

A QUEST OF SELF, OPPORTUNITIES, AND BELONGING

Sonia A. Syafitri

A Review of *Pinay on the Prairies: Filipino Women and Transnational Identities*

By Glenda Tibe Bonifacio

(Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 320 pages.

Pinay on the Prairies: Filipino Women and Transnational Identities by gender and migration scholar Glenda Tibe Bonifacio offers an intimate, detailed picture of the lives and identities of the Filipino migrant women in the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan; told using a feminist approach uniquely attributed to the Filipino women, or what Bonifacio calls “Pinayism.” In her book, Bonifacio attempts to shatter the stereotypical and racialized image of Filipino migrant women, presenting these women to be more than just “nannies” or “domestic workers,” but as individuals with their own complexities and uniqueness. Bonifacio also attempts to fill the gap in academic writing on Filipino migrant women—especially those being told using a feminist approach—in the discourses of migration and labor. As of today, over 11 million Filipinos, or about 11 percent of the total population, have migrated outside the Philippines, creating a Filipino diaspora all over the world since the 1970s.¹ Academic publications on the Filipino diaspora in various discourses are widely available, but most focus on the diaspora within the United States and the Philippines’ postcolonial relationship with the United States. Writings on the Filipino diaspora in Canada are also available but are still relatively small, as they typically only focus on the three most popular destinations of the Filipino migrant: the “MTV” metro areas of Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.

Despite the fact that Canada has yet to ratify the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, it is still one of the top destinations for registered Overseas Filipino Workers, largely attracting Filipino women looking for employment as live-in caregivers or nurses.² Indeed, in Canada, the population of Filipino permanent residents reached 36,578 in 2010.³ *Pinay on the Prairies* holistically captures all aspects pertaining to the migration experiences of Filipino women in the Canadian prairies with a storytelling platform that mimics the journey itself. The book begins with the push factors back in the Philippines that ignite the emigration process before transitioning to the pull factors that motivate women to migrate, detailing the opportunities available and how they measure up to the initial expectations of the immigrant Filipino women. The book then continues by exploring the initial arrival and adjustment process, where Bonifacio elaborates on


the many ways in which Filipino women negotiate their identities and priorities as individuals wanting to be accepted by the host community while maintaining ties to their roots in the Philippines. The book concludes by elaborating on how the migration journey has altered the lives of the women, their families, and their surrounding communities.

I applaud Bonifacio's effort in utilizing the "Pinayism" approach, which allows her to effectively highlight feminist identity and gender in initiating, constructing, and shaping the migration journey throughout the book. It allows these women to tell a story with their own unique identities, with assumed roles and duties influenced by their gender. Gender plays a role in idealizing select feminized professions appropriate for migration, such as caretaker or nurse, and as a social construction, gender is also a powerful determinant of the decision to migrate; most Filipino women admitted they emigrated in order to provide a better living for their families, which reflects the maternal ideal found in a collectivist society like that of the Filipino diaspora. The use of "Pinayism" to define a feminist identity and perspective that uniquely belong to the Filipino women is one example of a branch that is reluctant to follow the hegemonic Western, white, middle-class perspective that currently dominates feminist discourse, simply because such a viewpoint is not the feminism that resonates with non-white and non-Western women. The layered, intricate process of how these migrant women negotiate their identities to integrate with their host communities, while also trying to maintain a meaningful bond with those in the Philippines, is illuminated throughout the book. One example is the unique viewpoint of Filipino women in leadership. While the Philippines has elected female presidents, patriarchy still very much influences how Filipinos view leadership, demonstrated by the number of men elected as leaders of Filipino communities and public offices in Canada.⁴ Interestingly, many Filipino women consciously choose to rally their support behind male candidates instead of competing against them. To a traditional Western feminist perspective this may be unusual, as this still places the women as "followers," but to the Filipino women, these men are worthy of their political support because their leadership benefits the society as a whole.

Bonifacio successfully tells the story of Filipino immigrants with a "Pinayism" approach. However, there is room for improvement. Throughout her book, Bonifacio explicates the challenge the Filipino women faced in the Canadian prairie regions, including discrimination based on their "racialized profile"—the racial identity that is ascribed to Filipinos in Canada. While race certainly plays a role in constructing and projecting identities of migrant Filipino women, the book does not provide sufficient information on what exactly the term "racialized" means and how it came about in the communities of the three provinces explored and Canada

as a whole. Not all readers will have the same level of understanding of race and racism, and while feminism and gender are the storytelling platform of this book, additional elaboration on race would enrich the migrant women's stories. The lucid tone of the book is appreciated and maintained even when Bonifacio digresses to provide evidence of various experiences of the Filipino women with discrimination along their journeys—not only in Canada but also in the Philippines.

Nevertheless, empirical elaboration on how the Filipino society as a whole perceived migrant women would solidify Bonifacio's claims concerning their racial identities. The racialization of Filipino women would also merit juxtaposition with racial identities experienced by fellow migrant women of other nationalities. Empirical evidence on the contribution of migrant Filipino women to the Canadian economy is also missing, which is unfortunate, as this evidence would add more weight to the significance and power that migrant Filipino women possess.

Despite these critiques, *Pinay on the Prairies* has successfully provided an informative and insightful look into the unique experiences of Filipino migrant women in rural Canada that is currently missing from the broader migration discourse. With migration being a journey so personal that its stories could only be told through a first-person narrative, the quest of Filipino women in pursuit of better livelihoods is nothing short of honorable. 

NOTES

¹ Glenda Tibe Bonifacio, *Pinay on the Prairies: Filipino Women and Transnational Identities* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 239.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.