Filipina Modern: “Bad” Filipino Women in Japan

Nobue Suzuki

Yes, I asked my aunt [in Japan] to bring me there. My mother [also in Japan] told me that it was fun to work at a bar. I kept saying, “I wanna go! wanna go! wanna go!” Well, the thing is, Filipinas going to Japan all seem to come back beautiful. . . . Their skin has grown light. I also wanted to look like that, right? I wondered how they became so beautiful? Well, [I figured that] I should go after all and I’ll become pretty too.

Julie, in her early twenties in the early 1990s, thought going to Japan offered a sure way to acquire the kind of modern appearance that many Filipinas her age desired.¹ Faced with financial difficulty, she also decided to go to Japan to earn money to enable her younger sisters to continue their schooling. She convinced herself by saying, “Find some means to raise money. School, school, school. Money, money, money! I’m the eldest and I must be strong!” In the end, Julie went to Japan, got a job as a bar hostess, worked hard, and saved. But she did not give all the money to her family. She gave about 20 percent to her parents and kept 80 percent for herself. After marrying Masaki, a Japanese public employee, in 1995, she began investing in property in the Philippines. As a sign of her middle-class life, human value, and security, she now owns a fancy 4.8 million-peso ($12,000 @ $1 = PhP25) condominium near the foreign embassies, overlooking Manila Bay. For Julie, working and marrying in Japan enabled the realization of her multiple goals of being simultaneously filial and modern.

Asian women’s migrations to the West and intimate associations with Western men have often been considered ways they liberate themselves from the oppressive “traditions” of their Asian homelands. On the other hand, tales about Filipino women (Filipinas) such as Julie in liaisons with Japanese men are not so liberating: popular allegories commonly depict them as desiring not so much affective relationships but material gain. To achieve this goal, they are thought to take up jobs in the “sex industry” in Japan and marry Japanese men through meetings at nightclubs or matrimonial agencies. Filipinas like Julie who work at bars are thus
suspected of using sex to achieve their unsavory ends. By crossing the prescribed borders of gender, class, and nation, they are seen as sexual and moral transgressors who are contrasted to the ideologically valorized wife-mother of the home within the national boundary of the Philippines and Japan. This assumed transgression from women’s proper place and financial power has made these Filipinas “bad girls” in both countries. \(^2\) Simultaneously, activists and academics portray Filipina immigrants as victims of gendered, classed, and nationalized North–South power disparities where “patriarchal” men of “rich” Japan dominate women of the “poor” Philippines. Filipinas in Japan have been seen as yet to achieve the modern life of the First World. Some Western feminists would conversely view these Filipinas “bad” because they ironically reinforce the desirability and power of the modern state and its men, instead of challenging them. \(^3\)

The majority of such work on border-crossing women, however, disregards the multifaceted realities of their lives, which are continuously created under changing social and historical conditions. In particular, they fail to embrace the women’s subjective views of migration abroad and work or marriage with foreigners. To assume the essential features of Filipinas’ migration to Japan renders these women impersonal, faceless objects of (non) study, an objectification that prevents an understanding and appreciation of the women as multidimensional historical subjects of their own lives. \(^4\) While various forms of surveillance do subject women, Filipinas themselves generate new meanings and reorganize their affective and material relationships in their lives.

Drawing on the data collected through interviews and participatory observations of the lives of Filipina wives in the Tokyo area in the 1990s, this chapter problematizes these academic and popular discussions by inquiring into some of the ways in which Filipinas attempt to attain modern identities in the course of their migrations and marriages to Japanese men. In the burgeoning literature, modernity is understood not as capitalist rationality and development or individual interests as defined and led by the West since today such capitalist modes of social organization are found globally. Modernity in this chapter instead refers to people’s imaginations and attitudes about contemporary global realities and achieving self-realization. \(^5\) Thus, while Westerners and Japanese make people of the “poor, traditional South” a reference point to lionize their own ethnocentric imaginaries of progressive difference, the Filipinas described here too make prolific attempts to attain their own versions of modern dispositions and lifestyles by reworking a range of discursive and lived differences in their everyday lives situated in a global terrain.

Filipinas’ modernity in their daily lives with Japanese husbands is better captured in the spaces uniquely created between Japan and the Philippines in their differential historical relations to the West, notably the United States. Filipinos have been strongly influenced by the colonization by Spain (1565–1898) and the United States (1901–1946) and continuing American capitalist and cultural presences in the Philippines. Despite the criticism that Filipinos have been suffering from a “colonial mentality,” recent scholarship argues that Filipinos’ gestures and language mimicking America—through for example, performing American pop culture and speaking English—are ways to bring its symbolic power into their