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DOMESTIC SPACES OF THE GULF: PRECARITY, AUTONOMY AND SOUTH ASIAN ECONOMIC MIGRANTS IN THE ARABIAN GULF

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Abstract: Since the *oil boom* of the 1970s, a slow stream of literary productions has been evolving on the migrant majority in various states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Through textual and visual readings, this paper exposes the rubric of labor migration that renders domestic labor as a precarious state in the Gulf. Representative works that focus on Gulf's domestic laborers from India and Sri Lanka are examined here to mirror the vulnerabilities of domestic workers in various contexts from South Asia. While these texts, in different genres,—Kamal Majeed's filmic adaptation of K.U. Iqbal's reportage, *Gaddama*, and Jean Arasanayagam's short story "The Sand Serpents," focus on the widespread societal circumstances and ideologies that make guest workers from the developing economies susceptible to the oppressive and informal domestic labor markets of the Gulf, they also complicate the dyad of public/private spaces and forecast the possibilities of subjective transformations for achieving meaningful life goals.

Keywords: Arabian Gulf, Gender, Kerala, Migrants, Sri Lanka

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The *oil boom* in the 1970s dramatically increased the wealth of the Arab Gulf[1] citizenry. With access to increased financial resources, guest-workers were invited to several states of the Gulf to not only help with economic rebuilding but also to aid in the domestic labor sector[2]. A recent survey estimates that more than 24 million legal migrants live in the Gulf Arab States—i.e., more than half of its total population. A large number of these economic migrants—around 6.6 million, employed as domestic laborers are from South and Southeast Asia—particularly from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Philippines, and Sri Lanka (ILO 1). Most native-Gulf families employ Asian women workers for domestic

responsibilities like cleaning, tidying up, preparing meals, and tending to both children and elderly individuals (IHRC 127). For instance, 90 percent of Kuwaiti families employ domestic workers (IHRC 10). A recent study that looked at migrant domestic workers from the Philippines to Kuwait reports of the popular sentiment among native Gulf population that today: "if you don't have a servant, you're not Kuwaiti" (IHRC 10). However, while these domestic workers are economically desired for their labor, they are excluded from Gulf's political, social, and civil societies. Unable to maintain independent legal status without their sponsors, retain their passports, own separate living spaces, or even participate in communal gatherings within the homes they help care and maintain, domestic workers occupy a precarious space between the private-public dyads of Gulf's formal labor rubric. What are the human *affects* and vulnerabilities of being in this state of in-betweenness? How does it get registered in Gulf's literary archives? What aspirational values might these texts offer through their creative possibilities? Distinct from socio-political and journalistic accounts of domestic labor in the Gulf, texts such as Kamal Majeed's filmic adaptation of K.U. Iqbal's real-world reportage, *Gaddama* and Jean Arasanayagam's short story "The Sand Serpents" offer more sensitive and complex accounts of the lived experience of these migrants from South Asia. Most notably, fundamental to these textual depictions of precarity in Gulf's domestic labor workforce is a focus on the specific encounters faced by women that are triggered by economic and social insecurities in their countries of origin.

In his influential text, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*, Sunil Amrith details that the "formation of Asian diasporas *within* Asia developed from the distinctive characteristics of Asian migration in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries" (19). What are the distinctive features that make Gulf migration fueled by the *oil boom* of the 1960s precarious? At the same time Dilip Menon encourages us to go beyond area studies and "to think about the multiplicity of connections across noncontiguous spaces" to draw ties across space and time (8). Using both analyses, we notice that reminiscent of the archaic migratory practices of ancient Athens, where resident-aliens (*Metics*) sponsored by native-citizens ended up with limited protection and rights, the twenty-first century Gulf immigration policies too rely on a contract-based sponsorship program called the *Kafala*. Economic migrants to the Gulf are bound by the *Kafala* system of contractual labor, which permits the native sponsors to confiscate their travel and identity documents—such as passports, granting them full control over those sponsored. The vast authority

these sponsors wield over the legal residency of their migrant employees undoubtedly amplifies the unequal power dynamics between sponsors and workers in the Gulf. The immigration system also requires these guest workers to leave after a period stipulated by the sponsor. The primary distinction, and the source of discrimination, of guest-workers from the general category of the migrant is in their structural condition of being transitory—after all, a guest is expected to leave after a while. Also, because of their exclusion from the political, social, and civil rights of the host country, migrant workers in the Gulf become vulnerable to working in environments that are neither suitable nor safe. They lack judiciary protection that ensures legal prosecution of abusive sponsors against any form of abuse, harassment, and violence. Without the right to accessible complaint mechanisms, exploitation is rampant as they are overworked without compensation, rest periods or social security protection (ILO 189). Kristin Surak in "Guest Workers: A Taxonomy," explains that most nation-states, at certain junctures in their economic progress, entrusted with both capital and the welfare of their populace, summon migrants as surplus labor. Simultaneously, however, they also endeavor to repel these migrants as enduring trespassers (86). Similarly, in their thorough historical investigation on guest workers, Aristide Zolberg, spotlights a paradox:

> What typically makes immigrants economically desirable to employers—their submissive malleability as rightless outsiders who perform the undignified tasks that natives shun—are precisely the qualities that make them undesirable as members of a society. (293)

Using this contradiction, Zolberg affirms that guestworker programs in various forms inherently represent an ideal solution for nation state building enterprises—they gain compliant labor while avoiding undesired integration (294). As guest workers in the Gulf, domestic laborers—mostly women, experience conditions of extreme precarity especially because they work *and* reside in the same space as their employers. Domestic workers and the sponsor-employer in the Gulf are strangers existing in the same intimate, private confinement of the home-space. This makes domestic workers available to their employers at all hours, without privacy or rest hours, which in turn, allows for exploitation by making them vulnerable to the constant demands of the household. Moreover, though they form the primary labor force of Gulf economies, domestic laborers in the Gulf are guest workers whose plight as "rightless outsiders" render them as threats in contemporary national discourse (Zolberg 293). Recently, an article by Gulf Center for Human Rights reported that an official television channel in the Gulf broadcasted a similar sentiment

when the host claimed when asked of a case dealing with abuse of domestic workers that "We must stop making the Saudi employee a scapegoat with every crisis, and make the expatriate workers, who replaced Saudi workers — who are more efficient than them, the first to be dispensed of, not the sons of the homeland" (GCHR). If such wider public discourse largely treats guest workers, most of them from South and Southeast Asia, as worthless objects to be "dispensed of," recent literary productions such as Benyamin's *Goat Days*, Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*, Greta Rana's *Hostage*, and Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*—to name a few, all offer alternative readings that centralize migrant workers from these parts of the world in contemporary Gulf states. For our purpose, texts from South Asia that specifically focus on domestic workers—Kamal Majeed's *Gaddama,* and Jean Arasanayagam's "The Sand Serpents," converge in making visible the precarious circumstances and ideologies that render them "submissive and malleable" while also problematizing the separation between a public-work space/ private-home space (Zolberg 293). They make evident the everyday lived realities and internal transformations that help migrant domestic workers overcome vulnerabilities to eventually gain autonomy. They offer aspirational values in showcasing the importance of the domestic sphere in the development of ethical migratory practices based on integrity and equality. Ultimately, these texts compellingly argue that the domestic sphere cannot be overlooked in contemporary migrant discourses to the Gulf as it will underrate not only the significant contributions of labor offered by migrant women in the nation building project of the Gulf, but also ignore to register their personal autonomy.

I. *Gaddama*: The Structural Inequities of Domestic Labor Migration in the Gulf

Contemporary academic discourse on film as literature has provided us with substantial data to consider the language and grammar of films as an artistic and imaginative rendering of storytelling[3]. Additionally, the connections between literature and film in their shared dependence and their joint impact warrant their analysis in new literary contexts[4]. Here, my use the film *Gaddama* as an interdisciplinary text that merges the visual and textual parallels with the goal of this volume that aims to reconceptualize "migrant writing" into "migration literature"[5]. Scholarly discussions on the textual aspects of films focused on forging a regional identity based on Gulf migration in the south Indian state of Kerala—also the setting of *Gaddama*, reveal the centrality of films in imagining migratory habits, practices, and patterns of a place (Radhakrishnan 217).

For instance, in their discussion of "home cinemas of Kerala," Karinkurayil underscores how such narrative films function as form of what Deleuze categorizes as "Minor Literature" (34). Thus, investigations on how texts use literary and poetic strategies to represent specific forms of migration warrant imaginative interventions of filmic representations as another way of telling the Gulf migrant story. Based on a true reportage by K.U. Iqbal in *Malayalam News* entitled "Subaida Vilikkunnu" (transl. "Subaida is Calling"), Kamal Majeed's filmic adaptation of *Gaddama* (transl. The Servant), chronicles the life of a young woman, Ashwathy, from the South Indian state of Kerala (Prakash). Ashwathy is employed in a cruel Arab household as domestic help and struggles to survive the precarious space allotted to the domestic labor force in Saudi Arabia. It also brings to forefront the socio-economic situation in her country of origin, that force young women like Ashwathy migrate to such partially hostile host States, with little legal protection, leading to perilous situations. Domestic workers from South Asia move to the Gulf based on scant information provided by deceptive recruiting practices that makes their existence precarious in foreign countries. For most, the chain of abuse begins way before the sponsor–employer contract (*Kafala*) is signed, and the actual act of physical migration. They are not provided with any orientation to ensure full understanding of the working conditions in the country of destination. Often, pressured by debt obligations, domestic workers are trapped by illegal recruiting agents in their very own home countries. Typically, domestic workers migrate to the Gulf using the aid of legal recruitment agencies. But deceptive recruitment agencies and tactics are widespread. An article entitled "Tricked and Trapped," details various recruitment practices in the Gulf that border on human trafficking while binding susceptible women to contractual servitude:

> deceptive recruiting practices are prevalent, including false promises related to wages, working conditions and the nature of work, content or legality of employment contract, housing and living conditions, legal status, job location, and so forth […] that may result in a human trafficking situation. (Harroff-Tavel and Nasri 35)

Without formal migration monitoring systems in place, states such as Kerala will not be able to record and register these crucial practices of Gulf migration (Zachariah 363). In such cases, films such as Majeed's *Gaddama* expose real-world threats of recruiting practices in home-countries that contribute to the Gulf's perilous economy of migrant domestic labor. In *Gaddama*, triggered by economic and social insecurity, Ashwathy is forced to seek employment in the

Gulf. She is a widow burdened with the care not only of her parents but also of her deceased husband's parents. So, when a local migrant from Saudi Arabia, working as an illegal recruiting agent, offers her a job as a "Gaddama"—a domestic help, for a household in Buraimi, some 400 km. away from the capital city of Riyadh, she accepts his offer without much investigation. Usman, the recruiter-agent is a fellow Keralan but does not hold any formal recruiting knowledge or authority. As an employee of the same household in Buraimi, he does not disclose to Ashwathy that by taking up his offer, she would be governed by the *Kafala*—i.e., become legally, financially, and socially dependent and physically controlled by her sponsor in a foreign country. Instead, he extorts money from her and does not exhibit any moral recompense till the very end of the film. Migrant women like Ashwathy are the most likely to be trapped by illegal recruiters since they lack the linguistic skills and social networks to enter the formal labor market of the Gulf.

Gaddama not only makes visible the problematic recruiting practices that domestic workers such as Ashwathy endure even before migration, but it also throws light on the precise factors that stimulate and maintain such perilous migratory patterns. In the film, precarity is presented through Keralan community's obsession with migration to the Gulf, despite evidence that migrant labor may lead to violence and even death. Death of migrant workers in the Gulf has garnered much journalistic attention in public media. Local newspapers in India and abroad constantly carry stories of tragic deaths of Gulf migrants due to exposure to heat and humidity, air pollution, overwork and abusive working conditions, poor occupational health and safety practices, psychosocial stress, and hypertension (GCC). For instance, "The Guardian" recently ran an article that claimed that "as many as 10,000 migrant workers from south and south-east Asia die every year in the Gulf countries," and that more than half of these deaths are unexplained (McQue). Yet, migration to the Gulf continues to thrive as it is fantasized by many in the developing world as the door to economic prosperity. The film's opening shot of a Keralan social worker in a hospital mortuary, attempting to identify *yet another* dead body of an "unknown Indian," in remote Saudi Arabia is instructive in this context (*Gaddama* 00:06:57). In the film, Razak Kottekkad, a fellow Keralan migrant, is a welfare worker who strives to ascertain the identity of dead bodies brought regularly to mortuaries in Saudi Arabia. He does this to ensure their repatriation to loved ones back home. Through the opening lines by Razak, we glean into the normalization of such "unknown" deaths. Razak tells us that the police had found a particular body on the highway between Riyadh and

Damman without any identification—passport or any document, that would help recognize the address of this individual who has been deceased for over three months (*Gaddama* 00:07:26). The tattoo "Ram" on the dead body's left arm allows Razak distinguish the individual as Indian. Referring to the general condition of migrant workers from various states in India in the Gulf, Razak says it doesn't make a difference whether one is from "Bengal, UP or Bihar, that after death, we are all doomed to remain unknown[6]" (*Gaddama* 00:07:25-00:08:10). When the hospital staff advise Razak not to "waste his time" on these matters, "as such bodies, after a while, are disposed off in the hospital mortuary itself," Razak responds that he finds it compelling to inform the family of the migrant back home. The reason, Razak states is that "when the family of migrants back in India do not receive the monthly money and phone call that they are used to, and now expect, they are bound to presume that these migrants have abandoned their families for newfound pleasures in the foreign-Gulf" (*Gaddama* 00:08:15- 00:08:38). Razak makes clear the erroneous fantasies of migration ingrained in the local culture about the unfailing economic prosperity of the Gulf. Interestingly, in the final scene of the film too, Razak is seen receiving a phone call that requires him to identify the body of yet another "Unknown Indian" (*Gaddama* 01:54:36). By presenting the death of "Unknown Indians" in the Gulf, at the beginning and end of the film, Majeed underscore the dialectics of precarity that shape the cultural plasma of migrant-sending South Asian countries such as India.

Gaddama also highlights how migration imposes precarity through experiences of displacement, violence and fragmentation on women at the edge of society struggling for their daily economic survival in both India and the Gulf. When depicting employed women, both in Kerala and the Gulf, Majeed's film uses the domestic sphere of home, especially the kitchen, as their designated space. In Kerala, Ashwathy is employed in the domestic-kitchen-sphere of pickle making to provide for her aging and debt-ridden parents. Her life revolves in the spaces of home and a woman-centric workplace of the pickle factory. When she marries Radhakrishnan, who forbids her to continue with her job in the pickle-factory even though they struggle financially, she dutifully engages in the daily chores of cleaning and cooking in her household. However, her marriage is short-lived as he dies in an unfortunate accident, leaving his parents too in her care. Anticipating a life of unconfinement, forced by widowhood and economic hardship, she leaves the margins of familiarity for what J. Devika calls "cosmopolitanism of duty," to work as a domestic help in Saudi Arabia (129). Ashwathy's hopes of liberation are

dashed against the reality of what awaits her in the host country. On arrival, her sponsor immediately confiscates her passport and asks her to go to the kitchen where she will work and live in slave-like conditions. She is forced to confine herself to her sponsor's house for the entire five months of her stay before she heroically manages to abscond. Sharing the same domestic space with her employer and his family, Ashwathy becomes constantly vulnerable to abuse and confinement. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and older members of the host family, Ashwathy is "on call" all the time and gets no rest. She has no personal space and is constantly under surveillance by all members of the family. She is economically exploited as she is underpaid a salary of 600 Riyals, out of which Usman steals 200 as commission (*Gaddama* 00:42:06). Ashwathy is also physically abused equally by the children and the older men of the house. In a heart-wrenching scene that captures the confinement and repression of her body, we see how the older boy of the household amuses himself by literally tearing Ashwathy's arm with a glass shard as he walks past her (*Gaddama* 00:25:49- 00:31:09). While the grandfather uses his walking stick to poke and prod her body for entertainment, the women of the house contribute to her torture as they overwork, starve and beat her regularly. Without a stable and secure home, she is beaten to "submissive malleability" and dispossession permeates her new identity (Zolberg 293). Although the film is set in Saudi, it's frequent employment of non-linear flashbacks and jump cuts to Kerala are reflective of experiences of being a "rightless outsider" both in Kerala's domestic spaces, and that which migration amplifies for Ashwathy and her lot in the Gulf (Zolberg 293). Ashwathy is forced to work in hazardous conditions and migration to the Gulf signifies exploitation and repression, rather than financial security and power.

If Majeed's film captures the vulnerability of Gulf's domestic laborers to physical, mental and economic exploitation, it also affirms that immigrant networks may be effectively assembled to overcome such exploitation. Fellow migrants help Ashwathy from the moment she lands in Gulf, and on through her escape journey that emphasizes how social networks can save such women while *in extremis*. This is evident in Majeed's film right from Ashwathy's arrival at the airport, where she remains for an entire day and a half as her sponsor does not show up. She is stunned to see the numerous women of Asian descent—all Gaddamas, waiting to be "picked-up" by their sponsors at the same airport (*Gaddama* 00:06:24). Unaware of the local rules and customs, and clad in her native sari, Ashwathy feels out-of-place amongst the uniformly dressed migrant women—all in abayas which are "long, baggy black garments used to conceals

one's body and arms, worn to comply with local beliefs on modest dressing" (Middle Eastern 2). Up to 2018, the Saudi Arabian dress regulations mandated all women, whether local or foreign, to wear an abaya in public places (Saudi Women). Noticing her discomfort, a fellow migrant domestic worker approaches Ashwathy at the airport, offers her an abaya and instructs her on the laws of the host country (*Gaddama* 00:05:31). Moreover, in her employer's home, the only source of comfort for Ashwathy is Fatma—a migrant domestic maid from Indonesia. Despite coming from different backgrounds, practicing different religions, and speaking different languages, Fatma and Ashwathy share similar experiences of economic and social insecurity that lead them to the Gulf as domestic laborers. Surviving the tsunami that shattered her country, Fatma is left an orphan and leaves Jakarta for survival. They share a room and help each other with daily chores. When Ashwathy finds out that Fatma is trapped into having an affair with the adulterous Usman, she demands that he marries Fatma and leave the household (*Gaddama* 00:41:19). He refuses, but the affair is soon discovered by the family, and Ashwathy witnesses how both Usman and Fatma are brutally punished. They are violently whipped and left starving for days by the sponsor who claims that "he has the God-given right to punish them" (*Gaddama* 00:47:50). Fatma's plight demonstrates the continuities of Gulf migrant exploitation in domestic work across national borders. Ashwathy too is aggressively attacked and violently beaten and tortured by the sponsor when she helps Fatma escape to the capital Riyadh (*Gaddama* 00:50:22). Now, saddled with the work of Fatma as well, Ashwathy becomes an unpaid and overworked victim to slave-like conditions in the Gulf. However, she is inspired by Fatma's escape and follows her footsteps to a traumatic escape (*Gaddama* 01:01:52). Her journey back home is fraught with many challenges that include captivity, physical torture, and near-death experiences in the desert (*Gaddama* 01:01:52-01:43:04). Remarkably, each time—be it the heroic support a fellow Keralan offers her in a remote goat-farm or the safe passage and shelter that yet another Keralan, Bharathan, provides her for which both are accused of adultery and imprisoned, Ashwathy exhibits agency and resistance in the film to overcome these challenges through the support of fellow migrants. In the final scene with Ashwathy, Razak appears as a ray of hope as he instructs her to think of her life in the Gulf as a bad dream(*Gaddama* 01:54:01). Razak's suggestive remark foreshadows a hopeful return for Ashwathy: "even the dry desert offers us remarkable stories of resilience. In the desert, we find green life in the most remote and unexpected places" (*Gaddama* 01:54:05). Majeed's film instructs us how migrant networks can truly challenge the abusive machinations of Gulf's

domestic labor markets. In fact, K.U. Iqbal, the author of the screenplay says that

> Many of the characters in the movie, like that of Srinivasan, who plays Razak Kottekkad, are real-life characters. The only difference is that his name is Shihab. The work Shihab has done and is still doing for Indians in Gulf countries is incredible. He has devoted his life for them." Ultimately, the movie is about human relationships of different types; of love between human beings which pervades and not just romance. (Prakash)

Social workers such as Shihab, faithfully depicted as Razak in the film, are crucial in establishing connections between migrants in the Gulf, and Majeed's representations brings to forefront the aspirational awareness needed in forming civil alliances in the Gulf as it may be the only way to survival. Thus, *Gaddama* not only captures the vulnerabilities associated with domestic work in the Gulf, but it also stresses the degree to which migrant social links can play a role in the lives of these workers. Through its representation of precarity of Gulf migration, *Gaddama* makes visible repressive structural systems of Gulf's domestic labor markets in place, such as economic and social insecurities in home countries, and the *Kafala* contractual labor agreements and illegal recruitment practices in the Gulf to finally reveal the vital role of informal migrant networks that can help domestic workers escape oppression.

II. No Place Like Home: Return Migrants in Jean Arasanayagam's "The Sand Serpents"

While *Gaddama* successfully exposes the external structures that lure migrants to precarity in the Gulf, the central character in Arasanayagam's short story "The Sand Serpents" is seen tracing the resulting internal transformation of migration, which in turn, also reveals acts of autonomy amongst exploited workers in the domestic labor markets of the Gulf. Set in Sri Lanka and the Gulf, "The Sand Serpents" is a poignant short story from Jean Arasanayagam's 1995 collection, *All is Burning*. It draws on the inner voice of a domestic worker, Nanda, as she returns from Doha, the capital of the Gulf state of Qatar, to her hometown of Mahawa in Sri Lanka. While the focus of *Gaddama* is the vulnerabilities experienced by domestic workers in the Gulf, Arasanayagam's text foregrounds the agency exhibited by them to overcome alienation through their return journeys. During the taxi ride from the airport to her home in Mahawa, Nanda details her experiences in the Gulf that documents her struggle in successfully reclaiming her human dignity through acts of self-determination. Kendra Cherry details that human potential gets actualized

when intrinsic motivation drives human behavior to enjoy an activity or see it as an opportunity to explore and learn. Individuals that act independently to perform an activity for its own sake rather than from the desire for some external reward gain self-satisfaction (23). Even at the risk of facing an unpredictable future in Mahawa, by returning home, Nanda exercises autonomy by eschewing extrinsic motivators like economic rewards for what she calls "santhosaya," or an "indescribable sense of peace" that generates a more satisfying and meaningful life goal for her (Arasanayagam 188).

Nanda's migration to the Gulf is triggered by economic and political instability in her home country. Like Ashwathy, Nanda leaves for the Gulf in search of economic opportunities. As the oldest child to her aging parents, she is burdened by family responsibilities such as taking care of her aging parents and aiding her younger sister complete an education. Likewise, Nands's decision to leave Sri Lanka reflects the historical conditions that left many of its citizens in precarity. Premila Paul in an article entitled "Dangers in the Desert: Jean Arasanayagam's "The Sand Serpents" details how the political unrest in the 1980s due to "the long-drawn-out ethnic fight," between India and Sri Lanka led to devastation of the country with millions of "displaced families" and refugees (127). Their precarious existence forms the background and theme of most of the stories in *All is Burning*:

> Poised between war zones and refugee camps, the existential choice before the terror victims was to leave their homeland and seek asylum in other countries, or cling to the remains of a familiar life. Some chose to leave home temporarily, slog in alien lands under trying conditions, and make money with the hope of rebuilding their future back home. For the uneducated girls, getting recruited as domestic help in the Middle East homes was a tempting option. (Paul 127)

Except for a small reference to a character by the name of Abdeen, who escapes death during the 1971 insurgency and manages to make adequate money in the Gulf to invest back in Sri Lanka, no mention of the 1980s war is evident in this particular story. However, Arasanayagam makes clear that the lack of political and financial stability, for girls like Nanda in Sri Lanka, prompts them to migrate. In fact, Premila Paul states that the Sri Lankan government actually encourages and promotes mass migration of its citizens to the Gulf. They even institute formal training centers such as "The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment Training Institute in Colombo" that offer a "special curriculum for easy migration" (129). Paul goes on to describe that such "training includes a basic course in English, the deft use of appliances like washing machine, microwave oven, blender, etc., cooking food, laying the table, and making beds

the western way (Paul 129). At the same time, the Sri Lankan government does not provide any training or predeparture orientation at a state or institutional level in ensuring a safe and satisfying migratory experience for its domestic workers (Paul 129). Stories like the "Sand Serpents" make visible, how despite the lack of the familial, state, and institutional support, individual characters like Nanda exhibits a notion of female autonomy that conceives of itself as a form of resistance to prevailing modes of thinking about migrant domestic workers not only as passive victims doomed to fail with no option than to continuously suffer dehumanization in the Gulf, but also as inconsequential players in the field of Gulf migration studies.

Throughout the text, Arasanayagam uses contrasts to challenge the mythical conceptions of the Gulf as an El Dorado for Sri Lankan migrants. The abundant greenery of Sri Lanka is in stark contrast to the dry desert of Doha; the two-roomed house in Mahawa is open and airy while the palatial air-conditioned house in Doha binds and suffocates Nanda. In Doha, Nanda is fed mutton and rice daily, but it lacks the rich, flavorful, and familiar Sri Lankan tastes of chilly and fish. In the Gulf, she misses the taste of plantains, guavas, and mangoes; the fragrance of Jasmine petals, Aralia flowers; and the peace offered by the local temple bells. Before migrating to the Gulf, Nanda works for Loku Mahathmaya's estate in Mahawa where sparrows and parrots color the sky. She works as a domestic laborer for Loku Mahathmaya, a benevolent employer who treats her with dignity. As Loku Mahathmaya's employee, Nanda is able to nourish her body and mind—to eat her favorite coconut-based dishes to heart's content, and to roam free in his paradisical Serendib estate that is full of rich and diverse flora and fauna. Loku Mahathmaya's foresight in insisting that Nanda learns Akuru, the Sinhala alphabet, which helps her when she migrates to the Gulf, underscores the inclusive social and civil spaces she enjoys as a domestic worker in her own country. Nanda recognizes the relevance of this when she says: "I can read and write now. I can speak English too. This helped me when I was in Doha" (Arasanayagam 183). Nanda's life in Loku Mahathmaya' s estate is in complete contrast to what awaits her in the Gulf.

Arasanayagam candidly depicts domestic work in the Gulf as a degrading and devastating system of exploitation and enslavement for migrants. When Nanda decides to leave home, she too suffers extreme dehumanization that often defines the experiences of such women who are trapped in domestic servitude in the Gulf. Like Ashwathy, in *Kahddama*, who was tricked by an illegal recruiter, Nanda reaches Bahrain through a recruiting agency, though

a legal one. At the same time, instructive differences exist in the experiences of Ashwathy reaching the Gulf through an *informal* recruiter and Nanda's arrival in the Gulf through a *legal* agency. Unlike Ashwathy who is exposed to extreme forms of violence and must abscond from her sponsor, Nanda has a number of choices—she does not need to run away and is the one who makes the decision to return home legitimately after procuring a flight ticket from her employer, despite her breaking the *Kafala* work contract. Of course, for Nanda, migration to the Gulf is an awfully alienating experience, but it differs fundamentally from the *in-extremis* situation of Ashwathy who is brutally tortured by her sponsor. Yet, upon her arrival in the Gulf, Nanda is not spared experiences of degradation as she becomes a commodity in Gulf's domestic labor market. Once in Bahrain, her port-of-arrival, she must wait to be *matched* with a sponsor who will employ her. Highlighting the dehumanizing treatment of real lived experiences that domestic workers in the Gulf endure, Arasanayagam depicts how the agents prepare her for sale, fattening her up with "sardines and *parippu* and bread to eat" before they parade her in front of prospective clients (Arasanayagam 183). A recent article details how recruitment agencies from South Asian countries bring domestic laborers into the country, often advertising their pool of workers with photographs and such information for their prospective Gulf employers:

> Each agency has a long counter with an employee seated behind it. These employees are more than happy to show their binders to all visitors who seem interested in acquiring a domestic worker. The binders contain page after page of foreign women's pictures, accompanied by their details, from height and weight to religion and country of origin. Also listed on the pages is the price for their recruitment and salary. One […] gentleman standing outside of the offices offered to provide a […] domestic worker at a deeply discounted rate. Her sponsors had recently returned her. (IHRC 41)

Akin to slave-markets, the above report exposes the inhumane and degrading treatment domestic workers undergo in contemporary Gulf countries. In fact, recently the chairman of the Kuwaiti Association of the Basic Evaluators of Human Rights deplored such dehumanizing practices: "The advertising of domestic workers, setting up an ad for people, violates basic human rights (IHRC 41). Analogously, in Bahrain, unfamiliar with the local language and culture, Arasanayagam's Nanda "recoils" in fear when a prospective client couple—Bossa Sir and Bossa madam from Doha, arrive at the recruitment agency to select a maid (Arasanayagam 183). After a very brief meeting, Nanda gets picked from amongst twenty of potential domestic maids. Harroff-Tavel

and Nasri in *Tricked and Trapped*, discuss how meetings between a "prospective domestic worker and the sponsor-employer is a significant moment of life choice for both sides [and] yet, it is based on limited knowledge" (36). Under such a practice, through a brief encounter, Nanda must accept the *Kafala* contract of being fully controlled by her sponsors in a foreign country; while Bossa Sir and Bossa madam must allow her into their private home to not only cook, clean, and raise their own children but also *live* with them. Thus, as we see in *Gaddama*, the domestic worker and the sponsor-employer are "strangers abruptly thrust into the intimate, private environment of the home. Often, they struggle with cultural and language barriers for even simple communication" (IHRC 36). While effective communication skills are typically considered a crucial requirement for this job, it's ironically the absence of communication opportunities that intensifies Nanda's desperation in the Gulf (Paul). She is unable to communicate in her language within her sponsor's home, nor is she allowed to interact with other Sinhalese maids in the Gulf. Letters from her family are withheld from her. Unable to eat familiar foods, nor step outside the house after work, Nanda's life is marked by isolation and gloom in the Gulf. Whereas Nanda's decision to give up her employment and return to Sri Lanka is largely based on the torture she endures at the hands of the sponsors oldest child, her social and cultural isolation amplifies her determination to return home after just six months of expatriation. This is illustrated through Arasanayagam's strategic use of a stream-of-consciousness technique to highlight the precariousness of Nanda's situation and to give deep insight into the anxiety experienced by those like her in the Gulf. Written in Nanda's first-person point of view, the story is self-reflexive and non-linear. Her thoughts lead us to the uncertainties of her future life with flashbacks and fragmented memories of her past.

Significantly, Arasanayagam not only illustrates the structural components of Gulf migration such as the *Kafala* and recruitment system currently in place that dehumanize domestic workers, but they also shed light on the devastating psychological effects of isolation and alienation on Nanda. Exposed to the horrors of servitude and dehumanization in the host family home, Nanda tries to adjust and find a way to survive. However, living in the house of strangers in a foreign land, and unable to communicate in the same language, Nanda suffers tremendous loneliness, social isolation and alienation that accompany domestic workers in the Gulf. Like Aswathy, Nanda is also stranded at the Doha airport for three days without food, water, or access to a telephone before she is picked up by her sponsor. Even though Nanda describes her sponsor as a

"kind" but "thoughtless" individual, her life is made miserable by Menoor, the sponsor's oldest child (Arasanayagam 184). Living in the same space, Nanda is constantly bullied and harassed by Menoor. Nanda's work involves taking care of Menoor—the oldest of the five children in her sponsor's family and is described as a "jealous" and "disturbed" person who makes Nanda's life miserable (Arasanayagam 181). Whether starving Nanda by "putting water in the plate of rice Bossa madam served," or "trampling" on Nanda's sleeping body, Menoor found pleasure in different ways of tormenting her: "I was not human to her. I did not have feelings" (Arasanayagam 181). In an interview, the founder of Kuwait Social Work Society, Sheikha Bibi Nasser Al-Sabah details that "Domestic workers are in the house without rest; they're always available. That's what you're used to. You don't see it as something inhumane. Kids grow up with it" (SAIS). Like Ashwathy in *Gaddama*, Nanda's status as a domestic worker makes her vulnerable to the harassment of even the children at the sponsor's home.

While focusing on dislocation and alienation as a defining characteristic of life in the Gulf, Arasanayagam correspondingly explores Nanda's autonomy and self-determination to leave an unsatisfying life in the Gulf and return to Sri Lanka to pursue reappraised life goals that generates more internal fulfilment and meaning for her. It is during her journey back to Sri Lanka that Nanda reflects on the conditions of those others who have previously been to the Gulf from her own hometown. While most of these domestic workers to Gulf seems to ultimately face suffering due to migration—going mad, committing suicide, murdering their mistresses, facing broken marriages and family relationships back home despite financial success, Nanda is also observant of the changing thought-patterns on the traditional conception of marriage as the end-goal for women such as herself:

> I am getting on in years and I do not know what prospects of marriage I will have in the future. The men prefer money nowadays. But some of the women have grown more selfish; they have come back and built spacious houses. They do not want to marry and share their wealth with the men. (Arasanayagam 186)

By emphasizing the independence these women "selfishly" display in claiming their hard-earned financial resources after their return from the Gulf, this text also intervenes in constructing new identities for women such as Nanda—migrant women who resist the "submissive malleability" imposed on them by Gulf's ideology of domestic servitude (Zolberg 293). In doing so, it adds to the increased range of possibilities that may gradually open up for them as they return from experiences of subjugation in the Gulf.

For Nanda, migration to the Gulf acts as a catalyst in enabling her to realize that financial gain at the expense of being dehumanized is not an option to be traded for her personal happiness. Her initial desire for financial security that motivates her to migrate to the Gulf in the first place, gives way to a deeper and meaningful understanding of life's self-actualization potentials to experience satisfaction—what she calls an "indescribable sense of peace, santhosaya" (Arasanayagam 188). Nanda is now able to find "santhosaya" in the everyday ordinary:

> For six months I had no chair to sit on, only the floor, and when I was tired and weary I had only the wall to lean back. I enter the house and sit on a chair. A luxurious feeling assails me. I have never felt such a flood of happiness in my whole being. It is an indescribable sense of peace, santhosaya. (Arasanayagam 188)

However, it is through migration and exposure to experiences of domestic servitude in the Gulf that Nanda can recognize the unsurpassed value of human dignity—that the happiness she derives in even the simple acts as sitting in a chair account for more satisfaction than her initial desire for economic gains. Nanda's decision is aspirational as it registers her response to the brief but impactful effects of domestic labor migration to the Gulf: When I sit on this chair, I feel I will never want to return to that country again. This, alone, is enough for me" (Arasanayagam 188). This internal transformation gives her a new sense of purpose and meaning that revivifies her integrity. Ultimately, Arasanayagam's objective for this text is in detailing Nanda's recognition of her self-worth; her awareness of the value of dignity over economic prospects; and her self-determination to return to Sri Lanka to exercise autonomy over her own life. "Sand Serpents" succeeds in exploring migration of domestic workers in all its diversity, particularly drawing attention to the women making choices about their lives in the labor markets of the Gulf. While Arasanayagam never loses sight of depicting a culture in which domestic laborers are exploited and dehumanized in the Gulf, her text also asserts the possibilities of self-determination to overcome the dislocation that accompanies them in migration.

Gaddama and "Sand Serpents" offer compelling insights into the lived experience of domestic workers in precarious Gulf spaces generated by political, social and civil exclusions. These two texts reveal the unique forms of precarity suffered by contemporary migrants in the Gulf—through economic and social insecurities, informal recruiting practices, and lack of public-private divide in domestic labor norms, while also detailing the rich networks they draw on to survive and transform themselves. Drawing on real life struggles

with poverty and the idealistic hopes of prosperity, these texts lend themselves brilliantly to new forms of interpretations in various genres. They also succeed in demonstrating to thousands of potential domestic workers that their own role in migration involves moving beyond the imposed ideology of passive compliance, but to demand dignity through self-determining acts of agency. Ultimately, by focusing on domestic laborers, these texts contribute to an enormous broadening of genre of the Gulf migrant literary sphere usually dedicated to texts on fortunes made through the *oil boom*.

Notes

1. Generally referred to as the Gulf, the GCC States consist of all the Arabian Gulf countries except Yemen (i.e. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). For the purpose of this essay, I interchangeably use Gulf/Gulf States/ Arabian Gulf and GCC to mean the same.
2. My use of the term is guided by the clear definition provided by the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011, (ILO C189) that states "*domestic work* means work performed in or for a household or households." Also helpful is Neetha N.'s definition of "our general understanding of *domestic work* as housework—as a non-technical, unskilled occupation".
3. See Monaco, James. How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Richardson, Robert. Literature and Film (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).
4. See Bluestone, George. Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).
5. Adair, Fasselt, and McLaughlin, email communication, 9 September 2021.
6. All translation are mine.

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