

# Breaking and Making Sri Lankans

## Serlankiyye Subjectivities and Practicing *Lajja*

by

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## Abstract

In 2012, Nesrine Malik published an article in The Guardian titled “Lebanon cannot be ‘civilised’ while domestic workers are abused” (Malik 2012). My goal in this project is twofold. Firstly, I argue that Lebanese discourse actually proves Lebanese ‘civility’ by constructing the Serlankiyye as a racialized, gendered and classed object, invisibilizing the systems that produce marginal subjecthood and relegating the Serlankiyye to heterotopic spaces. In Lebanon, the Serlankiyye is defined by dirt, irrationality/stupidity and guilt. Through this project I render visible the classed, gendered and racialized systems that construct Serlankiyye subjecthood and illustrate them as informed by the normative structures that emerge when the Lebanese anti-colonial, nationalist project intersects with the Sri Lankan anti-colonial, nationalist project in a space where the former commands territorial and discursive authority.

Secondly, I demonstrate that what Lebanese society produces as Sri Lankan “irrationality” is informed by the Sri Lankan MDW practice of *lajja* – a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist concept of self-respect. I argue that Sri Lankans rearticulate *lajja* in Lebanon not to resist the Lebanese, but to reaffirm self-respect and recreate a sense of what it means to be a Sri Lankan in Lebanon. Nevertheless, since Sri Lankan MDWs practice *lajja* at the intersection of Sri Lankan and Lebanese nationalist projects, the very same acts that MDWs view as productive of *lajja*, employers frame as dirty, irrational and guilty. Given this fundamental disconnect, differing MDW accounts and employer accounts of MDW actions reinforce each other, as MDWs continue to navigate their experiences using *lajja* and employers continue to justify the conditions they impose on MDWs using dirt, irrationality and guilt.

In this vein, I push back on the existing literature about Sri Lankan workers in Lebanon, which perceives Sri Lankans through a resistance analytic and falls victim to the very same discourses that produce the Serlankiyye by viewing Sri Lankan subjecthood as one-dimensional. Through *lajja*, Sri Lankan MDWs engage in projects that go unseen by their supervisors, including employers, state institutions and human rights organizations. Ultimately, I propose the question: **Are Sri Lankans really so easy to break?**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In Lebanon, Serlankiyye means maid. The literal translation of the term Serlankiyye is “Sri Lankan woman.” It is a sensible question to ask “*Serlankiyyetik Filipiniyeh?*” or “Is your maid Filipina?” The term “Serlankiyye” is thus naturalized in mainstream Lebanese conversation and used by all Lebanese institutions, public and private alike. The term, however, is constituted by very specific racialized, gendered and classed normative assessments about Sri Lankan behavior.

Every time I introduced myself as “Serlankiyye” in Lebanon, I received the response:

*Keef enti Serlankiyye? Shaklik mish Serlankiyye!*

How are you Sri Lankan? You don’t look like a Sri Lankan.

I was not considered a different type of Sri Lankan because I did not ascribe to the racialized, gendered and classed construction of the Serlankiyye. Instead, I was considered fundamentally not Sri Lankan at all. In Lebanon, one is either Sri Lankan or not. Sri Lankans are not a diverse group of people of varying ethnic, religious, class and gender identities. Instead, Sri Lankans are transformed into a very specific racialized, gendered and classed object used as fodder in Lebanese casual conversation to indicate anything “lower.” In this project, I will explore how both Lebanese society and Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers (MDWs) produce what it means to be a “Serlankiyye” and the racialized, gendered and classed systems that determine Serlankiyye subjecthood.

## I. PERSONAL IMPORTANCE

In writing this thesis, I have been forced to acknowledge both my own class privilege and the socializations of my liberal-secular upbringing. I first considered writing about Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in Lebanon after a friend of mine jokingly asked me if they would receive a personal slave if they were to visit me in Sri Lanka. Their comment was intended as a social critique about the way in which domestic workers in Sri Lanka are dehumanized and confined to marginal spaces within the household – a power dynamic I took for granted during my childhood. Later that year, a Lebanese professor of mine told me that the word for “maid” in the Lebanese dialect was “Serlankiyye.” At first I was furious that the Lebanese had homogenized all individuals who identified as Sri Lankan in order to produce the lowly “Serlankiyye.” Soon after, I realized that the systems that produced the marginal subjecthood of domestic workers in Lebanon were similar to those at work in Sri Lanka, only with an added racial element given the context of migration.

During the summer of 2015, I went to Lebanon with the hope of exposing how and why Sri Lankan workers were oppressed. Given my familiarity with Arabic, Sinhala and English, along with my Sri Lankan nationality, I was able to access Sri Lankan communities in Lebanon in contexts more intimate than conveyed in current published literature on the topic. Throughout my stay in Lebanon, I did not hear a Sri Lankan migrant domestic worker claim that she was attempting to resist Lebanese oppression. I realized that this may be due to my position in relation to MDWs. Firstly, not everyone I spoke with considered me a confidante and was necessarily compelled to share their most intimate feelings with me. Secondly, a few of the Sri Lankans I spoke with may have felt a sense of embarrassment in telling me – another Sri Lankan – that they were in a position so dire they needed to resist. Nevertheless, throughout my

ethnographic work, I learned that Sri Lankans by and large did not involve themselves in domestic workers' unions or participate in "empowering" beauty pageants run by Filipina workers.

Instead I heard repeated references to the importance of *lajja*, translated as respectability, dignity and conducting oneself in an appropriate timid and shy manner. For an entire year, I denied the importance of *lajja* in the lives of Sri Lankan women in Lebanon. I had been conditioned to look down on *lajja* as "village talk" and the attitude of disempowered women who cared 'too much' about what society thought. Therefore, a liberal-secular understanding of female empowerment informed how I interpreted my ethnographic work and prevented me from listening more fully to the voices of the women I spoke with.

Finally, through Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* (2004), I wrestled with the challenge of acknowledging the depth of my normative socializations and subjectivities. I began to accept that a subject's exercise of agency is a product of the social forces that constitute its subjecthood. I made an effort to refrain from normatively evaluating Sri Lankan MDW behavior while analyzing my ethnographies, despite the anger I personally felt every time I read about a fellow Sri Lankan being abused in a foreign country. By accepting the stories of the women I spoke with at face value, I came to believe that they practiced *lajja* in order to express what mattered most to them as migrants in Lebanon. Thus, I learned that Sri Lankan migrant women use *lajja* to achieve personal dignity and to produce a sense of Sri Lankan community in Lebanon.

## II. AIRPORT ARRIVAL VIGNETTE

*Laila, an upper-middle class employer, and I stood at the airport arrival area waiting for the Sri Lankan migrant domestic worker she had recently hired. The worker was supposed to be arriving at 7:30PM on Qatar Airways. It was 8:00PM and we still hadn't spotted her.*

*Immigration couldn't be taking so long, I thought to myself. Or could it? I asked Laila and she replied, "Sometimes immigration takes much longer for maids because they are sent in groups by the recruitment agency. Immigration won't let any of the girls in until all of them have been cleared because they think one dishonest girl says a lot about the agent who sends the group."*

*15 minutes later a group of ten Sri Lankan workers emerged through the arrival area doors. They were escorted by four members of the General Security (GS). They formed a line near the group of employers waiting for them. A member of the GS, Hassan, called the names of the 10 workers in alphabetical order, allowing the employer to identify her worker. As each individual worker came to the front, Hassan took her passport and other identification documents for "safekeeping" and handed them to the employer.*

*Hassan called the name "Nirmala Amarakoon."*

*A worker who appeared as if she were in her early 20s, not much older than I was, walked to the front and handed over her papers. Laila walked to Hassan to collect both the papers and the worker. She introduced herself to Nirmala and said that we would first have to go to the embassy to register her and then we could return home.*

*By 9pm, we had left the airport and were on our way to the recruitment agency. At the recruitment agency, a member of the General Security greeted us at the door and asked to see each of our IDs. I handed over my British passport and Laila handed over both hers and Nirmala's. The General Security member quickly waved his hand and said, "No, no need, I just*

*need to see the Serlankiyye's," pointing at Nirmala. After scanning Nirmala's passport, we were finally permitted to enter the recruitment agency. At the agency, we sat in the general waiting area for around five minutes until another Sri Lankan lady with a name badge titled "Lasangi" beckoned us toward her and asked for Nirmala's ID and papers. Laila provided the papers. Lasangi then asked Laila for the \$300 insurance fee agencies often asked for in order to authorize monitoring of the MDW for the first three-month period of her contract.*

*Laila paid the \$300, saying, "Good, we cannot be watching these ones all the time ourselves. It is very hard to know what they get up to." We sat back down.*

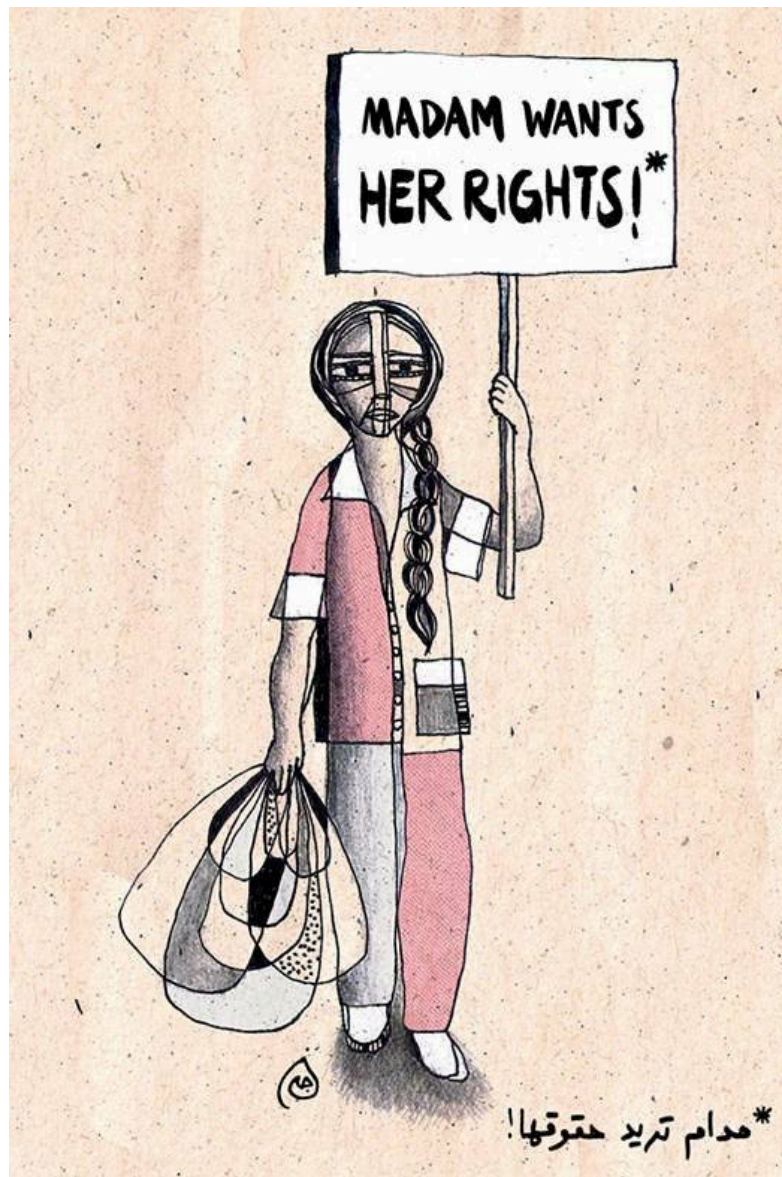
*Around 10 minutes later, a Lebanese man approached and asked for Nirmala's papers. Laila provided the papers and the Lebanese man analyzed them for a good two minutes. He then asked for Nirmala to scan her finger prints and eyes. He subsequently took several pictures of Nirmala from four different angles. After this process, he asked Laila whether Nirmala could come to his office to sign the contract. Laila nodded and Nirmala left. After around 15 minutes, Nirmala emerged from the room and approached Laila. Laila asked whether the process was done and Nirmala answered, "Yes, madam."*

*The recruitment agent emerged from the room carrying the contract and told Laila that he had explained to Nirmala how the contract worked, and that they did not accept the Sri Lankan contract because rules are different in Lebanon. The updated Lebanese contract specified that workers could not leave the employer's house without permission and without papers. Laila replied, "Good, I am glad they know this now." Following this final exchange, we left the recruitment agency and returned home.*

*Once 'home,' Sri Lankan MDWs can expect to work an average of 100 hours a week without designated days off or downtime. They are tasked with maintaining the entire household,*

*scrubbing and cleaning every room in the house, cooking food, assisting the madam with special occasion preparations, grocery shopping, childcare, providing assistance when the family travels around Lebanon and abroad, amongst other more household specific tasks. During my stay in Lebanon, I spoke with a Sri Lankan MDW who had been ordered to massage her employer's feet to "prevent arthritis." MDWs have even accompanied Lebanese women to women's rights rallies for the purpose of holding the latter's signs.*

*Occasionally MDWs can expect a day off to visit Dowra, the migrant suburb of Beirut. Dowra is filled with restaurants, markets and common spaces for migrant interactions. As a result, the suburb has become a hub for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Nevertheless, employers often discourage their workers from visiting Dowra, which they consider "immoral," and advocate that, instead, their workers attend church.*



Over the course of the past 10 years, protestors have recorded MDWs carrying signs for their madams during political marches. Most recently, a Lebanese employer was photographed protesting for women's rights while her MDW held her belongings. Jana Traboulsi's cartoon critiques the paradox of attending a women's rights march with an enslaved woman MDW. (Retrieved from the Traboulsi's blog "Ayloul" in March, 2017.)

When first witnessing the scene in the above vignette, I asked myself a series of questions.

Why did Hassan give Nirmala's passport to Laila?

Why did Nirmala so easily submit to what I viewed as indignities?

Why was there a General Security officer outside the recruitment agency?

Why did Laila naturally assume that she needed to answer questions on Nirmala's behalf?

What language(s) do MDWs and madams speak with each other?

Why was Laila relieved that the recruitment agent had directly told Nirmala that she could not leave the house without permission and without papers?

More generally, why was the transportation of MDWs from airport to home so meticulously organized?

**And lastly, what were the structures of power undergirding this interaction?**



### III. ARGUMENT

In this thesis, I explore the various layers of classed, gendered and racialized assumptions that inform the way in which Lebanese discourse constructs the term “Serlankiyye.” Although the “Serlankiyye” can be interpreted to mean anything “lower” than the Lebanese, I analyze its production through three specific characteristics: dirt, irrationality and guilt. I argue that these three characteristics are constructed within three specific spatialized dynamics: containment, intersection and displacement, respectively. The way in which the Serlankiyye is reiterated within each spatialization is determined by the power dynamic between the dominant discursive agent, typically Lebanese, and the Sri Lankan MDW. In this vein, Serlankiyye discourse is produced so it can be spoken by different people in different ways with differing normative implications.

*so how would I produce a Serlankiyye?*

The Serlankiyye is first produced as dirty within a spatial dynamic of containment. Since the assessment of “dirt” is primarily aesthetic, it can be accessed by any responsible aesthetic actor. As a result, dirt as a quality is produced through containment in both the household and in “public” Lebanese spaces. These various discursive agents produce the Serlankiyye as dirty in order to both relegate her to heterotopic spaces and justify the perpetual need for the colonial disciplining processes that establish Lebanese domination.

Irrationality, on the other hand, is produced within a spatial dynamic of intersection. When an MDW is perceived as having challenged, challenging or being able to challenge Lebanese disciplinary mechanisms, the Serlankiyye is constructed as irrational. Thus, irrationality is constructed through the perceived threat of a Sri Lankan MDW undermining the normative power structures in Lebanon that regulate the dynamic between employers and

MDWs. By producing MDWs as irrational, Lebanese authorities are able to extend the heterotopia of deviation within which MDWs are placed and delegitimize MDW behavior as irrational. Lastly, the Serlankiyye is produced as guilty through the spatial dynamic of displacement. If the MDW is perceived as successfully challenging Lebanese disciplinary mechanisms, either by stealing or running away, she is produced as guilty. Running away involves physically displacing oneself and stealing involves physically displacing another object belonging to the state. I argue that guilt involves an assumption about intentionality.

*how does one determine intentionality?*

In my Chapter 3 discussion of irrationality and guilt, I find that discursive agents, particularly employers and state institutions, attribute intentionality to the Serlankiyye based on whether irrationality or guilt best allows them to avoid taking responsibility for MDW life. Once the Serlankiyye is perceived as posing a plausible threat, she is produced as guilty and necessary of more extensive, state-administered disciplining. The production of guilt thus justifies incarceration in detention centers and direct state involvement.

Ultimately, this thesis explores the contiguous spatialized levels that produce MDWs as dirty, irrational and guilty in order to transport them from one form of incarceration, overseen by the employer, to another, overseen by the state. I argue that the normative assumptions about dirt, irrationality and guilt that constitute the Serlankiyye emerge from the intersection of Lebanese and Sri Lankan anti-colonial, nationalist projects, in a space where the former commands discursive and territorial authority.

*what does it mean to be civilized?*

I assert that the Lebanese nationalist project actually proves its civility and domination by normalizing and invisibilizing the systems that produce the Serlankiyye as a racialized, gendered

and classed object. I will explore the intersection of these two nationalist projects later on in this chapter. Furthermore, I contend that the same acts Lebanese employers use to produce the Serlankiyye as dirty, irrational and guilty are viewed by Sri Lankan MDWs as productive of *lajja*.

***Lajja* is a Sri Lankan, specifically Sinhala Buddhist, nationalist concept that translates as self-respect or shyness.** The Sri Lankan nationalist project mobilized *lajja* as a gendered concept to assert the ethical superiority of Sri Lankan women as compared to the “shamelessness” of European women during British colonialism in Sri Lanka. Throughout my ethnographic work, I found that the women I spoke with did not consider their practice of *lajja* as resisting Lebanese state institutions or employers and, instead strove to reaffirm self-respect and recreate a sense of what it means to be Sri Lankan in Lebanon.

*what does it mean to be “Sri Lankan”?*

Partha Chatterjee argues that the production and designation of *lajja* to women, who were considered part of the “private sphere,” is deeply rooted in colonial epistemological binaries such as that of the public/private, thus demonstrating the difficulty of expressing ‘nationalism’ in a way that is independent of colonial normative ideology (Chatterjee 1989). In a similar vein, I argue that *lajja* is rearticulated by Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon at the intersection of Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects, creating a ‘hybrid’ Third Space, both in the rearticulation of *lajja* as a practice and in the creation of the migrant suburb of Beirut, Dowra, as a counterspace for the Sri Lankan community (Bhabha 1994). I assert that this hybrid form redirects *lajja* from its gendered function in post-colonial Sri Lanka, determinative of the relationship between men and women, to a practice structured by the racialized and classed relationship between Lebanese madams and Sri Lankan MDWs. While the practice of *lajja* is interpreted by Lebanese

employers as Serlankiyye dirt, irrationality and guilt, Sri Lankan MDWs are able to empower themselves as the primary breadwinners in the space of the Sri Lankan migrant community.

Throughout this project, I emphasize the voices of Sri Lankan MDWs as they articulate the practice of *lajja* while inadvertently navigating, inhabiting and subverting the Lebanese production of Serlankiyye subjecthood, subsequently both empowering and disempowering themselves. Ultimately, I hope to produce an honest representation of the voices I listened to in Lebanon, both Sri Lankan and Lebanese, without imposing false consciousness on either group. Before I discuss the specific ways in which the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects intersect in the Sri Lankan MDW experience in Lebanon, I will outline the details of the *kefala*, or sponsorship, system.

#### IV. THE *KEFALA* SYSTEM

The Lebanese-Sri Lankan migrant labor trade is governed by the *kefala*, or sponsorship, system. The *kefala* system consists of laws governing migrant workers' migration to and legal residence in countries within the Middle East, primarily in the Gulf. While some countries, such as Qatar, have an explicit law named the "sponsorship law," others, such as Lebanon, include these laws in their residency or immigration policies. In Lebanon, legal provisions considered part of *kefala* can be found in the 1962 Foreigner's Law, the 1949 Labor Law, the 1932 General Contractual Obligations Law, and the Lebanese Penal Code. **Nevertheless, the *kefala* system as a whole is not legally institutionalized in Lebanon.** Generally speaking, "The sponsorship system consists of General Security regulations complemented by Ministry of Labor requirements" (Hamill 2011).

*who decides how these regulations are combined?*

According to Priyanka Motaparthi, *kefala* is “a way for governments to delegate oversight and responsibility for migrants to private citizens or companies” (Motaparthi 2015) and various arms of the state including the immigration police or General Security. The following five actors are key players in facilitating the labor recruitment process. Serlankiyye subjecthood is constructed and perpetuated through their interactions with one another and with Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers.

#### **Actors:**

1. **Sponsor or employer:** The sponsor (the kafeel) is the individual responsible for the migrant worker under the *kefala* system.
  
2. **Agencies:** Private recruitment agencies in Lebanon and Sri Lanka coordinate the trade of MDWs. In Lebanon, domestic work is not incorporated into the labor law and is addressed solely within the private sector. As a result, private recruitment agencies function according to self-imposed standards. These agencies orchestrate a majority of the recruitment process, from pre-departure orientation programs in Sri Lanka to the return trip to Sri Lanka. They provide information, assistance and financial support to migrants. As stated by Mr. Al-Amin, the public relations officer of the Syndicate of Recruitment Agencies in Lebanon (SORAL), agencies assist migrants with covering up-front costs for documentation and other pre-departure expenditures.

As the agencies both determine the cost of the MDW and loan money to the migrants, they are able to charge MDWs unjustified or excessive fees. The recruitment agency is also responsible for relaying information between employers and migrant

workers. Agencies have been known to belittle MDW concerns by deferring to employer demands, forcing MDWs to sign contracts written in languages they do not understand and beating MDWs. Most critically, the *kefala* system is designed to financially benefit the recruitment agency at the expense of both employers and MDWs. **As a result, recruitment agents are most invested in preserving the *kefala* system and preventing domestic work from being integrated into Lebanese labor law.**

3. **Ministry of Labor:** The relationship between the Ministry of Labor and the migrant labor community varies based on the minister holding the position at the time. In 2011, Boutros Harb proposed a draft law to more closely regulate the work of MDWs and ensure the continued use of the *kefala* system, but his draft law was abandoned as the government changed. The following Labor Minister Charbel Nahas (2011-2012) publicly announced that he would seek to abolish the *kefala* system, as “any labor law that takes into account the nationality of the worker is tantamount to racial discrimination” (Without 2015) and increase the minimum wage in Lebanon. He resigned shortly after these specific comments on January 23, 2012 over unconfirmed matters.

During his time as labor minister, however, Nahas proposed a reform package that involved increasing the role of labor unions concerning domestic work. The Prime Minister Najib Mikati, under whom he served, proposed an alternate plan to counter the one proposed by Nahas. The Council of Ministries opted in favor of Mikati’s and rejected Nahas’s. As a result, Nahas referred the government’s decision to the Lebanese Shoura

Council, an administrative court that examines the legality of government decisions. The Shoura Council confirmed that the decision was illegal and Nahas re-proposed his package only to have it shut down once again by the Lebanese government (Chakrani 2012). Nahas's proposal never led to tangible change, since both governmental officials and recruitment agencies across Lebanon actively lobbied to block his efforts.<sup>1</sup>

4. **General Security or Immigration:** Given the exclusion of MDWs from Lebanese labor law, the *kefala* system is enforced by the Ministry of Interior and the General Security (GS). GS is in charge of both legal matters concerning migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and preventing internal unrest. The dual role of the GS implies a causal link between immigration and internal security. General Security processes the worker's immigration documents, is responsible for deportations and maintains the Adliyah Detention Center for Foreigners. It also visits the employer's home within the first three months of the worker's employment to ensure that each MDW is employed by the designated employer.

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<sup>1</sup> The ministry of Salim Jreissati (2012-2014) proposed a draft decree similar to Harb's draft law, yet the association of recruitment agencies, including its head Hisham Bourji, opposed the decree claiming that "some of the articles were contradictory, defying their practical experience in the sector." According to Bourji, the draft decree only addressed those working under the law and neglected the several unregistered recruitment agencies that had evaded the law entirely. He also claimed that the majority of abuse takes place between the employer and the worker and stressed that the draft decree did not sufficiently highlight the employer's role in the process. A key proposal of Jreissati's draft decree was the revival of the National Employment Office that would handle relations between employers and domestic workers. The existence of an NEO, however, undermines the power of the *kefala* system and both the Lebanese government and recruitment agencies lobbied against it. Jreissati eventually conceded and, together with the ILO, refocused on more incremental changes such as requiring a witness upon the signature of contacts before the workers leave for Lebanon and the protection of worker confidentiality, including medical records.

*how does a Sri Lankan MDW obtain a visa?*

The mechanisms of obtaining and renewing visas and residence permits are managed by the General Security. As a result, MDWs are viewed within a “law and order” framework (Hamill 2011). The application for a visa to work in Lebanon includes several steps in conjunction with an employer or, more commonly, a recruitment agency. I narrate the following steps as if I were an embassy official providing information to one of the Sri Lankan MDWs I spoke with in Lebanon.

1. Your first step will be to secure official preliminary approval from the Lebanese Ministry of Labor for a work permit before arriving in Lebanon.
2. After receiving this approval from the Ministry of Labor, you must use the approval to apply to General Security for an entry visa.
3. Next, you must come to us and pay \$65 for the embassy registration and processing fee. Both you and your future employer will sign the “Contract of Employment for Domestic Helpers from Sri Lanka in the Middle East Countries” from the Sri Lankan government. We will send it to them for a signature after you have been designated an employer.
4. Once your entry visa is issued in Lebanon, your future employer or the Lebanese recruitment agency will pick it up for you from the General Security.
5. You are ready to board the plane for Lebanon. Once you arrive, your future employer will be waiting for you.
6. The General Security will take your passport and give it to your future employer. It is for your safety. Do not ask questions.



According to Hamill, “The General Security asks employers to retain worker’s identity documents throughout the duration of the employment relationship” (Hamill 2011. 28).

## Immigration Regulations

*why can she not keep her passport?*

According to the *kefala* system, the sponsor must assume all recruitment costs, along with full economic and legal responsibility for the worker, including room, board, medical insurance and all extra costs and living expenses. Furthermore, **the worker’s visa status is tied to the sponsor**. The system puts the migrant worker at the mercy of the sponsor, who is also typically the employer. As a result, all issues between the migrant worker and the employer impact not only the worker’s employment, but also residency status.

*what happened to the contract she signed in Sri Lanka?*

Often, the Sri Lankan government contract is discarded and Lebanese recruitment agencies draft their own contracts. The Lebanese Ministry of Labor introduced a standardized contract in 2009. If used (and this is rare), the new contract is not signed between the worker and the sponsor, but between the sponsor and the recruitment agency. According to the standard work contract, there are only three legal grounds for a domestic worker to terminate her contract: 1) physical or sexual abuse proven medically 2) proven non-payment of wages for a period exceeding three consecutive months 3) employment in a capacity that does not qualify as domestic work. Despite the fact that the worker is not involved in the signing process, if a

contract is broken, a sponsor may request the worker to pay a recruitment fee, unless abuse or proven violation has been committed by the sponsor.

*how do you prove physical or sexual abuse?  
how do you prove non-payment of wages?  
what qualifies as domestic work?*

Materially, these three categories are nearly impossible to prove due to difficulties such as finding witnesses, forensic medical experts or qualified lawyers who are willing to advocate for an individual who is financially limited. Furthermore, since Lebanon has not ratified the 2005 ILO domestic workers' convention or included a definition for "domestic work" in its labor law, the Lebanese courts do not have a specific definition of what constitutes "domestic work." Domestic workers seeking assistance also face communication and literacy obstacles.

As stated by Hamill, "Although the standard work contract provides three escape hatches on paper, they are only nominal at best" (Hamill 2011, 25). Due to the uneven distribution of legal power, the employer is able to withhold identity documents, confine the worker to the household, and threaten the worker with the possibility of "returning" her to the recruitment agency. The worker cannot change employment without the sponsor's approval, and cannot leave the country without first receiving an 'exit visa' from the sponsor (Hamill 2011). As a result, contracts leave workers particularly susceptible to abuse. If the MDW "escapes" or leaves her place of employment for any reason, she risks jeopardizing her legal status since the *kefala* legally binds MDWs to their employers. Hamill states, "For domestic workers who want to remain within the boundaries of the law, they are left with very little choice when it comes to leaving abusive employers" (Hamill 2011, 26).

*where can she go?*

In this project, I argue that in addition to the material obstacles that prevent MDWs from legally and legitimately leaving their place of employment, the Lebanese state produces the Serlankiyye as inherently dirty, irrational and guilty, and normatively justifies containment. Since the *kefala* provides disproportionate legal power to the employer, the employer is able to use various control mechanisms to both determine their relationship with the MDW and produce Serlankiyye subjecthood.

*what does the kefala really mean for Sri Lankans in Lebanon?*

The *kefala* system has allowed for a series of domestic worker abuses including: withholding identification papers and wages, physical and sexual abuse, deception and false promises concerning conditions of work, denying food, debt bondage, verbal harassment and humiliation, overwork at an average of 100 hours a week, lack of overtime pay and of days off, lack of freedom to change employers, physical confinement and threat of deportation (Jureidni, Moukarbel 2004).

### **Housemaids: Rights and Obligations**

I have included the General Security's stipulations for MDW "rights and obligations" below.

1. Respect Lebanese laws and regulations
2. Respect the members of the family whom she is working for
3. Be committed to the nature of her work as a housemaid and protect the contents of the house she is working in and not expose family secrets
4. Adapt to the family and its way of living
5. Not leaving her employer's house and without their prior approval or in accordance with the "work contract"
6. Signing the wage slip after the collection of her salary as receipt
7. Not to work outside of the employer's house or in another domain other than that of a maid
8. Not to get married (to a Lebanese or a foreigner) during her stay in Lebanon (she has the right to get married after leaving Lebanon and return again according to the applicable laws of such case)

*where is the “rights” part of “rights and obligations”?*

Notably, the communique doesn’t actually stipulate “rights.” Hamill rules that although these regulations “appear to reflect customary practices in Lebanon, they are not squarely grounded in law” (Hamill 2011, 30). Nevertheless, since there is no labor law detailing the “Rights and Obligations” of MDWs, the General Security communique is the primary standard. In the following section, I will lay out a framework for analyzing Sri Lankan MDW life in Lebanon as a product of intersecting Sri Lankan and Lebanese anti-colonial, nationalist projects. The fact that both Lebanon and Sri Lanka are colonized nations demonstrates the way in which colonial tools and apparatuses can be reproduced in the dynamic between two nations in the “Global South.”

## **V. THE LEBANESE AND SRI LANKAN NATIONALIST PROJECTS**

In this thesis, I argue that the way in which the Lebanese nationalist project produces Serlankiyye subjecthood resembles that of the relationship between colonial apparatuses and colonized peoples. In her book *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka’s Migrant Housemaids* Ruth Gamburd concludes that “relations of domestic servitude that used to take place in colonial times between the visiting colonial and the native servant are now reproduced in the Middle East, with the servant now the visitor and the master now the native” (Gamburd 2000, 31). My project therefore investigates the reproduction of a colonial-type relationship in the context of migration where Sri Lankan migrant workers, who hail from a colonized nation, become subjects of the Lebanese state on Lebanese soil, another colonized nation. I propose that since race is constructed and Whiteness indicates a system of power, a

colonial dynamic in which the powerful party produces a racialized subject to affirm its own domination can very much exist in the relationship between two “previously” colonized nations.

In the following section I will briefly explore the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects as they pertain to my work. Subsequently, I argue that the production of Serlankiyye subjecthood, alongside the rearticulation of *lajja*, within intersecting Sri Lankan and Lebanese nationalist projects resembles that producing the subaltern subject, alongside anti-colonial, nationalist attempts to regain sovereignty, within intersecting Sri Lankan and British nationalist projects. I primarily focus, however, on how both nationalist projects were founded in response to colonialism. Thus, the neocolonial Global South-Global South dynamic of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon provides an important level of nuance when analyzing the ‘colonial’ relationship between the Lebanese state and Sri Lankan MDWs.

### **Maid Ownership and Inter-Sectarian Unity in Lebanon**

Lebanon is often described as “the bridge between the East and the West” (Kaufman 2004). This discursive construction is rearticulated amongst friends and academics alike and propagates the very same orientalist binary that Edward Said condemns, in which the “East” is characterized by religious sensibilities, familial social orders and traditions and perceived as an irrational, different, inferior and psychologically weak non-European Other (Said 1978). The West, according to Said, is characterized by its rationality, material and technical dynamism and individualism. The “East-West” identity produced by Lebanese Maronite nationalism affirms this Orientalist binary and places Lebanon at the intersection of the two, capable of both rationality and technological advancement without losing its familial social orders and religious sensibilities.

*“we have a saying in Lebanon:  
one can swim in the Mediterranean Sea  
and then ski the mountain slopes  
all in the same day” (Baroody 2012, 9).*

In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee critically notes that “most decolonizing nationalist projects achieve a political but not an epistemological break from colonialism” (Chatterjee 1986). Lebanon’s “East-West identity” is evidence of the Lebanese nationalist project’s inability to break epistemologically from colonialism. Although “East/West binary” discourse is primarily employed by Lebanese Maronite nationalism, it continues to pervade the upper and upper-middle classes of all Lebanese sects. Lebanese Maronite nationalism is an ideology that accompanied the birth of Lebanon as an independent unit.<sup>2</sup> Two core components of Lebanese Maronite nationalism are Phoenician revivalism – the claim of Phoenician roots in order to distinguish Lebanese Christians from Muslims – and affiliation with French colonialists (Kauffman 2004, 12).

*how did the Lebanese become White?*

Phoenician revivalism places the Lebanese and their ancestors “among the originators of Western civilization,” by claiming “Hellenic civilization was of Phoenician origin” (Larkin 2011, 12). Furthermore, French leaders publicly claimed that “the French came to save their Maronite friends,” and that “Lebanon is to be created to serve the Maronites” (Dib 2013, 91). The Maronite-French alliance thus girds the “perceived supremacy of the Maronite community to that of the Lebanese Muslims – as arbiters of modern Western culture, particularly coveted technologies and sciences” (Larkin 2011, 3). To avoid reducing an incredibly complex situation,

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Maronites viewed Lebanon as the only place in a region dominated by Muslims in which the Maronites could exercise religious freedom. As a result, Maronite political leadership institutionalized Maronite political domination within the Lebanese constitution in order to guarantee freedom for the sect and “maintain the status of Christians as equal, or even superior, to their co-citizens, the Muslims and Druze” (Kaufman 2014).

I must emphasize that non-Maronite Christian, Sunni and Shia' sectarian-nationalist discourses do not revere the Phoenician revivalism of the Maronite Christians.<sup>3</sup>

According to Lara Zaid, a pseudonym for an acquaintance at AUB, the French language is frequently associated with the Maronite-French nationalist link, but due to Maronite ideological hegemony (Kaufman 2014) amongst Lebanese upper classes, has permeated the upper class as an indicator of upper class identity. Similarly, the employment of “maids” has become a marker of upper and upper middle class identity, accompanied by the discourses of civilization that undergird the Maronite nationalist project. The employment of Sri Lankan MDWs, thus, pervades all sectarian lines and geographical regions in Lebanon. In this vein, I argue that what was originally a Phoenician revivalist affiliation with ‘Western rationality’ has bled into the discourse of the upper and upper-middle classes in Lebanon, regardless of sect, when dealing with Sri Lankan MDWs.

The proliferation of Lebanon's “East/West identity,” created by Lebanese Maronites and reproduced by the upper classes, positions Sri Lankans as a foil against which the Lebanese people, diverse in sect, unite to reaffirm the ‘superiority’ of Lebanon in contrast to Sri Lanka and produce a utopic image of a civilized Lebanese society. The role of the Serlankiyye as a point of unity is particularly evident in coffee shop conversations between upper and upper-middle class Lebanese women. During my ethnographic work, I realized that the Serlankiyye was a key component of the conversations through which upper and upper middle class Lebanese women relate to each other. While at a salon in Achrafiyeh, I listened to two Lebanese madams in the salon engage in the following exchange:

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<sup>3</sup> As Karim Makdisi discusses, the sectarian confessional system in Lebanon allows communal patrons to run their areas like micro-states with their own hegemonic ideas. As a result, “an ethos of national unity” was never developed and sectarianism constituted the “antithesis of a nation” (Makdisi 1996, 24). As is evident, the Lebanese attempt at a nationalist project is ongoing.

*Madam 1: My Serlanki left the stove on for 4 hours yesterday. The house almost blew up.*

*Madam 2: Did you slap her?*

*Madam 1: Yes, but it never helps. They are stupid, they cannot learn. Before I started hitting her I used to tell her nicely, but you cannot be nice with these Serlankis. It is not part of their culture.*

In her ethnographic work, Nayla Moukarbel shares the following restaurant conversation:

*“On the table next to mine sat three couples. At one point, I heard the word “Serlanki” so I eavesdropped and managed to hear the last part of the conversation. One woman was telling the others: “The Madam goes out of the house. After a while, she phones the housemaid and tells her what to do: “Put the vegetables in the fridge, cook some rice, etc.” The Serlanki goes: “Yes, Madam, yes, Madam” [the storyteller was imitating the tone of the housemaid]. Then, at the end, the housemaid asks: “Who’s calling please?” Everyone at the table laughed.*

Evidently, the topic of “housemaids” and the accompanying maid relationality play a critical role in determining the way upper and upper-middle class Lebanese women build common ground between one another. By laughing, everyone at the table implies that they understand the tropes that made the joke funny, particularly the trope that Serlankis are inherently stupid.

### ***Lajja and Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism***

In post-colonial Sri Lanka, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement attempted to assert “Sri Lankan” national values by mapping new meanings of the world/home dichotomy “onto an identification of social roles by gender” (Chatterjee 1989, 624). Men were assigned to the public space, through which they were tasked with learning the material tricks of Western power –



science, technology, rational forms of economic organization and modern methods of statecraft. Nineteenth century nationalists argued, however, that while it was essential to cultivate the material techniques of modern civilization, it was also imperative to maintain the “distinctive spiritual essence of national culture” (Chatterjee 1993, 623).

Thus, the Sri Lankan nationalist project tasked women with upholding the superior “spiritual essence” of Sri Lankan society (*lajja*), which men lost in their encounter with the West, by designating them to protected private spaces. According to Chatterjee, the construction of *lajja* is not so much a dismissal of modernity, but an attempt to “make modernity consistent with the nationalist project” (Chatterjee 1993, 121). As a result, the cultivation of *lajja* in women became a critical part of Sri Lankan nationalism.

*who is lajja for?*  
*where is lajja from?*  
*why?*

Through migration, however, Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon are able to use *lajja* to elevate their class status and assert their financial superiority by earning a productive wage and distinguishing themselves from unproductive Sri Lankan men in Lebanon. As subjects in Lebanon’s nationalist project, however, Sri Lankan MDWs also remain subservient to Lebanese madams. Thus, Sri Lankan MDWs selectively adapt and reform both Lebanese and Sri Lankan categories of what it means to be a “good woman” in their rearticulation of the *lajja* ethic. Both Chatterjee and Kumari Jayawardena note that while nationalist movements initiated the ‘modernization’ of third-world women, along with the move into the material realm, “this was not the total picture... [women] still had to act as the guardians of national culture, indigenous religion and family traditions” (Jayawardena 1982, 120). Similarly, Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon both conduct material work in the domestic realm and retain an ethic of *lajja* as they do

so. The very nature of domestic work in a foreign country, therefore, complicates the rearticulation of *lajja* and structures it within the classed, gendered and racialized processes that emerge through the intersection of Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects.

### **Intersecting Anti-Colonial Nationalisms**

In my literature review, I closely explore the similarities between the colonialist production of the subaltern subject and the Lebanese production of the Serlankiyye subject. To summarize, I assert that the discursive production of the Serlankiyye normalizes the Lebanese domination of Sri Lankan MDWs and justifies the subsequent physical and ideological discipline viewed as necessary to teach Sri Lankans civilized behaviors, such as hygiene.

*why bother cleaning “dirty” Sri Lankans?*

I contend that, like the colonial project, Lebanese state institutions produce the dirty, irrational, Serlankiyye not for reasons of altruism, but to ascertain perpetual Sri Lankan inferiority and rationalize ongoing discipline and surveillance. Furthermore, similar to the muteness of the subaltern woman, the Sri Lankan woman in Lebanon cannot articulate *lajja* in a way that is independent of Lebanese normativities (Spivak 1988). Thus, by rearticulating *lajja* within the structures of the Serlankiyye, but without vocally acknowledging Lebanese influence on its rearticulation, Sri Lankan women both undermine the discursive power of the Serlankiyye and perpetuate it.

Most critically, both Sri Lanka and Lebanon are colonized nations with their own anti-colonial, nationalist projects. Thus, I argue that by continuing to designate class, race and gender to either the private or public spheres, both the Lebanese and Sri Lankan anti-colonial projects

demonstrate their inability to distance themselves from the epistemologies of colonial normativity in various ways (Chatterjee 1989).

*“Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1988)*

The Sri Lankan nationalist project Otherizes women to construct a spiritual nationalist identity through the gendered production of *lajja* (de Alwis 1998). Currently, the Sri Lankan government actively promotes the migration of Sri Lankan MDWs to the Middle East for the purpose of accruing remittances. However, the state also ensures that predeparture orientation sessions (PDOs) include extensive units on family values and *lajja* (Smith 2010, 108). Meanwhile, the Lebanese project Otherizes Sri Lankans to construct a White nationalist identity through the racialized production of the Serlankiyye, a quest evident in the discursive affiliation with the East/West binary and a prevailing desire to “be European” (Kauffman 2014) at the expense of “more” Brown people.

*why would a colonized people treat others as colonial subjects?*

Lebanon is a country that has experienced significant migration of both laborers and refugees from the Middle East and Asia and of its own citizens to nations in Europe, West Africa and the United States (Jureidini 2004). According to a male co-owner of a café in Moukarbel’s study,

*“First, we were attacked by the Palestinians, then the Syrians and now Israel... And next it’ll be the Sri Lankans...”* (Moukarbel 2007, 28). The café owner expresses a fear of migrants “attacking” his country. This is not a fear we haven’t heard before, regardless of the country in which we may reside. The next quotation demonstrates another aspect of anti-immigrant rhetoric: a demand for gratitude.

According to an employer interviewed by Moukarbel,

*“Why is she [the Sri Lankan MDW] complaining anyway? With the money I give her, she is building a house in Sri Lanka. Do you know how they live there, in total misery? She’s lucky to have me as an employer...”* (Moukarbel 2007, 101).

As demonstrated by the employer, the simultaneous migration of Lebanese diasporas to Euro-American nations and the reception of Asian migrants in Lebanon produces a dynamic in which the Lebanese state is viewed as a receiving nation of cheap labor and necessarily “superior” economically and ultimately, morally, to Sri Lanka.

In this vein, by rearticulating *lajja* in a space uniquely governed by both Lebanese and Sri Lankan normativities and racialized, gendered and classed anti-colonial projects, MDWs inadvertently distort both *lajja* in its “Sri Lankan” form and the *Serlankiyye* in its Lebanese form, instead navigating their lives through a hybrid nationalistic practice indicative of a particular migrant experience in another colonized nation, Lebanon.

*again, what does it mean to be “Sri Lankan”?  
what does it mean to speak “Sinhala”?*

### **Language at the Intersection of Anti-Colonial Nationalisms**

Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon typically speak either Sinhala and/or Tamil while living in Sri Lanka. According to Lakshika, most of the MDWs are Sinhala-speaking. Once they arrive in Lebanon, their employers teach them to speak combinations of Arabic, French and English. Fida Bizri’s article, “Sinhala in Contact with Arabic: The Birth of a New Pidgin in the Middle East” (Bizri 2012) calls the Arabic/Sinhala spoken by MDWs “Pidgin Madam.” Given the various languages used in Lebanon and the particularities of the Lebanese dialect (in contrast with the dialects of the Gulf), the form of pidgin spoken by MDWs in Lebanon is unique to the country. Through the mixing and muddling of three or four languages, employers and MDWs frequently

miscomprehend one another. Language, therefore, plays a critical role in determining employer-MDW relations and adds to the mutual miscomprehension and ultimate reinforcement between the Lebanese production of the Serlankiyye and the Sri Lankan practice of *lajja*.

## VI. METHODS

My project consists of participant observation and multi-sited ethnography in Lebanon and in Sri Lanka, content-analysis of Lebanese NGO reports and 10 semi-structured interviews with MDWs, officials and ambassadors in Lebanon, including the Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and Ethiopian ambassadors/consuls. I organize my methodologies by location in order to provide greater detail into the relationships I built with various individuals and groups within each space. Notably, the majority of my ethnography was conducted in Lebanon, as my project focuses on the lives of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon itself and not those who have returned to Sri Lanka, although this is also a crucial topic that incorporates many elements relevant to the current development of Sri Lanka's economy.

Critically, many of the women I spoke were "live-in" MDWs who received Sundays off. The only two situations in which I was able to speak with a live-in who did not receive time off was at Laila's apartment, with Nirmala, but my interaction with Nirmala was limited given Laila's presence. I was also able to speak with the "live-ins" who had permission to visit Lakshika's apartment briefly for about one hour during the week while on a grocery shopping trip.

I learned that in a highly unregulated society that prides itself on *wasta*, or connections, **trust** was the most important factor in acquiring access. The only two places to which I gained access in a more deliberate way were Lakshika's apartment, by cold-calling Caritas, a Catholic

NGO, and the Migrant Community Center in Lebanon, by signing up to teach English. My internship also tasked me with attending various MDW conferences around Beirut and my family put me in touch with a lead recruitment agent who took me to several of his meetings. Otherwise, I found that as a Brown woman of small stature, many of the people I met, including those I met by virtue of spending time at restaurants and markets, trusted me rather quickly. Several of the women I spoke with me asked me if I was with my parents and once I said no, offered to “take care of me.” Lakshika insisted I stay at her apartment when I caught a fever and Laila made sure that I didn’t starve when I was too busy to cook for myself. In this vein, it is important I acknowledge that assumptions about my age and allegiances may have factored into the conversations I had with older women, both Sri Lankan and Lebanese.

### **Caritas**

I first heard about Caritas at Mezayan in Hamra, a popular restaurant for armchair Marxists and foreign intellectuals in the most café-esque sense, located across from my apartment. I decided to give the Center a call. A Sri Lankan woman named Lakshika answered the phone and immediately, I adopted the heavy Sri Lankan accent I use with my parents. Surprisingly, she was incredibly receptive to me and asked me to come visit on Sunday during Mass. For the rest of my stay, I visited Lakshika’s almost every Sunday to help out with setting up for Mass and cultural activities. I attempted to contribute to the organization by assisting with rehabilitating abused workers and keeping them company on the days Lakshika was busy, typically Wednesdays. Lakshika also designated me with the responsibility of coordinating children’s events for Sunday sessions, which I found exceptionally entertaining.

I used ethnographic methods during my interactions at Lakshika's, documenting my interactions with various General Security officers who would attend for sessions, Caritas workers, Filipina MDW conversations and most critically, the Sri Lankan MDWs who would spend entire afternoons in the space.

I was primarily interested in the ways Sri Lankan MDWs spoke with each other about their lives and experiences through casual conversation, organized activities and Mass. It is in this space, and primarily in the inter and intra-generational interactions between Sri Lankan women and their children, that I recognized the concept of *lajja* and the coordinated attempt to recreate a sense of Sri Lanka in Lebanon. Lakshika also introduced me to the overhead Lebanese Caritas organization and a lady named Elsa. Elsa became one of my primary sources for the legal and administrative aspects of Sri Lankan migrant worker life in Lebanon. It is important for me to recognize my privileged position in being able to access Caritas databases and reports through Elsa, based on my fluency in the English language and affiliation with the American University of Beirut (AUB).

Furthermore, Lakshika took me to the Adliyah Detention Center several times to visit incarcerated Sri Lankan MDWs. Through her, I was able to conduct an ethnographic analysis of the Detention Center, its infrastructure, daily schedules, types of food cooked (I participated in the group cooking effort), medications provided, casual biographies of the General Security at the Center and a detailed account of the life of Shanthi, the Sri Lankan lady assigned by Caritas to oversee the Center. **My access to this highly monitored space depended largely on the close relationship I developed with Lakshika during my stay in Lebanon, a relationship that was only possible through my privileged status as a Sri Lankan with no "legal" issues,**

**connections to the embassy and AUB, a British passport and accent adaptability (British, American and Sri Lankan).**

Notably, by working with Caritas, often I met individuals through snowball sampling whose views ethically aligned with my own, leading to potential selection and researcher bias. Nevertheless, performing “objectivity” was not important to me in this project, although I did spend large amounts of time with my Lebanese friends in upper and upper-middle class spaces. Furthermore, I do briefly problematize the ‘rational’ normative discourses underlying NGO and human rights organizations in Lebanon, including Caritas. Nevertheless, I do not provide an extended critique of this discourse, as that is not my goal.

### **Dowra and the Indo-Lanka Restaurant**

I spent approximately three days a week in Dowra. I cannot distinguish between research and leisure in my time spent in Dowra, as most of the time I was browsing Sri Lankan stores looking for sarees, maggi noodles (Sri Lanka’s two minute noodles) and Nestomalt. When I first travelled to Dowra, the place was overwhelming. Occasionally, I felt uneasy travelling solo as a woman in Lebanon, both in Dowra and in Lebanese areas, although primarily in the latter given my research on Lebanese racism. Dowra’s streets were filled with a diversity of men and women sitting together at tables smoking shisha and chatting. I felt less comfortable interjecting completely randomly into these conversations, so I decided I would choose two specific markets to loiter.

After two weeks of loitering on the premises, the Sri Lankan owners and shoppers noticed that I had become some sort of regular. Eventually, the owner of one of the markets approached me and asked who I was. I responded in Sinhala saying that I was a student from Sri



Lanka studying in the US and wanted to learn about Dowra. I also noted that I had come looking to stock up on maggi noodles. Growing up in Sri Lanka I understood the value of bonding over maggi, and I was relieved when the shop owner smiled. At first we spoke at length about why I was in Lebanon and what I hoped to get out of my research. Eventually, his wife introduced me to several of her friends. Although I did not record these encounters, as I acquired them ad-hoc and in completely intimate settings, these were indisputably the most valuable interactions I had in learning about *lajja* and respectability in Lebanon. Since I spent time alone at the Indo-Lanka restaurant as well, however, I have included one ethnographic account I overheard. Following the conversation included in my ethnographic work, I actually introduced myself and joined the group to talk about my research, subsequently receiving consent to publish.

Again, several of these interactions were acquired through snowball sampling, potentially limiting my research to a very specific segment of the Sri Lankan community in Lebanon. Furthermore, most of these women were actually allowed out of the household on Sundays, and thus did not experience the same conditions as those who were not.

### **Laila's**

Laila is the aunt of one of my friends in Lebanon. Given my relationship with her niece and the fact that she wanted to “take me under her wing,” she allowed me to spend three days at her house when I decided that I wanted to take a break from living with my friends. I conducted extensive ethnographic analysis at Laila's, with her consent, primarily because her niece, my friend, was curious about what I'd produce in this thesis. Luckily for my research, Laila was in the process of hiring a new MDW during the period I met her. Thus I was able to accompany her

to the airport. Her house gave me significant insight into the relationship between Lebanese employers and MDWs within the household.

Furthermore, I had the rare opportunity to speak privately with a live-in Sri Lankan worker who could not leave the house. I took notes about where the maid's room was placed, the bell system, the way in which Laila advocated locking rooms, the types of food in the kitchen and the way in which Laila assessed Nirmala's domestic performance. In this vein, it is crucial that I acknowledge the effect my presence may have had on the way Laila treated Nirmala. Furthermore, I recognize that my friend who put me in touch with Laila knew about the nature of my research. Therefore, I do not know to what extent selection and researcher bias factored into her suggestion.

### **Additional sites**

I took field notes through the majority of my interactions in Lebanon. I gained the most insight into the normalization of Serlankiyye discourse amongst upper and upper-middle class circles by spending time with my friends at beaches, bars and restaurants. I took several notes on my phone about the jokes that were made, who they were made by and often my friends and I would inquire further about where the groups of people came from – typically by asking a waiter or a bartender. Thankfully I did not have to experience Serlankiyye jokes within my own group of friends. Instead, we challenged ourselves to overhear racist comments made by Lebanese people in these particular upper and upper-middle class situations.

In this vein, I am grateful to the friends I made in Lebanon through AUB and the ways in which they were able to accommodate my frustrated rants. Notably, I did not ask any of them to accompany me to Dowra, primarily because I wanted to mitigate any possible assumption about

where my loyalties lay. Critically, although we “challenged” ourselves to overhear these conversations and be conscious about the jokes present in the conversations around us, I made sure that none of us made light of the situation. Eventually, my friends began hearing “jokes” and comments in a light some of them had not fully acknowledged beforehand. It was no longer “just a joke.”

Mid-summer, a friend at AUB and I decided to sign up to teach English at the Migrant Community Center in Beirut. I was assigned to a group of Sri Lankan MDWs and was able to translate between Sinhala and English script. After class, the women used to stay for approximately an hour to speak with me. The most striking moment during my time at MCC was when I learned that one of my students had stopped coming because her employer had banned her from leaving the house. After this, I realized that I found it very difficult to distinguish between the NGO-designated categories of “live-in,” “freelance” and “runaway” MDWs during my classes, which led me to consider the human aspect of classifying MDWs into three distinct categories, especially given that I listened to both stories of “freelancers” facing abuse living in rented houses with Lebanese men and the more commonly shared stories of MDWs facing employer abuse, primarily physical. I noticed that amongst the women I spoke with, those who eventually told me they lived with their employers would share stories of physical abuse with me, but not those of sexual abuse. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate sharing stories of women living independently of their employers experiencing sexual abuse. Thus, I recognized the ways in which people subtly alter stories to privilege the conditions they have chosen.

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In Chapter 2, I discuss existing scholarship on Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon and situate my project in the framework of postcolonial theory, **focusing on the voices of Sri Lankan MDWs and discrediting the racialized, classed and gendered Lebanese discourses that produce the Serlankiyye.**

As we consider the dilemmas of MDWs, we might wonder what power structures constrain their lives? However, MDWs do not only live in spaces constructed by others. They, too, construct spaces for themselves, within the limitations of the social forces that constitute their subjecthood. While Chapter 3 first explores how Lebanese discourse produces the Serlankiyye, my goal in Chapter 4 is to stress **the importance of viewing the social forms MDWs choose to practice as legitimate and not discrediting them as merely a product of their indisputable marginalization.**

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

*“The ~~nineteenth-century homosexual~~ 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century Serlankiyye ~~became~~ has become a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology with an indiscreet anatomy and a possibly mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into ~~his~~ her total composition was unaffected by ~~his sexuality~~ her race... the ~~homosexual~~ Serlankiyye was now a species”*  
(Foucault 1976, 42-43).

This literature review will include two sections. In the first, I will outline the theoretical framework I use throughout this thesis. In the second, I will discuss the existing literature that deals specifically with Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in Lebanon.

### I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout this project, I use Foucault’s work on heterotopias, disciplinary institutions, governmentality, technologies of power and subjectivization to understand how relationality and the normalization of power contribute to the Lebanese production of Serlankiyye subjecthood. Notably, however, Foucault holds that Western societies have moved from “a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality” and considers race a “historical retroversion” that exists outside the temporality of modernity proper. He argues that the power that is now exercised through sexuality, population, health and education “increasingly authenticates itself through a mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of race” (Foucault 1976, 149). It is this legitimization that he describes as a “historical retroversion” (Foucault 1976, 158). Instead, Foucault proposes that “the deployment of sexuality” should be conceptualized using “the technologies of power that are contemporary with it.” Since he does not consider “race” contemporary, his theory is not always directly helpful in analyzing the role that race plays in the production of modernity.

As a result, I situate this project within a broader frame of postcolonial theory that draws on Foucault's formulations of discourse, genealogies and social constructionism to understand the interactions between colonial apparatuses and colonized people.

Edward Said cites Foucault's understanding of discourse in order to "identify Orientalism... [because] without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient" (Said 1979, 22). In a similar vein, this project investigates how the Serlankiyye as a discourse produces the Serlankiyye as a subject. As Said notes, "these discourses produced the knowledge necessary to construct ideologies of domination" (Said 1979, 94), evident in the establishment of the *kefala* system in Lebanon and the understanding that Sri Lankan MDWs must be constantly disciplined. Thus, I use Foucault's assertion that discourse normalizes structures of power to argue that the discursive construction of the Serlankiyye has normalized the Lebanese domination of Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers. Furthermore, similar to Ann Stoler's argument, the Lebanese play out their fantasies of racial supremacy by projecting their imaginations onto the bodies of Sri Lankan women (Stoler 1995, 137).

If readers of Foucault necessarily walk away with the general conclusion that race, gender, and culture are socially constructed, then readers of Durba Ghosh learn to see this conclusion at work in British India. "British policy," Ghosh contends, "deployed the dynamic and discursive category of "race" in order to reify the categories of "British" and "Indian" and the attendant rights and privileges associated with each" (Ghosh 2006, 10). My project explores the way in which the Lebanese state constructs the discourse of the Serlankiyye in order to distinguish Sri Lankan domestic workers from the Lebanese and to exclude them from the rights and privileges afforded to the Lebanese people. Additionally, Foucault applied the technique of

“genealogy” to discursive forms of power. Post-colonial theorists, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, have used Foucault’s “genealogies” to undermine European notions of a unified and linear historical progression in which Europe peoples are constructed as superior and more “developed” than colonial subjects (Chakrabarty 2000). Thus, postcolonial theorists have been able to disrupt European narratives of modernity in which the subaltern subject thrives under European colonial power. Similarly, I contend that Lebanese discourse seeks to discipline Sri Lankans and construct Sri Lankans as ‘deviant’ in order to reaffirm its own domination, and not, as argued by Said, for stated reasons for altruism

Furthermore, similar to Durba Ghosh, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, I argue that the Serlankiyye becomes the object against which Lebanese society defines itself as “good.” This relationship explains the constant disciplining of Sri Lankan MDWs and their relegation to heterotopic spaces in order to construct a utopic Lebanese society. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that “post-Enlightenment states justified the deprivation of rights and imprisonment of criminals by describing the process by which punishment would graciously rehabilitate criminals into productive members of society” (Foucault 1975, 23-26). In this process, the criminal becomes the subject of knowledge. Said argues that to “justify the subjection of colonized peoples, Orientalism undergirded impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination” (Said 1993, 194). My project combines Foucault’s criminals with Said’s colonized subjects, since Sri Lankan MDWs are ultimately criminalized through the logics that constitute the subject formation of the Serlankiyye.

Most critically, however, my project incorporates Gayatri Spivak’s claim that in Foucault’s work “the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness” (Spivak 1988, 277).

Unlike the majority of literature on Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, including Ray Jureidini, Nayla Moukarbel and a host of human rights organizations, I emphasize the voices of Sri Lankan MDWs as they experience, navigate, inhabit and subvert the way in which Lebanese discourse attempts to produce Serlankiyye subjecthood. Thus, in my discussion of *lajja* I strive to avoid presenting Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers as an “Other” and inaugurating their Othered subjecthood.

Furthermore, I acknowledge Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern subject cannot speak without being “gifted” the ability by the “benevolent colonial intellectual” (Spivak 1988). She argues that constructing subaltern subjecthood is consistent “with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be mute as ever” (Spivak 1988, 295). Spivak draws on the work of Jacques Derrida, which contends that “European ethnocentrism in the constitution of the Other... [is] the European Subject’s tendency” (Derrida 1967) and identifies that tendency as problematic. I acknowledge that the problem that the subaltern woman cannot speak is not an issue that is solvable through my text. It can only be addressed through a change in the historical and discursive circumstances that protect its production. Nevertheless, in Chapter 2, I strive to tackle this issue by discrediting the Lebanese voices that attempt to construct Sri Lankan subjecthood and by rendering visible the racialized, gendered and classed systems that constitute this process.

In Chapter 3, I emphasize the voices of Sri Lankans in a way that does not frame their experience as reacting specifically to the Lebanese construction of the Serlankiyye. Although the Sri Lankan MDWs I spoke with do claim that their practice of *lajja* is in line with the quest to



construct Sri Lankan subjecthood, through my ethnography I demonstrate the way in which the (re)articulation of *lajja* in Lebanon differs from the way in which it is produced in Sri Lanka.

Thus, in Lebanon, the subaltern Sri Lankan woman's attempt to "speak" is informed by Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity through which Sri Lankan migrants rearticulate *lajja* as informed by both their Sri Lankan understandings and their Lebanese conditions within a Third Space (Bhabha 1994). While the rearticulation of *lajja* demonstrates this Third Space discursively, the existence of alternate spaces, or counterspaces, for Sri Lankan workers represents the Third Space physically. These hybrid formations are in line with Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak independently of colonial apparatuses, given what Bhabha details as the complex systems of exchange and interrelation that construct "culture." Thus, MDWs both inhabit and reject elements of Lebanese discursive and territorial hegemony through the rearticulation of *lajja* and the formation of counterspaces.

My project seeks to de-essentialize Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers and convey their thoughts and experiences about *lajja* as they were relayed to me. Nevertheless, in choosing to focus on the concept of *lajja* I recognize that *lajja* could be interpreted as an "essential" component of Sri Lankan subjecthood. Thus, I stress that *lajja* is merely one of the social forms Sri Lankan MDWs use to navigate their lives in Lebanon and that the articulation of *lajja* differs both based on the context within which it is produced and who it is produced by. In line with Bhabha's concept of "ambivalence" (Bhabha 1994), the women I spoke with inhabited elements of the tropes the Lebanese use to produce the Serlankiyye without paying homage to the Lebanese. Instead, the women viewed these tropes, including that of *lajja*, as a product of their own values.

This belief both undermines the power commanded by the Lebanese construction of the Serlankiyye and perpetuates it by encouraging the Sri Lankan women I spoke with to continue undertaking similarly misunderstood acts. Ultimately, my approach throughout this project is best understood by Saba Mahmood's proposition that a subject's exercise of agency is a product of the social forces that constitute its subjecthood (Mahmood 2004).

## **II. CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP ON SRI LANKAN MDWs IN LEBANON**

The lives of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon are largely undocumented by academics and scholars and currently remain the domain of human rights organizations and reports. Throughout my project and prior, I came to recognize two primary authors in the field: Ray Jureidini and Nayla Moukarbel. Lina Abu Habib and Monica Smith have also written on the topic. Notably, three of these authors are Lebanese and none Sri Lankan.

“Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of ‘Contract Slavery’?” written by Ray Jureidini and Nayla Moukarbel is the first comprehensive academic overview on Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon. Through an analysis of 70 interviews with Sri Lankan women in Lebanon, Jureidini and Moukarbel argue that “the living conditions, how they are treated by their employers, and how the legal and administrative arrangements of these workers have facilitated the poor conditions and entrapment which many encounter” (Jureidini 2004, 581) and can be classified as “contract slavery.” In this vein, the two authors recognize both race and gender as crucial factors undergirding the discrimination of Sri Lankan MDWs.

They mention the existence of a racialized wage hierarchy in the labor market and the racialized term ‘Serlankiyye,’ while recognizing that gender plays a significant role in both determining intra-household relations and encouraging Sri Lankan women to leave their country

due to “a poor lifestyle at home and the abuse of a drunken husband” (Jureidini 2004, 587).

Jureidini and Moukarbel also highlight the tensions that arise from the fact that the Sri Lankan MDW’s ‘home’ in Lebanon is also her workplace (Jureidini 2004, 585), subsequently highlighting the role of migration in distinguishing between the previous Arab migrant worker populations that have decreased due to sectarian fears in Lebanon and the current MDW populations from Asia. Furthermore, they note the obstacles regarding conducting fieldwork on Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon, specifically the difficulty of accessing the homes of Lebanese employers to interview MDWs.

Primarily, however, their work provides comprehensive insight into the structural “violence or threat of violence” of the *kefala* system and the extent to which it can be classified as slavery. In their analysis of the *kefala* system, they provide detailed information into its legal and administrative underpinnings, highlight the existence of three categories of MDWs: ‘live-ins,’ ‘freelancers’ and ‘runaways,’ and explore the types of employer abuse associated with each category. They also conduct a theoretical exploration of the extent to which the conditions of MDWs in Lebanon can be classified as slavery by analyzing the various acts of violence that occur in the employer’s home, the Detention Center, the recruitment agency and other Lebanese spaces. They conclude that “they did not find as much evidence of direct physical abuse as expected” (Jureidini 2004, 598), and instead focus on “denial of freedom” and “exploitative working conditions” as forms of psychological abuse.

Similarly, Lina Abu Habib’s short piece “The Use and Abuse of Female Domestic Workers from Sri Lanka in Lebanon” (1998) underscores the difficulties of tracking the “road from Sri Lanka to Beirut” (Abu Habib 1998, 53) given the “lack of documentation or research” (Abu Habib 1998, 53). Nevertheless, she is able to use fieldwork and secondary research to

investigate the financial exploitation of Sri Lankan MDWs in the process of migration. Abu Habib outlines the abuses Sri Lankan MDWs face in Lebanon, which include physical and sexual abuse, exclusion from labor law and unpaid overtime work. She states that “there is very little a Sri Lankan maid can do except run away without her passport and travel documents” (Abu Habib 1998, 54). Most critically, Abu Habib highlighted that up until 1998 NGOs had denied the presence of Sri Lankan MDW abuse in Lebanon. Her piece is fundamentally a call for researchers and human rights organizations to open their eyes to the abuse of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon.

Nayla Moukarbel’s dissertation, “Sri Lankan Housemaids in Lebanon: A Case of ‘Symbolic Violence’ and ‘Everyday Forms of Resistance,’” provides an admirably extensive ethnographic study of the relationship between Lebanese madams and Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon. Her focus is on the power dynamic between two women who have been tasked with responsibility over the household. She employs Bourdieu’s notions of ‘symbolic violence’ and ‘habitus’ in exploring the different ways in which Lebanese madams manipulate the classed and racialized power dynamic between them and their worker to establish dominance. I found her work extremely valuable in providing me additional insight into how Lebanese employers discuss, conceptualize and strategize their relationships with their workers. Although not directly discussed, Moukarbel’s work provoked me to ask questions about gendered national identity and its role in the production of the Serlankiyye.

In a similar vein, Monica Smith’s piece “Erasure of Sexuality and Desire: State Morality and Sri Lankan Migrants in Beirut,” Lebanon provides “a critical analysis into state and non-state interventions into the intimate and sexual lives of Sri Lankan migrant women in Beirut and interrogates the ways that normative ideals of heterosexual marriage and family are regulated

and enforced transnationally” (Smith 2010, 378). She argues that state and non-state actors impose Sri Lankan normative ideals of sexuality as evidenced when a key United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report omits references to healthy MDW sexual life in later drafts.

Smith investigates three reasons for this omission. Firstly, “a desire to make migrant women appear to be as vulnerable to HIV as possible to ensure that AIDS remained on the UN agenda” (Smith 2010, 382) and secondly, “a fear that if governments were informed through the report that migrant women willingly engaged in sex abroad, there would be negative repercussions for women” (Smith 2010, 382). Thirdly, and according to Smith, most critically, she explores the importance of “moral notions of instilling proper values in migrant women” (Smith 2010, 382), such as motherhood and monogamy, based on the Sri Lankan moral norm *lajja-baya*. Smith argues that *lajja-baya* disempowers women in Sri Lanka, but in Lebanon, “most women support each other’s new attire, mechanisms and relationships” (Smith 2010, 383). Thus, she argues that by silencing the voices of women who “deviate from the norm” (Smith 2010, 379), state and non-state organizations subject MDWs to sexual violence, assault and the denial of access to sexual health instruments.

In my project, I propose a critical intervention into the existing literature on the topic summarized above. While I recognize the value of these works, I posit that each piece identifies the Sri Lankan MDW as an oppressed subject, necessarily imposing a resistance analytic on the lives of workers and further subjecting them to the one-dimensional subjecthood produced by Lebanese discourse, which, too, frames them as either oppressed or resisting. I argue that although scholars support MDWs on “ethical grounds,” they, too, are complicit in reproducing

the discourses of rationality and resistance that structure the Sri Lankan MDW experience in Lebanon.

After rereading Moukarbel's work several times, particularly as a Sri Lankan woman, I recognized both factual inaccuracies in her piece – a claim that Sri Lanka ranks “among the 30 poorest countries in the world” (Moukarbel 2007, 24), along with normative subjectivities specific to her position as a Lebanese woman who grew up with “maids” within the socializations of Lebanese racial discourse. In this vein, even her vignettes on Sri Lankan “resistance” are extrapolated through narrations of Lebanese employers. Thus, my project hopes to complement her work by relaying the voices of Sri Lankan workers in settings more intimate than those accessed by the Lebanese academics who have published on the topic. Furthermore, through analyzing Moukarbel's book, I recognized a distinct rhetoric of Lebanese supremacy and pity for Sri Lankans that resonated through her vignettes and implicitly in the way in which she described Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan workers. As a student in Middle East Studies, I became curious about the way in which Sri Lankan and Lebanese anti-colonial attempts to construct a national identity intersect in the Sri Lankan MDW experience in Lebanon.

Crucially, both her work and that of Jureidini's, advocate for reform within the legal system. They view resistance as an act of an actor who seeks autonomy within a rights-based framework. Alternatively, I argue that compliance with the legal system is ultimately not useful for MDWs and that a reformation of the legal system – incorporating the domestic work into the labor law – may only yield minor changes in the way court cases are adjudicated. I argue that this because the legal system is not objective and that as long as racist judges reach verdicts over MDW lawsuits, MDWs will be incarcerated for crimes that they did not commit. In this vein, while employers who accuse MDWs of being irrational and NGOs/scholars who advocate that

MDWs be rational by using the legal system are on different ends of the spectrum of rationality, both groups still use rationality as the norm to which MDWs must subscribe. Rationality, in both cases, means complying with an authority through legal means.

Smith's dissertation importantly highlights the need to address issues of sexual health. However, her discussion of *lajja* and Sri Lankan moral normativity struck me as a particularly narrow interpretation of Sri Lankan MDW practices. Her suggestion that Sri Lankan women are liberated through sexual freedom in Lebanon resembles colonial discourse in which colonizers used the "lacking" freedom, particularly sexual, of subaltern women to justify the colonial project. Furthermore, it assumes distinct Lebanese and Sri Lankan moral normativities, thus falling into the Othering "Clash of Civilizations" discourse condemned by many postcolonial theorists including Spivak and Talal Asad. Given my theoretical approach, I explore the practice of *lajja* not as indicative of a sexist Sri Lankan morality, but as a complicated concept that is rearticulated in ways that combine the Lebanese and Sri Lankan experiences of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon.

Crucially, Smith proposes that Sri Lankan MDW "sexual transgressions" are either acts of resistance or coping mechanisms. Evidently, she assumes that resistance and coping are both rooted in transgressing or defying norms. Instead, I argue that the women I spoke with inhabit so-called oppressive norms, such as *lajja*, as a way of navigating their lives respectfully and thus, empowering themselves in the process. Empowerment, therefore, can stem from both resisting and inhabiting social norms. In this project, I argue that to an extent, migration to Lebanon does not allow Sri Lankan MDWs to shed the shackles of *lajja*; instead, *lajja* and its normative connotations are redirected from a gendered dynamic between men and women to the classed and racialized dynamic between Lebanese madams and MDWs.

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Overall, my project seeks to disrupt the liberal-secular analytics of resistance and oppression that undergird the existing scholarship on Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon and propose an approach that involves conceptualizing a subject's agency as necessarily structured by the social forces that constitute the Sri Lankan MDW's subjecthood. In this case, the complex relationships and power dynamics at work in the diverse experiences of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon. In Chapter 3, I discuss how Lebanese discourse constructs the Serlankiyye at the intersection of Lebanese and Sri Lankan anti-colonialist, nationalist ideologies, in a space where the former commands territorial and discursive authority. In Chapter 4, I investigate the ways in which Sri Lankan MDWs practice *lajja* to navigate their experiences in Lebanon.



### **Chapter 3: “Maybe it’s Just Stupidity” Spatializing Serlankiyye Subjectivities**

In this chapter, I analyze the production of the “Serlankiyye” through three specific characteristics: dirt, irrationality and guilt. I argue that these characteristics are produced through the spatial dynamics of containment, intersection and displacement, respectively. The way in which the Serlankiyye is reproduced within each dynamic is determined by the relationship between the dominant discursive agent and the Sri Lankan MDW. Firstly, the Serlankiyye is produced as dirty through a discourse that considers Sri Lankan MDWs unclean. Given that dirt is intrinsically aesthetic, the evaluation of “dirt” can be accessed by any responsible aesthetic actor. As unclean objects, MDWs are contained heterotopically in both public and private spaces, through separate pews at church and maid’s rooms within homes. Containment thus undermines the public/private binary and justifies the need for colonial disciplinary mechanisms that establish Lebanese domination.

Secondly, MDWs are produced as irrational/stupid within a spatial dynamic of intersection. It is at moments when Lebanese employers perceive that an MDW has challenged, is challenging or will be challenging Lebanese disciplinary mechanisms that the Serlankiyye is produced as irrational. Irrationality is thus produced through a perceived threat to the established power dynamic between employers and Sri Lankan MDWs. By constructing the MDW as irrational, Lebanese employers are able to delegitimize MDW behavior.

Finally, the Serlankiyye is produced as guilty within a spatial dynamic of physical displacement. If an MDW is perceived to have successfully challenged Lebanese power structures, particularly through running away and stealing, she is constructed as guilty. Running away is the physical displacement of the body, while stealing is the physical displacement of an

object considered Lebanese property. In this chapter I argue that guilt involves an assumption about intentionality that is ultimately determined by legal authorities and state institutions. Thus, by producing the Serlankiyye as guilty, the Lebanese state is able to justify direct and extended containment in the form of detention. Ultimately, this chapter investigates the contiguous levels through which the Serlankiyye is produced as dirty, irrational and guilty, and in doing so the chapter demonstrates how containment (incarceration overseen by employers and private owners of Lebanese establishments) is transformed through intersection and displacement into detention (incarceration by the state).

By producing the Serlankiyye, Lebanese individuals and institutions are able to justify the heterotopia of deviation within which Sri Lankan MDWs are placed. Foucault argues that a heterotopia of deviation is created for “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (Foucault 1986, 25). This system of Otherizing relegates MDWs to marginal spaces both within the household and beyond. By assigning MDWs to these spaces, employers simultaneously assume that MDWs are deviant, specifically dirty, irrational and guilty, and also force them to be so through confinement. Deviancy, thus, is a result of the discrepancy between the social norms Lebanese employers use to evaluate Sri Lankan MDWs and the characteristics they assume are inherent to Sri Lankan MDWs.

In Chapter 1, I explained that the practice of owning an MDW is a core daily activity through which elite Lebanese women across the sectarian spectrum relate to one another. Thus, I argue that “maid relationality” and the subsequent social production of the Serlankiyye are necessary components of inter-sectarian national unity amongst the upper and upper middle class Lebanese women I interacted with. Critically, the social production of this discourse by upper and upper-middle class women also finds legitimacy in state legal institutions pertaining to Sri

Lankan migrant domestic worker life in Lebanon, particularly the *kefala* system, the lack of laws concerning migrant domestic worker rights, the lack of citizenship for MDWs and, finally, the designation of General Security to handle MDW affairs (Hamill 2011). As a result, the Serlankiyye plays a distinct role in the production of Lebanese national unity as lived practice and is reproduced beyond the realms of both upper and upper-middle class Lebanese women and state legal institutions. In fact, the Serlankiyye has been normalized within Lebanese discourse as a term that is used throughout Lebanese society and is interchangeable with the qualities that constitute it – dirt, irrationality/stupidity and guilt. By placing the Serlankiyye within a heterotopia of deviation, Lebanese society is able to construct a utopic image of itself that is distinct from the Serlankiyye and what it represents.

I investigate the ways in which the Serlankiyye is constructed as dirty, irrational/stupid and guilty in a space where Lebanese normativities command territorial and discursive authority. I argue that by producing the Serlankiyye and subsequently rationalizing the relegation of Sri Lankan workers to a heterotopic space, Lebanese society is able to produce an image of itself distinct from what the Serlankiyye constitutes. I have organized this chapter into three primary sections based on the three characteristics and spatializations through which the Serlankiyye is constructed.

## **I. PRODUCING DIRT THROUGH CONTAINMENT**

In producing the Serlankiyye as dirty, Lebanese entities, including public officials, private recruitment agencies and private employees, assume that MDWs are inherently dirty and force them to be so in order to justify placing them within a heterotopia of deviation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> According to Mary Douglas, “dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (Douglas 1966, 44). Dirt is therefore a

Additionally, Lebanese institutions and employers use the discourse of maternalism in order to demonstrate an effort to correct MDW deviance. Nevertheless, the Lebanese effort to “help” is not structurally designed to be successful given that MDWs are continually segregated regardless. This structural failure implies that the Serlankiyye is inherently, unchangeably and timelessly dirty and thus reaffirms its placement within the heterotopia of deviation.

Lebanese institutions and individuals engage in corrective methods through the discourse of maternalism. Maternalism is “an indirect form of power; it advocates affection and care while, in fact, reinforcing the employer’s superiority in opposition to the worker’s inferiority” (Moukarbel 2007, 127). Thus, Lebanese institutions and individuals employ corrective methods not to “correct,” but to reaffirm the need to correct. This is evident in the understanding that Serlankiyyes never actually become clean (Moukarbel 2007), despite being “taught” how to be so. Simultaneously, by constructing MDWs as dirty children, Lebanese employers cultivate the feeling of gratitude in MDWs, who they claim to care for “like my own child,” according to Lebanese employer, Karima. Nevertheless, the presence of a maternalistic dynamic between two grown adults demonstrates the lack of respect Lebanese institutions and individuals have for Sri Lankan MDWs.

Maternalism is also evident in the use of the term “girl” in reference to MDWs by employers, recruitment agents and state institutions alike, along with the terms “mama” and “baba” by MDWs in reference to employers. By infantilizing MDWs, Lebanese employers and state institutions are able to justify the production of the Serlankiyye as dirty, irrational and

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symbol of the “inappropriate elements” rejected by a particular system. In this case, Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in the Lebanese discursive system. Douglas argues for a hierarchical understanding of social relations based on categories. That which is dirty threatens to take apart categories, therefore dirt comes from category error. Evidently, the production of the Serlankiyye as dirty preempts the challenge Sri Lankan MDWs are perceived to pose to established structures of Lebanese social life.

guilty, demonstrate the perpetual need for “correction” and reaffirm MDW existence within the heterotopia of deviation.

The following paragraph details the sequence of events that occur when a Serlankiyye expressed her desire to leave her designated employer. It is quoted from Nayla Moukarbel’s ethnographic work. For the sake of this chapter, I will call the employer “Yasmine” and the worker “Priyanka.”

*Yasmine: General Security gave me her passport at the airport. She came out with a plastic bag only. She didn’t smell, I don’t know if she was dirty. From the airport directly to the bath. The bath was hot, ready for her. I bathed her, I had prepared a shampoo for her against lice. Her clothes all of them I took them and threw them in the garbage. Because she was skinny I gave clothes from my daughter before I could buy her new ones. I taught her how to take a bath. I think that they take a bath with their clothes. When she stepped into the bathtub she had still her panties and bra on. I closed the curtain and told her to take them off, and I gave her shampoo and a sponge to clean her body. She was shy, trying to hide her breasts and... you know... I also taught her how to brush her teeth. She took her bath.*

*At first my husband put her on the dining table with us. I told him, haram (poor her). First of all, the house is small... Then she took a table to the balcony and told me: ‘Madame I like sitting there.’ She took her plate, when we served, all of us, she took her plate and sat outside. She was great. But their odour! She doesn’t remove the hair under her arms. In the beginning, as she is always wearing a T-shirt, I did not notice. Then I cut her underarm hair with scissors. If my husband sees them, he’ll go crazy, he will kick her out! How is she going to smell in the summer? She [the housemaid] did not react. Then the next day, I told her: ‘Take, this is*

*shaving machine, go shave.’ She said: ‘No Madame’ and I don’t know what... I replied: ‘Go shave because this hair brings bad odour of sweat.’ So you have to go into disgusting details. For instance, she does not remove the hair on her legs. And they look scary! I told her: ‘Stop wearing skirts, we are not obliged to be confronted with this sight, wear pants.’ I like her to be presentable. I tell her: “You are beautiful.” I like her to look smart. I tell her to tie her hair in the morning. It is so long, disgusting. I want her to cut her hair but I think, this one, she will go crazy if I cut her hair, crazy. I make her wash her clothes every day.*



*“KAFA came up with a new soap “Clensen Ozo Trio” especially made for foreign workers in Lebanon, and offered it to customers in a supermarket to see how they would react to it. Sadly enough, people were convinced that their foreign workers need a special soap, while others lashed out at the sales woman and accused them of being racist.” (Retrieved from [blogbaladi.com](http://blogbaladi.com), April 2017).*

The following vignette details the three days I spent at Laila's house during my stay in Beirut.

*During my time in Lebanon I visited several middle to upper-class Lebanese households. Every single middle to upper-class Lebanese household I visited included a small room referred to as the "maid's room." The maid's room was typically located next to the kitchen or a laundry room and had a small, private bathroom. All the maid's rooms I visited included a small bed and a single chair. None of these rooms included windows or exceeded eight meters squared. Nirmala's room resembled a typical Lebanese maid's room. It included a small bed, a single chair, no windows and was located next to the kitchen. The cupboard for cleaning appliances could only be accessed through Nirmala's room.*

*I spent three consecutive days at Laila's house, lounging on the sofa, strolling around the house and innocuously observing my surroundings. I noticed that every time Nirmala decided to return to her room for a break from chores, Laila would demand that she leave the room and help with some new request. One time, Laila called Nirmala to bring her water because she did not want to get up from the living room sofa, located approximately 10 meters from the kitchen. Laila's house included a bell system, through which she could call for Nirmala if she didn't want to physically move or raise her voice. Sometimes, Nirmala would return to her room to speak on the phone and Laila would complain to me that Nirmala was "always on her phone" and "totally useless." During the three days I spent at Laila's (note: I didn't leave the house once), I only recall hearing Nirmala speaking on the phone twice. From speaking with Nirmala in Sinhala while Laila was out, I learned that Laila did not allow Nirmala to cook Sri Lankan food in the house, because it "smelled bad." I also learned that Nirmala did not receive any off-days, as they weren't stipulated in her contract.*

*One of the times I spoke with Nirmala in front of Laila, I asked Laila whether Nirmala could sit in the living room with us, so we could have a conversation. Laila replied, "No." I*



*asked, “Why?” Laila bluntly replied, “Because she is dirty and I don’t want her ruining the covers. Also what would the neighbors think if they walked into the house? That I sit with Serlankiyyes?” I figured it would be wise to refrain from pointing out that, in fact, she did, because I’m a Serlankiyye. She continued, “Also, if she sits with us then she will become too comfortable and think that she is one of us and start acting differently.” I also noticed that every time Laila left the house, she would lock her room. She suggested I lock my room too, “in case the girl takes something.” She noted that I have a tendency to leave my stuff everywhere and door unlocked, which would incite Nirmala to steal. Laila’s comments imply that domestic workers’ desire to steal often gets the best of them if not preempted by the employers.*

*Throughout these three days, I noticed that Laila made sure that Nirmala was kept busy during every possible moment, often by creating tasks for her that weren’t particularly urgent, but were presented with a tone of urgency. Laila prohibited Nirmala from cooking Sri Lankan food, claiming that it “smelled bad.” Sri Lankan food has a distinctly strong aroma that differs drastically from the milder Lebanese cuisine. Presumably unaccustomed to Sri Lankan food, Laila refused to have her house contaminated by such “different,” thus, “smelly” aromas. She also ensured that Nirmala could not “escape” by preventing her from taking days off. Furthermore, Laila called Nirmala “dirty” while Nirmala was standing next to her.*

*By claiming that Sri Lankan food “smells bad” and by characterizing Nirmala as “dirty,” Laila justifies the spatial exclusion of MDWs within her own house. MDWs cannot physically share the same space or cook their own foods in fear that “Sri Lankan culture” will contaminate Laila’s Lebanese household.*

The two above vignettes demonstrate that Lebanese employers construct Sri Lankans as “dirty” by evaluating the way in which they engage with the rituals Lebanese employers consider

to be fundamental practices of daily life, such as showering, hair growth, cooking, eating and sitting. By using repetitive rituals, Yasmine is able to justify both the need for continual separation between her and her MDW and the need for continual disciplining of the deviant.

In the first vignette, Yasmine addresses Priyanka as if the latter is inherently dirty. Immediately, she details the various hygiene rituals that she has taught Priyanka, subsequently implying that Priyanka does not know how to perform these acts independent of Yasmine's intervention. Through this maternalistic dynamic, Yasmine implies that her own customs, specifically those of hygiene, are superior to those of Priyanka. Critically, Yasmine homogenizes the dynamics at work in the closed space of the bathroom and evaluates Priyanka's response against her own personal priority to ensure that Priyanka showers. She does not mention the power dynamic inherent to the relationship between her and her maid, which may explain Priyanka's shyness. Furthermore, Yasmine does not recognize Priyanka as prioritizing modesty, "trying to hide her breasts," more than Yasmine's desire to clean her. Without proposing alternative explanations for Priyanka's behavior, Yasmine assumes that "I think that they take a bath with their clothes on," implying that the primary explanation for Priyanka's unwillingness to undress is her innate ignorance of how to 'correctly' perform hygiene rituals.

As Asad puts it, the production of the deviant or "savage was not merely an abstraction for purposes of logical contrast [with the Lebanese]; he [she] was someone toward whom one could and should behave appropriately" (Asad 2007, 34). By producing the Serlankiyye as dirty, Yasmine is also able to reaffirm her own superiority both in contrast with Priyanka and by demonstrating her so-called benevolence in 'teaching' Priyanka how to bathe. Thus, the disciplinary mechanisms used by the Lebanese employers are more telling of a need to reaffirm Lebanese domination than the reasons for why Priyanka did not take her clothes off.

Once Priyanka is constructed as inherently dirty, even Yasmine's attempt to wash her cannot successfully alleviate her of her dirt. This inability highlights that, like the dynamic between the colonizer and the subaltern subject, Lebanese disciplinary mechanisms are primarily a form of asserting domination, as opposed to demonstrating benevolence. Subsequently, Yasmine proposes spatially segregating Priyanka from the rest of the family. Instead of stating that she intentionally separated Priyanka, she remarks that Priyanka in fact chose to separate herself based on the assumption that her inherent place is within the heterotopia. Whether or not this was the case, by indicating that separation between Yasmine and Priyanka is appropriate through the term "great," Yasmine reaffirms that Priyanka belongs to a marginal space. Yasmine's desire to portray the situation as Priyanka's 'choice' can serve to preempt any guilt the former may incur from having to actively marginalize Priyanka, particularly given that her husband had already approved of Priyanka's presence amongst the family.

Yasmine reaffirms her conviction that Priyanka belongs to a marginal space when, immediately after stating "she [Priyanka] was great" for voluntarily separating herself, Yasmine continues "But their odour!" By using the plural, Yasmine reestablishes the understanding that all Serlankiyyes, including Priyanka, smell dirty. In both vignettes, Yasmine and Laila imply that "odour" or a "bad smell" are the necessary product of an MDW's inherent dirtiness. In the first vignette, after condemning Priyanka's odour, Yasmine proceeds to explain her assessment through an extended evaluation of Priyanka's hair. The fact that hair grows back and cannot be eliminated indefinitely supports the tension between Yasmine's disciplinary attempts and the MDW's inherent dirtiness. By virtue of the nature of hair, Yasmine is forced to continuously discipline Priyanka, "cut her underarm hair with scissors," insist that she shave because "this hair brings bad odour of sweat" or that she "wear pants." Furthermore, Yasmine says "this hair" as

opposed to “hair,” implying that Priyanka’s hair in particular is predisposed to smell bad. Furthermore, in the second vignette, by preventing Nirmala from cooking Sri Lankan food because “it smells bad,” Laila ascribes Nirmala’s dirtiness to her nationality. The link between Nirmala’s inherent dirt and that of her nation’s cuisine underscores the processes of racialization that produce the Serlankiyye.

Notably, the disciplinary processes Yasmine imposed on Priyanka all involve removing, covering or rejecting negatively perceived products of Priyanka’s body. Through attempting to control the substances produced by Priyanka’s body, Yasmine is able to explicitly characterize Priyanka as inherently dirty. Furthermore, Yasmine notes that if her husband saw Priyanka’s hair “he will kick her out,” explicitly recognizing that the appropriate response to dirtiness is exclusion and relegation to a heterotopic space. By constructing the Serlankiyye, Yasmine is able to spatially segregate Priyanka along with everything affiliated with her, from her hair to her food.



*“Three workers’ rooms. The photos are stitched panoramas – the only way to capture the entirety of the rooms due to the very confined space.” (Retrieved from Bassem Saad’s case study in Failed Architecture, April 2017).*

The construction of a maid's room in every Lebanese homes and the legal provisions for the maid's room in Lebanese Construction Law explicitly reaffirm the idea that MDWs are viewed as inherently and necessarily existing within a heterotopia of deviation. Bassem Saad notes that "the prevalent attitude amongst clients and architects holds that the domestic worker and their dwelling spaces belong to the category of non-aesthetic service-related elements in a design that must be cleverly concealed behind several layers of architecture to ensure that they are rendered as inconspicuous as possible" (Saad 2016).

He also states that architects and floor plans intentionally separate the maid's room from the general space of the house and design convoluted paths to enter the room. This effectively creates a "forced invisibility behind multiple layers of insidious architectural barriers such as sealed corridors and narrow windows" (Saad 2016) and excludes MDWs from the daily rhythms of the main house accessible to what Saad refers to as "full-status inhabitants" (Saad 2016). Employers deny MDWs access to the house's daily rhythms, but continue to normatively evaluate MDWs based on the ways in which they engage with these very daily rhythms and rituals. By structurally preventing MDWs from assimilating into the house's rhythms, rituals and norms, employers are able to continually assess MDW practice of these rituals and norms as deviant.

Saad further situates the maid's room as a heterotopia of deviation by describing its "controlled openings and containment of content that is not to be made public" (Saad 2016) that requires and optimizes "employer control over worker mobility within the household" (Saad 2016). In demonstrating that MDW confinement to the heterotopia is justified through the construction of the Sri Lankan as "dirty" (Saad 2016), it is crucial to note that maid's rooms are typically accessed either through the kitchen or through the laundry room. Both spaces are

reserved for the cleansing of non-human objects, such as dishes and laundry, respectively. By ensuring that maid's rooms are only accessible through spaces that are designed to contain and eradicate dirt, Lebanese Construction Law illustrates the maid's room, too, as a space designed to contain and invisibilize dirt.

When I explicitly ask Laila why Nirmala cannot sit with us, she matter-of-factly replies, "Because she is dirty and I don't want her ruining the covers." Nevertheless, she continues, "Also, if she sits with us then she will become too comfortable and think that she is one of us and start acting differently." Her response demonstrates the construction of dirt as a direct justification for relegating Nirmala to the heterotopic spaces to which she is assumed to belong – the maid's room. As an inherent product of the heterotopia, Nirmala cannot be comfortable within the spaces reserved for "normal" people." By implying that Nirmala is false in thinking that she is "one of us" and that her acting differently is thus inappropriate, Laila insinuates that the Serlankiyyes cannot assimilate into the norm, even if provided the physical space to do so, because they are fundamentally different.

These vignettes illustrate dirt as a quality related to the spatial dynamic of containment. Containment is justified through the assumption of dirt and dirt is created by the imposition of containment. Since the bodies of MDWs are simultaneously inscribed with the mutually reinforcing attributes of dirtiness and containment, the heterotopic relegation of the Serlankiyye transcends physical space and travels with the Sri Lankan MDW as she moves around both the household and public spaces. Thus, the Sri Lankan MDW is not merely confined or relegated to a heterotopia of deviation. Instead she embodies it and becomes equivalent to it through the assumption that she is inherently deviant and cannot be reformed.

Therefore, the construction of Sri Lankans as “dirty” does not refer to literal dirt. Laila and Yasmine, along with all the other employers I spoke with, task their MDWs with the responsibility of cleaning the house while accusing them of being dirty. By contrastively representing Sri Lankans as dirty yet tasking them with cleaning the house, Lebanese employers ensure that Sri Lankan employers cannot perform domestic work successfully due to their inherent dirtiness. This contradiction illustrates dirt’s role as a symbol of class and morality, as opposed to a reference to the lack of physical hygiene. The disciplinary mechanisms employed by Laila are thus more telling of the state’s need to produce Sri Lankans as deviant in order to justify domination than of Laila’s altruistic desire to care for Nirmala “like her own child.” By normalizing their domination, employers are able to reaffirm their fantasies of racial supremacy by projecting their imaginations onto the bodies of Sri Lankan women (Stoler 1995, 137). Bassem Saad dramatically remarks that “the racialized and gendered body is forced into becoming a troglodyte in the heart of the household” (Saad 2016), reaffirming the idea that the maid’s room itself does not fully exhaust the MDW’s placement within a heterotopia of deviation. Instead, the Serlankiyye body is separated from spaces of the “norm” through its very existence, regardless of physical location.

## **Public Space**

The Serlankiyye body’s quality – the quality of being “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966, 44) – is manifested through a moving heterotopia and made explicit through the way MDWs are treated by officials in public spaces. Lebanon has several “no-go zones” within restaurants, cafés, beach hangouts and even public swimming pools. “No-go zones” are areas into which MDWs are not permitted access. Most MDWs are only allowed entry into restaurants



when they are accompanied by their employers. Notably, the Filipino ambassador's wife was asked to leave a swimming pool because she was mistaken for an MDW, indicating the "overt fear of contamination from the bodies of these 'Others'" (Moukarbel 2007, 145) amongst the Lebanese. Since the Serlankiyye is a racialized object constructed by both assuming and imposing dirt on Brown bodies, all MDWs, regardless of class status, are produced as embodiments of dirtiness. Furthermore, given that "dirt" in this context is indicative of assumptions about class and morality, the Serlankiyye as a Brown body, regardless of literal wealth bracket, is produced as of an inferior class.

In addition to the "no-go zones," which prevent MDWs from entering public spaces altogether, the Lebanese state carves out specific spaces within public institutions and designates them to MDWs only. A prominent example of this kind of space is the separate room reserved for MDWs at churches. Like the maid's room, the separate church room represents the way in which MDWs (re)produce heterotopic spaces by merely dwelling in a particular place, thus becoming "troglodytes" in the heart of households, churches and other places in which they are provided "less than full-status" access (Saad 2016).

Furthermore, according to an employer named Karima, churches are the only acceptable place for her MDWs to visit outside the house. At church, employers expect that their MDWs will learn "good values." Church, therefore, becomes a disciplining space within which MDWs are told that they are responsible for learning correct morality. Nevertheless, since MDWs are structurally confined to separate rooms within the church space itself, they are assumed to be inherently incapable of learning "good values." The Lebanese state thus uses church segregation to discipline Serlankiyye bodies into understanding their innately subordinate status.

Evidently, Serlankiyye bodies both produce and are produced as heterotopias of deviation in all spaces claimed by the Lebanese state, whether within the household or in public swimming pools, effectively undermining the public/private space binary. The production of heterotopic bodies is justified by associating the Serlankiyye with “dirt.” Foucault crucially notes that heterotopias do not always exhibit coherence. Instead, they construct coherence. Thus, the Serlankiyye is both produced as dirty through the spatial dynamic of containment and is contained because it is assumed to be dirty, establishing an equivalence between the Serlankiyye and dirt. In terms of coherence, the relegation of the Serlankiyye and what it embodies to heterotopic spaces allows the Lebanese nation to perceive itself as a civilized utopia free of undesirables.

## II. PRODUCING IRRATIONALITY THROUGH INTERSECTION

In the vignette, Yasmine constructs Priyanka as “crazy” if the latter were to reject Yasmine’s disciplining procedures. She says, “I want to cut her hair, but I think, this one, she will go crazy if I cut her hair, crazy.” As implied, Yasmine perceives acts that reject control and exclusion to be “crazy” and implies that if Priyanka were to engage in such acts, she too, would be “crazy.” Irrationality is thus produced through the intersection that occurs when an employer interacts with an MDW in order to discipline her and the MDW is perceived as challenging the disciplining and the boundaries of the heterotopia of deviation within which she is placed.

Crucially, Lebanese institutions and employers are responsible for demarcating the boundaries of the heterotopia and, in effect, constructing themselves as the “norm.” Consequently, they are also able to both relegate MDWs to segregated spaces and bring them out as subordinated subjects that can be returned at will, thus controlling the relationship between the

Sri Lankan MDW and the boundaries of containment. When MDWs are perceived as challenging their conditions, they enter a space in which the deviant attempts to intersect with the non-deviant. Nevertheless, the deviant's attempts are in vain given its structural composition as "inherently" deviant.

The bell at Laila's house symbolizes one of the technological surveillance mechanisms (Foucault 1975) used to control Sri Lankan MDWs within the space of the household. Lebanese employers press or ring the bell to draw MDWs out of their heterotopically confined maid's rooms for the sole purpose of performing their inherent function of domestic work. Laila uses the bell to summon Nirmala to fetch water, even when the glass of water she wants is a mere ten meters from the sofa on which she is sitting. Furthermore, the fact that Laila constantly demands Nirmala to leave her room and perform a newly assigned task each time the former returns to the space resembles the fifth criteria of Foucault's "control of activity" – exhaustive use, in which wasting time is considered "a moral offense and economic dishonesty" (Foucault 1975). Thus, Laila determines Nirmala's "morality" through the former's productivity and engagement in domestic work. Rest time or time spent "idly" in the maid's room is perceived as immoral, thus constructing the maid's room as a space of inherent immorality.

Nevertheless, even if Nirmala minimally engages in "rest" time – I only heard Nirmala speak on the phone twice in three days – by virtue of her innate irrationality, Nirmala is produced as inherently unproductive and accused of "always" being on the phone. By "being on the phone," Nirmala is perceived to be challenging her employer's perpetual demand that she performs domestic work. Thus, any act outside of the MDW's sole function of domestic work is cast as unproductive, irrational and a challenge to the normative power structure of the

household in which the Sri Lankan MDW performs only what the Lebanese employer tells her to.

In the moments when Sri Lankan MDWs intersect with Lebanese expectations, the Serlankiyye turns into a challenger and is constructed as “irrational.” By producing Nirmala as both unproductive and irrational, Laila is able to justify additional demands for productivity and continued discipline. By constructing Priyanka as “crazy” for not wanting her hair cut, Yasmine is able to cast Priyanka’s behavior as irrational and justify the extended need to control Priyanka’s physical characteristics. As is evident, irrationality compounds with dirt in order to justify the exclusion of Sri Lankan MDWs from the space of the civilized utopic Lebanese nation.

### **Irrationality as Stupidity**

An employer, Karima, claims that she ensures that her MDWs are safe by telling her driver to follow them when they leave the house. She notes,

*Only thing is, I think I trust Surangani [the Sri Lankan MDW] a little more, she is innocent, but because she is innocent she is also stupid. Anita [the Filipina MDW] is the one who takes charge, but I know she is more dangerous.*

Karima’s description emphasizes the different tropes used to construct MDW irrationality according to “nationality,” and sheds light on the specific ways in which the Sri Lankan “Serlankiyye” is constructed. Sri Lankan workers are constructed as irrational though stupidity and are subsequently perceived as being incapable of independence. The assumption that Sri Lankan MDWs cannot make rational decisions and require surveillance further justifies their exclusion.

Additionally, while Sri Lankan MDWs are considered “worse workers,” they are also viewed as “better maids.” This distinction highlights the difference between a worker and a maid in Lebanese society. Maids are those who are the easiest to “break” and manipulate, while workers are those who produce “quality” work. Since the Serlankiyye is considered synonymous with “maid” and not with “worker,” Sri Lankans are discursively associated with a subjugated status that lacks the productive aspect of performing domestic work. By structurally producing the Serlankiyye as inherently dirty and irrational and by affiliating the Serlankiyye with Sri Lankan MDWs, Lebanese discourse effectively prevents Sri Lankans from becoming “better workers.” Thus, when a Lebanese employer intersects with a Sri Lankan MDW, the irrationality produced takes the specific form of stupidity.

### **Stupid Run-Aways**

The very same discourse applies to the perception surrounding why Sri Lankan MDWs “run away.” In one of Nayla Moukarbel’s vignettes, she details a meeting at a recruitment agency between a male employer, the Sri Lankan embassy consul, an embassy representative and a Sri Lankan MDW. She describes the situation as follows:

*“The contract of the housemaid is for two and a half years. She tried to “run away” four times; the first time only three days after arrival. She claimed she thought she was coming to care for an old woman and found herself, instead, with a family with six children. She tried going down from the balcony twice (they live on the first floor) using a bed sheet. She was caught every time, either right away or later on by the police, who brought her back to her sponsor. She succeeded at the fifth attempt. The meeting is set to decide whether to send the housemaid back to her employers or keep her at the embassy until she travels back to Sri Lanka. The sponsor*

wants her to work for him for another two months and promises to let her go home then. The housemaid wants to leave now for Sri Lanka and doesn't wish to go and work for him anymore. The housemaid is standing by the wall throughout the meeting. She has bruises on her arms and face and is very skinny.

*The recruitment agent asks the employer: Do you hit her?*

*The employer responds, "We do not make hitting our business. I get angry sometimes but I don't hit her. My wife sometimes, maybe. Yes, Madam hits her. Maybe just once a month. But it is only because she upsets my wife. She dropped herself from the balcony. We live on the first floor. She ran away from our house two days ago. She was not like that. She changed these two days [looking at the MDW, hinting that the state she is in, bruises, weak and in tears, is not the employer's doing]. We brought her to help us not to hit her. I take her off her [meaning the wife]. Ask her. There is no problem between us. The only problem is that she runs away.*

*Consul: A woman cannot change in two days. She is obviously not fed properly, beaten...*

*Embassy representative: Was the housemaid paid?*

*Employer: We paid her over \$1000. She asked us to keep the money to take with her. She didn't want to send any more to her husband. I will not let her leave without paying her. She is lying.*

*Embassy representative: No use to try to understand the way they think. We have to step down to their level. She needs the money.*

*Employer: My wife is the one who deals with her. That's why. She does things on purpose to upset my wife. Let me give you an example. We had a new mop. My wife asked her: Where is the new mop? She said she doesn't know. The mop was in the toilet, inside.*

*Embassy representative: Maybe it is just stupidity. [Whispering to Moukarbel: What do you think of the housemaid? She is lying, right?].”*

*Nayla: I don't know.*

*Sponsor: Residency papers, we made them the first year. The second year, no, we'll do them when she leaves. We did not know about the embassy before.... We were nice with her at first. First three days, she runs away. Why? Her papers are with us. She must be stupid to leave. Where does she want to go? Her papers are with us. Then she started being hypocrite, doing things on purpose to upset my wife.*

In this vignette, the Lebanese employer produces the Serlankiyye as “stupid” when she attempts to leave the house. The *kefala* system stipulates that employers are responsible for MDW legal papers, and as a result, MDWs cannot actually go anywhere, as mentioned by the employer. Thus, through the *kefala* system, Lebanese employers ensure that any attempt to leave the household can be produced as stupidity. Critically, however, the ways in which the Lebanese embassy representative, the Lebanese employer and the Sri Lankan consul construct the Serlankiyye as stupid differ, possibly based on a desire to avoid taking responsibility for the worker.

The Lebanese employer repeatedly stresses that the Sri Lankan MDW “purposely” upset his wife, attributing intentionality to the MDW’s actions. By describing the Sri Lankan MDW as “purposely” inflicting harm, the Lebanese employer is concerned with “identifying culpability that can be established through the reconstruction of a particular type of motive” (Asad 2007, 45). According to the *kefala* system and General Security communique, the MDW must “respect the members of the family whom she is working for” and “adapt to the family and its way of

living.” Thus, if an MDW is produced as culpable of having violated these stipulations, the employer is no longer required to take responsibility for the Sri Lankan MDW and the MDW is handed over to the embassy or recruitment agency. Thus, by attributing intentionality and subsequently culpability to the MDW’s actions, the Lebanese employer attempts to exempt himself from liability.

The consul, on the other hand, proposes that it is not reasonable for a “woman to change in two days” stating that she is “obviously not fed properly, beaten.” By attempting to prove employer liability, the consul is able to prevent his embassy from having to take responsibility for the MDW. The Lebanese embassy representative proposes a third option and suggests that “maybe it is just stupidity,” eliminating intentionality and agency from both the Sri Lankan MDW and the Lebanese employer, instead using an “inherent” stupidity to explain the situation. By alleviating both parties of blame and ascribing the misunderstandings to Serlankiyye stupidity, the Lebanese embassy representative is able to both preserve the power dynamic between the Lebanese employer and the Sri Lankan MDW and institutionalize Serlankiyye stupidity as the norm or expected standard.

Intentionality, in this vignette, is ascribed based on the desire of various Lebanese discursive agents to avoid taking responsibility. I will discuss a similar situation in my discussion of guilt in which the Serlankiyye is produced through a complex web of bureaucratic politics between various Lebanese authorities. The vignette above demonstrates the way in which the Serlankiyye is produced as irrational in order to alleviate blame and responsibility from Lebanese actors, subsequently relegating Sri Lankan MDWs to heterotopic spaces in order to sustain an image of a civilized, utopic Lebanese national space.



In the next section, I argue that when the Lebanese state directly perceives an MDW to be displacing an object, either herself or other property of the state, the Serlankiyye is instead produced as guilty. This is due to the sovereign's state monopoly on the ability to decide on a state of exception (Schmitt 1922) in order to attribute the MDW with guilt despite the lack of legal stipulations regarding how to respond when an MDW violates the extra-legal *kefala* system.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in line with the state of exception, when an MDW runs away or steals, she violates the *kefala* system and displaces both the physical and figurative stipulations of the heterotopia that confine her body to a marginal discursive and territorial space beyond the Lebanese nation. By successfully challenging the *kefala* system, she is perceived as undermining normative Lebanese power structures. The Lebanese state is subsequently able to justify the extended incarceration of MDWs in a detention center, overseen directly by state apparatuses.

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<sup>5</sup> The *kefala* system's significant normative power, despite not being legally institutionalized, is related to the "state of exception" as conceptualized by Agamben. According to Agamben, "The state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other" (Agamben 2005, 23). Similarly, the state of exception employed by the Lebanese state in handling MDWs is neither internal nor external to the juridical order, as it contains the very racialized norms that undergird the Lebanese legal system despite itself, being extra-legal. Thus, the extra-legality of the *kefala* system does not undermine the Lebanese legal system. Instead, it is deeply connected to it, therefore questioning the "very limit of the juridical order" (23). Both the Detention Center and the *kefala* system are articulations of Agamben's "state of exception," which performs the function of forming a social group by exploiting fear of diversity. David Campbell argues that "the passage from difference to identity as marked by the rite of citizenship is concerned with the elimination of that which is alien, foreign, and perceived as a threat to the secure state" (Campbell 1992, 42). Agamben's state of exception is based on this process of eliminating that which is perceived as a threat and legitimizes itself in reference to the perceived threat that must be dealt with using exceptional measures. Agamben's state of exception can be used to conceptualize the securitization of the MDW threat in Lebanon, the designated of the GS to deal with MDW affairs and the ultimate ability of the sovereign state to create extra-legal procedures and systems that pertain only to MDWs, such as the *kefala*.

### III. ADLIYEH: PRODUCING AND ASSUMING GUILT

The Serlankiyye is produced as guilty of defying Lebanese normative structures when she successfully engages in acts of displacement. The Lebanese state uses this production of guilt to justify detention and incarceration. In this vein, the motif of guilt as a quality of the Serlankiyye is produced through the spatial dynamic of displacement to justify the spatial dynamic of detention. Detention differs from containment in that it is overseen directly by state institutions. Both detention and containment are institutionalized by various Lebanese institutions, including the General Security, immigration law, labor law, construction law and the extra-legal but normatively fundamental *kefala* system. Unlike containment, however, detention occurs when the Lebanese state itself has defined the MDW as legally deviant of the extra-legal *kefala* system. Thus, the Detention Center is built for MDWs with “legal issues” (Without 2015). Critically, by using a set of regulations that have not been legally institutionalized in order to assess MDW guilt, the Lebanese state implies that the MDW is inherently guilty and does not need to need to be evaluated against the criteria of an established legal code.

The process of producing inherent guilt through detention is as follows: The Serlankiyye body is first produced as dirty through the spatial dynamic of containment. When the Serlankiyye challenges or is perceived to challenge the boundaries of containment, the Lebanese employer produces her as “irrational” and “stupid” by normatively evaluating MDW behavior in a space where the two individuals encounter one another and intersect. Finally, when the Serlankiyye is perceived as successfully challenging her containment and causing displacement, both of her own body and of other objects claimed by the Lebanese household and state, the state intervenes to produce her as guilty and detain her. Evidently, the Lebanese state plays a direct

role in transforming irrationality into guilt, and subsequently providing legal legitimacy for the essentializing, racialized discourses used to produce the Serlankiyye and justify detention.

The assumption of guilt can be demonstrated through a 2006 court case. In 2006, a Beirut judge sentenced a Sri Lankan worker to six months of imprisonment for stealing \$5,000 worth of money and jewelry from the employer – a charge the worker denied. The charge was not supported with any evidence and the employer did not provide details about the stolen items, did not attend the trial session and did not request civil compensation. The court took the fact that the worker “ran away” from the employer to be “circumstantial evidence in furtherance of the accusation of theft” (Without 2015), despite potential alternative explanations for leaving the house, such as unpaid wages or ill-treatment. By interpreting “running away” as circumstantial evidence for guilt in committing another crime – theft – the Lebanese court assumes that the Serlankiyye is guilty before she is proven innocent. In the case of the Serlankiyye, the proof of innocence is not even required, since guilt is considered a critical component of Serlankiyye subjecthood. The spatialized production of the MDW thus culminates in the Detention Center, where dirt through containment is transformed into guilt requiring detention – a form of extended containment administered by the state to mitigate the Serlankiyye threat. The production of the Serlankiyye is a vicious cycle in which the exclusion of Sri Lankan MDWs is continually justified.

The Adliyah Detention Center is a heterotopia of deviation that is both at the margin of Lebanese society and under direct surveillance by the Lebanese state. The following vignette details one of my visits to the Detention Center.

*After a few weeks of helping out at Caritas, Lakshika felt as though she trusted me enough to take me to the main detention center, or shelter – the terms are used interchangeably.*

*We entered a heavily guarded, grey, prison-like building with several floors and no elevator. We walked up six flights of stairs and reached a gate. Lakshika buzzed in and a tall Sri Lankan woman (Shanthi) answered, confirmed it was Lakshika and let us in. The shelter was completely grey, black and white and the metal bars separating the rooms reminded me of the walls of a cage. The shelter was divided into four separate areas: the kitchen, the common room, the MDWs' dormitories and the caretaker's quarters. The shelter housed around 100 Sri Lankan MDWs who had left their respective sponsors for various reasons. The reasons I gathered from my interactions included mental and physical abuse and conflicts with employers.*

*Lakshika and I spent the entire day at the shelter. I noticed that the interactions between the authorities (Lakshika and Shanthi) and the MDWs were incredibly regimented. Breakfast was served at 9am, lunch at 1pm and dinner at 6pm. No exceptions were made. After lunch, MDWs who had been prescribed medication by Lebanese hospitals formed a line in front of Shanthi and waited their turn for her to feed them the medication. Later that day, I asked Shanthi why she had to feed them medication and she replied that they were unlikely to take the medication themselves, and she had to make sure that they did. She maintained a database to record whether each MDW ate all three meals and took her medication in order to preempt further physical health and "psychological" issues. During the afternoon, I sat down with Lakshika and Shanthi and played with Shanthi's child. Shanthi told me that the General Security had established the shelter because MDWs could not be detained with regular Lebanese citizens. Thus, the authorities needed a special place only for migrants.*

*In the evening, I spoke with six different MDWs who made it clear that they would rather be in the shelter than at their employer's home, but they would rather be in the city, specifically*

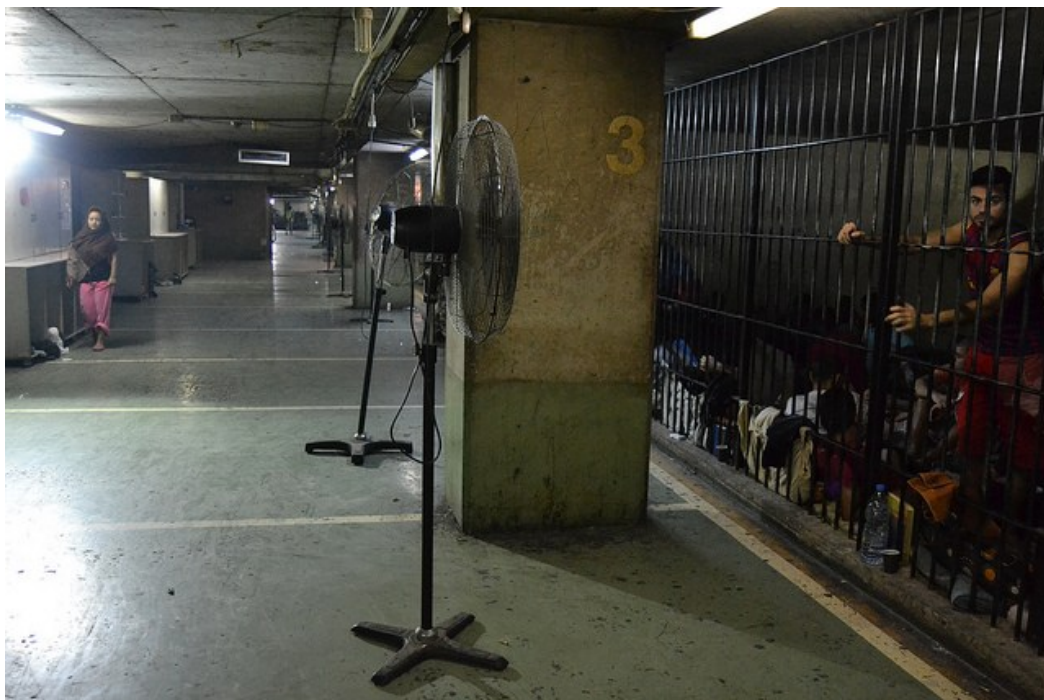
*in Dowra, a migrant labor hub, than in the shelter. I asked one of the MDWs, Rasika, whether she was allowed to leave the shelter. She replied,*

*“No, none of us can because we don’t have our papers with us. Some of our papers are with the employer and some are with Caritas, so we cannot move around freely. Also, some of us are wanted by the General Security for different reasons and it is not safe. If we have to move from here to Lakshika’s, Shanthi or some other Caritas person will come to take us.”*

*After dinner, we thanked Shanthi and the MDW tasked with helping her coordinate the shelter and returned to Lakshika’s. Once we were back, I asked her about the medications. She told me that they were prescribed Lexotanil for diagnoses of being “crazy” or “mentally disturbed.” Mental health stigma is rampant in both Lebanon and Sri Lanka. After returning home, I researched Lexotanil and found out that it was used to help people sleep. I had wondered why the MDWs had returned to their rooms following lunch. I hesitate to determine causality, but the Lexotanil is one possible reason.*



*This photo shows MDWs praying in a cell at the Detention Center.  
(Retrieved from the Lebanese Center for Human Rights website, April 2017.)*



*This photo shows the corridor in between the kitchen area (on the left) and a row of cells (on the right). (Retrieved from journalist Samya Kallub's Flickr, April 2017.)*





*This photo shows an MDW in one of the cells furthest away from the entrance to the Center. (Retrieved from the NOW Lebanon website, April 2017.)*



*This photo shows a General Security officer guarding one of the cells. The Center does not provide equipment to wash clothes and MDWs hang their clothes on railing, as picture above, for drying purposes. (Retrieved from the Lebanese Center for Human Rights website, April 2017.)*

## Not-So-Arbitrary Detention

I argue that what Lebanese policy institutions have termed the “systematic arbitrary detention” of MDWs by the General Security is not in fact “arbitrary.” It is based on and justified through an extended process of constructing the Serlankiyye as dirty, irrational and subsequently guilty. According to the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, the General Security carries out “arbitrary detention” to mitigate illegal immigration despite the fact that this method has proven “ineffective and counterproductive” (Moukarbel 2007). As a result, I contend that continued criminalization is first and foremost a method to justify Lebanese domination and perpetually relegate migrants to heterotopic spaces in order to construct a “legal” utopic Lebanese nation.

Both the General Security and Caritas describe the Detention Center for Foreigners as a temporary “holding facility with an average of 500 detained migrant domestic workers with legal issues. It holds two categories of migrants: those in pre-trial detention and those who have been tried for an offense of a crime in Lebanon and then transferred to the end of their prison term” (Without 2015), typically in preparation for deportation. The Center is run by both the General Security and Caritas. Critically, the fact that many of the MDWs are merely in “pre-trial detention,” and have not been convicted as guilty, but are incarcerated anyway, demonstrates the assumption of inherent Serlankiyye guilt. Furthermore, the physical and behavioral architectures of control and surveillance within the Detention Center resemble those used to contain guilty bodies within Lebanese state prisons.

Foucault describes a heterotopia as “a parallel space, such as a prison, that contains undesirable bodies to make a real utopian space possible” (Foucault 1986). Given that in order to conclude what constitutes an “undesirable body,” utopian normativity must precede the creation of a utopia, containment within this parallel space itself is a disciplining process that forms



undesirable suubjectivities. Thus, the heterotopia is both located at the margins of society and central to the construction of the utopic society.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Adliyah Detention Center is located in an underground parking lot beneath a busy highway bridge in Beirut. Lebanese citizens living in Beirut pass it every day, yet many do not know it exists. The Center is poorly ventilated and detainees are “locked up in metal cages three floors underground where they have no access to hot water, natural light, fresh air or the opportunity to exercise, and are forced to sleep on rough flagstone floors using blankets and sponge mattresses covered in feces and mold” (Harbi 2014). The Center is also heavily guarded by both General Security and technological surveillance mechanisms including intercoms and cameras.

I later asked Lakshika why we had to walk up six flights of stairs given that the Center was already so heavily guarded. She explained that the stairs were kept to ensure that MDWs do not escape. I asked how “escape” was even possible given the General Security, the gate and the buzz-in and camera system guarding the entrance to the Center. She replied, “I don’t know but it has happened before. If they want to leave, they will.” Her response demonstrates that the physical architecture of the Center is not merely a physical barrier to block MDWs from leaving, it is also a part of the behavioral technologies used to produce obedient, docile, permanently surveilled and criminalized bodies (Foucault 1975) that do not even try to leave. Lakshika’s response also highlights the agency attributed to MDWs once they are produced as guilty. A guilty Serlankiyye is assumed to constantly want to behave in ways that challenge the authority of the state, thus justifying the need for consistent disciplining in order to prevent that desire from succeeding.

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in line with Agamben’s concept of the ban (Agamben 2005), MDWs are excluded from the realm of the Lebanese utopian imaginary through constant reference to it. Therefore, MDWs are repeatedly defined in reference to what they’re not (Lebanese).

Critically, the General Security frequently visits the Center to coerce MDWs into signing their “voluntary repatriation” before they are convicted as legally guilty. If they refuse to do so, they are forced to remain at the Detention Center until they agree. The General Security told me that extended detention is due to the “slowness of embassies to issue travel documents,” but in a 2010 study by the Lebanese Center for Human Rights, 90 of the 92 women detained had valid passports, either with them or with their employers. Evidently, the embassy’s role in MDW detention is minimal and does not explain the fact that the Detention Center holds an average of 100 migrants every day.<sup>7</sup>

MDWs who are convicted as guilty and imprisoned in public Lebanese prisons are returned to the Adliyah Detention Center once their terms are complete. Even after serving their designated terms, these women continue to be incarcerated in the Detention Center indefinitely, pending deportation. One primary reason for extended detention post-imprisonment is the employers’ unwillingness to pay for plane tickets. According to Mr. Ali Al-Amin, when both employers and embassies refuse to pay for plane tickets to repatriate the workers, the “burden falls on the shoulders of the recruitment agency.” During one of our conversations, he detailed a specific instance in which his agency was forced by the Sri Lankan embassy to pay over \$3,000 for both plane tickets and to fiscally compensate the MDW who had not received her wages from her employer.

I noted that he did not appear as if he was complaining, so asked him whether he thought it was worth it. He responded, “Yes, there is no problem, because we want to have good relations with the embassy.” I do not know to what extent his response was influenced by the fact that he

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<sup>7</sup> According to Caritas and General Security, the Detention Center can hold 500 migrants. Based on my ethnographic work and through speaking with Shanthi and Lakshika, I learned that it holds an average of 100 migrants each day. An article published by Al-Akhbar, the Lebanese newspaper, claims that the Detention Center only has the capacity for 250 migrants.

knew I was both Sri Lankan and had connections to the embassy. Regardless, his story highlights that the extended incarceration of Sri Lankan MDWs within the Detention Center is a product of the bureaucratic *kefala* system, comprising embassies, employers and recruitment agencies, which designates employers as responsible for their MDWs, but does not stipulate legal penalties for employers who refuse this responsibility. The bureaucratic process of identifying who is responsible for the MDW air ticket resembles the bureaucratic process of ascribing intentionality in order to avoid responsibility discussed in the vignette with the Sri Lankan consul on page 23. In the vignette, the employer accuses the worker of “purposely” upsetting his wife and casts her as being intentionally malicious. By ascribing intentionality, the employer gives weight to his suggestion that the worker has violated the General Security communique and therefore tries to preempt having to take further responsibility for the MDW.

Notably, both the processes of attributing intentionality and responsibility are undertaken by employers, recruitment agents, state institutions and embassies about and around MDWs, but never by MDWs themselves. Furthermore, both processes are only possible since the *kefala* system is not legally institutionalized. I argue that by designating employers as responsible for MDWs but exempting them for punishment if they do not uphold their responsibilities, the *kefala* system clearly prioritizes the employer and demonstrates its primary goal of sustaining the demand for MDWs. Thus, by serving as a normative but not legal authority, employers use the *kefala* system to justify the containment of MDWs while also avoiding the responsibility of handling MDW affairs. As a result, MDWs are evaluated through a plethora of bureaucratic politics, self-interests and normative assumptions structured to privilege Lebanese employers.

Beyond the physical infrastructure of the Detention Center, the space also employs a series of behavioral disciplinary mechanisms to regulate MDW activity. Shanthi is responsible

for carrying out a meticulously designed schedule in which eating and bathing are designated specific time periods that cannot be negotiated. Most critically, however, Shanthi is tasked with medicating each of the MDWs after meals.

### **Pathologizing Difference**

Following the meal, the MDWs form a line and Shanthi places the medication in their hands or mouths and watches them to ensure that the worker ingests the medication. This process resembles that of communion in the Catholic church when the priest places the “host” into the mouth or hands of the receiving Catholic. Similarly, by ingesting the medication, MDWs become subject to the intended effects of the substance. According to Caritas worker Nancy Abboud, “most inmates arrive with some sort of health condition,” typically “mental,” so Caritas administers medication and advocates for the transfer of women to hospitals “if necessary.”

I argue that this system of medication is rooted in the way the Lebanese state pathologizes what it perceives as irrationality without acknowledging the structures that cause MDWs to be perceived as behaving in “irrational” ways. According to Donna McCormack, “postcoloniality does not accept the normative compulsion of medical and psychoanalytic models, where difference requires coercive interventions and where difference is defined in relation to imperialist, white norms” (McCormack 2014, 142) when evaluating the subaltern subject. Thus, the mere production of the Serlankiyye by the Lebanese state as “different” from the state’s norms necessitates “coercive interventions” to medically ‘treat’ difference perceived as inherent irrationality. This process allows the Lebanese state to overlook the structures of marginality that determine MDW behavior and, much like the Lebanese employers who evaluate

their workers as dirty and irrational, causes the state to attribute deviant behaviors to an inherent, essentializing deviance within the Serlankiyye subject.

I asked Shanthi why she did not let the MDW medicate themselves and she told me that several of them resist and refuse to take the medication. Shanthi's response, too, overlooks the potential that some of the MDWs may not need "crazy" medication and are merely responding to the conditions of incarceration. The fact that Shanthi, a Sri Lankan national, is complicit in perpetuating the pathologization of MDW marginalization sheds light on the classed production of the Serlankiyye. Shanthi, while a Sri Lankan national, is not "that" type of Sri Lankan national. I spoke with a member of the General Security who described Shanthi as "basically Lebanese." Thus, in order for a Sri Lankan individual to not be dirty, irrational and guilty, she cannot be Sri Lankan, she must be Lebanese.

### **Protracted Temporariness**

General Security has repeatedly confirmed, both in my interactions with them and in Lebanese media, that the Adliyah Detention Center is merely a temporary station for foreigners awaiting repatriation. Despite this claimed "temporariness," MDWs are frequently detained for up to two years. Rasika, the woman I spoke with most extensively at the Center, had been undergoing a lawsuit in which she was convicted of assaulting her male employer. According to Rasika, the male employer had assaulted her and she had told her madam, but the madam "didn't believe me. She called me a liar and hit me. Madam's husband told her that he slapped me because I stole money, but I didn't steal money."

Rasika's explanation for her lawsuit sheds light on the cyclic logic that undergirds MDW incarceration. The employer beats the MDW for responding to abusive treatment, which stems

from the assumption that MDWs are dirty and irrational, while simultaneously using the construction of the inherently dirty, irrational and guilty Serlankiyye to justify physical abuse. Thus, by responding to her conditions – in this case by assaulting her employer – Rasika merely confirms the assumption that she is irrational. Furthermore, once her employers take her to court, she can no longer remain in their house and her only legal place of residence becomes the Detention Center – a space that produces guilt. If an MDW upsets her employer enough for them to force her out of the house and if the MDW is incapable of finding an alternate place to avoid the General Security, the *kefala* system requires that she be placed within the Detention Center. Thus, despite lacking legal legitimacy, the powerful normative underpinnings of the *kefala* system, according to which the Serlankiyye is inherently dirty, irrational and guilty, make it possible for the state to classify an MDW as deviant and incarcerate her within a space that produces legal guilt. Crucially, the protracted temporariness of the Detention Center ultimately means that MDWs can be held indefinitely and will not be absolved of guilt.

Although the Detention Center does not fall under the category of a prison, in practice it has become one in terms of its physical structure and its treatment of inmates. Since it is not officially a prison, however, the General Security Detention Center has more autonomy over practices of incarceration than the public Lebanese prisons meant for Lebanese citizens. The General Security is able to keep MDWs at the Center indefinitely and is not required to provide contracts that specify length of stay. Furthermore, written convictions are not necessary for permanently “temporary” detention. The only criterion required to access the heterotopic space of the Detention is that of migrant status. The Detention Center is therefore the ultimate representation of the Serlankiyye body as inherently dirty, irrational and guilty.

It is a heterotopic space of displacement and containment that displaces Sri Lankan MDWs from participation in Lebanese ‘public space’ and contains them in a location that everybody passes on their way to work but nobody knows exists. Most crucially, the Detention Center is a physical embodiment of the *kefala* system, which also sustains MDWs in a protracted temporary state during their stay in Lebanon by tying their existence to their employers, effectively denying them the ability to assimilate into Lebanese society and to acquire the rights afforded to Lebanese nationals. Notably, the Center employs the same physical and behavioral structures of control institutionalized by the *kefala* system through which Sri Lankan MDWs are assumed to be inherently guilty and, thus, produced as inherently guilty. Ultimately, the processes through which the *kefala* system and its participants produce Serlankiyye dirt, irrationality and guilt culminate in the physical space of the Detention Center, for which the only criterion for access is migrant status.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Serlankiyye is produced as dirty through the spatial dynamic of containment. When a Serlankiyye is perceived as challenging Lebanese normative structures of power within the household, employers construct the Serlankiyye as irrational. Thus, the Serlankiyye is produced as irrational within the spatial dynamic of intersection. If the MDW is viewed as successfully challenging Lebanese normative structures by running away or stealing, the state produces the Serlankiyye as guilty. Notably, the production of guilt involves an attribution of intentionality in order to construct the Serlankiyye as a malicious object that requires extensive incarceration. Guilt, in the context of Sri Lankan MDWs, is legally ascribed by the Lebanese judicial system. Thus, once the state’s judicial arm has determined that the Serlankiyye is guilty, it ensures

oversight of MDWs through the state-controlled, heterotopic space of the Detention Center. Crucially, by relegating MDWs to heterotopic spaces, madams who practice maid relationality are able to transform MDWs into a discursive object used as fodder for a form of humor and conversation accessible only by maid-owning Lebanese families in order to build common ground. The migrant, and specifically the Serlankiyye, becomes one of the ways in which the Lebanese state consolidates its territorial and discursive boundaries of nationhood.

While studying the normalization of the Serlankiyye in Lebanese discourse, I recognized a parallel between the discursive formulations used by state institutions, recruitment agencies and employers to marginalize Sri Lankan MDWs and those used by NGOs and human rights organizations to “liberate” them. Many of the human rights organizations in Lebanon working with MDWs, including Caritas, Insan and KAFA, frame the abuse of MDWs as a violation of both domestic and international law. By describing the situation as a “violation” and lobbying for domestic work to be included in labor law, NGOs and human rights organizations, too, assume the inherent “objectivity” of the domestic legal system. In this chapter, I shed light on the way in which the Lebanese legal system has actually conferred legal legitimacy on a system – the *kefala* system – that has not been established as legal. I argue that this is because the Lebanese legal system is not “objective” and the adjudication of the law involves a process determined by a judicial body that, to a large extent, is influenced by the very Lebanese normative discourses that produce the Serlankiyye. Given that the racist norms present within the Lebanese legal system are structurally designed to discriminate against Sri Lankan MDWs, by encouraging Sri Lankan MDWs not to “run away” and instead participate in the legal system, human rights organizations may inadvertently contribute to legitimizing abuse



Importantly, the NGO strategy of exposing the Lebanese state's failure to ratify legal conventions protecting domestic workers also does not address the racialized, gendered and classed norms that underpin the marginalization of MDWs, especially given that the *kefala* system is largely administered by private recruitment agencies that Mr. Al-Amin claims are "independent" of the state. Through my interactions with Mr. Al-Amin, I learned that this method of lobbying for MDW rights has in fact bred resentment within the private recruitment agency community and encouraged agencies to distance themselves further from state influence by strengthening company presence in Lebanon. After returning from Lebanon, I read a series of articles in The Daily Star on the closure of recruitment agencies that were hailed by the media as a success for human rights. Nevertheless, after speaking with Al-Amin, I learned that the recruitment agencies had 'closed' because they were absorbed by the larger agencies in an attempt to establish a monopoly. Given that the lead recruitment agencies already have very close personal ties with the Ministry of Labor, the establishment of a monopoly amongst recruitment agencies creates the possibility of strengthening the injustices of the *kefala* system.

Furthermore, researchers, such as Priyanka Motoparthy, and journalists, including Nesrine Malik, have referred to the *kefala* system as "at cross purposes with modern development" (Motoparthy 2015) and "uncivilized" (Malik 2012). I argue that the *kefala* system is very much in line with the goals of liberal development, similar to the goals of colonialism, given the "Otherizing" civilizing mission on which it is premised. Therefore, I assert that drawing on liberal humanitarian discourse is not, in fact, useful in combatting the abuses faced by Sri Lankan MDWs on a daily basis. Ultimately, by both framing the decision to "run away" as "unproductive" or "illegal" and casting the *kefala* system as antithetical to "development," liberal human rights discourse also views MDWs through the rationality vs. irrationality and

resistance vs. submission binaries, subsequently constructing MDW subjecthood as one-dimensional.

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In the next chapter, I will explore the Sri Lankan MDW practice of *lajja*, which I argue does not necessarily aim to “resist” Lebanese structural injustices, but instead to provide MDWs with self-respect and recreate a sense of what it means to be Sri Lankan in Lebanon. Through this discussion, I emphasize that Sri Lankan lives in Lebanon are **not as one-dimensional** as constructed by Lebanese state institutions, recruitment agencies, employers and human rights organizations. Instead, **MDWs use a variety of practices to navigate their lives in Lebanon and determine their experiences within the structural conditions of their subjecthood.**

## Chapter 4: “Sri Lankans are the Easiest to Break” Rearticulating Respectability in Lebanon

In this chapter, I argue that the production of the dirty, irrational and guilty Serlankiyye is based on differing Lebanese and Sri Lankan normative evaluations of an ethic known as *lajja* or respectability in Sinhala nationalist discourse. These normative evaluations are produced through an intersection of Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects. I assert that Sri Lankan MDWs cultivate *lajja* within this intersection, inhabiting, rejecting and restructuring Lebanese and Sri Lankan norms to produce a rearticulation of *lajja* that both differs from and resembles the *lajja* of the Sinhala nationalist project. Furthermore, the Sri Lankan MDWs I spoke with asserted that they viewed *lajja* as a product of their own values. This rearticulation demonstrates Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, in which the discourse of the colonizer and the colonized are combined to produce a Third Space.

In line with Bhabha, by articulating *lajja* as a product of their own values, despite the ways in which it is influenced by Lebanese normativity, Sri Lankan MDWs both undermine the Lebanese production of Serlankiyye subjecthood and perpetuate it by continuing to behave in ways that the Lebanese view as constitutive of the Serlankiyye. The complex rearticulation of *lajja* also impacts relations between MDWs and their employers (madam/maid) and MDWs and their own community (men/women).

Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that firstly, *lajja* is rearticulated within the Sri Lankan community in Lebanon through the intersection of Sri Lankan and Lebanese nationalist projects and secondly, performed to produce consequences that can both empower and disempower Sri Lankan MDW relations. Furthermore, I return to my discussion (from Chapter 3) of “running

away,” as it can be used to demonstrate the varying norms and motives undergirding the Lebanese construction of the “Serlankiyye” and the Sri Lankan cultivation of *lajja*.

## I. RECONCEPTUALIZING AGENCY AND RESISTANCE

In her dissertation, Nayla Moukarbel notes that, “One way to resist is to avoid problems by ‘performing,’ following the script written by employers, but, more importantly, refusing to interiorize judgments over their persons made by employers” so that “employers can control them [MDWs] materially but not psychologically” (Moukarbel 2007, 141). Nevertheless, she notes that “the worker is still viewed as a subordinate by the employer who is comforted by the deferential attitude of the worker; even if the worker thinks he or she is fooling the employer and ‘derives pleasure’ from this performance” (Constable 1997, 209). Moukarbel suggests that Sri Lankan MDWs are ultimately deceived into contributing to their own repression by emphasizing that although the worker “thinks she is fooling the employer,” she is not. Her analysis therefore aligns with the Lebanese discursive production of the Sri Lankan MDW as stupid.

Nevertheless, none of the Sri Lankan MDWs I spoke with framed their situations in terms of “resistance” or a desired attempt to “fool their employers.” The only women I spoke with who even implied such a resistance were those who had united to form a domestic workers’ union. None of these individuals, however, were Sri Lankan. In this chapter, I challenge Moukarbel’s assumption by arguing that what she views as deference is actually a decision MDWs make to cultivate *lajja*, the Sinhala nationalist ethic of respectability and dignity. The Sri Lankans I interacted with most closely were focused on **remaking and reproducing what they saw as Sri Lankan identity**; socializing amongst themselves, conducting Sri Lankan rituals and building

community in modest ways that did not necessarily require undermining the state, and ultimately cultivating the ethic of *lajja*.

Thus, I refuse the liberal-secular analytic of ‘resistance’ that has typically characterized domestic workers and particularly migrant domestic workers as women whose lives are either passive and disempowered or active and resistant. I argue that casting such a narrow analytic on the lives of MDWs shows more about what is relevant to the liberal-secular imaginary than it does about the lives of these women. Furthermore, I do not seek to impose a false consciousness on my subjects and claim that their actions are resistance, regardless of whether they recognize it or not. By shedding the analytic of resistance and by representing these women’s lives in the manner that they have deemed important, I hope to produce a respectful and accurate account of my interactions within this space.

## II. *LAJJA* IN SRI LANKA: PREDEPARTURE ORIENTATION

By engaging with Sri Lankan MDWs in a variety of settings, I was able to identify the practice of *lajja* as a guiding concept in the process of self-cultivation undertaken by the Sri Lankan MDWs I spoke with. ***Lajja* refers to respectability, restraint, honor, modesty, humility, docility and other attributes considered defining of the “proper Sinhala woman”** (de Alwis 1999).

The first time I heard the concept of *lajja* evoked during my fieldwork was at a Sri Lankan predeparture orientation session (PDO). According to Elsa of Caritas, Sri Lankan PDOs “demean” MDWs by encouraging them to listen to their employers regardless of the situation and remain “submissive.” Human Rights Watch, the ILO and Migrant-Rights.org have proposed reforming Sri Lankan PDO sessions to include more “productive information” that will allow

workers to “empower” themselves. During the state-run PDO I attended, I witnessed the following statement from Jayaweera, the Sri Lankan recruitment agent (in Sinhala):

*“Before we start training, we need to make sure you girls know the golden rule. Always listen to the madam and sir. They are being kind keeping you in that house and it is your **duty** to repay that kindness with **decency** and **modesty**. As Sri Lankans, we are proud of these **values** and when you travel abroad, you represent our **nation**. We need you to keep that in mind. If we hear of any problems, we will speak to the madam to decide what to do with you.”*

This rhetoric, including the terms duty, decency, modesty, values and nation, facilitates the transportation of the *lajja* attitude from Sri Lanka to Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> Jayaweera’s statement is rooted in Sinhala nationalist rhetoric and Buddhist ethical sensibilities that provide guidelines for a woman’s role in society (Spencer 1993). In this context, it is also intended to strengthen the sense of Sri Lankan nationalism in migrant workers who travel abroad and act as “ambassadors” of the nation. The rhetoric used in the PDO is only one example of the disciplining processes the Sri Lankan state uses to cultivate a sense of *lajja* within Sri Lankan women.

Ganath Obeyesekere has argued that disciplining takes place between authorities considered responsible for the diffusion of national values (such as law enforcement officers, schools, parents and employers) and the subordinates they are considered responsible for (Obeyesekere 1984). Local schools in Sri Lanka frequently employ techniques, such as caning and cutting hair, to shame students in front of their peers and punish them for inappropriate behavior. According to a high school principle interviewed by de Alwis, “Parents expect teachers to beat their children if they have done something wrong, because this is what they do at home”

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<sup>8</sup> I noticed that such terms were common in Sri Lankan government-run PDOs. Unlike in Lebanon, the MDW trade in Sri Lanka is a coordinated effort between private agencies and government organizations, under the primary supervision of the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE).

(de Alwis 1999). Teachers will also ask their students, “*lajja nadda, mokakda minissu kiyanne*,” ‘aren’t you ashamed, what’ll people say?’” Sri Lankan employers reinforce this standard by castigating subordinates in front of their peers/coworkers. Obeysekere’s account of “*lajja-baya*” is thus a description of an agent who remains conscious of his place in relation to an authority, and to the employer-worker dynamic. Obeysekere’s work, however, incorporates the term “*baya*,” which is associated more closely with male socialization processes. As a result, my thesis will solely explore the cultivation of *lajja*.

### III. *LAJJA* IN LEBANON: RESPECTABILITY AND COMMUNITY

In this chapter, I build on Chapter 3’s argument that the Lebanese construction of the “Serlankiyye” is part the Lebanese nationalist project by exploring the construction of *lajja* in two lights. On the one hand, I understand *lajja* as part of the Sri Lankan anti-colonial, nationalist project. On the other hand, I read it as an alternative perspective into the Lebanese construction Serlankiyye. I argue that, similar to the relationship between Sinhala nationalism and British colonialism, Sri Lankan MDWs rearticulate *lajja* in dialogue with Lebanon’s own nationalist project, borrowing, inverting, self-differentiating, copying and synthesizing norms in order to become the desirable subjects of Sinhala nationalist discourse and recreate what it means to be Sri Lankan in Lebanon. Importantly, Sri Lankan MDWs do not rearticulate *lajja* in homogenous ways or for homogenous reasons. Although each woman I spoke with evoked the relationship between *lajja* and being Sri Lankan, they all differed in the way they expressed *lajja* and their desired outcomes in doing so.



*This photograph depicts Sri Lankan MDWs sitting in an improvised Buddhist space in Lebanon. Sri Lankan Buddhists in Lebanon do not have their own temple, and have been prevented from establishing one. Sri Lankan MDWs either improvise Buddhist spaces or worship in Christian spaces such as St. Joseph's Church or Caritas. Caritas, the Christian NGO, is primarily responsible for MDW matters. Moukarbel notes that many MDWs pretend to be Catholic to access religious spaces (Moukarbel 2007, 140). (Retrieved from the ILO Lebanon website, April 2017)*



#### IV. SUNDAYS AT LAKSHIKA'S IN DOWRA

Lakshika's apartment, also used as a Caritas shelter, is located in the migrant suburb, Dowra, next to a Sri Lankan supermarket. Caritas Lebanon collaborates with the Lebanese state on issues concerning MDWs.<sup>9</sup> Lakshika's apartment is located at the top floor of an apartment complex populated entirely by migrant workers. The apartment serves as a site for various community and Caritas events, including Mass, a day-care for children, a practice space for cultural events, and Caritas-led empowerment "know your rights" sessions. During Sunday "off-days," Lakshika's apartment operates an extensive day-long program for MDWs who seek to engage in various community building activities within a 'private' space.

I learned about the Caritas shelter during one of my many nights at Mezyan restaurant – a hotspot for young Lebanese and foreign 'intellectuals' and armchair Marxists. I called the center and asked (in English) to speak with whoever the coordinator was. A woman named Lakshika answered the phone and cautiously inquired what I wanted. Based on her name, I knew she was Sri Lankan. I started speaking English with the heavy Sri Lankan accent I use around my family and her tone changed immediately. She invited me to the shelter on Sunday and asked if I wanted to participate in Mass. I said I would be delighted to.

A typical Sunday at Lakshika's apartment/Caritas shelter in Dowra provided me with significant insight into the various conversations and activities Sri Lankan MDWs engage in during their off-days – when they do receive off-days. The apartment consists of two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen and a living room. The living room is used for community gatherings.

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<sup>9</sup> The reality of this agreement is such that the state allows Caritas to operate spaces for MDWs, as long as these operations do not intrude on those that are important to the Lebanese 'public.' Furthermore, Lebanese law does not contain specific legal stipulations concerning the operation of MDW spaces and the state is free to intervene as it deems necessary. According to Manjit, a store owner in Dowra, the state had previously blocked an attempt by the Sri Lankan migrant community to host a concert of Sri Lankan artists.

One Sunday in June, I arrived at Lakshika's at 9am and sat for breakfast with the family, which included Lakshika, her husband and her young son. Her husband, Dharshan, asked me several questions about Sri Lankan politics and the post-war situation in Sri Lanka. He was curious as to whether the government was seriously considering building a bridge to India and informed me what a terrible idea that would be because of all the "terrorists" who would flood into Sri Lanka.<sup>10</sup> He also praised Mahinda Rajapakse, the previous nationalist president, who at one point was considered "a man of the people." Dharshan noted that although Rajapakse was not doing the best job, at least he had "done something for the country, unlike those American UNP buggers who hadn't been able to end the 30-year civil war." I was surprised by his insistence on speaking about Sri Lanka, as I had initially entered the site curious about Sri Lankan 'marginalization' in Lebanon. Lakshika, instead, was intent on stuffing me with food and glancing at me every time her husband made a remark that could be construed as inappropriate. This interaction was my first of many that provided me insight into how migrant workers structure their experiences in Lebanon by drawing on elements of Sri Lankan society, politics and 'culture.' Dharshan's support of President Mahinda Rajapakse also shed light on the nationalist element that structures the experiences of the Sri Lankans I interacted with.

### **Sunday Mass**

*Women began filing in for breakfast at around 11am. Lakshika had bought Sri Lankan food from one of the restaurants in Dowra and had told me to leave it on the dining table in the living room for a Sunday community breakfast-snack. The Mass at 12am was exclusively for Sri Lankans and there was another Mass later in the afternoon primarily for Filipinas. I asked*

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<sup>10</sup> During the Sri Lankan Civil War, South India was accused of harboring LTTE "terrorists."

*Lakshika why this was the case, and she replied that it was because Sri Lankans felt most comfortable around people they could speak their language with.*

*I was sitting at a table in the Mass room at Caritas organizing a few toys for the kids. A group of Sri Lankan ladies sat across the room from me chatting in Singlish (a hybrid slang consisting of Sinhala and English).*

*“Aneh, madam brought one of those Filipina girls to come help out at the house. She was saying that she is good with the cooking but Filipinas have bad food in their country so we are going to work together,” says one woman who looked like she was in her late 20s. For the sake of this narration, I will call her Latha – an extremely generic Sinhala name.*

*“Does that mean you are going to get paid less?” asks her friend.*

*“No, I am not getting paid less than now but Ima is getting paid more of course. It is because her English is very good and she is the one who knows how to cook, I only help with ingredients. Madam is good though, she treats us both the same. Not like that Madam who lived in Baabdat.”*

The way in which Latha interprets “less” to mean less than her current salary, as opposed to less than Ima’s, along with her use of the phrase “of course,” indicates both that she conceptualizes wages in a way that is distinct from its competitive value within the larger MDW labor market and that she seems accustomed to the reality that Filipinas are paid more.

*“Yeah, the Baabdat woman was a witch. I remember when she didn’t pay you for months and you stopped coming to Lakshika’s for Mass even,” remarks her friend.*

*“Yeah, I was very unhappy there. Remember that Bangladeshi lady who worked with me? They used to beat her. She has gone missing now. No one knows where she is, even in Dowra.*

*“These Filipina women always get paid more and some of them actually don’t speak better English than us. I don’t know why. It is just because of their stereotype. The Lebanese think Filipinas are cleaner, speak better English and are better workers. Some are, I have a very good Filipina friend who is a good woman, but not all are like this.”*

It is at this point that I realized the ladies were aware that I was listening and may be directing parts of their conversation toward me. The remaining part of the conversation appeared to evoke a rigid ethical discourse that I did not recognize previously.

*“I know, that is the excuse they always use, but I think they just don’t like Sri Lankans,” retorts a third lady.*

*“Yeah, I think they are just racist,” chips in a fourth.*

*“I **always** do what madam asks though, and I **never** fight back because that’s shameful. **That is just not done,**” says Latha. “I think that is why she treats me well, but I do not know why I do not get paid more because of it. I am grateful for what I have.”*

Latha’s final statement responds to the rigid ethical discourse evoked by her friend using similarly phrased absolutes, such as “I always,” “I never,” “shameful,” and “that is just not done.” Throughout this conversation, Latha and two other Sri Lankan MDWs engage in an evaluation of previous and present employers, MDWs of different nationalities and comparative wages. This exchange is particularly striking since evaluation is the very tool employers use to supervise and control MDWs. Both Latha and her friend, however, evaluate their employers, MDWs of different nationalities and comparative wages using a different mode of normative evaluation than the employers discussed in Chapter 3.

While the Lebanese employers assessed MDWs using criteria of dirt, irrationality and guilt, the Sri Lankan MDWs evaluate others in terms of “goodness” and kind treatment. The

distinction in normative assessment stems from the Sri Lankan MDW cultivation of *lajja*, or respectability, which proposes an assessment of morality based on virtues such as honor, patience and kindness. Thus, MDWs are able to exercise discursive power in manipulating categories that have been previously fixed by the Lebanese state in order to fit their own modes of normative evaluation. In the following vignette, I describe an exchange between two MDWs, one Sri Lankan and one Filipina, at the Indo-Lanka Restaurant in Dowra, that alludes to the concept of *lajja*.

## V. THE INDO-LANKA RESTAURANT IN DOWRA

*Dowra is a suburb north-east of Beirut. I spent significant amounts of time at the Indo-Lanka restaurant in Dowra, as it is the primary place in Lebanon for Sri Lankan food.*

*During one Sunday afternoon in July, I sat at a table with my roommate, Ghina, and “ate lunch” as I eavesdropped on the conversations around me. The room was noisy, so it was difficult to discern entire conversations. Nevertheless, I will include one of the excerpts I heard below.*

*“Sometimes I wish I could earn more money because madam doesn’t always give me wages on time. Only thing is she also has my passport, so I can’t register to work at any other place,” remarked a woman who I later found out to be named Vindya.*

*“Why don’t you work with me at Hotel L?” asked her Filipina friend, Mimi.*

*I actually lived right across from Hotel L, and knew it to be a brothel in Hamra.*

*“I went to Hotel L a few months ago but they told me there is no demand for Serlankiyye,” replied Vindya.*

*“Why not?” asked Mimi, “I don’t think there are enough Filipinas in Lebanon to be with all the Lebanese who go to Hotel L.”*

*Vindya laughed and replied, “I know Syrians also work there, I’ve also heard of poor Lebanese but I think that is very rare. I think Lebanese men don’t want dark women. I don’t hear of Bengalis working at Hotel L either. I’ve been thinking more about running away these days because I am not getting paid and I have nothing to send back to my family. But I don’t know where else I can find work if I leave without my passport.”*

*“Ahhh, Vindya. Is that really the only reason you want to leave? I haven’t really heard of many Serlankiyyes leaving because they don’t receive their wages, mainly because like you said, you don’t know where to go,” asked Mimi.*

*Vindya paused.*

*“Madam has also hurt me a lot recently. I don’t know why because she also tells me everything about her life and marriage. Whenever her friends are not there, I am the one who listens to her. But I am also the one she hurts the most,” whispered Vindya.*

*“What has she done?” asked Mimi, in a louder and more adamant tone.*

*“Yesterday she hit my head against the wall many times and I had a headache for the rest of the day,” replied Vindya. “She said it was because I hadn’t learned the cooking skills she had taught me.”*

*“Had you?” asked Mimi.*

*“I don’t know. I thought I had, but madam said the dinner wasn’t good enough for the children, it was only good enough for the dogs,” replied Vindya.*

*“Did she only hit your head against the wall?” questioned Mimi further, seeming both curious about this situation and upset at Vindya’s reaction.*

*“She took my clothes off and beat me everywhere with a spoon,” replied Vindya.*

*“Did you say anything?” asked Mimi.*

*“No,” replied Vindya*

*“Why not?” asked Mimi.*

*“I felt embarrassed. In my culture, we are told to respect elders and not talk back to madam or sir. That is the only thing we learned at the predeparture orientation in Sri Lanka,” replied Vindya.*

As evident in both vignettes, employers use racist and gendered discourse to evaluate MDW character, morality and work performance, based on Lebanese normative standards produced by the larger Lebanese nationalist project to define itself as civilized and controlled. Vindya’s madam tells her that the food she made is not “good enough for the children. It was only good enough for the dogs.” In this accusation, Vindya’s employer equates the food Vindya makes to that which is only fit for animals, and contrasts this equation with her own, Lebanese children. Thus, she evokes an animal/human dichotomy that is critical to the construction of national identity (Chatterjee 1989). Her contrast is reminiscent of Longva’s argument: “migrants are the foil in relation to which the nationals perceive and define themselves” (Anh Nga Longva 2000, 184). In Lebanon, this oppositional dynamic emerges when two distinct nationalist projects for the cultivation of identity intersect through the experience of Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon. The employer considers Vindya’s cooking “not good enough” for her children, un-Lebanese and characteristically “Sri Lankan.” The contrast between characteristically Sri Lankan and Lebanese is even highlighted in the General Security communique’s stipulation insisting that MDWs “adapt to the family and its way of living.” Thus, by characterizing the cooking as “Sri

Lankan,” the employer considers it an unclean product of a dirty, irrational, guilty body and thus, inappropriate for her children.

Latha’s employer evaluates MDWs using criteria that include “cleaner, speak better English and are better workers.” All three of these characteristics have a distinct place in the Lebanese nationalist project, which views hygiene, productivity and familiarity with a Western language as critical components of “civilization,” as defined by colonial France’s civilizing mission.<sup>11</sup> Latha, however, evaluates other MDWs based on “goodness,” stating that her Filipina friend is a “good woman.” Evidently, Latha’s understanding of “goodness” both incorporates and distinguishes itself from the criteria established by her Lebanese employer. Although she does not condemn her employer’s normative criteria as incorrect, she does imply that “goodness” surpasses these criteria. When discussing her Filipina friend who is paid more, she states “not all are like this,” suggesting speaking “better English” is not a sufficient criterion for being a “good woman.”

Latha’s evaluation of her Filipina MDW friend sheds light on the way in which *lajja* takes on a different form in its Lebanese rearticulation. Furthermore, it demonstrates Bhabha’s concept of hybridity: *lajja* is informed by both the MDW’s Sri Lankan and Lebanese experiences to produce a “Third Space” (Bhabha 1994). By refraining from condemning her Lebanese employer and reformulating a mode of evaluation, Latha exercises agency within the structural limitations of her subjecthood in order to navigate her experience in Lebanon (Mahmood 2004).

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<sup>11</sup> France’s civilizing mission in Lebanon was distinct from its project in North Africa. In North Africa, French colonial schools only taught French history. In Lebanon, however, “the fact that France related to the region as part of its own “Hellenic” heritage, combined with the Christian bonding with the Maronites, led French Jesuit teachers to teach and conduct research into the history of the region” (Kaufman 2014, 177). In this vein, both French and Arabic were considered “historically” integral parts of Lebanese ‘civilization.’



## VI. REARTICULATING *LAJJA*

### Rearticulating *Lajja* within Lebanese Norms

Vindya's exchange with Mimi demonstrate the way in which the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects intersect in a space where the former commands discursive and territorial authority. When questioned about her madam's response, Vindya responds "I don't know," implying that she is not sure whether her madam's assessment of her performance is accurate or not. She continues, "I thought I had, but madam said the dinner wasn't good enough for the children, it was only good enough for the dogs," providing the madam's normative evaluation as justification for her treatment. This statement demonstrates the distinction between Lebanese and Sri Lankan normative criteria and the limited ways in which Sri Lankan ethical normativity has influenced the discourse of Lebanese employers. In this vein, not once did I hear an employer I spoke with refer to the lack self-respect or indignity of the MDW. I am not implying that employers think that MDWs are respectable or dignified, instead, I am suggesting that employers do not conceive of "respectability" and "dignity" as characteristics that are even used to evaluate a MDW. Nevertheless, "self-respect" and "dignity" are defining components of *lajja*, through which MDWs evaluate themselves.

Although I acknowledge the fact that in Lebanon, Lebanese normativity is privileged, I argue that Lebanese discourse has not been influenced by Sri Lankan MDW practices for two reasons. Firstly, the classed relationship between upper and upper-middle class Lebanese employers and working class Sri Lankan MDWs implies the superiority of the former's norms and practices. Secondly, unlike Lebanese employers who reaffirm their superiority through the contrast with Serlankiyye subjecthood, Sri Lankan MDWs do not practice *lajja* in an

oppositional manner that requires imposing their normative values on the lives of Lebanese people.

Vindya responds to the question about why she does not “say anything” to her employer by stating that “I felt embarrassed. In my culture, we are told to respect elders and not talk back to madam or sir.” The “culture” she refers to is that of the disciplining process used by Sinhala nationalism to cultivate *lajja* in a “proper” Sinhala woman and define Sri Lankan values as congruent with modernity. Given that *lajja* became a behavior that was practiced consciously due to its place in the Sri Lankan nationalist project, Sri Lankan MDWs are able to intentionally use it to navigate their lives. Thus, every instance of employer abuse is both another opportunity for MDWs to rise above the occasion and reaffirm their respectability and an opportunity for Lebanese employers to justify their abuse of “submissive” and “irrational” Sri Lankan MDWs.

### **Rarticulating *Lajja* through Colonial Epistemologies**

Earlier in this chapter, I briefly discussed the different normative discourses Lebanese employers and Sri Lankan MDWs use to evaluate *lajja*. I argue that for Sri Lankan MDWs *lajja* as situated at the intersection of Lebanon and Sri Lanka emerges as a rearticulated version of the *lajja* present in the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project. For example, Latha’s friend repeats the Lebanese employer’s criterion of “better English” as a mark of Filipina MDW superiority and “civility.” I argue that this repetition is due to complexities within Sri Lanka’s own relationship with colonialism.

The Sinhala Buddhist anti-colonial project intentionally targeted English speaking, branded it as a shameful characteristic of the “Christianized, anglicized, urban bourgeois” (Chatterjee 1989, 182) and as antithetical to the *lajja* Sinhala Buddhist woman. Nevertheless, due

to colonial connections, English simultaneously became the language of elite Sri Lankans who dominated the business sphere and established a significant presence in politics. English thus acquired a class-connotation that implied material success

Most Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon, however, are recruited from rural regions in Sri Lanka that are regionally separated from Colombo, the English-dominated business capital. Both Vindya and Latha are from cities within Sri Lanka's Northern Central Province, which is situated away from the west coast where the British colonialists established themselves. English is not prominent within the educational system or social spaces of the Northern Central Province, unless related to its tourism industry. Thus, MDWs who hail from this specific region, amongst other rural regions in Sri Lanka in which English is not prominent, are unfamiliar with the English language.

By including "English" as a component of goodness, Latha's friend expresses what can be interpreted as class aspirationalism in Sri Lanka, given the correlation between the ability to speak English and class status. Furthermore, she expresses a form of identification with what Chatterjee regards the inability of the colonized state – both Sri Lanka and Lebanon in this case – to distance itself from the epistemological frameworks of colonialism, including that which privileges knowledge of the English language. The Lebanese rearticulation of *lajja* is thus not only influenced by Lebanese normative criteria, it also resonates with Sri Lanka's own complex and classed colonial and post-colonial history.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Latha's friend's repetition of "better English" as an indicator of "goodness" sheds light on the complex ways in which British colonialism institutionalized access to English in Sri Lanka according to geographical region and created further socioeconomic disparities within the Sri Lankan population.

## Reararticulating *Lajja* as Territorial and Discursive Integrity

Although *lajja* has taken on a new form in its Lebanese expression, Sri Lankan MDWs still abide by many aspects of the *lajja* that define the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project. I introduced myself to Vindya later in the day and asked her about her conversation with Ima, particularly why she did not want to work at Hotel L. She responded, “*It is not appropriate for young women to work in brothels.*” I had previously heard the explanation that she told Mimi, that Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi MDWs did not work at brothels because “there is no demand.” However, Vindya’s assessment of sex work as inappropriate indicated the prominence of *lajja* discourse in her self-evaluation.

Notably, Vindya does not condemn Ima’s work at Hotel L, despite later telling me that she considers the work inappropriate. Her assessment reflects the regionally specific Sinhala Buddhist conception of *lajja*, according to which the virtue should not be used to assess non-Sri Lankan women, who are considered subject to the ethical norms of their “own cultures.”<sup>13</sup> Vindya’s lack of condemnation thus represents the anti-universalist nature of *lajja* cultivation. As a virtue that was used to oppose colonialism’s claim to universalism, *lajja* operated by evaluating only women who were considered linked to the Sri Lankan nation. Ima, as a Filipina, was exempt from this assessment. This contrasts with the way in which Lebanese employers use the universalist discourses of “civility” and “control,” inherited from French colonialism,<sup>14</sup> to evaluate Sri Lankan MDWs and use them as a foil to Lebanese nationalist identity.

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<sup>13</sup> During my childhood, I attended an international school with a predominantly White population. Often my family, family friends and other Sri Lankans I met while with my school friends held me to a different standard. When I asked why, I was told that the foreigners’ behaviors are assessed according to their “own cultural standards” and that we are “different.” The understanding that foreigners cannot be assessed using the same normative criteria is prominent amongst Sri Lankans of various classes.

<sup>14</sup> French colonialism established Maronite Lebanese as the “rational” caretakers of the Lebanese nation in contrast to Lebanon’s “irrational” Muslim population. Maronite superiority was institutionalized in the constitution that designated that the president of Lebanon must be Lebanese. Despite the fact that

In this vein, I argue that Lebanese employers mobilize the universalist discourse of colonialism in a way that is explicitly reminiscent of the colonial project, excluding Sri Lankans from “civility” and “control” fundamentally because they are not perceived as capable of understanding the superior epistemologies of Lebanese nationhood, and subsequently justifying colonial domination. The Lebanese employers’ attempt at universalism, thus, reflects the colonial attempt at universalism, which constructed specific ideals such as rationality, civility and control as qualities necessary to all humankind, but judged these qualities not to exist in those who did not fit colonial normative definitions.<sup>15</sup> The Lebanese employment of universalist moral discourse both sheds light on the structure of Lebanon’s own nationalist project in relation to migrants and contrasts with the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist employment of *lajja* as an intentionally regionalized, anti-colonial concept only applicable to those within the Sri Lankan nation.<sup>16</sup>

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Lebanon’s Maronite population is considerably smaller than its Muslim population, the constitutional clause persists to this day.

<sup>15</sup> My interpretation of how Lebanese universalism is employed stems from the tension between universalism and colonialism that colonial powers sought to resolve through the civilizing mission (Mehta 1999). Thus, the civilizing mission is a critical component of the search for post-colonial modernity in Lebanon.

<sup>16</sup> Notably, both anti-colonial projects reserve their respective moral priorities – rationality in the French colonial sense in Lebanon and *lajja* in Sri Lanka – for themselves, excluding non-nationals from access to these “virtues.” The distinction in this context, however, is that since Sri Lankan MDWs work for Lebanese employers, the Lebanese are put in a position where the formers’ “values” and work ethic impacts the quality of work produced. As a result, the Lebanese have the power to assess Sri Lankan work as produced by a body that is inherently different and delegitimize it in order to maintain a monopoly on rationality, civility and domination. Sri Lanka, however, does not have a recent history of migration, except for various Indian populations; Sindhi, Tamil, Gujarati, etc, who also practice *lajja*. Therefore, the majority of people from “other cultures” that are not assessed according to *lajja* hail from European nations. Given that *lajja* was produced to assert ethical superiority over and distinctiveness from the British colonizers, this assumption of inherent difference between the Sri Lankan people and the British means that the Europeans in Sri Lanka cannot even be fathomed as knowing how to practice *lajja*. Additionally, unlike the Lebanese situation, European individuals in Sri Lanka do not engage in menial labor for Sri Lankans. Thus, these “inherent differences” do not impact quality of work and are irrelevant so long as they do not influence Sri Lankan women.

### **Rearticulating *Lajja* as Value, Behavior and Affect**

Latha ends the Mass conversation by stating, “I always do what madam asks and I never fight back,” invoking a framework of rigid ethical discourse and establishing a moral high ground. Her response highlights the manifestation of *lajja* within the complex employer-worker relationship. The moment her friend adopts an accusatory, confrontational term – “racist” – that is more closely associated with Lebanese modes of normative evaluation, Latha responds using equally rigid ethical discourse to describe her own behavior, and she remarks that disobeying an employer is considered “shameful.” She conducts temporal evaluation, contrasting her different employers, and concludes that her current situation is definitely the better option. Instead of evaluating her employers as implicated in systems of patriarchy and racism, she chooses to be “grateful” for her situation.

Gratitude is a part of *lajja* as a behavior and shame is a component of *lajja* as affect. Mala Sinha categorizes *lajja* into “value, behavior and affect” (Sinha 2013). As a value, *lajja* includes honor, dignity, morality, pride, pedigree and convention and as a behavior, *lajja* includes conformity, self-regulation, gratitude, restraint, unassuming, gentleness, consideration, politeness, humility, sacrifice, respect and adjustability. As an affect *lajja* refers to embarrassment, modesty, shyness and humility. Latha’s response incorporates elements of gratitude, restraint, humility, modesty, respect, sacrifice and adjustability in a quest for respectability (de Alwis 1999). She deliberately ensures that the conversation does not devolve into a barrage of accusations, instead diverting and ending it with a model performance of *lajja*.

### **Rearticulating *Lajja* in Personal Subjectivities**

In contrast to the position often held by the advocates of secular liberal feminism, such as Lebanese and international civil rights organizations and the Filipina Domestic Workers' Alliance, Latha does not seem to consider her response a form of submission, but instead a recognition of the place women must occupy in society in order to achieve respectability. The phrase "that is not done" is a Singlish phrase describing an act that would create a feeling of shame on behalf of the actor if performed. Latha exercises an agency that is structured by the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project, amongst her other personal experiences and relations, in order to agentively reaffirm that she is cognizant of her place in society and that she is grateful for the way in which she is treated by her current employer. Thus, Latha finds agency in cultivating respectability through *lajja*.

Furthermore, Latha defended her employer despite the latter's absence from the scene. This demonstrates that *lajja* is not necessarily performed for the purpose of acquiring material or social benefit from authority.<sup>17</sup> It is instead a necessary part of the way in which a Sinhala woman must conduct herself for her own peace of mind. The self-cultivation of *lajja* resembles a conversation between Mona, a female preacher, and a young woman discussed in Saba Mahmood's work. Mona states, "This is the feeling I'm talking about: there is something inside you that makes you want to pray and gets you up early in the morning pray. And you're angry with yourself when you don't do this or fail to do this" (Mahmood 2004, 125). Like Mona, Latha's response demonstrates the self-regulating nature of *lajja*, through which Sinhala women assess themselves and their performance against what they view as the normative criteria set by

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<sup>17</sup> In the section "Relocating Lajja," I discuss how the material benefit acquired through domestic work and the practice of *lajja* can in fact be used to gain social status within the Sri Lankan community in Lebanon.

the Sinhala nationalist project. In effect, Sinhala women who repeatedly assess their own behavior with regard to *lajja* are continuously contributing to the Sinhala nationalist project – an interpretation that can be substantiated by Lakshika’s vocal desire for a “Sri Lankan community in Lebanon,” a sense of home and Sri Lankan ‘identity.’

Following the Mass exchange, I spoke to Latha for an extended period of time and was able to ask whether she blames her previous employer for mistreatment. She responded in a way that I initially found surprising:

*“No, manikeh (young girl). We have all been given our specific roles in life and it is up to us to make the most of what we have. I am sure that I cannot return to my country because of my karma from my past life. If I do not deal with my situation with honor and respectability, my faults will follow me into my next life. I do not like my friends speaking about our employers in a bad way because they are gracious enough to employ us here, so we do not have to return to Sri Lanka. Speaking badly about anybody attracts the four evils of the tongue and makes us no better than them. She should be lajjay (ashamed) speaking like that.”*

Her response is a clear evocation of *lajja* and refers to its spiritual Buddhist roots, specifically the concepts of *karma* and *hiri ottapa*. *Hiri* is a sense of shame or conscience that an individual incurs when they engage in acts that undermine the importance of human relations and natural environments. *Ottapa* is the reflection, willingness and preparedness to stand back and consider the consequences of actions (Chah 2005). Latha evokes *hiri ottapa* when considering the consequences of “speaking badly about anybody.” Furthermore, she concludes that due to her *karma* from a past life, she cannot return to her country. Her reference to *karma* indicates a belief that uncontrollable social forces determine subjecthood and one’s position in life. This same Buddhist belief undergirds *lajja*. *Lajja*, thus, is a value, behavior and affect that allows MDWs



like Latha to respectably navigate the hand they have been dealt to prevent their faults following them into the next life. Latha also explains her gratitude as a product of not having to return to Sri Lanka, thus implying that she prefers the structural forces that constitute her experience in Lebanon to those that determine her life in Sri Lanka.

Additionally, Latha states that “speaking badly” makes “us no better than them.” This statement starkly resembles the aim of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project to establish Sinhala social values, such as *lajja*, as superior to those of the Western colonialists (de Alwis 1999). Through this statement, Latha also demonstrates a personal desire to retain respectability in the face of Lebanese employers abuse of Sri Lankan MDWs. Ultimately, she implies that the cultivation of *lajja* can affirm the superiority of one’s own practices as compared to the crassness of the colonialist’s, in this case, the abuse inflicted by Latha’s employer. ***Lajja* cultivation thus also functions as a mode of differentiation and inversion.**

Latha’s statements demonstrate the situations in which she chooses to evoke *lajja*, the discursive ways in which she chooses to do so and her explanations for her choice. It also displays the extent to which the Lebanese rearticulation of *lajja* is similar to that of the Sinhala nationalist project in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the fact that Latha’s use of *lajja* has not translated into an increase in wage exemplifies the normative differences in the way Sri Lankan MDWs and Lebanese employers assess value. Latha’s Lebanese employer does not recognize *lajja* as a significant virtue for a Sri Lankan MDW, and therefore does not consider the cultivation of *lajja* as a part of being a “good” domestic worker. As a result, the Lebanese employer has not increased her wage – an outcome that Latha does not, in fact, deem significant.

Latha and Vindya’s vignettes demonstrate that the articulation of *lajja* in Lebanon both resembles and diverges from the way in which it is practiced in Sri Lanka due to the intersection

of the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects. These vignettes also reveal the ways in which the normative modes of evaluation used by Lebanese employers and Sri Lankan MDWs differ and intersect, ultimately impacting the production of the Serlankiyye as a foil to the construction of Lebanese national identity. Most critically, however, the concept of *lajja* can be seen as both undermining and perpetuating Lebanese discursive power.

### **Rearticulating *Lajja* in “Running Away”**

In the Indo-Lanka Restaurant, Vindya addresses the concept of “running away” discussed in Chapter 3. She considers running away a more appropriate way of not disrespecting her employer, but also preventing further abuse. This assessment draws heavily on the *lajja* ethic, as Vindya would rather preserve her own dignity and self-respect by removing herself from a volatile situation without confronting another individual. For both Ima and the Lebanese employer, however, dignity and self-respect are acquired using more confrontational and assertive methods, such as “saying something” or “standing up for your rights,” as has been explored in depth by Lebanese civil rights organizations, the Filipina-run Domestic Workers’ Alliance and existing literature on the Sri Lankan MDW situation in Lebanon, including Moukarbel’s dissertation. Notably, in Chapter 3, Premalatha’s employer asked her why she didn’t “say something” if she was truly unhappy. Evidently, Lebanese employers also assume that “dignity” and “self-respect” is acquired through confrontation.

While Vindya regards her desire to run away as a way of preserving respectability and innocence without enduring further abuse inside the household or engaging in “shameful” professions such as sex work, the Lebanese justice system views running away from an employer’s home as “circumstantial evidence” in proof of guilt. These differing interpretations

demonstrate the way in which Sri Lankan and Lebanese assessments of certain behaviors speak past each other and mutually reinforce one another. MDWs are also often accused of “lying” about why they run away. Employers who take their workers to the Sri Lankan embassy or a recruitment agency will insist that the MDW repeatedly states that she wants to leave for “no reason,” according to recruitment agent, Mr. Al-Amin. I sat in on twelve “return” sessions in Lebanon, during which an employer takes the MDW to the recruitment agency and discusses the situation with the recruitment agent. The following is an excerpt from one of those sessions.

*Premalatha (MDW): There is never food. She locks me in the room and takes me out some time but there is never food, even in the room.*

*Employer: You say you want to leave. Not that you want food. Why didn't you bring this up at home if this was true?*

*Me (in Sinhala): Is food the only reason you want to leave?*

*Premalatha (speaking to me in Sinhala): No, madam also hurt me. I was too shy to tell mama or baba why I wanted to leave because I felt ungrateful. I did not understand why I wanted to leave as well, I just knew that I wanted to leave and that fighting back would make me as wicked as them.*

*Me (in Sinhala): Do you mind if I tell them that? I won't repeat that you called them wicked.*

*Premalatha (in Sinhala): No problem.*

*Me (in English): She says that your wife also hurt her, but she was too shy to tell you why she wanted to leave because she felt ungrateful.*

*Employer (in English): That is because she is ungrateful. That is not a rational reason to leave. There are worse employers in Lebanon than us. You should not feel pity for these people.*

This particular excerpt demonstrates a series of tensions between the employer, Premalatha and me. The Lebanese employer sees me as sympathetic to what he views as “these people,” while the Sri Lankan MDW recognizes that I can be used to convey a certain message, by being interpreted as not one of “these people.” With regard to Premalatha, the employer deliberately sought to establish that she was lying by pointing out that she had said that she wanted to leave, not that she wanted food. The employer constructs this miscommunication as a “lie.” By distracting from Premalatha’s accusation that she is not provided food, the employer neither confirms it nor denies it.

Crucially, in order to expose Premalatha as a liar, the employer asks, “Why did you not bring this up at home if this was true?” This question in particular manipulates the employer/worker dynamic to imply that MDWs can successfully voice their concerns to their employers without being called “ungrateful” or being told that “contracts are just a signature” – claimed by the recruitment agent Richka in Moukarbel’s work (Moukarbel 2007). Premalatha, however, answers this question to me by saying, “I was too shy to tell mama or baba why I wanted to leave because I felt ungrateful. I did not understand why I wanted to leave as well, I just knew that I wanted to leave and that fighting back would make me as wicked as them.”

Premalatha’s response demonstrates the evocation of *lajja* as a normative guiding principle when navigating abuse. Premalatha felt too embarrassed to explain why she felt abused, since such an explanation had been previously constructed as “ungrateful” by both employer rhetoric and that of the predeparture orientation programs. As a result, she preferred to run away without providing the employer a “rational explanation” or rather an explanation that the employer considered “rational.” This speaks to the normalization of control within the household, discussed in Chapter 3. Notably, Premalatha felt comfortable discussing with me why

she did not previously explain her reasoning to her employers directly. I interpreted Premalatha's change in comfort to reflect her familiarity with the Sinhala language and her ability to communicate effectively in a way that she was not able to in Arabic and English. Thus, her refusal to explain why she wanted to leave stemmed both from her desire to preserve gratitude and the fact that she can more coherently articulate her thoughts in Sinhala, ultimately culminating in the Sinhala nationalist concept of *lajja*.

These divergent interpretations of a single act, specifically of running away, indicate the different social forces and fears that inform the process of normative evaluation practiced by Lebanese courts/employers and Sri Lankan MDWs. The securitization of migrant labor in Lebanon provides the framework within which Lebanese courts judge migrants to be guilty, while migrants instead choose to seek companionship within their own communities and avoid being subjected to further humiliation. Vindya seems to not consider her act of leaving as one fuelled by "injustice," thus implying that she does not view *lajja* through a framework of resistance.

As is evident in Premalatha's vignette, Lebanese employers and state institutions do not comprehend and cannot empathize with a logic that plays a key role in the discourse of Sri Lankan MDWs – a logic that explains one's rationale for leaving the house without confrontation and remaining seemingly passive in the face of explicit abuse. In Chapter 3, I discussed Karima's remark that Serlankiyye are stupid/irrational and innocent, and subsequently passive in the face of aggression. The "passive" response to abuse is perceived as part of the MDW's irrationality and further normalizes the racialized, gendered and classed discourses constitutive of Serlankiyye subjecthood. The Lebanese state is thus able to preserve and rationalize its structural racism by interpreting *lajja* behaviors, such as running away, using

specific Lebanese modes of normative assessment. *Lajja* and Lebanese nationalism therefore reinforce each other through miscomprehension. The more employers treat MDWs as irrational, the more MDWs respond with *lajja*, and this in turn strengthens the employer's conviction that MDWs are irrational. The way in which *lajja* is rearticulated within the context of two intersecting and diverging nationalist projects therefore supports the racialized discourses used by the Lebanese state to justify spatial exclusion.

## VII. RELOCATING *LAJJA*: GENDER AND RACE IN A THIRD SPACE

In "The Location of Culture," Homi Bhabha examines "the sudden and fortuitous discovery of the English book" (Bhabha 1994, 102). The English Book is a sign of the fixity of colonial power and its discursive ability to "narrate," propagate and ultimately normalize European heritage. Bhabha, however, proposes that by accessing the English book, the colonial subject is able to empower itself against colonial oppression. As I have discussed in this chapter, *lajja* is the name that Sri Lankan MDWs give to some of their own practices – the very same practices that, in the eyes of Lebanese employers, constitute the stereotypical Serlankiyye. Thus, the Serlankiyye and *lajja* are two very different faces of the same coin.

By practicing *lajja* distinct from the Lebanese construction of the Serlankiyye, Sri Lankan MDWs undermine Lebanese discursive power. By rearticulating *lajja* at the intersection of Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects, Sri Lankan MDWs undermine Sri Lankan nationalist discursive power. I argue that by practicing *lajja*, similar to the colonial subjects who employ the English book for their own purposes, Sri Lankan MDWs rearticulate *lajja* within and distinct from the structures of the Serlankiyye, undermining both Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects and producing a discursive Third Space. Critically, I assert that the creation

of this Third Space demonstrates the way in which Sri Lankan MDWs transpose the gendered *lajja* of the Sri Lankan nationalist project to an increasingly racialized and classed *lajja* determinative of the employer-worker relationship.

*Lajja* in its post-colonial Sinhala Buddhist nationalist form was initially conceived as practice that determined the way in which women behave in relation to their male counterparts. The Sri Lankan nationalist project therefore developed a primarily gendered version of *lajja*. In developing *lajja*, Sri Lankan nationalist discourse mapped women onto ‘private’ spaces and ‘social’ values, ethics and spirituality (Chatterjee 1989). When women established a public presence through professional careers, *lajja* was expected in the way women conducted themselves in relation to their employers, both female and male, and male coworkers. The presence of women in the “public space,” however, continued to be structured by the boundaries of *lajja* and its limits on assertiveness and stubbornness.

In order to retain its gendered understanding of *lajja*, Sri Lankan nationalist discourse rearticulated *lajja* as a quality inherent to women, and not one developed through their affiliation with concealed, protected and ‘private’ spaces. This new form of *lajja* (as a quality affiliated with the nature of women as opposed to the physical place of women within the household) allowed the practice to transcend social class boundaries and manifest amongst working class women who were now able to simultaneously work and practice *lajja*. Thus, this new form of *lajja* is particularly prominent amongst working class Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon.

*Lajja* as rearticulated in Lebanon strays further from the gendered, ‘private’ space version of *lajja* affiliated with the Sri Lankan anti-colonial project through its emphasis on race. As discussed in Chapter 3, Lebanese discourse constructs Serlankiyye subjecthood based on assumedly inherent racial difference. Consequently, the Lebanese state’s control over Sri Lankan

life explicitly racializes *lajja*. The embodiment of *lajja* in Lebanon takes on a distinctively racialized form that contrasts with the primarily gendered way in which it was produced in Sri Lanka.

Ultimately, when Sri Lankan women left the ‘private’ sphere and undertook professional work in Sri Lanka, *lajja* was rearticulated as a compromise between women’s engagement in ‘public’ life and the need to practice *lajja* to preserve dignity. Evidently, the gendered nature of *lajja* was first challenged in Sri Lanka itself. Sri Lankan MDWs who are employed in Lebanon practice this compromised version of *lajja*. Critically, since Sri MDWs in Lebanon are subjects of a highly racialized discourse, I argue that their practice of *lajja* not only challenges gender dynamics, but also relocates the power dynamic within the relationship between employers and workers in Lebanon.

In Lebanon, by rearticulating *lajja*, MDWs have been able to financially empower themselves amongst the Lebanese-Sri Lankan community as the primary breadwinners. Nevertheless, by rearticulating *lajja*, MDWs both undermine and reaffirm Lebanese discursive power exercised by Lebanese employers. In line with Bhabha’s “English book,” by seeming to “reclaim” the Serlankiyye through *lajja*, MDWs are able to partially undermine Lebanese discursive power. However, I draw on Spivak, who emphasizes the impossibility of linguistic subversion, to note that by continuing to engage in practices of *lajja* MDWs also perpetuate the Lebanese discursive construction of the Serlankiyye. Regardless of these outcomes, however, I argue that the very process of rearticulating *lajja* itself produces a Third Space in which Sri Lankan MDWs are able to provide themselves an alternative to the Lebanese and Sinhala nationalist projects. The following vignette demonstrates one way in which *lajja* is transferred



from the relationship between Sri Lankan men and women to the employer-worker relationship, while impacting the way in which MDWs experience gender and race in Lebanon.

*Another one of the activities that takes place on a Sunday at Lakshika's is the afternoon dance practice. Every Sunday I visited Lakshika's, MDWs came together to practice for a culture show at the end of the month. The performance consisted of various Sri Lankan cultural elements – Sri Lankan food tasting, traditional dancing and a Sri Lankan comedy. Both women and children turned up on Sunday afternoons at 3pm to practice for the event.*

***Amali:** Everyone needs to form a circle. First we must repeat the moves that we learned last time. Do you remember the *lajja manikeh* (shy/ashamed girl) move with one hand on your hip and the other arm swaying? That is the first move for the girls. Boys, each of you line up on the floor in front of one of the girls.*

***Irangi:** Shape, but I don't want to be a *lajja manikeh*. *Mata lajja nah aneh* (I'm not shy/embarrassed). Isn't there another character I can be?*

***Amali:** No, we can't have too many characters.<sup>18</sup> Also, it is important to be shy. If this man is looking at you, you should be *lajjay* (ashamed)!*

***Irangi:** Why? I am not ashamed in front of Ranga, he is my friend. I am only shy in front of madam.*

The *lajja manikeh* (the ashamed, or meek, girl), in the above vignette, is a common trope in Sri Lankan folktale narratives and dances. In the vignette, Amali states that “it is important to be shy.” She conceives of shyness as a quality produced from the breach of respectability that results when a woman sees a man looking at her. According to Sinhala nationalist rhetoric, women are necessarily sexualized in public space unless they embody *lajja* and avoid making

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<sup>18</sup> Many South Asian dances are narrative theatrical forms that include a plot, theme, characters and often a didactic message.

eye contact with men, thus determining behaviors ‘appropriate’ for women. Irangi, however, challenges this relationship. Without eradicating the concept of *lajja*, she instead relocates it primarily in her relationship with her mother’s employer. This relocation demonstrates a change in the social forces that constitute *lajja* and the new forms in which *lajja* is rearticulated in Lebanon. Instead of needing to practice *lajja* in order to be respectable amongst men, Irangi claims that this ethical disposition is most relevant to the employer-worker dynamic.

A similar relocation is implied by Vindya, who feels comfortable discussing private affairs in a ‘public’ space surrounded by Sri Lankan males but does not feel comfortable remaining in the house of her employer. In this situation, Sri Lankan males, the very proponents of *lajja* in Sri Lanka, become allies in a foreign country, as Sri Lankan MDW existence is largely structured by the employer-worker relationship. In an earlier moment of Sri Lankan national life particularly during the “post”-colonial rebirth of *lajja* in the 1950s, men were considered responsible for the ‘public sphere,’ and subsequently productive work. Women were tasked with upholding morality in the ‘private sphere.’ In Lebanon, however, female MDWs engage in productive work and earn a wage. Thus, they are thus able to command respect within the spaces of the Sri Lankan community. Most Sri Lankan males in Lebanon are the husbands of MDWs and depend on the MDW’s salary. As a result, female MDWs are able to explicitly prove their material worth in a way that is more difficult in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, although Sri Lankan MDWs are able to rearticulate their relationship with men, their relationship with their employers is fraught with dangers. In her insightful work on the madam/maid relationship, Moukarbel argues that Lebanese employers, the madams of the house, are particularly wary of another female presence within their spaces. She mentions the “It was her or me” (Moukarbel 2007) mentality used to justify returning MDWs to the recruitment

agency. Female employers are thrust into a two-fold dilemma of ensuring dominance within the household space, while proving to themselves that they are the ideal ‘maternal’ employer (Moukarbel 2007). In order to attain social validation from both Lebanese society and her husband, Lebanese women are required to tread this fine line. In order to do so, they construct the trope of the “ungrateful” housemaid, who they claim to “treat like my daughter” or “like myself,” but who “never appreciate it” (Moukarbel 2007).

Thus, through the normalization of a controlling madam/maid dynamic, Lebanese employers are able to challenge “conventional gender roles” by delegating work to their housemaids and acquiring a ‘managerial’ position. Lebanese employers therefore undermine gender roles by passing along housework to migrant women in order to engage in public life and move up the social ladder. Moukarbel notes that despite Lebanon’s increasingly weak economy, demand for MDWs has not waned, reflecting the fact that MDW ownership surpasses economic need and is primarily rooted in a desire for social status. The freedom to move into public life, however, also threatens Lebanese madams who feel as though the second they leave the house, their husbands and children will turn to the ‘maid’ instead (Moukarbel 2007).

Vindya mentions that she does not understand why madam hurts her because “she also tells me everything about her life and marriage. Whenever her friends are not there, I am the one who listens to her. But I am also the one she hurts the most.” This statement provides significant insight into the madam/maid dynamic from Vindya’s perspective. Moukarbel discusses the use of “gifting,” which can include the gifting of information, in order to “buy and bond the domestic” (Moukarbel 2007, 131). Vindya is led to believe that the relationship between her and her madam is one of trust and companionship, and for that she should be grateful. However, through gifting, the Lebanese madam constructs a relationship of indebtedness, in which she

ensures that the MDW is aware that all the ‘freedoms’ she receives – the ability to leave the house occasionally, speak with her friends, receive her wages, food and lodging – are tokens of the employer’s kindness. The Lebanese madam’s demand for gratitude thus reinforces Sri Lankan *lajja*, in which gratitude plays a significant role in cultivating the “good” Sri Lankan woman. By accusing an MDW of being “ungrateful,” Lebanese employers exploit a key component of *lajja* and undermine the MDW’s self-respect. These mutually reinforcing conceptions of ingratitude provide a key explanation for why Sri Lankans are considered “more submissive and easy to break.”

Evidently, the gratitude essential to *lajja* is most present in the madam/maid relationship. The madam/maid dynamic is thus one in which the MDW’s presence threatens the madam’s relationship with her own world and causes the madam to employ notions of *lajja* and gratitude in order to control her MDW. Meanwhile the MDW employs *lajja* to endure abuse, earn a productive wage and elevate herself amongst her Sri Lankan male counterparts. The rearticulation of *lajja* thus guides the way in which Sri Lankan MDWs choose to perceive their Lebanese experience, avoid uncomfortable confrontation with employers and financially empower themselves within their communities.

Nayla Moukarbel argues that being employed in a foreigner’s household may be perceived by MDWs as the “only means” for migrant women to “challenge the gender-role constraints within the Sri Lankan maid’s own country.... Especially if these constraints are important, as they are for Sri Lankan women whose culturally ascribed norms and virtues are chastity, docility, passivity, obedience and subservience in a life guided by the demands of the household...” (Moukarbel 2007, 100). My project, however, argues that MDWs do not “challenge” gender-role constraints within Sri Lanka, but use these so-called “constraints” to

reconfigure their experiences with gender and racial relations in Lebanon. MDWs, thus, reassign *lajja* between men and women as *lajja* between workers and their employers. This reassignment begs the question: why and how do scholars prioritize specific forms of power (gender vs. race) in relation to their subjects? The reassignment of *lajja* reemphasizes the need for **an intersectional approach in understanding the powers that structure Sri Lankan MDW life in Lebanon**. *Lajja* does not “go away” in Lebanon, it is merely reassigned.<sup>19</sup>

Notably, the diverse ways of practicing, rearticulating and conceptualizing *lajja* are in no way consistent amongst the over fifty MDWs I spoke with during my time in Lebanon. Each process of *lajja* cultivation is structured by the individual MDW’s personal experience of the intersecting nationalist projects of identity construction. Latha takes a rigid ethical stance when her friends insult her employer, while Vindya is less decisive about her assessment of the employer-MDW relationship. I also noticed a class and generational correlation in the articulation of *lajja* amongst Shanthi, from the Detention Center, and Lakshika. Shanthi, the woman in charge of the Detention Center, never referred to *lajja*, while Lakshika did so in an inconsistent fashion. For example, she would stress the importance of behaving “timidly” but criticize MDWs for enduring abuse.

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<sup>19</sup> Although I stress the importance of analyzing *lajja* through an intersectional framework that considers the white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal state structures that inform MDW life, in this thesis, I do not investigate the ways in which MDWs express their sexualities. This is not because I do not find this important, it is because the women I spoke with did not choose to share these stories with me and I can only narrate what they chose to share. In the next section, I draw on Monica Smith’s work on MDW sexualities to provide further insight into this key aspect. In her work, Smith notes that due to the prevalence of heteronormative discourse in Sri Lanka, MDWs are often unwilling to share stories other than those of heteronormative sexual expression (Smith 2011, 12). She also discusses the impact of cis gender discourse on the way in which migrant women choose to identify themselves. Her dissertation combines queer theory with Agamben’s state of exception to investigate “non-traditional spaces and the nuances in the state’s inclusion-exclusion project” (Smith 2011, 86), critically examining the way in which states determine the way in which MDWs experience gender and sexuality.

Notably, both Shanthi and Lakshika were previously MDWs who had been hired by Caritas and were now paid by the organization. Amongst other Sri Lankan women, I recognized generational differences in the articulation of *lajja*. While, younger females would challenge *lajja* in their relationships with men, and occasionally relocate it in the dynamic between employers and workers, older MDWs would emphasize both ‘girlish humility’ and humility in the employer/worker relationship. Nevertheless, I cannot generalize, as I also spoke with middle aged MDWs who acknowledged that they did not practice *lajja* in their relationship with men because “Sri Lankan men were useless,” an implicit reference to the status of Sri Lankan MDWs as breadwinners in the Sri Lankan community in Lebanon.

### **Dowra as a Third Space**

I argue that while *lajja* language and practice discursively produces a Third Space for the individual in the form of self-respect, certain forms of *lajja* behavior, such as running away, can produce a Third Space that is a physical and collective manifestation of *lajja*, such as the migrant-only suburbs in Beirut. While Lebanese employers relegate Sri Lankan MDWs to heterotopias of deviation, Sri Lankan MDWs, to an extent, reclaim these heterotopias, demonstrated through Lakshika’s comment in the first vignette: “Sri Lankans felt most comfortable around people they could speak their language with.” Thus, by producing counterspaces, Sri Lankan MDWs put conditions on their marginality and redefine it as comfort.

My primary example of this physical Third Space is Dowra, a suburb in greater Beirut.

*Dowra is a suburb north-east of Beirut. It is home to Egyptian, Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, Armenian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Nepali, Filipina, Ethiopian and Pakistani migrant workers. Sri Lankan MDWs were amongst the first migrant worker nationalities to travel to Lebanon, and*

*today form the country's largest MDW population. As a result, Dowra's set-up is largely determined by the Sri Lankan population. The suburb includes several Sri Lankan supermarkets, restaurants and small businesses providing specialized services, including a hairdresser and tailor. The most popular restaurant in Dowra is an Indo-Lankan Restaurant named Dora Circle. The restaurant attracts several MDWs from around the country and occasionally a few surprisingly inconspicuous and camouflaged observers like myself.*

*The restaurant had a simple layout: seven tables with approximately four plastic chairs at each table. It was located on the second floor of Sri Lankan supermarket and across from the Western Union, which allows MDWs to send money home. The restaurant was run by both Sri Lankan and Indian-Tamil males. Given Sri Lanka's complex history with its Tamil population, including the Sinhala-Tamil Civil War, and the introduction of the Tamil language into the syllabus of local schools, a significant portion of the Sinhala population knows how to speak Tamil. As a result, all the Sri Lankans, whether Sinhala or Tamil, were able to converse with the South Indians in Tamil.*

Dowra is a space dominated by Sri Lankans, Sri Lankan stores, markets and cultural symbols. Both men and women, although largely women, own independent stores. Several of these women are “run aways.” As is evident, Dowra has become a space in which Sri Lankans are able to navigate their lives in ways they imagine to be most closely representative of Sri Lanka. CD stores are populated with Indian, Sri Lankan and Lebanese CDs and are sold by Sri Lankan workers – a clear example of hybridity at work in which Sri Lankan women can profit from both their own and Lebanese cultural production. The Indo-Lanka restaurant also offers “Sri Lankan” food, Lebanese style, with fewer spices than the dishes produced in Sri Lanka.

Most critically, however, I was struck by the fact that I could not tell the difference between Sri Lankan Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil workers. The scene of the Indo-Lanka Restaurant, and Dowra as a whole, obscured the so-called racial boundaries that fuelled the Sri Lankan Civil War and Sri Lankan racial categories. As a result, divisive Sinhala Buddhist nationalism was partially rectified in Lebanon, by transposing its own racialized (“Tamil” vs. “Sinhala”) and gendered (Sinhala women vs. Sinhala men) dynamics onto the relationship between Lebanese madams and Sri Lankan employers. In this process, the Sri Lankan community in Lebanon, as migrants, demonstrated a sense of unity that contrasts with the racial and gender tensions present in colonial and “post”-colonial Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, as I argued earlier in terms of *lajja*’s mutually reinforcing relationship with the Serlankiyye, the existence of counterspaces such as Dowra reaffirm Sri Lankan exclusion by making the spaces belonging to Sri Lankans those at the literal margins of Beirut. Furthermore, while Sri Lankan MDWs such as Lakshika claim that they prefer to be with people who speak their language in Dowra, Lebanese employers like Karima claim that those “places are only appropriate for workers, not us Lebanese” because it is “very unsafe, dirty and we might get sick if we go there.” Thus, Dowra, the physical collective manifestation of *lajja* created by generations of “running away,” also reaffirms the spatial exclusion of Sri Lankan workers. In this vein, by claiming a connection between *lajja* and Sri Lankan national identity, Sri Lankan MDWs undermine the discursive and territorial authority of the Lebanese nationalist project, while also perpetuating it.



## VIII. ADDRESSING *LAJJA* AND SEXUALITY

Before I conclude, it is crucial that I recognize the impact of relocating *lajja* in Lebanon on migrant sexualities.<sup>20</sup> In her dissertation, “The State of Sexuality and Intimacy: Sri Lankan Women Migrants in the Middle East,” Monica Smith eloquently asserts that “Spaces, where an acknowledgment of migrants’ humanity or the migrants’ need for sexual intimacy, assert themselves through efforts to rework and resist the overarching state conceived and circulated paradigms of femininity and ‘migrantness.’” (Smith 2011, 107). MDWs, thus, contest the imposition of state-sanctioned *lajja* and cohabit with male partners outside the employer’s home for several reasons, including “economic incentives in the form of prospects for higher wages and greater freedom of movement and association” (Smith 2011, 124). Most critically, however, Smith stresses another motivation: “the desire to rework the socially constructed and state mediated emotion of loneliness, anger and shame” (Smith 2011, 158).

She explores how, in Lebanon, Sri Lankan freelancers “encourage each other to find boyfriends and ostracize those who cannot find one” (Smith 2011, 166). A Sri Lankan Caritas worker in Smith’s study, named Nirmila noted, “They are really looked down upon if they don’t have a boyfriend... If one man moves away they find another man to replace him” (Smith 2011, 166). Women also enter into “fake marriages” to share expenses, engage in sexual intimacy and express care for each other. Many of the women she interviewed contrasted their sexually

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<sup>20</sup> Smith argues that the Sri Lankan state explicitly promotes a migrant who is docile, celibate or “at least able to lead a sexual life hidden from public view; and focused on duty to the family” (Smith 2011, 9). She also notes that the “Lebanese state wants compliant, temporary and cheap bodies to work as maids,” implying the strictly regulated role of MDWs in Lebanon. Thus, she argues that both states’ “partially include” Sri Lankan MDWs by denying their sexual identities. As a result, the image of a “proper Sri Lankan woman” causes the Sri Lankan government, particularly the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), and the Lebanese state to attribute MDW abuse to the latter’s own sexual and moral deviancies. The “invisibility” that allows for sexual transgression also excludes it from “recognition, reward and protection” (Smith 2011, 45)

liberated circumstances in Lebanon with how “different and controlled” their lives were in Sri Lanka. By emphasizing the affective aspects of sexual intimacy, Smith recognizes that transgressions are not always acts of resistance, instead they can also be coping mechanisms.

Smith’s discussion complements my argument that in Lebanon, *lajja* is transferred from the gendered dynamic between men and women to the racialized and classed dynamic between Sri Lankan MDWs and Lebanese employers. MDWs are ostracized for not cohabiting with a man, thus reemphasizing the restructured relationship between men and Sri Lankan women in Lebanon. Nevertheless, while Smith chooses to focus on the agency Sri Lankan MDWs exercise in the realm of their sexual lives freed from the shackles of *lajja*, I choose to focus on how *lajja* is actually employed agentively to navigate newly formed racialized and classed dynamics between Sri Lankan MDWs and Lebanese employers. I recognize the critical importance of Smith’s work in analyzing Sri Lankan migrant women through the historically overlooked lens of migrant sexualities, particularly given the confines of sexuality particular to *lajja*. However, in this thesis, I have chosen to represent the narratives of the MDWs I spoke with as they articulated them. None of the women I spoke with mentioned sexuality, possibly because, I, too, am Sri Lankan and that may have led to the assumption that I would disdainfully judge their behavior.

As a result, I focused on the way in which Sri Lankan women refer to the concept of *lajja* and undertake its practice in order to retain what both they and the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project have determined necessary for “self-respect.” By focusing on articulations of *lajja* independent of sexuality, i.e. the way in which modest, humble and innocent mannerisms allows Sri Lankans to undermine the dirty, irrational and guilty production of the Serlankiyye, I sought

to portray *lajja* as a useful tool in navigating the Lebanese conditions faced by Sri Lankan MDWs.

Furthermore, I argue that by using *lajja* to recreate a sense of what it means to be Sri Lankan, the MDWs I spoke with do not necessarily problematize the sexually restrictive state definitions of Sri Lankan women's morality. The women I spoke with appeared to prioritize national identity more than other forms of identity, in contrast to Smith's finding. Lastly, I propose an alternative to Smith's idea that transgressions are either forms of resistance or coping mechanisms. I reverse this causal relationship to argue that **inhabiting social norms, such as *lajja*, and not necessarily transgressing them, can also be a coping mechanism.** By inhabiting "restrictive" social norms like *lajja*, Sri Lankan MDWs empower themselves in knowing that they can engage in a practice outside the understanding of Lebanese discourse and, evidently, of liberal secular feminisms.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It is important that I clarify that *lajja* is not a be-all and end-all solution to MDW marginalization in Lebanon. *Lajja*, or more specifically *lajja-baya*, is regarded as a primary reason for why Sri Lanka has consistently had one of the highest suicide rates in the world over the past 30 years. Notably, Sri Lankan MDWs in Lebanon also frequently resort to suicide. Studies by Jeanne Marecek (2006) and Silva and Pushpakumara (1996) discuss how young Sri Lankan women use suicide and suicide notes in order to "point the finger of blame" (Marecek 2006, 77) at their perpetrators without engaging in confrontation, which has been proven in Sri Lanka to lead to victim-blaming and denial. Engaging in *lajja* practices allows Sri Lankan MDWs to avoid confrontation in a similar way, given the systematic denial of MDW abuse in Lebanon ("I treat her like my own child"). Without condemning *lajja* as a practice, however, I ask us to refer to Talal Asad's work "On Suicide Bombing" in order to question the liberal secular sensibilities that condemn suicide as a practice more "horrific" than nationally and legally institutionalized abuse, such as is prevalent in Lebanon. Particularly, Lebanese discourse frequently refers to Sri Lankan MDW suicide as a primary example of Sri Lankan irrationality. I did not discuss suicide in this thesis purely because none of the women I spoke with chose to discuss suicide. Nevertheless, it is critical I acknowledge the role of suicide in the lives of Sri Lankan women both in Sri Lanka and in Lebanon. Lastly, similar to Asad, I ask: why do we – particularly the Lebanese people reading my project – consider the suicide of Sri Lankan women and MDWs more "horrific" than the systematic abuse perpetrated by Lebanese employers and institutions? Why are Sri Lankan MDWs irrational for committing suicide but Lebanese employers not irrational for inflicting abuse?

## IX. CONCLUSION

Sri Lankan MDWs are situated at the intersection of the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects. As a result, their experience in Lebanon combined with their ethical cultivation in Sri Lanka produces a rearticulated form of the *lajja* ethic. MDWs employ *lajja* in difficult situations to primarily maintain self-respect. The predominant manifestation of self-respect occurs when workers refuse to talk back to their employers and opt instead to “run away” or leave the house without providing an explanation considered valid or rational by the Lebanese employers.

The fact that “running away” is perceived differently by Lebanese employers/state institutions and Sri Lankan MDWs speaks most comprehensively to the different normative criteria used to assess *lajja*. Rasika, who I spoke with at the Caritas Detention Center, had been accused of assaulting her employer after he sexually assaulted her. Instead of filing a case, which she knew would not work in her favor, Rasika chose to run away both to avoid further confrontation and shame regarding how she’d responded. Currently, the Lebanese state is treating her with Lexotanil to mitigate irrational and guilty behavior by sedating her. In this vein, Lebanese employers are able to use the practices of *lajja* (“running away”) to justify the production of the Serlankiyye as dirty, irrational and guilty. The Lebanese state, partially comprised of a collection of individuals from prominent Lebanese families with their own MDWs, adopts similar discourses to construct the Serlankiyye as inherently guilty. Thus, by evoking *lajja*, Sri Lankan MDWs participate in the normalization of disciplinary treatment carried out by Lebanese employers and state institutions.

Sri Lankan MDWs, however, do not perceive themselves as subjects of the Lebanese state and, instead, use *lajja* to produce a Third Space both territorially and discursively reserved

for Sri Lankan-only participation. Within the household, Sri Lankans physically reside in maids' rooms, independent of Lebanese presence. Furthermore, the women I spoke with practiced *lajja* when dealing with their employers, subsequently acting as ambassadors for Sri Lankan values. In Dowra, Sri Lankan MDWs are able to produce a community dominated by Sri Lankan business and social life, within which they are the primary breadwinners. Workers, such as Latha, use *lajja* as the guiding ethic to assess and affirm their self-respect, a quality that ultimately cannot be assessed wholly by anyone but themselves. Vindya states that she “does not know why” her employer abuses her, given their intimate relationship. Most significantly, however, she does not agree with the treatment she receives. She merely feels that running away is a less confrontational and more dignified solution to her situation than engaging in acts that would undermine her personal *lajja*. Premalatha, too, describes her employers' behavior as “wicked” and refuses to align herself with such treatment.

By exercising *lajja*, MDWs foster a sense of Sri Lankan community and determine what it means to be Sri Lankan in ‘foreign,’ Lebanese territory. MDWs reconceptualize the “Serlankiyye” identity, the label used to justify the production of the Serlankiyye and its spatial exclusion, to instead create their own spaces and retain respectability within the structural conditions of the Lebanese state. The practical consequences of *lajja* are both destructive and empowering. Nevertheless, by focusing on the ethical responsibility associated with *lajja*, MDWs are able to ensure that they can view themselves and their conduct in a dignified way, regardless of the social forces that structure their Lebanese experience.

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In this chapter, I discussed how the differing agendas of both the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects and Lebanese employers/authorities and Sri Lankan MDWs perpetuate a vicious cycle of abuse toward Sri Lankans. Nevertheless, the Sri Lankan MDWs I spoke with were instead determined to maintain self-respect and disassociate from the “wicked” Lebanese community by evoking an ethic they consider respectable.

To employers who see *lajja* in action, it may seem as if the Serlankiyye acts in an entirely passive, breakable manner. To a Sri Lankan MDW, those very same actions may encode an enduring, indeed unshatterable, sense of internal dignity. These contradictory normative assessments of Sri Lankan behavior and conduct pose the question:

**Are Sri Lankans really so easy to break?**

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*“If the cow provides healthy milk, why ask whether she is black or white?”*  
(Sri Lankan Proverb)

### I. TO MY HOMELAND:

The process through which nationalities and skin colors become synonymous with professions and class status is not unique to Lebanon. White supremacy and structural racism are global phenomena. What struck me the most, however, was the way in which people from a country of post-colonial literary prowess and on the forefront of today’s anti-Islamophobia campaigns could ignore the structural racism at home. In Lebanon, the “Serlankiyye” is not a unique phenomenon. “Egyptian” means gas station worker, “Sudanese” means janitor and “Russian” means sex worker. So, the second time I went to Lebanon, I saw racism in every Lebanese person’s eyes.

The process of writing this thesis has challenged me both emotionally and academically, taking me to a space that has institutionalized structural racism against both Brown people and Sri Lankans specifically. It allowed me to connect with my country in a way I honestly had not been able to during my childhood growing up in an incredibly liberal-secular family and attending a liberal-secular school. It taught me to view concepts like *lajja* not as a sign of “weakness” as I had been told as a child, but as a sign of empowerment. Whatever qualms I hold with the violence inherent to the establishment of nation-states, this thesis has allowed me to witness the joy and unity that nationalism brings people in difficult, marginal situations.

In taking the moral high road, Vindya, Latha, Premalatha, Lakshika and several of the Sri Lankan women I met in Lebanon were able to reaffirm their respectability and connection to Sri Lanka through *lajja*. Latha makes sure to preserve her employer’s dignity by refusing to

slander her in a discussion with friends. All four women express gratitude at the opportunity to migrate, despite the abuses faced by the majority of MDWs in Lebanon. Furthermore, a large majority of Sri Lankan MDWs who migrate to Lebanon decide to resettle permanently without returning to Sri Lanka. I am not saying that this is out of a boundless sense of “choice.” I acknowledge that a part of this decision is due to the way in which the Sri Lankan and Lebanese governments have repeatedly reemphasized the need for foreign remittances and foreign labor, respectively. I recognize that many of these women were driven by Sri Lanka’s 30-year civil war. And finally, I assert that these women do not return because they “enjoy” being abused.

Instead, my project has explored the way in which national practices and values inform MDW experiences and allow them to navigate, not “cope,” with the advantages and disadvantages of migration. By choosing to resettle and recreate Sri Lankan Third Spaces in Lebanon, migrant workers are able to assert a form of structurally conditioned agency in which they articulate their personal interpretations of Sri Lankan nationalism in a way that suits their needs and desires. So I ask, which is more “Sri Lankan” – Sri Lanka or Dowra? What are the boundaries of the Sri Lankan nation? And where does *lajja* fit into it?

## II. TO THE SCHOLARS AND NGOs IN LEBANON:

Throughout this thesis, I chose to emphasize the lives of Sri Lankan MDWs as they narrated them. I discredited the voices of the Lebanese and relayed the information the Sri Lankan women I spoke with chose to relay to me. In this process, I have learned that one crucial step in mitigating MDW abuse is **respecting Sri Lankan women**. I argue that respect does not come from victimization or from ascribing ‘agency.’ When scholars and NGOs depict MDWs as victims, the people who seek to marginalize Sri Lankans are validated. When scholars and NGOs



ascribe agency to MDWs, the people who seek to marginalize them become resentful. Thus, the passionate draw of post-colonial nationalism.

Instead, I propose that both scholars and NGOs who interact with MDWs should neither cast them as victims nor endow them with agency. I propose **that we engage with the lives of Sri Lankan MDWs as they narrate them** and shed the analytic of resistance. I understand that such an endeavor is not practical in all situations, given the increase in MDW suicides and reported incidents of sexual and verbal abuse. Nevertheless, I suggest that we take a multi-pronged approach in combatting MDW abuse and Lebanese racism. In the long run, the specter of the Serlankiyye will not crumble if we continue to silence the desires and modes of self-expression of Sri Lankan MDWs.

### III. REITERATING THE ARGUMENT:

In this project, I argued that Lebanese discourse produces the “Serlankiyye” as dirty, irrational and guilty through three spatial dynamics: containment, intersection and, ultimately, displacement. When they cause displacement, Sri Lankans are criminalized as “guilty” in order to justify further incarceration and surveillance. Chapter 3 explored the various Lebanese normative assumptions that emerge when the Lebanese and Sri Lankan nationalist projects intersect in a space where the former commands discursive and territorial authority.

In 2012, Nesrine Malik published an article in *The Guardian* titled “Lebanon cannot be ‘civilised’ while domestic workers are abused.” This thesis demonstrated that the very notion of Lebanese “civility” itself is based on the racialization and marginalization of Sri Lankan MDWs. As long as Lebanese discourse normatively defines “civility” in line with that of liberal colonialism, it will construct an “Other” against which it can assess and validate itself. Our goal

is not to achieve “civility.” It is not to “civilize” ourselves, or to “civilize” dirty, irrational and guilty Sri Lankan MDWs. It is to achieve justice. It is to acknowledge that Sri Lankan MDWs, too, are humans and humans cannot be legally attached to their “masters” through a slavery-inducing *kefala* system. Therefore, the *kefala* system cannot be reformed. It must be abolished. And we cannot stop short of that. In doing so, we will be able to see how *lajja* has in fact empowered Sri Lankan women in Lebanon within their own communities. Empowerment is not limitless and totalizing. Each one of us is constrained by the socializations of the forces that construct our subjectivities. Sri Lankan MDWs are no different. How are we to liberate them if we, too, do not know what liberation means?

#### IV. TO THE WOMEN WHO GAVE ME THIS PROJECT:

Sri Lankan migrant women are the primary breadwinners in Lebanon’s Sri Lankan community. I am proud of these women, not only for their work in asserting themselves as women, but for the role they play in sustaining the Sri Lankan economy. But I cannot be alone in my pride. *I call for the Sri Lankan government to truly value the assistance we have received from Sri Lankan migrants around the world and engage in conversations with foreign, particularly Middle Eastern, governments to **abolish the kefala system**.* For as long as the term “Serlankiyye” exists and Sri Lankans are disparaged in Lebanon, all Sri Lankans, regardless of class, will be considered a subspecies.

We cannot distance ourselves from our own people on the grounds of class, as the Sri Lankan embassy in Lebanon has repeatedly sought to do. We cannot separate ourselves into “Serlankiyye” and not “that” type of Sri Lankan. When I was ill in Lebanon, the embassy did not

care for me. Lakshika did. Was the care Lakshika provided me in some way inferior because of her “inherent” inferiority? No. She treated me as one of her own and for that I am grateful.

We cannot let the classism that is rampant in our societies divide us both at home and abroad. If there is anyone I can truly thank for the creation of this thesis, it is the Sri Lankan women who fed me, took care of me and welcomed me into their lives. I end with the words of Latha and hope we all attempt to see its applicability in our own lives:

*“No, manikeh (young girl). We have all been given our specific roles in life and it is up to us to make the most of what we have. I am sure that I cannot return to my country because of my karma from my past life. If I do not deal with my situation with honor and respectability, my faults will follow me into my next life. I do not like my friends speaking about our employers in a bad way because they are gracious enough to employ us here, so we do not have to return to Sri Lanka. Speaking badly about anybody attracts the four evils of the tongue and makes us no better than them. She should be lajjay (ashamed) speaking like that.”*

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