

Building Workers Solidarity in Hong Kong:

Indonesian Overseas Domestic Workers and Their Literary Narratives*

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the recent emergence of numerous works of fiction written by Indonesian female overseas workers, especially those who are (and used to be) working in Hong Kong as domestic helpers. It examines the conditions under which these women workers write and read their stories, and contrasts how these run against the grain of contemporary Indonesian literary production, which typically does not register the experiences of the Indonesian working class. Through a reading of some of these works of fiction, this essay looks into how Indonesian overseas domestic workers in urban-capitalist Hong Kong are sharing stories and experiences among themselves, and at the efforts of those women to build solidarity with other overseas workers of different nationalities in the city. It shows that these works of fiction operate as a literary instrument that provides a forum for the workers, for the first time in their lives, to actively define the world they live in and, thus, liberates them to pursue the overseas journey they dare to take, for the basic premise of gaining self-autonomy.

Key Words: Migrant Worker, Female Domestic Helpers, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Narrative, Fiction

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Begitu duduk di pesawat Cathay Pasific (sic!) yang membawanya pulang ke negeri pertiwi, Dewi menyempatkan diri untuk memotret negara Hongkong dan bandaranya dari jendela pesawat sambil berbisik, selamat tinggal Hongkong. Aku benci kamu tapi aku cinta kamu.

[As she sat on the homebound Cathay Pacific plane, Dewi took the chance to shoot some pictures of Hong Kong and its airport from the plane's window, and was whispering good-bye to Hong Kong, I hate you, but I love you.]

(Bo Niok 2007b, 216).

I. Introduction

Dewi, the protagonist of the short story quoted above, is leaving Hong Kong after four years of working as a domestic worker in that city. She recalls her days of service for two employers during the four years and compares how each has treated her. While the first employer is described as a “stingy” lady (*majikan yang pelit*), Dewi is gracious with the second one who treats her as if she were a member of the family: she is invited to sit at the same table and eat the same food served during the yum cha, dining in the restaurant. Dewi considers herself fortunate to work for a “good employer” (*majikan yang baik dan perhatian*) who allows her to do things she likes. On the day she leaves Hong Kong for her home country, Indonesia, she expresses mixed feelings over Hong Kong. While mixed feelings are often the ingredient of romantic stories, Dewi's love-hate feelings are evidently something that

were developed over the years of her stint in Hong Kong. Is Dewi alone in having these sorts of mixed feelings? How are these feelings conjured up among the overseas Indonesian workers who work in Hong Kong as domestic workers? What kind of experiences do Indonesian overseas workers have in Hong Kong that lead them to develop these mixed feelings? Is there something this story (and many others written by the workers themselves) wants to tell its readers beyond the common image that the Indonesian public has of domestic workers' lives and work abroad?

This essay examines the ambivalence of thoughts and feelings of the Indonesian overseas workers as expressed in their written narratives. Indonesian overseas domestic workers, collectively and individually, have been prolific in writing their stories: in just the short period between 2005 and 2011 we have amassed a collection of more than a dozen published short stories and novels, more than 5 anthologies of poetry, and several one-piece / individual poems published in local and national newspapers throughout Indonesia. Interestingly, most of these published narratives are written by those who have worked in Hong Kong as domestic helpers. Although there is now an abundance of published works by overseas Indonesian workers, there has never been a serious study of their stories (Nabonenar 2007; Rosa 2007). This essay wishes to introduce their writings and to acknowledge the social significance of their works for our understanding of the issue of labour migration in East Asia. Their works alone stand as an important breakthrough against the practice of letter writing predominantly employed by other nationalities of Southeast Asian foreign domestic

workers;¹⁾ they use fiction as a major vehicle of self-expression.

This essay starts with a general context that provides the conditions for the overseas workers to produce written narratives and the importance of their writings within the Indonesian literary circle. Their written narratives offer fresh insights into the world in which these overseas workers are living and the challenges they are facing daily in that process. From this point of view, this essay takes the written narrative as a locus of expression for these workers in their efforts to articulate and convey to others the feelings and thoughts they have in their daily lives as overseas workers in urban Hong Kong. In particular, this essay locates how Indonesian overseas domestic workers in urban-capitalist Hong Kong are sharing stories and experiences among themselves, to illuminate the process of negotiation they have in their efforts to build solidarity with other overseas workers of different nationalities in the urban city.

From this understanding, this paper shows how these works of fiction by the overseas workers can be seen as a literary instrument that provides a forum for the workers, as for the first time in their lives, to actively define the world they live in. Overseas workers have discovered their own voice and are now capable of articulating their concerns without the intermediation of intellectuals or NGOs as used to be the norm. In the absence of the state's protection and also, on the other hand, the waves of their emerging collective social awareness as foreign domestic workers, these workers have taken matters into their own hands and

1) See Koetsawang (2001) on Burmese workers' private letters; De Guzman (2008) on an analysis based on letters written by Filipino workers to family members and NGOs.

developed a form of self-liberation through the vehicle of writing fiction to collectively claim their own autonomy. In that way, it shows these overseas workers have gained their own independence in the social context of labour migration in East Asia by transgressing the public image of domestic workers as weak, poor and illiterate victim of globalization.

II. Indonesian overseas workers and their narratives

The common public image of overseas domestic workers pictured in many newspaper reports is that they are either the nation's unfortunate subjects dragged by the forces of globalization or the "economic heroines" whose self-sacrificing impulse is to generate a better life for the family back home (Ford 2002). They are pictured in this way to represent the nation's shame and pride. In the eyes of the state, these workers are imagined in terms of statistical data and valued for their income-remittances to the state's economy. As in the case of the Philippines, overseas workers are acknowledged as *mga bagong bayani* (new heroes) for their remittances that have helped shore-up the nation's poor economic performance for the last two decades. Within that, official policies adopted by the state (comprising governments of both the sending and the receiving countries) are formulated to regulate or control the outbound flow of labour or to capitalize on these flows. Since these overseas domestic workers are predominantly female, the issue of women's sexuality also becomes the central linkage between the state's protection and the nation's imagination of the "proper" role of women. Women workers are viewed as a fragile subject that needs state

paternalistic protection. Under the existing sexual division of labour, their domestic work is perceived as feminine, undervalued and highly exposed to exploitation and abuse (i.e., verbal, physical, and sexual abuse). In the development of this image, we see how several times the government of Indonesia has imposed a moratorium on deploying workers to Malaysia – a policy claimed to protect the workers, yet imposed only after constant public outcries about alleged abuses perpetrated against Indonesian domestic helpers.

The workers' image as a self-sacrificing individual or in need of the state's intervention overlooks the real situation faced by these overseas workers. Behind the sheer weight of their numbers and representation in the public sphere, overseas workers have to deal with problems and make decisions on a daily basis about their life and work abroad. The experiences they accumulate shape the complexity of the responses, negotiations and attitudes of their actual life as domestic workers. These life stories, unfortunately, are hidden behind a veil of public ignorance and also are often absent from the official discourse of the state. Their life stories are only deemed important as long as they serve to strengthen the public image of a weak, poor and illiterate domestic worker.

It is in this context that some Indonesian overseas domestic workers are taking an active step in describing their world by writing fiction. As literacy becomes widespread by the end of the 20th century, female overseas workers can take their own pen to express their feeling and experiences in a written narrative that allows fellow workers to read the stories.²⁾ They are seriously engaging themselves with literary activity as

2) Literacy rate of adult females in Indonesia in 1980 was only 59.4, but by 1990 it had

part of their daily life as a domestic helper (Iswandono 2010). The titles of their writings are just as diverse as the subjects of their stories are varied and complex. Each writer has her own style of writing, too. In their stories, they give an honest description of the complex and multi-faceted reasons for working abroad, ranging from a passion for adventure, an escape from social duties back home, forgetting past events (such as failed relationships and marital breakups), an aspiration for personal freedom, and so on.³⁾ Economic reasons alone are not the only push factors for these women to take the risk of working abroad, given the nature of their work. The opportunity to work overseas provides workers with life experiences that they had never experienced before back home. In the stories, they give a vivid picture of daily life as a domestic worker, and provide detailed practical and factual information on work and life in urban cities of the capitalist world in East Asia (especially, in Hong Kong and Taiwan). More importantly, they also narrate personal accounts of the challenges they often face and the choices

increased to 78.7, by 2000 it reached 82.1 and by 2004 it reached 86.8 (ASEAN Statistical Pocketbook 2006). Migrant authors are part of this rising literacy rate among adult females as they receive compulsory primary education (since 1990s), thus their writings start to outburst in the first decade of the 21st century.

- 3) The various reasons for working abroad these workers expressed in their writing are in line with what Williams (2007, 132) notes, that “For some Eastern Indonesian women I interviewed, the appeal of traveling and working abroad – apart from the money – was the opportunity to escape from family constraints and live in a different community overseas for an extended period. Some simply wished to experience different spaces and places, which in their words was “*memperluas cakrawala*”, which literally means to expand their horizons.” In the case of Bugis migrant women workers in Malaysia, Idrus (2008, 168) concludes that “Searching for brighter futures (*massappa’ dallé*) for *passimokolo*’ carries not only a sense of economic purpose (as labour migrants), but also, for single women, the non-economic intention of finding a husband... Working in Malaysia is about earning and consuming, not about saving or sending money home.”

they make in relation to personal relationships and autonomy as a woman in a foreign land. These are the issues they had been trying to convey but often were blocked or censored by the intervention of the state and/or their employment agencies, their employers, and sometimes also, by well-intentioned journalists reporting about their life.

Their narratives not only offer a clear window to the real world of working people in the 21st century as they experience and understand it themselves, but also serve as a narrative of personal liberation. What stands out in these works of fiction as a narrative is that all stories are shaped by the conditions of their employment aboard – and in fact, many of these workers only started to write fiction after they become an overseas worker. For that reason, their writings could be read in two ways: as a detailed description of the workers' actual world in Asian urban cities, and as a text that is produced and consumed by the workers to inspire others to support their (collective) struggle for equality and freedom. In other words, their written narratives are breaking the chain of silence among the working people and at the same time, opening the door for others to understand their life and work.

To understand this contour of their writing activities, we may take a look at the life of Maria Bo Niok, a pioneer among Indonesian overseas workers. Maria Bo Niok is the nom de plume of Siti Mariam Ghozali. Born in 1966 in Wonosobo (Central Java), she had to do manual labour from an early age for a living. At the age of 17, she got married and, to support her family, she ran her own petty stall selling rice and birds in a traditional market in her hometown. But her marriage did not last long, and only after a painful divorce did she decide to try her luck becoming

a domestic worker in Hong Kong.⁴⁾ Her first stint lasted for two years (1996–1998), and after a short break, soon followed in Taiwan for two years (1998–2000), and once again in Hong Kong for four years (2001–2005). She started to write only after she went abroad as a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Thus, it is important to note that she has quite extensive experience working as an overseas domestic worker – and as a seasoned migrant, she is equipped with social references on the contours of migrant work: its dangers, pitfalls and, also, advantages.⁵⁾ Her first published work, *Geliat Sang Kung Yan* [Writhes of The Kung Yan], is a collection of 22 short stories, each of which is based on her life and experience. They were written in different times, with the earliest one in November 2002 and the latest in July 2006. The title *Geliat Sang Kung Yan* is an example how the author's experiences as a *kung yan* (Cantonese: worker/ labourer) resonate with its target readers, overseas Indonesian domestic workers (especially those in Hong Kong), inspiring a sense of solidarity as the reader easily notices and identifies her experiences with their own. We can also see that these stories were written during and after her last stint in Hong Kong, and this fact shows that her experiences as an overseas worker have provided her with

4) Maria Bo Niok does not hide the fact that her divorce had played a part in her decision to work abroad. In fact, she often takes her personal experiences in marriage as an inspiration or source of reflection for developing a theme in some of her short stories and novels. She has been actively supporting and promoting works by fellow migrant workers. In her own house in her hometown, Wonosobo, she also organises a reading club for the locals. For her, writing (and reading) has become a passion in life.

5) In a newspaper article on Maria Bo Niok's writing activities, Tanesia (2006) notes that "Being away from her family often made Maria feel (*sic!*) sad, bored, and lonely... To help relieve her stress, she would write what she felt on pieces of paper or the backs of old calendars. It did help. But most of the time she threw away what she wrote."

enough understanding on the nature of her own migration, to reflect on her own life as a worker and a confidence to write her stories down for others to read.

Based on the above description, we could see that the literary path taken by these domestic workers is shaped by various factors. One important quality of this path is that they learn to compose short stories and novels by themselves. They do not have any prior training in creative writing nor writing experience that might have prepared them with some literary techniques and vocabularies to entertain readers. Instead, they learn to write by self-practice and studiously make drafts of writings. The main consideration that encourages them to narrate their stories is simply their personal experience as an overseas domestic worker. It shows an aspect of their writings that workers are passively content with their life and work but actively seeking various ways to improve the quality of their life as a domestic helper in the globalized Hong Kong. These texts offer a tapestry of many colours, created by themselves, against the monochromatic official discourse on their life abroad. These texts serve as a valuable document on how, in the context of globalization in Asia, these workers are being pulled out from their home country (and also, being pushed in to foreign labour markets) to seek employment abroad as a “no-other-way option”, as described from their own perspective. In that way, their writings are a symbolic aspiration for one’s personal development.

In line with that, it is also important to note that most of the protagonists in migrant-worker writings have developed a positive outlook on life. They are women of strong determination, but also open minded to learn new things in life. It is a model character for a surviving

overseas worker: despite the hardship in life and work, they are ready to overcome social barriers in life with a smile and opt for a change. This positive outlook illustrates how workers have a dream of an ideal situation and are not afraid to advocate it through their writings. Therefore, these writings are not simply a type of literature for leisure but instead, carry a certain worldview to enrich readers' thoughts and also, wish to realise that view through their collective efforts.

Although their narratives are meant as a shared story among themselves, as a social text they are for the public to read and gain understanding about the workers' life and work abroad. As such, readers may find a number of threads in their narratives that are important for the workers to write and share with their fellows as a testimony on their migration.

One important thread raised in their writings is about the interaction among overseas workers of different nationalities. It creates a discourse on the constructed social identities of the overseas workers during their time working abroad. In the context of a globalised East Asia, Indonesian overseas workers meet fellow workers of different nationalities and engage together in various kinds of interaction beyond ethnic/racial boundaries outside work. Thus, they often cooperate with other fellow overseas workers, and this opens up possibilities to cultivate themselves as members of society. On the other hand, however, under the pressure of globalization, each worker is forced to pursue her/his own economic interests, and this often leads to atomization and competition with other overseas workers. The written narratives of these Indonesian overseas workers offer a window to look at how workers understand this challenge in their social interaction and also, their responses to this

challenge as they locate their own place in society.

III. Between competition and sympathy

As urban Hong Kong draws various international overseas workers, especially from neighbouring Asian countries, to try their luck in work and life, its heterogeneous social landscape makes possible diverse encounters among its population and instances of solidarity. In a foreign land, foreign workers shift registers in their use of language, customs, and in many instances, body language, depending on the situational context they come upon, to accommodate how a practical interaction works. Unlike middle-class travellers, domestic workers understand that the nature of their purpose in Hong Kong is to work. In such a situation, unfortunately, competition for work among overseas workers may downplay any interaction among them. Employment agents in Hong Kong often construct racial/national divisions of labour based on their social-cultural-religion-language skill profiling. Filipina, Indonesian, Nepali, Sri Lankan and Thai workers are segmented to target different customers in the market. This segmentation may enhance the individual worker's bargaining power (such as, Filipinas with English proficiency, who are valued better), but it also shapes workers' perceptions on fellow workers who do not share the same social category. This situation creates "stereotypical beliefs" as Loveband (2006, 79) has noted based on her work on the situation of overseas workers in Taiwan:

In interviews with both employers and labour brokers, it was

clear that both shared a profound belief that workers from particular countries held certain distinct and inalienable traits. This ‘truth’ (occasionally with slight variations) was echoed many, many times in different interviews with a range of different people, both men and women, including employers (both middle and working class), politicians, shop workers, doctors etc. – however, what was surprising was that foreign workers themselves shared many of these stereotypical beliefs about the ‘other’ foreign workers.

If this is the case concerning the dire situation of domestic workers in Hong Kong, is there any possibility for them to cross over the boundaries of stereotypical belief created by market forces? What kind of social relationships might domestic workers have when they allow themselves to be governed under the hegemony of the artificial social category?

In one of her short stories, “G/0,03,10,13,18” (in *Penari Naga Kecil*), Tarini Sorrita describes how Filipina, Indonesian and Thai domestic helpers are being positioned within the Hong Kong market place, and how this also affects the migrants’ perceptions of each other. Anna, the Thai worker, who is known among migrant workers of all nationalities as a money-lender with high interest, is pictured as penny-pinching, unsympathetic, and unsociable individual. Felly, a 52-year-old Filipina worker, is pictured as a “very pleasant” person – a character noted as “not like any other Filipinas,” and thus she is well known to other fellow workers. Tanti, the Indonesian protagonist of the stories, even considered Felly as her own “ate” (Tagalog: elder sister). Meanwhile, Tanti is pictured as a naïve Indonesian who is still new in Hong Kong and just

trying to run her daily chores well. In the story, interactions among the domestic workers are made possible because they work in the same apartment building and they find there is no one else to turn to besides fellow domestic workers. Regardless of the perception each has against the others, they share a common understanding that they all “come to Hong Kong to try their luck for the future” (Sorrira 2006, 14).

This story shows that although racial/nation-based perception may persist and linger in the minds of the overseas workers, it does not prevent them from developing meaningful interactions with other fellow workers of different nationalities. Politeness is the main key in this interaction but being friendly, as the character Felly displays in the story, is the most important trait in building personal interactions among them. As urban-capitalist Hong Kong pools low-class migrants from many different countries in their search for work and may segregate them for the market, overseas workers could still rely on their fellow workers irrespective of the segregation imposed on them. The expression of prejudice and social categories created by market forces could undermine any meaningful relationship domestic workers may have developed with fellow workers of different nationalities, but ironically it helps them to become aware of their own situation in the host society. The notion that they are having a similar fate in their work in Hong Kong helps them develop awareness that as domestic workers they do exist as one social group, a group that is, in fact, the weakest community in the society.

This interaction overseas workers develop among themselves may consist of different kinds of relationship, either genuine or artificial. What makes this relationship peculiar is the fact that workers understand this relationship could only take place in relation to their work abroad. The

chances of meeting a stranger (of a different nationality) and the possibility for interaction open up because they are in Hong Kong. In their interactions, nation-based constructed identity may be activated to serve as a marker for their own distinctiveness, but it also works to question their perception of the other fellow workers. From this point, workers are reminded to accept that other fellow workers may act differently beyond their stereotypical portrayals. Not only does it transgress the market created-boundaries, it also challenges the artificial interactions they may have so they can develop a meaningful relationship out of it.

One such possibility is clearly illustrated in Maria Bo Niok's short story, "Batik" (in *Geliat Sang Kung Yan*), which forces the readers to acknowledge other fellow workers of different nationalities from a standpoint they share together as overseas workers. In the story, Sri, the Indonesian protagonist, was sent back home to Indonesia after losing her employers' batik shirts that she had hung to dry outside during one typhoon day. On her way in the train to the airport, she sat across from a Filipina worker who was holding a lot of luggage as a symbol of her success in work. The woman noticed Sri was looking at her and thus, started a conversation in English:

"I am from Philipina (sic!)," *sambung wanita tadi*,

"Are you ok?" *wanita itu terlihat peduli dengan kesedihan hati Sisri.*

"Yes, I am ok," *jawab Sri dengan tersenyum yang penuh terpaksa. Ia nanar meratapi keadaannya. Ingin rasanya dia membawa pulang barang banyak untuk anak-anaknya. Juga uang banyak untuk menyekolahkan mereka. Pedih sekali hatinya. Sisri*

pernah berjanji pada ayahnya jika dia berhasil dalam perantauan, dia akan ikut membantu sebagian untuk membiayai ayahnya menunaikan ibadah haji. Kini apa? Semua sirna terbawa tai fung dan goyang dombretnya. Sri sangat sedih dan menyesal. Butiran-butiran air mata jatuh berderai di pipinya. Si wanita yang bernama Novena Sebastian itu, pindah tempat duduk di sebelahnya. Dia memeluk Sri dari samping dan menghiburnya.

Kata Sebastian, enam tahun lalu dirinya juga mengalami hal yang sama. Tapi demi keluarga yang ditinggalkan, dia harus berangkat dan berangkat lagi ke Hongkong. Hingga dia berhasil menaklukkan kekerasan kerja di Hongkong. Katanya pula, kini dia mau ambil cuti pulang. Konon, dia setahun sekali pulang ke Philipina untuk menjenguk keluarganya. Sri kembali semangat mendengar cerita dari teman barunya itu. Mereka berpisah di bandara Hongkong. Pesawat terbang akan membawa mereka menuju negeri pertiwi yang berbeda.

["I am from the Philippines," said the woman. "Are you OK?" she seemed concerned with Sri's sad look,

"Yes, I am OK," answered Sri with a full forced-smile. Confused, deep inside her heart she laments on her situation. She wishes she could bring a lot of gifts for her children. And also, a great deal of money for their schooling. It broke her heart. She once promised her father that if she succeeded in her journey, she would pay for her father to go for the Hajj out of her own pocket. But now [what to do]? All [the dreams] have vanished, carried away by the typhoon and her dance. Sri is so sad and disappointed. Teardrops are falling on her cheeks. The woman

named Novena Sebastian moved to sit next to her. She hugged Sri by her side and consoled her.

Sebastian said, six years ago she also experienced the same thing. But for the sake of her family back home, she had to go to Hong Kong more than once. Until she finally succeed in conquering the harsh working conditions in Hong Kong. She also told her that she is now taking her leave to go back home. She said she goes back once a year to the Philippines to visit her family. Sri regained her spirit listening to the story of this new friend of hers. They went their own separate ways at Hong Kong airport. Airplanes will take them back to their different homelands.] (Bo Niok 2007b, 166-167)

Although the meeting was short and unexpected, Sri was consoled and because of that, “regained her spirit.” Sri did not expect she could become that close to a stranger. She forced a smile to hide her feeling, but the woman from the Philippines noticed that, and instead of withdrawing herself from the polite conversation, moved to sit beside her. By moving her seat, the woman, by now introduced as Novena Sebastian, has taken the first move to cross the cultural prejudice – that she was trying to reach out to the estranged Sri. Later, Novena gave Sri a hug – a physical gesture that is not a habit among Indonesians, but commonly understood as a sign of sympathy. Her move was to make Sri recognize that her new friend could understand her situation despite the fact that she is coming from a different background. Her hug represents an active step in narrowing the gap between two migrants from different cultures. As Novena began sharing her story – she was

once fired also – the level of interaction between the two of them became intensified: from eye contact to physical attribution, and continued to an emotional engagement. By the end of their encounter at the airport, Novena is no longer a stranger Sri happened to meet on the train but has become her friend.

As the story reflects the situation of interaction between workers of different nationalities in Hong Kong, it signifies the habits of Indonesian domestic workers in such interactions. The story ingeniously positions Sri, the Indonesian protagonist, as the passive character while Novena, her Filipina counterpart, as the one who takes the initiative, assuming the active role. It serves as a satire to remind her readers on how Indonesian workers have been notoriously lazy in crossing cultural prejudices as they only care about flocking and bonding exclusively among their own group. There is a strong sense that Indonesians are also too cowardly to question the foundations of their own beliefs and conservatism when facing the urban Hong Kong, and thus when an opportunity strikes to develop a meaningful interaction with others, they prefer to give up – due to various reasons and excuses (notably, the perceived language barrier). In that way, the story reflects the cultural barriers as perceived by Indonesian workers and their passivity (and probably also, inability) to cross over the boundaries of stereotypical belief.

One important insight the story shows is that Maria Bo Niok must have heard the commonly circulated gossip, rumours and prejudices in much small talk among Indonesian workers about fellow workers of different nationalities. As she certainly realizes that such condition would only isolate Indonesian workers from the civil communities of Hong Kong, she tries to convince fellow workers who are her readers, to

abandon such bigotry towards workers from other countries. In that way, through her short stories she encourages them to see workers of different nationalities beyond the veil of cultural prejudice, to value them as fellow workers who, like themselves, are also struggling to make a living in urban Hong Kong. It is the first step to cross the cultural barriers that may exist between them, and shatter the stereotypical belief created by the market. The story highlights it as the condition for an interaction among workers of different nationalities to develop genuinely. Thus, the story suggests readers should leave their comfort zones, break their chains and free themselves out of the cave of illusions that has been blocking their view from the wider world. The readers are dared to take the first step whenever they see the chance to increase the level of their interaction with other fellow workers and to willingly share experiences and stories as a fellow worker – just like the initiative taken by Novena.

IV. Steps for organising

Despite the complexity of the issue and the cultural contestation and expression of prejudice among overseas workers as described in the short stories, one person has brought a different understanding to overcoming such barriers in real life. Her name is Eni Lestari, a prominent workers' right activist in Hong Kong. She is surely one of those workers who have succeeded in crossing the cultural barrier and more importantly, understands the significance of organising among Indonesian overseas workers. She has learned by observing how workers from other countries have organised themselves for years in

Hong Kong. In her note, Lestari mentions that *Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Hong Kong* (Association of Indonesian Overseas Workers in Hong Kong), an organisation she chairs, is relatively new in comparison to other organisational drives of workers from other countries. She stresses that “Filipinas, Thais and Sri Lankas had been organising for years” (Lestari 2010). The notion of comparison with other fellow workers in Hong Kong is important to highlight the fact that Indonesian workers are in fact slow to realize the need for organising. Thus, experiences of fellow workers from other countries in organising may work as a guiding mirror to instigate the formation of a formal-registered organisation among Indonesian workers.⁶⁾ In that way, Indonesian workers can also defend their rights and interests more effectively.

The social context for this organising drive, as Lestari has noted, is the rise of organisations of overseas workers in Hong Kong that have succeeded in mobilising workers and defending their interests. Since mid-1990s, overseas workers with the support of some NGOs have established organisations that provide counselling and assistances for fellow workers on employment issues – and generally, they are formed based on nationalities. For instance, United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNFIL-HK) caters the needs of Filipino workers, meanwhile Friends of Thai (FOT) provides assistances for Thai workers. Nonetheless, these organisations come together in many occasions to work on common issues, such as campaign against pay cut and advocacy against racial

6) While Hong Kong as a liberal-capitalist city government may provide the necessary institutional arrangement for overseas workers to organise, Hsia (2009, 129) notes that “(n)o matter how liberal the context of reception, however, conditions for migrants would not have changed without pressure from a strong social movement.”

discrimination in employment. Many Indonesian workers learn about these support organisations (only) after they are caught in troubles regarding their working conditions and thus, are forced to realise the need for organising among themselves.⁷⁾

While there are some significant developments for the Indonesian workers to organise, there is still a practical challenge to consider given that the organising drive is not seen as an imperative for their work in Hong Kong – even if a worker is interested in organising. In one of her stories, Tarini Sorrita describes how organising has to compete with many other activities held by the workers when they gather:

...hari Minggu, seperti biasanya adalah hari libur yang ditunggu-tunggu oleh semua orang bahkan oleh mesin pun hari libur adalah hari yang dinantikan, setelah bekerja selama enam hari lamanya. Terutama bagi para domestic helper yang kebetulan hari liburnya jatuh setiap hari minggu. Mengapa? Karena masih banyak dari mereka yang liburnya bukan hari Minggu. Bahkan ada di antara mereka yang tidak mendapatkan haknya untuk berlibur. Kasihan memang, namun kita masih bertanya, "Siapa yang salah?" Memang tak akan ada habisnya membicarakan mereka kalau tak ada kesadaran dari pihak-pihak yang bersangkutan.

[... Sunday, as usually is the day off that is waited by every one – including by machines, after working for six days. Especially also, by fellow domestic helpers since their holiday

7) See Asato (2004, 262) on the efforts of Indonesian Migrant Workers Union in negotiating the placement fees.

usually falls on (every) Sunday. (You may ask) Why? Because, many of them have their holidays on other day than Sunday. Some of them even do not have the right for holiday. It is a pity, but still we ask: "Whose fault is that?" There will be no ending discussing about them if they themselves do not come to realise this issue.]

(Sorrita 2006, 54-55)

The fact that Indonesian workers prefer to spend their free time chatting with their peers at Victoria Park, shopping in Causeway Bay, clubbing in Wan Chai, or relaxing with any other activities, shows how organising as an activity has become their last option, regardless of whether it is essential for their own sake as an overseas worker.⁸⁾ This explains why we see only a handful of workers who are actively joining workers' rights organisations.

Pushing the workers' morale for organising is in fact a difficult task. It is not always about the passivity of the workers themselves, as Tarini Sorrita describes in the story, but also as a result from outside intervention that pictures organising in a dim light. It is important to note that many Indonesian workers who are just beginning their two year-contract for the first time in Hong Kong do not realize the need for an organisation that works to protect and defend their rights and interests. Once they are introduced to the idea of organising or being asked to participate in the organisation itself, reluctance and suspicion are their most common reaction. It is because many of them remember that their

8) Rini (2005, 65) notes how May Day is viewed like an ordinary holiday for workers to have a day off.

agents or employer has confiscated the guidebooks they received from the Hong Kong Labour Department.⁹⁾ Thus, they may see that organising is not welcomed in their field of work as they may lose the job itself, once their agents or employers know about their participation in such activities. Aside from that, many workers still have doubts about the benefits an organisation could deliver to change or level-up their employment contract. In that way, Indonesian workers, unlike their Filipina sisters who can draw supports easily from their own organisations, are conditioned to resolve any of their issues on an individual basis without the support of an organisation to defend and secure their minimum rights as an overseas worker (Ford 2006).

The challenges in their organising efforts can be seen as part of the impact played out within the contemporary structure of global capitalism that places low-level overseas workers (such as domestic helpers) in a weak position to bargain with the states (both of the sending and the receiving countries). These workers also have an unfavourable standing to seek institutional assistance from the labour unions (Ford and Susilo 2010). Nonetheless, support groups and NGO activists in Hong Kong have been looking for ways to meet these challenges. They have been joining arms to bring changes for all workers regardless of their races and nationalities, based on a common understanding that the one worker's individual issues are part of the larger mission to consolidate fellow

9) Rini (2005, 62) notes that many employment agents confiscate not only workers' passports but also personal address books and the guidebook provided by the labour department of Hong Kong. Lestari (2010) also notes that Hong Kong government has "translated the employment ordinance into Indonesian and hand us pamphlets about our rights when we go through immigration. [but] Lots of agents confiscate the booklets along with migrants' passport as soon as they leave the airport."

workers from different nationalities into one collective struggle (Wee and Sim 2003; Asato 2004; Constable 2009). In that process, short stories written by the workers themselves, as discussed in this essay, work as a literary instrument to consolidate their collective struggle for freedom.

V. Conclusion: Solidarity in Formation

This paper introduces the writings of Indonesian overseas workers, particularly those who have worked in Hong Kong, as part of our reading to understand the changes in our contemporary social world under the regime of globalization in East Asia. The stories they tell to and share with us in their writings are based on their personal experiences, dreams, and hopes in their own vocabularies and expressions. Reading their writings offers us an insider perspective on work and life in Hong Kong as a marginal group in the society (i.e., female domestic workers) with limited social-political-economic resources. In this regard, their writings come to us as a product of their reflection on the nature of their own migration for work and the efforts they make to formulate words as their own voice.

The political and cultural implications of these written narratives by the overseas workers are an important note for our understanding on the nature of labour migration in East Asia in the 21st century. Their works supply us with insights into the real working life that female domestic workers have to face and the opportunities they often encounter in urban Hong Kong. In that regards, there are two particular contexts worth to be considered: the literary situation in Indonesia, and the

shaping of working class identity in East Asia.

In the Indonesian literary scene, women writers are predominantly members of the middle class – a class that allows them to pursue high education, earn social status and become independent in their own world. This middle-class characteristic is well-established in literary circles with certain names to refer to. The outburst of female writing after the fall of the Soeharto regime in 1998 is also a by-product of urban middle class women (Garcia 2004). The works of these middle class writers are experimenting on “sensitive” social issues such as gender and female sexuality – and this alone has attracted criticism by members of the old guard who label them in one collective as “*sastra mazhab selangkangan*” (lust/ orgasm/ groin-school literature) (Marching 2007). While middle class women writers may take the lead in the centre stage for their experimental stories, it does not mean women of other classes are passively sitting in silence and just following the trends in their lives. As part of the changes in the socio-political environments of post-1998 Indonesia where promotion of individual rights and the democratization process are taking roots, authors from diverse educational and economic backgrounds are confident in bringing out their narratives into the nation’s literary scene. Therefore, regardless of their literary merits the fact that some overseas domestic workers have been taking an active step to pen down their expression of crises, fears, needs, hopes and dreams defies the conventional middle-class nature of Indonesian women writers.

To consider the importance of the writings of these overseas workers, one must bear in mind the social context in Indonesia where overseas workers and their stories were hardly discussed within established

literary circles. Their life as overseas workers had never been raised as a theme in any novel – as if they were non-existent in and absent from the minds of Indonesian writers – despite all the NGOs' campaigns and media attention on the hardship of these workers. It is as if the middle-class writers were ignorant of the potential of overseas workers' life stories as a source of inspiration in literature. Thus, in terms of literary outlook, writings by the workers offer a sense of “newness” – both as a theme and as an author.¹⁰⁾ With their writings, these overseas workers have highlighted an often ignored-fact that they are not just ordinary women who only receive public attention for their miserable stories as reported in the newspaper (or, in the eyes of the state, for their remittance), but as individuals with remarkable skills and imagination and, more importantly, as brave women who dare to take their destiny into their own hands.

In the context of the working class identity in East Asia, one important quality of these workers' literary works is that they document and raise issues on working conditions abroad from the perspective of a manual worker who is working within a global capitalist world. The feminization of labour is a salient characteristic of migration in East Asia, as young female workers from developing nations like Indonesia are taking a journey to a richer country in the region (like Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, etc.) where the labour market is in need of cheap domestic workers and

10) Unlike the middle class women writers whose fictions are predominantly published and distributed by well-known publishing houses based in Jakarta, these works of fiction written by overseas workers are published by small publishing houses in the provincial cities in Java and thus, distributed locally. This alone means their works are often left out from discussions in literary circles in the capital city. Their works, unfortunately, are not listed in the catalogues of public and university libraries.

caregivers for the elderly. More than 70 per cent of the officially documented Indonesian overseas workers annually are in fact women – and since 1998, there is a steady increase in the number of Indonesian workers. Undoubtedly, this feature of globalization in the region is shaping the workers' written narrative that allows them to foster their own perspective as domestic worker.

As the government of Hong Kong has laid down regulations on the workers' working conditions (such as, their rights for holiday) and the supports provided by many NGOs in the city for foreign domestic helpers, these workers may consider writing fictions as a way to express themselves. With their writings, these domestic workers create a context in which they can freely narrate their personal lives, experiences and fantasies as migrants, for sharing among themselves but also for the general public to read. They do not write for the sake of writing as a leisure activity or for a literary experiment (unlike their middle class sisters), but with a purpose of sharing their narratives so that others may understand the constant yet numerous vulnerabilities they are facing in life as an overseas worker. In particular, fiction as a literary genre has become an effective tool for these workers to give meaning to their own lives and work in Asia's urban cities, because it provides a space for them to freely combine facts and fantasies, to move between anonymity and having some public profile, and to convince their readers about important issues while also entertaining them. In that sense, their written narratives offers a description on how the process of globalization in East Asia is experienced, understood and expressed by the workers themselves. By writing fictions, Indonesian overseas workers are consolidating their own efforts in defining the world they

are experiencing abroad, in articulating their interests as foreign workers, and in reaching for public understanding to support their cause.

The fact that domestic workers are now capable of speaking for and taking care of themselves shows a mode of independence: a capacity to articulate their collective interests as female overseas workers, and persistent efforts to defend themselves even though they are lacking support from many parts of the society (and also, from the government that is supposed to protect them). By sharing their stories among themselves and for the general public to read, overseas workers open up an understanding of their work and life abroad and thus, deliver a change for their own self-representation in society. Their literary activities have challenged the stereotypical image of illiterate and defenceless victims of globalization as commonly portrayed in the media and government's discourse, by showing the agency of a female domestic worker: a capable, articulate and experienced overseas worker with strong determinations in life.¹¹⁾ In conclusion, their literary narratives are not about them showing off their literary skill for self-expression, but more about them in consolidating their collective efforts to reach for a better change in their status as a domestic worker. To appreciate their literary works is to acknowledge their collective struggle to achieve self-autonomy.

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11) This is not to say that literary activities taken by these workers are the only possible way to advance their interests and rights. Indonesian overseas workers in Hong Kong are in fact, active in many various activities in their day-off. Sorrita (2006, 57) notes how some domestic helpers are active in musical bands.

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