

Imbisibol [Invisible]. 2015. Written by Herlyn Alegre. Directed by Lawrence Fajardo. Produced by Solar Entertainment. 132 minutes.

IMBISIBOL TELLS THE STORY OF *BILOGS* (*bilog* or circle pertains to zero, signifying nonexistence)—undocumented Filipino migrant workers—and their struggles in Japan. Uneasiness dominates the beginning of the film, as Linda and her husband, Kazuya, are drawn into conflict over his insistence and her refusal to evict the bilogs in their apartment. The scene is capped off with a news showing the deportation of an overstaying Filipino family.

The succeeding scenes show the lives of other bilogs who are all connected to Linda: roommates, elderly Benjie and Edward, who is deported when immigration officers catch him without valid documents; Manuel, Linda's former tenant who is a host club entertainer and has been out of the limelight; and Rodel, a single father who works in a lumberyard and one of Linda's tenants.

The plot thickens when Rodel gets promoted and accidentally kills a jealous Filipino coworker in a brawl. Distraught, he runs back to the apartment to escape. On that same day, Manuel and Benjie arrive separately at Linda's place: the former in order to borrow money, the latter in order to bid farewell.

The film's climax heightens when Rodel desperately tries to evade police search by forcing himself into Linda's house to hide. Meanwhile, Manuel, unable to borrow money, leaves. He is apprehended and questioned by the police, who discover that he is a bilog. The police proceed to enter and search Linda's house. Benjie is found with no valid residency status. Together with Manuel, he faces deportation.

The film is dominated by spatially limited scenes: the cramped rooms, the host club, and even the sofa-confined make-out scene between Manuel and a patron. These highlight the personally and socially limited activity

of undocumented migrant workers. The use of low lighting and the constant play of shadows serve to indicate the need to hide, disappear, and blend into the opaque screen of the night; hence, the need to be rendered *imbisibol*: invisible to others, even to one's self.

To be *imbisibol* means constantly hiding and changing one's identity to better blend in with society. This is indicated by the use of Japanese or pseudo-Japanese aliases by Linda and Benjie—a practice that is even more to be expected in Japan where racial stereotypes and the assumed homogeneity of the Japanese pose formidable challenges to the social integration of other ethnic nationalities (Nagayoshi 2011, 562). This is shown in the scene where Linda, a Japanese citizen through her marriage with Kazuya, is approached by an undercover immigration officer who suspects her of being a bilog.

The true nature of one's work is also rendered invisible to the family: Manuel prostitutes himself for additional income. His experience shows how the objectification and commodification of the body experienced by males under the female gaze are at work and are part and parcel of overseas employment. Sexuality is also rendered invisible, as in the case of Benjie's romantic affair with Edward. Moreover, bilogs make themselves invisible to authorities by avoiding getting caught through the help of fellow Filipinos, such as the priest who code-switches between Japanese, English, and Filipino to "preach" caution against immigration checks.

Issues of the rights of migrant workers arise, as in the case of the elderly Benjie's unhealthy working conditions. His health is further jeopardized by his bilog status which hinders his access to social services. These violations of foreign migrant rights in Japan are perpetrated because the lack of effective implementation of legal mechanisms.

Nagayoshi Kikuko (2011) writes that in Japan, "The social rights of these foreign residents are generally admitted as 'a favour' or 'permissions' (Okawa 2001; Ota 2001), and whether these 'rights' are secured in practice differs among local governments" (566). In the film, this "rights-as-favor/permission," such as the right to work, is shown when Benjie is reported

to his Japanese supervisor because he was sleeping on the job (he was on a night shift). Without regard for his age and his health situation, his Japanese supervisor reprimands Benjie; reminding him that he only allows him to continue to work despite his lapses because it is a “favor” he grants him for being “friends.” Because of this, it appears that Benjie does not receive any medical benefits from his work.

In addition to these, the film also shows the psychological burdens of being a bilog. For Linda, coddling her bilog *kababayans* (compatriots) nearly jeopardizes her marriage even though she does so out of compassion. She also faces a moral dilemma and suffers from subsequent psychological trauma when she is forced to kick her tenants out. Another psychological burden portrayed is the isolation felt and experienced by bilogs. This is summed up in Manuel’s bitter remark, “*Hindi ninyo ako naiintindihan.*” [You don’t understand me.]

It is to the credit of the film that it represents undocumented Filipino workers in Japan as people whose inclinations of self-preservation and survival prevail and rule out accepted forms of social and legal codes of conduct. By being faithful to this biting reality, the film unmask what is usually a romanticized image of Filipino migrant workers.

The film ends not in the glorious exaltation of migrant workers but in a grounded and humanized realism. It starts and ends in harrowing uneasiness. Unlike typical films on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) during the last decade, the ending is neither comforting nor inspirational: Linda kicks out her illegal tenants, and refuses to provide refuge for Rodel. All the bilogs are caught and eventually deported. And the system that forces people to sell their labor because of the lack and inadequacy of decent and sufficiently paying employment at home is neither inspiring nor a source of pride.

References

- Nagayoshi, Kikuko. 2011. "Support of Multiculturalism, But for Whom? Effects of Ethno-National Identity on the Endorsement of Multiculturalism in Japan." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (4): 561–78.
- Okawa, Akihiro. 2001. "Gaikokuseki Shimin to Shakai Hoshō, Fukushi Seido" [Foreign Residents and Social Security, Welfare]. In *Tabunka Shugi no Sentaku: 'Shithizunshippu' no Siten kara* [Choices of Multicultural Society: From the Perspective of Citizenship], ed. NIRA Citizenship Research Group, 71–92. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Hyouron Sha.
- Ota, Haruo. 2001. "Kyoiku ni okeru Shiminteki Bunkateki Fubyodo: Nyukama no Kodomo to Gakko Kyoiku" [Cultural Equality in Education: Education for Foreign Children] In *Shithizunshippu' no Siten kara* [Choices of Multicultural Society: From the Perspective of Citizenship], edited by NIRA Citizenship Study Group, 139–58. Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Hyoronsha.

Domar BALMES

University of the Philippines Diliman