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In Pursuit of the “Ideal Migrant”: The Alienation of Idealisation in the Migrant Experience

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Abstract

The act of human migration is itself a radical immersion into the otherness of another culture, an experience that takes place on the very borders of subjectivity. At these borders, the feeling of alienation can dominate a migrant’s existence, due to the displacement of their spatial and psychic references. The purpose of this paper is to consider the influence of the idealized migrant figure on the newly migrated subject, using representations from modern literature. The methodology used for this paper is based upon the theoretical work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose understanding of fantasy illuminates how the structures of alienation and idealization converge within a subject’s psychic life. Within the context of migrant, the migrant subject has recourse to fantasy, a concept defined by Lacan as driven by the question: what does the Other want from me? While an answer to this question evades any direct answer, it gives the subject an image to strive towards, thus disguising the antagonism that pervades their existence. In the case of the migrant, the desire of the Other is founded by the figure of the ‘ideal migrant’, an acculturated subject able to traverse their foreign surroundings without fault. Certainly, such an image prevails in contemporary society through celebrities who have effectively succeeded in their country of migration, yet similar relationships are perhaps more common and potentially damaging in more localized forms. In this paper, the dramatization of this concept will be explored in recent representations in modern literature, specifically the short stories “Further South” by Isabelle Li and “The Dignity of Labour” by Roanna Gonsalves. The major findings proposed here is as follows: instead of investing in idealized figures of success for migrants, a more effective solution would be to encourage communities that embrace a shared feeling of alienation, to avow the antagonism at the core of migration and allow individuals to relate to one another’s hardship.

Keywords: Migration, modern literature, Jacques Lacan, fantasy, alienation, work, idealization

Introduction

In the pursuit of my desires across such frontiers, I am paradoxically forced to face my confines, together with that excess that seeks to sustain the dialogues across them. Transported some way into this border country, I look into a potentially further space: the possibility of another place, another world, another future (Chambers 2005, p. 5).

At its core, human migration is an immersion into the sublime unknown of another culture, an experience on the very borders of selfhood that maps the fault lines of subjectivity. At these borders, the recourse to fantasy can be induced by the migrant subject in response to the alienation and otherness felt in a foreign culture. In its Lacanian valence, fantasy is driven by the question: what does the Other want from me? While an answer to this question is inherently unanswerable, it gives the subject an image of

completeness to draw from. In the case of the migrant, the Other can be structured as the ‘ideal migrant’, a phantasmatic subject who is able to traverse their foreign surroundings without fault, providing an image for the migrant to strive towards, thus distancing them from their adverse material conditions. In contemporary society, we find such images in celebrities like Jackie Chan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, individuals who have left their home and become successful in their new country. While these figures do provide migrants with an image of hope that they can also be successful, they can also have a destructive impact by setting near impossible standards of success within a restrictive capitalistic economy. The interaction between the migrant and the fantasy of the “ideal migrant” is dramatized in the short stories “Further South” by Isabelle Li and “The Dignity of Labour” by Roanna Gonsalves, as both stories give accounts of the everyday migrant experience, with the pressures of work and assimilation both crucial. This paper will seek to understand the influence of the idealized migrant figure on the newly migrated subject, using representations from modern literature. In particular, the following questions will be addressed: What does the “ideal migrant” offer the newly migrating subject, and what is the psychic structure of this relationship? What communities might allow for migrants to better adapt to their new home country?

“Further South” is a story about a woman who migrates to Singapore from China, finding her new environment alluring, challenging but above all, alienating. Within Li’s story, this alienation is found most clearly in her everyday work life, where her individuality is discarded in favor of submitting to the absolute demands of the boss. The caustic over-permeation of work into a subject’s life is a prevalent theme, one that adequately conveys the impossible expectations placed upon migrant workers to assimilate in their new country. Instead of structuring her work around her life, the protagonist must put her job above all else, exemplified in her recounts of not eating in order to maintain efficiency:

I skipped breakfast, so I could start work early and finish in time to go for dinner ... I started working, automatically moving from one activity to another. I skipped lunch, to fast-forward the day. The emptiness of my stomach seemed to clear my head, and I began to experience a lightness and euphoria (Li, 2016, p. 72).

These accounts, as well as the stark words of her colleague – “If I’m not married by twenty-five, I’ll kill myself” – offer a lamentable portrait of the surrounding work situation the protagonist finds herself in (Li, 2016, p. 73).

Even outside of work, the protagonist’s remaining free time must be spent in the order of a kind of active acculturation, a process evenly captured within the exchange of capital. By taking up the hobby of shopping, the woman hopes to become closer to the local residents, bridging the cultural otherness that divides them: “I would meet with friends at shopping centers, look in the shiny windows and display cabinets, walk through aisles crowded with clothing, and have a meal in the food court afterward” (Li, 2016, p. 73). However, within this structure the woman isn’t able to find respite from her position as a migrant, as shop assistants identify her accent as foreign, treating her like she “came from a village” (Li, 2016, p. 73). Marx’s claim that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” reaches its critical relevance through this aspect of the protagonist’s life, which, in tandem with her lack of name, attests to her absolute servitude to the demands of an Other, to the point in which she is devoid of a core element of her subjectivity (Marx, 1904, 11-12).

Alone and alienated from her surroundings, the protagonist compares herself to “an ant, crawling in circles, unable to escape,” that is until she meets Luke (Li, 2016, p.73).

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Luke is an American expat who represents the “ideal migrant”, a subject able to expertly traverse the inner workings of Singapore and evade the debilitating conditions that the protagonist struggles with. When the protagonist sees the world through Luke’s eyes she is able to bypass the alienating resonance of her surroundings, seeing the world as a beautiful utopia:

When I looked through his eyes, the world was full of hidden beauty and small delights: the spiraling external stairs with the shadows of the balustrades, the patterns of leaves against the sunlight, a tree growing out of the window of a deserted terrace (Li, 2016, p. 73).

Similarly, Luke is able to show the protagonist (of Chinese descent) points of familiarity in the otherness of Singapore, walking “along Singapore River and the back streets of Chinatown, checking out the associations named after obscure places in China” (Li, 2016, 73). Importantly, this return to familiarity ends up being the most intimate time the two spend.

In the all-important narrative turn of Li’s story –the dinner party – Luke’s status as the “ideal migrant” is radically challenged. In this sequence, the protagonist goes to the restaurant expecting to be joined by only Luke but is greeted by several other characters. Within this narrative gesture, the protagonist realizes Luke’s fundamentally divided nature, as his presence is (quite literally) split with the introduction of four other characters. Accordingly, these characters all reveal themselves to all be subjects of lack; Fanny has trouble with her boss knowing about her “moonlighting during office hours,” Poet is known to harbor pain and longing in reference to Luke, Qing plans to flee from his revenge-seeking father-in-law and Yun, who has a bandaged arm and intense anxieties regarding the quality of seafood (Li, 2016, p. 77). Essentially, this scene reveals to the protagonist that the ideal migrant is based on contradiction. Such a revelation is met by physical feelings of disgust and revulsion by the protagonist, whose structuring principles of meaning have been severed. As she leaves the dinner party and heads back to the safety of her home, further evidence of Luke’s divided nature is revealed through a phone call.

‘Who’s your husband?’

‘You know who he is. You had dinner with him.’

‘Luke’s not married. He’s divorced.’

‘He married me in Malaysia. I’m in Malacca, about to give birth.’

‘Luke and I are friends. I don’t believe you.’

‘Don’t do this to me.’ She started to cry. ‘I’ll let my father speak to you.’

‘My daughter has attempted suicide,’ said the voice of an old man with the same accent.

‘You are making it up’ (Li, 2016, p. 77-78).

The protagonist’s consistent denial of Luke’s divided nature testifies to the hold that fantasy has upon her, as she is unable to give up on her fantasy frame qua Luke. Finally, another unknown caller rings at 2 am and in their brief conversation the protagonist reveals her intention to move away from the situation she finds herself in, yet still investing in an idealized existence in a country “just a little bit further south”. This notion is taken to its logical end in the final lines of the story, with a direct reference to the phantasmatic structure the protagonist finds herself continually sutured into:

I sat on my bed, leaned on the windowsill, and opened a corner of the curtain. The city was asleep and I was peeping into a dream that belonged to someone else. I had gone from northern China to southern China for the university, then to Singapore for work. Where would be my next stop? (Li, 2016, p. 78).

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The idea of peering into another’s dream coincides with Lacan’s understanding of fantasy as a way of responding to the question of Other’s desire, with the protagonist more or less existing through the dream of the Other. In fleeing Singapore, she continues in her search of a better beginning, yet her inability to reconcile with the surrounding otherness means that she will encounter the same issues in her new place of migration, playing into a continued cycle of alienation.

“The Dignity of Labour” by Roanna Gonsalves also explores the overwhelming sense of alienation in migrant experience, this time following Nina and Deepak, a couple who immigrate to Australia from India. Like in “Further South,” the experience of otherness is central to the character’s recourse to fantasy. Initially, Nina and Deepak have high expectations for their immigration to Australia, having high paying positions in India and expecting a similar if not better situation in their new home country. Instead, the couple struggles to find any semblance of work, let alone jobs even vaguely related to their positions in India. Consequently, Nina reflects upon Deepak and her descent into otherness:

She feared they would be lost in a new amorphous blackness with no place for a toehold, nowhere to steady herself. But now she felt the cogs turning again, oiled, dependable ... what she really wanted to do was scream loud enough for a hole to be blasted in the ceiling. But the ceiling was white and impenetrable (Gonsalves, 2016, 226).

Out of this sense of alienation comes the “ideal migrant”, a notion given its image in Suzanne and Patrick, an Indian couple that migrated from India six years earlier. In comparison, Suzanne and Patrick have successfully acculturated to Australia, finding well-paid positions and a particularly pristine house:

... she realized that the whole house, from the walls to the ceiling to the furniture to the crockery, was white. The floor tiles were white. All the kitchen appliances were white. ‘We just finished renovating,’ Suzanne said, sparkling in her white glitter-necked kurta and white shorts, offering her left cheek to each of them to kiss. She introduced them to Patrick, dressed in a white T-shirt and white tennis shorts (Gonsalves, 2016, 230).

The insistence of the color white in this sequence speaks to the level of purity and stability that Patrick and Suzanne appear to have in their lifestyle, a stark contrast to Deepak and Nina’s shambolic existence. Consequently, Nina and Deepak struggle to maintain appearances for Patrick and Suzanne, with Deepak, in particular, struggling to feel at home in his pursuit of “ideal migrant” status:

She knew he was struggling to keep himself together as a new way of living raged around him. And here in this house, he was being asked to let go and reform in the image of what he despised (Gonsalves, 2016, 231).

In a later dialogue, Deepak verbally expresses his feelings of inadequacy in the eyes of the “ideal migrant”, who for him represents the supreme and unassailable judgment of the Other: “Why? I’m not good enough for them, is it? A shelf-stacker and a petrol-station worker is not good enough for them?” (Gonsalves, 2016, 239). Clearly these experiences weight on Deepak, who is described as living as if “there were a spring coiled tight inside him,” a suitable metaphor for the harsh adversity of the subject that is forced to try and live up to a model of perfection (Gonsalves, 2016, 238-239). Deepak’s rampant internal conflict culminates in his physical abuse of Nina, an unfortunate outcome of living in extreme alienation.

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After this incident, Suzanne finds Nina unconscious in her apartment, caring for her with a “Christian righteousness and Christian clarity that Nina was able to foresee but unable to resist” (Gonsalves, 2016, 240). In her time spent recovering in hospital, Nina retains a guarded sense of shame in front of Suzanne, trying to maintain the illusion of stability in her life: “Nina wished that Suzanne had minded her own business. It was not as if he had killed her” (Gonsalves, 2016, 241). In this sequence, it is made obvious that Nina is desperately trying to show Suzanne that she doesn’t need her sympathy and support, even though she knows she does. This symbolic need to keep up the appearances speaks to Nina’s subservience to the image of the undivided ideal migrant, unwilling to admit her flaws but creating further feelings of alienation and immobilization for herself.

The crucial turn in Gonsalves’ story comes in the final sequence, where Nina encounters Donna, a down to earth woman devoid of pretense. Crucially, Donna shows a level of direct kindness in the seemingly mundane dialogue about her work life:

‘Yeah. Just finished a double shift. Off home now to put my feet up, watch a nice meaty Spanish movie on SBS.’

‘You must be exhausted,’ Nina is saying

‘That’s what the city does to ya’ (Gonsalves, 2016, 243).

Significantly, this dialogue between Nina and Donna is markedly different to Nina’s interactions with Suzanne, with Nina able to see that Donna also experiences a sense of hardship in her work, and can relate to this aspect of her personality. The apogee of their interaction comes when Nina mistakenly follows up Donna’s claim that she is from the country with the question, “Which country?”:

The instant she asks this question and even before Donna says, ‘Tamworth,’ she realizes how ridiculous, how naïve she sounds. Donna grasps something else, that Nina is asking a question that doesn’t quite make sense and yet makes all the sense in the world (Gonsalves, 2016, 243).

What follows is an absurdist sequence where both Nina and Donna seem to explode with laughter over the misinterpretation. What makes this encounter so profound is that in making an error Nina reveals herself as a lacking subject to Donna, yet doesn’t feel a sense of shame like she did with Suzanne. What follows might be understood as a shared embrace of Otherness, as Nina and Donna’s rapturous laughter seems to reach a transcendental crescendo:

She knows there are seeds inside her that are rooting her to this minute, this place, seeds that she never knew existed, buried so deep, they are now being shaken out as the laughter fills her and thrills her ... This time Nina laughs as a woman who has just absolved herself. Her feet are sore now but the laughter has cracked open her body and the light is coming in (Gonsalves, 2016, 243-244).

Nina’s feeling of elation signifies her acceptance of the otherness around her, a decidedly Hegelian “union of opposites” where Nina finds a piece of herself in the Other, allowing her, at least for a moment, to transcend her over-subservience to phantasmatic structures. As Žižek explains, the realization of the lack in the Other is profoundly significant in the subject’s overcoming of alienation:

Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other. So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of ‘de-alienation’ called by Lacan separation: not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated forever from the object by the barrier of language, but that

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the object is separated from the Other itself, that the Other itself ‘hasn't got it’, haven't got the final answer-- that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. This lack in the Other gives the subject – so to speak – breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other (Žižek, 1989, 122).

Through stumbling upon a moment of excess (the laughing fit with Donna), Nina restructures her subjectivity so to see herself in the Otherness of her surroundings. Crucially, this is the point where Nina is able to move beyond the point that “Further South” ends on, identifying her own lack with the lack in the Other and moving past the image of the “ideal migrant”. Furthermore, Gonsalves’ story ensures the investment in this mode of thinking through Nina’s newfound decision to embark on new beginnings, finding solace where there was once only Otherness.

The limitations of this study lie in its small sample space, only engaging with two literary representations of the migrant experience. Certainly, the diversity and breath of migration exceed the confines outlined here, and it is certainly possible that a more cohesive representation of migration can be found in a combination of sources. This study has definite intersections with studies by Shubin and Findlay (2014) and MacKenzie (2009), the former of which utilizes a similar methodology to conceptualize the creation of ‘ideal’ migrant workers by recruitment agencies in the context of Latvian labor migration to the UK. In contradistinction to these approaches, this paper invests in literary texts as an invaluable source of understanding the nature of migration.

In considering the experiences of migrant subjects in “Further South” and “The Dignity of Labour,” the stark feeling of alienation induced by the notion of the “ideal migrant” stands out as a common central concern. While both stories convey the agonizing loop of alienation that following this image induces, their point of divergence lies in how their characters respond to the image’s destruction. In Li’s story, the revelation of Luke’s divided nature is met by disavowal and continued investment in the supposed authority of the ideal image, while in “The Dignity of Labour,” Nina is able to disinvest in the idealisation of the Other, with the encounter with Donna allowing her to embrace her status as a lacking subject. What both stories reveal is the extreme alienation that stems from the migrant’s attempts to live up to new expectations in a foreign country, with debilitating work conditions and availability, as well as the hold of fantasy as a means of escape. What both Li and Gonsalves stories demonstrate is the potentially destructive nature of the ‘ideal migrant’ for the migrant subject, as they create unrealistic standards of success within an economic system where few can transcend their class category. In effect, the fantasy of the undivided ‘ideal migrant’ works to conceal the surrounding otherness that forms from the process of migrating from one country to another. Keeping in mind the increasing transnational flows of work and the resolution of Gonsalves’ story, an alternative to idealization might be found in creating environments where migrants can talk openly about their personal struggles in a new home country and relate to each other’s alienation, thus fostering a level of authentic solidarity.

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