

Titles and Garments

al-Jarida, 21 August 1912

What have I to do with this cloak, plaything of the wind — it embraces it, and the cloak billows; it lets go, and the cloak shrinks back; forever unfolding and folding, rising and falling, its hems trailing at the heels of my sandals; its bulk spread wide, its sleeves flung open, racing ahead of their wearer to the dinner-plates, smudging what my hand has written on the page, hiding my diamond ring from people's eyes, and hindering me whether I move or stand still?! What have I to do with this costume, which shuts me off from life in a darkened room, and confines my pleasures to a narrow space; which obliges me to feign patience in matters I am eager for, and to affect gravity through every mood and turn; which calls me "Sheikh" when I am no sheikh at all — for "the true Sheikh is one who creeps along, bent with age" — which makes me hateful in the eyes of beautiful women, when I have all the high spirits and vigor of youth, and all the wildness and abandon of adolescence, being, as I am, a child of passion and reckless desire, a ward reared on wealth and fortune; mine are the title, the decoration, the rank, the lofty station of splendour and towering glory, the far-travelling name, the soaring fame, the eminent standing?!

What have decorations to do with men in sashes, or eminent standing with men in caftans? How can rank sit well on the wearer of the long robe, or dignity be attained by the man in the turban? These are nothing but opposites drawn far apart, meanings bound in contradiction, which good taste abhors and sound judgement despises.

How far am I from Western dress, with all the beauty and comeliness of its appearance, the elegance and majesty of its cut, the nobility and order of its look, the harmony and neatness of its garments; from the red tarboosh set upon a radiant brow, from buttons that bewitch the eyes with their gleam and captivate the mind with their brightness, and a necktie that flutters in the breeze, enthralling hearts and stealing away reason?!

Away, then — O ancient garb — get you from me, for I am none of yours, and you are none of mine ...

Al-Ahnaf ibn Qays used to say: "The Arabs will remain Arabs so long as they wear turbans and gird on swords." True enough — but why should

we insist on remaining Arabs? Why do we not simply merge ourselves into the Westerners, seeing that they are the kings and sultans of the universe, the jinn and demons of the world, who have struck their share of both learning and wealth, and taken for themselves the portions of honour and beauty; who hold sway over benefit and harm, who grip good and evil in their fists, who toy at will with riches and poverty; who command, and time itself listens, who forbid, and the age itself obeys?!

Such is the way of the sheikh, when he attains rank or receives a decoration: he comes to despise his old dress, grows impatient with it, wearies of his former appearance, and feels ashamed of it — and this is truly an ill-omened notion, an evil confidant.

Remember, O Sheikh — for you have forgotten — that people look to you as an example and a model to follow; it behooves you, then, to remember that even if you begrudged your dress its own dignity, you have thereby given away the dignity of your own self, and that had you gone on indulging your old-fashioned ways, it would have served you better — for candour becomes a man far more than hypocrisy and double-dealing.

You possess, in the sheikh's dress and turban, in your own adornment and decoration, and in your fluency moving between different languages, a distinction that none of those other men, the tarboosh-wearers, can claim; so beware of squandering this distinction, for it is the clearest path to the very fame you desire. And since you possess a glorious history, an ancient and inherited honour, and a life all your own, beware of destroying all of this by merging yourself into others; for you would be committing an offence against yourself and against your nation alike — your own self would lose its individuality, and your nation would lose one of its members. This is sincere counsel — where, then, is the attentive ear, and the rightly-guided heart?