

Zaydi Discriminatory Decrees and Their Effect on Yemenite Jews in Nomi Eve's *Henna House*: A Psychological and Textual Analysis

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Abstract

Nomi Eve's novel *Henna House: A Novel* (2014) is the first novel to tackle the history of Jews in Yemen—one of the poorest and most forgotten countries of the world—in English. The novel revisits the last period of the Jews' history in Yemen before their transportation to Israel in Operation Magic Carpet between 1949 and 1950 and is illustrative of the subordination and suffering of Jews in Yemen. It explores the experience of the Yemenite Jews in the first half of the twentieth-century Yemen and reveals the explicitly racialized association of human repression of Zaydi majority. It also explores the experiences of marginalization and segregation in the lives of Yemenite Jews. It raises questions on the relation between religion, politics and minorities and legal implications of the incorporation of a religious minority into the mainstream of national identity. The aim of the present article is to examine the effects of Zaydi discriminatory laws particularly the Orphans' Decree on the Yemenite Jewish community and explore the experience of the Jewish children under the threat of being uprooted just to be planted in another soil. It argues that Eve has been able to articulate the suffering experienced by Yemenite Jews at the hands of Zaydis and that the novel presents a realistic picture of the Jewish community during the first half of the 20th century. For the purpose of the study, the psychological approach as well as the textual approach are to be used.

Keywords: Yemenite Jews, Orphans' Decree, Persecution and Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Nomi Eve's *Henna House* (2014) is the first novel to be written in English to address a topic which has never been discussed before—the marginalization and persecution of Jews in Yemen. The novel revisits the last period of the Jews' history in Yemen before their transportation to Israel in Operation Magic Carpet between 1949 and 1950 and is illustrative of the subordination and suffering of Jews in Yemen. As a historical novel, *Henna House* attempts to revive a lost and forgotten history, memory and identity. The novel is very illuminating and the reader comes to know the life conditions of the Jews at the time, their struggle to preserve their Jewish culture and

heritage and their adherence to the teachings of Judaism. Moreover, the novel focuses on the impact of the ideology of Zaydi supremacy on the fate of Yemenite Jews who for several centuries have been treated as the “Other” and therefore inferior. It demonstrates that the discriminatory decrees imposed on the Jews were prejudicial and unfair and can be considered as the main force behind their departure to Eretz Yisrael. In other words, the Jews’ longing for Zion, and their dream of return to Eretz Yisrael are the outcomes of persecution and discrimination that they received at the hands of Zaydi rulers of Yemen. The aim of Nomi Eve is to remind Yemenite Jews of their past and the corrupt consciousness of those who ruled Yemen in the first half of the twentieth century.

Historical Context

There are numerous accounts concerning the origin of Jews in Yemen. One account suggests that Jews arrived in the Yemen during the reign of the Queen Belquis of Sheba, and the reign of King Solomon between 965-925 BC (Abu Jabal, 1999, p. 16). According to Tudor Parfitt (1996) the Jewish community was founded by a group of Jews who disobeyed Moses during the Exodus and made their way to the southern parts of Arab Peninsula (p. 3). It is also said that following the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 AD, the Jews left for Yemen (Parfitt, 1996, p. 7). Another account believes that King Solomon sent his men to Yemen to bring gold and other ornaments to adorn his Temple and some of them never returned (Blady, 2000, p. 7).

The Himyarite Kingdom (2nd century BC-6th AD) was one of the most prosperous and wealthy kingdoms in the Southern part of Arab Peninsula and was the last one before the advent of Islam (Tobi, 1999, p. 3). The Himyarites were greatly influenced by Judaism and during the reign of King Tubba Abu Karib As’ad (385-420 AD), Himyar converted to Judaism. Judaism then became the official religion of the Himyarite Kingdom. With the advent of Islam in 7th century AD, Yemenis embraced the new religion but some of them maintained their old one. When Islam became the main religion in Yemen, the Jews became a minority. Since then, “the status of the Jews declined as they were no longer ordinary citizens but *dhimmi*—protected people—who were obliged to pay a poll tax” (Tobi, 1999, p. 4). However, they were granted full freedom of religion and protection of the self and property.

The Jews’ history in Yemen is “an unending chain of persecution and humiliation” (Parfitt, 1996, p. 6). That is why “[D]uring the long centuries of exile, the Jews had prayed for an abrupt and dramatic end to their existence in Yemen, a time when their triumphant remnant would return to the Holy Land on the wings of eagles, as foretold by the prophets” (Tawil, 1998, p. 14). The life of Jews in Yemen has witnessed many ups and downs. It was stable and prosperous at times and faced declination and oppression at other times. Tudor Parfitt (1996) argues that discrimination and persecution started with the arrival of Islam in Yemen: “In exchange for the protection of their persons and property by the State, their exemption from military service and their freedom to worship in their own way the *Dhimmi* were expected to fulfill various requirements, all of them discriminatory” (p. 15). Yosef Tobi (2013) writes that since 629, Yemen “was governed by Islam and the Jews became subject to Muslim discriminatory rules of *dhimmi* and were forced to pay the protection tax (*jizya*)” (p. 248). However, discrimination and persecution of Jews did not gain full force until the Zaydis ruled Yemen early in the 10th century. In *Jewish Communities in Exotic Places* (2000), Ken Blady writes “[a]ctive Muslim persecution of Jews did not gain full force until the Shiite-Zaydi clan seized power early in the tenth century” (p. 10).

The Jewish community of Yemen was “a traditional, patriarchal society that lived its life according to religious law and in adherence to the codes of a society which was largely untouched

by the changes of the industrial world” (Eraqi-Klorman, 2014, p. 1). This community lived among the Yemeni tribes and accepted much of their ethos and traditions. Most Jews were self-employed entrepreneurs, craftsmen and artisans. It is estimated that the number of Jews during the first half of the twentieth century stood at around 65,000, while the Yemenite population was estimated to be between three and four million people. Religiously, the population of Yemen can be divided into two main groups: the Shafi’is, following the Sunni stream of Islam, and the Zaydis, a branch of Shite Islam. There are other minor groups such as Jews and Christians. The Zaydis have maintained political rule over Yemen for hundreds of years. The Zaydi state was first established by Al-Hadi ila Al-Haqq Yahya Al-Rasi (859 –911), the first Imam of Yemen, at the end of the ninth century in northern Yemen. In 1918, Yahya al-Mutawakkil took over the country and became Imam of Yemen. The Zaydi regime ended in 1962. It was during Yahya al-Mutawakkil’s regime that Nomi Eve’s *Henna House* is set.

Throughout their rule of Yemen, the Zaydis have issued various discriminatory regulations against the Jews. In other words, a number of discriminatory ordinances and decrees were meticulously enforced by Zaydi imams. These discriminatory regulations continued to be an obligatory part of the state law until the 1950s. Summarizing these laws, Ken Blady (2000), writes:

The Jews of Yemen were treated as pariah, third-class citizens who needed to be perennially reminded of their submission to the ruling faith...The Jews were considered to be impure, and therefore forbidden to touch a Muslim or a Muslim’s food. They were obliged to humble themselves before a Muslim, to walk on his left side, and to greet him first. They were forbidden to raise their voices in front of a Muslim. They could not build their houses higher than the Muslims’ or ride a camel or horse, and when riding on a mule or donkey, they had to sit sideways. Upon entering a Muslim quarter, a Jew had to take off his footwear and walk barefoot. No Jewish man was permitted to wear a turban or carry the *Jambiyyah* (dagger), which was worn universally by the free tribesmen of Yemen. If attacked with stones or fist by Islamic youth, a Jew was not allowed to defend himself. (p. 10)¹

Further, the Jews were forced to wear sidelocks or *peots*. The wearing of such long and dangling *peots* “was originally a source of great shame for the Yemenites. It was decreed by the imams to distinguish the Jews from the Muslims” (Blady, 2000, p. 11). More degrading and insulting decrees to the Jews were the *Atarot* (Headgear) and Latrine Decrees. The former was a seventeenth-century decree forbidding the Jews to wear a headcovering or turbans.² The Latrine Decree was a nineteenth-century edict in which the Jews were forced to clean out public toilets and remove animal dung and carcasses from the streets (Blady, 2000, p. 11). Another discriminatory edict was the Orphan Decree which gave the Zaydis the right to convert to Islam any child under the age of thirteen whose father is dead. Further, evidence by a Jew against a Muslim was invalid and a “Jew was forbidden to pass a Muslim to his right, and whoever did so, even unwittingly, could be beaten without trial; the Jews were forbidden to make their purchases before the Muslims had completed theirs; a Jew entering the house of an Arab or the office of an official was only allowed to sit down in the place where the shoes were removed” (Tobi, 1999, p. 89). Tudor Parfitt summarizes some of these laws in the following:

[the Jews] were required not to insult Islam, never strike a Muslim, or to impede him in his path. They were not to assist each other in any activity against a

¹ See also Eraqi-Klorma 2002, pp. 389-408.

² For more details on these decrees see Tobi 1999, pp.142-156.

Muslim...They were not to build new places of worship or repair existing one...They were not to pray too noisily or hold public religious processions. They were not to wink. They were not to proselytize. They were not to bear arms. They were required to dress in a distinctive fashion in order not to be mistaken for a member of the Muslim occupying forces. In other words *dhimmis* had all the times to behave themselves in an unostentatious and unthreatening manner, one appropriate to a defeated and humbled subject people. They were to avoid the slightest show of triumphalism and they were forbidden any activity that could lead to proselytization. (Parfitt, 1996, pp. 15-6)

Yemenite Jews were “excluded as it almost always...from affairs of state, and from the great institutions of the country” (Parfitt, 1996, p. 2). Most of these discriminatory laws and regulations remained in effect even after the last major Jewish exodus in 1950.

One of the harshest and most discriminatory decrees which Yemenite Jews had to endure was the ‘Orphans’ Decree’, by which Jewish children who had lost their parents were taken by the government and subjected to forced conversion to Islam. There are several accounts about the beginning of the enforcement of the decree: some accounts say that it was first introduced and enforced in the 17th century while others believe it was first enforced in the first decade of the 19th century (Nini, 1991, pp. 21-23). However, the decree was not in full force until 1918 when Imam Yahya took over Sana’a after the Ottomans departure, it was revived in places under the Zaydi rule. Aharon Gaimani (2004) writes: “Some people considered this decree even harsher than that of Pharaoh since the latter only applied to males, whilst the Orphans’ Decree applied to females as well” (p. 171). According to Eraqi-Klorman “The Orphans’ Decree has been preserved in the collective memory of Yemeni Jews as the single most threatening and oppressive act against their community” (2001, p. 23). Avraham Tabib labeled it “the mother of all the evil decrees” (as cited in Eraqi-Klorman, 2001, p. 23).

To avoid the forced conversion of orphans, the Jews of Yemen had two ways: first, the arrangement for orphans to be married so that they are considered adults. This had some undesirable consequence such as Child marriage and polygamy as some orphaned girls were married to older men as second and sometimes third wife. The other way to avoid conversion was to smuggle the orphaned children out of Yemen (Ariel, 2010, p. 97; Ariel, 2014, p. 119; Gaimani, 2004, p. 171). Many orphans along with their relatives left their villages to Aden as the first step in migration to Israel. In Aden the Jewish leadership arranged for their permits and final transportation to Israel. Their journey from Sana’a and other cities in the north was difficult and full of dangers. Jews who helped rescue the orphans were at great danger. Those who were suspected of doing this were imprisoned and tortured.³ To facilitate their departure, they, sometimes, paid the Imam’s soldiers so that they could leave without being caught and other times

³ Jews who were captured helping orphans leave the country were treated very harshly by the authorities. They “were put in jail and tortured with leg chains. They put two chains on each person” (as cited in Eraqi-Klorman, 2001, p. 34). Eraqi-Klorman also cites some other cases in which Jews were tortured and who due to “the terrible agony, hunger, beatings, iron chains...converted to Islam” (ibid). “Economic pressure, in the form of fines imposed on members of the community, was also used to persuade the Jews to surrender orphans who had been smuggled out” (ibid).

they pretended that they were on a trip to visit the tomb of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi in Taiz. (Ariel, 2010, p. 99; Gaimani, 2004, p. 171).⁴

Henna House

Told in the first point of view, *Henna House* tells the story of Adela Damari, a Yemenite Jewish girl who was born in 1918. The novel proceeds to document Adela's plight from "slavery" to freedom, interweaving cultural, social and political issues together. The novel rewrites this long-inherited division between the Zaydi community and the Jews. The story takes place in Qaraah, a day's ride from Sana'a in the Kingdom of North Yemen. The year was 1923, five years after Imam Yahye⁵ Hamid Ed-Din became the Imam of Yemen. Adela Damari is the daughter of a Jewish shoemaker. She is a bright, young, intelligent little girl and the youngest of nine brothers and the only girl in the family as well as her mother's last and least favored child. She is part of a large, extended family clan—two uncles and many aunts and cousins. Adela's biggest fear is being taken away by the Confiscator, a government official who snatches Jewish orphans, and delivers them to the Zaydi authorities to convert them to Islam, and give them to Zaydi families mostly as servants. His job, to use Adela's own words, is "to pluck children out by the roots from the soil of their birth and replant them in a different garden" (p. 8). Adela's father is ailing and his health is deteriorating very fast and the confiscator is waiting for her father to die so he can confiscate Adela and force her to be a Muslim.

To avoid being taken away by the confiscator, Adela needs to be betrothed. But unfortunately, all the boys her mother is able to find for her suffer tragedies and either die or leave Qaraah altogether. Adela gets betrothed several times but unfortunately none of them is successful. First she is betrothed to a boy in the village but he dies soon. Then at the age of eight, she is betrothed to her cousin Asaf but he leaves the village with his father for a trade journey and never comes back. Then she is betrothed to Mr. Musa, an old man who dies just before their marriage. Finally she is betrothed to David, Hani's husband, as a second wife.

After the death of her parents and due to the difficult circumstances in Qaraah, Adela and her extended family leave their small village and head for Aden which was a Britain protectorate. She lives in Aden for three years. Life in Aden is totally different. It is a very busy and modern port city with modern conveniences. Adela goes to the port every day looking for her fiancé Asaf. One day Asaf comes back and they get married after a long waiting. But Asaf betrays her with her cousin Hani and therefore she gets divorced. Then she marries her childhood friend Binyamin Bashari and both of them leave for Israel shortly in the aftermath of WWII.

It is within this framework that the dilemma of the Yemenite Jews is presented by Nomi Eve. The protagonist of the novel, Adela, is a Yemenite Jewess and hence a minority figure. She belongs to a human species which troubles any simple designation of her as a Yemenite Jewish female protagonist. She is, in fact, a complex minority figure who is made minor and comes from a long line of minoritizations. Her biggest fear is being confiscated by the Zaydi authorities if her father dies. Confiscation is a taking possession of orphaned children of a different religion by the Zaydi regime which acts as if by a right of ownership. The confiscation of Adela and other Jewish

⁴ There were many tricks used during trafficking children such as disguising the orphans as Arabs; removing their sidelocks; or using crates of the same used to kerosene and they loaded two crates on each donkey and put two children, sometimes one child, in each crate. During the journey they used only side roads. They stopped during the day and walked only at night (Eraqi-Klorman, 2001, p. 32). For details see Gaimani, 2004, pp. 172-174.

⁵ The name Yahye is better transliterated as "Yahya" but the author is following the transcription used in the novel.

children registers the paradoxes of dwelling in Yemen. Acts of intrusion and dispossession in the novel point to the conflicts of uncertainties reigning in the kingdom of Yemen. The confiscator visits them without invitation; he is an unwelcome visitor/an intruder whose visits go beyond the claim to buy a pair of slippers for his wife.

The novel highlights the Zaydis' feeling of superiority and contempt for Jews. The first visit of the confiscator happens when Adela is five years old. When the confiscator sees Adela for the first time, he says to her father "What is wrong with the girl's eyes?...they are too big for her face...Eyes like that see either too much of the world or too little of it. And the color—greenish gold? Pretty and ugly at the same time" (p. 7). The confiscator's comment about the size and different color of Adela's eyes shows his arrogance and sense of superiority and contempt for the child. Adela feels this contempt: contempt for her Jewishness. She understands that the nucleus of the problem lies in her Jewishness which creates distaste in Zaydi eyes. It is this Jewishness which accounts for and which motivates him to comment on her eyes. Further, the confiscator is applying his own standards of beauty—the dominant culture's image of beauty—to define her beauty.

The rich appearance of the confiscator, compared to that of Adela's father, adds to his arrogance and contempt for the Jews and shows his authoritative status and richness. He wears a

jambia sheathed on a belt around his waist. The curved ritual scimitar was exquisite—the blade a gleaming threat of forged iron, the hilt a mellow yellow Eritrean ivory, overlain with two jeweled serpents wrapped around the handle, a band of rubies at the thumb point, and an embossed hawk's head on the lip of the hilt, representing both mightiness and honor. He wore an expensive maroon silk djellaba with a black turban, and his beard was carefully tended. (p. 7)

A *Jambia* made of African ivory and inlaid with jeweled serpents is a symbol of richness and wealth. However, despite his wealthy appearance and strength, Adela is able to see his reality. "Even then, at only five years old," Adela says, "I saw him perfectly for what he was: a thief, an evildoer, and a descendant of Amalake. I wanted to spit at him, but I knew I would be punished for it in this life and in the World to Come" (p. 8). As a thief, he makes daily errands to the Jewish quarters sniffing the odor of death and looking for victims. He seems to be keeping a health record for every Jew who has children and patiently waiting for their death. Adela knows very well "that the Confiscator was a bad man. I knew that my father hated and feared him. But it was only later that I understood that he was a bringer of nightmares, a kidnapper. History, religion, and politics had conspired to make him such" (p. 9). The confiscator is a nightmare not only for Adela who continues dreaming of him at night even years after she has left for Aden but for the whole Jewish community.

Eve's novel explores the complexity of the look—confiscator's look—as the controlling gaze of a dominant and oppressive society which constructs *Zaydism/Zaidiyyah* as the norm while viewing Judaism/Jewishness as the other. It is a mesmerizing gaze that leaves the gazed at the mercy of the gazer. The problem is that the look of the dominant social order represented by the confiscator is internalized by Jewish characters; that is, they construct themselves through and against the gaze of the Master. Describing the constant gaze of the confiscator during his visits to her father's stall, Adela says: "And still he stared at me—looking at me, seeing me live a different life" (p. 8). The next time the confiscator visits the stall, he does not gaze at her:

he didn't mention my eyes, and for most of the exchange he ignored me completely. But even though he didn't glance in my direction, I felt his gaze upon me. Not his

‘this-lifetime’ eyes...but his ‘next-lifetime’ eyes—the hooded eyes of the soul that can see into the heart of a small girl. And that is when I learned to fear him. When he saw right through me, making me feel simultaneously naked and invisible. (p. 11)

The gaze shows how the Jewish community is subject to intense scrutiny from Zaydi political institutions and hence *Henna House* is a story of a community that is constantly under the gaze of the dominant ideology. Moreover, the problem for Adela with the dominant gaze of the confiscator is that it conjures up the triple devaluation of being female, Jew, and poor. The confiscator’s gaze is, as a gaze of hegemonic society, driven by racism and the power dynamic of subordination/domination as it is by the exploitation of those young orphans kidnapped by the Zaydis—most of the orphans are used as servants at Zaydi homes. Here Eve constructs the “circuit” of gaze relation, a relation between Zaydi Master and non-Zaydi Servant or the other, in which the Zaydi/Master looks upon the other and sees ugliness, an absence of humanity and ordinariness. In turn, Adela, the other, looks upon the Master, the confiscator, and sees omnipotence and omnipresence.

One of the recurrent images in the novel is that of the jambia and the two jeweled serpents wrapped around the handle. The first thing that attracts Adela’s attention the first time she meets the confiscator is his jambia. She gives a detailed description of the jambia and is particularly attracted to the two serpents. Expressing the power of the serpents she recalls:

I was making my way home when I saw the Confiscator gesturing to me. He was standing by one of the spice seller’s stalls. I almost turned and ran, but his jambia pulled me forward, the jeweled serpents on his scimitar twisting around each other, tugging me closer, closer. I was in their thrall. They were alive, their emerald eyes looking deep into my heart, as the hawk on the hilt opened its beak to murmur into my ears, a wild bird-whisper that came to me in a language I knew but didn’t know. (p. 12)

She also says: “Whenever the man spoke, the snakes looked at me, opened their fanged mouths, and hissed” (p. 180). Actually, snakes are traditional symbols of rebirth and fertility because of how they shed their skins. But for Adela, the snake on the confiscator’s jambia signifies a rebirth into a new life as a Muslim. So for her, the snake is an ominous reminder of what could happen to her were she to be confiscated. They also symbolize transformation and metamorphosis: “I thought of Moses’s staff. How God had turned it into a snake, which writhed at Pharaoh’s feet. This made me think of the Confiscator’s jambia, and soon the fire of fear was igniting behind my eyes” (p. 43). The transformation of Moses’s staff and the Satan into snakes resembles Adela’s transformation into a Muslim child.

Eve’s novel delves deep into the child’s psyche to register Adela’s fear and anxiety. The appearance of the confiscator installs fear inside Adela—fear of losing her father, fear of being confiscated and converted and finally fear of losing her community. It is a natural response to the threat and the vulnerability that she feels. So, whenever, the confiscator appears, she will timidly crouch in the back of the shop feeling so afraid that he may kill her father with his jambia. Her color changes and she becomes as “pale as a ghost” (p. 11). Describing her reaction to one of the confiscator’s visits, she says: “I buried my face in my father’s legs—though at the last minute I pried myself loose and glared at the Confiscator, a fatal mistake which turned me into a pillar of salt, like Lot’s wife” (p. 12). Even after being betrothed to her cousin, the feeling of fear of being

picked up by the Zaydi authorities does not disappear. Though she knows that she is protected from confiscation by her engagement to Asaf, she knows very well that

this protection was tenuous and that I was still at risk, simply because life was unpredictable and I was a Jewish girl in Yemen. Occasionally I would see the Confiscator in the market. Each time my belly clenched up and I felt fire leap in my skull. Whenever the long shadow of his maroon djellaba disappeared into a throng of marketers, I told myself, 'I am safe, I am safe, I am safe' but deep down, I didn't believe it. (pp. 47-8)

It is this unpredictability which is the great threat for Adela because Zaydi leaders do not have law to rule; they rule according to their whims and the only law available is one which suits their personal needs and gains. Describing her constant fear of the confiscator, she says that she often hears the voice of the confiscator's wife in her head. And her fear increases as her father's health deteriorates.

Adela's fear of the confiscator motivates her to devise a plan to free herself from confiscation and conversion if her father dies. She steals a poison satchel from her Aunt Rahel's house one day and keeps it for herself to finish her life if her father dies. Many times when she is alone at home, she takes out

Aunt Rahel's embroidered satchel, untied the cinch, and sniffed the bitter flakes of root...It smelled of death, decay, and all manner of miseries. It also smelled of freedom. I knew that taking my own life was against the sacred law of our people, but I also didn't think that anyone would judge me poorly for my actions. After all, what else was there for me to do but take matters into my own hands, if my father should die, leaving me an orphan? (p. 110)

Adela's decision to end her life rather than be converted to another religion demonstrates the Yemenite Jewish community's adherence to Judaism and shows their fidelity and loyalty to their religion. It is due to their total exclusion from the outside world and other Jewish communities that "Yemenite Jews tend to be highly conservative...They did not easily adopt new religious ideas introduced by visitors or emissaries...In this respect they represent the most Jewish figure of all." (Tobi, 1999, p. 206). They are so devout and religious: "To them religion is still the first and last consideration-a principle of life" (as cited in Tobi, 1999, p. 206). Hence, Yemenite Jews are "considered the most authentic element of the Jewish people" (Tobi, 1999, p. 206).

Adela's fear of the confiscator and her loss of trust in her community lead her to find her refuge and solace in the cave. One day after meeting the confiscator in the market, she runs to a nearby cave and since then the cave becomes her safe sanctuary. She reminisces:

After that day, that flight, I took possession of that blessed little cave. Throughout that spring and early summer, I felt truly safe there. I knew the Confiscator would never find me in my earthen sanctuary. But it wasn't only the Confiscator that I hid from. I also hid from my mother, whose cruelty toward me often took the form of verbal rebukes, but also manifested itself in beatings that left my behind black-and-blue. I hid from my older brothers, and I hid from the future and whatever miseries it would hold. I grew to love that cave. (p. 23)

In the cave Adela starts making her own gods and goddesses. She picks up stones and twigs, and using her embroidery skills, she makes them into idols—she has ten little idols ritualistically arranged for devotion. Further, she constructs a small altar and sets her idols upon it. She becomes “an uncommonly pagan child for a Jewish girl and imbued my stones with the names of goddesses I had heard mumbled by the fortune-tellers in the corner market stalls” (p. 24). Besides the idols, she also has cast-off pots, rugs, and trinkets. She also has candles, knickknacks, a little copper pot and tray, an indigo wood-husk pillow and a small reed mat. In spite of the frightening nature of the caves, and in spite of the unpleasant consequences that she may face if discovered, Adela feels very comfortable in her new home: “I knew then that my cave would always welcome me, and that I would always feel more at home there than I ever would in my parents’ house” (p. 115). There seems to be a sense of being in isolation. Significantly, her visitations to the cave communicates her incompatibility with the existing social and political orders, thereby suggesting an engagement with a world free from all these conundrums. She seeks transcendence from the legacy of racism and discrimination.

It is easy to notice that confiscation is not the only dilemma that Adela faces. She is disliked by her mother and this feeling of detest on the side of her mother has a significant impact on her. Adela’s father’s meekness, humbleness and his constant fighting with his wife shows the family’s inability to provide security to their daughter. Hence, Adela lacks the warmth and love at home. Her mother is unable to nurture feelings of self-worth in her. Though her father tries to give her affection she needs, his daily fights with his wife traumatize Adela and show the fragmentation of the family and its carelessness about their daughter. So, Adela struggles between an overwhelming desire to leave home and live in a private home represented by the cave and a profound wish that she could kill herself with the poison she steals from Aunt Rahel. This feeling of alienation is juxtaposed with the warmth that she feels in the cave with her idols. Further, thrust into such a horrifying political and a deviant cultural milieu, Adela feels vulnerable. Partly due to her feeling of vulnerability (she belongs to a community surrounded by enemies who keeps attacking them for trivial reasons) and partly due to her suspicion and self-reliance, Adela resists conventional filiation and starts her own community in the cave. This is not only a rejection of a community unable to protect her but also a rejection of a religion and a god that has totally left her and her people. She creates her own world in the cave with new religion and new Gods. Unlike that of her community, Adela’s position is radical. Her decision to create her own world and Gods is revolutionary.

Adela’s childhood becomes a nightmare. Though badly damaged whenever she sees the confiscator, Adela is able to heal itself by resorting to her secluded home. She chooses the cave to familiarize herself with herself and her secret world. Though she has a cultural, religious and historical past to serve her as a model, she rejects it and attempts to create her own cultural and religious present. Thinking of her father’s old age and approaching death, she loses her sense of security and safety, things she recovers in the darkness of the cave. While living in a familiar society, Adela enjoys discovering her own environment but she constructs her own childish view of the world in isolation. Moreover, in the cave, as she ritualistically arranges the idols, Adela’s friendship and love for Benjamin is inscribed in its most perfected moment.

The other side of Adel’s transition can be attributed to her relationship with her mother. Worse yet, Adel’s relationship with her mother is governed by tension and pretension. Her mother maintains a social distance between herself and her daughter through nonreciprocal conversations. Adults in her family do not talk to her; they give directions and orders. In her family,

communication is hierarchically structured; it is a one-way conversation. Maternal expressions are seldom verbalized in the novel; rather, Adela is beaten and those expressions are inscribed on her skin. Certainly Adela does not feel coddled, and her mother never overtly acknowledges her claims for attention. However, this cruelty could be, as Ralph Ellison (2003) says, “an expression of concern, of love” (p.141).

Eve unveils moments in the history of Yemenite Jews which are too horrible to relate. Eve’s job is, to use Toni Morrison’s words (1995), to “find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it” (p. 93). The novel examines what may happen to the most vulnerable member of a marginalized community, a Jewish female child, in a Muslim-dominant country where human rights and freedom have no access. She unveils the underrepresented and often unrecognized history of racial oppression in Yemen. Though the novel is set in a critical moment of history in Yemen including WWI, the international war and the conflicts with outside powers are largely absent from the novel. Instead Eve focuses on local concerns as in Qaraah, Adela’s home-village, people are most concerned with the struggle of survival and the difficulties of this task in light of impoverishment, poverty, backwardness and ignorance. While the Zaydis in 1920s celebrate their victory over the Othman’s empire and the establishment of their newly born kingdom, Eve offers a sharply different version of history.

Henna House presents Orphans’ Decree as a cross-racial metaphor for all kinds of persecution, discrimination and submission. Focusing on Jews’ distorted history and the effects of racial discrimination and marginalization of the Jews, Eve’s narrative seems to provide an important corrective version of the Jews’ history in Yemen. Furthermore, the novel focuses on the oppression of female children under Zaydi regime, which leaves them prey to all forms of abuse and which gives the novel a feminist tone.

Beside the portrayal of Adela’s suffering to survive in a hostile and aggressive society, the novel presents a gloomy and painful portrayal of the Jews’ life in the first half of the 20th century. It presents Zaydis as the ruling class controlling every minute detail of the lives of the Jews. The size of homes, the type of clothing, and the type of jobs are decided by Zaydi majority. Describing the condition of her family under the rule of Imam Yahye Adela say:

My family and all the Yemenite Jews dreaded the Imam’s many decrees. The day the Confiscator first came to my father’s stall, I couldn’t have told you a lick about politics, but I could have reported how often my father and brothers came home stinking like shit, death, and piss because they had been conscripted to carry dung, cart off sewage, and haul animal carcasses. The Imam’s Dung Carriers Decree relegated Jews to the jobs of refuse and carrion collectors. (p. 9)

Adela’s father and brothers are forbidden from riding horses and therefore they have to ride only donkeys, and they are forced to ride sidesaddle. Moreover, they are not allowed to build their homes as tall as the houses of Muslim neighbors and when they walk in the street they are forbidden from walking on the same side of the street as a Muslim (p. 9). Further, they are assigned to perform certain mean jobs. Actually, the superiority of the Zaydis is seen in their refusal to work in certain jobs. They regard craftsmanship as inferior to their status as the offspring of the prophet: “Working with one’s hands was considered beneath the Muslim men in the Kingdom of Yemen, so the work was left to us Jews. Accordingly, the men of our community became jambia makers, metalsmiths, wicker workers, jewelers, potters, tailors, carpenters, tanners, and rope braiders” (p. 14). The Zaydis claim to descent from Prophet Muhammad and have a divine right to rule. Descent from Muhammad means descent from Al-Hasan and Al-Husain, the offspring of Fatima (Prophet

Muhammad's daughter) and Ali ibn Abi Talib (Prophet Muhammad's cousin and the last of the Righteous Caliphs). They call themselves *Hashmites* (descendants of Hashim, the grandfather of Prophet Muhammad) and Ahl Al-Bait (means belonging to the Family of Prophet Muhammad). They have enjoyed a high status and respect due to their alleged ancestry. However, they have oppressed all other Yemenites whose religious beliefs are different: including Sunni Muslims, Jews and other minorities.⁶ They see themselves as God's representative on earth and that Imamate/leadership is their heavenly right.⁷ They were created to rule and not to work.

CONCLUSION

Eve in this novel skillfully invokes the traumatic history of Yemenite Jews as Yemen's paradigmatic minority through a Jewish female protagonist and her treatment of historical racism. Dramatizing an extreme form of the vulnerability suffered by Yemenite Jews, the novel demonstrates how Jews' lives are conditioned by the persistent and entrenched legacy of centuries of racial inequality and oppression. The novel probes deeper into the Jewish community's psychic dilemmas, tribulations and oppressions as symbolized by the tragic life of Adela. The Zaydi apparatus operates by establishing binary relations based on supremacist/racist premises of superiority and inferiority. Through stereotyping the other into certain templates of representation such as Jew, Kafir and enemy, the Zaydis maintain a dominant status preventing the other from sustaining a sense of self. Hence, it seems vital for the inferiorized subjects such as Adela and other characters to begin their journey to their new home which is a journey of freedom, self-affirmation and self-discovery.

Henna House demonstrates that lack of liberty, subjugation, racial and religious discrimination are the driving forces that motivated the Jews to leave their land seeking refuge in the newly born State of Israel. In other words, the enforcement of laws such as Orphans' Decree was a major cause of Yemenite Jews migration out of Yemen in the first half of the 20th century. There were, of course, many other factors which were equally important such as poor economic conditions, political instability and religious freedom. However, the novel makes it clear that the majority of the Jews migrated due political and religious persecution. Yemen lacked political and religious freedom which put pressure on them to emigrate leaving their money, domestic possessions, dwellings, articles and everything they had behind.

While Eve seeks to analyze some aspects of the tragic history of Jews in Yemen, the entire narrative reflects the miserable life the Jews led during the rule of the Zaydis. In *Henna House*, the orphans' decree is a plot device used to frame the narrative trajectory and development of the main character of the novel, though the novel deals with other aspects of first half of the twentieth century history of Yemen and the Jewish community such as the child immigrants to Aden and then Israel, the danger and difficulties faced during the evacuation of children from regions under the Zaydi rule and the difficult and miserable life of the Jews under the oppressive regime.

Yemeni Jewish orphans are seen as a commodity that can be owned by the Zaydi Muslims. They have no right and there is no law to protect them. Betrothing and marriage are not perceived as an act of one's own choice but rather as an unfortunate solution to avoid being deprived of one's communal and religious heredity. In fact, the practice of Orphans' Decree posed a great challenge to the Yemenite Jews by depriving them of the most basic human rights—choosing one's own God. The Orphans' Decree posed a great challenge particularly for female children as they faced

⁶ See Al-Muqri 2011, p. 126.

⁷ See Hadi Mohammed Saleh (2016), p. 23.

double discrimination for being both female and Jewish. Further, when the female orphans were taken, they were subject to harsh treatment and maybe to rape also.

Eve in *Henna House* has given the reader a vivid picture of the misery and suffering of the Jewish community in Yemen in the first half of the 20th century. The Zaydis are portrayed as violent, cruel, and narrow-minded and the Jews as a weak and poor working-class community doing mean jobs to survive. The novel sheds light on the vulnerability of the Jewish community. They know the destiny of their children if they die but they are unable to do anything. *Henna House* holds as its central concern a critique of religious marginalization and its power of destructiveness when imposed upon people of other religions. Eve has this idea in mind as she asserts that the idea of religious superiority is one of probably the most destructive ideas in the history of humans. One can easily discern much about workings of religion by exploring the plight of the novel's main victim as well as the whole Jewish community depicted in the novel.

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