

Gendered Paradoxes

Educating Jordanian Women in
Nation, Faith, and Progress

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INTRODUCTION

A Day in the Life of Nada

The al-Khatwa Secondary School for Girls is located in Bawadi al-Naseem, a city of about fifty thousand that stands sixty-five kilometers northeast of Amman, Jordan.¹ It is one of three high schools in the city and enrolls about six hundred students in grades 10 through 12. Most high school girls in Bawadi al-Naseem spend their days between home and school. School is an important space in their lives. Nada is one such student—an eleventh grader, she has lived in Bawadi al-Naseem all of her life and has been at al-Khatwa since tenth grade. Despite occasional conflicts with teachers or classmates, Nada enjoys school and especially the camaraderie of her friends. She is known among her friends as the peacemaker as she is always resolving disputes between friends. Nada also likes to tell jokes and has been known to pull a few practical jokes at school, like the time she hid her friend Rula's shoes when Rula went into the prayer room and left her shoes at the door. Nada studies hard and hopes to go to college, although it is unclear whether she can achieve this goal since her grades are not very strong.

Nada rises each day around 6:30 a.m. to get ready for school. In the winter months it can be quite difficult to get up as there is no heat and the water is freezing cold. The first thing she does in the cold months is light the small kerosene heater in the main room, the room in which the family gathers to eat and watch TV, and where the girls in the family sleep. Today is a relatively warm day, however, so she washes first, dresses, makes her father some coffee before he heads to work, and has some tea and bread with yoghurt. For school she wears pants with the green school uniform—a long shirt that comes to mid thigh. She also covers her hair with a headscarf. When she first started wearing the headscarf in ninth grade, she was excited to be like the older girls. Now she sometimes wishes she did not have to

wear it, but on most days she is relieved that she does not have to deal with her hair, which is unwieldy. Some of Nada's friends rise earlier to do their dawn prayers, but Nada does not pray regularly. Her friend Samar has been encouraging her to do so. And during the previous Ramadan, Nada had begun to give some thought to becoming more committed (*mulazimah*) by doing her regular prayers, but still she does not feel ready. Her younger siblings walk together to the local elementary school, while she walks the short distance to her own school. Her oldest sister, Shereen, is a teacher in town. Another sister is at the university studying chemistry. Amaney, who is three years older than Nada, is at home studying to retake her high school completion exams (*tawjihi*) so that she can get a grade high enough for a place in the public university. Her oldest brother, Muhammad, is in the army, and her brother Jamil, who did not pass *tawjihi* but refused to repeat it, is looking for work.

This has been a challenging year for the family. Nada's father's health has been failing, and there have been a lot of unexpected medical expenses. Her father has missed many days at work and does not get sick pay. Her mother used to do some babysitting to help supplement their income; however, she has been caring for Nada's grandmother for several months now so has been unable to earn the extra income. Muhammad has been in the army for two years, but because of his modest salary and the cost of transportation and his cigarettes, he usually does not save enough to help out the family. Shereen, the schoolteacher, has been helping the family stay afloat financially. Jamil is frustrated with being unemployed, he is paying the price for not passing the *tawjihi*. He knew that he was not a good enough student to get the necessary grades on *tawjihi*, and that is why he refused to retake the exam even though his mother begged him. Nada is hoping she will do well enough on the same test to go to a public university and eventually work to help support her family.

On her way to school she sometimes runs into her neighbor Nisreen who is Christian. Although there are not many Christians in Bawadi al-Naseem, several Christian families live in Nada's neighborhood, and she and Nisreen have been friends since first grade. The walk is pleasant on most days although when it rains the street can get quite muddy. Although most of Nada's classmates walk to school, not all do. Some are driven by family members, while others come from distant parts of the city or surrounding villages and travel by bus to attend high school in Bawadi al-Naseem. For the most part, Nada's teachers, who are all female, live relatively close to the school. Most are driven to work by their husbands, while a few have their own cars. Nada needs to be in the schoolyard by 7:45 for the morning

assembly. She tries not to be late as recently the principal has begun shutting the gate so as not to allow girls who are late to slip in undetected. Once Nada was late (having stayed up too late with relatives who were visiting from Amman the night before) and was made to stand outside the gate with several other unlucky girls until the morning assembly was over. Then the principal let them in and gave them a severe scolding and ordered them to clean up the schoolyard as punishment. Most days however, Nada gets to school on time and lines up in formation with the other eleventh-grade girls.

For the morning assembly, the nearly six hundred girls at al-Khatwa line up in rows by class and section and every morning follow the same routine. The tenth graders are the largest contingent as they have over fifty students in each section. After tenth grade, a proportion of these students will go to the vocational school because of their poor grades; those with strong grades go on to the humanities or the scientific track, both of which are offered at al-Khatwa. Thus the class sizes in eleventh and twelfth grades, the secondary phase of high school, are smaller. Nada has gone through the motions of this morning ritual every day of her school life since first grade. Line up, recite the *fatiha* (the opening verse of the Qur'an), and sing "Long Live the King." Usually, at least one patriotic song follows this, and then the girls are made to do a brief set of calisthenics. At Nada's high school, the girls barely feign effort, and none of the teachers or administrators really push them to perform the exercises vigorously. Nada remembers how excited she used to be about this morning assembly when she was younger; she and her friends competed to see which grade could sing and recite the loudest and with the greatest enthusiasm. Now the assembly feels limp after the repetition of so many years. However, from time to time school administrators try to enforce some enthusiasm, yelling at the girls to stand straight, pay attention, or raise their voices.

The school staff also regularly conducts uniform inspections during the morning assembly. Nada's friend Sawwan is usually in violation of the dress code—most frequently by wearing nail polish, but occasionally with high heels or even makeup—and she tries to hide behind Nada during morning inspections. Nada does not understand the point of getting all dolled up for school, but she knows there are many girls who are trying to make themselves look prettier, older, whiter, thinner, and the like. Nada has no such preoccupations, and anyway her mother would never let her go to school with makeup on. After some announcements, the girls go to their classrooms. They are supposed to march in line quietly, but the girls are usually quite rowdy in the halls. The day begins with their chatter and laughs,

unless of course it gets too loud and then the school secretary's screams for quiet can be heard throughout the halls.

Nada's class, "first secondary humanities b" or *awal thanawi ba*, takes the stairwell up to the second floor. On their way they pass pictures of the king and his father and grandfather, as well as "Jordan First"² signs that have been distributed by the government. Once they get to the classroom there is less in the way of decoration. The walls are white and badly in need of paint. Some handmade signs made by students from previous years adorn the classroom walls, some patriotic and others directing students to keep their classroom clean and their appearance neat. Students had also clipped some pictures and newspaper articles about the Palestinian intifada and posted them on the walls. This year, some of Nada's classmates worked with the history teacher, Dia, to make patriotic signs in keeping with the "Jordan First" campaign for their classroom as well. The room is sunny, as it is upstairs and has big windows that let in the light but also the cold in the winter months. In the winter the girls wear jackets and sweaters in the classroom to stay warm, and some students even wear gloves. Luckily, none of the windows in *awal thanawi ba* are broken.

Nada has seven periods a day and a half-hour lunch break; every day she takes Arabic, English, Islamic studies, math, and social studies. She also studies computers three days a week. On the other days she is supposed to take physical education (PE) and art, or a special activities session. However, of these, PE is the only elective that is offered and even then not all of the time. The girls dislike PE anyway and prefer to just sit in the schoolyard during that period, especially as the weather warms up. Each group of students is assigned a classroom, and they remain in their classrooms throughout the day, with the teachers coming to them for different subjects. Nada has seen schools in America on television and wonders what it would be like to have lockers and switch classes. She finds it tiring to be in the same classroom the whole day, save for the half-hour break. Some of her friends are constantly looking for ways to get out of the classroom: when teachers come late or do not show up at all, girls take advantage and leave the classroom.

One time, the Arabic teacher did not turn up in her classroom as expected because she had to leave school early to take her sick child to the doctor. One of the girls went to the teachers' room to inquire about her and returned claiming that another teacher had told them to just go home. About ten girls promptly left, while the remaining thirty-five students stayed in the classroom or in the schoolyard. When the administrators found out that the ten girls had left the school early, the principal, assistant principal, and secretary called them all to the office the next day and scolded them.

Furthermore, the principal said they would all be publicly reprimanded at the school assembly the next day. The girls were very upset and begged the principal not to publicly name them. Nada's good friend Ibtisam had been one of the ten, and she came back to class crying. She was mortified at the prospect that she would be publicly scolded. Nada knew why Ibtisam and some of the others were upset. They feared that a public scolding would hurt their reputations, especially since the staff had implied that they left school early so that they could wander around town unsupervised. Ibtisam was particularly worried as she had some cousins in the school with whom she was not on good terms and she feared they would exploit this incident to speak ill of her. In the end, the principal never acted on her threat. Nada guessed she just wanted to teach the girls a lesson by scaring them.

This school year the teachers and staff have become increasingly frustrated with the girls in Nada's class. They have been misbehaving quite a bit since the winter break, and the teachers are losing their patience. Nada is frustrated as she feels the teachers generalize when it is only a handful of the girls who make the most trouble. At the same time, the behavior of a few, and their disrespect for the teachers, were making it increasingly difficult for anyone to learn anything.

Nada's favorite subjects are English and Arabic. She thinks she would like to study languages and become a translator or journalist, but her teachers tell her that teaching is the only realistic possibility for a girl from Bawadi al-Naseem with a degree in languages. She is not sure if she would like teaching, but she really admires her English teacher so she might consider it. Of course she knows of many young women who have graduated college and applied for teaching jobs who sit around waiting for a teaching post for years, making this career path problematic as well. Her friend Layla also wants to study languages, and she already writes for the main newspaper in Jordan in the youth section. Nada likes the idea of being a journalist too, but in Bawadi al-Naseem there are not any journalism jobs. She would have to go to Amman and she is not sure if that would be possible, although her brother may move to Amman and so she might be able to live with him. She has also heard that some girls take jobs in Amman and live in dormitories, but these girls are still a minority. Of course, it is too early to think about these issues. First, she needs to do well and get into the university.

Besides English, Nada is also looking forward to religion class today as she finds her religion teacher, Miss Suhel, to be dynamic and fun. This is the first time that Nada has found this subject to be so engaging; in the past she always thought of it as her most boring subject. Teachers can really make a difference, thinks Nada; a teacher can really lead a girl to love a

subject or to hate it. On this day, Nada is sitting with her classmates waiting for Miss Suhel to arrive. Jumana, who always sits near the front, is discussing her favorite television program, *Star Academy*, a reality TV program produced in Lebanon that many of the girls have been obsessed with lately. In this program a group of young people from around the Arab world are chosen to live together, train together, and compete as performers (singing and dancing). It is like the American program *American Idol*. Nada's teachers frequently criticize this program as immoral, but she ignores the criticism, as do many of her peers, because she and her sisters love watching this program. Her friend Nadine's mother is obsessed with *Star Academy* more than any of the schoolgirls, but some of her friends' parents have forbidden them from watching such programs or have refused to have satellite television for fear of such programs. These parents are particularly offended by the way in which participants, males and females, live in the same house.

Amina is seated in the opposite corner of the classroom. She certainly did not watch *Star Academy* the night before. Amina, the president of the student prayer room committee, is very religious and finds such programming offensive. She prefers to watch al-Manar, the Hizbullah channel, as well as channels devoted to teaching about Islam. In class this day, she is again talking to her classmates about the importance of being good Muslims. Some of Nada's classmates listen to her attentively, while others ignore her. Nada has mixed feelings about Amina. On some level she admires Amina's degree of religious commitment, but Nada also finds Amina to be too pushy and at times judgmental, so she keeps her distance.

Fadia is talking about the latest news from Palestine and Iraq. Fadia likes to talk about current events, as does Amina. Although many of Nada's classmates are well-versed in the details of regional politics, most are more interested in lighter talk—about friends, superstars, and boys—and on this day some complain that their fathers monopolize televisions at home with the nightly news. Nada sometimes feels guilty for not paying more attention to what is happening in her part of the world; her social studies teacher, Tamara, is always complaining that her generation no longer reads newspapers or follows the news. But Nada finds it all too depressing and prefers to watch programs that are entertaining.

Nada turns to Fedwa who is in her usual spot in the back of the room showing her friends the new treasure she has acquired from her brother. He always brings her perfumes, lotions, and makeup. Sometimes Fedwa also brings in photographs of American or Arab pop stars. Nada and her classmates love looking at these pictures, especially pictures of the Backstreet Boys. This morning, Nada sees Fedwa pull out her mirror, adjust her

headscarf, and apply some makeup even though it is forbidden. The mirror is then secretly passed around during class to various friends. "Who is she fixing herself up for?" wonders Nada. As if reading Nada's mind, Ibtisam leans over and says, "Did you hear that Fedwa likes this guy who works in a mobile phone shop on Queen Noor Street? She walks by his shop every day." Ibtisam goes on to clarify that Fedwa has never spoken with this person, but she wants to look her best when she walks by.

Miss Suhel finally arrives, and after making some small talk with the girls, she begins the lesson. "Islam and Work." She discusses the need for people to be "respectable" in the workplace and refers to taxi drivers as an example of workers who have "bad habits." Nada knows that some of her classmates have male relatives who are cab drivers, and she wonders if they are offended by the teacher's comments. Miss Suhel also talks about the bias Jordanians have against "working with their hands." She says, "We all want our children to be doctors and engineers."

Nada and her classmates know exactly what Miss Suhel is talking about. Nada's cousin Ahmed wanted to marry a girl he met in another city where he worked as a medical technician, but the girl's parents would not even consider him as a suitor because he had only gone to a two-year college. Miss Suhel's lesson also leads to a discussion about the number of Jordanians with degrees in fields like engineering who do not have jobs despite their education. Amina says she has a relative with a college degree selling falafel on the street. Other girls talk about difficulties their male relatives are having getting married with or without college degrees because of the cost of living.

Samar interjects, "And all the men want to marry a civil servant, a working woman with a government job. They come and ask after a girl and they say, 'Is she a *ma'wadhafa* (employee in the public sector)?'" Miss Suhel adds, "The other day a mother of a potential groom was in the teachers' room inquiring after single teachers." Fadia wonders aloud, "But how are we to find work if men can't even find jobs?" Lorees argues that her work will be caring for her children. Miss Suhel, responding to Lorees's comment, emphasizes that women can do both. Fedwa, who is one of thirteen children, asserts that the problem with today's society is that when women work they neglect their children. As for Nada, she hopes she will have a well-paying job someday so that she can help her family, although she is not sure how she will feel once she has a family. She also knows that some of these things are out of one's hands, nothing but fate.

Time is nearly up and the math teacher will be here soon. Nada really likes math, but since she was placed in the humanities track, it is not likely

she will be able to pursue a major in math or science in the university. Just before Miss Subheil leaves, Indira, an eleventh grader from another class, comes in to make an announcement. She informs the girls that the Ministry of Education wants students to attend an Independence Day celebration at a nearby university and that they should plan to be there on time the next day to board the buses. Many of the girls groan and a few say they will not go. Others are happy to miss class. A couple of Nada's friends will be performing at the Independence Day event—one will sing and the other will recite poetry. Nada used to participate in such events but decided that being in the music group at school was taking too much time away from her studies, since the group practiced during class.

After a couple more classes, Nada and the girls of *awal thanawi* ba join the rest of the school for the midday break. It is not really a lunch break, as the main meal of the day is a late lunch around three with one's family. Some of the girls bring a sandwich to school, but most buy potato chips or cookies from the school canteen if they eat anything at all. The canteen sometimes has small sandwiches as well. Some of Nada's classmates do not have money to buy anything from the canteen, and if Nada has some extra money, from time to time she will treat them. She is, however, often without money, and her friend Kareem, whose father is a successful doctor, treats her sometimes. Jenine, a girl who has come to the school only recently, is very poor. Her mother is divorced and living on a farm in a nearby village. Jenine often does not have enough money for bus fare home from school, and some of the teachers try to help her. In this respect, Nada feels that the school is a nice community.

During this break the girls wander around the yard and chat. On this day, Nada's friend Ibtisam, whom she usually talks to at the break, is sitting on the stone steps sulking. She will not even talk to Nada. Nada keeps asking her what's wrong, but Ibtisam ignores her. After a while, though, Ibtisam reveals that she had a major argument with her mother the night before. Ibtisam feels that her parents favor her older sisters and brother. She complains about having to wear hand-me-down clothing, and she says her father regularly insinuates that she is not smart enough to get into college. Nada knows that Ibtisam often feels this way. Her sisters were very successful and were the top students in their departments at the university. Her father recently suggested that she switch into the vocational track since she is not getting good grades. Her two older sisters both excelled in the scientific track, the most prestigious of the academic tracks and the most difficult to get into. Nada tries to cheer Ibtisam up. She tells her that parents always compare siblings so they can push them to do her best. As for the hand-me-

downs, Nada has little sympathy, as she has worn only hand-me-downs herself and life is expensive in Jordan. Not all parents can afford to buy new clothes for every child.

After the break, Nada completes her classes and then prepares to go home. She lingers a bit in the yard with some friends. It's a beautiful day, sunny but cool in the shade. Nada thinks her school—at least the outdoor grounds—is the most attractive one in the whole city. The school building and the classrooms are nothing special, but the schoolyard is lined with trees on one side, and it has a small olive grove adjacent to the yard. Nada and her friends are outside enjoying this scenery when one of the teachers comes out and tells them it is time to go home. The students are never allowed to linger for long. Nada catches up with Nisreen and they walk home together. When Nada arrives home, she helps her older sister prepare lunch. The girls share the housework, dividing up the tasks from week to week. Nada usually does the dishes or the sweeping and the mopping. Her brothers are not responsible for the housework, although her brother Jamil helps from time to time. Jamil also runs most of the errands for the family. Her mother has been helping to take care of Nada's grandmother in the mornings, and so Nada's sister has been doing most of the lunch preparation. Her father usually takes a nap after lunch. Nada sometimes naps after lunch and then completes her chores. Then, if she has homework, she will do it. The remainder of the evening she watches television with her family. Currently they are following a Turkish soap opera, and sometimes they stay up late to watch an American movie. Nada loves this time with her family, when the work is done and they can all sit back and watch television.

Nada lies in bed trying to sleep. She thinks she will attend the next day's Independence Day rally. It will be a nice break from school, and she can see her friend Hanan play the *tabla* (drum) for the first time. She also can't stop thinking about her favorite Turkish soap opera and the intense romance between the two main characters that seems doomed to fail. She wonders if women anywhere lead such lives—lives of intense romantic love, intrigue, and family defiance. Although she sometimes daydreams about boys and future romance, she could never imagine going against the wishes of her family for love. She knows she will not marry as her mother did—at the age of sixteen to a complete stranger—but still there are limits and one's family is one's support. With these thoughts in her head, Nada finally falls asleep.