Chapter 11
Reconceptualising Migration in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on the concept of migration in South Africa in the migrant labour system, which is ill-defined and poorly understood. Historically, the understanding of this concept has been framed within the country’s colonial past, which was rooted in a racial and gender segregated system. The representation of this concept is colonial and Eurocentric. This chapter utilises a decolonial lens to provide a critical discussion of migration and the meanings attached to this concept. Migration is diverse; however, its representations failed to capture its complexities. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to reconceptualise the distorted and stereotypical understanding of migration in South Africa. A dynamic and fluid approach to understanding migration is recommended, one that transcends race, class, and territorial divides.

INTRODUCTION

Migration has caused the world so much of intertwined complexities that it should be well understood – especially considering the attempts by various stakeholders and interested parties to resolve complexities associated with migration. In fact, migration has been so much popular considering the wars in Palestine, Philippines, North Africa, West Africa, East Africa, some parts of the Asia in Bangladesh and

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so forth. It also has been popular in the United States so much that among the very first things the Donal Trump administration did coming into power was to target migrants. In fact, Whitaker (2017) is of the view that the Trump administration victimized migrants. The famous events of the Rohingya people – “an ethnic Sufi-Sunni Muslim minority that lives in Rakhine (formerly Arakan) State of Myanmar” (Mohajan, 2018) also known as Burma prior to 1989 over what could be called ethno-religious tensions and factionalisms (Dussich, 2018), which have resulted in approximately 1.1 million Rohingya people scattered in some parts of Bangladesh for example (Dussich, 2018; Mohajan, 2018) has traumatized the world enough that the complexities and impact of migration on people can’t be left without empirical understanding. In Uganda for example, as far as the pacification of this country by Britain in 1894, the ethnic minority of the Muslim Nubians speaking Ki-Nubi who had settled in Uganda from the Sudan after the draconian Western practice of slave trade in some parts of colonial Africa seem to have suffered similar discrimination, victimization and persecutions by indigenous Ugandans (Mahajubu et al., 2019). Mahajubu et al. (2019) reported that “the Nubians were part of the slave army employed by the Arabs for slave raiding activities” The daily catastrophic genocides resulting from migration of people in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Greece, Italy and some countries such as Libya, Egypt and Morocco in North Africa for instance have been attracting global attention over the years. The horrible Human Rights violations on the Rohingya people have seen the intervention of Pope Francis 2nd who had tried to speak Humanitarian sense with leaders such as Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing to note the violations of the Rohingya in Myanmar (Dussich, 2018). It is evident that migration, and its consequences is a global phenomenon.

Whereas migration has of late become a global phenomenon with huge social and economic consequences, this chapter reflects on the concept of migration in South Africa. Migration has not received much empirical research in Africa despite it being very popular in other parts of the world after making significant inroads into academic research (Lipton, 1980). In Africa, migration has been studied mostly from the context of movement of people from the rural areas to urban as a result of migrants wanting to access better livelihoods – harvest and employment and on some occasions social reasons such as marriages (Lipton, 1980). Whereas Lipton (1980) could have credibility with regard to migration for livelihood access in some parts of Africa, the same could not be said of migration on marriages for example. The issue of marriages in migration would always have different format and context in Africa with Western patterns on migration and marriages. It is not the intention of this chapter to delve much into this debate – not for this chapter at least. This chapter defines how migration is conceptualized and understood by most people the world over – specifically in (South) Africa. Like with many other concepts popular in the developmental disciplines, different people conceptualize, define and understand
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