

Voices of the Desert: A Bakhtinian Reading of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*

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Abstract: *In contemporary literary studies, the application of critical theories can provide deeper insights into complex narratives and their socio - cultural implications. This research paper examines Abdelrahman Munif's Cities of Salt through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and heteroglossia. By employing a close reading methodology and textual analysis, the study reveals how Munif captures the complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic forces shaping the transformation of a traditional society under the pressures of modernization. The paper explores how the diverse perspectives and linguistic variations within the novel reflect the socio - political dynamics and ideological conflicts triggered by the discovery of oil. Through a Bakhtinian framework, the research highlights the novel's depiction of the tensions between tradition and progress, the displacement of communities, and the resulting cultural disintegration. This study demonstrates how Cities of Salt serves as a polyphonic narrative that not only critiques the impact of industrialization on the environment and indigenous Bedouin but also engages in a broader dialogue about the costs of globalization and economic exploitation. By situating the novel within the context of Bakhtin's concepts, the paper provides an in - depth understanding of Munif's literary approach and its relevance to contemporary discussions on cultural preservation and socio - economic justice. This study will examine excerpts from the first volume, AL - Teeh¹, which best align with the study's argument.*

Key words: *Cities of Salt*, Heteroglossia, dialogism, Cultural Conflict, Indigenous Bedouin.

"Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it." — Mikhail Bakhtin

1. Introduction

To provide a clear framework for the subsequent analysis, it is essential to define the key concepts that form the foundation of this study. Dialogism, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the presence of multiple voices and perspectives within a text, highlighting the dynamic and interactive nature of language (Bakhtin, 1984). Heteroglossia describes the diversity of speech types and social languages in a literary work, reflecting the complexity of social interactions and cultural contexts (1984).

Understanding these concepts is crucial to exploring Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, tells the tale of a poor oasis community disrupted and dispersed after oil is discovered in their region. The narrative begins with a vivid portrayal of *Wadi Al - Uyoun*², the central setting of the first volume, *Al - Teeh*. Despite being situated in a harsh desert, the Bedouins are depicted as leading a contented life. The palm trees and flowing brooks elevate the valley's significance, not only for its residents but also for travellers. To illustrate how the people perceive the valley as a wonder, the author writes: "*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 at all stages of a journey, in setting out and returning: "How much longer to Wadi al - Uyoun?" "If we make it to Wadi al*

- Uyoun, we'll rest up for a few days before going on, " and "Where are you, Wadi al - Uyoun, earthly paradise. " (2)

However, this serenity was short - lived following the arrival of the three American oilmen. The writer vividly describes the Bedouins' fear as the machines began operating, saying:

the machine started to roar again, frightening everyone...the men and boys... the animals who drew near retreated in fright; the camels fled, and the sheep stirred uneasily. " (69)

These lines demonstrate the dramatic and terrifying impact of industrialization on a traditional community. The "roar" of the machine symbolizes the disruptive force of modernization, abruptly shattering the tranquillity that previously defined the lives of the inhabitants. The reaction of the men and boys reflects their disbelief and terror, capturing a moment of collective shock and confusion. Their retreat is both a physical and psychological response to the intrusion of an alien force into their familiar world. The panic extends to the animals, with camels fleeing and sheep stirring uneasily, suggesting that the natural order itself is disturbed by the advent of the machines. This detail emphasizes the all - encompassing nature of the disruption, affecting both humans and animals alike. The fear and disorientation experienced by the characters in this scene capture the sense of loss and displacement that accompanies the imposition of industrial forces on a previously harmonious way of life.

¹ The first volume—in Arabic, *Al-Teeh* (The Labyrinth/The Wilderness, 1984)—was translated in 1987 as *Cities of Salt* by Peter Theroux.

² 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.

When the "oil curse" disrupts the *wadi*, both the Bedouin and the natural environment endure similar impacts. Munif describes how, following the discovery of oil and the arrival of Americans, their "air - conditioned rooms with thick curtains shut out everything: sunlight, dust, flies, and Arabs" (391), while the 'roar' of the oil machinery "frightens both Arab men, animals, and birds" (68). This illustrates the inseparability of inhabitants and nature.

However, this study aims to explore how *Cities of Salt* embodies Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism, and heteroglossia, providing insights into the novel's depiction of cultural, social, and economic transformations. By conducting a close reading and textual analysis, this research will investigate the multiplicity of voices within the novel and their representation of the broader socio - political dynamics at play. The focus will be on understanding how the narrative reflects the tensions between tradition and modernity, the displacement of communities, and the environmental and economic repercussions of industrialization.

2. Literature Review

A considerable body of scholarship has examined *Cities of Salt* from various perspectives, including environmental, cultural, and socio - economic analyses. In *From Soil to Oil: The Resistance of the Environment in the Cities of Salt* (2015), Al - Sarrani examines how the environment resists the impact of oil discovery. She argues that oil acts as a colonizer, encroaching upon the natural world. The article illustrates this resistance through Munif's indirect portrayal, which includes episodes where the environment is personified and depicted through the responses and behaviours of the people, who react as if they were part of the environment. The article concludes by addressing the cultural displacement experienced by people due to the environmental colonization.

Mohammed Albalawi in *Disrupting the Desert Scene: The Impact of Oil Discovery in Abdelrahman Munif's Cities of Salt* (2015), aims to uncover various insights by examining themes from the first volume of Munif's *Cities of Salt*. It highlights the effects of oil discovery on human dynamics, the cultural encounter between Americans and Arabs, and the gradual shift in the Bedouins' lives from simplicity to complexity. Despite promises of a prosperous future, the Bedouin tribes find themselves deceived, losing both their authority over their lands and recognition.

In *Munif's Cities of Salt as Counter Narrative: Capitalism, Ideology and Transformation* (2018), Alraddadi examines Abdelrahman Munif's quintet *Cities of Salt* and its realist representation of the Arabian Peninsula before and after the advent of oil. The study demonstrates the role of oil in the eventual massive transformation of the region's social, historical and economic structure into capitalism. Deploying a Lukácsian categories attuned to literary and historical development, this study offers a materialist analysis of Munif's quintet from the vantage point of socioeconomics, providing a fuller understanding of how Munif perceives the transition. It asks fundamental questions regarding the relationship between literary production, oil, and global capitalism. By delineating what can be described as an "aesthetics of the oppressed," this study offers a unique

perspective on crucial issues such as social inequality, environmental degradation, labour exploitation, female exclusion, urban deprivation and religious ideology.

Ali Odeh Hmoud Alidmat and Kaur Manjet in *Conflict of Culture in Translation: A Case Study of Abdelrahman Munif's Novel Cities of Salt: Al - Teeh* (2020), showed that in translating a text, the translator should not only be concerned with literal translation but also take into consideration the connotative meanings as well as the cultural underpinnings of the source text because the translator is only a conveyor and a bridge between the source language and the audience of the target language. This paper also found that a dialect must be translated into a dialect rather than into standard language if not, the target message will not have the same influence as the source message. The paper establishes that transliteration is a good strategy when the translator is faced by names such as desert animals and/or names of places. It also determines that there is a correlation between the translator's native language and the type of translation equivalence opted for. The analysis of the examples in the text has shown that Theroux's translation as a lot of lexical gaps. To fill these gaps, this paper recommends making footnotes as one way of clarification or providing more information about cultural items likely to be mistranslated and in cases without equivalents, translating the expression ideationally is the best choice. It also recommends that during translation, the translator can seek the services of a person from the culture from which the original text is written.

3. Research Gap

While existing scholarship has examined various aspects of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, there is a notable gap in the application of Bakhtinian concepts such as dialogism and heteroglossia to the novel. Although some studies address the cultural and social transformations depicted in the text, they often overlook the ways in which Munif's narrative structure embodies Bakhtin's theories of dialogue and multiple voices. Specifically, there is insufficient exploration of how dialogism and heteroglossia contribute to the depiction of cultural conflict and modernization processes in the novel. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining how dialogism and heteroglossia function in *Cities of Salt* to illuminate the complex interplay between cultural identity, modernization, and social conflict.

4. Methodology

This research paper employs a Bakhtinian theoretical framework to analyze Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, focusing on the concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia. The methodology involves a close reading of the novel to identify and examine instances of these theoretical concepts within the narrative structure. Dialogism is explored by analysing the dynamic interactions between various voices in the text, assessing how characters' perspectives engage in a dialogic process that reflects cultural and ideological tensions. Heteroglossia is examined by identifying and interpreting the diverse social and cultural voices represented in the novel, such as those of the Bedouins, foreign workers, and government officials, and analysing how these voices contribute to a multi - layered depiction of societal change.

The analysis combines textual evidence with Bakhtinian theory to reveal how Munif's narrative structure mirrors the complexities of modernization and cultural conflict, providing a comprehensive understanding of the novel's thematic concerns.

5. Discussion

This analysis will start with a close reading of the novel's key excerpts, focusing on how Munif employs dialogism to present a multifaceted narrative. By examining the interactions between characters and their diverse voices, we will uncover the underlying cultural conflicts and tensions brought about by modernization. Additionally, we will explore the heteroglossic elements within the text, highlighting how Munif captures the rich array of social languages and dialects to reflect the complexity of the socio-cultural landscape. This approach will allow us to appreciate the polyphonic nature of Munif's narrative, where multiple perspectives coexist, each contributing to a deeper understanding of the novel's themes. Dialogism can be seen in the interactions between the native Bedouins and the foreign oil workers, reflecting their contrasting worldviews and experiences. The author writes:

"They said, 'Wait, just be patient, and all of you will be rich!" (29)

"Under our feet, Ibn Rashed, there are oceans of oil, oceans of gold, " replied the emir. (86)

"... money is not everything in the world. More important are honor, ethics and our traditions" replied Ibn Rashed (85)

This dialogue captures the initial skepticism and misunderstanding of the Bedouins regarding the concept of wealth as introduced by the foreigners. The first Bedouin, Fawaz, echoes rumors of newfound prosperity brought by the Americans, reflecting a mixture of curiosity and confusion. The emir's reply highlights the local authority's recognition of the wealth beneath the land, illustrating a pragmatic acceptance of the changes and opportunities that the discovery of oil brings. The third quote reflects Ibn Rashed's viewpoint and underscores a fundamental difference in values and perceptions: for the Bedouins, wealth is not measured in monetary terms but in the sufficiency of their traditional lifestyle. Munif creates a dialogic space where these contrasting voices coexist, interact, and often clash. Through conversations like this one, the novel presents a microcosm of the larger cultural and ideological conflicts at play. The dialogic nature of these interactions helps readers understand the complexities and nuances of the transformative period depicted in the novel.

Heteroglossia is evident in the novel's portrayal of diverse voices, including the Bedouins, the foreign workers, and the officials, each representing different social and cultural perspectives. In a discussion with his son, Miteb gestures towards a palm tree and explains:

[t]hat tree, the fourth on the left, is just your age, boy. You grow every day, and it grows with you. Tomorrow you will plant a tree for your son, and he'll plant a tree for his son,

and Wadi will get greener every day. People will keep coming to drink the water and hope never to die, and when they sit in the shade of the tree they'll say, 'May God show mercy to whoever planted the trees and the green plants'" (48).

This quotation beautifully captures the deep interconnection between nature, culture, and heritage. Miteb's words to his son highlight the cyclical and generational responsibility of nurturing the environment, emphasizing that the act of planting trees is not just an ecological duty but also a cultural and familial tradition. By linking the growth of the palm tree to the boy's own development, Miteb illustrates how nature is intertwined with human life, serving as a living heritage passed down through generations. The imagery of people sitting in the shade of the trees and blessing those who planted them reflects the cultural value placed on gratitude and reverence for the past. It shows how the simple act of planting a tree can create a lasting impact, providing comfort and sustenance for many years to come. This practice not only preserves the natural landscape but also maintains the cultural heritage of the community, reinforcing the bonds between people and their environment. In contrast, the heavy machines brought by the American oil-men show that they prioritize industrial development and modernization over traditional values. 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)

The roaring machine and blinding lights symbolize the overwhelming and often destructive nature of modern technology, which can be seen as an imposition on the natural environment and indigenous cultures. The terror experienced by the men, boys, and animals signifies the deep-seated disturbance and alienation felt by those who live in harmony with nature when confronted with such abrupt changes. The roaring machine and blinding lights reflect the American ethos of technological progress and industrialization. This perspective often prioritizes economic growth and resource extraction over environmental and cultural preservation. The blinding light, likened to "scores of small but brilliant suns," highlights the relentless drive for energy and progress, often at the expense of ecological balance and indigenous ways of life. Additionally, the voice of a government official introduces yet another layer of heteroglossia. In a conversation between the emir and Ibn Rashed, the author depicts the scene as follows:

"The emir began talking before Ibn Rashed spoke, as if he knew why they had come and what it was they wanted..."People of Wadi al - Uyoun, you will be among the richest and happiest of all mankind, as if God saw none but you...Under our feet, Ibn Rashed, there are oceans of oil, oceans of gold, ...Our friends have come to extract the oil and the gold. " (85 - 86)

This official narrative frames the oil discovery as a positive force, heralding national progress and economic prosperity. It reflects an official stance that aligns with state interests, highlighting how the discovery is perceived as a means of transforming the nation and its fortunes. The quotation also implies a shift in values and priorities, where the natural environment and traditional ways of life are potentially sacrificed for economic gain. The focus on material wealth can lead to the erosion of cultural heritage, environmental degradation, and social dislocation. The metaphor of standing "under our feet" underscores the dominance and control exerted over the land and its resources, highlighting the power dynamics at play. Through these diverse voices, Munif effectively captures the heteroglossic nature of the social and cultural landscape in his narrative. The interplay between these perspectives not only enriches the narrative but also underscores the tension and dialogue between tradition and modernity, local and foreign influences, and individual and collective aspirations. Each voice contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's thematic concerns, illustrating how heteroglossia serves as a critical tool for exploring the complexities of cultural conflict and societal change.

6. Conclusion

To wrap up, Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* employs Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia to create a rich and complex narrative that captures the multifaceted impact of modernization on traditional societies. The exploration of dialogism reveals how the novel's various voices engage in dynamic interactions, reflecting and contesting each other's perspectives to highlight the cultural and ideological tensions inherent in the process of modernization. Heteroglossia is evident in the diverse array of voices representing different social and cultural backgrounds, each contributing to a multi-layered depiction of the novel's thematic concerns. Through these Bakhtinian lenses, the paper underscores the novel's thematic depth and complexity, demonstrating how Munif's narrative structure effectively mirrors the intricate realities of cultural conflict and change. The interplay of these theoretical concepts provides a comprehensive understanding of the novel's exploration of modernization, highlighting the diverse responses and experiences that shape the socio-cultural landscape depicted in *Cities of Salt*. Future research could compare Munif's use of dialogism and heteroglossia with those employed by other postcolonial or contemporary authors to address similar themes of cultural conflict and modernization.

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