

**Hydrocarbon Genre: The Oil Encounter in Abdel Munif's *Cities of Salt* and Amitav
Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason***

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The discovery of rich haul of petroleum in the Persian Gulf was a “game changing” event for industrial capitalism. Fuelled by oil trade and the resulting encounters, the region witnessed hectic socio-economic activity throughout the twentieth century. This economic boom led to the establishment of a number of urban centres riddled with skyscraping buildings and shopping malls. The old economic order gave way to a petro-capitalist system which metamorphosed the culture, society and ecology of the region. Oil is central in driving the global capitalist engine and the Persian Gulf region remains a major contributor to overall mineral oil production in the world. This region has been the epicenter of conflicts aimed at controlling the lucrative oil wells and monopolizing the international oil trade. The neo-colonist machinery operates and flourishes in the Arab region on the pretext of modernizing this region and often conflicts, like the infamous U.S-Iraq war, have been imposed on the pretext of replacing despotic, barbaric autocrats. The petro-capitalist economy has transformed the cultural geography of the region, and led to social and economic stratification, producing economic and ecological inequity in its wake.

Though critics like Edward Said and Noam Chomsky have tried to deconstruct U.S/ West intervention in the Gulf and delved in its political, economic and sociological implications yet the literary world has unfortunately been mute or silent in responding to the oil business and its socio-political-cultural and ecological implications. Oil as the “black, liquid gold” has changed the socio-cultural landscape of the Arab world but the ecological implications of petro-capitalism and hydrocarbon dependence can be noticed all around the globe, confined as they are not only to the oil producing regions. Never has a commodity caused so much harm but provoked so little hostility. The “mirage” of easy affluence created by oil business has often blinded the elite of the OPEC—Oil Producing and Exporting Countries—to the long term catastrophic effects of oil dependent economy. Michael Watts in his analysis of implications of oil business in Nigeria describes oil as a “mythic commodity” (189) disseminating a

“phantasmagoria of petro-commodification” (193) and an “El Dorado effect” (205). Thus, environmentalists and political thinkers are quite skeptical about the sustainability of such a petro-economy which has bred over consumption, created class conflicts, led to social fracturing and stratification and mushroomed petro-wars.

Oil business has accelerated desertification, contributed greatly to greenhouse effect, increased global warming and decreased biodiversity in the Arab region. Oil slicks on the land and sea have been widely reported and their ecocidal effect on marine and terrestrial fauna written about. But, the far greater spill of combusted hydrocarbons into the atmosphere, almost all over the world, has been contributing immensely to air pollution. According to the Climate Change Index (CCI) developed by Maplecroft, a British risk analysis consultancy, Arab world is home to 5 of the top 10 countries most exposed to the impacts of climate change—Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and Somalia. Thus, the relative absence of literary-critical engagement with oil is startling seeing its pervasive role in modern, industrial economy, and its role in accelerating environmental degradation.

Abdel Rahman Munif is one of the few Arab intellectuals who have fictionalized the oil encounter. His novels, written in Arabic, were banned in Saudi Arabia for "for their excoriating satires of the peninsula's oil elite" (Boullata1). He wrote his first novel, *The Trees and the Assassination of Marzouq* (*Al-Ashjaar wa Igtiyaal Marzouq*, 1973), at the age of forty. Munif resorted to literature as a complex tool of catharsis, resistance, dissent and subversion. His fictional work is perhaps the best illumination of the “hydrocarbon genre” that documents the social, economic, cultural and ecological impact of oil on the Arab-Islamic world. *Cities of Salt* is the first novel in a quintet written by Abdel Munif. *Cities of Salt* (1994) has been considered as the greatest “oil fiction” written after World War II. This novel is about the discovery, subsequent drilling for oil in the Persian Gulf in the 1930’s and its socio-political-economic consequences. *Cities of Salt* was first published in 1984 and Peter Theroux translated this novel into English in 1987. Issa J. Boullata even argues that the novelistic form of *Cities of Salt* is inherently postcolonial because it adapts and adopts Western forms in order to disengage itself from the West. He places *Cities of Salt* into a category with “recent Arabic novels that speak in the voice of Arab culture, using its narrative techniques and heeding its needs and its environment, in the interest of establishing Arab authenticity and disengaging from

Western influences”(2). While subjecting Munif to an exacting literary critique, Rob Nixon focuses more closely on the representation of the ruined ecologies in the novels as “an unofficial, contrarian imaginative history of the oasis as resource frontier” (81).

In *Cities of Salt*, Munif weaves a heart-wrenching story of the metamorphosis of a whole society, and the socio-cultural upheavals after the arrival of the American oil corporations in *Wadi al-Uyoun* (the valley of natural springs). Munif points out that before the colonization of the land and its resources, “people were poor, but they were happy with the life they lived and praised it extravagantly” (8). His tale lacks particular time zone or territory but the narrative allegorically highlights the crisis and confusion of the Arabs in their march towards Western modernity. The novel also traces the subsequent decimation and exile of its oil-scarred native community of Bedouins after the destruction of their ecosystem. *Cities of Salt* narrates the falling apart of ecological and socio-cultural structures necessary for human sustenance. Munif also attempts to establish that petro-imperialism was an “ecocultural” disaster as it propounded a hegemonic relationship over the environment and people of the Arab world.

Amitav Ghosh in his essay, “Petrofiction: The Novel and the Oil Encounter” written in 1992, coined the term “petrofiction” to classify novels, like Munif’s *Cities of Salt*, that talk about the oil industry and its eco-cultural implications. In this essay, Ghosh draws parallels between the earlier sixteenth century spice trade and the oil trade carried out in the twentieth century as he remarks, “. . . oil is clearly the only commodity that can serve as an analogy for pepper” (29). He goes on to point out that a major difference between the spice trade and the oil industry is the production of literature:

Within a few decades of the discovery of the sea route to India, the Portuguese poet Luis de Camoes had produced the *Lusiads*, the epic poem that chronicled Vasco da Gama's voyage and in effect conjured Portugal into literary nationhood. The Oil Encounter on the other hand, has produced scarcely a single work of note. (7)

Amitav Ghosh, in this essay, laments the absence of oil genre or lore and analyzes why oil lurks on the threshold of invisibility in fiction. The writer laments the literary barrenness regarding oil in the “cultural imaginaries” of world literature. He contends that the traditional novel genre with its fixed “sense of place” is not equipped to deal with the “slippery nature” of oil encounters. Ghosh’s essay also opens up possibilities for a writer to create a new kind of

novel, the structure and form of which will reflect the contemporary world in which the marching bulldozer of consumerist-capitalist globalization has been fuelled by mineral oil. Ghosh not only criticizes the American novel for ignoring oil encounters but also highlights the lack of fictional engagement with the multiple effects of petro-capitalism in the Indian sub-continent, a region from where a large number of people migrate to offer themselves as cheap labour in the oil rich nations.

Abdel Munif's quintet is also the subject of Amitav Ghosh's essay. Although the petro-capitalist society created by Munif in *Cities of Salt* is fictional yet it reflects the real, emerging world and the changing cultural landscape of the Arab world. Michael J. Watts describes the emergence of the same type of petro-capitalist society in Nigeria, "in which a key resource (petroleum) and the logic of extraction figure centrally in the making and breaking of the community"(35). Rob Nixon suggests that "[Munif's] novels help track the human consequences of America's oil-driven entanglements with Islamic repression, political unrest, and environmental devastation" (56). Munif's narrative tries to excavate the recent history of the Arab world in which the native communities have been marginalized, and obliterated from the dominant discourse. The text alludes how under the pretexts of 'development,' 'modernization,' and 'civilization,' blatant "environmental racism" was practiced. The writer questions such development where the traditional societies are forced to remold themselves in the image of Western societies. *Cities of Salt* highlights how such "maldevelopment" can set in motion "... a process of exploitation, inequity, injustice and violence" (Shiva 6).

Besides being a tale of the neo-colonial takeover of the Middle East, *Cities of Salt* also needs to be analyzed as an Arab-centric rendition of the sufferings of the native Arab tribes. The Bedouins, post-oil capitalism were forced to abandon their pastoral mode of subsistence. Subverting the dominant "Orientalized" images of Arabs as uncouth, barbaric nomads, Munif presents the deeply ingrained and rooted life of the inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun. The dislocation of the Bedouins from their native ecosystem in the oasis to synthetic nature of the city reconfigures their social ecology leading to the redefining of communal ties. Munif highlights the collective suffering of such "ecosystem people" who ended up as "environmental refugees" (Gadgil 4) in the new petro-capitalist set up. The fracturing of the native Bedouins' relationship with their land, and their ending up as disempowered, right-less, marginalized

workers in the cities, also gave rise to “collective resistance” against the new petro-capitalist order. The novel chronicles the expansion of the port city of Harran and the emergence of the working class of Harranis, whose enslavement and uprising is delved upon in detail. *Cities of Salt* delineates the growing class divisions in the society by recording the growing animosity between the alienated workers and their American masters:

The shift ended, and all the men drifted home to the two sectors like streams coursing down a slope, one broad and one small, the Americans to their camp and the Arabs to theirs, the Americans to their swimming pool, where their racket could be heard in the nearby barracks behind the barbed wire. When silence fell, the workers guessed that the Americans had gone into their air-conditioned rooms whose thick curtains shut everything out: sunlight, dust, flies, and Arabs. (22)

Thus, the novel gives a peep into the demarcated spaces that emerged in the post-oil Arab world. According to Issa J. Boullata, “. . . just because the novel doesn't have a typical protagonist, does not mean it has no protagonist.” Boullata further contends that “society as a whole is the protagonist of this novel” (16). By revising conventional novelistic form and portraying a community as the novel's protagonist, Munif is able to give expression to political, ecological, social, and religious concerns, and is able to illustrate how these concerns have intertwined as the result of a class struggle. *Cities of Salt* foregrounds the plight of the lower-class Bedouin, by exposing their inhumane treatment at the hands of the Americans and the Emir's police force, and also by satirizing the Arab elites. It is for these reasons that the novel was banned in Saudi Arabia. Nothing better illustrates the validity of Ghosh's statement that petrofiction is an embarrassment to both America and the Middle East.

In the sphere of Indian fiction written in English, Amitav Ghosh has experimented with petrofiction in his two works, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *In an Antique Land* (1992). Amitav Ghosh, influenced by Abdel Munif's attempts, experiments with “petro-magic-realism” in the *Rajas* section of *The Circle of Reason*. The action in the *Rajas* section of the novel is located in a fictional Arab emirate of al- Ghazira. Michael Watts description of oil as a “mythic commodity” disseminating a “phantasmagoria of petro-commodification” and an “El Dorado effect” (189 193 205) can be used to describe the pull of oil rich Middle-East for millions of workers from South Asia. In *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh shows that this pull of the capital might attract millions of workers but the reality for them may turn out to be quite different.

In a sensitive description, the writer describes the shocking reality of migrant existence in an

Arab emirate. The worker-refugees who arrive in hordes to the Gulf countries are described as follows:

. . . those ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were tools - helpless, picked for their poverty. In those days when al-Ghazira was still a real country they were brought here to slip between its men and their work, like the first whiffs of an opium dream; they were brought as weapons, to divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of sanity; to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at. (261)

In describing the socio-cultural landscape of the emirate, al-Ghazira, Ghosh shows the life of migrant workers doomed to live on the fringes. The migrant-refugee hopes of a better life are often dashed by exploitation, poor living conditions and xenophobic abuse. The oil-rich Arab world benefits from the skilled services of the migrant workers, but seldom the states make an effort to integrate them socially or culturally. Through his allegorical take on Western interference, Ghosh hints at how petro-capitalism has led to fracturing of social structure and led to its stratification. But, his portrayal of the life of the migrant workers in *Ras*, also reflects the exclusive nature of the Arab society.

The migrants in *The Circle of Reason* live in “. . . narrow spit known as the *Ras al-Maqtu'*, the Severed Head.” (196) *Ras* is basically a shanty town, a slum area and the violence indicated in the coinage of the name shows the geographical space’s violent exclusion from the emirate’s affluent districts. Amitav Ghosh vividly portrays the dark and dingy environment of the *Ras* and shows how the migrant space is excluded from the spaces of high culture. The “environmental refugees” from poor Asian cousin nations are victims of “environmental racism” in the urban landscape of emirates like al-Ghazira, made to occupy severed, excluded, marginalized spaces. Thus, economic, social and environmental justice is denied to these migrants whose exploitation and exclusion are highlighted by the writer. Ghosh describes this space called *Ras*, occupied by people from all corners of the world:

... a narrow strip of beach. . . roofs of corrugated iron and halved oil-drums, with their crazily angled wooden platforms and tracery of pumpkin vines and at last, led by a strip where the dense patchwork was cut through by charred, blackened frames of shacks, . . . (211)

The bazaar where the migrants shop is again a secluded space meant for the mass, multicultural *mélange*. The fall of the Skyscraping Star building goes unnoticed in “*Souq ash-*

Sharji”, the shopping centre of refugees because , “. . . for even during the day the gloom of the old bazaar’s honeycomb of passageways was a live thing, coiling through the tunnels, obscuring every trace of the world outside. . . .” (208). The heterogeneous and multicultural atmosphere of the Gulf, precipitated by a global capitalism, is evoked by this description of a bazaar near the *Ras*:

On one side of the road, jostling for space, were tiled Iranian chelo-kebab shops, Malayali dosa stalls, long, narrow Lebanese restaurants, fruit-juice stalls run by Egyptians from the Sa'id, Yemeni cafes with aprons of brass-studded tables spread out on the pavement, vendors frying ta'ameyya on push-carts- as though half the world's haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of a single street. (373)

The upmarket life led by the Ghaziris is in stark contrast to the perilous and precarious existence of the migrant community. The swanky homes and fashionable market places meant for rich Ghaziris, where maids and workers from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh are employed to do menial jobs, are stuffed with latest, imported gadgets. In the novel, Hurreya Avenue, where Professor Samuel works as the manager’s assistant has, “. . . freshly frozen Australian lamb and Danish mutton , French cauliflowers and Egyptian cabbages, Thai rice and Canadian wheat, English cod and Japanese sardines, prawns and shrimps and lobsters from the world over. . . .” (223). The *Rajas* section of *The Circle of Reason* repeatedly shows al-Ghazira’s reliance and convergence with the forces of globalization. *The Circle of Reason* presents a dystopian picture of the Arab world by highlighting society’s tendency to over-consume signified by mushrooming shopping centres and malls like the Star. The novel thus highlights the conversion of places like al-Ghazira into inter-national, non-places. But, unlike the dominant mode in the contemporary fiction that privileges elitist cosmopolitanism and transnational travelling, Ghosh espouses a kind of “cosmopolitanism of the poor.” Munif in his *Cities of Salt* foregrounds the poor native Bedouins as a community but Ghosh chooses to focus on the multicultural, marginalized community of migrant-refugees. Both these writers do bring out the complicity of the elites in furthering Euro-American imperialistic intervention of their land. While *Cities of Salt* is an elegy on the loss of pre-oil world for the Bedouins, *The Circle of Reason* is a lament on the failure of dreams in the “promised land” for the migrants.

al-Ghazira in *The Circle of Reason* is a fictional place but can represent any contemporary place in the Arab world. The Star is al-Ghazira's tallest skyscraper and it is so named due to its "five pointed arms" (263). The high point of Ghosh's dystopian narrative, of the petro-capitalist regime in Arab emirate of al-Ghazira, is the fall of the Star skyscraper. In his magic-realist style Ghosh describes the fall: "When it fell it was an avalanche of thousands and thousands of tons of bricks and concrete and cement. . . ." (207). The fall of the multistoried skyscraper, Star, is Ghosh's prophesy about the fall of petro-capitalism and the precarious, slippery nature of petro-economy. The mall symbolizes the flaunting of newly begotten wealth by high class of al-Ghazira and its fall signifies the ecological principle of bust that often follows the boom. Ghosh articulates his skepticism about the sustainability of this petro-economy that subjugates the Gulf emirates to the forces of global capitalism.

The Star cropped up as a mole on the landscape of al-Ghazira against a historical background of petro-violence and neo-imperialist exploitation. Through his tale of the arrival of oilmen and replacing of the old Malik by a puppet Amir, Ghosh presents an allegory of the neo-imperialist conquest of the Middle East by Western oil giants. Rather than resorting to a direct war, the neo-imperialists adopt indirect and surreptitious coercive tactics to force the old Malik to give them digging rights of the oil wells. Adopting a "petro-magical-realist" technique, Ghosh also alludes to the use of propaganda to impress the native Ghaziris of the benefits of welcoming the Western corporate. The novel narrates the incident of bringing in of ". . . specially grown date palms, which could grow on any soil, however inhospitable" (277). The writer's treatment of the oil encounter in *The Circle of Reason*, like Munif, is surreal. If Munif has shown the expropriation of Bedouin and Arab lands, Ghosh has highlighted the fracturing of the cultural landscape in the aftermath of neo-imperialist expropriation. *The Circle of Reason* is Ghosh's subversive, skeptical treatise on this petro-imperialism and expresses serious doubts about its sustainability. Both, the novels bank on traditional, local narrative techniques in their disavowal of Western novelistic form. Munif falls back on *Arabian Nights* and other Arabian classics in narrating his oil story, while Ghosh probably uses his "lived experience in the Gulf," and his reading of to writer his petro-magical-realistic tale. Both these novels present communities—local or migrant—that resist the dominant paradigm of progress and growth. Munif points to the emergence of a new class of victimized and marginalized native Hiranni working community,

Ghosh presents a poignant tale of the life of migrant workers, particularly from the Indian sub-continent, in the Emirates.

Though a magical-fantastical allegory of eco-cultural implications of petro-capitalism written almost three decades ago, *The Circle of Reason*, like Munif's *Cities of Salt*, surprises by its contemporaneity. The unrest and violence being witnessed in the Arab world today shows the precarious nature of oil consumption story, and hints at the potential fall of petro-capitalism. *Cities of Salt* is an insider's tale of the oil encounter, whereas *The Circle of Reason* is an outsider's understanding of the effect of oil encounter on the Arab World. The action in Ghosh's novel, though, is not completely confined to the Arab world as the loose plot unfolds in multiple settings, and the oil encounter is discussed only in the *Ras* section of the text. Though distantly inspired by Munif's *Cities of Salt* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, *The Circle of Reason* challenges the celebratory discourse of border crossing and "place hopping" by focusing on the marginalized migrant workers. Both Abdel Munif and Amitav Ghosh, in these complex aesthetic pieces, challenge various stereotypes about the Middle East perpetuated by the dominant Euro-American discourse. In showing the subjugation and resilience of the poor, proletarians these writers do come across as powerful advocates of human rights and environmental justice.

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