

## Dictator Fiction in Yemen

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**For citation:** Suvorov M. N. Dictator Fiction in Yemen. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Asian and African Studies*, 2024, vol. 16, issue 3, pp. 592–603. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2024.307>

The dictator novel, a literary sub-genre of Latin American origin, has been developing in Arab literature since the late 1950s, but it was not until the end of the Arab Spring that works of this sub-genre, as well as short stories about the dictatorship appeared in Yemen. This article examines two books of Yemeni dictator fiction, Ali al-Muqri's novel *Land of the Leader* (2019) and Wajdi al-Ahdal's collection of short stories *Fatal Arrangements* (2020). Ali al-Muqri tells the story of an Egyptian writer who came to another Arab country to write a biography of the country's dictator. Though the country and the dictator have no real names in the novel, many recognizable details point to the dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi. It is not, however, the dictator who is central for the plot, but the community of local intellectuals serving the dictatorship. Wajdi al-Ahdal's collection comprises fourteen stories about fourteen dictators, from Adolf Hitler to Comorian Mohamed Bacar. The stories al-Ahdal tells may have never happened in reality. For the most part, they are related to the dictators' intimate lives, to their use of fortune-tellers, sorcerers and clairvoyants, to their behavior with their confidants and courtiers, etc. Grotesque and caricature are more important in these stories than historical truth. Both writers, unlike other Arab authors of dictator fiction, avoid portraying the horrors of the dictatorship and its crimes against humanity and prefer to highlight the dictatorship's immanent irrationalism bordering on idiocy. Caricature in their narratives clearly prevails over drama, and their dictators are not so much fearful as ridiculous.

**Keywords:** Arab fiction, dictator novel, Yemen, Ali al-Muqri, Wajdi al-Ahdal.

The “dictator fiction” in the title of this article is not an established literary term, but a definition of the literary works considered in the article (a novel and a collection of short stories), which was applied by the author by analogy with the “dictator novel”, a literary sub-genre of Latin American origin.

The development of the dictator novel was started by Guatemalan Nobel Laureate Miguel Ángel Asturias's publication of *The President* (*El Señor Presidente*, 1946). It was further solidified as a serious sub-genre by Cuban Alejo Carpentier's *Reasons of State* (*El Recurso del método*, 1974), Colombian Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El Otoño del patriarca*, 1975), and Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos's *I, the Supreme* (*Yo, el supremo*, 1975). The dictator novel flourished in Latin America and later became widespread in the literatures of Africa, as evidenced by relevant scholarly publications [1–3].

In the Arab world, the dictator novel has not become as outstanding a literary phenomenon as it has in Latin America and Africa, although individual works that can be attributed to this sub-genre have appeared in Arab literature since the late 1950s. Egyptian

critic Hosam Aboul-Ela wrote in 2011: “A discussion of the relationship between Arab novel and Arab dictator must inevitably begin — as so many discussions of modern Arab fiction do — with Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz”, whose novel *Children of Our Alley* (*Awlād ḥāratinā*, 1959) “must be considered the foundation of dictator fiction in the region. <...> With its network of gangs of thugs deployed by a central authority to terrorize the populace, no other work of fiction strikes a more haunting note today. In the novel’s notorious ending, the decrepit god, who has allowed the system to run amok, dies. Generations of clerical scholars have misinterpreted this figure to be God, but if the real reference meant by this centralized authority was murky in the fifties, Mahfouz’s regular return to the theme of dictatorial authority in his fiction in the 1980s, as Mubarak took over for Anwar El-Sadat, should have made it all too clear that the god in *Children of Our Alley* was really the Arab dictator” [1]. Other few Egyptian dictator novels that Hosam Aboul-Ela mentioned either had the same allegorical character, or portrayed “patriarchal, arbitrary, and corrupt system”, while “the actual body of the dictator hovered around its margins” [1].

Among non-Egyptian Arab dictator novels one should mention several Iraqi Taha Hamed al-Shabib’s novels published in the 1990s, especially *The Plait* (*al-Ḍafira*, 1999), which insinuates to Saddam Hussain’s dictatorship [4, pp. 69–70]. Libyan Hisham Matar’s *In the Country of Men* (2006) and Algerian Yasmina Khadra’s<sup>1</sup> *The Dictator’s Last Night* (*La dernière nuit du rais*, 2015), written by their authors in emigration, and in European languages, portray Muammar Gaddafi’s dictatorship in a more direct and realistic manner [5, pp. 9–10].

In the countries of Arabia, the majority of which are monarchies, the dictator novel (and dictator fiction in general) did not appear, as it seems, until the end of the Arab Spring. And it was in Yemen, the only Arabian peninsula country with republican rule and the only one affected by the Arab Spring, that works of dictator fiction appeared for the first time in Arabian literature<sup>2</sup>. These works are Ali al-Muqri’s novel *Land of the Leader* (*Bilād al-qā’id*, 2019) and Wajdi al-Ahdal’s collection of short stories *Fatal Arrangements* (*Al-Ta’bi’a*, 2020). In this article I’m going to discuss the two Yemeni writers’ individual approaches to the theme of dictatorship, including their commitment to certain literary strategies and techniques.

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In Ali al-Muqri’s novel *Land of the Leader*, the protagonist-narrator, an Egyptian writer named Ali, receives an offer from the ruler of an Arab country to participate in some secret project for a substantial monetary reward. Ali really needs money to provide proper treatment to his wife suffering from cancer, so he agrees without much hesitation.

Upon Ali’s arrival in the country, he is settled in a governmental guest house and the task before him is explained. He is to lead a small team of local intelligentsia, whose task is to write a panegyric biography of the Leader, who led the country after the revolution and has autocratically ruled it for decades. Immediately after the revolution, the Leader gave the country a new name, Irasubia<sup>3</sup>, but very soon the citizens began to call it “Land of the

<sup>1</sup> The writer’s real name is Mohammed Moulessehou.

<sup>2</sup> In the literature of the Persian Gulf monarchies, the theme of dictatorship seems to be absent to this day.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the country is composed of fragments of the Arabic names of Iraq, Syria and Libya.

Leader”. Local intellectuals have already written hundreds of scholarly and fictional works about the Leader, but the new book should surpass all previous ones. Ali understands that writing a eulogy to the dictator poses a serious threat to his reputation as a writer, but the conditions of secrecy of this work make it easier for him to deal with his own conscience.

Ali plunges into a specific atmosphere of total fear, suspicion and servility, characteristic of society under the dictatorship. From his colleagues working on the biography of the Leader and from the servants of the guest house he learns shocking details about the Leader and the style of his rule. There is no free press and television in the country, there is almost no Internet access, it is impossible to buy alcoholic beverages and exchange local money for hard currency. The streets of the city are dotted with the Leader’s portraits, and from above — as citizens believe — an artificial star-eye belonging to the regime is watching everyone.

Ali enjoys the special attention of al-Shaima, an adult unmarried daughter of the Leader. It turns out that it was she who recommended the Leader to invite Ali, as she was impressed by his novel *Desire*, in which he had accurately described the suffering of a young woman deprived of bodily pleasures. Seeing in Ali a man who understands woman’s soul, al-Shaima insistently offers him to marry her secretly. Fearing to fall out of favor with the Leader’s daughter in case of his refusal, Ali agrees<sup>4</sup>.

Ali comes up with an elegant structure for the new biography of the Leader. The book should comprise 101 chapters (namely, 101 “gems” — in imitation of the famous *Book of the Unique Necklace* of Ibn Abd Rabbih, a medieval Arab author) titled by the Leader’s epithets (imitating 99 “Beautiful Names” of God): Dream, Praiseworthy, Desired, Inspirer, Valiant, Ruler, Fighter, Revolutionary, Commander, Omniscient, etc.<sup>5</sup> Ali’s idea gets the Leader’s approval, and the team starts working.

When the new biography of the Leader is half ready, a popular uprising against the dictatorship breaks out in the country (quite unexpectedly for the reader!), and in the last two chapters of the novel Ali conveys the development of the revolution and the expansion of chaos in the country. Ali learns about what is going on from TV reports, from the Internet, to which he has access, and from the stories that are told by the residents of the guest house. Most residents are opponents of the regime, whose number in the conditions of the large scale violence is growing.

At this time, Ali receives the news of his wife’s death in Egypt. Money, which Ali came to the Land of the Leader for, loses its significance for him. Moreover, there is no way to receive this money, because the rebels execute the Leader, who fell into their hands. The mutilated body of the Leader exposed to public view is subjected to desecration by the citizens: after three days it turns out to be completely covered with human feces. In the finale of the novel, Ali, imprisoned in the guest house, is waiting for an opportunity to get to the airport and fly back to Egypt.

The novel contains a large number of details proving that the prototype of the Leader is the eccentric Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. These details include, in particular, the Bedouin origin of the Leader, his all-female cadre of bodyguards (Gaddafi’s “Revo-

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<sup>4</sup> Ali’s affair with al-Shaima in the novel seems not only implausible, but also inappropriate in all respects, since it does not play any significant role in the development of the story.

<sup>5</sup> Association of a dictator’s honorific titles with the Beautiful Names of God can also be found in Somali Nuruddin Farah’s dictator novel *Sardines* (1981) [2, p. 208].

lutionary Noons”), his influential son, known for his liberal manners (Gaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam), as well as the circumstances of the Leader’s death<sup>6</sup>.

According to Abduh Wazin, a Lebanese writer and critic, the fact that Gaddafi is easily recognized in the novel prevents the reader from considering the novel allegorical or generalizing, although the author probably intended to make it such by not naming the Leader and giving the country the fictional name of Irasubia. And if one is to consider the novel as a largely realistic work, then the author, according to the critic, should have paid much more attention to the personality of the Leader, which, in fact, is reduced in the novel to several well-known features of Gaddafi. Al-Muqri has not even touched on the topic of the Leader’s intimate life, although in his earlier novels the sexual theme was prominent<sup>7</sup>. And if the main object of consideration in the novel was to be not the dictator but the intellectual serving him, then the author should have paid much more attention to Ali, whose image in the novel seems unconvincing [6].

Agreeing with Abduh Wazin, one may note that the other numerous characters in the novel who Ali interacts with are almost devoid of individual features. Besides, there is practically no visual image of the scene in the novel. These two features of the novel are characteristic of all al-Muqri’s literary works, which resemble a theater of faceless puppets, completely devoid of scenery.

What is worthy of interest in the novel is the depiction — combining caricature and reality — of the style of the Leader’s (i. e. Gaddafi’s) rule. Here, for example, is what the cook of the guest house tells Ali about a local schoolgirls’ meeting with the Leader, in which she, as a schoolgirl, participated:

The meeting opened with speeches by women organizers praising the Leader. Then they introduced him to us, and he started giving us his medical instructions. He paid especially great attention to the danger of breast cancer in a woman. Concluding his speech, he made an unexpected announcement that the “Leader’s Center for Medical Research”, under his leadership and patronage, had developed an effective method of treating this disease, and that he personally wanted to inform us, the women of the future, about it and assure us that our breasts were now safe. His speech was accompanied by a demonstration of breast images via a film projector. At the end of the event, one of the youth leaders stood up and said that on behalf of all the girls present, she asked the Leader to touch their breasts with his blessed hand in order to let them feel protected from diseases. I was stunned by this request and saw the same stupefaction on the faces and in the eyes of most of the girls. Then I, like the rest of the girls, had to walk in front of the Leader and let him touch my breasts. <...> The Leader was standing on the podium and with his blessed hand giving us blessings and health. <...> That day something that I could not have expected happened. I found myself in a group of girls whom the Leader had chosen for a personal meeting. We were told that we were lucky, because it was us he honored with a personal meeting. I can’t tell you more than what I’ve told you. I cannot. They say there is some secret way by which the Leader’s confidants find out that he is interested in a girl and deliver her to him at any cost [7, pp. 70–71].

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<sup>6</sup> One may add to this list a golden statuette of the Leader presented to Ali (Gaddafi did have a golden statue of himself) and the composite name of the country, Irasubia, invented by the Leader (Gaddafi once proposed to unite Israel with Palestine and name the new state Isratine).

<sup>7</sup> In the novels *Black Taste*, *Black Odour* (*Ta’m aswad, rā’iḥa sawdā’*, 2008), *The Handsome Jew* (*Al-yahūdī al-ḥālī*, 2009), and *Woman* (*Ḥurma*, 2012).

And here is the rhetoric characteristic of the Leader in Ali's retelling:

He told us how overnight he managed to turn his country into the greatest of countries. "They have everything, they have created everything", he said. I understood that he meant other states. "We", he put his palm on his chest, "have created something that they are not capable of creating. We have created the man able of creating anything" [7, p. 20].

Noteworthy are the claims of the Leader to the sanctity and even divinity of his personality. For example, he allowed his confidants to address him or relate to him with the Arabic expression *Ṣallā-Llāhu 'alayka ('alayhi) wa-sallama*<sup>8</sup>, which is traditionally used only in relation to the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, the Leader "discovered" a mention of his personality in the Quran: he told theologians that Ahmad, mentioned in the sixth Ayat of the Quranic surah *The Ranks*, was himself, since at birth his mother gave him that name, but his father later changed it to another.

Also noteworthy in the novel are passages that in a caricature-and-realistic way convey the behavior and statements of the intellectuals serving the dictator. Here is how Ali describes a discussion of the new biography of the Leader:

I suggested that the title of the book should highlight his achievements as the inspirer of the revival, as its conductor. However, al-Muhibb quickly objected, "He is not the conductor of the revival, but its creator, whose energy feeds the conductors of the revival in their achievements". Al-Muhibb explained that inspiration does not come to the Leader, generating a thought in him, but the Leader himself is the source of this inspiration. He is the inspirer who will save all mankind from all problems in the earthly life and in the afterlife. "Yes, save them even from such problems of the afterlife, that deprive people of sleep, as their relationship with the Lord, as the reward or punishment they expect", explained al-Muhibb. Then he started talking about how the Leader inspired scientists, economists and sociologists, and in general all geniuses of thought, as well as writers and other artists. "He is neither a thinker, nor a genius; he is the inspirer of thought and genius". I understood what he meant, and al-Ahmad, in his turn, added that he was not just the Leader of the country, which borrowed from him his features, but the Leader of all countries and all mankind. "He is for the entire world, he is the international Leader, not the leader of any one nation, he is the Leader of nations, which will unite one day, inspired by him, into one nation, and he will become its Leader". In fact, the Leader had already united all nations by one goal and one aspiration, and informally they were already following the path he had outlined. "He is the great unifier, he is above all other unifiers; the union he has created is indestructible, powerful, united by the will of the all-powerful leader. It is the nation in the hand of the great Leader, the nation that is the spirit of the Leader, its unifier, its maker, its creator, its greatest creator" [7, p. 33].

About the mentioned historian al-Muhibb Ali tells the following:

His specialization in the field of the biography of the Leader was the object of everyone's attention, since all his works always contained something new and remarkable, as did all master's and doctoral dissertations completed under his supervision. I was to read those dissertations, because they could make my knowledge of the Leader exhaustive. To be more precise, they could supplement my knowledge, since I already knew that an exhaustive knowledge of the biography of the Leader was impossible, since such knowledge would have suggested regarding the Leader an ordinary person, like any president or tsar, whereas he went beyond all those characteristics and names.

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<sup>8</sup> Peace be upon (you) him (Arab.).

The academic studies that I got acquainted with were devoted to the economic thought of the Leader and his discoveries enriching humanity, his scientific approach to the unification of mankind, his views of the institution of family, his original solution to the problem of water supply, as well as the energetic thought of the Inspirer, that is, the way of turning day into night and vice versa, demanded in the worlds<sup>9</sup> [7, p. 57].

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With much more imagination the theme of dictatorship was approached by Wajdi al-Ahdal in his short stories collection *Fatal Arrangements*. The book comprises fourteen stories, varying in volume, devoted to fourteen dictators: Adolf Hitler (Germany), Joseph Stalin (Soviet Union), Francisco Franco (Spain), Jean-Bédel Bokassa (Central African Republic), Augusto Pinochet (Chile), Suharto (Indonesia), Nicolae Ceaușescu (Romania), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines), Omar Bongo (Gabon), Idi Amin (Uganda), Pol Pot (Cambodia), Jorge Rafael Videla (Argentina), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), and Mohamed Bacar (Anjouan, Comoros).

In the story of Hitler, the action takes place in the afterlife, in the story of Stalin — both in the earthly life and in the afterlife, in the rest of the stories — in the earthly life. When the action takes place in the earthly life, the narrative, however, focuses not on the well-known facts of the dictators' lives, but on such stories and episodes which — even if they had happened in reality — could not have become known to the general public. These stories and episodes are related to the dictators' intimate lives (Ceaușescu, Bongo, Pol Pot, Mugabe), to their use of fortune-tellers, sorcerers and clairvoyants (Hitler, Stalin, Bokassa, Pinochet, Suharto, Ceaușescu, Bongo, Amin, Pol Pot), to their behavior with their confidants and courtiers (Stalin, Ceaușescu, Marcos, Bongo, Amin, Bacar), and to their secret visits to the meeting places of the common people (Amin, Videla). Such an approach provides scope for the author's imagination without the need to distort historical facts. Only in rare cases does al-Ahdal contradict well-known historical facts (for example, describing Franco's death as a result of the collapse of the Madrid TV tower in a flood) or comes up with something absolutely implausible (for example, a "phallic" component in the methods of Pinochet's and Ceaușescu's rules). All the stories are characterized by a colorful depiction of the national cultures of the countries in which the action takes place (customs and traditions, food and drinks, clothing, social habits, popular arts, etc.) and by the writer's inherent penchant for caricature and grotesque, especially in the sexual and physiological spheres.

In the story *The Missing Star of Pol Pot* a brave Norwegian journalist named Siggrid Haugsgjerd comes to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, to collect material about Pol Pot's "revolutionary experiment". In the hotel Siggrid asks the personnel to arrange a meeting with Pol Pot for her and is told to wait at the hotel. On the ninth day, all the guests of the hotel, except Siggrid, are evicted, and Pol Pot arrives at the hotel with his guards and confidants.

After Siggrid shakes hands with Pol Pot and introduces herself, he beams at her, and the following scene occurs.

There was an awkward silence. Then she started talking again about the newspaper she works for, about its influence, and how the King of Norway reads it every morning over cof-

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<sup>9</sup> The worlds (i. e. earthly world and other world) here are an obvious allusion to a Quranic Ayat (1 : 1).

fee... He continued to stare at her, fascinated by her beauty, having forgotten the rules of etiquette. Suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, he approached her and ran his palms through her thick silky hair, touched her ears, lips, neck, shoulders, going down and down, until he reached her toes. It was as if he wanted to make sure that she was a human being and not an angel descended from heaven. Finally, almost snuggling up to her, he said, "You possess that fabulous Scandinavian beauty that drives dark-skinned equatorial men crazy" [8, p. 110].

After their visit to the hotel pool and lunch, during which Pol Pot continues to molest Siggrid and surprises her with the information that a love potion has been dissolved in her wine glass, she agrees to spend time with him in bed in exchange for the interview.

After the interview, which was terminated when Siggrid doubted the ability of Brother Number One to spread his "revolutionary experiment" to the whole world, Pol Pot invites a palm reader, a one-eyed man dressed in a Maoist-style black suit. Pol Pot asks Siggrid to show the man her palm and she does so. The palm reader sets to work, sweating profusely and exchanging remarks in Khmer with his master. The result of Siggrid's palm examination makes Pol Pot excited.

After that, Pol Pot took her to bed and spent six hours with her. He kissed every inch of her body, and it seemed to her that he had never had a woman before her [8, p. 121].

The next day at noon, state security officers break into Siggrid's room and seize her passport, tape-recorder, camera and all her papers. And in the evening of the same day, she is taken to the main Cambodian prison, Tuol Sleng, one of the most terrible prisons in the world.

After about twenty days of her imprisonment, Pol Pot comes to her cell and informs her that she has been sentenced by the Organization to death for her secretly tape-recording his love lamentations while they were together in bed. Sigrid doesn't beg him for mercy and refuses to talk to him at all. Pol Pot leaves, and a few hours later she is released from prison and taken to a luxury villa in the suburbs of Phnom Penh. Pol Pot, who is waiting for her there, informs her that she will now live in the villa until he manages to convince the Organization to grant her amnesty. She gets her possessions back and in addition is presented with a variety of gifts.

Forty days later, Pol Pot brings her the news of her amnesty, as well as her passport, money and the air ticket. He asks her for a service for the people of Kampuchea. She agrees, and he hands her a piece of paper with a safety word. At parting, he whispers something in her ear that confuses her.

Seven months later, the Norwegian newspaper that Siggrid works for publishes a long interview with the Leader of the revolutionary experiment in Kampuchea. Pol Pot feels happy when having scrolled through the text of the interview he finds the word Angkor<sup>10</sup> in it. That is the safety word.

The publication of the interview was delayed so much because the US Ambassador in Oslo had to wait a long time for the response from Washington.

The unofficial oral message that Siggrid had conveyed to the US Ambassador was that Democratic Kampuchea was ready to start a war with its neighbor Vietnam and overthrow the regime there, provided that the US would secure economic and military assistance to Kampuchea [8, p. 124].

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<sup>10</sup> Angkor was the name of Khmer Empire's capital.

A few hours after Pol Pot finds the safety word in his published interview, the armed forces of Democratic Kampuchea attack the border areas of Vietnam and move deep into its territory. However, the Vietnamese launched a counteroffensive and managed to inflict a crushing defeat on the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot and the remaining Khmer Rouge found refuge in the jungle.

In January 1979, journalist Siggrid returned to Phnom Penh. No one knew what her plans were. The last time she was seen, she was accompanied by one-eyed Khyu, the palm reader. Nothing more has been heard of her, and her fate remains unknown to this day [8, p. 125].

Another story by al-Ahdal, *Bokassa's Presidential Breakfast*, explains how Bokassa got the idea of declaring himself Emperor, which he implemented in 1976.

The story begins with a scene of breakfast attended by Bokassa and his close friend, the star of the national football team, which has not won a single match yet.

The breakfast giving off an appetizing aroma consisted of the testicles of ten political oppositionists fried in vegetable oil with nutmeg and lemon juice, lamb baked on coals and seasoned with red pepper, various biscuits with honey and nuts, and two bottles of French wine [8, p. 41].

After breakfast, Bokassa is brought several folders, which he passes over to the footballer, explaining that they contain reports from seven national security services monitoring the situation in the country.

Leafing through the reports, the football player comes across a message saying that “a blind woman aged hundred has grown horns and new teeth instead of fallen out ones, and began to lay eggs like a chicken” [8, p. 44]. Bokassa notes with annoyance that this story was most likely invented by villagers, who hide their laying hens from the state.

In another report, the footballer discovers a message saying that “a sorceress named Dagongui turned twenty policemen into donkeys, and when the state security forces captured her, she turned the head of the state security of the district into a mule” [8, p. 45]. In response to Bokassa's ironic remark about this message, the footballer says that he personally knows this outstanding sorceress, and that it was she who predicted to him in his youth, when he was a poor porter, a brilliant football career.

Bokassa says he wants to get advice from this outstanding sorceress about his own future. The footballer warns Bokassa that the sorceress predicts the future of a man based on the condition of his penis. This does not bother the dictator, and soon the footballer delivers the sorceress to the Presidential palace. And this is how the story ends.

Marshal Bokassa pulled down his trousers, and the toothless old woman began her magical action. His friend, the star of the national football team, stood next to him, showing him pictures. Having completed the examination of the thing, the shaggy old woman announced to Bokassa that he would become Emperor. Bokassa was delighted with this prediction and considered it his divine destiny.

After Bokassa passed this magical examination, events accelerated. Having received a crown made for him, encrusted with diamonds worth more than five million dollars, he arranged an incredibly expensive ceremony — which led to the bankruptcy of the state budget — where he proclaimed the transformation of the Central African Republic into an Empire.

His Imperial Majesty, as he was called after that, did not know that the cunning sorceress Dagongui had turned him into a donkey, which became the main laughing stock and the subject of jokes for the whole of Africa [8, pp. 46–47].

These two short stories, *The Missing Star of Pol Pot* and *Bokassa's Presidential Breakfast*, demonstrate how skillfully Wajdi al-Ahdal fits his invented, largely caricature plots into the canvas of real historical events and into the general atmosphere of the place and time depicted.

The close relation between the quality of a penis and political power forms the basis of two other stories, *Pinochet Chases Penises* and *Ceaușescu's Theory of Government*.

In the second story, the Romanian dictator has a nightmare in which a huge crowd of people forcibly feeds him red beans from large army boilers. Upset by that vision, he consults an interpreter of dreams. The interpreter concludes that according to the vision some arrangements are taking place against the dictator.

After some time, while consulting a Chilean professor, specialist in pléthysmographie of penis, Ceaușescu learned two important things.

The first was that his own penis had the “ideal length of 8.125 cm, inherent in the penises of kings, presidents and other great personalities such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong and Fidel Castro” [8, p. 70].

The second thing was that pléthysmographie of a penis could be successfully applied in state administration.

After that meeting, which remained unknown to historians, the Socialist Republic of Romania began to apply the theory of the “Clash of Penises”, founded by Professor A. S. Martinez — before Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” appeared, — and abandoned Leninist socialism.

Ceaușescu’s penis, whose length corresponded with the golden sacred number, became the benchmark for determining the degree of trustworthiness and patriotism of the citizens, as well as their suitability for key governmental positions and even their worthiness to be part of the Romanian people.

According to the theory, which was applied secretly, a citizen whose penis was shorter than the penis of Danube of Thought<sup>11</sup> was considered trustworthy, loyal to the regime and an innate adherent of socialism. And an unfortunate one whose penis was longer than the penis of Danube of Thought was considered unreliable, prone to anti-state activities and treason to the nation; besides, he was looked at as an innate representative of the decaying bourgeoisie. Moreover, the last stage of the application of the theory implied a large-scale state campaign of surgical operations aimed at shortening penises longer than the penis of the “Dear Owner of the Golden Phallus” and lengthening shorter ones. The ultimate goal of the campaign was creating a harmonious, highly developed, ideal society [8, pp. 70–71].

In the story *Stalin's Propaganda*, the Soviet leader learns that Bulgarian clairvoyant Baba Vanga predicted his death. At the last dinner with his associates, five days before his death, he forces Lavrentiy Beria, chief of the Soviet security, to reveal the details of Baba Vanga’s prediction.

Raising his glass, Beria smiled politely and poured all its contents into his mouth. With eyelids reddened and droplets of vodka in the corners of his mouth, he wiped his mouth with a handkerchief and said:

— Literally, she says that you have destroyed millions of people because of your perverted nature, and the reason for the perversion of your nature is that you do not know how to defecate... The fact that you are not able to respond to the natural need leads to constipation

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to this Ceaușescu’s honorific nickname, al-Ahdal mentions his other nicknames: Omniscient Genius, Light of Humanity, Warming Sun, Savior of the People.

and absorption of harmful substances through the intestines into the body. And this in turn leads to disruption of your nervous system and makes you a nervous pervert... She says that you delay defecation so much that the feces become petrified in your intestines. Ordinary people can enjoy the passing hours of their lives. As for you, you only suffer and suffer, and everything will end for you with a brain hemorrhage.

Having listened attentively to Beria, Stalin kept silence for a while, which seemed longer than eternity, then cheered up and said:

— Hero of the Soviet Union... The winner of Hitler... will not die heroically!

With difficulty Khrushchev suppressed an inappropriate laugh, retaining a serious look. He thought to himself, "What an interesting diagnosis! After all, he really is a person who refuses to respond to anyone's need. He's just deaf to everyone but himself. He ignores even the need of nature! What a nightmare!"

Stalin noticed drops of sweat on Beria's temple and choking with laughter said:

— When I die, write in the medical report... ha ha ha... that the death was caused by my inability to defecate... ha ha ha!

Stalin went on laughing hysterically, and one by one his closest associates joined him: first Molotov, then Kaganovich, then Rushailo and Lugachev<sup>12</sup>. The others did not laugh, preferring to hide their feelings. Everyone, be he loyal friend or hater, had his own considerations [8, pp. 17–18].

The above fragments from the stories *Ceaușescu's Theory of Government* and *Stalin's Propaganda*, though they describe obviously implausible events and episodes, are, nevertheless, expressive ethnically-colored caricature representations of the dictatorial regimes in question.

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The approaches of Ali al-Muqri and Wajdi al-Ahdal to the theme of dictatorship are partly different and partly similar.

Ali al-Muqri, concealing real names of the country and the dictator, portrayed, nevertheless, the dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi, recognizable even in detail, at times grotesque. At the same time, he, in fact, did not add anything to the image of the eccentric Libyan dictator that previously would have not been a reason for a wide international irony regarding Gaddafi. Besides, the focus of the writer's attention was the mentality and behavior of the community of intellectuals serving the dictatorship, while, to use Hosam Aboul-Ela's words, "the actual body of the dictator hovered around its margins".

Wajdi al-Ahdal, on the contrary, concentrated on the personalities of the well-known dictators, in many cases inventing their physical features, intimations of their characters, drives, ambitions, fears, sexual desires, and even nightmares. The stories al-Ahdal tells have never been subjects of public discussion, because they all are simply invented by the writer. Grotesque and caricature are more important in these stories than historical truth<sup>13</sup>.

What unites al-Muqri's novel and al-Ahdal's short stories is that both writers, unlike other Arab authors of dictator fiction, do not concentrate on the horrors of the dictator-

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<sup>12</sup> Rushailo and Ligachev (corrupted here into Lugachev) were in reality Russian political figures of a much later time.

<sup>13</sup> Two al-Ahdal's novels, *Mountain Boats* (*Qawārib jabaliyya*, 2002) and *The Quarantine Philosopher* (*Faylasūf al-Karantina*, 2007), are completely built on grotesque, caricature, and parody. See about them: [9].

ship and its crimes against humanity and prefer to highlight the dictatorship's immanent irrationalism bordering on idiocy. Caricature in *Land of the Leader* and in *Fatal Arrangements* clearly prevails over drama, and their dictators are not so much fearful as ridiculous.

Interestingly, neither al-Muqri nor al-Ahdal chose the former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was also regarded as a dictator, as the protagonist of their works. Moreover, in al-Ahdal's short stories there are no Arab dictators at all, with the exception of Mohamed Bacar, if, of course, the latter is to be considered an Arab.

In a letter<sup>14</sup> to the author of this article, al-Ahdal explained that he deliberately had excluded well-known Arab dictators from the list, because, firstly, the assessment of their personalities in the Arab world is ambiguous, and secondly, the Arab reader tends to perceive fiction as nonfiction, as documentary, which may create problems for the writer.

These two arguments put forward by al-Ahdal may explain to some extent why Arab dictator novels are relatively few, whilst Arab dictators are (or were) relatively many.

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Received: December 20, 2023

Accepted: May 27, 2024

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<sup>14</sup> Sent on April 7, 2020.

## Йеменская художественная проза о диктаторах

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**Для цитирования:** *Suvorov M. N. Dictator Fiction in Yemen // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Востоковедение и африканистика. 2024. Т. 16. Вып. 3. С. 592–603.*  
<https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2024.307>

Роман о диктаторе, жанр латиноамериканского происхождения, развивался в арабской литературе с конца 1950-х гг., но лишь после «арабской весны» произведения этого жанра, а также рассказы о диктатуре появились в литературе Йемена. В настоящей статье рассматриваются посвященные диктатуре произведения йеменских авторов: роман Али ал-Мукри «Страна Вождя» (2019) и сборник рассказов Ваджди ал-Ахдаля «Фатальные приготовления» (2020). Али ал-Мукри рассказывает о египетском литераторе, приехавшем в другую арабскую страну для написания биографии правящего этой страной диктатора. Хотя страна и диктатор в романе не названы своими настоящими именами, многие узнаваемые детали указывают на диктатуру Муаммара Каддафи. Центральное место в романе занимает не сам диктатор, а сообщество местных интеллектуалов, обслуживающих диктатуру. Сборник Ваджди ал-Ахдаля включает четырнадцать рассказов о четырнадцати диктаторах, от Гитлера до коморского правителя Мохамеда Бакара. Истории, которые излагает ал-Ахдаль, возможно, никогда не имели места в действительности. По большей части они связаны с интимной жизнью диктаторов, с их использованием услуг предсказателей, колдунов и ясновидящих, с их манерой обращения с приближенными и придворными и т. п. Гротеск и пародия в этих историях имеют большее значение, чем историческая истина. Оба писателя, в отличие от других арабских авторов произведений о диктаторах, не сосредотачиваются на изображении ужасов диктатуры и ее преступлений против человечности, предпочитая высвечивать присущую диктатуре иррациональность, граничащую с идиотизмом. Пародия в их повествованиях явно преобладает над драматизмом, а их диктаторы не столько страшны, сколько смешны.

**Ключевые слова:** арабская проза, роман о диктатуре, Йемен, Али ал-Мукри, Ваджди ал-Ахдаль.

Статья поступила в редакцию 20 декабря 2023 г.,  
рекомендована к печати 27 мая 2024 г.

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