

Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (9 May 1945 – 18 October 2015)

Insult¹

“Insult,” or *Ihanā*, is taken from *Hikāyāt al-Mu’assasa* (Tales of a Foundation) published in Cairo in 2002 by Dār al-Shurūq. It stands alone as a short story, and can be read as a chapter in a novel. It is a sordid tale of a woman’s brush with power that ends with her disgrace. Like many of al-Ghīṭānī’s tales of tyranny, particularly the 1974 *Zayni Barakat*, beautifully rendered into English by the late Farouk Abdel Wahab in 1988, it is about conspiracy that cannot be anticipated, fathomed or unraveled. The machinery of power works most effectively through insinuation and rumour. Here, we see al-Ghīṭānī at his best, exposing structures of power at the heart of tyranny without pointing fingers at real persons or institutions.

Who could have ever imagined it? Not even Hamdi al-Izmirli at the peak of his power would have dared. What happened was completely new to the kind of mischief those who worked here were used to. The details became common knowledge in the widespread accounts of the Founder’s cruelty and the ferocity of his vengeance from those who opposed him or tried to harm him.

Al-Jawahiri himself did not contradict the rumours about what had happened to Khalid, a young graduate from the Faculty of Sciences, University of Alexandria, first of his class in Mathematics Department. The Founder, may God have mercy on him, had picked up the habit of following the career of outstanding graduates in various disciplines (disciplines with no obvious connection with each other), including engineering, economics, and the sciences, taking initiative in supporting those less fortunate, then offering them jobs with attractive salaries, or providing them with funds to study abroad on condition that they worked for the Foundation upon their return.

¹ Selected by Roger Allen, translated by Wen-chin Ouyang, and edited by Michael Beard.

His Highness spoke often of Egypt's wealth in talent and ability, and that what they needed was opportunity and climate. How often did he ponder the secret of the superior achievements of Egyptians abroad and of their abysmal failures at home? It is the climate, he quickly answered himself; if they had lived in the right climate they would have been boundlessly productive.

Khalid was one of the young talents the Founder nurtured. He was quiet, shy, inclined to solitariness, his voice so soft it could hardly be heard, but he was patient and strong and would at times spend eighteen hours a day at work. Before long it became clear that the security services were interested in him. Some even said that secret agents were making inquiries and collecting intelligence about him. At that time al-Izmirli had not joined the Foundation yet.

It is true that the Founder, God bless him, paid no attention to security services under the Monarchy, or even after the Revolution, when the Republic settled into its rule of the country. He may have refrained from ridiculing the secret agents or mocking them but he did not stop hating them; he made no attempts to curry favours with the services' new agents. What he used to say, 'No one is more ignorant of a subject than those who specialize in it, and the Secret Services are the worst offenders', had gone down like a proverb. One of the secret agents must have conspired to get rid of him, and masterminded the plot that led to the fateful 'Big Trial' that destroyed him, no doubt to seek revenge from him and take him to account for something he did. Of course no one knows the details of this conspiracy. At this point it is all guesswork.

He started noticing Khalid's movements, and worked out the real purpose behind the long hours he spent at the Foundation every day. He was able to ascertain through his private means, supported by security reports, that Khalid was an important leading member of a secret extremist leftist organization that believed in the inevitability of history, and that he was behind many of the rumours that targeted him personally, aimed at casting doubt on his leadership in the long term. He gave orders for Khalid to be sent on a mission to Aswan in connection with the gold mines that have been deserted since Pharaonic times. Reopening them to mine gold had always been part of the Foundation's plans objectives.

Khalid's enthusiasm surprised all. The region he was being sent to was far and rugged. But he was not going alone. He was in fact one of the fourteen-member delegation, a team of specialists in soil, groundwater, mining, astronomy, and blood circulation, as well as a chef

dedicated to feeding them, and a bus with a chauffeur tasked to drive them around on the rugged terrain around Aswan.

Three nights after the bus had left Aswan, news of a troubling event spread around the Foundation. No one knew any details, and every one told his own version of what had happened, but the gist remained the same. Remembering Khalid's gentle features and his retiring temperament, some sought proof for the rumors they had been hearing, and others marveled at his deviousness, how on earth did he manage to hide his aberration? Was he ever given the opportunity to show it, one gave this logical answer? But did he have to travel so far to get into the act, another asked? A woman worker insisted that she shuddered whenever he came near her or spoke to her.

His name came to be linked with a scene that no one among his colleagues witnessed. When the head of the delegation went into the tent he was shocked to find the Nubian cook on top of Khalid. The mission was cut short and the delegation returned to Aswan. That the event occurred was confirmed after the witnesses gave their testimonies. No action was taken in Cairo. The Founder, God bless his soul, did not mention the event in the weekly meetings. Khalid did not come near the Foundation ever again. He simply disappeared. He did not even bother to pick up the file containing all his personal papers kept at the Human Resources Department.

Al-Jawahiri said he met him later by chance and learned that after he quit his job at the Foundation, his research and political work, he had opened a furniture shop in Damietta and stayed in hiding in fear of arrest and imprisonment because of what had become known about him. No one knew to what extent they could trust al-Jawahiri and what he was saying about Khalid. Al-Jawahiri quite often repeated the rumours the Foundation wanted to spread to who-knows-what-end. In time the tale acquired a different spin and came to be told as one more example of the Founder's cruelty, God have mercy on his soul, and the bizarre acts of revenge [he meted out on his foes].

Did Safiyya know this about the Foundation and what had transpired in its past? What she did to Her Ladyship proved that she had mastered those techniques and was even able to refine them. Lady Damietta received an elegant white envelope containing an invitation to dine at the Samiramis Hotel. She did not expect this after what had happened to her that forced her to

take a leave of absence to avoid the smirking of colleagues or the look of pity in their eyes. She contemplated the envelope long and hard. She had received similar envelopes only a few times during all her years at the Foundation, on special occasions, or during visits by foreign delegates, or at the signing of lucrative deals. It opened to a card framed in gold and written in prominent black letters inviting her to dinner with the Governor of Cairo and the senior staff in charge of the affairs of the capital who were visiting to meet and cement relations.

It must have something to do with the Foundation's new tunnel project, or collaboration plan, or the issuance of decrees pertaining to the piece of land on the Nile coast near al-Ma'adi. For months everyone had been talking about the Founder's determination to build his high and mighty headquarters on this piece of land, and the Civil Aviation Authority's stubborn opposition. But more important, why was she invited? What was the motive? Was the intention to restore her reputation? Was Safiyya behind the invitation? Or was there something more sinister?

Whatever the motives might have been, she had to accept the invitation. Making an appearance under the circumstances was important to her, particularly because His Highness would be there—the invitation card in his name indicated that he would be the host. Above all Abduh al-Namrasi telephoned her at home and stressed to her how important it was for her to attend. Even though, in all honesty, she could not stand the sight of him, in fact, he disgusted her; his voice on the phone filled her with anxiety, as if its echoes would sully her house. But he was ever so polite. He ended their short conversation wondering whether she would grace the party with her presence, and she replied all too quickly, yes, of course.

She talked the matter over with her husband the same day in the early afternoon and they both agreed she should go. He would accompany her to the hotel then go off on his own to run some errands but would return to pick her up in two hours. If she had not finished by then he would wait for her in the reception. When she turned up at dinner she glittered brightly, and all eyes were fixed on her. She was wearing a green velvet suit her husband had bought her in a small boutique on Rue Jacob in St. Germain in Paris that sold hand made clothes. When he saw it in the display window, he said to himself, this would look good on the missus. The price did not stop him. Handmade clothes were rare, he thought, and of course dear. He missed having her

with him in Paris and the thought of seeing the suit on her quieted his longing; he could not wait to see her wrapped in his gift.

She liked that about him, always surprising her, with a loving touch here, or an affectionate word there, as if they were still the young engaged couple they had been all those years ago. She truly missed having him with her at dinner. She sat at table number two, placed to the right of the main table, where the Governor and his deputy sat with a third person in civilian clothes, whom she heard addressed, Sir, General. As expected, His Highness made no appearance, and the Professor hosted on his behalf. This was a clear sign that his star was on the rise again and his fortune was having a second wind. Shortly after the Founder took over, the Professor faded from mention for a while, but now many expected him to become the second in command and took his prominent role at dinner as a sure sign. Safiyya sat at table number four. Seating had of course been carefully planned. A small white name card directed each guest to his seat. Lady Damietta took every care to avoid catching her eye. She steered away from Safiyya's table all evening. Everyone welcomed her exceptionally. Some conspicuously shook her hands with exaggerated warmth. She even managed to take in Abduh al-Namarsi's showy reception, he who must rally on such occasions, being the person responsible for organizing the invitations, contacting the hotels, and informing the 'Umar Mukarram Mosque of deaths should there be any, everything 'Atiyya Bey used to do and more. Abduh al-Namrasi was superior, some thought, but his past life, even present life, as a professional gigolo cast some dark shadows on his achievements.

It was rehabilitation of some kind, she thought, engineered perhaps by Intishar al-Qalyubi, or perhaps by His Highness himself. He was absent more often than not, true, but nothing, no detail however arcane, escaped his attention. Minutia always reached him as soon as something happened, many believed, with at least ten people reporting to him directly and all at once. Hamdi al-Izmirli, despite his old age—and someone like him would never be retired, retirement age or not—managed his affairs from afar. His Highness must have been unhappy with the way she was treated. Inviting her to dinner and seating her at this table were a sure sign of Safiyya losing some ground, however little, for she could not have possibly allowed her to be put ahead of her and seated at this table. What happened after dinner took her completely unawares. It shocked her to the core.

The guests were leaving. She had just crossed the elegant hall with large windows overlooking the Nile. A smartly dressed young man, clearly a hotel employee, blocked her way, spoke to her in a polite tone, head bowed, eyes down cast, voice very soft, but commanding and threatening. He would like to speak to her on an important matter away from the crowd so as not to attract attention. Away from the crowd? So as not to attract attention? What did he mean? She was sharp. Even those at the far end of the hall could hear her every word. He must have got the wrong person. He had no idea who he was talking to. Of course he knew her position and her standing very well, he said quietly, but there were pressures and he must ask questions, just a few questions.

Her hands shook. She sensed something vague but horrible was about to happen to her, something she had not known before, something she could not have possibly guessed. Her anger was the protective shield she could use to resist, fight off the unknown menace. She insisted, just say what you have to say here and now, for she would not take a single step aside with him. He extended his hands, his fingers touched, and looked at those standing around him, most of them employees of the Foundation, who accompanied the Governor, their exact positions unknown, and the only man left from the main table, his Excellency the General. Safiyya was nowhere to be seen. Nobody knew from which door she had left.

The smartly dressed young man looked around him, as if apologizing to all for what he was going to have to say in front of them at the insistence of her Ladyship. He was truly sorry that he had to ask her Ladyship questions about the spoons and forks she used to eat her dinner. She swallowed hard, moistened her lips and throat, not believing her ears [how far things had gone]. The young hotel employee continued, Her Ladyship asked for a set when she sat down, to the surprise of all waiters, for they had never left a place unequipped. Abduh al-Namarsi came forward, angry, and what did he mean? The hotel employee looked at him, he just wanted some answers from her Ladyship. Al-Namarsi pointed his finger at him, warning he meant to accuse one of the most honorable ladies at the Foundation, no, not just, in the whole society? If ever the accusation was proven unfounded... The hotel employee interrupted, it was not an accusation. Al-Namarsi, ferocious in his reply, it was clearly an accusation, and of theft as well. The Legal Department at the Foundation would take the Hotel to court and the Hotel would pay damages exorbitant beyond imagination. The hotel employee bowed his head, as if giving in to reality. Al-Namarsi turned to Lady Damietta, and wondered aloud, would it satisfy you if she

opened her purse? The hotel employee nodded. Al-Namarsi looked at Lady Damietta hopefully, repeating that the Foundation would avenge her from this insult, and from that affront.