

Five Villains

by Ahmed Mattar

Translation and Introduction by Housseem Ben Lazreg

Introduction

Ahmed Mattar (1954-2014) is an Iraqi poet who has been recently living in exile in London. His poetry is very critical of the Arab rulers, lack of freedoms, the use of torture, and clinging to power at all costs. Mattar started writing poetry early in his life when he was fourteen. His first poems were mostly romantic before he turned to politics as his main subject. Due to his harsh criticism of the Arab regimes, Mattar had to flee Kuwait and he settled eventually in London.

In this poem entitled “خمسة أشرار”, the poet narrates the story of five Arab dictators: the Tunisian president Ben Ali, the Libyan leader Muammar Kaddafi, the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad. They all came and occupied a house and kicked out its landlord. The latter eventually revolted and chased them away. This is a metaphor of how these dictators arrived to power either by coups or electoral fraud and how they ended up in the wake of the Arab Spring, a series of revolutions that shook some Arab countries.

In this commentary, I explain some of the cultural, linguistic, and political references in the poem. For instance, the poet refers to “Joha” who is a famous figure in the Arab popular humor, known for his malice and stinginess. The story evoked in the poem is “Joha and the Nail”. Joha sold his house but left a nail on the wall so that he has a pretext to come back to it. At

some point, Joha brought his family to visit the nail and threw a party there. In the end, the new owner couldn't bear it anymore and bought the nail for a price many times higher than what he had paid for the house itself. In addition to that, the poet made reference to the 'Zār' which denotes the practice of exorcising spirits from those individuals possessed by demons. This ritual, which involves incense, music, and movement, is common in some parts of Africa and the Middle East.

Linguistically speaking, in the last verse, the reader should intuitively guess the missing word. I support keeping the form as it is in the original (a dotted blank) because based on the rhyme and the story, it is the word "donkey", a symbol of stupidity in the Arab culture.

On the political level, the poet made references to five Arab dictators and delineates their fates in the wake of the "Arab Spring". The Tunisian president, Ben Ali, and the Egyptian president, Hussni Mubarak, and the Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, were dethroned. The Libyan leader Muammar Kaddafi was killed by the rebels while Bashar Al Assad is still in power massacring his opponents.

To conclude, Ahmad Mattar is one of the vocal critics of the Arab status quo and his poems represent a call for revolution and change. Many of his verses were sung during the protests in many capital cities of the Arab World during the "Arab Spring".

Five Villains

O Revolutionaries I have a riddle
about five villains
The first seems to be a plumber
The second a bartender
The third pretends to be a lunatic
in a wall-less house
and the fourth is apparently a human
but in reality Bashar ¹
while the fifth, Bloody hell
something utterly different
a plumber? No... a lunatic?
No... a bartender? Bashar?
I do not know, but I know
that you know him as a deceiver
The five came from a desert
and lived in a rented house
They came thirsty, famished and exhausted
Each one of them was barefoot and naked
clothed in the misery of the poor
and covered with dust and dirt
The landlord was very kind
He housed them on the upper floor

¹ In this verse, "Bashar" refers to the current president of Syria Bashar Al Assad.

and chose to stay in the basement
even though his house has ten floors
He possesses four cows
and three wells
His family includes his mother, wife
and young children
He is at ease and generous
graceful and revered
Decades passed
and he never asked them for a dime
They asked him for cold water
and the meat with fresh bread
He was generous, so they wanted
the wells and milking the cows
He gave them all that, so they wanted the sieve
the knife and the press
He gave them all that and ended up
with only clay pots
They asked for the pots, and got them
They also asked for him, so he became confused
The landlord felt embarrassed to refuse
So he asked for permission to go on an errand
The landlord left his house
and went to work for the neighbors
in order to feed his guests

and his family
The five men stole the family's food
and accused the little daughter 'Abrar'²
then they thought of sending the family into exile
and made their decision
They banished the family from their house
and organized a spiritual ritual
They ate, drank, got intoxicated and danced
They beat the drums and played the oboe³
They sold the water and the gas of the house,
and bought islands and seas
They founded cities, castles
and gardens with rivers
Their fortunes expanded so enormously
that they became the lords of business
The landlord was sad because of their doings
and complained to the neighbors
They said: "You are most entitled to your house
and the family is more deserving of the home"
So he hurried back to his house,
summoned the five and
addressed them gently: "Enough
of this chaos and destruction that you brought to the house

² In Arabic, the name 'abrar' is derived from the root (ر , ر , ب) . The meaning of the daughter's name is associated with devoutness, morality, piousness and virtuousness.

³ Zār: In some parts of Africa and the Middle East, Zār ritual or Zār cult is the practice of exorcising spirits from those individuals possessed by demons.

I treated you with kindness but you treated me badly”

They replied: “Shut up you joker

Do not raise the issue of the house

or we will shoot you in the head”

So the owner revolted like a storm

and the volcano blew up and erupted

As for the first⁴, he understood the story

and flew away at the drop of a hat

As for the second, he thought about staying

and confronted the revolution, but he fell down

therefore the prison welcomed him warmly

as well as his son

The third, who is certainly mad

vainly and recklessly said:

“I am your Creator and I will chase you

street by street... house by house”

He ranted, foamed and threatened

but finally died like a rat

and his death was indeed

a lesson for those who have insight

As for the fourth and fifth

they were doomed too

they did not learn the lesson but they became

⁴ Each one of the coming verses explains the fate of an Arab leader, Tunisian president Ben Ali, the Libyan leader Muammar Kaddafi, the Egyptian president Husni Mubarak, the Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the Syrian president Bashar Al Assad.

like Joha and the Nail⁵
Hey, leave my house
“I will not leave unless we engage in a dialogue”
Leave, this is my house, leave
“I will not leave unless I have the house
it is either I follow my nail
or I will set fire in it”
So this riddle, my brothers
has perplexed me
Shall we give the house to its landlord?
or to the nail owner?
What if the landlord was killed inside it
would he be in Paradise or Hell
Are there in the landlord's words “Leave O oppressor”
any shame or disgrace?
Is my riddle clear?
He, who did not understand, is!!!⁶

⁵ Joha is the protagonist of popular Arab humor. In this story, he sold his house but left a nail on the wall. He started coming back to his house on the pretext of missing his nail. Another time Joha brought his family to visit the nail and had a party there. In the end, the new owner couldn't bear it anymore and bought the nail for a price many times higher than he had paid for the house itself.

⁶ Here, the reader should intuitively guess the missing word. Based on the rhyme and the story, it is the word “donkey”, a symbol of stupidity in the Arab culture.