

Songs that Never End: The Contrasts, Contradictions, and Complexities of Life.

In “Songs that Never End”, Film artist and scholar Yehuda Sharim weaves a beautiful tapestry illustrating the beauty and bleakness in the lives of one refugee family, who are dealing with the trauma of escaping political unrest and persecution while finding themselves in the midst of an uphill journey to adjust to American life in Houston, TX. Although it’s easy to interpret Professor Sharim’s film as a glimpse into a refugee family’s daily travails, that take would be incredibly simplistic and unfair. What unfolds in this family’s stories are within-family struggles that are clearly microcosms of larger societal and cultural issues that each family member faces.

Abbas is a loving father and husband, who left a well-paying, highly respected job in Iran who struggles to meet traditional expectations to provide for his family. He’s a poet at heart and the beauty of his poems is abrasive against life within the confines of his apartment. His wife, Samirya is battling physical limitations, but is also silently suffering from mental health issues while trying to care for four children, including twins toddlers. Yet, despite the hardships they face, the love they have for each other and their children are painfully clear as they recite Abbas’s poetry for the camera. Why is it painful? Because the viewer can imagine a time when life allowed them to express their love through the beauty of words and that picture is in stark contrast to the heaviness of their current life. Instead of poetry, Abbas’s gift of words now expresses pain, anxiety, and sadness.

Ali, the oldest, desperately embraces Americanism while rejecting his Persian background, all indicative of an inner conflict so painfully familiar to any first-generation immigrant. When discussing why he declined to join the Persian club at school, Ali pointedly responded that he wanted to “remove” Persian from his being. His rejection of his native language, music, food, and people are contrasted with his eager embrace of America and all-things American. Any child of immigrants understands Ali’s mindset: the desire to fit in and be “American” is a defining struggle. It’s clear that Sharim is both shocked and empathetic to Ali’s struggle, which Ali cleverly uses to turn the tables on the film maker:

Sharim: So you are not in the Persian Club?

Ali: Yes, but I didn’t went there.

Sharim: Why not?

Ali: So hold on. If there was an Israel club, do you went there?

Sharim’s pause mirrored my own gasp as I held my breath. That pause conveys so many thoughts in just a few seconds, including a chagrin that many first-generation Americans will feel watching the scene. Despite (or a consequence of?) our experiences and inner conflicts, we all desperately want a different experience for Ali. Indeed, I found myself cringing at Ali’s words because I could hear those same words echoing from my own memory and could only passively hope that with time, Ali would find peace in his own identity.

Hana’s, the oldest daughter, strikes the most complex emotions. From the opening scene, Hana demands to be heard. Some of her first words in the film are “Film me. Film me. Film me.” Part

of Hana's need for attention can be attributed to her age, but to leave it at that is disservice to her story. Unlike children who are born into a social-media dominated world who learn to perform at a young age, Hana's need for acknowledgment is far more complex. She is a girl in a family structure that expects her to be a caretaker. And while her family worries for, as heart-wrenchingly expressed by Abbas's fears that she might be suicidal, they are also at a loss as to how to deal with Hana's own potential and abundance agency. Hana's declaration of her dislike for human beings will shock adults to their core. It is hard to remember that this child is only nine years-old, because her words are a treatise on social injustice and her delivery belies her age. She relays a story about witness one homeless man helping another, while the wealthy only lend money for interest: "Why those people that had everything didn't give him [anything]... They have everything they want but they don't care about the person who doesn't have anything in his pocket. They say I give you \$2 but you give me \$3 tomorrow... and that's why I don't like human beings." Because those words come from a child who we know has seen too much ugliness in the world, it's an observation that is a dagger into the heart.

The music in the film also haunts me. The discordant tones that suffuse frames of the world outside the home is particularly fitting. It is sad, but beautiful and shining at the same time. In essence, the music is so much like the film itself: a piece of art that proves that life is profoundly beautiful and disturbing at the same time.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Sharim's film is that it is a brutally honest depiction of refugee life in America. The complexities and consequences of diaspora, especially for individuals and their families, are laid out in their raw forms. The depiction of the psychological and practical complexities of refugee life makes the work a "must-see" piece of scholarship for any student in the fields of social justice and equity. Indeed, I am requiring my own students, both undergraduate and graduate, to view this film. Although many of my students are also children of immigrants, as time passes, the tragedies and triumphs of those who came before us lose their vividness, and perhaps, their poignancy. The fading of those experiences is probably the blessing of healing and resilience, even if we need to remember and honor those experiences. However, Sharim's film will be an enduring reminder of the experiences of all of our forbearers face: hardship, coping, and a strong need to make sense of the world. As is true for everyone, sometimes they succeeded and sometimes they struggled. However, despite the hardships and hurdles, like the Dayan Family, they also experienced moments of wonder, dances of innocence, giggles in jest, and sing songs that can't be ignored.