

Linguistic Vulnerability of a Female Maid: A Short-story Entitled “Maybe Not Yem”

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To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in a language; ... Does the power of language to injure follow from its interpellative power? And how, if at all, linguistic agency emerge from this scene of enabling vulnerability? (Judith Butler 1997, 2)

Judith Butler has addressed that language is thought to be “mostly as agency”, in a sense that speech inaugurates both linguistic and bodily interpellation of a subject. Thus language and physical existence recall partly intertwined, but unidentical subjectivity, through “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” acts (see Butler 1997, 5); when someone is subject to a hate speech, s/he is subjugated to the negative subject position. However, an alternative subjectivity could emerge from “a mode of response” of the addressee, by diverting the negative connotation of the utterance with an unwitting retort, which comprises the mixture of physical and linguistic enactment of the addressee (1998, 2-5). That is to say, injurious speech invokes an alternative meaning-creation in excess of the very utterance, in-between body and language, as well as in-between speech and its effects. This is what Butler calls “linguistic vulnerability” (1997, 2-3), which inextricably links to the question of power relations between the speakers in terms of race, gender and class.

Indeed, linguistic vulnerability always operates over a certain sense of historicity, which has been shared and nurtured through the constant repetition of the utterance by distinct speakers in similar contexts (Butler 1997, 36). In that sense, a speech act is always citational, as it contextualizes from other previous speeches, and thus its relevance is levered by the social convention.

If that is the case, how does injurious speech produce an alternative agency by diverting from its assumed-meaning? In what sense, does this alternate agency inaugurate in-between linguistic and physical terrains? Then, how does it counter the historicized power relations embedded within the interactions?

To answer these questions, I will explore a short story written by an Indonesian female

author who used to work in Hong Kong as a migrant domestic worker (MDW), to elucidate the literary agency projected in it. This work is highly relevant to address my questions above, in the sense that it was written by a MDW about MDWs, and thus it was narrated to deliver the poignant message to counter the conventional biases against them. To put differently, this work is chosen for its unique setting that the author and her protagonist interconnectedly project alternative meanings of being a female maid, by pushing the boundary of being female maid.

Therefore, this attempt inevitably involves the question of representing Self and the Other; a female maid was seen as the sign of “inferior Other” in Indonesian literature, to idealize the Self-images of Indonesia as urban male elite. In that sense, interrogating how this “inferior Other” was constituted and re-constituted in the field would help to undo the fantasization of the Self based on gender, class and race/ethnic divisions, as found throughout the society.

I will frame the discussions of this paper as follows: first, I will briefly delve into the background of the author and how this authorship has attracted social attention in Indonesia. Second, I will elaborate on how prominent literary works produced the biases about them, as the process of historitization of the fetish of female maid in the Freudian sense. Third, I will turn to the text¹ of the short story, to indicate how the Uncanny images of female maid worked as the antithesis to the above fetish of female maid. Besides, the MDW protagonist’s eerie image in the beginning gradually transformed in the text, as it re-contextualize her uncanny speech as the expression of her sorrow and anguish from her subordination. Moreover, several exploitative incidents that the protagonist and the narrator goes through together are examined, by which they develop the sense of solidarity. However, in the end, the protagonist again refutes this temporal solidarity. I will explicate on her final enigmatic denial of her name as Yem, as suggestive of her perlocutionary agency, which attempt to once again unsettle and expand the boundaries of “being a female maid”.

1. *Maybe not Yem*—the background

To demonstrate the story’s sophisticated use of linguistic vulnerability, I will first oversee the story itself and look into the author’s background based on media articles and my own personal interviews with the author, as it has critical implications to appreciate this work sufficiently.

In 2007, a short-story written by a female author who used to work in Hong Kong as a MDW won a national literary award in Indonesia. The story, entitled “*Maybe not Yem*” written by Etik Juwita, was first published in the major regional newspaper *Jawa Pos*, and then nominated for the Golden Pen Literary Awards in the year, in which the work has won

the fifth place in the short-story section that is for the works published in the national and major regional newspapers. Juwita's nomination attracted social attention for her background as a former MDW. Etik Juwita is currently in her late 20s and has formerly worked as a MDW in Singapore and Hong Kong. Therefore, *Maybe not Yem's* novelty was perceived first and foremost in terms of its authorship and the unusual choice of topic, as Juwita was the first author who won the national literary prize as a MDW, and that it located transnational female domestic-labor migration within the issue of women's oppression in the local culture to have female domestic workers. Thus, *Maybe not Yem* (henceforth MNY) was one of pioneer works among the Indonesian MDWs' publications both in terms of its foreseeability and quality, among a number of publications by MDWs released after her work.

Such remarkable achievement of Juwita must have given strong impacts on the Indonesian society, as it apparently went against the negative images of female maid that has long been sedimented in the region. The tradition of having female servants has a long history in Java, as the major regions in Indonesia. It was originally prevalent for Javanese aristocrats since the colonial period as a state of social privilege, but over time, the profession has gone beyond aristocrat families, and has prevailed even to many urban (lower-)middle class households (Locher-Scholten 2000). This has inspired a number of prominent modern literary works in this theme. As a result, the lowly images of female maid survived and permeated to the people's mind to the present, by further incorporating the latest popularity of women's transnational migrant labor as domestic workers. In that sense, this story employs the multiple stigmata of Indonesian women who migrate as transnational domestic workers as the main motive.

2. Fetish of female maid in Indonesian literature

Negative images of female maid appear recurrently in the major Indonesian literary works, and these works, despite their artistic contributions, may have functioned to reinforce the stigmatizing connotations of female maid in the guise of fiction. In effect, the fetish of "babu" is found in many of these works, which generally appeared as the symbols of subordination, low education, materialism and seduction/promiscuity. For example, the short story by the prominent author Pramoedya Ananta Toer, entitled "Inem" (1952), portrayed the subordination of a rural female child-maid who was forced to marry at the age nine. Another short story of Toer, entitled "Flunky + Maid" (1963) illustrates the seduction and willful subordination of a beautiful Eurasian maid to Dutch men for the sake of luxurious life in the colonial context. Meanwhile, a work of Linus Suryadi titled "Pariyem's Confession" (1981) narrated how a female maid of rural origin became the mistress of the son of an aristocratic family where she worked for, by outlining her

enjoyment of sexual affairs in a straightforward manner, which would have contextualized her as the symbol of promiscuity. Although it is undeniable that these works gave significant contributions as literary works, they have also helped to constitute the fetish, or “the negative historicity” of female maid in compound of gender, race and class. Be it directly or otherwise, such negative connotations deeply permeated to the readers’ mind, as the state of historicity of the fetish of female maid.

MNY strategically employs such negative historicity of female maid, by effectively narrating contrasting images with them. MNY presents the protagonist of female maid named Yem, which is perhaps short of Pariyem, as a typical name for rural women from lower socio-economic background. Besides, it invokes another assumption that this kind of woman would have typically timid and submissive attitudes to others due to limited socialization and education opportunities. By naming the protagonist and presenting her as a typical female maid, the text tactically constructs the basis to present an alternative.

3. Uprooting the fetish of female maid: as the uncanny and derogating mother

MNY presents the two female maids as the main characters; one is Yem, who used to work in the Middle East and going home permanently, and another is “I”, or the narrator, who is also going back to Indonesia from her workplace Singapore for holidays. These women meet as taking the same long distance shuttle service on their way home from the airport. Despite Yem’s supposedly-submissive naming, the narrator soon discovers that Yem blatantly goes against the idealtype of a MDW by her derogatory speech:

“Can you believe it? One of my friends threw her boss’s baby into a washing machine, just before going back to her village,” the woman beside me said in a flat voice. ...The woman (Yem) was terrorizing me (the narrator). Damn it all! A chill ran through me as I thought of what she had just told me. ...

“I put rat poison in the milk for my boss’s kid,” she said. ...

“Have any children of your own?” ...

“Three living. Another three, I aborted.”

In the first and second instance, the narrator is shocked by Yem’s terrorizing comments, which is not only vicious and cruel, but explicitly derogates the ideal image of female maid as surrogate mother. In the third, the narrator learns that Yem does not even hesitate to kill her own children, which suggests Yem’s apparent deviation from mothering roles. This disturbs the narrator’s professionalism and morality as a MDW, as she feels Yem repudiating the mutual respect and solidarity among the women in the same profession. In other words, the narrator tacitly functions as the superego of the female maid at this point.

4. Female maid as poor, unattractive and mentally-disturbed

The text's another reference to the historicity of Indonesian female maid is found in the negative portrayals on Yem's physical appearance. Yem is depicted as old, poor, unattractive and somehow unhealthy.

I guessed her to be around forty. Her cheeks were somewhat sunken; a false gold tooth sometimes gleamed with flashes of light. Her nails were cut unevenly—like those of a patient in an asylum. Her dark and deep set eyes reminded me of a gambling addict suffering from lack of sleep. Though she was thin, and had sagging breasts, she was also muscular. Maybe she was suffering from some kind of mental disturbance....

Dedicating a whole paragraph, the text illustrates that Yem is totally dissonant from ideal images of female maid as young, healthy, docile and reproductively active. With false gold tooth, sagging breast, the dark and deep set eyes and unevenly cut nails, the text highlights the unhealthy condition of Yem, being just like a patient in an asylum with mental disturbance. These images do not only refute the conventional image of female maid as the lustful seducer, but may be also interpreted as the image "afterward" her womanly servitude above, as Yem might have got such physical conditions in effect of her reproductive labor with low wages. These descriptions altogether cement Yem's subjectivity as uncanny and failure in the narrators' eyes.

5. Inaugurating an alternative subjectivity

However, as the story progresses, alternate subjectivity of Yem gradually unravels. The text employs three motives, namely: Yem's background, the abuse and exploitation by the local males.

After having a few conversations with Yem, the narrator realized that she was a divorcée who had been left by her husband, and had worked in Saudi Arabia in a highly exploitative setting. Moreover, the subsequent interactions implied that her unhealthy condition was triggered by the mental and physical abuses she received during her employment abroad.

"Look at that big toe of mine. It was crushed." ...

"Got crushed beneath a table leg when I was serving dinner to my boss."

"Didn't you see a doctor?"

"Sure, with whose money, your mother's?"

"No, your boss's."

"Right, and not be given food for a day?"

These conversations indicate the process by which the narrator began to realize Yem's mishap during her work, which introduced her to a new context of Yem's subjectivity; Yem's previous pejorative exclamation turns out to be her expression of anger and protest to the subordination, rather than the sign of her lack of professionalism. This enables the narrator to tease out the truthfulness of Yem's anger, by delineating her stories of abuse against her employer's children as the reiteration for her own subordination to her abusive employer. Thus, the combinations of physical and conversational portrayals of Yem presented in this section create the clevege in the seemingly-monolithic subjectivity of female maid, and direct the eyes of the narrator and readers to the unstated dimensions.

6. Reconstituting solidarity—Common exploitation toward female maid

After the narrator becoming more sympathetic to Yem, she and Yem goes through two incidents of exploitation by the local males in their way of traveling together, and it further develops their relationship in a way to nurture their solidarity. These incidents took place where their shuttle service made stops without prior notice. In the first occasion, the MDW passengers, including Yem and the narrator, was forced to exchange foreign currency they brought back from foreign country with the so-called money changer, who basically consists of a group of local thugs.

“We’re here to help the foreign workers. Because of so much deception, we’re here to help foreign workers whose money is still in the form of checks, dollars, riyals or ringgit. There’s a lot of counterfeit money in circulation; we’re just helping out is all. Not forcing anyone to do anything. All of this is for your own good,” ...

Although most women submit and obey the men's request for unreasonable exchange, the narrator escapes by her witting response, while Yem by her blunt statement that she had no money to exchange with. Then, Yem further explains to the narrator that her traveling with no money is because her boss refused to pay her any money, instead of giving her the air ticket to fly back to Indonesia. In this way, it becomes clear that Yem had to choose to go back without wages, just to get away from the abusive condition, which indirectly accounts for Yem's blunt and uncanny demeanor being caused by the exploitation working conditions.

Furthermore, their shuttle makes another stop, this time to make the MDWs pay for false insurance. While the money changer mentioned earlier used the pretended sympathy for justification, the bogus insurance uses both sympathy and threat.

“We are from an insurance agency. The insurance you paid at the airport only covers

you for travel within Jakarta and West Java. Beyond those borders, we are not responsible. Yesterday, a car with foreign workers was robbed in Brebes. Everything was taken and the workers themselves were raped. ...But it's completely up to you. It would be a pity if either you or your money weren't safe." ...

Again, the two women successfully evade the sham respectively, as the narrator stand toe-by-toe with the group of crooked males with her wit and courage, and Yem just dealt with her straightforwardness. These two incidents bound Yem and the narrator with the temporal sense of solidarity.

Additionally, these episodes expose their level of intelligence indeed exceeding their deceivers', which apparently goes against the conventional connotation about them as lacking education and morality. In this way, the text turns around the conventional overpowering relations of local males over MDWs, by outlining the women's competence.

Indeed, the narrator's level of intelligence is a proof of her capability, in recognizing details from smallest information to negotiate with the local thugs' exploitation. She is able to identify the location of the scam insurance company using limited information she saw on the calendar, and then threatens the deceivers that she would report this to her relative of the Police officer. Such intelligence of the narrator is a far cry from its traditional stereotypes as ignorant and submissive. Furthermore, the above-mentioned capabilities of Yem and the narrator, combined with the author Juwita's authoring competence to write this text in such a powerful and sophisticated manner, altogether serve to project an alternative agency of female maid in-between the body (physical appearance) and language (speech), as well as in-between the illocutionary and perlocutionary speech.

Conclusion

This work has elucidated how the combination of linguistic and physical agency of female maid has effectually undone the conventional meaning of the term. Injurious speech, as demonstrated, is the enactment of social subordination, and yet, it can also open up the space for an unexpected agency projected beyond the assumed boundary of interlocutionary speech. It is in this sense that wounding speech is worth careful attention, as it allows us to re-examine the mechanism of social domination. By tracing the process of historical sedimentation of literary stereotypes of female maid, I have tried to show the strength of MNV in tacitly subverting the ideological cast against the female reproductive labor, and by doing so, attempted to direct more attention to the consequence of fantasizing human agency based on gender, race and class. In this regard, MNV goes far beyond mere questioning of the subjugation of female maid by injurious speech; rather, Juwita has successfully combined the power of injurious speech with the notion of linguistic

vulnerability, to experiment on the possibility to project an agency with “no name”; Her portrayals of physical and linguistic agency certainly extended the range of subjectivities of female maid, by present her joy, pride and solidarity together with her rant and anguish. This is indicative of Juwita’s own active participation in the perlocutionary agency that she herself captured in her text. This being addressed, Yem’s final rebuttal of her name, seeming to me, was indicative of her (and Juwita’s) impossible aspiration to project themselves without naming it, as our common aporia to inscribe our own linguistic vulnerability as human agency.

Notes

- 1 I will use the English translation by Andy Fuller for my textual analyses.

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