

## Who is the Hadhrami? Exploring Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla* through Hall's Identity Lens

Rasha Saeed Badurais<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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Hadhrami identity in literature has not yet been tackled in depth through academic endeavor. Therefore, this article aims to investigate a significant Hadhrami literary work, Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla*, to explore the features of Hadhrami identity employing the axioms of Stuart Hall's concepts of identity. The novel has attracted much thorough analyses chiefly considering its ideological and spatial semiotic dimensions without highlighting the focal issues in the present article. The major Hadhrami identity traits have been traced through Salem, the protagonist, and other background characters within the lens of Hall's concepts of identity: the enlightenment subject, the sociological subject (these two I call the core identity), and the postmodern subject. The study is limited to the Hadhrami's of *Al-Mukalla* context as represented in the novel during a period of the last four decades of the twentieth century. Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla* spontaneously reflects multidimensional aspects of the Hadhramis' identity that begins and ends in the land as suggested by the title, and the implications of the novel's final remarks. When the external circumstances are unstable: contradictory ideologies, poverty, blind expansion of the cement blocks over the natural sources of beauty and livelihood, the subjects consequently become unstable. Nevertheless, the Hadhrami's attachment to a firm center, the beloved (&) land, to *Al-Mukalla* (with all its components physical, emotional, human, cultural) functions as a safety valve to find a way back to stability regardless of the demanding distracting post-modern context. To sum, yes, the Hadhrami may be passive and submissive, may be shattered by the vortex-like modern conditions, but the core is genuine and guarantees a return. Finally, more studies are strongly recommended to explore Hadhrami identity in different parts of Hadhramout and in several fields, literary and non-literary, to document our identity peculiarities by answering "Who is the Hadhrami?"

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Keywords: *Al-Mukalla*, Hadhrami Identity, Saleh Ba'amer, Stuart Hall

### 1. Introduction

The two major fields in this article are Hadhrami identity and Hadhrami literature. Considering identity, a complex issue itself, Hadhrami identity which is marked by a variety of distinctive features -as I suppose- has not yet been tackled in depth through academic endeavors, a problem attributed to that the Hadhramis' themselves have been reluctant to document its peculiarities (Alsba'i's, 2020; Belfaquih, 2015; and Baharethah, 2011). As for Hadhrami Literature, according to Baharethah (2019), it has been tackled in a number of periodicals and books such as Baabood's essays (1937-1938), Albakri's *The Political History of Hadhramout*, Alhamid's *The History of Hadhramout*, Alshateri's *The Stages of Hadhramout History*, Alsaqqaf's "Genres of Hadhrami Literature" (1972), Assabban's *The Literary Movement in Hadhramout* (2001), among others. Baharethah shows that these writers survey the fluctuating stages of Hadhrami literary history highlighting the prominence of poetry and the influence of several factors, especially the religious, on the Hadhramis in their literary themes and their decline from literature in general. With this general tendency towards literature, there is a lack of scholarly studies about Hadhrami identity through literature. So, in this article, I attempt to shed some light on the features of Hadhrami identity through Hadhrami fiction.

Linking the two fields, Hadhrami identity and literature, in an academic article is supposed to illuminate both and draw more attention to conduct further studies and enrich academia with more literature on "Who is the Hadhrami?"

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<sup>1</sup> English Dept., College of Arts, Hadhramout University, Al-Mukalla, Hadhramout, Yemen, English Language Studies Section, School of Humanities, USM, Penang, Malaysia. Email: rashadurais@student.usm.my

As mentioned above, Hadhrami literature is marked with poetry, basically local and verbal (I mean using the local dialect in it and its being recited orally). Among the Hadhrami writers: the distinguished poets Almehdar, Alkaf, Almallahi...etc., and the fiction writers: Alhmomi, Ba'amer, Bataweel, Baseddeeg...etc. Regarding the Hadhrami fiction, Masood Amshoosh's book *The Novel in Hadhramout in Ninety Years* (2017) is a serious attempt on the way to shed light on the Hadhrami fictional works (Alraipress.com, 2018). Baghreeb (2018) explains that Amshoosh argues the Hadhrami novel was born as a result of the movements of Hadhrami migration which provides a positive exposure of the local Hadhramis to a variety of literary genres including the free verse and fiction.

Through the literary production of the novelist, Saleh Ba'amer, there is a strong bond between him and his area and its people, Hadhramout and the Hadhramis; a pure internal Hadhrami perspective which gives Ba'amer's works an advantage over other fictional works written by Hadhramis of the inside and outside (Hadhramis of diaspora) to explore Hadhrami identity and makes Ba'amer's works a fertile field to target Hadhrami identity through Hadhrami literature.

### 1.1 Ba'amer and *Al-Mukalla*

Saleh Saeed Ba'amer (1946-) is a novelist and short story writer. He was born in Qusai'ar, east of Hadhramout governorate, and received his early education there. He continued his higher education in Kuwait and then got a diploma in journalism from Egypt (Saleh Saeed Ba'amer, <https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/>). His works include short story anthologies, such as: *Dreams of Mother Yumna* (1983), *Dhom Al-Meshqasi* (1993), *When the Palace Speaks!* (2005) and the novels: *Al-Samsam* (1993), *Al-Mukalla* (2004), and *It's the Sea* (2013) (<https://www.noor-book.com/tag/صالح-سعيد-باعامر/>).

Of Ba'amer's works, *Al-Mukalla* shows the novelist's immersion in the minute details of people of Mukalla. Reading it gives an overall image of the people's life. So, in this article, the Hadhrami in the title inquiry is restricted to the identity features of the Hadhramis of Mukalla city although Mukalla is the melting pot of all Hadhramis. The novel is basically about Salem, a simple citizen, who is attached heart and soul to the land with all its features, especially the sea. Salem is involved in the ambivalent ideological changes that happened in the area during a period that extends from the sixties to the nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Though relatively short, the novel's profundity and peculiarity attract various academic endeavors. Surveying violence in Yemeni novels, Ibrahim Ahmed Thabit (2020) briefly explains the key issues in Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla* stating that the author focuses on the ideological violence during a period of severe transformations in Yemen including the political conflicts of 1967 and 1986, 1990 reunion, and 1994 war. As for the Hadhrami novel, Thabit also shows how Ammar Bataweel's *Aqroon* (2017) and Mubarak Salimain's *Al-Tofan* (2018) reflect issues of identity and violence, but without many details. Bin Duhri (2018) focuses on the binary open/ closed space in the novel proving the significance of this element in the narration to explore the text, its aesthetic dimensions, and its influence on the readers. Musallam (2015) argues that the novel is a manifesto documenting the major historical and ideological events that happened in Mukalla and influenced the author and his main character who, both, have a nostalgic refuge in the pure nature of Al-Mukalla, even if it is shrinking in front of the materialistic invasion. In these articles, Hadhrami identity has not been investigated as it is the case generally.

Consequently, there is a true need to investigate the field of Hadhrami identity through Hadhrami literature as it is the mirror reflecting nations' Selves. So, to contribute to answering the overarching question suggested in the article's title, "Who is the Hadhrami?" and the question specified in the article, "what are the Hadhrami identity features as represented in Ba'amer's novel?" the study aims at investigating Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla* to probe the features of Hadhrami identity through Stuart Hall's axioms. The suitability of selecting Hall's framework is to be explained in the next section.

## 2. Hall's identity concepts

Hall foregrounds two basic identity principles; its complexity and fluidity and its essential social perspective (Shamsuddin & Bahar 2020). Hall draws a chronological distinction between "old identities" which were more stable/ solid, and the modern identities which undergo "crisis of identity" that indicates and leads to instability. Here, identity becomes an issue, i.e., "When it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent *and* stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (Mercer, 1990, p. 43, as cited in Hall, 1996).

Hall argues that there are three consequent concepts of identity: enlightenment subject, sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. Before explaining each concept, it is remarkable that Hall's Marxist identity perspective is indicated through referring to the individual as the subject.

About the three concepts of identity, Hall states that the core or basic identity principles are the ones acquired and/or shaped during the early much stable life stages of the subjects. As they grow up and contact and interact with the social surroundings more, the internal -enlightenment identity- and the external -the sociological identity- work together in harmony and, according to Hall, help the subjects to strike a balance in their lives. This is a positive perspective of identity in which there is a harmony/ balance between the psychological and the social dimensions of identity. That is the core individual identity is constructively developed and refined through interaction with the social elements. So, the result is stabilizing "Both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable" (p. 4). However, the unstable postmodern circumstances disturb this harmony and thus lead to a fragmented unpredictable identity, "[t]he subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities" (p. 4-5). Therefore, the postmodern subject is characterized by an unfixed identity.

In Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla*, there is a dominating nostalgic feeling of the core identity, the one of the pure/ positively primitive selves which interact with and gain its purity from the nature. Always the mere sociological factors: with the family, neighbors, true friends, help stabilizing and supporting the balance of the internal identity. However, when the external circumstances are unstable: Socialism, poverty, blind expansion of the cement blocks over the sea and the natural resources of beauty and livelihood (fishing), the subjects consequently become unstable. The status of Salem and other Hadhrami individuals/ subjects have been essentially shaped, directed and redirected by the ideological circumstances; chiefly, political, financial, and religious. However, Salem and the Hadhramis resist the forces of dilemma, by listening to local music, by looking at the sea even if it is driven away from them, by chatting in the cafe and backbiting everybody, by enjoying drinking tea and eating Bakhumry, by criticizing others, and by being true lovers to the land and to their beloved.

### 3. Analysis and discussion

Within Hall's identity lens, the analysis of the novel is conducted through, first, examining the protagonist's, Salem, character; then, the social background he represents and interacts with.

#### 3.1 Salem

Salem is shown as a member of a society; an example of a set of people who share similar hopes and disappointments. His attachment to the nature of Al-Mukalla is portrayed through the habit of sitting on the rocks by the sea to meditate or to fish. One morning I went to the beach determining to reach my favorite position whatever obstacles I might face, I trod with disgust the foreign rocks scattered in the area discovering that the familiar view had been eliminated; it was not only my rock that had been buried by stones, but also others' rocks used as fishing platforms by fishing lovers, but even all the sandy and rocky stretches. (p. 8) Also, he, as people of Al-Mukalla, likes to have his early breakfast in the zone's coffee shop (Meghaieh) "in which I used to meet morning company [...] and I seated myself between their circle around a table" (p. 8).

Here, there is a strong bond between the individual/ subject (Salem), the social circles (the family and people in Al-Meghaieh), and the nature (the sea and the pure landscape). These factors strengthen the core identity features (the enlightenment and the sociological) and guarantee a return whenever one is driven by the modernity devastating currents.

For Salem, as the novel's protagonist and the representative of 'a' Hadhrami, the influence of postmodern trends disseminates his ideological tendency, this is implied, first, in his remark about his library, in which he "has replaced the political books [basically socialist] by literary and religious ones!" (p. 10); and second, through listening to the radio.

For example, when he turns the radio on, he listens to Mersal, the famous local singer, singing: "Oh, a standstill crisis, its roots striking deeper; its branches getting higher" (p. 10), Salem wonders how strange life is as Mersal once used to sing,

"The crisis ended up!" (p. 10). Another example is when he listens to Balfaquih, another Hadhrami singer, singing about the time how it influences and is influenced by the people, "It is Time; Yah Time/ acquaints you with people/ and through people you know Time!" (p.11). Among the echo of the words, crises and time, Salem recalls his own crises of home, of income and of emotional stability.

At a moment of total incarnation with the sea and despising the dominating materialistic greed, Ba'amer, through Salem, reveals his wishes that let the greedy accumulate money, build palaces and villas, hypocritically brag about pompous ideologies, steal pieces of land, and buy all sorts of vehicles, take every "thing," every

materialistic thing, but leave the ordinary people life of dreams and happiness, the unbeatable sea, the hardships of mountains, and a piece of land to peacefully belong to.

Through this poetic prose revelation, Ba'amer and Salem highlight a significant feature of the Hadhramis of Al-Mukalla, which is satisfaction with the simplest means of peaceful and dignified life. The newcomers and the chameleon-like people are the greedy minority who deform the Hadhrami sought serenity,

“Confiscate everything  
Live and leave death for us,  
Ride modern vehicles, and leave us the land, the sun,  
morning meetings and sunset moments,  
occupy the plains, and leave us the mountains,  
take the rocks, and leave us the sea and rain rhythms” (p. 12)

These lines resemble Mahmoud Darwish's style; the style of the persecuted, the one who is estranged from his own land due to unfair external factors: the ideological instability, and the economic crises. Here, it is evident that the modest Hadrami wants to live respectfully and in peace without ideologies, materialism, greed, only to live in peace, "leave me a piece of land to dance and sing on" (p. 12), a plea which implies a positive primitivism.

This positive tendency towards peaceful life paradoxically leads to submission and passivity. A prevailing Hadhrami identity feature is submission to any circumstances even if stark injustice and satisfaction with being followers. In general, Hadhramis indulged in being second after Aden, prior to 1990 reunion. When Salem goes to Aden, he is happy to watch fresh programs on Aden TV unlike the ones recorded and sent to Al-Mukalla to be broadcast. Another similar but more specific indicator is when Salem just obediently follows his jailers without resisting or even knowing the charges against him, “I had been imprisoned here [Almonawarah Prison] before without being charged!” (p. 14). As being imprisoned once in Al-monawarah Prison and another in an unknown flat in Bowaish, Salem never resists being arrested by Saeed, who had been once a socialist comrade, and by the stranger, Mohsen Ba'ony. He does not try to escape or make any strong reaction to charging him using his private correspondence with his wife, Fouziah, before their marriage. He just follows those who arrest him and passively obey them. It is true that he escapes from Bowaish flat, but this happens when he suspects that his jailers intend to kill him. His submission and passivity are also evident when he cannot find a house to live in with his family without being threatened every time to be evacuated. He also does not have a stable source of income and the only thing he does to face his problems is to sit in front of the sea for long hours waiting for the unknown to get his postmodernity problems solved.

Salem is willingly ready to follow anyone who just respects him even if this 'any'one is not fair with him! For example, after being arrested by Ba'ony unknowing why, he whispers to himself that, “if I were to choose, I would have chosen him to be in charge” (p. 56) this “him” is Ba'ony who hosts Salem well with food and qat! And “I wish he would have all the means to lead us” (p. 56), here it is about Hussain Ba'alwi, who also shows a milder attitude to Salem than that of Omar Baleel in the mysterious Bowaish flat.

In all, Salem is a peaceful person; he likes the sea and is hurt by the systematic process of materialistic deformation of the natural scenery of Al-Mukalla coastline. He is faithful to his principles and to his love. Once he was a socialist, and after the disputes between the comrades, in 1967 and 1986, and after the 1990 reunion and summer 1994 civil war, he shrinks to his own personal and familial affairs and finds refuge in religiosity.

His noble love for his wife, Fouziah, before and after their marriage has been documented through the correspondence between the two before their marriage and the strong bond between the two afterwards, especially when Salem has been arrested by the socialists once and by the northern-leading authorities after 1994 war. The artificial circumstances of conflicting ideologies and torturing economic and political contradictions disturb the core peaceful and noble tendencies of the man, so he always finds security in the sea, the simple people in the coffee shops, and basically in his home where his wife and son are always there patiently waiting.

### 3.2 The Social Background

In the novel, there are two major societies, the local coffee shops (Al-Meghaieh) and the Al-monawarah Prison. This selection is significant in that it shows the Hadhramis between two opposite extremes: freedom and captivity. As portrayed in the novel, those outside and those inside the prison are similar people, in the cafe, Salem, uncle Bagerdaneh, and uncle Khukhul; and in the prison, the kind jailers, Abd Al-Azeez and Abd Allah; Mubarak, the cook; Ahmed, the barber; and Mohammad, the proletariat-supporter, and Salem.

By foregrounding this binary, the novelist may imply that the Hadhramis are chained by several circumstances that deform their normal (peaceful) life and put them in a dilemma of captivity/ imprisonment.

The local coffee shop (Al-Meghaieh), in the very early morning, after dawn prayer, is the refuge of the locals to drink tea with some pieces of the famous local pastries (Bakhumry) with some tobacco cigarettes and gossiping about everything “the government, the opposition, the political parties, today youth ...” (p. 8). Among those youth being criticized by the elderlies is Salem himself about whom they know the problem of searching for a permanent residence and his habit of gazing at the sea for long hours, “instead of searching for a house!” (p. 9), i.e., instead of doing something useful. This indicates two opposite features: the first is that these simple people of Al-Mukalla care for each other's affairs; however, this care is more likely to become suffocating curiosity, which is the other point. The attention (being concerned and curious) is indicated in another incident when Saeed has arrested Salem taking him to an unknown destination, a passer-by comments, “Ah! What's up!! Are you together again? He'll soon leave you flat” (p. 25). This remark by this unidentified person proves that he knows both (Salem and Saeed) well, and being unidentified makes him a symbol of all people in the area. The incident also reveals the extent of solidarity between the members of Al-Mukalla community.

In all, the static position of the coffee shop and its customers who sit there eating, smoking, and chatting gives an image of a miniature of the society of Al-Mukalla and it gives the impression of passivity as all the mentioned actions do not lead to any improvements or solutions of the crises these people live in. The only advantage here is the act of sharing their problems which supports their emotional/ psychological solidarity.

All indications to spying on people's private affairs in the novel are of external factors represented by outsiders, either emotionally or regionally. These are portrayed through the negative side: the chameleon-like people such as: Saeed, Ba'aony, Baleel, and Al-Sai'eri. For example, Saeed, the sheds his skin with each new current. He does not like the sea, only its fish, “the sea is for the fishermen while the land is for the landlords” (p. 20) which shows a Machiavellian superior attitude. Saeed represents a dimension/ a party of the Hadhramis who try to adapt/ mimic the dominant color/ ideology to live, ending up to be colorless creatures who might appear as Saeed, Mohsen Ba'aony, Omar Baleel, ...etc. The prisoner, Al-Sai'eri, like Saeed, is another aspect of the Hadhrami but not the typical. Maybe he portrays the ones destructed by the devastating circumstances. These external factors are symbolic of the currents that the ordinary Hadhrami subjects/ individuals (like Salem) face and the way how he/ she/ they react to them: passive, submissive, but patient and dare to argue and -somehow- confront these factors, but in vain.

Although, there are some hints of the negative universal feminist feature, gossiping, “the accredited news agencies” (p. 58) which is shared with men as shown above, Hadhrami women are represented by Fouziah, Salem's faithful beloved and wife. She keeps waiting patiently for her husband who is drifted by the ideological and economic circumstances looking after their only sick son, Ahmed. Although Ba'amer does not reveal a lot about her or women in general, Fouziah's firm role proves to be pivotal as the core/ center to which he is sure to return, even if he has some whims to migrate, “I will leave Mukalla. [...] Migration is the refuge” (p. 58). Salem is always assured that all is well by just finding her doing the routine chores. Another factor that links Salem, the Hadhrami, to his land is the warmth of the bigger family, the neighbors and friends, who come asking about him after his escape from Bowaish flat, “and I saw groups of friends and neighbors come to visit” (p. 71).

This attachment to the beloved land, with all its elements, and to the beloved wife helps Salem/ the Hadhrami, as I think and have argued before (Badurais, 2021), to strike balance and not to be lost by the disseminated currents of the highly fluid postmodernism, “which love I owe you? Which loyalty? Which adoration?” (p. 70), and in the last moment of incarnation between the land, the beloved, the inhabitants and the identity, he confesses/ declares, “Mukalla is love” (p. 71).

#### 4. Conclusion

Who is the Hadhrami? My attempt throughout this article to find a possible answer to this question is an initial stage to explore the complexities of the Hadhrami identity issue through literature. My attempt is conducted through Ba'amer's *Al-Mukalla* as the novel that spontaneously reflects multidimensional aspects of the Hadhramis and that begins and ends in the land as suggested by the very beginning of the text; its title, and the implications of its final remarks about the reality of Al-Mukalla as the home, security and love. In the novel, the reader meets Salem, the representative of the Hadhrami in Ba'amer's perspective. Salem is a simple man who is attached to the nature of his beloved (&) land; to his wife and family, to the sea, the fish, the rocks, and the social aspects of the inhabitants of this land: spending/ wasting time in the cafes, gossiping, being passive and submissive in handling life crises through gazing at the sea, listening to local music and songs on the radio, surrendering to the unknown portrayed through the ideological blind powers which accuse Salem of naive charges based on private irrelevant evidence.

This mixture of contradictory factors internal and external shape the Hadhrami identity in Al-Mukalla and gives it two contradictory features: solidity and fluidity. The fluidity meets Hall's postmodern subject who undergoes confiscating circumstances that disseminate his perspective of the Self, like the ideological and economic circumstances that make Salem's life unstable. However, his attachment to a solid/ firm center, his beloved (&) land, I mean his attachment to Al-Mukalla (with all its components physical, emotional, human, cultural) and to his wife and family, work as a safety valve to find a way back to stability regardless of the demanding distracting post-modern context. To conclude, yes, the Hadhrami might be passive and submissive, might be shattered by the vortex-like post-modern conditions, but the core -what Hall names the enlightenment and sociological subject- is genuine and works as a guarantee for a return. Finally, I strongly recommend more in-depth studies conducted to explore Hadhrami identity in different parts of Hadhramout and in several fields literary and non-literary to document our identity peculiarities and enrich this realm about Who is the Hadhrami.

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