



New York- Amman- Dheisheh

By Yara Al Afandi



In spring 2014, I went from living in one of the West Bank's biggest refugee camps – Dheisheh Refugee Camp, approximately one square kilometer of land with 13,000 residents – to air-conditioned, 4G'd upstate New York.

The transition didn't just affect me; it shook me to the core. I thought I lived in a mediocre environment. So what if we didn't have electricity 24/7 or we only had water in our taps 3 days a week, 4 days if we're very lucky? It was auspicious, I thought. It wasn't that bad, was it?

It was very weird when people, especially foreigners, asked me what it was like to live in a refugee camp. I didn't know what to answer, because living in that camp was all I knew. I didn't have anything to compare it to. Then God weaved his magic and moved me to one of New York's most expensive liberal arts colleges.



Street in Dheisheh Camp.

Moving to the United States for five months introduced me to the color green, which turned out to be not only a crayon but also the actual color of actual trees and plants that we do not have. Seeing a beautiful turquoise ocean on another continent while I am not allowed to visit the sea in my own land and having personal space, a concept we lack in Palestine, changed me. But that was not all. The feeling of being underprivileged, disadvantaged, and destitute changed me too. I wasn't financially lacking, I was lacking socially and educationally, and I lacked basic human rights. A refugee camp was no longer okay, a refugee camp became a resented place. A refugee camp was no longer a home for me. It hit me like lighting. It is not okay for me to have full rights in another country and be treated as a terrorist in my own. It is not okay to cross two checkpoints twice a

This article is a personal sarcastic observation of the emotional and intellectual perplexity of a displaced female living in two worlds – one dominated by capitalism and the free-world notion and one dominated by social and military occupation with a focus on the aftermath of moving from one world to another.

day to get to college, and it is definitely not okay to accept occupation, take it for granted and normalize an illegal eradicating regime. Nor were a simple “haram” or “socially unacceptable” okay either.

The day I left the United States was a sad day; even the sky shed its tears in beautiful summer tranquility. I had to go from Washington DC to New York, and then from New York to Chicago and on to the final destination of Amman. The flights to Amman were long and



New York City.



Dheisheh Camp.

smooth, nothing extraordinary. The usual extra security checks and the usual dirty looks.

The hard part, however, started once we stepped into Al-Jisser (the area between the Jordanian and Israeli borders). I was stranded from 8:00 pm until 3:00 am. No buses to move the travelers from the Jordanian borders to the Israeli borders, and people were multiplying by the hour. It was very unorganized, very frustrating, and extremely chaotic. It was home! I literally had to elbow and wrestle my way onto the bus to get a seat. But even then I had a certain peace of mind because I knew that the night would be heavy with the scent of jasmine and full of impetuous, short-tempered, and deluded Ford van drivers. It was home!

As I entered the camp and saw the blue UN gates of the girl's secondary school my heart skipped a beat; I started breathing differently and my body automatically readjusted to refugee mode.

Of course traveling to the "dreamland" of thousands of people has its ups and downs. Returning to Palestine definitely has its downs. But the biggest change is an emotional, intellectual, and human disorientation.

You will look at things from a very different perspective. This might lead to culture shock, a mild depression, and a certain level of frustration; trust me I've been there. But it will forever erase what ordinary is. After going back to the confines of the inconsequential refugee camp, life became different. Life was no longer complete; it was a shadow of a life. A displaced, incomplete, and despicable version of life. There was a juxtaposition of emotions. I felt grateful yet aggrieved. I felt safe but angry. Any emotions of anger or exasperation I felt were partly because I had left but mostly because I felt limited and restricted. These limitations were not

only political, they were social too. For some reason people felt obligated to say "You're not in America anymore, you can't do this or say that." People felt an obligation to conform me to pointless and frivolous society rules. Not because they made sense but because they were inherited generation after generation.

This is what's infuriating about going back to a refugee camp: social restriction and social conformity to certain cultural laws. I came back with enormous confidence, a broader intellect, and a passion for change. But people are not yet ready for change; they are still in denial, living on the ruins of great ancient Arab discoveries and inventions. We invented the number zero and some algorithms, but then what? The enormous energy and passion for change that I had acquired had begun to decline as I realized the inability of people to accept change and admit that going forward does not mean dissatisfying God or doing something *haram*. Moving forward means building a nation occupied by both military and cultural forces. Moving forward is the only weapon Palestinians have. Educational, rational, and social change will enable refugee camps to be less shattered and more ready than ever before to face occupation and advance to freedom – the freedom of both country and mind. But no matter where I travel, home will always be home and Palestine will always be a crowded, messy, and maddening haven that I hate but still love.

Yara Al Afandi is a baby biologist at Al Quds Bard College. She's refugee-camp born and bred with a passion for writing. Yara works as a teaching assistant and is active on the community level, participating in various community and youth development projects, empowering and mentoring the refugee youth, and hoping for the greater good.