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## REFERENCES

Identity Constructions in Contemporary Yemeni Novels / Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi.-  
Narratio Aliena? Studien des Bonner Zentrums für Transkulturelle Narratologie, vol.  
13.- Berlin: EB-Verlag Dr. Brandt, 2020.- 204 p.

- 1 The lack of study and criticism of modern Yemeni literature in a language other than Arabic and edited outside Yemen could almost be considered a thing of the past following the publication of two doctoral dissertations by Yemeni students abroad: the first was published by Antelak al-Mutawakel in 2005 at the University of Amsterdam on *The Writing of Yemeni Women Writers* and the second was published this year in Berlin, under the title: *Identity Constructions in Contemporary Yemeni Novels*. Also arising from a doctoral dissertation, that of Yemeni researcher Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi, this is the second book in English dealing with contemporary Yemeni narrative literature. This book reflects a revival of interest in Yemeni narrative literature that has occurred inside and outside Yemen in recent years, which is also embodied in two recent books written in Arabic on this subject: one, by Yemeni 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Bāqays, was published in 2014 in Aden (*Thamanūn 'Āmman Min al-Riwāya fīl-Yaman* [Eighty Years of Novel in Yemen] (2014)) and the other, by Samāḥ 'Abd Allah Aḥmad al-Farrān, is also a doctoral dissertation and was published in 2016 in 'Ammān (*Thaqāfāt al-Nās: Qira'ah fīl-sard al-Yamanī al-mu'āṣir* [The Culture of Text: A Reading into Modern Yemeni Narratives]).

- 2 Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi's dissertation, *Identity Constructions in Contemporary Yemeni Novels*, is published as part of a collection by Bonn University's Center for Transcultural Narratology studies, and was written between 2015 and 2019 in the framework of the research project "The Struggles over Identity, Morality, and Public Space in Middle Eastern Cities", established by the Volkswagen Foundation at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg in Germany. During the preparation of his dissertation, al-Rubaidi was also an Associate Fellow in CARPO – the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO was founded in 2014 by German-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. The work of this center is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient). Today, Al-Rubaidi is a Lecturer at the Gender Development Research and Studies Center (GDRSC) at the University of Sana'a, where he teaches social sciences methodologies, discourse analysis, theorizing state and civil society. He also supervises student projects that deal with social and political issues in Yemen. Prior to his PhD, Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi was a student of Arabic Literature at the University of Sana'a and Lecturer at the University of al-Bayḍā'. He has also been a researcher at the Yemen Polling Center (YPC) in Sana'a in the Volkswagen Foundation-funded project on 'Framing the Revolution in Yemen' with the University of Bonn.
- 3 *Identity Constructions in Contemporary Yemeni Novels* is not only the first book in English dealing with contemporary Yemeni narrative literature, but it also constitutes a transdisciplinary literary study using literary material to offer a social and historical analysis of Yemeni society and its self-representation. Consequently, the study offers much to interest sociologists and historians of ideological conflicts in Yemen and of the uses of history in these conflicts. The study brings particular new knowledge about the different readings and counter-readings of history in Yemen, as well as about Yemeni social culture and its treatment of regionalism, sectarianism and racism in the collective imagination. The author starts from the observation that the contemporary Yemeni novel is fundamentally social, political and historical, especially since 2008, and particularly the novels of 'Alī al-Muqrī and Aḥmad Zayn.
- 4 Al-Rubaidi follows German literary criticism, especially that founded by Hans Robert Jauss, together with the socio-historical approach of Pierre Bourdieu, according to which literature represents a polyphonic dialogical social space of identities in which the historical consciousness is freely unraveled. Here, literature is considered as an exceptional means of free expression about old and deep social issues in Yemeni society; able to provide a collective representation, but also to correct it and to propose alternative approaches, perceptions and philosophies. The novel as a genre reveals the collective trauma and carries a reformist political agenda, stating it not explicitly but through aesthetic representation. Literature, then, becomes the place for utopia. Al-Rubaidi states that one of the main aims of his book is to show "the predominant humanistic tendency", which characterized Yemeni narrative literature: "This study is an attempt to uncover this role of literature as an aesthetic representation of the Yemeni existential crisis, as an aesthetic written space designed to inform Yemeni citizens about themselves and as a medium used by the intellectual elite to suggest certain solutions (...). The narrative space of each novel offers a dialogic cosmos with a multidimensional parallel history that challenges the official history promoted in

academic, political or journalistic circles.” (p.17). In this aspect, the book goes beyond the study of Yemeni literature to encompass historical and political studies on contemporary Yemen.

- 5 The reader will notice that the study follows strictly the structure and systemic organization of an academic work. The author explains his objectives and methodologies in the introduction and first chapter. The socio-historical approach of the literary contents of the novels, is indeed well informed with anthropological and social sciences theories, applied to the specificities of Yemeni society and literature, and to its identity constructions in the collective imagination. Chapter one is dedicated to the “Historical Overview, Theoretical Considerations and Research Methodology” (p. 23–48): here the author first describes the “Novel Production in Yemen 1927–2017” and then defines, based on social sciences and literary criticism, the conceptual tools and frameworks he uses in the textual criticism of the novels. Here, the axis which will structure the literary analysis of the novels in the following chapters, is clearly defined in three sections: “Habitus and Identity” (p.28), “Historical Consciousness and Collective Trauma” (p.39) and “Dialogism and Focalization” (p.43). These headings structure the whole critical approaches adopted in each chapter of the book. They are justified by references to Pierre Bourdieu, Lucien Goldmann, Norbert Elias, Max Weber and Marcel Mauss (on Habitus). Al-Rubaidi also refers to more recent studies in the field, most of them from Germany, since he mentions the works of Heidrun Freise, Jörn Rüsen and Jürgen Straub, on the concepts of Identity and Historical Consciousness. In literary criticism, al-Rubaidi refers to Hans Robert Jauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer on Collective Trauma; Mikhail Bakhtin and Gérard Genette on dialogism and focalization. Each chapter is introduced by extensive sections on the socio-historical and geopolitical contexts of the novel on the one hand, and is completed, on the other hand, by sections about the place of the novel in the history of literature in Yemen and in the Arab world. On this point, one can admire the competence of the author in linking the contemporary production of novels in Yemen to the historical context of the development of the novel in Yemen and in the Arab world, using a rich secondary literature in Arabic and in English. By doing this, al-Rubaidi contributes to the insertion of the contemporary Yemeni novel into the history of Arabic literature, something which has not been realized before. Moreover, the literary study is introduced by an encyclopedic knowledge on the “Political History of Sana’a and Aden” and its historical treatment in the Yemeni novel (p.48–78). The same methodology is applied in the first sections of the following chapters which detail “Religions and Islamic Sects” in Yemen and in the contemporary Yemeni novel in Chapter 3 (p.99–107); then, ethnic issues in Yemen and in the Yemeni novel (p.135–143). These introductions are based on the main classical and recent academic studies on Yemeni society, religions and politics, such as the study on Zaydism by Bernard Haykel (2003), on Muslim Brotherhood in *The Free Yemeni Movement* by J. Leigh Douglas (1987) and on Salafism by Laurent Bonnefoy (2011, 2008). Al-Rubaidi also mentions the works on civil society in Yemen by Sheila Carapico (1998), on Regionalism by Stephen W. Day (2012), John M. Willis (2012), T. Y. & J. S. Ismael (1986 and 2008), Noel Brehony (2011), and Laurent Bonnefoy (2018). On emigration from the Hadramawt, he refers to studies by Ulrika Freitag (2003) and Noel Brehony (2017). The author also relies on the monograph by Mar S. Wagner (2009) on the Jewish Arabic poetry in Yemen and one by Yosef Tobi (1999) about their “History” in Yemen, but he does not mention Wagner’s more recent book on *Jews and Islamic Law in Early 20th-Century Yemen* (2015). Surprisingly, al-Rubaidi does not mention the study

by Shelagh Weir: *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen* (2009), nor the two important monographs on Sharia Law in Yemen by Brinkley Messick (1996 and 2018). Al-Rubaidi seems also to ignore two other recent important books on slavery in the Arabian Peninsula, the first by Benjamin Reilly (2015) and the second by Jerzy Zdanowski (2014). The author could also have mentioned the studies made by Bogumila Hall of the marginalized people in Yemen, but he did not.

- 6 So, al-Rubaidi's study concentrates on the very contemporary Yemeni novel and in this it complements the study published in German by Gunter Orth (Berlin, 1997) about three famous Yemeni novelists of the 20th century: Muhammad 'Abd al-Walī, Zayd Muṭī' Dammaj and Aḥmad Maḥfūz 'Umar. Al-Rubaidi's book focuses on the Yemeni novels written between 2008 and 2017, especially those which make use of "collective memory". As he explains, 59 novels were published during the period from 2001 to 2007: "That number outstrips the number of novels published over the previous 70 years, from 1927 to 2000" (p.26). The following decade (2008–2017) coincides with the historical apogee of the genre in Yemen: 83 novels, more than between 1923 and 2004 (p.16). Al-Rubaidi expounds that in Yemen, "novels have begun to appear, side by side with religious books, in the main libraries, bookshops and kiosks. Moreover, the cultural pages of the main newspapers in the country present both major reviews and snippets regarding these novels. Most of these newspapers are run by editors and columnists who came from the literary field, which is mostly dominated by the secular leftist intelligentsia of the country. Thus, novels and books of poetry and literary criticism are now celebrated in these newspapers more than academic or religious books". (p.26).
- 7 The choice of this decade (2008–2017) is also based on the fact that, as the author shows, the novel in Yemen at this time particularly focuses on political and social debates, more than before, returning to the past and using reconstructions of collective identities to formulate reformist views of society. Indeed, since 2008 Yemen faces social, political, regional and religious fragmentation because of the numerous wars, both internal and international. Regionalism and religious fragmentations are often mixed by the media, through the wars between north Yemen invaded by Houthis and the southern independence movement influenced by Salafis; between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis sustained by Iran; between al-Qaida and the US. The organization of civil society in Yemen, from the point of view of tribalism, sectarianism and racism, is also represented in the novels selected through the Yemeni youth "spring" that occurred in 2012 in Sana'a; the historical status of the Jews and the Yemenis of African slave origins, such as the *Akhdam* or the *Muwalladūn* (those whose mother is African or Asian), who constitute the margins of the Yemeni society. Women are not seen as a separate group but as part of the above-mentioned identities. The author asserts that his study is based on three main questions: "First, what are the possible communal or collective identities represented in the contemporary Yemeni novels? Second, why do contemporary Yemeni novelists tend to write about collective or group identities? Third, why do they refer frequently to the history of Yemen when representing these identities?" (p.20). Al-Rubaidi explains: "Novels from before the so-called 'Arab Spring' from 2008 to 2010 and after it from 2011 to 2017, may display both continuities and discontinuities in the literary treatment of the problematics and polemics regarding the idea of identity in a country that had been traumatized by sporadic conflicts and

large-scale wars” (p.45). To summarize the contents of each of the chapters, I expound below direct quotations from the analysis of Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi.

- 8 Chapter two (p.49–98) explores “Regional identities” but it concentrates on Sana’a and Aden through the study of three novels: the first is *Steamer Point*<sup>14</sup> (2015) by Ahmad Zayn, which portrays the cosmopolitan past of Aden city in the late 1960s, during the last days of colonial rule. “*Steamer Point* is the English name of the European neighborhood in al-Tawāhī, a district in Aden city. This work belongs to a wave of novels in the Arab world that make use of the cosmopolitan image of certain cities during colonial times to imply the possibility of alternative cosmopolitan cities in the future” (p.52). Al-Rubaidi writes: “Samīr’s admiration of the colonial rule is based on its achievements. His skepticism about the nationalist project is based on his fear of the radical and authoritarian attitudes of the revolutionaries. (...) The novelist tries, through Samīr’s perspective, to give voice to the silenced voices of minorities and workers who have no voice in the Yemeni historical writings relating to that period of time. In the formal books of history in Yemen, the dominant voice is that of the revolutionary figures, particularly the radical leftist wing of the National Liberation Front in the South who won in their struggle against the colonial state and banished other rival national groups” (p.63). Al-Rubaidi concludes: “This thematization of regionalism is, then, a reflection of the state of affairs in today’s Yemen in which the people of Aden and the South in general are demanding independence from the North and striving for a return to the pre-1990 borders. Setting his novel in the context of the revolution against British colonial rule thus allows the author to bring the attention of the reader to a big opportunity that, in the author’s opinion, was lost in the process of the postcolonial national project; a chance that was lost once again in another historical moment, namely in the aftermath of the unification of the two Yemens in 1990. Had politicians seized the moment back then, a more open, democratic, multicultural and tolerant space in Aden might have been possible. Moreover, the possibility of a loss of another revolutionary chance in 2011 is found in the undercurrents of this novel” (p.97).
- 9 On the subject of regionalism, the author explains in the introduction to this chapter that “in addition to Sana’a and Aden, there are other governorates, such as Ḥaḍramawt, Hudaydah, Ta’iz and Ma’rib, that can be seen as distinct urban centers that host minor regional narratives and identities. However, Yemeni modern political history still revolves mainly around the two political urban centers of Sana’a and Aden (...) In the years since 2011, Aden and Sana’a have, in terms of coming to grips with the collective Yemeni identity or identities, been equally at the heart of both the peaceful public debate and the bloody conflict” (p.51).
- 10 The second novel about regionalism, *Ṣan‘ā’ī* [My Sana’a] (2013) by Nādyah al-Kawkabānī, is set in Sana’a City in the aftermath of the 1963 revolution in North Yemen and retells the traumatic events of 1968. The third novel *Sūq ‘Alī Muḥsin* [‘Alī Muḥsin’s Marketplace] (2016) also by N. al- Kawkabānī, tells the story of the 2011 revolution. “The main characters of the first novel appear in the second novel to serve one main idea: that the two revolutions in North Yemen (one in 1963 and the other in 2011) are historically and socially connected and have the same humanistic goal” (p. 78). “Talking or writing about historical figures such as the former president Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī (assassinated in 1977) and ‘Abd al-Raqīb ‘Abdulwahāb (assassinated in 1969) were considered taboo during the rule of president ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣaliḥ (1978-2012).



Against this background, the fictional work in these two novels is a contribution to the historical writings on the unspoken details and personal circumstances of the formation of the republican system in North Yemen” (p.87). Al-Rubaidi adds: “The novel reinterprets the events of 1968–1969 as a conflict between traditionalists and modernists rather than a conflict between Zaydis and Shafi‘is. These events are raised in the novel in order to challenge the official discourse of the Yemeni state which denies this traumatic past and bans discussing it” (p.88). Al-Rubaidi concludes: “Ṣubḥiyah, the main character in both novels, has biographical similarities to the author. Her inclusive view, regarding sharing power among Yemen’s different regions and regarding the enjoyment of a dignified life by all citizens, reflects the position of the author who participated actively in the National Dialogue Conference (2013–2014). Federalism, a debated topic in post-2011 Yemen, is envisioned as a solution in the undercurrent of the narration” (p.98).

- 11 **Chapter three (p.99–134)** is dedicated to “Religious identities” through the study of two novels. The first is *al-Yahūdī al-Ḥālī* [The Sweet Jew] (2009, Beirut & London) by ‘Alī al-Muqrī that presents, through a love story between a Muslim girl and a Jewish boy, a number of aspects of the life of the Yemenite Jews in the 17th century. As al-Rubaidi explains: “Jews have, then, indeed been given more attention in the novels produced during the last 15 years. This can be attributed to the fact that, after the communication revolution, different intellectual voices have called for a revision of the way modern Arabic cultural production deals with religious and ethnic minorities. Moreover, the consequences of the events of September 11th, 2001, and the American occupation of Iraq in 2003 have raised the questions of identity and otherness in Arabic literary and intellectual writings. Generally speaking, the image of this ethnic group in the aforementioned novels has taken on more historical and contextualized dimensions in a move away from biased ways of representing Jews in some pre-modern Yemeni literature in which simplistic categories and classifications such as infidels, magicians and exotic objects of sexual desire are employed” (p.109). “The *Sweet Jew* by ‘Alī al-Muqrī is a challenge to and a deconstruction of the inhumane rhetoric against Jews” (p.114). It is “the first novel in Yemen whose main theme is dedicated to recognizing the right of religious minorities to the land and to their own culture” (p.133).
- 12 The second, *Ḍulmat Yā’il* [Yā’il’s darkness] (2012) by Muḥammad al-Gharbi ‘Amrān, is a historical novel depicting the life of Yemenis during the domination of the Ismā‘īlī Dā‘ī ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Sulīḥī (d. 1067) in the 11th century. The novelist invokes the experience of the Sulayhids in unifying Yemen on a federal basis. “Being torn between the religion of his mother (Judaism) and that of his father (Ismā‘īlī Islam), the main character, Jawthar, expresses his skepticism and religious perplexities in different ways” (p.132). “It echoes, or rather interacts with, the skeptical atmosphere that has dominated the intellectual and literary landscape in Yemen since the 2011 revolution” (p.134). Al-Rubaidi concludes that “Both novels, however, reflect a secular humanist worldview; recognizing the rights of minorities and advocating a tolerant life in Yemen is at the heart of their narrations” (p.134).
- 13 **Chapter four (p.135–168)** on “Ethnic identities” presents *Ṭa‘m aswad, rā’iḥat sawda’* (*Black Taste, Black Smell*) (2008) by ‘Alī al-Muqrī, which is, in the view of al-Rubaidi, “the first novel in Yemen that tackles collective identities in a comprehensive manner” (p. 46) and “harshly criticized racism in Yemeni society” (p.144). This novel centers around the life of the *Akhdam*, who are Yemenis of African and slave origins. Al-Rubaidi



considers this novel as an “ethnographic narrative” since it documents “the life of the *Akhdam* and the myths surrounding their way of life. It also creates a space for the *Akhdam* to express themselves in the way they would wish to. For example, their own independent opinion regarding the official history in Yemen is presented, and their ghetto, Mahwa, is described not only as a stigmatized space but also as a space of a normative order counter to the dominant one in Yemen” (p.144). In the view of al-Rubaidi, “the novel has a social reform agenda, it portrays this black pariah caste that lives mainly in shanty-towns outside the main cities in a way that gives an impression that this minority has an organized counter culture. According to the novel, the *Akhdam* challenge not only the *adab* norms that are dominant in the society, but also the social hierarchy ranking in Yemen itself” (p.148). Al-Rubaidi looks particularly at the idea of identification through the dominant themes of political memory, social stratification and migration. He explains that “writing about the *Akhdam* has gained importance only in the last few years. It is noteworthy that those who have written about the *Akhdam* belong to the mainstream Arab Yemenis, not to the *Akhdam*”. Al-Rubaidi mentions four novels that are significant in this regard, including *Ḥarb taḥt al-jild* [A War under the Skin] (2010) by Ahmad Zayn, which tells the story of a journalist who embarks on writing a report for a foreign journal on *muhammashin* or *Akhdam*, the marginalized in Sana’a (p.142). Then, al-Rubaidi undertakes an analysis of two novels by the Hadrami author ‘Ammar Bāṭawil: *Sālīmīn* (2014) and *Ekron 94* (2017), which tells about a slave from Ḥaḍramawt.

- 14 **Chapter five** presents the conclusion and summarizes the “humanist space” envisioned by the Yemeni novelists and mediated through historical consciousness. This original study aims to understand the social functions of literature, its philosophy in Yemen today, its uses and its motives as well as its reformist and humanist agenda. For that, al-Rubaidi also used biographies of the authors and interviewed them. The appendix of the study includes biographies of the authors of the eight novels, a table illustrating their social and professional backgrounds and images of the front covers of the eight novels.
- 15 By the way, one could regret that the author did not include in his study many quotations from the selected novels, nor did he present detailed textual analysis of the extracts he does quote. This is remarkable especially in Chapter 3, where there are only three quotations from the novels. Moreover, the studies published in French on Contemporary Yemeni literature seem to be ignored by al-Rubaidi. I met with al-Rubaidi at the University of Sana’a in the seminar on literature, some ten years ago, and have myself published various articles about contemporary short stories in Yemen (Jenvrin, 2008, 2010, 2012), focusing on the stories written by Nadya al-Kawkabani and by Ahmad Zayn (including one which has been translated into Arabic (see « Voies novatrices dans la nouvelle yéménite contemporaine » in F. Mermier. L. Bonnefoy, M. Poirier (eds.), *Yémen. Le tournant révolutionnaire*, Paris, Karthala, 2012. Translated into Arabic: *Al-Yaman. Al-mun’atīf al-tawrī*, Dār al-Furāt, Beyrouth 2016). Surprisingly, the article by Patrizia Zanelli (2013) “In Focus n° 3: Sana’a and Rapid Urbanization in Some Short Stories by Muhammad al-Gharbi ‘Amran” is also ignored.
- 16 However, *Identity Constructions in Contemporary Yemeni Novels* by Abdulsalam al-Rubaidi constitutes, without doubt, the most important contribution available in English nowadays, about the contemporary history of the novel in Yemen; and it can be considered as a particularly interesting and original study, useful for all

anthropologists and historians of ideas, working on Yemen; and also for literary critics, generalist or specialized, on Yemeni or Arabic literature.

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## AUTHORS

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