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FUGITIVE WITNESSING: STORIES OF INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS

ABSTRACT

Policies on migrant workers are characterised by competing frameworks of governance that do not necessarily protect migrants. Despite their vulnerability, however, migrant workers also possess agential capacities. Guided by the concept of “fugitive witnessing”, I discuss excerpts from the book “Bantay-Salakay: Anthology of Short Stories by Domestic Workers in Singapore, Hongkong and Taiwan” (Mga Bantay-Salakay: Antolohiya ng Maiikling Kuwento ng mga Indonesian Domestic Worker sa Singapore, Hongkong, at Taiwan), a collection of stories originally in Bahasa Indonesia and translated into Filipino. Specifically, I problematise how stories written by Indonesian domestic helpers reveal and negotiate varied aspects of migration. The paper concludes that stories of subaltern groups within the diaspora may serve as complex and discursive means to assess, interrogate and reform the contemporary phenomenon of labour mobility.

KEY WORDS: Indonesian migration, migrant stories, migrants’ rights, diaspora

Ubežniška pričevanja: Zgodbe indonezijskih migrantskih delavcev in delavk

IZVLEČEK

Za politike, povezane z delavkami_ici migrantkami_i, so značilni različni okviri upravljanja, ki migrantke_e ne nujno ščitijo. Kljub svoji ranljivosti pa imajo delavke_ici migrantke_i tudi zmožnost delovanja. Na podlagi koncepta »ubežniškega pričevanja« bom obravnaval odlomke iz knjige Bantay-Salakay: Antologija kratkih zgodb gospodinjskih delavk_cev iz Singapurja, Hongkonga in Tajvana (Mga Bantay-Salakay: Bantay-Salakay: Antolohiya ng Maiikling Kuwento ng

mga Indonesian Domestic Worker sa Singapore, Hongkong, at Taiwan), zbirke zgodb v indonezijskem jeziku bahasa, ki so bile prevedene v filipinski jezik. Natančneje, problematiziral bom, kako zgodbe, ki so jih napisale_i indonezijske_i gospodinjske_i pomočnice_ki, razkrivajo različne vidike migracij in se o njih pogajajo. Prispevek ugotavlja, da lahko zgodbe subalternih skupin v diaspori služijo kot kompleksno in diskurzivno sredstvo za ocenjevanje, preizpraševanje in reformiranje sodobnega pojava mobilnosti delovne sile.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: indonezijska migracija, zgodbe migrantk_ov, pravice migrantk_ov, diaspora

1 Introduction

Contemporary institutions and values are now increasingly informed by the logic of neoliberalism, fueled by political and economic paradigms that justify the trend of many national governments toward relinquishing their responsibility to provide jobs in favor of an aggressive global labour market. In the past, conflict, invasion, and persecution drove large numbers of people away from their homeland as in the case of the Jewish, Armenian, and African diasporas. Currently, it is the neoliberalist ideology that drives big segments of the human population to abandon their country of origin and attempt to eke a decent living someplace else. Generally, such a decision is painful as it may mean having to leave one's family behind and, in not a few instances, making themselves susceptible to varied forms of abuse and violence. Add to these the feelings of alienation and what Simon Weil (2002: 39) calls "uprootedness". It would be a grievous mistake, however, to reduce migrants to hapless victims of the system and, thus, deemphasise their agentic capabilities. Migrants, while acknowledged as a marginal constituency, employ strategies to come to grips with their peripheral existence and even circumvent the very strictures imposed on them. Viewing diasporic communities, therefore, should necessarily involve a multilayered praxis that will account for the materiality of social conditions and also take stock of the varied ways by which the migrant as a subaltern subject can be empowered, insurgent, and transformative. Among the discursive strategies employed by migrants is the production of narratives largely based on their own lived experiences. As pointed out by Sarah Bishop (2019: 4), narratives of marginal groups such as migrants recuperate "underrepresented perspectives – to enfranchise voices that have historically been left out of academic research".

In Indonesia, one of the world's top labour-sending countries, the diasporic writings of domestic helpers and other service-oriented workers, or what have been called *Sastra Buruh Migran Indonesia* (writings of Indonesian migrants;

Pocos 2019) are increasingly gaining recognition and getting published. These developments, I would argue, constitute efforts to make the voices of migrant workers heard and, thus, democratise the literary/cultural field by widening the range of texts that can be considered literary. It has become axiomatic that literature is not just about self-contained texts; rather, literature is a cultural artifact and, as such, it is inextricable from the dynamics of history, society, and culture. Literature, in that regard, can be seen as visual and/or aural records that can serve as important tools for understanding, appreciating, interrogating, and interpreting social processes. But like other art forms, literature should be made more inclusionary by acknowledging and propagating the works of otherwise marginal groups such as labour migrants especially if such works deal with their writers' own subaltern conditions.

Given their language, themes, and other qualities, true-to-life narratives, especially when they concern victimization and abuse, can be analysed using a concept I call "fugitive witnessing," which points to how such narratives can illustrate a discursive strategy to uncover, challenge, and engage the excesses of power. As I shall explain later, the concept can be deployed to show how the migrant, from a position of relative inferiority and otherness, can transgress deeply entrenched norms, circumvent traditional restrictions, and enact various other forms of resistance.

Narratives written by migrants draw inspiration from real life and not a few of them recount actual experiences of marginality, they may have implications for the crafting of policies to secure the rights of workers in both the host country and the homeland. In short, the recognition of migrants' workers cultural productions constitutes a critical interrogation of political and artistic conventions, while attempting to secure the welfare of a sector that is by and large considered voiceless, inferior, and peripheral.

2 Indonesia as Source of Labour

Indonesia holds the reputation of being a leading labour-exporting country. Many of these migrants serve as domestic helpers in neighboring countries and territories like Hongkong, Singapore, and Taiwan. As a result of the unrelenting promotion of labour export (primarily because of the shortage of job opportunities), working overseas remains the most viable and popular option to many Indonesians. The argument for labour export often invokes the concept of "triple win" which involves three categories of actors – the sending country whose economy is propped up by remittances; the receiving country whose human capital shortage is addressed by the entry of foreign workers; and the migrants

who are able to support themselves and their families (Baubock and Ruhs 2021). According to Maksum (2021: 1), Indonesia's migrant workers have become "an unavoidable, albeit complex, consequence of globalization, but many have reaped economic benefits from their presence at both the global and individual levels".

There is concern, however, over the protection and welfare of Indonesian migrants. In the receiving country, migrant workers are generally vulnerable to varied forms of abuse which, however, may be underreported. The failure to report incidents of abuse victimizing migrant workers may be ascribed to the fear of being blamed, the lack of funds to pursue the case against the abuser, and the lack of awareness about the proper authorities to handle the concern (International Organisation on Migration 2010). It has been noted that justice may be elusive to the victimised migrant because "the handling of... cases... is conducted haphazardly without a clear system and strategy" (ibid.: 38). Frameworks of governance relative to labour export are characterised by seemingly competing goals and priorities: on the one hand, the Indonesian foreign ministry and non-government organisations are pushing for legal mechanisms to guarantee the security and protection of migrants; on the other hand, the labour ministry is perceived to be more supportive of recruitment agencies given their role in the further pursuit of labour export as a job-generating program (Bal and Palmer 2020). In 2010, the International Organisation for Migration or IOM lamented: "There is lack of compliance by some recruitment agencies indicating the need for the government to take a more active role in regulating the industry, as well as monitoring and ensuring compliance" (2010: xi).

To confound it all, little attention has been paid to the condition of post-migrant workers as an important human security aspect of migration. Certainly, government should not acknowledge migrants' remittances while turning a blind eye to their situation upon going home. As pointed out by Maksum (2021: 2), there should be "long-term strategies" for migrant workers, which include "creating more job openings so that the workers don't have to look for work abroad". The issues confronting post-migrant workers include poor financial management; difficulties in accessing finance for business; and contributing to the population problems of their place of origin, which in turn complicate perennial concerns relating to high unemployment and poverty.

3 Material, Methodology, and Framework: Disentangling *Bantay-Salakay*

Entitled *Bantay-Salakay: Anthology of Short Stories by Domestic Workers in Singapore, Hongkong, and Taiwan* (*Mga Bantay-Salakay: Antolohiya ng Maiikling Kuwento ng mga Indonesian Domestic Worker sa Singapore, Hongkong, at Taiwan*), the book is edited by Filipino Carlos Pioscos and was published in 2019 by the *Sentro ng Wikang Filipino* (Filipino Language Center), an institution dedicated to promoting the Filipino language. The book is a collection of stories all originally in Bahasa Indonesia and carefully translated by Pioscos into Filipino, the national language of the Philippines. In his introduction, Pioscos reveals that one of the reasons for producing the collection has to do with the fact that Indonesia and the Philippines are Southeast Asia's top labour-exporting countries, and in many ways, migrant workers from both countries share the same experiences and travails. Indeed, it is no exaggeration that the stories found in the book could resonate with Filipino readers as they would with their Indonesian counterparts. Pioscos provides a two-pronged objective in his work:

... to gather stories by Indonesian women, and more importantly, to reveal the different, but also similar, experiences of migration among Indonesian women... (2019: xix).¹

The Filipino term *bantay-salakay* in the title is Pioscos' translation of the Bahasa term *penjajah*. Initially, the editor was torn between two other terms in Filipino – *mananakop* (coloniser) and *pakialamera* (meddler). In the end, Pioscos settled for *bantay-salakay* (pluralised as *mga bantay-salakay*), a term that has no direct English translation but which was chosen on account of its provocative undertones. Literally, *bantay* refers to a "guard" or a "watcher" while *salakay* means "assault", and put together, the words become an oxymoron (i.e., the custodian as attacker) encapsulating the complex position of the domestic helper in the household and in the global labour market. The migrant is fissured by contradictions: one who is welcomed but also marginalised, one who is indispensable but also ignored, one who is vulnerable but also viewed as the source of moral panics. Indeed, *bantay-salakay* is a fitting metaphor for the domestic helper who is weighed down by her irreducible otherness, but one capable of making sense of her situation, narrating her afflictions, denouncing excesses of power, and exercising individual and collective agency.

The collection has a total of 26 narratives all originally written in Bahasa and published previously in various books and journals. After reading the narratives,

1. All English translations are by the author.

I identified the thematic concerns in each of the narratives which would serve as guide for the discussion. An initial clustering of the narratives was produced based on the thematics. In the process, those pieces that were too short or whose themes did not resonate with the other narratives were excluded. Eventually, three relevant themes emerged from the final classification.

The analysis of the narratives is guided by a concept that this paper calls “fugitive witnessing”. Witnessing, in this context, is critical spectatorship characterised by a questioning attitude towards oppression and disenfranchisement at every turn. It is akin to Henry Giroux’s (1996: 9) declaration that engaging the present is necessarily an “ethical response to the narratives of the past”. Along those lines, the narratives analysed here can be read as testimonial writings, an emerging literary genre that underscores experiences of subalternity. I would argue that while it is not clear whether or not they are biographical or semi-biographical accounts, the narratives cited here are based on migrant workers’ experiences and, as such, being synecdochically communal, hew closely to testimonial literature, invoking affective investments that are at once shared and collective.

The qualifier “fugitive” is also a crucial component of the framework. “Fugitive” here refers to a line of escape. But it is no mere absconding as it invariably involves a critical view of injustice, including both its causes and ramifications, as well as the enactment of possibilities. It may refer to an actual, physical act of transgressing the law, dodging figures of authority, or using the imagination to flee from the strictures of a highly regulated society. It may be instanced by the deployment of such discursive tools as sardonic humor or, in the case of stories, surreal plots as attempts to emancipate oneself and the disempowered segment to which they belong from excessive social impositions. It may also be illustrated by an attitude of suspicion or skepticism, if not a well-worked-out repudiation of the constraints and limitations of ideologically informed reality, at times blurring the demarcation between real life and fantasy. According to Appadurai (2005: 31), imagination has served as “an organised field of social practice, a form of work... and a form of negation between sites of agency (‘individuals’) and globally defined fields of possibility”.

It is imperative, of course, to view the migrant worker not as a muzzled victim but as a subtle dissenter, using discursive tactics to expose the underbelly of neoliberalism and highlight the inequalities brought about by labour export. For one thing, migrants’ “bodily experiences” as related in their own narratives unearth the “ethical and legal violations of neoliberalism” (Baumik 2015: 91). Migrants’ narratives likewise constitute an attempt to dispute the views of orthodox leftism that conveniently ignore and undervalue the ability of the exploited to circumvent critically and creatively the power of the oppressor. The views of

orthodox leftism which, to borrow the words of Giroux (2000: 6), accentuate “ghostly economism” should be replaced with the idea that power does not simply emanate from hegemonic institutions; rather, power, alongside technology and ideology, can conduce to “forms of knowledge, social relations, and other concrete cultural forms that function to actively silence people” (Giroux 1985: xix). One should, therefore, pluralise the “notion of antagonism” (Giroux 2000: 6) and deploy varied tactics of engaging systemic domination, which include recuperating the narratives of exploitation and abuse.

The analysis is guided by the following questions: What thematic concerns pertaining to migrant workers’ experiences can be gleaned from the narratives? How do these concerns illustrate fugitive witnessing within the context of labour diaspora? And what transformative possibilities are foregrounded or enacted in migrant workers’ narratives?

4 Analysis and Discussion

This section of the paper analyses selected stories from the book and categorises them according to their thematic concerns. The reading yielded three relevant themes: The first has to do with the feelings of anxiety and alienation that are inextricable from living and working in a foreign land; the second pertains to the critical and conscientised migrant, serving as a counterpoint to the representation of the migrant as docile victim; and the third refers to the ways by which authority, tradition, and social codes are transgressed by the migrant as coping and resistive mechanisms. Most of the passages cited here are originally in Filipino, and their English translation appears in the discussion for better readability.

4.1 Anxiety and Alienation

Anxiety and alienation are emotions that inevitably arise from being in a foreign land. At times, this is made complicated by the feelings of uncertainty and loneliness, of being uprooted and “unhomed” (Bhabha 1992), and of being the proverbial “other” in an unfamiliar milieu, as can be gleaned from the story *A Bowl of Chicken Feet Soup* (*Isang Mangkok na Sabaw na Paa ng Manok*). The narrator relates how her ways would often clash with the culture of the host country, even hinting at the impossibility of her complete assimilation. One glaring source of distress is her lack of familiarity with the language of the host country. After learning a few words, she finds herself disconcerted by how her employers would sometimes address each other with otherwise impolite expressions like *jisin* (crazy), regardless of the age of the interlocutor. The narrator observes,

“Then, I realised that respect means different things in different places” (2019: 25). Before long, she herself becomes the target of harsh derision and contempt. On one occasion, takes a verbal beating from her employers only because she has consumed all of the chicken soup in a family gathering. The protagonist’s observation is painfully poignant: “Because of one minor mistake, he cruelly told me to be more careful and observant of the practices in this country” (ibid.: 28).

Similar reflections can also be seen in the story *Choices (Mga Pagpipilian)* in which the narrator also expresses her frustration over having to leave Indonesia and work in a country with a language and a culture markedly different from hers. What can be deduced here is a feeling of despair over having to be separated from her loved ones and be proverbially adrift in foreign territory only because there seems to be no other viable choice to climb the social ladder but to leave one’s place of origin. Once in the receiving country, the migrant, without sufficient orientation and exposure, needs to cope with the dislocation and the concomitant anxiety of having to serve people with an unfamiliar culture and speaking an unfamiliar language (Yang, Featherston and Shlonsky 2022). To overcome the feelings of anguish and despair, the migrant has to repeatedly affirm her self-worth:

Domestic helpers in other countries are steadfast soldiers. They are not just heroes of the global exchange market, but also heroes who do not know surrender and defeat. Inspired by hope, they are shaping, with their tears and sweat, a great future for their families... (Choices 2019: 76)

Feelings of alienation and otherness can also manifest themselves in one’s sartorial preferences in which case a person may conceal their own cultural identity and associate themselves more closely with the culture of the host society. It does not necessarily border on self-loathing, but it can be construed as a deliberate, self-conscious response to the gnawing sense of dislocation and marginality. On the part of the migrants, acculturation can be “stressful” and lead to “problems of self-esteem and mental health” (Moyano 2019: 4) and how one dresses up may be a strategy for coping particularly in largely homogeneous cultures. This is suggested in *The Hijab from Turkey (Ang Hijab Mula Turkey)* where the narrator tries to shake off her Indonesian identity by dressing in Western-styled clothes. She asserts that it is an attempt to raise her self-esteem – “My social rank seems to improve because of how I dress up” (2019: 146). In this regard, it is also out of a desire to address the anxiety that stems from looking different from the natives of the place, and ineluctably put under erasure some aspects of her native identity.

4.2 The Critical and Conscienticised Migrant

In some of the narratives, what figures is the migrant worker as politically conscious intellectual who knows the rights of migrants even in foreign territory, and as such, counters the representation of the migrant as passive and nonchalant victim. This development of consciousness from “an oppressed existence” to “consciousness of the oppressed” is called “conscientisation,” a term that has achieved popular usage in psychology, pedagogy, and the social sciences (Montero 2014: 298). It may be further defined as “the discovery of the dimension of the human being and the commitment with its consequences, leading to humanization of the people” (Barreiro 1986 in Montero 2014: 298).

One can see the conscienticised migrant in *Light in My Writing* (Liwanag sa Aking Panulat) where the protagonist, also the narrator, has a penchant for writing, and uses this talent as a strategy for dealing with and mitigating her loneliness and distress: “At least in writing I find solace and relief whenever I am overwhelmed by sadness over the little space I occupy in this apartment. My work becomes lighter because of my writing” (2019: 5). To confound it all, the narrator has to cope with her female employer’s cantankerous mother who would often verbally abuse her. In any case, she seeks refuge in her writing, seeing this as a way to relieve herself from the heavy emotions that burden her on a daily basis. Her writing, however, is not exclusively anchored to self-expression; it is mediated by her lived experiences as a migrant—as the peripheral Other trying to maneuver through the dominant culture of the host country. Writing, in this case, articulates the dialectical link of emotions to “what and how things should happen in our lives” (Chun 2019: 316). It is also interesting to note how “light” serves, first, as a modest implement through which she could write deep into the night, and second, as a metaphor for hope, as if to suggest how her writing provided her with comfort and optimism in the midst of seeming uncertainty while in foreign territory.

The migrant’s enlightened and critical erudition can also be seen in *The Quiet Library* (Ang Tahimik na Aklatan). Here, the protagonist ruefully observes that many of her fellow migrants are not cognizant of their rights as workers, and this she ascribes to their dismissive attitude towards books and reading. She believes that there is a connection between a migrant’s ignorance and her susceptibility to abuse – a claim that is not without basis since many migrants who are not aware of their rights can easily fall prey to trafficking, unpaid work, sexual abuse, and other human rights violations (Oberoi and Taylor-Nicholson 2013; Basok and Ilcan 2006; Grant 2005; International Organisation for Migration 2010). This suggests the crucial importance of education and information as a preventive measure

against abuse and exploitation. In an effort to help educate fellow migrants, the narrator as socially responsible intellectual regularly puts up a mobile library at Victoria Park which serves as a venue for the sharing of books and ideas: “The transformation brought about by books is in stimulating the minds of migrants when they read, and encouraging them to develop their consciousness” (2019: 14). Citing famed intellectuals such as Cicero, Joseph Brodsky, Pramoedya Toer, and Maxim Gorky, the protagonist epitomises the conscientised and organic intellectual who is not just concerned with work and personal welfare, but also with improving the lot of the very sector in which she belongs.

Migrants sometimes have to take a painful trajectory before they are able to help others – that is, they experience victimization first hand, survive it, and make their own interventions, either as individuals or as members of an advocacy-oriented organisation (Agustin 2003). The epistolary narrative, *A Letter Towards the End of April (Isang Liham sa Katapusan ng Abril)*, relates the travails of the narrator, particularly the physical, emotional, and other abuses that she has gone through, her eventual redemption, and her work to keep fellow migrants from suffering the same dreadful fate that befell her. While migrant workers have been given the appellation *pahlawan devisa* (literally, “heroes of the foreign exchange”), the protagonist recalls the feeling of hopelessness in reference to her firsthand experiences of victimization and trauma. Fortunately, she is now affiliated with a non-government organisation (NGO) that concerns itself with ensuring the welfare of migrant workers. Towards the end of the story, the protagonist declares, “Whatever the job – domestic worker, street sweeper, garbage collector – everyone has rights” (2019: 23).

Corrupt government elements may also be complicit in the perpetuation of the issues confronting migrants. In some cases, government operatives connive with unscrupulous recruitment agencies if only to expedite the process of a worker’s migration and subsequently put the worker in harm’s way (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2011; Verite 2016). As in the previous story, the narrator in *O Allah, I’m Coming Home (O Allah, Ako’y Pauwi Na)* is also aware of the terrible injustice that migrant workers are confronted with not just in the hands of their employers or other actors in the receiving country, but even in the hands of bureaucrats in their own homeland. In the story, the narrator named Kie puts forward searing criticism of the government for its perceived corruption and irregularities in the deployment of migrant workers:

This is probably how low the morality of government officials can get. As long as their pockets and stomachs are full, as long as they have elegant clothes to wear, as long as they have great shoes and houses, they will

remain indifferent to the less privileged whose burdens are getting heavier by the day (2019: 167–168).

She cites her own personal experience to buttress the claim: her passport indicates that she was already 26 years old when she was applying for work overseas even if she was actually three years younger. The disparity points to an anomalous bureaucratic stratagem to avoid any complication that may arise from a migrant worker's actual age. The narrator calls out the authorities for this continuing malpractice that has compromised the security of migrant workers in more ways than one.

If it is not the migrant herself, then a conscientised family member (say, her own child) who can take up the cudgels for other migrants, old and new. In *Bring Me Back My Aminah*, Ana, the daughter of a deceased domestic helper who used to work in Hongkong, refuses an offer from no less than her mother's ward to live and work in the progressive city. Ana is apparently involved in a modest campaign that she has mounted in her small Indonesian village to help reintegrate former domestic helpers into society. When offered the chance to go to Hongkong, Ana makes a sober demurral: "I will stay here. In my country. They need me more than your family. And I don't want to let them leave their children. Like my mom left me" (2019: 197). This recalls at least two important points: First is the sacrifice that a migrant has to make for her family's upkeep, such as being away from loved ones and, if she has children, not being able to raise them personally. The other pertains to inadequate systemic mechanisms for reintegrating former migrant workers into society, thus necessitating the likes of Ana to make interventions often using the resources at their disposal. As the International Organisation on Migration (2010: xii) has observed, "(A) large number of labour migrants are in need of government services or assistance after their return". And while there are modest efforts on the part of the Indonesian authorities to organise training programs such as those on entrepreneurship, these campaigns are not always successful because of insufficient resources (*ibid.*).

4.3 Defying Authority

At the risk of being repetitious, there is need to go beyond the discourse of victimization that once informed most of the critical studies on migration. The migrant is not one who will just stand idly by in the face of injustice, but one who will boldly expose and criticise it, whether the perpetrator is a well-connected personality in the host country or an abusive family member. She employs both confrontational and indirect strategies to disrupt social power and prevailing value systems. She finds ways to circumvent the restrictions imposed on her by

tradition or by dominant authority, motivated by her belief that defiance in such cases is a just and noble option. Included in these resistive practices is recreating one's identity to defy social codes, say, those that pertain to traditional hierarchical relations or orthodox gender ideologies.

In *There Are No Diamonds in Diamond Hill* (*Walang Dyamante sa Diamond Hill*) the narrator adamantly stands by her allegation that she has suffered maltreatment in the hands of her employer and wants to leave the household to which she has been assigned. She insists on leaving her employer even if the agency does not seem to lend credence to her protestation:

I do know where I am getting the courage to confront my agency. The fact of the matter is that I do not know any other agency. I only know that if there is no one else to save me and solve my problem, I need to stand on my own two feet and fight for myself, no matter the consequence (2019: 72–73).

In such instances, running away serves as one of the most viable forms of resistance in the face of abuse and servitude. Along that line, fleeing may not simply be viewed as a stratagem to ensure self-preservation but also to subtly unsettle and undermine the mechanisms of control and domination. In some countries, unfortunately, absconding is considered illegal and migrants who run away face stiff sanctions even if, in most cases, migrants leave because of abusive treatment (Naufal and Malit 2018; Chammartin 2005). In an attempt to correct this seeming injustice, the United Nations declared that “Migrants who ‘run away’ from abusive employers should not be detained and deported” (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2013).

Wilted Dreams in Formosa (*Mga Nalantang Pangarap sa Formosa*) centers on an even more drastic and violent action taken by a migrant worker to end her oppression—that is, murdering the person who has committed acts of violence against her. The person responsible for the murder is not the narrator herself but a fellow migrant named Ayu whose abuse, the narrator says, should have been reported earlier. The narrator muses on Ayu's fate with profound regret:

I should have informed the police or called the 1955 service hotline for migrant workers having problems with their employer or agency. Because I did not decide promptly, my friend's situation worsened and now she's going to prison. If only I was brave enough, Ayu would not have reached this point (87–88).

While murder should not be condoned under almost any circumstance, the account somehow contradicts the portrayal of the domestic worker as a helpless, at times even willing, victim who only despairs over her affliction until she returns

to the home country. The vengeful murder is a transgression of the highest order, exemplifying what Fishman (1996: 38) calls “criminal resistance,” an extreme form of resistance by someone from an oppressed and vulnerable sector, in this case that of women migrants. Nonetheless, there is little indication, if at all, of her being laden with guilt, and the narrator chooses to end her own life instead of allowing herself to be incarcerated as if to demonstrate her defiance to the very end. This situation – of the aggrieved migrant aggressively fighting back and killing her abuser – may easily be considered illegal and immoral under the dominant system of justice. As pointed out by Sloop and Ono (1997: 50), however, there are “competing logics of justice that are culturally struggled over”, and the context within which a crime is committed by a victim against the oppressor may not necessarily resonate with traditional notions of morality and justice.

Not a few of the narratives point to how the migrant worker embraces a new gender identity in response to the high-handedness of the men in her life. Such an attitude can, of course, be ascribed to the patriarchal order in which the sufferance of women and their domination by men are perceived to be natural and irreversible laws of the universe (Soman 2009; Pierik 2022; Facio 1995). The following observation from UN Women is instructive:

Being a migrant accentuates the risks of women and girls to various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in countries of origin, transit, destination, and return. Their increased vulnerability to GBV derives not only from the intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination they face, but also as a result of structural and gender inequalities, including a lack of access to safe and regular migration pathways (UN Women (2021: 1).

One can see a revamp of identity in *The TB Story (Kwentong TB)*, a riveting narrative about an otherwise scandalous affair between two women: Gie, the nickname of Giyandri, who makes the sweeping declaration: “All men are shameless” (2019: 138).; and Ree, a fellow migrant, who has suffered molestation in the hands of a Pakistani worker.

A lesbian relationship is also taken up in *At the MTR Station (Sa MTR Station)* in reference to a well-known public transport system in Hongkong. The couple in the story, Sandy and Sita have been together for months. But Sita has a husband and did not consider herself a lesbian prior to the relationship. It is suggested that her new affair, disgraceful and even repulsive by certain standards, is an act of protest against the philandering of her husband who is rumored to be mispending the money she has been sending. The advice Sita has been getting from neighbors and even from her own family also seems to excuse her husband’s wrongdoings:

My neighbors have noticed my husband's infidelity, but they tell me not to separate from him... Even my own family has accepted him. They love him as a member of the family (2019: 142).

Illustrated in the story is how the victimization of the migrant woman can take forms other than physical abuse—say, psychological injury—in the hands of the employer, a citizen of the receiving country, a fellow migrant, or even a loved one (American Psychological Association 2012). The story of Sita points to how trust has been flagrantly violated by her own supposed life partner. It is also notable that the train plays a significant part in the life of Sita, and it can also be teased out as an interesting trope for her own personal journey that is fraught, uncertain, and exciting.

The story *Life is Like Mochi (Ang Buhay ay Parang Mochi)* references a modest confection that symbolises and sustains the bond between the three main characters in the narrative – the narrator Lautin and the lesbian lovers Sabita and Angani. Indubitably, it is also their painful experiences of abuse and displacement that have kept them together, as their companionship has provided them with the necessary emotional support to confront the precariousness of living outside the homeland. According to Hombrados-Mendieta et al. (2019: 12): “(P)ositive interaction patterns should be promoted between immigrants and their friends and family, to build positive perceptions of social support. Special attention should be given to immigrants who lack family support.” It is said that even before she met Sabita and Angani, Lautin had demonstrated her grit by leaving the house of her employer upon realizing that she could be repatriated for her medical problems. As for Sabita and Angani, their relationship can be construed as a strategy to rebuild their self-worth after each one's traumatic experiences: Sabita was raped by her own brother, while Angani had a failed relationship and suffered psychologically through her parents' divorce. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that both have harbored a deep-seated resentment of men. In any case, Lautin looks at the lowly mochi as a way to describe their friendship and philosophy in life:

By making mochi, I have learned the real meaning of companionship.... It is also in making mochi that one learns how to persevere in life. You have to dissolve the bitter memories to create something sweet.... It is also believed that mochi symbolises the human heart; it can be divided into two – one bad and the other good (2019: 166).

Defiance may also be directed at the role of the migrant worker as a source of financial support for her family back home, as suggested in the story *O Allah, I'm Coming Home (O Allah, Ako'y Pauwi Na)*. Weighed down by the pressure of working for her loved ones, the narrator engages in illegal substance abuse

and begins to be remiss on her financial obligations. Her lover Gha, also an Indonesian migrant woman, challenges social conventions by leaving her family, especially her abusive husband. For the couple, their relationship, created partly by their unpleasant experiences, takes precedence over the judgment of a narrow-minded society:

Perhaps, love is crazy and blind. But I am happy that I'm with you. You are the center of my world. When sailing, however, the waves may rise high and threaten to sink the ship. Likewise, our quarrels add color to our relationship. But we carry on because you are mature and always do me a favor. And our relationship has become great, like love symphonies or like a poet's dreams (2019: 171).

In a way, the decision to leave Indonesia and continue staying outside the homeland constitutes an attempt to repress the unpleasant memories of the physical and emotional harm inflicted on migrants by their families. This suggests that apart from the desire for financial stability, "intimate" forms of abuse such as domestic and sexual abuse, not to mention tremendous family pressure could also be a reason for women to migrate, shirk their family responsibilities, and engage in what could be described as deviant behavior while abroad (Parish 2017).

5 Conclusion

The paper discussed stories of Indonesian migrants through the concept of fugitive witnessing which points to their role as witnesses to different forms of inequality and injustice while at the same time highlighting the many ways by which they can demonstrate their collective and individual agency. Whether the story is the narrator's own or that of a fellow migrant, one can see in each purposely selected account how the migrant serves as keen-eyed witness to varied experiences of injustice. Parenthetically, the agent of injustice is not always the harsh or overbearing employer; in some cases, it is the spouse, the recruitment officer, the family, or the fellow migrant who takes advantage of the domestic helper's vulnerability. On the other hand, the migrant is not reduced to the role of disempowered victim, but rather one capable of carrying on resistance and forging transformative and emancipatory possibilities not just for herself but for fellow migrants. Along these lines, the stories were categorised and analysed according to thematic concerns – the feelings of anguish and restlessness that are bound up with staying in unfamiliar and, at times, inhospitable territory; the critical, empathetic, and conscientised migrant who decries her and other migrants' victimization; and lastly, the strategies by which the excesses of power that legitimate abuse and oppression are circumvented and transgressed.

The popular “triple win” notion is often invoked to stress the benefits of labour export. The migrant, in particular, is supposed to be accorded employment opportunities that are not available in the home country, but this comes at a considerable cost to her physical and psychological wellbeing. In other words, notwithstanding the supposed rewards of global labour mobility, migration can cast workers, the so-called “remittance heroes,” into precarious conditions. It is, therefore, incumbent upon stakeholders, including the governments of both sending and receiving countries that the rights of migrant workers are strictly upheld and protected, and not merely treated as disposable bodies in the shadow of globalization. More importantly, economies should make sure that there are adequate jobs for workers so that leaving their country will not serve as their primary option for seeking employment, their energies and skills optimised to the advantage of the homeland.

Considering how labour export under the aegis of the neoliberal order has engendered new inequalities or perhaps expanded old ones, the project of gathering stories among diasporic communities ought to be undertaken, particularly those that are largely, if not entirely, based on lived experiences of migrants’ abjection. I am not referring to stories produced by professional writers or bourgeois academics some of which concern themselves less with the collective struggles of migrants than with exilic ego-boosting. I am referring specifically to the *more* marginalised sectors within migrant populations – domestic helpers, construction workers, care givers, entertainers, undocumented migrants, etc. – whose stories deal with real instances of oppression but, if not for independent presses and advocacy-oriented groups, may not be published and reach a broad readership. The narratives of such sectors cannot just be viewed as *stories*; rather, they constitute a communal, discursive strategy against exploitation and violence, forging bonds that are anchored in “collective experiences of despair, struggle, and hope” (Moratilla 2018: 39). Recuperating the narratives of/by subaltern migrants is a crucial step for assessing transnational labour migration as a defining characteristic of an inexorably globalizing world.

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