

**VIOLENCE AGAINST  
FILIPINO WOMEN IN  
AUSTRALIA:  
THEORISING THE  
RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN THE  
DISCURSIVE AND  
NONDISCURSIVE**

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Violence is both discursively constructed and an objective condition of many women's lives. It is crucial, therefore, that analyses of violence against Filipino women in Australia critically examine the relationship between the discursive and nondiscursive. This paper presents a feminist exploration of the relationship between Filipino women's experiences of violence and the media's discursive construction of that violence. It is based on interviews with Filipino women, the case study of a murdered Filipino woman, Rosalina Canonizado, drawn from interviews with family members, and a discourse analysis of Australian media articles. The discursive terrain examined constitutes competing ways of making sense of the women's lives. An intersectional approach is used in developing the analysis. I explore how intersections of gender, class 'race' and ethnicity in the media construct Filipino women in particular ways and shape their experiences of violence as well as responses to it. Reading media texts against the interview data makes visible absences and silences in the textual discourse. It is argued that theorising the relationship between the discursive and nondiscursive allows the revelation of such gaps in the media representations which result in a misrepresentation of Filipino women and the violence they experience.

## **Introduction**

Violence is both discursively constructed and an objective condition of many women's lives. The language, meanings and categories we use to describe practices such as murder are integral to the socially constituted identity of the event (Smith, 1990 p 90). It is crucial, therefore, that analyses of violence

against Filipino women in Australia critically examine the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive dimensions of violence. Althusser has indicated that the actual world is a material force but it can only be accessed by means of the discourses, the material structures through which ideology operates, which constitute the object of knowledge (Hennessy, 1993 p 75). Ideology shapes women's lives in the sense that the lived reality of women "...is never served up raw..." but is made intelligible from a multitude of various positions (Hennessy, 1993 p 78). However, some perspectives are more accurate and adequate than others. As New argues:

Knowledge *is* situated and perspectival, but that doesn't mean all perspectives are equally as good, or that there are no good ways of judging between them. While there are no self-evident criteria for making such judgments, the internal coherence of the account, its scope and power to "situate possibilities", its implications for other accounts, and its practical effects are all relevant (1998 p 2).

New's point is particularly pertinent when considering how violence against Filipino women is represented in the media, which is the major and most powerful source of information about Filipino women in Australia. It is also our main source for information about domestic violence, including murders (Women's Coalition Against Family Violence, 1994 p 122). The media portrayal of Filipino women has, overall, been negative – they are usually represented as mail order brides – and it is this view that has gained currency in popular Australian imaginings of the 'Asian Other', although considerable resistance has always come into play.

This paper emerges from a wider study of Filipino women, violence and representation. Today's paper analyses the relationship between Filipino women's experiences of violence and the media's discursive construction of that violence. It is based on a discourse analysis of four media texts, interviews with two Filipino women who were in violent relationships with a non-Filipino partner, and the case study of Rosalina Canonizado drawn from interviews with her family. Rosalina Canonizado was murdered in April, 1991. Thomas Keir, her husband, was charged with her murder and acquitted in 1993 due to lack of evidence. In September 1999, Keir was convicted of murdering his first wife, Jean Keir, Rosalina's second cousin (CPCA, January 2001 p 4).

The paper explores how narratives of gender, 'race' and class in the media construct Filipino women in particular ways and shape their experiences of violence as well as responses to it. I argue that the texts articulate a

discursive continuity in constructions of Filipino women and violence across media by drawing on orientalist and culturalist discourses, including 'mail order bride', to provide a framework for understanding violence.<sup>1</sup> In Orientalist discourse, "Asians" are exotic, inferior and backward creatures subject to the superiority of the West (Broinowski, 1992; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1994). Erotic racial and sexual myths about Eastern women constructed by the West to justify colonial imperialism are continually being reinvested with new life (Kabbani, 1994 pp 113,139). Culturalism invokes culture as an explanation for the social situations, experiences and disadvantages of migrants, thereby obscuring structural inequalities of racism, sexism and class (Bottomley & de Lepervanche, 1990; Pettman, 1992 pp 67-68). In the texts examined, culturalist discourse locates the key to violence within the traits and 'culture' of Filipino women – their presumed 'mail order bride-ness'. Reading media discourse against the interviews reinserts the voices of Filipino women into accounts of violence, thus revealing absences and silences – gaps – in the textual representations.<sup>2</sup> Exploring the relationship between the discursive and nondiscursive illuminates the way media reportage has inaccurately and inadequately covered violence against Filipino women in general and, in particular, misrepresented Rosalina Canonizado. It also highlights the material effects of such media representation on the women's lives.

## Representing Violence

### Media discourses

Negotiation and contest are central to the construction of meaning (Hall, 1997a pp 9-10). Media representations constitute major sites of hegemony – ongoing negotiation and conflict over definitions of the 'real' and the

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<sup>1</sup> Although, as David (1991) indicates, there have been several developments in the media representation since the early and mid 1980s, continuity remains a feature of the reportage – for example that all Filipino women are mail order brides.

<sup>2</sup> As Macherey argues:

What is important in the work is what it does not say. This is not the same as... 'what it refuses to say', although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or not. But... what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey into silence (1978 p 87).

Spivak suggests Macherey's ideas are relevant to the social texts of imperialism where she identifies a collective ideological *refusal* (1988 p 286). She states the work here is a task of measuring silences. The notion of what the work *cannot* say is important especially in relation to the subaltern woman (Spivak, 1988 p 286). This paper links absence with what the text cannot say and silence with what the text refuses to say.

privileging of certain kinds of cultural value and identity (Gledhill, 1997 p 348). Stereotyping is a representational practice used to represent difference in popular culture and it intervenes in the various possible meanings of an image in an attempt to fix one preferred meaning and exclude others (Hall, 1997c pp 228, 257-258).<sup>3</sup> As Hall contends, stereotypes:

...get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity...[S]tereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference' (1997c p 258).

For Hall, the representation of difference within stereotyping is caught up in the play of power: "...power to mark, assign and classify; of *symbolic* power; of *ritualized* expulsion" (1997c p 259).

This aspect of representation and stereotyping is exemplified in Frances Whiting's article on violence against Filipino women in Australia. Titled, 'Click here for your dream girl', Whiting's article appeared as a special report in the *Sunday Mail* (1999 pp 20-21) and is characteristic of the way such violence has been constructed in the media in recent years.<sup>4</sup> A central feature of the report is its constant play on Filipino women as 'mail order brides'.<sup>5</sup> The article opens with the emphasised statement:

They're young, beautiful, desperate and caught in a world wide web. They're e-mail order brides. And they're yours at the click of a button (Whiting, 1999 p 20).

and goes on to pose the question:

Want a bride from the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Russia, Vietnam, Moldova, South America, Mexico or even Kazakhstan? Just click on the

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<sup>3</sup> While discourses of mail order bride, orientalism and culturalism together form the dominant representation of Filipino women in the Australian media, non-Filipino partners are, in general, similarly represented in stereotypical terms as old, socially inadequate misfits who are incapable of forming relationships with Australian women.

<sup>4</sup> There are, however, some media reports that sensitively and insightfully address the issue of Filipino women and violence. Exploring the issue through the stories of Filipino women, Nikki Barrowclough's article, 'The shameful story of Australia's serial husbands' (1995 pp 46-67), is an excellent example of such investigative journalism.

<sup>5</sup> Mail order bride discourse is a hegemonic ideology preconstructed in the interdiscourse. Pecheux's concept of the interdiscourse explains the textuality of hegemony and how cultural commonsense is maintained (1975 pp 113-121; Hennessy, 1993 pp 77-79). The preconstructed gives the effect of an 'always-already there', thus conveying the sense of 'what everyone knows' (Pecheux, 1975 pp 115,121). It acts as a base in the symbolic realm for the articulation of subjectivities across gender, 'race', class, and other differences. Although articulations of difference are historically specific, the preconstructed reifies categories of otherness as universal givens, therefore allowing hegemony to operate across social formations (Hennessy, 1993 p 78). Preconstructed in the interdiscourse, the notion that all Filipino women are mail order brides and as such are likely to be victims of violence has, thus, tremendous ideological force in shaping commonsense understandings of Filipino women in Australia.

country of your choice – there appears to be a “special” on Korean women – and home-shop your way through the images of hundreds of potential partners (Whiting, 1999 p 20).

The article not only fixes all Filipino women as ‘mail order brides’, regardless of how they migrated to Australia or the length of their marriage, but it also constructs them as a special category of ‘mail order bride’. While Russian partners are women, ‘Asian’ wives are ‘girls’:

The demise of the Soviet Union has seen a marked increase in the number of Russian women looking for husbands in the West, particularly in the United States. There, the demand for Russian partners is now higher than for *Asian girls* (sic), but in Australia, Asia, particularly the Philippines, continues to be the major supplier of mail order wives (Whiting, 1999 p 20) (emphasis added).

At times, it seems as though Whiting’s report is actually advertising Filipino women as mail order brides. Particular discourses about Filipino women are conveyed through the article title, “Click here for your dream girl”, introduction agency photos of beautiful, young Filipino women together with the caption “BRIDAL CATALOGUE: An endless parade of women can be beckoned to the screen for selection”, and excerpts from Internet advertisements. As Smith argues, discourses of femininity are articulated to a commercial process and create the ‘motivation’ that returns the [male] purchaser to the commodity market (1988 p 41). Whiting’s article may work to create men’s desire for a ‘perfect wife’ and encourage them to look towards the Philippines for one.

By evoking ‘mail order bride’ discourse, the article exacerbates the problem of violence against Filipino women. As Robinson argues, the term ‘mail order bride’ defines Filipino women as commodities and they are then seen to undermine the notion of romantic love as the ‘norm’ of Australian marriage (1996 pp 54,56). It constitutes and reflects the ‘illegitimacy’ of the women and their motives for marriage. Although Whiting may have endeavoured to present a sympathetic discussion about Filipino women and domestic violence, she nevertheless reinforces the dominant stereotype of Filipino women as commodities, subservient (they are ‘girls’ not women), opportunists and poor – people who are prepared to do anything to escape poverty. In effect, Whiting creates a reverse discourse of Filipino women as victims because of their ‘oriental’ and ‘cultural’ identity as ‘mail order brides’.<sup>6</sup> Considering the circumstances, such women are likely to become victims.

This is an example of what Pettman means when she states that migrant women are often represented in ways which suggest they experience dangers because they are 'Asian' – cultural difference or 'race' becomes the explanation rather than other factors that locate women socially, such as racism, sexism and class (1992 p 35).

Although the article quotes Estelle McNally from the Centre of Philippine Concerns Australia (CPCA), who points to the nexus between myths about Filipino women and male violence, any critical edge is lost by the overall tenor of the article. McNally's statements are juxtaposed with excerpts from an Internet advertisement and "...its helpful guide to the Filipino woman..." (Whiting, 1999 p 20). The advertisement stresses the submissiveness and sexual availability of Filipino women. Immediately following the Internet quotes is a statement that both blames the victims and suggests the murdered Filipino women were mail order brides:

It's almost a carte blanche invitation to abuse, and yet it's an invitation thousands of women are still accepting, even though they've heard the horror stories. CPCA figures show that since 1987, 17 Filipino women have been killed in Australia and four are missing (Whiting, 1999 p 21)

Whiting goes on to say:

Given that this information is freely available to women in the Philippines, courtesy of lobby groups and a Department of Immigration video on domestic violence, perhaps the most remarkable factor of all is that anyone would want to come here in the first place (1999 p 21)

The article, thus, solves the problem of how to understand domestic violence by allowing the reader to pity Filipino women while simultaneously reaffirming the mail order bride discourse and locating the key to violence within the women themselves.<sup>7</sup> Both the stupidity and desperation of women who knowingly risk death for a 'better life' are highlighted. The subtext is that Filipino women are calculating opportunists, determined to proceed in spite of warnings – they, thus, deserve it. There is a parallel here with the media construction of the so-called 'boat people'. What is glaringly absent in Whiting's account is any sense of the women's agency. Filipino women do display considerable agency within the constraints of their particular situations. Rather than address the issue of violence against Filipino women humanely, Whiting's article recasts the practices and experiences of the

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault defines a reverse discourse as one which "circulate[s] without changing [its] form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy" (Foucault, 1978 p 102).

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed this tendency in the media elsewhere (Saroca, 1997).

women through a racist, sexist and classist lens, thus compounding the violence many encounter.

## **Narratives of Filipino women**

The narratives of two Filipino women, Rissa and Belinda, who both experienced physical, psychological and verbal abuse in relationships with non-Filipino partners, identify the nexus between media representation and violence. In particular, they emphasise the central role the media plays in exacerbating the problem of violence against Filipino women. Rissa works in a women's refuge with women escaping domestic violence as well as educating community organisations, such as Filipino groups and the police, about such violence. Belinda arrived as a migrant from Papua New Guinea and is a nurse who also does voluntary referral work with women in violent relationships. Reinserting Filipino women's voices into Whiting's article allows an exploration of the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive dimensions of violence. Although the narratives of Rissa and Belinda are also discursive, I suggest that they provide a more accurate and adequate perspective on the violence experienced by Filipino women than Whiting's account. The interview quotes exemplify Crenshaw's argument that the actual violence many women experience as well as responses to it is not only shaped by gender but also by other dimensions of their identity such as 'race' and class, as is the representation of that violence and its effects (1991 pp 1242,1245).

The narratives of Rissa and Belinda illuminate the way the media often misrepresent Filipino women's experiences of violence as well as create desire for and discontent with the women. As Cunneen and Stubbs argue, the specific racialised and sexualised construction of Filipino women as submissive, passive and servile yet sexual beings – perfect marriage partners – renders them particularly vulnerable to abuse in Australia (1997 pp 41,110-113).<sup>8</sup> However, while Filipino women are constructed as representing

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<sup>8</sup> According to Cunneen and Stubbs, although the violence Filipino women experience can be understood at one level as male violence against women, masculine fantasies of Filipino women are a fundamental factor in the abuse (1997 p 119). The violence is contextualised as domination that has been mediated by representations of 'race' and gender: men attempt to live out the masculine fantasy and their Filipina partners refuse to comply (Cunneen & Stubbs, 1997 pp 113-114). Cunneen and Stubbs establish that Filipino women in Australia are almost six times more likely to be victims of homicide than other Australian women (1997 p 31).

masculine fantasies of desire, they are also constructed in terms of male-defined images of fear – hence the stereotypes of Filipino women as insatiable, manipulative, and exploitative of (‘first world’) men’s emotions (Cunneen & Stubbs, 1997 pp 102,119,120).<sup>9</sup> Rissa’s and Belinda’s comments point to the way such themes, together with notions of victim-blaming, rescue and eternal gratitude (*utang na loob*), underpin both the actual violence Filipino women experience at the hands of their non-Filipino partners and the media representation of that violence. They suggest that a dialectic between commonsense discourses of the media and non-Filipino partners is a significant dimension of the abuse. As Rissa clearly expresses:

*I think media generally is unfair in reporting violence against Filipino women. It comes across to me that most of the time these Filipinas deserved it. That they’ve done something that’s why they were hit. And also I feel like they are misrepresenting most Filipinas because they only maybe interview a certain kind of Filipino women when in fact, like the rest of the women in the world, we are all individual... Well for example while it’s true that some Filipinas came here as mail order brides – although I don’t have anything against mail order brides – there are many that are not. And I don’t know why being a mail bride has anything to do with being abused. I believe that many men who order a bride are selfish. They do it not because they really love the woman but because they want somebody to look after them and as their company and all that, but not wanting to be a responsible proper husband. I believe that these men think that just because the Filipino women came from a poor country that they will put up with anything. Many of these men think that by coming to Australia, the poor women owe them for the rest of their lives because they have been rescued. When some of these Filipino women are not prepared to put up with abuse then these men are really shocked. And I think they believed that they have the right to abuse them because they feel they have to be grateful for being able to come to Australia. And many of these*

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Smith argues that discourses of femininity structure desire, and that desire and discontent are constructed in the relationship between the perfect textual image and the forever imperfections of the body (1988 pp 47-48,53). It is through the textual image that women [and their male partners] become conscious of bodily defects (Smith, 1988 p 50). Significantly, as the narratives of Rissa and Belinda indicate, violence can also arise in this relationship as many Filipino women fail to live up to the impossible media (male) image of perfect marriage partners.

*Filipinas think so too that they have to put up with the abuse because of this particular reason that they owe these men (July, 1999)*

Rissa provides more detail:

*Because what I find also is many of the men that marry Filipino women expect for their wives to put up with things that most Australian women will not, will never put up with. And if these Filipino women will not do that, then they will be branded as they are no good, they are the users. And the media tend to play this up or make it worse by writing that because of our race that's why this happened (July, 1999)*

Like Rissa, Belinda emphasises this connection between racist and sexist media representation and the violence perpetrated by non-Filipino partners.

As she explained to me:

*I think there is a relationship for the fact that whatever you hear with the Australian men and whatever they say, that's always sort of related to what has been published. This is a good example from my husband. My husband is not really a person who is criticising a person from other nationality. But he picks on the Filipina. You know why? Because he mixes with Filipino-Australian marriage couples and these Australian men are the ones who are branding their own wives and said, "oh you are not good. You are dopey." And mind you, with all the things that my husband had said to me when he is not well, he said "you're hopeless" and things like that, that's the same words that I hear from those Filipinas I have helped. And that flows on because this all comes from the media and the portrayal of the men going over. And I said to my own husband "why marry a Filipina when in fact you have that presumption within yourself that we are not good. What makes us bad?" He said "oh yeah because you are all mail order brides. You just come here just to sit down on your bottom and depend on social security." And I said to him "I am not depending on social security. I am the one bringing you up. I am the one doing all your resume and everything." (August, 1999)*

Belinda develops this point:

*Yeah, regarding to what my husband sometimes say, I presume that comes from the Australian friends that he mix with married to a Filipina. Of course they had those different presumptions and different*

*things they're calling their wives. And it happens that my husband is picking it up and start coming to me. He said, "oh you're hopeless. You won't be good here in Australia. You'll be the same. You'll be just the Filipino yourself." And I tried to think about it. And then after all when I see all these articles in the paper 'mail order brides start coming here', so I start cutting them, highlighting the words that I don't really like. And my husband turn around to me and say "no wonder that's the way you people are." It creates racism towards the Filipino women. The community sees us as opportunists. It is what they read and what they hear about Filipino women, that's the way they portray us (August, 1999)*

According to Hall, cultural meanings have material effects as they regulate the social practices and conduct of individuals (1997a p 3; 1997b p 28).<sup>10</sup> Rissa and Belinda identify how the reporting of violence against Filipino women within stereotypical terms gives rise to many negative effects, in particular the way it creates and aggravates situations of real danger for Filipino women. Rissa suggests that such portrayals work to discredit the women in the wider community, thus invalidating their experiences of violence. She felt that the reporting fuels a general assumption that the violence Filipino women experience is not as bad as the abuse other women experience. As Rissa explains:

*I think this reporting has an effect in the wider community. I think that people buy into this. They believed what they heard from the media that we're no good, we have no brains and all that because I have an experience as a worker. I helped two Filipino women from a domestic violence situation and it was reported twice to the police and there was no record of it. Maybe because these two Filipino women don't speak much English. And when the police came, the husband said there was no problem and everything was okay. The Filipino woman said "no, no, no wait I have a complaint. I have a complaint." The police just left. He didn't even want to listen to her...Well I think it*

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the research of Woelz-Stirling, Kelaher and Manderson reveals that the stigmatisation of Filipino women and their marriages to non-Filipino men limits public discourse on domestic violence (1998 p 289). Further, they argue that stereotypical representations and social disapproval of these marriages, and the consequent shame Filipino women experience, has led to an underreporting of physical and emotional abuse (Woelz-Stirling et al., 1998 p 289)

*makes us feel like we are not being taken seriously or respected by many people. And I don't know if I have mentioned before, as a worker in the refuge even the police sometimes I think behaved the way they do because of what they've heard or what they've read in the media. They don't respect us as much as Australian women maybe because they think that we will just put up with anything. Some people would think because you are a Filipino woman you must be a mail order bride yourself (July, 1999)*

Rissa emphasises her point about the harmful consequences of media representation:

*It [the media portrayal] gives clients less self-confidence. They feel that they are not being taken seriously or that people don't believe them. Even the police that I was talking about before told me that maybe the women were lying, that's why there was no record. No one will believe the women because there's already a stereotype in the community that we deserve it, that we must have done something to be abused (July, 1999)*

Similarly, Belinda pinpoints the way the dominant media portrayal of Filipino women as mail order brides works to stigmatise the women and isolate them from the wider community:

*The title 'Filipino mail order brides' isolates Filipinas...It does isolate the Filipino women because the community itself know that we are a mail order bride, whatever you do, you try your best to mix in the community, you're out anyway. You had that feeling that you are a second class citizen. You want to enjoy but you can't. They won't even support you. Because it looks like it goes back to you "that's your fault. Why you come here? Why you get married to an old man?" They don't even know, yet, how old you are and how old your husband is. But they branded you that all of us really married to an old man, anyway. Mail order bride says... The meaning of that for the people who don't know us is a young Filipina marrying an old man. And a young Filipina just looking for greener pastures and trying to use the system just to come out, get out of the country. That's the way. It says it all, which make us isolated from the rest of the community. Cause wherever you go, Chinese, Vietnamese, they even say "oh mail order bride." Why*

*people have to say that? Because the media had portrayed that we are mail order brides (July, 1999)*

Belinda goes on to outline in more detail the links between media portrayal and isolation, and how isolation increases the vulnerability of Filipino women. It may have dangerous consequences:

*One example too is my neighbour. She thinks that I'm the one violent not my husband because of me being a Filipina. Because that's the media. And she won't believe because she thought that's me being, you know, answering him back. And they can hear me answering back they think I'm the one really bad. But I prove it to them that I'm a good person never hurt them or never do anything. And that's the way it affects the community as well. The media portrayal affects a Filipina in violent situation, that's why they cannot ask for help. Because the neighbour themselves isolate them. That's why they need that support that they have that Filipina who live closer to them and can support them. Because those of the neighbourhood would say, "oh that's your fault because you cannot speak in English." And that's what other Filipina said to me "oh my neighbour won't even know about me because I'm Filipina." Because they read it in the newspaper and they watch it on the television so they know where we come from. So never been given the chance. There's a lot of them out there. And it's just a pity because that makes the Filipina more isolated and they are very vulnerable to any violence because of the media portraying all of this. They're more vulnerable to be killed by the husband and to take their own life (July, 1999)*

The narratives of Rissa and Belinda reveal gaps in media accounts such as Whiting's report. It is neither accurate nor adequate to define all Filipino women who migrate to Australia as so called 'mail order brides', or to suggest that they are desperate, stupid, poor, opportunistic or the cause of the violence. Moreover, Filipino women are not a homogeneous group but come from a diversity of backgrounds, as do the non-Filipino men they marry. Both Rissa and Belinda identify the central role the media play in exacerbating the problem of violence against Filipino women. Whiting's article is profoundly silent in regard to the pivotal role of media representation in the marketing of Filipino women, whether intentionally or not, and the creation of desire for and discontent with these women. Rissa and Belinda illuminate some of the

negative effects that racist, sexist and classist representations of Filipino women and violence give rise to. Overall, their narratives highlight that Whiting's one-dimensional and sensational reporting does not resonate with the everyday lives of Filipino women and the violence they experience. The relationship between the discursive and nondiscursive here is one of misrepresentation and the creation or aggravation of danger for many Filipino women.

## **Representing Rosalina Canonizado**

### **Media discourses**

The image of young, beautiful, desperate and poor women who disregard advice about danger, risk abuse and use Aussie men as tickets to a better life, so pervasive in Whiting's article on Filipino women and violence, is apparent in the media reporting of Rosalina Canonizado's murder. However, although there is a discursive continuity in constructions of 'the Filipino woman' and violence across media, there is also a marked discontinuity in representations of Rosalina over time within the same newspaper. In textual discourse, Rosalina epitomises an inherent contradiction. She is both a beautiful young bride – a perfect marriage partner – and gold-digging opportunist.

Discourses of domestic bliss inform the earlier textual representation of Rosalina Canonizado's murder (Macken, 1993 p 6; Quinn, 1993 pp 1,8). The following extracts from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Sunday Telegraph* reportage of Thomas Keir's acquittal for Rosalina Canonizado's murder construct their relationship as a love match. Keir is the perfect husband and, by implication, Rosalina is his perfect wife. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Thomas Andrew Keir loved his wife, Rosalie. As neighbours who knew them said, they seemed very happy during the 18 months they were married...In his statement to the jury, Mr Keir said: "I loved Rosalie very much."... "He was her first boyfriend," Mrs Canonizado had said outside the court at the start of the trial. "And for someone who is away from her family for the first time and without any friends in Australia, she would fall in love with anyone who was really nice to her." And Mr Keir was really nice to Rosalie. As Mr Molomby [Keir's counsel] told the jury: "If there was any whisper of a bad relationship between Mr Keir and his wife, you would have heard it." Of almost 50 people who gave evidence in the trial, no-one knew of any problem in their relationship (Macken, 1993 p 6).

In similar tones, the *Sunday Telegraph* journalist describes Rosalina as Thomas Keir's 'beloved bride' and presents a picture of an idyllic relationship:

Mr Keir's mother, Joan, with whom he has lived for the past two years, describes the relationship between her son and Rosalie as "wonderful" – a view shared by neighbours, who gave evidence at the trial that the couple seemed very happy during the 18 months they were married. Mr Keir's upholstery business was doing well, the couple had made substantial improvements to their home in Tregear, in Sydney's west and were considering starting their own family. The pair seemed very much in love and spent little time apart. But on Saturday, April 13, 1991, the idyll was shattered (Quinn, 1993 p 8).

Both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Sunday Telegraph* journalists presented very sympathetic accounts of Keir and provided him with considerable space to tell his story. According to Thomas Keir, he loved his wife and they were happy. Readers are meant to assume that Rosalina Canonizado shared the same experience. Various sources were used to support Thomas Keir's claims – neighbours, his mother and counsel. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* article, the statements of Ester Canonizado, Rosalina's mother, were linked in such a way that even they appeared to support Tom Keir's story. The media simply reproduced Keir's claims without any investigative journalism. In particular, they did not consult Rosalina's family members for their version of events.

In contrast to the earlier reportage, discourses of love match and domestic bliss are conspicuously missing from the *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney) 1999 report on Thomas Keir's conviction for murdering Jean Keir, his first wife. The article correctly presents Keir as a violent, jealous and possessive tyrant who brutally dominated Jean's life (Peterson, 1999 p 18). Brief mention is made of Thomas Keir's similar treatment of Rosalina Canonizado but it is in the context of his violence towards Jean. Significantly, when the article makes reference to Rosalina, it articulates an explicitly orientalist and culturalist discourse which mars an otherwise sympathetic account. Although Peterson, the *Daily Telegraph* journalist, telephoned Ester Canonizado in the Philippines after Thomas Keir's trial for Jean's murder, he reproduced the tired old sexist, class-based and racist stereotypes of Filipino women – even though the grounds for doing so were especially tenuous. Peterson states:

When Thomas Keir showed more than a passing interest in Rosalina Canonisado (sic) she thought he was her ticket to a better life. She came from a poor family in the Philippines while he owned a business, a house and showered her with gifts. Rosalina ignored warnings from her Sydney-based relatives that Keir totally dominated the life of his first wife. In less than two years they were married, and Keir's obsessive personality re-emerged. And

like Jean, Rosalina's union with Keir ended in gruesome circumstances (Peterson, 1999 p 18).

Peterson's comments point to the behaviour and 'culture' of Rosalina Canonizado as the problem rather than the violence that killed her.<sup>11</sup> In media discourse, Rosalina Canonizado is 'matter out of place' in Mary Douglas' sense of the term and in a racist sense in that she belongs in the Philippines married to a Filipino man.<sup>12</sup> Without overtly stating it, Peterson implies that Rosalina is a mail order bride, a discourse that has a long history in the public arena and is readily recognisable. He, thus, simultaneously brings her 'legitimacy' and motives for marriage into question and provides a framework for understanding her murder. Rosalina is discursively constructed in terms of hegemonic narratives of Filipino women. She emerges as a poor, manipulative, predatory and desperate woman, a 'gold digger' who used Tom Keir as a passport to Australia. The discourse of 'a better life' recasts Rosalina Canonizado as an abuser who took advantage of an 'unsuspecting' Aussie male. A theme of rescue underpins the discourse, and is played out as a binary opposition – Australian man rescues Filipino woman from a life of poverty. The subtext is that Filipino women should be eternally grateful for 'being saved', even if violence is a feature of the 'better life'. Gender, 'race' and class relations are brought into sharp relief in the characterisation of Rosalina Canonizado's quest for a better life in terms of 'first world' male affluence and 'third world' female opportunism and poverty.<sup>13</sup> Peterson's construction of Rosalina's quest in terms of an escape from poverty obscures her actual background as well as the reasons why she left the Philippines. Rosalina Canonizado is also described as a 'beautiful bride' and 'petite half-Filipino girl' (Peterson, 1999 p 18). Here again are the sexist and racist stereotypes of Filipino women that featured so predominantly in Whiting's

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<sup>11</sup> As Pettman argues, minority women are often absent within western discourses and when they are made visible "...it is often as problems or victims, in ways that deny them agency and purport to explain their experiences within culturalist frames" (1992 p vii). Similarly, Gilroy suggests that Black people are forever fixed within an "...alternating current of racism between problem and victim status..." (1987 p 12).

<sup>12</sup> Douglas argues that cultures require things to stay in their appointed place to ensure stability, and cultural order is disturbed when things turn up in the wrong category or fail to fit any category (1966 pp 35-36). This 'matter out of place' is seen as a transgression of boundaries and is, therefore, perceived as dangerous.

<sup>13</sup> Discourses of 'a better life' in the Australian media tend to construct and reinforce gendered class and 'racial' stereotypes of Filipino women. There is a strong notion in media and other popular discourses that Australia **is the better life**, even if the Filipino woman is subjected to violence. The quest for a 'better life' is often constructed as something pathologically intrinsic to Filipino women rather than a phenomenon with a long history in Australia. For example, in the 19th century, Caroline Chisholm imported young Irish women to marry non-Aboriginal Australian men.

article, and are pervasive in media reporting in general. Peterson's portrayal of Rosalina creates a narrow and distorted picture of her life and is particularly disappointing as the major story about Jean Keir's murder is written more sensitively. The account is explicitly culturalist in that it locates the key to murder within Rosalina Canonizado's presumed 'culture' and violence is seen as the outcome of her desire for a better life. Her ascribed motive for marrying and alleged disregard of relatives' warnings about Thomas Keir's treatment of Jean, position Rosalina Canonizado as less of a victim than a woman complicit in her own demise.

### **Rosalina Canonizado's story**

Presenting the story of Rosalina Canonizado through the narratives of her mother, Ester Canonizado, and sister, Ella Masigan, gives Rosalina a voice in the present and also allows an exploration of the relationship between the discursive and nondiscursive. Reinserting Rosalina's voice into media accounts of her murder reveals a misrepresentation of both the woman and the violence she experienced. It also indicates that Rosalina Canonizado was not simply a victim but demonstrated considerable agency within the constraints of her particular situation.

Ester and Ella undermine the pervasive theme of domestic bliss that pervades the earlier media reports of Keir's acquittal. As the interview quotes make clear, Thomas Keir's 'love' for Rosalina Canonizado was not 'domestic bliss' or an 'idyllic' relationship for his wife. His possessiveness, jealousy and need to control Rosalina's movements suggest a history of domestic violence. Keir employed strategies of social isolation to cut off Rosalina from the support of other family members. Ester's and Ella's comments provide a different interpretation to the media version of Rosalina and Tom as so much in love that they spent little time apart. Rather, Tom Keir's jealousy and domination was a major factor in keeping them together. As Ester explains:

*She was starting to get lonely and because she was not allowed to go to visit our relatives very often, she got lonely. She can't go anywhere she wants unless she's with Tom. She's not allowed to go any place... And she is really sweet to anybody. Especially our relatives, they have close relationships. But suddenly it was cut off by Tom when they got married... That's why our other relatives were saying that "Oh Rosalie,*

*we have not been seeing you so much. Why, what happened?" (Ester, January, 2000)*

Ella reaffirms Ester's assessment of Thomas Keir's relationship with Rosalina:

*It's like she was in hiding. Because prior to her marriage, we had a very good relationship with our relatives there. We come to occasions like birthdays and anniversaries. We always get together in parks, you know, BBQs. And since she got married, it also reached me that she's not allowed to go alone (Ella, January, 2000)*

Constant arguments over Tom's drinking and gambling further challenge the media discourse of domestic bliss. A few days prior to her murder, Rosalina was particularly distressed about her domestic situation. She had planned to purchase a car, which would have greatly increased her mobility. Both Ester and Ella felt that Tom's drinking and gambling were a significant source of conflict in the relationship. They were concerned that neither the court nor the media chose to investigate this angle in relation to Rosalina's murder. Rather, as Ella astutely notes, in the official reconstruction of events all traces of conflict were removed. She relays the last telephone conversation that she had with her sister to illustrate her point:

*Excuse me but the last time I talked to her she was even telling me – this could be the cause of their quarrel – she was telling me "ate, you know what, I'm buying my car. I'm buying my car already". But she called up several times prior to her death. First she was bubbling that she was buying a car. And then the next call was telling me "you know this guy lost in the dog race, greyhounds, and he lost so much \$10,000 or something". And she was so mad and she was telling me, just to unload her emotional problems, she was telling me "you see this man, I've been working hard. I want to go back. My car will be delivered soon and we don't have money to... He promised me". It's like that... Oo, a few days before she was murdered. But the thing is when I went to Australia then after the murder, I think there was a video showing that they were OK. That they visited one of my aunties who gave birth or who was in the hospital. And then their video which was taken was very sweet and that's the video that they've been showing there...It's like the video that they were OK. That they're very sweet. Of course, will you let people know that you're fighting? When*

*you talk of marriage, you just keep it to yourself when you fight. It's like if you tell somebody bad words it's just inside your house and nobody can, you know. So that night maybe they're OK but... (Ella, January, 2000).*

Peterson's article describes Rosalina Canonizado as coming from a 'poor family' in the Philippines and using the affluent Thomas Keir as a 'ticket to Australia'. There is a profound silence here on anything which threatens to disrupt the perceived 'truth'. What the text refuses to say is that Rosalina was a highly educated woman from a middle-class family of professionals who travelled extensively. There are major factual inaccuracies in the article. The ease with which Peterson slotted Rosalina into the standard racialised, sexualised and class-based stereotype available for Filipino women, despite evidence to the contrary, demonstrates that a mail order bride discourse and its orientalist and culturalist cognates underlies the text. Ester Canonizado and Ella Masigan were highly critical of the way Rosalina was represented in the news reportage. Addressing this issue, Ella commented:

*So I just want to, for the articles that came out after my sister's death that we were very poor in the Philippines, well I just can say that we're not that very poor because when you say 'very poor' you can't even afford to buy your food. I mean, we all went to college, four of us. My mother was a teacher, public school teacher. You see, I can speak English very well so we must have gone to a good school. And we came all from university... My father use to work before his heart attack after the death of my sister, he use to work with Manila Gas Corporation as a senior collector... I don't know who wrote that one that Rosalie came from a poor family. Cause I don't consider us rich but you know here in the Philippines once your children went to college and got their jobs... I'm sorry to say that but maybe, maybe because we're far away and nobody can just, you know, it's easier to interview Tom than to call us in the Philippines... Sorry, it just came out that she was a poor girl, helpless, and she just wanted to come to Australia to marry an Australian and live there. We can prove it that Rosalie finished a university degree in accounting and she was actually a Dean's Lister and half scholar then (Ella, January, 2000)*

The discursive representation of 'first world' male affluence and 'third world' female poverty and opportunism so strongly underscored in the *Daily*

*Telegraph* article unravels when read against the narratives of Ester and Ella. Rosalina Canonizado was not a financial dependant, but worked as a business partner with Thomas Keir in a joint venture. She was also a career woman who provided further support to Tom through her paid work. Thomas Keir was not affluent. Rather, Rosalina worked hard at two jobs to make their upholstery business successful. The text is silent on these aspects of her life. Rosalina's financial and practical contributions to Tom are made clear in the following pieces of narrative:

*She tried to build up that business upholstery and make it big along with Tom (Ella, January, 2000)*

*Yah, along with Tom. She's really willing to leave the office, sacrifice working in the office, just to help Tom so that their business will become big. And then she said she has put a lot of money also, because she was working then, in the business so that it will be successful...Sometimes I think that Tom is really disappointed because Rosalie was working. He really doesn't want her if possible to work but because they need the money because the business is just starting, he was forced to let her work (Ester, January, 2000)*

*About Tom's big business. They emphasised that Tom is a rich guy and he owns a big upholstery business when, in fact, he fought with his partner that's why he started again from scratch. And Rosalie helped, even funded him (Ester, January, 2000)*

*When Rosalie was already working in Silverwater she even funded Tom's start for the upholstery business...(Ella, January, 2000)*

*Yah. They both started it...And Tom and Rosalie started again, another business. So they are partners in that business because Rosalie was working then. She was the only one working so she helped in the financial status of the shop. And she even, she was working two jobs. She was working in Silverwater and after that she helped Tom do something, help in finishing the upholstery (Ester, January, 2000)*

Peterson's article plays on the notion that Rosalina knowingly disregarded warnings from relatives about Thomas Keir's brutal domination of Jean. This then became a background factor in the explanation of her murder. Rosalina's 'reckless' actions are the focus of attention rather than the fatal act of

violence, and she is reconstructed as complicit in her own death. However, the knowledge that it was Jean's mother who introduced Thomas Keir to Rosalina helps clarify the situation. Jean's mother and aunt have stated publicly that they were concerned about Tom's 'distress' after Jean 'disappeared' so they introduced him to Rosalina to "perk him up a bit" (Cornwell, 2000; Smith, 2000). Given that Jean's family were instrumental in bringing them together, Rosalina had little reason to be concerned about Tom at that time. The following discussion contextualises the meeting and the early stages of the relationship:

*She met Tom Keir when she attended the wedding where she was invited. He was introduced to her by the mother of Jean. But she did not know at first that they were relatives. It was only after a while when they talked about the relationship of Jean. But she never met Jean in person because Jean was already gone by that time. That's what the mother of Jean said to her "she's gone" and she introduced Tom to her as Jean's ex husband. That time she was holidaying in Australia but she never met Jean in person only the mother. It was the mother of Jean who introduced Tom to her with the help of the other relatives. And then when they talk about it she found out that they were related in some way around fourth degree. But she never met them before because she was not yet born when the Strachan family left for Australia (Ester, January, 2000)*

*I'm sorry to interrupt because I think they thought that the guy, that Tom, needed a companion because they do believe or maybe they were told that she really did leave him for another man. She just went away and this guy is really pining (Ella, January, 2000)*

*So they thought they are making Tom happy by getting Rosalie as his date. And after a few dates then he always go to the place where Rosalie stays. He was even very helpful to our relatives showing everything that is good. That's really what men do usually when they want to impress somebody. So after a time, Rosalie got in love with him and when she came to the Philippines to attend the wedding of her sister he went with her to the Philippines (Ester, January, 2000)*

Ester's comments point to a customary aspect of courting in the western world – couples usually try to impress each other in the early stages of their

relationship. When Rosalina received a letter about Thomas Keir just prior to their wedding, their relationship was already established. It was only after the marriage, as is often the case with violent men, that Tom's violence came to the fore. Moreover, the perceived reason for the letter and the fact that Jean's family had initiated their meeting worked to dampen concern. Ella explains:

*When there was already a schedule for the wedding, I remember the mother of Jean, who is apparently my tita, which I don't really know how it happened, apparently she sent a letter to Rosalie because she was mad at Tom. But since the beginning, she and another aunty introduced him to her... Then she started warning Rosalie "oh you see, that guy is like that, like that, like that. And he was very much in love with my daughter". After all that had happened, she introduced them... Well, of course that letter is so hard to accept cause somehow, when we came to realise that she's a relative, the mother of Jean... There was no mentioning of Jean before (Ella, January, 2000)*

Rosalina did not recklessly ignore warnings from relatives. At the time of her marriage, given the circumstances, it is understandable that she did not realise the danger Thomas Keir posed.

## **Conclusion**

Exploring the relationship between Filipino women's experiences of violence and the media's discursive constructions of that violence has demonstrated that often there is very little resonance between media portrayals and the acts of violence they are supposed to represent. One of the major problems is that the media tend to construct Filipino women in sexist, racist and class-based ways, and their experiences of violence and response to it are shaped in a like manner. The paper illuminates how discourses of mail order bride, orientalism and culturalism underpinning media representations of Filipino women together create desire for and discontent with the women. It is in this space that violence arises. Such discourses work to locate the key to violence within the women themselves. While discursive continuity in constructions of Filipino women and violence across media is a predominant feature, the paper identifies a marked discontinuity in representation of Rosalina Canonizado over time within the same newspaper. The articles examined provide little insight into the complexities of the violence that many Filipino

women experience in their everyday lives. Reinserting the voices of three Filipino women, Rissa, Belinda and Rosalina, into media accounts not only gives voice to those centrally concerned, but also illuminates problems with media reporting on violence, in particular inaccuracies and inadequacies at the level of representation, and silences on the central role of the media in the marketing and creation of desire and discontent. Importantly, it highlights that the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive dimensions of violence is often one of misrepresentation, and the creation and exacerbation of danger for Filipino women at the level of media effects. The articles examined demonstrate Wall's argument that media reportage of crimes committed against minority groups may reinforce the very stereotypes that they struggle against (1994 p 1). The challenge for the media is how to present 'news' such as murder while simultaneously ensuring that the victims, in this case Filipino women, are not themselves stigmatised (Mowatt & Wall, 1992 p 12). In concluding, Ella's comments on the media portrayal of Rosalina succinctly capture the central core of the problem:

*The problem in that thing that they did not focus how was she as a person, you know. That she was, as I've mentioned earlier in the tape, she was a graduate in a premier university was never mentioned. And also the side that was reported was from the other party to lift his chances of proving that, to generalise Filipinas who come to Australia as mail order brides. They did not access information from us. Did not get our side. Then they were not able to say anything about my sister coming to Australia because she benefited from my being an airline employee and that she can go there anytime she wants. And then, they didn't find out if what they wrote was true. You know, it's a matter of confirming. If the other side says "yeah, yeah, these are not poor families", at least they had checked it out. Or gave the effort to check it out and come here, although it would be really expensive. But just a letter or a telephone call. We were waiting for that for so long (Ella, January, 2000)*

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