

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Inshallah

**Michael Armstrong**

When you live in the Gulf, you learn some Arabic words simply because you hear them so often. You hear ‘*Assalaam alaykum*’ (peace be with you) whenever someone walks into a room. Those in the room reply, ‘*Alaykum assalaam*’ (and peace be with you). I’m not sure whether the words, coming from citizens of a region perpetually troubled by conflict, are ironic or apt. You can use the shortened ‘*Salaam*’ (peace) instead to initiate or return a greeting, but I always think about bell-bottoms and hippies when I hear ‘*Salaam*’ and have to stifle a laugh. And ‘*Salaam*’ is often accompanied by a slowly raised hand that reminds me of the lazy Nazi salute officers give each other in movies.

There are some Arabic intonations that most Westerners will never master. The glottal stops and the inflections are a mystery to me. And there are regional variations, dialects and ‘Classical Arabic’, a phrase I hear the Lebanese use a lot. But I continue to butcher the little of the language I know, and the Gulf Arabs just smile and say, ‘Yes, that is right,’ both of us knowing it is not.

The Gulf States are unusual because citizens constitute only a minority of the population. Most are expats from the subcontinent, Africa, the Philippines, Iran, or other Arab states like Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine — although a lot fewer Palestinians since the Gulf War. There are comparatively few Westerners. You rarely meet citizens in the normal course of your day because they do not take service or menial jobs. Because of this and the regional variations of the language, it is often difficult to understand expats when they pronounce basic Arabic words you have learned. And, as many of the expats you meet speak only fragmented English, defaulting to broken Arabic is often the only option.

One evening about 11 pm, I heard a siren when I was getting out of the shower. I thought it was a police car on the street below — at the time, we were living on the fourteenth floor of an apartment building. Then I heard a voice through a loud speaker. An American voice. After getting dressed, I looked to the street below and saw nothing unusual. Then the sirens and the American voice came again. The noise was not just coming from our building; it was coming from our apartment. We were living in a duplex, and in the ceiling high above the void near the staircase, I saw the speaker. ‘Evacuate the building. Do not take the elevators. This is an emergency. Evacuate the building.’ More of the loud screeching siren. I told my wife and daughter to wait and I went to investigate.

I looked down to the street again: nothing, no fire trucks, police cars, nothing. I thought about taking the stairs, and then heard the elevator’s bell a few floors below. It arrived and I took it to the ground floor. Our building was large and had about three or four security guards on duty at any one time. I went to the lobby and saw two guards. They smiled at me and I asked if there was a problem. I said, ‘Evacuation?’

One turned to the other. ‘*Shinoo?*’ (What?)

I explained that I’d heard a siren and someone over a speaker telling us to evacuate. I kept repeating ‘evacuate’. Their body language suggested nothing was wrong and I saw no other tenants rushing outside, so after a few minutes I walked

‘Inshallah.’ Michael Armstrong.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

back to the elevator. As I was walking, I chided myself for using the word ‘evacuate’. How would they know what ‘evacuate’ means? Idiot. I should have said ‘alarm’.

As I approached the elevator, an older security guard, one I recognised and thought had a better command of English, came out when the doors opened. I asked, ‘Alarm?’

He smiled broadly, gave me the lazy Nazi salute and said, ‘*Salaam!*’

I went back to the apartment and slept.

A word you will hear often is *al hamdulillah* (Thank God). There are some who use it in a religious sense, but for most it is said to show relief, the same as if an Australian were saying, ‘Thank God I remembered to bring my umbrella today’. Arabs will describe a car accident (and there are many accidents here) in English, but sprinkle the description of the accident with many *al hamdulillahs*. And when greeted and asked about their health, Gulf Arabs will invariably say, ‘*al hamdulillah*’.

One of my favourite Arabic words is ‘*Wa’allah*’ (I swear). I like it because I often hear it from desperate, imploring students who are adamant that they had completed an assignment I had not received: ‘*Wa’allah*, I emailed it to you on Thursday’. You will hear ‘*Wa’allah*’ often during arguments, as though the swearing is in some way persuasive — it is not and everyone knows it.

But the word you will hear the most in the Gulf is ‘*Inshallah*’. It means, ‘God willing’ or ‘If God wills it’. It is said in a religious context at times, but mostly it is an everyday word that equates to the now almost defunct Australian phrase, ‘She’ll be right’. Arabs want to be polite and helpful; they do not want to say ‘no’. ‘*Inshallah*’ offers a qualification to any agreement, a clause if you like, that voids any promise should one of the parties not be able to execute their part of the bargain. You will hear ‘*Inshallah*’ whenever you ask someone to do something or make a commitment: ‘How long will it take to fix the tap?’ ‘*Ithneen*. Two days.’ ‘Two days?’ ‘Two days, *Inshallah*.’ ‘When will my dry cleaning be ready?’ ‘After tomorrow.’ ‘So, Tuesday?’ ‘Yes, Tuesday, *Inshallah*.’ ‘I will see you in class on Thursday.’ ‘*Inshallah*.’

You can get almost anything home delivered in the Gulf, and I was once recommended a home delivery shopping service by a colleague. She said the food was good, reasonably cheap, and delivered within four hours. I tried it out, ordering and paying online. After four hours, my groceries had not arrived, but as it was *Ramadan* and they were likely to be busy during the evening, I gave them another hour and then called. Now after 10 pm, I told the operator to hold my delivery until after 5 pm the following day. He said, ‘Okay, tomorrow after 5 pm. *Inshallah*’.

At 1 am, my phone rang. The driver was downstairs. ‘Delivery. Which apartment?’ I quietly told him to bugger-off and fifteen minutes later received an enquiry from the call centre. I explained that I had asked for delivery the following day after 5 pm. ‘Okay. After 5 pm. *Inshallah*.’ At work around midday, the driver called again. ‘Delivery. Which apartment?’ More choice words.

When my groceries had again not arrived by mid-evening, I called and cancelled my order. At 1:15 am, I received another call. The driver was downstairs. Again the call centre was on the line fifteen minutes later. This time I let them have it, the words unprintable and my Australian accent more distinct. ‘Don’t angry,’ he said. He would organise a refund tomorrow ... ‘*Inshallah*’.