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Dubai: Gilded Cage by Syed Ali

Yale, £14.99 £13.49; 228pp

Dubai's meteoric rise from obscure pearl-trading port to global tourism and business hub studded with glittering towers and man-made palm islands continues to fascinate and appal in equal measure. The emergence on the world stage of this small emirate in the Gulf has spawned a host of books, all looking behind the meticulous branding that **Dubai** has used to attract business people and tourists from across the globe.

Dubai: Gilded Cage is another that scratches the glossy surface of fantastical construction projects and conspicuous consumption to examine the paradoxes and contradictions of **Dubai** society.

Syed Ali is a sociologist and assistant lecturer at Long Island University, in New York, whose interest lies in the people of **Dubai**, "a unique brand of global city: a city of transients". Expatriates, most of them living on three-year renewable visas, make up 90 per cent of the population.

Ali picks briskly through the layers of **Dubai** society, meeting migrant workers of all stripes to study the Faustian pact that they strike by moving to **Dubai**, trading away their political rights for a taste of the good life. Young professionals from the West are offered a quality of life and professional advancement that they might struggle to find at home. In return, the visa system is a simple and effective mechanism of government control.

Working around them is the enormous labouring class that is still building the city's skyscrapers, staffing its restaurants and cleaning its streets. Most are brought from the Indian sub-continent and enter into modern-day slavery, tithed to their employers and subject to serious exploitation. Living conditions for many remain appalling.

Regardless of this, as Ali points out, **Dubai** still offers even the most poorly paid construction workers a salary far in excess of what they might earn in their own countries. And so they keep coming, many aware of the conditions that await, so as to remit their income back home.

The human cost of building Brand **Dubai** has been extensively picked over in the media. However, Ali examines the effect that this "permanent impermanence" has in preventing the population from putting down roots in the city and interacting with each other. Class groups remain distinct and civil institutions rare, achieving the Government's aim of suppressing dissent. Instead, **Dubai's** expatriates are encouraged to work and spend until the time comes to leave. Ali makes little effort to give a sense of the city on the ground - his interest remains with the people he meets and their sense of place in **Dubai** society.

The question of how sustainable this model of a transient workforce is for the city in the long term is sidestepped. Where **Gilded Cage** is particularly strong, however, is in putting the perspective of Emirati citizens, who make up a mere 10 per cent of the population, rarely coming into social contact with expatriates.

The timing of the book's publication is unfortunate since recent events have shone new light on the flaws at the heart of **Dubai's** economy. In November the stateowned **Dubai** World group admitted that it was unable to repay billions of dollars of outstanding debts. The city teetered on the brink of bankruptcy before its oil-rich neighbour Abu Dhabi stepped in.

Ali charts **Dubai's** decline as the global recession took hold early last year, with the current crisis severely tarnishing the city's brand and exposing a dependence on its neighbour for support. As Abu Dhabi flexes its financial muscle and new work opportunities appear in the capital of the United Arab Emirates, **Dubai** may face a new task to prevent its transient workforce from drifting up the road.

Hugh Tomlinson is Gulf correspondent for The Times

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