

Sulaymān Fayyāḍ (7 February 1929 - 26 February 2015)

Violet Flower¹

Sulaymān Fayyāḍ was a scholar of the Arabic language and a prolific writer of short stories. “[H]is precise depictions of the psychological makeup of his characters,” according to Hosam Aboul-Ela, who translated Fayyāḍ’s only novel, *Aṣwāt* (1972), into English, *Voices* (New York, London: Marion Boyars, 1993), “rivals some of the finest work of Mahfouz and Idriss” (6-7). Fayyāḍ’s fictional works were published in three volumes as part of his complete works, *Mu’allafāt Sulaymān Fayyāḍ: al-Majmū’a al-Qaṣaṣiyya*, by al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li l-Kitāb in 1994. “Violet Flower” (1987), *Zahrāt al-banāfsaj*, the text on which this translation is based, appears in volume three (325-337). It is a study in inscrutable interiority, a mode typical of Fayyāḍ’s short stories. The apparent conceals rather than reveals. The clarity of language and the transparency of narrative, always focalized on the quotidian and the mundane, deliver emotional intensity unaccompanied by justified comprehension of human motives and behaviour. Perhaps this is why his stories continue to speak to the twenty-first century.

I cannot tell when exactly my daughter took the veil. Nor do I know when the smile permanently left a face that was once full of life, lovely with youthfulness, and glowing with mischief.

I began to notice her regular absence from home during certain hours of the day. But I would always find her at home after sunset. She never left the house after dark unless she had to attend a lecture at the university. Then she would leave with me. I would drive her to the university and drop her off in front of the gate to her faculty then go to my own faculty. After I finished my administrative work, or delivered my lecture, if I had any, I would find her sitting on the steps of her faculty waiting for me,

¹ Selected and translated by Wen-chin Ouyang. Edited by Michael Beard

alone and atop a pile of books. My heart would tremble with tenderness, and I would take her home with me.

I told myself at the time that perhaps she had just had a difficult emotional experience which left her distracted and absent minded, her face expressionless and eyes dull. Or perhaps she felt lonely, burning with a desire to love and marry. Or perhaps she was exhausted by the combination of our housework, for which she had taken responsibility since her mother passed away when she was at the tender age of thirteen, and of the amount of homework she had to do in order to excel academically.

I exchanged a few words with her on our way home.

“Open your heart to me. Think of me as your father, mother, brother, friend.”

Without even looking at me, she gave me a terse reply.

“You are the best father [a girl could ever have].”

She then fell into silence. I looked at her and saw her face from the side. She seemed in deep thought, distracted and withdrawn.

We were on another journey home together. It was drizzling and the screen wipers were busy going left and right. She asked me suddenly, having observed me all the while I was busy looking at the road ahead under the dim streetlights.

“Father, why don’t you pray?”

I stole a glance at her. I looked back at the road. My hands on the steering wheel trembled. I kept silent. I told myself that my adolescent daughter was going through a religious experience, in fear or in longing, as she would have suffered through an emotional experience. She might even have had that experience already, disappointed in a love she had been pining for, or failed in a love relationship, and is now retreating into herself looking for peace of mind. I affected an uncomfortable laugh.

“Say that I am recalcitrant, a disobedient Muslim, but I believe in a creator of this universe.”

I do not know why I laughed.

“God will guide me to the right path one day and I will pray and go on pilgrimage.”

I was disconcerted when she asked me in suppressed anger:

“Why do you laugh?”

I kept silent. She felt awkward. She bowed her head in confusion.

That night I went to her room to make sure everything was all right. I gave her door a slight knock. She had already turned off the light. I found her praying on a mat. She had put a white scarf on her head, and was wearing a loose white robe with long sleeves. I had no idea when she bought that prayer mat, or scarf, or long sleeve white robe. She always wore blouses that left her two arms bare. I withdrew quietly. I thought I saw a smile on her face. I also had a feeling she saw me.

I got used to seeing her pray in the days that followed. There were days when she got up at the crack of dawn, pulled the Quran from her bedside table, and opened it to the page on which she had paused the night before to read a verse silently, moving her lips without uttering a sound.

I began watching her in contentment though tinged with anxiety. I noticed her face glow with serenity, and her eyes, two deep pools, tranquil and full of wonder. She had given in and lost her passion, that burning love for life, she made me feel, and I thought of a violet flower at that moment, I do not know why, a violet and not any other flower.

One Friday, I found myself bathing, putting on my clothes and cologne, and leaving the house quietly to go to the mosque. When I returned home, I found a Quran on my pillow. I grabbed it and put it gently on my bedside table, on top of the other books. I understood her veiled invitation to me. I made no comment.

Another Friday. I went to the mosque again. I heard the Imam invite us to live piously and remember death in an annoying sermon that renounced life and the living. I prayed behind him. As soon as he ended the prayer, saying peace be upon you, and we did the same after him, a bearded young man, though without a moustache, took his place and began to give a sermon amidst the crowd. It split between those leaving and others waiting to hear him. I was astonished by his frank call to Jihad. I was tempted to ask him, against whom, who will make that final decision, and in whose name?, but I refrained, afraid of potential consequences. He was surrounded by men, all bearded, whether tall or short, who donned the same mien, and carried the same body, as if they all ate, together, from the same dish, forever.

I left the mosque in agitation. As I crossed the square in the midday heat, a sign hanging above a pavilion that seemed to have nothing to do with weddings or funerals caught my eye. On it two words were written in the style of Persian calligraphy: "Fashion Veils." My curiosity would not rest until I checked the place out for myself.

I went inside the pavilion. I found veiled women and bearded men. And they were against mixing company, I thought to myself. No one seemed to pay me any attention but I knew they were watching me closely. As soon as I made a move, a veiled woman left her place, and a bearded man would take it, stand before me, and look at me in suspicion and anticipation, but silently, ready to smile at me, or to reprimand me, I had no idea.

Thick silk clothes were everywhere, in gray, white, yellow, cream, and olive green, which reminded me of the shawls fashionable in the forties. Complementary scarves, in white or matching colours, were accessorized with bright plastic brooches or white or black headbands to keep them on the head. Burqas with visible or concealed openings for the eyes were plentiful too. None of the pieces on display had a distinct fashion identity, I thought, as I looked and thought of women's clothes from Mamluk and Ottoman times. I busied myself calculating the price for a complete day or evening outfit. I was utterly surprised by how affordable they were. A set I estimated at the price of one hundred and fifty pounds cost only thirty. Shoes with sensible heels were sold for five pounds. I asked myself, how, and who bore the cost of the difference? How could any woman, educated or not, resist such temptation?

I arrived home. The lights were on. My eyes fell on my daughter. She was wearing a white dress, a white scarf, a white headband, a white plastic brooch, and white flat shoes. Her face was calm and serene, and her eyes dark and distant. She was fully veiled. I looked at my daughter. I did not smile. I was too afraid to utter a word that would bring forward a confrontation. I am fifty years old and have learned some wisdom in the years I have lived. She is my only daughter and for her sake I lived like a bachelor for ten years. I said to her as I closed the door:

“A sacred day?”

She answered:

“A Friday! I will get lunch ready.”

She went to her room and closed the door behind her. I sat in the well-lit living room alone. I felt exhausted and gave in to contradictory feelings I could not discern or articulate. I just knew I could not breathe. My daughter came out of her room wearing a long sleeved housecoat and a white scarf in the middle of the summer heat. She put the hot dishes on our dining table. As she sat down to eat with me she mouthed ‘In the Name of God’ silently. I lost my appetite. I stood up, said, ‘Thanks be to God’, and left the table.

My daughter looked at me and knew immediately what upset me. She said not a word. I gazed at her, hoping she would talk. [She did not]. I went to my room quietly and closed the door. My daughter is plotting something, I said to myself. When did she buy those clothes? Is she involved with those bearded men and veiled women?

It was night. I sat in the living room. I called her. She came, with a book in her hand. I had made a decision. Discussion would be futile. Dialogue would not be necessary. There was no longer any need to keep silent, get emotional or angry. I would not give in to my daughter, nor harass her with questions. She would either avoid giving me straight answers or insist on siding with the bearded men and veiled women, who condemn our entire history while dreaming of the golden age, which lasted a mere twenty three years, of the Bedouin life, and of returning to the desert so as to be able to kill each other when they clashed over dogma, ideology and vision.

She sat with me. I asked her:

“Do you remember a lecturer in my department? Emad?”

She replied:

“Yes.”

I said:

“What do you think of him?”

She said:

“Not bad.”

I said:

“Emad is one of my best students. He will be somebody in our field one day. I have always wished for a brother like him for you.”

She sensed danger. She questioned:

“Why didn’t you get married all these years? You have a lifetime ahead of you to fulfill the other half of your religion.”

Her words shocked me. My daughter was inviting me to marry when I called her out in order to invite her to do the same thing. I felt I was losing her. Rather, I had lost her already, a long time ago, it seemed. I feigned laughter.

“I promise you I will get married, but after you. I want to make sure you are taken care of first. You are in your final year at the university and I want to see you settled with a man and a job.”

She sighed and I continued:

“No one knows when my time will come.”

She surprised me yet again as she said, calmly but defiantly:

“Because I am veiled?”

I ignored her question.

“Emad asked for your hand in marriage today.”

That was not true. Emad had not asked yet, but I was certain he would. He asked after her nervously every now and then and when on occasion he came to our house I noticed his eyes following her every move. I was guessing that he had been waiting the past two years until he could afford a house and to support her, from the additional income he made from monetary incentives and rewards and perhaps from the private lessons I heard he was giving. I asked her:

“What do you think?”

She was grave. She sighed. A light of contentment shone in her eyes for a fleeting second. She said calmly but in certainty:

“I will ask my commander.”

Her commander? I was dumbfounded. She was with them, in a collective, and took orders from a commander who controlled everything concerning her life, body and soul? I felt my jaws clench. She was dictating our confrontation. A sentence escaped my mouth, which I wished I had been able to hold back. Irritably, I retorted:

“This commander of yours, does he believe in polygamy?”

She answered quietly:

“The law allows it, when a man is given the means, and when men are fewer than women.”

I challenged:

“And you? Will you be able to accept a co-wife one day?”

She replied with a question:

“Why not? A man can satisfy more than one woman.”

I wanted to scream. I held back my anger. She said:

“But this is not what we’re talking about. I have no objection to marrying Emad if my commander agrees.”

I was overwhelmed by another wave of silent anger.

“Tomorrow, in the early afternoon, let’s go to your commander.”

I left the house with her sitting there alone. For the first time in years I felt the need to go to a café, or a club, and sit with friends, or anyone.

I returned home three hours later. I put on my pajamas. Sleep abandoned me. I lay in the dark.

I heard dawn prayers broadcast by the warring loudspeakers. I opened the window, looked at the street and let myself go with the cool summer morning breeze. The street was empty. The door of the building across the street opened. A veiled married woman came out. I recognized her in the soft light of the street lamp nearby. She was alone, but walked straight ahead, confidently, and I knew that on that empty street she was walking, on her own, towards the dawn prayer.

Another woman came out of our building, also veiled, and in a white robe. By the time I noticed I was only able to see her back. But I knew deep in my heart that she was my daughter. I went straight to her room. I flicked on the lights. Her bed was empty but made, with her bed sheets tightly tucked in, blanket neatly folded, pillow in the right place, and slippers perfectly lined beneath her bed, in anticipation of her return.

I went back to the window hoping to catch a sight of her. She had disappeared. I stopped myself from going after her. I stood there, waiting. I listened to the calls to prayer, unevenly coordinated in their beginnings and endings, to the voices of imams reciting aloud the Fatiha and short verses from the Quran, chanting 'Allah Akbar.' When I heard the footsteps of men and women heading in my direction, and the final prayers for forgiveness, I went back to my room and sat on my bed for a few seconds. I could not stand the wait. I went out and sat on a chair right behind the door. I heard the key turn in the door.

As soon as she opened the door and walked in, I turned on the lights. She was taken aback, but only for a second. She looked at me:

"Why did you get up?"

I looked at her. I said nothing. I got up, went into my room, and closed the door behind me. I heard her close the door, turn off the lights, and walk quietly, without bumping into any furniture, towards her room. Since when did she go out at dawn? How many veiled women did she know in our street, in our quarter? How many men admonished them, brainwashed them with threats of hellfire, and with promises of God-knows what things? I didn't know anything about her.

In the early afternoon of the following day, she sat next to me in the car, my veiled daughter, and guided me to a suburban neighbourhood, no, she commanded me, my daughter, as I drove through the affluent suburban neighbourhoods, she gave me orders, my daughter, and made me go deep into a poor neighbourhood, where garbage piled high on the two sides of the street, and flies in droves buzzed above them. Her commander lived there, among the poor, the ill, and the defeated. My heart went out to her and him, to a commander I had never met. But why did her commander let his bearded men and veiled women (and did they all become his women in spirit?) live in this dirt when Islam commanded cleanliness?

She, my daughter, ordered me to stop in front of a grocery store. I stopped. She opened the door from her side and got out. I opened the door from my side and got out. She came around the front of the car to stand beside me. She pointed to an old man and said without pride or embarrassment:

“My commander.”

I was in total shock. This old man? The tips of his beard were burnt I could not tell by what. He was wearing a jellabiya with a greasy collar and standing in the middle of barrels of oil. I figured he must be a supplier of some sort, evidenced by his collar, the two greasy pans of his scale, and the sacks of sugar, tea and rice heaped up in the middle of the shop, also swarming with flies. I asked her, my daughter, in horror, in terror:

“Him?”

She answered neutrally:

“Yes. Him.”

The man turned towards us. He came to us. He looked at her and smiled. She said to him:

“My father.”

He looked at me:

“Yes.”

I said briefly, suppressing my anger, merely seeking his consent:

“My daughter asked me to seek your permission. A young man asked me for her hand in marriage. He works as a lecturer in my department at the university.”

The grocer looked at my daughter in exasperation. To my astonishment, my daughter bowed her head in shame, her face turning pale, like someone from whom mercy had suddenly been withdrawn. He turned to me, shouting, waving his hand:

“God and his messenger refuse this. God and his messenger reject this. God and his messenger forbid this. So do the community of the faithful.”

I was dumbfounded. I glared at my daughter. Before I could even begin to argue, he declared:

“This is her husband according to God’s Law and the Prophet’s Tradition.”

I looked where he was pointing, calling and ordering:

“Come here!”

What he was pointing at came forward, a bearded man in his thirties wearing a greasy jellabiya and carrying a barrel of oil, who looked like his servant.

The grocer commander told to me:

“This is he.”

I looked at my daughter. She did not look up and seemed powerless before her commander.

The commander scolded, looking at my daughter:

“A believer is better than a non-believer even if you loved him.”

I shouted at the commander:

“He is not her equal, nor are you, to the best of what I know about religion and living.”

The commander mocked me:

“There is no such thing as equality between a Muslim woman and an infidel man.”

I realized at the moment that I had conceded to him as soon as I began arguing and exchanging words with him, that I would look weak to my daughter and tip the balance in his favour if I continued, even if I could win the debate. I turned towards my daughter, lifted my hand, slapped her hard on the face, and pushed her forward.

She climbed into the car in silence. The commander's servant was about to come after us, but his commander lifted his arm and stopped him. I climbed into the car, steered violently out of the poor quarter.

I did not utter a single word on the way. Every cell in my body was shaking. I saw her face in the mirror. She was calm and tranquil but submissive to nothing. I knew I had not liberated her from her commander yet. I demanded:

"How does he, this, erh, thing know who is an infidel or not. How dare he condemn anyone he hasn't met, or known what is in his heart! He must be a kharajite and whoever is not with him is an infidel."

She did not reply. Not so much of a peep came out of her. Her face remained calm, meek and submissive, as if she had suddenly put on a mask. She became a stranger to me. We, father and daughter, had become strangers to each other. I could no longer tell what tomorrow would bring.