

A Translation Into English of Khalil I. Al-Fuzai's ^(Note 1) “Wednesday Train” ^(Note 2)

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Abstract

Saleh leaves his village for the city, searching for a job. When he gets there, he cannot find even a place to sleep that night. Life in the city is not as easy as Saleh thought.

The story, at the beginning, focuses on a social custom: people accompany travelers to a station or airport. Sometimes the travelers need no help, yet relatives or friends join them anyway up to a particular spot. In many cases, the well-wishers make it difficult for the traveler, who gets embarrassed and tries to observe etiquette at the expense of keeping watch over personal cards, baggage, and children in those crowded places. Hence, those well-wishers may become a burden rather than a help.

Another issue the story depicts are the jammed conditions of public transportation. In trains, cars, and buses, one can see people standing and walking: “after three hours he spent standing... Saleh arrives... at the city.” The only transportation where travelers should buckle up in Saudi Arabia is airplanes. Recently, efforts were made to improve these conditions, but cooperation from the public is important for any progress in this respect.

On the other hand, readers may notice the protagonist’s treatment of both his wife and mother; “he bids farewell to his mother warmly, and to his wife lukewarmly.” In addition, he is going to leave his wife and children with his mother; this is the normal tendency in Saudi Arabian society.

Keywords: Khalil al-Fuzai, Saudi, Short story, “Wednesday Train”

1. Introduction

In a patriarchal society, what is expected from a woman towards her husband is “her absolute loyalty whether he is fit for a husband’s role or not.” However, the author is clear about this

cultural axiom: being a “husband here means control and protection on his side, and loyalty, obedience, and submission on hers, and there is nothing more than this.”

In the course of comparing the village with the city, the protagonist is told that “night becomes day in the city, for people there do not come to know darkness.” Until recently, many big villages had no electricity, and distant villages and rural areas in Saudi Arabia are still without electricity today. Saleh describes life in the city as “a life that does not know quiet.” It is a life with “chaos outside.”

In brief, like some protagonists in Khalil I. al-Fuzai’s stories (Dohal, 2018 & 2019), Saleh struggles to make a living; he leaves his family and goes to the city searching for a job (Note 3).

2. Translation

The hands of the watch will soon announce that it is five in the afternoon. And in the railway station crowds of travelers and well-wishers gather, and some salesmen are happier on this day than on any other, though they usually do not make a profit on other days. With regard to the travelers—their wishes become manifold, their inclinations are diverse, and their tendencies vary—the Wednesday Train will soon enfold them in its spaciousness and move toward one destination, which all of them hope to arrive at. With regard to the well-wishers, their feelings differ; one might be overwhelmed by affection and sadness over the separation from a dear friend, another may be happy because s/he is saying goodbye to a boring guest, and they have been looking forward to seeing him leave; and who knows, among those well-wishers are some who have no need to be sad or happy-but by habit they come to say goodbye to a traveling relative or a traveling friend... (Note 4) the crowd becomes so thick that an onlooker would imagine these crowds will find no place on the train, whatever the number of cars, and he will be shocked to learn that in only three cars all of these people will be jammed together with other passengers that the Wednesday Train takes on from other stations, and then the train will not stop until the end of its journey when it arrives at the big city, which becomes a dream that tickles the minds of many who live in the countryside, and no doubt boisterous thoughts wrestle now in the minds of those who are traveling to the city for the first time, and Saleh is one of them.

How do people live in the city... the way they talk... aspects of their lives; all these things are strange to Saleh, who is not familiar with these things and does not know how to face them. After a short time, that is, at five fifteen, the Wednesday Train will come, and after three hours it will arrive with other trains at the city. Night will ease shut its curtains then, yet night becomes day in the city, for people there do not know darkness, or so Saleh heard, and if he can sleep in the train, he will search for work when he arrives in the city. This is the objective of his trip to the city, after the disappointment of not finding work in his village. He would not be concerned if he were not married with children for whom he has to procure food and clothes, so he has no choice but to travel to the city to earn money rather than stay and risk poverty and hunger. And on the wooden rectangular bench, his wife sits on his left and his mother on the right, while wooden rectangular benches are scattered about the sitting area of the railway station without care or order. He turns toward his wife before saying anything,

and imagines sadness covering her face, yet her thick veil prevents him from exploring her feelings... as if the blackness that wraps her from her toe to head has wrapped with her all that connects her to people as well, and his mother is in no better situation regarding this matter. In fact, all the countrywomen in the railway station have the same feeling. At last he says to his wife, whispering lest someone should hear him, after leaning toward her to enable her to hear him, “Children... take care of the children.”

He tosses out these words with rigorous crudeness.

And she looks at him.

And she is able to see him clearly through her thick veil, and see his dirty loose garment, and his cap that she herself had sewn, and his wrinkled, gloomy face, and his tall height and his young physique, beside his often decisive voice... all these characteristics are not going to change her view of him; he is her husband, and this means her absolute loyalty whether he is fit for a husband’s role or not. She does not know Saleh except for one aspect which he condescends and allows her to know; as for the other aspects of him, she does not know them and does not want to know them... all she is concerned about is Saleh as a husband... With regard to Saleh, the poor penniless man whose strong muscles did not succeed in securing food for them, she does not care about this characteristic at all... husband here means control and protection on his side, and loyalty, obedience and submission on hers, and there is nothing more than this.

After looking closely at him, she turns her gaze downward in an unjustifiable lowliness, and he is not concerned about hearing her response, so he turns toward his mother and says, whispering lest someone should overhear him after leaning close to enable her to hear him, “Children... take care of the children.”

He says these words gently, combined with all meanings of respect.

And she looks at him.

To his mother, Saleh is a protecting shield from the vicissitudes of time after she lost everything; she did not allow him to leave her... how much she objected to the idea of his trip, yet she gave in to reality at last, when she could no longer justify the idea of his remaining with them, after all doors of sustenance at the village were locked in his face. Hence, he must try his luck in the city, where the locked doors of sustenance may open for her son after his auspicious trip, and he will return with piles of stacked money to start a new life that will give her pride before women who brag of their sons who traveled to the city and returned with a lot of money to start new lives that granted happiness to their humble families. How hard a separation for those who are not used to it! Tears spring out of her eyes, and she whimpers in a way that lets Saleh know that she is crying, so he respects her feelings and does not say anything, but he looks aside, ignoring the hubbub that prevails at the railway station.

And behind him on another rectangular bench is sitting a youth from the village who is studying in the city, and who is wearing prescription glasses with one broken lens, reading a

book with one eye and closing the other, and with no reason and no prelude he asks Saleh, “Are you travelling to the city?”

“Yes.”

“What do you do?”

“I am looking for work.”

And the youth gets himself busy after he says, “Really?”

“Yes, and I think I will find a job.”

“Really?”

“And it won’t take long for me to find it.”

“Really?”

“Bi—Allah, find another word, other than ‘REALLY.’”

And because the youth is preoccupied with reading, he replies, “Really?”

Accordingly, Saleh gets angry, thinking the youth is making fun of him, so he returns the insult, “You are impudent.”

“Really?”

The student is still busy reading, yet at the last moment he draws his attention to the level the situation has reached... he looks at Saleh, and finds anger on his face, and sees him wearing two wooden slippers with which he is afraid Saleh will start hitting him incessantly. So he prefers to withdraw from such a situation, and leaves his place after the hair on his head stands on end. Indeed, it has been easy for Saleh to draw the attention of onlookers; despite his gruffness, he has to appear to anyone seeing him that there is stubborn determination behind his mummy-like paleness.

Suddenly, the sole train called the “Wednesday Train” screeches... it arrives with a roar preceded by a thundering rattle like a subjugated horse, so necks stretch, and passengers get ready to leave their seats and head for the train, and Saleh makes his way to the railroad car after bidding farewell to his mother warmly, and to his wife lukewarmly. All done on purpose, and he entrusts to her the care of his children, who were not permitted to come to the railway station lest his heart relent while saying goodbye to them--he could change his plan and go home, which had happened several times; he loves them so much that he cannot think of leaving them, yet as long as his trip is for their benefit, the burden of separation is lessened.

He carries in his hand a bundle containing some stale bread and some dry food that his wife made for him, and a piece of fabric to cover himself with, in case he needs it after putting a part of it under him, and a small tin can into which his mother inserted some medicines while wishing that her son never need them. He crams himself in line among other travelers to form with them a jointed human lump, some of its parts flabby, breathing, and sitting on benches

with no backs to rest on... these parts seem odd, like ulcers in a soft human body, and just as you would look at the ulcers, you would look at those people sitting in their insolent seats.

Saleh stands not far from the window, where air flows harshly as soon as the train moves, and in the distance the sun is almost setting, while threads of black night begin to weave together in a coherent, living pattern that Saleh is not able to trace. And despite the chaos, sleep tickles some travelers' eyelids, and the noise begins to bother nerves, and soon it becomes noticeably less agitating, and Saleh's mind drifts away in the distance, setting out from his time and place to the city that he dreams to live in, and from his far depths a great hope emerges... a hope that takes off like the train. After three hours he spent standing, feelings of optimism befall him... Saleh arrives with other train passengers at the city, and night is at its early beginning--yet quietness reigns in the railway station and sad, choking lights occupy spots of narrow hallways, granting the calmness a gloom that there is no way to accept or reject, and there are some welcoming people, but their inactivity terrifies Saleh and makes him wonder what kind of life they are living.

Saleh carries his bundle and heads for a corner where the light does not reach, and as he prepares to sleep, he hears a voice ask him, "What are you doing here?"

The speaker was one of the security guards... and the words are spoken through his nose with pretended arrogance.

"I want to sleep."

"Why don't you sleep at your family's?"

"I have no family in this city; I left them in the village."

Saleh stands before the policeman, whose eyes reflect unbearable scorn.

"No sleeping here."

And he waves his baton while finishing his statement.

"Make haste! Leave here. Collect your things quickly."

And when he notices indecision overwhelming Saleh, he graciously suggests, "You may sleep in one of the mosques."

Saleh has no choice but to leave the place... he collects his things and, carrying them, starts to look for a nearby mosque.

Life outside the railway station agitates the nerves with its violent hubbub—a life that does not know quiet—and with its residents' speed in their way of passing by him. What a big difference between the quiet inside the railway station and the chaos outside!

3. Conclusion

After having a chance to read for this Saudi writer in this international journal, people of different cultures will know about this man of letters, and how literature all over the world share a lot of interests and ideas. Translations in such a case may help in developing an

atmosphere of understanding and learning about different cultures. In “Wednesday Train,” readers will experience a theme all cultures share; i.e. a struggle for survival where “chaos outside” prevails as stated in the story.

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Notes

Note 1. KHALIL I. AL-FUZAI (1940-) is a literary writer from Saudi Arabia. In his writings, he introduced his culture, addressing many social, cultural, and religious issues he saw in his society.

Note 2. This story was translated from the following Arabic source:

Al-Fuzai, Khalil I. *Thursday Fair*. (سوق الخميس). Taif: Taif Literary Club, 1979: 97-103.

Note 3. An introduction a reader may need to connect the text to its context.

Note 4. ... Every now and then there are few dots found in the source text.

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