

Mehmet's Choice

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Creating Learning Against Radicalization
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Teacher's guide to Mehmet's Choice

Goal:

A story targeting teenagers (Grade nine to eleven) that covers the theme of radicalization. It aims to provoke critical thinking by addressing sensitive issues, such as religious rules and cultural traditions.

Development:

The story follows Mehmet (16 years) and Layla (14 years), two Turkish siblings who emigrated to Québec from France. They move into one of Montreal's multiethnic neighbourhood, the borough of Saint-Laurent.

Story narrates how they settle into the neighbourhood, having neighbours of different nationalities and religions. The story follows Mehmet struggling with acceptance and seeking belonging. He befriends Robert, a playboy who is polar opposite to Mehmet and Hussain who is a childhood friend from a strict religious background.

Mehmet's conservative outlook clashes with Layla's secular free spirit. Mehmet's relationship with his parents and especially with his sister declines.

The *moment déclensheur* is when Mehmet seeks out his sister to confront her about seeing another boy.

Character traits:

Wadaa: mother. Wadaa who is 40 years old is a bit religious, but open minded, does not force her religious practices on the kids, she is veiled. She comes from a religious family. Her marriage to Shafiq was arranged.

Shafiq: Father. Coming from a secular middle class family, Shafiq's parents owned a corner store in Marseille. His parents were hard working and could not be bothered with religion. He inherited the business from his parents.

Mehmet: Mehmet is 16 years old. He is shy and withdrawn, loves his mom. A bit impressionable.

Hussain: introduces Mehmet to the muslim brotherhood. Attending mosque one Friday night with Hussain, Mehmet is triggered to confront his sister.

Family: they fail to give emotional support. They are so busy with their new depanneur.

Layla: free spirit, a social butterfly, makes friends easily, infectious laugh. Open minded. Free to do her own thing. Layla starts seeing a boy in her class. Mehmet finds out about it and that triggers the *moment décisive*.

Robert: Mehmet's friend in the same homeroom. Mehmet slowly becomes distant from Robert as he sees him as a negative influence.

Mehmet's Choice

Mehmet, Layla and their parents moved from Marseille, France to Saint-Laurent, Québec. Originally a middle class family from Konia, Turkey, they work for long hours in their new bakery selling Turkish delicacies. They start their day before the crack of dawn and finish at dusk. They both work hard earning a living in this small bakery.

Mehmet's mom is observant of her religious practices, but does not force the children to do the same. His father is secular. The family rarely attend the mosque.

Mehmet and Layla go to a multi-ethnic inner city school in Saint-Laurent. On the first day of school, Mehmet sits next to Robert. Over time, they become friends. Mehmet is introverted, shy, and very serious for his age, as he has to take on lots of responsibilities working in the bakery. He is still trying to find out who he is, and his family's immigration makes it harder for him to cope with his identity crisis. He is trying really hard to figure how he fits in his school and in this new society. It puts a lot of pressure on him. He feels protective of his sister, sometimes a bit overbearing for her, but their parents are happy that he looks after her. Mehmet never mentions any of his emotions to his parents. He knows that it would worry them. His parents count on Mehmet to look after Layla. He feels even more protective of his sister since they are in a new environment.

Mehmet is struggling with either becoming westernized or going back to his heritage. He cannot reconcile the western ideologies with his somewhat traditional heritage.

His school friend Robert represents all the advantages of being born in Canada. He does not have to work, he snowboards, smokes weed and he is a bit of a playboy. Mehmet and Robert are friends at school, but do not interact outside of school. Mehmet is a bit jealous of Robert. He does not want Robert to think less of him, so he never opens up to him.

Layla is bubbly and beautiful, she easily makes friends. She is a social butterfly and popular. She quickly establishes a varied circle of friends inside and outside of school.

One day in the park, Robert tells Mehmet that Layla is going out with a friend of his, not having a clue of what would come next. Mehmet is very upset about this news. He feels that he has failed in protecting his little sister, and that she is too young to see boys. He thinks that she is not capable of taking care of herself in this new environment with all its unknown dangers. He can't hide his reaction from Robert and expresses his worry about his sister.

Robert does not take his reaction seriously. He tries to calm him down by saying “Chill out! It is normal for them to go out!”

Mehmet can not handle the pressure. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, you don’t understand my culture. You ignorant b#\$%d !”

“Hey man, join the 21st century,” Robert says flippantly. Mehmet gets really upset and shoves Robert to the ground. Mehmet storms away, confused and hurt. He has no one to go to. He knows that he is not a religious fanatic, but also that he is not quite onboard with the progressive ideas of western feminism.

Hussain is a childhood friend from France who also emigrated to Canada with his family. Hussain and Mehmet’s parents are old friends. His family is very religious and they are strictly observant of traditional practices. He frequents the Muslim Brotherhood.

Hussain often visits Mehmet at the family bakery and does so the day of Mehmet’s argument with Robert. He can see that Mehmet is visibly upset and not focused. Hussain asks Mehmet “Are you okay?” Mehmet tells him what happened. Hussain is offended by Robert’s actions and tells Mehmet that Robert doesn’t really understand our culture. Hussain tells him that he understands him. He mentions a group of friends that share his point of view and invites Mehmet to meet them at a Friday night gathering. Mehmet sees that Hussain understands him and perks up at the idea of meeting these people who may help in showing him how to deal with his sister.

Friday night comes and Hussain picks Mehmet up at his house in his father’s car. They head out and arrive at the mosque. Mehmet asks, “Why are we going to a mosque?” and Hussain clarifies, “That’s where I am meeting my friends.” Mehmet gives him a weird look, he doesn’t usually go to the mosque. “Okay...”, He replies.

In the mosque, Mehmet and Hussain sit in a circle with Hussain’s friends and they discuss abstinence and other religious practices. The speaker asks if anyone would like to share an experience. Hussain leans over to Mehmet and tells him to share his story. Mehmet hesitates, but begins to open up about his sister.

After hearing Mehmet’s story, the speaker tells everyone that Mehmet needs to take action because the Quran forbids any forms of fraternization between men and women.

Listening to the speaker, Mehmet is overcome with emotions, he abruptly leaves the mosque to rush back home with many thoughts in his head.

He arrives home and runs up the stairs to his sister's room to confront her, but she's not there. He asks his mom, "where is Layla?" His mother says she's out with her friends. Mehmet is frustrated by her lack of attention.

Sitting outside on the steps of the house, Mehmet waits for his sister . . .

Layla is walking home in the distance with a boy . . .

Classroom Activity

Preamble: The issues discussed within the piece are sensitive in nature and may provoke extreme emotions for the students. The teacher or activity leader should take steps to create a safe environment for students to discuss the various themes that may arise.

Setup the class in a circle, have volunteer students read the story to the class.

After the reading, proceed to discussion with the following questions. Divide the class into teams of four students to answer the questions, mention to class that they need to reflect carefully on their answers, the answers have to be logical and respectful. Provide students with a 15 minute session to answer the questions. After this session, have the class reconvene to share and analyse their answers.

Questions for discussion with your class:

1. How can Mehmet's parents interfere in the current situation without making it worse? What could they have done to prevent Mehmet from feeling isolated at home?
2. Could Robert and Mahmet's discussion about Layla have gone differently? If so, how could Mahmet and Robert gain a greater understanding of each other's point of view?
3. Is Robert at fault at all? As a Canadian, should he be aware of other cultures? Should culture sensitivity be taught/ discussed at schools in countries like Canada?
4. It is true that one should take action against sin based on the religious teachings of Quran. How can one reconcile religious teachings with personal freedom and feminism in the 21st century?
5. Do you think that Hussain was trying to recruit Mehmet into the muslim brotherhood when he brought him to the mosque? Explain.
6. How do you think the story should end? Explain why?