

A New Start: Hope in the Lives of Refugees in Comparable Arab Literature and Film

To pick up and leave home to search for a better life elsewhere takes an unbelievable amount of courage, strength, and, most importantly, hope. These qualities are almost imperative for refugees, people who are migrants of circumstance rather than of choice. Whether fleeing war, economic strife, or another threat to their livelihood, refugees are forced out of their homes and must simply hope that what lies before them is better than what they're leaving behind. The novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and the film *Salt of this Sea* both chronicle the lives of refugee migrants and their families and place an emphasis on the role of hope in the lives of these characters. *Hope* focuses on the lives of four very different individuals living in Morocco, hoping to cross the Strait of Gibraltar into Spain, while *Salt* tells the story of a Palestinian-American woman as she visits the homeland her grandfather was forced to leave and experiences the struggles of displaced Palestinians living in the West Bank. The characters in these stories are faced with highs and lows that test their strength, but regardless of circumstance, some are able to emerge with new dreams and hopes for their future.

One of the most common and visible threads connecting the characters of *Hope* and *Salt* is their hope for a new and better life. At the beginning of each story, we find many of the characters daydreaming and hoping for change in their lives. In *Salt*, Emad is a Palestinian living in Ramallah, far from his family's original—and now non-existent—home in Dawayima. Emad is suffocated by the restrictions on his movement as a Palestinian living in the West Bank. He is stuck in his dead-end job in a restaurant and stuck in Ramallah, and his only hope is the chance to study in Canada. He has already earned a scholarship and waits hopefully to hear if his Visa

request will be approved, envisioning a new life in a new nation. Also dreaming of a new nation are the characters in *Hope*, all of whom have something they are trying to escape in their current lives. Faten is a devout Muslim woman who is faced with impending legal trouble after making a derogatory statement about Morocco's king; she hopes that going to Spain will allow her to escape the corruption of the Moroccan government. Halima is a mother stuck in an abusive marriage with an alcoholic husband, and she hopes that she can escape the abuse and start a new life with her children in Spain due to the complexities of divorce in Morocco. Aziz is newly married and hopes that he can escape his perpetual unemployment. Murad wants to escape his unemployment as well, as he rarely brings in money through being a tour guide in Tangier anymore. Each character is subject to some form of political, social, or religious repression and are all stuck within dismal economic circumstances. They are all faced with a different, apparently insurmountable obstacle, for which the only solution seems to be migration. Yet they remain optimistic, hoping for a better life abroad and hoping that their risk will be worth the reward.

Within this hope for a better life is the hope of some characters to reclaim pieces of their lives they feel they've lost. Soraya, the main character of *Salt*, travels to Israel in the hope of claiming the money her grandfather was forced to leave behind during the Nakba, or 1948 Palestinian Exodus. This money can be seen as a form of reparation for both her grandfather's loss of his home and her loss of connection to her ethnic roots. She wants to reclaim her Palestinian culture, as she comes to the West Bank and soon abandons any intention she may have had to return home once her Visa runs out. She hopes to live there as she may have if her grandfather hadn't been forced to leave and proves this through her journey to his hometown. During this visit, she attempts to reclaim his home from an Israeli woman and, when that fails,

she and Emad attempt to start a new life within the ruins of Dawayima. Murad of *Hope* has a similar desire to reclaim his dignity. After his father's passing, Murad must fill the role of the patriarch for his family, yet he's unable to measure up due to his unstable employment. He's embarrassed and frustrated by his inability to fit this role, as displayed when a man asks Murad's uncle for his sister's hand rather than him. Upon hearing this, Murad is bitter, saying to his mother, "Just because I don't have a job you think I'm invisible? I'm her older brother. You should've come to me" (p. 107). He feels that his talent and university degree is wasted in Tangier and that the only way to prove himself to his family and to others in Moroccan society is to flee to Spain and hope that he will be successful there.

The daydreams of the characters in *Hope* and *Salt* aren't easily achieved, and the characters are forced to accept that the vision they hoped to see through migration may not have been realistic. Two out of the four characters in *Hope* don't make it into Spain, and the other two are faced with a harsher reality than anticipated. Faten resorts to prostitution in Madrid as she is unable to find another job, and she loses touch with her old self, abandoning her religion and hope for her future. Though Aziz finds a job after his second journey to Spain, he hasn't earned as much money as expected and isn't able to come back to Morocco permanently after five years as he'd hoped. He feels disconnected with his wife, and when it comes time for him to return to Spain, it's made clear that he's lost hope for the survival of their relationship as he ponders, "He couldn't imagine her with him in Madrid...And he, too, had his own habits now. He closed his suitcase and lifted it off the bed. It felt lighter than when he's arrived" (175). Soraya and Emad of *Salt* face similar challenges to their hope and faith. Emad's request for a Visa to Canada is rejected for the fourth time, and he finds out that the Israelis destroyed Dawayima. Soraya is unable to retrieve her grandfather's money and is also unable to convince an Israeli woman to

sell her back her grandfather's home. She and Emad are left without any direction and any of the aspirations and dreams that they had held before.

Emerging from this disappointment and destruction of their hopes, some of the characters are able to reflect, reprioritize, and construct new hopes for themselves. Soraya and Murad find themselves in this situation, where they realize that though their original hopes were unfulfilled, they are able to create new ones. They both achieve this through reflecting on their personal journeys and struggles. For Soraya, though she is finally caught by the Israeli police and forced to return to the United States, she is able to realize her identity as a Palestinian. She feels truly connected to her cultural identity, and now has the hope that she can continue to honor that identity back in the U.S. Though not explicitly stated in the film, it is presumed that Soraya has the hope that she may one day return to Palestine and will be able now to fight for the rights of her people. Murad experiences a similar transformation after he is sent back to Morocco upon his arrival in Spain. Though his hope of using his skills in Spain is thwarted, he finally finds a job in a gift shop in Tangier. In an unexpected turn of events, he finds his true calling within this less-than-ideal situation, as he tells customers traditional Moroccan stories. In telling these stories, he sees the warped perspective that foreigners have of Morocco, and he hopes now that he can become a storyteller in order to connect people with the traditional Morocco that he knows.

Both *Hope* and *Salt* illustrate the difficulties of refugee life and of migrating due to circumstance rather than choice. For many of the characters in the novel and the film, hope was a motivator at first, and each character genuinely believed that they could have a better life abroad. Yet, when these hopes fell through, the characters were forced to either accept their reality or create new hopes for to work towards. Each work shows the pivotal role that hope plays in the lives of refugee migrants, yet they both display it realistically. Though the characters in the novel

and the film may hope to have a better life elsewhere, those hopes are easier said than achieved. These works explore the struggle to maintain hope in spite of disappointment, and this is clearly the reality for many refugees of today who are fleeing war and poverty in the hope of a new start in a new nation. Though their hopes may remain unfulfilled throughout their journey, as it happened to many of the characters in *Hope* and *Salt*, these stories show that in spite of this disappointment, there is still a chance to rekindle the hope that one has lost and to reimagine a better future, as Soraya and Murad did.