

Book Review

Jafar Suryomenggolo (ed.) (2019) *At a Moment's Notice: Indonesian Maids Write on Their Lives Abroad*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. ISBN 9788776942700. 219 pp. Hardcover US\$85; softcover US\$25

Reviewed by
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At a Moment's Notice is an anthology containing short stories written by Indonesian domestic workers, collected and translated by Jafar Suryomenggolo, who is an Assistant Professor at National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo. The stories he collected in this book provide a sincere look into the lives of Indonesian domestic workers employed overseas in countries and cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Through these short stories, readers are able to glimpse the different stages of Indonesian migrant workers' journey abroad. Although these stories are works of fiction, they are all based on the experiences of the different authors of working as maids in a foreign country. No two stories are alike in this book as each tale has a different ending and is told from a different perspective.

These stories were originally written to enable domestic workers to share their life stories with one another. When one looks into the working environment of Indonesian migrant workers, one soon learns that upon the maids' arrival in their destination countries, any materials related to labour rights or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are taken from them. This is to keep the worker unaware of any rights that could be violated during their employment, and thus stops them from reaching out to government agencies or NGOs who could help them. Short fictional stories, however, are in fact "safe" for workers to read and thus, through these stories, domestic migrant workers show support for one another.

The book consists of twenty-three stories, categorised into four themes: Employer–worker Relationships; Love and Sexualities; Moonlighting; and Home. Each theme is based on the challenges on which the stories are built. For Employer–worker Relationships, the title of the theme speaks for itself in that stories are centred on the maid's relationship with her employer or other members of the household. The book starts on a lighter note with heart-warming and comedic stories such as "The Jade Bracelet" and "A, Ne, Ge", then followed by stories of maids dealing with ill-treatment from their employers such as "Susi" and "I Love Your Daughter". The next two themes – Love and Sexualities and Moonlighting – both deal with love relationships, including same-sex and interracial relationships, as well sex work. The final theme, Home, contains stories that reflect the conflicts and anxieties surrounding the maid's return home.

By sorting the stories into these areas, the reader will soon realise that a domestic worker's daily life does not only consist of her being confined to work within the parameters of her employer's home, but it also involves her constant negotiation between her gender roles as a mother, daughter, friend or wife, and her role as a caregiver to her employer's household or other individuals who may not necessarily be directly related to her work.

Moreover, all of the stories are written by individual authors, although it is not known whether these authors have ever been in contact with one another. Thus, it is safe to say that each story can be read in any random order as they are not directly connected to one another despite being categorized into themes based on the story's conflict. It can also be noted that a few authors have written more than one story in the collection. As for the authors, what is known about each of them are the countries they have worked in or are currently working or residing in, as well as the duration of their work there. The year that they are born is also given along with their *nom de plume* or pseudonym. These are all listed in the beginning of the book before the first story. Coming across this section of the book as a reader adds another personal touch to these stories, as I can imagine the trajectories of the domestic worker's migration journey and then picture the worker herself in the situation in which she puts her characters. Despite not being very detailed, having information like this about the authors adds a dimension of vividness to the story's imagery by making it easier to create one's own mental version of the story with the information of the author's work background and other details from the story. In addition, this gives more ground for the reader to have a platform to relate to the author as they can picture themselves in the story, which adds great depth to the author's intentions in sharing her tale.

Every reader will have their personal favourite in the book. Even though the stories are separated into themes based on the main issues on which they are centred, the stories range from comedic relationships between a maid and her employer or a member of the household, to familial tragedies, to stories retold from the maid's point of view. Thus, it is refreshing to see the maids' stories told from multiple perspectives, ranging from her own perspective, her employer's perspective to the third-person perspective. As readers have their personal biases, the stories that seem to have most powerful emotional effect are those told in the first person from the maid's perspective, like the stories, "The Jade Bracelet" and "Grandma Leung's Tear". These stories, I felt, bring to light, the situations that maids commonly experience in the households they work for, which ultimately lead to a happy ending. However, they can also remind us about the great vulnerability many maids are faced with as they are in the disadvantaged positions of being contracted to their employers who could easily terminate their contracts at any time, leaving them vulnerable to the emotions or moods of their employers. What is also not emphasised in all the stories is that, if the contract is terminated, residence in the maid's destination country will also become invalid and therefore she would be forced to leave the country without any financial compensation.

Some stories may surprise general readers in that certain topics, such as same-sex relationships and sexual abuse, are described. With the knowledge that Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, the average reader may assume that topics related to sex and the LGBT community would never circulate among domestic workers as these topics are taboo and not generally discussed in daily life back in Indonesia. However, with the emergence of short stories like these, readers would be able to see domestic workers as more than just maids for families and caregivers for the elderly and children. More specifically, as one goes through the book, they would be able to explore and develop an understanding of the multifaceted lives that domestic workers live, such as being involved in a love affair with someone from another culture or from a different race as well as from a different line of work, developing strong bonds or having strained relationships with members of an employer's household and witnessing sexual acts, or being the victim of abuse that would otherwise be considered taboo or cause one to be ostracised in the conservative Muslim culture in Indonesia.

Overall, this book gives readers a platform to relate emotionally to domestic workers who are normally looked down on by the societies in their destination countries. One can hope that in the

future, rather than looking down on domestic workers, more people will be able to appreciate and sympathise with domestic workers they see on the streets, guiding their employer's children to school or elderly relatives to the park. These same people who provide intimate care leave behind families and their familiar surroundings to work in a foreign place where they are at the constant mercy of their employers and the rest of the society.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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