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Voice of Singapore's Invisible Hands: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers and Poems on Home and Family

Adriana Rahajeng Mintarsih

As key actors in transnational work migration, Indonesian migrant domestic workers (MDWs) often find themselves with hardly any voice to narrate their stories. Mainstream media, governments, and NGOs from Indonesia and destination countries such as Singapore frequently focus on the negative aspects of their experience, such as the abuse MDWs may experience from employers. Moreover, the media often refers to these workers as unskilled workers with poor education who migrate abroad with minimum to no pre-departure preparation or training needed to survive their jobs, such as skills of domestic work, English language, and cultural knowledge of the destination countries. These workers are often depicted as incompetent, inconveniencing and causing anger to their employers (“Dr Musni Umar”, 2010). They are also often considered untrustworthy by their employers so that surveillance with CCTVs—installed at home—is needed to catch their bad behaviour, such as stealing or abusing their employers’ children (Paul, 2018). These negative discourses disadvantage the workers.

Concerned with the existence of such negative discourse, Yoga Prasetyo, the son of an Indonesian MDW in Singapore, founded Voice of Singapore’s Invisible Hands (or The Voice) in late 2016. A nonprofit organisation that aims to challenge the negative discourses about MDWs, especially among Singaporeans, The Voice uses Facebook to promote its members’ literary work and achievements, as well as to share stories to inspire migrant workers. (See article by the author in this issue for a detailed description of The Voice.)

At the outset, The Voice focused on prose and writing workshops (see poster in Figure 1). However, after reflecting on the first batch of workshops, Yoga and the author identified the need to supplement the workshops with online literary criticism and English classes to enhance the literary and English language skills of the workshop members.

Volunteers from Yoga’s network in Indonesia use a variety of teaching methods when conducting online sessions. For example, one of the volunteers for the English mentoring



ENGLISH PROSE & WRITING WORKSHOPS

by Voice of Singapore's Invisible Hands

OPEN TO ALL MIGRANT WORKERS
who wish to become (good) writers!

WHEN Every Sunday from 3.30pm to 5pm . Class starts on February 10.

WHERE Chye Sing Building, 87 Beach Road,
03-01, Classroom 6.

HOW Click tinyurl.com/enrollthevoice and fill out the form
to join us!

Deadline of application: Feb 8, 2017 at 9pm.
20 seats available.

FREE

VOICE OF SINGAPORE'S
INVISIBLE HANDS



Fig 1. Poster for writing workshops.

program uses YouTube as a teaching medium. Some of the other volunteers use Skype video calls when they lead the mentoring program (see Figure 2).

The Voice has become a platform for Indonesian MDWs to share their personal stories of their homes, family, and culture in the form of literary work written in English. Although this literary activity seems very personal, it is political in nature since MDWs' personal pieces can challenge negative stereotypes of Indonesian MDWs that circulate in both Singapore and Indonesia, including stereotypes that MDWs are unintelligent or



Fig 2. English training on Skype.

incompetent. For example, Wiwi Tri, one The Voice's earliest members, who published her poems in anthologies with other Indonesian migrant writers and participated in literary competitions in Singapore, was invited to read her poem at the Singapore Poetry Festival in May 2017, along with other talented migrant writers (see Figure 3). This event is an annual poetry writing competition for permanent residents and citizens of Singapore. Wiwi was also invited to be one of the guest speakers representing migrant workers in an art and cultural event called Human Library #3: The Heartland Edition, which was held in Singapore in August 2017. By reading her poems in front of the general public, Wiwi has been able to concurrently show her talents and indirectly challenge the dominant discourse on Indonesian MDWs.

The Voice's members, who migrated for a better future for themselves, their parents, children, and partners, often feel displaced. They usually keep their problems and emotions to themselves. They do not share their emotional burden with their family back home for fear of making them worried. Meanwhile, in Singapore, they are often unable to communicate their feelings to their employers. Moreover, they usually have very limited time and mobility to socialize, including with fellow MDWs, because they work long hours every day as live-in workers who are sometimes denied their rightful days off and kept under surveillance by their employers. For most of The Voice's members, writing becomes a healthy outlet that allows them to express their complex struggles as migrants who are, at the same time, part of a family and a nation. Patrick Hogan explains the psychological role of literature, stating that "literature provides us with otherwise unavailable insights into the ways emotions are produced, experienced, and enacted in human social life" (2011, i). Other kinds of texts, such as academic texts, cannot express such emotions. Below are three poems that were posted on The Voice's Facebook page that convey the authors' longing for home and family.



Fig 3. Wiwi Tri reading her poem at the Singapore Poetry Festival, May 2017.

“Memoir of a Wanderer”

by Melur Seruni (the inspiration behind The Voice).

Note: Melur Seruni is pictured in the English version of the poem.

MEMOIR OF A WANDERER

By Melur Seruni

The time has come to chronicle
Each and every foot step
In the long journey
Of this odyssey

The laughter
The pain
Are becoming like flowers
On this Earth ground

The west wind begins blowing
Carrying the melody of longing
The solemn grief over
A wish for an encounter
As even the storks
Have returned to their nests

The memories that remained
The travels archived
In my mind they are carved
As the cure that relieves
When this yearning overwhelms

(translated by Diana L.)



Jejak Kenangan Perantau

*Oleh Melur Seruni
Tiba masanya terlukis semua
Setiap jejak langkah
Pada lorong panjang
Sebuah pengembaraan*

*Gelak tawa
Luka lara
Menjadi serupa
Bunga-bunga
Di bumi suaka*

*Angin mulai bertiup
Dari barat menuju ke timur
Menerbangkan kidung rindu
Syahdu nan pilu berharap temu
Bangau telahpun terbang berpulang
Menuju ke sarang*

*Ada yang terpahat
Jejak-jejak yang tersurat
Pada setiap kenangan yang melekat
Sebagai penawar serta obat
Jika kerinduan tak lagi terawat*

As acknowledged by Yoga Prasetyo, the inspiration behind *The Voice* is Melur Seruni, who has written many Indonesian poems and published them in anthologies in Indonesia. Melur introduced Yoga to the relatively unknown world of MDWs' poetry, which inspired him to start a literary community for MDWs in Singapore. Melur's love of writing poetry started in elementary school, but it was not until she migrated to Singapore that she started writing poems intensively, collecting poems, and later publishing her poems in anthologies or on Facebook. Melur was inspired by the writing of prominent writers in exile, and her experiences of alienation and solitude as a migrant were the driving force behind her poems.

"Memoir of a Wanderer" illustrates Melur's longing for home. Migration has been a big part of her life. Before making her first transnational migration in 2000, she migrated between cities in Indonesia, taking different jobs as a cleaner, cook, and babysitter. She wrote this poem in 2013 when she was considering taking a break from her work. She felt the need to take a break because she wanted to be around her family, recover from the pain caused by her previous marriage, and reconnect with her son after their communication had been cut off by her ex-husband (Author interview with Melur Seruni, June 18, 2017).

In Melur's poem, she depicts home as a nest; Melur's migration is similar to that of a bird, which also travels long distances. The tone of the poem is weary and reflective, and it illustrates the complicated situation Melur faced in 2013. Melur eventually returned to Indonesia in February 2017 to start a new family and reconnect with her son.

“Perfect Lullaby” by Nur Hidayati: Education Goals

Nur Hidayati's habit of writing entries in a diary began in secondary school. Now, as a migrant worker who is in charge of her employer's domestic chores and who takes care of a child with autism, she often finishes work quite late at night. However, she always sets aside time to read different kinds of books, from novels to textbooks about autism, before going to bed. Because of her love for books, she built a small library at home for children in her neighbourhood. She wants to stay in Singapore for a couple more years to finish her finance management course at Aidha, a charitable institution that provides financial education and entrepreneurship skills to foreign domestic workers and low-income Singaporean women so that they can become financially independent. Nur believes that education is important for her personal development and useful for her family's future. Moreover, she wants to set a good example for her son by taking education seriously.



Fig 4. Nur Hidayati and her son.

“Perfect Lullaby,” a poem Nur wrote in English, was based on entries in her diary. The poem conveys Nur’s love for her son. She reveals how important her son is to her and how she always keeps him in her prayers. Nur was physically and emotionally present for her son until he was three years old. However, after she decided to go back to Singapore for the second time in 2016, her presence in her son’s life has been limited to emotional ties. She only uses the voice calling feature on her smartphone to communicate with him regularly, because her husband does not have a smartphone that supports video calls (Author interview with Nur Hidayati, June 15, 2017). The poem is optimistic in tone. Nur does not dwell on her sadness at being away from her son. Instead, she emphasises her hopes and prayers for him.

“Perfect Lullaby”

By Nur Hidayati

*From the first time I welcomed you into my world,
You’ve become my hope
I love you black,
I love you blue,
I love you from your top to toe
I love you big,
I love you small,
I love you from short until you’re tall.*

*You are my joy
You are my tears
Your smile casts away my fears
You are my sunshine
My pouring rain,
My strength,
Who helps me fight against the hurricane.
You are my love
My love is,
You.
And every single day,
You make me feel brand new.*

*Every night, I hold you
Tight.
Kiss your glowing cheeks,
My baby boy.
This loving feeling is fantastic.*

*Then I whispered my prayer,
To you.*

*Hoping that God will,
Always be there too.
In everywhere you go
And in everything you do
So, baby ... as I promise
No more cries,
No more sadness
'Cause mama's here
And mama knows,
Best.
When the time goes by
Time for you to leave and,
Say goodbye,
Please do remember
My prayer is,
Your perfect lullaby.*

“Pa” by Dianna Listy Syukur: Storytelling

Dianna Listy Syukur loves listening to people's stories and using play scripts as a medium for storytelling. When working as an MDW in Hong Kong, Dianna once participated in a short documentary about an Indonesian MDW in Hong Kong and her sexual experiences. Some of Dianna's friends find her to be a good storyteller, because she is very meticulous. She does not write poems often. However, when she is swamped with emotions, she tends to write whatever comes to her mind, and it is not necessarily in the form of a poem. She joined The Voice hoping to improve her storytelling skills.

Like Melur and Nur, Dianna migrated because of her family. She left her hometown in 2008 after high school to earn money to pay for medication for her father. However, during her time as a migrant, her father passed away. To cope with her grief, she wrote the poem below for her late father.



Fig 5. Dianna Listy Syukur

“Pa”

By Dianna Listy Syukur

*The ground beneath my feet is still fresh
Decorated by the flowers whose beauty I could not see anymore
But your laughter of yesterday keeps ringing in my ears
Even when layers of soil have separated you from me
Pa... I love you.
Can you hear that?*

“Ayah”

Oleh Dianna Listy Syukur

*Tanah yang kujejaki masih basah
Bunga-bunga yang elok tak lagi dapat kulihat keindahannya
Tapi tawamu kemarin masih terngiang di telingaku
Walau lapisan debu telah memisahkanmu dariku
Ayah..aku mencintaimu.
Kau dengar itu?*

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