

Evening Talk: A Stranger

Kawkab al-Sharq, 4 March 1934

*Ah, pity the stranger in a distant land —
what has he done to himself?*

*He parted from his brothers, and they gained nothing
from life after him, nor did he gain anything himself.*

Egypt is no distant land at all, with respect to Palestine, in these very days when people can fold the earth itself beneath them, devouring whole distances, by car at times, by train at others, and when people can plunge into the sky itself, swallowing it whole, by aeroplane, whenever their own affairs, and their own needs, call them to it — or whenever whatever hopes, or sorrows, stir within them drive them to it.

Yes — Egypt is no distant land, with respect to Palestine, nor with respect to any other country of this same Arab East, whose own parts are joined by bonds of genuine affection and love, by ties of culture, language, and faith. A man remains, among his own people, settled in his own homeland, however far his own dwelling lies; moving freely among his own fellow countrymen, however distant the span, so long as he has never truly left this same Arab East.

Egypt is no distant land, with respect to Palestine — a man from Palestine ought never to feel a genuine stranger in Egypt, nor a man from Egypt a genuine stranger in Palestine. Yet these same harsh circumstances, these same violent trials, these same dark days, insist on nothing less than making the Egyptian himself a stranger in Egypt — how much more so, then, a man from Palestine, settled upon the banks of the Nile?

And if an Egyptian, a man of Cairo itself, cannot even visit Banha, or Qalyub, or Tukh, should the ministry object to his doing so, or object to his visiting these same towns — even though Egyptian soil belongs, by right, to every Egyptian alike, by the very force of the constitution, the law, and the natural order of things — how, then, could we possibly deny that a Palestinian might find himself powerless to visit Egypt, or powerless to leave Egypt, returning to his own homeland, whatever the circumstances calling him to return?

Yes — every Easterner ought to feel himself genuinely a stranger in the East! Whether or not this same East is the very homeland he was born in makes no difference — this is something inescapable, so long as the East's own affairs remain out of Easterners' own hands, so long as those who rule in the East are not Easterners at all, but a different people entirely, arriving from across the sea, preceded by destructive force, followed by destructive force, imposing their own will, and their own whims, upon God's own servants by outright compulsion. The Easterner ought to feel himself a genuine stranger in the East, so long as the Westerner — the Westerner alone — remains the one managing the East's own affairs, deciding them exactly as he pleases, and wishes. And who knows? Perhaps this same feeling, among Easterners, of being strangers in their own countries, foreigners upon their own soil, prisoners within their own homelands — perhaps this same feeling, should it grow strong, and constant, and sink deep into the very depths of their own souls, might stir within them exactly the genuine, productive determination that ought to stir there: the determination to become truly their own countries' own sons, truly their own homelands' own people, truly their own soil's own inhabitants — a status no one disputes, no one need defend, and no one else controls.

Everything, in these very days, is erasing the very borders that nature itself once raised between countries and homelands — a mountain here, a river there, a sea at one point, a desert at another — and everything, in these very days, is softening these same natural differences nature herself once established between peoples. Yet there remains one thing that raises, in place of these same natural borders, other borders instead; raises, in place of these same natural differences, other differences instead; and only deepens the estrangement, and division, among people — and that thing is the injustice of colonialism. Colonial injustice turns the entire Arab East into one immense, colossal prison, inhabited by tens of millions of prisoners; divides this same prison into sections; and compels its own inhabitants to remain confined within these same sections, never leaving them, never entering them, except by its own leave, and its own consent — a leave, and a consent, resting on neither justice, nor fairness, nor mercy, nor genuine feeling of any kind, but resting, rather, on advantage alone, and on this same sinful, unjust advantage that turns people into other people's own slaves, at a time when all people ought to be free, and all people ought to stand equal before right, justice, and fairness.

All of these same dark thoughts occurred to me, when a visitor came to tell me that a friend of ours, a man from Palestine, has lived in Egypt now for several years, holding views on his own country's own politics the colonizers themselves detest — living in Egypt as though he were free, when he is, in truth, most likely a genuine prisoner, though genuinely content with this same narrow freedom, genuinely pleased with this same prison he has made for himself out of the Nile Valley, since he counts, among Egypt's own prisoners, friends he loves, and who love him in turn, taking him into their own circle, and being taken into his. Yet events still happen, and misfortunes still befall — God has never entirely severed all his ties to his own homeland, in Palestine: his own closest family remains there, his own brothers, his own companions and peers of his own generation, and he stays in touch with them, and they stay in touch with him, meeting them, should they ever come down to Egypt, exchanging letters with them, should they remain in Palestine.

Then news reached him that his own mother had fallen ill, gravely ill — and he resolved to go to her, to see her, to care for her, to fulfil whatever right God had ordained, nature had ordained, and morality itself had ordained she held over him. Yet he found the prison's own gate closed. When he sought to have it opened, it was not opened for him; when he pressed his own request, no heed was paid to him; when he pressed harder still, no attention was given him at all. And the illness, there in Palestine, pursued its own course, neither slowing, nor relenting, giving no thought whatsoever to the fact that a son remained in Egypt, wishing only to see his own mother, finding, in leaving Egypt, nothing but hardship and difficulty — as though it would do well to delay, would do well to wait, in case the jailer's own heart might soften, in case this same prisoner might yet reach his own mother, before death itself should reach her first.

And the prisoner keeps seeking to have the gate opened, submitting to the jailer whatever opinions, and certificates, the doctors send him, attesting that the illness pursues its own course with real speed, showing neither gentleness, nor patience. Yet the jailer's own heart remains closed, exactly like the prison's own gate — no mercy, no kindness, ever penetrates the jailer's own heart, exactly as the prisoner himself can never penetrate his own homeland's own soil, to see his own mother, before she dies.

Then the telegraph carries, to this same prisoner, the very news of his own mother's death — never mind his own grief, never mind his own

anguish, never mind his own despair; none of this holds any real weight, any real significance now. But remember, rather, that he rushed with this same news straight to the jailer, asking him to open the gate, so he might hasten to his own homeland, and discharge, toward his own mother, the very duty he had once failed to discharge before her death, now that death had already claimed her. But the jailer's own heart remains forever closed, exactly like the prison's own gate — this same grieving, wretched friend will never leave Egypt; will never see his own mother dead, exactly as he never saw her ill; will never take part in her funeral procession; will never pray over her; will never stand beside her own grave. This same righteous woman will proceed to her own grave, with no son to accompany her; this same righteous woman will descend into her own grave, with no son to bid her farewell; and there will fall, between the living, and this same righteous woman, those same deaf stones sealing the gates of the grave — while her own son remains a prisoner still, three closed gates standing between them: this gate, never opening onto mercy, within the jailer's own heart; this gate, never opening for the prisoner, onto Palestine; and that final gate, which, once closed upon the dead, opens for nothing at all, until the very day the dead themselves are summoned to resurrection, and reckoning. And the colonizers will still say, after all of this: that they are messengers of mercy, and angels of peace; that they have come to the East to civilize it, refine it, educate it, and raise it up toward the highest human ideals!

How genuinely fitting it would be for the English to reflect on this same cruelty — one people find themselves incapable of even describing, since they find themselves incapable of even grasping it — though they never find themselves incapable of actually committing it, whenever injustice, oppression, arrogance, and pride drive them toward it!

How genuinely fitting it would be for Easterners to reflect on this same thing, to show mercy toward this same stranger, their own brother, and show mercy toward themselves too — for every one of them is a genuine stranger, exactly like this same man — and to seek out, for themselves, some measure of that same honour, and dignity, capable of freeing them from these same vast, colossal prisons, over which darkness itself hangs heavy.

How genuinely fitting it would be for this same estranged friend, Professor Muhammad Ali al-Taher, to find genuine consolation, and genuine solace — and to know he does not suffer these same heavy sorrows alone, but suffers them alongside every one of these same

Easterners, all of them likewise driven by colonialism into a life of abasement, misery, and disgrace.