

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

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**Introduction**

Within a neo-colonial, and exploitative migrant labour framework, foreign domestic workers (FDWs) are represented in Singapore by a mixture of government policy and their portrayal in the press, individual blogs, and on the websites of 'maid agencies'. Through the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, Filipino and Indonesian domestic helpers working in Singapore show their creativity, feelings, and connection with home. The

subaltern speaks through her poems, as she challenges her depiction in the Singapore mainstream. Although some mention suffering and deprivation, the overall picture is one of willing self-sacrifice and strength.

‘Siti’ is a common name among Indonesian women, which I use to symbolise FDWs from both countries. The Siti of domestic worker poetry is different from the Siti constructed by the Singapore mainstream. Also, Singapore is two cities, one a global metropolis dominated by a meritocratic, Chinese success culture and the other a ‘below-stairs’ space inhabited by poorly paid, effectively invisible foreign women.

Singapore has been independent for around half a century. Its rise as a financial, manufacturing, and educational hub, its labour laws and practices, and forces of globalisation have created a neo-colonial binary between nation and imported labour.

## **Neo-Colonial Singapore**

In her discussion of colonialism and post-colonialism, Loomba (1998, 47) summarises Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* in the following manner: Colonialism divided East and West into ‘us and them’; westerners were portrayed as rational and civilised, hard-working and forward-looking, while non-westerners were seen as irrational and barbaric, lazy and caught in tradition. Europe was conceptualised as

masculine and the Orient as feminine (Carr 1985), to be cared for and protected, but also penetrated and exploited.

While the individual was celebrated at the Metropole, the colonised were grouped together according to simple essentialisms (Loomba 1998, 54). Portraying people ‘as all the same’ allows the self to keep the other (actually plural and diverse) at a distance, especially if the center feared that racial mixing would imperil their purity and power. Colonialism saw complex interactions between race, gender, and class (Rajan and Park 2005, 54), an intersectionality which persists, as the colonial abuse of women as plantation labour has given way to modern sweatshops and domestic service. Under globalised, neo-liberal economics, governance has changed but exploitation is the principal characteristic of the postcolonial era (Rajan and Park 2005). People are elements in the production process, and ‘colonisation = “thingification”’ (Cesaire 1972, 21) or ‘commodification’ (Woods 2015) is an equation that still rings true. Exploitation is the result of power flowing not only from top to bottom but also in a ‘capillary fashion’ (Foucault, quoted in Loomba 1998, 50); unskilled workers in Singapore are at the end of the finest filaments of a power dynamic. Exploitative power flows around every aspect of these workers’ lives and there is nothing they can do to liberate themselves from it. It is ‘all pervasive’ (Loomba 1998, 50). In addition, the neo-colonial status of unskilled workers in Singapore brings the nuance

that ‘metropole’ and ‘colony’ occupy the same physical space. Loomba’s criticism of Said for neglecting the ‘self representation of the colonised’ and the resistance to colonisation from below (1998, 49) is pertinent when considering the self-representation of domestic helpers. The poems written by domestic workers not only constitute an alternative to the way in which they are represented in the Singapore mainstream, but also resist neo-colonial attitudes and reveal a sense of agency.

## **Government Policy on Domestic Helpers**

Singapore relies on foreign labour in its manufacturing industry, service sector, infrastructure development, and even family life. The categorisation of the roughly one million foreigners employed in the island republic (Yap 2014) as ‘workers’ and ‘talent’, reflects the ‘bifurcation’ of foreign labour (Yeoh 2005). Unskilled or semi-skilled ‘workers’ come from poorer neighbouring countries, while highly skilled ‘talent’ often hails from the West and Northeast Asia (Yeoh and Lin 2012).

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) classifies domestic helpers under the lowest class of ‘Work Permit’, which lasts for two years. Foreign workers may not bring family members, marry Singapore citizens (Yeoh and Lin 2012), or become pregnant (Yap 2014, 231). They must leave the country when their contract ends (Yap 2014, 224). This is a ‘use and discard’ approach to foreign la-

bour (Yeoh 2005). In December 2016 there were 240000 FDWs, mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines and all living at their employer's residence. They live and work at the intersection (Crenshaw 1989) of nationality, gender, status, rural origin, and locatedness, caused by the income disparity between Singapore and its neighbours.

Because FDWs have neither job descriptions nor fixed working hours they 'are not real workers' (Anggrae-ni 2006, 104), echoing the colonial conceptualisation of the 'national' and 'international' as masculine and 'household' and 'body' as feminine (Silvey 2006). This reflects a binarism in which male labour was considered 'larger' and female labour 'smaller' (Silvey 2006, 67) such that women and their work were trivialised and considered unimportant. Although FDWs have neither clear job descriptions nor fixed working hours, the legal frameworks governing their employment as foreigners suggest that they are not part of an informal economy. Indeed their lack of protection within a highly centralised and formalised labour system reveals the strongly neo-colonial power dynamic at work.

## **The Domestic Helper Experience**

Regional income disparity is a push-pull factor in a complex migration system (Castles and Miller 2009) providing cheap labour and facilitating remittances to poorer countries. Many women seek employment in Singapore to help

meet education costs of family members; others need money for loans or health care expenses (Maid to order 2005, 13). Well-qualified Filipina women end up as FDWs to support poor parents (Swept under the rug 2006, 67).

Homesickness is the main problem for one quarter of domestic helpers on arrival in Singapore. One tenth feel unable to cope with their work and a similar number are stressed in a new environment (FDW and FDW Employer Study 2010, 16). Many FDWs claim to work between 13 and 19 hours per day and feel treated 'like machines' (Maid to order 2005, 61, 66).

Maid to order gives accounts of FDWs falling from high buildings when working and even committing suicide due to overwork, verbal or physical abuse, pressure over debt or threats of repatriation, or being forbidden to leave the employer's residence or communicate with family and friends (2005, 39).

Employers sometimes confiscate FDWs' telephone numbers and contact addresses and forbid them to use mobile phones, or contact neighbours or other domestic helpers (Maid to order 2005, 42). Some employers believe FDWs incapable of making good choices about friends (of both sexes), managing money, or other areas of adult life. This 'control and confine' approach (Swept under the rug 2006, 73) 'infantilizes grown women' (Maid to order 2005, 43), seeing

them as ‘stupid, unskilled and worse still, so recalcitrant that they are untrainable’ (Anggraeni 2006, 204).

Physical and sexual violence, and personal, gender-based, and ethnic abuse are common (Maid to order). Concerning sexual abuse, one Indonesian FDW asked, ‘Why do domestic workers always have to submit?’ (Swept under the rug 2006, 17). If domestic service represents feminisation, such abuse of the body signals the most extreme essentialisation of all.

Some FDWs have to eat leftovers, are given inadequate food, or are deprived of food as punishment (Maid to order 2005, 79ff). Many do not have their own place to sleep (Tay 2016, 9), sharing rooms with their employer’s children and even adult men, causing lack of sleep and stress.

Domestic helpers describe their work as repetitive ‘drudgery’ (Thomas and Lim 2010, 5) and when they cannot socialise with friends, human needs such as friendship and affection are unfulfilled (Tay 2016, 17). Some engage in ‘transnational mothering’ (Platt et al. 2014, 15), even making sure that their children’s homework is done.

## **The Representation of FDWs in Singapore Society**

FDWs are represented in several overlapping sources, a discourse formation of ‘language and practice’ (Hall

2013, 29). This section looks at government guidelines for employers, articles in the Singapore press, websites of private maid agencies, and a small number of blogs.

### **Government Guidelines for Employers**

The MOM provides advice for FDWs and employers in cartoon style leaflets, in which the employer is always female and of a lighter skin tone than her employee. In a country where no one wears shoes in the house, the domestic helper is portrayed as barefoot, even when outside, while the female employer wears black court shoes, a symbol of power and authority (“Handy guide” n.d.). In a neo-colonial binary a white male master has been replaced by a non-Caucasian female.

‘Your guide to employing a foreign domestic worker’ reminds employers that FDWs may lack English skills, fail to meet cleanliness expectations, ‘need constant supervision and coaching’, struggle to adjust to Singapore, and ‘have different way of life, beliefs and customs’ (“Your guide” n.d., 5). On their rest day, FDWs should not throw litter or spit, ‘talk loudly in public’, and must ‘avoid places with high traffic flow’. They are ‘strongly encouraged to take part in constructive and meaningful activities’ (“Handy guide” n.d., 8). The loss of agency and simplicity of mind implied evoke a neo-colonial feminisation.

Regulations prohibiting marriage to people in Singapore and requiring six-monthly medical exam-

inations ‘codify stereotypes that...domestic workers...[are]... promiscuous’ (Maid to order 2005, 91) and echo colonial-era fear of the ethnic other.

## Newspapers

Singapore’s *Straits Times* and *The New Paper* contain numerous articles about domestic helpers, which fall into three broad categories. The first is legislation and policy related. The second category exposes criminal or unethical behaviour by employers and the punishments given. The final group details illegal or inappropriate activities by the FDWs, such as abuse of people in their care, theft and damage, and illicit sexual activity. As policy has been covered, this section looks at the second and third categories. The following are relevant headlines from *The Straits Times* and *The New Paper* in the last quarter of 2017 and the first of 2018:

Woman jailed for hitting maid with plastic hanger (Alkhatib 2017a)

Maid jailed for pouring hot oil on employer’s teenage son (Chong 2017)

Punggol couple claim trial over maid abuse (Alkhatib 2018a)

Couple accused of abusing maid allegedly made her pour hot water on herself (Alkhatib 2018b)

Maid jailed for false rape claim after sex with 70-year-old (Alkhatib 2018c)

Maid jailed for stealing \$5k in red packets from 90-year-old employer (Chong 2018)

Maid jailed for eight months for hurting elderly woman with a mild form of Alzheimer's disease (Alkhatib 2018d)

Getting tougher on maid abusers (Alkhatib 2018e)

Maid jailed 8 months for pinching grandma, poking her eye (Alkhatib 2018f)

These headlines were found by searching on the websites of the two newspapers. The articles referred to are either accounts of events in which the FDWs were involved or reports on legal cases in process, presentations of facts with no commentary or opinion. The articles provide a simple representation, which 'works as much through what is not shown, as through what is' (Hall 2013, 43). The only positive mentions of the women relate to their functionality as domestic helpers. They are either a threat or a liability, without normal emotions, aspirations, or struggles, stereotyped into an otherness convenient for the dominant mainstream. We are given a neo-colonial, essentialised and selective construction of those far from the 'metropole'.

## **Maid Agencies**

This section looks at the representation of domestic helpers on the websites of so-called ‘maid agencies’. In ‘Eight simple ways to make your children fall in love with your maids’, the company “ Search-maid” claims that many people do not show respect to domestic helpers and treat them inappropriately in front of children. Maids are treated like slaves, ‘very low graded human[s]’ (Simple ways n.d., n.p.).

According to Finesse Living, employers must ensure that the maid has sufficient rest. ‘Common maid problem’ are stubbornness, ‘bad disposition and table manner, poor personal hygiene’. Employers are urged to ‘set a good example is for the maid to emulate’. Also, employers should ‘never give multiple or complex instructions’ (Common maid problems n.d., n.p.).

United Channel comments on national characteristics. ‘Filipino maids can handle more complicated tasks compared to helpers from other countries’ while Myanmar women are ‘less demanding’ and ‘known to be sweet in nature and have a positive outlook in life’. Indonesians are ‘hard-working, well-behaved and easy-going’. Unfortunately, they may be unfamiliar with urban living (Maid expectations n.d., n.p.)

Another *Finesse Living* article notes that some FDWs do not ‘come from urban dwellings’ and may not be familiar with ‘modern gadgets and electronic equipment’. It is important that employers ‘show by example, practice the use of the gadget or equipment repeatedly’. Employers are urged to be patient and ‘never expect them to understand you immediately’. Maids should be allowed to call friends and family, as long as this is not excessive (New maid n.d., n.p.).

Eden Grace Maids Filipino domestic helpers are relational, concerned for those in their care, and ‘good in motor skills’ [sic]. FDWs from Northern Luzon are known for ‘being hard-working and thrifty’ while those from the Western Visayas have ‘a reputation of being gentle and submissive’ (Filipino maids n.d., n.p.). Raymond Maids describe their Indonesian domestic helpers as ‘obedient, hard-working, and humble’ (Indonesian maids n.d., n.p.) and Myanmar maids as ‘humble, hard-working, and patient’ (Myanmar maids n.d., n.p.).

Choosing and retaining a good FDW is important because of the ‘numerous news coverage of Singapore maids gone bad!’ (Selecting and keeping n.d., n.p.). United Channel’s advice on managing a maid ‘without being nasty’ reminds employers that FDWs find it difficult to settle. Employers should show the domestic helper that she is ‘part of the family’ and remind her that ‘her sacrifices are worth it for her family back home’ (Manage maid n.d., n.p.).

Eden Grace Maids asks employers to show understanding because settling in and homesickness can cause FDWs to lack focus in their work. Domestic helpers 'in general are non-confrontational' and thus might 'either deny or give excuses', so employers should avoid criticisms such as 'you are stupid or you are not a good helper'. Eden Grace also asks that FDWs be treated as family members, because 'by nature, they are warm and hospitable' (Tips for employers n.d., n.p.).

Advising employers to be patient and caring may result from human rights reports and unfortunate stories in the press. Less positive is the representation of domestic helpers as 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977), humble, submissive, and overwhelmed by Singapore's urban environment; there is more than a hint of essentialisation and orientalism here.

## **Blogs**

While government publications seek the good of employer and employee and private agencies aim to recruit good FDWs for responsible homes, bloggers have no constraints. Blogs that I visited either advocate better treatment of domestic helpers or serve as fora for people to complain.

In 'Maid abuse: Singapore's shame', Tan discusses maltreatment of domestic helpers. On a visit to a maid agency, she overheard the owner telling dissatisfied em-

ployers, 'if you don't like the maid, just bring her back' (Lucky Tan 2009, n.p.), a commodification which makes a woman no different from a defective microwave or tin opener. Tan also mentions negative stereotyping caused by 'dramatised juicy stories...about maids bringing men to the house or maids having boyfriends outside'. This posting is followed by 41 comments discussing government policy or experiences with domestic helpers. Seven posts portrayed FDWs negatively while one positive comment concerned an Indonesian woman who aspired to be a teacher. Two posts advocated sending maids back 'if you're not happy with them'. Another person suggested beating up the FDW as a means of stress relief. A follow-up posting to the story of a maid who was almost starved to death joked that the employer's family had done her a favour by helping her lose weight. Another posting said that maids are treated like slaves. FDWs are described as dishonest and inept and liars and thieves.

Another blog records 'life as a Singapore domestic maid's employer' (Winter 2009, n.p.). FDWs are described as 'spongers, lacking guilt, and feeling entitled to everything' they are given. Winter is scathing of maids who apparently do not write down her instructions because they are lazy or unwilling to do things the way she wishes. She asks domestic helpers why they have low status jobs and then blame their employers. For Winter, FDWs are immature and schemers, unwilling to face the consequences of their actions. Winter castigates 'modern maids' for coming to Singapore to 'earn high salary, get plenty en-

joyment, find boyfriends and asking for little workload'. In other postings domestic helpers tell lies, are 'big headed' and spend time 'chit chatting' instead of looking after children; they are slippery and underhanded. One says in capital letters, 'even the nicest maid can turn against you'. A non-Singaporean points out that FDWs are treated like cattle and make a contribution to the nation.

The final blog I looked at belongs to a Dr Donna Chow. In '10 common mistakes made by first-time maid employers', Chow says that domestic helpers should be treated humanely and paid appropriately but not be allowed to 'run all over our shoulders' (Dr Donna Chow 2017, n.p.). Chow speculates that a FDW might bring 'sexy clothing (for their off days?), potential weapons (to use against you?) or lots of valuables (from another household?)' into the house. Employers should install CCTV in the house to detect unsuitable behaviour. If they have to eat out together, the employer should order the food for the FDW. Finally, Chow advocates rewards for good work and zero tolerance of 'stealing things, telling lies or abusing your children'. In her second posting Chow warns that a steam iron is 'a potential weapon for anyone who gets real mad and out of control' while a Chinese cleaver should be stored 'away until you are sure of the mental well-being of your help' (Dr Donna Chow 2016, n.p.).

Blogs allow employers to let off steam and complain about their domestic helpers and the employment system. How-

ever, the dominant representation of FDWs is as unreliable, dishonest, abusive, demanding, and even dangerous.

The Self-representation of FDWs in their Poetry After considering domestic helpers' experience and representation in civil society, let us now see how the women portray themselves. The Singapore mainstream characterises FDWs in a reductionist way, either trivialising them as literally belonging to the 'household' in accordance with Silvey's (2006) masculine/feminine binary, or viewing them as dangerous. However, the picture emerging from the poems by the FDWs challenges such trivialisation by gender or type of work. The poems depict women functioning in a transnational space, earning money and showing considerable agency, as they improve the lives of family members back home. Although their day-to-day lives are often affected by capillary flows of power (Foucault 1977) in a neo-colonial space, within it they represent themselves as creative human beings who make material difference to their families outside of it by sending remittances, continuing relationships, and providing maternal care transnationally. The 15 poems quoted from here were entries to the Singapore Migrant Worker Poetry Competition for the years 2015-2016 and can be found on the competition website along with details of the authors. Some poems were written in English, while others were translated from Tagalog and Bahasa Indonesia; the translations used here were taken from the poetry competition website.

When quoting the poems I use the name of the author, followed by her country of origin (PH or ID) and the year in which she took part in the poetry competition in brackets. There are eight by Filipinas and seven by Indonesians. Rolinda has two poems and these are referred to as Rolinda1 and Rolinda2 respectively. Basic information on the poets is given in Table 1:

Name	From	Poem Year	Comment
Manik Sri Bandar	ID	2016	Vocalist for traditional music
Nur Hidayati	ID	2016	Has a child in ID
Susilowati	ID	2016	
Wiwik Triwinarsih	ID	2016	
Sharasyamsi-Yahya	ID	2015	
Anjia Mutiara	ID	2015	
Pujiati	ID	2015	Studying in open university
Edna Manatad	PH	2016	Former company manager
Joan Bastatas Ferrer	PH	2016	

Rolinda Espanola	PH	2016	Has 7-year-old daughter in PH
Juliet Ugay-Dumo	PH	2016	Has an 11-year-old son in PH
Rea Maac	PH	2016	Production inspector in PH
Glory-Ann R. Balista	PH	2015	Has a son in PH
Rolinda O. Espanola	PH	2015	
Grimaldo Rioflorido	PH	2015	A hotel restaurant worker in PH

Table 1. Basic information about the poets. Summarised from The Migrant Worker Poetry Competition details posted at <https://www.singaporeworkerpoetry.com/copy-of-poets> and <https://www.singaporeworkerpoetry.com/copy-of-poets-1>.

I discovered seven principal themes in the women's self-representation: change agent, one who sacrifices for others, overcomer, person of faith, victim, mother, and lover. I illustrate each theme with extracts from the poems to let these subalterns speak for themselves. Filipinas are often slightly older than their Indonesian counterparts and more are married. Their better English and stronger democratic tradition make them more outspoken.

## Change agent

Many women work as FDWs because of the economic disparities between their home nations and Singapore. Despite enduring considerable hardship, they exercise agency resulting in positive change for themselves and their families.

Edna (PH, 2016), a company manager in her own country, writes:

[I] leave those who are dear to me  
For a better life, for the future I see

Anjia (ID, 2015) uses the words 'warrior' and 'burning zeal'. These lines encapsulate her ambition:

Let my wings flap  
Till they fill the pale clouds with colour  
Streak like lightning, single-minded,  
Soar high to reach all my goals

These single women probably intend to use the money and opportunity in Singapore for personal improvement.

More commonly, however, the authors are bringers of change for their families.

Rolinda1 writes (PH, 2016):

Finally, I can help my family  
Fearless, I will sacrifice to provide them happiness

In her poem Juliet (PH, 2016) is a 'breadwinner' who believes:

In exchange for a better future and money,  
a necessity to make my own [family] worry-free and  
happy.

In the following poems, the agency suggested by 'help', 'provide', 'make', and 'support' contrasts with the passivity of FDWs within Singapore families:

Glory Ann (PH, 2015):

I just wanted to make  
A bright future for you

Rolinda2 (PH, 2015):

To work abroad is the only decent act I know  
To support your education and give a better tomorrow

Grimaldo (PH, 2015):

Because she wants to earn money  
To achieve on the glory  
Not only for herself and also for the family

### **Women who sacrifice for others**

Related to 'change agent' is self-sacrifice, as many FDWs work abroad to benefit others. For Rolinda1 the sacrifice is personal and emotional; being looked down upon and considered second class is a loss of dignity.

Rolinda1 (PH, 2016):

Fearless, I will sacrifice to provide them happiness  
To be a maid in a foreign land  
Where people look down on us  
But for my family, I am a hero

Juliet's sacrifice is emotional and physical (PH, 2016):

Years of sacrifice and patience,  
of many sleepless nights and absence.  
Years of being far away and being a breadwinner,

Rolinda2 (PH, 2015) tells her young daughter there was no alternative:

So here I am going far from you  
And wish someday you'll understand what did I do  
To work abroad is the only decent act I know

Grimaldo's (PH, 2015) absence was a sacrifice for family:

She decided to leave the country  
As she faced her own journey  
In a place that has a lot of opportunity  
For the sake of her beloved family

### **Overcomer**

In the poetry the women rise above physical and emotional hardship. Although their intersectionality of gender, race, and class suggests weakness and powerlessness, the FDWs portray themselves as strong and patient.

Joan (PH, 2016) comments:

all the trials that  
I have endured  
Because of this, two decades  
Have passed,

Rolinda1 (PH, 2016) also talks of enduring:

Each year I endured  
I hope that one day my masters will change their  
treatment

Juliet (PH, 2016) has survived great emotional and physical torment:

Years of sacrifice and patience,

of many sleepless nights and absence.  
Countless days of longing and sadness  
combined with regrets and endless stress.

Years of nightmares, restrictions and isolation,  
and the law at the time was missing in action.

Grimaldo (PH, 2015) speaks of resilience:

She knows she needs to be strong  
From the time she felt alone  
She will stand on her own  
Because she wants to earn money

Finally, Anjia (ID, 2015) sees the financial reward beyond grief and physical exertion:

Banish my stream of tears  
Wipe my dripping sweat  
With my wages.

### **Women of faith**

Many Filipina FDWs are Christians while most Indonesians are Muslim. For some of the women, God is present with them, acts in their interest, and is reliable and faithful.

One third of Manik's (ID, 2016) poem either mentions or addresses God, the 'soul-shepherd' whose faith is

eternal. She also writes:

Longing for YOUR-love ...  
Longing for YOUR-care ...  
My God ...!

Fellow Indonesian Wiwik (ID, 2016) also longs for God and 'his greatness':

Isn't the Almighty everything?  
The sky will not fall, said the wanderer,  
As long as He's not wrathful.

Their compatriot Nur (ID, 2016) asks God to be with her son -

Then I whispered my prayer to you  
Hoping that God, will always be there too  
In everywhere you go  
And in everything you do

Joan (PH, 2016) contrasts Singapore's beauty and wealth with her loneliness, yet:

Despite all of this;  
I am grateful to God the Almighty  
For the peace of mind  
That I have.  
Thanks to the Holy Father,  
For all the trials that

I have endured.

Although autobiographical, Grimaldo's (PH, 2015) 'The Journey of My Life' is written in the third person. In the central section we read:

She starts the day with a Prayer  
Praying for the health and safety of everyone  
And thanking for what He done...

And every time she do that she always keep smiling  
Because she know God is there watching everybody  
Watching everybody and also with her  
So she got a peace of mind day by day

Finally, Juliet (PH, 2016) does not appeal to God but describes Singapore as:

a land of promise and convenience  
where faith is a luck or just coincidence.

Christianity is popular among middle and upper class Singaporeans, those most likely to have live-in domestic helpers; Juliet's comment seems like an accusation of hypocrisy.

## **Victim**

Many authors portray themselves as victims. Rolinda<sup>1</sup> (PH, 2016) describes the effects of inadequate food:

I lost my weight, I am too skinny  
Sadly, noodles and bread, the only meal I eat

Grimaldo's (PH, 2015) poem claims:

For the success of her JOURNEY  
she went by she will sleep late at night  
And she will wake up before the sunrise

Moving away from the physical, Manik (ID, 2016) writes:

And the lucid dew cools my soul,  
Banishing the anger  
From the tempest of my broken heart.

Two Filipinas comment on loneliness and isolation. Silence and loneliness engulf Joan (PH, 2016), while Juliet (PH, 2016) talks of Countless days of longing and sadness combined with regrets and endless stress.

Rolinda's (PH, 2016) account is disturbing:

No phone, no daily dip nor even brushing is allowed  
Never talk to anyone, even to fellow Filipinos

My daily suffering is making me lose my sanity  
Work is what I am here for, but why are they doing  
this to me?

In her 'Desolation and request of mother to son', Glory

Ann (PH, 2015) the poet expresses a mother's loneliness:

Feelings of sadness in my heart  
I just endure.  
When I sleep at night  
I wish,  
you are next to me  
I try to close my eyes...  
But cannot stop the tears flowing.

### **Mother**

Motherhood appears more in the poems by Filipinas. Nur's poem is entitled 'Perfect lullaby' and Glory Ann's is the heart-breaking 'Desolation and request of mother to son'. Rolinda's poems are for her seven year-old daughter. Juliet is a single parent with an 11 year-old son.

Joan (PH, 2016) thanks God for being able to endure for two decades, but comments:

But most of all, my family, my children  
Are dearly missed;  
In this restless heart of mine.

Glory Ann (PH, 2015) misses her son:

Because being far with you  
Is very difficult and painful.  
Hopefully you hear, Son!  
This is my little wish,  
That I have to create opportunities

To again express to you  
My love and tenderness.

The same is true of Juliet (PH, 2016):

Smiles from my son's face will be visible,  
and all those years of absence will become accept-  
able.

In her imagination Rolinda<sup>2</sup> (PH, 2015) has been there  
for her daughter. She writes:

I wish to see you blow those candles each year  
To be a part of the crowd who sing and cheer  
I wish to be on that stage every school end  
To see those beaming smile when medals and rib-  
bons pinned  
I wish to give you bath, dress up and tie your hair  
To hold your hand and walk to school  
and be glad if you say its my mom standing there  
I wish to hug you every time you come home crying  
To make your milk and on the light if your dream-  
ing  
But more than that I wish to be a good mother

Finally, Nur (ID, 2016) seems to have left when  
her child was very small. In 'Perfect Lullaby' we  
see how her identity is wrapped up with the child:

From the first time I welcomed you into my world  
You've become my kind of hope

You are my joy  
You are my tears  
Your smile cast away my fears  
You are my sunshine  
You are my pouring rain  
You are my strength

### **Lover**

The final theme is 'lover'. Three younger women from Indonesia write to their significant others.

In Sharasyamsi's (ID, 2015) poem each stanza appeals to the power of the wind to achieve something shared with another person: 'our destination', 'our hopes', 'two hearts' and finally 'a blessed union':

You,  
Be the wind to my clouds  
so that I may go forth confidently  
to our destination

You,  
Be the wind to my kite  
so that I no longer fear crossing  
the skies of our hopes

You,  
Be the wind to all life  
Show them the way

and my way back  
treading the inspiration of two hearts

You,  
Be the wind that gives life to my dreams  
my hope and my love  
you alone are my dream  
may we be joined  
in a blessed union  
that is no longer taboo

A composition by Pujiati (ID, 2015) is all about the desire to be with a loved one:

Gazing at the sea  
I feel myself drowning  
In the depths  
Of your heart

The roar of the waves  
washes away  
the melancholy  
Of my love-longing

The waving coconut palms  
Tell of how it feels  
When two hearts  
Become one

In her poem, Wiwik (ID, 2016) appears to be thinking of a lover as she asks: "Am I missing you?"

## **Two Siti's: The Two Representations Compared**

Poems by FDWs show a very different representation from that in mainstream Singapore society. In government guidelines, domestic helpers are a resource to be managed and used, while in the press they are helpless victims or suspicious characters. Employment agencies portray them as well behaved and keen to please, if a little slow. In some blogs they are characterised as malicious and potentially dangerous.

To many Singaporeans, FDWs are a necessary evil allowing them lifestyle and employment options. Many Singapore women can only work in demanding, full-time jobs if someone else cooks, runs the home, and looks after the children. In their poems the FDWs represent themselves as tenacious and resilient in the grip of an inherently unfair employment system and exploitative working and living conditions. The women demonstrate agency and determination as they undergo various neo-colonial privations to better themselves or their loved ones. It is ironic that civil society portrays the FDWs as weak and helpless when they are as capable and resourceful as the Singaporean women liberated by their labours. The FDWs are trapped within a neoliberal, neo-colonial power dynamic constituted by Singapore employment law, yet the poems reveal a form

of agency from below and resilience which seems to undermine both the power of employers and the system, as well as the unjust portrayal in the public sphere.

The Singapore representation focuses on what domestic helpers do, good and bad, whereas their own poetry is concerned with who they are and how they feel. While the Singapore mainstream reduces FDWs to functional elements in some kind of Foucauldian power/knowledge relationship, their own poems provide a rounded and human representation. Indeed, after the 2016 poetry competition, Singapore poet Alvin Pang confessed, 'So many of us have domestic helpers, but don't imagine they have an intellectual life. This blows that wide open' (Ho 2016). He also asks, 'Do we expect poetry from those whom we see solely as low-wage, low-skilled workers?' (Kuah 2018). Speaking in 2016, Edna Manatad (one of whose poems I feature) commented, 'People belittle and judge us because of our job, but an event like this is a way of saying, here I am and I have talent to show' (Martin 2016). The views of both Singaporean and Filipina poet deconstruct any simple notion of colonial centre and periphery, and the portrayal of those at the margins in essentialised and functionalist terms.

It is presumably no small thing for a migrant at the bottom of Singapore's socio-economic ladder to enter a poem in a national competition which seeks to empower foreign labourers. Singapore does not welcome publicly

voiced dissent and FDW poetry is unlikely to be excessively critical – biting the hand that feeds you is never a good idea. While there is mention of suffering and ill-treatment, most authors focus on love for their families and desire to improve their lives. Despite the difficulties, much of what is written is positive, the FDWs seeing themselves as hardworking and resourceful. In a transnational space rarely thought about by Singaporeans, they remain in touch with family, carry out remote mothering, and provide financial resources for those back home. The FDWs in the poems are physically in Singapore but strongly connected with friends and family at home. In a circumscribed way, the domestic helpers manifest power from below (Foucault 1980), remaining faithful to the desires and expectations of their own people rather than the exploitative mechanism of Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has looked at a small sample of poems by Indonesian and Filipino domestic helpers in Singapore, comparing the self-representation of the women with that of government guidelines, the press, maid agency websites, and blogs in the Singapore mainstream.

Two different representations exist. While the Singapore mainstream paints foreign domestic helpers as slightly threatening or somewhat hapless, their own poems portray strength and endurance as they provide for their families. The women write more about their feelings for

their loved ones than the injustices they face, without ignoring these. While they cannot resist the neo-colonial forces which constrain their lives, in a personal way these women construct an alternative narrative. In a modest but significant way, the poems undermine an assumed polarity of power and agency associated with a neo-colonial center and periphery and deconstruct an unjust and reductionist portrayal of the FDWs in Singapore.

Without directly critiquing the migrant worker employment system in their poems, the FDWs subvert it through depictions of agency, resilience, and love. Within one small country there exists a tale of two Siti's, two descriptions of life and work as a foreign domestic servant living in someone else's family home. One appears cold and essentialising while the other is rich, personal, and closely linked to home.

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