

Magic Maids: Sweeping Up a Storm at the Sorbonne

Nadeera Rajapakse



Venuri Perera and Eisa Jocson at the University Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne

Photo credit: Jean-Remy Mallek

After performing in several theatres across Paris, Eisa Jocson and Venuri Perera bewitched the spectators, students, and startled passers-by at the Pantheon Centre of the University Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne in March 2025. They swept through the halls of the 18th century building, housing the second oldest university in Europe, to embody women migrant domestic workers.

Their representation was hailed by an eager audience of economists, historians, philosophers, political scientists, anthropologists, geographers, working on and interested in various related subjects. A roundtable session among scholars and artists, bound by common themes of female labour, exploitation, and agency, was followed by a general discussion between the two dancers and guests.

Among the many compelling insights shared, one particularly resonant idea was that the deepest intellectual understanding often arises through embodied experience. In the novel *Expectation*, the author describes how this can happen: “suddenly the knowledge arrives, hitting her body before her mind. It spikes her blood, makes her heart race, her palms

damp” (Hope 2019: 251). Accordingly, in *Magic Maids*, resistance is articulated through movement, the dancers physically and symbolically reclaim the figure of the domestic worker. In the following commentary, I will discuss the idea of resistance, its significance in this context, and the narrative power of the performance in reclaiming the idealised image of women.



Venuri Perera and Eisa Jocson shedding docility, resisting purity.

Photo credit: Jean-Remy Mallek

Firstly, resistance comes in the shape of exposing the disturbing aspects of migration for domestic work. For one, the fundamental contradiction structuring Sri Lanka’s migration economy: the systematic social devaluation of women’s domestic labour against its staggering economic contributions. The state’s reliance on 8.4 billion USD in annual remittances, of which 54% are from domestic workers (CBSL 2023), exists in violent tension with cultural imaginaries that render these workers as ‘demure’, ‘docile’, and ‘disposable’, while being remittance-sending ‘heroines’.

The aesthetic framing of domestic workers as ‘smiling, docile’ figures emerges from deep cultural constructs. The ideal female figure in religious, nationalist, and cultural tropes lacks agency, existing in submission to

men or gods (Sreenivasan 1975, de Mel 2001, de Silva 2004). Added to that is a narrow version of “purity” as well as “pedagogies of respectability” (de Alwis 2022). This has translated into general media representations where most Sri Lankan newspaper articles frame migrant workers mostly as either “victims” or “heroines” (*rata viruwo* in Sinhala), denying complex subjectivity. This is just like the female ideal in certain religious representations: they are either pure, chaste, and submissive, or they are all-powerful, destructive goddesses. The *Vessantara Jātaka*’s ideal of female self-sacrifice finds an echo in the state rhetoric celebrating “heroines” sending remittances, making resilience and silent endurance the most acclaimed qualities in “good” maids (de Silva 2004).

In keeping with economic market logic, the supply of migrant labour is endless, coming from many South Asian nations competing with one another, whereas demand from employers (mostly in the Middle East) powerfully dictates all terms of employment. Hence, women migrant workers are disposable, easily replaceable. The dancers, Jocson and Perera, recount discovering “24 nails driven into her body, like a living voodoo doll”, referring to a real experience of a migrant worker. Again, the contradiction is made obvious: the horrific exploitation of bodies that literally constitute the nation’s economic lifeline. Sri Lanka’s 1.2 million migrant domestic workers generate about 30% of total remittances, 6.7% of GDP (World Bank 2023). And yet, the institutional recognition of the value of their labour remains an uphill struggle: only in 2020 was the promise made to upgrade domestic work to the skilled labour category (Mudugamuwa 2020), while standard employment contracts under the Foreign Employment Act, and ILO Convention 189 ratification still do not take full account of domestic work.

These institutional failures mirror the “social reproduction paradox”, i.e., the simultaneous economic reliance on and symbolic annihilation of care work under financialised capitalism (Elson 2012). In the course of their performance, Jocson and Perera narrate:

“even if you hit her, she may say ‘hit me baby, one more time’”, laying bare the paradox where ‘docile’ workers must be simultaneously productive enough to remit and disposable enough to replace.

Another revelation from the duo is about racialised market hierarchies. The performance’s mocking comparison between “a Filipina” and “a cheaper Sri Lankan” exposes what Bridget Anderson (2000) terms “hierarchies of servitude” in global care chains. Recruitment agencies actively cultivate this in terms of salary differentials: a Filipina worker is paid double the wage received monthly by a Sri Lankan domestic worker in many Middle Eastern countries (Esim and Smith 2004); skills framing: Most Sri Lankan agencies advertise workers as “more submissive and easier to mould” vs. Filipinas as commanding “more respect” (Jureidni and Moukarbel 2004: 6). Above all, “Sri Lankan” or “Sri Lanki” is synonymous with domestic worker, so much so that if the domestic worker is from the Philippines, the question would be “Is your Sri Lankan a Filipina?” (Jureidni and Moukarbel 2004: 5). Jocson and Perera rephrase the question for the French audience (and French employers), asking where their “Sri Lankan” is from: Algeria? Romania? The Republic of Guinea?



*Venuri Perera, defying norms of docility
(Still from video footage)*

Credit: Leonie Sence, Iris Chaput, Maya Abou Imad, Lucie Liu and Theo Milon

The devaluation of migrant workers is seen in other disturbing institutional shortcomings and exclusions. While Sri Lanka's economic crisis has intensified reliance on migrant earnings—remittances cover 128% of the trade deficit according to the Central Bank (CBSL 2023)—the 2023 national Budget allocated only a paltry amount to migrant welfare; only a handful of returnee workers access reintegration programs (IOM 2023) and the majority of migrant households do not use bank accounts, especially for remittances. Most have no pension contributions despite working close to a decade abroad (ILO 2021).

On the other hand, restrictive regulation is palmed more on migrants than on markets. In the SLBFE curriculum, mandatory household training encourages submission (Handapangoda 2023, Jureidni and Moukarbel 2004). There are bans on pregnancy, marriage (Ireland 2018), and unionisation (Amnesty International 2025), while non-payment of wages, non-compliance with labour laws, and non-respect of basic worker rights go unpunished.

By framing domestic work as 'natural' feminine traits rather than skilled labour, global labour markets exclude them from formal economic accounting. Then the idealised yet paradoxical requirements are piled on: maids need to perform docility and as a result, suppress emotions for job security. They need to channel productivity to super-human levels: An average workday in Gulf Cooperation Council countries is 17 hours (ILO 2021), which they endure stoically, leading to chronic health conditions.

Lynch documents how Sri Lankan migrant workers face "moral censure for transgressing spatial boundaries" (2007: 92), stigmatised as "fallen" women for monetising domesticity while remaining culturally obligated to perform it, unpaid, at home. These contradictions add up, with the state praising women's economic contributions while denying them labour rights, which Jayawardena describes as "patriarchal ventriloquism" (2016: 24).

But then, the *Magic Maids* strike. Jocson and Perera viscerally demonstrate that the same bodies disciplined into docility can erupt into wild, powerful dancing, symbolising the latent agency within apparent submission. This agency becomes discernible, palpable, when we shed the gendered, capitalist lenses above. Despite moral, physical, and institutional risks, which are well-documented, Sri Lankan women continue migrating at unprecedented rates.

This constitutes not merely economic pragmatism, but a strike against the gendered, spatial order. Migrant

women transmit subversive "gender remittances" (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011) that slowly corrode patriarchal ideology in sending communities. These narratives weaponise the very mobility that moralists decry. Their efforts have led to movements, like the ILO C189 campaign, which have forced recognition of domestic work as skilled labour providing potent examples of "capability metrics" (Piper 2017). In Sri Lanka, returnee workers now demand pension contributions, not as supplicants, but as creditors of a national economy that they sustain.

By migrating to take up work that challenges traditional ideals of domestic femininity, and through subtle defiance of religious or moral ideals that confine them to obedience and purity, women migrant domestic workers show resistance.

The performance epitomises the central contradiction: these women are economically indispensable, yet socially expendable. Their labour props up GDP while their contribution is undervalued, a paradox sustained by gendered architectures. Yet as the performance's climactic shift from slow, robotic sweeping to wails, vigour, and piercing eye contact reminds us, even the most disciplined bodies harbour the capacity to disrupt the scripts written upon them. The true measure of feminist praxis lies not in lamenting oppression, but in tracing, as this commentary has attempted, the fault lines where agency erupts through the cracks of constraint.

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