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Poverty, Migration and Literature from below: Bangladeshi Labour Migrants' Literary Expressions in Singapore

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Abstract

In neoliberal global economy, poverty is often theorised as an eradicable economic issue, partly depending on a poor country's domestic and bilateral policies and partly on poor people's initiatives (Kiely 2005). An individual's migration to sell labour in a relatively rich country is considered a powerful personal strategy to make a leap from 'poverty to prosperity', affecting the migrant's both local and national economy (The World Bank Report 2018). Labour migration is intricately linked with a person's wider context of collective histories of aspirations, struggles and resistance. Using literary materials published in English (translated from Bangla) by Bangladeshi labour migrant poets and writers in Singapore, this paper analyses the centrality of these written texts to recreate migrants' personal histories within their individual journey of poverty eradication. In such narratives, a migrant often appears as a precarious self being caught in a myriad of uncertainties in a foreign land. Thus, their narratives become a tool to destabilise the binary categories of a migrant's home country as poor and the host country as rich. Instead, a labour migrant's perception of poverty and material inequalities is expressed through what I call 'literature from below' where creative words become a political tool to resist any a-historical categorisation of labour migrant, poverty and its eradication. The words emerging from labour migrants' lived experiences represent them both as agencies of eradicating poverty and workers living in an uncertain condition of economic and social precarity.

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Introduction

I am revisiting this paper as the world is passing through the longest and perhaps the most complicated lockdown of our living history because of coronavirus (Covid 19) pandemic. While we don't exactly know what kind of world we will have to rebuild as we get used to living with the virus, there are clear indications that the world will change drastically at least for the near future. The global economy faces a new type of recession, for which it is not prepared. Unlike other economic recessions of the 20th and 21st centuries, this one is not caused by a financial collapse or economic shortfalls. Rather it is caused by what Ozili and Arun (2020) call the 'spill over' effects of ranges of fully-functioning industries such as sports, oil or tourism. Concerns are crucially raised for South Asian countries, fearing that the recent hard-earned economic development and the milestone of widespread poverty alleviation will face a grim U-turn as the pandemic sweeps through the world (World Bank South Asia Economic Forum 2020). One of the key issues being raised in the World Bank report was the reduction of foreign remittance as many international migrants may face joblessness, and at the same time, the global transaction chain may face challenges. For Bangladesh, already, there are early indications that foreign remittance in the early months of lockdown has reduced the country's chance of hitting its target of 17% more gross remittance from the year 2018-19 to 2019-2020 (Ahmed et al. 2020). There is a fear that as different host countries are taking stringent measures to control the spread of the virus (such as temporary pause in construction and industrial sector), the impact will be harsher in the upcoming months and years.

Coronavirus further revealed the unequal and unfair status quo between the so-called skilled and desirable migrants and the low-skilled, wage-earning precarious ones (The Business and Human Rights Resource Report 2020). From the hardest hit European countries such as Italy or Britain to oil-rich Gulf region and the giant Asian economies such as Singapore and China, often the low-paid migrant workers live through the uncertainties of joblessness, wagelessness and hunger. Living in a

hostile environment without protection and support (Kalush 2020), many South Asian temporary migrant workers from the Gulf region have taken desperate steps to return to their home country, which they once left for a better life for them and their families (Hashmi 2020).

This desperate decision to return home during a global pandemic highlights the precarious condition of a migrant worker. In an affluent yet foreign city, where the status of a migrant worker precludes access to many provisions of a basic safety net, survival is impossible. Home, however poor and problem-stricken, will take them in. In reality this has proved challenging since most sending countries struggle to take back a large number of people from disparate geographical regions. Societies also fear the spread of the virus through the returning migrants (Liao 2020; The World Bank Group 2020). A strong unwelcoming backlash often has created a hostile environment for migrants returning home. Overnight, the term 'man power' or 'remittance senders' becomes empty: in host countries, the migrant workers' status as labourers has become precarious; consequently, their status as remittance senders in their own countries suffers. Some European countries such as Germany and Italy have temporarily changed their labour laws for asylum seekers, immigrants without jobs or papers, allowing them to work in agriculture industries which suffered from a labour crises because of the virus (InfoMigrants 2020). While welcoming, concerns are raised that such measures once again push already vulnerable migrants to the forefront of pandemic-stricken countries' economic rebuilding (D'Ignoti 2020). These issues are only unfolding, and the future of migrant workers seems uncertain.

Singapore (the focus for this paper) and its relation to low-skilled migrant workers becomes more murky and complicated in this pandemic. In the early months of the pandemic, Singapore appeared as a global role model to tackle the spread of the virus, with its robust testing system supported by a strong healthcare system (Heijman 2020). However, in April 2020 Singapore's second surge of the virus emerged from its migrant ghettos with over-crowded dormitories where

low-skilled migrant workers typically live (Ratcliff 2020). Lawson and Elwood (2014) see unexpected contact zones of people of unequal social strata as an open-ended way to challenge the societal dominant perception of poverty as an individual failure. Rather more critical yet nuanced structural features that reproduce poverty and suffering often become apparent through such unusual encounters. The news and reports of migrant workers' suffering have created an opportunity for such encounters between the migrants and the wider Singaporean society. When the pandemic-hit dormitories became a topic of routine reporting, the grim photos of Singapore's migrant workers' living conditions have created a wave of shock across its civil communities. While Singapore's acute housing crisis and skyrocketing rent are common knowledge, the institutional neglect (Yea 2020) of migrants have become a topic of civil, political and media attention and discussion. A migrant male body with gloves and mask caged in a cramped room marks a critical transition from the hegemonic narrative of migrants as unknown abject figures to migrants suffering from longstanding policy-fed inequalities in an affluent country.

Being stuck in a strict lockdown, many migrants from Singapore have started using their personal social media pages such as the Facebook to express their emotions. The reciprocal nature of social media writing means that migrants could create a virtual community, sharing their collective thoughts on their everyday life. Migrants' own narratives have become even more important during the pandemic when they are turned into topics of national debates and discussions. Sharif Uddin – one of the poets/writers considered in this piece – writes from Singapore:

*Lying on bunk, see nothing but a piece of sky
boxed up by the window.*

I store all my troubles in that bit of sky.

I am afraid that it will shatter/

*when I can no longer bear the burdens of my
suffering! (Lim 2020)*

The prison metaphor in his lines is a living experience for him and many others. This sense of being caged in an invisible prison runs through the words of the writers written even before the pandemic, as being discussed in the later part of the essay. Some discussions on Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore and the role of culture in Singapore's policy of community integration will provide the wider contexts within which the creative works need to be located and interpreted.

Bangladeshi Migrants in Singapore

The migratory relationship between Bangladesh and Singapore mirrors what Rahman calls, 'South-south migration' with three key attributes: "it is regional in geographical scope, temporary in duration, and single in terms of migration category" (2017:1). As globalisation and development within Asia speeded up in the late 20th century, gaining a momentum in the 21st century, countries closer to Bangladesh such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei have turned into key destinations of the temporary migrants mostly from rural Bangladesh. Men and increasingly women from different parts of rural Bangladesh take labour migration as a strategy to change their individual fortune, and to take their families out of the poverty zone, unlike the educated communities of big metropolis who often take migration as a lifestyle choice or to settle in a different country permanently. The chance to alleviate poverty through migration is certainly one of the push factors for labour migration. As labour migration typically takes place in particular clusters of rural communities (Siddiqui 2003; Mahbub 2017), the material changes in migrants' households become an obvious status symbol, incentivising young males and often females and their families to choose migration as an option to change the family's wheel of fortune. Siddiqui et al.'s report (2018) illustrate that the percentages of families living in poverty dropped from 10.35% to 9.6% from 2014 to 2017 based on the single fact of labour migration from these families. Within the overall growth of consumption in rural Bangladesh in this period, migrant households occupy the top position with 30% growth. Thus, like previous flows of migration from Bangladesh

to European countries such as Britain (Gardner 1992), labour migration from rural Bangladesh to an affluent Asian country like Singapore is perceived to be an important way to move out of poverty and to attain some sort of financial security.

Singapore has a hierarchical and tiered migration system: roughly divided between migrant elites and migrant workers, where most Bangladeshis fall within the second category. Within the non-professional workers category, there are internal hierarchies. For example, the 'S' pass holders mid-level personnel (minimum earning \$2200/month) are permitted to bring their families if the income level increases to \$4000/month. By contrast, the work permit pass-holder workers do not have the right to bring their families. This category includes temporary migrant workers for industrial sectors and female domestic workers for household. The visas are obtained for two years, and the renewal largely depends on the status and demand of the jobs. A migrant worker can stay in Singapore for a maximum of 18 years (Mahbub 2017). Since Singapore has sectoral restrictions on foreign employers working in particular sectors, most migrants from Bangladesh (and also other neighbouring countries like India and Pakistan) work in construction sector (Transient workers count too 2014). Currently almost 160,000 Bangladeshis work in Singapore (Bangladesh High Commission, Singapore 2020). In 2018, just below 10% of the total male labour migrants from Bangladesh went to Singapore, making it the fifth-largest labour recipient country for Bangladesh. More than 41 % migrants are absorbed in low skilled jobs in the country's growing construction, shipyard, and other heavy-weight sectors (Siddique 2018).

Since labour migration in Asian countries like Singapore typically takes place temporarily, the extent to which poverty is alleviated permanently for migrants is a critical question. In the early 2000s, Siddique (2003) noted that women migrants from countries like Saudi Arabia often faced a negative economic trajectory for their short-term migration. In most recent years, the book *Dreams and Realities: Untold Stories of Migration* (2016) based on the oral narratives of

migrant workers from the Gulf region revealed a grim picture that many migrants could not repay the debts they made to go abroad. Thus, migration often threw them into a deeper abyss of poverty. The complex outcome of migration is a key theme of the migrant workers' literary expressions. The writings underscore that poverty in or after migration is a nuanced web of material, emotional and psychological uncertainties that is difficult to articulate and record. Poems and personal narratives are the spaces where such complex articulations create a shared narrative of empathy and resistance.

Culture in Singapore's Integration Policy

Cultural solidarity among communities has been historically significant to Singapore's national identity formation. Kong (2000) notes that in the 1960s-70s when Singapore's primary focus was economic development, culture and arts were mainly used for the purpose of nation building and to galvanise the idea of 'one Singaporean culture' to combine the four ethnic cultures of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Others. From the late 1990s, underpinned by the country's economic success, the country's cultural policy has shifted to attract global communities to consume culture in its city space. Tourism becomes a key feature of this new cultural industry, and much like the cultural spatialisation in cities like London and New York with Bangla Town and China Town, Singapore utilises its ethnic and cultural enclaves as potential selling points. Thematic districts have added new attractions to this burgeoning industry. Centralised and traditional establishments such as Singapore National Museum and Singapore Art Museum have ensured Singapore's strong footing in the globalised hub of art and culture.

Since its early days of nation building, Singapore has maintained a strong immigration integration policy, which Rahman and Tong (2012) call a transnational inclusion policy within which migrants of difference statuses are encouraged to take part in its cultural landscape. However, in recent years, the city space with its diverse populations has presented a complex challenge to maintain this ambitious integration strategy.

Termining Singapore's social integration process for migrants as 'bifurcated labour', Yeoh (2006) argues that Singapore's plan to be identified as a 21st century global city depends on the process of selective integration of highly-skilled migrants, while vulnerable labour migrants are being systematically excluded from the process of social inclusion. These issues were thrown into a sharp relief following the tragic death of Sakthivel Kumarvelu in December 2013 who was killed by being hit by a bus carrying migrant workers. This eventually led into a violent clash between migrant workers and the staff members of the bus. To deal with the longstanding issues leading to the riot, the state took two particular strategies. On the one hand, the continuous surveillance and the enforcement of law and order were tightened in the labour migrant concentrated areas (The Migrationist 2014). On the other hand, the role of National Integration Council, built in 2009, became crucial to the reconstruction of harmony between and across communities. The cultural engagement with migrant workers through state funded grassroots engagements and NGO involvement was increased to bridge the social gaps between Singaporeans and the temporary labour migrants. In its ten years celebration, the council in 2019 recognised the role of different organisations including schools, community organisations, NGOs and migrant welfare organisations for their contribution to rebuild the post-riot society of trust and relationship between different communities (NIC 2019). When situated within this wider context, it is perhaps a matter of little surprise that the Migrant Workers Poetry Competition – the formal platform of migrant labourer's artistic production – was launched in 2014, a year after the riot. The political possibility is readily recognised in the cultural act. 'Activism poems' a term coined by Shivaji Das, the main organiser of the migrants' poetry competition, powerfully resonated the political mood of Singapore's labour migrant community. The words and lyrics produced after a day's toil either by a Bangladeshi constructor worker or a Filipino domestic worker are the voices of the 21st century's Singapore, vying to be a model of neoliberal city of hyper diversity within and beyond its region.

Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore's cultural landscape

Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore played a pivotal role in creating the new landscape of migration literature. Das noted that the idea of organising a poetry competition for migrants occurred to him when he 'noticed a group of migrant workers who would regularly come together to share poetry they had written for Banglar Kantha (The Voice of Bengal) -- a Bangla newspaper from Singapore' (Varma 2017: n.p.). The circulation of the newspaper was limited to Bangla speaking population. In an effort to introduce the Bangladeshi labour poets to a wider audience, Das first organised the competition in 2014, when all the 27 poetry entries were by Bangladeshi workers. The night after the competition, the identity of Bangladeshi labour migrants appeared in a new way in the country's media, 'Bangladeshi workers tell their tales in poetry' (Hio 2014: online newspaper report).

Bangladeshi migrants no longer relied on competitions or the web circulations of their poems through Facebook and other websites. Rather, they entered the mainstream scene of culture and art by textual production of their works. In 2016, Mukul Hossine shook the literary landscape of Singapore with his first published book, *Me Migrant* (2016). The collection of poems, written in Bangla, was translated and edited by Cyril Wong, Singapore's prize-winning poet. In Wong's words, every effort was taken to keep Hossine's unique voice in translation. 'Me Migrant', the poem I discuss below, is recognised as the 'emotional centrepiece', influencing Wong's editorial choice of organising the poems in the book (2016: 6). Hossine's second book, *Braving Life* came out in 2017. In the same year, a collection of poems written by Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore was published under the title, *Migrant Tales* (2017) from Bangladesh. In 2018, Md Sharif Uddin's memoir, *Stranger to Myself: Diary of a Bangladeshi in Singapore* won the national award in the non-fiction literary category competition. As I write this essay, Uddin's second memoir, *Stanger to my world: Covid diary of a Bangladeshi migrant*

worker has got published in 2021 from Singapore.

For the migrant writers, the act of publishing, I would argue, is a political act of resistance. To borrow narratologist Fludernik's (2009: 27) words, 'simply writing a book does not guarantee its being read.' The power of textual narrative is in its ability to be permanent, to reach out to a wider population, and to enter as a form of knowledge in human memory (M. O'Toole 1989). Publication is not an individual project, rather the publication industry relies on a circuit of power between the author, publisher, distributor and the wider audience. The identity of an author powerfully determines the readership and the business aspect of a book (Fludernik 2009). The migrant identity of the poets and writers in this context has played a moral/catharsis role for the civil society in Singapore and elsewhere, as such writings introduce the so-called migrant labourers as humans. The migrant workers have utilised the powerful tool of publishing their writing, often in English, to recreate the unknown world of migrant workers on paper. In this fundamental way to challenge the landscape of representation, labour migrants' writings fall within the wider colonial/postcolonial struggle of power, resistance, and recognition of the unknowns. As Collis and Bolt note (2003: 122), '[f]rom the colonial to the postcolonial world the struggle for identity is a struggle to write the lives of subject peoples.'

Within a broader debate of literature, the publication and its widespread recognition powerfully contributes in redefining what constitutes migrant literature. From the 1980s, what came to be known as migrant literature and then diasporic literature or most recently world literature has permanently challenged, changed and enriched the terrains of literature written in English. Despite such changes, what constitutes a migrant literature is still tied to its Anglophone locality, produced mainly by highly-educated postcolonial citizens. Peterson argues, citing reference to the transition of guest worker literature to migrant literature in Germany: "The term migrant literature [. . .] implies that the subject matter will have to do with migration and/or the life and culture of "other" nations and

peoples. Though the migration experience and the attending processes of integration and identity development continue to play a primary role in this literature, thematically, migrant literature can be very diverse. (Migration Literatures blog post: n.d.)

Undoubtedly migrant literature is diverse with its own spaces of traditionality and innovation, within which labour migrants often occupy an invisible position. Within this hierarchical landscape of voice-giving, the migrants in Singapore have created new ways of recognising literature both locally and globally. It is from this vantage position of curving out a new location of culture and power, I call the migrants' project literature from below. This location may have the similar possibility of what Vargo (2016) characterises as the power of working-class literature in Victorian England which 'emphasizes the agency of ordinary people and the way they reformulate hegemonic values in various contexts' (2016: 453).

As I move on to present some of the poems and excerpts, I want to highlight that because of the exclusive focus on Bangladeshi poets and writers, I could not include female migrant poets whose writings are now featured in Singapore migrant workers' poetry competitions and in different virtual forms. The domestic worker hiring policy in Singapore is extremely privatised (where an employee needs a security bond of \$3,700). Typically domestic workers are not protected by Singapore's Employment Act that gives basic terms and working conditions, exposing them to a greater degree of abuse and neglect (UN Women: n.d). Given their marginal positionality, it is welcoming that from 2017 female domestic migrant workers can also take part in the competition, and female migrants from countries such as Philippines and Indonesia won the first three prizes in the year's competition (Ho 2017). A gendered analysis of the poems will be an important document to understand and appreciate the growing body of works.

Words and Expressions

Dominant themes of migrant literature such as memories of childhood, home as a metaphor for

affection and security, the pain of leaving home, the everyday toil in migration, and their rootless identity are the key themes of the poems composed by the migrant poets. While the themes may be shared, my enquiry here mainly underpins the ways that the migrant workers position themselves in the cross-lines of home and foreign lands, where ideas of poverty and poverty-lessness are challenged. To unpick these issues, I want to specifically focus on three poems: 'Me Migrant' and 'Singapore's Golden Jubilee' by Mukul Hossine from the book, *Me Migrant* and 'Luggage' by Mohar Khan from the book, *Migrant Tales*.

Hossine's poem, 'Me Migrant' powerfully depicts that a migrant is an imposed-on identity given to him by an unknown 'you'. The stanzas set the context of a migrant's nameless identity

Me migrant/

Live overseas/

Thousand thousands miles away/

Me migrant

Beyond borders

Mislaying smiles

Dawn to dusk then dawn again (2016: 16)

He disassociates his subjective I self from its possessive form, me. He is an object of identification: he is 'me' rather than 'I'. He accepts his new identity with a sense of contempt and resistance. He disowns all humane expectations; the discourses of humanity 'love, compassion, kindness/lose their meaning' (p. 16) because he is now a migrant. He lives 'outdoors' in a vast world of unknown, where the location of affection – the touch of mother, the proximity of home, the sense of selfhood are lost. The selection of this rather small and direct poem's title as the title of the collection strongly indicates the marginal positionality of a migrant's being: a migrant is not a subject in his or her own right; a migrant is a given name, often appreciated but mostly neglected. A migrant poet cannot defy the generic identity given to him; rather, he uses the identity

to expose what it means to be interpolated by a name or an identity that was unknown to him before he embarks on a journey to sell labour in a foreign land for earning money.

Hossine's poem, 'Singapore's Golden Jubilee' stands out within the collection for its upbeat, optimistic tone and celebratory lyrics. I chose this poem, partly to defy the common assumption that labour migrants' poems revolve around the thematic territories of individual loss and gain, and partly to think through what it means for migrants to celebrate a national day of their host country. Being largely absent from a country's historical narrative, migrants often celebrate a national day such as a country's golden jubilee in its immediate festivities. Singapore celebrated its golden jubilee of independence in 2015, and Hossine's poem captures the jubilant mood of the national celebration. In praising Singapore, Hossine wants to be part of Singapore's multicultural social fabric:

Oh loving Singapore,

Your inner light

Joins you with the world.

Such a peace-loving city,

Where humanity's guardians

Keep active and aware.

You're filled to the brim

With inspiration and promise

And also fresh air

From green forests, blooming flowers. (2016: 52)

Singapore is both global and local. Its 'green forests, blooming flowers' may remind the migrants of their homeland. In a separate poem, 'Village' Hossine uses the motif of greenery to recreate his village in Bangladesh: 'I want to move over and over/through a village encircled by greenery/where mother's love is the whiff of ripened crops' (2016: 49). Singapore is also full of the 'electricity of life' (2016: 52): a modern and globalised 'dreamland' for many migrants.

Like in his 'Me Migrant', as a temporary labour migrant a sense of un/belonging runs through this lyrical poem. The final stanza makes a stark difference between citizens and migrants living in Singapore:

Oh, praiseworthy Singapore,

You're rooted in the heart of citizens;

You're the home of pride;

You're a dreamland;

You're shelter

For all us foreign workers (2016: 53)

While 'rootedness' is entitled to citizens, Hossine recognises that for migrants like him Singapore is neither a home, nor an unknown world. Singapore is a 'shelter': temporary and life-saving. For a migrant worker like Hossine this temporary and floating identity is not a choice. Rather, it is a condition within which he needs to build his relationship with Singapore.

This sense of continuous un/belonging seeps through Mohor Khan's tightly crafted poem, 'Luggage' (2017:153). 'Luggage' is a metaphor for a migrant's burdensome movement:

I wonder,

Is this battle for a luggage?

Is money like a moonlit night?

If it is,

My fight is for [sic] eternal moonlit. (2017: 153)

The comparison of money with eternal moonlit underlines the excruciatingly painful reality that for a labour migrant having an affluent life where he would not have to worry about money is impossible: this would be like getting an eternal source of moonlit. A migrant may take up the luggage to leave his home, but it does not guarantee that the battle to ensure a financial security for him and his family would ever end. In this process, he becomes unrecognisable as a human; he turns into an over-used and uncared

for luggage.

In all three poems, the migrant male body is denied a space of belonging. Bourdieu (1989) theorises all social spaces as double structuring where certain objective qualities such as the ethnic/racial demography of a space make it more normalised for one group of people than others. Individuals and communities employ their positional habitus to assess whether they can be part of that space. While Hossine takes on a marginal position in Singapore's space of celebration, Khan challenges the notion of a migrant's home/abroad/belonging/ unbelonging. Migration narrative typically creates a binary of belonging and unbelonging, with a continuous critical focus on political construction of belonging in a nation state and the unstable nature of un/belonging for migrants within the space (Christensen 2009). However, Khan's metaphor 'luggage' powerfully suggests that while belonging and unbelonging requires a space, a life of a migrant is actually a space-less one. This is more so for a labour migrant whose individual identity is lost in the work he does. When his identity is invisible and uncounted for, he does not have any space to be recognised. He challenges any hegemonic discourse of belonging or otherwise.

In 2018 the recognition of Md Sharif Uddin's memoir, *Stranger to Myself: Dairy of a Bangladeshi in Singapore* as the national award winning non-fiction has powerfully positioned the labour migrants' creative works at the foreground of the country's literary landscape. Labour migrant literature is no longer a fringe or a community supported production. Rather it is a piece of work that echoes Albert Camus' absurdist novel, *La Stranger* (1942) and Julia Kristeva's political-philosophical book, *Stranger to Ourselves* (1988) in telling the everyday absurdities of encountering the other in a city space. The memoir, divided in different chapters, is organised in diary entries, written over eight long years — from 2008 to 2016. In publishing a memoir that includes the writer's experience and reflection of being a migrant worker -- the struggle to cope, the everyday loopholes of policies for migrant welfare, the dark world of Little India where cheap sex is a lucrative commodity -- Uddin has opened

up a dangerous avenue for himself, his status as a migrant worker and for his writing. Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, his preface comes with a disclaimer, '[i]t is not my intention to write anything against my homeland [Bangladesh] or this country [Singapore]. [...] I have just written down the most valuable moments of my life here' (Uddin 2018: 13).

The political is always present in the personal entries. The first entry, 'journey abroad' begins with a metaphor of 'dream' that runs throughout the memoir -- how the dream of a migrant worker turns into a 'death of dream' -- a dream of sending enough money back home to build a house, a dream of returning home after some years of hard work, a dream of having a decent meal every day or a dream of finding time to read books or to write. The writer's realisation of the harsh life of a labourer in Singapore is quick and sharp. Distancing himself from 'foreigners' and 'tourists', he portrayed the 'immigration line' of the migrant workers in the airport and recollected the empty welcome he received from his immigration agent (First Night, p. 19). Being separated from his own world, where Uddin was an owner of a shop, a husband, a brother, a son, and a father, he turned into a stranger to himself in migration, as he writes in 2015 (The Death of Dreams), 'I feel like a stranger to myself' (p. 134).

The Narrative of Poverty as Precarity

Poverty's experience and perception are relational within individual's context. The migrant workers are unequivocal in their expression that taking their families out of poverty was the key reason for their migration. In doing so, the migrants find themselves in a state of precarity characterised by ranges of uncertainties: temporary immigration status, highly regulated labour market position, and a mismatch between their expectations and realities. Junjia Ye (2014) redefines relational poverty as precarity for migrants in Singapore, arguing that the globalised, neoliberal economy has given birth to a new precarious class in financially successful urban settings like that of Singapore. He argues that narratives need to be shifted from poverty as an issue in the least development countries from the ever-growing

precarious labourers in rich cities, a majority of them are consisted of migrants. This precarity, as the author notes, is complexly managed by a nexus of state power and community-based structures that define the rules of migrants' entitlement to resources. The continuous diversification of city populations results in recognising and categorising people in their intersectionality of race, class, gender, labour, citizenship status in the receiving country. These categories and rules surrounding them determine what migrants are entitled to, pushing some migrants at the verge of a precarious living. The transnational space of this precarity further complicates a migrant's position. Labour migrants find themselves in ranges of precarious positions if they return home without making enough money, or if as suggested earlier in the essay without paying off their debts. Thus, many migrants while attempting to reduce poverty in their own families and communities find themselves in an indecisive state of precarity.

This sense of double and constant precarity defines the writings being discussed here. Whether in poetry or dairy entries, the migrants have depicted their life in a constant flux of uncertainty and material impoverishment. Writing for them is not an elitist and leisure activity. Rather, writing creates a site for the migrants to exist. My use of the idea 'to exist' here is characterised by Badiou's theory. Badiou (2011) characterises existence as a category of appearance, through which a self creates an identity. As a contrast to exist, inexistence is the reality for masses who 'decide absolutely nothing, have only a fictional voice in the matter of the decisions that decide their fate (Badiou 2012 in Swyngedouw 2015: 171). But for Badiou this state of inexistence is not powerless; rather power emerges from the very nature of being in-existent. 'New possibilities' appear from the existing predictable structure of everyday life and by people who are managed to be in-existent by the system (Ruehl 2015).

This new possibilities of existence emerge through the migrants' writings. It is from this location of inexistence, the political decision of writing comes for the migrant writers. The effort to be

recognised is what Swynedouw terms political: “The political is not about expressing demands to the elites to rectify inequalities or unfreedoms, the daily choreographies of interest and conflict intermediation in public policy arrangements and rituals of governance, or a call on 'the state' to undertake action. It is the demand to be counted, named and recognised, theatrically and publicly staged by those 'who do not count', the inexistent. (2015: 174)

The new possibilities through words are transnationally shared. Migrants who are typically expected to contribute in global economy are increasingly contributing to their receiving countries' location of culture. Many neighbouring and migrant-receiving countries have adopted Singapore's model of encouraging migrants to be integrated through their cultural participation. The migrant worker's poetry competition now takes place in Malaysia and similar kinds of events are adopted in countries in the Gulf region. There is always this troubling question, whether the expression of discontent leads to any transformational change in the ways that states manage and police labour migrants. It may be argued that the cultural turn of migrants' position has camouflaged the growing state repercussions against poor migrants across many parts of the world. While this may be true, we need to remember that poems are one of the earliest forms of resistance to hegemonic power. When individuals are lost in the grand discourses of economy, development, and the neoliberal world order, the migrant workers have reclaimed this age-old tool to carve out their own voices and identity. Their words remind us that beyond the discourses of mutual development of nation states, there are localised histories of individual loss and resilience.

Conclusion

On paper and in terms of legal rights, the category labour migrants may mean temporary services to economy. But for individuals, this is a permanent identity. Even when they cease to use their labour for production, even if they return home, their identity as migrant labourers marks a permanent stamp on them. While this identity is imposed on,

migrant workers use their pen to make the identity their own. In this ownership, poverty is real and lived in. On policy papers and discussions, the individuals may be modelled as instruments of poverty reduction for their families, communities and countries, but in their own words, they embody what is now theoretically termed as 'working people in poverty' resulted by a complex nexus of neoliberal policies of flexible recruitment and the continuously changing demands of the labour market (Feldman 2019).

In their narratives, poverty and history tie each other. Each of the poem or the text is an attempt to make meaning of the individual's metaphorical journey from poverty to prosperity which often is a journey from poverty to precariousness. The only hope in this precarity is to use the pen to create a future of resistance.

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