

Teaching Literature of Economic Migration

By

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Teaching literatures of migration in a multicultural classroom cannot be isolated from the textual entanglements with other media through which such a literature maps on to a culture. This essay will deliberate on how economic migration in the contemporary world differs from the earlier phases of diasporas, reflect on the critical analysis of its representation in contemporary literature on migration and highlight the fault lines of such conceptualisation. Further, it delves on practices in classroom in the teaching of this literature, and possible outcomes of such a course on literatures of migration.

Defining the Literature of Economic Migration

Speaking about migration, Ranajit Guha once characterised it as “absolute discontinuity”.¹ For long, migration is thought about as a giving up of one’s homeland for the foreign. However, there clearly was a shift in the terms of being cast away by the late twentieth century. Reflecting on this, Carine M. Mardorossian draws up a binary between the earlier literatures of exile, which are premised on the possibility of return to one’s homeland and in which the figure of the exile is caught midway between one’s homeland and one’s place of exile, and the literature of migration, which is characterised by the impossibility of return, conscious as it is, of the perpetual change that is affecting one’s homeland such that no return to a homeland as one left it is possible.

Because of her displacement, the migrant’s identity undergoes radical shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in her ambivalence towards both her old and new existence. She can no longer simply or nostalgically remember the past as a fixed and comforting anchor in her life, since its contours move with the present rather than in opposition to it. Her identity is no longer to do with being but with becoming.²

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Much of this account is informed by the optimism of a globalising world in which the migrant identity stands as the node of resistance to monocultures and territorial powers—an optimism that properly belonged to the time when the wall between the East and the West came down in Europe. Writing around the same time and sharing the mood, Arjun Appadurai could conceive of the migrant archive as the migrants ‘capacity to aspire for a new and better world.’³ Writing half a decade later, Vijay Mishra’s study of diasporic literature is coloured by the knowledge that migrants cannot be banked on to provide an alternative to totalising and repressive territorial cultures. The impossibility of mourning that characterises the diasporic literature according to Mishra is the impossibility or even the undesirability of ever attaining that home that one so also longs for.⁴ This impossibility is also the resource for both progressive and regressive politics that migrants can have with regard to their home.

There is a disconnect between such characterisations of migration and the contemporary reality of advanced technologies connecting people physically or virtually. Writing against the cliché of the migrant being *in-between two cultures*, Leslie A. Adelson questions the idea of cultures which exist in isolation to each other. The discourse of “in-between” is a [desperate] attempt to keep the two worlds separate, ignoring the myriad ways in which the worlds have been connected, and the role of the migrants in the making of the host culture.⁵ Following this, Adelson reads German literature by Turkish writers as instances where one can find the breakdown of traditional boundaries and the seepage of spaces into one another. The telephone, the television, the mirror, and the reverberation across the walls in the domestic space, all become welded in the creation of a new space, one which does not yield itself to boundaries premised on blood and birth. In this literature, the author may find her mother in Istanbul in a woman at a railway station in Germany, while the mirror on the wall overlooking the courtyard relays the sun that upsets the divisions of East and West. This neighbourhood in Germany has its nodes not only in Istanbul and Africa, but also the vast sky through which the televisions and the pigeons transmit messages.⁶

The characterisation of migration in the paradigm of death and loss is even more disconnected from the experience of circular migration, where the migrants keep coming back to the homeland, and mostly settle post-retirement. As has been noted as a peculiar characteristic of Gulf migrant memoirs in Kerala, which has a long history of circular migration to the Gulf,

When memory is studied with relation to migration, it is a truism that it is home which is remembered from one’s location in the place that one has migrated to (Marschall 2018). For the Keralan migrants to the Gulf, owing to the circular nature of the Gulf migration, however, it is the place one had migrated to, the Gulf, which is often the remembered place.⁷

One way of thinking about this circular economic migration is the idea of temporariness built into it. Characterised as “Temporary People” the idea of migrant temporariness brings to the fore the need for developing a new language to speak about migration for those migrants who have no hope of ever settling in the host countries and will have to leave the host land eventually. Understandably then, Deepak Unnikrishnan, in his work *Temporary People*,

substitutes the discourse of exile with that of *absence*, thus accounting for the “temporary” time of migration from a point of view that is understood to be the only permanent place, that of home, and of mother.

And by the time you’ve done the math in your head, everything you’ve missed, what’s been gained, you’ll come to realize what the word *pravasi* really means: absence. That’s what it means, absence. When you write your book, address my Hari personally, and tell my beautiful, beautiful boy, tell my son that’s what it’s always meant: absence.⁸

As Priya Menon notes in her study of *Temporary People*, temporariness “disturbs the distinction between future, past and present”. The recognition of spectrality therefore is the mode of existence of the migrants and the failed disjunction of time is a step towards developing a new vocabulary of the migrant experience in the Arab Gulf.⁹

While temporariness may not characterise all economic migrations of the contemporary world, it definitely extends itself to more than the condition of migrants in the Arab Gulf. Any migration aimed at remittance back home and unable to imagine a settled life in one’s destination may easily fit into such a paradigm. One could also think of other migrations, say, that of rural China to its urban centres, where the discourse is that of escape from a place that has nothing to offer, to one of personal development.

My youth began when I was 21. At least, that’s when I decided it began. That was when I started to think that all those shiny things in life—some of them might possibly be for me.¹⁰

The aspiration that is built into such migration, one that is at work in economic migration in general, can similarly be a distinguishing factor from a discourse that is built on a language of alienation. More importantly, the question of aspiration forces us to relocate the frames of culture, not just of host (like in Adelson’s critique), but also that of homeland, thus further destabilising the notion of between-ness and alienation that is the legacy of diasporic discourse in the study of migrations. Aspiration signals to the already permeated nature of home, in which the elsewhere is built as that where and/or through which a better home can be realized. Fundamentally, it can offer a popular repudiation of the national frames in which modernity is imagined in postcolonial discourse, while also bringing to the fore sites other than the West as the resource for imagining better lives.

To teach the culture and literature of economic migration is to consciously mark a new time in understanding migrations, and to build this consciousness into one’s reading.

Economic Migration in a Literature Classroom

A fundamental task that an instructor of literature of migration is entrusted with is to treat the literary texts of migration as literary texts. These are not texts of truth-telling but texts which operate in a specific field of production. They are not ethnographic records of migration as they are records of a literary culture. The text is not direct-from-the-heart testimonial as it is an operation within the existing practice of the use of various literary themes and plot devices, stock

characteristics and motifs. Literatures of migration, inasmuch as they are produced by migrants, are testimonies of migrant creativity, a niche in the shared language, more than artefacts arising from a globally readable transparency of the migrant condition.

Often, migration literature is treated as a universal category and is not situated adequately in the literary field. Already the task of Comparative Literature has come under criticism for its smoothing over of fundamental differences over what constitute literature, or if at all literature can be considered a universal category.¹¹ When it comes to diasporic or migration literature, it is treated as a category in itself. While this has pragmatic value, as pointed out elsewhere, migrant literature operates within the context of regional/vernacular/national (in many instances these can be simply called linguistic) literatures. For example, Amitav Ghosh, author of *A Circle of Reason* has stated that his said work [a novel in English, and perhaps the first novel of Indian literature to feature the Arabian Gulf] was his response to the paucity of writing in Bengali literature on the Gulf.¹² Similarly, the strategies employed by Malayalam Gulf writers, such as the use of world literary figures, can be read in the context of the power structure within the Malayalam literary field and the placement of these authors within this field.¹³ This placement in the field of regional literature is one of the ways in which new migrant literature is different from the older diasporic literature.

As for the Indian diaspora, while writers can be seen to use their diasporic status as a ploy to reassert their identity in the alien environment, in the absence—except in the case of a few like A.K. Ramanujan and Gayatri Spivak—of any organic connection with a specific linguistic culture in India, the Indian identity they construct for themselves often turns out to be a myth suspended in a cultural vacuum. India for them is still a cultural monolith that communicates with the international community through what they consider to be the only pan-Indian language, English.¹⁴

The migrant literature of contemporary economic migration is part of, and makes its presence felt, in the field of linguistic literature of the homeland. The success of the Malayalam original of *Goat Days*, titled *Aatujeevitham* (2008), is a case in point. The novel was published by Green Books, established just five years before. Benyamin, the novelist, was a migrant in Bahrain at the time. The novel went on to become an unprecedented commercial success, also receiving critical acclaim. Not only did it establish Benyamin as an author to reckon with, and his subsequent works published by the well-established DC Books, the novel also cut out a bigger space for Gulf writing in mainstream Malayalam publishing industry. While many new works got published, some of the earlier ones were brought to light from the obscurity that had greeted them in their initial publication.

To treat the migrant literature as literature is to also recognise its overlapping with an established mode of writing, and its departures from the latter. The established mode of writing on migration, the literature of diaspora, as an older tradition, is characterised by the themes of trauma and mourning, alienation and assimilation. Teaching the literature of migration, the first task before the instructor is to move away from the frames that have dominated the

literature of diaspora and forge a new language of migration. The literature of diaspora is caught in the logic of the single language states, where movement between territories are also movement between sovereign and monolithic, monocultural nations. Even multiculturalism is a cultural trait in such a narration. This is essentially a nation-state interpretation of territory. While the power of the states cannot be underestimated in globalisation, instructors have to factor in the multiple temporalities that exist within the state and without being in opposition/resistance to it. The different logics of mobility, such as being mobile but inhabiting the authentic, being immobile but cosmopolitan, etc. that characterise tourism is one example.¹⁵ To account for the multiple temporalities that occupy a space without it being in resistance to the state, and to develop a language to discuss these temporalities divergent from the individualist-statist logic of alienation/assimilation is the second task at hand for the instructor on the culture of economic migration.

A third task that confronts the instructor is to convince that literatures of economic migration are worth studying. There are many factors why one might be convinced otherwise. First, like mentioned, these are not stories of cultural alienation and the pain of assimilation. This is not to discount the fact that many literatures of economic migration do feature alienation to a large extent, under the weight of a literary tradition. This in itself should be subject to scrutiny. Secondly, literatures of circular economic migration are not stories of an eventual departure. They do not narrate an exodus or fleeing. Rather they are stories of travel taken more or less to be part of the ordinary for the community even if they are of immense biographical value to the individual migrant. We need to balance between the individual-evental and the communal-routine nature of this migration. Thirdly, these are stories of people who seek economic betterment, but whose economic worries are not as basic as food and shelter, but rather propelled by what are understood to be vices—such as the need to give a dowry for one's sister, the need to have a middle-class life style, such as a fridge, an AC, etc. In other words, the migration is towards ends that shouldn't elicit our sympathy, which doesn't fit well when dealing with diasporic literature.

Consider, for example, how Najeeb, the protagonist of Benjamin's *Goat Days* (2012), narrate the reason why he chose to migrate to the Gulf,

When a friend from Karuvatta casually mentioned there was a visa for sale, I felt a yearning I had never experienced before. How long have I been here, diving for a living? How about going abroad for once? Not for long. I am not that greedy. Only long enough to settle a few debts. Add a room to the house. Just the usual cravings of most Malayalis. Not just that. There was a rumour that sand mining from the river was going to be regulated. If that too is gone, what work can I get? Can one go hungry? I have, in the past. But things are different now. Now, at Ummah's insistence, I am married. My wife is four months pregnant. Expenditure will now mount up like a mound of sand. Moreover, I have recently developed a recurring cough and cold – perhaps from staying in the water for long stretches of time. Can one refrain from diving into the water fearing pneumonia? This must be an opportunity from the Lord Himself. I should not waste it.¹⁶

The possibility of starvation in the event of being jobless, a creeping sense of ill-health if one is to continue in the present job, a state-sponsored denial of one's livelihood—all of these are undeniably part of the reasons for migration. However, there is also something normal about the Gulf dream, “the usual cravings of most Malayalis”.¹⁷ The “cravings” themselves suggest a kind of excess involved, the realm of desire rather than need. The journey itself, while one requires much thought on the part of the protagonist, is nevertheless part of a chain which is no doubt formed as part of earlier migrations by others of the kin or region.

If migration can only be palatable if they are made under duress, if only such stories as those of exile or migration out of need deserve the pathos, then the literature of contemporary economic migration asks for a revision of terms in which migrant literature is to be read. The less than admirable purpose of travel, the relative taken-for-grantedness in this movement, and the continuing living link between oneself and one's homeland fit uncomfortably in a tradition of moving out into complete alienation, out of desperation, and for noble aims. In addition to devising a new language to speak about the multiple temporalities of community irreducible to state but not necessarily in resistance to it, the task is therefore also about demonstrating ordinary journeys for livelihood as meriting literary output, and about contextualising mobility such that aspirations of economic mobility can also be seen in its multi-dimensions of social mobility, or political resistance, or aspiration itself as a basis of desirable future for all. It is here that the reading syncs with the intended effect of the text itself.

In the age of “airport literature” where literature is treated as the window to unknown worlds, it is important that studying/teaching literature does not become a means to exerting one's gaze over the other.¹⁸ Literature should not be an occasion to speak about other lived cultures, as if our powers of analysis render the world transparent before us. Instead, as Spivak notes on the practice of comparative literature in a multicultural classroom, literature should be an occasion to find the resonances of the stranger within us, to connect us to our own situations, and subject ourselves to introspection, rather than subject the other to our scholarly scrutiny.¹⁹ Classrooms in any reputed university in India are populated by students who have had to leave their hometowns and villages for the purpose of education and livelihood. The fact of migration is especially affectively resonant in such a classroom, and the literature of migration should offer us the space to explore the others within us, and regain the planetary potential that migrant archives were hoped to hold within themselves against totalitarian and autochthonous dispensations.

Two related concerns pertaining to the conduct of the classroom need to be mentioned here. One, to not treat literature as anthropological document should also involve strategies to avoid any student or group of students becoming an object of the gaze of their fellow students or the instructor. Any university in India is bound to have students from different regions of India, some with a long and established history of migration to other regions. These population groups might also be subject to racial othering and may be the target of derogatory discourse in dominant culture. The instructor should be sensitive

and careful in arranging the classroom setting and teaching methodology so that students from such regions of long-standing migration are not treated as specimens. The obverse of the situation (and the two situations can co-exist) is that the students from regions with a long history of migration turn themselves into native informants. Not only does such a situation confer an authority on a student without the necessary checks to ensure the person deserves it, the discussion again has the potential to dislodge a text from its embeddedness in a literary culture to it being a piece of transparent ethnographic data.

Any study of literary culture cannot avoid bringing to the classroom the connectedness that literature has with aural and visual cultures. This is especially true when the segment of migrating population has weak relations with the established literary culture but much greater influence on other media such as films or has a different system of literature from the dominant culture, such as the predominance of oral culture. Often the texts from other media can offer a counterweight to the image of migration and migrant lives offered by literature.

Pictures can move away from the weight of diasporic thought based on alienation and *Bildungsroman* and academic rationalizations of remittance and mobility. They present us with an imagery that accounts for the network of relations as a fact of diasporic existence, the foreign space as a space of leisure, the laughter and banter of migrants, and the affective intensities of the unfamiliar.²⁰

Teaching literature of economic migration therefore cannot ignore the organic link between the migrants and the cultural products not only among themselves but also on the cultural production back home. The study of literatures of migration requires us to move beyond methodological nationalism and explore literature as it is caught in the web of multi-sited connections, in terms of its genre and its geographical precincts.

The Syllabus and Course Outcomes

The objectives of a course on economic migration will be to introduce the students to a range of literature coming out of the context of contemporary economic migration, to signal towards the need for a new vocabulary to speak on migration as departing from the discourse on diaspora, to delineate the links of the literary culture to diverse media, and to deliberate on how such a recognition could help change the terms of literary criticism. It is in designing the syllabus as much as in the conduct of the classroom that these issues can be addressed. The syllabus will have to factor in the multi-sitedness that has been referred to previously. The syllabus has to have primary texts from a range of migratory situations and regions. The situations referred to here are of regional, internal, and international migrations. It should ideally feature transnational migrations as well as migrations to metropolises within nations. The syllabus should also cover a variety of geographic regions and population groups. For example, one could think of a syllabus that brings together, Turkish migration to Germany with the Kerala migration to the Arab Gulf (both being international migrations), the migration from rural China to its urban centres

with the migration from the smaller towns and villages of India to its urban centres. One could think of reading Emine Sevgi Özdamar (2005) with Deepak Unnikrishnan (2017), Anjum Hasan (2009) with Xiaolu Guo (2009).²¹ Other than the literary texts which will serve as the primary reading/reference lists, syllabus should also include works from other fields of study, such as anthropology, development reports, etc., feature other textual materials such as films, interactive games, songs, etc. which will help the students to locate the specific discursive universe in which the given piece of literature makes meaning. One could juxtapose Özdamar (2005) with Nermin Abadan-Unat (2011) and films by Fatih Akin; Benyamin (2012) with Leela Gulati (1993) and films by Salam Kodiyathur; Jahnvi Barua (2010) with Duncan McDuie-Ra (2012); or Guo (2009) with Lixin Fan's *The Last Train Home* or the interactive game *The Long Day of Young Peng*.²² This is of course in addition to the readings on the literary culture itself as a way of glimpsing the specific field of production of the literary piece. The proficiency of the class would vary with each of these instances, but one could always make an effort.

The aim of the syllabus should be to bring to attention not only the specificity of each migration culture and the literature produced as part of that culture, but also to understand the cross-cultural connections, in the network of ideas and images, in the similarities in aspirations and the comparabilities of the idioms, that would allow us to develop a planetary approach to such literatures. The immediate outcome of the course will be that the students will be aware of a few texts of literature arising out of a range of economic migration in different parts of the world. A more fundamental aim should be to capacitate the students to engage in new reading practices. These practices should enable the student to look at themselves and their 'own culture' critically. The assignments for the course can be directed towards an active engagement on rethinking aspects of migration cultures on the part of the students. While students can read and analyse literary texts not discussed in the class, or introduce the class to other migration cultures, the course can also encourage the students to extend their reading skills beyond this. An example is reading personal letters from and to migrants as part of the textual culture of migration. Similarly, cassette letters, a practice prevalent in some migration cultures in the cassette age, could be read both along literary axis as well as for what it can tell us about the popular appropriation of mass culture, and the genre crossings in migration cultures.²³ The activities that students could involve themselves in as part of the course can have a greater impact beyond the classroom. The course could be a starting point to engage meaningfully in the local cultures of migration and develop an archive of this migration. The students could do a team work of collecting various artefacts connected to migration at the local level, and thus expand the local community engagement of the institution. These could be the first steps to recognising the importance or even the centrality of migration to contemporary culture.

In conclusion, teaching the culture of economic migration can be a step towards rearticulating the position of the economic migrant as a cultural agent while also contributing to situate the migrant cultural products in the wider, mostly territorial, culture, and channelled towards community engagement on

the part of the instructor and the students, with a planetary orientation. The task is not just to look at migrant creativity, to recreate their life in the foreign land, or to look at the history and society from their perspective. What we have to do is to speak about migration as it is part of this soil and our bodies and the trajectory of our collective existence. And for this we need to develop a language that is as yet in its elementary stage. The course could be the student's first foray in forging and speaking a language that befits the new world of travel and communications. It can develop the necessary self-distance that education is supposed to provide that could be the beginning of imagining the world anew.

Notes

- ¹ Ranajit Guha, *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays* (Permanent Black, 2002), 648.
- ² Carine M. Mardorossian, "From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature," *Modern Language Studies* 32, no. 2 (2022): 16.
- ³ Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in Arjen Mulder and Joke Brouwer, eds. *Information is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data* (NAI Publishers, 2003), 14–25.
- ⁴ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (Routledge, 2007).
- ⁵ Leslie A. Adelson, "Against Between: A Manifesto," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 29 (2003): 19–36, doi: 10.1017/S0896634600006099.
- ⁶ Leslie A. Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Towards a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- ⁷ Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil, "'Dubai' as a Place of Memory in Malayalam Cinema," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 36 (2023): 459, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-022-09422-1>.
- ⁸ Deepak Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People* (Restless Books, 2017), 186.
- ⁹ Priya Menon, "'Pravasi Really Means Absence': Gulf-Pravasis as Spectral Figures in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 191–2, 185–98, doi: 10.1080/00856401.2020.171962.
- ¹⁰ Xiaolu Guo, *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (Vintage, 2009), 3.
- ¹¹ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Who or What is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical Problems of Translation," *Discourse* 30, no.1/2 (2008): 22–53.
- ¹² Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (Ravi Dayal, 1986); Claire Chambers, "Representations of the Oil Encounter in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41, no. 1 (2006): 36.
- ¹³ Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil, "Indian Gulf Writing" in Ulka Anjaria and Anjali Nerlekar, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Indian Literatures* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 337–50.
- ¹⁴ P.P. Raveendran, *Texts Histories Geographies: Reading Indian Literature* (Orient BlackSwan, 2009), 59.
- ¹⁵ Noel B. Salazar, "The Power of Imagination in Transnational Mobilities," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 18 (2011): 576–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2011.672859>
- ¹⁶ Benyamin, *Goat Days*, trans. Joseph Koyippally (Penguin India, 2012), 35–6.
- ¹⁷ Benyamin, *Goat Days*, 35.
- ¹⁸ Casanova, Pascale Casanova, "Literature as World (2005)" in David Damrosch, ed. *World Literature in Theory*. Chichester (John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 195.

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 467–83.

²⁰ Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil, “On Stale Images,” *Dastavezi: The Audio-Visual South Asia* 3 (2021): 75, doi: 10.11588/dasta.2021.1.15080

²¹ Emine Sevgi Özdamar, “The Courtyard in the Mirror” trans. Leslie A. Adelson, *Transit* 2, no. 1 (2005): np, doi: 10.5070/T721009715; Anjum Hasan, *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This* (India Ink, 2009); Unnikrishnan, *Temporary People*; Guo, *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*.

²² Nermin. Abadan-Unat, *Turks in Europe: From Guest Worker to Transnational Citizen* (Berghahn Books, 2011); Jahnvi Barua, *Rebirth: A Novel* (Penguin, 2012); Benyamin, *Aatujeenitham* (Green Books, 2008); Leela Gulati, *In the Absence of Their Men: The Impact of Male Migration on Women* (Sage Publications, 1993); Sabine Marschall, “Memory, Migration and Travel: Introduction,” in Sabine Marschall ed. *Memory, Migration and Travel*. (Routledge, 2018), 1–23; Duncan McDuié-Ra, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

²³ For example, Bishopsgate Institute, UK, has a project titled Tape Letters Project, which collect the cassette tapes of Pakistani immigrants for 1960–80s period. The project recognises these tapes as an important resource of oral history.