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The Narrator and His Double in *al-Nashīdah* by ʿAlāʾ ʿAbd al-Hādī: A Study of the Humorous Narrative in the Light of Mobility Theory

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Abstract

Al-Nashīdah (2003) by ʿAlāʾ ʿAbd al-Hādī (b. 1956) is a volume of prose poetry that combines multiple genres including Sufi nonfiction, Arabic *maqāmah*,[1] prose poetry, free verse, and rhymed verse. Mobility characterizes both form and content of the humorous *maqāmah*-like narrative: the physical movement of the narrator and his double parallels movement from one genre to another creating a postmodernist narrative that takes the form of a journey. The narrator, who shows commitment to the tradition of classical Arabic literature, and his double, who represents postmodernism, move in time and place to meet first with Sufi writer, al-Niffarī, and then with different Arab poets, rhetoricians, theorists, and rulers. Dialogism gives rise to different types of humor including wit, slapstick, wordplay, situational, and dark humor. The journey, which apparently takes a traditional form, ends with the metamorphosis of the narrator's double and his fusion into the narrator, signaling the rebirth of the postmodern author. Through this study, the humorous *maqāmah*-like narrative embedded in the poetic block will be analyzed in the light of mobility theory to unravel the interchangeable situation between tradition and postmodernism.

Keywords: carnival, dialogism, humor, maqāmah-like narrative, mobility theory, philosophy of play

الراوي وقرينه في *النشيدة* لعلاء عبد الهادي: دراسة السرد الفكاهي في ضوء نظرية الحراك

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ملخص

النشيدة (2003) لعلاء عبد الهادي (من مواليد 1956) ديوان شعر نثري يجمع بين أنواع أدبية متعددة منها: الصوفي غير الخيالي، المقامة العربية، الشعر النثري، الشعر الحر والشعر المقفى. يتميز شكل ومحتوى السرد الفكاهي الشبيه بالمقامة بالحراك: توازي حركة الراوي

[1] A traditional serio-comic Arabic genre.

وقرينه الجسدية التنقل من نوع إلى آخر، مما يخلق سردًا ما بعد حداثي يأخذ شكل الرحلة. ينتقل الراوي، الذي يبدي التزامه بتقاليد الأدب العربي الكلاسيكي، وقرينه، الذي يمثل ما بعد الحداثة، في الزمان والمكان ليلتقيا أولاً مع الكاتب الصوفي النفري، ثم مع مختلف الشعراء والبلغاء والحكام والمنظرين العرب الكلاسيكيين. يؤدي الحوار إلى ظهور أنواع مختلفة من الفكاهة بما في ذلك: الدعابة الذكية والهزل والتلاعب بالألفاظ وفكاهة الموقف والفكاهة المظلمة. تنتهي الرحلة التي تتخذ شكلاً تقليديًا على ما يبدو بتحول القرين وانصهاره في الراوي، مما يشير إلى ولادة جديدة للمؤلف ما بعد الحداثي. من خلال هذه الدراسة، سيتم تحليل السرد الفكاهي الشبيه بالمقامة المتضمن في الكتلة الشعرية في ضوء نظرية الحراك لكشف الموقف القابل للتبادل بين التقليد وما بعد الحداثة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الكرنفال، الحوارية، الفكاهة، السرد الشبيه بالمقامة، نظرية الحراك، فلسفة اللعب

Introduction

The Egyptian poet ʿAlāʾ ʿAbd al-Hādī is a highly distinctive voice in modern Arabic culture. He received his Ph.D. degree in Comparative Literature from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1997. Ever since, his poetic output has been well recognized. Among the prestigious awards ʿAbd al-Hādī received are the International Award Füst Milán from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1998/9, the International Phoenix Festival Medal in Iraq in 2008, and Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī Award in Tunisia in 2009. He is currently President of the Egyptian Writers' Union and Secretary General of the Arab Writers' Union.

Al-Nashīdah, namely a mixture of prose and poetry, is perceived as an *opera aperta* or an open work by Umberto Eco's definition. It requires a special reader for whom form and meaning are inseparable, a reader whose horizon can absorb this heteroglossia, this multigeneric text. The volume is a manifestation of poetry writing through mixing different genres: the high and the low, the classical and the modern, the serious and the comic, and the prosaic and the poetic, although the poetic block is perceived more at the level of discourse than at the sentence level. Among the literary genres juxtaposed in the volume are nonfiction, prose poetry, free verse, rhymed poetry, and *maqāmah*-like narrative, fwhich is the focus of the present study. Such a narrative deconstructs what Jean-François Lyotard calls grand narratives, "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephens and McCallum 6). The text is divided into five episodes each of which is related to a specified position or context. It is obvious that "The Context of the Letter/The Context of the Dream" (*Maqām al-Ḥarf/Maqām al-Ḥulm*) deconstructs the grand narrative of creation, "The Context of Love" (*Maqām al-Ḥubb*) desecrates the grand narrative of love, "The Context of Writing" (*Maqām al-Kitābah*) casts doubt on the grand narrative that associates rhetoric with spoken discourse, "The Context of Countries" (*Maqām al-Bilād*) liberates one from the grand narrative of home and national identity, and "The Context of Poetry/Destination" (*Maqām al-Qasīd*) subverts the established grand narrative about Arabic poetry.

Such grand narratives, a quintessential feature of modernity, are countered by little narratives about everyday life. Thus, each episode talks about a stage in the journey of the traditionalist ʿAlāʾ, the narrator, and his double who reveals himself as a poet. Although their journey ends where it begins, they undergo a transformation as a result of what happens on the road. Indeed, the open road is a free-floating zone moving the traveler beyond the confines of space and time and promising personal freedom and self-discovery. According to Ann Brigham, traveling on the road is not a flight from the opposition but a meeting place of clashing or contradictory elements. It involves navigating different geographic scales, crossing borders, conquering distance, disrupting spaces, and reconstructing identities (ix). Therefore, the road narrative is the most

appropriate structure for juxtaposing various cultures, mixing multiple genres, and incorporating different views. Equally appropriate is the road for subverting established social order since it is often traveled by tramps, gypsies, and rogues of every type who threaten “to undo the familiarity of place-based communities and neighborhoods” (Cresswell 14).

Classical *Maqāmah* Genre

Literally, *maqāmah* is a traditional seriocomic Arabic genre that arose as a result of the waning role of tribal poets in favor of the court secretary (*kātib*). As James Monroe notes, “the *maqāmah* genre filled a much-needed gap produced when the *qasīdah* was no longer viable” (10). It offered poetry in the guise of prose alternating ornate prose known as *saj'* with verse. According to Amina Shah,

> The meaning of the word *maqāmah* is derived from “a place where one stands upright” and hence the place where one is at any time. Next it is used metonymically to denote “the persons assembled at any place” and finally, by another translation, “the discourses delivered or conversations held in any such assembly.” This metaphorical use of the word *maqāmah* has however been restricted to discourse and conversations like those narrated by al-Harīrī and his predecessor al-Hamadhānī, which are composed in a highly finished style, and solely for the purpose of exhibiting specimens of various kinds of eloquence, and exemplifying rules of grammar, rhetoric and poetry. (viii)

In Daniel Beaumont’s view, *maqāmah* has only one meaning, “religious counsel,” and the masculine form *mqām* appears in various texts of the pre-Islamic period in a number of uncertain meanings (1). Instead of the word *maqāmah*, ʿAbd al-Hādī chooses the polysemous masculine form *maqām* which calls to mind the form of *maqāmah* while signifying the various senses of abode, assembly, sacred place, and social status.

Maqāmah can be considered the forerunner of the picaresque novel, an episodic narrative of the road adventures of a carefree *picaro* or rogue who lives by his wit in a corrupt society. Like the picaresque novel, the Arabic *maqāmah* has an episodic structure and its protagonist is a rogue who uses his remarkably eloquent skills to trick the gullible narrator as he goes through various kinds of adventures. Both *maqāmah* and the picaresque novel share the chronotope of the adventure of everyday life in which metamorphosis serves as the foundation for portraying the milestones in an adventurer’s life. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains,

> Metamorphosis or transformation is a mythological sheath for the idea of development—but one that unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with “knots” in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of temporal sequence. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 113)

In other words, the narrative portrays the moments of crisis in the hero’s life but does not follow a single temporal sequence; rather, it is episodic, fragmented, and disconnected. The rounded-off episodes from everyday life are “perpendicular to the pivotal axis of the novel, which is the sequence guilt-punishment-redemption-purification-blessedness” (Bakhtin 128). On his way to redemption and rebirth, the hero has to descend to the very depths of everyday life, the nether world reigned by obscenity, but he observes it as an outsider, eavesdropping on private life and

seeing it all in its nakedness without being part of it. The series of adventures he undergoes result in his purification and construction of a new identity. In this chronotope, space "becomes more concrete and saturated with a time that is more substantial: space is filled with real, living meaning, and forms a crucial relationship with the hero and his fate" (Bakhtin 120).

ʿAbd al-Hādī's *Maqāmah*-Like Narrative

ʿAbd al-Hādī's *maqāmah*-like narrative follows the chronotope of everyday adventure. The narrator's double is a rogue who descends to the low everyday life to observe it as an outsider. The narrator, on the other hand, fully participates in this world where unacceptable behavior is welcomed, obscenity is celebrated, and opposites are united. Thus, the narrator indulges in numerous love affairs with lovers of famous poets, describes their physical appearance in detail, and recites erotic poetry. This carnivalesque world is characterized by its parodic-travestying discourse that reflects in its fullness the heteroglossia of Arabic culture and exposes the folly of absolute dogma and traditional ideologies through mixing various styles and genres: pastiche, a patchwork of words, sentences, and complete passages from al-Niffarī's, prose, verses of classical poets, quotes of famous writers, and everyday language interlaced with archaic words. In this world, the unlikeliest of people meet and interact, thus creating dialogism that is set in opposition to monologism of the authorities which claim possession of universal, transcendental truth.

In Bakhtin's view, the spirit of carnival grows out of a "culture of laughter" based on the physiological realities of the body and "opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order" (*Problems* 160). The metamorphosis of the narrator's double is signaled by his meeting with the female Bedouin who, acting like a goddess, gives him a quill pen and a parchment, and guides him out of the oasis of tradition, circularity, and rigidity. Following this meeting, the narrator's double undergoes peripeteia, rather than the catharsis or purification experienced by the hero of the adventure of everyday life, and witnesses rebirth as a postmodern writer.

Following the tradition of Arabic *maqāmāt*, ʿAbd al-Hādī's narrative starts with *isnād*, the citations or "backings" used to verify the legitimacy of a *hadīth* (Hämeen-Anttila 40). The first *maqāmah* starts with "ʿAlā', the narrator, told us" (ʿAbd al-Hādī 11), thus establishing ʿAlā' as the narrator and giving him legitimacy and recognition. The reader is made to believe what is told by the first-person narrator, whose distance from the fictional world is typically narrow as he gives the reader access to his thoughts and feelings, as well as actions. Moreover, the details, which the first-person narrator provides, help validate his narrative, narrow his distance from the fictional world even further, and give room to humor and laughter. According to Bakhtin,

> As a distanced image, a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 23)

To further confound the reader, the hyperbolic form (rāweya), narrator, is used to signify the one who learns the poetry of ancestors and narrates them orally. It is ironic, the reader thinks, that ʿAbd al-Hādī, the postmodernist poet, should choose to assume the role of a traditional narrator. As a traditional narrator, ʿAlā' does not only tell the story of his travel with his double, but proceeds to borrow from his ancestors. However, he does so in a completely innovative manner. Thus, he misreads al-Niffarī's *Mawáqif and Mukhátabát* creating a completely new discourse about writing other than the Sufi discourse of al-Niffarī. Although he criticizes his double for disregarding the advice of cognizant men: "Comply with what you have; don't innovate: what you have is more than enough," (ʿAbd al-Hādī 11) the narrator does exactly what he criticizes his double for. Far from being satisfied with what he has, he returns to tradition only to revive it and use it in an original manner. In the end, it turns out that ʿAlā' ʿAbd al-Hādī, the author, is made up of the narrator and his double. The narrator's double undergoes metamorphosis and fuses into the narrator who renounces narration in the classical traditions and writes postmodernist poetry of the like of *The Ashes' Milk* (*Ḥalīb al-Ramād*), ʿAbd al-Hādī's volume of poetry published in 1994.

A brief introduction sets the time for the narrative as one of the travel seasons, a setting that suggests mobility without specifying time or place. Such spatial and temporal expanses create "a new chronotope for a new, whole, and harmonious man and for new forms of human communication" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 168). The new chronotope, Bakhtin refers to, is the chronotope of the adventure of everyday life where metamorphosis acts as a vehicle for portraying the whole man. In his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller provides a detailed description of the whole man:

> He ought not to aim at form to the injury of reality, nor to reality to the detriment of the form. He must rather seek the absolute being by means of a determinate being, and the determinate being by means of an infinite being. He must set the world before him because he is a person, and he must be a person because he has the world before him. He must feel because he has a consciousness of himself, and he must have a consciousness of himself because he feels. (XIV)

The whole man, Schiller describes, emerges from ʿAbd al-Hādī's playful narrative. Play has a liberating force, "as it suppresses all that is contingent, it will also suppress all coercion, and will set man free physically and morally" (Schiller XIV). It liberates the narrator and his double, so they open up and display all their contradictions in words as well as in action. They talk and wander freely, but their movement is governed by the rules of the game which are flexible and capable of change. They go through a series of adventures that take them to the very depths of everyday life, "the nether world, the grave, where the sun does not shine, where there is no starry firmament" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 128). Obscenity lies at the center of this world together with fraud, profanity, and other aspects of everyday life. In such a world, vulgar conventions are exposed and the existing social order subverted.

"In this everyday maelstrom of personal life," Bakhtin notes, "time is deprived of its unity and wholeness—it is chopped up into separate segments, each encompassing a single episode from everyday life" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 128). Accordingly, the five *maqāmāt* take the form of separate episodes that mechanically arrange themselves into single sequences. Each sequence

represents a stage in the course of the narrator's and his double's lives. When fused with their actual spatial course or road, the metaphor of "the path of life" is realized. One may begin the story at almost any moment and finish at almost any moment because the structure of the whole is repeated in each part, and each part is complete and rounded-off like the whole. Thus, the mobility of the narrator and his double does not imply progression toward the formation of an identity. Rather, their fluid state of becoming results from the continuous process of differentiation, from the playful and profane heterogeneous narrative. Participation in the game of the narrative, viewed as an event, takes them out of themselves so that they become play itself. Their movement is not tied to any goal other than to fulfill themselves for their own sake. In Gadamer's own words, "the players are merely the way the play comes into presentation" (98).

As in the Arabic *maqāmah*, the narrator introduces the reader to an anonymous trickster or *homo ludens*, whom he refers to as his double. The term *double* or *doppelgänger* refers to the encounter with a duplicate of oneself. The origins of the literary double have often been traced to age-old beliefs in the presence of a companion image capable of manifesting itself to the living. The power of the imagination, the fascination with dreams, and the experience of shadows all point to the inherent duality of the human mind, its ability to fabricate doubles to navigate between real and counterfactual worlds. In Freudian psychoanalytic terms, these binary figures represent the Super-ego that tries to dictate rules that are constantly thwarted by the Id's irrational impulses. In fiction, the double figure has been used extensively to represent the divided self. Examples include Edgar Alan Poe's *William Wilson* (1839), Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Double* (1846), and Vladimir Nabokov's *The Eye* (1930). Most often these are first-person narratives in which the second figure that threatens or triumphs over the narrator is a mere projection of his imagination.

In *al-Nashīdah*, the narrator and his double are presented as allegorical puppets rather than flesh and blood humans. *The Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the figurative sense of a puppet is "a person or group whose actions are controlled by another" (1041). As a performer on the stage, the puppet's free movement is actually controlled by the very strings that provide this freedom. The puppet, therefore, is an apt metaphor for man: as a performer on the theatre of life, man's freedom of movement is actually controlled by the very tendons that transmit energy and allow him to move. The first time a puppet was used as a metaphor for man is found in Plato's *Laws*:

> Let us suppose that each of us living creatures is an ingenious puppet [*thauma*] of the gods, whether contrived by way of a toy of theirs or for some serious purpose—for as to that we know nothing; but this we do know, that these inward affections of ours, like sinews or cords, drag us along and, being opposed to each other, pull one against the other to opposite actions; and herein lies the dividing line between goodness and badness. (I: 644 d–e)

Plato envisions humans as puppets who are governed by passions that control their relationships and distinguish the good from the bad. *Thauma* means "wonder" and "marvel," and describes not only puppets but also the whole puppet-like world. In Aristotle's *On the Cosmos*, God creates forms of every sort by means of mere movement "in the same way… the men who run puppet-shows [*neurospastai*], by pulling a single string, make the creature's neck move, and his hand and shoulder and eye, and sometimes every part of his body, according to a rhythmical pattern"

(398b). *Neurospastos* is composed of two words: *neuron* which means “tendons” and *spastos* “to cause convulsion or spasm.” Thus, it literally describes the passive kineticism of puppets and, by analogy, of men. However, in order to bring the puppet to life, the puppeteer does not only use strings to endow the puppet with graceful mobility but uses his own voice to compensate for the puppet’s muteness. Movement pertains to the body, discourse to the spirit. God created man and “breathed into him of His spirit” (*The Holy Quran* 32:9). The wonder arises from this duality of body and soul, man’s animalistic nature, and divine spirituality.

Man’s attempt to attain unity with himself is inhibited by this dual nature. As Giorgio Agamben suggests,

> [Given that] in our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a logos, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element, we must learn… to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation. (16)

This duality is represented by the stock, puppet-like characters of the narrator and his double. That is why they are portrayed as monodimensional characters. Nothing is known about the narrator except his name, his corporality, and the fact that he is a follower of tradition and is interested in poetic form. On the other hand, the protagonist, or rather antagonist, whom the narrator realizes to be his double is an old man whom the narrator has abandoned for ages as he “originated matters traditionalists had not heard of” (ʿAbd al-Hādī 11). This double is associated with reason, meaning and postmodern spirit, and his role is to show the paradoxical side of the narrator, decentering the idea of a stable and unified self and celebrating contradictions. Through the narrator and his double, the conflict between body and mind, form and meaning, as well as tradition and postmodernism is thus established. Such a conflict acts like the friction of physics, impeding their movement forward and obstructing their progress.

1. First *Maqāmah*

In the first *maqāmah*, aptly titled “The Context of the Letter/The Context of the Dream” (*Maqām al-Ḥarf/Maqām al-Ḥulm*), the narrator and his double meet with al-Niffarī, an ancient Sufi writer from the Abbasid era. Although the narrator is a follower of the tradition of ancestors, al-Niffarī chooses to speak to his double advising him: “The principal thing is that thou shouldst have knowledge of what thou art, whether elect or common. If the elect does not act on the principle that he is elect, he perishes” (11). Al-Niffarī here acts like a seer who foresees the future and his words act like an oracle that is actualized at the end. In fact, the Greek Sophist is formed from the noun *sophia* meaning “wisdom” suggesting sagacity and the higher kinds of insight associated with seers and poets. Specializing in one or more subjects and possessing rhetoric and erudition, Sophists flourished in Athens in the fifth century BC, charging the young and wealthy money in exchange for teaching them wisdom. Therefore, they were condemned by Plato who likened them to avaricious tricksters who made claims they could not fulfill and taught only the rhetorical art of persuasion to gain power and achieve personal and political success (*Protagoras* 246a–248a).

Although al-Niffarī does not figure as a greedy person who teaches the narrator's double in return for money, his words of wisdom seem to revolve around form rather than meaning. Thus, he advises the narrator's double not to dwell "on the significance of letters" and emphasizes the following: "Everything has a tree and the tree of letters is names. Depart from names and thou wilt depart from meanings" (14). Al-Niffarī's insistence on the correct use of language is reminiscent of Prodicus' position outlined by Plato in *Protagoras* (377a–c). Plato calls Sophists "friends of the forms" and criticizes them for regarding forms as the only things that are (246a–248a). In other words, they teach the rhetorical art of persuasion rather than philosophy, and therefore, their aim is not reaching true knowledge. In contrast to Plato's views, however, al-Niffarī notes: "When thou departest from meanings, thou art fit for my gnosis. Expression is a veil… The beginning of authorities is that thou shouldst have gnosis without expression. Because if thou knowst who thou listen to, thou knowst what thou listen to" (ʿAbd al-Hādī 14). In other words, the Sufi writer advises the narrator's double to dismiss the view of language as referential. Like structuralists, he seems to suggest that "exterior referentiality is but an illusion, for signs or sign systems refer to other sign systems" (Riffaterre 3). Unlike structuralists, however, he advises the narrator's double to learn about the speaker in order to get a clearer understanding of his speech. In other words, al-Niffarī stresses the importance of authorial intention.

The whole *maqāmah* is in fact a misreading of al-Niffarī's *Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt*, a Sufi text that is concerned with the dissolution of ego as a result of unity with divine presence. ʿAbd al-Hādī embarks on the journey of deconstructing tradition by distorting the meaning of previous masters. This is the goal of all creative poets as pronounced by Harold Bloom: "Strong poets make [poetic] history by misreading one another so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (5). Without misreading grand narratives, tradition will certainly kill all creativity. To thwart these attempts of tradition at killing creativity, ʿAbd al-Hādī borrows al-Niffarī's language but not his discourse, constructing the *maqāmah* in the form of an elaborate pastiche out of al-Niffarī's words interspersed with a few words of his own, which take the imperative form "Read," "Then write," and "Don't dwell," (ʿAbd al-Hādī 11–13) so that boundary lines between his speech and al-Niffarī's are distorted and confused. The result is a totally new discourse on the significance of letter, the danger of gnosis, and the importance of writing for the formation of identity, exemplified later by the transformation that the narrator and his double undergo. Al-Niffarī points to the danger of gnosis when he says: "The most hostile of your enemies only seeks to expel thee from ignorance, not from gnosis" (12). He emphasizes that "gnosis is the affliction of creatures: elect and common alike; ignorance the salvation of creatures: elect and common alike" (ʿAbd al-Hādī 14). He warns the narrator's double: "Letter is a veil… Letter is the path of Iblīs" (ʿAbd al-Hādī 13). In other words, letter is equivocal and every word carries multiple meanings, a warning to the reader of *al-Nashīdah* as well as the narrator's double. If one dwells on the significance of letters, says al-Niffarī, one will get lost. Al-Niffarī finally advises the narrator's double to be truthful and authentic:

> Write who thou art that
> thou mayest know who thou art.
> Truth borrows no other tongue but itself. (15)

ʻAbd al-Hādī's discourse thus establishes writing as a prerequisite for the discovery of one's identity. Ironically, however, it emphasizes that "truth borrows no other tongue but itself" while it borrows the language of al-Niffarī. The *maqāmah* ends with these remarkable words: "These are your reflections in the context of the horizon" (15), signaling the openness of the work which takes nothing less than the horizon for a setting.

2. Second *Maqāmah*

Although they follow different paths, the narrator and his double meet in every context, thus indicating the instances of contact between tradition and postmodern aesthetics. In the second travel, the narrator says that he took bumpy paths and that distance was escorting him, another form of friction that obstructs his movement forward. He also mentions that he was traveling at night. The night here stands for the historic pre-Islamic era to which the narrator travels to meet with classical Arab poets. Soon, however, the reader discovers that he has traveled to that era to meet not with them, but with their sweethearts. The wanton behavior of the narrator throughout this *maqāmah* is typical of his comic puppet-like character. The narrator is a womanizer, a vice that retains its simple, independent existence and figures as the central character. In Henri Bergson's opinion, "At times it delights in dragging them down with its own weight and making them share in its tumbles. More frequently, however, it plays on them as on an instrument or pulls the strings as though they were puppets" (7b).

The narrator continues to disclose some very significant details to the reader, thus narrowing the distance between him and the fictional world, he says:

> I ran out of water and food. Suddenly, after I was certain of my death, an oasis appeared from a distance. I thanked God and started eating the ripest of fruits. I selected a tree in front of the spring to shade myself from the scorching heat. Sand was my pillow. When the sun was about to set, the night revealing its secrets and the sky disclosing its colored cloak, I saw... (ʻAbd al-Hādī 57)

First, the fact that he ran out of water and food signifies his lack of thoughts and creativity, i.e., his emptiness. In portraying comic characters, the author shifts from the moral to the physical and from action to gesture. The body takes precedence over the mind and manner seeks to outdo matter. This is especially true in the case of the narrator, who himself stands for the body, form, and manner. To take a tree as a resting place, sand as a pillow, and the sky as a blanket is therefore in keeping with his character.

Equally natural is his thrill at reaching the oasis, which has only women, classical poets' lovers. He indulges in transient relationships with seven of the most beautiful women as recorded in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry: poetess Laylā al-Akhyaliyya who forsook Tawba ibn al-Ḥumayyir, Mai, Dhū al-Rumma's beloved, Lubnā, Qays' beloved, ʿAzzah, Kuthayyir's beloved, al-Mutajarridah, al-Nuʿman's wife, ʿAfrāʾ, ʿUrwah ibn Ḥizām's beloved, Laylā, Qays ibn Muʿadh's beloved, and Buthaynah, Jamīl's beloved. The physical features of these women are described in detail using archaic Arabic words that sound quite hilarious to the common reader. For example, he uses *ʿuṭbūl* to describe the girl with a long neck, *ʿabhara* to describe the fair girl with big buttocks, and *hirkūlah* to describe the girl with wide hips. The narrator clearly desecrates classical and transcendent notions of love. He mentions how he manages to spend a single night

with each of the famous poets' lovers, even the historically chaste ʿAzzah for whom Kuthayyir recited the following verse:

> Any sign from you that satisfies
> the tell-tale, would satisfy me. (59)

Nevertheless, the narrator's connection with the tradition of classical Arabic poetry is superficial. He does not delve deep into meaning but contents himself with form, represented by the lovers' beautiful bodies. He keeps reciting Arab classics' verses and repeating the same gestures. Thus, he gives each woman a similar ring with an engraved verse of his own.

The narrator's repetition of the same acts and gestures of love with each woman shows his rigid and automated character which lacks humanity and creativity. "It is really a kind of automatism," Bergson notes, "that makes us laugh—an automatism… closely akin to mere absentmindedness" (8a). The narrator is unaware of his vice, rigidity, and automaticity and keeps committing the same sins again and again without any prick of conscience. In fact, he amuses readers more by virtue of his absentmindedness. As Bergson remarks, "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself" (8a). The moment a comic character is conscious of the vice, s/he starts to amend his/her behavior and ceases to be comic. This *maqāmah* abounds in comic situations. According to Bergson: "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (23a). For example, the narrator finds out that he has not met with ʿAblah yet. He considers: "Why don't I wait for a day or two so I can narrate her story. My narrative suffers from the boredom of adoration, passion and lovers" (ʻAbd al-Hādī 70). Yet, he decides to leave for fear of unfortunately meeting ʿAntarah on the eighth day. More funny, however, is the scene where all women get together and discover his lie when they see a similar ring with each one of them. To cover himself up, the narrator gives ʿAblah, ʿAntarah's beloved, a ring although he has not had a chance to meet with her. This helps absolve him of their charge and secures him a safe exit from the oasis.

The contrast between the narrator and his double is no clearer in any other place than in their answers to the female Bedouin's question about love. Typically, the narrator replies in physical terms describing the act of sexual intercourse grotesquely, he says: "Love is a circle! He sits between her thighs and strains himself" (ʻAbd al-Hādī 72). The female Bedouin gets angry at his reply and retorts: "This is not a lover but a child seeker" (72). When women start arguing with him, he feigns agreement in order to escape from the oasis. In contrast, the emotional reply of the narrator's double appeals to the female Bedouin:

> Love is a tendency in the lover's
> heart to see death as a game
>
> Starting with an accidental look or joke,
> it strikes the heart as a flame
>
> Like a fire, it starts with a little spark
> then all the wood is enflamed. (73)

Approving his poetry, the female Bedouin comments: “By God, yours is a lover’s narration” (73). Again, narration (*riwāyah*) is associated with poetry rather than prose, which contrasts with its common usage that refers to prose narrative. As a reward for his narration, the narrator’s double is given a quill pen, a writing tool that stands for meaning, originality, and the mind, in place of the narrator’s tree, which represents form, tradition, and the body. The female Bedouin then leads him out of the oasis, i.e., traditional love songs, and advises him to go to his lover, i.e., postmodernist poetry, and expresses his concern about her. The narrator, on the other hand, gets lost in circles. The circular movement of the narrator is another form of repetition, rigidity, and automaticity characteristic of comic characters that are stripped of their individuality and humanity. Such are the traits that laughter aims at correcting. Bergson notes,

> The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct. (41a)

3. Third *Maqāmah*

As for “The Context of Writing” (*Maqām al-Kitābah*), it aptly takes place in the fall, corresponding to the stage of maturity in man’s life. Equally significant is space: the narrator’s expression “eating up the distance” refers not only to the cutting of the distance speedily but also to the quick passage of time. Throughout this *maqāmah*, the folly of the grand narrative of classical Arab masters who unanimously agree that speech is preferable to writing is exposed. They argue that only speakers can be described as rhetorical and eloquent and cite the example of Aristotle who only recognized performed lyrics. They also quote Socrates saying: “I do not transfer science from living human hearts to dead sheep skins” (ʿAbd al-Hādī 90). One of their arguments against writing is especially hilarious: “If writing was honorable and handwriting—a virtue, the Prophet peace be upon him would have been the worthiest of it” (90). When the narrator quotes some famous thinkers praising writing, they consider him a spy, retorting that poetry can never be appreciated in writing. Such funny arguments and parodied opinions make the reader question the authority of Arab masters and scholars, thus deconstructing the myth of sacred tradition.

Exposing this vulgar convention, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī expresses his high esteem of the voluntary act of writing:

> A book is read more than a speech because a writer does so voluntarily, but a speaker does it involuntarily. Whoever reads your book does not know whether you wrote it hastily or slowly, but examines whether you are correct or mistaken, did well or failed. Thus, your sluggishness is different than your correctness and your hastiness does not justify your mistakes. (91)

Al-Tawḥīdī maintains that the reception of discourse depends on the medium through which it is communicated, and forms of modern poetry differ from traditional Arabic poetry because the former is often received through writing whereas traditional Arabic poetry was often recited. To judge modern poetry by the rules of traditional Arabic poetry is, therefore, a huge mistake. “The Context of Writing” (*Maqām al-Kitābah*) ends with the narrator’s double leaving the place after throwing a sheet of paper in which he considers classical masters faulty and cites the following

verse by al-Mutanabbī, thus assuming the role of the narrator, a gesture that anticipates his metamorphosis and fusion into the narrator:

> The dearest place is the horse's saddle
> and the best friend of all is a book (93).

The *maqāmah* ends humorously with the narrator's disclosure that his double "started a new career in writing, God forbid, showing his adoration of it" with his poem "Seduction" (93). The use of the expression "God forbid," commonly used with something evil, in connection with starting a new career in writing strikes one as hilarious. What makes this sentence laughable is the absurdity and contradiction embodied. As Bergson explains: "A comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form" (36a).

4. Fourth *Maqāmah*

"The Context of Countries" (*Maqām al-Bilād*) represents the fourth stage in the journey of the narrator and his double. Neither time nor place is specified. However, it is understood that it takes place sometime in the past when the Islamic ruler was called *Sulṭān* (ʿAbd al-Hādī 113). The narrator is invited to the *Sulṭān*'s court and is asked about his opinion of his rule. He quotes Ibn ʿAbbās' reply to Muʿāwiya: "I believe the *Sulṭān* is about to sell half of his palace to buy the other half!" (113) These are witty remarks from history, and wit differs from humor. As Bergson notes,

> A word is said to be comic when it makes us laugh at the person who utters it, and witty when it makes us laugh either at a third party or at ourselves… wit is a certain DRAMATIC way of thinking. Instead of treating his ideas as mere symbols, the wit sees them, he hears them and, above all, makes them converse with one another like persons. (33b)

The narrator elaborates saying that the *Sulṭān*'s entourage is untrustworthy and oppressive. He advises him to seek firmness in the consultant and counsel from the firm. Then, he begins to enumerate the evils of the land: its unquiet borders, crowded houses, polluted air, and muddy water. When the narrator maintains his criticism of the *Sulṭān*, he sends him to jail for one month, another friction that obstructs his mobility. The *Sulṭān*'s exercise of power significantly impedes the mobility of the narrator just as the authority of classical Arab poets obstructs the development and evolution of new forms of poetry writing. When the narrator is released from prison, he sees a prince's procession and hears the following conversation between the prince and a miller:

> Prince: "Why do you put a bell around the neck of the donkey?"
>
> Miller: "If I do not hear the sound of the bell because I'm ill or sleeping, I will know it has stopped so I shout at it."
>
> Prince: "How would you know if it was moving its head without working?"
>
> Miller: "My donkey does not have the prince's mind." (117)

The miller's sarcastic comment serves to repeat the narrator's earlier insolence toward the *Sulṭān*, and one expects him to receive the same punishment, which stands as a warning to whoever dares to defy power and unfollow tradition. Disguised as a wise man, the narrator tells citizens about his courage in front of the *Sulṭān*. However, his double suddenly appears, beats the narrator at his own game, and assumes the role of caretaker of the people giving them advice in writing and calling his country "The Hunted," a gesture which criticizes careless rulers and negligent people alike.

Through this *maqāmah*, ʿAbd al-Hādī attempts to liberate the reader from the grand narrative of home and national identity. Thus, when the *Sulṭān* declares "The best of *Sulṭāns* resembles the eagle surrounded by carcasses, not the carcass surrounded by eagles," the narrator comments: "Both are evil. The worst of *Sulṭāns* is the one feared by the innocent, and the worst of lands is the infertile and unsafe" (115). Confessing his disenchantment with the long-established notions of home and nationalism, he chants Miskīn al-Dārmiyy's:

> I stay in the neighborhood if I am honored
> and leave it when I fear being slighted (115).

Thus, the narrator considers his land home only if his rights are respected. If, however, he fears being humiliated, the narrator does not hesitate to leave it and find a home elsewhere. Again, the narrator declares his objection to the *Sulṭān*'s rule that is based on the proverb: "Let your dog go hungry and it will follow you." Maintaining the allegory, the narrator says: "I am afraid someone else might entice it with a loaf of bread, so it follows him and leaves you" (116). Confronting the *Sulṭān* defiantly, he recites ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Ḥasan's words:

> Don't think the earth is a closed door for me,
> our two countries a mother or a father (116).

Upon finishing this *maqāmah*, the reader will at least reconsider his perception of what constitutes a home, if not espouse the narrator's views. The little narrative thus succeeds in subverting the grand narrative that is well established in the collective consciousness.

5. Fifth *Maqāmah*

The last *maqāmah* titled "The Context of Poetry/Destination" (*Maqām al-Qasīd*) marks the last stage in the journey of the narrator and his double. The pun here in the Arabic word *Al-Qasīd* maintains the same duality of the title of the first *maqāmah*, "The Context of the Letter/The Context of the Dream" (*Maqām al-Ḥarf/Maqām al-Ḥulm*), and establishes poetry as the final destination, thus exalting poetry and considering it the ultimate destination of man's journey and the place where tradition and postmodernism can meet and unite. The narrator's description of his double in the first *maqāmah* "talking to an old man—I later knew he was my double—whom I have abandoned for years" (11) is repeated in more or less the exact same words in the last *maqāmah*, "An elderly man I later knew he was my double, stood nearby" (149), thus reiterating the circular movement and the repetition of the conflict between tradition and postmodernism,

form and meaning, and body and mind. Meanwhile, it causes laughter because a recurrent situation contrasts with the changing stream of life. As Bergson notes:

> Whether we find reciprocal interference of series, inversion, or repetition, we see that the objective is always the same—to obtain what we have called a MECHANISATION of life. You take a set of actions and relations and repeat it as it is, or turn it upside down, or transfer it bodily to another set with which it partially coincides—all these being processes that consist in looking upon life as a repeating mechanism, with reversible action and interchangeable parts. (32b)

The *maqāmah* subverts the grand narrative of classical Arabic poetry that follows the meters recorded by al-Khalīl and parodies the opinion of classical Arab theorists regarding the primacy of form. Parody, one of the most ancient and widespread forms for representing the direct word of another, exposes the retarded classics' views of poetry and their resistance to any new rhythms and meters that are not recorded by al-Khalīl. In al-Jurjānī's view,

> If the poets of the pre-Islamic era had not taken precedence and been regarded as models and scholars, you would have found many of their poems deficient, detestable, rejected and disowned. However, good opinion and belief protected them and dismissed any misgiving, so minds defended them in every possible way and argued for them in every context, and God knows what! (ʿAbd al-Hādī 157)

The narrator, who stands for traditionalists, agrees with the views of his predecessors, reciting the following verse:

> The crying tongue may compose poetry
> even as rhymes may exhaust the orator. (158)

He also quotes Diʿbil ibn ʿAlī al-Khuzāʿī's verse:

> I recite a verse whose poet and
> audience died but it stays alive. (158)

An example of obscene witty remarks is found in the dialogue between the male Bedouin and the Persian man regarding Arabs' ownership of the poetic genre. The male Bedouin says: "Poetry is Arabs' property, so whoever composes poetry among you is the son of a harlot who lay with one of us" (159). The Persian man retorts: "Whoever is not a composer of poetry among you is the son of a harlot who lay with one of us" (159). ʿAbd al-Hādī thus develops a series of "sexual indecencies" that range from sheer obscenity in the erotic *maqāmah* of love to subtle witty remarks here, the aim being, in Bakhtin's own terms, "to destroy the established hierarchy of values via the creation of new matrices of words, objects and phenomena… [that] re-structure the picture of the world, materialize it and flesh it out" (192).

As Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila notes, many of the *maqāmāt* end in a final envoi, a short quotation of verses, put in the mouth of the protagonist, which sums up his philosophy and explains his

behavior or just discloses his identity; however, the envoi is sometimes entwined with a finale which marks the separation of the narrator from the hero (59). The envoi that discloses the identity of the narrator's double in ʿAbd al-Hādī's *maqāmah*-like narrative occurs at the end of "The Context of Poetry/Destination" (*Maqām al-Qasīd*). The narrator's double leaves narration to the narrator after writing trusts him. The narrator keeps staring at his double as he walks away. When the narrator looks behind him to pay his double farewell, he sees the horizon pointing to his double while the latter is reciting from the poem *The Ashes' Milk* (*Halīb al-Ramād*): "Your kingdoms do not have holes for histories" (ʿAbd al-Hādī 160). In other words, narrators or followers of conventions will go into oblivion while creative writers of the caliber of the narrator's double will be revered by nothing less than the horizon itself. Ironically, the narrator's double leaves narration, i.e., recitation of poetry, to ʿAlā'; thus, we return full circle to the beginning that establishes ʿAlā', the postmodernist author of *The Ashes' Milk* (*Halīb Al-Ramād*), as a narrator.

However, as is the case in some *maqāmāt*, the envoi of the narrator's double is followed by a finale, the narrator's elegy of his double at the end of the volume. The metamorphosis of the narrator's double into a writer at the end of "The Context of Poetry/Destination" (*Maqām al-Qasīd*) completes the irreversible temporal sequence of the narrative and closes off the circle. However, the narrator's elegy of his double signals the narrator's metamorphosis too. He has turned into an image of his double. The narrator declares:

> So, I betrayed my narrative, and wrote poetry
> calling out to people and milking ashes. (172)

Thus, the narrator transforms into a postmodernist poet, his poetry is capable of containing all voices, styles, and genres because of its rebellion against norms, traditions, and ideologies. The kind of poetry he writes refers only to itself. On the one hand, it deconstructs form through its novel uses of language; on the other, it deconstructs meaning leaving it enigmatic, indeterminate and ubquitous, thus representing truth in its fullness.

Conclusion

As elucidated above, the humorous *maqāmah*-like narrative is centered stylistically and thematically on writing as a journey. It starts with al-Niffarī's advice to the narrator's double that writing is a means of self-discovery. Guided by the female Bedouin, who gives him a quill pen and a parchment and shows him the way out of the comfortable oasis of tradition, the narrator's double decides to start a new career in writing with the poem titled "Seduction" (*al-Ghiwāyah*). Next, he appears in "The Context of Countries" (*Maqām al-Bilād*) advising people in writing. Finally, the narrator's double undergoes metamorphosis and fuses into the narrator, who ironically decides to leave narration and write postmodernist poetry. The result is a postmodernist narrative which takes bumpy paths through the traditional world until it reaches the present form that allows contradictory voices and multiple genres to coexist without any of them dominating discourse. Being postmodernist, however, does not mean that ʿAbd al-Hādī's narrative is separated from tradition. Rather, it uses the style of *maqāmah* writing and the chronotope of everyday adventure to create a new form of writing, which stands as clear evidence that creativity lies in deconstructing grand narratives and misreading tradition.

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