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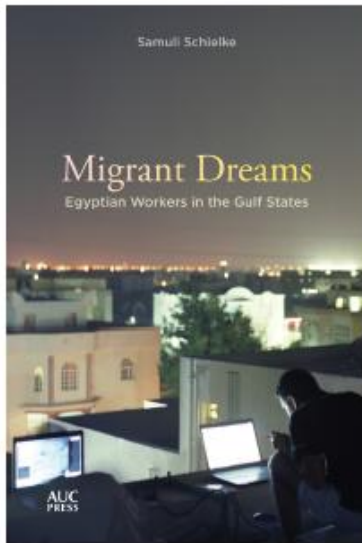
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Book Review – Dr Rania M Rafik Khalil
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Migrant Dreams
Egyptian Workers in the Gulf States

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Migrant Dreams is about the hopes and aspirations on which migrant workers thrive to achieve their goals. The first version of this book was published in 2017 in Arabic with the title *Hatta yantahi al-naft* (Until the End of Oil). Samuli Schielke explains that in order for him to understand Egypt, he needed to study the effects of international migration and foreign dependency. Based on over a decade of fieldwork, observations and conversations, Samuli Schielke gives a detailed overview of the life of low-income Egyptian migrant laborers who relocated to the Arab Gulf States on temporary contracts, returned, then migrated again. The book focuses mostly on the story of Tawfik, an intelligent Egyptian young man from rural backgrounds who is compelled to achieve the dream of marriage and building a family home, while in *ghurba* (away from home). The most important task of the book as Schielke puts it is “to describe how and under what conditions migrant workers live” (xv). He attempts to define the life of a migrant which is not really a life yet is entirely concerned with building a life.

Migrant Dreams engages with questioning the impact of migrating to the Gulf in relation to money, want of a better life, families, and communities back home. The narrow circle of life mostly revolves around the work site, accommodation provided by the contractor, buying food, calling home, and logging online. The author highlights the pros and cons of such a limited life overshadowed with the prospect of instant deportation of non-citizens. Labor migrants often experience subaltern racism which according to Schielke is not a coincidental side effect, but a functional part of the way countries in the Gulf are governed; “Subaltern racism is part of an architecture of power in which an entire society is systematically depoliticized and demobilized” (p.27). It reinforces the narrow circle of life guiding workers’ “dreams towards a specific circular path” (p.27). He highlights that the logic of separating “families” and “bachelors” is far more reaching than just separating unmarried men from families in public spaces and the poor from the rich but it is part of the system of segregating migrants into those who earn an income sufficient enough to send for their families to live with them and those who cannot afford the expenses to do so. Migrant work is a harsh reality, one that is often unsettling and alienating reduced to “making, saving and spending money” (p.44). Egyptian migrant laborers often want to appear successful in the eyes of their families and potential brides and consequently, they share very little about what they do and how they live. Ghurba, Schielke says “teaches one to suffer and to endure in pursuit of those inevitable dreams that can only be realized with the help of money” (p.57). Such a life makes it exceedingly difficult to pursue other dreams. The book interrupts the tracing of Tawif’s life by commenting on the expulsion of thousands of migrant workers in 2013 and 2014 in the Gulf to replace them in the active workforce with citizens, this coincided with the stagnation of the Egyptian economy. To tell a young Egyptian man at that time to forgo his dream of migrating to the Arab Gulf States, particularly those from villages was equal to crushing his dreams. A paradoxical outcome of the pursuit of a better life through migratory labour is the difficulty of returning to the stable life one dreams to build back home. According to Schielke (2020), “Egypt is one of the many societies that rely heavily on migrants’ remittances” (p.55). The chapter, *Until the End of Oil* points out that “the attempt to turn one’s dreams into reality through migratory labor means, in practice, that one has to endure a less –than-real life while waiting for real life to begin.

And one often has to do so over extended periods of time: for just one more year, until the end of oil” (p.78). Migrant money has over the course of forty years transformed some Egyptian villages into semi-urbanised communities with empty multi-story red brick buildings. Empowered by the economic gain accumulated in the Arab Gulf States, many who returned to Egypt perceived it with a “mixture of intimacy and estrangement” (p.87).

The author towards the second half of the book, points to the most debated issues according to his research and conversations with Tawfik and other migrant labors. Discussions revolved around “the impact that migration to the Gulf has on how Egyptians understand a good life in material, ethical, and spiritual terms” in addition to the how migration has often gone hand in hand with a deep conviction in destiny and a belief in God’s unknown plans. He further points out that migration to the “Gulf has transformed Egypt’s once pluralistic moderate and solidarity – oriented society into a religiously conservative intolerant and fiercely materialistic one” (p.92). Four pages later however, he remarks that the Gulf is also “an important source of cosmopolitan, upper-class liberalism” (p.96).

Schielke shifts in the final chapters of his book to the notion of migrant money and the difficulties that must be endured away from home in order to make that home possible. He makes an attempt to tie the impact of migration laborers in villages in Egypt to a more global perspective by comparing it to the experience of migration for work in Finland and Sweden. It is not particularly a suitable approach from the perspective of an Egyptian reviewing the book. It weakened his argument and far from plausible. In his defense though, the aim of this chapter The Shine of the Metropolis is to contextualize migration from rural areas to cities as being a world-wide phenomenon. The book ends with the final chapter concluding the argument that “migrants’ initial aspirational dreams are not simply disappointed but rather transformed by experiences” (p.109).

Throughout the book Samuli Schielke traces the endeavors of Tawfiq who helps Schielke in deepening his understanding of the dreams of Egyptian young men from rural areas and low-income families. Schielke depicts his dreams and struggles, resulting in a rich account of life as a migrant worker in the Gulf. *Migrant Dreams* is bound to appeal to international audiences as well as Middle East scholars interested in the detailed lives of labor migrants and their experiences.

About the author

Samuli Schielke is a research fellow at the Center for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin, Germany. He is the author of numerous publications including most recently, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (2015) and *The Perils of Joy: Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt* (2012).

About the Reviewer

Dr. Rania M Rafik Khali is assistant professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, the Research and Postgraduate Studies Coordinator for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the International University Ranking Coordinator for the British University in Egypt (BUE).

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