

## Disclosed Ironies in Deepak Unnikrishnan's Temporary People

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### Abstract

Migration – order of the day has unleashed yet another realization of Gulf migrants that restlessness ensues forever. As Ru Freeman states in the blurb of the selected novel, “the Arabian Peninsula, where citizenship can never be earned no matter the commitment of blood, sweat, years of life, or brains” has mainly caused this restlessness. Whether the decision to cross the sea for Gulf is taken by choice or coercion, it brings permanent agitation. Deepak Unnikrishnan reveals the Indian immigrants' ironic conditions of life in Gulf. He is a writer from Abu Dhabi of Indian descent and he teaches at New York University, Abu Dhabi. *Temporary People* written by Deepak Unnikrishnan won the Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing.

Amna Al Ahbabi in the dissertation “Representation of Black Otherness in Khaleeji Literature” states that a novel “challenges systems of oppression by looking into the discourse of race and racism”. In this emerging Khaleeji (of the gulf) literature, “the plight of the migrant domestic workers” (Ahbabi) is a predominant theme. This paper is an attempt to analyse the revealed ironies in Gulf migrant workers' lives particularly Indians. As G. Gurucharan states in his report “The Future of Migration from India: Policy, Strategy and Modes of Engagement” that “there is need for empirical and analytical work to explore the ways in which migrants are portrayed in both home and host societies, and how these images affect public opinion and policy decision-making (9).

**KEYWORDS:** Gulf migrants, Irony, Magical realism, Deepak Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*.

Irony has become the very suitable mode to represent the contemporary reality through novels and when it comes to migrants, even their nostalgia is fully submerged with ironies. Hutcheon writes, “irony has not lost its appeal as a rhetorical strategy of choice for writers or as a focus of theorizing and analyzing for critics” (7). When V.S. Naipaul represented Diaspora sensibility, it was with longing and contempt about the root and the struggle to establish oneself in Carribean, but the current condition of migrants to Gulf state that they could never think of citizenship and their establishment in Gulf, they should ever remain the temporary survivors or again as yet another migrant to the West. Since “oil had just begun to dictate terms”, these migrant workers have to be content with the monetary benefits they could make as long as could remain in Gulf.

Irony means as Behler stated that saying the opposite of what you mean (Burgers 187). This novel contains ironical disclosure of human life especially of migrants in Gulf, who are destined to be temporary people by law and order. The novel is divided into three parts, first two parts contain each nine stories and the third one is with ten stories. Stories are juxtaposed on the basis of its seriousness: some stories represent the actual existence and day-to-day life whereas the other stories depict the contradictions and irony behind migrant life. Some pages carry graphic

representations of people who travel in jet and some pages are not in narration but presents mere names of job categories like nurse, engineer, electrician etc., which plays a more effective technique to enable readers to internalize the experience of migrants. The entire experience of Gulf migrant Indian workers is depicted through small narratives amounting to the wholeness of migrant life. Both fragmentation and universality are the two facets of contemporary global anglophone fiction.

The story *Limbs* presents a simile that migrant workers become the inanimate objects like a 'passport' or a 'suitcase' when they leave their country for a labour in Gulf. Any male/ female worker is just "past his past, past his present" (TP 5), losing their life and heading forward as the plane is "lifting its beak". The story is full of metaphor and simile to represent the lifeless condition of a migrant. Birds explain the motif that migrant workers do fall from half built construction sites and based on the level of injury that they can gain some monetary benefit, for finger there is one amount and life there is another huge value. Anna is led by Khalid to find those who fall from buildings to either stitch or fix the parts of the body together. "If the case was hopeless, praying until the man breathed his last." (9)

Anna has mentioned that she is looking after someone's child, a caretaker or a nurse in a hospital. She could not reveal that she is fixing the collapsed bodies to her relatives. On the other hand, what makes these workers to fall from tall buildings also remains a mystery. Is it "bad luck, ineptitude, a heavy workload?" (TP 11) She left her children and pond fish for this job and earning. Her condition is unlike the young people who "are bored with their native, wanted to see the outside world" (TP 13) and for others it is the "Tax-free!" salary (TP 13). Another person called Iqbal came to know from a fortuneteller that Gulf could 'transform' his life. All these workers carry some inevitable burden, which makes them inefficient to fly (find an escape or way out). Iqbal also fell from a building and stated that "my family's with me; we all have wings. The sun's cold... we fly...they (the birds) fly... their feet possess talons... they fly" (TP 18). Anna's tiny city was growing into a never tiring "mutating worm" (TP 19). The horrific nature of the job haunts Anna even in her dreams, in which she flutters with waxwings that cannot help her to escape.

The NRIs employed in Gulf are outsourced workers, expats, non-citizen, homeless, temporary people, illegal, ephemeral, gone, deported, and above all more arriving (TP 24). One such worker is Johnny Kutty, who is recently married, left his wife in native, is undergoing mechanic's apprenticeship at Dubai. He is always dotting after the perspiring phone calls made to his wife. Despite all his effort to keep rapport with his wife, sustain their relationship, and preserve her loyalty, he fails, after the realization that he lost his wife, no more phone calls.

A common factor understood by a taxi man is that nine out of ten travelers from south India say that "Hindi no maalum" (29) and that south Indian with military hair cut and sun glasses looks like American. His another observation at Abu Dhabi mall is that foreign women think that it is normal to have kids when they are fifty for which he responds that "you should be thinking about grandchildren at fifty" (34). These comments are not only ironical but it exactly represents the current reality. Keralese population in Gulf is considerably high similar to Punjabis in Canada. The author explains the possibility that "Malayalees adapt well anywhere. Only our language Malayalam, a palindrome, is difficult" (47).

Marie Percot states in *Indian Nurses in the Gulf: Two Generations of Female Migration* that “from 3 to 4 millions of Indian migrants living in the Gulf, more than 1.3 million are Keralese people who are employed at every level of the job hierarchy” (4). Further Marie states, “the Gulf plays a crucial role as first step to the rest of the world” (4). The major reason for this migration is unemployment and through this migration process the Keralese catch hold of the first opportunity and from there two per cent of Keralese have migrated to the West. Another expelling factor is the caste system and Hindu untouchability, which is mediated by the penetration and conversion of Christianity (5).

While irony is one side of the migrant narrative, magical-realism is the other. Britannica .com defines that “magic realism” is a Latin-American narrative strategy that is characterized by matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction”. In the story, “Mussafah Grew People” the blend of fact and fantasy is merged to create fictional representation. There were three Keralese – Pinto, Tinto and Vimto who carry seeds to the island to the west of Dubai and it was ruled by Sultan MO-MO. A group of researchers were working on to create a miniature baby with two limbs and a brain. The head of this research project is under trial now due to corruption charges. These three Keralese were carrying seeds to this project. Once they handed over the seeds brought from Kerala, they were driven to desert to die. They were working as truck drivers in Dubai for the past six years, one day they were informed to take a journey to Musaffah for 600 dirhams per day. They found it beneficial, so undertook the responsibility. They had their dreams behind this money, Pinto wanted to buy gold, leave Gulf start a business back at home; Tinto’s wife was carrying the fifth child, so he wanted to make future plans; Vimto wanted to explore Europe and Disneyland. After completing the work they were given half the money, driven to a desert, after a few days, food and water emptied, another few days past they saw ‘oak-dark’ men, who gave them water. They were handed over as survivors in the desert to the commander to be housed inside shipping containers.

A building elevator called Mushtibushi remains a place of sedition to spoil young girls. In this story Mustibushi, a culprit has molested a small girl, and then urinated on her face. Aggressive acts against female children remains everywhere in the world which represents the hard core reality. Another ironic story Dog represents the temporary living of human beings on earth. After the demise of the last elder in the family, a dog remains there, so a man and woman were arranged to look after the dog. The siblings were trying to sell the property and split their share, but ironically the dog passed away first. The story states:

In two years the house would sell, the siblings would splinter, and men would show up with machines and saws, cut everything down, level the ground, destroy the dog, which became part of a tree, strip it all away, as though there had been no old lady, no house, no children, no tame parrots, no crows, no Botswana, no pickle, no Mathai, no dog, no life. (219)

The extreme irony in an NRI’s life is represented in the story Baith in which a son is held up under trafficking explosives during air travel, all his attempt to have a final look at his father’s face. His father was under life support and his attempt ended in vain. The ironies depicted through these stories do not depend on the ‘eye of the beholder’ but it is experienced by human beings and also empathized by the readers.

Since 1970s the major cause behind this migration is the economic push and pull factor, which ensues job hunt and to make a decent income to one's family and there has been a gradual decline off available employment opportunities prevail in the Indian scenario. India Labour Migration Update 2018 states: employment growth declined 0.7 per cent per annum between 2004-05 and 2009-10 and further down to 0.4 per cent per annum between 2009-10 and 2011-12. From 2013-14 to 2015-16, total employment in India shrank by about 0.4 per cent per annum, i.e., an estimated reduction of 3.74 million persons in employment. Total employment reduction based on sectoral estimates for the same period would be 5.3 million persons in employment. Labour bureau statistics too recorded a drop in the number of jobs: from 480 million in 2014 to 467 million in 2016.

Every individual including woman is in dire need of making income, so migration provides ample scope through different categories like professionals, skilled, unskilled to optimize employment availability to the non-natives.

Sudhaveni Naresh restates Khadria's view in her article Indian Migration to Gulf Countries: Issues and Challenges that the migrants are playing a pivotal role in the growth and development of a country. Indian traditional emigration destinations were British, Burma, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaya, Fiji and Caribbean countries but after 1970s the destinations have changed to Gulf, Europe and most recently to Australia and Canada. It is mainly due to increased demand for skilled workers. The conditions of the workers turn out to be highly ironical that throughout their lifetime they are destined to remain either temporary people at Gulf or again a migrant to the West. On the contrary, G. Gurucharan states in his *The Future of Migration from India: Policy, Strategy and Modes of Engagement* that till 2030 the emigration from India will be high nearly like the six million people granted emigration clearance in 2003-12. (7)

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