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# Short Film Review

## IF I DIE IN AMERICA

(Ward Kamel, US 2024)

A dark street, a close-up of a bloody face, a mouth forming the words “Sameer, Sameer, Sameer. Wake up!” This is how the short film *IF I DIE IN AMERICA* (Ward Kamel, US 2024, 15') begins. We learn that Sameer (George Shakkour) has died in a car accident, and we follow his husband, Manny (Gil Perez-Abraham), for the rest of the film. Manny, deeply grieving for his husband, has to deal with Sameer's traditional Muslim family. They want to bury Sameer's body in Kuwait and try to get Manny to sign the necessary papers. In the process a family member insists that Manny and Sameer did not have a real marriage. Manny talks to Sameer's mother Noora (Ilham Malki), who acknowledges that the two were married and asks him for her



Fig1: Manny grieving for his husband. Film still, *IF I DIE IN AMERICA* (Ward Kamel, US 2024), 00:00:44.

son's body with the words, "You had him while he could still choose. Do you need him now that he can't?" (00:13:10). The film ends with Manny packing his suitcase – perhaps to fly to the funeral in Kuwait – leaving the bedroom and turning off the light.

A central medium and the primary site of contestation in *IF I DIE IN AMERICA* is Sameer's dead body. From Manny's perspective, the body is that of his husband. Even if we do not know anything about Manny's own religious convictions, it is clear that for him, no quick funeral, as according to Muslim tradition, is necessary. The body's physical presence is necessary for him to process his grief. From the perspective of the in-laws, the physical body is needed for a ceremony to be held as soon as possible, in Kuwait, and certainly not in America. While there are ritual justifications for the family's position (ideally no more than 24 hours between death and burial), there are also other considerations, such as the status and reputation of Sameer's family, as when Dalal (Hana Chamoun) – a female member of Sameer's wider family – mentions "delays" that are "offensive to the family and the faith". The family suggests the compromise of Manny holding a memorial ceremony without the body, but no such middle ground between the two positions is feasible. Director and writer Ward Kamel revealed in an interview that his own experience of immigrating to the United States from Syria during the infamous "Muslim travel ban" inspired the scenario of *IF I DIE IN AMERICA*.<sup>1</sup> The context of immigrants being artificially separated from their families is important for understanding the lack of compromise about what can happen.

This incommensurability is also evident in the film's aesthetics, which depict a rather grey, generic America. In this moment of grief, Manny is alone and isolated. Though people send him messages with condolences, there is no one there with him (fig. 1). His isolation is reinforced by frequent close-ups of faces, contrasting music (electronic music with a pulsing beat versus soothing Bach) and slow lateral camera movements, all of which help the viewer empathize with the main protagonist and his emotional state.

This aesthetic of isolation makes the final scene, in which Manny is shown packing a small suitcase and then exiting the bedroom and switching off the lights, with Bach playing in the background, all the more powerful (fig. 2). Manny and Sameer are probably about to travel together on one last

1 *The Hollywood Times Official*, Interview with Ward Kamel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c5e0NzrcCw> [accessed 17 December 2025].



Fig. 2: Manny packing his suitcase at the end of the film. Film still, IF I DIE IN AMERICA (Ward Kamel, US 2024), 00:14:09.

trip, to Kuwait. Perhaps the funeral there will ultimately help Manny grieve, but the story ends before we reach this point.

As we see it, possession of Sameer's dead body is the reason for the conflict. Conflict is essential to film narratives. Conflict of different kinds often moves the narrative forward: it helps create structure, develop characters and generate motivations. When religion is a part of a film story, through characters, beliefs or spaces, it often serves to create tension or conflict. The conflict in IF I DIE IN AMERICA shapes how religion is represented and understood in this short film. On a first viewing, the portrayal of religion may seem unsympathetic. IF I DIE IN AMERICA presents a religious tradition related to how to treat the dead, a tradition with a focus on a collective. From the perspective of Sameer's family, the individual's grief is not crucial, or at least much less important.

Connected to this conflict, religion in this short story also has the role of a moral voice. Religious characters in films often express moral standpoints that lead them to seem set in their ways and unwilling to compromise. However, a religious-moral perspective can challenge a simplistic understanding of what is happening. In IF I DIE IN AMERICA, religion is used to move the perspective away from personal loss and onto family and community – to the needs of the many instead of the few. The interests and wellbeing of those closest to the dead (often the partner left behind) are frequently prioritized, but here the audience and the character Manny are challenged to look at grief in a different way – to not be “selfish”, as Sameer's mother

puts it, but to see the needs of others as well. To reach out and meet others in a situation of grief.

We can explore the connection between the individual and the collective in relation to Manny. Throughout the film, the camera follows him closely and shows his changing emotions in dealing with his loss and his traditional-religious in-laws. But who is Manny?

Let us gather “the facts”. We know that Manny was married to the man who died, although Khalil (Moud Sabra), one of Sameer’s relatives, calls their relationship simply an “arrangement to get a Green Card”. We know that Manny is aware of the non-acceptance of homosexuality among his husband’s relatives, and we know that he is unaware of Muslim practices regarding the burying of the deceased. But his views and values are never explicitly articulated in the film. He is almost without name, without qualities, and possibly without religion, and therefore arguably without justified demands in relation to the funeral. We see his emotions but learn little about his ideas about the world and his way of life. All of this remains open and can be filled in by us, the audience. Does this make it easier for us to identify with Manny? The title of the film can be taken into consideration here. The short is not called “If Sameer Dies in America”, but rather “If I Die in America”. Who is this “I”? Is it Manny, who suddenly becomes aware of his own mortality? Is it we, the viewers of the film? Is the film a *memento mori*? Numerous images, such as the leftovers from a party, the decaying flowers, or the lights being turned off, are *vanitas* motifs. So, is Manny a blank canvas that we can fill individually with our own values and questions?

The film is complex and nuanced in many ways. It requires special effort for the viewer to recognize how it assumes that “religion” has particular justificatory power that transcends secular, individually held or unsystematically articulated views, and also how it constructs the tensions between different worldviews, styles of living and emotional bonds.

We conclude by posing three questions that highlight the particularity and relevance of this multifaceted and polysemic short film for the study of religion and media:

(1) How are religious customs – particularly the urgency of Muslim burial practices – used as a means to explore queer identity, death and associated emotions? Could one have told a similar story with another religious or ritual context (Christian, Hindu, Jewish etc.)?

(2) What does this film tell us about current trends concerning the representation of religion in translocal or diasporic contexts, and especially about the distance between diasporic contexts and imaginations of “home”? Is this distance shown as “growing” – perhaps in light of borders becoming everywhere more rigid?

(3) How does this film navigate the potential pitfalls of depicting foreign cultures and societies in a negative light, thereby either challenging or inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes within the Western imagination? Conversely, is there a danger in portraying non-religious people as inarticulate and lacking in values? Can the film distinguish between individual life-stories and a larger cultural and religious context that may often be more flexible and diverse than imagined?

### **Bibliography**

*The Hollywood Times Official*, Interview with Ward Kamel, 29 June 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c5e0NzrcCw> [accessed 17 December 2025].