

Book Review

Willen, Sarah S. *Fighting for Dignity: Migrant Lives at Israel's Margins*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, 302 pages.

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Scholars of migration and human rights in the Middle East will appreciate *Fighting for Dignity*, which offers a compassionate ethnographic engagement with the global migrant communities in Tel Aviv—Nigerians, Ghanaians, Filipinos, Colombians, and Ukrainians—in homes, churches, medical offices, hospitals, advocacy organisations, and other kinds of public spaces. These become public spaces due to the deliberate apathy of the Israeli government towards migrant populations, as these spaces become the inhabitable spaces of welcome for these communities.

Sarah S. Willen undertakes the study of dignity, indignity, and indignation in the wake of Israel's aggressive mass deportation campaign (*gerúsh*), launched in the late summer of 2002, aimed at expelling global migrants whom the state of Israel sees as illegal by virtue of overstaying without a legal visa extension. The campaign was promoted as the solution to Israel's growing unemployment, which has rendered the Jews of Israel jobless in the presence of migrant job seekers. However, Willen offers a different, and important, argument when it comes to the active implementation of the campaign, a project meant to preserve Israel as a Jewish state by forcing non-Jewish migrants out of the country. Nonetheless, the methods used to push the targeted community out of Israel were a catalogue of violation.

The book has four major themes: Imogen Tyler's social abjection, Hannah Arendt's "natality," the development of socio-political distinctions in the backdrop of critical medical anthropology, and the changing landscape of Israel's migrant activism and advocacy. Anthropology, as a discipline, recognizes dignity as a normative term and consequently, sociocultural anthropologists, in their decision to refrain from using "blanket assertions of universal human

features or normative human values,” (94) from the perspective of Israel’s treatment towards its migrant community begs not only to enhance our comprehension of the lived experiences of the migrant communities, but also to realise the causes and consequences of methodologically practicing abjection in the social, political, and economic realms.

When speaking about natality, Hannah Arendt underlines the capacities of individuals to change the world and eventually initiate something new in the changed world. Willen projects Arendt’s ideology in her study of the lives of the Israeli migrant communities as their wish to live and flourish, even when heaped with indignities. Rather than depending on a specific idea about dignity, the book demands concentration on the variety of desires experienced by the migrant community—the attainment of which is the basis of peoples’ fundamental right to live as “dignified” human beings.

The right of the global migrants in Israel to live a dignified life is mobilized by the community of Israeli activists and advocates through various desperate idioms formed as a result of moulding their ideologies of social service around demands of humanitarianism, of upholding the Jewish values of treating asylum seekers in the blessed land as one’s own, working by the guidelines of human rights, and their commitment to migrant advocacy. Though different advocacy groups espoused discreet approaches in their work, they were driven by two common ideas: expressing indignation at the government’s behaviour towards the migrants, their denial to be complicit in the discriminatory act of excluding the migrant communities from Israel’s political and moral fabric by exercising violence.

Fighting for Dignity was born of two decades of ethnographic commitment to bring to the fore the sufferings of the invisible communities residing at Israel’s margins. The book is not a simple intervention that seeks to comment on Israeli society’s state-commoner relationship—it has a larger aim of contextualizing dignity in the context of global migration. *Fighting for Dignity* is a study in existential anthropology, an essential read for anyone aiming to theorize the lived experiences of migrant communities anywhere in the world.

References

- Tyler, Imogen. 2013. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1973. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.