

Ulasan Buku/ *Book Review*

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Caring for Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia
by Megha Amrith, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-87-7694-192-5

In alignment with the objective of this journal to expand the knowledge on Asian studies, this review addresses a special book recently published by NIAS Press (the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies) of the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. For the first time, the book offers insights into the life of Filipino medical practitioners working in foreign countries, particularly in Singapore. Megha Amrith, an Indian sociologist, has captured the rich tapestry of life of Filipino medical workers working abroad. It is a timely book given the media regarding the ill-treatment of foreign workers and captures a large demographic spread throughout the world. This book is a good read to all those interested in this segment of society, to Filipinos seeking to work abroad, and all those involved in the medical industry, especially with significant foreign worker cohorts.

The book helps promote awareness among employers, governments and the public concerning the challenges faced by Filipino medical workers, especially the nurses. Their unrevealed stories, concealed feelings and veiled perception are expressed through personal narratives. These Filipino foreign workers develop a perception of what life is like working abroad and sometimes they may become bitterly disappointed. In this regard, Singapore is regarded as a medical hub for the region and it employs many Filipino nurses, many of whom later go on to work in the west.

In the introduction, the author sets the scene by detailing the canvas of the study before explaining her methodology. Her functional grasp of Tagalog (the Philippines' national language) helped in the translation of Tagalog terms. She begins by revealing characteristics of her Filipino sample in Singapore to provide context. The author achieved an 'insider' perspective by adopting a qualitative study through observation and interviews with her Filipino informants. She also explains the post-colonial nation-states that contributed to the migration trend. A new trend of exporting human resource particularly the medical workers has been a national issue in the Philippines particularly regarding security, brain-drain, labour exploitation and policies on migrants.

The introduction chapter also presents stories of sociality and intimacy of the Filipino labourers. It details the intimate relationship between the Filipino workers with local employers and their social groups. The author examines perceptions of the status of Filipino nurses vis-à-vis other nationalities and the dominant perception that they are a lower-class employee cohort. This is extended to a study of status and profession to make sense of the tendency among Filipino workers to interact socially with others in a similar profession.

The author then examines the historical factors leading to the past and present migrant convergence in Singapore. Many anthropologists and sociologists have been using the Foucauldian approach to scrutinise the issue of migrant recruitment and national economic transformation, especially in the women labour force. She analyses the issue of regional inequality in reference to political developments in the 1980s and 1990s, where Asian values became part of the political-ideological discourse that influenced the policies of ASEAN leaders like Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir Mohammad and Benigno Aquino. These affected visa policies, citizenship values, religion and workplaces all of which impacted on nurses in the Philippines and working abroad. The fact that the Singapore government introduced policies to attract female medical workers is cited and helps explain why Singapore is a popular destination for migrant medical workers.

Chapter one will help readers understand the motivation and aspirations of young graduated nurses who decide to work abroad. It narrates the stories of a new generation of migration medical workers in a globalising Asia like their trajectories and career possibilities in this field.

Chapter two examines the Singaporean political, economic structure in the context of contemporary medical workers from the Philippines and its impact on visa categories such as EP, S-Pass and Work Permits. The development of medical tourism has changed the demands of healthcare consumers as an important factor in international immigration of medical workers is explained in the subtopic of transnational medical care.

The ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Manila presenting the voices of nursing students and nurses, recruitment agencies and public officials is discussed in chapter three. The imagination of migrants and their expectations of life abroad are discussed through a "cartography of care" or imaginative maps of migrants or spatial dimensions. The author then transitioned to discuss the debates on citizenship, cultural values and national aspiration of migrants who live abroad. The debate of humanity vs. financial incentive is correlated in reference to the objectives of Filipino nurses in pursuing this profession. The chapter also addresses the reasons for the Philippine's 'brain-drain' regarding medical practitioners and the reason they chose Singapore as their preferred work destination.

To better understand medical workers, chapter four provides the perceptions of Filipinos and the migration process. It narrates the Filipino outcries to 'racial slur' by famous American television shows and Hong Kong journalists

who wrote sceptically and questioned the credibility of Filipino workers. It depicts the Filipino nurses' expectations of working in Singapore. This includes examining the narrations of the ill-treatment of Singaporeans toward Filipino nurses and doctors. The chapter concludes by addressing the challenges faced by male Filipino nurses in Singapore.

Chapter five delves deeper into the issue of perceptions. The distinction between Asians, first world, third world, modern, backwards, caring, the transformation in migration and subjectivities are evaluated based on the intimate relationship and cultural values experienced by Filipino health professionals in their medical careers. Differences in social status, culture and beliefs to that of the host country are also discussed. This is followed by chapter six which captures the perceptions of nurses upon returning to the Philippines. It represents the outcome of their journey abroad and offers their final view on the experience.

The last chapter ties in everything and brings the discussion to a neat close. It concludes that many Filipino workers disagree with the cultural values of host countries and silently criticise the morality and family system in Singapore. The Filipino nationalistic values and virtues are perceived as contrary to the cold, atomised and capitalist Singaporeans.

To conclude, I truly recommend this book to the Filipino medical employers and policy makers as well as Asian studies researchers who aim to have more knowledge on the psychology of Filipino medical workers living abroad.

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