



# Voicing the Voiceless: Exploring the Life of Precarity and Diasporic Subjectivity of the Migrant Workers in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017)

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**Abstract**— The term *Diaspora* is a multifaceted nuanced one, ranging from a wide variety of immigrant experiences in the context of contemporary socio-political global scenario. Migrant experiences across the globe contextualize different migrant subjectivities, depending on individual subject position. The conventional notion of the idea of an ideal 'homeland' or an indifferent 'hostland' has been problematised in the context of the dynamic process of Global migration, displacement and re-discovery of the 'self'. In the context of present-day diaspora and mass exodus of people across borders, the term *Diaspora* points out to an ambivalence that helps re-think the idea of homeland/ hostland. Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017) is such a testament of the precarity of the displaced migrant labourers that lays bare the predicament of the working class migrants in the gulf countries. Unnikrishnan, a writer from Abu Dhabi and a resident in the US, hails from a Malayali village in Kerala. *Temporary People* (2017) is his debut novel that poignantly explores the themes of precarity, homelessness and the predicament of migrant labourers in the gulf countries who are treated as modern day slaves due to the system of *Kafala*. Thus, Unnikrishnan lays bare the complex diasporic subjectivity by portraying the 'lived experiences' of the migrant labourers who are considered as disposable cheap labour, an indispensable part of the country's economy, having no right to claim themselves as permanent citizens. Thus, my research paper aims at exploring the diasporic subjectivity of the migrant workers in the gulf countries who undergo the life of precarity, alienation and discrimination. By so doing, I would focus on how Unnikrishnan gives a voice to the 'voiceless' and exposes the varied diasporic experiences, affected due to the system of *Kafala*. I have employed the theoretical frameworks of Homi. K. Bhabha's "Third Space" as brought out in his *The Location of Culture* (1994). In addition to these, I have employed other theoretical interventions of Vijay Mishra, Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben..



**Keywords**— Migration, border crossing, precarity, *Kafala*, ambivalence.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Deepak Unnikrishnan, a writer from Abu Dhabi and a resident in the US explores the life of precarity and impermanence of the displaced migrant workers of the gulf countries in his debut novel *Temporary People* (2017) which won the Hindu Prize. Unnikrishnan hails from a Malayali family in a village of Kerala, India, and he is well aware of the displacement of the working class migrants

from the villages of Kerala to the oil monarchies in the gulf countries specifically in the UAE. In the UAE, foreign nationals constitute over 80 percent of the population who are brought in to construct and serve towering monuments to wealth in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. With the advantages of the oceanic trade routes connecting the Western part of India to that of the gulf countries, a large numbers of working class migrants (most of them are known as the

'Gulf Malayalis') leave behind their homeland in search of work and better earning. Unnikrishnan critiques the model of Kerala's 'welfare state' with regard to the life-altering remittances the migrant workers send in to expand its overall economy. *Temporary People* (2017) deals with the plight of the deplorable life of the migrant workers in the gulf countries who are hired as disposable cheap labors from the Indian sub-continent to work in the construction sites of skylines, monuments or towers. As Unnikrishnan rightly states in the "Introduction" of *Temporary People* (2017), fiction has "barely addressed the so-called guest workers of the Arabic gulf." Thus, in *Temporary People* (2017), he portrays the lived experiences of the displaced migrant workers who are treated as the invisible, non-citizens of a global enterprise. In one of his remarks on the ideas of precarity, instability and impermanence, Unnikrishnan states in the "Introduction" of *Temporary People* (2017): "The UAE does not grant citizenship to its foreign labor force or their children...". In a similar vein of thought, he poignantly explores the dehumanizing life of the working class migrants who are considered beneficial to the country's economy, yet treated as homeless or stateless, having no right to claim themselves as the permanent citizens of the state.

Unnikrishnan employs surrealistic technique to lay bare the disoriented and fragmented lives of the migrant workers in the gulf and presents a glimpse of their daily sufferings by means of grotesque representations of the migrant workers. Unlike the use of realism in Benyamin's *Goat Days* (2012), Unnikrishnan depicts the bizarre and the grotesque that corresponds to the disjointed lives of the migrants, marked by precarity, instability and impermanence. In *Goat Days* (2012), Benyamin explores the life of hardship and struggle of a gulf Malayali migrant worker named Najeeb who is tricked into a slave like existence, herding goats in the isolated desert of Saudi Arabia. Benyamin uses realism to expose themes like brutality and inhumanity of the modern day slavery in the Gulf countries, popularly known as *Kafala*<sup>i</sup>. *Kafala* is a sponsorship system in many of the countries of the Middle East, including the UAE, where a *Kafeel* or a sponsor hires cheap labor force with some preconditions. This practice has often been criticized by the human rights activists because of its barbarity and inhumanity. The *Kafeel* or the sponsor hires the migrants with the pre-conditions like confiscating their passport, imposing restrictions on them regarding returning to their homeland, etc etc. Consequently, this sponsorship system turns the migrants into slaves who are bound to work with certain inhuman work agreements under any unforgiving master.

## II. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

*Temporary People* (2017) is a testament of the stateless non-citizen working class migrants who occupy a space of non-belonging. Unnikrishnan gives a voice to the 'voiceless' and problematizes the migrant experiences of the working class communities who epitomize a sense of non-belonging to either the lost 'homeland' or the indifferent host society. Motaz Attalla, an Egyptian writer reinforces the idea of the "Third Space" in an interview which is published in the journal *Mada Masr*. He had migrated to the US after the failure of the Egyptian revolution and the return to authoritarianism. Thus, being situated in this kind of 'border zone', he understands his diasporic experience in terms of a "Third Space" which is neither Egyptian nor American. Thus, Attalla argues, the idea of a 'Third Space' has its "own literary canon, its cultural memes, its particular brand of cultural hybridity and nostalgia." Homi. K. Bhabha in his ground-breaking book *The Location of Culture* (1994) refers to the term "Third Space" to reinforce the idea of liminality and cultural hybridity. Thus, as he argues, the third space or the 'interstitial' phase is linked with the idea of discursive ambivalence where identities are contested and performed against a nationalist pedagogy. In the light of the above statement, the idea of the 'third space' offers a space for cultural interaction and dynamic exchange of intercultural practices where a migrant well integrates into the host society yet maintains cultural ties to its homeland ( for example, the Asian-Americans in the US or the British-Indians or British-Pakistanis). On the contrary, Unnikrishnan's depiction of the migrant labourers is marked by instability and impermanence where they are emotionally bound to the space of their origin and at the same time undergo the life of precarity in an indifferent host society. As Unnikrishnan depicts in the novel, 'third space' for them is a space of non-belonging where they belong neither to their nostalgic homeland nor to a hostile receiving society. He portrays this unpredictability at the very beginning of his novel with reference to the remark of an anonymous person:

There exists this city built by labor, 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. When visiting, take note. If you are outside, and there are buildings nearby, ghosts may already be falling, may even

have landed on your person. (Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 3)

Giorgio Agamben popularises the term 'bare life' to refer to those 'biopolitical' subjects, who are treated as animals in nature without political freedom. Though he refers to this term to denote the condition of the war-refugees who can be regulated and governed by the totalitarian state, this term is still relevant in our present-day global migration where a large number of immigrants are considered to be stateless non-citizens. Hannah Arendt raises the same concern in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973), where she talks about an era of calamity that has produced 'homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth' (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, P: 479). She further argues that for those people affected by it, 'powerlessness has become the major experience of their lives' (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, P: 479). In *Temporary People* (2017), Unnikrishnan depicts the migrant guest workers who are reduced to 'bare life' with no voice of their own. They are treated as disposable labourers who are reduced to the level of objects. All the twenty-eight 'Chabters' in this novel encapsulate the disjointed lives of the migrant workers and Unnikrishnan delineates the plight of the workers using surrealism technique to foreground the bizarre and the grotesque. Thus, in the novel, a migrant escapes the deplorable situation in the labor camp and turns into a luggage himself. Another bizarre phenomenon happens when a migrant eats a passport to become a passport himself. Unnikrishnan takes recourse to this grotesque technique to represent the lived experiences of the migrants that shows how they are treated like objects and not as humans. As he writes in the first *chabter*<sup>ii</sup>, titled as "Gulf Return":

IN A LABOR 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, past the bored ticket agent at check-in, past security, past pat down and a rummage through his suitcase... (Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 5)

In her book *The Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), Avtar Brah opines that the concept of home is connected to a 'homing desire'. Brah further argues that home is not a place but a space that evokes a homing desire to assimilate to it. This pervading sense of homing desire is observed in

the *chabter* "Birds" where a migrant labourer named Iqbal frequently dreams being a bird that can liberate himself from his present socio-economic constrictions. The *chabter* "Birds" delves into the life of precarity of the guest workers who engage in constructing skylines, monuments and sky-high towers in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. This *chabter* shows the ephemeral life of the workers who fall from the incomplete buildings and disappear before it comes to a completion. In this *chabter*, Unnikrishnan explores the miserable condition of the workers through the character of Iqbal, Badran and Nandan, who undergo the life of precarity in the gulf. As, he gives voice to the 'voiceless', he points out the flaws of the global enterprise that pumps out maximum productivity out of the labourers. They send in life-altering remittances to the place they leave behind, yet they are considered as non-citizens of the global enterprise. In this *chabter*, Unnikrishnan presents Anna Varghese who patches up the broken limbs of the workers and listens to their stories of daily hardships with patience. As discussed earlier, Unnikrishnan's surrealistic representation of the lives of the guest workers corresponds to the fragmented, disjointed stories of the migrant workers to whom the idea of home is a pure nostalgia. As he writes:

Pedestrians mostly ignored those who fell outside the construction site, walking around them, some pointing or staring. The affluent rushed home, returning with cameras and film. Drivers of heavy-duty vehicles or family sedans took care to avoid running over them. But it didn't matter where labor fell. The public remained indifferent. In the city center, what unnerved most witnesses was that when the men fell, they not only lost their limbs or had cracks that looked like fissures, but they lost their voices, too. They would just look at you, frantically moving what could still move. But most of the time, especially in areas just being developed, the fallen simply waited. Sometimes, the men fell onto things or under things where few people cared to look. Or they weren't reported missing. These were the two ways, Anna would share with anyone who asked, that laborers could die onsite. (Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 11).

In another *chabter* titled as "Pravasis", Unnikrishnan underscores the relationship of the guest workers with the place of origin they have left behind. This *chabter* "Pravasis" exposes the real struggles of the migrant

workers who are treated as stateless non-citizens. It appears to be a fragmented glimpse of their daily lives and by presenting this *chabter* as a means of portraying the reality, Unnikrishnan offers a rich polyphony with a focus on the real scenario. As he writes:

Expat. Worker.

Guest. Worker.

Guest Worker. Worker.

Foreigner. Worker.

Non-resident. Worker.

Non-citizens. Workers. ( Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 23).

*Temporary People* (2017) problematises the notion of Global migration with reference to the working class migrants in the gulf whose 'personal' life is connected to the 'political'. In the *chabter*, "Fone", Unnikrishnan deliberately uses the trope of teleportation to refer to the notion of virtual border crossing. But, at the same time, he showcases how the distance also affects their personal relationships with their home. Unnikrishnan problematises the conventional idea of an ideal homeland or an indifferent host society. In this *chabter*, the trope of the 'fone' has a dual meaning of both minimizing the geographical distance and at the same time increasing the gaps in personal relationships. Johny Kutty, a migrant worker is instantly connected to his wife through teleportation and find his wife involved in an extra-marital affair with his friend Peeter:

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. A man could use the fone to talk to his wife, and as his wife cried softly into the neighbor's phone, her husband would hover over her, like a giant bee, seeing his wife cry like that, feeling satisfied that his wife could cry like that, content that he could see her cry like that, even though she wouldn't be able to see him, or even know that he was there, so close he could see the dirt on the back of her neck. And he was so happy he could see her cry like that. ( Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 25).

According to Stuart Hall, home is a place, not of 'being' but of 'becoming'. Hall opines that the idea of home can be recreated through memories where a migrant assimilates to a newer place by constantly negotiating with

it. The themes of displacement and nostalgia for the lost homeland are manifested in the *chabter* "Water" where an anonymous narrator recounts his experiences of a lost homeland. The narrator recollects the place of birth, marked by the interplay of water and land. The coastal village where the narrator lived was surrounded by a number of water bodies that used to overflow in the monsoon. The narrator recounts his experiences of catching fish in the lake, which according to the local folklore was believed to be enchanted by *jinns*. On the contrary, the narrator expresses his mourning for the lost homeland when his mother works as a migrant labourer in a land bereft of water. Thus, the narrator's story of displacement is marked by the interplay of mourning and nostalgia where the place of birth, surrounded by the bountiful rivers and the present place of migration, bereft of water are placed in stark contrast. As the narrator recounts his memories:

My mother now works on land almost completely bereft of water, where there are no rivers, but instead a salty sea where many years ago, men dove for pearls from wooden Sambuks. She takes care of a girl who is around my age. The girl's name is Ibtisam and she understands our tongue...They hide during the day, she wrote, to escape the heat. At dusk they emerge, exploring a more manageable climate, to partake in its nightlife, to eat at restaurants, to host dinners, to hold hands in the park, to play games, to kiss and not get caught, to teach their children how to ride bicycles. Before dawn, they disappear, only to return the following day. ( Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 194- 195).

In his ground-breaking book, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007), Vijay Mishra remarks "All Diasporas are unhappy but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way" ( Mishra, 2007: 1). In a similar vein of thought, the *chabter* "Veed", explores the themes of longing, belonging and a sense of connection to one's familial roots and thus brings out this pervading tone of diasporic melancholy. The word "veed" is a Malayalam word that denotes the place where the ancestors are cremated, thereby signifying the place of belonging, mourning and nostalgia. In that context, the word embodies the concept of one's familial home and connects him/ her to the ancestral past. In this *chabter*, an anonymous narrator recounts his childhood memory of visiting his ancestral place Kochi where his grandmother is cremated. This poignant storytelling of a guest worker is a reminiscence of the nostalgia for the homeland and by



presenting this story Unnikrishnan explores the themes of diasporic identity, senses of connection to one's familial cultural practices and heritage. As the *chabter* "Veed" throws light on the themes:

"No!" he laughed. "Veed? Veed, *where?* Where aare *you* from?" The English equivalent of "veed" is "home", or "place". In Malayalam, my Parents' tongue, "veed" encompasses a family's soul, where ancestors are cremated, where the soil remembers your footprint. But in translation, as "veed" becomes "home", the word's power has ebbed.

"I am from Trichur," I remember telling Uncle Saleem after I checked

with Amma. ( Unnikrishnan, 2017, P: 212- 213).

### III. CONCLUSION

Thus, *Temporay People* (2017) with its rich polyphony, offers a kaleidoscopic lens that mirrors wide variety of migrant experiences depending on individual subject position. It is a powerful testament of the lived experiences of the gulf guest workers that delves into how the migrant labourers grapple with the notion of identity, home and belonging. Unnikrishnan addresses these relevant issues of working class migration and the plight of the workers in a distant land. This rendering of 'voices' to the 'voiceless' turns this novel into a testament of the ground reality of the guest workers. Since, the term Diaspora is a multifaceted nuanced term, Unnikrishnan's *Temporay People* (2017) sheds light on the intricacies of the labor diaspora or the diaspora of the working class migrants. It discusses how the contemporary socio-economic determinants shape the identity of the migrants and thereby form different diasporic subjectivities.

### IV. END NOTE

iThe term *Kafala* refers to a sponsorship system in many of the countries of the Middle East that links a migrant worker's legal status to a specific employer or sponsor known as *kafeel*. Thus, the sponsor or *kafeel* is responsible for the worker's visa, residency, and exit permits, that restricts the worker's ability to switch jobs or leave the country without permission. It has been condemned and severely criticized for its inhuman exploitation and abuse, such as withheld wages and poor working conditions. In recent times, some countries such as Saudi Arabia and others have abolished this system.

iiUnnikrishnan uses this spelling instead of the real grammatically correct spelling of Chapter to refer to the disjointed and fragmented lives of the migrant workers. He deliberately uses this misspelt word in case of the *Chabter* "Fone" where he drops the actual spelling of the word.

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