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Film Review: *Capernaum*, A Lebanese, Refugee Drama Film

Reviewed by Manar Hesino¹ and Manal al-Natour²

Film Information:

Capernaum

Director: Nadine Labaki

Producers: Khaled Mouzanar and Michel Merkt

Year: 2018

Distributor: Sony Picture Classics

Genre: Drama

In *Capernaum*, a drama film directed by the Lebanese director Nadine Labaki, the viewer is taken through a child's perspective on life in the slums of Beirut, Lebanon. Through the perspective of the 12-year-old boy, Zain El Hajj, the film depicts global issues including child poverty, child marriage, the current Syrian refugee crisis, lack of documentation, and gender-based violence.

Viewed from Zain's perspective, the story of *Capernaum* takes place in Lebanon, when government corruption and the Syrian refugee crisis has resulted in a significant increase in child poverty and family displacement, not only in Syria but also in neighboring countries. The lead actor portraying Zain El Hajj, Zain Al Rafeea, actually fled from Syria to Beirut at twelve years old, adding a high level of realism to his portrayal. Zain has been sentenced to five years in prison for stabbing his sister's husband. The film takes the viewer back in time through Zain's memories and slowly leads up to Zain committing the crime and being sentenced to prison. The flashbacks make it clear that Zain's parents are neglectful and abusive. They marry off his eleven-year-old sister, Sahar, to someone more than thrice her age, in exchange for chickens. After failing to save Sahar, Zain runs away from home to escape from his current life. Along his journey, Zain meets an Ethiopian woman, Rahil, who is a domestic worker, and her infant son, Yonas. Although Rahil suffers from poverty, she takes pity on Zain and offers for him to stay with her under the condition that he babysits her son while she is at work.

The story continues to unfold, and we learn that Sahar has died from complications with her pregnancy. The enraged Zain takes a knife and stabs his sister's adult husband for being the reason she is dead. While imprisoned, Zain's mother comes to visit him and informs him of her new pregnancy. His heartless mother has no remorse about her culpability for her deceased daughter, and Zain becomes more infuriated and frustrated. Zain then makes the decision to sue his parents for their neglect and for having more children despite not being able to care for them.

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After being brought into a courthouse, Zain informs the judge that he wishes to sue his parents for having him and for giving him life. He requests that they stop having children so no more children will be forced to suffer because of his parents' neglect.

In *Capernaum*, the predicament of the Syrian civil war is highlighted with the strong correlation between child marriage and poverty. Child poverty is the main factor behind the suffering, abuse, and hunger that children must face in Lebanon (Wainwright 2014). In regard to the Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanon has taken in over a million Syrians who have been fleeing from the Syrian civil war. Many Palestinian and Syrian refugees who have been displaced and relocated to Lebanon are currently experiencing very high rates of poverty. These populations are vulnerable to food insecurity, chronic illnesses, and trouble gaining access to education. Although the film sheds light on how the Syrian crisis has impacted Lebanese society, several countries face similar issues related to child poverty, child victimization, and refugee and displacement issues (Wainwright, 2014). The situation of the refugees is not worse than that of many citizens in Lebanon. In *Capernaum*, we witness decrepit buildings and homes and young children begging for food or money on the streets. In the capital of Lebanon, parts of Beirut suffer from poverty in extreme levels. The corrupted government leadership and the civil wars Lebanon went through led to extreme conditions of poverty and lack of funding for the country's infrastructure and welfare (Abouzeid, 2021). The same can be said about Zain and his family's uninhabitable living conditions in their apartment complex and in most of the neighborhoods surrounding them. Human rights activists have been monitoring the ever-changing conditions, and Roth reports that "The Lebanese pound has lost 90 percent of its value since October 2019, eroding people's ability to access basic goods, including food, water, health care, and education" (Roth, 2022). As a result, many of the Lebanese populace are forced to live in the same conditions as Zain's family. In *Capernaum*, neither Zain nor his siblings have been enrolled in any school due to lacking any documentation because his parents could not afford to pay the fee associated with their birth certificates. Zain does delivery work for their landlord, and Asaad and his siblings sell juice on the street. Neither the children nor the parents are legally registered in any government database. Thus, the parents are also unemployed and are struggling to pay rent, forcing them to earn a living through other means.

The implications of lacking documentation extend to foreign workers and temporary residents in Lebanon. Some foreign workers who had left their families and home countries seeking better living conditions, such as the Ethiopian domestic worker Rahil in *Capernaum*, are exposed to harassment and exploitation. Rahil escapes her workplace after becoming pregnant, fearing that her child would be taken away from her. As a result, she became an illegal resident who is forced to work and live in shady locations and avoid the authorities at all costs, all while caring for her newborn in secret. Rahil's suffering due to her illegal status represents the miserable migrant workers conditions in Lebanon. The *Kafala* migration worker system in Lebanon requires that a sponsorship be made directly through the employer. The employer has the right to terminate the sponsorship at any point, and the worker may get deported. This system does not preserve workers' rights since "workers are excluded from the Lebanese Labour Law" and instead it "ties the legal residency of the worker to the contractual relationship with the employer" ("End Kafala"). This system allows for the worker to be confined by their employer and not allowed to seek work anywhere else. In *Capernaum*, due to her illegal status in Lebanon after she left her employer, Rahil finds herself exposed to exploitation at the hands of Aspro, a shop owner who helps her forge her documentation.

Both Sahar's and Rahil's experiences represent the hardships women face due to their gender. Sahar is sold by her parents as an eleven-year-old bride for chickens and a rent arrangement for her family. She then loses her life by getting pregnant at a very young age. Her husband Asaad does not face any legal consequences. Rahil also represents the gender oppression women face at the hands of their husbands. She seeks the help of Yonas, the father of her child, and he does not take any responsibility and instead is only concerned about his job and personal betterment. Both Rahil's and Sahar's cases show gender oppression towards young women living in poverty.

Sahar's marriage is similar to the marriages taking place in Syrian refugee camps. Child marriage is one of the emerging challenges that face young Syrian girls in refugee camps where child marriage is seen as a strategy of escaping poverty and "protecting" the girls' honor. This is not only a form of gender-based violence, but a crime being committed by both families and the regime (al-Natour, 2013). What young, displaced girls like Sahar are being forced into is a form of sex trade. As such, young girls are simply being used in what is referred to as *nikah al-mutah*, which translates into a "pleasure marriage." The woman in "pleasure marriage" is seen as a sex object and stripped of her dignity (al-Natour, 2013). Living in the fragile context of war has significantly impacted the increase in child marriages in Syria and refugee camps, and some neighboring countries that are suffering financial crises like Lebanon. It has been estimated that 41% of Syrian girls in Lebanon are married before reaching adulthood in recent years (Chakraborty, 2019). People who are unable to feed and educate their children find child marriage to be a survival strategy. *Capernaum* depicts the struggles child brides are facing today, including dropping out of school and focusing on domestic responsibilities, being exposed to devastating health consequences and pregnancy complications due to childbearing at a very young age, and missing the chance to fully realize their potential. From a psychological point of view, child marriage has many negative side effects, including an increase in infant and maternal mortality as well as the risk of sexual and domestic violence (Chakraborty, 2019). In *Capernaum*, Zain's parents marry off his young sister, Sahar, who had just reached puberty age, to their landlord's son in an effort to ease their living conditions. Zain tries to protect his sister from such marriage and has hidden any evidence of her getting her monthly periods by washing her clothes and stealing women's pads from their landlord store for her. Zain's turning point starts with his sister's marriage. When Sahar is taken away by her father in a scooter, Zain hopelessly tries to chase after them by foot before giving up shortly after.

Not only is the foreign worker Rahil exploited by Aspro, but so is the Lebanese boy Zain. Aspro repeatedly harasses Zain for his size and age, and then he dismisses Zain and locks up his belongings including his only money. Rahil and Zain meet for the first time in the park after he leaves his parents' house and gives up on saving his sister from a disastrous marriage. The depiction of the miserable conditions of poverty in Lebanon reaches its peak when the Zain decides to work for the migrant worker Rahil. With no food and shelter, Zain looks to earn an income and offers Rahil to keep an eye on her son Yonas, feeding him and keeping him safe while she goes to work. He pretends that he is a Syrian child stuck in Lebanon so he can obtain food for Yonas and himself. To earn a quick income, Zain resorts to selling to the public a homemade drugged drink that he learns to concoct from his parents. The hopeless Zain finds himself unable to keep Yonas safe despite all his efforts and decides to "sell" him to Aspro after Rahil and Zain have exhausted all their resources to survive and keep Yonas alive. Zain understands that Rahil has been arrested by Lebanese authorities due to her illegal status.

Capernaum reveals how living in poverty and constant struggle to survive could lead an honest child victim to commit a crime when it is impossible to endure and cope with his living conditions. In a moment of despair, Zain decides to go home. He finds that his sister Sahar has died from excessive bleeding while being pregnant. She neither was able to keep her pregnancy at such a young age, nor was she able to seek the proper medical treatment due to her lack of documentation. After living through constantly traumatic experiences, the enraged Zain grabs a kitchen knife, runs into the streets looking for her adult husband Asaad and stabs him. *Capernaum* ends its story with Zain in the courtroom asking his parents not to have any more children, believing that their lives would not be better than his own. He ends up being sentenced to prison for five years for committing a violent crime. The childhood trauma Zain faces is a small representation of the tragedies faced by young undocumented children around the world, in general, and in Lebanon in particular, especially since the fatal explosion in Beirut in 2019, the global pandemic of COVID-19, and the current fragile economic situation. Yet, in the courtroom, Zain's smile for his identity card photo sends a message that there is hope of a better life for Zain and others. The film director Nadine Labaki collected the Jury Prize for *Capernaum*, and she dedicated "her win to the cast of her film, many of whom were impoverished or refugee children she met on the streets of Beirut. 'I really think about them. I hope the film will enable the voices of these children to be better heard and trigger a debate,'" she said after collecting the award. (Allam, 2018).

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