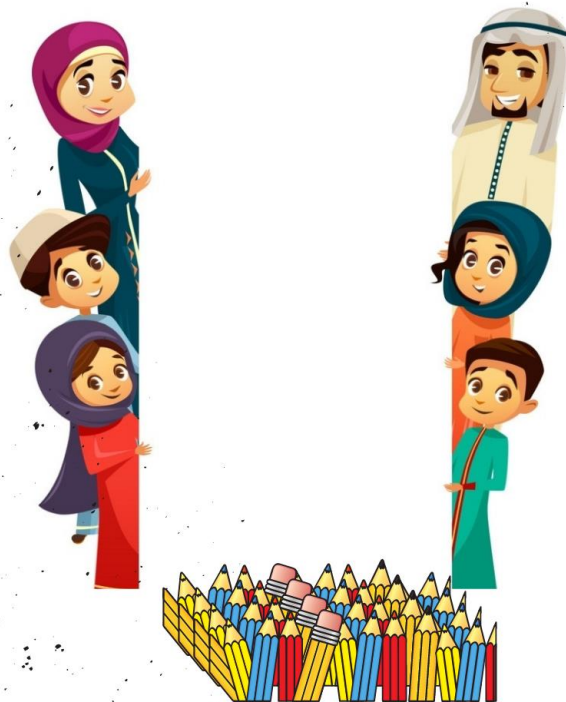


SENSESNHUMOR 2021 SERIES



little rascals

#ofparenting



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INTRO

Little rascals revolve around the lives of nine teenage kids who met at Mahsood Islamic Academy. It is a story that brings out the role of parenting, and how this role influences the way kids generally grow up. This could be in terms of how they relate with their friends, their teachers or just amongst themselves as peers. Mahsood Islamic Academy, as will often be referred to in this story as MIA, was a school located in South Maghrib Province. Majority of the parents in the Province preferred taking their children to MIA because of its strictness in following Islamic religion, which was the main religion of the people of South Maghrib. The characters described in the story are **fictitious**, unknown to the author, and so are the **places**. Most of the places and beliefs described in this story could have been **exaggerated** a little in a bid to create flow, consistency and the plot adapted by Little Rascals.

CHAPTER ONE- MEET THE KIDS

On that hot morning, Esther, and John, often referred to as the twins, walked into the class. There, they were met with Ustadh Maalim who was teaching something Arabic as they could see from the writings on the board. They were the second last of the new students to arrive that morning. Maalim called the class to attention, to welcome the new students. It was the beginning of the year, and the beginning of the term. MIA usually receives new students at this time of the year because of the exchange program available in the school. This year, it was their first time in many years receiving Christian students. Esther and John came to South Maghrib for a year because their dad, Bishop Elli, was going to attend to some important matters for his All- in faith foundation in South Maghrib. Since the program was estimated to take him eleven months, he decided to bring his children along on his assignment. Mostly, he just wanted them to experience what it would be like to live in a different province with different cultures and religious beliefs. It was meant to mould them into appreciating what they already know in matters of their Christian faith or, just being reminding them that, for as long as you lived in this world, you may need to learn how to interact with people of different faiths including Islam because that is what humanity was all about..

Bishop Elli was a renowned pastor and he led the Sobriety Church in the North together with his wife Reverend Hannah. The North was mostly a Christian dominated society. Him and his wife were scholars and they believed in

learning and understanding different doctrines of life relating to religion. They believed that, for as long as people lived, they were likely to interact with different kinds of people and hence they made a deliberate decision to expose their children to different beliefs and religious environments while they were still young. This belief is what led them into deciding to allow their children accompany him to South Maghrib which was an all Islamic Province. This made them excited not because they had taken a break from their usual schooling, but also, they would be learning a different culture altogether as part of their exchange program.

As they stood in front of the class awaiting to be welcomed, the rest of the students couldn't help but notice the discomfort in their attires. South Maghrib was quite hot, but they were forced to wear hijab and taqiya to cover their heads appropriately. While this was new and exciting for the Christian twins, one couldn't help but notice their little discomforts in what looked like strange attires.

"Class let us welcome our new exchange students, Esther and John, all the way from the North. They will be joining us this year. Make them feel at home." Maalim said to the students.

"Would you like to say hello before you take your seats? Maalim asked the twins.

"Yes, Wasalamamalekom, Esther said," The whole class burst into a laughter even before they could respond. She had made a good attempt at it since it was her first time saying anything in Arabic.

"You say, As-Salaam-Alaikum, don't worry, you will get the hang of it with time," Maalim corrected Esther as he ushered them to their seats.

Shortly before they proceeded with the class, another student was ushered in by one of the administrators. She looked rather shy and not very outspoken. She was not wearing her uniform; she still had her home clothes on. She was wearing a printed buibui veil and a coloured yellow shiny hijab. She did not have her backpack of books either. She looked rather lost, but at the same time relieved to be in that class. She looked a bit tired, like someone who was looking forward to having a meal and not sitting in a class. Maalim had a small chat with the administrator, then ushered the girl in.

"Seems today we are in luck to receive our visitors. Let us welcome Shamsa who will be joining us this year too. Shamsa welcome to MIA, you can have your seat."

"Would you like to say hallo to the rest of the class? They would love to hear from you." Maalim asked looking at Shamsa in concerned way.

" As-Salaam-Alaikum, she faintly said, "I am happy to be here, it's by Allah's mercies that I was able to join you today." She said.

Shamsa, was a girl rescued from the rescue centre in South Maghrib. The rescue centre hosted girls majorly and at times boys who ran away from their homes for one reason or the other. She had been living at the centre for a week before her education sponsorship to MIA was approved. She had been out of school for a couple of months, because of an early marriage she had been subjected to. She was barely fourteen years old, and it was a surprise that a child as old as Shamsa had been denied education and forced into an early marriage. She came from one of the outcast communities that still circumcised its girls and after the circumcision, their girls were married off to anyone but majorly to old men as either third or fourth wives.

As she narrated her ordeal to her classmates later, she explained that one evening, when she came home from school, she found a crowd of people gathered outside her house. Her aunties were present amongst other relations who had come for the negotiations of her marriage to an old man who happened to be a distant relative of theirs. Her mum was against it, but she was later told that she would be ousted of the community if she went against the rules of their custom. Shamsa was the last born of the girls. She came from a family of four siblings that constituted of three girls and one boy. Her older sisters had gone through the same ordeal and her mum had also been resistant. So Shamsa being the last born, her mother thought she could have a

say and opt out of that ruthless tradition and allow her daughter to continue with school because she was also a very bright child.

A week before she joined MIA, she had found her way to the rescue centre after escaping from her supposed matrimonial home. She was en route to the well to fetch water accompanied by the male kids where she took advantage of the moment where the male kids were busy herding and escaped without their knowledge. When she arrived at the rescue centre, she narrated her story and the administrator empathised with her situation because she didn't even have shoes on by the time she got there. Within a couple of days, they were able to secure her the last slot left at MIA on sponsorship. Bishop Elli was among the people who spearheaded the Rescue Centre's administration and her sponsorship to MIA. The rescue Centre was one of the projects that were run by his All-in faith foundation back at the North. The foundation was a regime that supported children of all faiths that had been treated unfairly by the society by providing shelter and rehabilitation in cases of emergencies like what Shamsa was ideally going through. Shamsa was just lucky to have found help when she needed it.

Mahsood Islamic Academy taught other things apart from basic education, but also vouched for other curriculum activities like sporting, farming, artwork and culinary. These skills were deemed important for every child that went through MIA to equip them with life's basic skills which were mandatory. Another mandatory class was the Islamic Religious Education, which was

taught by Ustadh Maalim, and this is where they spent most of their time together. Islamic Religion was deemed to be very important and crucial for the upbringing of any child of South Maghrib and most importantly for any child that went to MIA.

Soon the bell rang, and the pupils walked out of the class for their midday break. While outside, they saw one of the students talking to one of the administrators and other gentlemen. They had not noticed that he was absent during the morning class. His name was Musa. He had just also joined MIA from a different Islamic school from a different province. He seemed a bit stressed the previous day, but no one tried to ask him what was wrong. They probably thought he was being reserved because it was also his first day at his new school. As he narrated later, he explained that his mother had recently been granted a talaka, and she was forced to leave her matrimonial home. She carried along her other two young children and left Musa behind. Musa was the youngest of the kids his mother and dad had.

He narrated to them that his dad had taken in a fourth wife and things were becoming a bit uneasy in the house because all the wives stayed together. His mother was the first wife and as time went by, she could no longer stand to see her husband throwing money away doing expensive weddings, yet their incomes were not okay. On the day his mother left, Musa was in school, and she did not want to disrupt his class. Also, another thing that might have made it difficult for him to go with her was because he was his father's

favourite child and the only oldest boy around. They were a family of ten children. Of the four wives, it was Musa's mother who was working, while the rest of them were housewives. So, with time, she felt that she could no longer fit in a polygamous marriage especially where most of her income seemed to be used in planning for weddings of other wives. That is when she decided to ask for the talaka to be set free and move on with her life. And when that was granted, she did not hesitate but took her leave.

The problem with leaving a child behind, is that you are not sure about how they will be taken care of. You are constantly worrying whether they would be okay. And so, she decided that, through the lawyers she would battle her way until she got Musa back and when that happened, he moved to South Maghrib where his mother had settled securing a place at MIA.

"Musa, you came in a bit late today," asked one of the kids.

"Yes, I never thought I would come back to school again after witnessing the morning drama at my house. Some of my dad's acquaintances came to harass my mum telling her that her lawyers know nothing about family sheria, and that he will still fight for me to go back to him. Staying at my dad's place is fun because we have everything there, but I think it's more peaceful staying with my mum. I hope it will still be the same even after she gets married because I have been seeing a strange man frequenting our house. He seems to like her

maybe he's on courting her. But what do I know about these adult things anyway?" Musa said.

Soon their break was over and Khatib walked in. He was in a different class, but his dad requested that he gets transferred to Ustadh Maalim's class. His dad apparently thought that Maalim taught very good Islamic education given the recommendations he had received, and he believed that his child should only receive the best. Khatib came from a very wealthy family. They almost owned South Maghrib. This was because, the dad owned many facilities in the region. From the transport sector, to major restaurants including some major state entities of South Maghrib. Rumour had it that they also owned a mining and an oil quarry in another state rumours which Khatib was quick to dismiss every time people asked.

Khatib was the second last born of his family. His dad too had married several wives. He came from a big family. But their wealth was more than sufficient to take care of his family and even adopt several, unlike Musa's dad. He wore fancy clothes during the evening break, and at times, he would get fancy foods brought to him in school. He worked very hard though, maybe he believed his dad's wealth wasn't his and he needed to work for his own. He too at times came top on his class. Khatib's Father was the Sultan of South Maghrib. People looked up to him because he was very generous, at times extremely generous that people would shamelessly take advantage of. The same generosity extended to his children and mostly Khatib who used to

bring exotic cuisine for lunch to his classmates every day, and mostly to Abdalla who was the janitor's child. Abdalla was the top student in their class. He loved studying and enjoyed being in school because being in school was the only place he found comfort compared to his house. His family was struggling to meet basic needs including even paying for his fees but at some point he managed to get a scholarship for his tuition, granted that he was very bright and also because his dad was a humble employee of the school.

Shortly after Khatib came in, another student walked in just before Ustadh came back to their class. Tawfiq was his name. He was the principal's son. He was coming back from his prayers. Tawfiq was very religious, he followed his Surah's to the latter. People joked about him being a Sheikh. They called him Sheikh Tawfiq. He would quote the Surahs at his fingertips without referring to the Quran. He had been attending Madrasa from when he was one and a half years as people always joked. This was because his uncle, whom he had been staying with while his dad was doing his master's program was an Ustadh at the main town Madrasa. Tawfiq strictly prayed five times a day, even when he was out, he would always ensure that he finds a spot where he could pray. He had a bag that he seemed to carry everywhere which contained his prayer mat. He never liked being on the wrong and every time he would get anyone on the wrong, he could recite the Surah of obedience and tell people off how Allah wouldn't appreciate disobedience especially amongst children. His dad was very proud of him, many a times he would even offer to teach the young students Islamic education whenever he could.

His family was very strict on religion to a point that they had to recite a few Surahs' and read the Quran every night. This same strictness was also slowly rubbing onto his adopted brother Yusuf. Yusuf was previously known as Josef. He was adopted by Tawfiq's parents about five years ago when he first came to the South. He lived in the North and he was one of the students that Bishop Elli brought to South Maghrib. His parents had died in a fire and he had no one else to live with. During their All-in faith mission, Bishop Elli had heard about the fire and at that time, they only had one place left at the rescue centre in the South which sponsored needy students to different schools. Since Josef had no choice, because he was now an orphan, he agreed to relocate to South Maghrib with the help of the Bishop's foundation and found a home at Tawfiq's home. Unlike his half-brother Tawfiq who was overly strict on religion, Yusuf would struggle a bit but that was understandable because Islam was new to him.

Soon Ustadh Maalim came to class and this time in their cultural and religious lesson, he began talking about dress code and how people should appreciate decency in the attires they wear. He began talking about covering themselves, how they always needed to be decent, even before he proceeded further, Umi, one of the outspoken students in the class raised her hand and asked.

"Ustadh, don't you think that this covering of our heads is a bit old school and demeaning? Why aren't boys allowed to cover their heads fully? If this is all about decency, even boys should get hijabs, I mean, look at the newbie, she

seems to be struggling in her hijab.” She concluded, and the whole class broke into a laughter.

“Umi, I know you come from a very special family. You may not fully appreciate about this decency topic because even your hijab is always on your shoulder.” Ustadh began responding as he signalled her to put her hijab back on her head.

“Your parents have given you too much freedom you know. Don’t you know religion and culture go hand in hand? And according to Islam, a woman or a girl, should be decently dressed, and that includes covering their heads fully.” Ustadh added.

Umi’s parents had studied in Christian and highly Westernised countries despite them being Muslims. They were very open minded, and never bothered so much on being too strict about religion. Umi would wear normal clothes and they would be okay with it. They were mostly concerned with the education of their children more than their religious following. Many people referred to them as the Elite. Umi’s parents were social activists. They fought for humanitarian and human rights. They believed that a person is a person even without religion. This doctrine landed them in bad spaces from time to time, but their organisation funded one of the biggest health projects in South Maghrib and hence it was so difficult to detain them. The people of South Maghrib often referred to them as the Kafirs because, their ways never

matched Islam in any way. Umi told the class that her parents told her if she wanted, she could even get married to a Christian. They would not object. For as long as she was alive and happy.

CHAPTER TWO- IN THEIR HOMES

Later that day, when Esther and John got home, they were so eager to share the experiences of their first day of school in MIA with their dad Bishop Elli. They wanted to tell him of how they had met very awesome kids who had interesting life experiences that told so much about their lives and what they had been through. It was their first time ever to learn about female circumcision, and the fact that kids their age could be married off like what happened with the girl Shamsa. They wondered how they thought they were too young incapable of even taking care of themselves, to imagine them being married.

"Daddy," Esther called, "But why should children be married off? Would you marry me off if we were from that culture as well? I think it's very wrong, how do they expect a child like me to take care of a family? I can hardly find my clothes sometimes, I can't even make a meal for myself, how on earth am I supposed to take care of other people, especially a husband? That is not only unfair but sad and disgraceful." She lamented.

"Well my child, Bishop Elli began, there are so many things that go on in this world, that you have no idea. There are countless number of children I rescue, through the All-in Faith Foundation that go through a lot of trouble in the hands of their caregivers. Shamsa was lucky that she was smart enough to escape. Majority of them, once they become pregnant, it becomes very

difficult to get help or even seek refuge. And, my answer is no, I don't think I would have married you off because the plans I have for you are enormous my girl. What do you think John? This Shamsa girl, how did she look like to you?" Elli asked.

" Well dad, I also share the same beliefs with you. I can' even imagine seeing Essy getting married. She doesn't even know how to boil an egg," And they all laughed, "Can you imagine her taking care of a husband or kids, that would be very disastrous." John sarcastically responded.

"She looked a bit distressed, but also relieved to be in school. I can only hope that her parents or supposed husband, doesn't go to the school to look for her. But why did her parents even agree to marrying their child off to an old man? That doesn't make sense at all, "John asked.

"Well John, you see people come from different cultures and have different beliefs. I believe that you wouldn't have known that something like this existed in the world were it not for this trip. Hence the reason as to why I wanted you guys to come along with me to learn and know what goes on in other parts of the world. That way you can do better with that information or shun it when you will be in positions to. Some of these beliefs and customs don't agree with the rest of the society even the rest of the world because they are backward and uncouth. And that is what the All-in faith foundation stands for. Protecting children and young males and females from these atrocities to give them a

chance to be respected people of the society. Anyway, what else happened? As I am already aware of Shamsa's case" Elli asked.

"Dad, today I learnt how to greet in Arabic. Did you know they say Asalam Alaikum? Is that how it's said John? I remember I said something funny and the whole class laughed hysterically." Esther responded.

"You said, Wasalamamaleko, hahahah, that was indeed funny because we had been memorising that greeting even before we got into the class and you couldn't just remember how to say it right. Now imagine if you can't memorise a simple greeting, what would have become of you if dad married you off, he laughed as he pulled her hair.

"Daddy wouldn't dare, he's a pastor you know, a man of God, he wouldn't do that to his daughter, as it is against his faith and beliefs. Isn't that right dad?" Esther asked teasing.

"Okay, enough you two, Eli interrupted, "Let's set the dinner table, then give mumsy a video call after, I am sure she is done with church by now."

Over at Musa's house, he had been wanting to ask his mum a question, but he wasn't outrightly sure how his mother would respond. He followed her to the kitchen where she was cooking and sat on the three-legged stool. This stool was commonly found in many South Maghrib households especially in the

kitchen. He had just finished doing his homework. His mother always insisted that he had to have his schoolwork done before he came helping in the kitchen. Musa's mother loved to cook, even as she came from work, no matter how tired she was, she always ensured she prepared meals for her family. Musa loved hanging around the kitchen so much and loved helping whenever he could. This made him love the kitchen too just like his mother did. He would help his mother and aunties prepare snacks during the festivals like Eid and during Ramadan. He loved eating as well, maybe that is why most of the time, he loved hanging around the place where food was prepared. His mother always made them Mitai and Katlesi every evening for tea and at times for breakfast. These were snacks that were common in South Maghrib that every household would prepare during special occasions. Musa would then carry some to school to share with friends, but mostly he would share these snacks with Shamsa whom he had become fond of.

"Mum, I need to ask you something. He began, so now that you and dad got divorced, will you be getting married to Hemed?"

"Oh Musa, why would you even think of something like that? Hemed and I are work mates. Even though occasionally he would drop me here, it is mainly because of the long work schedules we have, and especially when I didn't use the car. You know waiting for the public means would imply that I arrive here late, and I wouldn't make time to cook for you. Is that what you would like ha Musa?" She tactfully responded.

"Oh, then he must be a real friend. So, he goes dropping over every other lady to their houses too I guess, he must be some workmate." Musa naughtily responded.

"Hahaha, Musa I see where you are going with this. He does not go dropping off every other lady. And when did you become this naughty, she asked, as she loosely hit him with the kitchen towel she was holding on his face, I thought you were here helping me out, in fact, now peel these potatoes for me," she added, trying to conceal her smile.

"Well mum, you know I am just looking out for you. And I also don't want to get caught up with more drama at home. In fact, the students in class noticed that morning drama that dad caused in school with those his shrewd lawyers." He added.

"I am sorry about that son; he shouldn't have stormed to your school like that. But we have settled the matter, so there's nothing to worry about. If I ever think about getting married again, you would be the first one to know. And, Hemed is just a workmate. Now chop chop those very first. And while at it, tell me more about this Shamsa girl."

"What mum, you are starting with me too, huh," he said shyly smiling.

"I am not starting anything; you were beginning to tell me about her before I interrupted you." His mum added.

"Well, imagine, this girl, had been married off to an old relative of hers. Apparently, she comes from the Alsheitty community. You know that community that,

Her mum interrupted, "The community that circumcises its girls! Wow that must have been hard for such a young girl." Musa's mother responded.

"Oh yes, she actually came from the Rescue Centre, where she had run to after escaping from her estranged old grandfather of a husband. Luckily that Bishop who runs that faith something foundation was able to rescue her, so now she studies with us in MIA on full scholarship. Currently she is staying with Mrs. Hoyo, the school counsellor at her mansion. She was lucky to have escaped." Mumbling in low tone, "I also think she is beautiful."

"Musaaaaa! his mum laughed.

"What mum, I think she truly is, someone had to say it." He responded

"Okay if you say so, maybe one day you can invite her over for lunch or something, I would love to hear her story as well," his mother added.

While Musa and his mother were bonding in the kitchen, Khatib on the other hand, had accompanied his father to the Baraza. The Baraza was a weekly meeting that mostly had men as the main attendants, who came to the Sultan , Khatib's father, to discuss on issues about their households, any challenges they are experiencing, or looking to get solutions to some of the problems they could be facing in their houses. It was what they called the men's conference because only men attended the Baraza. Khatib's father, loved being in the company of his sons in these meetings because, he believed that it was through these Barazas that his sons would become manly or at least have experience in manly issues by listening in on the stories and experiences shared by the older men. It was one of his lessons to his children in preparation for them becoming responsible men, and maybe even pass on them skills that will enable them to become a Sultan in future.

The Baraza usually occurred at the council's premises of South Maghrib, just behind their home. It happened every Mondays and Fridays. At times, people even had to travel from very far to attend these Barazas because the Sultan had made them somehow compulsory for the people of South Maghrib. It was through these Baraza attendance that he was able to know people closely especially when they came seeking for financial aid from him. He would often ask them; how come I have never seen you? Translated, I have never seen you in any of the Barazas, which was a cue for that person to now start attending if they needed any form of aid from the Sultan.

In these sessions, there were also different teachings about Islam, about parental advice, about marriage etcetera lessons that were very important especially for men with families. There was also free food and drinks served during these sessions, where a certain type of people had made it a habit, to come have their fill and leave even before the Baraza ended. So Khatib's role was usually to take attendance, and man the gate to ensure that people don't leave in between. Here, he met so many people, his teachers from school, the parents of other students, other town officials amongst others. It was through these Barazas that the Sultan learnt of Ustadh Maalim and his proficiency in teaching Islamic religion that he had to have Khatib transferred to his class. While Khatib enjoyed attending these Barazas, his mother on the other hand thought that he was a bit young to be attending them especially since at times they could end late considering they mostly occurred during school nights. Khatib was always excused and asked to report an hour late the following day in school on a day after the Baraza. This was special permission granted only to him because wasn't his father the Sultan after all? He could request for anything at the snap of his fingers and it would get done.

One time a student asked him,

"Khatib, why do you always arrive late on Tuesdays, and he would say,

"It's because I am the Sultan's son I am allowed to." He would respond. This was a comment that never went well most of the time because it made him

look like he was superior to the other kids. He however never disclosed to anyone in his class that he attended the Baraza because these sessions were only meant for grown men. None of the students knew that he usually attended those sessions apart from Ustadh Maalim, who he and Khatib met occasionally during those sessions.

Over at Tawfiq's house, he and Yusuf were doing their evening prayer recitals. Their dad was also with them but proceeded to his study room to finish up on a few school administration work. Their dad, the school's principal, apart from being strict on religion, was also a workaholic. He brought a lot of schoolwork at home, something that his wife often complained about. He loved working and was committed to the school's excellence to the bone.

His wife had asked him to consider getting extra support to free him from the unending school matters especially when he was off duty, but he insisted that without the extra effort he is putting, the school would be in shambles. This conversation will often end up in an argument between him and his wife.

"You are working so hard, even the board should recognize this, especially if this is affecting our bedroom matters." We should be "sleeping" instead I am here keeping you company at this hour." she nagged. "This is not what I signed up for as your wife."

"Okay honey, maybe you can consider closing the door before you start with this bedroom matters argument again. Do you know the boys are still awake and they could hear us? Don't let them start wondering what happens in the bedroom right?" He said smiling taking off his glasses like now giving his wife all the attention.

The principal would spend so much time in his study room, either working on school projects for MIA or doing online courses. He was a scholar and loved reading a lot, even when it costed him spending time with his family.

"If you don't come to bed with me right now, you will have yourself to blame. Said his wife Halima, as she stormed out, and that was his cue for him to stop working and join her. She was the only one who could stop him from over working. Tawfiq and Yusuf had long since finished their prayers and it was time for them to have their dinner.

"But why are mum and dad, sometimes quarrelling, I get to hear it at times, is it something I should be worried about? I can't handle being in a separated family again, what we went through before the fire was just the worse moment of my life," Yusuf asked with concern.

"Well, they are not quarrelling per se, they are just having disagreements and when that happens, they go to the bedroom to sort out their issues, like now,

shhsh, do you hear their bed squeaking, he naughtily said, and they both laughed. "So that's them sorting out their issues."

"You are naughty bro," How did you even know about that, Yusuf asked Tawfiq,

"Well it's because apart from having lived longer with them than you, whenever I am up praying, I get to hear them a lot conversing. Mom is always saying that dad works a lot, and it's usually her place to make him ease up a bit. That is what family entails. Maybe we shall know more about it when we get wives too in future," he ended laughing at that thought that he could become someone's husband.

"But you, of all the people getting married, Yusuf asked, and the way you are always behaving like a Sheikh? I doubt girls would want anything to do with you. They may think you are too religious to know those bedroom matters you are talking about", He teased.

"Bro watch and learn, in fact my eye is on Umi I think she is pretty but highly opinionated," Tawfiq remarked.

"Umi Wallah! No way. That girl is stubborn, and she is not even religious like you. You even heard her talking about getting married to a Christian." Yusuf retorted.

"You just wait and see, she's just confused that one her parents are just weird, however if I talk to her nicely and befriend her, she will see me differently"

Tawfiq responded grinning shyly.

"Good luck with that bro." Yusuf said sarcastically.

Over at Umi's house, she was briefing her parents about how her day had been.

"Mum, dad, she began, you wouldn't believe what happened in school today. Can you imagine we received a girl today, who came from the rescue centre? She had been married off to an old Rajul. And this Rajul happens to be a distant relative of hers. Can you imagine, isn't that incestuous?" Umi began narrating.

"She came in today, I even felt sorry for her, she was not only married off while still young, but also circumcised. She was lucky to have escaped. That foundation you support for that Bishop from the North was the one that found her a place at MIA. So, you guys are also doing a good job too. Even when the rest of the community calls us Kafirs." Oh, and by the way, the Bishop this time, brought his kids for the exchange program, did you know that he had twins. And they are in our class too." Umi concluded

"Oh Umi, that must have been tough, her mum Mariam stated, So this girl, what's her name again?

"She is Shamsa Bakar," Umi responded.

"Yes Shamsa, so you mean her parents are from that Alsheitty community? I thought we had several outreaches with the Kadhis in that area to stop doing nuptials of children to old men? I am glad that she managed to escape. So where is she staying now? Did Mrs, Hoyo take her in too?" Mariam enquired.

"Yes, mum she did. That is where she is currently staying." Umi replied.

Mrs Hoyo was part of the girl rescue committee that volunteered to house the girls that had been rescued from early marriages or any form of family distress. Mrs Hoyo was a widow, whose husband had died many years back leaving her with a large estate worth unknown millions of shillings. She lived with her family and had an extension side where she accommodated the rescued girls and that is where Shamsa was currently staying. Mrs Hoyo worked part time at MIA as the school's counsellor.

"I think mum you should go back to Alsheitty and find out why Nikahs against young girls and old men are still being conducted. In fact, you can even tag me along." Umi nudged.

"Ease my child, her dad stated, your time to join the human right society will come, for now let your mother and I deal with those things until when you are much older to handle criticism. Or do you think we enjoy being called Kafirs? But that was supportive of you all the same. You are a true Wallah after all." Her dad added.

Meanwhile, things were moving rather slow at Abdalla's house. They had just had their dinner. His father was working two jobs, one as a janitor at MIA and on part times, worked at the Council offices during the Baraza. He had to find a way to make ends meet for his family. His wife had been sick for a while, so it was a struggle to get funds to buy the medication she needed. This dire situation at home is what made Abdallah strive to work even harder in school so that he could help his parents in future. Abdallah was the top student in MIA, it was a surprise how he scored one hundred percent in every subject. The people in school often referred to him as the genius of MIA. Luckily for him, he did not have to be worried about dropping out of school due to lack of tuition money, because, he had received a full scholarship until university. And the that scholarship would still be on until the day he will choose to stop schooling. Even if he wanted to do ten master's degrees, he will still be able to do them under that scholarship. That is how brilliant he was.

He went to the bedroom to check on his mother, who had been coughing for some time.

"Ma are you okay, your coughing is a bit worrying. Papa is finishing up at the Baraza and he will be collecting your medicine. I can see you haven't touched your food yet. Please try and eat something." Abdalla asked his mother in a concerned tone.

"Abdallah my boy, she said faintly, I don't know how long I have here, I feel so tired, and this disease has gotten the best of my days. I would have wished that I was better by now, at least to take care of you and your papa."

"Don't worry about that, papa and I are fine, you taught me how to cook and to take care of things, so that is not a problem maa. All I want is for you to get better so that we can finish up on that Biriani lesson. I want to surprise you guys on Eid with my cooking skills." Abdalla said as she held his mother's shoulder

"You are always full of hope son, even when I have already given up. So, tell me, how was school, did you meet any new people today? I heard that the exchange program was now back on, any new people who joined you?" She asked, trying to divert the story. His mother always wanted to know how his son was fairing in school always. So, with every chance she got, she would make enquiries about his schooling.

"Yes ma, we received the new students, and as usual, I was helping out with lots of signing up. We even have Christians this time. They came from the

North. They are the Bishop's children and they are in my class as well. Then another interesting one was this girl Shamsa, who comes from Alsheitty. You know that ridiculous community that circumcises its girls? As if that wasn't enough, she was also married too to an old Rajul. The girl has nerves though, she ran away from her marriage, I bet they will come looking for her someday." Abdalla narrated.

"Wow, that must have been one hell of a day, she said in between coughing. But I know Allah, will continue protecting that poor girl. I can hear your papa coming please welcome him for me." His mother prompted.

"Welcome papa, I was just talking with ma, did you bring her meds? Abdalla asked his dad as he opened the door.

"Yes, I did, there was a long queue at the pharmacy, all of us were redeeming the coupons to buy the drugs. The Sultan was so kind, he gave me several to help in getting medication and food for your mama. How is she by the way. Has she eaten?" His dad asked as he paced to the room where his wife was.

"Well, she just ate very little. I had gone to check on her when I heard her coughing excessively. We were having a little chat about school just before you came in." Abdalla responded.

"Asalam alaykum Bibi, how are you? Abdalla tells me you have not managed to eat anything. You know what the doctor said, you need to eat so that these meds can continue working." He said to his wife.

"Yes, I was coughing, and look, she said showing him the piece of cloth that had some blood stains. I was coughing and noticed these blood droplets, that's how I got up. Did you manage to get the medicines? she asked while trying to sit up.

"Oh, my dear Bibi, I am so sorry, I wish there was something I could do, or even afford to take you to a proper hospital. Let me speak to the principal tomorrow to help me get me an advance, or even get well-wishers to help us. Don't worry Bibi, I will always be here Inshallah, in sickness and in health, we shall beat this disease together." Salim said in an assuring voice.

His wife had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. She had been on medication for as long as Musa could remember and now it seemed that she was worsening by the day. Abdallah's parents have been together even since they were young high school sweethearts. He used to work at the ministry in the North while his wife ran some businesses. But ever since his wife became ill, he had to resign from his ministry work to take care of her. Bills started piling, he used up all his savings, everything had suddenly become expensive and he just had to look for an alternative source of income. That is how he ended up working at MIA as the janitor. Since Abdallah had been in the school

already and being an exemplary student, he was actually the head boy, through the principal and well-wishers, who also knew about Abdalla's mother's illness, was able to secure that fully paid scholarship for all of his studies.

At Ustadh Maalim's household that evening, where he was having dinner with his family, he asked about his eldest son's whereabouts. He was always away, sometimes he would even take some days before coming home. No one would even trace him. And whenever he came back home, he never wanted to be questioned. He was always a troubled kid. Ever since his mother left and the father took in a second wife, his behaviour suddenly changed. He became disengaged from the rest of the family; he became unruly and at times just withdrawn. No one could understand him. Maalim thought maybe it was because his mother left, and he was being a bit patient with him. But the more he became patient, the more he became embarrassing. There was a time he was even accused of stealing. His father almost cursing him because stealing was a vice he preached against and even taught about its consequences in his Islamic religious classes.

Rumour had it that he had gotten into some bad company. Some secret gang that had been terrorising the community. Word had gotten to Ustadh that he and his son were needed at the Kadhi's court to verify the accusations of robbery else, action was to be taken against Kadir. Ever since that word got out, Kadir went missing and that was what was worrying Maalim. He was

worried that if he and his son did not show up in court within the seven days ultimatum they were given, something bad would happen to him.

Even before he finished thinking about Kadir, there was a knock on the door. A few friends of Kadir had brought him home. He was very drunk. It was the first time Maalim had seen his son in such a sorry state.

"Asalam aleykum Ustadh, one of Kadir's friends said, We have Kadir with us, he says he needs to get some of his clothes and will be back after a few days."

"Where is he staying and why is he not coming into the house to say hallo to his papa and siblings, why is he sending you? Scoot over, Maalim said, pushing him to the side of the wall as he walked to the car where drunk Kadir was seated.

"Son, why have you chosen shame? Why are choosing to embarrass me and yourself like this? What do you think people will say when they see you like this? Don't you know the stature I hold in this community? Or have you forgotten that I am a teacher of religion? This behaviour that you are bringing up, is portraying me like a person who is preaching water and drinking wine. This is not what I expected of you son, very shameful!" Maalim shouted.

"Aaaa papaa", Kadir said in between drunken hiccups, "Or should I call you Ustadh too like the rest of the people who don't really know you? Why haven't

you told people the real reason why mama left. You two sided, hiccupping again, two sided Ustaaaaadh. Please, let me live my life like you have chosen to live yours.” Kadir drunkenly responded.

Soon the friend emerged out of the house, with a bag of clothes belonging to Kadir and off they drove.

“Wherever you go son, just know I still love you, and you are doing yourself a dis service with this attitude and behaviour. And remember to show up at the Kadhi’s court, else there will be a warrant of arrest issued against you.” Maalim shouted.

“Yea yea yea, I will show up, he said “Or they can come arrest me, I am sure you will get me out by the crack of dawn. Isn’t it dad, or Ustaaadh or whatever they call you,” Kadir said laughing off drunkenly as the vehicle drove off.

When Maalim walked back to the house, he was met with his wife at the door and she told him,

“You need to tell Kadir the truth or better still, let him go search for his mama and get the truth from her own mouth, maybe this unruly behaviour will come to an end. I hope he knows that if he doesn’t show up at the court he will be arrested.” Maalim’s wife said.

"I just don't know what to do with him anymore, haven't I tried enough? This boy keeps embarrassing me and this family. For what? I did not chase his mother, she left on her on her own free will. Didn't she get pregnant for another man? Why is Kadir taking it all on me. Wallahi this child, May Allah Have mercy on him and forgive him." Maalim said licking his finger pointing the sky like swearing upon Kadir.

CHAPTER THREE- CLASS VS HOME

Meanwhile at Mrs Hoyo house, Shamsa was having the time of her life. She felt better because Mrs. Hoyo was understanding and receptive. She was very accommodative and motherly, something that she had longed for. She couldn't remember the last time she felt as peaceful as she did while at Mrs. Hoyo's house. Maybe when she was at her parents' house before the marriage talks began. Everything was going so well, with her attending school as usual until that fateful evening when she learnt that she too was going to married off like her elder siblings. Then her house stopped being peaceful. It started immediately with the circumcision, and there after the Nikah celebration of her marriage to the Rajul. Being at Mrs Hoyo's house reassured her of the embrace and warmth she had since missed from her parents' house. Mrs Hoyo had told her and other girls over dinner about her own story. She also came from the Alsheitty community. Her story and Shamsa's were also most similar in that, she had also run away from her own home when she got to learn that her parents were planning on marrying her off. She also stayed in a rescue centre just like Shamsa did, and eventually found refuge in one of the homes that supported girls in her situation. So, she vowed to herself, that whenever she could, when she grew older, she would also provide refuge to girls who would be in similar situations. That is how she managed to open her estate to girls like Shamsa to seek shelter. She had been running the refuge home for over ten years where she had managed to house over one hundred girls over the years.

Mrs Hoyo later got married to a Sultan from the East, and when her husband died, he left her lots of estates and undisclosed properties worth millions of shillings. One of the properties is the current house that she and other girls are staying. Shamsa was so happy and privileged to have found refuge at her estate. She wondered how much kindness one person like Mrs Hoyo owned, to open her home to kids like her for refuge.

"So, Mrs Hoyo, does it mean that you never went back to your parents' house after they attempted to marry you off?" Shamsa asked that morning while they were having their breakfast.

"Well my child, it was very complicated, going back to their house meant that I was agreeing into their marriage arrangement. I did however go back to say hallo to them when I found out that my dad was ailing. He sent for me, before he died. He asked me to forgive him for having wanted to marry me off and wanted me to go back home. I forgave him plus my mama too, but never went back. Even for you child, just take your time, and eventually when your heart is ready, you can go to your parents' house." Mrs Hoyo said.

"I don't know if I can ever forgive my papa. But maybe I will do it someday because it's the Islamic thing to do right? I was so surprised that he married me off, despite having learnt of the approval of my scholarship award. I thought that is what he would have wanted to me get at least to cut down on the costs of school fees. But he refused to sign the papers and insisted that no

daughter of his will be furthering their education. And he went ahead to arrange my marriage. My brothers are still going to school, their schooling was never interrupted. I wonder why mine had to. It's such a backward culture. When I grow up, I would like to become a magistrate so that I can put people who infringe children's rights behind bars!" she added.

"Aaah Shamsa! The way you are talking you looks like you may go back to look for your papa and arrest him heee, is that so child?" Mrs Hoyo asked looking very concerned.

"Well, maybe not, but I will ensure that no child has to go through what I have gone through. If it weren't for the Bishop's foundation that found the slot for me at MIA and you opening your doors to me, I wouldn't know what would have become of me. To even imagine that he refused to sign the consent for the scholarship I had received." Shamsa lamented.

"In life, Mrs Hoyo began, there presents so many challenges and it's in our best interest to pick the lessons and grow from there. I think with your experience, you have all it takes to make better decisions for the generations to come. Now finish off your breakfast so that we head to school. I don't want to have a bad reputation for late coming with the principal. And even you, I am sure you can't wait to meet your classmates right, especially that Musa. You seem to like him huh? But be careful, boys are also to be treated with caution, you don't want to be jumping from the pot into the fire huh Shamsa!

You need to concentrate on your studies now more than ever.” Mrs Hoyo cautioned.

When they arrived at school, Mrs. Hoyo went straight into the teachers’ den as Shamsa proceeded to class. Before she arrived at her class, she was met with Umi Wallah who was also walking towards the classroom.

“Asalam alaykum Shamsa, great to see you today. You look rather happier and cheerful unlike the first day you came. How is it at Mrs Hoyo? I hope she’s treating you well and feeding you lots of meat, rumour has it she has an abattoir. So, meat must be plenty in her house.” Umi said as they both laughed.

“Well, Umi, let me just say, meat or not, I am just happy to be staying with her. It’s peaceful and she is motherly, I wish my own mother would be as warm as her. Can you believe that Mrs Hoyo also went through the same ordeal as I did while she was a child? She also escaped her home when she heard that her parents wanted to marry her off. Her parents were also from Alsheitty community as well.” Shamsa revealed.

“Oh, I had no idea, my parents have been doing several outreaches in that area. They were to have meetings with the Kadhis to sensitise them to stop conducting Nikahs of young children. It’s just sad that even many generations later, that culture hasn’t stopped. But I believe we are the change, right? I

hope today Ustadh Maalim will not talk to us about dress code again, you do realise we are the only Muslim girls in that religious class, and much is expected from us." Umi insinuated.

"Why are you forgetting Esther? Shamsa asked,

" Well Esther is not a Muslim, even as she tries to wear that hijab because of the school rules, she is not expected to practice it like us. I will still insist that with us being the only two Muslim girls, a lot is expected of us. But sometimes I feel like we are being restricted a lot. There are things we shouldn't do, places we shouldn't visit, things we shouldn't say just because we are Muslim girls. I love being free and wearing whatever I want, do you know sometimes I wear pair of jeans at home? Umi said to Shamsa.

"What, isn't that a bit too much Umi, Shamsa exclaimed. We are not supposed to be seen anywhere wearing jeans you know that. Where did you get them from? Shamsa asked sounding very shocked.

"I told you, my parents are liberal. My dad got them from me when he visited Mali. He says that they are even decent than the Buibuis because they cover you properly and protect you in case of anything. But I only get to wear them in the house lest I am stoned. It will only verify the society's thoughts by saying that I am indeed the daughter of the Kafirs." She sarcastically said.

"Oh, me too I would say so, remarked Shamsa. But you are lucky that your family is liberal and understanding, unlike mine who married off a child, clearly we live in two different worlds." Shamsa exclaimed.

"Tell me about that! Umi remarked. One day I will invite you to my house to meet the crazy Wallah family, you will be shocked." Umi added, and the both laughed as they walked into the class.

When Ustadh came in that morning, he looked a bit distressed, not in his usual happy jocular mood. His mind was engrossed on his son Kadir's behaviour the previous night. Not many people who knew about his son Kadir and whether he was his real father. When Ustadh married Kadir's mum she was already expectant. But people did not know, only Maalim and his wife. She had been raped by her uncle one night where she became pregnant with Kadir. Since Kadir's mother and Maalim were already friends, he ended up marrying her, and decided to take care of her and the pregnancy. So many years later, Kadir's mum found out the uncle who had impregnated her was dying and was to leave a good amount of estate, she decided to go back home to claim what she can get from him, after exposing his actions towards her. That is something that only Kadir's mother and Maalim knew about. So, he was worried with how Kadir was behaving that he may not be able to have a chance to talk with him and maybe explain to him what transpired. He needed to assure him that his mother did not just leave but had a plan. So, all

these things were lingering on Maalim's mind he didn't even notice the many Asalam Alaikum greetings the class had been extending to him.

"Ustadh, your mind today seems off, we have been saying hi to you for the last three minutes, but you have not been responding, is everything okay?" Tawfiq asked.

"My apologies Tawfiq and to the rest of the class as well, I have had a difficult night, but all is well." Ustadh answered.

"I have been a bit upset by something my son did but that shouldn't deter our interactions today. Hoping you have all been well." We have a very interesting topic to cover today under our Ethics and Islam. Shamsa you are well? Hope you have settled in well, and to the rest of us, hope all is well with your families." Ustadh began.

That morning they talked about the role of children in families and how children played a bigger part in the society and even in their homes. They also discussed parenting in general and how important it was to have good parental guidance in the upbringing of any child. Parental guidance can be from parents, adopted parents, guardians, simply anyone who has been given the responsibility of taking care of another human was equitized as a parent. Each of the students went ahead to give examples of what constituted as upright upbringing in a household. They all shared their experiences including

Shamsa and Yusuf who were now living with adopted parents. Yusuf mentioned that even though he knows that the principal may not be his dad, he accords him the ultimate respect he deserves because that is what he believes a child should do. His brother Tawfiq also shared the same sentiments and added that Allah expects all the children to be obedient to their parents to receive Thawab.

"Excuse me Ustadh, Musa Asked, so does it still mean that for someone like my dad, who granted my mama talaka, I should still respect him as well? I think that wasn't fair, sometimes when he calls, I don't feel like greeting him. I still find him at fault all the time." He asked.

"Well Musa I feel your sentiments and even understand where you are coming from. But needless to mention, as children, it is more than a religious obligation to be obedient to our parents, whether they are with us or not. We still need to accord them the respect they deserve. Besides, the differences they have are between them as adults not with you. For you as the child, your duty, is to do your part as Allah expects of you. Obedience grants you many years on earth. Allah also teaches us to be respectful to our parents and at the same time we learn that forgiveness is key to a happy life. Forgive your papa, for all the things he might have done, and choose to move on with your new life happily. That way your mind and heart will not be hanged over what he did or didn't do, and in the end, that will help you to still stay obedient." Ustadh responded.

"Take a look at Khatib, Ustadh proceeded, His father is the Sultan of South Maghrib, they own almost the entire estate, but you should see how obediently he speaks to his father you will be amazed because it is always respectful. It doesn't matter where you come from or who you are, respect and obedience impact fully a child's life and creates the environment that is comfortable for the parents and the child. The home becomes harmonious because of the respected all of you accords one another. Your parents will want to work even harder, give you as much as they can simply because you are obedient and respectful and that is what a child is expected to do. So, even for you Musa, regarding your relationship with your dad, it's still expected of you as his child to be respectful to him whether he is with you or away because he is still your father." Ustadh added.

"Excuse me Ustadh, " Musa queried , "But now let me ask, for example my mother chooses to get married again, will I still be required to respect the new man even when I know very well that he is not my dad. I don't think I can do that. "Musa queried.

"How so Musa? Why would respecting another man be a problem to you, wouldn't that be your mama's husband which equates him as your dad as well by extension?" Ustadh asked.

"No, in fact, I wouldn't even imagine my mother getting married again, what we have gone through already is enough. If it happens, maybe I would know

what to do. What do you think Esther? If it were you in my place what would you have done? Assuming one of your parents chooses to remarry, would you still go ahead and respect the new person?" Musa asked.

"But why are you asking Esther? Maalim insisted.

"It's because they are from a different religion, maybe she would know or have a different idea." Musa responded.

"Well, our parents are staunch Christians, and my dad preaches against divorce unless maybe one of them dies, But I think I would still respect the new parent assuming if one of my parents chooses to go either way because biblically, we are still expected to be obedient and respectful." Esther and John both giving their insights on the contribution.

"Each one of you is right in their own way, personally I would insist, as a child of Allah, you are obligated to be respectful to your elders, I think even the laws of Musa teaches this, didn't you learn about this in Madrasa when you were little? Maalim queried.

"Yes, however I also believe that respect is supposed to be both ways, just as children respect their parents, even parents should respect their children too. They should respect their wishes and desires as well. For example, in my view I

think Shamsa's parents were disrespectful in marrying her off to an old Rajul." Musa emotionally responded.

"Well, well, Musa, we have heard you and indeed its true, respect has to be both ways," added Maalim, at the same time thinking about his own son Kadir wondering whether he had respected him enough to tell him the truth about his real father. While he was at those thoughts, he remembered he hadn't seen one of his students in class that morning.

"Has anyone heard from Abdalla? Its unlike him to miss class. Has anyone heard from him? Ustadh asked in a concerned tone.

Abdalla had not come to school that day which was quite unusual as he never missed class. They also noticed that the janitor Salim was also not in school. That is when it dawned on them that something could be amiss. Ustadh enquired from the administration's office about the whereabouts of the two, whether they had sent in any word that they would be absent. He was told that Salim mentioned that there was an emergency but did not disclose the nature of the emergency. Upon further enquiry they were told that Abdalla's mother condition had worsened and that she had collapsed at night. They rushed her to the hospital and that she had fallen into a coma. They were waiting for the doctor's report to advise on the next steps. When the students heard of this, together with the Ustadh, they passed by the hospital to check on them. Upon arriving there, they found Abdalla and Salim holding onto each

other crying. They were told that Abdalla's mother had just died. It was very painful to watch them. The students hugged Abdalla as they passed on their condolence messages. The principal and other school officials together with a few parents immediately began planning for her burial.

When Abdalla finally resumed back to school, he mentioned that life had never been the same with his mama gone, but he believed she was at a happier place because she had suffered for a long time. His father too was coping with the situation, he had talks with him whether he could try getting his job in the ministry, but it wasn't concluded yet. Life was picking itself up from where it left them after the death of his wife. Students and friends kept checking in on them as they wished them well. Abdalla's sponsors also flew in and paid their respects as well which was quite noble of them. They had even discussed about taking him for a trip for a couple of weeks during the holidays just to allow him to get over the grief. The principal was also very kind, he had asked Abdalla's dad to take a few days off as he mourns and grieves the death of his dear wife. So, when that ended, he resumed to work as usual.

CHAPTER FOUR – CONFLICT

Months had passed and things had already gotten back to normal. School was going on as usual. Shamsa, the runaway girl as she was now being referred to, had since been living comfortably at Mrs Hoyo's. Surprisingly that, three months after she ran away from her matrimonial home, nobody had made efforts to look for her as she thought. She wondered not even her own parents. She had grown bitter just to think that her own people didn't seem to want to know where she was. She wondered, hadn't her supposed husband not informed her parents of her disappearance? She never wanted anything to do with them no matter how many times she had been told to forgive them and let go. Mrs Hoyo had done a great job, where, apart from just offering shelter, she also offered counselling advises to Shamsa about acceptance and how to move on with life. She had been holding onto a grudge that was almost taking a toll on her wellbeing. When you are a lost child, the most you would expect to hear is people looking for you, especially your parents. Maybe even get to hear of adverts and posters placed about your disappearance and whatnots, but that never happened. She had even made it intentional to keep tabs with the local news in a bid to come across information about a missing girl. Just to get the reassurance that people cared enough about her to look for her. But sadly, that was not the case as per her expectations in fact, according to her, life was slowly going back to normal like she never existed.

In a couple of weeks, it was time to observe the holy month of Ramadan where everyone in South Maghrib prayed and fasted according to their Islamic religion. Esther and John were not spared either, they were requested to try and even attend the mass recitals at the Barazas where everyone was now mandated to attend in the evenings. The Sultan had made it mandatory for the people of South Maghrib to attend the Baraza recitals every evening after the last prayer for the day as they shared iftar. This was quite an interesting experience for them as they had never been forced to attend any Islamic event. However, the foods and drinks that were shared in the evening, made the experience worthwhile. Most of the school kids never even went home, after classes they went ahead to the venue where the Baraza was held and waited for the evening events there. So, after sharing the evening the meal, they would then proceed home.

In one of the evenings in the Baraza, there was a Sheikh that had come to visit South Maghrib from Alsheitte community. During the teachings, he mentioned how much they had tried as a community to stop the early girl child marriages and that he even went ahead to report the cases where parents of the children who had conducted early marriages to their under aged children were reprimanded. It was at this event that Shamsa got to learn what had happen to her parents. They had been reprimanded for what they did to her. This was after Umi's parents, Mr and Mrs Wallah the human rights activists, got to secretly notify the Kadhi in Alsheitte about what had happened to Shamsa after getting the information from their daughter Umi. Shamsa's parents had

learnt about the whereabouts of their child of how she sort help from the rescue centre after escaping her estranged old Rajul husband they had married her off to. However, as per the agreement they had at the Kadhi during their summon and questioning session, they were told not to contact Shamsa for six months until the whole ordeal cooled off. They got to learn of where their child had been staying and even where she had been schooling. Six months were now over, and they had now come back to pick their child. Shamsa's father Mr Bakar, had actually accompanied the Sheikh to the Baraza that evening and sort for permission to address the people of South Maghrib, first to apologise for what he and his wife put their daughter through and secondly, request that they take their child back home. What this meant for Shamsa was that she loses her place at MIA and at the same time leave Mrs Hoyo's house where she had already gotten comfortable. There were talks between the parents and the school and what was agreed was that Shamsa would continue with school until she completes her final junior year at MIA, thereafter, she could now decide to go back home or continue studying at MIA until final year. She was to continue with schooling while at the same time she could still visit her parents' home over the holidays. But this was to be decided with time.

Later that evening when they got home, Shamsa asked Mrs Hoyo,

"Now that I have learnt about what happened with my parents, my heart is at peace, they didn't look for me because they were reprimanded. I can only

imagine what my mum had been through because none of this was her fault because she was against it." She said.

"Yes child, remember when I told you to be at ease that everything would work out? So, what would you want? Would you wish to go back to Alsheitty with them or would you want to continue studying at MIA? As for the housing, my doors are open for you child you can continue staying here should you choose to stay." Mrs Hoyo assured her.

"Mmm, honestly I don't know, I miss my mum and my siblings. I would have loved to go back home, but maybe I think staying here and visiting them whenever I can, would be the best option for me. I can't even imagine going back to my old school. I have already made friends here and Musa and his mother have been kind to me too. I would rather continue with my new life here complete my school and figure out my life from here." Shamsa added.

"Well child, whatever decision you make, I will support you all the way, you know you are like my granddaughter, it wouldn't be a problem having you around." Said Mrs Hoyo.

Back at Ustadh Maalim's house, just when he and his family had gotten back from the Baraza, there, they were met by Kadir at their doorstep. He looked rather confused and looked like he had been drinking as well. They found him sited at the porch just outside the house and he was crying. Ustadh was quick

to rush to him and when Kadir saw him, he quickly rose up, hugged him and continued crying. Ustadh asked him to get into the house so that they could talk about what could have happened. He also mentioned to him that it was very risky to for him to have come around the house because the security offers had issued a warrant for his arrest following the robbery he was implicated with. He had been summoned at the juvenile court to either accept or deny the accusations, but he had failed to show up in court three times. Ustadh Maalim had tried talking on his behalf to see if he could find a way out of it maybe settle it out of court but that was denied. He was also told that should he meet him; he should inform the authorities or else he too will be reprimanded.

"Kadir come inside the house, it was very risky of you to be sitting outside the house like that. Do you know the authorities are looking for you?" Maalim asked while he hurriedly closed the door. "Did anyone see you?"

"No papa, no one saw me, I just wanted to come and apologise for how I acted the other day. I know I was wrong. Mamaa reached out to me and told me everything. She also told me about my real papaa and I was very stubborn and wrong to act the way I did towards you. I was ungrateful despite you having taken me in and raised me like your own child. I am very sorry. I wanted to come and apologise in person before anything happens to me. I am aware the authorities are looking for me, after this, I am going to turn myself

in.” Kadir said to Ustadh who was now holding Kadir by the shoulders trying to empathise with him.

“Son, it is written in the Surah that obedience is key, and it is what is expected of us, both young and old. We need to obey our parents, or anyone above us especially as children. You realised your mistake and I honour you for seeking forgiveness. I have forgiven you. Remember once all this is over, you are welcome to come back home any time, my door will always be open for you because you are my child.” Ustadh added.

“Thank you, papa,” Kadir said as he walked out of the house.

“Before you leave child, do you have means of getting you to where you are headed to or maybe you can sleep in then leave early in the morning. As you can see it’s so late at night I could take you to wherever you are headed to, remember they are hunting for you, I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you child.” Ustadh asked looking very concerned.

“No papa I will be fine, but thanks though, Khalid responded as he walked out of the house.

“I don’t think there’s anything I haven’t done for this child, even though he wasn’t mine, I raised him as my own, right from when his mother and I met I

have treated him as my blood all throughout these years.” Ustadh began narrating to his wife.

“There were days that were good, especially when he was a kid, before he started hanging out with those stubborn friends of his. It became difficult to manage him. His mother tried as much as he could to keep him straight. We all did our best. He is eighteen now, he is more of an adult than a child, having even quit school years ago. I don’t know how he has been managing. He refused my help. Look at what is going to happen to him now, he may go to jail. Sometimes I feel like I may have failed him, had I been stricter with him, he wouldn’t have ended up the way he did. No one would even believe that his guardian, a teacher of religion would let his own child go to jail for theft, this is what I teach against every day.” Ustadh lamented as he cupped his head in his hands.

“No dear, even Allah knows you tried. We may have been married for two years now but with each and every of these days I have spent with you, I have observed how good of a father you are , you tried your best and you did everything you could for Kadir, he just chose wrong. I hope that he uses this period as a teaching to let him know that the world gives kindness back to kindness and vice versa is also true. He will be fine.” His wife comforted him.

Over at the Wallah’s house they were busy celebrating the victorious win, where they were able to have Shamsa’s parents reprimanded for what they did

to that poor child. Even though many people would have wished that the matter gets resolved customary way as opposed to the sheria way they were happy, that justice was served, and a lesson learnt not just for Shamsa's parents but also for any other parent who may have thoughts of marrying off their child at a tender age.

"I think that was well played, you guys rock," Umi said to her parents as she tapped her father a high five, "I am happy you were able to step in for Shamsa, and that she can now regain her life. I just hope that her parents may not consider doing that again to her once she returns home." Umi praised.

"Well, we did what we had to, and I am glad we were able to help when we could before it was too late." Mr Wallah responded and also thanking you for bringing up Shamsa's story to us. As parents we have a duty to protect our children and even children of those parents who might have dropped the ball a bit in parenting like what Shamsa's parents did. I don't think they are bad parents, they thought they were doing right by their culture and religion which is outdated. Children, especially female children, need to be empowered and taught how fend for themselves too just like the male child. Marrying them off instead, especially when they are hardly old enough to understand themselves is not just mean but also selfish and barbaric." Mr Wallah responded.

"There were days people called us controversial or what was that word again, Kafirs, whenever we went all out championing for human rights and children's

rights, and they thought we were just being stubborn. But right now, I think they can see the fruits of our stubbornness. When it comes to children's rights, we do not joke about it because we wouldn't want to mess around with the future generation. One wrong move when they are young, and we mess their whole future altogether. I can't help but wonder what would have become of Shamsa had she not even run away from her supposed husband's home or the many girls who are trapped in similar arrangements where they have no hope for their future but just continue staying married to old men," Mrs Wallah added. "We are also glad that the Bishop played a huge role in this by setting up that rescue centre, otherwise our dear Shamsa girl wouldn't have had a place to run to in the first place." She concluded.

Over at the Bishop's house, Esther and John are talking about the cultures they have been assimilated into so far. They have now been fully accustomed into the Islamic culture. Maybe not getting comfortable with just the dress code but also in even understanding what exactly goes on behind. They have also understood the reason for fasting and why it's important for the people of South Maghrib and Muslims in general to fast. They have attended the sessions at the Baraza as it was required for all people in South Maghrib during these days of Ramadan and they indeed learnt a lot. South Maghrib was a small community and people there knew each other so one would tell if one didn't attend the Baraza. They also learnt the importance of prayer and why the people in South Maghrib respected prayers. They prayed five times a day which was quite interesting for them to observe, it even made them feel

bad about their own routine, where at times their dad had to remind them to do their night prayers. They were also happy to learn that Shamsa may have the opportunity to go back home to reconnect with her people whenever she could, because her parents were now aware of what the sharia expects of them, so they may never be able to marry her off in case an opportunity presents them especially while she is still young and in school.

"I am happy that finally justice was served and that Shamsa's parents learnt a lesson. Marrying off a young child is very wrong; they were even lucky they were not jailed. Because denying a child their right to education is in fact a criminal offense in the North", the bishop said to them as they were preparing for dinner. Children deserve to be treated kindly and with respect just like adults too, in my view, I think marrying off a child to an old man is just disrespectful. I am just glad that is over." Bishop said

"Yes dad, we are happy as well, and mostly even thankful that you set up the rescue centre where girls like Shamsa can run to in case they find themselves in situations where they faced abuse from their caregivers." Esther added.

"I am sure you can't wait to go back home and narrate everything to mum. She would be pleased that you will go back home a very obedient child, hahaha, John said to Esther laughing. "But truthfully Dad, this was a great experience for us, even to learn that we shouldn't take things for granted including our ability to doing normal things like going to school because

some kids don't have the opportunity. From Abdalla's experience we also learnt that you could be good at schoolwork and at the same time go back home and nurse your ailing parent which can not only be difficult but distracting. It was very heart-breaking to learn that his mother had been ill for such a long time and that his dad even had to quit his normal work to take care of his ailing wife. I think the kids in our class all have different eye-opening experiences that they have gone through in life that we wouldn't have come to learn about had we not taken this trip with you dad." John said.

Over at Musa's house that evening, his mother had been looking for the perfect opportunity to speak with him. She called him to the kitchen where she was preparing for some snacks for Suhur.

"Mum you made matobosha, my favourite, is there something in particular you'd like to ask from me because this snack definitely comes at a price." Musa jokingly asked as he gobbled up the contents of the plate.

"I told you from a long time ago, you are too smart for your age Musa. Well you are right; I need to talk to you about something. You remember our conversation sometime back when you questioned about my relationship with Hemed?" his mother began.

"Yes, I remember him, the philanthropist one, the guy who goes dropping his workmates home all the province, how can I forget?" Musa responded naughtily.

"Well that philanthropist as you call him, is seeking for my hand in marriage. You remember I told you that I would inform you in case I was to go down that route? So here I am telling you now." His mother responded carefully looking at Musa to catch his reaction towards the news.

Musa was a bit silent for a few minutes, then his mother asked,

"Well, say something, your silence is killing me, is it a bad idea? Do you think I am making a mistake son?" She queried.

"No mum, on the contrary, I am happy to hear that, to say the least, I knew this day would come and since you are no longer married to papa I don't see why not. But does that mean we shall be required to move, or will he now move in with us? I kind of enjoyed our peace though. Musa responded.

"Thank you for hearing me out, about that, we shall figure it with time, for now I just needed to know if you would be okay with that. I will organise for a dinner later so that the two of you can officially meet." She responded.

For a moment Musa's mother felt a huge sigh of relief. She wasn't sure what her son's reaction would be. She was afraid that he would not be open

enough to tell her his concerns or worse, even object the whole idea altogether as a bad move. But her relationship with her son was enviable, they openly communicated about everything, and anything that is why it was easy for either of them to discuss with the other about anything. Musa may be fourteen, but his mind was already grown like that of an eighteen-year-old or twenty-year-old. He was already too mature for his age.

CHAPTER FIVE – YOU LITTLE RASCALS

If there was one thing that the students looked forward to at MIA was the Islamic religious class by Ustadh Maalim. This was because, it was the only class where they got to interact freely as it was more of practical life teachings than class lessons. The students got to open and share on even personal things about themselves and about things happening in their homes which when discussed, brought a different perspective or made them see things on a different light. Ustadh Maalim always encouraged the kids to share and talk because talking and being open, was the only way to make them understand religion better from a life's perspective. It's in these classes that they got to learn about values and virtues they needed to have in order live harmoniously both at home and at school. They were taught things like obedience and respect, how to be thankful, learning how to forgive and apologising whenever they did wrong or hurt people. Ustadh tried to bring these concepts clearly to the kids and at the same time, incorporating religion in it. He learnt very early that whenever he taught Islamic religion without incorporating the day to day life experiences, it was a bit difficult for the kids to relate to and eventually making his teachings irrelevant.

On this morning, he was teaching the kids about the power of obedience and respect. He was emphasizing to the kids why it's important to be obedient, why they should obey their parents and elders. He even went to mention that

obedience was recognised even in the laws of Prophet Musa that children should honour their parents so that their days are numbered on earth.

"I will share with you a personal story that will make you see the reason why it's important to be obedient and respectful. My son Kadir, I know some of you may know or may not know, but he was recently taken into jail for theft. It's very sad to see such a young soul getting wasted especially one who had a bright future ahead of him. Worse is when everyone looks at you as the teacher religion to have your child passing through the arms of Sheria for something that could have probably been avoided. I had tried being there for him, he refused to complete his studies, he joined a gang or a group of friends that negatively influenced his behaviour. He went on the wrong path. I tried as much as I could to lead him in the right way but as you can see my efforts didn't bear as much fruits as I expected. This is just to say , it doesn't matter who you are, or what you are, but for as long as you don't do what is expected of you, you may find yourself in the wrong path or wrong arms of the law. You are bound to lose a lot, your time, your respect, even bring down the reputation of the people who care about you. It's by Allah's grace that I can even stand and teach about this despite everything that is going on with my family So, in short, obedience and respect goes a long way, it shapes who you are and who you become." Ustadh said.

“Ustadh, Tawfiq asked, so does it mean that you let your own child go to jail? Why couldn’t you do something for Kadir, I thought parents are supposed to come in and stand in for us no matter what?”

“Yes that’s true, indeed parents are supposed to come in and stand in for their children, but you realise that there are times where everyone has to own up for their mistakes such that even my plea as a parent to stand in for you may not help. He did wrong and he needed to own up to his mistakes and serve his time.” Ustadh heavily responded.

“That’s true, Yusuf said, back in the North before coming to South Maghrib, I witnessed a similar case. A child had to do time, at the juvenile court because he had caused harm to another child. His parents also tried to do everything they could to prevent him from being taken in, but the law is the law, they were not able to help him. He too was a bully, he bullied the students and the kids in my school, he was very rough, until he hurt a kid very badly.”

“Yes, those are the repercussions of doing the wrong things sometimes you may end up hurting the wrong people. Like in my case with Kadir, he and his gang friends went to steal at the chief’s palace in the west and when they were confronted, it’s only Kadir who got identified and ever since that happened, his warrant for arrest was issued but he disappeared, that is what even made his case worse.” Ustadh remarked.

"I am so sorry about that Maalim, Abdalla said, I can only imagine how hard it must have been for you. We children also need to be cognizant of the efforts our parents make to keep us happy, feed us or even just take care of us. We can only do this by just being obedient." Abdalla added.

"We are honestly sorry about what you have gone through Ustadh. But we are glad you shared your story with us, hearing this from you only makes us to want to be better children to our parents and not do things that might heart break them," Umi said. "We should try and stop being hard-headed. I can't imagine what my parents might have gone through the day I disappeared; I still regret it today."

"The best thing about being an obedient child isn't the fact that you will never make mistakes, it's the fact that you will learn from those mistakes, so even for you Umi I think you must have learnt a lesson from that experience to never put your parents under unnecessary stress. Ustadh said. "I would also wish to believe we have had the best time in class this year, as we have about a week before we wind up the year. For those of you who will be joining us for the next year, you are welcome and for those of you who shall be going back to their homes like Esther and John, it has been a pleasure to have you here at MIA." Ustadh said.

Later that evening, the kids decided on doing a surprise for their Maalim whom they all agreed had been a great pillar for impacting good behaviour

on them especially on teaching them how to communicate openly. They all loved the religious education class so much that they even wished the class extended. He made them feel free to talk about anything and even asked them should they need any help from him, he was always willing to extend guidance and support to them for as long as he could.

Ramadan was coming to an end, and there after the EID celebrations, the schools would break for the long holidays. This also meant the end of the exchange program for that year. The kids were happy that they were taking a break and the fact that schools were over. They were happy to have made new friends. They were also happy to have had good times and were even able to pass through the challenges of the year together especially, how they all came in for Abdalla when he lost his mother, or how each one of them expressed empathy and sympathy towards Shamsa's story. It was indeed a great year. They learnt mostly about themselves and importantly how to appreciate their families and what their parents were able to give, because, what they got at home may be what one lacked in theirs. All in all, they learnt the act of love and being able to offer a shoulder to cry on in case one needed. They were also happy that they learnt that people could express kindness especially when they learnt that Yusuf was Tawfiq's adopted brother and he never looked down upon him one bit. They were also intrigued by Khatib's family and their generosity, especially for Khatib who was always sharing with them expensive foods and snacks and being kind despite coming from a wealthy

family and also learning that you can be wealthy but brilliant in class too. This encouraged them to just want to do better.

That evening as they were preparing to head for their final Baraza, Abdallah informed Ustadh that the kids from class just needed to say goodbye to him before they took their break, so he was required to just go back to class briefly where the kids were. Upon reaching the class, he found that the students had organised a small celebratory appreciation for him. Abdalla had also informed them that it was his birthday that day, those were the pecks of him being the head boy he could access important information like knowing the date of birth of Ustadh Maalim. So, they organized a farewell party for him, to express their gratitude. Ustadh Maalim was moved by the gesture and he was extremely happy. He was happy and relieved to learn that he had been so impactful to their learning and their stay at MIA had been beneficial after all. He was overwhelmed with joy, which was evident in his eyes as he had begun breaking down. They had brought with them gifts to present to him as a token of appreciation.

He didn't mutter anything, maybe remembering to himself how extraordinary that year had been, from the great students he took in that year to his own experience with his son Kadir. He was extremely overjoyed and overly humbled at the gesture that the kids extended towards him. He kept quiet for a moment maybe he mumbled a prayer within him, and when he finally

managed to speak amidst his tears of joy, he just said, you **little rascals**, you didn't have to... May Allah Reward each one of you. Be good kids.

THE END!!!

APPENDIX

Hijab- Ladies Veil that is worn over the head.

Taqiya- Gentleman cap worn on the head mostly by young boys or male

Buibui- Ladies clothing that covers them from top to bottom

Talaka- Divorce.

Sheria- Law.

Surah- Reading from Quran.

Madrasa- Islamic school.

Kafir- Slang/insulting- for non-Muslim.

Eid- Celebrations to mark the end of Ramadan.

Ramadan- Fasting season.

Nikah – Muslim Marriage.

Bibi- Wife.

Thawab- Blessings.

Suhur-Meal consumed in the morning before fasting.