

The Length of the Kitchen Spoon's Handle

A Story of Globalization, Migrant Labour and Gender

by Simi Malhotra

Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids: *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle*
by Michele Ruth Gamburd
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Whenever one encounters a book that proclaims to be the published version of a dissertation, one feels a little wary. The stylistic devices that so very suit a dissertation may not be the best when it comes to present the same study in book form to the reader. It is primarily in relieving the reader from such a concern that Michele Ruth Gamburd succeeds with her current book. In spite of being, self confessedly, the published version of her graduate dissertation at the University of Michigan, the author takes sufficient pains in the 'Introduction' to the book (pp. 1-24), through autobiographical anecdotes and other sundry fictive devices, to make the otherwise decidedly evaluation-oriented dissertation become a readerly presentation.

The book, as the title itself suggests, is a study of the patterns and consequences of migration by Sri Lankan women to work as housemaids, particularly in the Middle East. As such a study ought to be, it is based on extensive field work done by the author in Sri Lanka and she does embellish the book with charts, tables and recollections from interviews emerging out of this research. However, as I have just stated, this book continuously makes the attempt to look somewhat different from a mere research report, and while this emerges as one of the plus points of the book, this also turns out to be its serious drawback as far as academic transparency is concerned.

One of the demands of most generally accepted forms of anthropological research is that the object of study should be clearly delimited and be actualized so that the conclusions emerging out of the study can be verified, if so desired, by its potential readers. This book, however, strangely claims that all its observations

are based on the author's research in a village somewhere on the Southwest coast of Sri Lanka, whose exact location and name and the real names of whose inhabitants, the only informants of the study, the author chooses not to disclose. All that she says about the location of the village is, 'The village that I call Naeagama, or "The Village of Relatives," lies in the thirty-mile area between the towns of Kalutara and Ambalangoda on the Southwest coast of Sri Lanka, about a mile inland from the main highway, Galle Road' (p. 5), and 'I have designated the village in question by a pseudonym to protect the privacy of individuals and families whose stories I tell' (Note 5 on p. 5). About her informants, she similarly chooses to withhold the identity of all but two of her immediate associates: 'While I have kept Siri's and Sita's name unchanged, I have disguised the identity of other individuals to protect their privacy' (Note 6 on p. 7). While the good intent of the author in protecting the privacy of individuals can be lauded, one wonders if this amounts to a good research report. While the general conclusions the author arrives at from her preliminary empirical research can be much appreciated, and this current review will spend much of its remaining space in elaborating the same, one does feel a little cheated at this conversion of a sociological study into at best a piece of realistic metafiction.

Actually, literariness and primarily fictive imperatives, like nostalgia, rather than a strong inclination towards rigorous social research, govern this book, which work fine towards making interesting reading, but unfortunately limit the potential of the otherwise

competent study to that only. The author admits quite candidly that she, being an English literature major, consciously avoided social science subjects in college, and it was nostalgia, she having spent some part of her infancy in the same village (which she fictitiously calls Naeagama), when her mother, Geraldine Gamburd, was doing her research on Sri Lankan kinship systems, that drew her to pursue her graduate studies in anthropology, and that too on Sri Lanka. The choice of area as well as subject of research being thus rather fortuitous, one can see in the book constant traces of this latent literary student's soul-searching anthropology at work, with her mother's erstwhile research associate Siri and her own erstwhile nanny Sita as her accomplices in research. Not only does the author realize these latent traces by wishing to fictionalize the place of her research and the names of informants, she dedicates the whole of her last chapter, titled 'Immoral Maid and Abusive Employer: The Horror Story Genre', to the study of narratives emerging out of the phenomenon of Sri Lankan women migrating to the Middle East, and generally composes the entire book around literary, anecdotal and metaphorical paradigms.

The author's metaphoric sensibility shows even before the book starts, with its subtitle, 'The Kitchen Spoon's Handle', being taken from a Sinhala proverb, 'a woman's understanding reaches only the length of the kitchen spoon's handle', the primary object of her research being to find 'But how long is the kitchen spoon's handle?' (p. 5), and her conclusion being 'With the transnational migration of

female domestic workers from Sri Lanka to the oil-producing states of West Asia, perhaps the spoon handle now reaches several thousand miles instead of a mere twelve inches' (p. 232). Furthermore, she begins the book with an epigraph, an extract from W. B. Yeats's famous poem 'Among School Children' ending with the celebrated line 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?', and she metaphorizes her entire research around this literary piece.

The book begins with a customary dedication, in this case to the author's father, followed by an epigraph, a table of 'Contents', 'Acknowledgments', and an 'Introduction', where the author elaborates the rather autobiographical reasons behind her choice of the research topic and the plan of the book to follow. This is followed by nine chapters. Chapter 1, titled 'Labor Migration: National and International Contexts' (pp. 25-47) discusses globalization and the resultant transnational movement of goods, people, money and ideas in the form of development ideology, especially in the context of migration of labour from Sri Lanka to the Middle East. Chapter 2, titled 'Administrative Structures: Getting a Job Abroad' (pp. 48-74), takes up the case of different interdependent public and private institutions that operate at local, national and international levels to control migration. The focus in this chapter is mainly on the functioning of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) and the various recruiting agencies both in Sri Lanka and the Gulf, with special emphasis on inconsistencies in their policies and actions. In Chapter 3, titled 'Money-lenders: Crucial Resources and Crippling Interest Rates' (pp. 75-98), the author enters the specificities of Naeægama, and discusses, through two case studies of the role of moneylending towards migration of potential female labour to West Asia, the complex structure of caste and family relations vis-a-vis caste and gender identity. In Chapter 4, titled 'Agency: Women's Work Experiences Abroad' (pp. 99-122), the author takes up

for discussion several case studies to explore the work situations that the housemaids from Sri Lanka face in the Middle East and how they negotiate the highly adverse conditions, ending the chapter with a housemaid's narration of how she escaped from Kuwait during the Gulf War. Chapter 5, titled 'Control of Remittances: Prosperity and the Extended Family' (pp. 123-50), looks into the complex relations between the migrant women and their families back home and problematizes the traditional 'Western' perspective of evaluating prosperity in sheer monetary terms in view of the complex caste structures and patriarchally controlled family roles peculiar to South Asia in general and Sri Lanka in particular. Chapter 6, titled 'Caste Relations: Social Mobility and Land Reform' (pp. 151-172), studies historically caste relations in Sri Lanka and shows how money earned by migrant housemaids gets used back home to elevate one's social standing and thus intervene in the existing caste structure. The chapter also studies in this context a local land reform project whereby the Berava caste gets altogether displaced from its original territory by the Halaagama caste, from which more female members migrated to the Gulf. Chapter 7, titled 'Breadwinners No More: Masculinity in Flux' (pp. 173-92), deals with changing gender roles as a result of migration of women and the reaction of men to the same. In Chapter 8, titled 'Migrant Mothering: On Love and Money' (pp. 193-208), the author probes constructs about 'heartless' mothers 'abandoning' their children and examines, through case studies, what effect migration has on the children left back home as well as on the mothers abroad. In the final chapter, 'Immoral Maid and Abusive Employer: The Horror Story Genre' (pp. 209-31), the author takes up a host of 'horror stories' concerning abuse, violence, rape, torture and even murder of Sri Lankan housemaids by their Arab masters, as reported by official sources, the media, villagers, relatives of migrant house-

maids, and the house-maids themselves, to show, through the disparities of different versions of the same incidents, the politics of narrativization, and consequently look into questions of gender and class identity. These nine chapters are followed by a 'Conclusion' (pp. 232-44), where the author sums up her findings and inferences; two appendices—Appendix A. 'An Orthography of Spoken Sinhala' (pp. 245-47), where she explains from an apparently trained linguist's point of view her adopted schema for transliterating Sinhala words into Roman, and Appendix B. 'Calculating Inflation in Sri Lanka' (pp. 248-49), where she gives comparative figures of the Consumer Price Index in Sri Lanka from 1952 to 1997, a 'Bibliography' (pp. 251-65), and an 'Index' (pp. 267-75).

Though I have continuously brought to notice the narrative mode this book adopts at the risk of losing much of its scientific rigour, it cannot but be observed that the book is adorned at places with photographs and tables and maps, which work to a certain extent towards alleviating the lack of 'authenticity' that the author's declared stance thrusts on the book. Secondly, one cannot but marvel at the ease with which the author gives in footnotes original Sinhala phrases whenever she gives translated versions of some statement emerging from an interview, showing clearly her linguistic competence in an utterly foreign tongue. But, in the final analysis, considering that this is a 275-page book, costing Rs. 450, about a topic of probably very little immediate interest to a general Indian reader, and that too written in a rather narrativized mode, one wonders if, as a conscientious reviewer, one can recommend this book for purchase to any but the most enthusiastic inquisitors into the problematics of narrativization and the most obsessive of book-buyers.

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