

## The Portrayals of the Other in Yemeni Postcolonial Fiction: A Critical Study on Ahmed Zein's *Steamer Point*

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**Abstract**

This research paper investigates the portrayals of the other in Ahmed Zein's *Steamer Point* (2015), with a special focus on the European colonizer. In addition to that, it examines the coexistence between the natives and Europeans as reflected in the story. The postcolonial theory has been used as a methodology to frame the discussions and analysis of the novel in this study. The paper has been constructed into five sections: The introduction, the background of the study, the theoretical framework, discussions and analysis, and finally the conclusion. The study ended with the conclusion that The relationship between the self and the other is one of the complicated issues in the postcolonial era. Each one of self and other seeks to abolish the boundaries between them. The other seeks to abolish the components of the self, which makes the self feels the loss of his privacy and rights in his relationship with the other. *Steamer Point* dealt with the issue of colonization and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized people. While the story seems to glorify the colonizers, it also shows their real face in the negative way they looked at the natives, as well as how badly they treated them. That hegemony and biasness against the local people led at the end of the story to independence.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to investigate the portrayals of the other in Ahmed Zein's *Steamer Point* (2015) with a special focus on the European colonizers in Aden, as well as it examine the coexistence between the natives and Europeans as reflected in the novel. The research methodology selected to frame the analysis is the postcolonial theory. The paper has been constructed into five sections: introduction, background of the study, theoretical framework, discussions and analysis, and finally the conclusion.

### 2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This section provides some historical background about the author, Ahmad Zein, a synopsis of *Steamer Point*, and ends with some previous scholarly studies. Ahmad Zein was born in 1966.

He is a critically acclaimed Yemeni writer and journalist. He lives in Al-Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and works at *Al-Hayat Newspaper*. He is the author of five novels: *American Coffee* (2007), *Correction Status* (2009), *War under Skin* (2010), *Fruit of the Crows* (2020) and *Steamer Point* (2015). The last one is the emphasis of the present study. His novel *Fruit of the Crows* (2020) was long-listed for the [2021](#) Arabic Booker Prize. Zein believes that most of the writers' works and poets of the second decade of the twenty-first century have focused on the Arab Spring revolutions. And these events in Yemen remain “on hold until further notice” (Al-Khatib, 2015). He noted that writers, novelists and poets instead of writing a great deal of literary writing, they turned to political writing. In which he believes witnessing prosperity in a country like Yemen, achieves good news for those who live in it and does not skimp for them” (Al-Khatib, 2015). Zein is one of Yemeni writers who tried to show the clear idea of the situation in their countries during the colonial era. He tried to show how his country suffered a lot from the colonizers and highlighted that in some ways the colonizers developed Aden to be a piece of heaven.

*Steamer Point* tells a story of a young man whose name is Sameer. He works as a teacher and at the same time he takes care of an old French merchant, who lives in Aden. The events of the story take place in Aden before the end of the colonization of the southern part of Yemen in 1967. A mirror is set between the young man and the merchant. Both see the reflection of each other as well as their own faces. The mirror itself turns into a third character which gives the young man and the French man an opportunity to see and comments on each other. The mirror ultimately reveals the real anxiety of the French man who is thoroughly afraid of the rebels on his last night in Aden. The mirror also reflects the concerns of the young man, who looks at the departure of the English colonizer with great concern. The mirror then appears to be a meeting place for a long conversation. It reveals the worries and anxieties of both men to the extent the young man becomes acquainted with his desires and the old man turns to his memories.

The novel ranges between the central point from which it started, as well as it represents the time of narration. It also starts between specific periods of time after the end of the global war and it occupied an important position in cultures, races and religions. The narrative takes its title from the English name for the neighborhood of *Al-Tawahi*, which was called Steamer Point – meaning the meeting point for steamships. The text falls within the postcolonial novels as it deals with the complex relations between the colonizer and the colonized one. It also reveals the existence of the colonizers within the colonizers themselves and vice versa. As reflected in the story, during the fifties and sixties, Aden appeared as a piece of Europe. Unlike

the other cities of Yemen, Aden has nice streets, elegant shops, luxury cars, cinemas, libraries, modern cafes and concerts. In addition to its civil laws and institutions, the mosques, churches and synagogues are adjacent. *Steamer Point* combines the relationship between the self and the other. It has complex and confusing situations. The colonized ones find themselves drawn to their colonizers, and the colonizers rebel against the traditions established by his empire over decades. It also tells about a city that none of its multi-ethnic and multicultural residents knew to whom it belongs.

Alkodimi (2021) wrote an article entitled *Yemeni Novels between Celebrating Colonialism and Anti-colonial Voice*, in which he compared between some literary works of some Yemeni novelists such as Ali al-Muqri, Nadia al-Kowkabani, Wagdi al-Ahdal, Ramzia Al-Eryani and Ahmed Zein. Based on his analysis, he found that the Yemeni novelists share the same concern and they are all worried about their homeland –Yemen.

In addition, Abu Shihab (2020) wrote an article entitled *Fruit of Crows by Ahmed Zein: The Dilemma of Realty and Dream.... the merit of narration*. He expounded on the style of Zein's writing in that novel and how the author shows the existence of Yemeni people during the time of colonization and how they attempted to oppose it in order to change what is happening.

Writers have their own style to reflect the problems and issues of their societies. Yemeni writers suffered a lot from their bad situations. As a result, they use writing as a tool to express their feelings and tell other about their country. Even though some scholarly studies investigated in postcolonial literature, a few works centred on Yemeni postcolonial literature. In addition to that, few works emphasized on the writings of the Yemeni writer, Ahmed Zein. The current paper emphasizes on Zein's *Steamer Point* providing a new aspect, as well as it discusses the novel from a different angle.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Postcolonial literature includes all the literary productions that are in some way affected by colonialism, either written during the time of imperialism, or after it. These works usually portray the experiences of colonialism or postcolonialism (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 2). According to Edward Said (1993), there are no individual aspects taken into consideration. The non-Western cultures are represented as a homogenous mass, merely due to their belonging to a particular culture or race (p. 75). Increasingly, postcolonial theory has been found useful in examining a variety of colonial relationships beyond the classic colonizing activities of the British empire. The concepts of boundaries and borders have been crucial in the imperial occupation and

domination of indigenous space. Furthermore, the questions of borders and borderlands have now become a pressing issue in an age of hysterical border protection. Cultural borders became recognized as a critical region of colonial and neo-colonial dominations, of cultural erosion and class and economic marginalization. From this point, the concepts of postcolonial theory that frame the analysis in the current research paper will be clarified in the next paragraphs.

The term “binary opposition”, which came from "binary" i.e. a combination of two things, is widely used in postcolonial theory. In his criticism of the western discourse, Bhabha (1994), points out that “the objective of the colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (p. 70). Similar to Bhabha, Said (1978) explains that the Arabs, for example, are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization. Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being (p. 111). In fact, the concept "binary oppositions" will be appropriated and applied in the current research paper to show the conflict between the natives and Europeans in Aden.

According to Ashcroft et al. (2004) the relationship between the self and the other takes two basic forms: either the self denies the freedom, control and sovereignty of the other over itself and thus turns into something completely dependent on the other, or acknowledges the freedom of the other on the basis that it is the basis of his freedom. Thus, the relationship between the self and the other becomes a circular relationship, not a dialectical relationship (p. 189).

The concept "essentialism" is the assumption that groups, categories or classes of people objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category. Some studies of race or gender, for instance, assume the presence of essential characteristics distinguishing one race from another or the feminine from the masculine. In analyzing the culture, it is a generally implicit assumption that individuals share an essential cultural identity, and it has been a topic of vigorous debate within postcolonial theory. The essence or whiteness of something. In the context of race, ethnicity, or culture, essentialism suggests the practice of various groups deciding what is and is not a particular identity. Essentialism tends to overlook differences within groups often to maintain the status quo or obtain power. Essentialism can be used by a colonizing power but it can also be used by the colonized ones as a way of resistance.

The word “mimicry” is the ambivalence of the stereotype and it contains signs of crisis that are more evident in another mode of colonial discourse. According to Bhabha (1977), 'mimicry' is a strategy of colonial power/knowledge emblematic of a desire for an approved, revised Other (it is also a strategy of exclusion through inclusion that purports to accept the 'good native' all the better to exclude and denounce the majority 'bad natives'). Mimicry is ambivalent because it requires a similarity and a dissimilarity: 'a difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (p. 86). It relies on resemblance, on the colonized becoming like the colonizer but always remaining different. However, 'mimicry' also produces a disturbing effect on colonial rule. Like the stereotype, mimicry results in fantasies of menace; but this is a menace produced by (or forced upon) the colonized ones. With mimicry, the authoritative discourse becomes displaced as the colonizers see traces of themselves in the local people, as sameness slides into otherness (cited in Ashcroft et al, 2004, p. 32). An intrinsic distinction between being English and being Anglicized; the colonized people are unequipped to completely become the first.

The term “hegemony” refers to the dominance of one state within a confederation. It is generally understood to mean the domination by consent. The term is employed to describe the success of imperial power over a colonized people who may outnumber any occupying military force, but whose desire for self-determination has been suppressed by a hegemonic colonial power. Hegemony is important because the capacity to influence the thought of the colonized people is by far the most sustained and potent operation of imperial power in colonized regions. Indeed, an ‘empire’ is distinct from a collection of subject states forcibly controlled by a central power by virtue of the effectiveness of its cultural hegemony.

The term “othering” was coined by Gayatri Spivak for the process by which imperial discourse creates its ‘others’. Whereas the Other corresponds to the focus of desire or power in relation to which the subject is produced, the other is the excluded or ‘mastered’ subject created by the discourse of power. Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects (Ashcroft et al., 2004, p.156).

#### **4. Discussions and Analysis**

As illustrated earlier, the novel tells a story of a young man whose name is Sameer. He works as a teacher and at the same time he takes care of an old French merchant, who lives in Aden. The events of the story take place in Aden before the end of colonization of the southern part of Yemen in 1967. A mirror is set between the young man and the merchant. Both see the reflection of each other as well as their own faces. The mirror itself turns into a third character

which gives them an opportunity to see and comment on each other. The mirror ultimately reveals the real anxiety of the French man, who is thoroughly afraid of the rebels on his last night in Aden. It also reflects the concerns of the young man, who looks at the departure of the English colonizer with a great concern. The mirror then appears to be a meeting place for a long conversation. It reveals the worries and anxieties of both men to the extent that the young man becomes acquainted with his desires and the old man turns to his memories.

The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is complicated. During the time of British colonialism of Aden from 1839 to 1967, the city was beautifully arranged and covered with grace. It has turned into a city that did not resemble Sana'a in North Yemen. In one hundred and thirty-eight years, the British turned the open town to the sea into a miracle city before it returned to destinies that lacked joy. Aden in the novel is an extravagant fictional place with elegant streets, multinational people and openness to diverse civilizations. The scenes intersect in the novel. The charm of the Europeans has seduced the local citizens with emulation and happy imitation. The departure of the colonizer ended the mutual relationship between the self and the other. The local self has its reality in front of itself and the other has its endless joys. The strange arrival is accompanied by control for the Yemenis served the colonizers, whatever the price is. They accepted that better than an independent stagnation penetrated by salinity and diseases.

The Adenis imitated and compared their life with the life of British people. Without the high level of the colonizer, the Adenis would not have discovered their reality. The relationship between the characters showed that the “civilized colonizer” took a dominant position because the Yemeni emulated the colonizer. The colonized were attracted to the colonizer and followed him, even if the colonized one seemed independent. This was clear through the novel’s characters, their lifestyle, their relationship with each other and with the colonizer.

The novel compared the paradise of Aden with other cities. The novel showed historical events in Aden at the time when Aden was a multicultural city in which Indians, British, Persians, Jews, Somalis and the Yemenis lived. All faces and cultures could be seen in this city. The place where the world’s ships met and messages from the whole world arrived. All events in the novel centered on the European Neighborhood Steamer Point. It was a place crowded with restaurants, libraries, churches, banks, foreign schools, cinemas and everything that made it part of the West without leaving its Yemeni soil. Steamer Point was a part of the west that the Yemeni citizens had not seen. It was a part of the imagined paradise. The reality of the colonized was that he did not see the European other as an enemy, but rather regrets his departure.



The novel discusses the relationship between the colonizer and the local people. For instance, Sameer, the young Yemeni man, who worked as a supervisor in the palace of the old French merchant, was fascinated by the Western culture. He admired its rich aspects of life and what the British did in the city of Aden. He saw the West as an important and useful model for his country. From his perspective, they turned Aden into a “piece of paradise” especially since he came from a northern village which was backward at that time.

During the novel's events, Sameer's attitude toward the colonizer can be seen clearly in his admiration of their lifestyle and achievements in Aden. Even his friends did not like his attitude as well as they did not like the way he talked about the colonizer in their meetings, or even in the play that he wrote about Aden. They told him many times that he would lose and regret what he thought about the west. He was afraid of the Independence Day. He thought it meant the end of happiness in Aden.

Aden was a city with a variety of people from everywhere. There were the Yemenis, Indians, Somalis, Persians, English and French. It also had Muslims, Jews, Christians and Buddhists. Sameer felt afraid about Aden when he the energy of the resistance. Furthermore, Sameer has been suffocated in the entanglement of their struggles, since what was driving them originally was the long for power. Their activities would transform Aden into a city shut on itself.

There are three perspectives on the colonizer held by native people in Aden. Some of them attempted to celebrate the colonizer. They glorified the colonizer and liked them. That was obvious in the attitude of Sameer. Others opposed the colonizer and attempted to organize insurgencies to change what was happening. Most of them tried to do their best to show the ugliness of the colonizer and deliverance from the colonizer. The rest tried to improve their lives, but their ways of life were similar to the ones of the colonizers in some way.

The Other in the novel means the European, as embodied in the character of the French merchant who started in Aden from scratch and then became its most prominent wealthy man. He was described as the indispensable man of Aden. The relationship between French man and Sameer was similar to the relationship between the master and the servant. Sameer suffered from his companions' doubts that he was not a genuine Adeni person. This is probably because Sameer came to Aden from a village in North Yemen. In addition to that, this is also because Sameer's perspectives and opinions about the Europeans in Aden are completely different from his other Adeni friends. Yet, the French merchant suffered from the consequences of his opportunism. He preferred that extreme wealth at the expense of defeating his motherland in

World War II. In addition to his failure to win the heart of an English woman, Iris, he fell in love with her. But she did not pay him attention. Finally, both faced the same fate and were expelled Aden.

By the same taken, Iris, the English woman, wanted to integrate into the local community and learn about its customs. She liked to acknowledge them far from her British people, who were satisfied with their arrogance. However, in her different behavior, the Adenis' temptation increased her impression of them. The stories of the Yemeni characters are nothing but stories of their attraction to the strange other, whose fragility can do nothing against the colonizer.

The characters and events intertwined in the novel and its reference was the European neighbourhood, in which some local people lived and others wished to live. The European characters, who lived in the European neighborhood had an independent life of luxury and sophistication. Thus, they became the reference for the Yemeni characters. As the Independence Day approached, the sad endings brought together all the characters. The French man left sadly at night. Iris left without much joy and the young man who worked for the French man did not get the girl he loved, nor did the coffee owner got the girl he dreamed of. It was as if the independence of Aden had closed an era of happiness and blissful distraction.

The novel was rich with details and its characters had extensive historical knowledge. The novelist talked about the characters with different fates. He demonstrated, in his work, that the novel on the cognitive level is an effective part of reading and interpreting history. Indeed, national literature does not only take pleasure in history but also it deals with re-visioning history as a way to guide the readers to read the present and the past from a different angle.

The mirror's technique was used in the text as an alternative tool to the dialogues which are usually used in stories. The outside of the mirror is more important than the images that gather on its surface. The face in the mirror has inner worlds behind it and it is a cold surface without memory that breaks into fragments at the end of the path. The mirror combined the curiosity of a Yemeni young man with the arrogance of an old Frenchman. What brought them together is the present in the beauty of a city closer to paradise. The first is fascinated by a city unlike any other in Yemen. The second is fascinated by a city that made his fortune, which he made with other Europeans. The mirror showed the reality of the colonizer who saw the native people as servants or simple workers.

Hegemony in the novel appeared in the way the colonizer controlled the lives of the native people. They give the natives certain jobs to work in, they cannot work in business,



trading or governmental jobs. They can only work simple jobs because other jobs are for the colonizers. In some cases, the colonizers used the natives to work as spies to collect the news and information from everywhere around the city.

In brief, throughout the novel, the colonizer is also portrayed in the character of Iris, who is not satisfied with the way that her people were treating the natives. She usually ignores their behavior with the natives. She likes the natives and their lifestyle, kindness and generosity. The coexistence between the self and the other or the natives and the Europeans can be seen through the way of life of the natives and the British. Sameer is one of the natives who worked in the house of the French merchant who was one of the colonizers and every native wants to work in his house or one of his shops. Suad and Nageeb are examples of the national resistant that wants the colonizers to leave, but at the same time, they have adopted a lot of colonizers' behaviors and lifestyles. Yet, the British themselves could not do many things in the city without the help of the natives because they thought about the natives as simple workers who could do many things to the colonizers. The colonizers related the simple jobs only to the colonized people and they were the masters of these jobs. So, they needed the natives to do these jobs for them.

## **5. Conclusion**

The relationship between the self and the other is one of the complicated issues in the postcolonial era. Arabic novels and the Yemeni ones in particular focus on this issue. Each one of self and other seeks to abolish the boundaries between them. The other seeks to abolish the components of the self, which make the self feels the loss of his privacy and rights in his relationship with the other. In this research, *Steamer Point* has been discussed from the perspective of the postcolonial perspective. It is rich with information that assist the reader to understand the history of Aden during the colonial period. The story deals with the issue of colonization and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized people. While the story seems to glorify the colonizers, it also showed their real face. The real face of the colonizer is portrayed through the character of the French man who showed how the European people looked at the natives, as well as how they treated them. In the story, the European people lived happily in rich places at the neighborhood of Steamer Point. While the natives were simple workers and did not have the same rights as the British, the colonizers were described clearly and considered responsible for the development that occurred in Aden. They stripped the local people of their basic rights and assets. That bias authoritative mastery and double-dealing over the natives led at the end to independence.

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