

Limits of Conversion: Islamic Dawa, Domestic Work
and Migrant South Asian Women in Kuwait

by

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Date: August 24, 2009

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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Abstract

Tens of thousands of migrant domestic workers, women working and residing within Kuwaiti households, have taken *shehadeh*, the Islamic testament of faith over the past decade. Drawing on 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kuwait, and 2 months of research in Nepal, this dissertation analyzes the processes through which South Asian domestic workers develop newfound Islamic pieties, processes that underscore the importance of the household as a site of intersection between transnational migration and globalizing Islamic movements, and that point to the limitation of conventional understandings of wage labour and religious conversion.

To Rifat J. Ahmad, Syed I. Ahmad, S. Z. Ahmad, Salma A. Ahmad, and
Ebtehal Al-Khateeb and family

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Preface

“Baji, check the news please. Is it true what they are saying?”

It was early Tuesday morning when my father called. Still in my pyjamas, I was seated at my desk trying to summon up words that would conclude my master’s thesis, a project examining how the local production and transnational circulation of wedding videos knit together far-flung networks of diasporic Pakistanis. This wasn’t the usual routine my father and I shared: a back and forth telephone conversation late in the morning where, during his break time, my father told me about the latest goings on in the small factory where he worked, and where I would share with him about how my writing was progressing, how the kitten he had gifted me was doing, and other mundane tidbits.

“Baji, they are saying there has been a bombing in New York. Check the news please. Is it true?”

His voice rung with urgency and turning on the television I could see why. Looping over and over again, frame by frame, were a series of images too overwhelming, too horrible to comprehend, even for someone inured to the explosions of Hollywood blockbusters: large planes striking larger buildings with deadly precision; trails of smoke and tiny, frail bodies jettisoning themselves from these buildings; columns of steel and

glass imploding and crashing to the ground; waves of dust and debris chasing pedestrians, before settling to the ground covering large swathes of lower Manhattan.

As the day and subsequent weeks unfolded, and the circumstances of the bombing became more apparent, the world changed. The events of 9/11, the destruction of the World Trade Center's twin towers by Al-Qaeda, the loss of countless innocent lives, rippled through and reconfigured everyday life in ways profound and immeasurable. For me, the acute concern I felt for family members, friends and other residents of New York—were they ok? how could we help?—began spreading both near and far.

On her way home from work the next day my mother was pursued by a motorist in mid-town Toronto spewing out abuse and invectives at her. One stuck with her long after:

“He told me to go home! Go home! Go home to my cave! Can you imagine? Is *this* a cave?”

Far from a cave in the mountains of Afghanistan, for over thirty years my parents had made Canada home, one I had seen shaped by the tears my mother would abruptly wipe away after long-distance calls with her parents and siblings in Pakistan, and by the white hairs that implacably crept up her temples with the long days she spent at the

office, longer nights attending university classes, and parenting three children in the cracks of time in-between.

For weeks after 9/11 my family received numerous phone calls from friends throughout Toronto and North America telling us of defaced mosques, the firebombing of a Sikh temple, men in turbans and women in veils being heckled and harassed at bus stops and on the street, and of people with Muslim sounding names and/or purported physiognomy being turned away at the Canada-US border, and being subject to ‘surprise’ or ‘random’ security checks. There was also cryptic mention—could someone be listening?—of friends, neighbors and someone that someone knew being visited by police or intelligence officers.

Palestinian friends and colleagues who I had met while working in the West Bank and Gaza also sent emails, ones expressing their trepidation about what lay ahead. The second intifada had started a year earlier, and many were worried the conflict would deepen. As one former neighbor wrote, “now they are surely going to bomb, and bomb us some more until they get what they want.”

Also planning for the worse were members of my extended family in Pakistan, the majority of whom lived in northern munition and cantonment towns and cities, and areas adjoining the border region with Afghanistan. Anticipating the bombing and invasion of

Afghanistan that commenced in October, they had begun stockpiling staples and fortifying their homes in case the conflict spilled across the border. In the ensuing months, they also told us of shadowy operations taking place in Pakistan, and waves of refugees whose crossing and settlement in the country was transforming the physical and social landscapes of the region.

Back at my desk in Toronto, it felt as though the world had contracted and become increasingly integrated (if not imploded). The surveillance, heightened vigilance and paranoia I associated with living in the occupied Palestinian territories now laced North American Muslims' everyday lives (if in more muted form). Heightened conflicts, invasions and bombings elsewhere felt keenly close—intimately tied as they were, and promulgated by the attitudes and assumptions underpinning the mainstream media, 'experts', policy makers, colleagues and neighbors understanding of the 'East' or 'Muslim world'.

Within this shifting terrain of war, violence, stigma and suspicion, I began rethinking my plans for future research. 'Islam' and 'Muslims' figured prominently in debates and discussions that swirled about in the press and everyday conversation in ways jarring and upsetting, but (perhaps strangely) not surprising. Growing up in Montreal and Toronto in the late 1980s-90s, I had developed a dual sense of how Islam was understood and lived. I was often the only Muslim at the various schools I had

attended, and in the neighborhoods where I lived. Orientalist discourses suffused these spaces. If classmates, colleagues and friends were surprised that I was allowed out, played sports, had male friends, or that my mother worked and my father was also responsible for cleaning, cooking and taking care of his children, these signs—which contradicted their perception of Islamic social practices and gender relations—were understood as having developed from Western influences, or our being ‘modern’ or ‘progressive’ in our outlook. These signs were perceived as having developed and persisted in spite of the fact that my family and I are practicing Muslims.

Simultaneous to being subject to stereotyped and simplistic understandings of Islam and Muslim societies, I also grew up with the sense that Muslim populations and Islamic practices were intrinsically plural. Due in part to the limited size and resources of the Muslim community at that time, in Canada I went to mosques and Islamic schools that were attended by Muslims of diverse Islamic traditions (e.g. Sunni, Shii, Ismaeli), traditions of jurisprudence (e.g. Hanafi, Maliki), as well as ethno-national and linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshi, Lebanese, Egyptian, Turkish, South and East African). My appreciation of the multiplicity of Muslim communities was further widened, and deepened by my travels through South Asia and the Middle East. In Pakistan, and linked to cities in the UK, US, and the GCC states, I was part of a sprawling extended family network that was internally diverse and consisted of strict salafis, ardent liberal-secularists, followers of sufi saints and tariqas, and what one of my

aunts called the ‘aadat bunch’, members whose prayers, fasting, and other religious practices suffused their everyday lives, but who were not connected to any Islamic group or movement. Through living and working in South Asia and the Middle East, I also learned of small differences in religious practice (e.g. in contrast to Pakistani women, Palestinian women did not feel it necessary cover their head upon hearing the call to prayer), and the traditions of localized and/or marginalized Muslim groups such as the Bohri, Druze, Ahmadiyyeh, Alawite, and Alevi.

While conducting research on the production and viewing of Pakistani wedding videos in Toronto, I had also observed significant shifts in religious practice and organizing among South Asian Muslims in Toronto. Since the mid-1990s, large numbers of South Asian Muslims previously residing in Gulf Cooperation Council states, secondary migrants from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Bahrain, had moved to Toronto. There were myriad reasons for their migration. Some had been laid off and seen their employment opportunities dwindle as the GCC states began implementing nationalization policies that replaced foreign residents and workers with citizens. Others had migrated to keep their families together, as sons over the age of eighteen were no longer permitted to reside in the GCC under their parents’ sponsorship, or as their children began attending universities in Toronto and surrounding areas. Many had first thought of, or had attempted to migrate back to Pakistan, but found future employment and business possibilities there limited, or who found conditions in Pakistan

uncongenial, especially for children who had grown accustomed to the facilities and resources available in the GCC.

As these newly arrived migrants began reconnecting with family and friends, and integrating themselves into life in Toronto, changes began appearing in the wider Pakistani Muslim communities. These were evident to me as I undertook my research. Weddings, which had previously taken place in Pakistan or were modestly held in Toronto, became more lavish. Unlike earlier waves of Muslim migrants to Canada, those from the Gulf tended to be wealthier. They staged weddings that were larger in scope and scale, a practice that began spreading more broadly among others in Toronto. Weddings also became more gender-segregated—whether from the direct example set by these GCC-Pakistani migrants, or because of the broader effects their integration and increasing influence on mosques, Islamic schools, and everyday religious practice. If GCC-Pakistanis came with more savings, they also came with religious knowledge, training and practices alternately called puritanical, *salafi*¹, or *Wahhabi*².

¹ the term refers to Muslim practitioners who primarily, if not exclusively, follow the Quran and *sunnat* (traditions of the prophet) as did the first companions or ‘salaf’ of the Prophet

² term refers to followers of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, an 18th century scholar from present day Saudi Arabia who advocates a form of Islam said to be purged of innovations, and following the strict guidance of the Quran and *sunnat* or traditions of the Prophet. The term is often used as a gloss for forms of Islamic tradition and practice said to be puritanical in form and/or originating from the Arabian peninsula, even if the term is not widely used in the Arabian peninsula or by those said to be adherents of Wahhabism.

I had begun thinking these broad transnational fields of diversity and deliberation related to Islamic belief and practice, and how to begin to account for them against a hegemonic discursive background of simplification and suspicion related to Islam, when 9/11 occurred. The events of that day and what ensued exacerbated the dissonance, if not incommensurability, of essentialist discourses about Islam with my own observed and lived experiences of seeing the plurality of ways in which Islam is lived. The importance of conducting research on Muslim societies in the hopes of fostering more thoughtful, sustained, and meaningful dialogue, of redressing misconceptions and challenging powerfully entrenched ways of thinking, and actions based upon them, became more urgent and fraught. I worried about what might be the implications of undertaking such work—would it unwittingly contribute negatively rather than productively to promoting better understanding and actions—and how to undertake research and analytically rich scholarship that did not reinscribe the positions of Orientalists and apologists against an overriding context of suspicion, stigma, violence and war.

In beginning to sketch out a research project on the transnational fields of Islamic practice among diasporic Pakistani women routed through the Arab Gulf states, I drew on the work of Talal Asad, Edward Said and the work of ethnographers and scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Anna Tsing and Gayatri Spivak, all of whom, in different yet resonant ways, documented and analysed the formation and hegemonic sway held by Orientalist, colonial and imperialist discourses about the East, the colonized, the subaltern, and

people in ‘out of the way places’, and who carefully, painstaking, attempt to excavate and account for other possibilities of thinking and living in our shared world. Inspired by their example, I began conducting preliminary research on Pakistani networks in the Punjab, Toronto, and Kuwait, and examining how their religious beliefs and practices shaped and were affected by their experiences of migration, social dislocation, and transnational material and social relations.

While in Kuwait, I learned about and began pursuing a topic that, although resonant with my initial research questions, shifted the focus of my research substantively. As I discuss in the introduction, in the early stages of my work in Kuwait, I discovered that large numbers of female migrant domestic workers were taking *shehadeh*, the Islamic testament of faith, a phenomena underscoring the importance of the household as a site of confluence of the feminization of transnational labour migration and the increasing spread and reach of globalizing Islamic reform and dawa movements. In contrast to coherent diasporic fields linked to ethno-national forms of identification and solidarity, domestic workers reworking of household and kinship networks through their newfound practice of Islam points to more fluid and nascent forms of social belonging, ones that are provisional, incipient, and tenuous, but still significant. Their experiences further pointed to a unique feature of Kuwait. While sharing a similar global context of war and conflict, and while constituting a cosmopolitan milieu, unlike Toronto, axes of relations and power asymmetries in Kuwait were not organized along

East/West lines, but rather were characterized by different sets of historical and contemporary social and political-economic relations and multi-valent relations of power. Perhaps ironically given Kuwait's proximity to spaces of overt conflict and violence, and a strong US military presence in Kuwait, domestic workers' relations with their employers and their newfound practice of Islam points to sets of power relations not reducible to East/West, Islam/West, but more layered and alternately complicated Inter-Asian connections. The following dissertation is an attempt to begin to map this textured socio-political realm.

1. Introduction

1.1 Moments

Moments punctuated my fieldwork, moments neither marking the ongoing continuation of routine and habit, nor of the magnitude of life-altering events. They constituted something else, something in-between, something familiar and strange, blurring the lines between continuity and change. These moments intertwined the unexpected with the everyday. They pointed to how experiences, encounters, situations, utterances, or pauses, are not just structured by discourses, disciplinary practices, and political-economic relations, but also mark instances of newfound possibilities, ones just glimpsed, or barely grasped at the time¹.

To tell their myriad tales, moments need to be recorded, narrated, and reflected upon. This dissertation consists of a series of such moments, ones I narrate, and then unfurl in order to both document and analyze the experiences of my primary interlocutors—South Asian migrant women who are working in Kuwaiti households and who are adopting Islamic precepts and practices—and discuss how their experiences

¹ Both Bloch and Foucault point to how possibilities of an event or experience are difficult to recognize at the time. In his discussion of the event, Ernst Bloch points to their paradoxical nature. The 'newness' of events, he tells us, involve both absence and presence, the here-and-now and not-yet, clarity and obscurity. He explains that this has to do with immediacy and proximity of an event, or "the darkness" of the lived moment, that makes it difficult to recognize or assess their nature at the time (see Geoghegan's discussion, 1995: 35-6). In his discussion of the experience of writing his books, in 'Remarks on Marx' Foucault tells us that "an experience is something you come out of changed" (1991: 27), and that experiences are neither true or false, but constructions and fictions that exist only after they are made (Foucault 1991: 36).

underscore the importance of the household as a site of confluence between Islamic reform and dawa movements, and the feminization of transnational labour migration that marks our contemporary period.

The initial stage of my research was bookended by two such moments, and in introducing the circumstances, research questions and underlying theoretical issues animating this dissertation, there is no better way to begin than describe these moments to you.

1.2 First Moment: Rosa Recites the Shehadeh; and, the Reworking of My Research Topic

The first moment began with me seated in the backseat of a taxi. It was a searing hot July day, and I was on my way to Auntie Sadia's home. Jose, a taxi driver from the Philippines and one of my defacto guides² was swearing softly under his breath. We

² Jose had migrated from the Philippines shortly after the first Gulf war (been in Kuwait over 13 years when we first met in 2004). In his mid 30s at the time, he had come in order to save money so he could send his children to private school. At first he worked in a newly opened American fast food restaurant. He grew tired of this job, and through friends, found work at a taxi company. The hours of work were longer, but the pay much better. As he once told me, 'my life here is to work, my family is in the Philippines. The faster I am finished here, the more time I can spend with them there.' His two children, a son and daughter, flourished at school, and after graduation from their private high schools, had gone on to university in Manila. Jose had also used his money to build his family a home in the city. Shortly before his youngest child, his son finished his undergraduate degree in business, and about three years before we met, tragedy struck. Jose's family house burned down, and both his son and wife died during the fire. The family did not have insurance, and Jose's family savings, in the house and in his children's education, was depleted. Jose realized he would have to remain indefinitely in Kuwait and try to rebuild his savings. In 2006, his situation changed dramatically. His daughter married a man who was in the process of migrating to Vancouver, Canada,. A few months after she had migrated, she found a lucrative job. Once she obtained her citizenship, she planned on

were late. The emir's impromptu decision to visit his favorite palace, a sprawling seafront compound on the outskirts of the city, had left Jose and I idling behind a hastily erected roadblock. Part of an ever-lengthening queue of cars, all we could do was wait.

I did my own cursing in the backseat. A couple of weeks into my first trip to Kuwait, I was en route to attending a study circle, a *halaqa* organized by women who participated in Al-Huda, a women's Islamic movement that had first developed in Pakistan. My research on the movement's spread into the Arab Gulf States was beginning in earnest—that is, if I ever got to Auntie Sadia's.

sponsoring her father to come live with her in Canada. Jose planning on spending the interim time saving money, which he would then use to start a small business, perhaps a taxi company, in Vancouver. Jose was also a staunch Catholic and spent a great deal of time telling me about his experiences with the Catholic community in Kuwait. My research both intrigued and repulsed him. He was cynical about domestic workers' newfound pieties. He also (and pretty staunchly) disliked Islam and made many incendiary comments about this to me, even after learning I was Muslim. When I asked why he still liked me after he knew I was Muslim, he responded by joking "your money isn't Muslim," and by telling me I was nicer than most Muslims because "I was from the West."

Our sometimes uneasy friendship cooled somewhat after he directly insulted one of my interlocutors while we were riding with him. A couple of weeks before he left for Vancouver, however, he contacted me and asked me to apologize to my interlocutor on his behalf. He also wished me well and told me to contact him and his daughter if I ever visited Vancouver, reminding me that we were, after all, going to be fellow citizens and country-fellows.

When I told other Filipino friends and friends who have spent many years working and researching in the Philippines about the types of comments Jose made, many thought they reflected/were shaped by the Philippine state's discourse about Islam. In addition, similar to my experiences with NGO and government officials in Nepal, Jose attributed to Islam most of his negative experiences in Kuwait (i.e. exploitative relationships with employers, gender asymmetries, structural and physical violence migrants experienced).

Anxious yet resigned, I looked out my window. A few meters ahead of us in one of the other lanes was a white minibus emblazoned with the logo of one of the largest companies in Kuwait. The men inside, wearing identical blue jumpers, looked to be South Asian. Sweat-stained, most were slumped in their seats, or sleeping with their heads pressed against the windows, the backs of their seats, a friend's shoulder, or against any supportive surface they could find. "They are probably coming back from a construction site", Jose told me. "Look at them, poor devils; look how tired they are! and for what?" Behind the bus was a gleaming SUV. The driver, a stylishly dressed woman, was using the rearview mirror to adjust her *abaya*. In the backseat a diminutive Indonesian woman was holding a toddler. "Probably going shopping before lunch, and taking her maid," Jose explained, "or maybe on her way to a family member's home. She looks dressed up, but," he added, "I guess they always do." Immediately to our right was a group of young men, *shabaab*, who were listening to music and gesticulating animatedly. I could feel their insistent gazes. "Don't look," Jose warned, "they will get the wrong idea. I don't want to have to deal with that. You don't want to have to deal with that..." We didn't. The police officers—who Jose had informed me earlier, were primarily Bedouin, the underclass of the citizenry, had gotten back into their cars. The highway was opening up again.

As we made our way into the labyrinthian streets of Auntie Sadia's neighborhood in S****, I was thinking about what I had just seen: a street scene-cum-microcosm of

Kuwait. There was the emir, the sovereign, who generally directed the country from afar, but occasionally, and often unpredictably, punctuated the everyday with his exceptional presence (Agamben 1998, 2000). Then there was the police, an integral part of Kuwait's state apparatus charged with regulating the movements of citizens and non-citizens, whether these be across roadblocks or borders. And stalled or speedily moving along, citizens and foreign residents and migrants were trying to go about their daily lives. As suggested by their dress, activities and vehicles, they shared the road in ways indexing deeply entrenched asymmetrical political, economic, and gendered relations and divisions that comprise Kuwaiti society.

These thoughts dissipated as I found myself in front of Auntie Sadia's complex. Other women, I was relieved to note, were also arriving late. Introducing myself hurriedly, I joined them as we made our way up the stairs and into the room in which everyone was assembled. It was large and beautifully appointed: striped silk sofas ringed the walls, the dark wood tables were intricately carved and inlaid with mother of pearl, and the tiled floors were strewn with plush carpets and plushier cushions. Once seated and taking in my surroundings, I became increasingly perplexed with what I saw. Was this an Al-Huda *halaqa*?

In the far corner of the room, seated on a hard-back chair, a tall spare woman dressed in a dark blue abaya and matching hijab, Sister Hanan, was addressing the other

women present. Speaking in an English heavily inflected with Arabic, she was leading the group in *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis). Judging from their attire and appearance, the women listening were of diverse backgrounds. A couple of younger women wore long *thobs* decorated with embroidery that was distinctively North African. Next to them was a blond-haired blue-eyed woman who looked to be Syrian. Several other woman, who I was to later learn were from Sri Lanka, Canada, Egypt, and the UK, wore black abayas and hijab. Seated on the sofas were numerous South Asian women wearing shalwar kameez. And closer to where I sat was a Filipina woman dressed in a lavender and white maid's uniform, and an Indonesian woman wearing a bonnet-like hijab and matching tunic.

Towards the end of the *halaqa*, an affair at times a serene or spirited, Sister Hanan, called for the other women's attention. "Sisters," she began,

"today is a day of great *baraka* [blessings]. I know many of you have to get back to your families or pick up your children before the lunch hour, so my words will be short, but inshallah, we can talk of this more, and celebrate this great news next time. As you know Sister Rosa, may Allah be pleased with her, has been attending our *halaqas* for, *alhudullilah*, many months now. A few weeks ago she approached me about taking *shehadeh*...[quiet murmurings in the room]...I told her to wait, think about it some more, and talk to her family. And *mashallah*, she

is persistent: she asked me about this again two weeks ago. I told her again to wait, think about it, and talk to her mother and father in the Philippines. And *mashallah* sisters, she is persistent: Last week, she came to me again after class and told me she wants to take shehadeh, and rather than going to Rawda [the women's center of Kuwait's largest dawa movement] she wants to take it here with you. [she gestures to Rosa] And so sisters..."

Rosa, the woman in the maid's uniform, approached Sister Hanan and raised her right hand and index finger. Without any further preamble, she recited:

“La illah ha illullah Muhammadan rasulAllah.”

When most of the other women had left, I introduced myself to Auntie Sadia. Still a little confused, and obstinately clinging to my initial research lead, I asked her whether she and Sister Hanan held these *halaqas* regularly, and whether they were influenced by the lectures of Dr. Hashmi, the leader of Al-Huda. Auntie Sadia wrinkled her forehead slightly, and paused. Then, realization dawning, she exclaimed:

“oh ho! Sorry, sorry Attiya-beti [Urdu: daughter]. Nuzhat told me you wanted to come when we listen to Dr. Farhat's lesson. No, no--today is Sister Hanan's *halaqa*. We hold it in English, not Urdu. It is for women who live close-

by...women who can't go to night classes but who have *taqwa* [Arabic: God-fearing or mindfulness]...”

Perhaps more than any other moment, my going to Auntie Sadia's (ostensibly) on the wrong day of the week, and attending Sister Hanan's *halaqa* rather than Dr. Hashmi's tape-recorded *dars*, was the moment that defined the course of my subsequent research. It marked the first of what was to become many instances where I witnessed or learned of migrant domestic workers' newfound practice of Islam³. It was also the first time I became aware of the activities of Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement.

Over the next few months as I continued with my research, Rosa's story traveled along with me. In meeting with long-standing members of Kuwait's Pakistani diasporic community, interviewing members of Al-Huda, attending *durus* (classes), mapping out the group's networks, and developing relations with Kuwaiti families and academics, the issue of domestic workers newfound Islamic pieties insistently poked its way into our conversation. Many had heard of Rosa's taking of shehadeh, and knowing I had been a

³ I should note that when I returned to Kuwait to conduct the bulk of my dissertation research, Rosa had already returned to the Philippines. We corresponded for a short while through letters, and I also learned about her experiences upon her return through her former employer, Zakira. Rosa was from a small village in the south of the Philippines that had a Muslim population. Before coming to Kuwait she had become close friends with a neighbor who was a Muslim. Her parents were supportive of her decision but others within her community were not, and like Jose, were skeptical, and sometimes hostile about her conversion. Her primary concern in the Philippines was finding a Muslim husband.

witness, asked me about it⁴. As I was learning, Rosa's, as well as the stories of countless other domestic workers' who are adopting Islamic practices, circulate widely in Kuwait. Although not reported by the mainstream media, these newfound religious practices are a widespread phenomenon in Kuwait—in the past decade it is estimated that over 12,000 domestic workers have taken shehadeh⁵—and are a heated topic of discussion and debate among Kuwait's citizens and foreign residents.

Initially I found these conversations to be an interesting side-note if sometimes irritatingly long side-track to my research (as my interlocutors continued apace with their comments). Slowly but surely, however, as I began scrawling down my impressions and my interlocutors' comments, and in later seeing these suffused throughout my notebooks, my fascination grew. A new research field was starting to form. The issues animating my interest in Al-Huda—including how women's religious pieties inform and are affected by their gendered experiences of migration to the Gulf region; what types of religious subjectivities, practices, and movements develop among Muslims in plural Muslim contexts in which Muslims of diverse ethnic, national and linguistic backgrounds interact with one another; the forms of religious groups and networks developing amidst

⁴ Many with whom I met had a seemingly bottomless well of questions for me, questions I dutifully answered as best as I could but was not in really in any position to proffer adequate responses to: how did she learn about Islam? Was she pressured, or did she recite the shehadeh sincerely? Did the women present give her money or gifts, and if not then, later? Did her salary increase? Did you ask her if she will remain a practicing Muslim when she returns home? Can she go back to her family in the Philippines or does she now have to stay in Kuwait? Is she wearing a hijab or an abaya?

⁵ This is based on statistical accounts compiled by Kuwait's largest Islamic dawa organization.

diasporic and transnational social fields in our increasingly integrated world—were taking on a new and unexpected configuration: the interrelation between migrant women, domestic work and Islamic dawa.

1.3 Kuwait's Complicated and Contradictory Cosmopolitanisms

Although I was unaware of it at the time, the reconfiguration of my research topic marked several distinctive features of Kuwait as a field-site, features underscoring an issue existing works on transnationalism and globalization, Islamic reform and dawa movements, and the feminization of migrant labour in our contemporary moment elide or hitherto have not accounted for: the significance of households as spaces of cosmopolitan interaction, dense social and economic relations, and everyday Islamic practice.

When I first arrived in Kuwait, I was struck by the city-state's textured social landscapes. Every day entailed the discovery of diverse, and often unexpected configurations of peoples and languages. For instance, when I first moved into my apartment, owned by an older Kuwaiti businessman but leased to me through his Lebanese real estate agent, I met with workers from all over the world as they prepared my apartment for habitation⁶. In the morning, an Iranian man speaking Farsi installed security bars on the windows. In the afternoon, an Indonesian man who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia came to install the air conditioner. Late in the evening, after

⁶ It had been unoccupied for several months.

their day jobs had ended, an Afghani as well as a Punjabi man, speaking what they called a ‘Pushto-Punjabi mix’, but who communicated with me in Urdu, came to unclog the drains. Day-to-day when boarding buses and taxis, I was greeted by drivers from Egypt, India, as well as the Philippines, and when going to coffee shops, shopping centers or restaurants, I was assisted by service sector workers from throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, all speaking dialects and accent-inflected Englishes, Arabics, Urdu-Hindus, as well as a panoply of other languages whose sounds and cadences, if not comprehensible to me, became somewhat familiar to my ear.

As I spent more time in Kuwait, and became familiar with social spaces beyond the households and Islamic dawa halaqas and classes I was researching, I came to realize the contradictory or varied forms of cosmopolitanism in Kuwait. In surveying the term, scholars have noted how cosmopolitanism as both concept and practice comes in myriad forms (e.g. see Mignolo 2000: 721, 723-4). Many argue that carving out definitions and models related to the term are self-defeating. In the lead article of a ‘Public Culture’ special issue focusing on ‘Cosmopolitanisms’, Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge and Chakrabarty point to cosmopolitanism as a “project whose conceptual content and pragmatic character are not only as yet unspecified but also must always escape positive and definite specification, precisely because specifying cosmopolitanism positively and definitely is an unc cosmopolitan thing to do” (2000: 577). Though they insist on maintaining a fluid concept of cosmopolitanism and express ambivalence about

proffering definitions or models of the term, scholars' discussions are underpinned by a shared understanding of what the term generally refers to. For Mignolo, cosmopolitanism "is a set of projects towards planetary conviviality", and for Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge and Chakrabarty the term refers to instances "across time and space...[where] people have thought and acted beyond the local."

In Kuwait, cosmopolitanism comes in varied forms, indexing both the plurality of peoples, as well as the deeply wrought and entrenched divisions and asymmetries that exist in the country. As I discuss in chapter 2, Kuwait has an interregional past and a transnational present. Citizens, who comprise one-third of the country's total population (1 out of the total 3 million), are of varied backgrounds. Some are descendants of tribes that migrated to the region from the Najd region of present day Saudi Arabia, of Bedouin tribes from the region, and the bulk are descendants of Arabs and Ajam (term used to refer to non-Arabs) from areas throughout present day Iraq and Iran. Historically through trade, and seasonal migration, peoples residing in the city-state of Kuwait were also connected to families, businesses, and cities throughout the Indian Ocean, including Southern India and East Africa.

Among citizens in Kuwait today, differences are marked in terms of hadhar (historically city-dwellers) and bedu (historically nomadic peoples); Arab and Ajam; Shii and Sunni (as well as the country's tiny Christian population); liberal-secularists and

Islamic activists and reformers; and ones based on family background. The Kuwaiti dialect of Arabic--a form of Arabic resonant with those spoken by others in the Gulf region, but interspersed with local idioms and expressions, as well as Farsi and Hindi-Urdu—is predominantly spoken by citizens, but some are also fluent and Fari, Hindi-Urdu, and other languages tracing their families’ historic inter-regional connections.

In addition to citizens, the bulk of Kuwait’s population consists of foreign residents and migrant workers from (in descending numeric order) throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, East North and East Africa, Europe, North America and Australia, as well as a small population⁷ of stateless peoples, the ‘bidoun’⁸ who claim residency and citizenship rights in Kuwait. Differences among foreign residents and migrants are marked along ethno-national and linguistic lines. Overlapping with these are distinctions based on occupation, where in descending order of status, Kuwaitis and GCC nationals, then expats from the North, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Africa, receive better remuneration and recognition in Kuwait.

Despite my initial impressions, after living in Kuwait for extended periods of time, and tracing my varied interlocutors’ social networks and becoming familiar with those of others in Kuwait, I came to realize that interactions among citizens, foreign

⁷ Estimated at 100,000

⁸ Terms means ‘without’ referring to the fact these peoples are without citizenship, and lack official documents attesting to their birth, residency or citizenship status. The total population of the ‘bidoun’ in Kuwait is estimated to be 100,000.

residents and migrants were limited and attenuated. Most Kuwaitis and foreign residents that I met tended to interact and socialize with people of similar ethno-national background (and for Kuwaitis, with members of their extended families), and to a lesser extent, similar linguistic background. Cosmopolitan social spaces were delimited to encounters in consumer-oriented public spaces, such as restaurants, grocery stores, shopping areas, and public parks when the weather is temperate; occupational and class-specific spaces, including interactions at workplaces, and among children of wealthy Kuwaitis and foreign residents at private international schools⁹; and religious centers and places of worship, including mosques, Islamic centers, the Catholic and Protestant church compounds in Kuwait City, as well as halaqas and other forms of religious gatherings in private settings.

With the widespread migration of domestic workers beginning in the late 1970s, households have developed into uniquely cosmopolitan spaces in Kuwait. As I discuss in chapter 3, domestic workers have become a ubiquitous part of the everyday lives of Kuwaitis and well-to-do foreign residents. Over the past thirty years, the number of

⁹ Most Kuwaiti children go to public national schools that they can attend free of charge. The vast majority of male foreign residents and migrants are so-called ‘bachelor workers’—a term that does not necessarily refer to their marital status, but rather to the fact they do not meet the minimum salary threshold to sponsor their family members to reside with them in Kuwait. For foreign residents and migrants who do meet this threshold, most send their children to their corresponding national schools (e.g. to the Pakistani, Indian, Filipino, etc. schools). Wealthier and well-connected residents mostly send their children to private international schools that offer courses in English, French or both Arabic and English. With few exceptions, female residents and migrants, even if they are gainfully employed, are restricted from sponsoring their family members.

migrant domestic workers¹⁰ in Kuwait has burgeoned by over 1200%. Today they constitute 16% of Kuwait's total population, and are employed in over 90% of Kuwaiti households. Of different national¹¹, ethnic, linguistic, educational and religious backgrounds, in Kuwait they share a common situation and set of experiences. Intimately imbricated into the everyday lives of Arabic-speaking, Muslim Kuwaitis, their labour, whether it be cooking, cleaning, or caring for children and the elderly, is crucial to the social reproduction of Kuwait's population.

Uniquely situated within households, female migrant domestic workers develop sustained, intense, and often intimate relations with Kuwaitis. Their experiences contrast markedly with other foreign residents and migrants, most notably 'bachelor workers' employed as cleaners or construction workers, whose movements are carefully scripted and restricted in Kuwait. Based on interviews and visits to their dormitories and shared accommodations in Kuwait, I learned of how these workers rarely interacted with people outside the context of their workplaces and housing areas. For example, while visiting a group of Pakistani workers employed by one of Kuwait's largest building companies, I learned that they mostly interacted with fellow Pakistanis working with the same company, and to a limited extent others in the company, or at the mosques, or in their

¹⁰ Domestic workers in Kuwait are predominately female. While some households employ migrant men, usually in the capacity of drivers and gardeners, the vast majority of domestic workers in Kuwait (over 90%) are women who typically reside within the households in which they are employed. In contrast, male domestic workers are usually allocated quarters that are adjacent or proximal to the households within which they work.

¹¹ As I discuss in chapter 3, domestic workers are migrants from numerous countries, including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

neighborhood shops who they could communicate with in either Urdu, Punjabi or Pashto. These men had been recruited by a labour agency in Pakistan that had developed long-term contractual ties with a Kuwaiti construction company. Periodically, the recruitment agency would send groups of these men to Kuwait, where they were met at the airport by their soon-to-be foreman, a company official and a waiting van. They were then taken to their housing facility—a small cement apartment complex over half an hour outside Kuwait city. There they lived, eight or ten to two- or three-bedroom apartments, usually with one bathroom, and a shared wet room on each floor where they could hand wash their laundry. These men worked from 5am to 6pm everyday, six days a week. They were taken to and from their workplace by a bus, and on their days off, usually watched television, did their laundry, cooked, and occasionally, took a bus into the city to go to parks or inexpensive restaurants and shops there. These men tended to form groups with fellow ethno-nationals (E.g. Punjabis, Pathan) and/or other men who spoke their native languages. Their foreman was a fellow Pakistani, and while they occasionally met with other male workers of different backgrounds living in their neighborhood (e.g. Egyptians, Filipino) or in other public places, most had never interacted, much less spoken with other foreign residents or Kuwaitis.

1.4 Second Moment: Noura and Sophia's Discussion of Conversion to Islam versus Becoming Muslim

Given that domestic workers live and work in the intimate spheres of Kuwaitis' everyday lives, and are beholden to their employers for their work and residency visas (a

matter I discuss in Chapter 3), many in Kuwait, including foreign residents, embassy officials, and liberal-secular Kuwaitis argue that domestic workers adopt Islamic precepts and practices as a result of their relations with their employers—although *how* these relations play a role is vociferously debated. Beginning with Rosa’s recitation of the *shehadeh* (Islamic testament of faith) and the discussions and debates spiraling from this moment, I began noticing rhythms, repetitions, and tenuous, tendril-like threads weaving their way through my ever-burgeoning network of interlocutors’ utterances.

Many of their comments revolved around one question: why? Why are these women becoming Muslim? The two most common accounts presented to me—articulated in the distinction ‘converting to Islam’ and ‘becoming Muslim’—concentrated on two different explanatory variables. Those focusing on domestic workers’ ‘conversion to Islam’ often questioned the sincerity of these women’s newfound religious practices, viewing their conversions as either these women’s self-interested, calculated attempts to wrest better remuneration or treatment from their employers, or as coming about due to the pressure, implicit or explicit brought to bear upon them by the families with whom they work. The second set of accounts attributed domestic workers’ ‘becoming Muslim’ to the activities of Kuwait’s Islamic dawa and reform movements, specifically their success in reaching out to Kuwait’s diverse non-Muslim population, and in promoting the Islamic reform of Kuwaiti families and households. Domestic workers newfound pieties

are seen as both resulting from, and further encouraging Islamic practice within the household.

Several months into my research, I began to realize that the differences in these accounts were not just based on their positing of different explanatory factors—sincere religiosity or asymmetrical relations with employers—to account for domestic workers’ adoption of Islamic precepts and practices. A moment that spurred this realization occurred on a hot July day. I was outside, sitting on a bench with two of my interlocutors during a break in our *salaat wa taharaat* (prayer and purification) class at Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement’s women’s center. We were an unlikely trio: Sophia, a Nepali Hindi-speaking woman, Noura, a Goan English-speaking woman, and myself, a Canadian-Pakistani ethnographer and frequent multi-lingual go-between. Sophia and Noura were speaking in English, reveling in newfound sounds and expressions, which gave me a moment of pause, a moment to absorb our surroundings, and our conversation. The heat was unbearable, as summer days in Kuwait are wont to be, and though beads had long since turned to rivulets of sweat, neither Sophia nor Noura made any move or gesture to hint they wanted to go back into the cool air-conditioning of our class. It was simply too noisy and their conversation too engrossing. Noura was telling Sophia about her mother’s response when she told her she had taken *shehadeh* (the Islamic testament of faith). Dumbfounded, her mother could only splutter out a question further mangled by the telephone reception: “you...are converting....and turning...turning from our Lord

Jesus?” Sophia’s response to this, in turn, dumbfounded me: “That’s no problem. Explain to her you are becoming Muslim, not converting.”

Before Sophia’s comment, I had never heard the difference between ‘conversion to Islam’ and ‘becoming Muslim’ as starkly juxtaposed. Her comment spurred my increasing recognition that these two accounts were undergirded by different presuppositions, understandings and logics¹². The first account, ‘conversion to Islam’ is

¹² In addition to their fundamental dissonance, there other aspects of these accounts that were striking to me. First and most immediately, I was frequently taken aback at how readily—and vociferously—the people with whom I met discussed domestic workers’ newfound Islamic pieties with me. The reticence they displayed in talking about their own situations, whether as entitled citizens, abjected migrant workers, or well-to-do but tenuously positioned foreign residents and expatriates¹², and the initial wariness they displayed in speaking with me, an unknown and unconnected newcomer, was not evident as they proceeded to liberally share their opinions with me. This topic provided a good alternate topic of conversation, one touching on, and epitomizing a number of issues they were grappling with themselves. Domestic workers situation both illustrated and belied how foreign migrants and residents’ relationships with Kuwaiti were limited to those of time-delimited, contractually-based waged labour relations. Kuwait has long-standing historical interregional¹² relations with many peoples and places throughout the Indian Ocean, the Arab world, and present-day Iran. With the advent of the country’s petro-dollar economy, and the formation of the Al-Sabah led redistributive welfare state, Kuwaitis increasingly came to differentiate themselves from these places and peoples. Through increasingly restrictive naturalization laws, the right to citizenship in Kuwait was limited to patrilineal descendants of those residing in Kuwaiti in the early twentieth century. Those migrating to Kuwait after this period were excluded from formal citizenship and came to be designated as ‘foreign migrants or residents’ and ‘guest workers’. Though integral to Kuwait’s development and ongoing prosperity and growth, and regardless of the length or breadth of their attachments to the country, these peoples continue to be regarded as ‘foreign’. Their presence and status within the country is dependent on their being sponsored by an individual Kuwaiti citizen (kafeel), who obtain for them time-delimited work and residency visas, which in turn, are dependent upon the wage labour contracts they establish with their kafeel. Domestic workers, who have increasingly become a ubiquitous part of everyday life in Kuwait, and who reside with and are integrally involved in the ongoing social reproduction of citizens, exemplify how ‘foreign workers’ presence and contribution to Kuwait elude and exceed the terms of wage labour contracts. Moreover, as subjects who are poorer, marginalized, and racialized in relation to their Kuwaiti sponsor-employers, and whose everyday lives are inextricable from Kuwaitis, domestic workers experiences further exemplify foreign resident and migrants’ exclusionary belongings in/to Kuwait.

Domestic workers’ adoption of Islamic precepts and practices also tapped into the aspirations, apprehensions, and ambivalences many had with respect to Kuwait’s Islamic reform

one that was consistently used by domestic workers' family members in their home countries, such as Noura's mother, some Kuwaitis, most notably liberal-secularists, other foreign residents in Kuwait, and journalists and academics writing about this topic. This account focuses on different causal factors leading migrant domestic workers to change their religious beliefs, practices, and identities—and 'convert to Islam'. Some argue macro-factors best explain these conversions: Domestic workers migrate because of worsening economic conditions in their places of origin, and they go to Kuwait because of its booming petro-dollar fuelled economy. In Kuwait, their immersion in Muslim households leads some of these women to convert. These conversions are further

and dawa movements. Although located at the northernmost tip of the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf, a region associated with 'Wahhabism', a tradition of Islamic practice often portrayed as puritanical, intolerant and antithetical to the 'Modern West', Kuwait's religious history is a motley one. A defining moment in the country's history, one celebrated in nationalist myths and the memories of older residents, is the city-state's resistance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries against a number of incursions by Ikhwan fighters associated with the Al-Wahhab backed ibn-Saud family, culminating in the final defeat of these fighters at the Battle of Jahra in 1920. The influence and interconnection between Kuwaiti Islamic groups and Salafi religious leaders and institutions has persisted, however, up until the present day¹². Kuwait's religious landscape has also been shaped by residents' increasing travel¹² throughout the Arab world, and by the large influx of Palestinian and Egyptian migrants coming into the country beginning in the mid-20th century. Citizens became increasingly influenced by, and the country became an important transnational site for pan-Arab secular movements, and religious movements such as the Ikhwan al-Muslimin¹² (Muslim Brotherhood). From the late 1990s onwards, Islamic groups, including the Shii National Islamic Alliance, have come to play a more prominent social and political role in Kuwait. This period has been marked by the ascendance and jockeying between numerous religious movement, as well as the increasing marginalization of the country's longstanding liberal-secular movements¹². Domestic workers' adoption of Islam was seen as fundamentally linked to these processes; in marking the increasing reach of these movements. For those associated or sympathetic to Kuwait's Islamic movements, domestic workers newfound Islamic pieties was a phenomenon full of socio-political possibilities: reinforcing and encouraging Kuwaitis' practice of Islam, and as these women visited or returned to their family and communities as home, potentially leading to the spread of Islam further afield. For those associated with Kuwait's liberal-secular movements, domestic workers' conversions marked the Islamic movement's increasing encroachment and spread into all corners of Kuwait's socio-political landscape, a phenomenon regarded as full of pitfalls and perils.

encouraged and facilitated by Kuwait's Islamic dawa movement, which has expanded its activities in the face of a burgeoning non-Muslim population in Kuwait and developed links with Islamic groups in domestic workers places of origins. Others point to micro-experiences to account for why domestic workers convert: Domestic workers' everyday engagement with Islamic precepts and practices within the household lead some to develop new-found pieties. Alternatively, domestic workers convert in order to receive better remuneration or treatment from their employers. Though they point to two different scales and registers—macro factors versus micro experiences, political-economic structural processes versus individual motivation—these analyses are strikingly similar. Both are predicated on apriori distinctions drawn between different religious traditions (e.g. between Christianity and Islam), and between political economy and religion. With respect to the latter, the relationship between religion and political economy is articulated through linear cause-effect relationships.

The second account is predicated on ethical forms of reasoning and focuses on processes by which domestic workers 'become Muslim' through their engagement with Islamic precepts and practices. Among members of Kuwait's dawa movement and migrant domestic workers who are becoming Muslim, being Muslim is conceived in fundamentally processual terms: One is not simply **a** Muslim, one must **be** Muslim, and being Muslim is something both new—and old—Muslims must constantly actualize, enact, and produce. One becomes, and is in a state of constantly becoming Muslim by

learning Islamic precepts and practices, and reengaging with one's life in relation to these. This process is neither unidirectional nor linear, but cyclical and recursive: one apprehends and approaches Islamic precepts and practices in and through cultural meanings and social relations that comprise one's daily lived experience. Proficiency is achieved through constant striving, a constant tacking back and forth between Islamic precepts and practices and the stuff of everyday life through which these precepts and practices are apprehended, approached and actualized. For domestic workers who are becoming Muslim, the stuff of everyday life necessarily includes their preexisting religious traditions, their relations with family members in their places of origin, and their labouring and relations with their employers in Kuwait. Becoming Muslim is thus not conceived as a renouncing or rejection but as a reworking and reengagement with one's life. It is a dynamic and encompassing process in which the boundaries between different religious traditions and between religion and political-economy are conceived as porous and fluid.

Both these accounts are predicated on incommensurable forms of reasoning—one on causal logic that identifies political-economic factors as reasons for domestic workers' 'conversion', and that focuses on their asymmetrical relations with their employers within the household as leading to their conversions; the other on ethical forms of reasoning that posits a situation in which domestic workers 'become Muslim' through their engagement with Islamic precepts and practices, a process spurred by Kuwait's Islamic reform and

dawa movements increasing focus on the household as a site where proper Muslims are produced and reproduced. Domestic workers' own accounts of their newfound practice of Islam also emphasized the household, but in ways that differed from these two other accounts. Domestic workers were not preoccupied with questions of their motivations or reasons for their newfound pieties. Of more concern to them was what their adoption of Islamic precepts and practices entailed, and how these were reshaping their relations with members of their households in Kuwait, and in the places from which they had migrated.

1.5 Moments Reprised

This dissertation emerges from a process of thinking through what these different accounts tell us about the nexus of migration, the feminization of transnational labour, domestic work, and transformations in religious practice in relation to subject formation among South Asian women in Kuwait. My work on this particular constellation of issues developed and was furthered by a series of moments punctuating my fieldwork in Kuwait, moments that weave through and animate this dissertation, moments that link up with broader historical and theoretical trends and trajectories. The way in which I conceptualize 'moments' is influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Ernst Bloch, both of whom point to radical forms of empiricism, and attune our attention to both the patterns and possibilities of encounters, utterances, events, and other modalities of experience.

Historically, anthropologists have conceptualized and analysed moments as instances indexing particular systems that structure individual experiences and socio-cultural fields. Anthropologists from the symbolic and cultural/hermeneutical traditions focused on systems of signs (most notably language) and meaning undergirding socio-cultural fields. Anthropologists from the cultural ecology or material traditions were attentive to how modes of production, and the circulation and distribution of material objects, including commodities, gifts, currencies, objects, etc., knit together and structure social-cultural fields. Critiques of these two traditions were often based on contrasts and the implicit idea these two traditions were complementary—symbolic or cultural/hermeneutical anthropologists elided historical particularities and trends, often positing socio-cultural fields that were ahistorical; material anthropologists imported and imposed concepts that were assumed to be universal, but were either inadequate in accounting for diverse socio-cultural fields, or committed epistemological violence that elides other modalities of experiencing and understanding our world.

Michel Foucault's genealogical method, and conceptualization of power, governmentality, discipline, discursive formation, and ethics have replenished anthropological thought and practice over the past several decades, and have provided a means of bridging anthropology's two dominant traditions. His genealogical method underscores how concepts and discourses emerge in relation to particular socio-cultural and historical contexts. His reconceptualization of power, where power is not external to

individual selves or groups but productive of them, and where power is neither concentrated nor vested in a sovereign or sovereign bodies, but is diffused and exercised through widespread practices and institutions that constitute disciplinary apparatuses. Foucault's work has highlighted and pointed to everyday practice, relations and activities as suffused and shaped by power, discursive formations and disciplinary apparatuses. Although Foucault's work does not necessarily emphasize the coherence or continuity of these realms, most anthropologists have focused on these aspects in drawing upon his work in lieu of focusing on the dynamism and fluidity of discourse, disciplines and power. A notable set of examples here are the works of Talal Asad, which tether Foucault's work to that of Alasdair MacIntyre in their formulation and analysis of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' (Asad, 1986).

My own conceptualization of moments draws on Foucault, but with recourse to Gilles Deleuze and to a lesser degree Ernst Bloch. In different ways, both point to the plurality, play and possibilities intrinsic to experiences, encounters, situations, utterances, etc. Gilles Deleuze proposes a conceptualization of ontology that is predicated on a radical conceptualization of difference. Rather than conceiving of ontology as the study of what there is, where scholarship involves "accounting in the most adequate fashion for the nature of what exists" and "to offer us the identify of what is [where] an identity requires conceptual stability" (May 2005: 17, 18), Deleuze proposes an ontology that focuses on difference rather than identity, one that "mov[es] beneath the stable world of

identities to a world of difference that at once produces those identities and shows them to be little more than the froth of what there is” (May 2005: 19). Deleuze’s understanding of difference is one that does not simply refer to the distinction between two identities, the negation of one identity, or to a lack, but rather, to difference in itself, a pure difference that exceeds and encompasses all identities, distinctions, and negations (May 2005: 21). Ernst Bloch’s work is predicated on a radical materialist, dynamic and processual understanding of the world, one “convey[ing] qualities such as mutability, provisionality, activity, motion and development” (Geoghegan 1996: 30-2). Through his ‘principle of hope’—discovering the possibilities latent in the present and actively, willfully fostering them--Bloch emphasizes the ‘not yet’ quality or ‘utopian’ quality intrinsic to experiences, utterances, activities, situations, etc. In contrast to both Deleuze and Bloch, my experience and conceptualization of moments do not necessarily entail a liberatory potential, but also point to ambivalences, and the difficulty of assessing the implications of newfound possibilities and the unexpected.

Moments marked Rosa, Sophia, Noura, and other domestic workers’ developing engagement and cultivation of Islamic sensibilities and practice. Their newfound Islamic pieties emerged gradually, punctuated by moments of piqued curiosity and quickened recognition. Their adoption of Islam was a fluid process, characterized by their reengagement and reworking of their relationships and everyday activities through Islamic precepts and practices. The outcomes of these reworkings—the forms of

subjectivities, relationships and belongings developing—were uncertain and tenuous, something my interlocutors were acutely aware of; an awareness they bore with both wariness and hopefulness as Noura and Sohpia's interchange illustrates so poignantly.

My own understanding of domestic workers' newfound practice of Islam was also marked by moments, ones constituting the bulk of the materials I draw upon in this dissertation. In thinking through and analyzing domestic workers' experiences, I argue that they not only necessitate our rethinking of moments, but they also necessitate our rethinking of categories of religious conversion and labour. Domestic workers emergent practice of Islam points to a complex—and unexpected—configuration of areas usually demarcated in terms of the political-economic and religious. Their experiences underscore the interrelations of these realms, an interrelation that is not predicated on subsumption or determination, but a more complicated form of imbrication. Domestic workers' experiences further underscore gendered dimensions of global processes today, most notably the importance of the household as a cosmopolitan space through which the feminization of transnational labour migration, and Islamic reform and dawa movements are produced and reproduced today.

1.6 Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Religion and Islam

Domestic workers' discussions of their newfound Islamic pieties differed significantly from other accounts circulating in Kuwait. The two most widespread

accounts focused on their relations with Kuwaiti households as leading to their development of Islamic sensibilities and practice: some argued domestic workers' were 'converting to Islam' because of the pressure brought to bear upon them by their employers, or because they believed it would lead to their better remuneration and treatment; other argued they were 'becoming Muslim' because of the activities of Kuwait's Islamic dawa movement, which has increasingly focused its reform efforts on familial and household relations, social spaces in which proper Muslims are produced and reproduced.

These accounts resonate with different theoretical approaches to the study of religion that suffuse the work of social theorists and Islamic studies scholars. Beginning with Karl Marx, one approach emphasizes the political-economic or functionalist determinants of religion. Marx's work is influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach, who argues that God is the outward projection of humanity's inner nature, and hence a construction through which humans come to worship and imprison themselves¹³. Marx, however, shifted the terms of analysis somewhat, arguing that religion is a human fabrication that produces and maintains the interests of the bourgeoisie and ruling class. As his oft-cited aphorism 'religion is the opiate of the masses' indicates, for Marx religion constitutes a super-ordinate form of ideology, one developing and reinscribing asymmetrical social relations that characterize particular historical circumstances and systems of material

¹³ see *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1851)

relations. The influence of Feuerbach is also marked in the works of Emile Durkheim. In 'Elementary Forms of Religion', a work informed by an evolutionary and teleological perspective, Durkheim argues there is a religious substrate to all societies. Through a discussion of Australian aborigine societies, he provides an originary account of religious phenomena. Religions, in both feeling and form, develop through a social grouping or societies' recognition and sense of itself as an organic whole, its sense of solidarity, which it project outwards, onto a totem or divinity, which are imbued with (ineffable) reverence and awe. The worship of these divinities further served as an ongoing means through which social solidarity among the peoples in a social group or society is produced and maintained.

Another approach to the study of religion focuses on how religious precepts and practices shape social relations and material circumstances. In 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,' Max Weber implicitly counters the Marxist thesis of the primacy of the base (historical material factors) over the superstructure (ideational realm). He argues that rather than marking a fundamental shift in the mode of production, capitalism stems from a particular practice of Protestantism. Calvinists believe in the doctrine of predestination: that God has decreed the salvation of some, the choice of whom we cannot know, and is independent of their own actions. This doctrine leads to a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness, from which the capitalist spirit is born. On an everyday level, this feeling of loneliness, what Weber describes as a

constant torment, leads individuals to regard themselves as part of the elect because a lack of certainty is said to indicate a lack of faith. The performance of good works and prosperity in worldly activity was seen as a sign (not means) of being one of the elect. Calvinism supplied the drive and moral energy of the capitalist entrepreneur. Believers strived to instantiate signs that indexed their having been chosen by God: sober, disciplined and industrious work (i.e. the 'protestant work ethic'), and the accumulation of wealth and capital. Cumulatively these beliefs and the actions they animated led to the emergence of capitalism, which gradually developed its own dynamic and inertia, separate from its initial Calvinist impetus. Capitalism became a self-functioning system, and without its animating spirit, an 'empty cage' the rest of us are subject to.

In 'Religion as a Cultural System', Clifford Geertz also discusses how religious meanings and beliefs animate social and material worlds. In contrast to Durkheim, Marx and Weber, however, he places emphasis on the cultural dimensions of religious analysis (1973: 89), rather than on how religious meanings and beliefs are related to systems of social-structural and psychological processes (Geertz 1973: 125). For Geertz, culture refers to "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Ibid). In particular, sacred symbols objectify a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their lives, their moral aesthetic style and mood, and synthesize their ethos with their world view—the way in which things function and the

are ordered in their world. As such, religions mutually reinforce a people's metaphysic with their style of life, and imbue both with "an aura of factuality" and authority (Geertz 1973: 90). Religious symbols not only provide a means through which different worlds become comprehensible and graspable, but they also shape these very worlds.

Both these approaches to the study of religion—ideational versus materialist—underpin scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies. Orientalist approaches to the study of Islam have predominated until recently. Beginning with scholars studying the sacred texts and the written works of Muslim scholars (e.g. Ernest Renan, Silvestre de Sacy), historians (e.g. Caussin de Perceval, William Muir), the writings of travelers and adventurers (e.g. Frances Burton, Flaubert), and continuing with the works of social scientists and religious studies scholars (e.g. Garcin de Tassy, Ernest Gellner, Clifford Geertz, Francis Robinson), Orientalist approaches essentialize Islam¹⁴, and cast it in a theoretical framework reminiscent of Geertz's system of signs and meanings, and Levi-Straussian structuralism. Islam is presented as a code stemming from the *sharia*'a that shapes Muslims' behavior and the nature of Muslim societies across space and time. Variations and differences among Muslim societies are often presented as adulterations and/or as the syncretic results that arise with Islam's diffusion into new socio-cultural terrain, and hence as 'impure' versions of Islam, or they are presented as differences in the degree of Muslim societies' adherence to Islamic principles.

¹⁴ Ironically, mirroring Islamist visions of what constitutes Islam.

These scholars' conceptualization of 'Islam' not only relates to their fixation and fetishization of the *sharia 'a* as numerous scholars have so ably discussed, but more fundamentally, it relates to their inability to historicize Islam in a meaningful way (Said, 1978, Gilsenan 1982, Das 1984, Asad 1986, Al-Azmeh 1993). One site where this inability becomes evident is Orientalists' recurring critique of what they refer to as 'Islamic historiography'—Muslim reformers accounts of Islamic history, especially the *salaf*, the nascent Muslim community that emerged at the time of Prophet Muhammad. As Fazlur Rahman explains, Orientalists accuse Muslim reformers of “subjective selectivity in the interests of furthering their own interpretations of, sometimes, violating the principles of intellectual integrity, of arguing for a foregone conclusion and of simple ‘romanticism’ and glorification of the past” (Rahman, 1966: 235). Orientalists argue that in extolling the time of Prophet Muhammad, ‘Islamic historiographers’ assume rather than analyse whether the nascent Muslim community lived out the Islamic ideal as presented in the *sharia 'a*. For Orientalists, ‘history’ is significant insofar as it points to a *lack* in different Muslim societies’ emulation of the ‘Islamic ideal’ (for good examples, please see Gibb 1932; Smith 1957).

In this respect, Orientalists' conception of 'history' is profoundly Platonic and Hegelian in nature. It is premised on a singular vision of 'the Islamic ideal', which like Plato's “forms[, is] ultimately and absolutely real, while the earthly manifestations,”

historic instantiations of this ‘Islamic ideal’ “are mere copies or imitations” (Patton, 2000: 32-3). In addition it is premised on the idea that these historic instantiations are “oriented towards reunification of absolute spirit,” in this case the ‘Islamic ideal’, “which has become divided or alienated from itself” (Patton, 2000: 31). More simply put, Orientalists and conventional accounts of Islam are premised on a singular vision of ‘Islam’, and moreover, they assume that this vision of ‘Islam’ not only persists throughout time, but that it is the preeminent historical force and analytical factor that accounts for the nature of Muslim societies.

Anthropologist Francis Robinson’s analysis of 19th century Indian Islamist movements illustrates this approach. His account is based on—in his words—“how Islamic history moves” (2000: 50). Islam, he tells us, “offers a pattern of perfection for man to follow...It is summed up in the law [i.e. *sharia*’*a*] in which the divine guidance for man is gathered together in a comprehensive system of rules designed to direct all human activity” (Robinson, 2000: 50). The extent to which Muslim societies realize this ‘pattern of perfection’, however, fluctuates historically, and Robinson argues that these fluctuations are a function of Muslims’ knowledge of Islamic law (2000: 50-2; 62). Simply put, “as knowledge of the law has grown more widespread, its provisions have tended to oust false practice” (Robinson, 2000: 50). Within this context, Robinson conceives of Islamist groups as a “great movement of revival and reform,” which has “mingled with great processes of economic, social, technological and political change to

produce substantial shifts in belief and behavior from those profoundly influenced by magic and superstition to those in which the formal requirements and understanding of Islam were more fully realized” (Robinson, 2000: 5). In other words, for Robinson, Islamist movements are both the manifestation of and vehicle through which the ‘Islamic pattern of perfection’ was being achieved in the late 19th century.

In contrast to Orientalist accounts that essentialize Islam, other accounts that try to historicize Islam tend to treat it as an empty signifier animated by economic or political processes that characterize different historical and societal contexts. Notable here are Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori’s account of ‘Muslim Politics’, which they argue “involves the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of the institutions...that produce and sustain them. The interpretation of symbols is played out against the background of an underlying framework that whether in the Muslim world or elsewhere, inevitably involves the management of competing, even clashing, interests” (1996: 6-7). Another example is analyses of the Iranian Revolution and the resurgence of Islam in Egypt that depict ‘Islam’ as a vehicle through which the disenfranchised articulate and attempt to redress their economic and political dislocation/subordination (see Beinin and Stork 1997). Although these analyses account for variations in Muslims’ conceptions and practice of Islam through space and time, they do so at the expense of accounting for how historical processes inform and are informed by ‘Islamic’ concepts and practices. In treating ‘Islam’ as a set of manipulable and empty

signifiers, they sidestep the issue of the significance of 'Islam' as it is understood and elaborated in different social and historical contexts.

Historian David Gilmartin's analysis of the emergence of Islamist movements during the colonial period illustrates this approach. His discussion is predicated on the idea that 'Islam' is not a fixed 'pattern of perfection', and he examines diversity in conceptions and practice of Islam at a given time, rather than diversity across time. Gilmartin does not analyse how the tradition of Islam is transformed through cycles of iteration or 'action in the world'. Instead, Gilmartin analyses how, to paraphrase the Comaroffs, the attempt to harness the indeterminacy of Islamic symbols animates both the exercise of power and the resistance to which it may give rise (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 18). He argues that Islamic reformers in the Punjab emerged not simply in opposition to the British colonial presence, but also in opposition to the Islamic religious elite and to form of Islam that was predominately practiced during the pre-colonial period. Thus, similar to the Comaroff's discussion in 'Of Revelation and Revolution', Gilmartin's analysis of Islamic reformers is based on the idea that Islamic tradition is a site of struggle which is animated by a "political sociology that emerges from their place in a system of relations," and that the groups involved try to gain hegemony over each other in and through Islamic tradition (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 18).

In face of the limitations of both ideational and historical-materialist approaches to the study of Islam, the difficulty that arises is how to conceptualize the significance of Muslims' understandings and elaboration of Islam without essentializing or explaining them away. Michael Gilson's work (e.g. 1982), based on over two decades of research in various Muslim societies (e.g. Yemen, Lebanon), provides one way of addressing this issue. He argues that by documenting the various practices of Islam in these places, we learn that Islam is not a single, rigidly bounded set of ideational or symbolic structures determining or interacting with other total structures, but is a *word* that identifies varying relations of practice, representation, symbol, concept and worldview within the same society and between different societies. One way of conceptualizing his approach is that he treats Islam as a set of concepts and practices that shape and are shaped by systems of social, political, and material relations in particular historical circumstances. A limitation of his approach, however, is that he relativizes Islam, and although more nuanced than Eickelman and Piscatori, his approach focuses more on how social and historical forces shape Islam than vice-versa.

Talal Asad presents another approach to the study of Islam and Muslim societies. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, most notably his genealogical approach, and his concept of power and discourse, as well as the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, specifically his discussion of traditions as marking different forms of reasoning and sets of argument and debates in shared languages and styles of discourse, Asad proposes that

we study Islam as a discursive tradition. He purposely eschews the concept of ‘religion’, and cautions against using it as a normative concept when analyzing Islamic traditions. Rather than a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon, Asad discusses how ‘religion’ is a concept and practice tied to the development of the modern West. He argues that those who study Muslim beliefs and practices need to understand the historical and socio-cultural milieus in which the term has emerged and been deployed. The predominant understanding of religion is one that “insists on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes by which meanings are constructed” (1993: 43). Asad argues that religion has come to be understood as an autonomous realm, a realm of human belief and practice that is autonomous and not reducible to any other. Through a discussion of Geertz’s universal definition of religion, he painstakingly points to how the form of religion that has come to predominate in the modern West—a privatized Protestant Christian understanding that prioritizes belief as a state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world—is consonant with liberal attempts to separate religion from other realms of endeavor and activity, most notably politics, law, and science, and is indicative of how marginal religion has become (and is treated as being, disciplined into becoming) in modern industrial society.

Instead of examining Islam through the concept of ‘religion’, Asad proposes we analyse Islam in terms of the concept ‘discursive tradition’. Within this framework, Islam is not simply treated as a set of symbols, concepts and precepts that program

behaviour and society, or that brings meaning to an otherwise alienating or bewildering universe, or that is subject to the vagaries of power relations and material-historical circumstances. Rather, Islam constitutes a set of traditions—historically situated discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice. These discourses are necessarily related to particular social and historical locations. As Asad tells us “these discourses relate conceptually to *a past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short term, or why it should be modified or abandoned) through *a present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions and social conditions). Tradition here does not necessarily consist of practices imitative of what was done in the past, nor does it encompass everything that Muslims do and say. What is crucial to the production and reproduction of tradition in the present is the practitioner’s conception of what is apt performance. Asad argues that arguments and conflicts over apt performance is part of Islamic discursive traditions, and the reasons why Orientalists and anthropologists have neglected this is because they marginalize the place of argument and reasoning surrounding traditional practices—they assume traditional practice excludes reasoning and requires unthinking conformity. Or, argument and conflict is generally represented as a sign of ‘tradition in crisis’. In his discussion, Asad does not assume or argue that these conflicts and arguments are underpinned by power relations—rather, he argues that strivings for apt performance necessarily entail differences in positions and arguments,

and that in different times, places, and populations, there may be different forms of Islamic reasoning—thus pointing to the diversity that underpins ‘Islamic tradition’.

Asad’s discussion of apt performance resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘becoming’. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy is premised on the idea that there are no fixed Platonic forms, ultimate foundations or original identities. In contrast to this ‘ontology of being’, they present an ‘ontology of becoming’, which as Patton explains “it is not being that returns but rather returning itself that constitutes being... It is not one thing which returns but rather returning is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity” (Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Patton, 2000: 31). Similarly, the ‘Islamic ideal’ striven for through apt performance is not something fixed or transcendent that determines the nature of Muslim societies; on the contrary, *it is an ideal these Muslims strive for and instantiate through their very practice and belief*. Furthermore, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, these instantiations “must not be taken to mean the return of the same”, i.e. the reproduction of past practice, “but rather the production of sameness through the returning of that which differs”, i.e. constant attempt to achieve proper practice in different times and spaces, which necessarily entails different instantiations and manifestation of proper practice (Patton, 2000: 35). Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘becoming’ thus helps us to account for the significance of Islamic ideal without essentializing Islam. Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘ontology of becoming’ also provides a more compelling account of differences among Muslim societies. Whereas an ‘ontology

of being' treats identity as primary, and difference as derivative, an 'ontology of becoming' treats difference as "the fundamental principle and the identity of objects is understood as something produced from the difference of which they are composed" (Patton, 2000: 34). Within this context, difference is not understood in terms of deviation from the Islamic ideal. It is not a lack. Rather, difference is the preexisting basis from which Muslims strive to establish commonalty in the form of their vision of 'true Islam'. This way of conceptualizing difference and commonalty is useful because unlike conventional accounts that presume apriori similarities among Muslim societies, it does not preclude other factors that constitute Muslim societies (e.g. economic, political, social and cultural processes, etc.). It points to how these factors are the essential bases from which Islamic ideals are conceived and enacted historically.

1.7 Two Limits of Conversion: Another Account of Domestic Workers' Newfound Islamic Practice and Pieties

My research on female migrant domestic workers in Kuwait who are adopting Islamic precepts and practices is indebted to Asad, who provides a sophisticated set of analytic tools to begin studying Muslim worlds, and who attunes us to how hegemonic ideas and practices about religion necessarily informs but need not overwrite our studies. My research is further inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Norman O. Brown in ways profound and ineffable (as the best sort of inspiration is wont to be). Both animate an idea—the plurality and possibilities of Muslim worlds perhaps best expressed in the lines

of Muhammad Iqbal's 'Javid-nama'—that my research on newly practicing Muslims' understandings and instantiations of Islam point to:

“the Koran—
a hundred new worlds live within its verses,
whole centuries are involved in its moments...
a believing servant himself is a sign of God,
every world to his breast is as a garment,
and when one world grows old upon his bosom
the Koran gives him another world!”

Over the course of my research, and as I detail in this dissertation, I found that my interlocutors provided different accounts of their newfound Islamic pieties than did others in Kuwait. Unlike those who frame domestic workers' experiences in terms of their 'conversion to Islam', my interlocutors were not preoccupied with the question of why they were converting to Islam. Rather than focusing on questions of motivation and sincerity, they were more concerned with what becoming Muslim entailed, and how Islamic precepts and practices were reshaping their relationships with their family and household members in Kuwait and in the places from which they migrated. I also came to realize that while some domestic workers had initially begun learning about Islam at the request or behest of their employers, or had begun attending halaqa gatherings and

dawa classes because these spaces provided them with unique opportunities to meet with women of similar linguistic and ethno-national backgrounds, these reasons did not obviate their developing interest or commitment to Islamic practice.

Through my research, I also learned that while many domestic workers conceptualized their practice of Islam in processual terms, ones consonant with accounts of their ‘becoming Muslim’, I found that their ideas and practice of Islam were not reducible to those of Islamic reformers and members of Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement. While halaqa gathering and Islamic dawa classes constituted important pedagogical spaces, these were not the most significant spaces through which domestic workers came to learn about and practice Islam. Rather, it was within Kuwaiti households, through their everyday experiences of living and working in these spaces, ones suffused with everyday Islamic practice, that domestic workers came to develop and instantiate their newfound Islamic pieties.

In analyzing the processes through which domestic workers become Muslim, I argue their experiences point to the limits of two forms of conversion—of religious conversion, and the conversion of domestic work into waged labour. In discussing their newfound pieties, my interlocutors often underscored continuities in their lives, and areas of resonance between Islam and their previous religious beliefs and practices. Rather than marking a radical departure or rejection of their previous lives and beliefs, their

newfound practice of Islam entailed a reworking of these realms. As Sophia articulated to Noura: they were becoming Muslim, not converting. My interlocutors' experiences within Kuwaiti households also underscore the limitations of conceiving of their work in terms of waged labour. The everyday work they undertook within Kuwaiti households, including cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and the elderly—entailed overlapping sets of social and economic relations that are not easily convertible into, or reducible to the terms of waged labour. Domestic workers' relations with their employers, including affective and patron-client relations, and economic relations of gifting and distribution, often eluded and exceeded that of labouring relations. Their experiences of living within the intimate spheres of Arabic-speaking, Muslim Kuwaitis, also involved newfound learning, and led to the formation of emergent subjectivities, habits, and sensibilities.

Marked by these two limits of conversion, domestic workers' newfound practice of Islam points to the importance of the household as a cosmopolitan space of work and activity, a dense space of social and economic relations, one in which Muslim subjects are produced and reproduced. Domestic workers' adoption of Islamic precepts and practices foreground the household as a space of confluence between the feminization of transnational labour migration and Islamic dawa, widespread political-economic and religious processes that constitute today's increasingly integrated world. Their experiences bring into sharper relief the material circumstances and processes that relate

to the formation of new religious subjectivities and movements today, political-economic processes that are not determinative of these religious movements, but that function in concert, and indicate areas of doubling, overlap and resonance between these two realms.

1.8 National versus Globalizing Forms of Muslim Belonging

Domestic workers' newfound pieties are cultivated through their everyday engagement with Islamic precepts and practices, a process through which they reengage and rework their existing relations and activities, one often leading to the reconfiguration of their familial and other forms of belonging. As I discuss in chapter 6, the form of Muslim belonging being promulgated by Kuwait's Islamic dawa movement encourages newly practicing Muslims to rework rather than reject their previous lives and relations. They promote a processual and globalizing form of Muslim belonging, one that encompasses rather than excludes other bases of belonging. This form of belonging contrasts with what I will call 'nationalized' form of Islam. By 'nationalized' I am not referring to how Islam is articulated in relation to particular nation-states (e.g. form of Islam practiced in Pakistan), but to how, with processes of colonial modernity, Islam has been conceived and configured into forms akin to the nation and nationalism.

In "Modern European and Muslim Explanations to Islam in South Asia", Peter Hardy discusses how Muslim rulers, their aides, historians, literati, and others in medieval India, although cognizant of the fact they lived among a predominantly non-

Muslim population, did not think the stability of Muslim rule, or the bases of their financial and political power were related to, much less dependent upon the size of their population relative to that of the broader population (1979). Before the introduction of the census by British colonialists, Muslims in South Asia had no means and did not think of themselves as an aggregate—much less an aggregate linked to a territory, political order or population. This changed with the advent of colonial modernity. Historian Gilmartin argues that with the introduction of the census and representative politics, Islamic groups and movements articulated along communal lines emerged (Gilmartin 1988). Van der Veer further argues that despite British colonial officials' conception of their activities in India as being secular, their subjects did not necessarily perceive them in this way. An unintended consequence of their colonial project is that they gave new impetus to religious traditions in South Asia such that resistance to colonial projects came to be articulated in religious terms.

Cumulatively, these changes fostered a new understanding of religious organizing, one resonant with the nation form. The nation is characterized by what Marcel Mauss calls a 'collective belief in homogeneity---where citizens supposedly stand equal within a collective social body that both encompasses and exceeds them. Benedict Anderson points to another characteristic of the nation: it is limited in form, both with reference to territory and membership such that individuals are either included or excluded, in or out. And finally, the nation is conceived as a collective social body that

both encompasses and exceeds citizens, a system that is perceived (or, pace Benedict Anderson, imagined), to have its origins in the past, and continues on largely unchanged through empty homogenous time. This idea of an originary order that persists through time resonates with Orientalist and essentialist accounts of Islam where Islam is conceived as a fixed static order, one that developed and was practiced in its 'pure' or 'true' form during the time of the Prophet, and where anything that differs from this is seen as a deviation or adulteration brought about through external influences. This conception of Islam is predicated on an ahistorical vision, where order is fixed, permanent and transcendent, and where history only marks periods of decline or the continuance of the 'pure' or 'true' forms. Fixed or essentialist understandings of Islam emerge and resonate with historical processes marked by conceptions of the nation. These understandings present a form of Muslim belonging that is digital in its logic (i.e. where you are either a Muslim or not), where all Muslims are conceived as being equal or commensurate (i.e. all are equally Muslim), where the Ummah is conceived as an unchanging pan-national or supra-national body that exceeds and encompasses all Muslims, and where divisions or difference are seen as indexing adulterations of this order.

National forms of Islam differ from globalizing forms in myriad ways. Islam is conceived as a dynamic order among those developing globalizing forms of Islam. Here, Islam is not conceived as a fixed or static order, a set of prescribed rules and practices to

be replicated, but rather as a set of precepts and practices instantiated through (not in spite of) particular understandings and material circumstances, and with reference to what Asad discussed in terms of ‘apt practice’ and Deleuze and Guattari in terms of ‘an ontology of becoming’. Globalizing Islam is also predicated on a different understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. It is not predicated on digital logic (you are or aren’t Muslim; you are in/out) but on analog logic characterized by a continuum, where everyone is seen as having latent Muslim potential, and where being Muslim is achieved through constant striving and effort. Differences among Muslims are not conceived as fracturing or polluting, but the basis from which solidarity develops. Unity and solidarity emerge through effort and work. Similar to Tsing’s argument in ‘Friction’, globalizing projects of Islam emerge through the ‘friction’ among groups, through the sticky materiality of practical encounters. The globalizing vision of Islam proposed by Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement is not seen to transcend difference and plurality, but works in and through them.

1.9 National Formations in Spaces of Global Interrelations

One of the forms of belonging domestic workers’ practice of Islam works in and through are national ones (i.e. related to their national citizenship and not to be confused with my previous discussion of Islam understood in national forms). Contrary to expectations of others in Kuwait, the Muslim forms of belonging domestic workers’ develop do not mitigate or challenge national forms of belonging—forms of belonging

that largely inform and structure these women's experiences in Kuwait¹⁵. Their experiences of developing newfound Islamic pieties are firmly situated within broader national and transnational socio-political landscapes and geographies, ones that come in and out of focus through scholarship on globalization and transnationalism.

One of the ironies of conducting research in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf is that the very rubrics—globalization and transnationalism—that have made this region legible and of interest to anthropologists in the late 20th century have also skewed our expectations and understandings of the region. Up until the late 1990s, this region largely fell off social scientific and anthropological maps. Unlike other parts of the Middle East and South-West Asia, this region was considered to be a political and civilizational backwater, at best a stop-off point for people heading elsewhere. Early accounts of travelers, scholars and colonial officials depict the region as being populated by a smattering of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples who eke out a meager existence in a harsh and unforgiving environment. The only areas mentioned at length, or with some modicum of interest are the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, or cities located on prominent trade routes, or coastal cities linking the region to peoples and places throughout the Indian Ocean.

¹⁵ Contrary to many foreign resident and migrants assumptions, domestic workers' becoming Muslim does not improve their chances of gaining Kuwaiti citizenship. Unlike Bahrain, where Sunni Muslims have a better chance of being granted citizenship, in Kuwait domestic workers can only be granted citizenship if they are married to a man with Kuwaiti citizenship.

With the end of the colonial and ‘protectorate’ era, and the emergence of sovereign nation-states, there has been a split in scholarly attention to the region. Anthropologists have largely focused on Oman and Yemen, where one finds ‘thick’ cultures unadulterated by Westernization, consumerism and processes of modernization¹⁶. In contrast, the oil-rich Arab Gulf States were considered to have ‘thin’ cultures, subject to radical transformations brought about through the advent of petrodollar economies and rapid, wide-scale state building processes. The oil-rich Arab Gulf states have largely fallen under the purview of demographers¹⁷, whose work focuses on the region’s shifting population of citizens and migrants, as political scientists, most notably international relations scholars, and economists whose works underline the importance of the region’s natural resources and geopolitical location to broader political-economic processes.

¹⁶ This include Wikan’s ethnography of Sohar, a town in Oman which she tells us is “uniquely representative of traditional Arabic civilization, almost untouched by modernization”. Her ethnography focuses on Omani women and gender relations, and complements her husband, Frederik Barth’s study of economic systems and relations of the village (their division of ethnographic labor is related to how spheres of village life are gendered in particular ways; they, like other husband/wife teams that conducted ethnographies in the Middle East (e.g. studies by the Ferneas) assume/inpute a great deal of assumptions, including that the public realm of men is where politics and economics happens, whereas the private sphere of women is where culture and social relations happen...again, longer debate and trajectory of ethnographic literature on the Middle East, which I don’t really have time to discuss but felt the need to/have flagged). Another example is Stephen Caton’s ethnography, in which he discusses how poetry is a means of conflict resolution and is inextricably part of political and social processes. A further example is Brinkley Messicks’ ethnography of Ibb, a village in the higlands of Yemen. His ethnography explores what he calls ‘textual domination’—the connections between literary processes behind the constitution of authority in texts, and the social and political processes involved in articulating the authority of texts—and how this intersects historically with other realms of authority and economic relations. A final example is Ann Meneley’s examination of patterns and practices of socialization and etiquette among women in the Yemeni town of Zabid, and how these patterns and practices are crucial to establishing their families’ honor and status.

¹⁷ Includes Nagi (1986), Shah (1997, 2000, 2002) and Kapiszewski (2001)

It is only recently¹⁸ with the ‘global turn’ in anthropology—and the increasing recognition that social and cultural formations are not locally bound, but are formed and reformed through global interrelations (e.g. Clifford 1994; Marcus 1995; Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Trouillot 2001, 2003)—that anthropological attention has slowly turned to the region. Although there is still a dearth of scholarly research, recent works have focused on the region’s cosmopolitan or global cities (e.g. Marchal 2005, also see Al-Rasheed 2005), transnational labour migrant populations (e.g. Ahmed 1981, 1984) and diasporic communities (e.g. Osella and Osella 2007, 2009, Gardener 2008; Vora 2008; Leonard 2000¹⁹).

¹⁸ Al-Rasheed argues that another reason for the dearth of qualitative and in-depth research on this region has to do with the multiple levels of restrictions in conducting research in/of the region, including stringent visa and research restrictions (e.g. Caton mentions how he had to abandon almost two years of work in Saudi Arabia because of said restrictions), the requirement that scholars have to affiliated to research institutions (that worked more to regulate and keep surveillance over foreign scholars/ reserachers), and self-censorship by scholars concerned about gaining reentry to their research sites or concerned about the potential impacts on their research subjects. I would add gender-based restrictions in terms of being able to conduct research, and qualify that in Kuwait censorship is not systematic, but random, which breeds its own particular dynamic and paranoia.

¹⁹ Examples here include Ahmed impressionistic accounts of Pakistanis’ experiences of living in the Gulf region (where he basically makes the point they go to the region to make money, experience discrimination where/when their Islamic identities are de-emphasized (assuming it would be apriori understood/function as the basis for solidarity), and discusses commonalties between the ‘tribal structures’ of UAE nationals and Pathans) . Another example is Karen Leonard’s work—two comparative analyses of Hyderabad Muslims’ experiences of residing in Dubai and Kuwait City. She argues that Kuwait has proved a more generative site for ‘religious revival’, conservative gender relations, and the reproduction of Hyderabad identity (migrants focused on their places of origin), whereas the cosmopolitan and liberal Dubai has proved generative to more egalitarian/liberal gender relations, and to the emergence of more cosmopolitan identities.

My work contributes to scholarship in three interconnected ways. I focus on migrant domestic workers, a socially and numerically significant population in the Gulf region that heretofore has been overlooked by researchers. I examine household and religious gatherings and classes, spaces of interactions among citizens and foreign residents and migrants in the Gulf, two interconnected populations that are usually analyzed separately. And I examine how national and diasporic fields of belonging are being shaped and reshaped by religious practices and forms of Muslim belonging.

Domestic workers experiences in Kuwait also contributes to our understanding of global and transnational processes by underscoring the ironies and seemingly contradictory processes that characterize the Arab Gulf states' increasing integration into contemporary global processes. As I discuss in chapter 1, Kuwait has longstanding interregional relations and connections with peoples and places throughout the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, and the peoples and places of present-day Iraq and Iran. With the advent of the city-state's petro-dollar economy, and the country's increasing integration into global commodity circulations and trade beginning in the late 1940s onwards, these interregional relations have been reconfigured. Fueled by petro-dollars and led by the ruling al-Sabah family, Kuwait has developed state institutions that focus primarily on welfare redistribution, and the formation and consolidation of the country's body of national citizens. Simultaneously, Kuwait's development and prosperity has been made possible by the work and contribution of large populations from throughout

the Arab world and Asia, and more recently East Africa. These populations have been excluded from formal belonging and citizenship, and are regarded—and disciplined—into temporary ‘migrant worker’ or ‘foreign resident’ populations.

These two tracks--the consolidation of Kuwait’s national body and the exclusion of its migrant workers and foreign residents from formal belonging—have been produced by two simultaneous tracks of governance and political economic-relations. Citizens have access and are subject to Kuwait’s welfare state. Through the country’s citizen-devolved kefala system, domestic workers and other migrant and foreign resident populations are largely governed by their kafeel, individual citizens who are their sponsor-employers in Kuwait. The bulk of migrant workers and foreign residents are employed in Kuwait’s market-driven private sector, a realm separated from and ceded to the country’s merchant class and citizenry by the Al-Sabah led state. As I discuss in chapter 3, historically Kuwait’s domestic work sector has fallen outside the purview of state or state-like institutions. It is only recently, through the efforts of a motley group of transnational actors, including labour recruitment agencies, foreign embassies, lawyers, and human rights workers that state and state-like institutions have come to play a more prominent role in this sector.

Domestic workers’ position as temporary migrants subject to their political-economic relations with their sponsor-employers, is one that has developed through

broader historical and political processes whereby Kuwait's longstanding interregional relations have been reconfigured into transnational ones. The country's increasing integration into global circuits of petro-chemicals, finance capital, migrant workers, and remittances has produced rather than simply consolidating exclusionary national belongings and state and state-like institutions as scholars of the region have argued (e.g. Dresch 2005, Al-Rasheed 2005, Leonard 2000). These processes further contrast with other accounts of transnationalism and globalization, which either point to the continued importance (e.g. Trouillot 2001) or to the dismantling (Hardt and Negri 2000) of national forms and state institutions in the face of global and transnational interrelations, rather than their formation as the case of Kuwait's domestic workers and domestic work sector illustrates.

1.10 Fieldwork and Methods

During my dissertation fieldwork in Kuwait, conducted between July-August 2004, February 2006-July 2007, and February 2008, I sought to learn why it is domestic workers become Muslim, why they were not preoccupied with articulating their reasons or motivations for becoming Muslim, and why it is domestic workers' accounts contrast so markedly with the accounts given by others in Kuwait. During the initial stages of my fieldwork, I assumed that if I spent more time in Kuwait, and developed long-term, in-depth relations with these domestic workers, they would feel comfortable sharing the 'true' or 'real' motivations for their newfound religious pieties with me, and that by

observing their activities and experiences in Kuwait, I would also be able to ascertain the reasons for their practice of Islam.

Regardless of the plans and itineraries that I charted before leaving for the field, my initial time in Kuwait was consumed with figuring out how to live and navigate the city-state as a single woman on a straightened budget (relatively speaking). I learned first-hand how living accommodations, transportation, and spaces of social interaction are highly segmented in Kuwait: divided between 1) those who belonged to, resided with and socialized through networks of households (including domestic workers, Kuwaitis, long-standing foreign residents); 2) recently arrived well-heeled foreign residents and expatriates living in housing complexes, individuals who largely socialize in commercially oriented public spaces (i.e. malls, restaurants, cafes); 3) so-called ‘bachelor workers’ or ‘migrant workers’, who live in dormitories or building complexes located in neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city, or in parts of the city that have otherwise been abandoned by others, and who are bused to and from their housing accommodations to their work places by the companies with whom they work; and 4) others such as myself, service industry workers, nurses, teachers, lower-middle class and middle-class foreign residents who existed in the interstices of these other spaces. In general, social interactions among different groups in Kuwait, and households and private spaces are largely channeled along national, ethnic and linguistic lines. Important exceptions are private spaces and households of Kuwaitis and well-heeled foreign residents who employ

migrant domestic workers. Plural interactions among different peoples and groups also take place in public arenas such as (in certain cases) work spaces, elite private schools, commercially oriented public places, certain public parks, and religious centers.

Within this social matrix, at first there were few spaces where I could meet with and get to know domestic workers. My entry into Kuwait's myriad social worlds was hampered by my lack of substantive connections (i.e. in the form of family members, work colleagues or long-standing friendships). As I was experiencing first-hand, in addition to the paucity of spaces of plural interaction, most people in Kuwait tend to be wary of individuals, most especially would-be-researchers with an odd story and even odder requests, who they do not have preexisting social connections with. In embarking on my research, it was therefore necessary for me to draw upon connections I had forged through my pre-dissertation research, including long-standing members of the Pakistani community who were linked to my own diasporic Pakistani friend and family networks, and Kuwaiti academics to whom I had been introduced in absentia by fellow scholars overseas. Through these connections, I was introduced to a quickly expanding and proliferating network of people, to whom I explained my research topic, and who I asked to introduce me to domestic workers they knew and/or members of the households for/with whom these women work. I was soon vetted by a panoply of sponsor-employers, and eventually introduced to the women working within their households. Only one employer that I met made it difficult, and defacto making it impossible for me to return to

their household and meet with the woman working there for reasons that were never explained to me. Overall, however, most acceded to my requests and did not place any overt²⁰ restrictions on my access to the women working within their household so long as the women themselves were willing to meet and speak with me and I did not interfere with their duties and work.

I decided to focus on female domestic workers not only because they constitute the overwhelming majority of household workers, but also because unlike male domestic workers²¹, they reside within the household (rather than in separate quarters), and because of gender-based restrictions on social interactions. I also decided to work with women who had migrated from India and Nepal²². I did so not only because I was able to communicate with them (many of these women spoke Hindi/Urdu²³), but also because of the resonances and points of overlap in their socio-cultural understandings and practices, and because of their different histories and structures of migration to Kuwait. Places and peoples in the Indian subcontinent have long-standing connections with what are today

²⁰ so long as I did not interfere in the household's functioning or domestic workers' work within the house, both of which I was careful not to do

²¹ Although I met with and developed ongoing conversations and rapport with a host of drivers and gardeners, including those who were fellow rooftop dwellers. I lived in a masculine space—in the rented former guard's rooftop quarters of a small apartment complex. From my rooftop perch I could often see and sometimes speak with guards, caretakers and drivers living on other roofs. On the street, however, they were circumspect not to speak with me for fear of damaging their and my own reputation.

²² I met and interacted with, as well as developed close friendships with domestic workers who had migrated from other places, most notably the Philippines and Sri Lanka, some of whom had taken shehadeh, others of whom were self-styled secularists or practiced a different religious tradition (i.e. Catholics, Baptists, Hindus and Buddhists)

²³ Although it may not have been our first languages. Many Nepali women had learned Hindi through Bollywood films and other Indian media.

the Arab Gulf states, and during the 20th century, Indians have constituted a large and longstanding population in Kuwait. The experiences of Indian nationals contrast markedly with those of the Nepalese, who began migrating in significant numbers to Kuwait beginning in the early 1990s.

As I started to learn about the experiences of my Indian and Nepali interlocutors, I discovered that many of them had obtained informational and instructional materials about Islam, and had attended various study circles and classes organized through Kuwait's Islamic dawa groups, and to a lesser degree, Islamic reform movements. To learn more about my interlocutor's experiences with these groups and movements, I therefore began attending activities organized by them, and interviewing their members. Over the course of my research, I spent time with the Ministry of Awqaf's Women's Outreach center to learn about their Project Barirah, a project focusing on raising awareness about the situation of domestic workers in Kuwait. I also spent time with an Islamic Inter-Cultural Awareness Center that caters largely to the country's expatriate population (i.e. from countries in North America and Europe); the women's center of an organization affiliated with Kuwait's *salafi* movement; and two weekly halaqa organized by women in my neighborhood. Most of my research, however, focus concentrated on the women's center of Kuwait's largest Islamic dawa movement (henceforth referred to as the women's center), a movement with links to numerous Islamic groups in Kuwait, including a prominent transnational Islamic social reform group, the Ikhwan Muslimin

(Muslim Brotherhood), as well as Islamic groups throughout the world (including Jamaat-i-Islam, The Tablighi Jamaat, the Islamic Charitable Centers of Nepal, Muslim Women's League in Sri Lanka, etc.). I focused on this women's center because it is most actively involved with Kuwait's foreign female migrant and resident populations. I attended the center's Hindi-Urdu "Salaat wa Taharaat classes for Newly Practicing Muslims"²⁴ for over 14 months. Simultaneously, as some of my interlocutors progressed with their learning, I followed them as they took the next level of courses, including ones that focused on *seerat* (the biography of Prophet Muhammad), *tajwid* (pronunciation and recitation of the Quran), *fiqh* (often translated as Islamic jurisprudence, but in the context of these classes it was translated as Islamic etiquette and practice), and *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis and interpretation). I also attended the center's course on "The Practice of Dawah" (in English), which was being taught for the first time. Through interviews and participant observation with these groups, I focused on learning their history, organization and composition; the pedagogical techniques they employed; the resources they offered and how they distributed them to members; and the ways in which domestic workers accessed and engaged with them. Through all of these activities I also became acquainted with, and developed relations with a further group of domestic workers who had converted to Islam. I also became part of a dense interconnected network of migrant women active in these Islamic groups.

²⁴ commonly referred to as either "Salaat wa Taharaat" or "New-Muslims Class"

Ten months into my research, I came to realize that few, if any of my existing interlocutors had more than piecemeal information about other actors and groups (i.e. aside from domestic workers and their sponsor-employers) involved with Kuwait's domestic work sector. Unable to find documentation or research on this sector²⁵, I therefore undertook a short sectoral analysis: I met with officials at embassies, staff and owners of labour recruitment agencies, journalists, lawyers, and human rights workers to learn more about the demographic history of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait; visa, legal, and contract-related systems and procedures; and different systems by which their activities are governed and policed in Kuwait. Through these activities, I became acquainted with and learned more about the experiences of domestic workers who had been exploited and/or abused by their sponsor-employers. I also developed relations with a further group of domestic workers, many of whom worked part-time and did not live with their sponsor-employers (commonly referred to as 'outside workers'), and who had not adopted Islamic precepts and practices.

In addition to all these sources, I also developed relations and collected data from domestic workers residing in my neighborhood. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I also traveled to Nepal to visit with some of my interlocutors who had returned back, or

²⁵ with the exception of Dr. Nasra Shah's extremely informative and important demographic research

who had traveled back to visit their families and communities temporarily²⁶. Most of my Nepalese interlocutors were from three regions in Nepal: the Katmandu valley, areas surrounding Pokhara, and the Jhapa district. I had hoped to meet with six interlocutors in total, 2 in each region, however, the two who were from the Katmandu valley were unreachable—one had disappeared, and one had migrated to Israel shortly before I arrived in the country.

In total I worked closely with 24 migrant domestic workers. When I was first introduced to them, and during our initial meetings, I often undertook structured and semi-structured interviews with them. I did so not only to learn about their life and migration trajectories, but also because many of them expected me, as a ‘journalist’, ‘book-writer’ and researcher²⁷ to do so. As I developed rapports and relationships with these women, our conversations became more informal. When possible, I met with and interviewed members of their household (i.e. sponsor-employers, fellow domestic workers), and their families and friends in Kuwait, and I conducted participant-observation in their households. With a few exceptions where my interlocutors declined

²⁶ As I discuss in Chapter 1 and 2, domestic workers are hired for contract cycles lasting two years. Between each contract cycle they are entitled to round-trip transportation to their countries of citizenship, and up to two months vacation time.

²⁷ I explained the nature of my project and my position as a doctoral student several times to my interlocutors, however, many continued to interpellate me as a ‘journalist’, ‘writer’ or ‘book-writer’.

to do so, I tape-recorded our interviews and conversations²⁸, and supplemented these recordings with notes and reflections recorded in my field journals.

My interactions and interrelations with my interlocutors varied widely, some of which related to age differences, facility with the language(s) we shared, and our respective circumstances and situations in Kuwait. I introduced myself as a researcher from Canada, studying in the US, and part of diasporic Paksitani networks. I also was up-front about my own religious background, and when asked, discussed with them the reasons I did not wear the hijab and abaya²⁹, or (in some cases) practice Islam in the same way that they, their sponsor-employers, and/or members of the Islamic movements did so. My situation and living conditions in Kuwait caught many of my interlocutors by surprise. Many of the women with whom I met, especially those I met early on, worked and resided in relatively affluent homes, and were driven by their employers or drivers if they were visiting friends or were out in public spaces. In contrast, except when using taxis at night, and except when some of my Kuwaiti interlocutors and friends made their family drivers' services available to me, I walked and used public transportation a great deal. I also resided in a modest apartment, one associated with male migrant workers (i.e. I lived in rooftop quarters formerly occupied by the building's maintenance workers and/or security guard). For workers living and working 'outside' Kuwaiti homes, my

²⁸ Many of my interlocutors allowed themselves to be recorded so long as I promised not to let anyone else listen to these recordings, and to destroy them once I no longer needed them.

²⁹ I only covered my head while inside mosques or while praying

living situation was comprehensible and resonant with their own. For domestic workers residing and working within prosperous Kuwaiti households, however, they were often shocked, dismayed or pitying about how I lived (i.e. where I lived, and living ‘alone’) and about how I commuted in Kuwait³⁰. Their assumptions about my situation and status—predicated on my being a doctoral student studying in the US, and having citizenship in North America—were jarred, dashed or tempered by seeing how I lived in Kuwait³¹. My living circumstances either provided a counterpoint, or were resonant with my interlocutors’ experiences in ways that helped me better foreground and understand how they experienced and navigated Kuwait.

1.11 Overview of the Dissertation

Kuwait has an interregional past and a transnational present, a dynamic crucial to understanding how it is in the face of the country’s longstanding and multi-layered cosmopolitan history, some peoples and populations are considered to be citizens, and others foreign residents and migrants. The formation of the Kuwaiti state and national body in the face of the country’s increasing integration into global relations and circulations is discussed in Chapter 2. Historically, Kuwait’s domestic work sector has

³⁰ For example, when one of my interlocutors, Santa/Sophia visited me, she was upfront about being glad she did not have to live where and how I did in Kuwait.

³¹ This, of course, in no way mitigates the deeply entrenched privileges and access to resources I have as a doctoral student and Canadian citizen.

I should also qualify that while domestic workers are subject to deeply entrenched asymmetrical relations with their sponsor-employers in Kuwait, a good number do not live in large rooms or suites as did some of my interlocutors.

largely fallen outside the direct purview of state or state-like institutions, and it is only recently, through the efforts of a motley group of transnational actors, including labour recruitment agencies, foreign embassies, lawyers, and human rights workers, that state and state-like institutions have come to play a more prominent role in this sector. I discuss these issues in chapter 3.

In chapter 4 I discuss the dialogical and globalizing nature of Kuwait's Islamic movement, a sprawling network of halaqa, classes, centers, mosques, and media outlets, linked to other Islamic groups in Kuwait and internationally, that has developed in relation to the presence of migrant workers and foreign residents in Kuwait. This dawa movement is also dialogical in its pedagogical approach and techniques: where members come to learn, instantiate and refine their understanding and practice of Islam in and through their everyday experiences. In Chapter 5, I discuss how domestic workers' work and relations within Kuwaiti households eludes and exceeds the category of waged labour. As materialist feminists, and more recent work on immaterial and affective labour have pointed to, domestic work is a realm of activity that is difficult to commensurate in terms of market calculations, one that necessarily involves, shapes and disciplines domestic workers' personality, sensibilities and dispositions. In Kuwait domestic work is also a realm of activity involving other forms of economic and social interrelations, including gifting, patron-clientelism, and (pseudo) familial relations, interrelations that develop not in spite of, but through domestic worker's activities within the

household. Understanding the household as a dense site of intimate and generative social and economic relations is crucial to understanding how these women come to adopt Islamic precepts and practices. In describing their experiences within the household, few of my interlocutors specifically mentioned or emphasized religious practices therein³². Islam was part of the background, a set of sensibilities and practices suffusing and inextricable from everyday household rhythms, part and parcel of Kuwaiti worlds within which they worked and lived.

In chapter 6 I discuss how the term ‘conversion’ fails to capture the particularities and specificities of domestic workers experiences. Their newfound religious experiences are marked not by the eventful or the extraordinary, but by the everyday and the mundane. Drawing on their stories, I describe how their newfound pieties are entwined with their daily activities and intimate relationships within the household. The process by which they come to adopt Islam is a slow and gradual one, where their awareness and appreciation of Islam deepens. Their experiences are marked not by a fundamental change in, or rejection of their previous lives, but point to a gradual recasting and reworking of their lives through Islamic precepts and practices, a process further facilitated by Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement. Chapter 7 unfurls a moment during a dawa class that illustrates the form of Muslim belonging that is developing through the activities of Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movemen

³² As one of my interlocutors who had lived and worked with the same Kuwaiti family for over forty years once stated to me, she did not “note it”.

2. From Interregional to Transnational Relations; or, the Production of Foreign Residents and Migrant Workers in Kuwait

2.1 Temporary Lawg

*Hum Idir-Udur nahin hain
Hum lawg, hum temporary hain*

*We are not here-there
We people, we are temporary
-Halima*

*Atti-beti, eik saal pehle aap ayetah?
Me asa ta
Me ayetah or sauwchoutah que dauw, mumken char sal idir tehroungi
Laaken zindagi asa heh ke me idi-ri hainh das saal
Ya Allah, das saal!
Mera makaan oudir hain aur **sakne hawn**
Daunauw jaga kabi kabi mera ghar*

*Atti-daughter, you came a year ago?
I was like that
I came thinking I'll stay two, maybe four years
But life has been such that I have been here ten years
Oh God, ten years!
My house is there and I live here
Both places are sometimes my home
-Mary.Maryam*

The domestic workers I came to know in Kuwait, whose stories, comments, conversations and experiences punctuate, weave through, and animate the following pages, all moved there. Whether over-seas, over-land, or through the skies, they all journeyed to Kuwait, a place that was to them, at least initially, a bewildering tangle of tongues/*zabaan* (languages), highways, villas, inscrutable customs, and unrelenting dust

and heat. Though strange, Kuwait was also familiar, a place glimpsed before through stories told by relatives and neighbors, through fragments of long-term and ongoing cross-Oceanic relations, and through meaningful, and sometimes mocking, hopes and dreams of prosperity.

To begin a discussion of the historical and socio-political processes that shape South Asian domestic workers' experiences in Kuwait with the observation that these women moved there, might at first appear obvious and trite. As migrants whose Kuwaiti civil identity cards indicate their *jinsiyyeh*¹ as 'Hindi', 'Nepali', or 'Ceyloni', these women carry with them the constant mark, the constant reminder of their being out of place. Existing work on labour migration, diasporic communities, and interregional Indian Ocean relations—works that partially chart these women's experiences—all revolve around the issue of movement and displacement, both in terms of mapping transnational trajectories that have developed through petro-dollar economies and late stage capitalism, and in terms of deepening our understanding of the circumstances and implications of these movements to emergent forms of economic relations, social belonging and political governance that comprise (and crosscut) our globalizing world.

In this chapter and next (Ch. 3) I also focus on the issue of displacement, but I shift the terms of analysis somewhat. Rather than focusing on displacement in terms of change or movement across geographical space and cultural place, I foreground the

¹ I explain the term '*jinsiyyeh*' more fully later in this chapter. The term is often translated as 'nationality' but it also carries with the further meaning of filiation and following.

temporal cast of my interlocutors' experiences of displacement, a temporal cast that attends to how, as labour migrants, they are constructed as a transient population; to how, as domestic workers, they constitute a provisional diaspora (Lan 2006: 21) and to how, as Halima, put it, they are considered, and consider themselves to be 'temporary lawg' (temporary people). Disciplinary practices and discourses about their 'temporariness' are predicated on several assumptions, namely that these women work in Kuwait for short durations of time, and that they are away from, and will return back to families and communities in the places from which they have migrated--peoples and places to which they are assumed to belong permanently. Reinscribing national and familial forms of belonging, these assumptions elide the ways in which domestic workers, as a population, are a *necessary structural* part of Kuwait's everyday functioning, they obfuscate the long-term engagements and effects of domestic workers' intimate imbrications with Kuwaiti families and households, and they elide other possibilities of belonging and relatedness that domestic workers experience and develop.

In my discussion of these issues, I slip between and entwine my interlocutors' experiences of migration with a broader socio-historical accounting of the ongoing but changing relations between peoples of the Indian subcontinent and the Arab Gulf States, and the emergence and fluid structuring of Kuwait's domestic work sector. In so doing, I explore the myriad ways through which South Asian migrant women working within Kuwaiti households come to be defined and disciplined as a temporary population—a temporal cast to their presence in Kuwait that is integral to their precarious and indeterminate economic, social and political positioning.

2.2 The Cusp of Transnationalism: Mary/Maryam’s Journey to Kuwait

Mary—who, twenty-seven years after moving to Kuwait, would insist on being called Maryam—was the most punctilious and systematic of my interlocutors. We first met in Rawda at an IPC *Salaat wa Taharaat* class two years after she “tawrasa changed” (changed a little) her name². Sitting next to her in one of the chairs that ringed our classroom, I remember glancing at her notebook and being struck by her manner of taking notes—each page was laid out in bands and blocks, columns and paragraphs so precise as to be geometric in their precision and arrangement. Mary/Maryam opened up a similar notebook several weeks later when I visited her at her home. It was our first formal interview, and she had prepared by writing out, in neat English, a chronology of important events in her life. For the next hour she recited them to me, and I—as she clearly expected me to do--duly recorded these in my own notebook.

They included:

September	14,	1949:	birth in N****
January	8	1950:	family move to L****
March	20,	1961:	Baba-ji accident in L****
July	23,	1968:	leave Bombay
August	4,	1968:	arrive Kuwait
May	8	1972:	marriage of Agnes
June	23,	1974:	marriage of Sara
		.	
		.	
		.	

² I will use the word Mary/Maryam for two reasons: my accounts about her experiences her track periods before and after she insisted on being called Maryam; also, in Kuwait there remained people who continued calling her Mary despite her oft-stated preference to be called Maryam.

Over the course of subsequent meetings, I asked Mary/Maryam to further describe these moments to me. Judging from her lengthy pause and quizzical expression, she was surprised at first—as surprised, no doubt, as I was by her chronology—but graciously accommodate my queries. Her responses were crisp and concise, focusing on recounting as accurately as she could important circumstances and activities related to these events. Rarely did she linger over details, or speak about—much less speculate over—what she and others felt and thought. There was a spare, elegant rhythm to her narration, a rhythm that was only occasionally disrupted or extended.

One such exception related to “July 23, 1968: leave Bombay”, her first journey to Kuwait. The tales she told related to this event, and in the act of retelling, interwove details that were tantalizingly evocative. During our conversations Mary/Maryam repeatedly (amidst sighs and pauses) mentioned how exhausted she had been that morning when she boarded the steamship. Bypassing the bustle of fellow passengers who were watching the port, then city, then harbour slip steadily and inexorably into the Indian Ocean, she made her way to the prow of the boat. Finding a nook where she could safely lay down her suitcase and sit for a while, she gazed out at the seemingly limitless expanse of glittering water. The respite was sorely needed. The weeks before had been busy and dizzying, drawing heavily on abilities and connections she had cultivated since “March 20, 1961: Baba-ji accident in L****”.

On that day, her father, a mason, was in the midst of unloading a lorry-full of building supplies when a large crate of bricks fell upon him, crushing both his legs. Upon his return to work six months later, the bones and muscles of his legs had ostensibly mended; however, Mary/Maryam's father found standing for extended periods of time excruciating, and ultimately impossible. He was unable to sustain long-term work. With no steady source of income, the doctors bills, the cost of medicines, the children's school fees, and the household's everyday expenses mounted and mounted. Mary/Maryam's family soon found themselves in spiraling debt.

Her parents were at a loss. Eleven years earlier, after converting to Catholicism, and finding their village no longer a hospitable place to live, Mary/Maryam's family moved to a village in the south, several hours outside of Bombay, with a thriving Christian community. In the face of her father's disability, their neighbors and church members proved sympathetic, and provided them with much needed support; however, long-term, the family had little recourse. Not having any familial or close enough relationships within the community, they had no access to ongoing means of support. As Mary/Maryam put it to me: "*hamara relationships oudor deep nahin ta. Zada madat nahin hosakta hai*" (our relationships there were not deep. a lot of care/concern was not possible).

To support her family, Mary/Maryam's mother began cleaning the homes of wealthy residents residing in their village and in the surrounding districts. The amount she earned was a pittance—far too meager to even cover the family's everyday expenses.

It thus fell to Mary/Maryam, the eldest of the three daughters, to help support the family. At the age of eleven she stopped attending school, and through church contacts, was placed with a well-to-do Christian household in Bombay. There she worked as a live-in servant, under the tutelage of a housekeeper and butler, stern taskmasters who brooked no insubordination. Mary/Maryam's life consisted of "shugh! kaam! work!³," interspersed with her mother's periodic visits on the weekend, and two or three times a year, short trips home where she could play with her sisters in the open fields.

Years passed and Mary/Maryam's scrupulously saved wages ("jingle-jangle churianh nahin khareedteh!"/ "I didn't buy jingle-jangle bangles!") were sufficient to cover the family's everyday expenses, however, with her sisters' school graduations and possible weddings looming, and with her father's tab at the village watering hole increasing, Mary/Maryam and her mother began looking into alternate ways for her to earn money. Her uncle Bobby suggested she consider finding work in Kuwait. The only member of Mary/Maryam's extended family to maintain relations with her parents after they had converted to Catholicism, Uncle Bobby's experiences both paralleled and starkly contrasted with that her own parents. Like her father, Uncle Bobby learned masonry skills, and he too decided to move from their village in the North, a place where as part of an unscheduled caste, he felt it would be impossible for him to prosper. Rather than moving to the village his sister and brother-in-law lived in, he decided to ply his trade in Bombay, and further afield in Bahrain and Kuwait from the mid-1960s onwards.

³ All three words for 'work', the first in Arabic, the second Hindi/Urdu, and the third English. Her utterance, like many of my interlocutors, underscore how poly-lingual and creolized conversations were in Kuwait.

While abroad, he heard through other migrants that there were families in the Arab Gulf states seeking to hire maids from India, a fact he relayed to his sister and niece during his next visit home.

Mary/Maryam began to make inquiries and soon learned of a family residing in her employer's neighborhood with connections to Kuwait. The husband was from a Kuwaiti merchant family with longstanding ties to Pune and Bombay. Dubbed the "Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah" by Mary/Maryam, he kept a home in Bombay, where his second wife, a Hyderabadi woman, and their children lived. He himself only resided in Bombay during the summers, and when next he came, Mary/Maryam and her father went to see him, and ask for his assistance. He told them of a respectable Kuwaiti family—a distributor with whom he worked, in need of a maid, and he helped Mary/Maryam establish correspondence with them in Arabic. After she agreed to terms with the family, Mary/Maryam's mother came to town to help her prepare for her trip. They had a passport made—involving a thrilling day of going to 'the studio', and several not so thrilling days dealing with the "bureaucracy-wallah" at the passport office. Mary/Maryam then applied for a visa and was screened at the Kuwaiti consulate—a nerve-wracking experience where she worried any misstep or breach of etiquette would disqualify her from receiving a visa. Her visa issued several weeks later, she and her mother visited the church she attended in town to receive blessing from her priest and to obtain a letter of introduction that she would present when she visited the Catholic church in Kuwait. And finally, dipping into the family's limited funds, Mary/Maryam and her mother went on several excursions to the bazaar, where they haggled down the prices for

a small used suitcase, serviceable clothing, sturdy sandals, a brush, hair-pins, and a glittering sari and delicate glass bangles for special occasions. Never before had Mary/Maryam purchased so much. Both before and during her ten-day long voyage she kept a vigilant eye on her suitcase-full of goods, and occasionally, when she thought no one was looking, she cracked open her suitcase long enough to peer at, or gently finger the fabrics inside. Hard-earned through years of work and saving, they were the only tangible links she had of a home rapidly receding with every roll and sway of her ship. Her newly-bought goods also carried with them refrains of her mother's counsel of how she should care for them, and how she should comport herself among the Arab-lawg, with whom she would be living for the next few years.

2.3 Tandem Formations: National/Transnational and State/Global

When Mary/Maryam embarked on her ten-day long voyage, she was among the first group of Indian women to travel (without their husbands or families) to the Arab Gulf states in search of work. Her journey was at the cusp of profound changes transforming the nature and scope of interrelations between the two regions. The Indian Ocean had long since supported travel and trade⁴, not just between the subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula but more expansively among communities in Persia, East Africa, and South-East Asia (see Abu-Lughod 1989; Al-Rasheed 2005; Anscombe 1997, 2005; Bose 2002, 2006; Chaudhuri 1989; Ghosh Magnus 1980, Ghosh 1992; Ho 2006; Onley 2005). Port cities along the coasts, including Zanzibar, Aden, Mucat, Bahrain, Surat and

⁴ involving the circulation of dates and pearls from the Gulf; rice, coffee, tea, spices, wood, cotton, smuggled gold from India; wood for the construction of boats and houses (including mangrove poles used for house construction whose length determined the size of rooms) from the East Coast of Africa, and later, manufactured goods including guns from Europe (Crystal 1992: 32)

Calicut, were home to cosmopolitan networks of merchants, pearlers, financiers, shopkeepers and artisans. As the presence of the “Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah” and his family points to, these networks were dense and well established, often involving the intimate, and intricate imbrication of languages, cultural traditions, marriages and kinship bonds. Relations were articulated not just through trade, but overlapping ties of gifting, loans and debt bondage, blood, social reciprocity, and legal systems.

Mary/Maryam’s migration was facilitated by these long-standing connections; however, her experiences also point to a series of transformations taking place in their form and nature. This was apparent upon her arrival in Kuwait. When she disembarked, spoke to immigration officials, and met her new employer and his son “Baba Ibrahim” and “Muhammad”, they all identified her “Al-Hindiyyeh” (Indian, feminine), an appellation that no longer referred (simply) to locality and place (i.e. where she was from), and to concomitant associations of language and cultural practice, but one that increasingly denoted nationality—jinsiyyeh—a form of belonging understood in homogenous and mutually exclusive terms, one that increasingly articulated relations among Kuwait’s citizenry and its foreign migrant and resident populations. As a noun indicative of a type of nationality/jinsiyyeh, rather than as an adjective referencing a region and its attendant socio-cultural forms, ‘Al-Hindiyyeh’ smoothed out differences among the people of India, and effaced the historical connections between the subcontinent and the residents of Kuwait. Although the majority of Kuwait’s residents had migrated from and maintained familial and trade connections inter-regionally, they

turned inwards towards Kuwait city and the Arabian Peninsula in articulating their national identity and myths.

In the decades prior to Mary/Maryam's arrival, a robust national imaginary had been developing in Kuwait, one that centered on the experiences of city residents who had migrated from the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, and on the city-state's emergence and endurance in the face of numerous historical challenges faced by its residents. This included accounts of the region's perennially harsh environment, the drying up of the city's water reservoirs leading to the importation of water from the Shatt al-Arab, plagues and epidemics that devastated the population, the collapse of the pearling industry, and the threats posed by foreign powers, whether these be attacks, trade embargoes, or the all-too- looming interest of the Ottomans, the Qajars, the al-Saud backed Ikhwan, or the British. Nationalist narratives extolled the city-state residents' resilience and hard-won autonomy in the face of these challenges. This autonomy, rather than residents' trans-regional connections, became the cornerstone of Kuwait's nationalist ethos. Unlike the far-flung, overlapping networks of the 'Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah', Kuwaitis horizons of belonging were increasingly articulated in national terms, a localized, Arabized and increasingly exclusionary form of belonging.

These nationalist narratives emerged in tandem with shifts in Kuwait's political economy, governance, and sovereignty—shifts brought about through the advent of oil. Prior to the development of its petro-dollar economy, Kuwait's rule was notable for the overlapping, often competing efforts of its elite (Crystal 1990: 2-5; 166). The city

consisted of a mosaic of ethnic (Arab, Persian, East African, Turkish, Kurdish, from the subcontinent, etc.), linguistic (ibid plus Urdu/Hindi, Gujarati, Hyderabad, etc.), and (to a lesser extent) religious groups (Sunni, Shii, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian) ruled by an Sunni Arab elite, descendants of tribes that had migrated to the region in the 18th century from the Najd region of the Arabian peninsula. Kuwait's governance was characterized by the interdependence of two groups of elite—the large merchant families and the Al-Sabah family. As employers, financiers, creditors, and patrons, the large merchant families held sway over large segments of the population. They also played an integral role in developing the city-state's public infrastructure and resources, including the establishment of schools, health clinics and a municipal council responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the public market, for building roads, and for supervising traffic, zoning and the construction of new buildings in the city (Crystal 1990: 48-60). In addition to improving the well-being of the city's residents and promoting industry and trade in the region, these projects provided an important means through which the merchants cultivated the support and loyalty of the populace.

Mary/Maryam's soon-to-be employer 'Baba Ibrahim's' life story was intricately connected with those of the "Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah's" family: this merchant had provided him with loans during a difficult period of business when 'Baba Ibrahim' was a young man, when the merchant was in town, 'Baba Ibrahim' would attend his diwaniyyeh, and the merchant was a supplier through which he received goods from Bombay to sell in his shop. For his wedding, 'Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah' gave 'Baba Ibrahim' some gold-embroidered silk, which was made into a bridal dress for his soon-to-be-wife.

Although they commanded a great deal of authority in Kuwait, the merchant families were focused on their trade, and unless directly related to their sphere of activities, were uninterested in undertaking the day-to-day adjudication and military protection of the city. These responsibilities were vested in the Al-Sabah family, whose activities were largely financed by the merchants. Relations among the merchant families, the Al-Sabah and the rest of the populace were mediated through a series of majlis and diwaniyeh. Forums of socio-political coordination and consultation organized along familial, trade and sectarian lines, these majlis and diwaniyeh were sites of intense political jockeying that both reflected and buttressed hierarchies among Kuwait's residents.

The late 1930s through the 1950s marked a time of tremendous political contestation and change in Kuwait. The advent of oil transformed the country's decentered hierarchical system of governance, and shifted the balance of power among its elite. As the group charged with Kuwait's foreign relations, the Al-Sabah were the intermediaries with whom the British negotiated oil concession and treaties, and as a consequence of this, the group who controlled and channeled the revenues generated by the rapidly burgeoning oil industry. This eventually ended the family's financial dependence on the merchants, and provided them with the resources to achieve political ascendancy in Kuwait. Through a series of complicated political maneuvers, and their resounding defeat of political factions led by prominent members of the merchant class that sought to unseat them and challenge their control over the country's oil wealth, the

Al-Sabah established themselves as the sovereign rulers of Kuwait (see Crystal 1990 and 1992). Led by the Jabir and Salim branches of the (now royal) family, descendants of Mubarak the Great (1896-1915), whose carefully redacted⁵ personal history became a cornerstone of Kuwait's national mythos, the Al-Sabah consolidated their rule through two major strategies.

First, they centralized existing state functions, and further developed and expanded the reach of the state. Drawing on Arab intelligentsia and functionaries that were recruited primarily from Egypt and among Palestinian refugees, Kuwait developed into a generous welfare state. The state provided citizens, such as 'Muhammad' and the other children of 'Baba Ibrahim' with access to free education (from primary to higher education levels), universal health care coverage, public sector jobs, retirement plans after 20 and 15 years of work for men and women respectively, periodic bonuses dependent upon the country's oil revenues, child allowances, and subsidies for marriage expenses, housing, utilities and foodstuffs (Longva 1997: 183-4). State institutions became an ever-present and necessary part of the citizenry's lives. As political historian Jill Crystal notes: "to get married and receive housing, to have children and receive money, to get an education, a job or a prescription filled, to walk down the street, you went through the state...the state was apparent everywhere in the new streets and houses as well as the ministries" (Crystal 2005: 167). State formation was the means through

⁵ He murdered his brothers in claiming the throne. These events were omitted from Kuwaiti history books and classes until relatively recently. Some of my Kuwaiti interlocutors mentioned learning about the death of Mubarak's brothers when reading about Kuwaiti history overseas.

which the Al-Sabah redistributed Kuwait's oil wealth, and in so doing, established clientelistic and disciplinary relations with the populace (Crystal 1990/2: 78). The nascent Kuwaiti state functioned through both disciplinary and sovereign and forms of power. In the form of education, health, housing, infrastructure and jobs, citizens' lives were enabled, shaped and ordered through the state. With these state resources and services "came the eyes of the state, now everywhere and nowhere. The gaze it cast was less a controlling gaze than an ordering one....Sets of very ordinary rules and norms came to order all aspects of life. Constant but diffuse scrutiny, not fear, kept people in line" (Crystal 2005: 167). Citizens' everyday experiences were inextricably bound to the state, a state controlled and ordered by the Al-Sabah, whose rule came to be seen as historically determined, inevitable and beneficent.

These relations were bolstered by the National Assembly (*Majlis al-Ummah*), a consultative-legislative body that further mediates relations between the ruling family and the Kuwaiti populace. The Nation Assembly is comprised of two groups—16 cabinet members that are appointed by the Emir and Prime Minister (himself appointed by the Emir, who is usually the crown-prince), and 50 general assembly members elected by the populace. Elected members are charged with representing their constituents, whether this be airing grievances or proposing policies and legislation; however, decision-making ultimately rests with the Emir and the Prime Minister, the Cabinet—both of which are appointed by the Emir. The Emir also has the constitutional prerogative to dissolve the National Assembly and call for new elections, and the un/extra-constitutional ability to suspend the National Assembly altogether—both of which have occurred frequently

throughout Kuwait's history, leading to alternating cycles of representation and repression—if the National Assembly is deemed too boisterous, or is seen to challenge the authority or sovereignty of the ruling Al-Sabah family and/or the Emir.

Through these state-making ventures the Al-Sabah supplanted the merchant elite as the primary financiers, employers and patrons of the Kuwaiti populace⁶. In the wake of attempts by some members of the merchant class to challenge the ruling family—by developing broad-based coalition movements organized around the Majlis al-Ummah, or by organizing political groups allied with pan-Arab movements in the Middle East (Crystal 1990, 1992)—and in order to stave off further such challenges, the ruling family made a tacit agreement with the merchant families (i.e. undocumented but widely understood/acknowledge and practiced; Crystal 1992: 8, 75). The merchant families ceded control of state functions and institutions, and the National Assembly to the Al-Sabah (i.e. they absented themselves from formal political spheres; Crystal 1992: 7)). In return the Al-Sabah yielded control of certain realms of economic activity—ones outside state distribution networks and services—to the merchants (Crystal 1992: 75). The Al-Sabah not only agreed to keep out of Kuwait's private sector, but through state policies and laws, they created conditions for the merchant class to dominate and prosper in this sector. Direct aid and protection was given to merchants to create enclave economies through state grants of land, money and concessions (Crystal 1992: 8). This arrangement was cemented through protective commercial laws, which restricted property and

⁶ 92% of Kuwait's population were employed by the state.

business ownership rights to nationals⁷ (Crystal 1992: 8, 90). Through these favorable conditions, the merchant class came to monopolise trade, construction and commercial services in Kuwait, spaces of authority and economic wealth that were complementary to the oil industry and state-driven petro-dollar redistribution networks (Crystal 1992: 8, 76, 90).

Preferential access to Kuwait's private sector, and access to resources provided by the Kuwaiti state were predicated on having Kuwaiti nationality and citizenship, the criteria for which became increasingly exclusionary in the mid-20th century. Kuwaiti nationality codes date from the late 1940s, but were only loosely applied until the late 1960s (Longva 2000: 185). In 1948 two decrees were issued defining who were to be considered 'originally Kuwaitis' (Kuwaiti bi-l-asl; Kuwait by 'origin'), a group that included any member of the ruling family (i.e. the Al-Sabah), those residing in Kuwait since 1899, children of Arab or Muslim men born in Kuwait, and the children of Kuwaiti men (State of Kuwait 1948, Order no. 3, 23-30). These decrees further stipulated that naturalization (Kuwaiti bi-l-tajannus) was possible for those who had resided in Kuwait for at least 10 years, were employed, and spoke Arabic (State of Kuwait 1948, Law No. 2, 35-49). In 1959 a further 'Nationality Law' was adopted in which the category 'originally Kuwaiti' was expanded to include descendents of those residing in Kuwait

⁷ The 1960 commercial companies law requires that 51% of all companies belong to Kuwaitis and stipulated that only Kuwaitis could own businesses or property outright. Foreign residents were banned from finance and banking. Import businesses, the ownership of commercial agencies, and the right to establish businesses were restricted to Kuwaitis. In addition, preference was given to locally produced goods and to Kuwaiti companies when it came to bids for state contracts. In general, this law primarily benefitted the merchant class of Kuwait (Crystal 1992: 90).

since 1920⁸ and where the category of children of born to Arab or Muslim men was dropped as a criteria for citizenship (Longva 2000: 185). Naturalization also became more limited--requiring residency for 15 years, and the total number limited to a maximum of 50 cases annually (Longva 2000: 185). . From the 1960 through to the early 1980s, the state adopted special policies that led to the naturalization of thousands of Bedouins (Bedu), who had previously lived nomadic lives, crossing between the borders of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, but who had increasingly been settling in Kuwait⁹ (Longva 2000: 187).

These state decrees, laws, and policies alternated between and blended the principles of *jus soli* (nationality/citizenship predicated on residency) and *jus sanguinis* (nationality/citizenship predicated on blood). Kuwaiti nationality initially encompassed and was extended to peoples based on their residency in the city-state. Elite families as well as the general populace, city-dwellers as well as the Bedouin (hadhar and bedu); Sunni, Shii, Christians and Jews (until most migrated/fled to Israel¹⁰), Arabs, Persians, Indians, were all granted citizenship and the rights and entitlements citizenship conferred. The city-state was diverse, fragmented, and intensely hierarchical. As a basis of identification and belonging, being 'Kuwaiti' did not necessarily have more purchase

⁸ This date marks the Battle of Jahra, an important event in Kuwait history where residents of the city repelled the Al-Saud led Ikhwan armies, thus preserving the city-state's independence from the rulers of present day Saudi Arabia.

⁹ Some argue the Al-Sabah granted citizenship to the Bedouin to redress the widening demographic gap between citizens and foreign residents in Kuwait, and to build their popular base of support against the increasingly vocal liberal opposition led by members of the merchant class.

¹⁰ Research has yet to be done about the reasons and circumstances whereby Kuwait's Jewish community migrated to Israel in the late 1940s.

than did any others. This situation changed with petro-dollar driven state-making processes, the consolidation of the Al-Sabah's rule and the nationalist myths they promulgated, the emergence of a merchant-led private sector that gave conferred special privileges and entitlements to Kuwaiti nationals, and the increased migration of populations that would come to be referred to as 'foreign workers' and 'expatriates'—populations who, although an integral part of the development of the Kuwaiti nation-state, were 'workers of the nation' rather than 'nation builders'. A concerted sense of national belonging was emerging, one based on two overlapping understandings. Nationality was understood in terms of 'jinsiyyah', from the root words 'jns', meaning 'to make alike, to assimilate, to naturalize', and the word 'jins' that translates as 'species, class, category, race, and recently, nation' (Longva 2000: 193). It was also understood in terms of 'taba'iyya', from the root words 'baya' meaning pledging oneself to a higher power, and translated as following or allegiance to a leader (Longva, 2000: 192). Kuwaiti nationality was thus understood in both horizontal and vertical terms—where nationals were parts of, and subject to the nation-state, a nation-state ruled by the Emir, who was often presented in patriarchal terms as the beneficent father of the nation (Shyrock 1997, Al-Mughni 1993, Goodwin 1995, Leonard 2000, Tetreault 2000).

During the 1960s, the principles of Kuwaiti nationality shifted from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis*. Naturalization became increasingly restricted, and with few exceptions¹¹, citizenship was extended only to the descendants of existing nationals. This extension

¹¹ Most notably with reference to the Bedouin and to individuals granted citizenship by Emiri decree (usually because of their service to the Al-Sabah and to Kuwait).

was an intrinsically gendered process, where only the children of male citizens were able to become citizens, a process based on the patrilineal understanding that belonging and citizenship are channeled through the father (Dresch 2005: 31). Kuwaiti nationality also began to carry racial overtones—where being Kuwaiti became synonymous with being ‘Arab’. This is evidenced by the national constitution, which proclaims: “Kuwait is an Arab State, independent and fully sovereign...the people of Kuwait are part of the Arab nation” (Onley 2005: 62). A concerted process was underway whereby interregional pasts were elided, and Arab genealogies emphasized (Crystal 1992: 52; Al-Rasheed 2005: 8; Onley 2005: 60, 62). This process was an integral means through which Kuwait’s ruling families, most of whom were descendants of migrants from the Najd region, entwined their family mythos with that of the Kuwait city-state and nation, thereby further consolidating their hegemony over Kuwait. Emphasizing Kuwait’s Arabness might also have reflected the Al-Sabah’s attempts to wrest authority and legitimacy away from the merchants—a group linked as much to far-flung interregional networks as they were to the interior of the Arabian Peninsula. Arabization might have also been part and parcel of a broader intellectual and political shift in which Kuwait’s intelligentsia began to look west-ward, to the rest of the Arab world, in articulating their aspirations and modernization-development projects, a process reflecting the expanding circulation and currency of Arab print media, the increasing trend of elite Kuwaiti children being sent overseas to study at universities in Cairo and Beirut, and the fact that many Kuwaiti educational institutions were developed and initially run by teachers and administrators from Egypt and the Sham region (Crystal 1992: 52).

Gendered, raced, Arab-ized, both horizontal and hierarchical in form, entailing access to a general welfare state, and preferential treatment in the private sector, Kuwaiti national belonging and citizenship gained greater currency among residents of the city-state over the course of the twentieth century. It also became increasingly exclusionary. By the 1960s, around the time Mary/Maryam and her uncle were migrating to Kuwait, naturalization was no longer possible for migrants, a population that was increasing in number and scope at the time. Large-scale migration to the region began in the 1930s, a process spurred by the advent of the oil industry and related infrastructural projects, and by the limited pool of educated, skilled workers available in Kuwait at the time.

British officials were initially the ones involved with recruiting and managing migrant workers. They had been granted this right based on the terms of the oil concessions, however, their decisions were still subject to the political approval of Kuwait's ruling elite. The British brought in workers from the Indian subcontinent, a group consisting of semi-skilled manual workers, skilled artisans, and clerical staff (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 565). The migration of these workers was channeled through a system of labour recruitment that had developed through the British colonial presence in the Indian subcontinent (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 568). In some parts of the Arab Gulf states, most notably Bahrain and Qatar, the local population protested against the higher salaries given to the Indian migrants, and to the higher-status occupations that they held (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 568). Based on existing research, it is unclear whether a similar situation developed in Kuwait. What is known is that in Kuwait the British constructed a racially stratified system of labour in which

workers' wages and working conditions varied according to their race and nationality. Reports indicate that the situation of workers from the subcontinent was a largely difficult one. In August 1948 the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) Indo-Pakistani Employees Association was formed (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 569). The association organized labour strikes to improve workers' wages and living conditions¹² (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 568). Attributing workers' activism to 'unrestrained nationalism', the British deported the striking workers (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 569). This in turn prompted the newly independent Indian government to send a 'Goodwill mission' in December 1948, comprised of the Indian Secretary General and Indian representative to the UN General Assembly to investigate the conditions of their compatriots working in Bahrain and Kuwait. The reports they produced was highly critical of the living conditions and the discriminatory attitudes towards Indians among the British staff, especially as experienced by those working with the KOC (Secombe and Lawless 1999: 569-70).

In the 1940s, presumably in response to the labour strikes, and linked to country's project of Arabization, Kuwait increasingly began to turn to Egypt and the Sham region for labour. Arabic-speaking intelligentsia from these regions were key to the development of the Kuwaiti state, especially with respect to the country's public educational system. From primary to higher education levels, a generation of Kuwaitis were educated by Egyptian and Palestinian teachers. Many of the country's doctors,

¹² reports mention workers being housed in tents, subject to sandstorms and Kuwait's intense heat

shopkeepers, restaurant managers, office clerks, and bureaucrats were also from the broader Arab world, and Egyptian and Yemeni men predominated in semi-skilled and artisanal trades. The demographics of migrants in Kuwait shifted again in the 1970s when increasing numbers of workers from South and Southeast Asia were recruited, primarily for semi-skilled occupations (e.g. construction work, artisanal trades), and then again in the late 1970s, a period that witnessed the wide-scale migration of women from South Asia, most of whom who worked as ‘maids’ within the households of Kuwaitis and well-to-do foreign residents. From 1975 to 1996, the number of Arab foreign migrants and residents in Kuwait fell from 80% to 33% (Kapiszewski, 2001: 62). The reasons for this shift are greatly debated. Some argue that Kuwait and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries began hiring non-Arabs because they “were perceived to pose less of a political threat and to be less inclined to interfere in their host country’s internal affairs” (Arnold and Shah 1986: 15; also see Nagi 1986: 54). Rulers of these countries were concerned that pan-Arab ideologies and movements might destabilize the authority and existing systems of governance in the GCC, a concern exemplified by the support and collaboration among many Palestinians within Kuwait of the Iraqi occupation during the first Gulf war. Other argue that after the rise of oil prices in 1973, the GCC states found themselves flush with capital, and embarked on large-scale infrastructural and building developments that were “labour-intensive” in nature. Arab markets were already exhausted, and the mobility of these workers was restricted. As a result, companies turned to South and Southeast Asia labour markets (Nagi 1986: 49-50, also see Birks and Sinclair 1979a). Workers from these countries were also perceived as being a cheaper, more docile labouring population than were Arabs, and because they lacked

linguistic or cultural affinities with Kuwaitis, it was assumed they would be reluctant to settle in the country permanently (Nagi 1986: 50-4).

In addition to changes in the composition of its migrant population, the early 1970s also marks the beginning of the period when Kuwait's foreign resident and migrant population began to exceed that of its citizenry. For almost 40 years, non-citizens have comprised the majority of the country's population¹³. Today, it is estimated that foreign residents and migrants comprise two-thirds of the country's total population. Although a long-standing, widespread and integral part of Kuwait, this population has been regarded and concerted attempts have been made to discipline them into a temporary, transient population (Longva 1997: 44; Nagi 1986: 50). Whether they are recruited as domestic workers, construction workers, doctors or engineers, migrants usually hold limited term contracts (typically two years), and come on two-year residency and work visas subject to renewal. Work contracts usually include health and dental insurance (universal coverage is available in Kuwait, employers have to pay initial fees), housing, in-country visa costs, and return flights to the places from which they have migrated. Non-citizens are not permitted to invest in land, housing, or have majority ownership in businesses. Their work contracts and living circumstances in Kuwait are structured in a manner that encourages their savings (there are no income or sales taxes in Kuwait), and their accumulation of easily portable and transferable forms of capital—all to ensure their return migration or further migration to other more desirable and permanent destinations,

¹³ Except in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, when the majority of Kuwait's Palestinian population, estimated at 300,000 were expelled, and just before other migrants and foreign residents who had fled the war had returned back, or were replaced by other migrants.

such as North America, Australia and Europe. This infrastructure—supporting impermanence rather than residence—is further bolstered by restrictions hindering migrants’ ability to sponsor family members and establish their own households in Kuwait. Workers must receive a minimum wage of 250 dinars per month (approximately \$850 USD) to sponsor a family member’s residency in Kuwait¹⁴. This salary threshold effectively bars working class and service industry migrants from bringing family members to Kuwait, and ensures the production of large populations of the country’s so-called ‘bachelor workers’ and ‘single lady workers’. Family sponsorship systems are also highly gendered: parents and daughters of foreign residents and migrants can be sponsored; however sons over the age of 18 cannot be sponsored. Women may not sponsor their spouses unless they procure their own employment. In addition, unless paid for or subsidized by employers, the cost of sending children to private schools is higher for foreign residents and migrants in Kuwait than are similar costs in their home countries, a difference that has effectively discouraged many from moving their families (Leonard 2000: 217; Nagi 1986: 52). Cumulatively, these contracts and conditions have attempted to bolster migrants’ transience and experience of temporariness in Kuwait

Like many places throughout the world, Kuwait has experienced—and benefited from—wide-scale transnational migration under late-stage capitalism. For decades, Kuwait has developed global interrelations, mediated through the circulation of bodies,

¹⁴ This amount has decreased. In 2004, the minimum threshold was 400 dinars. To get a sense of the scale of this amount, public sector employees in Kuwait earn 90 dinars per month, the average salary of a domestic worker is 45 dinars per month, and for construction or semi-skilled labourers it is 60 dinars. One notable exception to this are school-teachers, who exempted from this law.

goods, and capital, with communities and countries throughout the world. Kuwait's experiences of transnationalism and globalization, however, belie those who argue these processes entail the dissolution of the state, and national forms of belonging. The country's particular history of petro-dollar fueled political-economic development and state making has forged, consolidated and continually reinscribes national forms of belonging and exclusionary citizenship. For both citizens—subjects of and to a national imaginary promulgated by a generous welfare state, and foreign residents and migrants—disciplined as a transient and temporary population through contract and living conditions, their experiences of globalization and transnational relations in Kuwait have, as Paul Dresch has pointed out, marked a “tightening¹⁵ of self-definition that runs counter to facile talk among Western-domiciled elites of diaspora, creolisation, and transnationalism” (2005: 24; also see Al-Rasheed 2005: 8-11).

If we return back to Mary/Maryam, and her description of her disembarkment at Kuwait city's port in 1968, we remember that she was identified first and foremost as “Hindiyyeh”. Mary/Maryam migrated to Kuwait at a time of profound transformation, when the interregional interrelations between Kuwait and the Indian subcontinent were being reworked, reformed and rearticulated. These changes were marked in how the appellation ‘Hindiyyeh’ was understood. When she met with immigration officials and her employers for the first time, Mary/Maryam experienced ‘Hindiyyeh’ not as a term referring to a geographical place and its associated cultural practices and languages, ones

¹⁵ I would add that in the context of Kuwait it doesn't just entail the tightening, but the production of these forms of belonging and subjectivity.

meaningfully and intimately imbricated historically with that of ‘Kuwaiti’, but as a form of a type of citizenship understood to be separate and mutually exclusive of ‘Kuwaiti’, a form of belonging in which the plurality and cacophony of peoples on board her steamship were smoothed into flat horizon of belonging; a form of belonging that channeled her access to resources and wealth in Kuwait and her living circumstances, an appellation that despite historical and ongoing interregional interactions across the Indian Ocean, and despite the many years she would spend in Kuwait, marked her as a transient and temporary presence in Kuwait.

3. Global Productions of State and State-Like Institutions

3.1 Pregnant Silences

Unlike Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara was not interested in recounting details of her trips to Kuwait—something she made quite clear to me during our first few meetings:

“why do you keep asking about this? I start from my village and come here, or I start here and go back there. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. *Bas. Story finish.*”

At the time, I thought she was reluctant to discuss her trips because she had forgotten details about them, or thought them unimportant. As I started leaning more about Kuwait’s transnational domestic worker sector, and learned more about Sumitra/Sara’s and my other interlocutors’ experiences of travel and migration, I came to realize that her reluctance—her silence—instead indexed a crucial dimension of this sector.

Emerging in the early 1970s, but expanding rapidly over the last decade (late 1990s-late 2000s), Kuwait’s domestic work sector is a fluid realm whose actors, networks, and bureaucratic procedures often operate in the shadowy interstices of a number of local and transnational juridico-political systems, interstices sometimes shading into illegality. In the following chapter I trace the contours of this sector through

my interlocutors' experiences, information buttressed by interviews conducted and information collected from embassy officials, labour agency workers, human rights advocates, ministry officers, lawyers, police officers, and journalists.

Falling outside existing labour laws and largely ignored (until very recently) by policy makers and government officials—both in Kuwait and labour-sending countries—one might assume that without government regulation, paid domestic work is the epitome of neoliberal forms of economic relations—subject only to the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. However, as socialist feminists, and now theorists of immaterial and affective labour have long pointed out, domestic work has historically fallen out of, or has fit awkwardly within market calculations and commodity economies. As a result of all of these factors, I initially conceived of domestic work as a realm of exception, a realm excluded yet productive of existing national and transnational juridico-political systems, of Kuwait's rentier, state driven welfare economy, as well as of its neoliberal merchant and migrant driven market economy. I thought domestic workers' experiences of exploitation and abuse (as I discuss below, estimated to affect 7-10% of domestic workers, where the majority of complaints are related to salary disputes) resulted from their being excluded from these political and economic systems, and that the only way of redressing the problems they encountered was by including them in these systems (e.g. include them in existing labour laws, regulate their migration and pay). When I learned that many such attempts had been made, but were largely unsuccessful, I started to speculate that the continued problems experienced by domestic workers in Kuwait, and

the inability to reform political and economic systems to their benefit had to do with the inherent contradictions of including that which previously had been a necessary exclusion as discussed by Agamben¹.

In learning, compiling, and mulling over my informants' experiences, and comparing these with the accounts of journalists and officials involved in Kuwait's domestic work sector, I started to realize that my understanding was predicated on the assumption that legal systems and market economic systems are the only—or the only efficacious—political and economic organizing principles. This perspective assumes or 'all-or-nothing' type scenario, emptying and eliding other forms of socio-political governance, and forms of economic distribution and circulation that my research with domestic workers points to, other forms that are not apart from, but complicatedly imbricated with juridico-political and market systems.

When Sumitra/Sara and I began discussing the circumstances leading to her migration to Kuwait, I initially assumed she was reluctant to talk about her journeying to Kuwait because she had forgotten or found the details unworthy of mention. I didn't realize that her silences were pregnant ones, indexing her apprehension of mentioning realms of activity that are ambiguously legal and moreover, that her experiences of

¹ The difficulty that arises with their inclusion into existing legal and market economic systems has to do with the fact that, similar to Agamben's discussion of bios in relation to the polis, domestic workers constitute the nomos, the necessary exception that produces and reproduces these legal and market economic systems, and their inclusion was result in the exacerbation of the problems they experience (i.e. contradictory process augmenting the abuse and exploitation).

Kuwait's domestic work sector—of dealing with labour agents, embassy officials, officers at the Ministry of Interior, etc.—were not as significant to her, or worth discussing in depth as much as were her experiences in the household within which she worked, and her relationships with fellow domestic workers and her employers.

In this chapter, I begin by discussing the circumstances of my first meeting with Sumitra/Sara, one facilitated and channeled by relatives of her employers. As we shall see, meetings such as these were not incidental. In Kuwait employers play a primary role in the governance of migrant domestic workers. After describing my own experience of being vetted by Sumitra/Sara's employers, I then discuss the broader social and political processes that have produced a system whereby the relationship between domestic workers and their employers has become the most important set of political-economic relations shaping these migrant women's experiences in Kuwait. Through Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara, Santa/Sophia, and Mercy/Rahman's experiences, I then discuss the roles played by other actors and institutions involved in Kuwait's domestic work sector.

3.2 Household Vetting and Governance: Kafeel in Kuwait

The events of my first meeting with Sumitra/Sara were overwhelming, bewildering and discomfiting to me. Those were early days in my research, well before I had begun mapping out my interlocutors' experiences of migration and work, and tracing the contours of Kuwait's domestic work sector, where every detail, every feeling, even

moment was written down, puzzled over, and analyzed, but still felt like flotsam, bobbing up and down in waters whose depth and currents remained mysterious. I was out of my depth.

We were first introduced by Shaima, a member of the extended family with whom Sumitra/Sara worked. Shaima had heard about my research through mutual friends, and immediately suggested I meet with Sumitra/Sara:

“She would be perfect for your research. Her story is really moving...

Perfect, that is, if she’ll talk to you.

Let’s see.

Join us on *jumaa* [Friday], and *inshallah* [God-willing], we’ll see.”

Intrigued and a little apprehensive, the following Friday I joined Shaima, who along with her parents, uncles, aunts and cousins, was visiting ‘Grands’ place’—a large sprawling compound where her grandparents, great-uncles and many of her great-aunts lived. The compound was located in one of Kuwait’s oldest and most exclusive neighborhoods, a neighborhood located not far past the first ring road, a road tracing the path of Kuwait’s historic defense wall. With the onset of Kuwait’s petro-fuelled development, the first ring road became less of a marker of enclosure and containment than of growth—of successive waves of urban development radiating outwards from its path. Within this geography of growth, ‘Grand’s place’ was located close to the center.

Over the tips of the trees, and through gaps in the otherwise villa-ed horizon of the neighborhood, I could see the shimmering glass of skyscrapers in the city center.

As we made our approach, Shaima and I circled a ring of bushes and stonewalls, verdant and stalwart barriers punctuated only by a gate and by a driveway overhung and flanked by a large garage. We were a little late, so Shaima directed us quickly through the compound to the place where her family had gathered. ‘Grands’ place’ was quietly impressive, consisting of several villas that were interconnected by a series of courtyards and gardens. The architecture and décor were eclectic. Rushing through, I caught glimpses of a blue-tiled and fresco-ed solarium that would not be out of place in Isphahan; a diwaniyyeh whose spare stucco walls contrasted with the room’s intricately carved wood benches and gaily striped cushions; a sleek modernist building made of striations of stone and glass; a cavernous kitchen eminently functional in its design; and a colorfully tiled sitting area that could easily provide a backdrop for an Almodovar film.

‘Grands’ place’s’ panoply of styles, understated affluence, and location in one of Kuwait’s oldest and most exclusive neighborhoods² were all visible, physical, manifestations of what I would discover over the following years: Shaima was from a branch of the al-****, a cosmopolitan and influential family in Kuwait. Historically, the al-**** had maintained trade and familial ties with Basra and the coastal areas of present-day Iran. Since the 1940s, however, their branch of the family had shifted away from

² Families with homes in areas ringing Kuwait’s city center tended to be of the political and economic elite of the country.

commercial activities, and become an integral part of Kuwait's state-building efforts. No longer trading, the family continued to travel, mainly for educational purposes. Funded largely by state scholarships, both male and female members of the family were sent abroad to study at educational institutions throughout Egypt, Lebanon, Germany, England, and the US. A part of Kuwait's small but growing intelligentsia, members of the al-**** had held ambassadorial posts abroad, deanships at local universities, leadership positions in many of the country's social organizations³, as well as key positions within government bureaucracies.

Every Friday after the midday prayers, members of the al-**** assembled at their 'Grands' home'. These afternoons provided occasions where family members, young and old, male and female, boisterous and reticent, successful and not-so-successful, could meet with one another, share their news, tell jokes, debate politics, gossip, eat, and eat some more. When Shaima and I joined them that afternoon, the room was thrumming with activity and conversation.

In the middle of the room, seated neatly on the floor was a young man. Gathered around him were a group of children to whom he was giving instructions on how to play the guitar. A little further away, towards the back, two grave grandfatherly figures were being introduced to their young relative's doll. Closer to the entrance, and sometimes

³ As discussed by Crystal (1990, 1992) and Al-Mughni, and Tetreault (2005), these social organizations (e.g. Graduates society, Women Social and Cultural Society) were important socio-political activist centers that played a role in lobbying the government and shaping public opinion.

spilling into the hallways, which afforded them some measure of privacy, a group of young dishdasha-clad men were teasing and surreptitiously flirting with a group of giggling women. Coming in and out of the room, their arms laden, and then emptied of dishes of steamy, aromatic food, jugs of ice-cold water, and trays of sticky sweets, a group of Filipina, Indonesian and South Indian domestic workers were setting up the buffet-style lunch. Although she was the head cook, Sumitra/Sara was not among them. She had Fridays off, and on that particular Friday, she and her husband had gone to visit some friends. They would be returning shortly, and until then, Shaima and her family asked me to join them for lunch, an opportunity for them to learn more about my research. A round of food and pleasantries later, their questions started in earnest.

Shaima's mother began by asking me about the circumstances bringing me to Kuwait. After teasing me about my 'Libnani-Urdu-English Arabic', her uncle followed up by asking how it is I had learned about domestic work and Islamic dawa in Kuwait, and why I chose to pursue this research topic. Another aunt asked me whether anyone else was involved in my research, whether my advisors were directing my project from afar, who had funded my research to Kuwait, and what I intended to do with the material that I gathered. I addressed these and other questions as best as I could. I shared with them, as succinctly as possible the somewhat circuitous path leading me to Kuwait and to researching migrant domestic workers who were developing newfound Islamic pieties. I shared with them my own stories leading me (literally) to their door.

The early stages of my research⁴ were punctuated by many such moments—initial meetings with potential interlocutors wary about participating in my research, who I needed to reassure about my motivations and intentions. While sipping tea, and introducing myself as well as my project, I was nervously aware how fleeting—yet consequential—were my responses, utterances, gestures and comportment during these moments. Early on, I was quite apprehensive that employers such as the al-**** would decline/refuse⁵ to allow me to meet with the women working within their households, and other members of their households. I assumed that they would be both sensitive and defensive about the issue of migrant domestic workers, a matter regularly reported about by the international press and human rights organizations, and finding myself in their homes, meeting with them, I also realized how strange and presumptuous was my request to gain access to their intimate, everyday spaces.

My apprehensions and assumptions were somewhat accurate, but I underestimated the breadth of their responses. One employer with whom I met challenged me on the research methods I envisioned using—most notably my use of semi-structured interviews—calling them scientifically unsound because I would have no way of distinguishing opinion from fact. Some, like the al-**** were keenly aware of the Orientalism undergirding much of the scholarship and the international news media's

⁴ As I discuss in the introduction, initially I was introduced to my initial group of interlocutors through their sponsor-employers, and/or family and friends of their sponsor-employers. As my networks proliferated, I met with and developed relations with domestic workers through other channels.

⁵ rarely would anyone outright refuse, but politely curtail the scope of interactions, or make numerous excuses, such as being too busy, etc.

coverage of the region, most especially as it related to the situation of migrant domestic workers. As a fellow ‘Easterner’, a fellow Muslim—but one who had been raised and was studying in North America—these meetings gave many employers the opportunity to quiz, and often challenge me about the assumptions undergirding my work. Most employers, though, were more concerned that I not repeat household secrets and gossip to others in Kuwait—worrying more about the immediate ramifications about the local, rather than transnational circulation of the information I sought to learn.

Initially, I conceived of these meetings as required formalities. Discussions with employers provided them with the opportunity to ascertain my respectability and trustworthiness—a vetting process necessary before allowing me to visit their homes and develop what I hoped would be ongoing relationships with members of their household. What I was not fully cognizant of then, and what became clear as I began compiling my fieldnotes, was the way in which these meetings also provided spaces where employers explicitly articulated their own understandings of domestic workers’ experiences in Kuwait, and the country’s domestic work sector. Most focused on how they went about hiring maids, how they obtained their iqamas what their responsibilities as a kefala entailed, and in some cases, their day-to-day interactions and relationships with domestic workers. Noticeably absent, even among members of Kuwait’s intelligentsia such as the al-****, many of whom were a part of social committees, state ministries, international governmental organizations, and human rights groups, was an awareness, of actors, institutions and processes outside Kuwait’s kefala system that were involved in the

adjudication and governance of migrant domestic workers. These discussions with the al-**** and others constituted instances where employers not only exercised their responsibility and prerogative as the kefala of the women working within their households, but in terms of their utterances, in terms of what they focused upon in our discussions, these instances also indexed the overriding importance of the kefala system to Kuwait's domestic work sector. In retrospect, I came to realize how these initial meetings were not just simple introductions or mere formalities, but were moments of iteration of the kefala system, a citizen-devolved system of governance undergirding migrant domestic work in Kuwait.

Similar to other foreign residents and migrants, in order for Sumitra/Sara and other migrant domestic workers to live and work in Kuwait they must enter into a kefala arrangement. At its core the kefala system is a set of triangulating relationships, agreements and procedures among migrants, citizens, and—usually at a silent, shadowy removal—the state. Migrants are granted the right to reside and work in Kuwait through a kafeel, a term often translated as ‘sponsor’ (see Longva 1997, 1999, also Crystal 2005), but which also carries the meaning ‘guarantor’ (Foster 2001). The kafeel is able to procure the necessary visas for migrants by adhering to a set of conditions and stipulations set by the state. Most notably, the kafeel must 1) employ the migrants whom they are sponsoring for the duration of their stay in Kuwait; 2) repatriate migrants at their own (kafeel's) expense upon the termination of the contract; and 3) monitor and inform the Ministry of Interior if there are any changes in the migrants' labour contract, place of

residence, or civil status (Longva 1999: 20-1). If the migrant they sponsor should abscond or 'runaway', by law it is incumbent upon the kafeel to report this to the police station in their district within 24-48 hours. Migrants, in turn, are not allowed to change their kafeel until the completion of their contract, or unless mutually agreed upon by them. Within this arrangement, the kafeel becomes economically and legally responsible for the migrants they sponsor, and migrants are in turn beholden and dependent upon their kafeel for their right to stay and work in Kuwait.

The state plays a limited role within this context. In addition to issuing visas to the kafeel, the state can also be called upon to ensure that the kefala agreements are fulfilled. The state can be brought in to intervene if the terms of migrants' contracts are not upheld, either through Kuwait's judiciary, or in rare cases, through legislation, direct arbitration or decrees issued by the executive branch (i.e. cabinet and/or the emir). The state can also undertake procedures to deport migrants if they are found to be in breach of their kefala arrangement, most notably if they abscond from their employer.

The development of the kefala system has generated a great deal of debate among scholars of the Arab Gulf states. Although there are varying perspectives on why this system has emerged and continues to persist, these debates are predicated on the general agreement that the kefala system is fundamentally related to processes of state-making and governance, and the normative assumption the state should play the primary role in the adjudication and governance of migrants. Some argue the kefala system's

predominance relates to the Kuwaiti state's capacity. The large-scale migration of much-needed workers from throughout the Arab world and Asia began in the 1950s, a period during which the Kuwaiti state was beginning to develop its own institutions of rule, and it is argued, did not have the institutional apparatus necessary to oversee this population. Consequently, the state devolved the responsibility of the adjudication and governance of migrants to its citizenry in the form of the kefala system (Crystal 2005: 158-168).

Others point to the kefala system as a strategy deployed by the state to consolidate overlapping systems of rule and privilege in Kuwait. Specifically, they point to the ways in which the kefala system reinscribes differences between citizens and migrants, produces power asymmetries between the two, and reinforces the existing system of rule and division of power among Kuwaiti citizens. As mentioned in the previous chapter, beginning in the 1960s Kuwait's naturalization policies became increasingly restrictive, effectively making it impossible for migrants to become citizens. Without citizenship, migrants were excluded from the state's petro-dollar redistribution networks, and fell largely outside the purview and disciplinary practices of Kuwait's state infrastructure. To redress the potential political problems that might ensue, most notably migrants' demands for enfranchisement, especially given that from the mid-1970s onwards, Kuwait's population of migrants began to exceed that of its citizenry (Kapiszewski 2000; Longva 2005: 126), the state delegated daily control and disciplining of foreigners to individual employers and kafeel (Crystal 2005: 169). With migrants' presence in Kuwait being contingent upon, and policed by their kafeel, the kefala system has become an important

means through which asymmetrical power relations between migrants and citizens in Kuwait is produced and reproduced.

With the exception of the early years of Kuwait's development, migrants have overwhelmingly been employed in Kuwait's private sector. Today it is estimated that migrants comprise over 95% of Kuwait's private sector, and that over 92% of Kuwaiti nationals are concentrated in the public sector (Longva 2005: 120). As previously mentioned (see chapter 2), the Kuwaiti state has developed in tandem with the country's petro-dollar economy. State institutions have become the means through which the al-Sabah have distributed the country's oil-wealth, over which they maintain overall control, and have established their rule over the city-state's population. In doing so, the Al-Sabah came to a tacit agreement with the other members of Kuwait's ruling elite, ceding control of the private sector to the merchant families and the rest of the citizenry, and establishing policies ensuring their privileged position within this sector. The state passed legislation stipulating majority ownership of private businesses needs to be held by citizens, and granting generous subsidies and contracts to these businesses (Crystal 1992: 8-9, 75). The governance of migrants, who comprise the bulk of workers in the private sector, through the *kefala* is another means ensuring citizens' advantageous position within this sector. Migrants' labour is an important means of capital accumulation in sectors largely falling outside Kuwait's oil industries and public sector, an alternative source of wealth from which Kuwaiti entrepreneurs and businesses profit (Dresch 2005: 23-4). The *kefala* system encourages the development of economic realms

relatively autonomous from those dominated by the Al-Sabah and Kuwaiti state, parallel and interlocking realms of activity that both consolidates Kuwait's body politic, and actively produce and reinscribe differences and status distinctions between citizens and migrants.

Whether it developed because of the Kuwaiti state's limited capacity or concerted strategy, the kefala system constitutes a set of relationships and agreements fundamentally shaping migrants' experiences in Kuwait. No matter how long they reside in Kuwait, or whether they are born in Kuwait, and regardless of their contribution to the country's development and prosperity, migrants are only allowed to stay in Kuwait on a temporary basis. Their presence remains contingent upon, and policed by citizens. Migrants are allowed to stay in Kuwait for periods of time delimited by the labour contracts signed with individual citizens and institutions—their kefala—who acts as both their guarantor and sponsor. Emerging in tandem and parallel to the country's state infrastructure, Kuwait's kefala system plays an integral role in bolstering the existing division of power among citizens, and in ensuring the impermanence of the country's migrant population.

It is in both citizens' and migrants' interest to fulfill the terms of their agreements. Contravention has consequences for both sponsors and migrants, but perhaps not surprisingly given that the kefala system systematically ensures citizens' privileged status, penalties are weighted in migrants' disfavor. For the kafeel, who are responsible

for their employees' visa and travel costs, medical health care coverage, and recruitment agency fees, they incur costs and investment capital in the migrants their sponsor at the beginning of the contract cycle, and it is in their interest that the migrants they sponsor complete their contracts. If their employees abscond, sponsors not only lose their return and potential dividends on the money that they invested, but they can also be held liable should the migrants they are sponsoring engage in any illegal activity⁶. Citizens can also have their right to sponsor migrants revoked if they are found to be negligent in their duties as guarantor and sponsor, and if they do not report employees who have absconded within 24-48 hours. As a result of this, and although it is illegal, many kafeel confiscate and hold onto their employees' passports, thereby making it difficult for these migrants to abscond, leave the country, and/or find other employment opportunities in Kuwait. There are several reasons why migrants abscond, or in Kuwaiti common parlance 'run away'. Some 'run away' because they have found, or they seek to find, more lucrative employment opportunities. Some do so to escape situations of abuse and exploitation. And in the case of some female migrants, usually domestic workers, many abscond because they enter into common law relationships, and decide to reside with their partners. Unless they have committed crimes, migrants who have absconded from their kafeel can leave the country when the government declares an amnesty: periods when they can leave the country without penalty, but subsequently have limitations placed on their ability to return to Kuwait.

⁶ Unless they are found to be complicit, few are actually prosecuted, however, the possibility remains/looms and acts as a deterrent. In addition, the government recently (winter 2009) passed more stringent laws related to this.

Similar to their sponsors, migrants bear significant costs in coming to Kuwait, usually in the form of exorbitant fees paid to labour recruitment agencies in their home countries. Most incur substantial debts or have to sell major assets such as landholdings in the hopes of finding employment and earning salaries that are often significantly higher than what they can earn in their home communities (often at least triple the amount in the case of domestic). In coming to Kuwait their first priority is often to recoup the costs they have incurred, and to begin accumulating further savings. Many domestic workers with whom I met, most notably well-educated Filipina and Indian women migrants (e.g. who had worked as nurses, teachers, etc. in their home countries), mentioned that they had initially migrated in the hopes of finding upwardly mobile employment opportunities in Kuwait, but once they arrived, realized that switching their kafeel and finding other jobs was logistically difficult or precarious⁷. Consequently, most migrants remain with their initial kafeel, even under difficult conditions.

Deportations rarely occur within Kuwait, but are perceived to be a widespread occurrence. The possibility that their kafeel may deport them looms large in conversations, and in the decision-making of many migrants in Kuwait. It is a perceived threat that leads many to comply with the dictates of their employers (also see Crystal 2005: 170, Longva 1999: 21-22). According to Kuwait's 1959 residency law, deportation is not subject to the whims of employers (although it is often perceived to be

⁷ Switching their kafeel or finding jobs in-country usually involve entering into grey markets of visa trading and verbal (as opposed to written) contractual agreements.

so among migrants and contrasts with other Gulf States such as Qatar) and can only take place as a result of a judicial or administrative decision taken by the authorities under three circumstances: the migrant has been convicted in a court of law and the court has recommended they be deported; the migrant is unable to find a means of sustenance; the Ministry of Interior deems the migrant to be a ‘security or moral’ threat to the country (usually occurs if they are found to be guilty of a crime, but the procedures by which this occurs are unclear to me; Longva 1999: 21).

Cumulatively, these conditions that systematically favor citizens, and the overall importance of the kafala system in shaping migrants’ experiences, have led to the widespread perception that migrants are solely subject to their kafeel, and have little, if any recourse in situations of abuse and exploitation. Such a perspective elides other forms of governance, arbitration and adjudication that have developed since the early 1960s, most notably the country’s labour laws. Migrants who hold visas to work in the public sector (visa number 17), or in the private sector (visa number 18) are protected by the country’s 1964 Labour law. Adapted from Egyptian civil law, this law explicitly outlines workers’ entitlements and rights, most notably the right to sue their employers if their work contracts are violated (Longva 1999: 22). Workers who pursue such cases are often successful. However the problem that many migrants face is that this law does not mitigate the 1959 residency law stipulating that while a trial is pending, they are forbidden from working for anyone else in Kuwait (Ibid.). Early in 2009, after a great deal of lobbying on the part of labour-sending countries, Kuwait passed an amended

labour law focusing on improving the rights of migrants by making penalties for exploitative or abusive employers and kafeel harsher, by making it possible for migrants to form labour unions, and by expediting trial procedures and ensuring quicker court turn-around times⁸.

3.3 Notable Exceptions

A notable group of migrant workers not covered by Kuwait's labour laws are those working in the domestic work sector (migrants holding work visas #20). In conducting research on this sector, it was striking how often this fact was mentioned to me. The general consensus among many that I spoke with was that because existing labour laws do not cover domestic workers, they are entirely subject to the whims and dictates of their kafeel, and the difficulties they experience can be mitigated, and best resolved by their coming under the purview of these laws. In the absence of regulating laws, the officials with whom I met repeatedly emphasized how important domestic workers' relationships are with the Kuwaiti families with whom they work. These relationships, they told me, largely determined domestic workers' experiences in Kuwait. Domestic workers are not only employed by, and granted the right to work and live in Kuwait through their kafeel, but most reside with them, and have their activities and movements monitored by them. As my experience with the al-**** attests to, in trying to establish relationships with some domestic worker, or at the very least meet with them in

⁸ See Kuwait Times Feb 3 2009 and Asia News February 13 2009

the households within which they worked, I often had to meet with and receive the tacit approval of their kafeel.

Few that I met questioned why it is existing labour laws do not encompass the domestic work sector. The answer was plainly obvious to most: the situation reflected the cruel logic of asymmetrical power relations between domestic workers and their employers, the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor, citizens and migrants, the master and the maid. The lack of regulating, protective laws stemmed from the powerful wanting to maintain their privilege and the status quo (also see Anderson 2000). Orientalist (Said 1978) tropes further underlay and reinforced some of these accounts, most notably those circulated by the international news media and human rights organizations. Here Kuwaiti employers—Arabs, Muslims—were depicted as indolent, despotic, inherently violent, lascivious and sexually predacious. As I pursued my research further, and mapped out Kuwait's domestic work sector, it became increasingly clear that although widespread and taken for granted, these discourses did not adequately account for the complexity of domestic workers' situation. In meeting with embassy officials, lawyers, human rights officials, journalists, government employees, and labour agents, I came to realize that although domestic workers indisputably occupy socially and politically precarious positions in Kuwait, (and although I share the ethical and moral imperative of many in Kuwait to improve their situation) these discourses elide a crucial issue: In treating the absence of labour laws related to domestic work as a lack, an oversight, an aberration indexical of asymmetrical power relations, and in assuming ipso

facto the efficacy of legal procedures to redress the systematic problems domestic workers experience, these discourses disregard how domestic work has historically been a realm of activity difficult to convert in terms of waged labour, and to render legible to juridico-political systems. They disregard the difficulty of having domestic work recognized and remunerated in terms of waged labour, and the difficulty juridico-political systems have in adjudicating and regulating the household.

Before Kuwait's petro-fueled development, and the widespread migration of Arab and Asian populations to the region, few families within the city-state were able to engage people to work within their households. Only the ruling elite and well-to-do merchant families had the resources necessary to retain wetnurses, concubines, and handmaidens from indentured or slave populations, foster children⁹ from impoverished families, and on a part-time basis, employ socially and economically marginalized women¹⁰ and men to work within their homes. To refer to these groups as domestic workers would be an anachronistic misnomer. The work they undertook was not

⁹ There existed a system whereby well-to-do families would nominally adopt or foster a young child from an impoverished family. The child would be responsible for household tasks, and status distinctions would be made between them and the 'blood children' of the family. Complex sets of relationships and reciprocity would develop over time. For example, with one Kuwaiti family with whom I met, there was one branch of the family that was comprised of descendents (children and grandchildren) of a 'house-boy' who the family had adopted from an impoverished Arab family (Yemeni-Saudi). The descendents were treated, and regarded themselves as part of their Kuwaiti family (i.e. had the family name, socially interacted with the rest of the family regularly, and had begun intermarrying with other branches of the larger extended family).

¹⁰ It is worth noting that few Kuwaitis with whom I met mentioned this to me. Those who did were usually older Kuwaitis, unconcerned with admitting to their family and country's previously less affluent past. The younger generation tended to be unaware or unwilling to speak about members of their families who might have undertaken this work in the past.

understood solely in terms of labouring relations, but included other valences of relationality including patron-client and kinship relations.

The remuneration these groups received was not necessarily in the form of wages, but included other forms of economic exchange and distribution including gifting, apprenticing, fostering, financial pensions, and ongoing social support. These relations and forms of circulation were usually adjudicated at the household level. If difficulties arose, the women and men undertaking work within households often drew on immediate sources of socio-political support, including family members, religious leaders, and in rare cases would present their grievances to courts or diwaniyyeh for arbitration and settlement. Those working part-time within households could also leave and seek employment elsewhere.

With the advent of oil, the number of Kuwaitis seeking to hire domestic helpers increased. In the late 1970s 13% of households employed domestic helpers. By the late 1980s this number increased almost five-fold to 62%, and by the late 1990s, had increased by another 30% to 87% of households. In the early 2000s, the percentage of citizen households employing domestic workers began stabilizing at around 90-93%. The reasons for Kuwaitis' growing demand for domestic workers are myriad, interconnected, and greatly debated. Some of my interlocutors argued domestic workers were needed to replace others within the household who previously undertook the work domestic workers were charged with, most notably children, who began attending school,

and women, whose employment opportunities and activities outside the home began expanding. Others, most notably elderly Kuwaitis, remembering days of hardship, privation and poverty, emphasized that the increasing demand for household workers was part and parcel of profound changes in their lifestyles. The trickling down of Kuwait's oil wealth and the dramatic rise in the population's prosperity, made it increasingly possible for citizens to retain these workers, and relegate the mundane tasks of social reproduction to them. Some also mentioned that these workers became increasingly necessary as the size of families and houses increased, as many families moved from extended to nuclear households, and as social events, ranging from daily visits among family members, to weekly family meals and diwaniyyeh, and to special events such as weddings, grew in frequency and scale¹¹.

Although demand for household helpers increased exponentially from the 1960s onwards, few if any local women or men were willing, or found it necessary to continue to undertake this work. As a result, Kuwaitis began looking further afield for household workers. Initially some families sponsored male 'houseboys' from Yemen to work with their households. Others hired the wives and daughters of less affluent migrants on a part-time basis (Brown 1997: 209; Shah 2002).

¹¹ I should note that in contrast to Cheng's discussion (2006: 15) of Malaysia, in Kuwait the hiring of domestic workers is not one fostered or promoted by the state. Though integral to the development of a modernizing (upper-) middle class, the hiring of domestic workers has not been promoted by government policies. This is a realm the government, rather emphatically, would prefer not to be involved in adjudicating or governing.

From the late 1960s onwards, households began hiring women from South Asia, the majority of which were initially Christian women from Goa (Secombe and Lawless 1980: 565, Goans accounted for 95% of domestic workers; led to the widespread sense/speculation among labour agents and migrants in South Asia that Kuwaitis are favorably disposed towards Christian maids). Some Kuwaitis who resided in South Asia brought their servants with them when they visited and/or moved back to Kuwait. Other families were able to recruit workers through intermediaries—in a few instances such as Mary/Maryam's, through merchant families with connections to India, or through church officials, but for the vast majority, it was through a growing legion of labour agents. During the 1970s, well over 90% of total domestic workers came from South Asia, specifically Southern India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan (until a ban was instituted by the Pakistani government in the late 1970s) (see Shah et al 1991, and Shah et al. 2002). In the 1980s, Kuwaitis began recruiting women from the Phillippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and in the 1990s, from Nepal, Ethiopia and Eritrea (Ibid.).

The composition of Kuwait's population of domestic workers is difficult to determine due to the paucity of data available. Neither the Ministry of Interior nor the embassies of labour-sending countries collect systematic data about this population. Domestic workers' migration tends to be circular in nature, meaning it is hard to determine when they leave and/or when they return to Kuwait (Shah et al. 1991). In addition, due to migration bans instituted by labour-sending countries and the general

fluidity of the sector, the number of women migrating from the different countries tends to fluctuate dramatically over short periods of time.

What is known, however, is that the total population has expanded exponentially since the early 1970s, and the majority of this population is comprised of women. In 1975, the number of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait was estimated to be just under 12,000, less than 1% of the total population (,estimated at 1 million). By 1980, the population had grown to just under 20,000, and in the next five years, tripled to over 63,000, when domestic workers comprised 2% of Kuwait's total population, which was estimated to be 1.7 million. By 2000 the population had expanded to 200,000, 10.5% of Kuwait's total population of 2 million, and by the mid- to late-2000s when I undertook research, the population had more than tripled and numbered over 500,000, one-sixth of Kuwait's total population (3 million), and one-quarter of its migrant population (2 million)¹².

Rapidly developing, especially in the last several years, and subject to sudden and dramatic demographic shifts¹³, Kuwait's domestic work sector has gone largely

¹² There is a gap in demographic information for the 1990s due to the events of the first Gulf war. With regard to the estimated population numbers of the mid-late 2000s, some estimate as much as 200,000 domestic workers (of a total population of ½ million domestic workers; 500,000) are said to be in flux, either working 'outside' or remaining in Kuwait despite the expiration of their work and residency visas (interviews, human rights and labour agency officials).

¹³ For example, beginning in the early 2000s, the majority of women coming to Kuwait to work as domestics were Nepali women, despite a ban issued by their government restricting them from migrating to the Middle East. In the fall of 2007, in an unprecedented move, the Kuwaiti government issued a ban on the entry of Nepali into the country. What was previously estimated to be 1500 to 2000 Nepali women migrating to Kuwait per month stopped entirely. As a result of

unregulated both by the Kuwaiti government, and by those of labour-sending countries. The domestic work sector has fallen largely outside the immediate purview of the Kuwaiti state given the country's history of petro-dollar driven state development, in which the state ceded the private sphere and adjudication of migrant to individual Kuwaiti citizens through the kefala system, and the state's reluctance to intercede at the level of the household for fear of disrupting the existing balance of power between citizens and the state. For labour-sending countries, the time during which their citizens began migrating to Kuwait coincided with processes of structural adjustment, in which state institutions and capacities were systematically dismantled. In addition, historically states have been more effective in regulating the entry, rather than the exit of peoples from their territories. Only in recent years, as the scale and importance of remittances has become clear, and as news media and foreign embassies have reported on the difficulties experienced by their nationals, have the countries of labour-sending countries begun to develop policies and procedures to regulate the migration of domestic workers. These governments have also lobbied the Kuwaiti government, and supported the efforts of other advocates, most notably international governmental organizations such as UNIFEM and the ILO, human rights organizations, and the US embassy in Kuwait, which has also prompted the Kuwaiti state's limited intervention in this sector.

the labour shortage, the domestic work sector began recruiting women from Ethiopia and Eritrea, who had previously made up a small percentage of this sector but whose population increased rapidly]

3.4 Domestic Work Sector: State-like¹⁴ in the Absence of States

Although states and international governmental organizations have increasingly come to play a more active role, by and large it is other actors, institutions and systems that have been integral to the development and regulation of Kuwait's domestic work sector. This sector can be best characterized as a fluid realm, comprised of overlapping networks and groups that fall in the shadows of existing juridico-political systems—areas of parallel adjudication and governance sometimes crossing into realms of illegality. The most telling and evocative tales of Kuwait's domestic work sector are ones told by domestic workers. Better than interviews with embassy officials, labour agents, and others, their journeying to Kuwait best describes the many twists, turns, and vagaries of this sector.

Take Mary/Maryam's experiences, which illustrate the ideal of a citizen-devolved, kefala administered domestic work sector. As mentioned in the previous chapter, her migration to Kuwait was facilitated by the information provided by her uncle, and by the "Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah", the latter who introduced her to a family in Kuwait in need of domestic help. Over the course of almost forty years of living in Kuwait, she has had very little direct interaction with state or state-like institutions. The extent of her engagement has been largely bureaucratic and limited to obtaining security clearances from the police and Ministry of Interior; obtaining her work and residency

¹⁴ Referencing Trouillot (2001)

visas¹⁵ and civil identification card, and having them periodically updated by the Ministry of Interior; and having her passport extended or a new one issued by the Indian Embassy¹⁶. The work agreement Mary/Maryam came to with Mama Alia and Umm Ibrahim was one they arranged between themselves (facilitated by the ‘Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah). Through mailed correspondences, they set up a contractual arrangement whereby Mary/Maryam’s travel fees, room and board, incidental costs (i.e. clothing and toiletries), and visa-related fees would be covered by her employers, and she would receive a salary of 30 dinars per month¹⁷. Though this arrangement would appear to constitute an ideal market transaction, unhindered by the distorting effects of government intervention (for a resonant discussion, see Cheng 2006: 77), the relationships between Mary/Maryam and Mama Alia and Umm Ibrahim, and the domestic work undertaken by Mary/Maryam both eluded and exceeded that of waged labouring relations. As I discuss in the next chapter, the relationship between domestic workers and their employers often entails other valences of relationality, including patron-client and kinship ones, as well as other forms of economic exchange, circulation, and distribution.

¹⁵ To obtain a residency and work visa, a potential migrant/resident needs to be sponsored by a kafeel. Once they have obtained a letter of support from their kafeel that has been issued by the Ministry of Interior, they must then undergo medical and security checks, and submit these and a small fee to the Kuwaiti Embassy in their home country. If they are approved, a visa is then issued. They enter the country on a temporary visa, subject to further security checks (fingerprinting and potentially an interview at a police station), health tests (blood checking for STDs, TB test, urine analysis, chest x-ray, and a cursory check up with a doctor). Once a residency visa has been obtained they can then apply for a Civil ID card.

¹⁶ Other foreign migrant and residents undertake these procedures as well.

¹⁷ In the following chapter I discuss how the economic and social relations between domestic workers both elude and exceed that of waged labour; their relations entail other valences of relationality and other forms of economic exchange, circulation and distribution.

When she first came to Kuwait in 1968, Mary/Maryam was among the first group of migrant domestic workers seeking work within Kuwaiti households. In the following years, especially after the 1973 oil boom, the number of domestic workers migrating to Kuwait increased rapidly. Though an expanding presence in Kuwait, few administrative procedures or state institutions were in place to deal with their situation. This became especially apparent when some domestic workers began experiencing acute exploitation and abuse from their employers¹⁸. At the time, there were no known or established procedures for dealing with their grievances. Domestic workers did not fall under the country's labour laws, nor did they fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (as did other foreign migrant workers). Over the course of my research, two explanations for this were often presented to me. Paid domestic work is generally excluded from most labour laws around the world, including in the US and until very recently, the UK. Kuwait's labour laws, passed in 1964, were derived from Egyptian civil codes, which also excluded domestic work. Furthermore, at the time Kuwait's labour laws and ministry of labour was being formed (early 1960s), there were few domestic workers in Kuwait, and were overlooked by these laws and institutions.¹⁹ As domestic workers became a larger presence in Kuwait, they were further excluded from these laws and institutions because, as one embassy official put it: "households and

¹⁸ Reports were made by journalists and embassy officials. There are no existing reports or statistical accounts of the breakdown and extent of problems encountered by domestic workers.

¹⁹ These explanations were presented to me by human rights officials, legal scholars (including a former Dean of Kuwait's Law School), and labour agency officials.

private citizens are not considered companies here” (i.e. labour laws and the ministry of social affairs deals with corporations and companies)²⁰.

Although they do not fall under the purview of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, or existing labour laws (like other migrant workers and foreign residents), domestic workers were not without legal recourse. They could file criminal cases in situations of physical abuse, and civil cases in situations where contract stipulations were not being upheld²¹. Few domestic workers, however, accessed the courts. Many were wary of state institutions²², or did not trust Kuwait’s police or judiciary, or did not have the information necessary or were unable to access these resources (largely related to language barriers). Those who did pursue criminal or civil cases had several options in addressing their situation: prosecuting their case, undertaking dispute resolution and arbitration, agreeing to out-of-court settlements, return to their original employer, return to the Kuwaiti labour agency that had recruited them, find a new employer, or return to their home country (Brown 1997: 213)

In attempting to redress the problems they were experiencing, most domestic workers went to their home country’s Embassy or to the labour agency in-country that

²⁰ These explanations or the dynamic I described is woefully inadequate (i.e. it seems tautological in form). I have not been able to find further information about this period and this dynamic, but will follow up when I next return to Kuwait and see if this can be developed further.

²¹ Brown notes that there are two types of criminal offenses: 1) *junha*, crimes punished by less than three years in prison, are handled by the police and usually involves arbitration or dispute resolution (this is encouraged); and 2) *jinaya*, a crime punishable by more than three years in prison; is handled by the *niyaba* (Brown 1997: 212).

²² Not just Kuwaiti, but state institutions in general.

facilitated their migration²³. Labour agents, and embassy officials began taking on the role of mediators between domestic workers and their kafeel. If a domestic worker wanted to pursue criminal charges or a court case, these cases were often inter-mediated by their embassies (i.e. embassy officials assumed the role of mediator between them and Kuwait's police or judiciary)²⁴. Embassy grounds also became makeshift shelters for domestic workers who did not want to/could not return to their kafeel and who had no where else to go. Some embassies began establishing more formally run shelters on the embassy premises or in other rented buildings²⁵.

Most Embassies found that they were not adequately staffed and ill-equipped to take on these responsibilities. As a result, many lobbied their home governments, as well as the Kuwaiti government, to put into place measures to redress these problems.

Concurrently during this period, press reports started to circulate locally and transnationally about incidents of exploitation and abuse²⁶. In response, the governments

²³ I return to labour agencies later in this chapter.

²⁴ This process has now become formalized. For a domestic worker to file charges or pursue a legal case against their kafeel, they must do so through their embassy. In addition, if a domestic worker 'absconds' for this reason, they must report to their embassy within 24-48 hours to ensure they are not blacklisted (i.e. officially listed in Kuwait's police registry as 'absconded').

²⁵ The facilities offered by the different embassies vary widely. The Filipino Embassy has a smoothly-run shelter. The Indian Embassy once established a shelter, but it was shut down after it was discovered that the 'madam' of the house was contracting out domestic workers to do part-time work and pocketing some of, if not most of their wages. The Sri Lankan Embassy has reserved the basement for 'runaways'; however their facilities are quite rudimentary. In speaking to Embassy officials, many mentioned how difficult it became for them to look after and monitor the movements of their nationals, and how many of the women were understandably anxious about languishing at the embassy and not being able to earn money. As a result, some embassy officials would quietly suggest or not stop domestic workers who wanted to live off the premises (i.e. and possibly work part-time and earn money before being deported or repatriated back)

²⁶ One story told to me by a member of Kuwait's Indian Women's League was telling. This group, comprised mainly of well-to-do Indian expatriate women, is well-known for their efforts on behalf of fellow nationals. One year they wanted to hold a benefit concert to raise

of labour-sending countries imposed restrictions or outright bans on the migration of women seeking to work as domestics in Kuwait and/or the rest of the Gulf region.

During the late 1970s through to the mid-2000s, these included²⁷:

-The **Pakistani** government imposed a ban on the migration of domestic workers under the age of 35, and a minimum wage threshold of 42 Kuwaiti dinars (KD) before outright banning women from migrating in 1979 (Shah et al., 1991).

-The **Bangladeshi** government restricted women from migrating to countries in Western Asia and from working as domestic workers unless accompanied by their husbands (Shah and Menon, 1997: 19). In 1983 a total ban was implemented.

-The **Indian** government restricted women under the age of 30 from working as domestics in Western Asia or Northern Africa, established a minimum wage threshold of 45 KD, before outright banning women from migrating to Kuwait in the mid-1990s.

They attempted to implement these regulations by stopping the certification or attesting

awareness and money about the plight of runaway maids. They recruited a (somewhat) famous Bollywood actress to perform at their concert in Kuwait. The actress' efforts, as well as the publicity surrounding this effort (i.e. the media from India covered this story more extensively than they ordinarily would because of the involvement of the actress) led to great controversy and moral panic in India about the situation of "our women" in "the Gulf" and ultimately, due to public pressure, the government instituted a ban on women's migration.

²⁷ Some of this information was derived from interviews, and where possible, I include corroborating references.

of visas for housemaids by the in-country embassies²⁸ (Shah et al., 1991; Shah and Memon 1997).

-The government of the **Philippines** banned the migration of domestic workers to Kuwait in 1988. An exception was made in the case of domestic workers being requested by the royal family, senior government officials, and diplomats

-The **Indonesian** government restricted women under the age of 22 from migrating to work in households

-in 1998 the **Nepalese** government issued a total ban on the migration of domestic workers

Although these restrictions and bans assuaged public opinion in the labour-sending countries, they proved grossly ineffectual in stemming the migration of domestic workers, in improving the conditions or enforcement of contractual agreements (i.e. state institutions in labour-sending countries had no ability or jurisdiction to enforce contract stipulations) and contrary to their intended purposes, these restrictions rendered migrant women further vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Domestic workers from these countries continued to migrate to Kuwait and other countries in the Gulf region by

²⁸ i.e. these women could not get passports extended, or any bureaucratic procedures done at the embassy; the embassies are not involved in the Kuwaiti government's visa issuing process with respect to individual domestic workers, however, they are involved in issuing permits for labour agencies to recruit these workers

traveling via other countries. Ironically, migration restrictions or bans rendered the actions of these women ‘illegal’ in relation to their home country governments and embassies abroad. Many domestic workers thus found themselves in a situation where they were legal migrants in Kuwait (in relation to the Kuwaiti laws) but were *illegally present in relation to their home embassies and co-nationals in Kuwait*. Rendered illegal in this way, domestic workers had no recourse to their embassies, which previously had constituted a bulwark and first line of assistance in helping them redress problems they experienced in Kuwait.

Sumitra/Sara never needed the Indian Embassy’s assistance vis-à-vis her employers, however, the restrictions and affected her in other ways. I saw glimmerings of these effects when we first met that Friday afternoon at ‘Grand’s place’. At some point during my discussion with—or defacto vetting by—members of the al-**** family, Carla, another migrant woman working within their household, came into the room to inform Shaima’s aunt that Sumitra/Sara had returned home, and would meet with me.

As Shaima and I made our way through the courtyard towards the domestic workers’ quarters, a small building flanking and overhanging the end of the driveway²⁹, she once again reminded me:

²⁹ Sumitra/sara shared a small flat with her husband here. Younger domestics working for the family, especially those involved with cooking and cleaning, were housed inside the family house rather than this building. Older domestic workers (usually married) and drivers resided here.

“Sumitra/Sara is wonderful, really.

She is well-trusted and respected by mama and our grand before her

But she can be...a little abrupt.

Don't take it personally.

If she talks to you, great. Alhumdullilah.

If not, don't take it personally, ok?”

Sumitra/Sara's 'abruptness' was not immediately apparent. She listened politely while I explained my research, and answered my first few questions³⁰. When I began asking her about when she first came to Kuwait and the circumstances related to her migration, however, she became a little evasive and impatient:

S/S“I came many years ago, when this one (Shaima) was still a baby...Yes, I came from India, near Bombay.”

AA-“...oh, ok...so, in the early 1980s?”

S/S- “yes, around then”

AA-“and how did you come then? By boat, plane?”

³⁰ Based on my experience up until then, I had found it useful to have a list of set questions to ask initially. This fulfilled my interlocutors' expectation of being interviewed properly (many assumed I was a journalist or writer and this was the proper way of going about my work), and my wanting to get to know them better. I therefore began asking them standard, easy questions such as where they were born, what education they had, when they migrated to Kuwait, etc. But I must say these moments were both tremendously exciting and daunting—being face to face with women whose experiences I so desperately wanted to learn about, but also realizing that learning about them and their stories is far from a simple or straight-forward process...

S/S- “sometimes by boat, sometimes by plane. What does it matter?”

Towards the end of our first meeting, I was a little crestfallen, feeling as though I had been pulling teeth, and would not be invited back. To my surprise, however, and great relief, Shaima called me a week later:

Shaima- “...and, Sara has been asking when are you going to visit her next?

AA- (disbelieving) “...really?”

Shaima- “yes. She spoke to my mother last week, and asked why you had not come back. She called you reporter-girl: When is reporter-girl coming back?”

During our subsequent meetings, I again broached the topic of her travels to Kuwait:

S/S-“why do you keep asking about this? I start from my village and come here, or I start here and go back there. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Bas. Story finish.”

It was only later, much later—after I had learned about her initial reasons for migrating to Kuwait, her work with the al-**** household (discussed in the chapter 5), and her experience of tending to Mama Gul Nar and becoming Muslim (discussed in chapter 6)—that the reason for her reluctance to talk about her experiences of journeying

to India began to emerge. Sumitra/Sara and I were discussing the business she had started in her village in India, when she mentioned how difficult it had been for her initially, especially given the obstacles she faced when traveling to and from India. My interest piqued:

AA- “was transportation difficult from your village?”

S/S- “no, my journey took a long time”

AA- “I thought you lived close to Bombay?”

S/S- “not Bombay. I had to travel from Bombay to Colombo, and then to Kuwait.”

Over the course of our subsequent discussion, Sumitra/Sara described to me how she had learned of airport officials who either stopped women from going to the Gulf Arab states, or who insisting on large ‘payments’ from these women to allow them to continue their journey. Apprehensive of dealing with these officials, or that she would be turned back from the airport and possibly have her passport confiscated, Sumitra/Sara began traveling to Kuwait via Sri Lanka, an itinerary large numbers of other Indian domestic workers also embarked on. Sumitra/Sara experienced the migration ban not as an insurmountable obstacle, but one that made her journeying more expensive, arduous, and in some cases, more perilous. She was also uncertain if the al-**** were fully aware of the stipulations of the ban, and did not want me to broach the topic with them.

Similarly, when I traveled to Nepal, I learned about the ways in which my Nepali interlocutors' activities often shaded into illegality as a result of the migration bans placed upon them by their government. These issues were foregrounded one afternoon, shortly after Sophia/Santa (whose experiences in Kuwait I discuss further in chapter 6 and 7) and I met up in a town on Nepal's eastern border with India. It was mid-afternoon, and we planned to travel to her home, several hours away, late that evening. In the intervening time, Santa/Sophia had some shopping to do, and was going to cross the border into India. Worried that I might be bored waiting in the town for her, she suggested I come with her. I declined the invitation, telling her I didn't have a visa to cross into India.³¹ She looked confused, and then told me the matter was inconsequential: no one would check, or stop us at the border. I told her I was reluctant to do so because again, I did not have a visa, which was necessary for Canadians, and that if I crossed the border, I might be detained. She again insisted it would not be a problem: I looked like a Nepali or Indian woman, so no one would check, or stop us at the border. I then told her that if they stopped me and checked my passport, they would find a stamp and sticker in it, one located at the back, issued by the Pakistani consulate in Toronto, indicating that I was of Pakistani background and entitled to citizenship status there. I told her about how I had grown up hearing about Pakistanis and Indians who had unwittingly (or wittingly) crossed the Indo-Pak border, were detained, and ended up languishing in jails for years on end. Even if they did not detain me, I told her, even if they just stopped me for

³¹ I really wish I had been able to tape-record this conversation. It was pretty tense, fraught, but really repetitive in structure

questioning and let me go, I did not want to have to deal with potential questioning, bribes, or worse. I did not want to risk any of this happening just for a shopping trip.

My last comments seemed to resonate, and we parted ways for the day. A few days later, our tempers cooled about the matter, we discussed the issue further. I learned about the apprehension Santa/Sophia had felt when she had first crossed the border on her own at the age of fifteen. Her trip was prompted by events that had unfolded the years before, starting with the death of her father. Santa/Sophia's was an upper-caste Brahman man who, later in life, his children with his first wife having reached adulthood, had decided to marry again, this time to a woman from an unscheduled caste: Santa/Sophia's mother.

Santa/Sophia, her mother, her older sister, and two older brothers lived in the shadow of her father's first family. Their home was set back from the main road, where the first house was located. Her father continued to live in the first house, only coming to visit their family when he had time to do so. When he died, he bequeathed a small but sufficient amount to Santa/Sophia's mother and their children. This inheritance, however, soon dwindled. It went towards furnishing Santa/Sophia's elder sister with a dowry, and was siphoned off to pay for her brothers' alcohol debts at local watering holes³².

³² Alcoholism among young men in the area was rampant. When I visited several years later, one evening when Santa/Sophia's mother had gone overnight to visit a sick relative, a number of

To help support herself and her mother, Sophia left school and made arrangements to migrate to the Arab Gulf states, where she hoped to earn money as a domestic worker. In making these arrangements, she sought out the advice of second cousins and neighbors who had previously worked in the region³³. They put her in contact with a local labour agent with connections to recruitment agencies in Bombay. The agent informed Santa/Sophia that she was too young to migrate to Kuwait, where the minimum age requirement for domestic workers was 18 years old (she was 15 at the time). Santa/Sophia consequently had a fake passport and identification card made, and made arrangements with another labour agent to travel to Bombay³⁴.

Several weeks later, with only an inconspicuous shopping bag on her shoulder, Santa/Sophia crossed the border³⁵. Not only was she alone, but for the first time she was concerned about being stopped and questioned. The border officials luckily ignored her, so she proceeded to the bus station, where she boarded a bus to Delhi. From there took a train to Bombay, and ultimately to the offices of the labour recruitment agency. Workers

drunk men, relatives of Santa/Sophia appeared at the house, and had to be picked up by sisters or wives.

³³ One of the most fascinating parts of my visit to Santa/Sophia was meeting these women, hearing a little about their experiences, and our reprising Arabic catch-phrases (surreh! Inshallah) together. Upon hearing of Hema/Salma (an interlocutor whose stories I begin to tell in chapter 5) and my visit, a number of these women came to meet us in the evening, forming an unexpected gathering of Nepali women who had lived and worked in the Arab gulf states.

³⁴ Unlike Sumitra/Sara, who had previously traveled from India to Kuwait, Santa/Sophia needed assistance from a labour agent because she was unaware of a lot of steps and procedures of migration.

³⁵ Nepalese do not need a visa to cross into India.

there drafted her 'biodata' (curriculum vitae), took her picture, and lodged her in one of their dormitory accommodations. Along with other Nepali and Indian women, she remained there until she was selected by an employer residing overseas. For many women this selection process can entail several weeks, if not months of waiting, during which their fees or debts to the labour agent would increase (i.e. they had to pay room and board), a spiraling cost that sometimes necessitated their return home, or if they could manage to find it, temporary work in Bombay. Santa/Sophia, however, was fortunate. Within a week, she was selected by a potential employer in Kuwait, who had agreed to sponsor her, and sent, via the Kuwaiti labour agency and then the labour agent in Bombay, a contract as well as an entry visa application form. The labour agency then arranged for her to undertake a series of health checks. When these were completed, they took the results, and her contract and visa application form to the Kuwaiti consulate, which issued an entry visa for her.

Santa/Sophia then traveled by plane to Kuwait along with eleven other women. In Kuwait, her group was immediately met and ushered through the bureaucratic procedures at the airport by a labour agency employee. Her group was then taken to the agency offices, where they waited for their employers to pick them up. Santa/Sophia's family was a middle-class Kuwaiti family she described as being quiet. They had two young children, and lived in a suburb far from the city. This she had noted during her many drives with her employer while they undertook visa-related procedure in-country. Sophia was taken to undergo fingerprinting and police checks, and health checks

including a chest x-ray, blood and urine analysis, and a cursory check-up with a doctor. These forms, along with her contract, passport, and initial visa papers, were all taken to the Ministry of Interior to have a work and residency issued, and then a civil identification card. During these initial two months, if either the domestic worker or their employer were unhappy with their arrangement, they could request or would be taken back to the labour agency, where the domestic worker would await (and hope) for another employer to sponsor and hire them.

Santa/Sophia and her employer passed through this initial ‘trial period’, however, Santa/Sophia was desperately unhappy. A few weeks shy of her sixteenth birthday, she told me the language barriers, the unbearable heat, the work, and the separation from her mother were all too overwhelming. She became despondent, something her ‘Mama’ in Kuwait noted. “Mama, she called her sister’s maids, girls from Nepal and India, nice girls, to speak with me, but still I was *so* unhappy. I had to leave. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I cried, cried, cried, and finally told mama I needed to leave. Otherwise, I thought I would die.”

Her employers asked her to wait, be patient, she would get used to being in Kuwait, however as Sophia/Santa continued to insist on returning, they agreed and arranged for her to fly back to Nepal. There, back at home with her mother, she recovered but for the next several years, told me that she felt like a failure. As her and her mother’s bills began accumulating, and their financial situation worsened, she set her

mind to returning to the Gulf region. Her mother, however, intervened and restricted her from returning until she turned 19. At that point, Sophia had a new passport and identification card made (this time, legitimate ones), and she cycled through through the entire migration process again³⁶, this time wizened with experience and tempered in expectations.

In contrast to Mary/Mariam, Santa/Sophia's experiences, and to a lesser degree those of Sumitra/Sara, underscore the increasingly important role that labour agencies have come to play in channeling and regulating the cross-border movements of domestic workers. During my interviews with labour agents in Kuwait (and a few in Nepal) many told me they envisioned themselves as 'market facilitators'—to facilitate meetings and contractual arrangements between domestic workers and prospective employers. Labour agents conceived of themselves as for-profit business people whose role³⁷ should be restricted to that of transactional intermediaries. A few emphatically mentioned they were not interested, or capable, of taking on policing or governance roles that had increasingly been foisted upon them.

The discrepancy in labour agencies' self-conception and the actual roles they have come to play³⁸ can be explained as follows. With the implementation of gendered

³⁶ In the next chapter, I discuss her subsequent experiences working in Kuwait.

³⁷ In Kuwait they are paid by employers-sponsors, in labour-sending countries they are paid by the Kuwaiti labour agents, and by domestic workers

³⁸ During one interview, a labour agent described the process of domestic workers' recruitment as follows: 1) establish contact and agreements with labour-sending agencies; 2) undertake a job

restrictions on migration, labour agencies, especially in the labour-sending migration of domestic workers. In addition, as intermediaries, labour agencies have been integrally involved in arranging the terms of domestic workers' work-sponsorship agreements with Kuwaitis³⁹. When problems arose between domestic workers and their employer-sponsors, rather than going to their home country's embassies (which they would not do so since they were considered to be 'illegally' present in Kuwait by their home country embassies), many domestic workers sought recourse through the labour agencies that had recruited them.

As labour agencies' role as intermediaries and arbitrators between migrants and their kafeel-employers expanded, so did disgruntlement and concern about the activities of these agencies. Reports about abuse began circulating in Kuwait and transnationally: labour agents were involved in exploiting domestic workers who were 'returned' by their

order with the embassy of labour-sending countries; 2) the embassy in turn processes the job order, sends it to the labour department in their country, waits for their approval and subsequent contract drafted; 3) labour agency receives the biodata (resumes) of domestic workers recruited by agents in the labour-sending country and then markets them in Kuwait; 3) the marketing usually takes place in their front office—where prospective employers can look through catalogues of potential domestic workers, and where initial agreements with employers are reached; 4) employer chooses and obtains a visa from the Ministry of Interior; 5) contract signed by employer, labour agent and sent to labour agent and prospective domestic worker in the labour-sending country; 6) contract needs to be processed by Ministry/government body in labour-sending country; 7) medical, procedures undertaken in labour-sending country; 8) contract, medical forms and visa form taken to the Kuwaiti embassy or consulate for processing and approval; 9) domestic work travels to Kuwait; 10) receive the domestic worker at the airport, who are then brought to the agency (usually back rooms where there are showering and rest facilities); 11) employers contacted and come to pick up their employee; 12) employer signs 'receiving of worker', receives documents of worker needed for obtaining an iqama; 13) agent receives commission; 14) 2-month waiting period while domestic worker and employer-sponsor decide whether they will continue with their contractual agreement

³⁹ i.e. they were integrally involved in the drafting of contractual agreements

employer-sponsors; cases of physical and sexual abuse by labour agency employees were increasingly reported; and labour agents were found to have fleeced or reneged on agreements made with both domestic workers and sponsor-employers.

In 1992, a law was enacted by amiri (i.e. by the Emir) decree requiring domestic work agencies in Kuwait to obtain a permit to continue their operations, and for the government to establish an office to inspect the operations and regulate the activities of these agencies (Brown 1997: 212). Labour agencies had to obtain a license from the Kuwaiti government (for a fee of 5000 KD, approximately 18,250 USD) and register with the chamber of commerce. In response, labour agencies set up their own organization, the Kuwait Union of Domestic Labour Offices (KUDLO) to self-police and regulate members⁴⁰, and to lobby government ministries and embassies to redress the problems faced by agencies. Senior members of this organization told me that they formed KUDLO for several interconnected reasons: 1) as citizens and private businesses they had no authority or jurisdiction to act on behalf of domestic workers seeking their assistance vis-à-vis employers, the police, embassies, and government ministries; 2) they found that the Ministries of Interior, Social Affairs, and Foreign Affairs were ill-informed and knew very little about recruitment processes and problems; 3) and ministry officials themselves were doing nothing to redress problems related to this sector.

⁴⁰ They drafted a code of honour and conduct of behaviour. If members were not adhering to these codes KUDLO officials would write a letter of complaint to inform the Ministry of Interior and government officials involved in issuing permits.

In total there are 450 labour agencies in Kuwait, not all of which are a part of KUDLO

In the mid-2000s, a split developed among KUDLO members. One faction wanted to continue focusing on self-policing, and lobbying foreign embassies and the Kuwaiti government. The second faction wanted to become more actively involved in developing procedures and programs to redress problems experienced by domestic workers⁴¹. A new group was formed called Al-Haqooq. In conjunction with labour-sending embassies, and the tacit approval of government officials, Al-Haqooq 1) began compiling a blacklist of employers, 2) offering legal counseling and support to domestic workers and in some cases labour attaches at these embassies, 3) opened a shelter for absconding maids, 4) started an insurance policy program⁴², and 5) began advising the government on the passing of laws related to the domestic work sector.

Labour agencies, KUDLO, Al-Haqooq, and the efforts of labour-sending countries' foreign affairs and embassy officials all played an instrumental role in encouraging and fostering the Kuwaiti government's passing of programs and laws related to the domestic work sector, including:

-in 2006: the Ministry of Interior established a dispute resolution center for domestic workers and their employer-sponsors

⁴¹ approximately 8-10% of all domestic workers experience problems, the vast majority of which relate to contract-related disputes. An estimated 2-3% experience physical or sexual abuse.

⁴² A life and accident insurance program employers purchase for domestic workers.

- in October 1st 2006: the government implemented a minimum wage law (40-45 KD depending on the experience of the domestic worker), and made it mandatory for domestic workers, employers and labour agents⁴³ to sign 3-way contracts.

These contracts are tri-lingual (in Arabic, English and the language spoken by the domestic worker) and consist of a number of stipulations including (but not limited to): 1) contract period is for 2 years; 2) in addition to their wages, employers are responsible for domestic workers' international travel costs, health and dental care fees, living expenses (food, housing, in-country transportation related to their job), incidental costs (i.e. clothing, shoes, toiletries); and 3) domestic workers are entitled to breaks during their work day, one day off per week, and a month of holidays per year.

-in summer 2007: established a shelter for runaway maids

-in July 2008: 1) the Ministry of Interior passed a law whereby domestic workers can transfer their residency visa after 1 year of working with an employer; 2) domestic workers have to sign their contract within Kuwaiti embassies overseas, before which they have to be informed about their potential employer-sponsor's family composition and size, and the type of house within which they reside

⁴³ In the case of domestic workers and employers who arranged their work directly, they have to sign with an embassy official present (and witnessing).

Recognizing that restrictions and bans were ineffective and compounding the difficulties experienced by domestic workers, and increasingly aware of the importance of domestic workers' remittances to their national economies⁴⁴, the governments and embassies of labour-sending countries began changing their approach and role in the migration process. They increasingly started to monitor and police labour agencies (both in their own countries and the GCC), and passed laws about contract stipulations necessary to hire domestic workers from their countries. In order to recruit domestic workers, Kuwaiti labour agencies need to submit job orders to the labour-sending country's embassy in Kuwait. This order is then processed by the embassy, and sent to the labour and/or foreign affairs ministries in the labour-sending country. If a Kuwaiti labour agency is found to be remiss (i.e. there are a lot of complaints and legal cases filed against them, do not redress problems experienced by domestic workers), embassy officials will deny their future job order requests. Labour-sending countries' embassies further stipulated that domestic workers and their employers should register and file their documents (i.e. contracts, copy of passport and visas) at the embassy. Embassies also began establishing and formalizing sub-divisions and procedures in country to counsel and address problems experienced by migrant domestic workers. The labour ministries and foreign affairs ministries in labour-sending countries were also instrumental in passing laws stipulating contract terms for migrant domestic workers. These include:

⁴⁴ For example, during an interview with the foremost migration expert in Nepal, he mentioned that despite the country's civil war and economic downturn, the GDP of the country had actually remained the same or even increased, largely due to remittances. He further noted that much of these remittances were being sent by migrant domestic workers

-Filippino government in November 2003: set a minimum wage of 120 KD (versus 40-5 KD set by the Kuwaiti government); migrant domestic workers need to undertake pre- and in-country orientation sessions; migrant domestic workers and their employers must register with the labour attaché's division in Kuwait; stipulated penalties on non-compliant recruitment agencies

-Indian government in October 2007: set a minimum wage of \$300-350 USD/month (in comparison with Kuwait's minimum wage of \$146-164 USD); migrant domestic workers have to be paid through banks; migrant domestic workers must have mobile phone connectivity; employers need to provide a bank guarantee of \$2500 if a domestic worker is recruited directly (i.e. not through a labour agency; it is unclear who would keep possession of the guarantee); the minimum wage of the employer must be \$2723 USD/month; domestic workers need to be at least 30 years old; contracts must be approved by the embassy in-country and overseen by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs; employers must purchase a life insurance policy for migrant domestic workers

-Sri Lankan and Indonesian governments in Fall 2007: both countries set a minimum wage of 60 KD

The capacity of labour-sending countries and their embassies to safeguard their co-nationals, and enforce these contract stipulations vary widely. While I was conducting

research, the abilities of embassies to assist their nationals ran the gamut from the Philippines Overseas Labour Offices (POLO)--affiliated with the Philippines Embassy, which had readily available statistics about the composition and situation of its citizenry in Kuwait, and that offered a range of services to its nationals, including in-country orientation sessions, legal support and financial advice; to the other extreme, the Nepalese government, which did not have an embassy present in Kuwait despite having a significant population in the country⁴⁵. It was widely known that Nepalese women were the largest group of domestic workers migrating to Kuwait in the early to mid-2000s. The reasons for this had to do with the lack of documentation needed, and the shortened procedures related to sponsoring them to come to Kuwait. Eventually, in an unprecedented move, in the fall of 2007 the Kuwaiti government banned Nepali women from migrating into the country⁴⁶. The reasons given had to do with administrative, bureaucratic and governance problems that had developed due to there being no official state representatives in the country. The ban was lifted in late 2008 for reasons that are still unclear to me⁴⁷.

3.5 State-come-lately?

Kuwait's domestic work sector initially developed with minimal state involvement. The Kuwaiti state has been unwilling and ill-equipped to police this sector

⁴⁵ And vice-versa, there is no Kuwaiti Embassy in Nepal.

⁴⁶ The Nepalese government was unaware of this until alerted by a labour agent **two weeks after** the ban had been implemented.

⁴⁷ I will be following up with my interlocutors, who were unable or unwilling to discuss the matter over email or the phone.

given the country's history of state development, and the country's parallel development of a welfare-redistributive national economy and a neoliberal migrant and trade driven economy. Under Kuwait's citizen-devolved kefala system, the governance of domestic workers fell to individual Kuwaitis, specifically the employer-sponsors of domestic workers. Migrant domestic workers do not fall under the purview of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour as do other foreign migrants, nor do they fall under the country's existing labour laws. In the face of media reports and moral panics developing around the situation of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait, the governments of many labour-sending countries imposed migration restrictions and bans that were largely unenforceable and ineffective. In the absence of government involvement, other actors and groups became involved in regulating and adjudicating the domestic work sector in Kuwait. Notable here are labour recruitment agencies who have been instrumental in channeling and regulating the movements of migrant domestic workers. Through the activities and encouragement of these labour agencies, the Kuwaiti government has in the past few years developed and passed new laws and policies related to the domestic work sector, and the activities of labour agencies have been an important means through which labour-sending countries have been able to, albeit to a limited extent, monitor and adjudicate this sector. Kuwait's domestic work sector thus points to a unique process whereby transnational and global processes—of cross-border migration, trade and the development of inter-regional networks—have led to the increasing involvement and development of state and state-like institutions, rather than to their dismantling. At the same time, however, and perhaps ironically, despite the development of these state and

state-like institutions, migrant domestic work remains a difficult realm to regulate and adjudicate. As labour agents, embassy officials and government workers told me repeatedly during interviews: It is hard to enforce contract stipulations and monitor the situation of domestic workers, not simply because of the kefala system, but because of the difficulty of adjudicating and policing relations and activities within the household, and as I argue in the net chapter, because of the difficulty of adequately accounting for and remunerating these relationships in terms of conventional understandings of waged labour and contractual arrangements (also see Anderson 2000). For domestic workers, the most significant relationship remains the one they have with their employer-sponsors. Unless they were discussing the steps by which they migrated to Kuwait in response to my questions, or unless they experienced difficulties in Kuwait (e.g. nonpayment of salary, exploitation and/or abuse by their employers), few domestic workers mentioned state institutions, courts, the police, lawyers, or labour agents. Thus to go back to Sumitra/Sara's reticence in discussing her journeying to Kuwait, one can argue that her reluctance not only relates to how some of her actions shaded into realms of illegality, but is also related to the fact that details of her interactions with labour agents, embassy officials, government worker (although not separate or divorced from them) were not as significant as were her daily interactions and relations with her employer-sponsors: the al-****.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For revisions and follow-up research: grey and black markets related to domestic work in Kuwait; working 'outside'; visa trafficking, sex trade, also importance of family networks; Mercy/Rahman's story as launching point.

4. Dawa and Dialogical Islam

4.1 Transnational Trajectories and Interrelations: Demography and Dawa

In a discussion about transnational religion, Peter Van der Veer pithily points to a key issue that scholars examining contemporary religious practices and movements are grappling with: “Theories that emphasize the universality of religion and the particular historicity of the nation,” he tells us, “underestimate the extent to which the nation form is universalized in modern history and determines the location of religion” (2001a: 1). His comments underscore the importance of the nation-state to the nature and location of religion. This issue resonates with recent scholarship that examines how religious traditions have been reworked and reshaped through the disciplining practices of modern secular-liberal state institutions (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2006), a long line of scholarship examining how religious movements have focused their efforts on capturing state or state-like institutions and government (e.g. see Deeb 2006), and how religious publics, though not reducible to the nation-state in their socio-political visions and practice, have largely been spatially isomorphic with the nation-state (e.g. see Hirschkind 2006).

Globalizing processes and transnational circulations have created new fields of possibility for religious practices, publics, and movements. However, as many have discussed with respect to broader thematics of globalization and transnationalism, these processes have not led to the dissolution of the nation-state, but rather, have reconfigured the reach and significance of state institutions and national forms of belonging (Bowen 2004a; Trouillot 2003; Van der Veer 2001a and 2001b). The continued importance of the

nation-state is clear with respect to transnational forms of Islam. Existing work has focused on how ethno-national populations of Muslims (e.g. Pakistanis in Britain, Algerians in France, etc.) and Islamic groups (e.g. Tablighi Jamaat) have spread across national borders, and are developing forms of belonging and organizing across spatially discontinuous areas¹. While important and necessary realms of study, these works ignore or elide other forms of transnational Islam developing in our contemporary moment, including what Bowen has described as a “global public space of normative reference and public...[that] cannot be reduced to a dimension of migration or of transnational religious movements” (2004b, 879). The women’s wing of Kuwait’s Islamic *dawa* movement is one example of transnational Islam that is novel in its form: a movement whose pedagogical practices and modes of organizing have developed dialogically in relation to the presence of diverse groups of foreign residents and migrants in Kuwait. Kuwait’s Islamic *dawa* movement has developed through processes similar to what Yelvington has described as “multiple interactions of material, ideational, and discursive phenomena... a dialogue not between fixed objects, but a project of mutual influence and conditioning” (2001, 240-1). The story of Kuwait’s Islamic *dawa* movement is one that needs to be told in relation to Kuwait’s demographic history. It is a story that intertwines the growth of Kuwait’s Islamic organizations with the burgeoning of its migrant and foreign resident population.

¹ For example, see Metcalf’s volume for discussions of Muslim populations in North America (1996), Madawi’s discussion of Saudi Islamic groups in England (Al-Rasheed, 2005), and Ewing’s discussion of Turks in Germany (2008).

Similar to the other oil-rich states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Kuwait's everyday functioning depends heavily on its foreign migrant and resident population. Overweening nationalist discourse notwithstanding, it is well documented that Kuwait's interregional relations with other parts of the Middle East and across the Indian Ocean predate the country's petro-fuelled development (as I discussed in chapter 2; also e.g. see Anscombe 2005; Onley 2005). These relations have been integral to Kuwait's constitution, something tacitly acknowledged and encountered in everyday life. It is apparent in the names of many Kuwaiti citizens—names pointing to forebears from further-flung places, such as Al-Awadhi (Iran), Al-Hindi (India), and Al-Ghanim (Saudi Arabia). It laces Kuwaitis' everyday speech, a spoken Arabic punctuated with Farsi, Hindi and Swahili terms, and notable for sounds not often heard in other parts of the Arabic-speaking world (e.g. sound of 'cha'). It is also apparent in Kuwaitis' mention of longstanding business and kinship ties in India, Iran, and other states in the Persian/Arab Gulf.

Beginning in the late 1940s, with the development of Kuwait's oil industry, and the concomitant formation of its state institutions and infrastructure, starker distinctions and divisions emerged between the country's citizenry and non-citizens. Citizenship in Kuwait became restricted to those who could prove their residency in the country prior to the 1920s, to those who could trace patrilineal descent from this group, and to women who married into this group (Longva 1997, 49-50; also see Kuwaiti 1959 Nationality Law). These restrictions have effectively excluded the vast majority of people who have

migrated to Kuwait from the early 1950s onwards². Ever-burgeoning, this population has been integral to Kuwait's post-oil development.

Kuwait's first wave of migrants was overwhelming Arab. Most came from Egypt, or were Palestinian refugees who had been displaced from their homes after *An-Nakba* and the creation of Israel. Better educated and trained than the majority of Kuwait's preexisting population, they became the teachers, doctors, nurses and administrators of government-sponsored social institutions, and they both developed and became bureaucratic functionaries in the country's rapidly growing state institutions and oil industry (Longva 1997, 25-34). Kuwait's deepening relations with Egypt and the Mashreq were furthered by its citizenry's travel and pursuit of higher education and training in these countries³. For example, until recently, the majority of Kuwait's lawyers and judges were trained in Egypt, and in the summer months, Kuwaitis were a widespread presence in Alexandria, Cairo and Beirut.

These ties to the Arab world had a profound effect on religious practice and organizing in Kuwait. The precise nature of these effects was a source of great debate

² In this chapter I refer to this diverse population as foreign residents and migrants. I do so with some reservation given the ways in which these terms can reinscribe exclusionary discourses and practices. I hope, however, that by underscoring the way in which these terms are ascribed to people migrating to Kuwait from the mid-20th century onwards highlights the historical and social processes of differentiation through which differences between citizens and non-citizens are established and policed in Kuwait.

³ I should also note here that over the course of conducting research I also heard of several instances of Kuwaitis pursuing higher education and vocational training in India and Pakistan. I was unable to find supporting research/ documentation that could give me a sense of how widespread this was. Older Kuwaitis told me few did so after the mid-1950s.

among many of my interlocutors, attesting perhaps to their varied nature. Some argued Kuwait became increasingly secular and liberal⁴-westernized through their interactions with Arabs whom they characterized as being more cosmopolitan, cultured and ‘free’ than themselves. They cited discotheques, mini skirts, and alcohol, all widespread during the 1960s-70s, as important indicators of these influences. Others argued that Kuwaitis—a population that I was told was already pious and socially conservative, did not necessarily become *more* religious, but began practicing Islam and developing forms of Islamic organizing consonant with those in other parts of the Arab world. An illustrative example here is the influence of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimiin* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Kuwait. Fleeing increasingly hostile governments in Egypt and Syria, members of the *Ikhwan* migrated to Kuwait, where they became part of Kuwait’s public university and judiciary, as well as the Ministry of Awqaf. In tandem with Kuwaiti citizens who had studied or worked with sympathizers of the movement while abroad, *Ikhwan* members from other Arab states also played a significant role in the development of Islamic reform and activist organizations in Kuwait.

⁴ Some just used the term ‘liberal’ to indicate that the term superceded or was not reducible to western practice. Others used both terms to point to how liberal practice was synonymous or reducible to western forms and practice. I should also note that while Kuwait has developed through longstanding colonial and postcolonial relations with the British and Americans, prior to the Gulf war, many Kuwaitis conceived of the process of modernity upon which they had embarked as inflected and developed as much in relation to other parts of the Arab world as it was to the ‘West’. Many of my interlocutors--citizens and non-citizens, young and old, who have resided in Kuwait for a long period of time, pointed to the aftermath of the Gulf war as leading to Kuwait’s greater integration into an American-driven form of globalization, and to the subsequent revisioning of their prior development in and through these terms.

From the mid-1970s onwards the demographic composition of Kuwait's foreign migrant and resident population began to shift. In just under two decades, it went from being predominately Arab to being largely South and South-East Asian (Longva 1997, 31-34; also see Arnold and Shah 1986; Kapiszewski 2001). In the face of these changes, members of Kuwait's Islamic organizations found themselves implicated in ways that were unexpected, and that they were ill-equipped to deal with. A range of foreign migrants and residents—male and female (albeit few at first), Thai and Tamil, construction workers and household caregivers—started to show up at mosques and Islamic centers seeking Arabic lessons.

Initially most of the people who came to these classes were Muslim, many of whom were hoping to improve their ability to engage with the Quran. Non-Muslims started to attend as well, as word spread that these classes were being offered free of charge, and that they were not restricted to Muslims. In offering these classes, officials from the mosques and Islamic centers, who were, with few exceptions⁵, unfamiliar with the languages spoken by their students, drew on the support of foreign residents and migrants who were already familiar with Arabic. They anticipated that fellow nationals would be able to not only better communicate, but would also know which pedagogical techniques were most appropriate and effective. In cases where officials were unable to find such help, Kuwaiti and Arab teachers muddled through as best as they could until

⁵ For example, some Kuwaitis with trade and kinship ties in India were able to speak Hindi/Urdu.

some of their students became more fluent in Arabic, and were able to assist, and then teach subsequent classes.

In discussions I had with former teachers and students, many emphasized how novel these experiences were. Through these language classes, Kuwaiti citizens, preexisting foreign residents, and recently arrived migrants interacted with one another in ways that were rare in Kuwait aside from the workplace, and schools attended by the children of well-heeled residents and migrants. Although these classes offered a rare opportunity for engagement and dialogue, many of my interlocutors, especially foreign residents, emphasized that these interactions were neither sustained, nor their effects in any way transformative of the deeply wrought asymmetrical relations among these groups. As Sister Zaynab, an Egyptian daiyat who spent a formative period of her life in Canada, put it to me:

“we had chances to speak to one another, to talk, to learn about one another that isn’t usual here. Where do you see this now? The shopping areas? No. Parks? No. People pass each other...People, they socialize at home here [Kuwait]. With their families...And we talked in these classes. Oh yes, I made friends in these classes, *alhumdullilah*, friends who I cherish. But still we socialize with our families. When classes end, we go home. Maybe I talk to them sometimes on the phone, visit them during Ramadan maybe...And for these laborers, they take the buses back to their camps or apartments they share.”

In addition to the language courses that they provided, officials and instructors from these mosques and Islamic centers also began offering Islamic classes, most notably *tajwid* (recitation of the Quran) and *tafsir* (exegesis of the Quran). These classes tended to be impromptu, and were undertaken according to students' interests and requests. For example, Rasul, a student of these early *dars*, told me of how his teacher Ibrahim, an English-speaking Kuwaiti, would help him and his fellow students learn chapters from the Quran they had asked him to explain, and that the timing of their classes depended on their work schedules. In the early 1980s a group of instructors such as Ibrahim, and officials from a variety of Islamic organizations, increasingly began to coordinate their teaching activities with one another. They founded a loose network whose focus was on teaching Islamic precepts and practices to Kuwait's non-Arabic speaking foreign resident and migrant populations.

4.2 Kuwait's Islamic Dawa Movement and Domestic Workers

The morphology of this network—what has burgeoned into Kuwait's Islamic *dawa* movement, was and remains protean and widespread. It consists of three main groups: administrators⁶ able to communicate in Arabic and English; a multi-lingual group

⁶ I should note the organization is not funded by the Kuwaiti government, or by any other government. The ties they have developed with Kuwait's governmental bodies relate to their needing and receiving accreditation as a social organization in order to function legally in Kuwait, to their needing to receive travel visas and work permits for their employees, etc. In addition, as the number of people who were converting to Islam increased in Kuwait, this created several logistical problems, most notably related to the situation of 1) 'Newly practicing Muslims' (organization's terminology) trying to get visas to go to Saudi Arabia to perform *umrah* or *haji*, and 2) couples in which 'Newly practicing Muslim men' (organization's terminology) were trying

involved with maintaining resource centers and producing and distributing media and new media; and the bulk of the movement, a multi-lingual and transnational group of teachers. Teachers are hired and undertake their work in relation to the situation and needs of their students—members of Kuwait’s foreign resident population.

Take for instance the classes that have developed in relation to Kuwait’s domestic worker population. In the early 1980s, correlated to the increased migration of these women to Kuwait, the number of domestic workers seeking to learn about Islam also began to increase. Their interest in furthering their understanding of Islam was not necessarily precipitated or predicated upon their conversion to Islam. Some attended because they were curious about Islamic precepts and practices, and/or they wanted to learn more about specific skills such as *tajwid*, the recitation of the Quran. Others attended due to misunderstandings and conflicts that had arisen in the household within which they worked, problems resulting from their unfamiliarity with Islamic practices, and their employers’ inability to effectively explain the nature of these practices.

Similar to the Arabic language lessons, the dawa movement’s introductory courses were taught in the vernaculars spoken by domestic workers. The dawa movement hired teachers who were not only knowledgeable about Islam and who had

to marry Muslim women. By law in Kuwait, non-Muslim men are restricted from marrying Muslim women. The state ended up developing a judicial branch that provides certification to new Muslims. This certification process is routed through the administration of Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement. New Muslims must first go to them to receive a form attesting to their new status before then going to the courts to receive their certificate.

facility in Arabic and English, but who were also fluent in one, or several of the languages spoken by domestic workers. In cases where the dawa movement could not find women with these abilities locally, they sought them out further afield with the assistance of mosques and Islamic organizations in the countries from which domestic workers had migrated. Teachers, overwhelmingly foreign residents and migrants, were hired for two-year contracts that were renewable subject to demand for classes in languages that they taught⁷. This demand fluctuated according to migration trends and patterns. For example, the daiyat who worked with Indian women, and who spoke a myriad of languages including but not limited to Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil, and Hindi/Urdu, mentioned that the periodic issuing of travel bans by the Indian government on domestic workers' migration to the Gulf region resulted in the waxing and waning of the number of students in their classes.

In addition to offering classes in languages and pedagogical styles familiar to students, the dawa movement offered them in different formats, and at places and times that accommodated domestic workers' circumstances. Most domestic workers attended regular weekly classes held at the dawa movement's women's center on Tuesdays, mid-way through Kuwait's work-week, when they tended to have lighter work loads. Classes

⁷ Although it was possible for them, especially those fluent in Arabic and English, to become administrators.

were held between 5-8 pm, when employers usually rested before evening socializing, and when either they or their drivers could take domestic workers to the center⁸.

Teachers also held semi-regular classes in the homes of Kuwaiti women who hosted gatherings for domestic workers who worked with their extended family networks or lived in their neighborhoods. One of the more unusual examples of these informal classes was a ‘filmi night’ Sister Tahira, one of the Indian daiyat, held semi-regularly in a *diwaniyyah* belonging to a wealthy Kuwaiti woman. The women attending these gatherings tended to get bored or listless with lectures, and in response Sister Tahira had taken to showing them clips from Islamic cartoons, film clips produced by Harun Yahya⁹, and movies like “The Message”, clips she would translate into the many languages spoken by women present, and then use to illustrate a point in an ensuing lesson or discussion.

4.3 Halaqa: Circle of Diversity, Discussion and Deliberation

Another form of classes offered outside the women’s center are *halaqa* that are organized and hosted by foreign residents and migrants, and that are facilitated by

⁸ A few who worked ‘outside’ (who do not live their employers, but had their own accommodations) came by their own means (i.e. taxis or buses). For the most part, employers were wary about permitting their employees to walk long distances or take public transportation and taxis, citing safety concerns such as the kidnapping, trafficking, and rape of domestic workers of the street in Kuwait. Several such incidents were reported in the news media everyday. In addition, for most of the year, the tremendous heat and punishing climate make walking hazardous to one’s health. Employers were also concerned that domestic workers would abscond or develop illicit relationships if they were to use public transportation and be out in public regularly.

⁹ Pen name of a Turkish writer who writes and produces a panoply of media (e.g. books, films) about Islamic topics, Islam and contemporary events, etc.

members of Kuwait's Islamic dawa movement. One example brings us back to the beginning of this dissertation, and my unwitting trip to attend a *halaqa* organized by Auntie Saima. As I was to learn over the next four years during my trips to Kuwait and in email correspondence with women attending these *halaqa*, Auntie Saima was a woman well situated to host these *halaqa*

Auntie Saima and her husband were longstanding members of Kuwait's resident community. In the early 1970s after Uncle Amir, her fiancé, completed a business degree in the US, the two married in Pakistan. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Kuwait, where Uncle Amir found work as a mid-level executive in a bank. The two prospered, had several children, and their growing family became entwined in relations and activities with other Pakistani and South Asian Muslim families in Kuwait. Within their social circle, Auntie Saima developed a reputation for being 'ready steady'-- a calm, resourceful and trustworthy 'baji'¹⁰ who had helped many newly arrived brides navigate Kuwait's often treacherous social and logistical waters.

Also well known among her friends, something Auntie Saima would herself discuss during the *halaqa*, was that she and her husband held very different views about what constituted proper Islamic practice. Uncle Amir referred to himself as a secular Muslim, explaining that he held a believing heart, even if he did not pray or practice Islam regularly. His wife's quiet, firm piety irked him a great deal, as did her propensity

¹⁰ Urdu term that means older sister; also used among women to indicate seniority and as a term indicating respect.

for what he called ‘sober’¹¹ behaviour. The two were a study in contrast and had reached a détente of sorts, one based on an always uneasy and precarious recognition of difference, and their looking the other way in the face of each others’ sometimes antithetical daily practices and activities.

An uneasy realm of difference and détente between the two were the *dars* and *halaqa* that Auntie Saima began hosting from early 2000 onwards. Her decision to begin hosting these classes was one precipitated by a trip she took one summer to Pakistan, during which her sister introduced her to, and she began regularly attending, *dars* led by Dr. Farhat Hashmi. Laden with suitcases of cassette *dars* and Al-Huda workbooks, upon her return Auntie Saima was resolved to share her newfound learning in Kuwait. She organized classes at her home two days a week, and invited women who were part of her extensive social network to participate. These *dars* became, and continue to be, quite successful. They are regularly attended by dozens of Urdu-speaking South Asian women¹². One issue of concern to Auntie Saima, however, was that many younger Muslim South Asian women who had grown up in Kuwait, or who had migrated from North America and the UK, were not coming, or ceased to come after attending a few classes. She knew many of these women to be pious, and their lack of attendance puzzled her. In following up on the matter, she discovered that many found the Urdu

¹¹ Term he and others used to refer to her solemnity and seriousness.

¹² Attendance varies at different times of the year, most notably during the summer when most foreign residents travel abroad, often to their communities/countries of origin.

spoken by Dr. Farhat¹³, what Auntie Saima described as a literary and sophisticated form, difficult to understand. They also told Auntie Saima that they found listening to the tapes ‘*tora* [a little] boring’. When I asked some of these women about their experiences, they told me that although Dr. Farhat was well-spoken and knowledgeable, and although the Al-Huda *durus* were informative, but they were ‘bawut seeda’ or ‘sakht’—too straight, dry and inflexible.

In response, Auntie Saima decided to develop another course for these women. She approached a former teacher at the Islamic *dawa* movement with whom she had taken numerous courses in *fiqh* and *tafsir*. Sister Hafsa was not only fluent in English, but having spent many years teaching Islamic classes at mosques in the US, Auntie Saima thought her teaching style might be better suited for the women uninterested in Al-Huda *durus*. Sister Hafsa agreed, but on the condition that other women from the neighborhood were to be invited to attend. Initially, most who came to these classes were friends or immediate neighbors of Auntie Saima, but as word spread about them, the composition of the class increasingly began to reflect the diversity of Auntie Saima’s neighborhood—one known for having large numbers of Kuwaiti Shi’, a broad spectrum of foreign residents, and some ‘bachelor workers’ and ‘working ladies’¹⁴.

¹³ Who is known to use a very literary and ‘mushkil’ (difficult) Urdu.

¹⁴ Terms often used to refer to migrant workers who are male and female; otherwise put, the neighborhood was diverse nationally and class-wise.

Sister Hafsa’s approach to teaching these students centered on the study of the Quran. Unsure about her students’ familiarity with the Quran, and a little uncertain about how to bridge disparate sets of experiences and backgrounds, she began by doing *tafsir* of *Surat al-Fatiha*, a commonly known short chapter from the Quran, one most Muslims have memorized and are able to recite in Arabic even if they are unable to read the Quran, or are unaware of the chapter’s meaning. Sister Hafsa’s *tafsir* focused on unraveling the many-layered meaning of each word. She would discuss the meaning of a word in relation to other words in the passage, trace its root word, and discuss the many resonant words deriving from this root. In discussing words and passages from this *surat*, she would interweave stories from the *hadith*¹⁵, mention their resonance with other parts of the Quran, and relate them to words and events from everyday life or political events. She would encourage students to share whatever knowledge they had of these words, and the *hadith*, etc.; to pose any questions they might have; and to share experiences consonant with them. Asma, a Sri Lankan friend Auntie Saima had met through the Islamic dawa movement, and a student attending Sister Hafsa’s *halaqa* from the beginning, mentioned that during discussions the women in the class would often point out the resonances between words in Arabic encountered in the Quran and ones they commonly used in the languages they spoke everyday—for example, the word *mazbut*, which she told me, means correct or accurate in Arabic, and strong or straight in Urdu. She mentioned how moving it was for her to “see how these words move and connect us.... you realize how beautiful the Quran is, al-humdullilah, how deep and powerful the

¹⁵ Traditions of Prophet Muhammad.

words are...how we speak them, and try to understand them, and live them.

Alhumdullilah.”

By far the issue generating the most discussion in and through Sister Hafsa’s *tafsir*, words eliciting a series of more animated words through which experiences were shared, and assessments and reassessments of proper practice were made, were ones related to marriage, household and family relations. A memorable example of this occurred three years after I first met the women attending Auntie Saima’s *halaqa*, and more than a year after I began attending these *halaqa* myself. At that point in my research, I had learned to discern the subtle yet unmistakable signs when some of the women present were not convinced, or were concerned with what Sister Hafsa was saying—signs that were evident that early afternoon. Auntie Saima was lightly biting down on her lower lip, and her brow was furrowed in a way often presaging a pointed question. Asma was flipping through her Quran, in search of a passage with which to frame her subsequent comments. Amina, timid, looked over at Salma, less timid, imploring her with her eyes to *say something*. And Khadija was scanning the expressions of the other women as she did when she was uncertain about an issue at hand. What had spurred this quiet (but respectful) consternation?

In the midst of her lesson, an exegesis of Surat Qaf (passage from the Quran), Sister Hafsa had begun explaining the word ‘sukr’, which, she told us:

“means to block something, or hide it, or cover it...or obstruct something, or shut it off...this is why we use the word ‘sukran’, which means subhanallah, that someone can not think right or is not able to judge right or take a decision. Her reasoning or understanding, subhanallah has become blocked or obstructed. This state stems from three things. One thing is love...Subhanallah, they say love is blind...”

Before she got to two or three, Sister Hafsa was interrupted by Asma, who—in fits and pauses, clearly worked up but trying to choose her words carefully—began telling the story of her nephew, a boy:

“who was supposed to be...pious, but who was clearly blinded by his...love for a woman he was...somehow... seeing...this woman was not...religiously minded, and is not Sinhala-speaking...but it doesn’t matter to him. The boy, he wants to marry her anyways. My sister is upset. I was shocked. What to do?”

In the ensuing back and forth of discussion, Sister Hafsa made several points. Generally agreed upon by everyone was:

- that a commitment to living a pious life [*din*] was something to be sought after in a potential spouse;
- and it was clear and evident that some acts, such as *zina*, were illicit [sexual relations outside the bounds of a legally contracted marriage].

But, Sister Hafsa also cautioned the other women from too easily assuming they understood what was permissible [*halal*] and forbidden [*haram*] when it came to relationships, engagements and marriage. Acknowledging that this probably contradicted their own experiences growing up in Egypt, Sri Lanka, India and Kuwait, she argued that these days it was essential for potential spouses to interact with one another before becoming engaged, and for them to get to know one another well during the period between the signing of a marriage contract and hosting a wedding ceremony announcing the marriage publicly.

The following is a short excerpt from their discussion:

Sr. Hafsa-

“They (young men and women) meet one other in college; they can communicate through the internet, on their cell phones. It is different from when we were young...”

Auntie Saima-

“it was better then...”

Sr. Hafsa-

“no, no, you can not say that. We don’t know. Only Allah [SWT] can truly judge. My point is that it is different. They see and interact with one another. Why would we try to restrict them from speaking and seeing one another, especially when it comes to *this* [potential marriage]? We have to be aware that

the situation, the rules of *one* generation, they do not necessarily apply to the *next*.
The situation is different. The rules are different”

Asma-

“but...I don’t know Egypt, but I think for most of us from the subcontinent, we sign the nikah and celebrate the marriage soon after. Usually on the same day.”

Khadija-

“yes, in Syria we have long engagements before the marriage, where the boys and the girls they go together, but I don’t know, we trust our parents’ judgement, that is important...if they are good boys, or not...I think it is hard for girls to really know when their hearts are soft...but even with our parents, with their experience, we never know, *sah* [right]? With me I did not have a long engagement because I knew Hasan; we are cousins. I knew him...or thought I did [laughter...hers and others]...These boys these days, they are...are...well, they don’t have taqwa...And if a girl gets pregnant, the boys don’t want to marry her”

Sr. Hafsa:

“I am not saying there are no limits. Yes, there are and have to be. This happened to my niece in Egypt and astakfirallah, they were both in the wrong, the boy and the girl. They showed poor judgement. It wasn’t haraam but still...I am not saying it is just her fault. And he would not marry her. And it has been difficult for her. It is difficult for women like this in Egypt; they get blamed. But still, sisters, they must see and know one another before marrying...But the time

grows short. Let us return to Surat Qaf...ok?...which *aya* [numbered portion of a chapter] were we on? Inshallah, maybe we can discuss this more while we eat...”

Sister Hafsa resumed leading *tafsir*, and this discussion continued later over lunch, subsequent telephone calls, tea-time get-togethers and *halaqa*. Asma, Sister Hafsa, Khadija, and the other women present listened to one another, often disagreeing, and came to their own decisions or judgement. Led by Sister Hafsa, the women in the *halaqa* engaged with the Quran and with one another in order to reassess and recalibrate their assumed ideas and practices of what being a good Muslim entailed. They did so not necessarily according to personal interest—although this, they would tell me, was something that needed to be accounted for even if it should not be determinative—but rather, with an earnest desire, and with thoughts towards future moral reckonings, to do what was incumbent upon them to do as pious Muslims, and to do what they could realistically achieve in relation to their personal circumstances and situations, one which varied widely among the women—some of whom, like Auntie Saima, were well-to-do housewives, others, like Rosa and Hema, who were migrant domestic workers. They developed flexible dialogical ethical practices with which to engage their worlds. Crucial to this ongoing process was their mutual support and shared learning, support and learning facilitated and fostered by Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement, an amorphous and widespread movement that has developed and continues to develop dialogically in relation to Kuwait’s foreign resident and migrant populations. In contrast to Al-Huda *dars* in Kuwait, which rigidly followed the taped lectures of Dr. Farhat Hashmi, and

which were characterized by rote learning, Kuwait's Dawa movement's pedagogical style, similar to its morphology, is dialogical. It calls upon members to engage and reflect upon their own experiences in and through the Quran. Developing and constituted in this way, the movement points to a form of transnational organizing that is often hard to discern and analyze, and that is not always fully accounted for in existing studies. Focused as many of these studies are on specific transnational and diasporic populations, they tend to look at the growth of Islamic movements linked to the spread of these populations. An obvious example here is of Al-Huda, whose spread is linked, whether explicit or tacit, to the movements of Pakistanis and Muslim South Asians. Another example is of returning South Asian migrants from the Arab/Persian Gulf who are said to be practicing 'Wahhabi' or salafi forms of Islam learned in the region, forms of Islamic practice they are then seen to spread in their subsequent movements. Rather than pointing to a diffusionary transnational morphology, Kuwait's Islamic Dawa movement is novel insofar as it points to a dialogical transnational morphology and dialogical form of engagement with Islamic precepts and practices.

5. Domestic Work and Deferred Lives

5.1 Absence of Presence

Sleep-blinkered, Nadia rolled over in bed. The movie she fell asleep watching had long since ended, leaving a blank screen in its wake, one casting the room in a faint, flickering blue glow. In snatches of drowse and focus, Nadia slowly registered something was amiss. The room was too still, too silent. She peered around looking for her sister. Hajira's bed was rumpled, but no toes peeked out from under the blankets, and no curls framed the edges of the sheets or trailed down the side of the bed—tell tale signs her sister had wandered off during the night.

Muttering lightly under her breath, Nadia roused herself out of bed. After checking to see if Hajira had fallen out of her bed and fallen back asleep on the floor, she headed to the bathroom. Four years old, Hajira insisted she was old enough to go to the bathroom on her own, but in the wee hours of the morning she was prone to falling asleep there. Her sister was not in the bathroom, so Nadia quietly checked her parents' room. Hajira wasn't there either. Now joined by her mother, they checked Asad, their brother's room, the family room, the maktab—but found no sign of Hajira. Heart rates and thoughts quickening with concern, they made their way down the stairs to the ground floor, where they noticed the kitchen door was ajar. Hajira wasn't there, nor was she in the adjoining laundry room, the hallway branching off, or the small sitting room it opened up onto. The door to Deepa's room, however, had been opened. Inside, on a bed stripped of its sheets, lay Hajira. Cheeks smudged with tears, she had fallen asleep there.

The next day, when they called Deepa, they also found her in tears “I wasn’t expecting that,” Dalal, Nadia and Hajira’s mother, later told me:

“She hasn’t been to India for a visit in over ten years,

her daughter is now 18, but

Deepa told me she wanted to come back.

I said: you haven’t been home for so long,

maybe you should wait.

I said: I will call back again tomorrow, and

if you want us to, we’ll book you on an earlier flight back...

Then she spoke with Hajira on the phone for almost an hour”

AA- What did they talk about?

Dalal-“Nothing really,

Hajira..spoiled child (laughs)...told her she has to come back

She asked her: when are you coming back home?

She then told her about the movie she watched last night with Nadia...

How Nadia and she had eaten their breakfast together this morning, but that her sister wouldn’t cut her apple in small pieces like she [Deepa] does...”

Perhaps more than any other story told to me, more than any other occasion that I witnessed, Hajira and Deepa's parting both belies and looms with the expectation that women like Deepa, migrant domestic workers, constitute a temporary presence in Kuwait. Their story underscores how domestic workers have become an inextricable part of everyday life in Kuwait—where far from an exceptional presence, migrant domestic workers have become an ever-present feature of Kuwait's social landscapes. When visiting a Kuwaiti home, they are usually the ones who answer the door and bring you refreshments and food. Go to one of Kuwait's many bustling shopping malls, and you will see domestic workers trailing behind their employers, laden with shopping bags or shepherding stray children. On walks in residential areas, you will see them sweeping driveways, taking out the garbage, cleaning cars, or surreptitiously chatting or flirting with neighborhood domestic workers and drivers. Domestic workers often accompany their invalid employers to hospitals, tending to them and spending the night, sometimes even for weeks on end. During a charity walk-a-thon, I even spotted domestic workers alongside their employers, carrying water bottles.

For Hajira, the presence of domestic workers in Kuwait took on a highly personalized and specific cast: in the form of her relationship with Deepa. Hired shortly after Hajira was born to help look after her, and assist her mother with the household chores, Deepa was the one who prepared breakfast for her and her older brother and sister, who helped her get dressed, and until she started playschool, who she spent her day with while the rest of the family was at school and work. Until Deepa left to visit her

family in India, she had been a fixed and constant presence in Hajira's life. Not being able to remember a time without her, and never having experienced her world without her, the night Deepa left Hajira made her way to the one place in her home where she could both register and express her sense of loss at Deepa's absence. .

Deepa's own experience of their parting was also telling. Like many other domestic workers, she had migrated to Kuwait expecting to stay for one or two contract cycles. Initially she worked within the household of a prosperous Lebanese family. After her employer and his family were relocated to Dubai by his company, Deepa decided to stay in Kuwait where she began working in a beauty salon. There she met Dalal, a Kuwaiti woman with whom she developed a good rapport, and who eventually hired her to look after her newborn daughter. What she had envisioned as a two, maybe four-year stay in Kuwait extended indefinitely, and her return 'home' to her household and family members limited to short visits.

In the weeks before her first visit in over ten years, Deepa shared her excitement and trepidation about seeing her family again. She told me that although she had been lucky with her employers, both being kind and generous, and although she had been careful about sending regular remittances to her family, she emphasized how much she had missed in India during the intervening years:

“Vasmi [her daughter], she has finished her highschooling,

and will start her college in the fall...

Madu, my sister who I told you about before, she has given birth three times,
three babies I haven't seen yet...

And my parents, they are old

but they started cooking and selling foods to shops in the neighborhood....

So much has happened to them, they have done a great deal

while I am here,

just working,

just working,

day after day,

same-same..."

5.2 Overview

A moment pointing to domestic workers' temporary absence rather than temporary presence in Kuwait, Hajira and Deepa's parting also underscores the deeply wrought, often fraught interrelations and intimacies between domestic workers and members of the household with whom they work. These relations, as I discuss in this chapter, develop through—and not in spite of—the work undertaken by domestic workers.

Domestic workers' lingering presence and deeply wrought relationships with members of their Kuwaiti households necessitate our rethinking of a number of common assumptions about their experiences in Kuwait. These experiences are often narrated or scripted in linear terms: where domestic workers come to Kuwait for short, delimited periods of time; work and earn a salary; save their earnings; and return back to the families and communities to which they belong. These scripts are ones fostered and actively produced by Kuwait's migration system and domestic work sector. They are also ones initially shared by domestic workers.

Drawing on stories, conversations, and moments that I witnessed during my fieldwork, in this chapter I examine the myriad ways in which these scripts are both produced and come unraveled in Kuwait. Specifically I focus on two aspects: 'work' and 'family'. I discuss how the work undertaken by domestic workers in Kuwait, and their relations with Kuwaiti families elude and exceed the form of waged labour relations. I also examine how the differences between, and the assumed coherence of their 'work families' in Kuwait, and their 'real families' at home become blurred, ambiguous or overlap. Otherwise put, these scripts presume and necessitate certain understanding and practices of 'work' and 'the familial' that are complicated by my interlocutors' experiences of gendered labour and everyday living within Kuwaiti households.

I begin with Santa/Sophia, whose experiences underscore how difficult domestic work and domestic workers' situation can be in Kuwait. Santa/Sophia was well-regarded

and respected by her employers, and in addition to her regular monthly wages, also received generous additional allowances and gifts from them. The difficulties she experienced are ones that are often elided in most accounts of domestic workers' experiences—where a focus on abuse and exploitation obfuscates the difficulty of the work itself. As we shall see, domestic work entails more than the (purportedly) simple household tasks of cooking and cleaning. It is also a realm of activity that involves and shapes domestic workers' dispositions, sense of self, and subjecthood.

Sumitra/Sara and Anisha's stories point to how relations among domestic workers are also a crucial element shaping their experiences within the household. Their experiences further point to how economic relations between domestic workers and employers are not limited to remunerated labour, but also involve gifting and patron-client distributions. If domestic workers' economic relationships with their employers can develop a 'familial' cast (ie. of obligation), their relationships with family members at home can also take a 'commodified' cast' –a dynamic Sumitra/Sara and Anisha's stories further illustrate.

Mary/Maryam's forty-year relationship with Mama Alia and Umm Ibrahim's family highlight the intimate relationships that can develop between domestic workers and their Kuwaiti families. As we shall see, these relationships develop through (not in spite of) the asymmetrical relations between domestic workers and their employers. Domestic workers experiences in Kuwait can lead to the development of new

relationships, belongings and social networks; however, as Hema/Salma's experience with Youmma illustrates, the scope of these possibilities is curtailed by restrictions on domestic workers' mobility in Kuwait. Whether intended or not, the monitoring and policing of their movements and activities keep domestic workers' horizons of belonging tethered to their households in Kuwait and the places from which they have migrated.

Although domestic work constitutes a dense, vital site of activity that is generative of subjectivities and relationships, many domestic workers experienced their time in Kuwait as a deferral of their lives. To many their experiences in Kuwait constituted a seemingly interminable stretch of mundane, repetitive task; work they undertook in order to live the kind of lives they envisioned as worth living in a longed-for future. Life, in other words, lay elsewhere—in another place and time. Although many domestic workers stay in Kuwait for extended periods of time, belying assumptions of their 'temporariness', they often experienced and described this time as one of suspension and postponement.

5.3 Santa/Sophia: The Difficulty of Domestic Work

Sitting on her front porch Santa/Sophia mused how far away Kuwait felt. It was a languorous afternoon. The monsoon rains had quickly come and passed, but lingered on in the heavied air and trees. We had just finished a meal of lentils of rice, a meal Santa/Sophia's mother had served out in all-too generous portions. Bellies full, eyes drooping, we made our way to the front porch where we sat watching passers-by heading

to the main road. I had traveled down that same path a few days earlier; the beginning of my visit with Sophia and her mother. The home she and her mother shared lay at the end of the path: a small, sturdy bungalow (recently painted a vivid purple with aqua trim!) set amidst a small plot where they grew subsistence crops (corn, rice, vegetables) and kept chickens, goats and a milking cow,

Journeying here, to Nepal's southeast, a lush agricultural region of tea plantations, swaying corn, and checkered rice paddies, had been difficult. A day and a half bus ride from Katmandu, this part of Nepal was only accessible by a series of narrow roads that ribboned their way through mountain passes, were precariously perched along swollen riverbeds, and at this time of the year, were rendered slick—or washed away—by monsoon rains. Add to that a general strike that had been called in the region by the (then) Maoist insurgents, and indeed, Kuwait felt very far away.

Sophia/Santa and I had met in Kuwait almost three years earlier. She had arrived late for a dawa class, and after being briefed about what she missed by a fellow student, Sophia/Santa did something few other students ever did. She launched into a series of questions challenging or asking Sister Tahira for clarification about several issues. When she learned about my research, she immediately suggested I attend classes organized by another Islamic reform movement, classes she had been attending for a year and considered to be more rigorous. Several weeks later, she approached me again, telling me that her 'mama' (employer) had invited me to their home for tea. Her 'mama's'

interest had been piqued by my research, and by my description, during one class, of the old city of Jerusalem/ Al-Quds ('The Holy', name most often used by Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims).

'Mama''s home was the top two floors of a villa owned by her father-in-law and occupied by his children until they received their land allocations from the government, and built their own homes¹. The tea was initially awkward. After greeting me at the gate with a big hug, then ushering me to the drawing room, Sophia/Santa disappeared. I was left in the company of 'mama' and her two daughters, with whom I duly shared stories and pictures of Jerusalem's holy sites.

Sophia /Santa later reappeared with a tea-cart and proceeded to serve us. Her hand was steady and practiced, but she looked a little discomfited. After pouring her own tea, she made her way to a chair at the outskirts of the seating area, where she sat quietly, listening and watching our conversation. Not accustomed to her reticence, but also unsure of her rapport with her employers, and what was the appropriate thing to do, I tried drawing her into the conversation a few times, but she this only elicited a few perfunctory remarks. On my way home, I quickly wrote down my thoughts and apprehensions: "their [Sophia/Santa, mama and her daughters] rapport seemed respectful, fond even...when Sophia left me with them in the drawing room, she had even joked

¹ The Kuwaiti government allocates plots of land and gives low / no-interest long-term loans to help couples build their own homes 15 years after they have registered their marriage with the government; this program is allocated through the husband (i.e. Kuwaiti woman married to a non-Kuwaiti can not receive this grants).

with the daughters, who were about her age. Maybe it was something that had happened before I came, or while I came, the switching between Urdu, Arabic and English, or (more likely) maybe she isn't used to having her employers meet friends in this type of social setting². Whatever it was, I really didn't know what to do. It felt as though my presence made more apparent, rather than less so, differences between them, something we (?) all felt but didn't say..."

A few weeks later, I broached the subject of my visit with Sophia/Santa. It was during a break in one of our classes. She was in the midst of adjusting her hijab, and her hand stilled. Her eyes dropping to the desk, she considered the matter. She didn't appear surprised, and I suspected she had been thinking about it, knowing I would eventually question her about it:

Sophia/Santa-

Wallah, Attiya, I did not know what to do

It was nice, they were nice to have you come and meet you like that

And mama had bought some cake before coming home [from work] just for our tea

They are nice

But when you and I talk, it is one thing

When I talk with them, with mama, it is different,

² i.e. my research was generative of social encounters and interactions that were otherwise unusual/unprecedented

with Heba and Alia [daughters], it is also different
Strange it was (ajeeb-ta) you people meeting

The issue of ‘it being different’ influenced my subsequent visits. Until the family’s frequent trips overseas, and the preparation surrounding their eldest daughters’ marriage kept them too busy to meet, I visited Sophia/Santa household several times. During these occasions my time with both Sophia/Santa and ‘Mama’ and her daughters rarely overlapped. I would spend my time with either Sophia, in the kitchen or in her rooms, or with Mama and her daughters, in the dining or family rooms. Both Sophia/Santa and Mama and her daughters would occasionally ask me about what I had discussed with the other, and they certainly spoke to one another about conversations I had with them (something they would unselfconsciously drop references to during our conversations), however, we all experienced this dense, overlapping, interconnected realm of dialogue in discrete segments—different times and spaces of interaction, each characterized by different registers through which Sophia/Santa-myself, Mama/her daughters-myself, and Sophia/Santa-Mama/her daughters related and conversed with one another.

Sitting on her front porch many months and miles later, the issue of ‘it being different’ was raised again. Santa/Sophia and I had been discussing whether she planned on returning to Kuwait, and this issue figured prominently in her decision-making. Mid-way into her second contract-cycle, three years after returning to Kuwait for a second

time (events related to her first journeying are discussed in chapter 2), Santa/Sophia left Kuwait in haste, parting with ‘Mama’ and the girls in tears. In the month prior to her leaving, Santa/Sophia had lost a great deal of weight. At first she attributed this to all the traveling she had been doing with the family—going to Lebanon, Egypt and Dubai, and to the months of preparation and work related to Mama’s daughters marriage. But in the weeks following the wedding, Sophia/Santa’ weight did not stabilize, and she continued to feel lethargic. ‘Mama’ took her to the health clinic, where she underwent a series of tests. They soon discovered that Santa/Sophia had developed a tumor in her abdomen, and would require surgery.

In the ensuing weeks, a complicated network of transnational negotiations and arrangements took place. Mama and her husband insisted Sophia/Santa have surgery in Kuwait, where she could be assured of quality care, and they contacted friends and their family doctor for advice. Sophia, at her mother’s insistence, and her own (at least then) unspoken concern about dying in Kuwait, away from home, wanted to return to Nepal. Her sister, who lived in a district close to her mother, had been looking around to find the necessary facilities, and found one across the border, in India. Sophia was set on returning home. Within a few weeks, all the arrangements for her return to Nepal and her surgery had been made.

When I visited Sophia several months later, her tumour had been successfully removed, and though still underweight, she was on the mend. ‘Mama’ called regularly to check how she was feeling:

Sophia/Santa-

Yes, they contact me by phone (when the lines are working)

to ask how I am...

And they want me to come back when I am better, but I don’t want to, at least not now, not for a while

Attiya-Why not?

Sophia/Santa-

The work is hard. I don’t feel ready. I will see if I can find work here first.

Attiya-

I guess it takes time to recover from surgery like yours...

Sophia/Santa-

...No, it is not just that. The work is hard. It is hard being there.

Attiya [smiles over at Sophia/Santa’s mother, who had been listening intently]-

I guess it is hard leaving here

Sophia/Santa-

Yes, of course...but no, the work is hard. It is hard on me...

We discussed the details of her work further. Sophia/Santa, like ‘Mama’, followed a strict routine that I came to learn in bits and pieces during my visits. She woke early in the morning, around dawn, when the family awoke to perform their morning prayers (fajr). Sophia/Santa made breakfast for the family—eggs, toast, fruit, cereal, which she laid out in the kitchen, for them to come and eat when they were ready. She usually took care of laundry and/or cleaning in the morning, when the rest of the family was out. After taking a break late morning, she would then start preparing the main meal of the day, the afternoon meal, which would be ready by the time the family came home and was ready to eat around 3pm. Santa/Sophia would then clear and clean up, and take a late afternoon break. The last of her duties of the day came when she prepared the early evening tea, and sometimes ironed the clothes when members of the family headed out for the evening. Mama strictly enforced the rule that in the evenings, Sophia/Santa was not to be bothered by anyone. Breaks in this routine only occurred when the family was hosting or attending a large gathering (Sophia would attend if they were attending an event at a close friend or family members’ home to help with the serving of food and to meet with the other maids/domestic workers), during Ramadan,

when the family traveled [which they did frequently in the summers] and in the weeks leading up to their daughters' marriage, when Sophia worked around the clock.

During breaks, and her weekly day off, Sophia would often speak to friends and family members on her mobile phone, do homework or go and attend Islamic dawa classes, watch Nepali and Indian programs on the satellite-linked television in her room, and visit with the other domestic workers living in the extended family's home. Sophia was never allowed to go out on her own. Mama would accompany her if she had to go to the clinic or do some shopping, or would arrange for the household's driver to drop her off, and pick her promptly back up when she went to attend dawa classes or visit friends.

Mama and her family were conscientious and caring employers, who frequently told Sophia/Santa (and me) that they regarded her as one of their own daughters³. They were careful not to overwork her (except during the build-up to the wedding, when as a member of the household, Sophia/Santa was expected to help with the added chores and activities), they paid her wages regularly and on time, and in addition to her room, board, toiletries and clothes [as per contract stipulations], they also paid for her mobile phone, gave her pocket money when they went to the shops or traveled, and bought her and her mother gifts of clothes, watches, jewelry and perfume. On her journey back to Nepal, the family arranged for Santa/Sophia to stay with friends of theirs during her long lay-over in

³ discuss pseudo-kinship relations later in the chapter; take up this issue

Sharjah, gave her a lump sum to cover her operation expenses, and regularly wired her small amounts of money during her recovery.

Mama and her family were exemplary in their treatment of Sophia/Santa, something few domestic workers I met experienced with their employers. In our conversations, Sophia/Santa mentioned that she felt a deep appreciation for them, something words couldn't quite convey, and how thankful she was to God to have them as her kafeel. In the same breath, however, she would also underline another dimension of her work, something most work on domestic workers in the Gulf region overlook in their focus on abuse or exploitation experienced by these migrant women, something she came closest to articulating that day on the porch:

Sophia/Santa-

When I go to their home, it is my home for a while, but really it is their home...

I try to remind myself that everyday there, whenever I have been out [of the house] and feel good coming back I remind myself I am not really back...

and they are nice to me--but they are fond of me

they give things, they helped with the surgery

although I don't ask, I didn't ask

I think they wouldn't like it if I asked...

they are fond of me,

and they have to be fond of me, I have to make sure of this, this is necessary
and to be fond of me I have to be close, but not too close, you know?
close enough for us to be friendly, nice talking together
for the house to be nice and easy
but not too close...

you see, they have to like me
it can be hard [on me] because they have to like me
...not like you, I can be frank with you...I can tell you about Hari...
but I have to be nice with them,
I don't need to be nice with you unless I want, which I do [*laughs*]
It is different."

A thread running throughout our conversations, 'it is different' underscores a dimension of domestic workers' experiences that is often elided. When Sophia/Santa began working with 'Mama', the training she underwent was not limited to learning how to operate appliances and cook foods unfamiliar to her. Her disciplining was not reducible to learning the routines and rhythms, and the peculiar preferences of the family. The work she undertook was intimate, but not just because it involved everyday interactions in the rooms and halls of the household. Sophia/Santa's work also necessarily involved her very behavior and comportment, a continuous calibration of the way in which she engaged with Mama and her family, the constant awareness that a sharp

remark, a sullen expression, uneasy rapport, or overstepped familiarity could diminish her standing and situation. In her own words, this dimension of her work ‘was hard’, one exacerbated by her living with ‘Mama’ and her family in their home.

Sophia/Santa’s experience points to how domestic work involves not just physical labour (e.g. cleaning), or the making of specific objects (e.g. meals), but also involves the performance—and production—of subjectivity (Anderson 2000: 3; Weeks 2007: 239, 241; Hairong 2008: 168). In contrast to gendered assumptions that domestic work is an un-skilled occupation that is undertaken by subjects uniquely suited to this type of work (i.e. women), it is in fact a realm of activity that necessitates the cultivation of dispositions, and the ongoing training/self-disciplining with respect to interpersonal interactions. As Nicole Constable writes, “domestic workers’ labour extend[s] into her most private domain; her body, her personality, her voice, and her emotions” (Constable 2007: 90; also see Weeks 2007: 239-40 and Lazzarato 2007: 2). Domestic work, affective and immaterial forms of labour, is a realm requiring too much of the self rather than too little, where workers’ very personhood is implicated and produced through their work (Weeks 2007: 241-2; also see Moors 2003: 390; Hochschild 1997, 2000). It is, as Sophia/Santa explained to me “hard”, and as our interactions and conversations indicate, difficult to articulate and make readily apparent.

5.4 Rethinking Markets, Solidarity and Family: Household Workers' Interrelations, Gifting and Patron-Client Relations, Families Through Commodities

The issue of her personality and demeanor also figures prominently with respect to Sumitra/Sara's experiences in Kuwait. As mentioned in chapters 2 and 6, Sumitra/Sara was known among those in the al-**** household for being 'rather abrupt', a gloss Shaima initially used to forewarn (and reassure) me before I met with her for the first time, and later, a term we used to broach the matter of Sumitra/Sara's relationship with family members and other domestic workers in the compound. When Sumitra/Sara was hired in the early 1980s, Anisha was the most senior domestic worker working with the family, and it quickly became apparent that the two did not get along. Their mutual antipathy was an open secret, one the al-**** knew and occasionally wondered at, and one that shaped the relations and interactions among domestic workers within the compound.

Their situation underscores an important dynamic that characterizes domestic workers' experiences in Kuwait. In addition to the family members with whom they work, the others with whom they most often interact are fellow domestic workers--those working in the same household (e.g. Mary/Maryam's experience), the same extended family home (Santa/Sophia), or the family compound (Sumitra/Sara and Anisha). While some might assume that their shared experiences of migration and work may lead to the development of a feeling of common purpose, and acts of mutual support, my research points to more complicated and messy situations. Assuming they identify and engage

with one another on the basis of their shared structural position obviates other aspects that animate their interactions. These include their educational, ethnic, religious backgrounds, their assessment of each others' status and situation back home, their understandings of proper gender roles, often discussed in terms of 'proper behavior' and morality, often intangible and incoherent aspects of each others' comportment and demeanor that they like and dislike, and their relationship with their employers.

This complicated realm of relations, configured into a myriad of scenarios—where Filipina and Indonesian nannies open the gates for Pakistani drivers bringing their charges home; where Tamil gardeners come to the kitchen to eat dinners cooked by Sinhalese maids, where Nepali and Ethiopian women divvy up their households tasks—highlights the way in which households have become a cosmopolitan milieu for many in Kuwait. While most accounts of interactions among migrant groups in the Arab Gulf states focus on public spaces—parks, restaurants, souks, shopping districts and with some wealthier expatriate schools—as spaces of interaction among migrant and foreign resident groups, they overlook learning and relations forged through household rhythms of work and routine. This is especially noteworthy given how the household is an important site through which social belonging and differentiation among groups are produced and reproduced (e.g. see Stoler 1995, 2002).

These spaces open up new social possibilities and bases of solidarity for many domestic workers. For Sumitra/Sara and Anisha, however, their own interactions with

one another were fraught. Although they both came from the same part of India, and shared similar personal experiences, they took an almost immediate disliking to one another. As a fellow domestic worker once commented to me: “both are from near Bombay, but there they would never meet (mulakaat; cross paths and socially engage with one another). Their mutual antipathy stemmed from their interactions with one another, and were informed by each others’ personal histories, an assessment that could be summarized as follows: Sumitra/Sara considered Anisha to be controlling, and Anisha considered Sumitra/Sara to be bold and improper.

The problem between the two-- at least according to household lore--developed almost immediately. After a long journey, and being picked up by Gul-Nar and Salman (her new employers), Sumitra/Sara had been taken to Anisha, who was to feed her and take her to her new room to rest. Exact words aren’t known, but conversation ensued, a conversation Sumitra/Sara felt was unnecessarily invasive, and one in which Anisha felt rebuffed.

Several years before moving to Kuwait, Anisha’s husband had died. A widow with a young son, she took up residence with her mother, her eldest brother, and his young family. Although her relatives had asked her to move back in with them, she soon found herself unhappy. Anisha did not get along with her sister-in-law, and living together in their small, cramped home near Bombay exacerbated matters. She often mentioned that her sister-in-law treated her and her son with disrespect—as though she

were an unwanted dependent, a needy hanger-on. The distinctions her sister-in-law made between her own children and Anisha's young son added a layer of humiliation.

After her mother died, Anisha decided to take up work in Kuwait as a housekeeper (a term she used), and used her earnings to send her son to boarding school in India. She began working with the al-****, a household in transition in terms of domestic helpers. In the past the family had hired local women to cook and clean within the compound, however, they increasingly found fewer women willing to do so. Anisha was the third Indian woman to begin working with them, and the other two women, Christian women from Goa, expected her to treat them with deference. As Anisha stated, she was 'a junior partner', unfamiliar with how the family liked their food cooked and how to use the 'processor' and 'dust machine'. For years, she worked diligently and quietly, and by the time Sumitra/Sara came along, she was the most senior domestic worker in the compound, and now she expected to be treated with respect.

Sumitra/Sara arrived, and as she would later tell me, she "wasn't like the other girls working there, I was not young and soft, I was frank and firm"⁴. Like Anisha, Sumitra/Sara entwined stories of her family situation back home with her account of her relationship with Anisha—experiences that formed and informed how they understood and related to one another. Sumitra/Sara was also from a village close to Bombay, where

⁴ Idea of firmness resonates with Kuwaiti and South Asian discourses about marriage and intimate relationships, specifically the idea that it is best to marry young when one's personality is 'soft' and can be shaped in relation to one's partner and spouse. The expectation of malleability is often gendered; where there is more of an onus on women to be 'soft'.

she had married a local boy at a fairly young age. Their marriage had been a love match—the two had met at school, where her husband-to-be had become enamored of her, and insisted on marrying her despite her family’s protestations. Their marriage had been a happy one, at least until her husband became abusive. Unable to change his behavior, and unwilling to put up with his behavior, Sumitra/Sara decided on a course unheard of/unusual at the time (or so she told me): she decided to leave her husband. Her family opposed her action, telling her they would not support her, and so she arranged with a labour recruiter to go to Kuwait, where she would do ‘ghar-ka kaam’ (house-work).

When Sumitra/Sara arrived in Kuwait, she bristled at Anisha’s questioning of her background, and her ‘acting like madam’. Anisha, in turn, felt as though her actions were misconstrued and that she was treated rudely. Their relationship did not improve, a fact that became apparent to others in the compound in the ensuing weeks. Their antipathy was not expressed in arguments or outbursts, or in their discussions with others, but through their demeanor and pointed silence in one another’s company—a fact others noticed readily given the expectation that their similar background would lend itself to their developing a friendly rapport. Aparna, a domestic worker who worked with the family later told me: “no, there was no seeerial drama with them [referring to serialized daily drama programs in India], it is not good to do that here...and the point is what? We knew anyways. They speak the same language, but never talked.”

According to Shaima, her grandmother Gul-Nar was aware that the two did not get along, but since it did not affect their work or that of others, and since it was ‘really none of Grands’ business’, she did not interfere. “These sorts of things,” Shaima continued, “happen a lot with lots of people living together...you learn to live with it, manage it...sometimes it is best to not say anything.” Their situation came to a détente of sorts—what one of the uncles, a former diplomat once wryly referred to as the household’s cold war---when Alice the family’s cook returned to Goa, and suggested Sumitra/Sara take her place.

Although they worked and lived in the same compound⁵, Sumitra/Sara and Anisha lived largely parallel lives. Everyday, from the servants’ quarters to the house, and every couple of years, from Kuwait to India, however, they took pains not to have these paths overlap. If they crossed paths, passing in the halls, or coordinating their activities during Ramadan, they ignored or treated each other with indifference. Anisha was in charge of the cleaning and the family’s laundry. She divided these responsibilities among the two other domestic workers, Aparna and Kiran. In the mornings, when family members were away, Aparna and Kiran cycled through cleaning the rooms of the house, and everyday would mop and vacuum the hallways and rooms most frequently used.

⁵ The following reflects how they recounted these periods in their life. Both Sumitra/Sara and Halima could recall few punctuating stories, but focused on listing off what their usual tasks and schedules were like. In many ways their tellings instantiated the uneventfulness, tedium and blurring of time they experienced related to the repetitive rhythms of their activities. Events were rarely related to/about tasks they undertook, but more so important moments (e.g. son’s graduation, buying of a house) in their lives, disputes and disagreements among themselves, and general family gossip. I obviously did not observe Sumita/Sara’s and Halima’s time in Kuwait prior to the mid-2000s, so my account here relies on their retellings, and those of (some) al-**** members and fellow domestic workers.

During this time, Anisha would tidy up the family members' bedrooms, attend to the phone and visitors, and respond to any requests made by the family. After the mid-day meal, they would do the laundry, and in the evenings, when the family entertained or the nights when the men held their diwaniyyeh, they would take care of the guests by answering the gate, ushering the guests to the house, and serving food and drinks. If a family member went to a social gathering and needed to bring a helper, Aparna and Kiran, the two 'junior partners' usually accompanied them. When the family traveled during the summers, unless they were visiting their own families in India and Sri Lanka, Aparna, Kiran and Anisha traveled with them.

Sumitra/Sara's domain was cooking and her activities were confined to the 'kaam ka kitchen' (work kitchen), 'family kitchen' (kitchen family members used), and the store-room. When Alice left, Gul Nar hired a woman from the Philippines, Carla, to work with Sumitra/Sara. Although they initially had difficulty communicating with each other—Carla spoke Tagalog and English, whereas Sumitra/Sara spoke Hindi and a little English—the two got along famously. When I discussed their relationship, both Gul Nar and Carla indicated to me that at first they were both a little reticent and formal with one another, and learned more about "how they worked, and how they thought" (Kistaran kaam karte, kistaran sawchte) and tentatively, gradually came to an accommodation through their work. As Carla once commented "we became sisters through our work"—explaining that they didn't see each other as being the same because they shared the same work, but they formed a specific bond with one another, a bond forged through their

different histories and experiences and cultures' and by the time they spent working with one another. The contrast between Sumitra/Sara's relationship with Anisha and Carla underscores a thread I observed with a few other households. Some of the most intense and volatile relationships I witnessed between domestic workers were ones between domestic workers who shared similar backgrounds—who had preexisting bases of evaluating and assessing one another, where in discussions they would compare each other to other personalities and 'types' they knew at home. Among domestic workers with divergent backgrounds, relationships were often more circumspect—where they initially exercised a cultural relativism necessary to living and working in close quarters with families and fellow domestic workers who think and act differently than themselves. It often seemed to me that interactions among domestic workers were not hampered and then facilitated by the speaking of different then pidgin languages, but where these languages indexed their growing relationships: the development of new scripts to speak, and with which to speak. For Sumitra/Sara and Carla their own relationship was forged in complementarity and the rhythms of the schedule they kept to. Sumitra/Sara had learned and could anticipate foods the family enjoyed eating, and Carla, who had taken hospitality and cooking lessons in the Philippines, knew how to run a kitchen efficiently and, as Sumitra/Sara pointed out, professionally. Their days were entwined by a strict routine—waking early to make breakfast for the family, cleaning up and then preparing the afternoon meal in the morning, and after cleaning up again, serving the family's tea after they woke from their afternoon naps. If the family entertained in the evening, Sumitra/Sara and Carla prepared the food beforehand and had it ready to be served by

Aparna and Kiran. During Ramadan, they changed to a nocturnal schedule, and cooked an array of special foods.

One of the aspects of domestic work that the al-****'s household illustrates is the social significance of food in Kuwait. In interviewing employers and domestic workers, it was striking to me how little employers mentioned the work of cooking and cleaning, and the women they had hired to undertake this work. Although members of Gul-Nar's household saw, and interacted with Anisha, Aparna and Kiran most frequently, it was often Alice, Sumitra/Sara and Carla who they mentioned. In part this had to do with how the family was involved in domestic work, an involvement that was fundamentally gendered. Most men I spoke with had little sense of the work involved in the maintenance and the upkeep of the house. Women, like Gul-Nar and her daughters, had a fairly good grasp of the patterns of work within the household, and how domestic workers and their tasks were to be organized and managed, however they were only involved to a limited degree (e.g. the gathering of dry-cleaning, which was then sent to the cleaner with the driver; purchasing groceries). A notable exception here related to cooking. Gul-Nar would occasionally join Sumitra/Sara and Carla in the kitchen to cook special dishes, and would sometimes be accompanied by one of her four daughters, who she, Sumitra/Sara and Carla would instruct. Their involvement is an indication of how important food was to the family: food was what gathered family members together regularly, food was what they offered to guests and family members who came visiting, and the making of special foods marked important occasions. Food was what was most

often circulated and shared when visiting other homes, and if cooked well—or poorly—was frequently a topic of conversation and comment. If members of the family were not aware of who was assigned to the sweeping, ironing or dusting, or whether they did these tasks well, they did notice—and remembered many years later—the biriyani Sumitra/Sara cooked, the sweet dumplings Carla made during Ramadan, and how it was best to get fries from outside. Although Sumitra/Sara and Carla were not as visible a presence, and although they did not interact as frequently with their employers as did other domestic workers, their work loomed large in the thoughts and memories of members of the al-****.

Sumitra/Sara and Anisha co-habited the al-****'s household for over twelve years, rarely meeting, and were involved in realms of activity—cooking and cleaning—rendered distinct by their avoidance and dislike of one another. They took different days off, and alternated the years when they visited India. Over the course of my conversations with each of them, the continuities and contrasts in what they did during these times were striking. Sumitra/Sara summed it up best: “I rest, pass time doing this or that, and do the other house-work.” Her day off was Saturday, the second day of the weekend, and the day after the busiest day in her week, Fridays, when the extended family gathered at the compound for a large meal after the jumah prayers. In the mornings, the family's driver sometimes drove her to the city, where she would call and wire money to her brother, and if needed do some shopping. And in the afternoons and evenings, she sometimes visited or entertained friends. But usually, she would spend her

day in her room, reading and listening to the radio, or tending to correspondences and business matters. Similarly, Anisha took Fridays off, sometimes Sunday when Aparna and Kiran were away. She often spoke to her son on the phone and then visited friends in the morning, and in the evenings, sometimes went to the city to wire money to her son and shop. But like Sumitra/Sara, more often than not, she stayed in her rooms, sewing, listening to music, and resting. Both disliked being ‘in the street’, which they considered needless and improper, and the feeling of boredom they experienced, an element running through their day-to-day experiences, but most acutely felt on their days off, as underscoring absences and lags in their lives.

As their activities on their weekends gesture to, Sumitra/Sara and Anisha were continually invested—emotionally, economically—in peoples and projects in India, investments they reinforced and furthered during their trips to India in the summers⁶. For Anisha, this took the form of her son. Her salary went towards paying for his boarding school fees, his tutors, his school uniforms, money she paid to her brother to look after him during holidays and summers when she wasn’t able to visit, and later, his college and hostel (dormitory) fees. As for Sumitra/Sara, after three contract cycles where she saved almost the entirety of her wages and did not return to India during the summers, but pocketed the money that would have been used to pay for her airline tickets, she purchased a small tract of land in the village she was from. With her brother’s assistance,

⁶ as mentioned earlier, as part of their contract stipulations, domestic workers are entitled to a month’s holiday per year, and a return ticket home every two years (end of a contract cycle). Most deferred taking their holiday time until the end of their contract cycle, when they would spend a two-month holiday, or return two months before their contracts officially expired

she began constructing a house there and started a small agricultural business (initially hiring men to grow crops, which were then sold at local markets; renting out tracts of land to tenants).

Their everyday earnings were saved and invested into a planned-for future. Life in the present was meaningful largely in relation to what it would bring in the dreamed-of distance—for Anisha, as the mother of a prosperous, well-educated man who would look after her, and for Sumitra/Sara as a flourishing businesswoman and proprietor. Their ventures were supported by the al-****, not just in terms of the wages these women earned from the family, but in other ways, through other means. Gul-Nar, the chatelaine who domestic workers referred to as ‘Mama’, and her eldest daughter Aliya-bibi’ gave pocket money when their employees went to the city or needed to do shopping. They also kept tabs on events in their domestic helpers’ lives, and the lives of close family members, such as births, marriages, and deaths, and gave gifts or small amounts of money, which the women could then pass on as gifts. After Anisha’s son graduated from college and got married, the family gifted amounts Anisha used towards helping her son furnish his apartment, and buy gifts for the bride’s family. Sumitra/Sara’s business ventures were of special interest to--and admired by--Gul Nar, who assisted Sumitra/Sara during some especially difficult periods, and gave suggestions when someone tried cheating her in a business deal. When both women prepared to retire from their work (Anisha in 1995, Sumitra/Sara in 2007), the family gave them lump-sum amounts, which Anisha used towards buying a flat in Bombay, and Sumitra/Sara was going to use to build

a mosque in her town. In 2000, after Anisha's son was dismissed from his job in Bombay, she wrote to Aliya-bibi, who arranged for him to work as a clerk in her brother's shipping company in Kuwait⁷.

Their situations, like that of Santa/Sophia, whose employers provided her with assistance during her surgery and convalescence in Nepal, underscore how economic distributions and circulations among domestic workers and the families with whom they work are not always reducible to remunerated labour—where their work is converted into a salary; their time into money. It may also entail patron-client type dispersals, gifting, charity and distributions that are seen as morally incumbent upon the families with whom these women work. In addition, whether in the form of sweets Anisha makes during Ramadan and brings to the al-****, other domestic workers who bring back jewelry or cloth for their 'Mamas' and 'Madams' after their holidays, or Sumita naming the mosque she built after Gul-Nar, these relations also entail re-gifting and flows of goods, and actions back to the families/households with whom they work, even if these are undertaken from positions of asymmetrical ability, need and asymmetrical feelings/senses of obligation (in conversations, one of my interlocutors and I used to term 'debt in obligation' to articulate this sense). Rather than the linear conversion of labour into

⁷ When I met with them in Kuwait, Anisha and her son lived in small two-bedroom flat in a middle/lower-middle class neighborhood in Kuwait where South Asian foreign residents/migrants predominated. She spent much of her time looking after the house and tending to her two grandchildren while her son and daughter worked during the day. Ironically enough, she told me her experiences in Kuwait were now 'more Indian' than 'mixed' as they were before. She visited the al-**** household periodically, to pay her respects and she was proud/gratified about how Aliya-bibi sent her food during Ramadan and gifts for her grandchildren's birthdays.

wages, these relations point to more complex configurations of economic exchange and distribution involving circuits of time, work, affect (and/or immaterial and intangible), goods and money among asymmetrically positioned subjects.

If the economic relations between domestic workers and their employers both elude and exceed that of waged labour, taking on forms often associated with the family (e.g. allowances, gifts, obligation), my interlocutors also experienced a mirroring with respect to their own families--where their relations their family members took on an overtly economic cast⁸. Physically absent from the everyday worlds of their children, parents and siblings, these women nevertheless loomed large in terms of the money and resources they provided their families (a presence, ironically, predicated on their very absence). As Anisha once commented, "I am...but don't only want to be there only with my money!" She was very much aware how her authority and influence among her siblings and cousins was bolstered by her relative wealth, something she was not shy about exerting, especially with respect to her eldest brother's wife, a woman who she thought previously disregarded her⁹. When it came to her son, however, she worried about him resenting her for being away, and for him caring about her because of "Seiko

⁸ Economic and familial relations are obviously not distinct domains. What I wish to highlight here is how their interrelation and the forms through which they are imbricated, have changed through my interlocutors experience of migration and earning a salary, and through their access to other goods, resources and monies. For a debate about whether domestic workers' relations with family and friends have been commodified, or whether this argument is predicated on the already assumed purification (Latour 1993) of these domains, see Parrenas (2001) and Anderson (2000: 123-8)

⁹ For a resonant discussion about how migrating affects their status within their family, see Mills 2003: 46; for a somewhat contrasting discussion see Gamburd 2000: 237-9. The difference in my account with that of Gamburd may be based on the fact that my discussion is based on the accounts provided by my interlocutors in Kuwait, as opposed to when they were in their communities from which they had migrated, and thus at a spatial and temporal removal from their employers and life in Kuwait.

and Gucci¹⁰ (i.e. referring to watches and colognes she gifted him when she visited during the summers)¹¹. To redress this, she took pains to call her son weekly, write long letters, spend summers with him every few years and make it plain to him she expected to stop working and “look after him properly” once he started working and was able to support them.

5.5 Mary/Maryam: A Part, Yet Apart

Sumitra/Sara and Anisha both stayed in Kuwait for lengthy periods of time. Like many other migrant domestic workers, they came to Kuwait intending to stay for one or two contract cycles, but each ended up working with the al-**** for over 20 years. Although many domestic workers do not stay in Kuwait for such extended periods of time, most find themselves staying for periods longer than they expected, and if they do leave, often return again in a few years, or take up work in other countries. Their continuing presence in Kuwait is an open secret. It is a phenomenon defying not just their own expectations, but those of their families and their employers, and one belying—and defying—official, public discourses and disciplining.

The reasons for their extended stays are myriad. Deepa, Santa/Sophia, Sumitra/Sara, and Anisha’s experiences all point to the sticky, affective relations that

¹⁰ A theme I need to develop further is the doubling that happens—unpaid versus paid domestic labour, inversions that may happen, affective and how strange it must be to return and work unpaid all the while recognizing how it could be remunerated elsewhere. I also need to further discuss the idea of ‘globalized/transnationalized’ double-burden.

¹¹ For discussions of how family relations have increasingly become commodified, and/or articulated through commodities, also see Lan 2006: 20; Mills 2003: 50, Parrenas 2001: 149, Moors 2003: 392

develop through--not in spite of--their work with Kuwaitis. My informants further indicated a mixture of incentives and inertia accounting for their continued presence—they had become accustomed to life in Kuwait and to the families with whom they worked, their salaries and benefits increased, the families, who had also become accustomed and trusted them, often tried to convince them to stay, and their personal situations and those of their families in India, Nepal or elsewhere remained difficult.

In deciding whether or not to return to Kuwait, Santa/Sophia was well aware of this dynamic:

“If I go, it will be difficult, very difficult to come back...

We think of more and more reasons to stay,

I need this, I need that; we don't.

...And I think, when I go back to the house, my room is big, my clothes are nice

And I think when I come to the house¹², like the family (in Kuwait), I think I am glad to be back

But I am not back, not really. Although they tell me “this is your home”

Home it is, home it isn't (*Ghar hain, Ghar nahin hain*)

It is difficult”

¹² Referring to when they return from traveling during holidays, when she accompanied the family to Lebanon, Egypt, and Dubai

As her comments indicate, she was worried that the urgency and immediacy she felt in having to return to Nepal would wane if she were to go back to Kuwait, and that gradually she would develop a sense of Kuwait-as-home. She also pointed to how these transitions in her feeling of attachments to place coincided with changes in her and her mother's need for commodities and goods. Many domestic workers find that through their migration, their consumer needs spiral, and they become more entangled and disciplined into market economic relations, exchanges, and calculations, Akin to the eerie doubling and blurring between the familial and economic as Anisha's experience with her son illustrates (see last section where I mention her concern about her relationship with her son becoming commodified and mediated through commodities) some domestic workers also realized upon returning to their home communities, that they undertook similar work, but at 'home' their work was not remunerated or recognized in the same way—pointing not just to a transnational/globalized double-burden, but the eerie doubling of the burden itself. Some also hired other women to do the housework in their absence—women who became their proxies and doubles, and as Hochschild (2000) and Parrenas (2001: 149) have written, a further link in global chains of commodified care-taking.

Santa/Sophia's comment about the difficulty of returning back to Nepal yet also not feeling as though Kuwait were really home, gestures towards the ambivalences and asymmetries that characterize domestic workers' experiences of belonging within Kuwaiti households. Domestic workers' inclusion and position within the household

were not predicated on their being the same, or their being treated equally as other members (note: this is not synonymous with being treated with disrespect). In part this has to do with how relations among members of these households are themselves asymmetrical (i.e. no one is treated equally or as the same within households)—relations are animated, and influence and authority are differently weighted by age and gender (e.g. where a mother may have authority over her son, but where her son will have authority over his wife.). Within this matrix of differential relations, domestic workers occupy a complicated, often fraught position. Their interactions and authority often differ and shift in relation to children, fellow domestic workers, elderly grandparents, and ‘Sir/Madam’ or ‘Baba/Mama’.

In addition to age and gendered asymmetries, domestic workers are also assumed to be, and re reproduced as ‘other’ through their work. Differentiation between them and other members of the household (i.e. family members) were often articulated to me in terms of differences in their cultural practices, traditions, religious background, and their ‘understandings/ways of thinking’. But perhaps more telling were gestures and practices that often went unsaid—ranging from the quizzical expressions and pauses when I asked them about how they understood the differences between themselves and their employers, indexing how differences between them are assumed and go unspoken; to the fact that domestic workers rarely ate with or socialized with their employers; and finally, to their spatial inclusion within the household—where their quarters were often separate and at a distance from those of family members. Differentiation was also marked in terms of their

demeanor—as Santa/Sophia noted, ‘not being too close’, and being discrete and cautious—and their dress, where some domestic workers wear uniforms or differently styled clothing.

With very few exceptions¹³, domestic workers are never considered to be kin¹⁴, even though there is often a familial cast to the ways in which they and other members of the household refer to one another, even though they may undertake work and engage in economic relations of gifting, reciprocity and obligation that are associated with the family. For domestic workers who stay and work with their families for extended periods, and who make their households home, this does not change. They continue to be regarded and treated differently (even) as familiarity, intimacy, concern, and care deepens between them and their families (i.e. differentiation doesn’t mitigate their belonging). Their staying longer does not index or entail their becoming more equal insofar as equality carries with it the connotation of sameness; rather, their position shifts and varies among different members of the household.

These processes became apparent to me one afternoon in the women’s dawa center. Mary/Maryam, whose migration to Kuwait was discussed in the first chapter, and

¹³ Even if they marry Kuwaiti men, it may take awhile before they are considered to be kin, usually after they have borne a child.

¹⁴ I should also note that even if they hold citizenship, they would not be considered Kuwaiti, but the wife of a Kuwaiti. To be considered Kuwaiti they would need to have a Kuwaiti father (patrilineal national belonging). I should note that although I was born and raised in Canada, and only occasionally visited Pakistan, most Kuwaitis I met considered me to be Pakistani because my parents, and moreover my father, are ‘aslan Pakistani’ (blood-wise and historically are from Pakistani).

I had both arrived early that afternoon. Classes had not yet begun, and we were both waiting in the large front room of the center. During my bus ride over, I had fallen asleep, and having missed the stop near the center, had to walk a good distance back in the crushing heat. Sweat stained, dusty, and my head throbbing slightly, I had taken refuge in the corner, trying to recover myself before heading to the bathroom to wash up. Mary/Maryam had joined me a short while later. Neither of us feeling particularly talkative, we both sat there.

As my clothes started to feel less sticky and uncomfortable, my thoughts turned to Mary/Maryam, who I realized did not usually come to the center on this day:

AA-Sister Hanan has convinced you to take [the] tafsir [class]?

Mary/Maryam—No....Wallah, I wish I could, but these days are usually busy for me. I came to drop [sic] these forms [taps her folder] for *umrah*...But now, I am waiting for Sister Shersha...to speak to her.

Sister Shersha had not arrived with the other daiyat that afternoon. The daiyat usually arrived en masse at the center, dropped off by a bus hired by the center to take them to and from their shared apartment complex. Sister Shersha had errands to do that afternoon, and was expected to arrive by taxi at any moment. Mary/Maryam waited patiently, but she appeared preoccupied. Her hands picked at her folder, her lips

twitched, and her brow furrowed and unfurrowed in the way people do so when they are quietly debating with themselves. When Sister Shersha came, the reason for Mary/Maryam's preoccupation unfurled through their conversation:

SS- Hello girls! What's going on here in the corner? (Salaam larkiyan! Corner-main kyia hora hain?)

AA-Walekum Assalaam. Just catching my breath. I'll go and let you talk...(I get up to leave)

Mary.Maryam—(to me as SS sits) No, no need. Your face is still red. Sit. Sit. And anyways...this might be good for your report [my research]...Sister, I came to drop my forms, but on the ride over Khaled called, and he told me, he said it is not good for me to go, it is too hot still and we need you home for Ramadan

SS-Oh ho! I thought everything was ok (teek-taak)

Maryam—I did too...I know I should be patient, but really, this is too much...

The reason "it was too much" went unspoken, but was very much understood by all present. In the weeks before Mary/Maryam had been planning to go to Mecca with Sister Shersha and a group of other women involved in the dawa movement. Organized

periodically by the movement, trips such as these made it possible for migrant and foreign resident women who did not have mehram (male ‘guardians’) in Kuwait to go to Mecca in order to perform hajj (major pilgrimage) and umrah (small pilgrimage). The daiyat took care of visa-related bureaucratic procedures, made travel arrangements, and in some cases, dipped into the movement’s budget and subsidized the costs of some women. Mary/Maryam knew she did not have the physical stamina to undertake hajj¹⁵ and she worried that if she put it off doing umrah, she would become physically unable to perform it as well.

Mary/Maryam had her heart set on going, something she had made quietly clear to all who knew her. In the months prior, she had been memorizing new surats (passages from the Quran) and learning all the associated rites of umrah. Aware of all this, I was appalled, that Khaled, a boy she had helped raise, had the gall to ask her to reconsider going, and moreover, had done so in a rushed manner, over the phone.

SS-I’ll take your forms now and hold a spot for you. Inshallah, be patient, go back home and Inshallah, talk to him and Umm Ibrahim...

A few weeks later, not having seen Mary/Maryam at the center, and my calls to her having gone unanswered, I asked Sister Shersha if she had spoken with her.

¹⁵ A pilgrimage to Mecca incumbent upon all able-bodied Muslims, one that involves a fair amount of physical activity to perform.

SS-Wallah, I have not heard from her, but it is usual. They (domestic workers) are often busy just before Ramadan starts...Inshallah, we will see or speak to her soon

Although we were both eager to hear how Mary/Maryam had fared with her conversation with Ibrahim and his mother, neither of us wanted to be too intrusive. As Sister Shersha pointed out, the situation was a ‘touchy, sensitive issue’, one underscoring the ambivalences of Mary/Maryam’s position within the family.

Mary/Maryam had been working with Umm Ibrahim’s family for over forty years, ever since Baba Ibrahim (whose daughter would name her first son ‘Ibrahim’ after her father, and henceforth be called ‘Umm Ibrahim’ by those outside the family) met her at Kuwait’s port¹⁶. In recounting this moment, Mary mentioned how surprised she was by him:

M/M-I don’t know what I had been thinking, I thought he...He wasn’t big, he wasn’t an emir like the Bombay Kuwaiti-wallah. He wore a simple white dishdasha, [which was] a little dusty, and [he] was more modest...And he spoke a little Hindi, but not a lot, not well like I thought. The one [Kuwaiti merchant] in Bombay he spoke Hindi very well...

Among the first things he told her was that she should think of him as her ‘Baba’ and his family as her ‘khanda’n’ {i.e. khandaan; Urdu/Hindi word for extended family).

¹⁶ The following is a compilation of different conversations I had with Mary/Maryam.

“they would look after me, he told me...I would be like a daughter to them.” When they arrived at his home, a small and functional semi-detached building, she found a large and bustling household. It consisted of his deaf and nearly blind mother, a frail woman who spent much of her time propped up on a day bed between the living and dining room areas; his three sons and two daughters, all of whom were in their teens or early twenties; and most importantly, his wife, Mama Alia, a tall stalwart woman with a quiet sense of humour.

For the first several months, Mary/Maryam was desperately unhappy. Unlike Baba Ibrahim the family spoke no Hindi, and communicating with them was a challenge necessitating ample gesturing in the short term, and her learning of Arabic in the long term. She also found Kuwait to be “strong/severe hot (sakht garmi); not like Bombay, which is just hot (sirif garmi)”, and “empty”—with few amenities and little to do in comparison to Bombay, and a socially isolating place. Mary/Maryam was accustomed to being away from her family, but until she arrived in Kuwait, had not realized how “different Kuwaiti, these Arab people were ” (again, her impressions of Kuwaitis had been formed by ‘Bombay Kuwaiti wallah)—differences developing, consolidated and/or exacerbated from processes of Arabization that had been taking place in Kuwait in the decades prior to her arrival in the country (see chapter 1). Her sense of social isolation was only marginally mitigated by her weekly trips to the Catholic Church’s compound in downtown Kuwait. Most of the other churchgoers were Goan, Palestinian or ‘Angrez-lawg’ (i.e. North Americans and Europeans), with whom she worshipped and interacted

politely (she spoke a little English, which also improved in Kuwait), but with whom she otherwise felt little connection, as she neatly summarized in her comment: “I went, then I came back. A few I was friendly with, but not close.” Her social situation improved when her uncle came back to Kuwait—she visited with him and her cousin regularly.

Initially Mama Alia was a little uncertain how to manage having Mary/Maryam working in her home. She had no prior experience of employing domestic workers. Suggestions made by family members and neighbors were based on their experience of hiring part-time helpers locally, or employing Yemeni ‘houseboys’. Mary/Maryam, however, did not speak Arabic, was not familiar with their customs and practices, and moreover, she was residing within the household¹⁷. She was also concerned about Mary/Maryam’s feeling of isolation.

M/M-“I tried hard to hide my tears, and make my face say ‘I am ok’, but she knew...”

From what I can tell from Mary/Maryam and Umm Ibrahim’s accounts, Mama Alia was torn about how to treat her new domestic helper—to ensure her well-being, not just emotionally, but to her mind, morally as well. As Umm Ibrahim once commented to me:

UI-“they [domestic workers] come to us without their families, without protection.

¹⁷ From what I can gather, the ‘houseboys’ lived in small buildings separate from or adjoined to houses.

It is our duty, our duty to their parents, to them, to make sure there is no funny business.

Not all Kuwaitis, astakfirallah, behave right here.

We read about this in the papers.

Not all these maids behave this way,

astakfirallah, you hear about this, about boyfriends, sneaking, and

asktakfirallah, other things too!

But it is our duty.

Maybe I will never meet them,

but how could I look their parents in the eye.

They [domestic workers] are under our protection¹⁸”

Mama Alia’s major concern was how to manage Mary/Maryam’s relationship with her sons, who were about her age. The course she decided upon was to divide their work in such a way as to maximize Mary/Maryam’s time with her daughters—who she involved in the cooking and cleaning, alongside Mary/Maryam, and she took care of her son’s clothes, and other aspects of their daily care. She also kept a vigilant eye on Mary/Maryam’s comportment, and those of her sons¹⁹ in relation to one another.

¹⁸ I return to this theme in the next and final section of this chapter

¹⁹ Whether this was her intention or not, the effect of her actions was similar to what Ann Stoler has discussed with respect to domestic workers in colonial Java—where intimate relations were managed to ensure the ongoing social reproduction of the Dutch, and the simultaneous purification and production of difference between the Dutch and the local population (Stoler 1995 and 2002).

For her part, the level of interaction she had with the family initially discomfited Mary/Maryam. Her own sense of her work and position within the household was informed by her experiences of working in wealthy Bombay households, contexts in which she rarely saw, much less spoke to ‘Sir-ji’ or ‘Madam’, and where she was managed by a housekeeper but undertook most tasks individually.

Mary/Maryam’s situation changed shortly after Fardous, Mama Alia’s eldest daughter’s wedding. She married a member of her parents’ extended family, a prosperous young electronics seller. Unlike her parents, who had always lived in extended family arrangements or in homes close to their extended family, Fardous was to set up her own household in a newly built home, located in a newly developed neighborhood at a (relative) distance from both her parents and her in-laws. Somewhat lonely, and overwhelmed by her work, Mama Alia sent Mary/Maryam to Fardous’s home, where she remained.

Fardous and Mary/Maryam’s work in their new household was less integrated—Fardous cooked the household meals and did the work related to her husband’s personal needs (e.g. ironing his clothes), and Mary/Maryam cleaned, did the laundry and was in charge of food and drinks when guests visited. Several times a week they went to visit, and were visited by both Fardous’s relatives and her in-laws. These social gatherings, although considered informal, involved a great deal of preparation and work (e.g. preparing foods, serving guests, cleaning) that added to the overall housework. In

conversation, Fardous/Mama Ibrahim once noted how much simpler it had been for her parents and their generation—living in a nuclear household and a social context where there were raised expectations about social gatherings, led not necessarily to more household work relative to earlier generations, but to work of a different kind. For women, socializing and family gatherings did not, strictly speaking, entail or point to greater leisure, but entailed more work, work that was often delegated to the families domestic workers.

Mary/Maryam frequently accompanied Fardous during her visits to her mother's home. During one such visit, an event occurred that Mary/Maryam would long remember, an event that highlighted her ambivalent status within the family. The women from Mama Alia and Baba Ibrahim's extended family had gathered that day to plan out the trousseau for a cousin's upcoming wedding. Mary/Maryam was in the kitchen preparing 'qahwa for the women when Umar, the ten-year-old son of one of Fardous's cousins came into the kitchen:

M/M-..."He was holding a cup and asking me to give him something more to drink.

He was thirsty from playing outside and wanted more to drink.

I told him to wait.

I am watching over the coffee right now;

it is about to boil.

I will help you with the water jug in a moment...

He got upset, and this time screamed: I want water!

I told him to wait again.

And then I felt something strike my back.

He had thrown his cup at me!

It had a little bit of water in it, and it splashed on my back...

I was shocked. Upset.

Mama Alia came into the kitchen a few moments later. I was still in shock, upset

She saw Umar, his face was red and he now looked scared

And she saw me still looking over the coffee. My back was wet

And she saw the cup on the floor...

She didn't say anything, she just looked at me a long while

And then she told Umar to come with her

I don't know what happened, but when I was coming to the room with the coffee tray,

there were loud voices in one of the other rooms. One of the voices was Mama Alia's.

Later, Umar came to say he was sorry, he should not have been angry, he should not have thrown the cup at me. He was crying.

And later, his mother also came to say sorry

Mama Alia didn't say anything to me until before I left with Fardous.

She took me aside and asked me why I did not tell her?

Had this happened before?

I told her no, no...

She said: you tell me next time!

Anjum (domestic worker recently hired by Mama Alia) later told me she heard Mama Alia had been very angry, very angry

She had argued with Umar's mother in a room away from the guests. Umar was with them, maybe he was spanked she (Anjum) said."

For Mary/Maryam, this event crystallized how she was both a part of, yet apart from the family. Omar, she told me, would never have thrown a cup at Mama Alia or Fardous. He might have gotten angry, even thrown a tantrum, but he would not have thrown the cup. In addition, although she believed (based on what she knew) that Mama Alia had treated the situation in "the right way", swiftly and surely making it clear to Umar and his mother that his behavior was wrong, and having him apologize, how Mama Alia dealt with it was also telling:

AA- I don't understand...do you mean because you were not involved directly in talking to Umar and his mother?

M/M- Yes and no. Umar and his mother are family but not of the same house. When they (families) argue they do not like outsiders to know. It would not have shown respect

to Umar's mother for Mama Alia to argue with her with me present, you see? And also, I think [this was noteworthy to me, because Mary/Maryam rarely speculated on motivation] she knew...that it would embarrass me. [pause]

AA-Embarrass you? [inflected with a prompt]

M/M-yes, embarrass me.

AA-I still...um...don't quite understand.

M/M-"I am weaker than Umar's mother you see. It would not have been right for me to get angry with her, to go to her and say 'your son did this and this'. It would have brought problems for Mama Alia. It would make problems... Mama Alia, she had to be the one to talk to Umar's mother, that is what had to be done there...[also] she knew I am weak here, but did not want to make this a big thing you see, a thing everyone is talking about, it would embarrass me...That is why Umar's mother came to me, I could not go to her. It was right for her to come and say her *sorries*²⁰ to me, "

My understanding of what Mary/Maryam said was that how the matter was dealt with underscored relational asymmetries between her and members of Mama Alia's extended family, and highlighted her fraught position within the family. Although

²⁰ we were speaking Hindi/Urdu and she used the modified English word 'sorry'

Mary/Maryam might have addressed the matter directly had the child hypothetically been Mama Alia's or Fardous's—she was close enough to them to do so—as an 'outsider' she did not have the same prerogative with members of the extended family. Furthermore, according to Mary/Maryam, Mama Alia was well aware of this and was showing sensitivity in not wanting to embarrass Mary/Maryam by having this point highlighted. It would have underscored Mary/Maryam's position as a domestic helper, something she both was and understood herself to be, but also was not, insofar as her relationship with the family meant more to both her and (presumably from Mama Alia's handling of the matter) to them as well. This story reinforced the great trust, admiration and love Mary/Maryam had for Mama Alia, and simultaneously reinforced the limits and asymmetries—tacit and largely unspoken—that existed in their relationship.

This dynamic, of being a part, yet apart, animated Mary/Maryam's experiences within Fardous's household over the unfolding years. Her work changed and was reconfigured as the family grew with the birth of Fardous' five children. Her days passed with the rhythms of cooking, cleaning, caring, and on her days off, attending Church and visiting her uncle and his family. As the family grew, and hired other domestic helpers and drivers, she became the one to manage and coordinate their work. Her earnings went towards supporting her parents, and providing dowries for her younger sisters. She visited with her family every few years, staying for months at a stretch, but always ended up returning back to Kuwait. There was always something leading her back—fees for her father's surgery, a bad harvest, and eventually, Fardous's due dates (i.e. the dates she

was expecting to give birth), Fardous's daughter, Farah starting school, etc.

Mary/Maryam never ended up marrying—she thought it improper to develop or engage in intimate relationships on her own, and her uncle's attempts to 'find her a match', as well as Fardous' discrete inquiries on her behalf, proved unsuccessful. In her own words "My age was too great. My time had passed."

When we first met, Mary/Maryam had been working with Mama Alia and Fardous' family for almost forty years, and was effectively retired from work. In the years prior she had suffered from numerous health complications, including gallbladder and knee problems, which necessitated surgery and extensive rehabilitation. Her work was limited to helping occasionally with the cooking, and managing the other domestic workers in the household. Mary/Maryam expected to reside in Kuwait with Umm Ibrahim's family for the rest of her life. The family had built her a small wing, consisting of a bedroom, a small sitting room, and a bathroom, on the ground floor of Umm Ibrahim's new home. The rest of the family also resided in this house, including Umm Ibrahim's eldest son Ibrahim and his young family, her youngest son Khaled, and Farah, her daughter who was divorced from her husband.

Though I wasn't aware of all of these details when Mary/Maryam and Sister Shersha discussed whether she should go on umrah, I knew enough of the contours of her relationship with the family to be surprised—and quite indignant—that Khaled, of whom Mary/Maryam was especially fond, would ask her to reconsider and/or postpone going.

Several weeks later, after not having seen or heard from her, Mary/Maryam finally called, and asked me to come over for *iftar*. Assembled in her sitting room, a few days later, with her cousin, a few friends, and Sister Shersha and Tahira, she told us the story of what had ensued after she returned from the center that day:

M/M-“I came home, still a little upset, you know,
But alhumdullillah...Khaled he wasn't home,
and he came home late, too late...
I had gone to sleep, upset you know.

The next morning, before he went to work, he and Farah came to my room
They told me, alhumdulillah [her voice breaks and tears start to well up]
That they don't want me to go with the group on umrah

It will be too hard for me...the long bus ride, staying in a hostel...it will be too hard
They said [starts crying]
You are our mother...our second mother...we will take you

And so they did...

They prepared everything, Visa, everything. We went by plane and we did umrah
together, during the beginning of Ramadan, they took me, they went with me.

Alhumdullilah”

In contrast to her (and our) initial assumptions that Khaled and Umm Ibrahim's family had asked her to postpone her trip to Mecca because it was inconveniently timed for them, Ramadan being a hectic time, Mary/Maryam learned that that they had been concerned about her ability to undertake *umrah* on her own, given her health. This concern led them, without her knowledge, to begin planning a trip of their own for her, one where Khaled and Farah could accompany, help and join Mary/Maryam while she undertook a journey and the pilgrimage rites that meant so much to her. The fact that they undertook this trip during Ramadan, a time full of social engagements and obligations, further underlined their commitment to her.

Mary/Maryam had been living and working with Khaled and Farah's family for over three generations, first in Mama Alia, and then in Umm Ibrahim's households. Having moved to Kuwait in her late teens, and now in her late fifties, she had become an integral part of family members' lives in intimate, ineffable ways. Her work, her care, her very selfhood were entwined with that of the family's. Their growth, their development, their stories involved Mary/Maryam, whether it be memories of her famed kheer (rice pudding) during Ramadan, her scolding the children when they came home late, or her inconsolable tears at Mama Alia's funeral. Her trip to Mecca, a trip organized by Khaled and Farah, two children she had helped raised, instantiated how deeply wrought these relationships were. However, like the story of Omar and Mama Alia, even though family members had acquitted themselves well in taking her on *umrah*—

respecting her feelings, and recognizing all that she had done for (and with) them—the initial assumptions she had after Khaled’s phone call to her: “this is too much!”, underscores how her relationship and belonging to the family are also characterized by asymmetries and ambivalences.

5.6 Deferred Livings: In-Deference to Propriety and Family

The domestic workers I met migrated to Kuwait expecting to work for a few years and then return back to their families and home communities. As we have seen in this chapter, many ended up staying for extended periods of time. The reasons are numerous and interconnected, including financial needs and incentives to stay, the inertia of familiarity and routine, their becoming ensnared in market economies and commodity exchange, and the formation of unexpected subjectivities and newfound relationships. Those who returned ‘home’ often ended up coming back to Kuwait, or migrating to other places shortly after their return.

Despite spending significant periods of their lives in Kuwait, my interlocutors often described their time in the country as a time of deferral, a time in which they put their lives on hold, working in the present to save for a future elsewhere. For many, however, the present continued indefinitely, and their dreamed-of futures perpetually receded back. This sense of suspended living relates in part to the repetitive routines of their daily lives. As Deepa commented to me once: “So much has happened to them [her family in India], they have done a great deal; while I am here [in the house], just working,

just working, day after day, same-same...”. The monotony of everyday housework made palpable the sense of time passing uneventfully, of waiting, of postponement.

Their sense of delayed living also relates to another dynamic in Kuwait, one that at first may appear obvious: domestic worker’s lives are largely confined to the household. Domestic workers not only work within households, but the vast majority of these migrant women also live within the same homes within which they work. In addition, as my relationships with domestic workers and their employers deepened, it also became clear to me that with few exceptions, the scope of domestic workers’ social interactions and activities in Kuwait were circumscribed by their household—to their employers, fellow domestic workers in their household, domestic workers who worked with their employers’ neighbors, friends or family members. At first, I thought this had to do with the fact that as migrants, domestic workers had few friends or family residing in Kuwait, and that there were few public venues they could financially and physically access²¹ during their time off. Eventually, I began to realize that the paucity of public

²¹ Shopping malls and restaurants are expensive for them to access. These were also places they either felt uncomfortable going to, or they had the sense that they would be restricted from accessing. them. Public parks and other outdoor venues are impossible to go to most of the year due to the country’s oppressive weather. A notable exception here are religious centers or compounds, however, these are limited in number and size, and for Hindus, Buddhist, Sikhs, and other spiritual and religious groups that are not considered people of the ‘book’, their religious centers and places of worship were informal venues, often located in private homes. However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Mary/Maryam and Mercy/Rahman) most domestic workers either did not know where these religious centers were located, or were not interested in going to them. “Bachelor’ workers are routinely restricted from entering middle class or upscale shopping malls because these places are designated ‘family places’. Few such restrictions exist for young Kuwaiti or expatriate/foreign resident males. I have never heard or met any domestic worker that has been similarly restricted, however, many told me that unless they were accompanying members of the family with whom they worked, they felt ‘not easy’ going to such places. Historically, groups not considered to be ‘people of the book’ have been restricted from building places of worship in Kuwait. In addition, minority religious groups, like the Shii and Christian groups have long accused the government of dragging its feet in issuing

places for them to go to, and the curtailed opportunities they had to establish new friendships, intimate/romantic relationships, and social networks, had to do with restrictions placed upon their mobility by their employers.

Scholars have long noted the irony at the heart of migrant domestic workers' position as transnational subjects (see Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004; Lan 2006: 3; Moors 2003: 387-8; Robinson 2000: 258). Although these women may journey across vast distances, crossing numerous borders, their mobility is curtailed in the countries they migrate to, often by the walls and passageways of apartments, houses, courtyards, and compounds. In Kuwait restrictions on domestic workers' mobility can be accounted for in two overlapping registers: employers' and domestic workers' explanations of how these safeguards are necessary to ensure domestic workers' personal security and moral well-being; and whether concerted or not, intended or not, how these restrictions limit the scope of relationships domestic worker can forge, further producing and reinforcing their belonging to the Kuwaiti households within which they work, and their own families at 'home'.

permits that would allow for the construction of new places of worship. For the Shii, they have established a network of Husseiniyeh, religious centers, throughout Kuwait in which they have worshipped. It is an open secret that groups not considered 'people of the book', such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, operate religious centers where they can worship in Kuwait, but whether they are still restricted from outright building or operating places of worship was in dispute—some told me there still exist government restrictions, others told me bureaucratic procedures constituted defacto restrictions, and others argued many groups within Kuwait (i.e. without foreign funding) did not have the financial means to construct such places of worship.

Hema/Salma's situation in Kuwait is illustrative. Unlike my other interlocutors, Hema/Salma had migrated to Kuwait not because of any immediate or pressing financial considerations. The daughter of a prosperous Nepali farmer, she and her family, consisting of her parents, an elder brother serving in the Indian army, his wife, and a younger brother in high school, did not want for anything. Five years earlier (three years before she would journey to Kuwait) Hema/Salma's mother had made the curious determination that her daughter would never marry²². Wanting to secure her daughter's financial independence, she arranged for Hema/Salma to migrate to 'Saudi'²³. Her wages would be saved and then invested, providing her with an independent income to do with as she wished when she returned to the family farm.

AA-“Why didn't your mother or you look for work in Jhapa or somewhere else in Nepal? Why come to Kuwait?”

Hema/Salma- “There are no good jobs for me there... I stopped schooling in the fifth class...The teacher was bad and I was bored doing nothing...[eventually] my mother sent me back, but I was wasting my time. I left a year or two later...and this was a chance to see something, to wander [and] travel”.

²² When Salma told me about this, I was about to follow up and ask her how/why this was the case. I was stopped from doing so, however, by a mutual friend's sharp jab to my side. The reasons were 'delicate', and to be learned slowly, as her trust and our friendship deepened.

²³ Many people who I met in Nepal referred to all the Arab Gulf states as 'Saudi'—a quick gloss referring to the region.

What Hema/Salma saw, she saw accompanied, and well chaperoned by others. Her journeying began, as her periodic trips to India always did, with her waking well before dawn. After eating a large breakfast her sister-in-law had prepared, she and her father hoisted her bags into her uncle Vik's taxi van. Before setting off, her mother tearfully handed her a bag laden with food. Half the trip Salma gazed out at the rice paddies and then the tea plantations rolling by, and the other half, when the road bumped and careened, she remembered the food bag and tried to stem its oily leaks and dribbles by balancing it carefully in her hands. The last thing she wanted was to splatter her clothes, or Uncle-ji's car with oil.

Well into the day they arrived at the border crossing. All but ignored by the Nepali patrolmen, they walked across. At the bus station, her father scanned the buses and drivers, and finding one that met his silent criteria, he crammed her bags under the seat near the front. They waited several hours together, eating some of her mother's packed food. and then as the driver began starting the engine, her father kissed her perfunctorily at the crown of her head, told her to "go healthy and fast", and left.

Almost a day and a half later, Salma arrived in Delhi, where her brother, on leave from his military duties, met up with her and accompanied her the rest of the way to Mumbai. In Mumbai he met with the labour agent, checked his sister's dormitory accommodations, and only then returned to his posting in Kashmir. From that point onwards Salma was on new terrain, and on her own.

Salma/Hema had been told many harrowing stories of women's experiences in the dormitories—of abusive or predacious agents, touts from brothels, unscrupulous women who might steal from her while she slept, or worse yet. Her time there, however, passed uneventfully. The agent had been well-chosen, based on the suggestion of a woman from her village who had migrated to Kuwait several years earlier. In accompanying Salma/Hema to the agent's office and the dormitory, her brother had also established her reputation as a woman not to be trifled with. Moreover, she developed a friendly rapport with Aparna, a fellow Nepali woman who was also heading to Kuwait. The two looked after one another. Four days later, when they, along with approximately twenty other Nepali women, arrived in Kuwait, they were shepherded through the airport and visa procedures by an airport official and agent representative²⁴. They were then taken by bus to the agent's office in Hawalli, took showers, rested, and drank tea while waiting to be picked up by their kafeel (sponsor/employer).

AA- "Who came? Who came to pick you up?"

S/H- "no it wasn't the Youbba [grandfather] (*laughs*)!"

Siham Mama came...

She was one of the first to come,

²⁴ Such representatives and officials were necessary not only to facilitate logistical and bureaucratic procedures in the airport, but I heard dark rumours of some airport workers who engage in sex work trafficking, and lure unsuspecting women into their networks.

after an old, sour-looking man came (I was worried he might be Siham, I didn't know if she was a woman or man!),

and after a really proud woman came with her nose in the air and her fingers sparkling (alhumdullilah it wasn't her!)

No, Siham Mama came, in her hijab and abbaya:

I thought who is this black-wallah lady?

But her face was kind

She smiled at me, and laughed quietly when I didn't understand what she said

Sita (? muffled part of the recording; Sita was the name of the secretary in the office)...(translated) for us while Siham Mama took care of the papers...

She drove me to the house

She tried speaking to me again, but I could not understand her

It was afternoon [note: most people in Kuwait use 'afternoon' to refer to the period after the siesta nap, a time called early evening North America]. I was tired

Her sister's maid, Kamala, she came over to help

She translated for us, Arabic to Nepali, Nepali to Arabic

And helped explain; showed me where my room is, what the other rooms are

I ate, and then took a nap...I slept a long time, waking at night and not knowing what to do, so went back to sleep (*laughs*)"

The next day, and for the next three and a half years²⁵, Hema/Salma worked in Siham Mama's household, a place she described to me as a "ladies only" affair consisting of Siham Mama²⁶ and her two daughters, Sadia and Farah, both of whom went to college and were about Hema/Salma's age. The family lived on the top floor of a villa that was adjacent to another villa shared by Siham Mama's parents, Youbba Ali and Youmma Fatima (grandfather and grandmother), her eldest brother, and his family. Although Siham Mama ran her household independently, Youmma Fatima (grandmother) was an influential presence. With her daughter working long hours at the bank, she considered herself her granddaughters' watcher, and--as she was soon to discover--Hema/Salma's watcher as well. From her window, and her cell-phone, she kept an eye out, monitoring and directing their movements. For the girls, she exercised this (self-imposed) duty by vetting their friends, and unless they were able to get rides with their mother or (previously vetted) friends, arrange for her driver-cum-defacto chaperone to take them to school, shopping malls, or their friends' homes. Youmma's vigilant eye was a source of constant negotiation and periodic arguments among Youmma, Mama Siham and her two daughters.

Youmma's policing of Hema/Salma was also thorough. She was not allowed to go outside alone. If she wanted to walk to the *bekala* (corner store), she was

²⁵ She had to leave prematurely due to the death of her eldest brother. He died during a border skirmish in Kashmir. After his death, Hema/Salma's mother insisted that she return back to Nepal. She did so, but hoped eventually to return.

²⁶ Who was divorced from her husband. The divorce rate in Kuwait is quite high, some say about 35%, but this is regarded as a conservative figure.

accompanied by another domestic worker from Youmma's household, or she would be driven there. If she had to go shopping, visit the health clinic, etc., she was either taken by Mama Siham or by one of the daughters and the driver. When she invited Aparna over during her day off, she was deemed 'fast' by Youmma, and not invited back.

AA-"Did you talk about it? "

H/S-"A little. She said she was 'tehz' (fast) and not a good influence on me. Aparna invited me to her home, and to the city center, but when Youmma heard, she did not say no, she did no."

AA-"...did no?"

H/S-"...She didn't exactly say no...She just made it hard, very hard to see her, so I stopped with this, and maybe saw Aparna when Youmma was away...quietly quietly going to her house..."

Despite restricting Hema/Salma from visiting and allowing Aparna and her other friends from visiting her (including myself), Youmma, did encourage her to befriend other domestic workers who were working in the households of friends and family members. Youmma knew these women, as well as the families with whom they worked. Their status and respectability were established, whereas those of the others were more uncertain, and relationships with them were not to be risked. In order to keep in touch with her 'other' friends, as well as her family members in Nepal and India, Hema/Salma kept a cellphone, one she took care not to use or be seen with when Youmma was around.

Although in less extreme forms, the restrictions placed on Hema/Salma were ones other domestic workers in Kuwait experienced, especially younger, unmarried women. Two interconnected reasons were often given to me to explain these restrictions. First and foremost, employers and domestic workers alike stressed the matter of their personal safety. Unlike Dubai, when you walk in the streets and most public areas of Kuwait, there is a palpable sense of intimidation and threat²⁷. As one domestic worker pointed out to me “you don’t feel easy”. This feeling develops not just because of the harassment of male passers-by and passing cars, with their solicitations and honks, but from widely circulated stories and everyday newspaper accounts of women being abducted off the street, driven to empty sandlots or into the desert, sexually assaulted and beaten, and left there. The majority of women targeted are foreign migrant women, most especially women from throughout Asia and East Africa, who are assumed to be domestic workers. These women are marked as vulnerable and preyed upon because as relatively marginal (i.e. poor) migrant women, they are assumed to not have any family protection or *wasta*²⁸ (i.e. social protection and juridico-political recourse²⁹). As a result of this, few domestic workers that I met were allowed to, or wanted to walk the streets or go to public areas

²⁷ This contrasts with other places in the Gulf. Few people in Kuwait walk in the streets, not only because of the oppressive weather, but also because of this palpable sense of unease and threat.

²⁸ The few expatriate women I met who walked also had similar experiences, but as directed by guidebooks and embassy officials, if threatened would take out their cell phones or yell back that they would call their embassy officials and/or the police.

²⁹ Some newspaper and human rights reports argued domestic workers did not go to the police or engage with Kuwait’s juridical system because these institutions were perceived to be biased towards Kuwaitis. While some of my interlocutors noted to this, based on their experiences in Nepal and India, most were wary of these institutions to begin with—that to access them one needed *wasta*, connections and money or bribes, etc.

unaccompanied. If they were allowed to do so, they often perceived this as neglect or carelessness on the part of their employers.

Venturing outside domestic spaces, especially alone, was understood to be a form of exposure, fraught with potential physical danger (as we have just seen), as well as moral peril³⁰. Space in Kuwait was not conceived as abstract or morally neutral, but as eminently social. Households were spaces domesticated and cultivated through the establishment of propriety and moral order (although the form of this order may vary from family/household to family/household). Areas outside the household were potentially volatile spaces where the upholding of propriety and moral codes was more uncertain. Public spaces were not necessarily seen as moral vacuums, but as morally unpredictable spaces. Within such contexts--public parks or the city center on Friday or Sunday afternoons—domestic workers might not only be subject to what one interlocutor called ‘romantic hustlers’, but where they might also lapse morally (what the same interlocutor called ‘our own worst romantinstincts’). Here there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the production of moral spaces and of subjectivities—subjects acting with propriety carve out and domesticate properly moral spaces, and such spaces are necessary to formation of subjects that act with propriety.

A further reason many kafeel policed and restricted the movements of domestic workers in their employ is because of their concern that these women might abscond.

³⁰ Although this is slowly changing

Popular news media accounts and human rights reports have rightly drawn attention to domestic workers who flee abuse and exploitation. Over the course of my research I also learned of domestic workers who had absconded in order to find jobs that are more lucrative and/or more to their liking³¹. Others such as ****, whose experiences I discuss in the chapter 6, eloped and entered into common-law arrangements with their partners³²

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The concatenation of these factors led many employers, like Youmma, to closely monitor and police the movements of migrant domestic workers, women such as Hema/Salma. On her part, Hema/Salma was ambivalent about Youmma's vigilant eye. In discussions she likened her experiences to those of the daughters of the household, Sadia and Farah, and she mentioned how they resonated with her own parent's actions in Nepal. She noted a few important differences, however: unlike the daughters, her position within the family was contingent upon them liking her, and her doing her work well, and that she could not discuss or argue the matter like the daughters could with Youmma. She also told me that in Jhapa, when she went out in public, she was often

³¹ For example, one of my interlocutors had worked with a woman, who had 'run away' in the hopes of working in a shop. She had left her employers based on a promise made by an acquaintance, only to find her wages were not what she had hoped. When leaving her employers' home, she had left the four-year-old child she was a nanny to unattended (the employers had gone out with the other children and my interlocutor). Consequently, when she returned a week later they refused to take her back.

³² I discuss (or will when revising my dissertation) the story of one such interlocutor in chapter 5.

³³ After absconding, domestic workers' residency and work visas were revoked, thus rendering them 'undocumented'. If found, they would be detained in a holding facility, deported and banned from ever returning to Kuwait. Many stayed in the country, usually to work illegally, or live with partners until the next 'amnesty'—a period where undocumented/illegal migrants without a criminal record could leave. As for kafeel/employers, if the domestic worker they sponsored absconds, employers are responsible for reporting this to the police within 48 hours or face potential penalties. In addition, given that fees for domestic workers require a large initial outlay, domestic workers absconding entailed a financial loss for employers. And of course, it resulted in household disruptions.

accompanied, but not because of her or her parents' concern about her personal safety. Rather, it had to do with her class and caste—in her village, as a Brahman and from a well-to-do family, she was of relatively high status, and “did not go roaming about outside very much”. Besides, she noted to me wryly, there wasn't much to do in Jhapa.

One place Hema/Salma was allowed to go to unaccompanied³⁴ was the women's dawa center. Initially she went to improve her Arabic and English. Since migrating to Kuwait, in addition to her daily work within Mama Siham's home, Hema/Salma spent her days voraciously learning Arabic and English—both of which she learned from watching satellite television and from Sadia and Farah's tutoring. One of the domestic workers in Youmma's household had told her about the dawa center being a good place to improve her Arabic and meet English speakers. Her interest in going was further cemented when she learned many other Nepali, and other domestic workers also attended.

When we first met at the center, three years after Hema/Salma moved to Kuwait, she spoke Arabic fluently and was well-advanced in learning English. Extremely intelligent, quick witted, and playful, she juggled words from four languages—Nepali, Hindi, Arabic and English—on the tip of her tongue, deploying them in different configurations for humour, effect, as well as communication. I was extremely grateful for

³⁴ She was driven there and back by Youmma's driver or Mama Siham. The Women's Center was considered a safe and proper place for her to go because men were not allowed on the premises, and as a religious center, it was assumed she would not be doing anything inappropriate or potentially illegal.

her skills and proficiency. As a translator, she facilitated and made possible numerous multilingual conversations I had with women at the dawa center. Often in small groups, these discussions provided me with a different context to learn about their understandings and experiences than did my individual meetings with them. Outside the earshot of teachers and quietly disapproving students, many of these conversations revolved around discussions of place and activities with which these women could engage, and how their activities and mobility were monitored and policed by their employers.

Take for instance, a series of discussions between Hema/Salma, Santa/Sophia, Heba³⁵, and myself that took place over the course of several weeks. The event triggering this on-going conversation was a call Santa/Sophia had received. It was late one evening, and her work day had long since ended. She was reading in her room when, as we were to find out, fate struck in the form of a phone call:

Santa/Sophia—I was reading, and feeling bored with the magazine...

My cell phone rang (hai!) and though I did not know the number, I was bored, so I answered anyways.

The person calling, he was so nice.

He spoke Nepali!

³⁵ Young woman from Madhya Pradesh in India who they were friends with.

He told me he had called accidentally³⁶ ...no, no, nothing like that; I see your face Salma!
He was nice, nothing silly or *haram*. His name is Hari. He is very nice to talk to!

The two took to one another almost instantly, and the phone calls continued for weeks. Uncertain about what she should do next, Santa/Sophia had broached the topic discreetly with the three of us, friends she could trust not to tell others, and who might be able to assist her.

Santa/Sophia- "...he wants to meet."

Heba- "Oh, Santa/Sophia, what is this? You don't know him really! He may say sweet words on the phone, but you don't know!"

Santa/Sophia- "Silly! [We would meet] not at his home or work! That is the problem: where?....But anyways, I don't know if it I should meet him yet"

Heba- "...your Mama will not like this [i.e. meeting him]! I don't this is a good thing to do..."

At this point, our class was about to resume, and so the conversation ended. Over the next week, Santa/Sophia decided on a course of action, one involving me. She

³⁶ As I was to learn, some migrants, primarily 'bachelor' workers, randomly dial telephone numbers people hoping to find someone, usually of the opposite sex, with whom they can chat and potentially develop romantic or sexual relationships.

recounted what happened a few weeks later when the four of us next met, again between classes:

Hema/Salma- “So, Rose³⁷, what’s going on?”

Santa/Sophia- “...it was too hard to meet...and I am still double-minded [about it], so Hari asked me to send him a photograph; and he will send me one...”

Heba- “oh...³⁸ But you can’t mail [it] here can you? Can he mail [it] to you?”

Santa/Sophia- “no, no. It would need to be dropped and picked up...so I gave the letter to Attiya, and the picture, and she took it”

Attiya—Yes, um, I took the letter to him.

Heba—What was he like? Where did you go (to drop and pick up the letters)?

Hema/Salma—Yes, what was he like? What did our *Rooooomeo*... (*stops because of a warning look from Santa/Sophia*)

³⁷ Referencing Kate Winslet’s character, the heroine of ‘Titanic’. The movie, and Leonardo ‘Leo’ DiCaprio were huge favorites of theirs.

³⁸ At this point, she isn’t quite as disapproving. It might be because the exchange of photographs often takes place when engagements are being decided on. For Heba, this act might have indicated to her that Hari’s intentions were proper and honorable.

Attiya- Yes, he works at a...hotel³⁹. It was in the **** Center (name of the shopping mall) at the back. I went early in the day; it was just opening. The security barrier...the barrier at the entrance of the door...had come up half-way so I waited. There was no one inside that I could see, so I waited. Then I saw someone and called him over. I told him I was looking for Hari. Sophia asked me to speak to him in English...

Heba and Hema/Salma look at Santa/Sophia pointedly

Hema/Salma—“yes, yes, you (looking at Santa/Sophia) are a big-person⁴⁰ with friends from ‘big-places’, huh?”

Santa/Sophia- “Quiet! (*swats Santa/Sophia and looks at me*) Go on”

Attiya- “He seemed surprised, I don’t know that he quite understood me. But anyways, I gave him the letter and he told me to wait. He headed to the kitchen, where a group of other men had gathered⁴¹. They asked him questions and I could hear some joking (turn

³⁹ Word Sophia used to refer to the steakhouse restaurant where he worked; among many South Asians, hotel is used to refer to what in North America is typically called a restaurant.

⁴⁰ When she handed me the letter and instructions, Santa/Sophia told me not to speak in Urdu or Arabic, but in English. She had talked about me as her Canadian friend, and as Heba and Hema/Salma’s responses indicate, it was supposed to index her status as having friends in ‘big places’.

⁴¹ The manager of this hotel was a Nepali man who hired many other Nepalis. The hotel was jokingly called “Nepali Central 2” by Hema/Salma. “Nepali Central 1” was a Nepali restaurant, a second-floor hole in the wall in the city center, owned by a Nepali man who has lived in Kuwait since the early 1990s, and in

to Sophia) did he tell you about that? I could see him writing...then he gave it to me...and I brought the letter to Santa/Sophia when I saw her in Q**** (other women's religious center).”

Heba- “that’s all?”

Attiya- “uh, yes. It was pretty quick”

Heba- “Santa/Sophia, so what now? What are you going to do now?”

Sophia—“I am still double minded...but I do want to see him, see his hotel maybe, but Mama will not like it.”

Heba- “No, she won’t...”

Hema/Salma⁴²- “Yes, be careful, your mama, she will send you to the *beit-surta*⁴³ to keep

Hari and other boys safe from you!

Or, she will keep you in *beit-detention*

the absence of an embassy, was the intermediary/representative that Kuwaiti police, human rights and governmental officials went to for help with translation, and who facilitated the activities of embassy officials from the Nepali Embassy in Saudi Arabia.

⁴² Hema/Salma spoke in Hindi/Urdu (neither Heba nor I speak Nepali, and Santa/Sophia speaks Hindi/Urdu as well). There were a few exceptions, though: ‘beit’ and ‘surta’ were spoken in Arabic; ‘detention’ was spoken in English.

⁴³ ‘house’ of ‘police’- meaning police station

to keep you safe from Hari and other boys!...

And if your Nepali mama hears of it:

watch out! then you will really need protection

She will keep you in *ghar-detention*!

No Kuwait, no Hari, no problems!

Hema/Salma's utterance⁴⁴, consisting of a series of brilliant plays on words, conceptual doublings, and a repetitive rhythm, entwines a number of issues discussed in this section. Her use of the tri-lingual words 'beit-surta', 'beit-detention' and 'ghar-detention' points to the resonances between house and police stations, of being detained and having their movements constantly monitored and policed; and of being a domestic worker mired (detained) in the household, and an absconder detained by the police; (mired in jail). She also inverts the common assumption about why restrictions are placed on domestic workers' mobility in Kuwait by cleverly asking who and what is being protected—they or others?—thus gesturing to how their sexuality and the possibility of their developing relationships outside the household are considered to be threatening. Her twin use of the word 'beit-detention' and 'ghar-detention' underscores their paralleled experiences of being largely confined to the household, both in Kuwait and in Nepal and India. The twining of these terms and places points to a further dynamic: whether intended or not, the restrictions on their mobility and curtailing of their opportunities to forge further relationships keeps domestic workers tethered to

⁴⁴ I will rewrite this when I have ore time. I am not happy with my flat accounting of her utterance.

households in Kuwait and in the places they migrated from. Domestic workers' belonging to these spaces—beit-detention and ghar-detention--are not automatic or already-assumed, but produced and reproduced everyday by the constant monitoring and policing of their movements and interactions.

5.7 Post-script and Anticipatory Preamble: Islam in Suffusion

In this chapter I presented a series of stories that elicit the everyday texture, ongoing relationships and overriding processes that characterize migrant domestic workers' experiences in Kuwaiti households. These experiences are often elided by works that focus (exclusively) on the asymmetrical relations between domestic workers and their employer-sponsors, the incidents of exploitation and abuse that some domestic workers face, and that analyze the time they spend within these households solely in terms of wage labour relations. Islam is not given prominence in these stories. This is purposeful. A striking aspect of my interlocutors' accounts and discussions of their time within Kuwaiti households is how they treated Islam as part of the background. Islam in the form of daily prayers, month-long fasts, purification rituals and ablutions, utterances (Inshallah! Mashallah!), and as principles animating moral and ethical deliberation and actions, was woven into the texture of the everyday worlds they inhabited in Kuwait, and was inextricable from the myriad ways in which Kuwait was (oftentimes) a place different and strange to them. Islam was part and parcel of the shaping and disciplining of their dispositions and behaviour within the household in ways that were ineffable, inexplicable, and hard to pinpoint or encapsulate. As I discuss in subsequent chapters,

their newfound pieties marked a quickening and deepening appreciation of Islam, and their ability to bring Islam into (sharper) relief—developed through their experiences learning more about Islam, a process facilitated by Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement.

6. Explanation is not the Point: House-Talk and Muslim Becomings

6.1 House-Talk

Sumitra/Sara and I were crossing the courtyard, making our way to the rooms in the servants' quarters she and her husband shared. She was carrying the cake I had brought. I was carrying the tea she had made. We were quieter than we were usually wont to be. The finality of this, our last meeting, loomed large. She and her husband had finalized their plans to return to her village in Southern India, and, my fieldwork drawing to a close, I was leaving Kuwait in a couple of days. Once we were comfortably settled in her sitting room, she asked me a question I suspect she had long been contemplating:

“Attiya, I still don't understand. This house-talk, what is its use; its importance? Those people who will see your report, what do they care about this? I am a practicing Muslim, yes, but my life is...well...pretty boring. Tell them about the life of the Prophet...that would be better...”

Sumitra/Sara's comment prompts the central issue I address in this chapter. Over the course of conducting fieldwork in Kuwait, Pakistan and Nepal, many of my interlocutors discussed their newfound Islamic pieties, what some might call conversion, in terms of their daily activities and intimate relationships within the household—what Sumitra/Sara referred to as ‘housetalk’. When I first began meeting with these women, I

often overlooked these matters. Sumitra/Sara, Mary/Maryam, Mercy/Rahman, and others, told me tales of seemingly simple mundane matters—of work and gossip within Kuwaiti households, of financial and family matters back home, and of everyday Islamic practice. I waited for the unexpected, the underlying, the eventful, the dramatic related to their adoption of Islamic precepts and practices. I was watchful for any word, any gesture hinting of an employer who might practice Islam in an exemplary or coercive manner, or hinting of a life-changing encounter with a Muslim daiyat (those who call people to Islam), or *to something more*. Few such tales or hints were forthcoming. I was perplexed. I was also a little disbelieving. Domestic workers' articulations of their newfound pieties contrasted with how others in Kuwait perceived and depicted them. Rather than focusing on reasons or explanations—on **why** they were 'converting to Islam', a question others in Kuwait were preoccupied with—my interlocutors were intent on the question of **what** their 'becoming Muslim' entailed, and how their newfound pieties were developing through the Kuwaiti households within which they lived and worked. To my interlocutors, explanations for why they were converting to Islam were not the point. The significance of their newfound pieties was intertwined with what Sumitra/Sara referred to as 'house-talk'. Spurred by the frequency of what I perceived to be the lack--or the absence--of causes for my interlocutors' newfound pieties, and spurred by contrasts between how these women and others in Kuwait discussed their practice of Islam, I came to recognize that the term 'conversion' fails to capture the particularities/specificities of their experiences. In this chapter, I want to draw from my interlocutors' stories in order to argue that their experiences of becoming Muslim are

processual. Their experiences are marked not by the rejection of their previous lives, but by a gradual reengagement and reworking of their lives (thereof) through Islam. My interlocutors' stories further underscore the importance of the household as sites in and through which domestic workers become attuned to, and begin to adopt Islamic precepts and practices—thus pointing to the importance of the household as a site through which transnational migration and Islam intersect.

6.2 Dwelling Awhile

Domestic workers' articulations of their newfound pieties point to the importance of the household, but in ways that are muted and subtle, subtle ways I slowly, slowly became attuned to over the course of visiting with my interlocutors in their Kuwaiti households, meeting with their employers, attending the classes they took at Kuwait's Islamic dawa movement's women's center, and with respect to some of my Nepali interlocutors, visiting with them in Nepal. Through these fieldwork experiences I came to appreciate how their households, both in the places from which they had migrated and in Kuwait, were not just sites bookending their transnational migrations and journeys. Rather, their households were dense and vital sites of intimacy, labouring, affect, economic exchange, and asymmetrical gendered, aged, raced and kinship relations that animated their transnational movements and experiences. For domestic workers developing newfound Islamic pieties, their households in Kuwait constituted spaces of everyday activity and interaction through which they gradually came to develop Islamic sensibilities—Islamic sensibilities through which they then came to reexperience and

rework their households both in Kuwait and in the places from which they had migrated. Their discussions of their newfound pieties were enmeshed in 'house-talk' and focused on what becoming Muslim entailed, rather than the question of motivation or causes. To convey and illustrate these points requires us to dwell awhile with my interlocutors, and for me to recount to you, and share with you their stories, albeit in condensed and stylized forms.

I begin with Mary/Maryam. When Mary/Maryam and I first met, I remember being struck by a rather ornate key strung with a blue satin ribbon, which she had wound around her wrist. When she spoke, Mary/Maryam often gesticulated, and particularly pointed comments were accompanied by the swaying of the key from her wrist. During my first and subsequent visits to her home, Mary/Maryam would unwind the ribbon just enough to open the front door. Only two keys existed for the house, she told me, one held by Umm Sayyid, the head of the household, and the other which she held. Mary/Maryam's key indexed her position within the household: she had been living and working with the family since the early 1970s, and was considered to be the second mother of the house. Mary/Maryam had become such an integral part of the family that when they decided to go on pilgrimage to Mecca together, Mary/Maryam accompanied them. Although Catholic, and although she did not participate in the rituals, Mary/Maryam had asked to go because of the significance of the trip to the family. Several months earlier, Umm Sayyid's mother, the matriarch of the family, and Mary/Maryam's mentor since she had arrived in Kuwait at the age of 19, had passed

away. In several months time, Sayyid, the eldest son of the house, was going to marry. Between their mourning and their hopes for the upcoming marriage, the family had decided to go on pilgrimage, and Mary/Maryam accompanied them. During her stay in Mecca she spent most of her time in the hotel room, where she could see pilgrims and processions from her window. What she saw struck her and spurred her, as she put it, “to *think* about Islam”. For over 30 years, she had been witnessing the family’s practice of Islam, but, as she put it, “did not note it”. When she returned to Kuwait, she continued going to Church regularly, but found herself becoming more attuned to Islamic precepts and practices. As she stated in one of our conversations, “I don’t know really when or how, but I started thinking, seeing...not just with my head or eyes, but with my heart...differently.” Mary/Maryam began reading a series of pamphlets in Hindi and primer books she had obtained from the dawa movement, and she began observing more closely the family’s prayers, and their reading and recitation of the Quran. Two years later, still attending church, she began fasting during Ramadan, and attending classes at the dawa movement’s women’s center.

Mary/Maryam’s experiences resonate with those of Sumitra/Sara, whose comments prompted my discussion in this chapter. Sumitra/Sara and I were introduced through Shaima, a member of the extended family within whose household Sumitra/Sara worked. As Shaima and I made our way through her extended family’s shared courtyard and gardens, and into the house of her grandmother, Gulnar, she cautioned that although Sumitra/Sara had agreed to meet me, she could be a little abrupt and impatient. She told

me the story of how, when Sumitra/Sara had first migrated to Kuwait from her village in southern India in the mid-1980s, Gulnar had hired her to help the other domestic workers of the compound with the cleaning. It became quickly apparent, however, that cleaning, which required some level of cooperation with the other women was not something Sumitra/Sara would excel at. She had a brusque personality and little patience for the other domestic workers in the compound, women she often dismissed as gossipy and silly. She was, however, an efficient and skilled cook, and so Gulnar moved her to the kitchen, where she worked for the next 15 years.

Given her reputation for having a daunting personality, it therefore came as a great surprise to Sumitra/Sara when Gulnar requested that she be her caregiver when she developed cancer, an illness that kept her bedridden. “Gulnar Bibi, she asked me to be the one to look after her because she knew that I am strong. She told me, may God look over her, that this illness is going to be difficult and I need someone who won’t be too soft...I need someone who will make sure I am doing what I should’. In tending to Gulnar, what Sumitra/Sara remembered most was waking up early in the morning, going to Gulnar’s room, turning on a cassette recording of Quranic recitations, and sitting with her while the rest of the household busied themselves with the coming day. Over the next five years, they shared in this ritual. When Gulnar succumbed to her illness, Sumitra/Sara found herself continuing to listen to these recitations. Gradually she began to supplement these with Hindi translations of the recitations, and with other readings about Islamic history and what she called ‘scientific’ or ‘practical’ Muslim books—books

by authors like Harun Yahya, who used Islam to explain natural phenomena, and books outlining how to perform Muslim prayers and rituals.

In contrast to both Mary/Maryam and Sumitra/Sara, Mercy/Rahman learned about and developed an interest in Islam through discussion and debate. Mercy/Rahman's nickname among her network of friends was 'little preacher', a nickname she had developed for trying to preach the Christian gospel to her network of friends and loved ones in Kuwait. Notably absent from this network was her first employer. When Mercy/Rahman had first migrated to Kuwait, she had worked with a large Kuwaiti family that continually exploited her and allowed their eldest son, a ten year old, to continually harass her. "They (the family) were terrible," she told me, "my head hardly touched my bed, I was always up cooking, cleaning, feeding them and their guests...and that boy...he had *such* a temper...he would throw his slippers at me, or push me...and his mother would not believe me or told me I was the one at fault."

Unhappy and angry, Mercy/Rahman bided her time until her two year contract elapsed, and then made a proposal to her employer and sponsor, Mama Amina. She wanted to 'work outside', meaning she wanted to live in her own accommodations and work part-time cleaning Mama Amina's and other Kuwaiti families' homes. Mama Amina agreed, but on one condition: Mercy/Rahman had to pay the residency and work visa fees, her health care coverage (costs usually born by the employer), and a supplementary fee to cover what Mercy/Rahman wryly called 'the bother'.

Mercy/Rahman's experiences with Mama Amina's family cemented a wariness she had long felt towards Muslims, a wariness that had developed through her earlier experiences with her Muslim stepfather. Mercy/Rahman had grown up 'Pentecost' [the term she used] in a small town in Southern India comprised of Christians, Hindus and Muslims. When Mercy/Rahman was quite young, her father died, and several years later, her mother remarried, this time to a Muslim man. The problem Mercy/Rahman encountered through her mother's remarriage was not linked to her ability to continue practicing her religion—she, her mother, her sister and eventually her two step-brothers maintained their 'Pentecost' faith. Rather, Mercy/Rahman was subject to her step-father's physical and sexual abuse. This abuse continued for several years, unabated despite her mother's knowledge, until Mercy/Rahman's step-father migrated to Kuwait.

A couple of years after he migrated, her step-father stopped sending remittances, and eventually stopped communicating with the family altogether. Worried, and needing to provide for her family, Mercy/Rahman's mother migrated to Kuwait as a domestic worker. Unable to find her husband, and unable to fully cover her family's expenses in India with the salary that she made, Mercy/Rahman's mother requested that her daughter join her to work in Kuwait.

In our discussions, Mercy/Rahman told me of how, through her experiences with her stepfather and Mama Amina's family, she tended to avoid Muslims in Kuwait, not

speaking or engaging with them too much unless she had to, with two notable exceptions. When Mercy/Rahman began ‘working outside’ and moved into a one-bedroom apartment shared with 5 other domestic workers, she developed a close relationship with Eva, her Indonesian roommate, and with Abdullah, an elderly Pakistani man who owned a small convenience store in her neighborhood. Both were Muslim, and Mercy/Rahman, the ‘little preacher’, was committed to teaching them about Jesus. In one of our conversations, she described her encounters with them as follows: “I pushed at them, telling them about Christ, and they pushed back. Eva pushed back quietly. She listened to me, would often nod, and simply say “Islam is good for me.” With Abdullah, our conversations were more heated.” Through her everyday encounters with them, Mercy/Rahman found that she had many questions about Islam, questions Eva and Abdullah were not able to address. To address these, Mercy/Rahman began attending classes at the women’s center of Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement—where she became known for being a spirited debater.

6.3 Everyday Routines and Possibilities

Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara and Mercy/Rahman’s stories illustrate two key dimensions of domestic workers’ experiences of their newfound pities in Kuwait. Whether it be ‘starting to see and hear with my heart’ as Mary/Maryam described it, or Sumitra/Sara’s experience of listening to the refrains of the Quran in the morning, or Mercy/Rahman’s ‘pushing and preaching’, their experiences of developing new pieties and an interest in Islam were marked not by the extraordinary, but by the everyday.

Punctuated by few, if any dramatic events, miracles, or visions, domestic workers' experiences demonstrate the slow unexpected infusing of incipient protean Islamic sensibilities, affects, awareness and practices into the folds of their day-to-day relations and activities--relations and activities concentrated within the household. Here, their everyday experiences figure not just as sites of repetition, reproduction, habit, and disciplining as discussed by Lefebvre, Bourdieu, and Foucault, but also of newfound possibilities and open-endedness that the work of Bloch and Deleuze point to (see introduction).

Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara, Mercy/Rahman and other domestic workers' articulations of their household experiences also differ from how liberal secularists and Islamic reformers discussed them. As I mentioned earlier, despite their contrasting perspectives, these groups attributed domestic workers' newfound pieties to their position/location within the household. For liberal-secularists, Kuwaiti households constitute a space within which the state is reluctant or unable to intervene, a space within which domestic workers are subject to unequal power relations, leading many to convert. For Islamic reformers, the household constitutes an integral social space through which the Muslim ummah is formed, a space their activities have increasingly sought to reform, a space in which domestic workers come to witness and experience Islam, leading many to adopt Islamic precepts and practices. In contrast, Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara and Mercy/Rahman discussed their Kuwaiti households not as a determining force for, or as a locus of explanation for their newfound pieties; but rather, their 'house-talk' pointed to

the household as a site of ongoing activity and interaction through which they often unexpectedly, became attuned to and began to practice Islam.

6.4 Quickening Learnings: The Dawa Center

Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara, and Mercy/Rahman's stories also illustrate how domestic workers' further learning about Islam was channeled through Kuwait's Islamic dawa movement. Transnational in its composition and scope, this dawa movement is animated by one objective: to promote Islamic learning and living among Kuwait's non-Arabic speaking population. Sprawling and fluid in its composition and form, the movement has developed in relation to the presence of Kuwait's non-Arab foreign resident and migrant population. Today, it is comprised of a multitude of study circles and teaching centers that produce and distribute informational and instructional materials about Islam, and that offer a series of courses ranging from introductory to more advanced classes. The dawa movement strives to be inclusionary and encompassing in terms of the linguistic, ethnic and national backgrounds of its participants. Members do not subscribe exclusively to any of the four Islamic madhab--schools of jurisprudence [talfiq], and are linked with other Islamic modernist reform movements both in Kuwait and across the world

This dawa movement is widespread and well-known in Kuwait. Domestic workers seeking to further their understanding and practice about Islam learn of the movement's resources and activities through word of mouth—from fellow domestic

workers, other foreign residents and migrants, or their employers. Most of the women I got to know obtained pamphlets, books, and cassettes produced by the movement. Many also attended classes offered by the women's movement—most notably their “Classes for Newly Practicing Muslims”. Offered in the languages spoken by these women—such as Hindi/Urdu, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesian, Sinhala, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Amharic, Tigre and Chinese—and facilitated by teachers who were typically from the places from which these women had migrated, these classes were spaces in which domestic workers could learn Islamic precepts and practices among women of similar backgrounds, and could address issues specific to their situation and circumstances--issues that more often than not revolved around their relations and responsibilities within their household, both in Kuwait and in the places from which they migrated.

Like everyday life in the household, these classes were infused with repetition and rearticulation of everyday experience through Islamic stories, precepts, and practices. Simple in their design and execution, these classes focused on discussions about the five pillars of Islam, and on the performance of prayer, and purification or ablutions associated with prayer. Teachers would repeatedly and recursively cycle through these Islamic precepts and practices, eliciting and interweaving their students' questions and comments. In so doing, they tried to establish connections and underscore the resonance between Islamic precepts and practices and students' everyday activities.

Mary/Maryam's experience of attending these classes illustrates how they interwove the everyday into the classroom. Mary/Maryam initially began attending these classes in order to improve her recitation of the Quran. She told me that her 'zabaan'—her tongue/language was different than her Kuwaiti family's, and to her ears, her tongue was unable to properly recite the passages of the Quran. She hoped that being taught by, and alongside women who had her same 'zabaan' would address this problem. During one class, when the teacher was translating a passage they had just been reciting, one emphasizing the importance of filial obligation and responsibility, Mary/Maryam found herself with an opportunity to ask about an issue she had been worrying about. She had recently spoken to her parents in India over the phone, a conversation during which she had broached with them her new interest in Islam. Their response, as she had feared, was overwhelmingly negative. Her parents told her--in no uncertain terms--that should she convert, they would disown her and cease to have anything to do with her. This worried Marriam because her parents were old and infirm, and her remittances their only sources of income. Mary/Maryam concluded her account to the class by saying that although she had begun reading the Quran and fasting, and although she would probably live the rest of her life in Kuwait as the second house-mother with Umm Sayyid's family, she dared not take shehadeh, the Islamic testament of faith, for fear of alienating her parents, and because of her sense of duty towards them.

In the ensuing discussion, several suggestions were given. One woman proposed she take shehadeh because her parents would eventually come around and accept her

decision [quote] “they would have to, wouldn’t they?” Another woman suggested she take shehadeh, but not tell her parents: [quote] “how would they know...and that way Mary/Maryam you can fulfill your duty to both them and Allah” Another woman suggested she wait awhile, and gradually broach the topic again with her parents: [quote] “Allah will understand”. In deference to her greater knowledge of Islam, Mary/Maryam asked the teacher, Sister Shersha, for her thoughts:

“Maryam, I think you are right to wait. Taking shehadeh as you might wish will not be good for your parents right now, and as we have learned in the Quran and hadith, we must treat our parents with kindness, gentleness, respect...Maybe they are in shock, maybe they don’t understand Islam, I don’t know. But I think Hema’s idea is good: wait awhile and then talk to them again. And when do you next go back to India? Maybe wait until you have a chance to visit with them, talk with them, tell them about Islam, and so maybe they will change their mind. Have patience. Being patient and honouring our parents is something Muslims should do.

For the next year, Mary/Maryam struggled with simultaneously trying to practice and reconcile two Islamic precepts and virtues—being dutiful to her parents, and dealing with her parents’ opposition to her becoming Muslim, with patience. Her attempts to cope with her situation, a source of ongoing discussion and sympathy among the women of her class, points to how these classes were not simply informational and instructional

spaces of Islamic learning. Rather, these classes constituted spaces of ethical formation and deliberation, in which students struggled to understand what was incumbent upon them to do as Muslims. In these classes, students learned Islam not as a set of rigid principles to be mapped onto their lives, but as discussed by Mahmood, Hirshkind, and Henkel with respect to Islamic ethical practice in Egypt and Turkey—they learned Islam as principles understood, instantiated, practiced and striven for in and through their day-to-day activities and experiences.

Mercy/Rahman’s experiences of learning more about Islam resonate with those of Mary/Maryam—and her experiences further underscore the dialogical and processual nature of domestic workers’ becoming Muslim. Mercy/Rahman initially began to attend the dawa movement’s “New Muslim” classes because of her puzzlement and skepticism over Eva and Abdullah’s repeated assertions that “Christians are Muslims too”. Bible in hand, she attended the classes periodically in order to address questions related to these and other issues “I remember thinking Islam is simple, and Sister Jamila understood Jesus simply...this was a problem for me, so I kept going [to the classes], I kept pushing. But this idea of asking God to lead us on the straight path...this is something I did before. I used to ask Jesus to show me the right path in what I do...I started to think maybe it [Islam] isn’t so very different.”

Here, Mercy/Rahman was referring to the concept of ‘fitrah’. A term often invoked by women participating in Kuwait’s Islamic dawa movement, *Fitrah* was

understood to be a form of moral reasoning that guides people's actions, an innate, God-given capacity to distinguish right from wrong---and "stay on the right path". The daiyat often told me that because of their fitrah every human being is latently Muslim. Being Muslim is understood to be a capability that everyone is endowed with; but they added, it is one actualized through constant effort. This constant effort is necessary because if everyone is born with fitrah, everyone also has the propensity to be forgetful and stray. They pointed to prophets and revelations [including Jesus and the new and old Testaments] as being forms of secondary guidance to shepherd people back to the straight path. People may take up practices not in keeping with this guidance, or they may not heed it, but this does not nullify their being Muslim. Their capacity remains. Within this context, the daiyat pointed to the inadequacy of the term converting. As one explained: "we never say that this person, that person was made a Muslim because they are already Muslim. That is why we don't say they convert, because they are *reverting*, they are coming back to their fitrah. Just as we Muslims are trying to keep to our fitrah."

In our discussions, the concept of 'fitrah' (I discuss the term further in the next chapter) held deep resonance for Mercy/Rahman. She often puzzled over the term, and used it when discussing similarities between how she practiced her religion, and how Eva, Abdullah, and her other friends practiced theirs. When Mercy/Rahman went to visit her household in India—consisting of her son, her husband, his mother who was also Mercy/Rahman's aunt, her siblings and cousins—she used the term '*fitrah*' when explaining her interest in becoming Muslim. "I thought this might help them see some

similarities, make them softer to Islam. I was wrong. At first my husband thought I was interested in Islam because I had met a Muslim man, but after I explained this wasn't true, he said I had brought a devil-spirit with me from Kuwait.”

Mercy/Rahman's mother-in-law told her she was being selfish and that her actions were jeopardizing the family's cohesion. When Mercy/Rahman returned to Kuwait, almost immediately her mother visited her. She urged Mercy/Rahman to reconsider her position and weigh the potential consequences of converting to Islam—likely divorce from her husband, and ostracism from her extended family. Seeking counsel, Mercy/Rahman went to visit Sister Jamila, who suggested that Mercy/Rahman be patient, wait awhile, and broach the topic again with her family “it will be better for you and them”. Several months of back and forth telephoning later, Mercy/Rahman's family decided on a course of action: they assembled their financial resources, making it possible for her husband to migrate to Kuwait. Her husband hoped that by being in Kuwait with her, he would preempt her taking of shehadeh. Mercy/Rahman hoped that by living in Kuwait, her husband would come to understand her interest in Islam. When I left Kuwait, their situation remained unresolved.

Before I left, though, I had a chance to ask Sister Jamila about Mercy/Rahman's predicament:

“what to do? She has a child, a husband, her family, as well as herself to consider...Maybe her husband will become Muslim or at least understand Islam?...Inshallah, she will take shehadeh and embrace Islam fully [later], but she is acting with iman (faith) and sabr (patience) now. She is learning and doing what we Muslims should do”

Sister Jamila’s response, emphasizing Mercy/Rahman’s continued engagement with her household members in India *through* her practice of Islam, underscores an important dimension of domestic workers’ experiences of their newfound practice of Islam. Domestic workers come to apprehend and approach Islamic precepts and practices in and through previous understandings and social relations that comprise their daily lived experiences. Greater understanding and proficiency in their practice of Islam is achieved through constant striving, a constant tacking back and forth between Islamic precepts and practices and the stuff of everyday life through which these precepts and practices are apprehended, approached and actualized.

For domestic workers who are developing newfound Islamic pieties, the stuff of everyday life necessarily includes their preexisting religious traditions and household relations. As Mercy/Rahman’s situation illustrates, their becoming Muslim is thus not seen as a renouncing or rejection of their previous lives, their preexisting religious traditions and household relations, but as a reengagement and reworking of them. It is

understood as a dynamic and encompassing process in which the boundaries between different religious traditions and other forms of belonging can be porous and fluid.

6.5 Everyday Becomings

To conclude this chapter, I would like to briefly touch upon the ways in which domestic workers' experiences of newfound piety in Kuwait can contribute to our understanding of religious conversion and transnationalism. House-talk is central to domestic workers' articulations of their newfound pieties. Mary/Maryam, Sumitra/Sara, Mercy/Rahman and many of my interlocutors discussed their developing interest in Islam in terms of their everyday relationships and activities within their household. The household constituted a space of everyday engagement through which they became attuned to and adopted Islamic practice, a space they then reengaged and reshaped through their practice of Islam. Their experiences underscored the everyday--versus the eventful--as sites through which their Islamic pieties were articulated and experienced. They discussed, mulled over, and interrogated these experiences, but were not concerned or absorbed with explaining them—explanations of motivations or reasons were not the point. What was of significance was what their newfound pieties entailed. My interlocutors' experiences underscore the processual nature of their becoming Muslim--where they became Muslim, and continued to become Muslim by learning Islamic precepts and practices, and reengaging their lives in relation to these. This process was neither unidirectional nor linear, but cyclical and recursive: they apprehended and approached Islamic precepts and practices in and through cultural meanings and

interpretive strategies, religious practices and social relations that comprised their daily experiences, experiences concentrated within the household. They experienced becoming Muslim not as a radical break from their previous practices and relationships, but as a reworking and reshaping of them.

While some might argue that this reworking and reshaping simply reflects or bespeaks a transitional moment between two sets of religious practices or their practice of a syncretic religious form, domestic workers' experiences may point more to the processual nature of Islamic ethical practice. Domestic workers' experiences of becoming Muslim resonate with works as diverse as Richard Eaton's discussion of the spread of Islam in Bengal during Moghul times, and Karin Van Nieuwerkerk's examination of Northern European women who are as she puts it 'Embracing Islam'. These works also underscore the processual, the gradual nature, and the continuities in individuals and communities' adoption of Islamic precepts and practices.

Far from experiencing their adoption of Islamic precepts and practices as a radical change, stemming from a dramatic episode or sudden realization, and far from experiencing them as a rejection of their previous lives and practices--domestic workers' newfound Islamic pieties entailed a gradual recasting and reworking of their lives, one rooted in the recursiveness of their everyday experiences within the household. Domestic workers' discourse of becoming Muslim is incommensurable with the discourse of those in Kuwait who understand their newfound pieties in terms of 'conversion'—where their

adoption of Islam is seen as a radical break, departure, or rebirth in their lives, a radical change spurred by a clear reason, explanation, or motivation. Domestic workers' experiences are not legible in this discursive frame, leading many in Kuwait to question the sincerity of their newfound pieties.

Domestic workers' developing Islamic pieties also underscore the importance of the household to the development of transnational religious subjectivities and movements. Their newfound pieties point to the household as a site in and through which two global processes-- migration and Islamic reform movements—are reshaping social belonging and political organizing today. Their experiences point to the importance of examining the household in addition to, and in relation to nation-states, voluntary organizations, human rights groups—as sociopolitical forms articulating and generative of transnational processes today.

7. A Moment of Muslim Belonging and Becomings

7.1 A Moment

This discussion about migrant domestic workers in Kuwait, their newfound practice of Islam, the women's wing of an Islamic *dawa* (call to or invitation to Islam) movement (henceforth referred to as 'the Movement'), and the form of Islamic belonging emerging through this Movement's activities, begins with a story, one told on a rare damp and cold day in Kuwait. It was late January, and the women of the Movement's "Salaat wa Taharat (prayer and purification) Class for Hindi/Urdu Speakers", predominantly domestic workers, migrants from the Indian subcontinent, were listening intently. Their teacher, Sister Tahira, was hitting her stride. Seated atop a desk, eyes aglow, hands outstretched, the ends of her *hijab* and *abaya* animated by her movements, she was telling a story, a recursive story, a spiraling story, a story steadily drawing her students into its narrative folds and repetitions, a story punctuated very occasionally by their comments:

Sister Tahira—

Saad Bin Abi Waqqas was a companion of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him

a companion is someone who was close to him

who was next to him

who accepted him as prophet when the Quran was revealed

when he started to speak about the message--Islam

when the message was revealed to him
they are those who were becoming Muslim

the Meccans, they tried to stop them
they pressured
they coerced
to stop them from following the prophet
this should not happen, they said

the mother of the one of the companions, Saad bin Abi Waqqas

she said, she said she would no longer take food

his mother, she said:

I will not eat

I will not drink

so long as my son is part of this *dharam*,

this *mazhab*,

this religion,

this *din*

I will stop from eating

even if I die...

Mary/Maryam—Oh...

Amina—Hai Hai!

Sister Tahira—the people, they heard her...

Hema/Salma—What to do?

Sister Tahira—(nods in acknowledgement and continues)

...they heard her story

and they pressured Saad bin abi Waqqas

they pressured this companion

they pressured this Muslim

they said: go!

go!

go!

go to her!

she is your mother

go to her, listen to her, prepare food for her,

listen to her, make her food, eat with her

she is your mother

he came to her, and he said:

oh my mother, I found something so beautiful
I found Islam, and oh my mother
I accepted
and now, even though it would hurt me more than you can know
even if you should die in front of me one time
even if you should die in front of me a second time
a third time
a fourth time
even if you should die in front of me a hundred times
even though it would hurt me more than you could know
it will not make a difference
I will not leave Islam

Santa/Sophia (interjecting)—

But this isn't a good word. This isn't right. Isn't it wrong to disregard what our mothers say? You said this before.

Class Murmurings

Sister Tahira—

young ladies, listen...LISTEN:

Sophia, you spoke correctly

I told you this story because if your mother asks you for something reasonable
for something just
than you must take heed
if your mother isn't Muslim,
if she is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Christian, or if she worships (*puja karte*) something else,
and she asks you for money, to eat, to drink
then, you must give it to her
feed them, give them drink (*kilao, pilao*)
but if she pressures you to again become Hindu, Buddhist
or something else
you do not have to listen
you should not listen

I told you this because...
it is difficult,
it is a difficult matter
one of the most difficult
but this is what makes our din *mazbut*¹
it is like reciting the *shahadeh*²
la illah ha illallah muhammadan rasullah
it makes our spirit, our bodies, our being *mazbut*

¹ Translations: Arabic: correct/right; Urdu: strong

² Translation from Arabic: testament of faith

it makes us Muslim...and...

As Sister Tahira was segueing into a discussion of the five pillars of Islam, the classroom door opened, and as discreetly as she could, in walked an older Nepali woman, a student who had not been to class for many months. From the gleam in her eye and the way that her lips quirked, Sister Tahira was undoubtedly tempted to tease Sonia about her long-standing absence. Most probably she would have used the (suspect) joke she reserved for Nepali students—“*arré*, what mountain have you been on?”—but she let Sonia pass by without comment.

The students’ attention, though, was not easily regained. The murmuring that usually accompanied an interruption or lull in class did not abate; rather, it increased as Sonia made her way to the back of the class, and it peaked when she reached another student, a much younger and relatively new student, Karima, who had, in the interim, gotten up, bowed her head, and started to quietly weep. Kissing her, Sonia sat her down gently.

Perplexed and a little perturbed, never having seen a similar display among her students, Sister Tahira turned to Santa/Sophia.

Santa/Sophia—You didn’t know? They haven’t seen each other since they came to Kuwait together six months ago. Sonia is Karima’s mother.

As the women of the class quietly took in Karima and Sonia's reunion, a feeling that had long since suffused the class became palpable. As migrants residing abroad, as domestic workers away from, yet supporting their households by working in the households of others, the women of the class were acutely aware of being out of place, of being socially liminal. They longed for their families and places of home, a longing made more poignant by the anxious recognition that they would be returning and reencountering their families and places of home—as did Saad bin abi Waqqas, Sonia, and Karima—as newly practicing Muslims.

7.2 Unfurling the Moment

In their articulations of their newfound pieties, Sonia, Karima and other domestic workers were concerned with what their newfound pieties entailed, and how they were to become practicing Muslims. Rather than narrativizing their experiences, or explaining their conversion in terms of inner motivation, they focused on the relations through which they came to learn about and began to adopt Islamic practice. That moment in the classroom where Sonia and Karima were reunited undercores these women's concerns with how their newfound pieties would affect previous relationships they had with parents, children, siblings, fiancés, boyfriends, and friends from home.

Their experiences point to a realm that has hitherto not been accounted for by existing studies on religious conversion. Broadly falling within two categories, these studies either examine how religious conversions affect the demographic balance and political relations between communal groupings in the context of colonial and postcolonial state formation (Hardy 1979; Viswanathan 1998). Or, they concentrate on the individual as the locus of analysis, examining how conversion arises from the dictates of one's conscience (James 2002 as an exemplar of this; for a critical account of this approach to conversion see Morrison 1992 and Asad 1996), or how conversion marks a transformation in the individuals' subjectivity and how they narrate their lives and experiences (Rouse 2004).

My research with migrant domestic workers in Kuwait suggests a shift in analytic perspective, one that attends to how these women experience becoming Muslim through their relationships with others, thus emphasizing a relational form of subjectivity, a relational self. It is a perspective that attends to how becoming Muslim entails their articulation into—and their articulation of—social formations that are incipient and protean, ones formed and reformed through their newfound practice of Islam. In demarcating this space of analysis, I use the term 'Muslim belonging', a term that refers to the position/place of the self in relation to a broader realm of socio-political inclusion, and that underscores the fluidity of both the self and the socio-political realms formed.

Part of a larger project about domestic workers in Kuwait, Islamic dawa, and Muslim belonging, this chapter focuses on a crucial site in which domestic workers who are becoming Muslim further their understanding and practice of Islam. Spearheading dawa efforts in Kuwait, the Movement offers a series of classes called '*Salaat wa Taharaat*', 'prayer and purification', or as they are spoken of colloquially, 'classes for newly practicing Muslims'. Over the course of becoming Muslim, the vast majority of migrant domestic workers take part in these classes, which are taught in the myriad of languages and vernaculars they speak, and which are often taught by daiyat who are from the places from which they have migrated.

Organized in this way, these classes have become sites in which migrant domestic workers' national, ethnic, linguistic, and in some cases such as that of Sonia and Karima, familial bases of belonging are being reconstituted. While some might consider this a paradox or ironic consequence of the way in which these classes are arranged, I argue this phenomenon points to the underlying form of Muslim belonging promoted by the Movement, a form of belonging in which familial, linguistic, ethnic, and national bases of belonging are reconstituted in and through Muslim idioms, practices and networks/social formations.

In explicating this form of belonging, I return to and work through the moment I described at the beginning of this chapter. I discuss the efforts of two daiyat who have been instrumental in developing these classes, one of whom, Sister Tahira, we have

already met, and the other, Sister Zaynab, whom we will meet shortly. I then discuss the transnational circuits and circumstances leading to Sonia and Karima's reunion during the class.

7.3 Sister Zaynab Explains Fitra and Muslim Being

One of the most prominent daiyats in Kuwait, Sister Zaynab commanded a great deal of respect. Learned, self-possessed, and eminently capable, she would have been a daunting figure were it not for what one student called her '*khushi bhaat*' (glad words). Amidst the women with whom she worked—fellow daiyats, the movement's administrators, prisoners, nurses, shop clerks, maids, middle class housewives, Ministry of *Awkaf* officials, and an earnest ethnographer—Sister Zaynab had the knack of remembering small details about each and every one of them. Weaving these details into banter, she would seamlessly establish familiarity and put people at ease. Take for instance the day we met. Deeply flushed, the lingering effects of a ten-minute bout with Kuwait's relentless sun, and acutely aware of being so, my greetings to her were more of a stammer. Gesturing me to a restful chair her response was warm, and a little perplexing:

SZ—*Walekum Assalaam ya Attiya*...[leans forward and slowly raises an eyebrow] and as they say here: *schlonick?*

AA--[pause]...er...I'm fine...just not used to the weather quite yet

SZ—I am not sure anyone gets used to the weather here. I still haven't. Did your car break down? Or the air-conditioning?

AA—No. I came by bus.

SZ—By bus! I thought they weren't safe...safe for women

AA—Well...

So began our first meeting. Each time we met subsequently, Sister Zaynab would, invariably, greet me with an arch *schlonick*³ (a joke it took me several months to figure out), and she would ask me how I was navigating Kuwait, finding information about the wayward bus routes and their uncertain schedules surprisingly interesting.

Sister Zaynab's route to Kuwait and the Movement was also circuitous. She was born and raised in Egypt, and shortly after getting married in the mid-1960s, she and her husband moved to a large Canadian city. There she studied and later practiced dentistry and became an integral part of the city's nascent Muslim community. Her experiences in Canada were quite formative. In our conversations she mentioned how dealing with her neighbors' and patients' misconceptions about Islam, and how meeting Muslims from all over the world led her to redouble her efforts to learn and practice Islam. Late in the

³ Colloquial term used in Kuwait that means 'how are you?', but which strictly translated, means 'what is your colour?'

1980s, after her husband received a lucrative job offer from a large Kuwaiti institution, they relocated to yet another cosmopolitan milieu, Kuwait City, where she put her newfound learning about Islam to work.

First, she began organizing informal *halaqa*⁴ meant to strengthen the *din* [often translated as ‘religion’ but has the more encompassing meaning of ‘way of life’] of already practicing Muslims and to address questions posed by people unfamiliar with Islam. Her *halaqas* became spaces where women of different nationalities, languages, and lives rubbed shoulders and found means of conversing. As Sister Zaynab’s reputation for charismatic teaching spread, these *halaqas* grew into lectures and classes drawing more and more people. Thereafter her work snowballed. Women contemplating taking *shehadeh* approached her for counseling and guidance. She started to write what would become a series of manuals about how to undertake dawa. When members of the Movement began to develop their women’s section, they approached Sister Zaynab for her assistance, and she became an integral part of the founding of the Movement’s women’s center in the mid-1990s.

Generally advocating a fluid approach to learning and teaching, what she called a student-centered pedagogy, Sister Zaynab was stringent when it came to the classes she developed for newly practicing Muslims. She was adamant that these classes needed to be ‘practically oriented’. She insisted that students were interested in learning *how to be*

⁴ Arabic and Urdu translation: study circles

Muslim rather than the intricacies of *aqeedah*⁵ and what it *means to be* Muslim. In these classes, she focused on awakening and furthering her students' *fitrah*. A concept central to how she understood Muslim forms of belonging, Sister Zaynab explained *fitrah* as follows:

“The prophet (PBUH) said that everyone is born with fitrah. Every baby who comes from her mother's womb comes with this fitra. We are all already born with this guidance, this first guidance, this leading guidance, this ability to distinguish what is good from what is bad. Every baby is born Muslim...”

Here *fitrah* is understood to be a God-given blessing, an attribute intrinsic to humans, an innate capacity to distinguish right from wrong, a form of moral reasoning that guides people's actions. For Sister Zaynab, as well as other women involved in the movement, because of their *fitra* every human being is latently Muslim. Being Muslim is a capability that everyone is endowed with, but it is one actualized through constant effort. This constant work is necessary because if people are born with *fitrah*, people also have the propensity to be:

⁵ Arabic translation: tenets of faith and belief; this is in contradistinction to dawa classes offered by other groups in Kuwaiti, most notably ones that are *salafi*, who follow a puritanical form of Islam that focuses almost exclusively on the Quran and hadith, rather than other bodies of Islamic knowledge and jurisprudence (most notably scholarship of the madhabs, schools of jurisprudence; also *fiqh*, *tafsir*) in seeking to reestablish communities that emulate the '*salaf*' or community of Muslims at the time of the Prophet.

“...forgetful. We stray. That is something we tend to do: be forgetful and stray. So Allah sent us secondary guidance, through messengers and revelations, to remind us...that is why one of the names of the Quran is Al-Zhikr, the remembrance, that is why we must constantly recite the Quran, why we recite its passages, like Surat Al-Fatiha 17 times a day in prayer: to remember...”

To be Muslim people must constantly remember and strive to live in accordance with this guidance. People may take up practices not in keeping with this guidance, or they may not heed it, but this does not nullify their being Muslim. Their capability of being Muslim remains. It remains something that can be actualized through practice. Within this context, Sister Zaynab pointed out the inadequacy of the term ‘converting’:

“we never say that this person, that person was made a Muslim because they are already Muslim. That is why we don’t say they convert, because they are *reverting*, they are coming back to their *fitrah*.”

The Movement’s ‘classes for newly practicing Muslims’ were developed to encourage this process of reversion and to facilitate students’ return to their *fitrah*. Sister Zaynab and other daiyat designed these classes to be spaces in which students would not just learn about Islam, but would actualize being Muslim by beginning to incorporate Islamic precepts and practices into their lives. Held around the time of sunset, the time of day during which the fourth of the five daily prayers are performed, these classes

centered on the instruction and performance of ‘*Salaat*’—prayer, and “*Taharaat*”—purification or ablutions associated with prayer. In cultivating their performance of these rituals, students not only learned the bodily postures they entailed, but also how to recite and commit to memory passages from the *Quran*.

Through explications of these passages, the daiyat would open up further realms of discussion, including the five pillars of Islam and the lives of the prophets, most especially, the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the *sahaba*, his companions. In these discussions, students learned Islamic precepts through an examination of how exemplary Muslims elaborated and strove to incorporate them into their lives. Sister Tahira’s telling of the story of Saad bin abi Waqqas is an example of this. It opened up space for the women of the class to discuss their struggles to practice Islam in the face of parental opposition, and simultaneously to care for and fulfill their responsibilities to their parents as enjoined in passages of the *Quran* and the *hadith*.

7.4 Sister Tahira’s Speech and the Plurality, Play and Proliferation of Muslim Belonging

The Movement’s ‘*Salaat wa Taharaat*’ classes, which Sister Zaynab played an instrumental part in developing, were an integral part of the Movement’s dawa work, and teaching these classes was a task eagerly sought by the daiyat. Sister Tahira, for one, waited 3 years before she finally had the chance to teach these classes. She had made no secret of her hopes to the other daiyat, but they had advised against it, telling her that her

oratory skills, which were prodigious, were best served elsewhere, in the women's dawa movement's public outreach activities, for instance. When prodded further, the daiyat admitted, reluctantly, that Sister Tahira was not quite ready to teach the class. Her manner was '*tori sakht*': a little too forceful, a little too unyielding, not supple enough to deal with the motley array of women who were in the class. But when Sister Shersha went on maternity leave, and Sister Jamila had to return suddenly to India due to a family emergency, Sister Tahira was the only daiyat remaining who could speak Hindi/Urdu. Sister Tahira found herself presented with the opportunity she had been longing for. Seizing her chance, she walked into class brimming with enthusiasm.

Sister Tahira's lecture about the five pillars of Islam was eloquent. The cadence of her speech and the questions she posed were perfectly timed. Her exhortations were vigorous. But despite these and other rhetorical flourishes--of which she had many--the students were strangely unmoved. Ten minutes into what would become an hour and a half lecture, I sensed uncomfortable shifting in the seats. Fifteen minutes later students were listless and looked bored. A few minutes after that most had dropped all pretense of listening. Surreptitious messages circulated. Under the guise of taking notes, one student started to write a letter to her sister in Goa. Another student text messaged on a cell phone she hid behind her Hindi translation of the *Quran*. Sister Tahira responded by redoubling her efforts. The situation spiraled: intensified effort on her part resulted in intense restlessness on the students' part. Frustration hung heavy in the air. Three weeks

later the situation had not improved. I ran into Sister Tahira in the halls after class: her red-rimmed eyes bespoke inner turmoil.

The day that Sonia and Karima were reunited several months later, however, the situation was entirely different. Students were engrossed and at ease. What had changed in the interim? An explanation begins with Sister Tahira's dawning realization that her speech ('baat') was not quite right: what was needed was not forcefulness of speech, but enfolding speech, speech that would encompass and include students by words, by rhythm, and by resonating with their experiences and the issues of concern to them.

Sister Tahira had longed to teach the 'class for newly practicing Muslims' because she "very much felt with them [students]". Like many of the women in the class, the trajectory leading her to Kuwait had been one of hard work and sacrifice. She grew up in a modest neighborhood in Hyderabad. She was a few years shy of finishing her high school education when her father abandoned her, her mother and her younger sister. A bright and capable student, Sister Tahira supplemented her mother's meager wages as a seamstress by tutoring middle-class students at a nearby grammar school. She then paid her way through both an undergraduate and masters' degree in English at a local college by working as a secretary, a teacher, and later an administrator at an Islamic organization. In addition to supporting her own education, Sister Tahira's earnings also went to support her mother, whose failing eyesight had made it difficult for her to continue working, and to pay for her younger sister's dowry and wedding.

When she was in her late 30s, unlikely to marry, her mother and sister for the most part taken care of, one of Sister Tahira's closest friends chanced upon an advertisement in a local newspaper. It told of an Islamic group based in Kuwait that sought to recruit a daiyat who was fluent in Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi/Urdu and English. Unbeknownst to Sister Tahira, her friend forwarded her biodata (resume) to the organization. Several months later, after her initial shock, a telephone interview, a videotaped interview sent to Kuwait, her mother's anxious and mounting excitement, the packing of her favorite lawn shalwar kameez ("because who knew if they had them there?"), and tearful promises to call as often as she could, Sister Tahira found herself on a plane to Kuwait. "If I wasn't going to get married in India, it was good to know my life wasn't over. *Alhumdullilah*⁶."

Over the next few years Sister Tahira zealously applied herself to improving her knowledge about Islam and her repertoire of skills, gaining much admiration and accolades from her peers. She took courses in public speaking, and *fiqh*⁷, *seerat*⁸, *hadith*⁹, *tafsir*¹⁰, and *tajwid*¹¹. When she began teaching the "*Salaat wa Taharaat*" class, she meticulously wove this newfound learning into her class lectures. She also took pains to draw parallels between her life and those of her students, and she underscored

⁶ Arabic translation: praises and thanks to Allah (God)

⁷ Arabic translation: Islamic jurisprudence

⁸ Arabic translation: life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

⁹ Arabic translation: scholarship and body of knowledge about the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

¹⁰ Arabic translation: Quranic exegesis

¹¹ Arabic translation: recitation of the Quran

how important Islamic learning had been to her personal development and to her ability to achieve success in life.

Despite these efforts, solidarity and pedagogical success were not to be found. Frustrated, and a little bewildered, Sister Tahira sought out Sister Zaynab's help. Sister Zaynab suggested Sister Tahira sit in on the other "*Salaat wa Taharaat*" classes, ones offered in languages she spoke and languages she did not speak, paying particular attention to the students' expressions and responses, and not just the content of the class or the daiyats' techniques. Several months after having attended a smattering of classes in Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesian, Sinhala, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Amharic, Tigre and Chinese, and after having discussed her impressions with the students and the other daiyat from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Eritrea and China, Sister Tahira gradually started to develop a different feel for things.

In conversation she mentioned a moment when she was making her way up the steps of the Movement's building alongside students who were on their way to class. As these women filed into their respective classes the diversity and yet repetition of what Sister Tahira saw struck her. It dawned on her that her initial understanding—that each class imparted the same information but in different languages—woefully failed to capture the dynamism and diversity of these spaces.

Learning Islam was not simply a matter of translation, of translating similar principles into different vernaculars and cultures. Rather, each and every class marked a space in which students—and teachers—were struggling to understand what was incumbent upon them to do as Muslims and how to incorporate these Islamic precepts into their lives. Moreover, they grappled with this in and through the existing understandings and practices that shaped their lives. Islam was not a set of principles to be mapped onto their lives, but rather principles understood and practiced in and through their lives.

Sister Tahira's newfound approach to Islam, still incipient and inchoate, what she often described as 'a feeling', wove its way into her subsequent thoughts and encounters. She sensed it while speaking to other daiyat as they rode home on the Movement's bus. It flitted through her mind while she gave a talk explaining the month of Ramadan to a group of nurses at a public hospital and while she met with a Kuwaiti woman who was organizing a gathering for domestic workers in her neighborhood. She felt it in informal chats she had with her students before class and during break, moments where she strove to learn, rather than assume she understood their experiences and how they were approaching Islam.

This 'feeling' further unfurled into her class, expressing itself through speech, a recursive, repetitive speech through which she sought to enfold students into Islamic learning and living. Her retelling of the story of Saad bin abi Waqqas, with which I

began this paper is illustrative. Prompted by a discussion Sister Tahira had with a student, Sara, who was shortly to return home to Goa and her devout Christian parents, her retelling of the story sought to be inclusive of students. It did so not simply by virtue of its topic or subject matter—which resonated deeply with students’ experiences, nor by simply encouraging students to directly comment or pose questions, which they certainly did, but by subsuming them into its very telling.

The recursiveness of Sister Tahira’s speech, every repetition, every fold, wove together words from different languages and dialects, and a range of affects meant to enfold students into the story’s very telling¹². Take for instance what I translated as the four-fold repetition of ‘go!’. Here, Sister Tahira used the words ‘*jao*’, ‘*chalo*’, ‘*yalla*’, ‘go’—Urdu/Hindi, Arabic and English words she uttered with ringing command—all of which conveyed the pressure Saad bin abi Waqqas came under to visit his mother, to encourage her to eat, and to stop practicing Islam. Another example are the words I transliterated directly from her lecture: ‘*dharam*’, ‘*mazhab*’, ‘*religion*’, and ‘*din*’, words Sister Tahira spoke with a hint of contempt meant to convey Saad bin abi Waqqas’ mothers’ dismissal of Islam. But Sister Tahira’s use of these words was also meant to express another idea: that as a realm of belief and practice, Islam encompassed, but was not exhausted by these terms and their span of meanings and associations. By speaking in the plural, by speaking in a proliferation of languages, and by evoking sadness, dread, joy, fear, love, and longing through her utterance and play with words, Sister Tahira’s

¹² note: this is not fully apparent in my transcription in which most of the words she uttered were translated into English

speech strove to resonate with, and reverberate further into, her students' subsequent thoughts, feelings, encounters and experiences.

7.5 Karima and Sonia's Transnational Travels, Travails and Newfound Routings

Karima had difficulty stemming her tears while Sister Tahira was telling the story of Saad bin abi Waqqas and his mother, but they overflowed as her own mother walked into class. In that moment, that tumult of speech and event, that entangling of stories and experiences, where—as I was to learn—anxiety and hope, hunger and prosperity, newfound worlds and hard-fought homes, separation and reunion both juxtaposed and overlapped, Karima's tears flowed. It had been over six months since she had last seen her mother. Over six months since they had arrived together in Kuwait and were separated at the airport.

Karima and Sonia had been separated before. Frequently in fact. When Karima was still a child and her family still lived on their subsistence farm several hours outside the Kathmandu valley, her mother and father realized that their means of livelihood were no longer adequate to meet the demands and pressures of a rapidly transforming Nepal. What they produced no longer sufficed to feed, much less clothe and educate, their children. Karima's father migrated to an Indian border town, where he became a '*kaam-wallah bandah*', a laborer who took whatever work he could find. Few and far between

were his visits home and remittances. So few were they that it took Sonia several months to realize it when he disappeared. Frantic with worry, she mobilized her network of family and friends to find out what had happened. The news was grim. Her husband had remarried and started a new family in India, leaving his—now old—family in Nepal.

Dismayed but resilient, Sonia moved to Katmandu, leaving Karima and her two younger brothers under her family's care. In Katmandu she started to make and sell small handicrafts to tourists and supplemented her income by working as a laundress to foreign expatriates. Eventually, she saved enough to bring her children to Katmandu, where she hoped they would receive an education that would lead them to a prosperous future, especially Karima, who was unlikely to receive anything other than an indifferent education in their village, and whose brilliance and industriousness were roundly praised by her teachers.

When Karima turned 14, disaster struck her family yet again. Her youngest brother developed a serious respiratory ailment, a chronic one requiring expensive treatment and medicines. Realizing her earnings would not cover his medical costs, Sonia began looking further afield for work, eventually finding an agency that would send her to Dubai and, she hoped, a more prosperous future. After selling her farm to pay the agent fees, arranging with a half-brother to keep watch over her children in Katmandu, crossing the Indian border, taking a day and a half-long train ride, and waiting

three weeks for her paperwork to be processed in Mumbai, she finally boarded a plane several months later. It took her to Kuwait.

She did not see her children again for two years. In the interim she called regularly, and the system that she had set up to ensure her daughter received her remittances ran smoothly. When she returned home for a two-month stay Karima surprised her by asking to accompany her back to Kuwait. While she had been away Karima had developed a relationship with a classmate's older brother. The two were intent on marrying. What they lacked, however, was the means to marry. Karima was intent on earning money abroad while her boyfriend finished high school. Her mother vehemently opposed the idea, but after much wrangling, relented. Paying the necessary people, they procured a passport attesting to Karima being twenty years old—three years older than her actual age and two years older than the legal age required for a woman to work as a domestic in Kuwait. Karima then followed her mother on the well-worn circuitous route through which Nepali women overcome the ban imposed by their government on women traveling to the Arabian Gulf region. When they separated at the airport in Kuwait—Sonia picked up by her *kafeel*, Karima taken to the 'manpower' agency that had recruited her—neither expected it would be over six months before they next met.

Their experience of separation is partly a story about how space articulates the types of social encounters and relations possible in Kuwait, and about how these spaces

are delimited for domestic workers. Like the vast majority of domestic workers in Kuwait, Sonia and Karima both lived ‘inside’, residing where they worked, in rooms tucked away in their employers’ homes. Unfortunately for them both, these homes were located on opposite ends of Kuwait City, a distance impassible by public transportation, and both risky and prohibitively expensive to maneuver by taxi. Further complicating matters, there were few, if any, public spaces where they could meet on their respective days off since restaurants are expensive, shopping centers intimidating, and parks intolerable in the oppressive Kuwaiti heat. But more importantly, perhaps, were the ways in which their communication and mobility were channeled—and in Karima’s case curtailed—by their employers.

Unbeknownst to Karima, she had been hired because her employers’ former domestic worker, Nirmala, had ‘absconded’, “running off with some man from the *jameeyah*¹³.” In a social context where premarital and extra-marital affairs were frowned upon, or at least kept discreet, Abu and Umm Khalid, Karima’s employers, had been greatly offended by Nirmala’s actions; “*Astakfir-Allah*, who knows what they are doing...what kind of marriage they have contracted”. This comment, points to the extent of their moral indignation by their refusal—or inability—to conceive of Nirmala’s relationship outside the terms of marriage. Abu and Umm Khalid’s family had grown very attached to Nirmala, who was from all accounts a bright and personable young

¹³ Arabic translation: every district in Kuwait has at least one *jameeyah*, a cooperative shopping area in which profits get redistributed to the citizens residing in the district in proportion to the amount they spend every year. The *jameeyah* is usually located close to artisinal workshops, restaurants and health care centers.

woman. She had become part of the family. Her precipitous departure had left the family feeling saddened and betrayed. In addition, as Nirmala's *kafeel*, Abu and Umm Khalid were also responsible for her whereabouts, her wellbeing, and for ensuring that she was complying with the stipulations of her *iqama*¹⁴. Her absconding had put them in a difficult legal position. Though obligated to report to the police that she had absconded, they were loathe to do so for fear of the implications it would have for Nirmala. Filing such a case could have led to her deportation, and she would have been blacklisted from entering Kuwait again¹⁵.

The implications for Karima of her employers' experience with Nirmala were evident from the outset. From the moment they first met, Umm Khalid made her position very clear. Issuing an ultimatum, she told Karima she would only proceed to hire her if she agreed to certain set of conditions: 1) not to develop any immoral relations, 2) not to run away, and 3) to allow her to monitor Karima's calls and movements outside the home. Having only just arrived, disoriented, and in an extraordinarily difficult position, Karima agreed, but she bridled against Umm and Abu Khalid's paternalistic treatment. Karima was further frustrated by what she felt was her mother's complicity, or at least complacency about her situation. In speaking to her over the phone, her mother told her

¹⁴ In order to work in Kuwait domestic workers must obtain a work and residency visa, called an *iqama*, which they can only obtain through an individual Kuwait sponsor, a *kafeel*. The *kafeel* obtains the *iqama* for a domestic worker through the government, and they are individually responsible for the people who are under an *iqama* in their name. If someone they are sponsoring is involved in illegal activities, they may be held partly responsible, or at the very least, have their right to obtain *iqamas* suspended.

¹⁵ See footnote 19

that her situation was not unusual and perhaps it was best given the perils faced by young migrant women in Kuwait.

Though their paternalistic behavior continued, Umm and Abu Khalid did encourage Karima to get to know domestic workers who were neighbors or working with the families with whom they visited. Karima also told me of the consideration and small kindnesses they showed her. It was, therefore, surprising to me that they would not allow her to visit with her mother. When I asked her about this, Karima evaded the issue. Pressing her further, she finally admitted several weeks later that she and her mother were reluctant to bring up the matter because they feared doing so would bring to light certain matters they hoped to keep concealed. They were worried that Umm and Abu Khalid (Sonia's kafeels being fairly relaxed) would not believe they were mother and daughter or worse yet, that they would notice the discrepancy between Sonia and Karima's basic information since Karima's information was based on a passport that was "not exactly correct". Consequently, for the first several months Sonia and Karima resorted to telephone calls in order to communicate with one another.

During one such call Sonia suggested her daughter check whether her employers might permit her to take classes at the Movement, classes Sonia had recently started attending¹⁶. To her delight, Umm Khalid agreed and arranged to have the family driver

¹⁶ Prior to migrating to Kuwait, Sonia and Karima (both of whom are from Nepal's Tamang ethnic community) practiced what they told me was a form of 'everything' religion, one that incorporated elements of Bon (a form of shamanism), Tibetan Buddhism, and Hinduism.

take Karima. Though an extreme example, Sonia and Karima's story underscores an important dynamic of the Movement's classes. Residing as they do with their employers, domestic workers usually have very few opportunities to meet with people outside the social networks and activities of the families with whom they work. There are few public spaces where they can meet, and their mobility is often curtailed by a confluence of factors, including the limited transportation available to them, a general sense of unease about their safety in public, and their employers' policing of their activities and movements. Within this context, the Movement provided a unique and unparalleled space for domestic workers in Kuwait—one in which they not only have the chance to meet and interact with women who are of similar backgrounds and who speak the same language, but one in which their kafeels can be certain they are in a safe, supervised, and same-gendered space.

Although the Movement's class provided Karima and Sonia with an opportunity to meet, their story of separation, sadly, did not end. When Karima arrived for the next class her mother was not there. As she was introduced to the other students, given copies of the class books and handouts, and as she sat through her first of many classes, the circumstances leading to her mother's absence played through her mind incessantly. Karima's youngest brother had contracted a liver disease, one that had gone initially misdiagnosed, a complication leading to his hospitalization and a somber prognosis. Concerned and not trusting her half-brother to manage the situation, Sonia had returned home in haste. They feared the worst. For weeks Karima's expressions in class bespoke

his fluctuating condition. During breaks and whispered conversations, she slowly began opening up to other students in class, including myself, with whom she loved to practice her English. In the class, Karima found a space to speak Nepali, circulate magazines, pictures and stories from home, and share with others their grief, worries, longing and hopes.

If the promise of seeing her mother initially drew Karima to the “*Salaat wa Taharaat*’ class, and if much-needed camaraderie encouraged her to come again, Sister Tahira’s speech cemented her commitment to coming regularly. It is hard to pinpoint when—perhaps after her brother’s condition improved, perhaps after the fluid Hindi, English, Arabic and hand gestures she used to communicate with Umm and Abu Khalid started to gel, perhaps after she started to feel more surefooted in Kuwait—but after several weeks of attending class, Karima started to become more engaged and animated. Her eyes glistened as she listened more and more intently to Sister Tahira. She posed questions with increasing deliberation, and soaked up other students’ stories about their experiences in Kuwait, and how they came to practice Islam.

After taking *shehadeh*, Karima’s adoption of Islamic precepts and practice was rapid and assured. Within a few short weeks, she had learned how to perform *salaat*, her body postures punctilious, her pronunciation precise. She had begun interweaving stories from the *seerat* and early history of Islam into her conversation. Reveling in newfound scripts, sounds, and expressions, she was also learning how to read and write Arabic.

Cementing her reputation as a prodigy, when Sister Tahira was called away one day, and much to her obvious delight, Karima was called upon to lead the class.

Several months later Karima's mother finally walked into class. After being so long apart, after so much had happened to them both and to their family, the two were finally reunited. The moment was starkly moving. As Karima gently wept a hush descended over the other women. Their separation and reunion, spanning and crossing local and transnational spaces, interweaving as it did exacting work, everyday tragedies, and longed-for futures, affected everyone. In a context where their everyday lives were spent in the homes of others, in intensely intimate yet liminal spaces, and where their mobility was limited, the space of the class gave these women a chance to meet as fellow Tamang, as fellow Nepali, as fellow Hindi-speakers, as fellow South Asians, and as fellow domestic workers. For Sonia and Karima, the class also provided them the chance to meet as mother and daughter. But in that moment, that moment of overflowing tears, tears of joy and anxiety, they were aware, as were the other women, that the multiple forms of belonging being reconstituted through the class were not just routed through the perils and promises of transnational migration and localized domestic work. Their reunion was also routed through their newfound practice of Islam, the broader implications of which, for their families, for their places of home, and for themselves, they were just beginning to grapple with.

7.6 Muslim Being, Becomings and Belongings

This chapter begins with a moment, one in which the stories of two newly practicing Muslims and their encounters with their mothers juxtaposed and overlapped. One story, told by Sister Tahira, was of Saad bin abi Waqqas, one of the earliest people to revert to his *fitrah*, to take *shehadeh*, a companion of the Prophet whose mother had stopped eating in protest over his newfound practice of Islam. Interwoven into Sister Tahira's speech, into the story she told embodying and exemplifying Islamic precepts and practice, into the way in which the plurality, play and recursiveness of her speech enfolded her students into these precepts and practices, Karima, a migrant domestic worker in Kuwait, a young woman who had recently begun to practice Islam, suddenly found herself reunited with her mother. Though both Karima and Sonia worked in Kuwait, before that moment they had been unable to meet for over 6 months due to the myriad of factors limiting domestic workers' mobility in Kuwait, and due to Sonia's hasty trip to Nepal, where her son, Karima's brother, lay gravely ill.

Both these stories unfolded during a "Salaat wa Taharaat" class for Hindi-Urdu speakers organized by the Movement. There are numerous ways in which domestic workers' attendance of these classes is analysed by people in Kuwait and in domestic workers' places of origin. Some attribute their attendance to self-interest—they attend in order to meet with women of similar backgrounds, a chance they might otherwise not have in Kuwait. Or, that they attend these classes as part of their attempt, in becoming

Muslim, to wrest better treatment and remuneration from their employers, the overwhelming majority of whom are Muslim. Some might analyze their attendance in functionalist terms, focusing on how their religious practice affects the cohesiveness of the social groups in Kuwait and their places of origin, of which, as transnational migrants, they are often a liminal part. Domestic workers may become Muslim due to the pressure, implicit or overt, brought to bear upon them by their employers who may be concerned with the potentially destabilizing effects non-Muslim domestic workers may have on their everyday social reproduction as Muslims. Domestic workers' newfound practice of Islam may be seen as arising from their attempts to better integrate themselves into the families with whom they work. Other analyses telescope ahead, and focus on whether domestic workers remain Muslim when they return to their places and communities of origin, and examine the effects their newfound pieties may have within these milieu, for example by leading to the emergence of new religious communities or by affecting the demographic balance and relations between existing ones.

While these explanations may be partly true, this chapter provides a different account, one that shifts the space of analysis and attends to a realm elided by these other explanations. Rather than analysing domestic workers' individual motivations, or the social causes and consequences of their newfound practice of Islam, this paper instead focuses on a moment that took place during a class offered by the Movement for newly practicing Muslims. By lingering over this moment, and unfurling the stories and experiences entangled therein, this paper slowly brings into focus the form of Muslim

belonging articulated through Kuwait's da'wa movement, a form of belonging embodied and actualized through the Movement's '*Salaat wa Taharaat*' classes, a form of belonging that develops in and through the lives and experiences of the women who are involved with the class, women like Sister Zaynab, Sister Tahira, and Karima.

For all three women, being Muslim is not understood simply as a form of identification, as a category of belonging that is binary or digital in its logic—something you either are or are not. Unlike citizenship or national belonging, or even how Muslim identity is treated as an ethnicity within North America and Europe, as Sister Zaynab's discussion of *fitrah* points to, being Muslim is understood as intrinsic to everyone and it is conceived in fundamentally processual terms. Though a capacity latent in everyone, being Muslim is something that must be actualized, and something that requires constant striving to maintain. One is not simply *a* Muslim, one must *be* Muslim, and being Muslim is something both new—and old—Muslims must constantly enact, work at and produce. One becomes, and is in a state of constantly becoming, Muslim by learning Islamic precepts and practices, and reengaging with one's life in relation to these¹⁷. The

¹⁷ This form of Muslim belonging resonates with what Gilles Deleuze refers to as an 'ontology of becoming'. Deleuze's philosophy—or, as he puts it, his 'nomadic thought'—is premised on the idea that there are no fixed Platonic forms, ultimate foundations, or original identities. In contrast to this 'ontology of being', which assumes the sameness of these forms, foundations and identities across space and time, and that treats difference or variation in them as a deviation or lack, Deleuze's 'ontology of becoming' treats difference as primary, and draws our attention to the processes through which forms, foundations and identities are striven for, instantiated, and become a shared or common project. Rather than a fixed state of being, these forms, foundations and identities are said to be in a constant state of becoming. Or, as Deleuze explains: "it is not being that returns but rather returning itself that constitutes being...it is not one thing which returns but rather returning is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity" (Deleuze, 2006: 48). Similarly, those participating in the Movement do not treat or conceive of

Movement's classes for newly practicing Muslims were designed to be spaces within which women can engage in this process, and in so doing, 'revert' back to their *fitrah*. As Sister Tahira learned through her experience of teaching this class, this process is neither unidirectional nor linear, but cyclical and recursive: one apprehends and approaches Islamic precepts and practices in and through cultural meanings and social relations that comprise one's daily lived experiences. Proficiency is achieved through constant striving, a constant tacking back and forth between Islamic precepts and practices and the stuff of everyday life through which these precepts and practices are apprehended, approached and actualized. For domestic workers who are becoming Muslims--and as Sister Tahira tries to enfold and encompass through her speech--the stuff of everyday life necessarily includes their preexisting languages, religious traditions, familial relations and other forms of belonging, including those based on ethnicity and nationality. Becoming Muslim is thus not conceived as a renouncing or rejection of one's life, but as a reworking and reengagement thereof. It is a dynamic and encompassing process in which the boundaries between different religious traditions and other forms of belonging are conceived as porous and fluid. As embodied by the space of the Movement's '*Salaat wa Taharaat*' classes, where Nepali and Indian forms of belonging are reconstituted in and through Muslim idioms, practice and networks, this form of Muslim belonging works through and reconfigures other forms of belonging in complex and often seemingly contradictory ways. The implications of this form of

being Muslim as a transcendent or fixed state; rather, it is something they constantly strive at becoming and that they instantiate through their very belief and practice.

belonging, as Sonia and Karima's reunion poignantly underscored, remains incipient and uncertain.

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Biography

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