INTRA-RELIGIOUS PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN ARABIC LITERATURE: THE CASE OF THE JORDANIAN WRITER ĠĀLIB HALASĀ

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze an example of how intra-religious dialogue and peaceful coexistence are dealt with in the Arabic novel. It focuses on two works by Jordanian writer Ġālib Halasā, namely the short story Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḫarūn (1968) and the novel Sulṭāna (1989). The purpose of the paper is to show how such a cohabitation is portrayed by the author, coupling a historical and a literary reading, in order to show some sides of peaceful coexistence in Jordan.

While conflict and violence are widely explored issues in the scholarship dealing with Arabic literature, the same is not true for dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Despite their growing popularity, Peace studies have not broken through the wall of Arabic literary studies yet.

The cliché can be challenged by changing our perspective and highlighting the role of literature as a bridge between different faiths and communities. Moreover, we need to re-think the relation between literature and peace not as a secondary corollary of the more familiar literature/war pattern, but as a study subject in its own right. It is necessary to point out the importance of reflecting on positive peace in modern and contemporary Arabic literature, and to start building a new critical discourse revolving around peacebuilding.

Keywords: Arabic literature, Ġālib Halasā, Jordan, intra-religious peaceful coexistence

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Introduction

Due to the ravaging dynamics and consequences of conflicts, the need of writing them is no surprise. War is written for a variety of reasons: extending one's control to something which is beyond control by its very nature, coping with trauma, keeping a record of the events, giving a warning to the future generations, pursuing just peace, and so on. War *must* be written despite its incommunicability: it is not a matter of choice, but a "sacred duty", as Kate McLoughlin argues regarding a Vietnamese author whose "compulsion is not that war must be written about, but that it cannot not be written about" (McLoughlin 2009, p. 18). McLoughlin goes further claiming that "seldom stated, though nonetheless espoused, is the thought that writing about war brings about peace" (McLoughlin 2009, p. 18). Moreover, in some cases, the topic of conflict in literature intersects with more pragmatic issues, such as the exploitation of the symbolic capital provided by conflict writing. As Felix Lang (2016) shows in Bordieuan terms, for instance, conflict writing ensures consecration to authors belonging to the Lebanese literary field and needing to challenge the previous generation on writers on the same ground of theirs.

History of the modern Middle East is also a history of unrest, and conflict is consequentially a pivotal element in modern and contemporary Arabic literature. The contemporary literature of the Mashreq is often read through the lenses of war, and religious and State violence, by which it seems to be inescapably defined. The sectarian conflict in Lebanon, for example, gave birth to a canonical corpus of novels whose boundaries are defined by war itself, and which is usually referred to as "the post-war Lebanese novel" (Seigneurie 2008, 2011; Lang 2016); Palestinian literature seems to be characterized by the overwhelming presence of conflict as well, though not neglecting the issue of reconciliation (Abdel-Malek 2005).

Is it possible, though, to reverse such a paradigm and start thinking of these literatures as literatures of peaceful coexistence, at least to some extent?

This paper aims to explore an example of how intra-religious peaceful coexistence is portrayed in Arabic literature. It focuses on the case of Ġālib Halasā, a writer and literary critic who was born in Jordan in 1932 and died at Damascus in 1989. Halasā spent most of his life in exile from his home country due to political reasons: being a Marxist militant, at the beginning of the Fifties he was forced to leave Jordan – where the Communist party was outlawed in 1951 – and he never went back. Halasā spent around twenty years in Egypt, where he took part in the literary wave of the Sixties Generation. Ousted from Egypt for political reasons in 1976, he moved to Iraq and eventually to Syria, where he died of a heart attack in 1989.

Due to his troubled relationship with the Jordanian government, Halasā was included in the national literary canon only after his death. His inclusion in the canon started in the Nineties and perfectly fits the cultural policy of the Hashemite Kingdom also from the point of view of pluralism and peaceful coexistence, as this paper argues. Despite most of Halasā's novels short stories are also set in Egypt and many of them contain

references to the Jordanian childhood of the author. In particular, his 1989 novel *Sulṭāna* is a valuable depiction of Jordan in the first half of the twentieth century. Lying between a memoir and a historical essay, the first part of the novel is remindful of the style of Ǧamāl al-Ġayṭānī, one of the most prominent authors of the Sixties Generation in Egypt.

The topic of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the Jordan Rift Valley appears in *Sulṭāna* through short references to the topography of the village where the novel is set. The unnamed village – which is nonetheless a clear representation of Māʿīn, where the author was born and raised – is split into two quarters, one Christian and the other Muslim. On the top of the hill where the village stands, two monuments symbolically rise side by side, namely the shrine of ʿAlī, the founding father of the Islamic quarter, and the Greek Orthodox Church (Halasā 2008, pp. 12-13). Moreover, the Christian young protagonist of the novel was nursed by a Muslim woman, with whom he almost has a mother-son relationship.

Besides the topic of interreligious coexistence, which I developed elsewhere (Fischione 2020), intra-religious coexistence is also explored in *Sulṭāna*, as well as in Halasā's 1968 short story *Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḫarūn* (Wadīʿ, Saint Mīlāda and others). This paper focuses on how such a cohabitation is portrayed by the author, coupling a historical and a literary reading, in order to show some sides of peaceful coexistence in Jordan.

1. The "elastic nation": Peaceful coexistence in Jordan as a political strategy

Jordan is often described as an "elastic nation" (Massad, 2001, pp. 222-275), in which the borders between the Self and the Other fluctuate according to political necessity. Having become a shelter to many refugees coming from its neighboring countries torn by wars since the first Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948 and having been a multicultural and multireligious site since even before the Hashemite State was founded in 1921, Jordan displays a great internal diversity. Many cultural, ethnical, linguistic, and religious communities inhabit the country and contribute to the ongoing nation-building project patronized by the Hashemite rulers: Circassians, Gypsies, Armenians, Christians of different churches, Muslim, Bedouin tribes, Palestinian urban dwellers, and so on. Nonetheless, Jordan has chosen not to deal with such diversity in terms of minorities and majorities in the official discourse (Chatelard 2004, p. 21). The Hashemites have found more advantageous to speak about the so-called Great Jordanian Family instead: paternalistic rhetoric which nonetheless avoids feeding the dangerous mechanism of majority-minority dialectics.

The conceptualization of minorities in the Middle East has gone through a progressive transformation process during the last two centuries. Before the introduction of some administrative reforms known as *tanzimat*, which started conceiving the Ottoman empire as an Islamic political entity, the empire used to deal with its "minorities" in terms of *millets*, "a word indicating a non-Muslim community that had the right to a certain degree of communal autonomy […], in return for certain institutionalized disadvantages

(like special taxes)" (Robson 2016, p. 3). As scholars point out, before the *tanzimat* the Ottoman Empire used to deal with its many religious communities in a flexible way, leaving room for self-administration and political negotiation on a local level (Robson, 2016, p. 22). This is the reason why the historian Géraldine Chatelard, in her ground-breaking work about Christian tribes in Madaba, echoes Lucette Valensi's dynamic image of a wave to replace the static metaphor of the mosaic which is often used to describe the Middle Eastern religionscape (Chatelard 2004, pp. 23-24; Valensi 1986).

As Peter Sluglett summarises, "given the likely limitations on the capacity of a premodern empire to exert any kind of standardized authority over its far-flung provinces, the absence of a uniform mechanism for regulating the affairs of the non-Muslims does not seem particularly surprising. The reality seems to have been a series of local arrangements, which resulted in the creation of a degree of autonomy for the non-Muslims" (Sluglett 2016, p. 25).

With the Mandate system, however, the French and the British institutionalized the concepts of minority and majority by stiffening the Ottoman *millet* system, leading to the dramatic consequences we have been witnessing until today in the Middle Eastern region.

However, as highlighted by Chatelard (2004), it is impossible to find any episode of interconfessional confrontation between Christians and Muslims in Jordan, which can be explained by both demographic and ideological factors. Transjordanian Christians, in fact, amount to a small percentage on the overall Jordanian population[2] and they do not form a compact minority, belonging to several different Churches. Moreover, they consider themselves as Arab as their Muslim fellow citizens (Chatelard 2004, p. 20). Lastly, the situation of Jordan is quite different from that of other Middle Eastern countries: "One of the most interesting features of the management of local confessional communities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan resides in the relative freedom that such communities enjoy. If compared to the secular and centralizing legislation in force in Syria and Iraq, in fact, Jordan seems to be more liberal towards its minorities" (Chatelard 2004, p. 21)[3]. This results in a large and visible presence of Christian institutions: not only churches, but also schools and hospitals serving both Christians and Muslims.

This paper focuses on the case of the Jordanian writer Ġālib Halasā, and how the theme of coexistence between different souls of the Jordanian religionscape is developed in his short story *Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḫarūn* (Wadīʿ, Saint Mīlāda and others) and his novel *Sulṭāna* (Sulṭāna). Written in the Fifties and published in 1968, the short story can be considered as a preliminary draft of *Sulṭāna* (1989), which is unanimously acknowledged as Halasā's most ambitious and important work. *Wadīʿ* is a hypotext of *Sulṭāna*, which expands on the former for what the rural setting

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[2]   "Traditionally estimated between 6 (as officially stated by the monarchy) and 4 percent of the population, the Pew Report states that Christians in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan now make up 2.2 percent of the total population (30,000 Catholics; 20,000 Protestants; 90,000 Greek-Orthodox; less than 1,000 belonging to other Christian churches)"; (Maggiolini 2018, p. 37).

[3]   Translation from French here and elsewhere is mine.

of the novel is concerned. The two works here considered are all set in the Jordanian rural environment and portray the community life in Māʿīn, a village close to Madaba where Ġālib Halasā himself was born in 1932. Māʿīn is an ancient Christian site: in 1973 some valuable mosaics dating back to the Umayyad period were discovered in a church belonging to a monastic complex to the southwest of the village. The local population counts a considerable number of Christians, who traditionally inhabit the Jordanian Rift Valley and belong to a variety of denominations. Orthodox and Catholic, as well as Protestant Christians, are portrayed in these works, which document the theological and social tensions between different souls of Christianity, but also show how peaceful coexistence has been achieved in Jordan by both exploiting institutional tools refined through centuries (tribal negotiation, partial local autonomy from any centralised power etc.) and centering the public practice around the concept of "elastic nation".

2. Intra-religious coexistence in rural Jordan: Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḫarūn and Sulṭāna

The story plot of *Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḫarūn* revolves around the pilgrimage of some inhabitants of Māʿīn to a village close to Amman, where they meet Mīlāda, a girl who was supposedly visited by the Virgin Mary and blessed with the power to heal people from incurable diseases. The character of Mīlāda is introduced at the beginning of the story, when Wadīʿ, the young protagonist and an alter-ego of the author himself, reads out loud an article about her in the newspaper. Wadīʿ's audience is composed of a group of men among whom stand out the main authorities of the village, namely the young Catholic priest Father Ṣalībā and the old Orthodox priest Father Gregorius. Hearing that Mīlāda is an Orthodox, Father Ṣalībā triggers Father Gregorius with a provocative question: "How does one explain that the Virgin Mary appeared to an Orthodox girl?"[4] (Halasā 2002, p. 77). Father Gregorius would like to avoid any confrontation with Father Ṣalībā and urges Wadīʿ to continue his reading in order to prevent the contentious to go further. Father Ṣalībā, however, has no intention to give up and mocks his Orthodox counterpart by aping him: "Shame on you, Father! It is a shame to say that the Orthodox abandoned the Church of the Lord! We are the trunk and you are the branch. We Orthodox are the right path, the path of the Lord, and you are the ones who deviated from it" (Halasā 2002, p. 77). The old priest runs out of patience and replies: "Brother, I learnt these words in my father's house! I read them in the books!" (Halasā 2002, p. 77), appealing both to tradition and study to legitimize his opinions about religion. Father Gregorius feels a helpless bitterness when he thinks about his life spent in a sort of exile: "The saint Father stopped. He was feeling anger shaking him to the bones; anger of which he did not know the target, and which was about to make him lose his temper. He almost ended up invoking the Mother of God, who had disappeared for thousands of years just to come back and visit an Orthodox girl. He was about to say

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[4] Translation from Arabic here and elsewhere is mine.

it aloud, but the Lord always helps his pious servants at the very last moment and saves them from evil and scandal. Wadīʿ yelled: "Should I read or not?" […]. [Father Gregorius] started complaining about his life spent in a foreign country and wasted between people not appreciating his sacrifice, with a job gaining him just a little more than nothing…" (Halasā 2002, p. 77-78).

Such a vivid scene, albeit depicted with a certain amount of irony, opens a wider window onto the multi-denominational reality of Jordan.

Protestant and Catholic missionaries began to establish themselves in Transjordan at the end of the Nineteenth century. They soon entered into competition with the Greek Orthodox Church, to which the majority of Transjordanian Christians belonged at that time and which started suffering the higher financial and soft-power capabilities of the French. As highlighted by Géraldine Chatelard, clerics were constantly addressing polemics to their competitors: "the Latins used to blame the Orthodox for their religious backwardness; the Orthodox used to stigmatize the quasi-imperialism of the Roman Church; the Melkites were despised by the former due to their adherence to the Oriental liturgy, and by the latter due to their uniatism" (Chatelard 2004, p. 21).

Moreover, the Greek Orthodox clergy was considered ignorant and greedy by the Catholic clergy, which is also confirmed by some passages of Halasā's works. For instance, when Father Gregorius gets upset, he starts "pronouncing words in classical Arabic mixed up with Latin at an impressive speed" (Halasā 2002, p. 78). Another example of such a cliché of liturgy languages used by the local clergy without knowledge can be found in *Sulṭāna*, where the inhabitants of the village choose a young man named Ḫalīl to replace the old Orthodox priest. Ḫalīl – eventually "dethroned" by Ṣalība, who appears in *Sulṭāna* too, but this time as a young and intemperate Orthodox priest – is described as follows: "He was good at reading and had a fine handwriting. He and his old mother made a living with a small plot of land. He also gave private lessons to some children of the village and was known for his ability to draw portrays of anyone would request him to. In short, he had all the characteristics the villagers expected a man of religion to feature. He was compliant and naïf, he had a beautiful voice with which he used to sing church songs in Arabic and Greek (without knowing Greek, of course), and had learnt entire passages of the Gospels by heart" (Halasā 2008, p. 44).

Another issue opposing the Orthodox and Catholic clerics is marriage. The Catholics criticize Orthodox clerical marriage the not only for doctrinal reasons, but also because it diminishes the devotion and spirituality of the clerics themselves on the one hand and deprives them of the time to study on the other (Chatelard 2004, p. 86). Conversely, the Orthodox criticize the Catholics for being hypocritical, as the following passage of *Sulṭāna* shows well: "The young guys of the village used to spend their nights at the priest's house drinking bitter coffee. They used to tell a story about the priest. He had promised a woman to pay her a visit in the night because she had told him that her husband was away. As soon as the priest arrived, the woman asked him to take off his clothes and so he did. After a while, her husband knocked at the door, and she hid the priest and his clothes in the closet. The priest stayed trapped in the closet until morning,

when he heard the husband say that he had sold the closet and the buyer was on his way to pick it up. That is how the couple enjoyed mocking the priest" (Halasā 2008, p. 47). At hearing this story, Father Ṣalībā used to smile and say: "That is how the Catholic priest is […]. Catholics are like this" (Halasā 2008, p. 47).

Another conflicted relation reported by the story is the one between atheism on the one hand and religion on the other, which is grafted onto the broader conflict between reason and superstition. Seeing a group of villagers waiting in line for the bus to Amman in order to go and visit the young "saint" Mīlāda, doctor Mattà, the physician of the village, comes out of his house and yells at them: "I'll tell you: honestly, I do not like the behaviour of the Mother of God. She pops up out of the blue in a dark cave and scares a young girl. When the girl turns out to be gone nuts from terror, the archbishop comes up, kisses her hand and proclaims her a saint. Then, instead of taking her to an asylum, they drag her back to the cave to let the Virgin visit her again and frighten her […]. If the Virgin came to my home and introduced herself what would I do? Of course, I would go to Abu Abduh the butcher and ask him to prepare an opulent meal. I would give her the costliest presents for Mary Magdalene and the rest of her friends, and my warmest coat and a cough syrup for Jesus, who must be freezing up in the seventh heaven" (Halasā 2002, pp. 88-89).

Due to his patent contempt for the Virgin Mary, the doctor is said to be Protestant by one of the villagers standing in line, which is interesting because it puts blasphemy and the Protestant "heresy" on the same level. The doctor does not seem a religious person, indeed, since he is irreverent to both the Virgin Mary and Jesus. Nonetheless, in a society in which religion is a crucial trait of identity, he is perceived as belonging to the most profane Church known in the village, namely Protestantism. Both in *Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḫarūn* and *Sulṭāna*, in fact, protestants are described as those who threaten Marian devotion, a cornerstone of popular piety in Jordan and elsewhere, as the icons of the Virgin Mary studding Halasā's portrayals of his childhood in Māʿīn also testify. In *Wadīʿ*, a man named Ḫalīl tells the following story, confirming the suspicion with which both Orthodox and Catholic look at Protestants: "Once he went to Jerusalem to sell wheat and lentils. Buṭrus bin Samʿān hosted him at his place. On Sunday, Buṭrus asked him about his leg, and he answered: "Nor doctors neither medicines could cure it". Buṭrus said there was an American priest who was able to heal people from incurable diseases. Ḫalīl asked him who he was. When Buṭrus said he was a Protestant priest, Ḫalīl said: "I seek refuge in God! Should I go to a Protestant who says that the Virgin Mary is like any other woman, and that she slept with Joseph the Carpenter?!" (Halasā 2002, p. 79).

In *Sulṭāna*, the same motif is repeated in a slightly different fashion: "The fortunes of Father Ṣalībā improved when a group of American missionaries arrived in the village. Nobody knew anything about them, except a rumor claiming that they considered the Virgin Mary a woman just like any other. One of them was an American who spoke in Arabic with a strange accent. […] He began to say words that Father Ṣalībā imagined being referred to the fact that the Virgin Mary would be a woman like the others, to

which he traced the sign of the cross on the missionary's face, grabbed him by his shirt collar and told him to leave the village and never come back" (Halasā 2008, p. 44).

The Protestants are somehow felt as a common "enemy" by both the Orthodox and the Catholics. The reasons for such a hostility are both ideological and political: on the one hand, in fact, the Protestants threaten the popular piety by denying the virginity of Mary; on the other, they are perceived as supporters of Zionism due to their adherence to the rhetoric of the Promised Land contained in the Old Testament (Gandolfo 2008, p. 453). Their luminary position between religion and non-religion makes them a perfect scapegoat for both Orthodox and Catholics.

Conclusion

Despite such apparently strained relations, however, the borders between Churches in Jordan have been extremely porous and easily traversable since the missionaries started heading to the Holy Land, to the point that – as highlighted by Chatelard (2004, p. 90) – whole tribes could change their denomination more than once. Economic and tribal-political ties were more important than theological details. For example, in some cases it was convenient to become Catholic because it was a means to avoid the tithing due to the Orthodox Church. Financial issues were an actual problem, as showed by Halasā (2008, p. 49) in *Sulṭāna*, where the peasants refuse to pay their tax in kind to the Church (twelve and a half kilograms of wheat per family) in the aftermaths of the 1947 famine. As a Marxist, Ġālib Halasā could not ignore the issues of poverty and social justice, which constantly run under the surface of both the texts analyzed above.

The multi-confessional milieu depicted in the works considered here is part of a broader picture, namely that of the opposition between a rural and archaic world on the one hand, and an urban and progressive modernity on the other. The rural environment of the village is imbued with a deep-rooted religious feeling translating into both Christian popular devotion and attachment to ancient superstitions. The spatial divide between the countryside and the city intertwines with the religious sphere, providing the author with a tool for voicing his disquiet towards the social and economic issues afflicting his home country. This can be easily noticed in *Wadīʿ wa-al-qaddīsa Mīlāda wa-aḥarūn*. Despite the intra-religious skirmishes between different parts of the same village community, in fact, in the end all the differences are levelled by the common social condition of the peasants travelling to meet the young saint. When the group of villagers reaches Amman, carrying a panoply of typically rural presents for Mīlāda (such as live chickens and cooking fat), they are hosted by Ilyās – Wadīʿ's brother – and his family. By moving to the city, Ilyās emancipated himself from the mindset of the village and he cannot hide his contempt for the poor farmers who come to spend the night in his house. When asked about Mīlāda, "Ilyās answered that the saint was sent for sure to an asylum in Lebanon. If they had not yet, they should have done so as soon as possible" (Halasā 2002, p. 93). Besides pathologizing the behavior of the young saint just like doctor Mattà did, Ilyās eventually kicks the group out of his house calling them

"beggars" (*šaḥḥādīn*) (Halasā 2002, p. 100). The same despising attitude can be found in the character of the driver that drives the group back to the bus station after their visit to Mīlāda, who "was trying to start a conversation with the purpose of mocking them" (Halasā 2002, p. 122). The intra-religious differences, which seemed so important in the village, lose any meaning when the pilgrims go to Amman and realise they are only a group of peasants: "They were feeling like they had been fooled, in a way" (Halasā 2002, p. 122).

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