

Geopolitics and Power of Oil in Abdelrahman Munif's Cities of Salt

^[1] Meghali Saikia

^[1] Research Scholar, Discipline of English, KKHSOU, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract— *The modern culture is a hydro-carbon culture. Our lives are saturated in oil. Oil and its myriad refined products determine how and where we live, move, work, play and consume. Oil shapes our physical and political landscapes. To think about oil is not solely to think about automobiles, derricks, oil spills etc. but the computer or the mobiles we are using would not have come to us without this black liquid gold. Before colonization of the land and its resources, people of Saudi were poor nomadic tribes but they were happy with the life they lived and praised it extravagantly. But with Western modernity, crisis and confusion arose among the Arabs. The natives were exiled after the destruction of their ecosystem. Their life is thrown into a constant state of unrest after the arrival of the Americans. Oil becomes the base structure that governs the push, pressure and stay factors of the locals as well as it also supports displacement, exile and resettlement. The paper expressed how on the pretexts of development, modernization and civilization, geopolitics and power of oil along with environmental racism is practised. The locals started working as labours in their own place and were treated as disposable resources and recipe for disaster by the oil company. The traditional nomadic society of the unknown Wadi, and the Bedouin community were forced to remould themselves in the image of western societies. These are the things that the government hides from the public and the journalists don't print. Therefore, the present paper will discuss how hydro-carbon genre or oil documents the social, cultural, economic and ecological impacts on Arab-Islamic world.*

Keywords— *geopolitics, hydro-carbon, modernity, oil company, west.*

I. INTRODUCTION

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'. The drive towards modernity gave the Arab world the ever-growing subordination and mortification at the hands of the United States, Europe and Israel. Munif said, "Our crisis is a trilogy: oil, political Islam, and dictatorship. This trilogy is the factor that led to the collapse, confusion, and consequently to the suffering lived by Arab societies in their search for the road to modernity..."

Environmental historians McNeill and Engelke (2014) describe the period since 1945 as the "Great Acceleration": a period that unfurled in the context of a fossil fuel energy regime and [...] exponential growth in energy use" (2). It is also, they point out, "the most anomalous and unrepresentative period in the 200,000- year-long-history of relations between our species and the biosphere" (5), and the period that is unlikely to continue. 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.

Like Munif, Ghassan Kanafani, and other Arabic writers formed a new secretarial class in the Gulf. This class occasioned the emergence of a subgenre of Arabic oil literature. It was during this age that Munif's *Cities of Salt* was published in 1984. His novels written in Arabic were banned in Saudi Arabia "for their excoriating satires of the

peninsula's oil elite" (Boullata, 1998, 1). He resorted to literature as a complex tool of catharsis, resistance, dissent and subversion. His fictional work is perhaps the best illumination of the 'hydrocarbon genre'. In an interview for the French magazine, *L'Orient Express* in 1999, he said, "we were burdened with an immense load of dreams and desires for change and at the same time a group of political parties presented themselves as a vehicle to bring about change."

The literature of crisis during Arab modernism are- Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1967), Emile Habibi's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974), Nawal El- Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain* (1977), Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (1985), Sherif Hatata's *The Net* (1986), and Hanan al-Sheikh's *Scent of the Gazelle* (1988). These novels rejected return to a mythic past and accepted alternative possibility of great leap 'forward' to development. They demand new ways of conceptualizing the present.

The more a nation-state is blessed with the plenitude of an energy resource, the greater are the chances that the state would get spoilt. Since the discovery of oil in the mid-19th century, there are still surprisingly few literary fictions that undertake an exploration of what could well be said to have defined world politics. Nor, for that matter, are there very many fictions that have dealt with the social, cultural and political importance of energy in any way, shape or form.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present paper has followed a standard and interdisciplinary approach of research that is characteristic of the disciplines of humanities and literature, following as it does the methodology of interpretative analysis of texts. The researcher has tried to collect data directly from the novel. For the purposes of the present study, the theoretical framework is based in large measure on key theoretical underpinnings of related fields of studies like postcolonial theory, petro-cultural studies, Middle Eastern studies, imperialism, ecocriticism, anthropocene and related reading practices.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Edward Said describes *Cities of Salt* novel as “the only serious work of fiction that tries to show the effect of oil, Americans, and the local oligarchy on a Gulf country”. Claire Chambers in her essay ‘Historicizing Scientific Reason in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*’ says, “Knowledge is produced by structures of dominance, particularly the military, economic, and epistemic strategies of colonialism”. Timothy Mitchell, in *Carbon Democracy* also argues that, in order to understand carbon energy (oil), we need to examine modern democratic politics. Modern democratic politics and carbon energy are tied together, and the development of the two powers (democracy and oil) has been linked from the start. Patricia Yaeger’s *PMLA* “Editor’s Column” from 2011 coined the term “energy unconscious” in literature and other media to expose the mostly hidden role oil has played in particular lifestyles, cultural assumptions, or social ideals. Michael Watts (2001) uses the term ‘petro-violence’ which is used to describe the oil industry damage on the environment, such as oil spills. (Lewis, 581) says that the workers’ position leaves them vulnerable without. In this sense, migrant workers lead lives that are “hyper-precarious”.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

“The most fabulous geological event since the explosion of Krakatoa surely was the discovery of oceans of petroleum beneath the dark and backward Muslim realms of the Persian Gulf”. This was the opening sentence of John Updike’s review of Saudi dissident Abdelrahman Munif’s novel *Cities of Salt*. Inviting Americans to exploit local oil was a devil’s bargain from which the Saudi’s deeply conservative temperament has never fully recovered. The country was forcibly incorporated into the global capitalist system through the flow of oil, and the Saudis, like most of us, became what Daniel Yergin termed “hydrocarbon” people living in a hydrocarbon world. No wonder such a violent transition into modernity is, according to the author Sandra Mackey, described by the Bedouins as Waqt al-takhrīb (the period of destruction). *Cities of Salt* depicts the transition from a traditional social formation to a colonial-capitalist way of life with their displacement in Harran, where they

become mostly alienated from nature as workers surviving off wages. The privatization of landownership, in the 1860s, also facilitated the sale of land to European colonialists.

The expression “geopolitics” was created by Rudolph Kjellen in 1899, as meaning the “science of the State”. In the author’s view, the key elements in the definition of geopolitics are power and space; therefore, the major geopolitical challenge is how to use space to increase power. Sayyid Qutb, in “The America I Have Seen: In the Scale of Human Values,” says “Faced with the machine, the human being cannot maintain his equilibrium, until he himself nearly transforms into a machine.” Thus, the Americans tried to treat the local populace and migrants as machines working day and night. Oil wealth has also benefitted a class of corrupt politicians who cooperated with oil companies.

The author not only aims to exemplify how the Arab rulers have failed to meet their people’s needs, but he demonstrates how the Arab rulers have changed as a result of the arrival of technology. Walled villages have been submerged beneath concrete, glass and asphalt. It is a hierarchical relation where the Americans are on the top of that hierarchy. Hence, then come the emir and his men, the capitalists, and finally comes the workers at the bottom of the hierarchy. The Americans lived in air-conditioned housing, erected behind barbed wires, with swimming pools and gardens while the workers are subjugated to live in “bidonvilles”, barracks with rats, dogs and flies.

As the Bedouin begin denouncing this new cultural imperialism, the emir is increasingly seduced by Western gadgetry, including the radio and telephone, which strengthens the Arab leaders’ connection with remote centres of power. The Americans bribed the emir with luxurious cars, and different kinds of weapons. The habit of the Whites to use people around them to meet their own ends is evident here. He did not care or exhibit any affectionate behaviour towards the Bedouin’s distress. The emir, in return to all the bribes, provides the outsiders with protection by oppressing his own people to facilitate the job of exploiting those workers and their environment, preventing them from rebelling against the company, and asking for their right in sharing the oil profits with the Americans.

The Bedouin suffer from different opposing forces like the interventionist state, the capitalist class and the colonizer. In one incident, the personnel office requires each worker to be interviewed to determine their classification such interviews, however really give the workers a sense of intrusion and suspicion. Consequently, the problem with oil is that it is usually not directed to develop the local residents and their local environment. On the contrary, it is used to help accumulate more capitals in the hands of the colonizer and capitalists who secrete saliva as soon as they hear about the discovery of oil in Wadi Al-Uyoun and Harran. The colonizer financially supports the political leaders in the colonized countries to help them in achieving their goals.

The Americans kept the ways they extract and manufacture oil as a secret from the local residents. Munif comments on this saying that “the tragedy is not in our having oil, but in the way we use the wealth it has created in the future waiting us after it has run out.” In underdeveloped countries, he continues, “oil has become a damnation. In twenty to thirty years’ time, we would 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 and their hundreds of thousands of inhabitants will have to begin again their quest after the unknown” (qtd in Nixon’s “The Hidden Lives of Oil”, 2).

It is the workers who constructed the oil pipelines and it is the Americans who will get the huge profits. Munif portrays the negative effect of industrial capitalism on small businesses of the middle class, and how they joined the workers in their strike. In the novel, we see how the businesses of Raji and Akoub were eliminated by the capitalists like Hassan Rezaie and Al- Naqib. They lost their job as truck drivers when faster and more efficient American trucks appear. Muffadi’s business was also eliminated by the arch-capitalist, Subhi Al- Mihmalji. Later on, Raji and Abu As’ad- the coffeehouse owner- joined the workers in their strike.

The inhabitants of Wadi 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. 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). In another instance, the oil company in Harran 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).

V. CONCLUSION

Munif views cities fuelled by oil as fragile, impermanent, and easy to dissolve. Water, in this regard, is a metaphor for a delicate and humble, yet dangerous, destructive, and threatening element for salt. In the case of cities built with salt, a sprinkle of water surely will be able to dissolve and make them vanish. In the novel, he depicts how the oil industry took people from their cultures of origin to work in the oil industry, preventing them from living harmoniously with the environment. By reading novels, we realize that hopes and aspirations of a new life showed by the oil-men is not the ultimate truth, since truth varies according to perspectives and locations. Therefore, mechanization of human life is the main subject of the oil novel.

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