

Environmental Justice and Oil Industry: Violence Against Human and Non-human Entities as Represented in Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*

Dr. Motasim Almwajeh
Department of English, Jadara University

Abstract

People in the Arab World look at the revenues and financial benefits of oil, but they forget the negative effects of it on the environment and the values, traditions, and practices of local communities. This paper sheds much light on the plight of the local communities as a result of so-called development which takes place at the expense of nature. The paper shows the resistance of the natives to superimposed unhealthy changes, but at the same time it acknowledges that reasonable and gradual change is a necessity as long as it does not lead to the destruction of nature and those who subsist on it.

Keywords: oil, resistance, nature, development, destruction.

Abdelrahman Munif is a prolific novelist, critic, and Marxist sociopolitical activist whose fiction and journalism shed light on the dynamics of the oil industry in the Arab World and on the bedouin communities and traditions that have been largely co-opted and even eradicated by oil-drilling, neoliberal capitalism, and land enclosure. Munif obtained a Ph.D. in petroleum pricing and marketing from the University of Belgrade, a hub of the non-aligned movement. He started writing after he resigned his membership of the Baath Party in Baghdad in 1965 in disapproval of the party's tyrannical practices. He wrote his first novel, *The Trees and the Assassination of Marzouq* (*Al-Ashjaar wa Igtiyaal Marzouq*, 1973), at the age of forty, when he resorted to literature as a more complex tool of resistance and modification. In Munif's words, "The defeat of 1967 pushed me toward the novel not as a means of escape but of confrontation" (qtd. in Hafez, 2006, p. 47). In an interview with Iskandar Habash, Munif commented that he "substitutes one tool with another": "My great gamble was in politics, but after I experimented with political activism, it became apparent that the available political methods were insufficient and unsatisfactory."

Overall, Munif produced a considerable range of work, including fifteen novels, interviews, and newspaper columns, but *Cities of Salt*—the longest novel in modern Arabic literature—established his reputation as one of the most gifted contemporary Arab authors, both locally and globally. Peter Theroux's faithful, sensitive, and excellent English translation of *Cities of Salt* has made it much more widely read, both in the Arab World and worldwide. Without a doubt, Theroux was faced with an extremely challenging task, given that Munif's prose is highly wrought, sophisticated, and riddled with ambiguities and culturally specific idioms, presenting a formidable challenge to non-native speakers of Arabic. I read the novel in both Arabic and English and did not come across any errors or mistranslations; rather, all the aphorisms and expressions are conveyed in plain, equivalent English, sacrificing nothing in readability.

Experienced in the industry and politics of petroleum—a knowledge vastly manifested in his fiction—Munif excavates the underlying insecurities instigated by "petro-capitalism" on the environmental, psychological, and sociopolitical configurations of post-oil Arab countries. As a result, covering "what in real time are the years from 1933 and 1953" (Hafez 56), Munif's epic masterpiece faithfully reproduces, more than any other novel written in the Arabic language, milestones and episodes in the history of the Arab World and the effects of oil on Arab societies, also more comprehensively and accurately than the work of all social scientists put together. *Cities of Salt* demarcates a long period of contemporary Arab history beginning in the twentieth century and uncovers the malevolence embedded in global capitalism on Arabs' cultural identity and ecological well-being. In order to discern the dynamics of the past, present, and future of the contemporary Arab World, Munif speculated that one needs to study oil and that "Petrofiction"—a term coined by Amitav Ghosh to classify literature about the oil industry—provides the most potent instrument.

Although *Cities of Salt* is the most ambitious Arabic and even international work to deal with the history of oil, its tensions, and the subsequent drilling for it in the Arabian Gulf, it is certainly not the first work to do so. A number of Arab writers and scholars have expended substantial effort to elucidate the genuine motivations behind the American presence in the Middle East, as it is directly tied to oil and as it has shaped their perception of their identity, the new global order, and sense of security. In fact, Mahmoud Taimour's novel *Shamrock* (1958) marks the first effort of bringing to light the question of oil exploitation by Western corporations. The events of Taimour's *Shamrock* take place on a fictional island aptly named "Oil-land," and it shows that oil revenues are mostly channeled to transnational corporations and Western companies. It affirms that these corporations propagate Western standards and values, retain Western undertones, and interfere in Arabs' affairs. There are

references to oil and the desert in other Arabic fictive texts, including Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *In Search of Walid Masoud* and Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, but oil is not the cornerstone of these cultural productions.

In *Cities of Salt*, Munif weaves a heart-wrenching story of the metamorphosis of a whole society and the upheavals after the arrival of the American oil corporations in Wadi al-Uyoun (the valley of natural springs) and the subsequent decimation and exile of its oil-scarred community after the destruction of their ecosystem. At the outset, Munif links the bedouins' fluctuating demeanor, expectations, and beliefs to natural undulations, which orient and shape their social, epistemological, and cultural perceptions. For instance, during the years of abundant rainfall, Wadi al-Uyoun's people, who seem blithe and contented, would overexert their insistence that "all travelers stay there longer. . . Their generosity would reach the point of extravagance . . . but during the years of drought" (p. 4), they become cantankerous and introverted. This parameter extends to transform customary Arab communities into "exploited and oppressed populations, and nomadic tribal rivalries into centralized police states" (Hafez, 2006, p. 54). *Cities of Salt* also traces the monumental reconstruction and expansion of the port city of Harran (literally the scorching desert in Arabic), whose ancient courses and landmarks are reduced to rubles in order to make room for oil installations.

As a story of a people's displacement from their land, Munif's *Cities of Salt* chronicles the gradual and ultimately radical transformation of both people and land caused by the tidal wave of oil and American domination, negotiating the complex social and political dimensions of modern Arab states and drawing a vivid picture of the realities of post-oil Arab society. The novel does not have a conventional protagonist; rather, its main character is the aggregate of the newly created working class and the Harrani community, who are part and parcel of the lower class. Issa Boullata explains that the absence of a central character in *Cities of Salt* is not "because the individual is irrelevant or insignificant, but because the aggregate of individuals calls for fictional attention and interest at this juncture of historical circumstance in Arabia."

Given that fact, the novel teems with characters who contribute to the progress of the plot and who perform a specific role and move from the foreground to the background or completely disappear afterward. Some minor and abruptly sketched characters can be immediately forgotten after they disappear, while others have a crucial impact on the course of events. Some characters leave their imprint on the progress of the plot. Take, for example, Miteb al-Hathal (whose first name translates as the troublemaker), the community's ancestral patriarch who instinctively suspects the Americans and who, even after his exodus from Wadi al-Uyoun, remains a phantom, a prophetic, spectral figure appearing sporadically to strike terror into those collaborating with the Americans and multinational oil companies. Thus, it is conjectured that he is behind any act of resistance (terror from the Americans' standpoint). He is held responsible for setting fire to the Americans' tents in H2 and the eruption of a proletarian revolution after the dismissal of twenty-three of the company's workers and the assassination of Mufaddi al-Jeddani at the behest of Johar, the truculent commander of the Desert Army. Mufaddi is murdered because his threatening logic and ideology have nettled the Americans and the ruling elite who have become extremely oppressive of any contradicting views. In a parallel vein, Mufaddi al-Jeddani, Harran's only "healer" before the arrival of the capitalist doctor Subhi Almahmalji, embodies the forces of the old and has a key role in the novel, both before and after his death. His memory and specter assist in solidifying the community's self-identity and mobilize the lower class to confront torment and demand justice. Some protesters "swore" that "they saw a phantom shaped like a man flying above their heads, and it looked exactly like Mufaddi al-Jeddani" (p. 616).

In this way, the novel becomes a harmonious panorama in which vignettes build up in a dramatic manner. However, the main characters share the common denominator of beginning a journey toward the unknown, a labyrinth or a maze. Although Miteb is not a heroic figure, he poses as the most ambivalent and sophisticated character in the novel. On a whim, he defies the Americans' and their self-interested collaborators' philanthropic rhetoric of coming to Wadi al-Uyoun to look for water and bring wealth and prosperity to its people, enunciating that it is a self-serving act. He declares, "They certainly didn't come for water—they want something else . . . They said, 'Wait, just be patient and all of you will be rich!' But what do they want from us, and what does it concern them if we get rich or stay just as we are [Miteb chooses not to use the word poor]?" (p. 29) The people of the wadi, especially Miteb, look askance at the foreigners' habits of going to "places no one dreamed of going" and collecting "unthinkable" items (p. 30). They enquire "about dialects, about tribes and their disputes, about religion and sects, about the rocks, the winds, and the rainy season" (p. 31). The Americans' declared intentions of coming to the desert to aide its people crumble at the threshold of real-life situations—the formation of a "rightless" class of workers and the devastation of the wadi's ecosystem. The most striking examples entail the wiping out of Wadi al-Uyoun and Harran and the enslavement of the local inhabitants because of the oil discovery.

Indubitably, the various colonial discourses share a number of characteristics and tend to be laden with such rhetorical ruses as bringing light, relief, democracy, and modernization to the colonized, making any protest against these "marvelous" concepts appear absurd. Belying the colonizers' evil purpose, this decoying form of rhetoric facilitates the implementation of the U. S.'s imperial policies behind the façade of helping the local

inhabitants. Like Miteb, other central dissenters against so-called “development” and capitalism—including Miteb’s wife Wadha, the fortuneteller Najma al-Mithqal, Umm Khosh, Mufaddi al-Jaddan, Ibn Naffeh, and Khazna Al-hamad—voice their apprehension and skepticism toward the Americans’ ulterior motives, concurring that they want oil no matter what. These characters wind up exiled, incarcerated, murdered, or driven to madness because of their resistance to environmental and social injustice.

Moreover, the Americans’ discourse essentializes capitalism as a desirable principle while it relegates communal and sustainable modes to the realm of the problematic that must restructure and reshuffle in order to be acknowledged in the new world order. This demand conceals assimilative paradigms in which the lifestyles and ethos of the local inhabitants are made incompatible with the real motives of a “modern” colonizer. As an impediment to “development,” the local inhabitants have to relocate, abandon their values, and consume the same colonial technologies for which they are not prepared. These social class stratifications originate from the locus of power (the Americans and their upper-class allies) to a weaker periphery (the lower class), institutionalizing inequalities as well as hierarchies of power relations. Alert that this seductive rhetoric aims to mesmerize the local people and impede any resistance or at least objection to the American intervention in the desert, Miteb seeks to dissuade the emir from paving the way for the Americans and to rally countervailing forces to defend the wadi. Ania Loomba defines colonialism “as the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods” (8). In light of this commonsensical definition, the oil companies, with their ardent concern with seizing the oil-rich land, can only be seen as imperialist forces, playing a “midwifery” role at the birth of global capitalism.¹ Simply, without colonialism, the transition to capitalism could have never taken place. The present-day U. S. oscillates between colonialism and neocolonialism, which intersect. That is to say, the U. S. resorts to military action if the “others” oppose its global dominance.

Munif satirizes the oxymoronic concept of *imposed* freedom or the human rights rhetoric that almost always accompanies global capitalism and the American adventures in the Middle East, one that is actually devised to sanction the luxury of certain groups to the detriment of others. More than ever before, the local inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun and Harran are dehumanized, objectified, foreclosed, and even rendered invisible to the colonizers whose prime concern is making profit irrespective to human and nonhuman suffering. In one of the most revealing scenes, Miteb moved and stopped and cursed and gazed at everything as though he would never see the place again . . . he flinched every time the Americans pointed back in his direction, thinking at first that they were pointing at him. Then, he realized that they were pointing instead to the land he was walking on; that he was no more than a landmark to them. (p. 103)

Before the arrival of the oil companies, Miteb is a venerable tribal leader who enjoys a special status among his people, given his lineage as a member of a family famous for being the “fiercest worriers against the Turks; they had never slept in the same place twice and had turned the Sultan’s Road into Hell on earth” (p. 109). The invocation here is that as his forebears defended the oasis against the Turks, Miteb will strive to guard it against the Americans who are adamant about ransacking it in their oil frenzy.

Munif is one of a small number of Arab and even international writers who have dared to extensively and polemically discuss the underpinnings of the oil industry, the American presence in the Middle East, and “petro-despots.” To a great extent, *Cities of Salt* pays considerable attention to the environmental wreckage and oil extraction as tied to issues of neocolonialism, tyranny, and global capitalism, not to mention the traumatic communal transformation accompanied by the discovery of oil. After a visit to post-oil Wadi al-Uyoun, Miteb’s son Fawaz laments that “There was no trace of the wadi he had left behind; none of the old things remained. Even the fresh breezes that used to blow at this time of year had become hot and searing in daytime” (Munif, p. 135). The passage above reveals the extent to which the wadi is tainted and transformed that even the resuscitating “breezes” have become scorching and dry due to environmental impairment.

Using a comparable mechanism, cowing the Harranis who are too seen as a barrier to the process of oil drilling to sell their oil-rich land, the envoy of Ibn Rashed, the Americans’ local collaborator and Miteb’s antithesis, petrifies and terrorizes them with much the same damage inflicted on Wadi al-Uyoun: “There isn’t a single person or house left there—everyone had to leave. They were all scattered under the stars . . . Here, in Harran, some of the *workers* are originally from Wadi al-Uyoun” (p. 253, my emphasis). Through deception and coercion, communal and private land has been usurped and concentrated in the hands of the Americans and a few elite people who fail to perceive any spiritual or cultural essence in land beyond its pecuniary value. Once more, Ibn Rashed slyly orders one of his workers to apprise the Harranis that their communal land belongs to the government. It is the “government’s privilege to take and give out land and that they couldn’t eat or drink land” (p. 252). Therefore, they had better surrender their land and receive some compensation, because their land will be ultimately annexed.

In addition to expounding the ramifications of flattening and altering the Eden-like oasis of Wadi al-Uyoun

¹ I object to and refrain from using euphemistic expressions such as “discoverers,” “explorers,” or “oil experts” to describe American capitalists in the Middle East; rather, I stress that this is another form of colonialism or imperialism using the alibis of development, democracy, and freedom.

into an oil-metropolitan, *Cities of Salt* underlines the consequences of living in Harran's degraded, disconnected environment. Munif's *Cities of Salt* exposes what happens when the ecological and sociocultural systems necessary for the maintenance of human welfare "fall apart." In *Street Fighting Years*, Tariq Ali queried Munif about the meaning of the title of his masterpiece, and Munif clarified that it refers to "cities that offer no sustainable existence. When the waters come in, the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities to dust (p. 58). In essence, the forceful dispersal and displacement of the inhabitants of the wadi to Harran redefine their communal ties and their relationship with nature. Thus, *Cities of Salt* renders a trenchant critique of class oppression and offers an outstanding example of ecological refugees whose plight stems from imperial havocs wreaked on their ecosystem, which is replaced with "mud structures heaped up against one another" (395) and afterward "tall symmetrical buildings" that bear no connection to nature (Ali 57).

In contrast to the common stereotypes of bedouins as sinister harbingers of bloodshed and banditry with no sense of place, Munif epitomizes the inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun as deeply ingrained in place: "The al-Aoun clan, to which Jazi al-Hathal and his father Miteb before him had belonged, had been sown in this place like the palm trees" (p. 10). On the one hand, they view the wadi as a sanctuary warranting pride, a place that constitutes their identity and survival. On the other hand, they behold "money and possession with haughtiness and sometimes outright scorn" (Munif, p. 8). In his classic tome *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, Friedrich Engels holds that for the working class, "money is worth only what it will buy, whereas for the bourgeois it has an especial inherent value, the value of a god, and makes the bourgeois the mean, low money-grabber that he is" (p. 125). It should thus come as no surprise that, oblivious of the wadi's cultural and spiritual resources that have accumulated throughout history and infatuated only with the oil underground, outsiders deem indigenous land a commodity that can be owned by and sold to multiple owners.

Indeed, the fictional Arab communities, as portrayed by Munif, are altered from largely egalitarian bedouin communities governed by the laws of nature and the elders into a consumerist hybrid plutocracy or oligarchy in which voices contradicting the official rhetoric of the ruling elite are brutally silenced and freedom of expression is suffocated. Modernity celebrates individualism, pragmatism, commercialization, privatization, and labor. Yet, it inadvertently generates a number of intriguing potentials for novel subjectivities, new associations, socioeconomic change, and an alternative modernity, as people consolidate and organize in opposition to oppression. To Sabry Hafez, the arrival of modernity in traditional societies in the Middle East is "inseparable from the proliferation of tyranny," and the oil riches are "evil feeding corruption, greed, and human weakness. We watch the crushing of the life of the desert, with its freedom, independence and dignity, under the wheels of a repellent juggernaut" (54). In pre-petroleum Wadi al-Uyoun, dialogue, not violence, is favored to settle disputes among the people, and the common people and their emirs are required to convene when the emirs wrong.

The confiscation of these rights with the rise of capitalism demonstrates that systematic development inaugurates despotic modes of authority with the environment and its inhabitants, thereby curdling their liberal aspirations into disillusionment. In an interview during the Gulf War of 1990-1991, Munif complained that "oil becomes a damnation. In 20 or 30 years time, we shall discover that oil has been a real tragedy for the Arabs, and these giant cities built in the desert will find no one to live in them. . ." (qtd. in Nixon). *Cities of Salt* shows the devastating impact of capitalist modernity and technology on local communities. As Munif puts it, these "people were poor, but they were happy with the life they lived and praised it extravagantly" (p. 8).

At the heart of *Cities of Salt* is the problematic alliance between the Americans and the local elite, whose mutual interests converge under the auspices of the new world order. It then displays the struggle of the local inhabitants against their puppet political leaders as well as the avarice of oil companies wrought by the Americans, designating that these petroleum behemoths capitalize at the expense of the local inhabitants. Besides, the ruling elites pave the way for the American oil companies, which come for their own profit, to dominate and exploit the people and their environment. The rulers conspire to allow them a free hand in return for unimaginable wealth.

As a result of this multiple dilemma, the common people have to resist not only the invaders, but also the totalitarian political leaders who brought them and granted them the pretext to abuse the locals and rob them of the sources of their subsistence in the name of development. In "The Hidden Lives of Oil," Rob Nixon argues that the dominant story of petroleum links the U. S. "to the Middle East in a matrix of mutual, volatile dependencies." As a harsh critic of this lopsided, inequitable "relationship" between the U. S. and the oil countries of the Middle East, Munif anticipated that this neocolonial "partnership" will lead to wars and desperate acts of terror against U. S. interests in the Middle East. The most glaring example of the volatility of these bonds driven by oil gluttony between the U. S. and the Middle East is the rise and fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's infamous dictator whose political and economic aspirations obstructed the U. S.'s domination of Iraqi oil. Saddam's egregious human rights record was manipulated to justify the incursion into Iraq, distract public attention from the arcane motives behind the war, and ensure American dominance over the world's richest-known oil reserves in the Middle East. As a rule of thumb, Saddam's human rights record surfaced *only when* he

posed a threat to multinational oil companies and stopped cooperating with the imperial powers that, in the first place, helped build up his military and economic might.

These powers managed to keep his human rights abuses and misapplications off the media's agenda, but when he proved a formidable obstacle to the dissemination of neoliberal global capitalism, they revealed all his heinous crimes to the public. I am not, by any means, suggesting that Saddam was an angel, but there are more ruthless leaders whose human rights records are made absent from the media's reach, either because they are in line with Western policies or because the West is not interested in their oil-poor regions. By now, all of the Bush Administration's justifications of the war on Iraq have been invalidated. Another case I feel compelled to mention here is the blind eye that the West turns to Israel's unspeakable massacres of the Palestinian people with the U. S.'s unquestioning approbation and complicity. The list can be expanded, as there are many examples that I do not have enough space to address them all, but one won't fail to pull the strings together and discern the double standards and injustices bedeviling the new world order that places unconditional pressure on the "Other." Munif observed that the U. S., "obsessed with oil fever and the need to control it, has gone much too far in protecting regimes and individuals unworthy of protection" (qtd. in Nixon).

In its parallel juxtaposition of customary, pre-capitalist and post-capitalist Wadi al-Uyoun and Harran, *Cities of Salt* documents the shocks, ambivalences, and anarchies that gripped the inhabitants of these villages after the arrival of U. S. oil companies. It laments the price paid in human and nonhuman lives for oil-hungry machines and tallies the cultural, epistemological, ideological, and class-based quarrels between the forces of the old and the forces of the new. Ammiel Alcalay explains that in *Cities of Salt*, we can see "the march of progress' as the new usurps the old through the development of 'modern' institutions: traditional healers give way to quack doctors and hospitals; tribal henchmen to uninformed soldiers and armies; customs and justice are replaced by arbitrary decrees and rule of 'law'" (p. 135). Yet this novel should not be read as a threnody for tradition, as Munif frequently criticized unconstructive conventional practices, and he saw in productive development and modernization a vehicle to rid Arab countries of the yoke of foreign domination.

As such, he did not oppose modernization, mineral wealth, development, and democracy; rather, he was critical of how these systems and concepts are obfuscated to further subdue the oppressed masses. Moreover, despite his largely idealistic portrayals of the pre-petroleum community of Wadi al-Uyoun, Munif acknowledges, especially at the beginning of the novel, the tremendously patriarchal structure of its families. He simultaneously exposes the heightened objectification and exploitation of women in Western culture, reversing the negative stereotypes of misogyny that have been solely ascribed to Arabs by viewing patriarchy as a universal phenomenon. Western women are portrayed as targets of the male gaze, the embodiment of social codes within a context essentially androcentric and male privileging; they are reduced to sex objects whose purpose is to satisfy male sexual desire. The Arabs' shock at the colonialists' objectification of women reached its climax "when the last boat came ashore with one man and seven women. The women were reclining around the bushy-bearded, hairy-chested man, who fondled, smacked and leaned over them one by one and put his arms around two at a time" (217). Munif's description of these women who are dehumanized and turned into fetishized objects through exaggerated cosmetics and styling allows for voyeurism and reveals the much pressure on them to view their bodies as packaged items. These women become the sensuous objects of male gaze by both Western and non-Western men. Ibn Rashed pejoratively says, "These women are like sheep—white and soft and naked, and nothing else" (p. 226).

More to the point, Munif negotiates the characteristics of post-oil (postmodern) societies that exhibit patterns of discontinuity, complexity, chaos, "perspectivism," and fragmentation, illuminating the disarrays wrought by environmental and social racism. In one of the most poignant scenes in *Cities of Salt*, Munif delineates the butchery of the wadi by the mad machines in predatory terms:

The tractors attacked the orchards like ravenous wolves, tearing up the trees and throwing them to the earth one after the other . . . After destroying the first grove of trees, the tractors turned to the next with the same bestial voracity and uprooted them. The trees shook violently and groaned before falling, cried for help, wailed, panicked, called out in helpless pain and then fell entreatingly to the ground. (p. 106)

Here, the novel approximates the physical violence needed to transmute humans and nonhumans into commodities. Witnessing the preliminary stages of the wadi's "butchery" by the "maddened machines," powerless and defenseless Miteb gives an anguished cry, mounts his Omani camel, and disappears into the hills. In *The Arabic Novel*, Roger Allen hypothesizes that Miteb's "disappearance and the intermittent reported sightings of him from the community become symbolic of the disappearance of an old way of life and of suspicions regarding the motivations of the foreign visitors" (p. 93). In Hafez's words, *Cities of Salt* "can be read as a huge canvas of the brutalities of modernization and its devastation of customary ways of living" (p. 54). The social change of the wadi's community is manifested in their reaction to Miteb al-Hathal's pathetic desertion. Shockingly, Miteb's departure is barely noticed in the shifting context of all matters: "Only a few people saw him leave. They were busy and afraid, watching the maddened machines uproot the trees and level the earth and topple everything . . ." (p. 108).

After Miteb vamooses the wadi, his son Shaalan stays there to work for the American oil company and to ask for compensation for the destruction of their natural supplies. Miteb's own family suffers from vicissitude because Shaalan's stay in the wadi indicates his acquiescence in the new status quo and prophesies more divisions among the inhabitants of the wadi. In this new era, he is christened "Company Shaalan" or "American Shaalan" instead of Shaalan the son of Miteb al-Hathal, to sever him from his origins and heroic roots. The narrator wonders, "How is it possible for people and places to change so entirely that they lose any connection with what they used to be?" (p. 134) Also, the Americans give ancient places new names, calling the stations surrounding Harran H1, H2, and H3. The collective identity of the wadi's inhabitants has become more individualistic and pragmatic, where people no longer care for one another. Fawaz, Miteb's son, is dismayed at the mistreatment, fragmentation, and torment of the workers in Wadi al-Uyoun: "It seemed to him that each of these men lived by himself without any connections to the others around him" (p. 137).

The inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun and Harran are deprived of any compensation for trampling their houses and palm orchards, draining their fountains and wells, and degrading their grazing land and ecosystem as a whole, though Ibn Rashed has evasively promised them better dwellings and big sums of money. In another instance, the oil company in Harran intractably refuses to pay any compensation for Mizban's death because, according to its manager, "the law is the law, and rules are rules," and because the company's legal department decrees that "the company is neither responsible nor liable, since the transfer of the workers to the company's responsibility was not effected until after the decease" (356).

After the destruction of its ecosystem and means of subsistence, Wadi al-Uyoun witnesses new confrontations based on the nature-culture binary oppositions instead of the communal holistic configuration that has the power of foiling divisions embedded in culture-nature determinisms. These struggles take place in urban settings that are structured by forces of class-based social splits, racism, and capitalism. Accordingly, *Cities of Salt* traces the rise of two belligerent classes; the change in mentality owing to new social and economic circumstances; and the arrival of profit-hungry contractors, doctors, big corporations, and transportation companies, along with capitalists such as Hassan Rizaie, Ibrahim al-Saad, and Mohieddin al-Naqib. At this turning point, the novel spotlights the conflict between the local inhabitants and the working class, on the one side, and the ruling elite, the newly affluent, and the Americans who embody the institutions of the new, on the other. Contemplating the ecological and sociopolitical cleavages and wreckages accentuated by capitalism, Ibn Naffeh, Harran's religiously politicized leader who explicitly reviles anything associated with the Americans, sees in modernity and technology (the telescope and the radio, Rizaie's bribery to ingratiate himself with the emir) rivals to his religious authority. He pontificates on matters of grave importance and pronounces that the "Americans are the root of the problem, and what's happened now is nothing compared to what they have in store for us" (p. 578).

Time and again, Munif declared that domestic and international injustices made for a fertile environment for the rise of fundamentalism and counter-violence, prognosticating a mounting sense of antagonism toward the West, especially among the ostracized. Amitav Ghosh remarks, "If the Spice Trade has any twentieth-century equivalent, it can only be the oil industry," with a major difference: the production of literature, as the "oil encounter has produced scarcely a single work of note" (p. 75). Ghosh ascribes this scarcity of "petrofiction" to the entanglements of the oil industry and the political unrest to all parties involved. He argues that *Cities of Salt* details a confrontation between two fundamentally disparate worldviews. In the first, the emir sits in coffee-houses,

where everybody had time for everyone else and no one was ever so ill that they needed remedies that were sold for money, and a universe in which Mr. Middleton of the oil company holds their livelihoods in his hands, where to the newly arrived Lebanese doctor Subhi al-Mahmilji charges huge fees for the smallest service, where the "petro-despot" emir spies on the townspeople with telescope and needs a cadre of secret police to tell him what they are thinking. (p. 84)

The burgeoning complex, heterogeneous society is strictly divided into pyramid-shaped hierarchal structures. At the top of the pyramid is a small state-protected, property-holding class of ruling elite and aristocrats who literally own the means of production. At the very bottom lie the disenfranchised proletarians who are merely toiling machines in the service of the upper class. Overall, the recent "developments" (building a port and a pipeline), the rapid expansion of Harran, and the lately arising institutions demand a great deal of menial labor. To meet the demand for workers in the oil industry, the uprooted bedouins are coaxed with rewards into toiling for the Americans and the emir. This conversion of the local inhabitants into exploited laborers is facilitated after they are made to sell their land and camels—their means of transportation and source of living. This process of livelihood destruction and desperation has led to a growing supply of workers who were self-employed. Deprived of the constituents essential for their survival, the bankrupt, poverty-stricken shepherds, farmers, traders, and shopkeepers seek entry into the urban labor force to live on wages from the oil company. At any rate, their animals and plants cannot survive in this toxic environment, so they are placed in an irreversible situation.

In conjunction with converting the local inhabitants into travelling, sweating workers, there has been an influx of workers who never “hesitate to accept any work” and who feel “intimidated to the point of despair” (p. 207). I find Engels’s *Condition of the Working Classes in England in 1844* pertinently applicable to *Cities of Salt*, given these two books’ focus on class struggles in degraded urban environments, albeit their different cultural and historical contexts. Engels contends that before the rise of capitalism, these toiling workers “did not need to overwork; they did no more than they chose to do, and yet earned what they needed” (p. 2). The workers in Harran have migrated from various neighboring and far-off places, permanently expanding the size of the working class, which has become, through the process of “proletarianization,” subservient to the bourgeoisie. According to Engels, “the worker is, in law and in fact, the slave of the property-holding class, so effectually a slave that he is sold like a piece of goods, rises and falls in value like a commodity” (p. 79). He also adds that “the proletariat has no other choice than that of either accepting the conditions which the bourgeoisie offers him, or of starving, of freezing to death, of sleeping naked” in the scorching desert (p. 76).

Ultimately, the company builds a purely industrial, capitalist city populated only by workmen who are huddled and cramped in “barracks hastily constructed with wood and sheer metal” (p. 290). The workers are told that these are provisional camps, and, in a short while, “the Arabs will have houses built for them just like the ones the Americans have” (p. 291). As it happens, the workers’ dwellings linger in the most depressing and filthy conditions, lack cleanliness and convenience, and are incompatible with family life. As Karl Marx puts it, “It is true that labour produces wonderful things for the rich—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* 88). Also, Harran’s arid, polluted environment is suffocating to its long-time residents, but it is much unhealthier and disheartening to the later settlers; it filled their “chests with a strangling oppression from the very time of their arrival there” (p. 244). The drastic ecological and atmospheric change in Harran has unpalatable effects on the workers, especially the ones uprooted from Wadi al-Uyoun, who are not accustomed to such a harsh environment or drudgery: “The people accustomed in former years to the slow advent of the summer, heralding its own arrival with rising heat and humidity, were surprised by this summer’s early assault” (p. 374). After the company’s complete obliteration of the ecosystem, Harran witnesses a drought, “searing winds, and tumultuous sand storms” that it has never seen before, mixed with dirt that almost covered the whole city.

Even the nights that are usually mild and soothing in their coolness have become grim and heavy this year. The workers are, in Engels’s words, “drawn into the large cities where they breathe a poorer atmosphere than in the country; they are relegated to districts which . . . are worse ventilated than any others; they are deprived of all means of cleanliness” (p. 97). Under such suppressive structures that split the world into knowers and objects of knowledge, and proletariat and bourgeoisie, and because of the stark disparity between the workers’ living conditions and those of the Americans, the Harranis feel systematically plundered and divested of their autonomy, dignity, and humanity. Therefore, they demand a commendable position on the grid of power relations. The Americans live in air-conditioned enclaves erected behind barbed wires with gardens and swimming pools, while the Arabs, despite all the oil revenues, commerce, and abundance, are callously forced to live in broken, suffocating, and fetid hovels. This increasing sense of prejudice prompts the counter-resistance of these subordinated groups: Injustice and discrimination often backfire and engender protests.

What’s worse under this hegemonic capitalist system—which deepens the chasm between local beneficiaries and the masses shattered and subdued by oil—is that workers face the risk of layoff, loss of resources, and starvation. Basically, the oil company can dismiss its employees when machines take over or when they are no longer needed without any penalties or without endangering its revenues. Receiving the news of his discharge from the company, one of the workers decries: “They just threw us out without giving us a reason, as if we had no rights” (p. 586). The swelling unrest of the Harranis and their growing disgruntlement with the vulnerability of their position, along with their subjection to the most dreadful brutalities, have reached their pinnacle with the murder of Mufaddi al-Jeddan and the laying-off of twenty-three employees from the company after the pipeline between wadi al-Uyoun and Harran is completed: “When the news of Mufaddi’s murder spread, their resentment rose to the surface; they felt unnecessarily, intolerably oppressed” (p. 596). The murder of Mufaddi and the firing of twenty-three employees from the company after the pipeline is finished constitute the instantaneous impetus behind the workers’ strike at the end of the novel. Yet the workers’ anger has accumulated through time, especially since they are subjected to the most repugnant physical and psychological abuses at the hands of the Americans and the emir’s soldiers, who hurl imprecations at those who defy their “authority.” Hence, they are placed in the most revolting position where they march through the town in protest against the Americans and their allies.

Grippingly, Mufaddi’s death goes beyond an individual’s death, as he is the most conspicuous epitome of the forces of the old and is a symbol of the strife of the lower class. Mufaddi “had never worked for money and did not hide his contempt for it, nor did he trade his services for favors. He got extremely angry when anyone offered to pay him, no matter how much or how little” (p. 547). The workers’ chagrin is further augmented by

the interrogation, fingerprinting, and classification they are required to undergo earlier in the novel. Also, the tragic death of Mizban during his service to the company and the humiliation of his brother Hajem have provoked the workers to take action with little fear of reprisal or arrest. These incidents aside, the constant vituperating and flouting of the workers, embittering them with adversities by incarcerating them in newly created jails (establishing a surveillance culture), and forcing them to overwork drive them to revolt against the bourgeoisie. At this stage, rebellion becomes the only language the class that plunders them so mercilessly understands. In Nixon's words, "subjects had less and less to lose and soon began to lose all fear." This injustice explains the impetus behind the wave of Arab spring that has swept a number of Arab countries.

In response to the workers' rejection of the company's decision, Johar, the commander of the newly established Desert Army, instantly resorts to violence, ordering his troops to scourge them severely and "Break their bones. Curse their grandfathers and have no mercy" (p. 583). In hopes of curbing the revolution and mollifying the workers' conflated dissenting voices into one protest, Johar attempts first to convince the workers who are not thrown out to not join the revolt, as it is not of their business. Still, the workers "smashed the gate, tore up the notices, and destroyed the bulletin board. . . . Juma tried to escape from them. . . . but they tied him to the cement gatepost and left him there after taking away the whip" (p. 586), the symbol of authority over the working class. Fused into one voice and led by two of Miteb's sons, the protesters demand the reinstatement of the unduly fired workers and an investigation to find Mufaddi's murderer. The marchers' chants of resistance are loud and rhythmical:

Your blood, O Mufaddi, is not forgotten. . . .

Stone by stone, we constructed,

Inch by inch, we built the pipe. . . .

Our rights are everlasting, they are ours.

With our blood and sweat we will achieve them! (p. 596-97)

Because they are consumed with sorrow and anger, the workers confront their oppressor. They question and refute the systems that cherish the bourgeoisie yet victimize them:

Why did they have to live like this, while the Americans lived so differently? Why were they barred from going near an American house, even from looking at the swimming pool or standing for a moment in the shade of one of their trees? Why did the American shout at them, telling them to move, to leave the place immediately, expelling them like dogs? Juma never hesitated to lash out with his whip when he found the workers in "restricted areas." . . . The Americans were never satisfied with anything but constant work. (p. 595)

Engels comments, "If any one wishes to see in how little space a human being can move, how little air-and such air!-he can breathe, how little of civilization he may share and yet live, it is only necessary to travel hither" (p. 53).

As less and less of the old life remains and as cultural traditions are irretrievably subsumed, obliterated, or co-opted by hegemonic forces, a new sense of solidarity emerges among the workers who settle in Harran and configure a new home and community because of petro-capitalism. The "unhomed" workers, to borrow Homi Bhabha's term, become aware of their oil-inflicted deficiency of rights, homelessness, and disadvantaged position, so they, as a group with largely common interests and experiences, start forming coalitions and coalesce to counterbalance this trend of injustice and baneful development. Hence, a more complex "hybrid" alternative tradition of modernity that critiques capitalist modernity becomes indispensable to a Marxist struggle claiming common impulses and a cause of action and resistance.

Manifold positions of resistance are generated in exigent circumstances of exploitation and displacement, and some are much more conservative and competent than others. Take, for example, the genuine empathy Miteb develops with Umm Khosh because of his own experience with losing power and social status, after the advent of the Americans. This association between Miteb and Umm Khosh stems from their shared silence and rejection of unsettling realities. Umm Khosh refuses to believe that her only son Khosh will never return to Wadi al-Uyoun, and Miteb resists the Americans' intervention in the desert, though they are authorized by the emir. Of course, this is not the only motive behind his unbending eco-resistance to the Americans and their capitalist allies, but it is a prime factor. Miteb is the only one "who kept his old feelings toward Umm Khosh or even grew more sympathetic to her. He made sure to be near her most of the time to protect her from harm, to keep the children away and to save her from the collapse. . ." (p. 63). There are many references to this allegiance between Miteb and Umm Khosh, where Miteb's "melancholy," instigated by environmental and social racism, is linked to Umm Khosh's grievances and lamentations at the unexplained evanescence of her only son. The people of the wadi reiterate that Miteb has "got just like Umm Khosh—you cannot reason with him" (p. 58). Both share a sense of loss and belittlement driven by dissimilar, albeit interconnected, dynamic tensions: imperialist land usurpation and enclosure and loss of a dear family member.

Another model of mutual struggle against capitalist modernity is the alliance forged between the two hybrid truck drivers, Akoub and Raji Abu Aqlein, who obtain employment as a result of the emergence of petro-capitalism in Harran. Once sworn enemies and rivals, Akoub, a spectral figure in the novel, and irascible Raji

formulate an alternative tradition of cooperation against a new adversary: multinational tycoons. When they first arrive in Harran, Raji hates and envies Akoub and regards him as his rival. In the early phase of petro-capitalism, small-size corporations and businesses competing with one another in the market. Alvin So states that “as capitalism developed, the number of capitalists has become smaller because of the inherent dynamics of concentration and centralization of capital” (p. 24). First, the ever-expanding markets and the need of technology have induced corporations to boost their production. Conversely, the sheer competition in the market has plummeted many small businesses, such as Raji’s and Akoub’s that have become the target of takeover by Hassan Rizaie’s and Mohieddin al-Naqib’s corporations, into bankruptcy and liquidation and hired labor. This process of capitalism leaves us with a largely dwindling rich class and an ever-expanding poor one, as the middle class completely evaporates. Essentially, as “corporations devour one another, there is a massive concentration of ownership in the hands of the bourgeoisie” (p. 24).

Some other positions of resistance and consolidation include the unsuccessful partnership between Hajem and his uncle, referred to as “the old bedouin” throughout the novel, to oblige either Ibn Rashed, who skulks into every place for fear of being held accountable for Mizban’s death, or the oil company to pay the due compensation for Mizban’s death, with the latent sympathy of all the employees with their case. A more conservative pattern of resistance prompted by capitalist modernity integrates the vigorous solidarity among Khazna al-Hassan, Mufaddi’s skillful assistant, Mufaddi, and Ibn Naffeh. As the embodiment of unswerving tradition and religious fundamentalism, these aggressive characters become aware of their insecure place on the grid of power and realize that their means of survival are devoured by forces of capitalist modernity, so they become much more conservative, totally rejecting and demonizing the forces of the new, even the positive aspects of modernity. In fact, Khazna and Ibn Naffeh use Mufaddi’s death as a pretext for mobilizing resistance and igniting antagonism toward the Americans and their elite allies. Ibn Naffeh declares, “It was the Americans who killed Mufaddi—they’re the whole reason, they are the root of the problem” (p. 578). Still, the most pivotal and prominent coalition is the one formed between the company workers and the local Harranis, for they all feel systematically manipulated and reduced to objects of exploitation and domination.

Because of the booming petro-capitalism and the constructions of highways in Harran, the capitalist Hassan Rizaie brings eight huge trucks into Harran. Harassed and threatened with losing the source of their livelihood, Akoub and Raji consolidate and unite in order to become less susceptible to the pressures of the elite. Rizaie orders the drivers of the new trucks to do away with Raji and Akoub: “crash into them on the road, and they’ll die God’s death or end up slaves” (p. 490). In order to nullify and devour Akoub’s and Raji’s small businesses, Rizaie’s trucks and al-Naqib’s buses “began to transport goods and passengers to and from Harran at no charge, or for a minimal fee” (p. 491). There is a notorious, unethical competition between the two corporations: “Naqib stole Rizaie’s passengers just as Rizaie had stolen the passengers and cargo business from Raji and Akoub” (p. 496). Each seeks to remove those standing in his way and to take over their position. Tactically, when the Harranis accustom themselves to the new trucks and buses and when Akoub’s and Raji’s trucks no longer run, fees will double or even triple, and the working class will be crowded out by this competition.

When Akoub dies, the workers skip work to attend his burial: “They simply informed the personnel office that one of their colleagues had passed away, and that they had to attend his funeral. . . . Beyond this measure of solidarity, Ibn Zamel, Ibn Hathal, and every one of the other workers did what they could to express their love and respect for Akoub” (p. 502). The workers demand better treatment and more advantages. Engels sums up this process as follows:

If the centralization of population stimulates and develops the property-holding class, it forces the development of the workers yet more rapidly. The workers begin to feel as a class, as a whole; they begin to perceive that, though feeble as individuals, they form a power untied; their separation from the bourgeoisie, the development of views peculiar to the workers and corresponding to their position in life, is fostered, the consciousness of oppression awakens, and the workers attain social and political importance. (p. 122)

Assuming that men are physically stronger than women, the company hires only men; thus, it creates and re-enforces a stringently applied division of labor between men and women. I argue and have argued that colonization and “development” propagate patriarchal ideologies and hitherto have underdeveloped the colonized by perpetuating despotic regimes. This is why women play an ancillary role in or are completely absent from the parts marking the historic mission of the working class, which is composed only of men. While men in “modern” Harran, after the proliferation of the oil industry, are plunged into the ranks of the proletariat, women are confined to their houses to perform domestic, socially prescribed tasks such as looking after children at home.

On a different level, despite the oil revenue boom, the colossal monetary affluence is improperly shared between the few ruling elites and the economically disadvantaged, culturally diminished, and politically estranged. From this perspective, *Cities of Salt* embodies Munif’s historiographic preoccupation, as it chronicles the devastation of Wadi al-Uyoun and the subsequent rise of Harran, which used to be a small town inhabited by a few fishermen. Munif debunks master historical narratives and elevates authentic Arab history and present to

their rightful place. He employs cultural symbols of the sea and desert: In Arabic literature, the sea or the ship signifies foreign intervention or domination, as the colonial powers usually invade these regions through the sea, while the desert embodies the native consciousness of the Arab. The narrator observes that “a group of Americans arrived by the *sea* road, and it appeared that they had been here several times before” (p. 183, my emphasis). Interestingly, Fawaz describes the first Americans to arrive in Wadi al-Uyoun as “Franks,” a word frequently employed to invoke memories of the Crusades and other Islamic-Christian Europe confrontations and designates that the Americans are impulsively envisioned as a theological, cultural, and social threat to the locals.

All in all, Munif fashions a uniquely “Arab” perspective of history and a narrative style difficult for Western readers who are neither inured to such a narrative style nor the novel’s Quranic, non-Biblical discourse. Therefore, the English translation was largely denounced in North America. For example, John Updike acrimoniously dismissed Munif as a verdant writer too deficient in technical expertise to construct such a big project, discrediting his writing style as verging toward inconsistency and mishmash and “unfortunate, given the epic potential of his topic, that Mr. Munif appears to be *insufficiently westernized* to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel” (qtd. in Alcalay, p. 143, my emphasis). Noticeably, Updike idealized Western literature as the supreme product of civilization and openly disparaged those who do not conform to it, neglecting the fact that authors from various cultural paradigms tend to have different writing styles. As befits any ambitious author, Munif can be legitimately criticized for idealizing and largely romanticizing the bedouin past. He does not attend to the dynamic tensions within the bedouin society itself. In addition, Munif overlooks the “positive” side of oil—the fact that it has been used as a “weapon” against the West to take a more moderate stance toward the plights of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, these criticisms should not be used to deter people from reading the novel, as Updike’s charges do.

Though Munif’s critiques and lamentations are Arabo-centric in the sense that they bring into focus oil-driven mayhems in fictional Arabic states. Munif was exiled and stripped of his Saudi citizenship, and such incidents testify to the lack of work in this field. Because of the complexity of the political terrain he negotiated and his scathing satire of Arab petro-despots, Munif was the subject of multiple modes of effacement, censorship, and banishment by some Arab regimes. Inveighing against the despotic regimes in some Arab states is synonymous with assassination, torture, and exile. In states in which democratic practices are not sanctioned or not existent at all, the consequences of speaking out can be catastrophic. This looming risk explains Munif’s multiple dislocations and the peripatetic life among Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria and casts an inevitable shadow of censorship over his writing, validating his creation of fictional locales.

Munif leaves the novel hanging on a utopian note by fashioning an episode of unmistakable socialist triumph for the working class: “His Highness ordered the reinstatement of all workers to the company, and the company has acceded to his wishes” (p. 626). The emir acquiesces to the workers’ demands of reinstating the twenty-three dismissed workers and investigating the murder of Mufadi al-Jeddani. This sanguine ending proves Munif’s firm belief in the power of the proletariat to deconstruct the status quo and enforce justice. Although the emir agrees to reinstate the dismissed workers, injustice and exploitation will persist, as the benefits of oil accrue disproportionately to domestic and international beneficiaries, and the hunger of capitalists and their local partners for profit will uphold injustice.

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