

ФИЛОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ

العلوم اللغوية

PHILOLOGY

УДК 821.411.21

Original Paper

Оригинальная статья

**SOCIAL BACKWARDNESS, RELIGIOUS RADICALISM AND WAR
IN YEMENI MARWAN AL-GHAFURI'S NOVEL**

“SAADA’S BRAIDS” (2014)

M.N. Suvorov

St. Petersburg State University

soumike@mail.ru

Submitted: May 6, 2020

Reviewed: May 16, 2020

Accepted: May 28, 2020

Поступила в редакцию: 6 мая 2020 г.

Одобрена рецензентами: 16 мая 2020 г.

Принята к публикации: 28 мая 2020 г.

Abstract

Violent events of the last half-century of Yemen's sociopolitical history have provided rich material for socio-historical fiction to flourish in Yemeni literature. There is, however, an extremely tragic and rather lengthy episode in the Yemeni recent history that has been touched upon only in one Yemeni literary work. This episode is the armed conflict between Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels that lasted from 2004 to 2010. Obviously, the obscurity of this war made it difficult for fiction writers to place a story in this war's confusing context. However, Marwan al-Ghafuri, a Yemeni poet and prose writer living in Germany, managed to do so in his novel Saada's Braids (2014). Three main themes determine the content of the novel: the social backwardness of Yemen, religious radicalism and war. All three themes are interwoven in the novel and presented to the reader through their perception by

Zainab, a girl from a mountainous village in Saada province. In the harsh conditions of wartime, Zainab's personal drama unfolds, leading the girl to finally settle in Sanaa.

Keywords: Arab literature, Yemen, Marwan al-Ghafuri, Saada war, Houthis

For citation: Suvorov, M. N. (2020). Social backwardness, religious radicalism and war in Yemeni Marwan Al-Ghafuri's Novel Saada's Braids (2014). Eurasian Arabic Studies, 10, 16-33.

СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ОТСТАЛОСТЬ, РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЙ РАДИКАЛИЗМ И ВОЙНА В РОМАНЕ «КОСЫ СААДЫ» (2014) ЙЕМЕНСКОГО ПИСАТЕЛЯ МЕРВАНА АЛЬ-ГАФУРИ

М.Н. Суворов

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет

soumike@mail.ru

Аннотация

Бурные события последних пятидесяти лет социополитической истории Йемена дали писателям богатый материал, обеспечивший процветание в йеменской литературе социально-исторического жанра. Есть, однако, в этой истории один крайне трагический и достаточно продолжительный эпизод, который получил некоторое освещение только в одном йеменском произведении художественной литературы. Этот эпизод – вооруженный конфликт между правительством Йемена и повстанцами-хуситами, который продолжался с 2004 по 2010 г. Не вполне ясный характер этой войны, по-видимому, усложнял писателям задачу превращения ее в контекст какого-либо литературного сюжета. Эту задачу, однако, удалось выполнить Мервану аль-Гафури, йеменскому поэту и прозаику, проживающему в Германии, в его романе Косы Саады (2014). Содержание романа определяют три основные темы: социальная отсталость Йемена, религиозный радикализм и война. Эти три темы в романе тесно взаимосвязаны и представлены читателю через их восприятие Зейнаб, девушкой из одного из горных селений провинции Саада. В тяжелых условиях военного времени разворачивается личная драма Зейнаб, которая завершается переселением девушки в Сану.

Ключевые слова: Арабская литература, Йемен, Мерван аль-Гафури, война в Сааде, хуситы

Для цитирования: Суворов М.Н. Социальная отсталость, религиозный радикализм и война в романе «Косы Саады» (2014) йеменского писателя Мервана Аль-Гафури // Арабистика Евразии. 2020. № 10. С. 16-33. (на английском языке)

INTRODUCTION

The genre of socio-historical novel appeared in Yemeni literature for the first time in the 1970s, soon after two independent states – the Yemeni Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) – were created as a result of the revolutions of 1962 in North Yemen and 1963 in South Yemen. Most novels of this kind published in the 1970-80s depicted the hard life of Yemenis in pre-revolutionary decades and were in many cases ideologically biased.¹

After the unification of the two Yemeni states into one state, the Republic of Yemen, in 1990, the general liberalization of public life in the country allowed Yemeni writers not only to rethink in their works the country's recent history, but also to write more openly about current events. The next three decades of Yemen's sociopolitical history were no less turbulent than the previous ones, and all this provided rich material for the socio-historical genre to flourish in Yemeni literature.

An alternative picture of the revolution of 1962 in North Yemen and the subsequent civil war was presented in the novels *Coffee Flower* (1998) by Ali Muhammad Zayd, *Another Face of Sanaa* (2004) by Ibrahim Ishaq, and *Dervish of Sanaa* (2017) by Ahmad al-Sayyad. A critical view of the sociopolitical and cultural situation in PDRY appeared in the novels *Three Midnighters* (1993) by Sa'id Awlaqi, *Soaring into the sky* (1995) by Abdullah Salim Bawazir, *The Ruined Queen* (2002)² and *Revelation* (2018) by Habib Saruri, and *Fruit for the Crows* (2020) by Ahmad Zayn. The process of the rapprochement and the unification of the two parts of Yemen in the second half of the 1980s, then the civil war of 1994 in the united Yemen and its consequences for the South – all this forms the historical and sociopolitical background in the novels *The Last Qarmatian* (2003) and *Yemen and Seasons of Hell* (2010) by Ahmad al-Sayyad and *To No-Man's Land* (2012) by Bushra al-Maqtari. Political hostilities between YAR and PDRY form a significant part of the background in Muhammad al-Gharbi Amran's novel *Red Manuscript* (2010). The situation in the united Yemen before the revolution of 2011, characterized by total corruption, violence on the part of the state power structures and armed tribal units, the spread of radical Islamist ideology, the suppression of civil liberties, blatant

¹ For more details see (Suvorov, 2010, p. 175-178; 2018).

² The novel was initially written and published in French in 1998.

female discrimination, decline in health services and education, and unprecedented increase in poverty, is reflected in one way or another in the novels *The Bird of Destruction* (2005) and *Suslov's Daughter* (2014) by Habib Saruri, *Nothing but Love* (2006) and *Submissive Wives* (2009) by Nadiya al-Kawkabani, *American Coffee* (2007) and *War under the Skin* (2010) by Ahmad Zayn, and *Happy Land of Intrigues* (2018) by Wajdi al-Ahdal.³

There is, however, an extremely tragic and rather lengthy episode in Yemeni recent history that has been touched upon only in one Yemeni literary work. This episode is the armed conflict between Yemeni government and the Houthi (or Huthi) rebels, also known as Saada war, that lasted in six cycles from 2004 to 2010. Although the conflict has claimed thousands of lives and caused a humanitarian disaster in Saada, Yemen's northernmost province, its exact causes and driving forces were hard to define.

Victoria Clark writes, "Among Yemenis, the true causes of the unrest which began in 2004 remain as obscure as they did to the outside world which generally, but mistakenly, explains it as either a self-contained sectarian struggle between a minority of Yemeni Shiites and a majority of Yemeni Sunnis, or as a proxy war between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia over supremacy on the peninsula, in which the al-Huthis are raised to the rank of an organisation like Hezbollah, or finally, as a local jihadist movement guaranteed to ally itself with al-Qaeda. If all three of these accounts are certainly wide of the mark, the truth remains hard to discern" (Clark, 2010, p. 246-247).

Another author, Ginny Hill, writes, "Human Rights Watch characterized the media blackout in Saada as the strongest in the world. Foreign journalists were routinely barred from entering the combat zone, and Yemeni journalists based in Sana'a were often forced to rely on phone calls with local tribal contacts to report the conflict. Claims and counterclaims were impossible to verify. <...> The lack of reliable information emerging from Saada helped to perpetuate this smouldering, multifaceted conflict. There was neither a formal tally of casualties – nor an informal body count – but the combined number of dead soldiers, civilians and rebels supposedly numbered thousands. Claims for the war's causes encompassed Zaidi⁴ revivalism, accusations of *sayyid*⁵ supremacy, economic neglect, smuggling, profiteering, elite rivalry,

³ For more information about all these novels see (Suvorov 2010, p. 295-333; 2013; 2018; 2019; 2020).

⁴ Zaidi is the adjective form for Zaidism, which is one of the branches of Shia Islam (note by M. Suvorov).

⁵ *Sayyid* (f. *sayyida* or *sharifa*, pl. *sada*) – is a member of a family that traces its lineage back to the prophet Muhammad. Before the revolution of 1962 Zaidi *sada* were the ruling elite in North Yemen, and after the revolution they were somewhat marginalized by the republican regime. They, however, continued to hold strong positions in Saada province, predominantly Zaidi, which for this or another reason received little economical support from the

regional interference and the relationship of the modern central state to semi-autonomous marginal communities, as well as calls for social justice. The rebels simply said they wanted their people released from prison, the withdrawal of the Yemeni army from Saada and freedom to worship according to their tradition” (Hill, 2017, p. 175-176).

The above excerpts explain why it was not easy for a fiction writer to place a story in the confusing context of this obscure war. However, Marwan al-Ghafuri⁶ managed to do so in his novel *Saada's Braids* (2014), and this is what I'm going to discuss below.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The text of the novel *Saada's Braids* presents an imaginary Facebook correspondence between Marwan al-Ghafuri himself and a young Yemeni woman living in Sanaa, who at first introduces herself as Iman. The correspondence continues from the beginning of February to the end of March 2014, after which Iman deletes her account.

Iman, who has previously read al-Ghafuri's novel *Khazrajite*⁷, tells the writer about her misadventures – in order for him to write a new novel based on her story. In his response messages, very emotional and highly poetized, the writer expresses sincere empathy for Iman's troubles and covertly confesses his love for her. At the same time, he compares different episodes of Iman's story with various tragic and romantic stories that exist in the cultural heritage of the East and the West. These stories include the story of fisherman José Salvador Alvarenga, who spent 13 months drifting in the ocean without fresh water and food, the story of Rudaba and Zal of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the story of long-haired Rapunzel, the heroine of a brothers Grimm's fairy tale, the story of Bishr al-Hafi, a famous Muslim Sufi-saint, etc.

Iman's real name, as Marwan soon learns, is Zainab. She is 25 years old and was born in a remote mountain village in Saada province to a Zaidi family. Zainab spent her youth in the conditions of the armed conflict between Yemeni government and the Houthis, in which the men of her village fought on the side of the Houthis⁸. Zainab talks about six wars in Saada, whose numbers the locals use for dating events in their rural life. Since the third war, Zainab's beloved older brother Hasan was involved in the conflict.

government. And it was members of a charismatic *sayyid* family of al-Houthi (first Hussein al-Houthi, and after his killing his brother Abd al-Malik al-Houthi) who led Zaidi rebels in Saada against the government (note by M. Suvorov).

⁶ Marwan al-Ghafuri (b. 1979) is a Yemeni poet and novelist, a professional cardiologist living in Germany.

⁷ See (al-Ghafuri, 2013).

⁸ Al-Ghafuri, however, does not use the term “Houthis” in the novel, but calls the rebels *mujahidun* (i. e. people of Jihad) or simply men of Saada.

Life conditions in the village are largely archaic: there is no school, no doctor, no roadway.⁹ The nearest taxi rank is almost an hour away on foot. All this is compounded by the wartime shortage: there are almost no cars left in the village, and gasoline is not available in the entire province. The latter circumstance did not allow the villagers to take Zainab's father to the hospital when he had the fatal heart attack.

In a message to Marwan Zainab says, "If you climb to the top of the mountain that rises above our homes, forgetting for a while about Iman's long braids, and look around the space spread out before you, you won't find a single public school in it. If you take up binoculars and use them to examine mountain slopes, paths and valleys stretching for tens of kilometers, you won't see a single child dressed in school uniform and carrying school bag" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 51).¹⁰

Public life in the village is led by Sayyid, a representative of the *sada* stratum, who preaches to the villagers, summons tribal militia for war, and treats the sick with the help of the Quran and his own hereditary "divine grace". It is in his arms, at the recitation of Quranic *ayat*, that Zainab's father, who suffered from heart disease, but never visited a doctor, dies.

Father's personality in Zainab's story is very colorful – it is a typical Yemeni tribesman. At breakfast, after morning prayers, he is always cheerful and kind, and at dinner, after chewing *qat*¹¹, he is always sullen and nervous. With his family members he is taciturn and responds to all the concerns and fears of his wife with one phrase "Everything will be alright!" According to Zainab, she saw her father scared only once, just before his death, when he started vomiting.

Zainab tells Marwan about how the life of the village was affected by the conflict between the government and men of Saada, which very soon acquired a character of a religious conflict between two main religious groups in Yemen: the Zaidis and the Sunnis (especially the Sunnis of Salafi bias). Long before the armed conflict began, many young Yemenis, including some Zaidis, received religious education at Saudi-sponsored religious schools where they were inculcated with Salafi views. In predominantly Zaidi areas, the growing influence of Salafis (or Wahhabis, as Zainab

⁹ To compare, Ginny Hill writes, "When Hussein's targeted killing in 2004 put an end to the first rebellion, the security services chose to display images of his corpse on massive poster boards inside Saada city as visible proof of his death, because hardly anyone living in Hussein's home district, who did not possess a private generator, had access to electricity or televisions" (Hill, 2017, p. 181).

¹⁰ This and the following citations are translated from Arabic by the author of the article.

¹¹ Qat (*Catha edulis*) is a plant of light narcotic properties, chewing the leaves of which in the company of friends has long been a kind of social habit in Yemen, the main way of socialization.

calls them) was being perceived especially painfully, which helped creating an atmosphere of religious intolerance.¹²

During the armed conflict, this religious intolerance reached its peak. So, Zainab's fellow villagers expel from the village a man named Abd al-Hafiz, who previously taught children Arabic and the Quran at the mosque, then went to work in Saudi Arabia, and returned, allegedly, a convinced Wahhabi. Religious intolerance also extends to several Jewish families living in a neighboring village of Al Salem, who are forced to abandon their homes.¹³

Some details in Zainab's messages to Marwan give the reader an idea of the biased information field that existed around that armed conflict. Here is, for example, how the Zaidis' attitude to the state power had changed during the conflict:

"We had to go down a terribly steep slope and then continue on a horizontal road cut through the mountains. This road was built when I went to classes at the mosque, that is, when I was between 12 and 14 years old. At that time people said that the road had been built at the state expense, but later they began to tell about a *sayyid* who built this road for our villages, and we completely forgot the story of the state's beneficence" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p.143-144).

And here is how the governmental newspapers covered this conflict:

"Hasan bought a newspaper for himself. It was 'Akhbar al-Yawm'. On the front page there were intertwined headlines, such as 'Rioters Impose the Practice of Pleasure-Marriages'¹⁴ in Villages' or 'Obscurantists' Forces Defeated'. There was also a headline in red above a photo of rocket launchers and tanks reading 'The Final War'" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 199).

For Zainab, the war is embodied in the occasional roar of explosions that reaches the village, and in the bodies of dead villagers, mostly young men. There are so many dead in the village that "it has become normal for a woman to go to a funeral in one house and after that be released from the obligation of attending funerals in other houses" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 233). Zainab is particularly distressed by Hasan's account of how his comrades-in-arms abused a wounded soldier of the government army who had been captured by them. The dying soldier told his tormentors that his

¹² Ginny Hill writes, "Religious politics in the volatile crucible of Saada were stoked by the presence of the Salafis. Saada played host to a network of Salafi madrasas, sponsored in part by money from the Saudis, who established a religious footprint throughout Yemen with Saleh's consent from the 1980s onwards. Saudi-sponsored Salafism became a 'significant local force, competing with traditional identities', and many viewed 'the spread of these schools as an attempt to weaken Zaidi social and political influence'" (Hill, 2017, p. 184-185).

¹³ Interestingly, Al Salem is the real name of a village in Saada province, whose Jewish dwellers were forced to leave their homes during the conflict (Hill, 2017, p. 182).

¹⁴ Pleasure-marriage (*zawaj al-mut'a*) is a private and verbal temporary marriage contract, that is practiced in Twelver Shia Islam, but generally not accepted in Sunni Islam. Often it is regarded as religiously veiled prostitution (note by M. Suvorov).

brother, a native of Taizz, worked as mathematics teacher in a secondary school in Saada province. Zainab tearfully makes Hasan promise her that he won't go to war again.

And this is how Zainab describes to Marwan what she felt after the funeral of one of the killed villagers:

“Many years ago, when I was a child, I met him at the door of the village store. He asked me about the price of my new shoes which I had on my feet. I said I didn't know, because my father had bought them for me in the city of Saada. He said that no one had bought him shoes for a long time.

I must have been nine years old. I told him that when a boy grows up, he gets money and buys everything he needs.

He smiled happily. Then he waited a long time until he grew up and could buy shoes. But as soon as he grew up and became an adult, he became dead.

The motherland cost him as much as a pair of shoes. I won't tell you his name. Even when he returned to the village as a dead body, I didn't think that anyone was interested in learning his name or remembering that he had any name at all” (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p.73-74).

The harsh conditions of life in the village, the atmosphere of religious intolerance, the war and its many casualties – all this forms the background on which Zainab's personal tragedy unfolds, setting one of the main themes of the novel.

Between the fifth and sixth wars, when Zainab is nineteen-year-old, her belly begins to grow in size, which is accompanied by internal pains. Her parents and fellow villagers suspect that she is pregnant, but she categorically denies this possibility. Illegitimate pregnancy of a woman in the traditional Muslim society of Yemen brings the most terrible shame not only on the pregnant woman, but also on all her relatives. The usual way to get rid of this shame is to kill the pregnant woman.

Exactly at this time Zainab's father dies, and this is how she describes to Marwan her father's wake:

“For ten days, our house turned into a theater, where women spoke words of condolence and empathy to the family, but among themselves led quite different speeches. Like birds of prey, they looked around the room, trying to see Iman with her swollen belly.

‘God knows, I heard that she had an affair with teacher Abd al-Hafiz,’ one woman whispered to another in the guest room.

The women had forgotten why they had come; they were preoccupied with another question – Iman’s belly, which was growing in size for some unknown reason. However, the women of the village knew the reason:

‘Of course, she had time with a man’.

All conversations revolved around the man’s personality.

‘Shameless wench, she killed her father, who could not bear such a disgrace,’ a woman said to her neighbor on the left.

‘He should have cut her down and finish with that, not driven himself to death,’ the neighbor answered.

My mother was reading the words of women in their eyes, and her heart was on fire. For a time, she forgot her grief over my father’s death and was experiencing another grief, because of me. Because of my swollen belly. Because of my illegitimate pregnancy, as they said.

Now, as I write this message to you, a strange thought has occurred to me. When I think about what was being said about me, and how my story was being told to each other by girls and women, I notice a strange thing. While telling it, they not only received satisfaction from the awareness of their own high morality, but also the pleasure of savoring it. Some of them, as we learned from time to time, could not discuss during the entire time of their gatherings with friends anything other than my sin with an unknown man. All the details were being discussed. The whole story was being recreated – how we met, how we dated, and even intimate details. Religious morality in this story took up much less space than sexual details. Each pair of interlocutors was constructing this story in its own way. Two women were composing it together and experiencing it together. Soon enough, the story became as secret as any forbidden pleasure. At first, I was being told that women were disgusted even to mention my name. However, the stories that were coming to me through my sister, who was collecting them, showed no trace of disgust and were full of lust” (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 90-92).

Zainab tells Marwan that she really felt love for teacher Abd al-Hafiz when she attended his classes at the mosque. Her young imagination was captivated by Arab poems about love, which the teacher introduced to his students. But soon after Abd al-Hafiz left for Saudi Arabia, a rumor spread in the village that the teacher had been secretly dating with Safiyya, Zainab’s older friend, Sayyid’s daughter. And it was because of this dating that Sayyid’s men first forced the teacher to go to work in Saudi Arabia, and after his return, banished him from the village altogether.

Interestingly, Safiyya herself told Zainab about her secret dating with a young Wahhabi, but called that guy Yahya, not Abd al-Hafiz.

The story of Safiyya opens up another important theme in the novel – the problem of social archaism in Yemen, which manifests itself, in particular, in the preservation of the traditional pyramid of social strata with its inherent norms of marital correspondences. A woman can only marry a man who belongs to her stratum or to the stratum located above in the pyramid. When Safiyya's Wahhabi was absent from the village for a long time, she could not even ask his mother where her son was.

“When Safiyya imagines what might happen in the village if someone saw her in the house of Wahhabi's mother, her legs start trembling. How can a girl born to a *sada* family dare to visit a woman born in a stable? Even if her parents allowed her to do this, the villagers would refuse to accept it. They would consider such an act of the girl not only an insult to their faith, but also an insult to their history. It would look as if Safiyya, taking a large shovel in her hands, dug up the graves of their ancestors and threw their remains out for food to birds of prey” (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 58).

Interestingly, it is Safiyya and her relatives who most savor the story of Zainab's pregnancy, because this story can obscure the rumor of Safiya's affair with Abd al-Hafiz.

The only person who believes that Zainab is not pregnant is her brother Hasan. Zainab persuades Hasan to take her to Sanaa for medical examination. At this time the sixth war begins and the government promises to use the scorched-earth tactics. Sayyid gathers a militia of young villagers, calling them to a victorious war. This is how Zainab describes his sermon:

“It was not long before the praiseworthy Sayyid delivered a speech to the inhabitants of our and other, distant villages. He said that God promised us victory, but he did not say anything about those to whom God promised defeat. I imagined his audience, in their excitement, seeing themselves victorious, without even thinking about what their enemies look like.

The message of that day still rings in my ears: ‘It was ordained that our faith would always and everywhere have enemies, and it was ordained for this Community that God would send it someone who would protect its faith and its land.’ I had a feeling that the congregation liked the phrase ‘protect its land’. In a village like ours, people easily understand what war means if they are told – even in a figurative sense – that it means protection of land, valleys, and wells. The sermon ended, and everything became even vaguer than it was before. Intuitively, we realized only one thing – we would have to provide more fighters.

The continuation of the speech was so intricate that one couldn't understand it easily or remember anything from it. It could even seem that there was no continuation at all" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 113-114).

Unlike other young villagers, Hasan refuses to go to war, explaining that he must take care of his widowed mother, as well as take his ill sister to Sanaa for treatment. Sayyid, dissatisfied with Hasan's refusal and believing that Zainab is pregnant, not ill, promises to help him to deliver his sister to Sanaa. He obviously hopes that in gratitude for this service, Hasan will go to war. Hasan accepts Sayyid's help. Sayyid finds a driver for them, gives them the address of one of his relatives in whose house they can stay in Sanaa, and sends his brother with them as an escort.

Zainab's conversation at the taxi rank with a small shepherdess about the war, the views of villages deserted because of the war, young ragged Houthi fighters at checkpoints, a sermon about Jihad that sounds, instead of songs, from the speakers of the car tape recorder – all this makes Zainab depressed. A change occurs in her soul: she wants to say goodbye to her past, to the wildness of rural mores, to forget about religion and war, to start a new life. In a message to Marwan, she tells him how she recalled a saying of old woman Sham'a, her Jewish friend, that the prophet Muhammad is "the prophet of tribesmen".

"I recalled our last meeting," Zainab writes. "It occurred to me – I still don't understand why – that I wouldn't like to meet this prophet of the tribesmen either on my way to Sanaa or in Sanaa itself. I would like to meet another prophet on my path, who is suitable for all people, including me. A prophet, who, even being convinced by people that I committed a sin, would answer them in the manner of his brother Christ, 'Let him who is without sin among you throw a stone at her'" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 127-128).

On the way, Zainab decides to take a new name – the name of the shepherdess Iman, whom she met at the taxi rank. Iman means "faith" or "belief"; in the case of Zainab, it is her belief in herself, in her own endurance, in her own future. This belief in herself makes her – in violation of Muslim etiquette – express her own opinion of the war to her male companions:

"I know dozens of houses in our village that live in misery and grief, as if in total darkness, because of these wars. What good is it for a woman who has lost her son to be told that her son was a man of Jihad and died a martyr? My mother wanted only one thing – for Hasan to become a man like our grandfathers were, to plow land and take care of crops, to give life to children and please his mother's heart" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p.155).

The men are not willing to keep up this conversation, but Zainab knows that Hasan is on her side, because before leaving, he said:

“How I hate this war! We go with people we don’t know to kill other people we don’t know for the sake of winners whom we don’t know. Even among the defeated, we don’t know anyone. I have asked myself a thousand times, lying on my stomach on a hillock or in a dry watercourse: What will happen if we win or lose? In both cases, we will either go home or die” (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p.109).

In Sanaa, Zainab and Hasan stay in the house of Sayyida, an elderly female relative of Sayyid. According to the results of the initial medical examination of Zainab, doctors in the hospital make a preliminary diagnosis – an internal tumor. In a message to Marwan Zainab describes her thoughts on the eve of the final examination:

“What’s worse for you: carrying a child whose father is unknown to your family, or having a tumor? What scares you more: that you got pregnant in secret from your family, or that a tumor growing inside you kills you? What would be easier for the villagers to accept: that a girl bleeds to death, or that she spends an hour in the bed of an unknown man? If you, Iman, lived in another country, your family would pray to God that it be an illegitimate child, not a tumor. My mother would probably say, ‘Sleep with whoever you want, just live’.

Hasan has taken care of me and believes in me. What would happen if he stopped believing me? No doubt, he would say, ‘It is better for you to die than to sleep with someone illegitimately.’ It didn’t even occur to me to ask him, ‘What is better for you: that your sister is pregnant, or that she is on the verge of death? What are you secretly hoping for: that it turns out to be a tumor, or that it turns out to be an illegitimate child?’ I did not ask him such questions, because I was not ready to experience more disappointment” (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 196).

The preliminary diagnosis being confirmed, the doctors perform the operation on Zainab. Hasan is almost mad with joy that it was a tumor, not a child, and that the operation was successful. Soon he goes back to the village, leaving Zainab with Sayyida for a period of post-operative rehabilitation.

Two months later, Hasan returns to Sanaa and tells Zainab bad news. Sayyid’s brother, who had accompanied them to Sanaa, returned to the village immediately after Zainab’s operation and told people there that doctors found a dead baby in Zainab’s womb. After this message, Zainab decides not to return to the village ever. And after some time Hasan dies on the battlefield – either in the government’s sixth war with the Houthis, or in the subsequent violent events.

At the time of her correspondence with Marwan, Zainab, who now calls herself Iman, has been living in Sayyida's house for five years, and her messages to Marwan contain some impressions that she has received in Sanaa. Thus, about the growing influence of religion on public life, she writes:

"It seems to me that I live in a kind of a theater of azans and prayers, in which there is no activity other than religious. At the beginning of each year, I feel that the number of mosques has increased slightly again, as well as the number of people who come to pray in them. But virtue is becoming less and less, and good people are also becoming less on the streets" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 20).

The insignificance of the results of 2011 revolution, which took place in Sanaa before Iman's eyes, causes her bitter irony:

"Old women say that when the revolution came, electric light disappeared. Girls say that gasoline is also missing. Men say that many inexpensive necessities have disappeared. They do not talk about the disappearance of the ruler and do not remember him. They only want the things that have disappeared to return, and they remember them" (al-Ghafuri, 2014, p. 16).

Sayyida, who became one of Iman's dearest people, has her own tragic story, which she tells Iman. This story, in a sense, continues the unfinished story of Safiyya. In her youth, Sayyida loved a young man, who could not marry her because he did not belong to the *sada* stratum. Knowing of her origin, he did not even dare to pose the question of their marriage before her relatives. And she didn't ask him to do so, either. When he was thirty years old, he told her that he was marrying another woman. And she never married. But in her seventies, she continued to think about her beloved as if they had never parted.

RESULTS

One can distinguish three themes that are most prominent in *Saada's Braids*. These themes are: the social backwardness of Yemen, religious radicalism and war. All three themes are interwoven in the novel and presented to the reader through their perception by Zainab, the heroine of the novel.

The social backwardness of Yemen manifests itself, first of all, in inequity of different social strata that is expressed, in particular, in the persistent norms of marital correspondences. It also manifests itself in the plight of Yemeni woman, who is deprived of her human right to choose her life path. Another manifestation of social backwardness is the persistent complex of archaic mores, customs and beliefs that dominates Yemeni public opinion, being supported by general Muslim religious tradition and by certain religious figures. Zainab herself becomes a victim of these

mores and traditions, and for this reason, at a crucial moment in her life, expresses dislike for Muslim prophet Muhammad, “the prophet of tribesmen”, as she calls him. Social backwardness creates fertile ground for religious radicalism. In the conditions of the archaic mass consciousness, ignorance and religiosity, certain religious-political leaders mobilize their supporters with religious slogans, presenting their struggle for power as Jihad, the protection of the “true” faith. This is what Sayyid does in the novel. Jihadists’ actions extend not only to their armed opponents, but also to peaceful people, adherents of another religion or another trend within the same religion. There are several victims of religious radicalism in the novel, including the Jewish old woman Sham’a and other residents of the village of Al Salem, Salafi teacher Abd al-Hafiz and other Salafists.

Zainab and her brother Hasan hate the war that is being waged in the province. The causes and purposes of this war are not clear to them, the losses are obvious. Hasan participates in the war because tribal traditions oblige him to stand shoulder to shoulder with his fellow tribesmen. But he hates killing people whom he doesn’t know for the benefits of other people whom he also doesn’t know. Hasan and Zainab understand that the main reason for the persistence of the war is social backwardness and religious radicalism that prevail in Yemen, especially in rural areas. And this, as al-Ghafuri seems to be suggesting, applies to all wars that have taken place in the recent history of Yemen.

CONCLUSION

The three themes, which define the content of the novel, are the most problematic not only for modern Yemen, but also for the entire Arab-Muslim world, which is surviving now a conflict between globalism and traditionalism. This fact makes al-Ghafuri’s novel very attractive not only for the Eastern readers, who are the witnesses of this conflict, but also for those Westerners who want to better understand what is happening in the Arab-Muslim world.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

1. الأهدل، وجدي. (2018). أرض المؤامرات السعيدة. بيروت، لبنان: نوفل. 310 ص.
2. عمران، محمد الغربي. (2010). مصحف أحمر. بيروت، لبنان: الكوكب. 348 ص.
3. عولقي، سعيد. (1993). السمار الثلاثة. صنعاء، اليمن: عبادي للدراسات والنشر. 112 ص.
4. باوزير، عبدالله سالم. (1995). يا طالع الفضاء. صنعاء، اليمن: عبادي للدراسات والنشر. 80 ص.

5. Clark, Victoria. (2010). *Yemen. Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*. Hampshire: Yale University Press. 311 p.
6. الغفوري، مروان. (2013). *الخزرجي*. عمان، الأردن: أزمنة. 110 ص.
7. الغفوري، مروان. (2014). *جدائل صعدة*. بيروت، لبنان: الآداب. 239 ص.
8. Hill, G. (2017). *Yemen Endures. Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
9. إسحاق، إبراهيم. (2004). *صنعاء الوجه الآخر*. القاهرة، مصر: الهلال. 179 ص.
10. الكوكباني، نادية. (2006). *حب ليس إلا*. القاهرة، مصر: ميريت للنشر. 195 ص.
11. الكوكباني، نادية. (2009). *عقيلات*. صنعاء، اليمن: عبادي للدراسات والنشر. 307 ص.
12. المقطري، بشرى. (2012). *خلف الشمس*. الدار البيضاء، المغرب: المركز الثقافي العربي. 206 ص.
13. سروري، حبيب. (2002). *الملكة المغدورة*. صنعاء، اليمن: المهاجر. 263 ص.
14. سروري، حبيب. (2005). *طائر الخراب*. صنعاء، اليمن: مؤسسة العفيف الثقافية. 247 ص.
15. سروري، حبيب. (2014). *إبنة سوسلوف*. بيروت، لبنان: الساقى. 220 ص.
16. سروري، حبيب. (2018). *وحي*. بيروت، لبنان: الساقى. 255 ص.
17. الصياد، أحمد. (2004). *آخر القرامطة*. بيروت، لبنان: المؤسسة العربية للدراسات والنشر. 219 ص.
18. الصياد، أحمد. (2010). *اليمن وفصول الجحيم*. بيروت، لبنان: رياض الريس للكتب. 247 ص.
19. الصياد، أحمد. (2017). *درويش صنعاء*. بيروت، لبنان: دار العربية للعلوم. 177 ص.
20. Суворов М. (2010). *Художественная проза Йемена (1940 – середина 2000-х годов)*. СПб.: Студия «НП-Принт». 359 с.
21. Суворов М. (2013). *Новые романы из Йемена: между откровением и эпатажем*. Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Сер. 13. Вып. 4, с. 68-78.
22. Suvorov M. (2018). *Historical Novel in Modern Literature of Yemen*. *Eurasian Arabic Studies*, 1, 87-94.
23. Suvorov M. (2019). *Two Novels about the Information War in Yemen on the Eve of the Revolution of 2011*. Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Сер. 13. Вып. 3. С. 298-310.

24. Suvorov M. (2020). Yemen and the Arab World in Wajdi al-Ahdal's novels: from Parody to Realism. *Eurasian Arabic Studies*, 9, 51-64.
25. زيد، علي محمد. (1998). زهرة البن. بيروت، لبنان: الكنوز الأدبية. 368 ص.
26. زين، أحمد. (2007). قهوة أميركية. الدار البيضاء، المغرب: المركز الثقافي العربي. 160 ص.
27. زين، أحمد. (2010). حرب تحت الجلد. بيروت، لبنان: الآداب. 192 ص.
28. زين، أحمد. (2020). فاكهة للغربان. ميلان، إيطاليا: منشورات المتوسط. 239 ص.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

1. al-Ahdal, Wajdī. (2018). *Ard al-mu'āmarāt al-sa'īda* [Happy Land of Intrigues]. Beirut: Dār Nawfal. 310 p. (In Arabic)
2. 'Amrān, Muḥammad al-Gharbī. (2010). *Muṣḥaf aḥmar* [Red Manuscript]. Beirut: Dār al-Kawkab. 348 p. (In Arabic)
3. 'Awlaqī, Sa'īd. (1993). *Al-Summār al-thalātha* [Three Midnighters]. Sanaa: Markaz 'Ubādī li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-naṣhr. 112 p. (In Arabic)
4. Bāwazīr, 'Abdullāh Sālim. (1995). *Yā ṭālī' al-faḍā'* [Soaring into the Sky]. Sanaa: Markaz 'Ubādī li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-naṣhr. 80 p. (In Arabic)
5. Clark, Victoria. (2010). *Yemen. Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*. Hampshire: Yale University Press. 311 p.
6. al-Ghafūrī, Marwān. (2013). *Al-Khazrajī* [Khazrajite]. Amman: Dār Azmina. 110 p.
7. al-Ghafūrī, Marwān. (2014). *Jadā'il Ṣa'da* [Saada's Braids]. Beirut: Dār al-ādāb. 239 p. (In Arabic)
8. Hill, G. (2017). *Yemen Endures. Civil War, Saudi Adventurism and the Future of Arabia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
9. Iṣḥāq, Ibrāhīm. (2004). *Ṣan'a' al-wajh al-akhar* [Another Face of Sanaa]. Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl. 179 p. (In Arabic)
10. al-Kawkabānī, Nādiya. (2006). *Ḥubb laysa illā* [Nothing but Love]. Cairo: Dār Mīrīt li-l-naṣhr. 195 p. (In Arabic)
11. al-Kawkabānī, Nādiya. (2009). *'Aqīlāt* [Submissive Wives]. Sanaa: Markaz 'Ubādī li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-naṣhr. 307 p. (In Arabic)
12. al-Maqtarī, Buṣhrā. (2012). *Khalf al-shams* [To No-Man's Land]. Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-'arabī. 206 p. (In Arabic)
13. Sarūrī, Ḥabīb. (2002). *Al-Malika al-maghdūra* [The Ruined Queen]. Sanaa: Dār al-Muhājir. 263 p. (In Arabic)

14. Sarūrī, Ḥabīb. (2005). Ṭā'ir al-kharāb [The Bird of Destruction]. Sanaa: Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-thaqāfiyya. 247 p. (In Arabic)
15. Sarūrī, Ḥabīb. (2014). Ibnat Sūslūf [Suslov's Daughter]. Beirut: Dār al-sāqī. 220 p. (In Arabic)
16. Sarūrī, Ḥabīb. (2018). Waḥy [Revelation]. Beirut: Dār al-sāqī. 255 p. (In Arabic)
17. al-Ṣayyād, Aḥmad. (2004). Ākhir al-qarāmiṭa [The Last Qarmatian]. Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirāsāt wa-l-nashr. 219 p. (In Arabic)
18. al-Ṣayyād, Aḥmad. (2010). Al-Yaman wa-fuṣūl al-jaḥīm [Yemen and Seasons of Hell]. Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books S.A.R.L. 247 p. (In Arabic)
19. al-Ṣayyād, Aḥmad. (2017). Darwīsh Ṣan'ā' [Dervish of Sanaa]. Beirut: Dār al-'Arabiyya li-l-'ulūm. 177 p. (In Arabic)
20. Suvorov M. (2010). Hudozhestvennaya proza Iemena (1940 – seredina 2000-h godov) [Yemeni prose fiction (1940 – mid-2000s)]. St.Petersburg: Studiya "NP-Print". 359 p. (in Russian). (In Russian)
21. Suvorov M. (2013). Novye romany iz Iemena: mezhdū otkroveniem i epatazhem [New Novels from Yemen: Between Revelation and Epatage]. Vestnik of Sankt-Petersburg University. Ser. 13, issue 4, pp. 68-78. (in Russian)
22. Suvorov M. (2018). Historical Novel in Modern Literature of Yemen. *Eurasian Arabic Studies*, 1, 87-94.
23. Suvorov M. (2019). Two Novels about the Information War in Yemen on the Eve of the Revolution of 2011. Vestnik of Sankt-Petersburg University. Ser. 13, issue 3. Pp. 298-310.
24. Suvorov M. (2020). Yemen and the Arab World in Wajdi al-Ahdal's novels: from Parody to Realism. *Eurasian Arabic Studies*, 9, 51-64.
25. Zayd, 'Alī Muḥammad. (1998). Zahrat al-bunn [Coffee Flower]. Beirut: Dār al-Kunūz al-adabyya. 368 p. (In Arabic)
26. Zayn, Aḥmad. (2007). Qahwa amīrkiyya [American Coffee]. Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-'arabī. 160 p. (In Arabic)
27. Zayn, Aḥmad. (2010). Ḥarb taḥt al-jild [War under the Skin]. Beirut: Dār al-ādāb. 192 p. (In Arabic)
28. Zayn, Aḥmad. (2020). Fākiha li-l-ghurbān [Fruit for the Crows]. Milan: Manshūrāt al-Mutawassit. 239 p. (In Arabic)

Information about the author

Doctor of Philology

Mikhail Nikolaevich Suvorov

St. Petersburg State University

19903, Saint-Petersburg,

Universitetskaya nab.

Russia

soumike@mail.ru

Информация об авторе

Доктор филологических наук

Михаил Николаевич Суворов

Санкт-Петербургский

7-9 государственный университет

19903, Санкт-Петербург,

Университетская набережная, 7-9

Россия

soumike@mail.ru

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: *The author declares Conflicts of Interest Disclosure.*

Раскрытие информации о конфликте интересов: *Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.*