

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS:
CHALLENGING OPPRESSIVE VISIBILITY OF FOREIGN
HOUSE MAIDS IN LEBANON

by
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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The estimated 250,000 migrant domestic workers (MDWs) operate under the prevailing *kafala* sponsorship system in Lebanon – a system that endows the sponsor legal guardianship over their house maid after paying for their travel and contract expenses. Beneath *kafala*, these laborers cannot quit their job at will, nor change employers or leave the country throughout their contract period. Wishing to avoid taking responsibility for their employee’s actions outside of the domestic sphere, some employers engage in informal practices such as locking their house maid within the home. Moreover, the 1946 labor law excludes MDWs from its protection, denying them a minimum wage (\$450/month), a mandatory day off per week and the right to unionize. Although the high abuse and mortality rates characterize MDWs in Lebanon as vulnerable, individual and collective acts of resistance demonstrate that these workers can (and do) challenge the prevailing system. The media gives disproportionate attention to their status as victims of modern-day slavery.

In “Maid in Lebanon I” (2007) and “Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home” (2011), the Sri Lankan subjects becomes visible through a humanitarian lens which deploys narratives of victimhood while reproducing the sponsor-employee hierarchy. The notion of ‘giving voice’ dominates “Shebaik Lebaik” (2016) where African migrant workers perform their critique of the *kafala* system in ways that sometimes subvert, but oftentimes reproduce, stereotypical conceptions. “Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)” (2016) adopts a radical representational tactic of invisibility where MDWs remain unseen and unheard throughout his fly-on-the-wall observation of a maid recruitment agency. While Mansour and Daccache believe that their cultural productions can lead to material change for the plight of MDWs, Abi Samra expresses pessimism in that regard.

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DEDICATION

To the migrant woman silently perched at her sponsor's window during the 2018 International Worker's Day protest.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) are a visible minority in Lebanon, with conservative estimates counting at least 250,000 living and working within the country (Fernandez). In the years preceding the Civil War, domestic work in Lebanon primarily originated from rural areas or neighboring countries such as Syria, Egypt and Palestine who would send young girls aged 10 years old and upward (Chalala). From 1975 onward, the feminized transnational flow resulted in a unilateral shift toward South Asian and African women's migration to Lebanon to work within the private sphere of the home (Chalala). Their hard-earned remittances bolstered their respective economies while aiding their families to significantly improve their living conditions (Gamburd 16). However, MDWs encounter a number of obstacles while working in Lebanon. Firstly, they do not enjoy protection under the 1946 Labour code, which ensures them a monthly minimum wage of USD \$450, mandatory rest days and the right to form unions (Pande 2013). Moreover, Lebanon failed to ratify the 2003 UN treaty known as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families ("International Convention"). The *kafala* sponsorship system, which provides the framework for MDWs' working conditions, endows the Lebanese sponsor (employer) with legal guardianship of their house maid, hence burdening them with the full responsibility for their actions during the contract period. Having paid for travel and contract expenses gives the sponsor "a misguided sense of possessing the worker" (Pande 2013). Under the prevailing system, MDWs cannot change or quit their job nor leave the country without their employer's permission. Although not specifically stipulate by the prevailing system, employers informally engage in practices such as withholding their employee's passport and expecting

the house maid to reside within their home on a full-time basis (so as to avoid dealing with the legal repercussions of any potential mishap outside of the domestic sphere) (Battah). While the kafala sponsorship system provides the According to this logic, two groups of MDWs exist in Lebanon: legal house maids who reside with their employer full-time (live-ins), and illegal workers who reside outside of the sponsor's domicile (freelance and runaways) (Jureidini 5). In the absence of a well-defined legal framework to protect their wellbeing, MDWs' work conditions within the home become "privately negotiated within an extremely unequal relationship" (Abdulrahim 11). Abuses involve withholding wages, restricted mobility, and psychological and physical abuse (Jureidini 15). Psychiatric morbidity and suicide rates among migrant workers are alarmingly high, with one incident per week (Zahreddine 619). Civil rights groups have assumed the responsibility of protecting this group of so-called exceptional workers. Despite the predominance of narratives of victimhood, MDWs contest and challenge the prevailing power structures within the domestic sphere as well as through meso-level of resistances¹ (Pande 2012). In the political sphere, MDWs' have attempted to form the first union for migrant domestic workers in the Arab world (Kobaissy 6). Unfortunately, their efforts have not been recognized by the Lebanese government under the pretext of their illegality (Kobaissy 1).

Throughout my thesis, I will critically examine the politics of representation and motivations behind particular narratives surrounding MDWs within local cultural productions released in the past 11 years (2007-2018). The four media texts I have selected (three documentaries and one theatrical and folkloric production) feature the lives and experiences of MDWs in Lebanon as their primary object of representation:

¹ "strategic acts that cannot be classified as either private and individual or as organized collective action the strategic dyads forged across balconies by the most restricted live-in workers, the small collectives formed outside ethnic churches by other live-in workers, and much larger worker collectives (that often cross national borders) in rental apartments occupied by illegal freelancers and runaways" (Pande 2012)

- Maid in Lebanon I (2007) and Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home (2011): 26-minute and 38-minute (respectively) human rights documentary by Carol Mansour's Forward Film Productions. The former follows the migratory journey of a rural Sri Lankan woman, Sorayka, to Lebanon. The latter focuses on the complex dynamic between MDWs and their sponsors by considering several case studies. Mansour wishes to explore three key questions: "why women migrate, why they often return to the Middle East over and over despite the suffering and why abuses occur" ("Maid in Lebanon- Forward Film Productions").
- Shebaik Lebaik (2016): DVD recording of a play and folkloric performance (2014-2015) directed by Zeina Daccache and performed by 22 migrant domestic workers from five African countries. Through improvisation, storytelling and show-and-tell, the migrant performers share aspects of their culture and convey their struggle under the *kafala* sponsorship system.
- A Maid for Each (Makhdoumin) (2016): a full-feature documentary by Maher Abi Samra that observes the daily operations of Al Raed recruitment agency. The representational silence of MDWs sculpts an apt cinematic metaphor for the daily experience of a group of individuals rendered invisible by local recruitment agencies and their omnipotent customers.

To familiarize myself with existing representations, I researched other documentaries related MDWs in the Middle East and discovered a dominant discursive trend toward victimhood and modern-day slavery (e.g. "The Secret Slaves of the Middle East" (2016); "Nightmare in Dubai" (2011); "Domestic workers trapped, exploited and abused in the UAE" (2015); "Domestic worker abuse" (2012); and "Justice denied – Nepali migrant women trafficked to the Middle East" (2017)). The only counter-representation appears as part of a mini-documentary by Anti-Slavery International named "Menuka Beraili" (2012) in

which the interviewee describes her work experience with a family in Lebanon as pleasant and devoid of complication.

My analysis will consist of three main parts. First, I address the issue of structure versus agency in the narratives of the selected films. Here, I critically assess 1) how these cultural productions provide an opportunity for marginalized populations to self-represent or be represented and 2) whether these films reproduce and reaffirm or disrupt and subvert mainstream notions of what it means to be a migrant worker in Lebanon by opening up a representational space for more complex narratives. For example, do these representations depict this group of workers as having agency in fighting daily structural injustices or do they align themselves with narratives of modern-day slavery? How media texts have chosen to structure and articulate the imbalanced relationship between migrant worker and their sponsors that employ them will be scrutinized. By exploring the realm of representational politics, I examine who has the power to create representations and what narratives consequently become constructed.

Secondly, I will probe the political promises and pitfalls of visibility by examining the relationship between the representations contained within each film and social change in housemaid's lived realities. Do these films enable social change within existing power hierarchies (and do they even intend to)? Here, the assumption that increased visibility will lead to political and material change for those made visible will be questioned.

The third part of the analysis focuses on the ways in which these mediated representations connect the larger social, political, historical and institutional cadre. How does the dominant discourse become manifest in the texts? Through a semiotic analysis, I will carefully and critically examine each cultural production to search for explicit and implicit signs within the text that connect it to the 'bigger picture'. I will explore how and if representations of MDWs' labor and living conditions in Lebanon can become a site of self-

reflection and negotiation for those represented through an analysis of cultural productions and interviews with the cultural producers.

A. Literature Review

In the following section, I review literature on MDWs, media coverage of MDWs in Lebanon, and media receptions of and engagements with the selected films under study.

1. Between Globalization and Feminization

Overall, a paucity of research and empirical data exists regarding MDWs in Lebanon and in the wider region (Jureidini and Moukarbel 588; “The paper” 415; Gamburd 32), with no studies to date specifically addressing mediated representations of MDWs in Lebanon. This gap in the literature makes my area of inquiry a pertinent one to investigate. To better situate my research, I have conducted a review of the existing literature concerning MDWs by focusing on books, scholarly articles and NGO reports on a local and international level.

The globalization of housework has led to an influx of women migrating from poor to rich countries in what becomes known as the “new domestic world order” where female migrants provide their services in the global North but also increasingly so in Middle Eastern countries (Lan 174). Between 1972 and 1992, “Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka sent over 90 percent of their migrant workers to the Middle East” (Gamburd 33) with the majority of women working as housemaids upon arrival (Gamburd 35). By 1996, figures estimated between 1.3 and 1.5 million Asian women working in the region (Gamburd 36). This economy “may provide opportunity, however limited, for poor and immigrant women. But it also breeds callousness and solipsism in the served” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2014) – a concept which “Maid for Each” so clearly illustrates in its filmic cross-section of a local recruitment agency. Abu-Habib (55) remains critical of the economic benefits gained by

Sri Lankan MDWs and asks that further research be conducted to debunk the myth of ‘Eldorado’ promised to many migrants. Gamburd reminds the reader that the benefits of this mass migration should not be entirely discounted: “[...] female migration to the Middle East financed the daily subsistence of a large and growing number of village families. Finding that they could no longer earn enough locally to make ends meet, let alone purchase land, build a house, or start a business, many village families opted to send women to work in the Middle East (Gamburd 16).

A consensus exists across the collected reports in that the root of the injustice experienced by Lebanese-based MDWs resides in the *kafala* sponsorship system which renders these workers vulnerable to a range of abuses by systematically stripping them of their basic rights (Jureidini 15; Abdulrahim 9; Jureidini and Moukarbel 583; “The paper that you have”). The prevailing *kafala* system is compared to ‘contract slavery’, where “contracts are ‘legal fictions’ rather than legally binding employment agreements that conceal conditions of slavery” (Jureidini and Moukarbel 583). The majority of reports and scholarly articles published emphasize the exploitation endured by MDWs by adopting humanitarian narratives of victimhood and discourses of modern-day slavery (Jureidini and Moukarbel 582; “I prefer to go back”; “The paper that you have”; “Dreams” 2; Jureidini 17; Abu-Habib 53). The mistreatment of house maids appears to be an issue of global concern. While “Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in The New Economy” (2014) addresses the issue of migrant domestic work from a pointedly US-centric perspective, much of the observations made on the subject can easily be transposed onto a Lebanese context, particularly with respect to abuse and exploitation which “follow such uncannily predictable patterns that many in the social service would almost wonder if there is an “Abuser’s Manual” being circulated” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2014).

Jureidini and Moukarbel (586) accuse the “Madam” or female employer of the household as being the primary perpetrator of abuse, imposing explicit and subtle manipulation tactics to control her employee. Commonly-held ‘maternalistic’ attitudes by employers which entail the need to protect their domestic worker by, for example, limiting her mobility and withholding their papers, were “symbolic at best” and primarily served to exacerbate the already-existing power imbalance between employer and employee (Abdulrahim 19). Symbolically speaking, the seemingly innocent act of gift giving from sponsor to house maid can further indebt the employee to the employer’s whims, implicitly binding the former to perform services which extend beyond formal obligations (Gamburd 112). These “complex dynamics operate to keep housemaids at once marginal outsiders and intimate outsiders in the homes of their sponsors” (Gamburd 101). Pande (2013) claims that the portrayal of “madam” as a force of supreme evil creates a dangerous misconception that shifts the blame from state to the household, hence distracting from the structural roots of the problem. In this “culture of abuse”, Pande (2013) highlights the normalization of these practices which remain ignored by the state: “The denial of basic rights can become engrained within the social structural fabric and becomes unseen or unnoticed by the majority”. Furthermore, Pande (2014) condemns the paternalistic attitudes and legal frameworks imposed by on MDWs in Nepal and the Philippines which have a twofold victimization effect by preventing illegal MDWs from returning home and disallowing MDWs to migrate to Lebanon due to travel bans.

Both Pande (2014) and Kobaissy (9) challenge prevalent narratives of victimhood by depicting this group as having agency in the face of great injustice. In “Organizing the unorganized: migrant domestic workers labor union organizing in Lebanon”, Farah Kobaissy (2015) chronicles the struggles endured by MDWs in forming the first union of its kind in the region through which they can self-represent, push for legislative change and become

recognized within the larger institutional framework. In “From “Balcony Talk” and “Practical Prayers” to Illegal Collectives” (2004), Pande contributes to the meager resistance literature by demonstrating how these workers overcome spatial exclusions through “meso-level resistances” which exist neither in the private sphere nor qualify as organized action. Through her research, her aim is to “question the portrayal of MDWs in the Arab world as the ultimate and defeated victims of abuse” (Pande 2004). For one, the Sri Lankan house maids considered in *The Kitchen Spoon’s Handle* reject commonly-circulated representations which portray them as “isolated, structurally marginalized, vulnerable individuals” (Gamburd 116), instead viewing themselves as active agents within their own narratives. Realistically speaking, the major factors which impact the worker’s overall experience (e.g. the values of the family receiving her) mainly depend on luck and remain outside of the realm of the worker’s control or sense of agency (Gamburd 104). Despite the complex disciplinary techniques operating within the household, Gamburd (101) qualifies MDWs’ frequently unacknowledged importance within the home as such: “[...] her centrality to smooth domestic functioning gives her a certain power to negotiate boundaries and resist her subordinate position” (Gamburd 109). While the prevailing hierarchies outweigh individual acts of dissent, a closer look at the micro-politics of resistance and domination within this system of “lived dominance and subordination” (R. Williams 1977; Gamburd 101) can provide a more realistic account of how Lebanese-based housemaids challenge or reaffirm the prevailing structural and relational inequalities.

Far from harmless, representations carry weighty political implications with them, classifying individuals into categories which become naturalized or assimilated as ‘common sense’ (Gamburd 100) Kobaiyy (9) accuses these recurring representations of victimhood of exacerbating current conditions for migrant workers: “Trafficking discourse negatively affects legislation to further increase exploitation and forbid their unionization”. Jureidini and

Moukarbel (605) address their failure to report on positive representations by stating that, while more positive narratives surrounding this group exist and should gain representational traction, they have chosen to adopt a critical stance *vis a vis* MDWs' experiences in Lebanon.

2. MDWs in the Lebanese Media

In my review of the media coverage of MDWs in Lebanon, I limited my research to newspaper articles which have been published during the past 5 years. I gathered forty-seven articles published in English from local (*The Daily Star*, *Al Akhbar*, *Annahar*), regional (Al Jazeera) and various international news sources. Thirty-six Arabic-language articles were collected from local newspapers *Annahar* and *Al Akhbar*.

The press serves as a vigilant watchdog in reporting on systemic injustices and institutional failures in dealing with MDWs working and residing in Lebanon. The *kafala* sponsorship system is compared to one of quasi- or modern-day slavery (“Union honors migrant workers”; “Lebanon ministry rejects”, 2015; Al Bawaba, 2013; Mis; Habbab) that “transforms humans into hostages” (Mis). International human rights bodies have consistently held the Lebanese government for its failure to comply with human rights treaties to which it is party (“Lebanon: Migrant workers' children expelled”; “HRW slams Lebanon”; “Lebanon: General Security's deportations”; Anderson; Fernandez), including the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Conventions of the Rights of the Child (CRC) (“Lebanon: Migrant workers' children expelled”). Government officials appear disinterested by the cause (e.g. walking out of conferences) or come in defense of Lebanese sponsors (“Lebanon: General Security's deportations”). As The New Nation describes it, “The tragic condition of female workers in different ME countries, including Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and UAE, is nothing new” (Hasan, 2015).

Contrastingly, *Al Akhbar* portrays Lebanese employers as being the victims of both mistreatment without legal recourse (Habbab). In evoking the plight of MDWs, international and local human rights groups and civil society groups speak for MDWs who rarely speak for themselves. *Al Akhbar* typically gives voice to NGO representatives (e.g. KAFA, Caritas) and international human rights bodies (e.g. Human Rights Watch, International Labor Organization). On the other hand, *Annahar* adopts a top-down approach by primarily serving as a mouthpiece for the labor minister Sejaan Azzi (“Azzi demanded”; “the role”; Abi Akl; “Azzi determines”), leaving no room for MDWs to self-represent. This erasure of MDW subjectivities relegates their voices to the margins, only allowing their struggle to be told through official statements issued by government officials.

Whether in media reports or through the words and policies of government officials of both sending and receiving countries, MDWs often become entangled in the patronizing language of victimhood which deprive them of agency. Many of the reviewed articles report on the exploitative working conditions, abusive practices and high death toll of one worker per week due to unnatural causes such as suicide (Habbab; “39 domestic helps”; “Migrant”; Sidahmed; Dubin; “Ethiopian maid survives”). A Nepali newspaper reports the repatriation of “31 helpless housemaids” from Lebanon, cloaking these women as ‘damsels in distress’ (Sidahmed). Reports on the deportation of migrant mothers from Lebanon and the subsequent tearing apart of families under new regulation by the General Security depicts MDW mothers as powerless in the face of injustice (“Lebanon: Migrant workers' children expelled”; Dubin; “HRW slams Lebanon”). While the majority of articles describe MDWs under discourses of victimhood, a handful endow them with a voice with which to speak for themselves, particularly in defense of their labor union: “We are banding together to have a political voice. We are workers, not slaves” (Al Jazeera) or in defiance of current system through organized protests which explicitly list their demands for reform (Raval; Banchyi; Baydoun;

O'regan). The labor union has been portrayed as a site of struggle between MDWs who demand legal protection while the Lebanese government repeatedly refuses to acknowledge the union's formation ("Lebanon: Migrant domestic workers with children deported"; "Overcoming threats"; "Union honors migrant workers"; Hamati, 2017). *The Daily Star* framed the launch of the union as such, "[The workers] attended in large numbers, exceeding expectations and overcoming the subordinate and acquiescent environment that shackles workers in Lebanon" (Hamati, 2017).

3. Receptions of Cultural Productions on MDWs

I have gathered published articles and reviews regarding my selected media texts and have engaged with how these sources frame and evaluate each production. Press coverage surrounding "Maid in Lebanon" (2007) presented the Sri Lankan subjects within the discourse of victimhood as having escaped situations of "extreme poverty" with "no running water and electricity" ("Maid in Lebanon: protecting the rights") only to be often met with exploitative working conditions and abuse in Lebanon. Director Carol Mansour hopes to raise awareness about these conditions which ILO gender specialist agrees is necessary: "It is crucial to have the media on our side when promoting workers' rights, and particularly migrant workers' rights" ("Maid in Lebanon: protecting the rights of migrant domestic workers"). The single review about "Maid in Lebanon II: Letters from Home" depicts migrant workers as helpless victims of mistreatment while showing a more ambivalent attitude toward the employers represented in the documentary (LAU).

Reviews about the play and folkloric performance "Shebaik Lebaik" frame the production as necessary for cultural reciprocity between Lebanese sponsors who know little to nothing about MDWs and their despite employing them within their homes for decades, at times (Al Afkar). The emphasis on how many 'sending' countries have more progressive

laws surrounding women's rights and enjoy more reliable basic amenities such as water and electricity supplies (Al Afkar, Al Quds) which becomes presented as evidence against their 'backwardness'. The article title, "The Senegalese are more civilized... than us?" (Al Afkar), clearly articulates this prejudice toward foreign help as originating from "backward" countries. Moreover, this framing proves problematic as it implies that MDWs' rights depend on their degree of civility rather than having intrinsic merit. The production is praised for remaining neutral by maintaining an even-handed perspective (Al-Akhbar) as it portrays the complaints of both domestic worker and sponsor (Aalmoki). Oddly, neither review critiques the neutrality of the play's stance as problematic, particularly considering the power imbalance that structures the relationship between sponsor and employee. While director Zeina Daccache voices her opinion across collected reviews, there was a glaring absence of MDWs' discussing their experiences as active participants in this cultural production. Language barriers do not explain this oversight as the performers were either Arabic and/or French-speaking. The journalistic practice of discrediting MDW insights in lieu of the Lebanese producer's subjectivity only serves to reinforce the erasure experienced by this group on a daily basis. Once again, this patronizing position discredits these subjects as being unable to speak for themselves, reminding us of "the persistence of difference and power between 'speakers' within the same cultural circuit" (Hall et al. 17). The play is presented as an opportunity to challenge negative stereotypes held by society at large, particularly in front of high-ranking officials among the attendees, the underlying assumption being that the performance will incite empathy among those with the power to incite meaningful structural changes (Joseph Ataman). Whether these promises will achieve its political promise by resulting in material changes will be the subject of scrutiny at a further stage.

Maher Abi Samra's documentary "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)", which circulated the circuit of international film festivals, received the highest volume of attention, with many

articles announcing his win for best documentary prize at the Dubai film festival. An eerie silence enshrouds the workers who remain silent and invisible throughout while the film expounds on their commodification and dehumanization, as “goods to be exchanged and smuggled like livestock” (Garratt). In its cold presentation of agency practices, the documentary demonstrates a general sense of complacency in the face of a deeply unjust system. Abi Samra highlights his complicity in the system: “I wish I could condemn this system which enslaves African and Asian women. I participate, just like everybody else” (Agenda Culturel).

B. Conceptual Framework

In framing my project, I engage with three related concepts that allow me to explore the mediation of MDW’s experiences: intersectionality, representation, and visibility. I adopt an intersectional feminist lens to demystify the overlapping influences of race, gender and class which inform MDW experiences in Lebanon. Female migrant workers in Lebanon experience “intersectional erasure” (Cho 799). As Lina Abu-Habib (52) has argued in “The use and abuse of female domestic workers from Sri Lanka in Lebanon”, that “being a woman domestic worker from Sri Lanka means facing gender, class, and race discrimination simultaneously”. Thus, an intersectional approach is necessary to understand the subject-position of MDWs, their precarious living and working conditions, and the narratives through which their experience becomes mediated. For example, advocacy campaigns primarily focus on the plight of Lebanese women under a patriarchal system, at the exclusion of MDWs’ struggles. Exceptionally, the NGO KAFA (Enough) Violence & Exploitation has published research and spearheaded campaigns (addressing MDW-related issues, such as the project “Stop the exploitation of migrant workers” designed to “build support against violence and exploitation experienced by MDWs” through capacity-building, awareness-raising and

advocacy work (“KAFKA”). Male migrant workers – while subject to a range of discriminatory abuse and structural injustices – do not suffer from specific issues experienced by their female counterparts. For example, some ‘sending’ countries enforce paternalistic policies, which prohibit female MDWs from entering Lebanon while overlooking male migrant labor (“I prefer to go back” 276). Under the *kafala* sponsorship system, female MDWs that become pregnant during their contract period must legally return to their country of origin (“The paper that you have” 418). Although MDWs clearly classify as both women and migrants, their particular set of concerns differ from Lebanese women and male migrant workers, making an intersectional approach necessary to fully grasp their socio-political predicament. While marginalized and oppressed people are encouraged to form alliances in order to collaboratively weaken structural inequalities along multiple axes (Cho 803), I would like to explore the representational possibilities and limitations of the partnerships which were forged between Lebanese cultural producers and migrant workers in the production of these media texts.

My analysis also engages the political promises and pitfalls of representing disenfranchised groups as a way to raise public awareness about social injustice and to combat oppressive stereotyping. A study conducted by the ILO (“Documentary on migrant domestic workers”) showed that negative attitudes and behaviors enacted by sponsors toward their housemaids could be directly correlated with a poor opinion toward MDWs and their line of work. Andrijaseic and Mai (2016) argue that representations matter as they can positively or negatively impact the plight of a subordinate group. For example, representing migrant workers as ‘helpless subjects’ has had political implications such as impacting policy-making and maintaining labor inequalities (Andrijasevic 5). Chandra Mohanty critiques Western-style feminism as condescending toward the so-called Third World Women by consistently portraying them as “sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, tradition-

bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized and passive” (336) whereas depicting the Western woman, her foil, as “educated, modern, in control of her body and her sexuality, and free” (337). In a similar vein, Hazel Carby (86) warns scholars and researchers not to impose Western ideologies of liberation onto cultures which have their own values and experiences. Instead, Carby (84) suggests a more equitable approach which takes into consideration the cultural specificities which foreign female migrants emerge from.

While the films under consideration take it as their objective to be critical of the power structures which producing oppressive conditions, they were ultimately produced within the overarching political and social contexts which they aim to critique. As Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (789) state, “The production was not located somewhere outside the field of race and gender power but was an active and direct engagement with issues and dynamics that embodied such power.” Social justice documentaries feel pressured to operate within the parameters of humanitarian discourse in order to gain credibility and financial support (Smith 159). There is a clear humanitarian inclination to represent the subaltern homogeneously (Smith 159) and to ‘give voice to the voiceless’ with the implication that having a voice is “equated with being human” (Rangan 105). While Linda Alcoff (10) acknowledges that speaking for others involves a complex interplay of power relations, she believes that neglecting to speak for (or, preferably, with) the less privileged is an irresponsible abandonment of political responsibility which serves to exacerbate the marginalization of the disenfranchised. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (43) elaborate on that idea: “Whatever the intentions, the effects of speaking only for ourselves are often the silencing of Others, the erasure of their experience, and the reinscription of power relations (p. 12)”.

Several ethical dimensions exist in the creation of a documentary as the dissemination of the filmmaker’s ideology has aesthetic and real-life consequences (Donovan 347). Maccarone (194) argues that, far from providing an objective or unbiased account,

documentaries are the result of directorial decisions on multiple fronts and at every stage of production (Nash 319). Marks of a filmmaker's ethics can be discerned through authorial devices such as, "camera movement, framing and shot size, use of intertitles, sound FX, and soundtrack music or narration, reflexivity and subtitles" (Donovan 348). Each documentary, essentially, becomes heavily informed by the filmmaker's epistemological, philosophical and ethical views which she can express from her privileged position as cultural creator (MacDougall 10). Seen as a means toward an ideological end, filmmaker Philippe Dunne firmly believed that the documentary can almost always be classified as an "instrument of propaganda" that seeks to propagate the documentarian's social, political or personal agenda (Dunne 194). Another area of contention is the "keenly felt power differential" (Aufderheide 369) between filmmaker and subjects, with the former often possessing greater social and economic power than the subject (as is true of the texts in consideration for this dissertation). Compared to journalists, documentarians develop deeper and longer-lasting relationships with their subjects (Maccarone 200) during which ethical practitioners adopt "do no harm" and "protect the vulnerable" as guiding professional principles in their practice (Auderheide 369). During pre-production, informed consent needs to be given in a non-coercive environment which fully informs participants of the ramifications of their involvement (Nash 321). During production, a respectful environment and honest relationship must be maintained while grappling with the ethically thorny dilemma of whether to interfere with the lives of your subjects to better their plight or to passively observe a situation that you could ameliorate for the sake of 'journalistic integrity' (Maccarone 200). Participants often become excluded during post-production which alienates them from the final product and their representation in it (Nash 322). Even with the best of intentions, documentarians cannot predict the consequences of the participants' involvement including how far their representations will travel and how they will be received by various publics until their media

production has been released (Aufderheide 380). In fact, media producers express a felt obligation not only toward participants but also *vis a vis* audience members and financial backers who maintained the most power over the filmic output (Auderheide 364). This trifold obligation shapes the output of the final media text by, for example, prioritizing certain narratives over others and necessarily creates tensions and compromises as a result.

The representational space for MDWs afforded by these media texts allows for an increase in visibility. In “Visibility: A category for the social sciences” (2007), Andrea Brighenti’s (324) provides a thorough overview of visibility which he describes as lying at the intersection between power and perception. Who becomes visible and how that visibility becomes manifest remain deeply political questions as they ultimately produce representations. Brighenti (340) warns that, “Power does not rest univocally with seeing or with being seen. Rather, it is the style in which seeing and being seen take place which carries the most important consequences”. Thus, rather than assume the positive valence of being visible, I want to unpack the forms and meanings of MDWs visibilities and any material or symbolic consequences they have. The struggles of the disenfranchised of the world acquire validity and visibility through an institutionalized framework set up by Western media and advocacy groups (Smith 160). Butler (23) agrees that cultural frames and discursive formations dictated by power render a face visible and recognizable as a human subject in need. The resulting representations of victimhood primarily depend on demonstrating the disparity in human rights experienced by the subaltern group relatively to the privileged Western viewer and decreasing the affective difference between intended audience and the subject of their gaze (Smith 163). Consequently, a systematic filtering of events through pre-determined narratives and representational tropes demonstrate the subaltern as primitive, helpless and in need of foreign assistance (Smith 164). The space between the camera and subject (otherwise known as axiographics) will be considered as an

extension of the concept of the gaze where power relations occur (Donovan 347).

Humanitarian documentaries combine recurrent narratives and news media framing form an axiographic where information specifically caters to the needs of a Western audience (Donovan 349). The filtering of events therefore excludes narratives or representations which contradict the trope of worthy victimhood (Fergoso 10).

MDWs in Lebanon experience the duality of hyper(in)visibility (Petermon) by remaining largely invisible in the public sphere despite being demographically sizable. Beaudevin (2009) echoes this ambivalence toward representation as being, on one hand, a legitimizing source of empowerment while, on the other, one of disenfranchisement: “The concern is not to increase visibility for the sake of greater clarity alone without attention to the costs and consequences (12)”. Edward Said (40) adopts an even more critical stance with regards to representation, qualifying it as a reductionist act of violence which can never fulfill its promise of wholly depicting its intended subject: “The act of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves violence of some sort to the subject of the representation as well as a contrast between the violence of the act of representing something and the calm exterior of the representation itself, the image—verbal, visual, or otherwise—of the subject.”

C. Methodology

The world which we inhabit is comprised of signs which appear natural to us but which are bolstered and hidden away by prevailing power structures. As Arthur Conan Doyle once wisely stated, “There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.” A semiotic approach toward cultural production will be adopted in order to understand representations of migrant domestic workers with respect to the dominant ideological currents. Ideology is “knowledge that is constructed in such a way to legitimate unequal social power relations”

and therefore produces representations that reflect the interests of the elite (Rose 70).

Semiologists argue that reality or the ideological matrix which we inhabit as being made up of signs. These signs can be adequately broken down using semiology which “[lies] bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful” (Rose 71). Norman Bryson elaborates on the inseparable nature of image, social formation and significance:

The social formation isn't, then, something which supervenes or appropriates or utilizes the image so to speak *after* it has been made; rather painting, as an activity of the sign, unfolds within the social formation from the beginning. And from the inside – the social formation is inherently and immanently present in the image and not a fate nor an external which clamps down on an image that might prefer to be left alone. (Rose 72)

Rose (75 – 77) provides a checklist of signs pertaining to human-related signs, namely: representations of bodies, representations of manner, representations of activity, and props and setting.

1. Semiotic analysis

Textual and theatrical analyses offer the tools to make reasonable assumptions about the possible meanings embedded within a media text. By adopting a semiotic approach toward these forms of analyses, I will uncover authorial intent as well as intended and possible received meanings. According to Alan McKee (14), the process of sense-making which is undergone in the production of any cultural production cannot be seen. Rather, the discursive meanings embedded within media productions can be extrapolated through a textual analysis – a methodological approach that allows researchers to interpret the most likely interpretations of a text within a particular social reality by making an educated guess regarding intended meaning (McKee 15). The producer's intentions provided during the

production side will also be investigated but cannot be solely relied on to understand the myriad of ways which texts circulate and acquire meaning within a society (McKee 68). I intend on deploying semiotics to decode the content, structure and function of the visual components recorded within each media artefact. In doing so, I must go beyond merely describing the visual elements comprising the media text to describe the ways in which they inform each other and how they connect to pre-existing symbols in the larger social cadre.

This methodology will be conducted on two levels. On a primary level, I will be subjecting each text to a ‘superficial’ reading by critically observing, taking note of and considering the possible meaning intended by the producer in their use of visual language, verbal language and non-verbal language. Documentary films and theatre productions both qualify as institutional practices in that both are governed by “rules, constraints and conventions” which have evolved over time (Maccarone 196) and which leave their marks on the final production. The secondary or ‘larger-picture’ reading entails connecting the elements of the primary reading to the socio-historical, political and institutional realities which inextricably envelop and imbue it with deeper meaning. Here, my task becomes to “trace the complicated web that connects the small details of texts with much broader matrix of relations” (Wong, 2012). Since I am particularly interested in studying the representation of race and dealing with the racialized other, I have looked into Stuart Hall’s theorizing of race as a discursive construct. Every culture has a “great classificatory system of difference” which utilizes visible racial or biological markers to divide society into dominant and subordinate groups, and which, once disrupted, “generates enormous tension in the society” (“Race: the floating signifier” 3). Often, the mass media serves to reinforce and stabilize the hierarchy of difference by reproducing stereotypical representations of particular groups (Davis 43). Consequently, media consumers assimilate these representations into

‘recognitions’ or the seemingly natural articulation between an ideology and a subject matter (Davis 187).

For the documentary film textual analyses, I will be consulting the series of questions in Appendix A which cover the five following categories: “genre and audience”, “historical and institutional factors”, “socio-cultural context”, “narrative”, “film language and representation”. Throughout each screening, I will take note of “camera movement, framing and shot size, use of intertitles, sound FX, and soundtrack music or narration, reflexivity and subtitles” (Donovan 348). Silences or absences will be paid equal attention as inclusions. By critically and carefully examining each production, I will be able to make more informed interpretations regarding the intended meaning as well as how those intentions can be validated, challenged or rejected on the audience reception side.

On the other hand, an analysis semiotics of theater performance will be used to unpack the discursive meanings embedded within the play and folkloric performance, “Shebaik Lebaik”. Tadeusz Kowzan’s signs systems of theater and semiotics of performance provided in Appendix B will guide my analysis of this cultural performance (Aston 105). Parvis’ questionnaire, which emerged from Kowzan’s system, will provide a useful and more detailed framework for analyzing the various elements within a play that prescribe its meaning (Appendix C) (Aston 110). As a viewer, I will be encountering “Shebaik Lebaik” as a DVD recording rather than a live performance. Far from presenting the play “as is”, the recording of the performance has been shaped by a variety of professional and aesthetic preferences and decisions inevitably made at each node of production. While theater semiotics will take precedence in my analysis, textual analysis will scrutinize filming and editing decisions that structure the film and guide the audience’s viewing experience of the performance.

2. Interviews

My semi-structured interviews were carried out in person (Carol Mansour) and over the phone (Maher Abi Samra and Zeina Daccache). Once I have conducted my textual analysis, I will enrich the below list with more questions of my own regarding their texts. A full list of questions (general and divided according to director) can be found in Appendix D. Once the interviews have been completed, I will use a transcription program to transcribe the footage. I will analyze the responses together, looking for similarities and differences in each director's response.

D. Chapter Overview

Throughout chapter two, I will take a closer look at the representational politics behind Carol Mansour's human rights documentaries, "Maid in Lebanon I" and "Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home," as conceived of within the institutionalized framework of the International Labor Organization. Chapter three studies how Zeina Daccache's theater and folkloric performance, "Shebaik Lebaik," provides a creative platform for MDWs to represent, subvert and negotiate their conditions. Perceived through the gaze of the omnipotent sponsor, Maher Abi Samra's full-feature documentary, "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)," disrupts dominant modes of representation by rendering the MDW invisible in chapter four. Finally, chapter five intermingles the most pertinent findings throughout the preceding chapters, and points out the commonalities between the four texts as well as their discrepancies.

CHAPTER 2

CARVING THE IDEAL HUMANITARIAN VICTIM

Despite the common practice of hiring a live-in house maid, many Lebanese feel a sense of shame or resigned indignation when confronted with the question of migrant domestic work. In relation to her intended viewership, documentarian Carol Mansour confesses: “You wash your dirty laundry at home, not out in public. Our reputation is not very good. We don’t need to show how bad we are to the rest of the world.” (“Carol Mansour interview”). Refusing to sully the reputation of Arab sponsors any further, Mansour prefers to keep the MDW industry and its ramifications hidden away from the foreign gaze.

“Maid in Lebanon I” (2007) and “Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home” (2011) belong to the corpus of human rights documentaries which “aim to inspire individuals, communities and societies to become catalysts for change” (“Our Productions”). Both productions qualify as expository documentaries as evidenced by their didactic and persuasive qualities relayed by a “voice-of-god” narrator that serves to advance a clear agenda (Aldredge). For brevity’s sake, I shall be referring to “Maid in Lebanon I” as ML1 and “Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home” as ML2 from this point onward.

Rife with personal testimonies of trauma and violence, migrant women in ML1 and ML2 show their bodies and narrate first-hand accounts to provide material evidence for the abusive nature of the *kafala* sponsorship system. Shown through Mansour’s lens, these women appear to be doubly-victimized by the abject poverty which characterizes their lives ‘back home’ in addition to the systemic racism and oppression in Lebanon. ML1, which is narrated by “one of the 60,000 women working abroad as a housemaid,” follows the migratory path of a Sri Lankan woman named Sorayka. ML2 examines the relationship between sponsor and house maid as narrated by a first-time Lebanese sponsor. The viewer is

exposed to ‘good’ employers through several case studies within the sponsors’ home as well as ‘bad’ employers through forensic photographs and first-hand accounts of abuse.

In 2000, Mansour founded Forward Film Productions, a self-proclaimed socially-aware, politically-motivated media producer that ‘gives voice’ to under-reported issues to an international audience (“Our Productions”). One of the pillars of Forward Film Productions is to “promote and protect the rights of humanity” by fostering collaborative partnerships with governmental and non-governmental bodies (“Our Productions”). An experienced social justice documentarian, Mansour has produced a generous repertoire of productions over the past twenty years on the subject of “human rights and social justice, covering issues such as migrant workers, refugees, environmental issues, mental health, war and memory, right to health and child labor” (“Carol Mansour”). The International Labour Organization (ILO) joined forces with Mansour to produce a piece which grapples with the subject of child labor in Lebanon, exposing its “harrowing truth” in “Invisible Children” (2009) (“Our Productions”). “I come from a beautiful place” (2010), “Not who we are” (2013) and “We cannot go there now, my dear” (2014) explores the trials and tribulations of refugees whose forced migration has forcibly relocated them to Lebanon and who “struggle to survive, against the odds” (“Our Productions”). The subject of mental disorders is tackled in “It’s just another place” (2016) and “Where do I begin?” (2011). Furthermore, “We want to know” covers the 2016 civil war between Hezbollah and Israel whereas “All for the nation” (2011) deals with sexist citizenship laws which forbid a Lebanese women to pass on her nationality to their offspring if married to a foreign individual.

Currently, Mansour is in the final stages of yet another documentary with the ILO with a projected release date in the Fall 2018. In this yet-to-be-named documentary, a MDW named Soma who has been working for a Lebanese family for the past 32 years returns to Sri Lanka with her sponsor’s daughter. The purpose of their voyage would be to introduce the

daughter, who had practically been raised by Soma, to her family (“Carol Mansour interview”). By mediating this unlikely encounter, the documentary attempts to enable a fuller humanization of the relationship between sponsor and worker in a normally non-reciprocal relationship. Interestingly, Mansour has reversed the migratory journey in ML1 which pursued Sorayka from her native Sri Lanka to Lebanon.

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss production choices that informed the making of the documentaries (e.g. funding, production choices, distribution and circulation) followed by a textual analysis. The analysis will specifically be paying attention to the visibility (MDWs, good/bad sponsors and recruitment agency) and the agency of these workers.

A. Funding

ML1 and ML2 adhere with the representational politics of their civil society benefactors. Released in 2007, ML1 had primarily been funded by Caritas Sweden (through Europe Commission funding), Caritas Migrant Center Lebanon and the International Labor Organization (ILO) (“Carol Mansour interview”). Caritas is an international Christian relief and development NGO which exists in 200 countries worldwide and describes its vision as such: “Caritas strives for a world where the voices of the poor are heard and acted upon, where each person is free to flourish and live in peace and dignity” (“Vision”). The choice of words indicates a hierarchal relationship where the “poor” and marginalized will be liberated by giving them a platform to be heard. The representations brought to life through this discourse create a humanitarian framework through which recipients of aid lack the agency to participate in the undoing of their own oppression or, at least, to have a say in shaping the narrative of their oppression.

ML2, which was released four years later, received full funding from the ILO (“Carol Mansour interview”). The ILO presents itself as a tripartite United Nations agency that

specializes in fighting for decent, fair and dignified work conditions for employees worldwide (“About the ILO”). Much like Caritas and other humanitarian organizations, the ILO hopes that ‘giving equal voice’ to laborers, employers and officials will suitably shape labor policies and programs to better suit all involved parties (“About the ILO”). In 1998, the ILO proclaimed the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work which obliges member states to adhere to the four following categories: “freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced or compulsory labour, the abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation” (“ILO Declaration”). More relevantly, the ILO declared the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families in 1990 and happens to be the “only international body with a mandate for international labour migration” (“OHCHR”). Throughout their efforts, the ILO emphasizes each nation’s obligations toward respecting international standards of human rights and attempts to delineate techniques which can hold non-compliant states accountable for their transgressions (Clapham 17). The organization’s ambition with this documentary is for Lebanon to ratify the international convention on the protection of rights of all migrant workers and members of their families which was drafted in July 2002 and which no Middle Eastern country has signed to date. In its closing shot, the documentary urges its spectatorship to remember that “the international agreement concerns us all” and that “it is our responsibility to treat them fairly and respect them as women, as workers, as people. And it is their responsibility to provide the work.” The use of the terms “international agreement” and “rights” in the final shot remind us of the documentary’s heavy anchoring in the discourse of human rights. Once again, the language utilized to designate and delineate their beneficiaries creates a binary of protector-protected in which the beneficiary becomes the infantilized recipient of the organization’s benevolence. As spectators will learn through the

documentaries, Lebanon has not ratified the international convention for migrant workers which places it outside of the jurisdiction of the ILO for instances of “modern slavery” (“Maid in Lebanon II”). Despite its best efforts, much criticism has been launched at the organization for “its simplistic extension of the scope of general labour and social security laws to specific categories of vulnerable workers”, since, “in majority of instances they are then not effectively executed” (Servais). One of the primary obstacles lies in effectively transposing and implementing these standards onto various socio-economic milieu, many of which refuse to bear the economic cost entailed in executing ILO standards (Servais).

B. Production

Budgetary constraints pushed Mansour to fulfill many roles simultaneously throughout the creation of both documentaries, oftentimes writing, filming and editing the final product (“Carol Mansour documentary”). At most, one other member would join Mansour on set for a shoot. In order to film the migrant women and their families, Mansour and her small crew shuttled between Lebanon and Sri Lanka. As a middle-aged Lebanese woman, Mansour belongs to the dominant social demographic which habitually employs MDWs within their homes (“Intertwined”). Class and racial differences endow her with significant power advantages in relation to her subjects which cannot be divorced from her interaction with them. Cognizant of her positionality, the director attempts to minimize the discrepancy of the ‘center-margin power relations’ between herself and the migrant subjects. She describes this methodology as uncomplicated yet requiring a trifecta of time, research and trust:

“We don’t take big cameras and lighting and so on plus crew of two. We go as if we are there to have coffee. We listen to them. We don’t go with a paper and pen. It’s like a conversation. It becomes very natural, very easy to talk to them. They usually like to be heard. It gives them a chance to talk. We don’t interrupt them. It’s a relaxed environment. It’s to put them at ease. There aren’t power dynamics. It’s a strength of a

documentary filmmaker to be able to talk to people like you would like to be talked to.” (“Carol Mansour interview”)

Rather than allow her positionality to inhibit her, Linda Alcoff (10) would argue that it is Mansour’s political responsibility to use her privileged position to speak with the subaltern. However, the classification system within which Mansour and her subjects find themselves stubbornly entrenched makes me question the accuracy of the statement “there aren’t power dynamics.” Perhaps those tensions can be minimized but not entirely eliminated.

C. Casting, Script-Writing and ‘Playing It Fair’

Seeking a representational balance, a Sri Lankan had narrated ML1 in English while Ghada Najjar, a first-time Lebanese sponsor and friend of Mansour’s, narrated ML2 in Arabic. Rather than prioritize the journalistic ideal of ‘fairness’, a documentarian should opt for taking a bold stand against oppressive systemic conditions through a subjective stance whenever necessary to tell stories which power often relegates to invisibility (Curry). The script for ML1 had been researched and written by Mansour then simply received by the Sri Lankan narrator without the latter’s participation in producing the text and participating in her own narrative. Mansour does not speak with her subjects but for them. Conversely, Najjar and Mansour collaborated to write the script of ML2 which contradicts her principle of wanting to maintain representational equality (“Carol Mansour interview”). Mansour prioritizes the creative and intellectual input of the Lebanese sponsor over the Sri Lankan one due to naturalized race and class-based categorization of difference. Caritas, who funded ML1, only viewed the documentary in full once production had reached completion, endowing Mansour with some creative freedom. However, the implicit expectation to produce a human rights documentary which adopts specific representational politics need not

be articulated by Caritas for it to be known. On the other hand, the ILO ‘kept a close eye’ during the writing process of ML2, only giving their approval for shooting to commence once the script had been shaped in accordance with their political goals (“Carol Mansour interview”).

To select which migrant women to work with, Mansour would rely on informal networks (word of mouth) then select those whom appeared forthcoming, endowed with adequate communication skills and willing to share their story before a camera (“Carol Mansour interview”). These stories undergo a filtering process so as to fit the “standardized aesthetic and narrative form” typical of human rights documentaries (Gandsman 9). In other words, the representational politics of victimhood and suffering must be adhere to and be legible by the standards of their intended spectatorship.

In ML1, the abuse cases hailed from Caritas’ shelters² where MDWs receive free housing and pro bono legal advice. In terms of identity protection, the names and whereabouts of the women featured during the personal testimonials remain unknown to the viewer. However, four out of five of these women can be identified by face which is problematic on two fronts: 1) the legal system views these runaways as illegal and, 2) former sponsors who have ‘invested’ in them may be on a hunt to reclaim ‘their property’. Due to their excessive vulnerability, these women are completely (and problematically) dependent on the very entity funding the production of the documentary. This conflict of interest undermines participant consent, perhaps even coercing them into compliance, resulting from a sense of obligation toward their benefactors and/or fear of losing their privileges. Moreover, the mediation of their personal testimonies increases while in a “protected” house compromises the secrecy of their whereabouts and safety from vindictive sponsors and a racist legal system. Mansour characterizes the state of MDWs in Lebanon as “very

² This information is not revealed to the viewer. Mansour disclosed the whereabouts to me during our interview.

vulnerable”: “If she is beaten on the street by someone, she can’t do anything about it” (“Carol Mansour interview”). By Mansour’s standards, this group of workers already navigate their milieu in a state of vulnerability and precariousness which is why she should have, by her own logic, taken additional protective measures to ensure their wellbeing.

According to Ellen Maccarone (2010), this infringes on the documentarian’s ethical duty to safeguard their subjects’ wellbeing from harm which may directly or indirectly result from the production of their film. For ML2, Mansour relied on word-of-mouth and looked among her friends to select families and their house maids who would be willing to volunteer themselves as case studies. Mansour’s insistence at obtaining the full consent of the Lebanese household owners and their foreign domestic aid before moving forward with the documentary irresponsibly fails to take into account the significant power differential separating both parties. Mansour selects potential sponsors from her extended social circles which means that they belong to the same classificatory strata within Lebanese society. While Lebanese sponsors have agency in choosing whether to partake in the documentary, their foreign help experiences significantly less freedom in making her ‘decision’. The disparity in power fosters a coercive environment where Mansour’s choice of methodology re-enacts the inequalities which she intends on critiquing. Moreover, the director’s informal approach of acquiring case studies through personal connections could blunt impact her capacity to represent the Lebanese sponsors from a critical angle so as not to compromise the nature of her relationship with them.

For practical and ideological reasons, Forward Film Productions do not reward their subjects with monetary compensation for their involvement in the production. This practice has a practical base (small budgets) and an ideological one (“Paying someone to tell a story doesn’t make sense. It’s a human story that cannot be monetized,” says the director). Instead, during her visits to Sri Lanka to connect with the families who have been ‘left behind’,

Mansour will offer them gifts as a gesture of gratitude: “We become friends with their family. We want to help them. So we give them something but not monetary compensation” (“Carol Mansour interview”). In terms of editing, the raw footage amounted to up to 30 hours which clearly had to be reduced to a 20-minute documentary. Such an intensive editing process necessitates making major decisions regarding what material remains. The viewer must bear in mind that, like any film, the director and editor play a prominent role in molding and essentially constructing the final production. Despite the natural aesthetic habitually adopted by expository documentarians, we should be cognizant of the (insidious) artificiality which exists even in the most naturalistic of productions.

D. Audience and Distribution

Forward Film Productions states their interest in disseminating often-overlooked societal issues to a local and international audience (“Our Productions”). Various versions of the documentary subtitled in English, Arabic and French exist (“Carol Mansour interview”). In both films, English was used to convey additional textual information which could not be adequately conveyed *via* voice over. With English is the language of narration in ML1, the documentary appears to be catered to a global viewership. However, Mansour insists that her intended spectators are, in fact, Arabs sponsors as well as the government officials and policymakers who shape legislation and sustain the *kafala* system (“Carol Mansour interview”). The language of narration switches to Arabic in ML2. After the release of ML2, Mansour remembers many Lebanese spectators being surprised at Sri Lanka’s beauty – something that few locals had formerly been aware of. As Mansour puts it: “Somebody will have a Sri Lankan employee working in their house for 20 years and have no idea what Sri Lanka looks like.” The importance of establishing cultural reciprocity with a Lebanese audience also appears in chapter 3.

Unlike Maher Abi Samra's "Maid For Each" (Makhdoumin), which traveled the international film circuit, the director chose not to submit her documentary abroad due to its poor portrayal of Lebanese sponsors (see quote at introduction). Upon its release, a public screening took place at Masrah al Madina. The DVDs can be purchased commercially through Amazon for \$19.99 USD (30,000 LL) or at Library Antoine for \$18.67 USD (28,000 LL). To Mansour's surprise, many Lebanese schools still screen ML1 for educational purposes 11 years after its original release, namely the American Community School (ACS), International College (IC), College Protestant Francais (CPF) and College Notre-Dame de Jamhour. Overall, Mansour receives frequent criticism for focusing on so-called 'depressing' social justice issues as opposed to less oppressive topics and finds it challenging to retain her audience's interest in the subject of MDWs as it evokes feelings of discomfort, resigned indignation among other unpleasant emotions ("Carol Mansour interview").

Both ML1 and ML2 can be streamed on YouTube. On YouTube, ML1 has been viewed 684,417 times since its online release on April 4, 2011 (Mansour 2007). According to the caption, ML1 aims to give the viewer a glimpse of the "fears and struggles" which they face "hidden behind closed doors" (Mansour 2007). ML2, which has been viewed far less than its predecessor (111,921 times since April 6, 2011), strives to represent the "complexity of the relationship between migrant domestic workers and the Lebanese households" which it qualifies as "honest, humorous and touching" ("Maid in Lebanon II").

E. Textual and Visual Analysis

Throughout the textual and visual analysis below, I will investigate the representational formations of MDWs in relation to their native Sri Lanka, Lala recruitment agency, their labor, biographic elements and good/bad sponsors. I have decided to

intermingle my analyses of ML1 and ML2 within the same section as they share the same director and similar thematic concerns, methodological choices and political aspirations.

The DVD boxes of both documentaries speak eloquently on the politics adopted by each production and the archetypes of plausible poverty/worthy victimhood from which the subjects will be carved. A photograph of a Sri Lankan family adorns the cover of ML1.



Fig. 1. Cover image of “Maid in Lebanon I” DVD. “Forward Film Productions.” *Forward Film Productions- Award Winning Documentaries*, www.forwardfilmproduction.com/.

The suitcase-holding woman standing at the center is the prospective house maid who, like countless other Sri Lankans, will be embarking on a migratory journey where her manual labor within the home will provide sustenance for her family. Her child vulnerably leans against his mother, evoking the theme of motherhood and enforced separation which both documentaries (particularly ML2) explore *ad nauseum*. The featured image photographically constructs the ideal of the ‘worthy victim’ in its mediation of victimhood and helplessness in the face of poverty. The construction of the humanitarian space that

justifies Caritas' intervention begins with the cover and assumes a more elaborate form throughout the unfolding of the media text. ML2, on the other hand, creates visual tension between two environments: a busy street view of Lebanon *versus* a solitary wooden house in the prairie in rural Sri Lanka. We can already sense the dissonance implied by this aesthetic decision which intends to remind us of the different cultures that sponsor and employer belong to.

1. Primitivism versus Civility

With Sri Lanka as the primary reference, its rural areas from which the selected MDWs originate appear as primitive and untouched by civilization, widening the perceived gap between Lebanon and Sri Lanka and further entrenching the latter in notions of 'backwardness'. This montage fails to invite the viewer to reflexively consider their own positionality within the global inequities that privilege some at the expense of others. Albeit mobilized as a means to introduce the viewer to the often-neglected culture of the other ("Carol Mansour interview"), such representations may bolster an anthropological justification for racism which relegates the culturally regressive as less capable and less human. In a misguided attempt to divorce migrant participants from primitive associations, MDWs share facts that 'prove' the progress of their respective countries (chapter 3).



Fig. 2. Introductory shots of rural Sri Lanka. *Maid in Lebanon I*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ8hkYhb5ik.

To reiterate these visual representations, the narrator describes their conditions as one of “no running water or electricity” where “many of them, washing machine or a vacuum cleaner”. The owner of Lala agency comments that these women come from “very primitive cultures that lack civility”. In nearly every shot, we see nature’s dominance over the landscape with little to no recognizable signs of modern civilization present, whether in terms of urban design, transportation or wardrobe.



Fig. 3. Introductory shots of Beirut. *Maid in Lebanon I*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ8hkYhb5ik.

When transitioning out of rural Sri Lanka, a montage propels the viewer into the heart of bustling Beirut with overhead shots of busy highways and claustrophobic apartment buildings lining paved streets. Groovy music underscores a quick succession of shots hinting at a Westernized form of modernity: a Starbucks coffee shop, groups of well-groomed women holding designer purses, a lingerie advertisement on a billboard and more. This visual grammar contrasts both countries as binary opposites on the spectrum of civility. These introductory sequences highlight the rurality, provinciality and simplicity of Sri Lanka in contrast with the modernity of city life in the Beirut.

2. Re-inscribing Power & Compromising Safety

A double-standard characterizes the formal titular introduction with higher recognition and respect conferred to Lebanese individuals in contrast with their MDW counterparts. For example, a text box formally introduces Beirut-based recruitment company

owner, May Khalil, of Lala recruitment agency in ML1 yet fails to do likewise for Sorayka, the Sri Lankan protagonist of the same documentary. The documentary follows the latter's migratory path making her a central and, therefore, inarguably more prominent individual within the media text. The refusal to grant her the acknowledgment of a full name and an occupation belittles her participation in the documentary and resituates her on a lower social rung in relation to her Lebanese female counterpart. During the case studies in ML2, the names of Lebanese sponsors are preceded with the titular "Mrs." as opposed to their MDW counterparts. Far from trivial, such conscious decisions reinforce MDWs as 1) vulnerable 'children' therefore justifying paternalistic policies emplaced to 'protect them', 2) relegate them to a place of inferiority in relation to the 'madam', and 3) hints at an overt or unconscious bias of the director toward MDWs. This discrepancy in appellation can also be found in Zeina Daccache's "Shebaik Lebaik" (chapter 3).

3. The 'good' recruitment agency

Lala agency provides the sole representation from one of 360 locally-based foreign maid recruitment companies in Lebanon (MIL2). Unlike "Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)" which revolves entirely around the daily operations of Hamra-based El Raed agency, both documentaries assign Lala agency a secondary role by featuring it strictly in the introduction to provide an overview of their standard operation procedures within the industry. Although these companies typically have a poor reputation among sponsors (as acknowledged by the narrator at the start of ML2), the agency in question provides a positive impression of itself. The owner, May Khalil, expresses sympathy toward these women by critiquing sponsors' expectations with regards to their employees: "You have to make up your mind. Is she a teacher, is she a maid or is she a nanny?" Within her agency, a close up of hands casually flipping through a maid's catalogue at the agency followed bureaucratic processes such as the

exchange of documents, cash and passports. The brochure contains full-length photographs of each maid with adjoining descriptive text which the camera does not come close enough to reveal the content of to the viewer. The juxtaposition of both narrative and visual elements hints at the blatant commodification of MDWs by both agency operators and their customers. Khalil breaks down the total expenses incurred on the Lebanese employer. So far, the MDW has been casually objectified then commodified by Lala agency owner, their representative in rural Sri Lanka and her customers in Beirut. The commonality or ‘business as usual’ aspect of this practice – appears in the naturalistic filming and editing style which implies that the viewer is peering in on a normal day’s work at the agency. A black screen with white text provides a budgetary breakdown of the average cost in \$USD per month of employing a Sri Lankan domestic worker based on a 2-year contract. The monthly total of \$480 USD is broken down into individual components to the sound of coins falling.



Average per month based on a 2 year contract for Sri Lankan Domestic Worker	
Salary	\$180
Entry Visa	\$11
Work Permit	\$14
Residency Permit	\$17
Medical Tests	\$2
Notary Fee	\$6
Health Insurance	\$5
Agency Fees	\$62
Clothes/Uniform	\$5
Accommodation Package	\$150
Return Ticket	\$13
Medical Care	\$15
Total	\$480

Fig. 4. Average monthly cost incurred in hiring a Sri Lankan MDW. *Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0dEu6SBGZ4.

The sponsors at Lala agency in ML2 prove to be an exception to this representational lacuna among ‘bad’ sponsors who, as shown below, prefer not to be filmed. One of Khalil’s customers refers to her housemaid as oblivious and a “curse” who is unfamiliar with televisions, toilets and all electrical appliances. The second sponsor casually objectifies “the one that she has” as being incapable of work then makes reference to her husband occasionally slapping their maid. Moreover, she complains about the Lebanese government, which she believes has infringed on house owners’ rights with their supposedly unreasonable regulations, and MDWs attitudes who “have become so arrogant that you cannot beat them anymore”. The sincerity of Khalil’s previous statements which champion the rights of MDWs comes to question as she fails to stand up for the migrant women. Both sponsors constitute the embodiment of the caricatured sponsors put on by migrant performers in the theatrical and folkloric performance, “Shebaik Lebaik” (chapter 3). The normalization of such discourse evidenced by the fact that such words can be uttered with impunity at a recruitment agency speaks volumes about how poorly-protected these women are as things currently stand.

4. Behave: Kafala is What You Make of It

The visibility afforded to MDWs varies radically depending on the status of their sponsor. Here, I will be integrating the notion of agency into my analysis. One of Mansour’s goals in producing this documentary had been to produce a balanced perspective, showing both the positive and negative outcomes of the prevailing system (“Carol Mansour interview”). The documentaries construct a binary of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sponsors which operate within the prevailing system. Typically, the ‘good’ sponsor expresses caring and sympathetic opinions about their MDWs, does not outwardly appear to engage in forms of physical or emotional abuse and has developed a dependency on their worker. Within this

context, MDWs manifest as obedient workers and sad mothers who content with their good fortune to be employed by their sponsors. In chapter 4, Abi Samra describes creating his documentary, “Maid for Each (Makdhoumin),” specifically to unsettle the majority of Lebanese sponsors who consider their maids fortunate to work for them. Conversely, the ‘bad’ sponsor never appears before the camera. However, we know that they withhold wages and food, imprison within the home, beat, mutilate, violate, rape and dehumanize their victims. The worker reemerges as victim through tell-all personal testimony, forensic photographs and newspaper clippings. Within this framework, the well-behaved sponsor can judge ill-behaved ones from atop their moralistic soapbox without critiquing the sponsorship system as whole. The below is an examination of MDWs and their sponsors along the axis of visibility and agency in supposedly exemplary and hellish households.

a. “Madam is good, madam gives me everything”

The benevolent sponsor emerges in both media productions, albeit more prominently in ML2. The typical sponsor, otherwise known as ‘madam’, is a middle-class Lebanese woman who has hired a MDW for a range of needs: house chores, babysitting, caring for the elderly etc. All of the featured sponsors explicitly voice caring for MDWs’ wellbeing and respect for their rights. When Jelly arrives, Najjar empathizes with her and voices her concerns over how best to make her feel at ease while her husband expresses that, “She’s like any working person, like any other employee, this is how I see it. You have to respect them as workers and respect their rights.” Zina from ML2 reiterates this belief in human rights, showing contempt for the ‘slave-like conditions’ that others impose on their workers by framing the problem in relation with extreme cases. The degree of intimacy and dependency between sponsor and sponsored varies but can be characterized as friendly and not overly authoritarian. At one end of the spectrum, Badawi (ML2) expresses sentiments of attachment

toward Ganilla, her Sri Lankan MDW of 12 years, even cooperating with household chores. In describing their relationship, Badawi's daughter jokingly says, "In another life, my mother was a Sri Lankan." The maternalistic cliché of the MDW 'being like family', which places them as "marginal insiders and intimate outsiders", is evoked by several sponsors (Gamburd 101). Overall, sponsors fail to question their complicity within the structure which enables these deeply imbalanced relations. Although Najjar weaves in reflexive commentary in her narration in ML1, she forsakes a structural critique for a rumination on her role as a first-time employer in which she, undoubtedly, self-represents as compassionate and caring toward Jelly. In an exceptional yet short-lived moment in ML1, an older client at Lala agency questions the common-sense hierarchy distinguishing her and her house maid: "Why should I be her 'madam' and not the other way around?"

Within a 'benevolent' household, the MDW appears docile, obedient and happy, typically wears a maid's uniform and is represented as performing duties within the domestic sphere. This custom reinforces and fixes the hierarchical nature of their relationship with their respective sponsors who dress in Western clothing. The house maid corresponds to Mohanty's "Third World Woman" with the Lebanese sponsor presented as her foil. One hundred percent (a conspicuously high number) of considered house maids report being satisfied with their employers and working conditions. As Nirosha says in ML1, "Madam is very good. Madam gives me everything." However, the fact that these women still live and work under the jurisdiction of her employer during the time of filming severely impact the parameters of permissible discourse, to the extent of dismissing their validity. From the vantage point of the house maid, Mansour belongs to the same category of power as her employer and, in some sense, reproduces the inequalities which characterize the sponsor-MDW relationship (Gandsman).

As is typical of the didactic human rights documentary, archetypal characters become cast so as to confirm a pre-existing framework which suits the political aim of the documentary. The theme of motherhood is invoked, primarily to draw parallels between the maid's estranged family in Sri Lanka and the Lebanese sponsor's children who she must care for in their stead. While producing ML2, Mansour filmed the reactions of migrant domestic workers, Lila and Nirosha, watching footage that Mansour had filmed of their families in rural Sri Lanka ("Carol Mansour interview").



Fig. 5. Lila's daughter (above) and Lila crying (below). *Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0dEu6SBGZ4.

Lila watches her daughter recite the contents of her letter off the monitor of Mansour's video camera while her sponsor's toddler sits on her lap. While her off-camera sponsor holds the video camera out in front of her, Lila cries intensely while the toddler wipes away her tears while calling her "mama".



Fig. 6. Nirosha crying (above) and Nirosha's daughter (below) *Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0dEu6SBGZA.

In the photograph above, Nirosha's sponsor's child sits on her lap while she cries upon watching footage of her husband and daughter. We learn that her husband has been building a new house for them with Nirosha's hard-earned remittances. While she may be experiencing heartache, the documentary seems to suggest that the *kafala* system does provide benefits, endorsing the myth of Eldorado which propels MDWs to leave their countries. In another frame, Nirosha's daughter appears shirtless, to which her 'madam' asks, "This is your daughter? She doesn't have a shirt?"

Nirosha and Lila break down in tears upon viewing footage of their family, while the camera voyeuristically collects footage of them in a severe violation of privacy. The stereotype of the vulnerable and abused MDW comes to the fore. Although Mansour denies having used emotional trickery ("Carol Mansour interview"), exposing them to such emotionally-triggering footage after such a prolonged absence from their loved ones can be expected to provoke a dramatic response. In her defense, the director claims that she would have abstained from including said footage had either of her subjects expressed their disapproval – something which, considering power dynamics, would have been difficult to express.

This recomposed family portrait marginalizes the biological mother from parental responsibilities with the migrant worker assuming her position. Thus, we see how the globalization of female domestic labor separates subaltern mothers from their children in order to foster the children of more privileged mothers. Although normally conceived of as private moments of vulnerability, the humanitarian documentarian collects and disseminates said footage as a means of legitimizing MDWs as worthy victims who are able to perform pain and poverty for the intended spectatorship. Outside of household labor, they are only exceptionally depicted as enjoying leisurely time on their Sunday off, engaging in activities such as attending religious sermons and shopping in ethnic stores. This disproportionate

representational emphasis on domestic work and motherhood flattens the MDW into a simplistic, essentialized figure.

b. “If there is a problem, you will have to bear the hardship”

Unlike ‘good’ employers with nothing to hide, sponsors who openly express racist sentiments or who are guilty of maltreatment fail to appear before the camera. A major challenge for documentarians seeking to report on human rights violations lies in depicting structural inequality without resorting to representing instances of overt violence (Gandsman). The *kafala* system involves “invisible processes” which, by their nature, resist visual documentation (Gandsman). Instead, Mansour opts for an approach that is characteristic of human rights documentaries by focusing on personal testimonies of extreme cases of abuse, forensic photographs of the victims’ bodies, as well as the media coverage of such violations. The narrative deployment of anonymous, brutalized women and their traumas converge into a simplified story of victimization.



Fig. 7. Nirosha’s family discussing her departure to Lebanon. *Maid in Lebanon I*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ8hkYhb5ik.

The family of Sorayka share a cautionary tale of an MDW whose face had been permanently scarred with an iron as punishment by her ‘madam’. This demonstrates how stories of abuse which circulate among future and former migrant maids create a discourse of fear and form the reputation of the Lebanese sponsor. The narrator reiterates this insecurity: “Although we are aware of the abuse and discrimination, we can only hope that it won’t happen to us.” Entrapped by fatalism, Sorayka’s migratory path and precarious future has been etched before her, leaving her no choice but to “bear the hardship.”

5. Performing Pain: Personal Testimonies



Fig. 8. Compilation of personal testimonies. *Maid in Lebanon I*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ8hkYhb5ik.

Several victims relay traumatic events from abusive sponsors from their past (numbered from left to right): denied food and salary withheld for 8 years (image 1); ‘falling’ from the fifth story of her employer’s home, resulting in permanent memory loss (image 3); physical abuse which has left permanent effects on her body (images 2 and 4). These particular cases, which serve to make visible “the social machinery of oppression,” have been specifically selected by the director to fit a pre-existing humanitarian agenda where NGOs advocate a solution to the system (Gandsman). Providing personal testimonies have been a primary selection criteria for their participation rather than an organic occurrence – one which aids in the representational construction of the ideal humanitarian subject. Rather than collapse the distance between viewer and subject, this flurry of confessions fosters an already existing sense of pity toward these victims. Moreover, it provides reassurance to ‘good’

employers who feel absolved from responsibility for their involvement in the system since their behavior fares relatively better than the referenced abusers. Overall, I am not implying that these productions have been produced with malevolent intent, only that the representational strategies mobilized often undermine the agency and constrain the visibility of the very marginalized groups they are meant to be ‘save’, thereby perpetuating the same violence which enable said entrapment.

6. Bruises and Bodies: Forensic Photographs and the Press

Beside confessional accounts, forensic photographs and newspaper clippings further substantiate accusations of abuse and violations. A sample of headlines reads as such: “When immigration turns to slavery”, “Sri Lankans are our domestic animals”, “Charmila returns home tortured and raped”, and “Abused Sri Lankan’s torment finally ends.” The local, regional and international press have collectively adopted the discourse of modern-day slavery and abject victimhood.

Another montage demonstrates forensic photographs through the close ups of the body parts of physically abused women, including photographs of deceased MDWs.



Fig. 9. Forensic photographs of abused MDWs. *Maid in Lebanon I*, YouTube, 6 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZ8hkYhb5ik.

The viewer unwittingly becomes witness of these injustices as demonstrated by bruised and battered bodies. What purposes does the propagation of these images serve? The notion of “seeing is believing” - one of the pillars of human rights documentaries - postulates that gathering visual evidence is crucial to exposing violations (Gandsman 10). The photographic evidence places the viewer as voyeur and, ultimately, witness of battered and bruised bodies. These disembodied marks of violence only serve to reinforce the stereotypical representation of migrant women as vulnerable victims who are incapable of self-defense or alternative forms of recourse. Moreover, the burden of responsibility must be borne by the victim whose body becomes the locus of proof rather than the perpetrator who remains

conveniently hidden from sight. Although the weaponization of these images can be problematic, human rights documentarians such as Mansour deem them necessary to provoke empathy and shock in their viewers (Gandsman). In other words, these images serve as triggers for “an international third-party spectatorship” whose awareness and subsequent outrage at these human rights abuses are essential toward mobilizing political change (Gandsman). However, Susan Sontag argues that the re-appropriation and consumption of these so-called disquieting images can, paradoxically, reinforce callousness among the viewer: “To suffer is one thing; another is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. [...] Images anesthetize” (Sontag 57). Rather than contradict existing depictions, forensic photographs agree with circulating representations of the maid as abused slave.

F. Conclusion

ML1 and ML2 fulfill the hallmarks of human rights documentary who, on their misguided quest, aim to better the plight of the marginalized but, in doing so, often reproduce differences, restrict visibility and deepen narratives of victimhood. Dichotomizing the problem into ‘good’ *versus* ‘bad’ sponsors distracts from the systemic problem of the sponsorship system. Instead, Mansour burdens the sponsor with the responsibility of behaving humanely toward their MDW in the absence of a legislative system to hold them accountable for violations. Mansour’s directorial drive to appear objectified by providing a balanced representation disfavors the marginalized, distracting from their narratives which remain buried beneath the oppressive *kafala* system. With a clear agenda in mind, Mansour selected subjects to confirm her hypothesis (rather than to allow let her hypothesis emerge organically from the existing cases). Her methodology for acquiring participant consent of

live-in and runaway subjects compromises their autonomy, limits their freedom of speech and, in the case of those in hiding, renders their situation more precarious. Nuance fails to enter the predetermined narratives of successes and failures. When evoking the successes of the sponsorship, the selected cases studies feature Sri Lankan MDWs who are content with their working conditions and express feeling fortunate to work for ‘good’ sponsors. The independent, civil ‘madam’ stands in stark opposition with the ‘third world woman’ whom she employs. When evoking the failures of the sponsorship system, personal testimonials and photographs of abused and slain migrants’ bodies recast these women as total victims who entirely lack agency. Instead of reflecting on the overarching global order where Southern bodies provide cheap labor, these disembodied women become portrayed merely as victims of “bad apple” sponsors, as if the problem were localized on such a minute scale. These representations, which invades the privacy and dignity of MDWs, have been tailored to emotionally unsettle the relatively more privileged viewer into action against these appalling injustices. Moreover, the simplistic binary of ‘good’ and bad employer provides a sense of reassurance for the majority of sponsors who, having treated their house maid well by these standards, no longer feel implicated in the problem. This humanitarian documentary model and the organizations which commission them rely on mobilization resulting from the instilment of emotional distress. The familiarity of these representations, however, undermine and work against these projected goals.

CHAPTER 3

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

Renowned drama therapist, Zeina Daccache, has found her niche at the intersection of theater arts and empowerment of disenfranchised communities. Despite the marginalized identities of the individuals whose lives she aspires to ameliorate through artistic intervention, she has rarely been met with criticism for her subject choice – except when exposing the struggles of migrant workers in Lebanon through her folkloric and theater production, “Shebaik Lebaik” (“Zeina Daccache interview”).

Half-amused and half-despaired, Daccache relays to me one example of such vitriol: “Let me tell you a funny story: one day, someone sent me a photo of the Facebook post of a ‘sitt’³ that wrote: ‘Zeina Daccache has really diminished in our eyes. We thought that she has worked with criminals in prisoners but here she is now, working with disgusting house maids by giving them a voice.’ I couldn’t believe it. The criminal who has maybe killed 20 people is forgiven but these workers, because of their skin color, should not have a voice.”

Under the tutelage of Daccache, twenty-two migrant workers (primarily MDWs) committed themselves for 11 months to produce, “Shebaik Lebaik.” The participants hailed from five African countries, namely Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ethiopia, Cameroon and Sudan. The show, whose tickets went for \$10 (15,000LL) saw the stage twice in December 2014 and thrice in May 2015. Daccache says, “The performance had an encore because of how popular it was.” A surprising number of high ranking political actors attended the opening night such as the Lebanese minister of labor, Sejaan Azzi; the British ambassador, Tom Fletcher, and the chargé d’affaires of the Norwegian Embassy.

³ An older, middle-upper class Lebanese woman with conservative politics

Daccache's drama therapy NGO, Catharsis, and the Migrant Worker Taskforce (MWTF), kick-started this collaborative cultural production ("About Us"). MWTF aims to provide an avenue for migrant workers to acquire new skills while tackling issues particular to their community through grassroots efforts. Founder Omar Harfouch states that the conditions in Lebanon for migrant workers, "very much resemble slavery or human trafficking" (Bajec). Prior to the production, Harfouch and a team of volunteers had already been providing English and computer classes for migrant workers at AltCity Hamra - a Beirut-based hub "supporting impact innovation, social entrepreneurship, and economic growth" that celebrates "positive community engagement skills" and believes that "those living the challenges always develop the best solutions" ("Altcity"). Among other initiatives, AltCity currently hosts the Migration Innovation Lab which enables migrants worldwide to devise concrete solutions to issues that concern them *via* technology, entrepreneurship and innovation ("migrant innovation lab"). In terms of sponsorship, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Beirut financed all production costs entailed in the preparation and staging of the show ("Shebaik Lebaik"). The director describes her relationship with her benefactors as such: "They put no conditions on how the performance should be done. I told them what my goals were and they were very happy with it." A portion of the grant provided had been allocated to the participants who were each compensated an undisclosed amount of money for their creative labor ("Zeina Daccache interview").

A. Whose Story Gets Told?

Daccache describes her selection process as an organic one: "We started asking who is interested from the MWTF group. Students were signing themselves up and participation was not mandatory at all. Some dropped out, others stayed on until, finally, we had reached a fair number of participants". No acting experience was necessary to be considered eligible.

However, a selection bias emerges *via* this casting method as only migrant workers who are 1) members of MWTF and, 2) freelancers, runaways, or live-ins ‘granted’ the day off by their employer, could take part of this cultural production. This ‘gives voice’ to narratives of workers endowed with relatively more freedom than their less mobile counterparts (live-ins with no days off). A noticeable gender imbalance exists among the performers with triple the number of women participating in the production than men. In accordance with gendered division of labor, the female participants primarily work as house cleaners which renders the majority of the cast domestic workers. All participants hailed from African nations, with Ethiopians comprising the largest group in the cast. However, Filipino, Sri Lankan and Nepali workers, who constitute a significant percentage of Lebanese-based MDWs, are not represented. Due to the nature of *kafala* which doesn’t enforce days off for the employee, Daccache and the performers had to suffice with only two hours of rehearsals every Sunday. Time limitations forced Daccache and crew to follow a rudimentary template. In comparison with Daccache’s prior productions such as “12 Angry Lebanese” or “Sheharazade in Baabda”, “Shebaik Lebaik” falls short in terms of nuance and narrative structure.

Daccache officially founded the Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy, Catharsis, in 2007 where she serves as executive director and drama therapist (“Mission”). A pioneer in drama therapy in Lebanon and the region, Catharsis works alongside marginalized populations to, through a series of guided workshops, produce a theater production which draws from their personal experiences and struggles (“Missions”). Catharsis has worked independently or in collaboration with an NGO to help those in crisis including, “survivors of trauma, substance abusers, prison inmates, individuals with mental illness, refugees, survivors of abuse, older adults and at-risk youth etc.” (“Mission”). She worked alongside male convicts in the notorious Roumieh prison and female prisoners in Baabda prison in “Twelve Angry Lebanese” (2019-2010) and “Scheharazade in Baabda.” (2013), respectively,

and permanent residents of a local psychiatric asylum in “From the Bottom of My Brain” (2015) (“Who Is She”).

B. Humanitarian or Revolutionary?

There exists a certain ambiguity with regards to the director’s approach toward her performers: does she believe that the oppressed should be the ones to envision their own liberation or does she, conversely, adopt a humanitarian model where the subaltern needs to be saved by the benevolence of others? In the director’s words, these performances aspire to “give special populations a tool for self-advocacy” in order to advance their agenda and influence policymakers (“Mission”). Refusing to speak on behalf of participants by dictating solutions to their problems, Daccache wants drama therapy to “constitute a vehicle for the actors to ensure themselves justice” (“Zeina Daccache interview”). This approach seeks to embolden participants as the architects of their own liberation. Two notable events occurred in terms of self-advocacy: 1) a portion of ticket sales went toward purchasing return tickets for MDWs held at General Security (“Zeina Daccache interview”) and 2) the abolition of circular 1778 which prohibits MDWs from entering a romantic relationship (“Shebaik Lebaik”). While MDWs should, like anybody else, have the right to love and be loved by a partner, such a tokenized move forward fails to respond to their original, more pressing request: the abolition of a fundamentally oppressive system. During rehearsals, Daccache utilizes techniques from Augusto Boal’s theater of the oppressed which encourages participants to explore the conditions of their subjugation in order to envision potential solutions to their predicament (“Zeina Daccache interview”). They specifically used the “freeze” exercises in which participants were to improvise scenarios derived from their lived experiences as migrants workers in Lebanon alongside its myriad of struggles. The participants and director shared an egalitarian relationship in which Daccache describes

herself as a mentor and friend with many still occasionally contacting her and her staff years after the show's staged production.



Fig. 10. Zeina Daccache and participants during rehearsals. Rached, Nayla. “Catharsis Présente Shebaik Lebaik. Les Travailleurs Migrants Tendent Des Ponts.” *Magazine*, Beirut, 2016, magazine.com.lb/index.php/fr/mobile/item/10304-catharsis-présente-shebaik-lebaik-les-travailleurs-migrants-tendent-des-ponts?issue_id=161.

Some participants reaped long-term benefits, whether on a personal or professional level: “One of them acted in a film “Ghada el 3eid” [Lebanese TV series]. She’s the only Ethiopian in the film. Her name is Etafir. They gained a lot of self-confidence. People knew more about them and started recruiting them” (“Zeina Daccache interview”).

In opposition with Boalian theater, the language which the Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy uses to describe itself borrows from the lexicon of civil society with words such as “healing”, “empowerment,” and “integration” as its primary ambitions (“Mission”). Daccache states: “The goal was definitely therapeutic and for them to work on themselves.

You have no idea how shy they used to be. They used to feel a major sense of inferiority because of how very racist people are in Lebanon” (“Zeina Daccache interview”). Even the name, Catharsis, originates from from Aristotle’s coercive system of theater which focuses on ‘curing’ the maladjusted in order to be reinserted into society (Boal 42). The founder of theater of the oppressed, Augusto Boal, whose techniques Daccache borrows during her exercises (“Zeina Daccache interview”), critiques Aristotle’s coercive system of tragedy as a “system of intimidation” which purges society of antisocial or destabilizing elements within a system of “definite, accepted values” (46). Seen through that lens, Daccache burdens participants with the task of adapting to a profoundly disturbed society rather than demand of that society to redress its ways. Finally, the declaration, “Under the High Patronage of His Excellency Minister of Labor Sejaan Azzi,” prominently figures on the press material of the performance. More concerned with preserving the image of Lebanese employers over ameliorating working conditions for migrants, Azzi has, on record, stated that, “The violation of a person’s dignity and rights exists not only in Lebanon but everywhere in the world. We should not whip ourselves and depict the Lebanese society as an enemy to human dignity” (Owens). During the performance, Daccache uses circumlocutory language that does not implicate Azzi by name when introducing scene 9 regarding MDW suicide and legislation: “Our next topic has to do with legal matters and MDW suicide. After their deaths, it remains unclear what happens next!” How revolutionary can a performance be if has been endorsed by the officials whom the system depends on? No revolutionary intervention would seek out or publicly endorse someone who has, throughout their political career, stood against the interests of the participants around whom the performance revolves. In fact, nobody as staunchly disinterested in MDW rights and the abolition of the *kafala* system as Azzi would endorse a project unless it presented no threat to the established dominant system.

Regardless of which school she belongs to, Daccache says, “For me, the domestic house worker is like any other worker like you and I. This person has rights and duties. In this country, unfortunately, we use their services from 8AM until 8PM, the poor woman. This is slavery. Is there hope? Thank goodness that there are many NGOs such as Caritas and Aamel who are putting the spotlight on this issue which makes people more aware of the situation.” (“Zeina Daccache Interview”). In summary, Daccache espouses the discourse of modern-day slavery, views MDWs as powerless and places her faith in NGOs to resolve their predicament. Moreover, Daccache expresses ambivalence with regards to the future for MDWs in Lebanon but believes that ‘giving voice’ to them has ameliorated their situation: “Today, they can organize a march in the streets. Civil society has sided with them. They have a voice.” Finally, she acknowledges that the *kafala* sponsorship system must be abolished and hopes for the day that legislation will protect this vulnerable group of workers.

While directing “Shebaik Lebaik”, Daccache did not have a particular audience in mind but states being concerned about “having to deal with people who would be very critical of the project such as the ‘tantes’ that are against black people being on stage. Migrant workers staging their demands by parodying the Lebanese sponsor is considered “matter out of place” within the established classification system, inciting some to police symbolic borders (“race”). The promotional text on the DVD states that the aim of the performance is to “voice out messages from the migrant workers population to the Lebanese Society,” which echoes the human rights ideal of liberating the oppressed through self-expression (“Shebaik Lebaik”). Arabic and French are spoken throughout the performance, with English subtitles available. It should not, however, be taken for granted that these migrant workers perform primarily in the Arabic language. Despite MDWs’ acquisition of the Arabic language due to lengthy employment periods (sometimes amounting to decades), Lebanese society fails to integrate or even acknowledge them on the most fundamental level.

For these workers’ demands to be recognized as legitimate, the participants must articulate them within the parameters dictated by the dominant group while the opposite does not hold true.

The analysis below concerns itself with the recorded version of “Shebaik Lebaik” on DVD (2016). The ticket revenue for the two-day screening of the DVD at Metropolis Theater contributed to the sustainability of Catharsis’ drama therapy rehabilitation program (“Zeina Daccache interview”). Filmed by Jocelyn Abi Gebrayel and edited by Saad Saad, the final DVD has undergone aesthetic and professional decisions before landing on the shelves of Antoine Library. Since the recording does not exist online and the price per DVD (\$17 or 26,000LL) exceeds the purchasing power of the average MDW, it is safe to assume that house maids do not comprise the intended viewership.

For clarity, I have tabulated the 14 scenes comprising “Shebaik Lebaik” (below). I shall analyze the promotional material, describe the four performance genres (acting, show-and-tell, improvisation and storytelling) then produce a textual and theatrical analysis analyzing the representational politics of MDWs according to the several themes delineated below.

Table 1. Each scene with corresponding category and summary

Category	Scene	Summary
Acting	Waiting Room (1)	6 migrant workers and 3 Lebanese performers present a caricatural representation of Lebanese sponsors gossiping among each other

	Waiting Room (1) <i>continued</i>	about their maids as they impatiently wait for the performance to begin
Introduction	Introduction (2)	Zeina Daccache specifically introduces the prominent members of the audience (by name) and generally introduces the performers (by nationality)
Show-and-tell	Burkina Faso participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (3)	Burkina Faso participants perform traditional dance and sing national anthem; one representative compares her country with Lebanon (celebrate International Woman's Day as national holiday and no water shortage)
Show-and-tell	Senegalese participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (4)	Senegalese participants perform traditional dance and sing national anthem; one representative spoke of Senegal's history as primary

	negalese participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (4) <i>continued</i>	node for slavery and compares her/his country with Lebanon (right to pass on nationality to husband and children; Lebanese free in their country)
Show-and-tell	Cameroon participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (5)	Cameroon participants perform traditional dance and sing national anthem; one representative spoke of -
Show-and-tell	Sudanese participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (6)	Sudanese participants perform traditional dance and sing national anthem; one representative compares her country with Lebanon; one representative compares Sudan with Lebanon (the Sudanese are always at a disadvantage in relation with the Lebanese, whether in Lebanon or Sudan)
Improvisation	Suffering of the sponsor (7)	Daccache introduces the

	Suffering of the sponsor (7) <i>continued</i>	four categories. Performers represent employers as impatient, rude, condescending and with little sympathy as sponsor and MDW act out everyday scenarios around the home. The only source of suffering for the sponsor which the performers identified: teaching their MDW skills only for her to leave once her contract ends.
Improvisation	Racism in Lebanon (8)	Performers denounce racist practices such as the common designation of all MDWs as “Sri Lankan” and racist policies such as banning darker-skinned women from entering swimming pools (with the exception of those belonging to the upper echelons of society)
Improvisation	Suicide and Legislation (9)	One scene depicts a

	Suicide and Legislation (9) <i>continued</i>	'madam' attempting to cover up the murder of her helper as a supposed suicide whereas another represents a cruel recruitment agent who treats the migrant women in her agency like commodities.
Improvisation	Suffering of migrant workers due to sponsorship system (10)	Performers assume the role of MDW or sponsors with the latter engaging in abuses such as withholding salaries, limiting food intake, restricting their mobility, confiscating their passports and overworking them.
Singing	Introduction to storytelling segment (11)	Ethiopian woman sings a brief melodic introduction
Storytelling	Adam shares his migratory journey in a "self-revelatory monologue" (12)	"There once was a Sudanese boy named Adam..." who was kidnapped (and held for \$200 ransom), physically abused and nearly left for dead while simply attempting to cross over

	Adam shares his migratory journey in a a “self-revelatory monologue” (12) <i>continued</i>	from Sudan to Lebanon.
Singing	Interlude to next story (13)	Ethiopian woman sings a brief melodic interlude
Storytelling	Ayni shares her migratory journey in a “self-revelatory monologue” (14)	Propelled out of her country by poverty, Ayni finds herself working within an abusive sponsor. Upon running away, she was imprisoned and deported. Desperate, she returns to Lebanon and now luckily works for “the best family in Lebanon.”
Show-and-tell	Ethiopian participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (15)	10 Ethiopian participants perform traditional dance and sing national anthem; one representative speaks of how: the oldest skeleton in the world hails from Ethiopia; Ethiopian women can pass on their nationality to their children; civil

	Ethiopian participants share facts, perform a folkloric dance & sing their national anthem (15) <i>continued</i>	marriage exists; and Muslims and Christians have coexisted peacefully for years. The show's closing receives a standing ovation.
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The promotional material features an image of an oil lamp with a genie hazily emerging from it.

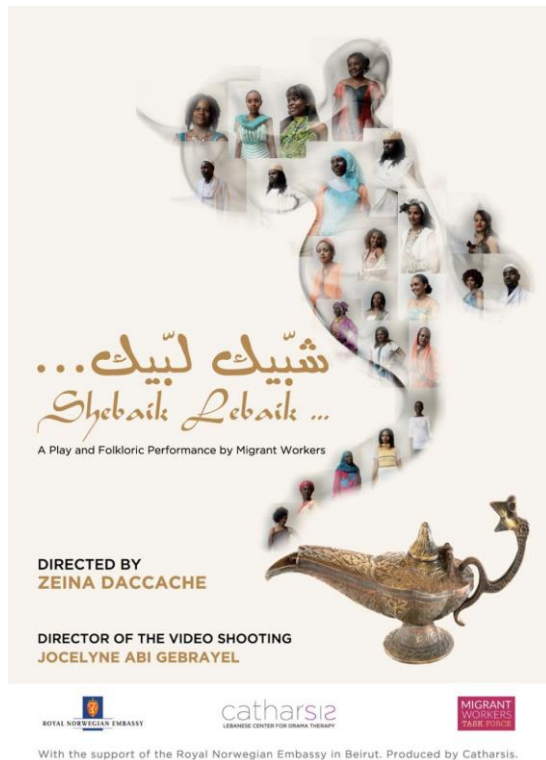


Fig. 11. Poster advertising the screening of the DVD. *Screening & DVD Launching of "Shebaik Lebaik" / Metropolis.* Metropolis, www.metropoliscinema.net/2016/shebaik-lebaik/.

Placing this popular character on the cover alludes to a universally-recognized character that symbolizes hope and wish fulfillment. Once a character has enunciated their three wishes, the genie responds, “Shebaik Lebaik” (“Your wish is my command”), before fulfilling their demands. A compilation of portraits of the performers comprise the body of the genie to symbolize their collective wish to ameliorate the conditions which determine their work and living conditions in Lebanon. The association to a juvenile fairytale and the non-assertiveness of their demands (to hope or wish for rather than to demand) domesticates their demands and reduces their status as non-threatening to the dominant ideology.

C. Performance Genres

1. Acting

The opening scene of the performance features 9 performers (6 migrant workers and 3 Lebanese actors⁴) who take on caricaturized roles of Lebanese sponsors gossip among each other about their house maids. In an ironic reversal of roles, each migrant participant assumes the role of a Lebanese sponsor that adheres to racist beliefs about MDWs. This tactic enables performers to launch their critique of the dominant class through comedy. Elegant clothing and accessories adorn their bodies as signifiers of elevated status and power.

A sense of irony emerges from migrant workers enacting the role of sponsors who mistreat and dehumanize their MDWs. Although the migrant performers lack agency in their victimized portrayal of themselves, they regain a sense of power in their ability to embody and mock sponsors to an audience of individuals who belong to the dominant social group being critiqued.

⁴ Scene 1 exceptionally includes Lebanese individuals among the cast.



Fig. 12. Rahel Zegeye performing a parody of a Lebanese ‘madam’. Daccache, Zeina, director. *Shebaik Lebaik*. 2010.

Much like Mansour, Daccache espouses the notion of representational equanimity by showing ‘both sides’ of the story. Promotional text describes “Shebaik Lebaik” as seeking justice for MDWs and their employers as substantiated by scene 7 which places the suffering of the sponsor center stage. This representational decision does not account for this power imbalance in which the dominant group controls all economic, social, political and legal institutions. Conversely, MDWs who, starved for outlets to express their subjectivity, must now share their first such platform to voice their very legitimate grievances with the omnipresent Lebanese sponsor. Thriving for fairness undermines the struggle of the marginalized while dismissing the power imbalance characterizing their relationship with the hegemonic class. Overall, the performances of the sponsor divide them into a good/bad binary, with the former far outnumbered by the latter. In Daccache’s introduction of the

performance, she stresses that the participants reference their former sponsors rather than their current ones while on stage. She credits the former for being kind enough to grant their MDWs the permission to attend rehearsals, underscoring their limited freedom of mobility.

2. Improvisation

Daccache adapted Augusto Boal's celebrated theatrical techniques to explore issues that resonated with MDWs on a personal and collective level: "We used a lot of improvisation. We would give them a theme which they would play around with on stage. That's how we spent a lot of our rehearsal sessions together" ("Zeina Daccache Interview). Derived from participants' direct experiences, these four themes were explored: the suffering of the sponsor; racism in Lebanon; suicide and legislation; suffering of the migrant worker. Within each theme, two to three participants would volunteer for a brief improvisational scene (1 minute, on average) where they could either embody the oppressed (a migrant worker) or the oppressor (Lebanese sponsor). Whenever Daccache shouts, "freeze!", she terminates a skit and makes room for the following one. Her role as 'creative police' can be interpreted as a form of censorship since it enables her to set the parameters for what types of conversations are permissible and what form these issues can take. Performers dress in casual clothing which gives them the needed flexibility to switch between the role of sponsor and migrant worker from one scene to the next.

3. Show-and-Tell

Dressed in ethnic costumes, performers assembled according to nationality with each group taking its turn at 1) singing their country's national anthem, 2) reciting a series of facts related to the country in question by a designated speaker then 3) performing a choreographed folkloric dance. The performers' dancing bodies which dress in colorful,

traditional costumes, and dance to upbeat, African rhythms, become a site of entertainment for the Lebanese gaze.



Fig. 13. Performers from Burkina Faso performing a folkloric dance. Daccache, Zeina, director. *Shebaik Lebaik*. 2010.

While Mansour aspires for a cross cultural exchange, these stereotypical ethnic embodiments neither expand the repertoire of representations nor advance a critique of the system, and could feed into an anthropological justification for racism, instead. During part two, subjects related to progress, particularly in areas related women’s rights, civil marriage, telecommunications and electrical/water supplies, would be breached. This didactic approach stands in opposition with Boalian theater which places participation at the center of any performance. In terms of creative autonomy, Daccache stresses that “the performers would practice among each other which dance they would like to perform and which themes they would like to bring up about their country” (“Zeina Daccache Interview”).

Dividing MDWs along national lines seems an arbitrary mode of categorization seeing as how their demands transcend national barriers and unify, rather than divide, them. Daccache justifies her choice on placing a heavy emphasis on national provenance as follows:

“There definitely was a hope for there to be an increase in awareness with regards to the richness of these cultures and this was definitely reached. As you saw from the performance, they teach us their national anthem and various things their countries have achieved such as allowing civil marriage. They have electricity when we don’t. You know? So everyone in the public was like, “wow, they’re like that? They’re better than us in these things? The woman can give the nationality to their children while we can’t?” (“Zeina Daccache interview”)

However, the overall structure of the show-and-tell scenes proves problematic for many reasons. The national classification alienates participants by stressing on an Other-ness that can and has been weaponized against them to deny their rights. Speaking in Arabic during the Q&A segment, Zegeye, states that she’s spent 15 years in Lebanon: “I am now Lebanese!” I find this statement, which punctures the hard and fixed boundaries of the system of classification, more nuanced in its meditation on alienation, belongingness and national identity, than the show-and-tell segments, which failed to meaningfully reflect on the struggle for MDWs to be accepted. To relegate them to national categories *via* cultural signifiers/practices means to resituate them as being from elsewhere. To a large extent, the show-and-tell scenes provide a satire of Lebanese society by way of the foreign, migrant gaze. When each group takes turns comparing their respective country to Lebanon according to a yardstick of progress, they forsake the opportunity to directly address the crux of the problem (i.e. kafala) by focusing on irrelevant factoids (see more: Appendix E). Instead of arguing for the inherent protection of all human beings under the international charter of human rights, they list facts related to secularism, civility, history and women’s rights that ‘prove’ their worth. The argument adopts a cultural evolutionary theory where the worth of a

nation and its inhabitants can be determined by how far they have progressed along the spectrum of civility.

4. Storytelling

Autobiographical storytelling (otherwise known as self-revelatory monologues in Boalian theater) features performers sharing tragic first-hand accounts related to their experience as migrant workers in Lebanon. Ayni from Ethiopia and Adam from Sudan begin with their narration with a twist on the traditional storytelling introduction: “There was once a girl/boy named Ayni/Adam...”

5. Singing

An Ethiopian woman seated by the stage sings a brief melody as interlude between one storytelling segment to the subsequent one.

D. Textual and Visual Analysis

In the following paragraph, I will be conducting a textual and visual analysis of the promotional material and the film itself, with an emphasis on the representational politics through which MDWs become known to the public as well as the types of narratives which emerge from this collective meditation on being a MDW under an oppressive system.

In terms of scenography, a minimalistic set up provided the stage for the performers. The stage consists of a simple, wooden 3x1 meter long stage that served as an *ad hoc* platform for the actors. A horizontal string of bulbs hangs above the stage provide overhead lighting with several bulbs forming a large circle on the wall behind the stage used for dramatic flashes during the folkloric dance segments. The overall stage production budget

appears to have been modest yet effectively utilized for the intents and purposes of the performance.

1. Themes

Five themes emerged from my screening of the DVD recording of “Shebaik Lebaik.” I’ve decided to classify them in the form of the relationship of MDWs with: biography, nationality, sponsor, and political authority.

a. Biography: An undifferentiated mass

Biographical clues regarding the performers existed in the form of colorful cardboard DIY posters which adorned the hallways leading to the stage. A photograph of the participant accompanied by handwritten text in Arabic provided the template for said posters. Some photographs represented the performers dressed in folkloric costume against a white background. Others re-inscribed their identities with their labor by depicting them in the workplace (e.g. posing in front of her ironing board; performing kitchen chores; scrubbing a garbage bin; carrying two large garbage bags).

During scene 2, Daccache adapts her mode of introduction in accordance with positionality. She announces the full names and titles of the prominent audience members on opening night, with a generous applause following each introduction. Contrastingly, Daccache provides a broad overview of the actual performers, rather than acknowledging each participant by name – a decision which fixes them as interchangeable beings or part of an undistinguished mass. Their full names only appear in full under “cast members” during the credits. Similarly to “Maid in Lebanon I and II” (chapter 2), the prefix of “Mr.,” “Mrs.” And “Ms.” precede the names of Lebanese contributors but not their MDW counterparts.

Whether in Mansour of Daccache's productions, the inclusion of such prefixes proves unusual but exist specifically to reinforce the prevailing power imbalance.

b. "Better than my own family": the 'Good' Sponsor

In terms of sponsor representation, Ayni's self-revelatory monologue (scene 14) concludes with a positive, and perhaps saccharine, note regarding MDW-employer relations. At first, she describes her dire economic standing and romanticized view of Lebanon which pushed her to migrate toward it only to find herself bound to abusive Lebanese sponsors who overworked her, and withheld her salary and passport.



Fig. 14. Ayni sharing her story during the self-revelatory monologues. Daccache, Zeina, director. *Shebaik Lebaik*. 2010.

Victimized by the system on multiple fronts, she ran away which consequently led to her imprisonment and deportation. Upon returning to Lebanon, Ayni was assigned “the best

family in Lebanon – better than [her] own family”. As the narrator in “Maid in Lebanon I” says regarding the arbitrary assignment of sponsors under the *kafala* system, one can only hope for a good employer. However, Ayni foregoes the opportunity to critique of the systemic injustices by taking a sycophantic turn: “Never judge an entire population if only one of them was unkind to you.” This statement assumes that abusive sponsors make up an exceptional minority and fails to critique the framework which dictates the unequal terms of their relationship, instead hoping that employers will ‘behave themselves’ underneath the prevailing system. Therefore, the problem lies with MDWs who must refrain from generalizing negative experiences and should, instead, adopt a positive attitude as a corrective for misbehaving sponsors. In that sense, the problem as described by Ayni shifts the burden of responsibility from structural injustice to individuals and from the perpetrators of the system to its victims.

c. “That’s what you get when you give them freedom!”: the ‘Bad’ Sponsor

Conversely, negative portrayals of employers proliferate throughout the remainder of the performance, particularly during the waiting room (scene 1) and improvisation segments (scenes 7, 8, 9 and 10) which depict them as overly demanding, cruel, authoritarian, conceited, selfish and, in one case, homicidal. As enacted by the migrant workers, Lebanese sponsors entertain views about their MDWs rooted in biological racism such as their supposed dishonesty, dirtiness, laziness and inherent stupidity. During said scenes, a more ambivalent relationship with regards to self-representation emerges. Some performers confirm the stereotypical portrayal of Third World Women (Mohanty 340) by being submissive, self-effacing and silent, whereas others subvert them by demonstrating assertiveness, combativeness and courage. In this profoundly unequal relationship, the ‘madam’ takes advantage of their position of power by dehumanizing their employee,

reducing them to a mere means to an end. In scene 10, which focuses on the hardships endured by MDWs, sponsors engage in a range of abuses such as withholding their wages, limiting their food intake, restricting their mobility, confiscating their passports and overworking them. In many scenarios, the vulnerability and dehumanization endured by these workers reinforces narrow representational parameters in which the subjects lack dignity and agency. Often, the audience problematically laughs along with staged representations of violence and discrimination. For example, while Sudanese actor, Ibrahim, ironically assumes the role of a racist Lebanese sponsor in scene 1, he exclaims, “You deserve it! That’s what you get when you give them freedom. How many times have I told you that you can’t be nice to Sudanese?” While the audience laughs at the dramatic irony, their amusement perpetuates a form of violence against the performer and other Sudanese who experience such racial insensitivity as part of their everyday lives. In scene 9, a sponsor attempts to cover up her involvement in the murder of her MDW whom she had pushed off her balcony. The audience bursts with laughter at the play on words which the sponsor mobilizes to acquit herself of culpability from her crime. These reactions could be read as disrespectful toward the performers and other MDWs whose lives are personally implicated and compromised to the extent of morbidity due to structural and societal injustices which threaten their very existence. During scene 14, Adam describes his near-death experience of being trafficked over the border with hundreds of other migrant workers, during which he had been beaten, kidnapped, and held for \$200 (300,000LL) ransom. This story demonstrates the interchangeability and disposability of migrant bodies who, by virtue of their nationality and class, can be abused with impunity then substituted at will. Much like Ayni’s personal testimonial, Adam recites a narrative which makes him legible as a worthy victim during which he must bear the burden of proof for his abusers’ deeds.

c. “Today is their day. They have invited us and not the other way around”: Confronting Authority

Resistance against authoritative figures present in the audience occurs overtly during the Q&A segment following the performance. Rather than congratulate or comment on the performance which had ended only moments ago, Azzi seizes the opportunity to reassert Lebanese dominance in the order of classification by inviting the audience to collectively sing the Lebanese national anthem. This dismissive and defensive reaction from the minister of labor himself demonstrates his low regard of the participants and their demands which holds little promise for positive legislative developments. In a move to belittle his authority and assert solidarity, Daccache frustrates his efforts: “Today is their day. They have invited us and not the other way around.” Despite his history of banning union formation and barring MDWs from joining the labor code, Azzi spews empty political speech by asserting that “dignity is humanity’s most important attribute” and that he wants to “make Lebanon the country of fairness and equality” by canceling the sponsorship law. Instead of addressing himself directly to the MDWs, Azzi disrespectfully turns his back to them, choosing to address the audience instead. Beyond superficial rhetoric, Azzi seems not the genuinely concerned with the performers demonstrations of the everyday injustices of rampant racism, structural inequalities, and political and legislative oversight.



Fig. 15. Omar Harfouche speaking with Sejaan Azzi. Daccache, Zeina, director. *Shebaik Lebaik*. 2010.

If this performance can be rewarded for anything, it would be the opportunity for MDWs to speak directly with ministers and other relevant parties about their demands. Ethiopian participant, Rahel, openly retaliates against Azzi's hypocrisy and lack of follow through. She challenges him on multiple fronts and shakes her fist at him while demanding to know what he can do for their community. Rahel's confrontation demonstrates the noble qualities of agency, courage and dignity in the face of injustice, proving to be a representationally exceptional moment across the four media texts under consideration. Although occurring after the show, the performance enabled a public conversation and altercation between a member of the oppressed and the oppressor in a way that ruptures representational expectations of MDWs.

E. Conclusion

A pioneering theatrical production in the region, “Shebaik Lebaik” enabled a group of migrant workers from various African countries to voice their experiences under the *kafala* sponsorship system in front of a live audience. Despite utilizing revolutionary Boalian theater techniques which explore the ways in which marginalized populations can collectively resolve their subjugation, the language surrounding Catharsis’ work borrows heavily the lexicon of civil society and human rights discourse – one which believes in ‘giving voice’ to the disenfranchised as a means of saving them. However, the representational politics, as mobilized by the migrant performers themselves, often reproduce exploitative relationships and racist concepts. The failure to individually introduce the performers belittles their contribution while relegating them to an inferior social class with respect to Lebanese citizens. Through the various performance categories, several relationships emerged, each illuminating the plight of MDWs in Lebanon. In the improvisation sequence, the MDWs’ relationship with the sponsor depicts a thoroughly unbalanced one where the employer enjoys absolute power and exploits it with impunity. Through role reversal, the performers present exaggerated versions of sponsors, depicting them as spoiled, racist and lacking in humanity. The ability for MDWs to publicly represent and parody the dominant class facing an audience comprised of Lebanese individuals endows the participants with an unprecedented sense of agency. While some performers choose to retaliate against their unfair treatment, others choose to silently endure their lowly status by showing compliance in the face of oppression. Those adopting the latter attitude in the face of power, disrupt the humanitarian representational model of submission and victimhood.

Moreover, show-and-tell performances divided performers along national lines involving a formulaic mode of self-representation which demands rights on the basis of progress. They self-anthropologize in a way that conforms to, rather than discomforts, the

Lebanese gaze. While Daccache believes that the *kafala* system should be abolished (“Zeina Daccache interview”), “Shebaik Lebaik” often takes a lenient approach toward the prevailing system and displaces the blame onto the sponsor who should act humanely within the existing structure. Defiance against authority manifests itself particularly against the minister of labor, Sejaan Azzi, when a MDW shows courage and strength of character by demanding her rights. While well-meaning, “Shebaik Lebaik” reasserts representational stereotypes of MDWs while primarily constructing them as hapless victims of ‘bad’ sponsors. While counterexamples do exist, the overall structure of the performance either distracts the audience with irrelevant and/or misguided information (show-and-tell) or reiterate narratives of victimhood (self-revelatory monologues and improvisation sequence).

CHAPTER 4

MANIFESTING INVISIBILITY

Each of my many viewings of the “Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)” inspired an uncomfortable concoction of emotions, directly linked to my positionality and complicity within the system that the film so adeptly deconstructs. One of the first things that the director, Maher Abi Samra, wanted to know was: “Why are you doing this?” Surprised by his inquiry, I spoke expansively about visibility, agency, *kafala*, modern-day slavery and more, hoping to impress him or at least placate his curiosity. He cared more about why I, a person belonging to a specific socioeconomic class within Lebanese society, wanted to pursue such a topic. “Are you doing this out of guilt?” he asked. This question, incidentally, is at the heart of his documentary.

The following quote, narrated by Abi Samra at the 50-minute mark, succinctly delineates his thesis: “We are all complicit in signing [kafala contracts] and benefitting from them. Contracts that turn workers into maids and allow us to own them for a two-to-three year term that can we renewed if we are satisfied with her work. We know that the police and authorities are on our side. There is no other oversight. We are accountable to no one but ourselves. It’s then up to each individual’s ethics.”

Through his oeuvre, “Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)”, Abi Samra paints a portrait of Al Raed agency in the Hamra district in Beirut where we discover the blatant commodification and dehumanization of MDWs being trafficked to satisfy the Lebanese sponsors’ every need. A steady stream of customers stream in and out of the agency, seeking to ‘purchase’ a house maid or to file a complaint against their current one. This busy agency, which is situated in a middle-class neighborhood, serves as a microcosm for systemic processes which otherwise resist easy documentation. Abi Samra’s family had been loyal clients, hiring numerous house maids *via* the company over the years. Throughout the

production of the film, Abi Samra and the agency owner, Zein, had honest and constructive conversations on the subject of migrant work.



Fig. 16. External view of the agency (above) and Zein in his office (below). Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)*. *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

Unlike Daccache and Mansour who endow foreign female workers a central place in their productions, Abi Samra keeps his subjects out of sight and earshot throughout the film and hence, invisible - all this despite the fact that “the central idea of the film is about house maids” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”).

A. Subjective Filmmaking

Maher Abi Samra is an award-winning Lebanese documentarian (“un témoin libanais”). Before becoming a filmmaker, the director had been a member of the communist party. Dispelling the myth of objectivity and representational fairness in filmmaking, the director describes his relationship with his craft as follows: “Documentary film appears to be the most effective way for me to express the complexity and contradictions of reality, to put forward my point of view and my subjectivity. My films are political.” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”).

His cinematography consists of politically-charged films such as “We Were Communists” (2010) and “Women of Hezbollah” (2001). In “Merely a Smell” (2007), Lebanon resembles a “disemboweled body” in the wake of the 2006 war with Israel (“Moujarad Raiha”). In 1994, he served as assistant director for the documentary, “Legacy of Transatlantic Slavery,” for the Transatlantic Slavery gallery in the National Museums Liverpool - the world’s “only permanent museum gallery devoted to the transatlantic slave trade.” (“Transatlantic slave trade”).

B. Complicity in a Sick Society

In Arabic, the title “Makhdoumin” translates into “the served” which, in this case, corresponds to the Lebanese sponsor. The director assumes this vantage point while making this documentary (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). When asked to share his motivations behind directing the film, the director responded:

“I did it because this is a society that is exercising this act. There’s a serious problem with this society. It’s not out of pity for the plight of house maids. It is a sick society that is hurting itself. Children are being raised in this environment. I am not standing in for these workers. I wanted to think of MDWs’ presence as a means to reflect on men and women, children, and society as a whole.” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”)

Rejecting the simple binary of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ employer, Abi Samra, discredits the entire sponsorship system and holds all those operating within it as responsible and complicit (a word which he often reiterates). Although Abi Samra had never personally employed a MDW, family members and friends have always employed foreign help within the home. In a reflexive turn, the director holds himself accountable for participating in this culture of oppression and for benefitting from these grotesque abuses of power. By recognizing himself as part of the problem, he adopts a unique position with respect to human rights documentarians who tend to moralize from a position of assumed superiority. In terms of audience, Abi Samra had intended for the documentary for the majority of Lebanese sponsors who fail to see how they might be personally implicated in the problem (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). Sensationalist journalistic practices, which only report on extreme cases of abuse, provide sponsors with a misguided sense of relief for their relatively benign behavior. Despite the political nature of the film, his aspirations remain modest bordering on cynical: “Nothing is going to change because of a film. Not even on a personal level. For example, the maid stayed at my parent’s house” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). Overall, he rejects the humanitarian premise that the marginalized must be saved by the benevolence of the more privileged class. Instead, he believes that the oppressed should spearhead their own revolution since the sponsor will never liberate the sponsored.

C. Funding, Production, Circulation

Three production companies participated in the creation of this media text: Ourjouane Productions (Lebanon), Les Films d’Ici (France) and Medieoperatorene (Norway). Distribution was taken care of by Icarus Films Release which proclaims itself to be a “leading distributor of documentary films” which “address areas of political, social and cultural concern” (“Icarus Films: About”). The award-winning distribution company subscribes to the

commonplace designation of modern-day slavery by describing the film as an exploration of a market where the Lebanese “prevail as master over mail-order maids who become their property (“Icarus Films: About”). Funding was provided by two regional supporters and one international one: SANAD (an Abu Dhabi-based development and post-production which “supports the development of documentary films by Arab filmmakers with emphasis on artistic innovation”)([“About SANAD”](#)), the Arab Documentary Film Program (“a program that funds and supports creative documentary films in the Arab region” provided by the Arab Fund for Art and Cultures)(“About AFAC”), and the French National Center of Cinematography and the Moving Image.

In Lebanon, “Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)”, screened for two weeks (February 9 – 22, 2017) at Metropolis (Sofil) movie theater in Achrafieh. English subtitles accompany the primary spoken language of Arabic (with rare instances of Ethiopian). “We do not have enough cinemas in Lebanon that would screen such a movie,” says Abi Samra. Documentary films produced with high artistic sensibilities belong to a niche market which fails to attract enough box office revenues for major theaters to screen it. Metropolis theater has a loyal audience for these types of films rendering the location an ideal venue for the film to be shown to the public. Numerous international film festivals screened the documentary which won the following awards: Peace Film Prize at the Berlinale Film Festival; DOK.horizonte (Munich Film Festival); Best Film (Buenos Aires International Festival); Best Documentary (Dubai Film Festival) and Official Selection (Venice Biennial Film Festival) (“Icarus Films: A Maid for Each”). The imbalanced relationship between sponsor and sponsored depicted in “Maid for Each” holds a mirror to various countries which espouse a liberal economy and depend on cheap labor (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). The French television station, France 3 Corse, had agreed to air an abridged, 52-minute version of the production. However, they objected to the lack of representational balance which rendered MDWs invisible. Ignoring

their recommendation, Abi Samra explains that allowing a maid to speak would be an alleviation of responsibility as it would falsely empower this group by temporarily giving them voice when, in reality, they had none.

The film has neither been commercially released on DVD nor can it be found for streaming online. The distribution company, Icarus Films, has only uploaded a trailer on Vimeo and 3-minute excerpt on YouTube. In response to this scarcity, Abi Maher explains: “I would like for it to be on the Internet but it cannot be due to production and protection of rights, which I am personally against.” In order to access the film outside of the international film circuit and its brief screening time at the local cinema, the viewer is required to send an email to the distribution company to inquire on ordering options. In my instance, I contacted the film’s executive producer, Jinane Dagher, who temporarily gave me access to the private Vimeo page. The password was provided strictly for research purposes with the implicit understanding that I would not share it with anyone nor screen it with an audience. By the time my research comes to a close, I will have lost access to the film. The limited accessibility of the film severely constrains the number of individuals who will have the opportunity to consume it.

D. Textual and Visual analysis

My visual and textual analysis has been conducted surrounding the relationship between MDWs, agency owners and sponsors. More specifically, I will be focusing on the visibility of the sponsor and recruitment agencies, the (in)visibility of MDWs, and the everyday practices which characterize their relationship through the lens of the agency.

1. Poster Art: Bleach, Gloves, Beirut

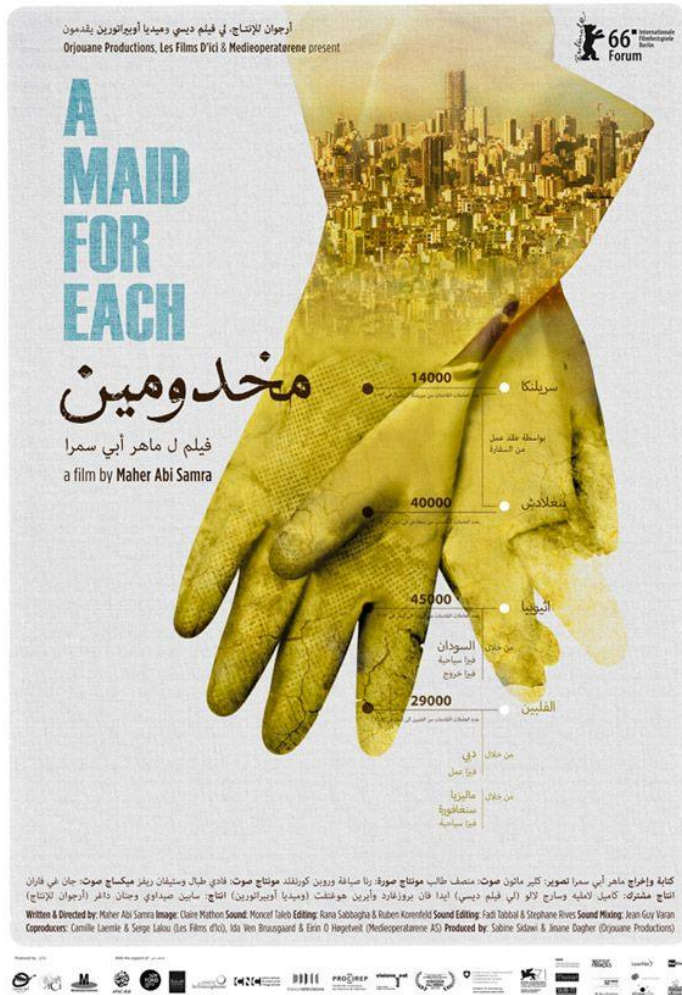


Fig. 17. Official movie poster. “Makhdoumin (2016).” IMDb, IMDb.com, www.imdb.com/title/tt5490996/mediaviewer/rm2616406528.

The film poster consists of an image of a pair of rubber yellow gloves hanging upside down. Through double exposure, a bird’s eye view of a city tastefully blends in with the cuff of the gloves. One of the essential tools for household cleaning, the pair of gloves stand in for the 250,000 MDWs working within the nation. The photograph of the dense cluster of buildings represents Beirut where these women reside and work in order to send remittances

to their families. The choice to artistically blend both images serves to visually depict the intertwining inseparability of both MDWs and the Lebanese households that employ them. In brown ink, names indicating four ‘sending’ countries beside numbers corresponding to the number of individuals sent from each (e.g. Sri Lanka 14,000; Bangladesh 40000) occupy the lower half of the gloves. Some white liquid (presumably bleach) appears to have been spilled on the lower right-side of the poster. As a result, the text designating sending countries and the number of women sent from each seems faded which has compromised its legibility. Written in relatively small and faded font, the names and numbers represent interchangeable units of disposable and dehumanized labor. The details of their individual person, subjective experience and rights matter not in the grand scheme of things. Like the documentary which intentionally relegates its subject matter to invisibility, the poster gives scarcely little visibility to these migrants who have been reduced to faded numbers. In this well-crafted visual metaphor, the materials used by MDWs to conduct their labor lead to their own erasure.

2. Unobtrusive Viewership: A Fly on the Agency’s Wall

In its fly-on-the-wall observation of the daily operations of Beirut-based Al Raed agency, the film qualifies as an observational documentary in the sense that it aspired to transpose human activity with immediacy and minimal intervention (Walker). The vantage point assumed by Abi Samra had been from the “position of the ‘makhdoum’ or the patron that renders the maid invisible” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). Often, the viewer hears disembodied voices which remain off-camera. The voice-over commentary, spoken by the director himself, occupies but a small part of the audio and permits the narrator to share his insights and musings related to the industry and his positionality to it.

The unobtrusive style of filming lends the viewer a feeling of watching an unmediated representation of reality which would occur in that exact same configuration in the presence or absence of a recording device. From opening to closing scene, the media text which occurs primarily within the agency has been filmed with a keen aesthetic sensibility and formalistic methodology. The use of long shots dominate the film and absence of jump cuts lend an extended sense of temporality. Moreover, none of the subjects at Al Raed agency break the fourth wall which feeds into the illusion of untainted reality. The feeling of voyeurism emerges from directorial and editorial decisions such as these which minimize intervention. The motif of mirrors as a stylistic device contributes to an atmosphere of secrecy and covertness where the audience bear witness to the underbelly of a morally-dubious industry. Outside of the agency, the camera slowly pans over nondescript building in Beirut at beginning and closing of the film, as if to use the cityscape of the city as a metaphor for the breadth and immensity of Lebanon's dependence on migrant work.

3. Absolute Power and Total Subordination

Within the deeply unequal system, MDWs are subjected to subordination by recruitment agency operators and their sponsors, leaving no room for MDW agency with regards to their predicament. Deprived of all information, the viewer knows not how many women remain locked up in the agency, how long they have been there, what conditions they live in or any other qualifiers beyond their status as migrant house maids. Zein repeatedly asserts his authority and commands the agency's women to, for example, "sit down" and "stay quiet" through the slightly ajar door as a reminder of the 'pecking order' within this agency. The camera reports on the dehumanization of MDWs in this agency from a cool, uninterested distance. While the human rights documentary is didactic, this text raises more questions regarding their plight than it resolves.

On one occasion, an Ethiopian MDW named Berritu who remains off-camera speaks up against her sponsors' mistreatment but to little effect. Berritu has sought refuge from her former employers at the agency. The following snippet of their dispute occurred in Ethiopian and was translated in English in the subtitles.

Zein: You came here to work, so work. What is this, 'if she isn't good'?

Berritu: All I want is for them to be good. If they don't yell then all is good.

Zein: If you work good, why they yell? You come here to work, no? Or you go back like you came so work well and make no problems.

Berritu: All I want is for them to be good. If they don't yell then all is good.

The futility of Berritu's complaints sheds light on her vulnerability in the face of her employer and her agency. Without adequate recourse for Berritu and others to report violations and complaints, their livelihoods and wellbeing remain precarious, at best. We learn that house maids that have been 'returned' or who have complained about their employers remain stowed away in the agency and locked up within their rooms overnight.

4. Hodeib, Helen and intersectionality

The only scene to disrupt the representational vacuum of MDWs appears in the two opening shots. Famous Lebanese actress, Bernadette Hodeib, sits at the center a highly-ornamented Lebanese living room with gaudy decorative pieces and Persian carpets adorning the floor and walls.



Fig. 18. Bernadette Hodeib posing with house maids. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each* (Makhdoumin). Vimeo.com, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

Silently, Rahel Zegeye (who had also prominently appeared in “Shebaik Lebaik”) stands at a noticeable distance from Hodeib, indicating the formal and hierarchal nature of their relationship. Hodeib wears bespoke clothing while sitting proudly on her Ottoman couch. Both stare silently through the camera and directly at the viewer, as if to directly implicate them into this portrait punctuated by power and exclusion. In the second frame, Hodeib smiles eerily as if to show off her luxurious home and its many possessions, including her two obedient maids who become reduced to mere status symbols and commodities. The title, “Maid for Each”, references the dependency and self-indulgence that Lebanese express with regards to foreign work in the home. The above frames, totaling less than one minute of screen time, represent the only two full-bodied and clear representations of MDWs shown throughout the entire documentary.

The naturalized and seemingly immobile demarcations dividing one group from another become less static once read along the lines of gender, race and class. For example, Hodeib’s complex history with hiring MDWs and experience of racism for having relatively darker complexion pushes her toward roles which grapple with these concerns. In 1997, Hodeib performed in Roger Assaf’s theatrical performance, “Jnaynet Al-Sanaye’,” where she played the role of a Sri Lankan MDW who gets “raped, robbed and abused while working for a wealthy Arab family” (Seleiha). Her character survives a three-story jump in an attempt to escape her abusive sponsors and ends up landing in a penitentiary. For Hodeib, a well-known Lebanese actress, to have agreed to be associated with Abi Samra’s documentary or Assaf’s staged performance at all is surprising. High profile entertainers rarely, if ever, speak out against the migrant suffering nor the *kafala* sponsorship system for fear of upsetting the status quo.



Fig. 19. Bernadette Hodeib on her mother’s relationship with MDWs. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)*. *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

In the documentary, she confesses having been dogged by suggestions to bleach her skin and straighten her hair in order to fit more neatly into Eurocentric beauty standards throughout her life. Skin color appears as a similarity between Hodeib and the workers who have served her over the years. However, class positionality has superseded racial indicators so that Hodeib can, in spite of her skin color, claim authority over a house maid of similar complexion.

Despite sharing racial markers, the off-camera MDWs exist on a lower hierarchal rung than Helen, an Ethiopian employee who works for the agency. Albeit hailing from the same country and living beneath the weight of the same oppression, Helen assumes a position of superiority in this relationship does not treat the other woman as an equal, nor does she wish to forge a bond of solidarity with her despite claiming to be “like a sister” (a vacuous and weaponized term of endearment). Instead, she manipulates the women on behalf of Zein by maliciously mistranslating their words and invalidating their complaints. The abused, in turn, becomes the abuser. This symbolic “matter out of place” does not disturb the symbolic order since Helen mimics the ideology of the dominant class and reproduces it to further subjugate MDWs into submission. When an altercation occurs between Helen and an Ethiopian MDW who refuses to work for her sponsors due to mistreatment, the former dismisses the latter’s grievances: “You’re not hungry and they don’t beat you, so why? Stop complaining. You’re exhausting us.” This logic, which invalidates lesser abuses by relativizing them with more extreme ones, lies at the heart of Abi Samra’s critique. Seen through a Foucauldian lens, Helen’s grasp on power changes depending on who she happens to be addressing. For example, she cowers into a position of subservience when being addressed by Zein. However, her position as the boss’ messenger elevates her standing to the extent of being able to manipulate and exert power over other Ethiopian women.

5. “Why would I give up that privilege?”

Abi Samra attempts to convey that, once on Lebanese soil, the recruitment agencies that fly them in and Lebanese sponsors that employ them have absolute rule over them. As Zein unapologetically describes his agency (and others like his): “We’re a state, an entity unto itself. We’re the judiciary, the district attorney, everything. If you have a problem with a girl, the police will direct you to the agency.” Having witnessed and eavesdropped on the operations of the agency, the viewer takes his statement as reality and not hyperbole.

The voice over of an anonymous sponsor honestly summarizes why the Lebanese, who command the power in this situation, feel reluctance toward amending the plight of MDWs in their country: “You can’t honestly expect someone to act against their own best interests. You have a stake in this whole thing. You have someone working instead of you. Why would I give up that privilege? [...] This whole situation is to my advantage.”

6. In/visibility

Through this close-up view of Al Raed agency, the MDW appears as a commodity meant to be ordered, bought, returned or exchanged upon demand.



Fig. 20. Zein scolding an Ethiopian woman at the agency. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each* (Makhdoumin). *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

Zein and a customer both direct their attention in her direction. The viewer can extrapolate an approximation of the Ethiopian employee by triangulating the meeting point of their gazes. The properties of her body remain up to the imagination of the viewer. Otherwise, she remains disembodied and, in some sense, as Hodeib stated in the introduction, out of sight and hence, invisible.

Helen, their Ethiopian employee, enjoys the most visibility among MDWs in the production. When Amal summons Helen, she dutifully walks over to her desk and appears within the frame, albeit not in any identifiable way. With her back to the camera, Helen's head and half of her torso remain outside of the frame while her hands remain dutifully clasped together behind her back. Once she has received her orders, she walks away to fulfill her task without question. Helen serves as a mouthpiece by the Lebanese operators of the agency, adopting their attitudes toward MDWs and acting somewhat as a 'double agent'. In this hierarchical relationship where no reciprocal conversation exists, there is the speaker and the spoken to.

7. Satisfaction or Your Money Back: Sold, Returned, Stored

The daily practices governing Al Raed agency handle MDWs with the same impersonality as one would a marketable good that can be customized, purchased with warranty, tested out and traded for a new one. If given back, the ‘returned’ good will remain locked away within the agency until she is bought by a new customer or returned to her country of origin. Amal informs two different customers that their future maid will become the part of the inheritance when her sponsor dies. The agency takes customized orders from their customers, whether in terms of personality, nationality or faith. Zein speaks to a client about an “obedient and gentle” Ethiopian who has been trapped in the office after having been returned by her then sponsor while another client demands an Arabic-speaking Christian worker for their home. Women who appear subservient and hard-working are the most coveted among sponsors.



Fig. 21. Zein and his customer browsing through the catalogue of house maids. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)*. *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

The brochure, a staple at agencies across Lebanon, allows clients and business owners to compare options according to standardized criteria, with clients judging the personalities of prospective maids based on their facial expressions and body posture (e.g. “This one’s too willful and the other looks slow”; “she looks tame”; “You can tell she looks willful”). As if to optimize the properties of a product, customers read the photographs of the MDWs on display and cross-reference them with desirable traits.

Zein vocalizes his feelings of guilt for locking these women inside the agency: “Some nights I lie in bed and I can’t sleep. I start obsessing over what might happen. You never know, I mean, they’re people. And I’ve locked them in.” To be imprisoned overnight and stowed away like merchandise corresponds too closely to the definition of slavery.

8. Sponsors’ Subjectivities

Rendering the invisibility of MDWs visible had been a central aim for Abi Samra in producing this film. To ‘give voice’ would have been, in his words, hypocritical and a negation of his duties. Instead, the subjectivity of sponsors takes front stage, where they express sentiments that highlight the invisibility and interchangeability of these workers: “This one, is she the same as that one?” “I can’t remember the number of maids that worked in my house. Their faces and names get mixed up in my head”; “She was only the frame around the family portrait. But if you change the frame, the picture inside stays the same. No one can step into it.” Some of their reasons remind of the failure of state for failing to provide basic public services which would significantly lessen the burdens of child and elderly care. Their decisions to remain anonymous had been motivated by shame for their involvement in this industry, despite it being widely practiced (“Maher Abi Samra interview”).

9. “Their existence is forced upon us through their deaths”

Hodeib’s pithy introductory statement sets the tone of the representational politics of the film: “Servants who know their job well are the ones who work silently, whose presence is unfelt. They become hidden. Invisible.” Unfortunately, only tragic tales of abuse prove capable of catapulting this otherwise hidden away group of workers into visibility. The media – attracted by sensationalist tales of escape, theft, madness, suicide and murder – fail to report productively on their plight, further entrapping them through pejorative representational politics which do nothing to better their standing. This visibility through tragedy is reminiscent of Mansour’s montage of newspapers clippings which highlight the type of mediated representations manifest in the press. Moreover, stories of rapist and homicidal sponsors console and absolve other employers who relativize the morality of their actions accordingly. The narrator bleakly states, “their existence is forced upon us through their deaths.” Overlaying a pan of the city, Abi Samra relays the common tragedy of MDW death – more specifically, the suicide of his friend’s house maid. After visiting a therapist, his friend had been reassured that she had taken her own life due to personal issues which absolved him of responsibility and emboldened him to hire another MDW. Another friend’s Bangladeshi helper returned to her country due to a collapse of a factory in her home country which led to the death of her two sisters. The sequencing of these tragic stories highlights the injustices faced by “disposable, cheap, invisible labor” inhabiting the lower rungs of society and whose lives or deaths hardly register as a blip on the map of humanity.

10. Standard Operating Procedures

Operating with full impunity within a culture which has normalized MDW commodification, Zein hides nothing from Abi Samra or his viewership. In order to capture systemic processes which, by their nature, defy direct observation and documentation, the

agency owner provides the viewer with a simplified diagram that delineates the inner-workings of his industry.



Fig. 22. Zein explaining the complex processes entailed in hiring MDWs. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)*. *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

Through this elaborate description, we learn about the complex interplay occurring between the various formal and informal bodies involved in this transnational recruitment process, including the routes through which to employer MDWs from countries which have adopted travel bans (i.e. Ethiopia and the Philippines). Visible as imported products, MDWs have been reduced to marketable goods which exist solely for the consumption of Lebanese employers. Although Zein had known that the film would be widely distributed, he never asked for anonymity nor felt restrained from revealing the daily practices and interactions occurring within his agency. Zein adds, “Why should [Zein] be secretive? Everybody knows about this industry. Nothing is hidden” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). The purpose of the documentary had not been to scandalize the recruitment owner who recognizes that the

practice is problematic but nevertheless needs to make an income: “Zein would prefer selling potatoes but he’s doing this for us. We are the customers. We cannot run away from responsibilities and blame Zein.” (“Maher Abi Samra interview”) In lieu of selling starchy vegetables, Zein commodifies African and South East Asian women for a living by importing, selling, returning then in a market where their cheap labor remains high in demand. Overall, Abi Samra insists that this system of commodification and exploitation exists because of sponsors’ demands rather than Zein’s opportunism or malevolence (“Maher Abi Samra interview”).

11. Shoe-Box Bedrooms and Racist Architecture

The layout of luxurious apartment buildings under construction reveal the racism embedded even within the architecture of the typical Lebanese household. Within an expansive 3-bedroom apartment with two spacious balconies, the “maid room” occupies by far the smallest space at a mere 2.3x1.5 meters nearby the kitchen. A close-up shot emphasizes the minuteness of the maid’s allocated room which fits her bed and a small bathroom. A washing machine or ironing board can be seen either directly outside of or within each of these walk-in-closets masquerading as bedrooms. According to Bassem Saad’s trenchant critique of these normalized architectural practices in Lebanon (“5 meters squared maid’s room: Lebanon’s gendered and racist architecture”), he describes them as a “grievous mechanisms of oppression” and “a concrete manifestations of institutional racism against foreign domestic workers” in which “dehumanizing design gestures revel in making the maid’s room as invisible as possible” (“Failed Architecture”).



Fig. 23. Close up of the layout of a typical Lebanese apartment. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)*. *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

The average room for a MDW, as per Lebanese architectural norms, averages “around 5m² in area, is sometimes windowless [and] is only accessible through the kitchen” (“Failed Architecture”). Invisibility pervades all aspects of the MDW experience. In fact, the discriminatory aspects themselves become invisible to the average Lebanese because of their normalization and total integration within Lebanese society.



Fig. 24. A region with a high density of recruitment agency advertisements. Abi Samra, Maher, director. *Maid For Each (Makhdoumin)*. *Vimeo.com*, Ourjouane Productions, vimeo.com/159929246.

Visual motifs of female workers dressed in aprons materialize across the cityscape. The title, “A Maid for Each”, no longer appears euphemistic but literal. Upon closer inspection, a total of eight advertisements (each corresponding to a separate agency) appear in a frame containing an estimated 15 buildings – an overwhelming number within such a constrained space. Although different in style, they draw from the same recognizable visual tropes. Dressed in aprons and holding a tray, the iconic representations of these women reiterates their near-synonymous association with servitude.

E. Conclusion

Zein and his co-worker primarily occupy center stage with everything seemingly happening around them. As previously mentioned, one of the most striking silences or absences which takes the viewer by surprise is the omission of any MDWs from sight. The Ethiopian employee, Helen, who works within Al Raed agency, perhaps receives the most visibility although she mostly remains off-camera while speaking with Zein. At most, we see her back turned to the camera only once and her disembodied hand enter the frame to give Zein a parcel. Two MDWs stand obediently on either side of their seated ‘madam’ in the opening shot of the film. This is the only scene depicting full-bodied house maids to the viewer. The rest consists of shadows, murmurs and other allusions. Contrastingly with the previously considered media texts, Abi Samra does not provide a platform for the subaltern to speak, stifling their voices instead. Beyond silencing his subjects, Abi Samra omits any biographical information and other identifying elements such as faces or names. (The opening scene serves as an exception to this noticeable representational gap, where

Bernadette Hodeib proudly showcases her house maids.) Rather than focus on MDWs and their subjectivities such as Mansour and Daccache, Abi Samra prefers to draw our attention to the status quo which, as part of its *modus operandi*, routinely subjects this disadvantaged group to silence, servility and invisibility. Conversely, Al Raed's clients appear frequently on camera in their dealings with the agency. They are depicted either skimming through the agency's catalogue in search of a domestic worker or complaining to the agency about their dissatisfaction with their current worker. The incessant sound of telephones ringing indicates a healthy business with many customers. When Zein or Amal handle calls to the agency, we neither hear nor see the customer on the other end of the call. During his conversations with Helen who remains off-camera, we learn that Zein speaks fluent Ethiopian. Invisibility operates differently for MDWs than for clients. Migrant women are, by default of historical and discursive conditions, forced into silence as this film consciously replicates. Their inability to speak for themselves within a system that cheapens their existence but which ultimately depends on their labor exacerbates the irony of their precarious position. This imposition of silence does not stem from empowerment but its opposite. In my interview with the director, I would like to probe whether Helen's consent was assumed or asked for. While we hear of the house maids being discussed like stocks on the market or commodities on sale, we do not see nor hear them. The MDWs' subjectivities remain obscured, invalidated or disregarded throughout the documentary. In terms of agency, the agency's customers have the luxury of choosing to participate in the film or not to do so. Some customers choose to remain off-camera while speaking for shame of being associated with the industry. If they choose to participate, Lebanese customers are further endowed with choosing whether they prefer being in front of or behind the camera. Invisibility, in this situation, results from the freedom and power to choose. Overall, one should not be so narrow-sighted as to assume that this agency's operations and dehumanizing practices to be an exceptional case. Zein, his

clientele and the house maids do not strictly represent themselves. Rather, their case should be considered a microcosm for normalized structural frameworks currently prevailing in Lebanon. The economic, social and political realities that the subjects of this film belong to create the conditions of their way of being and placement within society.

CHAPTER 5

(IN)VISIBILITY, AGENCY AND FREEDOM

Under the oppressive *kafala* sponsorship system, MDWs in Lebanon live precariously and in a state often compared to modern-day or indentured slavery. In order to critically assess the representational politics of MDWs in Lebanon and their implications, I took, as my objects of study, Zeina Daccache's "Shebaik Lebaik" (2016), Maher Abi Samra's "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)" (2016), and Carol Mansour's "Maid in Lebanon I" (2007) and "Maid in Lebanon II: Voices from Home" (2011). Firstly, I investigated how cultural productions enable them to self-represent or be represented and whether the resulting depictions challenge preexisting associations through more complex narratives or reproduce them. Secondly, the political promises and pitfalls of visibility looks into whether increased visibility enables material change in MDWs' lives and, if so, how that manifests. Finally, I have conducted a semiotic analysis on each media text to draw connections with the political, social and institutional realms, in order to embed the productions within a larger framework.

A. For Whom?

In terms of viewership, "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)" traveled the international film circuits and, therefore, reached the widest audience. While ML1 and ML2 may not have been screened internationally, they can be purchased locally on DVD or viewed by the global viewership *via* YouTube (as opposed to Abi Samra's documentary which can only be accessed after receiving permission from his producer). Besides the five occasions during which "Shebaik Lebaik" had been performed in front of a Lebanese audience, "Shebaik Lebaik" can also be purchased and screened on DVD. Most importantly, the theatrical and folkloric performance distinguishes itself from the Mansour and Abi Samra's media

productions in that key local and international political figures comprised its audienceship, having attended the show on its opening night in December 2014. While only producing marginally effective results with respect to MDWs' original pleas, their show enabled the performers to reach those endowed with the power to change legislation and abolish the current system.

B. Casting, Consent and Collaboration

The methodology for recruiting migrant participants, which determines who gets to tell their story, varies across texts. The twenty-two migrant participants in Daccache's production were self-selecting as they had responded to open call posters about "Shebaik Lebaik" at Migrant Workers Task Force (MWTF) and consisted entirely of African migrant workers from Sudan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Senegal and Cameroon, at the exclusion of other prominent MDW nationalities. Migrant workers who did not enjoy Sundays off could not participate in the performance, therefore eliminating their narratives from the storyline. Mansour targeted live-in maids through informal networks (word-of-mouth) and runaways *via* Caritas' shelter. Her methodology toward casting her subjects fails to meet the ethical standards demanded of a documentarian dealing with vulnerable populations. It compromises participant consent, limits the parameters of permissible discourse and exacerbates the vulnerability of critical cases. Following a human rights documentary template, Mansour approaches her subject matter with preconceived representational categories which she then sought to fill. Neither the victimized runaway sharing her personal testimonial nor the 'happy' house maid living with her sponsor emerged as organic narratives from her encounters with MDWs. Moreover, the Sri Lankan narrator had neither contributed in researching nor writing the script for "Maid in Lebanon I" (whereas her Lebanese counterpart in part two had provided her creative input). In both instances, MDWs become spoken for,

rather than with. While Mansour attempts to diminish the power differential between herself and her subjects, the short timeframe spent with her subjects doesn't allow for much camaraderie to develop with them, sustaining the hierarchical nature of their interactions. Conversely, the participants in "Shebaik Lebaik", developed a friendship with Daccache during the 11-month rehearsal period, during which time they deeply explored the multitude of themes which they would like to address. Through techniques from the theater of the oppressed, participants explored the variety of struggles experienced by themselves as MDWs in Lebanon for "Shebaik Lebaik," which they transformed into improvisational scenes along the axis of four main themes. According to Daccache, the participants derived inspiration from real-life experiences of oppression, therefore placing their personal narratives as center stage. Finally, Abi Samra had been familiar with Al Raed agency for years and developed a close friendship with agency owner, Zein, throughout production. Through a series of reflexive conversations, Abi Samra and Zein continuously challenged one another regarding the MDW complex. Unsurprisingly, no MDWs were consulted throughout this process, therefore entirely eliminating their input from the final production. Relegated to invisibility, the question of MDWs' authorial intent does not apply to "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)".

C. Representational Politics: Subversion or Reproduction?

Upon first viewing of the four media texts under consideration, it becomes immediately clear that Maher Abi Samra's representational politics differ significantly from those adopted by Carol Mansour and Zeina Daccache. While "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)" espouses invisibility as its preferred mode of representation, Mansour provides an opportunity for MDW participants to self-represent or be represented through a humanitarian discourse while "Shebaik Lebaik" views the *kafala* system *via* the migrant gaze. The house

maids at Al Raed agency remain unseen and unheard, only acquiring visibility through shadows, collective murmurs, off-camera voices and silhouettes working late into the night. MDWs make a rare appearance in a poignant scene where they stand, immobile and silent, beside their smug sponsor, who objectifies them into mere indicators of social class. The paucity of biographic elements, such the failure to provide full names or precede MDWs' names with the prefix "Mrs.", similarly relegates these women to their inferior status *vis a vis* their 'madam,' in Mansour and Daccache's productions. As a means to combat MDWs' daily invisibility, Daccache provides a creative platform for her marginalized subjects to be seen and heard, where participants introduce the spectators to their culture and launch a trenchant critique at their sponsors. Maintaining representational balance holds a place of centrality in "Maid in Lebanon" I & II (e.g. a Sri Lankan MDW narrates ML1 while a Lebanese sponsor provides the voice-over in ML2); healthy households and cases of abuse share the same amount of airtime; the subjectivities of both MDWs and their sponsors are valued equally). Maintaining an air of objectivity disfavors the marginalized and presents both sides as having equal power and presenting equally valid arguments. Rather than provide a corrective, Abi Samra underscores the reality of the MDW-sponsor power discrepancy by assuming the vantage point of the omnipotent Lebanese sponsor (the *makhdoun*) through a cold, detached gaze. According to him, to do otherwise would have been a distortion of actual MDW-sponsor relations and an alleviation of responsibility ("Maher Abi Samra interview"). In "Maid in Lebanon" I & II, the co-dependent relationship shared by house maid and employer appears respectful and friendly. The MDW, in this context, assumes a static depiction as an obedient house maid who, while experiencing heartbreak due to separation, sends her hard-earned remittances which aid her family out of dire poverty. This representation entertains the Eldorado myth and redeems the system as somewhat justifiable. In terms of attire, the live-in maid remains in uniform, which fixes her to a lower status than the 'madam'. By

mobilizing these positive examples, Mansour wishes to provide a fair and balanced representation of the system where positive outcomes can be achieved - so long as sponsors self-regulate their behavior. Unlike “Shebaik Lebaik,” where participants can parody and critique the system, Mansour’s house maids remain incapable of dissent, especially considering that the interviews had been conducted within their respective sponsor’s home. While the sponsor presents him/herself as self-respecting, migrant participants choose to represent under the most scathing representational politics in “Shebaik Lebaik.” Although the participants in Daccache’s performance replicate racist and oppressive relationships on stage, there is an undeniable sense of agency in embodying and parodying the sponsor in front of a Lebanese audience, many of which hire MDWs themselves (or, at least, know others that do). With the abusive cases in ML1 and ML2, the body of the victim becomes the evidence for violations under the sponsorship system. Depictions of abuse and death emphasizes the vulnerability of the MDWs while constructing the ideal humanitarian victim for the viewer who must be moved by the severity of these cases. The personal testimonies in ML1 and ML2, and self-revelatory monologues in “Shebaik Lebaik,” follow a narrow framework that shares personal and intimate details about heinous crimes of which the subjects were victims. However, these representational politics encumber the victim with the burden of responsibility while also failing to bring justice to the case by holding the perpetrator accountable for their violation. Moreover, these portrayals of victimhood fail to provide a space for migrant participants to state a constructive alternative to the sponsorship system and the myriad of challenges accompanying it. When newspaper clippings provide evidence of their abuse in ML1 and ML2, we are reminded of Abi Samra’s chilling statement about how house maids “forces themselves onto us with their deaths”, after which any concerns linked to MDWs remain dormant until the catastrophe occurs. In a reflexive move, Abi Samra relays the suicide of a friend’s house maid and the triviality with which her death had been handled

by her sponsors who accused the woman of insanity (rather than critique the system for victimizing her and playing a role in her demise). While Mansour's representational binary between 'good' and 'bad' households holds the Lebanese sponsor accountable for their actions within the prevailing system, Abi Samra makes no such distinction, holding everyone accountable (including himself) for profiting from this deeply-exploitative system. Instead of portraying the violence incurred by systemic injustice by using victims' bodies as evidence, he prefers to let the inner-workings and daily practices of Zein's agency insinuate the nature of the system. In fact, Mansour and Abi Samra agree on the commodification of foreign help, as depicted by: the language used and customized requests made by customers at Lala and Al Raed agency; the brochures which catalogue them according to specific criteria, the employer's 'right' to return or exchange their house maid, as well as the total power exercised by the sponsor over their 'commodity'. The closing scene of "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)", depicts a cityscape littered with large-scale advertisements for MDW recruitment agencies – with one shot containing eight billboards at once. Abi Samra utilizes photographs to point to the system and its large-scale manifestations, whereas Mansour uses photographs to point at the abuse inflicted onto victims of the system.

In terms of cultural reciprocity, Mansour and Daccache both express frustration with the fact that few Lebanese sponsors know anything about their MDWs' countries of origin. Mansour attempts to address this lacuna with establishing shots of Sri Lanka which, once compared with Beirut, reproduces the primitive/civil binary which can, in turn, potentially reinforce anthropologically racist views. As if to counterbalance such representations, the migrant participants in "Shebaik Lebaik" perform 'progress' by stating facts about their respective countries which gently ridicule Lebanon's regressive status with regards to civil marriage, women's rights, provision of basic amenities and more. The participants use their platform to elevate themselves from representations of 'backwardness' in order to earn their

status as humans deserving of dignity and respect. The choice to divide the participants along national lines resituates their being-from-elsewhere, despite the fact that many of them have resided in Lebanon for years and identify as *quasi* Lebanese. The fact that the performance primarily occurred in Arabic demonstrates their degree of integration and familiarity with Lebanese culture. Many of the live-in maids and runaways in Mansour's productions speak Arabic. Their fluency in Lebanon's native tongue punctures their marginal status as 'outsiders' which puts the system of 'hard and fixed' borders into question.

D. Political Pitfall and Promises

The four directors could not be farther apart in terms of the political ambitions of their productions. Mansour and Daccache espouse the belief that speaking up against injustice contributes toward its denouement while Abi Samra, unsurprisingly, disagrees. With Caritas and the ILO funding Mansour's documentary, it comes as no surprise that Mansour espouses a humanitarian discourse regarding the plight of MDWs. In fact, ML2 explicitly advances its aim for Lebanon to ratify the international convention on the protection of rights of all migrant workers and members of their families. Shortly after the sequel's release in 2011, the ILO funded a 24-hour hotline for domestic workers which Caritas facilitated and the Ministry of Labor launched ("ILO-funded"). During the launch, Sejaan Azzi said, "This project is the practical implementation of the Ministry of Labour's concern for human rights. Every domestic worker now has an address to turn to lodge a complaint in the event she is subjected to any kind of harm or violation of her dignity, and that address is the Ministry of Labour" ("ILO-funded"). Daccache links the advancement of MDWs' rights with their ability to 'speak up' and 'have a voice' – be it through civil society groups or performances, such as, "Shebaik Lebaik" ("Zeina Daccache interview"). Her career as drama therapist has been built on the presupposition that failing to speak with the marginalized consists as a moral failure

on her part. In an exceptional representational moment, the Q&A segment following the performance enabled migrant participants to vocalize their demands to the minister of labor and other high-ranking ministers and diplomats. Azzi who, over the years, had stifled MDWs' attempts at political autonomy and self-representation, shared the stage with that very group of workers and listen to their demands. My optimism waned upon discovering that the performance, as a whole, had been endorsed by Azzi himself. Both Mansour and Daccache operate within an institutionalized framework which they believe serve to bolster and empower the weak and vulnerable. Contrastingly, Abi Samra outwardly expresses his cynicism over his own film – and films, more generally – in creating material change (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). His oeuvre is political, in that it wishes to hold up a mirror to Lebanese society to reveal its “sick” ways to itself, but his beliefs regarding its effectiveness in producing change is limited (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). While Daccache and Mansour place their faith in NGOs and civil society, Abi Samra believes that the oppressed will liberate themselves using the tools of the revolution (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). In response to Daccache’s gain, the director would argue that the cancelation of circular 1778 following the performance “Shebaik Lebaik” fails to qualify as meaningful political change within the hierarchy of MDWs’ immediate demands. The migrant performers had placed the *kafala* sponsorship system within its crosshairs only to be sidetracked with a trivial gain. What does a MDW care for being in a relationship if legislation fails to enforce one day off per week? Can one even have a partner if not permitted to leave their employer’s home? The sponsor, who has most to benefit from the prevailing situation, will fail to do more than symbolic gestures, most of which serve to alleviate themselves from unpleasant feelings of complicity (“Maher Abi Samra interview”). The fact that the sponsorship system remain enforced without signs of regression makes one

wonder whether the director's pessimism with regards to the inefficacy of cultural productions producing tangible change may have been warranted.

E. On an affective level

Watching each of these cultural productions on numerous occasions throughout my research elicited a range of emotional responses. "Shebaik Lebaik" enabled me to become more authentically acquainted with the migrant performers in terms of their personalities, creative capacities and personal experiences within the prevailing system. Upon watching the recording of the theatrical performance, I felt a degree of kinship toward a few of the performers whom I sensed to have known on a more personal level and who I could consequently envision as multi-faceted individuals with complex inner lives. The expression of pure jubilation and pride expressed during the folkloric dance and the genuine display of emotion during the self-revelatory monologue left me feeling as if I had witnessed rare moments of authenticity. On the other hand, Mansour's productions inspired feelings of frustration at the reductionist representational politics adopted by the select productions. Contrary to the director's desires, I experienced neither pity nor an urge to act at the sight of the invasive photographs and testimonials, rather a sense of discomfort at the indignity and violence to which the concerned women were being repeatedly subjected to an audience of unwitting voyeurs. As might have already become clear throughout my expose, Abi Samra's superlative production achieved the highest degree of success in emotionally compelling me and intellectually stimulating me. My own culpability in living within, taking advantage of and perpetuating a profoundly oppressive system become glaringly obvious to me. Over the past twenty years, I have benefitted from the service of two different live-in MDWs. Bayyoush (Ethiopia) had been a live-in for ten years while Edith (the Philippines) is currently employed within my mother's home. I had been close friends with both of them, respecting

them as whole human beings and oftentimes sharing secrets with them that my mother knew nothing of. However, watching Abi Samra's production stripped me of the illusion of the 'good' employer which I had so deeply convinced myself of belonging to. The director intentionally crafted his film to resonate with individuals like myself who so easily absolve themselves of responsibility, pointing the finger at abusers and the like. Large (liberal?) tears streamed down my cheeks at specific moments during the film and, upon leaving the cinema, my friends and I immediately launched a reflexive analysis of our own behaviors and thought processes our positionality with regards to MDWs in Lebanon.

F. "Migrant women must lead their own revolution in order to be free"

Overall, the chosen cultural productions adopt different representational politics, and espouse varying political aspirations *vis a vis* the multi-faceted subject of migrant domestic work in Lebanon, with each text connecting the subject matter to the larger social, political and cultural milieu in their own particular manner. Despite, or perhaps because of it, Abi Samra's unapologetic reproduction and exaggeration of MDWs' invisibility, as viewed from the vantage point of the sponsor, delivers his message in a uniquely powerful way that resonates with and chills the viewer. By eschewing personal testimonies and forensic photographs, Abi Samra spares the victim the indignity of having to perform their pain nor use their battered bodies as evidence of an oppressive system that sustains such brutalities. While Mansour would justify her decision to disseminate these narratives as a way to alarm her viewership into action, I argue that the representational politics of omission adopted by "Maid for Each (Makhdoumin)" disrupts the humanitarian logic of victimhood, thereby provoking the shock which Mansour had intended to produce. Daccache's staged production presents itself as a foil to Abi Samra, in the sense that it provides a platform for migrant performers to be seen and heard. When given this opportunity, some participants 'flipped the

script' by demonstrating assertiveness and demanding their rights, while others reasserted their status as subservient in the face of the existing hierarchy. In ML1 and ML2, the women remain locked in a binary of obedience and motherhood or abject misery and precariousness. Dichotomous representations aside, neither of the texts under consideration underscore MDWs' constructive political efforts to unionize nor the ways in which these women overcome their subjugation through everyday acts of resistance. Ultimately, neither of these cultural productions were able to dismantle the *kafala* sponsorship system – perhaps an overly ambitious goal considering the embeddedness of this practice in Lebanon. This failure to instigate change agrees with Abi Samra's cynical prediction that the dominant class cannot propel the sponsorship system out of existence and that, in fact, the MDWs themselves must instigate their own revolution in order to be free.

Appendix A

Textual Analysis Questions

Part 1

I. Genre and Audience-

1. What tradition or genre is it in?
2. What are the features determining genre?
3. What other work might it be connected to?
4. Who made this? Why?
5. What can we tell about its' creators?
6. How does it fit within the director's other work?
 - a. Does it share significant narrative or thematic concerns?
 - b. Does it share particular visual or technical elements?
7. What is the film's theme?
8. What is the target audience? How does it address its audience?

II. Historical and Institutional Factors-

1. What are the institutional factors that may be important?
 - a. as a production of a specific producer (i.e. Walt Disney), institution (Disney Studios), specific economic factors (Studio Film), or a political background? (U.S. politics 1959)
2. What is the film's historical significance?
 - a. as a document of its time?
 - b. as a part of history of film?

III. Socio-cultural context

1. What is the film's socio-cultural context?
 - c. as a work from a specific country?

- d. As a work from a specific culture?
- e. As a work representing a specific part of its society?
- f. As a work made for a specific audience?
- g. As a work made for a specific reason?

Part 2

IV. Narrative

1. How is this film constructed according to narrative/story being told?
2. Is the narrative organized by plot or time sequence, or some other way?
3. Does the film use other principles than narrative sequence as a structure (for instance, an argument?)
4. What is the nature of our engagement with the story or characters?

V. Film Language and Representation

1. How are characters and issues represented?
2. What is the style and effect of acting and performance?
3. How is meaning created by camera angles, shots, and camera movement?
4. How is meaning created by editing and sequencing?
5. How is meaning created by lighting, shade and color?
6. How is meaning created by sound and music?
7. How is meaning created by location and set design?
8. Does the film make use of symbols, metaphors, or allegories? Share are they and how do they work within the context of the film?
9. How is meaning created by technical elements such as production design, mise en scene, composition, special effects (matte paintings, models or animation, computer generated images....etc.)

Appendix B

Tadeusz Kowzan's signs systems of theater and performance

1 Word 2 Tone	Spoken text	Actor	Auditive signs	Time	Auditive signs (actor)	Visual signs (actor)
3 Mime 4 Gesture 5 Movement	Actor's external appearance	Outside the actor	Auditive signs	Space	Visual signs (outside the actor)	Auditive signs (outside the actor)
6 Make-up 7 Hair-style 8 Costume				Appearance of the stage		
9 Properties 10 Settings 11 Lighting	Inarticulate sounds			Time		
12 Music 13 Sound effects						

Appendix C

Parvis Questionnaire

1. General discussion of performance
 - a. What holds elements of performance together
 - b. Relationship between systems of staging
 - c. Coherence or incoherence
 - d. Aesthetic principles of the production
 - e. What do you find disturbing about the production; strong moments or weak, boring moments
2. Scenography
 - a. Spatial forms: urban, architectural, scenic, gestural, etc.
 - b. Relationship between audience space and acting space
 - c. Systems of colours and their connotations
 - d. Principles or organization of space
 - relationship between on-stage and off-stage
 - links between space utilized and fiction of the stages dramatic text
3. Lighting system
4. Stage properties
 - type, function, relationship to space and actors' bodies
5. Costumes
 - How they work; relationship to actors' bodies
6. Actors' performances
 - a. Individual or conventional styles of acting
 - b. Relation between actor and group
 - c. Relation between text and body, between actor and role

- d. Quality of gestures and mime
- e. Quality of voice
- f. How dialogues develop?
- 7. Function of music and sound effects
- 8. Pace of performance
 - a. Overall pace
 - b. Pace of certain signifying systems (lighting, costumes, gestures etc.)
 - c. Steady or broken pace
- 9. Interpretation of story-line in performance
 - a. What story is being told?
 - b. What kind of dramaturgical choices have been made?
 - c. What are ambiguities in performance and what are points of explanation?
 - d. How is plot structured?
 - e. How is story constructed by actors and staging?
 - f. What is genre of dramatic text
- 10. Text in performance
 - a. Main features of translation
 - b. What role is given to dramatic text in production
 - c. Relationship between text and image
- 11. Audience
 - a. Where does performance take place?
 - b. What expectations did you have of performance?
 - c. How did audience react?
 - d. Role of spectator in production of meaning
- 12. How to notate (photograph and film) this production

- a. How to notate performance technically
 - b. Which images have you retained
13. What cannot be put into signs?
- a. What did not make sense in your interpretation of the production?
 - b. What was not reducible to signs and meaning (and why)?
14. Are there any special problems that need examining? Any comments, suggestions for further categories for the questionnaire and the production

Appendix D

Interview Questions

A list of general questions for the open-ended interviews (directed at Carol Mansour, Zeina Daccache and Maher Abi Samra):

- Who provided production funding?
- Who was your intended audience?
- Where was your text circulated?
- What were your intentions in creating this film?
- How did you choose your subjects?
- Do you think that your film was well-received or understood by your audience and by the subjects themselves?
- Were there any discoveries or difficulties in making the films?
- Were there any challenges in representing the “other”?
- How much involvement did the subjects have in the production process?
- What do you think of Lebanon’s relationship with migrant domestic workers? Is the situation improving?
- Do you employ a migrant domestic worker within your household?
- Who do you blame for the plight of MDWs?
- What is the solution to this problem?

Questions specifically addressed to Zeina Daccache:

- How often did you gather with the performers to rehearse? Was there anything that constrained the number of rehearsal hours that you could dedicate to the performance each week?
- How did you decide on the improvisation topics breached during the performance?

- Why did you decide to divide the performers according to country of origin during the introduction? Why did you choose to represent each country *via* folkloric dance performance?
- What was your relationship with the performers and what did you do to diminish the power differential between you and them?
- Were the performers financially remunerated for their involvement?
- What were the expectations of the Royal Norwegian embassy (the main sponsors) of this project? Did you have artistic flexibility with your work?
- Which theater techniques did you employ with the participants?
- What are your thoughts on the change in legislation which occurred as a result of your performance?

Questions specifically addressed to Carol Mansour:

- How did you select the sponsor families to be featured in both documentaries?
- How did interviewing the migrant domestic workers within their employers' homes limit their ability to freely express themselves?
- Did the Sri Lankan narrator in part one of the documentary contribute to writing the script?
- What was your relationship with the Sri Lankan women and what did you do to diminish the power differential between you and them?
- Why did you choose to focus on Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers over Filipino or Ethiopian ones?
- Were the selected women or their families directly remunerated for their involvement?
- Did you utilize any strategies to encourage your subjects to cry?

- Did you intentionally choose to omit representations of migrant domestic workers socializing and engaging with the world outside of their employer's home?
- Did you intentionally choose to limit screening of the documentaries to a Middle Eastern audience? If so, why?
- What were the expectations of the International Labor Organization and/or Caritas of the production?
- How did you ensure the safety of the women who were in hiding at the 'safe house'?

Questions specifically addressed to Maher Abi Samra:

- Your media production stands out in that it completely negates the individuality of the migrant domestic workers within El Raed agency. What was your thought process in doing so?
- You mention that your intended audience is the majority of Lebanese home owners who do not see themselves as a part of the problem. Why did you choose to address them rather than policy-makers or politicians?
- Unlike the other directors considered, you implicate yourself and the Lebanese population as a whole as being a part of the problem. Can you say more about this decision to be self-reflexive?
- Do you think that your film has helped to raise awareness about the plight of these workers?
- How did you choose El Raed agency over others and why did you give it a central role?
- What is your relationship with the agency owner, Zein? Was deception used in any way to convince him to participate? What do you think of him and the industry that he works in?

- Why did architecture feature so prominently throughout the film? Did it hold certain symbolic value?
- Do you believe that these women have any sense of agency over the predicament? If so, why did you choose not to represent that whatsoever throughout your film?
- Seeing as how the film made the international film circuit, can you explain why this subject appealed to the global audience?
- Helen's role in the film is special in that she stands midway between the Lebanese agency owners and the migrant workers who the recruitment company peddles. Can you describe the relationship between her, Zein and the women?

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