

Citizenship in the Gulf

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It was on the 28th of August – the day declared and celebrated as Emirati Woman's Day – that I was first confronted with the indignities of unequal citizenship. Unlike the tiered citizenship found in many Arab Gulf states, there is another constellation of belonging and membership that renders citizenship a conveniently obscure condition. While citizenship is meant to transcend the salience of race, religion and gender, in the Arab Gulf, however; citizenship works to reinforce these categories.

I had gone to the Immigration Department to renew my non-Emirati son's residency, which had expired and accrued fines. It occurred to me to ask if the fine can be waived, as I was unaware that the visa had expired, nor was I in the country to resolve the situation in time. It was my perceived citizen-privilege that I invoked at that moment to demand exemptions and waivers. But the officer in charge turned me down. We had an altercation that concluded with him saying very sternly, 'who told you to marry a foreigner? You have to bear the consequences now.'

It would have been futile to take the conversation further with someone whose conception of citizenship, I felt, was tied to- and associated with the Islamic and cultural imperative for a legitimate child to bear their father's name. Would it have made my child an illegitimate son-of-the-state if I were to pass on my citizenship to him? Perhaps. When state-membership is conflated with state-ownership, citizenship becomes laden with many political meanings and military projections.

It was British sociologist, T. H. Marshall who had first conceived of the evolution of citizenship in the capitalist West. He assigned a sequence to the evolutionary process, which starts with civil rights that coalesce around political rights, culminating in the acquisition of social rights in the form of full and active citizenship (Møller and Skaaning, 2010). But according to Longva (2005), citizenship in the Arab Gulf states entails access to social rights, since political rights are assumed to have been forfeited by the populace, while civil rights remain ambiguous, and state regulated. Social rights, however, are narrowly defined as the privileged access to economic benefits and services provided by the ruler (Ibid.). Due to the absence of a similarly evolutionary process that preceded the introduction of formal citizenship in the Arab Gulf states, the condition of citizenship became entangled with indigenous perceptions of tribal-state membership, subjecthood and agency. Given the kinship structure that govern, to a large degree, the domains of 'household, market and state' within Arab Gulf societies, citizenship as a category by which to understand the experience of Khaleeji womanhood becomes paradoxical (Maktabi, 2017).

I left the Immigration Department with my Khulasat al-Qayd in hand, perplexed at the remarkable ability of a document to be at once the repository of power and privilege, yet also the proof of my disenfranchisement. Khulasat al-Qayd, or the Family Book, is a document that stands between full state-membership in all its tiered manifestations, and the passport, which extends to its holders Emirati mobility sans economic privileges. My acquisition of this powerful document dates back to 2011, when I had applied for a 'separation' from my father's Family Book upon marrying my non-Emirati ex-husband. Because a female citizen's foreign marriage no longer annuls state-membership, the document was intended to serve as deferment-ticket to the state's enduring predicament of having to address the citizenship question and define its boundaries (Lori, 2019).

My photo is plastered on the first page of the Khulasa, which typically identifies the head of the family. Traditionally, the head of the family was, and still is, the male, whose photo was the sole image to grace the entire book. The invisibility of the woman – or women, if the head of the family chose to have more wives – was a matter of privacy, too. But the face of the male head of the family always stood out amidst the faceless names of his household members listed in the book. I was competing – no, outdoing, in fact – the male in my new family; his mere foreignness relegating him to a subordinate status. But I could not

compete with the Emirati male, who had a document full of scribblings. Mine, however, was sanitised of my transgression. 'Who told you to marry a foreigner?'

The Khulasa does not bear witness to my motherhood; my son is not listed in it. Our only proof of relation is his birth certificate, and the visa sticker glued in his passport that lists me as his Kafael (sponsor). It is rather puzzling how the orderly and linear categories of citizenship, motherhood and Kafala meet at an awkward junction that is defined by time, only to be reversed when my son grows up to become my male guardian.

The literature on the exclusionary citizenship practices of Arab Gulf states that render women second-class citizens, or half-citizens with parcelled rights and privileges, fail to see the avenues by which women contest and reclaim their agencies. A foreign marriage is not a disempowering choice, rather it is an avenue.

For Khaleeji women, a foreign marriage does not come easy. It is the fruit of the right to choose; a right that is wrestled from the guardianship of the family that is often unenthusiastic about it. A woman has then to overcome state obstacles engendered in 'compatibility' laws that are supposedly put in place to protect women from the exploitation of men, who have their eyes set on another prize – the rentier privileges of a citizen. But foreign marriages, while halving the economic privileges of an Emirati woman, may afford Khaleeji women and their children certain freedoms that are lost in the unbargained social contracts of the Arab Gulf states.

Okruhlik (2016) aptly stated that citizenship in the Gulf is a commodity that can be granted and revoked at the whim of the ruler. The precarity of citizenship, then, makes it less desirable for a Khaleeji woman like me, who now has to perform towards what Rima Sabban (2020) refers to as the 'debt of gratitude'.

Military conscription that was introduced in 2015 was a turning point for many Khaleeji mothers of noncitizens. We were, for the first time, met with the unease of our redefined roles as 'mothers of the nation', birthing our children to be at the service and the vanguard of our states. This reconfiguration of citizenship as a debt that has to be repaid in exchange for the social privileges accrued through access to rentier wealth does not reconstitute long-withheld civil and political rights, however. This is, perhaps, where deferment becomes a privilege in disguise.

Okruhlik (2016) suggests that for states, the granting, withholding or revoking of citizenship are decisions pertaining to national security. For the expectant recipients, citizenship entails access to economic privileges. As such, citizenship serves different objectives and is perceived differently based on whether one is the grantor or the recipient (Ibid.). But there is another category vested with agency: the abstinent.

A few years ago, the UAE amended its citizenship laws to allow Emirati mothers of noncitizens to file applications on behalf of their children. The eligible age for an applicant was reduced from 18 years to six. While a window has opened for Emirati mothers to seek a form of permanent residency for their children, no Emirati mother I know has applied, and neither have I. 'Our children have strong passports,' some of the mothers told me, 'There is no pressing need for us to apply for an Emirati one.' By strong passport, these mothers meant Western passports.

Choosing a foreign marriage demonstrates agency, and perhaps unwittingly, a long-term plan that considers the social and political constraints that non-Khaleejis are able to escape through foreignness. My son holds the citizenship of a democratic country where, at the age of 18, he will be eligible to cast a vote. In his country of citizenship, he would not be de-naturalised for civic or political activism. In fact, he can aspire to hold public office and lead the country, too. Perhaps, he would become my Kafael in his country, where guardianship does not exist as a disciplinary tool against women.

In the imminent post-oil era, when the economic privileges of citizens begin to wane, it is those privileges that my son's citizenship affords that will outlast the economic ones we will for now forfeit.

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