



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE IN-BETWEEN WORLD OF THEY DIE STRANGERS BY MOHAMMAD ABDUL-WALI

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## Abstract

*Yamutuna Ghuraba* (1971) which is the subject of this paper, translated under the title *They Die Strangers* (2001), was widely hailed for its realistic outlook and psychological depth. It tackles issues related to the problems of the Yemeni society among which is emigration. Of mixed races, Abdul-Wali reflects the emotional and spiritual dilemma he faced as a result of being *muwallad* (hybrid), raised in a foreign land and educated in a foreign language. He is neither considered Yemeni, nor Ethiopian. His personal experience of being born, living, studying and working in a strange land allowed him, no doubt, to reveal such an experience vividly and with compassion. The novella which is set in Ethiopia has a touch of autobiography. He examines issues related to the painful experience of emigration such as alienation, isolation, identity crisis and the everlasting conflict between homeland and adopted land. The issue of in-between world which has always enjoyed a defining significance in the thematic framework of his literary works is the focus of the present paper as it is one of the facets of emigration. Therefore, taking this idea of straddling between two worlds, two religions, two cultures, two morals, two languages and two identities where immigrants find difficulty to belong to anyone as a point of departure. Edward Said's theory of in-betweenness is taking into account.

**Keywords:** Yemeni emigrants, Immigrants, M. Abdul-Wali, *They Die Strangers*, In-between world, Edward Said.

## Introduction

Emigration is a notable social phenomenon in Yemen since the destruction of Mareb Dam that led to the dispersion of Yemeni people all over the world. In *Qisat al-Adab fi al-Yemen* (1990), Al-Shammy emphasizes that "Yemeni people are emigrant people. They are always inclined to travel and wander" (p. 165) [writer's translation]. In 'Dispossessed' (2002), Broderick states that the Yemeni people are "a nation of emigrants who fan out across the Horn of Africa, the Gulf States and even further, in search of, but rarely finding, economic opportunity and personal freedom" (p. 1). In his analysis of Abdul-Wali's works, Romeh, an Egyptian writer and critic, speculates if life has imposed on Yemenis "a definite and an inescapable fate, i.e., emigration!", maintaining that the one who reads the history of Yemen definitely "will get a false impression that it is utterly a history of emigration and emigrants for it was so in the past as it is in the present and perhaps it will remain so in the future" (1986, p. 179) [writer's translation].

Since the beginning of Abdul-Wali's literary career, the issue of emigration constituted the major concern in his works. Basedeeq believes that his fiction exposed the evils of Yemeni emigration very remarkably (1996, pp. 115-116) [writer's translation]. Gundel maintains that most of his stories "revolve, no surprisingly in the light of his own experience, around emigration, the alienation in a strange country, the hardship of the wives left at home in some mountain village ... and the difficulties of return" (1999, p. 1). As a matter of fact, almost all of Abdul-Wali's stories revolve around the Yemeni immigrants in Ethiopia particularly. He highlights their

suffering and longing and examines the sources that led to their emigration. He emphasizes as well that the life of these immigrants is determined by their country's political and economic conditions.

In *They Die Strangers*, Abdul-Wali offers his readers various examples of Yemenis' long-term immigration. He introduces a host of passive characters who left their homeland either to escape poverty or injustice and political oppression. All the major characters suffer the dilemma of emigration and its consequences for their own ways. As presented, they are all out of touch with the realities of their life and of themselves. They are alienated both from their own country and their sense of self. They are self-enclosed characters who do not look outwards to see what life is but withdraw into themselves. They have individual ambitions but are incapable of fulfilling them. Through the technique of narration, Abdul-Wali gives his readers an opportunity to delve into his characters' lives, experiencing not just their dreams but their feelings of loss, loneliness and disenchantment in a strange land of disparate social and cultural codes. In Ethiopia, their adopted land, they are considered 'Camel Jockeys'; camel riders. They lose not only their motherland but also their identities. They are leading a life which is half realized and half lived. The readers encounter the hypocrite religious man who uses religion to laugh at people, the revolutionist who was forced to leave his country but never thinks of returning because he believes that there is no paradise in Yemen and the materialistic salesman who cares about nothing but money, spends all his time in his small shop, dreaming of a big house of his own in his village to which he does not return.

### The In-between World of *They Die Strangers*

The writer presents the in-between state which is the result of emigration through three key figures of displacement. The readers are introduced to Abdou Sa'id who emigrates to Ethiopia as a young man, opens a small shop in Addis Ababa and becomes a successful merchant. He is one of "hundreds of Yemenis, pushed from the poor coast of their country" (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 25). Most of these emigrants are poor and uneducated. They left their home to support their families who face appalling conditions in their villages that lack running water, electricity, health care and education. Abdou is like many Yemenis who believe that "[w]hoever goes overseas comes back rich" (ibid, p. 26), as if "money thrown in the streets there..." (ibid). So, he leaves. The narrator comments: "And one morning, [he] simply left, just as many before and after him had left the village" (ibid, p. 27). Caught between two worlds of a different set of cultural values and religions, leads him to live in a state of confusion where he is unable to form a clear vision of his identity. In his new adopted home Abdou is denied even his name. He bears double identity. He is called by his neighbors and customers Saleh although his name is Abdou. But he does not care. "Why should [he]? A name was a name, so long as they bought all they needed from his store" (ibid, p. 18). He loses the sense of time. He does not know how old he is. "No one asked him, and even if they had, they would have found that he himself didn't know" (ibid, p. 17). Abdou "could have been forty years old or perhaps thirty-five, but his age didn't seem to matter" to him (ibid, p. 20). He does not remember for how long he has been in Ethiopia or how he came. He "himself forgot whether he'd traveled on a dhow, boat or a ship with torn canvas. To him, that was ancient history" (ibid, p. 25). As it is obvious, the narrator offers no precise temporal reference, thus it becomes difficult for the readers to detect the time for either the character's childhood in Yemen or his adulthood in Ethiopia. Obviously, Abdul-Wali intentionally ignores the history of this character which shows that there are immigrants whose history is lost.

As portrayed, Abdou confines himself in his dirty shop that is 'ten meters long and three meters wide'. By portraying the room as such, Abdul-Wali attempts to reinforce the protagonist's sense of estrangement. He is denied a nurturing place that would allow him to feel at home in his adopted home. Furthermore, he never tries to make a close relationship with other people either Yemenis or Ethiopians. "He never disclosed anything about himself or his dreams. He remained as silent as a tomb ... he never talked about himself. Never" (ibid, p. 28). The word distant is the best that describes this character adequately. As the narrator unfolds: "He lived

among them but apart, like the distance between his dirty black clothes and his smiling white face” (ibid, p. 17). Weir comments that Abdou’s

obsession with his goal makes him shun any relationships that might enmesh him in the local community, including those with Yemenis; he does not even contribute, like others, to The Free Yemeni Movement ... His only human contacts are over the counter with customers, and with dispensable sexual partners. (2001, p.11)

*They Die Strangers* evokes the consequences of dislocation both physical and psychological. Living in-between two worlds, Abdou shows no real belonging either to his original homeland or his adopted land, precisely, indecisive to choose a definite one for himself. On the one hand, he is indifferent to the state of corruption in his home country, for neither the monarchy nor the revolution means anything to him. He does not care about the appalling condition in Yemen under the rule of the Imam or gives donations to Yemen. The narrator reveals that he “knew very little about home, except for what was revealed in the letters he received two or three times a year” (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 27). Moreover, he never attends the meetings of the Yemeni community in Ethiopia. Hence, it is interesting to note that his homeland starts to get into oblivion because of the long absence and the loss of connection with the Yemeni community in the adopted home. On the other hand, he distances himself from his adopted land. “In his heart, he lived not in Sodset Kilo, but in his faraway village in Yemen” (ibid). He never pays tax to the Ethiopian authority for he regards it a waste of his own money. He considers his new home as a transient place to which he feels no commitment and that he is only a temporary worker. As it appears, the Yemeni emigrants like Abdou Sai’d never regard themselves as immigrants, or settlers, but as temporary workers earning money to send their poor families at home. As revealed in the novella, Abdou emigrates to Ethiopia while intending to return home. The narrator comments: “His entire reason for emigrating was so that one day he could go back to his village, work his father’s land with his own two hands, and water it with his sweat” (ibid, p. 60). He believes that he cannot replace his home which is “pure” (ibid, p. 30) with any other home.

It is interesting to note that Abdou is not just straddling between two worlds but also between past and present. He finds solace only in recalling the past, the only way through which he maintains a relationship to his home and eases his feeling of displacement in the present time. He frequently returns in his memory to Yemen of his childhood where he left a wife whose face he cannot remember, for it “was completely erased from his mind” (ibid), and a child who became a man and father. Obviously, Abdul-Wali stresses the role of memory in easing the pain of dislocation. Abdou’s absorption in his memories springs from his fear of losing his past to oblivion. So, he hangs the photograph of his new house in his village on the wall of his old shop in order to remind himself of returning home to enjoy the fruit of his emigration. He dreams of his return to his home, to the new house that he calls ‘the village’s bride’ built for him in his village with the money he sent back home where he finally will be able to find rest and peace. As the narrator unfolds: “He had worked very hard, and it was time to rest” (ibid, p. 61). Ironically, Abdou never sees his new house, for shortly before his return to home he dies. He suffocates from carbon monoxide while lying in his small shop dreaming of his triumphant return. He fails to retrieve his simple past life in his small village and fails also to maintain his present in his adopted land. He dies alone, a stranger “who left nothing but his grave...” (ibid, p. 66).

As the title indicates, the writer emphasizes the difficulty or the impossibility of returning to the home one has left. To the protagonist, home is never retrieved or achieved but exists only in the realm of the imaginary. (ibid). As for the adopted home, it is not his home. Ironically enough, even his grave is “not his. It is not his land; it belongs to other people, to the Ethiopians” (ibid, p. 65). One can safely say that Abdou’s death is a symbolic death. It is the death of all the dreams outside home and the end of shattered life and uncertainty. When he “died he left nothing behind. A woman deserted for years there, a son he didn’t know, a land which he didn’t offer a drop of his blood. He died like a stranger ...” (ibid). The narrator comments that after a long struggle he “lay in his final resting place, his last palace, a simple grave. Here no children shouted: ‘The most beautiful tomb in the world is Abdou Sa’id’s” (ibid, p. 64). The readers are made aware that all immigrants,

not just Abdou Sa'id, die strangers in a strange land. As revealed in the context, he is "like hundreds of Yemenis die in other lands" (ibid, p. 65). Broderick comments on the death of Abdou that "even though [he] has lived longer in Ethiopia than in his native Yemen to which he never returned, he still dies a stranger in his adopted country" (2002, p. 2).

Obviously, the immigrant protagonist in this work experiences a condition of "in-betweenness", as Edward Said describes it. He never feels at home in the host country. He is restless, overwhelmed by the feeling of uprootedness. He is always "apart" because he does not separate himself completely from the place he has voluntarily left. Suspended between two places, he feels as what Said describes, "neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old", he is "beset with half-involvements and half-detachments" (1996, p. 36) Abdou feels nostalgia for his ancestral homeland and yearns to return to feel "rest". On the other hand, he fails to preserve his Yemeni identity and Muslim values in the context of an African and Christian environment. He retains certain ties to the social and moral codes of his home but does not practice them all. He prays regularly and refuses to drink alcohol because it is "forbidden" but he allows himself to have extramarital relations with Ethiopian women and have illegitimate children. The death of an Ethiopian woman with whom he has had an illegitimate child confronts him for the first time with the reality of his false life. Hence, he senses the necessity to escape but, as Said notes, there is "no escape" even for the one "who tries to remain suspended" (ibid, p. 43). As it is obvious, Abdul-Wali "explores the deep displacements and cultural dislocation that constitute the legacy of expatriation" (Broderick, 2002, p.1). Abdou fails to survive because he fails to bear the consequences as well as responsibility of his suspended and contradictory life.

Abdul-Wali also introduces another type of emigrants those who leave their country not to seek economic opportunity, like Abdou, but to seek freedom. During the years that precede the 1962 Revolution ending the monarchy in North Yemen, many left to escape political and religious persecution. Hajji Abdul Latif cannot stand against the ruler Imam therefore escapes to Ethiopia. He leaves his homeland to avoid arrest and persecution, or in the words of the narrator, to "escape [...] from the ghost of the Imam" (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 57). As portrayed, Abdul Latif is a former revolutionist, a member of the Yemeni Movement referred to in the novel as The Liberals Party. He participated in the 1948 Revolution against the Imam to establish a Republic, but leaves to Ethiopia after its failure and establishes there a successful business. In his new adopted home, he performs his duty towards his comrades who remain in Yemen for "he had organized community meetings, raised funds, even given emotional speeches mixed with prayers, religious rhetoric, and political enthusiasm"(ibid, p. 45). However, he gradually deserts his revolutionary dreams of emancipating his country. As Romeh states, his "dreams are replaced by other small and false dreams" (1986, p. 185) [*writer's translation*]. He does not show any regret or guilt that he left his home or that he does not take any action about the political situation in his country. His existence is evidence of his exclusion from the political struggle in his homeland. Lured by the lifestyle of the adopted land, he withdraws into his mundane world of money, women and alcohol and sinks in his everyday problems.

Hajji Abdul Latif loves his homeland and dreams of its emancipation but the return, as he believes, may cost him dearly. When Abdou reveals to him his own desire to return home, he laughs, ironically saying that Abdou is "crazy". Moreover, he tries to convince him that there is no "paradise over there" (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 52). Abdul Latif sees in his adopted land a refuge from the brutality of the Imam, a temporal solution until the revolution erupts. As he says: "There's no point in returning until after the revolution" (ibid, p. 52). He says this without asking himself how the situation in Yemen will be changed if people simply run away and abandon their responsibility by choosing not to face the injustice of the ruler. It is worth noting that the long and luxurious life outside home eliminates the revolutionary spirit in Abdul Latif.

Abdul Latif's heroic dreams turn out very catastrophically. Aware that death is approaching, he fears to die a stranger in a strange land. He painfully realizes that all that he wants and dreams of are reduced to find a grave for himself in this strange land. He unfolds to his secretary that Abdou "found a grave [he] dreamed of",

as if graves become “the final outcome of all this struggle” (ibid, p. 65). Ironically enough, even this last home is not his home, as the narrator emphasizes, “it belongs to other people” (ibid).

Hajji Abdul Latif finds a solution to his existential problem in the in-between state. He cannot ignore his glorious past full of heroic struggles for freedom and a meaningful existence in homeland. Likewise he cannot abandon his luxurious life in his adopted land. He continues to support his fellow revolutionists, “participating in their freedom struggle, but from outside his homeland. And this is Abdul Latif’s way for revolting [although] he knows very well that he is deceiving himself” (Romeh, 1986, p. 185) [*writer’s translation*]. He justifies his leaving when he says: “We work here to feed our people back home; we migrated to save our country” (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 57). This sort of life which Abdul Latif is leading is what Said describes as “fundamentally a discontinuous state of being” (2001, p. 177). It is, in Said’s words, “never the state of being satisfied, placid or secure” (ibid, p. 186). It is the result of emigration, to use Said’s words “permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (ibid, p. 173). One can safely say that Abdul Latif knows well that he is alluding himself. He, inwardly, realizes that he is leading a false life which does not offer him an escape. As Said emphasizes, “there is no real escape even for the [one] who tries to remain suspended, since that state of inbetweenness can itself become a rigid ideological position, a sort of dwelling whose falseness is covered over in time, and to which one can all too easily become accustomed” (1996, p. 43).

Living between two worlds is living between two morals without practicing them adequately. Hajji Abdul Latif who pretends that he is a pious man, actually does not practice his religion truly and faithfully. For instance, he stands firmly against adultery as it is a prohibited practice but he, controversially, believes that a man should be careful in the matter in order not to have illegitimate children. As he says: “You know there’s not a single Yemeni in Ethiopia who hasn’t known at least one woman here. Is it reasonable for a man to remain alone for years without getting close to a woman?” (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 46). Likewise, he attacks the Yemenis who drink alcohol because it is forbidden for the Muslims even calling it “mother of all evils” (ibid, p. 47). Nevertheless, he drinks it secretly and chews paper mint “to cover his breath” (ibid). This moral discrepancy is emphasized further through the character of Sayyid Amin, another emigrant who left home and settled in Ethiopia. He studied religious science in Yemen and emigrated not to work to gain money but to acquire money through religious hypocrisy and cheating. As portrayed, he is wearing a religious mask to laugh at the Yemeni immigrants to gain their confidence. He lives, as Al-Gawi maintains ironically, “at the expense of poor Yemeni immigrants and women” (1978, p. 10) [*writer’s translation*]. Obviously, this character is like all Abdul-Wali’s characters presented in this work, hollow and unfulfilled.

Between the figure of the emigrant who emigrated for economic reasons and that who left for political reasons, emerges a third type described by the narrator as “the most lost of all” (Abdul-Wali, 2001, p. 65). This type is embodied in the character of the secretary of Abdul Latif. Abdul-Wali exposes not just the dilemma of the emigrants but also that of their offspring who are of mixed origin neither Yemenis nor Ethiopians who inhabit an ambiguous social position. The secretary is one of them as he is the son of a Yemeni father and an Ethiopian mother. The secretary represents those who live in-between two worlds without feeling a sense of homeland. They live with no definite identity, displaced and alienated from not just their fathers’ land but also from their mothers’ and are described by the narrator as “strangers”. In their homeland, they are racially discriminated and have to face titles like ‘*muwalladin*’, and in the adopted land they are ‘strangers’. They are fighting for survival and a sense of belonging in either land. Hanging between two cultures and two identities, they feel disillusioned and face discrimination and racism in both lands. In fact, Abdul-Wali strongly condemns the immigrants who are giving birth to children in adopted land and exposing their lives to discrimination for they are considered displaced and marginalized in both worlds or as called in the novella “a burden” (ibid, p. 57).

As the novella introduces the character of the secretary, the readers find themselves in front of a character with dubious identity. He is an unnamed character, a ‘stranger’ as he calls himself, who “had been born without a country, a stranger in a strange land” (ibid, p. 56). The secretary has neither a first name that would give him

individuality nor a family name that would give him a sense of belonging. He is only referred to by his job, 'a secretary', which signifies his subordination to someone who "often made a fool of him in public and many times had threatened to fire him" (ibid). As a matter of fact, a name is the right of an individual. By failing to name this character, the writer wants to show how injustice is inflicted upon him. He is denied an identity which is his own conception and expression of his individuality. Likewise, the writer intends to emphasize that home is part of one's identity and thus to be deprived of home means being deprived of an identity. In fact, the secretary suffers double marginality. He is depicted by the writer as the lost, the forgotten and the stranger who does not know "[w]here was his land? [or] Who were his people?" (ibid). He is neither Yemeni nor Ethiopian. He lives in an ambiguous state of permanent dislocation, straddling between two worlds, or as described by the narrator "stuck in the middle, pulled by both sides" and therefore becomes "no one" (ibid). The narrator comments:

The secretary's father dreamed of his homeland, of a Future in Yemen, someday when it was 'liberated' from oppression. He had a foundation to stand on and dreams to support him. He wasn't a stranger, despite being an expatriate. He had a county to go home to one day. But, his son the secretary was like a rootless tree; he was no one. Yes, No one. The secretary's mother also had her dreams, her roots. She had a land and a country here in Ethiopia, soil that kindly contained her. But he was the stranger; he could not even say he was a 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? (ibid)

In an attempt to reconcile with his situation, the secretary decides to take responsibility for Abdou Sai'd's illegitimate child who was rejected by his father. He believes that he and the child are in the 'same situation' and belong to 'the same people'. This suggests that such a moral decision is the way through which to overcome his sense of estrangement and giving meaning to his shattered life. As it is obvious, the writer alludes to the responsibility towards preserving the religious teachings and fulfilling the traditional and cultural norms that will help the immigrant to protect his identity and survive in the state of inbetweenness.

Abdul-Wali in this work does not offer a clear solution to the identity crisis of the *muwalladin* who are straddling between two worlds. However, there is a suggestion that such a solution is possible. In the novella, there is a strong and persistent attempt to find a clear definition of home and identity. The secretary's urgent need for a home and identity is to protect him and to make him feel secured. He reveals: "We are searching for a homeland, a nation, a hope. You don't know what it's like to feel like a stranger. We'll try to liberate the land of Yemen." (ibid, p. 58). This ultimately reflects the writer's standpoint when he unfolds through the narrator that "a nation that emigrates from its land is a nation of traitors" (ibid, p. 64). Thus it becomes crystal clear to the readers that Abdul-Wali's solution to the dilemma of these confused and shattered immigrants is presented implicitly through suggesting the movement to the right direction, to home.

## Conclusion

Abdul-Wali sheds light in this work on the experience of emigration and its devastating impact on the life of the individual. His emigrant characters fail to fulfill their desire for home in both their native and adopted land or to keep themselves whole. They are all torn apart between two worlds. Therefore, they fail to survive, to transcend their feeling of loneliness, and to accomplish a sense of self-knowledge. In short, their search to locate themselves between the two worlds remains an effort in vain. Abdul-Wali's characters never return home for it becomes seemingly inevitable. They simply die strangers as the title from the very outset reminds the readers. The return only can be through memory. Straddling between two worlds, as shown by the writer, is a dangerous situation because the two worlds can never meet. They will diverge and lead nowhere.

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## بين عالمين في رواية يموتون غرباء للكاتب محمد عبدالولي

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### المُلخَص

تعد رواية يموتون غرباء (1971) للكاتب اليمني محمد عبدالولي احدى اهم الروايات اليمنية والتي ترجمت الى اللغة الانجليزية في العام (2001). ساهمت هذه الرواية في رسم ملامح الرواية الواقعية في اليمن وذلك من خلال تناولها لقضايا تمس الواقع بصورة مباشرة وكذلك سبورها للأغوار النفسية لشخص الرواية. تناولت هذه الرواية قضية الهجرة ومآلاتها ليس فقط على الأسرة والمجتمع اليمني ولكن على المهاجر نفسه وما يعانيه جراء اغترابه عن وطنه واسرته من وحدة وعزله وكذا تشتت بين عالمين مختلفين كليا في الديانة واللغة والثقافة. لقد ساهم كون الكاتب "مولد" من اب يمني و ام اثيوبية في نقل صورة واقعية عن هذين العالمين دون تزييف. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تحليل هذه المنطقة الوسطية بين هذين العالمين والتعرف على اثرها في تشكيل شخصية المهاجر اليمني على وجه الخصوص. نظرية الكاتب الفلسطيني الامريكي ادوارد سعيد حول العيش بين عالمين سوف تكون الاطار النظري لهذه الدراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المهاجرين اليمنيين، الهجرة، محمد عبدالولي، يموتون غرباء، بين عالمين، ادوارد سعيد.

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