

# HAYY AL-LIJĀ



"September", 1995, collage. Haibat Balaa Bawab

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**H**ayy al-Lijā, a novel written by Balqis al-Humani and published in 1969, presents the life style of a poor segment of the Lebanese society. While portraying the life and daily practices of this particular group of people, it tracks the social progress and change that took place along a span of time stretching immediately before World War I until the period following World War II.

This is a novel about a group of Shiite Lebanese people

who move from their villages in the South of Lebanon and settle in Hayy al-Lijā, a Shiite ghetto in Beirut, where they attempt to uphold their traditions and customs and pretend that nothing has changed and that life is the same as it was in their villages. The changes that occur are primarily visible in Fattum the main character in the novel. The novel traces the story of Fattum from the time when she marries her cousin,<sup>1</sup> at the age of 14, moves from a village in South Lebanon to Beirut, and eventually returns as an old woman to her village where she intends to spend the rest of her days (p. 7). Fattum never loved her husband for he was rude, rough and uncouth. He insulted

and abused her for trivial reasons, or for no reason at all, and constantly made fun of her tall and slender body comparing her to a "tall reed" (p.9). Fattum knew all along that her husband did not love her. He used to come home at sunset to change his clothes and eat his supper before going out again without informing her of his whereabouts. He always returned home late after Fattum was sound asleep (p. 24). For her husband, marriage was no more than a shelter to spend the night, and a place where service is always available free of charge (p.3).

Fattum never benefited from their constantly improving economic situation. When her husband began earning more money, she heard of the improvement from others. She continued to live in her shabby room since her husband preferred to spend his money on other women, and beat his wife and insult her for the most trivial reasons (p.51).

Yet Fattum did not succumb to her husband's mistreatment for long. At one point when her husband was about to leave the house, she asked him where he was going. His reaction to her audacious question was physical violence. He pushed her and when she fell on the floor, he started kicking her with his shoes (p. 37). A similar incident occurred, and Fattum once more summoned up her courage and questioned her husband about his whereabouts, and when he tried to grab hold of her, she scratched his face and dug her nails in his shirt screaming hysterically. After this incident she left her marital home and went back to live with her parents in the village refusing to return to her husband.

Fattum's entire life underwent a drastic change when her husband fell ill and had to be operated on. His health problems prevented him from resuming his job, and so Fattum had to find a job, and in this way, she became the primary breadwinner and head of the household. When Fattum took charge, her husband's absolute authority was shaken. He was relegated to the role of merely objecting, or giving his opinion, while the real decisions were now within the domain of Fattum's responsibilities (p. 152).

Previously, when subjugated by her husband, Fattum compensated for her sorrow and misery by manipulating and dominating the people around her. Her first victim was As'ad, her brother in law. Fattum waited on As'ad and looked after him for, after all, he was her husband's brother, and in return the latter respected her and gave her the care and concern that she never had with her own husband. So when he made up his mind to marry a stranger, Fattum felt suffocated and choked for she loved As'ad, but would not even admit it to herself. So she decided to play match maker and marry him off to a woman of

her choice, his cousin "Hasna".<sup>3</sup> She succeeded only after coercing and intimidating him. Later on As'ad fell in love with another woman, Khadijah, and married her secretly. When Fattum found out, she set out to put an end to his second marriage, and she succeeded. As a result As'ad began to take drugs in order to drown his sorrow, and he openly blamed Fattum and her son, a drug trafficker, for his ailment. As'ad's condition deteriorated until he was found dead in a gutter in one of the suburbs of Beirut (p. 251).

Similarly, Fattum contested her cousin Zayn al-'Abidin's<sup>4</sup> choice of partner and told him "you must forget this girl". In the end her schemes worked and she managed to split them apart. Moreover, when Ahmad proposed to her daughter Zaynab and proclaimed that they were in love, Fattum refused his proposal and beat her daughter because she had the audacity to fall in love. Again she urged her son Muhammad to marry her niece<sup>4</sup> although he did not love her, and when her daughter Sumaya fell in love with Samih, she married her off to Zayn al-'Abidin who was already married and who was much older than Sumaya. However, with time, the character of Fattum undergoes change. Initially, she wanted to marry her son Mahmud to Sa'da whom he never loved and insisted that he should obey her wishes. Yet the death of As'ad changed her. When it came to her son's choice of wife, she told her husband that "there is no compulsion in marriage." She accepted her daughter's wish to further her education, anxiously awaited her graduation, and accepted her new job as a school teacher. And when she was told that Sami and her daughter were in love, her reaction was "there is no harm in that. The girl has to experience an honest love story."

This drastic change that took place within Fattum had a great deal to do with her economic situation and psychological condition as well as the sweeping changes that occurred in society as a whole. With time and through interaction with urban people having dissimilar views and ways of life, the people who left their villages and came to live in the city, had no choice but to undergo changes at all levels and particularly in their vision, outlook and mode of thinking.

*Translated by Myriam Sfeir*

**Footnotes:**

1. the son of her paternal aunt
2. the daughter of his maternal aunt
3. the son of her maternal aunt
4. her sister's daughter

