

Book Review: *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced*
Random House, New York, 2010
188 Pages \$12.00

Kim Fleming

In February 2008, Yemeni girl Nujood Ali was living with her family in the outskirts of the capital city of Sana'a. While her life was far from easy, she had a happy childhood until the day her parents told her she was to be married to a man three times her age. At the time Nujood was probably ten-years-old, but might have been as young as eight. Within weeks the marriage occurred, Nujood was moved hundreds of miles away from her family, and her nightmare began.

Nujood's husband had promised her family that he wouldn't touch her until after she'd gone through puberty, but he raped her nightly from the first evening they arrived at his family home. Beatings soon followed and were encouraged by his mother, who also treated Nujood with incredible cruelty. Nujood had nowhere to run and no one to protect her, but she managed to convince her husband to let her visit her family in the capital. After finding little sympathy and no willing help there, she turned to the last person she could think of, her father's much-neglected second wife, for help. There she got the suggestion that would set her on a path toward freedom and world fame.

The next day, Nujood set out from her parent's home, using the money her mother had just given her to buy bread to instead pay bus and taxi fare into the heart of downtown Sana'a. Once there, she faced the overwhelming crowd of adults, pressed her way into the courthouse, found her way to the judge's chamber and demanded that she be granted a divorce. Her fierce determination and bravery would eventually be met with success. Nujood achieved her divorce, inspiring other young girls in the region to do the

same, and garnering her worldwide fame. Her story however does not end there, nor does it really end at the book's conclusion. What will come of Nujood, only time will tell, but the reader is left both rooting and fearing for her future.

I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced, is Nujood's harrowing and brave autobiography. The account begins after Nujood has embarked on her plan to escape her marriage, and the narrative weaves forward and backward through time and her story, until it ultimately converges at the time of writing. The book is composed simply, yet speaks profoundly to the power of courage and determination when all seems lost and impossible.

It aims to tell what is assuredly an all-too-common tale for young girls and women all over the world, one of being forced into marriage at a young age accompanied by subjection, humiliation and seeming hopelessness. This story explores the complex issues related to long-standing customs like child-marriage, endemic poverty, and the taboos that can shame one's family (particularly the ways in which women and girls are held almost solely responsible for bringing shame.)

In spite of the complexity and sadness, the story also aims to provide a way out, a glimmer of hope and the means for possible social change. We meet Yemeni adults, both male and female, who are privileged and are not afraid to challenge custom and ally themselves with Nujood and her cause. Yet this is a piece that very much exists on a two-steps forward, one-step backwards plane of existence. As Nujood makes progress in her own life, we also see the struggles she must endure, especially after she returns to her natal home where she had to carefully balance her familial obligations and her new-found fame. She attempts, with some success and some failure, to return to

school. We, are aware of what a profound and incredibly inspiring human Nujood is, and of what a beautiful country, culture and people she is a part of; however we are not allowed to forget her circumstances, her culture or her family. Nor are we allowed to forget all the ways in which they are all trapped, both victims and perpetrators of the worst aspects of their culture.

Nujood's story is written in a first person narrative, and the reader is to assume that the words are Nujood's, as spoken to co-author Delphine Minoui; however, this is left entirely unclear and it sometimes leaves the reader wondering. Is the incredibly strong, mature and concise wording of this story in fact, the product of a ten-year-old matured beyond her years by her experiences? Or are these essentially the thoughts of a ten-year-old girl, balanced, interpreted and evened-out by a mature French journalist? What impact did translation from Arabic, to French to English have on this child's thoughts and words? These issues are left essentially unaddressed, and though still powerful, the book is weaker because of it.

Reading such adult language, commentary and ideas, veiled in the voice of a child makes it difficult to not dwell on the narrative form rather than remain focused on the actual story. On too many occasions Nujood talks of her lack of education and her essential ignorance of anything outside her own small world; when this is contrasted against didactic details of her culture or religion that are also included in the narrative the reader cannot help but focus on the discord.

Nujood's book is intended for a general audience, but would be a powerful addition to any book club's roster or any number of high school or college level courses. The story begins as an all-too-common one, it reaches its pinnacle as a profound, rare and

inspiring one, and it ends on an uncertain one with both hope and fear for what will become of Nujood and her family. The themes addressed are complex but their presentation through the experience of a child makes them easier (if more unpleasant) to digest, and an accompanying reader's guide provides provocative questions to guide both the reading and discussion of the book.

By spreading Nujood's story and awareness of her cause, one can hope that we can be a part of the eventual change. By spreading her story, one can hope to contribute to the education, freedom and the happiness that Nujood, and all Yemeni little girls long to achieve.