**A Woman's Fate**

The news soon spread like a smog through the small town from the north to the south. It was announced that *School*1 was an undesirable thing. The English word had reached this part of the Gulf without its Arabic synonym, so that people used it blindly, even the senior citizens, and it was causing a lot of trouble.

The *School* had announced that there would be a school uniform for all girls who wish to enroll in the coming year. It would be a pair of white trousers, a brown dress and a white small scarf. The length of the brown dress should be to the knee.

Sara was a nine years old, with black hair and eyes. She had already spent two years at *School*, but before this she had always worn her house dress for school. She loved school and study so much that she would open her books and tell everything she had learned to her younger sisters, Raya and Fatma. Raya was only four years old, and Fatma was a six, but even for her the word *school* meant something great, though she was only a child.

That day, when their father came back after *Al-Maghrib* prayer and entered the house, he called in a loud voice, "Al- Salam Al-Ikom, " and went straight to his room to take off his dishdasha and cap. He was a very strict man whose time had given men power and pushed them to show their dominance.

He then went directly to the kitchen, where the mother was cooking rice.

" You’ve returned?"3 the mother said.

"Yes. Where is Sara?" the father asked.

" I think she’s playing with her sisters."

" See, I’ve heard about this new school dress. I am a man and I will not let my daughter wear anything so alien."

" But, think of her future. She must be educated."

" I see no purpose to it all,” and he yelled from the kitchen, “Sara, come now immediately!"

Sara had been lying on her mat in the small bed room. Hearing her father’s voice, she threw the book she was reading and ran to the kitchen.

"Yes, Dad."

"Why don't you help your mother? You need to start cooking now."

"Yes, Dad," Sara murmured.

He left the kitchen, and Sara went near her mother and picked up the teapot. She poured tea into a cup.

"Oh, my hand! Oh!" She ran to the bathroom.

Her mother followed and found Sara crying in pain. Her left thumb was burnt.

"How many times I have said be careful! You’ve burnt yourself. I’ll get the olive oil," the mother said anxiously.

Sara went to her room and found her sisters playing with her bag and books. She was angry and beat them with her right hand, weeping.

The mother came in holding the olive oil. "What's happing here? Oh, Allah what's this mess?"

"They have torn some pages from my book," Sara cried.

"I told you to put them away from your sisters. It is your own mistake."

The mother put some oil over her daughter's thumb and rubbed it. Then she said, "I’m going to check the rice. Raya and Fatma, you be quiet."

But Sara was still tearful and she hit her sisters again, and they went to their mother crying.

“So this is what we have gained from *School*!" the mother said.

After that, the family gathered for dinner, a large metal plate of chicken and rice placed on a big metal tray on the sitting room floor. The father prayed, "In the name of Allah. Oh Allah! Bless the food you have provided us and save us from the punishment of the hellfire.” They all started to eat.

Sara looked across at her father. “Dad, I have to cut out a dress for the next year. The school will open in September. They want us to wear a different dress, not our house dresses.”

"It's western dress. No woman should wear such a dress," the father replied.

"I don't think it’s western. It looks just like an Omani dress."

"You know more than me?"

The mother eyed Sara and warned her with an expression to stop speaking. She looked at her husband and said, " Oh, children are naughty these days!"

Sara stood up, saying, "So? You will not allow me to go to the school? Hasn't our prophet said, *’Go in quest of knowledge, even unto China’* ? I *do* know more than you!" She ran to her room and shut the door.

The father stood up to wash his hands and then to go to pray Al-Isha prayer. The mother went to see Sara.

"Never speak to your father like this! You don't know him like me. He knows what is best for us," she said.

"You are cheating yourself, Mom. This is not a life!" Sara cried.

The mother moved near her daughter and held Sara's chin. "Don't make yourself so uneasy, my daughter. I am worried about you."

"So I have to start doing the tough work here?"

"We all have to help your father. We have to eat and live."

" I hate all this!"

Sara lay on her mat, covering herself with her quilt. Her mother went out to finish the house work.

Days passed, and the school was opened for the new year. Many girls did not go to the school because of the decision about the new school uniform. Sara would wait each day for the boys who lived next her house to hear about the school. Every day she asked them what they had done at school, and she would return each day to her house, crying that she had missed a chance with no reason.

One afternoon, as she was going to her aunt’s house to play with her cousins, she met Ali near his house. He was ten and lived nearby. Because he was from a different tribe, his family was more broad-minded, and especially since his parents were literate.

Ali was surprised to see her. "Sara, I haven't seen you for a long time. Why don't I see you outside playing these days?" He moved near her. "You look exhausted, Sara. Are you okay?"

"Well, I have to help my mother in all chores. I have to work at the long farm, to, .cutting grass and corn for the cows and goats in the morning. Then, I go to feed them with my mom. I have also to take care of my two younger sisters. Many things need to be done. To be honest, I wake up at dawn and I don't sleep until night." Her tears wanted to fall as she spoke, but she was strong and held them back

" You do all that, Sara! You are becoming a farmer, or a housewife!" Ali smiled.

There was silence for a few minutes. Sara pretended to observe the mango tree, while Ali was looking at the falaj4. The sound of water flowing into the steams was lovely.

Then Ali looked at Sara, " Why don't you have a worker? Your father has a lot of money. He can afford one."

Sara turned toward Ali and said, "My dad is very intolerant. I’ve heard my mom complaining to my granny. He wouldn't let me go to school because of the new dress. He won't employ any worker. My mom is tired of working day and night."

They heard a voice calling Sara. " It's my Aunt Nasra’s voice,” and she whispered to Ali that she hated the old woman, then said farewell and returned to the house.

There she found her uncle's wife, Nasra, with her two daughters, Asma and Mariam, sitting with her mother, eating dates and drinking coffee. She shook hands with them all and then seated herself near her mom.

"It is much better now that Sara is sitting in the home instead of going to school," the uncle's wife said, " From the beginning I never allowed my daughters to attend School, and now they are all married."

"For a woman, it is better to be wed and to rear her kids," her mom said.

Sara wanted to say something. She could hardly bear to be speechless, but she remembered her mom's instructions that she should remain silent in the presence of older women. She heard them say that they would come to take her the following day. She was shocked. She realized her destiny. Here, girls were married off at an early age without consulting their views or sensations. Her friend Fatma had recently been married to a young boy from her relatives. Sara thought of other young girls who had been married, too.

She was wondering which one of her cousins she would be married to. She thought of Ahmed. He was a very handsome boy, and smart as well. But she remembered that Ahmed was in Muscat studying and couldn't be married now. She thought then of Mansoor, who was younger than her. Then, she thought of Said and Habib, but their mother wasn't the aunt, Nasra. Their mother was from Zanzibar. Her Aunt Nasra had only five sons, Juma, Ahmed, Mansoor, Ibrahim and Khalid, she was thinking, IIbrahim and Khaild were old and already married.

Aloud, she said, "I hate all this. I don't want to marry."

She ran to her room. She wanted to complete her study and become a doctor. Yet her dream had already been smashed in front of her eyes. She went to open her bag to look at her notebook. She thought of asking Ali to teach her. The Imam called to Al-*Mugrub* prayer. As she got up for ablutions, she saw a crescent moon shining in the sky. It was so beautiful and so gentle. She stopped and eyed at it deeply until she heard the sound of her mother speaking to her two sisters.

"Where did you go, Mom?" Sara asked.

"I went with Nasra to Aiza's house. She’s given a birth to twins. They are sick."

"Why don't they take them to the hospital in Muscat?"

"Hospital! People have died because of that stupid place. A family from Al-Jafriya village went to the hospital and the boy’s sickness increased. They gave him an injection. How can any child bear their harsh tools! Allah protect us from their malice."

"I’m going to pray, Mom"

" Today is the first of Shaaban5. We are getting near Ramadan," her mother said.

After prayers, Sara took her notebook, intending to go out.

"Where are you going?" her sister, Fatma, asked quietly.

Sara said quickly, "Don't tell anybody. I am going to study with Ali. He’s offered to help me to read more and more."

"Ali!" Fatma laughed. " You ought to be going with Juma. He is your husband."

Sara stopped and turned back toward her sister. “What? I have no husband, in the first place. Second, stop laughing at me. I’ m older than you."

She went outside the house.

Their father came in happily holding a purse. He went to his room where he had found his wife organizing the mats.

" I’ve married Sara to my nephew Juma for seven *qoreesh*."6

"Thank Allah! Nasra came to visit us in the afternoon. They are going to take Sara tomorrow." The mother spoke sorrowfully. She could not add anything more. Juma was about twenty years old. He had already divorced twice. He was a playful man. He worked with his father in the souk where they had three shops. She did not like Juma or his father. They were greedy people.

The mother had only three daughters, so when her husband died, all his property would be divided between her, her three daughters and her husband’s stepbrothers. There were many stepbrothers from three different mothers. She was afraid that Juma's father was planning something by marrying his son to Sara.

The father was busy counting the money and locking it inside the*mandoos*7 when Fatma knocked the door of her parents' room and entered.

"Sara’s gone outside," she said.

"To where?" the father said angrily.

Fatma didn't reply. She looked at her mother with a scared face. She knew that she had made a mistake. The father shouted at Fatma until she told him the truth. He immediately picked up his stick and went outside, hurrying like a fugitive zebra from an enraged lion. Fatma ran to her room. The mother followed the father, attempting to calm him down.

Sara was sitting with Ali, practicing reading the Holy Quran. A lamp was standing between them, lighting the place smoothly like the crescent moon.

"Here you are, girl!" the father said angrily. He pulled her by her hair and the Holy Quran fell down.

Ali picked up the Holy Quran and kissed it. "I ask Allah's forgiveness," he said.

The father took no notice and dragged Sara to his house. She was crying. He threw her into the bedroom and hit her three times with his stick, until the mother stopped him. The father caught Raya stealing a look at the beatings and threw her into her room. Fatma was lying there on her mat. Raya, panic-stricken, went over to Sara, and Sara put an arm round her sister’s neck.

"Don't be afraid, dear," she said. Raya put her head on her sister's shoulder and burst into tears.

The mother then came, bringing a loaf of bread and honey that she put on the ground for them.

"Don't go without eating your dinner. I’m going to wash the dishes. Sara, you don't have to come to help me."

"Thank you, Mom."

The mother left. She wanted to be lenient, but she couldn't. He had warned her. How many times had she quarreled with him about her daughters? It was all she could do. Her life was totally reliant on him. A wife had no option but to obey her husband’s every word. Whether she liked him or not was not important, as long as she was able to help him and provide him with all his needs. It was as if she was in one wadi and her husband was in a totally different one.

The sound of the dawn prayer call soon awakened the village. Sara had not slept. She went to her sisters and kissed both, as if bidding them farewell. After praying, she opened the Holy Quran and tried to read. She had memorized all the *Amma*  *Suwa*r8 , but she wasn't yet able to read the other Suwar perfectly. She started to read *Surat Al-Noor*. She heard her father’s arrival from the mosque, but continued to read on until she had finished the *sura*. She placed the book in the recess on the wall and went to look for her mother. The mother had gone to the barn where the cows and goats were. Sara found her mom with three other women, her aunts Aysha and Ruqaiya and her granny, all busy milking the cows. Sara greeted them. She watched them working hard. When they finished the milking, they let the goats and cows go out to the farm.

The father came in with a bag of flour which he gave to her mom. Sara stood to shake her hand with her father. Then her aunts and grandmother left with her father.

In the kitchen, her mom mixed water with the flour and some salt and began to knead it to make bread. Sara watched her mother, admiring her skill.

"Sara, would you like to try?" the mother asked.

"Sure.” Sara took lump of dough and started to knead. It was very difficult. The dough kept falling from her hand.

"With practice you’ll be able to do it," her mother said.

At that moment someone knocked on the front door, and the mother went to see. Sara heard her mother say, " Come in, you’re welcome."

"No, thank you,” she heard a man say. “We are in a hurry now.”

The mother came back into the kitchen. “Sara,” she said. “Go and wash your hands. Your uncle is waiting for you."

"Why?" Sara asked.

"Your father has married you to your cousin, Juma."

"But Mom, I’m too young. I can't live with a man!"

"Hurry now. There is no time for talking," and the mother took Sara's arm to lead her.

Sara looked at her mother scornfully and pulled her arm away from her mother's hand. "I have to choose my own husband," she said.

She looked up at the sky and went to wash her hands and face. She came back and looked at her mother then went outside. Her uncle was waiting there in his white dishdasha and cap. She said goodbye to her mother who was now crying. Then she left with her father-in-law, like a small camel that has been taken from its mother to be presented to a zoo.

Her mother stood watching until they disappeared from sight. Then she closed the door.

Glossary:

*1School :* It is a word that had been spreading when the education had started in the gulf. For Sara, I used the word school because she knew its aim. For the people in the town, I had used *School* to show that they used the word without knowing its meaning.

*2Al- Salam Al-Ikom*: It is the Islamic greeting way when meeting other people or entering the house. Even after the prayer, we say it.

*3You returned?* : People say it naturally when they see a person coming back even though they know the answer.

*4Falaj:* here, it refers to the irrigation canal in the town.

5*Shaaban* : It is an Arabian month coming before Ramdhan.

*6Qoreesh*: It was the common currency at the time. They were coins.

*7Mandoos*: it is a wooden box used instead of a cupboard to keep things.

*8Amma Part*: It is the last section in the Holy Quran. It has 30 Suwar.

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