

Art

# The Curse and Blessing of Living in a Refugee Camp

**Muhammad Mansour\***

The trip to the Ketermaya refugee camp, sandwiched between mountains in Chouf District was not an easy ride. To get to the destination, one is bound to get lost several times on serpentine, rough mountain roads. Passing by a brick factory was the landmark I needed to know that I had finally arrived at the isolated and disadvantaged camp accommodating around 61 Syrian families. Getting lost had given me a better sense of the extent to which the camp goes unnoticed.

The putrid smells from over ground sewage, and the overpopulated makeshift tents brought to my mind the Argentinean novelist Ariel Dorfman, who has lived his entire life in exile, who once said, «I think to be in exile is a curse, and you need to turn it into a blessing. You've been thrown into exile to die, really, to silence you so that your voice cannot come home. And so my whole life has been dedicated to saying, 'I will not be silenced'.»

The scene inside the camp reveals the tragedy of each family there and the scars left by the war in Syria in each member: family loss, trauma and exile, experiences that would leave anyone desperate and demoralized. Yet, the children born and raised in Ketermaya have been spared these feelings, as they are unfamiliar with the war. The kids here can be compared to the scene of the camp from a far, where the physical sense of the camp itself diminishes to become a tiny spot surrounded with massive mountains of pine and wild flowers growing on their cliffs. Both children growing up in the camp and wild flowers symbolize the resilience and love of life.

## Collage Art and Recycling Culture

Afya Rizq, a 38-year-old Syrian collage artist based in As-Suwayda city in Syria, has come to the camp to enhance the capacities of the children by connecting them to her unwavering conviction of «the door» behind every demolished house and «the light», even a slim one, penetrating the darkness. These themes are represented in dozens of her collage artworks on display in Beirut.

Capitalizing on children aged between 4 and 8, Afya has been encouraging them «not to be silent» and instead express themselves, making use of what may seem ugly or go unnoticed inside the camp.

Inside four-meter square classes silver-walled to reflect the sun light, around 17 kids have been asked to portray their beautiful faces or faces they would like to be. After drawing a sketch, they have been tasked with going around the camp to collect bottle tops, cardboard, cloth pieces and any other type of trash that can be used for recycling. At this point, kids begin to construct the items in their portraits



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after adding their favorite colors to match their works.

The ultimate goal is to channel any potential existing hate and revenge, which are usually incubated in such inhumane circumstances, into an alternative, self-created world where the power of imagination can really make a change. «Rather than complaining about the situation, a real change begins when we indeed care about our place,» Afya said. «It is essential for children at this age to express their feelings, memories and even ongoing plight in the form of an artwork, this is one of the avenues of much-needed self-expression,» she added.

Afya, who has come to Beirut to display her collage artwork, has never forgotten her dedication and love for children. Beginning in 2005, she has used art to heal and motivate children inside resettlement camps around her Syrian village that has been relatively untouched by the war. At one of her galleries here, she had come across a New York-based humanitarian group who offered her to join as a volunteer. Without any

hesitation, Afya decided to accompany the group. Even after they had left, she stayed, in an attempt to make a difference with the children by turning «the curse» of deprivation and marginalization into a «blessing» in the sense of planting the seeds of beauty and positivity among them. In other words, she was changing their perspective on life and enhancing their capacities to «transform the surrounding ugliness into beauty».

«Every child is an artist; my role is just to use their perception of the place around them and show them the beauty inside what is considered ugly,» Afya said.

## The Growing Birth Rate as Resilience

Resilience is also reflected in the remarkably growing birth rate at the camp, growing despite amidst all the poverty and deprivation. Each mother I have met at the camp has a family of between four and eight children, almost half of them were born inside the 4,000-meter square camp owned by Ali Taqesh, a donor from the Chouf District south of Beirut.

The influx of Syrian refugees to the camp

started with a shelter accommodating one family fleeing the war in 2012. It took only seven months for another 75 shelters to be built to accommodate another 35 families from Syria. Now, the number has doubled and so has the number of members in each family. This is a silent message that no matter the situation, the fundamental human right of giving birth and reproduction is a clear-cut blessing, given that children represent the future and despite all circumstances, they are able to reshape this future in a way that older generations have failed.

A single meeting with a child in the camp was enough to give an idea of what the future would look like. Thirteen-year-old Baraa Antar has never used an iPad or video games – she does not have a cell phone. The only time she got to see life in a city was when she went on a school trip to Beirut, as part of Salaam event where music was performed at the American Lebanese University. «I was afraid and could not leave my parents out of fear,» she said.

Her fear is justifiable, it is similar to birds who get scared from car honks and the fast-paced life, even the movement of the shadow on the wall is enough to make them fly. People in the civilized world got used to this fast rhythm of life until their fear vanished and was replaced with indifference, selfishness and greed. Then people forgot who they really were.

At the camp, Baraa perceives the outside world based on her interactions with a New York-based kid of her age named Logan. Her pen pal sent her a letter describing his life in New York. A life she has never seen but only imagined. This imagination has been motivated her enough and now she daydreams about traveling to America to receive a better education.

Asking how she sees herself in the future, she says, in a confident, eloquent and passionate voice, that she wants to be a lawyer. «I want to achieve justice in the world, beginning with my family members,» she said hopeful, with tears in her eyes.

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