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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## At the Crossroads of Care Work and Conversion: How Female Migrant Domestic Workers are Reworking Islam in the Arab Gulf

Review by Schuyler Marquez, New York University

*Everyday Conversions: Islam, Domestic Work, and South Asian Migrant Women in Kuwait.*

By: Attiya Ahmad

Duke University Press 2017

In recent decades, the Arab Gulf has emerged as a site of spectacle, marked by the extravagant architecture and capitalist development projects financed by the region's oil wealth. Attiya Ahmad's ethnography "Everyday Conversions," however, beckons readers to focus on what may seem to be a far more banal locale as a site of emergence and transformation in the region: the household.

Ahmad's book centers on the tens of thousands of female domestic workers who come from South and Southeast Asia to work for Kuwaiti citizens' families. According to Ahmad, domestic workers make up one in six of the population and work in ninety percent of Kuwaiti households (27). However, the numbers alone do not convey the complex hierarchies that these workers navigate. Domestic workers, like other foreign workers, enter the Gulf through the *kafeel* system, a sponsorship program in which citizens of good legal standing can act as sponsors for migrant workers. Scholars of the Gulf have demonstrated how the *kafeel* system has produced a complex scenario in which the majority of the population is in fact composed of non-citizen foreign workers. Although they are in the majority, these workers are mostly excluded from the protections of the state, benefits that are reserved for Kuwaiti citizens. Such a situation has left many workers in situations of high vulnerability and exploitability. However, Ahmad is keen to

tell the story from a more intimate view—through the narratives of the domestic workers who help reproduce citizens' households. Ahmad highlights that such work cannot only be read through a lens of precarity, and while subject to hierarchies and exclusion, domestic workers also in many ways traverse these boundaries as they perform affective labor for citizens' families. Through this work they become critical to the reproduction of the household and therefore of Kuwaiti society. Through her ethnographic fieldwork among domestic workers, Ahmad illustrates how their work is a generative site for new transnational subjectivities and affinities.

Ahmad characterizes domestic workers as “dual agents of reproduction,” highlighting how their work is integral to both their sponsors' and their households in their home countries. In Ahmad's analysis, domestic workers prove to be adaptable, as they wield new power in their home countries by sending capital to their families back home and through negotiating their positions as workers inside households in Kuwait. Through a discussion of these women's narratives, Ahmad emphasizes that these women are not mere victims, but agents as they reconfigure new transnational subjectivities. Such subjectivities crosscut traditional ideas of family and market, nation and religion. For example, as women provide capital for their households back home, their relations with their own families become more mediated by the market, whereas their relations to their work households come to be mediated by rules typically reserved for kin.

Ahmad also investigates why many domestic workers have begun converting to Islam. Rejecting two popular explanations for conversion, a secular liberal explanation that posits workers convert to receive better treatment and an explanation that emphasizes the influence of Islamic reform, Ahmad contends that domestic workers' conversions must be understood as taking place within the everyday rhythms and routines of their work. Conversion for these women is not a one-time event, but a gradual process that takes place over time as they attune to their lives and work in Kuwait. Through their conversions, women can make sense of and deliberate on tough decisions they find themselves in as they seek to relate to their families, find partners in marriage, and navigate their workplaces. Ahmad emphasizes that women's participation in this new religious movement is cosmopolitan, stressing the emergent and novel ways these women bring Islam into their everyday lives. While women engage with the Al-Huda movement that originated in Pakistan, Ahmad contends that this movement takes on its own character in the Gulf, as workers

from South Asia and Africa mingle and make sense of their transnational experiences through Islamic precepts and practices. A key idea is that women do not leave behind their old religions and practices, but reinterpret them in their new trajectories.

What emerges throughout the book is that domestic workers do not form a mere diasporic relation to their homeland, but navigate a complex picture involving crosscutting vectors and asymmetries. In some ways, workers relate more to their sponsors than their own homeland, an affinity that demonstrates their reconfiguring of national and religious imaginaries. A particularly useful concept in the book is the Hindi concept of *naram*, referring to the malleability and adaptability that women must demonstrate in new contexts, most typically applied to adapting to marriage. While people back home may see workers as engaging in nefarious work, women characterize their ability to adapt as *naram*, emphasizing their cosmopolitan agency they exercise in navigating their lives in the Gulf. Other key themes are Ahmad's concepts of suspension and temporariness to describe the ways of domestic workers are both apart from and in between worlds.

While the book is extremely detailed in its storytelling, more discussion of Ahmad's relationships with her interlocutors would make for an even richer experience. While she makes it clear that she is a Muslim woman that has navigated Muslim networks in South Asia, Middle East, and Canada, the book would benefit from more discussion of what challenges she may have faced in making connections with these women as an academic researcher. In a similar vein, the ethnography could also benefit from more discussion on the dynamics between women in the movement. For example, in one part of the book she mentions how Filipina women are seen as the most prized domestic workers and how women were critical of one another's clothing. More attention to these kinds of hierarchies would be a fascinating contribution to understanding the power dynamics at stake in this area of work.

Overall "Everyday Conversions" is an excellent ethnography for scholars interested in examining how work, Islam, gender, and kinship are recast in transnational arenas. The book is an outstanding demonstration of how household activities are in fact embedded in transnational

dynamics, as gendered, racialized, and religious subjectivities are reworked in this surprisingly turbulent space.

**Schuyler Marquez** is a PhD Candidate in Sociocultural Anthropology at NYU. Her research examines the rise of industrial halal meat production in Brazil, examining the implications that this industry has for how Muslims imagine and materially produce understandings about a global and modern Islam. In addition to her work in Brazil, she has conducted research on Muslim communities in the United States and Denmark.



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