

‘Ā’isha al-Ka‘bī’s “The Ladies’ Fitting Room”: Translation with an Introduction

O. Ishaq Tijani^{1*}, Imed Nsiri²

¹University of Dubai, United Arab Emirates

²American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Corresponding Author: O. Ishaq Tijani, E-mail: itijani@ud.ac.ae

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ABSTRACT

This article features a translation of “Ghurfat al-qiyās” (2007, The Ladies’ Fitting Room), a short story by the emerging Emirati female writer ‘Ā’isha al-Ka‘bī (1973-). The Introduction provides some brief comments on the content of the story in order to show how, while foregrounding the portrayal of some women’s obsession with their looks, the narrative reflects some of the socio-cultural issues that concern women and gender in contemporary Emirati and Arabian Gulf societies. The story is very minimalistic in the exploration of its subject-matters, but it is this narrative technique that makes its content—especially the sub-text, or the un-said aspects of the story—much more intriguing than its form.

INTRODUCTION

The history of fitting rooms in the modern world dates back to the 19th century when department stores began to emerge in Europe. Emile Zola mentions their existence in his novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), and his note “that they were then forbidden to men” serves to underscore the gendered origin of fitting rooms. Since the American actor Buster Keaton featured as an attendant in a department store in *The Cameraman* (1928), fitting rooms “have continued to provide comic scenes in films.”¹ In the same vein, both the fitting room and the mirror inside it serve to provide some comic colorization to the scenes presented in “Ghurfat al-qiyās,” even though most of the scenes represent some tragic, unpleasant situations. Written by one of the emerging Emirati women writers, ‘Ā’isha al-Ka‘bī (also Aisha al-Kaabi; b. 1973), the story is included in her first collection of short stories, eponymously titled *Ghurfat al-qiyās* (2007, The Ladies’ Fitting Room).² Al-Ka‘bī graduated with a BSc in biology and embryology from the United Arab Emirates University and an MSc in the same field from the University of Arkansas, USA.

Whereas the narrative aspect of the story is written in standard Arabic, a couple of Arabic dialects are used in its dialogues and interior monologues. Though not specified

by the author, it is obvious that the story is set in an unnamed Emirati city. The characters include Emirati nationals, an Egyptian woman, and a female shop attendant from the Philippines. We contend that even though the story is very minimalistic in the exploration of its subject-matters, the narrative technique employed by the author makes the content—especially the sub-text, or the un-said aspects of the story—much more intriguing than its form. While foregrounding the portrayal of some women’s obsession with their look, the narrative hints at some of the socio-cultural issues that concern women and gender in contemporary Emirati and Arabian Gulf societies.

The six, all-female major characters in the story (herein referred to as Ladies I - VI) are of different ages and have different social concerns. However, one thing unites them: they all have the desire to purchase some new pieces of clothing, though for varied reasons. It is through this unifying desire that the divergent personalities and worries of the women are revealed to the reader. Lady I, being unmarried and seriously searching for a husband, wants to “dress to kill.” She leaves the room happier than she was when she entered. The secret of that happiness is that she is still young, still looking beautiful and charming, and so, is still a cynosure of men’s amorous gaze.

For the rest of the ladies, however, the fitting room is a medium for reflection on their social problems. Lady II, also

with hopes of finding a husband, is now in her thirties and already growing gray hairs. Lady V is unhappy because her husband is getting married to another woman; her marriage to the man is forced or, at least, arranged because of the fears that she might not find a husband, presumably, due to her facial defects or other social considerations. Through Lady III, the author treats two issues: i) the concept of *'ayb* (shame or scandal) in the sense of the public talk about, or exposure of, women's body; and ii) the effects of mothering on women. Through Lady IV, the story reflects one of the challenges faced by low-income foreign workers in the Arabian Gulf region; the lady in question here is Egyptian, as shown not in the translation—as it is impossible to do so—but through the dialect used in the original Arabic text.

Lady V embodies the author's subtle criticism of the idea of male superiority or preference for male children. Her daughter calls her "Umm Ahmad" (meaning, Ahmad's mother), an appellation that indicates that the woman is a mother of several children, including the girl herself and a boy, named Ahmad. In Emirati society, it is still considered a thing of pride that there is a male child in the family. A parent is often addressed or called, in informal settings, with reference to the name of his or her first son, whether he is the first child in the family or not. A parent is rarely referred to as father or mother of a female child unless she is the only child in the family, or all her siblings are girls. Implicitly, Lady V prefers to be addressed as "the girl's mother" rather than the "boy's mother" because, most probably, the unnamed girl is much older than the little boy, who is even not present in the shop at the time of the event; worse still, he might even be non-existent.

While it may be easy to blame patriarchal societal beliefs and conventions as the reason for the ladies' lack of happiness, it is also plausible to attribute it to their own lack of personhood and self-esteem; this is because they all view themselves as sexual objects for men's admiration. Without exceptions, all the scenes in the story reflect images of the stereotypical woman often found in the male-oriented literary tradition. So, how can the text be classified as feminist, that is, one that serves to support women's rights or reject their oppression? A majority of Emirati women are now educated and have entered the labor force; they now enjoy almost the same rights as their male counterparts. But this is only on the surface, i.e. on the official, constitutional level. On the unofficial level, many of them—educated or not—are still trapped in the shackles of Arabian patriarchal ideologies and practices. This is what al-Ka'bi's "Ghurfat al-qiyās" serves to expose and indirectly criticize.

Translation³

Right at 10:00 am.

Lights are being switched on, and, slowly, there is a sign of life coming into the place. exchanges of morning greetings among the staff... A muffled conversation can be heard at a remote corner of the shop and soon it grows louder, flooding the entire place before fading away after a few minutes.

A door is suddenly opened. A lady peeps inside to check the empty room; she looks around the tiny place and then forcefully slams the door behind her.

Loud music suddenly starts blaring.

Shortly before noon.

A hesitant hand pushes the door open to ensure it is vacant. A short, plump, somewhat beautiful young woman enters. She makes sure to firmly lock the door behind her. She bends toward the mirror to scrutinize the dark circles that have stubbornly remained beneath her eyes, which she has been trying hard to conceal with beauty creams. Drawing out her lips with dissatisfaction, she begins to remove her clothes, layer by layer, cautiously hanging them on the rack on the back of the door... She takes a pair of jeans which she wants to try on, effortlessly slips them on, and looks at herself in the mirror.

"Certainly, they're the right sizes. but, no, they don't make me look seductive. After all,

I'm not so fat to put on something of this size. I should try a smaller pair."

She stands behind the door, opens it cautiously and calls upon a female attendant who is standing close to the fitting room.

"Yes, dear, the same model, but one or two sizes smaller."

A few minutes later, the attendant comes back with the requested items.

She selects the bigger one and begins the stuffing operation. A good start, followed by some difficulty in the hip area, a bit of wiggling, a lot of pulling up. All that is left is the zipping up, which she does with some difficulty; buttoning up is even more difficult.

A look in the mirror.

A turn to the right, then the left.

A smile of satisfaction.

"This will turn him on. No man would pass up this beauty to run instead after that broomstick Faṭmūh. He's always complimenting her as if she's the only one working in the office. Yes, I'll show her, that four-eyed thing!"

A sigh of relief when she opens the zipper, it was more difficult to put the pants on than to take them off. She hastily puts her clothes back on, looks again in the mirror, applies red lipstick and then some whitish powder on her face.

She takes her prize and leaves the room.

An hour later.

Some light knocking on the door. The door opens and a lady in her early forties enters... She ensures the door is firmly locked behind her and then places her handbag and the gown she is carrying on the bench that is placed in the corner of the room... She slowly removes her headscarf, facing the mirror, and moves closer to be sure of what she is seeing: unbelievable, some gray, and white hairs sprouting up on her hairline, signaling the defeat of youth. She sighs sorrowfully at the image of herself reflected in the mirror. She then sluggishly completes the removal of her clothes, picks up the gown from the bench, turns it around and then opens the side zipper, carefully putting her head in it, then her hands, before pulling it down to cover the rest of her body. She zips it up and pulls back away from the mirror, her back touching the door. The red, silky garment with its long chiffon tail appears to have been specially sewn for her. She might not be a beautiful woman, but no one can deny the attractiveness of her tall and slender figure... She makes a half

turn, takes a quick look to be sure of the overall appearance. The dress is precisely what she wants: simple but beautiful.

"There's no need to dress too elegantly. everyone knows how this occasion makes me feel bad: the engagement ceremony of my youngest sister."

- So, Mona. all your sisters are married except you. you're an 'old maid' now, aren't you?!...

She begins to remove the gown while trying to control the tears flowing from her eyes... She then slowly puts on her clothes, having a quick look in the mirror to make sure they are in order... She opens the door, about to leave. but quickly turns back to pick up the gown from the bench... She then goes out of the room, leaving it empty.

Soon afterward.

A little boy, about three years old, stands in front of the door and points inside the room...

"No one is in this one, mama."

A beautiful looking lady joins the little boy. It is obvious she does not care about her elegance... She raises up the index finger toward her mouth as a way of cautioning the child not to raise his voice. She then grabs his hand and they both enter the room. The child instantly jumps to sit on the bench in the corner of the room. The lady firmly locks the door and then places her handbag and the garments she is carrying on the child's lap, who then busies himself with counting the garments that have been dumped on him. She removes her clothes while reiterating her warning to the child not to peek at her; though he, naturally, does not take his eyes off her. From the child's lap, she takes a loose, blue blouse and a white skirt with blue embroideries... Putting them on slowly.. she looks in the mirror.

"This set is not bad, except that it makes me look fatter than I am. I will try another one."

She puts an orange-colored blouse and an olive-green skirt from the child's hands. removes the first set and hurriedly puts on the new one, having remembered she has to pick up the kids from school. This set is so tight on her that it shows nothing but the flaws of her body, which looks like a heap of flesh stacked together, haphazardly. Even though in a hurry, she cannot but keep looking dejectedly at herself in the mirror. How she used to love flaunting her full figure in front of her husband Bu Saeed, and his lustful looks chasing her, like a lion ready to devour its gazelle... or at least, this is what it seemed to her when he used to call her "a gazelle"... Of course, that was before giving birth to five children.

"I'd better stick to the loose one, I don't wanna hear any more of Bu Saeed's nasty comments."

She rushes to change her clothes, having decided to select the first set without trying on the remaining pieces she had wanted to buy. She takes the chosen set, stands at the door, hurries up her child, who is insisting on taking with him an embellished piece that has attracted him. But he grudgingly drops it when his mother scolds him, threatening to leave him behind in the store. The lady has already left the room by the time her voice reaches the little boy, requesting him to join her. The child takes a final look at the embellished piece. and then he vanishes.

Late afternoon.

A dignified lady enters the room... It is difficult to determine her age, just as it is hard for an onlooker to ascertain

whether her pursing her lips is the remnant of a smile or of the start of a grimace. She locks the door. puts her handbag on the floor and then begins to turn around the gray suit that consists of a jacket and pants. She looks at the attached tag in order to be sure of the price again and then shakes her head in dissatisfaction.

In anger, she throws it on top of the heap of garments that have been placed on the small bench. As she is about to leave the room, she changes her mind as it occurs to her, out of inquisitiveness, to try on the suit in order to see how she will look in it. No need to remove her headscarf and the shirt, which is white and will perfectly match the suit should she decide to buy it. She removes the black skirt she is putting on, replacing it with the gray pants from the suit, before putting on the jacket on top of her white shirt. She turns round to face the mirror. and she is astonished to discover how clothing can enhance someone's personality... This high-class suit increases her loftiness, as it makes her look like an important personality. like a school principal or a lawyer, for instance. She had wanted to become either of these, but for her family's financial hardship. But why does someone like her, a receptionist in a modest hospital, require a suit with a price that is half her monthly salary?!

"How can I even think of buying such a suit while I still have to pay the installment for my daughter's school fees. I must be out of my mind!!..."

In the evening.

With force, the door is opened, banging on the wall of the tiny room, producing a disquieting sound. Enters a lady in her forties. She has an aura of extreme elegance and excessive make-up. She is accompanied by a girl, who is below twenty and does not wear any make-up or attire that will attract people's attention. The latter closes the door, while the former begins to check her make-up in the mirror and thereafter begins to take off her clothes, handing them over to the girl, who then cautiously hangs them on the rack that is fixed to the back of the door. She turns to the girl, asking her about the new pieces of clothing she wants to try on; the girl points at them on top of the seat... With care, the lady takes up embroidered pink pants and a transparent white shirt on which are stitched some scattered pink-colored letters. Humming a happy tune, she puts them on. looks at herself in the mirror with admiration and satisfaction and then turns to the girl:

-So. what do you think of your mom?

- Do you want to know what I think?!. You're the most beautiful mother on earth, but...

If only you would listen to me, Umm Ahmad, and choose the outfits that are appropriate for women of your age!

- How many times have I told you not to call me "Umm Ahmad"?. It was a mistake asking for your opinion in the first place. This is what I get from you and your dad!

In a different mood from that with which she entered the room, Umm Ahmad removes the pink suit she has decided to buy and then puts on her clothes, which are not too different from the ones she has just chosen today. She stretches her hand toward her daughter for her abaya and headscarf. After extended moments of standing in front of the mirror to make

sure that this fit of anger has not blemished the lines of her make-up and to adjust her bangs, whose color is difficult to determine... She carries the chosen garments and leaves the room, ignoring her daughter, who could but shake her head in despair and then catches up with her mother.

At the end of the day.

A lady who, at first glance, looks stunningly beautiful except that, on a closer look, one discovers that even though the scalpel of the surgeon corrected some of the defects on her face, it has also left some noticeable asymmetrical features on the face... She smiles at one of the female staff in the store, as a way of confirming that she does not require any assistance. She closes the door, drops the garments she is carrying on the small bench, and then slips her hand into her bag to take out a cell phone. She reads some of the received messages and then tries to make a call. She waits. No response. She flares up, attempts to call again, waiting a little longer, to no avail. She decides to type a message, sends it, raving. She waits again for a short while, then tries calling again. No response. She types another message that bears all her frustration and resentment.

“Ok, Sayfūh. You think you can pull the wool over my eyes!. Sure, you’re after a new catch. But for this milestone around my neck, I would’ve given you hell!”

She attempts a final call... The telephone is switched off this time. A series of insults. Then a deep breath, attempting to control herself before getting out. She tests her false smile in the mirror, returns the phone to its place, puts her small handbag under her arm and leaves the room.

9:45 pm.

The female worker stands in the middle of the room. She gathers all the garments that have been casually piled up on top of the small bench, looks behind the door and then on the floor to make sure she does not drop anything.

She leaves the room.

Music off.

Lights off.

NOTES

1. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Changing_room; accessed 29 December 2015.
2. This title literally translates as “The Fitting Room,” but we have rendered it as “The Ladies’ Fitting Room,” which is much more appropriate to the content of the story.
3. Please note that we have kept most of the interspersing periods (dots) as they appear in the original text, except in some instances where we changed the structural order of a sentence to make it much more readable and clearer in English. Also, please note that some of the more common Arabic names—e.g. Ahmad, Mona, and Saeed—are written in the translation as they are usually spelled in the Latin Script, without macrons and diacritics. However, we have used the standard transliteration format for some of the names that are used/written in the original text to reflect their pronunciation and use by the Emiratis in certain circumstances—e.g. when one is in the mood of anger or delight, satisfaction, etc.—as in the case of Faṭmūh or Faṭumah instead of Fāṭimah (Fatima), and Sayfūh instead of Sayf (Saif).

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