

The Cruelty of Kafala: Immigrant Life in Kuwait

Written by Lorcán Owens

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LORCÁN OWENS, MAY 18 2021

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The heat. The humidity. My first reaction when I arrived in the Middle East was the absolutely unbearable intensity of heat and humidity. 'It's 1 o'clock in the morning. How is it so hot?' My newfound Irish friend who I had met at the airport in Dublin laughed. 'Didn't I tell you? You'll get used to it though. It'll be grand (fine) by mid-October'. We soon had to part ways as she was getting a flight to Doha while I had to wait another two hours for my flight to Kuwait, my final destination and where I would be for the next 10 months. I moved to Kuwait in August 2014 with absolutely no idea what was ahead of me. I was armed with minimal knowledge of Kuwaiti, Arab and Islamic society and, for all intents and purposes, was moving blindly to the Middle East. I had been offered a job teaching in a school in Salmiya, Kuwait. I was put in touch with one of the current teachers, who told me about school life and so on. Even though I had months to prepare, I focused on the logistics of posting my passport to the Kuwaiti embassy in London, as there is none in Ireland. I had to get documents legalized, and then they had to be attested. I needed vaccines, the Kuwaiti embassy was a nightmare to deal with on the phone and everything just seemed to take ages. I never thought to research Kuwait bars coming to terms with the fact it was (and remains) a dry state. No alcohol. No pubs. No nightclubs.

'Oh, you can get drink in the compounds. I had a friend who worked on the oil rigs in Saudi years ago and they used to drink away in their compound on the QT...' / '...No, there's no alcohol in Kuwait. It is completely illegal. I have researched this.' And on it went in the months prior to my moving, with self-appointed experts who had never set foot in Kuwait and could not believe it bordered Iraq, telling me I would definitely get drink in this non-existent compound in which I was being told I would live. Oh, and that I was pure daft to be moving to a country bordering Iraq.

It was only at the airport in Dublin where I met the girl who warned me about the heat that I got my first insight into Kafala. I was warned about 'the locals'. 'If your school is all locals, they'll be wild. They all have nannies at home and they do the homework for them, they do everything to be honest. They haven't the heed of the dog on them'.

I was stunned. I had not heard anything about this. How do they afford nannies? They all have one, not just princes and royalty? 'They all have one, some have more. They bring them over from The Philippines and Sri Lanka mainly. They have them working all hours to be honest. It's shocking really'. I was starting to wonder what I was doing. I had been nervous the night before my flight, which was the first time I had felt anxious about the move. Now, I felt mild panic. How bad will it be? Are they going to be hard to teach if their behavior is this bad? They must be so spoiled if they all have nannies. I was reassured. Behavior is an issue in all schools but it was not always that bad. 'You just accept it and live for the weekend and the salary'. Once we parted ways, I was on my own waiting for the last leg of my flight from Abu Dhabi to Kuwait. There was no going back.

I landed in Kuwait at 4 am, hours later than scheduled, as I had been delayed in both Dublin and Abu Dhabi. I had informed Human Resources (HR) that I would be arriving late into the night as I was told a member of staff would be there to meet me at the airport and bring me to my accommodation. After a tedious and tetchy encounter with border security, I was in Kuwait. Everyone was wearing a *dishdasha* or *thobe*. Everyone, that is, except the odd westerner and the airport staff who were scurrying around in their blue uniforms, heads down, no eye contact, silent. I made my

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way through the arrivals gates and scanned the signs held aloft by weary taxi drivers. I spotted my name. A small, dumpy woman seemed to know who I was before I approached her. She looked absolutely jaded.

'I'm sorry about the delay; at least you didn't have to wait here for hours waiting for me'.

'I've been here for six hours, sir'.

'Six hours?! I emailed HR and told them I was going to be hours late. Did they not tell you'?

'No, sir'.

I was stunned. Stunned that this woman, who was Filipina, was kept waiting for six hours when I had told HR not to have anyone waiting for me until 3 am at the earliest. Why does she keep calling me sir?

As we approached my new home, I looked outside and got a huge shock. I expected grand, arabesque houses along pristine avenues lined with palm trees and exotic flowers. Kuwait looked anything but. There were huge bins plonked intermittently on what should have been footpaths but were de facto parking spaces. Often, there was no footpath at all. The buildings were a ramshackle mess of aging apartment blocks with grimy windows. And the cats. There were cats everywhere. When we finally reached the apartment, I was relieved that it was in a relatively modern building. I was on the 18th floor.

'I'm really sorry you had to wait that long. Will you get to lie in tomorrow for a while'?

'No sir, I'm working again in two hours'.

A wave of guilt, pity and shock hit me. I thought back to my earlier chat in the airport, which seemed an age ago: 'They have them working all hours to be honest. It's shocking really'.

The next day when I met my new housemates, I told them about what had happened. One of them was 'fresh off the boat' like myself, while the other was starting his second year. 'I'm not one bit surprised to hear that', said the latter. 'They have her working flat out'. We went to school to get our classrooms organized. There were women in blue uniforms running around everywhere. They were all South Asian and Filipina, armed with brushes, scissors, display paper and dustpans. I was shown my classroom and set about organizing display charts. Suddenly, three of the women entered. 'Good morning sir', they chimed. 'Oh, hello my name is Lorcán, I'm new here, what're your names? Where are you from'? They seemed taken aback, almost embarrassed. I cannot even remember if they answered because they proceeded to take the scissors, tape and paper from my hands and methodically covered the display boards. I was mortified.

'I can do it myself; it is fine, I'm sure you're busy elsewhere'.

'It is ok sir, we'll do it all'.

I felt somewhat emasculated and useless. I was later told these were 'the helpers', a group of maybe 20 women who cleaned the school, escorted the smaller children to the bathroom, prepared the lunches and assisted at arrival and dismissal of pupils. There was a hierarchy within this group, led by the oldest, known as 'Momma', who spoke to us with confidence and assertiveness. She was the de facto mediator for the group. After a few weeks, I stopped trying to make conversation with 'the helpers', as it never went past pleasantries. Some had very limited English, but it became apparent that they were not used to interacting with teachers. We would often chat and joke with Momma, who held the unique position of liaising seamlessly with everyone in the school. The woman who greeted me at the airport was also held in high esteem, and had no problem letting people know if she was in a bad mood.

However, I became uncomfortably aware that the school was deeply stratified. I learnt that the helpers earned a pittance and lived together in shared accommodation, sending home as much as possible to their families via

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Western Union. They were from impoverished backgrounds with little to no education. Momma seemed to like Kuwait. She had been there for several years, had learnt English and held a position of authority within the school. She preferred being a helper than being a nanny.

I noticed how dismissive some of the children were towards their nannies. One day, when we were gathered in the hall for dismissal, one of the boys in my class threw his school bag at the feet of his nanny to pick up while he skipped off out the door. I gave the class a stern lecture the next day about respect. 'How many of you say thank you to your nanny? Do you ever ask her about her family and if she misses them?' The class fell silent. I was lucky in that I had a generally well-behaved class, and some students were evidently fond of their nannies. They often compensated for distant parents, many of whom I learnt had marital problems, a common problem in Kuwait. However, there was this sense that the children had no concept of a common humanity. There was no education in civic values, racism, tolerance and general decency. I often felt the children were good to be as good as they were. There were parents who cared deeply about their children and would talk to me weekly, sometimes even daily, about their children's behavior and progress. Others had no interest, and it was left to the nannies to rear, educate and discipline them.

Kafala: The Epiphany

As time progressed and I slowly settled into life in Kuwait, I saw evidence of a stratified and unequal society all around me. There was an unwritten and unspoken 'pecking order' of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Arabs on the top, with Kuwaitis, Emiratis, Qataris and Saudis occupying first place. Omanis and Bahrainis were perceived as holding a lesser social status, reflecting their smaller economies. Westerners were next, Americans and British in highest esteem, followed by Canadians, Australians and Irish, other Europeans and white South Africans on the bottom of this subcategory. Lebanese were held in high esteem, as they dominated the social and cultural life of the Arab world, but this was not reflected in their salaries. Egyptians were not 'real' Arabs, as they are African. Palestinians held a contradictory position in Kuwait, being admired, pitied and despised simultaneously; admired for their resilience, pitied because many were officially refugees and despised because they sided with Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War. Jordanians and Syrians were somewhat neutral in Kuwait, though some Syrian children were taunted as being with 'DAESH' on the schoolyard, given that the Islamic State (ISIS) had just occupied vast swathes of the country.

Beyond these upper echelons, there was everyone else. They were the people who formed a majority of the population not only in Kuwait, but the entire GCC region. They were the ones who slaved on building sites in the searing heat, who drove taxis, who cleaned, who cooked, who served us in the vast malls, who served us in restaurants, who packed our shopping for us and carried it out to the awaiting taxi. These were the people who actually worked and kept Kuwaiti oil rigs pumping, who transported the oil to refineries, who built the refineries and rigs in the first place and who ensured the petro-economy functioned.

Within this enormous cohort, there was again a pecking order. The Filipina maid earned more than a Nepali or Bangladeshi maid, as she spoke fluent English and was considered less likely to be homesick or complain. The Pakistani taxi driver earned more than a Bangladeshi. And as it happened, an English teacher earned more than an Irish teacher, as they were British and had a desirable accent. Kuwait was like a much bigger and more complex version of the Titanic, only instead of A Deck to E Deck, there was A1, A2, E1, E2 and so on.

I soon learnt the only way to really learn about what was going on was to chat to the people affected. This was difficult. You could not strike up a conversation with your waiter about whether she lived 10 to a room. The helpers did not engage in conversation. The only people who could talk openly without being overheard were taxi drivers. I always sat in the front of a taxi in Kuwait, as I would do in Ireland. It was always the same format: haggle about the price of the fare (there were no taxi meters), explain I am not British and no, I am not married and I have no intention of marrying in the near future. The horror.

However, the conversation would often become very deep. It was universally clear that these taxi drivers were not happy to be in Kuwait. The sense of homesickness was palpable. They had families back in Pakistan or India or Bangladesh who were relying on the remittances sent from Kuwait to pay for their education. They were sacrificing

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their mental, emotional and sexual wellbeing to live in a country that had neither comprehension nor interest in the lengths these migrant workers were willing to go to raise their families. Kuwait was, for them, a means to an end; stay for a few years, save and leave. The same objective as the rest of us, only they suffered the receiving end of Kuwait's endemic racism and classism.

'How many of you share a room'?

'Nine, sir'.

Sometimes there were more. Then there was the confiscation of passports in case they absconded. They would arrive, get their permits, and their passport would then be confiscated for a year. They would travel home once a year for two weeks or perhaps a month. They worked long hours. They did not have a guaranteed salary, as the fares were negotiated. One dinar was the going rate, but they always asked westerners for three dinars. They always seemed weary or despondent or a combination of both. Some would become upset when they would talk about home. None of them ever said, 'I'm happy to be in Kuwait'.

Kuwait was not a happy place. People were there to make money, and money seemed to be the only priority in life. Kuwait was an Islamic state in name only. The religion of Kuwait was oil, and oil was money. There was nothing to do socially except shop, eat, sunbathe or play sport, that is if you were happy to train in 40 degrees at nine o'clock on a Friday morning. We had private house parties where we drank ethanol mixed with Fanta or Pepsi, which we would buy, often still warm, from a 'dealer'. It was a big occasion to be invited to a chalet party in the desert. You would pay 10 or 20 dinars for the privilege of dancing in a shed not unlike a dance hall in 1930s rural Ireland. These parties were the only time it felt like I was in a normal country, where you could actually enjoy yourself and be surrounded by people who cared about life other than work or money or buying things.

The chalet and house parties gave a false sense of equality and normality to an otherwise deeply hierarchical and classist society. We were the lucky ones who had the freedom to socialize, but at least there was diversity. There were Arabs from Lebanon, Egypt and beyond. Many Kuwaitis would join too, eager to escape the omnipresent watch of their families. There might be staff from the French embassy mingling with Sri Lankans on a business trip. It was an engineered microcosm of normality in a country where people were classified and categorised according to their race, status and passport.

Back at school, we were told that we would be getting teaching assistants in November or early December. We were delighted, as we needed the support, given the lack of provision for special educational needs and the misbehavior that was a problem in the senior classes. There would be one assistant per class in the junior classes, and Year Three and upwards would have one per year group. We were delighted when they arrived. In Year Three, we were joined by Ms. Lopez (names have been changed to protect identity). She and the others had arrived from the Philippines, and we later learnt that they were all qualified teachers. It was late November when they arrived, so I knew they would not be able to travel home for Christmas, as it had taken us over a month to get our permits and residency before we got our passports back.

In the meantime, we went to Dubai for the Dubai Sevens rugby tournament. I was gob smacked. I had already visited Bahrain at this point and was jealous of the nightlife and laissez-faire social scene I witnessed there. Dubai was like stepping from the 19th century to the 21st compared to Kuwait. The scale of the opulence, no open skips by the side of the road, no cats scavenging, the taxis had meters, the bus stops were enclosed and air conditioned, the Burj Khalifa, Barasti, the partying... It was everything Kuwait was not.

On the flight back to Kuwait, I was downbeat. What am I doing in this sandpit where you cannot even drink? I moaned all the way back in the taxi until one of my Irish friends said, 'Lorcán, you do realize Dubai is just a cleaner version of Kuwait with alcohol? They still have the same set up in their schools, the salary is not as good and they treat migrants as badly as they do here, or worse. At least they don't hide it here like they do in Dubai'.

She was right. I had got so caught up in the glamor and frenzy of the weekend that I had not noticed that the bars had

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a team of workers in uniform sweeping and washing, the children had their nannies in pink or blue uniforms chasing after them in Dubai Mall, the taxi drivers seemed as tired and wan and the many building sites were operating all through the night with minimal health and safety precautions in place.

I went home that Christmas and just forgot about Kuwait until I had to return. When we landed back in school, I spoke to Ms. Lopez. I had not actually gotten to know her before Christmas between her late arrival and exams. 'It must have been hard to miss Christmas, but at least you can go home next year'.

'No sir, I can't'.

'Why can't you? You'll get your passport back soon enough, and you can go where you want then'.

'No, we can't. We will not get our passports back. They took them off us and we can't leave for two years'.

I was absolutely stunned. I learnt that the school had confiscated the teaching assistants' passports and that they were being locked into their accommodation at night in case they escaped. This was the moment that I truly realized the ugly and cruel reality of the Kafala system. I still did not know this was the name of it, but it did not matter. None of the teaching assistants had been told this would happen when they signed their contracts. They had not consented to having their passports confiscated, they were told they would go home in summer, that they were free to do as they wished after work and during the weekends. None of this materialized. I spoke to other teaching assistants and suggested they complain to their embassy, but they said there was no point, nothing would happen and they needed the money. Besides, the embassy was already inundated with case after case of domestic workers who had fled their employer, been abused, had not received their salary in months and felt their lives were under threat.

I spoke to the vice principal about it. She was close to the teaching assistants and had already learnt of what was going on. She was equally appalled and had tried to speak to the owner, but the owner scoffed at her concerns. She told me the fire alarm went off one night and they panicked as they were locked in and could not escape. They had to wait for the woman who had the keys, the woman who met me at the airport, before they could escape. I spoke to my housemates about what I had learnt and one of them, the one who had joined in August, got angry. 'I'm bringing this up with HR. This is slavery. We can't let this go on'. True to his word, he did bring it up. The HR manager, who was British, was clearly uncomfortable that the issue was being highlighted. 'We can speak about this at another time if that's ok'. If that's ok?

Locking women into their already crowded accommodation, confiscating their passports and controlling their movements down to allowing them to attend mass and go shopping while supervised on Fridays, and she wanted us to move on to discuss some inspection we needed to start preparing for. It was January at this point, and I finally realized what kind of country Kuwait, and the countries surrounding it, were really like: sandpits of greed, gross exploitation, modern-day indentured servitude at best and outright slavery at worst in all but name. I had already said I would only do a year here due to the boredom, but I had another more valid reason to leave now.

The children knew no better. 'I have had six nannies since I was born and they all leave', chimed one Egyptian boy in my class, with his Arabized English and blissful innocence highlighting how normal he seemed to think this was. I wondered why they all left, given I knew his father was difficult to deal with at the best of times. I saw how other westerners had normalized Kafala. They even had a term to distinguish and otherize the 'lesser', even though we were all subject to a *kafeel* (sponsor): we are expats, they are migrants. They became so entitled. Some of the teachers would pay one of the helpers to clean their apartment on Friday. Saying please and thank you steadily dropped the longer you lived there. People would complain about a slow taxi driver or slow service in a restaurant, with no empathy that maybe they were exhausted having worked for hours on end.

I witnessed a Kuwaiti go ballistic with a driver for failing to park his car correctly. He started roaring at him, throwing insults in Arabic at the man who was so shocked he had not time to process it. Then he proceeded to hit him on the head with his newspaper. I had had enough. I shouted at him to stop. They say your accent is most acute when you are angry, and this was true with me. 'Cop yourself on, he parked your car, if you don't like it get up and do it

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yourself'. I froze. Had I crossed the line? I was told never to challenge 'the locals' way back that late August in Dublin Airport when I was wondering should I get on the plane at all. In the end, he walked away and complained to the guard on duty in the car park. This could be a sacking offense, as they would accept the flimsiest excuse or complaint to sack a migrant, thereby rendering their visa null and void and, suddenly, they are illegal and either leave the country or become undocumented laborers.

By the time I left Kuwait in June 2015, I understood how abnormal and obscene Kuwaiti society was. I was starting to normalize what was going on after only 10 months and knew the longer I remained, the more likely it was that I would lose my sense of morality and decency. It is not normal for whole races to be castigated as servile, docile and placid subservient workers, who do all the hard labor, all the menial tasks, build everything, do everything that allows society to function at a basic level and yet get no recognition or consideration for their human dignity.

This is the cruelty of Kafala. The Kafala system in Kuwait, the wider Gulf and Lebanon is a system entrenched in the belief that certain races exist to serve a supposed superior race. It is manifest and blatant racism coupled with arrogant classism that has become so normalized in these societies that even seemingly enlightened, educated and otherwise decent people find ways to rationalize the savagery that is tolerated and encouraged around them. The list of excuses is tiring and endless.

'They're better off here than they would be at home'.

'They need the money'.

'Nobody made them move here'.

'Think of how this is helping their families back at home'.

'I do not hear/see them complaining'.

'That's just the way it is'.

And on it goes. This is how Arab societies and many westerners who live in the region excuse something that would be intolerable and unspeakable in a liberal democracy. Children grow up thinking it is perfectly acceptable that their nanny sleeps in a room not the size of a bathroom, works anywhere from 12 to 20 hours a day and never expresses personal opinions, thoughts or emotions. In Lebanon, two domestic workers die a day and some Lebanese put this down to being emotionally unstable and incapable of adapting to 'a modern society' (Su 2017). This is perhaps the most pathetic and laughable trait of these societies: laughable if it were not so tragic. These countries really believe that they not only blend the best of old and new, they are doing these people a favor by giving them a job. In their twisted logic of trickle-down economics, the Saudis assert that they are assisting the global Ummah by allowing Bangladeshi, Pakistani and other Muslim migrants to share in the wealth and opportunity of the Land of the Two Holy Mosques. Indeed, they even allow Christian Ethiopian and Filipino migrants a chance to elevate their lot. The Emiratis give agrarian Afghan and Nepalese laborers a glimpse of western life, where Islamic tradition and western capitalism merge in a tacky display of ostentatiousness, gluttony and grotesque inequality.

In Lebanon, despite its own economic catastrophe with over 50 percent of the population facing poverty by the end of this year, many still think it is perfectly normal, indeed necessary, to have an Ethiopian domestic servant available minute and hour to tend to their every need (Su, 2017). Except now many cannot afford this status symbol, so they dump them at the Ethiopian, Filipino or relevant embassy in Beirut, emotionally destroyed, physically scarred and psychologically traumatized after years of de facto slavery. Qatar, eager to clean up its image as the world questions allegations of alarming mortality rates at World Cup building sites, has just announced an end to its Kafala system, increasing the minimum wage and allowing workers to switch jobs after six months with no penalty. Whether this will actually be implemented remains to be seen. In my experience in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon, withholding salaries, confiscating passports and working without adequate rest are endemic in the region, and I do not foresee a change of law changing a mentality that views certain races and classes as perpetual servants for a

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supposed superior race. Back in Lebanon, in tandem with the Qatari announcement, social media activists who have campaigned for years to abolish Kafala were excited to learn that Lebanon would finally abolish its own Kafala structure, potentially ending the misery inflicted on hundreds of thousands daily.

But I wonder if the long-term damage caused by the normalization of Kafala will undo the social stigma, racism and classism that facilitates Kafala in the first place. Yes, Saudi Arabia is a theocratic dictatorship, but the Saudi government never forced anyone to hire a maid. The Emirati government does not force or officially allow its citizens to confiscate their domestic servants' passports. The Kuwaiti government did not force my former employer to lock in some 60 teaching assistants, drivers, cleaners and administrative staff into their accommodation at night. The western engineers working on building the stadia of the World Cup could insist on minimal personal protective equipment, a safe work environment and dignified accommodation for laborers, but choose to pass a blind eye. The Lebanese have a semblance of a democracy, and yet, while there is a growing and vibrant civil society movement advocating for the rights of migrants, the fact remains that Lebanese society, as a whole, prizes having a live-in maid as a status symbol, a visible yet docile and silent demonstration of belonging somewhere in the fast-shrinking Lebanese bourgeoisie. Having a live-in house cleaner in the Middle East is a commodity that tells your neighbors and society where you are in the pecking order, with the nationality and number of domestic workers a demonstration of wealth and prestige.

Abolishing Kafala in Qatar and potentially Lebanon is an important and significant step, but educating children and society that exploitation is immoral, that there is no pecking order, demonstrating real tolerance, equality and human dignity is the only way to ultimately end this mentality that has been allowed to persist for far too long. It is now well past time for the citizens and western residents of the GCC, Lebanon and beyond to seriously question the social structures that have allowed de facto modern-day slavery to persist so pervasively into the 21st century. Abolishing Kafala on paper is a start, changing the mentality of normalized exploitation is going to take a lot longer.

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About the author:

Lorcán Owens is a podcaster, educator, researcher and writer. He holds an M.A. in Political Communication from Dublin City University (Ireland). He undertook his MA thesis research in Lebanon in June 2018, where he examined the communication of secularism as a political movement in Lebanon. He frequently visits Lebanon and the MENA region and was most recently there during the *thawra* in November 2019. Lorcán runs a podcast where he discusses Lebanon, the MENA region and other geopolitical topics with a wide range of guests.