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Caricaturing the Reality: Wajdi al-Ahdal as a Short Story Writer

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Abstract. Wajdi al-Ahdal, one of the most translated and discussed modern Yemeni writers, is widely known for his novels, three of which have been translated into European languages. By the time his first novel appeared, the writer had published four collections of short stories: *Flower of the Traveler* (1998), *Gibberish of the Ventriloquist Time* (1998), *Portrait of the Bastard* (1998), and *A War That No One Knew About* (2001). Later, three other collections were added to this list: *People of Tavern Street* (2017), *Wadi al-Dujuj* (2017), and *Fatal Arrangements* (2020). However, the writer's short stories seem to have received less attention from readers, critics, and scholars of literature than his novels.

This article is intended to shed light on Wajdi al-Ahdal's short story writing, which is, in fact, unparalleled in modern Arab literature. The largely realistic image of Yemeni everyday life is often created in his stories by the means of caricature, grotesque, and black humor, especially of a sexual nature. The writer's incessant experiments with the form and content of the short story obviously had a significant impact on the formation of his writing manner as a novelist.

Keywords: Arab literature, short story, Yemen, Wajdi al-Ahdal

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Филологические науки

Научная статья

**Карикатура на реальность:
рассказ в творчестве Ваджди ал-Ахдаля**

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Аннотация. Ваджди ал-Ахдаль, один из наиболее переводимых и обсуждаемых современных йеменских писателей, широко известен своими романами, три из которых были переведены на европейские языки. К моменту появления его первого романа писатель опубликовал четыре сборника рассказов: «Цветок путника» (1998), «Тарабарщина чревоушательного времени» (1998), «Портрет негодяя» (1998) и «Война, о которой никто не знал» (2001). Позже к этому списку добавились еще три сборника: «Люди с улицы харчевен» (2017), «Вади ад-Дуджудж» (2017) и «Фатальные приготовления» (2020). Рассказы писателя, однако, не удостоились такого внимания читателей, критиков и литературоведов, какого удостоились его романы.

Цель этой статьи – пролить свет на творчество Ваджди ал-Ахдаля как автора рассказов, которое, по сути, не имеет аналогов в современной арабской литературе. По большей части реалистическое изображение повседневной жизни Йемена в его рассказах часто создается с помощью карикатуры, гротеска и черного юмора, особенно сексуального характера. Непрекращающиеся эксперименты писателя с формой и содержанием рассказа явно оказали значительное влияние на формирование его манеры письма как романиста.

Ключевые слова: арабская литература, рассказ, Йемен, Ваджди ал-Ахдаль

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Introduction

Wajdi Muhammad al-Ahdal (born in 1973), Yemeni novelist, short story writer, playwright, and screenwriter, became widely known after the publication of his *Mountain Boats* (2002), a postmodernist caricature novel, which caused a public scandal in Yemen, echoed throughout the Arab world. By the time the novel appeared, the writer had published four collections of short stories, which remained, as it seems, little known to the readers, critics, and scholars of literature. Following

the first novel, al-Ahdal published four more, two of which (as well as the first one) have been translated into European languages¹. However, his three new collections of short stories, which were published during this period, received less attention from Arab and international readers, critics, and scholars than the novels.²

In this article, I'm going to review Wajdi al-Ahdal's collections of short stories for two purposes. The first is to shed light on this part of the writer's work, which is, in fact, unparalleled in modern Arab literature. The second is to find out to what extent these short stories are thematically, plot-wise and stylistically related to his novels that brought the writer worldwide fame.

Materials and methods

Wajdi al-Ahdal's first collection of short stories (or, better, short texts) titled *Flower of the Traveler: A Narrative Cocktail* (1998) demonstrated the author's obvious postmodernist inclination. The title and subtitle of the collection themselves hint at the postmodernist character of the book: while the title imitates the title-style of medieval Arab treatises, the word "cocktail" in the subtitle indicates a mixture of genres and styles, which is a characteristic feature of postmodernist narratives.

The preface, full of self-irony and signed with the name of another Yemeni writer, Sami al-Shatibi, also warns the reader about an unusual nature of the book.

"I am a failed author," the preface reads, "whose head does not produce any new thoughts, and whenever I had the damned feeling that I was not a real writer, some evil demon began to torment my nerves" [3, p. 5].

Next, the narrator tells the reader how one day someone else's letter fell into his hands, which he read, and from which he drew a lot of new ideas that allowed him to write half a dozen short stories and a small play.

"After that happy incident," he goes on, "which evoked a crazy idea in my mind, a year and a half passed, during which this crazy idea flashed especially brightly whenever I felt that my talent as a short story writer was being depleted and extinguished as a result of my reading postmodernist literature. At first I wanted to tour post offices and buy letters there, which for one reason or another could not be delivered to the addressees or returned to the senders. But later I found that idea stupid because it could arouse suspicion from the state authorities. The only thing I could do in order to continue writing my simple short stories was to get a job at a post office, open the envelopes there and learn terrible secrets that were waiting for me" [3, p. 5–6].

This preface is followed by a satirical play titled *Marriage of the Colonel* and eight texts of various volumes, seven of which are entitled as "the letter of so-and-

¹ About al-Ahdal's novels see [1].

² Al-Ahdal's collections of short stories, except one, *Fatal Arrangements*, were published in one volume [2].

so”, and one – *Flower of the Traveler*. All these texts do not fit the definition of any of the existing literary genres and represent in their style a mixture of fiction, sometimes resembling a fairy tale, satirical narrative, and popular scholarship. Humans in these texts turn into inanimate objects and vice versa, historical figures of the past tell about fictional heroes of the present.

Some of the texts are provided with footnotes, which combine reliable information with fantasies imitating scholarly narrative. In *Letter of a Nigerian* and *Letter of a Bedouin*, the volumes of the footnotes significantly exceed the volumes of the main texts. Moreover, many of these footnotes are intentionally redundant, adding to the texts’ “scholarly” images. Three “letters” in the book begin with phrases parodying medieval Islamic *isnad*, which is a list of authorities who have transmitted a report about the Prophet Muhammad. In two of the three “letters”, this pseudo-*isnad* contains the name of the author himself, Wajdi al-Ahdal, and in *Letter of a Paper Man* narration about al-Ahdal is conducted on behalf of al-Ahdal, whose personality is thus doubled.

Another al-Ahdal’s “invention” in the book is that at the bottom of each page, in a separate frame, there is a funny quote allegedly taken by the author from one of the letters he viewed and having nothing to do with the main text placed on the page. Here are some of these quotes:

“A letter from Cambodia: Cambodian dictator Pol Pot became famous as the man thanks to whom Cambodians knew about butter only from the media. With the help of arguments that make pubic hair stand on end, he managed to convince people that the animals whose meat is eaten had died out in protest against the world imperialism” [3, p. 8].

“A letter from the Human Rights Organization: At the age of four, he was put in a small rectangular cage, in which he stayed for twenty years. When he was released from it after the dictator’s death, he was already an unusual young man. His body had received a wonderful, incredible development. The limbs took the form of intertwined branches, and the torso became like a cube, and it was no longer possible to change this shape, since his stay in such a state for many years fixed it forever” [3, p. 9].

“A letter from Europe: A Yemeni citizen, using a power of attorney of unknown origin, filed a lawsuit against the Spanish government in one of the courts of Granada, demanding compensation for the lives of Yemenis killed during the Reconquista, which lasted eight centuries” [3, p. 23].

“A letter from the Voice of Qat³ news agency: According to a condoling source, seventy Yemeni philosophers committed suicide as a gesture of disagreement with the report of a Swedish organization, stating that there is not a single philosopher in Yemen” [3, p. 31].

³ 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 (note by M. Suvorov).

Al-Ahdal's second collection, *Gibberish of the Ventriloquist Time* (1998), comprised twenty-six small texts, the average volume of one page, resembling the medieval Arabic genre of *nādira* (anecdote), some of them beginning with pseudo-*isnad*. The majority of these texts has a pronounced sexual orientation and is distinguished by a special language, which the author uses for creating ambiguous phrases, avoiding direct names and precise definitions.

Here is, for example, the text of *The Short Woman*:

"He was walking along one of the deserted alleys of Qaa al-Yahud⁴, which are somber even in the middle of the day. Suddenly, a short woman appeared in front of him, moving towards him. She could well have been mistaken for a girl wrapped in her mother's cloak, if not for her bouncing breasts. In order to miss each other in the narrow alley, he swerved to the right. She also swerved, blocking his path. He swerved to the left – she again blocked his path. Barely avoiding collision, he, however, touched her breasts with his chest. For a minute they both stood motionless, not even hoping that the rival would give way.

Some boys who ran into the alley brought them out of their stupor. He stepped aside, and the short woman, moving forward, said:

– Next time you won't get away from me so easily!

From that day on, he avoided walking down that alley, fearing a meeting with the short woman, in whose hellish eyes he saw in one minute what he had not seen in the eyes of his wife in all ten years of their life together, even in moments of the most insane passion. During those ten years, he was a hero in the marital bed, and for this reason, when fate sent him the meeting with the short woman, he decided not to risk and not to spoil his heroic chronicle with a record of defeat" [4, p. 8–9].

And here is the text of *Masters and One Slave*:

"When I was a four-year-old girl, my brother, who was two years older than me, used to take me to the kitchen to invent new dishes. He mixed flour with milk, sugar with salt and fried it all on a mixture of fat, tea, tomato paste, and other products. Then he tried his 'new dish' and as usually found its taste disgusting to the point of vomiting. To hide these activities from our parents, he, with all the cruelty of his soul, forced me to eat all this stuff alone at a time.

Having reached the age that did not allow me to legally stay longer in my parents' house, I married a man whose age did not allow him to legally marry girls of my age. Bringing me to his bedroom for entertainment, he mixed serious things with nonsense, doubts with confidence, and cooked us both on the hearth, which had never burned. Then he tried his new 'honeymoon' recipe and as usually found himself in the position of Baraqish, who ruined herself.⁵ And in order to hide his own impotence

⁴ Qaa al-Yahud – a quarter in Sanaa, which was inhabited by Jews before 1949 (note by M. Suvorov).

⁵ This is an allusion to Arabic proverb "Baraqish ruined her own family", which means "to harm yourself" (note by M. Suvorov).

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from people, he, with all the cruelty of his soul, forced me to eat all kinds of folk remedies and radioactive medicines that were supposed to cure my chronic infertility!” [4, p. 27].

In his third collection, *Portrait of the Bastard* (1998), comprising five stories, Wajdi al-Ahdal demonstrated exceptional ingenuity in creating surrealistic, fantastic or, as Yemeni critic Ali Rabi‘ al-Khamisi put it, “parapsychological” plots [5, p. 92–93]. It is the complexity of these plots mostly absent in the “texts” of the two earlier collections that became a distinctive feature of the new book. For the rest, the writer retained his style and favorite tricks: pseudo-*isnad*, “scholarly” footnotes, parodying various narrative styles, confusing the reader about the identity of the narrator and the circumstances of the narrative, animating inanimate objects and vice versa.

Besides, the author again indirectly pointed to his postmodernist orientation. For example, in the introduction to the story *Newspapers of the Third Millennium*, the protagonist-narrator says, “I was sitting at my desk in newspaper al-Thawra’s editorial office, ready to take poison given to me by an Ethiopian woman to rid myself forever of this unbearable postmodernist literature, when suddenly a venerable old man entered, tall and broad-shouldered...” [6, p. 25].

Postmodernist literature is also mentioned in *The Story of Four Short Stories That Escaped from the Author’s Desk*, where it is discussed by fifty al-Ahdal’s short stories, including some stories of this collection. The fifty short stories discuss their own advantages and disadvantages, trying to figure out which of them is worthy of being published. The writer, thus, comments on his work in his own work.

Al-Khamisi writes about a special humorous language of the collection’s stories, full of funny expressions, comparisons and allegories [5, p. 98–99].

The following fragment from the story *Chance to Get Acquainted*, describing a girl, may serve as a good example.

“Unwittingly, I allowed myself to look at her the way a jeweler looks at a precious stone, given, of course, the huge difference that exists between looking at a stone and looking at a woman. She resembled a stepladder, which could be unfolded or folded if necessary. Her skin was wheat-colored, and warmth radiated from her face, suggesting freshly baked flatbread taken out of a tandoor. Not fleshy, but not skinny, wide enough in the body, in other words, the best what you can choose for bed pleasures” [6, p. 12].

The main feature of al-Ahdal’s fourth collection, *A War That No One Knew About* (2001), which comprised short stories, small texts of anecdotal kind, and one small play, was a satirical look at the sociopolitical life of modern Yemen. Especially noteworthy in this regard are the stories *A War That No One Knew About* and *Murder in an Unintelligible Dream*, whose plots, although surreal, give a clear idea of what is going on in Yemen, including political assassinations, Islamic fundamentalists’ hypocrisy and arbitrariness, etc. In the latter story, of special

interest are the end-notes, which represent three different points of view on the events described in the story, allegedly expressed by the three main political forces of the country and narrated in three different manners characteristic of the corresponding periodicals. In the anecdotal stories *Suspicious Movement in the Front Row* and *Sliding Hands*, as well as in the play *One Moment*, the satire on Yemeni socio-political life is so sharp, even rude, that their publication can only be explained by the absence of an official censorship in the country.

Here is, for example, the text of *Sliding Hands*:

“Sometimes surprisingly similar things happen in the world. For example, a half-crazy guy has settled in the Revolution Park, who sticks to walking girls for days on end. He doesn’t say a word to them, but his hands slide to the place below his waist and pull out his thing as a request for help.

And on the other side of the world there is a high government delegation that is engaged in hunting for the financial assistance from other states. And they say that the delegation’s head uses a very impressive trick: his hands slide to the place below his waist and turn out the pockets of his trousers as a request for help” [7, p. 65].⁶

Al-Ahdal’s fifth collection of short stories, *People of Tavern Street* (2017), appeared sixteen years after the fourth, when the writer had already published four novels, two screenplays and one multi-act play. This collection is the first of al-Ahdal’s three “thematic” collections, since all its thirteen stories are united by Tavern Street, a popular street in the central part of Sanaa, where the action of these stories takes place, in whole or in part. The prototypes of the heroes of the stories, according to the author⁷, are real people whom he met on this street.

Here is what is said about the street itself in the stories *Murder on Tavern Street* and *Makki*:

“If Sanaa is the capital of the country, then Tavern Street is the small capital of the big city.

If a man brags to people that he visited Sanaa, but at the same time he did not visit Tavern Street, know that he did not visit Sanaa. This street, as its name implies, comprises a chain of taverns specializing in cooking folk dishes and clusters of coffee shops, which are visited by a huge number of people every day” [8, p. 15].

“Tavern Street has a unique geographical location. It’s ridiculously easy to get to it from any part of the city. It is the navel of the city, the scar that indicates the junction of the umbilical cord with our mother earth. I have studied distances in Sanaa and found that Tavern Street presents the “golden number”. And from the point of view of astrology, Tavern Street is influenced by Aquarius, which attracts freedom-loving youth and intellectuals, so the atmosphere in this place generates new ideas and amazing impulses.

⁶ In the 1990s and 2000s the Yemeni economy was extremely dependent on foreign financial aid.

⁷ Letter sent by Wajdi al-Ahdal to the author of this article on August 3, 2020.

All the men who come to this street are magnificent. You will not find such men in any other place. These are the best of people, the cream of society, who have kind hearts and indulgent dispositions. Among them you will not find anyone who is arrogant because he is armed and belongs to an influential tribe. I have been to many places, I have drunk whole barrels of tea and coffee in innumerable coffee shops, but only on this street have I experienced peace of mind and relaxation. Even the looks of the people here are not challenging; they do not have that intensity that indicates a person's bad intentions towards you. There is a kind of hidden solidarity of people in their opposition to the gloomy present that looks at us all, and in their looks you feel something that helps you to safely pass your earthly path.

Villains have no place here. Tavern Street just spits them out, and the invisible force punishes them with nervous diseases, bodily injuries, and fatal incidents, so that they would never step on this street again. Therefore, everyone who comes to Tavern Street is chosen by Heavens. He becomes – whether he knows it or not – a member of the secret community that brings good to the society” [8, p. 5–6].

In the story *Makki*, the narrator is a madman, who considers himself an omniscient sage and blames his father, a qat merchant, for all his troubles. The hero of the story *Writer Nima* seems to be another madman, who considers himself a writer and blames his pen for his own creative infertility and for other unseemly deeds.

In the stories *Basil Revolution* and *Suicide Bomber*, the largely realistic narratives end with surrealistic finales.

The first story has the form of a diary of a young man, beginning on February 25, 2011 and ending in February 2021. The diary describes the events of the Yemeni revolution of 2011 and subsequent developments in the personal and professional life of the young man. In the last entry, he writes that the government has published an album with photos of the participants of the revolution, in which he finds his own photo. The photo is accompanied by a brief biography of him, which says that he died of cancer in December 2011.

The hero of the second story, a jihadist, is preparing to commit a terrorist attack on board an airplane and tells the reader in detail about his life. Already on board the plane, he meets Samuel Huntington, from whom he learns that everyone on the plane does not really exist, but is a dream, seen by a sleeping book. The jihadist accidentally wakes up a book lying on the seat next to him and ceases to exist.

The realistic stories *Life without Holes* and *Abir* tell the stories of representatives of the poorest segments of the capital's population. The hero of the first story, a homeless man, lives in a large cardboard box on Tavern Street and makes his living by collecting garbage for recycling. The heroine of the second story, a twelve-year-old girl, is engaged in begging together with her mother, grandfather and grandmother. When her relatives get sick, she has to go begging alone, and one day

she is raped. After that, her brother, who does not participate in begging, fearing that she could get pregnant, gives her in marriage to a poor man, who has practically no money for *mahr*⁸. The marriage is followed by the birth of two children, even greater poverty than in the parental home, and death from cancer at the age of fourteen.

This is how the girl describes their family begging:

“We worked in al-Tahrir area from eight o’clock in the morning until one o’clock in the afternoon, that is, full-time, like civil servants. My favorite place was Tavern Street. When we got there, I broke away from my mother and rushed forward. The people on this street are especially generous. They easily give coins and small banknotes to me and others in need. And the kindest of them leave food on their plates so that some needy, or homeless, or mad person could pick it up. And the cleaners in these taverns are in no hurry to remove the plates from the tables, leaving them for everyone who wanders into this dead-end street, which resembles a big bird’s nest. I would collect into a blue plastic container the remains of scrambled eggs cooked in Adeni manner, *fasulya* beans, *ful* beans, liver, and fried minced meat. Then I would sit on the stone steps of the bakery located at the end of the street and wait for the kind baker to give me five small loaves of white bread, still hot. After a few minutes, my mother would come up, then, after about a quarter of an hour, my grandfather and grandmother would come dragging their feet. We would sit down facing the wall, our backs to the street, and with the greed of a flock of hungry goats, devour this delicious mixture, licking the remaining fat from our fingers” [8, p. 63–64].

The stories *Inhabitants of the Planet Neptune*, *Morality in 2100*, and *No One Awaits You*⁹ satirize some trends in modern life in Yemen. Especially funny is the last story, in which the Messiah, having arrived in Sanaa, finds that no one is waiting for him. Frustrated, he starts working as a cook in one of the taverns of Tavern Street and tries to tell the visitors about his mission. However, nobody is interested in his teachings; everyone wants to give him advice.

“A bearded young man, not used to joking and having fun, asked him, ‘Do you have a mobile phone?’ The Messiah answered in the negative. The young man said, ‘Then you need to buy one, otherwise how will you keep in contact with your followers?’

An arrogant man, who insists on adding the title of doctor to his name, even though he only has a master’s degree in avian veterinary medicine, asked him, ‘Do you have a social network account? Facebook? Tweeter? Instagram? Telegram?’ The Messiah shook his head regretfully. The man said laughing, ‘The world has changed, buddy! Any business, in order to be successful, must be known on social networks! You can’t do anything without them. Your call will not go beyond this stupid street.

⁸ *Mahr* is the obligation, in the form of money or possessions paid by the groom, to the bride at the time of Islamic marriage.

⁹ This short story was not included in the first edition of the collection, but was included in the 2021 edition [2].

Personally, I won't believe in your mission if you talk to me live. But if you tweet about it, I might believe it'.

A guy studying to be a programmer, said, 'The awaited Messiah sounds old-fashioned. You'd better think about the awaited rap music, the awaited jeans, the awaited app. You need to either anticipate fashion or create it. Then you will earn well'" [2, p. 428].

As is typical of Wajdi al-Ahdal, there is a lot of humor in the stories of the collection, in particular, of a sexual nature. Here is, for example, what a young beggar woman in the story *Murder on Tavern Street* tells about her beloved, the main hero of the story:

"One day he gave me a green leaf picked off some tree and told me to look at it carefully and tell him what it looks like... I began to think with all my might what it looked like, but I couldn't invent anything... While I was thinking, he went to drink his favorite tea made in Adeni manner. As he sipped his tea, he stole glances at me from time to time... I decided to tell him that the leaf looks like human heart... I liked this idea, and I was glowing with joy. I thought that such an answer would bring us even closer... After finishing his tea, he stood up and looked at me questioningly. Having realized from my smile that I did have the answer, he came over and gestured with his hand that he was waiting for the answer. When he heard my answer, he raised his eyebrows in surprise and scratched his nose. Then he told me that my answer was wrong... I asked him, 'And what is the correct answer?' He touched my hand, took the leaf from it, folded it in half and explained, 'This leaf looks like your vulva!' Then he walked away, barely holding back his laughter. I was seized with a tremor, and I almost fainted from the embarrassment into which he drove me... Then it became clear to me that he was right. Because the leaf of a tree looks like a secret place in the woman's body... Or vice versa, we, women, ourselves try to make this place look like the leaf of a tree" [8, p. 23–24].

The plots of all thirteen stories in al-Ahdal's sixth collection, *Wadi al-Dujuj* (2017), are based on Yemeni legends and folk stories that the writer heard from his relatives and elderly people. Most of these stories are about the humans' encounters with the jinn and other supernatural creatures, which the writer expounds in his inherent humorous manner.

Here is, for example, how an encounter between a rural guy and a *jinniya* (i. e. female jinn) takes place in the story *Qasim and Haylan*¹⁰:

"Haylan examined the flock and noticed that the white sheep marked with black spot was missing. He went back to look for her. Having found her tracks, he followed them and found the sheep grazing in a secluded gorge. He called her – she neglected his call. He began to throw stones at her to make her return to him – but there was no reaction. He picked up a stick from the ground and, having approached, tried to drive her with the stick – she did not move from her place. Annoyed, he dropped the stick and took her up in his arms. Once in his arms, the sheep instantly turned into a

¹⁰ This short story was not included in the first edition of the collection, but was included in the 2021 edition [2].

woman and, having become heavy, fell out of his hands. Lying on her back, she was writhing in pain, and he, struck by her nakedness shining under the rays of the sun, stood unable to take his eyes off her. He had never seen such beauty in his entire life. She asked him to look at her back... and he copulated with her.

In the story *Musawi*, the protagonist, a young handsome guy, fascinated an old witch. She put a spell on him, and he died. And here is what happened next:

“At midnight, the old woman came to his grave, sprinkled the ground with the blood of a ram, while conjuring the Lord of the Lower world to give her what he keeps, then stamped her foot three times. The grave opened with a slight rumble, and a fat ram with shiny horns jumped out of the clouds of dust. After that, the grave closed. The old woman drove the ram with a stick into the darkness of the night. When they had walked away from the grave to a safe distance, the old woman got seized with lust, and, turning into a sheep, she began to rub against the ram. The ram got excited and covered her several times. This was the first night of many nights in which she satisfied her lust in this way” [9, p. 12].

There are also stories in the collection about miracles (*Blind Man* and *Khaizaran and Sultana*) and about some barbaric tribal customs (*Aslan and Nabat*).

The stories of al-Ahdal's seventh collection, *Fatal Arrangements* (2020), are united by the theme of dictatorship and are only indirectly related to the Arab world. The collection comprises fourteen stories, varying in volume, devoted to fourteen dictators: Adolf Hitler (Germany), Joseph Stalin (Soviet Union), Francisco Franco (Spain), Jean-Bédél Bokassa (Central African Republic), Augusto Pinochet (Chile), Suharto (Indonesia), Nicolae Ceaușescu (Romania), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines), Omar Bongo (Gabon), Idi Amin (Uganda), Pol Pot (Cambodia), Jorge Rafael Videla (Argentina), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), and Mohamed Bacar (Anjouan, Comoros).

After this incident, he began to say that she constantly forces him to copulate with her. He refused to marry his cousin, and she married another man. And throughout the rest of his life, he was haunted by seizures of epilepsy” [9, p. 345].

In the story of Hitler, the action takes place in the afterlife, in the story of Stalin – both in the earthly life and in the afterlife, in the rest of the stories – in the earthly life. When the action takes place in the earthly life, the narrative, however, focuses not on the well-known facts of the dictators' lives, but on such stories and episodes which – even if they had happened in reality – could not have become known to the general public. These stories and episodes are related to the dictators' intimate lives (Ceaușescu, Bongo, Pol Pot, Mugabe), to their use of fortune-tellers, sorcerers and clairvoyants (Hitler, Stalin, Bokassa, Pinochet, Suharto, Ceaușescu, Bongo, Amin, Pol Pot), to their behavior with their confidants and courtiers (Stalin, Ceaușescu, Marcos, Bongo, Amin, Bacar), and to their secret visits to the meeting places of the common people (Amin, Videla). Such an approach provides scope for the author's imagination without the need to distort historical facts. Only in rare cases does al-Ahdal contradict well-known historical facts (for example, describing Franco's death as a result of the collapse of the Madrid TV tower in a flood) or comes up with something

absolutely implausible (for example, a “phallic” component in the methods of Pinochet’s and Ceaușescu’s rules). All the stories are characterized by a colorful depiction of the national cultures of the countries in which the action takes place (customs and traditions, food and drinks, clothing, social habits, popular arts, etc.) and by the writer’s inherent penchant for caricature and grotesque, especially in the sexual and physiological spheres.

In the story *Pinochet Chases Penises*, a fortune teller on coffee grounds, Mapuche Indian, informs the Chilean dictator that he will die at the hands of men distinguished by long penises. Pinochet invites professor-anthropologist Martinez, from whom he learns that the average length of the penis is 14 cm. According to the professor’s research, the men who have longer penises are prone to illegal actions, which fact indirectly confirms the Indian’s prediction. Pinochet suggests using prostitutes to identify on this basis various opponents of the regime, including communists. The professor approves of the idea.

“His Excellency the President concluded the meeting in a joyful mood and issued a secret decree stating that the length of the penis of a Chilean citizen should not exceed 14 cm. Those who have longer penises should be destroyed as traitors to the state.

In subsequent years, campaigns were held in the country to measure the length of the penises of the male citizens. Men were receiving new identity cards, in which a field was added for indicating the length of the holder’s penis.

According to the eyewitnesses, thousands of Chilean men, who were physically favored by nature, were shot dead as a result of the implementation of this decree” [10, p. 54].

And here is a scene from the story *President Omar Bongo’s Party*:

“His Excellency turned to the cake, square in form, with a side of one meter, and expressed his admiration for the creation of the Lebanese pastry chef, who had decorated the cake with cream of the colors, that made up the flag of Gabon: green field, yellow field, and blue field. The President was handed a saber, with which he cut the cake into two halves, then cut off a piece, put it on a porcelain plate and went to where the fortune teller Marie Tankunku had been sitting. The Head of Ceremonies jumped up to him and, panting, said that Marie had already left. There was a short conversation between them, after which the President returned to the table, where he saw a disgusting scene.

His impudent men were raking the remains of the cake with their palms and nails, holding big pieces of the cake in their hands, having forgotten about the plates. The Interior Minister was quarreling with other ministers, trying to grab what had left of the cake for himself. In cream-stained suits, they were jostling like bulls, elbowing and swearing.

President El Hadj Omar Bongo lost his temper and kicked the table in a rage. The ministers froze in place from surprise. The President unleashed his wrath on them:

– You, shit-making horde of ancient sort! You recently walked in rags, which you cared about more than about the honor of your wives! And now that I’ve turned you into government

officials and bought you these suits in the most expensive boutique in Paris, you don't care that they might get dirty or tear! Do you know how much one such suit costs?!

The brain of the Finance Minister stood out in the crowd, and in the manner of a diligent student in the classroom he answered:

– Five thousand, five hundred and eighty dollars.

The President nodded slightly a couple of times. His men knew that those nods did not bode well” [10, p. 89–90].

These fragments from two stories, *Pinochet Chases Penises* and *President Omar Bongo's Party*, though they describe obviously implausible events and episodes, are, nevertheless, nationally-colored caricature representations of the dictatorial regimes in question. The same may be seen in the other stories of this collection.

Conclusion

The editorial summary of the volume comprising six al-Ahdal's collections of short stories reads:

“Like a mirror, Wajdi al-Ahdal's short stories produce an imaginative picture of Yemeni society, created with the help of various artistic approaches. Among these are humorous tendency in the depiction of crisis realities, as in *Flower of the Traveler* collection; creating worlds of fantasy, as in *Portrait of the Bastard* collection; parodying the style of medieval stories, as in *Gibberish of the Ventriloquist Time* collection. In some of the writer's stories, we can notice sharp criticism of the gloomy present and its rejection, as in *A War That No One Knew About* collection; in others we can see the manner of oral folk narratives, as in *Wadi al-Dujuj* collection; in still others we can find realistic images of people with whom we deal in our daily life, as in *People of Tavern Street* collection” [2, back cover].

All the approaches and manners listed in this summary can be found in the writer's novels as well. Undoubtedly, al-Ahdal's experiments with the plots and styles in his first four collections gave rise to the unique text of *Mountain Boats* novel, in which vivid Yemeni social realities are depicted through parodying a tale about a princess and a prince with many references to Yemeni folklore, while the narrative is saturated with caricature, grotesque, and black humor, especially of a sexual nature.

The Quarantine Philosopher (2007) novel, which allegorically depicts the Arab world in its recent history, can be considered a parody of G. Orwell's *Animal Farm* which is, like *Mountain Boats*, full of caricature and black humor.

The novels *Donkey among Songs* (2004), *A Land without Sky* (2008) (in English published translation – *A Land without Jasmine*, 2012), and *Happy Land of Intrigues* (2018), which are largely realistic, have some surrealistic elements, characteristic of al-Ahdal's short stories. In the first novel, the protagonist, an investigator chasing a sexual maniac, eventually turns out to be this maniac. The second novel, whose

heroine, a school girl, turns into the text of a book, echoes in this respect some stories of *Flower of the Traveler* and *Portrait of the Bastard* collections. As for the third novel, whose hero loses his life in a collision with an otherworldly creature, a ghost or a genie, it echoes in this sense some stories of *Wadi al-Dujuj* collection.

The reviewed collections of short stories by Wajdi al-Ahdal allow us to assert that the short story genre is no less important in the writer's work than the novel genre. It was in the short story that al-Ahdal experimented most with the form and content, and these experiments had a significant impact on the formation of his writing manner as a novelist.

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