



# Petro-Narratives: A Critical Analysis of Cultural Confrontation in Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*

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**Abstract:** This research paper offers a critical reading of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, with an emphasis on the significant cultural confrontation depicted in the narrative. The story depicts disruptions experienced by the traditional Bedouin community upon the discovery of oil, which results in profound socio-economic changes and cultural clashes with Western oilmen. Through the lens of cultural studies, this paper explores themes of cultural confrontation, identity crises, and the clash between modernity and tradition. The analysis demonstrates how Munif's portrayal of these cultural dynamics serves as a critique of the disruptive impacts of globalization and Western intervention on Middle Eastern societies. This critical examination aims to enrich the discourse on petrofiction and its representation of the complex interactions of culture, power, and identity in oil-dominated landscapes. Since the novel is a quintet, this paper examines excerpts from the first volume, *Al-Teeh*, which aligns with the study's argument.

**Key Words:** Petrofiction, Cultural Confrontation, Bedouin Community, Modernity vs. Tradition, Middle Eastern Literature.

"In the clash between East and West, the collision of traditions and modernity, lies the heart of our struggle for identity." — Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (1998).

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

In contemporary Arabic literature, few literary works capture the clash between tradition and modernity as powerfully as Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*<sup>1</sup>. This novel describes the dramatic changes experienced by the Bedouin community after the discovery of oil in their desert. Munif's story critiques the social and economic disruptions and cultural confrontations that come with the arrival of Western oil companies in the Arabian Peninsula. It is not merely a story about the transformation of a community; it is a profound exploration of the cultural clashes that arise when the forces of globalization and modernity collide with deeply rooted traditions. This research investigates how Abdelrahman Munif's Petrofiction depicts the cultural confrontations between the Bedouin community and Western oil companies, and what insights this provides into the wider impacts of globalization on indigenous cultures. This paper aims to enrich the discourse on petrofiction and its representation of the complex intersections of culture, power, and identity.

<sup>1</sup> It was translated into English by Peter Theroux who is an American translator and writer.



## 2. Evolution of Petrofiction :

Petrofiction, a literary genre that explores the socio-economic and environmental impacts of oil, emerged in the mid-20th century. It began as a response to the increasing dominance of the oil industry on global affairs and societal fabrics. Amitav Ghosh, in his essay titled *Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel* (1992), explores the thematic and narrative implications of oil in literature. He coined the term 'petrofiction' to describe novels that engage deeply with the socio-political, economic, and environmental impacts of the oil industry. He argues that oil, as a dominant force in modern global history, has not only shaped economies but also influenced cultures and identities. Through his analysis, Ghosh shed light on how literature can serve as a critical lens to examine the complexities and consequences of our dependence on fossil fuels. His essay provokes readers to reconsider the role of oil in contemporary society and its portrayal in fiction as a means to understand broader issues of power, exploitation, and environmental degradation.

In *Monstrous Transformer: Petrofiction and World Literature* (2017), Graeme Macdonald examines the distinctive genre of petrofiction, focusing on its origin, features, and importance within global literature. The article investigates how petrofiction provides a lens for authors around the world to address the socio-political, environmental, and cultural impacts of the oil industry. It explains how petrofiction transcends geographical borders, presenting varied perspectives on issues such as power relations, environmental harm, and social change. Through a comparative analysis of petrofiction from different regions, the article demonstrates the genre's ability to reveal global connections and inequalities while highlighting local experiences and challenges. By placing petrofiction within the larger framework of world literature, the article emphasizes its role in promoting cross-cultural dialogue and comprehension. Additionally, it examines the symbolic meaning of oil as a "monstrous transformer" that profoundly and often disturbingly alters landscapes, economies, and identities. Ultimately, the article asserts that petrofiction holds a vital place in world literature, providing readers with a complex and nuanced exploration of one of the modern era's defining phenomena.

As petrofiction has evolved, it has increasingly transcended geographical and cultural boundaries, reflecting the global nature of the oil industry and its far-reaching consequences.

## 3. Wadi Al-Uyoun: Oasis of Serenity :

The narrator begins the story with a rich description of *Wadi Al-Uyoun*<sup>2</sup>, the setting for the first volume of *Cities of Salt, Al-Teeh*. The Bedouin living in the Valley seem to enjoy a contented life. Despite being located in a hard desert, the Valley's palm trees and flowing streams give it a distinguished reputation that is valued not only by its inhabitants but also by 'caravans'. To depict the Valley's beauty, the author writes:

*WADI AL-UYOUN: AN OUTPOURING OF GREEN amid the harsh, obdurate desert, as if it had fallen from the sky...For*

*caravans, Wadi al-Uyoun was an ordinary place to its inhabitants, and excited to strong emotions, for they were used to*

*seeing the palm trees filling the wadi and the gushing brooks surging forth in the winter and early spring, and felt protected*

*by some blessed power that made their lives easy...for caravans, Wadi al-Uyoun was a phenomenon, something of a*

*miracle, unbelievable to those who saw it for the first time and unforgettable forever after. The Wadi's name was repeated all the stages of a journey, in a setting out and returning: "How much longer to Wadi-al Uyoun?" "If we make to Wadi al-Uyoun we'll set up for a few days before going on," and "Where are you, Wadi al-Uyoun, early paradise? (1-2)*

<sup>2</sup> Wadi is an Arabic word which means a valley or channel that is dry except when it rains. Metaphorically *Wadi Al-Uyoun* stands for natural harmony, cultural heritage, purity, and generosity.



These lines describe *Wadi al-Uyoun* as a green oasis in the harsh desert, making it seem almost a miracle, "feeling sure that He who had created the world and humankind had created, at the same time, Wadi al-Uyoun is this very spot as a salvation from death in the treacherous, accused desert." (2) Though the people of the valley were poor, they were happy with the life they lived and praised it extravagantly. The valley is the place of contentment for the Bedouin, even during hard times when the only available food is dry dates, milk, and stale bread. Then the author introduces Miteb al-Hathal, who had a rare passion with Wadi-al Uyoun, and people of the valley saying that "The people here are just big children...A single word enjoys or kills them. You have to know just how to speak to them and how to deal with them." (6-7). This viewpoint highlights the cultural superiority felt by the outsiders, suggesting they believe the Bedouin can be easily manipulated with the right words and tactics. Also, these lines emphasize the power -dynamics, where the outsiders view themselves as superior and more knowledgeable, while the Bedouin are seen as subjects to be guided and controlled. After that, Miteb comes to know from Fawaz that Ibn Rashed "has foreigner guests...Three foreigners with two marsh Arabs, and they speak Arabic" (25-26). Then Miteb and Fawaz saddled two horses to investigate the matter. To illustrate how enigmatic the three Americans appear to the Valley Bedouin, the author writes:

*"But what do they want from us, and what does it concern them if we get rich or stay just as we are? Watch their eyes, watch*

*what they do and say. They're devils, no one can trust them. They're more accursed than the Jews. And the bastards*

*memorized the Koran. Strange." (29)*

The rhetorical questions reflect the valley Bedouin's confusion about the Americans' intentions, indicating that they perceive them as having ulterior motives that do not align with the interests of the local people. The comparison to the Jews, and the astonishment that the Americans have memorized the Koran, underscores the extent to which the Bedouin view the Americans as both dangerous and cunning, and for caravans, the author writes:

*"Whenever the men of caravans saw the three foreigners and spoke to them, their fears and doubts increased...As to why*

*Miteb al-Hathal behaved as he did, why he viewed the foreigners with such anger and fear, a state of inspiration more like*

*prophecy had filled his heart and life in recent years!" (33-34)*

These lines show the growing anxiety and suspicion among the Valley Bedouin towards the foreigners. Miteb al-Hathal's reaction to the foreigners, marked by anger and fear, is portrayed as almost prophetic, suggesting a deep understanding of the threat they pose. It is clear that Miteb has a strong relation with the Valley. Through the character of Miteb, the author portrays the anxiety one feels towards disruptions in a peaceful home. These anxieties fade when the disruptors leave, and life in the Valley returns to normal. However, this normalcy does not last long.

#### **4. Disturbing the serenity of *Wadi Al-Uyoun* :**

For months, the Valley's inhabitants have enjoyed peace. Suddenly, the foreigners return with others and some of the emir's men. In just days, the Valley's rhythm changes drastically. Equipment fills the area, a camp is set up, and wires and fences are erected. The narrator describes Miteb's intense anxiety in response to these developments saying:

*" People long remembered the moment he arrived, shaking like a leaf and glancing about him like a wolf. When he caught*

*sight of the newly built camp, he could not stop cursing. He wanted to destroy it utterly, but the people prevented him. Later*

*on, many of them would say, "Miteb al-Hathal was right ... yes, he was right!" (68)*



Miteb's intense anxiety highlights his deep connection to the land and his foresight of the negative consequences of this intrusion. His cursing and desire to destroy the camp show his desperation to protect his home. The people's eventual agreement with Miteb underscores his role as a prophetic figure who understands the true impact of the foreigners' presence. When the machinery started working, the inhabitants become frightened. The narrator says:

*"the machine started to roar again, frightening everyone...the sound was accompanied by a blinding light. Within moments*

*scores of small but brilliant suns began to blaze, filling the whole area with a light with no one could believe or stand. The*

*men and boys retreated and looked at the lights again to make sure they still saw them, and looked at each other in terror.*

*The animals who drew near retreated in fright; the camels fled, and the sheep stirred uneasily."(69)*

This quotation portrays the impact of the machinery's activation on the inhabitants. The use of sensory details like the roaring sound and blinding light creates a dramatic atmosphere of fear and astonishment. The mention of the men and boys checking repeatedly to confirm what they are seeing adds to the sense of bewilderment and panic, while the reaction of the animals underscores the widespread fear induced by the machinery's effects. Overall, the narrator effectively conveys the overwhelming and unsettling nature of this technological intrusion into their surroundings. The disturbance of the desert scene isn't solely caused by the quest for oil; the customs of the foreigners also exploit fear and resentment among the Valley's inhabitants. During their breaks, American workers lie on their stomachs, clad only in shorts. This sight of semi-naked foreigners infuriates the Bedouin. Ibn Rashed tells the Americans that the locals would find it unacceptable for men to lie around like that, particularly because women frequently pass by the camp on their way to fetch water from the streams. Despite his attempts to persuade them otherwise, the men continue with their daily routine. Even though Ibn Rashed defends the Americans, he privately shares a sense of dissatisfaction with their behavior and how they present themselves. As a result, women stopped bring water and the inhabitants sent a delegation to the emir saying:

*"Your Excellency, we have no objection to their taking water from the brook, but we'll die before we let them take it over our womenfolk, Your Excellency, our honor, Your Excellency ... If you want to solve the problem, solve it. And if you don't want to solve it, we will ourselves."(79)*

The Americans seem to seek a sense of home in the desert. However, the sight of men lounging semi-naked contradicts the Bedouin's cultural norms, which are fundamental to their way of life. Since the emir hasn't addressed the Bedouin's grievances, Miteb, Ibn Rashed, and others set out on a journey to meet him. Upon their arrival, the emir appears and speaks:

*"People of Wadi al-Uyoun, you will be among the richest and happiest of all mankind, as if God saw none but you...you have been patient and endured much. God is your witness, but you will be living as if in a dream. You will talk about times past as if they belonged to some old legend."(85)*

After that, the emir informs the Bedouin that under their feet lies "oceans of oil, oceans of gold." (86). However, Ibn Rashed ventured desperately "money is not everything in this world. More important are honor, ethics and our traditions." (85) These lines highlight the contrast between the emir's materialistic perspective and Ibn Rashed's commitment to traditional values. The emir's declaration that there are "oceans of oil, oceans of gold" beneath their feet reflects a worldview focused on wealth and economic opportunity, suggesting that material gain is of utmost importance. This perspective underscores the broader theme of modernization and industrialization, where economic benefits are often prioritized over cultural and ethical considerations. In contrast, Ibn Rashed's desperate assertion that "money is not everything in this world" emphasizes the intrinsic value of honor, ethics, and traditions. His statement underscores a profound cultural and ethical conflict, illustrating the deep-rooted values of the Bedouin that are threatened by the



introduction of modern, profit-driven ideologies. Ibn Rashed's argument highlights the tension between preserving traditional ways of life and embracing the economic opportunities presented by oil discovery.

### 5. Sands of change: Bedouin-Displacement :

Munif effectively portrays the dual dimensions of displacement faced by the Indigenous Bedouin inhabitants—physical and psychological. The physical displacement, characterized by the loss of land and the forced resettlement of the Bedouin, represents a dramatic and tangible change. Meanwhile, the psychological displacement encompasses the profound emotional and existential crises experienced by individuals as they navigate the erosion of their cultural identity and sense of self. It portrays the conflict between traditional ways of life and the onset of modernity. As the machinery roars to life, the Bedouin watch in terror, their once serene desert now a hub of industrial activity. The author says:

*He looked at the men in the camp, filled with a strong sense of finality, and when the mad machines went into action, he screamed in a harsh but pained voice: "I'm sorry, Wadi al-Uyoun ... I'm sorry!" This was the final, insane, accursed proclamation that everything had come to an end. 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. (106)*

This excerpt powerfully shows the emotional and physical destruction of the Bedouin community as their land is destroyed by machines. The tractors are described as attacking the orchards "like ravenous wolves," tearing up the trees and throwing them to the ground. The trees are personified, shaking and groaning as they fall, emphasizing the violence of the destruction. Miteb al-Hathal's cry, "I'm sorry, Wadi al-Uyoun ... I'm sorry!" expresses his deep sorrow and helplessness as he watches his home being destroyed. These lines capture the profound sense of loss for the once-beautiful *Wadi al-Uyoun*, showing how modernization not only displaces people but also destroys their history and identity.

While many Bedouin observe the changes silently, others engage in them. However, Umm Khosh was unable to resist the displacement and died the moment she was forced out of her beloved homeland, *Wadi al-Uyoun*. She is a mother of a long-traveling son. She has kept her faith in waiting for her son's return to Wadi despite mocking from kids and others. The poor woman died after being forced to leave the valley for oil exploration and constructions. The author writes:

*Abdallah al-Masoud pointed at Umm Khosh. "What about the old woman?" he asked. "She's coming with us. " Several people repeated these words approvingly. "And if she doesn't want to come?" "Whether she wants to or not, " said Muhammad al-Med-awwar. "We'll take her with us and go. " "Fine. See for yourself. Ask her. " Muhammad al-Medawwar strode over and put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Umm Khosh ... Umm Khosh." She did not reply or move. "It's nearly noon ... Umm Khosh. " She did not reply... In less than an hour a grave was dug and Umm Khosh was buried. No one wanted to touch her belongings, so the wind scattered them and the sand buried all that she had left behind. (123-24)*





This heartbreaking incident sheds a critical light on the profound repercussions of oil exploration on women and the fact that no one wanted to touch Umm Khosh's belongings and her possessions were left to be scattered by the wind underscores the dispossession and loss experienced by displaced Bedouins, particularly women who may have fewer resources and less ability to protect their belongings or assert their rights.

## 6. Oil and Identity: Cultural Confrontation in Petrofiction :

The town of Harran has its own story of destruction and displacement, connected to but separate from what happened in the Valley. While buildings and landmarks were destroyed in both places, people in Harran were compensated for their lost land, unlike those in the Valley. Despite this, Bedouin from both areas feel deeply confused and sad about what has happened. In Harran, two different towns emerge: Arab Harran and American Harran. Bedouin workers, now dressed in overalls and white caps under American engineers' guidance, seem like unfamiliar figures to their own culture. Arab Harran tries hard to keep its values and traditions intact, while American Harran grows bigger and more spacious but feels increasingly strange to the Bedouin, who observe everything with confusion. The arrival of a massive ship adds to the astonishment. As it nears shore, the Bedouin hear voices, songs, and drums. The ship brings hundreds of people, including women who are remarkably different: perfumed and dressed in clothes that leave parts of their bodies uncovered, except for a small colourful piece of fabric. The sight of these laughing, radiant women leaves an unforgettable impression on the Bedouin. The author says:

*"The women were perfumed, shining and laughing, like horses after a long race. Each was strong and clean, as if fresh from a hot bath, and each body was uncovered except for a small piece of colored cloth. Their legs were proud and bare, and stronger than rocks. Their faces, hands, breasts, bellies-everything, yes, everything glistened, danced, flew. Men and women embraced on the deck of the large ship and in the small boats, but no one could believe what was happening on the shore." (214)*

The Bedouin move closer to the ship, trying to make sense of this dramatic deviation from their usual way of life. The Bedouin are not only taken aback by the musical instruments brought on the ship but also overwhelmed by the behaviour of the new Americans. The author writes:

*"They nudged each other to look at some new scene, but as the party spread and grew wilder and the naked or seemingly*

*naked men and women appeared on the ship and in the small boats striking dramatic poses-the men stroked the women and*

*then attacked suddenly for hugs and kisses, and carried the women around on their backs, and made them sit on their laps-*

*the Arabs shouted and pointed more boisterously." (217)*

This excerpt shows how the Bedouin react strongly when they see the Americans behaving very differently from what they're used to. The Americans on the ship are openly hugging, kissing, and carrying each other, which surprises and confuses the Bedouin. They shout and point excitedly, showing how different these behaviors are from their own cultural norms. It highlights the clash between the Bedouin's traditional ways and the new, more expressive culture of the Americans arriving on the ship. This sudden encounter creates a new class system that confuses the Bedouin. politically, this unprecedented event is cultural imperialism. Edward Said points out, "Imperialism isn't just about domination; it also aims to expand its ideology" (186). Clearly, the Americans want to spread their culture beyond their own borders, which forces the Arabs to accept it. The Arabs are genuinely shocked. Even though the Americans realize their behavior disturbs the Arabs, they continue their inappropriate displays, especially after forming a closer bond with the Emir during their visits in the first weeks. These visits highlight the stark differences between the two cultures.



For days, the emir has been getting ready to honor the Americans. The author says, "[the emir] and his his men did everything in their power to make the party magnificent and the event memorable" (280-281). Arab hospitality is a well-known part of their culture, often seen as one of its best aspects. For the emir and his men, inviting guests isn't just a social duty but a matter of pride and respect. The reception happens in a large tent set up specially for the Americans. The emir arranges a camel race, which surprises the guests who thought camels were slow and only used for carrying things. When they see how fast the camels can run, they take pictures, clap, and try to get closer after the race ends. The camel race is just one part of the night's entertainment. They also show a few falcons to the guests, and then there's an aerial battle when the falcons chase after pigeons that are let go. The look on the Americans' faces shows they're amazed and maybe a little scared because they've never seen anything like this before. The meal the Arabs make shows their generous hospitality. They don't just serve any food; they even put a camel's head among the dishes. They also kill a sheep for each guest, which shows how much they want to make their guests feel welcome and respected. After dinner, the guests get to watch a sword dance performed by the Arabs. This is the first instance in the novel where the author brings together the peoples of two very distinct geographies, languages, and customs.

The role of women in these interactions is fascinating. While American women have been seen partially unclothed in front of the Arabs, Arab women have had no interaction with the American male guests. Arab women do not play a notable role in extending hospitality to men. However, after many Bedouin workers were let go from the oil company, the Americans became concerned for their safety. They requested that the emir assign guard units to protect the installations and prevent trouble. This decision to appoint guards not only created a cultural divide between the Bedouin and the Americans but also led to separate benefits, causing increasing frustration over time. To illustrate the Bedouins' feelings about this segregation, the author writes:

*"They felt afraid, but still dared to say things they would never have said had they not been so consumed with sorrow and*

*anger. 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 Americans shout at them, telling them to move, to leave the place immediately, expelling them like dogs? (595)*

This passage highlights the strong feelings of injustice and inequality faced by the Bedouin in their own community. The Bedouin are powerless in the sense that they must follow the orders without having the right to fight them. It is clear that the destruction or loss of the surrounding environment ultimately leads to the loss of the inhabitants' cultural identity, even if they stay in the same location, because their culture is deeply tied to the environment. Munif has raised a significant question: " How is it possible for people and places to change so entirely that they lose any connection with what they used to be? Can a man adapt to new things and new places without losing a part of himself?" (134). The quotation touches on cultural displacement, where the familiar is replaced by the foreign, creating a sense of exile within one's own homeland. It vividly portrays the emotional and psychological impact of adapting to new realities while grappling with the loss of cultural roots. However, in recent years, the Gulf region has continued to experience significant socio-political changes, driven by economic diversification, modernization efforts, and geopolitical dynamics. Heavy investments in sectors such as tourism, technology, and renewable energy are aimed at reducing dependence on oil, reflecting a shift towards a post-oil economy. This transformation echoes the dramatic impacts depicted in Munif's narrative.



## 7. CONCLUSION:

To wrap up, this paper examines how the discovery of oil leads to major changes and conflicts in society and culture. Munif's narrative shows how Bedouin lives and identities are deeply affected by the sudden modernization and economic growth brought by oil. The characters in the novel struggle to keep their cultural roots while adapting to a new way of life, highlighting the tension between progress and tradition. Munif's work reminds us of the human cost of rapid change and the loss that comes with it. This research emphasizes the importance of *Cities of Salt* in helping us understand the complex relationship between economic development and cultural identity. Munif's petrofiction serves as a powerful lens through which to view the ongoing challenges and opportunities facing the globe today.

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