

ATTIYA AHMAD. *Everyday Conversations: Islam, Domestic Work, and South Asian Migrant Women in Kuwait* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017). Pp. 288. \$25.95 paper. ISBN 9780822363446.

**W**hy do women from India and Nepal migrate to Kuwait? What are their work arrangements? How many of them convert and what explains their conversion to Islam? This book makes a unique contribution to our understanding of women and migration due to its analytic focus on their religious conversions.

Chapter One, “Temporariness,” situates *Everyday Conversations* in the literatures of feminist, post-colonial, and cultural studies theories and summarizes Ahmad’s research approach. Her ethnographic fieldwork, based on interviews with South Asian women working in Kuwait, allows her to map their experience as domestic workers and explores how and why many choose to convert to Islam. The uncertainty of their situation is linked to Kuwait’s citizenship laws and *kafala* system, which renders migrant workers, including women, dependent on their sponsoring families, regardless of how long they have lived in Kuwait. Chapter Two, “Suspension,” looks at the transitory nature of life for Kuwait’s domestic workers, who live in a state of limbo, suspended between two families and countries and afforded only temporary legal status. Ahmad contextualizes their circumstances within the history of Kuwait’s twentieth and twenty-first century development and its exclusionary immigration laws.

Chapter Three, “Naram,” (Urdu/Hindi: softness, malleability) addresses the interiorization of social expectations on domestic workers. Ahmad defines the idea of *naram* as “the underlying normative expectation they [female domestic workers] are subject to and become subjects of: that they adapt themselves unobtrusively to a new social milieu” (105). This malleability helps the women adapt to the new culture, language, and household relations in Kuwait. In contrast, the women interviewed by Ahmad suggest male migrants from South Asia do not possess this trait. Thus, Ahmad relates being *naram* as a feature of South Asian gender roles that also impacts choices made in new host countries. This characteristic also in part explains how women are attracted to learning more about Islam, as it relates to the subjectivity of their Kuwait experience.

In Chapter Four, “Housetalk,” Ahmad analyzes everyday relationships and conversations in the household. She demonstrates through the stories of different workers how household life reveals the pervasive influence of

day-to-day Islamic practices. The conversion to Islam is not so much an instant “road to Damascus” lightning bolt as it is a gradual adaptation to the context in which domestic workers live and to the essential patterns of their daily lives.

In Chapter Five, “Fitra,” (Arabic: instinct, disposition, human nature) Ahmad explores the women’s innate sense of right and wrong and their understanding of religion more generally. She argues that many domestic workers come to accept Islam as a belief system in continuity with their original religious background, rather than a dramatic departure from traditions carried with them to Kuwait. Most of Ahmad’s women interlocutors took classes at the women’s center of Kuwait’s Da’wa movement, which focused on the integration of Islamic practices into daily life. The classes provide a social circle and collective space, as well as an intercultural place of belonging for the women. Conversion itself is a mundane affair, rather than a dramatic departure. The practice of *fitra*, however, and the choice to convert to Islam, has little impact on the “deeply hierarchal and acute dependence on their employers” (192). Their conversion adds another layer of meaning to their own lives, but does not significantly reconfigure relationships within their households and their workplaces.

In the Epilogue, “Ongoing Conversions,” Ahmed concludes that the main themes addressed in the book, namely, the women’s temporariness, suspension between two worlds, and cultivation of *naram* as a behavioral guide, are all revealed in conversations of the everyday. The courses at the center and cultivation of *fitra* then create the conditions for women to move gently towards conversion to Islam. These conversions are thus not subject either to the triumphant interpretation of Islamic reformers or to the mere pragmatism posited by transnational theorists. They are, rather, part of the quotidian elements of daily tasks and relationships.

Ahmad’s effort to capture the women’s individual stories not only illustrates the themes in *Everyday Conversions*, but also is its greatest strength, creating an analysis that is compelling and broadly accessible. Ahmad’s research makes a unique contribution to the literatures on migration, feminist, and transnational theory, and to the history and anthropology of the Indian Ocean world. The one weakness of the book is Ahmad’s struggle to situate her work theoretically. It is always a challenge to articulate complex interrelationships in scholarly language. While ordinary language is already an abstraction of reality, the language of academic theories is even further removed from the reality we seek to elaborate. If there’s one flaw to the book, Ahmad overdoes the theoretical language to the detriment of the book’s sound ethnographic descriptions.

In contrast, later in the first chapter, Ahmad's description of the political, cultural, and economic context of the migrant women is engrossing, and clearly contextualizes the women's everyday situations.

The book is well suited for study in anthropology, gender studies, migration studies, and courses in advanced ethnography, and also provides excellent examples of the practices of fieldwork and writing ethnography. ✂

DOI:10.1017/rms.2018.64

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**MARIEKE BRANDT.** *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (London: Hurst and Company, 2017). Pp. 472 pages. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN 9781849046466.

This timely book hits the shelves as its subject, Yemen, one of the least-covered political crises of the Middle East, spirals further and further into a humanitarian nightmare. In 2004, a former Yemeni parliamentarian named Husayn al-Huthi was murdered on orders from then Yemeni president 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih. This triggered a series of conflicts between the army, Salafis supported by Saudi Arabia, local tribes, and a rising Zaydi group that has come to be known as the Houthis. After the fall of Salih in 2011, the Houthis mustered a range of tribal loyalty, allowing them, with the help of forces still loyal to Salih, to enter San'a' in September 2014 without resistance and eventually depose interim president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The bombing campaign and blockade begun in 2015 by a Saudi-led coalition has caused thousands of deaths, major damage to the infrastructure and economy, an outbreak of cholera, the threat of famine, and the destruction of heritage. With little media coverage of the conflict, Brandt's masterful account now illumines the story of how this disaster has unfolded.

"The aim of this book," writes Brandt, "is to reconstruct the conflict's development by giving full play to its local drivers: the micro- and meso-political, tribal, and personal dynamics that shaped the manner in which those individuals and communities directly involved in the conflict calculated their interests, concerns and ambitions, vis-à-vis each other, the Houthi movement and the old regime (2)." Brandt's book begins with an overview of the geographical, social, and political aspects of the northern regions of Sa'da, Sufyan, and al-Jawf, including the traditional roles of tribes in these areas. Following the lead of other anthropologists working on