

Through a Duwaydar's Eye

The Hostage (Al-Rahina), by Zayd Mutee' Dammaj. Translated from the Arabic by May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley. Introductions by Robert D. Burrowes and 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Maqalih. Preface by Salma Khadra Jayyusi. New York: Interlink Books, 1994. xv, 151 pages. ISBN 1-56656-146-9 and 1-56656-140-K (pbk)

This extraordinarily fine novella, characterized as a "historical" novel by a number of critics, comes from the pen one of the most distinguished writers in Yemen.

The action of the story takes place in mostly one locale, the hermetic, claustrophobic, if also sumptuous, interior of the palace of the Governor of Ṣan'ā', sometime in the late nineteen forties. A handsome boy has been sent there from the Fortress high atop the mountain overlooking the city where he was held a hostage, a practice, as Robert Burrowes explains in his useful background essay, that was common in the days of the Imam. The hope was to forestall tribal resistance by imprisoning the relatives of potentially hostile tribal leaders.

In the Governor's palace the boy becomes a *duwaydar* which, we are told, "was, among other things, a boy who hadn't yet reached the age of puberty . . . who now did the work once done by the *tawashiyeh*, or eunuchs" (p. 24). In other words, because of their youth and presumed sexual innocence, the "*duwadera*" were considered to be safe companions and servants of the pampered palace women. Why they should have been considered safe is another question, for it is clear that they soon become the prey of these lonely creatures who desperately seek attention and intimacy.

Among them is the beautiful, spirited, and haughty young sister of the Governor, the Sharifa Hafsa. Because of her position and wealth she is a powerful individual, nearly as influential as her brother, but it is the sheer force of her personality that at once intimidates and captivates those around her, including the protagonist. Though willful and at times ruthless, she is nevertheless capable of generosity, kindness, and even tenderness towards her *duwaydar*. His infatuation with her becomes an obsession. It is never clear whether she loves him in return or rather the handsome and wealthy court poet, who visits the governor's palace from time to time and for whom the *duwaydar* acts as a reluctant

go-between with the Sharifa. The poet is more of a tease than even Sharifa Hafsa, alternately spurning her, then giving her reason to hope. As it turns out, he may be more attracted to the *duwaydar* than the latter's mistress. Nor is it clear that she loves the poet or is simply hoping to benefit from a liaison that will get her out of the palace. Brooding over her fate, she identifies with her *duwaydar* because she too is a hostage in a world that is both cruel and implacable. At the end of the story, through an unforeseeable set of circumstances, she fixes upon him, ironically, as a means of escape from her gilded cage.

The protagonist is not the only *duwaydar* in the palace, however. Befriending him on the first day of his arrival is the "handsome" *duwaydar*, a lively, humorous, and intelligent youth — as well as an elusive figure — who teaches the recalcitrant country bumpkin the ropes. Eventually, he seems intent on having himself replaced by his clumsy pupil as the palace's darling. The reason for this substitution becomes clearer when we learn that he is in the advanced stages of tuberculosis. In appreciation for his friend's kindness, the protagonist takes over more and more of his duties, though he refuses to massage the obese governor's feet and turns a deaf ear to hints that he should service more than the women in the palace. It is by performing other acts of resistance that he maintains his dignity. In any case, their relationship becomes one of brothers. The "hostage" *duwaydar* tends to his friend's care on his deathbed, tenderly cradling him in his arms until his coughing fits subside, and then single-handedly preparing his body for burial.

But it is not the death of the "handsome" *duwaydar* that is the denouement of the story. Because the palace is insulated from the outside world, political events are heard only indirectly like the sounds of a gathering storm. A radio broadcast; a conversation in which the Free Yemeni Movement is mentioned; a report of the Imam's assassination; the victorious return of the Crown Prince who declares Ṣan'ā' an open city to be sacked by his tribal supporters in payment for their loyal service: these are the premonitions of a revolution raised and then tragically lost. What happens to the Sharifa Hafsa and the hostage amid the turmoil? I will not give away the story's ending except to say that it is hopeful and bitter at the same time.

Much of the novel's intensity comes from the compression and carefully wrought structure that one associates with the short story form, of which Dammaj is a recognized master. The author also uses the full resources of irony, allusion, and humor to create a complex world, one which is resonant with emotion but devoid of sentimentality.

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