

Lebbeik, Pilgrimage of the Poor - Lebbeik, Pèlerinage de Pauvres

A novel by Malek Bennabi

About the novel

Bennabi probably wrote this – his only novel - while engaged in a business that purchased sheep and goat fleece from herdsmen for supply to wool merchants. He was living near his home town of Tébessa, and would travel deep in the countryside towards the Tunisian border. The venture was not commercially successful and when World War II broke out, Bennabi and his wife Khadija were in an impoverished state. They left for France, leaving the manuscript with the mother of his closest friend, the medical doctor Abdulaziz 'Azzouz' Khaldi.

The novella's dedication includes a fulsome tribute to Khadija: 'To my dear wife, in acknowledgement of her maternal tenderness for the humble of my country.' It also portrays an impoverished family sustaining itself on the sale of some eggs, drawing on Khadija's own experience helping the widow they had recently encountered. They understood poverty and the sense of honour amongst the Algerian dispossessed.

Lebbeik features the respect given to prospective *hajjis* and the warm send-offs, as well as the respect shown to the returnees. The novella has political undertones because Shaikh Ben Badis had recently been banned by the French from hosting one such event in the Great Mosque in Bône, lest 'a religious building should become the theatre of an innovation created for political ends'. The story makes references to the authority of the *qadi* in settling disputes, indicating the Algerian's preference for shariah courts, even though it denied them French citizenship. It describes the emergence of an Islamic brotherhood on board the pilgrim ship and some of Bennabi's own real-life preferences come to the surface, such as the special regard in which he held Tunisians. One of the characters is an 'intellectual' in a red *chechia* that could well be Bennabi himself! In many passages describing Brahim's musings and state of mind, Bennabi offers a view of what is unique about the 'Muslim soul'.

Lebbeik includes a sort of love story as a subplot in the complicated relationship between the hero Brahim and his wife Zohra, whom he had not treated well during his wild days.

Three Extracts from *Lebbeik*

Extract 1 – how the novel starts

For thirteen centuries now, the Muslim festivals and rituals, one year after the other, have been regulated by the lunar calendar. The father in a family may perform his pilgrimage to the holy land in the peak of summer while his son may do so in the middle of winter. Apart from the Arabs of Arabia, accustomed to their terrible climate, Muslims of other lands dread the pilgrimage in the hot months. But whether it is summer or winter, it is necessary to respond to the true call, the irresistible call – one that is more than just in order to fulfil a half-forgotten vow or pious intention to endure the strenuous rituals under the Meccan sun:

Lebbeik – I am with You, God

For thirteen centuries, the mysterious call makes itself heard annually in the very depths of our being, more often of those who are of the most humble. And in the lands afar from the land of Islam, the response is evoked each year:

Lebbeik, lebbeik!

The pilgrimage arrived in April that year, the month when the orchards are in bloom, the breeze sweeps over the landscape and the scent of rose bushes and the blossom of orange trees hangs over the plain of Bône. To the pilgrims on the train from Constantine approaching Bône to embark the ships, these fragrances are like gusts from Paradise, a foretaste of the blessings reserved for the chosen. Their faith is replenished and in one body they take up the chant:

Lebbeik, Allahumma lebbeik

Bône is in celebration, receiving pilgrims arriving by train and aiding those seeking to go to town for some final purchase of provisions or to pray at the mosque while awaiting their ship. Many families invite the pilgrims to their homes, so that they too may have the honour of offering them a last meal on the way to the holy land. The pilgrim is not an ordinary guest where normal formalities hold: even the old maids of the household come down to envelop their guest in warm hospitality and also sigh in regret: would they not have the good fortune of ‘washing their bones’ in the waters of Zam Zam?

For next year, *insha Allah*

For next year, *insha Allah*

Insha Allah! Insha Allah! Make a prayer for us at the tomb of the Prophet.

The next year, if we are in this world.

Ah! I wish to die there!

These are the sincere words of Muslim souls that long for the far-off 'Valley without cultivation', where in times past Abraham took his progeny for the glorification of God and its inhabitants bestow a heartfelt generosity to their pious visitors.

Exchanging these words, tears well up in the eyes of these old men and women.

They say to the pilgrim – be it their parent, their son, their friend, their guest:

'Say a prayer for me there...'

With these words a wish that could not be fulfilled personally is attached to the departing pilgrim.

Extract 2 – The pilgrim ship

Brahim and his group settled themselves in the same place as the previous evening. The imam and another member of this little community went about organising the meal. Each brought forward his provisions, including the sweets that were customary fare for pilgrims. In the past, during long voyages, the pilgrims would come well-stocked, even with salt and pepper, and prepare their own meals. Today it is only confectionary that each family presses on their pilgrim, according to their means. For the bourgeoisie of the town it is *baklava*; for the simple and poor citizens, *makroud*; and for country folk, *rfiss*.

In Brahim's group, gathered in a circle for the meal, there was but *makroud* and *rfiss*, reflecting their varied and modest origins. Brahim had a loaf of good bread from the Vernis store that was fried in egg yolk and some fruits – Uncle Muhammad undoubtedly had little time for preparing other items for the pilgrim's basket.

The imam soon returned with his helper bearing two trays of some standard items. Not much accustomed to restaurant food, particularly the country folk, the pilgrims began to examine the dishes as they had done the previous evening.

The imam acted as culinary censor, taking a piece of meat at a time with a spoon, passing it under his nose, sniffing, before placing it on the platter. Each time, with several grimaces, he would declare:

'This is not from pig...'

Soon Brahim interjected:

'I would like to say that I saw the ritual slaughter of sheep this morning. They were taken on board, I was told, for the entire journey, up to Jeddah.'

The imam, however, resumed his action, declaring:

'Do we know? There is no harm ascertaining.'

The others shared their opinions on their portions and soon it was time for the *rfiss* and *makroud*: firstly for the imam and then for Brahim.

A sailor became curious with this Muslim scene. He edged his way near to the group of diners and looked for a way of entering the conversation. The imam glanced at the unexpected observer and thought that an explanation was in order:

'We are Muslim. We do not eat pork,' he said in Arabic while offering some of his *rfiss*.

The sailor did not understand what was said or the offer but out of politeness took the cake.

Happy that the ice had been broken and apparently not knowing Arabic, he ate it:

'It's good! Thank you. Do you understand French?'

The pilgrims understood the words 'good' and 'thank you' and thought they were obliged to offer more *makroud* to the sailor. Brahim replied in a mixed accent:

'Me. I understand French a little.'

The sailor thought that Brahim's French was adequate and so questioned:

'The others amongst you, the Muslims, you do not eat the pig and you do not drink wine? Muhammad prohibited it?'

Brahim faced a questioning look from his companions. Their eyes were on him when he replied to the sailor:

'One neither eats the pig nor drinks wine, else one enters Hell.'

While the sailor was absorbing this, Brahim translated the question and response for his companions.

The imam considered Brahim's translation incomplete because he spotted absence of the word 'Muhammad'. Brahim agreed that he had avoided part of the question.

The pilgrims resumed their meal but the imam, with their support, called on Brahim to clarify that the forbidding was not from Muhammed but ALLAH.

The sailor was observing the conversation without understanding. Between mouthfuls, Brahim told him:

‘It is not Muhammed who prohibited wine and the pig but the Gracious God.’

Another pilgrim had stopped by them and was looking on, leaning on the deck’s railings a few feet away from the sailor. He quipped:

‘Yes, but it is Muhammed himself who confirmed that. You yourself have not heard Allah.’

Brahim felt awkward and chewed on a morsel to play for time. The pilgrim, donned in the red *chechia* and with the manner of those bilingual intellectuals one meets in Algiers, commented again:

‘It is neither Muhammed, nor Allah...but God who has made this prohibition.’

On hearing this, the sailor asked in a more serious tone:

‘Isn’t God and Allah the same for you?’

‘For me, yes,’ replied the pilgrim, ‘whereas it is not the same for you. When you say Allah you think of some “fetish of the Muslims” and when you say “God”, your thinking is somewhat closer to what I have in mind when saying Allah.’

The sailor interrupted:

‘Oh! Me, I do not think of this at all. One has enough to think about with the difficulties of life. Moreover, if there were no religions there would not be these many conflicts on earth; and if there is God, there would not be so much injustice and misery.’

Brahim had been having a fair go at translating the conversation for his companions, while they were eating. There was a murmur of disapproval within the group on the first of the sailor’s remarks.

The imam, offering a portion of meat to Brahim, voiced his disapproval:

‘The wine has dazed him,’ he said with a look of compassion towards the sailor. ‘He will think of God one day and realise life was but a veil blocking the sight.’

He took a piece of *rfiss* and offered it to the sailor saying:

‘Here. Take this before being devoured by the Fire.’

The pilgrims laughed at this wit and collected their utensils at the end of the meal. The pilgrim leaning on the railings started again:

‘See - the difficulties of life, the conflicts and the miseries – these are neither caused by accident or by God’s doing. It is society once civilised that first violates the basic rules of happiness for its own interests. Today these have been replaced by artificial rules, but there can be no substitute for happiness or for that matter, truth. Science and politics can never rebuild what has been destroyed in the human spirit.’

The sailor interjected:

‘And can religion re-establish it? A universal religion perhaps? Ah! I see it now...a global church that subjugates people, suppresses consciences and objectors.’

The pilgrim halted the sailor by offering him a cigarette:

‘What do you want?’ he said. ‘We struggle with words. We can say the same thing and take different meanings. Moreover in blaming religions, you are basically incriminating diversity. I suppose you also blame the plurality languages and defend Esperanto. But the Tower of Babel has remained an utopia....’

He struck a match and offered it to the sailor, who now demanded:

‘No doubt you are a believer because you are going to Mecca. And yet your speech is of a person too educated to be a believer?’

‘That is your impression,’ the pilgrim retorted spiritedly, as someone belonging to a culture where religion and science were in some way inter-related. It is the milieu from where the cultured Muslim emerges...a sceptic, a simple Muslim, a fanatic.

Though much of this was above his head, Brahim paid attention to the two men’s conversation.

For his part, he approved of the pilgrim in the *chechia* and had the impression of witnessing an epic duel between Islam and *kufr*.

He wrapped some cakes left over from the meal. As the two men moved off to continue their debate elsewhere, Brahim addressed one of his meal companions:

‘I did not understand it well,’ he said, ‘but I had the feeling that the hajji defended Islam well. He spoke French well.’

He placed the packet of cakes on the pump house behind him, adding:

'I am leaving these morsels for little Hadi if I see him again. He will be well fed in the kitchens, but a child likes such things.'

Extract 3 – how the novel ends

...After the pilgrim ship had returned to Bône, a haji knocked at the door of Uncle Muhammad on behalf of Brahim.

Pleased at receiving news of the coal merchant and honoured by a returning *haji*, he invited the guest to dinner.

Aunt Fatima busied herself in preparing a meal worthy of the occasion. However, she often interrupted her culinary labours, sometimes with a pot spoon at hand or a kitchen knife, to pose a question to her honoured guest about the people and things over there.

The pilgrim handed her a packet from Brahim.

When she opened it, he explained:

There is a prayer mat for you and your husband and this ring for Zohra.

He pulled out a letter from a large wallet that was from Brahim and, addressing Uncle Muhammad, said:

'Hajj Brahim told me that you would know who Zohra is.'

Aunt Fatima wiped her hand on the kitchen towel and placed the kitchen knife on the ground. She embraced the prayer mats and brought them up to her face that already had tears flowing down it. Uncle Muhammad began reading the letter aloud for the benefit of his wife:

Praise be to God, the One!

To my dear Uncle, may the prayers of the pious, the venerable, the generous, the wise shaikh be on you and yours.

I am pleased to let you know of my arrival in Medina a few days now, having completed all the rituals of the pilgrimage as you yourself had taught me on my departure. I praise God for having eased my return to the straight path after my having long followed that of error and mistakes – Satan be damned!

I feel like a new person and I see around me a new world where I would like to live, if it pleases God. Furthermore a *maghrébin* who runs a *hammam* here

has allowed me to install a percolator to sell coffee to his clients. I commenced this work two days ago and I should convey to you my satisfaction, notably with the Hindu[stani] and Javanese pilgrims who do not leave without having partaken.

I would also like to let you know that the job of coal merchant does not exist here because the whole world uses petrol or alcohol. I have left the coal with the wine in Bône – for the better.

I always think of you, friends of my parents, and I prayed for you especially at Mecca and likewise in Medina. I do not forget you at the grill at the tomb of the Prophet which I visit every day, accompanied by a little child from Bône who clandestinely boarded the ship and now has accepted to be like my son. He too, like me, is happy to have left his shoe shine box behind him.

Nor have I forgotten Zohra who had admirable patience in the difficulties she endured with me. I wish her a pilgrimage that she deserves. Moreover, if she accepts to join me in Medina for the next pilgrimage, I implore you to remit to her the remaining amount from the sale of the house for her voyage expenses. May God enable us to meet again in happiness in this world or the next.

Medina, 25 Dhul Hijja, 13...

Hadj Brahim, who prays for you.

* * *

Source: Facets of Faith – Malek Bennabi and Abul A'la Maududi, The early life and selected writings of two great thinkers of the twentieth century.[Islamic Book Trust, Kuala Lumpur, 2019]

<https://ibtbooks.com/shop/facets-of-faith-malek-bennabi-and-abul-ala-maududi/>