

10 “Wa-hākadhā kāna ka-Iblīs”

Satan and social reform in a novel by Salīm al-Bustānī
(*Bint al-‘aṣr*, 1875)

First published in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Beirut/Stuttgart 1999), 301–307

This chapter: The following essay is a miniature, originally published in a volume on *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature*, hence the focus on the archetypal subtext of temptation and the Devil. In Salīm al-Bustānī’s “social romance” (Moosa 1997), we will meet a writing subject that seeks to assert himself in public as a social critic who emphasizes his position by strong, almost didactic moralising and who does so by recurring to traditional religious concepts, common to both Christendom and Islam. I will argue that this can be read as an indicator of secularisation.¹ As already noted in the preceding chapters, the social background of emerging subjectivity is a kind of middle-class here, too, a mercantile bourgeoisie who are claiming for themselves a nobility of character and culturedness rather than one of wealth and inherited prestige.

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10.1 Introduction

Although the name Iblīs² (< Greek *diábolos*) is mentioned only once in the text analyzed in this study, there is more about this single textual appearance than one might expect. It is, in my opinion, a sign on the surface of the text pointing to an archetypal subtext that is instrumental in the author’s social criticism and his quest for a reform based on the ideas of Enlightenment.

¹ For other elements of secularisation, see above, Chapter 3 (secularisation in language) and Chapter 5 (in al-Marṣafī’s realism-pragmatism).

² “accuser, slanderer”, agent noun, from Greek *diaballein* “to slander, attack”, lit. “to throw across”, from *dia-* “across, through” + *ballein* “to throw” – etymonline, s.v. “devil” (https://www.etymonline.com/word/devil#etymonline_v_8484, as of Dec. 12, 2023).

The text examined here is a story by Salīm al-Bustānī (1848–1884)³ entitled *Bint al-‘aşr*. It was serialised in the 1875 issues of the periodical *al-Jinān*⁴ founded in 1870 by Salīm’s father Buṭrus, but known to have been written largely by the son;⁵ it was to become “the leading non-official Arabic weekly for the next one and a half decades” (Wielandt 1980, 127).⁶ The text is a mixture, very typical of its time, of leisurely entertainment – love, jealousy, and crime are important elements – , but also of social criticism and moralist instruction. A detailed summary of the plot will provide us with the main features of the text that we can build our analysis and interpretation on.

10.1.1 Plot summary

Anīs, the son of the town’s wealthiest merchant, but himself not very ambitious, has fallen in love with Rīma, a girl from a well-to-do family. Rīma, however, loves not Anīs but a certain Mājid, another young merchant who is not as rich as Anīs but has been able to acquire, by hard and ambitious work, a certain fortune.

At an evening party given by a rich local notable, Mājid and Rīma seize the opportunity to sit together and talk a lot – a behaviour that drives Anīs jealous. Love (which has come over him like an irresistible fate) and alcohol (which he takes refuge in) combine to make him blind enough to talk about his hurt feelings to a certain Šāliḥ. This villain, who is described as being “like the Devil” (*kāna ka-Iblīs*, 179a),⁷ hastens to support Anīs’s desire to take revenge on his rival Mājid and offers Anīs his help... which the latter accepts without really being aware of the possible consequences of doing so.

After some unsuccessful attempts to divert Mājid and Rīma from each other, the “devil” Šāliḥ cooks up a shrewd plan that aims at ruining Mājid financially

³ For his life and thought see, e.g., Dāghir 1956/1983, Part 2 (*al-Rāḥilūn* 1800–1955), 186–8 (with additional references); article “al-Bustānī”, no. 6 [J. Abdel-Nour], in *EI*² (suppl.); Georgescu 1978, 44–64 and passim; Jihā 1989, 15–38.

⁴ *al-Jinān* 1875, 30ff., 66ff., 102ff., 138ff., 174ff., 210ff., 249ff., 283ff., 318ff., 354ff., always in the *fukāhāt* section. For *al-Jinān*, its history and aims etc. in general see, e.g., Jihā 1989, 39–73; Hafez 1993, 70 and 111; Hourani 1962/1989, 274.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Hourani 1962/1989, 245.

⁶ In 1886, *al-Jinān* “finally ceased to appear because of the growing difficulties of writing freely under the rule of Abdülhamid” – Hourani 1989, 245.

⁷ Page numbers refer to *al-Jinān* 1875, “a” and “b” indicating the first and second column of a page, respectively.

so that he would not be a suitable husband for Rīma any longer on account of his poverty. The plan works out: with the help of forged documents, securities, commercial papers, pseudo-transactions and a hired front man, Şālih indeed succeeds in drawing Mājid into the trap that eventually brings about his total bankruptcy.

Contrary to Şālih's and Anīs's expectations and hopes, however, Rīma remains all the more faithful to her beloved, despite his sudden impoverishment, for what counts for the prudent and modest girl are the true, inner values only. Seeing that his plans have failed again, Şālih convinces Anīs that it would be the best now to get rid of Mājid once and for all, and Anīs willy-nilly consents. Luckily, their conversation is eavesdropped on by a servant, who then can inform Mājid that there are plans to murder him. Mājid now begins to suspect that his bankruptcy, too, might be the product of an intrigue arranged by Anīs and Şālih. He receives support from the town's new judge who is in charge of investigations concerned with Mājid's bankruptcy and who, as an exception of his time, is incorruptible and really loves justice. His inquiries into the matter have already made him smell where the truth might lie.

The hired front man whose bankruptcy had been feigned in order to draw Mājid into ruin, and who had accepted to spend some months in prison in return for a large financial compensation from Anīs – this man now gets frightened since the incorruptible judge apparently wants to set a warning example in his case so that he might sentence him to ten or fifteen years in jail. He starts feeling abandoned by Anīs and Şālih and soon confesses the truth to the judge. The judge makes Mājid privy to this information, and Mājid tells his fiancée Rīma about them. Behind the door, Rīma's sister Jamīla happens to listen to their conversation and hurries to confront Anīs, whom she loves, with what she has heard. Anīs, who until then had only been pretending to love Jamīla in order to always have an opportunity to be close to Rīma, all of a sudden feels very much enchanted by Jamīla, so much so that he too comes to regret having allowed himself to be carried away and approve of criminal deeds. Burning with love for Anīs, Jamīla forgives him his evil doings and puts in a good word for him with her sister so that Rīma shall persuade her fiancé not to insist on taking Anīs to court since he will get his money back from him down to the last penny. Mājid, gentle and indulgent as he is, is ready to do so on the spot. The judge shows some leniency with the repentant front man, too; the "devil" Şālih, however, is exiled from town. The end is, of course, a double wedding: Mājid marries Rīma, and Anīs marries Jamīla.

10.2 Analysis and discussion

Before analyzing Şālih the “Devil”’s function in this story, let us first have a short look at his background, his personality and the aim he pursues in acting as he does. Al-Bustānī introduces him as

one of those who pretend to be of noble origin and wealthy although he was in permanent need (*fī ḥtiyāj dā'im*) [of money] and his descent was limited [only] to his father who, in the beginning, had been a broker notorious for his dishonesty by which he had ruined a third of all [the town’s] merchants.

(al-Bustānī 1875, 105a)

The father had then doubled his wealth by gambling and built a beautiful house, a fact that had earned him social esteem and made him be looked upon even by the old rich elite as one of theirs.

But what man has gathered unlawfully, most often melts away in a way similar to that of its acquisition, and so gambling and drinking took away from him and his son this money, leaving behind only a few remnants, and these were used by the son to conceal the truth of his situation after his father’s death.

(ibid.)

Şālih’s situation is not an easy one: according to the text, he is the son of a *nouveau riche* who became poor again after having risen to a considerable social status. In order not to lose this status – a status that is bound to the display of wealth and obliges one, among other things, to give luxurious evening parties from time to time – Şālih sometimes eats nothing but dry bread, to save some money, and sometimes sells things he has been given as present by friends or acquaintances.

Although, strictly speaking, only the father is to be blamed for the loss of fortune, the author nevertheless finds no space to have mercy on the son either – for two reasons: first, he makes clear that he considers Şālih’s squandering money on the maintenance of a rich man’s image imprudent and unreasonable – he’d better forget about the “vain glory” (*al-majd al-bāṭil*, 139b and *passim*) of appearances and instead save the money and slowly reaccumulate a sound capital stock on which to build new, promising and useful projects. We could even expect him to do so since he does not belong to the group of stupid ordinary people (*al-‘amma al-mutaghaffila*, 139b) but can read and write, has a basic knowledge of grammar, geography, mathematics, etc., and is even quite fluent in a foreign language. From this description we may infer that what al-Bustānī wants the reader to detest most in this character is his immodesty, his desire to live in grand style instead of the modest life of an average citizen, a fault that the author directly relates to the highly condemnable non-usage of one’s intellectual capacity – a

logical nexus that shows him clearly as a man of Enlightenment for whom the best way of acting and behaviour results directly from the use of *reason*.

The reader should not have mercy on Šāliḥ also because he has a “malicious” character (*sharīr*, 105a). The narrator presents him as such right from his first appearance in the text and gives the reader some evidence for the validity of his judgment. For example, Šāliḥ does not hesitate to consider murdering Mājid as well as the front man as a means to reach his goals. The narrator also informs us that Šāliḥ enjoys plotting and scheming (*ilqā’ al-ḥitan*, 140b) as well as profiting from subsequent disasters. In order to maintain the social status he is proud of and of which he boasts, Šāliḥ plans to systematically ‘milk’ his victims. First, he waits for someone rich to have some kind of problem, as Anīs has with his rival Mājid. When he has found such a victim he seeks to gain the other’s confidence by flattery and hypocrisy, then offers his help, pretending that he might even spend large amounts of money to help his friends, thereby of course arousing those friends’ opposition and their offering him the money he might need to help them. And it does not need much persuasion for them to finally accept to give him a large sum, a great deal of which he will, of course, put in his own pocket.

Two things are evident here: (1) Šāliḥ is apparently, and in one incident also openly, likened to Iblīs; (2) this Iblīs is conceived of in quite conventional terms: for al-Bustānī he is still an inciter or promoter of vain desires and lower instincts in man⁸ – in our case especially Anīs’s longing for revenge out of hurt vanity, his love for himself, and the arrogant belief, resulting from class snobbery, that as the richer one he, not Mājid, is entitled to beautiful Rīma and should be adored by her. For al-Bustānī, Iblīs is still the permanent temptator and the Evil One who draws pleasure from sowing the seeds of discord, *ḥitna*, among innocent and virtuous people.

What is new and makes him a very specific devil is, I think, the fact that al-Bustānī, on the one hand, clearly marks him as belonging to a certain social group – he is the son of a re-impoveryished *nouveau riche* –; on the other, he instrumentalises the character for social criticism. I will try to show now that likening Šāliḥ to Iblīs serves al-Bustānī as a means to *sanctify* his objectives and must therefore be considered as part of the process of secularisation that accompanied nineteenth century enlightenment in the Arab world.

First of all, we should state that the identification of Satan with a *nouveau riche* who tries, by all means, not to lose his social status can be taken as evidence for that we are dealing here with a discourse of an essentially *bourgeois* nature

8 Cf. article “Iblīs” (A.J. Wensinck [L. Gardet]), in *EP*.

or, to be more precise, the discourse of an *educated* bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*). The social group favored by al-Bustānī shows all the characteristics of an increasingly self-conscious educated bourgeoisie as we know it from the age of Enlightenment in Europe,⁹ and in this group’s value system Ṣāliḥ always plays the part of the negative antipode: the educated bourgeois like Mājid or Rīma is virtuous, Ṣāliḥ embodies pure Vice; in Ṣāliḥ culminates that kind of materialistic thinking that al-Bustānī sees as the main disease contemporary society is suffering from while the educated bourgeois is upholding the *true, spiritual, idealistic* values – values that come to range higher in the hierarchy than external appearance because the educated bourgeois has to compensate in some way for his lack of wealth and nobility, and this he does by resorting to moral values, replacing the nobleness of origin and wealth (which he has not) with the only nobleness *he* possesses: the nobleness of character.

This value system is reminiscent of European Enlightenment also in the emphasis it lays on human reason as well as in a more or less direct equation of the reasonable with the morally good. So, even Ṣāliḥ’s maliciousness is, in the end, described by al-Bustānī as resulting from *jahl* “ignorance”, because he does not employ reason, *‘aql*, against the lower instincts, *fiṭra*: we remember the author assuring us that if Ṣāliḥ were wise he would not spend all his money on the maintenance of *al-majd al-bāṭil* but lead a moderate life, saving some of his money for future investments in useful projects. That the value system advocated by al-Bustānī is basically rationalistic is already evident from the frequency with which the words *‘aql* and *ta’aqquq* (or their contraries) occur in the text.

Let us now look at the function that Ṣāliḥ’s ‘diabolisation’, or ‘satanification’ fulfill in the rationalistic, moralistic, essentially bourgeois discourse that we are dealing with here. Two main functions can be observed.

First, diabolisation serves the author and his own social group, the new educated bourgeoisie, as a means to deny other rival forces a leading position in the quickly changing society of the second half of the nineteenth century. As in eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe, the educated bourgeoisie in the Arab world, too, in their struggle for social and political recognition tend to compensate for a *de facto* lack of power by elevating their own values through a usurpation of all possible virtues and a corresponding moral condemnation of rival forces. Very similar to eighteenth century Europe where the opponents of the

⁹ For a comparative investigation into the psychological make-up of this class, in German resp. Arab Enlightenment, see my “*Fa-ghawraqat ‘uyūnuhum bi-l-dumū*” = Guth 1997b [= Chapter 11 of the present volume].

bourgeois are the court and nobility, the author here targets the wealthy and powerful group of Arab merchants and bankers (whom he calls *akābir* or *a'yān*, e.g., 32b), the old rich elite as well as the *nouveaux riches*. Further he attacks their value system in which wealth defines one's position on the social ladder and where the display of luxury plays an accordingly important role. In having recourse to an archetype, diabolisation not only condemns the quest for *al-majd al-bāṭil* and its adherents morally but also adds the notion of the demoniac, in this way underlining their danger to society and the need to be on one's guard in face of the tempter.

The second main and, I believe, even more important function of drawing upon the Iblis/*fitna* archetype is that it allows the author to sanctify his own cause. Naming Ṣāliḥ an "Iblis" and his overall diabolisation widens the space of significance from the narrow realm of contemporary social conditions into the horizon of a quasi-religious meaning of the narrated events. It generates a subtext in which we have Satan, the enemy of God and mankind, tempting men, but the true believers resisting temptation because they are in the possession of the right revelation. In this way not only is Ṣāliḥ diabolised and made the enemy of mankind as a whole, but also are Rīma and Mājid elevated correspondingly into the position of the true believers who emerge from *fitna* unharmed or even strengthened, and what they believe in – the powers of reason in the first place, the satisfaction with a modest life style out of insight in the vanity of external appearances, etc. – all this is implicitly endowed with the quality of the Right Revelation, the divine message that immunises against all harms.

All this is, of course, only one expression of the process that is as essential for eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe as it is for Arab Enlightenment in the second half of the nineteenth century: the far-ranging process of secularisation. In making an originally religious archetype instrumental in social criticism – which can be achieved because of the essentially moralistic nature of the archetypal pattern – , al-Bustānī has secularised the religious and at the same time sanctified the earthly, he has become a 'missionary of the religion of Reason'.

The fact that, ironically, this missionary of Reason, in order to make his point, evidently falls back on an irrational method of representing social conditions in terms of a simplifying dualistic model such as the one expressed in the Iblis/*fitna* archetype may well be regarded, again, as an outcome of the good old dialectics of Enlightenment.