

BOOK REVIEW

Filipino Medical Workers in Asia: Narratives, Discourses, and Contestations

Caring for Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia. Megha Amrith. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2017, 272 pp. US \$27.00 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-87-7694-192-5 (hbk); ISBN: 978-87-7694-193-2 (pbk)

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The migration of overseas Filipino workers presents a familiar yet fascinating stories and intriguing narratives of hopes and dreams, love and grief, as well as of disappointments and successes. The unending search for a better life, along with the promise of uplifting the lives of the ones they left behind, poses an imaginary space and existence as they intersperse, interface, and interact with the daily encounters and travails in a foreign land. The choice and decisions created by the tensions and dilemmas on whether to stay put, move on, or to come home remain a daunting challenge among Filipino migrant workers. But more importantly, the capacity to embrace their fate with faith is an essential trait and characteristic to be able to love and care for others.

This is the theme and topic Megha Amrith's book, *Caring for Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia* tackles and represents. The book is a result of a doctoral project in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and funded by the Gates Cambridge Trust and Overseas Research Studentship. The author—Megha Amrith—is

a Research Fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility in Barcelona. She is an urban anthropologist of migration and has published papers on migrant labor, cultural diversity, care, and citizenship in comparative contexts.

With Filipino medical workers in Singapore as its main informants and respondents (pseudonyms are used), the book seeks to depict the trajectories and pathways the Filipino medical workers in Singapore assumes, which focuses on their plight, stories, and narratives that serve as a basis for staying, leaving, or coming home. It consists of eight chapters that touch and encompass a wide spectrum of the social, economic, political, legal, and moral situations and conditions as well as its implications in the Filipino migrant worker's life and the life of the patients they care about in a logical and colorful manner. The vivid stories and narratives of the Filipino medical worker informants in this ethnographic study provide the readers a clear appreciation and realistic impressions on how it is like working in Singapore as Filipino medical workers.

One thing laudable and commendable about the book is the introduction and presentation of rich and compelling literature on the structural and published debates on the prominence of migrant medical workers across the world. It dwells on the structural inequalities, which perpetuates migration, the devaluation of care and how to raise its worth, and the opportunities for empowerment and transformation in care work. It also posits a solid theorization and conceptualization on Filipino women as migrant workers, notably as domestic workers, sex workers, and entertainers, as docile and commodified bodies. Amrith used the Foucauldian and Feminist-Marxist paradigms as her methods of critique to add dimension in enriching and enhancing the migration literature (p.13).

Another strong suit of the book is its discussion on the politico-legal structures and hierarchies, which exists and pervades among workers in Singapore society. The politico-legal structures and hierarchies is a detrimental factor on the migrant worker's obtaining a permanent residence, which at times becomes a source of frustration and disillusionment. The book recounted the political and legal structure and hierarchy of workers in Singapore with the "Employment Pass" as the highest, which is intended for highly paid professionals such as doctors, bankers, consultants, and executives. With this Pass, migrants are highly mobile and enjoy many rights and freedoms. Following is the "S-Pass" intended for semi-skilled and technical workers, which include many of the medical personnel such as nurses, physiotherapists, technicians. The work permit is the lowest in the hierarchy and the strictest of them all, for it prohibits and restricts workers falling within this hierarchy (such as domestic workers) from bringing their families into the country, bar them from permanent residency, and even penalizes getting pregnant while in Singapore or being married to a Singaporeans or permanent residents. This leads the book to assert that, "There is a distinct and discriminatory hierarchy in the ordering of these visas, which is also mirrored in a negative public discourse towards 'foreign workers', reflected in moral panics about migrant behavior and their uses of public space on weekends" (p. 38).

Another startling discovery is that the book thrives in offering a comparative critique and remarks, putting

boundaries, terrains, and trajectories between Filipino medical workers and their global counterparts; between Filipino medical workers and their Burmese, Chinese, and Asian co-workers in Singapore; between Filipino medical workers in government hospitals and Filipino medical workers in Buddhists nursing care; between Filipino medical workers and their fellow domestic Filipino worker; and between the Catholic Filipino medical workers and their Evangelical Faith-based Filipino medical workers.

For example, the book compared the Cuban and the Vietnamese model and paradigm of medical workers migrant's mobility as driven not by profit or motivated by money, but are sparked and fueled instead by state-sponsored diplomatic agreements, humanitarian awareness, technical cooperation, scientific linkages, and networks (p. 39) as opposed to Filipino migrant worker's mobility paradigm that is catalyzed and fueled by a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, desires, and aspiration, which can be personal, familial, structural, and institutional in framework. Personal and familial because migrant medical workers choose to go abroad to seek for lucrative salary, high-income, and eventually, permanent residency and be able to bring their families and live a good life in a foreign country as long-term goals and aspirations. Structural and institutional because even the Philippine government encourages and sponsors the migration of medical workers to pump prime the economy through the overseas Filipino workers' remittances. Furthermore, the book also emphasized the three factors that leads to nurses' exodus which consists of the government's labor exportation policy, the "aggressive" strategies of labor recruitment agencies, the historically-rooted "Western orientation of nursing education, low salaries, undervaluation of the nursing profession in the Philippines, excessive workloads due to nursing shortages in some areas and the lack of security and opportunities for career development" (p. 40).

With regards to the specific characteristics of Filipino nurses as compared to their Asian counterparts such as the Burmese (Myanmar), Chinese, and Indian, the book, based on the interview on one of the senior Singapore-Chinese nurse, gave an overall picture of some Asian nurses when it argues that:

Myanmar nurses are placid, they have no strong ambition, they are not risk takers, but they are compliant. They are good middle strata people. They won't be drivers. Indians, we have management problems with them, they are too submissive and cannot assert themselves in front of dominant male patients; the Chinese from China, they are okay at work, they are happy because the culture is similar to theirs, but they create so many social problems outside; the Filipinos have charm, they are good entertainers. They are drivers, but sometimes they are too passionate, you see how they beat each other up." (p. 120)

These depictions of some Asian medical workers are useful and important in determining the profile and characteristics of what sets apart the Filipino medical workers and which traits need to be discarded and emulated by the Asian medical workers from each other in improving their attitudes and performances towards the medical, nursing, and caring profession. The book also pointed out that Filipino medical worker considers Singapore as merely temporary routes, a platform and springboard as a transit, transient, and fleeting moment to their imagined places and countries to work such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia. Unlike the Chinese and Burmese who are more contented and satisfied to permanently work and stay in Singapore on a long-term basis with their family.

Moreover, the book differentiated those Filipino medical workers working in government hospital as compared to those working in Buddhist nursing care homes, implying that the Filipino medical workers in a Buddhist nursing care are able to work, live, thrive, and operate under a more friendly, liberal, and stress-free working environment than working in a government or private hospital which is characterized as a hostile, antagonistic, hierarchal, bureaucratic, and stress-filled working environment.

Consequently, the book pointed out that a migrant's experience of shame is not a result of the political exclusion or victimization of Filipino medical workers in Singapore but rather a result of differences and clashes in the social perceptions and cultural interpretation of the nursing profession. The Filipino

society regards nursing as a dignified profession as opposed to the Singaporean society's view of the nursing profession as a dirty profession. As quoted from the book, "Nursing is a dirty work in Singapore as opposed to Filipino nurse' images of the profession which is valorized and this was not simply a question of image, but a question of performing tasks that migrant nurses do not associate with their jobs. It reveals very different cultural understandings of the nursing profession in Singapore and in the Philippines" (p. 92).

In addition, the book elucidated the boundaries and demarcations which exists between Filipino medical workers and Filipino domestic workers in Singapore. The Filipino medical workers refuse and decline to be associated with the domestic helpers as the medical workers perceive the domestic works as not up to their class or level. There is a certain animosity between the medical workers and domestic workers created and brought about by the thin line and blurred boundary, which sets them apart in the social and public hierarchies and spaces in the Singapore. The book even went as far as describing Filipino medical workers as living "quiet lives"—meaning a passive, unheralded, and dull life of existence as compared to domestic workers who are living a more active, alive, vibrant, and vigilant lives as they are more publicly engage in converging and discussing in public places such as "Lucky Plaza," and more intensely involved in championing advocacies, which promote the welfare of Filipino migrant workers in Singapore.

Furthermore, the book captured the contradictions and religious syncretism which exists among some Filipino medical workers who complained about their experiences of prejudice and discrimination, shame, and shallow treatment from their employers and patients but have similarly shown and demonstrated similar prejudices and discriminatory views and ideas to their own fellow Filipino domestic workers. In the case of nurses, the desire to establish a distance from their domestic worker *kababayans* (fellow country people) is stronger given the proximity of the work they do. Some domestic workers in Singapore also engage in care work. Private care workers for elderly individuals who work in peoples' homes are often classified in Singapore's immigration scheme as domestic workers.

This proximity leads nurses to differentiate themselves from domestic workers (pp. 98–99).

The book also enunciated the religious syncretism present and existent among Catholic Filipino medical workers in Singapore. Catholic Filipino nurses confided that whenever they are sick, they do not go to the hospitals or doctors for cure or go to mass for healing but instead they go to see a faith healer (*albularyo*) to treat and heal their diseases and sickness. Illness is viewed as caused by a disturbance to the spirits. The belief in spirits among these nurses, and the excitement with which they tell about faith healing, reveals that, even as they present themselves as pioneers of biomedicine, biomedicine is not sufficient in dealing with their own experiences of illness (p. 124).

It also exposed the judgmental and moralizing tendencies of the Catholic Filipino medical workers interviewed who views non-Catholics as sinners and regards punishment as a wrath of God to their immoral ways and sinful acts instead of being open, forgiving, and not harboring grudges or hate towards others as a devout and true Catholic. The observation among nurses that Singaporeans do not have beliefs beyond biomedicine does for instance not fit the anthropological explorations of the Chinese spiritual beliefs. It might also be a case of deliberate misrecognition; a way for some of my informants to hold a position of moral superiority with their spiritual Catholic subjectivities, in contrast to those who they believe put them in shameful positions (p. 125).

More so, the book focused on the glaring differences between Catholic Filipino medical workers with that of Evangelical Faith-based Filipino medical workers, which is analogous to the previous observation with that of Filipino medical workers and Filipino domestic workers. Catholic Filipino medical workers are living a laid back, passive, quiet, and silent life as compared to Filipino medical workers who are Evangelical Christians with the latter more active in church life and public advocacies. The Evangelical Christians Filipino medical workers find a more positive and purpose-driven life than that of the Catholic Filipino medical workers who are just going into the motion, are just content following the daily routine of life, and taking the path of the work then straight home trajectory.

But the book's distinctive and significant contribution lies on the experiences, narratives, stories, and perceptions of Filipino medical worker informants and respondents—from Cherry, who provided an early glimpse of a global, mobile, and cosmopolitan Filipino migrant worker; Christian and Liza who went abroad for the money, peer, and social pressures; Flor who is constantly and actively engage in online networks and activities in search for a new job and destination; Carlo and sir Jasper, who are enjoying their nursing career in the Philippines and opted not to go abroad anymore and are considered the exceptions; Alyssa, who is a stressed nurse in the midst of Singapore perfect model of medical care; the male nurses Roy, Jose, and Rommel who clear the garbage, mop the floor, do the dishes, change the diaper, and are spitted on the face by patients; Grace who has formed a special bond with her Singaporean patient she fondly calls “auntie”; Me-ann who is proud of her English more than the Singlish; Ella, who has difficulty speaking to non-Catholic patients about God; Alyssa who thinks that people got sick because they who do not know how to live with others; Lili, who is having an affair with a Malay security guard and with flexible religious affiliation and activity; Nelia, whose dream of landing a work in United Kingdom becomes a source of frustration and disappointment; Chariz and Leah who find their spiritual homes in Singapore; and finally Grace and her family, whose family reunion and gathering represent the tensions and contradictions of coming home and finding the home not anymore livable. Home is longed for but no longer realistically seen as a place to live, even if migrants are not happy or successful overseas. Rather, home becomes a temporary space for the denial of the hardships of life overseas (p. 178).

These are the characters and their stories who live to tell the inner core of their beings and experiences, which could wholly form as basis for decisions whether to go abroad, to stay put, or come back home for good among future Filipino medical workers who consider caring for a stranger either as a noble or lucrative profession, a dirty or dignified work, or simply a caring vocation. The characters and their stories powerfully depict and register the migrant medical workers' authenticity and resiliency to overcome the everydayness, encounters, and challenges they have to endure in the spate of an

imperfect society whose political, legal, cultural, and social underpinnings restrict and stunt to practice the authentic nature of the professions which is perceived as noble and dignified.

However, just like any book, it has also some opportunities for improvement and enhancement. The book could further solidify its main thesis and arguments, that is, to narrate and depict the stories, narratives, and experiences that Filipino medical migrant workers in Asia as they engage in caring for the others and the tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas they encounter in a foreign country (in this case Singapore). It can further highlight the tensions of their working relationships with their patients and employers, the contradictions of taking care of strangers (Singaporean patients) instead of taking care of their respective families and fellowmen, and the dilemma that these relationships created by staying, moving on, or coming home. The construction of comments and observations contained in the succeeding paragraphs are merely opinionated and reflective, and in no other way suggests that the book takes cognizance of it as basis for improvement but rather as a perceptive and reflective attempt to clarify and crystallize the concepts and message that the book intends to convey to its readers.

Firstly, the book missed out a very minute detail, yet with profound conceptual implication, with regards to the operational definition of Filipino migrant workers in its abbreviation when it equates and defines the meaning of DH (domestic helpers) in its abbreviation section as an “abbreviation to commonly used among Filipino migrants” (p. x). This terminology is of crucial importance in the harmonization and alignment of the profile of the main subject and informant of the book—the Filipino migrant medical workers and not that of domestic workers. This also sets the impressions and conceptions that readers could acquire with regards to Filipino medical workers, which in themselves are Filipino migrant workers but cannot be categorized as domestic helpers.

The abbreviation of DH being equated to Filipino migrant workers is problematic since the book cites and mention in recurring fashion DH and Filipino migrant workers in the book that presents a wrong impression and appreciation and consequently a hasty or sweeping

generalizations that all Filipino migrant workers are DH and vice-versa. Furthermore, it also appears in the book the discussion on the brewing tension and differentiation of Filipino medical workers with that of Filipino domestic workers with the former’s preference not to be associated and referred to DH coupled with the categorization of the worker hierarchies in Singapore which both the DH and Filipino medical workers are markedly differentiated. This implies that such abbreviation and definition of DH in the abbreviation section being commonly referred to as Filipino migrant workers opens up prejudice and discrimination on Filipino migrant workers not only in Singapore but all over the world.

The book actually realized this when it mentioned the two incidents and statements hurled at Filipino migrant workers, which elicited massive public outcries that made headlines in the Philippines daily newspaper. The public outcries show the Filipino nation strongly expressing abhorrence and condemnation on two such incidents and statements. The first public outcry is the undermining of Filipino medical worker’s qualification, competence, and credibility in an episode of an American television show, “Desperate Housewives” where one character questioned her doctor’s credentials by saying, “Can I check those diplomas ... because I want to make sure they’re not from some med school in the Philippines.” The second public outcry involves the calling out of Philippines as a “nation of servants” by a Hong Kong journalist, Chip Tsao (p. 75). The book could have carefully and painstakingly consider a more politically correct and socially sensitive meaning of the abbreviated DH right there from the opening pages of the book to provide a clearer picture and credible image of its main subjects and interviewees. It eventually appeared in the succeeding pages that the subjects are mostly Filipino medical workers in Singapore who are in no other way can be construed as DH.

Secondly, the title and cover page of the book itself is misleading and problematic. The book is entitled, *Caring for Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia*, but in true sense, the book largely covers and captures the stories, narratives, and responses of randomly selected Filipino nurses, which does not represent the broad spectrum and entirety of other

Filipino medical workers in Asia such as physicians, medical technologists, physical therapists, radiologists, occupation and rehabilitation therapists, as well as caregivers. The book suggests that, "The majority of my informants were nurses of different levels from the Philippines, and a handful of other medical workers including physiotherapists, radiographers, a phlebotomist and an optometrist" (p. 28). This may not be enough to represent the entire Filipino medical workers in Singapore for there are some other medical professions which are not ably represented in the study as main informants and interviewees.

In addition, the locale of the study focuses only on Filipino medical workers in Singapore and not encompasses Filipino medical workers working from the different parts of Asia. There is particular tendency to misrepresent the claim that the responses and narratives of the informants and interviewees reflect the general condition and situation of Filipino medical workers all over Asia when in fact it only applies to Singapore. The cover page also shows only Filipino nurses taking an oath as newly-inducted or registered nurses but does not illustrate other sectors of the Filipino medical professionals, which are obviously underrepresented in the cover bearing the title *Caring for the Strangers: Filipino Medical Workers in Asia*. A more workable and deserving title instead would be, "Caring for the Strangers: Filipino Medical Nurses in Singapore," for the book's scope and limitations attempts to cover Filipino nurses working in Singapore only.

Thirdly, although it thrives and breathes on comparative critique and comparative remarks between and among Filipino medical workers with that of other group of Asian medical workers (Burmese, Indians, Chinese, and Singaporeans) and with their fellow Filipino workers (workers in government hospitals versus working in Buddhist nursing homes, Catholic Filipino nurses versus Evangelical Christian Filipino nurses, Filipino medical workers versus domestic helpers) as a result if its multi-ethnographic evidence works, there is also a susceptibility and tendency to lurk into subjectivities and lopsidedness in terms of assigning the extent and coverage, which leads to unwarranted conclusions or generalizations towards another group.

One glaring example is the book's tendency to be overly critical of Filipino Catholic nurses as passive, judgmental, cynical, and politically laidback as opposed to Filipino Evangelical Christians (Faith-based groups). It also describes Filipino domestic workers as active, optimistic, and political advocate; owing and citing the difficulty to solicit open and transparent responses from Filipino Catholic nurses while getting gamely, lively, and open responses from both Filipino Evangelical Christians and domestic helpers although not considering that most of the informants and respondents interviewed are Catholic Filipino nurses. Such subjectivity and lopsidedness are made evident in allotting six pages (pp. 153–158) of discussion devoted to Filipino Evangelical faith-based nurses and a measly one paragraph subtly tackling the El Shaddai movement in the description of Filipino Catholic charismatic nurses in the context of setting the boundaries of migrant sociality and emphasizing the significant role that religion plays in making the lives of Filipino nurses more alive, vibrant, and purposive.

Finally, to find justification and concrete representation of the overall picture of Filipino medical workers in Asia, the book could have included other Filipino medical workers who are based not only in Singapore but also in other parts of neighboring Asia such as in Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, and China to achieve a more fuller, wider, and broader understanding on the real status, conditions, and situations of Filipino medical workers in Asia. Otherwise, the analysis, observations, and conclusions made are merely confined to Filipino medical workers in Singapore and not of the entire Asia. Furthermore, the book could broaden and widen the scope of medical professionals interviewed not only limited to predominantly Filipino migrant nurses and nursing aides but also includes other Filipino medical professionals as well. The inclusion of the domestic helpers in the context on the analysis and discussion of Filipino medical workers can also be removed because it is not significant and imperative in answering the primordial problem of the book, which centers around Filipino medical workers in Asia; thereby avoiding the possibility of comparing two groups of people which are not similarly situated in the context of worker's class, structure, and hierarchy. For future research and investigation, a sequel of the book

that focuses this time on the Asian medical workers in the care profession in Singapore or any parts of the globe is worthy of a project and investigation to clarify the often mundane nuances and caveats surrounding the narratives, stories, and plights of medical workers in Asia based in Singapore.

But in summary, the book is impressive with its contextualization of the contemporary migration of Filipino medical workers in a foreign country and its exploration of the condition, situation, and state of migrant workers' experiences, relationships, and socialities. The author is not a Filipino but he made it appear as if the book was written by a Filipino with a Filipino touch and flavor; owing to the robust, comprehensive, and rich literature and wealth of materials that the book contains, which brings and transport the readers into the very heart of Filipino

medical worker's very own political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics. The book also went beyond the parochial and sometimes naïve conceptualizations of Filipino worker's migration with substantive literature review as gleaned from both local outlook and global perspectives, which validates the book's sound conceptual mapping and solid theoretical grounding. In the end, the unraveling and fleshing out of Filipino medical workers' stories, experiences, and narratives from these conceptual paradigms and theoretical models on migration stands as the book's significant challenge and distinctive contribution to the body of scholarly work on Filipino worker migration as it sees and mirrors through the looking glass the authentic and true state of mind, heart, and soul of Filipino medical workers living in Singapore.