

# Lenin El-Ramly

## In Plain Arabic

### Summary

Lenin El-Ramly's play *In Plain Arabic* was first performed in Cairo in 1991 and first published in Arabic in 1992. As a satire, it has been highly acclaimed by reviewers both in Egypt and abroad as a painful yet honest portrait of modern Arab society, drawn by an Arab author.

A fictitious "television crew," all Egyptians, take part in the play and introduce it on stage in terms of a sarcastic "television program" called "In Plain Arabic." This title denotes the author's intention to make his statement about Arabs frankly and daringly.

The play is set in London sometime during the latter decades of the twentieth century. It consists of fourteen scenes in two acts, each scene presenting a snapshot of the life-style and way of thinking of a different male student who lives in the capital and represents the stereotypical national traits of the Arab country, from which he comes.

In act 1, a Palestinian student named Fayez disappears in London. In the name of Arab unity and solidarity, the other Arab students vow to find him, but in their attempt to do so, they demonstrate arbitrariness, hypocrisy, insincerity, and double standards. They even refuse to call the police because they believe that the English are prejudiced against Arabs. When an unidentified person phones them to claim that he holds Fayez as a captive, they refuse to ransom him and return to their frolic.

In act 2, the Arab students lose interest in Fayez's plight. When they meet to discuss how to rescue him, they fight over who should chair the meeting and ironically forget the reason why they have gathered. Professor Wisdom, Englishman, invites the Arab students and their Western colleagues to a debate on the Fayez matter. The Arab students make it a condition that in the debate, no one may speak about sex, ancestry, politics, or religion. When the Western students insist on the absolute freedom of speech, the Arab students withdraw from the debate altogether. Act 2 ends with their admission that they cannot liberate Fayez and that Arab unity, does not exist.

The disappearance of Fayez and its consequences are clear references to the crisis of the Palestinian people, to the treatment which the Palestinian problem has received at the hands of Arab politicians, and to the helplessness of Arab countries in the face of political and human dilemmas in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. There is also a clear description in the play of the cultural encounter between Arabs and the West in modern times and of the misunderstandings which have stood in the way of meaningful communication. In this respect, *In Plain Arabic* is reminiscent of Tayyib Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* in terms of subject matter and scope. It simultaneously represents a commendable effort within the dramatic genre, a valuable contribution to the art of satire, and a major addition to works dealing with cross-cultural encounters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibrahim Dawood, "In Plain Arabic: A Play in Two Acts by Lenin El-Ramly and Esmat Allouba", **World Literature Today** 70, no. 1 (1996): 233-234, e-article, JSTORE (database), ITHACA.