

Some Notes on the Mystical Elements in Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's Wad Ḥāmid Cycle

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Born in 1929 in the village of Al-Dabba, near Marawi in northern Sudan to a family of small farmers and Islamic religious teachers, Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ first studied agriculture at the University of Khartoum and shifted later on to international relations at the University of London. He started publishing his first literary attempts in 1953 shortly after he had moved to London to work for the Arabic section of the BBC. The social and cultural estrangement which he experienced in Europe is considered the primary impetus for his literary career and together with the consequences of colonization and the failure of the *nahḍa* project it constitutes one of the main themes of his writing. Never a prolific author, his whole bibliography consists of no more than a dozen short stories and two novels. His early short stories together with the novella *ʿUrs az-Zayn* were first published in 1962, his most famous novel *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shamāl* (*Season of Migration to the North*) followed in 1966 and the two parts of *Bandar Shāh* (*Bandar Shāh: Daw' al-bayt* and *Maryūd: al-juz' al-tānī min Bandar Shāh*) first appeared in 1971 and 1976 respectively. Two more short stories followed: *al-Rajul al-qubruṣī* (*The Cypriot Man*) in 1973 and *Yawm mubārak 'alā shāṭi' Umm Bāb* (*A Blessed Day on the Coast of Umm Bab*) in 1993¹. What binds most of these works into a more or less homogenous series is their setting in the fictional village of Wad Ḥāmid, which creates a framework within which the author accomplishes his narrative project.

To better understand the themes resonating throughout the cycle, we consider this a proper place for a brief introduction into the cultural and social

¹ HASSAN, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, p. x.

conditions prevailing in Sudan during the story time of the respective parts of the cycle.

Similar to most other Arab countries, Sudan's modern history was shaped to a large extent by traumatic confrontation with the West, which started with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and which revealed the enormous economic, scientific, political and military superiority of Europe and made obvious the need for wide reforms at all levels of society. The broad intellectual movement which subsequently arose with the aim of conceptually preparing and introducing the necessary modernization, called *nahḍa*, first aimed at synthesizing the scientific advances of the West with Islamic culture; however (as also shown by Ṣāliḥ's works), the selective synthesis and accommodation of technology and modern institutions to essentially traditional societies, beliefs and social structures, for which Sudanese society was also characteristic, very soon proved superficial and unable to attain its goals. Moreover, the emerging civilizational divide received a new face soon afterwards, when European powers started the direct colonization of most of the Middle East and North Africa in the second half of the 19th century, which further complicated the concepts and solutions put forward by intellectuals. The gradual decline of colonial rule and emergence of independent Arab states from the 1920s saw the rise of Arab national consciousness, the notion of national identity and the development of the concept of pan-Arabism; however, the hopes and enthusiasm this movement aroused were crushed soon after by the lost war of 1967.

Consequently, Ṣāliḥ belonged to a generation which witnessed the last years of colonial rule and the subsequent rise of Arab national states, the enthusiasm of Arab nationalism and the disappointment and frustration resulting from its collapse after the Six-Day War of 1967; all of these events are reflected clearly in his works.

The religious and spiritual environment in which Ṣāliḥ grew up also finds its reflection in the Wad Ḥāmid cycle – a mixture of orthodox Islam, mystical Sufi beliefs and animism (commonly referred to as “popular Islam”), which can be felt in his writings from the very beginning. As a result of the above, the general tensions that beset the village are between the old and new, science and superstition, tradition and modernity.

This becomes apparent in one of Ṣāliḥ's pivotal short stories, *The Doum Tree of Wad Ḥāmid*², which introduces not only the setting of the whole cycle

² Original Arabic title: *Dawmat Wad Ḥāmid*, the story is contemporaneous with events preceding and following Sudan's independence in 1956.

but also its central themes. The narrator, being an elderly member of the village of Wad Ḥāmid by the Nile, he explains to an unnamed outside visitor the village's history and way of life, its harsh environment and impenetrability for outsiders as well as the independence and resentment of its people to outside change. The whole story consists of a dozen short episodes which are basically of two kinds – six depicting the villagers' imaginary, psychic and spiritual world and their worldview, all of which become in one way or another threatened in the other six stories by various attempts of both the colonial and later on post-colonial governments to “modernize” the village as part of the *nahḍa* project by sending them a state-deployed orthodox preacher and by plans for building a steamer stop or by setting up an agricultural scheme.

What connects all twelve episodes is the centrality of the doum tree for each of the episodes. In the first group, the tree becomes a constantly present reminder of the villagers' cultural identity and its living memory; the episodes of the second group depict the various governments' failures to implement their plans due to the villagers' resistance and refusal to sacrifice the tree for the execution of these projects. Thus, by juxtaposing these two groups of stories, the author creates a setting which crystallizes the contradictions of the *nahḍa* project and the inherent tensions it produces within the village community.

In the old man's narrative, the tree is described as having a divine origin, defying natural laws and human knowledge: “No one planted it, my son. Is the ground in which it grows arable land?”³ The reader learns that the tree and the village itself were named after Wad Ḥāmid, a pious slave mistreated by his master. When Wad Ḥāmid called on God for deliverance, he was told by a voice to spread his prayer rug on the Nile and let it transport him. He stopped at the place where the doum tree grew and which, originally surrounded by wasteland, was later transformed by the power of the saint's *baraka*⁴ into the villagers' fertile fields and thus enabled the village to spring up nearby. In the story, the tree is prominent in the villagers' earliest memories and in their understanding of the small world which it commands: “And we, when we take ourselves back to childhood memories, to that dividing line beyond which you remember nothing, see in our minds a giant doum tree standing on a river bank; everything beyond it is as cryptic as talismans, like the boundary between day and night, like that fading light which is not the dawn but the light directly prece-

³ ṢĀLIḤ, *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, p. 6.

⁴ Blessings endowed with mystical power active even after the saint's death.

ding the break of day. My son, do you find that you can follow what I say? Are you aware of this feeling I have within me but which I am powerless to express? Every new generation finds the doum tree as though it had been born at the time of their birth and would grow up with them.”⁵

Thus the tree becomes not only a symbol of the village, but of the stability of its way of life, present in the village ever since they remember, resenting any change and standing untouched by time. In this way, it receives a mythical quality in the sense that it is presented as an archetype of rootedness and continuity defying any temporality. On the other hand, if we consider the villagers’ own regional blend of Sufi and animist creeds, the doum tree becomes of mystical importance to them in the sense that it makes intelligible an otherwise “cryptic” world by drawing a line between order and chaos, light and darkness and, in extension, between good and evil. Thus it becomes what could be called a living divine criterion for them that determines the proper conduct of life. However, this is not a universally applicable rule (for the orthodox, a law) but, like any mystical Way, a highly personal one, speaking to each villager in its own unique way, fitted to each individual’s particular needs and capabilities. Thus it creates a highly personal bond on a spiritual level, the mystical character of which is underlined by the fact that it cannot be logically or rationally explained; the old man is “powerless to express” the ultimate significance of the tree because it falls beyond the scope of language⁶.

This personal-mystical bond expresses itself in the fact that it appears in the villagers’ dreams where, whenever it appears, it always opens “a way out”, indifferently bringing relief after distress, as if it were a mediator between this world and the other. When an elderly woman is struck by severe fever, she does not seek a doctor, but spends the night under the tree and invokes the holy man Wad Ḥāmid: “I have come to you to seek refuge and protection – I shall sleep here at your tomb and under your doum tree. Either you let me die or restore me to life; I shall not leave here until one of these two things happen.”⁷ After she falls asleep, she dreams of a voice reciting the Qur’an, sees a bright light and the tree prostrating itself in prayer. Then Wad Ḥāmid himself appears, strikes her with his rosary and commands to stand up and go. At that she wakes up cured, as if she had never been ill.

⁵ ŞALİH, *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, p. 6.

⁶ HASSAN, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, p. 41.

⁷ ŞALİH, *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, p. 11.

These and other similar episodes contained in the short story confirm the villagers' strong belief in the tree's *baraka* and the essential role it plays in their lives, by which the tree becomes a significant guarantee of their psychic, emotional as well as spiritual well-being.

The Wedding of Zayn, as a work written shortly after Sudan's independence in 1956 and marked by the optimism characteristic for this period, treats on an ideological level the conditions under which the *nahḍa* project could succeed in its goal to synthesize Western science with Islamic culture. In fact, it recognizes synthesis between the two as the only way to achieve progress instead of promoting Westernization and suppressing the role of Islam. However, written by an emigrant nostalgically idealizing traditional society and in combination with the then wide-spread idealization of the *nahḍa* project, the novella is perceived as an essentially utopian work neglecting some of the complexities that characterize relations in the traditional environment in which it is set. As the author himself mentions in one of his interviews, the novella "represents my hopes and dreams which I wish could be realized within human society"⁸, although, similar to "The Doum Tree", it does not recognize the government as the agent of positive change but rather sees this in the village's pragmatic leaders, who represent the real power that rules the matters of everyday life⁹.

The story begins with three different short episodes describing the immediate reactions of the villagers to the news of the village simpleton Zayn's unexpected engagement to Ni'ma, the most beautiful and desirable girl in Wad Ḥāmid. Told from the perspective of a distant outsider third-person narrator (mostly with no subjective judgment of the events), the story time of the novella is much longer than narrative time; thus, the whole text consists of a series of narrative flashbacks mostly depicting Zayn's life from birth to his wedding with a few other episodes from the lives of other villagers. Consequently, narrative time is solely concerned with the "miraculous" event of Zayn's wedding.

This series of flashbacks is not only meant to portray Zayn and his history and position in the community but also to describe the relations between the various groups in the village, mainly those that exert the most influence on its life, including the powerful "Maḥjūb gang", the unpopular imam, the 'Umda, the "Oasis", etc.

⁸ BERKLEY, *The Roots of Consciousness Molding the Art of El Tayeb Salih*, p. xxxiii.

⁹ ṢĀLIḤ, *Tayeb Salih Speaks*, pp. 17–18. In: HASSAN, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, p. 51.

As the familiar literary type of the “holy fool”¹⁰ in spite of his animal-like bodily features and childish behavior which entertains the village, Zayn is treated as a dervish, a roaming mystic who has been elevated to a state of “divine madness”. This belief is further strengthened by his friendship with the mysterious ascetic Ḥanīn who comes to the village for six months each year fasting, praying and talking only to Zayn, who calls him “the blessed one of God”. This also reinforces the image of Zayn as a saintly character: “The people of the village, seeing these acts of Zayn’s, would be even more amazed; perhaps he was God’s prophet al-Khidr, perhaps an angel sent down by God in lowly human form to remind His worshippers that a great heart may yet beat in one of concave breast and ridiculous manner such as Zayn. Some would say: ‘He places His strength in the weakest of His creatures.’”¹¹

The story of the novella thus traces the peculiar events that eventually lead to Zayn’s full socialization and integration into the community to become its full member. This process starts with the appalling attack on Zayn by Sayf ad-Dīn¹² during Sayf’s sister’s wedding. After Zayn recovers, comes back from hospital and spots Sayf walking by, he jumps at him and nearly strangles him. Again, it is only the sudden appearance of Ḥanīn on the scene that saves not only Sayf’s but in fact also Zayn’s life. Ḥanīn appears “out of the blue at the moment, the very instant, when Zayn’s grip tightened on Sayf ad-Dīn and he had all but throttled him.”¹³ Ḥanīn, as Zayn’s spiritual guide, prevents him both from committing an evil act as well as breaching worldly laws. That he obeys Ḥanīn in this critical

¹⁰ To employ Sufi terminology, Zayn bears many traits of someone who would be typically called *majdūb*. In modern Arab literature, this type is best known in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley*, embodied by the character of Shaykh Darwish and in Yusuf Idris’ short story *Shaykh Shaykha*, represented by a character of the same name. Both characters bear similar traits as Zayn: the first is similarly a half-witted individual, treated by others as holy; the second shares mostly his physical traits but all three characters are accepted and accommodated within the community and they are even able to cross social boundaries forbidden to normal adults and fall beyond the traditional structure of society, where rules of social conduct binding to other members of the community do not apply to them. Thus, they are for example allowed to move freely both in men’s and women’s parts of houses, enter both men’s and women’s celebrations at weddings and are generally exempted from gender segregation.

¹¹ ŞĀLIḤ, *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, p. 46.

¹² The spoiled son of a rich merchant who was expelled but who returns to the village upon his father’s death to claim his share of the inheritance even before the end of the mourning period. On the night of his sister’s wedding, Sayf strikes Zayn on the head with an axe after which he spends several weeks in hospital. During his stay in the hospital, another extraordinary event occurs as Zayn’s teeth, which he had lost as a child, suddenly grow again.

¹³ ŞĀLIḤ, *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, p. 66.

moment while overcome by anger and that he makes peace with Sayf without protest is perceived as another sign of Zayn's "blessedness". The act is also considered a sign of his capacity to become fully socially integrated and it is rewarded with Ḥanīn's prophecy of marriage to "the best girl in the village"¹⁴.

The unexpected news of Zayn's marriage also becomes an event which illustrates the relations and the villagers' attitude towards the two aspects of religious authority they recognize – orthodoxy and mysticism. The imam's initial opposition to Zayn's marriage, due to his considering him unfit for such an institution, represents a religious prohibition because despite the fact that the marriage is first prophesized by the mystic Ḥanīn, it is the imam who is the representative of orthodox Islam and who is acknowledged as the sole person responsible for contracting marriages in the village. Thus the villagers' pressure on the imam and his eventual consent with the marriage shows that the village respects the imam as a representative of orthodoxy, or, one may say, the law. However, on the other hand Ḥanīn's prophecy, as shown by their reaction, is stronger than the imam's refusal, which demonstrates both Ḥanīn's strong spiritual esteem as well as the deep roots of their preference and inclination towards mystical authority as represented by Ḥanīn rather than orthodoxy embodied by the imam.

Consequently, in the novella the event of the wedding becomes in addition a catalyst that unifies the community and through which the various conflicts between the members of the village (albeit only temporarily) disappear. Moreover, it also serves as Zayn's "rite of passage" to becoming a full member of the village and completing his integration and socialization. From a broader perspective, the story could be interpreted as representing the whole of Sudan with its many conflicting tribes and the author's vision and dream of their reconciliation¹⁵.

The last work that will be dealt with in this paper and that can be with no doubt considered Ṣāliḥ's most ambitious literary experiment is the unfinished two-part novel *Bandar Shāh*, consisting of *Ḍaw' al-bayt* (1971) and *Maryūd* (1976). Described by the author himself as his most important work¹⁶, the novel can be said to belong to the body of Arabic literature which was produced in the late 1960s and 1970s and which reflects the crisis of consciousness that the lost Six-Day War of 1967 caused in the entire Arab world. Realizing the final failure of the *nahḍa* project as an attempt to combine the Arab past with Western

¹⁴ ṢĀLIḤ, *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, p. 64.

¹⁵ HASSAN, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, p. 58.

¹⁶ JIBRĪL, *Alā al-darb ma'a al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ*, p. 118.

modernity, which should have been attained within the newly-formed nation-states (the borders of which were drawn by European powers and thus are also a colonial legacy), writers found themselves in need for “new writing” that would provide them with a means of expressing this new condition. The literature of the period becomes increasingly experimental, abandoning all realism and defying the least sense of stable reality, thus reflecting the disturbed relation to the present and an attempt to rearticulate this present in new ways¹⁷. This is the context into which Ṣāliḥ’s last novel fits. It is written as a series of dialogues, dreams, mystical visions, various mini-narratives and historical accounts without any linear plot or even clear borders between the past, present and future. Thus it is broken into dispersed indistinguishable fragments that create an incomplete episodic novel. Another distinctive feature of the work is its rich intertextuality, as it draws on various Arabic narrative discourses which emerged from the sixth century up to the present. It contains direct quotations from works such as the *Kalīla wa Dimna*, verses from Abū Nuwās or al-Faytūrī and stylistically imitates and makes use of linguistic registers ranging from classical poetry and the Qur’an to the spoken rural dialect of northern Sudan up to various magical incantations and supra-linguistic fragmental utterances, thus attempting to create a new distinctive narrative discourse within the genre of the Arabic novel.

The title is made up of the Persian words *bandar*¹⁸ (city) and *shāh*¹⁹ (king); the main theme of the work is, as the author explains, the search for the ideal city, meaning the quest for the revival of Arab culture and civilization and the search for the ideal king, meaning the ideal form of government²⁰.

One of the central topics the novel deals is the question of authority; *Bandar Shāh* appears in various episodes as a mythical figure with no verifiable origin who comes to Wad Ḥāmid and builds a magnificent palace on a nearby hill, where according to different versions he rules over his sons or slaves with an iron fist assisted by his grandson Maryūd. The villagers hold him in great esteem while they are unaware of his tyrannical patriarchal rule, which they only learn about after his sons revolt against him and kill both him and Maryūd.

¹⁷ HASSAN, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, p. 129.

¹⁸ Meaning *port* in Persian, the word is also used in rural Egyptian and Sudanese Arabic, denoting the city as distinct from the village, or, in a broader sense, urban culture as distinct from rural culture.

¹⁹ *King* in Persian.

²⁰ JIBRĪL, *‘Alā al-darb ma‘a al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ*, p. 119.

The eleven scattered episodes told by various narrators that form the story of Bandar Shāh's tyrannical rule contrast with other episodes from village life, most distinctly with the three episodes that form the story of Ḍaw' al-bayt, a complete stranger with fair skin, blond hair and a foreign accent, whose half-dead body the villagers find one day on the river bank. Encountering a creature that they see for the first time in their lives, they overcome their initial fear and recognize him as a human being in need of their help. After he wakes up from a month-long coma during which they take care of him, they accept him and offer him a new name, identity, religion and later grant him a piece of land to farm and eventually a wife. Though his story at points merges with the myth of Bandar Shāh and Maryūd, reflecting in this way the various and often conflicting values of the community, including their stress on dignity, tolerance and generosity, which is at odds with the uncompromising traditional patriarchal system and male dominant rule, the story of Ḍaw' al-bayt is characteristic of an atmosphere of peace and tolerance. In this context, Ḍaw' al-bayt gives the villagers an opportunity to bring out the best in them. Consequently, the moment they accept his request (that of a complete stranger with an unknown past) to marry one of them, they feel as if transformed into something new: "We were seized by a frenzy of yearning, an ecstasy of love, as if we were at some Sufi gathering for the invocation of the Lord's name, while Ḍaw' al-bayt the stranger sat in the middle, connected with all that was taking place."²¹ Similarly, Ḍaw' al-bayt's wedding, which can be said to mark the culmination of this part of the novel, is depicted in a poetic passage very characteristic of the whole novel, which relies heavily on mystical and Sufi symbolism: "... thin and emaciated, every back bowed, every shoulder weighed down by the burdens of life and death, and the great concourse takes them over so that each becomes himself and something more. Today the wise man will behave foolishly, the religious man will get drunk, and the sober will dance ... They come like grains of wheat in a heap of wheat, each grain autonomous, holding within itself a great secret ... They come all of them poor to varying degrees, and are encompassed by a harmonious orbit rotating round its axis at a predestined rate. They come weak and return strong, needy and return rich, astray and find right guidance. Today the parts will be united and each one will become the one."²²

²¹ ṢĀLIḤ, *Bandarshah: Dau al-Beit*, p. 71.

²² ṢĀLIḤ, *Bandarshah: Dau al-Beit*, p. 74.

It is this and similar passages that represent one of the distinct features of Šāliḥ's works and that were given by this article as examples to illustrate how mystical thought, as an element with deep roots in the author's native environment became a fundamental source of inspiration in his works.

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R e s u m é

Niekoľko poznámok k vplyvom mystiky v dielach aṭ-Ṭajjiba Šāliḥa a jeho cykle Wad Ḥāmid

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Článok sa zaoberá mystickými prvkami v diele jedného z najvýznamnejších predstaviteľov modernej arabskej literatúry, sudánskeho spisovateľa aṭ-Ṭajjiba Šāliḥa. Obsahuje stručnú charakteristiku autora a základné črty jeho tvorby, ako aj historický a spoločenský kontext, v ktorom vyrastal a pôsobil a ktorý jeho diela reflektujú. Následne článok analyzuje vplyv islamskej mystiky v dielach, kde sa prejavuje najsilnejšie: v poviedke *Dawmat Wad Ḥāmid* (*Wad Ḥāmidova palma*), novele *'Urs az-Zajn* (*Zajnova svadba*) a románe *Bandaršāh*.