

Miral

by Rula Jebreal

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Reviewed by:

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Overview

Miral takes the reader on a journey spanning nearly five decades, beginning with the establishment of the Dar El-Tifel orphanage and up through the founder, Hind Hussein's, death in 1994. Set primarily in Jerusalem, the book sheds light on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as it explores the experiences of the characters through the period of the First Intifada. While the biographical components of the story of Hind Hussein are true, the author draws from her own life experiences. The story begins decades prior to *Miral*'s birth, and the reader follows her development and growth into a young woman during the 1980s. Even though the story may start out slowly and be challenging to engage with initially, as the book progresses, the pace also picks up and becomes a much faster read. While this coming-of-age story highlights the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and contains political undertones, it also communicates the importance of education and educational opportunity, philanthropic work and servant leadership, and compassion and selflessness in the name of a cause.

Intertwined stories paint a picture from multiple perspectives from within the world in which *Miral* was raised. These narratives and interconnected characters and sub-plots essentially turn the faceless masses of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict into identifiable and relatable characters caught in the religious and political upheavals of their homeland. The author has structured the experiences of the main characters within the context of five primary parts: Hind, Nadia, Fatima, *Miral*, and Hani.

The readers are first introduced to Hind at the time of her death. The story then turns to a pivotal time in Hind's life as a young Palestinian woman where she found a calling to servant leadership and a compassion and desire to help others. Her most prominent testament to service, the establishment of the Dar El-Tifel orphanage, began amidst the aftermath of the massacre in Deir Yassin. From the meager beginnings of Dar El-Tifel where Hind assumed the care of more than 50 orphaned children of this massacre, to the much larger and developed campus housing the successful and renowned school for girls, Hind's dedication, devotion and drive are clear. Dar El-Tifel was a symbolic testament that provided hope to young girls of Palestine. One of these children is *Miral* and becomes the primary focus of the book.

In parts two and three, the characters of Nadia and Fatima are introduced. From the illness of Hind, the story jumps back in time to Nadia's childhood. The reader then follows this character from her violent and abusive childhood through adulthood. This quick story almost serves as another coming-of-age story within itself. At a low point in Nadia's life, she finds herself in prison as the cell mate of the third character of interest, Fatima, and these two women form a deep friendship. Fatima, an ex-militant activist, plays an integral role in Nadia's life even as she remains in prison and Nadia is released. Fatima's family takes Nadia in, and Nadia eventually marries Fatima's brother, Jamal. While the two are engaged, *Miral* is conceived in an affair. Jamal accepts *Miral* as his own daughter, dedicates himself to Nadia, and they soon have another daughter named Raina. The end of the third section highlights Nadia's inner struggles as she deals with depression and alcoholism and concludes with her mysterious death.

Miral's character is more fully explored in the fourth part of the book. Following her mother's mysteriously tragic death, Miral's father decides to place both Miral and Raina in Hind's care at Dar El-Tifel during the school year. Miral grows into a young woman, finds herself successful both inside and outside the classroom, and participates in philanthropic work of her own through her involvement teaching English to children in a refugee camp. Through these experiences, Miral is drawn to political activism. She defies Hind's and Jamal's requests to not become actively involved, and she tragically witnesses firsthand the violent struggles of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She develops a particular connection to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) where she forms a relationship with Hani, one of the group's leaders.

The fifth part of the book is dedicated to Hani, Miral's first love and the leader of PFLP, who served as the catalyst for her continued involvement in activism and her passion for peace. At this peak of activism, Jamal finds himself torn struggling to keep Miral safe. Hind finds herself in a similar situation not just with Miral, but with many of her other children at Dar El-Tifel. This part is very fast-paced as many of the sub-stories and sub-plots come to a close. At this climax in Miral's story, she faces Jamal's illness and death and the discovery that he was not her biological father. Moreover, after having been separated from Hani, their emotional reunion is drawn short with his brutal murder. At this point the book quickly begins to wrap up as Miral concludes her time at Dar El-Tifel and prepares for the next chapter in her life.

Even amidst multiple story lines and sub-plots, many general messages surface: the importance of education, facing adversity and maintaining integrity, learning that you can draw strength from your weakest moments, being able to overcome adversity and grow stronger, the importance of philanthropic work to others, and not taking freedom for granted. As Miral is leaving Dar El-Tifel to pursue her post-secondary education in Europe, Hind expounds:

My dear girl, you are leaving nothing behind. Everything you need is already inside of you. You will never forget who you are and where you come from. The things you have lived through here will help you to be successful anywhere, whatever you decide to do.... You're the master of your own fate. (p. 308)

Application

Since a variety of issues are introduced in *Miral*, many students could potentially draw parallels and connections between their lives and the lives of the characters in terms of educational, religious, political, familial, and/or racial and ethnic identities. Students could attach themselves to different components of the many stories or find a topic of interest that is introduced at some point throughout the story: romance, love, family relationships, friendships, religion, religious experiences and/or questioning of religion, depression, violence, history, architecture, politics, philanthropic work, servant leadership, war and conflict, refugees and victims of conflict, coming-of age stories, gender roles, alcoholism, freedom, and educational opportunities.

These topics could also be sensitive issues. Specifically, sexuality, physical assault, rape and sexual assault, domestic violence, abuse, religious conflict, and political views may be areas of concern for some institutions at both religiously affiliated and non-secular institutions alike. However, some institutions may prefer the book for the special topics, such as the female perspectives and story lines offered and the underlying emphasis on the importance of educational opportunity for women.

Additionally, the organization and structure of the book may be an area of concern. The sense of time can be difficult to grasp at some points. As the story lines tend to jump around a bit, it may be hard to piece together a historical timeline of major historic events in relationship to the various points in the characters' experiences. While there is an overall story line development and building

of Miral's character, there are a great number of sub-plots and messages that may be confusing for some readers to decipher. Understanding the timeline of events may also be challenging if readers are not familiar with the historical context of the setting. Without appropriate facilitation and follow-up discussion of the text, these issues could overshadow the positive contributions of *Miral*. Conversely, for these same reasons, this could be an excellent read for an upper-level course or a specific topical course where the inclusion of this book could be a great fictional tool to highlight cultural, religious, political, and historical concepts.

Because this book covers a vast array of social issues and topics, there are many opportunities to draw connections to other areas and departments on campus to develop unique programming and enhance discussion opportunities. Small group discussions, lectures, panel presentations, art displays, and music events that explore various aspects of the religious, political, cultural, and historical background provided in *Miral* could be a great way to incorporate extracurricular programming with the use of the book in courses. Also, since the book has been made into a film released in the United States in 2011, the showing of the movie, and perhaps additional films in a series of themed productions, could be a great way to enhance programming.

The many powerful and moving messages contained within this book make it a rich read for many students and able to be incorporated in a variety of subsequent programming.