

# The Hostage within the Self

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**Abstract.** Great literature is a reflection of life in all its forms. Its themes are from life and address life too. Such literature contains eternal truth, it is not limited to one country, nation, or era. The reader at any age or in any part of the world would perceive the human's dilemma, pain, struggle, or thought discussed in it. In the twenty first century, we still read novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Some of them even gain more popularity than in their ages as the novels of George Gissing. *The Hostage* is one of such novels, it is written by the Yemeni novelist Z. H. Dammaj and published in 1984. This paper's focus is analyzing this novel and explicating its human eternal value. It will concentrate on the use of the word "hostage" and its meaning and implications. The key stone in this novel is the connotation of this word; who is the hostage? Is it the governor or the captive or the woman whose denied her rights as a human being. The paper will use an eclectic approach to dive into the far historical and social background of the novel and to analyze the historical figures in the novel, the custom and the age.

**Keywords:** Hostage, Imamate, Yamen, Place and Identity

## 1. Introduction

Literature plays a crucial role in recording historic events although these events, presented in literature, are not pure but facts mingled with imaginative ones. Life's catastrophes are depicted in literature especially in the novel genre. Novels transcend human values and ethics and mould the destiny of the human race as Ian Watt states about the novel: "truth to individual experience" and its function is to "convey the impression of fidelity to human experience"[1]. Thus, great literature is a reflection of life in all its forms. Its themes are from life and address life too. Such literature contains eternal truth, it is not limited to one country, nation, or era. The reader at any age or in any part of the world would perceive the human's dilemma, pain, struggle, or thought expressed through it. In the twenty first century, we still read novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Such novels that carry a unique human experience encompass a wide range of historic truth which influences the present and the future as Prasad mentions: more than any other genre, the novel has held a privileged position in debates about the relationship between reality (or history) and its representation in literature. Early theorists of the modern European novel, like Erich Auerbach and Watt, approached the genre primarily in terms of referentiality, that is, in terms of its unique ability to reflect the empirical world or bear witness to history [2].

Usually a historic novel concentrates on a particular period of time in the life of a nation trying to explain or to go beyond the historic documents. It tries to explore the life of great men as well as the wretched population.

## 2. The Title's Implication

*The Hostage* is one of such novels; it is written by the Yemeni novelist Z. H. Dammaj and published in 1984. This paper's focus is to analyze this novel and explicit its human eternal value. It will concentrate on the use of the word "hostage" and its meaning and implications. The key stone to understand this novel is the connotation of its title "*The Hostage*". The word "hostage" is the major theme of the novel: what does it mean? When did the Yemeni government start to use it in a certain political connotation? Who is the hostage? Is it one character or are all the character hostages? Is it the governor, the captivated, or the woman who is denied her rights as a human being. The paper will use an eclectic approach to dive into the historic and social background of the novel and to analyze the historical figures in the novel, the custom and the age.

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### 3. Historic Background

The novel explores how a Yemeni author comprehends and constructs his people, fashion, and multiple identities in the context of imamate out of date regime. The narration reveals to the reader hints of real places and real names. The reader can not ignore or miss the implication of accumulated cultures and inherited suffering of the old rules.

Thus, the novel establishes a connection between the character and the place, articulating this connection through everyday routine. The narrative articulates a resistance and a challenge to the ancient life style. The novel is set in 1948 it exposes the hostage system that existed during the reign of the Imamate (1904-1962). The Imam had the right to take young boys from powerful tribes to secure the obedience of these tribes. The Imamate regime borrowed the hostage system from the Ottoman Turkish occupiers of Yemen and used it for the same goal the Ottomans used it for: to strengthen the Imamate state [3].

The novel is a tragic narrative of a young boy from the countryside who has been taken hostage by the ruling Imam's soldiers and imprisoned "in the fortress of al-Qahira" [4]. There with other hostages, a religious teacher teaches them the Holy Quran and how to be obedient prisoners. Later the boy is sent forcefully to serve at the governor's palace to work as a *duwaydar*. A *duwaydar* is a personal servant who acts the role of eunuchs in old times: to work in the women's areas without any risk to their chastity. At the palace, the boy experiences a hostile atmosphere of corruption, injustice and humiliation created and controlled by the women of the palace, its soliders and the governor. He and the women are trapped in emotional, sexual and power relationships:

It left me floating in a daze, and all I could remember next morning was that my friend hadn't stayed there with me, because two women, neither of them Zahra, had taken him and sat on the palace steps, kissing him and squeezing further pleasures out of him. When he came back, I remember, he slammed the door violently behind him, then sank down to sleep more deeply than I'd ever seen him sleep before. [5]

The quote explicates the limited space and freedom of both male and female although the females are free in the general sense but they are not in reality and this limitation is reflected on the oppressed boys in the palace.

### 4. Critique of Social and Political State

However, the narrator is the "hostage" and the readers view the past events through his own eyes and perception. The sole narrator, who controls the whole action, dominates the narration and events, his voice, point of view, and perspective are what the reader receives. It is a social, political, and religious critique of the captors' corruption. The condemnation of the corruption is presented in the death of a boy-servant (*duwaydar*) who is the close friend of the narrator in that jungle. The death of the servant, an active member in the immorality of that place who dies of tuberculosis, is a symbolic punishment. The palace is a mini-world where one can find all samples of people: rich, poor, working, idle, moral, immoral . . . etc. but none of them is happy or has the freedom to act as he/she pleased. There are certain social restrictions on these people, these restrictions as in the case of the servants and women led to illegitimate sexual relationships which increase the depression of the inhabitants of the palace as they know that they are practicing unaccepted and forbidden pleasure not only from a social point of view but also from a religious one. The depression colors everything even the young youthful lives as the narrator describes: How difficult it was to wake up in this city, so different from the fortress in the mountains, with its fresh, invigorating air! In the city, you always seemed to wake with the feeling that you'd been beaten black and blue, with your body swollen like a drum or the stump of a palm tree and your eyes drooping. From the very beginning there was a lingering feeling of nausea and depression, and you didn't usually feel the least desire for breakfast or coffee. All you wanted was cool water, and that was only to be found, if at all, in the soldiers' jugs. [6]

The narrator thinks the problem is in the city and does not realize that his gloomy and bleak view of his surrounding springs from the fact that he is denied the right to live among his own tribe and make his choices in life.

### 5. Exclusion as a major factor of Identity Construction

It is alarming the insistence throughout the narrative of denying the narrator an identity. He is not given a name, he is merely known as the *hostage* or *duwaydar*: "They have oppressed me and attacked my family seizing everything [my freedom and my name] and transforming me into a hostage, then a duwaydar in her [governor's sister] and the servant of her brother, the Governor" [7]. The reader knows his gender from the course of the events but no name is attached to him. He is only called by the task assigned to him which is not his own choice of career. Also, he does not belong to the place where he lives and works. These facts lead to exclusion of his identity from the mass he lives within; his identity is constructed through being denied a real access to the people around him as Donald and Rattansi stated: It [identity] is constructed into discourses of inclusion and exclusion of those who qualify for membership, and those who do not. Identity refers to the processes, categories and knowledges through which communities are defined as such, and the ways in which they are rendered specific and differentiated [8].

Therefore, the hostage's identity is constructed through exclusion. He has no affinity to the place he lives in; nothing legitimize his claim of place and identity. He is simply there to perform a hateful disdainful task. His life is valuable to the captives only in the sense that his people will never dare to revolt as long as he is alive and if he dies then some one else must replace him from his tribe.

## 6. Identity and Place

Moreover, the place occupies a very important role in the construction of the identity and feeling of freedom. The narrator does not identify with the place, its people, or its authority and this exclusion leads to rootlessness and vague identity as Ashworth states: The functions of place identity include: the fostering and strengthening of the identification of peoples with their governments and jurisdictions at various special scales: the promotion of political ideologies that justify the right to exercise power over others; the identification of individual with social groups; and the construction of images of place for promotion in various markets for various purposes. [9]

It is clear from the above quote that the narrator does not identify with any of what Ashworth states the place plays a major role in Arabic literature and *The Hostage* is not an exception, to understand that we should briefly visit the history of Arabic literature. Poetry is the first literary genre that Arabs started with and are very proud of. The pre-Islamic poet starts his poem by recalling the past. The past lives in the poet's unconsciousness, all poets address the ruins of the place which are the landmark of the past [10]

Thus, the memory of the past colors the narrative with a sheer feeling of sadness and wretchedness. The place becomes here the motivation of the conflict as a center and source of imprisonment, pain, and humiliation. The novel's title is the threshold to step into the theme and indicates the place of the action: where would be a hostage? Defiantly not a comfortable place. The title is not even enough; the narrator provides an accurate description of the place, custom, and people living there at that historic period.

However, the narrator is not the only hostage in the novel; he is a microcosm of all Yemen. A brief historic background is needed here to show that every one is a hostage in one way or another. The historic plot is based on real history of Yemen with real names such as the Imam Yahya and Imam Ahmed, the governor, and names of real places like the fortress. And references to the political movements of that time: Yamni Republican Movement. And the narrator refers to repeated act of beheading of the opposing political figures: "I know beyond doubt that my father had been among those beheaded in the town of Hajja" [11]. All the characters are connected with a lack of freedom. Each has his own causes but at the end they are hostages. The narrator talks about the Imam as the ruler who has an infinite power which is not true the reader is able to recognize the fear of the Imam and his real status as a hostage of his political and religious position.

## 7. Other Hostages

The Imam and the narrator are both hostages of their age, political, social, and religious circumstances. The title of 'Imam' has a significant meaning. In Islam imam is only a leader in prayers and has no priestly office but in Yemen with the passage of time, the title retains a different meaning and power [12]. Yemen, or north Yemen in particular, in the novel and in reality was ruled by the Imam who has governors to help him rule the country. According to the *Encyclopedia of Yemen*, it was difficult to rule Yemen because of its

difficult geographical and social nature. The Yemeni society consists of tribes and the loyalty of its members is to the tribe not to the state. Consequently, that makes it difficult to have a control over a mountain country where movement is difficult and slow especially in the early part of the previous century. The solution to protect the state against revolutionary tribes was taking hostages to ensure the obedience of those tribes. This system of hostage is very old it goes back to ancient Yemen [13].

The Imam is a hostage to his title which is a heavy duty and to understand that we read Brinkley Messick's account of that: In the 1950s and prior decades, Yemen was led by a classic form of Muslim ruler, an *imam*, a commander of the "pen and sword," a spiritual and temporal leader who was also, as a trained jurist, the final legal authority in his state [14].

Here the imam fulfils two duties: spiritual that imposes on him a certain way of behavior as the embodiment of the religious head of state and the other duty is a political one where he acts differently from the spiritual one. He is not free to act on his own impulse, be on his easy nature with those around him, or enjoy the simple pleasure of life. Worse is that he is always expecting a revolt, waiting for something unknown within the walls of his own palace as it is populated with those hostages whom he has taken to secure his state from their tribes. He is a hostage of his state, of his political rule and of his cultural inheritance.

The other representative hostages are women. They are even in a worse state than men are. In the novel the emphasis is on Sharifa Hafsa, the Governor's sister. Sharifa Hafsa is a beautiful and aristocratic lady but that does not help her to be independent. She is the hostage of tradition and custom and the rules imposed on her by her gender and social status. She is a hostage of her high social position and weakened by her gender but she does not realize that. She goes as far as imposing her ownership on the narrator calling him "my handsome hostage" [15]. This is very ironic as she actually is the hostage of the young men's masculinity. She seeks, as the other palace women, sexual satisfaction through those hostages. She loves the hostage but she can not express her love to him openly nor marry him. She teases him with her other admirers and there is a kind of a competition among the palace women in seducing those young male hostages. It becomes a game only idle ruthless people can afford and that what these women are. They become so because of the life they live in a complete segregation from men and other social classes they become sex maniacs and pleasure seekers. These women become engaged with their own amusement and small world.

## 8. Conclusion

The state of the hostage is an endless dilemma. People live it without being aware of it. Some times, it is because of tradition, custom, religion, color, gender, or ideology. To come over this state a man has to open the doors for his free spirit to free him/her self as the novel seems to say at the novel's closure when the hostage breaks the doors of his prison and runs away. The novel ends with the national revolution, starting a new Yemen bringing hope but the reader of 2012 is aware of the struggle and pain the Yemeni people still live with the tribes as a corner stone for any settlement or peace just like the old days. Nevertheless, Arab Spring seems to bring a delightful and hopeful change to Yemeni women, and Kerman Tukel is a distinguished, intelligent, and outspoken Yemeni woman who is recognized by the whole world. This change within such tribal society brings hope just as the author intends at the end of his novel.

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