

# In Suspension: Memory of Indonesian Migrant Women Returnees in Cities

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to propose new ways to understand Indonesian migrant women workers and their lives, particularly at the intersection of memory and urban life. I explore the role of memory in the urban life of Indonesian migrant women returnees by examining the ways in which their memory affects seemingly mundane yet central details of their new life and opens up a space to expose and disrupt the workings of state and society that pushes women into the margin. Focusing on a growing number of migrant women who are settling themselves in urban areas upon completing their work overseas, I consider how their memory, suspended in the present, contributes to normalizing the anomaly by confronting and refusing public articulations of power *vis-à-vis* the feminine and the rural in Indonesia.

**Keywords :** *Indonesia, Migrant Women Workers, Urban.*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan pandangan baru untuk memahami buruh migran perempuan Indonesia dan kehidupan mereka, khususnya kaitannya antara kenangan dan kehidupan perkotaan. Saya mencari peranan dari kenangan di dalam kehidupan perkotaan para buruh migran perempuan asal Indonesia kembalinya mereka dari perantauan dengan cara menginvestigasi bagaimana kenangan mereka mempengaruhi namun terlihat biasa yang sesungguhnya menjadi pusat dari kehidupan baru mereka dan membuka ruang untuk menyingkapkan dan mengacaukan cara kerja negara dan masyarakat yang mendorong perempuan sampai ke batas. Fokus terhadap pertumbuhan angka buruh migran perempuan yang menetap di kawasan perkotaan bersamaan dengan mereka dalam menyelesaikan pekerjaan mereka di luar negeri, saya mempertimbangkan bagaimana kenangan mereka, tertunda saat ini, berkontribusi dalam menormalisasikan anomali dengan mengkonfrontasi dan menolak artikulasi kekuasaan public *vis-à-vis* dengan feminine dan pedesaan di Indonesia.

**Kata Kunci :** *Indonesia, Buruh Migran Perempuan, Perkotaan.*

Finally, I arrive at the *gang* that I couldn't find on my own. Jakarta is always overwhelming. I hop off *kopaja*. This seems to be close enough to the shopping mall in the SMS message from *Bu Dian*. Am I now in East Jakarta then. Too many streets, too many cars, too many buildings, everywhere. Kuala Lumpur was like this too in some ways, but this place, my capital, *ibu kota saya*, one that is supposed to feel like mother's embrace,

doesn't feel familiar. I walk a few blocks North and find a small house that was described to me over the phone. The green steel front doors seem to be open. I walk into the office of the organization that on one of our sleepless nights, my old friend from the factory whispered into my ear. If something doesn't work out for you here, go see *Bu Dian* in Jakarta, she said. The scars in my arms are itchy all of a sudden, and it's

covered under a long-sleeve shirt I'm wearing. My *jilbab* covers what's inside my head, but I'm not covering what I'm here to do. I'll get what my agent and my employer owe me. I want justice. I'm not going to be silent. I didn't come back here as a body. I came back as me, and my voice is stronger and louder than ever. I will change my life. I can't be yet another *TKI* victim.<sup>38</sup>

Heartbreaking and tragic tales of migrant workers from Southeast Asia are becoming frequent, familiar, and more than ever, affective. The stories make those who learn about them feel distressed and the images are difficult to see and hard to swallow. A former migrant worker appears in the Indonesian newspaper *Tempo* with her face swollen and bruised and her ear covered in bandages. Another newspaper, *Republika* shows the bottom of a dead worker's feet in their December 2014 report on migrant workers. The stories and images of migrant women that appear almost daily in the domestic media have come to represent the realities and identities of these workers – commonly invoking a response of *kasian* (roughly translated as “poor thing”) from Indonesians – who are dispatched overseas in the name of economic growth.

Declaring and summing up feelings and emotions stirred up by these returning migrant workers, in a *Kompas* article, a protestor – small framed woman wearing *jilbab* – holds a sign saying “my dear migrant worker, my poor migrant worker (*TKI Ku Sayang, TKI Ku Malang*).” As the stories and images continue to strengthen the concerns over “sub-human treatment” of Indonesian migrant workers (Ong cited in Tadiar, 2012) and to discursively construct the Indonesian migrant women workers' bodies, shown repetitively and propagated through media, their conditions overseas have become central to site of reconfiguration of the Indonesian women and by some, the state and its economy as a whole.<sup>39</sup> The overwhelming response to this has been more regulations and oversight into the labour export process that contributes Rp 120 trillion to the Indonesian economy, in an effort to secure the workers' continued existence and availability by ensuring their safety and security while working overseas.

However, my approach to labour migration in Indonesia in this paper departs from observing and surveying the conditions that these workers experience overseas. Instead, I propose exploring the

<sup>38</sup> I wrote this fictional piece based on my informal conversations with migrant returnee women living in Jakarta.

<sup>39</sup> See Igarashi, 2012 for a similar discussion on the Japanese case in the post-World War II context.

ways in which these migrant women's daily lives unfold upon returning to Indonesia, and more specifically, how their memory affects seemingly mundane yet central details of their new life opens up a space to expose and disrupt the workings of the state and society that pushes women into the margin. Thus, this paper attempts to propose new ways to understand Indonesian migrant women workers and their lives, particularly at the intersection of memory and urban life in Indonesia.

To do so, I want to focus on a growing number of women that have been active in, what I call, normalizing the anomaly by settling themselves in urban areas. The majority of Indonesian migrant workers are women and come from rural areas, but upon returning to Indonesia, a sizeable number of them are beginning to live and work in cities instead of going back to the villages, despite well-established networks and support systems at home. The exact numbers are not available, but this group seems to be growing steadily in cities around Indonesia. These urban women have made choices to live in an area to which they have no connections previously and their presence simultaneously challenge and form kinds of urban subjects that help explain the trajectories of mobility in the

contemporary Indonesian society.

Particularly, these workers – 80% women – return not only as exports that have fulfilled the intent and duties of state-sponsored neoliberal economic projects but also as persons with skills and experience resulting in palpable influences and changes to the notions of gender, labour, and citizenship. In many ways, they resist the “image of the new inhumanity in the Asian metropolis” (Ong, 2006, p. 195). I argue that their present made up of everyday choices, actions, and decisions constitute the counter-narrative to the making of history that Indonesia wants to engage in and sustain into the future. Their memory effectively disrupts the workings of the state and society that pushes women into the margin by challenging their preconceived notions of rural and/or urban women, and by negotiating and redefining their gender roles as well as gender-assigned spaces in the cities.

In this consideration, it is important to treat “memory” as malleable, environmental as well as temporal and spatial. As uncomfortable and uncertain as it sounds, rather than confining memory to the realm of the identifiable, ready-made and usable, memory is combined with (non-) verbal and (non-) visual expressions that are placed in the context of the moments they occur,

becoming and indicative of humanity in motion. It is not representative and all encompassing. Such conceptualization comes from the acknowledgement that memory of migrants – people on the move constantly dealing with the notions of mobility – travel with them to their daily tasks, exchange of words, interactions with the (non-) visible environment. Following Maurice Halbwachs (1992), memory needs to be studied together with or within social context in which it is constructed, as it begins to situate itself in spaces informed and constructed by thoughts and expressions. It is neither static nor referential, memory thus shapes and evolves into the future. Migrant memory finds itself across the boundaries of time, or as Tai (2001) put it, “memory works forward as well as backward; the past is shaped by the future as much as the future is shaped by the past” (p.2). Migrant women returnees in their decision making process tap into their memory knowingly and unknowingly that allows for re-imagination of their societal, family and gender roles. Thus specificity of their experiences and identity and place making could confront the popular discourse and instead necessitate personal encounters.

Situated in the present, the memory of migrant women often go through stages of manipulation in order to first exist as part of the official narrative, and

subsequently and incrementally as part of “countermonument” (Young, 1993) though in an informal, fluid manner. All the while, recollection of migrant women's narratives of their past and present exists in public and private spaces. For example, looking at trajectories of migrant women's stories, one can pick up and lift off the masculinized state's impulses to push the Indonesian women further into the margins that trace the experiences cursorily and claim authority over them. Following Pierra Nora (1989), these violated memories are then also reinvented in teleological perspective. In reorganizing their lives, the urban migrant women returnees engage in projects to alter the “official” teleology around their contribution, existence and re-imagination around their newly emerging identities in the ways of refusal and resistance. They refuse to accept history concerning them as History, and move seamlessly between memory and history, and rather than highlighting the hostile conceptualization of such relationship (Nora, 1989), start narrating and articulating with words and actions the new history of Indonesian women. However, as the public, official narrative is putatively rights-driven and normatively and continually reaffirms migrants as victims, this process results in struggles and exacerbates the trauma the

women experience. Trauma, Jenny Edkins (2003) writes, can be especially menacing because it involves a “betrayal of trust,” in that the very source of protection and security incurs torment (p. 3-4). Therefore, the very trauma that these women try to overcome by confronting, reimagining and reinventing their lives often continues on when their new life in cities proves to be full of hurdles involving betrayals from friends, family, agents, employers, and state.

It is well known that most of Indonesian migrant women come from rural areas. In small villages, it is easier to identify former TKWs by their shiny, new and big houses or stories of heartbreak, but the women returnees living in cities tend to disappear into the cityscape regardless of their origin. While villages open up the spaces that the migrant women previously had “owned”<sup>40</sup> and such ownership would publicly be recognized by the networks they belong to, occupying spaces in cities means being visible in places unintended for their membership, let alone contribution. In other words, “possessing” or “owning” spaces in cities does not enter their visions or imaginations. Their memory, unable to find places to be grounded, becomes suspended in the

present against the cityscape, scattered in an unspecific and somewhat randomized manner, and more settled when the women start to make decision regarding their future social mobility.

In fact, I think a closer exploration of the notion of power for migrant returnee women living in cities could reveal counter-intuitive interpretations of the rural-urban divide, in a manner similar to how Anna Tsing (1993) dispels in her ethnography of the Meratus people in South Kalimantan. Tsing uncovered that the “rural” is not stationary, backwards communities but lively and complex ones with active resistance to the “urban,” or in the Meratus people's case, Colonial, Java or Jakarta. The association with the “rural” does not make the migrant women returnees helpless, but instead, their memory of urban life overseas painted by struggles they overcame equips them with a different notion of power. Years of colonial rule and dictatorship left many Indonesians with what Dan Slater (2010) called “contentious politics,” defined by struggles amongst elites for greater power and effective and purposeful isolation of everyday people. Upon returning home, facing the same realities, the women creatively and dynamically solve the problems that tend to follow them across national boundaries, such as dealing with insurance claims, and in the process,

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<sup>40</sup> Here owning carries a sense of recognition from the community and state as well as a sense of legitimation involving no or little questioning over a migrant woman's entitlement to the space.

restructure and reorganize the power hierarchy. What the memory does here is helping women begin to claim the political and economic space in the city previously unavailable to them.

To take this further, in thinking of memory and gender of migrant women, it is useful to consider how in the process, femininity, grounded yet deterritorialized, crosses contiguous borders. Many migrant women will call their border-crossing experience – particularly the Terminal 3<sup>41</sup> experience well documented and explored by Rachel Silvey (2007) – a significant portion of their troubles as TKIs, but their movement in its entirety also provides backdrop for the social context in which the women reformulate their gender, and its memory is no longer limited to different expressions of nationalism. After crossing the border, the women continue to expect, as Jenny Edkins (2003) suggests, their state to offer security in return for obedience. The women believe that they have fulfilled their part by “willingly” going to work overseas and following the official procedures involved. When this is not the case from the moment they leave the country, marked by the scenes of their departure where groups of women wearing uniforms are being herded around

by men with loud voices, extorted for more money, and subjected to verbal and physical abuses, the women begin to question the meaning of their citizenship, and more broadly their identity as an Indonesian woman. In their workplace, the nature of their work – domestic and factory labour – indicates to them that the occupation is already highly gendered, and when the daily duties of cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and assembling are reserved exclusively for women workers.

Intriguingly, the memory of gendered labour creates a sense of solidarity with other migrant women and lives through the present and future in their life in cities. Also seen in the manifestation of Indonesian femininity found in the line of strong-headed female characters in *Buru Quartet* (Pramoedya, 1996a, 1996b, 199c, 1997), the migrant women returnees start taking matters into their own hands. For these women, it is as if the migration experience occurs when time stopped; that is, it is timeless when it is recounted. Then, a reformulated, restructured notion of gender carries onto the present and future as the women interact with new social contexts, irrespective of the fact that the experience happened elsewhere in different places and different times. Influenced by the sense of struggles, solidarity and independence, Indonesian women

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<sup>41</sup> A special terminal at the Jakarta International Airport only for outgoing and incoming TKIs.

escapes the colonial, bureaucratic conceptualization of gender, often tailored to administrative conveniences. Gender becomes a form and a tool of resistance for the women living in cities, and their lives and choices reflect this. What then takes up the central theme of these narratives are the varying notions of mobility, preceded by collective memory and surpassing the legacies of state-sponsored neo-liberal economic development projects.

The memory of migrant women continues to challenge what such “public” articulations demand from and define femininity, and becomes entangled with the kinds of projects that are grounded by male-dominated power and hierarchies. In this process of reformulation, the migrant women move in and out of the narrative of progress and modernity and activate a different mode of memory and meaning that resists a carefully laid-out version by the Indonesian state with very little room to articulate anything otherwise. As much as the state may be in the key role in the economic, capitalistic and neo-liberal decision making, the ways in which the migrant women moulds the memory challenge whether state really get to dictate the decisions of the migrant women returnees make, or to put it in another way, whether the women subject themselves to the norms articulated and expressed by state. Thus, I argue that by

removing the layers of state articulations in migrant memory, the core of a woman's femininity and her gender will become clearer, without the noise of the grand narrative.

I now turn to a discussion on existence of memory. Tai asserts “Memory creates meaning for particular events or experiences by inscribing them in a larger framing narrative, be it personal or collective” (2001, p. 2). Her view is situated within the understanding that the notion of past is performed as a prologue in memory and that a sense of future is embedded in narratives. As I argued earlier, memory, particularly that of a migrant woman, can exist in suspension and across time and space, thus transformative in an internal as well as external sense. To put it in another way, meaning alone from the experience could exist and formulate itself without attachment of memory, or the notion of it. That is without recalling the details, emotions or feelings and thus evocative meaning could dwell in the mind, in isolation, and when invoked with experiences of the present and future, meaning is recalled, uttered, performed, and documented as memory. Then, memory can hold multiple meanings, and meanings be attached to multiple memories. James Young (1993) points out that the processes involving memory arise

in a site of multiple functions depending on their needs, therefore indicating multiple inputs and outputs and producing enriching interpretations. In thinking of relationship between meaning and memory, we need to question the notion of counter-narrative and haste tendencies to produce it in the name of search for truths from grassroots. For instance, how does the (new) narrative situate within suppressions in official history? Sitting in elegant grains of subaltern studies, does the very action of constructing counter-narrative place the storyteller in a secretive hierarchy?. In considering this, I find feminist traditions to have striven to provide a line of thinking whereby the notions of “subject” and “authority” are questioned. Thus, when the viewpoint is centered on the “subject,” there is a need to allow much room for memory and meaning to exist independently in order not to limit their own expressions.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to opening up the space where memory and meaning could form their own connections, in looking at migrant memory, I raise a possibility

where meaning precedes memory, that is, meaning creates or forms, constructs memory. In other words, what is being talked about and displayed holds as much importance as what is articulated in silence and emptiness. It argues for explicit, tangible expressions of memory as much as unconscious, implicit, abstract, and hidden forms of memory. For instance, in answering my question about what she does as a migrant rights' activist, a migrant woman insentiently yet gently rubbed a scar on her hand from cooking when she was an overseas domestic worker. (I asked later where the scar came from and got an explanation.) Objects and bodies – often not as a whole but as parts, incomplete and misplaced – provide triggers for the memory, or awaken the memory when multiple layers that were erstwhile covering, protecting and hiding suddenly and gradually emerge from the depths.

Here, the role of images in migrant women's memory is conceptualized both as abstraction and specific expression and shaped by the official narrative (or History) dominated by the media captivated by visions of progression and modernity. I argue that the image of a migrant woman is always partial. Her life story starts with a difficult past and humble beginnings and ends with a tragic story of abuse and victimization. She

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, see Gayatri Spivak's “Deconstructing Historiography,” in Guha, R., & Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford University Press; Chakrabarty, D. (2009). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press; Wolf, M. (1992). *A Thrice-told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*. Stanford University Press.



drops her head and is covered in bandages and scars. She is vulnerable and “timid,” (Suryakusuma, 2004). Nonetheless, migrant women returnees in their new professional role as migrant rights activists contest precisely this by being healthy, vocal, and full-spirited, advocating for their agenda and leading public demonstrations in well-known public spaces in the cities. Perhaps no migrant woman sees herself returning to Indonesia as next Ibu Kartini, advancing the agenda of gender equality, but the lives of these migrants resemble hers inasmuch as her dedication to her family and ultimately dying after giving birth to a child thereby symbolizing the new Indonesian femininity both in terms of the maternal as well as (Western-influenced) modern. In fact, family is a crucial link to explore in looking at the memory of the Indonesian migrant women (Mahler & Pessar, 2001), which triggers and remains throughout the migration, and is found to be the source of their nostalgia in maintaining contacts back home. I will not be able to explore this further in this paper, but in fact, this yearning for home is the bond that keeps the migrant workers together while living overseas, and as Boym (2001) argued, it also means longing for continuity in their lives, while living through a major disruption.

Finally but not lastly, in working with migrant memory, I want to discuss what Rudolf Mrázek joyfully stresses as “the most rewarding part” in interviewing Indonesians, that is “how the talking went; how we [him and his interviewees] moved and stumbled across a particular landscape that was theirs and, in a revealingly different way, gradually also mine [his]” (2009, p. x). In exploring the colonial memory of well-known Indonesians, Mrázek appears to be going on the journey with them, relating the stories to his own as a Czech academic studying Indonesia and living in the US. As a migrant woman who immigrated to a foreign country just before turning 20, studying the memory of migrant women shape and affect mine as well, as much as mine may and may not affect theirs. This grappling with the memory – always expected but always surprising – adds a dimension to my work around migrant memory that is deeply personal and also ever-evolving. In some ways, Filipina interviewees in Rome notice the changes that happen to Rhacel Parreñas (2001), as they come to consider her as part of their community, a fellow Filipina, a fellow migrant and a woman, and comment on improvements on her Tagalog. The very nature of memory, meant to traverse across different spaces and time, gives me

assurance that migrant memory simply cannot remain sterile and in vacuum, and it is expected of me to give myself willingly and observe and partake in colourful interactions, expressions and articulations, rather than trying to separate myself.

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