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"They Die Strangers": Stories from Yemen

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the novel *They Die Strangers* (1972) by the Yemeni novelist Mohammed Ahmed Abdul Wali as a postcolonial narrative of emigration in which the writer argues about what is called the ideology of return. An emigrant himself, the writer discusses the impact of long- term emigration on the individual, his family and the society as a whole. The discussion, using a postcolonial perspective, covers issues related to the construction of the Yemeni identity, body politics, the Yemeni farmers‟ dream and the representation of women focusing on the body-land association. The discussion concludes with considering the novel as a parody against those who migrate leaving their women and their land behind, only to live and die as strangers.

INTRODUCTION

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However, with the rise of the modern Yemeni novel for which Abdul Wali is the pioneering figure, he was, perhaps the first writer to give voice to women by bringing the connection between the body and the land. His association of the female body with the land corresponds with modern trends in the contemporary Arab novel where the nation has been rewritten through the body to form what has been known in the field of literary criticism as "body-politics". Faulkner (2005) in her critical study, *National Allegory: Land and Body in Nawal EL Saadawi and Asia Dejbar*, contends that Arab novelists both males and females, uses the female body as a trope to rewrite the nation through the body in an effort to represent a "body politics"2 after independence. Both Al-Musawi (2003) and Faulkner (2005) have called this discursive and thematic strategy as body politics which has something to do with considering the female body as a symbol for the land and nation. Whether it is done deliberately or not, Abdul Wali‟s metaphorical link between the image of the land and the female body finds its echoes in his Arab predecessors‟s works such as those by Yahya Haqqi, Naguib Mahfouz, Kateb Yacin, Mohammed Dib and Ghassan Kanafani.

Abdul Wali creates a strong bond between the woman and the land; both are deserted by the males who depart searching for a better livelihood abroad. These two constructs are metaphorically linked in what may be called a body-land association. This association is depicted as a source of attraction to the departing males forming what is called the ideology of return for the Yemeni migrants in the narrative. In what follows, some thematic issues are explored pertaining to identity formation and the body-land association.

THE YEMENI IMMIGRATION AND THE IDEOLOGY OF RETURN

Emigration is a characteristic of the Yemeni people, as Swanson (1979) suggests in his anthropological study about emigration and the development of Yemen3. In fact, the word becomes synonymous with the history of Yemen since the collapse of Marib Dam about 575 A.D4. This event has been recorded and narrated in the *Qur'an* in a chapter named after the land

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of Sheba. The *Holy Qur'an* states that:

There was indeed a sign for Sheba in their dwelling-place: Two gardens on the right hand and the left (as who should say): Eat of the provision of your Lord and render thanks to Him. A fair land and an indulgent Lord! But they turned away, so We sent on them the flood of „Iram" and in exchange for their two gardens gave them two gardens bearing bitter fruit…(34: 15-16*)* .

The first wave of Yemeni emigrants was said to be caused by the destruction of the Dam which was a source of prosperity to the ancient inhabitants of the land of Sheba. Anyone interested in the history of this area can find a parallel relationship between this incident and the departure of people who fled seeking better chances elsewhere.

Nowadays many Yemenis are familiar with emigration in their lives, as they grow up in the absence of their parents (forefathers, and other relatives such as uncles and cousins). Natural, economic, political and other factors have driven the Yemeni people out of their country. In fact, economic factors appear to be the main motivation behind most of Yemeni emigration. Yemeni emigrants, first and foremost, leave their country in search of better opportunities. Although there are no reliable statistical information about the exact number of Yemenis outside their country, based on media news, there were around two million Yemeni people residing in the Gulf states up to 1990 when Saddam Hussien invaded Kuwait. Most of them were forced to leave due to political reasons because the Yemeni government was said to support the Iraqi invasion. There are also many Yemeni communities in the U.S.A., Europe, Africa and South East Asia. Exact figures are lacking but most of the Yemenis in the U.S.A. reside in New York, California, Michigan, Detroit, San Francisco, and Oakland. The Yemeni communities in Europe have resided mainly in England and France (Al- Ashwal, 1997).

In Southeast Asia, the impact of Yemeni emigration is quite remarkable. The Yemenis started arriving in this area in the early 18th and 19th century residing mainly in what is known today as Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore (Arai, 2004). Professor Farid Al-Attas of Universiti Malaya (UM), in an interview with *Yemen Times* during his visit to Yemen, suggests that there are around

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8 million people in Southeast Asia who can trace their ancestry to Yemen. These descendants now have contributed significantly to the process of development of their new societies. Many have risen to high ranking positions, be they governmental, commercial or academic. Members of this community still retain their Yemeni family titles such as Al-Kaf, Al- Saqqaf, Al- Junayed, Al-Attas and Al-Aidarus.

Unlike other forms of the modern waves of emigration that have taken place in the colonial and postcolonial era where migrants sought permanent residency in the targeted societies, migration for the Yemenis is seen as a transitional stage in their lives, a step towards success back home. It is a means towards an end. This is not to say that many Yemenis do not settle down in the societies to which they migrate. What distinguishes them from others is that in their hearts they believe that they will return one day. To this effect, both as individuals and as groups, they develop *an ideology of return* to their country. As a consequence, they intend to invest their money, hopes and dreams in their homeland regardless of how long they stay abroad In order to understand the thematic structure of *TDS*, it is important to place it in its Arabic context with novels about similar content. In this way, the novel belongs to a group of novels by Arab and African novelists who take the immigration of the protagonist and his subsequent contact with the host culture as the main motif to their theme and narrative structure. Thus, such novels as *Al-Duktur Ibrahim* (1938), *The Latin Quarter* (1954), *The Saint's Lamp* (1945), and *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) belong to the same category. The protagonists of these novels traveled to metropolitan centers such as London and Paris where they were subjected to cultural encounters between the East and the West. The pretext for their departure is to obtain knowledge and education in the colonizer‟s culture.

TDS to a certain degree belongs to the same category but with major variation. The main difference is that the protagonist‟s destination is not the metropolitan center, but he makes his way towards a "minority within the larger minority"6. He travels from Yemen, considered as one of the most peripheral areas of the Arab world, to Ethiopia, another peripheral destination in the center-periphery dichotomy of the world as dictated by the colonialist discourse, which divides

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the world into a center and its periphery (Ashcroft et al., 1995). Therefore, the major cause behind the Yemeni male character‟s departure as inferred from the text is not to seek cultural and educational enterprise. Rather, he leaves his land to escape from extreme poverty and drought that struck the country after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Turks; they have left Yemen a „wasteland‟ after four centuries of rule and domination (Wenner, 1986).

The ascendancy of the neopatriarchal system of the Zayedi Imamate7 and its subsequent policies of isolation and an agrarian economy in a rapidly changing world put the country in a critical situation in the modern and post modern world. Political oppression was there, but affected a limited portion of the population concentrated in the southern part of the former North Yemen from where the present writer‟s family originated. Economic obstacles were the main force for driving the Yemenis to the outside world.

In theorizing the different reasons behind the immigration of the Yemenis and the presence of this topic in the Yemeni local literature, Abdul Aziz Al-Maqalih[8] states:

Emigration is the central issue of each novelistic work that appeared in Yemen, whether like the one attempted by Al-Zubairy or that seemed to achieve more considerable maturity by the Yemeni writers later on. Emigration is the problem of problems for the Yemeni people. There are emigrants from almost every home. The villages‟ strongest youths have been taken away by emigration (Khisbak, 1999: 21).

Al-Maqalih (1999) asserts that there are always economic drives behind the Yemenis‟ departure. Ships carried the Yemeni youth to different parts of the world in order to help those who were left behind. These immigrants arrived on the shores of Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia and even Europe and the U.S with the intention of returning to Yemen one day. Their emigration was not an end but a means towards an end, which was to lead a happy, stable and successful life at home. This determination to be back home is referred to as the ideology of return (Swanson, 1979) which functions as the main motif to the thematic structure of *TDS*. The unusual recurrence of this theme in such novels as *Strangers in their Homelands*, *The Fogeway*, and *Al-Batool Village* (Khisbak,

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1999) leads Al-Maqalih (1999) to remark in his critical appreciation of *The Fog Way* that: "He who does not emigrate dies, he losses his prestige in the southern Yemeni community city. He is considered as an unrespectable person. Emigration is like life for him" (Khisbak, 1999: 24).

Abdul Hameed Ibrahim, in his critical study about the Yemeni fiction (the novel and short story), notes that emigration is related to the Yemeni people. It is synonymous with the history of Yemen since the dawn of history. It becomes a social problem if we consider the fact that "out of six persons, one migrates" (Ibrahim, 1976: 192). He notes that many Yemenis are familiar with emigration in their lives as they grow up in the absence of their parents (forefathers and other relatives such as uncles and cousins). Yemeni local literature, both poetry and prose, responds to this phenomenon by recording its effects on the individual and society. Many poems were composed lamenting the migrant and describing his agonies and melancholies, such as Motahar Al-Iryani‟s poem "Al-Balah" (The Struggle, our translation) and Mohamed Ana‟am Ghalib‟s poem "Al-Ghareeb" (The Stranger, our translation)

The narrative of *TDS* relates the story of a Yemeni shopkeeper, Abdou Said, the central character of the novel, who migrates to Ethiopia and settles in Sodset Kilo, one of the quarters of Addis Ababa. By the time we meet him in the very outset he has spent ten years during which he struggles hard to resist assimilation and keeps his connection with Yemen, where he has left a wife (whose face he cannot remember) and a child, and devotes his life to the dream of returning one day as a wealthy man. He works non-stop, and lives in squalor in the back of his shop in Addis Ababa, minimizing his expenditure to shocking limits so that he can send all his profits home. Through such hard living in his sojourn, his remittances bring about the achievement of his dream for soon we come to know that this has paid for a magnificent house whose picture he hung on the wall of his shop.

His obsession with his personal quest causes him to avoid any relationship that might enmesh him in the local community, including those with Yemenis; he does not even contribute, like others, to The Free Yemeni Movement (The Liberals Party). His only human contacts are over the counter

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with his costumers during the day and with dispensable sexual partners of the indigenous black women. He could not resist the allure of African women, succumbing to a series of encounters which result in fathering children he never acknowledges. He utilizes everything for his own personal interest. Even his one regular relationship with the rich wife of an important official is selfish, avoiding tax payments through the protection of this woman‟s use of her husband.

One day an event occurs that threatens all his plans and turns his life upside down. The Muslim mother of one of his illegitimate children dies, and her Christian friend, Ta‟atto, also a prostitute as the mother had been, begs Abdou Said to accept responsibility and acknowledge the child as his son. Despite the fact that she once gave him her virginity, and that as a Muslim he has a duty to prevent his son being raised by the Christians and among prostitutes, he rejects her appeal. In desperation, she asks the Yemeni *Sayyid10* to interfere. The Sayyid seizes the chance to enhance his own reputation for piety and closeness to God, transferring the whole matter to a prominent personality of the Yemeni community, while keeping himself away from such "dirty" affairs (he only receives gifts and presents from people in gratitude for his religious services).

Sayyid Amin tells Hajj Abdul Latif that he has learned about this problem directly from God, and that He has selected the Hajj from among others to be his instrument in persuading Abdou Said to perform his religious duty. The self-important Hajj is delighted to receive this honour and bustles about in search of Abdou Said and his shop. Ironically, during their meeting Abdou Said is very suspicious at the arrival of the Hajj at his shop thinking that he wants subscription to the Liberal Party again. However, he relaxes once this is not the aim. The Hajj and his companion, Salih Saif, fail to persuade Abdou Said, who is now planning to go to Mecca to perform the Hajj, to wash himself from his sins and go back home as clean as if he is born again. His long-cherished plan to escape to Yemen fails because divine punishment is waiting for him and ultimately he dies by suffocation inside his shop, dreaming of his house and the never-attained prestigious life in his village. The child is saved and adopted by the Hajj‟s assistant known as the secretary, who neither belongs to Yemen nor to Ethiopia, but who is stuck in the middle.

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This brief account of the story inescapably does grave injustice to the vigor of the narrative and the subtlety of the novel‟s construction of the Yemeni (imagined) community, its attendant issues of identity, dreams of prosperity, and women‟s vicinity. These issues are fore grounded in the subsequent sections.

EMIGRATION: IDENTITY AND ALIENATION

Abdul Wali‟s novel presents a realistic picture of the Yemeni emigration in the 40s and 50s. The narrative revolves around two generations of Yemeni migrants in Ethiopia on the neighbouring coast of Africa. The first generation is of Yemenis who have left their homeland in the early nineteen-thirties for a better life for their families, such as Ahmed Abdul Wali, the father of Abdul Wali. In the novel, Abdul Wali depicts an ironic picture of his father‟s generation as one that is characterized by religious hypocrisy, promiscuity and insincerity, and whose continuous search for wealth makes them betray their identities as Muslims and as Yemenis. As a result, they gain materially, but do not actually find enjoyment in their wealth as they discover the reality of life, that all lives will end with death. Thus Abdul Wali presents a discourse of resistance in showing his depiction of the earlier generation of migrants for whom migration was simply a means of materialistic gains. In contrast, the second generation of migrants are portrayed as having genuine love and longing for their country, particularly shown in their concern to help bring about its independence and liberation. Ironically, this is the generation referred to as the half- breed, the hybrid ones who are half Yemeni and half Ethiopian.

In the novel, Abdou Said, the main character, belongs to the first generation that has spent fifteen years in the Ethiopian quarter of Sodset Kilo in Addis Ababa. From the very outset, the narrator introduces us to a stereotypical Yemeni immigrant who is engaged in a fierce struggle to achieve materialistic success in order to return one day to his village a wealthy man having an expanse of land, a beautiful house and four wives. The writer‟s authenticity in representing his subject matter is achieved by his manipulation of narrative techniques. Among the various techniques accessible

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to him, he uses two devices in order to communicate his theme in a subtle manner. The setting of the narrative and the act of characterization help us to discern his meanings.

As for the setting, the writer has located the majority of his fiction in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia and Eritrea. These two locales were the most frequent destination of Yemeni migrants prior to the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. It is in this place that the problem of the *muwalldin* (hybrids) occurs. In other words, it is in this locale that Abdul Wali has created an imagined community whose members are from the margins of the Yemeni community in Addis Ababa. They are those "Yemenis in exile and exiled in Yemen" (our translation from the Arabic of the title of Abdulla Al-Baradoni‟s famous poem). As illustrated by the character of the secretary, it is this group of *muwalldins* who are to revolt against their elders.

The construction of displaced and hybrid Yemenis is a remarkable discursive strategy of Abdul Wali‟s fictional world. The fact that Abdul Wali himself was a *muwalled* (hybrid) since his mother was Ethiopian, might explicate his serious engagement with this issue. As Wier (2001) points out:

This birth status undoubtedly sensitized Abdul Wali to the race issue, which is a subtext in several stories where skin color is mentioned, and is a major theme in two stories in which muwallads prominently figure, ("On the Road to Asmara", and *TDS*) ("Introduction" to *TDS*, 2001: 1).

What is remarkable about this setting is that it is built with recurring characters, themes and motifs. Like Naguib Mahfouz‟s famous alley in Cairo in which his serious novels take place such as *Midaq Alley* (1947) and the *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-1957), Tayyib Salih‟s village of Wad Hamid and Faulkner‟s Yoknapatawpha county, Addis Ababa is a constant setting for Abdul Wali‟s fiction. It allows the writer to foreground the themes of alienation, longing, separation, hybridity and identity. To this end, Abdul Wali depicts different alienated and rootless characters in the same locale.

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Abdul Wali, through his use of setting and characterization, reflects a radical departure from the conventions of Yemeni local literature which had hitherto been meant for edification and entertainment, instead of being representative of the social reality of Yemen. What distinguishes Abdul Wali‟s fiction is his characterization of realistic or believable figures to communicate his themes. He uses similes and metaphors in constructing his characters as we will see in the case of the central character. It is obvious that he draws heavily on colonialist discourse in constructing Abdou Said‟s character. At one point, the writer appears as if he is contesting orientalist discourse in representing the orient (the Arabs in this context) as a feminised people (Said, 1978). Yet, his way of rendering this character corresponds to the colonialist discourse of depicting the orient (Arabs and Africans) as hyper- masculine (Fanon, 1967). For example, Abdou Said‟s huge physique and giant body is described as a source of attraction to the black women in the narrative. Almost all his costumers are women who regularly seek his sexual services. The narrator, in fact, greatly exaggerates the sexual behaviour of this character, who is transformed into a mere sexual animal who has nothing to do at night except to fill his bed with prostitutes. “There was something about him that drew women to him. He flirted with them all…He never rejected any woman who came to him. No one knew whether he himself went after them or whether they pursued him…” (*TDS*, 2001: 21).

NARRATING THE NATION IN THEY DIE STRANGERS

Hourani (2002),, in his seminal work, *History of the Arab People* points out that the period from 1945-1956 15 in the Arab World is known as the age of independence and nationalism. There was a national fever calling for social and political change in the entire Arab world, and Yemen was no exception. Literature, and culture, more generally, occupies a privileged place in nationalism. According to Ernest Gellner, “Nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of high culture on society”16. The main component of this high culture is literature as Timothy Brennan argues in his essay “The National longing for a form”. Brennan, throughout his essay, asserts that it was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations. Literature, in general, and the novel, in particular, have participated in the formation of modern nations as

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Benedict Anderson has argued in his influential book, *Imagined Communities*.

In his study, Anderson argues that nations are "imagined communities" which can be read and constructed through literature, particularly through the novel. According to Anderson‟s argument, the novel becomes essential to the representation of the nation, communicating "the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, authors and readers, moving onward through calendrical time." (Anderson, 1991:27). Moreover, "Fictions seep quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (Anderson, 1991: 36). Third world nationalism is no exception, prompting Fredric Jameson to describe the third world novel as a national allegory17.

What is important here is the relationship between the novel as a platform of expression and the nation and national consciousness being written about and represented in this platform. Building critically on Benedict Anderson‟s work, Bhabha (1992: 2) urges us generally to "encounter the nation as it is written". *TDS* as the first real Yemeni novel that has national underpinnings similar to those advocated by major Arab novelists in the Arab literary center such as Mohamed Hussien Haykal‟s novel *Zainab* (1913) and Tawfiq Al-Hakim‟s novel *Return of Spirit* (1933) 18. There is a strong relationship between this novel and the Yemeni intellectuals‟ call for modernizing the Yemeni society socially, politically andotherwise. These intellectuals believed in the power of the word and "the permission to narrate" (Bayoumi & Robin, 2000: 243-266) in calling for a national awareness about the state of their country, which was under a form of government that comfortably fit into the sociologist Max Weber‟s category of "patrimonial traditional political system" (Burrowes, 1994: 4).

They formed a national movement that was called The Yemeni Liberal party or the Free Yemenis. This movement played a role in the failed attempt to oust the Hamid Al-Din family on the

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occasion of the assassination of Imam Yahya in 1948. The narrative makes many references to this state of affairs throughout the novel. These commentaries appeared in the characters‟ dialogues or in the narrator‟s comments. Furthermore, two of the major characters were introduced as members of the Free Yemenis who fled to Ethiopia following the demise of their revolt against the Imam. Hajj Abdul Latif is described as a short man with a full body and a small beard. He was forty-five, one of the rich Yemenis of Addis Ababa who were leaders of the community. He had played a role in the 1948 revolution, for he was one of the Yemeni liberals; until today, he still believed in that cause and offered lots of help (*TDS*, 2001:42).

Abdou Said and the other characters are aware of such belonging but do not want to sacrifice. They believe that "they are from the same country, which makes [them] cousins. [They] are all Yemenis. If something hurts one of [them], it hurts [them] all..." (*TDS*, 2001: 50). Ironically, this is only talk, but when it comes to work, these people proved to be egoists concerned about their own needs only, ignoring higher aims in life. In this way, these people, once dead, will soon be forgotten for they have no noble aims to live by. It is apparent that, in the above passage, the novelist makes use of the stylization device in a Bakhtinian sense to foreground the solidarity and unity among the various members of his imagined community in the Ethiopian sojourn.

Bakhtin (1984), in his theory of "double-voicedness", theorizes many modes of dialogic discourse that he identifies in his analysis of Dostoevsky‟s fiction in 1929. Among the many concepts of intertextuality, Bakhtin (1984) refers to what he calls "stylization". Stylization refers to an author‟s imitation of a certain person‟s style or discourse to convey his own purposes. According to Bakhtin (1984) "the author‟s thought, once having penetrated someone else‟s discourse and made its home in it, does not collide with the other‟s thought, but rather follows after it in the same direction, merely making that direction conventional" (Hassan, 2003:83).

Here, Abdul Wali stylizes the Prophet Muhammad‟s hadith (tradition), which means that all believers are like a unified body, if something hurts one, it hurts all. The main reason behind

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using such a technique is to give a religious aspect to solidarity between the members of his community. That is, to base his call for mutual love and cooperation on a religious basis. Through his own sense of loss and distortion between two worlds, two lives, two countries—Yemen and Ethiopia— and two races; Arab and African, Abdul Wali, his narrator and the text construct an implied national conciseness in the minds of a group of characters who live in a foreign land. However, what is more significant about this construction is that the novelist, surprisingly, uses gender boundaries in his fictional construction of the Yemeni nation. The construction of the national identity in his fiction is gendered as his meanings of nation are highly permeated with notions of masculinity and femininity. Males are not portrayed as desirable figures; rather, they are presented as traitors who betray their land when they leave it and migrate. On the other hand, he idealizes women and regards them as the real producers of the nation creating an amazing association between the beauty of the female body and the warmth and security of the land of Yemen. These women do not leave their lands; they struggle, strive and bear the suffering of losing their husbands, sons and other relatives for the sake of the land and the nation. In this way, he creates a symbolic connection between women, land and nation. Nira Yuval-Davis evaluates such connection when she says that "women reproduce the nation biologically, culturally and symbolically" (Amireh, 2003:748). In the case of Abdul Wali‟s narrative, women produce the nation biologically and symbolically. The cultural production is still a masculine monopoly if we consider the masculine overtones of *TDS* as mentioned above.

WOMEN AND LAND IN *THEY DIE STRANGERS*

Women issues are among the postcolonial matters that occupy a remarkable place in the contemporary Arabic narrative terrain (Al-Musawi, 2003). These issues are caught between two extremes of male intellectualism; they are usually to be discussed in "a broad national or Islamic framework." (Al-Musawi, 2003:41). For the Islamically oriented writers, the female body is treated with respect and sacredness, whereas for the nationalists, the woman is associated with love, desire and passion. In the last decades and after the rise of movements of emancipation, the call for women‟s participation in all spheres of life becomes recognizable. Narrative fiction

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becomes one of the platforms for representing women and their assumed roles in society. The main motif for this representation is the call for the change of women‟s role in the society. Many Arab novelists make clear connections between the image of the woman and the land, or the nation. Egyptian novelists such as Hakayl, Yahya Haqqi, Al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz made use of this device to represent the state of Egypt in the aftermath of independence. This trope is further adopted by Arab female novelists including Nawal Al-Saddawi *Women at Point Zero* (1979), Ahlam Mustagnemi‟s *Memory in the Flesh* (1993) and Hanan Al-Shaykh‟s *The Story of Zahra* (1994). These women writers adopted this strategy to „decolonize‟ the female body from the hegemony of patriarchal discourses and patriarchal practices. In fact, this strategy has its essence in the Qur‟an before it began to be used in fiction. Allah in the Qur‟an states that" Your women are a tilth for you [to cultivate] so go to your tilth as ye will." (*The Qur'an 2*:223).

This body-land association is a recurring theme in Abdul Wali‟s fiction. His story *The Land Salma*, for instance, holds a strong connection between the land as longed for by the immigrant protagonist and his wife, who has been left behind to take care of the land. In this narrative, the writer shows a genuine sympathy for the cause of the deserted women and the land. The young married woman, Salma, thinks deeply about her entrapment and how to get out of the mess. Her marriage does not improve her status; rather, it enhances her slavery for she only changes bosses from her father to her husband. She only finds her release and refreshment in her devotion to the land. Thus, she decides to teach and inculcate in her boy how to love the land.

Abdou Said‟s wife and his mother are referred to in the text as unnamed characters, which mean that they have no identity. As for his wife, she is "pure" like his country to which he longs to return one day as a wealthy man. The Yemeni women‟s status stands for the situation of the land of Yemen. These women, like Abdou‟s mother, are situated in the margin of the society that lives in absolute ignorance and darkness. They are deserted for many years by their men in the same manner that Yemen is deserted by its youth, "We‟ve left our country and our women behind." (115).

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Abdou Said‟s indulgence with Ethiopian prostitutes has affected his memory of his wife and his land. He later finds it difficult to remember his wife, and only sometimes succeeds. The narrator states that "her face blended with those of ten other women, he encountered in Addis Ababa. This angered him. He did not want to compare his wife to these other women. From his perspective, she was a different type "pure" like his country" (30). The issue of purity sounds a little bit problematic and it can be interpreted in many ways. At one level, Abdou Said‟s wife image is linked in his mind to the many women he had an affair with. This bothered him because he knew that his wife is not like these women who sell their bodies. She is pure in the sense that she is bound to him by the institution of marriage which organizes and controls the relationship between men and women.

Abdul Wali uses African prostitutes in several stories to represent moral danger, as he sees it, for the expatriate life in Ethiopia, and portrays them as jolly, sassy, blatantly erotic women in charge of their lives, in contrast to the Yemeni village women whom he depicts as sad, repressed, abandoned victims (*TDS*, 2001: 9)

These women are situated in the center of the Yemeni migrants who have left their women and their land as if to waste their youth, energy and money on such affairs. Such representations help us to get the writer‟s tone of hate and derision for the migration. What is surprising is that the leading prostitute figure is portrayed as more noble, human and honest than the other male characters, including the religious characters. She exhibits an admirable willingness to solve the problem of an innocent illegitimate boy, while others deny their help including his "alleged father". Ta‟atto, Abdou Said‟s mistress, draws an example that a woman is not only a "body", she is a human with a mind to judge and a heart to love. She is a ware of her dilemma and, given another choice, she would never be a prostitute. She longs for a happy and healthy life, but there is no one willing to take her as a wife, thus "she knew she was sinning. But what could she do? Her alternative was to die of hunger" (40).

Her case might indicate that the construction of her character in such a way suggests that the

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writer critiques the culture and the society of his mother. Neither Fatima, nor Ta‟atto nor any other Ethiopian female, is born a prostitute and no one can be. These women are the victims of their social environment. These women have been exposed to the worst state of oppression a human being can tolerate by the Italian colonial powers and enhanced by the "national" neocolonial authority. "The Italians have passed through here and left behind lots of things, including this woman." (*TDS*, 2001:133) the narrator tells us in another story located in the same setting. The local poverty and lack of work that drive the Yemenis to leave their land have the same effect on these women who see in their bodies an easy and better choice to escape hunger.

Someone might ask why Abdul Wali did not do the same in representing the women in Yemen in the same way as the Ethiopian ones. The answer is quiet clear. The Yemeni society is a religious and conservative one in which women are considered as "sacred" beings, especially in the rural society. The novelist pays very close attention to the cultural difference between the statuses of women in both societies. Then, since he criticizes the migrants for their departure, he encourages them to return because there are many lovable things waiting for them, among them their women.

What is significantly postcolonial about Abdul Wali is his ability to create marginalized and underprivileged characters that can smoothly fit in a post colonial context. As a writer caught up in the aftermath of the British domination to Aden, which was a major symbol of the empire, he appeared to be sympathetic to the "subaltern" in the Yemeni context. Sylvia Shelala‟s assertion that Abdul Wali‟s concern and sympathy for women and their plight in a society where everything is dominated and appropriated by males may account for such placement20.

Generally, Abdul-Wali, respects women, be they Ethiopian prostitutes or those women who are left behind in his homeland, taking care of the land and rearing the children whose fathers are foreigners in a foreign land. He brought a connection between women, the land and the national consciousness, which makes the narrative fit into a postcolonial context. As one critic contends, "In the nationalist discourse land is equated to the female body and both are held as sacred. The

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enemy should not be allowed to defile them, as they stand for honor and should enlist, therefore, male sacrifice" (Al-Musawi, 2003:212). The body-land association becomes more elucidated when viewed in binary oppositions of natives and expatriates, need and desire, male and female, black and white, Muslim and Christian and so forth.

CONCLUSION

As the pioneering figure of the postcolonial Yemeni novel, Abdul Wali‟s fiction can be read as a direct criticism of the emigration and its attendant issues of identity crisis and the alienation predicament. The negative impacts are not confined to individual males, but extend to affect the migrants‟ families and the society as a whole. Women are deserted and the country is kept backward due to the departure of its men. In this respect, *TDS* can be read as a parody against those who abandoned their land and their women to lose their youth and virility in a foreign land. For Abdul Wali, these men turned their backs on their land in pursuit of money, with devastating consequences. In abandoning their women, their nation and their land, these Yemeni emigrants die unusual deaths. As suggested by the title, they die as an unidentified people. They die as strangers for whom graves are the ultimate outcome of their struggle.

A critical study of a translated novel such as *TDS* may lead to the significance of new literature as part of a new form of literacy that enables the appropriation of knowledge about marginalized cultures such as Yemeni culture, thus giving voice to the voiceless and the misunderstood or misrepresented. The unpacking of the "marginalized" Arab voice may construct new concepts and techniques in reading postcolonial works. This act of reading relies much on how readers make relevant of the new knowledge formed in the translated novels.

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