

House of obedience

Life



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The Bait-al-taa or House of Obedience is a provision in Islam law which gives husbands the right to demand obedience from their wives. If a woman leaves her husband's home without his permission he has the right to force her to come back. The husband can claim " nushaz" or disobedience and order her to come back with a qadi (judgement.) Once the woman returns she stays either at her husband's home or in another living area (House of Obedience) which provides the woman with essential necessities. Divorce is not allowed unless the husband decides that is what he wants.

In her short story " House of Obedience" Ihsan Assal rejects the idea of Bait-al-taa for it only hinders the progression of women in Islam. The short story " House of Obedience" by Assal follows the life of a young Egyptian girl named Nabila. Nabila is married off to a man at the age of fifteen and is very unhappy, she therefore runs away only to find herself living in the House of Obedience. The story opens in a court room where Nabila's father gets exonerated for marrying Nabila off at such a young age.

Nabila returns home to her parents but soon after learns that her court case has been reopened by her husband. She is taken away by a police officer, a soldier and a woman and is brought to the House of Obedience where her husband awaits her. The House of Obedience had a " sofa that was more like a swing. On either side was a cane chair, and in front was a small table" ¹² other furnitures included " a wooden bed, large cupboard, a clothes peg. " ¹³ Nabila is upset and saddened right away and cannot believe that she is being forced to live in the legal house.

Her husband, Adil tries to reacquaint himself with Nabila but Nabila does not stand for it. She tells him that she will never like him and pushes away his advances. She refuses to eat the food he gives her and ignores him to the best of her abilities, “ You think that the obedience verdict means that I have to give myself to you against my will? Adil, whatever you do I shall never in my whole life be yours. ” 14 Although Nabila gets visits from her parents and shares the misery and difficulties of living in a house of obedience with her mom she feels alone and trapped.

One day, when the door was unlocked Nabila runs away from the House of Obedience and returns to her parents’s home. This attempt however, as well as her second attempt are not successful. Her husband comes with police to look for Nabila and makes her return to the House of Obedience. After carefully analyzing her options Nabila goes to her husband and asks for nushuz. This would certify Nabila as being disobedient and would relinquish her rights to divorce and alimony, the only right she would have left would be to leave the house of obedience.

Although these are rather harsh conditions Nabila agrees to them for she is miserable living under the House of Obedience. Happy with the prospects of freedom, Nabila goes on about her day, this happiness however quickly fades. Adil returns to the legal house with papers that registered Nabila’s nushuz for the rest of her life and gave Adil the right to impose obedience whenever he felt like it. In other words, Adil could have Nabila return to the House of Obedience whenever he pleased. Nabila becomes angry and runs away to her parents’s home.

Adil follows her and grants her a divorce for he realizes that no matter how hard he tries no House of Obedience will make Nabila love him. In the end, Adil and Nabila divorce one another, leaving Nabila to question her true feelings for Adil- did her anger towards the House of Obedience block her judgement and view of how Adil truly felt for her? Regardless, Nabila moves on with her life. This story captures the determination and strong will of a young female. It is only because of her wits she is able to leave the House of Obedience.

This story shows us the difficulties living under the House of Obedience. You have no say in practically anything, you are a prisoner. Nabila is a rare case for not many women are allowed to escape the House of Obedience, she used her smarts to get out of a dead end and excruciating life that the law made possible. This story also shows us how the House of Obedience essentially served as a blockage to a marriage that might have worked out. If Nabila was not forced to stay in the House of Obedience and was allowed to stay at her parents's house, she might have come to realize that Adil did in fact love her.

Instead she focused all of her time and energy on her hatred towards the House of Obedience, she didn't have time to realize how Adil truly felt, " I started to cry when I heard the vow of divorce as though a dagger was plunged into my heart.... I felt some regret, for I had discovered suddenly that he really loved me. " 15 The origin of Bait-al-taa can be attributed to the traditions of Muslimfamilystructures. Women had to stay home, bear and raise children, and listen to their husbands in exchange for financial support.

If she was to ever leave without her husband's consent then the husband has every right to demand her to come back home. When she does return it is advised that people and neighbors are near, this way they could hear the women scream and be witnesses to her treatment. This shows that many women faced the potential of being beaten by their husbands. For the most part, Bait-al-taa is used by husbands to avoid paying alimony upon divorce, if a woman refuses to go to the House of Obedience, she forfeits her right to alimony. 16 Bait-al-taa is used as another tactic by men to enforce their authority and control over women.

Under Bait-al-taa women have no say at all, if they leave the house of obedience they are forced to return and if they refuse to go they give up their alimony, which many women need to support themselves financially. Women also cannot get a divorce until they can legally prove that their marriage can no longer be continued in a healthy manner. All of these restrictions and burden of proof are placed on women. In the 1920s the Egyptian Feminist Union fought long and hard to try to outlaw Bait-al-taa but they were not successful.

The Egyptian Feminist Union tried to show the government that women deserved the right to ask for a judicial divorce, many other Egyptian groups also tried to abolish bait-al-taa but they too were unsuccessful. It wasn't until February 1967 that an amendment to the Bait-al-taa was passed that outlawed the usage of police officers to force a woman back to her home¹⁷ and later in the year it was completely ended. 18 Unhappy marriages are the cause of women running away and age plays an important role in this decision. As time passes our ideas and perspectives begin to change.

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In the beginning of Islam girls were being married off at the age of 8, this practice was understood and accepted. However, with time people started to disagree, this was especially true in Egypt in the early and mid 1900s when bait-al-taa was being widely practiced and Egyptian Feminist were beginning to emerge. Age correlates with maturity and therefore, the Egyptian Feminist Union rallied and petitioned the government to set an age limit on marriage. After some deliberation the Parliament agreed and declared the minimum age for females to get married was sixteen and for males eighteen.

Although, this is what the Egyptian Feminist Union wanted, it was not a complete win. This new law helped the middle and upper class families who wanted to educate their daughters while it hurt the lower class families for they had to continue providing for their daughters for a longer time. Also, this law was not followed regularly, people began to create fake birth certificates and worked around the system to get what they wanted, “ my father was not punished for having me married off when I was a legal minor. 19 This law gave females more time to themselves before they got married but it also reinforced the idea that males were more important; under this law males were expected to finish school and get degrees while girls were not.

20 After reading “ The House of Obedience” it is clear that Assal does not agree with the Bait-al-taa and wanted it to be removed and I agree with her completely. Bait-al-taa goes against some of the fundamental beliefs of Islam, Islam says to “ not take revenge on your women’ and ‘ Be gentle with them or leave them respectively. 21 Women are supposed to be companions and partners to their husbands not their slaves. Bait-al-taa only causes

friction, anger and resentment between the couple. The husband gets upset at the wife for leaving, and the wife gets upset at the husband for keeping her in captivity, this causes violence to erupt and nothing is solved. The Bait-al-taa gives too much control to men and leaves women weak and defenseless, “ the bait-al-taa is more dangerous than prisons for criminals: the prisons are guarded by men invested with authority by the law..... The husband is clearly and involved guard.

No one controls him.... he can insult her and hit her and the courts will not consider this behaviour to be outside his legal rights. ” 22 No one wins under the bait-al-taa, its principles are not found in the Quran, Hadith or Sunnah. It goes against Islam and contradicts many laws in societies. For example, how could a husband get away or not be punished for beating his wife and keeping her in a house against her will while they're laws to protect citizens from bodily harm? The idea of Bait-al-taa is very contradicting and getting rid of it was the right thing to do.