

The Other Diaspora: South Asian Migrants in The Gulf States

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Abstract

Temporary People (2017), a collection of stories by Deepak Unnikrishnan brings to light the forgotten and ignored experiences of South Asian work migrants in the Gulf States. Those immigrants are simultaneously excluded from their home country and from the Emirati society, deemed by both as redundant and disposable. The precarious situations of these immigrants are aggravated by a fraught socioeconomic and ecological structures at home (forever deprived of human and civil rights) and in the host country (always considered an Other, a foreigner). Those migratory routes to the Gulf have not been included within South Asian diasporic discourse as those laborers have ambivalent relationships with the homeland. Unnikrishnan, once a Gulf boy, now lives in the USA, sheds light on contested meanings of being a “Pravasi” away from “Veed”. In this article, I examine the ways in which South Asian laborers in the Gulf are groundless beings with fragile roots back in the homeland in selected stories in *Temporary People*.

Keywords: South Asian migrants; Gulf States; Kafala System; Indian Diaspora

Temporary People (2017) is a prime testimony of the disposability and precarity of South Asian labor workers in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf. Deepak Unnikrishnan published his collection of short stories as a tribute to the dehumanization he witnessed in the Gulf. Born and raised in the Gulf to immigrant Indian parents, Unnikrishnan populates his narratives with surreal and grotesque images of migrant workers as they navigate exclusion from the Emirati nation and from their homeland. Unlike privileged diasporic subjects that reside in the West, these narratives of diaspora in the Gulf States are ignored by sociopolitical and academic discourses alike. Those migrants are prevented from planting roots in the Gulf because of their *Indianness*, yet they are also ostracized by their mother country due to socio-economic reasons that deter them from claiming basic human rights. *Temporary People* brings to light lives that are on the margins of both Emirati and South Asian societies, and thus, these lives are exposed to violence, made redundant and ultimately become disposable. In this essay, I posit that the precarity of the migrant workers in the host country is a manifestation of their disposability in their own home country, a condition which drives them to always be in a state of “permanent temporariness” abroad (Vora 2013, 3). The short stories cover two experiences: the life of migrant workers in the Gulf and what propelled these migrants to leave their *veed*, home. Unnikrishnan focuses on South India, Kerala region, more specifically, therefore, this essay will only focus on the troubled existence in Kerala elucidating the consequences for

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becoming a Gulf migrant. In “Nalinakshi”, “Water”, “Veed” and “Chabter Six” (b instead of P, as Arabs usually pronounce it), the migrant is cut off from their roots or is unable to fully return (body and soul) to their homeland.

South Asian Diaspora

When situating these narratives of diaspora in the Gulf countries within the wider migratory experiences in South Asia, two patterns of displacement occur: colonial and post-colonial diaspora, where the later often means relocating to industrially advanced countries (Jayaram 2004, 18). In writing about Indian Diaspora and of labor migrants to the Gulf States, one is haunted by the indentured system during the colonial era, which began in 1834 and ended in 1920. (Jayaram 2004, 21) the *Kangani* system (meaning overseer in Tamil) or the *Maistry* system (meaning supervisor) both recruited laborers from India to be shipped to the vast and far colonies of the British Empire. The prevalence of these systems was overshadowed by the new form of immigration from the Indian Subcontinent after independence in 1947 which was characterized by large-scale immigration of professionals to the West. Migration to the Gulf countries hawkishly targets low-skilled laborer. The Kangani and Maistry systems of the past are equivalent to current recruitment agencies that thrive on bribes and undefined commissions. The *Kafala* system in the Gulf, as explained later in this essay, acts like modern-day slavery system that gives Emirati employers legal rights to own foreign workers and do with them as they please (Barkawi 2020).

British colonialism in Indian Subcontinent paved the way in exporting migrant workers to the Trucial States — a name given to the Gulf countries by Britain coinciding with Britain’s interest in the newly discovered oil in the region (Hanieh 2011, 62). The overreliance on South Asian migrant workers intensified Emiratis’ grip on their romanticized image of a unified nation-state that is strictly Arab, specifically Emirati and Muslim. As a result, the foreign worker who is neither, was destined to be excluded from the fabric of the nation. In order to keep the nation homogeneous, policies were put in place to mitigate the influence of foreigners, especially that it is estimated that around 80% of the Gulf residents are foreigners. One of the instated policies is the notoriously known as Kafala (meaning sponsorship). A *kafeel* is a citizen who sponsors the migrant worker. Unlike migration to the West where there is a possibility of being naturalized, the Gulf countries prohibit naturalization of foreigners. Ultimately, these migrants are always reminded of their transient state of being and are at the mercy of their kafeel who has full rights to deport their laborers (Lori 2019, 136). The Kafala system has been compared to human trafficking and despite international outrage, little has been done to protect the imported workers (Qadri 2020). The World Cup managed to shed light on the exploitative nature of the Kafala system, especially that the new stadiums in Qatar were constructed, under inhumane conditions, by South Asian workers. It has been estimated that 6,500 deaths occurred in the process of construction, yet the Qatari officials deny such allegations, claiming that these are misleading information (Olley 2022). As it stands, the FIFA World Cup ended, and so did the international attention to the subject.

Indian diasporic literature and theories often ignore migrant workers in the Gulf as these types of migration are characterized as temporary, notwithstanding that this temporality is almost always prolonged and extended. In “Diaspora old and New” Spivak defines new forms of Diaspora as a testimony of “the increasing failure of a civil society in developing nations”, nations that endured colonialism, neocolonialism, and now the myth of transnationalism



(1996, 249). The elite, the upper-class, and academics in diaspora have taken it upon themselves to represent the underclass and the less privileged immigrants in the global South and North. Spivak believes that this new class of “economic citizenship” has inundated studies on diaspora and contributed to making a romanticized image of the homeland and of the immigrant (1996, 250). The Indian diaspora in the West, Spivak attests, is multicultural and able to be simultaneously Indian and Western. This essay adds to Spivak’s notion of diaspora, arguing that there is a new subaltern within diasporic discourse that cannot speak, and if able to speak, is not heard.

Labor migrants from the Indian Subcontinent to the Gulf States coincided with the oil boom in the Arabian Gulf. Romanticizing the idea of leaving one’s home and being forever chased by the dream of return do not prevail immigration narratives in the Gulf. The existing scholarship on South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf frame the phenomena within “economic globalization, rather than in social networks and forms of belonging within host countries” (Vora, 11). This narrow focus on the economic aspect of migration ignores the daily lives, (in)ability to assimilate, and the fraught return to one’s home. Vijay Mishra writes that “diasporic writing recalls a moment of trauma in the homeland” (2007, 12). For South Asian laborers in the Gulf, the homeland itself is the site of trauma, escalated by precarious socioeconomic situation. Neoliberalism, one can posit, is the source of this contested belonging to one’s homeland. The South Asian diaspora in the Middle East moves in and out (physically and metaphorically) of the subcontinent quietly, debating their Indianness in a globalized world that only exploits their body to build taller skyscrapers and serve the ever-exclusionary circle of rich Emiratis who maintain an imagined pure Arab lineage. This exclusion is binary as these experiences are not highlighted in literary and theoretical discourses on Indian diaspora. In *Impossible Citizens: Dubai’s Indian Diaspora*, Neha Vora interviews South Asian migrant laborers in Dubai attesting that they “revealed several disconnect from the South Asian diaspora literature, namely their sense that Western South Asian experiences were very different than theirs, their lack of nostalgia for homeland or sense of cultural ‘loss,’ and their ambivalent positions vis-à-vis the Indian state” (Vora 2013, 23). Politically speaking, these migrants are not deemed as important as those who migrate to the West. In 1999, for example, India instated a new policy to make its diasporic subjects feel more connected to their motherland by issuing Person of Indian Origin (PIO) cards that gives them the right to contribute and be part of the economic system in India, just like any citizen residing in the country would. These PIO cards are not granted to workers who migrate to the Middle East, Africa or the Caribbeans. Those migrants are considered nonresident Indians whose remittances contribute largely to economic growth in certain states in India, especially in Kerala and Andhra (Vora, 27). Rightly, Vora ascertains “it is the Indian state *in the first place*, and not the kafala system, that removes political rights from Indians in the Gulf” (2013, 27). These migrants are discarded by their own home country, and thus, any attempt to reconnect is thwarted by this sense of rejection. Consequently, “nostalgia and hybridity — are largely missing from the narratives of Dubai Indians” (Vora 2013, 65). The migrant workers are otherized at home and in the host country. *Temporary People* captures linguistic (mis)hybridity, showcasing how the migrants mix languages— native languages, Arabic, and English, to denote a creation of an incoherent identity. English is Arabized, evident in how Unnikrishnan uses “chabter” instead of “chapter.” The purpose of this linguistic incoherence is twofold: on one hand, it reminds migrants of their inability to be part of the host country, on the other, it belies the homogenous and pure lineage of the Emiratis by recreating Arabic words.

Assertively, the migrants pluralize and transform the spoken language, deemed as a necessary component of the purity of the nation.

South Asians in Gulf States bear, thus, conflicted connections to the motherland. In the “Diasporic Imaginary,” Mishra explains how old Indian diaspora romanticized and sacralized the homeland due to inability to make frequent visits back home. For the diasporic subject, Mishra contends, “their homeland is a series of object, fragments of narratives that they keep in their heads or in their suitcase” (1996, 442). The migration of South Asians to the Gulf is reminiscent of old indentured system, sharing its economic struggle and cultural in-assimilation. Unnikrishnan’s stories embrace the contentious connection to the motherland where his characters appear to be simultaneously longing for the homeland and at odd with it. The fragments of memories they have of their homelands emphasize the loss of that experience and of that sense of belonging. What is left of India, in other words, is a series of objects and sentimental recollections that contrast the romanticized past with the fractured experiences of the present.

Precarious Migrants, Unhomely Lives

The imported, cheap laborers from South Asia are abundantly available. A population that chases the dream of earning Gulf money to send it back home, encompasses those who are barred from their own society. They are already set to be exploited at home before their dehumanization ensues in the Gulf. Their precarity stems from failing social and political structures and who, as Judith Butler writes, “become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection” (Butler 2009, 25-26). The Kafala system consequently devours those who have been thwarted away. This precarious population “can be expunged at will or by accident; and its persistence is in no sense guaranteed” (Butler 2009, ii). Unnikrishnan’s characters are exposed to violence and exploitation by the Kafala system and by the Indian government that have marginalized and designated certain populations as ungrievable. Ontologically speaking, Butler differentiates between lives “recognized” or “apprehended” by others, where apprehension means that these lives are not fully acknowledged while “recognition” implies granting a subject full human and civil rights (Butler 2009, 5). In *Temporary People*, migrant workers are toiling under failing socio-economic, political, and ecological structures that render them invisible. When these lives are lost, Butler argues, “they are not grievable since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such population is deemed necessary to protect the lives of ‘the living’” (Butler 2009, 31).

Unnikrishnan purposefully passes over detailing the situations at home that propel young people to leave. While it is implied that poverty and unemployment is a prime cause, the stories highlight and complicate reasons that make these lives precarious in South Asia. The stories primarily shed light on economic situations and how in becoming a Gulf man, one can secure better living conditions for one’s family back home. Nevertheless, in “Water”, ecological instability and inadequate governmental support in responding to natural disasters exasperate people’s living condition. The story in “Water” opens with a narrator who was born

on land watched by water, where coconut palms turn lakes and rivers olive. When the monsoons are heavy, the earth here is not only watered, the ground is drowned.



The river breaks banks, flooding potholed streets, scaring strays, moving train tracks, leaving homes at the mercy of water, forcing people to wait by dry land, in a cousin's home, wherever, until the water recedes, until the rivers have explored enough and wish to return (193).

In these lines, there is no sense of urgency as floodings have become a common occurrence in the narrator's life. The story of the flooding is a tale passed by generations to the narrator and where both past and present produce uninhabitable situations for the people who live by the river. The narrator also shows how internal displacement is commonplace for his people. Those who live by the river are accustomed to go and wait on some dry lands. Yet, the return is not the end of the story; when the water recedes, "by then, fish have nibbled in the kitchens of these houses, slept in the beds of strangers, defected in their toilets, or died peacefully near makeshift alters" (193). What's left behind after the flooding is no longer inhabitable. The narrator gracefully and in a folkloric tone explains how flooding affects not only the people but also the water biodiversity. The land and the water are both impoverished, a detrimental aspect for those who live by the water and rely on fishing as a main economic resource. The lives that are lost in the process are not grievable as a result. The story then shifts to waterless land in the Gulf states, "where there are no rivers, but instead a salty sea" (194). There, the mother is a nanny who feeds her two kids back home Gulf money and false promises of reunion. The younger brother "would not go near her, wouldn't touch the chocolate she brought, or call her Amma" (194). The Gulf Amma has left behind her Gulf children who wait for her return. The moment of reunion between the mother – who is more of a mother to Ibtisam than to her sons, is unhomey. In "The World and the Home", Homi Bhabha clarifies those unhomey moments as "the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world" (1992, 141). Migration to the Gulf in "Water" encapsulates ecological, political, and social forces that take away the sense of security of being in one's home and homeland. There is no thinking about home without remembering monsoon season; there is no thinking of salvation without being outside of one's homeland. This migration, this "escape", promises economic stability albeit the family has disintegrated and has become unfamiliar.

While "Water" skillfully demonstrates some of the reasons why the people of Kerala are forced to leave, "Nalinakshi" and "Veed" expound on how these migrants are uprooted and forever unable to fully return to one's home and culture. The unhomey creeps up suddenly, heightening precarious conditions. "Nalinakshi" opens up with an eighty years-old woman from Thrissur whose son, Hari, "as soon as he started to walk, he walked his skinny ass all the way to Dubai" (185). Hari is a "Pravasi" but for the woman it means "a foreigner, an outsider. Immigrant, worker. Pravasi means you've left your native place. Pravasi means you will have regrets" (185). For the bereft woman, it also means "absence" (186). Hari is an example of what Bhabha describes as "freak displacements" where these subjects "are of the world but not fully in it" (1992, 152). Nalinakshi imagines how her son's return is fraught with estrangement, with alienation, and ultimately with regrets. The son has been cut off from his society despite his multiple attempts to replant his roots back home. The allure of having a house "with European shitters", the promise of a better life in the Gulf, and the prospect of sending home Gulf money haunt a generation of young men who see migration as the only alternative to a life burdened by insecurity.

The idea of a lost home is even more clearly manifested in “Veed”. The story materializes Bhabha’s moment of the unhomely. The story opens with the grandson’s confession that he was masturbating in his socks in an unidentified Gulf state when his grandmother, Amooma, died in Thrissur, Kerala. The experience of returning home, to Kerala for a funeral is surreal for the narrator who has been living in the Gulf since he was three-years old. Pondering over the idea of returning home perplexes the narrator who is unable to see himself rooted in Kerala. Back in the Gulf, a shopkeeper questions the narrator on where his veed is. The boy answers: “near the bus stop, the little shop near the bus stop, near the temple; near the temple near the little shop near the bus stop. That is where my veed is.’ It was a lie, in a way. That was where my Amma’s veed was” (212). For the narrator, his ancestors’ home is lost to him, being a Gulf boy raised as an immigrant, a foreigner, he is unable to identify his motherland. Back in Irinjalakuda, Amma’s veed is “sold, torn down” (212). Upon his return, the grandson throws the ashes of his grandfather and Amooma onto the sea:

When Muthacchan, my maternal grandfather, died, the family elders deemed it appropriate for me to, one day, when older, share him with the sea, so they portioned his ashes, leaving aside some for the only grandchild he knew and looked after until he was three... Water dissolved ash, took teeth and bone. . . Indra, the rain god, understood what was once woman had lived alone in my Amma’s veed and what was once man had built it (212-213).

Veed for the grandson is distant, mythical, and inaccessible. the stories in this collection appear disjointed but they have loose connections. The reference back to water and pouring rain connects the story with the narrator in “Water”, perhaps the same one, a grandson who is taken away from home and is unable to see his ancestral land as his own. The unhomely moment “relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.” (Bhabha 1992, 144). The history of the family appears mythical and surreal to this grandson who remains afloat somewhere on the Arabian Gulf, incapable of completing the journey of return to the ancestral home. The grandson’s “temporary” existence in the Gulf since he was three is interlaced with the political condition of colonial and post-colonial India where laborers like his mother are transplanted to more industrially advanced countries. The precarity of his mother necessitates the precarity of the Gulf son.

“Freak Displacements” and Misfits

The most haunting story of a failed return is in Chapter Six whose title is blackened out, indicating that it is a curse word. The story focuses on Mukundan’s return from the Gulf. Awaiting him is his wife and young son, Saji. Mukundan, Gulf father, who has not seen his son in three years, has been imprisoned in the Gulf and upon his release, he is deported to India. Mukundan’s Gulf money was pouring before the dreadful incident which now has the town gossiping. Before the shameful incident, the town aspired to be like Mukundan: “People liked to say Mukundan knew the Gulf so well he must’ve roamed the sands in an earlier life as a Bedu. There was no other way to explain his assimilation, his ease with the place. The man’s contacts were first class. His Arabic was superb” (222). On the surface, his migratory experience is hybrid par excellence; his assimilation into the new culture is impeccable: “Gulf Mukundan was what everyone in town aspired to be” (223). The process of assimilation was “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 86). The shameful incident, however, poked



through this success bubble. Mukundan was imprisoned after he had punched his friend, Dileep while waiting their turn to have sex with two Filipina girls. Most South Asian workers in the Gulf are single or live as single men, especially that bringing one's family is expensive. Being a bachelor in the Gulf does not mean they do not have a family back home. Michelle Buckley writes that "Bachelor Subjectivity" indicates the experiences of men who cannot take their family with them and to "delineate a subordinate class position for many lower-waged foreign workers" (2015, 139). Mukundan and Dileep, as young boys back in India "had experimented on each other, practicing stuff they saw in films, role-playing" (226). Enticed by the sexual proximity of the situation, and despite reminding themselves that only "broke sex-starved laborers" would do such a thing, the two men have sex, which was interrupted by the entrance of the Filipina women. Dileep accuses Mukundan of forcing himself on him, resulting in Mukundan being arrested by the police for immoral transgressions. (227). As a successful migrant who has managed to provide a steady income to his family back home, this aspired reputation is tarnished upon his return. Unable to face people's scathing disparagement, Mukundan is further excluded from his own society. In attempting to explain the situation to his younger son, Mukundan says: "In Abu Dhabi, I had two jobs . . . Shop manager most days; weekends, I pretended to be a building" (229). The metaphoric explanation is rooted in what South Asian laborers mostly do in the Gulf, to build. Mukundan's body is seen as a building, an entity to be objectified, exploited, and discarded after usage. It is well documented that South Asian laborers are sexually abused and exploited by their employers (Aronowitz 2022). The story sheds light on the corrupt legal system in the Gulf that predicated on punishing lower-class homosexual men. In a study conducted by Ryan Centner and Manoel Pereira Neto, they conclude that privileged, Western gay men are able to "craft transnational spaces of gay belonging in Dubai's nocturnal geography despite official homophobia" (2021, 93). Men like Mukundan, on the other hand, are excluded from circles of protection sustained by Western origin and capital. The officials request Mukundan to "give up" on his homosexuality. Refusing to do so, the narrative shows how he is rejected by both Emirati and Indian government who ultimately "forgot about him" (231). Unnikrishnan's narrative brings together economic and sexual abuses that demoralize men like Mukundan who are villainized for being homosexual at home and in the host country. Before being released from prison, the narrative hints at how the guards raped Mukundan:

The jailers turned that part — what "I gave!" — into paste, smeared most of it on the walls of Mukundan's cell. They diluted the rest of it in water and mopped the floors. It was how they would keep him there, leave that part of him there. A memory . . . "Look at my skin," Mukundan insisted. "Why do you think it's this way? Look at me! Some of me — elsewhere." (231)

The gruesome and haunting image of the rape scene is poignant as Mukundan can only describe what was done to him in terms of the services that men like him provide for the Gulf, mostly building and cleaning. The literal and the metaphorical shedding and smearing part of his body onto the walls and floors permanently alienate Mukundan from his own self and identity. Part of him has been stolen, shamed, and cemented on walls that he helped build. His return to India is equally met with disdain and humiliation. The next day, Gulf Mukundan disappears, and the family, later on, makes funeral arrangements to burn some of his belongings, to erase him completely from their family and society. The Gulf Widow shudders at the prospect that her son might also be thinking about boys. Unnikrishnan brings to light

the homophobic societies in India and the Gulf that push homosexuals into suicide. Queers like Mukundan are considered freaks, especially given their precarious socio-economic status which heightens their predicament and disposability.

Conclusion

In her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak claims:

When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony. Unless [one] want[s] to be [a] romantic purist or primitivist about ‘preserving subalternity’—a contradiction in terms—this is absolutely to be desired. (1991, 310)

Unnikrishnan’s stories are testimonies of the bypassed and ignored experiences of South Asian workers in the Gulf. Their subalternity is heightened by their ungrievable lives and deaths. Documenting their experience does not entail a “road to hegemony”, as Spivak claims. Unnikrishnan is one of few writers that painstakingly record those lives on the margins, forever assailed by temporariness, to shatter the idea of being a subaltern. The short stories intertwine the historical legacy of colonialism and present day neocapitalism, two world orders that perpetuate the state of precarity where “ontological insecurity generated by neoliberal capitalism and enforced by the state-corporations complex has led to the creation and proliferation of precarity” (Dwivedi 2022, 3). The experience of precarity of South Asian migrants is created and sustained by incessant pressure for development and progress, a point which generates, if not necessitates, legalized exploitation (Mendes 2016).

Often when academic discourses shed light on the abuse of immigrants’ human rights, they mostly imply those who immigrate to the West. Precarity of the global South subjects who are being abused in the global South is yet to be fully studied. The Gulf states consider South Asian laborers, as a “necessary evil” (Vora 2013, 13) and a “strategic threat” (Hanieh 2011, 65), and yet their experience has been only studied within economic lenses whereby their migration is justified to procure money. The short stories here show the full, albeit still incomplete, picture of the myriad reasons that push laborers to the Gulf, equally blaming corrupt systems at home that continue to produce precarious subjects ready to be shipped overseas. “A line of communication” between this group and the world is necessary to protect human rights and to abolish exploitative systems like the Kafala system. South Asian laborers, dragooned into submission, are striking and protesting their employers, despite the fact that their protest would be met with deportation. As subalterns, they are trying to speak out, and yet they are being forcibly silenced. Robert Vitalis’s seminal work, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (2007) documents the series of strikes that South Asians have participated in since 1945, to which American companies and the King of Saudi Arabia pondered that perhaps importing Sudanese worker is a more profitable route than having Pakistani and Indian laborers (2007, 104). Those strikes continue to fall on deaf ears or only trigger minimum reforms. Moreover, multinational corporations secure the dehumanization of foreign workers in the Gulf, all to make sure that the business pours in capital. Unnikrishnan’s short



stories, therefore, is an essential documentation of disposable lives kept in the dark folds of the most gleaming capitalistic states in the world.

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