

Maalouf 🗨️ leo
africanus

Religion



Amin Maalouf's novel *Leo Africanus*, a fictionalized memoir by an actual sixteenth-century Muslim adventurer, is an often-interesting account of life during the turbulent end of the Middle Ages, told from the point of view of a man who survived his life's ample turmoil and bridged conflicting cultures without wholly belonging to any.

The narrator of this work, a traveler and author known in his lifetime as Jean-Leon de Medici or Leo Africanus, was born in 1488 as Hasan al-Wazzan, son of a prominent Muslim family in Granada, Spain. At the time, southern Spain's Andalusia region (of which Granada was its chief city) was Muslim-dominated, with Catholics, Muslims, and Jews alike coexisting in a cosmopolitan, relatively tolerant atmosphere. Maalouf depicts Granada as an intriguing, exotic, tolerant place for its time, despite its corrupt rulers and ultimate weakness before the invading armies of Aragon and Castile.

Shortly after his birth, Spanish forces conquered Granada and soon started persecuting all non-Christians, forcing them to convert to Catholicism or flee, depriving them of their wealth in either case. Though European history depicts Spain's liberation from Muslim rule as a glorious event, it was a tragic blow for the Muslims who had lived there for centuries and built a prosperous, learned society. As his uncle Khali, a wealthy diplomat, laments, "See how the people . . . have been forced into slavery after their surrender! See how the Inquisition has raised pyres for the Jews . . . [and] for the Muslims as well! How can we stop this, except by resistance, mobilization, and jihad?" (Maalouf, 1988, p. 25) Though the word "jihad" today carries ominous meanings for Westerners, in this context it meant self-defense in the face of an intolerant enemy.

The Spanish appear in a distinctly negative light, as bloodthirsty, vindictive conquerors who used the Inquisition to crush their enemies, real or perceived. Maalouf offers an interesting inversion of Western opinion here, and he shows post-1492 Granada as a dark, dangerous place whose intellectual life is crushed. Also, while modern readers think of Jews and Muslims as mortal enemies, Maalouf demonstrates that they enjoyed peaceful relations in medieval Andalusia, and Leo laments the Spanish edict mandating “the ‘formal termination of all relations between Christians and Jews, which can only be accomplished by the expulsion of all the Jews from our kingdom’” (Maalouf, 1988, p. 59).

His uncle Khali assumes a dominant role in Leo’s life, helping educate him and, more importantly, taking him along on his 1504 diplomatic mission to Timbuktu, then an important Muslim cultural and commercial center in sub-Saharan West Africa. Even as a teenager, he demonstrates keen insights to the world around him, particularly to the appearances, peoples, and attributes of the cities he visits en route. For example, he describes Ain al-Asnam, an ancient city destroyed during Islam’s spread, as “sole witness of the age of ignorance” (Maalouf, 1988, p. 155), implying that despite its former glories, it symbolizes the dark era before Islam spread its enlightened message.

In addition, he reveals a gift for vivid descriptive prose when he says 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, 1988, <https://assignbuster.com/maalouf-leo-africanus/>)

p. 157). Though he is not intolerant of peoples different from himself, he also does not shy from passing judgments on unfortunate places, though his own life is full of misfortunes; he accepts fate's fickle nature, which perhaps sustains him through his difficulties.

His uncle dies en route back to Fez and Leo returns home to work in a hospice and marry his cousin Fatima, who is far less pleasing than Hiba, the slave girl who becomes his longtime mistress (similar to Warda, the servant whom his father chose over his wife, Leo's mother). He also tries to save his sister Mariam from the leper colony, where an influential suitor, a highway robber named the Zarwali, had had her banished for refusing to marry him.

One sees by this point that women have a difficult position in Muslim society; denied many rights, they live tightly circumscribed lives and are subject to male commands and whims at all times. Maalouf does not impose modern sensibilities here; he remains within the character of the times and accepts this lack of freedom as Muslims of the time did, and Leo laments his sister's fate less because she lacks freedom than because her punishment was unduly cruel.

As he enters adulthood, his life continues a pattern of good fortune followed by personal or financial disasters from which he always recovers and rebuilds. Leo becomes a successful merchant in Fez and fathers a daughter with Fatima, but when his longtime friend Harun (who has married his unfortunate sister Mariam to liberate her from the leper colony) causes the Zarwali's death, Leo is expelled from Fez for his complicity and loses his fortune on the road to a band of thieves. He finds some relief in Hiba's

native village, where her former peers buy her back from Leo, restoring some of his wealth but costing him the love of his life.

He accepts these reversals surprisingly well by modern standards, but Maalouf implies that the late medieval/early modern world was a cruel and fickle place, with few certainties in life other than misfortune. A common theme throughout the book is that such events are simply God's will; when he loses both his fortune and Hiba, Leo laments, " Such is the judgment of the Most High!" (Maalouf, 1988, p. 214). His faith does not waver throughout the story, even when Christians abduct, enslave, and force him to become a Catholic.

Leo's destiny seems to be the roads he travels throughout his adult life; his form of geography and travelogue seem to be his calling in life, and he demonstrates a keen grasp of how to describe people and places. His travels take him throughout northern, western, and central Africa, and he states without obvious boasting, " When our geographers of old spoke of the land of the Blacks, they only mentioned Ghana and the oases of the Libyan desert. . . . I myself, who am only the last of the travellers, know the names of sixty black kingdoms . . . from the Niger to the Nile" (Maalouf, 1988, p. 216). Such knowledge would later serve him well.

He becomes involved with the era's political intrigues when he meets and marries Nur, the widow of the Ottoman ruler's nephew. While Leo supports the Turks in the vain hope that they will liberate Andalusia from the Spanish and make it safe for Muslims again, Nur opposes it and fears that Turkish agents will murder her infant son to prevent him from assuming the throne.

Reflecting on the discord within his own faith, Leo asks, “ Is it not in the blade of a knife brandished by the Friend of God above a pyre that the revealed religions meet?” (Maalouf, 1988, p. 245) He longs for the tolerance and unity of his youth in Granada, hence his somewhat naïve support for the Ottoman Empire, of which he says, “ the turbans of the Turks and the skull caps of the Christians and Jews mingle without hatred or resentment” (Maalouf, 1988, p. 258).

His destiny as a geographer and scholar is realized when Sicilian pirates kidnap him in Tunisia and present him to Pope Leo X as a slave. As with the rest of his life, this misfortune leads to another lucky phase, as the pontiff, impressed with Leo’s intellect, employs him as a protégé. Forcing him to become a Christian and renaming him John-Leo de Medici (for the pope and the family that takes an interest in him), the pope employs him as a teacher of Arabic while tutoring him in European languages, so that he can produce a volume of his travels, *Description of Africa*. He earns his freedom but becomes embroiled in papal intrigues, so he must flee yet again – this time for Tunisia, where he can again be a Muslim. In closing, he advises the reader to be himself in the face of adversity, saying, “ Muslim, Jew or Christian, they must take you as you are, or lose you” (Maalouf, 1988, p. 360). Though he has kept his Muslim faith inwardly intact, Leo’s ability to adapt has ironically saved and sustained him.

The book illustrates the uncertainty of life in the pre-modern era, since peaks and valleys of instability mark Leo’s life from the beginning. His family loses its fortune and is driven from Granada by conquering Spanish Christians, who then launch a wave of intolerance against Jews and Muslims, forcing

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them to either become Catholic or leave. In addition, he loses his fortune to thieves, his wife Fatima dies young, he remarries Nur (who leaves him after his abduction), and he is enslaved by Christian pirates in the Mediterranean.

He handles it philosophically, accepting the fact that his life is destined to be itinerant, turbulent, and beyond his ability to control. As he tells Nur, “Between the Andalus which I left and the Paradise which is promised to me life is only a crossing. I go nowhere, I desire nothing I cling to nothing, I have faith in my passion for living . . . as well as in Providence” (Maalouf, 1988, p. 261).

Overall, Leo Africanus is a solid effort to take the modern reader into the mind of an educated, influential Muslim living at an unstable time in European history. Maalouf does not inject modern sensibilities into his narrative but depicts the Muslim culture of the times fairly, without a pro-Western bias. In addition, he strives for authenticity by using a sort of formal, occasionally wordy prose that one assumes is based on the actual writing and conversational style of Leo Africanus' times. In the process of producing this interesting historical figure's tale, Maalouf also makes clear one of the chief realities of this era in history – that life is uncertain and fickle, and that the intelligent, resourceful, and adaptable are best suited to endure these shifts of fortune.

REFERENCES

Maalouf, A. (1988). *Leo Africanus*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.