

Unlike other children for whom there was no plan

of education at all, we had a well-defined plan of education laid out for us by Father. First of all, a sound foundation in the mother tongue, as everywhere else in the civilised world. Because of the bizarre situation whereby Europeans dominated the scene through their affluence, upper-class Egyptians sent their children to English, French, Italian, or German schools run by religious or lay orders where it was hoped they would acquire a European veneer. There is no doubt that these schools offered a better education than did the state schools, but that was at the expense of Arabic and civics, which these schools ignored with remarkable effrontery. The history and geography courses more concerned with Europe than with Egypt produced people who were alienated from their own culture and traditions. But they could hardly be blamed so long as

they met with no opposition.

For another set of Egyptians the supreme form of snobbery was to claim non-Egyptian descent, preferably Turkish. Since the Turks had been masters of Egypt for many generations, claiming to be their descendants enhanced these people's image in the public eye. With complete disregard for their inherited culture, and ignoring the basic civic virtue of self-respect, they tended to see themselves as an extension of that super race and behaved accordingly. Opinionated and mulish they grafted themselves onto their culture, of which they acquired only the outer trappings, like the fabled crow who stuck peacock feathers on his tail.

There was no denying the predominance of the civilisation of Europe. Its transmission for the sake of progress could only be achieved, it is admitted, through mastery of a foreign language, but certainly not at the expense of Arabic. Since the state schools were the only ones where Arabic was properly taught, there was no choice but to send me there. Mother's protests in view of what her friends would say were brushed aside, as Father was firm in his decision. This caused quite a stir in my mother's close circle of friends. They raised aristocratic eyebrows and huddled together whispering for hours. "Who ever heard of sending one's children to a state school! Lice, skin diseases, and the unwashed children of civil servants and riffraff." That's what you got in a state school. It was a scandal. After many deliberations the reason was attributed to financial straits. Otherwise, they could see no reasonable explanation for an insane act such as this.

Until I entered school I could not conceive of the existence of children different from ourselves. Up to that time the universe was peopled with first cousins and the children I played with in the park. Whether Egyptian or foreign, we all had more or less the same upbringing. Suddenly, from a sheltered hothouse, cotton-wool existence I was thrust into the middle of a horde of savages: children who came from a background much more concerned with the business of living and getting on than with fussing over niceties. One look at me and they knew I was of different clay. One look at them and I realised I was up against a force with which I was totally unqualified to deal. My "good manners" were a blot, a handicap I must get rid of in order to survive. The gap only widened with time. My dearest ambition was to find a

point of contact that would make me accepted. I imitated their accent and deliberately used coarse languages for which I got scolded at home, but it didn't cut any ice at school, and I was treated with even more contempt as a sham.

In the welter of nationalities, religions, and languages in which I moved my mind was in chaos, for I did not know exactly where I belonged. But the school took care of that I was a *kafra* (An unbeliever). My name was glaring proof I was going to be sent straight to hell when I died. That was where all the *kuffar* (Unbelievers, plural of *kafra*) went. That terrified me for I had done nothing to deserve such a punishment. I did not tell lies, or steal, or hurt anybody. I had to inform myself of the meaning of this word I had never heard before. I asked Mother who referred me to Father, who did not spell it out but instead gave me a long dissertation about all roads leading to Rome.

But I still could not see why I should go to hell or exactly what a *kafra* was. Eventually, it was drummed in and I got it in the end.

I detested School and everything there. I don't know which I detested more, the teachers – except for a few – or my classmates, since both contributed equally to my torment. The building of the government school was old and dull and oppressive and smelled strongly of carbolic acid recalling the horror chambers of dentists and hospitals. The walls were gray and the long corridors were cold and cheerless. Ugliness was stamped everywhere, contaminating even the flowerpots which were supposed to give that dismal structure a note of cheer.

Learning was no easy task. The arithmetic teacher was a monster and the Arabic teacher was a noodle. The former maintained discipline with a class of six year olds by constantly wielding the "rat-room" or ruler that fell sharply on cold knuckles in winter under a hail of abuse. In between, the rudiments of arithmetic were inserted. They were totally rejected by my brain, which would not function under such conditions. When I went home and tried to do my sums, I'd find the fiendish face of the teacher, Abba Hafiza, staring at me from the pages of my notebook. If I looked up it would still be there, floating in the air like the fiendish face of the Cheshire Cat, and I'd be seized by such a crippling panic that any further effort was useless. As I realised what awaited me the next day if my homework were

undone my panic turned to terror and buckets of tears poured down, clogging my brain all the more. Then Mother would come and sit beside me and talk to me soothingly after giving me a drink of water with sugar and a large dose of orange blossom extract which was her magic remedy for all upsets. By and by my sobs would subside, and through her coaxing I'd agree to pick up my pencil and try again on condition that she would not leave me. Little by little my homework got done, most of it through Mother's effort, and I could go to bed with a little less fear in my heart although still tormented by Abla Hafiza's "rat-room" and the blazing hell that was to be my destination after all I had gone through in this world. Abla Hafiza and arithmetic were one and the same thing, and it is to her that I owe my lifelong feud with figures and mathematics.

It was just as impossible to learn Arabic from Abla Aicha, who was a mountain of flesh. After having conveyed herself from our classroom to another she could do little else. I suppose it follows naturally for one who is fat. She'd trundle into the room like a great wheelbarrow and lower herself into her seat with a thud. Haunches of beef overflowed on all sides and her knees could never be brought together on account of the intervening masses of fat so that her sitting posture was repulsive to look at. So was everything else about her... Sleepily her hooded eyes surveyed the reigning pandemonium. Then, loudly banging on her desk with a ruler she would succeed in obtaining silence just long enough to announce the number of pages we had copied out from the reading book. They were calculated to keep us toiling until the bell rang so that she could sink back in her chair, fixing her eyes on an invisible spot in space, and give herself up to a torpor from which she would awaken with the bell. Sometimes we were made to read aloud but not too often, as that was rather taxing for Abla Aicha: when one child was reading, the rest of the class went completely haywire. It took all her energy to bring it back to order first by banging it with her ruler and then with both fists and finally by shouting in every direction. But the din went on. The boys quarrelled and shoved and tripped one another. The girls played games or stood looking out the window or chased one another around the room. Whoever happened to be reading allowed nothing to spoil her great moment and went right on. Not that Abla Aicha exerted herself to any great extent. Having

shouted and banged she considered her duty done and resigned herself to the racket as an act of God. At the end of the year the reading book was no less a mystery than it had been at the beginning. Abla Aicha was succeeded by more competent, though no less obnoxious, teachers. At a higher level the teaching of Arabic was in the hands of specialised shaykhs from al-Azhar or Dar al-Ulum, an institute for the special training of teachers of Arabic. Most of them stuck to the view that women were complementary creatures conceived of for the comfort of a man and for the sole purpose of propagating the human race. Shaykh Rifaat, who took over from Abla Aicha, had more than the average shaykh's contempt for women. Potential Jezebels, they were an evil force to be crushed in the bud. His favourite maxim which he never tired of reiterating, was "Woman is a man's chattel," and consequently his dealings with and outlook on women were based on that assumption. A virtuous woman in Shaykh Rifaat's opinion must not expose any part of her body to curious stares. Only her face and her hands were to be left uncovered. The veil and long dress were therefore the ideal garb for the God-fearing woman. As to this shameless nakedness he would go on and on, pointing a trembling finger at our bare arms and legs for which God was going to punish us with fire and brimstone.

But in spite of these flashy outbursts of piety, a glint in his eye betrayed the voluptuary that he was. Sometimes, just before his lesson we'd plaster the walls with pictures of ravishing pinups in scant swimming costumes, posing in provocative postures. "Look, *Ya Ostaz*, don't you think they're gorgeous?" we would ask innocently. He certainly did, but nevertheless worked himself into a righteous rage and tore madly around the room pulling down the offending pictures, the execrable work of Satan. He would go on smouldering for a while, all the time cursing the evil day when the doors of the harem were unlocked to release the demons inside. This he poured in a flood of the purest classical Arabic, which was his only medium of communication with us. A learned man would not stoop to colloquial Arabic and we were absolutely forbidden to address him in anything but classical Arabic. We obeyed with alacrity, deliberately mispronouncing words and distorting expressions, which threw him into a fresh rage, this time a real one. This was sacrilege, he would splutter.

The noble language of our forebears coming from us was nothing but heathen jargon that would have made them hang their heads in shame. I have often wondered what Shaykh Rifaat would say to the flaccid and emasculated lingo of the present generation, the fruit of experiments with fancy new methods and grammars. From one shaykh to another we picked up such Arabic as they scornfully imparted, which was indeed a great deal. A sound foundation of grammar, a rich vocabulary, and fluency of expression. Now I was free to go to a foreign school.

It all began when I finished school, for I was then at the crossroads. If I followed the course of higher studies and a career, I was sure to meet with disaster: spectacles, gray hair, and the woeful state of remaining unmarried. Whereas through the sunny vales of marriage and procreation I was sure to bloom into that radiant state of womanhood that was the crowning glory to which my mother and father had dedicated their lives and mine from the moment I was born. The course of action was obvious but the innate who would be my conveyance to that nirvana of existence had yet to be found, and so I was duly hoisted on permanent exhibition. I began to be trotted out wherever people gathered to say nothing of the club terrace, where I became a fixture exposed to a particularly vicious variety of flies and the scrutiny of a crowd highly approved of by my mother. I was pointed at, stared at, poked at, and all but turned inside out. Of course I was outraged, but my squeals of protest were completely drowned in my parents' fanatic determination to do what was proper. Their outlook on that issue completely belied their Westernized exterior. No one looking at my mother in her Paris clothes or hearing her flawless French would have suspected the atavism underneath. Nor would it have been betrayed by our living style.

A succession of foreign governesses had brought me up on the model of "*les gentilles petites chez nous*", while the foreign school where I was educated drummed in notions of independence. But every now and then, to call me back to order when I showed a tendency to stray, my parents would give me a lecture on the subject of "East is East and West is West" which

left me only more drawn to the West while hopelessly tied to the East. So I drifted between East and West, an insipid blend, tormented by the incongruities of a dual existence.

I found myself being asked to marry utter strangers, a far cry from the way I had planned it in the logical sequence of first falling in love and then marrying. As things were, I was required first to marry and then to fall in love, with my husband, of course. It didn't matter if that failed to occur, for I would be amply compensated by wealth and rank. Exasperated and baffled, I was bent on striking out in rebellion. I had made a practice of spitefully turning down every proposal without giving it the slightest thought, to my parents' growing consternation.

Once when I had turned down a man they were particularly keen on, the disappointment nearly drove my mother out of her mind. For a week afterwards she would ask me, morning, noon, and night, "Why child, why in the world?" Every time I would answer slowly and patiently, "Because he is ugly, has a fat belly, and the sight of him makes me sick". Infuriated by this logic she would shout, "But don't you realize there are six pashas in his family and a thousand feddans to his name?" Almost wild with disbelief she would strike her forehead with her palm and shout even louder, "And you talk of a fat belly!"

Father was more explicit. "Just because you can rattle away in the tongue of foreigners does not mean you are going to act like them," he roared. "Your future is a matter that concerns me, and you will do what I consider right." All the time he spoke he grew redder and redder in the face until the Turk in him emerged and he went quite purple. He brought his fist down on the table and bellowed, "Tomorrow you will go to the farm and you will stay there until you come back to your senses."

Next day I was dispatched to the farm with old Badreya to reflect on the error of my ways. Miles away from Alexandria in a God-forsaken corner of the Delta the house was planted in the middle of fields – stretches and stretches of them every way I looked. Here and there tawny fellaheen in their tattered gallabias swerved in the noonday heat. Swathed in veils, their women toiled alongside them, dotting the monotonous landscape with black, while over it all hung a leaden stillness relieved only by the creaking of a waterwheel and the wail of the muezzin from the village mosque calling the wretched people to prayer. The

fabled beauty of the countryside that moved poets to transports of ecstasy eluded me. All I could see was an infinite dull green and an abject, miserable diseased population – the whole scene enveloped in unspeakable filth, in the midst of which our house sprawled, a monstrous incongruity carefully fenced in by tall eucalyptus trees.

The place was no more than a dump for superfluous and antiquated furniture. As for company there was only Badreya, who would squat on the floor beside me in the evenings and tell me about her three husbands.

She had been wed to the first one, she told me, when she was thirteen, in exchange for a heavy debt her father owed. Her husband had been advised by the village sages to take a young wife as the surest remedy for his waning physical prowess, which was causing him much embarrassment with both his current wives. Whereas before he had been the feared and venerated lord of the mud hut, now he thought he detected malicious titters and many a mocking hint, to his utter and complete mortification. A paltry twenty pounds, then, was not too dear a price for his lost virility.

In the bridal chamber where Badreya laid eyes on him for the first time she was confronted by a gray, toothless scarecrow laughing idiotically in a shaky treble, his eyes shining viciously. When he shuffled up to her, panting, his claws outstretched, she gave a loud scream and fainted dead away. For the next two years her life was one long dreary grind caring for the old man and doing her share of work in the fields. Nor was all this made any lighter by the old wives, who were continually pouring lethal doses of the venom of their spite on her weary carcass.

Release from this bondage came unexpectedly one day when her aging jealous husband stopped to consider the gains and losses of his marital venture. On finding that the losses far outweighed the gains, his being burdened by an extra mouth to feed while the promised cure failed to materialize, he decided it would be more profitable to send her back to her father and recover his loan. So the village shaykh was called in and after the simple formalities of divorce, Badreya and her bundles were loaded onto a tired donkey and together they hobbled forlornly to the next village where her father was night watchman.

After some time economy got the better of charity, and her

father began to look around for someone upon whom to dump this new encumbrance. That didn't take long, for the village seethed with boys wildly on the lookout for an outlet to their repressed instincts. Partly for lack of brothels and partly on account of religious scruples, this was impossible except through wedlock. So the hapless Badreya was again matched with a husband, this time a husky lad hardly older than herself, who after a couple of months, having satisfied himself that he had exhausted the joys of matrimony, simply disappeared, not forgetting to take with him Badreya's silver anklets, gold bracelets, and gold earrings, which alone gave meaning to her life. She hardly noticed his absence in her overwhelming grief over the loss of her cherished trinkets. Without them she was on a par with the lowly and the destitute. There was nothing for her to do now but to huddle on the mud floor of her hut and pray for death to come.

It was then that the go-between brought her to Grandmother. Our Granny was then going through one of her frequent interims between outgoing and incoming maids. Without a maid hovering perpetually round her person, life was not possible for Granny. Having exhausted the supply in Alexandria she had come to review the village peasantry hoping it would yield something better, the village being, she believed, as yet uncorrupted by egalitarian notions. When she saw Badreya, her expert eye spotted the rarity she was looking for. Ruddy, meek, and slightly dull-witted, she contrasted admirably with the mutinous, dolled-up sluts Granny had had so far. Granny was delighted and Badreya was engaged on the spot.

When Badreya survived thirty days with Grandmother a wave of optimism swept the house for the first time in years, and for a while Granny seemed almost reconciled to the world she was cursing every day with the morning papers. Badreya was a gem. She coped with her orders and counterorders, capricious whims, and nonstop vituperation with remarkable fortitude. Soon, however, the secret force sustaining her courage was revealed when one day both she and Granny's chauffeur Selim failed to turn up for work as usual. Investigations revealed that they were away together honeymooning, a tender idyll having flowered between them for some time. Selim in his cap and gold-braided uniform, seated at the wheel of a shiny limousine, proved

irresistible to Badreya for whom a uniform was reminiscent of kings and other mighties of this earth. At the first golden flash of his teeth she surrendered and was soon asked to join his seraglio.

But out of glamorous uniform and Granny's dazzling car, Selim was reduced to the level of ordinary mortals. Bitter disenchantment followed. The smooth and sleek Selim gave way to a roaring, beating, foulmouthed brute. Moreover, in her new dwelling she found herself swamped by a contingent of brats who were the crop of Selim's sundry unions, plus two wives he chose to keep when he reshuffled his original set of four to accommodate her. Brats and wives were all devoted to her torment whereupon she decided that since she was doomed to martyrdom, she would be wiser to put up with my grandmother in whose house at least she had a safe roof over her head. So back she came repentant and shamefaced, to become part of Granny's chattel, which eventually came down to us upon her death.

At this point in her story Badreya was looking up to heaven, her arms outstretched in fervent supplication, loudly calling upon the wrath of Allah and the vengeance of all his Muslim saints upon the entire male species. Then suddenly, remembering why we were both there, she realized that she had blundered and hastened to reassure me, "But have no fear, *sitti*, you will marry the prince of princes because you are pretty and rich and because your father is a great bey."

Badreya was so flattered by her elevation to the rank of Custodian that she felt bound to pick up where my parents had left off and daily preached to me about my folly, warning me against the deplorable and shameful state of celibacy that she was sure was to be my lot if I persisted in that attitude. Even a bad match, she insisted, was better than the mortification of people's thinking. I had never been the object of a man's desire and she strongly urged me to hurry up before the year closed on my twentieth birthday.

There was a lot to ponder about in the country. I began to have fearful visions of myself dessicated and wilting, living alone, in genteel poverty, pretending I didn't mind. A twentieth birthday was, alas, the deadline after which one was entitled only to the second-rate, which would gradually give way to the faulty and the rejected. Such fate loomed ominously in the near distance. As I saw it come near I began to panic, so that when

Mourad came along I had sobered up sufficiently to take him seriously. On second thought, I had to admit that he was not ugly and did not have a fat belly and that I rather liked the back of his neck. When I came near him I remembered disturbing emanations that were intensely male. It occurred to me it might not be too revolting to find him in my bed every morning. I began to realize I was luckier than most, which was not a bad start.

Wadida Wassef (1926-1994) was a writer and also a translator of Yusif Idris and Lewis Awad among others. She was the daughter of a mother from an Alexandrian merchant family and an educator father. She went to Mustafa Basha Primary School in Alexandria (site of the school story), the American Mission College in Cairo, and later attended the University of Alexandria where she studied English Literature. In 1970, she began to write her memoirs; an extract was published in Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing, edited by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Indiana University Press and Virago, 1990).

Margot Badran kindly provided this text. She is presently preparing Wassef's memoirs for publication and, at Wassef's invitation before she died, providing an introduction.