

# Films for the Feminist Classroom

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From Asia with Love. Directed by Sari Dalena. New York: Third World News Reel, 2002. 12 minutes.

In the Name of Love: Modern Day Mail-Order Brides. Directed by Shannon O'Rourke. New York: New Day Films, 2003. 58 minutes.

Love on Delivery. Directed by Janus Metz. Copenhagen: Upfront Films, 2008. 58 minutes.

Ticket to Paradise. Directed by Janus Metz. Copenhagen: Upfront Films, 2008. 58 minutes.

Reviewed by Glenda Tibe Bonifacio

From Asia with Love is a short and enticing film about the representations of women from China, Korea, and the Philippines in the mail-order bride industry, directed mainly toward Western men. Vivid imagery of the rural landscapes, Asian women in traditional garb, practices of Filipino weddings, Filipino women cavorting with an American man in a military polo shirt, photographs of barely-clad women in catalogues, and the ways that women market themselves through correspondence by mail or the Internet, all with vibrant sounds, make the film compelling to watch, with symbolism replacing lengthy narratives. The context of marriage-for-migration is provided through a short description by a Filipina, briefly situating the rise of the mail-order bride industry in Asia and the costs and benefits involved in the potential exchange. Asian women are constructed as “demure,” “exotic,” and “husband pleasers” for Western men. A subtle form of resistance comes at the end: a woman in traditional Asian attire (either Korean or Japanese) questions the practice by stating “I am not a doll,” insisting that she is a “human being” and a “person.” The melodic tune of a Filipino folk song used in the opening and ending scenes demonstrates the uncertain journey of marrying a foreign man in a strange land, but with much hope. According to Nicki Saroca, this industry embeds gendered and racist discourses of Filipino women reproduced by the media.<sup>1</sup>

The film noted that Filipino women with a college education also participate as potential marriage migrants, particularly with American men and mainly due to the dire economic situation in the Philippines. Thus, this topic needs to be explored deeply with readings to understand the complex intersections of militarism, development, gender, and culture in the lives of peoples and communities affected by global inequalities. Cynthia Enloe's Bananas, Beaches and Bases, Nicole Constable's Romance on a Global Stage, Ninotchka Rosca's “The Mail-Order Bride Industry,” and Andrea Lauser's “Philippine Women on the Move” would be most helpful to read.<sup>2</sup> The social constructions of Asian women in the West are laced with orientalist stereotypes regarding sexuality and passivity with little to no recognition of their individual abilities to rise from their own economic quagmire, even as they imagine an idealized marriage with foreign men.

In the Name of Love is a thought-provoking film on the Russian mail-order bride industry from the perspectives of the women involved, American male clients, and matchmaking agencies. It follows the personal stories and narratives of Russian single mothers who signed up with Svetlana Agency and their American male counterparts looking for partners. From Ina, a former bank employee with two young children, to Elena, a real estate property manager in St. Petersburg

with a little girl, for example, the film weaves their stories of looking for foreign husbands perceived as better than Russian men—who seem self-centered and abusive. The voices of Russian women enable us to understand their desire to find suitable foreign men with whom they would find a second chance to form a loving family. American male clients like Michael and Warren are portrayed by the CEO of another matchmaking agency depicted in the film as “successful,” but also as social morons, who need beautiful Russian brides to give them comfort. Thus they serve as opportunities for what the CEO views as “empowering women to get out of Russia.”

The film depicts foreign marriage as a way out of economic deprivation and social stigma for older, divorced women in Russia; and for middle-aged or older American men with money who embark on pleasure trips to Russia and elsewhere, they can find solace in the opportunity to form a new family. In each of the profiles of the Russian women, both in the United States and in Russia, the sensitive negotiations of language and cultural barriers depict marriage migration as a challenging personal project to pursue. The Russian mail-order bride industry proliferates under the culturally essentialist paradigm that Russian women find happiness within a patriarchal family structure. Ramaswami Mahalingam and Janxin Leu note that the representation of women in the international marriage market indicates power relations and the varied intersections of gender in society.<sup>3</sup> But the film also demonstrates the autonomy of Russian women who plan to migrate on their own terms, keeping in mind what happens to them and their children in the United States.

*Love on Delivery* and *Ticket to Paradise* are two eye-opening films on Thai marriage migrants in Denmark, mainly framed from the perspectives of Thai women wanting to secure a better future for themselves and their families. Both portray the presence of Thai women in rural Denmark, where chain migration through marriage has been facilitated by Sonmai, a former sex worker in Pattaya and now married to a Dane. The honest and pragmatic responses of Thai women who partake in deromanticized marriage arrangements, as in the case of Kae and Kjeld, a week after being introduced through a commercial website, demonstrate the tenacity of these women to achieve their goal: “if there is a will, there is a way,” says Sonmai.

*Love on Delivery* presents the forging of Kae’s marital arrangements in Denmark, Basit’s pain after being separated from her young son and the lingering trauma of abuse, and Sonmai’s plans to secure permanent residency in Denmark for the Thai women from her village. It shows the ways in which women participate in the economy and how they adjust socially are expressed, both in public and in intimate relations. With fun and humility, Thai women searching for the right Dane, not rich but willing to help their families left behind, learn about Western personal etiquette to adapt to societal expectations. Western men represented by lonely and divorced Danish males continue to patronize the sex tourism industry in Thailand, and perhaps will eventually find love in their travels or meet a Thai woman living in their own country (like Sonmai) who can mediate cross-cultural intimate encounters in pictures.

*Ticket to Paradise* follows Kae in rural Thailand as she waits for her visa to return to Denmark, the visit of Basit and her Danish husband to Thailand to finalize the sponsorship papers of her son, and Sonmai’s continued role as a mediator for Thai women seeking foreign husbands and as the one who deals with their problems. It also adds a new persona, Saeng, a single mother wanting to follow the path taken by those helped by Sonmai. Saeng migrates to Pattaya first to get the “experience” of working in the hospitality industry before she turns twenty-four years old, is the eligible age for entry to Denmark. The happy reunions of family members at the airport bring to mind the positionality of poor women in the global economy, contested avenues of economic liberation, and postmodern feminist discourses of the empowered subject who takes matters into her own hands.<sup>4</sup>

1 Nicki Saroca, “Filipino Women, Sexual Politics, and the Gendered Racist Discourse of the Mail Order Bride,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* 2, no. 2 (1997): 89-103.

2 Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed., (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Nicole Constable, *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail Order” Marriages* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Ninotchka Rosca, “The Mail-Order Bride Industry: The Global Market of Women,” *Kinesis* (November 1996): 12-13; Andrea Lauser, “Philippine Women on the Move: Marriage across Borders,” *International Migration* 46, no. 4 (2008): 85-110.

3 Ramaswami Mahalingam and Janxin Leu, “Culture, Essentialism, Immigration and Representations of Gender,” *Theory & Psychology* 15, no. 6 (2005): 839-60.

4Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

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Still from From Asia with Love (Sari Dalena, 2002). Used with permission.

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