

ENGL1102M

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Crime and Punishment — Egyptian Style

Karl Marx's economic ideology explains that as the gap between the rich and the poor increases, a revolution becomes inevitable. The proletariat's lack of everything from power to food leads this larger, poorer class to rebel against the few who have more ("The Communist Manifesto"). It is a game thriving on the jealous instinct of man. The most devious feelings surface in the most savage of manners. This is the situation Sun'allah Ibrahim depicts in his novel *The Committee*. The crime is not the unknown actions of the nameless narrator; this is not important, for Ibrahim gives absolutely no mention of what has occurred. The criminal is not even important. He simply serves as a tool to relate a bigger message about Egyptian society during the 1970s and 1980s. The woman on the old, battered bus, however, depicts the true offense. She, like so many other Egyptians with no money or power, has no say over any part of her life, including the body that moves her from one place to another. Any man can touch her because she does not own herself; thus, the ordinary citizens' lack of power, not only in Egypt, but in a large part of the world, emerges as the real crime. Consequently, the actual delinquents are those who refuse to award equal power, in this case, the government. The result, as Marx predicts, will be a harsh and dangerous revolution.

Ibrahim purposely makes the setting of his novel more important than the main plot in order to chronicle Egyptian society's change in ideology. The narrator explains, "In the '60s the Egyptian market had been restricted to a single car, the Nasser/Fiat, which was assembled in local plants. Now, various imported makes of cars flooded into the market, arriving directly from their home factories" (Ibrahim 128). In this description, Ibrahim demonstrates the change in Egyptian values. Prior to the huge influx of foreign cars, the country had operated on, and consequently valued, a smaller car and a smaller ideology. Afterward, the more money a person possessed, the more successful he/she became. This change also occurred largely because of the election of Anwar El Sadat to the presidency. Part of his agenda included converting Egypt from a closed-off command economy dominated by the public sector to one dominated by private investment (Cheng). The doctor the nameless narrator encounters when he breaks his arm perfectly illustrates the country's obsession with having more money to gain more American products. This man dares to charge an extra pound just for a follow-up visit. The narrator points out that the doctor does not really charge for the medical advice, but instead, he demands more money for the "furniture, the air conditioner, the sound system, and the medical equipment" (Ibrahim 151). The situation really demonstrates the disadvantage the lower class has been put in due to American consumerism. They, like the narrator, simply cannot afford the extra pound; therefore, their health is put at risk. In this situation, the narrator becomes somewhat belligerent because he feels so helpless; however, he has the sense not to act on his helplessness. Although he leaves the doctor's office angry, he makes no real effort to hurt the doctor or his belongings. Other men might not have the same patience, and they might actually act on their anger, destroying the office or even physically hurting the doctor. Such violence did break out in Egypt during the 1970s and 1980s during Sadat's reign. At this time, the government stopped controlling the price of bread and

consequently, the prices rose to such a degree that people could not afford their food. The poor public sector turned wild as bread riots broke out in Egypt (Cheng). This is the sort of dangerous revolution Marx warns about. People become so desperate and willing, they inspire a revolution against their oppressors.

In this particular case, the oppressors are those in office since these are the people who refuse to give the lower class the power it deserves. Under ideal circumstances, the government provides protection for its citizens in one main and simple way: it supplies a police force meant to keep each citizen's property safe. This includes the citizens' own bodies. Ibrahim's Egypt sees none of this. For example, in the scene where an angry man with few morals punches the narrator, none of the onlookers think of calling the police to end the fight, but instead, they tell the man, "Calm down. A cat in heat and a fag. Your virility aroused them and they picked a quarrel with you. Why sweat blood over them?" (Ibrahim 148). Had this occurred in the United States, they would not comfort the hostile man. They would have called for the police, but since the police are not a reliable source in Egypt, they settle for calming down the beast. The scene shows what will happen if the government keeps suppressing those in the lower class. The latter will transform from civil people into savages willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want. In this case, the man was willing to assault a woman sexually and punch another man in the face just to satisfy his sexual needs (Ibrahim 147).

Having criminals for a government creates a highly dangerous atmosphere within a country. People may do whatever they want because law and protection do not exist. Consequently, in this situation, the popularity of consumerism has grown to such an extent that the lower class, uninhibited by the lack of a police force, willingly attacks others for a profit. All of this culminates in a rebellion so desperate it turns bloody. Ibrahim's Egypt has not made it to this stage yet, but it is on that path. The narrator describes how he "was able to notice how most of the passersby had caught the urge to seek wealth and happiness. Crates of Coca-Cola were everywhere. Everyone stood behind them, grocers, doorkeepers, carpenters, and even pharmacists" (Ibrahim 136). These now civil citizens will eventually thrive on their need for Coca-Cola and turn violent. They will rush the streets of Egypt, asserting what little power they may have left with brutal force. They will use guns, bombs, anything, just to overthrow those keeping them in ruins. Eventually, Egypt's military assassinated Sadat, and although the people of the country were not involved directly, it is hard to imagine they did not agree with the military's actions. Without such support from the people, it is unlikely that the military would have acted so harshly.

Poverty instills a bitter desperation in the people of the lower class all over the world. They literally starve to death while they watch a select few enjoy fine meals, wear fancy clothes, and drive expensive cars. This sparks a jealousy so blinding that they do not even notice when they commit murder during the revolts. In order to prevent this type of behavior, each government must stop committing its own crime. It must give its people some sort of power through a valid vote. With this, the people can go on to protect their own interests, or at least, their own bodies.

Works Cited

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