

The Modern Literary (After)Lives of al-Khidr

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In what follows, I look briefly at a Qur'anic character in modern literature in several languages. This kind of use of a Qur'anic figure is admittedly not widespread in modern Arabic literature, but it is also not unusual.¹ One well-known example is the appearance of a Joseph figure, or Joseph-like figure, in the 1984 Arabic novel, *al-Rahīna (The Hostage)*² by the Yemeni writer Zayd al-Muṭīrī Dammāj (d. 2000).³ The action, which takes place in pre-revolutionary Yemen, is the story of a young boy who is taken hostage as a ransom in exchange for (the expectation of) his family's political obedience. The boy is sent to live with a governor of a city, where he is made into a *duwaydar*, or attendant. In this way, he becomes an outlet for the sexual fantasies of many of the palace women, and notably for the sister of the governor, the beguiling Sharifa Hafsa, with whom the youth immediately falls in love. In one important exchange between the two of them, Sharifa Hafsa tries to ensnare him, fails, and so threatens him. This is evidently inspired by, and modelled on, the relationship in the Qur'an between Joseph and Zulaykha (as she is known in tradition), the wife of Joseph's master. Knowledge of the Qur'anic narrative – in which the wife of a wealthy man tries to seduce her young servant – contributes to the reader's interpretation of the power dynamic in the modern narrative. And, in order to ensure that the correspondence is not lost on the reader, Dammāj includes an exchange in which another woman accuses Sharifa Hafsa of acting as a kind of Zulaykha.⁴

The Joseph story, to stay with that example, forms the basis of Tanzanian/British writer Abdulrazak Gurnah's 1994 English-language novel, *Paradise*, ostensibly a coming of age story about Yusuf, a twelve-year-old boy in rural East Africa whose father sells him to a trader to settle a debt.⁵ He falls in love with Amina, the adoptive sister of a fellow indentured worker, who is married off to the much older 'Aziz, who may or may not be Yusuf's uncle. Here, too, knowing the Qur'anic account helps us understand both how Gurnah has been inspired by that story and also allows us to read

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the modern narrative through and against it. Gurnah does not want to risk having the reader miss the relationship between the accounts and so names his protagonist Yusuf and the beloved's husband 'Aziz. Other examples of Qur'anic characters in modern literature include the fictionalised portrayal of the women around the Prophet Muḥammad in Algerian filmmaker and novelist Assia Djebar's 1991 French novel, *Loin de Médine (Far from Medina)*.⁶

Al-Khiḍr

In Sura 18 of the Qur'an, verses 60 to 82, Moses encounters an unnamed individual, one he seeks out in order to try and benefit from his knowledge.⁷ The man is reluctant to let Moses accompany him; Moses insists and he relents, but not without pointing out that Moses will not be able to abide him. When this man scuttles a boat on which fishermen depend for their livelihood, Moses finds the act abominable. Moses questions him further when he kills an apparently harmless youth, and when he rebuilds a wall for inhospitable townspeople without so much as asking for wages. At this point, the man insists that Moses and he part ways, but he first explains to Moses the reasons behind his acts, hidden from Moses, but nevertheless commanded by God.

Though he is not named in the Qur'an, this man is identified as 'al-Khaḍīr' by the Prophet Muḥammad in a *ḥadīth* recorded in Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan*.⁸ He has come to be known more commonly as al-Khiḍr or simply Khiḍr.⁹ There is no agreement about al-Khiḍr's full name, but Baliyā ibn Malikān is widely accepted by Qur'an commentators and narrators of Prophetic Stories (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*).¹⁰ Malikān was reputed to be a great king, and may be the Malkam of I Chronicles, 3:9. But other genealogies are also proposed: that he is a son of Adam; a grandson of Cain; the son of Pharaoh's daughter; the son of a Greek father and a Persian mother; the son of a Persian father and a Greek mother. Some even say that al-Khiḍr was raised by wild beasts.¹¹ In Islamic tradition, he is known as *mu'allim al-anbiyā'*, the tutor of prophets; and is a *mu'ammarr*, literally 'a long-liver', in his case an immortal one (until Judgement Day).¹²

The Arabic word *al-khaḍīr* means 'green' or 'greenery'; the honorific name 'al-Khiḍr' is consequently taken to mean 'the green one'. In some versions of the Alexander Romance, after al-Khiḍr has dived into the Water of Life – which he found by using a shining jewel brought from Paradise by the Prophet Adam – all the flesh of his body becomes 'bluish-green and his garments likewise'.¹³ In the Ethiopian version of the Romance, he is told: 'You are Khidr: wherever your feet touch, the earth will become green'.¹⁴ His greenness suggests links to St Gregory and St George, and echoes, if distantly, Zachariah, 6:12: 'Behold the man whose name is The Branch.'

Al-Khiḍr has been the subject of considerable attention, both in the Muslim exegetical tradition and in modern scholarship, Muslim and non-Muslim.¹⁵ One reason for this

interest is revealed by the title of the important 1913 book, *Die Chadirlegende und der Alexanderroman* ('The Khidr Legend and the Alexander Romance') – and Alexander has been linked to the Qur'anic character Dhū'l-Qarnayn, whose story immediately follows the al-Khidr one in Sura 18. Many books and articles have appeared since, especially on the subject of veneration of al-Khidr. In 2000, Patrick Franke published *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginaren im traditionellen Islam* ('The Encounter with Khidr: Studies on the Imaginary in Traditional Islam').¹⁶ His study examines the motif of the 'encounter',¹⁷ provides a phenomenology of reverence for Khidr, and closes with a look at two prominent twentieth-century exegetical views, those of Maulana Mawdudi and Sayyid Quṭb. Mawdudi, uneasy with al-Khidr's actions – he destroys a boat, kills a youth – elevates al-Khidr from a man to an angel; Sayyid Quṭb makes the far more radical step of unhinging the Qur'anic character from al-Khidr altogether. Claudia Liebeskind has gone as far as interpreting these moves as representing a possible 'swansong for Khidr'.¹⁸ But in his appendix of 173 accounts describing encounters with al-Khidr, Franke includes one which intimates the perdurance of al-Khidr:¹⁹ in a short passage in the novel, *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, set in the sixteenth century, the Egyptian novelist Gamal el-Ghitani (Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, b. 1945) has al-Khidr make a brief appearance.²⁰ Franke does not mention a young print-shop worker, called Khidr, who features in another work by el-Ghitani, and who, with the help of companions significantly named Sulaymān and Ilyās (Solomon and Elijah), is the saviour of Cairo,²¹ nor does he mention the presence of al-Khidr in a work by another major Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz.²² Those omissions are no reflection whatsoever on Franke – modern Arabic literature is after all not his remit. But regrettably even Arabic literature scholars have not paid much, if any, attention to such characters, and as a result these have rarely been analysed, let alone inventoried or described.²³ This is truer still of literature in languages other than Arabic.

I first noticed the presence of Khidr-like or Khidr-esque characters in non-Arabic literature in the year 2000, when I read, in close succession, the 1991 French novel, *L'homme du livre* (lit. 'The Man of the Book')²⁴ by the Moroccan writer, Driss Chraïbi (d. 2007); the 1994 Russian short story, 'Prints Gosplan' ('The Prince of Gosplan'), by the Russian writer, Viktor Pelevin;²⁵ and the 1998 short English story 'The Mapmakers of Spitalfields', by the Bangladeshi-born British writer, Manzu Islam (b. 1953). A few years later I read Reza Daneshvar's 2004 Persian story, 'Mahbūbeh va-Āl' (2004).²⁶ In what follows, I discuss these four stories, which include four literary incarnations of al-Khidr,²⁷ ones I heuristically dub: al-Khidr, anti-Khidr, meta-Khidr, and doppel-Khidr.

Driss Chraïbi and the Qur'anic al-Khidr

Driss Chraïbi (b. El Jadida, Morocco, 1926 – d. Crest, France, 2007) was a Moroccan author. After Qur'an school in Casablanca, he went to Paris to study chemical

engineering and neuropsychiatry. He travelled in Europe after his studies, and returned to France, where he settled and made a career as a writer, journalist, and radio producer. His first novel, the autobiographical *Le passé simple* (1954, *Simple Past*),²⁸ which he wrote when he was 28 years old and in which he criticises patriarchal Islam, caused ‘a critical maelstrom’;²⁹ it also established Chraïbi as an important voice, and anticipates many overtly political works that followed. His 1995 novel (properly, a novella), *L’homme du livre* (lit. ‘The Man of the Book’, translated as *Muhammad*) he wrote when he was almost 70 years old and dedicated to his father.³⁰ It is divided into two parts, ‘The First Dawn’ comprising five chapters, and ‘The Second Dawn’ consisting of only one chapter.

The work opens as follows:³¹

In a cave stands a man in a sleeveless, seamless mantle of undyed wool.

This is evidently the Prophet Muḥammad. Chraïbi writes in a prefatory note that his work is fictional, but that the character is not: ‘This book is not a historical work, but a novel, a purely fictional account, albeit of a considerable historical figure, the Prophet Muhammad.’ This is confirmed by the mention in the first chapter – and, later, the appearance – of Khadija, Muḥammad’s wife; by the identification of the cave as Mount Hira³, where Muḥammad is said to have first received revelation; and by other similar indicators.³²

Chapter one is a lyrical interweaving of desert scenes and Muhammad’s thoughts, many of them the words of the future Qur’an – future because it has not been ‘revealed’ yet, traditionally, on the twenty-seventh of Ramaḍān. As we read on, we learn that it is the day before the first revelation, and therefore before Muḥammad has actually become a prophet, the twenty-sixth of Ramaḍān. Chapter two finds Muhammad, affected by the sun, and by the words milling around in his head and in the landscape around him:³³

Ya Sin. The letters suddenly leapt out of the rock face...

[...]

And then... The shaking stopped. Suddenly. Between his feet, he noticed a hole, a kind of small fissure faintly resembling two intertwined letters: *Ya Sin*.

As the work proceeds, more and more of the language begins to resonate, and in several cases outright render, the Qur’an. Early in the second chapter, Muhammad notices a man:³⁴

In a bend of the path, a skinny ash-white donkey stood thrashing... and by its side, next to a scorched bush, stood a man. He rested his head on

the hands that were folded on a stick that stood almost as tall as he. He stood in the sun listening, listening to being. A white beard grew to his knees, his skull shone bald and rosy; his bare feet seemed alive, crisscrossed by a thousand dark wrinkles. He appeared ageless – and maybe, thoughtless...

As Muhammad came within calling distance, the old man said:

‘You are not possessed. Not possessed, no, and may the blessings of Jesus son of Mary be with you, my son!’

Muhammad stopped short.

[...]

... And in the sweetest voice he asked:

‘Do you recognize me?’

‘No, not really.’

...

‘Ha! Well, I recognized you by your voice, your voice of gold.... It’s been thirty years now since I saw you for the first time, in Syria, in Busra, sitting in the shade of a tree. Remember now?’

Muhammad says that he does not – but we do. This sounds like Baḥīrā, the Syrian monk said to have recognized Muḥammad on his trip to Syria. Chraībi is playing with their storied encounter. Earlier, this figure had been standing next to a scorched bush. He tells Muhammad several times his name is Bahira, but Muhammad keeps asking. Their last exchange goes as follows:³⁵

‘You’re blind yet you see? Who are you?’

‘Bahira,’ said the monk. ‘Don’t shout, I’m not deaf. May heaven grant that when the day comes when you are truly powerful, you will stay as you are, humble – humble and simple before your people...’

[...]

‘What are these legends? What is this sacrilege? What is your meaning?’ responds Muhammad.

Later, when they have parted, Chraībi uses close third narration to let us inside the monk’s head as he reflects on his own situation and lot:³⁶

And who was he, really? He could barely say his name with certainty. His name used to be Al-Khadir once, when he was with Moses, leader of the wandering Hebrews, at the crossing of the two seas. He had carried a rosary of fishes strung through the gills.

He then goes on to describe the short time he and Moses were together, effectively reprising verses 60 to 82 of Sura 18. Now that he and Muhammad part ways, he reflects:³⁷

When he entered Jerusalem shortly before Jesus son of Maryam, his name was Khidr.

There have been clues to the true identity of the monk, namely that he is al-Khiḍr: his agelessness, his namelessness, Muhammad's inability to understand his meaning. What is more, this nice intersection of Baḥīrā with al-Khiḍr is not entirely original. Early sources report that the Ṣūfī Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. c. 161/777–8) learned true spiritual knowledge from a solitary Syrian monk – al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) reports that it was from al-Khiḍr that he did so.³⁸

In many ways, then, this deployment is traditional, or undertaken with traditional 'encounter' narratives undergirding it. But the closing remark of chapter two – 'And what could he possibly have said or done on a day from amongst the days and somewhere on this earth to have been denied eternal sleep forever?' – suggests that something is amiss, adumbrating some of the twentieth-century controversies, per Mawduḍī, Qutb, and others, and the alleged 'culpability' of the Qur'anic al-Khiḍr in scuttling a boat that provides livelihood and in taking the life of a youth.

Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere, one image associated with the actions of al-Khiḍr is that of destruction.³⁹ In one tale about Amir Hamza – a character modelled on the Prophet Muḥammad's uncle – al-Khiḍr shows him how to use his arrow to split his nemesis in two. In another, al-Khiḍr comes to Hamza in a dream and shows him how to destroy the thousand-armed demon (*dīv-i hazār-dast*).⁴⁰ Al-Khiḍr has also been linked, if somewhat tenuously, to the Indian demon Rahu. Legend has it that both are put to death but survive because they have sipped from the Water of Life, al-Khiḍr immortalised as a maleficent demon fettered to the bottom of the sea, Rahu immortal and headless; both then become enemies of the stars.⁴¹ Chra'ibī does faintly intimate such a transformation in the character Raho in his novel, *Mère du Printemps* (1982).⁴² And as we shall see below, the demonic can indeed emerge.

Reza Daneshvar and Anti-Khiḍr

Reza Daneshvar (b. 1948, Mashhad) is an Iranian writer. He studied and taught theatre in Mashhad before becoming Vice President of the School of Arts there. In 1982 he left for France and has lived in Paris since. He is the author of several plays, novels and short story collections, one of which includes the story 'Mahbūbeh va Āl' ('Mahboobeh and Ahl').⁴³ This Persian short story, told in the style of a folk tale, is an allegory of Iran in the twentieth century, decrying superstition, repression and violence (especially against women). It centers on the life of Mahboobeh, a woman who is haunted at once by the demon-ogre Āl who is said to kill newborns and to eat the livers of their mothers, by her great-aunt's spirit, and by her having mistaken an ordinary man for Khiḍr. A few pages into the story, an older cousin tells the title character, Mahboobeh, about 'her uncle's strange encounter with Āl', years before.⁴⁴ The account reads as follows:⁴⁵

On his way to the mosque, in the dim light before dawn, the uncle had arrived at a stream, created by the storm, that now divided the city.

There, at the juncture, he had seen the silhouette of a man, bent over the water, who seemed to be waiting for the uncle to cross the stream.

In addition to being presaged in the passage quoted above about a man met – ill-met in this case, as he turns on the uncle, eyes flaming red and yellow – by a juncture in a stream, the Khidr-esque presence is presaged also by a toothless, green-skinned, white-haired hag by the name of Mollabadji.

Mahboobeh falls in love with her cousin. They become intimate, without consummating their passion, but they are found out and her parents begin the search for a suitor, possibly the neighborhood grocer. When Mahboobeh's cousin learns of this, he gives her news of 'Elijah, the immortal, wandering green-cloaked prophet who comes to the aid of those whose prayerful requests come from the very bottom of their hearts'.⁴⁶ This too is evocative of al-Khidr. Elijah, Idris (Enoch/Hermes), Jesus and al-Khidr are the four individuals who are said not to have tasted death;⁴⁷ in one Judaeo-Arabic account, Elijah and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi mirror Moses and al-Khidr from the Qur'anic account;⁴⁸ and he is green-cloaked.

The young lovers remain hopeful:⁴⁹

For the next forty days, he[r cousin] instructed, Mahboobeh was to sweep the threshold of their house before each sunrise and bless the name of the Most High... But her intentions should remain secret. For forty days she was to commit no sin, no matter how small, and on the fortieth day the green prophet would appear.

No one knew in what form the prophet would reveal himself. Perhaps he'd come as a human being, perhaps not. He might come in the guise of an acquaintance, or of a total stranger. She should not be deceived by appearances. The more he insists that he's not the green prophet, the cousin explained, the more confident she should be that he is. Cling to his garment and do not let go... He shall save you from Āl and all this nonsense about marrying the grocer. And then we'll wait till I've finished school. When I'm an engineer, I'll come and make you my wife. Don't forget to ask all this from the green prophet.... You won't see me until the end of the forty days.

Things do not turn out as planned. Although he keeps away for forty days, the cousin does not show up on the forty-first day as promised. The narrator tells us that, 'It was the green prophet who kept him away. The same green prophet to whose garment Mahboobeh had clung'.⁵⁰ We then get a description of this character:⁵¹

The green prophet wore greasy blue overalls and had a long string of yellow worry beads that he twirled around his finger. He sported a

huge moustache and spoke like a thug. In the beginning, he pretended not to know what the fuss was all about. He said, 'Let go of me, girl. Who the hell is the green prophet you're talking about?'

This man turns out to be a truck driver called Asghar, but Mahboobeh is convinced that he is the green prophet her cousin told her about. She spends the night telling Asghar everything about herself, her past and her aspirations. Now fully in the know, he sees his opportunity and seizes it, brusquely and brashly saying to Mahboobeh's father the very next morning, 'I'm the green prophet. I'm asking for your daughter's hand'. She is just fourteen when they marry.

Things get steadily worse. The cousin does learn what has happened but Mahboobeh is locked away, and he is in any case threatened with bodily harm if he tries to intervene. The truck driver is often drunk, and routinely mistreats and assaults Mahboobeh. She is also assaulted by a sergeant. She bears several children. Twenty-five years later, her cousin, now a revolutionary, visits. When Mahboobeh asks where he has been, he replies, 'Dealing with Āl. That's all.' She laughs and says, 'That green prophet you sent me was an odd one. Instead of rescuing me from Āl, he himself turned out to be an Āl of sorts.'

The Qur'anic al-Khiḍr is immortal. This, however, is not the case with Daneshvar's anti-Khiḍr. Instead, Mahboobeh, now possessed by the soul – spirit, rather – of her mysterious and transgressive aunt, Hajar, stabs Asghar while he is performing his ritual prayers. The case can therefore be made that Asghar is only as Khiḍresque as his own dissimulation. But there is enough in this skillfully woven tale to entitle us to see in him a version, however perverse, of the al-Khiḍr character. A reworking needn't be a perversion, however, as the next example shows.

Viktor Pelevin and Meta-Khiḍr

Viktor Pelevin (b. Moscow, 1962) is a Russian writer. After secondary school he pursued studies first at the Moscow Energy Institute, and subsequently at the Gorky Literary Institute, where young Soviet-era writers were trained in socialist realism. His early creative work did not attract too much attention, but he is now one of the most acclaimed writers in the post-Soviet literary scene. He is known for adroit juxtapositions: of the serious and the flip, of the realist and the surreal, of Western rationality and Eastern mysticism, of 'philosophical speculation and cultural autopsy'.⁵² His strong interest in human consciousness and mysticism was already evident in his first significant publication, a work of social theory, published in the *New Review*.⁵³

In 'Prints Gosplan' ('The Prince of Gosplan'),⁵⁴ the protagonist, Sasha Lapin, is a state employee who lives simultaneously in his everyday life and in his computer life,

notably within the adventures created by his favourite computer game (one inspired by 'Prince of Persia'). In his real life, he must negotiate the various levels of his office building and the state bureaucracy. In the game, he has to progress through numerous 'levels' to reach 'the princess'. The two realities are blurred for Sasha who seems not to be able to tell the two apart. He, his colleagues and friends are at once players of the game, creators of the game, figures in the game, and even characters inhabiting an external reality within the game. Pelevin skillfully alternates between realities and levels, allowing neither the protagonist within nor the readers without any certainty about what is 'real' and what is not. That al-Khidr should be part of this confluence of two realities seems entirely appropriate.

The story opens as follows:⁵⁵

Loading...

The little figure runs along the corridor. It is drawn with great affection, perhaps a little too sentimentally. If you press the < Up > key, it jumps back, and hangs in the air for a second, trying to catch hold of something above its head.

Three paragraphs later, 'Level 1' begins. As the story progresses, we accompany Sasha through the levels. When the narrative and Sasha reach Level Seven he realises that he has managed to get out of an underground labyrinth and is now in a palace. He tries to find his way out but he is disoriented. He runs down some steps and at the foot of a staircase he notices:⁵⁶

... a guard in a scarlet caftan, with a curling mustache, holding a long sword. Down in the bottom right corner of the screen Sasha noticed the six triangles that indicated the life force of his opponent, and he turned cold at the sight; he'd never encountered anything like that before. The most he'd seen was four triangles. Sasha took out the sword he had found once beside a heap of human bones, and assumed the position. The warrior began to approach, gazing straight into his eyes, and stamping his green Morocco-leather boot on the stone slabs. Suddenly he lunged with incredible speed and Sasha barely managed to deflect his sword using the < PgUp > key, before immediately pressing < Shift > , but that surefire move didn't work either – the warrior managed to leap back before advancing again.

'Hi there, Sasha!' said a voice behind his back.

Sasha felt a sharp surge of hatred for the unknown idiot who had decided to distract him with a conversation at such a moment, feigned a lunge, then aimed his sword directly at his enemy's throat and sprang forward. Once again the warrior in the scarlet caftan had time to leap

back. It was Petya Itakin. He was wearing a green sweater and old jeans, which surprised Sasha greatly...

After several pages of interacting with Petya in what seems to be the real world, Sasha, and the narrative, reach Level 8:⁵⁷

Lying on the floor, Sasha opened his eyes and gazed uncomprehendingly around the twilight room. ...
[...]

‘Don’t be afraid, shuravi,’ he said, bending over Sasha. ‘If I didn’t kill you right away, I won’t touch you now.’⁵⁸

The warrior says his name is ‘Zainaddin Abbas Abu Bakr al Huvafi’ and asks Sasha if he is a spiritual man. Sasha says he supposes he is. Then Abbas tells him he would have killed him except that he noticed that Sasha had a copy of John Spencer Trimingham’s *Sufi Orders in Islam* and decided to spare him. The cover of the book bears ‘a mystic symbol: a green tree made of interwoven Arabic letters’. Sasha says he is more than halfway through the book. When Abbas asks Sasha why he killed a certain Maruf, Sasha convinces him it was in self-defense. The two then have an exchange during which they share whisky and stories. Abbas requests a story with a moral, which Sasha tells; it features an old man wearing a black hat. This prompts Abbas to ask:⁵⁹

‘Tell me the truth, are you a hidden sheik?’

Sasha didn’t answer.

‘I understand,’ said Abbas, ‘I understand everything. Tell me, are you certain the old man’s hat was black?’

‘Yes’.

‘Maybe it was green? I think it might have been the Green Khidr.’

‘And what do they know here about the Green Khidr?’ Sasha asked. He hadn’t read about this person in Trimingham’s book yet, and he was curious.

‘Everybody says different things. For instance, the dervish from Khurasan that I drank with. He said that the Green Khidr rarely appears in his own form, he assumes the appearance of others. Or he puts his words into the mouths of different people – and anybody who wishes to may hear him speaking all the time, even when they are talking with idiots, because some of their words are spoken for them by the Green Khidr.’

‘That is true,’ said Sasha.

Sasha saying ‘That is true’ is odd considering he has not yet read Trimingham’s book and implies that he knows nothing ‘about this person’. Pelevin’s legerdemain here

consists in having Abbas imply that Sasha is connected to al-Khiḍr. When Abbas asks Sasha if he is a hidden sheikh, Sasha remains silent. When Pelevin has Abbas say, 'anybody who wishes to may hear him speaking all the time, even when they are talking with idiots, because some of their words are spoken for them by the Green Khidr', this echoes the earlier passage in the story (quoted above) where Sasha is distracted by the 'unknown idiot'. It is clear that the author wants us to think of both Abbas and Sasha in Khidr-esque terms. When Abbas, now in Level 12, thinks back to meeting Abbas, he thinks of it as an 'encounter'.

We already had intimations of Khidr in Level 1, in the description of Sasha's superior:⁶⁰

Boris Grigorievich was standing by the window and practicing the 'swallow's flight' blow, pausing at length in each of the intermediate positions.... Today he was wearing a 'hunting costume' of green satin.

And also in Level 3, when Sasha is summoned to the Gosplan offices, where the five-year economic plan is being devised. Before leaving he thinks about:⁶¹

Kudasov, deputy manager of the second section who had reached the eighth level in the game *Throatcutter* ages ago, but still hadn't managed to jump over some kind of green locker...

What is particularly creative is the meta-narrative and meta-fictional way in which Pelevin deploys al-Khiḍr, as a meta-Khiḍr. Not only is he mentioned within a narrative within a narrative that appears to be taking place within a game, itself in a fictional environment, but the mention is also tied to a real-life text. What is more meta-Khiḍr is encountered during an ascension through levels – which is evocative of the stages of gnosis through which a Ṣūfī aspirant passes. The blurring of the imaginary and the real is of course a feature of al-Khiḍr's life and afterlife. What is more, the hero's apparently concealed knowledge of al-Khiḍr not only mirrors the latter's access to knowledge specially vouchsafed, but the sentiment that he appears wherever he likes in whatever guise – besides the obviously skillful intersect with the world of gaming where avatars abound – also forces us to grapple with the notion that Sasha himself is Khidr-like, Khidr-esque, or even Khidr/meta-Khidr himself.

The story ends with a realisation on Sasha's part about the true nature of both reality and the game, though it is a realisation that comes to him in a dream, the story's only one:

At first he dreamed of Petya Itakin, sitting on the top of a tower and playing long reed flute, and then he dreamed of Abbas, wearing a shimmering green caftan, who explained to Sasha at length that if he pressed the < Shift > , < Control > , and < Return > keys

simultaneously, and then reached for the key with the arrow pointing upwards and pressed that as well, then wherever the little figure might be, and no matter how many enemies it was facing, it would do something very unusual – it would jump, stretch up, and a second later dissolve in the sky.

The erstwhile scarlet caftan is now green. If a character is Khidr-esque, does he have to be associated with green? As the next story shows, not necessarily.

Manzu Islam and Doppel-Khidr

Manzu Islam (b. 1953) is a British writer. He was born in East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and migrated to England, where he completed a doctorate. He currently teaches postcolonial literature and creative writing at the University of Gloucestershire. His scholarly publications, notably, *The Ethics of Travel*,⁶² ask many of the same questions his creative works do,⁶³ namely how do we encounter those who are different from us and what are the consequences of those encounters. He writes principally about the trauma of the civil war that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, the difficulties and triumphs of Bengalis remaking their lives in exile, and the traumas of the racism and othering they experience in Britain. The latter is informed especially by his time as a racial harassment officer and is visible in most of the stories in his collection, *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields*, including the title story.⁶⁴

‘The Mapmakers of Spitalfields’ opens with the narrator describing himself and friends at a cafe in Spitalfields. The door is flung open and two blond men in white overalls enter – the narrator dubs them Smooth and Nasty. They are searching for someone, show the customers the photograph of him, and question them politely but forcefully:⁶⁵

Suddenly becoming thoughtful, as if he had hit upon something,
Smooth paused to scrutinize my face.

— What they call you?

I gave him my name.

— Don’t play games with me, mate. You know what I mean. What they call you around here?

I again repeated my name. He snapped the photo off the table and they left as hastily as they had come.

The men in overalls are searching for Brothero-Man, an elusive figure who goes by that name and who addresses everyone as ‘brother’. The narrator is concerned that they will catch up with him:⁶⁶

But I wasn’t so anxious for him now because I knew they wouldn’t be able to catch him at this hour. He had this thing about twilight and

dawn. Each day, at those uncertain moments between day and night, he applied himself most skillfully. Not only did he outflank their hesitation with the supreme subtleties of his craft, but went onto a different plane altogether.

The narrator wants to find Brothero-Man and warn him about the 'mad-catchers' in overalls. The narrator seems to know a lot about him. As the story progresses, Brothero-Man acquires more and more Khidresque characteristics: he is able to conjure up things, and appears at all times of night and day, usually in dapper outfits, different colours on different days.⁶⁷ There is widespread sympathy for him, but the narrator is surprised to hear one friend, Munir, suggest that he be turned in to the mad-catchers because he 'talks rubbish' and goes 'absolutely nowhere'. Munir's wife Soraya is outraged:⁶⁸

I thought at least you'd be able to tell the difference between a mad man and a wise man. Have you bothered to listen to him? If you had, I'm sure you wouldn't say these things. Oh Allah, what nonsense I'm hearing! You think him a funny-ike because he dares to speak the truth like the prophets.

And another friend warns that if the mad-catchers touch Brothero-man, 'things will burn'.⁶⁹ The narrator reminisces about encounters with Brothero-Man, who speaks a rhyming mixture of Bangla and English, liberally peppered with swear words. On their first encounter, Brothero-Man 'leapt on me from nowhere on the spring of his legs'; Brothero-Man greets him, then melts into the alleyway.⁷⁰ It turns out he has been wandering the streets of London some twenty years, ever since he jumped ship, or so the story goes. His madness is believed to date from then, as is his secret mapping of the city:⁷¹

What do you say, brothero? Surely a strange new city, always at a crossroads, and between the cities of lost time and cities of time yet to come.

The narrator keeps searching for Brothero-Man to warn him about the men in overalls. Kamal, the news vendor, who finds Brothero-Man odd, but whose 'old man thinks he's got some kinda special power', says he was there earlier.⁷² The grocer Haji Shahab had seen him that morning too.⁷³

I tell you something, no one looks at my fish like him. Only Allah knows why he looks that way. But I'm sure they aren't ordinary looks.

He adds that, 'they would make a grave mistake if they touched him, because only Allah knew what would happen to them'.⁷⁴ The narrator goes to the mosque next, which Brothero-Man never enters, though he unflinchingly shows up for all five

ritual-prayers and stands outside, greeting those going in. When asked once why he does not go inside, Brothero-Man replies:⁷⁵

Inside/Outside what a fussing-wussing talk. Have you any idea, you shit head, where that mosque be? Right in me inside. You tell me... how can I go inside of the inside? Bawkk, bawk, bawk not knowing how to talk.

The narrator goes next to a poet's place, where he listens to verses composed about Brothero-Man, and where he witnesses the mad-catchers apparently apprehending Brothero-Man – but it turns out to be someone else. He then goes to the cinema, where he reminisces about how Brothero-Man saved him from Mulana, the local religioso, who was using religious rhetoric and guilt to extract money from him. The narrator next reaches a pub closed long ago:⁷⁶

It was as I stood looking at it for that first time that Brothero-Man appeared, as he did on so many occasions, by my side.
– Brothero, just like me, this place is not what it seems. You see it's an either-neither place. But most interesting. You've to lift the veil-bhorka to see the face.

The narrator continues on his quest to find Brothero-Man. He realises he should just go back to the poet's, as Brothero-Man never fails to show up there between two and three in the morning. When he arrives the poet is impatiently awaiting Brothero-Man's arrival. The narrator tells him to sleep and that he will wait for him. We then get a dream-like sequence in which Brothero-Man comes, reassures the poet, re-traces his movements (and the narrator's) around town, and then disappears into thin air as the mad-catchers try to seize him. The narrator then gets up, leaves, and wonders why everyone outside is staring at him. He buys some sweets and the shopkeeper refuses to take money. He goes to the Sonar Bangla cafe – where the story, and wanderings, started – ⁷⁷

As I entered, a hushed silence descended on the cafe. I went to a lonely corner, sat facing the painting of a boat on the horizon. But the oarsman wasn't singing any more. I was still puzzled to see that people were staring at me with the same melancholy eyes as they were in the street. Then Lilu walked in from the kitchen with a cup of tea in his hand. He set it on the table in front of me, leaned over and whispered in my ear.
– Brothero, he said, two mad-catchers in white overalls were looking for you. You got to hide, brother, you got to hide.

The alert reader might have already suspected that the narrator and Brothero-Man are somehow one and the same.

Brothero-man appears to be a real person, but he is also evidently a metaphor, a double, not only of the unnamed narrator, but also of the city and – inevitably – of ethnicity.⁷⁸ For Manzu Islam, Spitalfields is a cityscape to be mapped, and thereby dismantled; and the makers of the map, cartographers hiding in, and emerging from its byways, are there to transform Spitalfields, in much the same way that the cityscape has been transformed. Manzu Islam accomplishes this by having the mapmaker move around, be uncentred, unfindable. And he makes this move by recourse, if a profane one, to a double from Islamic tradition, the elusive prophet-teacher al-Khiḍr, whom he turns into Brothero-man, a Doppel-Khiḍr, who encodes and deciphers the city, and whose story is a Muslim narrative of survival.

Concluding Remarks

When a writer (re)uses or (re)deploys a character from an earlier work – the Qur'an for instance – for that new use to have any sort of purchase, there have to be recognisable qualities or characteristics from the original character; indeed, I would argue that there are some characteristics that are indispensable, or else the new character ceases to be identifiable with the exemplum. For someone to be a Joseph, he needn't have brothers, but surely he has to be young and handsome; he needn't interpret dreams, but he has to be captive and be the object of a woman's affection. This is the case with Dammāj's young protagonist in *The Hostage* (discussed above). For a character to be a Jesus, he needn't necessarily be virgin-born (though perhaps his father needs to be absent somehow), but he must be betrayed and, if he is to be like Christ, he must be sacrificed or make a sacrifice, usually his life. This is the case with Rifaat in Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley*.⁷⁹ Even if a Solomon has no Queen of Sheba, there has to be a connection to animals, ideally ants. This is true of Suleiman in Hisham Matar's novel, *In the Country of Men*, the subject of Noor Hashem's article in this issue.⁸⁰

As for al-Khiḍr, the constraints of characteristics are, relatively speaking, minimal. Franke identifies the basic elements of the al-Khiḍr-encounter in the Islamic imaginary as follows: sudden emergence and vanishing; greeting; and an emergence scene. And he qualifies the Islamic al-Khiḍr as: being a deliverer and helper in difficulty; being perceived as a mark of honour; being variable in form; bearing a distinguishing mark; embodying expectation and disappointment; and being a hidden presence.⁸¹ Even on the basis of this taxonomy, this gives writers a great deal of latitude. It would seem to me that, minimally, only two conditions are needed for a literary character to be Khiḍresque – that he be met by chance, and that his identity be a shifting one (three conditions, if we count being male, as I believe we must). In this way, al-Khiḍr turns out to be one of the Qur'an's most versatile and productive characters, because his very nature is anonymous, provisional,

shifting – something that Driss Chraïbi, Reza Daneshvar, Viktor Pelevin, and Manzu Islam have capitalised upon, if in very different ways.⁸²

‘Al-Khiḍr’ allows Chraïbi to plumb the Islamic tradition and religious history as remembered by Islam in order to create an interlocutor for the Prophet Muḥammad. There is a chance meeting and his is an avowedly shifting identity, now Bahīrā, now al-Khiḍr. By telling Muhammad what he knows, he fulfills his role as tutor, and by describing his time with and knowledge about Moses and Jesus, he attests to his God-given role.

In the ‘anti-Khiḍr’, Daneshvar for his part distills into one character the Prophet Elijah, the demonic Āl, and the vulgar and ill-met Asghar, truck-driver, thug, wife-beater, and womaniser. Everything that is mysterious about al-Khiḍr turns murderous in this grotesque obverse of him; whereas al-Khiḍr has special knowledge, given directly by God, Daneshvar’s anti-Khiḍr uses what knowledge he can extract to abuse any given situation. He is met by chance, and his identity certainly shifts.

Pelevin’s ‘meta-Khiḍr’ is closer to the Qur’anic al-Khiḍr and to Šūfī elaborations of the character – the connection to greenness, deciding whether Sasha should live or die, things not being what they seem, and all the trappings and accoutrements – but there is much about him that is shifting, not least his existence: is he real or virtual, is he a simulacrum?

The same can be said for ‘doppel-Khiḍr’, Manzu Islam’s doppelgänger of al-Khiḍr. Characteristics associated with the Qur’anic al-Khiḍr are certainly in evidence: he is in several places at once, he materialises and makes objects materialise, he knows things as they really are, he is connected with water and with fish, and crossing him can result in calamity. Also, meeting him only happens by chance and his identity is uncertain – so uncertain that the narrator may himself be a/the doppel-Khiḍr.

Simply put, the Qur’anic character of al-Khiḍr is productive and versatile, and can be, as I hope I have succeeded in showing, deployed very creatively, especially in the imaginations of remarkable writers.

NOTES

1 More widespread is the use of Qur’anic language and themes. See e.g. the novels *al-Zilzāl* and *al-Walī al-Tāhir* by the Algerian novelist al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār (1936–2010); and the plays *Ahl al-Kahf* by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898–1987), and *Hārūt wa-Mārūt* by ‘Alī Aḥmad Bā Kathīr (1910–69) (discussed in Dina Amin’s essay in this volume). See also the oeuvre of Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006), discussed by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem in this volume, and discussed also in Bayyūmī, *al-Qur’ān al-karīm fī adab Najīb Maḥfūz*. See further: Wild, ‘The Koran as Subtext in Modern Arabic Poetry’; Toorawa, ‘Modern Arabic Literature and the Qur’an; and Fudge, ‘Strangers in Fiction’.

2 English translation: *The Hostage*, tr. May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley (New York: Interlink Books, 1994).

3 In 2010, the Arab Writers Union voted *The Hostage* #45 on a list of top one hundred books in Arabic. See Lynx-Qualey, 'Best 100 Books'.

4 Dammāj, *al-Rahīna*, p. 98 = Dammāj, *The Hostage*, p. 104.

5 Gurnah, *Paradise*. The novel was finalist for both the Booker and the Whitbread Awards in 1994.

6 Djebar, *Loin de Médine* is discussed in Fudge, 'Qur'an, Canon, and Literature'.

7 The case can perhaps be made that al-Khiḍr is a uniquely Qur'anic character, though scholars have certainly suggested analogues. In his brief analysis of the Qur'anic story, Hodgson calls it one of the several points of departure for the mythic imagination in the Qur'an due to its personal and symbolic mode, and cites antecedents in Sumerian literature, such as the story of Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic, the Syriac Alexander Romance, and Jewish legendary accounts. See Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, vol. 2, p. 460; see also Friedlander, *Die Chadirlegende und der Alexanderroman*, p. 333. The Judaeo-Arabic version of the Elijah/Rabbi Joshua ben Levi story mirrors that of the Khiḍr/Moses one: Rabbi Joshua accompanies Elijah under certain conditions laid down by him, Elijah performs a number of seemingly outrageous acts, Joshua is baffled. See Nissim ben Jacob, *Elegant Composition*, pp. 13–16; and Wheeler, 'The Jewish Origins of Qur'ān 18:65–82?'

8 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, vol. 3, p. 1319.

9 The name is also spelled (and pronounced) differently in different languages, e.g. Xızır in Turkish.

10 See al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, pp. 192–94, pp. 199–203; and especially al-Ṭabarī, *Children of Israel*, pp. 2–18. This paragraph and the next draw on Toorawa, 'Khidr: The History of a Ubiquitous Master'.

11 On Islamic views of al-Khiḍr, see al-Ṭabarī, *Children of Israel*, pp. 2–18; Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet*.

12 See Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet*, *passim*.

13 Budge, *The Life and Exploits of Alexander*, pp. xl ff. and pp. 267ff.

14 Budge, *Life and Exploits of Alexander*, p. 269. It is noteworthy that the narrative in the Qur'an most closely associated with the figure of Alexander, namely *Sūrat al-Kahf*, Q. 18:63–98, immediately follows the narrative about al-Khiḍr (at verses 60–82).

15 See Renard, 'Khaḍīr/Khiḍr' (esp. the bibliography); Wensinck, 'al-Khaḍīr (al-Khiḍr)'; Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*; Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet*.

16 Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*.

17 See also Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet*.

18 Liebeskind, review of Franke, p. 571.

19 Cf. Fudge, 'Strangers in Fiction'.

20 al-Ghīṭānī, *al-Zaynī Barakāt*. The passage is: 'A thought flashed in Shaykh Kirmani's mind: the man whom he had met and who had warned him was none other than al-Khiḍr, peace be upon him', p. 204.

21 al-Ghīṭānī, *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*.

22 Mahfouz has one character encounter al-Khiḍr in a short story which consists of a cycle of seventeen dreams. See Maḥfūz, 'Ra'aytu fimā yarā al-nā'im', p. 141.

23 But see Cragg, *The Pen and The Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'ān*; Toorawa, 'Modern Arabic Literature and the Qur'an'; Fudge, 'Strangers in Fiction'; and cf. Cachia, 'In A Glass Darkly'.

There are important articles in Harrow (ed.), *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Harrow (ed.), *The Marabout and the Muse*, and Hawley (ed.), *The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam's Impact on Contemporary Literature*.

24 English translation: *Muhammad*, tr. Nadia Benabid (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

25 I am grateful to Vitaly Chernetsky for bringing this story to my attention.

26 I thank Catherine Porter for putting me back in touch with Reza Daneshvar, and Reza Daneshvar for providing me with a copy of the Persian original of the story.

27 Another significant appearance of a Khidr-esque figure is in an American science fiction novel, Philip José Farmer's *The Unreasoning Mask*; I am grateful to Harith b. Ramli for bringing this novel to my attention. Farmer also deploys a Khidr figure in the story 'St. Francis Kisses His Ass Goodbye'.

See also Voltaire's *Zadig* where, late in the story, a despairing and defeated Zadig encounters a hermit on the banks of the Euphrates. The two agree not to separate for a time; after a few days, Zadig realises that this is the angel Jesrad in disguise. The echo of the Moses-Khidr encounter is unmistakable.

28 Chraïbi, *Le Passé simple*.

29 Rogers, 'Driss Chraïbi', p. 97.

30 Chraïbi, *L'homme du livre*. It won Morocco's Grand Prix Atlas in 1996. English translation: Chraïbi, *Muhammad*.

31 Chraïbi, *Muhammad*, p. 13.

32 Having the action take place before Muhammad has become a prophet may have been a way to avoid the possible outcry about representing him fictionally.

33 Chraïbi, *Muhammad*, p. 16, p. 20.

34 Chraïbi, *Muhammad*, p. 24, p. 25, p. 26.

35 Chraïbi, *Muhammad*, p. 28.

36 Chraïbi, *Muhammad*, pp. 28–9.

37 Chraïbi, *Muhammad*, p. 30.

38 Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, pp. 30–1.

39 Toorawa, 'Khidr: The History of a Ubiquitous Master', p. 48, on which this paragraph draws.

40 Fayzī, *Dāstān-e Amīr Hamza*, p. 282, p. 499.

41 Hartner, 'The Pseudoplanetary Nodes'.

42 Chraïbi, *La Mère du printemps*, pp. 21, 181. For other instances of al-Khidr in Chraïbi, see Delayre, *Driss Chraïbi. Une écriture de traverse*, pp. 89–90, pp. 288 ff., pp. 398 ff.

43 Daneshvar, 'Mahbūbeh va-Āl'. English translation: Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl* and reprinted as 'Mahbubeh and the Demon Ahl'.

44 Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl*, p. 4. The translators have presumably opted for 'Ahl' because the untransliterated 'Al' looks like the short version of Albert or Alfred; I have changed this to 'Āl' in the citations.

45 Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl*, p. 4.

46 Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl*, p. 13.

- 47 See e.g. Corbin, *L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien*.
- 48 Nissim ben Jacob, *Elegant Composition*, pp. 13–16; and see note 13 above.
- 49 Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl*, pp. 13–14.
- 50 Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl*, p. 14.
- 51 Daneshvar, *Mahboobeh and Ahl*, p. 14.
- 52 Berrett, Review of Pelevin.
- 53 See McCausland, 'Viktor Olegovich Pelevin', p. 210.
- 54 Pelevin, 'Prints Gosplana'. English translation: Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', in Pelevin, *A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia*.
- 55 Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', p. 159.
- 56 Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', pp. 188–89.
- 57 Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', p. 194.
- 58 *Shuravi* is the Persian word for 'Soviet'. It is used neutrally now to describe someone from the USSR or Russia, but was used to describe Soviet soldiers and military advisors in Afghanistan.
- 59 Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', p. 200.
- 60 Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', p. 161.
- 61 Pelevin, 'Prince of Gosplan', p. 173.
- 62 Islam, *The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka*.
- 63 Islam, *Burrow*; Islam, *Song of our Swampland*.
- 64 Islam, 'The Mapmakers of Spitalfields'.
- 65 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 60.
- 66 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 61.
- 67 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 62, p. 63.
- 68 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 64.
- 69 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 64, p. 65.
- 70 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 66.
- 71 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 66.
- 72 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 68.
- 73 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 69.
- 74 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 70.
- 75 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 70.
- 76 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 77.
- 77 Islam, 'Mapmakers of Spitalfields', p. 83.
- 78 Several of these ideas were first formulated in '«Vivre sous d'autres latitudes»: "The Mapmakers of Spitalfields" and Other Survivors of Cartography,' a presentation I gave in October 2001 at the 'Reorienting Europe Seminar' organised by the Institute for European Studies at Cornell University. I am grateful to Davydd Greenwood and Gail Holst-Warhaft for having invited me to participate. I am grateful also to Manzu Islam for meeting with me in London.
- 79 Maḥfūz, *Awlād ḥāratinā*.
- 80 Matar, *In the Country of Men*.

81 Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*.

82 We might even be entitled to ask whether he is less a character and more the personification of a plot device; I am grateful to Harith b. Ramli for this suggestion.

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