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Religion into Literature: A Close Reading of 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's Novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* (The Seven Days of Man)

Abstract Modern Egyptian literature was secular from its beginnings, which can be traced to the beginnings of the twentieth century. Contrary to most of the other authors, 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim came from a rural community with a vibrant Sufi brotherhood tradition. And yet, he too made his increasing distance from the brotherhood the main subject of his novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* (The Seven Days of Man). The paper examines the religious-aesthetic dimensions of Sufism in this novel, since Sufism initially played the role of a great educator before it was successively replaced by more rational means of conceiving the world. The aesthetic dimensions of the novel, however, blur this clear-cut distinction between religion and enlightenment. *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* is, perhaps, the last example of a "Bildungsroman" in modern Egyptian literature, but at the same time, it is also an elegy for a lost world. The ambiguity starts with the title's reference to "seven days," which could either refer to the creation of the world by God or to man's own creation of his world. The end is likewise ambiguous, since the (Sufi) "way" (*ṭarīq*) leads the main protagonist back to his roots without offering him any kind of redemption. Shall we thus conclude that religion, by the natural laws of modern life, turns into literature, but that literature is nothing without religion, which is otherwise and outside literature irretrievably lost?

Islamic quotations, formula, and topoi are omnipresent in modern Arabic literature, and yet this literature keeps religion at a distance. The novel's characters may breathe with religious feelings, imaginations, and norms, but in most cases the authors and/or narrators seem mainly unaffected by the religious mood of their protagonists. This is certainly due to the fact that modern Arabic literature was secular from its outset, as it was predominantly composed by members of the urban middle classes who were more nationalist than religiously oriented. However, there are notable exceptions to this rule. One of these is 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, who was brought up in rural Egypt and only later benefitted from the educational system of the Nasserist state. In his novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* (The Seven Days of Man), which is halfway autobiographical, he addresses both his protagonist's alienation from tradition and his ensuing sense of loss. As an author, Qāsim felt challenged by the social transformations in Egypt that were threatening the continuation of the values, imaginations, and beliefs of the peasantry. As neither the mosque nor the museum seemed suitable asylums to him, he turned to the aesthetic realm of literature. Like any other "reflexive modernity," literature guarantees participation in a vivid process and a lively discussion over the future of tradition. In addition to other discourses, literature enables the presentation of human beings as actors within their own social, religious, and political settings. The role of the author is not only to frame, to reconstruct, and to structure communicative processes, but also to give subjective fears, wishes, hopes, feelings, and moods their due. In this sense, Qāsim has a lot to tell us about the life of the Egyptian peasantry around the mid-twentieth century, and particularly about the close connection between social, religious, and individual experience.

'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim was born in 1934 into a peasant family living in Bandara near Tanta. He attended the secondary school in Tanta, moving to the city in his last year. Afterwards, he continued his education at the Faculty of Law of the University of Alexandria. Before graduation, he was arrested on suspicion of leftist activity and sentenced to five years internment in a concentration camp. After his release in 1964, he graduated and began working in the State Organization for Insurance and Pensions. At the same time, he started his career as a writer and published his first novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* (The Seven Days of Man) in 1968/69. From 1974 onward, he lived in Berlin and planned a dissertation on modern Egyptian literature. The dissertation was never finished, but it was in Berlin that he wrote most of his works, including the novella *al-Mahdī wa-ṭuraf min khabar al-ākhirā* (The Mahdi and Good News from the Afterlife, 1984; Engl. trans. Rites of Assent). In 1985 he and his family returned to Cairo where he worked in the General Egyptian Book Organization, co-edited the cultural periodical *Majallat al-Qāhira* (Cairo Magazine), and began writing a weekly column in the Islamist newspaper *ash-Sha'b* (The

People).¹ However, at the same time—in 1987—he ran for a seat in the National Assembly as a member for the socialist *Tajammu'* (Unionist) party. A severe stroke, which he suffered in the same year, left him partly paralyzed, but did not stop his activities for the next three years.² He died in Cairo in the year 1990 at the age of 56. In a short autobiographical account, he wrote: "It was fate that bore me in the train away from my village [. . .] Anxiety and alienation hit me. I hasten back to my delights, and there in the village [. . .] I am a stranger once again. I discover that the rattle of the train over the tracks is my fate, it is my own inner voice, my hybridism, my split loyalty."³

A life between the worlds seems to have been the motor that turned the former student of law into an author of belles-lettres, and his semi-autobiographical novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* is exactly along these lines.⁴ It can be called a "Bildungsroman,"⁵ as it presents the story of a young boy named 'Abd al-'Azīz, who grows up in an Egyptian village near Tanta, then leaves his family in order to pursue his education in Tanta and Alexandria and gradually alienates himself from the ways of the Egyptian peasants and thus from his family and village. The novel has seven chapters which cover the seven days of the week preceding and including the annual pilgrimage (Mawlid) to the shrine of Egypt's highest (Sufi) saint, Aḥmad al-Badawī (Shaykh Badawī, al-Sayyid)⁶ in Tanta. However, the cyclical structure of the novel, which describes the preparations for, the performance of, and the return from the annual feast as an ever-recurring ritual, is counterbalanced by a linear structure, since the shift from day to day is also marked by lapses of several years in which the young boy turns into a young adult and develops a perspective of his own. Thus, in the first chapter, on the first of the seven days, he is still the small village boy who

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- 1 On *ash-Sha'b*, see Andrew Hammond, *Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics, and the Media* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 242.
 - 2 For Qāsim's (auto-)biography, see Abdel-Hakim Kassem, *The Seven Days of Man*, trans. N. Bell. (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1996), XVIII–XIX; "Qāsim, 'Abd al-Ḥakīm," in *Crosshatching in Global Cultures: Dictionary of Modern Arab Writers*, ed. John J. Donohue sj. and Leslie Tramontini, vol. 2, (Beirut: Ergon, 2004), 898–901; "Qāsim, 'Abd al-Ḥakīm," in *A'lām al-adab al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir. Siyar wa-siyar dhātīyya*, ed. Robert B. Campbell, vol. 2 (Beirut: Steiner, 1996), 1080–1083.
 - 3 Donohue and Tramontini, *Crosshatching*, 2: 898.
 - 4 Semah Selim presents a sample of al-Qāsim's statements, all of which revolve around being torn between old and new, rural and urban, and religious and secular worldviews. Semah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880–1985* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 185–186.
 - 5 See Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 168; Muhsin al-Musawi, "Beyond the Modernity Complex: 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's Re-Writing of the *Nahḍah* Self-Narrative," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 41 (2010): 33.
 - 6 Shaykh Aḥmad al-Badawī (1199–1276), who was born in Fez, Morocco and died in Tanta, Egypt, was the founder of a Sufi order in Egypt and is credited by his followers with many miracles. For this Egyptian saint, see Karl Vollers, and Enno Littmann, "Aḥmad al-Badawī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill 1960).

uncritically admires his father and his position among his Sufi friends, and by the concluding chapter, on the last of the seven days, he is already a student in Alexandria who returns to his native village only to realize that the old times, people, and customs have gone. Between the beginning and the end of the novel he takes us to a Sufi gathering in his father's house, the baking day of the women, the journey of the men to Tanta, the Mawlid of Shaykh Badawī with its climax in "the Big Night" (*al-layla al-kabīra*),⁷ and the farewell to the female owners of the lodgings before the group returns to the village.

Like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's (1889–1973) semi-autobiographical novel *al-Ayyām* (The Days) from 1929, *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* starts in the twilight. It is the twilight which marks the divide between day and night or, in other words, the divide between day and anti-day. One of many more opposites which occur in the novel (man/woman, village/city, individual/group, Sufi/orthodox, illiterate/literate etc.), the day is defined by the merciless light of the murderous sun, the exhausting work on dry fields, and harsh language in daily conversation. When night falls everything becomes different, but not for everybody. With another pair of opposites and with Sufi overtones, the darkness of the village is illuminated by the big, warm, and swinging light of the kerosene-lamp in the guest-house of 'Abd al-'Azīz's father. It is a religious privilege, or a privilege of intimacy, to be invited to this house, not a social privilege. The friends or "brothers," who gather every evening for their talks, twice in the week for performing religious rituals and on even rarer occasions for conducting a public *dhikr*,⁸ define themselves by their adherence to the same Sufi order⁹ and not by their status and wealth. On the contrary, the prevailing pluralism and mutual tolerance of the members of the group is obvious: Among them is a man who is a deaf-mute and mentally disabled, another who lives on the proceeds of his wife's thieving, and still others who commit adultery and/or consume drugs. After the group of seven to eight Sufis is complete and they are introduced to the reader of the novel, the evening begins with talks among the brothers and then proceeds with a recitation from old Sufi texts and culminates in reciting the Opening Sura of the Koran (*al-fātiḥa*) over and over again. A publicly performed *dhikr* (Remembrance of God) outside the house, which is attended by many other villagers, brings the evening to a close and serves

7 Mawlid's play an eminent role in the Egyptian popular imagination. This is underlined by the fact that the vernacular poet Ṣalāh Jāhīn (1930–1986) produced a puppet theater musical with the title *al-Layla al-kabīra*. It was the first show to run in the Puppet Theatre, which was opened by 'Abd al-Jamāl Nāṣir in 1959; it continues to run to this day and is frequently aired on state television. See Terri Ginsberg and Chris Lippard, *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema* (Landham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 218. In 2007, the puppet theater play was transformed into a ballet version and, in this form, even entered the Cairo Opera House.

8 For this Sufi ritual, see Louis Gardet, "dhikr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill 1965).

9 Like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim does not mention the name of the Sufi order to which his father was attached.

as a prelude for Sayyid Badawī's Mawlid, which will unfold during the forthcoming days/chapters of the week/novel.¹⁰

The importance of the (mainly Shādhilī) Sufi texts from books for the identity of the protagonists, which are kept in a huge chest in the house, cannot be overemphasized, as they shape their world-view. They are: the *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* (The Waymarks of Benefits) of al-Jazūlī, a fifteenth-century song of praise for the Prophet; the *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* (Mantle Ode) of al-Būṣhūrī, also a praise poem for the Prophet from the thirteenth century, which was regarded as sacred already in its author's life-time; the *Manāqib aṣ-ṣāliḥīn* (The Deeds of the Righteous), which was mentioned by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in *al-Ayyām* as belonging to the stock-in-trade of travelling book-sellers and containing stories about the legendary early Islamic raids and conquests;¹¹ the *Wasīla* (The Intercession), a hagiographic collection of the lives of the saints and their miracles; and last but not least, the *Sīrat Abū Zayd al-Hilālī* (The Life of Abū Zayd al-Hilālī), an Arabic epic recounting the Banū Hilāl's conquest of Egypt in the eleventh century. The list, which also comprises the epic *Sīrat 'Antar* (The Life of 'Antar) and tales from *Alf layla wa-layla* (A Thousand and One Nights), is not only proof of the fact that theology means nothing for the peasants, it also reveals that oral performance ranks first and that folkloristic books were seen as part of the religious heritage, which switches from the sacred to the profane and back again. Furthermore, the list speaks of an almost sacral reading of a popular, deep-rooted and, seen against the background of urban mainstream literature, "counter-hegemonic" textuality which is part and parcel of the rural cultural cosmos.¹²

This becomes clear when 'Abd al-'Azīz compares the books in the chest with his schoolbooks which, with their stories about little boys with clean clothes and little girls with braids and ribbons, use the "disciplinary discourse" of modernity.¹³ The Sufi books, on the other hand, exert an irresistible magical spell on his imagination. The archaic script on yellow pages, tiny lines with hardly any space between them, and their recitation with a full, rhythmic, and chanting voice evoke in his fantasy a kind of dreamland inhabited by men who are different from ordinary men. Thin, frail, and wearing the most tattered garments, they stand at the four corners of the earth, and when they choose to journey they cover huge distances with each step. Living among the ordinary people they stretch out their hands and heal the sick, and when they die, their light breaks forth and domed tombs are built for them in the cities. The streets are then filled

10 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a* (Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 2005), chapter one. Most of the following text quotations (page numbers in brackets) are from Bell's English translation. Kassem, *The Seven Days*.

11 Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *al-Ayyām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1992), 97. Cf. Remke Kruk, "Harry Potter in the Gulf: Contemporary Islam and the Occult," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32 (2005): 50.

12 Cf. Selim, *Novel*, 195.

13 Cf. Selim, *Novel*, 195.

with people who, like armies of ants, carry their provisions to the feasts of the saints in order to seek their intercession.¹⁴

The magnificent evocative power of the old books by no means only sparks the imagination of the child, it is also echoed in the frequent mention of the “glint of longing” (*iltimā’at al-shawq*)¹⁵ in the eyes of his father and the other Sufi brothers. This “glint of longing” is certainly an allusion to the Sufi’s understanding of life as a journey, and the life-journey unfolds in the novel as a cosmology in which the past and the present, the known and the unknown as well as the sacred and the profane continuously blend together.¹⁶ The dead are as much present in the evening sessions of the Sufis as the living. The power of the saint Shaykh Badawī is attested by all kinds of mediators (the shaykh of the congregation, wandering dervishes in fantastic array, holy fools with strange habits) as well as of rituals (amulets, magical procedures of all kinds, performance of the exorcist ritual of the *zār*), and the continuous overstepping of the boundaries between the profane and the sacred is marked not so much by *what* is told in the novel, but by *how* it is told. The language of the novel, with its comparisons, metaphors, and images is a mixture of the colloquial dialect, rural imagery, and sacred discourse. On the one hand, the language of the protagonists is often coarse and derived from their daily experience when, for instance, the eyes of a man are depicted as “two red openings that looked like pigeon anuses,”¹⁷ but on the other, the daily experience of the peasants is continually generalized and imbued with meaning by the insertion of comments from the holy tradition. To give but a few examples: “Hājj Muḥammad [. . .] had owned extensive lands, many animals, and even some riding horses. Then had come the crash and he had faithfully supported the brothers with all that he had [. . .]. But men are merely guardians of what they have; they own nothing. And the aim of this life is the afterlife.” Or: “Hājj Karīm lit his lamp every night for the brothers, and he illumined their gatherings with his enchanting words. How happy were those men who opened their hearts to affection and sincerity. The few acres Hājj Karīm still had were many, by the grace of God.” Or: “His wife had given birth to a son whom they had named Shahḥāt, or ‘Beggars.’ Were we not all beggars? The good things of this life were few, scattered marvels here and there.”¹⁸

The cosmos of the Sufi peasants is inclusive, tolerant, and humorous, but it is also a self-contained entity which turns a deaf ear towards the orthodox/Islamicist and the secular/areligious. In this world, the implacable

14 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 8–9, 23.

15 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 10 (3).

16 Cf. Selim, *Novel*, 191–192.

17 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 146 (122). Cf. Allen, *Novel*, 176.

18 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 13–14 (7); 30 (22). Cf. Selim, *Novel*, 192–193. van Leeuwen points to the frequent metaphorical use of the journey to denote a life-span, thus also imbuing an individual life with a religious-existentialist meaning. Richard van Leeuwen, “The Journey in Two Arabic Novels,” in *Sensibilities of the Islamic Mediterranean: Self-Expression in a Muslim Culture from Post-Classical Times to the Present Day*, ed. Robin Ostle (London: Tauris, 2008), 134.

village preacher is and remains an awkward figure, "that hulking giant who stood in the midst of the assembled peasants and shouted at the top of his voice terrifying things about the fire of hell, liars, thieves, and fornicators."¹⁹ But competing worldviews are not so easily dismissed when they grow among the Sufis themselves in the next generation as a result of a better, comprehensive and secular education. This is the case with 'Abd al-'Azīz, who distances himself increasingly from his father's circle after he has moved to Tanta and meets them for the annual pilgrimage to Sayyid Badawī at the railway station. First, he becomes aware of the fact that he is no longer part of this collective: "They were like flecks of iron drawn toward the pole of a magnet. But he was made of a different metal."²⁰ Gradually, in comparing the wealth, cleanliness, and rational structure of urban culture with the poverty, backwardness, and magical thinking of the village, he rejects the collective outright. In the end, the collective has lost all of its former spiritual splendor for him, and he perceives it only as a smacking, defecating and urinating body, devoid of all higher faculties and aspirations: "They might be sitting on the mats, but inside they were standing up, craning their necks, grasping, and chewing irreverently. The stomach was the moving force of history. The history of those creatures that were born in the primeval slime [. . .] that long epic of ugliness, greed, and voracity, was the history of man."²¹ The alienation of 'Abd al-'Azīz from his roots reaches its climax in a confrontation with his father, during which the father is prevented from cursing his son by the intervention of some other peasants.

After leaving the "path" of the Sufis and following his individual and personal "path" from Tanta to Alexandria, 'Abd al-'Azīz returns to his native village after news reaches him that his father is on his deathbed. Most of the Sufis are dead, the Sufi order itself is in decline, and the family is totally impoverished. The coffee house has replaced the mosque in its function as the village's center, the radio brings urban culture and world news to the village, and angry young men play cards, drink tea, and smoke water-pipes. They listen to the radio's popular music, comment upon the world news, criticize governmental decisions, and 'Abd al-'Azīz takes part in their discussions. The very last passage of the book runs as follows: "He lost himself among them. He felt the same bitterness, anger, and pain that they did [. . .]. Someone handed him a water pipe. He filled his lungs with the thick, rich smoke [. . .]. Only that heavy blue smoke could interrupt the incessant storm of his words."²²

To most of the commentators of 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a*, the "sudden intrusion of calendrical time"²³ into the

19 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 17 (10–11).

20 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 141 (117).

21 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 168 (140f.). Cf. Selim, 198, and her comments on 'Abd al-'Azīz: "libidinal individuation from the collective body as he slowly becomes aware of its stifling, monolithic corporeality."

22 Qāsim, *Ayyām*, 256 (218).

23 Selim, *Novel*, 204.

closing of the novel does not make sense. Hilary Kilpatrick deems the last chapter "unimportant,"²⁴ Roger Allen dismisses it as "unsatisfactory,"²⁵ and only Samah Selim writes: "The novel ends on this note of vitality and inevitability. 'Abd al-'Azīz finds himself in this furious din. He is once again reconciled to the community, but one that has actively thrown itself into the stream of history and collectively redefined itself as a community in open, angry rebellion against its own marginalization and oppression."²⁶ I agree with this view, but I would add that the protagonist 'Abd al-'Azīz, who sits in the coffeehouse and is about to return to Alexandria, is also about to turn into the writer 'Abd al-Ḥakīm who will write the novel *Ayyām al-insān as-sab'a*. In this moment protagonist and author merge into one: the protagonist witnesses the disappearance of the Sufi dreamland in favor of a new realism, and the writer becomes aware of the fact that this realism needs some roots in order to protect itself against any misconceptions. As a writer, 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim sought to dig beneath the surface of his memories, to preserve the vital kernel of tradition, to cast his findings into the form of a novel, to address an audience of urban/secular readers, to remind them of their own roots in Egypt's rural past, and to thereby immunize them against demagogues of any kind. In his own words:

I understood that my critical vocation hadn't just dropped upon me from the sky, prophecy-like [. . .]. During revolutionary periods in our history, people were able to raise themselves above (their) passivity and to resist their reality with vitality and seriousness of purpose [. . .]. During the present age of decadence and disastrous defeat, (the) fragmentation prevails once again but the people can never fall back to the same point from which they began.²⁷

An angry young man, was how the audience perceived 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim when he published his novel in 1968/69. Two years after the disastrous war of 1967, Nasser's experiment with an "Arab socialism" or "Arab nationalism" had fallen to pieces. Qāsim's novel marks the beginning of a new writing which believed less in technical modernity, had a greater concern for the self, and turned more to the religious-cultural tradition than the novels of the "social realist" period. Indeed, none other than that paragon of "social realism," Najīb Maḥfūz, referred to the ideas of 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim when he started to experiment with the literary tradition, mystical thinking, and self-reflection in the aftermath of the Nasserist project.

24 Hilary Kilpatrick, *Modern Egyptian Novel: A Study in Social Criticism* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1974), 146.

25 Allen, *Novel*, 177.

26 Selim, *Novel*, 205.

27 Quoted in Selim, *Novel*, 185.

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