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Dystopian Images of Beirut in The Lebanese Oscar-nominated Film *Capernaum* (2018)

MARIA ABDEL KARIM

Bournemouth University

ABSTRACT

This paper[1] explores how Nadine Labaki's Oscar-nominated film *Capernaum* (2018), evokes a dystopian image of Beirut, often focusing on the struggles of the poorest inhabitants of the city, trapped in its slums. Prior to the film, this part of the city was an invisible place to many Lebanese (including the author who grew up in Beirut) as well as to a wider international community. The author analyses how Labaki's voice and directorial style offers new visibility to the people who inhabit this part of Beirut but legally barely exist. Labaki's grim representation of Beirut in *Capernaum* (2018) foreshadows the cruel life conditions that most of the people are facing now (2022) in Lebanon.

KEYWORDS

Child brides, Beirut, Dystopia, Film, *Capernaum*

Introduction

Modern Lebanon was founded in 1920 as a result of the French mandate within the region (Kaufman 2001). Prior to that date, Lebanon was part of many ancient civilizations and empires beginning with the myth of its Phoenician origins (2001) up until it became part of the Ottoman Empire which was dismantled after defeat in WWI (Atakav 2013). Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, is considered as one of the oldest cities in the world and according to Lebanese folklore it was 'destroyed and rebuilt more than seven times during its 5000-year-old history' (Raschka 1996). Lebanon gained its independence from France on 22 November 1943 and became officially a republic state headed by a Christian Maronite[2] president which is elected by the parliament for six years. There are 18 official religious sects[3] in Lebanon (Khalife 2015). Power-sharing in Lebanon follows a confessional system and is carried out based on a National Pact, which was an informal agreement set in 1943 to elect leaders based on their sect. This pact was rooted in a sectarian structure which dictates that the president of the Lebanese republic must be a Christian Maronite, while the president of the Council of Ministers is a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the parliamentary chambers is a Shi'a Muslim (Fregonese 2012). Thus, political power in Lebanon is awarded on a sectarian basis rather than meritocracy. Sectarianism would soon become one of the main instigators for the Lebanese civil war which lasted from 1975 till 1990 and lead the country into its darkest period (Khatib 2008).

1 Some of the material and analysis featured in this paper appears in more depth in my PhD thesis: Abdel Karim, M., 2023. Women's Voices in Lebanese Cinema: Crisis, Patriarchy, and Empowerment (PhD Thesis). Bournemouth University.

2 The Maronites are the largest Christian group in Lebanon who occupy 34 seats in Parliaments and the only sect eligible for the presidency (Khalife 2015).

3 Muslim sects include: Shiites, Sunnis, Alawites, Ismaili [Sevener] Shiites. Christian sects include: Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Nestorians Assyrians, Chaldeans, Copts, Latins (Roman Catholics), Evangelical Protestants. Additionally, there is the Druze and Judaism.

Prior to the civil war, the country witnessed a prosperous period between the 1950s and early 1970s (Fregonese 2012) and according to Sinno (2020, 178) it was considered 'as the "cross-roads" *(silat wasl)* between East and West'. The French influence remained highly visible in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, which was referred to as the 'Paris of the Middle East' (Moussawi 2013), a cosmopolitan project (Fregonese 2012) and one of the most modern cities in the Arab world. According to Fregonese (2012) Beirut's cosmopolitan charm was noticeable through the luxurious seaside hotel district which attracted both Arab and western tourists and investors. Artists from different backgrounds; writers, poets, filmmakers etc. expressed their love for this city, often describing it as the city of culture, pleasure, sexual liberty, political activism, and resistance (Aghacy 2015). For example, Jordanian writer Al-Razzaz (cited by Aghacy 2015, 16) describes Beirut in his novel *Ahya' fi al-bahr al-Mayyit* (1982) [Alive in the Dead Sea] as 'a mirror of the aspirations and desires of Arab intellectuals and activists […]. It is a place that is supposed to realize their dreams and grant them political, social as well as sexual freedoms […]'. Other artists gave the city feminine qualities, after which it was fetichised and sexualized (Aghacy 2015). Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, famous for his poetry which is described as erotic, bold and controversial (Darwish 1998) with themes revolving around love, women, politics and Arab nationalism, wrote a poem in 1978 entitled *Beirut Set EL Donya* [Beirut, The Mistress of The World].[4] He imagined Beirut in a woman's figure and implored her to "rise from under the rubble like an almond's rose in spring" [my translation] after witnessing a lot of violence and destruction because of the civil war. However, in 1981, Qabbani was shattered by the death of his beloved wife Balqis who was killed in an explosion targeting the Iraqi embassy in Beirut where she was at the time (Darwish 1998). As a result, he wrote a poem in 1981 *Qasidat Balqis* [A Poem for Baqis] in which he refers to Beirut as 'the city that "everyday kills one of us"' (Sinno 2020, 188).

We may consider Beirut as a city of inspiration, beauty, and dreams for the youth and its people, but in a split of a second can also turn into a violent, destructive place which shatters the dreams and lives of all of those who reside in it. Aghacy (2015, 16) explains that 'Beirut is a locale open to countless and conflicting representations, alluring and abhorrent, menacing and protective, utopian and dystopian.' Sinno (2020, 189) adds to this that 'because place is contestable and is always becoming, any place can shift from utopian to dystopian as a result of the actions, biographies, and imagined communities of those who occupy it and the larger social structures surrounding them.' The terms utopian and dystopian are thus used in this context to describe real state of affairs or emotions and not imaginary worlds that do not exist, as these words have often implied. Ruth Levitas (2010, 9) associated utopia with desire and provides a new definition for the term 'Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being'. Claeye (2013, 145) views that:

> Utopias are linked by their commitment to a form of enhanced sociability, or more communal form of living, sometimes associated with ideals of friendship, while their dystopian counterparts are substantively connected by the predominance of fear, and the destruction of 'society', as a polar opposite of friendship.

People in Beirut and Lebanon as a whole, grew up embracing two contradictory beliefs: coexistence and sectarianism at the same time. The first leads to prosperous friendships and tolerance of the other, painting a utopian view of life in the city, while the latter, shatters and destroys those friendships and allows emotions such as fear of the other and violence to prevail, as it was the case during the civil war which turned the city into a dystopian hell. Therefore, one

4 Also known as 'Beirut, Lady of the World'

could say that Beirut can in fact be utopian and dystopian at the same time. Fregonese (2012, 317-318) indicates that 'Beirut is at once a city-refuge and a city-battleground' and relates that to the city's discrepant cosmopolitanisms. She further explains that 'Discrepant cosmopolitanisms occupy the space between the two extremes of that oscillation between conflict and coexistence' (Fregonese 2012, 322). Discrepant cosmopolitism can be seen in Beirut prior to the civil war. While the city was booming with foreign investors and tourists and witnessing a rapid economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, belts of misery and poverty were surrounding it as a result of subsequent waves of internal and external migration (Stafford 2019; Fregonese 2012). Lebanese people were migrating to Beirut from southern and eastern Lebanon in search of a better life in the city. While others arrived as refugees from Palestine and Syria to escape the conflicts in their countries and they all settled in the suburbs of Beirut forming poor slums which the Lebanese government refused to recognise legally or allow any significant improvements to happen (El Hajj et al. 2011). These belts of poverty which reflect the double side of Beirut became the place of origin for the inception of the Lebanese civil war which started 'with a shootout in Beirut's south-eastern suburbs' (Fregonese 2012, 325) and later spread to the whole country lasting fifteen years.

Post-war, efforts to rebuilt Beirut began after 1991. Yet, Beirut did not regain its glamourous reputation, despite sporadic and often short-lived improvements in the country, due to regional tensions, persistent instability, and the widespread corruption; a plague that has impeded its development. Beirut did, however, maintain a troubling bifurcate vision: a place where the wealthy Lebanese and tourists can enjoy its post-war luxurious newly built facilities such as the downtown area, the Zaitunay Bay and the opulent hotels nearby; and a place where poverty belts remain expanding around its suburbs without any management or support from the government (Hatoum 2006). This sense of Beirut as two entirely different visions, forms the heart of Labaki's *Capernaum*, offering a troubling landscape mostly focussed on the daily struggles of the dispossessed, and the cultural and moral struggles the city faces today.

Labaki's *Capernaum* (2018):

Labaki's film *Capernaum is* set in Beirut's poorest and most overcrowded slums and reveals how a failed state and political structure ends up marginalising its people and depriving them from their basic human rights. It provides an evocative vision of a dystopian Beirut that now appears prophetic as the entire city sinks into an abyss, enduring a financial collapse 'that the world Bank has said could rank among the world's worst since the mid-1800s' (Hubbard 2021). Labaki's representation of Beirut in *Capernaum* (2018) foreshadows the harsh living conditions that most of the people are facing now in Lebanon.

When *Capernaum* was released to the public in 2018, it received global acclamation and was nominated for an Oscar. However, it also received a backlash from some reviewers and audiences, who accused Labaki for 'poverty porn' in her film (Qureshi 2018; Stafford 2019). 'Poverty porn' as defined by Matt Collin (2009) refers to '"any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor's conditions in order to generate the necessary sympathy" required to gain support for a given cause' (cited by Hester 2014, 212). However, Labaki replied to this accusation in her interview with Qureshi (2018) by saying:

> I cannot do anything toward cynicism, you know, toward people who just decide to be cynical toward me wanting to tell the story because I haven't lived ... of course I haven't lived their lives, but somebody needs to tell that story, somehow.

It is worth noting that Labaki conducted in-depth research while writing the script for the film and interviewed many families and children living in Beirut's slums. As a female director, Labaki's female subjectivity and personal empathy, specially being a mother, herself, appears to have a strong impact on the representation of these underprivileged people's lives specially the children neglected on the streets. In an interview with the guardian, Labaki (cited by Cooke 2019) explains that she felt responsible to be the voice of these kids begging on the street 'I thought: if I stay silent, I'm complicit in this crime – and it is a crime that we allow this to happen'. She describes in our interview that making this film was like 'going to war' due to various complications she and her production team faced on set (Labaki 2020). It is also worth mentioning that Labaki's husband [the musician and composer Khaled Mouzanar] produced the film after he mortgaged their home to finance it (Labaki cited by Cooke 2019). This proves how persistent Labaki was to bring visibility to these people's dire conditions and give them a voice for she (2019) believes 'cinema can effect social change'.

Labaki uses some of the techniques of the Italian neorealist tradition which was seen in the films of Roberto Rossellini or Vittorio de Sica (Weinberger 2007) by casting nonprofessional actors, and filming in the real slums of Beirut with real refugees and people who reside in those shabby areas. She is simply using the art of filmmaking to reflect the cruel, dystopian life of those people. Whereas Hollywood often uses science fiction genre to project dystopic narratives of worse near future catastrophes and world disasters (Mirrless 2015), Labaki illustrates through a social drama genre and a neorealist apparatus that dystopia for some people in Beirut is a present condition of everyday tragedy rather than an imagined disastrous future.

Capernaum (2018) captures the grim (or dystopian) reality of people living on the margins in Beirut city, invisible from the system, and treated as second class human beings. Labaki had a prophetic vision in making the film, and observed, in interview in 2018 that 'the dystopian images in her film are a reflection of Beirut as it is today' and this is projected through the title of the film (Qureshi 2018). Labaki said, '*Capernaum* in French is used usually in French literature to signify chaos, to signify hell, disorder' (cited by Qureshi 2018). The opening aerial shots on Beirut's slums work well in setting up the locality and context of the story and are used as a reoccurring motif throughout the film. Everything in this city seems to be dysfunctional and out of place through these frames. The children of the slums are filmed using the effect of a handheld shaky camera, playing war games, and running around the dirty ghetto streets, breaking glass, smoking cigarettes, and armed with wooden rifle-like weapons. Their looks and actions reflect the violence and chaotic nature of this place. The opening soundtrack of the film (*Eye of God*) composed by Khaled Mouzanar, accompanies the visuals, and creates a melancholic atmosphere. We are transported as viewers, through these shots, to gaze at those children who belong to a low social status from above. At moments it becomes a very emotional and uncomfortable experience gazing at these underprivileged children. Labaki's framing plays an important role in fashioning a form of political activism and bringing light unto this abandoned space. People live in that place but, in the eyes of the state, do not exist (i.e., without having identity documentation, such as a birth certificate, or any human rights within the state). *Capernaum* (2018) highlights the struggle that women and children specifically face in these marginalized communities in Lebanon such as, child marriage, human trafficking, undocumented children, child poverty and domestic workers' abuse which further reveals how grim these slums are. The narrative tells the story of a 12-year-old boy, Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), who wants to sue his parents for giving him life in this unjust and chaotic world. In her interview with Aridi (2018) for *The New York Times* Labaki mentions

> He's actually not only suing his parents; he's suing the whole system

> because his parents are also victims of that system – one that is failing on so many levels and that completely ends up excluding people.

The film begins with a symbolic trial court scene, where Zain is accusing his parents of bringing him into this world in front of the judge and witnesses, which serves to embody the extent of neglect these deprived children are feeling. The trial was inspired by the research that Labaki did prior to creating the film, and the interviews she conducted with these children living in the slums. Labaki tells Bradley (2019) in an interview:

> I used to always ask them one question. 'Are you happy to be alive?' And most of them would say, 'No, I wish that I was dead.' Some kids even committed suicide or tried to commit suicide. And they told me, 'I don't know why nobody loves me. I am beaten up every day. Why do people treat me this way?'

Zain lives with his parents and siblings in these very poor neighbourhoods that have formed belts of poverty around the city. They all sleep on dirty mattresses on the floor in a messy, overcrowded room which resemble the whole cityscape. He and his siblings are forced into child labour on the rough streets of Beirut, instead of attending school like other children their age, because they live in extreme poverty and their parents use them as a source of income. His favourite sibling is eleven-year-old Sahar (Cedra Izzam). Once their parents find out that Sahar has started menstruating, they decide to marry her to their landlord's son who is more than twice her age, in exchange for some chicken and the rent. Forced child marriage is very common in these marginalised communities despite the reality that these children are not emotionally nor physically prepared for this step. Labaki reveals this early on in the film through a scene where Sahar appears naïve about sexuality when she first acknowledges that she started menstruating. Talking about menstrual periods remains a taboo topic that is rarely discussed openly amongst families and rarely depicted in films. A woman's body is prone to stigmatization in the patriarchal Arab world (Haddad 2012).

Many girls do not get proper communication or education about their menstrual cycle prior to experiencing it for the first time, and their first experiences are usually accompanied with shame and fear (UNFPA 2021). In a dysfunctional family like the one Sahar belongs to, the parents lack proper communication with their children and abuse them physically and emotionally, therefore it becomes very hard for a girl like Sahar to receive any awareness or knowledge about her sexual health under such dystopian conditions. Zain who appears to intuitively understand what was happening with his sister better than she did, starts convincing her to conceal her menstruation from their parents, assuming that they will marry her to Assad (Nour El Husseini) once they knew. Sahar is vulnerable, innocent, and naïve, seeing to not mind being forced to marry Assad, their landlord's son, and the owner of a mini market where Zain works as a delivery boy. Ironically, she presumes that Assad is a nice guy only because he gives her free liquorice and ramen. A cheap packet of noodle is enough to win her heart. Vulnerable girls like Sahar, lack the proper education, and are taught from an early age that marriage is the only future for a woman and a prime achievement. Many young girls in low-income countries and poor families see that marriage would grant them a better life and facilities (Ouattara et. Al 1998). However, Zain warns her about marriage suggesting that she'll become Assad's property, and a prisoner in his house where he would have full control over her.

The scene is filmed in an insanitary toilet with pale earth colours which serves as an appropriate backdrop to explore these children's suffering and evokes the dystopian cityscape. The camera

movement is utilitarian offering a sense of realism, and the scene setting, and sound similarly evoke a sense of uncomfortable and unwanted intimacy. Sahar is pictured sitting on a dirty toilet seat while Zain was washing her under garments which got bloodied by her unexpected menstruation. Labaki skilfully presents a great delicacy in directing this troublesome scene without sexualising young Sahar remotely. Zain then, rolls up his t-shirt and gives it to her, but she confusingly asks what she should do with it. This small but nuanced detail further elaborates on Sahar's lack of awareness about what a menstrual period is or how to behave in this situation. Ironically it was her 12-years-old brother, who had to inform her about what she should do and how she could use his t-shirt as a pad. At that moment Sahar could not have access to feminine sanitary pads so her brother had to resort to his t-shirt as a temporary solution. Even though this film was done prior to Lebanon's economic collapse, it is worth noting that this scene foreshadows the period poverty reality that many Lebanese women and girls are experiencing during the political and economic crisis that began in 2019 following the October 17 uprising and is still ongoing till the date of writing this paper (2022). Due to this dire economic crisis in Lebanon, feminine hygiene products have become a luxury since their prices have skyrocketed, and many females who cannot afford them are resorting to unhealthy alternative means during their menstruation (AFP 2021a).

The film continues to capture the disheartening reality of these marginalised children through the eyes and point of view of Zain who is forced into child labour instead of attending school. The envious and resentful look he has on his face as he glances at a minivan dropping some of the children in his neighbourhood from school while he is amid preparing for some home deliveries reveals the unfair conditions that children like Zain are subjected to. This emotional torture on his face is a common feature in neorealism. When asked to join school, he was faced by a total rejection from his father (Fadi Kamel Yousef) who believes that it is best for everyone if Zain continues to work for Asaad to support the family rather than attending school. As a result of the dire economic crisis that Lebanon is currently passing through coupled with a pandemic, many children are forced to drop out of school or never attend in the first place. A UK-based charity, Save the Children, warned that:

> The social and economic crisis in Lebanon is turning into an education catastrophe, with vulnerable children facing a real risk of never returning to school […] More than 1.2 million children in Lebanon have been out of school since the country's coronavirus outbreak began … (AFP 2021b)

This risk is for both Lebanese children as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees whose families cannot afford sending them anymore to school or provide them the necessary tools they need for education. This is resulting in more child labour and more little girls forced into marriage (2021b).

Zain is iconic of these underprivileged children. He spends his day making home deliveries before returning to the rotten building where he inhibits a small room with his parents. He is filmed mounting the noisy stairwell which is filled with dirt and the sounds of crying babies. He then ascends to his family's room which appears as a kind of architectural symptom of the under-development, decay, and neglect throughout the poorer parts of Beirut. This frames the dysfunctional cityscape aerial shots. In one of the scenes, Zain and his family are pictured sitting down on the floor having a very humble dinner in a candle lit room. The scene is captured through a handheld camera with tight medium shots on the family members gathered for dinner. Throughout the shots, this family appears trapped and suffocating in such a small

space. Ambience sound reveals loud noise coming from outside their room, which may be generators in the neighbourhood and a car alarm. The candles are used as a substitute for the lack of electricity not for the purpose of making the dinner appear more romantic. This picture of a family having just bread and some dips for dinner with no electricity is becoming the norm for many Lebanese people nowadays due to the lack of the state's power supply. While some people can still afford paying money for privately owned diesel-powered generators to supply them with electricity, the rest of the population prefer to save the money to put some bread on the table. In the absence of electricity, summer and winter are particularly very harsh seasons to survive in Lebanon. Summer 2021 have seen people suffocate from the heat and some were pictured sleeping on their Balconies (Charaf 2021) hoping to catch a passing breeze, but in the winter, many could face the risk of freezing to death. News of people dying due to extreme cold conditions at the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon always made the headlines during the freezing winter season, but this risk is now threatening the Lebanese as well who lack the basic resources to keep themselves warm during the harsh winters (Chamseddine and Kabalan 2021).

As the narrative evolves, Sahar's destiny and inevitable fate is decided by her father agreeing to marry her off to Assad in exchange for keeping a roof over his family's head and some chicken. Both parents appear desperate after taking this decision which will put their daughter's life in danger as it is presented later in the story. Poverty is represented in this film as the main factor that forces the parents to sell an eleven-year-old daughter to avoid becoming homeless with the rest of their children. Sahar is turned into a commodity or a financial transaction. While researching for the film, Labaki (2020) found that the parents are as much victims as their kids in the sense that:

> the mother in most of the cases was already married at a very young age just like her daughter and … unfortunately in 75% of the cases and these are based on studies the child repeats the same pattern.

Zain gets furious at his parents for sending Sahar away and feels helpless after his rescue plan of fleeing the house with her came out as a failure. Sahar is a victim of the patriarchal institution which oppresses women especially the vulnerable like Sahar. As Caputo (2018, 202) notes, the patriarchal system allows for women and girls to be treated like 'property or commodities in a system that devalues and dehumanises children and infantizes women'.

Unfortunately, in Lebanon child marriage remains legal. A law that would criminalise child marriage in Lebanon was introduced in the parliament in 2017 but it was never passed (Schaer 2021). In the absence of legal protection, marriage practices for young girls are seeing a dangerous increase in 2020-2021 due to the pandemic and the dire economic crisis in Lebanon (Schaer 2021). As a result, many girls from poor families are forced into marriages which have a negative impact on their life and health. Lemmon and ElHarake (2014, 4) highlight the consequences of this practice and state: 'Child marriage harms women and girls: it is a practice that disrupts a child bride's educational and economic opportunities, raises her chances of exposure to violence and abuse, threatens her health and the health of her children.'

Child marriage appears to be more prevalent among the Syrian refugees (40.5 per cent) who arrived in Lebanon because of the Syrian war/crisis that started in 2011 in addition to Palestinian refugees (12.0 Per cent from Lebanon, 25.0 per cent from Syria) and a minority of Lebanese girls (6.0 per cent) according to a survey conducted by UNICEF in 2015-2016 about the prevalence of child marriage in Lebanon (Hutchinson 2020).

However, due to the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon and the covid-19 pandemic, more young girls will be sold as brides. This unfortunate fate awaits many underage Lebanese girls and there is no visible solution for the near future.

After marrying Assaad, Sahar gets pregnant and faces a pregnancy issue which makes her suffer an extreme bleeding and eventually dies since her husband and parents could not admit her into a hospital because she is an undocumented child. In our interview, Labaki (2020) points out:

> Children are born and dying without anybody knowing because they're not being registered because unfortunately parents have to pay money to register their children […] they are completely invisible from the system that did not find solutions for them.

Many Lebanese are dying at the doors of the hospitals nowadays not only because they are undocumented as the film represents, but because they do not have money to be admitted into private hospitals as the public healthcare system is on the verge of collapse due to 'lack of funds for equipment, staff and supplies' (Layton 2021). Bizri (cited by Layton 2021) mentions that 'Eighty per cent of people cannot afford to pay [for private hospitals] and if they go to public hospitals, they may not have the right equipment'. These are few examples of how the Lebanese state and policies have failed to provide the Lebanese with their basic needs to survive.

Prior to Sahar's death, Zain decides to leave his parents' shelter and meets Rahil, an illegal migrant worker, and a single mother to an undocumented baby, Yonas. Rahil offers him a temporary refuge at her home. However, after a while Rahil was captured by the Lebanese general security due to her illegal residency, leaving Zain alone with Yonas. In the absence of Rahil, Zain took care of her baby and tried every possible way to find Yonas something to eat so he wouldn't starve. This representation of Zain as a carer makes him appear like an 'ideal citizen' in a world where adults are not and resonates with Michel Foucault's (1994; originally 1984) idea of 'the ethics of care of the self' which engages with the idea of citizenship (Pullen 2007, 197). By referring to this idea Pullen, (2007, 198) states: 'Those involved in childcare may reveal evidence of the ethics of the self through following ethical ideologies in society to make oneself competent for qualified citizenship.'

Labaki seems to be making a statement that Zain, who is an undocumented child is very much worthy of a citizenship, and more importantly he is entitled to get his basic human rights and be recognized as an existing human being in the eyes of the society and the state.

However, when Zain found himself that he could no longer take care of Yonas because he is not in a better situation himself, he decided to sell him to a human trafficker, Aspro, who manipulated and convinced him that Yonas will be in good hands with a new family. Zain who did not know Aspro's real intentions believed that he was doing the right thing and what is deemed best for Yonas in the absence of his mother. In this chaotic dystopia, children and babies are sold cheaply and there is no concern for their health and wellbeing. They are brought up on the rough streets and the government does not intervene to protect them or offer any help.

Zain returns to his parent's place only to find out that Sahar has died due to the pregnancy complication. This traumatizing news fuelled him with rage as he instinctively grabs a knife and runs outside his building towards Assad's minimarket where he stabs him with the knife and gets captured by the police and taken into Juvenile prison. It is once he gets into prison that he decides to sue his parents for bringing him into this brutal world and which brings us back to

where the film started. When the judge asks Zain what he wants from his parents, Zain responds 'I want them to stop having children', this statement occurs after Zain knew that his mother (Kawsar Al Haddad) is already pregnant again. With this bold statement communicated by an innocent child, the film argues that those who are impoverished must stop procreating children. This may also imply that they should abstain from sexual intercourse. Since for example Zain's mother, cannot resort to abortion in case of an unwanted pregnancy because abortion is illegal in Lebanon. Any woman who attempts to abort illegally would face severe consequences and legal prosecution along with whoever aborts or assist her in the act (Kaddour Et al. 2002). Additionally, Kaddour et al. (2002, 57) argues that:

> In Lebanon, the extent of contraceptive use is determined less by individual preference and more by availability. Access to contraception varies widely according to region, income, peer and family approval, age, legal restrictions, and even the time at which a request is submitted.

It can be argued that a poor family like the one depicted in the film which can barely put bread on the table would not be able to afford buying any contraceptive method. However, there are NGOs who are dedicated to help the poor have access to free birth control (Ghali 2021), but this also depends on whether these people living in these marginalized communities are aware that these NGOs exist and can have access to them. Therefore, there are so many obstacles that may act as barriers for getting hold on contraception. Due to all that, Seghaier (2018) argues that the film transmits a message that sex, and pleasure are luxuries that the poor are not entitled to have. Furthermore, this reinforces the theme of dystopia, where pleasure is denied and prohibited.

However, in this dystopic Beirut there is still room for some hope, as the story of Zain unfolds on him receiving help from a lawyer named Nadine, played by Labaki herself who assists him in obtaining official identity documents. The ending of the film sees Labaki's directorial style alternate between a Hollywoodian tradition echoed in the happy reunion between Rahil and her stolen baby who was rescued from the human trafficker and an Italian neorealist tradition as revealed in the last medium shot of the film on Zain smiling for the camera as his photo of identification was taken providing evidence for his citizenship. This final shot could be also read as a reference to Fellini's finale in *Night of Cabiria* (1957), which cannot be seen as a happy ending, but rather an unresolved ending with a glimpse of hope, reminiscent of neorealist films. However, the way Zain's story unfolds does not reflect the reality of these forgotten children who will remain stateless for the coming years with no one to rescue them unless the Lebanese government or the international community find a solution.

Conclusion

Labaki's main target and mission was to give a voice for these children (Labaki 2020) and the film effectively critiques the failed Lebanese system which renders people invisible, on the margins, and highlights the issue and dire consequences of child brides, poverty, child labour and undocumented children. However, the film does not provide any solutions for these people besides prompting those who cannot afford having children to not have them. If *Capernaum* (2018) was to be filmed in 2021-2022 it would be deceiving if it focused only on poverty in the slums of Beirut, for the fact is that most of the Lebanese population residing in all parts of the country are now living below the poverty line, unable to make ends meet and lacking basic means of life to survive. Lebanon in 2022 has become a living hell for most of its population not just those living in the slums as Lebanon battles one of the worst economic crises in modern history.

In the wake of the Arab spring 2011, a civil uprising started in Lebanon on October 17, 2019, against the regime which has been leading the country into a void due to mismanagement and corruption. The situation deteriorated dramatically when an explosion which was considered one of the 'most powerful non-nuclear explosion of the 21st century' according to Dr Rigby (cited by Amos and Rincon 2020) occurred at Beirut port on August 4, 2020, due to the ignition of 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate which was stored unsafely in a warehouse for almost six years (BBC 2021). The government who was made aware about this possible danger months before, did nothing to prevent this catastrophe (Nakhoul and Bassam 2020) which claimed the lives of more than 200 people, injured more than 6500 and damaged 300,000 home (AlJazeera 2021). Beirut subsequently resembled a dystopia, emerging from an apocalypse after the port explosion.

Following, the port explosion was the almost total collapse of the Lebanese economy, which worsened further during the coronavirus pandemic (2020-) and the deterioration of the value of the Lebanese currency which lost nearly 95 percent of its value since 2019 (Chehayeb 2022). This have pushed an estimate of 78 percent of the Lebanese to live below the poverty line according to the UN (Chehayeb 2021). The annual inflation rate in Lebanon has reached a new high record, 224.39 percent, in December 2021 (Mahfouz 2022). The country is also witnessing mass exodus of its youth and working population since unemployment rates have been skyrocketing (Taha 2021) and those who have no means to leave are resorting to illegal migration on sea boats often facing the danger of dying in the sea or being captured and detained (Chehayeb and Marsi 2022, The Associated Press 2021). The Beirut that was once considered the 'jewel' of the Middle East, the hub of culture, festivals and tourism became a ruined ghost town that plunges into darkness and total silence at night due to electricity cuts caused by lack of fuel (Layton 2021). It has turned into a place where dreams are crushed and shattered with no visible solution for the near future.

Lebanon now is in a state of disorder lacking all basic human needs. Beirut is not a vibrant place anymore. It is a condition that represents a psychological state. The city initiates trauma and suffering for many of its citizens. Inhabitants of Beirut feel out of place and question their belonging. Beirut now, more than ever, has become '*Capernaum*', a state of chaos in stasis. The Lebanese population urgently need an 'honest rescue plan' a 'real change', and 'true justice' for all the crimes committed against them by incompetent Lebanese governments throughout the decades. This proves that *Capernaum* (2018), has become a portrait of almost the whole country not just the poor neighbourhoods and marginalized communities as this paper has argued. By utilising the power of cinema, Labaki has brought to light the unsightly realities of contemporary Lebanon that must be honestly confronted for the country to have any hope of recovery.

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Maria Abdel Karim, filmmaker and doctoral researcher, born in Lebanon and currently residing in England. I hold a Master's degree in Film Directing from Bournemouth University (2018) and a filmography comprising of four award-winning short films and one feature film. I am experienced in screenwriting, directing and producing short films and I have five years of work experience in television productions (reality and entertainment shows), music videos and TVCs. I am currently a part-time lecturer in film studies and production, and pursuing a PhD titled *Women's Voices in Lebanese Cinema: Crisis, Patriarchy and Empowerment* at Bournemouth University.

Email: maria.a.karim@gmail.com