

Maalouf  leo
africanus: overview



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Amin Maalouf's novel *Leo Africanus* is a novel based on an actual sixteenth-century Spanish-born Muslim geographer and writer born under the name Hasan al-Wazzan. The author gives the reader clear insights into the conflicts between the Muslim world (whose influence in Europe was then waning) and that of Christianity (which reasserted control over his native Spain and to which he became a somewhat unwilling servant).

The theme of the title character's life is conflict and misfortune, which seem to plague him from early childhood. Born in 1488 to a rich Muslim family in Granada, Spain, he witnesses as a small child the Catholic victory over the ruling but weakened Muslim elites, followed by a wave of vengeance and intolerance against not only Muslims but also the Jews, who have also lived peacefully in Spain with Christians for centuries. Hasan (the name he uses throughout his life, except when in service to the Pope) demonstrates some of this by mentioning how members of the different religions interact and how some cultural exchange occurs.

For example, when discussing dates, he frequently refers to Christian and Muslim holidays in tandem, showing their mutual acceptance: "It all happened on the ninth day of the holy month of Ramadan, or, rather . . . on St. John's Day, the twenty-fourth of June, since Mihrajan was celebrated not in accordance with the Muslim year but following the Christian calendar" (Maalouf, 1989, p. 63).

Here, Maalouf makes clear that Islam was then the much more tolerant religion, accepting aspects of Judaism and Christianity that the Catholic Church refused to allow. Because Christianity and Islam were fighting for

territory, intolerance was an instrument of control and oppression, and the victorious Spaniards had to qualms about driving out or murdering Jews and Muslims who refused to accept forced conversions to Christianity.

His family, deprived of its wealth, flees for the North African city of Fez, where they live as refugees under the care of his kindly uncle, who provides for his education. As he comes of age, he shows a remarkable ability to observe and understand the peoples and places he encounters – a gift he sharpens when, as a teenager, he accompanies his rich, well-connected uncle on a diplomatic excursion to Timbuktu.

For example, he writes of Sijilmasa, a once-thriving city on the road to Timbuktu: “ Of its walls, once so high, only a few sections remain, half-ruined, and covered with grass and moss. Of its population, there remain only various hostile clans . . . [who] seem merciless toward each other [and] deserve their fate” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 157). Though he is not intolerant of peoples different from himself, he also does not shy from passing judgments on unfortunate or blighted places, though his own life is full of misfortunes; he accepts fate’s fickle nature, which perhaps sustains him through his difficulties.

Hasan’s adult life is generally unstable and rife with misfortune, which seems to be the norm in a world where little other than hard luck is guaranteed. After his uncle dies, he returns to Fez to work in a hospice for the sick and insane, marries a rather plain cousin (despite his long relationship with Hiba, a slave mistress), later becomes a prosperous merchant, and seems to live a

somewhat conventional life. However, he is not destined to enjoy a stable, uneventful life.

When he starts his business career, his mother makes a prediction that seems to foreshadow the direction of his life: “ Many men discover the whole world while seeking only to make their fortune. But as for you, my son, you will stumble on your treasure as you seek to discover the world” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 187). Indeed, fate – so strong a presence in the novel that it almost seems like a character – intervenes and his life is again turbulent. When he becomes embroiled in his childhood friend (and brother-in-law) Harun’s plot to avenge his sister Mariam’s confinement to a leper colony, the authorities expel Hasan from Fez and thieves on the road rob him of his fortune. In addition, he is forced to sacrifice his mistress, Hiba, in order to regain some of his riches.

However, his destiny is to discover the world, which indeed is why modern readers even know of his existence. Always astute and insightful, Hasan compiles his observations during his many travels, forming the basis for his lasting renown as an early geographer and expert on sub-Saharan Africa. He travels throughout the continent’s northern and central regions and, when speaking of other writers’ ignorance of Africa, states, “ I myself, who am only the last of the travellers, know the names of sixty black kingdoms . . . from the Niger to the Nile. Some have never appeared in any book, but I would not be telling the truth if I would claim to have discovered them myself, since I only followed the ordinary route of the caravans” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 216).

He moves to Cairo (then under Ottoman Turkish rule) to restart his often-disrupted life, commenting that “ I was suddenly certain that after the tempest which had destroyed my fortune a new life was awaiting me in this land of Egypt, a life of passion, danger and honour” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 218). Here, he again finds himself on the wrong side of destiny when he marries into the Turkish sultan’s family and supports them in their political maneuverings, in the vain hope that they will retake Granada in the name of Islam.

He dreams his entire life of his birthplace and the words of a visiting delegation from the sultan foster the naïve faith that he can return: “ A great Muslim empire is in the process of coming to life in the East, and we in the West should stretch out our hand to it. Until now, we have been subjected to the law of the unbelievers” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 257). However, this scheme also goes awry and he is enslaved by Italian pirates, who give him to Pope Leo X.

This phase of Hasan’s life is a strange twist of fate, in which apparent tragedy turns into great luck. The pontiff, seeing that the learned, sophisticated Hasan is no ordinary captive, employs him as a tutor of Arabic and requires him to learn Latin, Turkish, and lessons in the Christian faith. Hasan deems this “ a refined form of forced labour . . . [and] proof of [the Pope’s] own enthusiastic interest in me” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 294).

The end result of this gentle captivity is *Description of Africa*, a book describing his many travels in a continent with which Europeans were still largely unfamiliar. He wins his freedom but again finds himself on the wrong

side of a larger political conflict (this time within the Catholic Church), so he escapes Rome for Tunisia, where he can openly practice Islam again. In closing, he advises the reader to be himself in the face of adversity, saying, “Wherever you are, some will want to ask questions about your skin or your prayers. Beware of gratifying their instincts . . . beware of bending before the multitude!” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 360). Though he has kept his Muslim faith inwardly intact, his ability to adapt and “go with the flow” preserves him.

Without dwelling on the point, Maalouf makes clear to the reader that in this unstable, uncertain medieval world, Fate plays an exceptionally strong role in everyday life. Indeed, Hasan witnesses plenty of calamity in his life; his birthplace is seized and made repressive by Spanish Catholics; he and his family see their wealth rise and vanish repeatedly; he marries twice and loses both wives (the first dies young, while the second abandons him after his enslavement); and he is forced to seek his fortunes elsewhere several times in his life.

He accepts the fact that he is meant to live on the move and takes little for granted, seemingly aware that his fortunes can be reversed at any time (and frequently are). However, he never becomes embittered; he accepts his fate but laments, “Such is the judgment of the Most High” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 214). His faith does not waver throughout the story, and even when Christians abduct him and force his conversion to Catholicism, he follows but keeps his innermost religious beliefs to himself. He excels as a chameleon and thus survives.

His second wife comments on his tendency to travel and disrupt his own life, asking, “ What substance are you made of that you accept the loss of one town after another, one homeland after another, one woman after another, without ever fighting, without ever regretting, without ever looking back?” ” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 261). He responds by telling her that “ life is only a crossing.

I go nowhere, I desire nothing I cling to nothing, I have faith in my passion for living, in my instinct to search for happiness, as well as in Providence” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 261). Indeed, in this exchange, Maalouf presents the reader with the essence of Hasan’s character. He is well aware of life’s transience and thus is passionate only about his religion; though he seeks wealth and happiness, he wastes little time mourning the loss of either and looks ahead to “ the final Place where no man is a stranger before the face of the Creator” (Maalouf, 1989, p. 360).

Leo Africanus is more than simply a fictionalized memoir. It is a classic fish-out-of-water story, illustrating how this educated, well-connected Muslim merchant, traveler, and scholar finds reverses and radical changes in his life at several turns but adapts to each. In addition, it demonstrates how people of that era were very much at Fate’s mercy; little could be taken for granted in such unstable times, but the narrator never loses faith in the “ Most High,” the God to whom he turns for sustenance.

In somewhat formal prose that one suspects was the norm for educated people of that era, Maalouf does not impose a modern viewpoint but offers a fair, compassionate, historically-aware portrayal of both Muslim society and

one of the more unusual figures within it. The story of Hasan al-Wazzan is, more than anything else, the tale of an accomplished scholar and a consummate survivor who never forgot who he was, the culture that produced him, or the deity that showed him mercy amidst the world's turbulence.

REFERENCES

Maalouf, A. (1989). *Leo Africanus*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.