

Marxist-Feminist Mindsets on Women and Migration

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Abstract. The study of women goes beyond gender roles, exposing the intricate societal structure and power struggle by slowly tracing how women have fought against oppression and for an equal place in society. If studied from this epistemic standpoint, it has the potential to advance discourses for equal opportunity and empowerment for women. The increasing number of female migrants raises the question of whether women's migration is an act of empowerment or a form of oppression. Not only women's narratives of their struggles are detailed by statistics but also in literature. This research examines women's role in migration using the novel *The Mango Bride*, authored by Marivi Soliven in 2013. Using a Marxist-Feminist analysis as well as various theories on the sexual division of labor, class differences, and the commodification of women, this study investigates migration and woman representation in tracing the formation of a feminist mindset. It was found that three main mindsets shaped how women view other women or themselves in the context of migration, affecting their decision: 1) Migration is evidence of the sexual division of labor; 2) The struggles of female migrants vary from class to class; and 3) Migration can be used by the patriarchy and capitalism to commodify women. Ultimately, the mindset that aside from being an opportunity, migration can be viewed as a form of women's oppression.

Keywords. Marxism, feminism, women migration.

The intersectionality of women's studies expands toward understanding other societal issues, making it a favored research topic. Women's studies are frequently driven by this question: "Why are women not included?" "Where are the women?" (Rothenberg, 2018). However, studying the plights of women is not solely about women and their rights. Looking for women's inclusion or place in society focuses on exploring the complexities of how society works, specifically in understanding issues such as racism, social discrimination, and oppression in general. When more women are given opportunities to explore and play an active role in society, interest in studies concerning them increases.

Women are now more visible, and their influence has reached beyond the confines of family and household and into politics, the media, academia, and economics. However, recognizing their growing presence is not enough; understanding their roles as movers in a rapidly modernizing and globalizing world is more than essential. Although not a new phenomenon, globalization has increased rapidly in recent years. Several factors contributing to this growth are the spreading of people and ideas, technology, institutions, and policies (Wolf, 2014). It means that globalization consists of economic activity and extends to political, cultural, environmental, and security issues. As the world globalizes, mobility increases. Such movements show an increased interconnectedness and interdependence of peoples and countries. It arguably expands the global economy.

These migrants are influenced by several types of push and pull factors, such as environmental, political, economic, and cultural reasons. Push factors are negative aspects of the sending country, while pull factors are positive aspects of the receiving country. In moving, migrants must not only find a lack of benefits at home (push factors) but also expect a surplus of benefits abroad (pull factors); otherwise, the move would not be worthwhile.

Migration affects both the area of origin and the area of destination, either positively or negatively. For the source country, migration can help alleviate underemployment, and remittances could help the economy.

However, the country could suffer from losing a valuable young labor force and causing a brain drain. On the other hand, the destination country benefits by having immigrants take the less desirable jobs and gain skilled labor at a reduced cost. At the same time, these countries may experience overdependence on migrant labor and increased pressure on resources.

Aside from affecting the country socially, economically, and politically, migration also affects the family. The family is the primary economic unit, and family members depend on one another for basic sustenance. Men, being the producers in the family, used to be the ones who migrated to support their families. Women, on the other hand, were typically left at home to care for the family and wait for their husbands' earnings, or, as other sociologists put it, to consummate it. However, as global mobility flourished, the work of women did not only remain in their homes. When the nature of work in demand abroad needed more women than men, women became co-producers with their husbands. The seventeenth-century perception of women as merely consumers of what men produced has changed (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2009).

Gender as a social construction that organizes relations between males and females can greatly differentiate the causes, processes, and impacts of migration between the sexes. Gender roles, inequalities, and relations affect who migrates, why, and how, and migration also has significant implications for women migrant workers themselves.

As women constitute approximately half of all migrants, migration can provide them with opportunities to improve their lives and that of their families, offer avenues for greater autonomy and empowerment, and help them escape from social and economic confines. Unfortunately, it exposes them to different vulnerabilities, discrimination, and risks (Sijapati & Nair, 2014). These different facets of the lives of female migrants are greatly explored in migrant literature. Some well-known female writers who shared autobiographical accounts of their own experiences include Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston from Asia and Latina writers like Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez.

The Philippines, a country with the greatest number of female migrants abroad, has become increasingly gendered. There is, however, a dearth of reports about the experiences of Filipinos, women and even gays, in diaspora (Wright & Villaflor, 2019). As working abroad has blossomed into a more profitable source of income, women in the Philippines have taken on the role of being the breadwinners of the family. This new role can be perceived as empowerment, giving women a chance to work outside the confines of the household. However, the concept of empowerment is debatable since most women still perform stereotypical domestic chores. This kind of work questions the opportunity for equality given to women in migration since the "domestic" is seen in history as a distinctively female realm and is valued less (Ray, 2000). This mindset or collective dogma about women's automatic relationship with domesticity paves the way for them to be subordinated and marginalized. This mindset affects women's views of themselves and other women, their standing in society, and their decision-making since it limits them to equating themselves with domestic roles rather than exploring other opportunities. It triggers the question of whether women's migration to other countries to work is empowerment or another form of oppression.

Answering this question requires an identification of the root cause of female oppression. Marxist-feminism is a theory suggesting that women's oppression is a result of the rule of the patriarchy and capitalists. The oppression of women has been a key question for Marxism. After all, women constitute half of humanity and have faced discrimination and degradation in many areas. The oppression of women in developing countries has reached abominable levels. It is accompanied by child prostitution, bonded labor, and slavery. It is capitalism in the raw. Control (of the capitalist system) is maintained by denying women access to necessary economically productive resources and restricting women's sexuality (German, 2006).

Therefore, studying the role of women in Philippine migration from a Marxist-Feminist perspective tries to explore the causes and implications of women's migration toward society. More importantly, it presents how women value themselves amid being the forerunners of the migration culture in the country. As women assume new roles in the family and society, their awareness of these issues arising out of the felt abuses that women testify to in consciousness-raising groups and the perceived oppression of women will constitute the formation of a feminist mindset. This feminist mindset will shed light on the connection between women's migration and society.

Women's studies are an interdisciplinary academic field devoted to women, feminism, gender, and politics. Silvey (2004) studied feminist migration literature in geography, bringing several critical social theoretical themes to the forefront of migration studies. Another way of studying women is through literature. The representation of women in literature could help develop an understanding of who they are amidst the stereotyping

of a society led by the dominant male (Jocson, 2020). One recent book that discusses women’s oppression, particularly the lives of female migrants, is *The Mango Bride* (2013) by Marivi Soliven. Therefore, by analyzing the novel using the Marxist feminist approach, the researchers sought to describe how the new wave of migration affects their mindset toward being part of the class struggle.

More specifically, this paper sought to answer the following questions: How were female migrants represented in the novel? What are the struggles of female migrants as depicted in the novel? Moreover, how did the struggles of female migrants contribute to the formation of a feminist mindset? The answers to these questions may trigger a more critical look at existing knowledge, practice, or beliefs on women’s empowerment and whether women are already given equal opportunities, setting them free from oppression.

Underpinning Theories

To situate the theoretical debates about women, class, and work, Marxism and feminism must intersect. The relation of women as a social group to the analysis of economic class has spurred debates and studies within Marxist and feminist circles as to whether women’s movements challenging male dominion can assume a common set of interests for the left’s struggle to overthrow capitalism. Marxism and feminism are both theories of power and its distribution (Mackinnon, 1982). As a result, accounts of how social arrangements lead to pattern disparity have become an interesting point of inquiry. Marxism defines one’s conception of a lack of power per se as being deprived of one’s work, while feminism is the deprivation of one’s sexuality. However, Marxism and feminism exist to argue, respectively, that the relations in which many individuals work for only a few gains and in which one gender is dominant and the other is submissive are the prime issues in society.

As confronted on equal terms, these two theories pose criticisms of each other. Marxists have argued that to analyze society in terms of sex ignores class divisions among women, dividing the proletariat. Feminists, on the other hand, have claimed that Marxist economic theory is often blind to gender issues. According to Hartmann (1979), the relationship between Marxism and capitalism has been unequal. However, she suggested that feminist socialists “organize a practice that addresses both the struggle against patriarchy and the struggle against capitalism” (Hartmann, 1979). Therefore, despite some contradictions in the individual theories, using Marxist feminism as a unified approach could eventually achieve both theories’ end goals. In trying to view issues from a Marxist and feminist perspective, women’s oppression is rooted in the class system. True equality cannot be achieved under capitalism (Barrett, 1980).

The researchers see Marxist-Feminist theory as a fitting approach to analyze the theme of migration in the novel. Migration as an economic aspect can be analyzed from a gender perspective to contextualize how capitalists and patriarchal society contribute to the oppression of women. The researchers applied Marxist-Feminist analysis to the issues of migration presented in the novel. Three ideas from specific Marxist feminists were applied in this study: Heidi Hartmann’s view on patriarchy and capitalism, Michele Barrett’s work on the oppression of women, and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa’s contesting arguments on women as a commodity. The theme of migration will be highlighted to better understand the feminist mindset.

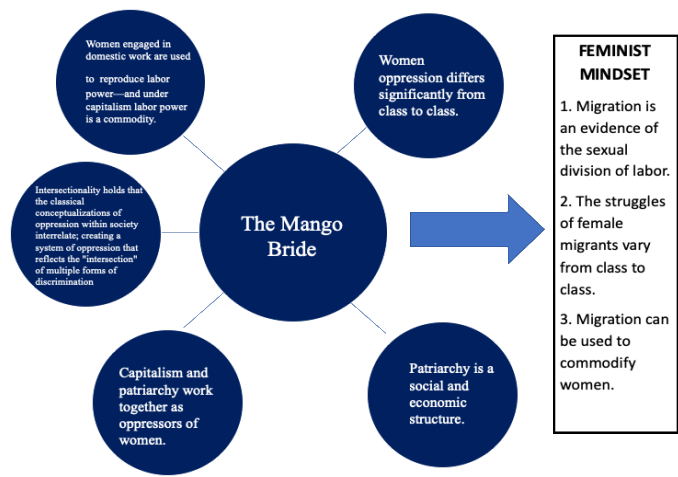


Figure 1. Theoretical Paradigm Applied in *The Mango Bride*

Representation of Female Migrants

The characters in the novel, Amparo and Beverly, represent women migrants as oppressed and struggling women. Before they left the country, Beverly and Amparo were victims of oppressive situations mainly rooted in gender bias. Despite the difference in social class, migration became an avenue for the two women to change their lives. Although, at first, they viewed migration differently—Beverly as an opportunity to have a better life and Amparo as a punishment for her disgraceful mistake—their migration to America did not become a way for them to escape their oppression as women.

Female migrants face different struggles abroad, and although they all come from the same gender class, migrants' social classes affect their experiences abroad. For instance, Beverly strives for survival while Amparo seeks freedom and liberation from her mother's high standard of living. The difference between the elite and the working class is already evident in their lifestyles; however, in migration, it is further proved that even in a foreign land where everyone is said to start anew, women from the bourgeoisie still get a head start. Before a woman thinks of seeking freedom and a better life, she must first survive a day with a decent job that will sustain the food supply on the table. Bourgeois women are spared the financial and physical struggles of proletariat women, making them focus more on the emotional, psychological, and abstract struggles. At the same time, the former has to deal with physical, emotional, and psychological oppression.

The Struggle of Female Migrants

Despite the hardships of living in a foreign land, more women migrate because of the promise of a better life. However, the opportunities offered to them are still limited and worse, including human trafficking, pornography, and, as seen in the novel, marriage for convenience. Applying the concepts of Marxist feminism in the analysis of the different struggles of women in migration has opened a perspective that migration can be an avenue for first-world countries to persuade women (particularly from third-world countries) to emigrate and be exploited.

The description at the back of the book reads: "Two women, two cultures, and the fight to find a new life in America, despite the secrets of the past." In real life, women are forging a new life abroad to bury the secrets of the past. It could be interpreted as women trying to escape the oppression they are experiencing. Women, who often migrated as OFWs, took on the breadwinner role, a typical role attributed to men. As women getting paid at work is seen as empowerment, especially when it comes to financial decisions. However, as observed, the influx of female migrants and the supposed move towards gender equality in the work field are not all pro-women.

The increase of women migrants can be a façade of the capitalist and patriarchal society that aims to show the world that women are finally given equal opportunities as men. Destination countries (mostly first-world countries) that demand women's labor from third-world countries conceal the exploitation of the females as cheap laborers by fronting that they are offering opportunities. However, these opportunities are mostly enough for women to think they have a better life but not too much for them to grow professionally and seek more profitable jobs. For the source countries, like the Philippines, taking pride in the growing number of female migrants is also misleading. Again, this could signify that women are given better options, but these women are sold and imported like commodities. In the novel, Beverly could be the personification of *The Mango Bride*, a bride who, instead of being married for love, is married (or more like bought) by Josiah to be his caregiver and house worker rather than a wife. This commodification of women does not show the economic progress of a country; conversely, it shows how the government fails to provide personal and economic opportunities for both men and women. According to a study by the International Development Research Centre, it is clear that poverty is a major factor driving women's labor force participation rates (Kabeer, 2012).

The Feminist Mindsets on Migration

The textual analysis and use of the Marxist-Feminist approach yielded the following findings:

1. Patriarchy and capitalism integrate to limit women's opportunities to earn money by assigning them domestic roles. It is shown in the novel how limited Beverly's work opportunities are. The only jobs offered to her were to become a waitress or a beauty queen (if not for her age). It summarizes the above

idea that opportunities for women mean work, not other than domestic jobs or using their physical attractiveness like in the case of marriage for convenience. Like Beverly, in this kind of marriage, women become indebted to their husbands, making them more dependent and tied to domestic chores. Moreover, in some ways, assigning domestic roles to women is men's escape from the responsibility of doing domestic chores.

2. Women's opportunities are limited because of the assigned gender roles of society, specifically being caged to doing domestic chores. It was seen in how Beverly has limited access to high-wage jobs because society views women's capabilities and skills as not far from their domestic chores. Therefore, jobs that do not require domestic chores are offered, if not given, to men. In Levi Strauss' concept of assigned tasks, when it is stated that one sex must perform certain tasks, this also means that the other sex is forbidden to do them. Thus, women are assigned to domestic chores and are not allowed to take jobs that are not under this category.
3. Women, although given a chance to work outside and migrate, are still limited to doing domestic labor. As seen in the novel, Beverly's dream of a better life in America did not happen because she was still tied to Josiah by marriage. She was still a waitress in America, just like in the Philippines; this time, her second job was to be a wife and mother at home for Josiah and Claire. Like in Beverly's case, migration is not always an opportunity for women, as it is only another means of oppressing them by forcing them to do domestic labor.
4. Marriage for convenience is a capitalist strategy to tie women to housework responsibilities. Beverly's marriage to Josiah had been her cage, preventing her from having personal growth and happy life. In a Marxist-Feminist view, she was merely a mother and a wife working for the benefit of the patriarchy. Her dependence on Josiah made her lose control over her decisions.
5. Bourgeois women have more access to education and resources compared to proletarian women. They have greater opportunities, and their class status is secure when making life decisions such as migrating. In the novel, Amparo had a better ending than Beverly because, even though they both struggle in life, they struggle differently. While Beverly first had to survive the physical struggles of having a better life in America, Amparo strives to achieve freedom from her mother's suffocating manipulation. Amparo does not have to deal with a lack of money because, as a bourgeois woman, she is financially secure. Her struggles were already toward the freedom she supposedly has as a woman, unlike Beverly, who must first survive poverty before seeking freedom.
6. Proletariat women are positioned by the patriarchy and capitalist society to have limited access to education and resources. It limits their available opportunities. Given the chance that Beverly had been acknowledged by Aldo and became part of the bourgeoisie, she would not have limited opportunities and resort to marriage for convenience. However, due to a lack of education and chances to explore her skills, she was situated to have no choice but to commodify herself.

The above findings can be summarized in these feminist mindsets:

- a. Migration is evidence of the sexual division of labor
- b. The struggles of female migrants vary from class to class
- c. The patriarchy and capitalism can use migration to commodify women

Conclusions

In light of the above findings, the following major conclusions are drawn:

1. Female migrants were represented in the novel as oppressed and struggling against the roles given to them by patriarchy and capitalism.
2. Social class is a factor that affects the struggles of female migrants. The experiences of female migrants on migration vary because of their different goals, reasons, and purposes as bourgeois and proletariat women.
3. The different struggles experienced by female migrants in the context of migration affect their way of thinking about women's empowerment, gender roles, and domestic labor.
4. Aside from being an opportunity, migration can be viewed as a form of oppression against women.

Allowing women to migrate and be part of the labor force is just a small step toward the desired gender equality. The current situation of migrants shows that women are still marginalized. These mindsets could be an eye-opener for women to widen their horizons of what they can do, not because they need to survive or because they have to support their families, nor because they are wives or mothers, but because they are women.

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