

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Zerangi

Michael Armstrong

During my four years in the Gulf there have been times when I feared for my life. When I first arrived, going out for dinner or visiting malls – particularly ones of the heavily populated, dusty, one-street-back-from-the-main-road variety – made me edgy. I still fear for my life, but I do not fear restaurants or malls. The fear comes when trying to get to them.

I admit that I am sometimes aggressive when I drive. I like to drive fast, and the speeding fines I've paid would probably fund a nice holiday to some exotic location. But like many who sometimes speed, I think I'm a good driver (a very good driver) and I tell myself that my speed makes me concentrate. I believe there is some research that supports this claim. Nonetheless, nothing prepared me for tackling Gulf traffic.

Of course, you must have a driving licence before you can drive, and getting your licence in the Gulf is an excruciating exercise. First of all, you must be a resident for at least two years before you can apply for one. You take written and practical tests, complete forests of paperwork, obtain the approval of your sponsor, get translations of your paperwork and attestations by your embassy, and take blood tests – even though you have already done that to get residency. If you have *wasta* (roughly translated as a connection to a person of influence) it is possible to circumvent the process. If you have a PhD, some of the requirements are waived. (We all know that people with PhDs are superior drivers.)

Knowing how to get a licence is only the first step – and the laws change frequently enough that sometimes the advice you receive is out-dated. I went to the police or licensing department four times. I went to the hospital to get a blood test. I waited a lot, usually in the outer office of some big cheese [at one department or other], and then pushed my way in, as though merging onto the freeway, to ask graciously if they would put their signature somewhere so I could go to the next department to get another signature. You must, for example, first get a signature from some official to permit you to have your eyes tested. Then you go to another building for the eye test. Then you go to yet another building to get another signature to have something else verified. A former colleague had *wasta* and used it to get most of his paperwork completed without having to attend any government department. He arrived at work one day with a stack of paperwork and said that his *wasta* told him he needed only to take the eye test and then collect his licence. I knew where to go so I took him ... five times. Each day, someone called 'Mariam' was not there, the system was down, or he didn't have the correct signature. So much for *wasta*.

Gulf men often accuse women of being terrible drivers – perhaps not an attitude peculiar to this part of the world – and I have heard arguments that women are bad drivers because they use *wasta* to avoid taking driving tests. Or, when they do take the test, they receive special treatment. A colleague said she was the worst driver of her group attempting the practical test. She did not go on roads, but took the test on a specially constructed track in the sand – but she was the only one who passed. When her name was called out, all the men clapped and congratulated her.

Mabrook!

Once you have your licence, you are free to commit suicide. But if you are a timid driver, do not drive in the Gulf. If you are a courteous driver, do not drive in the Gulf. You will soon become aggressive and impatient, or you will have a breakdown of the psychological if not the mechanical kind. If you do not push your way on or off a freeway ramp, you will stay there,

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Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.

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

unless the cars behind drive you – pardon the pun – insane by hooting their horns and telling you, with hand gestures, to put your one-and-a-half-metre-wide car into the ten centimetre gap in front of you. When people do let you pass, you are so incapacitated with shock that someone else darts in and takes your place. Every car in the Gulf is your competitor.

Locals curse the traffic and many blame expats for clogging the roads. There has even been a campaign by some parliamentarians to deport expats for minor traffic offences or to ban them from owning cars. Many Kuwaitis have three, four or more cars. It is easy to tell a Kuwaiti on the road: they drive big American SUVs, luxury European saloons or sports cars. And if you see an older American tank, like a Lincoln or a Cadillac, invariably an older Kuwaiti will be driving it, slowly, the window down even when it is fifty degrees, Arabic music playing, and prayer beads swaying gracefully from the rear-view mirror. But slow-driving locals are the exception.

It has been said by a Kuwaiti economist – and I think repeated by an *Imam* – that government sector employees, on average, spend only seventeen minutes per day working. Many government departments are only open from 9 am until noon, but the seventeen minutes is quite manageable even if you arrive a little late, leave a little early, drink a lot of tea (and therefore spend a lot of time in the bathroom), and have a brunch-break. This is relevant to my topic only because it makes me wonder why all these drivers are in such a hurry. Where are they going and what are they in a hurry to do? Of course, it is unfair to criticise only Kuwaiti driving habits. Without doing any formal research, I feel quite safe claiming that there is not a single Kuwaiti driving a bus in Kuwait, and bus drivers are some of the worst drivers in the country. Bus stopping. Side of the freeway. Picking up some fares. Sure. Just pulling-out into oncoming traffic. Why not? Going around a corner at 100 km/h with a full load of passengers. *Zain*, perfect. Cut me off, run into my lane, push in, turn without indicating. Of course. *Yellah, yellah*. And then there are the bi-polar taxi drivers: *Wa'allah*, don't get me started ...

Juxtapose these cars, buses and taxis being driven maniacally in the left lane or the emergency lane on the freeways – flashing headlights that get bigger and bigger in your rear-view-mirror – with the dawdlers, the Rain Men, the big tanks with their swaying beads and Arabic music, the taxi drivers putt-putting around looking for a fare, and the fresh-fish Western expats who take the rental cars with the brown seats just in case. The speed limit on the freeways is 120 km/h, the fast lane goes 130-140 km/h, the maniacs are doing 160 plus as they weave through traffic, and there is Rain Man in the middle lane doing about 60 km/h – 'Gotta get to K-Mart.' *Maafi mashkillah* – no problem.

The Gulf Road is the spiritual home of driving in Kuwait. It is truly pretty in the morning with the palm trees against the blue of the Gulf and the green grass that is seen so infrequently in this part of the world. But if the scenery is beautiful, the driving on the Gulf Road is astonishing.

Once, around midnight I was driving home from a restaurant along the Gulf Road, the traffic heavy as usual, and I saw something ahead that my brain found difficult to process. Something, not human, was holding onto the back of a motorcyclist. Was it a back-pack of some kind? We drew close at the lights and to my astonishment I saw that the motorcyclist was taking his nappy-wearing monkey for an evening ride! I have the pictures. A few months later, a colleague was driving behind a large SUV. In the cabin behind the driver, a tiger prowled the rear seat, alternately looking through the back window or poking its head through the partially opened passenger window. My colleague has the pictures. I have watched a motorcyclist doing a wheelie for about half a kilometre as a girl on the back of a motorcycle travelling alongside took photographs; I have seen cars driving parallel across the three lanes suddenly stop in order to halt all traffic behind them, just for kicks; I have seen many drivers give up waiting for a red

light to change and simply 'go'; I have seen cars driven so fast you'd think you were watching the Bahrain Grand Prix.

Often, the dangerous driving is a consequence of young men, many driving super-cars, wanting to race each other or to get alongside a car being driven by a girl. The zigzagging around traffic is frightening and a major reason for the appalling road toll. You wonder how the insurance companies make money after repairing all the twisted metal.

Another disturbing road behaviour is driving and texting, which is extremely common, despite warning signs and fines. You see a car swerving from side to side, pass alongside, and see the head down, phone in hand, the driver with no clue who or what is coming up. At night, you see the tell-tale illumination across drivers' faces. Using phones in cars is another attitude not peculiar to the Gulf, but it is taken to the next level here. I once stopped at the lights next to a woman and noticed her phone wedged between her ear and her hijab.

There are so many accidents that you would think drivers who see the squashed cars on the sides of the roads might alter their driving behaviour, but the road toll remains one of the worst in the world. The road designs seem grounded in some absurdist engineering philosophy. Roads merge to the right and cross another merging to the left, so people driving in the right lane are trying to turn left as people driving in the left lane are trying to turn right. There is a law that forbids combatants from moving their cars after an accident, even if that means leaving your car in the middle of the freeway, until the police arrive. Freeway drivers often have their fingers on the 'chicken-switch' or hazard light, and hit it so often that you give yourself whiplash if you are driving behind. Other drivers disregard hazard lights because drivers flash them so often or forget to turn them off. To some, the practice is insulting: 'I know how to drive; why are you warning me? I can see!'

And what of the freeway lanes, those arbitrary white lines that mean whatever one interprets them to mean? Do you put your car in-between the lines, or do you make sure one of the white lines runs down the middle of your car? It seems opinion in Kuwait is divided. And then there are the white lines that simply vanish. I don't know if the weather causes the roads to peel each year, as some suggest, or whether the new bitumen is not given enough time to cure, as others argue. Whatever the reason, the result of all this peeling and re-sealing is the phenomenon of the vanishing freeway lane. You are driving down the freeway and suddenly the white lines disappear - blown or washed away. And when the lines run out, drivers freak and suddenly seem to lose all sense of direction, making first a forty-five degree adjustment to the right, followed immediately by a ninety degree turn to the left, all without indicating, for that would take away all the fun.

Another absurdity of road culture here is the car with the sunroof. You would think that in the desert a sunroof in a car is somewhat redundant. Even at night during the hot months it is often over forty degrees until well past midnight and daytime temperatures can pass fifty degrees. Yet people buy cars with sunroofs, perhaps because they offer passengers an alternative view of the world. You see cars being driven along with a head poking through the sunroof, the head sometimes connected to a child's body. Sometimes you see two, three or four children moving around inside a car speeding down the freeway, or hanging out of the windows or sunroof. I've seen a child looking through the window as he sat on the driver's lap.

I have tried to understand the road culture here, and one day was discussing the pushy, aggressive behaviour with my Iranian friend. He explained that I was describing *zerangi*, a word in Farsi meaning 'clever' that is used to describe one-upmanship. Pushing into someone's lane, cutting department store lines, or stealing a table at a restaurant are examples of *zerangi*. I am

not sure if there is an Arabic equivalent, but it would explain some of the driving behaviours here.

What is absurd about *zerangi* is that it destroys itself. Cutting lines on roads, in department stores or government offices is contagious and when everybody does it the result is gridlock. I see *zerangi* backfire often as I sit on my balcony and look down to get my afternoon or early evening entertainment. In Kuwait, drivers often stop alongside shops – baqalas, juice sellers, *shawarma* joints – and honk their horn until someone comes out to take their order. The outcome is lots of cars stopped kerbside, narrow spaces for cars to pass, traffic jams, honking horns, and arguments. Instead of conveniently sitting in their cars for two minutes while their order is completed, the combatants sit in their cars for ten minutes waiting for the road to clear before they can get alongside the store of their choice and place their order. *Zerangi* absurdity!

Some of my Australian friends find it difficult to believe that I still live in the Middle East. They imagine I take a security convoy to work each day, bolt the doors each night after putting an AK-47 under my pillow, wear a *dishdasher* disguise when going out, and keep the phone lines clear in case there is a call from the embassy. It is not like that at all, but tomorrow morning I *will* touch wood just before I get into my car.

* Disclaimer: The author occasionally drives fast, has used the emergency lane on freeways, often flashes his hazard lights, stops for *shawarma* on the side of the street, and once freaked-out when the white lines on the freeway vanished.

Michael Armstrong holds a PhD from Edith Cowan University and lives in the Middle East where he teaches English and writing. He has published short stories, poetry, articles and creative non-fiction in journals, writing magazines, anthologies and newspapers. He co-wrote and edited an independent Australian feature film in 2010 and has just completed his first novel.