

Selling the Cage as Freedom

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To keep a bird in a cage you have two choices. You can catch it by force and shut the door behind it, and then it will beat its wings against the bars for as long as it lives. Or you can paint the cage in bright colours, fill it with the sweetest seed, write the word *freedom* above the door and leave that door wide open, and then the bird will walk in on its own feet, settle on its perch and look with pity at the birds still out in the wind. The strongest cage is the one its prisoner mistakes for the sky.

Capitalism, as an ideology, has chosen the second way. It has taken the word freedom, emptied it, and filled it with desire, consumption and exposure, until the person who uncovers the most believes he is the most liberated, when in truth he has placed himself on the shop shelf with a price tag around his neck.

The Architecture of the Cage

Capitalism begins by redefining freedom as choice, and choice as shopping. A person walks between a hundred kinds of shampoo, scrolls through a thousand shows, turns clothes over in his hands, and feels wonderfully free, yet the menu was written by someone else, the ideal life was drawn by someone else, and the one option never printed on the menu is the option to want less. He may choose his perch, but he never drew the bars, and the very abundance of perches keeps his eyes from ever resting on the cage.

Human needs are few and they are easily met, which is exactly why they cannot feed an economy that must grow forever. So need is quietly replaced with desire, because desire has no floor, and every purchase is designed to open a fresh hunger the moment the last one closes. Advertising teaches a person to feel the absence of things he had never heard of yesterday, and a content soul becomes the system's greatest threat, because the one who is satisfied stops buying. Allah described this wheel in two short verses:

> أَلْهَاكُمُ التَّكَاثُرُ (١) حَتَّىٰ زُرْتُمُ الْمَقَابِرَ (٢)

> *"Competition in [worldly] increase diverts you until you visit the graveyards."*[1]

The system never needs to call anyone to disbelief, because it keeps him too busy to remember his Lord until the grave interrupts the race. And the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, gave this busy servant his true name:

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[1] Surah At Takathur 102:1-2

> *"Wretched is the slave of the dinar, the slave of the dirham and the slave of the fine garment. If he is given, he is pleased, and if he is not given, he is displeased."*[2]

Pleased when given and angry when denied, his moods rising and falling with what lands in his hands, he is the perfect customer every marketer dreams of, and the Prophet, peace be upon him, called him a slave.

The favourite slogan of this culture is *do whatever you want*, printed on billboards, sung in songs and repeated in every feed until each craving feels sacred. Allah said:

> أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنِ اتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُ هَوَاهُ

> "Have you seen he who has taken as his god his [own] desire?"[3]

The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, also passed on a saying preserved from the first prophets:

> إِذَا لَمْ تَسْتَحِ فَاصْنَعْ مَا شِئْتَ

> "If you feel no shame, then do as you wish."[4]

In the mouth of the prophets this sentence was a warning about where a life without modesty ends. Capitalism simply erased its first half and hung the rest on its billboards as a promise.

Exposure: The Body in the Shop Window

The brightest paint on the cage is exposure. The culture calls the woman who uncovers brave, the one who shares every private moment authentic, and the one who guards her modesty a prisoner in need of rescue, so that the bird inside the cage looks out at the bird on the branch and asks why it lives behind bars. Allah tells us that the very first deception of mankind took exactly this shape:

> يَا بَنِي آدَمَ لَا يَفْتِنَنَّكُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ كَمَا أَخْرَجَ أَبَوَيْكُم مِّنَ الْجَنَّةِ يَنزِعُ عَنْهُمَا لِبَاسَهُمَا لِيُرِيَهُمَا سَوْآتِهِمَا

> *"O children of Adam, let not Satan tempt you as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their private parts."*[5]

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[2] Sahih al Bukhari 2887
[3] Surah Al Jathiyah 45:23
[4] Sahih al Bukhari 6120
[5] Surah Al A'raf 7:27

The first campaign in history was a campaign of undressing, it was sold as an ascent, and it ended with an exile from the Garden.

The bond between exposure and capitalism is structural. A covered body is dead ground for the market, while an uncovered body opens a market without end, because once showing the body is declared freedom, the industry declares how that body must look, finds every real body lacking, and fills the shelves with the cure. The woman who says *my body, my choice* soon discovers that the size, the age, the shape and the shade her body must have were chosen in advertising agencies and fashion houses, so that on the day she proclaims ownership of her body she hands its keys to the market. The same machine turns the man into the endless buyer of that display, his gaze untrained and his desire provoked at every turn, until both of them live in one cage, one as the product and one as the customer.

Today the widest window is the screen. People lay out their meals, their homes, their children's faces, their joys and their quarrels, believing they are expressing themselves, while every post becomes free raw material for platforms that grow richer the more privacy is mined and steer a person more easily the more he reveals. The bird thinks it is singing, and the hunter is recording the song and selling it.

The last stop is the human being as a commodity. Time is priced by the hour, attention by the click, the body by its market value and relationships by their return, until the mother raising her children is described as someone who does not work and a person begins to weigh his own soul by his salary, his followers and his brands. The bars of this cage are usually made of debt, because instalments, credit cards and interest let a person spend his tomorrow while living today, and a man who owes can neither object nor leave. Riba, which the Quran forbids in its sternest language, flows through this system like blood, and as long as it flows the door stays locked from both sides.

W'Allahu Alam

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