

A Wife For My Son

by Ali Ghalem

Ali Ghalem is an Algerian film maker who has three feature-length films to his name, including a screen version of "A Wife For My Son". He has won the silver medal at the Verona film festival and the Special Judges Award at the Pardes Festival. The book explores the struggle for emancipation fought by Fatiha, the central character, and although it deals explicitly with life in Algerian society it also evokes the wider experience of women everywhere in their overcoming of societal obstacles and the determining of their own fate. In this excerpt, Fatiha is being groomed for the wedding ceremony and all of her fears and confusions about the event are examined, in addition to the attitudes of other members of the community, especially the women.

Fatiha sat stiffly in her wedding dress and waited. Her mother entered, carrying a tray of henna, followed by the other women adorned in gold trimmed velvet and silver laced muslin of many hues, deep blue, green, pink and garnet red. Magic, movement. A vivid kaleidoscope. Putting on their wedding jewelry they looked at each other, admired each other, found fault with each other. Some of them had antique noble airs about them, like idols or tragic actors with enlarged and darkened eyes, with silver plates and chains, bracelets and silk scarves. They sat majestically on the cushions arranged around the large room; each covered with a fabric as sumptuous as the women's clothes. They smiled at Fatiha who responded with a timid acknowledgment. Houria rolled up the sleeves of her blue velvet dress and carefully applied the henna to her daughter's hands.

"My dear, you are more and more beautiful!"

Fatiha smiled at her mother and contemplated her hands while they were being dyed red. Houria was surprised at her daughter. Always so lively, talkative and gay. Now so silent! Why had she changed so much? She refused to let herself believe that Fatiha was simply unhappy. As soon as the thought made its way into her consciousness, she energetically pushed it back.

"You're just intimidated my pretty, my dear, my treasure . . . I was too, back then . . . but I was happy . . . so happy . . . but I didn't show it . . . She's so like me . . ."

And to convince herself:

"Are you happy, my pretty?"

Fatiha did not answer; she was still looking at her hands. For a moment she wished her husband would come and free her from all this quickly. The husband she had yet to meet and knew almost nothing about . . . The absence of even an idea of his face was intolerable. It was as if he didn't really exist. An intolerable absence, and the intolerable presence of everything demanded of her to become his wife. What was demanded of him to be her husband? She had no idea.

The presentation of the gifts began. A smiling woman placed a package on the big tray and extended a thousand good wishes; another offered money. Houria, still carefully applying the henna, announced the sum loudly, smiled and bowed while the women again yelled loud youyous. Fatiha just listened and watched. All the joy and excitement became more and more agonizing. She could no longer hold back her tears. Only an old cousin noticed. She came towards her; caressed her cheek with a sympathetic look, leaned over and whispered into her ear:

"You must smile at life, my angel, because if you don't, life will shrivel up like an old sheepskin in the sun." Fatiha laughed.

"So, you see . . . we laugh like that, over nothing . . . and everything becomes as pink as your dress! Believe me . . . you have to smile at life, my angel."

She gave Fatiha another pat on the cheek, then called all the young women over to give them henna which would promote their swift marriage. They ran over with outstretched hands and laughing, turned around, the center of their palms colored with the magic red.

Fatiha caught sight of Myriem who came quickly to her. They embraced and looked deeply at each other with affection. They didn't need words to understand each other. Myriem saw Fatiha's distress; she understood her desires and dreams and her refusal to accept her fate. But what could she say when things were done like this? . . . impossible to change.

Leila, a young cousin, began dancing to the sound of the darbouka and tambourine. Her hips wrapped in a red, yellow and gold scarf, her agile shoulders, the beauty of her movements, of her arms and hands, of her rhythm, her sensuality, simultaneously full and light, all of this enticed Fatiha and Myriem. Some of the young girls joined the dance. The women began clapping their hands to the

beat. Myriem wanted to bring her friend into the dance, but Fatiha remained still, her hands and feet bound in cloth, a prisoner of tradition. Aïcha, not missing a thing, approached Myriem and vigorously pulled her towards the dancers. She wanted to stop this conspiring. Her intuitive sense told her that her daughter-in-law had to be shielded from these friends whose lives would go on for a while as unmarried young women, some as school girls. Fatiha saw Myriem, followed by her mother-in-law, turn and give her an impish smile.

Aïcha was a beautiful woman who did not look her fifty years. Agile in spite of her dimensions and often exuberant, she seemed energetic and dictatorial, proud of the power and authority vested in her within the limits of a woman's universe. Next to her, Houria seemed discrete, reserved, and she was just that. Affectionate, calm and gentle, undemanding and very devoted to others, she smoothed out more conflicts than she provoked. Her presence was serene. She spoke little, listened and rarely gave an opinion. She considered her own opinion of little importance, accustomed to following her husband and always smiling as if life had spared her worry.

Fatiha, after comparing the two women, so different from each other, wondered how she would be able to live without her mother and with that woman who was to be her mother-in-law. Why did she have to change homes? Why did women always have to go live with their husband's family? She knew that if she had asked these questions she would be told to hush up . . . just crazy ideas . . . they get you nowhere, her mother would say. . . Everyone has their crazy ideas . . . she would have to silence her 'crazy ideas.' Be quiet . . . she had remained silent for days. What she wanted to say was not what was expected of her. It made her apprehensive. She sensed it would go on and on . . . for a long time . . . for a long time. She recalled the day Myriem tried to comfort her:

"Fatiha, are you in love with someone?"

"No, that's not it . . ."

"Then, why are you so sad?"

"Because I don't want to get married like this! I want to go on at school; I don't want to live like our mothers, stuck in the house. I want to work! Why do they decide everything for us like in the old days?" Myriem could find no answer.

"You're lucky, you are."

"Oh! . . . for how long? My mother spoke to me about Haddad's son, the one who works in the Ministry of Agriculture. I wouldn't be surprised if . . ."

A young pregnant woman walked through the courtyard carrying a bucket of water and some washing.

"That's my sister-in-law. Don't you recognize her?"

Fatiha could not. In eight years of marriage she had had six children; four of them had died. She was always sad and Myriem could not understand what had happened between her and her brother.

"My brother is very hard on her. I don't know why. And she takes it all without a word. She's completely passive."

"I don't want to live like that!"

"But your husband lived in France, Fatiha, he can't be like my older brother! He's more old fashioned than my father! He won't accept the smallest change. If it were up to him I would've never gone to school!"

"No . . . I don't want to live like that!"

Madame Suissi, Fatiha's former sewing teacher, had just come in and brought Fatiha out of her reveries. She came towards her with a smile, gave her a kiss and handed to Houria the gift that Fatiha's wrapped hands could not take. They looked at each other and remembered . . . their opposition to this forced marriage; their efforts to stop it; their powerlessness to change anything at all. Madame Suissi knew Fatiha had decided to become a teacher like herself but never dared to say so. But she could have. She was angry with herself for not having been able to convince Fatiha's father. She knew she had deeply disappointed the pupil she loved dearly. Fatiha had been cheerful, lively and intelligent, sensitive and always interested, full of questions and enthusiasm. She was angry with herself. It was not the first time it had happened and unfortunately it would not be the last. At times she was able to win over the parents of her students and change their futures, but this was very rare. In this case she had not succeeded and since she could only find words that avoided the issue, she simply said:

"How beautiful you are Fatiha!"

Fatiha, choked up, holding back her tears, tried to smile and lowered her eyes. Yes, Madame Suissi had disappointed her, but she did not blame her. What she could do was very limited in the face of her family's determination! Houria quickly took Madame Suissi to the table in the same way Aïcha

had taken Myriem, and with the same concern; to protect the young bride. She invited her to have some cake and drink whatever she wanted, leaving her with Myriem, who had just noticed her teacher.

When Houria looked at her daughter she saw she was alone, withdrawn, lost in the contemplation of her bound hands. She remembered the day her husband had pushed her to announce the good news, she could see her dear little girl slowly going through her morning routine, so nonchalant.

“Hurry up, dear, you’re going to be late again! Hurry up . . .”

She would very much like to be able to say those words again this morning . . . Her daughter was being taken from her . . . She could see her in her blue kabyle dress, with her long flowing hair.

“But dear, you haven’t done your hair yet!”

Fatiha’s burst of laughter . . . that marvelous laugh of hers!

“Why are you looking at me like that this morning? What’s the matter?”

“It’s just . . . just . . . never mind . . . hurry up . . .”

She hadn’t the nerve to tell her. Her father told her of the future marriage that night; Fatiha was still; she suddenly lost her color and broke into tears. Houria recalled Madame Suissi’s visit to talk about Fatiha.

“Fatiha is such a good student . . . it would really be a shame to . . .”

“Marriage is a more important thing than school for a woman!”

“She’s still so young; she has so many plans; she likes learning so much . . .”

“Marriage is more important . . .”

Her father was so self-confident, calm and preoccupied with order and tradition.

“Fatiha is a very gifted, she . . .”

“Fatiha is getting married; a woman’s place is in the home with her husband and her children; that’s where she has to put these gifts, as you say, to work.”

“But one doesn’t prevent the other, Mr. Kaddour! Today everybody’s work is needed, including women’s . . .”

“No! No! Not when men are unemployed.”

“But women working doesn’t increase men’s unemployment, Mr. Kaddour, to the contrary.”

“You can’t make me believe that!”

“It’s the truth all the same . . . and what’s more . . . now women want to learn, work, and choose their own husbands. . .”

“Then what was the use in winning our independence if we’re just going to copy everything the Europeans do? No! All that’s no good! I know about life, madame, I come from a peasant family and I’ve been working in hotels for a long time now . . . I know about life . . . we want our daughter to be happy.”

Houria had been silent throughout but each and every word of the conversation was engraved in her memory; she would not dare give her opinion; as a general rule what the father did was right . . . but why force Fatiha now? Why not wait a while longer? There was no rush.

Houria and Madame Suissi were reliving the same scene. Madame Suissi could not get it out of her mind; she thought of how powerless she had been to communicate with M. Kaddour; he agreed so naturally with his own decisions, so self-confident because he based himself on respect for the family order established for centuries for the good of all. Nothing she could have said would have broken through his convictions or have changed his mind. Then what would make him change his mind? Time? Probably . . . but how much time? She realized that as long as the Kaddours of this world could not be made to change their minds and accept that women could be trusted in modern social life the same way they had been trusted in family life, the same way they were trusted in the hard times of war, women’s lot would only change with great difficulty. In order to alleviate some of the pessimism of her conclusions, she began thinking that maybe Fatiha’s husband would understand her, be free from the prejudices paralyzing women’s legitimate aspirations . . . why not?

The atmosphere grew more and more lively, the excitement rose; the dancers, more and more numerous, were seized by the rhythm. Houria decided it was time to unwrap Fatiha’s hands and feet. This was done quickly. The henna was perfect.

Houria looked at her daughter with such tenderness that for an instant Fatiha felt happier; she felt like dancing and let herself be led by a cousin; her eyes caught the attentive look of Yamina, her young sister-in-law, and she smiled at her. Yamina responded with an affectionate wave of her hand. They were attracted to each other; they would be sisters; they would like each other. . .

While Yamina watched her young sister-in-law dance, one of Aïcha’s cousins eyed her. She found her absolutely charming and ready to be promised to a husband.

“Your daughter is pretty, Aïcha!”

Aïcha smiled with pride; it was true . . . Yamina had a nice face and a good character which was better yet!

“My sister has a son . . .”

“She’s still young, but we’d better start thinking about it! We have to marry our daughters while they’re young, like in the old days! It’s the wiser thing to do these days!”

“I was promised when I was ten . . . and with God as my judge . . . I have never regretted it . . .”

Yamina watched the dancers. How could she possibly guess that her mother and a cousin were deciding her future! Being of a docile and obedient nature, she did not suffer from her mother’s authoritarian character; she admired her and tried to imitate her in all the household chores; she knew how to do these things very well. . .

Houria contemplated her daughter, who at last seemed to be happy, letting herself be swept up by the joy of dancing. These kids! What’s going through their heads? Their sadness . . . like a cloud . . . like a very small cloud . . . that’s youth . . . and that’s the way it should be! Houria took a deep breath, Fatiha was happy. Thank you God! Thank you!

Fatiha danced with a liveliness unleashed by her anxiety, her worry, her regrets; she danced to forget and for the moment she felt free.