

A Migrant Experience of Gulf Malayalees in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*

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ABSTRACT

Abu Dhabi-based writer Unnikrishnan, originally from Kerala, explores the precarity and transience of migrant groups in his Gulf immigrant tales. Research was done to determine the issues that Indian migrant workers encounter in the Gulf states. In 2015, the UAE surpassed Saudi Arabia as India's most important Gulf destination market. C. (Chanda & Gupta) Although laws and programs have prioritized and safeguarded the well-being of Indian migrants, they are not limited to this group and are available to Gulf migrants as well. The sponsorship system, also known as Nizam al Kafala, governs and keeps tabs on the dynamic between migrants and their employers. The kafeel, or sponsor, is legally responsible for the worker in this kind of international contract migration. Humanitarian concerns inspired an initial trial of the system, which had a tight coupling of the work permit and the resident permit. The Kafala has eased several restrictions on foreign employees, including the need that they get exit visas from the Kafeel. The stories and experiences of Gulf Malayalee migrants were the focus of ethnographic and literary research into the lives of Arab Gulf migrants. However, the use of fiction to better comprehend migrant experiences is a relatively uncharted territory in the field of migration studies. This essay uses Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* to examine the plight of emigrant Gulf Malayalees.

Keywords: *Gulf Malayalees, Deepak Unnikrishnan, Temporary People, Kafala, Keralites.*

The impact of COVID-19 exposed the inequalities in income and job security of both vulnerable and seemingly self-sufficient world powers. Blue-collar workers and daily wage labourers were one of the first to experience the economic shock. With corporations and businesses shutting down on a large scale, the migrant workers suffered employment termination or asked to go on unpaid leave, indefinitely. Indian workers, who constitute nearly a third of the migrant population in the Gulf States met similar uncertainties. Gulf Malayalees who returned to India had mixed responses about returning to their jobs. Ali Akbar, editor of *Pravasi Risala*, a Gulf magazine, observes that a majority of non-resident Keralites wish to

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return to the Gulf States in order to sustain the current living condition of their family in Kerala, whose remittances also contribute largely to the state and national economy.

During the oil boom in the 1970s, Keralites began to travel to the Gulf through 6country-made boats. The growing demand for low–Keralites largely met skilled labour. However, the numbers have grown lesser in recent times due to unchanging job profiles–demand for construction–site workers and preference to Arab nationals. In the 1990s, Muzafer Ahmed, a Gulf Malayalee journalist, was among the first to write about Arab lands free from diasporic nostalgia. In his autobiography, *Marubhoomiyude Atmakatha* (Autobiography of the Desert) he writes about the desert, culture, landscape, bedouins, the flora and fauna, as an insider. Novelists like Benyamin and Deepak Unnikrishnan also write about lived experiences in the Gulf States and migrant narratives from an ‘insider’ position. Benyamin is a Bahrain-based Malayalee novelist whose *Aadujeevidham* (Goat days) narrates the story of a Malayalee kidnapped at an airport in Riyadh and forcefully made to work as a shepherd in a goat farm. Unnikrishnan is a Kerala born, writer from Abu Dhabi whose Gulf immigrant narratives examine precarity and temporariness in migrant communities.

Studies were conducted to identify problems faced by Indian migrant workers in the Gulf countries. UAE became India’s major destination market within the Gulf region in 2015. (Chanda and Gupta) While policies and programmes have promoted, facilitated and protected the welfare of Indian migrants, they are not exclusive for Gulf migrants, except for a few. Nizam al Kafala or the sponsorship system regulates and monitors the relationship between the migrants and their employers. This is a type of international contract migration in which the employee is the kafeel or the sponsor’s responsibility. With the work permit closely linked to the residence permit, the system was tried under humanitarian grounds. The Kafala has removed several key restrictions on foreign workers, including the need for permission from the Kafeel to leave the country. Ethnographical and literary studies were conducted in studying migrant experiences in the Arab Gulf through narratives and lived experiences of Gulf Malayalees. However, understanding migrant experiences through fiction is a less explored area in migration studies. This article explores the migrant experience of Gulf Malayalees in Deepak Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People*.

The novel describes periods of anxiety, listlessness and despair of migrant workers in the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, exploring periods of working abroad, living abroad staying home with a sense of transient interconnectedness. This article examines the effectiveness of magical

realism as a literary tool in the novel in the investigation of migrant transnational identity. It examines the migrant experience of Gulf Malayalees in relation to other migrant communities in the novel. It also analyses the temporariness of the Malayalee guest workers through the Kafala system. It records development in the labour laws of the Gulf countries and envisions an alternate shaping of the Gulf Malayalee consciousness.

Transnationalism has an inner processual and in-becoming character, inherently multi and transdisciplinary. It is associated with multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, internationalism and post-migration studies. (Tedeschi et al. 603) Transformative in approach, it spans across socio-cultural activities, citizenship and post-migration. A pragmatist inductive approach to transnationalism recommends defining the approach through actual use in an empirical context. In this approach, the variables and methods are analysed and examined in order to avoid generalised conclusions.

Transnationalism began as a process where immigrants built social networks linking their country of origin and country of settlement. Since the early 1990s, it has become one of the fundamentals to understanding contemporary national borders with reference to the migrant population. Transmigrants develop multiple economic, political and religious relations across borders and identities, connecting two or more societies simultaneously. According to Portes, transnational activities today distinguish four categories which are spread across national borders—activity conducted by states, institutions based in a country, institutions which are based in and operate in different countries and non-institutional actors. (185) In contemporary destination societies, immigration becomes multidirectional as migrant identities become dynamic. As social actors, the migrants interact with their homeland, destination country and migrant communities. A transnational identity blooms across nation-state borders in both global and local spaces, where migrants experience a duality between their place of origin and place of residence. In recent literature, transnationalism is seen as a component of globalization. While globalization includes socio-political and economic fields and the greater connections across countries and continents, transnationalism concerns individuals, their movement across borders, and global connectedness factors.

Connected across borders with high-intensity cross-border exchanges concerning common people and society is one of the main characteristics of migrant transnationalism. It emerged as a central theme in migration studies in the 1990s, which described the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations, which link their societies of origin

and settlement. It contributes to the wider processes of globalization, where patterns of change are deep-seated. Facets of social organization involve certain fundamental modes of transformation such as perpetual transformation in the sociocultural domain, conceptual transformation in the political domain and institutional transformation in the economic domain. (Vertovec 971) Social changes are gauged by the impacts on location, social organization and values. This 'transformationalist' aspect intensifies long-term interconnections with globalization.

Trans-nationalization or cross-border transactions become a process through which actors and non-state actors sustain ties across borders. These cross-border ties link individuals, groups, organizations, migrants and non-migrants to social spaces and borders through changes in economic, political and cultural changes. Migrant transnationalism goes beyond the boundaries of states into boundaries across families, majority groups, minority groups and generations. It is not a one-way movement but one with several intersecting borders across directions. As an economic, social and political process, it affects those who move, those who stay behind and all places travelled across national boundaries. Migration is inextricably linked to global issues. They are entrepreneurial and dynamic members of the society. Some significant challenges faced by migrants include exploitation, abuse of human rights and difficulty to integrate in destination countries.

Magical realism is a literary genre which blurs sharp distinctions between fantasy and reality through the incorporation of magical elements. Migrant transnationalism through magical realism exposes the inconsistencies of systems and order through elements of fantasy. It aims to raise curiosity about unheard worlds both unfathomable and undiscovered by human kind except through imagination. Used in the 1940s by the Cuban author, Alejo Carpentier, it was popularized by formerly colonised countries. Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alice Hoffman are some of the key proponents of magical realism. In the novel, *Temporary People*, Unnikrishnan uses familiar images of the United Arab Emirates and subverts its normality by subtle strangeness, the invention of strange objects, the juxtaposition of unlike things and the merging of its present and past. Magical realism provides necessary authorial freedom and liberation from censorship towards criticism of existing systems.

In Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*, Anna Varghese, one of the "stick people" of Hamdan Street, glues the broken bodies of labourers who fell from construction sites and tells herself the truth of her family in Kerala— lack of curiosity and genuine interest to know more about

what she does in UAE meant she had already drifted apart from the people who once cared for her. Understanding her job profile actually meant they stopped caring about her. (18) As one of the most respected people from her profession with qualities of understanding and a willing ear to listen to the troubled, Unnikrishnan juxtaposes her ‘milk of human kindness’ with her strange occupation of sticking the bones of construction workers who fall off the building so they return to work healthy and fit the following day. Questions such as what makes the construction–site workers fall from buildings and speculation about their ‘death due to natural causes’ is raised. It also raises the need to check the emotional wellbeing of the migrant workers who have a story to tell about how they landed in UAE and why they choose to stay on in spite of severe working conditions, just before they are ‘repaired’ or pass away in Varghese’s hands.

Identity, described as self-concept, has two dominant conceptions—logical and philosophical. Identity loses its ‘neat’ codification when expressed in its multiplicity. Plural dimensions of identity create and recreate the self both in similar and different contexts. In fact, multiple identities are adaptive in nature, which lets individuals adapt, resist or even withdraw in the face of change in similar and different engagements. Book I of the novel describes the experience of expatriates who leave Kerala to work in the Arab city of Dubai. There is a marked difference in the several dimensions of identity over time, as expressed by the Gulf Malayalee migrants. A majority of the characters are unnamed, suggesting the universality of subject and migrant experience. “Fone” interestingly explores communication as an undesirable and unwanted item in the hands of Gulf Malayalee migrant workers. This phonetic spelling of the word phone, reflects the Malayalee accent which manifests through the variation. In the story Fone, Johnny Kutty, a married Malayalee man who moves to the UAE in search of a better source of income for his family is betrayed by his very family. During his initial days in UAE, he is happy and feels connected to his wife through the mediums of communication which were accessible to him. One day when he used the phone which could transport him to Kerala in an instant, while still talking to the other person on line, he is flabbergasted and raged in anger. Kutty finds out that his wife eloped with his best friend. With changes in experience and drastic twists to one’s wellbeing, the personality of the man too, changes as he moves across borders—UAE to Kerala. He grows from a ‘man in search of a job’ to a ‘man in search of loyalty.’ He furiously breaks the phone, thus abandoning any more teleportation for the people of Abu Dhabi.

The fone did the one thing one 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. Or a woman could be speaking to her daughter, a daughter who hasn't learned to form words yet, but is instead biting the phone, like it's meant to be bitten, drooling into it, as her father steadies her wobbling body, coaxing her to talk, to speak, pleading with her to perform something worthy for her mother, and the woman sees all of this, her husband encouraging their child to say something, anything, as long as it's a word, any word, it didn't matter as long as it was a word. Or the phone simply rang and rang and no one picked up, even though the fone caller was in a state of bliss, itching to tell someone that he'd been promoted, that he was happy, that he needed to tell people he was happy to feel happy, that he needed to see people pretending to be happy in order to be happy. So, the fone had its uses, but its usage was regulated by the kadakaran. (Unnikrishnan 33–4)

Teleportation, which makes the 'fone' different from other phones, becomes a curse for Johnny Kutty. The story establishes relations left behind in Kerala through a loose telephone string which fails to connect the migrant's feelings towards his newly wedded wife. The telephone becomes a symbol of bad news to the migrant as he considers himself fateful. Communication becomes a much-detested means of expression as it weakens the link to home towards perfecting a 'balanced' transnational identity where both home and spaces other than home evoke similar responses.

Temporary People focuses on the migrant narratives of the expatriate communities in the United Arab Emirates. The novel in three sections, describes experiences that spring from three transnational positionalities of the migrants—transnationalization, transnational social spaces and transnationality. (Thomas) In contemporary migration studies, transnationalization refers to cross-border ties of migrants with collective agents. Transnational social practices are sustained cross-border ties such as cross-border families. Transnationality refers to the continuum of practices, ranging from regular to intense. In the novel, a connection between home and destination society is barely pulled together by a thread, where the characters reminisce about home and their family at different points in the stories. When Unnikrishnan's

characters get into trouble with the Emiratis they remember their previous relatively superior positions back home. The book also gives insight into the Gulf Malayalees' impact on those who stayed back in Kerala. There is a striking reinforcement of intersecting connections and moving boundaries.

The Gulf Malayalees refer to the immigrant population from Kerala in the Arab Gulf either as expatriates, migrant workers or family members. *Temporary People* is a novel that narrates the experiences of the immigrant population in the UAE, mostly of people who decided to leave Kerala due to better their monetary gains; others include those who did not have much of choice, those who were jailed in the UAE and brought home and those who left behind their family members for a better social standing in Kerala. The migrant experiences in the novel are critical and realistic in portraying the ground realities of the immigrants. “Birds” is a story about Anna Varghese, a female migrant from Kerala who can speak several tongues at her job. She magically glues broken bodies together and stitches searing cuts with horse-hair and needles. Her everyday interactions with several migrant workers at the construction sites of Hamdan Street become a variety of transnational social practices. The migrant workers who fall from high-raised buildings become family to her. They share their deepest secrets and she listens faithfully to them, sharing their common dream of returning home.

Unnikrishnan crafts the character Anna Varghese with a tint of mercy, sadness and hope. During one of her regular days at work, she meets Iqbal, another broken-bodied migrant worker who fell off a high-raised building on a construction site. His organs are strewn around, and his limbs are broken. It is almost as if Varghese could not revive him with her glue and horse-hair. Nevertheless, she listens to him as he miraculously talks to her on his deathbed. He seeks permission from Varghese to lie on her lap. It is almost his last wish to lie down on a bed closer to human touch and further away from the towering buildings and construction sites where he worked at. He tells her how he fell off the building as a bird frightened him from a tall building while he was engaged in an inappropriate action at work. Anna, a professional who glued broken bodies, is well aware of the tempers and speech of the migrant workers who are close to death. She listens to him patiently and caresses his head as he narrates a final story of the bird he tried to save but failed.

While Varghese continues to listen to him, he reveals how much he yearned to grow wings and pick portions of the building with his family and fly away. With this, Iqbal’s soul leaves his body, and Anna remembers the last words of his story as she prepares to leave the city. When

Varghese first leaves Kerala, she decides to leave her children behind. For several years she continues to yearn for her children's company but later realizes that neither she nor her children know her. However, there is a vague memory of her bringing her children to the UAE, showing them Hamdan street like she owned them, but now, with over three decades since her arrival here, she too has forgotten the several changes in the city. After her night-shift, Varghese's interactions are limited to Khalil, her boss and Kareem "Ikka" both elder to her, who share their experiences in the UAE and give occasional yet poignant advice. Khalid awakens her to a possible present status of her children's relationship with her. He tells her that distance does not always make the heart grow fonder and that one must move on from broken ties, however, withholding it from the outside. She lies down in a cot at Kareem Ikka's house and reimagines Iqbal's story with her family in it, as they scrape away to fly towards a cold sun free from heat. (Unnikrishnan 27)

Transnationalization as a process between migrants and employers is described during Varghese's moments with her employer, Khalid. The conversation is strictly professional as they converse about her end of term in the UAE with occasional advice from his own personal experiences with his family. The few minutes with Khalid opens the world in all its stark reality to Varghese. She comes to realize the widening gap with her children.

Her son and daughter had visited twice. The first time, she took them to the souk on a Friday, where they had to make their way past wayward tanks, robot monkeys, rotating princesses, woofing dogs. They bumped into people, she made them smell attar. She bought them cotton candy and a falooda each. The only mall she's taken them to was in Hamdan Center. If they visited now, she wouldn't know where to take them. She didn't know the new malls as well. Or her children. But those thoughts would need to wait. She had arrived at her destination. (Unnikrishnan 29)

Unnikrishnan uses insects to provide insights into language, and a lack of integration exists in the migrant communities of UAE. Kafkaesque in nature, the image of the talking white cockroach or *Germanica blattella* exposes the absurdity of selective inclusion of the migrant community. The white cockroach adopts human ways after decades of oppression from the brown cockroaches in the majority. It talks human tongue picked up by the inmates of the flat. Hiding inside broken shards of wood, underneath cupboards and the kitchen door, the white cockroach learns words and phrases in different languages from different tenants in the flat.

I understand Malayalam, I speak it. Arabic, I can manage, and a few others, like Urdu and Farsi and Tamil, I can identify by ear, recognizing the cadences from multiple tongues. That night, what I heard combined every language I knew or sorta knew, maybe more, resulting in a lexicon so strange, so distinct, so familiar yet distant, a mysterious patois, words perhaps heard then taken from maybe the Egyptians on the eleventh floor, the Sudanese family on the fifth, the Palestinians across from us, the Mallus, the

Bombaywallas, the English woman, the Pathans, the Sri Lankans and the Filipinos, words spoken to sons and daughters, to husbands and wives, between lovers and foes, words collected and taken out, poured into heads, practiced in secret but out loud, words selected then changed, pronounced and mispronounced, combined to form new sounds, to conjure old ones, to produce meaning, to obfuscate secrets or express joy. (Unnikrishnan 212)

Drawing similarities between the boy and the cockroach, there are parallels in terms of the languages they speak. Both acquire language from social interactions and environments where the Malayalee and the cockroach are migrants—the Malayalee among the Emiratis and the German cockroach among the brown cockroaches. The *Blattella germanica*, in comparison with the migrants, adopt mimicry, which reflects a genuine need for belongingness of the migrants in the Arab lands and suggests that they too have the potential to become better in stature and status than their employers.

The novel also highlights personal elements of the state of coming under the radar as a miscreant solely based on ethnicity and origin. The scientist in question suffers from the effects of the King's wrath in the city. Asked to manufacture migrant workers in large numbers, the scientist is asked to be gotten rid of when the scientifically manufactured migrants turn against the King. He is exiled to the deserts, where he is left to fend for himself. However, his research team consisting of Emirati citizens, get to retain their position in the Kings' office. The transnational connections of the scientist fail to come to his rescue, which suggests the extended periods of uncertainty which come with working outside one's homeland. However, the doctor's daughter, an Emirati, gets the welcome of a king from the King himself during his enquiry of her father's whereabouts. The scientist occupies an in-between place between freedom to relocate to a place he wishes to and the order to leave Dubai due to an attempt to commit treason. Blame due to the transnational identity of the doctor is heightened due to his dual positionality between origin and residence.

The cosmopolitanism of the UAE makes migrant experiences of different communities similar in many ways. In one of the 'chapters,' an unnamed narrator is confronted with a group of people who force him to stay through a 'ritual play' which takes place in the night once a year. The actors portray the lives of migrants through their dark portrayal of migrant life. The play begins at sunset and continues through the night into dawn. The lead lies on the hot desert sands, and a Range Rover is driven on his body ruthlessly. The intoxicated tribesman follows a stranger's orders to hit him with a stake and a protruding nail. This is done with little resistance from either of the two parties. The man appears to die to the audience though the actor is left

with a heavily bruised, scarred skin. The torture continues with the tribesman pouring fine sand into his eyes and throat with a funnel. He is then fired with a Kalashnikov and lies almost dead on the sand. The Pathan, representing migrant communities, is subject to third-degree burns as the tribesman finally sets his battered body alight. Unnikrishnan's use of the surname Pathan becomes representative of the migrant community of Afghanistan. In the second Act, the audience is given an opportunity to play the tribesman, where everyone gets to humiliate the Pathan with similar punishments, and a similar drill. Every migrant worker gets his chance to torture the actor. At the end of the play, the audience leaves satisfied with their contribution to the torture.

It is almost dawn when I pour lighter fluid on Mahmoud's clothes. I notice the man playing him is exhausted. I am the penultimate person to set him on fire. There have been hundreds before me, traipsing in after mandated ten-minute intervals. Once the man playing a stranger puts my fire out, he administers the miracle salve, before the last person in line sets Mahmoud on fire again. This is where the second act ends. Then the man playing Mahmoud the Pathan can go home, along with the assembled men of my city, who will also be permitted to return. (Unnikrishnan 49)

The strangeness of being shot and burned multiple times and still being alive is heightened when the Pathan leaps up to the ground and demands some booze and the Range Rover for a limited time in exchange for the inhuman activities done to him. The transnational ties of migrant workers with their employers is depicted as brittle and unpleasant in "The Anniversary." This is an attempt to recreate the scene of the brutal torture of an Afghanistani migrant. It suggests a subtle reflection of the killing and trial of a member of the Royal family who physically tortured the migrant. The story portrays the helplessness of the migrants at the hands of their employers, who are subject to exploitation. However, in "Birds," the trust between Anna Varghese and Khalid is mutually upheld.

"The Anniversary" can be read as a text which allows exploitation of the migrant workers from the migrants themselves, who simply keep quiet and retreat from taking any punitive action against the aggressor. The unnamed narrator assumed as a migrant worker and the tribesman, a native of UAE, become complicit in injuring the Pathan. A migrant worker himself, the narrator does not refuse to be a part of the ritual-play. Though reluctant to join his people, he joins them in the collective torture of the Afghanistani migrant. It is understood as exploitation done by the migrants on the migrants themselves. Keeping silent when there is a need for firm, collective action becomes an oft-postponed decision by the migrants. However, the reason for the silence falls back majorly on the Kafala or sponsorship system.

The Kafala is a work-permit sponsorship system in operation throughout the GCC. It allows migrant workers in totality to enter into employment when sponsored by a citizen of the Arab Gulf country. It grants citizens the power to permit entry and employment of the migrant workers. Employers gain considerable power over the migrants and their stay in the Gulf country through the Kafala. Book I describes the kafala system in action where a private employment agent brings a female migrant worker from Kerala to Dubai, promising her a job that involves only a tolerance to blood. In the destination city, she finds out that she has to sew the bodies of the migrant workers at construction sites who fell from towering heights during the day. Though shocked at the type of work she was asked to do, she also find herself in a situation where she cannot leave the city. Hope of survival back home is slim back home. Though the Kafala system worked to her benefit through a reasonably understanding employer, she stayed in Dubai without a threat of termination or changes in her immigration status before its due. It tends to bind its migrant workers to contracts, however, it also provided a means of livelihood to those who did not wish to get back home that was miles away.

The Kafala system emerged in the 1950s to strengthen the workforce with temporary workers in the period of the Arab Gulf economic boom. The unskilled migrant workers travelled to the Arab Gulf countries where each citizen was sponsored by a ‘kafeel’ who is from the host country. The kafeel or employer is responsible for the worker’s visa and legal status. Once the contract or term comes to an end, the employer renews or terminates the worker’s status. This also meant that if the employer failed to renew or terminate the term of the migrant worker, the kafeel would pay a fine for negligence. However, the Kafala system of the 1960s excluded overtime from its labour policy. It creates a power dynamic where migrant workers are subject to deportation if they speak out about their problems to other than the employer. With the lesser approach to safety barriers, there is a high chance of the employees disregarding their personal conditions, such as physical and emotional neglect. The migrant workers are not allowed to leave the premises of their employment area and are often forced to remain in the Arab States due to severe financial problems back home.

The Kafala system controlled migration to the Arab countries. It was intended as a means by which foreigners gained short-term employment projects in host countries under the Kafala. This applied to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries of Kuwait Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman. It was introduced to sponsor or be responsible for the migration workers, hence the word, kafeel. This was in exchange for the service and

labour which the Arab countries needed to raise skyscrapers. Interestingly, the Prophet Muhammad (May Peace be Upon Him) said that the Last Hour would not come until people competed with each other in the height of their buildings. Anna Varghese, in one of the ‘chapters’ remarks how times have changed in just a decade, where streets that were once familiar are almost alien today.

As a female migrant from Kerala, Varghese struggles to maintain a bond with her children back home. She admits that expecting the same enthusiasm and eagerness from her children whenever they enquired about her through the telephone or through their relatives in Kerala would soon fade away if she continued to hide her story from them. Varghese finds her professional life as a ‘stick person’ and her personal life with her children elusive and temporary. In spite of the thirty years of service in Dubai, she cannot guarantee herself a home there, a place in which she spent nearly half of the average lifespan. She knows that one day, she too would retire from her job and would be sent back home. However, the family she once left home would not be the same. She comes to terms with herself as she becomes aware of the different places her children and herself have grown, both geographically and emotionally. This, however, does not create any distance between her family. She dreams of wax-wings for children and herself by which they are liberated into the cosmos, free to explore and cross boundaries, free from restrictions.

Distance plays a role in the shaping of Varghese’s psyche. She acknowledges the gaping geographical chasm which has caused her to live miles away from home yet not distance herself emotionally from family, but on the other hand, her children becoming aloof from her because of the same chasm. Distance means different things to different people. To Varghese, distance symbolized yearning, never-failing love and unending happiness on a personal level. However, the temporariness which comes along with distance unsettles her. No matter how long she would stay apart, in spite of all the love and happiness the temporariness that distance would give her, becomes inescapable.

The glint of the sun made it difficult to see. She sensed people falling past her, falling with her, dropping like rocks, trying to steady themselves, putting those wings to work. As she flapped harder, she thought she faintly caught sight of many bird heads peering down at her. Their beaks were moving. “Fly,” they seemed to be mouthing. “Fly! (Unnikrishnan 31)

The desire for liberation is found in the inner thoughts of Varghese which surface as dreams. It is as almost she wishes to escape the shackles put around the people around her, people far away and even herself, in almost an instant. There is a bird with red eyes, their wings clipped,

iron lockets on their necks and bells on their feet through which Varghese recognizes herself and people like her. The bird pushes her human form from the top of the building, which suggests that there is nobody who could give her that needed push, but herself. She hears cries from things falling around her, both with and without wings. The birds encourage her to fly, explore the expanse and to believe in herself to take the leap of crossing temporariness and uncertainty.

“Mussafa Grew People” is one of the “chapters” about “MALLUS (Malayalees Assembled Locally and Lovingly Under Supervision)” who react to their temporary status in a rational manner. (54) The scientist, “Agro” Moosa doctors the seeds which yield several ‘sheaves’ of Malayalees. With the patronage of the Royals, Moosa grows MALLUS in greenhouse gases on Egyptian soil where scholars in Malayalam talk as much as they could in Malayalam to develop language in the MALLUS, also called the canned Malayalees. With the strain of ‘rationality’ with extended immunity, the seeds exceed twenty years of life and begin to question their ‘temporary’ status in spite of constituting a majority of the labour force. The protest staged by the MALLUS near Burj Khalifa acts as a means to show disapproval and discontent with the authorities and employers. However, the protest wears thin with the ruling to destroy the population of MALLUS through burning the doctored seeds. The power dynamics play against the MALLUS and the unrest dies down. This shows the level of autonomy and freedom of speech possessed by the migrant communities in the UAE. However, this system several key changes that have reshaped the Kafala system of sponsorship.

Labour laws or employment laws are those which mediate between workers, employers, government and trade unions. These laws contain labour codes like codes on wages and working conditions. With a prohibition on forced labour and against discrimination based on sex, colour, origin, race, religion and gender, the UAE labour law governs employer–employee relations in the private sector. Effective from 2 February 2022, it repealed a previous Federal Law of 1980. The new law protects both parties in the employment relationship, where issues related to working hours, minimum wage, termination of employment, work injuries and vacation are addressed. Work modes like full–time, part–time, temporary and flexible are introduced, and unlimited types of contracts are replaced by fixed-term contracts. Harassment, bullying and psychological abuse are also aimed to tackle against employers. However, this does not include the domestic workers. Though the Kafala system was tried on humanitarian grounds, it provided sustenance to millions of migrant workers from Kerala who did not find

job opportunities in their land. In the last decade, Qatar has negated the Kafala from its immigration policies.

Conscientization, or the coming to consciousness, is a developing and strengthening of consciousness that keeps Unnikrishnan's characters and narrators round in nature. Anna Varghese is a character who understands her job as a 'stick person' could not be kept under wraps any longer. Taking Khalid's advice, she tells herself that her children would stop asking about her as time went by with declining interest and curiosity, so she had to explain things to them before it was too late. She also begins to have dreams similar to Iqbal's, in which she grows wax wings as she stands tall on the topmost floor of Babu's home. She hears a voice asking her to fly, as she watches herself fall from the building. The mere act of attempting to fly becomes a symbol of passionate liberation. Varghese wishes to fly high above the sky, cross boundaries, teach her children to fly, and achieve greatness through freedom.

Migrant consciousness can be strengthened or changed when there is an awakening, mindfulness and deliberate, conscious actions. In the speculative chapter, In "Mussafah Grew People," the 'canned Malayalees grown by the scientist Moosa are designed to simply enter a labour workforce and work for twelve years until they are left to die in the desert. Moosa has a change of heart where he goes against his patrons and doctors the seeds such that the canned Malayalees prioritize reason, which causes much dissent in the land. The new seeds grow into rational migrant workers who go on a strike and decide to form their own 'MALLU Landoo,' which would overthrow the current regime. Though the seeds are destroyed by the labour ministry, the spirit of the Malayalee migrant workers changes from blind submission to one that is unapologetic about raising pressing issues that concern themselves and the state. They are aware that their needs are not meant, in spite of being the considerable majority in the land and could practically bring the cities to a standstill if they alone stopped working. One of the concerns was to not get rid of the 'canned Malayalees' just because they were replaceable. They too, deserved a better life and a better end instead of simply being left to die once they completed their term or contract. Reasoning brings them out from the decade-long darkness, a world that neither pondered nor questioned the rule of the land but simply aimed at fitting into a system.

The novel, in 28 chapters, is divided into three sections 'tapes' the different facets of Gulf Malayalee immigrant narratives with language, culture and genre elements. It gives insight into

the lives of the Gulf Malayalee migrant workers who traverse deserts and work tirelessly in building the UAE we know today.

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