

Book Review

Megha Amrith (2016) *Caring for Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. ISBN 9788776941932. Softcover US\$27

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The book *Caring for Strangers* was written by anthropologist Megha Amrith and is based on her fieldwork in the Philippines and Singapore. She follows prospective nurses in the country's capital, Manila, to a popular destination for work, Singapore. Amrith was able to not only capture the complexities faced by Filipino medical workers working overseas, but she was also able to display the significant role the "Lion City" played in the lives of the workers. The book's title accurately describes the routine lives of most Filipino medical workers, leaving their homeland to care for people they do not know despite originating from a Third World country that also needs their medical services. This reflects the contradiction of the Philippine state – it wants the nation to prosper by sending out its citizens to labour abroad and send back remittances, but it also needs the highly qualified medical workers to stay and look after the country's sick and needy. How migrant medical workers deal with this contradiction is explored through the narratives woven throughout the book as Amrith also details the micro-politics involved in the lives of migrants engaged in care labour. The narratives also illustrate how a researcher's close relationship with the informants can produce stories that are beautifully told and eye-opening. In this case, the narratives told by Amrith reveal the multi-faceted lives of the medical workers involved in her research. The anthropologist masterfully transformed her fieldwork into a book that allows readers to dive into the lives of a group of migrant workers, which lets them become more familiar with the frustrations, sadness and anxieties these workers encounter daily. One of the unforeseen contradictions is that the locals in Singapore do not have the same high regard for the nursing profession as the locals do in the Philippines. Rather, those working as nurses are looked down on and even discriminated against if it is noted that the nurse is not a local Singaporean.

Caring for Strangers is not heavily dipped in theory as the lives of migrants in Amrith's ethnography take centre stage for the most of the book. The first two chapters set the academic tone and informational background for the book whereas, from the third chapter onwards, the book starts to flow into a more third-person narrative similar to that of a conventional fictional novel, except in this case the stories are real. Amrith allows the personal narratives of the Filipino medical workers to take the spotlight in most of the chapters and does not try to compensate by overwhelming the rest of the book with academic references and commentary, allowing the book to be comprehensible for even the most leisurely reader. The stories told throughout the book also give it an overall unconventional sense of intimacy as readers are allowed to be up close and personal with the medical workers involved in Amrith's fieldwork. The narratives are revealing of the double lives migrants live in that they are looked down on by the Singaporean locals because of the stigmatisation as a result of the "dirty work" associated with their jobs, whereas, in the Philippines, migrant medical workers are held in high esteem by their families and communities as their jobs bring in a lucrative income.

Thus, *Caring for Strangers* showcases the depth of Amrith's fieldwork as the intricacies in the journey of Filipino migrant medical workers are neatly captured. The documented conversations

Amrith had with the workers unveil the routine complexities that medical workers have to navigate while working in Singapore, such as distancing themselves from the lowly image of the domestic helper and handling discrimination from their own patients. Her narratives also reveal that the lives of the Filipino medical workers are not as conventional as those of their compatriots who work as domestic helpers since, as mentioned earlier, the nursing profession is much more highly esteemed than most other professions in the Philippines. Hence, nursing education is considered by many Filipino families as an investment since the profession is considered to increase one's chances for financial stability that will eventually lead to a better life in the West (North America, the UK and Australia).

It was also nice to read that Amrith did not only focus on those associated with medical work but that she gave room for the personal narratives of domestic workers in her book, giving readers multiple perspectives on the lives of Filipino overseas foreign workers. One may be surprised to read that, with the high regard Filipinos have for the profession, it has led medical workers to formulate some sort of distance between themselves and their compatriots who work as domestic helpers. This was noted in how the medical workers would avoid spending time in certain places or participating in special events, to avoid being seen and clustered with the other group of migrants. Hence, Amrith observed that the lifestyles of these two migrant groups were notably different. Domestic workers, for example, were considerably more outgoing and active in other aspects of their lives such as political activism, whereas medical workers spent their days off surfing the Net, researching opportunities to "move on" – that is, finally settle for work in the West. In the end, the juxtaposition of the lives of the two migrant groups still leaves an impression that a hierarchy is present among different migrant workers in Singapore, especially among domestic workers and medical workers, allowing the latter to have some sort of distinction from those whom the Singaporean society considers even more lowly.

In addition to Singapore being the main site of Amrith's fieldwork, the pivotal role the city itself plays in the lives of migrants can also be noted. The city is seen as more of a stepping stone to a medical worker's journey to the West rather than as a permanent place of settlement. This reveals that despite the growing economy in East Asia, life in the West is still highly sought after, even if migration policies (e.g. working visas, nursing examinations) in some countries make it difficult for medical workers to settle down there. Hence, it was interesting to read how Singapore was seen by many medical workers as a transit city, in which the conversations, preparations and anything associated with their "moving on" to the West provided some sort of relief from their stressful jobs, as noted by Amrith's conversation with her informants. At the same time, however, Amrith has shown that not every medical worker ended up in the West; some found contentment with life in Singapore, as seen in the stories of those who have gained permanent residence in the city.

Overall, with the majority of Amrith's informants being female, going through the book was like reading stories about a group of different heroines, each navigating through their own career journey. Amrith was careful to include informants from different social backgrounds, allowing readers to go through narratives of similar goals and aspirations but from different people. Not all stories have a happy ending and some endings have been left unknown. But what is important is that the stories of those involved in the seemingly complicated world of care labour are told. Hopefully this will make people more aware of the intricate lives these medical workers live in having to serve those in need in another country, and in facing the social hierarchies and navigating the social boundaries that permeate their lives.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JEMIMA JOY GBADAGO, born to a Filipino mother in the Philippines but raised in Hong Kong, holds a Master's degree in Modern Asian Studies from the City University of Hong Kong. Her research focused on non-Western expatriates living in Hong Kong and their adjustment to the local Chinese culture. She is currently an English teacher for young learners at various schools and learning centres. [Email: jemima_joy7@yahoo.com]