



**Rasa Balockaitė**

## "Go West..."

*Myths of femininity and feminist utopias in East and West*

Working illegally in the West, eastern European women take care of "the logistics of bodily experience", freeing western women to participate alongside men in business, science and politics.

"No human being is illegal"  
-- written on a wall in San Francisco

"Go West", a 1970s song by the Village People, was popularized again in 1993 by the Pet Shop Boys, which bestowed the phrase with new connotations. Before the 1990s, in the United States at least, "Go West" would refer to the victorious conquest of the West in the nineteenth century or, even more likely, to the appeal of the youth movements in San Francisco and other West Coast cities in the 1960s. This changed in 1995, when the famous Pet Shop Boys video clip was aired and awarded a Grammy. Exploiting the motif of the fall of the Soviet Union, the clip featured a homogeneous crowd marching over the ruins of the Soviet empire towards the Statue of Liberty. What did "Go West" mean to its listeners? What did it mean in post-Soviet countries, in the former Eastern Bloc for instance?

A reference to the Soviet Union always brings memories of our strange past. On this side of the border, life was very different, horrible in some ways, fascinating in others. Despite the closed borders and the omnipotent censorship, "the West" always stood as a vision and a metaphor of a different, and thus better, life. The vision was distant and unreachable, known only through scarce letters from relatives living overseas and the parcels, containing jeans, chewing gum and concentrated bouillon cubes, which they mailed us, or through the radio programme Voice of America, listened to in secret.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the long suppressed desire burst forth, resulting in waves of emigration, prompted by the difficulties of the transitional period. After the singing revolutions were over, the post-communist states faced many challenges; in 1991, inflation rates reached 225 per cent, in 1992 — 1100 per cent, and in 1993 — 409 per cent, and people's savings were instantly devalued. The levels of unemployment went up to over 17 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Entire industries collapsed, leaving many unemployed, and thousands of citizens of the new democratic countries went after the illusion of a better life by choosing the risky existence of an illegal immigrant in the West.

The eastern European region soon became a source of cheap labour for western Europe and North America. Illegal immigrants are difficult to count. According to some sources, between 1990–2003, more than 300 000 people left Lithuania alone.<sup>2</sup> This number does not take into account such forms of emigration and illegal work as sporadic visits abroad under the pretext of visiting relatives, doing seasonal work, *au pair* programmes and others.

Lithuania's entrance into the European Union in 2004 and the opening of western European job markets and the possibility of getting jobs legally have changed the character of emigration, and the dividing line between the East and the West has moved further east as Lithuanian immigrants have been replaced by Moldavians, Russians and Ukrainians. They provide cheap, unqualified labour, are illegal and disenfranchised, diligent, submissive and invisible, unregistered by the all-seeing state panopticon. How do they live, what do they do and experience in foreign countries, in alien, non-domestic realities? What are their survival strategies? How does the presence of these talking machines affect the environment in which they have settled? How is femininity perceived by the women who have renounced abstract political and civil rights for better pay and fashionable clothes? Having refused their political voice, they walk mute along the streets of London, New York or San Francisco. What is the attitude of those who use the cheap services of immigrant babysitters and house-cleaners?

Sigmund Freud maintained that civilization is based on hard physical labour, non-creative and forced, often invisible and unappreciated, hardly ever acknowledged or mentioned. Ancient Greeks relied on a clear cut distinction between *oikos* (farm, household, family, and private matters) and *polis* (city, state, politics, and public matters). The status of citizen was granted only to the male master of an *oikos*. Others, such as servants, slaves, and women, "did the economic and physical labour of the household, while the master could absorb knowledge and discuss political and philosophical issues of interest to him".<sup>3</sup> The labour carried out by women as well as servants and slaves was an indispensable condition for freedom of the man, the master of the *oikos* and a citizen of the *polis*, to devote himself to theoretical thought and participation in cultural and political matters.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, western democracies were based on the same principle. In order to participate in public debates and political activities, one had to possess financial resources and time, so the public sphere was largely available only to white bourgeois men who had adequate property, a wife and servants. Women and servants performed all physical and economic tasks, so men could have enough free time on their hands to engage in politics. According to Alvin W. Gouldner, "patriarchal subjugation of women and private property were the unmistakable conditions and limits of the post-Enlightenment development of public rationality in bourgeois society".<sup>4</sup>

How does the distribution of labour between the sexes take place? A woman's reproductive system and her ability to conceive, carry, deliver and nurture a baby imprison her in the sphere of physicality and domesticity. A woman gives birth to children, she cooks, does the washing, irons, takes care of the sick and the old, creates comfort, and provides sexual services; in short, she is in charge of what Dorothy Smith calls "the logistics of the bodily experience".<sup>5</sup> This sphere is undervalued but not renounced; it is hardly ever noticed, but indispensable. Smith has proved that the professional career of an individual is directly dependent on his or her ability to dissociate from the sphere of the *oikos* and from physical existence. In patriarchal society, a man easily

dissociates himself from the matters of the household and "the logistics of the bodily experience" as long as there is a woman who takes care of that household, gives birth and nurtures his children, washes his clothes, nurses him in illness, and takes care of his entire physical existence.<sup>6</sup>

Thus man embodies and symbolizes thinking and pure logic, free from the unpleasant and dull household routine. He stands for rationality, action and universality, the sphere of culture and politics, while woman is relegated to the sphere of emotions and spontaneous reactions, to empathy, feelings, and imagination, to passive existence within the confines of the home, to relentless and speechless nature, to a weird and illogical world full of tears, smiles and emotions — all that comprises the secret of femininity.

"Femininity" is a fluid but rather stable image, formed in and sanctioned by patriarchal society. It is used in this text with a degree of critique and irony. According to John Stuart Mill, this kind of femininity was formed by complex and painful interdependence: when everything in a woman's life is acquired only by and/or through a man, there is nothing else left for her but look attractive, smile submissively, and sometimes burst into tears.<sup>7</sup> Eroticized inequality is the key to the secret of femininity.

More and more women are crossing the border between *oikos* and *polis* as feminists insistently fight for political, civil and economic rights for women, as household appliances are perfected, easing but also devaluing the work women do at home, as contraception is legalized, and women's right to control their own bodies is acknowledged. Instead, women are establishing themselves in the masculine spheres of business, science and politics. However, along with the emancipation of women there is increased demand for cheap labour in the *oikos* sphere — the sphere of domesticity — and of "the logistics of the bodily experience".

In western Europe and North America<sup>8</sup> this demand is usually satisfied by immigrant women from poor and developing countries. In the 1990s, they were joined by women from eastern Europe. Such women are invisible and inaudible; they do not have political rights because they are illegal immigrants. The jobs which they choose — which are chosen *for* them — are traditionally considered "feminine" since they typically include childcare, care of the elderly, or household duties. The jobs are transferred, bargained, and sold on an illegal job market, where no state laws or legal norms apply, as it is based on its own rules, verbal agreements, fear, and loyalty.

There is no statistical data about this field, only episodic and incoherent research. The main source of information which I use in this text is my own personal experience (where the boundary between research and life is very arbitrary) in New York in 2004 and some interviews recorded in 2005–2006.

First impressions about the illegal job market in the United States can be formed while browsing internet sites for Lithuanian immigrants, for instance [www.doleris.com](http://www.doleris.com). During October and November of 2007, for example, the job advertisements section contained ten job offers for caring of the elderly, and twenty to work as a babysitter and domestic help; four others offered various unqualified jobs.

It is obvious that this particular job market is related to the *oikos* sphere, or, as Smith calls it, "the logistics of the bodily experience". Even in advanced capitalist countries, this sphere demands sacrifices; therefore, some women,

often immigrants, are sacrificed so that others can be free. While illegal immigrants take care of the kitchen, children, swimming pools, gardens and cats, western women, freed from "the logistics of the bodily experience", can, alongside men, participate in business, science, and politics. Mariya Bikova shows that the conflict between work and domestic spheres can be resolved by purchasing cheap labour, which allows working mothers to continue being good mothers by simply paying other women to take over part of their maternal duties.<sup>9</sup> Here, one could make a somewhat unpleasant but significant parallel with the French upper classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Elisabeth Badinter points out, any French woman with an adequate social status would hire a nurse to breastfeed and nurture her baby and thus free herself from the troubles of motherhood.<sup>10</sup> There is little exoticism here: nowadays, especially in the US, an illegal immigrant babysitter feeds the baby she is in charge of, having warmed up a bottle the baby's mother has left in the fridge. Just as in patriarchal society, today, the dividing line between *oikos* and *polis* is not fixed; instead, it is constantly revised, decided not by a person's gender, but by their legal status: those who do not have citizenship and a work permit are treated as inadequate and imperfect and are restricted by the household routine, unable to free themselves from it. Bikova writes:

When everything in a woman's — in this case, an illegal immigrant's — life is obtained through the Other, a legal citizen who possesses power, status, and legal rights, she can only try to please him or her by manipulating the person's emotions: smiling submissively and crying sometimes, but not too often and not too much. Dependent on their masters' favour, afraid of deportation, or, in case of legal immigration, ignorant of their rights, restricted by linguistic and cultural differences, immigrant women diligently play various games of femininity, offering their masters a well performed image of an attractive, submissive, and vulnerable woman.

Bikova draws on Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, who has extensively worked with immigrant domestic workers from the Philippines in Italy and the US, and who claims that their almost absolute dependence on their employers is a direct and most likely the major reason for immigrants' loyalty, servitude, and compliance with their masters.<sup>11</sup> In her own presentation of the *au pair* participants in Norway, a country of great welfare, Bikova notes that most *au pairs* come from poor and developing countries and would have invested a lot in the trip, but their success greatly depends on the families that employ them. One of Bikova's informants, a successful career woman who employed an *au pair*, said that the young woman "demonstrated deep gratitude towards the family for no obvious reason"; in the employer's opinion, "this had to do with the *au pair*'s difficult economic situation at home".<sup>12</sup>

The discourse of "helpless femininity" is consciously constructed and actively maintained. In the illegal American job market, dealers operate on both sides of the Atlantic, for instance in both Vilnius and New York; they meet the newcomers (sometimes, brief meetings are organized in Vilnius) and, before presenting the product to the market, undertake what Gilbert Herdt calls "radical resocialization", achieved through what he compares to "a primitive form of behavioural surgery".<sup>13</sup> Thus, having arrived in New York, young women are often directed to a certain Polish lady residing in Greenpoint, Queens. She creates an atmosphere of cosiness and mutual trust, and begins the initiation process whereby the secrets of "femininity" are revealed to the future

labourers. The history of a formerly ambitious personality is erased and replaced by a new "I": one that is humble, gentle, and "feminine", who "likes" to clean up, to cook, and to take care of the house. Pohiti Hantzaroula calls these actions "initiation rituals". In pre-revolutionary stratified societies, which depended on strict hierarchies, such procedures were customary and helped to model the personality of a newly hired servant according to the needs of the employing family. Even now, these rituals draw boundaries between the master and the servant and establish the rules of communication by using "technologies of defacement", whereby the servant is required to renounce the markers of his/her individuality, at least external ones, such as make-up, hairdo or clothing.<sup>14</sup>

The newcomers are advised on how to dress, behave and speak; their former "I" is erased; their professional achievements, aims, ambitions and experience have to be renounced. Paraphrasing Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale about the Little Mermaid who had to forsake her voice in order to be able to walk on the ground, immigrants, too, have to become speechless — albeit metaphorically, in order to be allowed to walk on the land of their dreams. The newly constructed "I", simplistic and non-ambitious, allows the immigrants to feel at home in the *oikos* sphere, avoiding unnecessary attention and ignoring their ambitions. The young women are strongly advised not to reveal that they have university degrees, not to demonstrate their superiority over their masters, not to create tension or discomfort. This applies to anyone employed in this sphere, not only illegal immigrants: Bikova notes that *au pair* girls, for instance, are also expected to be cheerful, feminine, neat and attractive, but not too attractive so as not to overwhelm the hostess and to endanger her status.<sup>15</sup>

An interview is rehearsed in advance where answers are prompted, such as "yes, I like to wash and clean up"; "yes, I like to tidy up; this calms me down"; "I used to date a young man, but we broke up because we didn't have a place to live"; or "I'm going to have a family and children, but some time later; first I need to earn the money for a flat". These answers suggest that money is the main reason for being in the country. A biography is concocted, a sort of a Cinderella story, where personal achievements are diminished, while poverty and shortages are highlighted in order to manipulate the employers' feelings: to evoke their sympathy and gain material benefit. Master and doctoral students from eastern Europe play the role of unambitious creatures of limited intellect just to get a job as a babysitter or domestic help; medical doctors work as nurses in nursing homes for elderly people; engineers get employed as cleaners. Imprisoned by poverty in the sphere of physical existence, the sphere of *oikos*, they become submissive and humble, expecting the master to be kind.

Alongside illegal immigration, which can be regarded as a form of radical enslavement, the export of femininity is manifest in numerous other, somewhat softer forms, such as episodes of temporal employment during a visit to relatives, students' seasonal work, the *au pair* programme and others. Immigration with marriage as its aim also very often has economic reasons. It is very difficult to determine when such marriages are built on genuine feelings and when they are motivated by the desire to move to a more affluent country. Thus no statistics can be reliable in this case; however, some telling data reveal over 1000 dating agencies in Russia alone which help local women get acquainted with foreigners seeking marriage. Each year, 10 000 to 15 000 women leave Russia with marriage visas.<sup>16</sup>

What are the experiences of such immigrant brides? At this point I rely once again on my interviews conducted in New York from 2004 to 2006. Many of

these women are restricted by linguistic and cultural differences, socially isolated and entirely dependent on their spouses. Very often, submissiveness and humility are major expectations their husbands have of them; sometimes, a wife is not allowed to keep cash, while account statements for credit cards and mobile phones are sent directly to the husband. Thus both groups, economic and marriage immigrants, become similarly dependent either on their employers or their husbands and continuously seek to maintain their favour by performing submissive femininity. In western countries, they often face open contempt as they live and work illegally, do physical labour, and depend on other people's kindness; they are also frequently labelled "barracudas", where the name of a predatory tropical fish is a metaphor for a predatory woman in search of a rich husband, and marriage immigrants are derogatorily called "mail order brides".

Nevertheless, in their home countries their life abroad is narrated as a success story: they have escaped from the vicious circle, from their painful and banal destiny, seen as a ship which neither sinks nor sails anywhere. They have escaped from a sad post-Soviet country, marked by poverty and unable to solve its chronic problems. In some cases, money that immigrant women send home constitutes a major part of the family income. This secures emigrants' high status, associated with power, respect and recognition. Those who have succeeded in their careers as models or have made a successful marriage deal are usually the focus of attention in the local media, which constructs these women as iconic representations of eternal femininity. The femininity which *pays well*.

Post-communist eastern Europe has rediscovered and popularized the myth of femininity which was discarded, subdued and erased during the Soviet period. Then, both women and men had to comply with a ruthless and unsentimental social order and to participate in the socialist competition on equal terms and in an entirely de-sexualized context. After 1990, femininity turned back to the traditional patriarchal forms: the fashion industry is constantly seeking new models, and beauty contests are looking for new princesses and queens, promising them a fabulous life, a charming alternative to the monotony of the daily routine. Magazines aiming at female audiences, such as the Lithuanian version of *Cosmopolitan*, promote and encourage new standards of beauty: now beauty is mainly seen as a creation of make-up specialists and plastic surgeons. Plot lines may vary, but the main idea is fixed and stable: a contemporary woman is a Barbie doll, fashionably dressed, made-up and perfumed, with her hair and body in perfect shape. A woman is reduced to a body. If the body has brains, a woman can cleverly and successfully use her physicality to seek out selfish goals, including physical ones.

Media is wallowing in success stories: a poor girl from a remote Lithuanian village has become a fashionable model and is now making friends with Hollywood stars, holidaying in fantastic resorts, and owns an elegant suite in New York! A former beauty queen, having conquered insurmountable difficulties, has found her happiness in a rich businessman's embrace! Models and beauty queens enthusiastically open the doors of their houses for the media, show off their yachts, pearls and evening dresses, suggesting that a female body, if used properly and in time, can be a guarantee of success, social stability and a better life.

A female body is particularly well exploited by tourism industries which construct it as a resource, an object of national pride.<sup>17</sup> Lithuania as well as other eastern European countries is becoming one of the major destinations for

sex tourism, where one comes to throw a stag party or just to spend a "good" weekend, because this is a country of beautiful women and good beer, and both are cheap. Sometimes, "weekend affairs" may end happily. Contemporary Cinderella stories, too, end in a traditional way, except for one minor detail: they live happily ever after, and *far away*.

Go West. The differences in economic potential, living standards and social welfare between the East and the West still spark easterners' imagination with illusions about a better life and encourage emigration westwards. The destinies of people manipulated by propaganda and ideologies, balancing on the scales of offer and demand, are decided by so-called free choice, which is too often very limited. Women from eastern Europe, dressed in uniforms, dust the furniture of affluent Americans, do the washing, water their flowers, nurture their children, nurse their elderly, tidy their rooms, cook, and polish their shoes. Unlike their emancipated sisters, affluent western citizens, they do not discuss feminism nor do they require equal rights for women or dream about a career. They smile humbly and radiate "femininity" to avoid being hurt, fired, or deported. They hope their femininity will please and charm, and in return they will be married, and, through marriage, be legalized.

Earlier, aristocrats hired servants, governesses, and nurses. Gentlemen hypocritically sighed after their visits to a brothel: some women had to be sacrificed so that others could stay safe and untouched. In the twenty first century, some women have to be enslaved and imprisoned in the household so that others can be freed from it. An unpleasant, but a tried and tested truth.

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter R. Iwaskiw, ed., *Lithuania: A Country Study*, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See Department of Statistics to the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, *Demographic Yearbook: 2006*, Vilnius 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Alinta Thornton, "Does Internet Create Democracy?" [MA thesis] 2002, [www.zipworld.com.au/~athornto/intro.htm](http://www.zipworld.com.au/~athornto/intro.htm) p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Alvin W. Gouldner quoted in Thornton 15.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Smith, "Woman's Experience as a Radical Critique of Sociology," in James Farganis (ed.), *Readings in Social Theory*, 4th ed., Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003. p. 325.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John Stuart Mill quoted in Mary Lyndon Shanley, "Marital Slavery and Friendship: John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*," in Maria H. Morales (ed.), *Mill's The Subjection of Women: Critical Essays*, Lanham (Maryland): Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. 116–119.

<sup>8</sup> The situation in each individual country is, undoubtedly, specific; what is common practice in the US is very seldom in Scandinavian countries, the countries of state feminism. However, there are certain general tendencies, too. Mariya Bikova points out that, although in Norway, paternity leave is widely encouraged, state-sponsored child care centres are almost universally available (in December 2007, 84 per cent of the children between the age of 1–5 attended them), and general social norms presuppose that, in a welfare state, a family should bring up a child on its own, without help from the outside, the number of the families using services of domestic help and babysitters through the *au pair* programme increased from 277 families in 2000 to 2391 families in 2006. Mariya Bikova, "Norway — Professional Women's Paradise... with an au pair: The *au pair* Scheme in the Context of the Norwegian Welfare State," paper presented at the 24th Conference of the Nordic Sociological Association "Violence and Conflict", University of Århus, Denmark, 14–17 August 2008. [www.nordicsociology2008.dk](http://www.nordicsociology2008.dk) #A5 p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bikova, *ibid.* p.p. 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Badinter, *Xy: On Masculine Identity*, trans. Lydia Davis, Columbia University Press, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Rhacel Salazar Parreñas quoted in Bikova, *ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Bikova, *ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert H. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity*, New York, 1981. 305.

- <sup>14</sup> Pohiti Hantzaroula, "The Dynamics of the Mistress–Servant Relationship," in Antoinette Fauve–Chamoux (ed.), *Domestic Service and the Formation of the European Identity: Understanding the Globalization of Domestic Work, 16th – twenty first Centuries*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2004. pp. 379–408.
- <sup>15</sup> Bikova, *ibid.* p. 16.
- <sup>16</sup> Leonid Rybakovsky and Sergey Ryazantsev, "International Migration in the Russian Federation," paper presented at United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations Secretariat. New York, 6–8 July 2005. p. 11.
- <sup>17</sup> More on this see Ieva Dilyte, "Vyrai visad laukiami Lietuvoje" [Men Are Always Welcome in Lithuania], *Lygiu galimybiu pletros centras* [Centre for Equality Advancement], 19 December 2005, [www.gap.lt](http://www.gap.lt); and Rasa Erentaite, "Kolonijiniai marginalumo simptomai: kekses ir grazuoles" [Colonial Symptoms of Marginality: Hookers and Beauties], paper presented at seminar *Diagnoze – lytis* [Diagnosis: Sex], *Lygiu galimybiu pletros centras* [Centre for Equality Advancement], 12 May 2006, [www.gap.lt](http://www.gap.lt).

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