

Egypt's Reputation

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Clean of appearance, pleasant of inner nature, he flashes and thunders, he cracks and storms — yet his sky is always clear and serene, his spirit always bright and radiant, his heart always gentle and kind. Many people may suppose that the sword of martial law drawn in his hand surrounds him with a fence both frightful and dreadful, but the fence surrounding the Prime Minister is an elegant one: its outward face shows harshness and violence, while within it lies mercy and gentleness.

I do not know whether this preamble will please him or displease him, but I know that I am not writing to please him or to displease him; rather, I have written to put a few words before him, confident that he will not forbid their publication as other prime ministers before him used to do, and will not confiscate *Al-Ahram* if it publishes them, as the Ministry of Interior used to do before his time, and as it did after his time too — whether with his approval or his displeasure, I do not know.

Indeed, I am writing to put a few words before him, confident that he will not reach out his hand against me with anything I would dislike; and even if he wished to, his hand would not reach me, for his hand may grow short or it may grow long, but it will never reach me across the Sea of Rome. It is, as he knows, and as the narrators of the Thousand and One Nights say, a roaring sea with tossing waves. Indeed, I maintain that I shall put a few words before him, confident that his hand will not touch me with anything I would dislike when I return to Egypt, God willing. There is no doubt that when God grants me leave to return to Egypt I shall visit him, and there is no doubt either that he will receive me with harshness and a scowl, and that his harshness will then turn to gentleness, and his scowl to a smile, and I shall stay with him as long as God wills that I stay, and then leave his presence for my own home — not for prison.

There is no harm, then, in my saying frankly what I wish to say, and the first of it is that among his fellow ministers there is one whose policy does not please me. This does not mean that the policy of the other ministers delights or interests me; it means rather that the policy of the other ministers scarcely concerns me so long as I remain far from Egypt. But the policy of that particular colleague angers and provokes me, whether I am absent or present. And I take it that it angers and provokes

every Egyptian who has a heart, or who lends an attentive ear. The policy of this formidable minister angers neither me nor other educated people merely because it does things that ought not to be done and leaves undone things that ought not to be left undone — it angers and provokes because it harms without benefiting, displeases without pleasing, and because it is a futile exercise that will change nothing of the realities of Egyptian life, yet it troubles people needlessly and injures Egypt's reputation at a time when it needs not to be injured.

The Prime Minister has of course understood that I wish to speak of the Minister of Education and this policy of his, which does not even have the merit of being curious or amusing — a policy that used to raise laughter and invite jest twenty years ago, but which now neither raises laughter nor invites jest, but rather fills breasts with distress and souls with constriction, because it wastes time and effort and injures Egypt's reputation, without being of any use to the minister or to anyone else. The ministers before the present Minister of Education were strict in their conservatism, yet they advanced nothing and changed nothing of the realities of modern life in Egypt. What good, then, is the resumption of a futility that has already run its course and ended? And what good is a return to a policy that has already proven pointless, that does nothing but waste what Egypt's time and effort need, and no more?

I once criticized the policy of this formidable minister in a playful manner, some time ago; but now I do not even find in myself an inclination to playfulness. I am expending a great deal of effort, and spending a great deal of energy, simply to master myself, and to keep anger from carrying me beyond the bounds I ought not to exceed when speaking to the Prime Minister about one of his fellow ministers.

There is a difference between the futility in which Egyptians persist until they are drowned in it up to their chins, or up to their ears, without news of it ever crossing Egypt's borders and the sea to Europe and America, and the futility which the Egyptians have scarcely taken up before telegraph and post broadcast it to every country on earth, and before people speak of it in both the old world and the new. Egyptians drown in futility, for instance, when they waste their efforts and their time, filling their newspapers morning and evening with the story of the electoral districts and their geographic or social division, and with the term of the Chamber of Deputies, whether it ought to be shortened or lengthened. But news of this futility does not concern the outside world, and so it is not carried to it; let the Egyptians drown in it up to their chins

or their ears, and let them spend on it the brightness of their days and the darkness of their nights, for that is something that concerns them alone, apart from other people, and there is no harm to the Egyptians if they wish to prolong this fever and whatever delirium and raving follows from it.

But the futility of the Minister of Education is not content with the land of Egypt or the people of Egypt; it crosses beyond that land and these Egyptians to Europe and America, making Egypt, its people, and its government a jest for whoever wishes to jest, and a subject of mockery and pleasantry for those who love mockery and pleasantry. Does the Prime Minister know that a news agency broadcast throughout Europe and America that the Egyptian Minister of Education is being extremely and harshly strict in protecting ancient traditions, forbidding the Egyptian girl from crossing the sea or the ocean to Europe and America for fear of her corruption — and that he does not do this with respect to all Egyptian girls alike, but rather with respect to Muslim girls as opposed to Christian ones, as though corruption were a danger to Muslim girls in particular, or as though Christian girls did not deserve the minister's concern to keep them from evil, turn them away from sin, and protect them from corruption?

Does the Prime Minister know that the outside world has learned that the Egyptian Minister of Education instructs women teachers to lengthen their sleeves rather than shorten them, to avoid cosmetics, and to be a good example to their pupils in modesty and the preservation of tradition, and that the Egyptian Minister of Education is proceeding to abolish rhythmic dance in state schools and institutes, while seeing no harm in a girl learning whatever dancing she pleases at home and at her family's expense — as though rhythmic dance were a sin in the school and permissible in the home? The Prime Minister knows the outside world better than the Minister of Education does, and so he can picture the French, the English, and the Americans as they read these reports, as they jest about them and make of them a subject of mockery, and as they conclude from them that Egypt still lives in the Middle Ages, and that her share of progress remains as far as can be from what her politicians, her jurists, and the writers who advocate for her claim.

I would not wish to anger the conservatives, nor would I wish anyone to think that I condone immodesty or any departure from the modesty, restraint, and dignity proper to a girl; but the Minister of Education could, I think, have gone about this with some measure of

restraint and moderation, and with some measure of patience and gentleness — and not with this kind of public announcement, which gives the impression that the minister is more concerned that people know he cares about tradition than he is concerned with actually protecting tradition itself. For the protection of tradition is not achieved by announcement, nor by speaking to the newspapers, nor by publishing decrees in them, but rather by one of two means. The first of these is a path the minister cannot take, nor can the Prime Minister take it, nor can any politician take it: namely, confining girls to their homes, barring them from attending schools, institutes, and universities, and training them never to leave their homes except when dire necessity requires it, and within the narrow limits set out by the strictest of conservatives. I challenge this present Minister of Education, and whoever may come after him among ministers, and I maintain that whichever of them attempts this, or sets his mind to attempting it, will be compelled to leave the ministry and return to his own home to settle there, far from government and the conduct of affairs.

As for the second means by which traditions are protected — the effective means that the Minister of Education has not taken, and which I do not think he is able to take, because, as it appears, he prefers speech to action, excess to moderation, and harshness to gentleness — this means is to call for the preservation of modesty and dignity through wisdom and gracious admonition, gentle counsel, and sound upbringing. Let the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education believe me when I say that there is great absurdity in people's lives: the Egyptian girl is not exposed to danger in Europe any more than she is exposed to it in Egypt, nor is she exposed to danger on the European continent any more than she is on the British Isles. And the Egyptian boy deserves no less of the minister's concern, care, and protection than the girl does. The Egyptian boy is exposed to great temptation when he crosses the sea or the ocean to Europe or America — so why does the minister not station himself at the ports of Alexandria and Port Said, to turn young men back from traveling to Europe and America, protecting them from temptation, sin, and ruinous vice? Or does the minister suppose that sins, when committed by young men, are a lesser evil and a smaller danger to morals, virtue, and religion than when they are committed by young women?

And let the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education believe me when I say that the poet declares that ill-thinking is a mark of

shrewdness. I fear that this saying, and others like it, is what tempts our minister into ill-thinking and into excess in it.

*O you who believe, avoid much suspicion, for some suspicion is sin; and
spy not on one another,
nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his
dead brother?*

You would detest it. And fear God; truly God is Relenting, Merciful.

And so, to conclude: it is an injury to the whole of Egypt that one of her ministers should think ill of the Egyptian girl and the Egyptian woman, and it is an injury to the whole of Egypt that people should make of her a mockery and a plaything in the outside world, because one of her ministers did not know how to hold himself to moderation and restraint.