

ON ETHNOGRAPHIC VICTIMIZATION/ ROMANTICIZATION

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Introduction: Feminist Ethnography—a Dilemma

Ethnography requires a researcher to immerse herself in a research field at every level. Through acculturating herself to native habits and customs, acquiring the language, learning the history, and above all, involving herself in social relationships in the given society, the ethnographer slowly begins to describe and analyze the realities that unfold before her eyes. The eyes are not mechanical; ethnographers are often dragged out of their academic fortress of objectivity into complex social dramas imbued with local power relations of gender, race, ethnicity, class and more (Kondo, 1990; Behar, 1997). She may pay attention to, or get distracted from, certain aspects of the reality due to the position she occupies. The resulting ethnography is never a perfect rendition of “the Truth,” but a tentative representation, one of “partial truths” (Clifford, 1986).

Feminist ethnography is a methodology that has faced this politics of ethnography most keenly. Sisterhood, the original drive for feminists, has long been questioned; natural bonds among women are found to be illusory given diversities and inequalities among women. In particular, feminist researchers who aim to empower “other-ed” women—impoverished, marginalized, stigmatized—have been criticized for their naïveté.

Again: of the frequent claim that the interview process, as conducted by feminists, is empowering in that it “gives a voice” to those who might otherwise remain silent, one may well ask: is it empowerment or is it appropriation? When is the purported

empowerment or affirmation just another psychological surrogate, a “feel good” measure, a means by which researchers console themselves for the real imbalances in power that they know—despite all the talk of sisterhood—exists? (Patai, 1991, p. 147)

Feminist ethnographers, once casting an objectifying gaze onto others, are now turning a critical eye to themselves, their own positionality (Visweswaran, 1994).

While thus polishing its critical edge, feminist ethnography continues to expand its scope. One of the emerging areas of study concerns how care work—a traditional “woman’s domain”—is increasingly outsourced and commodified in a global context. Migrant women from less developed parts of the world are filling care deficiency in global cities where the neoliberal economy drives women into paid work away from home. Those migrant domestic workers have drawn much attention in academia as they embody multiple ironies and ambiguities: Their presence is ubiquitous in global cities, but their labor is made invisible (Sassen, 2002); they are there in order to meet the labor demand, but are regarded as a source of contamination, a threat for the host society (Ong, 2006); and the opportunities they seek abroad oftentimes turn out to be exploitative and abusive (Brooks & Devasahayam, 2011).

In intra-Asian contexts, the situations surrounding migrant domestic workers are particularly problematic. Global cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei attract large numbers of female household workers from the Phillipines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, to name a few. These states are said to share a cultural tradition in which care work is not society’s, but the family’s—that is, the wife’s and the mother’s—responsibility, and hence to provide minimal public support. According to Lan, intra-Asian migration has other commonalities: Labor-sending governments (e.g., the Philippines and Indonesia) are directly involved in promoting international migration; the employment system is highly commercialized with private agencies playing a critical role; and labor-receiving governments enforce strict legal regulations on migrant workers (Lan, 2006, pp. 31-2). While restrictions and protections vary among states, migrant workers in general are put into a financially, legally and

socially vulnerable position.

Upon delving into the lived experiences of those marginalized women, ethnographers may well encounter the dilemma of feminist ethnography. On the one hand, focusing solely on the vulnerability and hardships of migrant women may lead to representing them as helpless victims. And yet, celebrating their resistance could distract attention from actual mistreatments and discriminations. Indeed, romanticization of resistance is a tempting but dangerous trap (Abu-Lughod, 1990). How, then, do ethnographers, interacting with, describing and analyzing migrant domestic workers in Asian global cities, grapple with this ethnographic dilemma between victimization and romanticization? The following examination of prominent ethnographies that deal with intra-Asian migration among female domestic workers aims to provide not only a deeper understanding of the world of migrant women but also methodological insights.

Making the Invisible Visible: Maids' Stories

The oft-cited ethnographic works examined here are in the pursuit of “making the invisible visible again” (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002, p. 12). Constable’s book, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, was one of the earliest in this field, looking into the lives of migrant workers from the Philippines (1997) and later additionally into those from Indonesia (2007). Lan’s ethnography, *Global Cinderellas* (2006), examines Filipina and Indonesian workers as well as Taiwanese employers. In *Kokkyō o koeru ajia no kaji rōdōsha (Transnational Domestic Workers in Asia)*, Ueno (2011) interviewed domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia in Singapore. Lindio-McGovern’s work focuses on Filipina migrant domestic workers and follows them in multiple cities worldwide, including Hong Kong and Taipei (2013). I also refer to shorter articles by the authors above (Lan, 2003; Ueno, 2014) and others (Tang, 1999; Ogaya, 2004).

The ethnographies above derive from the longitudinal and recurrent fieldwork that each author conducted in her respective research site(s). As

a result, their interactions with the research participants extend beyond a mere interviewer-interviewee relationship: The authors often participated in the workers' political activities; some visited and/or volunteered in shelters for abused domestic workers; and others offered support for some workers' litigation processes against their employers. The ethnographers do not shy away from disclosing their emotional involvement; rather, they analyze what they observed from that situated position, hence providing a complex picture of their research participants.

Commodification, Exploitation and Abuse

The ethnographies illuminate, first and foremost, the harsh realities of female migrants in global cities. The stories began in their home countries, in which "a woman undergoes virtually the same homogenizing process intended to produce a single product: a hardworking, submissive, and obedient domestic helper" (Constable, 2007, p. 69). In training centers, prospective domestic workers learned the language spoken at their destination as well as necessary household skills ranging from operating a washing machine to cooking regional cuisines. On top of those actual skills, the women were taught how to present themselves before their employers, at which juncture, training became bodily intervention. The trainees were told to speak politely, to keep their hair short and to wear simple clothes. They were entitled to minimal possessions which did not include any makeup, accessories or extra money. Even under such severe discipline, the women were not to display their weariness, especially when a recruiter was around:

We are all dressed up, hair combed, and wearing the uniform. [They told us to] walk in a hurry. No crying face. Smile. They are coming soon. Smile. Say "hello sir," "hello, ma'am." [*So this is different from the usual?*] Yes, it's difficult for us. They told us we must smile. But we have been there for a long time, very unhappy, but we still have to smile. (Lan, 2006, p. 89)

The commodification process involves such bodily regimentation.

Once in host societies, it was local employment agencies that

took over the process of producing “a hardworking, submissive, and obedient domestic helper.” Such agents were found to discuss openly a worker’s age, skin complexion and body size, as if to evaluate and display a commodity. Stereotypes such as “smart Filipinas” and “docile Indonesians” were commonly utilized to market migrant workers. Moreover, the blatant commodification process came at a cost for domestic workers. Many started and continued their lives abroad in debts because they were unable to afford agent fees up front, and the financial strain accelerated the women’s vulnerability. Although loans and fee collections oftentimes included illegal schemes, the governments in both sending and receiving ends depended on those private agencies and provided less than desirable protection for workers.

Inside their employers’ homes, domestic workers were put under severe control and surveillance. Ueno (2011) refers to Maria, a Filipina working in Singapore, whose morning routine included bringing tea to her mistress in bed, readying her clothes, underwear, shoes and accessories till they all suit her liking, helping her wear them, and blowing her hair. Maria did all these day after day in the fear of getting shouted at (p. 99). Workers’ autonomy was rarely respected; employers gave minute instructions for household chores and defined the degrees of their employees’ involvement with the children they looked after. Simultaneously, job descriptions easily expanded, and workers sometimes found themselves in charge of pets, relatives and employers’ businesses. When failing to meet such demand, workers were punished; some were deprived of food, holiday or payment while others were verbally and/or physically abused. The ultimatum would be dismissal, which, given the financial strain described above, migrant women wished to avoid the most. Exploitation thus became common but hidden.

An illuminative example is a full page-long list which Jane, a Filipina working in Hong Kong, shared with Constable when she received it from a prospective employer (Constable, 2007, pp. 94-5). It included instructions as to where to sit or rest in the house (not in the parlor), when to bathe (at night, not in the morning), what language to use to greet the employer and his family (“Sir and Madam”), how to dress (no makeup, nail polish, tight pants or low-cut T-shirts), and which towels to use for

seven different purposes. Clearly, employers dominated workers' bodies, with specifications for language, clothing and hygiene. Time and space are also the means with which employers controlled domestic workers. Lan (2006) cites two workers in Taiwan who said:

Here I have no privacy at all. In the beginning, they came in the room without knocking on the door and I was only wearing shorts or even panties.

I sleep with the child. The only place I can take a rest is the bathroom. I always go to the bathroom on the top floor. Nobody uses that one. After I clean it, I sit there, crying! I pray, "Lord, I want to go back to the Philippines!" (Lan, 2006, p. 163)

The workers are deprived of privacy, and ultimately, of dignity.

At the same time, workers were oftentimes treated as a "member of the family," a rhetoric that could work to justify labor exploitation such as the kind mentioned above. Migrant nannies were especially vulnerable in this respect because their emotional attachment to children easily blurred boundaries and made their working hours even more malleable. Some madams confided with their maids about their husbands' affairs, their insecurity as mothers, and their in-law troubles, regarding them as "safe confidant" (Contable, 2007, p. 114). Ueno (2011) speaks of Lany, who played a role of counselor for her female Singaporean employer over her worry that her husband had become distant. When the couple did not speak to each other, Lany delivered messages back and forth between them, complained to and scolded by both (107). Evidently, only employers maneuvered the distance between the madams and the maids. They would expect extra care out of "a member of the family," but at the same time might overwork and/or underpay their employee. Such emotional exploitation is another common aspect of the domestic workers' experiences.

The ethnographers also encountered extreme abuse cases. Constable met Margie, who worked for a Hong Kong employer who confiscated her legal documents, inspected her mail and hit her repeatedly

in the face. She wanted to leave the house but could not: “Ms. Lu asked for a month’s salary in lieu of notice, but since I do not have any money then, I stayed” (Constable, 2007, p. 144). Abuse took on not only verbal, physical and financial, but also sexual forms. Lindio-McGovern describes her encounter with rape survivors and points to the psychological damage involved in such cases.

In Taiwan, I personally sought the opportunity to visit and talk to a domestic worker, Marisa, who was staying in a woman’s shelter and had filed legal charges against her male employer for raping her. She had a hard time concentrating while talking to me and would occasionally appear absentminded; then tears would roll down her cheeks. (Lindio-McGovern, 2013, p. 35)

Lindio-McGovern argues that sexual violence is “the most dehumanizing form of control” (p. 36).

The ethnographic realities cited above are only a fragment of the rich, poignant accounts that the authors provide in their works. The stories are filled with emotion, with the domestic workers crying and sighing and the authors empathizing. However, migrant women’s devastation does not necessarily mean that they are always quietly victimized.

Resistance and Subversion

Lindio-McGovern (2013) particularly focuses on the resistance—“action intended to correct an unjust, exploitative, or oppressive situation” (p. 16)—of Filipino migrant domestic workers. During her fieldwork, she worked with United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL), a coalition of organizations for migrant workers from the Philippines. Hong Kong entitles migrant workers to unionize, and they carry out rallies and demonstrations to protest both the Hong Kong and Philippine governments. One remarkable example in Lindio-McGovern’s ethnography is UNIFIL’s “mockery fashion show” (pp. 48-49). In June 2000, UNIFIL protested a dinner-fashion show event hosted by the Philippine Consulate in celebration of Independence Day, an extravagance in a luxury hotel that cost HK\$1,000 per attendee. UNIFIL

members gathered before the hotel dressed up in fancy dresses while simultaneously holding mops and brooms in their hands—with the author personifying the Consul General herself. The rally accused the event for excluding the workers, a major part of the Filipino population in Hong Kong, and for masquerading the real issues at hand and instead catering to wealthy locals. The event exemplifies the rage, determination and wit with which migrant domestic workers raised their voice in society. Ogaya (2004) too argues that such “social movement type” activities, including rallies and campaigns as well as peer counseling, seminars for migrants’ rights, management of temporary shelters, and leadership training, are common among migrant workers’ organizations in Hong Kong and Singapore. She also points to other activities that developed the workers’ skills and centered on their religious and cultural backgrounds (p. 390). These activities, it seems, organically connect individual well-being, skill building and consciousness raising with collective movement.

In more informal contexts, the ethnographers portray without fail female migrants assembling on their day off in the central areas of the cities—Central District and Victoria Park in Hong Kong, Lucky Plaza in Singapore, and Chungshan District in Taipei—, chatting and picnicking. Constable and Lindio-McGovern both use for their book covers pictures of domestic workers occupying a Hong Kong city corner. The sights are significant in revealing the informal support systems that migrant women spontaneously cultivate. In Hong Kong, Constable (2007) witnessed “Elly’s salon,” where a former hairdresser from the Philippines provided haircuts at a corner of Central:

Elderly Chinese stop and gawk at what they consider yet another low-class public display of private grooming. Elly and her entourage have had to develop a “thick skin.” They are used to brushing off the condescending attitudes of passersby. In return they crack jokes and poke fun at the bald old Chinese man who stares and points disapprovingly. In a language he cannot understand, they say, “He only wishes he had hair to cut!” and more aggressively, “The only cut he will get is with a razor!” (Constable, 2007, p. 167)

Although frowned upon by locals, such informal gatherings are a first step towards social visibility and collective action—a “peaceful sit-in” (Constable, *ibid.*).

Joining such meetings, the researchers observed that migrant women took on another identity on Sundays—that of a consumer. Typically, there were hawkers and vendors that catered specifically to migrant women, selling food, clothes, makeup and accessories. Cell phones were a commodity that those women purchased to connect with home as well as to network with one another. Lan (2006) observes their creative communication style of using multiple and hybrid languages in short text messages, and argues that such networking led to solidarity in the end (pp. 177-180). Lindio-McGovern (2013), during fieldwork, received a phone call from Flora, a Filipina in Taipei, who secretly kept a cell phone although her employer told her not to. She said in panic that she was told to leave the country without any advance notice or the month’s payment. Thanks to her secret defiance, Flora was able to contact the fieldworker, who sought help from an activist and a lawyer, and barely escaped illegal contract termination. Consumer goods thus constituted a critical part of the migrant women’s lives abroad.

Under even closer examination, some migrant women negotiated their identities before the researchers. Ogaya (2004) speaks of Luisa, who took an active part in volunteer work for migrant domestic workers while working in a household in Singapore.

Now I’m taking the hairdressing course while also teaching the basic and advanced sewing courses. . . . I made my original textbook for my students. Of course, I’m a volunteer, so I do not get paid for my teaching, but it doesn’t matter to me. I feel that I’m helping other migrant workers through my class. I want to call myself a “sewing teacher,” not a domestic worker. (Ogaya, 2004, pp. 398-399)

Ueno (2014) also cites a dialogue with Jesamine, a Filipina, who refused to be called “a maid.”

Interviewer: How would you address yourself in terms of your job?

I mean, shall I call you a maid?

Jesamine: No, DH is the name.

Interviewer: What is DH? Domestic helper, right?

Jesamine: No, no, DH, ma'am.

Interviewer: What's the difference?

Jesamine: It's cool. (Ueno, 2014, p. 254)

Re-naming oneself—"sewing teacher" or "DH"—is an attempt to reclaim an identity. Describing themselves in alternative terms, the women refused to be victimized by the researchers or the society.

Furthermore, jokes and ridicules are common means to create a bond among migrant women and also to reverse power relationships. Recall Jane, who shared Constable the absurd to-do list that she came across upon job-hunting; she and other workers along with the researcher read them together with "jeers and a chorus of dissent" (Constable, 2007, p. 94). Recall also Elsa, the hairdresser, and her friends who poked fun at local passers-by who shed a discerning gaze at their "hair salon." Such moments of humor, according to Constable, "create a temporary role reversal between local Chinese and overseas workers" (p. 177)—a "weapon of the weak" exercised by the supposedly obedient and helpless maids.

Ueno (2014) focuses particularly on such "day-to-day strategies they employ for their survival" (p. 241). In contrast to Maria mentioned above, who was exhausted from her morning routine, Sofi, another Filipino worker Ueno interviewed, proudly exhibited her ways to cut corners:

It's not hard to work for this family if I know how to handle sir and ma'am. I finish washing clothes and cleaning the house in two hours. When ma'am comes home, finds the room clean and tidy, and then sees the beautiful bed, she is already very happy. (Ueno, 2014, p. 249)

Sofi is the one "handling" the employers, not vice versa. Other women

confronted their employers demanding better working conditions while yet others gossiped and circulated negative rumors about the agencies and employers that had mistreated them. In Ueno's terms, "domestic workers use their 'weakness' as a resource in dealing with employers and others" (p. 259). Lan (2003; 2006) analyzes the linguistic aspects of women's resistance, referring to the jokes commonly heard among the migrant women's communities. The following anecdote is typical:

My employer called from the office and said, "Luisa, twelve hours, don't forget to EAT my children!" She actually meant, "twelve o'clock, don't forget to FEED my children!" [laugh]. [*Oh my God. Did you correct her?*] No. Some employers don't like that. So I just answered, "Don't worry! I already EAT your children!" (Lan, 2003, p. 154)

Many Filipina workers speak English, a coveted symbolic capital in Taipei and other Asian cities. The authority and leverage it grants domestic workers can also be the source of their everyday negotiation with their employers—"They have more money, but I can speak better English!" (Lan, 2003).

From publicly organizing rallies to secretly mocking their employers, the migrant domestic workers are found to resist and subvert oppressive power relations. They make use of what are available to them; support from unions and NGOs/NPOs, assistance from their peers, skills and knowledge that they cultivated, technology, language, and humor. Such rage, guile and laughter constitute another important part of the ethnographic realities.

The Symbolic and the Material

At the same time, however, the "weapon of the weak" is not without limits, especially when it is employed within the private confinement of a household. In fact, Lan (2003) quickly adds that the linguistic subversion above takes place only backstage: "In front of employers, [domestic workers] mostly follow the work transcript of deferential performance, exercising linguistic resistance with disguise and caution"

(p. 154). Constable (2007) too is aware of the ambiguity of the resistance she observed: “By and large, resistance remained on a discursive level, expressed quietly as a form of personal release” (p. 210). Ueno (2014) points to the possibility that direct confrontation and release of anger could lead to contract termination which puts migrant women, not employers, at risk (p. 252). As such, migrant domestic workers may well voluntarily subordinate themselves to their employers’ expectations on the surface: “After all, the power dynamics in employment relationships are primarily determined by the distribution of economic capital” (Lan, 2003, p. 157). This distinction between the symbolic and the material should be emphasized.

Tempting as it may be, the ethnographers here carefully avoid romanticizing the agency of migrant women although each observes and analyzes their resistance and subversion in her respective research field. They are acutely aware of the micro and macro power relations that surround migrant workers—from the employer-employee relationship to global inequality—, and portray their realities in a most complex and ambivalent manner. Ethnographies offer such multi-layered understandings of foreign maids, migrant domestic workers, or DH—the naming of whom is ever shifting.

Hearing the Unheard: Madams’ Stories

Let us return to the dilemma of feminist ethnography. Enumerating the hardships of “other-ed” women was not enough; nor was romanticizing their resistance and neglecting the material reality. The ethnographies examined above hence included both powerless and powerful aspects of migrant domestic workers’ lives, so as to reject any simplified labeling of the women.

At the same time, curiously, in some ethnographies the “madams” are portrayed rather one-dimensionally. They are sometimes depicted only through domestic workers’ stories, and are monolithically cunning, exploitative and abusive. In contrast, Tam (1999) and Lan (2007) interviewed female employers in Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively,

to hear another unheard story by the madams. Are the women mere oppressive mistresses, or are their lives as complex as those of the domestic workers?

Reluctance, Insecurity and the Structure Beneath

Employing a foreigner in one's household appears to be both liberating and distressing. With scarce public support, urban professional women—especially with children—find it practically impossible to juggle work and home on their own and turn to global outsourcing. Migrant women's labor is, to them, inexpensive and convenient, enabling them to lessen the time and energy spent on cleaning, washing and child minding. However, ironically, employing a migrant worker more often than not results in a strengthened division of labor by gender at home; that is, men continue to share less of the housework, leaving women—the madams and the maids—attending to the rest (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). True, madams are in a privileged position to control, inspect and even punish their maids; at the same time, they have to be in charge of other women's work as well as their own, and are even manipulated, challenged and ridiculed on occasions. Therefore, the madams' stories are filled with ambivalence, insecurity and anxiety.

Tam's interview research (1999) with working women in Hong Kong reveals that hiring a foreign domestic helper was, while affordable and convenient, a "reluctant or compromised solution" (p. 268) for them as they actually preferred an in-law to take care of their children. The gap between the ideal and the reality made the women anxious. A mother of two girls associated finding a suitable nanny with "gambling" (p. 270), and another, with a three-month-old baby, contemplated installing a closed circuit TV system: "It would be better if I know [sic] more clearly about what happens to the baby during the day" (p. 271). Tam points to "the contradiction inherent in hiring a low-paid helper to be in charge of important childcare duties" (p. 273), as a source of the women's conflicting feelings.

Lan (2006) too extensively analyzes female employers' experiences and finds similar discomfort among them; while some women presented themselves as a confident employer, others were insecure about their

position as a wife/mother/daughter-in-law when letting go of traditional duties. Consequently, the anxious women differentiated the roles between a maid and a madam, distributing menial or demanding jobs for the former and reserving spiritual wifely/motherly tasks for the latter. While upholding their decency as a wife/mother, they drew on stereotypes of promiscuous, uncivilized and thus untrustworthy migrant women too. Lan argues, “When female employers attempt to carve out a rigid boundary between maid and madam, they are simultaneously participating in the construction of stratified womanhood and the imagining of class and ethnic differences” (p. 124). Furthermore, the professional, cosmopolitan women in Lan’s study distanced themselves from the feudalistic, hierarchical employer-employee model; some said they tried to be on an equal footing with the workers, while others clung to a strict business relationship:

We want her to sit at table to have dinner with us, but she’d rather eat after we are done. I am really not used to that, but if we ask her to eat with us, she actually feels very uneasy. Then we look at her, we feel uneasy ourselves, too. . . . I don’t like the feeling of living in a class hierarchy. (Lan, 2006, pp. 213-14)

I think you have to define her *position* clearly. You need a *helper*, not a *friend*. So you better not have tea or intimate conversation with her. Because once you two talk about things and she has different opinions from yours, then what? You try to dominate the conversation with your identity as a master! It’s not *fair*. So I don’t treat them like friends. (Lan, 2006, p. 218, emphasis original)

Clearly, it is a struggle for madams to run a smooth household that now includes an “other.”

The picture of controlling and duplicitous madams should now be revisited. Many in fact find themselves caught in a new set of predicaments. What type of maid does she want to hire? What type of madam does she want to become? What type of relationship does she want between them? While maids tactfully maneuvered their ways,

madams strived to establish their positions vis-à-vis their employees. Lan analyzes such two-sided “boundary work,” saying, “Boundary work at home is not just a tug of war between the two parties in a local setting; it is a microcosm of identity politics and class struggles embedded in the global context.” (p. 236). Tam (1999), also analyzing the socially constructed nature of the women’s ambivalence, calls attention to “the patriarchal ideology of placing childcare responsibilities entirely on the shoulders of women in the private domain, while at the same time undervaluing such responsibilities” (p. 274). As such, personal stories of both madams and maids should be located in the sociopolitical structure where care work is handed down in gender, class, racial and ethnic hierarchies. The experiences of the two groups of women are intertwined.

Conclusion: Beyond the Agent-Victim Binary

Vulnerability of women has long been a central concern for feminist scholarship, and academic inquiries should never be devoid of actual women’s lived experiences. The ethnographies examined here reveal the fallacy of the simplified story that migrant maids, seeking opportunities abroad, and local madams, seeking help around their house, are in a mutually beneficial relationship. The ethnographic details illuminate that migrant women find themselves trapped in an oppressive social structure, against which they resist through utilizing the tools that are available to them. Some ethnographies reveal that the female employers too are faced with agonies, drawing and redrawing a boundary inside their homes.

Such complex realities as the ethnographers above portray prohibits drawing on “the agent-victim binary,” which, Constable asserts, “has proven to be a dead end of sorts” (Constable, 2009, p. 57). Specifying individual women’s lives, experiences and identities is a first step of feminist ethnography, but should not be done merely to victimize or romanticize the research participants. Analytically, it is crucial to distinguish the symbolic and the material in the everyday lives of the women and to relate the micro and the macro politics involved in their experiences. Moreover, when there lies a wide disparity among women,

focusing on one side of the story might re-invite the victimization/romanticization trap. Instead, a relational approach that situates both in the same structure would provide a deeper insight; the seeming “tug of war between the two parties in a local setting” (Lan, op. cit.) in fact signifies how individual women’s agencies are contingent upon sociopolitical power relations as well as local norms of gender, race and class.

Feminist ethnography, having departed from a naïve assumption of giving a voice to silenced women, now delves into the painful reality in which women oppress other women. Its multilayered analysis challenges the reader to face the sorrow, laughter and agony that the women’s complex lives involve, allowing them no “feel-good measure” of victimization or romanticization.

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