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Unfolding Multilayered Insecurity of Indian Migrant Workers in Gulf Countries : The Failing Reality and Postmodern Perspective in Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*

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Abstract
People migrate with a hope to substantiate their life elsewhere as geographic and political situations of their native land are not as favoured to meet the basic needs of life. Many succeed in uplifting their lifestyle whereas for many their dreamland turns to a meandering place full of sufferings. These migrants add a lot in the process of nation building of the host nation and in return, host nations see them either as a burden for their nation or mere as a subject to add more comforts in their lifestyle. Migrant worker's hope of finding better job opportunities and uplifting their lifestyle turns into dismal despair when some gets trapped as slave whereas others are forced to do life-threatening works. The present paper will examine the grievous situation of migrant workers in gulf countries and their sufferings, which goes manifold due to cultural, spatial and societal alienation, through Dipak Unnikrishnan's novel, *Temporary People*. Besides, the paper is an exploration through the lens of post-colonial reading and textual analysis of the text. Thus, the present paper will unearth the hidden causes that make migrants vulnerable to the extreme inhumane treatment. And it will attempt to explain how unjust behaviour of the host shatters the hope of migrants and elevates their sufferings.

Keywords: Alienation; Culture; Identity; Migrant; Slavery; Suffering

There are multiple texts in documenting the plight of migrants, especially from Gulf region. However, Deepak Unnikrishnan employs post-colonial and post-modern elements in his *Temporary People*, which sets it apart from other works. The use of irony, alienation and magical realism to show the conflated reality of the migrants from what they expected versus what turned out to be their reality. Unnikrishnan sets the tone of the narrative in the opening line, "In a Labour Camp, somewhere in the Persian Gulf, a labourer swallowed his passport and turned into passport. His roommate swallowed a suitcase and turned into a little suitcase" (*Temporary People* 5). This statement emphasises on the notion that once migrants move from

their homeland to another country, they people are nothing but a document or an object which is devoid of any feeling and therefore, often get treated as such. Being a child of migrants, Unnikrishnan himself struggled with the issues of alienation and identity crisis. He states in an interview with Los Angeles Review of Books:

> When you grow up in Abu Dhabi, you're trained by your folks to detach yourself from the place, but then you return to it periodically — not physically but mentally — and then sometimes you do so physically as well, and everything evolves, the city evolves, people evolve, your parents evolve, you evolve, and you can't get a handle on it simply because you don't know what to talk about (Interview).

Temporary people can either be read as a short story collection where each chapter deals with the different characters on different journeys or it can be read as a novel with unified themes. It is divided into three parts, namely, book one is titled "Limbs", book two is titled "Tongue and Flesh" and book three is named "Veed" meaning place of belonging in Malayalam. All the characters in the book are expatriates from South East Asia in general and India in particular. They all migrate to Gulf Nation to have a better life mainly for their families back home. These migrants face several problems, such as retaining their cultural heritage and sense of self, while assimilating in the foreign land. On their journey to find the dream of better life many migrants similar to the characters in the novel remain unnamed, underscoring the universality of their experiences as migrants and the collective nature of their identity struggles. It is an import part of the post colonial narrative. As, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) points out in their text *Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) :

> …noteworthy part of postcolonial literature, in which it manages place and displacement. Inside of this specific postcolonial crisis of identity, the worry emerges with the improvement or recuperation of a powerful relationship recognizing the middle of self and place" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 9).

Identity, often encompasses two prevailing conceptions: the logical and the philosophical. The logical conception of identity involves the tangible aspects of an individual's existence, such as their name, age, occupation, and cultural background. All the socially constructed roles and labels that are assigned to them from their birth. On the other hand, the philosophical conception delves into the deeper layers of identity, exploring questions of consciousness, existentialism, and the essence of being. Irrespective of category, identity remains the fundamental aspect of

human existence. The construct however, is not static rather dynamic. Identity itself evolve over the time and the circumstances. Individuals possess multiple dimensions of identity, shaped by various factors such as culture, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic status. Some individuals find it easy to assimilate or coexists with diverse identities, for some assimilation is an arduous journey.

On the account of extensive array of identities, individuals become innately adaptive towards certain identities. Correspondingly, identities themselves enable individuals to navigate the complexities of life and respond to changing circumstances. In different contexts, people may emphasise different aspects of their identity, drawing on different cultural or social resources to adapt to their environment. Sometimes, identity also aids individuals in preserving their sense of being by challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes.

During the 1970s oil boom, Indians, particularly Keralites began traveling to the Gulf via makeshift boats. Initially, Gulf countries sought skilled labour but eventually settled on the cheap labour as they were easy to control and exploit. It enabled GCC governments to give preferential treatment to native Arab population in employment sector. This stagnated migration towards Gulf to the certain extent. The migrants who live in the GCC countries are known as homeless, temporary people, or even in some cases illegal migrants, who come to the land of oil, work and depart. Arab nations soon realised that they require cheap migrant labour. Therefore, to incentivise the migrant population, GCC countries introduced the Nizam al Kafala, or sponsorship system. It governs the relationship between migrants and their employers, functioning as a form of international contract of migration where the employer assumes responsibility as the sponsor (kafeel) of the employee. Initially it was implemented for humanitarian reasons, to stop the exploitation of the migrants. This system also tied work permits to the residence permits. However, it became one of the prime modes of exploitation of the workers. Since then, many reforms have been made to alleviate restrictions on foreign workers, such as removing the need for sponsor permission to leave the country.

The Kafala system, prevalent across the GCC, serves as a work-permit sponsorship mechanism that governs the entry and employment of migrant workers. Under this system, migrants can only work in the Gulf countries if they are sponsored by a citizen preferably their

employer from the respective country. The Kafala system played a significant role in regulating migration to Arab countries, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations such as Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman. It was established to facilitate short-term employment opportunities for foreign workers, who were sponsored by local employers known as "kafeels" in exchange for their labour and services. This sponsorship system was crucial for meeting the labour demands of the rapidly developing Arab countries, especially in the construction of towering skyscrapers. This system grants significant control to the Arab citizens, enabling them to regulate the employment and residency status to the migrant workers. The uneven status quo put employer in a position to renew or terminate contracts at will. Andrew M. Gardner (2010) notes, a structural violence which bounds the labourer to the whims of the sponsor, "[allowing] the state and the citizenry to host (and profit from) the global economy without submitting to its logic" (Gardner, 22). Non-compliance by the employer may result in fines for negligence, which puts employees in the vulnerable state.

In Book I, the narrative vividly depicts the repercussions of the Kafala system through the story of a female migrant worker from Kerala who is lured to Dubai under false pretences. Upon arrival, she discovers that her job entails stitching the bodies of migrant workers who have tragically fallen from construction sites. Despite her shock and dismay at the nature of the work, she finds herself trapped in the city with slim prospects of returning home due to the oppressive grip of the Kafala system. This system acts as a modern day slavery, where migrants sell their freedom, for the better life of people back at home.

Despite the constraints of the Kafala system, some individuals find themselves benefiting from understanding employers who ensure job security and stability. For those who choose to remain in the Gulf countries rather than returning to their distant homes, the system provides a means of livelihood and sustenance. In Taxi Man, narrator shows the mundane and the repetitive nature of their lives, "Otherwise, I'm driving people until nine or ten p.m.. After that, it's watered-down curry and rotis at my usual haunt. Then crawl back into bed. Rest the fuckin' back. Sleep. Tomorrow, hit repeat" (*Temporary People*, 37) However, dull their life is, migrants cannot afford to break rules laid down by their employers. These strict regulations often confine workers to their place of employment, further limiting their freedom and exacerbating their financial struggles. In the same story narrator also says:

> Let me tell you what gonna happen. She gonna call the shurthas on me and they gonna come. They gonna pull up in their ride. And let me tell you what they gonna do: they gonna nail my cock in a cell infested with other chutiyas who got caught with their pants down. Government then gonna deport my chubby ass-Lahori ass back to homeland, friend. I don't come here for that kind of lafdayaara (31).

Hereto, fears of deportation and the status of being temporary aggravate the people's psyche and makes them more susceptible to paranoia.

It also leads to the alienation. In a chapter called *Pravasis?* Unnikrishnan writes: "Camp Builder. Tube-Light Installer. Helmet Wearer. Jumpsuit Sporter. Globetrotter. Daydreamer. City Maker. Country Maker. Place Builder. Labourer. Cog. Cog? Cog." (139). The repeated use of the word 'cog', especially with the final instance in a questioning tone, serves as a rhetorical device to emphasise the essential yet overlooked roles of Indian workers in the Gulf's employment system. These workers are indispensable components, much like cogs in a machine, crucial for its operation, but discarded once their usefulness is gone.

Furthermore, the choice to highlight the word 'cog' involves a clever wordplay. By removing the letter 'l' from 'clog', we are left with 'cog'. This suggests a dual perspective: while Indian workers are essential 'cogs' in the Gulf's labour system, they are also seen as 'clogs', hindrances or obstructions. This juxtaposition reflects the paradoxical situation faced by the Indian diaspora. They are invited to contribute to the development of the Gulf, filling roles that are often unattractive or deemed unsuitable by local citizens. However, their significant presence in the job market leads to tension and resentment among the Gulf citizens, who feel displaced and aggrieved.

The alienated characters in Unnikrishnan's work exhibit a consistent pattern of behaviour that aligns closely with the theoretical framework of Karl Marx. Marx describes alienation as the estrangement of the worker from their species-essence, which is the intrinsic sense of belonging to the larger human community. This form of alienation causes workers to feel isolated from their own kind, a condition exacerbated by class differences in a society governed by capitalist production modes.

In the context of the UAE, alienation is intricately linked to societal stratification based on class. This underscores the applicability of Marx's theory of alienation for two main reasons. Firstly, Marx's insights are deeply entrenched in the history of labour economics, offering universal relevance, particularly in developing regions like the Gulf. His analysis sheds light on the systemic issues that arise in labour markets where class disparities are pronounced. Secondly, Marx's theory elucidates the dehumanising effects of alienation on workers, highlighting how the capitalist system reduces them to mere cogs in the industrial machine. This is very well depicted in the novel, as Unnikrishnan in chapter *In Mussafah Grew People,* in which government is funding scientist to create cheap labour in petri dish:

> Laboratories were set up. Experiments conducted; results noted. Early breakthroughs involved growing nostrils in a petri dish. Then some hair, the wrong-colored toes. They grew a little man without a brain, and he lived for a week before he succumbed to an algae infection (50).

The core of Marx's contribution lies in his conceptualisation of a triadic interaction between humanity, nature, and industry. This interaction forms the foundation of his theory of alienation, marking a significant turning point in the understanding of this concept. By examining the alienation experienced by workers in the UAE through a Marxist lens, one can better comprehend the profound socio-economic impacts of class stratification and the pervasive sense of disconnection and disenfranchisement that it engenders.

In *Temporary People*, Deepak Unnikrishnan explores the exploitation of not just migrants but also their family members who suffer because of Kafala system. In the story *Le Musée*, after Sabeen's father disappears, a private investigator comes for interrogation. Moosa, a former scientist at a government-owned Oil infested company in the Gulf. After Sabeen receives news of father being dead, they had to leave country behind, "I went numb. The milk tasted sour. In a week, we boarded a plane for Kerala, no dead body, no belongings, no plan" (63). Here, the narrative sheds light on the kafala system, where family migration to the Gulf hinges on sponsorship by a Gulf national. Typically, the working male member sponsors the family, binding them to stay as long as he is allowed. Following her father's presumed death six months after his disappearance, Sabeen and her mother are compelled to leave immediately to avoid

losing sponsorship. They depart abruptly, without their belongings or a plan, highlighting the transient nature of migrant labour in the Gulf.

Not having an anchor in foreign land cause psychological trauma to the migrants. They constantly need something that will attach them to their homeland without travelling. Here, Unnikrishnan introduces the elements of magical realism to the narrative. It is one of the significant trope of the post colonial narrative, which blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality by integrating magical elements. Through migrant transnationalism, magical realism illuminates the inconsistencies within systems and orders by introducing fantastical elements, sparking curiosity about unexplored worlds accessible only through imagination. This movement originated in 1940s with Cuban author Alejo Carpentier and gaining popularity in formerly colonised nations. Proponents of magical realism are Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Alice Hoffman. There are multiple instances of magical realism in the novel. One of the prominent is a magical telephone, from the story *Fone*, that has an ability to transport people to their loved ones. Narrator describes it as:

> The device resembled a rotary phone, but it wasn't a phone; it was a fone. The fone did the one thing you would expect a phone to do: it could make calls. However, it couldn't receive any. The fone's main purpose was teleportation (25).

Although it has magical abilities, it was out of control of migrants. They could not choose when to call their loved ones. It was a mere chance upon which only luckiest people would stumble:

> A person could use the fone only once a year. One couldn't tell one's friends about the fone. They had to find it. Stumble across it and the kada itself was like stumbling across a Kurdish-speaking macaw or a wizard in a bar. Then once one knew what the fone did, one put oneself on a list and chose a date and time. If one were smart, one didn't choose religious or public holidays, or a late-evening time. One wanted to be sure the person one was calling was home, because one only got one fone call and it had to count. On the appointed day, one cut work by calling in sick, made one's way to the kada, and made that call. Then when one hung up, one would make an appointment for the next year (25-26).

Despite having a connecting link to their loved ones, distance breaks relationships and eventually people. Most often these are caused by psychotic issues. Although the story delves into the theme of communication it also sheds light on the unwanted aspect of life for Gulf Malayalee workers. It portrays the phonetic spelling of the word "phone" to reflect their accent and cultural identity.

In the Gulf, migrant workers like Johnny Kutty are compelled to accept their transient status during their work contracts. Johnny's neurosis emerges from his separation from his family, this is further aggravated due to his status of being newlywed. Distance from his wife makes him suspicions and paranoid. Limited to one annual call to his wife in Kerala via Fone, Johnny's imagination runs wild. He begins suspecting that his wife's infidelity with his friend Peeter. His desperate attempts to validate his suspicions lead to the destruction of the Fone and his subsequent arrest. Through the character of Johnny Kutty, the narrative explores the theme of betrayal and its impact on identity. Initially content with communication mediums linking him to his wife and homeland, Kutty's world is shattered when he discovers her affair with his best friend. This betrayal transforms him from a mere job seeker to a man craving loyalty and authenticity in his relationships. The destruction of the phone symbolizes his rejection of the false promises of instant communication and his desire to reclaim control over his own narrative and identity.

Unnikrishnan uses magical realism to subvert the familiar imagery of the United Arab Emirates, instilling it with subtle strangeness and the invention of peculiar objects. Through the juxtaposition of disparate elements and the blending of past and present, magical realism grants authors the freedom to critique existing systems without fear of censorship. These objects also act as a symbol that connect migrants with each other irrespective of their nationality. In the story In *Mussafah Grew People*, the MALLUS created by Moosa begin protesting and rioting. This is taken from real life incident where migrants had protested at the time of the construction of Burj Khalifa. These protests symbolise the neurotic's yearning for security, as breaking rules or participating in protests provides a semblance of control and self-assessment. Through the symbol of protests, the disturbed migrants could articulate their inner desires and align them with fictional goals, fostering a sense of unity despite being governed by strict rules. This

interconnectedness underscores their shared experiences within the society, albeit within the confines of administrative regulations.

Migrants in GCC nation often fall into inferiority complex, not just with Arabs, but also other migrants and also people who were back at home. Their ego makes them feel that they are superior, however, in reality they are using it as a mechanism to mask their inferiority. In Temporary People, injuries at work often go unaddressed for laborers, reflecting a disregard for their well-being. The recurrent deaths on construction sites highlight the precariousness of their existence. Psychotic tendencies among these workers stem from the understanding that they are easily replaced by cheaper labour. The pain of physical injuries is overshadowed by the loneliness and anxiety of their circumstances. This also extends in their personal lives, as Johnny Kutty gets paranoid that his friend Peeter will take his place in his marriage.

In Birds, the motif of migrant workers falling from construction sites underscores the precarious nature of their existence. The value of their injuries, whether minor or life-threatening, determines their compensation, with Anna tasked to stitch or mend the injured. The story reflects the grim reality of migrant workers facing injury and death, with prayer offering solace in hopeless cases. Anna finds herself in a dual role, caring for someone's child while secretly working as a body fixer, unable to disclose the grim reality to her relatives. The reasons behind the workers' falls from tall buildings remain shrouded in mystery, whether attributed to bad luck, incompetence, or excessive workload. Unlike those seeking adventure or enticed by tax-free salaries, Anna is driven by the necessity to provide for her children and maintain her livelihood, sacrificing personal comfort for financial stability.

Similarly, Iqbal's decision to migrate to the Gulf is influenced by a fortune-teller's prophecy of life transformation. Despite carrying burdens that tether them to their circumstances, these workers struggle to find an escape. Iqbal's fall from a building is accompanied by a surreal realization that his family is with him, metaphorically possessing wings like birds. However, the haunting nature of their jobs and the inability to flee persist, as depicted in Anna's dreams of fluttering alongside waxwings unable to offer her salvation. The depiction of Anna's city as a never-tiring mutating worm symbolizes the relentless cycle of labour and sacrifice endured by migrants in pursuit of a better life.

Irony serves as a poignant tool in both post-modern and post-colonial narrative to portray contemporary realities, particularly in the narratives about migrants, where even their nostalgia is tinged with irony. As Linda Hutcheon note in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* that Irony is "...semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with an evaluative edge" (Hutcheon, 89). In a simpler terms the complex task of irony is understanding both explicit and implicit meanings and evaluating them.

The character Anna Varghese is known as one of the 'stick people' of Hamdan Street is the epitome of the irony. She embodies the juxtaposition of compassion and an unconventional occupation. As she glues together the broken bodies of laborers who have fallen from construction sites, she grapples with the detachment from her family in Kerala, whose lack of interest in her work signifies a growing disconnect. Unnikrishnan compares Anna's empathetic nature with her strange profession, raising questions about the causes of construction site accidents and the emotional well-being of migrant workers who endure harsh conditions. These workers, with stories of their journey to the UAE and reasons for staying despite the challenges, find solace in Anna's care before being "repaired" or passing away in her hands.

The considerate structure of the novel, juxtaposes stories ranging from depicting migrant's everyday existence to exposing the contradictions and ironies of migrant life. Unnikrishnan also makes use of the graphic representations of jet travellers, while others list job categories, effectively immersing readers in the migrant experience. One story entitled *Pravasis* consists entirely of the roles that migrants play. Unnikrishnan writes, "Expat. Worker. Guest. Worker. Guest Worker. Worker. Foreigner. Worker. Non-resident. Worker. Non-citizens. Workers. Workers. Visa. People. Visas. Workers. Worker. A million. More. Homeless. Visiting. Residing. Born. Brought. Arrived. Acclimatizing. Homesick. Lovelorn. Giddy. Worker. Workers. (*Temporary People*, 23)" Through fragmented narratives, the novel captures the entirety of migrant life, balancing both universality and fragmentation. Migrant workers are likened to inanimate objects like passports or suitcases, symbolising their loss of identity and journey into the unknown. The story utilises metaphor and simile to convey the lifeless state of migrants, highlighting their detachment from their past and present.

Temporary People serves as a platform to vividly portray the lived experiences of Indian diasporic characters in the Gulf. The narrative goes beyond merely detailing their struggles and hardships; it creates an alternative space that challenges dominant metanarratives, such as the idealised "Gulf dream." By giving these characters a voice, Unnikrishnan's work facilitates the emergence of new discourses around their lives and contributions. By employing irony, alienation, and magical realism, Unnikrishnan vividly depicts the stark contrast between the migrants' hopeful aspirations and their harsh realities. Through a post-colonial lens, Temporary People unearths the deep-seated causes of migrant vulnerability, emphasizing the urgent need for more humane and equitable treatment of migrant workers worldwide. *Temporary People* not only acknowledges but also questions and advocates for the rights of the Indian diaspora. In doing so, it underscores the importance of recognising and upholding their basic human rights, thus highlighting the need for systemic change and better treatment of these essential yet often overlooked workers.

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