

TAHA HUSSEIN'S HUMOUR

Avihai Shivtiel

University of Cambridge, University of Leeds

Taha Hussein (=T.H.) (1889–1973) is considered the doyen of modern prose writers in the Arab world whose “westernized” approach to literature and in particular literary criticism not only brought in a breath of fresh air, but also “shook the foundations of conventional traditions”. (Badawi, 1962:7).

A large number of his works have been translated into several languages and many scholarly researches have been devoted to his numerous books and articles, analysing his views, experiences and unique style.

Moreover, his autobiography, *al-Ayyām (The Days)*, which is his childhood and early life memoirs, captured the attention of many readers inside and outside the Arab world as a model of *Bildungsroman*. (Kilpatrick 1992: 227). It has many facets: social life in rural Egypt, traditions and folklore, religion and education and some more. All these were expressed in a beautiful ‘neo-classical’ Arabic, rich in figures of speech and idioms taken from pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur’ān and post-Islamic sources, as well as phrases and expressions inspired by European languages (Cachia, 1990:52) or coined by him, often humorous, as “his gaze on people’s grotesqueness” (Jad, 32) is almost found in every page of *al-Ayyām*.

In her book, *Blindness and Autobiography*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas devotes a chapter (6) to the humour in *al-Ayyām* in which she analyzes and illustrates some of the droll situations, as described by T.H. and the ideas and language which makes the descriptions amusing. Furthermore, because of T.H.’s blindness she concludes that all the mirth-provoking situations are connected with sounds, and are not obviously the result of visual perception. Hence, the term she coins is “blind humor” (p. 127 *et alibi*).

However, although Malti-Douglas’ analysis is systematic and in-depth, the present article aims to shed more light on T.H.’s technique and tools, which afford the reader amusement, illustrated with examples taken from his first volume, since all the examples used by Malti-Douglas are quoted from Vols. 2 and 3 of *al-Ayyām*.¹

¹ For a brief sketch of his life and work, see Haywood (1971:193ff).

T.H.'s humour can be divided into three categories:

1. Funny situations
2. Superstitions, beliefs and customs
3. Phrases, expressions and idioms used to express irony, sarcasm and cynicism.

Linguistically and stylistically, T.H. employs many grammatical structures, some unique to Arabic, as well as figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes side by side with quotations from or references to the Qur'an and Arabic poetry. Moreover, his language is elevated literary Arabic (*fushā*) with a very small number of colloquialisms, which are either put in brackets or given a more classical 'flavour'.

Funny situations

Funny situations in part one of *al-Ayyām* are numerous. Let's examine some of them:

1.

حين تدعوه أخته إلى الدخول فيأبى فتخرج فتشده من ثوبه فيمتنع عليها فتحمله بين ذراعيها كأنه الثمامة².
(Arabic, 6)

'As soon as his sister called him to come indoors, he would refuse and then she would come out and seize him by his clothes while he resisted with all his might. Then she would carry him in her arms as though he were a plaything'. (English translation, 10).

Humour is reflected by the comic scene, in which the stubborn child struggles with his sister, who tries to put him to sleep, while he refuses to go to bed. The comic situation is also achieved by the sequential employment of the particle ف as ف الترتيب, i.e. ف denoting the exact sequence of events or actions [Wright, I :288].

2.

وكان إذا أخلت به إحدى نعليه دعا أحد صبيان الكتاب وأخذ النعل بيده وقال له: تذهب الى «الحزبين» وهو هنا قريب فتقول له: «يقول لك سيدنا إن هذه النعل في حاجة الى لوزة من الناحية اليمنى.» انظر أترى؟ هنا حيث أضع إصبعي. فيقول لك «الحزبين»: «نعم سأضع هذه اللوزة.» فتقول له: «يقول لك سيدنا: يجب أن تتخير الجلد متينا غليظا جديدا وإن تحسن الرقع بحيث لا يظهر أو بحيث لا يكاد يظهر.» فيقول لك «نعم سأفعل هذا.» فتقول له: «ويقول لك سيدنا: إنه عميلك منذ زمن طويل فاستوص بالأجر خيرا.» ومهما يقل لك فلا تقبل منه أكثر من قرش ثم عد الي مسافة ما أغمض عيني ثم أفتحها. وينطلق الصبي ويلهو عنه سيدنا ثم يعود وقد أغمض سيدنا عينه وفتحها مرة ومرة ومرات (Arabic, 30–31)

'Whenever one of his shoes needed patching he would call one of the boys of the school, and taking the shoe in his hand say to him, 'You will go to the cobbler who lives nearby and say to him, "Our Master says that this shoe needs a patch on the right side. Look, do you see? Here where I put my finger."' The cobbler will reply, "Yes I will patch it." Then you will say to him, "Our Master says that you must

² ثمامة means a 'blade of grass' but is used here metaphorically to indicate his light weight, but as a simile means 'trifle', 'easy to accomplish' (Wehr, s.v.).

choose a strong, coarse, new piece of leather and that you must put it on neatly so that it is invisible or nearly so". He will reply, "Yes I will do that." Then you will say to him, "Our Master says that he is an old customer of yours, so please take that into account," and whatever he says to you don't agree to pay more than a piastre. Now go and come back again in the twinkling of an eye.' So the boy would depart and 'Our Master' would forget all about him. By the time that he did return, 'Our Master' would have twinkled his eye times without number'. (English translation, 21–22).

The detailed instructions given to the pupil by the teacher are ludicrous and funny, since the teacher predicts exactly what the cobbler would say and therefore he prepares the child how to react. Moreover, the teacher "teaches" the pupil the precise job he wants the cobbler to do and in particular, how to haggle. The teacher's priority is clear: patching his shoe is more important than the fact that the pupil misses his class.

3.

ثم طلب اليه أن يقرأ «سورة الشعراء» وما هي إلا أن وقع عليه هذا السؤال وقع الصاعقة ففكر وقدر وتحفز واستعاذ بالله من الشيطان الرجيم وسمى الله الرحمن الرحيم ولكنه لم يذكر من سورة الشعراء إلا أنها إحدى سور ثلاث، أولها «طسم»، فأخذ يردد «طسم» مرة ومرة ومرة دون أن يستطيع الانتقال إلى ما بعدها وفتح عليه أبوه بما يلي هذه الكلمة من سورة الشعراء فلم يستطع أن يتقدم خطوة (Arabic, 39–40)

'Then he asked him to recite 'The Sūra of the Poets'. This request fell on him like a thunderbolt. He began to reflect and meditate. He uttered the customary phrase, 'I take refuge with God from the accursed Satan,' and also 'In the name of God the Beneficent, the Merciful,' but after that all he could remember of 'The Sūra of the Poets' was that it was one of the three that begin with Ṭā Sīn Mīm, so he began to repeat Ṭā Sīn Mīm over and over again, without being able to arrive at what came after it. His father prompted him by telling him some of the words which followed, but in spite of that he could not proceed at all'. (English translation, 27)

The dichotomy between the ordeal of a nine-year old child and the bemused T.H. the adult is conspicuous, especially that we are told later that he had failed to recite all other *sūras* he was supposed to learn by heart, and was unable to decide who was responsible for his failure: himself, the teacher, who neglected him, or his father, who examined him. (Arabic, 41). Moreover, T.H. admits that as a child he had not managed to memorize the text of the Qur'ān but instead found a way to pretend to know it by bribing the 'Ārif (= the teacher's assistant) in order to buy his silence. (Arabic, 52), and later by learning a different text (Arabic, 71–78).

Superstitions, beliefs and Customs

In several places in the book T.H. recounts a number of superstitions, beliefs and customs common to the primitive milieu where he grew up. These help the author draw a funny picture of a backward and naïve society with which the reader of the book may feel empathy and at the same time be amused by. The fear of the evil

sprites or demons who were on the loose during the night and were hiding during the day (Arabic, 8–9); the sizeable fish that swallowed small children but might have had a magic ring inside their stomach, which, if turned on the finger could fulfil any wish (Arabic, 13); and the ceremony conducted by T.H.’s mother in order to rid her son of the evil eye (Arabic, 83), are but a few examples of beliefs deep-seated in society which are humorously depicted. On the other hand, the custom to swear to divorce one’s wife (Arabic, 61) or to shave one’s beard as a proof for stating the truth (Arabic, 43–47); the custom of reading portions of the Qur’ān (عدية) to have a wish come true (Arabic, 106–107) and in particular, the “tariff”: reading Sūrat Yā Sīn four times for small wishes, such as free education for children, reading it seven times in the case of important requests, such as matters that concern the life of the family, like settling a heavy debt and reading it forty-one times, if the wish is of an utmost importance, such as moving to a new job for pay rise. (106) – all these and many others not only provide us with an authentic description of rural life, but also make us hold T.H., the product of this society, in great esteem for his achievements.

Lexical phrases, expressions and idioms

Humour expressed by ‘similes’:

(Arabic, 40) وقع عليه هذا السؤال وقع الصاعقة

‘this request fell on him like a thunderbolt’ (English translation, 27)

(Arabic, 44) تلاه علي كالماء الجاري

‘he recited it to me like flowing water’ (English translation, 29).

(Arabic, 45) كنت تتلو القرآن أمس كسلاسل الذهب

‘yesterday you recited the Qur’an like streams of gold’ (English translation, 30)

Humour expressed by metaphors; since the examples are numerous, two will suffice:

(Arabic, 45) فما راع³ الصبي الا شيء في يده غريب

‘the lad felt something strange in his hand’ (English translation, 30)

(Arabic, 58–59) ولكن لسانه لم يلبث أن انعقد وريقه لم يلبث أن جف

‘but after that he became tongued-tied, and the saliva in his mouth dried up’ (English translation, 36)

The use of idioms is very common in *al-Ayyām*, ‘adding flavour’ not only to the flowery style but also to T.H.’s humour technique. For example,

1. (Arabic, 45) فقد رفعت رأسي وبيضت وجهي وشرقت لحياتي أمس

³ The root روع expresses usually ‘fear, surprise; dismay’ and has figuratively acquired more meanings, including meanings expressed by the root رعى ‘observe, heed’. Hence, deliberately used by the author to connote ‘strange feeling harbouring some fear or dismay’.

'for yesterday you raised my head, caused my face to shine and honoured my beard'.⁴
(Arabic, 29)

2. (Arabic, 83) أكل الحسد قلبه

(lit. 'envy has eaten his heart') he had been consumed with envy (Arabic, 49)

Paronomasia or wordplay is often used by T.H. to create humorous situations.

For example:

1. (Arabic, 4) وكان لها في حياته – أو قل في خياله – تأثير عظيم

'Now this played a great part in his life; or shall we say in his imagination?' (English translation, 10).

2. (Arabic, 55) كان صاحبنا يرشو ويرتشي ويخدع ويخدع

'while our friend was engaged in giving and taking bribes, and in deceiving and being deceived' (English translation, 35)

3. (Arabic, 89) كان أقرب من أبيه إلى الدنيا وأبعد من أبيه عن الدين

'He was nearer to worldly things than his father and farther removed from things of religion' (than his father) (English translation, 53).

A large number of statements typify T.H.'s sarcasm directed at his teachers and in particular imams or Muslim theologians at large. In a number of places in the book he criticizes them, highlighting their deceit, greed and ignorance.

For example:

(Arabic, 98) كل ما يوجد من الفرق بين الساحر والصوفي هو أن هذا يتصل بالملائكة ذاك يتصل بالشياطين

'the difference between a magician and a Sufi is that one is connected with angels and one is connected with devils' (my translation).

T.H.'s deliberate use of ambiguity leaves the reader puzzled by the enigma: "who is who?". Moreover, the possibility to interpret the Arabic verb as intransitive ("to be in touch") or transitive ("to contact") makes the sentence an excellent example of 'double entendre'. Indeed, when referring to the famous philosopher and historian, Ibn Ḥaldūn, T.H. states that the former and his followers had confused "magic and Sufism, so that these two became one thing" (Arabic, 59).⁵

Moreover, the somewhat bizarre ceremony (of swallowing pieces of paper which contain letters from the Qur'ān) conducted by the Faqīhs (Arabic, 110–111) allows T.H. an opportunity to mock the religious people [whom he sarcastically calls حملة القرآن – the bearers of the Qur'ān (Arabic, 109)] and their followers.

Several statements reflect T.H.'s cynicism directed at all: males and females, young and old and educated or uneducated.

⁴ The beard is the symbol of manhood and a source of pride and respect and therefore it is customary to express a commitment or attest truth by referring to it. (See Lane 1944:29).

⁵ On T.H.'s opinion of Ibn Ḥaldūn, see, e.g., 'Awad, p. 12ff.

For example:

1.

فغنت إن كانت فرحة و عددت إن كانت محزونة، وكل امرأة في مصر محزونة حين تريد (Arabic, 25–26) ‘if glad, she will sing, and if she is sad by reason of bereavement, she will lament the deceased; for every woman in Egypt can mourn when she wishes’. (English translation, 19–20)

2.

المصحف! لقد حفظ ما فيه فما أفاد من حفظه شيئاً. وكثير من الشبان يحفظونه فلا يحفل بهم أحد ولا يُنتخبون خلفاء يوم المولد النبوي. (Arabic, 71)

‘As for the Qur’ān he had learnt its contents by heart and derived no benefit from what he had learnt. Moreover, many youths had learned it by heart and nobody took any notice of them nor were they elected caliphs on the Prophet’s birthday’. (English translation, 43)

The Qur’ān is playing an important role in *al-Ayyām*. First when T.H. tells the reader his failure to memorise the Holy Book, his ordeal in the tests and subsequently the shame he brought upon his family, and secondly, the numerous quotations from and the references to, which intensify irony, sarcasm and cynicism.

For example:

1. The teacher regarded his own voice very beautiful, while T.H. thought that God has ever created an uglier voice (Arabic, 32), quoting the Qur’ānic verse:

إن أنكر الأصوات لصوت الحمير

‘Verily the most unpleasant sound is the braying of asses’ (Q. 31:19).

2. T.H. uses a periodic sentence based on a Qur’ānic verse to provoke mirth:

إذا الشمس كورت وإذا النجوم انكدرت وإذا الجبال سيرت وإذا العشار عطلت علمت نفس ما أحضرت – Q

‘When the sun is rolled up, when the stars are cast adrift, when the mountains are wiped out; when pregnant camels are left unattended then each soul will know what it has readied’ (Q. 81:1–14)

T.H. (Arabic, 7):

فإذا أوت الشمس الى كهفها والناس الى مضاجعهم وأطفئت السرج وهدأت الأصوات صعدت هذه العفاريت من تحت الارض

‘when the sun sank to his lair and people retired to their resting-places, when lamps were extinguished and voices hushed, then these evil sprites would come up from under the earth’. (English translation, 11).

3. T.H. uses part of a Qur’ānic verse together with an example from Sībawayhi to describe the lamentable position he was held in the eyes of his siblings, thus resonating with the story of Joseph. The comparison with the biblical personality thus might be interpreted as irony. (Q. 12:13.)

وكان صاحبنا يقعد منهم مزجر⁶ الكلب وهم عنه غافلون (Arabic, 25)

Our friend would sit at a respectful distance from them, and although they were oblivious of his presence, ...'. (English translation, 19).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that *al-Ayyām*, apart from being a masterpiece literary work, which teaches the reader about the early life of Taha Hussein, is a fountainhead of anecdotes from which one can gaze at life in rural and urban Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries. It gives a clear idea about customs and beliefs, valuable information on parents-children relationship and human struggle and behaviour, when survival is 'the name of the game'. However, in spite of T.H.'s fierce criticism, often expressed by irony, sarcasm and cynicism, when almost every page of his Part One contains malicious mockery and even *Schadenfreude*, he does not hate this society as we often feel his empathy towards his characters whom he describes humorously.

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⁶ See Ibn Manẓūr, s.v. زجر. Paxton's translation misses the irony meant as literally the idiom قعد منه مزجر الكلب means "he sat at a dog's distance of someone" i.e., 'to sit at a fitting distance from s.o.' (Wehr, s.v. زجر).

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