

# PINK CURTAINS

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Sameera Azzam, a Palestinian short story writer who died in 1967, published several collections of short stories which show her ability to describe details and bring out local color. Many of her stories give a living picture of the life of unprivileged classes and common people.

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Abou-Khalil, the merchant whose shop in the street corner exhaled perfumes of cinnamon, pepper, cloves, nutmeg, henna, caraway and other spices, was evidently a skirt lover but, as he proudly declared, only within God's law. He swore that he never had more than two or, very rarely, three wives at a time while his religion allowed him four. The number of women who had the chance to belong to his harem exceeds ten. All were repudiated, one after another, except his second wife, Umm-Mahmoud, whom he kept because of her even temper and because she gave him Mahmoud, his favorite son. The time came when Abou-Khalil had only Umm-Mahmoud in his household. So we concluded that the man had decided to give up his favorite hobby and to grow old peacefully, free from the quarrels and intrigues of co-wives. But my mother refused to admit the idea, affirming that whenever a woman crossed the street, Abou-Khalil hurried to stick out his tarbooshed head, and started examining her from head to toe until she was out of sight, then he would withdraw while his bony fingers caressed his short beard dyed with henna.

Abou-Khalil's shop stood at a short distance from our house. In the same location he owned an old house which we overlooked from the small window of our kitchen. In that lodging, he once kept one of his wives, a frivolous young woman who, whenever Abou-Khalil was her night guest, showed her mirth by pinning a large rose on the edge of her gay-colored scarf, made up her face with thick coats of powder and rouge, and started playing the tambourine for a dancing performance. When Umm-Mahmoud heard about her co-wife's merriment, she only laughed and said: "Only God is everlasting. To-morrow he will repudiate her!"

"Tomorrow" might mean a month, several months, but never more than a year. The small lodging kept filling and emptying until one day the rumour spread that Abou-Khalil had decided to bequeath his property to Umm-Mahmoud, her six children and two other children from his repudiated wives. My mother shook her head saying: "This does not mean that he has given up remarrying. Otherwise he would have given the rooms for rent. Why should he keep them empty?"

My mother's argument was right. One morning, we saw the window of the room facing our kitchen open wide. A woman was there, wiping the dust off the worn-out shutters. "Didn't I tell you?" Said my mother, poking the neighbor who had come for a morning visit, "Abou-Khalil has a new wife!"

The woman who stood at the window seemed to be over sixty. She had an old white veil on her head. She could not be the new wife, we thought, for Abou-Khalil's ideal woman should be one with bulky hips, painted eyes, heavy breasts and hands painted with henna from his shop.

The news spread all over the place. From every window in the neighborhood, a woman stuck out her head, winking to her neighbor. Eyes were fixed on Abou-Khalil's house until he was seen coming in the evening, leaning on a cane, wearing the "bridal suit" as the neighbors called it, which consisted of a pair of shining trousers, a long jacket from which dangled a golden watch. His beard was dyed with henna and he smelled rose-water. Then every one was convinced of the "happy event" and more than one company gathered in the evening to discuss Abou-Khalil's matrimonial activities.

They impatiently waited for the morning to bring further news. Morning came and the worn out curtains moved, showing a white, pinkish face with a pair of large painted eyes. The woman was young, not yet twenty. Seeing that so many eyes were fixed on her from the neighboring windows, she grinned in a somewhat stupid manner and while she glibly chewed the chiclet which filled her mouth, she hurried away and was no more seen except three days later when Abou-Khalil went back to his shop, slowly pacing with his short legs and protruding stomach.

As soon as the new bride was alone, the women of the neighborhood flocked to her house for news. They came back with the conclusion that she came from a very humble and destitute home, otherwise she would not have accepted to marry an old man who kept her in a poorly furnished room, with only an old bedstead, a squeaking closet and a few shaky chairs. The fact that her mother stayed with her confirmed the conclusion. Her mother, inserted one of the neighbors, must be a wily old woman who gave her daughter to this old man with the hope that he would soon die and leave her a fortune.

— The girl seems to care for nothing except her stomach, said another neighbor; whenever she looks out the window, she is up to chewing something that fills her mouth.

— A fat and gluttonous young woman, said a third neighbor, will surely bring about the old man's end.

Only three months later, we heard a repeated knock at our gate and in came Umm Faheema the bride's mother, inquiring about the nearest doctor in the quarter. Abou-Khalil was suffering from a severe pain in the chest due to high blood pressure. My mother indicated to her the nearest doctor's clinic and she hurried to call him. Since that time, Umm Faheema started visiting us from time to time. She sat like a heap on the floor near the door, took from inside her skirt a small tin box filled with fine tobacco, rolled between her fingers a half-filled cigarette and started smoking contentedly.

When asked why she did not bring her daughter with

her she answered that the man was jealous. When he was at home, she had to stay with him. When he was away, he often sent a boy to inspect and make sure that she was at home, because he thought that the neighbors' company might corrupt her.

During one of those visits, my mother took the liberty of asking her why she gave her young daughter to that polygamous old man. She said that her daughter needed someone to provide for her. The man seemed to be well-to-do. He bought her a pair of bracelets, ear-rings, three dresses and a dozen of perfumed soap cakes. He would take care of her as long as he lived. If he died, she would marry another. "Wasn't he better than a young man who would beat her every night, as did her father to me?" she concluded.

My mother's curiosity, or interest in the woman's condition, led her to further question her: Does your daughter expect any inheritance? The old woman's face darkened when she said: "Believe me, dear neighbor, my daughter is stupid. She has been unable to obtain any promise from him. Should he die, Umm Mahmoud would not allow her any share in his wealth. Worse than that, she has not born him a child, though we have tried on her all sorts of treatment. She is unlucky, like me."

When the man fell sick, Umm Mahmoud sent one of her sons every half hour to inquire about him. Umm Faheema hurried to us every half hour to smoke a cigarette and complain:

— We failed to think of blood pressure. Should the man die, Umm Mahmoud would not allow us to spend one night more in the rooms. I hear that he has bequeathed the place to her. We have been stupid because we did not claim even some decent pieces of furniture.

I wonder if my mother was serious or kidding when she advised the woman to let her daughter ask Abou-Khalil, at the proper time, to make a sacred vow that, if God cured him, he would fill the room with new furniture.

The old woman was hilarious at the idea. Two days later, she came back running to announce that the man promised her two new bedsteads and a new closet if he recovered from sickness. He even asserted that he would buy her a sheep to be slain at his door on the Feast of Sacrifices.

Abou-Khalil recovered. Was it by the doctor's treatment, the intercession of saints or Umm Faheema's vows? We don't know. He went back to his shop. Umm Faheema passed by our house carrying a sum of money with which to buy new curtains. Shortly after that, the old, worn out curtains disappeared, new pink curtains ornamented the window. New pieces of furniture brightened the bedroom. Faheema kept looking out of the window every morning, eternally chewing her chiclet and smiling her empty smile.

But one day, she failed to appear. Instead of her, we saw her mother hurrying to fetch the doctor for Abou-Khalil who had another attack in the chest.

"This time," remarked a witty neighbor, "if Abou-Khalil should die, nobody would feel sorry. With pink curtains and brand new furniture, Faheema would not have to wait more than three days to find a new husband!"