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Study

12.11.2018

# Imagining an Alternative Homeland

Humanism in  
Contemporary Yemeni  
Novels as a Vision for  
Social and Political Reform

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funded by

DAAD



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## Introduction

This study presents the central findings of an analytical study of the construction of identities in six contemporary Yemeni novels.<sup>1</sup> These novels share several commonalities: They have been written within the timeframe of the last decade, 2005-2015; they make the country's past the background of their narrative; and they concentrate on collective identities in Yemen. The selection of the six novels from the bulk of the novels produced in Yemen during the last decade is based on the premise that these novels offer more material for studying the construction of identities in Yemen than others. More specifically, each of the six chosen novels is built around several themes or motifs depicting human experiences and attitudes that have to do with widely debated identity issues in Yemen. These issues revolve around three main categories or frames of identification: territoriality or regionalism, religious affiliations, and race. Although the study focuses mainly on six novels, throughout its analytical argument it also makes frequent references to other Yemeni novels as necessary and relevant.

The art of writing novels in Yemen dates back to 1927, when Ahmad 'Abd Allah al-Saqqaf (d. 1950), a Yemeni novelist from Hadhramawt, wrote his novel *Fatat Qarut* [*Qarut's Girl*].<sup>2</sup> Since then, the Yemeni novel has developed both thematically and technically. Prominent writers have contributed to establishing and developing this literary genre in the country. These writers include Muhammad 'Ali Luqman (d. 1966); 'Ali Ahmad Ba Kathir (d. 1969); Muhammad 'Abd al-Wali (d. 1973); 'Abd Allah Salim Ba Wazir (d. 2004); Zayd Muti' Dammaj (d. 2000); Wajdi al-Ahdal; Ahmad Zayn; Nabila al-Zubair; Salih Ba 'Amir; and 'Ali al-Muqri among others.

The time period in which the novels assessed in this paper were written, i.e. 2005-2015, can be said to comprise some of the most decisive historical moments in the recent history of Yemen. The first half of this decade (2005-2010) is considered foundational for the popular countrywide demonstrations against the regime of 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih (d. 2017), demonstrations that led to what has become known as 'the Arab Spring' in 2011. The second half (2011-2015) saw the 2011 'revolution' and the subsequent transition process, including the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which took place from March 2013 to January 2014. The NDC was the first time Yemenis from all regions, all political affiliations and all walks of life came together to debate the pressing issues for social, political and economic reform. Unfortunately, these political

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Marie-Christine Heinze for editing this paper and for her insightful and critical comments.

<sup>2</sup> On the Yemeni novel in general and its beginnings in particular, see Ba Qays 2014 and Orth 1997.

and social deliberations were marred by armed conflicts that culminated in the war that has been ongoing since late 2014 / beginning of 2015.

During this eventful decade of 2005-2015, more than 83 novels were published (see al-Faqih forthcoming: 16-21). This number exceeds the number of novels published in Yemen in the preceding seventy years (1927-2000), which amounted to 66 (ibid: 12). As already stated above, the six novels analyzed in this study address various issues relating to identity construction in Yemen. Two of them, *Steamer Point* by Ahmad Zayn<sup>3</sup> and *Sana'a'i [My Sana'a]* by Nadya al-Kawkabani,<sup>4</sup> address regional identities: In *Steamer Point*, Zayn depicts the cosmopolitan past of Aden city in the late 1960s, during the last days of British colonial rule. *Sana'a'i* is set in Sana'a city in the aftermath of the 1963 revolution against the imamate in North Yemen. Though situated in the past, the two novels address the present realities of Yemen in a retrospective manner.

Two of the novels revolve around issues of race, with a particular focus on the *akhdam* [servants], a marginalized social category in Yemen whose ancestors migrated from Africa many hundred years ago and who continue to be identified by their black skin color. The first novel to address this issue is *Harb Taht al-Jild [War Underneath the Skin]* by Ahmad Zayn. It tells the story of a Yemeni journalist who embarks on writing a report for a foreign journal on the *muhammasheen* [marginalized] in Sana'a, and in the process discovers large-scale marginalization of different segments of Yemeni society. The second novel addressing matters of race and racism is *Ta'm Aswad, Ra'iha Sawda [Black Taste, Black Smell]* by 'Ali al-Muqri.<sup>5</sup> It centers around the life of the *akhdam* in

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad Zayn was born in al-Hudayda in 1968. Zayn is a novelist and journalist; he lives in Saudi Arabia and works for the *al-Hayat* newspaper. His novels revolve around questions of identity, Yemeni unity, citizenship, homeland and the migration of Yemenis into the Gulf States. His novels are: *Tashih Wadh' [Residence Status Correction]* (2004); *Qahwa Amrikiyya [American Coffee]* (2007); *Harb Taht al-Jild [War Underneath the Skin]* (2010); and *Steamer Point* (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Nadya al-Kawkabani was born in Ta'iz in 1968. She is a novelist, short story writer and academic. She studied architecture at Sana'a University and obtained a PhD in architecture from Cairo University in 2008. Since then, she has worked as an associate professor in the Faculty of Engineering at Sana'a University. In her stories and novels, gender issues and social inequality are two central themes. Yemeni history, myths and traditional architecture serve as supporting motives of the narration. Her novels are: *Hubb Laysa Illa [It is not More than Love]* (2006); *Aqilat [Honorable Women]* (2009); *Sana'a'i [My Sana'a]* (2013); and *Suq 'Ali Muhsin [The Marketplace of 'Ali Muhsin]* (2016).

<sup>5</sup> 'Ali al-Muqri was born in Ta'iz in 1966. He is a poet, novelist and journalist. Since 1988, he has been working in the field of cultural journalism. From 1997 to 2005 he worked as editor in chief of *al-Hikma*, a journal of the Yemeni Writers Association. In 2007, he was appointed as editor of *Ghayman*, a cultural and literary journal issued under the supervision of Prof. Dr. 'Abd al-Aziz al-Maqalih, the head of Yemen Center for Studies and Research. In 2015, al-Muqri moved to France. Al-Muqri can well be described as the novelist of taboo topics in Yemen. His writings address issues of marginalized groups in Yemen such as Jews, the *akhdam* and the *muzayyinin*. His novels are: *Ta'm Aswad, Ra'iha Sawda [Black Taste, Black Smell]* (2008), *al-Yahudi al-Hali [The Handsome Jew]* (2009), *Hurma* (2012), and *Bukhur 'Adani [Adeni Frankincense]* (2014).

Mahwa,<sup>6</sup> a shantytown on the outskirts of Ta'iz city. The novel traces the story of 'Abd al-Rahman, or Imbu as he is called later in the book, a young man of peasant background who fled from his home village with his lover Dughlu, who herself belongs to a low social category labeled *muzayyinin* (people who work in menial jobs such as hairdressing and butchery). In Mahwa, the two lovers find safe shelter, where they experience a new life.

The last two novels discussed in this paper are dedicated to religious identities: They tackle the relationship of Islamic sects among one other, as well as to other religions, particularly Judaism. The first novel, *Zulmat Ya'il* [*Ya'il Darkness*] by Muhammad al-Gharbi 'Amran,<sup>7</sup> is a historical novel depicting the life of Yemenis during the rule of the Isma'ili *da'i* 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi in the 11th century. The second novel is *al-Yahudi al-Hali* [*The Sweet Jew*] by 'Ali al-Muqri, which acquaints the reader – through a love story between a Muslim girl and a Jewish boy – with the life of Yemeni Jews in the 17th century. Although set in a historical context, the two novels make strong references to current social and religious life in Yemen.

## Narrated identities and historical imagination

In the six novels discussed here, the Yemeni past is extended through narration to the present and the future. Individual and collective identities as they appear in the novels are the products of how the writer sees and imagines the past at a certain significant historical moment in contemporary Yemen. The experiences of revolution and transformation that the authors of the six novels go through themselves at the time of writing impact on the ways they view and depict the past in the stories they create. This accordingly also impacts how they construct and narrate the identities of their characters in the novels. These identities are thus products of the writer's imagination of the past or of their cultural memory (Assmann 2012). By choosing to write about

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<sup>6</sup> Literally, the word *mahwa* means 'confined space'. It designates the place of the *akhdam* in some regions of Yemen, such as Ta'iz.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad al-Gharbi 'Amran was born in Dhamar in 1958. 'Amran is a short story writer, novelist and politician. He holds a B.A. and an M.A. in history and was deputy mayor of Sana'a from 2006 to 2010. The modern history of Yemen since the revolutions of the 1960s in North and South Yemen forms the landscape of the characters of his novels *Mushaf Ahmar* [*Red Vulgate*] (2010) and *al-Tha'ir* [*The Revolutionary*] (2014). *Zulmat Ya'il* [*Ya'il Darkness*] (2012) and *Musammarat al-Mawta* [*Evening Conversations with the Dead*] (2016) are two historical novels depicting the life of Yemenis during the Isma'ili rule of 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi and Arwa al-Sulayhi in the 11th century.

these specific aspects of the past, the authors intend to convey certain messages to their readers about the Yemeni present. What follows is an analysis of the authors' historical imagination in the three categorical frames of identification in the novels: regional, religious and racial.

## Regional identities

The period that spans from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s is formative and foundational in modern Yemeni history. This period is of historical sensitivity as it not only currently continues to invoke debate and controversy among the intellectual and political elite of the country, but is constantly referred to in everyday political discussions at home or on the street. A political rupture, both with the colonial past in the South and the imamate past in the North, took place in these formative years, resulting in a bitter internal conflict which accompanied far-reaching transformations throughout the country. This internal conflict led to the creation of two Yemen republics, each with a very different social, economic and political color.<sup>8</sup> The two novels by Ahmad Zayn and Nadya al-Kawkabani project the contemporary Yemeni spatial divisions (i.e. those between the South and the North, as well as between Lower Yemen and Upper Yemen) with all its bearings on that traumatic, yet foundational, era in the modern history of the country.<sup>9</sup> The spatial subjects of narration are the two (former) capital cities: Aden, the former capital city of the South until national unity in 1990; and Sana'a, the former capital of the North and capital city of united Yemen. As capital cities, both spaces are highly symbolic in regard to the creation of a modern Yemeni state, as well as of urban culture and national identities.

### Aden

Set in the late 1960s, Ahmad Zayn's novel *Steamer Point*, which was published in 2015, follows the life of a group of Southern revolutionaries. The story revolves around their different feelings and attitudes towards British colonial rule and the future of Aden city. Although placed in a historical setting, the novel is preoccupied with urgent questions of contemporary Yemeni society: Values such as tolerance, freedom, and the issue of Adeni identity as a cosmopolitan city are at the core of the current political and intellectual debate

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<sup>8</sup> Yemen, before unification in 1990, was divided into two states, the South and the North. The South was partially occupied by the British until 1967 and subsequently became a socialist state; the North was under the rule of the Zaydi imamate until 1963 and subsequently became a republic ruled by a tribal-military elite. However, the geopolitical divisions of Yemen go back to even earlier times, with the boundaries between North and South marked by the British and the Ottomans in 1904; see Willis 2012.

<sup>9</sup> North Yemen (which was known until unity with the South in 1990 as Yemen Arab Republic) is generally marked by geographical and sectarian distinctions: Zaydi Upper Yemen and Shafi'i Lower Yemen.

in the country, with these values reflected in the depiction of the novel's characters. The voice of the main character, Samir, who is not Adeni but from al-Hudayda in North Yemen,<sup>10</sup> is freed from the power relations between the colonized and the colonizer and thus presents a rational account of the colonial experience in Southern Yemen. Samir's voice in the novel is quite different from the nationalist discourse adopted by the other characters. It recounts the positive achievements of the British on the one hand, but also conjures up the fear of an authoritative political regime that subsequently emerged in the following two decades, 1970-1990, on the other. For example, Samir expresses his fears that the rural identity of the revolutionaries will threaten the cosmopolitan identity of Aden.<sup>11</sup>

One main feature of Samir's voice – in contrast to others in the novel – is that it is not ensnared in radical nationalist discourse. It deals with history in a pragmatic way by tallying the profits and losses of both the colonial and the subsequent nation-state. This voice of reason is set against the strong nationalist voices of Samir's contemporaries which foreshadow the fate of the South in the aftermath of independence from the British. The specter of radical Marxist rule over South Yemen (1970-1990) is looming in the air.

Setting his novel in the context of the revolution against British colonial rule thus allows Zayn to bring the attention of the reader to a big opportunity that, according to the author's opinion, was lost in the process of the postcolonial national project; a chance that was lost once again in another historical moment, namely in the aftermath of the unification of the two Yemens in 1990. Had politicians seized the moment back then, a more open, democratic, multicultural and tolerant space in Aden might have been possible. Moreover, the possibility of a loss of another revolutionary chance in 2011 is found at the undercurrent of this novel.

### *Sana'a*

In Nadya al-Kawkabani's novel *My Sana'a*, published in 2013, Sana'a is aesthetically celebrated as a beautiful city with an ancient history. The political history of the civil war that followed the 1962 revolution against the imamate in Northern Yemen is the central concern of the narration. More specifically, the novel retells the bloody events of 1968 when a number of *shaykhs* [tribal leaders] and high-ranking military officers from the highlands of Yemen killed

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<sup>10</sup> Here we notice an identification between the main character Samir and the novelist Ahmad Zayn, who is also from al-Hudayda, which is a region in the former North. Reflecting the author's political leanings, the fictional character Samir can be seen as an embodiment of some actual moderate leftist personalities who originated from al-Hudayda, but found in Aden a promised land for their socialist dreams during the early 1970s.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Marie-Christine Heinze for bringing my attention to this important point.

'Abd al-Raqib 'Abd al-Wahhab. Even today, 'Abd al-Wahhab, who originates from Ta'iz (an important city in the lower highlands), is considered an important military officer and hero, and is credited with playing a significant role in lifting the 70 day siege on Sana'a, which had been imposed on the city by the royalists (i.e. those defending the imamate against those who wanted a republican system). The regional division between the highland and the lowland is one feature of the events of 1968 in North Yemen depicted in books on modern Yemeni history and continues to be orally transmitted by the older to the new generations.<sup>12</sup> The representation of that past is of great relevance to what has been going on in Yemen since 2011, when Yemenis divided into two main forces: pro and counter the 2011 revolution. This is because some figures in the General People's Congress, the party led by former president 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih (d. 2017), interpreted the 2011 events as a revolt organized and led by those who come from Lower Yemen, particularly Ta'iz, and hence not a revolution of the whole of Yemen (Abu Hatim 2011). As the author explained in an interview (al-Maqrami 2014):

"In this period of time [late 1960s], bitter conflict took place, which brought about a big crack in the fabric of Yemeni society. This crack has been deepened by subsequent political events. Although they lifted the siege imposed on Sana'a in the late 1960s, the real revolutionaries who flocked to Sana'a from the different regions of Yemen were largely oppressed. The victory was harvested by those who were hiding themselves. Meanwhile, the real revolutionaries have been treated in a very insulting and brutal way. They have been killed, tortured or exiled. Subsequently, the oppressors wrote history and claimed that they were the ones who were victorious and who had brought the revolution to victory."

Just as in al-Kawkabani's interpretation of the revolutionary past, there were forces in 2011 who came out victorious from the 'revolution', but whom she does not consider the 'real revolutionaries'. In the subsequent post-2011 transition process, these forces tried to portray themselves as those who were part of the revolution and are now bringing it to its fulfillment.

Built on Yemen's political history, the novel seems to be both interpretive and reflective (Kiram 2015). It is interpretive as it attempts to present a reading of the events of late 1968 in North Yemen in a way that serves the nationalist

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<sup>12</sup> The assassination in Sana'a of 'Abd al-Wahhab, who is originally from Ta'iz (Lower Yemen), by Zaydi military officers from Upper Yemen in the aftermath of 1963, as well as the exclusion of citizens from Lower Yemen from high-ranking governmental positions in the newly born republican system, created an atmosphere of disappointment, dissatisfaction and alienation among people from Lower Yemen. Partially, the novel is an attempt to reflect these feelings of marginalization that have existed from the 1960s and which continue on to the writing of the novel in 2013.

imagination of Yemen as one country and one essence that transcends regions, ideologies and sects. And it is reflective in the sense that it retells what happened in 1968 in a way similar to historical writings, albeit with fictional characters. Here, the space for imagination and fantasy utilized by the author is left to a minimum for the benefit of the orientational function of the text. The text bears a spirit of catharsis as it aims to purge and heal the traumatic past by imagining two purely and distinctly designed forces: progressive and regressive. As such, the novel can be seen to echo the post-2011 euphoric revolutionary discourse, which tended to overlook regional differences and internal conflicts in Yemen by imagining a well-organized society composed of only two conflicting forces that could be framed in simple binary oppositions: the new regime and the old regime, the progressives and the regressives, the modernists and the traditionalists – i.e. the good and the bad.

## Religious identities

### *Islamic sects*

In his novel *Zulmat Ya'il* [*Ya'il Darkness*], published in 2012, Muhammad al-Gharbi 'Amran develops an imaginary landscape of Yemeni life during the Isma'ili Sulayhid dynasty, more specifically in the time of the ruler and Isma'ili *da'i* 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi (11th century). A historian by training, the novelist brings to life the long-standing experience of Yemenis of different sects living within one society. The main character, Jawther, is born to an Isma'ili father and a Jewish mother. In one phase of his journey on the search for ontological truth, he prays to Yahweh, the god of his mother, and to Allah, the god of his mentor Sa'sa'. Moreover, by making the past the setting for his contemporary imagination, the novelist invokes the experience of the Sulayhis in unifying Yemen on a federal basis. (Federalism as a model for Yemen's political future was already under discussion at the time of writing the novel).<sup>13</sup> Against the dominant historical account of that period, which tends to be quite derogatory, the novel celebrates the strenuous effort of its main character in searching for the absolute truth.

Written at a sensitive historical moment in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, the novel aims to evoke the past to explain the present. The past for al-Gharbi 'Amran "has not left us, it still lives in us and equally in our sectarian conflicts, in our political savagery and our instincts to dominate over others" (al-Ma'mun 2016). In this sense, recalling the past appears to be a way of considering history as a chain of conflicts over political and economic interests.

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<sup>13</sup> Email communication with al-Gharbi 'Amran, 29 July 2016.

The past goes through these chains to the present and the future in an organic way and impacts on the present. Commenting on his novel, al-Gharbi 'Amran (ibid.) states:

“A writer can fuse different periods of time into one complex compound of time. The aim in this novel, which describes the Yemeni life by the end of the fifth century *hijra*, is to see the present and to penetrate into those structural depths of its events which have a relation to the past. Today's reality is the legitimate daughter of certain events that have repeatedly taken place in the past. I write my novel to help today's reader grasp the 'today' in the 'yesterday'. Readers may have different viewpoints about the past, but the thing that they all share is that they still live the past regardless of whether they like that or not.”

### *Islam and Judaism*

The novel *al-Yahudi al-Hali* [*The Sweet Jew*] by 'Ali al-Muqri, published in 2009, takes 17th century Yemen as its tempo-spatial frame of narration. Fatima, the daughter of a Zaydi mufti,<sup>14</sup> falls in love with Salim, a Yemeni Jewish boy. She reads the Holy Qu'ran with him, and he teaches her Hebrew. Leaving Rayda town, near 'Amran, for Sana'a together, Fatima and Salim decide to challenge the social and religious barriers existing at that time (and continuing to the present). The network of relationships textured around this central event is the backdrop against which the ambivalent and complex relationship between Yemeni Muslims and Jews is told. The different articulations of the characters make clear how human communication can develop ways of tolerance and coexistence from within extreme sentiments and contexts of hatred and misunderstanding. In the novel, love is the driving human energy that makes human beings reveal their deep positive emotions. In contrast to the derogatory image of the Jew in modern Arabic literature, Salim appears handsome, hardworking, open-minded and honest in his love for Fatima. Linking the imagined past to the complicated realities of today's Arab world, the novel tries to bring to light alternative possibilities for a more meaningful, happy and peaceful life, where religions can be open doors to coexistence rather than serve as barriers.

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**14** The Zaydiyya is a Shi'i Islamic school of thought, even as it is considered to be close to well-known Sunni schools of thought, in particular the Hanafiyya. Unlike its sister school of thought in Yemen, the Sunni Shafi'iyya, the Zaydiyya has a strong political component in its theological body. One important character of the Zaydi school is its strong emphasis on *ijtihad* [independent reasoning]. The Zaydiyya is particularly prevalent in the northern highlands of Yemen. For more information on the Zaydiyya, see Haykel 2013.

Although references to Sufi ideas of love and tolerance seem out of place in a non-Sufi space (Zaydi Yemen), the novel emphasizes that reform can come from within the Islamic tradition itself and with its own terms and conditions. Historically conscious, the novelist embarks on historicizing, humanizing and, hence, rationalizing the problematic relation with the Other, i.e. the Jew. The novel is thus a reflection on the historical experience of religious coexistence in Yemen with clear critical references to various religious fundamentalisms that can be encountered in Yemen (and the broader Arab world) today.

## Racial identities

### *Questioning racism and discrimination*

*Harb Taht al-Jild* [*War Underneath the Skin*] by Ahmad Zayn, published in 2010, is the story of a Yemeni journalist who embarks on writing a report for a Western journal about the marginalized black community in Sana'a. Revealing power relations in the journalistic field and the different motives for covering certain topics, the journalist Qays digs deep to discover that the whole country is a mire that pulls people down to its unknown bottom. During his research mission, Qays unearths the large-scale marginalization of different segments of the Yemeni population. Discrimination in Yemen does not only occur against Yemenis of African descent, i.e. the *akhdam* [lit. slaves], but also among those of Arab background, i.e. the majority. The novel accordingly opens (p. 6) with two significant lines of poetry by the well-known Yemeni poet, 'Abdullah al-Baraduni (d. 1999):

'Southerners' they call us, when we are in Sana'a.

'Northerners' they call us, when we are in Aden.

'Yemenis' they call us, when we are in exile.

Exiled we are, when we are in Yemen.

Set towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the novel refers to the new separatists and revolutionary sentiments in the South since the advent of the 'Southern Movement' [al-hirak al-janubi]<sup>15</sup> in 2007 and to the large-scale frustrations among ordinary people in the different regions of Yemen.

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**15** The Southern Movement, also simply known as (al-)Hirak, is a political movement that has its roots in demonstrations led by Southern retired military officers and civil servants in 2007, who protested for the payment of their pensions or their re-instatement into their old positions after they had been forcibly retired following the North's victory over the South in the civil war of 1994. Since then, the movement has grown significantly and has resulted in large numbers of Southerners actively protesting against the rule of the Northern elite. The majority of al-Hirak's members demand the disengagement of the South from the North and the restoration of an independent Southern state.

These experiences of discrimination “underneath the skin” of the country will one day come out, the author argues. Historically oriented towards the future, this novel can be read as a carefully calibrated narrative prophecy of what has happened in Yemen since 2011, and especially since 2014/15 when the peaceful revolution turned into a country-wide civil war.

### ***Akhdam***

In his novel *Ta'm Aswad, Ra'iha Sawda* [*Black Taste, Black Smell*], published in 2008, 'Ali al-Muqri penetrates into the life of Yemeni *akhdam* who live in a shantytown near Ta'iz. As in his novel *The Sweet Jew*, love is the main force of change in social relations: It is love that drives a girl of lower social background (the *muzayyinin*, i.e. those who work in menial jobs) to flee with her lover from their village to Mahwa Zayn, where the *akhdam* of Ta'iz live. Set in the period of 1975 to 1982, the novel makes continued reference to the social program of the Yemeni Socialist Party in the South, which aimed to eliminate social hierarchies and to integrate the *akhdam* into mainstream Yemeni society. The novel depicts the reaction of the *akhdam* community to these reforms by the socialists as twofold: On the one hand there is a remarkable enthusiasm of their representatives who themselves have been exposed to Marxist ideas, but on the other hand there is also an indifference of the ordinary *akhdam*, who are portrayed as not reflecting on class differences or racism, but who rather accept their situation without any symbolic or physical resistance. However, contradicting the central message of the novel, i.e. that social hierarchies in Yemen are unjust and need to be done away with, is the uncritical reproduction of some of the social myths and prejudices prevalent among the majority of Yemeni society about “the exotic life” of *akhdam*. Many Yemenis believe, for example, that the *akhdam* lack hygiene, do not practice religious rituals, eat their dead and are promiscuous in their sexual behavior. Some of these prejudices are reified through the behavior of some characters in the novel, such as 'A'isha and Rabbash.

The choice of 1975-1982 as the temporal frame of the novel is of great significance for its main message: During that time, leftist ideology was dominant in the South and also in some parts of the North. The Southern regime's achievements in terms of social equality were remarkable and are well-remembered by the leftist Yemeni elite. As part of that elite, al-Muqri furnishes his narrative with features and motives of a new social space where human dignity, love and respect can be possible.

## The space of the novel: Diversity through focalization

Narration has the potential to bring to the fore different voices and ideas. They enter into dialogue with one another to create a state of human communication. Therefore, the spaces produced out of this interaction tend to be multiperspectival and polycentric. According to this understanding, the novels at question have the potential to be a stage of interaction between the diverse 'addressing and responding' voices in Yemeni life. In contrast to the dominant discourse in Yemen that insists on the belief in the essential oneness of the Yemeni nation, the novelistic space tends to celebrate the diversity of Yemeni dialects, races, sects, regions and subcultures. As the respective novels under investigation here are concerned with the idea of identity in Yemen, the voices of their characters are informed by the historical imagination as well as the positionality (i.e. the social and political outlook on current affairs shaped by their personal background) of their authors.

All six novels are also oriented to achieve one goal: to teach a lesson about the beauty of diversity to the reader. This process is mediated through the focalization of certain points of view which convey the central message of the novel. Following is a summary of the focalized views of the six novels.

Samir in *Steamer Point* is a character imported from the time of the post-authoritative nation-state (or rather, the time of chaos in the post-2011 revolutions), who is placed into the colonial era at the end of the 1960s during the revolution against British rule in Aden. Positioned outside the power matrix of the colonizer and the colonized, Samir represents the point of view and the historical imagination of the generation calling for a 'new Yemen' in 2011 and after. This generation has been raised and socialized in the intercultural communication of today's globalized world. His voice is focalized in order to bear the humanistic message embedded in the novel on the one hand, and to offer a critique of the self-confident nationalist narration of the elites on the other. This orientation of the past to serve the future sets the tone: The future should be based on a new program outside the confrontational agendas between the Self and the Other. Moreover, Samir's regional background as one who came to Aden from al-Hudayda in North Yemen signals to the fact that Aden as a cosmopolitan city is for everybody, regardless of his social or regional background. Samir has his own independent opinion about the fate of the city in the postcolonial era, because he is an Adeni by immigration and choice rather than birth. Looking to the present events, this position of Samir

challenges the nationalistic rhetoric of some of the more extreme factions in the Southern Movement who reject the presence of Northerners in Aden. It also criticizes the politics of the political regime, which ruralizes and tribalizes a city that was previously open and cosmopolitan.

Subhayya's voice in *Sana'a'i* [*My Sana'a*] focalizes the novel's central message: namely that there is another version of Sana'a, subjectivized by the pronoun 'my' in the title, in which both of the prominent social components of Northern Yemen (the Zaydis of the highlands and the Shafi'is of lower Yemen) can live together within one progressive program, that also sees men and women as equals. Subhayya's love story with Hamid is significant in itself; she is the daughter of a revolutionary man from Shafi'i lower Yemen and he is an officer from the Zaidi highlands. Her behavior as a creative painter who openly participates in the public sphere is another motive that is meant to convey to the local reader that Yemeni women are not only a biological site of a man's sexual desires, but independent human agents.

In *Ya'il Darkness*, *Jawther's* ontological formation as half Jew and half Muslim merges the living experience of two Yemeni worlds and focalizes human interdependency in one character. The idea of pure race and absolute ideologies and dogmas is challenged by the ideas of fusion and relativism. As an existential manifestation of *Jawther's* mixed identity, his movement over space and time in search for absolute truth is another feature of human incompleteness and interdependency.

In *The Sweet Jew*, *Fatima's* passionate love for *Salim*, the young Jew, is the narrative realization of abstract ideas such as tolerance, recognition and admiration. On the other side of this love equation, *Salim's* admiration and love for *Fatima*, the daughter of a Muslim mufti, is what furnishes the necessary reciprocity of the humanist space envisioned in the novel. The description of the young Jew in the title of the novel as 'hali' [sweet], a flattering word usually used by females in Yemen (and used by *Fatima* in the novel) to describe a handsome man, is significant in revealing the worldview of the whole text. It is recognition of the beauty of the Other, who deserves not only to be perceived as a full and competent human being, but also to be appreciated, loved and celebrated. *Fatima's* readings of the Sufi *shaykh* Ibn 'Arabi are used as leverage for the main idea of the novel: Love transcends religious and ethnic boundaries.

*Qays*, the main character of *War Underneath the Skin*, is a journalist. His point of view is rich in thinking and evolves through different stages of transformation as the story progresses. This richness of thinking is derived from the experience of the author himself, who is a journalist just like his fictional

character Qays. Next to revealing the state of marginalization of different segments of Yemeni society, Qays' transformative and dynamic viewpoint brings to light the contestations in the journalistic field, which reflect the overall social and political polarization in the country. Qays changes from a journalist supporting the regime and its ahistorical narrative on Yemeni unity and solidarity to an investigator who critically reflects on the different regional, racial and political maladies of Yemeni society. As he changes, he builds friendships with leftist intellectuals, opposition journalists and foreign researchers, and it is these relationships which open up new horizons for him to see the country from different analytical perspectives.

*Black Taste, Black Smell* is about two marginalized social categories in Yemeni society, the *akhdam* and the *muzayyinin*. The foci of perception, or the localizers, are these two oppressed social strata in Yemeni society. In this narrative, the flight of two *muzayyin* lovers to a shantytown of the *akhdam* is significant, as it sheds light on the common ground these two social categories share in regard to marginalization and discrimination. The humanistic vision in this focalized perspective lies in the very act of giving a voice to the *akhdam* and the *muzayyinin* in view of their general voicelessness in Yemeni society – the novel thus gives them the right to exist and to speak for themselves and make themselves known through their actions and views. In general, their actions signal to the fact that they live in a society dominated by others and that their identity is thus formed through the imaginations and prejudices of others. Conversely, the two signifiers 'black taste' and 'black smell' in the title are a sensual declaration of the existence of this social category in Yemeni society. Their existence is undeniable and ineradicable in spite of their stigmatization by the majority of Yemeni society. The central message of the novel is to humanize the dehumanized image of *akhdam* in Yemeni society.

## From homeland to an alternative imagined space

### Humanism and coexistence: Envisioned spaces

The four authors of the novels belong to the era of the post-1960s revolutions. Muhammad al-Gharbi 'Amran was born in 1958, 'Ali al-Muqri in 1966, and Nadya al-Kawkabani and Ahmad Zayn in 1968. The common theme in all of their writings is the aim to provoke new ideas for the establishment of a new way of life in Yemen. In general, their writings suggest that modern Yemen, as it has existed over the last several decades is not an ideal place for a dignified life. This can be attributed to two main factors: firstly, the failure of the post-colonial, post-imamate and post-unification republics in the South and in the North in founding a political, social and cultural model satisfactory to the dreams and ambitions of the Yemeni citizens;<sup>16</sup> and secondly, the proliferation of radical and intolerant ideas and actions all over the Arab world (and Yemen specifically), which is a result of the failure of the political regimes and their cultural and educational programs offered to the children and young people of Yemen.

Based on their historical imagination, the authors use their artistic talent to explore Yemeni history in order to find those imagined ideas and experiences of the past that they believe may contribute to envisioning and forming a better society in a country suffering from wars, poverty and ignorance. "In this dark moment of Yemen, we must go back to the history of Aden," Ahmad Zayn argues in an interview; "[n]o one can imagine that a city like Aden today was once like an unattainable dream. It was one of those cities that would enlighten the places around it, but Aden's light has vanished, one can only find it in books" (Reuters 2015).

The reference to history is a common denominator of the six novels discussed here and it is what gives these novels 'historical legitimacy', as what they depict is considered real and authentic. Basing the stories on what both the authors and the readers believe to be Yemen's real history saves the novels from being considered as simply fantasies of creative intellectuals. The historical tendency in these contemporary novels is mediated by the radical historical transformations the country has undergone during the last few decades. Competing interpretations of history, and consequently diverse concepts of

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<sup>16</sup> In an interview with the newspaper *al-Hayat*, for example, 'Ali al-Muqri said that "[i]n my novels *Black Taste*, *Black Smell* and *The Sweet Jew*, I was preoccupied with investigating the concept of the unachieved homeland or the homeland that is not for all its citizens" (al-Haj 2014).

collective identity, have dominated in debates all over the country. It is accordingly logical that these new uncertainties and sensitivities find their way into Yemeni contemporary narrative discourse. The novels, built on the different historical imaginations of their authors, suggest that a better life in Yemen is possible and offer a vision to be striven for. In the words of al-Gharbi 'Amran:

“Literature is a horizon of dream and hope. But politics is to work for your own goals. The means of politics are immoral, but literature is a spirit that travels through us bearing beauty and creativity. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two is strong: The novel is a space and one of its components is politics; the latter is used as a raw material to shape a new creation. The stupidity of politicians is what gives a writer his chance of success. In other words, the world of ugliness is the complement of the world of beauty” (al-Ma'mun 2016).

The novels set new horizons for their readers' imagination of a better life. I call this space 'humanist' because it gives human beings their due importance as center of the narrative's universe. The novels develop the vision of a multifaceted and tolerant society in a country where many people went to streets in 2011 in order to not only topple an autocratic regime, but also to recreate a new social and political system that would have social justice at its heart. This dialectical relation between the texts and the dominant, yet disorganized, feelings of the masses post-2011 implicates the fact that literature reflects widespread societal emotions (in this case, uncertainties and insecurities) beneath its technically organized narrative form. In our context here, Yemeni novels of the recent past, especially those written by outstanding authors, transport the fragmented visions of the masses in their narrative structure.

It is the intention of the authors to offer alternatives. An abstract conceptual alternative homeland is juxtaposed with the real homeland; the cosmopolitan and open city with a city occupied by radicalism, poverty and military forces; and the literature with its beautifully dreamed up spaces with the everyday politics of nepotism, violence and marginalization. Both the six novels under discussion and the Yemenis who took to the streets in 2011 envision(ed) an alternative; an alternative to the regime was the main demand of the protestors. When making their demands, they took recourse to an imagined history in framing their wishes, with pictures of historical figures and slogans of the historical revolutions of South and North in 1960s often dominant. Even though they intersect in regard to the vision of 'an alternative', however, the novels differ from the demands of 2011 revolutionaries in their artistic form and in the dialogic complexities of the novelistic content. As they originate from the intellectual elites for the masses, the novels have a pedagogical mission. The pedagogical connotations of the novels permeate the narrative of

the novels in an allegorical fashion, even while depending on an imagined Yemeni history. There are thus no clear instructions about a good and successful way of life in Yemen, but rather vivid and complex dialogic allegories that give hints to that envisioned humanistic life. It can be claimed that the message of the writers can only be understood by their local readers thanks to this shared background. This shared background between the authors and the readers is historically and aesthetically placed in Yemen with its existential concerns and questions. In the following section, some features of the novels' humanist space are presented.

### Features of the narrated humanist space

The features of the humanist space encountered in the novels under discussion are as follows:

**Love:** In the novels, love is represented as a defying human energy that overcomes social barriers. For example, in the two novels by 'Ali al-Muqri, *Black Taste*, *Black Smell* and *The Handsome Jew*, love drives the main characters to challenge the social values and religious beliefs of Yemeni society and to opt for difference.

**Dialogue and transparency:** Moral issues are discussed openly in all the novels at hand. In contrast to the reality of daily Yemeni practice, where honor and shame dominate, the individual characters in the novels are open to have their actions questioned. Hamid's sexual relations with different women in *My Sana'a* by Nadya al-Kawkabani is an obvious example. Moreover, unlike in the novelistic discourse, the discussion of prevalent racism and stigmatization as social behavior in Yemeni society rarely takes place in real life.

**Admiration and gratitude:** Minorities such as Jews, *muzayyinin*, *akhdam* and Isma'ilis are depicted as objects of love and admiration. These emotions are an intimate form of human interaction that embody human dignity and put a human face on those parts of Yemeni society who are often ignored and dehumanized.

**Subjectivity and autonomy:** Although restricted by their social environment in different ways, the characters in the various narratives are given room to express their personal hopes and aspirations. Not only ideas, but oppressed emotions and sentiments find release in the literary imagination. Individualistic self-confidence of some of the main characters in their rejection of the collective tribal or religious norms and traditions prevalent in Yemen is one feature of this subjective orientation.

**Representation:** One of the problems of the political, social and cultural landscape in Yemen is the lack of representation of the vast human and social diversity in the country. The novels in question carve out multiple spaces to be inhabited by diverse groups and individuals.

**Recognition of the right to existence and to literary representation:** Until the beginning of the 21st century, religious and ethnic minorities had not found sufficient representation in Yemeni literary, academic and journalistic discourse. Yemeni novels of the last decade, in contrast, were not only able to integrate the *akhdam*, *muzayyinin*, Jews and Isma'ilis into their narrative, but also to give these groups the right to occupy the titles of the novels and to be discussed in Yemeni and Arab journalism. This representation in 'high literature' is an intellectual and literary initiative that aims to find a way to position these social categories as respected ones in Yemeni society.

**Secularism and worldliness:** The term 'secularism' is notorious in modern Islamist, and sometimes nationalist, discourse; it is believed to advocate a Western way of life where religion is withdrawn from the public space to only prevail in the private. According to Islamist discourse, in contrast, religion cannot be limited to a specific sphere, but must be part of all the aspects of Muslim life. This view is challenged by the narratives presented here, where the necessities of human life are what frame the movement of individuals over space and time, rather than any transcendental ideas. Here, in these novels, no abstract intricate intellectual terms are used to prove the validity of secularism, but the vivid depictions of people's worldly practices attest to its real-life existence, even in a country like Yemen.

**Rationality:** Sensitive issues such as regionalism and sectarianism in Yemen, as well as the colonial past in the South and the heritage of the imamate in the North, have been released by way of narrative from their formal limits in official Yemeni discourse. They have undergone a process of individualization and subjectivization. The discourse of the state on these issues reflects nationalistic visions that venerate 'the homeland' in an emotional way; but in the contexts of the novels, ordinary individuals are given the right to think rationally on the colonial and the imamate past. The characters in the novels develop their subjective views about that past unimpeded by the confining views of the modern Yemeni state.

**World citizenship:** Patriotism, regionalism, tribalism and nationalism are not celebrated in the six novels. To the contrary, the abstract concept of 'homeland' as it appears in the Arabic and Yemeni nationalist discourse is criticized, if not disdained, in the two novels by 'Ali al-Muqri. In *Steamer Point*, the focalized position of Samir has no room for a definitive homeland, but only for a

cosmopolitan city that includes everybody from any ethnic or religious origin. Likewise, the different identities contained within one personality in *Ya'il Darkness* by Muhammad al-Gharbi 'Amran and *The Sweet Jew* by 'Ali al-Muqri are an indication of this borderless way of self-identifying and self-understanding.

Awareness of nature and the environment: In *The Handsome Jew*, animals (dogs, cats and ants) are appreciated in a mystical way, in accordance with the Sufi visions that form the basis of Fatima's and Salim's humanist positions. In *My Sana'a* and *Steamer Point*, the beauty of the two main cities in Yemen, Sana'a and Aden, is celebrated in a manner that implicitly condemns the destructive practices of the state and the irresponsible behavior of some of their inhabitants.

Orientation towards peace: Recognizing the right to being different as an individual or as a group, the literary discourses of the four writers orient the consciousness of the reader to the fact that a peaceful life based on coexistence in Yemen is possible. In that regard, invoking communal and collective identities in the narratives is not meant to establish social differentiations or to serve a conflictual mobilizing end, but, in converse, to act as a way of recognizing the right of the different social components to identify and understand themselves in the way they prefer in order to live peacefully with each other.

Appreciation of art and literacy: Jawther, in *Ya'il Darkness*, is an artist whose paintings and calligraphy are celebrated in the novel. Contrary to the religious view that prohibits painting living creatures, the Isma'ili *da'i* 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi (in the novel) appreciates the work of Jawther and commissions him to decorate the main chambers of his palace. In the same novel, literacy and education are appreciated and embodied in the personalities of the main characters Jawther (male), Shawthab (female) and their mentor Sa'sa'. In the same token, the relationship between Fatima (female) and Salim (male) in *The Handsome Jew* is both emotional and scholarly; they love each other and they teach each other Hebrew and Arabic. In *Steamer Point*, the character of the educated and free female Su'ad is praised by her lover Samir. This can be interpreted as a rejection of the prevalent illiteracy in Yemen, especially among females.

## Conclusion

Rather than what appears to be, on first glance, a homogeneous message conveyed by each of the six novels, this reading suggests a complex and multidimensional humanistic space as an ultimate goal of narration, which is mediated through the historical imagination of the four authors. As has been shown in this paper, these novels engage with some of the most heated issues of contemporary society in Yemen in order to present an enlightening vision for the existential dilemma of a failed state and an underdeveloped society burdened with high rates of violence and corruption. The similarity of thoughts and emotions among the works of the four authors goes far beyond a mere thematic intertextuality towards a holistic humanistic vision and historical sensibility in regard to the Yemeni crisis. Below are three comprehensive concluding points about this enlightening literary vision developed through a critical reading of the six novels:

**Novelists' engagement and commitment:** The writers perceive themselves as leaders of enlightenment in society, and, hence, think that they should contribute with their visions to solving the current Yemeni crisis. But in what way? The authors have the basic belief that people are drawn to stories and want to learn about serious existential ideas portrayed in an attractive and vivid way that is close to reality. Moreover, the authors have the conviction that the narrative mode of writing with its polyphonic and complex characters has the potential to lift this multifaceted societal and political crisis from the discursively dominant simplistic dichotomist political, journalistic and religious formulations to its humanistic psychological and social complexities. Speaking in an intellectualistic tone in the form of dos and don'ts has often proven to fall short in achieving the wished-for goals of creating a society that places respect for and kindness towards other beings at the center of its normative framework. Distributing the enlightening message in a dialogic and allegorical manner has the potential to gain the sympathy of the reader in the sense that it can tell them about their society in a historicized, dialogue-based, and non-authoritative way.

**Recognition as an underlying philosophical premise:** In the narrative programs of the six novels, the engagement with the current existential crisis in the country is based on one central feature of the envisioned humanistic space: recognition. Recognition in this sense is a reciprocal intersubjective social process in which individuals appreciate each other. It entails the autonomy of individuals and an appreciation of their being as such (Honneth 2012: 41). The identities of the different individuals are formed through a process of recognition which is, in return, facilitated through the dialogic and communicative space of narration. Recognition of the right to be where they are (in Yemen)

and to be different (religiously, regionally, ethnically or racially) is one central feature of the narrative landscape. But recognition cannot stand by itself as an abstract category; it has to be realized and mediated through social behavior, such as love. Love, as a grand category that implies similar attitudes such as appreciation and respect, is a recurrent theme in the six novels; it comes as a natural humanistic energy that challenges man-made cultural barriers. In this regard, Yemeni identity-related barriers are challenged by the passion of love. For instance, while the love between Fatima and Salim in *The Sweet Jew* and between Jawther and Shawthab in *Ya'il Darkness* challenges religious barriers, the love between Subhayya and Hamid in *My Sana'a* overcomes regional and sectarian barriers in Northern Yemen. Likewise, the love between 'Abd al-Rahman (or Imbu) and Dughlu in *Black Taste, Black Smell* defies social hierarchy and segregation. Finally, the love between Su'ad and Samir in *Steamer Point* recognizes no difference between North and South, or between extreme left and moderate right. Stories that step over symbolic barriers permeate the narrative of all the six novels and signal to one main feature of the humanistic landscape advocated by these fictional works: love and respect.

Why collective identities? The main categorical frames of identification in Yemen – regional, religious, ethnic and racial – are not treated as morally justified ideological frames of reference used for promoting ideological aims, but are rather constructed for three purposes: a) To represent these identifications in literature after a long literary silence on these matters, as well as to rationalize and normalize, through the act of writing, the fact of difference and diversity against nationalistic and religious policies of homogenization and patternization. b) To point to the fact that each of the different social categories are equally Yemeni, and that all have the right to take part in society in the way they prefer to be and the way they understand themselves. c) To present and discuss some of the collective frames of identification, such as regionalism, in order to implicitly or explicitly criticize them.

In summary, as has been shown in this study, novels in Yemen have become a rich and effective literary medium used by local intellectuals to bring across their humanist message. Their narratives aim at motivating their Yemeni readers to think about an alternative model of living and an alternative model of society other than the current dominant belief system in a land torn apart by war, instability and increasing internal divisions and hatred: The alternative is a way of a life shaped by love, respect, recognition, rationality, openness, environmental awareness and orientation towards peace.

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## About CARPO

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## About this project

This Study is published in the framework of the project “Academic Approaches to Peacebuilding and State Building in Yemen”, which is funded through the German Academic Exchange Service’s (DAAD) Transformation Partnership. The partners in the project are the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of Bonn, the Gender Development Research & Studies Center at the University of Sana’a, and CARPO. Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Yemen, this project aims at contributing to peacebuilding and state building in the country. This objective is to be achieved by strengthening ties between researchers, academic staff, students and experts in the policy and development community through workshops, summer schools, conferences, a summer university, as well as a series of publications.

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*The editing and lay-out of this report has been financed through the DAAD-funded project 'Academic Approaches to Peacebuilding and State Building in Yemen' at the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of Bonn in partnership with the Gender Development Research & Studies Center at the University of Sana'a and CARPO. The positions and opinions presented here are those of the author and not those of the DAAD or the project partners.*

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ISSN 2367-4539

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