

A Tale of Two Siti's: Parallel Representations of Foreign Domestic Helpers in their own Poetry and in Singapore Society

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Abstract:

This article presents a comparison of two different representations of foreign domestic workers in Singapore. In the Singapore mainstream, which I understand as government policy documents, newspaper articles, advice from main agencies, and blog content, domestic helpers are portrayed either as victims of abuse by employers or as lazy, devious, or stupid functionaries. By contrast, in deeply personal poems entered into recent Migrant Worker Poetry Competitions the domestic helpers represent themselves as bringers of change, survivors, and thoughtful people at the margins. This bifurcated representation I call, "A tale of two Siti's", borrowing a name common among Indonesian domestic helpers to make the pun.

The treatment and portrayal of domestic helpers in the Singapore mainstream reveals elements of neo-colonialism, exploitation, and a strong binary between self and other which seem to have continued through Singapore's colonial and decolonial experience, and on into a new situation in which the island nation is in some way a neo-colonial power within Southeast Asia. This article attempts to give voice to domestic helpers from Indonesia and the Philippines, by analysing and quoting from poems they entered into the 2015 and 2016 migrant poetry competition. The poems themselves, and reaction to them and their authors are shown as negating a neo-colonial binary and celebrating the humanity and self-sacrifice of these women for family at home.

Keywords: migrant labour, representation, poetry, Singapore, neo-colonialism