

The Experimental Arabic Novel

Postcolonial Literary Modernism
in the Levant

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Chapter 2

Recovering the Past: The “Arabization” of the Novel

The basis . . . of the establishment of Arab revolutionary thought is the analysis of Arab reality.

—Adonis

I am very much trying to work against literature that tries to build up a relationship between a character and the reader. What I am trying to do is to get the reader involved in drawing his own conclusions as to what is happening, rather than having preordained conclusions drawn for him. I would compare what I am trying to do with Brecht's theater, in which the onlooker is made aware that he is watching a play. Similarly, I want to make the reader aware that he is reading a work of fiction.

—Abdelrahman Munif

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL COUNTER- NARRATIVE: ABDELRAHMAN MUNIF

As we have seen, both Gamal al-Ghitani and Emile Habiby used irony to comment in a veiled way on political subjects, as well as Arab history and folk tradition as a vehicle for that irony. At the same time, both of these novelists used their historical and cultural sources as a means of experimenting with narrative form. Ghitani's documentary style was a highly innovative method of constructing narrative, as was Habiby's use of the form of the fantastic fable. Written in the same year as Habiby's *Pessoptimist*, *Endings* (1988; *Al-Nihāyāt*, 1977),¹ by Abdelrahman Munif ('Abd al-Rahmān Munif), represents both a continuity with, and a departure from, these concerns. Munif is a prolific novelist, and presently among the most familiar contemporary Arab authors in the English-speaking world

after Naguib Mahfouz, due largely to the translation by Peter Theroux of the first three volumes the "Cities of Salt" series. He defies classification in terms of his nationality. A Saudi by birth, he was deprived of his Saudi citizenship, and has lived in exile in Egypt, Yugoslavia, Iraq, France, and most recently Syria. He could be described an Arab cosmopolitan in the sense that, while his cosmopolitanism is sophisticated, it is not Western-centered.

The difference between Habiby's, and Munif's work is twofold. First of all, *Endings* is not a resistance narrative, but rather a counternarrative. That is, it does not use irony in order to combat a sense of oppression, victimization, or complicity, but rather simply asserts a cultural alternative. Secondly, Munif uses the form of oral narration in a much more directed and purposeful way as a means of experimenting with narrative form. Formal innovation is no longer subordinated to political engagement, but has rather become the very means of that engagement.

The environmental and historical settings of many of Munif's more recent novels are marked by a preoccupation with desert life and culture. He puts himself in the category of Arab writers who are primarily concerned with developing an innovative style that is not imitative of the West. Munif is extremely conscious of trying to fashion a novel that is uniquely "Arab" in its view of history as well as in its narrative style. In this sense he clearly allies himself with writers such as Ghitani, who are interested in working within the Arab cultural tradition. These writers tend to be particularly interested in Latin American and Japanese literature, because they are areas of the world that have developed innovative literary styles, while retaining an indigenous flavor. According to Munif, Arab writers such as himself are intent on scrutinizing these types of literature to see how they have managed to achieve this literary independence from the West.²

Endings is set in a small desert village called Al-Tiba. The events of the novel take place during a year of particular drought, and concern the sport of bird hunting, which infects some of the villagers and people from the surrounding area like a mania. The main character is a man named 'Assaf, an outsider in the village who is ridiculed for his nonconformity. 'Assaf, however, is in fact far wiser than the rest of the villagers. He is a master hunter, with an almost reverential attitude toward nature, and a strong awareness of the limits to the advantage man can take of it.

Although 'Assaf feels himself to be an outsider, nevertheless he is loyal to the village, and during the drought, when hunger afflicts the villagers, he always leaves some game on peoples' doorsteps, keeping little for himself. Gradually, as the villagers become aware of 'Assaf's hunting talent and his generosity, they begin to feel a gruff affection toward him. When people come from the city in order to hunt, 'Assaf is always in demand to lead these veritable caravans, and is unable to refuse to serve as a guide. He tries to warn the people about the foolishness of hunting just for sport, maintaining that animals should only be shot in utmost dire necessity for food, but he is not rewarded with the sense that his words are heeded:

"These birds belong to us," he would say with some anxiety. "Either for today or tomorrow. If we're careful about conserving them, they'll be here for us to hunt. But if we kill them all or hunt them too much, they'll make an end of it and look for somewhere else to live."

He pictured a land totally devoid of partridges to hunt. "Listen, you people," he yelled testily. "If these birds disappear . . . you can be sure that the people of al-Tiba are going to die, the whole lot of them. I'm convinced of that." (32)

Events accelerate one afternoon with the arrival of a party of four guests in two cars, a Jeep and a Volkswagen. Their arrival unnerves the villagers, most of whom have never seen such vehicles. For the occasion, they assemble for an evening meeting, during which the conversation centers on hunting. 'Assaf is brought to the meeting, although he is known to dislike such gatherings. Although usually taciturn, on this occasion he is moved to speak:

"I've told you a thousand times before. Only a short stretch separates us from death, and it consists of the game which we have to preserve till the rains come again. . . . I've told you all: don't touch the female partridges; they're needed for future years. They're all we have left. I've told you: don't waste ammunition, and don't scare the birds. . . . But do you listen? No!" (46)

Despite his pleas, however, the villagers talk 'Assaf into leading another hunting party, with the guests riding in the Jeep. During this expedition, 'Assaf dies in a sandstorm. The community is stunned by

this event, realizing that it has lost the individual who, despite his non-conformity, is most precious to them. The villagers and the guests gather to share their grief in an all-night vigil. During this meeting they talk amongst themselves, recite poetry, indulge in reminiscences and sorrows, and tell stories.

The text of *Endings* is thus divided into two parts. The first part concerns the "events" that revolve around 'Assaf and his relationship to the village community. The second part consists of fourteen "stories" that are told on the evening of 'Assaf's death. Munif is carrying out several simultaneous narrative experiments here. Not only is he experimenting with building the novel on the basis of the oral tradition of folk narrative, but he works at undermining the reliance on the main character or hero, as well as on the centrality of plot. With 'Assaf's death placed at the midpoint of the text, the immediate effect upon the reader is disorienting. To this point, Munif has built 'Assaf up as a heroic character by emphasizing his special qualities—his independence, his wisdom, his concern for the welfare of the villagers. At the point of the reader's greatest interest, however, Munif suddenly disposes of his main character. He wants to make the reader aware that he is reading a work of fiction, and therefore he interrupts the reader's identification with the character in an abrupt fashion.

From this point on, the text is held together on a thematic basis, rather than by a linear plot. The fourteen stories that follow all thematically reflect the character of 'Assaf, whose death they commemorate. The stories all involve animals, and all of them end in a sudden manner, with a death that seems abrupt and senseless. For instance, the Third Story tells of a pair of crows that develop a strange relationship with a bitch. The crows hound, attack, and dive-bomb the bitch in a game that becomes the spectacle of the village:

Then one day the whole thing came to an end. The bitch disappeared.
No one saw the crows any more either. (92)

In early summer, however, the bitch returns with a whole litter of pups. The crows also return, and the mock battles resume, much to the delight of the children in the village. Then, suddenly, one day, the town policeman shoots the bitch and all her pups. The crows are never seen again. Each one of the stories has a heartrending ending of this type. The

Fifth Story is about a dog with a unique personality, to which his owner, a *shaykh*, is devoted. One day the dog falls in a water hole and cannot be rescued. The Seventh Story is about a family of crows that live in a nest in a walnut tree in a garden. One day, the owner of the garden decides to get rid of them, climbs inexorably up the tree, and has his eye gouged out by one of the crows before he is able to smash the nest and kill all but the female. The Tenth Story is about a major's pampered little dog that wanders into a pack of village dogs and is torn to pieces.

The Eleventh Story is worthy of special note, because it is the only one told in first person. The narrator tells of lighting a fire in his fireplace on a cold winter's day, and being surprised by a piercing shriek. A cat had been up the chimney, hunting pigeons that nested there. It emerges, scared out of its wits, its body badly burned. But instead of going into a corner to lick its wounds and hide, it dashes back defiantly, into the fire. When his children ask him about the cat's behavior, the narrator tells them, "Cats aren't the only ones that behave that way." The story ends enigmatically, with the man voicing his own private thoughts. This brief expression of personal subjectivity is all the more striking for its isolation within the text as a whole:

Once again there was silence. I raised my hand to scratch my head, hoping to get rid of both the dirt from the fire and the miserable thoughts I was contemplating. I wanted to behave in a way which would allow me to rid myself of a life in exile! (119)

Munif goes considerably beyond an interest in building the novel on the basis of the Arabic oral tradition in terms of his narrative innovation. It is important to note, however, that what he achieves is all done by means of a single experimental strategy. First of all, he is able to undermine the centrality of both the hero and linear plot. At the same time, he offers us an entirely new form of the Arabic novel, closer to that of a short story collection, and reminiscent of experimental modernist texts in the Western canon such as Jean Toomer's *Cane*,³ Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*,⁴ and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*.⁵

Also noteworthy is the sensitive concern the novel displays with local habitat and culture, and its privileging of a sense of community over individuality, which clearly reflect an ambivalence, if not outright criticism of modernity. Once again, these same characteristics—the retreat

from modernity and the sensitive depiction of locale—are key characteristics of the same texts by Toomer, Stein, and Hemingway that experiment with building the novel on the form of the short story or vignette. Thus, paradoxically, Munif's move toward basing the novel on a more indigenous form of narrative makes it highly comparable to key texts in the Western modernist canon.

In his *Inkisār al-Ahlām* (The shattering of dreams),⁶ Muhammad Kamil al-Khatīb (Muhammad Kāmil al-Khatīb) makes the point that Munif was a member of a highly politicized generation that turned to literature as a form of alternative expression. When the political dreams they had nurtured failed to come to fruition, the writers of this generation used literature as a weapon trained against the power structure of their own society. Muhammad Siddiq, for instance, characterizes one of Munif's later novels, *The Trench* (1991; *Al-Ukhūd*, 1985), as a work which challenges "the hegemonic master-narrative" of the "official Saudi account of the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."⁷

Munif may be among the most misunderstood and underrated Arab writers in terms of his formal experimentation. Western readers and critics are inclined to regard Munif's "Cities of Salt" series, of which three volumes have been translated and published in English, mainly as social critique of a highly elaborate and sophisticated nature. These works, in particular, have been the subject of proprietary claims on the part of self-styled "postcolonial" critics in the West. The claim is made on the basis of their preoccupation with broad historical or political themes, their rewriting of history from a distinctly "Arab" viewpoint, or simply their apparently unadorned, "realistic" style, qualities that endear them, respectively, to historicists, multiculturalists, and antimodernists.

At the same time, among Arab critics, Munif tends to be viewed as a novelist in the classical (realist) mode, the prose and structure of his texts unextraordinary, and their subject matter noncontroversial. There is a failure on the part of even highly sophisticated critics to grant Munif the status of an experimental writer. The "Cities of Salt" series is generally lumped in the category of the historical novel in the mode of Ghutani's *Zayni Barakat*. This is due partly to Munif's narrative style, which is unadorned, almost reportorial in tone. It is also due to the historical theme of these novels, as well as to the apparent absence of literary devices in these works, which either directly or obviously interferes with the

sequentiality of narration. The latter technique is one that Arab critics, in particular, have come to associate with the experimental novel. Yumna al-'Eid, for instance, contrasts what she calls the "modern" novel from its antecedent in terms of its reliance not on storytelling, but on *discours*. According to this distinction, she asserts that Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1987; *Mudun al-Milh: Al-Tih*, 1984) is not a modern novel, since it is "preoccupied with the 'play' of composition, not with that which forms the elements of novelistic discourse" (125).

This type of distinction, however, tends to ignore the ways in which Munif's form of narrative is, in fact, innovative in comparison with that of early modernists such as Mahfouz or Kanafani. Eid provides a hint of such a distinction when she refers to "narrative techniques which are not employed without the specialized discourse of storytelling" (126), and concludes that

The novel of 'Abd al-Rahmān Munif departs from the form of the problem-solution novel, or the novel of the heroic personality, but, in terms of its orientation, it remains a novel which tells a story. (127)

In other words, Eid is acknowledging that Munif does away with narrative techniques that impose a "problem-solution" (as in *Mtrammar*) or a "heroic personality" (as in *All That's Left to You*), neither of which can be employed without the discourse of storytelling, without actually doing away with the storytelling discourse itself. For her, then, Munif occupies a transitional position with respect to modern narrative development. This analysis, however, ignores other ways in which Munif's writing is experimental. While his experimentation may be conservative in that it is not meant to overturn the discourse of storytelling, it nevertheless draws attention to the act of narration. It also highlights its own fictiveness in ways that are subtler, yet paradoxically bolder, than those of most of his contemporaries.

In some ways, Munif's work in the "Cities of Salt" series is written in a clearly more traditional mode. Like Sonallah Ibrahim in *Najmah Aghustus*, he offers a counternarrative instead of a resistance narrative. Unlike *Najmah Aghustus*, however, the "Cities of Salt" novels are not "negative" texts, in the sense that they do not aim at defamiliarizing—but rather with refamiliarizing—the reader with an alternative view of history. In this sense, Munif is working in a retrograde manner from the

point of view of those critics whose only notion of experimentalism is as a defamiliarizing process. At the same time, this debate concerning the historical aspect of Munif's narrative obscures ways in which Munif is involved in an experimental project that specifically is meant to draw the reader's attention to the fictiveness of the text and, by implication, to the fictiveness of history itself.

The first of the volumes translated into English, *Cities of Salt*,⁸ is the story of the arrival of Americans in the tiny desert village of Wadi al-Uyoun. It proceeds to relate the story of the destruction of the village, the dispersal of its inhabitants, and the monumental reconstruction of the port town of Harran, linked by pipeline to Wadi al-Uyoun. Munif plays with the reader's cultural perspective by writing from the viewpoint of the Arabs who have no inkling of the technology that the Americans bring with them:

With the first light of dawn, huge iron machines began to move. Their deafening noise filled the whole wadi. So gigantic and strange were these iron machines that no one had ever imagined such things existed. . . .

When the machines stopped, small windows and doors opened up in them and dusty men came out and looked around them. A bewildered silence reigned: Where had these men been? How had they entered and come out of these machines? Were they men or devils? . . . These yellow iron hulks—could a man approach them without injury? What were they for and how did they behave—did they eat like animals, or not? (98)

The narration is objective, yet at the same time it reflects a communal perspective, in order to give the reader an immediate feel of the shock that the Arabs are experiencing. Walid Hamarneh refers to this technique as the "dialectic of process and narration." He explains this term by noting that although Munif relies on using a narrative form with objective perspective, he combines it with an underlying voice that is "sympathetic, yet not completely submerged."⁹ Such a perspective combines objectivity with an empathic voice that represents the shifting consciousness of the community.

The destruction of the village of Wadi al-Uyoun shows Munif's continued preoccupation with endings, as reflected in this shifting communal consciousness:

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 . . . 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. (106)

The collective ignorance of the villagers and townfolk is particularly used in contrast with the presence of the Americans, creating a sense on the part of the reader that they are "absent," just as Western colonial texts tend to treat their native subjects:

They were busy all day long. They went to places no one dreamed of going. They collected unthinkable things. They had a piece of iron—no one knew what it was or what they did with it—and when they returned in the evening they brought with them bags of sand and pieces of rock. Once they brought tamarisk and wormwood branches, and bunches of clover. They broke the branches in a strange way and attached pieces of paper on which they had written obscure things. That was not all: they placed wooden markers and iron poles everywhere they went, and wrote on them, and wrote things no one understood on the sheets of paper they carried with them everywhere. (30)

The Arabs' collective view of the Americans, who seem to accomplish things without exerting any visible power, confers on the foreigner an aura of mystery similar to that which orientalism conferred on the Arab world. In this case, however, the contrast is between an Arab culture that does not wish to know the causes of everything, and the fetishistic "scientific" attitude of the Americans, who constantly probe into every aspect of existence:

"The bastards want to know everything," said Ibraliim al-Nasir. "Even why my father got divorced and remarried. They wanted to know if I was unclean, because I didn't pray all the time. They asked if I had a lot of wet dreams, and they laughed. The bastards want to know who has planted every seed and laid every egg in history." (329)

Irony is one of Munif's most essential narrative techniques, never more powerful than when he is depicting the Arabs' participation in their

own downfall. One of the main characters is Ibn Rashed, a man who becomes a recruiter for the Americans, and rises to a powerful position in Harran. The Arabs succumb like sheep to the lure of the wealth he distributes, regardless of the cost to their previous way of life:

In the first days a number of the workers thought of leaving Harran . . . but the first salary Ibn Rashed distributed changed their minds. No one had ever dreamed of getting that much money, and none had ever possessed that amount before. They received their pay in a silent, solemn, almost majestic rite. (185)

Ibn Rashed . . . looked at their faces. "There's one more matter, my friends." He looked at them carefully. "The camels. From today onward they are of no use here."

For the first time the men felt that they were confronting an agonizing situation and a decisive choice; they were being asked to give up the most precious things they owned.

The next day they turned their camels over to Ibn Rashed with no discussion, and he gave them some money.

No one said a word. They were all thinking of the safest way to store their money so that it would not get lost or stolen, and after long deliberation most of them decided that the best and surest way to safeguard it was to have Ibn Rashed keep it for them. (186-88)

Pitted against these overwhelming forces, Miteb al-Hathal resists the coming of the Americans from the moment that they first appear, and delivers dire prophecies of the consequences. When the destruction of the village is accomplished, he vanishes into the desert, yet he continues to exert an influence on the imagination of the people, and upon the reader. By means of this character, Munif plays with the paradox of presence and absence, and combines these qualities in the person of the phetic, subversive character of Miteb al-Hathal:

Long days of hard, uneasy waiting . . . but Miteb al-Hathal did not come.

Miteb al-Hathal . . . No worker said it outright or pronounced his name out loud, but his specter filled the whole desert. . . . After the investigation they were all sure that Miteb al-Hathal, who had been gone for long years, no one knew where, was back, and that he would make the desert a hell for the Americans. (511)

In this passage, Munif connects the notion of disappearance or nonpresence with both the tradition of bedouin guerrilla warfare as well as Muslim messianic traditions such as that of the *Mahdi*. Munif is also playing here (and throughout the text) with the desert as symbol, in a way reminiscent of Kanafani's *All That's Left to You*. He uses this symbol, in part, to represent the Arabs, and he juxtaposes it with water, or the sea, which is associated with the Americans. The Americans arrive, via the sea, on great ships; they know how to swim; they are at home with water and on the water. The sea is the means by which they transport their men, their equipment, their technology, and even women who are brought for the pleasure of the colonists. In *Rich and Strange*, Marianne DeKoven argues that the symbolism of water, or the sea, is a uniquely modernist trope. In *Cities of Salt*, we can see how culturally specific such an observation is. Munif plays with this symbolism, echoed in earlier experimental Arabic novels such as *The Ship* and his own *Sharq al-Mutawassit*; (East of the Mediterranean, 1975);¹⁰ the desert symbolizes the native consciousness of the Arabs, while the sea represents the foreign consciousness of the Americans.

At one point, Miteb al-Hathal indeed makes an appearance, and here Munif borrows from the conventions of magical realism, all the more striking for its isolation within the lengthy text:

Rain filled the earth and sky. The narrow *wadi* at the end of Rawdhat al-Mashû gushed crazily with water, and the people stood and watched in bewilderment.

At that very moment, as a brilliant flash of lightning rent the sky, creating fear upon fear, Miteb al-Hathal appeared.

He . . . seemed to stand squarely on the opposite bank of the wadi. He struck the earth with his staff, looked at them all sternly and shook his head three times. Before he turned away his voice rumbled . . . "Fear is from things to come."

. . . "Didn't you see him? Where is he? He was there . . . he was there." (151-53)

Miteb al-Hathal is not a heroic figure, however, but rather an ambivalent one. He expresses his attitude toward the Americans in exaggerated, demonic terms:

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)

We should have done something a long time ago, when they first came. I knew they would return. I knew they would do things men and jinn never dreamed of. They came. I saw them myself. In the wink of an eye they unleashed hundreds of demons and devils. These devils catch fire and roar night and day like a flour mill that turns and turns without tiring out and without anyone turning it. What will happen in this world? How can we kill them before they kill us? (71)

The ambivalence in these passages comes from a tension between the truth that is expressed and the primitive terms in which it is articulated. Munif is here treading a thin line, suggesting a paradox. Miteb al-Hathal's anger and resentment is at once both visionary and based on ignorance. Munif's intention is to steer clear of a narrative that makes a particular historical or ideological point. Rather, he wants to present the reader with a broader, equivocal picture. His subject is the immense power brought to bear on one culture by another, the inexorable change this represents, and the subordination of everything else to this force of change, including personalities, ideology, traditional beliefs, and even culture itself.

Munif's subject is not so much the devastation caused to the traditional culture by colonial development, but rather the inexorable progress of that development. Within the framework of this progress, there are really no heroes or villains. The Americans who are so demonized by Miteb al-Hathal are similarly ambiguous figures, whose personalities are dwarfed by the historical process of which they are a part. In certain passages, Munif gives us a picture of the Americans as wide-eyed children, just as naive in the face of an alien culture as are the Arabs:

The Americans, who looked and behaved like small children, showed endless, unimaginable surprise and admiration. They asked about everything, about words, clothing and food. (262)

Every small thing excited the Americans' amazement. They took a great many photographs during the meal and tried to conquer their embarrassment at their inability to eat like the others. (263)

The subordination of character to history is also evident in the way in which Munif introduces and concludes his treatment of characters. They are introduced in an indirect manner. Often their actions have an

effect on the narrative before they are formally introduced. The character of the American, Sinclair, for instance, crops up for the first time in the narrative as if he had already appeared previously. At the same time, characters are dispensed of or melt away without any formality. When the narrative moves to the port city of Harran, Miteb al-Hathal's prophetic role is taken over by another character, Ibn Naffeh, who similarly reviles every change that the coming of the Americans has brought. When Ibn Rashed becomes expendable, he too passes away without affecting the course of the narrative. In this sense, Munif has the instincts of a realist, interested in offering a panoramic view of society. He has said that the "Cities of Salt" series was an attempt to evoke a sense of both place and history.¹¹ But the laconic way in which he introduces and disposes of characters goes beyond realism, and, in fact, parodies realism's exaggerated dependence on character development. As in *Endings*, Munif is trying to heighten the awareness of the reader by defying his or her expectations in a way that contravenes the conventions of realism.

In *Variations on Night and Day* (1993; *Taqasim al-Layl wa al-Nahar*, 1989)¹² Munif continues to follow his historiographic preoccupations. The narrative chronicles the creation and expansion of the fictional sultanate of Mooran. The jacket cover of the English translation advertises the novel as follows:

Full of Machiavellian intrigue and searing political satire . . . *Variations on Night and Day* . . . chronicles the creation of a Persian Gulf nation by a corrupt Arab monarch and conniving British empire builders. . . . The novel depicts the rise to power of Sultan Khureybit and the emergence of Mooran as a modern nation. Khureybit expands his dominion, crushing rival clans by military force and internal opposition with bribes, guile, assassinations, and executions—all in the name of holy war, even as he is being sponsored by the British Empire, which is playing rival sultans off one another to secure its influence over the region. Against this setting we see as well the venality of the Sultan's polygamous household, in which his several wives vie for preeminence through gossip, chicanery, and murder.¹³

Such a description of the work could not be more misleading. Munif has said, "The point of the novel was not to write social criticism. There is far more corruption in Gulf society than is mirrored in the book. If anything, it treats the subject of social and political corruption with kid gloves."¹⁴

In this third volume of the "Cities of Salt" series, Munif experiments further with narrative point of view. This experimentation can be seen most clearly when he focuses on events of particular importance. At these points, he tends to stop and recount the event from numerous viewpoints. For instance, after describing the Battle of al-Samha, the narrator proceeds for two pages to give supplementary accounts of the battle:

Before verdicts were given and the outcome weighed, there had to be an answer to the most basic question: what had happened?

Even this question, which should not have caused any great dis-sension, gave rise to the wildest discrepancies.

One of the Sultan's biographers, writing seven years after the Awali campaign, wrote. . . .

One of Mooran's "historians" wrote of the Battle of al-Samha. . . .

A more recent researcher who came to Mooran with a number of motives, one of which was the writing of history, wrote of the battle that. . . .

Hamilton wrote about the Battle of al-Samha years later, working from his journals. . . .

Much later a neutral historian recounting the battle wrote that. . . .
(122-23)

At many other points in the narrative, the narrator is at pains to include various versions of an event, often conflicting. Sometimes versions are later even asserted to be plainly fictitious. The technique seems to aim at creating uncertainty in regard to history, or to make the point that the reconstruction or interpretation of any event depends on the viewpoint of the individual:

The stories and tidbits, and even the rumors about their relationship, and the matter of Othman's money and other affairs, were full of contradictions and conflicting versions due to the numerous narrators and their varying motives, so that it was impossible to establish the truth, or even parts of it. (185)

There were radically different accounts of what happened next, after the gold and jewels were handed over. According to one version, the Sultan sold all of the gold in the markets of Haifa and Jaffa; according to another, Olayan took it all to India and sold it there. The best-

informed people said that no final sale took place: the gold had all been deposited or pawned with Jewish goldsmiths and money changers in Baghdad, against commercial loans at interest. (188)

Why had the Sultan chosen this specific place? Was there any meaning in this?

Historians were later perplexed by this detail, and found unnumbered interpretations for it. (195)

As to how Ibn Bakhit knew, there were at least three different stories. (209)

At the same time, however, when Munif reports a given event from different perspectives or viewpoints, his purpose is to give the reader a more complete view of an event. It represents an ultimate attempt to "objectify," to write history in the form of fiction. The idea that material of dubious authenticity can help to construct a "true" historical picture is a modernist idea in Western literature, but a traditional one in Arabic literature. Specifically, it has a direct connection with the Arabic literary tradition of *hadith*, or the record of actions and sayings of the Prophet. In the earlier days of Islam, those people who had lived in the society of the Prophet were the best authority for this knowledge. Later, Islamic tradition was further built on the authority of the first generation after Muhammad, and then with that of following generations. Not all of these traditions can be regarded as reliable; in fact, numerous contradictory traditions arose, yet all still form a part of the total body of *hadith*.¹⁵

At the same time, the notion that an accumulation of viewpoints can heighten the sense of "reality" conveyed by a narrative is certainly a modernist technique, akin to that which we have discussed in relation to Faulkner, Mahfouz, and others. In view of Munif's connection with Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, it may also be worth quoting from *The Ship*, in which Jabra reveals indebtedness to Kafka with respect to this narrative technique:

It was Kafka's habit in his *Memoirs* to describe an experience in one way, then again in another way, then again a third way, and so on for a fourth, or a fifth time in some cases . . . each time he would start differently, abbreviating some details in the previous version and expanding others. . . . It's like looking at a huge object and walking around

it. . . . This is the closest thing to a kaleidoscope of words and ideas. Every time it is turned, a new shape appears, or new idea. . . . How many facets does truth have then?"¹⁶

Munif is intent on challenging both the Saudi view of history and the Western colonial view of history. He mimics the Western colonial and postcolonial literary tradition particularly in his depiction of Hamilton, a character who, in several instances, seems to be modeled on T. E. Lawrence:

Hamilton . . . was loyal to the Empire but detested it. Money to him was a mere means of doing business, a means of entry, an autonomous power in itself. He wished he were a king people never tired of gazing upon, and yet longed to be an anonymous and unknown man. (50)

When he was on camelback under the sun's burning blaze, with the desert sand below him rolling on like the leaves of a book, he felt that he was the only man capable of this mission; that an awesome power had been entrusted to him. (51)

Hamilton . . . was addicted to Arab clothes; he could not give them up. When he was compelled to wear his own clothes, to board a plane or travel, he felt disguised. He smiled and laughed when he caught sight of himself in the mirror—this was the thing his friends did when they saw him in European clothes: they smiled. (54–55)

With this exposure to nature and turbulence, he felt that his body would not obey him, that it had mutinied and would not revert to his control again, especially after such a long time without a woman, and that only by violent action, no less violent than war, could he restore strength and discipline to his body. (70)

Hamilton, in fact, is a composite character of the twentieth-century orientalist man of action. Munif has made the point that Hamilton is modeled more on Harry St. John Philby¹⁷ than on Lawrence. Lawrence, he has noted, belonged to a generation associated with the end of an era—namely the Ottoman era, to whose destruction Lawrence was dedicated. Philby, on the other hand, belonged to a subsequent era, which was dedicated to building a new society rather than tearing an old one down.¹⁸ The history of Mooran is a history of construction and consoli-

dation, rather than dismantling and dismemberment. This is, indeed, a valid distinction, but one that relates more to the historiographical aspect of *Variations of Night and Day* than to the character construction. In choosing certain details needed for his portrait of Hamilton, Munif utilizes some characteristics associated more with Lawrence, than with Philby.

The point is that, by creating such an intertextual character as one of the focal points of his novel, Munif is at pains to counter orientalist history. Despite the detail that Munif lavishes on the character of Hamilton, he never allows him to dominate the narrative. Rather, he is subordinate to Arab history. In this sense, *Variations on Night and Day* responds directly to a work such as *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, in which Arab history is subordinated to Lawrence's own personal psychological narrative. Here, the Western orientalist is a mote floating on the tide of history, rather than a maker of history.

Munif takes a posture that is the inverse of Lawrence's with respect to his intentions as a writer. While Lawrence sought to remake history into a personal fiction, Munif attempts to use fiction in order to rewrite history. While these twin impulses seem to be contradictory, in fact they spring from a similar modernist viewpoint that blurs distinctions between history or autobiography and fiction. Both produce metahistorical narratives, which look back to previous historical narrative traditions. Lawrence looks back to Doughty and the medievalists, revising their literary tradition, while Munif looks back and revises the Western orientalist tradition.

MAGICAL REALISM: SALIM BARAKAT

This same sensitivity to locale that we noted in Munif's *Endings* is the main feature of the early work of Salim Barakat (Salim Barakât), a Syrian-born Kurd, living in Cyprus. Unlike Munif, Barakat has yet to have a complete work translated into English, although he is also an Arabic novelist of top stature, and a prolific one. His first two works, *Al-Jundub al-Ḥadidi* (The iron grasshopper, 1980) and *Fuqahā' al-Zalām* (Sages of darkness, 1985), are set in poor Kurdish villages near the Syrian-Turkish border. The former work is not a novel, but an autobiographical narrative, published in 1980, when the author still lived in Syria. *Fuqahā' al-Zalām* was published in 1985, after Barakat had moved to Cyprus.

Barakat's style is probably the closest of any Arab writer's to that of