

# **Filipino Women Workers in Saudi: Making Offerings for the Here and Now and Hereafter**

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*This paper is about female bodies in the making of new Muslim women. They are the Pinay (Filipina) migrant workers in Saudi Arabia who are finding ways to reclaim their selves through their exercise of womanhood. They live and work in an environment where women, though veiled, still cry for protection beneath the extreme regulation of their bodies; where men can be hunters even while hunted. The paper focuses on women married according to Islamic law, which accords them protection and confinement. As Muslim wives they are privileged, bestowed honour yet also more vulnerable to shame. That they are not in their own country renders their condition more fragile. Thus, although bodies are their own to rule, they have to inevitably bear the brunt of institutional restriction or eventually reap its blessings. Although deployed as docile bodies, they can, the paper shows, still try to be agents of their own emancipation.*

**Keywords:** *Filipina migration, Saudi Arabia, polygamy, female bodies, confinement and veiling, marriage*

## **Introduction**

Filipino workers I met declared Saudi Arabia to be the most restrictive place in the Middle East. Some who worked in Dammam and Al-Khobar near Bahrain, however, experienced much less overt restrictions than their counterparts in Riyadh or Qassim. Nevertheless, it was not just once that I heard Filipino workers, Muslim or not, saying ‘all the forbidden are here’. From this brief comment I make the following claims gathered from my Saudi fieldwork from September 2007 to February 2008: that sexual abstinence and monogamy are difficult to observe because the women need a man-husband to entitle them to a room of their own and for their protection; that one or both parties may be married but polyamorous arrangements can be straightened out by conversion to Islam. By polyamory I refer to multiple simultaneous intimate relationships. Having more than one partner is not so strange, particularly for males, since

many of them come from chaotic conjugal histories, while the women come from troubled marriages back home, particularly when husbands are inadequate providers. Although Islam dictates that wives be fairly and equally treated, women more than men submissively deploy themselves as sacrificial bodies for the hereafter while those of men are for the here and now. The following are mere fragments of their Saudi lives that disclose how Filipino conjugal mononormativities are renegotiated in the context of migration. The women examined here are the counterparts of the men I describe in *Remaking Masculinities* (Pingol:2001), left behind when their wives migrate. These men, whom I called *househusbands*, suffer in the absence of the mother of their children, hence they too bear sacrificial bodies.<sup>1</sup> This time I focus on women, and in particular, the *new Muslim women*. They are women whose bodies are protected and confined by the state, by society and by the very men to whom they have entrusted their lives.

I present two cases: Nana, married to a Balik-Islam (Muslim convert) and Rosario, married to a Palestinian Muslim. Both come from battlegrounds that could have annihilated them, figuratively and literally, had they not run for their lives. Nana trained as combatant in conflict-torn Mindanao while Rosario was a battered wife. Both were traumatized. They resettled themselves in a place where they believed redemption was possible: both entered into a real Islamic marriage that set them apart from other Filipina women of their kind. Nana was a born Muslim while Rosario grew up in a Chinese entrepreneurial milieu and converted to Islam while in Saudi. They claim to have come from traditions that impose a distinct code on women which is not as strictly observed by their fellow co-ethnics. Thus I refer to both as ‘women confined’.

The women I met resemble those in bell hooks’ (1991) novel: with clipped wings they nevertheless manage to bring out their selves in many creative ways. The other group of women whom I met in Saudi Arabia is that of the unprotected and defiled. Their lot, discussed elsewhere, is far more tragic. In this paper I limit myself to two cases of what I call the ‘new Muslim women’. *New* even to their own selves. Not that they are lacking in self-awareness as women. Rather, their deep engagement in the Saudi context renders their prior self-knowledge inadequate. Discontinuity and incoherence is everyone’s experience while in transit. The women I present here, however, managed to become long term residents. They employed the same marital strategies

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<sup>1</sup> Preceding Parreñas’ discussion in *Servants of Globalization* (2003) of gender roles and normativity, my book discusses the masculine normativities assumed by husbands whose wives were migrant labourers. These ranged from an extreme chaste life to destructive habits like alcoholism. Parreñas also cites the emotional distance and strains that members of transnational families go through.

discovered by other migrant workers responding to the predicaments generated by the global demand for feminised labour. While some studies paint the triumph of individual agency in attaining self-intelligibility (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993), the impact of other forces, particularly in states imposing restrictive legal frameworks, cannot be ignored, and more specifically so where moral dilemmas concern intimate relationships. In these, at stake is not only a change in partners but a shift in other fundamental matters such as faith<sup>2</sup>. Nana is a born-Muslim with a more zealous Balik-Islam Filipino husband, while Rosario is a ritual-observing Balik-Islam with a Palestinian husband born into the Muslim world. By his internalised ethical standards, a husband must be looked up to by his wife and be well informed on matters of morals.

This paper tackles the extent to which Muslim regulatory practices impinge on the two women's claims to womanhood as they have known it, and impel them to know it further. The regulatory practices they encounter may not be strictly Islamic, but specific to Saudi Arabia, as filtered through and textured by the particular ways of knowing Islam of Balik-Islam Filipinos, on the one hand, and of men reared in the Arab world, on the other. As *progressing* women, in Butler's term, Nana and Rosario grapple with an identity informed by 'socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility' (Butler 1990, p. 23), in terms of both from their culture of origin and the one encountered in Saudi Arabia. But perhaps only in their strict observance of Muslim regulatory practices will they arrive at continuity and coherence and be 'intelligibly' gendered, as women. Although apparently clear, this construction of gendered identity can be elusive; their representations are vague and multiple (Shildrick 2002; Turner 2008; Weeks 1998). How both women handle this internal tension will be elaborated in the succeeding discussion.

First, their confinement is voluntary and compelled. As mentioned above, they are in contradictory locations, remarried to better men than their previous husbands but constrained by Islamic rules and expectations. Their entry into intimate relationships may have been an individual choice but in the sense that they happen to be in a specific 'gendered geographies of power' (Constable 2009, p.51) this confinement is not their choice. The state and its instrumentalities have pre-identified convenient destinations for them, making them perceive the Middle East as a relatively easy region to enter. And their economic motivation is to maximise whatever resources and opportunities that

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<sup>2</sup> Entry into marriage with locals or other documented migrant workers can be a resource to extend one's stay and assure continued remittances for own families back home. Cultural differences, for example religious orientations, are also surmounted. See *Critical Asian Studies* Vol. 40 No. 4 edited by Nicole Constable.

come their way, to ensure that their stay can extend beyond the period allowed by their work contracts.

That I refer to the two women as “them” is merely a linguistic convenience. Against that, my personal identity and information management was to deploy myself as an OFW (Overseas Foreign Worker) like them. Equipped with this personal identity, how eagerly they asked me where I worked! When did I start or when will my contract end? Aiming to find their authentic selves, I also had to be as real as they were or as close to real, laying out that fragment of my own multiple self that would be most acceptable and credible. For I needed little time to assume the OFW label after immigration ordered me to go to the POEA (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration) and secure an OEC (Overseas Employment Certificate) just like any other Filipino seeking a work visa. This was my first taste of getting turned away by airport immigration officers in my own country, just before boarding my plane to the United Kingdom. All my previous visas were as an academic visitor. Even on my next returns and exits from my Saudi site of research I kept inquiring about my status: should I not be exempt? Did I want to emphasise my difference so as not be stigmatised as belonging to this occupational grouping? And what a nuisance I was to the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh when I insisted that I would not leave the safety of its premises unless I got the visa extension stamped into my passport instead of an authenticated photocopy! The legal officer said: ‘As a professor you have no worry.’ What status symbol can I carry when, like any other woman, I am covered in a black abaya and veil? Even toddlers get lost in a crowd when they mistakenly hold on to someone’s hand, who happens not to be their own mothers. I was told that even husbands could only identify their wives by their bags or shoes since these are their distinguishing body extensions. A husband makes sure to buy these for his wife to facilitate instant identification from a distance. In contrast, without my original passport or an *iqama* (permit), and given the colour of my skin and ethnic markers, who is the *muttawa* (religious police) who would not assume that I was an illegal? Even a person who has the required legal documents but happens to reside among the undocumented will be hauled in during a raid. My experience of having been driven away, ‘ro, ro, ro’ by no less than a *muttawa*, shoving me and a woman companion with his hands although we were meters away from him, but still within the premises of the *masjid*, was a not an amusing incident.

*Filipina* meaning ‘maid,’ has already entered the Oxford dictionary. ‘Modern heroes’ is still a vilifying label, the latest being ‘nation of servants’. Such epithets did not escape the ire of Filipino workers. The ‘nation of servants’ required Chip Tsao’s immediate apology after his column in a Hong Kong-based magazine encountered intense indignation, offending Filipino middle class sensibilities. Responses from readers, however, among them Andrea Soco,

a Filipino academic in Singapore, found this label no surprise since Filipinos themselves are very active participants in the construction of this particular branding. But the label challenged them to reconstruct and thus transcend its negative connotations. Soco makes the observation that the more than 100,000 Filipino domestic workers in Singapore bolster the popular image of the Filipino female who seeks self-actualizing opportunities, engaging in class-based leisure activities such as shopping, hiking and skating, or travelling to nearby countries.<sup>3</sup> Those in Hong Kong, on the other hand, are limited to appropriating public spaces such as in parks, where they establish themselves as transient communities on their days off. In these assemblies, they weave narratives of personal conquests and fulfilled desires in hushed voices, proving how desire -- although blocked by cultural norms -- causes transgressions to happen. In my case, it was my OFW occupational label that gained me the privilege of being privy to some otherwise unsayable revelations.

The women who confided in me were 'normals' in an ironic inversion of the sense of normalcy defined by Goffman (1961, 1963). They came from families where husbands have no regular work, habitually drink with other men, and are frequently gamblers or womanisers. Such sights are familiar and normal. So too is the ever-silent, sacrificing wife, or the nagging, pushy one. The women become the reconstructed wife upon assuming the OFW label. They break the myth that marriage is the solution; disclose that men are the problems along with the state that exports them. Overseas employment encouraged by the state proves that the state demands that its people should protect it, rather than the state protect its people. I stress this point, having gone through the state apparatus and been subjected to its medical rigours in order to be declared fit to work, and having paid the required dues before finally being granted my Overseas Employee Certificate. But wait, there was one more document to be notarised at the street corner. It declares that should something untoward happen to me in my country of destination, my shipping home should be handled by my husband at no expense to the state! He almost wanted withdraw me. Nonetheless, he attached his signature, though with great reluctance.

In this paper I focus on female bodies because the ownership by women of their own bodies is not an obvious or automatic truth. Female bodies, those of caregivers particularly, are mobilized within a service model that assumes them to be free servers to their clients. While they are guided according to specific terms and conditions set out in their work contracts mainly spelled out by their employer, their smooth entry into their client's household "often hinge upon a capacity to seize and hold the initiative in the service relation, (Goffman: 1959

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea Soco's response appeared in the Philippine Daily Inquirer under Overseas Employment, Foreign Affairs and International Relations, Migration, 06 April 2009.

p.22-23), a capacity that will require subtle aggressiveness on the part of the server while handling situations firmly but politely. The women I met work mostly in households, hospitals and beauty parlours. The success and failure stories about them have been widely analysed. But since the abolition of slavery by a Royal Decree in 1964, symbolically affirming the entry of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia into the modern world, servants, particularly ‘willing’ female foreign workers, have assumed an ambivalent status. These women’s bodies are viewed as needing protection, confined in controllable spaces and their movements are strictly monitored. A domestic helper attending classes at the Islamic Centre can only leave earlier than usual only after the desk clerk contacts her employer to confirm that she is really summoned by them and has their approval. Without this verification she cannot leave the premises since the gate is locked from the outside, guarded by the gatekeeper. Women workers in hospitals are provided with shuttle buses on designated days to attend to their necessary transactions with the outside world, mostly the remittance centre, and to shop in malls or for groceries, time permitting.

*Service occupations* can be redefined and ranked to suit an individual or a nation’s needs. In 2008, the Philippine government declared that henceforth *DH* be redesignated *HSW* (Household Service Worker) but the term *DH* persists. Despite labour agreements between sending and host countries, at the level of the workplace the ‘free’ server is not always free. Moreover, worker movement has generated other kinds of transnational movement: the global Filipina labour ethnoscape has now spread its tributaries into a variety of “marriage-scapes” and sex-scapes (Bender et al 2001; Constable 2009). The ‘free’ servers, or female bodies, are honed as workers in their own households, ready to be deployed in other foreign homes. Filipinos go first and foremost to work, to better their lives. Landing on foreign soil gives them social capital. That they rather than their husbands become the providers endows women with leverage in the marital relationship; and that they are English speakers marks them as the preferred choice for employers. As such, they are neither quite victims nor agents of their own destiny, since their contradictory locations of class, gender and ethnicity are played out in precarious circumstances.

There are illegal workers called *takas* who escape from their confinement. They may reclaim legal status again by finding another sponsor and be called *freelancers*. The previous sponsor releases the worker to the next sponsor for a fee which is exacted from the worker. In other words, the worker buys her freedom from one employer in order to tie herself to another. The longer the chain extends, the heavier the fee. It might have started with 2000 Riyal, then 4000, and then 6000 or more. Does the exchange affirm workers’ belief in the good will of society, both the host and the sender? Or does it generate alienation as people are stigmatised in the process of exchange? Such issues are particularly salient for the women I refer to as unprotected and defiled. It point,

however, to the stigmatisation of all migrant workers, particularly *Pinays*. Without proper documents they are unprotected and hence more vulnerable to defilement.

This stigma attached to *Pinays* is countered by those married to Arab men, placing themselves a notch higher than ones marrying other nationals or their own compatriots. Having elevated themselves to a position of honour, they must manage to live with their confinement.<sup>44</sup> Theirs is a modified kind of confinement. Following the Prophet's teachings, men are supposed to protect women. Polygamy is explained and rationalised by an ethic of care: after a battle, destitute widows and orphans are taken by warrior survivors, thus one may have more than one wife. Women's place is in the home while men move far and wide. The outside world is too dangerous for women, deemed too fragile for its harsh environment. Working outside the home, if ever allowed, is limited to occupations where there is not much exposure to men. Hence, in many Muslim societies one measure of a man's worth is his mastery and protection of his women. Concerned over their welfare, women are best confined. Hence, protected and confined refers to Filipinas [Born-Muslims or reverts] who are married to Muslims whom they met as workers in Saudi Arabia. Protection is accorded to them by an authentic Islamic marriage contract. Confinement refers to strict observance of behavioural and moral codes expected of a Muslim wife, relative to their own women compatriots. But whereas Muslim women in Saudi Arabia grow up in a society in which polygamy and confinement to the home are natural and normal, Filipina balik-Islam converts – and even born Muslim Filipinas – do not so easily accept polygamy or restrictions on their movement. In the Philippines they were used to moving outside the home freely, visiting friends, frequenting markets, shopping, working, eating out and travelling independently. Unlike women in Saudi Arabia, they cherish ideals of mononormative marital relations, even if these are most often honoured in the breach.

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<sup>44</sup> ~~Martha Nussbaum (2004, pp 217-218) employs Goffman's 'normal' to refer to the usual with its opposite, the unusual; extending this to the notion of normativity, the normal is the good and proper with its opposite would be the inappropriate, bad or disgraceful; Mary Douglas (1966, p. 122) enumerates four kinds of 'social pollution' among which she lists among Hindus the danger of sexual pollution and the need for strict boundary maintenance since 'women are the gates of entry into the caste' (ibid., p. 125). She notes the 'double standard' applied to men and women in patrilineal system (126). Peter Van Sommers (1988: pp112-113) cites the 'standard theory' of honour in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean where there is social vigilance over 'sexual exclusivity and to punish and avenge sexual misdemeanours. They extensively tackle the demands on women's way of coping with external and internally structured confinements and must need to recharge themselves to maintain their stamina to survive honourably.~~

## **Case 1: Two Women, One Man**

I first met Nana and her husband, Abdulmari, in Riyadh in a beauty parlour run by another Filipina where Nana's two sisters worked. Nana herself owned a beauty parlour catering to a Saudi and Filipina clientele. That afternoon, she and Abdulmari were both off from work. He had to drive her to see her sisters, Lanie and Nini, taking along their eight-month old baby in the absence of its part-time Filipina nanny. Although our first meeting, we had a long conversation, the first of many meetings until finally, we met in the Philippines on Nana's visit to her children there, several months later. Being a Tausug born-Muslim who was once a combatant in conflict-ridden Mindanao, Nana was my guide in the high risk Muslim areas of southern Philippines once she had accomplished her other plans. This was during a much-extended stay at home, away from her job and missing the peak season of her work, when women from the higher and the not-so-high classes come to pamper themselves in her beauty shop.

Forty-year-old Nana, a beautician, excels as a make-up artist, having first worked as a sales lady of cosmetic products in the Philippines. When she found her first DH job unappealing, she left her employers, returned to her agency and was accepted into a beauty parlour needing assistants. Her familiarity with cosmetics was noticed by her employer who sent her for training. Among her other skills are hair styling, manicure, foot massage, and sales. Now in its seventeenth year, her job pays well, to the extent that when her husband was out of work, the money he sent his first wife partly came from Nana. Their three children, all born in Saudi Arabia, could have remained with them, but this hindered Abdulmari's job search so she compromised, acceding to his appeal that "my family do not eat people". With the children scuttled off to Olongapo, her husband's home town in the Philippines, and tucked away under the care of his parents, Abdulmari finally landed a job commensurate with his accountancy degree, fulfilling his ambition of changing his worker status from labourer to professional. Consequently, the couple hoped this would help them obtain visas for their children to rejoin them in Saudi Arabia.

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### ***A visit to the Philippines***

For Nana, the search for her husband's first wife took place during the last leg of her home visit. Having taken her three children from Olongapo, she spent most of her vacation in her Upper Bicutan rented house, in a Manila Muslim resettlement project for the urban poor established in the 1970s. The project, built for cultural minorities during the Marcos years, boasted a grand mosque, overshadowing the more frequented Quaiipo mosque. It was located between the congested housing area where Nana and her sisters rented a unit, and the

standard BLISS housing put up by the then Human Settlements Authority. While BLISS hinted at civic dignity, affirming the pro-minority pronouncements of the then First Lady, Imelda Marcos, on Manila as the *City of Man*, Nana lived on the other side of the mosque, where lots were awarded for homes designed by owners.<sup>5</sup> Here, monstrous two-level structures intersperse with small homes. As we passed through the narrow, crowded streets, Nana pointed to the better designed homes. Her own imagined house would be something like that. Her current household included ten children: hers, aged six, five and four; Lanie's, aged twenty, fifteen and six; Nini's, aged five; and Cara's youngest child who is eight. Her two other children lived elsewhere. The children were mainly tended by Charmie, Nana's only sister in Manila, assisted by Nini's husband when not working. Although not living in this household, Nana also makes sure to be updated occasionally on her eldest sister Bel, who has thirteen children and resides in Mindanao. A recent family crisis occurred when Bel was hospitalised and much needed cash had to be rushed to rescue her.

I found the children ready for anything, moving around together as a group. Although second-generation survivors of absentee mothers, it amazed me how eager they were to meet strangers who entered their place for the first time. Like their parents, they had clearly learnt survival skills very young. Nana's mother had succumbed to a heart ailment at thirty-eight and their lone father could not provide enough for his brood of nine. Nana was barely ten, and she and her other sisters had to learn to cope early on. Of two brothers, one had lost contact, while the youngest, twenty-six, was still looking for a job.

But Nana was in the middle of another struggle when I met her. She was in search of a place in her husband's heart:

I can't say I agree. We hear that when a Muslim husband takes on another wife they say it is to protect the woman. But for me I don't agree, even if it is allowed by Islam; even if they say that there is a reward in the hereafter or that it is also for my sake if I allow my husband to have another wife. No, I can't accept [that], it hurts, even just the thought, your husband taking another woman! Just seeing your husband talking to another woman, you feel your ears are emitting smoke already, how much more when he takes another wife? I came to know of two who became friends, married as Christians, then converted to Islam. Their first wives did not know that the husbands were taking second wives. Later on the first wife came to know and she came crying to me. I reminded her of what she said to me before, that a second wife would be acceptable to her. But when it actually happened she couldn't take it. I see several Muslims here (in Saudi Arabia) who take two wives. I see it is really difficult. We had visitors once in our flat (in Saudi Arabia), three of them sharing one plate (a husband

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<sup>5</sup> Unit occupancy was free in its first five years but when grantees got their lot, titles tax and rent were exacted. As ownership changed hands and so also did the structures.

with two wives). I told myself, I can't take this. Maybe for them [it's okay] but not for me, I can't stand it. But my husband has a first wife, I am a second wife. I accept that. I accept that he goes and visits her (in the Philippines). When he got sick there I even sent them money. But if he still takes another wife, that I don't know if I can still stand it. Sometimes he teases me about his taking another [a third]. I tell him, 'alright, as long as you have become rich and I will make her the housemaid.' I tell him, 'we'll divorce first.' Even if Islam teaches that you will get the highest reward in heaven if you allow your husband to have another [wife], I cannot accept it. I tell him, 'Two of us are enough, if you still want another, divorce me first.'

His first wife did not know...maybe she sensed a change in him when she asked him if he has another wife [in Saudi Arabia]. He said, 'When a mother and child arrives, yes, but when no one arrives then there is no one else.'

### *Seeking the first wife*

Agreeing to be my guide to Mindanao a couple of months later, I also agreed to go and meet Abdulmari's first wife. We were to make this trip after looking in at Nana's Bicutan household, on my way back to my own family in northern Luzon. We started in Manila taking an early morning bus without having breakfast. When we got down in the town leading to the first wife's village it was midday, time for a proper meal. It did not dawn on me yet why Nana ate no lunch, saying the crackers and water she had on the bus were enough. I simply knew that her concern was over her husband's two sons, without a father and perhaps without a mother if what she had heard was true - that the first wife was not around, which would explain why the money sent by her husband was returned. 'I would feel lighter if she can accept that there are two of us,' Nana let out her angst. This trip, of locating the first wife, came from her while I was accompanying her to her in-laws' place in Olongapo to collect her three children and take them to their cousins in Manila. She was effectively supervising three households: in Riyadh, in Manila and in Olongapo, and possibly a fourth, the first wife's, depending on how things went at their meeting.

Abdulmari had eleven and eight-year-old sons by his first wife. It took some time finding a tricycle to take us off the beaten track. Among several competing drivers we chose one who volunteered he was a cousin of the first wife's mother; that this cousin was a widow with a daughter working abroad, whose husband also works abroad; that their children have a school tricycle service. The house was some three kilometres from the *poblacion*. It was high noon, and the road once off from the highway was unpaved, with pot holes filled with gravel to keep it passable during the rainy season. The pace was slow since the driver had to follow the tracks cleared by earlier vehicles.

### *The Meeting: Allah's Will*

The two wives met without the first wife knowing that Nana was the second wife. This was according to Nana's plan, to evade trouble. Her only concern, she told me, was that the sons continue receiving the support they deserved. As to whether he reconciled with his first wife and what this might entail, she hoped the will of Allah would reveal all in due time. To convince the first wife that we meant well, we both gave her our mobile phone numbers, as well as Abdulmari's in Saudi Arabia. She could contact any of us or him, no less. Days later, as was suggested to her, she opened a bank account in Manila, and provided the account number to Nana herself when they met there. Nana succeeded in maintaining the camaraderie; she kept informing me of their relationships' progress. My efforts were also appreciated by the first wife, with text messages thanking me entering my inbox. At first she confused our numbers and only later discovered that she was actually in contact with Nana. More interesting was the response of Abdulmari to these developments. Since the first wife did not know that she was dealing with a second wife, she felt free to tell Nana how the husband responded to her messages: Does she still miss him, does she still love him? Nana did not hide her knowledge of this exchange from the husband. The husband was caught in the middle.

As second wife, Nana had told me on several occasions that she was ready for any decision her husband made: her self-introduction to the first wife might look deceptive, but it was Nana's way of achieving her aim. She believed that one cannot reach a goal if one does not make an effort to find a way to reach it. One may not reach it if the means employed are not according to Allah's will. Her visit to the Philippines was to sort out the visa for her three children and her two sisters, who were in Saudi Arabia without legal papers. She had thought that with the husband's upgraded employment status, he could sponsor dependents. She learned, however, that he would need to secure a statement from a Saudi national vouching that he was a co-worker in the company. His company was run by a Kuwaiti and as far as he knew, there were no Saudi nationals among the workers, who were mostly foreigners. Nana hoped that once she got back to Saudi Arabia she could find someone to help her husband obtain this document through friends who might know some Saudi national. She might have to return without the children again. On the other hand, it might still be a blessing since if she took six months' leave with the children, her visa under her present employer would expire, freeing her to obtain sponsorship from her business partner for the new beauty parlour they planned to open; or she could enter under her husband's *iqama* (permit) if he managed to obtain the required document by himself, without her being there.

She was definitely in limbo. She asked, 'Why this suffering? Is there something we failed to do, [for Allah]?' Despite having located the first wife and two children to be provided with their monthly allowance, 'there is still this suffering'. She ruminated:

Is there something Allah wants to be done? In Islam [it says] ‘surmount those that impede one from these goals.’ Why is he asking his first wife, ‘Do you miss me, do you still love me?’ When I mention this, when we are talking on the phone, it irritates him, why do I still go over this, it is leading to not so...I was just asking to know what I am to him. Why he can’t put things in order, for the children to join us in Saudi again. Maybe Allah is telling us to settle this other matter: to part smoothly, to free his first wife; if he wants to return to her he needs to put everything in order. He is happy when they talk. I like fairness. He says to appease me, ‘the time will come’ [things will be in place]. But I know Allah is showing me signs, showing ways for us to understand how to lighten our lives, if Abdulmari takes his time, Allah gives this suffering. He does not tell me where I am [in his heart]. He says I am too intrusive; maybe so, but isn’t this for the benefit of everyone?”

### ***Suffering***

Alhamdulillah! Whether you like it or not, are able or not able, accept. Sufferings are challenges. I was not a prayerful person when still young. Then, when I prayed, I was about ten years in Saudi already. To pray is to bow three times. In one instance while I bent down, my back suddenly stiffened, I couldn’t go back to my standing position, my legs were tingling, numb! I was in tears, tears that I can’t explain, it drenched my shirt. My employer said ‘*Inti mafi kuwais, inti muhk karban!* (you are bad, you are crazy!) I was bad and Allah was telling me to say sorry, like making a confession.

She recalled how she was attracted to the rebel group in Mindanao, how she was fascinated with guns, big guns, different guns. She did not maim a single enemy, however. This happened again when she and her husband were doing their *nagsai* (circumambulation) around the kabbah at Makkah. On their third round, she was immobilized again, perhaps due to the crowd. She had difficulty breathing, similar to having an asthma attack. She felt paralysed but insisted on completing *nagsai*. Her husband patiently pushed her in a wheelchair. She looked at this as some message from Allah, there must be some wrong that needs to be righted. When they were at the devil’s pillars, she was strong. She asked, ‘Are we living in lies?’ Thus, meeting the first wife was one step to right some wrong done. She felt lighter after this, seeing she had done something for her husband’s two children.

Nana’s case highlights the ambivalence inherent in Islamic polygamy even for born Muslim Filipinos: her painful attempts to manage the emotional sharing dictated by her husband’s first marriage; her evident guilt at becoming the second wife; her determination to test her husband’s singular devotion to her. She manages these moral ambiguities alongside complex labour regulatory regimes and extended family obligations. Allah’s will cuts through her emotional heart-searching, moral dilemmas and suffering, but apparent beneath these is Nana’s desire for a committed, monogamous relationship. The same impulse is apparent in the second case study described here.

## **Case 2: Two Women, One Man**

Fifty year old Rosario occasionally worked at Sanada's beauty parlour. These were usually on days when her Palestinian husband, Karim, was outside the country. This was where I first met her. On the day I made my first visit to their flat she was expecting her husband's return from a visit to his parents in Lebanon. Karim and Rosario were married on January 23, 1995, but she lamented the fact that she could not bear him a child. That the incapacity was hers compounded her misery. Nevertheless her children by previous Filipino partners in Manila, a son, twenty-seven, and a daughter, twenty-three, each received the 200 dollar monthly allowance Karim had promised from the start of her Saudi life as his 'first wife'. Karim too had children from a previous marriage but he was already a divorcee at the time he met Rosario. Thus Rosario considers herself a first wife, since she came to know that a divorced wife is not included in the count of Muslim wives.

The father of her first son was good looking, but she only discovered later that he had other children, all first-born. Disenchantment followed. She became a battered wife; they parted ways. She found a second partner, only to go through a second round of wretchedness. She surmounted her two marital disasters by selling footwear procured at factory price. Realizing, however, how meagre her earnings were, she ventured into overseas work.

In 1994, when Rosario had been working in Saudi Arabia for about seven months as one of fourteen Filipinas in a large Saudi household, Karim entered her life. She had known only some of her co-workers since each was confined in a work area. Rosario was assigned to the second level. She and other workers at that level had taken a group picture with a Pinay worker serving in another household, who accompanied her Palestinian madam, the wife of an Armenian business man. Her employers were close friends of Rosario's employers and Karim also frequented the house since he was commissioned to handle its refurnishing. When the Pinay worker showed him the group picture, he pointed to Rosario and asked about her. Rosario was introduced as an 'Ilocana'. Karim had heard from other Filipinos that if he wanted to marry he 'should choose an Ilocana'. Eventually, when Karim proposed to Rosario, she countered, 'Are you sure? I am an Ilocana with a hole in my palm' - her way of warning him that she was not exactly tight-fisted.

His marriage proposal was made when her contract was about to end. She went home without giving a definite response. In 1995, Karim visited Rosario in the Philippines saying, 'You are the most expensive woman in my life.' They finally married and after Karim obtained a dependent visa for Rosario, she joined him in Saudi Arabia, in 1996. Every time Rosario indicated her desire to look for a job he threatened to send her home, declaring 'I did not marry you to

work.’ Once, when she visited her children in the Philippines, Karim followed to fetch her back. Five days later, she was already travelling with him back to Saudi Arabia. He values her cooking that reflects Rosario’s Chinese descent; indeed, she looks more Chinese, not unusual among Filipinos. Her father was from Hong Kong, married an Ilocana woman he met in Manila. Karim introduced her as ‘Chinese’ to his parents on their first visit to Lebanon. Likewise, Karim’s son, when asked by his Egyptian father-in-law as to the nationality of his step-mother, also said ‘Chinese’, not Filipina.

Their preference for referring to Rosario as Chinese seemed to spring from their discomfort at the not-so-flattering images of *Pinays* that Karim had picked up from his earlier visits to the Philippines. On my first visit to their flat, Karim arrived before I left. He explained to me his views on Filipina women as tending to be polyamorous:<sup>6</sup> ‘In an island I visited in the Philippines, when I met the father of my girlfriend he said, “you can sleep with my daughter.”’ Karim found this disgusting, all the more confusing when the father added that his sister was a doctor, to assuage his fear of impregnating his daughter. This father said, ‘Don’t worry if she’s pregnant, my sister is a doctor, she will remove the baby.’ Referring to his girlfriend, Karim said:

So you know, I used to advise my girlfriend because she is Japayuki. Why work there, like this, like this? Don’t you know that you reach a point, you will become nothing but dirt. Everybody will not touch you like this, like this. Is it true, [that he is] your father? She answered me, yes. Are you sure you are his daughter? And what about your brother? Sometimes his brother used to sit on my lap. I thought, I feel ashamed it’s gonna be like this. ‘No, don’t worry, I’m the one giving them money,’ she said.

Then the sister doktora introduced me to the chief of police in the town. She said, ‘He is the boyfriend of my sister.’ ‘I thought your sister was married?’ said the policeman. ‘Yeah, her husband is a seaman and when he is not here this is her husband.’

Looking back, Karim opines, ‘Poverty has no religion.’ He emphasises this point and he goes on with his list:

Although many [Filipinos] are college graduates, they can’t find a job. They arrive in Saudi and get another wife [who is already] married and has a family there in the Philippines...if you go to Christian people, sorry I have to tell you this, where they are living—in a room like this, they are sharing... [when] I ask, ‘Is your husband coming from the Philippines?’ ‘No, Mr. Karim, my husband is a drunkard.’

Karim counters,

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<sup>6</sup> Bella Ellwood-Clayton’s 2006 article on premarital sex in the Philippines seem to bear out such images; Mc Ilwaine’s study of sex workers in Cebu; and Corazon Raymundo, et al in *Youth Sex and Risk Behaviors* systematically shows how marital unions are preceded by unplanned pregnancies.

‘Maybe your husband is not a womaniser, [you allege this] just to make an excuse to have another one and that one [too] has [a] family.’ So, the end would be broken families. The majority of them are like this...if you have a husband here, maybe you can count ten or fifteen, that’s all. The real husband is this one, but the remaining... ‘Who is your husband?’ ‘He died, and we sent the body to his wife, to his family.’ But then that one, she said, ‘Oh, my husband has another wife and I will have another in the Phil.’

Karim counters,

And their children will be under the bridge of Quiapo or begging on the streets. They will separate at the airport.

Karim remembers another case,

There was this one I met before, her name was Fatima, I don’t know if [she was] Muslim or not, whatever she was. One time, while washing the dishes I went inside the bathroom, she was nude. I told her, ‘Crazy, why you don’t lock the door?’ ‘Never mind, Mr. Karim,’ she answered. So, she is in love with another one, he is very handsome, but he has another wife, they deported that one. Then, after three to four months, they get her, the police raided an area in Makarot. They got her, she was sleeping with someone else, his name was Jun and she was *buntis* (pregnant), and she told them she was [a] Christian. So, of course, Christian, they put the woman alone and the man alone. So, they deported the man and she doesn’t know his family; from where is the man (where he comes from). What do you think she will tell her parents: ‘I’m in love to someone like this?’ [Instead] she will tell [them], ‘I am working with an Arabo and the husband raped me, what shall I do?’

Listening to his many observations about women from the Philippines, I asked Karim what made him choose Rosario despite having met others he could hardly respect. ‘She can never be like that. Rosario, she cannot be a flirt even if I stay away from her for ten years. I never ever think like this, that she would do something bad...I know that the Chinese have completely different custom[s]. For Rosario, I feel proud that I have a wife like her even if I marry again, there is another reason [for that]; it doesn’t mean that I don’t love her.’

### ***Nursing her hurt***

‘Honey from Ethopia, have a taste.’ Without waiting for Rosario, Karim himself walked to their kitchen, came out with a small container, a recycled jam bottle, plus a spoon to convince me that this honey is unadulterated, really authentic. ‘I know the villagers who collected it.’ This was supposed to be his warm gesture of hospitality to me as soon as he had unpacked all the stuff he brought home. I sensed, though, that Rosario cringed. He came from Ethiopia, not Lebanon, as

she had told me. So it came to pass that I was already hearing this portion of her life before she was ready to open it up to me.

There were other women in Karim's life. Knowing about them became easier for her after her determined efforts to learn reading and writing Arabic. This skill gave her access to his mobile phone. But about the Ethiopian woman with whom he sired a son, she only came to know recently.

I told him once, 'I can accept another wife but what I cannot accept is how you did it. You did it behind my back. I don't know how you can sleep. I don't know how you can both sleep after doing this to me.' He could not respond to that. But he said, 'if you don't want this life, I can release you.' But I am not prepared financially. Had I known earlier, I would not have built the house. Imagine I have that house done for 2.7 million pesos, a house of only hollow blocks? Had I known, I would not have done a house that big. I was preparing for his retirement: on the ground floor there will be shops; one unit is 35 square meters...

Rosario found some consolation from Karim's mother. She told her that Karim's son by the second wife is also her son. She also had the sympathy of two of Karim's close associates. From what they heard from Karim, Karim cannot live without her. And Karim himself always made extra efforts to bring his new son and Rosario into a mother-son bond, true to Muslim ways. Despite all these, Rosario felt hurt over the fact that she was not told about the second wife when it would have been but fair to have been told from the very start.

Although she felt useful mothering their son every time Karim brought him to their flat, she felt that she was treated unfairly and unequally. She observed that the second wife got a greater share. She made another long visit to her own children in the Philippines. Karim was slighted by her not calling during her stopover at Damman; he called her again when he was in a restaurant ordering his takeaway lunch. Rosario comforted herself with the thought that perhaps he missed her good cooking. From her end, making calls was expensive, thus she rarely called. Karim promised that he would give her more time when she returned; Rosario retorted, 'While I am there, he does not do that.'

### **Progressing towards intelligibility**

For the newly arrived women migrant workers in Saudi or in any country destination, anonymity can be a phase of honing a self that did not have much chance to be played out in their previous local moral orders. In KSA, although known as very restrictive to women, punitive measures that apply to those venturing into polyamorous relationships can be evaded by conversion into the Islamic fold which allows polygamy. No matter how much this is denied as motivation of conversion by dedicated *Balik-Islam* I met, Karim's encounters discussed above bear it out to be so. Moreover, the diasporic moral sphere

confronts migrant workers to refashion their multiple, fragmented and incoherent self and reorient it towards some level of coherence. Firstly, their meeting a compatriot who asks about their lives forces them to select from their life stories those repertoires that make them look credible and creditable. This inquiry about how they are surviving in a strange land turns into a self-examination on who they are and how they are becoming. Secondly, they resituate themselves morally: do they assume accountability or do they want relief from moral responsibility? Circulating among other workers sheds some measure of intelligibility to these self-presentations. Thirdly, interviews on intimate relationships somehow bring out tentatively a coherent self that rests on those memories of the number of repertoires played out in their daily lives. The consequences of making a new self are so gradual they remain unnoticed; turning points such as termination of employment before one's contract ends, or physical afflictions, or other family misfortunes back home jolt them into inevitable self-confrontations. Hence, belonging to a community where these things must be taken in stride, having a friend or invented family comes in handy.

In the two cases presented, the self is situated in several playing fields where pragmatic considerations, decision for 'family togetherness, and fostering an Islamic moral order compete. Shouldn't there be only one wife since the couple's financial capability is limited and further drained by assistance to the extended family? Can two wives/families be accommodated in one place or should one be divorced and still sustain family togetherness with the chosen set? Whichever of the two repertoires, is it Allah's will, hence is such an arrangement still in keeping with the Islamic moral order?

Nana and Rosario are burdened by their uncertainty in positioning themselves in the hearts of their own husbands, although their being the recognised wife is both intimately and publicly conveyed. There are other women I met who are more privileged. One who struggles with her husband and his other family but has never given up her entrepreneurial role, and has established herself as a successful businesswoman as well as a religious teacher. Her household is always served by a DH, an Indonesian, preferably, rather than her own compatriot. But for the less privileged women I met, their own embodied selves were their own burdens. In a host country that tends to have a low regard of them, if not sweepingly marking them as loose women, they grabbed every fragile thread of security that came their way. For them the relationships were brief and transitory but these could make or unmake them, the imprints remain. They are the other *Pinays*. Nana and Rosario are not like them, but they also carry the stigma. Goffman notes how individuals with discrepancies between their actual identity and virtual one manage their information strategically to avert attention to that which might discredit them. They are careful about what 'to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to

let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where' (1963, p.57)

Although more privileged than their women compatriots, Nana and Rosario are also burdened. Financially better provided for, they have the leisure to reflect on themselves, to get to grips with their very own lost selves. Nana confidently declares she can manage to live as a divorced or second wife, whichever her husband decides, but also struggles for her rights of selfhood: a woman with children, where should they all be if not where she can earn money? Rosario, on the other hand, has put aside her entrepreneurial life to allow for her wifely duties, to reign over other matters. No matter how low and meagre their daily sales in their own *sari-sari store* in the intermittently on-construction house in the Philippines, her children religiously observe her *no-cigarettes-no-liquor here* policy, emphasising to their daily customers that they only sell things that keep body and mind healthy.

Her protest against her own 'bodily invalidity' (she cannot bear a child for Karim) persists on her lengthy visits to her own children in the Philippines; as well as in keeping to her best form in order to mother her husband's child by his second wife, despite the hurt she bears.

Although protected, Nana and Rosario are working through their dissatisfaction as wives within their Islamic marriages, where husbands are not what they idealised them to be. They are bodies supposedly both 'instrumental' and 'expressive'. They belong to the group of women with privileged legal status, protected but confined. Confined, because they insist on a code of conduct informed by their in-group, the Islamic community, in Nana's case, or privileging her Chineseness, in Rosario's; their platform and politics concern how to treat others (the other wives), to enable them to form a more realistic perspective on themselves as wives, with honour and dignity. Nana went to the trouble of searching for the first wife, even pledging financial support, and evaded being castigated when they were face to face, keeping hidden her real identity. After all, she is the current wife. This, however, does not make her complacent. Taught the Islamic moral code, according to which fairness and equality must be upheld, the rights and privileges she enjoys must also be bestowed on the other. Honour does not end here. She expects that both she and her husband be able to discern Allah's will. And she will only be assured that Allah's will has been responded to when finally her dream of a reunited, living-together family is achieved. What to aim for? With whom will the husband be living together or not living together, or should they all be united? This is something to resolve from Nana's perspective, to explain their being apart from their children while they used to be together in past years.

Similarly, Rosario tests her ground by detaching herself from the battleground. She spends months on home visits in the Philippines. She returns

after persistent calls from her husband. But when she has complied and is beside him, she continues doubting the stability of her position.

Nana and Rosario, although publicly recognized as legal wives, play out their difference from other women: they expect their men to be true to them. Although aware of Muslim culture where more than one wife is accepted, this is a custom in decline even among Arab Muslims in Saudi.<sup>7</sup> They rebel against this male privilege. Nana asserts that she does not mind if both of them stay as wives as long as she comes to know about it; or if their husband decides on one of them only, both should know. If the first wife is the chosen one, she is confident she can stand by herself; if she is chosen then the first wife will finally be freed to enable her to honourably enter into another relationship.

In contrast, Rosario's confinement is in her vision of retiring with her husband to the dream house still to be finished. This seems to be receding further from reality; a second child by the second wife is due soon. She also cannot imagine that a child be separated from its biological mother. Although she has developed some attachment to the child, a cognitive recognition of the other woman as an equal is still something she is working out.

## **Conclusion**

Nana and Rosario are following the moral careers of new Muslim women. Their steely bodies confront their sufferings, travelling to and fro from children to husband and back. Yet this is not all. More confounding are the everyday hurts and worries, imagined or real, which are outside their range of experience, their constraints being both external and internal. Nana is a Tausug woman. In the Southern Philippines Tausug women are far from docile and compliant wives. Hence, Nana needs to learn to be more so, having been transported outside her geographical boundaries and having a Balik-Islam husband who has zealously embraced Islam and who is ever-careful not to be discredited by his new in-group. By sustaining his social identity he could also earn security in his job and an extended stay in Saudi. Wherever they are and wherever they came from, to protect marital exclusivity is more a woman's concern; more than one wife is a man's honour while a woman's bodily invalidity is her shame. In her moral career Nana is more purposive and creative. Although born Muslim, Nana is vigilant in her attempt to get an assurance of exclusivity. Hence, she prays for husband's finding the path towards deciding on what to follow: will he divorce his first wife or reconcile with her? In case he follows

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<sup>7</sup> In a conversation with a son of one Filipina married to another Palestinian, when asked how many of his own friends have mothers who may be second or third wife, he said 'no one', their fathers only support one family.

this latter path, Nana is confident she can raise their children by herself by her optimism that she is always able to get a job as a beautician in Riyadh. Rosario, on the other hand is timid. She finds refuge with her own children in the Philippines. But for both, their position in relation to their spouses is also tentative. Having come from quite wobbly social situations in their previous worlds they remain steadfast combatants in a different war zone: in marital relationships where conflict over *another woman* is supposed to be out of the question. For this is something that any Muslim woman should have been raised to live with in harmony, not in conflict. Although being Muslim women, however, such an identity is something they struggle for. They struggle for their Muslim wife identity yet they resist polygamy.

Carving themselves as the new Muslim woman entails not only working within the boundaries of common practices set by the state or their own socialisation. Reclaiming their lost selves, the women they dream to be are continuously seeking their voices, enabling them to declare that their bodies are their own. Nana's sense of selfhood is in protecting sexual exclusivity since in her imagined wife status with Abdulmari, being a second wife ranks second in her list of preferred positions. First and foremost, that they continue the living-together arrangement or they divorce; or that she be the second wife is only her second preference. Honour, for her, is the active pursuit of the will of Allah. Doing the will of Allah would be brought about by her arrival at an enabling position, gauged by the inflow of her desired life goals. Goals that she finds great difficulty in attaining are signs that there are still other deeds that need to be done. She met the first wife head-on yet ever careful, making no missteps. She believes that the events she desires happen by Allah's will. If they do not happen then it is not Allah's will. Thus, she must find another means to succeed in what she desires.

For Rosario her project for the right to selfhood seems more farfetched. Rosario is a bodily offering to her husband (*I married you not to work*), but is hampered by a bodily invalidity. She dreams of being the provider for her own children since she was socialised from childhood under her father's bakery that expanded briskly, but observance of her Palestinian husband's restrictions also limits her merchandising. This deep-seated inadequacy as a woman makes her position, although first wife, more untenable. Her Palestinian husband offered her release once she was too insistent on her rights. These are their *jihad*. Thus, for Rosario, what else is more honourable than to suffer in silence; continue as an obedient wife, abiding by her husband's rules, repeatedly demonstrating that she is not like the loose women he had come to know? Agreeing to be released throws her back to a greater vulnerability, to be subject to the whims of fate, and stigmatised as another failed woman.

In this sense, the conquest of the self, to rise above the ordinary woman, is the women's yoke. Rosario shrugs off her self-pity while Nana takes on every

opportunity, to the point of infuriating her husband. Rosario's self-pity is oppressive while Nana's seizing on opportunities is emancipatory.

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