

The Seasonal Nature of a Marriage in Transition in *A Woman of Five Seasons*

*A Woman of Five Seasons* by Leila Al-Atrash explores the long-standing marriage of two very different individuals, Nadia and Ihsan Natour, and the developments that begin to show the cracks in their union. At the beginning of the novel, Nadia and Ihsan have been married for ten years, despite their differences in personality and their desires. Nadia craves independence and is seeking greater fulfillment as a woman, while Ihsan is a domineering and sometimes disrespectful businessman who insists that Nadia respect the traditional Arab marriage structure. Drastic changes in their marriage play out over the course of the novel in phases and may be symbolically categorized into five seasons, spanning from one summer to the next.

The first summer is characterized by the cracks that begin to show in what was had at one time been a solid marriage. With the excessive heat come now unavoidable issues between the two that set the stage for a major rift in their relationship. Primarily, Nadia's feelings of contempt towards her husband due to his often subtly oppressive behavior begin to bubble up to the surface and forefront of their marriage. For example, she is silently enraged by his insistence on calling her his "lovely kitten". An argument is sparked when Ihsan begs her to attend a social event with high society women of the developing city in which he is basing his business, called Barqais. Nadia is left questioning whether he is ever considerate of her opinion if it differs from his own. Rather than heated rage, Ihsan is filled with heated desire. He senses the distance that is growing between him and Nadia, and reflects at length on his physical love for her. The love is almost purely physical though, shown in his obsession with her straight hair and aversion to her curly hair, which is seen after she gets out of the shower. During this summer, the façade of their

marriage begins to crack when placed under the heat of the conflict between Nadia's anger and need for independence and Ihsan's desire and need for control.

This heat is quelled as their relationship transitions into an autumnal phase. Their marriage, quite literally, falls into a routine that is fit to accommodate their emotional distance. Ihsan provides lavish gifts for Nadia in exchange for her cooperation and submission to his notion of the "ideal wife". Though this season is not filled with outright conflict or much real drama, it further supports the idea that these two lack any real romantic relationship. Nadia continues to be burdened with a lack of fulfillment in their marriage and again questions both Ihsan's feelings for her and her feelings for Ihsan. Towards the end of the second chapter, she wonders whether she ever truly loved Ihsan anyway. She reflects on her missed opportunity to be with Ihsan's brother, Jalal, whom she sees as a much more progressive man and more fitting of her own notion of an ideal partner. Ihsan is becoming more and more focused on his business pursuits, further neglecting Nadia emotionally, despite the increase in his financial support for her and their children. Both become increasingly distant from each other, cooling their apparently superficial relationship with one another.

Fall becomes winter as their relationship enters a stage that may be referred to as their "emotional hibernation". This is marked by a visit from Ihsan's brother, Jalal. Since Ihsan had sensed his brother's feelings for Nadia in the past, his presence deepens the distance between Ihsan and Nadia. The two are sleeping in separate bedrooms, with Nadia negotiating for land and gold as part of her required financial quota that she says must be reached before she will sleep alongside Ihsan again. She is setting herself up for financial independence and greater distance from Ihsan. Both individuals experience significant lows throughout this winter period. Aside from some shots to his ego, Ihsan's business matters are progressing without issue. The low

point for Ihsan during this period comes with his new awareness of the lack of control he now has in his marriage, which comes to a head when Nadia requests both the gold and the land. He reflects early on in the third chapter on how Nadia fits in—or in this case, truly doesn't fit in—to Barqais high society. He seems disappointed in and confused by her and is at a loss as to what he should do about their distance and differences. Nadia hits an emotional low, as a private encounter with Jalal sparks her realization that she is just another woman to him. She finally lets go of any regrets she had about not marrying Jalal, but retains her need for independence from Ihsan. Nadia sees that she must take care of herself, rather than waiting for the men in her life to do it for her. This epiphany combined with the growing financial stability she has on her own is setting her up for a greater level of freedom to be achieved once winter breaks.

The lows experienced by the two main characters during winter directly play into their transformations during the spring. Both characters become very different people throughout this phase, yet their growth is clearly juxtaposed. Nadia strives toward self-improvement and becomes insistent on finding her own fulfillment as an individual. She decides to join a real estate business with Jessica Raban, a secretary that had just been brought in to work for Ihsan. Nadia also decides to go back to school to study business and flawlessly handles an issue with her family's stock shares when Ihsan is unreachable. Her confidence in herself has grown immensely, and she blossoms into her full identity during this spring period. Ihsan undergoes a very different transformation, which is predominantly negative. He begins having an affair once realizing he can't control Nadia and disappears for weeks on end to cater to this woman. Though he still admits he loves Nadia as a wife, he wants another woman as a lover, placing further separation between him and Nadia. Ihsan starts to meddle in illegal business deals as well during

this period. His new identity stems from the depths of his selfishness and self-interest, prompted to emerge by threats to his masculinity by Nadia's newfound strength.

The novel ends at the beginning of a new summer, where Nadia and Ihsan rejoin one another, albeit in an entirely different relationship than that of the previous summer. The power dynamic in their relationship reaches a tipping point and is completely inverted. This tipping point manifests itself in a scandal surrounding Ihsan's affair. Botched business deals prompt an old business partner to blackmail Ihsan with photos of him and his mistress, a co-conspirator in the blackmailing, which also leads to his exile from Barqais. He is left with nothing but Nadia, who graciously, with her own money, pays the blackmailer and Ihsan's mistress to keep silent about the affair. Nadia holds the power in their relationship, saving their family and whatever was left of their family's dignity while her husband sat helpless in the mess he caused. She has constructed her own identity rather than abiding by the one society has created for her, which has allowed her to protect herself and her family in this way. The novel ends with Ihsan acknowledging this new power dynamic, as he realizes, "The decision... was hers alone now" (168). He sees that she controls his future, a far cry from the previous summer when he would constantly force his expectations on and control her.

The couple is left to negotiate this new power structure, and with the novel ending so abruptly, the reader is left to wonder whether they were able to conquer this new dynamic working together or whether this shift caused them to come apart. Perhaps this speaks to the state of many traditional Arab marriages in Middle Eastern society today as modernization has called these patriarchal traditions within marriage into question. *A Woman of Five Seasons* examines the capsizing of patriarchal structure within a marriage and proves how complex power dynamics in very traditional marriages can be, especially when influenced by additional factors

such as financial fluxes or the presence of children and extended family. This novel therefore can serve as a microcosm—at least loosely—for the self-reflection of the Arab world and Arab cultures on patriarchy, power dynamics, and the disempowerment of women in very traditional marriages.