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Bringing the Migrant Nurse into Light: An Intersectional Analysis of Resilience in Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the ideological complexities of the profession of nursing as represented in Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*. Kapadia's film, released in 2024, delves into the lives, experiences, trials, and tribulations of three migrant working-women – two nurses and a canteen cook – working at a hospital and trying to survive in the city of Mumbai. By focussing on the trajectories of the two nurses, Prabha and Anu, this paper aims an intersectional analysis of the film's conception of nursing as a profession that continually grapples with hegemonic categories of class, caste, gender, and sexuality often finding itself at the margins of normative ideological frameworks. This analysis entails a brief examination of the historical and ideological background of the profession of nursing in India, as well as its connection to migration. The paper further aims to analyse specific instances of survival, negotiation, resilience, and/ or transgression seen in the film that help unpack the ideological contradictions pertaining to nursing. Finally, the paper attempts to locate the possibilities of contextualising specific acts of transgression, negotiation, and/or resistance in the film to enrich the analysis of resilience. The paper follows a theoretical and analytical methodology. This implies a sustained engagement with theoretical frameworks and concepts pertaining to nursing, intersectionality, gender, transgression, and liminality, which are tested through a close textual analysis of the film, *All We Imagine as Light.*

Keywords*: Intersectionality, Nursing, Transgression, Liminality*

> Then the skin of the halwa breaks open, right in the middle, like a great big yawning mouth. […] I am a part of it now, the halwa a foot above my head, part of the thickening red sweetness in the open mouth of this strange city (Hariharan, 2009, p.84).

Githa Hariharan's short story, "Gajar Halwa", published in 1993, which is about Perumayee, a young migrant worker from Tamil Nadu working as a domestic help in Delhi, ends with Perumayee's fear as well as excitement at the prospect of being sucked into and becoming one with a city that only a few weeks ago seemed strange and alienating to her. The monetary prospects offered by Delhi in comparison to her village that was still economically dependent

on government sanctioned roadwork projects or the monsoons weakens Perumayee's resolve to remain tangential to the city weakened, as she embraces the need to blend in by making friends at the milk-booth and giving in to the (consumerist) desire for self-expression and self-care: "But first I must buy a sweater, a blue one with shiny, beaded flowers, the kind I saw a girl wearing at the milk booth queue" (Hariharan, 2009, p. 83).

Transition to 2024, and Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* reterritorializes the migrant labour to perpetually exist at a tangent to the city of Mumbai such that in the opening montage of the film, the viewers are merely initiated into the voice-overs or conversations of migrant workers, who offer a range of commentaries on the city, but are never made visible on the screen as individuals (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 3: 15 – 00: 4: 51). This tangentiality may be crucial to a post pandemic context that is conscious of the tentativeness of migration of unskilled and semi-skilled labour to cities that supposedly offer better economic prospects. Anuja and Mansi Bhaktwani (2025) state, "India witnessed a large-scale *reverse* [emphasis added] migration where more than one crore migrant workers returned to their home (states) during the lockdown" (Lingering Impact Section, para. 5). Thus, while Hariharan's Perumayee attempts to make a home of the garage-like dark hole in Munirka or the small but warm kitchen of her employer in the decade of the 1980s/ 1990s (Hariharan, 2009), for Kapadia's migrant characters and protagonists in 2024, the prospect of leaving the city is a reality they must witness often. In this context are placed the characters of two Malayali nurses, Prabha and Anu, who share an accommodation, and grapple with the working and living conditions in Mumbai, while being conscious of the uncertainty of their tenure in the city.

This paper delves into the film's exploration of nursing as a profession that has a history of migration, and that intersects with taboos pertaining to gender, class, and caste even in metropolitan spaces such as Mumbai. This entails an analysis of the interplay between conformity and transgression as seen in the actions of nurses Prabha and Anu in the film. Furthermore, the paper unpacks the liminality of nursing as a healthcare profession, and as a profession that is in between the conventional binaries of the private sphere of home and the public sphere of outside. The paper finally delves into the supposed possibility of harnessing the liminality of nursing to locate newer lines of flight by the protagonists of Kapadia's film.

Globalisation's impact on women's work may be a significant starting point as seen in the case of both Hariharan's Perumayee, and Kapadia's Anu and Prabha. Globalisation has undoubtedly

affected labour demands and labour reorganisation supposedly leading to more employment opportunities on the one hand, and influencing gendered division of labour, on the other. Chaudhuri's (2005) discussion on the "feminization of the workforce" (p. xi) in the semi-skilled and labour-intensive industries in the post-1980s globalisation phase owing to supposed "female docility" (p. xi) and compliance in comparison to male workforce aligns with the context of Hariharan's story, where it is Perumayee's mother, who is appointed on the highway construction work in their village (Hariharan, 2009). Kapadia's film corresponds to the formalisation of the nursing profession into "an important segment of the 'care sector'" (Nair and Percot, 2007, p. 2), post globalisation, leading to an increased demand for nurses in different parts of the country and abroad. "Becoming a nurse in India today is in effect preparing to leave one's homeland, if not forever, at least for long periods of time" (Nair and Percot 2009, p. 2). Migration, which is almost a precondition for nurses, brings forth their inevitable confrontation with intersecting categories of gender, class, caste, region, and religion, making it necessary to adopt the intersectional framework of analysis to explore the nature of their transgression, resistance, and negotiation. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) explains about intersectionality, which is "a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things" (para. 3).

Taboo and Transgression

All We Imagine as Light begins by introducing Prabha and Anu as foils to each other. While Prabha's uprightness is evidenced at the beginning of the film as she goads an old lady-patient into taking the prescribed pills by gently complaining to the doctor, Anu comes across as relatively easy-going in her conversations with the patients, almost playful as she swings on her rotating chair at the reception and autonomously hands over a contraceptive to a young mother worried about subsequent pregnancies (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 07: 39 – 00: 12: 50). This dichotomy of traits is seen in each of the characters' sexual choices as well. For instance, while Prabha, a married woman, though supposedly abandoned by her husband, who works in Germany and has severed all contact with her, continues to await reconciliation with him, rejecting romantic advances of a doctor colleague at the hospital, Anu is in a stable romantic and sexual relationship with Shiaz, a boy outside her religious community. On the surface, this

binary seems to emanate from conventional differences of age-group and marital status between Prabha and Anu. However, on closer scrutiny, the dichotomy appears to have its roots in conventions of nursing, and each of the nurse's diverse response to these conventions. According to Nair and Healey's (2006) research on the development of nursing in India, the profession has had an intricate connection with the concept and framework of morality. Nair and Healey (2006) assist in unpacking the classist and casteist roots of morality that the nursing profession has often had to encounter in India:

> The evolution of nursing … [in India] involved a deliberate and concerted effort to distance it from its working-class roots. Beginning with Florence Nightingale's influential and well-publicised reforms, nursing was remade as a respectable occupation, suitable for 'ladies'… that middle-class and elite women followed to participate in public life through philanthropic, charitable and religious projects (p. 4).

Nair and Healey (2006) further state that in the West too there was a conscious attempt to morally cleanse the profession of nursing from its contamination by the supposedly "dissolute, gin-sodden and dirty … [w]orking-class, semi-trained caregivers" (p. 4) who preceded the trained 'lady-nurses' of the Victorian hospitals. The anxiety of moral righteousness evidenced in Prabha may be viewed as an example of this foundational quandary that has defined the development of nursing in the West and in India. Prabha's sexual restraint is made rather telling in the way it is juxtaposed with Anu's sexual autonomy that becomes a source of vexation for an entire group of senior nurses at the hospital as they informally designate Prabha to caution Anu on her supposedly questionable liaison with Shiaz (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 27: 55). Although Prabha's attempt to call Anu out on her flirtatiousness is marked by the harshness of the remark, "If you behave like a slut, people won't respect you" (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 47: 16), Nair and Healey (2006) assist in contextualising the statement in the "virulently persistent discourse associating nurses and prostitutes" (p. 13) based on the professional requirement of nurses to care for male patients, who are obviously not related to them by ties of marriage or kinship. Nair and Healey (2006) explain:

> A lot of stigma arose around the expectation that nurses should care for men […] In the nursing schools of India, teachers instructed their students in the nobility of the profession… Outside, the public image of nurses included the perception that they were morally unsound and liable to be prostitutes (p. 13-14).

Prabha's remark aligns with this collective ideology that has been internalised by an entire community of nurses until, at least, her generation. For Prabha, conforming to a collective ideology of morality inherent in sexual restraint and limited interaction with male colleagues seems to have been strategic to her survival and resilience in a judgemental workplace. For example, when she walks with Dr. Manoj on a particular evening to the local station and maintains professional camaraderie by engaging in small talk pertaining to language barriers in Mumbai, she instantly becomes conscious of the public gaze, when Dr. Manoj wishes to hand over a diary of his poems to her, clumsily digging into his trouser pocket underneath the raincoat. The awkwardness gets amplified by the arrival of the nurses from the subsequent shift, who greet Prabha on their way to the hospital. She instinctively steps back creating more physical distance between her and Dr. Manoj, making the latter aware, as well, of her discomfort emanating from an unwritten, yet internalised discourse on morality (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 16: 38 – 00: 18: 52).

It is significant to explore Anu's resistance against the legacy of morality internalised by the generation of nurses older than her. Her agency, however, is largely sustained due to Prabha's hesitant but continued tolerance of her supposedly transgressive actions. Prabha takes Anu under her wings as a mentor, an older sister, and Anu often attempts to vie for Prabha's approval. Nair and Percot (2007) delve into the concept of ethnic solidarity in their research on the internal migration of nurses from Kerala to cities such as Delhi, and Mumbai, and their eventual movement abroad. They explain the importance of informal network of friends made during nursing education that assists nurses in finding and sustaining career opportunities in different cities:

> There are also illustrations of situations when Keralite nurses who did not know each other helped in getting jobs on the basis of professional and ethnic-linguistic solidarity. … one sees older nurses helping the young nurse looking for a job by introducing her to the superiors of the hospital, giving a guarantee for the professional abilities of the new girl (Nair and Percot, 2007, p. 11).

Thus, Prabha's support to Anu in sharing accommodation with her, covering her rent at times, and being her informal mentor and guardian at the workplace provides Anu the means to sustain her routine transgressions pertaining to self-expression, and her relationship with Shiaz. Early in the film, Anu, while talking to her mother on the phone, notes that her hair is shorter now.

She dismisses her mother's advice to maintain the traditionally longer length by applying oil on her hair, and supports her own decision to look desirable: "I like it short. It's the new style" (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 15:15). Furthermore, Anu too, such as Hariharan's Perumayee, partakes of the socio-economic independence and freedom of choice regarding her lifestyle in Mumbai, "a social space away from the immediate concerns of parental control, and chaperoning by neighbours and relatives" (Nair and Percot, 2007, p. 15). For instance, the outings that Anu goes on with Shiaz, in the late-evenings after work, are in busy market-places, and restaurants indicating the consumerist base of the Mumbai night-life (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 30: 09); however, for Anu and Shiaz this night-life provides a spatial avenue for meeting and spending time together after work, something that would not be feasible in their native towns or villages. These outings align with Illoz's (1997) analysis of romantic love as utopian and transgressive: "Romantic love has been and continues to be the cornerstone of a powerful utopian vision because it reenacts symbolically rituals of opposition to the social order through inversion of hierarchies and affirms the supremacy of the individual" (p.10). Shiaz, for instance, notes about the endless possibilities of romantic excursions and moments of leisure in Mumbai, "In my village, [evening] was the time to stop playing football and go home. But here, it feels like the day has just begun" (Kapadia, 2024 00:40:25). Anu responds to Shiaz's impressions on Mumbai's nightlife by reminiscing her original ambition of becoming an airhostess and goes on to propose a fantastic romantic encounter of theirs on a flight (Kapadia, 2024 00:41:09). According to Illouz's analysis, while these romantic moments of transgression are "rituals [that] are ultimately based in the market" (Illouz, 1997, p.10), one may argue that Anu and Shiaz actively claim the consumerist framework of Mumbai to materially situate in its sites the expression of their sexual and romantic desires. The sexual autonomy exercised by Anu in Mumbai may be read as active resistance against both the filial/ community norms requiring her to have an arranged marriage with a groom from the same religious community, and the nursing profession morally requiring her to repress her sexuality.

Furthermore, Anu's comfort with her own body and sexuality renders her aware of the corporeal nature of her profession that inevitably brings her and the other nurses in close physical proximity with the male and female body. While Prabha articulates the acceptance of this professional requirement in formal terms, such as her castigation of young nurses at being repulsed by the smell of the placenta during a training on its removal and disposal (Kapadia, 2024: 00: 28: 57), Anu foregrounds the potential complexity of such bodily proximity that may

advertently or inadvertently lead to consequences of affective or sexual nature, which cannot always be denied or repressed, and which need not necessarily be perceived in a moralistic framework. For example, Anu narrates an incident pertaining to a young nurse being horrified by an erect penis while giving sponge bath to an elderly male patient eventually leading to the patient being reprimanded by Prabha (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 30: 37). Moralistically, the incident aligns with Nair and Healey's observations on the stigma associated with the nursing profession requiring female nurses to be caregivers for male patients, something that Shiaz's innocuous but anxious question pertaining to Anu having been exposed to male genitalia foregrounds (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 32: 22). However, Anu's playful, or rather in-jest narration of the incident indicates her mature acceptance of the corporeal basis of the nursing profession as something that need not be deemed shameful.

Anu and Prabha, thus, assist in foregrounding the caste-specific stigmas pertaining to nursing, as Nair and Healey (2006) explain:

> The requirement for nurses to come into regular contact with stigmatising bodily fluids was regarded as a major factor in the low level of social status accorded to Indian nurses. Prior to the establishment of western hospitals, the only local female caregiver working for payment was the *dai* or indigenous midwife, who in most parts of India was considered untouchable (p. 12).

Anu and Prabha, in their own ways, as discussed above, attempt to unpack and critique the supposedly privileged (classist and casteist) upbringing of younger nurses that renders them horrified at the sight of a naked/ diseased body, and bodily fluids.

Liminality and Lines of Flight

It is significant to explore the negotiation and resistance of Prabha and Anu in the framework of liminality because an integral basis of their disempowerment is the liminality of the nursing profession. Despite requiring specific educational qualifications and experience, nursing is rendered liminal in terms of its status due to its working-class roots, and stigmas of caste and gender as discussed in the earlier section. Nair (2020) contends, "Upward educational mobility, and even economic mobility, alone does not assure nurses of the socially valuable position they want" (The Problem and the Perspectives subsection, para. 4). Furthermore, nursing is viewed as a liability in the healthcare industry as well because, as Nair (2020) explains, "nurses are accounted as part of the hospital's 'cost', whereas doctors and other professionals are seen as

the opposite. Thus, doctors add to the reputation of the hospitals, whereas nurses' dedication and professionalism seem to have no consequences for the hospitals' standing" (Migration section, para. 10).

In *All We Imagine as Light*, the long working-hours compared to the limited remuneration is subtly made evident, as Prabha often leaves as late as the doctors, and Anu lives with Prabha as a way to share the rent. Additionally, as Anu spends a section of her salary on moments of recreation with Shiaz, she is often forced to request Prabha to cover her part of the rent indicating the meagre salary that barely seems to cover their basic living expense in Mumbai. While the nurses of the hospital seem to have an informal collective in the film, indicated by their group outings for movies, and a strong grapevine of moral scrutiny that Anu becomes the victim of, the collective does not seem to have a political affiliation with a union, in keeping with Maitreyee Chaudhuri's (2005) analysis on the increased demand for a female workforce in labour intensive jobs purely owing to their docility: "women make the most flexible robots" (p. xi). Nair and Healey (2007) further elaborate on the ironic lack of politicisation among nurses despite the strong ethnic, linguistic or regional solidarity:

> Even though they come from a state which is known for high levels of political participation among the people and trade unionism, which has been illustrated vividly in the literature on Kerala … nurses come out with role strain explanations regarding their reluctance for organisational activities" (p. 13).

In Kapadia's film too, there is no political collective of the workers in the hospital that can aid Parvati, who works in the hospital canteen, and who loses her house due to the mill workers' resettlement conflict in Mumbai.

Furthermore, as a profession connected to caregiving, nursing is perpetually in between the binaries of home (private sphere) and outside (public sphere) – its nature of work, which is providing care, remains feminine in accordance with the conventionally gendered division of labour, yet it requires giving care to patients, both male and female, who are not family-members, an act deemed transgressive and stigmatised for women in upper-caste middle-class communities. Nair and Healey (2007) assert:

> [C]aste ideals and ritual purity that existed in Indian society were predominant in everyday lives, and seemed to have affected the status of nursing quite negatively. The

> idea that 'respectable' Indian women would never be persuaded to enter nursing due to the ritually polluting nature of nursing work was often expressed… (p. 12).

Mohanty (2003) defines this ideology of domestication or seclusion of upper-caste-middle class women in heterosexual terms "drawing … on masculine and feminine notions of protectionism and property" (p. 150), and "based on the normative definition of women as wives, sisters, and mothers – always in relation to conjugal marriage and the 'family'" (p. 150).

In Kapadia's film, despite having severed all contacts with Prabha for an entire year, her husband unexpectedly sends her a rice-cooker from Germany, one day, almost as a reminder of her duties in the domestic sphere (Kapadia, 2024: 00:23: 44). The moment marks an interruption into the chosen alternate family-life that Prabha has with Anu, a life that has provided her with emotional nourishment and companionship evidenced in the many trivial and deep conversations that Prabha and Anu have, for instance, tending to a stray cat (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 21:17) or the pressures of marriage in their community (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 50: 39). The rice-cooker reduces Prabha from a self-sufficient nurse-sister to a liminal wife-in-waiting, who is supposed to fulfil wifely duties but has no access to the affective and sexual bond that she deserves in a heterosexual marriage, poignantly exhibited in the instance where Prabha, while mopping the rainwater on an evening sublimates her affective and sexual desire into tenderly embracing the rice-cooker while squatting on the ground (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 35: 20). Kapadia in an interview for TIFF Originals (2024), unpacks the classist undertones of this explicitly patriarchal action of the husband's:

> You have a rice cooker when things are little like, you know, better financially. And then the woman is, you know, has a big family she has to feed. So, the rice cooker gets even better. So, she can be a better mother, and a better wife… And then the commercial aspect of it completely feeds into that. […] not that you could go to work now, but you will take better care of your family (0:45).

The moment in the film, thus, reprises Prabha's sense of liminality between being an abandoned yet dutybound wife and a self-sufficient nurse-sister.

For Anu the binary of home and outside is rooted in the migration from her village in Kerala (home) to the city of Mumbai (outside), which, while it has opened new avenues of independence for her, has led to her displacement from the natal family, an integral source of security for her. According to Nair and Healey (2007), "Family plays an important role, directly

and indirectly, in every stage of migration and this aspect is discussed from their first migration to schools of nursing to migration to western countries" (p. 2). The film foregrounds Anu's sense of liminality as she is torn between filial love on the one hand, and, on the other, the affective bond with Shiaz, a relationship that, she knows, her family would not approve of. Her in-betweenness is intensified in the instance, when she is stranded on a local station in Mumbai on a day when she was supposed to meet Shiaz, disguising herself in a burqa, a plan that did not materialise due to heavy rain. Her distressed call to her mother, as she takes off the burqa and waits on the platform owing to an indefinite delay in the local train services, is reflective of the filial connect that she cannot entirely forsake (Kapadia, 2024, 00: 57: 36- 00: 58: 08).

It is, however, this liminality that also provides scope for resistance to both Anu and Prabha. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome may be employed to analyse a specific act of resistance initiated by Prabha. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain rhizome in terms of a divergent evolution of two interacting but heterogenous elements, which involves "neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying" (p. 10). One such line of flight, or the "many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that structure" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 11) an act of resistance, may be seen towards the end of the film when Prabha, as a nurse, applies the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to revive a man who had almost drowned in the sea in Parvati's village. The act of saving the man, while applauded by the crowd, renders Prabha's sense of in-betweenness heightened as she is assumed to be the man's wife, while he is made to rest in one of the houses (Kapadia, 2024, 1: 32: 58 - 1: 35: 22). Initially attempting to clear the air, Prabha eventually harnesses this liminality of nurse/wife into a line of flight, a multiplicity by forming a rhizome with the male patient who is deterritorialized in an imaginary role paly as Prabha's husband. In the tender, surreal moment of the imaginary role-play Prabha articulates her desires, and grievances to the husband, as she imaginatively reconstructs her husband's touch, and physical proximity (Kapadia, 2024, 1: 41: 43- 1: 44: 38). This role-play need not be perceived in terms of an imitation, but, rather, "an increase in valence, a veritable becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 10), which culminates into a firmer reterritorialization of Prabha as nurse as she severs all ties with her husband by the end of her imaginary conversation with him, once again reterritorializing him as the patient (Kapadia, 2024, 1: 45: 13). Choosing

the alternate family that she has with Anu over her marital family, Prabha resists the conventional role of the abandoned wife in-waiting.

For Anu, the line of flight is sought spatially, as she accompanies Prabha and Parvati to the latter's village to help Parvati resettle. While in the village, which may be seen as a liminal space between Mumbai and her natal home, Anu, who has asked Shiaz to follow her, strives for Prabha's approval of her relationship with Shiaz against the arranged marriage being planned by her parents. She looks up to Prabha as an elder sister and hopes for Prabha to understand her predicament better than her parents after having borne the negative repercussions of an arranged marriage herself (Kapadia, 2024, 1: 15: 31). The ethnic solidarity, and sisterly love (despite occasional conflicts) that she shares with Prabha propel her too to rely on this alternate family over her natal home. Nair and Percot (2006) contend about migrant nurses, "Nurses, thus, though physically far away from Kerala, remain part of a 'greater' Kerala which extends well beyond the geographical state" (p. 12). This observation is further materialised in the film in the form of graffiti scribbled by Shiaz in Malayalam for Anu in a cave that they visit in the village: "Our love is like the endless sea" (Kapadia, 2024, 01: 29: 03), a gesture that seals the relationship for Anu, and settles all uncertainties in her mind. The graffiti in Malayalam not only emphasises the ethnic solidarity she shares with Shiaz despite the difference in religion, but also unpacks the transgressive quality of their relationship that aims to reterritorialize their Malayalam identity, "their ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness" (Nair and Percot, 2006, p. 12), in a space, and family outside the geographical borders of Kerala.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the specific foregrounding of nursing in Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, and Kapadia's attempt to problematise varied ideological frameworks pertaining to class, caste, and gender that migrant nurses must grapple with. Through a comparative analysis between the approaches of Prabha and Anu to the moralistic aspects of the nursing profession, the paper has delved into instances of conformity, resilience, transgression, and resistance, as seen in the film. The paper has further unpacked the liminality of the nursing profession, and the strategic use of this liminality by Prabha and Anu to locate diverse possibilities of becoming.

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