Crossing the Gulf: Love and Family in Migrant Lives
Pardis Mahdavi
216 pages. ISBN 9780804798839

Reviewed by EMANUELA BUSCEMI

Pardis Mahdavi’s *Crossing the Gulf* is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Arabian Gulf that investigated immobilities and mobilities as well as familial love in the lives of migrant workers. Although her data concentrate mainly on Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), her arguments are relevant to other countries in the area with a significant presence of domestic workers. The book offers a deeply original reading of migration and intimacy.

*Crossing the Gulf* investigates the intimate lives of migrants, particularly how bonds of love and family influence their emotional, social, and physical mobilities and immobilities. Mahdavi draws on a vast array of interviews conducted with migrant workers, activists, government officials, and the staff of international organizations in the receiving countries of Kuwait and the UAE and the sending countries of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, and Madagascar. She met her interlocutors in cafés, jails, shelters, embassies, grassroots organizations’ offices, and private houses. *Crossing the Gulf* offers a rich and multidimensional problematization of migrant journeys and the life choices of foreign workers.

The scope of the book is threefold. It critically examines the complex and reciprocal relations between migration projects and intimate lives; mobilities and immobilities as “physical and emotional restrictions and opportunities” (22) in the lived experiences of migrant workers; and migration and immigration as complementary processes and forces. Mahdavi avoids dichotomous theoretical categories and conceptualizations.

One strength of Mahdavi’s work is how she problematizes and deconstructs the categories of human trafficking, crime, forced labor, and im/migrations through investigation of intimacies and intimate trajectories as well as symbolic and actual borders. Employing a multidimensional perspective on migrants’ lives, the book leads the reader to
a critical examination of the impact of the “rescue rhetoric” and gift mentality generated by the human-trafficking framework. This approach reinforces a dichotomy of victim and perpetrator. Employing voices and stories from her fieldwork, Mahdavi eloquently argues for the complexities of im/migration projects, offering a multilayered and multidimensional examination of subjectivities and agency, emotion, sexualities, parenthood, citizenship, and notions of home and family. She argues that “essentializing domestic workers as products of their abuse rather than emphasizing the complexities of their choices further challenges the agency of those who struggle to negotiate their potential courses of action, make decisions, and control their own lives” (75).

Mahdavi’s positionality as an engaged anthropologist, woman, and mother, as well as her use of a feminist methodology that included participant observation, contributes to a critical and original perspective complicating the classical insider-outsider fieldwork relation with her research interlocutors. In the words of one of her research participants, Noor, an illegal migrant turned sex worker and unwed mother living illegally in Dubai, “For so long you have been the voice of other people; now it is time you find your voice” (4–5). Mahdavi’s personal story at one point intersects with the narratives of her research participants when a struggle over the custody of her daughter temporarily makes it impossible for either of them to leave their area of residence. Bridging the gap between the researcher and the researched, the anthropologist’s life and her fieldwork data, Mahdavi undertook her ethnography with a renewed political engagement. Exemplifying a commitment beyond fieldwork relations, she aided some of her participants through lawyer friends working pro bono, helped draft a new human-trafficking law for the Malagasy government, and sought temporary refuge for other interlocutors through her network of contacts in the area.

The first part of Crossing the Gulf examines the legal and sociocultural regulations of migrant women’s bodies and sexualities imposed by the kefala (sponsorship) system and the structural inequalities deriving from exclusionary citizenship laws in the UAE and Kuwait. It investigates the crime of zina (sexual promiscuity) and the fate of children born to unwed migrant workers in a Gulf country. These children exist between statelessness and the possibility of living in the emir’s palaces, as is the case for foundlings in Kuwait. The second part of the book explores the transformative effects of migration on state policies, as well as how “encounters with the state,” in turn, affect migrants’ lives and their migration projects. These mutual relations become a “catalyst for change” (29–30). Mahdavi analyzes intimacy as a space that compels reconsideration of empowerment and identity in the face of structural constraints. The final part of the book critically examines the pitfalls and negative effects of the human-trafficking framework, arguing for a more inclusive policy design that considers and incorporates the fluidity of the lived experiences of migrants through the concept of intimate im/mobilities.

Crossing the Gulf employs clear and accessible language. It provides an interesting apparatus of notes that give the reader opportunities for further readings and suggests new areas and lines of research. The book includes an extensive bibliography of scholarly
and academic publications, statistical and legal reports, and documents produced by international organizations and state institutions. Mahdavi’s extensive and captivating integration of migrant narratives will appeal to a variety of audiences, including scholars, students, migration experts, international organizations and charity operators, government officials, and expatriates living in the area.

EMANUELA BUSCEMI holds a doctorate in sociology from the University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom. She teaches at the University of Monterrey (UDEM), Mexico. Contact: emabuscemi@hotmail.com.