

Book Review

The Epistemology of Migrant Voices Within the Public Discourse of Kerala

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil, *The Gulf Migrant Archives in Kerala: Reading Borders and Belonging*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2024), ISBN: 9780198908258 (Hardcover).

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“*Mone, Enna tirich?*” (“Dear, when is your return?” translated from Malayalam) is a naïve query that remains a central piece of conversation to be had with a migrant. The recognition of the migrant’s presence is fused with his prolonged absence at home. Migrant lives remain just as absent from public discourse in Kerala, despite remittances significantly contributing to the state’s social and economic development. *The Gulf Migrant Archives in Kerala: Reading Borders and Belonging* unravels ‘weak resistance’¹ in migrant lives, as ‘poetics of secrecy,’ and how it establishes migrant subjectivity in Kerala over the years. The author argues that such assertions continue through translation/transgressions but remain as a ‘rumour.’ The book examines photographs, cinema, literature, and comics produced by migrants, exploring their lives across the borderland. This is contextualised in the evolution of the state’s public discourse, towards a universal/non-particular identity based on a labour force under the collective of the trade union. The production site of the migrant remains invisible to the public discourse in Kerala, thereby making the migrant an ally of consumerism and global capitalism.

The rising use of TV/telephone/VCR in migrant households had reimagined migrant expressions in literary, visual, and auditory culture, which largely remained within the private genre. Say, for example, the ‘Kathupaattu’ (letter songs) reveals the pain of the separation of the husband from the wife. The performativity in migrant photos reveals aspirations, but these aspirations are often limited to a select viewership and appreciation within households back home. These private genres found their way into the public sphere through the

¹ The notion of ‘weak resistance’ by Ewa Majewska is used in the discussion of political agency of the counterpublics. Majeswka’s work, rooted in feminist theory, captures how the multitude becomes the common.

mediation of culture and religion, aiming to keep the community from falling prey to the “temptations” of the modern world. When the home cinema of Salam Kodyathur captured the migrant Muslims, who were otherwise absent in the booming Malayalam industry, he veiled the medium by using Islam as a formal device in navigating the content.

The caricature of migrants in mainstream Malayalam cinema, which either sympathised with the migrant or used laughter films, revealed the failure of public discourse in accommodating Gulf migrants. The migrants and their suffering remain ‘alien’ to the neighbours and relatives at home, with the migrants alone in a nostalgic past. The ‘comical’ figure of the rich migrant provides a momentary self-reflection for the audience, but still emphasises the binary distinctions between migrant/native and migrant/non-migrant. The ‘temporariness’ of migrants in the Gulf and a lack of cultural citizenship leave the migrant in a state of limbo, a state of perpetual non-arrival. As the migrants no longer belong to the world they helped to make, they struggle with their identity as “guest” or “invader.”

The book covers the cultural archive of migration that has remained (un)sighted, drawing temporal sensibilities beyond ‘temporariness’ as a feature of precarity (Siegenthaler & Bublatzky, 2021). This probes the narrative of a ‘passive being’ of a migrant, one subjected to economic forces at the micro or macro level. Migrants undertake an archiving that is ‘active, interventionist, and open-ended’ in nature; as they move from recording the past to imagining the future as a collective project (Appadurai, 2003). This also helps them to reimagine a community outside the spatial and temporal constraints. It creates a counterpublic wherein the ‘weak resistance’ of everyday private life is catapulted across, through visual and literary culture.

The categories of temporary/permanent or voluntary/involuntary in migration policies feed the state’s control of its borders. These categories distinguish migration from mobility. Migration is theorised as one undertaken by the poor, whose movement is driven by push-pull factors, and the above categories apply to them. The movement of the privileged is seen as an intrinsic human urge to be mobile. The distinction between instrumental and intrinsic migration draws the divide between migration and mobility. Migration, thereby, is either a problem to be solved or a solution to the existing issue. creating anti/pro stances in the discourse.

Gulf Archives reimagine communities and futures amidst temporal sensibilities and generate an episteme that challenges stable identities of the state.

The author illustrates it through Sageer's *Gulfumpadi P.O.*, Khadeeja Mumthas's *Barsa*, Krishnadas's *Dubaipuzha* and *Katalirampangal*, and Sonia Rafeek's *Herbarium*. As much as translation, untranslatability becomes necessary in building an affective community of the migrants. The use of symbols and ciphers in Benyamin's *Goat Days* creates zones of exclusion wherein the reader feels a sense of alienation and boundedness, just as the migrant. As the book challenges the classic rags-to-riches trope, it brings to light the kinds of occupations in the Gulf that migrants try to hide from their families back in Kerala. *Temporary People* by Deepak Unnikrishnan similarly reflects the opacity in the lives of the migrants.

De Haas (2021) treats migration as part of 'social change and development,' conceptualising migrant agency within his conceptual framework. This puts into focus how the history of migration is just as old as the history of humankind. *Gulf Archives* lays down the epistemic disjuncture in defining the migrant subjectivity along the lines of the nation-state²; the migrant cinema, literature, and photography cut across time, space, and identity in building a new epistemology. The author, likewise, shifts away from the analytical hierarchy present in the contemporary migration discourse in Kerala, deeply embedded in the Marxian framework of capitalistic inequality. His work has reframed the public debate with newer insights and frameworks, largely contributing to the revival of public anthropology in India (Panuganti and Singh, 2026; Borofsky and De Laurie, 2019). The *Gulf archives* and the author's subsequent involvement in recognising migrant photography, cinema, and literature within a particular historical juncture have developed a pluralisation of archives³. The work plays an important role in 'doing' social histories that remain on the margin (BSF-HCU, 2026). The author's childhood, which involved migration to the Gulf, adds a layer to the current enquiry (Karinkurayil, 2023).

The author maps the forms of memory wherein photographs move from the grimes of daily life, drawing idioms from cinema. The photographs do not just hold the Gulf as a past but create a Gulf that would be realised years later. Their imaginative labour is reflected in these photographs, which need to be

² Mezzedra and Neilson (2013) question the paradigm structuring the world into core and periphery, which uses border as a central device for articulation. The concept of 'border as method' has served as the epistemological framework for the author.

³ V Geeta extensively covers the necessity of doing social history, along the lines of marginalised populations. She emphasises pluralisation of archives, which facilitates the same.

acknowledged/discovered (TEDx Talks, 2025). The *Gulf archives* provide the reader with a lens to analyse the rising social media presence of interstate migrants in Kerala. The ‘mubarakbahivolgs’ of Deluyar Hossain Sekh from Murshidabad district of West Bengal is widely popular among the Malayali Instagram users of Kerala. As Mubarak recounts his daily life, struggles, and happiness, Malayali audiences remain hooked by his resounding ‘jaasti sandosham’ (translated as overwhelming happiness). Mubarak has reshaped the Malayali’s attitude to interstate migrants, as he chides his owner for making him work in the incessant rain. He has created a sense of egalitarianism among the interstate migrants and the Malayalis. Countless other, lesser-known social media accounts also narrate their emerging lives in Kerala, away from being mere data points. Many migrant youth showcase Perumbavoor (a migrant hub in Kochi) as a city of aspirations, just like Malayalis imagine Dubai. As the state of Kerala fails to acknowledge these migrants beyond their economic significance, they create a community across cyberspace. The author advocates for acknowledging migrant narratives, which can largely break xenophobic tendencies toward them.

The state of Kerala, with its strong anti-capitalistic bent, has brought labour/economic necessity from the private realm to being a subject of the public realm. The inversion of the classical hierarchy of human life has resulted in the rise of a ‘social,’ wherein the nation-state is reduced to merely administering the economic needs of its citizens⁴. This has helped the state, with its disregard for particularity, to bring a sense of conformity among its citizens. As the book lays out how migrants exercise agency across the borderland through their cultural archives, it shifts the discourse on Gulf migrants away from instrumentality. It calls for a curation of migrant narratives to expand the public realm by including more voices. As global capital and its critique push the ‘precarity trap’ as the only narrative of poor migrants, Gulf migrant archives leave me pondering over the future possibilities of public deliberation and visibility available to similar marginalised populations.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, in her book ‘On Human Condition’, argues that modernity values *vita activa*/economic necessity over *vita contemplativa*/contemplative nature of humans. Arendt opposes Marxism for flipping the classical hierarchy to valorise labour.

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