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A TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH OF KHALIL I. AL-FUZAI'S "THE SINGLE GATHERING"

Abstract: Khalil I. Al-Fuzai (1940-) is a writer from Saudi Arabia who published few collections of stories. In these stories he tries to introduce his Arabian society in a simple, frank way (see Dohal 2013). One of these stories is "The Single Gathering." Here he addresses the issue of marriage, encouraging the youth to marry. I chose to translate this story for it is a good sample of what Al-Fuzai has written (Dohal, 2018 & 2019). Furthermore, it presents some aspects found in the Arabian culture; it is about how people handle the idea of marriage.

Key words: Al-Fuzai, Saudi, short story, "The Single Gathering".

Language: English

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Introduction

Muhsen meets his friend's sister Maha. He fantasizes about marrying her, and decides to ask for her hand. We see him visit her family, but he is hesitant to declare the reasons for his visit. In the story, it is acceptable to call on a friend without a prior appointment. Culturally it is out of the question to refuse a friend's visit.

The issue of marriage is important in the Arabian society. It has cultural rituals. Usually a suitor or whomever he appoints to act in his behalf will talk first with a male representative for the female in question about marriage. Enough time is given to ask the female and her family about their consent.

In some Arabian families as it is the case in the story, it is unusual to have females attend meetings where there are males from other families. But the story tells us that Anwar and his family come "from the land of the north." That means that they are from Syria, Lebanon or Jordan. These countries are north of Saudi Arabia and are called the land of the north. In such societies women may join men at their meetings. Indeed, the story refers to the fact that some Saudi Arabian men marry women from Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Customs of the Arabian society encourage marriage. However, some people may abstain from marriage for various reasons, most of them personal. Muhsen hardly knows Maha's family, yet he has decided to propose to her. At a crucial moment, however, Muhsen discovers that Maha is engaged.²

* * *

Translation:

When the sun of life rises . . .³ and announces each morning the birth of a new struggle . . . the horizon of his life remains without conflict . . . emptiness and futility color every aspect of his life . . . and thwart its insistence on being free from every thing . . . and on the horizon the glimpses of hope blink out as if a dragon exerts itself to the utmost preying on its victims, desiring nothing but them, and the insistent, fundamental melancholy changes everything good before him into a pessimism that opens its mouth and swallows the faith of weak people . . . even from silence, until one day . . . the lost person changes into a human being who knows his aim, so he finds optimism even in the rays of the sun when they throw themselves at the foot of the scattered bushes in the garden of his house, or when they steal in through the windows of his bedroom.

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When he meets her, he finds in her the great secret that he has been searching for all his years, a search he was not aware of; he even used to mock his colleagues when they talked about marriage and the happiness it offers. He used to hate marriage . . . and hate women . . . and hate life . . . despite all the victories he achieved wherever the waves of life threw him . . . and in spite of the big hopes that he managed to hold . . . despite everything . . .

But when he finds himself . . . the world cannot make room for him . . .

The secret of his admiration is not her beauty . . . not her control over his feelings since their eyes first met, but inside him something calls out that the aim he sought in the past is embodied all of a sudden in front of him . . . in the person of Maha, the sister of his friend Anwar . . . Maha . . . how beautiful this name is! Oh chant of a lost hope, embodied in flesh and blood, and in the ultimate goal found accompanying his friend Anwar when he meets them on a smiling spring evening and insists on inviting them to his house, and without realizing the gist of his feeling at the beginning . . . he awaits them, boiling with impatience until the meeting takes place, then words pour from her lips like amiable streams and fresh rivers, even when she objects to his opinion, there is a hidden secret that confirms his discovery of the desired hope.

The next day, he is the first to talk with his colleagues about women, marriage and marital life; this change surprises them . . . some praise him and others get angry at him, and all are surprised at his decision to marry.

One of his colleagues bursts out, “Are you serious in what you say, Muhsen?”

“Yes . . . why not? I was wrong in my opinion. And it is not shameful to be wrong; the shame is when one insists on his mistake, and I am not the only one to leave the bachelors’ club.”

“But this is a sudden dangerous change, you may not like its consequences.”

“Do not worry . . . I always bear the consequences of my behavior, and I am convinced that this is the best choice, so there is nothing to fear.”

“Do you want my advice? . . . leave the issue of marriage to others.”

“Keep your advice to yourself until I request it from you.”

And he leaves his colleague angry. And his colleague leaves him angrier.

Soon everyone knows about his determination to marry, and his severance from the bachelors’ club, which he founded with the help of his colleagues. And

in an extraordinary meeting of the club board of directors, he announces his resignation from the club presidency, and they have to choose a new president . . . to hell with the members and their club.

The bachelors’ club . . . nonsense . . . if they only knew what he knew when he met Maha with his friend Anwar who brought his family from the land of the north to this boisterous coastal city.

In the evening he decides to visit his friend Anwar, removing from his mind the bubbles of hesitation that have been controlling him for a time, which seems long though it started yesterday.

And he knocks at the door though he is held back by his heart which is almost jumping from his chest, and the fear that he will betray himself announcing what he wants, in spite of his belief that life without Maha is not worth a clipping of a nail, oh quivering heart . . . sustain until the most dangerous part you are passing through is over, and you, oh lost mind, settle until the hardest experience you are engaging in is over. The door opens . . . and his friend Anwar is there, and happiness almost prances from his eyes, and honestly he welcomes him though he does not hide an obscure curiosity about the reason for the unexpected visit, particularly since he explains that he would not be available when his friend invited him during his visit to them yesterday; he would be busy with overtime work this week, and the next week as well. The question appears on his face . . . without haste oh! Anwar . . . in a moment you will know why I am here without an appointment . . . you will be happy for me when you find out that I am asking for the hand of your sister about whom you talked to me many times over the years before you brought your family with you.

“Welcome . . . an unexpected visit . . . I am happy that you are concerned with my visit.”

“Thank you, Anwar.”

He wants to say something but words pile up in his throat until they are about to choke him, and without his consent they dissolve between his lips so that he cannot distinguish them, while Anwar showers him with welcome and expressions of courtesy.

And when the rest of the family gathers to welcome him and sit with him, Maha is the last to come; discussion on a variety of issues, all of them trivial, takes place, until at last Anwar says, “What is the rumors we heard about you . . . I hope they are true?”

The air starts to thicken around him in a jelly-like rotten form . . . he becomes confused:

“What news, Anwar?”

“We heard that you intend to marry.”

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He has the chance and is not going to let it slip away. "Is there anything displeasing in this?"

"No . . . there is nothing displeasing . . . I am just wondering about your previous stance . . . you have been known for your hatred of women."

"Oh! Anwar, I was wrong until I met her."

"What happened?"

His gaze rolls to settle on Maha, so he forgets his friend's question.

He thinks . . . I should marry her, so why not declare the reason for my visit . . . no . . . no . . . they may get offended by my conduct, we must talk about this subject on our own, even Maha should be the first to know about my wish to marry her; never mind . . . I will invite Anwar to call on me or I will stop by his office, and then I can tell him about the matter, and he will welcome the idea, for I am his friend . . . of course he will ask me to wait for his final decision until he can ask her opinion and consider the proposal with other members of the family, and these are conventions whose results will be in my favor, but why wait? Such issues do not need hesitation, they need a quick decision . . . I will tell him everything, whatever the result, but I will wait for the right moment, and I will not leave this house until the whole family knows about the matter . . .

"What are you thinking, Muhsen?" Anwar surprises him with this question.

He answers, "Nothing . . . I am listening to what you are saying."

They talk about another topic, the fact that he is distracted gives them a chance to explore it, and leave the topic of marriage completely. He turns again to look at Maha in a way that attracts others' attention, and then he completely turns to face Anwar and joins him in a conversation that does not serve to distract his mind from thinking of her. And when she interrupts their talk, he lends not only his ears but also all his organs to what she says.

Should a chance come for him to disclose what he has in mind . . . but topics diverge and stray far from the subject of marriage, so he decides to turn the discussion back to this subject.

He takes the first opportunity when all become silent, and says, after he remembers that his friend's question is still without answer, "You asked me before the reason for my decision to marry."

"Yeah . . . I forgot that topic. Can you clarify the matter?"

"It does not need any explanation . . . I have found the one I dreamt of."

Unintentionally he glances at Maha through the corner of his eye, no one apparently notices because all are listening to him talk.

Anwar says, "She must be pretty . . . because you do not change your opinion easily."

"She is really pretty."

At that moment a curl of her hair drops onto the side of her forehead, but it does not separate from the golden hair hanging over her shoulder like the waterfalls of happiness; she is beautiful to the extreme of beauty.

"Do you want to know who she is?"

"If that does not bother you."

The doorbell howls urgently . . . suddenly it stops, and he feels a vacuum of quiet; there is a visitor whom a few steps still separate from them.

He says to his friend Anwar, feeling an urgent desire to finish the matter before its reins of power slips away, "In order to tell you we have to be alone."

And then, the visitor arrives, and all including Maha welcome him cheerfully; this reception makes Muhsen feel some disgust toward this youth whose appearance indicates that he is not from this country . . . like them.

And when he shakes his hand, welcoming him, Anwar says, with the youth still holding his hand, "This is my friend Muhsen, and this is Ahmed . . . my aunt's son and the fiancé of my sister Maha."

* * *

Conclusion:

As noticed in this story, Khalil I. Al-Fuzai is a social critic of his society; he criticizes and denounces abstinence from marriage; as indicated in the story, abstinence is a "mistake." And indirectly, he encourages marriage from within the society itself. In addition, marrying from other societies may cause some troubles like those of cultural variations that the Arabian society is very sensitive to. Hence, it is the mission of writers to address issues related and important to their societies (see Dohal 2013).

* * *

Translator's Notes:

1- This story was translated from the following Arabic source:

Al-Fuzai, Khalil I. *Thursday Fair*. (سوق الخميس). Taif: Taif Literary Club, 1979: 43-49.

2- An introduction a reader may need to connect the text to its context.

3- . . . Every now and then there are few dots found in the source text.

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