

Journey of Shadows: Navigating the Labyrinth of Existence - An Exploration of Indian Guest Workers in the Gulf through Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*

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Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries overwhelmingly have a great number of international migrant workers in most of the private sectors. Migration of labour force to GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) countries remarkably increased after the oil boom of the 1970s. According to the recent Ministry of External Affairs report (2022) of the Government of India Gulf region is the host to the over 8.5 million strong and growing Indian expatriate community; and source of about US\$35 billion annual remittances. Moreover, there are many constraints in the migration policies of the GCC countries like 'kafala system'. Even in many cases, the workers are contract labourers and not eligible to take their families with them. Apart from this, the socio-cultural changes for both skilled and unskilled labourers are also making the foreign life difficult. Most importantly, citizenship in most GCC States is difficult to obtain. It is because of the desire not to dilute the benefits of citizenship by naturalising the migrant workers that form the majority of the labour force. Thus, this paper tries to analyse the problem faced by the labourers in the GCC countries regarding their temporary status with reference to Deepak Unnikrishnan's novel *Temporary People*.

Keywords: Labour migration, Contract, Exploitation, Temporary status.

Introduction

The phenomenon of Indian guest workers in the Gulf countries has garnered significant attention in recent years due to its far-reaching economic, social, and cultural implications. The Gulf region has long been a magnet for a diverse spectrum of migrant workers, particularly those hailing from various states of India. These individuals embark on journeys characterized by ambition and hope, seeking employment opportunities in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. Their roles span a broad spectrum, encompassing work in construction, hospitality, and domestic services. Further, the latest report from the Ministry of External Affairs, as of 2022, highlights that the Gulf region serves as a home to an increasingly expanding Indian expatriate community of more than 8.5 million individuals (*Ministry of External Affairs Annual Report 2022*). Additionally, it remains a significant source of approximately US\$35 billion in annual remittances to India. These guest workers, while contributing significantly to the Gulf's rapid economic development, find themselves occupying a unique and precarious status as "temporary people" in these host countries. Deepak Unnikrishnan's evocative novel, *Temporary People*, offers an intimate and eye-opening exploration of the lives of these migrants. Within its pages, Unnikrishnan paints a vivid picture of the multifaceted challenges and complexities faced by these individuals as they embark on a journey to foreign lands in pursuit of a better life. This essay seeks to delve deeper into the themes of migration and the myriad challenges encountered by Indian guest workers in the Gulf, drawing inspiration from the powerful narratives found in Unnikrishnan's literary work.

Temporary People is a novel by Deepak Unnikrishnan, published in 2017. The book is a collection of interconnected stories that explore the lives and experiences of immigrant workers in the United Arab Emirates. Unnikrishnan, who himself hails from the UAE, uses a blend of magical realism, humour, and social commentary to paint a vivid and thought-provoking portrait of the expatriate labour community in this rapidly evolving nation. The novel's title, "Temporary People", refers to the precarious status of the immigrant workers in

the UAE, who are often brought in to perform essential but gruelling manual labour jobs. These labourers come from various countries, and work in challenging conditions while often facing discrimination, exploitation, and a lack of basic rights and social recognition. The term ‘temporary’ highlights the transient nature of their presence in the country, as they are frequently treated as expendable commodities by their employers.

Throughout the novel, Unnikrishnan employs a unique narrative style and a mix of English, Malayalam, and Arabic languages to capture the diverse voices and experiences of the immigrant labourers. The stories in *Temporary People* delve into various aspects of their lives, from their struggles and resilience to the often absurd and surreal situations they find themselves in. The structure of the novel is deliberately non-linear and experimental, using a variety of narrative techniques to convey the complex and often surreal stories of the characters. The novel composed of a series of short stories and vignettes, each focusing on different characters and their experiences. These stories are often interconnected but can also stand alone. This fragmented structure allows the writer to provide a kaleidoscopic view of the immigrant labour community. The book offers a powerful commentary on themes such as the human cost of globalization, the meaning of home and belonging, and the impact of labour migration on individuals and society. It sheds light on the marginalized and invisible communities who contribute to the construction and maintenance of the glittering skyscrapers and opulent lifestyle of the UAE, all while remaining on the fringes of society. *Temporary People* is a compelling and thought-provoking work that invites readers to reflect on the complex, often harsh, realities of immigrant labourers in a rapidly changing world. By combining imaginative storytelling with social critique, it creates a powerful narrative that resonates with anyone interested in themes of identity, belonging, and the human condition in a globalized world.

Labour Migration and Exploitation

The migration route from Asia to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is the most extensive South-South corridor. In 2013, the Gulf region welcomed around 19 million Asian migrants, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE being the primary destinations for nationals from various Asian countries. Specifically, the migration corridors between India and the UAE, as well as between India and Saudi Arabia, ranked among the top 10 worldwide during that year. Notably, Saudi Arabia was the foremost choice for Indonesians, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis seeking employment abroad (De Bel-Air 22). Migration, the central theme of Unnikrishnan's work, is portrayed as an epic journey of self-discovery, where the boundaries of home and foreign are blurred. The novel delves deep into the psyche of these migrants, who grapple with the complex issue of identity. Being neither fully integrated into the host society nor recognized as citizens or permanent residents, these individuals must navigate a delicate balance between two worlds, wrestling with questions of belonging, cultural roots, and self-worth. The psychological toll exacted by this existence is a recurring motif throughout the narrative. The challenges faced by Indian guest workers in the Gulf extend beyond identity to encompass the stark realities of their living conditions and the spectre of exploitation. Many find themselves residing in overcrowded labour camps, which often lack basic amenities and offer minimal privacy. Their daily routines are characterized by gruelling, physically demanding work hours, and the novel poignantly captures the harshness of these circumstances. Instances of abuse, discrimination, and the constant spectre of deportation further exemplify the challenges that accompany their chosen path.

Deepak Unnikrishnan's novel highlights the plight of Indian guest workers who are brought to the UAE to perform manual labour. These individuals leave their home country in search of better economic prospects but often find themselves trapped in exploitative working conditions. The novel shifts between various narrative perspectives, offering glimpses into the lives of different characters from diverse backgrounds. As stated by Tasnima Yasmin in her article, "Temporary People – A Novel by Deepak Unnikrishnan" the novel "leaves

readers grappling with mixed emotions while coming to terms with the real meaning of temporariness that is not just representative of the region but tragically inevitable” (4).

It can be observed that, the multiplicity of viewpoints underscores the rich diversity within the immigrant labour population in the UAE. Employers subject them to long working hours, meagre wages, and inadequate safety measures. The kafala system further exacerbates their vulnerability by tying them to their employers, limiting their job mobility, and making it difficult to change jobs or leave the country. Radhika Kanchana defines the Kafala system as:

The kafala system underpins the GCC countries’ policy of contractual foreign labour migration. Essentially, a local sponsor or kafeel (either a citizen or an institution) controls the foreign worker’s legal status in the host territory, and thereby, the temporality. It largely remains an informal policy, which facilitates the governments’ flexibility to maneuver. (Kanchana63)

These sponsors wield significant power over the labourers, controlling their legal status, visas, and work permits. In *Temporary People*, the characters often find themselves under the control of the Kafala system, which acts like the controlling force. This system, characterized by the broad discretionary power of local sponsors, is mirrored in the power dynamics between the characters and their employers in the novel. Many incidents highlight the potential for abuse and exploitation as the characters are beholden to their sponsors for their visas, work permits, and overall legal status.

Through the tapestry of his narrative, Unnikrishnan adroitly critiques the futile naturalization process endured by this community. The stark contradiction that individuals and families may spend the better part of their lives labouring and living in the UAE while being perpetually branded as ‘temporary’ lays bare an acute sense of estrangement. It underscores the profound complexity and paradox inherent in this expatriate experience. By shedding light on the predicament of these individuals, Unnikrishnan compels us to interrogate the very essence of identity and belonging in an environment where one can

invest a substantial portion of their life in a host country and still be relegated to the status of a transient guest. Thus the chapter entitled “Pravasis” Unnikrishnan mentions:

Temporary. People.

Illegal. People.

Ephemeral. People.

Gone. People.

Deported. Left.

More. Arriving (Unnikrishnan 23-24)

This critical lens prompts us to contemplate the broader implications of such a classification and its far-reaching consequences for the lives and welfare of those it affects.

Unnikrishnan employs elements of magical realism and surrealism in his storytelling which add layers of symbolism and abstraction to the narrative, allowing for a deeper exploration of the characters’ emotional and psychological experiences. Unnikrishnan often describes the workplaces of the immigrant labourers in surreal and dreamlike terms. For example, in one story, characters work in an office building where the walls are made of glass, allowing them to witness fantastical events outside, such as people levitating or flying. This surreal setting underscores the disconnection between the characters labour and the strange world around them, emphasizing the surreal nature of their working conditions. In the first chapter of the book entitled “Gulf Return” the author provides symbolic depiction of the challenges and aspirations of immigrant labourers working in the Persian Gulf. It utilizes surreal and metaphorical elements to convey a powerful narrative:

In a labour camp, somewhere in the Persian Gulf, a laborer swallowed his passport and turned into a passport. His roommate swallowed a suitcase and turned into a little suitcase. When the third roommate, privy and vital to the master plan, ran away the next morning with the new suitcase and passport, he made it past the guard on night duty, onto the morning bus to the airport... (5)

Unnikrishnan here uses surrealism to illustrate the labourers' yearning for freedom and their transformation from objects into autonomous individuals. It underscores the challenges and risks involved in seeking escape from the oppressive conditions faced by many immigrant labourers in the Gulf. The above mention lines suggest is a powerful metaphorical exploration of their dreams and the barriers they must overcome to realize them.

The image of 'fone' in the novel introduces a curious and surreal device which corresponds the ability of teleportation, allowing individuals to talk to their loved ones from a distance and see them during these conversations. In one scenario, a husband uses the 'fone' to talk to his wife. The image highlights the emotional impact of migration as well as the urge of the migrant to connect with their home. The presence of contemporary technology is here hinted through the surreal image as "earlier diaspora was far removed in distance and connectivity from home, whereas now, because of technology, distances have narrowed and real-time and simultaneous participation in life at home and host regions has become a possibility" (Harilal and Akhil 2). Thus, the writer's description of the word 'fone' employs its capability to teleport. The narratorial voice mentions "a man could use the fone to talk to his wife, and as his wife cried softly into the neighbour's phone, her husband would hover over her, like a giant bee, seeing his wife cry" (Unnikrishnan25). The usage of the 'fone' is regulated by the kadakaran, who warns that the device could break if too many people use it. The kadakaran's role adds an element of mystique and control to the narrative, suggesting that the fone is a rare and treasured resource within the community. People are instructed not to share information about the fone with their friends but rather to let them stumble upon it. This secrecy and the mysterious discovery of the fone add an element of whimsy to the narrative. The contrast between the fantastical fone in the novel and the real-time, long-distance communication made possible by modern technology illustrates the evolving experience of diaspora. The characters in *Temporary People* symbolize the longing and emotional disconnect that diaspora populations have historically faced, while modern technology

enables real-time participation and a heightened sense of belonging to both home and host regions.

In one of the stories, the character named Raju, who is an immigrant labourer working in the UAE, undergoes a surreal transformation. He suddenly finds that his head has turned into a helium-filled balloon. Raju's transformation into a balloon head symbolizes the fragile nature of his identity as an immigrant worker. In the UAE, he is reduced to a mere labour unit, stripped of his individuality and cultural identity. His head as a balloon conveys the idea that his sense of self is tenuous and easily lost in the demanding and dehumanizing work environment. Thus, Laavanya Kathiravelu marks, "it is not merely the routine of life in Dubai that migrants object to, but the fact that there is no time or self outside that routine" (204). The incident also captures the emotional turmoil he experiences as he grapples with the challenges and isolation of being an immigrant worker. It reflects his internal struggle and desire to transcend the dehumanizing conditions and regain his agency.

Further, the novel also captures the difficulty in the lives of the migrant labourers through marking their small compartments. The labourers share small spaces which is not even enough to breath. The incidents in the novel highlight the idea of cramped space. The author of the novel voices the groups of labourers who share a cramped living space in one of the Gulf's many labour camps. These camps often house migrant workers who come from various countries to seek employment opportunities but end up in challenging living conditions. Thus, labour encampment served as a direct response to the growing demand for labour in the construction and infrastructure sectors. With the influx of migrant labourers, many of whom arrived under the kafala system, these compounds provided a cost-effective means of housing a substantial workforce. Unnikrishnan frames one of his protagonists in one of these labour camps, who without any choice have to share rooms with other fellow workers. The room is small, barely accommodating their basic needs. There are bunk beds crowded together, makeshift shelves for their belongings, and a small shared bathroom area. The character named Iqbal therefore marks "Home's shit,...So small you could squeeze all of

its people and farmland inside a plump cow” (Unnikrishnan 19). Through such events, *Temporary People* paints a vivid picture of the human experience within the context of labour migration and the struggles faced by those living in small houses in foreign lands. The labours were only equipped with basic living spaces characterized by crowded living conditions, shared facilities, and limited amenities. While these encampments were established to meet the practical housing needs of a rapidly growing workforce, they also represented the vulnerability and lack of agency experienced by many migrant labourers:

Migration status and employment patterns also reflect on housing characteristics. The development of bulk recruitment for large-scale, turnkey projects, which became prominent after the 1980s and was encouraged by Asian countries’ governments, multiplied labour compounds¹⁸ across Gulf countries. (De Bel-Air 26)

This approach to employment became more prevalent starting from the 1980s, particularly encouraged by the governments of Asian countries. The governments of many countries without considering the living conditions of the migrant labour force promoted and facilitated the movement of their citizens to the Gulf region for employment opportunities, especially in industries like construction, infrastructure development, and oil-related projects. Unnikrishnan eloquently portrays this through interplay between migration status, employment patterns and housing characteristics within the context of immigrant labourers in the Gulf. The development of labour compounds, a central element of the narrative, aligns with the real-world dynamics discussed in the argument. He skilfully mirrors the post-1980s employment patterns in the Gulf with vivid examples from the lives of the characters, showcasing the intricate relationship between large-scale construction projects, labour migration, and the housing conditions they experience.

Dehumanization and Marginalization

Deepak Unnikrishnan’s narrative employs a polyphonic approach to intricately unravel the intricate experiences of this diaspora, navigating the intricate maze of paradoxical modes of

existence. In the dedication section Unnikrishnan writes “for anyone who left, then remained in the Gulf for family’s sake, only to leave again” (Unnikrishnan). Thus, in this novel Unnikrishnan masterfully problematizes the seemingly contradictory reality of Indians in the UAE, where they are labelled as ‘guest workers’ in an environment where many have spent a significant portion of their lives. The opening section of the novel “Limbs” encapsulates the central theme of transience and the dehumanizing impact of the labour system in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where immigrant workers come to build the towering skyscrapers and infrastructure of a rapidly developing city, only to vanish from sight once their work is complete. Unnikrishnan writes,

There exists this city built by labour, mostly men, who disappear after their respective buildings are made. Once the last brick is laid, the glass spotless, the elevators functional, the plumbing operational, the laborers, every single one of them, begin to fade, before disappearing completely. Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the facades they helped build. (3)

In these lines the “city built by labor” serves as a symbol for the UAE and its rapid development which has largely been facilitated by the hard work of immigrant labourers. This city represents the opulence and modernity of the UAE, but it's also a place where the labourers are largely invisible, existing on the periphery. Further the elaboration vividly describes how the labourers disappear after their work is done. This is a metaphorical representation of the transient status of these workers. They are often treated as expendable commodities and are frequently deported or leave the country once their construction projects are complete. In the words of Rupa Chanda and Pralok Gupta the experience and existence of migrants in Gulf countries is appropriately remarked:

Workers are accommodated in ghetto-like labour camps that lack basic amenities such as drinking water and sanitation facilities. Lack of safety at the workplace is another concern. Accidents at construction sites are common, leading to a number of labourer deaths every year ... A large number of Indian workers commit suicide in the Gulf

countries every year, mainly because of lack of money and the harsh working and living conditions. (189-190)

Thus, the mention of the labourers becoming ‘ghosts’ who haunt the very buildings they helped construct carries powerful symbolism. It highlights the idea that their presence and their labour leave an indelible mark on the city, even after they are gone. This imagery reflects the idea that these workers are not truly forgotten; their contribution lingers in the structures they have built. The narration here presents a haunting reflection on the exploitation and dehumanization of these workers, as well as a powerful reminder of their presence and contribution in a city that may seem polished and pristine, but was built on the toil and sacrifice of those who eventually vanish into the shadows.

Further, the phrase ‘Mussafah grew people’ is a significant and recurring motif in Deepak Unnikrishnan’s novel *Temporary People*. It captures the central idea that the industrial area of Mussafah, located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has a transformative and often dehumanizing effect on the immigrant labourers who come to work there. In Chapter Eight of the novel the readers are introduced a character named Ba, who has authority over the residents of Le Musée. The passage describes Ba’s method of control and the consequences for those who defy his authority. Ba, in a position of power, provides provisions and seeds to the residents, ensuring their survival for a certain period, even years if their harvests are successful. The provision of these resources allows Ba and his group, who are referred to as ‘the victors’, to closely observe and study the people they have essentially subjugated. Ba terms the residents ‘Les Exposés’, which is translated to ‘The Shown’ in English:

By Ba’s mandate, Le Musée residents would be provided provisions for six months, and seeds for crop; if the harvests were kind, these would keep them alive for years, enough time for the victors to observe the vanquished, to examine up close the people they had conquered, to watch them, to smell them, to notice how they spoke, how

they baked bread, and to be there when they died. Ba named the people of Le Musée.

He called them Les Exposés. (70-71)

The passage mentions a rather gruesome aspect of Ba's control strategy. In the story, Ba tells the handpicked individuals from the village that if they refuse to comply with his directives, he will instruct his men to find the most attractive boy and girl in the community and mutilate them, removing one body part daily. This threat is intended to install fear and compliance. Unnikrishnan goes on to describe that when they actually begin carrying out this threat, the assembled eleven individuals cease their resistance, realizing that Ba's warning was not an empty bluff. Unnikrishnan here illustrates the brutal and dehumanizing control imposed on the residents of Le Musée, where Ba and his group not only provide for their needs but also subject them to cruel methods of control and punishment to maintain their dominance and obedience. It conveys the theme of power dynamics, subjugation, and the dehumanizing effects of oppressive authority in the context of the story.

Additionally, in the chapter "Nalinakshi", the term 'Pravasi' is explained as meaning 'foreigner, outsider, immigrant, and worker'. It signifies a person who has left their native place, and over time, it comes to carry a weight of regret. The theme of separation from family is prevalent throughout the collection, as living in a distant place, almost like a purgatory, leads to missing significant life events such as births and deaths. Those left behind may either forget or, more likely, be forgotten by the. Ultimately, 'Pravasi' evolves to mean more than just living abroad; it embodies the idea of absence. The words of Ismail H. Genc and George Naufal rightly explore the condition of migrant in Gulf countries. They mark that:

Citizenship in the Gulf is very difficult and in many instances, next to impossible. That means that foreigners have no long run perspective in the region. On top of that, some worker categories are not allowed to bring family members to the host country if their income is below a certain threshold. (160)

This concept is further explored in the chapter “Veed” when the narrator discusses a conversation with their uncle. In Malayalam, the term ‘Veed’ encompasses the meaning of ‘home’ and even extends to include a family’s essence, where ancestors are laid to rest, and where the soil retains memories of one’s presence. However, when translated to ‘home’ in English, the term loses some of its depth and significance. Regardless of citizenship laws, it remains incredibly challenging to establish a sense of belonging when so much of your life is defined by what is missing.

Marginalization and isolation are also presented in this novel through workers who find themselves segregated in labour camps, isolated from the broader society, and estranged from local communities. This marginalization extends beyond legal status, with cultural and linguistic barriers further deepening their isolation. Gulf expatriates aspired to create permanent homes, driven by the hope of returning with savings to build concrete houses. However, economic constraints often left them unable to fulfil this dream. They ended up in a perpetual cycle of manual labour jobs, unable to settle into post-expatriate life. This underscores the disconnect between their aspirations and the challenging reality they faced. The gap between their aspirations and the actual circumstances they encounter is a direct result of the distance from their home countries, as they struggle to balance the promise of economic opportunity with the challenges of a transient lifestyle. Unnikrishnan through metaphors and unique narrative structure portrays the “lower-income migrants’ social existence is with a subject position unique to temporary labour migrants which manifest their economic and social insecurities” (Banu C.P. 28). The dream of a ‘true household’ was fuelled by the hope of eventually returning to their home countries with their hard-earned savings. They intended to use these savings to acquire land and transform their modest cottages into concrete houses, marking a significant improvement in their living conditions. The transience that characterises their lives creates a sense of disposability and a struggle to maintain their cultural identities in a foreign land. In the story “Birds” from Deepak Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People*, the dehumanization and perilous working conditions

faced by the characters provide a powerful illustration of the challenges endured by immigrant labourers in the Gulf.

Moreover, in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*, the theme of dehumanization and marginalization is pervasive throughout the collection. The novel vividly portrays the lives of immigrant labourers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who are subjected to dehumanizing conditions in their workplaces, often performing gruelling and dangerous tasks with inadequate safety measures. They are marginalized and isolated, living in segregated labour camps, far from the urban centres, and they face linguistic and cultural barriers that contribute to their sense of alienation. The kafala system further exacerbates their vulnerability, tying them to employers who hold immense power over their lives. These themes of dehumanization and marginalization reflect the harsh realities of immigrant labourers in the Gulf and underscore the urgent need for addressing their human rights and safety concerns.

Conclusion

In *Temporary People*, the themes of identity, belonging, language, migration, and dehumanization paint a stark and unflinching portrait of the immigrant labourers' experiences in the United Arab Emirates. Migration, a central driving force behind their displacement from home countries, is not solely fuelled by aspiration but is equally marred by the systematic dehumanization they encounter in the Gulf region. The kafala system, governing their employment, binds them to sponsors or employers who wield unmitigated control over their lives, perpetuating their status as disposable commodities in an unforgiving labour market.

The discussion delves into the intricate dynamics of migrant labourers' aspirations and the formidable challenges they confront while working in the Gulf region. Early expatriates in the Gulf carried dreams of establishing permanent homes, driven by the hope of returning to their home countries with savings to construct concrete houses. However, these

dreams often collided with economic constraints, leading them into an unending cycle of manual labour jobs, thwarting their aspirations. The gap between what they envisioned and the harsh realities they experienced was further accentuated by the physical and metaphorical distance separating them from both the host country and their home countries. This separation contributed to their sense of disconnection, as they found themselves neither fully integrated into the host country nor entirely bound to their home countries. In essence, the challenges faced by migrant labourers reflect the intricate interplay of aspirations, economic constraints, and the enduring gap that defines their quest for permanence and belonging in the Gulf region.

Unnikrishnan's novel serves as a poignant and thought-provoking lens through which to examine the experiences of Indian guest workers in the Gulf. It captures the intricate web of challenges that these individuals face, ranging from issues of identity and exploitation to living conditions, linguistic barriers, and social isolation. By presenting the human side of this migration phenomenon, the novel urges us to acknowledge the struggles of these individuals who play a pivotal role in the economic success of the Gulf region. As the Gulf countries continue to rely on the labour of guest workers, it becomes increasingly imperative to address these challenges and work collectively towards improving the rights and well-being of these temporary residents who contribute significantly to the region's prosperity while navigating the complex terrain of migration. *Temporary People* masterfully intertwines these themes to deliver a potent and emotionally charged exploration of the immigrant labour experience in the Gulf. The narratives not only elucidate the opportunities these individuals seek but also lay bare the dehumanizing realities they confront in their tireless pursuit of a better life. Unnikrishnan's work serves as an unapologetic indictment of the complex and often inhumane factors that govern the lives of immigrant labourers, shining a light on their unwavering resilience, tenacity, and ceaseless quest for belonging in the harsh landscape of the UAE.

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