

Representation of Violence in Yemeni Novel: A Study of Fekriah Shahrah's 'The Smile Owner'

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on daily violence as the main theme in novel *The Smile Owner* which was written by Fekriah Shahrah. It depicts the hegemony of Houthi militia in Yemen. It is an analytical study which interprets the novelist's literary work *The Smile Owner*. Moreover, as an instrument of data collection an interview with the novelist has been conducted to shed more light on the novel. This study is based on critical analysis of the literary text, which interprets the real context of violence in Yemen. Violence is a global issue between good and evil, and war and love. Shahrah as many of Yemeni novelists depicted the consequences of violence in their literary platform. The novel represents the situation of Yemen in the ongoing war in Yemen. Hence, the war in Yemen, death, abduction, retaliation and social fragmentation are the main themes of written and spoken Yemeni literature. This paper exposes the horrible implications of the coup led by Houthi Militia backed by Iran against the legal government backed by coalition led by Saudi Arabia and Emirates. Therefore, Fekriah Shahrah in the literary platform portrayed violence in Yemeni society using the narrated text as a tool to convey the awful war consequences.

Keywords: Torture, Displacement, Houthi militia, Representation, Violence, War, and Yemeni novel.

Introduction:

Literature, as a mirror of society is known as a representative of social and political life as stated by Edward Said (2013) "novels imitate reality" (p. 42). It is the soul and voice of the voiceless people to represent violence, oppression and subjugation. Violence is one of the prominent issues which got a wide space in social, political, and cultural issues in Yemen as it is a global issue. Themes of violence and national traumas are not new in postcolonial and contemporary Yemeni novel. In Yemen, dehumanization and subjugation of the regimes have ruled after the liberty from colonization, caused the spread of, violence and crimes, which are portrayed in the Arabic Literature. In fact, violence is a global issue and represented everywhere as the Arabic and Irish writers, Ghassan Kanafani and, Bobby Sands, focused on the literature which carries resistance, violence, and cruelty.

Professor Ludmilla (2020) in his article '*Of Literary Representations of Extreme Violence and Their Ethical Coordinates*' described violence as a term in British literary texts come from the Holocaust and the post -WW II period. Joseph Carroll (2014) argued that violence derives from occasions and circumstances, the motives of characters, the author's attitude toward the depicted characters, the author's general outlook on life, and the responses of readers. Violence is the flash point at which the tensions aroused by conflicting interests reach critical mass. In literature as in life, violence reveals the underlying structure of human motives and passions. Therefore, violence is manifested in different manners, levels and motivation in

literature. de Cicco (2019) indicated that violence is innate to all human beings according to Freud and his theory that one is born violent and learn to live in a society as it is represented in *Lord of the Flies*, as it is compared to the concept of state of nature found in the works of Rousseau and Hobbes. Flannery O'Connor's linked the term of violence to religion whereas William Golding's works emphasized that the motives are related to the social organizations. The concept of violence is used to enlighten human beings of their own nature. It intends to justify the acts and crimes committed in society and how we react to them. Violence and cruelty vary according to the position within society that someone holds, their individuality background and the core of their beliefs.

This research work intends to manifest how literature represented violence and what the motives behind violence in Yemen are on the ongoing war. It will answer the following question, what is violence? How did the author of the selected novel represent the theme of violence? What types of violence depicted in the novel? What are the main reasons behind violence on the ongoing war in Yemen? What is the role of literature to raise the awareness of the community and show the horrible implications of violence?

Methodology:

The researchers used the interview with the novelist as a data collection tool and text analysis as the primary source of data collection. It includes the critical studies related to violence in Yemeni literature in particular and the global literature in general as the secondary source of critical analysis of this study.

Background:

The civil war in Yemen represents the horrible kind of violence which Yemeni nation has encountered during the Imamate regime and later Houthi for seven rounds up to the recent time. In 2014, the northern Yemeni-based (Ansar Allah) Houthi movement (referred to in this paper as 'Houthis') took over the capital, Sana'a (also commonly spelled Sana'a), and in early 2015, advanced southward from the capital city to Aden on the Arabian Sea. In March 2015, after Yemeni President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had fled to Saudi Arabia, appealed for international intervention, Saudi Arabia and a hastily assembled international coalition (referred to in this paper as 'the Saudi-led coalition') launched a military offense aimed at restoring Hadi's rule and evicting Houthi fighters from the capital and other major cities (Sharp, 2015). The term coalition represents the international coalition led by Saudi Arabia and Emirates. Its objectives were to protect the civilians from attacks by Iranian-supported Houthi militias, restore the legitimate government. As Yemen found itself on the brink of civil war, the Saudi-led coalition of nine Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and Sudan) announced the beginning of Operation Decisive Storm to counter the Houthis and restore Hadi to power (Arraf, 2017)

Literature Review:

In Yemen, numerous novelists depicted the theme of violence as a consequence of civil war or the sectarian war between the two regimes: Imamate regime and Republican regime as in the novel of Mutiee Damaj *Hostage*, 1984. The novel portrayed the sufferings and the bad conditions of Yemeni people during the rule of Imam Yahiya and Ahmed. It also depicted the political corruption, injustice, and exploitation of people to serve their family, so the writer focuses on the difficult circumstances of people's life during that time (Alsubari, 2017). Marwan Al Ghafory's *Saada Braids* (2014) manifested the social discrimination according to

race and gender and the civil six wars. Moreover, it discussed the theme of war in Saada. Despite the ongoing political and economic turmoil, Yemeni literature has seen an unexpected surge in 2014. For Example, Ahmed Al Sakaf was one of the greatest novelists who wrote a novel, *Qarot's Girl* in 1927. The publication of Mohammed Abdulwali, *They Die Strangers* was in 1971, marking the beginning of popular literature in Yemen and the representation of violence. Abdulwali depicted the loss of identity and migration of land due to violence before the revolution of 26th September, 1962 (Albalawi, 2015). Another novelist, Ali Al-Muqri discussed the theme of violence in his novel, *Black Taste (2008)* that focused on the maltreatment that Blacks received as the marginalized. Here, violence is one of the main themes of Fekriah Shahrah's novel, *The Smile Owner* which mainly focused on the war incidents as well as their impact which created civil and reign war (Altwajji & Telha, 2020).

Fekriah Shahrah is a Yemeni novelist who was born in Ibb City, in 1978 as one of the greatest Yemeni women writers along with Nadiyah Al Sakaf. She carried upon her shoulder the Yemeni social conflicts in her literary works in the twenty-first century. She drew a very amazing picture for the torn community whose all dreams were devastated and wearied by the war. She mixed between hope and pessimism, love and war, and conflicts between morals and greed. In her novel, *The Smile Owner, part 2*, 2018 she tried to focus on four issues; the civil war and its impact on destroying Yemen as a community, morals, values, and freedom which caused the fading of love, social correlation, and unity. She wrote a collection of short stories called: *Coma* (2014), *Female fragrance* (2015), *Plain Heart* (2016), *The Smile Owner, part I* (2017) and *The Smile Owner, part 3* (2019). She started to write as a journalist and developed her writing to represent social and political conflicts because she believed that literature is more effective than political media.

Analysis:

1. Representation

It is the use of signs that stand in for and take the place of something else. It is through representation that people organize the world and reality through the act of naming the elements. Signs are arranged to form semantic constructions and express relations (Mitchel, 1995). The novelist, Fekriah through her writings wanted to be the voice of the voiceless and convey to the world the Yemeni community agony and deadly situation caused by the Houthi militia in one hand and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and Emirates on the other. She wanted to immortalize the horrible crimes committed against innocent people, women, and children who were pushed to the incinerates of death. "Our creative voices must reach the outside world to know that there are Yemeni people who were tortured by executioners who have committed crimes against them throughout years of ignorance, and war" (*The Smile Owner, 2017, p. 44, part 1*).

Representation is a term used for things that stand for other things. It refers to persons who 'act for' other persons. Representation is a term that depicts the daily life of several people, things, and notions. Sometimes one object can stand for a whole group of things, such as individuals, or a political representative stands for a group of people. The narrative representation is an old technique in which literature is being a mirror that depicts the whole incidents of people and series of events (Mitchel, 1995).

2. Violence

DeWall, et.al. (2011) have differentiated between aggression and violence by defining the former as "any behavior intended to harm another person who does not want to be harmed", and the latter as "any aggressive act that has its goal extreme physical harm, such as injury or death", (p., 246). Violence is a universal phenomenon within human society that is difficult to define or discuss. However, it is also a subject that deserves attention because it is very widespread and includes intense actions, such as fighting, abduction, retaliation and dying. The simplest explanation that can be given is that real violence is an issue involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something. As Michael Kowalewski (1993) indicated in his study *Deadly Musings* that "Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction points out, violence is a catch-all term, a kind of verbal wooden nickel, used with such frequent ease that its actual indeterminate status appears almost self-evidently clear" (p., 7). He goes further to define violence as an act of aggression that is usually destructive, antisocial and degrading in its consequence and that usually seems deliberate.

A study by Bushra Juhi Jani (2015) titled '*Violence as the Abject in Iraqi Literature: Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*'. The study discussed the theme of violence in two novels for Ahmed Saadawi and Mary Shelley respectively. One of the novels revolves around a drunken scavenger who collects the body parts of those killed in explosions and stitches them together to form a new body. Further, the study shows how violence of war is presented as dehumanizing in Saadawi's novel. The researchers have closely examined how people in the novel lose their humanity and become part of a monstrous reality, living off corpses.

Frankenstein shows that terrorism creates unstoppable violence by creating more violence. It suggests that violence can never be stopped unless people reject terror and bury hatred, to have an agreed-upon system and order. It confesses that humanity can only be restored when we reject and bury the Abject (Jani, 2015). The violence that has been presented in Fekriah's literary works is verbal. Violence varies according to cultural beliefs and can be manifested as sexual, verbal, domestic, psychological and physical violence. Therefore, violence in literature is created by a combination of words, which always appear as something that has been carefully designed by the author. Each artistic representation is unique because the creator includes his or her ideas, beliefs, and biases in the final product. *The Smile Owner* is Fekriah's revisit to the era of the Imamate regime, but with another colour. The coup of Houthi militia is similar to the Imamate phase because both of them have the same source of sectarian basis. Therefore, both of them are two faces of the same coin. Oda (2019) observed that "Violence can be defined as any physical or verbal force which causes harm. It is a common human behaviour particularly during times of crises or wars; however, it occurs in various types such as physical, verbal, sexual, domestic ... etc." (p., 3).

3. The Smile Owner:

This novel consists of three parts and focuses on the recent coup led by the Houthi militia in Yemen which started in 2014. It is a narrative story that was narrated by the Yemeni journalist, Wahid Al-Amir who was chased as most of the Yemeni writers and activists from Sana'a by Houthis. Wahid is the hero who wished a life of dignity for all the Yemeni people. After the coup of Houthi militia in 2014, the space of freedom was seized and many of the writers and activists were killed or still hidden. *The Smile Owner* not only represents what is committed against the journalists but also all Yemenis' crises such as killing, displacement, starvation, and children recruitment. It also shows the coalition intervention for eight years of

war, and so far, and how this coalition also destroyed the country, creating again a new militia in the south of the country.



The cover of the novel is a picture of a Yemeni child looking very sad and standing on the ruins of a house destroyed down by Houthis in Arhab district, north of the capital Sana'a in late 2014. This image represents the spirit of childhood and pain of his country. When the researcher asked about the name of the novel *The Smile Owner* and how it is related to the content of the novel, the novelist said, "Despite the criticism by other writers and critics regarding the name of the concerned novel that it does not relate to the content but, I found it appropriate that the hero represents a Yemeni man with all his suffering, yet, he smiled until he has become as, *The Smile Owner*. As in the past, Yemen is described as a happy land, though it was deprived of happiness for a long time by Houthi militia". The characters of the novel are a mixture of real and imaginary characters expressing reality altogether. The second part of *The Smile Owner* contains dark paintings drawn by the war in Yemen. Thousands of innocent children were victims of this deadly war. The characters, Hatem and his friend Anwar painfully portray the Yemeni children and their suffering from war.

Childhood period was not existed in Yemen for so long. It has been violated in arduous work, cruel treatment, or early marriage. But at the time of the militias, children were led to incinerators of death in the most horrible situations. (*The Smile Owner*, 2017, p., 31, part 1).

4. Characters:

The characters, Hatem and Anwar were two Yemeni children whose story frequently portrays the life of dozens of Yemeni children. This story was mentioned in the second part of the novel. "Anwar, if I was killed, would you go to my father and mother and ask them to forgive me" (*The Smile Owner*, 2018, p., 78, part 2). Children were exploited and pushed to the front line of battles to defend a sect of racial discrimination and its descendants. The militia aims to destroy the future of Yemen and to make the next generation as soldiers under their service. Children's minds are overwhelmed by destructive and racist ideas and one day they would be extremists or terrorists. "He was shot by a bullet in his chest; his body was exuding with a bullet as he shines: they shot me, Hatem. They killed me. My friend, Hatem!!! I don't want to die. I will not die" (*The Smile Owner*, 2018, p. 82, Part 2).

Due to the war, hundreds of Yemeni children were captured on the battlefield. These captives need rehabilitation to be integrated into the community again. The government cooperates with King Salman's center to help these children to overcome their traumas and psychological implication and be able to live as normal civilians. All the conventions, provisions, and principles of children rights protocols are stressed in Geneva and the general assembly as well. As Kadir, et.al. (2018) noted that:

Under the CRC, children who have been affected by armed conflict have the right to rehabilitation and reintegration in an environment that fosters their physical and mental health, self-respect, and dignity (Article 39). By using a right. (p., 2)

Fekriah Shahrah, the novelist, quoted real stories of the crimes that happened to the journalists in prisons. Some of them died under torture and others went out of prison paralyzed and unable to move, and the rest still languished in prisons under torture. She documented the confessions of some of the journalists after getting out of jail. With the same enthusiasm, Shahrah emphasized freedom that was assassinated on the day Houthis controlled Sana'a and how journalists, media workers, writers, intellectuals, and politicians were lynched. The detainee was abducted, all kinds of community here, from the Qat vendor to the university teacher, the mosque speaker, the teacher and the student (The Smile Owner, 2018, p., 38 part 2)

Fekriah also depicted the story of Mohammed Bin Mawdhah who was abducted by the militia without any charge or crime. It is stated that on page (34) part "two that they hung him with an iron rod that passes under his knees and both of his hands with his head were tied together in that painful position. They continuously hit him with a black wire prepared for that purpose", (p., 34, part 2). The novelist mentioned how the political and media detainees were tortured in the militia's prisons. She showed the horrible way in which people were treated on a sectarian ethnic basis and the national community was torn apart. Poverty and disease are spread and education was demolished in the areas under the militia's control. In the novel, the story of Ahmed Al Nuwairah was full of sorrow and sadness. He was one of the innocent Yemeni people who did not carry a gun but he was killed inside the jail. There was no legal reason for his murder. He said:

My name is Ahmed Al Nuwairah. My crime is that I carry all the attributes they deny, I am one of the members of the Eslah party and Republican against the Imamate. They accused me of helping several free journalists to escape from Sana'a city, which the militia turned into an old swamp for their tyranny. The journalists were smuggled to Marib, where the dream of a free civilian state was realized, (The Smile Owner, 2018, p., 46, Part 2).

The novel recounts a fictional narrative template of real events that Yemenis have suffered from. The protagonist, Wahid Al-Amir, wrote an article welcoming the coalition's intervention to save Yemen and defeat the coup of Houthis. He became homeless, hunted inside the country, refusing to emigrate like hundreds of displaced journalists outside the country, and remained subject to arrest as hundreds of journalists were arrested or killed under torture. He remained in Sana'a with his own eyes and his pen, reporting the bloody events of the war. After cultivating the smile of those around him by advocating for truth, he reaped pain and oppression in the eyes of people and the nation. He is trying to get out of his occupied city to Marib city, to make the dream of the state there, where thousands of liberals took refuge to escape the oppression of the militia.

Most notably in the novel is the character 'Afra' who is a poet from southern Yemen. She has a love story with the protagonist. Afra mostly symbolizes the status of the south and its association with northern Yemen. Wahid's family was Samira and his four sons: Shayf, Hafez, Amar, Samah, and other secondary characters are friends of the protagonist and are imaginary characters. A young man, Ammar was killed in the front line of the battle, and his young beloved, Samah spent her life waiting for his coming back until her feelings faded away because of his loss. "She returned to Sana'a after leaving it with dismay that now looks like she is 70. When I saw her in front of me, I was reminded of the old tree trunks. Her beautiful hair as if it falls as fast as her blood falls and she remembers Ammar," (The Smile Owner, 2017, p., 158, Part 1). The others died in the darkness of militia's jails, and some bodies were whipped severely. Another character, Zainab is a nurse who represents the segment of Yemeni women who are victims and ordinary people. She lost her husband and was unable to raise her children.

The gunmen broke into the room and dragged the officer in front of her two eyes, what do you have, a woman? This is one of the traitors and is called for justice. Any justice makes this savage!! The hospital passages were mixed with pain, screaming and the blood effect that was asked of the injured in Al-Natas Road while they avoided the gunmen in their power against the mentally injured (The Smile Owner, 2018, p., 137, Part2).

Moawath and Mohammed are the two detainees whose stories are received from reality to manifest the horrible crimes committed against the Yemeni journalists in the militia's prisons.

I still see that girl whose half down all of her body was taken by the shell in my mind. Those innocent children were victims and their bodies were torn. My heart is broken at their painful death, as well as the grief and anger of their families caused by the death of their children. (The Smile Owner, 2018, p. 35, part 2)

The significance of the novel is to document events as they are by ordinary people of Yemen. Both of them, the coalition forces and Houthi have their agendas. Fekriah has drawn expressive images of the tragedies of the victims of this ugly war. She mentioned the horrible genocides committed by the coalition's army planes. Fekriah mentioned Taiz city, which is sold every time and suffered from the bitterness of betrayal. She also talked about Osama, that handsome young man, waiting for his mother's meal. The novelist recalls the story of Fared the boy who said, "Please don't bury me" when he was injured. At the end of the novel, Shahrah was pessimistic because the war is still going on and the flood of blood is still running. Violence has been everywhere in Yemen. All Yemeni people are suffering from it. They have no salaries, education, health, and security. She said, "Nothing in the horizon calls for hope that the specter of war will leave this homeland" (The Smile Owner, 2019, p., 96, Part 3).

5. Interview with the novel's writer as follows :

(1) Violence is one of the main themes of your novel, how did you convert the violent incidents into a tragic novel, how did a novel affect the readers?

- The novel is a documentation of the war events for five years by both Houthi militia and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia, in the template of the narrative. In fact, the novel has become a desirable way to convey reality better than dry press reports that may

not bring people's suffering exactly to touch hearts. I chose the narrative style because the war produces only violence and destruction.

(2) Did you create the novel from your imagination or it is an imitation of reality?

- The novel, *The Smile Owner*, as I mentioned in the introduction of the second part, is not fiction; the events of war are real and represent the horrible situation, bloodshed, abduction, poverty, and malnutrition. Therefore, the main characters are only fictional that imitate reality and exactly in the sense that the journalist, Wahid Al-Amir represents every free pen and good manners in my country. He represented all those who carried the homeland concern and fought in this absurd war that devastated the souls before the bodies.

(3) From your perspective, how does literature depict social violence, social and sectarian conflicts in Yemen?

- She said, "In the novel, I tried hard to convey the picture as it is without fraud or lack. I am not going to have a problem for depicting reality. I tried my best to convey the true picture with the credibility of the war crimes that are taking place in Yemen.

In fact, both the Houthis militia and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia, want to destroy the Yemeni infrastructure, morals, and social correlations as has been depicted in the story of Afra and Aden as it is depicted in Crater district and all the horrible incidents committed by both the Coup and coalition in the north of Yemen, especially, in Taize city. "Taiz's children have been deprived of study during this year like all cities to spend their days in bringing water. They are crying from the horror of the bombing shot by militia and sniping their innocent souls," (The Smile Owner, 2019, P., 79, part 3). Afra wrote to Wahid about what the militia had done in Aden, is more horrible than what the British colonization did. She said:

...the region of "Crater", where Afra was staying, was exposed to the most horrible operation of organized destruction of such a civilization with extraordinary adversity of the city in which Jews and Christians lived one day, and they built it. Recently it is destroyed by the barbarians of the twenty-first-century criminals 'Houthis' as they expect that it is still inhabited by Jews, not Yemenis, (The Smile Owner, 2019, p., 43, Part 3).

The novelist tried to show the negative impact of the violence not only on the war area, but also in destroying the love of the two lovers; Wahid and Afra, Ammar and Samah and, Wahid and his family. The relationships among Yemeni people were devastated and people killed each other based on their identity, political, and geographical affiliation.

6. Conclusion:

Violence causes harm for individuals as well as the whole community wellbeing since the influence of violence causes social fragmentation and increases hatred as displacement, abduction and torturing in the jails by the Houthi militia. It is obvious that violence in Yemen emerged due to sectarian reasons backed by Iran. The civilians in Yemen are victims of this ugly war where they lost their lives, properties, families and jobs. Thousands of Yemeni people have been killed and thousands of children have been suffering from malnutrition, lack of food, and security. There is no education, health facilities, and even freedom under the hegemony of the militia. Most of the free people, journalists, politicians, and intellectuals are being either put in the jails of Houthi militia or displaced out of their areas. Due to violence, Yemen is

ruined and demolished socially, economically, and morally. The novelist tried to summarize the horrible daily crimes committed by the militia in Yemen in a very tragic way full of sad emotions and sorrows. Children are the most vulnerable segment of the Yemeni nation because they are deprived of education, health, and security. They are forced to join the incinerators of death.

7. Acknowledgement:

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