

## THE EPIC-NOVELISTIC DRAMA IN *SĪRAT AL-SHAYKH NŪR-AL-DĪN*

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### **Abstract :**

The research paper tackles Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy's *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn* (*the Biography of Sheikh Nur al-Din*). It adopted an analytical method to investigate the structure of the novel and Sufi visions, including the Sufi courtyard and its functional role in the text and genre blending called "epic-novelistic drama" to analyze the character of Sheikh al-Tayyib and the reflection of his personality on the portrayal of the protagonist and Sheikh Nur al-Din and the fusion of Pharaonic, Christian, and Islamic elements. After that, it delves into the features of folk epics, focusing on the traits of the folk hero as depicted in the character of Sheikh al-Tayyib and the woman's role in the overt and covert texts. Finally, the paper explores modern techniques, e.g., the stream of consciousness, the creation of parallel characters, and the stylistic techniques in the novel.

### **Keywords :**

Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn- Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy- Epic-Novelsitic Drama- Sheikh al-Tayyib – Sufi vision- Folk tales.

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### ***Introduction :***

“Their attendance has not been prearranged; something drew them all to gather. Mysterious restlessness recognized as yearning, they sought to silence by attendance”<sup>5</sup>.

This quote probably highlights the extent to which the author, Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy, sought to distinguish himself with a simple Sufi-like language in terms of simple structure and rich content. Abdulkarim Aljili argues that “language is existence”.<sup>6</sup> The language of the novel *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn (the Biography of Sheikh Nur al-Din)* excels the rhythm of rhythm and meaning intentionally. Yet, he used a title suggesting a biography to shock us by realizing that Sheikh Nur al-Din was not an individual whose life the author sought to recount. Rather, he embodied the history of Luxor, which, unknowingly, transformed into a city welcoming the world with altered features, leaving Sheikh Nur al-Din estranged in a town he no longer recognized, urging him to depart. In this context, the geographical and spiritual journeys intertwine, resembling chronicles, which are intellectually classified in travel literature as a reservoir of knowledge and a source for uncovering several mysteries, particularly geographical landmarks and the history of human communities”<sup>7</sup>. In this interesting narrative, the author was familiar with the place, which formed an intrinsic part of his memory that he sought to capture in a hybrid genre of folk biography, novel, and drama called (*Epic-Novelistic Drama*). However, Alhajajy did not narrate as a traditional storyteller who reacted emotionally to settings of war or unrestrained war but recounted what he longed to release out of love and agony simultaneously, recording such restless memories to turn into a biography akin to the *Hilali epic*. The events of the novel mainly unfold in Luxor, with some in Cairo or Sudan, focusing on the Alhajajy family anchoring the story. The author employed the place, which was almost transformed into a protagonist rivaling the human characters. Thus, the place became a key part of the narrative structure, as the author adopted ancient and modern techniques alike.

### ***I. Structure of action***

The action of the novel adopts the flashback technique. In terms of narration, the novel belongs to the action-driven novel, as the real narrator remains concealed, with a focus on characters that may seem independent, according to Stanzel. Moreover, the author persists but withdraws from the reader’s view”<sup>8</sup> (2). Using a flashback has advantages and disadvantages. It detaches from the temporality of actions as varying temporal signifiers. Nevertheless, the author condenses all varying times into a fixed temporal point (moment of writing). By establishing a temporal anchor, the author adopts an Aristotelian logic, with events rarely exceeding a 24-hour span. Yet, the flashback confines recounting the action to the narrator’s perspective. Consequently, the narration may not represent the truth but partially. Additionally, the flashback used as an inner monolog (inner feeling summoned to convey inner feelings in the first-person” is a tool of the stream of consciousness because it originates from the deepest inner consciousness. Here, the narrator differs because he endeavors to draw the reader closer to the characters<sup>9</sup> to make the action closer to the audience. Alhajajy succeeded and used the flashback of the narrator to introduce us

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy, *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p. 205, General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo, 1987.

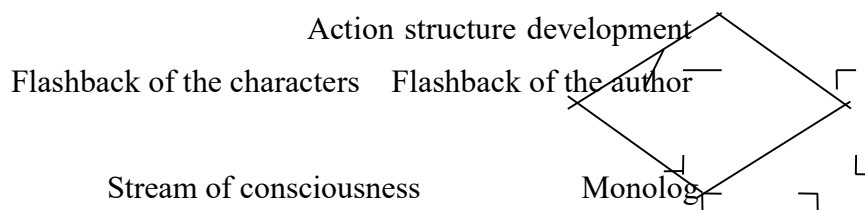
<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Reza Shafiee Kadkani: *The Poetic Language in Sufi Prose*, p. 121, trans. Emad Khalaf and Mohammad Hassan Zadeh, Ogarit Publishing and Aram Press, Damascus, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Amr Abdelaziz Mounir, *the Oldest Recorded Shinqiti Journey*, p. 1, Brill, Leiden, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Franz K. Stanzel: *Typische Formen des Romans*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht in Göttingen 11 Auflage 1987. s. 40

<sup>9</sup> Gero von Wilpert: *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*, Alfred Krner Verlag, Stuttgart, 6. Auflage, 1979, S.371

to the characters around Sheikh Nur al-Din that, in turn, relay their memories in a collective flashback. This aspect greatly contributes to the structure of actions as the author utilizes the memories of characters to draw the image of Sheikh Nur al-Din, as follows.



The action structure results from memorization and flashback of the characters that use the monolog, which draws the audience and character closer. In the monolog, the character uses the first person that gradually shifts to the second person, making the audience in the first person narrator, making it a medium or common denominator between two, each claiming ownership. However, a drawback of the flashback-based novel is that it does not allow the characters to develop and interact in the narrative flashback, where the plot is a mere accumulation of memories that are only connected by the protagonist. To introduce the characters, especially Sheikh Nur al-Din, the author creates events that highlight the greatness of the Sheikh, which may initially appear ambiguous or insignificant in his lifetime but become significant after his death, forming the protagonist's legacy. The action is structured as follows:

**A. *Sufi visions***  
**1. *Courtyard***

From the very beginning, the author consciously intends to report that “the Antiquities Authority has decided to demolish the courtyard and remove the old cemetery tomorrow”<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, the place to which the author is deeply attached is the essence of the novel. The author tries to conceal to embody the place without narration. He uses a rich memory to transform the place as a courtyard for the gathering of followers and disciples into an extended life, which they cannot demolish by a decision to end such a life. They have built a life of devotion and goodness over the years: Sheikh Abu al-Hajjaj, Sheikh Younis, Sheikh Ahmed al-Sayed Yousef, and Sheikh Nur al-Din. It is a long history representing them. One perishes in a tribe, a tribe under a sheikh, and a sheikh under a courtyard. Yet, it is being demolished today. Moreover, the climax is achieved when the demolisher recruited by the government cannot raise the ax to strike this towering structure, which has become sacred and respected even among outsiders. Urged by the awe of people, Sheikh Nur al-Din, embodied by this place, ascends, fully inhabiting it, recalling the advice of his sheikh (master), Sheikh al-Tayyib, skillfully depicted, as demonstrated later, to hold the axe, which seems to defy him, although none dares to. Totally agonized, Sheikh Nur al-Din strikes the first blow to demolish the courtyard, as if cutting all his veins or striking his soul. “He is demolishing the room of Sheikh Salama dwelled by forty *wali* (saints)”<sup>11</sup>.

Further, the Antiquities Authority orders the evacuation of the old cemetery. It insists on exhuming the corpses buried a long time ago to uncover the Avenue of the Sphinxes, as if the corpses are a sacrifice for the Pharaonic lambs' road (the Avenue). The climax intensifies in the character of Sheikh Nur al-Din with his inner conflict with his rebellious Upper Egyptian

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

counterpart who once confronted the English and must confront the government perceived as nothing but “a set of purposeless and harmful orders. The government has demolished their homes during the British occupation and after gaining independence”<sup>12</sup>.

His relationship with the government is strained: “He does not trust the government... It is a monstrous unknown creature”<sup>13</sup> “and they will be toys in the hands of the government; whatever it wants, it does”<sup>14</sup>. When Rafiqā compares Sheikh Nur al-Din to the government that wants to arrest him, she cries, “Why they wanna arrest him...Is he a thief or criminal... He is more honorable than the government?”<sup>15</sup>. The government is nothing but an order to demolish the courtyard and disturb the graves of ancestors. The recipient, Sheikh Nur al-Din, was the first to strike to demolish the courtyard and dig up the graves to reveal the remains of honorable ancestors, crying “Dig, man!”. “Then, he wraps the corpus in a shroud while reciting the Qur’an”<sup>16</sup>. The author introduces this scene to familiarize the biography of this man who absorbed the lesson of his master, Sheikh al-Tayyib, and approached matters simply and patiently. Thus, the tragic event of demolishing the courtyard that housed the history of Luxor for Muslims and Christians is a facet of Nur al-Din’s character, known to the public, but the hidden one is known to a select few, adding depth and a significant layer to the character.

## 2. *Sheikh Nur al-Din and the reflected character on the protagonist*

Sufism is the cornerstone of the novel. For instance, the Rifa’iya order is a dynamic and enduring tradition in the funeral of the ancestors (transfer of the remains) and the funeral of Sheikh Nur al-Din. The courtyard is a locus where devotees and followers meet Sheikh Yusuf, Sheikh al-Tayyib, Sheikh Ahmed Abu Alwafa Alsharqawy, and Sheikh Nur al-Din. It transcends materiality to be a realm of transcendence and spiritual purity. The author succeeded in employing the Sufi tradition that permeates Upper Egyptian villages, capturing their profound reverence for their Sheikhs, as evidenced in the depiction of Sheikh al-Tayyib and Sheikh Nur al-Din. Through his masterful rendering of this character, the author situates Sheikh al-Tayyib with great Sufi figures throughout history, including al-Junid, Ibrahim ibn Adham, and al-Hallaj. Such a luminous embodiment of a blind man with a deeper vision makes Sheikh al-Tayyib a divine embodiment of divine grace, invoking the poetic metaphor:

*The hearts of the wise have eyes that see,*

*What none but the highly pious can be.*

Sheikh al-Tayyib is almost depicted as a figure whose intervention is not an explicit summon but a sudden and mystical presence that meets the needs of disciples. For example, amidst a tense confrontation between Nur al-Din and the guards, Sheikh Al-Tayyib unexpectedly goes upstairs to the door with his right hand raised to the air as if he feels a wall leading to the courtyard. This scene would be unbelievable unless the spectators knew that the Sheikh was blind<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 230.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 88-99.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

In another scene, Sheikh Al-Tayyib instructs Yunus, “Go and check the water cycle, there is a scorpion. When Yunus follows the orders, he is shocked by the scorpion”<sup>18</sup>. The connection between Nur al-Din and Sheikh al-Tayyib is depicted with fear and respect, on one hand, and respect and mercy, on the other. It is a disciple-master relationship inseparable from physical space. This profound spiritual relationship is influenced by the place and its various influences<sup>19</sup>. In Sufi tradition, the disciple-sheikh relationship is total surrender, like a corpus in the hands of a washer, to denote complete submission of the disciple, who follows the Sheikh’s guidance, not out of the disciple’s desires and needs. It is exemplified in a scene between Yusuf and Sheikh al-Tayyib, saying:

- “This is my son, O Tayyib... I entrust him to you.”
- “A blessed gift you have given, O our Sheikh”<sup>20</sup>.

It encapsulates their deep spiritual bond. Thus, “Sheikh al-Tayyib has a deep profound vision”. Once again, he says, “Sheikh Ahmed Abu al-Duqun holds the hand of Sheikh al-Tayyib, noticing that there is a bond between the disciple and Sheikh al-Tayyib”. Here, the Sheikh is a guide who fosters the knowledge of disciples and transcends the spiritual terrain. Ibn al-Farid says,

*The bearer of burdens folds the sands,  
Graciously, pass o’er Tay’s golden strands*<sup>21</sup>.

In another scene, Nur al-Din tries to purify himself from his guilt, but his close friend unproductively struggles to dissuade him from his self-imposed fast and torture. Suddenly, Sheikh al-Tayyib comes and says, “O Nur al-Din... Nur al-Din! Open your eyes to see the truth, light, and love...”<sup>22</sup>. Then, he explains the Qur’an verse to the disciple that he could not fully comprehend. The verse has become elucidated as if Nur El-Din had murmured it at a time of reflection: “She was predisposed to him, and he to her, had he not witnessed the evidence of his Lord.”<sup>23</sup> Sheikh Al-Tayyib then elucidates: “You have noticed the sign of your Lord, Nur El-Din.” Allah verily embodies beauty and cherishes it. He has disclosed beauty to you, not to misguide you but to consolidate your position<sup>24</sup>.” Delving into the domain of saintly miracles, Sheikh Al-Tayyib’s prophecies and blessings are remarkably manifested, as he forecasts that Nur El-Din “will close the whorehouse”<sup>25</sup>.

Years later, the prophecy proves true. Earlier, Sheikh told him that he will marry Attyat, which became true, as well. When Attyat passes away, and Nur al-Din experiences great loss, Sheikh al-Tayyib enters the room “Basiry swears that he saw the eyes of Sheikh al-Tayyib with whiteness turning black, with their light focusing on the face of Nur El-Din, saying “O Nur El-Din you were tested but passed... You will see her, but do not be deceived”<sup>26</sup>. Late in the life of Nur

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 230.

<sup>19</sup> Mohamed Kashik, Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn and the Features of the Legend, New Culture Journal, Issue 38, Cairo, November 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn, p. 229.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn al-Farid: (Abu Hafs Umar Ibn Abi Alhassan D. 632 AH.= 1234AD.): The Collection of Ibn al-Farid, p. 7. Ed. Karam Albustani, Beirut, 1376 AH.= 1957AD.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> The Holy Qur’an, Surah Yusuf, verse 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn, p. 183.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 228.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.194.

El-Din, he suddenly observes Aziza, who was about to be killed for her illegitimate pregnancy had it not been for his intervention. In clear weakness, he scrutinizes her face, calling, "Who? Attiyat?"<sup>27</sup>. Aziza replies "I am Aziza, O master Sheikh".

We observe Basiri, who had previously encountered Atiyyat<sup>28</sup>, suddenly "vanish once more, only to be restored to Atiyyat by Aziza." The miracle of Sheikh Al-Tayyib is revealed—he was fated to encounter her, or perhaps he intended to meet her in the heavenly realm. During these times of clarity, Basiri endeavors to elucidate the miracles: "He remembers Sheikh Al-Tayyib, the blind seer who discerns the truth." He observed him approach Nur El-Din three times, unaccompanied by a guide. He understands that the Sheikh was not actually present with Nur El-Din; he was located in Qurna, yet the spirit of Sheikh Al-Tayyib swiftly reached out to assist Nur El-Din when he was incapacitated. It was a luminous spark moving<sup>29</sup>. In his depiction of Sheikh Al-Tayyib, Alhajajy fully embodies the role, adopting terms reminiscent of the wisdom of Ibn Ata' Allah Al-Sakandari and other esteemed Sufi thinkers. The guide's function arises, marked by a divergence from his followers' perspectives due to his clearer vision and more genuine discourse. Thus, it is evident how adeptly the writer intertwines Sheikh Al-Tayyib's vocabulary, distinguishing it from the overall narrative style—an essence acknowledged alone by the genuinely devoted.

"O Nur El-Din, refrain from pursuing isolation detached from the community...

You are destined for the people... A worshipper can approach God, even amid a multitude."<sup>30</sup>

"O Nur El-Din, love is a risky journey... To accompany us, one must embrace total risk... Our path is one of love... It is the celestial illumination... the essence of the terrestrial realm.. the heartbeat of a human being... One unfamiliar with love cannot traverse our path... One who does not love people cannot grasp divine love..."<sup>31</sup>

"You have surpassed the borders of the realm...It is time to embark on the path. O Nur El-Din, people pursue us, traveling thousands of miles to come to us, and we, likewise, endeavor to locate you across comparable distances to encounter you. Open your hand<sup>32</sup>. "O Allah, bestow upon him unwavering faith in You, assurance in the hearts of others, and tranquility that surpasses this life and the afterlife"<sup>33</sup>.

Surprisingly, Sheikh al-Tayyib appears in the cave where fighters against the English forces hide. He is portrayed as a Qutb who does not fear war but yearns for jihad. He feels compassion for his companions and addresses Nur al-Din, saying:

"The time has not yet been achieved, Nur al-Din... not yet ...Do not engage your loved ones, Nur al-Din, in matters beyond their comprehension. Exercise patience, as the forthcoming days will yield significant outcomes... Nur al-Din, a day will come in our land when it will be

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.158

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.334.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 319.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.102

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.183.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 194.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

governed by those devoid of affection for it and directed by individuals lacking in virtue. A day will come when a father will dread his son, and a son will lack trust in his father... The voyager will traverse with trepidation... This land's name will become a source of shame and humiliation. However, Allah's mercy is vast... They will be reunified to establish liberty and safety via their armaments. The offspring of this land will achieve unbearable achievements... Exercise patience, Nur al-Din... Exhibit patience”<sup>34</sup>. Alhajjy introduces unwillingly the biography and character of Sheikh al-Tayyib as leading his disciple. Creatively, the author shapes the spiritual relationship between Sheikh al-Tayyib and Sheikh Nur al-Din. According to Abdulkabir Alkhatibi, “the structure of a novel employs images and symbols linking the characters”<sup>35</sup>. On the path of Sufism, he progresses from moheb (lover), murid (seeker), to wasil (arriver)...

*Moheb* rank: “It is a long path, Tayyib”<sup>36</sup>.

*Murid* rank: “Extend your hand... “He extended his hand to his Sheikh and received the pledge”<sup>37</sup>.

*Wasil* rank: “After finishing prayer, he began to praise and murmur:

- Hū .. Hū .. Hū... Then, he moved to the sacred name of Allah:
- Ḥaqq .. Ḥaqq .. Ḥaqq ....”<sup>38</sup>. That is, he reached the fourth name, a superior rank to achieve the greatest one, where the disciple is almost comparable with the Sheikh. Therefore, Sheikh al-Tayyib raises his hand and begins to pray:

- O Allah, I know that Nur al-Din is beloved to you and to the people. O Allah, draw me closer to you through the love of Nur al-Din...

Sheikh al-Tayyib extends his hand to the nodded head of Nur al-Din, saying, “You will need me no more, O Nur al-Din. You will be the mufti (guide) of our path as we need you”<sup>39</sup>.

He achieved a high rank of Sufism and became the mufti of al-Ṭarīq (order). The Shiekh would always recite his regular prayers, invocations, and chant the poem of Imam al-Dardir: “Blessed are you, O Allah, my Lord, to You is all praise.”<sup>40</sup> These practices demonstrate to us the Sufi character of Nur al-Din.

- Personification of the Character of Sheikh Nur al-Din:

The writer adeptly depicts the characters to illustrate the valor of Sheikh Nur al-Din, emphasizing his Sufi attributes. Thus, he delineates the other characters, highlighting facets of their personalities that accentuate his key theme, imbuing them with psychological complexity and spiritual dilemmas that finally bolster the Sheikh’s heroic status. In spite of the diverse characters, their functions are vital and reinforce the ideals represented by the Sheikh. This aspect is demonstrated in the absence and underdevelopment of many characters, as they predominantly serve to emphasize particular attributes of Sheikh Nur al-Din. Alhajjy meticulously constructs Nur al-Din's image, imbuing it with both veneration and admiration, while his depiction is shaped by the conventional heroic archetypes seen in folk tales. For instance, the Sheikh’s birth is depicted

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Abdulkabir Alkhatibi: On Writing and Experiment, p. 95, trans. Mohamed Birada, Alawda Press, Beirut, 1980.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajjy: Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn, p. 231.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.194.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pp. 194-195.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 310.

<sup>40</sup> Imam al-Dardir, Poem of the Blessed Names of Allah, p. 60 and beyond, Alshamarly, Cairo, n.d.

as a moment of profound significance: “His mother recounted a light descending onto her lap, urging her to name the new-born baby Nur al-Din (lit. *light of religion*)<sup>41</sup>, a notion echoing narratives in folk tales. This notion was reported in the biography of Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him) on the account of Lady Amina, who reported that “during her pregnancy, she observed a light out of her that helped her see the Palaces of Busra in the Levant”<sup>42</sup>. The author continues the depiction of Sheikh Nur al-Din meticulously, as if Nur is prepared for his tasks. In *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, the Orientalist Richard Gramlich reported the motif of miraculous births as he observed the extraordinary occurrences associated with the births of wali (saints)<sup>43</sup>, exemplified by the account of Abdul Qadir al-Jilani's mother conceiving him at the age of sixty, far past the typical childbearing age<sup>44</sup>. It was also reported that Al-Hussien was delivered no later than six months of pregnancy<sup>45</sup>. In the *Life of Animals*, al-Damiri narrates remarkable pregnancies of four years, two years, and sixteen months<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, Attar recounts several examples. For instance in *Tazkirat al-Awliya (Biography of Saints)*, Attar recounts the night of the birth of Sheikh Abu Ishaq Alkazony (D. 246AH.=1035AD.) that “a person observed light out of the house of birth connected to the sky as a pillar of light, diverging in every corner of the house”<sup>47</sup>. The author should not have repeated such situations. He continues the depiction of Nur al-Din's divine vocation, claiming that his existence stems from a prayer by Sheikh Ahmed Abu Sharqawi when he was sinking, implying that Nur al-Din's life is infused with a concealed divine mystery<sup>48</sup>. Additionally, he reads a book instantly and memorizes it by heart<sup>49</sup>. The novel demonstrates his remarkable attributes, including a dramatic encounter with a charming woman, but he penetrates the wall to say “Are you there? It is repeated and he stands still”<sup>50</sup> and “he used to swim faster than anyone”<sup>51</sup>, with the narrator Basiri al-Abadi asserting that he had been graced by the great power of al-Khidr (peace be upon him)<sup>52</sup>.

- “He was the best horse rider in Luxor and a great champion”<sup>53</sup>.
- “Nur al-Din told Basiri that he saw Allah in this path”<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p.8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Hisham: (Abu Muhammad Abdulmalik Ibn Hisham Alma'fry D. 213 AH), *Prophetic Biography*, Vol. 1, p. 113, ed. Dr. Muhammad Fahmy Alsirjany, Tawfiqia Bookstore in Al-Azhar, Cairo, n.d.

<sup>43</sup> Gramlich, Richard: *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes, Theologie und Erscheinungsformen des islamische Heiligenwunders*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden GMBH, 1983, S. 148- 150

<sup>44</sup> Dar Shakwah: (Muhammad) 1615-1659): *Shipyards of Saints*, p.45, Cawnpore, 1884.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Tabari: (Abu Jaffar Muhammad ibn Jarir 839-923), *Manifestations of Imamh*, p. 71, Najaf, 1369AH=1949AD.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Damiri: (Muhammad KamalEldeen 1349-1405) *The Great Life of Animals*, Vol. 1, p.68, Cairo, 1319AH.

<sup>47</sup> Attar: (Farid al-Din) *Tazkirat al-Awliya*, Vol. 2, p.292; ED . Reynold A . Nicholson . 1 - 2 LONDON - Leiden 1905. The narration of light during pregnancy or birth is frequent, see Muhammad Ibn Othman, *Firdaws al-Murshidiyah ; fi Asrār al-Ṣamadīyah*, p.63-64, Leipzig; Gholam Serwar Lahori, *Khazīnat al-aṣfiyā'*, Vol. 2, p.225, Tehran, 1290 AH.; Sheikh Hussien Ibn Abdulwahab: *'Uyūn al-mu'jizāt (Eyes of Miracles)*, p. 58 and beyond, Aldawry Bookstore, Qum, 1395AH.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p.99.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.45.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.46.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.100.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 286.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.315.



Basiri has known the secret of Nur al-Din. What was the secret? What about the star that Mahmoud saw set? Basiri says that he saw it shine and set”<sup>55</sup>. Bessiri sensed a tug on his face, compelling him to look around. On the mountain, he observed Nur al-Din standing, gazing at the star and noting its position. Bessiri shifted his gaze between Nur al-Din and the star: the star in the sky and Nur al-Din in his white robe upon the mountain. His heart retreated... His gaze settled upon Nur al-Din. He observed a beam of light descending upon Nur al-Din's head, with the rays encircling him in illumination. Bessiri could perceive nothing but the illumination... Founding it hard, he finally succeeded in articulating: "We bear witness for you, O Nur."<sup>56</sup>

The images created by the author of Sheikh Nur al-Din, while appropriate for the character of Sheikh al-Tayyib, appear slightly overblown despite their truthfulness. Alhajajy portrays Nur al-Din as a magnificent man, but the halo he seeks to bestow upon him—one that is trustworthy of—has set him apart from the recipient, suggesting that the recipient is observing him from a distance rather than accompanying him closely. The author might have acknowledged this and sought to restore the recipient's connection by incorporating instances of human weakness in Nur al-Din, as if he preserves the recipient's spiritual connection with Nur al-Din, who, despite his relentless efforts for the benefit of others, remains, in his humanity, an admirer of love and beauty. For instance, although he had expelled a companion for surreptitiously observing a neighbor's window, where he gazed at a stunning, unclothed woman, we discover that Nur al-Din, Al-Azhar student, dates Atiyyat, his first and only love, who gets undressed, at a time of vulnerability. They pledge to get married, and he has secured their marriage contract duly signed by the esteemed Sheikh al-Tayyib. After that, he moves to Sudan to procure her mahr (dowry), returning with a pouch containing fifty gold pounds, but alas he is confronted with the news of her death. Consequently, sorrow engulfs him, and he rushes to her grave, standing over it in a touching moment of human suffering, akin to Qays at Layla's tomb. It is a moment of vulnerability, yet it has inherent strength, resulting in a wound that remains unhealed, even years later. Upon encountering Aziza, who has a striking resemblance to Atiyyat, he is rendered speechless by shock. “Who?” “Atiyyat?”

The author successfully depicts this moment of vulnerability:

"His facial expressions transform entirely as he raises his gaze to her visage... His eyes enlarge, focused on the girl's visage, captivated by her with fervor... His eyes quiver... Mahmoud observes his fingers shivering... his entire body shudders... The Sheikh stands as if greeting a dear person from whom he had been estranged a long time ago...- Who? Atiyyat?"<sup>57</sup>

The significant tragedy in this depiction is enough to trigger profound sorrow for the girl in Sheikh Nur al-Din...It makes mercy an inseparable attribute. The author tries to make Sheikh Nur al-Din real, when Nur pauses after demolishing the courtyard crying “He started to cry... weeping strongly”<sup>58</sup>. It is a unique human experience.

### ***B. Convergence of Pharaonic, Christian, and Islamic Elements:***

Upon visiting Luxor, one is captivated by the sight of the mausoleum of Sayyid "Abu al-Hajjaj," overlooking the Luxor Temple and features the remnants of an altar. Luxor exemplifies

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.225.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.331.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, pp.157-158.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.103.

the profound interconnection of Pharaonic, Christian, and Islamic traditions more than any other location. Thus, the author deliberately converged the three elements throughout the novel, stressing the bond between Muslims and Copts, as demonstrated by the words of Teresa, Mahmoud's lover: "If I would choose a man to marry, he would be Mahmoud"<sup>59</sup>. Munira, Mahmoud's daughter, feels the same deeply that "this girl, Teresa, is the most suitable to Mahmoud but"<sup>60</sup> religion hinders. "If only Mahmoud were Christian or she were Muslim, she would marry him despite her family's disapproval."<sup>61</sup> The author emphasizes that his grandfather also married a Christian named Teresa, suggesting that the tolerance between the two religions was not recent; indeed, he emphasizes it with pride.

"The name Teresa triggers him, as it recalls the well-known story of his great-grandfather, Sheikh Abu al-Hajjaj, who wed a Coptic woman named Teresa. He frequently feels proud of his grandmother, recognizing that his lineage embodies an interwoven blend of Arab and ancient Egyptian ancestry. Teresa unsettles the entirety of the past and intensifies the amalgamation of the earliest roots"<sup>62</sup>.

Nonetheless, Mahmoud and Teresa contend this feeling unconsciously. Mahmoud devotion to Teresa was not totally wrong. Rather, the author underscores the positive rapport between the bishop and Sheikh al-Tayyib, and between Sheikh Nur al-Din and bishop Makari, alongside his prior relationship with bishop Abd al-Masih, formerly his instructor, who was named Benjamin. Here, the history of Luxor excels solely the Muslims, incorporating the Copts as a key part of the area's narrative. In the conflict against the English forces, Ahmed Shams al-Din notably includes Abd al-Masih Abu Fahmi with Sheikh al-Tayyib, Sheikh Nur al-Din, Bessiri, and Sayyid Abualhassan, denoting his involvement in the Muslim resistance against the English. Furthermore, Sheikh Nur al-Din mediates among the Copts to facilitate their marriage, as is the case of Salib and Teresa, despite class disparities. These examples show Sheikh Nur al-Din as a universal marriage registrar, as if the author feels shocked by the broken contemporary relationship. However, I believe that Alhajaj intentionally associates Pharaonic history with current Islam, suggesting that history is a delicate accumulation of days and years. He maintains a connection between these rites and history, and even in the *khehwa* (isolation) of Sheikh Nur al-Din in the Pharaonic tomb, he does not shy away from the Pharaonic inscriptions; rather, he finds solace in them. Let us examine his account of the Pharaonic antiquities in the tomb, as if Sufism had elevated him to a transcendent level of existence. "He scrutinized engraved faces...knights fighting...captives... men standing subtly smiling... He knows these faces... They resemble those of siblings... an undressed man with private parts naked...a dog's head... a cat's face... a falcon.. a crocodile... The world is here.. He pauses at a depiction of a woman cradling a child in her arms, standing regally... Her gaze captivates him, beckoning him... He contemplates, feeling that he resides in his own realm... that an invisible force beckons him towards the sky... compelling him towards a superior authority that controls him... He experiences divine love... a fearless love, untainted and transparent... As he traverses the tomb's courtyard, an undeniable conviction envelopes him that this location is hallowed, akin to a mosque or a courtyard... He completes his prayer and continues reciting the Quran. He finds it joyful to recite the usual prayers recited by his sibling on every religious occasion. He recites: "Blessed are You, O Allah, my Lord; to You be

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.120.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.29.

the praise..." He is not chanting in alone; he is a bit sure, as the voices of people depicted in the images emerge from their positions to accompany him in prayers..."<sup>63</sup>

What kind of relationship does the author want to depict between the tomb and the mosque in a beautiful chant that surpasses the description of al-Buhturi of an engraving on a wall in the Iwan of Khausra:

"My suspicion intensifies as my hands make contact with them, resembling an embrace."<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, the author does not depict the Nile as a river but a lively heritage ... a being... that loves, hates, and sinks...Where people are purified of their fears in... Thus, Sheikh Nur al-Din is shown as "casting the dust of the graveyard into the Nile, undressed, while reciting Surah Yaseen, discarding his handkerchief and supplicating to Allah."<sup>65</sup> This profound relationship with the Nile is consistently highlighted in the character of Muhammad Khalil Qasim in *Al-Shamandura*. For instance, Darya Sakinah, a character, sends a letter to her son Jamal, saying, "Your mother visits the Nile's bank daily to pray for you"<sup>66</sup>. Moreover, Fadl's wife "faces the Nile, praying to Allah as if she believes He dwells within its depths"<sup>67</sup>.

The author asserts that when his son looks at his father's naked body, "he feels that he sees a Pharaoh emerging from the realm of eternity"<sup>68</sup>. When he remembers that he cannot withstand the river... as if a relationship of a vital, indissoluble connection between them, a passion that Sheikh Nur al-Din cannot suppress until he engages with the essence of the river"<sup>69</sup>.

We should not forget the dowry pouch of Atiyyat of fifty golden pounds that urged him almost to perish to get. Upon his return to wed her, he is shocked to discover that she passed away. Consequently, the dowry transforms into a concealed entity, from which he allocates funds to wed the impoverished and cherished individuals. He expends this concealed money (a representation of unadulterated vice) as if it were an Egyptian treasure - to connect lovers yet on the verge of separation due to socioeconomic disparities. He endeavors to unite them, perhaps atoning for the romantic union he could not get because of fate's interference.

The author stresses that the courtyard is a Pharaonic establishment: "Mahmoud approaches to examine its remnants and discovers a statue of an ancient Egyptian deity,"<sup>70</sup> accompanied by depictions of his cherished Atiyyat". Hussein indifferently remarks to his wife that she shares similarities with "*masakhit (statues)*" specifically likening her to the most adorable among them, like the depiction of the queen in the Luxor Temple, cradling her infant. "How charming is she!"<sup>71</sup>. Sheikh Nur al-Din himself concedes: "O My God, this is the first female body I have ever gazed at, its contours reminiscent of the woman who once prayed with me at the tomb"<sup>72</sup>. By the end of the novel, their relationship is in a state of mutual self-devotion, culminating in *hulul* (a mystical union) emblematic of Sufism. Mahmoud approaches the ancient cemetery: "He looked at the

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.96.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Buhturi: (Collection of Al-Buhturi, Vol. 2, p. 1175, ed. Hasan Kamel, Dar Almareef, 2nd ed., Cairo, 1973.

<sup>65</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p.84.

<sup>66</sup> Muhammad Khalil Qasim: *Al-Shamandura*, p.358, Ministry of Culture, Cairo, 1968.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.335.

<sup>68</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p.85.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.240.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.106.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p.188.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p.176.

remnants of the courtyard... Excavations commenced beneath in pursuit of the temple. The terrain was flattened to the temple's foundation... He felt that he was urged to trespass the wire fence... He stood amidst the ruins and discovered the remnants of stones from the altar. An ancient church once existed here, but it is now demolished. He traversed the stones and found fragments of statuary. A section of an ancient Egyptian temple that once existed here is now in ruins. The temple, church, and courtyard were completely obliterated... He stood before a huge statue, scrutinizing it in the illumination cast by the lamps of the Abu al-Hajjaj minaret. He stood in the courtyard before the face, presumably that of the Pharaoh. His body trembled upon the realization that he stood before Nur al-Din<sup>73</sup>. The author further delineates the condition of mystical union: "He left the statue and beheld before him the body of a deity, the softness, and purity of Nur al-Din's body as he emerged from the Nile"<sup>74</sup>. "His eyes were wide and elongated, resembling those of figures depicted in the ancient wall paintings of the Luxor Temple"<sup>75</sup>. Here, the author does not see the Pharaonic element as scattered ruins but perceives them standing before his eyes. He believes that the sanctity of his convictions extends beyond a religion marked by mindless zeal, transcending bounds to encompass the Creator. I believe that the author's Sufi perspective influenced his conviction despite his attempts to obscure it. This tendency has discreetly permeated the novel, revealing what he may have wished to conceal.

## ***II. Features of the Folk Biography***

### ***1. Features of the Folk Hero in the Character of Sheikh Nur al-Din:***

The author deliberately named his work "*Sīrat*", a title that encapsulates several folk traditions still transmitted among Upper Egyptians, especially during weddings, agricultural activities, and festivals. These narratives are maintained by males and females, with numerous folk tales transmitted over generations, including the folk tales of Antar ibn Shaddad, Princess Zat al-Himma, Al-Zahir Baybars, Ali al-Zaybaq, and Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan. These tales attained significant popularity, establishing themselves as a fundamental component of the public's cultural consumption at cafés and marketplaces. They permeated and persisted in the consciousness of the Arab populace to the extent that the identities of their authors were obscured<sup>76</sup>. The author has a distinct affinity for the *Sirat al-Hilaliyyah (the Hilali epic)*, probably because of the marginalized populations that emerged in Luxor, which the author acknowledges, including Al-Halbah/Hallebiyyīn, featuring the characters of Munufī, Azizah, and Riya, alongside the Ghawazi community, which the author intentionally illustrates through the character of Rafiqah, symbolic of the Ghawazī woman, who captivates the affections of all men. Nevertheless, she remains dedicated to Nur al-Din, and the author uses this character to imply that even these prostitutes have human emotions of love and hatred. Rafiqah is unable to contact Nur al-Din, despite her efforts via her friend Jalīlah, who thereafter develops feelings for Basiri Al-Abadi, Nur al-Din's companion from the 'Abbādah tribe, a desert clan well-versed in the region's mysteries. He returns her affection, and Sheikh Nur al-Din advocates for Basiri to wed Jalīlah, which ultimately occurs. The relationship between Nur al-Din and Basiri is robust and characterized by friendliness and humorous banter. As Nur al-Din is in the moment of death, he enquires, "Has Basiri come?". Al-Hajj responds, "No, dad."<sup>77</sup> It appears he desired to see his cherished friend before his death. The

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.33.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.338.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p.69.

<sup>76</sup> Farouq Khorshid, Highlights on Folk Biographies, p. 24, Iqraa Publications, Beirut, n.d.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajjaj: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p.207.

marginalized communities in Luxor would perform the *Hilali epic*. The author aims to transform the *Biography of Sheikh Nur al-Din* into an epic comparable to that of Abu Zayd al-Hilali, a hero renowned for his invincibility in combat. Sheikh Nur al-Din is depicted as a fearless warrior in the *mawlid* (festival) of Sheikh Abu al-Hajjaj, Abu al-Jud, and al-Tawab in Qus, where he triumphs over all adversaries. Hajj Muhammad Abdullah Abu Awad, renowned for killing the Turkish Multazim of Karnak, states: “You are victorious by virtuous luck, O Sherif... that suffices for today.”<sup>78</sup> We shall not forget the deserts he traveled to get the dowry of his beloved Attiyyat and the camel journey that caused him to almost perish in the desert of Sudan and Egypt like Antar ibn Shadad confronting catastrophes to get the asafeer camels as a dowry for Abla. He portrays the knight Nur al-Din, who excels in chivalry and swimming. “The narratives describe his swimming skill, as he consistently surpassed others in passing the Nile.”<sup>79</sup> His wife extols his virility, comparing him to heroic people from antiquity, remarking on his advanced years. “He can marry numerous young women; he is a robust, virile man.”<sup>80</sup> The characteristics of the Sirat are manifest in numerous instances: Rafiqah, who memorizes the *Hilali Sirat* by heart, attempts to reconcile her feelings upon witnessing Nur al-Din unseat Zidan, the Sheikh Tamaseeh, who has, for the first time, fallen off his horse. “She tends to this young man, who evokes memories of Abu Zayd al-Hilali and his conflict with his father, Rizq ibn Nayyil.”<sup>81</sup> Rafiqah affirms this manifestation by reporting on Munira: “Is she aware that her father was the preeminent horseman in Luxor, a hero akin to Abu Zayd al-Hilali? He elevated her and numerous other men to heroes in their neighborhood.”<sup>82</sup> When Rafiqah feels angry with Sayed Abu Hussein, the mayor of the West, “she expresses a desire to witness him combat Nur al-Din, asserting that Nur will undoubtedly win, just as Abu Zayd triumphed over his grandfather, al-Zanati Khalifah.”<sup>83</sup> Nur al-Din is not separate; rather, he personifies it in his cognition and consciousness. Upon observing Sayed Abu Hussein approaching, he greets him, “Welcome, Abu Mehran, son of al-Zanati Khalifah.”<sup>84</sup> Sayed Abu Hussein himself is affected by the tradition of Abu Zayd al-Hilali. At a time of sorrow for arresting his companion, Nur al-Din twirls his mustache and remarks, “Zaghabi would not have such honor of a mustache had I not imparted a lesson to the English, nor would the son of al-Zanati Khalifah have encountered such a predicament if I had not reinstated Said Pasha and Abd al-Mu‘ti Abu Jibril.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, all Upper Egyptian characters in the novel depict al-Zanati Khalifa, seeing him as a hero, with his life and chivalry as a model. When Nur al-Din wants to finish the battle against the English and allies, Sayed Abu Hussein resists him, unwavering in his commitment to persist in the jihad until death. Nur al-Din shouts at him:

- “O Zaghabi, war is a trick; do not resemble your grandfather, al-Zanati, who ultimately lost the entire West despite his heroism and courage.”<sup>86</sup> The author uses excerpts of the *Hilali Sirat* narrated by Rafiqah at the time of great desire for Nur al-Din:

*Younis, son of Hilyali wandered through the market with pride,*

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.21.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p.46.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.68.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.234.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 237.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p.272.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.228.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p.303.

*He greeted the merchants, who returned his stride.  
The Hilyali girls, a sight to behold,  
In the garden of Al-Alam, where the guide lost his hold.  
A beauty appeared from the window, an Iraqi delight,  
No Hilyali girl matched her, Oh, how her char took flight!  
Love's wound is cruel, baffling even the wise,  
From its pain, they sigh, "Oh, how about Abu Miyeh!" they cry.  
The town was divided, torn in two,  
Why has this sorrow come to me?  
I'm ill, dying, but don't turn me away,  
Ninety-nine doctors and nurses failed, yet none could stay"*<sup>87</sup>.

Rafiqah recites these lines in her current state, as if the author wants to stress that the Sirat are live events in Upper Egypt. Thus, he describes Rafiqah amazingly.

"She shivered, sprang, whirled, and uttered sad words:  
*From its pain, they sigh, "Oh, how about Abu Miyeh!" they cry.  
The town was divided, torn in two,  
Why has this sorrow come to me?  
I'm ill, dying, but don't turn me away,  
Ninety-nine doctors and nurses failed, yet none could stay"*

She repeated with varying intonation. Then, she cried and smiled, turned around fast, fell to the ground, and cried hysterically<sup>88</sup>. She seems to reach a Sufi state, fully engaged in the vibrant legacy she is a part of. The chant of Rafiqah is an oral composition transmitted verbally. According to Muhammad Rizq al-Khafaji, "we should differentiate between spoken discourse across various classes and text documented in books, as the latter frequently forfeits certain dynamic attributes."<sup>89</sup> Thus, the author illustrates that we should not regard these words in isolation, despite their reflection and expression of the discourse; we must also consider the act of their performance. At the end of the novel, Mahmoud discloses what he has concealed from the outset of the narrative. Upon calling out to Nur al-Din, he receives no reply other than the echo, as his father, Nur al-Din, is dead. Mahmoud faces a significant dilemma. Subsequently, good strides arrive from the west, conveyed by the renowned narrator, al-Nadi 'Uthman, as though he sensed the estrangement of this young man. It appears that al-Nadi intended to respond from across the Nile, suggesting that the Nile serves not as a barrier but as a conduit between two live experiences. The eastern bank of the Nile symbolizes the realm of the living, whilst the western one signifies the afterlife, according to ancient Egyptian beliefs, who established temples there, and the king in the east in Luxor and Karnak Temples. Moreover, they created tombs to the west of the Nile in the Valley of Kings and

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.238.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.P.238

<sup>89</sup> Muhammad Rizq al-Khafaji: The Phenomenon of Vulgarity in Language and Criticism, p. 6, Dar Fania, Cairo, 1986.

Queens. From the Valley of the Dead, the echo through the narrator reaches Mahmoud, son of Shams al-Din. The narrator plays the rababah and asks for peace and blessings of the Prophet, chanting

*O yearning heart, long for the Prophet's grace,  
O soul, send blessings upon his noble trace.*

.....

*We speak of Abu Zaid al-Hilali's might,  
A sword that bends not, a rider in the fight,  
With reins so tight, his spirit so free,  
A spring of hope for orphans, as all can see.  
Abu al-Barakat, with al-Khidr by his side,  
A shepherd of men, in whom all trust abide,  
Chief of the Arabs, his name does stand,  
A prince among princes, ruler of the land<sup>90</sup>.*

Mahmoud appears to aim for a profound connection between his father and Abu Zaid Al-Hilali, while positioning himself as a continuation of this legendary story. Consequently, he started to gaze at the sky, seeking the "star with the tail". He observed it... He remained motionless, examining it with great focus. It appeared altered from its initial form — it looked diminished, in a nascent state... separated from its companions, with a significant gap between them, yet it remained visible<sup>91</sup>. Mahmoud felt content with the simplicity of existence, an extension of this man and this legend. He listened once more to the explanation, which he had earlier assigned to the voice of the poet: The author seems to have aimed to create his vision through the character of al-Nadi Othman, initially referred to as the popular storyteller, only to depict him as a poet later. The author appeared to craft, through him, the ensuing words:

"Pray for the Prophet and bestow blessings upon him. Each day, we recount the *Al-Hilali Sirat*. So, you claim this is the tale of Abu Zaid... Many believe that we are presenting a narrative without foundation, asserting that Abu Zaid was a fictional figure; however, Abu Zaid indeed existed... He resided among us... And he was a champion... Numerous heroes have graced our land and will continue to do so... This is the rural landscape, the ropes of the children.<sup>92</sup>" The author continued with what he believed required additional clarification.

"He felt that Abu Zaid al-Hilali nor Nur al-Din passed away, no defeated the river, the sycamore tree will not die, with roots in the river to give birth to other trees"<sup>93</sup>. Accordingly, Alhajajy wanted the *Sirat* to continue, ending the novel with an excerpt from the folk narrator, "and pray for the Prophet".

<sup>90</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, pp.339-340.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p.340

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, pp.340-341.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p.341.

## 2. *Woman in the Sirat :*

In folk epics, women hold a significant position and occasionally exceed the roles of males. A woman may perish for love, give herself for honor and dignity, or defend her motherland and honor. The epics contain several names, such as Princess Dhat al-Himma, Al-Rabab, Qatilat aS-Shujaan, Ummama, Queen Aluf, Fatima bint al-Qadi Nur al-Din, and Umm Ali al-Zibaq. Thus, women were pivotal in the epic of Sheikh Nur al-Din, with Rafiqah being one of the most prominent characters. She is a "ghaziyya" (a lady who performs at celebrations and engages in sexual relations with men who compensate her), but she then experiences a profound metamorphosis. She, thanks to Nur al-Din, weds the mayor known as Sayed Abu Hussein of the West. She performs Hajj more than once. Moreover, Rafiqah fights in the cause of Allah on horses with the valor of the most esteemed knights and heroes, and advances, veiled, among the horsemen, accompanied by her husband, Sheikh Nur al-Din, and his companions. She makes plans and subsequently ascends to the position of mayor of the West after her husband, the former mayor, being ousted from office by the government and supplanted by another individual due to his participation in the jihad against the English forces. Upon her return after two months of combat in Esna, Khazham, Farshout, and Luxor, she epitomizes the woman archetype in folk epics. "She smiles, as she remembers a night they spent with a friend of her husband without knowing that Abu Hussien was her husband. Dressed like men, they thought that she was a man. Before dawn, she had an intimate time with Abu Hussien. In the duha (early morning), she approached the entrance to the village, afraid of the sight of people who were busy working in the fields... None were looking at her. Seemingly, none could recognize her until she arrived at the house... She found her son-in-law standing before the Diwan and called, "Mahran", who looked at her, dismounting off the horse... The boy advanced, saying "O uncle, any help? Please, come in"<sup>94</sup>.

Even Mahran could not recognize this veiled knight fighting with men to the extent that she forgets her femineity. A woman is not for pleasure only but can equal a man in courage and valor. Munira, daughter of Sheikh Nur al-Din, had a role in reassuring her father, assuming a role like that of a naqib (leader), whose role was to bring him happiness. Despite being portrayed as a paragon of kindness and jealousy over women who visited her husband, Sheikh Nur's wife retained dignity and piety. Overall, female characters were highly positive in the novel. Additionally, the author did not differentiate between Muslim and Christian women, retaining equal respect to the Copts and assigning them effective roles throughout the novel.

The role of "Raya" should be highlighted, as she endeavored to save her daughter, Aziza, whose father and brothers conspired to kill her before dawn. Her resourcefulness and determination urged her to seek the aid of Sheikh Nur al-Din at night, believing that none but he could save Aziza. Sheikh Nur al-Din intervened and resolved the crisis by marrying Aziza to Yunus, despite the parents' refusal.

## III. *Modern Techniques*

### a. *Stream of Consciousness and Creating Parallel Characters :*

Telling a story of a renowned figure, the author loses a significant part of suspense, which would otherwise serve as a powerful tool. Thus, the author employs other tools. For example, Salah Abdel Sabour, in the *Tragedy of al-Hallaj*, begins the play with a scene of al-Hallaj's death,

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, pp. 295-296.



although audiences are familiar with his execution. He begins with the scene of the merchant asking the preacher:

- Look what they've placed in our path!
- A crucified Sheikh!<sup>95</sup>

Ahmed Shams al-Din experienced a similar dilemma. He adopted the structure of folk epics, chronicling the hero's journey from birth to beyond death. He introduced the hero's death after about two-thirds of the novel. Then, he employed the stream of consciousness technique, bringing forward every character influenced by or influential to Sheikh Nur al-Din to attend the mourning to be consumed by personal grief, memories, and the virtues of the Sheikh. Accordingly, the final third, as the author intended, was a state of inescapable remembrance. Similarly, Mahmoud, the son, seemed parallel to the main character (Sham al-Din) as a shadow or natural extension. Although Mahmoud believed that he could not match Sham's greatness, some hints highlighted his aspirations to match. Remarkably, many events of the father's life were mirrored in the son's, demonstrating striking parallel. For instance, the father could not marry Attiyyat due to her death, the son could not marry Teresa because she was Christian. The recipient was the father when Attiyyat got undressed before marriage, and he gazed at her body, on the verge of disrobing himself. At that critical time, he fled. Later, he recalled it as a sign from his Lord, as told by Sheikh al-Tayyib. Similarly, Mahmoud acknowledged that Sheikh Nur al-Din was between him and physical pleasure. Once, after undressing with a charming woman, Mahmoud saw his father, as if penetrating the wall, questioning, "Is that you?". This recurring vision halted his physical actions entirely<sup>96</sup>. The recipient was the father who was fond of the Nile to purify the sins and explore his roots. Similarly, when Mahmoud felt annoyed or sad, he sought solace in the Nile: "he delved into the water with a desire to touch the bottom and hold the roots"<sup>97</sup>. The recipient was Aziza, who rekindled the love of the Sheikh, making his eyes widen, drawing an unwavering gaze, and stirring a deep internal reaction<sup>98</sup>. When the young man saw her, "he stifled a cry that almost escaped, suppressing it against his will... Her wide eyes, with long lashes, appeared as though they were painted with a fine, precise brow devoid of a single stray hair. As her eyes moved, his gaze followed to capture the rest of her body"<sup>99</sup>. The novel establishes a parallel between Sheikh Nur al-Din and the young man, with Mahmoud, a natural successor to his father. This parallelism underscores Mahmoud's emergence as a character shaped by his environment; akin to him, the Sheikh's persona was intricately developed in relationships to his surroundings. Moreover, the epic highlights other dualities, including Diab, whose return from Britain to Cairo and then to Luxor to sell his ancestral land disrupts the traditional reverence for heritage. Diab "appears like a ghost, a spirit, a serpent... a walking corpse in the old cemetery."<sup>100</sup>

Similarly, Rafiq with Sayyed Abu Hussien and Galila with Basiri take parallel lines. Although their characters did not clearly develop through the narrator, who memorizes the past days and events, their deep-rooted and clear characters are highlighted to reveal reactions. In fact, the epic gave historical dimensions to Luxor and the political movement. Although it may end

<sup>95</sup> Salah Abdel Sabour, *the Tragedy of al-Hallaj (Complete Works)*, p.449, Dar Alawda, Beirut, 1986.

<sup>96</sup> Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy: *Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn*, p.46.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p.341.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p.157.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

with the death of the protagonist, Shams Aldin, his biography cannot die as it passes through generations, enjoying unparalleled grace.

### C. *Stylistic Techniques:*

The novel utilizes the omniscient narrator, as the narrator has a comprehensive awareness of events, presenting them retrospectively with a complete understanding of the narrative's conclusion. The narrator possesses omniscience, whereas the recipient and characters engage with the narrative without prior knowledge of forthcoming events. Such omniscience is intricately woven into instances where the narrative converges with folk epics, illustrating the author's aim to blend historical narratives with modern realities. The narrative underscores that language facilitates comprehension, referred to as the mirror of expression<sup>101</sup>. Alhajajy addresses the complexities of the first-person by eschewing epic narration in favor of third-person storytelling. Mahmoud and Nur el-Din represent the author and his father, Sheikh Shams Aldin, enabling the writer to examine personal and familial relationships with a sense of detachment. This decision allows the author to authentically portray experiences, such as Mahmoud's affection for Teresa, which could have been uncomfortable if presented as a direct autobiography. The novel adeptly integrates classical Arabic for narrative with colloquial dialects for conversation, integrating passages from renowned epics such as *Hilali epic* to enhance its stylistic and rhythmic variety, successfully uniting prose and traditional oral storytelling.

*“O yearning heart, send blessings on the Prophet sublime,  
Upon the chosen one, honored through time.  
To whom Gabriel descended on the night of Rajab,  
A messenger revered by every Arab.  
Let me speak of the kings of the Arab lands,  
With wisdom that the mind fully understands.  
The nation of our Prophet, the Chosen One,  
Upon him be peace, until time is done.”*<sup>102</sup>

These chanted lines are rhymed.

It totally differs from the chanting of the Bedouin Bashir Wad Saleh:

*“Travel requires wisdom and foresight,  
A rifle, and belongings for any caravan’s plight.  
A camel as sturdy as a young lady in a stride,  
And one that never betrays its neighbor’s side.”*<sup>103</sup>

The expressions here seem to take the state of the oral enclosure, probably due to the effect of Sudanese colloquialism on the poet or *hadaa* (chanting), which requires them to match the

<sup>101</sup> Mohammad Reza Shafiee Kadkani: *The Poetic Language in Sufi Prose*, p. 102, trans. Emad Khalaf and Mohammad Hassan Zadeh, Ogarit Publishing and Aram Press, Damascus, 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 339.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p.327.

movement of camels and make them move fast. Humor is evident in some scenes (the train- the stolen goat- Rafiq, and an intimate moment with her husband- Throwing Basiri into the water wheel...). However, the true beauty of style is in language and rhythm, particularly the spiritual ecstasy of Ahmed Shams Aldin, when he transcends reality to a state of Sufi presence to experience *baqaa* (subsistence) and *fana* (annihilation) simultaneously.

Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn is an epic trustworthy of transfer and nation. It combines biography, narration, and dramatic dialog with folk epics. It is a historical epic that tells the story of Upper Egyptian generations that could almost perish unless recorded.

### Conclusion

*Sīrat al-Shaykh Nūr-al-Dīn* by the Egyptian writer Ahmed Shams Aldin Alhajajy is one of the most important Arabic novels that surpasses the boundaries between literary genres. The study revealed that this text combines various literary genres, forming the *Epic-Novelistic Drama*. It is a narrative, theatrical, and poetic text with autobiographical elements, as the genres merge, and the characters engage in a popular, poetic narrative drama. The study adopted an analytical approach to examine the structure of the narrative action and the Sufi visions, including the Sufi courtyard and its functional role in the spatial text that transcends time, making the fixed spatial courtyard a pivot for the changing temporal dimension. It analyzed the character of Sheikh al-Tayyib and its reflection on the protagonist, the characterization of Sheikh Nur al-Din. Then, it tackled the features of the folk tale in the novel, emphasizing the traits of the folk hero in the character of Sheikh Nur al-Din. It also addressed the position and importance of women in both the explicit and implicit texts. Finally, it explored modern techniques, such as the stream of consciousness, the creation of parallel characters, and the stylistic techniques in the novel.