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Yemeni Narrative and Society: Socio-political Issues in Dammaj's *The Hostage*

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Abstract

Narrative writing is relatively a new phenomenon in Yemeni literary discourse and a sequel to the maturity of the common folk forms. The present study investigates both the rise of Yemeni novel and the representation of the major social and economic issues in early Yemeni novel between the 1970s-1980s. Since the 1970s, the novel genre has become one of the most relevant phenomena in Yemeni literary canon. Yemeni writers of this era were aware of the importance of introducing contemporary issues to the reader. In addition to this task, the novel has enriched the Yemeni cultural field and remained dynamic in national identity formation. This study has a special reference to Zayd Dammaj's *The Hostage* (1984) for it is the first Yemeni novel that has unflinching determination and frankness in representing injustices and miseries in the society. Though *The Hostage* is also a tender critique of influential families that were part of the oppressive regime, it succeeds in helping the nation compromise with the past. The conclusion of the study suggests that while criticizing certain families for the misery of the whole nation may challenge co-existence, this discourse is seen as a subtle manifestation of negotiating differences. Further, the conclusion of this study finds that investigating history and major issues in Yemeni novel will guide readers and critics to a much-needed area of study on the factors which led to the rise of the Yemeni novel.

Keywords: Yemeni novel, Imams, social change, social conflicts, hostage.

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1. Historical Framework

Novel genre plays a crucial role in recording social experiences and historic events; although represented events presented in all literary forms, are not necessarily facts. Human experiences of pain, sufferance, and joy are presented as eternal truth in the novel genre which is, according to Watt (1957), “the truth to individual experience” and conveys “the impression of fidelity to human experience” (p. 13). Watt approaches novel genre with referentiality and eternality pointing to the ability of novel in recording events of a particular time in the life of a nation and its artistic capability to bear witness to history: “Ideas become general by separating from them the circumstances of time and place... [N]ovel's plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time” (p. 21). The earliest novels in literary history like the Japanese novel *Tale of Geni* (1010) by Murasaki Shikibu, the English novel *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) by Thomas Malory or even the few surviving Greek novels like *Apollonius of Tyre* constitute a coherent account of human experience. They are still read in the twenty-first century because they have the same human experience conveyed with a wide range of historic truth and continue to influence the present.

Much has been written about forming what Ian Watt terms the “The Rise of the Novel” in the Arab world, as well as the role of the novel in defining modern Arab identity and representing major issues concerning the nation. Within the Middle Eastern novel, as Roger Allen notes, there is a strong impulse to establish and document the concept of “nationhood,” employing the national heritage to shape the present to give historical legitimacy to the emerging political entities, most of which we know today, are shaped or reshaped barely a century ago: “it is also true-and undoubtedly desirable-that there are a number of local novelistic traditions, each one concentrating on the burning issues of the nation or region while at the same time inevitably reflecting its political, social and cultural priorities” (p. 51). Being new states, formed or granted independence between 1930 and 1960, the status of Arabic novel before this period is not a good case in point for context-independent representation of national issues. However, an Arabic novel written in Egypt and Lebanon is an exception; it is an example of mature literature that seeks to consolidate the notion of “Arabness.” Pan Arabism, the nationalist notion of cultural unity, secures its “sovereign” existence in Arabic novel in Egypt and Lebanon and affirms what Wen-chin Ouyang draws upon Stefan G. Meyer's terms “Arab nationalism” and “Arab unity”:

This is visible in the Arabic novels' engagement with modernity and tradition within the framework of the nation-state. Both modernity and tradition can take the shape of the nation-state. The ambivalence towards the nation-state inherent in the Arabic novel, gestures towards other ways of managing aesthetic breakthrough, relationships with the past and present, and the role of Arabic literature in the future of Arab culture (Ouyang, 2013, p. 226).

2. Discourse Analysis: Yemeni Narrative

In literary canon, Yemen, as a postcolonial nation-state that quickly jumped into a dictatorship and authoritarian regime, compels a hunt to investigate not only the history of national literature but also the country's imprisonment by one dictator Imam after another. The country occupies an important

part in the Arab region due to several economic and political considerations; a fact that explains the diversity of themes and issues in its literature. In the last two millennia, Yemen's location made it in the heart of trade movement between Asia, Africa and Europe; a position that boosted the country's economy, agriculture and culture: "This trade continued unabated until 1839, when Aden became a British possession, and the superior qualifications of that port, under an enlightened government, gradually withdrew the commerce of Mokha, since which period it has rapidly and steadily declined" (Lambert, 2009, p. 9). This important location had also invited many formidable invasions from world colonial powers like Rome, Greece, Persia and made the country a target of neighboring powers like Ethiopia and Egypt. This history is depicted in terms of human struggle for survival against external political powers and the longest dictatorship that ruled Yemen from 897 to 1962. Therefore, this novel is a trenchant indictment of domestic socio-political injustices and voices solidarity with the people. It conveys the climactic extremes and suffering of the people under political oppression of Imamates, a tough regime belonging to a minority ethnic group that controlled Yemen for centuries.

Yemeni novel emerged from obscurity and arguably reached its apogee in the work of the second generation of writers who possessed a noteworthy linguistic trait to switch between literary entertainment and socio-political reality (Altwaiji, 2019, p. 93). Although the novel genre had recent beginnings in the 1940s, its success has been notable in the national literary project that mainly amounted to "uprising against the Imam" and "descriptions of actual historical events or of conversations about life and society among personal acquaintances" (Kuzmanovic & Özdalga, 2005, p. 60). On the one hand, it was felt, at least on the level of modern cultural class, that novel had to play a significant role in the national identity formation; on the other hand, writers and scholarship holders had been influenced by the political issues outside the country and became relatively active in the political polemic inside the country. The connection between development of national novel and the political activism has been strong. Both Yemeni students outside the country and the political activists become the literary voice; promoting the novel genre through narrative writing and through literary criticism. These writers introduced the Yemeni society through liberal revolutionary goggles: at one point activists from north and south of the country are the representatives of the will of the nation, then Imamate monster and the colonizer are made up of factors of backwardness and incivility that cannot but work for their own interests:

... the rise of the novel coincided with the maturity of intellectuals in the traditional mold in Highland Yemen who opposed the rule of the Hamid al-Din Imams, and later with an emerging nationalist opposition to British rule in and around southern Yemen...The novel may have represented one kind of *lingua franca* between two groups, reformist Northerners and nationalists southerners, who were in the process of creating a national solidarity independent of both the Imamate and British colonial power (Hassan, 2017, p. 486).

In a much modern Yemeni novel, the narration is a collage containing nearly folk tales, legends, myths, oral poetry, superstitions, tales, music, fictional adventure...etc. that represents historical incidents, humanitarian situations and cultural: "It [folk literature] was used as one of the main weapons in struggles between tribes, and was used in various social events, such as national and individual festivals" (Al-Mutawakel, 2006, p. 59). The inclusion of folk forms exerted a major influence on the development of Yemeni novel and had a positive aspect insofar as it helped to bring to mainstream

readers certain written production rich in literary flavor. This juxtaposition of folk elements with narratives has also contributed to changing the status quo between the nation and the political regime, leading to a renegotiation of the *doxa* among the elites in the society. Folk elements had been playing a crucial role in the formation of Arabic novel in general and Yemeni novel in particular: "the dual function of folklore with social science on the one hand and with humanities on the other is its prime feature stirring us by tackling social issues at home and cultural issues related to the immigrants as an alternative technique of expression" (Altwaiji. 2017, p. 163). This resulted in forming the first Yemeni writers' Union with its headquarter in Aden in 1970; a landmark in history of Yemeni literature and a hallmark of literary unity among novelists from north and south of Yemen. This period between 1970 and 1980 witnessed publication of the biggest number of novels such as Messibli's *The Orphan*, Ba-Sadeeq's *The Way of Fogs*, Haniber's *The Village of the Batool* and Alzubairi's *Waq Alwaq*. This era coincided with the publications of the two most famous novels: Mohammed Abdulwali's *They Die Strangers* (1971) and Zayd Dammaj's *The Hostage* (1984). *They Die Strangers* and *The Hostage* reflect the artistic genius of novelists with different orientations; Dammaj represented the socio-political realities and Abdulwali focused on immigrants, exile and nostalgia. For critics such as Al-Maqalih (1987), an eminent Yemeni writer, novel of this period has remained weak and did not yet achieve creativity and mastery of the genre because novelists failed to create a "balance between the action and artistic structure" (Al-Maqalih, 1987, p. 12). He believes that Yemeni novel of 1970s-1980s was still a "stumbling effort" of writers who "are unable to express themselves well through the novel" (Al-Maqalih, 1987, p. 11). However, Mutawakel argues that novel of this era got its identity and "had a new style and content. It contained some new artistic tools of a novel...novel fulfilled the artistic criteria" (2006, p. 83). According to her, this decade marks publication of the biggest number of novels and the participation of female writers for the first time:

In the 1970s, the number of novels increased; about fourteen novels were written during this period, the greatest number of Yemeni novels written in any period. Most of the themes of the novel during this period were taken from Yemeni social and environmental life. Some novels dealt with immigration...Some novels dealt with the people's lives before the two revolutions...This decade marks the beginning of women's contribution to the novel (2006, p. 84).

3. Social Issues in *The Hostage*

The focus of this article is the magnum opus of Zayd Dammaj: *The Hostage* (1984). *The Hostage* can be categorized as a realistic novel. The novel deals the social, economic and political situations of the country through the miserable life of a boy who is taken by the Imam as a *Hostage* to guarantee the obedience of the boy's clan: "Hostage-taking and the billeting and levying of soldiers were key methods by which the Hamid al-Din imams exerted some control over- and at times punished - the tribes that lived in territory the Imamate presumed to be part of its domain" (Schmitz & Robert, 2018, p. 221). *The Hostage* has a historical significance because it is considered as a milestone in Yemeni written narrative that engages with themes of great importance to the national sentiment.

Zayd Dammaj (1943-2000) was a Yemeni author, politician and diplomat who was born in Al-Naqilain, Ibb, Yemen. In 1956, Dammaj went to Cairo where he enrolled in the Department of Law, Cairo University in 1964 but he changed his mind after he had spent two years and decided to make a switch

to the department of journalism. While he was still a student in 1968, he was summoned back home to participate in the revolution against the royal family. Following the footsteps of his father, Dammaj was one of the revolutionaries who formed the 'anti-royalist movement' against Imam. After the Imam stepped down, Dammaj was elected a member of parliament in 1970 and subsequently held other political offices in the new government. His political rise continued and he served as Yemen's ambassador to different countries. Dammaj is best known for *The Hostage* (1984) which was selected by the Arab Writers Union as one of the best Arab novels in the twentieth century. It is Dammaj's first English novel. Dammaj was a short story writer, too. His mastery of short-story writing, according to Caton, helped him produce his *magnum opus*, *The Hostage*: "Much of the novel's intensity comes from the compression and carefully wrought structure that one associates with the short story form, of which Dammaj is a recognized master" (Caton, 2018). In addition to *The Hostage*, Dammaj also wrote many novels such as *The Amazement and the Astonishment (Al-Inbihar wa Al-Dahshah)* (2000), *The Scorpion (Al-Aqrab)* (1982), *The Sorrows of the Girl Mayyasa (Ahzan al-bint Mayyasa)* (1990) and the incomplete novel *The Ahmadi School (Al-Madrasah Al-Ahmadiyah)*.

The Hostage (الرهينة *Ar-Rahina*) is a multi-thematic novel, though politically dominated. It is set in the pre-revolution Yemen during the era of the royal family of Imams and is taken as a tangible and unshaken testimony of the life in Yemen between 1940 and 1960. The novel's title *The Hostage* refers to a son of a tribal leader who is taken a hostage by the Imam, a general practice of all Imams, as a pledge for his father's political and military support: "the Imam regularly took from their families in order to secure the obedience of their fathers, tribes, or villages, the boys lived together, often in harsh circumstances, often separated from family and childhood friends for many years" (Burrowes, 1984, p. 7). Detaining citizens or taking them as hostages has been a general practice of Imams and a pledge for the tribes' political obedience: "As a sort of insurance, a tribe chief who pledged his allegiance to the Imam was often forced to surrender hostages, often his own sons and nephews" (Schmitz & Robert, 2018, p. 221). And after a period of imprisonment in a fetid fortress, the boy is taken to work as a *duwaydar*, a servant to royal ladies, in a sumptuous palace where he opens the narration with an observation on the panoramic view of his city, Taiz:

How beautiful this city was! I have seen it first when I was taken away from my village and imprisoned in the fortress of al-Qahira as one of the hostages of the Imam. His soldiers had come in their blue uniform and torn me away from my mother's lap (Dammaj, 1994, p. 23).

The Hostage is a kernel of truth and a true image for the country's social and political reality. It is an image of the rigid regime of the Imams, too. This image provides a vivid view of the social unrest before the revolution of 1948. It is presented through the hereditary line of the royal family who succeeds in isolating Yemen and exercises central control. In his review of the novel, Al-Maqalih refers to the fact that: "authors had no opportunity to hone their techniques in the new fictional arts... until the September-October Revolution decisively opened the way for Yemen enter the world...affording Yemeni writers the right to assimilate the new trends of contemporary literature life" (p. 15). *The Hostage* is a critique of the social corruption and the decline of moral values, too. Jayyusi (2005) notes in the novel's preface that the images of moral reality are "highly informative" and show "unique experiences of a bygone age" (p. 3). At the palace, the boy is seduced to give covert sexual gratifications for the royal female members, especially the governor's beautiful sister who promised to help him get

freedom. He serves with few boys who also have sex with the royal ladies; these boys were considered safe to be around the women since they were adolescents. The boys, however, are motivated and lured by the women of the palace for pleasures in the dark: "harsh role of the hostage was indeed the fate of a number of his relatives and childhood companions" (Dammaj, 1994, p. 52).

Dammaj leavens his criticism of the negative attitudes and conflicting needs in society by humorous scenes such as the man who gets kicked in the head by a donkey while trying to have sex with and the prepubescent boys who have their first acquaintance of sex with the royal ladies of the palace: "The author also uses the full resources of irony, allusion, and humor to create a complex world, one which is resonant with emotion but devoid of sentimentality" (Caton, 2018). In this first popular novel in Yemeni literature, the writer has used different artistic elements like themes, setting and characterization with "exciting and mysterious adventures" which gave the novel the qualification of "all sorts of literary expressive genres" (Jazem, 2003, p. 184). These elements give a central message and a general insight into the life of Yemeni society through focusing on two conflicting worlds represented in the palace: world of evil and world of goodness.

The Hostage is the first Yemeni novel to shoot an author to international fame. Its popularity has not been welcomed only by the Arab elite readers and critics but also by ordinary Arabs, too. The popularity of this novel is explained by two reasons; artistic and technical. Firstly, the novel was the first work of fiction to touch upon a humanitarian issue in Yemen by disclosing the huge gaps and discrepancies between the life of ruler and the life of the citizens: "Dammaj probably succeeded to use his artistic skills by depicting a unique portrait for the Yemeni environment with its uniqueness and peculiarity. And through his writing he shed the light on many different social concerns the Yemeni society experienced" (Murtaz, 2003, p. 173). It is an outcry against the dictator's perspective on people's freedom, identity, honor and dignity. The author wrote in the first person narration through a narrator, the protagonist, who is taken from ordinary class to give the narration effectiveness and credibility. The novel is also on Yemeni woman who is chained with severe social and religious practices during the Imamate regimes. A woman doesn't have the right to get education and cannot leave the house without permission of a male member; she is completely dependent on male members. She can be the fourth wife of a man who is 40 years older than her. Secondly, the novel's success has to do with the widespread of the text in many Arabic editions such as that of the Arts Publishing House in Beirut, 1984, the Cultural Affairs Publishing House in Baghdad, 1997 and the Reading For All Festival in Cairo, 1999.

National novel, according to many critics, got its artistic form and held its position in the world of literature with its own narrative form and artistic attire with the publication of Zayd Dammaj's *The Hostage* in 1984. *The Hostage* reflects both the author's comprehension of the national reality and his construction of the relationship between the people and the dictator. From the title, reader is introduced to various connotations of words, history and names of characters which all introduce one geopolitical and humanitarian reality of combining history and fiction:

Dammaj in his novel *The Hostage* has written a history of humanity around discontinuity or interruption. He uses his fiction as an instrument to present a history, not in terms of a story of the past but in terms of a story of humanity, in terms of culturally privileged and culturally

marginalized protagonists and in terms of how the latter try to subvert the former. The conflict in the novel is between individual consciousness and the collective historical agents of the society, making the novel a story of the quest for a new, more equal and more humane society that can better accommodate a new sense of identity (Hezam, 2018, p. 140).

The development of the national novel writing continues very slowly till the late 1990s. This slow development in novel genre is ascribed to the national awareness to saving the traditional heritage in a period that is considered the most stable in the history of the country: "The novelists of this period attempted to combine the traditional and the new contemporary styles of writing, believing that the old should not be neglected and the new must not be totally rejected" (Al-Mutawakel, 2006, p. 85). Between 2000 and 2015, novel writing has progressed noticeably. The new generation of both male and female novelists has contributed enormously to the development of novel. Readers, too, have been exposed to varied themes and new narrative techniques. These writers and their growing readership have a strong tendency to regard political narratives more highly than narratives of entertainment. Examples of these novels are Mohammed Amran's *The Revolutionist* (2014), Nadia Alkawkabani's *Just Love* (2006), Bushra Almaqtari's *Behind the Sun* (2012), Safa'a Alhabal's *My Destiny is a Butterfly* (2014), Marwan Ghafory's *Sa'ada's Braids* (2014) and Samir Abdulfattah's *Adjacency: Another Life* (2013). Out of hundred novel writers, there are fifty females, which is a reasonable representation of women writers in Yemen. During this period in history of Yemeni literature, novel has witnessed international recognition and been included in some anthologies of literature where both Yemeni male and female novelists are found. More than one hundred novels had been translated into English; however, most of these novels have not attracted the English readership and remained critically untouched both in the Arab world and in the west because critical studies of Arab novels traditionally focus on Egyptian novel and on Mahfouzian novel in particular.

4. Conclusion

In Yemen, novel is a relatively new genre that has been introduced as a result of the Yemeni students' contact with Arab writers in Egypt and Lebanon. It is very important to assert that Yemeni novel, though a recent phenomenon, deals with highly controversial social and political issues in Yemeni society and was so in its early history in the 1970s. A striking feature found in Yemeni novel is that political regime, represented by the Imams and elites, is not the only entity to be blamed; representation rather is a critique of other forces such as social norms, traditions and the people's deep-rooted belief in the supremacy of the royals. *The Hostage* is an example. It is a record of conflicts between social consciousness and the long-living power agents; making the novel a national agent for political change and a personal medium for attaining equality, new identity and satisfactory social status. *The Hostage* is not only an album of the dictator's injustices but also is a prudent investigation of the social absurdity and personal nothingness. It asserts the existence of sociopolitical realities and offers an alternative vision of harmony and coexistence through fantasy. *The Hostage*, thus, takes us at least halfway towards charting the needs of exploring the national identity and finding answers to questions on the role of cultural heritage in identity formation.

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