

The Social System in the Novel “Sanaa,” Interpretation of the Clouds and the Narcissus Suras by Ali Al-Amir

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Received: 20/04/2024

Published: 16/12/2024

Abstract:

The social system dominated the course of the narrative text under study, as it reflects a social reality in Yemeni society and occupies a space within it. Most passages of the novel depict a duality between past and present, simplicity and complexity, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, peace and war, joy and sorrow. All this enriches the narrative text and gives the reader the opportunity to search behind these implications for a truth hidden by the author.

Keywords: system, narrative, critique, modernity.

1. Introduction:

Society is defined as a social structure created by human beings through human actions that result in beauty or ugliness, facilitated by the gift of reason. “The task of sociology is therefore to study the actions of these people, interpret their motives and understand their goals and intentions,” which is studied through what is known as the social system.

Society consists of a group of individuals and families who belong to a particular culture, which is permeated by a set of inherited values, customs, and traditions. The behaviors and shared relationships that result from society are referred to in literary studies as the social system. “Literature, like other forms of consciousness, is subject to an organization imposed by society as a macrosystem. From Moran’s perspective, we must view society not only as a comprehensive macro-system that includes relatively independent sub-systems—each dependent on ideas and knowledge—but also as an ecological system that contributes to the organization of the systems it encompasses.¹” Thus, the study of literature from a social systems perspective begins with an organization imposed by society, not as a total system containing independent

¹ Kleiman Mawazan: Literary History, translated by Dr. Hassan Al-Talib, edited by Said Al-Loush, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Jadeed Al-Muttahidah, Libya, 1st edition, 2010, p. 27.

subsystems, but as a product of social consciousness linked to the practice of ideas and knowledge, which, like all sciences, can evolve.

Parsons states: "Social systems are composed of parts capable of reflection and thought in the performance of their functions,²" which implies that the social system includes separate components in their thinking and reflective processes. It is important to emphasize that these elements that constitute social systems are necessary and provide the strength to perform multiple functions and objectives.

The Image of Yemeni Society Through the Novel:

The novel introduces us to an ancient cultural area located in central Yemen, namely Sana'a, known for its political history and its many successes, making it a town that attracts many scholars. However, it lacks the tourism aspect that encompasses many ancient relics from a bygone civilization, largely due to the civil wars resulting from the current system's rejection in Yemen between its supporters and opponents.

Ali Al-Amir gives the reader a glimpse into the original history of Sana'a, stating: "It is one of the ancient cities inhabited by humans since the fifth century BC. It was limited to the area between the mountains of Nakham and Ayban, but the old Sana'a is the origin, which was surrounded by a wall with several gates, of which only the Yemen Gate remains."³ This excerpt emphasizes the natural image he projects onto the city of Sana'a, highlighting its stunning beauty and elegant scenery, inviting the reader to visualize the picturesque view of the Yemen Gate. He employs a distinctive descriptive style, blending astonishment and wonder at the sight of the single remaining gate, despite the fact that "its wall had seven gates: Bab Shu'b in the northern part of the old city, opposite Bab Yemen in the south, then Bab Al-Shuqadif in the center of the city to the north, opposite Bab Al-Sabha to the south, which was later renamed Bab Al-Sabh, and Bab Al-Roum in the northern part, at the end of the city to the west, opposite Bab Al-Balqah to the south, and finally Bab Qa'a Al-Yahud, today known as the Qa'a area on the western side of the old city."

It becomes clear that the writer has concealed the true message he wishes to convey to the reader by presenting a coded image that the audience must decipher to understand the wars that have plagued Yemen, particularly targeting the Sana'a area, leading to the near-total destruction of Yemen's gates and walls. "The shield of Sana'a and its wall remain an open museum in the open air," illustrating that it is a historical city with beauty that reflects the civilization and uniqueness of the Yemeni people. However, the consequences of repeated wars have rendered it a museum before every visitor, where one does not feel any security in a foreign land; as Abu Muhammad Al-Hamdani said about Sana'a: "It is the mother of Yemen and its center, its name in the

²- Dr. Abdul Fattah Ahmed Yousef: *Linguistics of Discourse and Cultural Patterns, Philosophy of Meaning between Discourse System and Cultural Conditions*, Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 2010, p. 151.

³- Ali Al-Amir: *Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus*, p. 430.

pre-Islamic era was Azal, and the people of the Levant call it Al-Qasbah. The Arabs say: There must be a way to Sana'a, even if the journey is long.⁴

Sana'a captured the hearts of Arabs in ancient times due to its historical landmarks that made it the cradle of Yemen, enhancing its splendor and beauty, inspiring numerous visitors from different countries who are captivated by its sight and find it hard to part from it⁵. The greatest Yemeni poets, such as Professor Dr. Abdul Aziz Al-Maqaleh, have sung about it, stating: "One day, our fate will sing in our exiles, there must be a way to Sana'a, even if the journey is long."⁶

This poem has been sung by many people of various nationalities. Anyone who distances themselves from Sana'a inevitably recalls Al-Maqaleh's poem, which expresses the deep sorrow of everyone who has left it, as returning now seems almost impossible due to the difficult, tiresome, and costly travel⁷, especially amid the current wars in Yemen. These conflicts have not only annihilated the Yemeni people but have also led to the destruction of invaluable cultural landmarks.

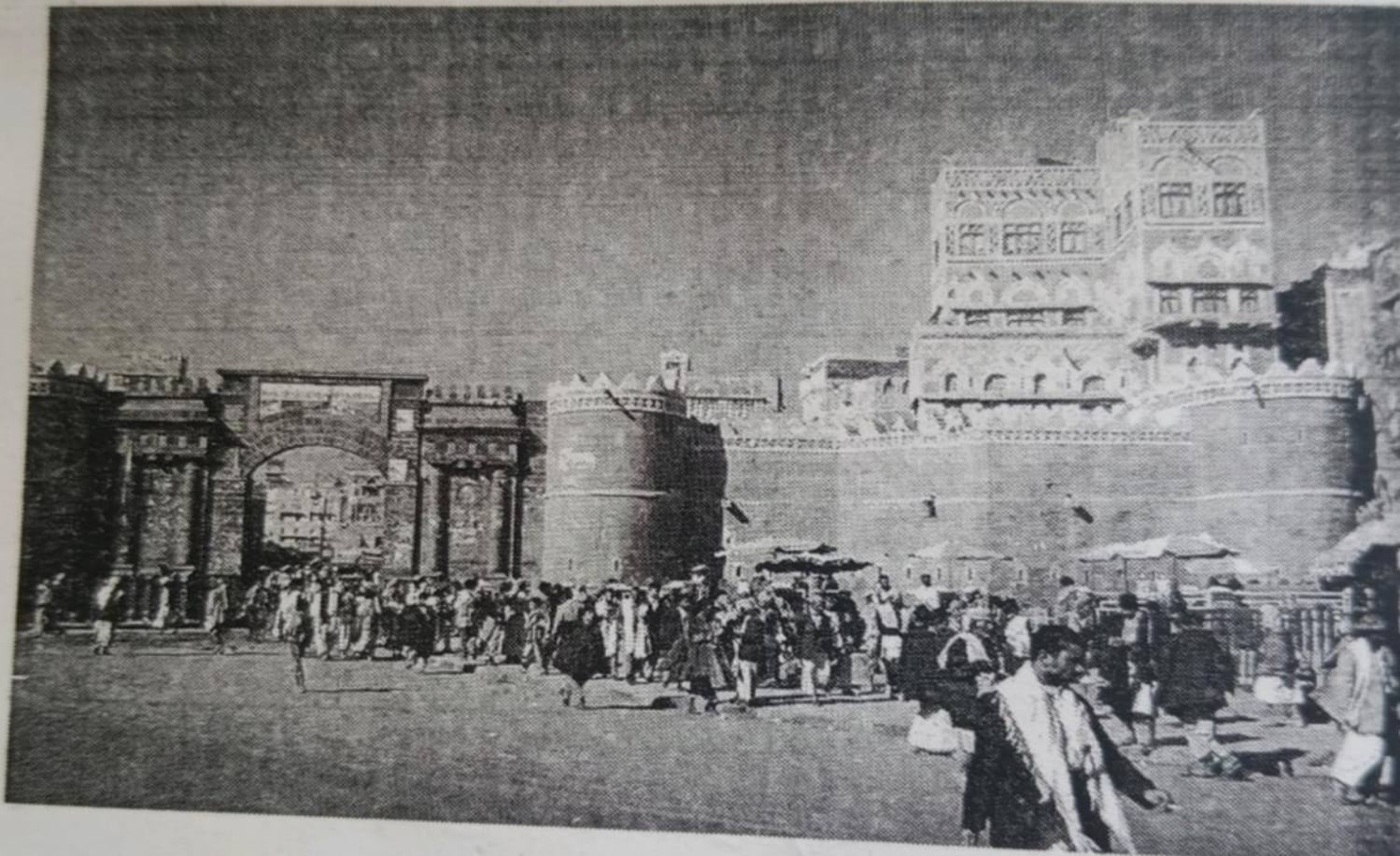
Such is the nature of war—it is a curse that kills innocent people, buries their creativity, and obliterates the civilization of an entire country, such as the Yemeni society, which endures dire conditions.

⁴- Previous source, p. 84.

⁵- Same source, p. 84.

⁶- Previous source, p. 85.

⁷- Same source, p. 85.



The Image of Bab al-Yemen⁸.

These two images, taken by Ali Al-Amir during his trip to Sana'a, "Bab al-Yemen", illustrate his desire to share his vision. He notes that no gate had caught his attention before, yet this gate stands as a witness to Yemeni history. It is the main entrance to old Sana'a from the south and is the only gate left among six others after all the others disappeared, leaving "Bab al-Yemen" as a testimony to numerous historical and political events.

The marginalized class in Yemeni society:

Ali Al-Amir highlights the marginalized class in Yemeni society, which consists of citizens considered to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They live in tragic conditions, isolated from the rest of Yemeni society, and work in menial jobs such as cleaning houses and washing cars. This "underclass" is largely confined to the streets, both men and women⁹.

The forgotten segments of Yemeni society lack the most basic rights to live with dignity, especially the right to employment that would provide them with the means to survive. Most members of this marginalized class work in degrading jobs, earning meager wages that barely cover their daily needs for food and drink. They are physically and psychologically exploited and deprived of their dignity as human beings.

This passage reveals the miserable conditions of this group in society. It shows the author's intention to give a vivid picture of the suffering of people belonging to impoverished social classes.

⁸- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, pp. 35-81.

⁹- Previous source, p. 131.



أبناء المهمشين

The Image of the Marginalized¹⁰

The marginalized are among the most affected groups by the war due to the dire conditions they endure. They face discrimination, as they are often not allowed to bury their dead in many isolated and rural areas designated for them. This prompted the author to ask his friend's father, "Do these marginalized people have a cemetery of their own, or do they bury their dead like everyone else?" His response confirmed the unsettling information in my mind: no one but them knows where they bury their dead. He said he had never seen a funeral leave their homes and speculated that they might bury their dead in their houses, even suggesting that some believe they actually eat their dead¹¹.

¹⁰- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 127.

¹¹- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 132.

The image of the marginalized, referred to in Yemen as “al-Akhdam,” represents the bottom of society, isolated from the living. Even in death, they are treated with discrimination, as they are not allowed to bury their dead in cemeteries. This reflects the preoccupation of officials with positions and politics, neglecting such issues.

The father of the author Ali Al-Amir provides conjectures indicating that this class is unaware of where they bury their dead, confirming the existence of social and cultural stratification and a lack of awareness among people.

It is not only cemeteries that affect the marginalised in Yemen; their homes also reflect a pattern of discrimination. Al-Amir describes the houses of the people of Sana’a: “Its name was Sam, named after Sam, son of Noah, its first builder, according to legend. Most of the homes of the marginalised are built on the outskirts of the city out of cloth, cardboard and mud¹². He notes: “I noticed a group of houses built in a uniform geometric style, one-storey cubes in parallel lines, but they were in a very dilapidated and miserable condition. When I saw the shapes of their inhabitants and their chaos, I knew that they were the marginalised, or what is known in Yemen as al-Akhdam”¹³. This reveals the hidden concept with which many marginalised people grapple, particularly with regard to the buildings in the village of “al-Akhdam”, a term that encapsulates the derogatory view of a section of Yemeni society characterised by modest homes that lack the necessities of a dignified life.

In another passage, he describes the miserable state of mud houses that resemble ruins, reflecting the fear, panic and uncertainty that invade people’s lives when they lose their homes and the means to live a decent life. He said: “He then took me to a ruin, I mean his house, which was a mud house that had mostly collapsed. From the back, he led me through a modest door with a piece of cloth hanging behind it, the only door to the room that protected him from the cold of Sana’a, and the whole house was that room”.

Despite living in a developed world, Sana’a still lacks the most basic living conditions. Through this passage, he wanted to show us the house he visited, describing it as a ruin because of its severe dilapidation and cramped conditions. This is probably a result of the situation that Yemen has fallen into because of the wars. However, we cannot deny that most houses in Yemen-even before the war-or even in other Arab countries suffer from poverty and marginalization. In this case, we acknowledge that the war has played a significant role in causing most Yemenis to live in fear and insecurity, making their homes a real threat to their lives.

¹²- Same source, p. 83.

¹³- Same source, p. 131.



Yemeni society between past and present¹⁴

In our novel, the author uses two opposing dualities to refer to the beautiful past that the city of Sana'a once lived: "Cities full of tranquillity and joy and an abundance of colourful blessings"¹⁵. He depicts the state of joy and happiness that the inhabitants of this blessed region once felt, because "joy in Yemen has its own rituals that are different from others. Yemenis, in general, are beings immersed in joy, despite the harshness of the day, the cruelty of the night, and even in the face of poverty... Born into great civilisations and opening their eyes happily in the land of happiness, they have excelled since time immemorial in taming the hardships of life, without forgetting their share in the pursuit of art and joy, all of which stem from their splendid historical heritage"¹⁶.

Yemen is rich in various social customs and rituals that date back thousands of years - rituals that bring happiness to the hearts and comfort to the souls of many Yemeni families. These traditions are rooted in childhood, despite the poverty and hunger they face.

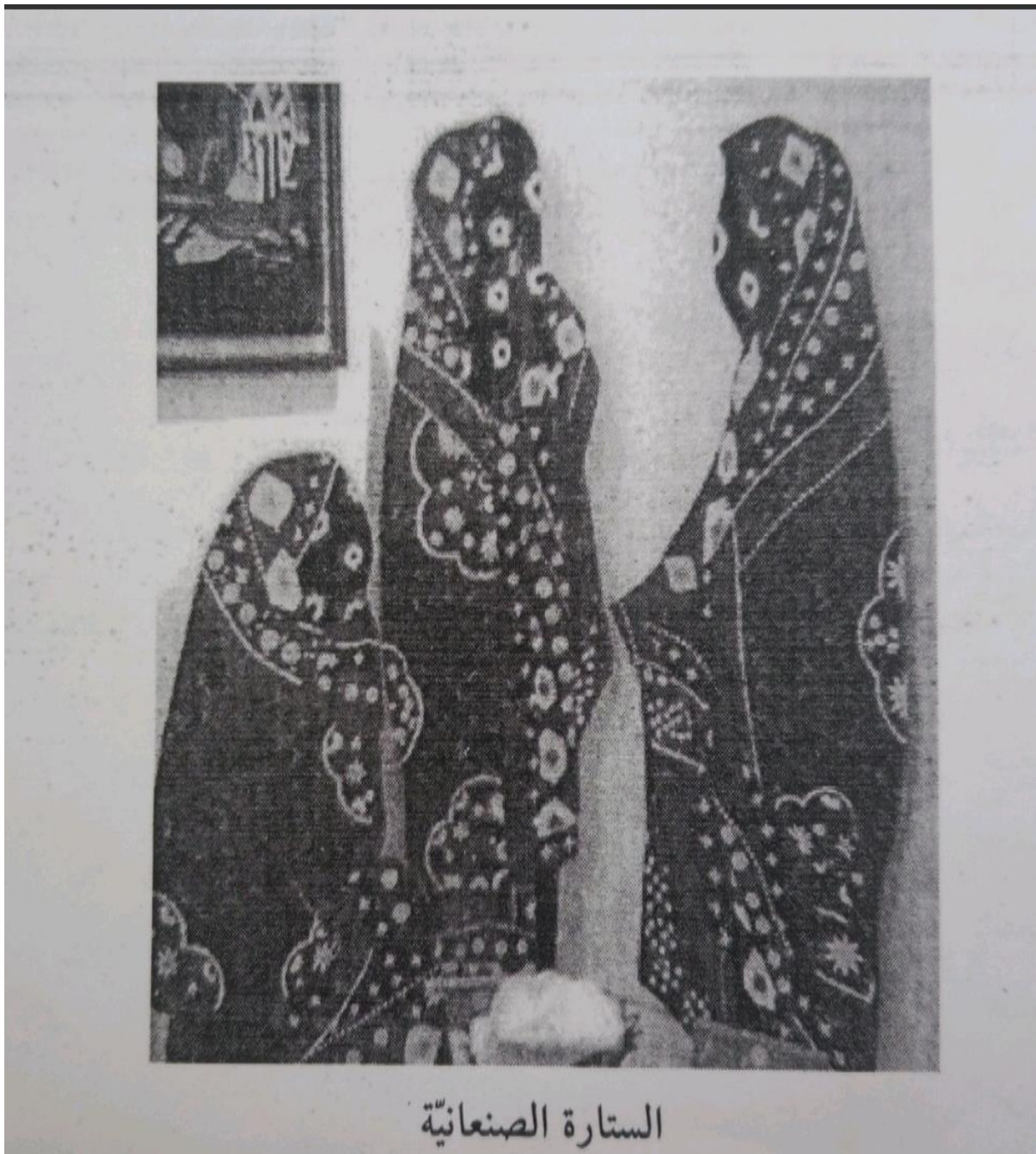
¹⁴- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 119.

¹⁵- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 38.

¹⁶- Same source, pp. 94-95.

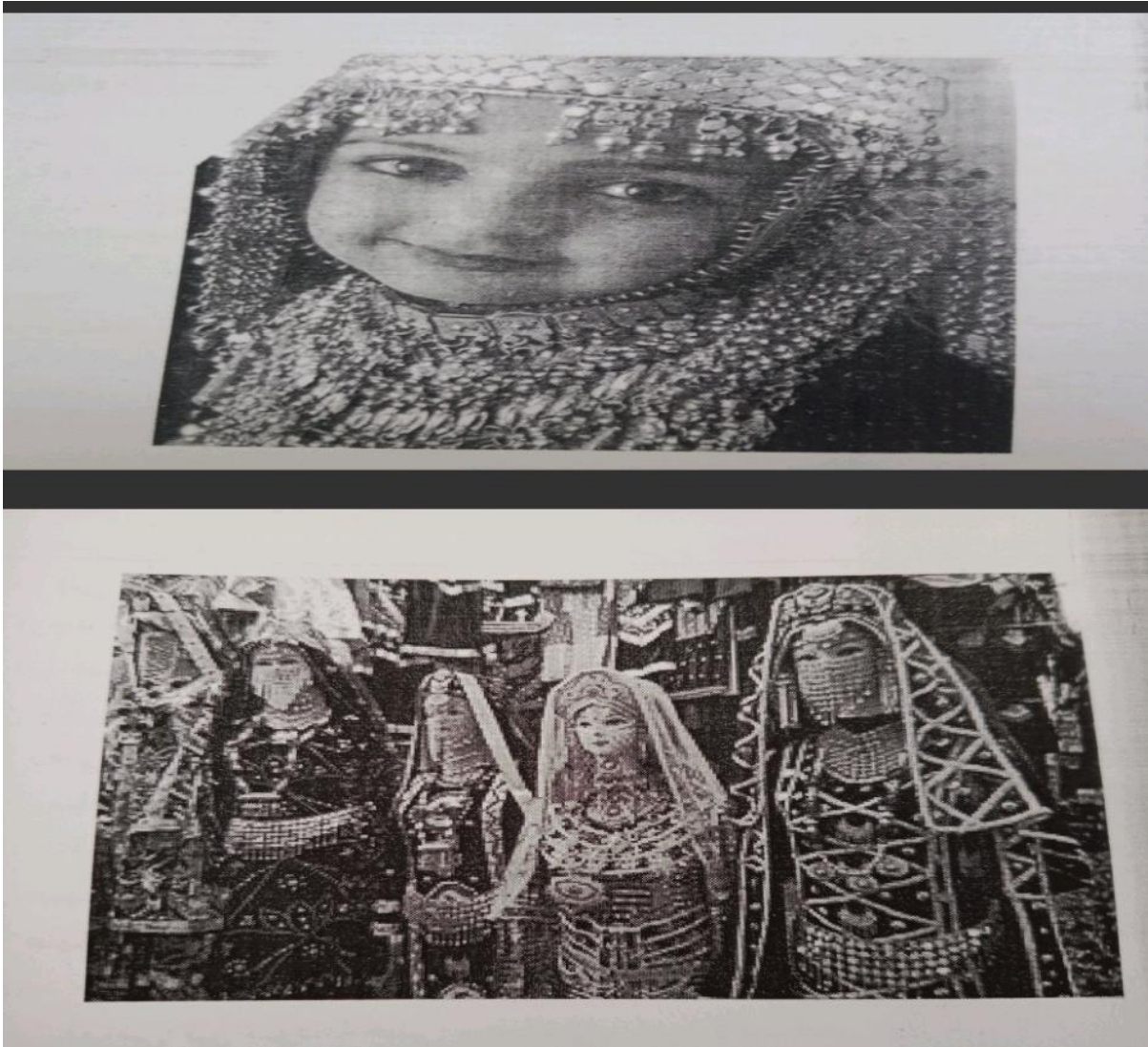
The author focuses on the idea that the joy, customs and art of the Yemenis remain a symbolic expression of beliefs and social relationships. Despite the pain, tragedy and sorrow, the people of Yemen continue to try to preserve them as much as possible and enjoy the blessings of life that make them unique. They strive to give these occasions a beautiful spirit that enhances the atmosphere of joy.

The following image shows the traditional dress of the Yemeni people, specifically the Sanaani curtain, a square piece of fabric filled with colours and decorations, resembling a work of art. Historically, it was considered part of a woman's identity in the old city of Sana'a and its suburbs.



The Image of the Sanaani Curtain¹⁷

The following two images represent another traditional garment known as the “Sanaani Zinnah,” a Yemeni heritage outfit for women. It consists of a dress that the woman wears, along with a “headscarf” or “miser,” adorned with silver jewelry known as “rash.”¹⁸



The Image of the Sanaani Zinnah¹⁹

Joy is not the only aspect present in this community; even humor has infiltrated their character and is reflected in their anecdotes, serving as an outlet for Yemenis during difficult times. The people are known for their cheerful and humorous nature, which has made them a cohesive and stable community, thriving on positivity and happiness through various celebrations such as weddings, religious holidays, national events, and

¹⁷- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 17.

¹⁸- See: Dhikra Al-Sulami (Huda) Yemeni, The Outfits of "Thobe and Zinnah": The Heritage of Yemeni Women's Dress, pp. 7:29-7:45, 16/08/2021.

¹⁹- Previous source, pp. 89-71.

joyful seasons. “These are the people who infuse joy with their spirit, creating it from nothing, whether in happy occasions or even in jokes. Yemenis are naturally humorous; they transform tragedies into anecdotes, joking about them.²⁰”

On another note, these jokes often carry a political undertone concerning prominent political figures in Yemeni society. The author states, “I have never seen a people like the Yemenis in their love for jokes, even while facing the worst living conditions. You find humor present in their literature and daily lives, crafted from their reality, with boundless audacity, even regarding their major political figures. These figures themselves do not hesitate to tell jokes with the same boldness.²¹”

When people’s suffering intensifies due to the circumstances, their refuge in daily life and literature becomes the telling of jokes that reflect their reality. For example, a Yemeni colleague narrated: “One person had been eating dirt and herbs for five years. The devil appeared to him and said: ‘Look, my son, you have one of two choices: either change your meal or say ‘In the name of Allah’ before you eat. I didn’t know about hemorrhoids until I met you.²²” This joke expresses their dissatisfaction with certain unacceptable matters, and even the most significant political figures share a sense of humor in their gatherings.

The author illustrates the humour in conversations with Al-Bardouni, recounting anecdotes and an interaction with a poet where “he said, ‘Ask me anything. Al-Bardouni replied, ‘Who is Nakhlah bint Amir? The poet replied, ‘A noble companion who witnessed many battles with the Prophet, peace be upon him. After the poet left, Al-Bardouni laughed and said, ‘Nakhlah bint Amir is my mother²³.

Thus, both citizens and politicians skilfully use humour for specific purposes. On the surface, it carries a spirit of fun and leisure, but its deeper aspect reflects Yemenis’ mockery of their rulers. Many sarcastic jokes serve as a coded message, appearing humorous but containing criticism of the situation in Yemen, and acting as a popular weapon for Yemenis to confront their lived reality.

The second opposing duality refers to the painful present that this city has experienced due to the civil wars among its inhabitants. The author states: “Whenever I hear on the news about a place in Sana’a, or Yemen in general, that is suffering from the ravages of war and the atrocities inflicted on its people - killings, arrests and displacement - I feel a pain and a sadness intertwined with nostalgia for it... I had no choice but to listen to my memory and let it evoke Sana’a, recalling all of Yemen, its land and its people, distancing myself as much as possible from the ongoing wars and focusing on the beautiful past²⁴.

²⁰- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 95.

²¹- Same source, p. 137.

²²- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 14.

²³- Same source, p. 137.

²⁴- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, pp. 15-16.

This conflict among the residents of Sana'a has created various psychological and physical effects suffered by its men, women, and children, including death, imprisonment, loss of loved ones, displacement, mistreatment, and pain and sorrow that have deprived them of various human rights, including a decent living, peace, and security. The economic and humanitarian conditions have deteriorated due to the devastating wars. As noted, "A young man lost his life last month from a bullet that pierced his eye and exited through his head. This was on the afternoon of Friday, April 22, when a young man from Bani al-Asri was crossing this checkpoint with a march heading to Hajjah to participate in a massive rally calling for the overthrow of the regime, raising the banner of 'the last opportunity Friday.'²⁵"

Upon reflecting on this passage and the unprecedented human tragedies it conveys, we realize that the cost of the ongoing war has become unbearable, not only for the civilians who are killed, injured, and displaced but also for the parties involved in the conflict.

The author also recalls his memories with a Yemeni friend who surprised him with the news of another friend's death, who was killed in the Al-Jawf governorate. "He was killed while fighting alongside the Houthis... killed while fighting the people of Al-Jawf."²⁶ The Yemeni civil war between the Houthi group²⁷ and the forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh continues to this day, leaving behind painful and traumatic remnants that afflict the hearts of the entire nation.

The novelist presents us with multiple images of what this simple people endure. He recounts another murder incident: "A revenge killing occurred at the Saba Roundabout: a man in a Mercedes with a little girl was stopped at a traffic light when two armed vehicles surrounded him and opened fire heavily, killing him along with several street vendors at the intersection, and they fled, leaving the girl screaming and flailing in her father's blood."²⁸

The virus of killing has afflicted many residents of Yemen due to the outbreak of strife that consumes anyone who approaches it, making it difficult to control. Consequently, people have deviated from the laws established by Islamic Sharia.

The author also points out that some of Yemen's inhabitants have joined the ranks of war, turning friends into enemies, leaving him in a state of shock when he states: "I am less surprised now when I see my friends celebrating their victories over their fellow countrymen in Sana'a, Aden, Taiz, and all Yemeni governorates, fully

²⁵- Same source, p. 197.

²⁶- Same source, p. 15.

²⁷- The Houthis (Ansar Allah) movement, previously known as the Believing Youth Movement, is a political and religious armed movement based in Saada, northern Yemen. They are known politically and in the media as the Houthis, named after their founder, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the group's religious leader.

²⁸- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 102.

convinced that all Yemenis, from east to west, north to south, have become either ISIS or Americans and Israelis. What has changed you, my friends?²⁹”

He emphasizes this in another passage where he depicts the crime of a neighbor killing another neighbor: “Their neighbor was killed yesterday in the mosque, and he fled from the village, while the armed forces were detaining the family of the deceased. The situation was on the verge of exploding.³⁰” The underlying message in these two passages reveals two aspects: the absence of legal oversight regarding the crimes committed in Yemeni society, and the lack of a religious deterrent that prohibits killing Muslims unjustly, which unfortunately is widespread in the Arab Islamic world.

Following the narrative of the text, we notice the dominance of the social dimension, as it reflects the social reality in a Yemeni community that has taken a prominent place within it. Most of these passages portray a duality confined between the past and the present, simplicity and complexity, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, peace and war, joy and sorrow. All of these contribute to enriching this narrative text, giving the reader an opportunity to explore these underlying meanings and uncover the truths hidden by the author. This is confirmed in the following passage: “Despite the exhaustion and blame, it is a space for both war and love, and whenever times are buried in its depths, from its ashes arises the whinny of other times, which also do not cease from war and love.”³¹

Education in Yemeni Society:

Education is the fundamental pillar that helps build a morally sound society. Without it, our youth cannot build communities and nations. Therefore, it is the main driving force behind the development of civilizations and one of the most important aspects that contribute to the cultural foundation of society.

In this context, we will explore education in Yemeni society, particularly considering the current situation faced by students and the education sector, which has suffered due to the ongoing wars and the state’s diminished role.

Despite the internal conflicts in the region, education in Yemen continues to endure. We see expatriate teachers migrating to work in Sana’a. A prominent example is the novelist Ali Al-Amir, who traveled from Saudi Arabia to Yemen to pursue education, stating, “There was a Saudi colleague studying with us in the master’s program.³²” He emphasizes the importance of teaching future generations, noting, “The school where I worked is considered a model school.³³”

²⁹- Same source, p. 15.

³⁰- Previous source, p. 113.

³¹- Ali Al-Amir :Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 83.

³²- Previous source, p. 47.

³³- Same source, p. 48.

Image of Yemeni Students³⁴



However, the state of education has completely deteriorated due to the enemies of Yemen who seek to destroy the foundations of knowledge. This is confirmed by the following statement: “You have prepared me for a better future, for I did not know that there were enemies of the future in Yemen - enemies of humanity and life. I did not know, Ghmidan³⁵, that there were enemies of Yemen”³⁶.

This passage illustrates the current state of education in Yemen and the poor educational conditions faced by students as a result of the ongoing war waged by various factions in the country.

Not only are students being neglected, but schools are also suffering from neglect. This reflects the government’s lack of attention to education, resulting in an inability to provide safety and security for students. As a result, the wars across Yemen have disrupted the flow of knowledge and education.

In some Arab countries, boys pursue education more than girls because of the misconception that women should take responsibility for cooking, childcare and the family. This belief often leads to boys being encouraged to pursue education more than girls, which ultimately hinders societal development.

However, this is not the case in Yemen, where women’s education is considered important, especially in Sana’a. Nevertheless, obstacles remain. One major barrier is the mixed-sex environment in schools, which can be uncomfortable for many families. To address this, the Yemeni government has established separate schools for girls. At the Ministry of Education in Sana’a, I met a Saudi colleague who had recently been

³⁴- Same source, p. 111.

³⁵- Ghmidan: A student the classroom of Professor Ali Al-Amir. His name refers to the oldest palace in the world, Ghmidan Palace, which was in Sanaa and housed the greatest kings of Yemen, including Sayf bin Dhiyazan. It is likely located where the Great Mosque is now. Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus. p. 100.

³⁶- Ali Al-Amir: Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 100.

posted to Yemen and was happy that the ministry had assigned him to a girls' high school³⁷.

Boys also have their own schools, as the picture of a boys' school in Yemen shows.

³⁷- Previous source, p. 45.



Image of a Boys' School³⁸

Thus, schools in Yemen are divided by gender, as confirmed by the following excerpt: "Working in a girls' school would be fraught with dangers. He said: What dangers? Aren't you teaching in a boys' school?"³⁹

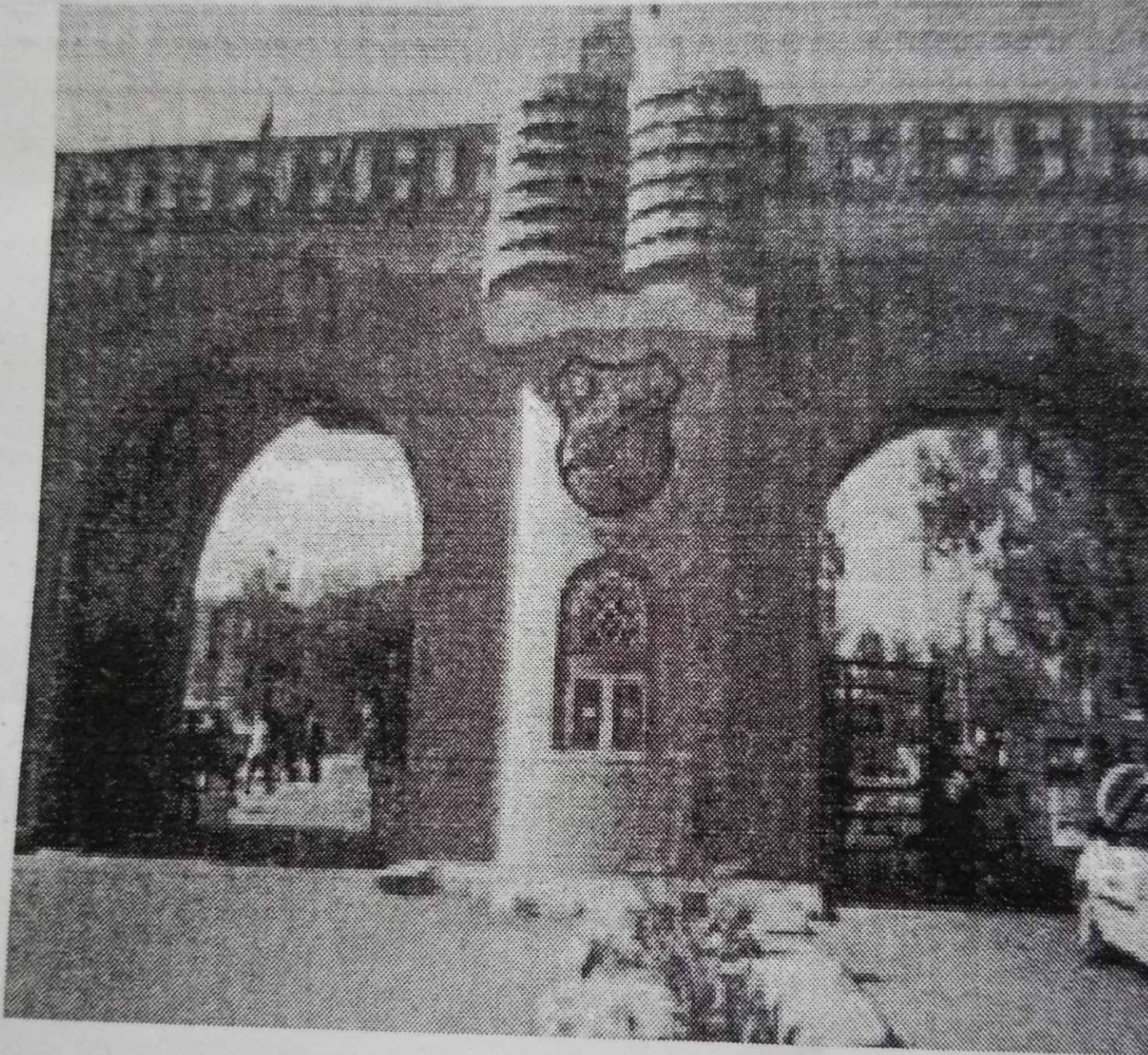
Undoubtedly, the advancement of nations can only be achieved through education and knowledge, and this is what we hope will improve in the education sector in Yemen.

image of the Gate of Sana'a University⁴⁰

³⁸- Previous source, p. 97.

³⁹- Ali Al-Amir:Sanaa, Interpretation of Clouds and Narcissus, p. 45.

⁴⁰- Same source, p. 105.



بوابة جامعة صنعاء