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semestrale di letteratura e cultura araba moderna e contemporanea

Anno VII, numero 14, dicembre 2017



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YEMENI LITERATURE AND HISTORY IN *ĞAWLAT KINTĀKĪ*
BY ‘ABD ALLĀH ‘ABBĀS AL-IRYĀNĪ:
NEW DREAMS AND OLD DISILLUSIONS

FRANCESCO DE ANGELIS*

The Yemeni people live in a perpetual state of conflicts and tension, it is therefore not surprising that a long list of Arab writers have been producing works pertaining to the genre of history fiction for generations. Here both past and, especially, recent history become the object of narration. In other words writers become the historians and spokespersons of a counter-narrative to official history. As far as Yemen is concerned, this is a tendency of contemporary writers, known as ġīl al-šabāb that seems to invite readers to wake up from the lethargy in which the official narration of historical events relegate them. Within such a context, it is possible to insert the novel Ğawlat Kintākī by ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī, in which the author tells the story of a group of young Yemenis who decide to take to the square in the name of revolution at the beginning of 2011.

1. What is Happening in Yemen?

Before venturing into the main topic of the present study, it would be appropriate – if not necessary – to briefly mention the latest socio-political events that took place in Yemen. This short introduction is certainly suitable to better understand the object of this paper, i.e., the relation between recent historical events and coeval Yemeni literary production. Moreover, it is fundamental in order to dedicate a small space to a region of the Arab world that almost disappeared completely from Western mainstream media after the controversial events of the Arab Spring.

The *ṭawrat al-šabāb* (Youth Revolution), by which the Yemeni version of the 2011 Arab Spring is known, brought about the end of the regime of president Saleh (‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ) that had lasted for over thirty years (1978-2012). However, it did not lead to the results that the young protesters of Sāḥat al-Taġyīr (Change Square), the Yemeni equivalent of Egypt’s Maydān al-Taḥrīr, had hoped for.

As resulted from statements released by many of the students who protested in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr, in the course of the first months of the demonstra-

* Ricercatore T.D. di Lingua e letteratura araba presso il Dipartimento di Mediazione Linguistica e Comunicazione Interculturale, Università degli Studi di Milano.

tion they had already perceived the danger of the protests’ instrumentalisation. Those same students confessed that by then their presence in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr had been overshadowed by the tribesmen and by the followers of the coalition of the opposition groups that were led by the *Tağammu‘ al-Yamanī li ‘l-İşlāḥ* (Yemeni Congregation for Reform), commonly known as *Ḥizb al-İşlāḥ*. Some even suspected that the protests had been organised by the opposition since the very beginning. According to them, the *Ḥizb al-İşlāḥ* youth had been sent to protest as independent students and were joined by real university students and then by the *Aḥzāb al-Liqā‘ al-Muštarak* (Joint Meeting Parties, or the opposing coalition). They were believed to have taken the entire organisation of the protests into their own hands, to the point that the demonstrators who did not have any political connection planned on finding a new base to carry on with their protests separately from the Islamic militants and thus avoid all political instrumentalisation.

As a result, the *luṣūṣ al-tawrāt* (thieves of the revolutions), who had been identified among political parties, Islamic extremists, the army and tribal leaders by writer and journalist Buṣrā al-Maqtarī (1979), took control over the protests of young Yemeni who often sacrificed their lives for a pluralist and democratic Yemen.

In any case, what should have been a period of transition, led by the new president ‘Abd Rabbih Maṣṣūr Hādī (deputy of the former president), who was supposed to guide the birth of a new Yemen that would embrace the protesters’ requests after Saleh’s regime, revealed to be a total failure. Political stability in Yemen seems more of a chimera than ever, not to mention the humanitarian crisis that holds an increasingly impoverished country in its grasp.

Hādī, who rose to power in February 2012, not only had to confront the ordinary difficulties of ruling the poorest Arab country in the world, but he also had to face one of the most intricate geopolitical situations of the globe. The new president proved himself to be too weak to face the demands of the separatist movements in the South known in Yemen as the *al-Ḥirāk al-Ġanūbī*, or simply the *Ḥirāk*, the attacks by the AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), the persistent loyalty of many military officers to ex-president Saleh and the demands of the Ḥūṭī¹, who wanted an independent State founded on a Shiite Islamic law, along with ancestral problems such as corruption, unemployment and food crisis.

Those who took most advantage of Hādī’s weakness – and the resulting power vacuum in Yemen – were certainly the Ḥūṭī. In the years preceding the Youth Revolution, in 2008, they managed, after fighting numerous battles against the central government, to threaten the capital itself. In addi-

¹ *al-Ḥūṭiyyūn* is a Zaidi predominantly Shia-led religious-political movement active in the northern region of Ṣa‘dah.

tion, they exploited the confusion created between 2010 and 2011 to reaffirm their absolute power not only over their region of origin – Ṣa‘dah, in the North of Yemen – but also the bordering areas. In September 2014, the Ḥūṭī entered the capital and surrounded the presidential palace and other key areas of the city after four months, effectively placing Ḥādī and his cabinet ministers under house arrest². Ḥādī was therefore forced to escape to Aden, but in March he fled to Saudi Arabia because he did not feel safe in the southern city. In the meantime, Saleh, who had always fought against the rebels in Ṣa‘dah during his rule, forged an alliance with them and sought to extend the Ḥūṭī’s sphere of influence over the entire country.

It is at this point that recent Yemeni history becomes even more complicated and that the events abruptly escalate due to the intervention of new participants. A coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and composed mostly of Sunni countries, i.e. the United Arab Emirates, Bahrein, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Pakistan and Sudan, carried out a series of bombings with the intent of restoring Ḥādī’s power. The United States, Great Britain and France offered logistic support to the coalition³.

After two years of fighting, neither of the two warring factions seemed to prevail over the other: while the coalition had gained ground and president Ḥādī had returned to Aden, the capital remained firmly in the rebels’ hands. The al-Qaeda militants had taken advantage of the chaotic situation and now controlled some zones in the South of Yemen.

It is easy to imagine, in light of this brief summary of the main events that took place in Yemen, that since 2011 the Yemeni civilians have had to face enormous difficulties: lack of electricity for days at times, lack of gas, unpaid salaries, food supply shortage. Liz Throssell, the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, thus concludes her report on the situation in Yemen: «Since March 2015, the UN Human Rights Office has documented 13,829 civilian casualties, including 5,110 killed and 8,719 injured. These numbers are based on the casualties individually verified by our Yemen Office. The overall number is probably much higher»⁴.

In addition to the thousands of people who died during the bombings, the country was hit by a cholera outbreak, counting 530 thousand suspected cases and 2000 deaths. At least 2 million people risk to dying of hunger, and

² *Yemen crisis: Who is fighting whom?*, in “BBC News”, March 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

³ A. Negri, *Yemen, coalizione guidata dall’Arabia Saudita contro i ribelli Houthis*, in “Il sole 24 ore”, 26 marzo 2015, http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2015-03-26/yemen-coalizione-guidata-dall-arabia-saudita-contro-ribelli-houthi-091756.shtml?uuid=AB2M5hFD&refresh_ce=1.

⁴ L. Throssell, *Press briefing note on Yemen, Cambodia and Guatemala*, August 25 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21996&LangID=E>.

the humanitarian aids – that could easily eradicate the plague – struggle to arrive due to continuous road blocks and delays on the frontier.

Despite this, very little information on what is considered by many to be the greatest ongoing global humanitarian crisis arrives in the West. Along with the lack of interest of Western media for a matter that they perceive as being far from them, it is necessary to keep in mind that it is difficult for local and foreign journalists to perform their job because the Saudi government prohibits international journalists from entering Yemen even if they are in possession of regular visas provided by the legitimate government.

2. Literature and Reality: The (Re)Birth of the Historical Novel in Yemen

A good amount of Yemeni novels written in the past 10 years present some common, albeit original, features. First of all, many of them seem to have the clear intent to narrate the story of Yemen, offering a different version of Yemeni history than that provided by the establishment, which often tends towards mythologisation and emphasising. In truth though, for Yemeni, but also Arab writers in general, the production of this form of literature almost becomes a natural reaction to the sociopolitical situation they live in. The Yemeni people, like most Arab populations, live in a perpetual state of conflicts and tension, a situation that Larry Diamond has defined a «striking anomaly»⁵. It is therefore not surprising, as Maria Avino points out, that a remarkably long list of Arab writers have been producing works pertaining to the genre of history fiction for generations. Here both past and, especially, recent history become the object of narration⁶. In other words, novels seem to become historical documents, while writers become the historians and spokespersons of a counter-narrative to official history.

Then again, the historical novel was already well known at the origins of Arabic literary tradition: as Sabry Hafez has noticed, the birth of the Arabic novel was clearly associated with the emerging of patriotism and national consciousness: «it was natural therefore that the historical novel and romantic fiction [...] were the two fictional types during the early period of the Arabic novel»⁷. Moreover, it consists in a literary production that has always been somewhat successful because historical novels not only engage the reader in a story in which he or she feels to be the protagonist, but it also

⁵ L. Diamond, *Why Are There No Arab Democracies?*, in “Journal of Democracy”, vol. 21, n. 1, January 2010, p. 93.

⁶ M. Avino, *Šāliḥ Bā ‘Āmir racconta la recente storia di al-Mukallā*, in “La rivista di Arabit”, VI, n. 12, 2016, p. 53.

⁷ Sabry Hafez, *The State of the Contemporary Arabic Novel*, in Cecil Hourani (ed.), *The Arab Cultural Scene: A Literary Review Supplement*, Namara, London 1982, p. 17.

presents the proper balance of education, national consciousness building, and entertainment⁸.

As far as Yemen is concerned, this is a tendency of contemporary writers, known as *ġīl al-ṣabāb* (the Youth generation), that seems to invite readers to become aware of their own story and wake up from the lethargy in which the official narration of recent and distant historical events relegate them. For instance, the novels of ‘Alī al-Muqrī (1966), one of the most important contemporary Yemeni writers, come to mind. Among other works, al-Muqrī wrote two novels that exemplify the main argument of the present paper: *Ṭa’m aswad, rā’ihah sawdā’* (Black Taste, Black Odour, 2008)⁹ and *al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī* (The Handsome Jew, 2009)¹⁰. In the former, the author tells the love story between two members of a particular social category, known in Yemen as the *aḥdām* (black men and women from sub Saharan Africa), that primarily deals with garbage collection. al-Muqrī’s work, however, is actually a criticism of the latent racism and prejudice that fellow citizens feel towards this part of the population living on the margins of contemporary Yemeni society. In *al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī*, the author deals with another sensitive issue, i.e. the relationship between Muslims and Jews, this time in a far away Yemen.

While al-Muqrī’s style is clear and linear, other writers, in order not to incur censorship, are compelled to recur to stylistic strategies, especially when they wish to recount recent events that highlight the mistakes and horrors of the ruling Yemeni classes that detain power and often have strong influence

⁸ R. Allen, *The Arabic Novel and History*, in Wail S. Hassan, *The Oxford Handbook of Arabic Novelistic Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 57.

⁹ ‘Alī Sālim, *Riwāyat “al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī” li-‘Alī al-Muqrī: al-ḥubb yaḥriq ġidār al-adyān*, in “al-Ḥayāh”, 26/11/2009, <http://www.yemeress.com/altagheer/11789>; Muḥammad al-Šalafī, ‘Alī al-Muqrī... *Yaman “al-Aḥdām” wa ’l-muhammašīn*, in “al-‘Arabī al-ġadīd”, 27/06/2014, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/culture/2014/6/2>.

¹⁰ *al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī* has been translated into French: *Le beau juif*, Ola Mehanna et Khaled Osman (traduit par), éditions Liana Levi, Paris 2011; and into Italian: *Il bell’Ebreo*, traduzione di M. Avino, I. Camera d’Afflito (a cura di), Piemme, Milano 2012. On it, see ‘Alī Sālim, *Riwāyat “al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī” li-‘Alī al-Muqrī: al-ḥubb yaḥriq ġidār al-adyān*, in “al-Ḥayāh”, 26/11/2009, <http://www.yemeress.com/altagheer/11789>; D. Saponaro, *Un romanziere, falsi Messia, turbanti e un esilio: la Cronaca degli ebrei yemeniti di ‘Alī al-Muqrī*, in “La rivista di Arabit”, II, n. 4, novembre/dicembre 2012, http://www.arabit.it/rivista_arabit/numero4_2012/7_saponaro.pdf; I. Camera d’Afflito, *Ebrei e musulmani nello Yemen, storia di una convivenza: ‘Alī al-Muqrī, al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī (Il Bell’ebreo)*, in “La rivista di Arabit”, I, n. 1, giugno 2011, pp. 159-161. For an overview of contemporary Yemeni literature in Italian, see *Lo Yemen raccontato dalle scrittrici e dagli scrittori*. al-Yaman fī ‘uyūn al-kātībāt wa ’l-kuttāb, a cura di I. Camera d’Afflito, Sapienza Università di Roma, Facoltà di Studi Orientali. Editrice Orientalia, Roma 2010, and the anthology AA.VV., *Perle dello Yemen*, a cura di M. Avino e I. Camera d’Afflito, Presentazione di I. Camera d’Afflito, Jouvence, Roma 2009.

over the population. This is the case, for example, in some of Waġdī al-Ahdal’s novels¹¹ in which there is a criticism of ‘*ādāt wa taqālīd*’ (uses and customs) in Yemen, like in many other Arab countries.-

Among the authors of the youngest generation, Aḥmad Zayn is the one to dispel the myth of a glorious Arab revolutionary past in *Qahwā amīrikiyyah* (American Coffee, 2007)¹². In this novel, Zayn’s narration relies on the intricate lucubrations of its protagonist, ‘Ārif, in order to hide his criticism behind the main character’s presumed madness. The novel opens when ‘Ārif is on the verge of spitting on a picture of Gorbaciov¹³, who, in some way, represents the failure of socialist ideology in the Arab world. The Soviet leader is therefore considered to be responsible for dashing the dream of a socialist revolution, of which ‘Ārif wanted to be the new hero.

Another novel that seems to aspire at recounting recent Yemeni history in an alternative manner compared to the “official version” is Bušrā al-Maqtārī’s *Ḥalf al-šams* (Behind the Sun, 2012)¹⁴. Here the writer tells her own version of the history of Yemen starting from 1994, the year the civil war broke out. The central government’s battles against the rebels of the Ṣa‘dah region, the purging of the Yemeni socialist party, as well as the consequences of all of this for the people, are evoked. al-Maqtārī seems to especially have the distress caused by forced integration in the wake of the unification of Yemen at

¹¹ On Waġdī al-Ahdal’s works see: Šāliḥ al-Bayḍānī, *al-Kitābah ‘amal ṭawrī wa i‘lān tamarrud: ḥiwār ma’a al-riwā’i Waġdī al-Ahdal*, 26/ 04/ 2007, <http://www.arabicstory.net>; F. De Angelis, *Il simbolismo nel romanzo Ḥimār bayna al-aġānī di Waġdī al-Ahdal*, in G. Borriello (a cura di), “Orientalia Parthenopea”, n. XI, 2012, Napoli, pp. 113-128; Muḥammad al-Šalafī, *Waġdī al-Ahdal... Sard bi-tawqūt al-Yaman*, in “al-‘Arabī al-ġadīd”, 9/01/2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/culture/2015/1/9>;

¹² On *Qahwā amīrikiyyah* see: Ibrāhīm al-Ḥuġarī, *Fī riwāyatihi al-ġadīdah “Qahwā amīrikiyyah” Aḥmad Zayn yuṣaḥḥiṣ šūrat al-Yaman fī fairat al-ġalayān*, in “Maġallat Nizwā”, yūliyū 2007, <http://www.nizwa.com>; ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Rāšidī, *Aḥmad Zayn fī «Qahwā Amīrikiyyah»... riwāyah tufakkik ‘alam^{an} qadim^{an}*, in “al-Ḥayāh al-lunduniyyah”, 7/06/2007, <http://www.alhayat.com/culture/bookrevs/06-2007/Item-20070606-01e6655b-c0a8-10ed-01b1-6996291dc849/story.html>; Nāẓim al-Sayyid, *Taḥwīl al-wāqi’ ilā mas’alah šaḥṣiyyah fī riwāyat Qahwā amīrikiyyah li-Aḥmad Zayn*, in “Šaḥīfat al-Quds al-‘arabī al-lunduniyyah”, http://articles.sakhr.com/story.aspx?writer=114&story_id=231850; Fayṣal Darrāġ, *Qahwā amīrikiyyah li-Aḥmad Zayn: riwāyah tuwāġiḥ madīnah ‘arabiyyah*, in “Startimes”, 16/01/2008, <http://www.startimes.com/f.aspx?t=7810257>.

¹³ Aḥmad Zayn, *Qahwā Amīrikiyyah*, al-Markaz al-Taqaḥfī al-Ġarbī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’ 2007, p. 7.

¹⁴ Bušrā al-Maqtārī, *Ḥalf al-šams*, al-Markaz al-Taqaḥfī al-‘Arabī, al-Dār al-Bayḍā’ 2012. See F. De Angelis, *Chronicle of a Revolution in between Literature and Journalism, Conservative Claims and Progressive Struggles: Bushrā al-Maqtārī’s Literary Articles*, dans S. Boustani, R. El-Enany et W. Hamarneh (éd.), *La littérature à l’heure du Printemps arabe*, Kerthala, Paris 2016, pp. 277-296.

heart. In this case as well, however, the references to historical events or people who really existed are not explicit. In *Half al-šams*, where there are three narrating voices, the story seems to consist in uninterrupted ravings that make its reading and comprehension particularly arduous even to an Arabic speaking audience. Another common feature in these novels, that consciously or unconsciously aspire at telling History, is their confused and intricate narrative style. This also occurs in the second half of ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī’s latest novel *Ġawlat Kintākī* (Kentucky Square, 2014)¹⁵ on which I will focus in the present study.

In reading the above mentioned novels – to which many others may be added – one almost has the impression that the creators of these plots, which are so hard to unravel, reflect the intricacy of the historical reality that they inhabit and where chaos truly reigns.

The fact that a lot has been written and read in Yemen about the intensifying of recent dramatic events despite the difficult living conditions testifies to the vocation of Yemeni writers to document what happens in their country through their works. In March 2015, the “Yemen Times” presented an article according to which the publishing and sale of novels by Yemeni writers had significantly increased during of the previous months: «Despite ongoing political and economic turmoil, national literature saw an unexpected surge in 2014. Twenty novels were published by Yemeni authors [in 2013], and while that figure may seem insignificant in a regional or global context, it is considerably more than the eight books produced the previous year»¹⁶.

At first this may seem to be a paradox, given the dramatic conditions caused by the ongoing civil war and economic and social crisis in the country, with bloody battles for power among various political, military, tribal and religious figures and increasingly difficult living conditions for the people. Nevertheless, the newspaper points out that such literary liveliness did not constitute an out-of-place peculiarity or a contradiction compared to the criticality of the context, but rather a direct consequence of the ongoing events. Indeed, it is precisely the harshness of the surrounding reality that

¹⁵ ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī, *Ġawlat Kintākī*, Dār al-Našr li ‘l-Ġāmi‘āt, Ṣan‘ā’ 2014. His other works include *Bidūn malal* (Without Boredom, 2006); *al-Šu‘ūd ilā nāfi* (Rise to Usefulness, 2007); *al-Ġurm* (Tribal Solidarity, 2008); *Mi‘at ‘ām min al-fawdā* (One Hundred Years of Chaos, 2009). His theatrical works include *Diġlat al-šahīd* (The Martyr’s Uniform, 2007); *Sayyidat al-nahrayn* (The Lady of Two Rivers, 2008); *Sayf al-‘uqdah, sayf al-ḥall* (Sword that Unites, Sword that Solves, 2009). His collections of short stories include *Ḥikāyat kull ḥamīs* (Every Thursday’s Tale, 2006), and *Ḥadīṭ kull yawm* (Everyday Words, 2010). All these works are published by Markaz ‘Ubādī li ‘l-Dirāsāt wa ‘l-Našr, Ṣan‘ā’.

¹⁶ Fareed al-Homaid and Shannon Mckimmin, *Political Crisis and Yemen’s Literary Resurgence*, in “Yemen Times”, March 23 2015, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1870/report/4991/Political-crisis-and-Yemen%E2%80%99s-literary-resurgence.htm>.

drives people to enter a bookstore in Sana’a and purchase books by Yemeni writers, along with the willingness to reflect on themselves, their own society and their own history. It is the same need that stimulated the creativity of these Yemeni writers, pushing them to write¹⁷ almost as if there were a sort of overlapping and spontaneous solidarity between writers and readers.

In general, the desire for freedom that shook the Arab world in recent years – the so-called Arab Spring – not only changed the balance of power in many countries and, in some unfortunately limited cases, resulted in true gains of freedom, but was also accompanied by widespread literary production. This phenomenon is in line with the intrinsic meaning of literature as an expression, product and stimulus of human thought. Many literary essays and narrative works about the protests’ thorny topics have seen the light since 2011 both inside and outside the Arab world.

Within such a context, it is possible to insert the novel *Ġawlat Kintākī* by ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī – a prolific Yemeni author of numerous novels, collections of short stories and theatrical works – which was published in 2014. In *Ġawlat Kintākī*, al-Iryānī tells the story of a group of young Yemenis who decide to take to the square in the name of revolution at the beginning of 2011. Thus begins the characters’ journey through dreams and fears, hopes and tears, in a continuous tension between the search for change and the fear of a past that comes back to make its grip felt. Among glances, which constantly follow one another like bearers of feelings and a powerful means of understanding, the stories of the protagonists and their families are entwined with reflections on Yemen and its present as well as its past. It is possible to sustain that the country itself in its entirety is one of the novel’s characters. The novel, in fact, although located, from a temporal point of view, at the beginning of the *tawrat al-šabāb*, is rooted in the modern history of Yemen through the recalling of its main historical events in the characters’ minds.

Many matters emerge in the story, but the one that dominates is the challenge that compels young people to dream and, at the same time, hone a form of increasingly aware and courageous insight into reality.

Upon reading *Ġawlat Kintākī*, one quickly becomes aware, from the very beginning, of the very close connection between the book and the troubled events that have been overwhelming the young Yemenis since 2011. The act of writing stems from reality and brings one to reflect on it, it feeds on what the writer has experienced. At the same time, it is fundamental not to forget that it is not a chronicle but rather a novel, not a sort of news report but rather a literary work and the result of invention and creativity. The novel, however, precisely in virtue of its being an artistic form of expression, is perhaps more powerful than a summary of the facts from a purely historical per-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

spective. Literature, in fact, possesses the strength and ability to transport us to a different world from the one in which we find ourselves, it enables us to live other lives and experiences, or it allows us to see something more in our own lives and experiences. By unfolding the stories, emotions and thoughts of its characters making us measure ourselves against them, sometimes making us empathise with them and put ourselves in their position, a novel can make us better understand the world that surrounds us because it endows us with a more profound – or simply different – gaze. In the same manner, literary creation and reality mix with and speak to one another in *Ġawlat Kintākī* in a dense entangling of references, symbols and clues.

By telling of the movements of the young protagonists and their trips between Sāḥat al-Taġyīr and their families' homes, al-Iryānī attentively describes the buildings and weaving of streets that really may be found in Sana'a, accurately indicating the names of the roads and even recreating the light traffic of bus drivers when they get up at dawn to prepare for work. Between the ring road and al-Zubayrī Street, the tall palace that towers over the roundabout in Ġawlat Kintākī and the monument to knowledge located near the entrance of new university campus, between Sāḥat al-Taġyīr and Maydān al-Taḥrīr, the spatial setting could not be more precisely defined. In parallel, while recalling a precise scenery for the reader, the writer also presents a sort of soundtrack, composed of references to melodies and famous Yemeni – or in general, Arab – singers, from Farīd al-Aṭraš to 'Alī al-Ānisī from Muḥammad 'Abd al-Waḥḥāb to Ayyūb Ṭārīš. In this manner, the novel is anchored to a specific concrete context with its own space and music, sight and sound. In addition to all of this, al-Iryānī makes a series of explicit references to facts, as well as symbolic elements throughout the entire novel, thanks to which its narrative invention and reality further interact at different levels, offering the reader a rich array of suggestions of which a brief overview will be provided in the following pages.

The first fundamental element in *Ġawlat Kintākī* to prove itself meaningful in the eyes of Arabic-speaking readers is represented by the names of many of the characters. In fact, almost all of the proper names in the novel, although common in Yemen, have a meaning in Arabic that is certainly not casual or superfluous. This is the case, for instance, of the members of the Tent of Life (the tent pitched in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr where the six protagonists sleep): Ḥilmī derives directly from the term *ḥilm*, which means “mildness”, “endurance”, “tolerance” and “discernment” and shares the same trilateral root as *ḥulm*, or “dream”. As the first member to follow the dream for change, Ḥilmī becomes the guide of the Group of Life precisely in virtue of his being mild, patient and tolerant, in other words *ḥalīm*, as specified in chapter 29. In fact, the young protesters shout «al-Ḥalīm qā'idunā» (The mild man is our guide), thus conferring upon Ḥilmī the role of leader of the

newly formed group¹⁸. In other words, among such violence and before the danger that the war will shred the social fabric, dividing the community into sects and tribes, those who seek change will react by taking up the banner of moderation and tolerance. Moreover, in the first chapter of the novel, Ĥilmī himself warns the reader: «Even our names have something in common, as if our father had agreed to our meeting each other»¹⁹, says the protagonist to the young men and women who had just decided to share his tent. In fact, in addition to being similar in terms of sound, like Ĥilmī derives from *ħilm*, Ramzī is a derivation of *ramz*, meaning “symbol”; Fathī derives from *fath*, “openness”, and therefore “beginning”, but also “conquest”; Nūrī is formed by the term *nūr*, “light”; Nazmī contains the term *naẓm*, which indicates the “act of creating order” but also, and especially, “poetry composition”, which is – not coincidentally – linked to the fact that Nazmī stands out for his love of poetry. Finally, the name Fahmī comes from *fahm*, or “understanding”, the act and ability to comprehend, and in fact Fahmī is the one who best understands the true meaning behind Ĥilmī’s plans and, more in general, carries on with the process of comprehension and acquisition of awareness that is the keystone of the novel up till the very last pages.

The female protagonists also have significant names, starting with Amal: as well as being a very common female name, the word *amal* means “hope”. In the first pages of the novel, Amal is truly the hope of the young people in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr, calling them onto the stage and encouraging them to demand the fall of the regime. Furthermore, the description of the ray of light that is reflected by the pendant around the girl’s neck and shines on Ĥilmī could symbolise the enthusiasm that is emitted by hope and leads to action. Nevertheless, Amal is soon surrounded by an opaque halo of uncertainty, for it is initially not clear where she comes from or what side she is on, until her being biased gradually emerges, and hope leaves its place to disappointment and disillusion. Amal, bringer of hope, is on al-Āḥar’s²⁰ side, until she thus disappears completely in chapter 29, after announcing that control over the stage and the square is no longer in the hands of the protesters, but rather Muṣliḥ’s:²¹ «Amal disappeared: was that truly hope?»²².

The meaning of Salwā’s name is also relevant: “consolation”, “relief”, “forgetting” a loss or pain. Fahmī leaves his state of isolation and alienation after Ĥilmī’s death to find Salwā and the girl, far from letting the victims of the revolution fall into oblivion, unites their memory with the prospect of a new beginning. It is to Salwā that al-Iryānī turns to finish the novel, entrust-

¹⁸ ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī, *Ğawlat Kintākī*, cit., p. 169.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ al-Āḥar is one of the characters supporting the regime.

²¹ Muṣliḥ is an ambiguous character whose position is not clear, for he stands between the regime’s supporters and the protesters.

²² ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī, *Ğawlat Kintākī*, cit., p. 175.

ing her with words that speak of love, the only consolation for the narrated tragedies and a source of new hope and strength with which to resist death.

The name of another great female protagonist in *Ġawlat Kintākī*, Sawsan, deserves a separate interpretation. As opposed to the previously analysed characters, Sawsan simply means “lily” in Arabic, which seems not to be indicative but is actually in line with the discretion that characterises the identity of the girl, or rather, her father. Such identity is inconvenient and must be concealed. As the daughter of a famous and influential member of the regime, Sawsan earns her place in the public eye so long as she hides under a *niqāb* and masks her origin behind a false patronymic, Dī Yazan, so she is known as Sawsan bint Dī Yazan that ideally makes her the successor of an ancient hero. The name Dī Yazan reappears in chapter 40 in reference to a mysterious character sent by the regime to find help abroad and endowed with the title of leader (albeit a puppet leader with no initiative) to be voted in order to put an end to the riots.

The only person Sawsan confides in is Hilmī, revealing that her father’s name is Fā’id and openly pointing out its unpleasant resemblance to the word *fayd*, a name deriving from the verb meaning “to be of advantage to”, “to be useful to”, and claiming «I do not like his name, it reminds me of profit»²³. However, the man’s identity remains a mystery, although it is sometimes mentioned that he is affiliated with Sāḥat al-Taġyīr (for instance, in chapters 22 and 29). His underlying presence throughout the novel is never explicitly identified with any of the previously mentioned characters, nor is there a Fā’id among them. Moreover, when Sawsan is finally about to publicly reveal her name, along with her father’s, she is shot and even her body is rapidly taken away. In the end, therefore, it is possible to sustain that mysteriousness itself is the real meaning that is conveyed by Sawsan’s choice of name²⁴.

It is also possible to find powerful allusions in the names of military characters, who are members of the regime that divide Sana’a and power among themselves by means of clashes and strategic alliances. Before the readers’ eyes, a scenery of power games presents itself, where various stakeholders opposed and united by interest, continuously fight but also balance one another in terms of strength, and all contribute in turning the country into a source of loot and their battle grounds. In other words, while facing each other, these characters are essentially all the same because they follow the same logic and adopt the same behaviour. Their similarity is reflected in their very names: from al-Awwal and al-Āḥar (literally “First” and “Other”), as if to say that one is worth as much as the other; al-Awwal al-Āḥar, whose name is the sum of the names of his two superiors; al-Āḥar al-Ṭānī, where

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.

tānī means “second”, thus literally identifying him as a “second al- Āḥar”. In chapter 18, dedicated to illustrating the relationship among the four protagonists and their impersonating, so to say, the structure of the regime, this continuous series of similar names produces an alienating effect that adds to the disorienting reaction generated in the reader by the description of the chaotic rules of power.

In addition to the main cases hitherto presented, al-Iryānī sprinkles many other cross-references and puns connected to proper names in the pages of *Ğawlat Kintākī*. For instance, the name of Sāhir (who is tasked with keeping watch over Sāḥat al-Tağyīr on behalf of Ḥāmid Ḥamīd Abū ‘Uyūn) means “he who watches over”, “he who does not sleep”²⁵. Of ‘Abd al-Muhaymin, summit of the contorted system of power that has divided Yemen, it is said that he dominates for himself by openly playing with the meaning of his name, literally meaning “Servant of He who Dominates”²⁶. The reference to the literal meaning of the name Muzāḥim Ibn Muzāḥim Muwaffaq is even more explicit: *muzāḥim* indicates the “competitor” of a competition, but also “he who makes way” among others, while *muwaffaq* means “lucky”, “favoured (by God)” as much as it means “appropriate”, from the verb *waffaqa*, i.e. “to find a compromise”, “to reconcile”. What expression could be more appropriate to identify the person chosen to favour a compromise in Sāḥat al-Tağyīr and Maydān al-Taḥrīr and truly reconcile the protesters and the regime? What, furthermore, could be said of Fā’izah and Maṣṣūr, meaning respectively the “victorious” and the “winner”? They are a winning couple, but the secret of their well-being is enclosed in the man’s nickname, *al-ṣāmit*, meaning “he who is silent”. Maṣṣūr is successful because he is silent, and in the novel he becomes the symbol of the silent majority that sees but does not speak, witnesses the events but does nothing to change their course, suffers with loved ones and the country yet, instead of taking to the streets to cry out its dissent, is satisfied with giving its vote to the candidate that is proposed by the regime. Fahmī thinks of these people, the mass of those who remain in silence, when reflecting on the end of the revolution: it follows that perhaps they were the only ones to have played a winning hand even if their bet was nothing more than abstention in the passive wait for an improbable saviour²⁷.

The last name on which it is necessary to pause is that of Muṣliḥ. In itself, *muṣliḥ* means “peacemaker”, “reformer”, or “he who provides well-being”. In this case, however, the aspect that most strikes the native Arabic reader is perhaps located in the semantic root to which the word belongs, rather than in a connection between the inherent meaning and the character. The term *muṣliḥ* recalls, on the one hand, the name of the previously mentioned *Iṣlāḥ*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

party, on the other, it shares the same root of *maṣāliḥ*, meaning “interest”, “advantages”, a term that often recurs in *Ġawlat Kintākī* in reference to the various military and political stakeholders that run the country by relating with one another while pursuing one’s profit. Moreover, the same root may be found in another name that is certainly well known to the novel’s audience: that of the president of Yemen at the time of the revolution, Saleh.

These lines help in introducing more food for thought. *Ġawlat Kintākī*’s pages are dense with continuous references to Yemen’s past and citations by historical figures. In addition, the novel converses with the country’s present and its contemporary history, in the measure in which the characters created by al-Iryānī not only take on a symbolic value that is often expressed by their very name, but they also are connected to real people belonging to Yemeni public life. While reiterating that the novel remains a novel and not a historical record, its being imbued with reality ensures that some of the characters resemble the protagonists of Yemen’s current situation.

The most evocative character, from this point of view, is surely al-Āḥar. The novel recounts that he was one of the most known figures of the regime, an important member of the army, in control of a military formation whose base is close to the new Sana’a University; he also went to battle as the protector, as it were, of Sāḥat al-Taġyīr to fight al-Awwal. The Yemeni reader, at this point, cannot avoid thinking of General ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar (1945), one of the main names in the country’s political scene. For 20 years, al-Aḥmar has been the commander of the First Armoured Division, whose headquarters were located near to the new Sana’a University, exactly behind Sāḥat al-Taġyīr (the Division was absorbed into the Defence Ministry in 2012 in an attempt to reorganise the army)²⁸.

In the first months of 2011, in the wake of the Tunisian revolution and the riots that were taking place in other parts of the Arab world, the young Yemenis also stepped up their requests for political renewal. The protests against president Saleh’s regime at Sana’a were actually concentrated around Sāḥat al-Taġyīr, where the protesters organised a sit-in. Such mobilisation gradually gained strength and, at the climax of the riot in March 2011, general al-Aḥmar announced his decision to dissociate himself from the regime, fight alongside the protesters and defend them with his soldiers²⁹. Along with al-Aḥmar, other members of the military declared their support to the anti-government uprising, as did the representatives of the opposing parties, united in the *Aḥzāb al-Liqā’ al-Muštarak* coalition. In this manner, a further

²⁸ Ali Abulohoom, *After 40 years as arsenal of guns, First Armored Division to turn into a public park*, in “Yemen Times”, April 25 2013, <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1671/report/2272/After-40-years-as-arsenal-of-guns-First-Armored-Division-to-turn-into-a-public-park.htm>.

²⁹ *Top Yemeni general, Ali Mohsen, backs opposition*, in *BBC News*, March 21 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12804552>.

point of contact unites al-Iryānī's characters and the flesh-and-bones men who contributed in moulding Yemen's current political reality: those who walk the same stage as Amal and Muṣliḥ recall those who, as representatives of political and military power, tried to grasp the reins of a youth movement that had been originally conceived as non-partisan. Their entry did not pass unobserved in real life, nor was it devoid of consequences, since some protesters reacted by leaving the square³⁰. Indeed, although the first demonstrators had taken to the streets to demand the end of a political immobilisation that had lasted for decades, the stage of the revolution was soon contended by the same forces that had actively participated in the preservation of the *status quo* and division of power based on tribal rules and the privatisation of the State for a long time. The *Iṣlāḥ* party itself, which was formally at the opposing side in 2011 and had rapidly taken on a prominent role in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr, had been represented within the government in various ways since the Nineties and also took part in the composition of the executive³¹. It is within such a context that the pages written by al-Iryānī must be located, for his characters face the possibility of trusting people who were known to, and had been involved in, the regime in order to achieve the change they desired so much. Faṭḥī's conflicted reaction to his brother Tābit's speech³², the tension between trust and distrust, the doubts that the members of the Group of Life are compelled to voice even while fighting themselves, enable the reader to know the anguish of a protester before the profound transformation of the revolution he or she had given life to. Through the reflection on those affiliated with the movement, *Ġawlat Kintākī* depicts a fight between hope and disillusion by narrating a process of gaining awareness that, in order to be executed, requires the strength to not ignore threatening signs and even the courage to acknowledge the possibility of becoming pawns in the hands of others. It is this very fear, for instance, to insinuate itself among the young protagonists after Nūrī's death, that of being not only killed, but also taken for supporters of those against whom they had decided to protest.

Along with al-Āḥar and his affiliates, a reflection on al-Awwal in the novel is of crucial importance, for he seems to have been specifically devised so as to embody elements that may be traced back to two distinct

³⁰ Nadia al-Sakkaf, *The Politicization of Yemen's Youth Revolution*, in "Carnegie Endowment for International Peace", April 27 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=show&article=43735>.

³¹ E. Ardemagni, *Lo Yemen fra terrore e vecchia politica*, in "ISPI", 23 settembre 2013, p. 2, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/lo-yemen-fra-terrore-e-vecchia-politica-9033>.

³² Tābit admonishes his brother not to participate in the next demonstration to be held near the TV palace, since he knows it will turn into a bloodbath. He also asks Faṭḥī to join the regime's supporters. See 'Abd Allāh 'Abbās al-Iryānī, *Ġawlat Kintākī*, cit., pp. 207-208.

people in the real world: president Saleh and his son Aḥmad ‘Alī. In real life, al-Awwal’s role as leader of the military forces that are openly loyal to the regime, was actually taken on by Aḥmad, military leader of the Yemeni special forces and the Republican Guard, i.e. the loyalist front entrusted with the task of repressing riots, who fought against the forces of the dissident general al-Aḥmar. However, the Yemeni reader cannot avoid seeing, in the description of the attack on al-Awwal in chapter 35, an unmistakable reference to the injuring of president Saleh, which occurred during the bombing of one of his headquarters on June 3, 2011, the first Friday of *rağab* month³³. al-Awwal’s character is therefore a condensation of the summits of the absolutist regime that was in power during the revolution and are therefore downsized in the eyes of the reader. In truth, Saleh’s presidency is not portrayed in a totalising manner, or as the only factor responsible for the situation in which Yemen finds itself, but rather as one of the many factors that contribute to defining its current situation. To echo the words that are reiterated by the members of the Group of Life, the Yemeni actually find themselves before multiple regimes³⁴.

The characters created by al-Iryānī are not only suitable for a symbolic and allusive interpretation, as may be inferred by the hitherto presented examples, but they also move along a temporal horizon marked by the salient moments of the Yemeni revolution between 2011 and 2012. Along with the previously mentioned bombing of the first Friday of the 2011 *rağab* month, there were the protests of March 18, 2011, known as the *ğum ‘at al-karāmah* (Friday of Dignity), that were repressed by government forces in the cities of Sana’a and Ta’iz, leading to the deaths of dozens of protesters, considered at the time the highest number of victims since the beginning of the movement³⁵. Two days later, on March 20, 2011, General al-Aḥmar declared his support to the revolution and was soon followed by various public figures that were connected to political parties, the army and the tribal system³⁶. In the course of the months afterwards, the episodes of violence and the clashes between loyalists and various opposing fronts increasingly grew in intensity until, within what could by then be considered a civil war, numerous protesters in Ġawlat Kintākī (later renamed Ġawlat al-Naṣr, Victory Square) were killed on September 18, 2011 and the following days³⁷. In January 2012, presid-

³³ L. Nevola, *God Exists in Yemen, part 2: the Moral Economy of Rizq*, in “Allegra”, December 15 2015, <http://allegralaboratory.net/god-exists-in-yemen-part-2-the-moral-economy-of-rizq/>.

³⁴ ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī, *Ġawlat Kintākī*, cit., p. 215 and p. 226.

³⁵ *Yemen: gli scontri più duri*, in “Internazionale”, 916, 23-29 settembre 2011, p. 25.

³⁶ *Yemen Uprising 2011-12*, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/event/Yemen-Uprising-of-2011-2012#ref1126010>.

³⁷ Tawfiq al-Sāmi‘ī, *19 sibtimbir 2011, al-‘aṣimah Ṣan ‘ā’ tastayqizu ‘alā aṣwāt al-mudāfi’ wa ġawlat naṣr*, in “al-Sahwah.net”, September 19 2012, <http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/arabic/subjects/1/2012/9/19/22586.htm>.

ent Saleh decided to abdicate in exchange for judicial immunity, leading to the February 2012 elections whose only candidate was Saleh's deputy ‘Abd Rabbih Maṣṣūr Hādī³⁸, as recalled in chapter 40 of *Ġawlat Kintākī*. ‘Abd Rabbih Maṣṣūr Hādī's rise to power was certainly not accompanied by the Yemeni political situation's return to normality: as a result, at the end of the year, at the time in which the end of the novel is set, the country continued to be the stage of violent unrest.

The rich mosaic of varied nature that has been hitherto displayed clearly shows how *Ġawlat Kintākī* lends itself to be interpreted on multiple levels. The linguistic clues, the characters' symbolism and the imposing presence of historical reality are indissolubly united with the plot, which is built on dialogue and the protagonists' feelings. The description of their emotions is a constant presence in every page, as well as the element on which the narration often pauses. The reader's attention is gradually directed, for instance, towards the enthusiasm that pervaded Sāḥat al-Taġyīr on the first days of the protest, the distress of the protesters' mothers, the new resolve that accompanies the desperation of their parents when they see their children die for their good. al-Iryānī also pauses upon descriptions of the disbelief and confusion provoked by the events the characters bear witness to and by the conversations between their relatives that they overhear at times, as well as upon the fury of disappointment, but also the warmth and comfort of loved ones. Nevertheless, the novel's emotions are mostly bound to two topics: love stories between the young men and women in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr, and Ḥilmī and Fahmī's friendship.

The feelings that grow between Ḥilmī and Sawsan, and between Fahmī and Salwā, are described in a decisively superficial way and with great naivety from the very beginning. This, however, is not done casually: the author entwines various narrative levels in this sense as well, and in reading one realises that such initial superficiality is gradually substituted by a greater depth and moves in accordance with the cardinal feature of the novel, i.e., the step-by-step journey in search of understanding and awareness. The relationship between Ḥilmī and Sawsan, and between Fahmī and Salwā, acquire significance through their conversations and exchanges, as well as the messages, letters and drawings that the characters exchange. At the same time, by expressing themselves with pens and paint brushes, and by contending with words and lines, the protesters gain awareness of what is really happening around them both in Sāḥat al-Taġyīr and in Yemen.

Sentimental affairs, friendship and revolution not only intersect, but also become one, as the protagonists repeatedly point out³⁹. In the same

³⁸ *Yemen: l'unico candidato*, in “Internazionale”, 936, 17-23 febbraio 2012, p. 25.

³⁹ ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbās al-Iryānī, *Ġawlat Kintākī*, cit., pp. 13-14; pp. 42-43 and p. 115.

way, therefore, the debates on feelings meld with those on the outcome of the revolts.

Therefore, throughout the unfolding of *Ġawlat Kintākī*'s story the protagonists journey along a path that takes them, so to say, to open their eyes. At first, they somewhat naively begin to ask themselves questions to which they cannot give any answers right away, both because they are not able to answer and because they choose not to do so (the response «time will answer» is often reiterated)⁴⁰. Later, the Group of Life protesters gradually add answers to the questions, thus finding the courage to voice their thoughts and fears, as Nūrī does after being struck down and as his parents and the other protagonists do when they must face death. This path is not easy at all and it is painful to the point that, for example, Nazmī claims that she would have preferred that Nūrī had died before transmitting frightening thoughts to his friends, such as those related to the significance of the generals and tribes⁴¹.

In *Ġawlat Kintākī*, true comprehension seems to be the result of communicating with others both in the form of verbal exchange and artistic confrontation, rather than that of an individual thought. Starting from the observation of Ĥilmī and Salwā's paintings, the young protesters build shared reflections and are increasingly able to understand what they are experiencing, glimpsing the sense and truth at the base of surrounding events with increasing clarity. Understanding, after all, stems from meeting the other's point of view not only for those who look at the paintings, but also for the painter, since Ĥilmī is often defined as being unaware of the full meaning of what he is portraying until he discusses it with his friend Fahmī. The same goes for writing, i.e., for the protagonists' poems, letters, and articles, in which they voice fears that are first unspoken and then evolve into new considerations and reflections on reality.

The situation in Yemen has not improved since the end of 2012. The protesters who embraced the spirit of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 were not able, in the months afterwards, to build a united front with common objectives and representation capable of efficiently lobbying and asserting themselves successfully on the political scene⁴².

The dramatic events described above constitute the context in which *Ġawlat Kintākī* was written and published (the first edition was printed in 2014). Just like the artists who crowd its pages, al-Iryānī has created a work that speaks directly to reality, uniting descriptions and concrete references with evocative and symbolic elements. Painters, singers, poets and writers – some of whom truly existed, while others were the product of the Yemeni writer's imagination – follow one another, enriching the narration with their

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77; p. 104; p. 133.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴² Nadia Aissaoui, Ziad Majed, *Una rivoluzione amara per gli yemeniti*, in "Internazionale", 918, 7-13 ottobre 2011.

works, which are often described as the expression of a dual meaning in which emotions and reflections on society are joined. The young protagonists, by means of the products of their creativity, give voice and body to their feelings, mixing the coldness of disillusion and fear with the warmth of their loved ones. In this manner, they are able to face themselves and what is happening around them; accordingly, al-Iryānī, in narrating the characters' stories, traces a careful path to reflect on the situation in Yemen. What befalls the young protesters of Sāḥat al-Taġyīr in front of Ḥilmī and Salwā's paintings, in terms of interpretation and comprehension, is therefore represented to the reader by means of this novel. It also is a bringer of meaning on many levels, among explicit historical references and hints, linguistic clues and symbolic elements.