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HISTORICAL NOVEL IN MODERN LITERATURE OF YEMEN

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Abstract

This article reviews the development of the historical novel in Yemeni literature since the early 1970s up to 2010. There is an evident difference in the themes of historical novels written before and after the unification of Yemen (1990). In the former period the authors mostly criticized the pre-revolutionary regime and social conditions, while in the latter period they analyzed post-revolutionary events. Novels about the ancient times started to emerge during this period as well. In spite of this difference, the majority of novels written in both periods demonstrate the authors' desire to express (in direct or indirect way) their positive attitude to the current socio-political situation in the country, as well as their support for the ruling regime. This affects the quality of Yemeni historical novels and makes them, in a sense, a marginal genre in Yemeni literature. Only few Yemeni historical novels convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with the realistic details and fidelity to the historical fact.

Key words: Arabic literature, Yemen, historical novel, PDRY, YAR

INTRODUCTION

Since its birth in the late 19th century, the Arabic historical novel has undergone considerable transformation from profoundly didactic and moralizing historical narratives (as, for example, in Salim al-Bustani's works: "Zinubiyya", "Budur", "Al-Hiyam fi futuh al-Sham") to the narratives, in which historical events are employed by the author only to give him the field for his socio-political and philosophical speculations (as, for example, in "pharaonic" novels of Najib Mahfuz, not to mention some of Jamal al-Ghitani's post-modernistic works). Yet in Yemeni literature, where the first historical novel appeared as late as in 1970, one can find mostly romantic and semi-realistic types of historical fiction, both not very sophisticated in their literary forms.

According to Encyclopædia Britannica, a historical novel is "a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact".

Among about twenty Yemeni novels, that were evidently intended to throw light on certain periods of Yemeni history, only very few may be estimated as attempting “to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact”. Before I suggest the explanation of this fact, I see it necessary to make a brief review of what has been written in Yemen in the field of historical novel.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The first historical novel that was published in Yemen is “Fighting the death” (Musara‘at al-mawt, 1970), written by Abd al-Rahim al-Sabalani, a north Yemeni theologian with al-Azhari background. Perhaps it was his traditional Islamic education that determined the style of his work, which is very close to a historical chronicle, flavored with an unsophisticated love story. In this respect, al-Sabalani’s novel is no different, for example, from historical novels of Salim al-Bustani, written in the 1870s. Like al-Bustani, al-Sabalani clearly regarded history as a means of edification, and this was reflected in the novel’s subtitle – “Moralizing historical socio-political novel, which takes place in Yemen in the period from 1956 to 1962”. Even the design of the book demonstrates the predominance of the author’s scholarly inclinations over artistic ones. Thus, the book is provided with a large number of photographs of political figures of the time, and at the beginning of the story the author gives a list of all actors with indications of their occupations, tribal and territorial affiliations and political views, that are divided into four types: reactionary (mutamassik bi-l-qadim), conservative (muhafiz), conformist (mutamalliq) and a person of progressive views (taqaddumi).

Al-Sabalani’s novel paved the way for other historical novels, whose main idea was the glorification of the North Yemeni revolution of 1962 and – on the opposite – the condemnation of the pre-revolutionary Imamate. All these novels had their settings in Yemen’s recent past: in the time immediately before and (in one case) during the revolution and the civil war of 1962-1970. These novels are the following: “Sana is an open city” (San‘a’ madina maftuha, 1977) by Muhammad Abd al-Wali, “Old harbor” (al-Mina’ al-qadim, 1978) by Mahmud al-Saghiri, “The village of al-Batul” (Qaryat al-Batul, 1979) by Muhammad Hunaybar, “Spring in the mountains” (Rabi‘ al-jibal, 1983) by Muhammad Muthanna and “The hostage” (al-Rahina, 1984) by Zayd Dammaj. The style of expression in these novels varied from highly romanticized, as in Muhammad Muthanna’s work, to highly realistic, as in Muhammad Abd al-Wali’s and Zayd Dammaj’s works, which are most consistent with the definition of the historical novel.

Though the main subject of Muhammad Abd al-Wali's novel "Sana is an open city" is the life of North Yemeni immigrants in pre-revolutionary Aden, then a British colony in the South Yemen and one of the biggest ports in the Indian Ocean, the writer managed to create a large-scale picture of the life of all pre-revolutionary Yemen, both in the northern and southern parts of the country. The novel is built in the form of letters that the protagonist, whose name is Nu'man, addresses to a friend of him. The friend does not appear in the novel, and the frankness with which the letters are written, gives the impression that Nu'man writes them to himself. The narrative, thus, is based on the internal monologue of the protagonist. Nu'man's personal impressions, as well as the stories of his friends, narrated in his letters, transfer the reader in space and time. The action takes place in a small North Yemeni village, in overpopulated Aden, in decaying Zabid, once a significant center of the Shafi'i scholarship, in the throes of violence and fires of the rebellious Sana of 1948. The whole of Yemen in the novel appears to the reader as one big prison, in which death looks more real and more natural than life.

Zayd Dammaj's novel "The hostage", which brought real fame to the author – first in Yemen, then in the Arab world and, finally, in the world – to this day remains the most famous work of Yemeni literature. The story takes place in the late 1940s in the palace of the Governor of a North Yemeni province. Although the author does not mention the name of the city, some details indicate that it is Taizz. Perhaps the writer deliberately did not name the place, as if hinting thereby that the situation he depicted was typical for any of the Yemeni cities of that time. The story is told on behalf of the protagonist – a boy, who is a son of one of the oppositionist Yemeni sheikhs. The boy was taken hostage by the authorities and held for some time in al-Qahira fortress, a prison for "political" convicts.

The novel begins with the transfer of the boy from the fortress to the Governor's palace, where he becomes *duwaydar* – a servant, whose duties are to carry out small tasks of the family members of the Governor, including women.

Although the palace is almost closed to the outside world, echoes of the events taking place in the country reach here. There are talks of the activities of the oppositionist Free Yemenis movement, of the murder of Imam Yahya in Sana in 1948, of the victorious campaign of the crown Prince, who suppressed the anti-Imamic uprising and gave the rebel Sana on plunder. All these pieces of information form the reader's idea of what happened in Yemen in the late 1940s and convey the atmosphere of confusion and anxious expectations in which the country lived then.

For the Yemenis themselves, Dammaj's novel "The hostage" was almost a documentary evidence of an era that many still remembered well at the time of the

novel's release. The atmosphere in the palace of a Yemeni high-ranking dignitary of the 1940s was portrayed in the novel so accurately and vividly, that immediately after the publication of the novel, many were convinced that the author had described his own experiences.

Interestingly, although the five mentioned above novels were written at the time when the civil war had been over, the authors (except only Muhammad Muthanna) didn't include the revolution and war period in their narratives. It looks like as if the authors were very careful about the fame of the revolution: for many reasons this fame could be upheld much stronger by realistic pictures of the backward Imamate, than by realistic pictures of the civil war, very controversial in their essence. The only novel in which the war is a part of the story (Muhammad Muthanna's) is the least realistic and the most romantic of all.

Much more ideologically biased were several novels about the recent past, that appeared in the same period in South Yemen (in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen). In the atmosphere of dominating Marxist ideology, the authors were expected to present pre-revolutionary social conflicts as a class struggle – which in its classical Marxist sense didn't exist in Yemen. Writing about things that didn't exist was, of course, difficult. Therefore in the few “historical” novels that appeared, the “class” conflict took the form of traditional, understandable conflicts (land-conflicts or bride-conflicts) – but between the characters, whom the author attributed to antagonistic classes and artlessly endowed with opposite personal qualities. Thus, the template pair of antagonists in these works became the insidious “feudal oppressor” in the face of a sheikh or sultan and the enlightened, virtuous, revolutionary-minded young man, who also had the class consciousness. The process of formation of the class consciousness of the young man was portrayed in extremely unconvincing way, or even remained outside the scope of the story. Even more implausible in the role of tyrants looked sheikhs and sultans, who in reality were representatives of families, traditionally esteemed for their nobility and sense of justice. As a result, these South Yemeni “historical” novels were no more than ideological fairy-tales, whose improbability was generously compensated by the abundance of secondary ethnographic detail, meticulous description of almost every movement of the characters and the long, unnatural dialogue. These novels are the following: “Radfan heights” (Murtafa‘at Radfan, 1976) by Husayn Musaybli, “Way of the clouds” (Tariq al-ghuyum, 1977), “Voyage aboard *Hasna*” (Al-Ibhar ‘ala matn Hasna’, 1984) and “Virgin of the mountain” (‘Adhra’ al-jabal, 1988) by Husayn Salim Basiddiq and “The village that dreams” (al-Qarya allati tahlum, 1984) by Ahmad Fad‘aq. Exactly of the same kind were two long plays: “The daughter of al-Dawdahi” (Bint al-

Dawdahi, 1977) and “Mansur al-Mansur” (al-Fata Mansur al-Mansur, 1977) written by Abd al-Majid al-Qadi.

After the unification of two parts of Yemen into one state in 1990, which was accepted by Yemenis as a great landmark in the whole Yemeni history, there appeared two distinctive types of the historical novel, which evidently pursued two different aims.

One type was born by some writers’ desire to present a more plausible and more truthful picture of Yemen’s recent past – a picture, not distorted by any political and ideological concerns, characteristic of the previous period. This type is represented by three novels: “The flower of coffee” (Zahrat al-bunn, 1998) by Ali Muhammad Zayd, “The betrayed queen” (La reine étripée, 1998; in Arabic: al-Malika al-maghhdura, 1999) by Habib Abd al-Rabb Saruri and “Red manuscript” (Mushaf ahmar, 2010) by Muhammad al-Gharbi ‘Amran.

The author of “The flower of coffee”, Ali Muhammad Zayd, shed light on the events, that took place in North Yemen in the first half of the 1960s. These dramatic events, which at the official level had always been talked of with exclusively pathetic intonations, received an objective assessment in the novel, which is largely due to the facts of the author’s biography. A native of the mountain district of Reima, located to the west of Sana, the future writer at the age of ten became a pupil of one of the schools of modern type, founded by the Republican government with the help of the Egyptians. The pupils had to study in the atmosphere of the civil war, and in 1967 Ali took an active part in the defense of Sana during the famous “seventy-day blockade”. Later, in the 1970s, he studied at the American University of Beirut, and in 1986 he defended his doctoral thesis on medieval history of Yemen at the Sorbonne. Living memories of his youth, set out with the impartiality of the representative of the European scholarship, gave the novel its historical objectivity, which was noted by literary critics and historians.

By portraying the realities of the time – the suffering of the rural inhabitants of North Yemen from the levies of the authorities and from famine, caused by drought, anti-British demonstrations in Aden, the perception of the news of the revolution in the North Yemeni country-side, the formation of the Republican National Guard, the bloody battles of the first year of the civil war and the chaos reigning in revolutionary Sana – the writer creates a complete picture of the life of the country in the first half of the 1960s.

The news about the revolution – in the novel – does not cause the villagers the slightest enthusiasm: they had nothing against the Imam, whom they never saw, but hated the soldiers who were rumored to have made this revolution. The word

“jumhuriyyah” (i.e. Republic) for them sounds so outlandish that many replace it with meaningless words “jurhumiyya” or “jumrukiyya”. The actions of the National Guard appear in the novel as an irresponsible adventure: untrained, poorly armed people under the leadership of equally untrained commanders are sent to certain death. In the first military operations, most of them are killed or captured. And the civil war itself soon ceases to boil down to the question of republicans’ victory over monarchists or vice versa and turns into a conflict of economic interests of various tribes, government groups, individual sheikhs and political leaders.

Habib Saruri in his novel “The betrayed queen” presented an extremely critical picture of radical leftist politics that was pursued by South Yemeni authorities in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, when the author lived in Aden (now he lives in France). Many episodes of the novel are vivid documentary evidence of everyday life of Aden in the 1970s. Thus, Saruri describes one of the characteristic features of that time – the food deficit caused by state measures to nationalize the economy and centralize agricultural production planning. Saruri tells also about the bloody purges, held in the early 1970s under the banner of class struggle. In terrible detail Saruri describes the civil war of 1986 in South Yemen that claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Muhammad al-Gharbi ‘Amran conceived his novel “Red manuscript” as a realistic national epic, shedding light on some of the dark sides of the post-revolutionary history of Yemen. One of the central themes of the novel is the armed struggle of the oppositional National Democratic Front, supported by South Yemeni regime, against the conservative forces in North Yemeni government. The writer for the first time in Yemeni literature showed the full scale and all of the contradictory nature of this conflict, the atrocities of both sides, the betrayal by the leadership of South Yemen of their North Yemeni associates. In addition to this theme, which is extremely painful for Yemen, the novel touches upon other painful subjects, such as the existence of secret prisons in Sana, the civil wars of 1986 and 1994, the growth of Islamist radicalism and terrorism.

The other type of historical novel, that appeared in Yemeni literature after the Unification, seems to be a product of some writers’ desire to glorify the leader of the Unification, the President Ali Abdullah Saleh. All novels of this type are set in pre-Islamic times or in the Middle Ages, and their protagonists are famous Yemeni rulers, who did a lot to strengthen the Yemeni state. The common feature of these novels is that they – for evident reasons (the first of which is the lack of historical data) – do not “convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age”, and little “realistic detail and fidelity to historical fact” can be found in them. What we find in

the novels of this type is only glorious deeds of the protagonist. This type is represented by three novels: “The vision of Shammar Yur‘ish, king of Saba, Dhu-Raydan, Hadhramawt and Yamanat” (Ru‘ya Shammar Yur‘ish, malik Saba, wa-Dhu-Raydan, wa-Hadhramawt, wa-Yamanat, 1994) by Anwar Muhammad Khalid; “The palace of power” (Dar al-saltana, 1998) by Ramziya al-Iryani and “The incense road” (Tariq al-bukhur, 2004) by Munir Tilal Yahya.

Anwar Muhammad Khalid’s novel is written in the manner, close to Salim al-Bustani’s and tells about the reign of the Himyarite king Shammar Yur‘ish (the late 3rd century A.D.) who was engaged in uniting Yemeni lands and strengthening the state power. In the preface to the novel the author lists scholarly books on which he relied when writing his work. He also says that he was not going to draw historical parallels between the plot and the characters of the novel on the one hand and the events and figures of the modern history of the country on the other, despite the similarity of the two eras, marked by the unification of the country. Such a statement by the author, however, only betrays his intention to make the plot of the novel a laudable allegory of the unification of Yemen in modern times.

Ramziya al-Iryani’s novel “The palace of power” tells about the life and deeds of the legendary queen Sayyida bint Ahmad, who ruled Yemen in the early 12th century A.D. The novel is also written in the manner, close to that of al-Bustani, and also, as it seems, is a tribute to the political situation: too obvious is the parallel between the medieval queen who united Yemeni lands and the President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Munir Tilal Yahya’s novel “The incense road”, which is written in the same manner, tells the story of Yemeni opposition to the Roman army led by Aelius Gallus, who made an unsuccessful campaign of conquest to southern Arabia in 24 B.C. The Arabs’ unity in the face of external aggression – which in the novel, undoubtedly, is the author’s figment – can also be estimated as the writer’s desire to give some “historical” justification for the need and the inevitability of the unity of the country.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would argue that for many Yemeni authors, the motive for writing a historical novel is not so much a desire to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age. Rather they are motivated by a desire to express (in direct or indirect way) their positive attitude to the current socio-political situation in the country, as well as their support for the ruling regime. This is what affects the quality of Yemeni historical novels and makes them, in a sense, a marginal genre in Yemeni literature.

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