

## **Refugees in our Own Land: Chronicles from a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Bethlehem**

*Muna Hamzeh*

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*Refugees in our Own Land* narrates the author's life between October and December 2000, when she was married and living in the West Bank's Dheisheh refugee camp. The book creates a new respect for the refugees among whom she lived and gives the reader a glimpse of the incredible difficulties of their everyday lives.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part chronicles Hamzeh's life during October 4-December 4, 2000: her personal life and that of her friends in Dheisheh, as well as current political events and how they affect the life of the refugees in the camp. These almost daily entries were actually e-mailed to a large number of people while she was still living in Dheisheh. The second half of the book is a series of short unrelated stories and articles, written between 1988 and March 2000, that highlight events that brought her to Dheisheh and explain other events and people in her life. Their order is a bit odd. After the reader gets used to Hamzeh's life in the camp, she abruptly ends her entries by describing how she left the camp and then, just when the reader wants to know what happened next, she starts relating the events that transpired 2 years ago prior to her journey to the West Bank. There is no mention of a husband there, and then all of a sudden she goes from living in the United States to ending up in Dheisheh. How she got there, unfortunately, is never explained. The lack of details concerning such important transitions is quite frustrating. Although she may have considered them "too personal" to include, it resulted in frustration on the reader's part.

One success, however, is her exposure of the humanity of people who so often are dismissed by the world as "refugees." She mentions their names and describes their faces and personalities, thereby giving the reader an

immediate empathy with them and a desire to reach out and comfort them. She also describes how, even when they have so little, they are always willing to help their neighbor in times of need. When people need financial support, they get it from their neighbors or buy it on credit. This is how they survive the loss of steady income due to Israel's imposed curfews. On the other hand, she points out that life in Israel goes on as normal, with people going to work, movies, and restaurants, as if the killing and wounding in the Palestinian camps occurs in a "far-away land."

Hamzeh also highlights the Palestinians' resilience, their refusal to give up, and their determination to make the best of things. They do not sit there demoralized, but go on with their lives as much as possible. She describes this when talking about the camp's "hominess," which is brought out by such simple things as the sound of radios and TVs and the smell of food cooking. In the camp, Hamzeh writes, it feels as if "we are all one big family."

The reader is always acutely aware of these people's daily pain, like the mother who learned from the TV that her youngest son was the first camp member to die during the al-Aqsa Intifada; the children who are terrified of gunfire and cannot sleep without lights on in their rooms, or who are afraid to carry their backpacks for fear of being targets for the Israeli soldiers who had just killed a school boy, and the destruction of the infrastructure.

Hamzeh does a good job of showing the resilience of the Palestinians among whom she lives, but not her own. Her political analysis often seems naïve, such as when she writes: "All it takes for the clashes to stop is for Israel to withdraw from the entire West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem." True, but the clashes happen because they will not withdraw. She alternates from being angry at the "world" for its inaction, accusing it of not caring to imploring it to help. She even calls out to Anne Frank to see what her people are doing.

The author criticizes certain aspects of the camp's culture in ways that some residents might find offensive. She dislikes the early age for women's marriage, as when she describes Samira as someone who "had dropped out of school at the age of 15 in order to get engaged." She is surprised that Samira was politically mature and yet married young. Hamzeh wonders if this is "the start of our women's great awakening? Are women beginning to realize that making men happy by cooking for them and washing for them and catering to their every need isn't what the whole world is about?" It seems a bit offensive to imply that such women are not as developed as she herself is, when the role of Palestinian women in the last two Intifadas as well as in the history of Palestine has been shown to be fundamental to both fam-

ily life and the resistance itself. It is surely not now that these women have become liberated.

Hamzeh's very personal and intimate account shows the vicissitudes of life under the brutal Israeli occupation, and some comparison of her reactions to those of the camp's permanent residents, not always flattering to herself, comes through. The reader is a bit shocked and disappointed with her decision to leave the camp without even saying goodbye, out of fear for her life, because admittedly she did not have the courage to do that. As Hamzeh finally makes it to Israeli soil, she is amazed and embittered at the Israelis' sense of "normalcy," although this was exactly what she was so desperately seeking and could not find in the camp. By this time, the reader has started to disengage from her, especially at the end of the first section when she justifies her departure by talking about liberation and how one must be free to talk about it. Ironically, she refers to Nelson Mandela, and the reader has an acute inclination to remind her that Mandela was the perfect spokesperson of liberation only when he was *not free*. One talks about liberation when one does not have it, not the opposite.

The second part consists of unrelated short stories, the first of which was in 1988 and describes why she went to Palestine. From the very beginning, she related to the Palestinian people as her people and questioned the world while using the possessive adjective: "...very few people who cared about us." If this chapter had started the book, the reader might have more sympathy for her, but at this late stage one dismisses her comments. She almost romanticizes the Intifada, showing a bit more of the naiveté seen earlier. She wanted to "watch the stone-throwing with my own eyes, smell the tear gas with her own nostrils and hear the sound of gunfire with her own ears." She also wanted to feel the courage of these people and overcome her fear of death, something we already know that she could not do because her lack of courage prevented her from saying goodbye to her friends and because her continuous fear of death no longer allowed her to live there.

The next chapter is the biggest jump one experiences, because all of a sudden, it is 1990 and she is married and again living in Dheisheh. The reader is thrown completely off balance, for there is no transition. The following chapters are the least personal, and are mostly about the people there, and so, in a way, one enjoys them more, as they are humorous and sad and give the reader a glimpse of the people's true spirit.

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