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مخدومين

Makhdoumin

A Maid for Each

Maher Abi Samra

Producer Jinane Dagher, Sabine Sidawi, Serge Lalou, Camille Laemle, Ida Ven Bruusgaard, Eirin O. Høgetveit. **Production companies** Orjouane Productions (Beirut, Lebanon), Les Films d'Ici (Paris, France), Medieoperatørene as (Oslo, Norway). **Written and directed by** Maher Abi Samra. **Director of photography** Claire Mathon. **Editor** Rana Sabbagha. **Sound design** Fadi Tabbal, Stephane Rives. **Sound** Moncef Taleb.

DCP, colour. 67 min. Arabic, Amharic, Oromo.

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For an estimated population of 4 million, Lebanon boasts some 200,000 foreign domestic workers, contracted under a system of full custodianship that deprives them of basic rights. Implemented since the start of the civil war (1975), this system is borrowed from similar ones in the Gulf countries. It is predicated on a transaction whereby the worker is not providing a service, but is rather commodified as a product, with specialised agencies organising their import under conditions not unlike modern-day outposts of slavery. Director Maher Abi Samra places his camera inside the offices of the El Raed agency with the full complicity of its owner Zein. Diligently, unobtrusively, he observes and probes. The components of this state-sanctioned system come undone methodically – the employers' entitlements, the agent's skill at commerce and the objectification of a woman selling her labour. A piercing, absorbing study of being complacent about the monstrous, *Makhdoumin* hones in on a single mirror from the kaleidoscopic composition of the social, revealing an even more complex portrait of our reality.

Rasha Salti

Modern slavery

These days, quite a few Lebanese households employ an African or Asian domestic worker. There are currently 200,000 domestic workers in Lebanon for a population of four million. Adopting a legal system inherited from the Gulf countries, the kafala (sponsorship) that has been practised in Lebanon since the start of the civil war in 1975 means that domestic workers are deprived of most of their rights and placed under full guardianship of their employers.

If I were to hire a maid, I would first need to go to one of the numerous agencies in Beirut. There, I would browse the agency catalogue proposing different maids, with their photographs and measurements, categorised by their ethnic origin. A maid would cost differently according to her country of origin: a Filipino costs \$200 a month, a Sri Lankan \$180 a month, and finally, all the way down the salary ladder, are the Ethiopians for \$150 and the Bangladeshis at \$125.

Once I took my pick from the catalogue, I would listen to the recommendations of the agency manager regarding my new status of kafeel (sponsor): the maid would live in my house and would be under my direct control and full responsibility. Thus, I should show her authority. The 'agent' would advise me to lock the door when I was out of the house (to avoid potential escapes) and to not hesitate to punish her if she misbehaved. If I am not satisfied with her within the probation period of three months, I can return her to the agency in exchange for another, or he can train her to be more obedient. I can also use the services of a private company that provides different training programmes for maids (cleaning, cooking Lebanese cuisine, etc.).

Their documents get confiscated

After paying the agency fees, travel expenses, a refundable deposit to the Ministry of Labour, administrative taxes, and signing an employment contract confirming my status of kafeel, I could have my maid brought in to Lebanon. I would pick her up from the airport. General Security agents would confiscate her identity and travel documents upon her arrival at immigration and hand them to me. I would only give them back to her upon her departure from Lebanese soil.

As a result, during the three years of her contract, she does not have the right to leave Lebanon. I would take her to my home: like many other apartments in Beirut, my apartment has a four-square-metre room adjoining the kitchen that was designed especially for a maid. My maid would not be allowed to live elsewhere or work for anyone else. If she ran away, her status would be illegal since I would have guardianship over her documents and she could go to jail for breaching our contract. I would do my best to treat her well, which means that I would try not to hit her, I would pay her salary at the end of each month, and would grant her one day off per week, as agreed in our contract. In reality, no one would ever check on me, the State would not protect her and would never act as a mediator between us. The state would be my accomplice, and the same goes for the police and the judicial system. The agency would thus be the only mediator between the maid and me. But I would be the client, and it would be in their interest to be on my side.

The employer is the owner

Domestic work is a real market in Lebanon, segmented according to the national and ethnic origins of the workers. The Lebanese employer is master and the worker the property. Even if I condemn this practice, I indirectly participate in it: I use my friends' sparkling clean apartments, I let myself be served by their present-yet-invisible maids, I use 'pidgin' language to address them, and I have even hired a domestic worker to take care of my elderly parents living in a suburb of Beirut.

Today, having a live-in maid in Lebanon is no longer a luxury or a distinction of social class, but rather, since the end of the civil war in 1990, a common practice for the upper and middle classes, mostly urban. The ultra-liberal system has been stretched to the limits like in many other third-world countries where anything and everything can be bought, including human beings who have become modern slaves. In Lebanon, where public services are not available, the state, built on a fragile equilibrium between confessional communities, does not fulfil any of its roles.

There are no reliable state-run public structures in this country, and we Lebanese have gotten used to finding individual solutions to our problems (every inhabitant buys his water and electricity by negotiating the amperage quantity with the relevant person in his neighbourhood). That's why it is in the interest of the state to have the domestic worker market democratised, integrated into the habits and lifestyle of the Lebanese, regulated by commercial and legal rules: without a maid, who would watch the kids after school, who would take care of the elderly parents, who would care for the ill who need help at home? Without a maid, how would women be able to avoid daily chores at home and family tasks, and feel free and equal to men, while preserving the patriarchal family order?

Without a maid, how do you reconcile a modern society and a traditional solidarity system? With *Makhdoumin*, I wanted to analyse the market that trades in Asian and African women and question the Lebanese society that has integrated this institutionalised trade in women and turned it into a necessity of daily life. Making a film on this topic includes exploring the commodification system, and, secondly questioning us, the Lebanese; confronting us with ourselves in order to question our contradictions and behaviour regarding the domestic worker market.

The system of commodification

In *Makhdoumin*, I did not tell spectacular and sordid stories of maids committing suicide or the tragic cases of abuse and rape, which are nonetheless so numerous. I did not focus on the downward spiral of this commodification. For it is the market itself supported by all of us, anchored in our Lebanese society, that I would like to question in all its trivialisation and normalisation, in its most ordinary manifestation.

In order to shed light on this system, I focused on a particular location: the recruitment agency for domestic workers. The agency is the scene where the stakes and the market logic are at play: it is the location where the agent chooses which maids to list in his catalogue in cooperation with agencies operating from the country of origin of the workers. His agency is a service company like any other: he offers his clients a range of maids that meet their needs, he operates in collaboration with the General Security and the Ministry of Labour, manages the after-sales services (personal problems caused by the presence of the maid, the returns and exchange of domestic workers, the complaints of disgruntled clients), for he is the sole intermediary between the employer and

the domestic worker. As a salesperson, he encourages his clients to sign a private insurance contract: were their domestic worker to run away, a part of their fees would be reimbursed. Indeed, it is at the agency that the commodification of migrant workers and institutionalised racism is so apparent; as are the conundrums around the status of the kafeel attributed to the employer, the laws of the Lebanese system and the consequences on the private sphere. The El Raed agency is the main location of my film. Zein, its commercial manager, is the central character whose day-to-day work we observe. He agreed to be filmed without reservations, acting as if he were my accomplice. When I first started this project, I asked Zein why he accepted my filming him. He said, 'I have nothing to hide. You will not make a discovery here. Here it is just like on the outside, like all our lives. There is no state; we settle our problems amongst ourselves. Why not show it?' The complex relationship between him and what he does enriches the film, even more so as Zein is a funny and endearing man, sarcastic and sharp. The fact that he is so likeable makes what he does all the more disturbing.

No demonising

I also particularly concentrated on the depiction of domestic workers in advertisements and to the space that is accorded to them in apartments through architectural plans: Beirut is teeming with advertisements in the newspapers, posters in the streets and in agency windows. The migrant workers are represented in them as drawings that show them as products, obeying the rules of supply and demand. This particular way of exhibiting them on posters tends paradoxically to make them 'invisible'. Meanwhile, the architects systematically include a small room for a maid adjoining the kitchen in all their plans for apartments in construction in the city, including those apartments meant for the middle classes.

On another level, I wanted to take a look at the Lebanese for whom maids fulfil a need in their daily life. Here, too, I wanted to avoid demonising and caricatures: although many Lebanese are progressive, advocating egalitarian values, rejoicing in the liberation of the Arab peoples, and feeling appalled by the injustices, they nonetheless own a maid, picked from a catalogue, whose passport they hold in their possession. If I wanted to shed light on their contradictions, which in certain respects are mine too, it is to try to overcome them, to see how it is, in the end, not in our interests to be kafeel and own a maid, and neither is it in the interests of any society that aspires to liberty.

With *Makhdoumin*, my aim was to deconstruct the whole logic behind the daily life of the Lebanese, to the point of becoming self-evident, an entire system in the image of a country without a state and without rights.

Maher Abi Samra



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Maher Abi Samra was born in Beirut in 1965. He studied drama arts at the Lebanese University in Beirut and audio-visual studies at the Institut National de l'Image et du Son near Paris. He then worked as a photojournalist for Lebanese daily newspapers and international agencies. Since 1995 he has made several short and mid-length documentaries. *Makhdoumin* is his second full-length film.

Films

1995: *Aaradi aawdat/Chronicle of Returning* (52 min.). 1996: *Iamar aala el mom/Building on the Waves* (26 min.). 2000: *Nissa' Hezbollah/Women of Hezbollah* (50 min.). 2003: *Sadiki/My Friend* (7 min.). 2004: *Shatila Round-About/Shatila Round-About* (52 min.). 2007: *Moujarrad Ra'iha/Merely A Smell* (10 min.). 2010: *Sheoeyin Kenna/We Were Communists* (85 min.). 2016: *Makhdoumin / A Maid for Each*.