

Cosmopolitanism Without Citizenship? A Critical Sociological Analysis of Diaspora, Migration, and Social Inequality in the UAE

SHAMSHEER ALAM

M.Phil and Ph.D.

West Asian Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

The United Arab Emirates has emerged as one of the most globally connected and migration-dependent societies in the contemporary world. Characterized by rapid urbanization, transnational labor mobility, and demographic transformation, the UAE projects itself as a model of cosmopolitan coexistence, multicultural tolerance, and global modernity. However, beneath this celebrated cosmopolitan image lies a highly stratified migration regime structured around temporary labor, restricted citizenship, and differentiated forms of belonging. This article critically examines the sociological contradictions embedded within the UAE's model of state-managed cosmopolitanism. Drawing upon theories of governmentality, transnationalism, migration sociology, and critical discourse analysis, the paper argues that cosmopolitanism in the UAE functions not as an egalitarian social condition but as a politically regulated and economically instrumentalized order sustained through migrant labor and controlled multiculturalism. The study analyzes how official narratives of tolerance, diversity, and global connectivity coexist with structural inequalities rooted in nationality, class, race, and legal status. Rather than conceptualizing diaspora communities merely as contributors to economic development or cultural diversity, the article positions them within regimes of "conditional belonging" and "permanent temporariness." The paper further argues that the UAE represents an emerging model of neoliberal cosmopolitanism in which migrants are simultaneously indispensable, visible, and politically excluded. By interrogating the tension between cosmopolitan branding and citizenship exclusion, the study contributes to broader debates in migration sociology, Gulf studies, citizenship studies, and critical globalization scholarship.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Migration, Diaspora, Citizenship, Inequality, Transnationalism, UAE, Gulf sociology, Migration governance, Multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has fundamentally transformed the social, cultural, and political organization of contemporary societies (Bauman, 1998). Intensified transnational mobility, global labor migration, and urban interconnectedness have reshaped the relationship between nation-states, citizenship, and identity (Castells, 2010). Within this broader global context, the United Arab Emirates represents one of the most significant examples of migration-driven social transformation (Kanna, 2011). Migrants constitute nearly ninety per cent of the UAE's population, making it one of the most demographically

unique societies in the world. Cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi have emerged as iconic global urban centers associated with multiculturalism, luxury modernity, economic globalization, and cosmopolitan lifestyles (Sassen, 2001).

Official discourse in the UAE consistently presents the country as a model of tolerance, coexistence, and global openness (Vora, 2013). Through tourism campaigns, urban branding, policy narratives, and international diplomacy, the UAE projects itself as a cosmopolitan hub where multiple cultures coexist harmoniously (Kanna, 2011). Institutions such as the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence further reinforce

the symbolic image of diversity and peaceful multiculturalism. Major international events, including Expo 2020 Dubai, have amplified this narrative by positioning the UAE as a global crossroads connecting civilizations, economies, and cultures.

However, beneath these narratives of cosmopolitan inclusion lies a deeply unequal social structure organized around migration governance, labor stratification, and citizenship exclusion. Despite their central role in sustaining the UAE's economy and urban modernity, migrants remain structurally temporary and politically marginalized (Gardner, 2010). Long-term residence rarely translates into citizenship, and social belonging remains conditional upon legal, economic, and administrative arrangements. Consequently, the coexistence of multicultural openness and exclusionary citizenship raises important sociological questions concerning migration, belonging, and inequality in contemporary global societies.

Moving beyond celebratory accounts of multiculturalism and globalization, the paper examines how cosmopolitanism itself is politically constructed, economically instrumentalized, and socially stratified. Drawing upon critical sociology, migration studies, and discourse analysis, the study argues that cosmopolitanism in the UAE functions as a form of state-managed diversity in which migrants are economically indispensable and culturally visible while remaining politically excluded and socially differentiated.

Theoretical Framework: Cosmopolitanism, Governmentality, and Migration

Cosmopolitanism has historically been associated with ideals of universalism, openness, and global citizenship (Beck, 2006). Classical understandings of cosmopolitanism imagined individuals transcending narrow national identities and participating within broader human communities. In the context of globalization, cosmopolitanism has increasingly been linked to multicultural urbanism, transnational mobility, and global interconnectedness (Appadurai, 1996).

However, contemporary sociological scholarship has questioned the assumption that cosmopolitanism necessarily produces equality or democratic inclusion. Scholars have argued that globalization generates differentiated forms of mobility in which access to movement, rights, and belonging is unevenly distributed across social groups (Bauman, 1998). Mobility itself becomes stratified according to class, race, nationality,

and legal status. Consequently, cosmopolitanism often masks underlying structures of inequality and exclusion (Harvey, 2005).

The UAE provides an important site through which to examine these contradictions. While the country projects itself as a cosmopolitan society characterized by openness and diversity, social incorporation remains highly unequal (Vora, 2013). Migrants participate extensively in the economic and cultural life of the country but remain excluded from full political membership (Longya, 2005). Cosmopolitanism therefore functions within a framework of differentiated belonging rather than universal inclusion.

This article draws upon the concept of governmentality developed by Michel Foucault to analyze how migration and diversity are regulated within the UAE. Governmentality refers to the ways states manage populations through administrative systems, legal structures, surveillance mechanisms, and forms of social regulation (Foucault, 1991). In the UAE context, migration governance operates through residency permits, labor regulations, visa dependency, and citizenship restrictions that collectively organize social life and regulate belonging (Gardner, 2010).

Producing the Cosmopolitan UAE

The cosmopolitan image of the UAE is not merely a spontaneous outcome of globalization but a carefully constructed political and economic project (Kanna, 2011). Urban branding, tourism campaigns, mega-events, and policy discourse collectively produce representations of the UAE as a tolerant and globally connected society. Dubai, in particular, has been marketed as a city of luxury modernity, innovation, and multicultural coexistence (Ali, 2010).

This cosmopolitan branding serves multiple functions. Economically, it attracts global investment, tourism, and skilled labor. Politically, it enhances the UAE's international legitimacy and soft power (Nye, 2004). Socially, it reinforces narratives of national progress, stability, and global relevance. Diversity becomes central to the country's global identity and developmental vision.

Yet this cosmopolitanism is highly selective and strategically managed. Diversity is encouraged insofar as it contributes to economic growth and urban competitiveness, but political incorporation remains tightly controlled. Migrants are integrated into the labor market

and urban economy while remaining outside the national political community. Consequently, cosmopolitanism functions less as a democratic social condition and more as a state-regulated model of multicultural governance.

Critical discourse analysis is useful for understanding how official narratives normalize this arrangement (Fairclough, 1995). The discourse of “tolerance,” “coexistence,” and “harmony” obscures the structural inequalities embedded within the migration system. Multiculturalism is represented as evidence of openness and progress while labor hierarchies, legal precarity, and citizenship exclusion remain largely invisible within official representations.

The UAE’s cosmopolitan discourse therefore performs ideological functions. It legitimizes existing social arrangements by presenting diversity as harmonious and mutually beneficial while depoliticizing questions of inequality, labor rights, and citizenship (Harvey, 2005). Through this process, cosmopolitanism becomes integrated into broader projects of neoliberal governance and global city branding.

Migration Governance and Permanent Temporariness

The UAE’s migration system is characterized by the institutionalization of temporariness (Gardner, 2010). Migrants are generally incorporated into society through temporary residency permits and employment-based visa systems. Although many migrants spend decades living and working in the country, legal permanence remains highly restricted (Longya, 2005).

This condition may be conceptualized as “permanent temporariness”. Migrants become socially and economically embedded within the UAE while remaining legally temporary and politically excluded. They may establish families, careers, social networks, and emotional attachments to the country, yet their future remains uncertain and conditional.

Temporary migration functions not simply as an economic arrangement but as a political technology of governance (Foucault, 1991). By maintaining migrants within legally temporary categories, the state preserves demographic control and minimizes pressures for political incorporation and citizenship expansion (Vora, 2013). Temporariness therefore becomes central to the organization of social order itself.

Importantly, temporariness is experienced unevenly across different migrant populations. Western expatriates

often enjoy privileged lifestyles, economic mobility, and symbolic prestige, whereas South Asian labor migrants and domestic workers frequently encounter precarious working conditions, restricted mobility, and social marginalization. Migration governance thus produces differentiated forms of belonging shaped by nationality, race, and class.

This stratification reveals the limitations of celebratory narratives of multicultural coexistence. Although migrants collectively sustain the UAE’s economy and urban infrastructure, they do not occupy equal social positions. Cosmopolitanism in the UAE is therefore deeply hierarchical and structured through unequal relations of power.

Stratified Cosmopolitanism and Social Inequality

The UAE’s social structure is organized through complex hierarchies of labor, mobility, and social status (Ali, 2010). Different migrant groups occupy distinct positions within the economic order and urban landscape. Western professionals are frequently associated with expertise, managerial authority, and elite cosmopolitan lifestyles, whereas South Asian workers are concentrated within construction, domestic labor, and service sectors (Gardner, 2010).

These hierarchies reflect broader global inequalities shaped by colonial histories, racialized labor systems, and neoliberal capitalism. Migrants enter the UAE within pre-existing structures of differential valuation in which certain forms of labor and mobility are privileged over others. Consequently, cosmopolitanism itself becomes stratified.

The visibility of diversity within urban spaces often conceals these inequalities. Shopping malls, luxury districts, tourism campaigns, and international schools project an image of seamless multicultural integration. Yet beneath this spectacle lies a fragmented social order characterized by unequal access to rights, security, and mobility.

This condition may be understood as “stratified cosmopolitanism,” in which different groups experience cosmopolitan urban life in profoundly unequal ways. Elite expatriates may experience the UAE as a site of opportunity, privilege, and global mobility, whereas low-wage migrants encounter conditions of precarity, surveillance, and exclusion (Standing, 2011).

Such dynamics challenge liberal assumptions that diversity alone produces social inclusion. The UAE demonstrates that multicultural visibility can coexist with

deep structural inequalities. Cosmopolitanism therefore cannot be understood independently from questions of labor, power, and citizenship.

Diaspora, Transnational Identity, and Conditional Belonging

Diaspora communities in the UAE occupy complex social positions shaped by transnational connections and conditional forms of inclusion. Migrants maintain cultural, familial, and emotional ties with their countries of origin while simultaneously participating in the social and economic life of the UAE. These transnational identities destabilize traditional assumptions linking belonging exclusively to territorial citizenship.

However, belonging in the UAE remains conditional and administratively regulated. Migrants are welcomed as workers, consumers, and contributors to economic development, yet they remain excluded from meaningful political participation. Inclusion is therefore tied to economic utility rather than democratic incorporation.

This condition of conditional belonging generates forms of emotional and existential uncertainty. Migrants may spend decades contributing to society while lacking secure pathways to permanence or citizenship. The future remains dependent upon employment status, residency permits, and state regulation. Consequently, belonging becomes fragile and reversible.

Second-generation migrants further complicate these dynamics. Many individuals born or raised in the UAE develop strong attachments to the country despite lacking formal citizenship. They often experience forms of cultural hybridity and identity fragmentation in which emotional belonging conflicts with legal exclusion. Such experiences reveal the tensions between cosmopolitan urbanism and nation-state frameworks of citizenship.

The UAE thus reflects broader global transformations in migration and identity under neoliberal globalization. Increasingly, migrants inhabit transnational social worlds characterized by mobility, hybridity, and fragmented belonging. Yet rather than moving toward post-national inclusion, the UAE preserves sharp distinctions between citizens and migrants.

Neoliberal Urbanism and the Commodification of Diversity

The UAE's cosmopolitanism is closely connected to neoliberal urbanism and global city competition. Cities such as Dubai function not only as economic centers but

also as spectacles of consumption, luxury, and global modernity. Architecture, tourism, finance, entertainment, and mega-events collectively produce an urban identity oriented toward international visibility and market competitiveness.

Within this framework, diversity itself becomes commodified. Multiculturalism enhances the city's global attractiveness and economic value. Migrant cultures are selectively incorporated into urban branding through cuisine, festivals, entertainment, and representations of coexistence. Cosmopolitanism becomes part of the city's marketable image.

However, neoliberal cosmopolitanism prioritizes economic growth and global competitiveness over democratic inclusion and social equality. Migrants are celebrated as contributors to urban development while remaining structurally temporary and politically marginalized. Diversity is tolerated and encouraged insofar as it supports economic objectives and global branding strategies.

This dynamic reflects broader transformations within global capitalism in which cities increasingly compete for investment, talent, and tourism through narratives of openness and cosmopolitanism. The UAE exemplifies a model of neoliberal multiculturalism in which migration is economically essential but politically controlled.

Consequently, cosmopolitanism in the UAE should be understood not merely as cultural openness but as a political-economic project embedded within neoliberal globalization. Diversity functions simultaneously as an economic resource, a branding strategy, and a mechanism of governance.

Conclusion

The UAE represents one of the most significant contemporary examples of migration-driven cosmopolitanism. Through rapid globalization, urban transformation, and transnational mobility, the country has cultivated a global image of multicultural coexistence, tolerance, and modernity. Yet beneath this cosmopolitan image lies a deeply unequal migration regime structured around temporary labor, citizenship exclusion, and differentiated forms of belonging.

Migrants are economically indispensable and culturally visible while remaining politically temporary and socially unequal. Through migration governance, labor regulation, and neoliberal urbanism, the state maintains a

system in which multiculturalism is celebrated symbolically while incorporation remains restricted structurally.

The UAE therefore challenges optimistic assumptions that globalization and cosmopolitanism necessarily produce democratic inclusion or social equality. Instead, it demonstrates how cosmopolitan urbanism can coexist with exclusionary citizenship regimes and stratified labor systems. The concept of “cosmopolitanism without citizenship” captures this central contradiction in which migrants sustain the social and economic foundations of the nation while remaining outside its political community.

More broadly, the UAE reflects emerging global transformations in migration, labor, and belonging under neoliberal globalization. As societies increasingly depend upon transnational labor and mobility, questions concerning citizenship, inequality, and the governance of diversity become ever more significant. The UAE demonstrates that multicultural visibility alone does not resolve these tensions. Rather, diversity itself becomes a site through which contemporary forms of inequality are managed, normalized, and reproduced.

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