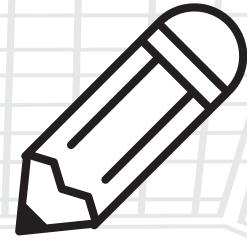


POEM FROM A PRISON CELL

BY MOHAMMED IBN AL-DHEEB AL-AJAMI



Background Information

Mohammed al-Ajami is a Qatari poet. He is married and has two daughters and two sons. He was arrested in 2011 on charges of 'inciting the overthrow of the ruling system' and insulting the emir (Qatari leader) as a result of a poem he had written called Tunisian Jasmine which had the line 'We are all Tunisians in the face of the repressive elite'. In 2012, he was sentenced to life in prison. After an appeal in February 2013, his sentence was reduced to 15 years. He was held in solitary confinement during his time in prison. Many human rights organisations including Amnesty International identified this as a serious violation of the right to freedom of expression and repeatedly called on the Qatari government to release the poet. The continued international campaigns were successful and in March 2016, Al-Ajami was released from prison after a royal pardon.

Below is an extract from 'Poem from a Prison Cell' which al-Ajami wrote while imprisoned in Doha.

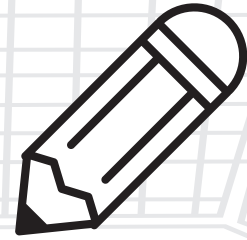
Poem from a Prison Cell

Is it my mind or my heart that I've lost
to you, Arab lands, home of enemies?
If you held our minds with law and reason
if you respected our opinions
then you'd hold my heart as well
Who am I? Don't ask the days about me—
I'm nothing but a prisoner
in an isolation cell
Here in my country, oppression
is what takes our rights away
Here, ignorance
determines our convictions
Here, the people
no longer have a voice, cannot
spell out the language of reproach

My country, if insight required an apology
I'd never stop apologizing
Tell your children, east and west
—and keep telling them, until
the birds sing it in the branches—
that a people without opinions
is nothing but a herd that's thirsty
yet blind to the nearby oasis.

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Read it!

*Don't worry if you don't understand every part of the poem yet.
Just enjoy the words and see what you notice!*

1. Try reading the poem in different types of voice – happy, sad, angry, excited, tired, frustrated etc. Which tone of voice suits the poem best?
2. Can you see any repetition in the poem? Why do you think the poet does this? How does this change how we would read it?
3. Read out your favourite line from the poem. Why did you choose that one?

Talk about it!

1. What do you think this poem is about?
2. Why do you think Mohammed wrote this poem?
3. Can you make any connections to the poem? (This poem reminds me of ...)
4. How do you think Mohammed felt when he wrote this poem? Why?
5. How does the poem make you feel?
6. If you could ask Mohammed a question, what would it be?
7. Mohammed says 'that a people without opinions/is nothing but a herd that's thirsty/yet blind to the nearby oasis'. What do you think this means?
8. Can you describe the message of the poem in your own words?

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