

Over recent years, Arabic popular culture has become a focal point of West Asian and North African studies. Most of the new research dealing with it concentrates on the 'popular' as opposed to an intellectual 'high' culture far from the harsh and hierarchically organized reality many Arabic-speaking societies face today. Popular cultural practices are thus seen as a rejection of the elite and a stance against those who have 'something to loose' within paralyzed and conservative communities. Albeit not denying the subversive political potential associated with these practices, this volume intends to take a more nuanced and broader perspective. Arabic popular culture might engage with emancipatory claims, but it might as easily follow the capitalist rulebook of global marketing. It might fight against oppressive authorities, yet it can equally become their symbol.

Approaches to Arabic Popular Culture therefore closely looks at the aesthetic implications of a topic ranging from Lebanese hip hop over Algerian pop novels to jihadi chants in the 'Islamic State' as well as from Egyptian mahraganāt music over sarcastic stories about hash dens and time travel in downtown Cairo to Saudi-Arabian YouTube-influencers. Thus, the theoretical scope widens and the reader is taken on a delightful journey to the unsettling pleasures of contemporary Arabic art and culture.

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Bamberger Orientstudien

hg. von Lale Behzadi, Patrick Franke, Geoffrey Haig,
Christoph Herzog, Lorenz Korn, Susanne Talabardon und
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The Culture of Laughter in Khayrī Shalabī's Novels

Cristina Dozio

Abstract

Since the novel is canonized as high culture, its relationship with Arabic popular culture is still understudied. Nevertheless, many novels are adapted into films, TV series and comics, while best-selling books blur the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow culture. An element of Egyptian culture that cuts across this divide is comedy, since *ʿadab sākhir* (satiric literature) is a best-selling genre and some novels resort to humour as a key stylistic feature. This paper aims at further investigating the interplay of literature and popular culture through humour. In particular, it examines how popular culture is employed to elicit literary humour and create a counter-narrative about history and society in two novels by Khayrī Shalabī (1938–2011), *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī* (1991) and *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (2000).

Shalabī engages with the culture of laughter in his literary representation of marginal characters and places, linguistic registers, the community of intellectuals he personally knew, and the transmission of *turāth* (cultural heritage). Firstly, he revives the stock character of the wise-fool to involve the audience in his satirical criticism of society shattering some stereotypes about Egyptianness. Secondly, he represents humour as a collective experience and act of subversive creation. Thus, applying Bakhtin's conception, the hash den and the street in the two novels become carnivalesque sites of resistance.

Keywords: humour, contemporary Egyptian literature, popular culture, *Shalabī*, identity, carnivalesque

We only talk about things that will lighten the mood: films we've seen recently, some interesting new music, tales of the wonders and oddities recited by taxi drivers, the jesters of the city. [...]
Ihab had with him the English translation of Khairy Shalaby's novel *The Lodging House*.

Ahmed Naji, *Using Life*
أحمد ناجي، *استخدام الحياة*¹

Popular Culture and Egyptian Fiction

Humour is a key element in Arabic popular culture which operates simultaneously on a highly local and on a cross-cultural level. Among the Arabs, Egyptians are known as *awlād al-nukta* (the sons of the joke) for their ability to crack jokes and laugh in the face of adversity. Some Egyptian cultural productions make fun of this talent, while suggesting that the collective experience of humour contributes to the construction of national identity. For instance, this ambivalent attitude is expressed by the protagonist of *Beer in the Snooker Club*, a novel written in English by the Egyptian Waguīh Ghālī (Wajīh Ghālī, 192?–1969):

'Why did you return, Ram?'

I lit another cigarette and stood by the window once more.

'You told me so many times you love Egyptians. I, too, Edna, but unconsciously, not like you. Egypt to me is so many different things. Playing snooker with Doromian and Varenian the Armenians, is Egypt to me. Sarcastic remarks are Egypt to me – not only the fellah and his plight. Riding the tram is Egypt. Do you know my friend Fawzi? He can never give an answer that isn't witty... and yet he isn't renowned for it. He's an ordinary Egyptian. Last week I was riding the tram with him when a man stepped on his foot. 'Excuse me,' said the man, 'for stepping on your foot.' – 'Not at all,' said Fawzi, 'I've been stepping on it myself for the last twenty-seven years'... How can I explain to you that Egypt to me is something unconscious, is nothing particularly political, or... or... oh, never mind,' I said.'²

In his journey from Cairo to London after the 1956 Suez Conflict, the main character challenges the fixity of Egyptian identity with his search for cosmopolitan agency, which includes cracking jokes.³ This novel invites to further investigation of the interplay of popular culture and Egyptian fiction through the lens of humour. In the expanding scholarship on

¹ Naji, *Using Life*, 122 and 143. Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 147 and 172.

² Ghālī, *Beer in the Snooker Club*, 190.

³ Starr, "Drinking, Gambling, and Making Merry," 271–85.

popular culture in the Middle East and North Africa,⁴ aesthetic innovations are discussed more in relation to cinema and music, while literature remains understudied. Nevertheless, literature contributes like other fields of popular culture to wider debates about language, legitimation, hybridity, memory, and ideology.

Firstly, literature interacts with other media for its mass dissemination. Traditionally, novels were serialized in the press and turned into films, while poems were transformed into lyrics for songs. Nowadays, this trend exploits all the new possibilities offered by media transitions (such as pan-Arab TV channels, promotion on the Internet, international literary prizes), and emerging genres such as the graphic novel. For instance, poetry enjoys multi-modal dissemination,⁵ while two recent successful Ramadan series (*musalsalāt*) were based respectively on *Dhāt* by the Egyptian Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm (b. 1937) and *Sāq al-bāmbū* by the Kuwaiti Sa'ūd al-San'ūsī (b. 1981).⁶ An episode of the afore-mentioned *Beer in the Snooker Club* was turned into a comic, written in Arabic, published on the leading magazine *TokTok*.⁷

Secondly, the divide between highbrow and lowbrow literature is becoming more blurred. The same reader, in fact, can read texts that enjoy different critical recognition, while the legitimation of a whole genre may change over time.⁸ In this respect, El Hamamsy and Soliman question the fixity in the representation of reading practices: "And the consumers of both types of culture are also expected to be intrinsically different. The assumption is that the same person cannot appreciate canonized literature and equally enjoy reading a comics book on the subway."⁹ Furthermore, Richard Jacquemond exemplifies the complexity of cultural

⁴ El Hamamsy and Soliman, eds., *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa*; Hammond, *Pop Culture in North Africa and the Middle East*; Sabry, ed., *Arab Cultural Studies*; Sabry, *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World*; Sabry and Ftouni, eds., *Arab Subcultures*; Valassopoulos, ed. *Arab Cultural Studies*.

⁵ Casini, "Le poesie della rivoluzione egiziana."

⁶ Ibrāhīm, *Dhāt*; Na'ūm and Abū Dhikrī, *Bint ismahā Dhāt*; al-San'ūsī, *Sāq al-bāmbū*; al-San'ūsī and al-Qaffās, *Sāq al-bāmbū*. For the adaptation of *Dhāt*, see Pepe, "Retour de Dhāt."

⁷ 'Andil, "Bīra," 5–10. For comics and caricatures, see: Guyer, *Oum Cartoon*.

⁸ Jacquemond, *Entre scribes et écrivains*; Snirr, *Modern Arabic Literature*.

⁹ El Hamamsy and Soliman, "Introduction: Popular Culture – A Site of Resistance," 1.

practices resisting dichotomy by focusing on the best-seller phenomenon in Egyptian literature at the beginning of the 2000s. He examines the changes in the book market (production), in which new publishers, authors, and venues appear; this market influences the choices of the expanding young audience (consumption), which looks for stories that mirror its own experience with a mixture of realism and social criticism. Jacquemond argues that these elements, consolidated by canonized novels, are now rearranged in realist fiction, detective stories, thrillers, and satirical literature (*adab sākhir*).¹⁰

Thirdly, everyday reality enters the realm of fiction with several references to global and local culture, ranging from cinema, music, sport, politics, digital communication, and mass consumption. Noting that such references become an archive of popular culture, Peter Konerding suggests examining Pop Literature as a new trend in Arabic fiction, to be compared with this category in the English and German literary tradition.¹¹

Humour as Creative Resistance

While satirical literature remains a best-selling genre, some Egyptian post-modern novels interact with popular culture to render the polyphony of contemporary culture, often with comic or satiric effects. In doing so, these works exploit the long tradition of humour in Arabic culture, which comprises jokes, proverbs, anecdotes, ballads, dramatic sketches, poems, and cartoons.¹² In modern and contemporary Arabic literature, some comic tropes and characters have circulated in written texts positioned in a *continuum* between high and low culture, elite and non-elite consumption, raising some issues about their aesthetic value.

For instance, the satirical press has received scholarly attention only recently. In her seminal study, Marilyn Booth examines the early mature production of Bayram al-Tūnisī (1893–1961), mainly written in *‘āmmīya* and published in magazines.¹³ Booth links the author's aesthetic

innovations in *zajal* poetry, dramatic sketches and neo-*maqāma* to his political and cultural mission, in the context of insurgent nationalism. According to Ziad Fahmy, the satirical press at the turn of the Nineteenth century was one of the mass media that disseminated a collective experience of the nation among the ordinary Egyptians.¹⁴ Thus, the satirical press was a venue for creative resistance against cultural and political hegemony. Its success was granted by its wide circulation among the elite and non-elite alike, thanks to a humorous language that was immediately understandable and resonant with everyday preoccupations.

These features of humour were activated in another moment of political upheaval, i.e. the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. The collective culture of laughter created an egalitarian space for voicing the people's claims and temporarily breaking the official discourse. El Hamamsy and Soliman note that the revolution has led to a massive production of popular culture with some innovations such as the close connection between art and the street, the incorporation of the people's feelings as the events unfold, new forms of dissemination through the media, the contribution of youth culture, and the 'activist' participatory attitude.¹⁵ These peculiarities are well-exemplified by humour circulating in that period. In this respect, Salem and Taira illustrate the challenges of translating revolutionary humour, which relies on immediacy and shared cultural references, while Damir-Geilsdorf and Milich cover different forms of political humour in the Arab countries as creative resistance.¹⁶

The complexity of humour makes it an interesting case for the study of popular culture.¹⁷ It is also a prominent stylistic feature in some Arabic novels, from the great masters of satire such as the Palestinian Imīl Ḥabībī (1922–1996), the Syrian Zakariyā Tāmir (b. 1931) and the Egyptian Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm, to best-selling novels and what is labelled para-literature. When humour enters the realm of fiction, it exploits the heritage of both high and popular culture. For the purpose of this study, popular culture is the set of practices, beliefs and objects with a broadly shared

¹⁰ Jacquemond, "The Yacoubian Building." Among these genres, Jacquemond has followed the evolution of satirical literature after the 2011 Egyptian revolution: cf. Jacquemond, "Satiric literature."

¹¹ Konerding, "Adab al-būb."

¹² Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*; Mahfouz, *Cartoons, Satire, and Humour*.

¹³ Booth, *Bayram al-Tunisi's Egypt*.

¹⁴ Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*.

¹⁵ El Hamamsy and Soliman, "Introduction: Popular Culture – A Site of Resistance," 13.

¹⁶ Damir-Geilsdorf and Stephan Milich, eds., *Creative Resistance*; Salem and Taira, "al-Thawra al-daHika."

¹⁷ El-Ariss, "Teaching humor;" Stewart, "Humor."

meaning in a community thanks to their mass dissemination. Characterized by its immediacy and connection to everyday life, it is enjoyed and disseminated by the elite and non-elite alike. Its complex relation with cultural institutions makes it oscillate between recognition and resistance. This paper combines literary criticism and the study of popular culture in examining the role of humour in the contemporary Egyptian novel. In particular, it investigates how Egyptian fiction recreates the collective culture of laughter to elicit humour: which aspects of popular culture are selected? Which language is used? Does humour shape alternative communities, voicing resistance? To answer these questions, the analysis focuses on two novels by Khayrī Shalabī (1938–2011) that exploit several comic tropes.

Khayrī Shalabī: an Archive of Popular Culture

Khayrī Shalabī was born in a village in the Egyptian Delta. In his youth, he dropped formal education and did manual jobs, while entering the literary circles in Damanhūr and Alexandria. When he moved to Cairo, he started working as a journalist and later was employed by national cultural institutions.¹⁸ In his prolific career, Shalabī has cultivated his deep interest for popular culture in many ways. Firstly, as a journalist, he got to know many intellectuals and professionals of the media industry. In the Sixties, he attended the Academy for Scriptwriters, wrote some radio dramas, worked for *Majallat al-masrah* (Theatre Weekly) and *Majallat al-idhā'a wa-l-talfizyūn* (Radio and Television Weekly). Secondly, his employment in public institutions allowed him to conduct research in drama and poetry. He was editor-in-chief of *Majallat al-shi'r* (Poetry Review) and the book series *Maktabat al-dirāsāt al-sha'bīya* (Library of Popular Studies), attached to the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. These initiatives were part of the institutional interest in folklore promoted by Nasserist cultural policies; at the same time, they stimulated a number of writers in archiving other aspects of popular culture in their literary creations.

In fact, Shalabī set his novels in marginal communities in the countryside and the city, shaping unconventional characters from the lower strata of

society.¹⁹ The author was also passionate about *Alf layla wa-layla* (Arabian Nights) and folk epics (*al-sīra*), two popular genres based on storytelling; this influenced his compositional style, which does not follow the straight novelistic order and often reproduces orality. In particular, critics agree that his trilogy *Thulāthiyyat al-amālī* (1990–1995, The Trilogy of Hopes) revives the style of folk epics. This rediscovery of the popular heritage and the use of various linguistic registers exemplify one trend of experimentation within the Generation of the Sixties, to which Shalabī chronologically belongs. However, he followed his own path in his writings and lifestyle: he frequented official intellectual circles as well as popular cafés and marginal neighbourhoods; he also chose the Monumental Cemetery of Cairo as his writing hub. Over his career, his novels were adapted into films and TV series, but his full recognition arrived in the 2000s when his novel *Wikālat 'Aṭīya* (1991; The Lodging House, 2006) won the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature* in 2003, paving the way to the *Egyptian State Merit Award* for the same novel in 2004. English and French translations of his novels followed. His latest work *Istāsiyya* (2010, Ecstasy) was longlisted for the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* in 2011.

The two novels chosen for this study are constructed around a series of comic episodes and include meta-narrative reflections about humour. The first one is *Rihlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī* (1991), translated into English as *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets* (2010).²⁰ It follows the time-travels of the first-person narrator and protagonist, Ibn Shalabī, who travels back and forth between the present (1979) and the past. Without following a chronological order, he witnesses significant events under the Fatimid (969–1171), Ayyubid (1171–1260) and Mamluk (1250–1517) rule. He also visualizes the evolution of Cairene monuments over time, since he remains fixed in the historical city centre (*al-Qāhira al-mu'izzīya*).²¹

Humour is elicited by the frame narrative, which encapsulates each journey in a mechanism of repetition and variation. Furthermore, the narrative device of time-travelling generates temporal incongruities and

¹⁸ Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman Ägyptens*, 495–99.

¹⁹ 'Uṣfūr, *Zaman al-riwāya*, 309–18; al-Fāris, *al-Ru'yā al-ibdā'iya*; Mehrez, "Kitābat al-qariyya."

²⁰ Shalabī, *Rihlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī*; Shalaby, *Time-Travels*.

²¹ Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman Ägyptens*; Bushnaq, "Reise im Zeitraum."

hilarious misunderstandings. Michael Cooperson notes that the fictional device of time-travelling, found both in canonized and popular writings both in the Western and Arabic traditions, complicates the representation of history.²² Like previous travelogues (*al-riḥla*), Ibn Shalabī's journeys allow an all-encompassing critique of society, highlighting the pitfalls of both historical periods. Moreover, the time-traveller interacts with history in a playful way, meeting his sources, debasing and popularizing them. Another central comic element is the rogue-like nature of the protagonist, who takes on different identities and manages to survive thanks to his ruses.

The depiction of Egyptian society through eccentric characters is enriched by the second novel examined here, *Ṣāliḥ Hēša* (2000), translated into English as *The Hashish Waiter* (2011).²³ It follows a group of aspiring intellectuals and friends who regularly meet at a hash den (*ghurza*) in a run-down neighbourhood near Downtown (*Wasaṭ al-balad*). At the hash den they smoke, talk about their projects, discuss serious political as well as cultural issues, and laugh. The relaxed atmosphere is provided by the hashish waiter Ṣāliḥ, who is a repository of popular wisdom and street dialect; when he reaches a status of rowdiness (*hēša*) through alcohol, he harshly criticizes society with his puns. All the members of the clique try to emulate Ṣāliḥ, reproducing his way of thinking and talking. In their last meeting, they watch the TV coverage of President's Sadat visit to Jerusalem (1977). Because of his vibrant protest, Ṣāliḥ is taken away by the police and later found dead. The members of the group are scattered and the police cracks down on the hash dens.

As regards humour, *Ṣāliḥ Hēša* revives the anecdotic tradition about intoxication induced by wine or drugs, which may lead to a euphoric mood. The link between hashish and humour, well-established in classical and Mamluk literature,²⁴ is still alive in Egyptian popular culture. The novel recreates this cultural practice and its containment by government institutions by focusing on the collective experience of humour. Frédéric Lagrange remarks that Shalabī elaborates on various aspects of marginality

²² Cooperson, "Remembering the Future;" Cooperson, "Safar."

²³ Shalabī, *Ṣāliḥ Hēša*; Shalaby, *Hashish Waiter*.

²⁴ Marino, "Raconter l'ivresse."

(location, characters, language) to capture the essence of Egyptian life, whereas Mara Naaman argues that the author inscribes spatially the group's negotiation for an alternative access to modernity, especially in comparison with established intellectuals.²⁵

Khayrī Shalabī was an archive of popular culture, respected by his peers for his wit and wisdom. Reflecting this attitude, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī* and *Ṣāliḥ Hēša* are full of references to Egyptian popular culture to elicit humour. The first strategy, illustrated in the next session, is reviving stock characters to challenge the authenticity (*aṣāla*) of Egyptian identity; the second strategy is portraying the collective experience of humour as a site of creative resistance.

Stock Characters and Their Double

Both novels revive the stock character of the wise-fool who speaks the truth in face of power, without fear of being punished thanks to his ambivalent nature. In Arabic folklore, this character is epitomized by the trickster Juḥā.²⁶ In *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī*, Ibn Shalabī shows his double nature when he meets the rulers, contemporary writers and classical historians, such as al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 1469/70), all of whom travel in time as well. Besides meeting popular icons of literature, journalism, and television,²⁷ the narrator popularizes classical historians by treating them as friends and mocking their flowery prose with colloquial idiomatic expressions and wordplay, as in the following passage:

وجدت بين الجموع كل أصدقائي الكبار من أمثال ابن عبد الحكم وابن عبد البر وابن عبد الظاهر وابن تغري بردي وابن إياس وابن الفرطوس وابن المركوب وابن المضروب.²⁸

There I spotted all my important friends: Ibn Abdel Hakam, Ibn Abdel Barr, Ibn Abdel Zahir, Ibn Taghrībirdī, Ibn Iyas, Ibn So-and-So, Ibn Whoever, and Ibn What's-His-Face[.]²⁹

²⁵ Lagrange, "Le marginal comme modèle national;" Naaman, *Urban Space*, 71–104.

²⁶ Corrao, *Giufà: il furbo, lo sciocco, il saggio*.

²⁷ Among others, he mentions Najīb Maḥfūz for his uproarious laughter.

²⁸ Shalabī, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī*, 86. *Ibn al-farṭūs* is an insult deriving from the word meaning 'to sow,' *ibn al-markūb* means 'you son of an old boot' and *ibn al-maḍrūb* refers to a scoundrel.

²⁹ Shalaby, *Time-Travels*, 76.

This direct approach to the historical sources turns history into something familiar, a mirror to understand contemporary life. In fact, after reporting official historical events, he relates them to shared knowledge about everyday life in Egypt including traffic, poverty, corruption, overpopulation, and political oppression, as in the following example:

هو طريق طويل طول الزمن الأبدى، كغيره من بقية الطرق المصرية مليء بالحفر والمطبات والآبار والمجاري، فضلاً عن التراب والروث وما أشبه، حتى وأنت داخل القصور المعززة الزاهرة حيث الأرض مفروشة بسجاد أخضر من حشائش ونبات نادر تستحيل هذه الجنة المزهرة في طريق الزمن أو زمن الطريق طريقاً مصرياً فضلاً - ولا فخر - بكل الحفر.³⁰

The road was as long as eternity, and it was filled – like all Egyptian roads – with potholes, bumps, manholes, and sewers, not to mention dust, animal droppings, and the like. Even on your way to the luminous places of Mu'izz, where the ground is covered with a verdant carpet of grass and rare plant species, the flower gardens along the path of time (or times past) tend to transform themselves – not that it's anything to boast about – into an Egyptian roadway full of holes.³¹

In his anachronistic comparisons, Ibn Shalabī refers also to contemporary consumption culture:

إذا بالأرض تترجرج كأنني أقف فوق السلم الكهربائي في محل عمر أفندي في القرن الرابع عشر الهجري،³²

But then the earth began to shake like the escalator at the Omar Effendi department store of the fourteenth century after the hijra.³³

In this familiar context, Ibn Shalabī reveals his duplicity: on the one hand, he is a journalist, a writer who instructs his public and a social observer; on the other hand, he is the representative of the ordinary Egyptians, a naïve participant, whose weapon of last resort is entertainment. The protagonist's attempt to identify with the ordinary people is proved by the extension of his name to all the Egyptians, collectively called *banū Shalabī* (Sons of Shalaby). Since belonging to a group allows a certain degree of self-mockery, the narrator makes fun of himself and the stereotypes attached to the genuine Egyptian (*al-miṣrī al-aṣlī* or *ibn al-balad*). He mocks

³⁰ Shalabī, *Riḥlāt al-turshagī al-ḥalwagī*, 30.

³¹ Shalaby, *Time-Travels*, 21.

³² Shalabī, *Riḥlāt al-turshagī al-ḥalwagī*, 212.

³³ Shalaby, *Time-Travels*, 21.

their patience tending to passivity, their meddling in one's affairs and their opportunism. Among the various flaws and virtues of Egyptians, Ibn Shalabi makes fun of the social role of comedy when dealing with the authorities:

البكاء ساعة الضحك..

قدر مصري أصيل

حقاً أن دمة المصري قريبة لا شك في هذا، سريعاً ما تهطل الدموع من عينيه خاصة في لحظات الفراق حتى ولو كان المفارق شخصاً بالغ السوء والإنحلال كالسلطان المرح أحمد بن قلاوون، كنت في الواقع أريد أن أوعده قائلاً: 'في ستين داهية ربنا لا يردك ولا يرزأ الديار المصرية بأمثالك مرة أخرى، لكنني بدلاً من ذلك عانقته والأدهى من ذلك بكيت! هل بكيت من ألم الفراق حقاً؟ أم بكيت بغريزة النفاق التي تأصلت فينا حتى النخاع نحن بني شلبي المساكين المعدمين؟ واقع الأمر أننا معشر الشلبية من المصريين نضحك ونرسل النكات اللاهية ونحن تحت وطأة الظلم، ونبكي حين يندحر هذا الظلم، فكأنما حبنا للعشرة والمودة [أقوى] من حبنا للإنتقام، يقول المثل الذي أرسله أجدا دنا الخانعون: 'أصبر على الجار السيء فلربما تجيء مصيبة تمسحه أو يتزاح هو من تلقاء نفسه'. وقد تكفل الواقع المصري التاريخي بتطبيق هذا المثل في الديار المصرية تطبيقاً حرفياً لا يخيب ولا يخطئ على مدى الأزمان.³⁴

Crying When It's Time to Laugh: A Genuine Egyptian Talent

There's no doubt about it: Egyptians weep easily. When saying goodbye, especially, they'll cry a river, even when the person leaving is a debauched louse like the merry Sultan Ahmad ibn Qalawun. What I had really wanted to say to him by way of farewell was, 'Good riddance, and may God never bring you this way again, or debase the Land of Egypt with anyone like you!' Instead of saying that, though, I embraced him; and even worse, I cried. Was I really sad to see him go? Or was it the instinct for flattery, so deeply ingrained in the poor and miserable Sons of Shalaby? The fact of the matter is that we Sons of Shalaby of the Egyptian branch laugh and distract ourselves with jokes even as the boot-heels of our oppressors grind us down. Then, when the bad times are over, we weep, as if our love for good company were stronger than the need for revenge. Our servile ancestors used to say, 'Put up with a bad neighbor and wait for some calamity to carry him off, or for him to leave on his own.' Throughout the ages, the historical reality of life here has done its best to apply this dictum as literally and unfailingly as possible.³⁵

This passage describes humour as a safety-valve to endure oppression, while mildly criticising the political passivity of Egyptians. In a novel based on the satirical criticism of society, the narrator cannot avoid

³⁴ Shalabī, *Riḥlāt al-turshagī al-ḥalwagī*, 205.

³⁵ Shalaby, *Time-Travels*, 188.

tackling a central element in the construction of Egyptian identity such as humour. As in the previous examples, he resorts to a shared knowledge about what is considered authentically Egyptian in popular culture, often crystallized by the official discourse.

Similarly, an episode of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* reveals the circulation of humour across cultural productions. In the novel, the members of the clique are fond of theatre and cinema; one of them is an aspiring actor who becomes a TV star at the end of the story.³⁶ As mentioned above, they construct an alternative intellectual community, whose central reference is popular culture as embodied by the hashish waiter *Ṣāliḥ*. The first-person narrator, who is a member of the clique, notes that they all imitate *Ṣāliḥ*, gradually tending toward an artificial imitation. Then a female character, *Ḥayāh*, goes to the theatre to watch *Madrasat al-mushāghibīn* (*The School for Troublemakers*),³⁷ a successful play which featured many comedy stars. She notices that also professional comedians appropriate popular culture, especially the stock character of the simple-minded:

تجولن في الكواليس حيث سلمن على عادل إمام وسعيد صالح ويونس شلبي وأحمد زكي وسهير البابلي وحسن مصطفى وهادي الجيار. وأهم شيء خرجت به حياة البري من هذه السهرة الفكاهية الضاحكة - بعد الترويح عن داليا وأمها - هو أنها اكتشفت لأول مرة شيئاً غريباً جداً لم تكن تلحظه من قبل هو أن سعيد صالح وعادل إمام بالذات فيهما لطشة سريعة لكنها واضحة من شخصية صالح هيصة التي سرها أن تعرفت عليها جيداً. قمر المحروقي إذن ليس هو الوحيد المتأثر بصالح هيصة.. هي في الواقع لا تدري إن كان صالح هيصة قد أصبح تياراً جديداً كاسحاً يؤثر في جيل بأكمله أم أن المتأثرين به هم الذين شكلوا ما يمكن أن يكون تياراً [لا] سيما وأن جميع ممثلي الكوميديا على إطلاقهم في بلادنا يشتغلون على شخصية العبيط أو المستعيط أو الذي ييسوق العبيط على الهباله لكيلا يلتزم بأي قانون؛ إنهم يتكلمون مثل صالح هيصة يرددون بعض طرائفه يفكرون بطريقته على المسرح وإنها لتأكد أنهم قد حششوا عند صالح هيصة غير أنهم كالعادة لم يأخذوا منه إلا القناع والمفردات والخرقاء يضعونها في سياقات من المفترض أنها جادة فتحدث المفارقات الزائفة. أما صالح هيصة نفسه فإنه في نظرها شيء ثمين من زاوية ما..³⁸

³⁶ This character is called Zaki Hāmid to recall the famous actor Aḥmad Zaki.

³⁷ *Madrasat al-mushāghibīn* (1973) was written by 'Alī Sālim, produced by Samīr Khafājī (b. 1930), and performed by the Troupe Artists United (*firqat al-fannānīn al-muttaḥidīn*). It starred 'Adīl Imām (b. 1940), Sa'īd Ṣāliḥ (1938–2014), and Aḥmad Zaki (1949–2005).

³⁸ Shalabī, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, 207–8.

They strolled around backstage, saying hello to Adel Imam, Saeed Saleh, Younis Shalaby, Ahmad Zaki, Suhair al-Babili, Hassan Mustafa, and Hadi al-Gayyar. The most important thing about that fun, uproarious evening for Hayat – besides, of course, showing Dalia and her mother a good time – was that she discovered something very peculiar, something she'd never noticed before: Saeed Salih and Adel Imam – in particular – had a certain air about them, which, granted, was only fleeting, but was clearly modelled on Rowdy Salih, whom she was pleased to have got to know very well. So, it wasn't only Qamar al-Mahruqi who'd been influenced by Rowdy Salih's personality. As a matter of fact, she simply couldn't tell whether it was Rowdy Salih himself who was this new, widespread, highly influential trend that had an entire generation in its throes or whether it was the people he'd influenced who'd gone out and created this trend, especially as every single comedian in the country played the part of the idiot, or the fool, or the guy who acts an idiotic fool so that he can get out of following any rules. They talked like Rowdy Salih, repeated some of his funny expressions, they thought like him when they were up on stage. There was no doubting that they'd all gone and smoked hash at Rowdy Salih's, but all they'd taken from him was an attitude and some cutting remarks, which they dropped into serious contexts to cause hilarious dissonances, but to Hayat, Rowdy Salih the man was himself a great deal more valuable than that when looked at from a certain angle.³⁹

In the last part of this passage, *Ḥayāh* defines humour as incongruity, when “funny expressions” and “cutting remarks” are “dropped into serious contexts.” Her overall opinion about professional comedy is not negative, since it absorbs popular culture to encourage the audience's identification; only when it silences its original sources, it becomes a farce. Looking at the interplay of art and society, this episode exemplifies the dissemination of humour in various forms of art, including the novel itself, whose protagonist *Ṣāliḥ* embodies popular culture's creativity and immediate resonance.

The Hash Den and the Street: Sites of Creative Resistance⁴⁰

Another feature of popular culture is its collective process of production. Producers are often anonymous and the evolution of cultural practices and objects is not always recorded. In this respect, the members of the clique in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* enjoy humour together: each of them contributes to crafting jokes, feeling that hashish blurs the barriers of class, age, and religion.

³⁹ Shalaby, *Hashish Waiter*, 186.

⁴⁰ For a full discussion of humour generating strategies in Shalabi's novels, see Dozio, *Laugh like an Egyptian. Humour in the Contemporary Egyptian Novel*.

In the following episode, the group composes a poem for Šālīḥ. The vernacular poet al-Jamal improvises the first three lines, then Ibrāhīm adds the fourth one, Qamar suggests a variation which is rejected, and Muṣṭafā adds the final line:

طرقع الجمل بأصبعيه في غبطة:
 _ 'جاتني قصيدة جديدة! صالح هيصة دخل التاريخ يجري! راكب حصان من غير لجام ولا سرج!
 بيمد إيديه يزغد المبسوطين في البرج...'
 أضاف إبراهيم القماش:
 _ 'ويخطف منهم الدُرج'
 ضحكنا. قال قمر:
 _ 'الخرج أحسن'
 قال زكي حامد:
 _ 'لا! الدرج أنسب! وأشعر! رمز للفلوس المنهوبة!'
 أضاف مصطفى لمعي بمرح مصطنع صوته مشروخ:
 _ '.. ويخطف منهم الدُرج! ويوزع اللي فيه ع العُرج!'
 ضحكنا بقهقهة غوغائية.⁴¹

Al-Gamal snapped his fingers excitedly:

'I've got a new poem:

Rowdy Salih went charging into history

On a horse without reins or saddle

He prods the joyful people in the castle.'

Ibrahim al-Qammah added, 'And their cash drawers he swindles.' We laughed.

'Their 'saddlebags' would be better,' said Qamar.

'No, 'cash drawers' is more on the mark' said Zaki Hamid. 'More poetic. It's a symbol of ill-gotten gains.'

With faked glee, in a cracking voice, Mustafa Lami added,

'And their cash drawers he swindles,

handing out what's in them to the disabled.'

We giggled uproariously[.]⁴²

The poem praises Šālīḥ for fighting injustice by comparing him to a folk hero or knight who steals from the rich and gives the poor. Arabic poetry has a long tradition of invective, both in *fuṣṣḥā* and *'āmmīya*, against the excesses of the rulers; this poem achieves this effect through its short length, assonance and fast rhythm. The use of *'āmmīya* in this

⁴¹ Shalabī, *Šālīḥ Hēsa*, 198–99.

⁴² Shalabī, *Hashish Waiter*, 177.

composition reflects the preference for this linguistic variety in modern satirical poems and songs, but the author also refers to the broader development of *'āmmīya* poetry in Egyptian literature since the late 1950s. This poetic trend revived the heritage of poetry written in the colloquial by filling it with modern concerns about the life of ordinary people and socio-political issues.⁴³ Its main representatives (Šalāḥ Jāhīn, Sayyid Hījāb, Fu'ād Qā'ūd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī) were known both for their nationalist poems and for their criticism, expressed with touching or satirical images. Shalabī, who studied this current in his poetry review, expressed his appreciation in other passages of this novel.

The poem's intertextuality allows the clique to criticize the political scenario of the Seventies in an oblique creative way. Their collective creation blurs the boundaries between performers and spectators, while the hashish waiter Šālīḥ is crowned as the king. In his motto, Šālīḥ defines himself as the king of the rundown (*malik al-kaḥyānīn*).⁴⁴ These features make the hash den a site of the carnivalesque, defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as the carnivalization that takes place in normal life and literary texts. Bakhtin argues that the carnival culture allows a "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers"⁴⁵, and has a central moment in the crowning of the carnival king who may be a slave or a jester.

In other passages of the novel, the first-person narrator describes the hash den as a stage in which performers and spectators overlap. This performance sheds light on Šālīḥ, who is otherwise ignored by the official institutions (for example, he does not have an ID); at the same time, it provides the crew with popular wisdom and wit used to legitimate themselves as counter-intellectuals:

حينما صرنا هكذا بدأ الحضور الحقيقي لصالح هيصة؛ ليس فحسب لأننا شغلنا به جميعاً وبات سلوتنا وموضوع حديثنا وموضوع تندرنا مثار حكاياتنا؛ وإنما لأنه - إلى جانب كونه كفوًّا لذلك - فيه من كل واحد منا شيء بل أشياء؛ [...] كل تصرفاته وأقواله وأفعاله التي نضحك منها ونعتبرها ضرباً من الجنون

⁴³ Radwan, *Egyptian Colloquial Poetry*.

⁴⁴ Shalabī, *Šālīḥ Hēsa*, 40, 111, 271; Shalaby, *Hashish Waiter*, 37, 98, 243.

⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 15.

المطلق سرعان ما نكتشف بعد برهة أننا ننشئ بها لأنها بعض ما نتمنى أن نفعله أو نقوله. أيا ما كان الأمر فقد أصبحنا مولعين بترديد مآثوراته باعتبارها من درر التراث الحي.⁴⁶

[A]fter we got to be like that, that was when Rowdy Salih really came on to the scene. It wasn't simply because we'd started fixating on him, because he'd become our amusement, our topic of conversation, the star of our jokes and stories; rather it was because - in addition to being all that - he also possessed something of each of us, more than just one thing. [...] Everything he did and said made us laugh because we thought it was a slice of utter insanity, but we soon realized that it invigorated us; it was everything we wished we could do or say. We obsessively repeated the things he said no matter what they were and claimed them as treasures of a living heritage.⁴⁷

Another carnivalesque site in Shalabī's novels is the street in *Rihlāt al-turshagī al-halwagī*. The protagonist moves back and forth between two sites of political power, i.e. the Citadel where the Mamluk sultans rule and the Storehouse of Banners (*khizānat al-bunūd*) where the prisoners of a previous war are detained and build a state within the state. When the two authorities clash, the underprivileged Cairene population exploits the chaos to invade the streets pillaging the buildings. As carnival unites the opposing poles of life/death and above/below, Shalabī's depiction of the street combines destruction with vital creativity thanks to humour. In the last chapter, the wine stored in the Storehouse invades the streets, creating an upside-down world.⁴⁸

ونظرت فرأيت رجالاً يخرجون من الخزانة يحملون جثثاً عديدة مجندلة أو مكسورة، ويحملون براميل من الخمر يملأونها حتى غدت شوارع المنطقة أبحراً صغيرة عميقة من الخمر. ورغم أنها اختلطت بالتراب بالدماء بروث الأقدام إلا أن كثيراً من المتلصصين صبياناً وشباناً وشيوخاً كانوا يحضرون بالأواني المنزلية يملؤونها من أبحر الخمر.. حتى هذا الغناء له من يشربه ويجد فيه المتعة!..

[...] كأننا في القاهرة القرن الخامس عشر الهجري حيث تتحول الشوارع إلى أبحر تسبح فيها الجرائم الإنسانية بفعل قليل من المطر أو انفجار ما سورة من موا سير المجاري كانت أبحر الخمر تمنع الخلائق من السير، ومع ذلك يتسم الحرافيش بمختلف أزيائهم وهم يشمرون ثيابهم ويفعلون حركات عجز عن فعلها البهلوانات لكي يخترعوا لأنفسهم طرقاً تجنبهم البلل والأحوال، برغم ذلك يلقون النكات

⁴⁶ Shalabī, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, 33–4.

⁴⁷ Shalaby, *Hashish Waiter*, 30–1.

⁴⁸ Another example of the carnivalesque is the episode in which the Chief Judge is attacked with kitchen tools on the street near the mosque (Shalaby, *Time-Travels*, 161–62).

الحارقة يسخرون بها من أنفسهم ومن قدرهم ومن كل شيء في الوجود!.. قال أحدهم أن [sic] الأرض قد سكرت من أبحر الخمر.. وقال آخر أنها لم تعد تحس بوقع خطي الأعداء.. وقال ثالث أن ساعة الحظ سوف تطول بها إلى فجر بعيد يجيء ولا يجيء.. فقال رابع أنه - الفجر - وقد جاء منذ شرعنا في هدم خزانة البنود وطرد الخمر منها. وقال خامس أن كلام صاحبه صحيح وأنها لا نرى الفجر الذي رصدته أجهزة الحكومة.. فقال سادس أننا لا نرى الفجر لأنه يلبس زي الليل البهيم.. فقال سابع من آخر الشارع: الليل بهيم هو الآخر؟ ظننت أننا وجدنا ننتمي إلى قطيع البهائم.. فقال واحد تمكن من صعود ربوة: بهيم يعني من فرط السوادة صار مليئاً بالأسرار المبهمة.. فرد عليه آخر من شباك: أفهمت إذن يا بهيم؟.. وهكذا تضيع المأساة وتفتت في القلوب المصرية كأنها يا بدر لا رحنا ولا جينا..⁴⁹

I saw men emerging from the storehouse carrying limp and battered corpses, as well as casks of wine. They poured the wine out, flooding the streets in all directions. The wine was mixed with dirt, blood, animal droppings, but the nasty mixture had its takers: men of all ages were coming out with pots and pans and covertly scooping up what they could. [...]

As in my Cairo of the fifteenth century A.H., when a little rain or a burst sewer pipe can turn the streets into a sea for human microorganisms to swim through, the torrent of wine made it impossible for the people to walk. Even so, the harafish in all their motley dress were smiling as they rolled up their pants and performed acrobatically impossible tricks to get around the puddles and the mud, all the while making fun of themselves, mocking their lot, and jeering at everything in existence. The earth was feeling no pain, said one. It didn't even mind being stepped on, said another. 'The fun should last until dawn,' said a third, 'and that's a long way off. It might not come at all!'

'It's already here,' said a fourth. 'It started when we began knocking down the storehouse and pouring out the wine.'

'True,' said a fifth, 'but we don't recognize dawn as observed by the government.'

'We don't recognize it because it's cracked,' said another.

'So the dawn's cracked too?' called another from the end of the street. 'I thought we were the only ones who were cracked.'

'Wise-cracked, maybe,' said another from atop a little hill he had managed to reach.

'Or just wiseass,' retorted another through an open window.

Thus did the Egyptians chew up the tragedy and spit it out as if nothing had happened.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Shalabī, *Rihlāt al-turshagī al-halwagī*, 261–62.

⁵⁰ Shalaby, *Time-Travels*, 241–42.

Firstly, the sea of wine breaks the religious prohibition of not drinking alcohol and the reference to the bodily fluids ("dirt, blood, animal droppings") reinforces the grotesque effect. Secondly, the narrator compares the absurd circumstances with an ordinary situation in his times, stressing the familiar element that encourages laughter. Thirdly, *al-ḥarāfish*, a category broadly corresponding to the riffraff, have no limits in their humour. This corresponds to Bakhtin's conception of laughter, which "is directed not at one part only, but at the whole. One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state."⁵¹ Finally, the performers/spectators collectively craft a joke about the possibility of fooling the government all night long until dawn. Told in *ʿammīya*, the joke revolves around the double meaning of *bahīm* as 'livestock' and 'dark colour,' but the English translator has recreated its effect playing with the words 'cracked' and 'wise.' This scene ends, once again, with the wise narrator remarking the continuity of a supposed Egyptianness across history.

Conclusions

This paper investigates the interplay of popular culture and humour in two novels by Khayrī Shalabī, a writer who had a great interest in Egyptian dialect, cultural heritage, and aesthetic innovations. While the novel is usually canonized as high culture, his works containing several jokes and meta-narrative reflections about the culture of laughter creatively re-elaborate popular culture. *Rihlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī* and *Ṣāliḥ Hēša* exploit familiar characters and stereotypes to enhance literary humour, since the familiarity of the situation allows the readers to lower their defences and enjoy the reading. These novels also depict humour as a collective experience, shaping alternative communities, albeit temporally and spatially limited.

Shalabī engages with the porous nature of popular culture by putting side by side marginal characters and intellectuals, high and low linguistic registers, classical historians, and contemporary writers that he personally knew. In this context, he focuses on the stock character of the wise-fool or simple-minded, embodied by Ibn Shalabī and Ṣāliḥ. This familiar

character challenges some stereotypes attached to the genuine Egyptian, including his attitude towards laughter. Furthermore, its duplicity (Ibn Shalabī has a double personality and Ṣāliḥ is imitated) reveals how artistic productions may appropriate popular culture for its resonance with the audience.

Another feature of popular culture elaborated by Shalabī is its collective nature, which brings together people of different backgrounds in a counter-hegemonic discourse. *Ṣāliḥ Hēša* contrasts the established intellectual circles with a community of aspiring intellectuals meeting at the hash den. They are glued together by the culture of laughter and by the hashish waiter, who is an archive of popular culture, especially in his knowledge of Egyptian dialect and subversive attitude. *Rihlāt al-ṭurshagī al-ḥalwagī* presents the street as a carnivalesque site where the poles of life/death, destruction/creativity join. It highlights the people's *qillat adab* (impoliteness) since they break the rules for the sake of a funny subversion.

Khayrī Shalabī consciously appropriates popular culture as part of his aesthetic project, aiming at redefining the Egyptian identity at times of socio-political and cultural change since the Seventies. With his interest in historical writing and the mass media industry, he attempts to rewrite history from below, focusing on the Egyptian ordinary people and some in-between communities. He oscillates between a strong interest in political issues and his characters' denial of any political engagement. This choice of topics is accompanied by a thorough experimentation with linguistic variation, interpolating *fushā*, *ʿammīya* and slang with comic effects.

On a final note, popular culture is deeply rooted in the local dimension but absorbs global elements and circulates transnationally. The same is true for humour, even though translating it is very challenging. While preserving its immediacy, the translator struggles with word play and shared cultural knowledge between the author and the intended audience in the source language. Yet, when the joke does not fall flat, humour provides fruitful encounters with global audiences.

⁵¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 88.

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Popularising the Political: Jihadi Chants as a Popular Medium of Communication in Jihadi Circles

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Abstract

Over the past decades, political chants in Arabic have played a unique role in the youth culture of several anti-establishment movements in the Arab-Islamic world. Islamist movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and jihadi organisations such as the self-named 'Islamic State' organisation (henceforth, ISO) and al-Qā'ida have skilfully resorted to this popular medium to spread their ideology. From a literary and discourse-analytical perspective, this study examines how jihadi chants are deployed to inculcate a political worldview in the Arabic-speaking environment. More specifically, this chapter deals with four main issues related to this artefact: firstly, it examines the genre's popular appeal in the light of the Arab-Islamic culture. Secondly, it investigates the chants' socio-political context. Thirdly, it locates jihadi chants within the vast poetic tradition, and finally, it exemplifies how chants are put to jihadist use on the battlefield. The overarching argument made in this work is that ideological chants are attractive and influential among the youth culture because of their resonance with popular traditional practices. By providing multiple examples of jihadi chants, this chapter argues that this genre should be acknowledged as a chief tool of ideological transmission among jihadi groups.

Keywords: jihadism, jihadi chants, *nashīd*, jihadi propaganda, jihadi cultural artefacts, psychological warfare