

*Contemporary Arab  
Petrofiction: Opening up  
Biopolitical Spaces for the  
Dispossessed*

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It is only right, to my mind, that things so remarkable, which happen to have remained unheard and unseen until now, should be brought to the attention of many and not lie buried in the sepulchre of oblivion.

—Anonymous, *Lazarillo de Tormes*

The twentieth century could rightly be called the Century of Oil and the Century of America. This century

made the United States reach the peak of its world hegemony through oil, a situation which would be inevitably followed by peak oil at some future temporal point, as proposed by the American geologist, M. King Hubbert<sup>1</sup>, in 1956. Hubbert's peak oil theory—that maximum oil extraction would lead to a terminal decline in oil production—accords with Trotsky's 1924 prophecy about the future of oil in America. Trotsky had highlighted that oil played an exceptional role in the United States' military and industrial departments, and that oil consumption in the United States equalled two-thirds of the world output of oil. Geologists were of the view that with America's rate of oil consumption, American oil would last for twenty five to forty years. Then America would use its industry and fleet to take away oil from all over the world (Ali 2002, 288).

Peak oil has thus become the nemesis of the American dreams of unbridled oil-hegemonic growth. The United States' petroleum-based geopolitical strategies, being mostly incendiary, did give rise to such petro-despotic aspirations. The want for oil led the 'mighty superpower' to more and more political interventions. Oil has not only been the cause of the United States' international entanglements and imperial designs, but also a prime source of its repute as a bully and its vulnerable strategies (Nixon 2011, 72). As the 1970s and 1980s moved along with the Arab oil crises having come and gone, the United States' domestic sources of petroleum largely dried

up and the geopolitical struggle for control of access to oil reserves took on an increasingly pronounced role in the world affairs. In this global scenario, a number of literary voices appeared decrying the ravages inflicted by Big Oil upon the spaces of traditional societies. These voices identified oil as primarily a resource curse. The idea of oil as a resource curse is hinged upon a paradox of abundance. The more a nation-state is blessed with the plenitude of an energy resource, the greater are the chances that the state would get concomitantly spoilt. Mineral-enriched states are more often than not undemocratic, war-mongering, riddled with corruption and governed by despots. The oligarch in a resource-cursed state never encourages strong ties between the ruled and the ruler. Such situations give birth to exaggerated forms of inequalities which are both horizontal and vertical. The first form of inequality is implied in the creation of a geographical split between resource-producing enclaves and the rest of the nation; while the ever-increasing rift between super-rich and ultra-poor classes denotes the second form of imbalance (Nixon 2011, 68-70).

There exists a crucial relationship between literature and energy. If the lens of energy, particularly energy as the base of economics, is used to contemplate and interpret literature, then modes of production can be critically discussed functioning as a force field for cultural production. Literary texts can be sorted according to the energy sources which made them possible. For

example, the coal obsessions of David, Henry Roth's protagonist in *Call it Sleep* (1934), can be compared with those of Paul, the second son of a coal miner in D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913); Charles Dickens' tallow-burning characters can be juxtaposed with those of Shakespeare. Woods marching in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), the colossal windmills in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), the smogs in Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), the electrical power pilfered at the opening of Ralph Ellison' novel *Invisible Man* (1952), and the dung fuel in Jorge Luis Borges' *Labyrinths* (1962) can be joined in a new repertoire of analysis energized by class and resource conflict breaking into visibility. Sources of energy appear into texts as force fields having cause-and-effect relationships other than commodity wars and class conflicts. The magical powers of electricity, the apprehensions roused by atomic residuum, coal polluted odours, the use of technology to chop woods, the whale oil's viscous animality, and finally the oil: every one of these resources serves as a concrete instance to represent an altering phenomenology. Thus a literary text can relate itself to its originating modes of production by making them its quasi objects.

The present age is the age of petroleum. Graeme Macdonald, in his article "Oil and World Literature," rightly says that every modern novel is to some extent an oil novel, taking into account the ubiquity of oil and its components in the substance and structure of modern

life. Just as the provenance of this energy resource is automatically international, cultural production in the era of petromodernity inevitably moves along the same global course (Macdonald 2012, 7, 31). However, in the context of the literature-energy relationship, it must be noted that the long history of the American titanic drama of petro-imperialism has surprisingly failed to produce any Great American Oil Novel (GAON). This literary barrenness was first pointed out and discussed in detail by Amitav Ghosh in his article “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” (2002, 74-87) while reviewing Abdel Rahman Munif’s petronarrative *Cities of Salt* (1984).

## **Arab Modernism versus Petro-Imperialism**

### **Background**

The long history of the earlier European colonialisms of the Orient, the United States’ never-ending hunger for more and more fossil fuels and the consequent fallout of crises in the Middle East gave rise to Arab Modernism which is primarily a tendency of disruption and subversion in contemporary Arab literature. This tendency prompted a new generation of Arab writers to question, and throw into doubt, the all-too-easy evolutionary and Eurocentric narratives of modernity and development, including the narrative of national independence (Makdisi 1995, 87). The imperialist narratives of Europe’s

self-definition in relation to the colonial Other were produced by the slowly modernizing European societies of the nineteenth century. Such narratives were intertwined not only with the developing doctrines of evolution, but also with a new version of colonialism in which modern Europe's cultural others came to be seen as underdeveloped. The European colonial discourse, in other words, was predicated upon a unilinear 'stream' of evolutionary Time, as delineated by Johannes Fabian in his book, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983). On this stream of Time the colonized 'Others' were farther behind the Europeans—the self-proclaimed representatives of modernity. These 'Others' needed to be 'raised' and 'improved' to become identical to modern Europe; they needed to be propelled 'up' the stream of Time to the shores and breakwaters of modernity (Fabian 1983, xl-xliii). The problem was aggravated when, by degrees, these 'Others' also started seeing themselves as inferior 'Others'. Among them there were the people who rejected the assumed superiority of Europe; but they too posed their opposition to it in those discursive and narrative terms which were invented and presented by Europe. This was their dilemma. They had to participate in exactly that discursive and conceptual system of modernity which they attempted to repudiate. As a result, very often their challenges appeared not as challenges; rather they were fated to be defused or negated (Makdisi 1995, 88).

The seemingly overwhelming superiority of the Western empires was doubled by the mercantile and industrial structures of capital imbricated with them. In the nineteenth century, the Arab world was gradually incorporated into the dual structure of colonialism and capitalism. Arab philosophers and writers found themselves trapped between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Some of them advocated a return to, and revitalization of, the classical Arabic heritage; others thought that the only way out of the double bind was 'forward,' towards progress, development, modernization and ultimately 'Europe'. The premise of a dualistic opposition between tradition and modernity, evolution and involution was accepted by advocates of both positions. The historical assumption was that the modernity chartered by Europe as a goal was like entering into the flow of the stream of evolutionary Time, while a rejection of that 'goal' meant trying to move 'backward' against the powerful 'forward' current of history. Advocates of modernity called for a 'Nahda' which meant cultural and scientific renaissance or rebirth. As a goal, modernity was a future condition, a future location, a future possibility, always displaced and deferred, always up the stream, up in the sky.

It was in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) that Frantz Fanon portrayed colonialism as regionalist and separatist in its very structure. According to him, it does not merely assert the existence of tribes but also reinforces it and thereby separates them (1963, 94). By the start of

the twentieth century, instead of a united Arab world, 'nation-state' became an indispensable condition for the Arab modernity. According to Albert Hourani, "To be independent was to be accepted by European states on a level of equality . . . To be modern was to have a political and social life similar to those of the countries of western Europe" (1988, 343-44). Hence a number of independent Arab states came into being along the fragmentary and arbitrary lines drawn up and militarily imposed by the great European empires; and the Nahda-inspired goal of 'modernization' led to a drive to 'development' restricted to the scale of the nation-state. State-defined units of the Arab world bore no resemblance to the economic and political needs or population distribution of the Arab people: for example, the oil-rich, thinly populated pigmy states of the Gulf imported about 90 percent of their workforce from other Arab countries, while most of their capital outflow was directed towards the developed capital markets of Europe, East Asia and the United States, leaving the Arab world deprived (Makdisi 1995, 95).

The advocates of modernization were doomed to face an all-too-apparent monumental failure. Modernity, as defined by the Europeans and their clueless admirers among the Arabs, remained a perpetually deferred future status instead of ever being or becoming an apprehensible present one. The drive towards modernity gave the Arab world nothing less than the disaster of Palestinian



Nakbah<sup>2</sup>, the destruction of Lebanon during and after recurrent civil wars<sup>3</sup> and the ever-growing subordination and mortification at the hands of the United States, Europe and Israel.

A reaction to all this gave birth to Arab Modernism. This literary tendency is most detectible in the context of a cultural and political crisis in the Arab world, which itself is produced and identified by this tendency. Such a Modernist tendency is opposed not only to the Nahda, but also to the Nahda-associated literary and novelistic forms and styles. These Nahda-based forms and styles are exemplified by a wide range of Arabic novels: from the earliest novels of the late nineteenth century to those following the World War II. To the earlier category of Nahda belong romantic and historical novels like *The Conquest of Andalusia* (1903) by Jurji Zaydan, *A Period of Time* (1907) by Muhammad al Muwaylihi, and *Zeinab* (1913) by Muhammad Hussein Haykal. The latter category consists of novels and stories by Yahya Haqqi, the early Naguib Mahfouz, and the early Tayeb Salih. An uncomplicated realist narrative with an omniscient narrator and a straightforward chronological and temporal structure are the most common features of these earlier works. Such texts were mostly inspired by, or imitations of, different European literatures. The reason for this is pointed out by Anis Makdisi as follows: “Most of what was available to the reading public from the end of the last century to the second third of the present one took

the form of translations of or adaptations from Western cultural production” (1988, 371).

Contrary to the *Nahda* and its styles, the oeuvres of Arab Modernism were composed either during or after a series of calamitous ruptures and breaks with the past. These ruptures had very much to do with the shared Arab experience of imperialism, the ongoing confrontation with Israel, Europe and the United States, and the persistence of neocolonial relations of power and domination. These relations locked the independent Arab states into a condition of subalternity, reminiscent of that of the nineteenth century. This subalternity was defined and enabled not only by the neocolonial situation in the Arab world but also by the bitter divisions and lines of demarcation by which Arab states separated themselves from one another. In spite of becoming technically independent, the formerly colonized nation-states were still dependent upon former colonial forces and newly emergent imperial powers like the United States. These powers still held the sway and continued playing a pivotal part via the global capitalist machinery and varieties of psychological, cultural, educational and institutional monopolisation. The Arab Modernist tendency challenged both the political and literary approaches formerly practised in Arab society. The bases of such approaches were a unilinear interpretation of history, teleology, a narrowly envisaged nationalism, and modernity. Both capitalist institutions and socialist revolutions always held open

the promise of such modernity which constantly proved to be a postponed future bliss. Thus, the claims of Arab Modernism were staked in opposition to both the West and the actually existing Arab nation-states.

## Trends

Arab modernism is basically a literature of crisis, which means that it is not merely a reaction to certain historical or sociopolitical circumstances, but also a reproduction of what in the Arab world is a 'sense of crisis'. It historicizes that sense of crisis through the creation of those historical concepts and categories inclusive of discontinuities and ruptures which enable an evaluative interrogation or understanding of the present. It also defines those historical conditions which let the contemporary take place or be intelligible. This literary trend is helpful in producing the expression as well as the reality of crisis itself. It is not just a replication of reality but also a cause of the production of the 'Real' in the Arab world. The main literary works, symptomatic of this tendency, include Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1967), Emile Habihi's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974), Nawal El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain* (1977), Abdel Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (1985), Sherif Hatata's *The Net* (1986), and Hanan al-Sheikh's *Scent*

*of the Gazelle* (1988). In spite of their major differences, these works can be grouped together to recognize the extent of the continuity of their cultural, political and historical projects with regard to modernity, and the extent of the challenges posed by them to the project of the Nahda and various proponents of 'traditionalism'.

These Modernist novels reject all unproblematic, univocal relationships to either past or future, in terms of both narrative and history. In their temporal structures, the possibility of a return to a mythic past is rejected along with the alternative possibility of an uncompromised and perpetually deferred great leap 'forward' to development. All that is left is a greatly unstable and contradictory present, defying the false reassurances of old and new dogmatisms. These texts bespeak only an uncompromising and unavoidable present. Such a historical present, according to the foregoing Modernist world-view, can only be reshaped by renouncing Eurocentric constructs and interpretations of 'tradition' and 'modernity', and replacing them with alternative formulations and constructions of history. In such historical reconstructions, the so-called 'Third Worldians' are not just incorporated or added as 'underdeveloped' and inferior 'Others', rather they exist as independent, self-conscious multiplicities.

Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963), Abdel Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984) and all the other works

coming under the loose rubric of Arab Modernism demand new ways of conceptualizing the present. These works are brought together across the boundaries dividing the Arab world through their simultaneous rejection of those boundaries and the teleological formulation of modernity as a perpetually deferred future condition. Both Eurocentric modernization and Islamic traditionalism are not acceptable to such an Arab Modernism. Rather it insists on the historical present, and the need to confront problems in and for the present, rather than the endless invocation of impossible and temporal alternatives (posts or pasts). Modernity is not only challenged but also redefined as an undesirable present condition, rather than as an ambiguous future one: this is modernity, we are already there, and this is it. Far-fetched goals of the early nationalist movements of the so-called Arab renaissance, the prospects of national economic development in the form of independent states, are implicitly rejected as phantasmatic impossibilities. Arising from a sense of crisis, Arab Modernism came to be premised upon the framework of a modernity apprehended as an immediate present experience, rather than a utopian (or dystopian) future condition. To some extent, Arab Modernism resembles the European 'modernism' of the post-World War I era: the period of revolution and the crisis of modernity in Europe. Arab Modernism, however, is not a simple recapitulation of an earlier European 'modernism'. According to Raymond Williams, the various European modernisms, constructed along a

certain metropolitan/imperial axis, narrated the projects of European imperialism, while Arab Modernism must be understood as a counter-narrative of those projects as well as their aftereffects (1989, 1-208). Although the importance of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of a European-defined modernization was stressed by its advocates, Arab Modernism challenges the finality and desirability of that unit.

As a matter of definition, modernity can never exist in a pure form; it always implies a certain degree of hybridization, a certain degree of mixture with the pre- or anti-modern. Arab Modernism contests the unilinear notion of History, and invalidates the possibility of an uncomplicated flow toward the modern and away from tradition. It insists on the immanence of modernity as an eternally imperfect blend of different stages and scales of advancement, a perpetually fragmentary fusion of tropes, narratives, forms and styles. In this sense, modernity becomes a 'process', the completion of which involves an incessant want of completion.

Arab Modernism is also relentless about the region's colonial history, its troubled status in the neocolonial world today, and the consequences of both colonialism and neocolonialism for cultural production and activity, and political and economic 'development'. This Modernism stands in a mutually determining relationship to European and American postmodernisms as their simultaneous

and necessary counterpart. According to Fredric Jameson's argument, if postmodernism is the first world 'cultural logic' of late capitalism, then Arab Modernism can be perceived as postmodernism's third world symbiotic and antagonistic 'other' (1991, 297-418). Understood in this way, the difference between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' is no more a question of temporality and of 'stages' of development: just as Arab Modernism does not follow the footsteps of the various European modernisms, it would not follow their transformation into a postmodernism that, in Jameson's words, arises out of a situation of completed modernization (1991, 1-10). Arab Modernism is no longer the evolutionary temporal logic of modernity, but rather one of the structural limits of capitalist economic development and of late capitalism itself. Any theorization of global culture involves the contradictory co-existence of modernity and postmodernity, a co-existence that is situated within global postmodernism because it necessitates the co-existence of contradictory modes of cultural and economic production, the 'synchronism of the nonsynchronous', to cite Ernst Bloch's famous phrase (1977, 22-38).

The contrast between first world postmodernism and third world postcolonialism can be perplexing. Ella Shohat and Anne McClintock are of the view that the term 'postcolonialism' is theoretically misleading and politically suspect (Shohat 1992, 99-113; McClintock 1992, 84-98). This theoretically simplistic and politically haz-

ardous opposition can only help to reinscribe the evolutionary logic of modernity and of the nineteenth century European sense of historicism. The postcolonial has come to replace the 'third world,' but it does so specifically by substituting a spurious temporal logic ('after' colonialism) for an admittedly problematic spatial logic (worlding). This substitution is particularly spurious and politically dangerous because it has done nothing to correct the limitations of the term 'third world.' Rather it has redefined the very same third world according to the political temporality of modernity itself, merely adding the hint that somehow colonialism was all along a third world problem and had nothing to do with the first world. While the first world is basking in the wonders of a high-tech postmodernity, the third world is still defined by the dilemmas first encountered in the old European colonial era, from which the first world has escaped any taint or guilt by (historic) association. Just as all were involved in colonialism together, now all must be either postcolonial or not. The very suggestion, implicit in the term 'postcolonial', that somehow colonialism is over and done with, presents severe problems for theoretical analysis and political action. The Gulf War is just one example to show that in the sphere of economic, military and political control and domination, a thorough deployment of proper colonial practices can be largely witnessed in the neocolonial world of today. The term 'postcolonial' encloses the idea of a world which is defined even now in a global sense through perseverance



of certain structures of colonialism and matrixes of neocolonial domination and mastery. What gets effaced in the experience of colonialism is the present, and the very possibility of grasping the present; announcing a 'post' is no more historically or politically enabling than resurrecting a 'past'.

The problem faced by the third world is to devise entirely new concepts with which to come to terms with a wide range of cultural, social, economic, and political crises. Arab Modernism is one configuration, one constellation, within a larger effort throughout the third world, and the first world as well, to invent new codes of understanding, an effort that some critics and theorists have identified too hastily as one, unified postcolonial endeavor. Frantz Fanon once said:

If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe, and America into a new Europe, then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us. But if we want humanity to advance a step further, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries. (1963, 314)

The production of new concepts does not involve further steps along the path of a unilinear history, which implies further deferral, but rather an intervention in this present with which, as Fanon said, "[we] feel from time to time . . . immeasurably sickened" (1963, 315).

## **Munif and Kanafani: Pioneers of Arab Modernism**

Abdel Rahman Munif (1933–2004) and Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1972) are among the pioneers of Arab Modernism. By making use of unconventional inventive techniques of writing, they upset normative hegemonic discourse and open up ways for the development of varied interpretations. Their texts reinforce their own innate susceptibility, besieged language and undecidability. These texts are like incomplete drafts of violated memory of history. The writings of these authors had much to do with their personal life-world experiences. Munif and Kanafani had both led their lives as exiles. During the oil boom in the Gulf, they willy-nilly partook in the gigantic trend of migration. At that time, society in the Gulf was in dire need of a refined type of bureaucratic middle class which could manage its newly established enterprises and institutions. So, poorer Arab countries like Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Jordan and Egypt became the centres of exporting educated labour to the Gulf. Like Munif and Kanafani, there were many immigrants who formed a new secretarial class in the Gulf. This class occasioned the emergence of a subgenre of Arabic oil literature. In Shakir Nablusi's words, the Gulf novel could only come into being with an imported bourgeoisie—a class whose wealth, ennui, and intrigues are documented in the literature (1991, 195). For nearly twenty years, Munif worked in the oil industry. The politics of

petroleum production is the main concern of his initial fiction. But his masterpiece *Cities of Salt* can be rightly called a five-volume journal of the contemporary history of Saudi Arabia. Its 'Valley of Springs' or 'Wadi al-Uyoun' is Abqaiq in a very lightly camouflaged form. Abqaiq was an oasis which was transformed, like Wadi al-Uyoun, into Saudi Arabia's leading oil field and became the opening place of the Tapline or the Trans-Arabian Pipeline. Munif's text chronicles the arrival and installation of American oil workers in Wadi al-Uyoun, a fictitious idyllic oasis, their disruption of its environmental conditions and basic rhythm of life, and their transformation of the coastal town of Harran into the base of their operations and transport depot.

Kanafani too belonged to this class of immigrant intellectuals. Having migrated to the Gulf, he worked in Kuwait for five years as a school-teacher (Abbas 1972-3, 146). Radwa Ashour, an Egyptian literary critic and novelist, relates Kanafani's experiences in these words, "There he knew exile in a new form: the loneliness of the stranger, the alienation of the isolated, the thirst of the psychical self in the desert" (1977, 23). And *Men in the Sun* was the outcome when he returned from the Gulf. Kanafani had led the life of a displaced Palestinian refugee. At the age of twelve, he went through the trauma of becoming a refugee. He lived his life in exile in various Arab countries until his assassination by the Mossad in 1972. The Palestinian-Arab struggle was his inspiration for writing and working incessantly. *Men in the Sun* has been described as the writer's defence mech-

anism against uprootedness and cruel annihilation. It is the story of the Palestinians in exile who strive to construct or reconstruct their destiny. The story allegorizes the Palestinian refugees' experiences of deracination after the 1948 Nakbah, and their attempts to get away from it. Through his wanderings from Syria to Kuwait, Kanafani had developed his political ideas. He had become a proponent of Marxism. Like George Habash he believed that a social revolution throughout the Arab world was the only solution to the problem of Palestine (qtd in Kilpatrick 1999, i). Like Munif, Kanafani also believed that oil was the only chance to build a future for the Arab world. If the capital outflow from the oil-producing Arab countries had not been directed towards the United States, the picture in the Arab world might have been quite different. There could have been one Arab economy instead of twenty or thirty competing Arab economies, with the revenues from the oil resources of the little Gulf emirates more evenly and more productively distributed within and throughout the Arab world, instead of being squandered on investments in the global North. This was the vision envisaged by both Munif and Kanafani.

### **Petrofiction**

In the canon of Arabic literature, Munif's *Cities of Salt* and Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* are a duo, exemplary of ground-breaking petrofiction. The mechanisation of human life is the main subject of these petronarratives. Here the wheel of time is made to spin back, and pre-in-

dustrial utopias are projected in which ideal communities exist. This is the most important characteristic of a petroleum novel: utopias of the past are deployed to highlight the present dystopias, the ravages inflicted by the relentless empire of machines. The novel as a genre essentially signifies a transcendental homelessness which is reflected in its attempt to grasp the meaning of life. This meaning can be apparent only in retrospect, after the whole shape of a particular form of life is known. Thus ontologically, the petroleum novel positions itself as a remembrance. Hence, the pre-industrial state of nature envisaged by Kanafani and Munif is pure, original and primitive in its form. This is a transcendental and transmundane world. In this form of existence man and nature are in harmony with each other. This is a golden age, what Raymond Williams calls “the natural economy, the moral economy, the organic society, from which critical values are drawn . . . a contrast to the thrusting ruthlessness of the new capitalism” (Williams 1973, 36-7). An aura of authenticity is created by linking cultural signification with geographical locales. Wadi al-Uyoun is an oasis in the desert of the Arabian Peninsula with traces of the legendary Najd of traditional Arabic poetry; there is Shatt al-Arab near ‘Basra’ of the Arabian Nights where the historical rivers Euphrates and Tigris converge to jointly fall into the Gulf of Fars; there is a village with olive groves in pre-Nakbah Palestine. The aura of authenticity, in Aamir Mufti’s words, is a pervasive language and mood in which authenticity comes to attach itself to the concepts of certain cultural practices as a kind of aura (2000, 87-8). And this aura of

authenticity itself is a by-product of modernization, an outcome of mass culture. In oil novels enchantment is deliberately imagined, so that the secularizing machine of modernity can deform it, and the lore of progress can extinguish it.

Munif and Kanafani were both products of their own exile. They made use of the aura of authenticity in an effort to recapture the lost lands that fuelled their yearning. Memory—geographical, cultural and racial—is the nucleus of their narratives. This memory is like a live, pounding heart which is rooted deep into the earth. With Munif and Kanafani land is imbued with anthropomorphic traits. The outcome of this technique is that nature is humanized, and humanity is naturalized within the particular geographic space. Ideologically it performs the function of grounding an imported genre—novel—in the native soil. It is also an outlet to criticize imperial modernity, and gives birth to “narratives of cultural continuity that can absorb the dislocations of modernity” (Mufti 2000, 88).

Both narratives make a start with the heart, but culminate in the production of a machine-like entity. The metamorphosis of the human body into a machine is the climax of these stories. In *Cities of Salt*, modern-day oil rigs resemble the fire and brimstone pillars of the ancient Hebrew cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were destroyed through divine retribution. Munif cau-

tions against a Sodom-like mutation of humans into salt. In Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, a water tank, an emblem of industrialization, first virtually aborts the relics of country life, and after that delivers the brand new denizen of the hydrocarbon realm. There occurs a ritualistic transition from the older order to the new age of technology which is embodied by and presided over by machines. These are the machines which viciously tear up olive groves and palm trees. They are the prime source of destroying the centric logic of an agrarian existence. Climactic scenes in these novels are full of apocalyptic images. When the order of nature is subverted, man's fall from Eden becomes inevitable, and the paradise is lost. The novel is "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (Lukács 1996, 88). These narratives are the epics of the worlds abandoned by God. Lingered over the ruins, the novelists deplore the loss of their homelands and recount the plagued birth of the mechanical age which looks like an alien existence in the land—a defunct plant growing in the native soil.

*Cities of Salt* and *Men in the Sun* both open with images of birthing which are expressed as a fecund earth bringing forth its fruit. Agrarian metaphors are employed: seeds are planted, the soil erupts with life, and the link between the land and human processes of reproduction is established through the nurturing of young shoots. These are symbols which demonstrate the ecological relationship between the earth and humanity as well as an organic

relationship between culture and geographical space, race and territory. Edward Said alludes to such images of historical continuity in his book *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). He speaks of them as “human history being generated, being produced and reproduced in the very way that men and women generate themselves by procreating and elaborating the species . . . Images for historical process are invariably biological.” For Said, “ideas about repetition” are just like the procreation and progression of the gens. This continuity is attained through the naturalistic bonds of filiation which stand in opposition to the institutions of affiliative relations (Said 1983, 112). In a Saidian sense, affiliation denotes such coalitions as are grounded in mutual economic interest; so affiliation is dissimilar to the more affective ties of religion, culture, race, blood, kin, and family. Such historical and cultural specificity is split at its roots by the shoving globalization of the industrial age. This severance from one’s roots initiates the process of re-imagining or recapturing the bygone: the salvation or reclamation of a natural, pure and organic community which preceded the outsiders’ incursion and their gadgets.

In his analysis of the affinity between country and city, Raymond Williams narrates that such wistful golden epochs have been repeatedly contrived by literary generations in succession. An atmosphere of retrospective radicalism prevails in which the values of obligation, charity and an open door to the needy neighbour are



emphasized and contrasted with the capitalist thrust and utilitarian reduction of all social relationships to a crude moneyed order (Williams 1973, 35-6). As advocates of this retrospective radicalism, Kanafani and Munif discern the climax of the age of industry, and the presence of outsiders in native soil as destructive. The paeans they sing in praise of their origins confer fellow feeling upon their narratives and fasten them to Mother Earth. Munif and Kanafani deplore the “liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage” (Benjamin 2002, 104), and yearn for all those things which are lost namely ritual, permanence, authenticity, and origins. But the paradox is that this loss makes them modern novelists. Through this liquidation a bona fide past is reproduced, and a phantasmagoric reverie is concocted. But the ultimate tragedy is that they find no catharsis or emancipation here; the empire of the machine further enslaves and liquidates their experience.

### **Text as Body**

Munif and Kanafani were essentially writer-activists. They were not against change. Towards modernity their approach was ambivalent. Their battle was against the cruelly perverted form of modernization in the Arab world. They had an insistent belief in the power of writing as a tool for change. So far as Munif was concerned, he appropriated a multi-genre tool to assault both the Persian Gulf bourgeois elite and their alien collabora-

tors. His faith in the instrumental value of literature was neither part of an organizational activism nor complementary to an already established literary career. After being disillusioned with organizational resistance, he adopted writing as a compensation for the social transformations he had once dreamt the region's radical movements would bring about. He re-entered politics through the door of literature. For Kanafani, art and politics were interrelated. He believed in the power of art to inspire and challenge newly-developed political actualities.

Hence, Munif and Kanafani make the written text embody both the trauma and the healing, the event and the mode of mourning. They transform the wounds of history into the dream of redemption through the power of their imagination. They construct their "imagined communities"<sup>5</sup> through deconstruction and recreation of traumatic memory. They deliberately grapple with the traumatic pasts of genocide and dispossession in order to be the voice of their peoples and to rewrite history from the Other's perspective. A text which is both literary and biopolitical becomes a domain holding its own particular norms and borders. Here the concept of the 'text' as a 'body' becomes very influential. This is a concept popular in modern discussions on discursive system. The text as a physical site can be useful in eliciting an ethical response from the reader through his intimate communication with the text. From Emmanuel Levinas' point of view, the text, seen as something physically

vulnerable, becomes the 'other' for which the reader is responsible (Levinas 1969). The text as a body stimulates the reader's imaginative creativity and urges him to respond to the other's call. The selected narratives work as reflexive texts. 'Becoming' is a theme common to both the texts. The suffering and cruelty stemming from violation of land and body are represented in written text. Though such written efforts also demonstrate the impossibility of mitigating physical, psychological and historical pain through the writing of text, and prove the impossibility of representation; yet, the very same impossibility gives birth to a 'novel' category of writing which happens and makes its place as a literary space or territory. A responsive relationship is built between the reader and the text. The result is the formation of a literary alliance among people from diverse cultures and nations.

## **Conclusion**

The hopeful note on which this study can be concluded is that art also performs the function of a liberating power because it transcends historical wounds by letting the reader experience them in a different manner. When art makes its way through and beyond space and time to re-examine the infinity, it dissolves the feeling of alienation from nature. Arabian literature generally and Palestinian literatures specifically urge that history should be recreated, reconstructed and retold through a new re-

sponsive consciousness. Post/neo-colonial Arab writers articulate the need for that formation of being which transcends the national by censuring the present national and racial identities within the colonial discourse and by striving to reach beyond such logic to explore new ways of reinterpreting being in its relation to memory. These writers are thus able to leave behind the defensive national discourse which projects the diffidence of the postcolonial subject, and enter into a better transnational and transcultural understanding of colonial histories. This is the literary space from where stems the dire need to confront the discourse of marginality and centrality which still goes on to form the ruling structure of the present-day postcolonial discourse within the academia of the West. The binary oppositions used in postcolonial discourse such as those between the colonized and the colonizer, the third world and the first, the margin and the centre imply that “the nation-state as the unit of political organization globally was taken for granted” (Dirlik 1998, 502). Through a text, the writer functions as an agency to channel the collective voice. And the enterprises of rewriting the collective memory are a “permission to narrate” (Said 1984, 27-48) the other histories of excluded and muted narratives—in the present study the dispossessed and dislocated Palestinian Arabs and Saudi Arabian Bedouin. These texts are an embodiment of the collective “power of expression that can be shared” (Hardt and Negri 2001, 243). In addressing one another, transnational narratives frame such a con-

structive discourse among various histories of persecution as can transcend the limits of the national. These texts unlock productive and innovative possibilities for 'becoming', shaping translocal alliances among writers belonging to different nation-states from all over the world. Such transnational discourse opens up new openings for articulation, and can remap the violent pasts as well as diaspora into alternative positionalities. In this way it can enable a reconstructive process of 'becoming'. The transnational histories depicted in *Cities of Salt* and *Men in the Sun* are linked through the shared experiences of pain and agony. The result is a new type of postcolonial literature foregrounding that ever-present multiplicity which has always been denied by the colonial space. Such biopolitical literature is capable of producing a new form of writing which is simultaneously literary and political because it shatters the very core of imperial fabric and its postcolonial residues.

### Notes:

1. Tyler Priest. "Hubbert's Peak: The Great Debate over the End of Oil," *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 44, no.1 (2014): 37-79.
2. The exodus and deracination of more than 700,000 Palestinians in 1948 after the Palestine War and the es-

establishment of the Zionist state of Israel in Palestine is called Nakbah.

3. The Lebanese Civil War, lasting from 1975 to 1990, caused the displacement, exodus and deaths of millions including the Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon.

4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, NY: Verso, 2006).

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