

Presentation 3

Border Struggles and the Production of Political Subjectivity of the Indonesian Domestic Workers (as Manifested in their Narratives)

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1. Introduction

The transitory lives of Indonesian domestic workers (IDWs) portray the challenging nature of borders. It is true that this challenge is not only embodied as the physical ‘international border,’ but also the metaphorical - cultural, political, and social - ‘local borders’ which draw a line between Indonesian domestic workers and their employers. This talk extensively explores the creative writing of Indonesian domestic workers - in the form of short stories and memoirs - in relation to the challenges they face in crossing abstract borders and how these borders often situate Indonesian domestic workers in such compromised situations. It also examines and analyzes Indonesian domestic workers’ responses and views toward the challenges faced, as well as their strategies to solve the problems caused by the various abstract borders. The linguistic barrier, for example, seems to be the standard border problem for all migrants. In the case of Indonesian domestic workers, the linguistic barrier often inhibits coherent communication between employers and employees.

This lecture portrays Indonesian domestic workers migratory experiences, as written by themselves. All the stories discussed here were written in Indonesian, and therefore all the English translations in the discussion are my own. In addition, the material used in my talk today is an amalgamation of the first chapter of my dissertation and also several published and unpublished papers.

In this introduction, I would like to talk about Indonesian domestic workers and the emergence of their creative writing. Then in the second

part I'm going to talk about migration, some thoughts on borders, and also political subjectivity, and the last part will be the discussion and concluding remarks.

The term 'domestic workers narrative', simply refers to any writing written by Indonesian migrant workers who work as domestic workers. So in Indonesia itself, domestic writing as a genre began in 2002, when one of the domestic workers in Hong Kong named Denok Kanthi Rokhmatika published her anthology of short stories in 2002. This publication marks the birth of the genre of Indonesian migrant workers' literature.

Picture 1. Selection of Migrant Authors Works

Source: Author

In the aftermath of Rahmatika's publication, there were a significant number of works published in the category of migrants' domestic writing, which also includes some articles of nonfiction writing in periodicals and



newspapers, both in the home country and the host countries, such as Hong Kong.

In the writings, the most popular theme taken is the Indonesian worker's migratory experiences, their everyday lives in the host country, and "illustrating these women's everyday challenges and experiences, including the navigation of various socioeconomic and cultural differences, mothering from afar and also ill treatment by their employers". Their writing for the most part underlines migrants' vulnerability as a marginalized group and the transitory lives of these Indonesian migrant workers indeed portray the challenging nature of borders. These challenges are not only embodied as the physical 'international border', the concrete border, but also other lines of social, cultural, political, and economic demarcation as stated by Mezzadra and Nelson, and their experiences are well recorded in the narratives.

Here, I would like to explore Indonesian domestic workers' narratives in relation to the challenges in crossing these abstract borders to examine and also analyze their responses to the challenges as well as some of the strategies taken to solve the problems. I will also discuss how their everyday life experiences become the avenue for the cultivation of their political subjectivity.

I would argue that through the process of crossing abstract borders, these Indonesian domestic workers have gained a deeper understanding of the effect of borders, and also in a way it has developed their critical thinking. In crossing these borders Indonesian domestic worker protagonists gain or experience a renewed sense of confidence which allows these women - as well as the readers of their narratives - to see themselves beyond the reductive label of 'maids'. Their gained perspective, in my opinion, transforms their role as maids into that of 'doers' who are capable of intellectual thinking.

So, these women, in my opinion, have the innate capacity to evaluate their position and also their environment, even in the host country. In their writing, they critically evaluate their lives, and also, when they write about their difficulties in assimilating to their new lives

in the host country, and also coping with the challenges of their own situation, it exposes the harsh realities of the Indonesian migrant workers' migratory experiences, and this is a perspective which as yet remains unknown to the public.

In examining their border struggles, I use two books. The first one is a memoir written by two Indonesian migrant workers, Bayu Insani and Ida Raihan, called "*TKW Menulis*" (which can be loosely translated as 'Indonesian Domestic Workers Write') published in 2011. Their memoir talks about the journey of pre migration of these two women, and then their migratory experiences in Hong Kong as well as the process coping and overcoming the obstacles to assimilation.

Picture 2. "Blood Stained Letters for the President "

Source: Author

The second book is an anthology entitled "Blood Stained Letters for the President", published in 2010. I will take two stories from this anthology. The first is "A Lesson Learned in the Land of Concrete" by



Kine Risty, and then "Ramadan in Willingness" by Juwana Aza.

To contextualize the border struggles depicted in the aforementioned titles, I would like to give an overview about the theoretical view on migration from a border studies perspective, to provide a background on border struggle, and how this struggle leads to the development of border awareness, and also border thinking. Then I'm going to elaborate the impact the awareness has on shaping the political subjectivity.

2. Migration and Border

When we talk about migration, I think it's already clear that migration is dynamic in nature. Migration enables people to move from one place to another place geographically and then this can be permanent or temporary. Also, according to Moslund (2010), migration causes especially traditional identity markers, such as nationality, origin, settlement, dwelling, roots, and bloodlines, not to solely be used to identify human condition changes. In a way migration involves a constant process of reinvention and also self-redefinition because, when people move according to Houtum and Naerssen (2016), they not only move physically, but also their personal and social boundaries shift, and then this migration can pose a significant human experience, since it is a process of social change, and it also changes people mentality because all of the elements involved in migration are transformed.

Sabina Hussain also argues that the migrant experience is always related to the intermingling of divergent cultures, it always signifies possibilities of different personalities and with this opens up possibilities of transformation. People carry their cultural baggage when they migrate and then as they work on settling down in a new culture their cultural identity is likely to change and that encourages a degree of belonging and they also attempt to settle down either by assimilation or biculturalism. Bhugra (2004) adds that the process of acculturation requires two cultures to come in contact and both cultures may experience some change.

In reality, however, one cultural group will often dominate the other group and in the case of Indonesian domestic workers, their employer's culture is the dominant culture. So, as migration allows people to cross physical and abstract border, this brings us to the many definitions of borders. Borders can be real, like the physical international border which requires people to provide themselves with certain documents needed to validate them as a legal border crosser. However, documents alone cannot facilitate the crossing of the abstract border because crossing this abstract border requires something else, for example, cultural fluency, language competence, and also any other traits that the migrants may not possess, at least at the initial stages of their migration. In his article, Victor Konrad explained the complexity of the definition of 'border' which ranges from real to imagined and also the concrete and abstract or symbolic meanings of borders which separate people, because they compartmentalize people within areas, regions and continents. However, when we talk about border, we can also see opportunities, as when people migrate, when they cross a physical border as Dr. Kim explained in her previous presentation, the people in Korea moved to Germany to get work. So, crossing the border line provides opportunities and in the case of Indonesia, as a poorer country, people moved to Hong Kong or Singapore to have a better job opportunity than in their homeland.

3. Border Thinking and Political Subjectivity

In discussing borders, Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006), contend that borders are not only geographic, but also political, subjective, and epistemic, which includes the division of people through religion, knowledge and language. So, here we can see that differences and opposition exist naturally on both sides of the border and this indicates the potential of the asymmetrical relationship. In the case of domestic employment, Momsen argued that domestic employment is an area that reflects the asymmetrical relationship between the employer and the employee and then the marginalization of domestic workers, particularly

migrant domestic workers is tied to the historical colonial relationship shaping the master and servant relationship.

We can say that domestic employment already situates migrant domestic workers to face multiple abstract borders; for example, racial, economic, social and religious borders and in discussing border thinking, Mignolo and Tlostanova further state that it develops as people's responses toward the colonial differences. Border thinking occurs because they become aware of the colonial differences, and this particular awareness helps individuals to be able to map out their subjective position and it will enable them to execute strategies especially in crossing the border. So, migrants everyday border struggles situate them to become a political subject and simultaneously, exercise their political subjectivity. This means that everyday practices should not be dismissed as banal, but rather considered highly significant and therefore, as Hakli and Kallio(2018) contended, political subjectivity can be located in the manner that people take up issues that stand out as important to them. They have something at stake and this brings political moments and in applying what Hakli and Kallio have suggested to Indonesian domestic workers, in their narrative, it does provide many examples of day to day experiences, which also involve subject positioning. That is to say Indonesian domestic workers are not only involved in conflict with their employers, but also in conflict with other members of the employers' household.

1) Cultural Borders

As previously mentioned, when people migrate, they bring along their cultural baggage, so exposures to the new values and new beliefs and customs of the host country have the potential to change migrants' belief and perception. Therefore, in this discussion, I will specifically talk about the cultural borders and the religious borders.

In Bayu Insani's memoirs of Indonesian domestic workers' lives she gives her impressions of these cultural challenges, these cultural differences during her employment in Hong Kong. She has worked for

several years and the experience of working for different employers in a way helps her to prepare herself to adjust more easily to her new surroundings. However, this is not to say that she can easily accept all the cultural differences in the host country.

For example, let us take a look at Hong Kong people's attitudes to when people cry for a for instance. This was a hard adjustment for her as we see in her story:

“They also told me that they didn't like to see me sad and crying. For people in Hong Kong, crying would bring bad luck to the house and the family. Therefore, they were against crying. Nonetheless, crying could ease the burden of being a migrant like myself who lived 1000 miles away from family.”

(Insani and Raihan, “*Indonesian Domestic Workers Write*” p.19)

People in Hong Kong believe that crying will bring you bad luck and Insani was aware of this because the employer told her, yet for her, as migrant far away from her family, crying had a different meaning. From this story, we can see how different attitudes toward crying are presented and this means that another cultural border needs to be crossed. In Insani's opinion, crying could ease the burden of being a migrant. This in my opinion, emphasizes a bitter fact that as domestic workers, the challenge is not only the burden of doing physical work, which is domestic chores in the employer's residence, but also the psychological pressure of living away from one's family. Perhaps people would say that crying will not solve the problem, but it still eases the psychological burden. So, in the case of foreign migrant workers, crying can be considered as a great tool for releasing the emotion.

In her memoir, Insani does not mention about how she negotiated this cultural difference. However, in a different part of the memoir, Raihan, the coauthor of this memoir, had a response to this cultural difference. She said that she would go to her room and lock herself in and cry. This allowed her to take care of her need without necessarily

breaking the local cultural codes. Here we can say that she could bridge this border or she could cross this border.

2) Language Border

Another standard border in any migratory experiment is the linguistic barrier, or the language difference. So, in her memoir Insani admits that she has trouble adjusting to the language. However, surprisingly, she is able to overcome this problem by learning with the children. She said, ‘I realized that learning a language with children was a lot better and faster than learning with adults who often got frustrated easily. Insani explained her success in crossing the language border. So this particular experience reveals that the language border is one of the absolute borders that play a significant role in the in the world of domestic employment, because mastering the host country’s language is imperative as this kind of employment relies heavily on effective communication between the employers and the employees and therefore only by having sufficient language competency can IDWs perform their work well.

3) Religious Border

Religious borders emerge due to religious differences. As they come from Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, most IDWs are Muslims, and they have moved to a country where Islam is not the main religion. This brings challenges for example in terms of food, and it might be difficult for them to get halal food. If they are observant Muslims, they also have to observe their religious rituals, such as praying five times a day, and also fasting during the month of Ramadan. Most of the employers who are not Muslim may not accommodate the observance of Muslim religious practices such as allowing them to do the five times prayer or separating pork from the daily meals. Thus Muslim IDWs often face challenges in maintaining their religious practices. Insani does not talk about this but in the memoirs, but in the anthology, in one of the stories, “Lessons Learnt in the Land of Concrete” Risty’s story

exemplifies a protagonist who is forced to give up their religious practices, even the principle, in the name of employment. The main character in the story named Eny is forced to consume pork which Muslims they are forbidden to consume. So Eny refuses and this results in a conflict as told in this exchange.

“One day, Ma’am talked seriously to me: “Eny! I don’t like you not eating pork”. Her voice sounded like thunder in my ears. Dear God! She even tried to threaten me that she would send me back to Indonesia just because I refused to eat pork. I could not hold my tears and cried in front of her. I told her that as a Muslim I was not supposed to eat pork. She was terribly angry with me. “Oh, Indonesia is Indonesia! But here is Hong Kong and you have to eat pork!” she snarled shutting the door so hard. Bhlaaarr! After refusing to eat pork, my Ma’am started to change her attitude toward me. She often got irritated so easily. One day, she told my agency staff about my refusal. Of course, the easily irritated agency staff was so mad at me. The staff babbled like a lunatic and told me that he had successfully made so many IDWs eat pork. Some agency staff even asked the employers to terminate their maids if they refuse to eat pork”

(Risty, “Lessons Learnt in the Land of Concrete”, p. 112)

In this excerpt, Eny’s experience underscores another challenge of being a Muslim in Hong Kong. To justify her own requirement the employer put emphasis on Eny’s foreignness and demanded that while in Hong Kong, she should follow the law of the land. In other words, the employer strengthened her own position by strengthening the association between different binaries; Indonesia versus Hong Kong, Muslim versus non-Muslim, as well as pork versus no pork. The agency staff sided with the employer and this emphasizes the structural power imbalance that disadvantages IDWs, and this illustrates the tendency that the more powerful parties do not consider IDW’s human rights when making decisions or when fulfilling their religious practices. Moreover, this story in particular demonstrates that IDWs are sometimes deliberately

prevented from implementing a reactive solution to their problem when they try to cross this particular border.

5) Production of Political Subjectivity

Cases where IDWs are forced to abandon their religious practices are an example of a political moment. I would like to continue my previous discussion about Eny, who refuses to eat pork. Eny, the main character in this particular story experiences a political moment when her employer tries to force her to consume pork. Her refusal to comply is considered the emergence of Eny's political agency, and Eny's employer cannot accept her refusal and tries to evoke the notion of space and belonging to justify her demand by constructing Hong Kong as the space in which the consumption of pork, instead of being prohibited is mandatory. Then the employer attempts to position Eny as a passive subject, and assimilate her into the mainstream culture of Hong Kong, at the expense of her Indonesian Muslim identity, yet Eny remains fully aware of her agency and she chooses to conflict with her employer's demand that she give up her religious principles.

This shows the forming of Eny's political subjectivity and demonstrates her strong will in defending her belief. Because her belief is at stake, she has something at risk. So she has to execute an act to overcome the problem. So she says:

“‘Dear God, is this the devil in the form of human?’ my heart screamed. ‘I’ve got to be tough. I must hold on to my principles strongly. Who is afraid to go back to Indonesia? I still have my parents who would give me a warm welcome.’ I did not want to submit myself to the human-faced devil.”

(Risty, “Lessons learnt in the Land of Concrete,” pp. 112-113)

So, by calling the employer a human-faced devil, we can see how this protagonist rejects the employer's framing of the conflict as one constructed by spaces, identities and border, Hong Kong versus

Indonesia, non-Muslim versus Muslim, and instead frames it as a battle between good and evil, with Eny representing the forces of good. So Eny thus resists her employer's attempt to dominate her internally as well as externally and establishes not only political agency, but also political subjectivity and also consciousness.

So IDWs border struggles as illustrated in the narrative by all the protagonists, have enabled these women to constantly search for spaces where they can develop themselves and also empower themselves, despite the strong grip of the colonial relation existing within domestic employment. Furthermore, these women, who have to cope with the difficulties of migratory life, heighten their awareness of different borders, and then their everyday border struggles catalyze the cultivation of their political subjectivity by making meaning of seemingly mundane experiences. So every strategy, negotiation and creatively executed act of resistance to oppression brings IDWs a greater confidence to stand up for themselves, as illustrated in these stories. Some of them do resign, because they don't want to give up what they believe in.

The confidence to stand up for themselves has the potential to subvert, dismantle, and disempower colonial differences in the relation between employers and employees.

IDWs' migratory experiences as manifested in their narratives can function as a means to raise awareness by appreciating these women better and see them beyond their contribution of sending a remittance back to their country.



Tri Murniati

Presentation 3. “Border Struggles and the Production of Political Subjectivity of the Indonesian Domestic Workers (as Manifested in Their Narratives)”

Dr. Tri Murniati is a lecturer at Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Purwokerto, Indonesia. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies from the University of Arkansas. Her research focuses on narratives written by Indonesian domestic workers (IDWs). Her dissertation, in particular, examines IDWs’ migratory experiences such as their everyday border struggles in the host countries. Her current research explores Indonesian migrant narratives in relation to the issue of citizenship.