

## Al-Muqri's Anti-Religious Stance: A Call for Moderate Islamic Discourse

Dr. Khaled Abkar Alkodimi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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Even though many critics and researchers have noted that religion is one of the taboo issues in al-Muqri's works, and in spite of the fact that al-Muqri's anti-religious attitude is easily noticeable in his novels, little attention is paid to this issue. This study uses textual analysis method to critically examine al-Muqri's anti-religious stance in his selected texts, *The Handsome Jew* and *Adani Incense*. It attempts to shed light on the way he presented religious figures together with their religious discourse and the mythologies that those scholars promote among the public. The study further attempts to probe into al-Muqri's critical techniques which he used to deliver his views. The study shows that al-Muqri utilizes different literary techniques to mock the religious figures and their fundamentalist discourse that impacts many and evoke hatred and revenge among individuals in the society. He also shows keen on interest in what I referred to as moderate Islam which he introduces in his first novel, *The Handsome Jew*, through Fatima's characterization. However, his call for moderate discourse appears to be more urgent in *Adani Incense* where he introduces the opposite of it, extremism, in order to stress the need for moderate voice. In this sense, I would argue that al-Muqri attempts to villainize most of his religious figures in order to strengthen his views.

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**Keywords:** al-Muqri, anti-religious, moderate islam, Mythologies, stance, religious discourse, representation, ridicule

### 1. Introduction

Ali al-Muqri is a Yemeni novelist and writer whose work has received a considerable attention from critics and researchers alike, and who has received many awards and prizes in spite of being a new emerging novelist. It is worth saying that al-Muqri has attracted the attention of the international community due to the tackling of certain taboo social issues such as love, sex, war and religion. However, what's peculiar about al-Muqri's philosophy of life is his common anti-religious stance that is apparent almost in all his works. Indeed, most of al-Muqri's novels in one way or another attempt to present religious characters as caricatures who embody the foolishness of their religious discourse and ideologies. This deliberate and instant attitude creates doubts and raises questions regarding al-Muqri's persistent misrepresentation of the religious scholars and their ideological discourse. The purpose of this study is to examine al-Muqri's selected texts that represent religious figures both Muslims and Jews to identify the representations of these groups in these works, as well as, the means by which he has delivered his views. It attempts to answer questions like what's the main intention or what is the purpose of al-Muqri to have his characters represented in that way. To what extent he succeeds in his depiction? And, if possible, what ideology has influenced his philosophy of life? Thus, in this study my intention is to explore the representation of religion and religious figures through the selected novels of Ali al-Muqri.

According to Nourin Binte Saeed (2013), representation can be defined as "the presentation of an object, individual, idea or entity not by drawing it as it is but by 'representing' it or preparing it in a new structure or a new form" (p. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, College of Languages and Translation, Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, KSA, Tel: (+966-2587804, [kaq2002@yahoo.com](mailto:kaq2002@yahoo.com))

It is a strategy that is used to sort out social existence, identities and belief for creating certain views about some specific groups or people, and society that became timeless truths. Reality, therefore, is constructed by such discourse where truth is embedded within false ideologies (ibid, p.5). Hence, as far as this concept is concerned, it is a narrative technique that is widely used to create a certain image of the target subject.

Saeed has analyzed three novels, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India* written by Daniel Defoe, Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forester, respectively, to show how these authors “have imposed their Eurocentric attitude in their works” (p. 6). According to her, these three writers deal with colonial discourses which depict other cultures as “dark” and “depraved”. She notes that, “representation of the minority image again and again comes as evil where European images are considered pure and superior” (p. 1). Likewise, in “Orientalism”, Said argues that the representation of East and West is a kind of binary process to produce unequal relationship between “occident” and “orient.” The definition of the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ based on calculative representations rather. “West/Self are represented as civilized, moral, industrious, masculine, active and rational while East/Other as savage, dark, lewd, lazy, passive, feminine, superstitious and exotic”. The image of the Colonized, people, on the other hand, is created by colonizers which create an “existential deviation” upon those people who are suffered from “false consciousness” (cited in Saeed, p. 4).

Seemin A. Raina (2009), on the other hand, addresses the representation of Muslims in particular, in her dissertation, *Critical Content Analysis of Postcolonial Texts: Representations of Muslims within children’s and Adolescent literature*. She attempts to examine children’s and adolescent Literature published and distributed in the United States that represent Muslims to identify the representations of these cultural groups in different literary works. Her main concern is to observe how Muslims are portrayed within adolescent and children’s literature in the United State (p. 13). She concludes that “since 9/11 the media has been full of images of the Middle East and Muslims, many of which have reinforced stereotypes about Muslim people, their beliefs, and ways of life” (p.14). Raina’s conclusion corresponds with that of Edward Said who notes that Muslims are perceived through particular lens wherever they are settled (Said, 1978). Similarly, Rubina Ramji (2016) states that “American cinema has, for the past one hundred years, offered up the image of Islam and the portrayal of Muslims in different, yet for the most part negative, ways” (p. 3). According to her since the late 1970s, Muslims/Arabs “have become identified with terrorism; and Islam has come to be understood as a radically militant religion at war with the West, especially the United States” (p. 3). Ramji (2003) further writes that “Hollywood films represent all Muslims as Islamic fundamentalists” (p. 65). Obviously, most of the western media attempt, in one way or another, to create a certain image of Muslims, that is of a terrorist. This definitely shows that media in general and literature, in particular, are important sources that can be used to stereotype certain social figures based on the purpose of authors.

Furthermore, Jared Powell also conducted a study concerned with the presentation of religion and religious characters in contemporary popular culture. The author argues that the world- renowned television show implicitly holds an agnostic view on religious matters, leaving interpretation up to the audience. He notes that caricaturizing specific beliefs and using them as plot devices also helps to hide religious representation in plain sight. (“n. d”, p. 1) Powell concludes that American popular culture attempts to target the largest possible audience with regard to religiosity by presenting the most basic representation of different views without encouraging any single standpoint (p. 1). He attempts to answer particular questions such as “to what extent does the mere presence of a religious character influence an audience’s attitude toward that religion? And essentially, what dispositions does a cultural object have the power to instill via association?” For him the culture- producing abilities of media are manifold, and media consumers’ views of religious groups can be reinforced, weakened, or altered through representation (p. 4). However, he finds that media across the board portray religious characters in a manner which will conform, or at least not disagree with, common stereotypes (p. 5).

Amardeep Singh, on the other hand, focuses particularly on religion in twentieth century fiction. He finds out that no literary critic is more helpful than James wood to discuss secularism in literature. He describes Wood’s views of fiction as such a road generalization that practically invites doubt: “Do novels really work that way upon readers (i.e., to destroy religious belief)? Are the novelists themselves aware of this phenomenon?” (2006, p. 1). Indeed, in his book, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, James Wood describes fiction as “the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity” (cited in Singh, p. 1). Hence, Wood seems to very much stress the view that fiction, in particular, is utilized to create negative images of religions and the religious figures. A view that many critics, including the ones referred to above, have strongly emphasized.

Based on the views discussed above, it is obvious that media in general and literature in particular, including fiction across the world are utilized in such a way as to create certain images that represent groups or certain figures, particularly religious ones, in certain manners. Western media and literature, for example, mostly portray Muslims as terrorists, as discussed above. In Muslim worlds, however, the camera will be shifted to certain figures and mythologies rather than including all Muslims. It is through literature, particularly fiction, that religious figures are stereotyped, mostly as dangerous individuals that threaten the stability of the society. These images are created in such a way to warn people from them and their discourse, as well.

Indeed, al-Muqri can be a case in point where fiction is skillfully used to present certain religious figures along with their religious discourse in a certain manner. Unlike Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* which promotes spirituality and religiosity, al-Muqri's novels can be best described, in James Wood's words, as "the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity" (ibid). *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, appears in desperate need for religion. It is through his spiritual journey that he has been purified and realized the right path. In contrast to Daniel Defoe, al-Muqri's fiction appears to be fully secularized as he continuously tries to damage the image of religions and the religious figures in many of his works. He attempts to create certain stereotypes of religious figures with a terrible religious discourse which impacts the public and the society at large. His main purpose, thus, appears to establish certain images in the mind of people to warn them of the danger of them. Thus, this work is grounded in the assumption that religious figures are presented in a certain manner in al-Muqri's selected novels.

In this regard, it is also worth mentioning to say that al-Muqri seems to have been influenced by the leftist views who had a distinct voice against religious discourse, particularly during the 1960s and beyond. In fact, the author himself admits that he has been writing in favor of the leftist. In an interview with Ali al-Muqri on Aljazeera channel, the reporter asks him if he has been influenced by the ideas and ideologies of the left wing since he belongs to a generation that grows up in the cradle of the leftists. al-Muqri openly admits their influence on him, but he denies the presence of ideologies in his fiction. He declares that he is more concerned with the artistic aspects of his work rather than dissemination of ideologies. However, he admits that certain characters have certain ideologies even though his novel does not promote ideological beliefs. According to him, most of men of letters at that time had leftist tendencies (Bouabidi, 2017, March 23).

## **2. *The Handsome Jew* and the Conflict of Religions: Calling for Moderate Islam**

Indeed, al-Muqri's novel, *The Handsome Jew*, easily lends itself to religion and its ramifications. Interestingly, the author's anti-religious voice is projected and reflected through the religious intolerance which constitute an important idea of the story. In this sense, I would argue that al-Muqri's anti-religious attitude is embedded within a larger scope in the story, the 'conflict of religions'. Significantly, that conflict is viewed mainly at two levels, internally and externally. The internal conflict is embodied within the narrator protagonist, Salem, who is totally torn between Seba and Fatima who seem to symbolize both religions, Hebrew and Islam, respectively. He lives in internal conflict between Islam and his Jewishness. In other words, he is shattered between his two beloved Fatima who represents moderate Islam and who loves and accepts all religions and races and whom he later marries, and Seba, the Jewish girl who represents his Jewish dream and the religion that he originally belongs to, and who later feeds their son after Fatima's death.

Ultimately, he chooses Fatima, his deep love and got married to her which means that he has become more attached to the moderate Islam. However, he remains Jewish until she dies which means that even though he loves Fatima, the symbol of moderate Islam, he never detached from his Jewishness until she passes away. Salem himself declares: "I found myself moving in her side ..., I am the one who is plagued by religious doubt except entering Fatima, I mean entering Islam, not because I believe it doctrine/religion, but I wanted to carry a quality of her". He adds, "in her side, there is nothing but ... love and forgiveness and peace. This is her path" (p. 102).

Moreover, even after he converts to Islam, he remains faithful to his Jewishness. For example, when the ruler (Imam) at that time issued a decree to expel Jewish to another part of Yemen, Salem sadly comments on the situation:

I bought a donkey and rented another. I wanted to help poor travelers to carry their goods, ... but I couldn't fulfill what I wanted. There were a lot of very old women carried on shoulders, as well as, many old men who creeps like little children, ...I just gave both to the nearest two needed, an old man and ... (p. 133-4)

Thus, the idea of the internal conflict is mainly embodied in the narrator protagonist, Salem, who is torn apart between the two extremes; Fatima, the symbol of moderate voice and his Jewish dream for which he continues to suffer until the end of his life.

Thus, a part from the romantic story of Fatima and Salem, al-Muqri's real intention, in *The handsome Jew*, seems to introduce what can be referred to as moderate Islam that accepts everyone and show tolerance to other religions. Such view is represented through Fatima who embodies love, peace, forgiveness and tolerance, the qualities that attracted Salem and leads him to convert to Islam. Imam and his Men, as well as, other characters like Saleh, on the other hand, represent the fundamentalists who appear to be hostile and aggressive towards other religions and communities. Imam as the ruler and the head figure in the country at that time was responsible about the suffering of many Jewish individuals during his era. He for example, "ordered for their evacuation from Yemen" (p. 128), as well as "demolishing their churches from existence" (p.129). Obviously, through the contrast between Fatima and Imam, al-Muqri seems to call for moderate islam that shows tolerance and understanding for other people and religions.

External conflict, on the other hand, is enhanced through the character of Saleh, the Moathen (prayer caller) a muslim religious figure through whom al-Muqri further present his views on religious figures. As soon as Saleh encounters a group of Jewish young men, he immediately interrupts them: "You say that Jerusalem is your homeland ... go to there ...or go to hell instead" (p.35). Saleh's vicious behavior marks al-Muqri's view of the conflict between the two sides. The situation, in other words, shows that the bases of the conflict between the two sides is basically and essentially due to the religious discourse of both which intensify and provoke hatred to other religions and races.

Saleh's hostility towards Jewish people is further revealed as he again abruptly interrupts them and asks about the day they are going to leave the Arab Peninsula. "When are you going to leave the Arab land ... or else will through you in the sea" (p. 48). However, Hayim's reply to him, on the other hand, shows to what extent Jewish people are misled by their own uncertain religious mythology. In his explanation, Hayim tries to convince Saleh that Jewish nation is chosen by God and that Jerusalem is their chosen homeland too (p.48-9). Saleh, however, tries to debunk their claims and to convince them that it's a muslim land. This argument is actually having its roots in religion as each group believes that they have the right to have Jerusalem for themselves. And this is the basis of the long-lasting conflict between Muslims and Jews. Significantly, the author seems to deliberately choose a religious figure to argue with Jewish people in order to deliver a message that such conflict is, in fact, based on religious ground, or that religious figures are really the roots of the matter. The author, in other words, suggests that religious figures are responsible about provoking hatred among the two communities as both institutions are driven by certain ideological discourses that intensify hostility against the other. al-Muqri's anti-religious attitude is further emphasized as al-Moathen, referred to above, later appears as a leader of a muslim group who attacks Jewish people and destroy their jars of wine. The issue according to him is that Jewish people have corrupted Muslims, particularly the young ones. This situation further emphasizes that conflicts and differences is basically and essentially is based on the two sides beliefs. Another group of muslim scholars threaten a few Jewish girls to death if they don't leave Sana'a. They accused them of corrupting young Muslims. Surprisingly, muslims were more interested in seeing those girls when they arrive to the village more than Jewish themselves (p.72). Those girls have arrived "after Islamic scholars have threatened to kill them if they did not leave Sana'a" (p.72).

Furthermore, Fatima is the daughter of the Mufti, the highest religious figure in town who is supposed to be the ideal person among his followers, and his family too. Fatima appears to have a considerable knowledge of both Islam and Jewish religion. "I take this decision after I have studied the views of the Sharia and I saw a difference that brings together the scholars without agreement ...and for me, Fatwa is complete" (p. 74-5). However, she is also presented as a lust woman who initiates love and admiration for Salem from the first time she meets him. Hence, even though she is a religious muslim woman, she violates Islamic sharia'a and falls in love and married to a Jewish young man. Interestingly, it is Fatima who gives the title of the story as she has never called Salem other than the 'handsome Jew' since the first time they meet. Indeed, she had, from the beginning inspires the handsome Jew to admire her. In this sense, al-Muqri seems to raise certain questions and doubts about the barriers between the two religions and the legitimacy of such marriages, but he never provides an answer. Fatima's decision to fall in love and Marry Salem is born out of her knowledge that the two religions do permit that as if she says that those practices exercised by religious scholars should be changed. Thus, she is presented as a very knowledgeable person who knows well not only about Islam but about Hebrew, as well, through whom he sends a message that marriages should not be band among Muslims and Jewish. In her letter, for example, she referred to important books of great religious scholars on which she bases her decision (p.74).

Significantly, the crisis of Fatima's body is introduced to further highlight how religion is mostly the source of the problem even for a dead body like Fatima's, as both sides refuse to bury Fatima's body in their graveyards on religious bases. Salem, on her sudden death while delivering their son, unconsciously reveals the secret of his wife, that she is Muslim. As soon as Jewish people learns she's Muslim, they secretly dug her grave and separate her body from other Jewish graves. They consider her as Muslim *caferah* {atheist}. Muslims, however, rejected her body to be buried among Muslims graveyard. They consider her '*caferah*' too, as she got married to a Jewish man. Salem, sadly narrates the crisis of his wife's body and his own struggle to bury her: "They buried her over there, ... and at night they came back and opened the tomb, took her body ... they said she is muslim, atheist {*caferah*}" (p.95).

Salem's tragedy is increased through the situation of their son who is rejected by both sides too. What's at stake is that such rejection is based on sharia law of both sides.

My uncle's wife opened the door, and closed it with her body. She throws our clothes ...go to your Muslim friends and hand over your Muslim son to them to take care of him, you know the son follows his mother, this is written in our Jewish Sharia, as they said. (p.95-6)

Salem then finds no other way, but to send his child to Fatima's sister: "I told her, this is your son, son of Fatima, Jewish did not accept him, in their legacy, the son follows his mother, I swear she remained Muslim throughout her life ..." (p.96). Surprisingly, Fatima's sister appears very rude too. She replies: "and we Muslims ... son follows his father, but not his mother, and you, Jewish son of Jewish and him too, Jewish son of Jewish" (p.97). Salem continues: "my legs got tired passing from Jewish house to a Muslim one, from a merchant to a goldsmith and from Rabbi to Faqih" (p.101).

Indeed, the mother-son crisis is utilized in such a way as to sharpen the author's critical voice of both sides, Muslims and Jews, as both sides refuse to accept both, the mother and the innocent child on religious bases. Ultimately, Salem finds no other than Seba who represents his Jewishness to feed that new born baby and there he grows within the environment of Seba, the Jewish girl and her husband, Saad, the son of al-Moathen. That coexistence of Saba and Saad symbolizes or suggests the possibility of tolerance and the coexistence of both religions together if they accept and respect each other. Needless to say that Fatima and Salem's marriage can be read as another sign that symbolizes love, forgiveness, peace, religious tolerance, the basic factors of coexistence among groups and races. Fatima and Salem's relationship, in other words "suggests that they inhabit a haven of gentleness and wisdom, contrasting sharply with mainstream society" (Irving, p. 252).

A part from the crisis of religions and the religious scholars, al-Muqri also attempts to ridicule the foolish incredible beliefs and Mythologies of Jewish people. "I got astonished when I heard him murmuring by the fascinating beautiful, ... who is this wine of life? ... daughter of who? "Jerusalem" replied she" (p.31). In this situation, for instance, Salem's brother is murmuring during his sickness of Jerusalem, addressing it as a beautiful girl or something that will cure his sickness. Salem appears different from his brother. He symbolizes the good voice of Jewish community. Like Fatima, Salem appears reasonable and understanding whose mind is pure and not contaminated by false beliefs or extremism. He has been taught by Fatima, thus, he is moderate in his philosophy of life including his religiosity.

However, the absurdity of the Jewish community is yet to be revealed and exposed through the notion of the 'Christian Rescuer' whom Jewish people think is going to save them and end their suffering. al-Muqri wittily uses situational irony to mock the myth of the 'Christian rescuer' as Jewish people believe that one day 'a Christian rescuer' will appear and save them. More than that, he will make Jewish the greatest nation, the rulers of the world. Hazza, Salem's brother, for example, confidently speaks to his brother, Salem and confirmed for him "the arrival of the day when the awaited Christ appears who will transfer monarch to Jews ... I will take revenge from all Muslims ..." (p. 32). The notion of the Jewish Saver is further emphasized through Asad who also confidently explains to Salem: "The original Jew, the Jew son of Jew, and no one else will sit on the Throne in Jerusalem, and will order the annihilation of all the enemies ... This is the will of God" (p. 52).

al-Muqri's situational irony of the Myth of the 'Christian Rescuer' reaches the peak when: "the news of the emergence of the Christian Rescuer, mentioned in the ancient books reached them ... they called each other evangelizing his appearance ... victory will be for Jewish, and monarchy will be solely for them" (p.117). The absurdity of the situation is further enhanced by electing a religious Jewish figure to carry on the mission.

They have agreed on someone called Suleiman al-Aqta or Suleiman al-Jamal. This Suleiman, or al-Nosh as they call him ...is one of the knowledgeable figures of the Jewish sharia... they begin to magnify and glorify him, as well as, taking his blessing, they believed that day will end by the time he has won ... (p. 122)

Hence, they appear to be very confident and blindly follow their beliefs without questioning them. Ironically, however, it turns into a disaster on Jewish people and their 'Rescuer' as that figure was captured, imprisoned and slaughtered like a sheep (p. 123-4). Thus, this situation depicts and ridicules Jewish mythologies for which Jewish people spent their life waiting for such incredible myth. They are dreaming of taking over everything and becoming the rulers. Hence, the dramatic fall of 'Christian Rescuer', the so-called Suleiman al-Jamal, and the Jewish dream in general, is carefully projected by al-Muqri in order to present and severely ridicule Jewish false mythologies whose stupidity strongly exposed as there is no solid ground for their beliefs. They just follow their dreams and incredible myths that comes down from their ancestor religious figures which they read in their religious books.

Therefore, al-Muqri, artistically interwoven different pictures to present his ultimate portrait of the religion and religious individuals. He has skillfully embedded his anti-religious attitude within his representation of the conflict of religions, the crisis of Fatima's body and her son, the militant islamic figures, as well as, the mythologies that depict the foolishness of Jewish people who blindly follow the teachings of their religious figures. Against the extremism in both sides, he promotes moderate religion that accepts all and understands all. Such view is embodied in Fatima and Salem, as well as, Asad and his wife Seba who show tolerance and understanding. To put it succinctly, al-Muqri successfully utilized the romantic story as a vehicle to deliver his critical views on religions and religious conflict.

### 3. *Adani Incense*: Modernity VS Tradition

Similarly, al-Muqri's *Adani Incense* (2014) is very much engaged with religion and its ramifications. Most of the religious characters in *Adani Incense* are presented as caricatures who are narrow-minded and stubborn. Worse than that, they are also violent and cruel. A picture that very much imitates the western media representation of Muslims in general since the early twenty first century. However, what is at stake here is the critical techniques that al-Muqri has utilized to deliver his views on religious discourse and mythologies in general. Significantly, caricaturizing and exaggeration appear to be the author's favorite tools to expose the foolishness of both. Religious figures, in other words, are created in such a way as to make fun of themselves through their speech, action, reaction and behavior. In this sense, the author's main concern seems to critically expose their foolishness and stupidity, as well as warning the public of blindly following foolish religious discourse and rituals.

Interestingly, al-Muqri's critical skills appear to be very sharp and concentrated in *Adani Incense* where he uses different literary devices to present his ideas. However, he does not merely caricaturize his characters, but equally important is the use of emblematic titles and symbols to mock many of his characters, particularly the religious ones. By using indicative titles or names that mostly create laughter the author seems not only trying to despise and devalue them as characters but equally important to debunk their discourse which appears to be the core of the matter. Abdul Jabar, for example, is referred to as 'the wanderer Imam' (preacher). The author wittily named him the 'rover Imam' to mock and expose the hollowness of those religious figures whose militant discourse leads to bad consequences. In his comment on Abdul Jabar, the walking preacher, for instance, the narrator protagonist observes that he was sitting with many people attentively listening around him: "he was attacking the means of entertainment, of which places of imagination {cinemas} as he calls it ...". He continues: "he said cinema is {haram} as it recreates people through its pictures, and in this, it challenges the creator, or claiming competing with him ..." (p. 161). Hence, Abdul Jabar is introduced here as a fundamentalist figure with extreme dangerous discourse.

Indeed, Abdul Jabar is presented in such a way as to reflect the conflict between tradition and modernity as cinema and media, in general, might embody or symbolize the modern life or the social changes that were taking place in Aden early twentieth century. Abdul Jabar and his militant followers, on the other hand, embody the traditional and fundamentalist views. According to the author, such individuals do not think of the future. They merely exploit innocent people who sympathize with their religiosity to misguide them. Through Abdul Jabar, in other words, al-Muqri attempts to unpack the danger of the ideological discourse that produces militant groups driven by force. They are narrow-minded and less concerned about people's welfare as they stand firmly against any social development. This view is emphasized through the situation of some militant groups who attacked "cinema premises which has announced to open its doors for women ..." (p. 159). Hence, this situation strongly depicts the aggressive behavior of those militant groups who blindly follow militant religious discourse.

Obviously, the author seems to criticize the religious discourse of those figures like Abdul Jabar which influence people and motivate them to develop negative view of the world around them.

al-Muqri's critical stance extends to include what he calls the 'little sheikh'. 'Little or Mini Sheikh' as he calls him, is the son of 'al-Mualem-Sheikh Abdul Jabar, referred to above. Mini Sheikh is presented as a true copy of his father who firmly and publicly stands against modernization and social changes. Shockingly, however, he ultimately abandoned his religious views and completely changed into totally different person. The author, again carefully exploits the sudden change of the Mini Sheikh to deliver a message that those figures are hollow, unstable and whimsical, as the change happened all of a sudden when he falls in love with Miss Sherin, Kiki Morwangi's daughter, who refuses him unless he thoroughly changes. It's ridiculous that little sheikh stands still unmovable until people start shouting at him to continue praying when he sees a girl in the balcony while praying in the mosque. Since that moment he starts searching for that girl until he finds her and proposes to her family.

Sheikh Abdul Rahman suddenly stops, after a stray look from him towards the balcony, to return to him, causing his heart to beat and his tongue with concrete ... he remained gazing at her and did not lower his head until a number of prayers shouted ... (p. 257)

Interestingly, the author skillfully shocked the reader in order to draw his attention to the absurdity of the religious figures and their discourse. Mini Sheikh appears totally absurd as his philosophy of life turns upside down in a matter of fractions. He looks funny when he thoroughly changes his mind and starts listening to music and watching videos, to the extent that "Shinker, Migi and Abdi did not accept the sudden retreat of Abdel Rahim from his hardline positions, but they considered it as a kind of joke..." (p. 260). Hence, 'little sheikh' has no solid ground for his total change. A mere look at a girl turns his life upside down, from a religious individual that sees everything haram into a fan of music and videos. Thus, through his characterization, al-Muqri, attempts to present religious discourse as hollow and baseless, as well as, to shock the reader in order to motivate him to rethink and carefully scrutinize what those figures say.

A part from caricaturing and emblemizing characters, exaggeration is almost present in every aspect of al-Muqri's novel. The situation of different groups of children who repeats songs {tahalil} during al-Aidarooos day fully sums up the situation: "Oh, sky pour Laban {milk} Ibn Abdullah inside Aden" (p. 123-4). In this situation, for instance, the author mocks the so-called al-Aidarooos, a prominent religious figure who is considered sacred and holy by many including Adanis, and hence, they annually perform particular rituals to celebrate and request his blessings. That is to say the whole situation seems to mock such religious rituals that reflect the stupidity and foolishness of religious figures and the society at large. People gather from different places to celebrate the so-called al-Aidarooos day. The whole situation is utilized in such a way as to sharply mock and criticize the hypocrisy of the religious institution. The author seems to attempt to unpack the foolishness and the huge influence they exercise over the public: "a sheikh with white clothes approached us ...he speaks about sacred deeds {miracles/kramat} of al-Aidarooos and how he saved Aden from death ..." (p. 123).

Like *The handsome Jew*, *Adani Incense* strongly ridicules mythologies that influence people's minds. However, the focus is more on a certain group of Muslims rather than Jews or all Muslims. Indeed, al-Muqri uses al-Aidarooos day to ridicule Sufism, a well-known religious institution popular in the southern and western part of Yemen. "Sufism is a mystical form of Islam, a school of practice that emphasizes the inward search for God and shuns materialism" (Megan Specia, 2017). According to al-Omanaa Newspaper, visiting of al-Imam Abubakr al-Aidarooos's Mosque and Tomb is one of the most significant annual religious ritual that goes back to more than 600 centuries ago where thousands of people from Aden and nearby towns arrive every year to participate in the event ("al-Omanaa", 2014).

The description of the person with the white thobe for al-Aidarooos, the holy figure, depicts the stupidity and the hypocrisy of the religious discourse. The man with the white thobe continues explaining the miracles of al-Sheikh Aidarooos and how "he even listened to him raising his voice calling: "Oh sky pour milk and the sky immediately rains milk that made people have enough and keep the remained in jars" (p. 123-4). He describes al-Aidarooos as a holy figure whom the sky could immediately respond to his requests. The person with the white thobe continues: "... {He} points at al-Aidarooos Mosque ... and in dazzle says that its doors and windows came alone from India, crossed the sea to Aden without being carried by anyone" (p. 124). This exaggerated portrait of al-Sheikh and his deeds is projected in such a way as to reveal how religion blindly leads its followers to believe in incredible rituals. Indeed, exaggeration is one of the favorite literary techniques used by al-Muqri to debunk certain social issues.

As a part of the annual ritual of Sufism, “the procession began from a distance, led by elders with white clothes and mantles...” (p. 124). Obviously, the author wittily points out that such event is led by eldest religious figures to blame them of misleading and fooling the public. He seems to deliberately present those figures in action to ridicule their foolishness and to give a clear account about the hypocrisy of the so-called Sufism.

Similarly, Jewish community, in *Adani Incense*, is also not save from the author’s sharp razor. His sharp critical eye seems to equally ridicule Jewish people who also show almost the same kind of stupidity and foolishness. They are depicted in such a way that they have their own incredible religious rituals and beliefs, which they blindly follow and exercise. That is to say, al-Muqri’s anti-religious attitude is further stressed through Jewish community who make fun of themselves thorough religious traditions which they exercise annually. “The procession passed by the crowds led by the piers raised by their white flags. There were children organized by Moshe, Shimon's cousin to chant Tahalil accompanied by the movements of their bodies” (p.167). Such exaggerated portrait of the crowd is intended to highlight the falsity of Jewish mythologies and rituals for which they fall victims.

Significantly, al-Muqri’s artistic depiction of the situation, however, lies in his sarcastic manner which he skillfully utilized to mock the situation. His skills, in other words, lie in the minor details he has presented which depicts Jewish community as if they are at a battle but not religious rituals. The way he describes the day of Jewish community to celebrate a religious event shows al-Muqri’s sarcastic style which seems to be his favorite mode of representation. Such detailed description of the occasion is again intended to depict the ugliness of blindly following religious figures who convince people to perfume incredible ritual exercises (p. 167-70).

al-Muqri’s anti-religious stance, however, seems to focus more on the militant discourse which he frequently emphasizes throughout the story. Such view is further sharpened as the story continues to stress the idea of the insanity of those scholars and their followers through the picture of a group of young men who gather around the house of al-Aref and try to punish him and his wife. They didn’t even make sure that it’s his wife. “I learnt that they requested al-Aref and Qabwah to submit themselves to them to execute them of {zina} unlawful sexual intercourse” (p. 237). Later on, both al-Aref and Qabwah were found dead. They were killed and thrown like rubbish in the street: “al-Aref was slaughtered with Qabwah and they found their heads thrown beside their bodies at Kriter Square early in the morning of a spring hot day” (p. 304). Thus, al-Muqri seems to suggest that such terrorist act is surely the ultimate result of the extreme religious discourse.

Interestingly, through such massive cruelty of such groups, al-Muqri skillfully uses symbolism to further highlight the ugliness of extremism. In other words, innocence is set against brutality. As Qabwah used to sell the most popular kind of flowers and perfume in the city, these people seem to have slaughtered beauty and innocence, and motivate chaos and hatred instead. “They got busy with the perfume trail, and they did not know that the perfume itself would be slaughtered” (p. 304). In this quotation, the author openly refers to Qabwah as the ‘perfume’, in order to show the ugliness of those deaf terrorists who kill innocence and beauty. Obviously, the author seems to blame religious discourse that could have influenced such militant groups and encourage them to perform such hostile attacks. The exaggerated image of the bodies being cut into pieces is intended to strongly depicts hostility and cruelty of such fundamentalists. As Qabwah can be read as a symbol of beauty, flower and optimism, these people seem to reject the beauty of life, the modernization, the innocence, as well as the coexistence. They are, in other words, represented as people who are against life in general, a view that present them as mere terrorists. In this sense, the author seems to blame the militant discourse that produces those kind of aggressive individuals.

al-Muqri’s sarcastic mode, however, reaches the peak when he brings in most of his characters to discuss what he called the “dream”, simply the dream of the possible visit of the Queen of England to Aden which was a British protectorate (p. 219). This method is wittily utilized to mock and ridicule the Islamic figures who appears to be funny and ridiculous when they insist that Queen Elizabeth should wear the Islamic veil (hijab) and long pants during her intended visit to Aden. As soon as ‘Little Sheikh’, referred to above, hears about the visit, he jumps and publicly requested: “Queen of Britain to wear a veil with long pants if she comes to Aden” (p. 256). In their discussion, some of them have admired ‘little sheikh’ for his courage and bravery, as well as, his cleverness to exploit the chance and make himself popular through his public preaching on the occasion. However, Migi seems to be not satisfied when he says: “what cleverness! He preaches the obligation of the queen to wear the veil and long pants!” (p. 252-3).

The absurdity of the situation lies in the controversial subject and the long dispute that the so-called dream has created. al-Mualem finds himself obliged to justify the preacher’s position: “He said that her wearing of veil, {hijab} and the long pants is a religious necessity to a void temptation...”.

Ahmad al-Wahti adds: “he fears that they would be tempted by Her and subject themselves to Her Majesty rather than to God” (p. 253). Sheikh Abdul Jabar appears to be very strict as he goes further and confirms that they should stand against her visit completely. His claim is that according to sharia’a, Islamic Law, she shouldn’t leave her home as she is a woman. He carries on justifying his position and says that based on sharia’a, she is not allowed to leave her home. “The right position of sharia’a is to stand against her visit from the ground up. Going out of her house as a sanctity is not permissible, let alone that her mandate is incorrect” (p. 253).

Thus, the characters in the above situation look absurd. Both, Sheikh Abdul Jabar and Sheikh Abdul Rahim (little sheikh) are presented as caricatures, arguing over irrelevant dream, as well as, giving funny claims. By involving sharia’a while discussing the visit of the queen of England, the author comically exposes and criticize the foolishness of those religious figures as queen’s visit has nothing to do with them and their views. The author, in other words, carefully attempts to show that these people are unreliable as they are not worried about the welfare of the state but only concerned with unimportant matters which just satisfy them only. They should instead focus on colonization as Aden was a British protectorate, as well as, on the welfare of the state rather than arguing over irrelevant matters. Interestingly, in this situation, al-Muqri seems to mix both caricaturing and exaggeration in order to further humiliate those figures and their views. With that, he seems to have fully achieved his goal by presenting religious discourse as hollow, empty and useless.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study is grounded in the assumption that religious figures are presented in a certain manner in the selected texts of al-Muqri’s novels. It draws on this supposition to unveil how al-Muqri has delivered his views on those figures and their discourse, as well. The study focuses on two of his novels, *The Handsome Jew* and *Adani Incense* which fully engaged with religion and the religious discourse. Both, in other words, strongly reflect al-Muqri’s persistent anti-religious attitude.

In his representation of religion and the religious figures, al-Muqri focuses on certain important issues; the conflict of religions, the religious discourse and the mythologies, where he attempts to highlight, the falsity of all. In this sense, it is noticeable that he attempts to villainize most of his religious characters. Significantly, the author seems to indirectly concludes that false religious discourse ultimately produces militant individuals who finally become terrorists.

His novel, *The handsome Jew*, is very much engaged with the conflict of religions where he stresses the need for a moderate Islam through Fatima, the heroine. His sharp razor focuses more on the foolishness of Jews and their religious rituals in order to expose the hypocrisy and the hollowness of those mythologies. In *Adani Incense*, however, he focuses more on the religious discourse as such discourse has become more serious where both the individual and the society seems to be entrapped in.

Paradoxically, while he is against preachers, he himself appears to be a preacher of moderate Islam in both novels. This view, however, appears to be more urgent in *Adani Incense*. In this novel, al-Muqri presented two types of religious discourses, unfortunately, none of them serves the people or the society. The first and the most dangerous one is that of Abdul Jabar and his son-little Sheikh. Their discourse is characterized by extremism and intended to encourage violence and hatred. The second is of the Sufism which neglect the mind and encourages people to spiritually live in fantasies. Obviously, by introducing both, it’s clear that the author is indirectly calling for a balance that satisfies both, the soul and the mind, that is the Moderate Islam. In other words, he indirectly suggests that the appearance of militancy is, in fact, the result of the absence of moderate discourse. Significantly, al-Muqri’s critical skills seem to be sharpened in his second novel as he interwoven different artistic techniques to deliver his views such as humor, sarcasm, symbolism and exaggeration.

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