

Winning Undergraduate Essay

The Freedom She Never Had

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'She was contrasting her own life lived under the burden of traditions and restrictions, with the free, unfettered life enjoyed by the girls of the new generation' is a quotation that sums up the short story *The Breeze of Youth* by Ulfat Al-Idilbi. It is quite interesting how the short story starts out with the submissive grandmother denouncing her granddaughter's 'openness' and then gradually growing envious as she watches her, thinking of the freedom she was denied as a teenager. Ironically, the grandmother ends up breaking all the taboos that she had warned her granddaughter about earlier in the story. In a way, she was releasing the frustrations resulting from the restrictions that had characterized her adolescent years.

This short story mainly highlights the cultural contrast and clash of generations between our present day and those of our grandparents, showing how traditions and ways of life have evolved. It emphasizes differences in the roles women occupied then and now and the greater freedom that women today enjoy as compared to the earlier generations. It is written to further help us understand and distinguish women's expectations from a grandmother's point of view, one who has suffered from the burdens of rigid traditions. Moreover, we witness a loosening of restrictions as portrayed in the granddaughter's actions and lifestyle, even though she comes from the same family and background.

The first paragraph of the story starts with the grandmother scolding her granddaughter for 'beautifying' herself, as she herself was moulded into believing and accepting the fact that any attempt by a woman to catch a man's attention is 'taboo' and is considered an act of shame. Worse yet, it is considered a 'sin', as the grandmother scolds her granddaughter: "Have you no fear of God?" The grandmother goes on complaining and blaming her granddaughter ("your troubles affect us all"), saying that all the world's catastrophes are

happening because of her, simply because she stood in front of a mirror and made herself 'pretty'. In addition to her granddaughter, her son too is held responsible: "yesterdays' men and today's are worlds apart". She recalls that when her father found her "making herself pretty", he gave her a good beating and asked who she's making herself pretty for. Can she not be pretty for the sake of being pretty and neat? Or is she relating to the old times when a lady would only beautify herself for her 'one and only man', which is in most cases on her wedding day? But still, her father "didn't have daughters who spend hours in front of the mirror", so from that day on, the grandmother learnt her lesson, submitted to her father's rules, and never again did she wear any makeup. What is most intriguing about this past event is that she is recalling it with pride, believing that her father was a man who was truly capable of raising and disciplining daughters! There are two aspects that need to be highlighted here. First, religion is used as a justification for the oppression and subjugation of women within a patriarchal society. We live in societies that are largely influenced by religion, and men have been very clever in putting religion in the service of their continued dominance. What has happened is that religions have given men the authority and freedom to understand and interpret religious texts in ways most beneficial to them. Since religious texts have been mainly interpreted by men and up until today most religious figures are men, then these notions are still persistent in the minds and traditions of many. Second, it is important to note how women, in many cases, uphold traditional patriarchal beliefs even more forcefully than men do. This, I believe, is a great danger. If any change is to be achieved, then it is essential that we work on changing women's attitudes towards their gender before changing men's attitudes. In my opinion, what is harder than convincing men of the importance of gender equality is convincing women of it. I cannot think of any large-scale change

or improvement as long as women are passive and compliant with the existing status-quo.

The grandmother ends her preaching by stressing that whoever said that “the worry over a daughter lasts from the cradle to the grave” is absolutely correct. She is blinded by the patriarchal belief that a daughter is a burden and always will be. Not only is she a burden, but a daughter is also the symbol of her entire family’s respect and reputation, and as such, any wrongful act on her behalf brings shame upon everyone. Well, of course a daughter who has been raised with such a belief is going to be a burden because such daughters do not have the freedom to be independent, educated, or productive. On the contrary, they are raised to depend on their ‘prince charming’ and their ‘significant other’ and not enjoy freedom and not be able to accomplish anything that a man can and would accomplish. It is ironic that the grandmother has not learnt from her past and is unable to warn her granddaughter not to follow the same path that she had miserably led.

All this pressure by the grandmother doesn’t affect the granddaughter who pays absolutely no attention to her and leaves the house, “humming a popular song”. The grandmother watches her granddaughter from the balcony as she enjoys her freedom, blending with her friends and being herself, and she feels envious. At this point, she reverses what she had previously lectured her granddaughter about and starts cursing her father. Now, she no longer blames her granddaughter and her son for failing to raise his daughter. Instead, she blames her own father for depriving her of the freedom that her granddaughter enjoys. She probably felt this way after she realized how happily the youngsters are enjoying every bit of their freedom and comes to the realization that the restrictions her father imposed on her harmed her instead of benefit her. The granddaughter goes out and explores the life that her grandmother never had, while her grandmother sits at home with nothing better to do than blaming and letting out her frustration and anger at her granddaughter. Things have changed, mentalities have changed, and she has no security and no education to do anything useful in her life. Now the grandmother expresses her regret for the life she had led, deprived of freedom and happiness.

The grandmother sits down and starts reflecting on memories of her youth. The granddaughter reminded her of all the things she never had and was never able to have or experience during her childhood. She remembered only one thing: the love she could never have. She recalls the time she went with her mother to the market to buy shoes and how she was praised by a man for her pretty feet. It was the first time she had received compliments from a man, and she felt excited and overwhelmed. After all these years, she still remembers what it felt like when he held her foot between his hands. It was probably the first and last time she had ever felt something like that. Her husband had never complimented her on her ‘beauty’, and this is the reason why she still yearned for the touch of that salesclerk whom she only encountered once in her life. She goes on remembering how he stared at her with that sweet enticing smile and wondered how he could see anything through her thick veil while she could see every bit of him. It is obvious that she had lived in a strict conservative religious society where a girl is expected to be covered up because her ‘beauty’ should never be revealed to men and should remain a ‘mystery’.

It is a universal instinct that we as human beings fantasize about the things that we are barred from, and we desire everything we cannot have. The grandmother is not allowed to expose herself and her society is very strict about it, so her instinct provoked her to do the opposite. She became proud of herself and she began walking ‘erect’ next to her mother’s side, discretely lifting the edge of her robe so that her shapely legs are revealed, without knowing what she is about to get herself into.

As she raised her robe with the intention of attracting the young man, an ugly old man spotted her, yelled at her with his utmost voice and damned all girls! Hearing this, she no longer walked erect and proud as before, but walked shrunken and embarrassed behind her mom, dropping the edge of her robe. The old man completely robbed her of her pride and confidence and reminded her that she was not allowed the freedom to do what she wanted. She also got lectured by her father when she returned home as he recited the story of the ‘Mi’raje’: Those women who show their beauty to men end up in hell hung by

their hair. It is not surprising for a religious society to use God as a weapon to scare and plant fears in their daughter's minds. Why would God create women as attractive beings if they are supposed to cover up? And why would women who show their beauty to men go to hell? Why not the opposite? Why didn't the grandmother think about these questions when she was scolded by her father? Perhaps she was too scared that she might get hung by her hair like the other women who are in hell because they have exposed their beauty. Her dad used God and religion to terrorize his daughter so that she wouldn't embarrass the family with any wrongdoing, and his technique proved successful as fear, guilt, and longing for forgiveness haunted her ever since. However, she found a way to rid herself of this guilt and resorted to diverse tricks to show off her charms.

When young, the grandmother was evidently going through a phase of discovering herself and her body and was satisfied with the impact she had on men. She was haunted by desires that she could never satisfy and so she started drifting away from her family and spending time alone. Deep in her heart, she wished she could confide in her own mother and tell her all that she was going through but she did not because she was scared and ashamed. Instead, the passion of love for the salesman tormented her until she could no longer bear it. She was clearly tormented by love because she was not allowed to have it! Had she been given the freedom to love, she would not have really yearned for the salesman's attention. However, the fact that she was not able to have him made her want him even more.

She knew she was never going to meet him again until her shoes wear out because of course she would not dare tell her mother that she likes the salesman and that she wants to go back just to see him. Hence, she resorted to lying so she can get what she wanted. On her way to the shoe shop, she was filled with "great hope and dreams". However, the first

disappointment came when she entered the shop and realized he had gone, followed by a second major disappointment when the old man who had previously yelled at her as she lifted his robe on the street came to her father and asked for her hand in marriage. What is more tragic is the fact that he had come with a 'dowry' for the daughter and her father accepted.

After remembering her youth years, "her eyes filled with tears, and she heaved a deep sigh for her lost youth and long life, which now seemed drab and worthless to her". It is clear that the encounter with the salesman still affects her and that her desires were never quenched. It is furthermore obvious that she never led a happy life, having the old man who bought her from her father as a husband. She never lived her youth properly, never enjoyed her beauty, and never felt love. As she gazes out the balcony and watches Um Anton with all the makeup on, she gets the urge to try to apply makeup on her face, even just once and probably for the first time since her father scolded her. In a way, she lives a moment of her lost childhood as she opens her granddaughters' drawer and starts smearing herself with cosmetics which she had never seen before. While she's doing that, she grows even more envious and frustrated at her lost youth and freedom which her granddaughter possesses.

While the grandmother suffers from the loss of her childhood, the granddaughter puffs away on an expensive cigarette and tells her friends what happened to her grandmother the day she walked into her room and saw her face smeared with makeup. They simply laugh about it and continue with their normal life. Such is the progression of life. After years and years of repression, the grandmother feels regret and remorse, looking back on a lost life- the life of a woman back then.

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REFERENCES

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