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MULTICULTURALISM IN AL-MUGRI'S *ADENI INCENSE*: NEW IDENTITY CONCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

Due to its outstanding position in incense trade and its strategic location at the south west of Yemen, Aden, the British colony during Victorian rule and port of Yemen, which links east to west, attracted settlers of different cultures and nationalities.

This paper aims at examining the theme of multiculturalism in the novel of the Arab Yemeni novelist Ali I-Muqri i.e. *Adeni Incense*, and checking whether the multicultural tolerant society of Aden gives a new conception of identity to its settlers who suffer the feeling of identity crisis during the Second World War.

The paper hypothesizes that Al-Mugri's novel, *Adeni Incense*, is an excellent example for the cultural coexistence in the city of Aden and assumes, also, that such genuine convenient cultural coexistence founded a new identity for its multicultural and multinational settlers i.e. Adeni identity. Some evidence, from the novel, were highlighted, after translating them by the researcher, in order to check the credibility of the hypothesis of the study.

Discussing the multicultural issues in Al-Mugri's novel *Adeni Incense* proves that the settlers of Aden found a new alternative, Adeni, identity and felt a new conception of identity mixed with the fragrant air of the Adeni incense.

Key words: Al-Mugri, Aden, Adeni, incense, multiculturalism

Introduction

The ancient city and port of Aden, which is located at the south west corner of Yemen, links east to west economically. It was occupied by the Great Kingdom in 1939 during the Victorian age to use it as fuel mid-journey supplier. 'It was an active port with shipping links to India, China and to Africa. Eritrea and Somalia could be reached in only a few days of sailing. The whole African East Coast, including the islands of Pemba, Zanzibar and Mafia had very early trade relations with the kingdom of Awsan through the harbor of Aden ...Freights are coming from India and Egypt: diamonds, sapphires, ivory, cotton, indigo. cardamom, pepper, dates,

wine, myrrh, and frankincense'. (*Maritime Incense Route: Aden*, 2017)

Historically, 'the Colony of Aden or Aden Colony (Arabic: مستعمرة عدن Musta'marat 'Adan) was a British Crown colony from 1937 to 1963 located in the south of contemporary Yemen. It consisted of the port of Aden and its immediate surroundings. Prior to 1937, Aden had been governed as part of British India (originally as the Aden Settlement subordinate to the Bombay Presidency, and then as a "Chief Commissioner's province"). Under the Government of India Act 1935 the territory was detached from British India, and was established as a separate colony of the United Kingdom; this separation took effect on 1 April 1937.

On 18 January 1963, the colony was reconstituted as the State of Aden (Arabic: ولاية عدن Wilāyat 'Adan) within the new Federation of South Arabia. The federation in turn became the People's Republic of South Yemen on 30 November 1967, marking the end of British rule. (Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, 2017)

Aden is recognized as incense trade home. 'Due to its prominent position in the incense trade, Yemen attracted settlers from the fertile crescent. The frankincense and myrrh trees were crucial to the economy of Yemen and were recognized as a source of wealth by its rulers'. (Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, 2017)

Objectives

This paper aims at examining the theme of multiculturalism in Al-Mugri's novel *Adeni Incense* and checking whether the multicultural society of Aden gives its identity to its multicultural/multinational settlers. It aims to prove whether the Adeni society succeeds to conceptualize a new identity recognition to its settlers who suffer badly the feeling of identity crisis as a result of the Second World War.

Hypothesis

The paper hypothesizes that Al-Mugri's novel *Adeni Incense* is an excellent example for the cultural coexistence in the city of Aden. It assumes, also, that such genuine convenient cultural coexistence in the society of Aden founded a new identity for its multicultural and multinational residents i.e. Adeni identity. So, *Adeni* identity is given to the residents of Aden who were suffering the feeling of identity crisis. Some evidence will be selected from the novel and translated by the researcher to check the credibility of the hypothesis of the study.

Methods

The multidisciplinary approach is to be adopted in this study together with the analytical method in order to examine the credibility of the hypothesis of the study.

Discussion and Findings

Ali Al-Mugri (1966) (علي المقرئ) is a contemporary Yemeni writer and novelist who started his career as a poet before he was banded

because of crossing the red lines of the society in one of his early poems.

He belongs to that group of writers whose works defy cross-continental taboos. 'He crosses boundaries and embraces the illicit, tackling difficult subjects with the utmost courage'. (Al-Madaniyah 2017). Due to his love for adventure, Al-Mugri used to swim against the tide of the society which resulted in abandoning him poetry and turning him to novelist. Novels 'offered him newfound possibilities to highlight repression and address taboos through narrative that allowed for diversity and disquiet.' (Al-Madaniyah 2017).

In spite of his challenging attitudes and the courageous bold characters, he usually selects in his novels together with the controversial themes treated in his novels, Al-Mugri participated to bring the Yemeni novels to universality: 'Al-Mugri contributed to bringing the Yemeni novel out of its local context and beyond the Arab borders. His novels carry a comprehensive and universal meaning of life, revealing the suffering, humility, obsession and misery of the human soul.' (Al-Madaniyah, 2017).

Each of Al-Mugri's novels introduces themes attentive to Yemeni society. The novel *Black Taste, Black Adour* (2008) introduces the suffering of the marginalized minority of the *Akhdam* in Yemen. *The Handsome Jew* (2011) treats the suffering of the Jews during the Imam rule and how they were degraded in their society and their incapability to coexist with Muslims. Al-Mugri's controversial novel, *Hurma*, (2012) crosses the red forbidden lines of the strict society and reveals the hidden desires of females and the harsh way they are brought up in a tribal strict society.

Three years ago, Al-Mugri published his distinguished novel *Adeni Incense*. The novel set in the city of Aden during the British occupation and reflects on its cosmopolitan nature at the time. Al-Mugri takes us through the diversity of Aden city, during the British colonization, 'which was then home to an unprecedented mix of races and religions. In the novel, Aden's uniqueness is underlined by its geography: a city with rural mountains on one side, which brought tradition and custom from within the country, and the sea on the

other side, bringing external cultural influences. This fusion of customs and ideas created an open city, welcoming and embracing all who arrived.' (Al-Madaniyah, 2017).

What inspires the novelist to write the selected novel Bakhur 'Adani (بخور عذني) is the socio-political history of the city of Aden whose tolerant society bears smoothly the coexistence of a mixture of people of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity: 'The novel is inspired by the social and political history of the city of Aden, commonly known for its religious tolerance and ethnic diversity....narrates the journey of a French soldier upon reaching the port of Aden during World War II. The soldier learns Arabic Language, and manages to engage in Yemeni public life, in a tolerant environment which soon erupts into intense conflict zone where suffrage and migration begins; turning Aden's once known paradise to a place of human misery. The author contemplates the meaning of home and what constitutes it.' (*Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, 2017), (*Sheikh Zayed Book Awards*, 2017) & (*Publishers Archive. Com.* 2016)

What can hold our attention from the very beginning, in chapter one or "First Whiff: Aden Harbor" as the novelist prefers to name, is the recently arrived French, the main character, who insisted on having neither name nor identity proof. When the receptionist of the hotel asks him about his name he replies that his name is 'anything' which no one can believe except Mama, a young lady, who pretends to believe him: 'when the receptionist of Crescent Hotel in At-Tawwhi (the name of a district in Aden) asked about my identity, "anything" I replied; but such reply was not accepted. I lasted for about one hour trying to convince him to fix this name without identity card, passport or any other document.....but they did not understand.....one of them who looked like Indian smiled and asked for my passport; he maybe thought that I was drunk.'(Al- Muqri, 2014, p. 8) Then the young lady, Mama, came and tried to help convince them to accept him without any identity proof; but in vain. She decided to take him to a simple house seemed to be her family's. She greeted him in French and took him to a family seemed to be African or Somali

and introduces him to what she called father, mother, and brother in a simple manner with no sense of affectation. He concludes that it is her family though her appearance is different!

He spends his night in a room on the surface of her house. In the early morning, it seems if he starts to feel a bitter feeling of not being able to recognize his old identity as it is clear in his letter to his friend where he wrote: 'I wanted to write to you; but as I was holding the pen and pad, I noticed that I couldnot address my letter to anyone I know because I am not, any more, the person you know and you are not you or no longer the same one. Or maybe I cannot keep you as you were i.e. your name, your address or anything else can indicate me though you. So, if I become no longer the one I was, all those who are related to me should not be the same as they were before.' (Al- Muqri, 2014, p.7)

The incense of Aden in Al-Mugri's *Adeni Incense* is not merely a title due to the different connotations it embodies. The Adeni incense is highly popular not only in Yemen; but perhaps all over the world just like the fame of Aden city. Thus, the sweet desirable odour of the incense of Aden is a symbol for the various types of the aromatic plants of Aden meanwhile symbolizes the perfumed fame of the friendly tolerant mix of people in Adeni society which is recognized as a wonderful home for the homeless as shown in the novel. It is the odour that colours the novel brightly as Al-Aref, the Arabic teacher philosophically explains to Michel which Michel starts to realize later on. The scent is breathed, felt and seen in Aden. Additionally, the incense of Aden plays a notable role in the sequence of events in the novel.

First of all, it has a psychological influence so great that it can get Michel the main character, perhaps, together with anyone else in Aden to recognize himself differently. It is the official seal that proves the descent of its holders to Aden. When the new comer to Aden, Michel is scented by Mama in the first morning for him in Aden, he starts to recognize himself differently. He feels as if the seeds of a new identity starts to grow inside him by the smoke and smell of the incense sticks. He confesses this in his letter to his French friend Chantal: 'Before going out and inside the unroofed

salon, she(Mama) dressed me in a baggy cloak, I saw a similar one on a dark-skinned man on the ship. Then she asked me to wait meanwhile she took a decorated pottery which was near the door and pick up some embers from the burner , and took a dry brown pieces (sticks) out of a silky bag and put it on the embers; “set your legs far away”, she said. She kept me on that position for a while. Finally, she helped me to put off the cloak’. (Al- Muqri, 2014, p.12)

The distinguished fragrance gets him to forget any other smell before: ‘ As I was going out the entry of the door, I had new odor. Precisely, I had a smell for the first time; didn’t I have a smell before?? How did it go on like that? I didn’t even smell the smell of puberty! Or youth sweat which I heard about! “This is a odor of the Adeni incense”, she said to me’. “ First Whiff: Aden Harbor” (Al-Muqri, 2014, p.12)

The scent interestingly overwhelms Michel all the way to Al-Bandar Casino: ‘when I talked to Mama, I felt that, I was not any more, the person I was last night. Not only had I a perfume; but my words had the aroma, too, shared with the incense or they are perfumed with incense’. “First Whiff: Aden Harbor ” .(Al- Muqri, 2014, p. 12)

Michel is greatly amazed by the intimate relation among the Adeni people symbolized by Mama introducing everyone to him as a member of her family i.e. father, mother, or cousin. Doing so gives him an impression that everyone he meets should be Mama’s relative. In Al-Bandar Casino, she seems to ‘ know them all. She introduces me to them except a lady of European countenance who was silent and indifferent of what is going on. She was setting alone in one corner and there was a dark cup on the table in front of her. No one but she and the waitress may know what was that cup contains. Mama describes the people she introduces to me as her fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and most of them as cousins; but she does not call anyone as aunt! She seems to have so deep intimate relation with them that I thought they are all her relatives. Actually, even those who were not given any relationship with her seem to be more closer to her.’ “ I was a Dream”. (Al- Muqri, 2014, p. 14)

What is actually remarkable about the people in the casino is not their close relation with Mama; but being close in spite of their diversity. Each one indicates different culture: the silent European lady, William from Britain, Abu al-Fadhli a prince from Lahj(a city near Aden), Francisco the Italian businessman. Shama’a, the Yemeni Jewish singer who comes later to vitalize or celebrate the night with them. Michel was told that, due to some controversies, regarding the language she should sing in i.e. Arabic or Hebrew, she should sing four night per month. Each night she should sing for specific religious or ethnic group; however, she rejects and chooses to sing each Thursday night for them all. “ I was a Dream”. (Al- Muqri, 2014, p.19). She seems to be aware of the unity of her Adeni audience regardless their various backgrounds.

Al- Mugri tries to trace the diversity of Adeni society not only in the casino; but anywhere else inside Aden city. As Michel was going to the teacher of Arabic, with Mama, whose name was Al-Aref, they passed by or through many districts like the Jew quarter, the Dunkel quarter, Husian Quarter, the Indian quarter, Bohra market, the Jewish quarter, Saffron street and the palace where Antonin Besse lives. The last name is the husband of Michel’s aunt to whom he originally came to Aden; but the high desire to hide his previous identity and to forget any link to it, Michel hides himself among people of Aden aided by the inability of his relative, who left France when Michel was still young, to recognize him.

The welcoming nature proves to be a common feature of the Adenis. Not only Mama; but Al-Aref receives the fugitive French soldier, Michel, with a permanent unfading smile overwhelms his body, his reactions, and his behaviours too: ‘ Al-Aref seems to be permanently smiling. His smile does not come out of his lips only; but from every part in his body, from his intimate shaking hands, with his glimpses, with his eyes movement during his speech and silence, or when he shyly blinks them.’ “A Fugitive Age”. (Al- Muqri, 2014, p.33) When Antony, the Italian medical who comes from Sana’a, arrives at Aden, Al-Aref warmly offers him a tour around Aden to show him the city: ‘the Italian visitor smiled and admired the life of Aden and its community. Al-

Aref invited him to a tour to get him to know more about Aden and said to him: "You knew only the ears of the camel". "Atoning incense". (Al- Muqri, 2014, p. 125) Antony seems to be thinking, for a while, of the proverbs he heard. Suddenly he rejoiced as if he understands the meaning and said: "I wish I could be back here" Aden is another country; it is different; you can find everything in it, or she is made out of everything". ' "Atoning Incense", (Al- Muqri, 2014, p.125)

The second effect of incense on the dramatic treatment is that it is used to penetrate into one of the sensitive themes in the novel i.e. the conception of the lawful and the unlawful i.e. the permitted and the forbidden. It is employed as an access to point out Puritanism and to highlight the attitude of the majority towards this strict religious orientation.

Ali Al-Mugri tends to characterize incense when he adds to it some human features like being atheist: 'Incense is atheist, such phrase became the most common phrase about Ash-Sheikh Adul Jabbar. I heard it in many places where it seems to be questionable because it was not a mockery from the point of view of many.' "Atoning of Incense", (Al- Muqri, 2014, p. 121)

Such description is given to incense by one of the strict Muslim sheikhs who was known as the mobile sermonizer who delivered a sermon at Al-Hedaya mosque in Creater and later on in another mosque in Ash-Seikh Othman (famous districts in Aden) where he condemned what he called obscenity that normally occurred because of men and women intermingling during their visits to the patron of Allah whose name is Aydrus. The atoning statement of the Sheikh, 'incense is atheist', is repeated even on the tongue of children. 'Some of those who attended the sermon or heard about it, including Saeed, saw the matter as slip of a tongue. He certainly means prohibition of incense. However, the mobile sermonizer, who is known by his rigorism did not retract his slip and tried, instead, to create some rhetorical justifications. One of these justifications is that the incense that is emitted from the carried incense burners and out of the incensed women's thighs, evokes men when they smell it mingled with women sweat. Thus, the Satan will

despise them adultery. It is the Satan who is shown to them in the form of incense.' "Atoning of Incense", (Al- Muqri, 2014, 121-122)

Although Sheik Abdu Al-Jabbar symbolizes the religious Puritanism, the moderate society of Aden realizes how to refute such extremism. The society, symbolized by Al-Aref and Saeed, seems to be immunized against any extremist trend that is why Aden becomes a safe shelter for those who escape the religious militancy in their countries. The refutation of such trend can be traced in Al-Aref's words: ' "Mankind can liberate themselves from everything but fear which can only be liberated from by death", Al-Aref said. He declared that the old father of Keiki Merwanji was Zardasht, migrated, too, from Persia to India, escaping from the Muslim militants; however, fear remains with him in India. So, he escaped to Aden." "The Wedding", (Al- Muqri, 2014, p 118) After a while of silence he added " in Spain, as in Persia and India, the militant were more fearful. Thus, their fear is their weapon to fight those who are fearful of them." "The Wedding", (Al- Muqri, 2014, p 118)

The third influence of the incense is that its fragrance sends us a free invitation to join some Adeni social events like Thursday parties, zar dance, and their wedding ceremonies. Incense is part of az-zar dance that is performed to get the devil out of some people's bodies. It is also one of the wedding ceremony rituals.

To sum up, Al-Mugri succeeds to employ incense, which is originally Adeni phenomenon, as a unique culture perfumes and overwhelms the multicultural society of Aden including its ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. He manages to create a kind of identification between the incense and the society of Aden in a way gets them to be excellent alternative for each other. The Yemeni Jew Shama'a, the Christian Graham, Abdu from Somalia, Shankeer from India, Henry from America, France from Holland, Antony from Italy, and the novel's main character Michel from France, are examples of many people find their lost identity in Aden and breath a new conception of identity with the fragrant air mixed with the incense of Aden. Such conception is highlighted in the letter of Chantal when she doubts about and questions Michel's

identity. However, she tries to identify him saying: "The only thing he knows is that he travelled to Aden and his real family is the Adnis who became the closest to him and after them he hoped to be named, one day, and recognized as one of them i.e. the Adeni." "Other Chantal", (Al-Mugri, 2014, p.83) And Mama affiliates him to Aden, too, questioning: "Who said rather than that? Asking to add "You are Adeni. Of course you are Adeni".(The Adeni, p. 79) It is remarkable that Michel mentions neither names nor places in Paris in an attempt, as it seems to forget all the memories related to his past identity. "Fugitive Wars", (Al-Mugri, 2014, p.43) and he himself confesses that he discovers, through the year he spent in it, Aden becomes home for " any other thing" . He believes that Aden seems not only to be other home or home for the homeless but it seems to be the alternative for any home or any idea about nationalism. "Hitler's Divorce", (Al-Mugri, 2014, p.142)

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