



A Tragic Romance: An Analysis of *Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi: A Passenger of Time*

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Abstract

In *Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi: A Passenger of Time*, the Bahraini novelist Ahmad Al Dosari depicts the life of the Abbasid poet Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi. The novel introduces the miserable life of the hero who suffers poverty and deprivation early in his life. It also depicts the love story which joins Ibn Zuraiq (Ali) and his cousin Hind which is eventually doomed to failure. It is the purpose of this paper to study the novel as a prose romance by focusing on the depiction of characters and plot. The researcher highlights how romance deploys characters who are discriminated as heroes and villains. She also studies the depiction of the protagonist as an isolated figure. In addition, the researcher studies how the plot focuses on the hero's adventures and his quest for happiness, as well as, its focus on non-realistic events. On the other hand, the paper investigates the novel's protagonist as a modern tragic hero. He is portrayed as a common man, a victim of his own society who struggles to maintain his dignity and overcome the conspiracies of his surroundings.

Key words: Prose romance; Quest of happiness; Non-realistic events; Modern tragic hero; Isolated figure

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We are born alone, we live alone, we die alone;
 Only through our love and friendship can we create
 The illusion for the moment that we are not alone.
 (G. Orson Wells)¹

INTRODUCTION

Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi: A Passenger of Time (2010) is a novel by the Bahraini novelist and poet Ahmad Al Dosari. The novel is a depiction of the story of the historical figure of Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi, Abu Al Hasan Ali², the lonely poor orphan and the suffering lover who died alienated in a far land away from Baghdad, his homeland. Ibn Zuraiq suffers a miserable life of poverty after the death of his parents, and because of the cruelty of his uncle's wife with whom he lives. Falling in love with his cousin Hind, Ibn Zuraiq's tragedy begins. Refusing such a union, Hind's mother, his uncle's wife, asks for an expensive dowry which Ibn Zuraiq cannot collect unless he leaves Baghdad. He becomes a captive of distances and unfulfilled promises and dreams. Ibn Zuraiq is a traveller who seeks good luck and the reward of the Cordovan Prince with the only skill he has; his panegyric poem. His love for Hind drives him to the magical lands of Andalusia and, ironically, to his own fatal destiny. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss how *Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi* can be read as a prose romance and its main character as an example of the modern tragic hero.

¹ G. Orson Wells (1915-1985) is an American actor, director, writer, and producer. Retrieved from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/o/orsonwelle142014.html>

² Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi (d. 420 AH) is an Abbasid poet who is known by his "orphan poem".

1. THE NOVEL AS A PROSE ROMANCE

Prose romance (a) deploys characters who are sharply discriminated as heroes and villains, masters and victims. (b) The protagonist is often solitary, and isolated from a social context. (c) The plot emphasises adventure, and is often cast in the form of the quest for an ideal, or the pursuit of an enemy accompanied by variable obstacles. (d) The events are sometimes non-realistic or melodramatic which project primal desires, hopes, and terrors in the depth of the human mind (Abrams, 1971, p.112). On the following pages, we will trace these features of prose romance in Al Dosari's novel by studying plot and characters. On the other hand, I will show how our main character, Ibn Zuraiq, the son of a poor glassmaker, is not the typical hero of the chivalric romance. He is not the chivalric knight or the mythical figure who falls in love with a pure and heavenly woman. On the contrary, he is the modern tragic hero, a victim of love, alienation, and homesickness, who finally embraces death. It is worth mentioning that the novel lacks an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.

Early in the novel, we learn that the events take place in 471 AH, i.e., during the Umayyad era. Our narrator Abu Al Abbas Bin Yahya, the Gorgan writer, is assigned the difficult mission of proving that Ibn Zuraiq actually existed, that his story is for real, and that he is the one who composed what came to be known as "the orphan poem", by Al Wazir (the state's Minister). The story of Ibn Zuraiq is faithfully reported to Abu Al Abbas by Sa'id Al Kufi, Ibn Zuraiq's best friend and travel companion.

2. CHARACTERS

2.1 The Villain

Hind's mother is the villain of the story. She is an "evil cursed woman", a greedy ferocious character whose interests contradict those of the hero (*Passenger*, p.201). The moment she realizes that Ali is falling in love with her daughter, her cruelty towards the young man becomes clearer. She has plans for marrying her beautiful daughter to a wealthy merchant from Baghdad. Her vicious behaviour forces Ali outside the house. However, "the swearing and the schemes the uncle's wife plotted did nothing but make the big hearts of Ali and Hind burn with love" (Ibid., p.110). Refusing poverty as an eternal destiny of herself and her daughter, Hind's mother wants to prevent any possible union between the two. An expensive dowry of five thousand dinars is her plan which sends Ibn Zuraiq into a journey of alienation and death. Her evil wishes for Ibn Zuraiq, "Go...May you never return! You stood between us and richness!" (Ibid., p.128) unfortunately comes true. She victimises the helpless young man who had tasted "the pain of living as a poor orphan" (Ibid., p.129) when he was but a boy, and later

suffers "the bitter taste of being humiliated and despised by people" like herself (Ibid.). Contrary to readers' expectations, the news about Ibn Zuraiq's death leave her "dumbfounded" (Ibid., p.201). She bursts into tears and says, "I never wanted such fate for him! Poverty is harsh and monstrous!" (Ibid.) Accused of causing the death not only of Ibn Zuraiq, but also of her own daughter, Hind's mother never wins the sympathy of readers. Her destiny remains vague as we are told that three days after Hind's funeral, she disappears without leaving a trace (Ibid., p.202).

2.2 The Isolated Hero

Ibn Zuraiq Al Baghdadi or Ali is the hero of our novel and the victim of misery. His story "is nothing but a sad story" (Ibid., p.7). He is the "martyr of distance and poverty"; the passenger who races time in quest of happiness (Ibid., p.11). His father was a poor glassmaker whose early death forced his wife and his son Ali to "survive in the lap of misery," in the neighbourhood of death in Al Karkh (Ibid., p.101). His mother suffered the hardships of life and was burdened with adversities. Ali believes that cruel winters which she has spent in collecting wood have caused her death. Consequently, death becomes Ali's best acquaintance. He was only ten when he was bereaved of his parents and grief left its "marks on his face" (Ibid., p.104). His agonized state has turned him to a solitary person who preferred isolation and enjoyed the company of the Tigris River. He spent most of his time walking on the banks of the river and invoking its waters with his tears. Sa'id Al Kufi tells the narrator, "[Ali] loved to weep next to the Tigris River that I thought his tears mixed with the water of the river forever. My Gorgan friend, you may have drunk his tears without realizing it" (Ibid.). Throughout the narrative, Ibn Zuraiq's loneliness is emphasised. The narrator Abu Al Abbas tells us that he could imagine, "Ibn Zuraiq so lonely suffering death caused by the pain of alienation and the great distance that separated Cordoba from Baghdad" (Ibid., pp.3-4), and that he fears to die, like Ibn Zuraiq, "so lonely and alienated" in a foreign land (Ibid., p.46). Eventually, our hero passes away "so lonely inside his room on the second floor of Fatimah's inn" in Cordoba (Ibid., p.191).

3. PLOT

3.1 A Model of Love, Separation, and Adventures

Like many adventure romances, *A Passenger of Time* introduces a model of love, separation, and adventures. Nevertheless, unlike traditional romance, the novel never promises the reunion of lovers. Ibn Zuraiq's love of Hind is the only compensation in a life of misery and deprivation. Separated from Hind by the evil plots of her mother, Ali travels to Andalusia to recite a panegyric poem in front of Prince Abu Abdel Rahman, the prince

of Cordoba hoping that he will bestow him an abundant reward and that he will return with Hind's dowry. Though he admires the lines, the prince decides to test the poet's patience, so he bestows him only thirty dinars. Ibn Zuraiq is shocked. He sighs deeply and painfully like someone who is "taking his last breath" (Ibid., p.193). The prince's trick is one of the forces which test the hero's will. Nonetheless, burnt with the fire of passion and longing, and defeated by an unfortunate end of his journey, Ibn Zuraiq writes his famous poem in which he begs Hind not to blame him for leaving her behind and asking for her forgiveness. "Blame him not!/ More blame makes him more fond of you!/ You were right but he was not listening!" (Ibid., p.31). The leather patch on which Ibn Zuraiq writes his lines to Hind is found under his pillow in a room in an inn where he takes his last breath. His friend Sa'id Al Kufi returns home with the patch; an ominous token of love which eventually kills Hind. Feeling that she is robbed of Ali's love, she drowns further in her sorrow and towards death. After Hind passes away, the patch is found in her arms (Ibid., p.202).

The motif of travelling and adventure is early emphasised in the novel. His early adventure is the promenade with his teacher which introduces him, Sa'id, and his classmates to a world beyond the walls of Al Karkh, the home of poverty and misery. Ali and Sa'id have long thought that Al Karkh Bridge is the end of the world and the only buildings in the world are the dilapidated dwellings where he and Sa'id live. When he crosses the bridge, Ali is overwhelmed with feelings of amazement. His eyes are opened wide with wonder. He discovers a new world, but he also discovers the depth of the self. Through the following lines, Sa'id describes this discovery of a different space and highlights a deeper sense of self-discovery:

We found out then that there was a whole different world! People, houses, markets, streets were all different! Even clothes, the smells, animals, women, and speech were different! We heard accents we never heard before. The way people walked, talked, dressed, moved, and even their looks all reflected the luxurious life they enjoyed. Words had different meanings from the ones we came to know in our neighbourhood. The word house, for instance, meant Ali's house or my house, the house of the miserable people like ourselves, people who were covered with the soot of the tandoor. However, there, it had acquired a totally different meaning. (Ibid., p.106)

A whole different world lies beyond the bridge. The teacher introduces Ali and Sa'id to "the real Baghdad" and motivates them to desert "the garbage" where they live (Ibid., p.107). Only through hard work the students will manage to "leave behind this shitty life" (Ibid.). Though Ali's crossing of the bridge is motivated by his love for Hind and his pursuit of happiness, as we come to learn later, it introduces him to the wonders of a faraway world such as the Pyramids in Egypt, the 'House of Knowledge and Sovereignty' in the city of Memphis, the 'Monastery of the Mud' which is to the South of Cairo, and the

Pompey's Pillar in Alexandria. In addition to places, Ibn Zuraiq comes to learn that he is not alone in his misery. Travelling introduces him to equally miserable people. In a cavern in Sicily he meets the old Christian couple from Constantinople who have started their search for their son who was forced to join the army of the Crusaders. Ibn Zuraiq identifies with their plight and agony. "The two stories, mine and that of the old man and woman, overlapped. Both stories dramatized man's agony in this life" (Ibid., p.174). Ali realises that human misery may take different forms; however, it remains painful and agonising. He knows now that human suffering is not limited by place; it is a universal property which one experiences anywhere. Such discovery motivates Ali's tears and sympathy.

Ibn Zuraiq's actual adventures begin the moment he travels from Baghdad to Egypt, Tunisia, Sicily, Lisbon, and finally to Cordoba. Not only does Ibn Zuraiq taste the pains of love- he gets thinner and weaker (Ibid., p.117), he is defeated by fever (Ibid., p.121) because he is "burnt with the fire of love" (Ibid., p.123) but he also suffers humiliation of the jail in his own homeland (Ibid., p.120). Throughout the cursed journey to Andalusia, Ibn Zuraiq goes through many hardships. For instance, when Ali and Sa'id reach Egypt, the earlier has fever and he becomes too weak. Sa'id describes his friend's condition, "I feared death which was lurking around us as a shivering grave" (Ibid., pp.139-140). Furthermore, Ali is victimised by bandits in Egypt. They steal his money parcel and leave him penniless (Ibid., p.152). It is the beginning of a "series of bummers" the two travellers have to face. Rough seas along with pains of longing affect him deeply while he is on the ship sailing to Sicily. The journey which lasted for twenty days almost killed Ibn Zuraiq: "He was hallucinating, saying Hind's name repeatedly. . . His condition got worse. He regretted leaving her but he wished to return home with her dowry to win her" (Ibid., p.162).

Furthermore, plot reveals two types of conflict: external and internal conflicts. The external conflict revolves around the initial situation that brings the couple (Ibn Zuraiq and Hind) together. In this context it is poverty and deprivation which is the common feature that joins the lovers. On the other hand, internal conflict is the deeper difficulty each character faces and which threatens to keep lovers from finding happiness together. Hind's mother's evil plans and ambitions of a luxurious life stimulate this conflict. She succeeds in keeping Ibn Zuraiq away from her daughter; nevertheless, her scheme turns out to be devastating for both lovers.

3.2 Non-Realistic Events

Romance delights in wonders and marvels which make events non-realistic. It makes much of mysterious effects of magic and spells (Abrams, 1971, p.22). Many mysterious details make us wonder about the powers

behind action. For example, our first narrator, Abu AL Abbas, tells us that he does not wish to interrupt Sa'id, the old man and the second narrator, who is "recollecting events which happened half a century before. He didn't simply remember events, he dug deeply with the mattock of regret" (*Passenger*, p.161). Sa'id is recollecting events which he survived half a century ago! Hammad the thug who leads Ibn Abbas to Sa'id tells us that "Behind this alley, a group of the dead live!" (Ibid., p.72) and that "the leader of the dead" is Sa'id al-Kufi; a dead man brought to life 0.(94). Sa'id turns out to be Hammad's own father (Ibid., 74). When Abu Al Abbas meets the too old Sa'id, he thinks the latter is "a hundred or two hundred years old" (Ibid., p.86) and his companions-followers may be pious people, Sufis, bandits, or most probably jinn (Ibid.). The starving woman, Sa'id's wife, whom the narrator meets under the Chosroes Hall Arch is looking for food near the Arch while "she [has] it all in the world of jinn" (Ibid., p.86); inside her spacious house which lies behind a "meagre front door" (Ibid., p.97). Hammad disguises as a bookseller. He is depicted as a wondrous character; he is a giant man who has huge hands like people of Aad (*Passenger*, p.83). His countenance changes; it is "as obscure as the night, the home of all secrets" (Ibid.). In that mysterious strange night, "wondrous breeze" blows (Ibid., p.94). Equally mysterious is the stranger sitting in the patio of the Monastery of the Waiter. "He [is] fully armed with a big sword next to his waist" and he is gazing at Abu Al Abbas. He is portrayed as a horrifying even demonic figure. Let's have a closer look at the narrator's description of his encounter with the armed man or "Angel of death" (Ibid., p.16):

All of a sudden, something was sparkling in the blinding darkness. It was white and I thought it was human teeth. It grew bigger; it moved towards me and got closer to my eye. Then, a human hand approached me, pulled me from the floor, and put me on the bed. I was almost stone-still. I concluded that they were pulling me down to my grave. (Ibid., p.15)

The narrator is overwhelmed with terror and the "smell of wickedness and rottenness" which came out of the stranger's body (Ibid., p.16). Whether an angel or a demon, the mysterious man who appears in the middle of the darkness is, ironically speaking, the narrator's lifebuoy. He leads him to the Arch and consequently to Sa'id.

4. IBN ZURAIQ: THE MODERN TRAGIC HERO

On the other hand, Al Dosari's protagonist is an excellent example of the modern tragic hero. The modern hero, rather than falling calamitously from a high position, begins the story appearing to be an ordinary, average person. A modern tragic character is presented as a victim of society or in other words a common man. In classical

tragedy, it is said that tragic heroes are usually someone of high status. Nevertheless, in his essay *Tragedy And The Common Man*, Arthur Miller defines the modern tragic hero as "the common man [who] is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (Miller, 1949). The modern hero's story does not require the protagonist to have the traditional catharsis to bring the story to a close. He may die without an epiphany of his destiny and he may suffer without the ability to change events that are happening to him. The story may end without closure and even without the death of the hero. Ibn Zuraiq is the helpless lover who is unable to change his destiny no matter how far he travels. When defeated by despair and a strong sense of loss, i.e. losing Hind forever, Ibn Zuraiq surrenders to death. He says:

If death is my destiny or hers,
We're helpless in front of God's word!
If everlasting separation is our fate,
How can we reject God's will? (*Passenger*, p.44)

Although he is a common man, Ibn Zuraiq has the requisite stature to be heroic. According to Arthur Miller, the tragic hero has "alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life" (Miller, 1949). His love of Hind is the only alternative which inspires his determination to win Hind and collect her dowry. His difficult journey from one land to another and all the way to Cordoba is meant to change his material status and defeat the social barrier which separates the two lovers. His poem expresses all:

And burdened with fears he faced while travelling,
Wishing to return to his family,
Yet pushed by dire need
To a new journey.
Wandering in God's spacious world
He comes and goes.
'Seeking sustenance,
I was determined to leave,
Even as far as Sind.
Bearing hardships of travelling.
Pursuing livelihood,
I said farewell to many'. (*Passenger*, p.42)

Furthermore, Miller's modern definition of the tragic hero suits our protagonist though he is a historical character. For Miller, the tragic hero possesses a tragic flaw, he is degraded by society, his surroundings seem to conspire against him, and despite his hardships he struggles against the world to maintain his dignity. Ibn Zuraiq exemplifies the four aspects of Arthur Miller's utopian tragic hero. He has a tragic flaw— his dedication and deep love of Hind. We feel sorry for him because his story is a sad one. Ibn Zuraiq is degraded by people around him because he is poor and unprivileged. His surroundings (Hind's mother and the Commander of the Army who sends Ibn Zuraiq to jail because the earlier wife shows interest in him)

conspire against him. He struggles with harsh realities- the fact that he is a poor orphan and Hind's mother is too cruel to him- and he means to change his fate. Separation from Hind and Baghdad is the first step in a long journey which eventually drives him to his own fatal destiny.

CONCLUSION

Though prose romance centres around two people falling in love and then struggling to stay together, plot is focused on the woes that accompany that love story. Those woes frame the hero's journey which usually focuses on the pursuit of a Higher Cause. Such cause can often be patriotic, professional, or a family obligation. In Al Dosari's novel, love and pursuit of happiness are the hero's Higher Cause. Ibn Zuraiq's love for Hind is tested throughout, and so is his role when placed in different adversities. Being fully aware of his vulnerability, Ibn Zuraiq endures the agony of love and translates his pain to lines of poetry. He is endowed with the only weapon available to him: his power of poetic expression which is equal to his power to endure social degradation, deprivation and loneliness. Instead of taking refuge in silence as modern tragic heroes would do (Rosenzweig, 1921, p.156), Ibn Zuraiq commits himself to the world through language. Alone Ibn Zuraiq addresses his beloved and imparts more of his true being and emotions through his poem or his soliloquy. Like many tragic heroes who provoke a response that oscillates between sympathy and withdrawal (Lucaci, 2011, p.3), Ibn Zuraiq wins our tears. Indeed, language becomes the hero's medium of expressing "an inner world of feelings" (Carlson, 1993, p.367). Contrary to the classic tragic hero who accomplishes "cosmic achievement" (Benjamin, 2003, p.119), our hero exposes his feelings of loss, suffering and forlornness through his "orphan poem":

"Seeking compensation,
in my beloved's face,
I drank from the same
Glass of pain and separation."
Many blamed me,
"Your heart is heavy with rue"
'Tis my fault, I admitted.
Overwhelmed with longing,
Our eyes were sleepless.
Leaving her,

Never thought I could,
Neither did she.
Life was hard,
Pushing me away from my happiness.
Oh, my home!
Vanished when I travelled away.
Shall time restore our sweet days?
Or shall passing nights bring my love back?
(*Passenger*, p.43)

Ali or Ibn Zuraiq finds solace in these lines which Hind's love has inspired. That love gives a meaning to his existence and feeds his need for affection. Hind is a symbol of human love to which Ibn Zuraiq turns for support. However, as many modern tragic heroes who often die with their conflicts unreconciled and without order restored to their worlds (Ross, 1998, p.119), Ibn Zuraiq meets his cruel fate deprived of his only love and source of compassion.

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