

‘Kadhakaran of Arabee Cundree’

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Temporary People

By Deepak Unnikrishnan

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In a film called *Arabikatha* made in 2007, a guileless socialist called Cuba Mukundan (named such given his love for Fidel Castro and workers’ rights) has to leave his beloved *naadu* of communist struggle to head to the Gulf to work when faced with insurmountable debt in his hometown of Chemmannoor, Kerala. In Dubai, carrying his copy of Karl Marx’s *Capital* (a Malayalam edition, bound in red), he steps into his blue overalls, with a notebook in hand, and tries to document the condition of his fellow- workers in a large factory run by a brawny Pakistani floor-manager. Wilting in the heat and under the evil-eye of the manager, he walks from worker to worker asking them if they are satisfied with their job conditions, only to be laughed at. By the end of the week, he quits his job as a worker, as well his mission to document the conditions of the worker in Dubai. He has understood enough.

The comedic and bittersweet sequences of *Arabikatha* - loosely translated as the Tale of the Arab Lands - and the political awakening of Cuba Mukundan, offer an unwitting ethnography of the life of the temporary guest worker in the Gulf, a theme that is recurrent in Malayalam cinema. It is one more film in a long lineage of productions dealing with the Malayali people in the Gulf.

The perilous and inevitable journey of the worker leaving the shores of Kerala to make for himself a better future are implicit to the life of the state. The first immigrant workers left its shores in the early 1970s, sailing away on *pathemaris* or wooden dhows, hoping to find better futures in the new found oil wealth of the emerging Gulf Countries, which shifted economic gears in the late 1960s and 70s with the boom in crude oil exports. The growth in infrastructure necessitated a workforce that was readily found in the poorer nations of South-East Asia, the Indian sub-continent and some countries of Africa. Workers from Kerala now leave from one of four international airports established for this purpose; there are documented and undocumented workers, entrepreneurs and specialists, and the most common of them all, the labourer.

In 2014, a 10-year long survey, resulting in the Kerala Migration Study¹ mapping this process, revealed that 35 per cent of all Non-Resident Keralites depart to the “migrant-receiving countries” of the Gulf. The study looked at the “sending” and “receiving” of labour and the economic factors that determine the inflexion of emigrants. Nearly INR 71,142 crore come back to Kerala as remittance from this emigration; 36.3 per cent of the net state

¹ Winner of The Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing.

domestic product. The Gulf, the Gulf-worker and the Gulf-returnee book-end the state of Kerala.

The numbers of the study came from the Pravasi Malayali Census (PMC)², conducted in 2013 and the result of the Kerala government's decision to document the Malayali diaspora. The PMC emerged in light of the Nitaqat drive of the Gulf countries, where workers who have fuelled the infrastructural growth of the Gulf for decades, were to be replaced by local citizen workers. But the PMC faces a problem: the numbers remain erroneous. The Kerala Migration Study of 2014 speculates that "... (a) lack of a clear understanding (by the enumerators) of the concept of a Pravasi Malayali is a major reason. Without setting coherent parameters that designate individuals as 'Pravasi Malayalis', one can expect the shifting base of respondents".

What then, is a clear understanding of the Pravasi Malayali? While cinema has documented this extensively, it was not until 2008, with the best-selling *Aadujeevitham* or *Goat Days* by Benjamin, that there was a literary account of the dislocations inherent to this concept: a fictive telling of the story of a migrant worker from Kerala in Saudi Arabia who is enslaved into spending his days in the hot deserts of the Gulf, tending to a goat.

To this spare literary world in Malayalam that came to Anglophone worlds in translation, Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* published by Restless Books, adds an important and polyphonic voice, one of the first fictions in English on the guest worker in the Gulf. *Temporary People* offers a fervent and unrelenting account of the cadences, intonation, pitch and mood of the temporary guest worker in the UAE: in essence, the inflection of the Pravasi Malayali who is its thematic centrepiece.

Deepak Unnikrishnan grew up in the U.A.E., and left Abu Dhabi at the age of 20. *Temporary People* brewed in his mind for nearly two decades before he wrote it, in two years, even as his life took him through four cities and dozens of jobs. His movements across the world are in keeping with the guest worker of the UAE who is considered 'eternally temporary'. The book is about being there-*avday*, a distance away from the *veed*-home and here-*ivday*, which is fixed in the coastal strip of the state of Kerala in the form of a passport.

In the author's words, the book responds to the "... consequence of circumstance, of always being/feeling temporary in my country of residence. ... about granting agency (on the page at least) to people who may not have the opportunity to linger in a country or city that has allowed them borrowed time". *Temporary People* is unlike literatures of diaspora, because the Indian diaspora of the Gulf countries is unusual: not for these people the luxury of settling down and putting down roots. The migrants of the Gulf cannot stay or claim the place for their own, or leave legacies behind for their children. Some 80 per cent of its demographic necessarily comprises expatriate non-citizens.

In its tightly-knit architecture -- an apposite term favoured by the author for its form -- *Temporary People* explores this condition of being a constant migrant. It strips away the politeness with which bureaucratic language endows the term "guest worker". The book spans 28 chapters, demarcated into sections titled 'Limbs', 'Tongue', and 'Home'. Unnikrishnan's linguistic skill is inordinate: invoking Salman Rushdie and George Saunders, his politics are in his language, through which we register the psychic landscapes of the people living long-decades of life building the countries of the Gulf now known for their lavish shopping malls, skyscrapers and tourist destinations. There is a dizzying array of

word-plays, spanning the Khaleej and Kerala and all the micro-milieus between the two. Each name - each Tinto and Salman and Vasudevan - conjure places and history; the 'Arabee Cundree' is shown to be a scramble of dialects, an array of languages colliding. Like Derek Walcott's memory of the *Ramlila* in the Caribbean, the English, Arabic and Malayalam of the Emirates heard from the voice of a migrant is "a branch of its original language, an abridgement of it". Unnikrishnan celebrates this, the "possibilities of language" that speak to and of the human geography of the guest worker in the UAE.

The author does not favour linear narratives, single characters or omniscience. While the chapters are sequenced to build an emotional frequency if read as an itinerary, they tell stories that accrete, enrich, contradict and corroborate each other. The text is dense, imagistic and playful. It moves from mock-journalistic prose to short story: a BBC-like news report about an exodus of migrants, to morality plays where guest workers participate in grisly re-enactments of what happens when cultures clash and labourers are pushed too far and too hard. There are prose-poetry typologies of what a *pravasi* is and could be. Some stories play like surrealist cinema, where a man eats a passport and becomes a passport. There are loan sharks and paedophiles, characters reminiscent of the Lemondrink Orangedrink man of *The God of Small Things*. A cockroach infestation in lower-middle class workers' homes becomes an army learning the patois of the UAE in Farsi, Arabic, Tagalog, and Malayalam; the broken appendages of workers who fall from high-rises that they construct are pasted together with glue; a eugenic experiment to solve the labour crisis to produce Mallus -- Malayalees Assembled Locally and Lovingly Under Supervision -- goes badly wrong.

While chapters of the book relentlessly document the scatterings and dismemberment that inhere in conditions of non-existent labour standards and racism, Unnikrishnan reveals the inner landscapes of people who can too easily become only numbers in migration studies or the Census. But *Temporary People* is not a work of elegy or lament, nor merely a documentation of the losses suffered by the guest worker. It is a work that lays claim to the languages that constitute a sense of identity, with wry affection.

Temporary People will take you back to every Malayalee nurse who told you a story of the Gulf or *Gelf*-maama from next door. It will remind you of Fox candy in tin-cans with Arabic typeface and rotary-dialled international phones calling the Gulf. It will make you think again about every good-natured joke cracked about the *Gelf*-returnee. It opens up, in a lineage of diasporic writing from Salman Rushdie to Jhumpa Lahiri, the voice of the working classes, whose choices and decisions look very different from mainstream postcolonial narratives. The Gulf worker stands somewhere in between indentured labour and the software IT worker looking for a Green Card; it is the second generation of writing emerging from a migration experience where the children of migrants are taught to leave. There is no second generation. It makes you ask: what makes people travel so far away in order to have their families stay at home.

In this particular historical moment, entries and exits to countries are all over the news. Images flood us on social media of people standing in queues in the US to handle bureaucracy that will decide their fates, their passports clutched to their chests as relatives hold each other in anxiety across glass borders at airport terminals. New borders are being drawn even as those that exist are retracting their permissions in determining who can cross over. The 21st century has seen a new phase and volume of human migrations. But for four decades, a transoceanic current has remained open across the Arabian Sea, and the fruits of immigrant labour in the Gulf have taken less importance in the focus on the Middle East than

war and terrorism. The ‘government-mandated Lego’ of the UAE has had a price for the labouring body of the immigrant, who has built the streets and high-rises, and has, afterwards, left.

“Let me tell you,” says an 80-year old woman from Thrissur in *Temporary People*, when asked what *pravasi* means. The Census and the dictionary tells us that it means foreigner, or outsider: one who leaves, the immigrant. She tells us: it is absence. That as (s)he leaves, the *pravasi* goes missing from the lives of those (s)he leaves behind. Deepak Unnikrishnan seems to ask us to consider this absence and feel it on our tongues. There are not many victories in this world he constructs, often there is a lot of despair. But in his own words, he makes that world sing.

¹ Kerala Migration Study 2014, Vol. 51, Issue No. 6, 06 Feb, 2016

- See more at: <http://www.epw.in/journal/2016/6/special-articles/kerala-migration-study-2014.html#sthash.QXIQND7C.dpuf>

² <http://www.ecostat.kerala.gov.in/index.php/reports/194.html>