

Khalf al-shams by Bushrā al-Maqtarī: when commitment is female in a macho society

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It has long been a platitude in Arab literary criticism to emphasise the relationship between the novel and society. Although such a relation may be challenged, even the devotees of pure aesthetic criticism have not been able to completely avoid the question of social influence in works of fiction within the Arab contemporary context. Indeed it would be difficult to deny that writing about the contemporary or modern Arab novel implies also, to a certain extent, dealing with social, political and cultural facets.¹ In any case, one must always be careful not to consider literary production to be a faithful reproduction mirroring non-fiction reality.

The idea that Arab intellectuals in general, and writers in particular, should carry the burden of a contribution to the improvement of the society in which they have lived spread significantly during the twenties. It became central in the discussions of men of letters, literary critics and journalists during the decades of nation-building.² This new way of conceiving literature and its role within society was also a chance to move away from the tendency to imitate western models, even though literary genres imported from Europe like the novel and short story were used. It could be said that since that time Arab literary production has become increasingly Arab.

When discussing “Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature” in 1993, M. M. Badawi wrote:

The political, social and cultural commitment of the contemporary Arab writers, with the almost inevitable attendant opposition by the individual to

¹ Sabry Hafez, “The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7 (1976), p. 68.

² See Verena Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizām) and Committed Literature (al-adab al-multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq”, *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3, 1 (2000), p. 51.

authority, is no doubt paralleled in the writings of authors who live under repressive authoritarian regimes in many parts of the Arab world.³

Considering the concept expressed by Badawi, one may well expect the history of Yemeni Literature to be dotted throughout with the presence of committed intellectuals. The political and social history of modern and contemporary Yemen has, in fact, been constantly characterised by the presence of regimes that have held both its civil society at large, and Yemeni intelligentsia in particular, in check. Notwithstanding this, when reading about the notion of *iltizām* in relation to Arabic Literature, one cannot help notice that it is always associated with authors from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and the countries of Maghreb, who operated at the end of the colonial period and during the early post-colonial period. Yemen is hardly ever mentioned. Are we to infer perhaps that there have not been any *multazim* intellectuals in Yemen?

Before that question is answered, it is necessary to clarify the meaning that the expression *iltizām adabī* has had during the history of modern Arabic literature, and then go on to define its meaning within the context of this work.

It is certain now that the term *iltizām* became a term of common use in literature during the fifties of the 20th century. It is also well known that *iltizām*, the Arabic word for commitment, which became the hallmark and battle cry of writers in the 1950s and 1960s, is a direct translation of Sartre's *engagement*.⁴

The fundamental role played by the Lebanese magazine *al-Ādāb* (1953) in promoting the notion of committed literature is also well known. But more especially, the magazine represented a sort of 'meeting point' for those intellectuals who, even with their own specificities, shared the idea that the solutions to the problems of a nation should not be sought only in the programs of parties or political leaders, but should also be found in various forms of literary art⁵. The objective of *al-Ādāb* was, as its founder and director Suhayl Idrīs maintained, to give voice to intellectuals who bear testimony to their epoch and whose literature is inspired by Arab society itself, a literature addressed to common people and the struggle for social justice.⁶

Very much as the editor of *al-Ādāb* intended, it seems clear that those who joined the magazine addressed a certain kind of literary production inspired by principles of social realism (*al-wāqī'īyya al-ishtirākīyya*). Politicised literary production erupted in the midst of this revolutionary euphoria, as did a critical debate over literary objectives. Socialist realism was conceived as a more authentic representation of social reality, of the masses, the peasants, and the labouring classes.⁷ Thus, in keeping with the principles of

³ Muhammad M. Badawi, "Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20, 1 (1993), p. 8.

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 245.

⁶ Suhayl Idrīs, "Risālat al-Ādāb." *al-Ādāb* 1, 1 (January 1953), pp. 1-2.

⁷ Ellen McLarney, "The Socialist Romance of the Postcolonial Arabic Novel", *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall, 2009), p. 187.

the Lebanese magazine, a truly committed author was someone who was able to establish an effective relation between his/her works and the needs of society. What was meant by “effective relation” is that the work of the author should, in some way, help make the reader aware of the broader national perspective. Thus the kind of literature that we are dealing with inevitably takes on nationalistic tones, and the mission that is undertaken by the author turns him/her into some kind of reformer. The demand for conscious and responsible artistic creation is only a consequence of the recognition that literature is socially and politically dependent, but at the same time socially and politically effective and significant.⁸

For Jean-Paul Sartre and the supporters of *al-Ādāb* too, the prerequisite for a *multazim* author is to be free, in addition to being *necessarily* responsible, as stated previously, to the society where he lives. This particular notion of the *multazim* author actually leads to a paradox: does not the situation of being *necessarily* responsible to society seem to present a limitation on the freedom of the author himself?! Paradoxically, he is a “free servant of his society”.⁹ In the *Marxist* conception of *iltizām* advanced by Suhayl Idrīs the line separating *iltizām* from *ilzām* (compulsion) is very subtle.

In any case, nowadays the expression *iltizām adabī* still seems too ambiguous, and the criteria according to which an author may be defined as either *multazim* or non-*multazim* are equally so. Concerning the latter category, there now follow some brief observations that focus on the Yemeni literary context.

The writer and poet, Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Zubayrī (1910-1965), lived during the period of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen (*al-Mamlaka al-Mutawakkiliyya al-Yamaniyya*, 1918-1962). It was a historical period marked by many power struggles and riots, such as those in 1948.¹⁰ It was above all in his poetic production that al-Zubayrī showed his greatest artistic qualities together with his interest in the cause of his beloved Yemeni People. In one of his most famous poems, which bears the evocative title of *Fī sabīl Filisṭīn*, al-Zubayrī expresses his sympathy for the Palestinian people. Is it then possible to consider al-Zubayrī to be a committed author?

Another unforgotten author in the Yemeni literary tradition is the poet ‘Abd Allāh al-Baradūnī (1929-1999). In his poems, as well as in his articles, he subjected the government to piercing criticism. During the conflict between republicans and royalists (1962), he sided with the former group. He was one of the first intellectuals to speak openly about the rights of women. Here, because of limitations in space, we will simply cite the evocative power of the titles that he assigned to his artistic activities, for instance, the weekly radio program, *Majallat al-fikr wa-l-adab* (Magazine of Thought and Literature). Once again, we may ask whether or not al-Baradūnī may be considered a committed author?

⁸ Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizām)”, p. 52.

⁹ Karl Kohut, *Was ist Literatur? Die Theorie der ‘littérature engagée’ bei Jean-Paul Sartre* (PhD diss., University of Marburg, 1965), 71, cited in Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizām)”, p. 55.

¹⁰ In 1948 the Imam Yaḥyā was murdered. There followed a period of chaos. The Imam Yaḥyā was succeeded by his son Aḥmad.

Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Walī (1939-1973), who led the genres of the novel and short story toward a greater artistic maturity, represents a turning-point in the history of pre-contemporary Yemeni literature. Many of the short stories by ‘Abd al-Walī are about the brutality and injustice perpetrated in Yemeni prisons, something that he himself experienced. The son of an Ethiopian mother and Yemeni father—he was first raised in Ethiopia and later in Yemen—‘Abd al-Walī dealt with the hardships faced by immigrants, a primary topic of his most famous work, the novel *Ṣan‘ā’ madīna maftūḥa* (Sanaa... open city, 1972). In the artistic project of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Walī, the themes of *ghurba* and solitude, though central, also become the vehicle for impassioned social criticism; the writer manages to capture many aspects of life in Yemen, mostly from the point of view of people belonging to underprivileged classes.¹¹ In order to show how literature may contribute to change and to illustrate how the literary production of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Walī has managed to shaken people’s consciences, it must be recalled that in 2000, 28 years after the initial publication of *Ṣan‘ā’ madīna maftūḥa*, Islamists led by *shaykh* ‘Abd al-Mağīd al-Zindānī (1942),¹² protested against the novel’s re-publication, because it was considered the work of a writer “known for his communist and atheistic views”.¹³ So, can ‘Abd al-Walī be considered a committed author or not?

In this very concise survey of Yemeni Literature, Zayd Muṭīr Dammāj (1943-2000), arguably the most famous Yemeni author, cannot be overlooked. His novel, *al-Rahīna* (The Hostage, 1984), is about the loss of innocence, people who are trapped, and a somewhat intoxicating mix of emotional, sexual and power-based relationships. It is set in North Yemen during the late forties of the 20th century, and is strongly critical of Yemeni society as it was before the revolutions brought an end to the rule of the imams. *The Hostage* is the main character, a young male adolescent from one of the many tribes that the imam wishes to control by kidnapping the sons of the tribal leaders. In Yemen there has been a long history of hostage-taking; ruling imams often used it as a means of ensuring tribal loyalty. To Dammāj, the hostage is a potent symbol of Yemen, a country that was isolated from the rest of the world by Imam Yaḥyā (g. 1904-1948), who chose to keep the people of Yemen inside the country and all foreign influences out of it. As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that the boy is much more than a servant, as the older women of the house visit his room at night to enjoy sexual gratification. Of course, the role of women in the novel is also of crucial importance. Older women are sexually frustrated, and the act of taking advantage of a young boy is seen to be somehow ‘more acceptable’ than having a sexual relationship with a grown man. In a sense women are also hostages; they have no freedom and are almost forced to stay indoors at all times. *Al-Rahīna* is, perhaps, just

¹¹ Edoardo Barzaghi, “Istanze politiche e sociali nell’opera dello scrittore yemenita Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Walī,” *La rivista di Arablit* I, 1 (2011), p. 65 [available at www.arablit.it; accessed March, 12, 2014].

¹² ‘Abd al-Mağīd al-Zindānī is the founder and chancellor of the religious “Īmān” University, leading member of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, known as al-Isḥlāḥ.

¹³ Lola Keilani and Nasser Arrabyee, “Seaweed fever,” *al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 488, June 29, 2000 [available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/488/re3.htm>; accessed May 2, 2014].

as relevant now, as when it was first published. ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ (g. 1978-2012), the former president, kept his people hostage for 33 years in a way that is only too reminiscent of rule of the imams Yaḥyā and Aḥmad (1948-1962). Can Zayd Muṭī‘ Dammāj then be considered a committed author or not?

For the sake of brevity, we must now take an imaginary temporal leap all the way to the group of contemporary writers known as *jīl al-shabāb* (the young generation). A brief overview now follows.

The poet, novelist and journalist, ‘Alī al-Muqrī, is the author of three novels: *Ṭa‘m aswad, rā‘iḥa sawdā’* (Black Taste, Black Smell, 2008), *al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī* (The Handsome Jew, 2009) and *Ḥurma* (Woman, 2012), in which the author displays both attention and sensitivity in his treatment of social themes. In the first novel, al-Muqrī exposes the prejudices and latent racism that Yemeni society displays towards a social group known as *akhdām* (black men and women from sub-Saharan Africa) who make a living mainly by collecting garbage. In *al-Yahūdī al-ḥālī*, recently translated into Italian by Maria Avino and edited by Isabella Camera d’Afflitto,¹⁴ al-Muqrī deals with another sensitive topic, the Jewish minority in Yemen. In *Ḥurma*, al-Muqrī engages with many taboo subjects, criticizing, for example the extremism of Muslim fanatics who stop calling little girls by name when they reach the age of eight and address them with term *ḥurma*.

I have already discussed the works of Wajdī al-Ahdal in previous articles,¹⁵ so here I shall only recall the ways in which his novels, which often resort to surrealism, have triggered strong reactions in the public and the so-called pure Muslims. In his works¹⁶ al-Ahdal has always shown great courage, ridiculing his fellow citizens’ excessive attachment to tradition and mocking religious extremism. It is no accident that some of his works have been accused of being blasphemous. Indeed, in the attitude of many Yemenis he sees an obstacle to the nation’s progress; he has proposed a secular society as the solution. Even if Wajdī al-Ahdal believes that the purpose of a writer should be simply to write and not necessarily to reform society,¹⁷ can he not be considered as a *multazim* author?

¹⁴ ‘Alī al-Muqrī, *Il bell’ebreo*, Maria Avino (trans.) and Isabella Camera d’Afflitto (ed.) (Milano: Piemme, 2012).

¹⁵ See Francesco De Angelis, “Censorship, Self-Censorship and Taboos in Contemporary Yemeni Literature”, in Sobhi Boustani et al. (eds.), *Desire, Pleasure and the Taboo: New Voices and Freedom of Expression in Contemporary Arabic Literature* (Pisa-Roma: Fabrizio Serra editore, 2014), pp. 63-78; Francesco De Angelis, “Il simbolismo nel romanzo *Ḥimār bayna al-aḡānī di Waḡdī al-Ahdal*”, *Orientalia Parthenopea*, XI (2012), Giovanni Borriello (ed.), pp. 113-128; Francesco De Angelis, “Una misteriosa scomparsa tra le vie di Sanaa”, review of *Bilād bi-lā samā’*, by Wajdī al-Ahdal. *La rivista di Arablit* 1, 1 (2011), pp. 185-187 [available at www.arablit.it]; Francesco De Angelis, “La battaglia delle donne nel romanzo contemporaneo Yemenita. *Ḥimār bayna al-aḡānī di Waḡdī al-Ahdal*”, in Isabella Camera d’Afflitto (ed.), *Lo Yemen raccontato dalle scrittrici e dagli scrittori* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Orientalia, 2010), pp. 119-124.

¹⁶ Especially in *Qawārib jabāliyya* (2002), novel which earned him a five year sentence for blasphemy, and deep resentment from Islamic extremists who threatened to kill him. On *Qawārib jabāliyya* see: Luc-Willy Deheuvels. “Violence, écriture et société au Yémen: Qawārib jabāliyya de Wajdī al-Ahdal”, *Chroniques yéménites*, No. 11, 2003, pp. 1-15 [available at <http://cy.revues.org>].

¹⁷ Interview with the author held in October 2008.

Finally, in this rapid survey of Yemeni writers, I would like to recall another author who, for his conservative and conformist ideas, stands apart from those already mentioned. ‘Abd al-Nāṣir Mujallī, the author of both novels and short stories, has more than once declared his support for the former president of Yemen,¹⁸ Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ. In his works, which are imbued with a totally pantheistic vision,¹⁹ characters who are confronted by the decadence of society often find a sense of relief in tradition. Thus the author can be contrasted with most of his colleagues: his literary production is not inspired by progressive ideas, and yet he still is a *multazim* writer, even if it is an *iltizām* linked to conservative ideas.

None of the writers mentioned writes only for the sake of writing. It is evident how they experience, before their fellow citizens, or even before any of their readers, a feeling of discomfort because of their country’s social, political and cultural shortcomings. Through their works, in addition to denouncing personal discomfort, which in most cases is shared by their readers, they often put forth a solution, although with different literary strategies. Some do so stealthily in order to avoid censorship, resorting to surrealism or to magical realism. Some do so more explicitly, through realism, while others choose to set their work in a remote past or a future time. Yet all of them bear the burden of responsibility for revealing a sense of discomfort and strive to offer a solution. Whatever the technique employed or the message that each author intends to bring to the readers, how can they not all be considered committed authors?

The truth is, in my opinion, that, once we discard specific definitions assigned to the notion of commitment in literature - which in the Arab-world context have been referred especially to Marxist or nationalistic²⁰ literature - literature is after all, in one way or another, always committed. Obviously, when making a distinction between classic, modern or contemporary literature in relation to the Arabic literary heritage, it may be useful to define literature as either committed or non-committed. Indeed Arab literary production of the classical age was essentially composed for a restricted circle of people: the local ruler and his court. During this period authors were, in most cases, artists patronised by nobles. Their task was mostly to celebrate the virtues of their employers and exalt the glory of the court or the excellence of the territory controlled by the ruler. In addition, up to the eighteenth century and beyond, the criteria that a great literary work was supposed to meet were almost entirely modelled on formal aspects: linguistic refinement, virtuosity, and verbal acrobatics.

¹⁸ Interview with the author held in November 2009.

¹⁹ Ada Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (Roma: Carocci, 2013), p. 244.

²⁰ Actually, as Verena Klemm has pointed out, up to the 1970s the meaning of the slogan *iltizām* was the subject of heated debates in the Arab literary scene. The meaning of the term had been changing continuously during that period. Under the influence of growing hostilities before and during the Arab-Israeli confrontation of 1967, the term became increasingly militant and anti-Israeli in tone. Later the term *iltizām* was warmly welcomed by the rising Islamist movement as one to be used for advocating ‘Islamic literature’ (*al-adab al-islāmī*). See “Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizām*)...”, p. 57.

From the nineteenth century on, when cultural debate throughout the Arab world changed radically, there was a dramatic change in literature. Intellectual discussions became dominated by nationalist issues, particularly in relation to European colonialism, which translated, for most of the Arab world, in the presence of foreign powers on its territory: above all others, Great Britain and France. The notorious *querelle* between modernists and traditionalists is closely linked to the nationalist issue. All this naturally exerted a strong influence on the development of literature and its new cultural orientations. Thereafter there was a vigorous cultural debate, as the emerging press tradition covered the confrontation between the various ideological factions, thus also contributing to a rise in the general level of education. Obviously, the circulation of the press greatly increased the number of readers, whose interests were certainly not limited to politics. Indeed political events and debate among parties on their own would never have been sufficient to capture the interest of the public; as a result, newspapers were forced to include cultural contents. Each newspaper employed a large group of writers to attract readers with stories and poems²¹. Long gone was that previous era when authors used to compose eulogies for their lords, for the public they now addressed had changed radically. Many of the authors who wrote for newspapers were also protagonists in the intellectual debates in process, and the press afforded them the chance to communicate their ideas to a much wider audience, often with the purpose of creating consensus in support of a particular idea. This contributed to the undermining of a series of stylistic assumptions that underlay their literary production. Given the new readership, they tried to adjust, so as to meet the requirements of readers who took little interest in mere verbal prowess. Paraphrasing the famous work by Sabry Hafez, Arab literature now moved in the direction of a *new narrative discourse*.

Thus, the medieval view of literature that had been dominant until well into the nineteenth century, regarding literary creativity as either morally and spiritually edifying or entertaining through mastery of language and verbal skill, gradually gave way to the consciously held assumption that literature should reflect and indeed change social reality.²²

With these reflections on the pre-modern era and the ambiguity of the expression *iltizām adabī* in mind, the concept of commitment will now be examined in the context of the political and social developments that have recently taken place in Yemen. More accurately, *iltizām adabī*, is here conceived as commitment and direct participation in the protest campaigns, started in January 2011, and known throughout Yemen as *thawrat al-shabāb*.

The active participation of Yemeni intellectuals in demonstrations against the regime of ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ should not be taken for granted. Firstly, as noted above, some intellectuals adhere to conservative positions, and possibly believe that the old regime would have guaranteed a degree of stability and a defence of tradition. Besides, as Aḥmad Zayn has noted, not all Yemeni writers are great dreamers; some of them have stopped being ones. A vast number of intellectuals, Aḥmad Zayn goes on to note, no longer seems to believe that a real change and new life for Yemeni society is possible. The history of

²¹ Isabella Camera d’Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea: dalla nahḍah a oggi* (Roma: Carocci, 1998), pp. 157-158.

²² Muhammad M. Badawi, “Perennial Themes”, p. 5.

their country has led them to a state of pessimism and indifference in the face of what is happening or might happen. Thus, rather than marching in the streets, many of them have chosen to observe the situation from afar, or at most, to post some kind of remark on a social network. The absence of many intellectuals from the *revolutionary scene* is nothing more than the reflection of the state of extreme weariness in the Yemeni intellectual scene, one that is by now stranded in the quicksand of indifference and non-commitment.²³

Despite this however, Yemeni literature has always shown a deep involvement in the country's political life. Yemeni literature, as Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi notes, is a literature of the human spirit at its best, endearing and liberating, with a deep and enduring love and a supreme commitment. Arabian Peninsula literature, in general, is as committed "to the struggle of Arab society [...]" as any literature in the rest of the Arab world, reflecting the general social and psychological scene, and speaking of Arab achievement and failure, joy and sorrow, hopes and fears". Thus we see Yemeni poets lamenting the destruction of Beirut, and expressing anger and frustration at political failure in Palestine and joy over the undying nerve of resistance to all forms of aggression aimed at the dignity and freedom of individuals and the nation²⁴.

The peculiarity of contemporary Yemeni literature, as opposed to other literatures, is that the same author may harbour different literary trends. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Maqālīh, the most famous contemporary poet in Yemen, for instance:

is essentially modernist, both in the complex structure of his poems and the novelty of his imagery; but in the stateliness of his syntax he is, probably, the most classical of all modernists; in his emotional exuberance he is perhaps the most romantic. This amalgam is only natural in an atmosphere of continuous social and political turmoil, which has never stopped since the end of the Second World War.²⁵

We return now to what has been happening in Yemen and other Arab countries from January 2011 onwards. The surge of popular protests known as "the Arab Spring" spread out from Tunis, and the series of events that ensued has been the occasion for a turning point in the lives and artistic production of many female writers. Yemeni *iltizām adabī*, and more especially where the Yemeni Spring is concerned, is often female, and that in a society in which the mere idea of a woman who writes is a revolutionary act, one that defies social conventions. Some female writers have definitively broken free from a societal enclosure that confined their literary production to "female matters". The short-story writer, 'Arwā 'Abduh Uthmān, can certainly be considered prominent among them. She

²³ Aḥmad Zayn, "Waqi' yamanī «mu'aṭṭal» aṣṭan wa-l-muthaqqafūn ghayr mubāliyyin", *al-Ḥayāt*, No. 17799, December 28, 2012 [available at www.alhayat.com].

²⁴ Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *The Literature of Modern Arabia: an Anthology* (Riyadh: Kegan Paul International in association with King Saud University, Distributed by Routledge, Chapman & Hall, London; New York, 1988), p. 23.

²⁵ Shukri 'Ayyad, "Introduction", in Salma Jayyusi (ed.), *The Literature of Modern Arabia: an Anthology*, p. 34.

has dedicated her life to the struggle for civil rights at large, and not only those of women, and also to the development of culture in Yemen. Notwithstanding her other activities, she has founded the *Bayt al-fulklūr* (The house of folklore). Hudā al-‘Aṭṭās and Nādyā al-Kawkabānī are the most famous, but not the only, female writers, who have personally taken part in the protests, often endangering their lives.

The young Yemeni writer, Bushrā al-Maqtarī, was also one of the women who occupied the foremost positions, in the squares, during the Yemeni demonstrations, especially in the town of Ta‘iz. Some revolutionary groups wanted her to be one of the ministers in the transitional government. She defined the attitude of Yemeni intellectuals towards the revolution as “negative and disappointing”. She also declared that “intellectuals were unable to supply readers with a consistent analysis of the revolution, nor did they try to create a cultural awareness within the public, that would be in opposition to the dominant conformism; it was as if the revolution had taken them by surprise”. She went on to add that the comments that they wrote about the revolutionaries protesting in the squares had “amounted to nothing new”. She declared that the absence of intellectuals from the streets “left the squares in the hands of politicized Islamists and Salafists, who made speeches opposing the revolutionaries’ demands, as they proceeded to launch a list of agenda that was the opposite of what a civilized country should aspire to achieve”.²⁶

Bushrā al-Maqtarī published her first novel under the title *Khalf al-shams* (Behind the Sun). It retraces the main political struggles that characterised the history of post-revolutionary Yemen, that is to say from the Sixties onwards. *Khalf al-shams* supplies a complete overview of Yemeni political events over the last five decades, and helps the reader understand the Yemeni Spring.

The text by Bushrā al-Maqtarī —who became famous during the revolution for being one of its youngest leaders, and was also threatened of death and declared an infidel²⁷ in the process— turns the writer into an icon of a revolution²⁸ that has produced only stillborn dreams, and for a number of reasons, all of which can be retraced to one major cause: the Islamists, the army and the tribes, which Bushrā al-Maqtarī calls “*luṣūs al-thawrāt*” (thieves of revolutions) and “*taḥāluf al-takhalluf*” (regression alliance), and who have robbed the young Yemenis who protested in *maydān al-taghyīr* (Change Square)²⁹ of their dreams.

The novel depicts events that unfold in an institution for political prisoners and mentally deranged convicts. It revolves around three characters with serious psychological

²⁶ Aḥmad Zayn, “Waqi‘ yamanī «mu‘aṭṭal» aṣl^{an}”.

²⁷ See Francesco De Angelis, “Chronicle of a Revolution in between Literature and Journalism, Conservative Claims and Progressive Struggles: Bushrā al-Maqtarī’s Literary Articles”. In Sobhi Bustami, Rasheed El-Enany et Wael Hamarneh (eds.), *La Littérature à l’heure du Printemps arabe*, Paris: Kerthala, 2016, pp. 277-296.

²⁸ Aḥmad Zayn, “Bushrā al-Maqtarī ayqūnat al-thawra al-yamaniyya al-shabba fī riwāyatihā al-ūlā: *Khalf al-shams*...ḥayā mumazzaqa sajjīnat kawābīsīhā”, *al-Ḥayāt*, No. 18012, July 28, 2012 [available at www.alhayat.com].

²⁹ This is the name given to the area in front of the new University of Sana, occupied by the anti-government demonstrators.

issues, who are also the narrating voices of the story: Yūsuf, Yaḥyā and Yaḥyā's wife. In their own way they each lead a life of suffering and disappointment. The destiny that awaits the characters as they seek a salvation they are unable even to imagine, is not merely tragic. Their ravings evoke the blurred image of a nation. That image becomes increasingly sharper, resulting in the portrait of a nation held hostage by war: Yemen sheds one war only to become involved in another —wars that are never very different from one another, and whose victims never achieve the honour of martyrdom.³⁰

It is significant that the only female character in the novel has no name of her own. She is only identified in relation to her husband. Throughout the novel the reader recognises her only as *zawjat Yaḥyā* (Yaḥyā's wife), or *ḥurma*, as her husband calls her. This female character is the daughter of a member of the Socialist Party of the South, forced to flee from the country on the eve of the civil war that broke out in 1994 between North and South Yemen. Thereafter, *zawjat Yaḥyā*, marries Yaḥyā the soldier, under the heavy persuasion of her own mother. Their relationship never actually blossoms into love, but instead is dominated by feelings of hatred. It is easy to see the status of Yemeni women reflected in the events that involve *zawjat Yaḥyā*. The very last thing that the protagonist in the novel does is to throw both his wife's medical records diagnosing cancer of the ovaries and her diary into the waters of the River Nile, thus symbolising extreme loss: both physical and spiritual. Bushrā al-Maḥṭarī brings together two characters who seem to share no affinity whatsoever in their life as a couple. She is a woman of the South, educated and raised in a politically committed family environment, while he is a Northerner, misogynist and uneducated, who hates all socialists from the South. *Zawjat Yaḥyā* becomes increasingly depressed, to the point of attempting suicide many times. As a form of therapy a psychologist advises her to put her thoughts in writing. The author thus creates an extreme contrast between the opposing viewpoints of the two main narrating characters. This gives the novel some interesting perspectives, through diverse points of view, sensitivities and psychological experiences. As the writer Wajdī al-Ahdal suggests, the pair —Yaḥyā and his wife— appear to be like a “duet”³¹ playing the same sad melody, although each one sings a different song. At a first reading Yaḥyā may seem like a gaoler maltreating both his wife and Yūsuf, the prisoner, but upon a closer examination he emerges as a victim too. He is the blind servant of his masters, persuaded that unquestioning obedience is the only way to achieve his ultimate goal: to be remembered as a protagonist in the destiny of his country. Yet he will discover reality very soon, when, sent to the Ṣa'da region, he will have to fight against Shi'ite nationalists, his fellow countrymen. The atrocities of the conflict will make him realise that it is not his war. The images of the women and children that he kills will haunt him for the rest of his life. Later he will unsuccessfully attempt suicide. After that he will continue his existence, as though he is waiting for his real life to start over at any moment.

The third narrating voice is that of Yūsuf, former university professor who tries to spread socialist ideals among his students. A member of a secret political association in his

³⁰ Aḥmad Zayn, “Bushrā al-Maḥṭarī ayqūnat al-thawra”.

³¹ Wajdī al-Ahdal, “Thalāthat adlā' sardiyya taḥkī «al-Yaman al-sa'id»”, *Majallat al-Dūḥa* 72, October 12, 2013 [available at www.aldohamagazine.com].

youth, he ends up in jail after a wave of arrests in the aftermath of the popular revolts which happened in Ta'iz in 1992.³² Although he is tortured to reveal the names of his comrades, he does not give in. This character, obsessed as he is by delusions of heroism and idealistic dreams, sinks into the morbid phobia of being persecuted by imaginary enemies and will never again manage to break free from his fears. A monologue reveals the deepest dimension of this character's soul; using the interior monologue as a mode, Yūsuf imagines that he is conversing with the man who tortured him for so long. His memories are mixed up and disconnected, but the most important thing, deposited like sediment at the very base of his memory, turns out to be the fact that as a child he had been abandoned by his mother, only in order that she could be married to the gas-seller. It is this very episode that causes him to change the peaceful course of his life; in an attempt to compensate for the loss of his mother and to assess his own virility, he is persuaded to defy fortune by becoming involved in a secret political association. Like Yaḥyā, he too is a frustrated man who ends up not believing in anything at all. Not only do his party comrades betray him during the war, but also Yūsuf realise how inconsistent is the ideology of the group to which he belongs:

We used to take to the streets; we would be in the front line of the riots. Our speeches would reach to the very top of the sky, and then in the evening we would go back to the party headquarters and get drunk in order to practice our ideology.³³

Although the narrative structure of *Khalf al-Shams* is well elaborated and the narrative technique is rigorous (the three narrators, for instance, take up the same narrative space, and alternate regularly in telling their story), the process of reading the novel is actually not easy, especially for someone with little knowledge of Arabic or of the modern history of Yemen. What makes the comprehension of the text of al-Maqtārī somewhat arduous, more often than not, is the ample use of the techniques of association of ideas and stream of consciousness. The novel questions fratricidal wars and tribal arrogance, and rudely exposes religious figures who always have a *fatwa* at the ready and are always willing to give their blessing to the wrongdoings of the powerful against the Yemeni people.³⁴ The writer tends to narrate events through the inner consciousness of the speaker, and, as a result, the reader is confronted by what appear to be long tirades on tribes, the unification of South and North Yemen, women, wars, disloyal soldiers, and fighters with little or no interest in fighting their own fellow citizens. The writer then confronts the reader with three stark, naked souls, who erode progressively until they ultimately reach total deterioration.

The effect of the almost constant use of stream of consciousness is that the novel seems to have no real plot, or, as al-Ahdal says “*Khalf al-shams* does not have an objective plot but only a mental one that exists in the minds of the characters, a plot that cannot be shared by others”. The narration, which does not follow the natural course of time, is based on

³² In 1992 there were revolts in all the major Yemeni cities, following a rise in the prices of food.

³³ Bushrā al-Maqtārī, *Khalf al-shams* (al-Dār al-Bayḍā': al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-'arabī, 2012), p 33.

³⁴ Aḥmad Zayn, “Waqi' yamanī «mu'aṭṭal» aṣl^{am} wa-l-muthaqqafūn ghayr mubāliyyin”.

digressions and reminiscences of forgotten moments, thus reducing time to a series of detached moments.³⁵ The fact that there is no subdivision into chapters or parts, but rather, that the novel is presented as a block instalment, makes it seem like a long uninterrupted monologue. It is as if we were seeing only one character, someone who is suffering because of a bitter reality in the face of obscurantism and tyranny; someone who lives with the feeling of being constantly left out, an outcast who feels everyone is plotting against him (or her). Notwithstanding this, it is by means of such narrative techniques that al-Maqtarī is able to project her criticism of actions carried out by the government and to have her characters expose disquieting truths and break the taboos imposed by an increasingly bigoted and conformist society.

Whereas ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maqtarī believes *Khalf al-shams* to be a realistic novel,³⁶ it must be acknowledged that the narrative is not devoid of symbolism. We could, for instance, hazard an interpretation which would claim that *zawjat Yaḥyā*, who undergoes the removal of her uterus, is the symbol of Southern Yemen when taken over by Northern Yemen. And what else could the marriage with Yaḥyā represent if not a reference to the 1994 civil war, which marked the supremacy of the North over the South? The prisoner character (Yūsuf), who becomes insane and is no longer able even to sort out his thoughts, is the symbol of North Yemen. The name is in itself proof of it. Yūsuf is related to the idea of beauty,³⁷ an indication of the beauty of this country which in ancient times was called Arabia Felix because of its wealth and natural beauty. Various clues seem to support this interpretation, among which is the marriage between the mother of Yūsuf and the gas-seller, another event representing the loss of national sovereignty and the passage of political decisions from the local community to the powerful neighbouring oil-producing countries.

As for the soldier (Yaḥyā), he seems to be the symbol of the Yemeni tribes that tortured Yūsuf (representing the North) and became his gaoler, the tribes that kidnapped the woman (the South) causing her to become sterile and denying her any hope of fertility of both spirit and body.

This brief essay has tried to show how, throughout the history of modern Yemeni literature, there may have been figures of great depth, that have turned their artistic commitment into an instrument used to establish a form of communication with the public, striving to imbue it with values that would contribute to the making of a better society. The reason why the words «iltizām» and «Yemen» are hardly ever to be found in the same article is

³⁵ Aḥmad Zayn, “Bushrā al-Maqtarī ayqūnat al-thawra”.

³⁶ ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maqtarī, “Bushrā al-Maqtarī fī riwāyatihā al-ūlā «Khalf al-shams» tanbush dhākirat al-Yaman”, *al-Hayāt*, No. 18147, December 10, 2012 [available at www.alhayat.com].

³⁷ In the Holy Koran, we find the following verses: “Ladies said in the City: «The wife of the (great) ‘Aziz is seeking to seduce her slave [Joseph] from his (true) self: Truly hath he inspired her with violent love: we see she is evidently going astray». When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them: she gave each of them a knife: and she said (to Joseph), «Come out before them». When they saw him, they did extol him, and (in their amazement) cut their hands: they said, «Allah preserve us! no mortal is this! this is none other than a noble angel!», *Sūrat Yūsuf*, verses 30-31, translation by Yūsuf ‘Alī, viewable at quran.com.

probably because Yemeni intellectuals did not possess any kind of framework or common ground on which they could establish any form of debate. There has been nothing like the Lebanese magazine *al-Ādāb*, for instance, nor there has ever been a Writers' Union in Yemen that is truly independent of the government, quite the opposite in fact. Over the last few years the Yemeni Writers' Union has been the object of criticism by many intellectuals, either for being submissive towards politicians, or for not having any real cultural project. This has resulted in Yemeni poets and writers simply doing the best they can, and mere publication being considered a great success. But what also hinders the emergence of a functioning cultural circle is the material conditions within which most of the Yemeni writers live. As denounced by the Yemeni writer and critic, Aḥmad Zayn, there are no theatres in Yemen, no publishing houses of relevance, no prestigious literary awards, and no avant-garde magazines; even cinemas have been closed down. This has caused writers to shut themselves in, to become more and more isolated; at times, writing has represented a rebirth or a form of therapy, but, as in many other instances, has failed to become either of these.³⁸

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³⁸ Aḥmad Zayn, "Waqī' yamanī «mu'aṭṭal» aṣlān".

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