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**CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE IN DAMMAJ'S NOVEL *THE HOSTAGE*: THE JOURNEY FROM SERVILITY TO EMANCIPATION**

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**Abstract:**

*The study aims to analyze Zaid Dammaj's novel *The Hostage* and trace one of the eternal issues—the enslavement of childhood innocence and its endeavor to escape from its traumatic reality. Dammaj is one of the most eminent writers in the history of Yemeni novel. He has nourished the literary scene with many of his works, characterized by their artistic depiction of the Yemeni reality. *The Hostage* is regarded one of the best novels in Yemen and even on the Arab level. Built upon an eclectic approach, the current paper delves into the depth of the struggle of the protagonist "the hostage", who is shown as an innocent victimized child, and finds out how the crises affect him. It tries to uncover the various kinds of dilemma the protagonist is put in. However, the study demonstrates that the story is evidence of the absurdity and arbitrariness of the Imamate regime imposed on the Yemeni people at that time. Moreover, though it is a journey fraught with many dangers, but it has contributed positively to the formation of the protagonist's identity. The study also confirms that the journey of the protagonist is a representation of the reality of the Yemeni people, who did not submit to the oppression and injustice of the Imam, but rather revolted and liberated.*

**Keywords:** *Hostage, Imamate, Exploitation of Innocence, Servility, Emancipation, etc.*

Yemeni recent past had witnessed different crises and issues that mingled with people's everyday life. Rulers of the state made the situation complex by their aggressive practices. Hence, the Yemeni fictional art, since its beginning in the late twenties of the last century, has not been so far from interacting with the reality and its changes; however, it was concerned with the social, cultural and political problems. Later in the seventies, the Yemeni novel had an important turning point and a remarkable development in terms of its structure, technique and themes. Zaid Mutee Dammaj is considered one of the most famous novelists of that period, and in the history of Yemen as a whole, and the most prominent person who took the reins of the Yemeni novel and steered it toward keeping pace with counterpart developments in the Arab world, and even in the whole world. Zaid Dammaj was born in the Yemeni province of Ibb in 1943. His father, Mutee Dammaj, was a well-known opponent figure of the Imamate regime, which was firmly ruling in the northern region of Yemen. After being imprisoned, he escaped and continued his campaign against the Imamates. Zaid Dammaj



started his primary education in Taiz, Yemen. After completing his primary school, he pursued his education in Egypt until 1964, when he graduated from high school. Then he enrolled in Cairo University to study journalism. In 1968, before having completed his university study, he returned to Yemen to take part in the national uprising against the Imams and their supporters, which lasted until the revolution's success was complete and the Imamate monarchy was overthrown. Zaid persisted in his political work and was elected in 1970 to be a member of the Yemen's inaugural Consultative Council. He then continued working in the diplomatic field until his death in Britain in 2000.

Zaid Dammaj presented a substantial corpus of literary work to the Yemeni artistic scene. He dedicated a great deal of time and effort to writing about the lives of Yemenis, whether elite or ordinary, in cities or in the countryside, in houses or outside. His works demonstrate that he had been profoundly influenced by the national activism as well as his upbringing in a struggling family, and all his works fundamentally reflect the people's real life. They take the shape of "conflict between individual consciousness and the collective historical agents of the society... the quest for a new, more equal and more humane society that can better accommodate a new sense of self" (Hezam, 138).

However, it was his distinctive novel *Al-Raheenah* (The Hostage), which was released in 1984, that shot him to widespread acclaim on a local, regional, and global scale. Numerous other languages, including English, Hindi, German, Russian, and French, have also had this novel translated. Moreover, the Arab Writers Union included *The Hostage* novel on its list of the top 100 Arab novels published in the 20th century. The novel takes place in the time before the Yemeni revolutions; that is, in the late forties of the last century, in the city of Taiz. The novel is narrated through the words of its protagonist; a small boy telling his story that started by taking him from his family's home by the Imam's warriors and kept in the Imam's palace prison; "in the fortress of al-Qahira" (Dammaj, 23).

Taking hostages is a way of pressure used by the Imam to force the tribes and their sheikhs to obey his orders and to maintain their loyalty to him. Sometimes "hostages have also become a means of repression, used to punish those who have sought to disrupt the established regime and, in the most serious cases, have made attacks on the lives of the occupying forces" (Herrmann and Palmieri, 141).

This kind of bureaucratic system had been borrowed "from the recent Ottoman Turkish occupiers of Yemen" and practiced by Imams to "strengthen their state" (Burrowes, 485). In the fortress of al - Qahira, lots of hostages were gathered and taught by a religious teacher to read the Qur'an and the necessity of being obedient and esteemed citizens to the Imams and their governors. The hostage was then taken to work as a servant in the palace of the deputy of the Imam (the Governor), and he was chosen as a *duwaydar* specifically to serve the Governor's sister (Sharifa Hafsa) in her house. The *duwaydar* is a "personal servant who acts the role of eunuchs in old times: to work in the women's areas without any risk to their chastity" (Alsudairy, 12). In the palace, the boy got acquainted with different types of people and relationships that were totally based on falsehood, exploitation, and customs that he did not accept some of them because they were an affront to his dignity. But with the passage of time and his many interactions, the protagonist entered into the participation of that society in its misfortunes and adventures, and indulged in the practice of some kinds of emotional and even sexual relationships. And with all these contradictory circumstances and events, the hostage's new personality had been formed, and consequently he eventually thought of salvation and escaping from the life of humiliation to a better life in which he could enjoy comfort and freedom.

As far as the subjects of the Yemeni society and its issues are concerned and their demand to be critically analyzed, the present study aims at exploring childhood innocence in Dammaj's novel *The Hostage* and its journey from servility to emancipation. Built upon an eclectic approach; descriptive and psychoanalytic, the current paper tries to delve into the depth of the struggle of the protagonist "the hostage", who is depicted as an innocent victimized child, and find out how the





different crises affect him. It also attempts to uncover the various kinds of dilemma the protagonist is put in.

### **Children's Innocence versus Regime's Brutality:**

The Hostage narrative presents, on one hand, the Yemeni citizen's simplicity, innocence, and the unfairness of time against him, and how he is exploited at first, but quickly realizes his error and removes the robe of shame and disgrace. On the other side, the novel displays the Imami regime's cruelty and aggressive tactics towards Yemeni people in general, and against children in particular. The Imams utilized intimidation to subdue the country and anybody who dared to oppose and challenge their agenda of seizing and controlling all parts of social, political, religious, and economic life. The hostage, the protagonist, though he is an innocent boy, is subjected to numerous types of physical and psychological abuses by the officials, men and women, of the ruling Imamate authority and their soldiers. Brutality starts coinciding with the beginning of the story when the soldiers of the Imam forcibly took the boy (the protagonist) from his mother's bosom and led him to the prison in al-Qahira fortress, where he was held as a hostage by the Imam. The narrator, once he was sitting upon the roof of the Governor's palace viewing the panoramic cityscape, declared: "How beautiful this city was! I'd seen it first when I was taken from my village and imprisoned in the fortress of al-Qahira as one of the hostages of the Imam. His soldiers had come, in their blue uniforms, and torn me from my mother's lap and the arms of the rest of my family; then, not content with that, they'd seized my father's horse too, in accordance with the Imam's wishes" (Dammaj, 23). The boy was not yet aware of what was going on in the country and never imagined that he would have become a victim of the illegal traditions one day. Certainly, the young boy was crying bitterly and begging the soldiers to release him and leave him safe in the hands of his mother and tribe, but unfortunately all his pleas were in vain. As a result, this horrific crime left a huge grief in the narrator's psyche, which would cast a shadow over the hero's personality, in addition to the details of the miserable story that he would tell in its remaining chapters. The hostage was then exposed to a condition of forced aggression when he was ruthlessly evacuated from the fortress prison and assigned the service of a duwaydar in the Governor's palace. Though the teacher in the prison had been teaching the hostages the nature of the duwaydar's profession, the boy was unaware of what was being intended at that time: "What I couldn't grasp was exactly what a duwaydar was, and what sort of work he was supposed to do. Perhaps I was too young to understand the explanations I was given" (Dammaj, 24). It was, in fact, the childhood innocence that prevented him, and of course his imprisoned companions, from understanding what was meant by those malicious terms which led to their exploitation in disgraceful ways. What was worse than that was that the sheikh used sometimes to warn the boys and terrify them of the risks of thinking of escaping from their assigned duties. And they had heard that some of those boys who were working as duwaydars tried to flee, but they failed, so their punishment was that they "had then been brought back to the fortress and put in chains there for the rest of their lives" (Dammaj, 24). Absolutely, this was part of the psychological torture that was implanted in the minds and souls of the young boys so that they would not think about changing their reality.

Entering the Governor's palace would have opened the way for the hostage himself to discover many of the mysteries and secrets that surrounded the life of the ruling class and those in its circle. It was with the help of the first duwaydar, the "sweet duwaydar" as he had been called by the residents of the palace, who welcomed him and started telling him of the places, people and some of the events that piqued his curiosity and astonishment. On the first night where he slept in the palace with his fellow the sweet duwaydar in his small room, the new duwaydar was surprised by someone knocking on the door and calling in a low voice to his friend. It was one of the women of the palace came, as usual, to relieve herself and have sexual pleasure with his friend, and then she left. The new duwaydar



was fastened in place, and he spent his night in terror and nightmares. He said: "I'd never felt so frightened in my life as I did that night" (Dammaj, 34). The woman was the Governor's spinster sister *Zahraas* the sweet duwaydar later revealed. This marked the beginning of the revelation of the false vision of the palace's life that was based on fabrication and exploitation of children's bodies which were not, at that time, able to practice these bad acts. All the concern of the inhabitants of the palace, women and men, was only to satisfy their various desires, including sexual ones, even at the expense of child servants. The first night experience was sufficient to leave the main character with such a negative impression that he announced the next morning that the entire city was completely shrouded in anxiety and anguish: "I rose from my sleepless rest, feeling as though I'd been beaten, my whole body aching. Then I opened the small window, to see an unhealthy-looking yellow haze hanging over the city" (Dammaj, 35). His mentality had been completely wrecked from the start, so he described the environment of that city as being gloomy and devoid of any signs of respectable and secure existence. His assurance grew when he went to the city center one day to look for any of his village's men and ask them about his family, and to witness the activity and trade there, but he found it exactly contrary: "We walked towards the center of the city, amid air choked with the smell of disease and the smoke from kitchen stoves. Everywhere were faces of a pale, sickly yellow, bellies swollen not from food but from sickness, feet bare and sticky with dirt and cuts. At every corner, in every alley, square or street, we jostled amid crowds of exhausted beggars and people sick or mad" though the city "had always seemed so lovely in its morning splendor, when we looked down over it from the walls of its al-Qahira fortress" (Dammaj, 55). Everything in the city has become deceptive and a source of anxiety because of the Imams' tampering with the public life of the helpless people, besieging them and confiscating their property.

When the duwaydar was appointed to work at the house of the Governor's divorced sister Sharifa Hafsa, he got there with his friend. The old duwaydar told him of her sternness and pride, so he was struck with awe and depression: "I climbed the stairs behind him .... my feelings were quite different. I felt apprehensive and alarmed, like a rare bird about to be put in a golden cage for life" (Dammaj, 50). The writer wanted to summarize the life of the boy that he would go through. Without any attempt to resist, the boy felt that what remained of the freedom he had enjoyed would be taken away, and that his life would be at the mercy and authority of Sharifa Hafsa. He admitted that "in spite of my work in Sharifa Hafsa's house, I felt depressed, bored and tired" (Dammaj, 52). Sharifa Hafsa took advantage of the boy and utilized him for a variety of purposes, including conveying her messages and carrying out her commands. And she went so far as to call him titles suggesting disdain and contempt: "hostage, my hostage, duwaydar, servant". She intended to tell him that he could not do anything without her will, which caused him psychological suffering. She used to impose blind obedience on him, and when he tried to disobey her orders or express his dissatisfaction with the work, she would punish him with hurtful phrases and words, and sometimes she would physically punish him by shackling his legs. One day he told her to excuse him from carrying her letters to, and from, the poet of the Imam "because it's no use", then "she gave me a slap in the face", and "I rushed down the stairs, pursued by furious curses she was shouting after me. A soldier took me to the main gate, and there I squatted on the ground and stretched out my leg for him to put an iron fether round it. Another soldier banged the fether shut" (Dammaj, 60). The physical and psychological pain made him wish and prefer that he would remain a prisoner in chains and that would be better for him than living in this city, where he would be far from the arrogance and ugliness of the inhabitants of the palace: "Yet in this city, and perhaps in the whole country too, the chained person had a more comfortable life than the people who were free! He had no work and no worries. What work can a helpless, fettered prison do, after all?" (Dammaj, 61). Verbal, psychological and physical punishment of the boy was repeated in different situations. She ordered the soldiers to handcuff him more than once, and one day





she threw a stone at his back when he did not obey her; so he was in pain because of the severity of the stone falling on him. Similarly, she severely addressed him with bitter words; as not being a man, but he had been just a child.

Generally, young boys in the palace are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation by the women of the palace, the poet of the imam, and even the soldiers. This Sharifa Hafsa herself once “told me to come closer, and I did so. Again she told me to come closer; again I did as she asked. Her breath was almost burning my face now. Still she approaches me to come closer, closer than I’d ever been to anyone before, even to my mother. Then she took my head between her hands and kissed me on the lips, with the kiss of the deepest, honeyed sweetness. My head began to spin, and so did the whole world around me” (Dammaj, 77). Another time she dragged him to have an affair with her: “I leapt angrily towards the door, but she took me by the shoulders and pulled me towards her till our bodies were pressed against one another, and I felt her panting. She kissed me till I felt ready to faint, and then took me by the hand towards her favorite room. There she locked the door, then embraced me, and I melted beneath her second kiss, like molten metal in a goldsmith or blacksmith’s furnace. I plucked the sweetest of kisses from her lips, and my hands wandered everywhere over the soft body I’d dreamed of for so long. Together we floated in pleasures till the roosters of morning crowed” (Dammaj, 129). Likewise, as the boy was seated next to him, the poet of the Imam made an effort to sexually seduce him in his first days in the palace. The boy quickly pushed the poet’s hands away as he attempted to squeeze his thighs and enjoy it. Next time the boy was curious and wanted to know what the poet wanted from touching his legs: “This time I thought I’d better leave it there, because I wanted to find out just what it was he was actually after. His fingers began to wander all over my thigh in a way that went beyond the bounds of decency; evidently sure of my submission now, he was moving towards my private parts themselves, seeking something I had never given to anyone, not even to Sharifa Hafsa herself. He was clearly determined to move on with his hand, and indulge his overwhelming desire. I managed to stop him just in time, and the other people in the room, sensing this, smiled maliciously” (Dammaj, 80-81). In fact, the boy was unfamiliar with the nature of sexual life, nor physical closeness with women or men, even if it was his mother. He was completely innocent and was being intentionally pushed into this dirty quagmire. Even the Imam’s soldiers did not spare the boy from their attempts to exploit him. Fate surrounded him one night, while he was shackled as a punishment for his disobedience to the commands of Sharifa Hafsa, so that he could spend the night in the place of the soldiers. The soldiers quarreled with the *bourezan* (the horn player) over the place where the boy would stay, but the *bourezan* prevailed, informing the boy “those soldiers are rogues, you could never be sure you were safe with them” (Dammaj, 108). It seemed as if everyone agreed that enjoying and exploiting children was a natural thing that everyone in the palace could do.

The powerful individuals in the palace were attempting to coerce the boys into engaging in every vice, including drinking alcohol they did not keep them far away from it: “At the poet’s insistence (backed up by the Frog, the Governor’s son) I took the glass he was offering me, and gulped the contents down with feelings of nauseous disgust I had difficulty in concealing. Yet, at the same time, the drink made me feel prouder and surer of myself, made me feel I wanted to curse the whole world and everyone in it. I went on drinking, knocking back a third glass the poet and the human frog had pressed on me. I’ve only kept a few scattered memories of how the gathering went after that” (Dammaj, 81). This was also present in the sweat duwaydar’s quarters, since he used to misuse alcohol and smoke cigarettes, causing his health to deteriorate, in addition to his involvement in sexual encounters with palace ladies. It was a malice inflicted upon children by embarrassing them and dragging them into every bad deed.

Typically, the writer wanted to highlight the Yemeni man’s modesty while also refuting the



crimes of the Imamate rule and its brutality towards its opponents. When the boy was assigned to accompany the women in their trip from the Governor's palace to visit the palace of the Imam and his Crown Prince, he was eager to see the various wild animals that were kept in cages. At the same time, he had had the notion that they were used to prey on and devour opponents of the Imam: "I'd been told that the Crown Prince kept all these wild animals in a spot overlooking the palace courtyard, so he could amuse himself by having some of his enemies thrown into the cages. He had a particular relish for the sight, it was said-a sight which would make ordinary people shudder and turn young children's hair white, as my grandmother, God rests her soul, used to say!" (Dammaj, 91).

The case could be generalized to include the other children of the city who were also not spared from the arrogance of the regime. When they gathered spontaneously and curiously in the palace yard to see the car of the Governor's son who had come from another country, "The soldiers roughly threw out the city children, who were eager to see this car which had come there from some mysterious other world, then locked the gates" (Dammaj, 65). This was a normal behavior practiced by the imam's soldiers, whose hearts were stripped of mercy and who were accustomed to treating citizens violently, even if they were children. There was no doubt that such behaviors would stick in the hearts and minds of children, hating that system and looking forward to ending it.

#### **Motives of Child's Maturity and Conscience Awakening**

Naturally, with the passage of time, the formation of a person's identity remains in a continuous process. Whenever a person goes through different experiences, it surely helps in refining his personality and his understanding of life in a better way. However, childhood time is believed to be the most crucial stage for the formation and maturation of the individual's personality, because of its profound impact on the child's innocent psyche. Pangestu and Sunardi insist on "the importance of childhood experiences in forming one's adult personality and behavior" (Dammaj, 21). As well as *The Hostage* novel is concerned, its protagonist is a young boy who underwent numerous experiences that helped in the awakening of his conscience and the construction of his personality. When the boy passed through a stage or set of events in his life, he was affected in a way or another and attempted to handle and think seriously about it in such a manner that enabled him to positively overcome the numerous barriers.

At the start of his job at the Governor's palace, the child was shrouded in ambiguity in his tasks and in some of the terms used to address some of the palace's patrons. Every time he innocently inquired about these issues, but he consistently received the same response from various people, saying "you will know that in the future' or 'soon". When the bourezan informed the boy that he did not seem to comprehend his work, the boy asked him, "What is it then?" the bourezan replied, "You will find out soon enough!" (Dammaj, 43). Likewise, when the boy asked the handsome duwaydar that he wanted to know why he had been called as "the handsome duwaydar", the later replied, "You will know in time!" (Dammaj, 47). The boy quickly recalled that the bourezan had said the same thing to him. Consequently, this made him recognizes that future would be hiding new things and he had himself to discover and be ready to face his fate.

The child was astounded by the importance of age in a person's life when the Governor and his sister Sharifa Hafsa repeatedly questioned him about his age. The Governor inquired about the boy's age when they first met, but he was too young to know the answer at the time, or, in fact, his father had not recorded the boy's birth date. The same happened when the boy met Sharifa Hafsa. She posed the same query to him and he was at a loss for words. This made the boy wonder why age played such a significant role in deciding someone's position and line of work. He was able to understand that each stage of life was associated with specific obligations that neither a person younger nor older than that stage could be trusted with: "This business about dates of birth seemed to be an important one in the





lives of these exalted people in the palace and its surrounding buildings. It reminded me of the way the faqih at the fortress had talked about the tawashiyeh and the duwadera-and about knowledge and the age of puberty!" (Dammaj, 51). Furthermore, the boy's return to work in the Governor's reception room on the latter's orders, after having worked in Sharifa Hafsa's own house, proved that the boy had reached a certain age at which he was not permitted to go with women: "I stopped going to Sharifa Hafsa's house, feeling that this would be against the definite orders of the Governor, now that-as he reminded me a number of times!-I'd become a man. Even inside the palace itself I no longer went into the parts reserved for the women ...My work was confined to the Governor's reception room" (Dammaj, 116). The boy felt that he had become an adult and had to act in different ways than he had previously.

The duwaydar received a kiss from Sharifa Hafsa and thought that it was because of her love to him. But when she requested him after some time to take her message and give it to the poet of the Imam, though the duwaydar had pledged not to do so, he felt that it was a trick by Sharifa Hafsa that the kiss given by her was not a gift, but a bait for carrying out the letters: "Hiding my sudden shock at her command, I reluctantly took the paper from her. I felt sure, all of a sudden, that the kiss that had so overwhelmed me had been a mere bribe, so that I'd carry out the task I'd refused to go on doing before, till I'd finally been placed in chains. In other words, she'd broken the solemn agreement we'd made; led me on with the kind of trick to which only the most foolish of lovers would have succumbed, then proceeded to trample on my feelings" (Dammaj, 79). By such way, the boy came to conclude that nothing to be given freely without a return, and relationships were built mainly on personal interests; hence, he had to be aware.

The level of care for palace employees has always fluctuated and changed depending on the person's readiness to serve the upper classes. People of the palace, both men and women, shifted their attention and focus from the handsome duwaydar to his new fellow, the new duwaydar, due to the former's poor health and fear of his dangerous ailment. They had rightly exhausted all of his might and power in satisfying their desires and gratifications. The narrator regretted that: "I felt really sorry at the way things had now turned round in my favor" (Dammaj, 87). This certainly awoke the new duwaydar, warning him that his fate would be the same if he did not exercise caution.

The past represents a great influence on the duwaydar's reformed consciousness. He was usually reminded by several events that let him remember his past life especially in his village and how the Imam and his soldiers used to aggressively take their properties: "I remembered my mother who'd fled with me from the guards of the Crown Prince, Sayf al-Islam, through the plantations of corn and sugar-cane, fearing I'd be kidnapped and taken hostage. For all her efforts, I'd been torn from her arms with a cruelty she hadn't known before, and made to ride to the city on a bumpy horse that had belonged to my father and his family" (Dammaj, 124,125). By remembering incidents that took place in his past the duwaydar was in his way of formatting his identity and becoming more aware of his present life. It is a natural phenomenon that one's personal identity is "an identity of consciousness through duration in time; the individual was in touch with his own continuing identity through memory of his past thoughts and actions" (Watt, 21).

The news and discussion that took place in the Governor's reception room about the Imam's assassination in Sana'a at the hands of the liberals astonished the duwaydar. He conveyed that news to his sick friend, the handsome duwaydar, who had been lying in his room. The handsome duwaydar felt elated, and immediately sat and asked about the Crown Prince whether he had been killed or not? Then he felt sad that he could flee! The reaction and sorrow that the handsome duwaydar showed shocked the duwaydar, the protagonist, and let him think again that how people were more aware than him regarding the necessity of the fall and elimination of the whole rule of Imams. He started blaming himself as his sensibility arose: "Does this duwaydar friend of mine, I thought, know so much more



about things than I do? And he a sick man too, perhaps even dying? I wondered at this, and blamed myself as well, because I had more reason to be on the alert than he had. I threw myself down on my bed, consumed with anxiety. The old Imam had been killed in Sanaa, and the Crown Prince had fled the city! What would happen to my own family? Some of them were in hiding, others in prison, or else in exile. And I was a hostage and duwaydar, or rather a mere servant now, just because my father opposed the Imam's policy" (Dammaj, 136). Then the Crown Prince (the new Imam) returned to Sana'a victorious after he eliminated the free revolutionaries, and the people lit the lights of the new victory on the houses of the city. But the duwaydar was overpowered with pride and vehemently refused to participate in lighting the lights or express any joy on the occasion of the new Imam's victory. Rather, he was preoccupied with thinking about the fate of the revolutionaries, including his father, which would undoubtedly be either murder, imprisonment, torture, or exile, and that the country's fate would be ruin, destruction, and revenge.

The deterioration of the handsome duwaydar's health had a profound effect on the protagonist's understanding of the fake life in the Governor's palace. Moreover, his death was the straw that broke the camel's back. The duwaydar has nothing left to do but escape from this bitter reality in which there was no guarantee of a secure life. He found the appropriate chance to leave his loneliness, as he planned to leave from the cemetery after the end of the handsome duwaydar's burial ceremony when it would be dark and the veil of night would fall: "I sat thinking over different plans I'd been forming ever since the victory torches had been lit for the new Imam" (Dammaj, 148). Though Sharifa Hafsa was with him at the graveyard and was aware of his plan to flee, and She tried all she could to dissuade him to reconsider and abandon his plans, but he paid her no mind and set off towards a new life, and leaving behind him, forever, a life of misery and disgrace: "She leapt to her feet and picked up a stone to hurl at me, but I'd already started running. Stones kept falling all around me, but, for all my compassion for her, I didn't stop. Still her beloved, husky voice rose, piercing my ears; in front of me was the darkness of the mountains, overlooking the desolate valley that descended, with me, towards an unknown future. I expected all the time to hear her void or feel a stone striking my back, but already I'd gone a good way down this new road leading to my future life, leaving behind her beloved voice, and the memories of my dead friend, and of the bourezan, and the tabashi who'd been kicked by the mule, and his colleagues, the guards" (Dammaj, 151).

After reaching the peak of his awareness development, the hostage was able to get rid of and liberate himself from the binds of servitude and exploitation, and depart on his own towards a new existence in which he would rewrite his life again. He did not care what might occur in it as much as he was able to escape from that miserable era where he had lived and suffered from all kinds of humiliation and psychological and physical torment at the hands of the Imam and his subordinates.

The image of the innocent hostage child in the novel created by the author Dammaj was intended to represent the situation of the Yemeni people during the rule of the imams in the northern part of Yemen prior to the revolution. The people had been subjected to various forms of oppression, suppression of freedoms, and isolation from the rest of the world. And with all of this, the writer hoped to demonstrate to the readers that the Yemeni people are always capable of overcoming their difficulties and anyone who wishes to be alone and in control of their freedom.

To conclude, Dammaj presents the protagonist of his novel *The Hostage* as an innocent boy whose life was fraught with difficulties that began since an early age when he was forcibly taken from his mother's arms by the Imam's soldiers and held as a hostage, and then assigned as a duwaydar in the Governor's divorced sister Sharifa Hafsa. During his time in the palace, the boy was subjected to many sorts of humiliation, despotism, and psychological and physical torture. He was exploited by the Governor's palace occupants, beginning with the Governor himself, his sister Sharifa Hafsa, the Imam's poet, and even the soldiers. They employed him as a servant who carried out their orders and





exploited him to gratify their wants, including sexual ones. It is to be stated that it is a vivid intended attempt the writer made to show the brutality of the Imamate regime and its dominance over the country during the pre-revolution period.

Despite the numerous hardships the protagonist faced, they gave him the opportunity to develop as a person and find a positive approach to deal with them. Instead of giving in to the demands that reality placed on him, he patiently tolerated them before rebelling and announcing his independence and self-reliance. He was able to create his new path in life after making the decision with confidence and satisfaction and carrying it out with pride. Here, Dammaj wanted to prove that it was the harsh reality and suffering that could have made the person more mature and recognize the situation he was put in.

Certainly, the novel wasn't just a one-sided account of a boy being kidnapped and imprisoned before being released. Instead, the hostage was a powerful symbol, intentionally depicted by the writer, of the Yemeni people's suffering, ambition and capability to attain a better life where everyone can live in fairness and equality as they make their way towards liberation after years of struggle against the ruthless Imami dictatorship.

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**To Cite the Article: Bahaj, Omar, and Sudhir, Mathpati, "Childhood innocence in Dammaj's Novel, The Hostage: The Journey from Servility to Emancipation". Literary Cognizance, III-3 (December, 2022): 20-28. Web.**