Identity Constructions in Contemporary Yemeni Novels

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To Fatimah Hussayn

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“Literature is not a tool of prophecy, it is rather a tool for interpreting reality. If we understand it this way, literature would save lives of millions of people, provided we take it seriously. Literature is a cry of warning. We should look at it as right words said at the right time. That means, we should consider the message of literature before it is too late and so prevent disasters before the happening of a potential disaster that could be avoided.”[1]

Wajdī al-Ahdal, Yemeni novelist.

“Nothing is more effective in deconstructing the power of history than writing about it in a prolific manner.”[2]

ʻAbdullah Al-Baraddūnī, Yemeni poet and historian.

[1] al-Ahdal, W. (March 21, 2017), Taʾwīl al-Ḥayah [Interpreting Life]. *Al-Waṭan Newspaper*, Qatar. Retrieved on 26.4.2017 from: http://www.al-watan.com/news-details/id/66186

[2] al-Baraddūnī, ʻA. (1994), *al-Yaman al-Jumhūrī* [The Republican Yemen]. Damascus: Dār al-Fikr. p. 117.

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Notes on Transliteration and Translation

Transliteration. For transliteration in general, I follow the standards of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). However, the names of famous Yemeni cities or governorates are written according to their common English spelling. I follow a similar method in writing the names of Arabic authors. I transcribe the name of the cited authors according to IJMES transliteration except for those who are widely known or who have written in European languages such as Mohammed Arkoun. I write their names as they appear in their books or articles in the respective European languages.

Translation. The translation of the quotes from the novels analyzed or from other Arabic sources are all mine, unless otherwise indicated.

In some cases, I mention Arabic terms or expressions followed by their English translations. This, in my opinion, will make it easier for readers familiar with the Arabic language to grasp the possible multiple meanings or shades of meanings of these words.

Introduction

1. Topic and Aim of the Study

This book is an analytical study of eight contemporary Yemeni novels that share some common background: they have been written within the last decade, namely between 2008 and 2017, they take Yemeni ancient and modern history as the background of their narrative, and they concentrate on communal or collective identities in Yemen. The selection of the eight novels from the total number of novels produced in Yemen during the last decade is based on the premise that these novels offer more material for studying the construction of identities in Yemen than others. More specifically, each of the eight chosen novels is built around several themes or motifs depicting human experiences and attitudes that have to do with widely debated identity issues in Yemen. These issues revolve around three main categories or frames of identification: regionalism, religious affiliations and race.

Although the study focuses mainly on eight novels, it makes, throughout its analytical argument (chapters 2, 3 and 4), frequent references to other Yemeni novels where necessary and relevant. Moreover, an historical overview of the Yemeni novel is provided in the first chapter. The purpose of this overview is to help the reader position the eight novels within their historical context, both as part of the novelistic production in Yemen, which dates back to 1927, and as part of the cultural movement in the country and the Arab world.

The time period covered by the novels under research, 2008 to 2017, corresponds in part to one of the decisive historical periods in the modern history of Yemen. The three years preceding this specified period, i.e. from 2004 to 2007, are considered to be fundamental to the popular countrywide demonstrations against the political regime, demonstrations that climaxed in what has become known as 'the Arab spring' in early 2011. During these years (particularly from 2004 to 2010), six rounds of war took place in North Yemen between the Ḥūthīs, a Zaydī (Shiʿī) group[1], and the Yemeni military. In south

[1] The Zaydīyya is a Shi'i Islamic school of thought, even though it is considered to be close to well-known Sunni schools of thought, in particularly the Hanafiyya. Unlike its sister school of thought in Yemen, the Sunni Shāfiʿīyya, the Zaydīyya has a strong political component in its theological body. One important characteristic

Yemen, the broadlybased popular social movement *al-Ḥirak al-Janūbī* was established in Aden in 2007 and expanded to all six southern governorates.[2] The following years (2011–2015) saw the 2011 'revolution' and the subsequent transition process, including the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which took place from March 2013 to January 2014 and which was the first time Yemenis from all regions, all political affiliations and all walks of life came together to debate the pressing issues for social, political and economic reform. Unfortunately, these political and social deliberations were accompanied by armed conflicts that culminated in the war that has been ongoing since late 2014.

An unprecedented number of publications of novels accompanied these dramatic and decisive transformations in politics and society, with more than 83 novels being published[3] during this eventful decade. This number exceeds the number of novels published in Yemen in the eighty years prior to that (1927–2004).[4] The writers' articles and the interviews with them indicate that their literary writings have been reactions to and interactions with these transformations. A reform agenda is at the cente of their philosophy of writing. Wajdī al-Ahdal (b. 1973), a Yemeni novelist, states:

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of the Zaydī school is its strong emphasis on *ijtīhad* [independent reasoning]. The Zaydīyya is particularly prevalent in the northern highlands of Yemen. For more information on the Zaydīyya, see Haykel, B. (2003), *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

2 The Southern Movement, (al-Ḥirak al-Janūbī) also simply known as *al-Ḥirak*, is a political movement that has its roots in demonstrations led by southern retired military officers and civil servants in 2007. They protested for the payment of their pensions or their re-instatement into their old positions after they had been forcibly retired following the North's victory over the South in the civil war of 1994. Since then, the movement has grown significantly and has resulted in large numbers of Southerners actively protesting against the rule of the Northern elite under former president 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih. The majority of al-Ḥirak's members demand the disengagement of the South from the North and the restoration of an independent Southern state. See al-Duraymīn, S. (2012), a*l-Janūbīyūn wa al-Qaḍiyyah al-Janūbīyyah* [The Southrners and the Southern Question]. Sanaʿa: Dār ʿUbādī.

3 see al-Faqīh, Z. (Forthcoming), *Bibliogrāfyā al-Riwayah fī al-Yaman* [Bibliography of Novel in Yemen], pp. 16–21.

4 al-Humaidi, F. (March 23, 2015), Political Crisis and Yemen's Literary Resurgence. *Yemen Times*. Retrieved on 05.07.2017 from: http://www.yementimes.com/en/1870/report/4991/Political-crisis-and-Yemen%E2%80%99s-literary-resurgence.htm

> "Literature is not a tool of prophecy, it is rather a tool for interpreting reality. If we understand it this way, literature would save lives of millions of people, provided we take it seriously. Literature is a cry of warning. We should look at it as right words said at the right time. That means, we should consider the message of literature before it is too late and so prevent disasters before the happening of a potential disaster that could be avoided."[5]

This study is an attempt to uncover this role of literature as an aesthetic representation of the Yemeni existential crisis, as an aesthetic written space designed to inform Yemeni citizens about themselves and as a medium used by the intellectual elite to suggest certain solutions.

One of the most salient features of the assessed novels is that their writers concentrate on a variety of controversial topics. Their themes are strongly related to the idea of the population's sense of identity and the normative order in society. Questions of religiosity, social and political differences, appropriate behaviour and history are among the issues tackled. Though the novels reflect the social and political consciousness of the intellectual elite in the country, namely, of their writers, different layers of society are given room to express themselves in the fictional world of the novels, albeit with different levels of success or failure in representing the social realities and the different voices. In other words, suppressed voices are freed from the pressure, censorship and oppression of the dominant mainstream in the real social space, and find a milieu in the dialogic space of the novel. The narrative space, as will be shown, is characterized by its multiplicity, dialogism and relative authenticity as it integrates, theortically, the different languages of the various social strata. Unlike, for instance, the limited space of dialogism in lyrical poetry (which has been the most dominant genre in Yemen for a millenium),[6] the narrative space of each novel offers a dialogic cosmos with a multidimensional parallel history that challenges the official history promoted in academic, political or journalistic circles. Rather than presenting a ready-made truth, the novel tends to expose this 'truth' to the reality of the dialogic human condition and to distribute the quality of search after truth among the differing social voices.

Some of the chosen novels have, within the last few years, become the subject of public debates in Yemeni universities, social media, journalism, and in

5 al-Ahdal, W. (March 21, 2017), op. cit.

6 See, for instance, Caton, S. C. (1990), *Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

qāt[7] social sessions. These novels have triggered discussion of issues regarding the writers' religious heresy and blasphemy, the situation of women, the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, and the unification of the South and the North. They have also raised questions concerning regional and tribal affiliations and differences in Yemeni society. Generally speaking, the issues tackled in fiction reflect what Yemenis discuss and debate in real life.

However, the investigation of novels produced during the chosen period shows that the issues of identity as represented in the novels can be narrowed down into the following three categories: Regional identities, religious identities and ethnic identities.

These frames of identification are frequently raised in different religious, political and literary discourses in Yemen; sometimes as a way of mobilising people to achieve certain political goals and sometimes in ways that instruct people to avoid any such identifications that may bring about fractures in society. These frames are marked by two features. First, they are raised in social discussions among citizens and in political public debates among the elite. Second, they have recently become a subject of intensive literary imaginative representations; a fact that makes them a phenomenon worthy of study. Hereunder is a detailed illustration of these three collective frames of identification.

*Regional Identities.*This category of identification was one of the nine main themes in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) that were put forward for discussions and deliberations. Two of the central topics of the conference were the southern issue and the Sa'ada issue.[8] These two issues were heatedly discussed in the hope that a lasting peaceful solution in Yemen could be achieved. However, regionalism as a marker of identification and hence mobilisation is the biggest problem in Yemen even greater than other problems such as poverty, lack of good governance and the deterioration of education. According to some scholars, regionalism in Yemen can be seen to offer an explanation for the different conflicts in the country.[9] These scholars

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7 The *qāt* (catha edulis) is a stimulant plant chewed by many Yemenis and some of the peoples in the Horn of Africa in social sessions. During these sessions the chewers of qat mostly discuss a range of social, cultural and political issues.

8 See Schmitz, C. (March 10, 2014), *Yemen's National Dialogue. Middle East Institute*. Issue No. 1. Washington, D.C: Policy paper series, p. 6.

9 Day, S. W. (2012), *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 7.

think that the multiple regional divisions have, generally, been overlooked by researchers[10] and downplayed by the Yemeni political elite for decades.[11] However, in the outcome of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) federalism was suggested as a solution for this problem.[12] These negotiations were initially spoiled by politicians who had different interests and eventually the suggested solutions were aborted by war.

Here, three novels were chosen, of which one is about Aden, and the other two about Sana'a. These three novels present a fictional account on the idea of regionalism in Yemen through two different representations of the two main cities in Yemen. Within the narration of the two novels about Sana'a, where the South and the North feature as two distinct regional spaces, Taiz in its relation to Sana'a and Hodeidah in its relation both to Aden and Sana'a are thematised and negotiated.

Religious Identities. Religious identities are debated in Yemen in different ways, through theological discussions in mosques, through religious polemics in the media and through political debate that tackles both the relationship of religion to the state and to the public sphere and people. Sectarian differences and relations among the different politico-religious groups are discussed and represented in different discourses such as media and literature. The current civil war has been represented as a sectarian war by some media outlets and the American war on terror in Yemen is represented in al-Qaida's discourse as a war against Muslims. Since 2011, contestation over public space in some Yemeni cities and rural areas has taken on religious dimensions. Religious symbols and slogans have been the tools of this struggle.

This situation has found its way to literary representations. Novels have been a good medium for representing the complex contexts of these phenomena. In this regard, two of the novels studied for this book tackle the relations between Muslim sects and those between Muslims and Jews. These two novels can be considered as examplary of other novels produced in the past few years that partially or wholly handle religious issues.

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10 Ibid.

11 Traboulsi, F. (2015), *Janūb al-Yaman Taḥt Ḥukm al-Yasār: Shahāda Shakhṣya* [South Yemen under the Rule of the Left.: A Personal Testimony]. Beirut: Dār Ryadh al-Rayys, pp. 167–168.

12 Schmitz, C. (2014), op. cit., pp. 9–10.

Ethnic Identities. Ethnicity plays a significant role in Yemen. Yemen has geographical and hence historical and social relations with Horn-of-Africa countries. The African Yemenis, who are called *akhdām* in Yemen, are said to have been enslaved in the early medieval history of Yemen by the tyrant ruler ʿAlī bin Mahdī al-Ruʿynī al-Ḥumairī (d. 1159) .[13] Today they live in shanty-towns outside the main cities or in marginalised neighborhoods. Other ethnic minorities are the so-called *mualladīn,* who have Yemeni fathers and African mothers, and, in Hadhramaut, the *mualladīn* who have Yemeni fathers and Asian mothers. These groups of people are distinguished by the mainstream Yemeni society based on their physical appearances or dialects, and they suffer from discrimination and racism.

These social, racial realities have been thematised in contemporary novels in Yemen. In this study, three novels are analyzed in order to examine the meaning of identity from this angle. Additionally, the social hierarchical system in Yemen is discussed within a historical and social perspective.

During the selection process, the priority was given to novels that thematize group identities and which represent these identities within a historical frame that links the past, the present and the future in one narrative and imaginative structure.

The study, then, is based on three main questions. First, what are the possible communal or collective identities represented in the contemporary Yemeni novels? Second, why do contemporary Yemeni novelists tend to write about collective or group identities? Third, why do they refer frequently to the history of Yemen when representing these identities?

To answer these questions, or particularly to uncover the varying modes of identification, the different manifestations of the habitus of the characters will be discussed. Moreover, in order to situate the novels in their historical and social contexts the function of the historical consciousness of the writers and the literary vision behind that will be brought into the discussion.

Finally, in the concluding remarks (chapter 5) of this study, I discuss the result of juxtaposing and assembling different voices and, hence, individual and collective identities in the novels assessed. Here, I elaborate on the intellectual and philosophical background against which the different identities in the novels were constructed and negotiated. I also discuss the different ways historical consciousness operates in the novels, i.e. the focus of narration on

[13] al-Thawr, ʿA. (1985), *Hādhihi Hyā al-Yaman: al-Arḍ wa al-Insān wa al-Tārykh* [This is Yemen: Land, Man and History]. Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwdih, p. 294.

specific periods of the past as a deliberate method for interpreting and orienting the present and the future.

2. Structure of the Study

This study comprises of five chapters. **Chapter one** is divided into three parts. The first part is a historical overview of novel production in modern Yemeni history since 1927. The second part is dedicated to the theoretical considerations, namely, the main notions used in the study: identity, habitus, historical consciousness, trauma, dialogism and focalisation. The third part is a description of the methodology applied in the study.

Chapter two explores the regional identities as reflected in three novels, and it is divided into two sections. One concentrates on Aden, the capital of the South, and the two other novels on Sana'a, the capital of the North and the capital of the united Yemen since 1990. The first novel is *Steamer Point*[14] (2015) by Aḥmad Zayn. It portrays the cosmopolitan past of Aden city in the late 1960s during the last days of colonial rule. The second, *Ṣanʿā'ī* [My Sana'a] (2013) by Nādyah al-Kawkābanī, is a novel set in Sana'a City in the aftermath of the 1963 revolution in North Yemen. Particularly, it retells the traumatic events of 1968. The analysis will tackle, by extension, the other novel, by al-Kawkābanī *Sūq ʿAlī Muḥsin* ['Alī Muḥsin's Marketplace] which was published in 2016. This latest novel tells the story of the 2011 revolution. The main characters of *My Sana'a* also appear in this novel.

Chapter three consists of two sections and is dedicated to the representation of religious identities. The first section tackles the representation of Jews in Yemeni novels. Here, I analyze *al-Yahūdī al-Ḥalī* [The Sweet Jew] (2009). This is a novel by ʿAlī al-Muqrī that presents, through a love story between a Muslim girl and a Jewish boy, a number of aspects of the life of the Yemenite Jews in the 17th century. The second section considers the representations of Islamic sects in the novel through *Ẓulmat Yā'īl* [Yā'īl's Darkness] (2012) by Muḥammad al-Gharbī ʿAmrān. *Yā'īl's Darkness* is a historical novel depicting the life of Yemenis during the domination of the Ismāʿīlī Dāʿi ʿAlī Bin Muḥammad al-Ṣulīḥī (d.1067) in the 11th century. Frequent reference is made to two other novels by the same author that are an extension of the

[14] The author chose "Steamer Point", the British name of one of Aden's ports and neighborhoods, to be the title of his novel. The neighborhood is called in Arabic *al-Tawahi*. Though English, the title is written in Arabic letters.