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Life by the Bagful

Racism is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic problem that existed since before it could be defined. It takes unique people with courage and fortitude to leave their home in one country and move to another. While America may be the land of opportunity, that opportunity is wrestled for, it is not handed out at the immigration stand. The 2003 film *Amreeka* exposes some of the challenges experienced by a Palestinian family moving to America. *Amreeka* exploits the urban, political, social, and financial check-points one must pass through to become an accepted and productive citizen in a new country.

Palestine is a biblical Middle Eastern region inhabited by Arabs that is without a land of its own. The State of Palestine is a region in the Gaza Strip of Israel. Israel is considered the birthplace of Judaism, Christian, and Muslim religions. Even with the conflicts each have endured, living in harmony seems to have escaped them. It is this battle over who is the chosen people of Israel that has caused hate among these religions. Today the region consists of the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Like Jews, more than half the Palestinian population lives in the diaspora. "According to the 2010 U.S. Census about 1.9 million Americans are of Arab descent," writes Robin Amer for Chicago Public Media. "The biggest wave of Palestinian immigration to the U.S. came in the 1980s and '90s not as immigrants but as students seeking advanced degrees," she adds. Chicago and its surrounding urban areas are now home to more than 25% of Palestinians in America. Palestinian immigrants consider Chicago an extension of their homeland (Amer, 2013).

The keyword unfolding in *Amreeka* is normalcy. Nothing is unique to this immigration from that of any transplanted minority. As arrival in America goes these people had it easy. Muna and Fadi, the principal characters did not face tremendous threats and did not experience any tragic results. There were no insurmountable problems depicted or ethnically distinct issues. This immigrant family was entering a new land while also dealing with divorce, financial pressures, a new school, difficulty finding employment, minor bullying, and family problems. However, these life events do not differ from most any ordinary middle-class family. The primary challenge this Arab family experienced was arriving in America at a time when suspicion of Muslim and Arab terrorists were high. Even those suspicions in 2003 were tame compared with the actual prejudice in play today (Shaheen, 2014).

Politics within *Amreeka* appeared incidentally. The only problem this middle-class Palestinian woman experienced in the West Bank was checkpoints in a crowded occupied region. Her home is not in a war zone, there is no violence shown, and there were no rockets exploding over the roofs of their homes. Her biggest problem was that her husband had cheated on her with a skinnier girl, and she was divorced. The Israeli soldiers she encountered in Palestine were stern but not warlike. They were appropriately security minded at a post 9/11 time when the second war with Iraq was ramping up.

It is clear however that living in the West Bank was a dead end. Her son Fadi needed to get out and seek a Western education. She needed to get away from the remains of her failed marriage. Moreover, while it may appear that their move to America would be culturally complicated, technology and a family to live with would ease that transition. Unlike the immigrants who came to America at the beginning of the 20th Century all on their own.

The ongoing pressures on the family were increasing suspicion and prejudice against Arab-looking Americans and Middle Eastern immigrants post 9/11. This caused some economic pressure and minor social pressure. Other than a High-school kids' misspelling Al Queda on a dusty windshield and an anonymous threat letter, no real cultural clashes became evident. Muna and Fadi were integrating well in a low-density suburb where culture as absent.

The economic pressures resulting from Muna coming to America were two-fold. First Muna's successful Arabic brother-in-law, a doctor, began losing patients because of increasing anti-Arab sentiment. This caused cash flow problems and increased stress between the doctor and his wife. The doctor's wife and daughters had all the upper middle-class trappings of American life. Fearful her financial comfort would disappear, she longed to return home to her beloved Palestine.

Though Muna had two college degrees, spoke three languages, and was a bank accountant in Palestine, there was little similar work available in a small suburb. Discrimination of her Arab heritage is implied when Muna does not get hired at the local bank. Though she had no more difficulty than any minority in looking for work in the banking industry (Orlando, 2000). It is not uncommon for even the most educated immigrant to find employment far below their education level even if it is flipping burgers at White Castle.

Being Palestinian is her heritage, coming to America was a choice. These two ideas merge and survive by developing a social network and establishing herself. Muna's social network consisted of her Americanized family. Her nieces who were American-born teenagers, her sister, and her brother in law. Oddly it is her sister who represents a growing dissatisfaction with America, her husband, and was the voice given to homesickness. Food is a way to maintain

a connection to one's culture. The family would visit restaurants and grocery stores in a small Arabic neighborhood in Chicago to maintain that vital link to back home. While the Chicago Arabic section paled in comparison to the highly dense bazars of their homeland it was sufficient to satisfy their emotional needs. Muna had incidental relationships with a sympathetic woman at the bank she pretended to work for, and an oddball high school dropout who also worked at the White Castle. Both of these people helped her early survive in urban America. The school Principal became an important person in their new environment. His genuine interest in them is revealed when he discloses that he is Jewish. It appears that religious differences between Jews and Palestinians disappear when sharing a bagful of burgers at White Castle.

Amreeka reveals bullying in as light a touch as it is possible to show. Fadi did not have to be Arab to be intimidated as the new student. The anti-Arab overtone was almost incidental yet obligatory. Any new child would experience being bullied in high school. Fadi's American teenage cousin and her black boyfriend coached him in how to dress cool. Within a few weeks, Fadi began to affect normal American teenage hip-hop inflected speech. However, he was still occasionally bullied. The only real discrimination was that in the police station when the white cops wanted to hold Fadi him for investigation, implying he might have been some vague Arabic threat. After having a fight with one of the white students, he was detained by local Police. However, it took very little convincing from the school principal to get him released.

Amreeka is not a lesson book on how to survive in a new land. What it does illustrate is how modern immigrants can settle in established cultural enclaves even in the face of minor adversity. Muna and Fadi had far more advantages and ability to survive than any oppressed immigrants. They worked through the checkpoints of life. It was normalcy.

References

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