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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Amin Maalouf's *Leo The African* : Between Self-Orientalism and Reconstructing Identity

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| ABSTRACT
This paper explores the fictional world of Amin Maalouf both as a manifestation of World Literature in French, and as an exceptionnal diasporic voice, while problematizing Maalouf's positionality as an exophonic writer grappling with issues of language, exile, and identity. It further questions Maalouf's engagement with the essentialist Logic characteristic of self-Orientalist/exoticist rhetoric, and thus speculates on his involvement -by accident or by design-with the machinery of the global capitalist marketplace and the publishing industry. The paper incidentally invites the reader to envisage Maalouf's literary opus Leo The African (1986) as a market commodity making its way through the international circuits of book trade dissemination, and to further examine the discursive strategies mobilized by both author and publisher to promote the circulation of Maalouf's text on a planetary scale.

| KEYWORDS

Amin Maalouf; exophonic; World Literature; Self-Orientalism; Leo The African; Global market

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The present article explores the fictional world of Amin Maalouf both as a manifestation of World Literature in French and an exceptional diasporic voice, while problematizing Maalouf's positionality as an 'exophonic'[1] writer grappling with issues of language, exile, and identity. It further questions Maalouf's engagement with the essentialist logic characteristic of self-Orientalist/exoticist rhetoric, and thus speculates on his involvement- by accident or by design- with the machinery of the global capitalist marketplace and the publishing industry. This paper does by no means presume that a writer and thinker in the caliber of Amin Maalouf is an accomplice of the neo-Orientalist agendas rampant in the international literary scene, it rather argues that if literature is produced with an audience in mind, the diasporic writer's speaking position –often performed from locations of power- not only complicates his authorial intentions and choices ; but oft compromises his work's integrity, when called upon to meet market demand along with its corollary consumerist imperatives. My argumentation tests the hypothesis that Maalouf's fiction performs a function of memory with a nostalgic/romanticised glorification of the past to facilitate a reading of the present, oscillating between historical fact and fiction, and that such an enterprise of necessity entails the endorsement of essentializing gestures and perhaps even self-Orientalizing/exoticising tropes. It further contends that when writing from a metropolitan center – Paris in this occurrence- a diasporic writer might be inclined – oft against his own intentions- to negotiate the dilemma of vending his own alterity through a subtle 'staging of marginality'(Graham Huggan, 2001)[2], while still coping with

1.Exophonic literature refers to literature composed in non-native languages by non-native authors, it is a form of literary translingualism. It was first used introduced by Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguscheuski and Robert Stockhammer in 2007.
2. In his seminal opus The Postcolonial Exotic (2001), Graham Huggan explores how postcolonial literature capitalizes on its perceived marginality and turns it into an intellectual commodity. Thus, postcolonial authors engage in a self-conscious process whereby they dramatise their subordinate status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience.

identity problematics. Being translators of sorts, diasporic writers- a coterie where Maalouf certainly belongs- are invested with a specific mission, if we believe Graham Huggan, driven as they are : ' by the demands of a metropolitan audience to produce works that seek to explain, account for, and make known the other as a means of cultural translation ' (Huggan,2001 : viii).

This paper does not contemplate to ventriloquize readings of Maalouf's work as a cosmopolitan corrective effort to re-read Arab Muslim history, it rather invites the reader to envisage his fictional body as a market commodity making its way through the international circuits of book trade dissemination, and to further examine the discursive strategies mobilized by both author and publisher to promote the circulation of Maalouf's texts on a planetary scale. My reading, thus, parts company with traditional assessments of Maalouf's works as counter-discursive artefacts deploying a textual instance of resistance, and much less as a celebratory paradigm of multiculturalism whereby a novel configuration of Arab-Muslim identity is charted.

2. Amin Maalouf and Market Valence :

'Elevated to the dignity of high officer of French National Order of Merit'(2020) by President Macron in a most pompous ceremony at the Elysee last February, Amin Maalouf is nothing short of a public intellectual in the contemporary French literary and mediatic landscapes. Previously 'immortalised' in 2011 by his integration of the most imposing French institution i.e The French Academy of Letters, the French-Lebanese author for whom 'the question of identity never leaves my(his) mind, because mine(his) is problematic'(The Guardian Nov 2002), is perhaps one of the most awarded francophone writers in the last few decades. A 'good son' of the republic, winner of prestigious French Prix Goncourt (1993) for his novel *The Rock of Tanios* (1993), the Prix Mediteranée for *Origins* (2004), recipient of Prince of Asturias Award for Literature (2010), shortlisted for the Biennial Man Booker International Prize (2011), consecrated Cultural Personality of the Year by the Sheikh Zayed book awards (2016), in addition to several honours and decorations across a long and prolific career, Maalouf oft refered to as 'Mr East', 'Mr Shehrazade' or 'Modern day One thousand and One Nights novelist'(Marmara Life, 21 Nov 2018), stands today as a unique voice, one 'which Europe cannot afford to ignore'(The Guardian). His profile as a multi-awarded writer, paradigmatic of the 'Levantine' pundit in the West, and the inclusion of his œuvre in the Western 'subcanon' readily invite interrogations about the degree of complicity between Western academic agendas, market demand and his authorial capitalising on self-othering. Thus, the present article seeks to investigate the following queries : is Maalouf not advertising for being the 'other' in the West to pander to the needs of the Western readership and publishing conglomerates ? Are his gamut of prizes not symptomatic of Western appreciation and acknowledgement of his 'political correctedness' ? Is he not the perfect prototype of the assimilated other, Maalouf who thinks that the sole 'compass to humanity today is Europe' ? How do his works position themselves within Francophone literature in particular and global literature at large ? How do his authorial choices dovetail with Western market dictates ? How does he manage 'the comfortable margin of difference'- to borrow from Stepping- to formulate consumable, palatable texts for the Western audience ? And ultimately Is Maalouf representative of World literature in French ?

An 'exophonic' author par excellence, his œuvre is crucially located within the translingual, transcultural and transnational provinces of global literature, entitling him, thus, to market competition across the international channels of dissemination. Significantly, Maalouf's trajectory as a Paris-based global writer with Lebanese origins epitomizes the predicament of self-exiled consciousness steeped in the cosmopolitan spirit, reflecting on issues as imbricated and complex as identity, migration, exile, cultural understanding and the dialogue between East and West. For the one who thinks that ' I (he) was born safe and sound in the arms of a dying civilisation' *(Le Nauffrage des Civilisations 2019*), the exploration of a lost world i.e Muslim and Arab culture is of necessity performed through the discursive reformulation of official historiography whereby he casts himself as a historian, a gap-filler and a fiction writer. This multi-functional vocation empowers Maalouf's fiction not only with corrective potentials but also with rehabilitating aptitudes in that it recreates symbolic ambits of tolerance and coexistence, while revisiting and further problematizing objective versions of history through a new lens. His re-assessment of momentous historical stations such as the crusades in *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes (Les Croisades Vues par Les Arabes, 1983)* or of controversial figures in the caliber of Andalusian Geographer Hassan Al Wazzan in *Leo Africanus* (*Léon L'Africain*,1986), the eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Al Khayyam in *Samarkand*(*Samarcande,*1988) or the third-century Mesopotamian founder of Manicheism Mani in *The Gardens Of Light* (*Les Jardins de Lumière,*1991), incontestably speaks to Maalouf's deep conviction that the panacea to the present cultural clashes and religious crises lies in the fictional manipulation of historical heritage, as well as the unrelenting questioning of the past. Eventually, Maalouf's handling of Arab-Muslim and Oriental history at large imparts his works with exceptional significance in an alarmingly conflictual world. This paper ambitions, accordingly, to redirect emphasis from the thematic dimensionality of Maalouf's fiction to its extratextual aspects, bearing in mind that the former are perused inasmuchas they contribute to unfold its engagement with market dynamics at work in the international book trade system.

3. *Leo The African* : An Exophonic Novel at The Crossroads of Genres :

The fact that the sumtotal of Maalouf's opus is composed in French inevitably confronts us with his reality as a 'hyphenated' writer actively engaged with issues of language choice, and understandably positions him within the category of exophonic literature. First introduced by Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguscheuski and Robert Stockhammer in 2007, and despite its theoretical looseness, exophony stands by and large as a form of translingualism or other-languagedness in literature. It, thus, encompasses

a wide array of writers and literatures produced in non-native languages by non-native authors. According to Chantal Wright : 'Exophony is an emerging term which has largely, though not exclusively, been used to describe the phenomenon of African literatures written in European languages, particularly in French.(cf.Heinrichs 1992 :19)'(Chantal Wright 2008 :39), it basically stands for '……..the phenomenon of writer working in a language other than his or her mother tongue. This term avoids the imposition of a thematic straightjacket and emphasises the innovative stylistic features that can be observed in this body of texts.' (Chantal Wright 2008 :27).

Accordingly, Maalouf's physical and intellectual exiles in the 'World republic of letters' forcibly entail linguistic exile in the Francophone literary marketplace, where Paris- the city of a hundred thousand novels (Balzac qtd in Casanova 1999)- stands as the Mecca of publishers, critics, editors, reviewers and translators, and the way he manages his status as a writer of the 'francophonie' in the city of literature par excellence, raises questions as to the compromises he is called to indulge in to ensure the circulation and distribution of his fiction. This 'writing within the grey zone'(Chantal Wright,2008) or 'born translated' literature (Walkowitz ,2015) 'presupposes some kind of incompatibility and at the same time exophonic writers seek a sense of comfort in the form of a sprachmutter (Mother tongue, my translation), even if they are always imperfect, there is a tension between the comfort of the mother tongue and the concomitant lack of freedom, as opposed to the uneasiness of a second language and the freedom associated with it. This tension is central to exophonic writing.' (Chantal Wright, 2008). If we concede with Chantal Wright that such a tension is actually familiar to exophonic writers, it is only fair to acknowledge that it undeniably begs authorial experimentation with language, styles and forms while concurrently relegating the mother tongue to a state of 'clandestinity' -to borrow from Abdelkbir Khatibi- who eloquently and poetically evokes this linguistic estrangement as part of the lot of any bilingual writer, arabophone and francophone in this particular instance : 'When I write in French, my mother tongue retreats, crushes and goes back to the harem.'(Khatibi 2008, my translation). Yet, if Khatibi's statement obliquely gestures towards a linguistic hierarchization whereby the mother tongue is curtailed to the realm of domesticity, this effacement of Arabic as a space of enunciation is otherwise concomitant with a persistent resonance of its underlying imaginary, which in turn contributes to generate a diaglossic discursive fabric wherein Oriental and Western linguistic and cultural components cohabitate. The text becomes, thus , a 'contact zone' where competing discourses of Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds struggle for visibility.

There is no room for speculation that if Amin Maalouf's notoriety in the Francophone literary sphere has vouchsafed market valence on his works and earned him currency as a highly 'readable' and incidentally 'canonizable' writer, the relatively belated translation of most of his texts into English has effectively contributed to their wider circulation beyond the hexagonal borders in a highly anglocentric literary market, as it is the case with his debut novel *Leo The African* or *Léon L'Africain* in its original French version- a translation-happy, prize-friendly text (Emily Apter 2014)- released as early as 1986, but which didn't make its way to the international market until 1998, featuring on the top list of bestsellers and winning him two awards namely Prix France Libre (1986) and Prix Paul Flat de L'Académie Française. Unanimously acclaimed by critics and reviewers, *Leo The African* retraces the lifestory of Arab geographer, diplomat and scholar Hasan al Wazzan through his numerous peregrinations, and consistently chronicles his ordeal with exile and displacement through locations as disparate as Granada, Fez, Cairo and Rome. Throughout this transnational, transcultural, translinguistic and even transreligious 'rihla', Maalouf celebrates cosmopolitan spirit beautifully exemplified by Hasan/Leo, the epitome of the 'Modern' man, while purposefully positioning his narrative right from the prologue within duality, ambivalence, and multi-dimensionality. Thus, Hasan/leo is the African, the Granadan, the Fassi, the Zayyati, from his mouth : ' you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castillian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and Vulgar Italian, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me (him). But I (he) belong(s) to none of them.' (*Leo The African*,1). In addition to celebrating the poetical dimension of exile, this universalist all-encompassing spirit unreservedly advocated by the narrator/traveller- patently self-conscious of its potential to transcend all disparities be they racial, ethnic, linguistic or religious- strategically reverberates Rumi's Sufi precepts whereby he claims his unbelonging to any confining epistemes :

> Iam neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem,
>
> Iam not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land,
>
> nor of the sea.(Rumi)

Thus, by suggesting a revised model of Muslim-Arabness at times of religious and political turmoils, Maalouf is obliquely capitalizing on the current massive popularity enjoyed by Sufi spirituality in the West, and while Hasan/Leo's unacknowledged identification with Rumi is performed simultaneously through textual appropriation and generic affiliation, with the fusion of the conventions of the historical novel, the travel narrative and the bildungsroman, it similarly reconnects with the quest as a narrative trope . Indeed, the internal mobility of the narrative translates in a transgeneric text travelling across different discursive modes whereby *Leo The African* needs to be viewed in the light of a nucleus of generic affiliations and conventions. In her paper *Amin Maalouf and Pan-Orientalism*, Fida Dakroub describes Maalouf as 'the Homer of the historical novel' (Dakroub,2010 :27 my

translation), and aptly argues that : 'The originality of Amin Maalouf's francophone historical novel dwells in its imposed gesture of mixing genres ennabling it to construct- in a mongrel fashion- the heterogeneity of the francophone novel in its vocation to be Pan-Orientalist' (Dakroub,2010 :96, my translation). Arguably, this heterogeneous dimension in *Leo The African* toying both with Western as well as with Arab-Oriental genres calls upon the reader to engage with a hybrid referential amalgam : 'At the level of narration*, Leo The African* uses metadiegetic narration, which is the Oriental narrative style par excellence, which *The One Thousand And One Nights* is the most pertinent exemple of.'(Fida Dakroub,96,my translation). In establishing this generic kinship with a paradigmatic text of Oriental letters, i.e. *The One Thousand and One Nights*, Dakroub is gesturing towards the narrative modes deployed by Maalouf, which go beyond the mere courting of the travelogue and the bildungsroman as Western genres. The critic extends the analogy to al *Maqamah, al Hikayah, alkhabar and arihla* : 'At the level of genre, hybrid narratives stand as a blend of precolonial authentic Arab genres such as al-maqama or al-rihla. This miscegenation is at the heart of Maalouf's historical novels. These novels present at the level of style a miscegenation resulting out of the contact between 'the coranic fact' and 'the colonial fact'(Dakroub,99, my translation). In her effort to disentangle the Oriental and Western residue in Maalouf's fiction, Dakroub concludes that : ' The type of narration in Maalouf's historical novels gets inspiration from the European narrative experience as well as Oriental narrative genres.(……..) For Maalouf, It is actually space and time that are Oriental' (Dakroub,2010 :100). While it is irrefutable that Maalouf's fiction distinguishes itself by its generic hybridity wherein the fusion of Western and Oriental narrative genres are totally compatible, Dakroub's argumentation in favour of the bonafide vocation of what she dubbs 'pan-orientalism' in Maalouf's project falls short from questioning the essentialist discursive strategies informing this latter, a gap which this paper hopes to fill.

While daringly breaking with French literary traditions, characterized by a long history of patronage, Maalouf surprisingly dispenses with prefacing. Conventionally in French letters, authors -whether established or not- solicit an intellectual authority to preface and thus accredit their work. This strategy, very common in 'the World Republic of Letters' performed by 'agents' or 'legislators' of literariness to borrow from Casanova, serves to validate and confer 'a certificate of literary value' (Casanova 1999) to works of art. Yet, proceeding otherwise, Maalouf is significantly- in the incipit of the novel- invoking a Western authority, no less than W.B.Yeats and thus placing the text under the aegis of Western patronage by claiming its affiliation to the international literary tradition :

' Yet do not doubt that Iam also Leo Africanus the traveller'

W.B.Yeats (1865-1939)

Such a peritextual tool enhances the exophonic manoeuvr of the narrative - double-edged in essence- presumably meant to uncover Orientalist inclinations in the British poetic tradition - and the Irish one more particularly-, foregrounds itself unequivocally revelatory not only of the irrefutable influence of Eastern culture on the West and the fascination of this latter with Oriental tradition but also of the infamous colonial enterprise and the Western appropriation of Medieval 'subaltern' legacies. While a case can be made that Yeats's deliberate endorsement of the personae of Leo Africanus the traveller is an overt, though ambivalent, attraction to the Oriental 'other'- a kindred interest verbalized in his lesser- known Orientalist opus *The Gift of Harun al- Rashid*(1924)- it remains that it is definitely a claim of the cosmopolitan spirit embodied by Hasan/Leo. Having said that, there is a much more occult story behind this appropriation. Emphatically, one cannot help asking analogous questions to Claire Nally's : 'How is it possible to identify and account for an African /Arabian writer/explorer from the sixteenth century, claiming to be a guide or influence in Yeats's life ?' (Claire Nally 2010 :138). In her attempt to settle on a convincing response, Nally pertinently quotes Bernadette Andrea's essay *The Ghost of Leo Africanus(2003)* and emphasizes how this latter 'assesses the colonial impetus for appropriating Leo Africanus as a cultural figure' (Claire Nally, 2010 : 138). Taken together, Nally's investigations embark the reader on a journey to the spiritual world of Yeats wherein occult forces, spirits and voices compete to guide the Irish poet. One such a voice is Leo Africanus's which Yeats is likely to have encountered in Leo's works, reissued in a second edition' (Nally,2010 : 138), Leo '…… was also presented in *Chamber's Biographical Dictionary* with his full name 'Al Hassan Ibn Mohammed Al Wazzan' (This would have been the edition Yeats consulted about his 'spirit guide')'(Nally, 2010 :138). Whilst surveying Leo's official story, Nally registers his reconversion to Islam and aptly points out that : 'As a reconverted Muslim, he partakes of traditional Orientalist symbolism signifying ' terror, devastation, the demonic hordes of hated barbarians' , but promptly surmises that : 'As a catholic, he underscores Yeats's aversion to Ireland's lower middle classes. Oscillating between the two, however, suggests a marked lack of allegiance, a culpable deception implying the colonial trope of untrustworthiness' (Nally, 2010 :139). If such readings offer a nuanced delineation of Yeats's obssession with leo Africanus, they nonetheless avail themselves of the findings of postcolonial theory in apprehending the binary structures undergirding colonial discourse. In this respect, it can be safely conjectured that Yeats's identification with Leo Africanus is energized via a whole Orientalist background whereby an Oriental agent is evidently handled with mixed feelings of ambivalence, yet still envisaged as a catalyst of modern values such as humanism, fluidity of identity but above all mobility, nomadism and unbelonging. Arguably, if Maalouf's postcolonial rendering of Hasan/Leo sounds as the vivid incarnation of the modern man, he is equally a 'cultural amphibian' according to Bernadette Andrea :

> Symptomatic of the displacements Maalouf suggests are constitutive of modernity, Leo Africanus further epitomizes the 'cultural amphibian' Edward Said proposes in *Orientalism* with reference to Shakespeare's Othello, a character similarly based on the life and writings of Leo Africanus, Said stresses that as epiphenomena of Orientalism, cultural amphibians are 'always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe'. He expands his notion in *Culture and Imperialism* to include the possibility of resistance, remarking that 'these voyages in represent a still unresolved contradiction or discrepancy with metropolitan culture, which through co-optation, dilution, and avoidance partly acknowledges and partly refuses the effort'. The cultural amphibian produced by orientalist discourse, in sum, may function strategically as an anticolonial subaltern . (Bernadette Andrea 2003 :196)

Quite early, the allegory of 'the Moor' has permeated part of the Western imaginary, materializing in a myriad of representations in different literary genres, and using a different taxonomy each time : the Blackmoor, the Mahometan, the Negro, the Muslim. Pertinently, Elizabethan drama registers insights of the Moor of which Shakespeare's Othello- a version of sorts of Leo Africanus- is an eloquent example. Maalouf's reactivation of this background inevitably connects his work to Western Orientalist discursivity while recycling configurations of the exotic Moor. Elsewhere, Andrea further argues that : ' Leo Africanus as fictionalized by Shakespeare and Maalouf and theorized by Said is ultimately grounded in the historical Al Hasan Ibn Muhammed al- Wazzan's strategy of assimilation and dissimulation'(Bernadette Andrea 2008 :196), an aspect which will be tackled in this paper in due course.

While still immersed in the process of deciphering Maalouf's text via its paratextual thresholds, one is confronted with the prerequisite yet mandatory exercise of interpreting the significance of topographical choices namely cover politics. For the purposes of this article, I have been using the Abacus edition (documented above), an edition illustrating Oriental carpet-like designs, featuring yellow, green and pink flowery motifs. The seeming simplicity of the illustration is apparently meant to reactivate the reader's inventory of Oriental symbolism and imagery, the most salient feature of is the magic carpet. Accordingly, the cover design is actually a covert exhortation to the reader in general and the Western one in particular to commence a journey in exotica. While the titular apparatus (*Leo The African*) foregrounds an imbedded oxymoronic quality juxtaposing Western and non-Western appellations, further prompting the metropolitan reader to unravel the inherent ambiguities and paradoxes of the narrative, which in turn re-energizes his Orientalist reservoir. In other versions and editions, cover strategies (as documented hereafter) exhibit an overt endorsement of an Oriental turbaned, sworded effigy in total accordance with Western conceptualizations of the 'Black moor', whereas the Spanish version seems to capitalize on the eponymous narrator's name, approached as a charactonym correlating the connotations of Africanhood and lionhood, both quintessentially exotic. While the back cover blurbs – appended above- advertise *Leo The African* as 'a *quixotic* catalogue of pirates, slave-girls and princesses', or else as 'a celebration of the *romance* and power of the Arab world', Maalouf's fiction is granted with the merit of ' offering a model for the future and a caution, a way towards *cultural understanding*' (my emphasis). This obvious emphasis exerted on both front and back covers to foreground the unfamiliar, the strange and incidentally the exotic aspects of Maalouf's work, actually fortify the outlandish scaffolding of this latter, while luring the target audience, in a typically opportunistic marketing move.

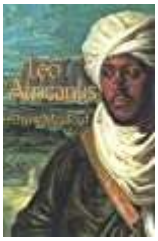

Figure 2 : An English version featuring the portrait of Muhammed Ibn Hasan Al Wazan
https://i.grassets.com/images/S/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/Books/13472814641/153496.jpg.

Figure 3 : The Spanish version capitalizing on the Africanness of Leo The African
https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51wnFpE+DL.jpg

On account of its belatedness, the English translation is advertising Amin Maalouf as winner of the 1993 Prix Goncourt, a detail which unequivocally reveals a very common marketing strategy whereby publishing houses capitalize on authors' market valence and credentials, such as prizes as sine qua non of 'literary prestige' (James English, 2005). Put crudely, if a Prix Goncourt laureate matches a Man Booker Prize winner, and if both are likely to score better in terms of sales, the former is less famiiar to the English-speaking audience, and is in all likelihood more liable to augment the outlandish facet of *Leo The African* in this very occurrence. Thus, when travelling out of its context (Damrosch,2003), a novel such as Maalouf's is susceptible to gain in market value while running the risk of getting 'lost in translation', however, *Leo The African* does not match this particular occurrence- since the translational transfer actually ensued between two major European languages where the center/periphery dichotomy is an irrelevant scenario .

Leo the African (henceforth abbreviated as *LTA*) is designed along a four-section architecture ; the book of Granada, the book of Fez, the book of Cairo and finally the book of Rome with each book divided into chapters named after the main event. Yet the evident imbalance in chapter organisation around Hasan's life as a Free Muslim in the first three chapters amounting to thirty one sections, and his account as a slave in the ultimate chapter in Rome with a total of nine sections, raises questions as to the implications of this disproportion. In this respect, Graem Harper convincingly points out that :

> What will immediately strike readers intent on getting to the events in Rome, is the great percentage of the novel (seventy five percent) devoted to the Islamic life prior to enslavement. This is clearly a function not only of the expectations of the audience but of the agenda that the Christian Arab writer has set for himself, which would to be at least partially revisionary of the orientalized rennaissance view. Maalouf intends to contextualize the convert and provide a solid sense of the many captivities that shaped Leo before his final capture by pirates and the various exiles imposed on him.' (Graem Harper ed.,2001 :56).

Whilst *LTA* happens to be situated at the intersection of numerous generic affiliations as argued earlier, it is quintessentially a travelogue wherein the author/narrator/traveller conflate in memoirs of sorts, dedicated to Giusepe, Leo's son, mentioned at different occasions in Hasan/Leo's journey/Rihla :

> But you will remain after me, *my son*. And you will carry the memory of me with you. And you will read my books. And this scene will come back to you : your father dressed in the Neapolitan style, aboard this galley which is conveying him towards the African coast, scribbling to himself, like a merchant working out his accounts at the end of a long journey.(*LTA,* 1)
>
> I was your age, *my son*, and I have never seen Granada again.(*LTA*,81)
>
> When I arrived in Cairo, *my son*, it had been for centuries the renowned capital of an empire, and the seat of a caliphate. When I left it, it was no more than a provincial capital. No doubt it will never regain its former glory. (LTA,221)

In creating the personae of 'the son' to which the whole narrative is addressed, Maalouf furnishes the character of Hasan/Leo with authorial self-consciousness, empowered as it stands, to claim not only historical credibility, but also potential discursive thrust on future generations.

4. Leo The African : A Self-exoticising Narrative ?

The narrative based on Ibn Al Wazzan's authentic lifestory is an imaginary biography which starts in Granada, the year of Salma al-Hurra in 894 A.H (5 December 1488-14 November 1489), three years prior to the fall of the last Muslim bastion in Spain. It is in

the district of *al Baisin* that Hasan's birth is celebrated in all due opulence within a typically Muslim polygamous -or more accurately bigamous- household, and a happy multi-culti environment wherein Muslims, Jews and Christians coexist in all possible and imaginable Convivencia ; indeed, the locals of Granada had their festive happenings animated by the orchestra of Danny the Jew, while the personal doctor of Boabdil , the Prince of Granada himself, was no other than Ishaq Hamun. Likewise, Hasan's mother Salma, 'al-hurra, the free, or al -'arabiyya, the Arab'(*LTA*,6) , uses amulets to get pregnant on Gaudy Sarah, the Jewish fortune-teller's counsel :

> When Sarah came back a few weeks later I was already having my morning sicknesses. That I gave her all the money I had on me, a great handful of square dirhams and maradevis, and I watched her dancing with joy, swaying her lips and tapping her feet loudly on the floor of my chamber, making the coins dance in her hands, the sound of their clinking together mingling with that of the juljul, the little bell which all Jewish women had to carry. (*LTA*,7)

Yet Salma's joy is short-lived as competition arises when Warda, the Christian slave, is expectant on her turn :

> Muhammad came home with a beautiful Christian girl, with black braided hair, whom he had bought from a soldier who had captured her in the course of a raid into the country near Murcia. He called her Warda, set her up in a room overlooking the patio, and even talked of sending her to Ismail the Egyptian to teach her the lute, dancing and calligraphy, like any favourite of the sultans. (*LTA*,6)

In creating a harem-like atmosphere in Mohammed al Wazzan's menage, Maalouf is deliberately calling on the Western imaginary by invoking all the exotic cliches about Oriental domesticity. Undeniably, the representation of women in the above passage as educated entertainers or modern escort girls, reminiscent of Asian Geishas corroborates Western fantasies about oriental female subjectivity as passive and instrumentalized commodities in the hands of Oriental men, and by the same gesture strongly conjures up the Oriental harem as an institution- even if in its domestic form- ever inflaming the Western imaginary. On the other hand, it is one instance, amid plenty, of cross-cultural desire the narrative is replete with. In later chapters, Hasan is in love with Hiba, the black beauty from Timbuktu, with Nur the Circassian Princess, and much later with Maddalena, the Andalusia-born Jewish, in the book of Fez the year of Timbuktu, the book of Cairo the year of the Circassian, and the book of Rome the year of the Conversa respectively. The inclination in Maalouf's text to use Shehrazad-like female figures ; beauteous, educated, mysterious, lavish entertainers, translates authorial and textual attitudes that arguably operate through a logic of reinforcement of the ontology of the Orient, of which the writer is supposed to be an expert. The narrative is equally peppered here and there with an erotica of sorts which further fullfils the promise of exoticism :

> I kissed her passionately. Which dispensed her from confessing that as far as surprises went I had only heard the ' Bismillah' and the rest of the prayer was to follow. But that did not come to pass before the end of the night, which was deliciously endless. We were lying down beside one another, so close that my lips trembled at her whisperings. Her legs formed a pyramid ; her knees were the summit, each pressed close to the other. I touched them, they separated, as if they had just been quarelling. My Circassian ! My hands sometimes still sculpt the shape of her body. And my lips have forgotten nothing. (*LTA*,242)

Quite telling, the story of the Rumiyya's bath early in the novel further exemplifies this exoticising narrative gesture :

> 'It was said', she told me, 'that one morning, the sultan called the members of his court to attend the Rumiyya's bath.' My mother was shocked she had to recount this ungodly act ;' may God forgive me !' she stammered,(…….)' when the bath was over, the sultan invited all those present to drink a small bowl of the water which Soraya, had left behind, and everyone rhapsodized, in prose or in verse, about the wonderful taste which the water had absorbed.(*LTA*,16)

If Hasan's account abounds in markers of the exotic, the instances of cross-cultural desire cited above, undeniably illustrate how otherness was inclusively envisioned in the Arab-Muslim context. The conceptualization of the Rumi or the Rumiyya in the Arab imaginary as treacherous is actually revisited in Maalouf's text, to shift the focus on the humanity inherent in the characters that populate the novel rather than on their racial, religious or ethnic affiliations.

Strikingly enough, Hasan's/leo's birth is considered by some critics (Fida Dakroub,2010) as a biblical reference evoking the story of Sarai, Abraham's wife, and Hagar, the Egyptian Jariya/concubine. In this respect, Fida Dakroub further explores the analogies that could be drawn between Selma, Mohammed's wife and cousin, and Warda, the Castillian slave. She even draws parallels between the circumstances of their pregnancies. If such an argumentation in favour of intertextual echoings from the Torah in

Maalouf's text opens new horizons in comprehending *LTA*, it nonetheless proves a little implausible or even incongruous at times.

> On the seventh day after I was born my father called Hamza the barber to circumcise me, and invited all his friends to a banquet. Because of my mother's and Warda's condition, my two grandmothers and their servants took charge of the preparation of the meal. (…….) it was the beginning of Ramadan(……) the meal was a feast fit for a king, the main dish was *maruziya*, lamb prepared with honey, coriander,starch,almonds and pears, and walnuts, as the season was just beginning. There was also *tafaya*, goat's meat mixed with a bouquet of fresh coriander. Not to mention the chickens, the young pigeons, and the larks, in garlic and cheese sauce, the baked hare, coated with saffron, and vinegar, and dozens of other dishes which my mother so often enumerated, recalling the last great feast which took place in her house before the fury of heaven rained down upon her and her own. Listening to her as a child, I always waited impatiently for her to reach the *mujabbanat*, hot pies made of soft white cheese, dusted with cinamom and dripping with honey, cakes made of dates or almond paste, and pastries filled with kernels and nuts, and perfumed with rosewater.(*LTA*,10)

While such an appetizing buffet, rich in Oriental ambience with its panoply of flavorful spices,aromas and tastes, plunges the reader into the sophisticated world of Andalusian and Arab-Muslim culinary arts, it undeniably celebrates cuisine as a semiotic signifier of exoticism or what could be accurately labelled a 'signifying culinaria'(Atef Laouyene,2008). This anthropological exertion on Maalouf's part , besides being a manifestation of 'gastro-exotics' (Atef Laouyene,2008), similarly introduces the audience to constitutive rituals of Muslim civilisation namely Ramadan and circumcision -apart from its instructive function in the narrative- exuding intentional self-othering/self-exoticising, first in its extensive use of vernacular (maruziya, tafaya, mujjabanat) openly speaking of its target market, with the tendency to foreignize the text for the reader- yet without taking her out of her comfort zone- then on account of the acknowledgement of the exotic in the familiar by the narrator, himself a self-conscious transnational subjectivity 'staging exoticism'(Huggan 2001). The narrator himself, a 'native informant' (Spivak 1991) as he stands, is actually not only 'negotiating a gap between two worlds' (Ashcroft 2015), but also attempting to seize, vehicle and share the truth about his culture of origin. Thus, If we agree with Graham Huggan's definition that exoticism is 'a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity'(Huggan 2001 :13), we might need to probe this constant criss-crossing in the novel to gauge Maalouf's dexterous handling of the aesthetic conventions of the exotic. The above celebration scene is meaningfully succeeded by a more detailed rendition of the circumcision celebration itself :

> When the money had all been collected, the barber asked for two powerful lamps, unsheated his knife, recited some appropriate Quranic verses and leant towards me. My mother always said that the cry which I let out rang out over the whole quarter like a sign of precocious valour, and then, while I continued to scream with the whole of my tiny body, as if I had seen all the evils that were to come pass before my eyes, the celebrations began again with the sound of the lute, the flute, the rebeck and the tambourine until the *suhur t*he meal just before sunrise in Ramadan. (*LTA,*11)

In total compatibility with Orientalist topos, this auto-gazing gesture strategically assumes the position of the outsider to provoke feelings of dismay- no matter how mild they might be- in the putative reader vis-a-vis circumcision, as a barbarian practice unjustifiably surrounded by so many rejoicing rituals amid the helpless crying of the would-be narrator, a 'third eye' of sorts. The contradiction between what is supposed to be a festive event, and the background narrative of the collapsing world of Granada, the fall of Al Andalus altogether, along with Muslim rule in Spain, actually sketch out a dystopian tale of decadence, humiliation and ultimately of forced exile and displacement. Pertinently, the premonitory anxiety of Abu Marwan, Hasan's maternal uncle, is quite telling of the ghastly days yet to come : But not everyone was in the mood for the celebration. My maternal uncle, Abu Marwan, whom I called Khali, then a member of the staff of the secretariat at the Alhambra, arrived late at the feast with a sad and downcast countenance.(*LTA,*11)

More significantly, Maalouf's narrative re-dramatizes the successive collapse of the last citadels of Muslim rulers in Spain, while artfully interweaving fact and fiction :

> At the beginning of the year 895, it was clear that no one suspected that such a metamorphosis would be possible. But, from the first days of the month of Muharram, the most alarming news reached us. Basta fell, followed by Purcena, and then Guadix. All the eastern part of the kingdom, where the war party was strongest, fell into the hands of the Castilians without a blow being exchanged. (*LTA*,27)

In documenting the perfid treasons which ultimately dealt a mortal blow to Andalusian reign in the Iberian peninsula, and in reporting the follies of the Granadan seraglio, and more specifically the extravagant and whimsical life of Boabdil, the ultimate Nasrid Prince of Granada, Maalouf's narrative is unmistakably –apart from its evident historical vocation- a manifest engagement with the poetics of exoticism. Indeed, *LTA*'s registering in full cognizance of the trope of the 'tearful moor in his last sigh' situate Maalouf's text within a whole Orientalist/re-Orientalist textual tradition taking stock of cliches susceptible of arousing sentiments of exotica in the West. Such a narrative gesture, in reality, re-enacts a self-exoticizing tactic which simultaneously reiterates the overused stereotype of the 'tearful moor' :

> (….), Since Boabdil went into exile with no hope of ever returning, and the Rumis had allowed him to take away all that he desired. He departed into oblivion, rich but miserable, and as he passed over the last bridge from which he could still see Granada, he stood motionless for a long time, which troubled mien and his spirit frozen in torpor ; the Castilians called this place 'the Moor's last sigh', because, it was said, the fallen sultan had shed tears there, of shame and remorse. 'You weep like a woman for the kingdom which you did not defend like a man,' his mother Fatima would have said. (*LTA,* 57)

Still, the polyphony that emanates from the passage whereby Maalouf deliberately positions his version of 'the Moor's last sigh' between historical fact and fiction, with a sense of doubt looming over the whole scene, leaves the reader unresolved about the veracity of the tale as a whole , while artfully evacuating it from its 'Arab kitsch of the superficial' to borrow from Salman Rushdie (quoted in Atef Laouyene 2007), who has similarly, though differently, availed himself of Boabdil's legend in his *The Moor's Last Sigh(1995).* This recycling of a constructive myth of Orientalist representation simultaneously re-enacts romantic sentimentality characteristic of exotic discourse while displaying alertness not to fall prey to the trap of cheap hackneyed cliches. Significantly, Maalouf's juxtaposition of different points of view, the narrator's, the historian's and the pamplisetic rewriter or gap-filler energize a more circumspect re-reading of official historiography which actually summons the reader in general and the Western one in particular, not only to cast a critical eye on a most familiar gamut of Orientalist mythos, but to question the very foundations of Orientalist rhetoric. Such tensions inherent to the fabric of the narrative materialize, elseways, in conflicting discourses artfully dramatized by characters such as Astaghfirullah and Abu Khamr both allegorizing two antithetical ideological and ethical discourses in Muslim thought, respectively and ironically religious bigotry and secular hedonism. Furthermore, if Maalouf's characterization strategically engages the Arab reader in philosophical cogitation over the true reasons behind the demise of Muslim rule in Spain and the ensuing decadence of the Arab Muslim civilisation, it otherwise replicates the very contemporary conflicts between the West and Muslims echoing Western anxiety vis-a-vis fanatic tendencies in today's Islam, thereby corroborating the rhetoric of globalization within an alarmingly islamophobic/Arabophobic climate.

In juxtaposing the extremist Astaghfirullah, 'I implore the pardon of God', on the one hand to the libertine drunkard Abu Khamr 'Father of Wine', Maalouf deftly uses his text as a platform for debating and by the same token uncovering the ideological diversity and polyphony inherent to Muslim tradition :

> Astaghfirullah was the son of a Christian convert, and it was undoubtedly this which explained his zeal, while Abu Khamr was the son of qadis, which meant that he did not find it necessary to give continual proof of his attachment to dogma and tradition. The shaikh was lean, fair and choleric, while the doctor was as brown as a ripe date, faster than a sheep on the eve of the 'Id, and an ironical and contented smile rarely left his lips. He had studied medicine from the old books of Hippocrates, Galen, Averroes, Avicenna, Abu'l-Qassis, Abenzoar and Maimonides, as well as more recent texts on leprosy and the plague, may God distance both of them from us. (*LTA* ,36)

If for Astaghfirullah : 'searching for new ideas at all costs was simply a vice ; what was important was to follow the teachings of the Most High as they had been understood and commented upon by the ancients', for Abu Khamr, the epicurean doctor, on the other hand :

> The lessons of History were quite otherwise. ' The greatest epoch of Islam,' he would say, 'was when the caliphs would distribute their gold to wise men and translators, and would spend their evenings discussing philosophy and medicine in the company of half-drunk poets. And did not Andalusia flourish in the days when the vizier 'Abd al-Rahman used to say jokingly : 'O you who cry ' Hasten to the prayer!' You would do better to cry : Hasten to the bottle !' The Muslims only became weak when silence and conformity darkened their spirits. (*LTA*,38)

In this polyphonic account, Maalouf traverses the ideological, historical, political and socio-cultural landscapes of fifteenth-century Andalusia in his effort to share comprehension with the reader about a sorry episode in Arab-muslim history, in order to discern how 'intellectual activity was flourishing, and its fruits were the books which were patiently copied and circulated among learned men from China to the far West' (*LTA*, 37/38) then, how 'came the drying up of the spirit and of the pen. To defend

themselves against the ideas and the customs of the Franks, men turned Tradition into a citadel in which they shut themselves up. Granada could only produce imitators without talent or boldness.'(*LTA*,38). In decrying the intellectual decadence of the Arab-Muslim civilisation, Maalouf nods towards the dogmatism of certain Muslim religious factions vis-a-vis tradition while constructing, only to deconstruct again, the trope of Al Andalus as an utopian multicultural setting, a beacon of knowledge and enlightenment in Medieval times. This lost paradise as a locus of religious, cultural and ethnic diversity is aestheticised as a persistent motif throughout the narrative, wherein hasan engages with Andalusian poetics in a romantically sentimental fashion almost kitsch-like in its haunting evocation of the Granadan theme : 'A lost homeland is like the corpse of a near relative ; burry it with respect and believe in eternal life.' (*LTA*,71). While this elegiac statement, mouthed by Astaghfirullah, utilizes very secular mournful terms, and provides a running leitmotif for the narrative, it incidentally encapsulates the quandary of exile in its global and modern forms betraying its global-oriented vocation.

Grannada, no city is your equal,

Not in Egypt, not in Syria, not in Iraq,

You are the bride

And these lands are only your dowry.

Thus, exile together with mobility are celebrated in *LTA* as liberating paradigms within the cross-border flows of migration and displacement. Accordingly, the plight of the people of Al-Andalus, bearing with the curse of dispossession of land and identity, can be readily approached through modern lens, thereby emphasizing overlappings between authorial autobiographical data and official historiography. The self-exiled Maalouf together with the displaced Hasan/Leo embark on an internal journey of growth and maturity, when called to relinquish their respective homelands and to experience dispossession in trans-territorial spaces. Thus, the predicament of the twentieth-century Arab Levantine Maalouf could be read in parallel with that of the fifteenth-century Andalusian Hasan/Leo, wherein the voyage from the East to the West, and then back to the East for the latter, is undertaken with an autogazing impulse which retraverses the silk road as a transcultural 'route' to re-assess the self. Indeed, Hasan al-Wazzan's sojourns in Timbuktu, Cairo, Alexandria, Tlemcem, Constantinople, Algiers, Tunis and Mecca, sketch out a recognizable Medieval itinerary transcending racial, ethnic, religious and cultural disparities, hence furnishing the reader with a kaleidoscopic view of Oriental settings at a complex historical conjuncture of turmoil and unrest. While Maalouf's rendition of an Arab-Muslim world on the brink of collapse discursively sustains official historiography, it knowingly exerts authorial re-reading through Hasan's optic, 'a third eye' of kinds, trotting around as a voyeuristic consciouness, oft emphasizing if not exaggerating exotica. Significantly, the authentification of *LTA* as a fictional account is performed through the reference to Hasan al-Wazzan's well-known *Description of Africa (1550)* which has been since its publication a reliable and enlightening source for Western historians over a long period of time.

Elsewhere, Hasan/Leo's trips to Sub-saharean provinces to explore the sumptuous black kingdoms of Mali and the mystification of the outlandish, concur even further to uncover the exoticizing gestures of the narrative :

> Even if I were more eloquent, even if my pen were more obedient, I would be incapable of describing the sensation when, after weeks of exhausting journeying, one's eyes lashed by sandstorms, one's mouth swollen with tepid salty water, one's body burning, filthy, racked with a thousand aches, one finally sees the walls of Timbuktu. Indeed, after the desert, all cities are beautiful, all oases seem like the garden of Eden. But nowhere else did life appear so agreeable to me as in Timbuktu. (*LTA*,165)

Hasan's rendition of the rituals at Askia Muhammad Toure's court ' king of Gao, Mali and many other lands, the master of Timbuktu' (*LTA*,167) and 'the most powerful man in all the land of the Blacks' (*LTA*,216) are genuinely awe-inspiring :

> At the court of Timbuktu the ritual is exact and magnificient. When an ambassador obtains an interview with the master of the city, he must kneel before him, his face brushing against the ground (……..) the palace is not large but of a very harmonious appearance ; it was built nearly two centuries ago by an Andalusian architect known as Ishaq the Granadan. (*LTA*,167)

The celebration of Black African civilisation through Hasan's rihla to Wangara, Zagzag, Kano, Bornu, Gaoga and Nubia further accentuate the exotic dimensions of Maalouf's text. Elsewhere, in the Book of Cairo, Hasan's touristic gaze does not miss to confirm and conform to Orientalist representations of the Arab. This compatibility is quite striking as it echoes outworn cliches of Oriental affability, indolence and merriment :

Cairo at last ! In no other city does one forget that one is a foreigner. The traveller has scarcely arrivedbefore he is caught up in a whirlwind or rumours, trivialities gossips. A hundred strangers accost him, whisper in his ear, call him to witness, jostle his shoulder the better to provoke him to the curses or the laughter which they await. From then on he is let into the secret…..(LTA,226/227)

Being simultaneously an exophonic and a self-exoticising text, *LTA*'s defamiliarization vocation is best expressed in its extensive use of vernacular, as a salient feature of born- translated literature. This tendency to punctuate the narrative with linguistic exotica is often supplemented by an explanatory appendix which actually spares the metropolitan reader the 'discomfort' of diction investigation, yet strikingly enough, Maalouf rennounces such a reader-friendly attitude, exhorting this latter instead, to engage in textual collaborative reading. In addition to the culinary glossary included earlier, the following list is by no means exhaustive :

Kannazin, kannaz, al-fakkak, aman, muhtasib, tabib, iblis, jihad, qaisariyya, majlis, salam alaikums, diwan, jubba, taylassan, qasba , tabla, Rumiyya, Rumis, Mihrajan, Dhu'l- Hijja, Dhu'l Qa'da, mudajjan, funduqs, ulama, anti taliqa, Alhamd ul-illah, the fatiha, Ghuraba, sura, wali, madrasas, ftat, mujahidin, maristan, khali, insha'allah', jarm, noria, jizya, bismillah, hammam, bazin, bassis, al-hashish, mizwar, Amin, labbaika Allahuma labaik.

More significantly, however, and further buttressing the self-othering/exoticising inclination in *LTA*, Maalouf intently nurtures his account with intertextual components from the Quran as well as Haddiths by the Prophet, grafted all throughout the narrative. The excerpts are often used as diatribes that either invoke divine justice in the face of human foulness, adversity or tyranny.

'Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgement…..' (*LTA*,274)

'God shows to whom He will the right path, and to others the way to perdition.'(*LTA*,)

'Do not come to the prayer in a state of drunkenness !'(*LTA,*

'Kama takunu yuwalla alaikom' : 'You will have the rulers you deserve'(*LTA*,)

'The angels do not enter into a house where there is a dog or a figurative representation.'((*LTA*,295)

'There are signs on earth for those whose faith is solid.

There are signs in yourselves, do you not see them ?

There are also good things in Heaven which are destined for you.

And also those by which you are threatened.'(*LTA, ?)*

If Maalouf's characterization of Boabdil, Qansuh, or Sultan Salim is caught between anecdotal history and factual historiography, it unmistakenly reinforces Western assumptions of Arab-Muslim tyranny and despotism, and while Maalouf forebodingly warns against the inappropriate use of the religious discourse in Arabia, Hasan/Leo does not exempt the Christian faith, and more particularly the city of Rome where destiny leads him after his abduction : ' What is the Pope for ? What are the cardinals for ? What God is worshipped in this city of Rome, entirely given over to its luxuries and pleasures ?'(*LTA,*295), If Hans's- Leo's young friend's- invective castigates the heart of Christianity embodied by the Holy city of Rome, it shatters with painful acuity any dream of inter-faith dialogue entertained earlier by Hasan/Leo while demonstrating the sad similitudes between Muslims and their Christian brethrens :

> The lifestyles of the prelates of Rome costs vast sums, while nothing is produced in this city of clerics ! Everything is bought in Florence, Venice, Milan and elsewhere. In order to finance the excesses of this city, the Popes have started to sell ecclesiastical titles : ten thousand, twenty thousand, thirty thousand ducas for a cardinal. (…..) If you pay, your sins are forgiven ! In short, The Holy Father is selling off Paradise. (*LTA,* 300,301)

While *LTA*'s last book -The Book of Rome- chronicles with extreme accuracy Leo's sojourn in Italy as a slave, then as a Christian convert, his assimilation/dissimulation tactics, mentioned earlier by Bernadette Andrea, evoke the politics of *Taqiya* known in some Muslim groups, as persuasively argued by the critic. While being a radical move towards interreligious understanding, Hasan/Leo's forced conversion betrays the complexities inherent in being a cultural 'amphibian' :

> In my country the beard is standard. Not to have one is tolerated, especially for a foreigner. To shave it after one has had a beard for many long years is a sign of abasement and humiliation. I had no intention of undergoing such an affront. Would anyone believe me if I were to say that I was

> ready to die for my beard that year ? And not only for my beard, because all the battles were confused in my mind,(….). (*LTA*,315)

In becoming a symbol of resistance, Hasan/Leo comes to exemplify rebellious otherness, and after being subjected to verbal violence and many other trying episodes : 'Barbarian, miser, pig' and worse'(*LTA*,316), he comes to the resolution to retreat to Africa while celebrating cosmopolitan spirit, fluidity of identity and religious tolerance:

> White minarets of Gammarth, noble remains of Carthage, it is in their shade that oblivion awaits me, and it is towards them that my life is drifitng after so many shipwrecks. The sack of Rome after the chastisement of Cairo, the fire of Timbuktu after the fall of Granada. Is it misfortune which calls out to me, or do I call out to misfortune ? Once more, my son, I am borne along by that sea, the witness of all my wanderings, and which is now taking you towards your first exile. In Rome, you were 'the son of the Rumi'. Whenever you are, some will want to ask questions about your skin or your prayers. Beware of gratifying their instincts, my son, beware of bending before the multitude ! Muslim, Jew or Christian, they must take you as you are or lose you. When men's minds seem narrow to you, tell yourself that the land of God is broad ; broad His hands and broad His heart. Never hesitate to go far away, beyond all seas, all frontiers, all countries, all beliefs. (*LTA*,360)

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued for the necessity to apprehend Maalouf's *Leo The African* as a self-exoticising/othering text, and has drawn attention to the strategies deployed both at the textual and paratextual levels to evidence the essentialist logic underlying the narrative. Yet, if Maalouf's entitlement to represent the Orient positions him as a 'native informant' (Spivak 1991) - as discussed earlier- one who has been trained in the 'deep colonial grammar' (Hamid Dabashi, 13) or else more crudely as a 'broker of sorts'(Kwame Appiah, 2005), a savvy reader will discern that the self-conflicted nature of the narrative does by no means fall in the trap of abusing its own heritage. *Leo The African* has the merit to walk the tightrope between commercial success, marketability and authorial integrity, with great assurance and chutzpah.

> 'dazzlingly *exotic*' *The Observer*
>
> 'Maalouf's fiction offers both a model for the future and a caution, a way towards cultural understanding and an appalling measure of the consequences of failure. His is a voice which Europe cannot afford to ignore' *The Guardian*
>
> 'The most entertaining education we could wish for…..Leo the African is a celebration of the romance and power of the Arab world, its ideals and achievements' *The Daily Telegraph*
>
> I, Hassan the son of Muhammad the weight-master, I, Jean-Leon de Medici, circumcised at the hand of a barber and baptized at the hand of a pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. I am called the Granadan, the Fassi, the Zayyati, but I come from no country, from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road, my country is the caravan, my life the most unexpected of voyages.(……..) From my tongue you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and Vulgar Italian, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none of them. (*Leo The African*, 1)

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