

## BOOK REVIEW

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Title : *Politics of the Temporary: An Ethnography of Migrant Life in Urban Malaysia*

Author: Parthiban Muniandy

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Parthiban Muniandy's *Politics of the Temporary: An Ethnography of Migrant Life in Urban Malaysia* is a book of stories – the stories of migrant workers and students he observed and interviewed as part of his Ph.D studies, and, especially, his own story of connecting with the lives of transient migrants working and living in the heart of the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, and Georgetown in Penang, as well as his reflections and feelings about the labour and political practices in Malaysia. Although the book title features the term "Ethnography" and he makes liberal use of ethnographic methods, it would be difficult to designate it as such as it appears to be more a collection of narratives loosely organized into three main thematic sections rather than a focused and consolidated study of and within a community, given the diverse nature of the migrant communities in Malaysia.

Muniandy's account is focused firmly on delineating the lives of migrants within the service sectors in the Golden Triangle of Kuala Lumpur, stretching on the map from Pavillion to St. John's Cathedral, covering areas like Imbi, Bukit Bintang, Chinatown, and Little India, all places with a very high density of migrant workers from South-east Asia and the Indian subcontinent who have become integral to the economic survival of much of Malaysia's service sector industries especially in the last three decades.

As a whole, Muniandy's work is insightful and productive while simultaneously problematic. Muniandy's stories of his subjects are well written and engaging. He draws us into their lives and creates connections between the reader and the subjects he describes. He provides rich descriptions of the lives of these migrant workers, humanizing the often depersonalized and faceless stereotypes presented in the media by fleshing out their personalities through interviews, observation, commentary and reflection. His narratives and reflections remind us that migrant workers are like us, and force us to engage with the ways in which they struggle to survive and thrive in difficult economic conditions and a foreign culture and country that often interpellates them unfairly and with prejudice. Muniandy depicts both the exploitative migration and labour laws and working conditions that trap and disadvantage migrant workers as well as the stoic acceptance of these by the majority of his subjects. He shows us how despite the challenges of working in a country that often discriminates against them, they are able to carve out pockets of community and experience moments of happiness and hope. His writing is evocative and his authenticity, passion and emotional connection with his subjects are clearly reflected in his words and descriptions.

Muniandy's organization of his text is questionable. He divides his book into what should constitute three cohesive thematic parts but which do not properly cohere as there does not seem to be a clear overarching rationalization for the choices of the subjects he observes and

interviews. In his attempts to represent the diversity of migrant worker life in downtown Kuala Lumpur, Muniandy stretches his sample too thin in trying to cover too large a range of nationalities as well as occupations. He delineates the lives of migrants involved in the food industry, car washing, small businesses, sales, undertaking, domestic work, construction, tertiary education and sex work. While migrants are involved in service work in all of the occupations and sectors listed above and more, the range covered in this slim volume diffuses the impact of his study as he is only able to include a few individual stories for the occupation on which to scaffold his reflections. When a larger number of his subjects is selected based on a specific occupation or industrial sector, as witnessed in the first section which focuses on the ethnographic documentation of a variety of food industry workers from multiple national origins who range from food stall/market sellers to employees in restaurants, the ethnographic narratives are the best consolidated and focused and provide cogent support for his conclusions.

In other cases, Muniandy's choice appears geographical—the subjects appear selected according to location as indicated in some of the titles of his chapters like “Pudu”, “Masjid India” and “St. John's Cathedral.” Muniandy attempts, in his second section, to provide a reflective account of the variety of migrant worker nationalities represented within downtown Kuala Lumpur but this enterprise is not without issues as his descriptions and observations present the diversity of migrant presence as existing in separate and almost territorial enclaves. While racial enclaves exist and are very much a part of Malaysian life, and as he claims, Malaysians tend to racially categorize and stereotype peoples, there are actually far more interactions between communities of migrants than has been suggested in Muniandy's descriptions. Muniandy is aware of the reductiveness of racial categorizations and the limitations of his study, commenting that when he identifies migrant workers according to national origin, he “[does] this with the full awareness of the problem with doing so” (p.73). Nevertheless, despite his recognition of the limitations of his study as he “cannot extend beyond interacting with a small number of people” (p. 73), his depictions run the risk of perpetuating the very national and racial stereotypes and generalizations that he is attempting to deconstruct in his book. Furthermore, Muniandy's choice of not documenting the Filipino migrant community (except for the case of May in Part Three) is rather surprising, and perhaps a lacuna in this section of the book, as this community is very active in the area of St. John's Cathedral, especially on Sundays.

Muniandy's third section is perhaps his most problematic. Part Three begins with Chapter 26 “Trying to Maintain Peace and Justice: A Conversation with a Police Officer” which is “a fictional recreation of the personal experiences of the author” (135). Ethnography often presents data in the form of description and narrative, and thus runs the risk of being criticized as being nothing much more than storytelling. Muniandy's move in this chapter calls into question the authenticity and reliability of his ethnographic observations as no reasons or explanations are provided for this deliberate piece of fiction.

Equally problematic is the inclusion of only one interview conducted in Georgetown in Part Three, which provides inadequate points for comparison with either the Kuala Lumpur or the Georgetown migrant worker situations. In his Preface, Muniandy comments that his book features observations and reflections drawn from his ethnographic data collection in both Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown, suggesting equal importance and weight given to understanding migrant life in both locations. This, however, has not been realized as all the narratives, bar one, are focused on depicting the life of migrants in Kuala Lumpur. It might have been better for the author to have consolidated his focus on examining migrant life only in Kuala Lumpur.

Nevertheless, Parthiban Muniandy's *Politics of the Temporary* is an important book, despite its thorny moments. It makes visible through the employment of ethnographic methods, the difficult lived realities of migrant workers in the Malaysian capital by narrating their experiences and allowing their voices to be heard.