

## Plot Analysis and Social Commentary in Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* (2018)

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### ABSTRACT

*The plot structure plays a pivotal role in a film's success, effectively guiding the audience through its narrative. As defined by Stanton (2007, p. 22), a plot is a series of interconnected events where each incident causes another, creating a cohesive storyline. This cause-and-effect dynamic significantly enhances a film's engagement and emotional impact. One film that exemplifies this well-structured approach is Nadine Labaki's Capernaum (2018). The film tells the heart-wrenching story of Zain, a boy who escapes from his abusive parents and sues them for bringing him into a world of misery. "Capernaum" has received critical acclaim, winning numerous awards, including the Jury Prize at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival. This study uses Tasrif's theory, as cited in Nurgiyantoro (2013), to examine the film's plot stages. Through a qualitative descriptive method, employing a narrative structure approach, the analysis focuses on the progression of events in the film. The data consists of dialogues, scenes, and imagery from Capernaum. The findings of this research outline five major plot stages: (1) the introduction of the situation, (2) the emergence of conflict, (3) the rising action, (4) the climax, and (5) the resolution. Each of these stages is examined to reveal how Capernaum underscores the systemic failures in protecting vulnerable children, serving not only as a powerful narrative but also as a compelling social commentary.*

**Keywords:** *plot analysis, film structure, Capernaum, social issues in cinema*

### A. Introduction

Film, as a medium of mass communication, relies on both visual and auditory elements to deliver its message. Its ability to captivate audiences lies in the seamless combination of color, narrative, and well-crafted storylines. As Stanton (2007, p. 22) points out, a film comprises four key elements: theme, character, setting, and plot. Among these, the plot plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and conveying the story effectively. Stanton also defines a plot as a sequence of interrelated events, where each event influences the next, creating a chain of cause and effect that strengthens the film's appeal. Similarly, Kenny (1966, p. 14) emphasizes that a plot is not merely a series of events but an intricately organized system based on causal relations, which enhances the creative structure of a film. Abrams (1999, p. 24) further elaborates that the plot is the framework of incidents in a story, arranged to evoke specific artistic and emotional responses.

Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* (2018) exemplifies the importance of a well-structured plot. The film, which tells the story of Zain, a 12-year-old boy who sues his parents for bringing him

into a life of suffering, has received widespread acclaim. As of February 2021, *Capernaum* held a rating of 8.4/10 based on 32,607 votes on IMDb. The film has also won several prestigious awards, including the Jury Prize at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival. The compelling narrative in *Capernaum* masterfully weaves together its plot, characters, and social issues, offering audiences a gripping exploration of systemic failures in protecting vulnerable children.

This analysis is based on Tasrif's theory (as cited in Nurgiyantoro, 2013), which divides the plot into five stages. These stages serve as a framework for understanding how *Capernaum* unfolds its powerful narrative:

**1. Situational Stage (Setting the Scene)**

This stage introduces the setting, characters, and context, providing the foundational information necessary for the story to develop. In *Capernaum*, the audience is introduced to Zain's harsh reality in the slums of Beirut, setting the tone for the unfolding drama.

**2. Stage of Generating Circumstances (Emergence of Conflict)**

Conflict arises as Zain decides to sue his parents, highlighting the severe neglect and systemic issues he faces. This stage sets the trajectory for the escalating tensions in the story.

**3. Rising Action Stage (Increased Conflict)**

The plot intensifies as Zain navigates life on the streets, forming a poignant bond with an Ethiopian refugee, Rahil, and her infant son. The increasing struggles and challenges he faces heighten the drama, drawing viewers deeper into the narrative.

**4. Climax Stage**

The emotional and narrative peak of *Capernaum* occurs as Zain's situation reaches its most critical point. The film's climax reveals the full extent of his despair and his desperate cry for justice, making a powerful statement on the plight of marginalized children.

**5. Resolution Stage**

The film concludes with Zain obtaining a birth certificate, symbolizing a renewed sense of hope and identity. Although the resolution offers some closure, it also leaves viewers contemplating the broader social implications of the film's narrative.

This analysis aims to explore the stages of the plot in *Capernaum* and critically examine how each stage highlights the systemic failures that leave vulnerable children unprotected. By understanding these plot stages, the study not only sheds light on the film's narrative structure but also emphasizes its role in addressing significant social issues.

## **B. Method**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive methodology utilizing a narrative structure approach. The data analyzed consists of words and images rather than numerical data (Semi, 1993:24). The narrative structure approach is often referred to as an objective approach. According to Ratna (2004:73), the objective approach focuses the analysis on elements known as intrinsic analysis. The structural or objective approach in literature fundamentally examines a literary work as an autonomous entity, independent of its background, history, and the author's biography, as well as other external factors (Satoto, 2014:47).

The data source for this analysis is the film *Capernaum*, directed by Nadine Labaki and produced in 2018. The film has a runtime of 2 hours and 6 minutes and was downloaded from the

site Bilibili. The data from this study includes clauses, dialogues, and images from *Capernaum* (2018).

The data collection technique follows Sugiyono's (2017:224) method, which involves repeatedly watching and observing the film, noting timestamps and dialogues spoken by the characters, gathering all data in the form of dialogues and images, and ultimately understanding and studying the theory relevant to the research. The data in the form of dialogues and images are expressed in phrases, words, sentences, or symbols (Arikunto, 2013:282).

Regarding the data analysis techniques, three steps are involved: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion (Sangidu, 2004:73).

### **a. Data Reduction**

In this stage, the author selects data in the form of dialogues, images, and clauses that are deemed important and relevant to the problem statement. According to Sugiyono (2010:338), data reduction involves categorizing data in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. Subsequently, quotes, such as dialogues from each plot stage analyzed in the film *Capernaum*, are organized and categorized.

### **b. Data Presentation**

Data presentation involves showcasing dialogues, images, and supporting theories related to the plot analysis of *Capernaum*.

### **c. Conclusion**

Following the stages of data reduction and presentation, the next step for the scholar is to verify or draw conclusions from the data based on the results of the analysis presented.

## **C. Findings and Analysis**

This study identifies five distinct stages of the plot in the film *Capernaum* (2018), based on the twelve data points observed, following the theoretical framework presented by Tasrif (in Nurgiyantoro, 2013:209). The five stages are as follows:

### **1. Situational Stage (A) - Data Point 1**

#### **Image 1: Zain in Court**

(Duration: 05:00 – 08:12)

**Lawyer:** "Do you know why you're here?"

**Zain:** "Yes."

**Lawyer:** "Why?"

**Zain:** "I want to accuse my parents."

**Lawyer:** "Why do you want to accuse your parents?"

**Zain:** "For bringing me into the world."

In this pivotal courtroom scene, Zain's desire to sue his parents for giving birth to him encapsulates his anguish and sets a somber tone for the film. The weight of his statement reveals the dire circumstances that have led him to take such an extreme step, highlighting themes of neglect and abandonment. The transition from the courtroom to Zain's harsh reality is crucial, allowing the audience to witness the struggles of his family as they grapple with poverty.

### **Image 2: Zain Performing Various Tasks to Help His Family Survive**

**Souad (Zain's Mother):** "This isn't a house! It's a shelter for pigs!"

**Souad (Zain's Mother):** "Zain, why are these vegetables rotten?"

These dialogues provide insight into the chaotic environment that defines Zain's daily life. The stark portrayal of their living conditions underscores the urgency of Zain's actions and amplifies the film's central themes of familial responsibility and societal failure.

**Zain:** "Sahar, why is there blood on your shorts? Hurry before someone sees us. Remember what happened to your friend Alia? When her mother found out, they locked her up at home, then some fat pig came and took her. Mom won't want you. She'll toss you in the street. She'll give you to Assaad."

This scene not only establishes the challenging circumstances Zain faces but also highlights his protective instincts toward his sister Sahar, illustrating the burdens placed on children in such dire situations.

## **2. Conflict Emergence Stage (B) - Data Point 2**

### **Image 3: Sahar Being Prepared for Marriage by Their Parents**

*(Duration: 23:49-25:30)*

**Zain:** "Where are you taking her? You're sending her to be that asshole's maid?"

**Souad (Zain's Mom):** "It's none of your business."

**Zain:** "Please don't do this to her; she's just a kid."

**Souad (Zain's Mom):** "We have no choice. Step away, I said, don't get mixed up in this."

**Sahar:** "I don't want to go, Mom!"

This moment is critical as it highlights Zain's desperation to protect his sister from a forced marriage. The emotional intensity of the dialogue underscores the tension within the family and the systemic failure of societal norms to protect vulnerable children from such exploitation. Zain's response embodies the internal conflict brewing within him as he grapples with the betrayal and anger directed towards his parents.

## **3. Conflict Escalation Stage (C) - Data Point 3**

### **Image 4: Zain's Struggles in the Streets**

*(Duration: 39:25-98:12)*

**Zain:** "Is the owner here?"

**Rahil:** "What do you want with him?"

**Zain:** "I'm looking for work."

**Rahil:** "What kind of work?"

**Zain:** "Anything; working is what counts."

**Rahil:** "What's your name?"

**Zain:** "Zain."

Zain's decision to run away from home marks a significant escalation of conflict. His experiences on the streets reflect the harsh realities faced by many children in similar circumstances. When he encounters Rahil, a woman struggling to provide for her infant son, their relationship becomes a lifeline for both. Zain's adaptability and resilience are evident as he helps Rahil care for Yonas, establishing a sense of family amid chaos.

#### **Image 5: Zain Finds Himself Responsible for Yonas Without Any Adult Support**

As Zain steps into a parental role, his nurturing instincts highlight the tragic realities faced by children forced to assume adult responsibilities. His commitment to Yonas demonstrates his resourcefulness and the dire societal conditions that necessitate such roles.

#### **Image 6: Zain's Decision to Give Yonas to Aspro**

**Aspro:** "Don't worry about Yonas; I love him. He'll go to a good family."

In a moment of desperation, Zain's decision to give Yonas to Aspro reveals the depth of his hopelessness. Despite the pain associated with this choice, it underscores Zain's awareness of his limitations in providing care. His internal conflict is palpable as he grapples with feelings of guilt, suggesting a tragic resignation to his circumstances.

### **4. Climax Stage (D) - Data Point 4**

#### **Image 7: Zain Returns Home and Finds Out That Sahar Has Died**

*(Duration: 102:15-103:55)*

**Zain:** "Who went to the hospital? Talk to me! Who was in the hospital? What did he do to her?"

**Souad (Zain's Mother):** "Sahar is gone."

The climax arrives with the devastating news of Sahar's death due to complications from her forced marriage. Zain's grief transforms into rage, culminating in his violent confrontation with Assad, Sahar's husband. This pivotal moment embodies Zain's fight against systemic injustices and his longing for retribution.

#### **Image 8: Zain Stabs Assad in a Fit of Rage**

**Zain:** "She's gone? You'll see what that means; I'll show you what it means."

This act of violence signifies not only Zain's breaking point but also serves as a critical commentary on the failures of societal structures that allow such injustices to occur. His desperate quest for justice is symbolic of a larger struggle against a system that perpetuates suffering.

### **5. Completion Stage (E) - Data Point 5**

#### **Image 9: Zain in the Youth Detention Center**

*(Duration: 104:05-120:30)*

**Reporter:** "Is there an adult next to you, Zain?"

**Zain:** "An officer."

**Reporter:** "An officer? Where are you calling from, Zain?"

**Zain:** "From prison, Roumieh Prison for minors."

**Reporter:** "Zain, why are you calling? What can I do for you?"

**Zain:** "I want to make a complaint against my parents. I want adults who can't raise kids not to have any. What will I take from all this? Violence, all the insults or beatings, hit with chains, pipes, or a belt. The nicest words I heard were 'fuck off, you son of a bitch.'"

Zain's poignant call from the youth detention center represents a turning point, where he finally finds his voice and demands accountability for the injustices he has faced. His raw, emotional expression of suffering is a powerful indictment of the systemic failures that have left him and countless others vulnerable.

### **Image 10: Zain in Courtroom**

**Lawyer:** "Zain, what do you want from your parents?"

**Zain:** "I want them to stop having kids."

**Lawyer:** "You want them to stop having kids? I don't think they're going to have any more children."

**Zain:** "And what about that one? He's going to be born, right?"

This courtroom scene serves as a climax for Zain's emotional journey, encapsulating his desire for systemic change. His words highlight the urgent need for societal and legal reforms to protect vulnerable children from neglect and abuse.

### **Image 11: Zain Takes a Passport Photo**

**Voice of Man:** "Smile, Zain; this is for your ID card, not your death certificate."

In the film's closing moments, as Zain prepares for a new chapter in his life, the act of smiling for his ID photo symbolizes hope and resilience. Despite the adversity he has faced, this moment hints at a brighter future and the possibility of reclaiming his childhood.

## **D. Conclusion**

The analysis of the plot in *Capernaum* reveals five stages of narrative progression, aligned with Tasrif's plot staging theory (in Nurgiyantoro, 2013:209-210). Each stage not only narrates Zain's journey but also highlights systemic failures in protecting vulnerable children. The film presents a linear plot structure with clear stages:

1. **Situational Stage (A)** - Duration 05:00 – 08:12: Introduces Zain's impoverished background and sets the foundation for the themes of neglect and systemic failure.
2. **Conflict Emergence Stage (B)** - Duration 23:49-25:30: Highlights the profound betrayal Zain feels when Sahar is married off, showcasing the societal neglect of child welfare.
3. **Conflict Escalation Stage (C)** - Duration 39:25-98:12: Illustrates Zain's harrowing experiences on the streets, emphasizing the survival instincts of children in dire circumstances.

4. **Climax Stage (D)** - Duration 102:15-103:55: Presents the emotional apex of the story as Zain confronts the consequences of his tragic circumstances, culminating in violence and a quest for justice.
5. **Completion Stage (E)** - Duration 104:05-120:30: Zain's transformation into a voice for the voiceless underscores the need for societal accountability and reform.

Through its poignant storytelling, *Capernaum* not only sheds light on the struggles of children in poverty but also serves as a powerful commentary on the need for societal change.

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