

## ELEMENTS OF DIASPORA IN MUHAMMED ABUL WALI'S THEY DIE STRANGERS

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper attempts to highlight the elements of the diaspora in They Die Strangers. In particular, it depicts the diasporic experience of Yemenis in Ethiopia represented by Abdou Said, the diasporic protagonist, and the secretary who is half-cast. The study concluded that among the parameterized diasporic elements experienced by Yemenis in the novella are immigration, discrimination, alienation, nostalgia, and identity loss.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Diasporic Elements, Muhammed Abdul-Wali, They Die Strangers*

### INTRODUCTION

Muhammed Abdul-Wali is a postcolonial Yemeni novelist and Diaspora writer. His father is a Yemeni citizen while his mother is Ethiopian. His postcolonial writings expose the reasons and impacts of Yemeni migration due to poverty and the oppressive tyrannical imamate regime. He has authored three literary writings: Sana'a, an Open City (1966) and They Die Strangers (1971). He has authored four stories: The Land, Salma, something Named Longing, the Uncle Saleh, and Rihanah.

They Die Strangers is the masterpiece of Muhammed Abdul-Wali. It is an attempt the problems that Yemeni migrants face at the period of imamate and give voice to their sufferings. They Die Strangers draws on many diasporic components such as immigration, exile, and nostalgia, and identity compromise. They Die Strangers narrates the diasporic experience of Abdou Said, Hajji Abdul Latif, Saleh Saif, the secretary, and the small boy in Ethiopia. The narrative starts upon the arrival of Abdou Said in Sodest Kilo in Addis Ababa and opens a shop. It mainly highlights the lifestyle and experience of Abdou Said. He is the protagonist in the novella. The novella revolves around Abdou Said, who has a wife and a son and land in Yemen. Due to financial problems, he migrates to Ethiopia and settles in Addis Ababa, specifically in Sodest Kilo. He works non-stop as a shopkeeper with the hope to return back to his homeland as a wealthy man. He is successful and is very keen to save every penny. As he suffers from poverty in Yemen, he does not think about going home until he would have collected lots of money. He lives in solitude and isolates himself even from the other expatriated members of Yemeni community there. He commits adultery with plenty of indigenous women resulting in fathering many illegitimate children. He even uses his sexual relationship with rich women to avoid paying tax. Once upon a time, a prostitute woman, Abdou Said's girlfriend, passes away giving birth to an Arab-looking baby. Possibly Abdou Said is his father. Ta'atto, a friend of the late mother, pleads Abdou Said to acknowledge the son as his own but he refuses to do so. Ta'atto tells another Yemeni migrant, Sayyid Amin, to settle the problem. Sayyid Amin approaches Hajji and requests him to persuade Abdou Said to take responsibility for the child. Hajji, along with his companion Saleh Saif meets Abdou Said to acknowledge the child but their efforts are in vain. Ultimately, the secretary takes the child as a brother and Abdou Said dies by suffocation as his shop is on fire. He dies as a stranger in a foreign country.

The section to come presents the salient elements of the diaspora in the novella.

## PREVIOUS LITERATURE

There have been some scholarly writings on *They Die Strangers* but none of has examined the elements of the diaspora in the novella.

Al-Wadhaf and Omar (2007) explores the postcolonial traditions in the novella and clarifies the effects of immigration on the individual and the society as a whole, the Yemeni identity, political notions, and the ideology of return. Abdul Wali's novella is a criticism on immigration as the migrants desert their wives, families, and lands. Migration is not intended for permanent residency but it is a transitional stage in Yemenis' life. Migration led to the existence of two generations. The first generation is of Yemeni origin and the second one is of mixed-blood. Those of mixed blood suffer more because they cannot identify themselves as Yemenis nor as Ethiopians. They are stuck in the middle. The nation is another important concept that has been depicted in the novella. Yemenis in Ethiopia formed the Free Yemenis movement which was involved in the failed attempt to oust the rule of Imam. The sense of nationhood has diverged among Yemenis. For example, Abdou Said never involves himself in politics. He never attends the political meetings. He wants to go back to his country to live as a passive citizen along with his family. On the other side, Yemenis, such as Abdul Latif, are politically active against the Imam rule. The last issue addressed is the relationship between woman and land. The authors claim that describing Yemeni women as pure might refer to the land of Yemen as it is not contaminated by colonizers and foreign people in contrast to Ethiopia which is multi-race country. Yemeni women in the novella are not politically active and are referred to without names. Their role is limited to gardening and preparing food.

Manqoush et al. (2014) examine the national identity of Yemenis in the novella. Building on the theory of nationhood, they explore the nationhood during the regime of Imam. Abdou Said's sense of belonging is shown by being nostalgic about Yemen and by his yearning to go back to his country. So, it is very difficult to assimilate the new Ethiopian culture. Besides, the novella portrays the endeavors of Yemenis to liberate their country from the oppressive Imamate's rule. Yemenis like Hajji Abdou Latif fled from the country after the failure of the revolution, but he keeps remembering Yemen and mobilizing people against the Imamate's rule. The study concludes that Yemeni migrants lose identity and experience rootlessness.

Manqoush (2015) examined the cultural dilemma of Yemenis in Ethiopia and compares it with that of Japanese in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Contra to Japanese, it is observed that Yemenis migrate to collect money and go back to their country. They are nostalgic about their homeland, though the condition in Yemen is very miserable and deteriorating. Having reviewed the earlier studies, the next section will analyze and discuss the elements of the diaspora in the novella.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Diaspora is a term that was derived from the Greek word διασπείρω "diaspeiro", meaning "I scatter", hence diaspora means scattering ("Diaspora," n. d.). The term Diaspora refers to any people of an ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands; being dispersed throughout other parts of the world; and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture. Diasporic literature is characterized by alienation, displacement, rootlessness, confusion, nostalgia, suffering, loss of identity, and assimilation problem. This subsection will highlight the most important diasporic elements in the novella.

The first diasporic element is migration. Migration is part of Yemeni's life. This problem has erupted recently during the Imamate regime. The novella depicts two types of immigration: voluntary and involuntary. Voluntarily represents the case of Abdou Said who leaves the country for 50 years searching for a better living. Forced migration is represented by Hajji Abdul Latif, who fled to Ethiopia after the failing attempt to oust the Imamate by assassinating Imam Ahmed in 1948. He "played a role in the 1948 revolution, for he was one of the Yemeni liberals" (Abdul-Wali 42). Hajji Abdul Latif was a member of the Free Yemenis movement responsible for collecting subscriptions in Ethiopia. Hajji Abdul Latif is forced out of his homeland. Al-Wadhaf and Omar (2007) assert that "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 the Yemeni emigration. Yemeni emigrants, first and foremost, leave their country in search of better opportunities" (6-7). They add that "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" (Al-Wadhaf and Omar 7).

The second element is discrimination. All Yemenis are called "camel jockey" (Abdul- Wali 18). This invokes feelings of anger among Yemenis except for Abdou Said. The case of half-breeds may be taken as a sort of racial discrimination as the blood is thought to be not pure. This is portrayed by the secretary dialogue with Hajji Abdul Latif "Yes, us! We're searching for a homeland, a nation, a hope. You don't know what it's like to feel like a stranger" (Abdul-Wali 58). This stigmatized feeling agonizes the secretary. The situation is worsened when Hajji Abdul Latif informs the secretary that he is a burden on Yemenis (Abdul- Wali 57).

The third element is alienation. The characters who feel alienated are Abdou Said and the secretary. Abdou never attended the community meeting nor did he make donations. He lives in complete isolation (Abdul-Wali 47). The secretary is a half cast person. His father is Yemeni and his mother is Ethiopian. He works in Hajji Abdul-Latif's company. He is a stranger in a strange land. This is made explicit by the narrator's comparison between the secretary's father and the secretary himself. His father "had a country to go home to one day. But, his son, the secretary, was like a rootless tree; he was no one. Yes, no one" (Abdul-Wali 56). The secretary's dilemma is revealed in his conflicting thoughts. He "could not even say he was Yemeni, for he did not know Yemen. He had never seen it. He had heard a great deal about it but did not know it. If he went there, how would it receive him? Would it spit him out as this land had, even though it was his mother's homeland? Then who was he? They called him muwallad, 'half-breed'. Where was his land? Who were his people?" (Abdul-Wali 56).

The fourth prominent element of diaspora is nostalgia. Abdou Said remains nostalgic about his early childhood.

Nostalgia is a recurring theme in the novella. When he chews leaves of qat in his shop, he remembers that:

He used to drink only goat's milk, which he milked secretly in the cool mountain breeze. Perhaps he ate some fruit that grew on village trees or dates that grew in the valley or bananas that he stole from a garden near the valley or bananas that he stole from a garden near the valley. Abdou treasured memories were of that valley, the trees ripe with fruit, goats lowing. (Abdul-Wali 25) He remembers his land and village and smiles within himself. One day he will come back to his village and people will chant "what house is the best in the village?" and they will answer themselves the house is "Abdou Said" (Abdul-Wali 62).

The last and the most important element of diaspora is the identity crisis. Identity is a cornerstone in any exploration of the diasporic literary text. The migrant develops what is called diasporic identity. Abdou Said lands in Ethiopia with his inherited identity but this identity loses its strength with the passage of time as he is being confronted with new social, economic, and cultural ways of living and thinking. Though the protagonist spends many years in Ethiopia, he does not forget about his homeland. This is evident in the narrator words "In his heart, he lived not in Sodset Kilo, but in the faraway village in Yemen" (Abdul-Wali 27). The secretary, on the other hand, experiences identity loss "Then who was he? They called him muwallad, 'half-breed'. Where was his land? Who were his people?" (Abdul-Wali 56). On the other hand, the secretary thinks that Hajji Abdul Latif easily assimilates into the host country and forgets about his liberation cause, "If you really wanted to liberate your country, why did you get married and have children? I tell you frankly, you'll never be the ones to liberate your country" (Abdul-Wali 57-58). Though the half-caste secretary has never been to Yemen, he is willing to free his country "We'll try to liberate the land of Yemen. We might succeed, but we will never make the excuse that others are blocking our way" (Abdul-Wali 58). From the title itself, it can be understood that the migrants experience an identity crisis as they live and die as strangers. Yemenis strive to preserve the Islamic values in a Christian society but some fail. Among the astray is Abdu Said. Weir (2001) claims that Abdou is an extreme example of a 'fallen' émigré who ruthlessly betrays the ideals of his native culture and religion without remorse" (11). His identity is dualized. This stage of dualization is explained as he is being torn in between his needs and desires on the one hand and his sacred values on the other.

To reiterate, *They Die Strangers* is a diasporic literary text that depicts the sufferings that Yemenis face in the host country.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, immigrant Yemenis experienced very difficult situations in Ethiopia. However, the extent of suffering varies from one character to another. All Yemenis in the novella are migrants except for the secretary, who is half-breed. Migration is a difficult experience especially for the half –breed. The other element was discrimination. There were two kinds of discrimination. External discrimination targets all the Yemenis without exception by other sects of the society. Internal discrimination that occurs among the Yemeni community members and it is exemplified by the secretary who was referred to as a burden on Yemenis by Hajji Abdul Latif. The third element was alienation. Two characters felt alienated. Abdou Said isolated himself from the other Yemeni members. The secretary suffers as he knows that he is like a rootless tree. Alienation for is a catastrophe that is going to persistently affect his life. He cannot say that he is a Yemeni and he has no proof to be Ethiopian. The fourth element was nostalgia. Abdou Said was the most noticeable character kept remembering his wife, his house, his village, and his land repeatedly. His yarn to go back is a recurring theme in the novella. The secretary also wished to go back to Yemen though he never was there. The final element was identity loss. Abdou said started to lose his identity as he is involved in fornication though he feels committed to returning to Yemen. The secretary was reported to drink alcohol. The one whose identity is at stake is the secretary who is stuck in between being a Yemeni and being an Ethiopian. The secretary represents the second generation of Yemenis which indicates that immigration results in the suffering of many people especially those who are of mixed blood.

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