

When Women Come First

Gender and Class in
Transnational Migration

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Foreword

Immigration is the great American drama, assimilation and upward mobility its great dream. But you won't find these dreams in Sheba George's moving tale of emigration from Kerala, India, to the United States. Hers is a narrative of continuing connection back to communities of origin — visitations on the occasion of birth, marriage, or death; the exchange of kith and kin (parents, children, and spouses); the flow of material aid and gifts; visual memories in photographs and homemade videos; and frequent phone calls and, increasingly, electronic mail, not to mention the old-fashioned letter. (Kerala, after all, has the highest literacy rate in India.) Sheba George focuses on the families, divided and unified in the process of transplantation, and how they create a Kerala of their own in Central City that is still tightly bound to the Kerala of India. Her ethnographic eye dwells on the different spheres of life in the United States — work, home, and community — on their interrelations and their internal composition, rather than on their degree of absorption into the wider United States.

To conduct ethnographic research is to continually revisit the people one is studying. But as Sheba George does so, she also nostalgically revisits her own childhood. When Sheba was ten, her mother departed for the United States to ply her nursing skills, leaving Sheba and her two younger brothers in the gentle care of their father. Two years later they would be reunited with their mother in a new land. *When Women Come First* uncovers the sociological meaning of this journey.

Sheba spent a year and a half in Central City interviewing, observing, and participating in the community created by an unusual migration

stream, one originated by nurses from Kerala. What happens, Sheba George asks, when women come first and the men follow later, when women are the main breadwinners and men are secondary earners? How resilient is the traditional hierarchy in the family in the face of challenges created by female-led immigration? The answer is by no means singular, depending as it does on the age and number of children, the shift work of the nurses, and the presence of supportive kin from or in Kerala. Women are as likely to voluntarily compensate for their men's loss of esteem by ceding them authority in matters of finance, for example, as they are to flaunt their command of the purse strings. And men are as likely to accept a redivision of domestic labor and child care as they are to insist on conventional patterns. More often than not, more egalitarian households result.

If relations are renegotiated in the family, male leadership is reasserted in the community, in the Indian Orthodox Syrian Christian Church, which brings Keralites together from far and wide. The men organize food and festivities, and the women are passive onlookers, prodded into subordination by other members of the congregation. The church is perhaps sowing the seeds of its own demise, however, given how out of touch it is with the gender expectations of the next generation, now being brought up in American schools. Thus, Father John, the priest at St. George's, knew what he was doing in welcoming the sociologist into his parish. He sought to broaden the vision of the church elders by involving Sheba in Sunday school teaching and in caroling, the latter being an activity monopolized by men. Sheba's compact with the priest led to a transgressive ethnography that, for all the discomfort it brought, served her well by revealing the strongly held norms that bound the older parishioners together.

Even as they try to create a space of domination and leadership, "nurse-husbands," as they are pejoratively called, are stigmatized by the middle-class men who came to the United States under their own steam, with their own social and cultural capital. The "nurse-husbands," these middle-class men scoff, are living off the earnings of "dirty nurses." Tragically, the defense of their dignity through the assertion of traditional norms within the church is thus turned against the husbands of nurses, who are humbled and hobbled by the stigma against nursing. In India, nursing is "polluted" work because it involves the touching of random bodies, a practice traditionally shunned by Hindus. It is more easily taken up by Christians, who have effectively taken advantage of the global demand for their profession, only to experience, in turn, the resentment aimed at the female parvenu.

The community of Keralites in Central City is tightly bound, materially and spiritually, to the world of Kerala. To understand the former required returning to the latter and examining the changing world of India and its floating stigma. Sheba George retraced the path of migration, but in reverse. She sought out the kin of her informants in Central City, as well as the community's connections to the Syrian Christian Church, which is the most powerful source of norms at play in the immigrant community. But here she confronted the limits of multisited global ethnography, because the connections led her all over Kerala — to no single community, and to no single set of norms. She found Kerala to be much more diverse than the sheltered, reconstituted community of Central City that it sustained. So, she asks finally, can the Keralite community in Central City, and those all over the United States, sustain themselves from one generation to the next despite their inner tensions and contradictions, despite the temptation of assimilation? Are we really living in a new era of globalization wherein diasporas can be sustained from one generation to the next? And how will American society greet the children of these immigrants? Will it be possible for a transnational Keralite community to be part of the plural world of the United States?

We live in a world that has loosened the bonds of patriarchy. Women now are as likely as men to migrate. We must adjust our theories accordingly. When women take off from Kerala or the Philippines, from Russia or Guatemala, do they come as single workers who will later be reunited with their country of origin, or do they come as members of families to settle in their country of adoption? In the one case, we find the creation of the transnational family, and in the other we find the migration of families or even whole communities. Sheba George casts light in both directions, demonstrating the significance of women coming first but never losing sight of the men they left behind, or the men who then follow.

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