman), the Novice and the Regular (two white women tourists), as well as all the other parts – three Local Women, Bumster, Hoteliers, Bredrin, Local Man, and American Tourist. As the black actresses play white characters, a

Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* is created, with the aim of altering the audience's customary perception. In addition, the identity of the characters is given not by names but by their social roles in the play.

The play starts with three Locals who seem to be in the middle of an argument, expatiating on the socio-economic differences between the Third and First World and between them and the British tourists who come to the beach to enjoy a holiday full of fun. Interestingly, the play's cycle structure begins and ends with the three Local women repeating the below-mentioned dialogue, but adding the divergence between the dual location of "there" and "here". "we just ... live / live here" (61). "The ellipsis emphasises the indigenous inhabitants' almost incidental worth in the relentlessness of the holidaymaking cycle to reinforce the fact that they are unable to travel "there" – the prerogative of European affluence – and yet, there is also an asserted sense of permanence, identity and belonging to tropical paradise which is presumably what the tourists' sexual odysseys aim to access" (Osborne 2010:48).

LOCAL Local. All a we.  
LOCAL 1 All a we three. *Local* .  
LOCAL 2 Local to where them –  
LOCAL Tek their holiday.  
LOCAL 2 To where them –  
LOCAL 1 haf their 'fun'.  
LOCAL 2 To where them –  
LOCAL 1 tek a break –  
LOCAL from who they are. From who they is. (tucker green 2005:5)

The setting is, as in *Sugar Mummies*, a Caribbean island, where a slowly revolving circular white-sand pit evokes a beach. The beach is the exotic place where the tourists seek sun, sea, sand, and – sex, in this case the Regular and the Novice. Regular is a sad and unloved older white British woman who has returned to the island *regularly* for years to enjoy a

“romantic” relationship with a local man, the sex trader Bumster. Her romanticism is dismissed by the Local, who stresses that Bumster’s inviting her for a drink is far from being a romantic gesture, but rather a “highballed glass a flattery” (17), that is, a monetary transaction. Novice is a younger white British woman on her first Caribbean trip (thus her name) – “the first-time-over-‘there’ tourist” (7) – who thinks she is entitled to have fun and casual sex, justifying her position by affirming that she has paid for it with her hard-earned money (8). She claims equal rights with men, an inheritance from the battle fought by the generation the Regular belongs to. Her “discourse of sexual self-empowerment” (Aston 2008:190) is contested by the Local when she says:

LOCAL Ev’ryting equal – where *you*’re from – [...] man and woman equal-righted / human-righted – man is man an ooman iss ooman cept yu noh satisfied wid that – noh satisfied wid what yu fought for – Yu there lookin the kinda man you lookin to like / like to like /like likin our man’ s dem ... right. Thass your human right. Right? Where’s mine (26-7).

“The Local condemns them both as British tourists [...] there is a certain naivety about independence gained from feminism – their liberation is compromised both by the eco-sexual transactions they engage in and by their infringements of her right to equality” (Goddard 2007:190-1).

While the British tourists come to the island to enjoy sexual pleasure as a capitalist and colonialist trade at the expense of another woman – as the Local states: “[...] you come ‘there’ ... Invite yuself to my ‘there’. We ask yu / we trouble yu? (58) – she herself has her own respectable hairbraiding trade, like the black woman Angel in *Sugar Mummies*, and calls herself “Miss Quick Finger (10). Yet she has also benefited from her man’s non-respectable trade, as her appropriate business sign “*Local styles at local prices*” (52) was paid for by Bumster.

In fact, “[t]he three women’s separate lives are interconnected by their relationship with Bumster, which they are battling to justify, and the similarities and differences between them surface as they each air their own angle on the debate” (Goddard 2007:184). All three are clinging to an illusion, the Local as much as the two white tourists. She affirms that her relationship with Bumster is based on mutual trust, “The me-an-the-he of it is long-term tings” (55). She has not used a condom with her prostitute friend – “flesh to flesh it / y’noh / wid nobody but we self / before” (56). Her illusion, as Osborne (2010:47) puts it, “is rapidly reconfigured as a delusion – as much as the Novice and the Regular are” when the Regular reveals that she too “trusted” Bumster by having unprotected sex with him. The Local, stunned, asks the Regular: “Did he even tell you about me?” She gets the spiteful reply: “Why would I want to know about a woman that lets her man / fuck / other women?” (51) Novice’s puritanical judgement – “Shame” – is contested by the Local when she asks her “Is what yu know bout shame?” (52). Their exchanges become angrier as they question who is being traded, with Novice asking: “Who is fucking who? And who’s been fucked (over)?” (59). They accuse each other of being a liar, a hypocrite, prostitute, whore (50). “As *trade* reveals, the cliché of the holiday romance has developed a distinctly sardonic edge where women might exercise a superior economic prerogative over local men, but still end up exploited and devalued from their transactions” (Osborne 2010:48).

“The shifting relationships of the three women are a mirror of the shifting relationship that the west has with the developing world, and Trade is as much about women’s relationships with each other and each woman’s relationship with herself as it is about the transactions between man and woman, rich and poor, here and there, first and third world” (Gardner 2006).

### 3. Conclusion

*Sugar Mummies* and *trade* illustrate the questions raised in the title of this paper as to whether sex tourism is a “fair” trade or whether it is a new kind of colonial exploitation. The two plays have provoked fervent debate about the positive and negative aspects of female sex tourism, with people asking whether this is “harmless fun” or “a mutually beneficial business transaction”. If it is exploitation, “who is the victim and who is the perpetrator – the women who fall for declarations of true love or the mostly poor, underemployed men who make them?” (Martin 2006:2). Are the women not guilty of hypocrisy when they justify their sexual relationships by stating that they are contributing economically to the welfare of the impoverished black males? Lichtig feels that “[a] particular Western malaise is under scrutiny, an emptiness that the characters seek to fill with fantasies of dominance and escape” (in Sierz 2011:119). Loveridge (2006) believes that whenever money is exchanged for sexual performance, “this may be a disturbing consumerism, reducing men to a meat market and women to shallow exploiters of those in poverty”. Furthermore, it “confirms that the legacy of slavery, under which the black body was commodified and dehumanised, is not far behind them” (Bindel 2013:8). Besides, a sexual relationship between white women and black men hardly contributes to the elimination of racial barriers, since most of the women interviewed by Bindel (2006) “admitted they would not sleep with black men back home”.

Gupta and tucker green illustrate that the sex trade is damaging for both the sex tourists and the local population. In *trade*, the Local resents the women tourists, here the Regular and Novice, because of their intrusion into local women’s lives, since they come from “there” to buy local women’s

men for their sexual pleasure. It finally turns out that Bumster, the Local's man, has left her, taken all the money paid by the likes of the Regular, and departed to Britain. Similar comments may be made about the women characters in *Sugar Mummies*. Kitty's sweet fantasies about a future life with Sly have turned sour, leaving her disenchanted and hurt. Maggie, unhappy with her lonely existence, yearned in vain for some pleasure on the island. Rather than a restorative break, it has been a damaging experience, with a final outburst of mutual hatred.

Former sex traveller Belliveau, however, favours sex tourism because she believes that it can be a healing experience for women who have had failed marriages, painful relationships and unfulfilling sex. "Casual travel sex by women, whether they are 20 or 60, is in everybody's best interests. I don't see it as exploitation. I see it as adults having fun" (in Martin 2006:6). Halliburton (2006) states that "on one level [female sex tourism] might seem to be about women's liberation, it's really another form of colonisation". "Sex tourism is sexual exploitation, whoever is buying" and "unless we talk about this last taboo of female behaviour and condemn it, the young men on Negril beach will continue to be seen as playthings and commodities, not equal human beings" (Bindel 2006).

Angel, in *Sugar Mummies*, is, like so many other local people, a victim of the sex trade industry, as her husband, who has spent his whole life as a sex worker, becomes infected with AIDS and finally dies of it. The death of Angel's husband is a constant reminder of the health risks involved in sex tourism. "With sex tourism, given the atmosphere and the exoticness of their lover, condoms are rarely used or discussed prior to engaging in sexual activities" (Phillips 2009) In the tourist areas, in fact, the number of those infected is higher than elsewhere on the island. In 2002, an estimated

20,000 adults and children out of a population of 2.6 million were living with AIDS or HIV – a figure that had more than doubled in two years (Bindel 2003).

In conclusion, the two plays under discussion confirm that sex tourism is not a “fair” trade but a new kind of colonial exploitation, due to the economically unjust relationship entailed. It is a “trade” that does not solve the problem of poverty in the postcolonial world; rather, it perpetuates it and “invites a continuation of the dependency brought about by a sexual labor relationship” (Phillips 2008:210). If there is a general agreement to censure the endemic exploitation involved in male sex tourism, this raises the pertinent questions of whether it makes a difference when women are the customers, and whether it is desirable for women to assert their equality with men by claiming to be entitled to participate in sex tourism.

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