AHLEM MOSTEGHANEMI WHEN SHAKESPEARE THOUGHT I WAS CLEOPATRA



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FOREWORD CIARÁN DEVANE

Four centuries on, the world is still talking of Romeos and Juliets and star-crossed lovers – but in her playful *Living Shakespeare* story, the Arab world's most popular writer Ahlem Mosteghanemi has taken the idea of Shakespeare as our contemporary a step further by exploring what might happen if a Jacobean gentleman were to join an Algerian novelist for a winter city break. Light hearted and fun, but still with a serious theme: why do they search in vain for a modern-day Cleopatra on the streets of Cairo?

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to today's burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

4 IT ISN'T LOVE THAT KILLS PEOPLE ANYMORE. IT'S HATE 7

INTRODUCTION SHAKESPEARE IN ALGERIA

Shakespeare glances at Algeria in *The Tempest* through the character of Caliban's mother, Sycorax, who was from Algiers. This slight connection contrasts with the strong bond between Shakespeare and Egypt established by the character of Cleopatra. Cleopatra is the inspiration for Algeria's most popular novelist, Ahlem Mosteghanemi, in her essay *When Shakespeare Thought I was Cleopatra*. Within Algeria, Shakespeare is not as well-known as the French dramatist Racine. Algeria was a French colony from 1830 to 1962, during which time the policy of 'assimilation' included the suppression of Arabic and Berber and the promotion of French culture on Algerians. Since independence, Algerian governments have promoted English, and the study of the language is growing in popularity at Algerian universities and with it an increased awareness of English language writers including Shakespeare.

Significant translated productions include Claude Barma's French television adaptation of *Macbeth*, which examined France's war in Algeria, and an Algerian-Arabic *Taming of the Shrew* performed in the 1960s. As Algeria's undeclared civil war escalated in the 1960s, theatres closed, and only recently has there been a return to Shakespeare on the stage: in 2006, *Twelfth Night* was performed in Algiers; in 2007, *Ophelia's Cry* in Mostaganem; in 2014, *Macbeth* in Annaba and *Shakespeare's Return* in Skikda; in 2015, a Globe production of *Hamlet* at the National Theatre in Algiers; and Propeller Theatre's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2016.

Ahlem has imagined 'Shakespeare's return' in this playful story which finds her and Shakespeare engaged in a vain search on the streets of Cairo for a modern Cleopatra.

WHEN SHAKESPEARE THOUGHT I WAS CLEOPATRA

by Ahlem Mosteghanemi Translated by Nancy Roberts

Shakespeare said once:

'Love's not Time's fool... Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, But bears it out even to the edge of doom.'¹

That's how I stepped into timeless time.

I read the quote above on a Twitter account in Arabic. Called 'Shakespeare', the account was named after a man who wrote in an age when books and plays were at least 500 pages long and contained up to 2,700 stanzas of poetry, but who travelled easily, nimbly, and light-footed through time. His strength lay in his laconic, wisdom-laden turns of phrase, in statements so memorable that they've had a way of sticking in people's minds down the generations, and up again to the age of Twitter.

In any case, he was making me rethink my own relationship with language and time.

One day in December 2015, I was shaken up by the statement that, 'Today is the first day of the rest of my life.' How could such a simple statement cause an upset so colossal that you feel as though you have to do an inventory of your entire life? I was faced with a linguistic formulation as subtle and ambiguous as the Mona Lisa. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The words set up a struggle inside me, between my urge to devour life, and a desire to spend the rest of my days writing.

Like somebody sending a message in a bottle, not at all confident that the sea would make a good postman, I tweeted back, saying, 'Would you like to spend the New Year's holiday with me in Alexandria? I'll be waiting for you. Signed: A woman you loved.'

I'd set him a trap that would be hard for someone who had written so passionately about Cleopatra not to fall into. The password was 'Alexandria', the capital city from which Cleopatra had ruled Egypt over the space of two decades.

Who was Shakespeare in love with? I couldn't get the question off my mind. And whenever I read his works again, it seemed to me that it was Cleopatra. He couldn't have fallen for Juliet. For one thing, the role of the young Romeo wouldn't have suited him. And for another thing, anybody who'd written about as many kings as he had must have become a king himself, and couldn't possibly have settled for anything less than royalty. It followed, then, that only Cleopatra would have fitted the bill. After all, wasn't she the woman who'd robbed the world's monarchs of their senses?

Three days and three nights went by without an answer to my tweet. On the fourth day, disappointed though I was, I found some solace in the status he posted. He wrote, 'When somebody ignores you, rest assured that you're the

¹ Sonnet 116

most important person in his life!'

Then two days before my scheduled departure, I was shocked to see a reply to my tweet. It read:

'There is a tide in the affairs of men Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life Is bound in shallows and in miseries.'²

Incredulous, I tweeted back, 'My God, is that you? Are you really coming? Just give me the word, and I'll arrange all the details!' He shot back reassuringly with a quote from Miguel de Cervantes: 'Don't worry, "love and devotion, lent me wings".³

So, no airport security inspections for him!

We'd agreed to meet in the hotel lobby, where I sat waiting for him in a long, loose-fitting dress like the ones women wore in his day.

I'd reserved him a room under the name 'Sheikh Žubayr' to help keep his identity a secret from the hotel staff. The name isn't my invention, by the way. It comes from a silly idea that started with Muammar Gaddafi, who swore that Shakespeare had been of Arab stock and that his real name had been 'Sheikh Zubayr', which had been corrupted into 'Shakespeare' so that the British could take credit for his genius.

In a day when terrorism is rife and it's fashionable to collect tourists' heads as war booty, it would be better for nobody to know who he is. Just think what a prize would go to whoever managed to assassinate Shakespeare in Alexandria. The assassin would win prime time on the evening news broadcast!

Just then a fiftyish-looking man walked into the hotel. Sporting a moustache and a light beard, he had a broad forehead, medium-length hair, and an earring in his left ear. I rushed over to him. Then I came to an awkward halt, not knowing what to call him or how to greet him.

The scene was being observed attentively by the hotel staff. So if I called out, 'Welcome, Shakespeare!' I'd blow his cover. If, on the other hand, I cried, 'Welcome, Sheikh Zubayr!' he'd think I was crazy. I opted in the end for a warm, 'Hi, William!' When he heard me, he shot me a puzzled glance and froze in place. Damn it, I thought. We're not off to a very good start. How could I say that to someone who added 3,000 words to the English language, and who doesn't belong to the era of 'Hi' and 'Bye'?

I left him to get rested up with the understanding that we'd meet for dinner in the hotel's seafront restaurant. That evening he arrived in dashing form, and he looked as though he'd washed off four centuries' worth of grime.

The first thing he said was, 'I liked you better in your white dress.'

My white one? I concealed my bewilderment.

Then I noticed him looking at my hair.

'Your hair was your crown,' he continued. 'Why did you give up your beauty?' *Oh, my God. He thinks I'm Cleopatra!*

He'd arrived star-struck with the charm of the Orient, and he'd wanted to see Cleopatra decked out in that elegant white robe of hers and her raven hair.

² Julius Caesar, Act 4, Scene 3

³ Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote, Part 1, Chapter 27

And what had I done? I'd shown up in a Victorian-style dress with my auburn hair down around my shoulders. What I'd failed to realise was that what enchants the West about the East is precisely its differences from it. But we Easterners insist on getting closer to the West by trying to be like it!

As I tried to think of something to say, he looked out the window and said, 'So this is Alexandria! I've always dreamed of visiting it.'

'It isn't looking its best these days,' I said apologetically. 'The city was inundated by severe floods a couple of weeks ago. Actually, I didn't expect you to take me up on my invitation. England is staging the biggest celebration the world has ever put on for a writer. So how, when you're at the height of your glory, could you leave everything, just like that, and come here?'

'Well,' he replied, 'what's the use of glory we can't share with the one we love? When you lose somebody, you don't feel it the most during the first days of mourning. But when happy times come, you realise that the one person who could have shared them with you on the deepest level is gone.'

'And who have you lost?' I asked.

'Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale

Her infinite variety.'4

I made no comment. These were words he had written in description of Cleopatra. It had to be her he was talking about.

He was so clearly in earnest, I didn't have the heart to deceive him.

"Will you forgive me if I tell you the truth?"

'I always have,' he replied.

'Well,' I said, 'I'm not Cleopatra. I just pretended to be her as a way of getting you to spend the New Year's holiday with me. I'm writing an article about your works, and I needed to see you. So, I thought, maybe it would make you happy to visit Alexandria.'

'So who are you, then?'

'My name is Ahlem, which means 'dreams', and I'm an Arab writer. I had a dream of meeting you, and I thought maybe I could make the dream come true. Let me be honest with you. When I was in school I didn't like you or understand you. As far as I was concerned, you were nothing but a nightmare! But then I started dreaming of meeting you. Just imagine – there isn't a situation in my life where I don't think of you. Of course, sometimes I feel like badmouthing you – you haven't left us anything to write about, man!'

He laughed for the first time, and it made him more handsome and approachable.

'So, then,' he said, 'your dream for mine. Of all the women in the world, Cleopatra is the one I most want to meet. She's really gripped hold of me.

"Other women cloy

The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry

Where most she satisfies."

Suddenly he stopped talking. Then he said, 'Are you jealous? Beware of jealousy.

"It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock The meat it feeds on".⁶

^{4, 5} Antony and Cleopatra, Act 2, Scene 2

⁶ Othello, Act 3, Scene 3

'Of course not!' I said with a laugh. 'A sensible woman would never get jealous, would she? Jealousy would be an admission that there's a woman more beautiful than she is! "Away at once with love or jealousy".⁷

He laughed again. 'You know my writings that well, do you?'

'Better than you can imagine!' I said. 'And to prove to you that I'm not jealous, I'm going to help you find her!'

A sudden rush of excitement seemed to surge through him.

'Really?' he said.

'We'll start looking for her tomorrow morning.'

The next day I found that he'd beaten me to the breakfast table. He greeted me with warmth and enthusiasm. It was obvious that he hadn't slept a wink.

I knew he was in a hurry to look for her. Before we set out, I told him, 'Since you've got a beard, I'd better call you Sheikh Zubayr so people won't recognise you.'

'What's this?' he thundered irritably. 'My beard isn't a disguise, and I'm not on stage!'

'But,' I reasoned with him, 'didn't you say that all life was a stage? Nobody shows who he really is, so what's the harm in keeping up the pretence?'

As we set out, he said, 'You know? The worst battles you have to fight in your life come when people want you to be somebody you're not.'

The minute we left the hotel, he started showing signs of disorientation. You can imagine the scene: car horns blasting, passengers hanging onto the doors of buses, pedestrians dodging vehicles as they scurried from one side of the street to the other, and women rushing in all directions, some with heads covered, others not, and some clad in long flowing abayas or jellabiyas. He reminded me of Cinderella's prince with a shoe in his pocket, hoping to find his way to his true love. But there was no Cinderella or Cleopatra in sight.

'Where are all these women going?' he asked me.

'To work, or to the university.'

'Why are they in such a hurry?'

'Because the streets are men's territory.'

'How's that? Isn't Egypt ruled by a woman?'

'The people weren't given a choice between a woman and a man, but between the Islamists and the military.'

'And what happened to the kings?'

There are more and more of them, actually. Everybody who comes to power these days turns into a king.

He seemed desperate as he searched. In vain. No sign of Cleopatra. 'Let's go down to the sea,' he said forlornly.

I could see that he was pining for the woman who once sprayed her ship's sails with perfume so as to leave a trail of sweet scents as she plied the seas. She was the immortal female possessed by a passion for love, a passion for life, and a passion for power – a woman who, drawn inexorably to what lay beyond her horizons, took lovers from among her enemies.

'It makes me sad to see Alexandria's coast in this condition, especially

⁷ Othello, Act 3, Scene 3

knowing that beneath it lies the empire Cleopatra ruled for two decades."

'Don't be sad,' I told him. 'The sea is no respecter of empires. Since then it's swallowed up the Roman and Greek empires too.'

"...we know what we are" he mused, "but know not what we may be."

I said, 'The sea finalises all fleeting love stories. You've come here against the tide. In this day and age, the West isn't dreaming of the East anymore. Instead, everybody in the East dreams of emigrating to the West. People in the East are in such miserable situations that they flee massacres in flimsy little boats even if they know it might mean ending up dead on some Western shore.'

He replied, 'The weight of this sad time we must obey.'9

That evening at dinner, he seemed convinced that there was no hope of meeting up with Cleopatra, and that he was as much a fool as Mark Antony, who had forfeited glory in his homeland to come in search of a wanton woman.

When I came down for breakfast the following morning, he was waiting for me in a sullen mood. He flung a newspaper down in front of me and said, 'Read this.'

The headline read, 'Cleopatra Taken Prisoner After Hiding Place Is Revealed.' A headline in smaller print read, 'In a secret message to Antony Cleopatra writes, "Farewell. I'm going to commit suicide".

'We've got to stop her!' he cried. 'We've got to do something to keep her from killing herself!'

'Don't worry, she wouldn't do that,' I reassured him.

'She'd commit suicide out of love for Antony.'

'You really think so? My dear man, women don't commit suicide for love anymore!'

'And what makes you so sure about that? Besides, the deadliest snakes on earth are human beings. I know plenty about the machinations of power, and I know that if she doesn't commit suicide, she'll be murdered. So do something. Write – come to her defence! You are a writer, aren't you?'

'My dear man, we're living in the age of fear. The Egypt we're living in is the place where Naguib Mahfouz, the only Arab writer ever to win a Nobel Prize in Literature, was stabbed for a statement he'd written ten years earlier. And in Algeria where I come from, 70 writers and journalists were assassinated in the 1990s for what they'd written, by people who'd never even read what they wrote!'

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies

But in battalions..."¹⁰ I witnessed plenty of censorship by Church and Crown in my day. But I thought that sort of thing had gone out of fashion!'

'Gone out of fashion?! I wish! The kind of things I used to write 30 years ago, I couldn't write today. I went from being an author to being a smuggler. I use books to smuggle ideas. We used to write to unnamed readers, but now we write to hitmen!'

'The ink in a writer's pen is sacred, so let him die in defence of his cause!'

'Go ahead, dear, and die again as a martyr for love. Maybe it's the role you've always dreamed of. As for me, I don't want to die for Cleopatra, or for any other cause, for that matter. There aren't any causes left anyway!'

'And the ideals I defended in my plays – aren't they 'a cause' in this day and age?'

^{8, 10} Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 2

⁹ King Lear, Act 5, Scene 3

'The world has changed, but feelings haven't. And neither have intrigue and power struggles. Plots are hatched the way they always have been, and people still die in the millions in senseless wars. This is why your writing never gets old, because people still struggle on the inside between good and evil just the way they did in your day.'

'I need to go to bed,' he said hopelessly. 'I can't take all this in.'

The next morning, knowing it was our last day together, I decided to tell him the truth.

'They released Cleopatra,' I announced, 'but her car crashed into a wall as she was speeding through a tunnel, and she died instantly.'

'Oh, my God,' he moaned. 'Was she rushing to meet Antony?'

'No, she was headed for a meeting with the opposition to plan the overthrow of the current Egyptian president.'

'Didn't she say she wanted to die with Antony's name on her lips?'

'And if she had said it, would you have believed her? Like every other ruler who's ever lived, all she cared about was power. And then a few years ago she put on the Islamic headscarf. I suspect that somebody had tampered with the brakes in her car. They probably planned out a way to have her die on the outside rather than killing her in prison so that people wouldn't take to the streets in protest.'

'Anyway,' I said, 'it isn't love that kills people anymore. It's hate!'

'I'm tired,' he said suddenly. 'I don't want to know what a car is, or what a brake is. What's wrong with you all? Why did you bring me to spend the end of the year here? This is the end of the world, not the end of the year!'

'Wasn't it your dream to come and see Cleopatra?'

'You're a writer, and you know very well that characters in novels shouldn't leave the page, and that dreams shouldn't leave our imaginations. Madam Ahlem – Madam 'Dreams' – don't bring people face to face with their dreams, or you'll give them the shock of their lives! I came because I thought it was Cleopatra who had invited me. So let me have at least a kiss from you, and I'll be on my way.'

'A kiss? So you want to imitate Antony all the way, do you? Well, you're out of your mind. I couldn't do that! Suppose somebody took our picture and posted it on Instagram or Twitter, and then wrote on Facebook that he'd seen me in Alexandria kissing William Shakespeare. It might help if you had an Arab name, at least!'

'What do you mean? Are kisses that difficult in this age of yours?'

'I'm afraid so. Wars are still permissible, but love is forbidden!'

'I can't believe your reluctance. Didn't you bring me here because you loved me?'

'Yes, but I still can't kiss you. You yourself once said, take good care of your reputation. It is "the immortal part"!'^11 $\,$

Damn, what a fool I am. I should never have come running after Cleopatra! Antony had it right when he said, "This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me!" 12

"But love is blind, and lovers cannot see

The pretty follies that themselves commit".13

Farewell, then. I'm going back to where I came from!'

¹¹ Othello, Act 2, Scene 3

¹² Antony and Cleopatra, Act 4, Scene 12

¹³ Merchant of Venice, Act 2, Scene 6

عندما اعتقد شكسبير أنني كليوبترا ا

قال شكسبير يوم+ ، "لا ينخدع الحب بأكاذيب الزمن. لا يتبدل الحب مع تبدل الساعات الزائلة والأسابيع، وإنما يتحمل صعاب الدهر حتى لحظة الهلاك." ¹ وهكذا دخلت في الزمن الأبدي .

قرأت هذه المقولة على حساب في التويتر بالعربية ، يحمل اسم شكسبير. هذا الكاتب الذي كتب لزمن كانت الكتب والمسرحيات فيه تبدأ ب500 صفحة ، و تضم 2700 بيتا ، اجتاز الزمن خفيفا بخطى رشيقة ، فقد كانت قوته تكمن في جملته القصيرة والقوية في آن ، والمحمّلة بخلاصة الحكمة الإنسانية . بتلك الجملة التي علقت في ذهن الأجيال ،عبر شكسبير الأزمنة إلى أن بلغ زمن التويتر. ها قد جعلني إذن أعيد النظر في علاقتي باللغة وبالزمن.

كنا في ديسمبر 2015، حين هزتناي مقولة "اليوم هو أول يوم في ما بقي لي من عمر."

كيف بإمكان مثل هذه الجملة البسيطة أن تُحدث فيك هزة ارتدادية وكأنك تقوم بجردة لحياتك؟ كنت أمام صيغة لغوية تضاهي لوحة مونوليزا التباسة، كلمات لا يدري من يقرؤها هل عليه أن يفرح أم يحزن. خلقت عندي المقولة صراعا بين شهيتي لدلتهام الحياة، ورغبة في إنفاق ما بقي من عمرفي الكتابة.

كمن يبعث برسالة في زجاجة غير واثق من أن البحر يصلح ساعي بريد ، كتبت له على التويتر، "أتقبل دعوتي لقضاء نهاية السنة في الإسكندرية؟ سأكون في انتظارك، الإمضاء :امرأة أحببتها."

نصبت له فحًا يصعب لمن كتب عن كليوبترا بمثل شغفه أن يقاومه. كانت كلمة السر هپ "الإسكندرية "، العاصمة التي حكمت منها كليوبترا مصرعلى مدى عقدين من الزمن.

من هي المرأة التي أحيها شكسبير؟ شغلني السؤال. وكلما عدت إلى أعماله, بدا لي أنه أحب كليوبترا. ما كان يمكن أن يحب جوليات ، فدورالفتى روميو لا يليق به ، إن كاتبا عاشر ما لا يحصى من الملوك في رواباته غدا ملكا، ولن يقبل بأقل من كليوبترا حبيبة ، المرأة التي دوخت ملوك العالم .

> مرت ثلاثة أيام وثلدت ليال دون جواب، في اليوم الرابع و رغم الخيبة، وجدت في منشوره مواساتي:"عندما يتجاهلك أحدهم اعلم انك الشخص الأهم في حياته."

كي لد أقع في اليأس، أقنعت نفسي أنني المقصودة بقوله هذا ، وأنه يجب علي الاستعداد للسفر من دونه مادام يصر على تجاهلي. لكن قبل سفري بيومين وقعت تحت صاعقة المفاجأة. كان تويت منه وصلني يقول:"ثمة لحظة في حياة الإنسان إذا انتفع بها نال فوزا ومجدا، وإذا لم ينتهز الفرصة أصبحت حياته عديمة الفائدة وبائسة."²

كتبت له فورًا غيرمصدقة، "يا إلهي أهذا أنت! أ_{حقا} _{استأ}تي؟! قل فقط إنك ستجيئ وأرتب كل تغاصيل سغرك."

جاءني الجواب فورًا مطمئتا بكلمات من سرفانتز، "لا تهتمي.. ساعائنا في الحب والإخلاص لها أجنحة!" ³

حسنا ، إذن لن يفتشه أحد في المطار، ويطلب منه أن يخلع حذاءه وحزام بنطاله ويفرغ جيوبه ليعبر الأجهزة الكاشفة!

¹ لقصيدة رقم 116.

²جوليوس سيزار الفصل الرابع المشهد الثالث.

³ميغيل دي سرعانتيز, دون كيخوتي, الجزأ الأول, الفصل السابع والعشرين.

اتفقنا أن نلتقي في بهو الفندق. كي أسهّل عليه التعرّف إليّ جلست أنتظره في ثوبي الطويل الفضفاض الشبيه بما كانت النساء يرتدينه على أيامه.

ثمّ ، كي لا يقدّم للغندق هويته الحقيقية، خطر ببالي أن أحجز له غرفة باسم "الشيخ الزبير". لم أبتكر التسمية، إنها إحدى قفشات القذافي الذي كان يجزم أن شكسبير من أصل عربي، وأن اسمه الحقيقي هو "الشيخ الزبير" و تمّ تحريف الاسم إلى شكسبير للنسب عبقريته للإنكليز.

في زمن الإرهاب ومطاردة رؤوس السواح، من الأفضل أن لا يعرف أحد من يكون. أية غنيمة أن يغتال أحدهم شكسبير في الإسكندرية، فيفوز بافتتاحية نشرة الأخبارالمسائية!

وفجأة ولج الفندق رجل خمسيني بشوارب ولحية خفيفة ،وجبين عريض وشعر متوسط الطول، و في أذنه اليسرس قرط. أسرعت نحوه. ثمّ توقفت أمامه مرتبكة لا أدرب كيف أناديه، ولا كيف أسلام عليه. كانت نظرات موظفي الفندق تتابع المشهد، فلو ناديته مُرحبة "أهلدّ شكسبير،" سينكشف أمره، ولو صحت "أهلدّ أيها الشيخ الزبير" سيعتقد أنه واعد مجنونة. فاكتفيت بأن قلت له بحرارة "هاي ويليام !" فبدت عليه نظرات مستغربة و تسمّر مكانه. تيه، إنها انطلاقة خاطئه! كيف أقول "هاي" لرجل أثره اللغة الإنكليزية بثلاثة آلاف كلمة، ولا ينتمي لزمن "هاي" و"بايي" !

تركته يرتاح من السفر، على أن نلتقي على العشاء في مطعم الفندق المطل على البحر.

في المساء جاءني متأنعًا. بدا لي كأنه استحم من غبار أربعة قرون .

كانت جملته الأولى " كنت أفضلك في ثوبك الأبيض." ثوبي الأبيض؟! أخفيت عنه دهشتي. ثمّ رأيته يتأمل شعري.

قال "كان شعرك تاجك. لماذا تنازلت عن جمالك؟"

يا إلهي إنه يعتقد أنني كليوبترا!

لقد جاء مأخوذا بسحر الشرق، يريد أن يرم كليوبترا بثوبها الأبيض الملفوف على جسدها وبشعرها الأسود، وجئته بثوب فضفاض من العصر الفيكتورم، وبشعري الأشقر. يحب الغرب فينا اختلافنا عنه، ونقترف حماقة التشبه به لنتقرب منه!

أمام صمتي نظر خلف النافذة وقال "هذه الإسكندرية إذt··· دومt حلمت أن أزورها· "

قلت كمن يعتذر " إنها ليست على ما يرام هذه الأيام. . قبل أسبوعين شهدت المدينة فيضانات كبيرة أغرقتها تمامł . في الواقع ما توقعّت أن تقبل دعوتي، إذ أن بريطانيا تقيم لك أكبر احتفالية عرفها العالم لكاتب، شكرًا لأنك في عز مجدك تركت كل شيء و جأتني. "

أجاب : "وما جدوى مجد لا نقتسمه مع من نحب. ليس الوجع في أيام الفقدان الأولى ، بل حين تأتي الأيام السعيدة، ونجد أنّ من يستطيع مشاركتنا فيها بشكل أصدق قد رحل."

سألته "ومن فقدت؟"

أجاب "لا يمكن للتقدم بالعمر أن يذبلها ولا للعادة أن تقلل من بهاء تنوعها." 4

لم أعلاق. هذا ما كتبه في وصف كليوبترا. إنه حتما يعنيها.

بدا لي صادقا في حبه لها إلى حد عرّ عليّ أن أغشه وأعيث بحلمه. قلت له, "أتغفر لي لو قلت لك الحقيقة؟"

قال, "دوما غفرت "

⁴أنطونيو وكليوبترا, الغصل الثاني, المشهد الثاني.

قلت "لستُ كليوبترا، كانت هي ذريعتي لأجعلك تقضي نهاية السنة معي. في الواقع ، طلب مني أن أكتب مقالاً عن أعمالك، كنت أحتاجك، قلت لعل زيارة الإسكندرية ستسعدك."

سألني, "فمن تكونين إذن؟"

"أنا كاتبة عربية واسمي أحلام, أي بالإنكليزية, Dreams. حلمت بأن ألتقي بك، فسعيت أن أحقق حلمي. سأصدقك القول . . يوم كنت في المدرسة ما كنت أحبك ولا أفهمك ، بل كنت كابوسي. اليوم أصبح حلمي أن ألقاك. تصور في كل موقف أذكرك، وأحيانا ألعنك . ما تركت لنا شيئًا نكتبه يا رجل \"

لأول مرة ضحك وبدا أكثر وسامة ولطفا.

قال "حلمك مقابل حلمي." ثم أضاف, " أريد أن ألتقي كليوبترا. من بين كل النساء مارست عليّ جاذبية آسرة. هي تجسّد جمال العالم ولذة العيش في آن معا. " إن غيرها من النساء يطفئن الشهوات التي يغذينها, أما هي فمن أرضته زادته جوعا لها."³

توقف فجأة وقال, " أتغارين منها؟ احذرت الغيرة. إن الغيرة وحش ذو عينين خضراين يستهزئ باللحم الذي يتغذى عليه."⁶

ضحكت وأجبته، "طيعا لن المرأة العاقلة لا تغار أليس كذلك ، فالغيرة اعتراف بأن ثمة امرأة أجمل منها! لا للحب وللغيرة معا!"⁷

> رد ضاحكا, "أقرأتني إلى هذا الحد؟" "بل وأكثر مما تتصور، ولاثبت لك أنني لد أغار سأبحث معك عنها!"

دبّ فيه حماس مفاجئ . قال : "حقا؟"

قلت : "ابتداءً من الغد صباحًا سنباشر البحث عنها."

* * *

في الغد وجدته قد سبقني إلى طاولة الفطور. سلِّم عليَّ بحرارة وحماس . كان من الواضح أنه لم

ينم.

كنت أدري أنه يستعجل البحث عنها . قبل أن نغادر قلت له, " مادام لك لحية من الأفضل أن أناديك. في الخارج الشيخ الزبير حتى لد يتعرفوا عليك."

قال متذمرا :" ماهذا . . لحيتي ليست عدة تنكرية ولست هنا في مسرح!"

قلت, "ألم تقل أن خشبة الحياة هي المسرح الحقيقي، لا أحد هنا يرتدب حقيقته فما المشكل إن واصلت التمثيل؟"

قال ونحن ننطلق, " تدرين . . أصعب معركة في حياتك عندما يدفعك الناس إلى أن تكون شخصًا آخر."

ما كدنا نغادر الفندق حتى بدا مذهولاً من صدمة الزمن: بشر في كل مكان يرتدون أزياء لم يرها في حياته ، ويتكلمون لغة لا يفهمها، زمامير سيارات، أناس مع_{لقون} إلى أبواب الباصات، آخرون يجتازون

⁵المصدر نفسه.

⁶أوثيلو, الفصل الثالث, المشهد الثالث. ⁷المصدر نفسه.

الشارع بين الحافلات، نساء مسرعات في كل صوب، بعضهن سافرات وبعضهن مغطات الرأس. وأخريات بعبايات أو جلابايات. بدا لي كذلك الأمير الذي يحمل في جيبه فردة حذاء ليستدل بها على حبيبته، لكن ما كان في الشارع من سندربلد ولا كليوبترا.

> سألنى, " أين تمضي النساء هكذا؟" أجبت "إلى العمل أو إلى الجامعة." "ولماذا هن مسرعات؟" "لأن الشارع مُلك الرجال!" "لحيف . . أوليست من تحكم مصر امرأة؟" "لد بل رجل." "بعد حكم كليوبترا كيف يمكن أن يختاروا أن يحكمهم رجل!" "بعد حكم كليوبترا كيف يمكن أن يختاروا أن يحكمهم رجل!" "الخيار ليس مطروط بين المرأة أو الرجل . . بل بين حكم الإسلاميين أو العسكر!" "عددهم يزداد . . فكل من يحكم في أيامنا هذه يصبح ملك." بدا لي حزينا عيثا يبحث عن كليوبترا دون أن يعثر لها على أثر.

أدركت أنه يحن لتلك المرأة التي كانت ترش أشرعة سفينتها بالعطور. كي تترك خلفها خيط عطر و مركبها يمخر البحر. كانت الأنثى الخالدة المسكونة بشغف الحب، وشغف الحياة ،وشغف السلطة . تختارعشاقها من بين أعدائها منجذبة دومًا لما وراء البحر.

قال, "يحزننى أن أزى شاطئ الإسكندرية على هذه الحالة، وتحته تغرق مملكة حكمت منها كليوبترا 20 سنة هذه البلاد."

قلت, "لا تحزن، البحر منصف ، لقد ابتلع امبراطوريات الرومان واليونان أيضا."

علق, "نحن نعرف من نحن، لكننا نجهل ما سنكونه."⁸

قلت, "البحر يحسم كل قصص الحب العابرة . لقد جئت عكس الموج يا عزيزتي، فن يومنا هذا لم يعد الغرب من يحلم بزبارة الشرق، بل كل الشرق يحلم بالهجرة إلى الغرب، حتى البؤساء يقصدونه على قوارب مهلهلة _{هرا}، من المذابح، حتى لو انتهوا جيثا على شواطئه."

قال, "علينا أن نتحمل ثقل هذا الزمن الكئيب. "⁹

في العشاء بدا لي مقتنعًا بأن لد أمل من لقاء كليوبترا، وأنه في حماقة أنطونيو، الذي ترك مجده ووطنه وجاء إلى مصر يبحث عن امرأة لعوب.

في اليوم التالي وجدته في انتظاري متجهمًا. ألقى أمامي فوق طاولة الغطور بجريدة ، وقال "اقرأي !" كان العنوان الكبير " كليوبترا تقع في الأسر بعد أن تعرفوا على مخبئها". وبعنوان أصغر " كليوباترا في رسالة مهربة لأنطونيو : _{وداع}ا سأنتحر. "

⁸هامليت, الفصل الرابع, المشهد الثاني.

⁹ الملك لير, الفصل الخامس, المشهد الثالث.

علق بقلق, "لابد أن نمنعها من ذلك!" قلت "اطمئن, هي لن تفعل." "بلى ستنتحر حبًا لأنطونيو. " "أتعتقد هذا حفا؟ ما عادت النساء يا عزيزي ينتحرن حباً!"

" تدرين . . أخطر أنواع الأفاعي البشر. لقد خبرتُ مكائد الحكم، وأعلم أنه إن لم تنتحر فسوف يقتلونها. تصرفي! اكتبى! دافعى عنها! أولست كاتبه؟"

"يا عزيزي نحن في زمن الخوف، في مصر التي نحن فيها تمّ طعن نجيب محفوظ، الكاتب العربي الوحيد الحائز على جائزة نوبل للأدب، بسبب جملة كتبها قبل ذلك بعشر سنوات. وفي الجزائر التي جئت منها اغتيل في التسعينيات 70 كاتبا وصحافيا بتهمة الكتابة، من قبل أناس لم يقرؤو أعمالهم حتى."

"عندما تأتي البلديا لد تأتي كالجواسيس فرادى ، بل كتائب كتائب."¹⁰ أضاف متنهد†, "عانيت أيضا كثيرًا من رقابة الكنيسة والقصر، لكني ظننت أن هذه الأمور انتهت منذ ذلك الحين!"

'إن مداد قلم الكاتب مقدس فليمت _{دفاعا} عن قضيته."

"تفضل إذن عزيزي: مُت مجددا شهيدا للحب. لعله الدور الذي كنت دومًا تحلم به. أما أنا فلا أريد أن أموت من أجل كليوبترا ، ولا من أجل أية قضية أخرس . . فما عاد هناك أصلاً من قضية! "

"والمثل العليا التي دافعت عنها في مسرحياتي ألم تعد على أيامكم قضية ؟"

قلت, "تغيّر العالم، لكن لم تتغير المشاعر ولد الدسائس، ولد الصراع على السلطة . ما زالت المكائد، وما زال الناس يموتون بالملايين في حروب عبثية . لهذا ما كتبتَه قبل أربعة قرون استطاع الخلود ،لأن الإنسان من الداخل مازال في صراع بين الخير والشر تمامًا كما تركته."

علاق بنبرة يائسة, "أودّ أن أنام ، تعبت. إني عاجز عن استيعاب ما يحدث."

* * *

في الصباح، كنت أدري أنه يومنا الأخير.

قلت, "قد اطلقوا سراح كليوبترا، لكن سيارتها اصطدمت بالجدار وهي مسرعة في النفق وماتت على الفور."

صاح, "يا إلهي أي خبر هذا؟ أكانت مسرعة للقاء أنطونيو؟!"

"لا بل كان لها موعد مع المعارضة لتدبير انقلاب على رئيس مصر الحالي."

"ألم تقل أنها تريد أن تموت واسم انطونيو على شفتيها؟"

" وهل صدقتها؟ منذ الأزل وحدها السلطة تعنيها ككل الحكام . ثمّ، لقد ارتدت الحجاب في الأعوام الأخيرة. و من الأرجح أن يكونوا قد عبثوا بالمكبح، وخططوا لموتها خارج السجن ،كب لد يقتلوها في الأسر ، فيخرج الناس في مظاهرات احتجاج! لكن الناس على أيامنا ما عاد يقتلهم الحب بل الكراهية." بدا محبط؛ . قال, " تعبت. لد أربد أن أعرف ما معنى السيارة، ولا ما هو المكبح. ما هذا الذي يحدث عندكم؟

بربك لماذا جئت بي هنا لقضاء نهاية السنة؟ هذه نهاية العالم لا نهاية السنة!"

"ألم يكن حلمك المجيء لملاقاة كليوبترا؟"

¹⁰هامليت, الفصل الرابع, المشهد الثاني.

"أنت كاتبة وتدرين أن على الأبطال ألا بغادروا صفحات الروايات، وعلى الأحلام ألا تغادر مخيلتنا. يا سيدتي أحلام—دربمز—لا تضعي أبدًا أحدًا في مواجهة حلمه فيُصدم!

سأعود من حيث جئت، فامنحيني قبلة على الأقل ويغي هذا بكل شيئ."

"قبلة؟ لكأنك تربد أن تقلد أنطونيو حتى الآذر. هل جننت! لا أستطيع! تصور أن يلتقط أحدهم صورة لنا وينشرها في الإنستاغرام أو التويتر ، ويكتب في الفايسبوك أنه شاهدني في الإسكندرية أقبّل وليام شكسبير! لو على الأقل كان لك اسم عربي!"

يبير: بو عنان اللحان عان لك السم عربي: - احراب الحال حال القراق حريقة في نيز كر الم حزا ال

صاح, "ما هذا؟ هل القبلة صعبة في زمنكم إلى هذا الحد!؟"

"نعم. مازالت عندنا الحروب مباحة والحب محرّم!"

"لد أصدق تمتعك. ألم تأتِ بي إلى هنا لأنك تحبينني؟"

"بلص, لكني لا أستطيع تقبيلك. ألم تقل أنت نفسك: اعتن جيدًا بسمعتك لأنها ستعيش أكثر منك؟" 11

"سحقا يا لي من أحمق. كان عليّ عدم الحضور لمطاردة كليوبترا. صدق أنطونيو حين قال: هذه

المصرية الحمقاء خدعتنني!¹² الحب أعمى والمحبون لا يرون الحماقة التي يقترفونها!¹³ سلاما أنا عائد من حيث أتيت!"

¹¹أوثيلو, الغصل الثاني, المشهد الثالث.

¹² أنطونيو وكليوبترا, الفصل الرابع, المشهد الثاني عشر.

¹³تاجر البنقية, الغصل الثاني,المشهد السادس.

ABOUT THE WRITER AHLEM MOSTEGHANEMI



Ahlem Mosteghanemi is a contemporary Algerian poet and novelist, among the most successful Arabic writers of our time. Her first novel, *Memory in the Flesh*, published in 1993, has sold over a million copies across the Arabic-speaking world. It was translated into English after winning the 1998 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature. The final volume of her acclaimed trilogy, *The Bridges of Constantine*, spanning Algeria's tumultuous recent history, was also published in English in 2016.

Ahlem Mosteghanemi was born in exile, during a time of great turmoil in Algeria. Her experiences as the daughter of a French teacher, turned Algerian liberation fighter, shaped her vision and provided inspiration for her writing. As one of the first students in the new Arabic schools in independent Algeria, she puts tremendous value in being able to write and express herself freely in Arabic.

When she released *Memory in the Flesh* it became an instant bestseller in the Arab world, as did her next four novels. Delving into human tragedy and unfulfilled dreams, her writing has universal appeal. Her work has also been translated into several languages and adapted into a television series.

Ahlem has been named UNESCO Artist for Peace and its Peace Messenger for two years from mid-2016.

Translation by Nancy Roberts

Nancy Roberts is a freelance Arabic-to-English translator with experience in the areas of modern Arabic literature, current events, Christian-Muslim relations, and Islamic thought, history and law. Literary translations include Salwa Bakr's *The Man From Bashmour* (AUC Press, 2007), for which she received a commendation in the Saif Ghobash-Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation, Ezzat El Kamhawi's prize-winning *House of the Wolf* (AUC Press, 2013), and Laila Aljohani's Days of Ignorance (Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2014). The editor would like to thank colleagues who have given advice and support: Country Directors and colleagues from British Council offices around the world whose efforts and inspiration have enabled these essays to come into being.

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The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

Living Shakespeare is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



With thanks to our partner The Open University.