

A Translation into English of Khalil I. Al-Fuzai's¹ "The Crazy Street"²

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: August 05, 2018

Accepted: October 10, 2018

Published: October 31, 2018

Volume: 6 Issue: 4

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Keywords:

Khalil al-Fuzai,
Saudi,
Biopower,
short story,
The Crazy Street

ABSTRACT

This story addresses the issue of assimilating Western values into an eastern society—such assimilation will cause a huge change in the life and values of the society. Saudi Arabian society, like many other traditional societies, has to undergo the change represented in this story—but change may bring problems. Writing this story in the seventies of the twentieth century, Khalil I. Al-Fuzai has predicted this change that the whole region is witnessing nowadays. Whereas an earlier story, "Elapsing Days," presents homesickness as a challenge for the main character, "The Crazy Street" symbolizes the inevitable change that is taking place in a coastal city. Indeed, coastal cities form good ports for new influence to penetrate the country. Foreigners who work at oilfields live in these coastal cities from which oil is exported. On the other hand, citizens come to these ports to work. They also use these coastal towns and cities for recreation. Hence, new and foreign influence takes place. Al-Fuzai is clear-sighted in his presentation here; cities and towns of a developing country like Saudi Arabia are now witnessing the change. This story explores how social and economic changes bring unexpected developments and startling events into people's lives. The story depicts three forms of change: First, there is an open, liberal change. Stores are full of customers who witness this change in the society by "delightedly looking at both pretty and ugly girls." Second, there is a cultural change: "Virtue commits suicide on this street." In a masculine society, the story shows how some women are willing to attract the attention of the unemployed who are wandering on the street. "Most of the customers are women" who flirt: "winking, backbiting, and using their eyebrows and eyes." And there are "busty girls whose boobs protrude until they are about to tear the firmly tight clothes that cover them." Traditionally, women were expected to wear baggy clothes. Third, the change is reflected in the man-woman relationship in the Bedouin society. In the story, a man takes care of children—a woman's traditional and cultural responsibility—and his wife and sister go shopping. However, the change creates an internal conflict for the natives as this story indicates. The change attracts people, including those coming from the desert; we see Doheiman, the protagonist, comparing the changing city with the village he comes from. It is also worth mentioning that appearance is more important to people than reality; those who cross the street fear that "they [will be] accused of corruption..." even though their concern is not "to destroy [their] values." Also we see old women try to "escape old age and flee towards youth." Even though adaptation and change become an inevitable part of the society's life, Al-Fuzai adds scenes to the story where change may be rejected at a certain point. At the end of the story, Doheiman engages in a conversation with a man he met in the café, but when Doheiman makes indecent remarks about two women who happen to be the man's wife and sister before knowing who they are, the man's jealousy influences his behavior: "How do you dare to say these indecent remarks?" Also people do not desire to be accused of "corruption" or trying "to destroy... values." In short, the story illustrates the inevitable cultural change that any society should witness. Khalil I. Al-Fuzai introduces such change in the form of a street. And because all people, including those coming from the desert, need to use the street, they have to be exposed to this cultural change. Finally, in my translation, some well-known words are kept with their original pronunciation and written in italics to keep the reader aware of the Arabic text.³

TRANSLATION

No one knows who was the first person to call this street by this name—no one except Allah.

All that could be known is that people pronounce this name with disgust, people whose motives differ according to the cir-

cumstances and cases. Despite the ignorance that all dwellers of this coastal city face when asked about the first person who called this street by this name, they all know every small and large detail about it, all are equal in that...⁴ the women and men... in brief, all are equal with regard to knowledge.

In this street, a pleasant voice recites loudly: "Take from my life... all my life... except seconds in which I see you..."

That voice mixes with another one similar to those raving with fever, repeating, probably in astonishment: "My lover holds me once..."

And from a far distance, it is possible to hear another voice beg for admiration and chirp with some stupidity: "Ask an experienced person and do not ask a doctor."

Along the street that stretches from the east to the west of the city, voices rise with boisterous noise, emanating indulgently from the radios or phonographs in a small area in the center of the city. The shops selling luxuries and women's stuff are full of customers who never buy anything so much as they enjoy delightedly looking at both pretty and ugly girls, sometimes for the purpose of sarcasm, and always for frivolity. Not far from these shops, a café stands facing up the other side where some jewelers are busy with their work, their golden-framed glasses dancing upon the tips of their noses. As long as most of the customers are women, this café is naturally filled with the unemployed who are tired of wandering in the street. They decide to rest in this café, preparing to resume the battle whose weapons are no more than winking, backbiting, and using their eyebrows and eyes. In addition to these, a few men wait for their wives or female relatives to finish buying what they need from the shops on this street.

Virtue commits suicide on this street, yet it is a temporary suicide. It does not exceed a few hours in the afternoon and a little time in the early evening. Yet it is worrisome to those for whom circumstances require crossing this street, lest they are accused of corruption and of joining the stream of those who are eager to destroy values they believe to be old.

On one of the benches scattered in front of the small café, Doheiman sits observing, almost startled at the coming and going of busty girls whose boobs protrude until they are about to tear the firmly tight clothes that cover them. It is a new thing for him to watch this continuous human crowd... and this surprising temptation in the street, and he remembers the desert women whose complexion is burnt with the sun and whose skin color turns brown so that he seems to hate them now, while he watches these girls of reddish brown, white and brown colors that were not burnt by the sun and were not changed into a color of coal... while he watches various colors associated with elegance and the ability to spoil minds, with regards to the old women who walk slowly, they are different from the old women of the desert except in their strange appearance when they dress up as a means to escape old age and flee towards youth... he watches all this like a hungry person who looks through the glass of a restaurant façade, through which he sees the most tasty types of food and the worst, but he has no option to choose, so he becomes satisfied with pursing his lips in an infinite grief, and he notices an old woman walking slowly and gossiping while at her side a pretty girl walks listening silently to the old lady's gossip without a comment, even one word on what the old woman is saying... he lets his gaze follow their trail on the street, until they disappear in the crowd of loafers with their steps that seem dull like their ideas, and the female loafers

who have nothing to do in the street except hanging around, and he pays attention to a sound that asks him in a laughing lisp, "Tow aal... you?..."

The speaker is standing in front of him, and he is trying to say, "HOW ARE YOU?" And Doheiman does not understand what this person standing in front of him and holding a pen and a piece of paper means, so he shakes his head as a gesture of questioning mixed with fear.

--"I am a g... gour... gournalist..."

Again... he finds it hard to understand.

The journalist is writing on his paper something Doheiman does not know, perhaps he is writing a description of this Bedouin sitting alone on a bench in front of a table on which a bottle of soft drink is set though the weather is not hot. He is wearing a *thobe*⁵ with baggy sleeves and a red *ghutra*⁶ which he tightened on his head with *igaa*⁷, the tail of which is left hanging from behind, and he has girded himself with a leather strap from which a pistol holster hangs. He is afraid of the one standing before him busy writing, and when he looks at him, he finds his face void of any expression, so he puts aside fear, and says in a lovely Bedouin dialect, "Oh! Respectable son, leaving me alone is better for you."

The journalist, or the gournalist as he called himself, does not want to get involved with this Bedouin in a situation where an outcome will not be praised. So he is satisfied to say dismissively, "Tuth..." what the hell, you are the loser; he says so emphatically and leaves.

Doheiman resumes chewing silence and ruminating grief.

Not far from him, three youths sit across the street, and the short waiter continues to hop and jump like a bird in his frequent flitting about the tables. Responding to requests and entertaining himself by mopping up the empty tables with a polluted cloth. He does wait a while before throwing it on his shoulder carelessly. The three youths are busy taking turns kissing the lips of a *narghile*⁸ while making disgusting comments about the girls and old women. One of them exhales a hot puff and says in a cracking voice, "Look at her... she is colorful... and looks like a rainbow."

No one responds to his comment.

Doheiman listens to a voice coming from within himself...

How beautiful life is in the city and how interesting many things are in it! And what a life the desert has in it! Heat and cool and austerity, and here in the city are the beauty of life and its ease... there it is hard to get water and here they sprinkle the ground with it, and the one who seeks water from the ground is different from the one who gives it water. There they are dying... and dying... until they die, but here they are living... and living until they die, and there is a difference between the one who is dying in order to die and the one who is living in order to die. Is it possible for him to live in this city while connected to the desert with more than one stake... his wife Wadhha who is always redolent of the smell of the desert, his mother and father and all the men of his tribe?... what will they say if he decides to live his life here... in addition, how will he live? After a while he banishes this idea from his mind with effort.

A car slowly passes in front of him as if to announce its legal right to pass among those frivolous people, but it re-

minds him of his camel that he brought to the city and left fettered outside it, and his heart is at ease, safety here becomes a very natural thing, and when he hears the horn of a car... he remembers a story that happened to one of his acquaintances in the desert when he was riding his camel. That friend was surprised when his travelling brother returned driving a car that appeared suddenly from behind a hill, and his camel was startled and threw him on the ground and fled away. And when he knew that the driver was his travelling brother, he intentionally determined to revenge himself. So he waited for his brother in the same spot and appeared suddenly in front of the car shouting at it in order to startle it as it had done to his camel that threw him on the ground. The upshot was that the car ran over him. It is a funny story, yet it is also painful. Doheiman feels sadness, then distress and then anger consecutively, but delight is victorious at the end, and he bears nothing but happiness because he watches this cheerful show of beautiful girls and old-fashioned women and oiled cut hair and the careless pretense of men whose looks jump to wickedly settle on rebellious breasts or ivory necks or eyes that spoil the mind beyond reason, or other things it is best not to mention.

The unemployed are seeking amusement on the edge of a pit from vice.

Doheiman turns around to find that the three youths have left their spot and a man who seems to have a sign of respect replaces them, and seriousness apparently distinguishes his tone, and he is holding two flower-like children's hands and forcing them to sit down. While they try to escape his control, maybe his anger reaching its limit gives an indication to their small minds that in fact they have to obey, and after he calms down, the man turns toward Doheiman and looks at him. Then he addresses the two children, "Whoever does not be quiet will be taken by the Bedouin."

So he draws a dull smile on his lips and says, "Yes, I will take whoever does not be quiet, and I will bring him to the desert."

They do not need another good reason to become silent.

The man says, "They are brothers... they have worn me out."

They start a friendly conversation... as if each of them has known the other for years, while the children keep silent and each one stays in his seat. The conversation is not void of short comments on whoever passes by—from the variant human examples of which the street is full, and despite the assured difference between their thinking, yet the angle from which they discuss many matters is the same, for no reason except that one of them tries to go up to the level of the other at the time the other tries to go down to the level of the speaker, but this does not include his readiness to become angry at any time. Despite all, he is ready to

understand and make friends with whomever he wants. And when it comes to being ready to understand each other and make acquaintance with each other, the two meet more than on any other point... and the man intends to invite Doheiman to drink a cup of coffee with him at his home after he knows that Doheiman will set out to the areas of his tribe once he has sold his supply of "the clarified butter" called *saman bari*⁹ and received money for it, which is in his knapsack, his *mezwadah*¹⁰, which is still on the ground near the chair he is sitting on... and the man also is ready to tell him that he will welcome his visit at his home whenever he comes to the city... this commonly takes place after integrating the conversation about life here and life there.

The man looks in one direction, and focuses all his attention there while Doheiman talks, and when he notices, he turns to see the man looking at two women approaching at a distance that enables him to confirm their beauty... trying to let those who are sitting on the other benches hear his voice; Doheiman says, "They are beautiful... do you admire them?"

The man is so busy watching the two women that he does not hear what has been said by Doheiman who in turn repeats, "They are beautiful."

"Whom do you mean?"

"I mean the two women you are looking at... look."

And he winks after throwing an inquisitive glance at the two women, and they come closer, and when he turns toward the man to continue his commentary which is impolite... he notices that the color of the man's face has changed, and an unforgettable anger has overcome him, so he asks, "What is the matter?"

He does not respond.

So Doheiman continues his remarks while the man stays still as if he is experiencing a period of calm that precedes a storm, his eyes stiffen on Doheiman with dim snowy looks, then he yells at his face, "What did you say?"

Doheiman is shocked to hear him shout, so he asks, "What makes you angry?"

"How do you dare to say these indecent remarks?"

"Which indecent remarks?"

"Is there anything more indecent than your utterances?"

He is angry to the extreme, so he presses on, "Do you not realize that these two women are my wife and sister?"

Clearly the two children are happy to hear these tidings, while Doheiman forgets almost everything, except that he has already pronounced such shameful words.

From far away... an iron door of a closing store shrieks, and someone rubs the ear of his radio to shut it down while two people quarrel for an unknown reason, all that... while the tide returns to wash again the sands of the seashore of this coastal city.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

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.
2. This story was translated from the following Arabic source:
Al-Fuzai, Khalil I. Thursday Fair. (سيمي خلا فوس). Taif: Taif Literary Club, 1979: 29-36.
3. An introduction a reader may need to connect the text to its context.
4. Every now and then there are few dots found in the source text.
5. *thobe*: a gown worn by men.
6. *ghutra*: an Arabian headdress worn by men.
7. *igal*: a cord worn on the headdress.
8. *narghile*: a water pipe device.
9. *saman bari*: clarified butter.
10. *mezwadah*: a knapsack.