

MARXISM AND OIL LITERATURE CHARACTERISTICS IN ABDURRAHMAN MUNIF'S CITIES OF SALT

Sameer M. Al-Shraah, PhD

Assistant Professor of English Literature and Criticism,
Department of English Language and Literature,
Faculty of Arts and Humanities Al-albays University, Mafrq, Jordan

Abstract

Cities of Salt can be studied as a manifestation of Marx's interpretation of colonialism and economy. Marxism here is used as a mirror that reflects the real faces of the colonizer and the capitalists who uses oil to exploit the Bedouins, their environment, and the workers. Thus, this research argues that studying *Cities of Salt* from a Marxist and an oil literature point of view helps in unveiling the dilemmas associated with this discovery of oil in the Bedouins' land to the world. This makes this literary work a possible provider of proper solutions to the exploitation which the colonized people and their environment suffers as a result of this oil discovery in their land.

Keywords: Marxism, petrofiction, and oil literature

Introduction

If we take into consideration the fact that the author, Abdurrahman Munif, was a member of the Ba'ath party, and the fact that he was an oil economist who worked in the Iraqi Oil Ministry, we infer that there has to be some Marxist thoughts presented in the novel. Therefore, no one can ignore the fact that this party is based on Marxism. In fact, this view tends to be strong if we trace the way the novel presents the negative effects of the political, economic, and social system brought about by the Americans. To be more precise, it makes a contrast between a cooperative society without distinguished classes and without a devastated environment at Wadi Al-Uyoun. Also, it makes a contrast between a capitalist and competitive society based on two classes—as Marx puts it—“of the property owners and the propertyless workers” (Marx, “Alienated Labor” 77). However, the whole novel is about the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the lower class represented mainly by the workers. If the struggle was mainly between the Americans on the one side, and the native residents regardless of their

differences on the other side, then this view would not be valid. However, on the one hand, we find a struggle between the Bedouins and the Americans from the first moments when they encountered each other. Thus, Al-Hathal says that “their smell kills birds” (Munif 31), and later on, he said to the emir “By God, Your Excellency, we were as happy as we could be before those devils came along” (Munif 87). On the other hand, we find a struggle between the lower class and the capitalists. Most of them are native residents of the area, and the bad connotative names the Bedouins used to ascribe to those capitalists are a manifestation of this struggle.

I.

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 kind of development meant here is a radical one that helps the Bedouins to be educated in a proper way to be qualified to direct their own life. Moreover, the Bedouins were not allowed to be real participants in the process of that development. They are treated as incapable subjects who are in need to be taken into custody instead of being effective participants in their own development. Talking about the real meaning of development, Gustavo Esteva refers to the different ways many scholars talk about the real meaning of development. He says:

...development has connoted at least one thing: to escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment. When Nyerere proposed that development should be the political mobilization of a people for attaining their own objectives, he was also conscious that it was madness to pursue the goals that others had set; when Rodolfo Stavenhagen proposes today ethnodevelopment or development with self-confidence, he was conscious that we need to 'look within' and 'search for one's own culture' instead of using borrowed and foreign views; when Jimoh Omo-Fedaka suggests a development from the bottom up, he was conscious that all strategies based on a top-down design have failed to reach their explicitly stated objectives; when Orlando Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman insist on participatory development, they were conscious of the exclusion made in the name of development; when Jun Nishikawa proposes 'other' development for Japan, he was conscious that the current era is ending; when they and many others qualified for development, and use the word

with caveats and restrictions as if they were walking in a minefield, they do not seem to see the counter-productivity of their efforts. The minefield has already exploded (Esteva 7).

As an alternative approach to the development set by the Americans, Bedouins could, for example, be sent to the western universities to master the skills that the American oil engineers have. When they come back, the Bedouins would be able to create their own systems of education, health care, etc. To secure their control over oil, the Americans kept the ways they extract and manufacture oil as a secret from the local residents. They do this by isolating themselves in their own “air-conditioned housing” with swimming pools, and their women resembles “milk and figs,” while the workers are located in “bidonvilles,” barracks without air-conditioning, but with rats.

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 awaiting us after it has ran out.” In underdeveloped countries, he continues, “oil has become a damnation. In 20 or 30 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 seems that what Munif wants to say in this novel is similar to what he said in the interview with him during the Gulf War. Like Marx, he thinks that the workers should be liberated and be responsible for directing their own raw materials, their own process of production, and their own development. However, this was because they were marginalized and deprived from participating in the process of developing their own land and their own life. In addition, the workers and other Bedouins naturally rebel against the bourgeoisie (the emir and his men, the capitalists, and the American company).

The source of this struggle is the introduction of the “industrial capital” associated with the discovery of oil in this “ancient Bedouin homeland” (Tariq Ali 2). Before capitalism, the Bedouins produced their own means of sustenance and administer and manage their life in their own way. Property seems to be distributed almost equally among them. After the introduction of capitalism, the Bedouins became workers who are “degraded to the most miserable sort of commodity” (2). The capital brings the Bedouin from their natural environment into a metropolitanized Harran. Thus, it makes them dependent upon the bourgeoisie who have their own means of production. Marx argues that capitalism works much the same way when he says:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, and has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural ... Just as it has made the country dependant on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependant on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, and East on the West. (Marx, “Bourgeois and Proletarians” 225)

Marx mainly argues for a just distribution of profits to avoid “the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus a more terrible restoration of monopoly” (Marx, “Alienated Labor” 77). He wants the worker to be in the heart of the production process. In Marxism, we discovered that this process consists mainly of three parts: the raw material, the workers or the proletariats, and the organizers or the bourgeoisie. Profits gained from this process should be distributed justly and in a proper way according to the efforts each one exerts. A good example of this argument is illustrated during the process of constructing the oil pipelines. It is the workers who constructed it, and it is the Americans who will get the huge profits. The workers refer to this fact during the strike when they chant saying:

Theft!
Stone by stone, we constructed,
Inch by inch, we built the pipe.
Now that we have built and raised,
What do you say, O company, O God!
God is our witness, you have no rights.
Our rights are everlasting, they are ours.
With our blood and sweat, we will achieve them!

(Munif 597)

They also chant:

Joher, tell your rulers
The pipeline was built by beasts of prey
We will safeguard our rights.
The Americans do not own it.
This land is our land. (Munif 592)

Another fact that supports this argument is the way Munif portrays the negative effect of industrial capitalism on small businesses of the middle class, and how they joined the workers in their strike. Marx explains this fact arguing that:

the lower strata of the middle class-the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants-all sinks gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not

suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skills is rendered worthless by new methods of production (Marx, “Bourgeois and Proletarians” 227).

In the novel, we see how the businesses of Raji and Akoub were eliminated by the capitalists like Hassan Rezaie and Al-Naqib. Muffidi'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. Hence, Abu As'ad says: “Well, if you want to drink today, everything is here: tea, sugar, coffee, but roll up your sleeves because today, Abu As'ad is off duty. In plain Arabic, it means Abu As'ad is on strike” (Munif 605).

Hegemony is so clear in the novel. This hegemony is in fact practiced by the bourgeoisie against the workers. Naim, one of the bourgeoisies, was hegemonic when he meets the workers and asked them about some information needed by the Americans. “Naim was seated when Fawaz entered and did not return his greeting. He nodded briefly and gave Fawaz an almost hostile look, as if he did not trust him” (Munif 203). This hegemony is the product of the capitalist system that makes the bourgeoisies, who are the minority to be a ruling class. However, it places the workers, who are the majority, in the lower class. “Why did the Americans shout at them, telling them to move, to leave the place immediately, expelling them like dogs? Juma never hesitated to lash out his whip when he found the workers in ‘restricted areas’” (Munif 597).

This hegemonic and unjust treatment of the workers leads them to organize themselves into political and social movements and rebel against the bourgeoisie. Marx explains this natural event saying that:

The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hand of the state, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class, and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible (Marx, “Proletarians and Communists” 237).

The American company's hegemony reached an extent to almost completely controlling the emir, and interfering in his policies in dealing with his people. The Americans suggest forming an operation group to handle the strike properly. “The phenomenon facing us today must be examined and treated in two levels, ‘said Philip, reading from a sheet of paper’” (Munif 609). Philip said this in front of the emir. Therefore, this

signifies how the American company controls the emir and interferes in the political decision making concerning the lives of the Bedouins people. Hassan Rezaie, another capitalist was there and adds: “Yes, yes, it is all completely abnormal ... we have to look at it closely and think of the future.” And comments on the Bedouins saying: “They are worse than devils” (Munif 609). Harvey describes this intervention saying, “Business and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors, but even acquire a strong role in writing legislations, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)” (Harvey 77).

The exploitation of one nation by another is the invention of capitalism. The main reason that brings those Americans to this boiling hot desert is the accumulation of capitals, which is a natural consequence of oil discovery. However, they are group of profiteers—in this case they could be oil businessmen—who brought the company to exploit the Bedouins under the pretext of developing them. This pretext was argued by Gustavo Esteva, that since January 20, 1949, the day on which President Truman took office:

... two billion people became underdeveloped. In a real sense, from that time on, they ceased being what they were in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into others’ reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the term of a homogenizing and narrow minority (Esteva 7).

Nevertheless under communism, things are different because “as the exploitation of one individual by another is put to an end, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put to an end. In proportion, as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end” (Marx, “Proletarians and Communist” 236). In the novel, the story of Akoub is a practical example of how a cooperative communist society might help erase social and economic barriers among individuals. He is a Christian from Armenia, but a stranger to the Bedouins and the workers. In spite of this fact, he is completely adopted by them, and they consider him as one of them after they have found out that he is not a colonizer. When he died, they washed his body, prayed over him and “Fawaz bin Miteb al-Hathal engraved a prayer on the tomb stone with a large nail, with words HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF YAACOUB AL-HARRANI” (Munif 504). Harran, their homeland, became an inseparable part of his identity as he was given a family name taken from the name of that homeland town.

As for the relation between the Americans and the Arabs, it differs from one to another. 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. This is reminiscent of Marx's argument against Feudalism. In this old political and economical system, the kings are on the top of the hierarchy. Beneath them, are the barons who are protected by the knights in exchange for lands. Beneath the knights, come the peasants who are allowed to work in exchange for eating and drinking. However, this system did not change a lot in the modern capitalist system as:

Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of laborers crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. As private of the industrial army, they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State, they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overlooker, and above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacture himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful, and the more embittering bit is (Marx, “Bourgeois and Proletarians” 227).

Furthermore, the Americans bribed the emir with various means of technology, luxurious cars, and different kinds of weapons. He, in his turn, provides them with protection by oppressing the workers, preventing them from rebelling against the company, and asking for their right in sharing the oil profits with the Americans.

The capitalist system that is usually associated with the colonizer enables the colonizer to enslave and colonize the people in a more effective way than the direct military occupation. However, the colonizer financially supports the political leaders in the colonized countries to help them in achieving their goals. David Harvey describes this miserable situation when he stated, commenting on embedded neo-liberalism, that “powerful corporations in alliance with an interventionist states were seen to be running the world in an individually oppressive and socially unjust ways” (Harvey 42). Thus, we are suffering from different opposing forces: “the intrusive state,” “the capitalist class,” (Harvey 42) and the colonizer.

All these issues which Marx and Munif argue against are the product of the struggle over oil possession. In fact, oil literature is one of the most important subjects that clarifies to the world the real conflict between East and West, the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressed and the oppressors,

etc. Rob Nixon thinks that oil is one of the few subjects that “open up the classroom to such varied perspectives on the current crisis: terrorism, Islam, tyranny, imperialism, patriotism, globalization, environmental wreckage, SUV’s, and fuel efficiency.” Also, he thinks that these issues “are all cross-hatched with the question of oil” and that “in responding to our students’ desire to broaden their worlds, we can find an ally in the extensive literature on oil” (Rob Nixon 2).

To take the issue of the environment referred to by Nixon, which is a typical theme in oil literature, we found that it was one of the first problems the Bedouins faced with the coming of the American oil company. Lamenting on the beautiful Wadi Al-Uyoun which used to exist before the coming of the huge American machines, the narrator describes Miteb al-Hathal’s sad thoughts saying:

for anyone who remembers those long-ago days, when a place called Wadi Al-Uyoun used to exist, and a man named Miteb al-Hathal, and a brook, and trees, and a community of people used to exist, the three things that still break his heart in recalling those days are the tractors which attacked the orchards like ravenous wolves, tearing up the trees and throwing them to the earth one after another, and leveled all the orchards between the brook and the fields. 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 as if trying to snuggle into the earth to grow and spring forth alive again (Munif 106).

Obviously, it was a contrast between a beautiful, natural, sensitive, delicate, and virgin environment of trees, people, water, soil, air, etc., with cruel, insensitive, and harsh invaders who came just to accumulate more wealth through oil exploitation.

Nixon also believes that through oil literature, the Americans could easily understand countries like: Kashmir, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan. These “are names and places previously obscured to most Americans by apparent

Irrelevance,” wondering: “What kinds of books can help make them less remote? Perhaps more important, while engaging our students’ curiosities and fears, what issues and topics can also show them that such places are, in fact, seamed through with America's past and Americans interests?” (Nixon 2). Therefore, presented to the West as oil literature, *Cities of Salt* contributes greatly in making Saudi Arabia a “less remote”

country. In addition, it helped made issues like terrorism and Islam less obscure and easier to be studied intellectually and critically. This is because one characteristic of petrofiction is that it unveils the real history of oil. In her article “Petro-capitalism, petrofiction, and Islamic discourse: the formation of an imagined community in *Cities of Salt*,” Ilana Xinos refers to Ghosh’ opinion, saying: “the reason behind the lack of petrofiction is the history of oil, which is embarrassing to all parties involved” (1). She continues that:

Ghosh also notes that the places where oil encounters happened were inhabited mainly by oral cultures, and were those parts of the Middle East that have been the most marginal in the development of modern Arab culture and literature—on the outermost peripheries of such literary centers as Cairo and Beirut. (1)

Cities of Salt helps in unveiling this embarrassing history to a great extent. As for embarrassment, *Cities of Salt* reveals the real faces of the colonizers, the capitalists, and the dictators. The American company and the capitalists bribe the emir and his men, and they in turn, oppresses and subjugates the workers to facilitate the job of exploiting those workers and their environment. As for the oral culture of the oppressed, we see in the novel that Fawaz al-Hathal is one of the very few Bedouins who know how to read and write. Thus, he learned this from his sheikh.

Another characteristic associated with oil discovery is the displacement of the native residents and the great negative effects of this displacement on them. In the novel, oil changes the Bedouins’ cultures by forcing them to move to a new environment—Harran—that they have little experience to deal with it successfully to survive. This was exactly like what happened to the Indian villagers who were forced to move to the slums of the city after building the Narmada Dam. The author Arundhati Roy, who joins the demonstration against the dam, asks critical questions about the real motives behind building that dam: “Will the water go to the poor farmers or the rich industrialists? What happened to the 16 million people displaced by fifty years of dam building?” (Armstrong, *The Dammed*). As we have seen, this idea of displacement is referred to by Marx (see page 4), who thinks that it is the product of the ruling of the bourgeoisie over the lower class.

Rob Nixon explains how, like Munif, other oil literature writers share almost the same characteristics and face the same destiny when they talk about issues associated with oil discovery like: a devastated environment, apprising regimes, displacement etc. He refers to the Nigerian writer Ken Saro Wiwa saying that “Like Munif, he was alert to the complicity between transnational petroleum companies and the brutal repressions inflicted on local populations by undemocratic, unpopular, and oil-empowered regimes”

(Rob Nixon 2). He made the following comparison between three oil fiction works: Munif's *Cities of salt*; Saro-Wiwa's prison memoir, *A Month and a Day*; and Joe Kane's *Savages*:

Read in sequence, *Cities of Salt*, *A Month and a Day*, and *Savages* bring into focus the double standards that bedevil the international politics of petroleum. In terms of human rights and environmental standards, oil corporations typically reserve one ethic for their operations in the West, another for their operations in the so-called developing nations. Even when law-abiding at home, they too often join forces with lawlessness abroad. For a writer to protest the corrupting intimacies between petro despots and oil transnationals can be a life-threatening enterprise. Saro-Wiwa was executed; Munif lived in exile just like does George Aditjondro, the vocal Indonesian intellectual who has written against his nation's oil-driven authoritarianism. (Nixon 2)

Moreover, Munif's *Cities of Salt* was banned, and Abdurrahman Munif was stripped from his Saudi citizenship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that *Cities of Salt* is a petrofiction work that reveals the real history of oil. Because this 'embarrassing history' is based on 'petro-capitalism' and the exploitation of the environment, investigating the novel from a Marxist and an oil literature point of view helps in introducing an effective way to radically solve the dilemmas associated with the black history of capitalism in general and 'petro-capitalism in specific'. Moreover, it helps the West to familiarize with issues like Islam and terrorism by unveiling the real reasons behind the incomprehensibility. This is common for many westerners on these critical issues, where oil plays a major role just as the novel seems to suggest.

References:

- Ali, Tariq. "Farewell to Munif: A Patriarch of the Arab Literature" Cornell University. (Nov, 2002)
<<http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/amunif.htm>>
- Armstrong, Franny, dir. *The Dammed*. 2002. DVD. Prod. Spanner Films Ltd., 2003. Esteva, Gustavo. "Development." *The Development Dictionary*. Ed, Wolfgang Sachs. London: Zed, 1992.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Marx, Karl. "Alienated Labor" *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Ed. David McLellan, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1977.77-87.
- . "Bourgeoise and Proletarians" *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Ed. David McLellan, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1977. 222-231.

- . "Proletarians and Communists" Karl Marx: Selected Writings. Ed. David McLellan, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977. 231-238.
- Munif, Abdelrahman. Cities of Salt. Trans. Peter Theroux. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Nixon, Rob. "The Hidden Lives of Oil." Chronicle of Higher Education. 5 (April. 2002) p.2. <
<http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/hidoil.htm>>
- Xions, Ilana. "Petro-capitalism, petrofiction, and Islamic discourse: the formation of an imagined community in Cities of Salt." Arab Studies Quarterly. 2006. <
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2501/is_/ai_n27025618>