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Novel as a Genre of Migration: Reading *Temporary People*

ABSTRACT: The birth of the novel has been identified as one of the pivotal moves in the realm of culture which made the homogenous empty time of the nation imaginatively possible (Anderson 1983). Novels have been credited with the arrival of a new subjectivity which can place itself in the world along a horizontal organization and also have a totalizing vision of the world. In that respect it has been studied as the discursive infrastructure for the birth of bourgeoisie (Armstrong 2006). The local/nation has remained the horizon of intelligibility of the novel even though the novels themselves might traverse ex-national spaces in its diegesis (as in Menon 2006). There have been recent attempts to read the formation of the novel form in terms of cosmopolitanism (Boes 2012), or in the context of migration, attempts to read literature differently (Adelson 2005). My paper is a continuation of the effort to hypothesize what literature in the age of migration would be. With this view, I look at the novel *Temporary People* (2017) by Deepak Unnikrishnan to enquire what would be the form of a novel in the age of labour migrations. I take as my starting point the confusion that the commentators have in classifying the work between a novel and a collection of short stories and ask if migration leads to the breakdown of the novel form, and if that is indeed the case, on the possibilities of the new writing as an index of the subject caught between fragmented sovereignties, torn and produced by borders, and residing in a state of partial intelligibility. The paper thus pursues the question on the locus of intelligibility of the novel form in the age of migration. The overarching interest in the paper is to see how the idea of citizenship which is central to the idea of modern novel is played itself to be inadequate in the face of transnational migration. In this context citizen is understood to be the individual rational subject who is the locus of intelligibility of an art work. There have been a few works in the recent years which have stressed the need to understand citizenship differently in the context of migration - for example the idea of consumer citizenship, and affective citizenship. What I am trying to bring forth in my paper, taking the novel as a site, is to look at the migrant labour subjectivity and what happens to a novel when it posits to account for this subjectivity.

My paper looks at the novel/short story collection *Temporary People* by Deepak Unnikrishnan (2017a), and would be about the subjectivity of borderlands as can be explored with this novel as

the pretext. In the beginning, but without going into details of who said what, I would like to point out a want of consensus in the public sphere as to what the ontological status of this work is. Of all the different testaments provided by the publishers, some of them refer to this book as a novel, and some others as a collection of stories. The cover of the book presents the book as “A Novel”, a qualification which has gone missing when the title gets reproduced in the title page inside. What is afoot here is a crisis in naming, not in that the commentators cannot agree upon a word, but that what the confusion points out is the inadequacy of both the terms – the novel as well as short story – to relay what it is in the differential structure of nomenclature that they are referring to. It is therefore a crisis in the structure itself, in that it is now imbued with a feeling which hasn’t yet found a name. Between the short story and the novel is the distance between the traveller and the God, the one defined by his particularity, and the other by His objectivity, the one by his locatedness, and the other by His transcendence. Indeed to write a novel is to arrogate to oneself the “transcendental condition of objectivity of form-giving” (Lukacs 1989, 88; quoted in Mufti 2007, 178). If novel is that realm which is made intelligible only by the reader’s occupying the homogenous empty world (Anderson 1983) and is therefore characterised by an overarching unity which might be consummated only in the figure of the reading subject (through “the process of anticipation and retrospection, the consequent unfolding of the text as a living event, and the resultant impression of lifelikeness” [Iser 1972, 296]), then to be caught between a short story and a novel is to wink and blink in the light of historical call of duty as the interpreting subject, aka citizen, to make sense of the world. Novels have been credited with the arrival of a new subjectivity which can place itself in the world along a horizontal organization and also have a totalizing vision of the world. In that respect it has been studied as the discursive infrastructure for the birth of bourgeoisie (Armstrong 2006).

The winking-blinking subjectivity that I argue is the material-imaginative labour of the borderlands is the subject of this paper, to elaborate on which I take on just one chapter/episode/short story (whatever one might call it depending on one’s take on the genre) from *Temporary People*. The paper also is an attempt to locate the genre of novel when it is confronted with the loss of nation-state as its *terra cognita*. The local/nation has remained the horizon of intelligibility of the novel even though the novels themselves might traverse ex-national spaces in its diegesis (as in Menon 2006). There have been recent attempts to read the

formation of the novel form in terms of cosmopolitanism (Boes 2012), or in the context of migration, attempts to read literature differently (Adelson 2005). My paper gestures at this direction without primarily concerning itself with it.

Deepak Unnikrishnan, the author of *Temporary People*, is born to migrant labourers in the Gulf and currently works in Abu Dhabi, UAE. He describes Abu Dhabi, the city he grew up in, as the “city where citizenship is not an option”:

My father came in 1972 on a three-year work visa, which allowed you to sponsor spouses or children to join you. After 18, sons were on their own. To stay in Abu Dhabi as a young man, you had to find a job or enrol in university. Only unmarried daughters could stay on their parents’ visas.

But unlike in the US, where the H-1B work visas offer the possibility of a pathway towards permanent residency, no long-term option exists in the UAE for non-citizens. If a foreign loser loses his or her job or reaches retirement age (60 in most companies), they need to leave, irrespective of how long they have lived in the country – or even if they were born there. (Unnikrishnan 2017*b*)

The temporariness of the only place one could call home bears heavy on the space and time. To be temporary is in fact to be devoid of that space which can record one’s growth, that permanence against which the vagaries of time can be indexed as such. In the age of double revolution, when Europe plunged into modernity, nation was that space in which the ever-growing promise of the youth that is modernity could be delimited, such that novels could be brought to an end. It was in the consummation of a nation as the endpoint of individual development that these novels could finally resolve itself (Boes 2012, also see Moretti 2000). To then be deprived of that space, the nation, is to be then at the mercy of time when time doubles itself as space, and therefore crosses boundaries.

But we also knew what it was like to feel temporary, to keep your eye on the clock, to normalise the inevitability of departure so completely that you didn't think about it, even though you always thought about it. (Unnikrishnan 2017b)

It is from the vantage point of this transience that Deepak Unnikrishnan approaches the question of migrant labour in the Gulf. Temporariness becomes the state of being which casts life in a double-image, as if in a split-screen, like in the simultaneity of thinking and not thinking, being and not being, which lends the labouring life in the Gulf a ghostly nature:

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. (Unnikrishnan 2017a, 3)

The novel/loosely-connected-short-story-collection recounts experiences of migrant labourers in the Gulf in a non-realist manner, experimenting with techniques of story-telling. With sections of varying lengths, some of them as short as a paragraph of a few lines (e.g. Book 2 Chabter 6, 8; Book 3 Chabter 1), and with varying themes, some bizarre and some quotidian, with varying genres at play, and some chapters just a collection of words (Book 1 Chabter 3, Book 2 Chabter 4), with the naming of sections as Books and "Chabter" (to refer to how Arabic doesn't have the p sound), but with sections which are within books but not within a Chabter, with Arabic numerals for the Books, the book strives against a realist form which would make the labourer lives transparently and inertly available. I read one chabter of this book, Book 2 Chabter One, in order to dwell on the nature of the state at the margins – as in precarious labour – and the subjectivity that is produced by virtue of finding oneself at this border.

The Precarious Labour Zone

The precarity of the labour in the Gulf primarily comes from the *kafala* system, which is the legal system of recruiting migrant labourers in the Gulf countries. The kafala system is a system in which a migrant labourer has to be sponsored by a *kafeel*, or the sponsor, who is usually a citizen or in some cases an elite non-citizen. Through various legal measures, such as not

allowing labourers to change jobs, preventing their re-entry for a time period if they cancel their earlier job visas, as well as through other practices such as the sponsor keeping the labourer's passport in his custody, the kafala system becomes, as Andrew M. Gardner (2010) notes, a structural violence which bounds the labourer to the whims of the sponsor, "[allowing] the state and the citizenry to host (and profit from) the global economy without submitting to its logic" (22). Gardner identifies the system as the cornerstone of the unequal relations between the nationals and the foreigners (54).

When a poor Indian family mortgages its productive assets, pulls children from school, and pawns the mother's jewelry to come up with the thousands of dollars it takes to send a son to the Gulf, only to have him face month after month of no pay and, finally, to be relegated to scrounging for illegal work, it may seem tragic for that family (68).

However, Gardner notes, what is tragic for the family is in fact a profitable venture under the system of kafala, for the number of middlemen involved who gains when a sponsor doesn't pay the sponsored. Taking this as another instance of "deportation industry" as specified by William Waters (2002, 266), Gardner lists as those profited by this industry as "including the multitude of citizen-sponsors all of whom work under the tragic system of kafala" (Gardner 2010, 68).

More than a transfer of wealth from south Asian families to the labor brokers, sponsors and state, as noted by Gardner (2010, 69), the debilitating conditions of the kafala system is at the heart of the consolidation of the state form in the Gulf, as noted by J. Sater:

migration and the lack of migrants' citizenship status substantially contributes to positive rights that official citizenship holders enjoy. This means that in spite of the consolidation of immigration in the Arab Gulf countries, and arguably the absence of meaningful nation-building concerns, it is the absence of liberal-democratic practices and corresponding negative and political rights that is the primary factor that explains why migrants will continue to be denied citizenship rights. (Sater 2013, 293).

Similarly, Philippe Fargues (2011) has noted that of the three policies that were pursued by the Gulf states to preserving their identity in the face of the far more numerous migrant populations in their countries – “non-naturalization of foreign nationals to maintain the national/non-national separation and the privileges of the former; pro-natalism applied to nationals in order to maximize their demographic potential; and the indigenization of the workforce in order to reduce the number of non-nationals” (Fargues 2011, 287), it was only the first policy which worked. What stood in the way of the third becoming successful was precisely the need “to minimize the cost of labor and maximize efficiency, and the interest of nationals who profit from the *kafala* or sponsorship system” (289)

The structural logic of *kafala* system, together with, ironically, what Thomas Chambers (2018) identifies as continuities between home and away in transnational migration, has led to fragmentation in the migrant population of the Gulf countries. “Dubai’s landscapes are designed to separate the population into zones, and the lives of construction workers often remain hidden and their mobility is restricted within the built environment” (Kendall 2012, 47), and “it is not unusual for adults in their social lives to only associate with those of the same nationality, religion or ethnicity.” (Willoughby 2006, 37).

The State of the Gaze

The chapter under discussion is titled “Mushtibushi” and refers to the garbled rendering of the Japanese company Mitsubishi which is the manufacturer of, along with other things, the elevators in the apartment building of the characters in this story. The plot, to summarise it however inadequately, is that there have been instances of series of sexual assaults targeting children in the Hamdan area of Abu Dhabi. The latest victim is a child of six. Debashish Panicker, a resident of the building in which the victim stays and was assaulted, “a long-serving responsible adult; a twenty year veteran in the Ministry’s employment” (Unnikrishnan 2017a, 91) is tasked with interviewing the person who happened to see the victim and the stranger who accompanied the victim into the elevator around the time that could be presumed to be just before the attack. This witness is Maya, a girl of “twelve, not ten. Soon, thirteen” (95). The chapter has three parts – the first is Debashish’s summary for the sake of the reader the background to the interview, the method of his interview (“I normally ask a question, wait for an

answer, write it down. I may also write how the child is behaving” [94]) as well as his findings in the interview. After noting that the witness confided to a deal with one of three elevators in the building for supplying him regularly with children for satisfying his kinks in return for leaving Maya and her brother alone so that the latter two can concentrate on how to mug their father’s debtors, Debashish concludes:

It is my recommendation that the building decommission one of its Mitsubishi elevators, more specifically, the middle one, because the machine stands accused of sexual impropriety. In fact, after hearing her statement, it is my recommendation that all three Mitsubishi elevators be decommissioned in case the infection the accused machine has is contagious – but how does one word that without feeling stupid?

In this city, where tall tales are birthed by all sorts – all kinds, every minute, seconds – her claim may be the mightiest of all. But I believe her. (94)

The second part is the transcript of the interview between Debashish and Maya. Maya comes across in the interview as a feisty individual of her own right who hates to the guts the world of the adults and is determined to resist it even as she rues the inevitability of having to transmutate into “manufacturists”, that is, the adults. The interview lays explicit the non-verbal dimension of any interview, that after all any interview is not conducted by speech alone, but also through gaze. “Maya was...” says Debashish, “blessed with intellect, and a big bosom” (p.93). “Oh, how you stare” (95), admonishes Maya, “Your eyes. Avert.” (98), “TOUCH me, I jump on your back, bit you like a tick, burrow, sceam.” (109) but also “These quests. Needs. Finger up bum hole. Untouched wee-wees. Brother and I would like everyone to get on with it” (101).

What comes across is the unreliability of Maya as a witness, not only because she is obviously an interested party in the whole episode, but also that she calls attention to her agency over her narrative – “Look, luv, whose story is this? I tell it my way “ (98), “Look, whose story is this?” (104). The unreliability in her narrative, her interests in the whole deal with the elevator which is on the wrong side of the law at different levels (mugging, supplying children for sexual satisfaction), as well her sassiness, exuberance, viscosity (“*Maya jumps on the table. She lifts*

her knees, up-down, up-down. She marches." [97, italics in the original]), complicated with her status as a minor ("Twelve, not ten. Soon, thirteen") produces her as a visible body, the live zones of sexual infraction which then becomes, as Lauren Berlant (1997) notes for post-Raeganite America, the zone for citizen action which would remove this hyper-visibility, normalize the minor subject, and produce "dead" citizenship. Maya becomes that subject on whom the citizen should exert himself, that subject where citizenship comes alive because here the citizenship status has to be actively administered, making itself vulnerable to resistance.

This translation of a potent situation to the dead letters of legality is achieved in the final section of the chapter, which is Debashish's report to the Police (*shurtha*) on his findings. This report produces Maya (M, as she is referred to) as "another little girl" which on the one hand erases the interest that the little girl could have in this whole episode but also produces her as less than citizen, someone whose words need to be taken with caution and judgement.

How does this chapter place its reader? The first section posits the reader as someone who is privy to the thoughts of the protagonist of that section, Debashish. Here the reader is the citizen-confidante whose ethical configuration is guaranteed by the state, or essentially what is behind it – the bourgeois subjecthood. The second part lays open the question of not just the unreliability of Maya as the witness, but also of Debashish as the untainted holder of rational values. Even while his tongue sticks to the purported nature of his visit, his wayward gaze is called out by the interlocutor, which should then consolidate the position of the citizen-reader as the horizon against which Debashish can be judged. In the third part the reader on the other hand is assigned the position of a mute witness. The conversation there, which is in the form of the report, is between the state and its local agent. However, this section brings to the fore what was hidden throughout, that even though the reader may always judge, his judgements were never from the position of a transcendental knowledge which bourgeois worldview promises to the apprehender of the world. One can observe this in the curious trajectory of "pidgin" in the conversation between Debashish and Maya (99). Before beginning the transcript, explaining the method, Debashish notes, "When you spot an emboldened **O** it means I jotted down any little tics when she spoke, or thoughts that came to mind as I reread, editing my notes" (94). In the course of the conversation, a curious transfer of words takes place – Maya says "This meant he borrowed

many fews”, and in order to explain what is meant by “fews”, Debashish inserts “[O: *Pidgin – cash*]” (99, *italics in original*). Curiously, Maya ends this bit of conversation thus: “Tell me something. You speak adult. Pidgin. Spelled like bird?” (99).

The question is, how did a word – ‘pidgin’ – which was “jotted down” or “came to mind” as the transcript was reread make an appearance in Maya’s conversation? Could it be that Debashish inserted the word later on because Maya used the word? If that is so, why would Maya use that word that is so disconnected with the rest of the conversation? Again, could it be because it was in Maya’s mind the thought first occurred that ‘fews’ is a pidgin for cash, and that Debashish just made it explicit? If it was indeed this rewriting, it serves to add to the fact that the transcript is in no way a reliable one, but one that has been reinterpreted from the standpoint of an interested party. In this it showcases an excess. Or could it be that Maya saw Debashish writing it down, and then deliberately asked a question about the way it is spelled, thereby investing the word with a desire to on the one hand reveal that she is privy to what he is writing, and on the other, that she still holds him incapable of correctly noting down what is happening – another way in which Maya draws attention to herself as a visible body that threatens the composure of the state.

However, one could also assume a very different position for reader if one goes by the timeline of the conversation and at least for argument sake assumes that Maya was actually repeating what was in Debashish’s mind. If so, what was the connecting link between Debashish’s mind and Maya’s word? I propose that we look at the role of the reader, us, as the very link between Maya and Debashish, the one whose reading sounds loud in the scene of the interview. That is to say, basically, that Maya got the word from us as we were reading the paragraph. This makes the reader into an invisible witness, invisible because he is not present in the scene, but all the same with real effects on the conversation. The reader then becomes the third person in the room whose reading becomes the articulation between the interlocutors. This calls into question our own need to remain invisible as the silent stock-taker of matters, as that index of being thereby non-vulnerable and therefore secure in the protected zone (because invisible and without a body that might be violated [Berlant 1997, 71]).

Translation between Margins

Even if we are to discount such a reading (which I would very much like to retain), the fact remains that the reader is presented a transcript flanked by two summaries – one as in a private talk, and the other in the form of an official report. What is played out in the chapter is the loss in translation itself between one summary to the next. Take for example Debashish's conviction that Maya was telling the truth and therefore the elevator is actually a sexual predator (94). While Debashish, in the beginning of the chapter/story tells us that he would recommend decommissioning the elevators, this part is missing in his final report, but leaves a curious trace:

But this report concerns what has been done to a helpless child, and I regret to admit that beyond speculation, my session with the witness has not come to much. The culprit has unfortunately gotten away. I do have one suggestion, which, with funds permitting, I hope can be implemented.

Before the machines are decommissioned, I strongly advise the installation of cameras...(111-112)

The report actually doesn't make a recommendation to decommission the elevators, which, as Debashish reminds us, "how does one word that without feeling stupid?" (94). The suggestion seem to have fallen through the gap between the two paragraphs cited above, but leaving a trace behind - "before the machines are decommissioned". One shouldn't, however, think of this trace as the trace of an imperfect erasure. Rather than read this trace as a leftover which would then forensically tell us what was left out, rather than labour on reading between the lines, the message between the lines are there for us to enjoy. In other words, it is not an accident nor the sloppiness on the part of Debashish that has left the trace of its seemingly pathological and now erased diagnosis. The trace is rather for us, the excess participant who is now a threat, the trace through which we are produced as precarious subjects. The labour of the trace is to display the fallibility of the state inspite of its exceptional technologies, and to create anxiety around its showcased errancy. An error may creep in a document, a salary might not reach on time, the boss might have a change of heart regarding handing over the passport. We are not only privy to the now erased bizarre suggestions, but we are only too aware of it, too conscious of what the state is

able to and is shameless about. The state enjoys and erases, it enjoys as it erases. The state produces itself as a site of pleasure by making a scene of erasing its pleasure.

If citizenship is an act of meaning making, that now has to take place in a zone of vulnerability, of precarity even, privy to the traces of enjoyment that suffuses the rationality of the state, but yet, having been refused a position in which judgement of a situation can be put into disinterested prose; occupying a peculiar state of excess that exists as a threat. It is at the margins that the pleasure of the state is in its live display, as that zone in which it lives through the numerous disinterested technologies that include and exclude, and through the whimsicality of deploying these technologies which is what produces this zone as a zone of pleasure for the state. The excess nature of the intimate witness of the scene is produced by this excess of the state in which state is no longer the stable entity of already-achieved contract but reserves the potential of capricious use of resources and power.

When at the margins, the power of the state is not its mantle of rational order but its very human fallibility which has to resort to guesses and conjectures. Here is how Debashish Panicker describes the possible detractor:

Even though it's possible an Emirati national may have done this, it would be foolish to assume the culprit at large is an Emirati solely on the basis of this circumstantial evidence. (112)

Debashish vis-à-vis the vulnerability of the intimate witness is caught in the contradictory positions of being an immigrant labour himself but also the representative of state in whom the state reproduces itself. On the one hand he too lives in the logic of kafala with its segregations, but on the other hand he is there on behalf of the state and reporting to the state. He is that double of the Thing which reproduces the Thing locally, that Thing which enjoys and whose perverse enjoyment is already a manifestation of its power –the postcolonial condition, as delineated by Achille Mbembe (2001). At the same time, he is also where the Thing is frustrated in its hopes of unhindered pleasure. On the one hand, what could be read fairly easily from the scene is that Debashish would risk his position greatly as the representative of the state if there is an

unambiguous allegation against a national (Emirati) in a society in which the population is subjected to racial differentiation through state-sponsored activities. As noted above, the racial – national/foreigner – dichotomy is central to defining the state form in the Gulf states, and relies on distances that should not be breached spatially or discursively. After all, the law of untouchability is about formulating who may be touched offensively (Muthukkaruppan 2017, 66). But on the other hand, these conjectures and conditional clauses are the very human technologies through which state produces a different kind of a public as its people – publics, rather than public, which due to the illegibility of the public order and the impossibility of breaching this obfuscation has to resort to knowledges that are shared *as if* in a private mode, as private and intimate truths – “In this city, where tall tales are birthed by all sorts – all kinds, every minute, seconds – her claim may be the mightiest of all. But I believe her” (Unnikrishnan 2017a, 94).

Conclusion

The state at the borderlands become the object of private pleasures, of rumour and gossip that operate through and build communities of private talk. The public speech becomes translatable into an intimate idiom through its fissures and incapacities (on public speech, see Warner 2005). In other words, the public speech becomes loaded with the enjoyment of gossip, pleased and dreaded in various intimate publics – “a voice that [is] unattributed, unassigned, and yet anchored to the images of self and other...” (Das 2007, 117). As Veena Das (2006) has shown, state becomes almost human in rumours – dependent on individual lives, and fragile enough to be potentially washed away by individual calls to rebellion (108-134). Rumours become a potent means of communication because of its “adequacy to a reality that has become suddenly unrecognizable” (134). What is particularly interesting is that the central piece of the chapter under discussion is the transcript of the interview rather than the summaries. This is counterintuitive in the sense that one usually assumes that it would be the official transaction of the state, the final report submitted to the police in this case, which would be the statement from which the alternative histories will have to be teased out. Instead, the summaries flank the main narrative. What I have sought to show in the paper is that it in the excess of the transcript itself – the excess in gaze and gestures that is lost in the official report – combined with the scientific

discourse that officially introduces it (the method of the interview, the legend to the interview, etc.) which makes it the realm where the magic of the state (Das 2007, 162-183) - with real consequences, non-transparent, “combination of obscurity and power”, and “placing oneself in a position of vulnerability”, and all of this grounded in everyday life (163) – is established.

It is the inadequacy of the known in explaining the real, or, the recognition that the real is missing in its legally/legibly permissible articulations that sustains the borderland subjectivity as a zone of precarious liveliness that congeals between the lines of the official discourse. The subject of the novel of migration is not a novel of being lost to the world, nor is it a novel with the command over the comprehensibility of the world, it is rather the one who can reproduce the state as a site of pleasure in inside knowledges. Rather than obscure the particularity behind the claim to intelligibility of ‘universal’ truths, the world of the migrant novel produces world as knowable and enjoyable only through the live bonds of intimacy, and construes its reader as an insider.

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