

## **Manning the World: Staging Filipino Migrant Masculinities in *Katas ng Saudi***

**Oscar Tantoco Serquiña, Jr.**

University of the Philippines Diliman

### **ABSTRACT**

This essay revisits and analyzes the 1987 play of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) titled *Katas ng Saudi*, which features four Filipino construction workers during the height of oil-fueled construction industries in the Persian Gulf. It employs the tropes of masculinity, nation, and migration to account not only for that sociohistorical moment when a massive tide of Filipino men (husbands and fathers mostly) comprised the initial phase of the so-called third wave of migration from the Philippines, but also for the hypermasculinity that pervades national, migrant, and diasporic discourses. What happens to male subjects when the patriarchal virility that they believe to possess as agency, or as an access to a labor circulation generative of profit, is displaced from its reified supremacies and consequently lapses into inutility within migratory or diasporic conditions? This essay explains the entwinement of masculinity, nation, labor migration, and diaspora, particularly through the negotiated manhood of migrant workers who are regarded as breadwinners, guardians, and pillars of the homeland, on the one hand, but simultaneously perceived as racialized, stratified, and sexualized workers of the world, on the other. An interrogation of *Katas ng Saudi's* melodrama, specifically the affordances that this theatrical genre provides in foregrounding and understanding issues of migrant masculinities, concludes the discussion.

*Keywords:* Philippine plays, labor migration, Filipino diaspora, PETA

Set during the height of construction and infrastructure work in one of the oil-rich Arab states of the Persian Gulf in the 1980s, the play *Katas ng Saudi* features four overseas contract workers (OCWs),<sup>1</sup> namely Tonyo, Baldo, Bernie, and Mang Edwin, whose masculinities are tested in the constraining culture of their current land of employment. In the barracks of their temporary home, their interactions with one another reveal an insurmountable pressure of fulfilling their role as patriarchs and providers to a homeland in which they remain physically absent but financially needed. Tonyo's character, for instance, takes on side jobs in order to augment his earnings, especially at a time when his salary always arrives late and his wife Mila is pregnant with their second child. His family separation, economic difficulty, and bruised masculinity prompt the whole dramatic narrative to flow and thicken. His case worsens in the play's latter part when he learns that his wife has given birth to a mentally challenged child.

The other men also have their own stories of suffering and sacrifice. Baldo is in the thick of a pen pal relationship with Lala, a Filipina domestic helper in Dubai, who will later be raped by her employer. Bernie, a gay migrant worker, admits his sexual preference in a paradoxically conservative but highly libidinal foreign space, where he hooks up with Saudi Arabians and utilizes his body for largely pragmatic ends. And finally, Mang Edwin is the oldest among the lot and is about to return permanently to the Philippines after retiring from his many years of contract work in the Middle East. He suffers from a medical condition called strabismus and yet maintains his optimism about life at home and abroad, even sharing advice with newly-arrived OCWs like Tonyo in the so-called Land of the Prophet.



Figure 1. A Saudi construction worker in Saudi Arabia, a domestic helper bound for Hong Kong, and a "cultural worker" heading for Japan constitute the different figures of OCWs in PETA's *Tatlo sa Tag-ulan*. Photo courtesy of the Philippine Educational Theater Association.

*Katas ng Saudi* seeks to raise awareness among audience members, political authorities, and policy makers about the plight of OCWs,<sup>2</sup> especially of Filipino migrant men, who take risks, cope with shifting social and economic contexts, and recast their masculine identities within highly-segmented and labor-intensive environments such as the Middle East. As seen in the biographies of the play's key characters, *Katas ng Saudi* reveals the emotional excesses of beleaguered masculine subjects in the labor diaspora. Having said that, the play carries a fraught proposition about Filipino migrant men in particular: they are referred to as custodians of the nation, while at the same time are cast elsewhere as marginalized workers comprising the bowels of the world's labor sector.<sup>3</sup>

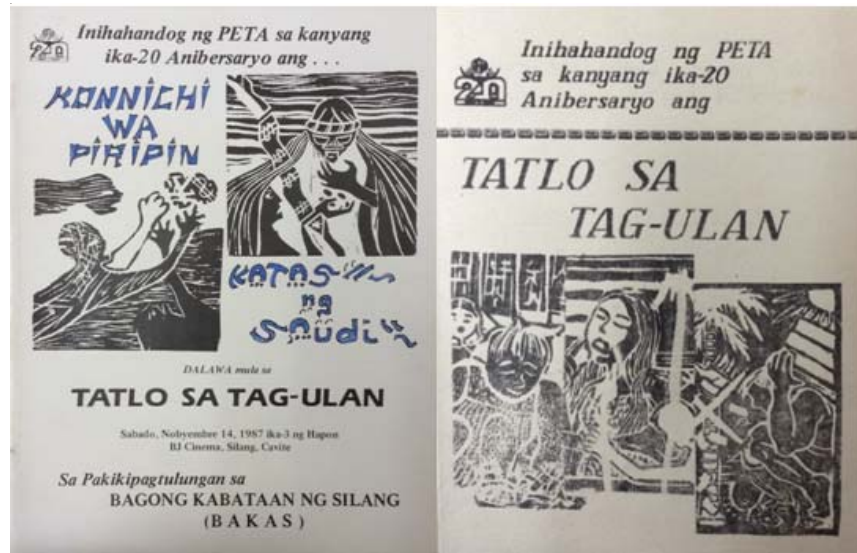
This essay revisits this landmark 1987 theatrical production because of its unprecedented and unmatched dramaturgical focus on the emasculation and dispossession of Filipino migrant men. While plays about the feminization of international labor have increased in the past three decades,<sup>4</sup> no other play in recent memory has extensively touched on the placement of men in overseas work as *Katas ng Saudi* did in the late 1980s. As a polemical play produced by a nationalist theatre company such as PETA during a triumphant yet tumultuous time after the deposition of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos through a bloodless People Power Revolution, *Katas ng Saudi* exposes the depredation of migrant workers, interrogates the deficiencies of the Philippine state, and underscores the damaged social institutions that labor migration has caused in the homeland. Written and staged in the ethos of what PETA calls "a people's theatre aesthetics," this play does not only register a strong nationalist ideology or espouse a rhetoric of return to the nation among the migrant population. Moreover, it initiates sociopolitical discourses and stages theatrical performances of a Third World penile economy in the diaspora. It is unfortunate, however, that the play's staging of a period in the history of global migration when men were still the prominent face of overseas contractual work has largely remained unexamined.

To redress this oversight, an examination of the play's theatrical production, dramatic representation, and ideological intervention on Filipino migrant masculinities is necessary. No matter how belated this criticism may be, there still might be something productive in the act of revisiting this play three decades since its original and only staging, especially if the intention of the critical practice is not only to demonstrate the formation and transformation of masculinities in the diasporic context but also, and more importantly, to illustrate the institution of theatre's participation in, and responses to, ongoing issues of migration, masculinity, and the nation. In this light, this essay primarily analyzes *Katas ng Saudi's* script

and stage, context and vision; however, given the datedness of the play, the belatedness of this theatre critique, and the disorganization, if not absence, of theatre archives in the Philippines, it is indeed a challenge to provide an in-depth analysis of *Katas ng Saudi*'s ephemeral and embodied aspects, such as acting and audience reception, and its material elements, such as costume and stage production. This essay nonetheless extrapolates from the play's existing documentation and initially asks: How does the play capture these displaced male egos of traditionally macho Filipinos who have to endure the degradation of labor amidst the promise that beckons in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia? How do the men in *Katas ng Saudi* "construct and navigate multiple masculinities at work and at home to maximize the benefits of migration and reassert their status and social roles in their communities" (McKay 65)? What negotiations do these migrant men make as regards their identities and masculinities in a country that, according to sociologist Arnel de Guzman, "has the amenities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but the cultural, political and legal superstructures of medieval Islam" ("Katas ng Saudi" 49)?

The next section of this essay addresses the emotions of these "feminized" migrant male subjects whose masculinities are brought into crisis during their vulnerable moments overseas. Male suffering is heuristically taken as an existential juncture that troubles masculine chauvinism and begs the question: "What are the stakes for the male subject in choosing to assume (even to impersonate) a feminine stance in the postmodern cultural scene" (Boscagali 66)? How does *Katas ng Saudi* depict its male characters' affective states like *tibay ng dibdib* (fortitude), *hiya* (shame), and *lakas ng loob* (strength of spirit)? How do the male characters of *Katas ng Saudi* demonstrate human agency despite the delocalized, deterritorialized, and dispersed identities that came with being far and away from the nation?

Finally, the concluding section reflects on the affordances of the melodramatic genre to issues of nationhood, migration, and masculinity. More specifically, how do these theatrical modes and migration theories on masculine experiences inform each other? How is labor migration, as a phenomenon that engenders both vulnerabilities and virilities among men, imagined as melodrama? And how might this genre contribute to our understanding of the figure of the Third World masculine migrant worker?



Figures 2 and 3. Souvenir programs that show PETA's *Tatlo sa Tag-Ulan* Trilogy. Photo courtesy of the Philippine Educational Theater Association.

## MIGRANT MASCULINITIES

This section focuses on masculinity within labor migration to carve a space of investigation for the ways by which notions of manliness and “cultures of masculinity” shape labor migration and diaspora. Intertwining Third World masculinities with migration seeks to show the changing subject-positions of men in nationalist and state-led discourses, where they easily claim domination, as well as in diasporic discourses, where this very domination is contested and threatened. This section’s goal is to explore how men’s naturalized hegemony gets negotiated when relocated to stratified, racialized, and sexualized spaces outside the nation. Hence, this section investigates migration’s feminizing tendencies and how these tendencies negate the masculine constructions from or within the Philippine nation. Political and cultural sociologist Joane Nagel writes that “real actors [within the nation] are men who are defending their freedom, their honor, their homeland, and their women” (400-402). While migration continues this logic to the extent that it affords male migrants opportunities to be materially and economically sufficient, it also challenges male privilege and power through the demeaning systems and operations of labor for which migration is notoriously known.

Even if the Philippine nation has come to be known as *Inang Bayan*, this figuration comes with the idea that this female/feminized physical territory is for men to secure and defend. The nation can only be imagined through a heroism and martyrdom that sacrificing, suffering, and servile men can embody. Through their unyielding offering of their masculine bodies for the sake of the nation's integrity, men have come to "the defense of the country's territory, culture and future. It is [they] who ... protect the land, ensure the continued survival of [their] race, and expel the foreign invaders" (Nagel 167). In *Masculine Domination*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that "[m]anliness, understood as sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also as the capacity to fight and to exercise violence (especially in acts of revenge), is first and foremost a *duty* ... [A] 'real' man is someone who feels the need to rise to the challenge of the opportunities available to him to increase his honor by pursuing glory and distinction in the public sphere" (50-51). Hence, the physique and behavior of men as *matatag* (firm) and *matapang* (brave) have come to be employed in the service of the nation. In connection with this, these "essential" definitions of masculinity have always been placed against the stereotypes of vulnerability, sensitivity, femininity, creativity, and subordination. They define the naturalized and idealized standards of male demeanor, thinking, and action.

However, while masculinity and nationhood go easily hand in hand, it is also interesting to inquire into the relationship between manhood, which is broadly defined as the overall and accepted conception of becoming male (Gilmore 1), and migration. Migration, especially when viewed from a Western standpoint, may be conventionally perceived as a site of alluring adventure, fraternal camaraderie, daring opportunities, and momentous chances to participate in a historically larger-than-life, generation-defining event. But once inflected with the tensioned flow of laboring migrants from the Third World to the First World, this kind of global mass movement gets burdened with the realities of displacement, de-skilling, and deprivation. Migration suddenly signifies mobility and capital accumulation as much as emasculation, subordination, and incapacitation.

For Filipino male migrants who are in Saudi Arabia, to labor elsewhere is to exert corporeal effort and to excrete or extract bodily excess. "Katas" may be translated into "juices" or "extract," which in the parlance of work, may semantically mean any material or symbolic byproduct, like money or mobility or fame within the community, taken from or produced by the body after undergoing certain physical or social stress. To the degree that it linguistically demonstrates a production or a materialization of one or more things, "katas" affirms the productivity of toiling

bodies even or especially in unfavorable conditions. “Katas” further testifies to the currency of human biology within geographies (“Katas ng Saudi”) that exploit or render bodies as tools of commerce and trade.



Figure 4. The play's poster shows the flow of the life and labor of migrant men from Saudi Arabia to the homeland, which depends on remittances of these OCWS in order to survive. Photo courtesy of the Philippine Educational Theater Association Library and Archives.

To talk of “katas” within the context of migrant men’s lives is to further charge the social phenomenon in question with sexual and gendered meanings, especially because the body becomes more central and the process of secretion of fluid more apparent. That this “katas”—concretely manifested through material goods, real estate, private property, monetary savings or remittances, education, and cultural capital—is what sustains the nation-state and social institutions in the homeland, particularly the family, all the more shows the highly paternalistic and masculine orientation of the discourse of labor migration in the 1980s, as well as the seminal

figure of men, even if they are outside the national borders, in the creation and maintenance of nationalism and statehood.

It is through this social logic that migrant men become heroic and martyr-like figures of the nation. More than their willingness to take on the risks they may possibly face abroad, it is their newfound ability to support the financial needs of their families and to keep the whole nation-state on an even keel through their remittances that they assert their influence on and get hailed by the homeland as modern-day heroes and martyrs. Even if the Philippine government has already broadened the definition of “hero” and made it less gender specific and more inclusive of women migrants (McKay 72), the idea of a national patriot remains largely masculine, while the notions of sacrifice and economic provision for one’s Filipino family are still expected from men more than their female counterparts.

Given these privileges that national discourses accord to men, it is interesting to ask if what historian Ernest Renan calls “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (19) comes in a masculine form or is primarily imagined with men in mind. It also becomes crucial to inquire if the long list of endeavors, sacrifices, and devotions, as well as the shared social capital premised on great ancestries, heroic pasts, and glorious triumphs, which outline or constitute the idea of a nation, are more capably and if not singularly enacted by men and social institutions led by them.



Figure 5. Tonyo breaks down after a series of mishaps in *Katas ng Saudi*. Photo courtesy of the Philippine Educational Theater Association Library and Archives.



*Katas ng Saudi* demonstrates that the cult of masculinity (alongside its cultural significations of heroism and martyrdom) and the idea of a nation (alongside its traditional Andersonian definition as a “deep, horizontal comradeship”) have been challenged by diasporic dissimulations, such as the exportation of nationals from the Philippines. Labor migration has produced a crisis of Third World masculinity to the degree that it not only displaces male subjects from the locale in which they may feel most powerful or celebrated, but also heightens men’s racial, class, and gender vulnerabilities, especially within terrains where they are threatened and cast aside. Even if overseas work affords most migrant men economic mileage and social influence, it has also alternately placed these male subjects under emotional and psychological strain, as well as physiological and physical threat.

In the 1970s, the New Society of former president Ferdinand Marcos saw warm-body export as a solution to the worsening problem of joblessness and the ballooning national and foreign account deficits of the country. With the 1974 Labor Code formalized to systematize labor migration programs and to promote overseas contract work as a source of foreign remittances, a tide of Filipinos, mostly men, went to Saudi Arabia and to other Persian Gulf States to take advantage of this region’s need for manual labor for the completion of massive infrastructural projects (de Guzman, “From Saudi” 7; de Guzman, “Katas ng Saudi” 2). By 1975, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had become the “single biggest employer of Filipino skilled and unskilled labor,” while temporary migration to the Gulf had overcome permanent emigration to the US and Canada, two prime destinations to which Filipino workers previously preferred to migrate (Margold 209). Between 1975 and 1983, “[a]pproximately three out of four of these migrants were men, with most employed as construction or menial service workers. A parallel migration exported women to the Gulf, largely as domestic workers, and to the affluent countries of Asia and Europe” (Margold 209). By the late 1980s and the early 1990s, there were already more than 90,000 Filipino OCWs in Saudi Arabia, “the largest concentration of OCWs in the world, after the Filipino immigration population in the United States” (de Guzman, “Katas ng Saudi” 3).

However, even if Filipino workers constituted a large part of Saudi Arabia’s workforce, this army of laborers remained vulnerable to various threats of eviction and exploitation. OCWs were mostly given few opportunities to renew their contracts and oftentimes had to contend with their subordination to Arabs and Euro-Americans (de Guzman, “Katas ng Saudi” 3; Margold 210). In large part because of the fundamentalist Muslim culture of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Filipinos had to

confront the country's closed and conservative society that did not only bar tourists from entering its territories but also restricted any outside influence—not “Muslim” enough, they say—that went against its economy, monarchy, and religion.

This crisis of masculinity through migration is what *Katas ng Saudi* makes visible on stage. Tonyo's physical distance from his wife Mila can only strike a forceful blow on his male ego. The birth of his disabled son is taken as an assault against his potency as a man. The growing financial ordeal, stemming from the expenses of Tonyo's migration and continuing up to Mila's hospitalization, pushes the migrant worker deep into a quagmire from which he can hardly escape. On Baldo's part, his pen pal Lala gets molested in Dubai, an incident which the male migrant cannot do anything about and which will eventually mark the end of his long-distance connection with the domestic helper. Mang Edwin is a cuckolded husband, who has aged abroad as a construction worker. Upon his return to the Philippines, he suffers from a physical ailment which he tries to ignore with profound hopefulness. And Bernie “comes out” as a male homosexual in Saudi Arabia, where he is raped and where he later on pimps himself to Arab nationals to earn more money. These “defective” masculinities do not only show layers of victimization that lead to the perceived and internalized inutility of migrant men; they also illustrate that migration capably severs relations, emasculates manhood, and espouses various forms of moral and psychological disintegration.

Masculinity is in crisis when those who traditionally embody it disintegrate in the face of emotional, psychological, or physical weakness, and start acquiring stereotypical feminine traits and behaviors. In *Katas ng Saudi*, the migrant men pour their hearts out, expose their private selves, and admit the loneliness and exhaustion they have experienced and continue to experience. Some communicative practices, like making long-distance calls, letter-writing, and storytelling, previously associated with women and marginal people (de Guzman, “Testimonial Narratives” 605-11), are employed in *Katas ng Saudi* in order to “give voice” to these Filipino male nationals turned diasporic/migrant subjects whose dominant masculinities in the Philippine nation see their “subordinate” (because linked to homosexuality and femininity) and “marginalized” (because inflected with race and class) versions overseas (Connell quoted in McKay 74). Through epistolary exchanges, for example, Tonyo and Baldo are able to communicate with their respective partners. The play's stage directions indicate these encounters as such: “Maglalabas ng papel ang dalawa. Mag-iiba ang ilaw. May lalabas na dalawang babae sa magkabilang dulo ng entablado—si Lala at si Mila. Magkaharap si Mila at si Tonyo; Si Lala at si Baldo” [The two men

will bring out a sheet of paper. The color of lights will change. Two women will enter the scene through the opposite sides of the stage—they are Lala and Mila. Mila and Tonyo are facing each other and so are Lala and Baldo.]. Such communicative encounters in the play either reveal tender and comical moments between long-distance lovers (who talk about romantic relationships, conditions of the family and the home, financial matters, and social roles, among others), or expose lamentable life stories and situations from both the nation and the diaspora (i.e., the rape of Lala and the birth of Tonyo's mentally impaired son). In other dramatic scenes, telecommunication functions as the means through which Tonyo's character lays bare his frustration as a male sufferer losing the bets he has made in the gamble of life.

Despite their compromised status as alien laborers, some of these migrant men nevertheless negotiate their masculinities and persistently embody their human agency. Mang Edwin endures all his working years through his optimistic outlook and deep faith in the Divine. Bernie finds the Arab state as the site of his gender transformation. The carefree Baldo makes do with his life as an overseas contract worker one day at time, killing boredom and avoiding depression through *bomba* and *komiks* from the Philippines. It is the *bagong-salta* or the newly-arrived Tonyo who cannot quite emplace himself well in his current site of work away from the nation.

Indeed, Tonyo's aggrieved and anguished figure ferrets out the argument against migration as a phenomenon that simultaneously dismantles and propels nationalisms and masculinities. On the one hand, migration dismantles nationhood and manhood insofar as it breaches national borders and displaces the privileges of men from the nation to more stratified and racialized spaces elsewhere. On the other, migration also buoys nationalisms and masculinities to the degree that remittances of migrant workers—the *katas* which comes from their very hard work—keep national economies afloat, families alive, and aspirations of communities realized. Through their migrant journey, their “cosmopolitan adventure,” their endurance in the most challenging diasporic situations, male OCWs get to prove their masculinities to themselves and to their relatives in the motherland. To put it differently, migration enables these Filipino men to create something of value from the nothingness in the homeland. With their “agential autonomy” largely but not solely wrought from the diaspora, men are able to reformulate and boost the basic relational units of their society.

Therefore, the ordeal of Tonyo negatively paints the phenomenon of labor migration as a national means to development. It critiques the Philippine government for continually spearheading labor migration from the country without considering the plight of OCWs. In the play, excessive emotions allude to a weak nation, a weak people, a weak citizenry, and ultimately, a weak masculinity. Male tears signify the dissipation of man's stoic resolve amidst adversity. As the antithesis of virility, these emotions and tears indeed go against what anthropologist David Gilmore calls "a public demonstration of positive choice, of jubilation even in pain ... a moral commitment to defend the society and its core values against all odds" (224). As the character of Tonyo expresses melodramatically:

Tonyo: Ang pamilya ko nga ang iniisip ko, eh, kaya't ganito ako. Hindi naman naiintindihan nina Baldo at Bernie itong nararamdaman ko, eh. Hindi pa sila mga ama. Wala pa silang asawa. Paano ko masusubaybayan ang anak ko. Para bang tagapayo lang ako mula sa malayong lugar. Ang kinakatakot ko eh yung masabi ng anak ko na ito ang tatay ko, yung nagbibigay sa akin ng laruan, tsokolate, tapes. Alam niyang mahal ko siya dahil sinasabi sa kanya ng nanay niya, pero hindi niya nakikita. Ano ako, Diyos? Hindi nakikita pero nagmamahal? Hindi niya nararamdaman ang pagmamahal ng ama. Paano na lang kung maghanap ng isang ama yung bata? Paano kung hindi na makatiis ang ina noon at iwan din ako? Anong klaseng pamilya ang palalaking ko kung naririto ako. Ayaw ko rito, pulos bawal dito, bawal yoon ... Hanggang kelan ako magsasakripisyo nang ganito? Gabi-gabi na lang, iniisip kong para akong nasa preso ... nagtatangkang tumakas pero hindi makatakas. Gusto ko na lang umuwi sa Pilipinas. Pero, kung uuwi ako, mahina ang kita ko. Tapos, ngayon pa ... kailangan ng malaking pera. Alam ko, pag nag-Saudi ako, marami akong maiipon. Mauuwi rin pala sa wala. Kahit saan na ako pumunta, wala rin... (Breaks down)

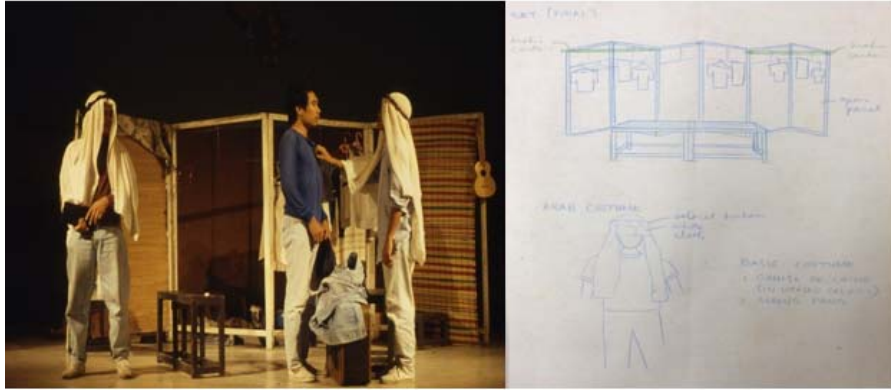
[Tonyo: I am thinking of my family, that's why I am like this. Baldo and Bernie do not understand my feelings. They are not yet fathers. They still do not have spouses. How will I supervise my children? As if I am just an adviser from a distant place. My fear is, my child will say that his father is the person who gives him toys, chocolates, tapes. He knows I love him because his mother says so, but he does not see me. Who am I—God? Someone you do not see but loves you. He does not feel fatherly

love. What if the kid looks for his father? What if his mother can no longer endure and chooses to leave me? What kind of family will I nurture if I stay here? I do not like it here. A lot is forbidden here ...Until when will I sacrifice this way? Every night, I think I am in prison ... wanting to escape but cannot. I want to go back to the Philippines. But if I return, my earnings will be insufficient. And now ... there's a need for a big amount of money. I know, when I go to Saudi, I would be able to save a lot. But everything will be for naught. Wherever I go, nothing happens ... (Breaks down)]

The next section of this essay is interested in how *Katas ng Saudi* renders men as vulnerable and weak, as emotional and emasculated. When men are perceived as weak and “feminine” in mindset and conduct, in whose name and in what form are these vulnerabilities made evident? If a theatrical production shows “male tears” and unleashes the “intimate” and the “personal” dimensions of men, what normative codes are transgressed, if any, in the social order of things? What does this surfeit of emotions in the face of the uncontrollable and the uncontainable say about the male ego?

### **EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES**

Setting the play in the temporary home of the OCWs in Saudi Arabia interestingly adds to the theatrical and figural “feminization” of migrant men. The house as the play’s sole venue puts in sharp relief the intimacy, privacy, and homosociality that characterize migrant men in the diaspora. The home is the site of emotional intensity as much as it is the enclave where these Filipino nationals freely and safely release their grievances about work and their employers, their racial prejudices against Arabs, their hopes and fantasies for themselves and others, their acts of transgression, and their cultural differences. The diasporic home of migrant men, in this sense, signifies a number of paradoxes: first, men leave the nation, specifically their own household, to seek means of establishing their families, only to be placed in such constraining architectural space; second, men, oftentimes perceived to own and belong to public spaces, are pigeonholed in the private sphere when pushed outside the nation; and third, men, as figures generally depicted with muscle and might, become subjects of domestic melodrama known not for their logical reason but for their intense emotions and affections.



Figures 6 and 7. A photo and a production sketch that show the interior of the migrant men's diasporic home in Saudi Arabia. Photos courtesy of the Philippine Educational Theater Association.

While Mang Edwin and Baldo always invoke *lakas ng loob* (strength of spirit) and *pagtitiis* (endurance) as virtues that migrant men must possess, Tonyo conversely embodies *kahinaan* (weakness), *pagkabalisa* (anxiety), and *kawalan ng pag-asa* (hopelessness). While the former understands labor migration with what McKay calls a “double masculine consciousness” (79)—skillfully straddling transnational and national spaces and asserting their masculinity even in degrading labor markets or workplaces—the latter is paralyzed by the irreconcilable gap between his marginalized masculinity in Saudi Arabia and his overall ideals of fatherhood, husbandry, and machismo. These contrapuntal states of mind are much starker because the play commends Mang Edwin and Baldo for being masculine, while at the same time deriding Tonyo for being “too feminine” or female-like (*parang babae*) in his faint-heartedness. There is indeed an implicit machismo in the play’s invocation of values that migrant characters must embody and uphold in the diaspora. In other words, dictating the “proper” emotions that a male migrant worker must feel gets enacted at the expense of other(ed) subjects of society, like females and homosexuals, whose devaluation and disenfranchisement become the very bases of men’s emotional stability and social value. In this sense, when Baldo and Bernie call Tonyo weak for being too affected by his family, or unmanly for being too open with his feelings, Tonyo is not only mocked; rather, women in the nation, such as Tonyo’s wife Mila, or in the diaspora, such as Baldo’s pen pal Lala, are also considered inferior subjects within a heteronormative ruling order. In other words, when the play’s migrant men make the imposition to “man up” or to “toughen up,” they are psychically and linguistically benchmarking themselves against other humans whom

they consider their subordinates. In one heated argument with Bernie, who shares with everyone some of his “survival tips” such as sexually liaising with Saudi Arabians to earn more, Tonyo demeans the homosexual migrant and openly express his patriarchal biases and homophobic tendencies.

Tonyo: Naku, Mang Edwin, pagsabihan niyo nga yang baklang yan.

Bernie: Hoy, kahit ganito ako, may silbi ako. Nakakapagpadala ako sa magulang ko, nabibili ko sila ng stereo, beta max, at lahat-lahat ng gusto nila. Eh ikaw, sigurado ka bang sa gusto mong mapunta napupunta ang pera mo?

Mang Edwin: Itong si Bernie, talaga ... Asawa pa rin yoon ni Tonyo. Siya pa rin ang may responsibilidad roon.

Tonyo: Anong gusto mong sabihin, mambabae ako? Bawal makipag-usap sa babae rito, kahit kababayan mo.

Baldo: Ano nga kaya ang pwedeng ikama rito—babaeng camel?

Bernie: Maraming paraan naman eh. Wala ka lang imahinasyon.

Baldo: Kung sabagay, hindi lang babae ang pwede mong patulan. Maraming nagiging ano riyang ... (Magbabakla-baklaan) di ba, Bernie?

Tonyo: Kung ipapares niyo ako diyan sa baklang yan, huwag na lang. [...] Magpapakamatay muna ako bago ako magpakama sa Arabong lalaki, bakla o anumang hayop!

[Tonyo: Mang Edwin, please reprimand that homosexual.

Bernie: Hoy, even if I am like this, I have a purpose. I send money to my parents, I buy them stereo, beta max, and other things they like. And you, are you sure the money you send goes to where you like it to go?

Mang Edwin: Bernie, that's still Tonyo's wife. He is still responsible for her.

Tonyo: What do you want to say? I should philander? Talking to women is disallowed here, even if she's your co-national.

Baldo: What can you sleep with here—a female camel?

Bernie: There are many ways. You just lack imagination.

Baldo: After all, it's not only women you can take interest in. There are many guys who turn out to be ... (Will act like a homosexual). Right, Bernie?

Tonyo: If you would just compare me with that homosexual, no thanks. [...] I'd rather die than sleep with a male Arab, a homosexual, or whatever animal!]

When migrant men's vulnerabilities are shown on stage, they can be subversive only to an extent that they destabilize conventional projections of masculinity and displace the centrality of logical reason in the making and doings of men. However, when vulnerabilities such as emotional instability, social alienation, and physical incapacity become a marker or matter of gender, and not general conditions of marginalized or disenfranchised migrant or diasporic subjects, the subversive possibility of expressing male vulnerability is lost.

Despite its figuration of domesticated men, *Katas ng Saudi* still foregrounds the idea that men have to be out in public, working for their families, their partners, and the whole nation that depend on them. Hence, the home becomes a beleaguered site encroached upon by a certain masculine deed and rationality that treat this intimate space as purely for women. This is seen more clearly in Tonyo's heated argument with Mila, who insists on working in order to supplement the family's income but is consistently barred by Tonyo and pushed to her old duty of bearing and rearing children. In other words, the home may produce opportunities for men to be emotional and defenseless. It may operate as a site where men, indeed, may loosen up. But it is this encounter with the private, intimate, and domestic spheres that reinforces the sexual division of labor. To the migrant men in *Katas ng Saudi*, the normative order of masculinity may be challenged or exposed for its feebleness within the confines of the temporary diasporic home. This disruption, however, is also the same moment that spawns extreme machismo within the family and other relational dynamics, thus retaining the social order of things.

*Katas ng Saudi's* melodrama of male subjects may have given the audience a "vision of men barely repressing tears, 'confessing,' reminiscing about their personal past,



and exploring the interiority that has taken the stage” (Boscagali 64). But the staging of men’s feelings of shame and loss has also served as a means to distinguish male subjects from female subjects, children, and homosexuals, as well as to preserve or reconstruct manhood from the point of view of sexual and gender difference. For example, Tonyo is made a laughingstock for not being able to take a hold of himself. When *Katas ng Saudi* employs migrant masculinities as the focal point of melodrama, it does so with a strong desire to “reestablish a sense of ‘place’” (Boscagali 67) largely for men to regain power and position. Hence, the play’s figuration of masculinities within the melodramatic mode does not come with a critical evaluation of men’s displaced egos or their decentered privileges; rather, within the context of PETA’s play, it functions as a defense of men’s domination and authority in the nation and the diaspora. From this perspective, rendering men emotional and vulnerable is neither a simple feminization of masculine subjects nor a straightforward bending of gender. Rather, entangling men in melodrama may be seen as “a particular formation of power and as a symptom of male anxiety in a period of crisis” (Boscagali 67-68). Particularly, *Katas ng Saudi*’s melodrama reveals strong patriarchal desires to manage the uncontainable and to guard masculine power. It secures a social arrangement of the family and other personal relationships, dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, the personal and the public, particularly for the sake of the migrant men in the play who seemingly need conventional narrative codes and references that can restore or save them in the face of emotional, moral, and psychological collapse.

When Tonyo, for instance, is informed about the birth of his mentally impaired son, he breaks down on Christmas Day, blames himself to no end, and equates his progeny’s impairment with his inutility/impotence/powerlessness as a man. Prior to this emotional breakdown, Tonyo disallows his wife from helping him in increasing the household’s income, a duty conventionally reserved for the head of the family. Only the husband deserves public mobility and access to capital accumulation, whereas the wife is relegated to the role of keeper of house and caretaker of kin. Male emotions, therefore, can only manifest at the personal and not at the social or public level, enabling men to comprehend and eventually purge their perceived weaknesses privately. In this transaction, women almost always bear the brunt of the ways by which men deal or cope with their emotions and desires to preserve their masculinity. Even or especially in injurious states, migrant men still have to serve as what sociologist R. W. Connell calls “exemplars of masculinity” (85): heterosexual, competitive, and able to rule women as well as other men. So in connection to male tears that *Katas ng Saudi* situated within the context of labor migration, “we can conclude that, in fact, they tend to deconstruct gender

dissymmetry in a way that can be damaging to women. Tears—and the femininity associated with them—are appropriated by the masculine subject as a means of survival” (Boscagali 74).

When largely used for the purgation of guilt, the assertion of masculinities, and the perpetuation of heteronormativity, not for the demystification of patriarchal domination and discourse, emotions will endlessly lead to more anxieties and paranoia that can only continue the sexual and social divide between men and women. For example, instead of commiserating with his pen pal Lala and finding a way to save her from misery, Baldo forgoes his friendship with her and succumbs to a chauvinistic disposition against female victims of rape. His main concern, after all, is Lala’s virginity, as well as his masculinist desire to wed a “pure” and “untouched” woman. This becomes a dilemma for Baldo, but in the end, it is the supremacy of his masculinity that prevails in marking off the “other” sex and in regaining the dominance of men over other groups.

Edwin: A ... Baldo ... nakadesisyon ka na ba kung ... ano ang isasagot mo kay ... Lala?

Bernie: Sasagutin mo ba?

Baldo: Eh ... hindi ko ho naman gusto yung nangyari sa kanya... pero kung ako ang aako ng anak ng may anak ...

Bernie: Hindi ka naman tiyak na nabuntis nga siya nung amo niya.

Baldo: Pero nandon na rin yon. May nakauna na sa akin. Ang gusto ko sana ... ako ang unang ... yun bang hindi pa nagagalaw ang babaeng pakakasalan ko. Yun bang ano ... virgin. Mahirap na kung sasagutin ko pa si Lala.

[Edwin: A ... Baldo ... have you decided on ... what to tell ... Lala?

Bernie: Will you respond to her?

Baldo: Eh ... I do not necessarily like what happened to her ... but if I need to be responsible for someone else’s child...

Bernie: You’re not even sure if her master got her pregnant.

Baldo: But there's that. Someone got her first. What I like is ... I am the first ... like the woman I will marry has not yet been touched ... Like ... a virgin. It would be hard if I would still respond to Lala.]

The differing attitudes of these migrant men, particularly Tonyo and Baldo, toward womanhood are indicative of how women are positioned in the discourse of masculinities. For Tonyo, women are meant to be protected by men and to be kept at home. For Baldo, women have to remain chaste and unsullied by others. In these instances, women are proverbial property to be owned and contained—all for the sake of the male ego and the patriarchal order. These are symptoms and outcomes not only of “the dominant position of men generally (and the concomitant subordination of women) but also the dominance of particular social groups of men, along with their values, their beliefs and their power and wealth, over other groups” (Mangan 13).

It is therefore important to ask about who and what remains in the arrangement of society, as well as in the relation between men and women, when this flexibility in social roles and status is asserted as part of someone else's human agency and coping mechanism. To put it differently, while migrant men have found ways to adjust and employ their sexual, racial, national, and class identities to secure their masculinities from the effeminacy that comes with their lowly regarded work within the international labor market, such gestures become problematic especially when enacted at the cost of the liberties of others, especially those of women and children who at present already have to contend with restrictions imposed on them by social institutions like the family and the state.

While the play affords its viewers a rare theatrical figuration of migrant men's misery and emasculation in the diaspora, there is something troubling in this rendering because it retains the prejudices that ultimately divide marginalized subjects in the nation or the diaspora. While the call for security and sympathy from the Philippine state is hardly surprising from a purportedly nationalistic theatre company like PETA, the more crucial concern is about the kind of nationalism that the play espouses and the very limits and implications of this ideological standpoint in relation to migration, diaspora, and the much later phenomenon of transnationalism. While the struggle for national sovereignty and the protection of migrant workers are crucial causes to affirm, evaluating this very militant advocacy through a more rigorous intersectional perspective—one that takes into consideration not only class but also gender, racial, and cultural politics—is imperative to avoid re-codifying conservative nationalisms that are detrimental to both local and

diasporic populations. Certainly, the play's figuration of OCWs in the Middle East may be seen as a cogent counter-argument against the Philippine government's, particularly the Philippine Overseas Employment Authority's (POEA), cataloguing of Filipino migrant men as having "inherent traits" of adaptability and hard-work, charm and friendliness, neatness and discipline, cleanliness and good grooming, self-direction and discipline (quoted in McKay 70). However, *Katas ng Saudi* falls short in interrogating a logic of practice from the Philippine state that capitalizes on Filipino migrants' suffering and sacrifice as the very bases of the elevation of Filipino masculinities, the continuation of an unfair sexual division of labor, and the construction of self-regulating migrant workers.



Figure 8. A scene from the play that shows the sexual violation of the domestic helper Lala. Photo courtesy of the Philippine Educational Theater Association.

### **DIDACTICISM, MELODRAMA, AND LABOR MIGRATION**

Like most nationalistic plays of PETA that toured the Philippines in the 1980s, *Katas ng Saudi* serves as a pedagogical medium in raising viewer awareness about labor migration. In this regard, it is quite apparent how the play's artistic vision fits in PETA's grand project of establishing a national theatre in the country. Although *Katas ng Saudi's* director, Ching Arellano, has been generally critical of the capacity of theatre, drama, and performance in showing the life and death of migrant workers,

he nonetheless declares his faith in the generative capacity of his work: “Hayaan na lang nating maging punla ang aming dula na uusbungan ng isang malawak pang puno ng buhay ng mga Pilipino sa Gitnang Silangan at sa iba pang bansa’t bayan” [Let our play serve as a seed that would grow into a big tree of life of the Filipinos in the Middle East and in other countries and nations] (Philippine Educational Theater Association n.p.).

However, despite the directorial vision behind *Katas ng Saudi*, this essay argues that some of the play’s ideological underpinnings endorse the same rhetoric of self-discipline and self-regulation used by the Philippine state in managing migrant Filipinos outside the nation and in conditioning its would-be OCW population within the Philippines. Even if *Katas ng Saudi* employs the character of Tonyo, for example, to expose the failures of labor migration in uplifting the life conditions of overseas Filipino nationals, the play’s didactic melodrama echoes a rhetoric that exploits the discourses of family, sacrifice, economic nationalism, and self-transformation in order to elide personal restlessness or neutralize social formations.

Edwin: Tonyo, hindi mo malulutas agad ang mga problema mo.

Tonyo: Alam ko ho, pero bakit ho naman sabay-sabay ang dating ng problema? Kung nasa Pilipinas ako, o, di sana nasubaybayan ko ang asawa ko, ang anak namin. Hindi itong malayo ako sa kanila na mabibigla na lang ako sa mga gastos at problemang ito.

Edwin: Kailangang magsakripisyo ka nang kaunti. Kung kapiling mo nga ang pamilya mo, at wala ka naming trabaho, baka itakwil ka pa ng mga iyon. Para ke pa at tinawag kang padre de pamilya...Hindi lahat talaga ng gusto mo’y mapapasaiyo.

Tonyo: Parang hindi kayo dinadalaw ng pagkalungkot.

Baldo: Ang gawin mo—magtakda ka ng ambisyon mo. Ang hirap sa iyo, puro pangmadaliang pangangailangan ang mga tinutugunan mo. Ako nga, nag-iipon na ako para sa kinabukasan ko. Magpapatayo ako ng bahay. Eto nga eh, may naipundar na ako. Ang benwa balls. (Matatawa)

Tonyo: Puro ka naman kalokohan, eh.

Edwin: Ang gusto lang ipunto ni Baldo, eh, isipin mo lang ang kapakanan ng pamilya mo, at hindi ka masyadong malulungkot.

[Edwin: Tonyo, you cannot instantly solve your problems.

Tonyo: I know, but why do my problems come simultaneously? If I were in the Philippines, I would have been able to watch over my wife and children. I wouldn't be away from them and surprised with all the expenses and this problem.

Edwin: You need to sacrifice a little. If you were with your family and jobless, they might reject you. For what are you called the father of the family...You can't really have all you want.

Tonyo: It seems like sadness does not visit you.

Baldo: What you need to do is to set your ambition. The problem with you is you only respond to immediate needs. Me, I save up for my future. I would have my house constructed. See, I have acquired this. Benwa balls. (Laughter)

Tonyo: You are pure nonsense.

Edwin: What Baldo purely wants to point out is, you must think of your family's welfare, and you won't be too sad.]

The migrant men explain the importance of *pagtitiis*, *pagbibigay ng sarili*, and *pagsusumikap* in order to succeed overseas. These are the very same virtues the Philippine government, through its hiring and deploying agencies of labor, utilize to promote warm bodies from the country. In the early 1980s, for example, a brochure from the POEA took pride in Filipino seafarers who were promoted to a very segmented international labor market as "innately" flexible, strong, and fluent in English: "[W]hat truly makes a Filipino the most dependable shipmate are certain inherent traits. He is adaptable and hard-working. The Filipino's charm and friendliness makes for a harmonious relationship essential to the working situation on board. He is neat and disciplined. Reflective of household breeding, the Filipino is particularly observant of clean surroundings and good grooming. Moreover, he keeps within set rules and regulations" (quoted in McKay 70). This marketing ploy from public and private manning agencies remains prevalent up until the contemporary period. It has, in fact, become the primary rhetoric of POEA in certifying the marketability of migrant workers from the Philippines, especially when the

country or the world encounters various forms of political discord and economic crisis that may affect the demand for and the performances of OCWs.<sup>5</sup>

Through characters that embody constructs of “genuine masculinities” and mock any practice or person that undermines conventional idealizations of a “real man,” *Katas ng Saudi*, like the bureaucratic rhetoric of POEA officials, exemplifies how male migrants “are expected to tame nature in order to recreate and bolster the basic kinship units of their society; that is, to reinvent and perpetuate the social order by will, to create something of value from nothing” (Gilmore 223). Like in POEA’s figuration of OFWs as self-regulating and self-sustaining, the play’s rendering of male migrants, particularly their heroic qualities, highlights the necessity for self-direction, self-discipline, and self-reliance in surviving the layered tortures that come with diasporic work and in holding together patriarchal authority in the homeland. There is something bothersome in this moralizing act, or in this psychosocial conditioning, that places all the burden of aspiring for a decent living and safe livelihood on the male migrant subject himself. Indeed, there is something even more vexing in a procedure that diminishes the real social struggles of migrant men either as psychological problems that have to be dealt with individually or as behavioral quirks that need clinical prognosis and intervention. The play’s espousal of psychic coping mechanisms to ease up migrant men’s feelings of anxiety and inadequacy reveals ideological sympathies for a neoliberal ethic that foregoes the crucial role of social structures in labor migration, on one hand, and that passes on the whole responsibility of sustenance, welfare, and survival to the individual migrant, on the other. Toward the end of *Katas ng Saudi*, the following are pieces of advice that Mang Edwin and Blado share with the frustrated Tonyo:

Baldo: Tonyo, lahat tayo may problema. Pare-pareho lang tayong may mga problema pero hindi namin masyadong iniisip...pero may ginagawa kami. Ikaw maya’t maya prinoproblema mo ang mga problema mo. Minsan pati hindi problema ginagawa mong problema.

[...]

Edwin: May kanya-kanya tayong kwento, Tonyo. Talagang ganyan. Minsan kailangang makisayaw ka sa istorya.

Baldo: Minsan kailangang magpanggap kang masaya ka...kahit alam mong hindi. Yun lang ang paraan para matanggap mo ang ilang mga bagay. Sinakripisyo mo na rin lang ang sarili mong mawalay sa pamilya mo, isakripisyo mo na nang tuluy-tuluyan.

[Baldo: Tonyo, we all have problems. All of us have problems but we do not think about them too much...but we act upon them. You constantly think about your problems. Sometimes even the unproblematic is turned into a problem.

...

Edwin: We have our own stories, Tonyo. That's how it goes. Sometimes you need to go with the narrative's flow.

Baldo: Sometimes you need to pretend you're happy...even if you're not. That's the only way to accept certain things. You are already sacrificing yourself by being away from your family, so you better do it all the way.]

Asian American studies scholar Kale Bantigue Fajardo, in his ethnographic study of Filipino seafarers and the Philippine nation-state's interpellation of these workers as hypermasculine subjects, discusses how *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude/solidarity) and *lakas ng loob* (guts), alongside heroism and martyrdom, are used as discursive strategies that not only encourage male migrants to enter seafaring and shipping industries but also create "heteronormative Filipino masculinities ... which in the logics of the state, nationalism, and capitalism are supposed to be subservient and loyal to the Philippine state and local/global/corporate power" (94). Through Mang Edwin and Baldo's insistence on the importance of cultivating fortitude and flexibility in sacrificing for one's family, *Katas ng Saudi* initiates discourses and reinforces ideologies on hypermasculinity. When the two OCWs tell Tonyo to go with the flow (*makisayaw sa istorya*) and to give his all (*isakripisyo mo na nang tuluy-tuluyan*), they are encouraging a technique of migrant-making that seeks to produce docile male subjects that "are not supposed to create, embody, and/or perform oppositional masculinities" (Fajardo 91). In this sense, the play does not exemplify a radical employment of *pakikipagkapwa* which in Filipino psychology signifies "a unity of the 'self' and 'others'" or a "recognition of shared identity" (Virgilio Enriquez quoted in Fajardo 88). Instead, what *Katas ng Saudi* encourages is the conservative view that regards virtues such as *pakikipagkawa* and *pagsasakripisyo* as essential for social equilibrium, especially in the labor diaspora, and for patriarchal rule, especially in the nation.

The play's conclusion speaks about the Philippine government's continued exportation and exploitation of warm human bodies. It registers a palpable sense of resignation for the lack of progress in the country. In his final recounting of the



lives of his fellow migrants, Baldo expresses his perseverance and personal success within a limiting context such as labor migration. He, too, comments on Tonyo's impatience to earn and succeed. After hinting at the endless cycle of labor migration from the Philippines, Baldo ends on an ambivalent note of both hopefulness and uncertainty.

Baldo: Mahirap talaga ang buhay sa Saudi. Mahirap din sa Pilipinas. Kahit saan naman, eh. Gagapang kang talaga. Lalo na kung mababa ang pinanggalingan mo. Yung tipong hanggang trabahador ka na lang. Para sa tulad namin, parang Saudi na lang talaga ang pag-asa namin para makaahon sa hirap. Sa tingin ko nga eh talagang Saudi na lang talaga ang pag-asa namin. Ano, kung aasa kami sa tulong ng gobyerno ... anong makukuha na namin? Kumikita pa nga ang gobyerno sa amin eh ... Umuwi na si Mang Edwin. Mag-dadalawang linggo na. Umuwi na rin ang matanda ... napagod din siguro ... tiyak lagi naming maaalala yung tawa niya ... tsaka yung mata niya. Si Tonyo, hanggang ngayon ganoon pa rin. Wala pa ring pagbabago. Parang lalong naging aburido nung umalis si Mang Edwin. Hanggang ngayon sinisisi pa rin niya ang sarili niya sa lahat nang nangyayari sa pamilya niya. Ang akala pala niya mula nung simula, pagdating niya dito, milyonaryo siya kaagad ... yung tipong biglang asenso. Siguro sa iba ganoon...yung matataas ang trabaho ... pero paano siya yayaman nang bigla-bigla kung \$150.00 lang ang sahod namin. Ako nakakaipon kasi wala akong sinusuportahan. Solo ko ang kayod ko ... Si Bernie ... ayun ganoon pa rin. Natanggap ko na rin. Kailangan eh, kasama ko ba naman sa kuwarto. Pero ilag pa rin siya kay Tonyo. Nakakaawa naman yung tao... wala naman siyang ginagawa kay Tonyo pero takot na takot. Tatlo na lang kami sa kuwarto ngayon, pero tiyak may bagong papalit kay Mang Edwin. *Sana naman matinu-tinong mag-isip. Tama na ang isang problema. Sana naman eh hindi tipong Tonyo na gustong biglang-yaman. Yun bang umaasa agad ng matamis na katas ng Saudi. Siyempre yung mga unang bunga e maasim, para bang prutas...Kailangang magtiis muna sandali ... tatamis din yan. Malay mo.* (emphasis mine)

[Baldo: Life is really difficult in Saudi. It is also hard in the Philippine. Wherever you are, that is the case. You will need to struggle. Especially if you come from the lower class. The kind where you end up just being a worker. For my kind, it seems like Saudi is our only hope to rise above poverty. From my perspective, I think Saudi is our only hope. If we expect from the government ... what would we get? It is the government

that earns from us ... Mang Edwin has gone home. It's been almost two weeks. The old man has already returned ... maybe he already got tired...for sure we will always remember his laughter ... and his eyes. Tonyo remains the same. Nothing has changed. He even turned more disgruntled when Mang Edwin left. Until now he still blames himself for his family's fate. He initially thought that upon his arrival here, he would immediately become a millionaire ... that he would instantly progress. Maybe that's the case of others ... those who earn big ... but how can he instantaneously get rich if we only earn \$150.00. I am able to save because I have no one to support. I solely earn my keep ... Bernie ... he remains the same. I have already accepted him. It's necessary, for I stay with him in the room. But Tonyo's still uneasy with him. I pity the person ... he's not doing anything to Tonyo but he remains very afraid of him. We're only three in the room now, but for sure there will be a replacement for Mang Edwin. I hope he thinks clearly. One problem is enough. I hope he won't be like Tonyo who wants to get rich immediately. Someone who instantly wishes a sweet life from Saudi. Of course the first produce will be sour, like a fruit. It is necessary to endure for a while ... It will also become sweet. Who knows?]

Although this conclusion provides the play's final critique against the Philippine government—a programmatic theatrical gesture and enunciative act from many grassroots, political, and popular theatres during the 1980s—there is something poignantly disturbing in Baldo's monologue that moves from the macro perspective of material and social conditions that structure Filipino nationals' destitution to the micro perspective of individual behavior and psychology. This shift may reiterate, as well as contribute to, practices of social institutions that largely condition and propel the worker's desire or need to work and risk his life and limb. To look at Tonyo as a "problematic" and "impatient" migrant who wishes to amass wealth immediately (*biglang-yaman*) and who expects a fruitful outcome from his gamble with fate is not only to pathologize his behavior as an oddity. It is also to compel the OCW to become self-disciplining in hostile environments. Moreover, to use the rhetoric of *pagtitiis* or endurance in migration discourse is to place the migrant worker in protracted uncertainty. To stretch the person's strength and to expect him to endure in such diasporic context may connote faith in the replenishing capacity of humans to toil and endure in the everyday and the elsewhere, but even this belief in the agency of men has to be contextualized within the habitus of the Philippine nation and diaspora. In focusing on the individual migrant worker who is expected to be self-sufficient, *Katas ng Saudi* seems to posit that the diaspora is

not for the faint-hearted and migration work not for the insecure. In this sense, the play overdraws the role of the individual migrant in achieving success overseas and falls short in questioning the crucial duty of the government and other social institutions in the lives of these OCWs.

This essay argues that *Katas ng Saudi*'s politically charged melodramatic theatre against the Philippine state carries traces of statist neoliberal logic and its editorializing, didactic, and proselytizing mode bears out ideological conservatism. Surely, like most political theatre, *Katas ng Saudi* explores the problems of labor migration, reaches an audience of the masses, and endeavors to change the beliefs and opinions of spectators. However, like most political plays, *Katas ng Saudi*'s dramatic figurations, rhetorical tropes, and ideological positions are to a certain degree simplistic and straightforward. Even if it fulfills the role of political plays in explicitly "pointing out the institutions and aspects of government that should change" (Kirby 131), PETA's play is nevertheless predisposed to perpetuate figurations and ideologies of masculinity, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. In this regard, *Katas ng Saudi* carries a "dual-edge potential": "it can be 'liberation-oriented', deepening confidence, building group or organizational unity, and inspiring collective effort. But it can also be used to 'domesticate', that is to coerce people into accepting their situation or adopting practices contrary to their interests" (Kidd 280).

While there is no question that PETA educates its viewers about the difficulties of the millions of migrant contract workers from the Philippines, its most political and popular works could perpetuate hegemonic art and politics if they are not able to convert their subversive dispositions into critical elaborations of first and foremost themselves (Bourdieu 114). Therefore, it is not enough that PETA's subversive tendencies are couched in the melodramatic staging of the lives of oppressed migrants and marginalized male subjects, nor embedded in dramatic scripts about the camaraderie of Filipinos in the nation or elsewhere. PETA's theatre needs to bring to light, not elide, the properties through which the subordinated and the subaltern—in this case, Filipino migrant men—may contribute to their own marginalization, or worse, cause the oppression of others. As Bourdieu pointedly argues about radical elaborations on different forms of supremacy: "[o]nly political action that really takes account of all the effects of domination that are exerted through the objective complicity between the structures embodied in both women and men and the structures of the major institutions through which not only the masculine order but the whole social order is enacted and reproduced ... will be able, no doubt in the long term and with the aid of the contradictions inherent in the various mechanisms or institutions concerned, to contribute to the progressive withering away of masculine domination" (117).

Plays like *Katas ng Saudi* can aid in looking at gender ideologies as social facts, or as “collective representations that pressure people into acting in certain ways—ways that are often constraining or sacrificial, but which usually have indirectly adaptive structural consequences, especially, in the case of men, the defense of boundaries” (Gilmore 224). Consequently, they can problematize the stronghold of nationalism as an ideology especially with the many dissimulations that happen to local and national identities that get entangled in the diaspora. They can make an effort in denaturalizing or destabilizing how masculinities serve “as avenues to personal aggrandizement or psychic development” (Gilmore 224); how labor migration and the diaspora can only be described as a threatening, not enabling, phenomena to nationals and diasporic subjects; and how linkages to the nation and the family function as the overarching determinants of one’s cultural and political identity. Manhood, nationhood, and labor migration are not givens. Instead, they are discursive constructs deployed by every society in order to manage or structure its population. If masculinities “must go beyond genetic endowment to encompass cultural norms and moral scripts” (Gilmore 23), nationhood and statehood must likewise go beyond their dependencies on the discourses of masculinity and interrogate their symbolic and material relations with labor migration and the Filipino diaspora.

*Katas ng Saudi* may unravel how the discourse of manhood interweaves with nationalistic and migrant discourses within the field of theatre, drama, and performance. As “a separate space subject to its own laws” and “as an extension of the everyday” (Mangan 22), the theatrical and dramatic stage has to be constantly interrogated for the interruptions and continuities of cultural practices and gender ideologies that it performs. In its figuration of migrant men, *Katas ng Saudi* shows that masculine domination is neither bound by geography nor enacted by anatomy: it manifests itself and is supported through the relations between private entities (like the family and the migrants themselves) and public and official agencies (like the state and employers). In this sense, *Katas ng Saudi* in particular simultaneously endorses *and* undermines hegemonies of masculinity. It also echoes *and* resists statist rhetoric on labor migration. These ideologies are what the play has to negotiate in order to transform theatre as a critical force that contributes to and dialogues with other discourses in the age of migration and diaspora.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s and the 1980s, the term Overseas Contractual Worker (OCW) widely referred to Filipino laborers abroad who were expected to come home immediately upon the termination of their professional contracts. In the late 1980s, specifically upon the restoration of democracy in the country after the People Power Revolution, the label morphed into the more celebratory, more encompassing, and more flexible term Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) in order to account for all types of migrant subjects composing the Filipino diaspora. Now, OFW is the term more commonly accepted and used in the literature on labor migration and in the Philippine society.

<sup>2</sup> *Katas ng Saudi*, *Konnichi Wa Piripin*, and *Amah: Maid in Hong Kong* completed PETA's trilogy for its rainy season offering that year. These plays were brought to various communities, academic institutions, and barangay areas, thus making them crucial components of PETA's efforts to harness a "relevant theater that will allow cultural interaction and exchange of view about issues pertinent to our lives" (Philippine Educational Theater Association n.p.). Mobile and dynamic in the nature of their staging, performances of the plays "decentralized cultural activities from the metropolis to the regions, allowing theater to flourish as the artists and the people experience life on another level" (Philippine Educational Theater Association n.p.). The plays toured Quezon City, Marikina, Las Piñas, Parañaque, Pasig, Bulacan, Pampanga, Bataan, Cavite, Antipolo, Angono, and Baguio from October to November 1987.

The trilogy was a cultural activity that served as a forum where audiences and artistic teams may take or think about critical stances against labor out-migration from the country. As the group Bagong Kabataan ng Silang (BAKAS) states in its collective appraisal of the plays: "Kung pagsasama-samahin ang tatlong dula, ay iisa ang magiging kasagutan—laging ang ating mga manggagawa ay ginagawang taga-kalap ng dolyar sa ibang bansa upang maipambayad sa panlabas na utang ng Pilipinas. Isinasantabi lamang ang mababang pasahod, ang pagsasamantala ng mga illegal na rekruter, ang paglabag sa kontrata ng mga dayuhan employer, at ang pang-aabusong seksuwal sa mga kababaihan sa hanay ng mga migranteng manggagawa" [If the three plays are put together, there will be one answer—our workers are always made into dollar collectors from other countries who may pay for the Philippines' foreign debt. Low wage, exploitation from illegal recruiters, violations of contract by foreign employers, and sexual abuse toward women from the ranks of migrant workers are always put aside] (Philippine Educational Theater Association n.p.).

<sup>3</sup> This paradoxical portrayal of migrant men from the Philippines is specifically captured in how the play's director describes male OCWs in particular: "Mga sundalong kusang-loob na pumapalaot sa dagat ng digmang paggawa—digmaan ng buhay at kamatayan. Hindi dahil dito sa bansa natin ay walang digmaan. Mayroon, kaya lang, sa simula pa lang, talo na ang mga manggagawa. Batayang armas pa lang—pagkain—ay hikahos na! [Soldiers who voluntarily sailed forth into the war of labor—a war of life and death. Not because there is no war in our country. There is, but from the beginning, laborers have already lost. Even basic machinery—food—is insufficient!] (Philippine Educational Theater Association n.p.). In this masculinist language, migrant men are characterized in militaristic terms of war, as well as elevated into human figures in an open struggle to

live. They are largely perceived as leaders and forerunners, guardians and warriors, but given their country's economic exigencies, they, too, are immediately emasculated, pitied, and found insufficient ("hikahos") in the ongoing but losing battle of life. Such is the irony embedded in the images of men from the "world's largest migrant nation": masculinities are challenged, if not enervated, by their subordinate status in the national and diasporic hierarchy of things.

<sup>4</sup> In her 2009 report, POEA administrator Jennifer Hardin-Manalili boasted: "[OFWS] are preferred over the rest not only because they are multi-talented and multi-skilled ... The ability to endure long grueling hours for work for the sake of others is the uniquely Filipino value which makes the OFW superior, in the eyes of employers abroad and the families they leave behind" (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration 2).

<sup>5</sup> Some plays that deal with the issue of labor migration and represent the figure of the overseas Filipino worker are Ricardo Lee's *DH: Domestic Helper*, Ricardo Saludo's *The Silent Soprano*, and Liza Magtoto's *Care Divas*. The first two plays focus on female migrant workers, while the third centers on *bakla* caregivers.

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**Oscar Tantoco Serquiña, Jr.** <ojserquina@gmail.com> is Assistant Professor at the Department of Speech Communication and Theater Arts of the University of the Philippines. He is currently a doctoral candidate in the School of Culture and Communication of the University of Melbourne, where he is a recipient of the Melbourne Research Scholarship and the 2018-2019 Norman Macgeorge Traveling Scholarship. He has received study and research fellowships from the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, Sciences Po-Paris, the National Library of Australia, and the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. His essays have appeared in *Kritika Kultura*, *Philippine Political Science Journal*, *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, and *Philippine Humanities Review*.