

Paradise Betrayed: Investigating the Plights of Female Domestic Workers in Two Contemporary Plays

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ABSTRACT

According to Yeoh and Huang (2000), the advent of globalization and the attempt to sustain economic strength of world cities unavoidably result in the reliance on foreign workers. Driven by constant economic instability of their own countries, a lot of women from the Philippines and Indonesia have been looking for employment abroad. This economic migration, however, has not always brought them wealth as some may have expected. Reports of abuse and maltreatment of female workers are not difficult to find. Contemporary authors in Southeast Asia have included the unfortunate stories of these women in their writings. In this study, two contemporary plays from the Philippines and Singapore are analysed in terms of the plights of female domestic workers. In Paulino Lim, Jr.'s *Ménage Filipinescas* (2008), Melissa, an email-order bride in California, is portrayed more as a maid and a prostitute solely subject to the mercy of her husband/master. Similarly, Harnesh Sharma's *Model Citizens* (2012) depicts the hard life of Melly, an Indonesian girl working as a domestic helper by day and prostitute by night in Singapore. Her lack of English skills puts her in a formidable situation where communication with the outside world hardly exists. Both plays demonstrate the characters' physical hardships, mental displacement and moral dilemmas.

Keywords: female domestic workers, plights, contemporary plays, *Ménage Filipinescas*, *Model Citizens*

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาของ Yeoh และ Huang (2000) ได้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงการพึ่งพาแรงงานต่างชาตินในการขับเคลื่อนเศรษฐกิจในกระแสโลกาภิวัตน์และภาวะการแข่งขันเพื่อรักษาเสถียรภาพทางเศรษฐกิจของประเทศต่าง ๆ ทั่วโลก จากภาวะเศรษฐกิจที่ไม่มั่นคงอย่างต่อเนื่องของประเทศ ผู้หญิงในประเทศฟิลิปปินส์และอินโดนีเซียจึงพยายามหาช่องทางเพื่อให้ตนเองได้ทำงานในต่างประเทศ แต่การทำงานในต่างประเทศมิได้การันตีว่าแรงงานข้ามชาติจะมีฐานะทางเศรษฐกิจดีขึ้นตามที่คาดหวังเสมอไป ซ้ำร้ายยังพบการละเมิดและการทารุณกรรมแรงงานหญิงข้ามชาติอยู่เสมอด้วย นักเขียนร่วมสมัยในภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้บันทึกเรื่องราวที่นับเป็นโชคร้ายของแรงงานหญิงเหล่านี้ไว้ในงานเขียนของพวกเขา การศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้เป็นการวิเคราะห์ชะตากรรมของแม่บ้านทำความสะอาดจากบทละครร่วมสมัยของประเทศฟิลิปปินส์และสิงคโปร์ โดยพิจารณาชีวิตของ Melissa จากบทละครเรื่อง *Ménage Filipinescas* ของ Paulino Lim, Jr. (2008) Melissa เป็นหญิงสาวที่ได้แต่งงานกับสามีชาวต่างชาติในเมืองแคลิฟอร์เนีย สหรัฐอเมริกา จากบริการจัดหาคู่ทางอีเมล ชะตากรรมของเธอแสดงให้เห็นถึงสภาพของแม่บ้านและโสเภณีที่จำต้องปรนเปรอความสุขตามแต่ความเมตตาของสามีและเจ้านายของเธอ ในทำนองเดียวกัน บทละครเรื่อง *Model Citizens* ของ Harnesh Sharma (2012) ได้นำเสนอชะตากรรมอันยากลำบากของ Melly หญิงสาวชาวอินโดนีเซียที่ได้ทำงานในประเทศสิงคโปร์ โดยมีอาชีพเป็นแม่บ้านทำความสะอาดในเวลากลางวันและเป็นโสเภณีในเวลากลางคืน เธอตกอยู่ในสถานการณ์อันเลวร้ายเนื่องจากการขาดทักษะการสื่อสารด้วยภาษาอังกฤษและแทบจะไม่สามารถติดต่อขอความช่วยเหลือจากโลกภายนอกได้ โดยสรุป บทละครทั้งสองแสดงให้เห็นถึงความทรามทางร่างกายสภาพจิตใจที่โหดเหี้ยม และภาวะกลืนไม่เข้าคายไม่ออกทางศีลธรรมของตัวละครทั้งสอง

คำสำคัญ: แม่บ้านทำความสะอาดหญิง, ชะตากรรม, บทละครร่วมสมัย, *Ménage Filipinescas*, *Model Citizens*

Introduction

England hires a lot of Filipino nurses, and maids of course. There's a story told in Manila. I heard that people in England eating out, who want to take home leftovers...Instead of saying, "Could I have a doggie bag?" they say, "Could I have a Filipino-maid bag?" (Lim, 2008, p. 47)

Female Migrant Domestic Workers: A Brief Overview

In the 21st century, where market competitiveness and economic prosperity have further divided the world of the haves from that of the have-nots, economic migration to industrialised countries, especially for domestic help, becomes a unique social phenomenon of our modern history. Several academic studies (such as Yeoh & Huang, 2000; Fortunati et al., 2012; Luz, 2013) discuss relevant factors that have contributed to the rising demand and supply and the rapid growth of transnational domestic workers today. One of the most significant factors is the globalised economy and politics in which affluent and powerful women in developed countries have entered workforce as a result of social transformations, instead of performing the traditional, expected roles of staying home, doing house chores or taking care of their families. Family income, therefore, is significantly produced by those professional women and their feminine power is "recognised at an international level" (Fortunati et al., 2012, p. 4). However, not every woman has got to enjoy such a privilege. Certain "unqualified" women, often members of the lower/ lower middle class in many Asian, Latin American and African countries, are left with limited options in the new economy, namely, nannies, maids and worst of all, sex workers (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

With the supply of female workers readily available in the so-called developing countries, the needs for domestic workers in the developed countries are catered for. Hence, in Asia there has been the overseas migration of female domestic workers from poorer countries to richer economies such as from the Philippines or Indonesia to Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. This transnational migration has created the phenomenon of “the global woman” (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002), putting women in the position of leaders of the global migrants. Additionally, it is worth noting that some economically weak countries in Asia, especially in South and Southeast Asia, include the export of their female workers in the national economic policy and profit from the remittances these workers gain from importing countries. In the Philippines, for example, the government introduced the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (Republic Act 8042) as a legal guideline for recruiting agencies, aiming to protect its overseas labour as well as to guard its national interests (see the Philippine government’s official website, www.neda.gov.ph, for more details). According to Pertierra (2006), the Philippines has one of the highest rates of workers-migrants, the majority of whom, of course, are women.

Workers Means Labour: The Abuse of Female Domestic Workers

Back in the colonial days, unpaid servants were equivalent to slaves; therefore, they worked extremely hard but did not earn a single penny. Despite the abolition of slavery and the end of colonial power afterwards, many servants continued to be underpaid and confined within the domestic space. As Anderson (2000) defines, domestic work generates three C’s – cleaning, cooking and caring. Based on this definition, it is not surprising that the occupation has been feminised since the mid-19th century because of the received

idea that women should clean, prepare food and provide care for families. Consequently, the view that domestic workers are low-paid, unskilled servants has been perpetuated and, thus, subjects several female workers to physical violence, maltreatment and abuse.

The situation however, raises at least a question in the case of female migrant workers in question here. If domestic workers are subject to such atrocities, why do many women still choose to migrate overseas as domestic workers? Lutz (2013) discusses possible motivations ranging from the search for better salaries and opportunities in destination countries to the escape from constant natural disasters and political conflicts. Destination countries, mainly the developed countries, are regarded and looked up to as the land of hope and opportunity where the women can send back the income to support their families back home and provide them with education and health services. Migrant workers, which according to International Labour Organisation (ILO), have so far made up the approximate number of 100 million worldwide. New comers, similar to their predecessors, are inclined to be badly treated and paid due to their “unskilled” or “low skilled” employment. They are also deprived of legal rights and alienated from the mainstream society of the destination countries because of the lack of language skills in some cases and the public perception of their presence in other cases. Furthermore, apart from the physical hardships and legal injustice that they potentially encounter, foreign domestic workers are faced with mental displacement as in cases of wives leaving their husbands and children behind as well as girls leaving their elderly parents. Consequently, it is not be too far-fetched to claim that their search for financial haven has created many problems in

the lives of the women and also the families they have to leave behind.

Foreign Domestic Workers and Contemporary Literature

The issue of overseas female domestic workers and their suffering dominates an arena of literary production of the “sending countries” and, to a lesser degree, receiving countries. Examples of such writings are produced by contemporary Filipino writers, both inside and outside the motherland. To name but a few, F. Sionil Jose’s *Viajero* (1993) portrays the Filipino diaspora, including the movement of female workers to the Middle East, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan. The characters’ continuous search for justice and the maintenance of their moral integrity are the focus of the novel. The other novel, Jose Dalisay’s *Soledad’s Sister* (2007), deals with the mysterious death in the Middle East of a Filipina domestic worker, whose body with clear signs of abuse is returned to Manila. According to the writer, the woman is one of over 600 overseas workers who is tragically returned home posthumously. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, in the receiving countries, such as Singapore, fiction writers and playwrights include the characters of foreign domestic workers in their stories. An all-time favourite, prominent Singaporean novelist, Philip Jeyaretnam, for example, depicts the forbidden love of a Singaporean master and an Indonesian maid in *First Loves* (1987).

This article analyses in depth the plights of female migrant workers in two contemporary plays from the Philippines and Singapore for the following reasons. First, Paulino Lim, JR.’s *Ménage Filipinescas* and Hareesh Sharma’s *Model Citizens* (2012) offer us the unique stories of two female characters, Melissa and Melly, respectively, who, despite their different statuses, share similar roles and

restrictions in the destination countries. Second, the main characters are both subject to discrimination, contempt and isolation in their overseas environment. Third, the endings of the two plays do not offer a positive solution to both characters. Last, both plays were written by prominent playwrights of the countries. Paulino Lim, JR. is an award-winning Filipino-American writer who authored several novels, short stories and plays. Haresh Sharma, on the other hand, has written over 100 plays, some of which were selected by Singapore's Ministry of Education as literature texts for national examinations. He also won many awards, the most prestigious of which was the Goldberg Master Playwright by New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

An E-mail Order Bride as a Sex Slave: The Choice Chosen in *Ménage Filipinescas*

Paulino Lim, JR. made it explicit from the very beginning that his play was dedicated “[t]o overseas contract workers”, a message that promptly raises a significant social issue in his country. The Philippines is unquestionably well-known for its export of contract workers to most, if not all, corners of the world and news of abuse are equally and sadly notorious as a result. In *Ménage Filipinescas*, the writer gives us a familiar picture of an interracial marriage between an elderly American man and a much younger Filipina in Southern California. Richard is a professor of English literature who is fed up with his work and forced to retire prematurely whereas Melissa is a school teacher back in Manila and the mother of a seven-year-old girl in her 30s. They meet through an online dating website, write each other a pile of emails prior to marriage and Richard finally takes his internet bride to his homeland.

While this may sound incredibly romantic, it is not. This paper argues that in spite of having a seemingly different status, Melissa is not really different from other Filipino compatriots working abroad. In the US, Melissa is confined to a traditional role of a submissive housewife who “wear[s] a robe, hands in latex gloves” (p. 1) as she supposedly does all the cleaning, makes a “sandwich” (p. 4) and “adobo” (meat, seafood, or vegetables marinated in a sauce of vinegar, soy sauce, and garlic, browned in oil, and simmered in the marinade) (p. 5) and goes to an Asian Market in Little Saigon to do grocery shopping for dinner preparation. Although she may be able to claim the preferable status of a legal wife, her cooking and cleaning duties are similar to those of live-in domestic workers. What disheartens the reader more is that Melissa herself also acknowledges her inferior position as she calls Richard “Master” (p. 7), suggesting a sense of compliance on her part. In addition to the cleaning and cooking, this Filipina protagonist also performs a caring duty. When Richard comes home from work, he will wait for her to “bring his slippers” (p. 34), “get [him] a drink” (p. 35) and “kneel at his feet [in order to] to clip his toenails” (p. 129). The servant-like duty of the character, especially the kneeling at Richard’s feet, remind us of a colonial style of master-slave relationship in which the white man could treat his local woman however he liked.

Moreover, as a wife, Melissa is obliged to Richard’s sexual exploitation for which she demands financial compensations from him. She says, “I told him I’d do it, without laughing or gagging, if he paid me a hundred dollars” (p. 31). Throughout the play, it is often implied that Richard’s sexual fantasy goes beyond what an ordinary conventional couple could imagine and Melissa has to subject herself as a sex slave to her master/husband who takes fetish pleasure from her though at an expense. In this sexual game between husband and wife, Melissa refers to herself in Filipino as

“puta” (p. 31) or a “whore” in English. As explicitly as she spells it out, the prostitute-like demand for money in their sexual relationship reduces her to the position of a sex worker.

For some readers, Melissa may seem as if she accepted or even enjoyed being treated like a servant and a sex slave. Nevertheless, she does not make her choices willingly. Like many other Filipino migrants, she is torn between her wish for a better life elsewhere and the life she is forced to leave behind in the Philippines. Having a seven-year-old daughter about whom she could not let Richard find out means that she has to find money to send back for her daughter’s education and living. Making a long-distance call from California, of course, raises suspicions, thus, she sacrifices her dignity and deploys her sexuality to earn some money for an international phonecard simply to hear her daughter’s voice. In one passage, Melissa expresses her sympathy for other mothers in her situation:

“I pity the mothers who leave their children behind, with their grandmothers usually. The mother tries to talk to them on the phone, but the children hardly know her. They don’t have anything to talk about. The mother is left with only the sound of a voice to remember.” (p. 46)

The passage very clearly illustrates the female migrants’ dilemma and plight of being away from home. In trying to search for a paradise devoid of poverty, corruption and natural calamities in their homeland, they are traumatised by distance and absence of their family. It also pinpoints a significant issue of alienation that the female migrants have to face. Not having a sense of belonging in the destination countries, they find themselves more and more alienated from the countries of their own. Within their own families,

mothers and children become strangers whose relationship is transnationally maintained solely via phone calls once in a while. The lack of acceptance in the destination countries is also demonstrated through Melissa's confinement of space imposed by Richard who calls the shared wall between his apartment and his neighbours, Sheila and Patrick, "The Berlin Wall" (p. 11). Richard does not want his wife to socialise with them nor does he like it when Melissa offers to clean their apartment for a small sum of money. She is also not allowed to attend the board meetings of Richard's apartment either. This separates her from the outside world altogether.

Besides, a language barrier is another important issue that the writer tackles in the play. Despite the fact that she was a school teacher with a strong command of English in Manila, Richard constantly insults her English and daily teaches English lessons to her. His linguistic contempt drives her further away from the mainstream American society. In one instance, he criticises her by saying that "[y]ou've got the words but they don't sound right" to which she submissively replies, "[n]o need to remind me. English is not my language" (p. 12). The issue of language is brought up later in the play when Sheila informs her of the possibility of getting a teaching position. Melissa immediately rejects the idea and tells her neighbour of what her husband has said:

"Richard says the same thing. I have to work on my English, my English speaking. I'm afraid the students will make fun of me...I heard if you speak with a French or German accent, you're okay. But if you speak with a Chinese or Filipino accent, you are in deep shit." (pp. 47-48)

Melissa's lack of confidence, mainly caused by her husband's insult and threat, deems her unfit to the external world. She, therefore, struggles in the alienated world and becomes withdrawn and nostalgic. As the play unfolds towards the end, a new character is introduced, Eddy, Melissa's Filipino ex-lover. His unfortunate account of being an overseas contract worker from Japan to Europe before ending up here in California as illegal immigrant, despite not being the focus of the study, parallels that of Melissa's. Fuelled by their lingering feelings for each other, Melissa and Eddy make love at the end of the play. Symbolically speaking, if Eddy represents the Philippines and Richard represents America, Melissa is clearly caught between her ties to the homeland and her ongoing quest for paradise. Unfortunately, her plights are unredeemable because both places take advantage of her physically and mentally.

Maid by Day, Prostitute by Night: A Betrayal of Dream in *Model Citizens*

This contemporary play tackles the current social issues of multiracialism that have plagued the Singaporean society today. Written in 2012, the story of *Model Citizens* depicts the lives of three women, Mrs. Chua, Wendy and Melly, who are different in their social and cultural backgrounds. Although this paper focuses on the character of Melly, a young Indonesian maid who wants to get married and acquire a Singaporean citizenship, it is not possible to ignore the other two characters. This is because their lives, connected through the roles each of them plays in the making of Singapore as a nation, are intertwined and, therefore, inseparable.

The play begins with the introduction of a crime committed by Melly's Singaporean boyfriend who stabbed Mrs. Chua's husband, a

senior MP. Mrs. Chua summons Melly for a talk, not to blame her for what happened but to encourage her to forget about her criminal boyfriend. Melly, however, is unable to speak English or Chinese and relies on her employer, Wendy, to speak for her. Because of her inability to speak the most common language of Singapore, Melly's existence is restricted within the domestic sphere of her employer's house similar to many other Indonesian maids in Singapore.

It is markedly interesting that Sharma does not concentrate very much on the roles and responsibilities of Melly as a live-in maid at Wendy's house. It probably goes without saying what a female migrant worker is expected and obliged to fulfill. The writer from time to time mentions Melly's duty such as she "ha[s] a lot of work" as she has to "cook everything" for a dinner party (p. 21). Instead, the play extensively deals with the moral dilemma that Melly has, for example, when Mrs. Chua asks Wendy to tell her maid that everything will be fine, Wendy firmly refuses because "[Melly] doesn't lie to [her] and [she doesn't] lie to [Melly]"(p. 19). Ironically, almost immediately after the statement, Melly lies to Wendy to get out of the house to do her usual nighttime job, a prostitute. Although the job is looked down upon, it gives something to her. As Melly recalls, Indonesia for her is a country where she "ha[s] nothing" (p. 39) while Singapore is a land of opportunity where she can have "some little luxury and a nice phone which can play [her] favourite song" as well as her family "eat[ing] meat and buy[ing] a toaster and hav[ing] a toilet" (p. 42). Her ultimate goal is to get married and become "a Singapore citizen" (p. 27). She is determined to reach the dream, overlooking the fact that her means will not always justify the end and vice versa.

Unfortunately, the dream betrays her and so does Singapore. Her boyfriend, a low-paid cleaner, is not allowed to marry her because

of her status as a migrant domestic worker which is regarded very lowly in Singapore. Additionally, his crime makes it impossible for them to get married and simultaneously causes the extreme futility of Melly's immoral actions. She comes to reflect on her own downfall including lying to Wendy and her boyfriend, having sex with her clients and ending her unwanted pregnancy by herself. What she has done amounts to nothing worthwhile. At the end of the play, she demands to be sent home after her dream goes completely shattered. In the following passage, Melly expresses her sense of loss and despair caused by the awakening of reality:

“I thought I would be a Singapore citizen. Have a husband, children...a family. I don't care if I have a small house. I don't care if we can't afford nice furniture. At least I will live here. My children will grow up here, go to school here. That was my dream Ibu...That was my only dream...” (p. 66)

Arguably, Melly's plights and sufferings are caused by her own naivety. Melly, not wanting to put up with her poverty-stricken life in Indonesia, seeks a better life and fortune in a foreign land just to discover that the haven does not exist for migrant workers such as herself. Alienated from the mainstream society because of her language deficiency, she becomes almost non-existent in this false paradise where the only recognition she has comes from the lies she tells, the body she sells and the soul she gives up.

Conclusion

The issue of female domestic workers is a very complicated one. As the women move to foreign countries, their life situations affect themselves, their families, their own societies and the societies to

which they migrate. As mentioned earlier, female domestic workers are motivated by their desire to seek better-paid employment overseas in order to support the families that they leave behind. The destination countries, they believe or are told to believe, are full of shimmering promises despite the notoriety of abuse and maltreatment of their predecessors.

Contemporary literature has not failed to capture the false promises of the “paradise”. First, as the analysis demonstrates, the female characters, Melissa and Melly, are required to work hard for their masters. Melissa must fulfill her wifely duties—cleaning, cooking, caring and having sex— for her husband, Richard, in order to provide for her family back in Manila. Similarly, Melly, through several hints that the writer gives, is busy cooking and cleaning for her employer. In addition, both characters are socially and culturally deprived and alienated. Melissa, regarded as an inadequate English speaker with a bad accent by her husband, is discouraged from getting a teaching position in California, socialising with her neighbor and attending board meetings of Richard’s apartment. Melly, in the same way, is unable to communicate with the outside world due to her lack of English and Chinese skills. Her only channel is her master, Wendy, who despite the love and care for her could not give her what she truly wants. Mental displacement is another grievance suffered by the two characters. In their search of happiness and opportunity abroad, Melissa and Melly must give up their family members and leave them behind. The former, having a seven-year-old daughter whom she cannot reveal to Richard, longs to be with her little girl in Manila but circumstances make it impossible. The latter wishes to give her family in Indonesia—parents, brothers and sisters—a better quality of life too. Nevertheless, aware of the fact that their home countries cannot provide such necessities, they have no choice but to leave for the US and Singapore, respectively. Finally, in the midst

of their quests, they are unavoidably forced to choose between the right and the wrong, and they unsurprisingly choose the latter. While Melissa lies about her family in Manila and has an affair with Eddy, her ex-lover, Melly lies to Wendy and her boyfriend, sells her body and kills her unborn baby. Their moral corruption is a result of their futile search for paradise that does not really exist.

The two plays studied here have shed some light on the suffering and the despair that many female migrant domestic workers encounter, especially those from neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia. Although it is fascinating to see many women demonstrate their strengths and persistent battle for their families' survival, it is simultaneously disheartening to learn that they are subject, either by chance or by choice, to many forms of physical and/or sexual exploitation, mental suffering and moral degradation. As a reader and a human being, we can regard the two plays as a reminder of the neglected plights and sufferings that many female domestic workers are encountering in the capitalistic and materialistic world of the twenty first century.

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