

# **A short story of academic oppression in Egypt - “literature departments have come under fire from self-appointed guardians of public morality”**

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**The real scandal at Cairo University is not the lesbian scene in a reading list text, but the cynical propaganda launched against it.**

Academic freedom comes once again under attack in Egypt. An article published in the state-owned *al-Akhbar* newspaper under the provocative title “Teaching homosexuality at Cairo University” launched a frenzied attack on the university’s English department for including a short story containing a lesbian scene on its curriculum.

This is by no means the first time that literature departments have come under fire from self-appointed guardians of public morality.

A few years ago all hell broke loose when a defender of public morality disclosed to the world the conspiracy wrought against the minds of Egyptian students by *Moll Flanders*, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century novel being taught as part of the “history of the novel” course. It was argued that having a main character who is a prostitute and a thief was a clear endorsement of immorality, implying that literature should concentrate instead on saints and angels.

But moral indignation has now gone beyond the *Moll Flanders* stage. The offending work this time is a short story titled *Snow-Drop*, by Tanith Lee. It was on the reading list of a fantasy fiction course offered to final-year students during the first term of this academic year, 2010-2011.

The short story, according to the *al-Akhbar* journalist, teaches nothing but depravity and moral degradation. It encourages perversion and is therefore “a crime in the full sense of the word”. Brandishing his moral sword, he threatened to file a complaint of moral corruption to the public prosecutor and to sue all those involved in allowing this short story to corrupt innocent minds.

The campaign waged against academic freedom seems to be an unimaginative application of a do-it-yourself manual on how to succeed in manipulating public opinion.

First, use a shocking, sensational title containing elements of the weird, the erotic and the unthinkable. Titillate the readers and fire their imagination with mental pictures of how homosexuality may be taught in the classroom. This will ensure the gaping public will become both intrigued and affronted.

Second, be as liberal as possible (no irony intended here) with words such as “erotic”, “corruption”, “depravity”, “explicit”, “perversion” and “lesbianism”.

Third, denounce and deplore in the most vehement manner and show your rightful anger in the most uncompromising of fashions.

Last, but not least, throw down your gauntlet and challenge your opponents, warning them that they will be dragged through the courts and forced to defend themselves against charges of moral corruption.

If you follow these steps, you are guaranteed a successful campaign that will ensure appearances on talk shows for several weeks and perhaps even longer.

The timing of this latest campaign also raises a few vexed questions. If the questionable short story was taught during the first term of this academic year, why was the complaint postponed until the end of the second term? Wouldn't it have been more logical to raise the issue at the beginning – if only to save the souls of the poor students?

Is it a coincidence that a new dean for the faculty of arts has recently been democratically elected by majority vote for the first time after decades of direct appointments by the government? The election was hailed by Egyptian universities as marking a new era of academic freedom.

The elected dean is not only a professor in the English department but also a woman. If her appointment becomes ratified, she will be the first female dean of the faculty of arts at Cairo University. One wonders if a fabricated moral scandal is not being used to discredit a department that has a majority of women on its staff, including the head of department as well as the teacher of said course.

The president of Cairo University has not ratified the election results yet and it is still unclear whether he will. Many university professors are vowing to take action if their call for democratic elections of university leadership is ignored.

Since the publication of the *Akhbar* article, English students and graduates have been increasingly vocal in rejecting any interference in academic curricula. They have created several Facebook groups that denounce any form of academic censorship at Cairo University.

"To fight for what we believe in, to take charge of our destiny and to make a difference, these are a few of the many lessons we have learned in the English department," wrote a student on one of these forums. "With our increasing numbers we have proven that we are willing to stand up and fight the good fight against ignorance and intolerance."

A radical Islamist cleric has recently called for the abolition of foreign literature departments because, according to him, they produce human beings who are culturally and intellectually deformed. But if the ability to think and argue and form independent opinions is a mark of intellectual deformity, then let us all hail such deformity.

To this cleric as well as to all the others who wrongly believe that they can close all the windows and shut all the doors, I can only say that they cannot take away our keys. They will have to understand that academic freedom is non-negotiable.

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\* guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 29 June 2011 10.02 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2011/jun/29/academic-freedom-egypt>