

## THE HUMANITY OF A MODERN ARAB CITY: A NOVELIST'S BIOGRAPHY OF AMMAN

NIJMEH HAJJAR

*The City is life in its multiplicity and diversity. She is the places and the people, the trees and the smell of rain, and the earth too. The City is Time itself, in a state of motion. She is the way people look at things, the way they talk, and how they deal with events... The City is the dreams and disappointments, which fill people's minds and hearts... She is the moments of people's happiness and the times of their sorrow. The City is the way she welcomes those she loves and confronts those she antagonizes, the tears with which she farewells those who leave her... and the smiles with which she welcomes those who return. The City is all these and other things besides, big and small. Is it at all possible to retrieve her?*

—Abd al-Rahman Munif (1933–2004), *Sirat Madina*<sup>1</sup>

After thirty-seven years of living abroad, the prominent Arab novelist Abd al-Rahman Munif returns (in 1992) to the city of his birth, Amman. He writes *Biography of a City: Amman in the Forties* (in Arabic *Sirat Madina*),<sup>2</sup> where he spent the first eighteen years of his life. By this time, Munif was already established as a leading novelist advancing a new genre of fiction depicting the realities of modern Arab society, and exploring at length the changing life of Arab cities. His important work, the *Cities of Salt*, a novel in five volumes, tells the story of a traditional society transformed by the discovery of oil, and of the turmoil resulting from an imposed modernisation and drastic urbanisation.<sup>3</sup> Edward Said sees the *Cities of Salt* as the “most interesting”, and “only serious work” of Arabic fiction portraying the effect of oil, Americans, and the local oligarchy in a Gulf country.<sup>4</sup> And Tariq Ali believes that this “remarkable contribution to Arab fiction”, “brilliantly” depicts the creation of the Saudi Kingdom under US influence.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the message of *Cities of Salt* can be applied to any and each city in the Arab oil-producing countries.

Unlike the *Cities of Salt*, however, Munif's *Biography of a City* is not a novel, although the author consciously uses certain novelistic tech-

niques. He draws sketches of his memories of the city, through the eyes of the child that he was, as he grew up in Amman amongst his immediate family, school friends and his neighbourhood. But it is not essentially an autobiography, even if, as he himself remarks, the two biographies (the author's and the city's), "intersect at some stations".<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I shall halt at some of these stations to highlight the overlapping biographies of author and city on their way to adulthood: he between childhood and adolescence, and she crossing from town to city.

My use of "she/her" rather than "it/its" with reference to the city is not only because the city's grammatical gender in Arabic is feminine. It is not unusual for creative Arabic writers to compare the city to woman. For the prominent poet Nizar Qabbani (Syria, 1923-1998) for example, "cities are like women, each one has her own personality, fragrance and flavour". But it was to a city, rather than to a woman, "to Beirut—the female" and "the lady of the world", that the poet of woman par excellence yielded his eternal love: "I don't compare Beirut to any other city", he proclaims, "She is in one palm and all the women of the world in the other".<sup>7</sup>

Abd al-Rahman Munif himself speaks of Beirut as a unique, "irreplaceable Arab city". In his biography of the Mauritanian intellectual Muhammad al-Bahi (1930-1996), Munif says that Beirut is "necessary for herself, her people and the others too".<sup>8</sup> But Beirut doesn't fare so well in his fiction. Although she is the only real Arab city mentioned by name in his novels, she is the "damned city".<sup>9</sup> His fictional cities are "big", "cursed" and "evil" cities, which "torture" and "mangle their people till death".<sup>10</sup> But Munif does not think that cities are intrinsically cruel. The novelist insists, "The worm doesn't grow in the cities themselves but inside the human being. It is the human being who is the disaster and the curse".<sup>11</sup>

It is thus more accurate to talk about "the humanity of cities" in Munif's writings, to borrow John Gulick's phrase.<sup>12</sup> Munif, I think, intended to prove that cities are 'human' too. This can be seen by contrasting his pessimistic fiction, where cities are faceless and "inhuman",<sup>13</sup> with his biographical representations of real cities, whether Arab or non-Arab, for example Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus and Paris. This is especially true of his city of birth, Amman. Not just because the story is based on his childhood memories in the then small city, but more so because of the way he re-constructs these memories.

My thesis is that the narrative of *Biography of a City* reflects the humanity of Amman in the forties in an optimistic light. It is a narra-

tive with a vision: a literary vision that combines the public with the private, and the historical with the novelistic to re-create the real world in the act of writing. It is also an urban vision of the "humanity" of the city as understood by Gulick for example, in that it "integrates the small-scale immediacies of everyday life with the... large-scale realities that impinge on city dwellers' daily lives".<sup>15</sup> Moreover, within the theme of modernism and the city, I see Munif's *Biography of a City*, in its "intention and method", as a beginning of a modern genre in Arabic literature, in Edward Said's sense of both "beginning" and "modern".<sup>16</sup>

I should like now to consider Munif's auto/biographical motivation. In his Introduction, the author tells us that he responded to two invitations in the early 1990s from different research institutions in Jordan to "talk" about Amman. However, the fiction writer found it extremely difficult, and not necessarily exciting, to write about something he knew very well, and certain events that actually happened. But then he feared the time was passing; so he set out to record his memories of a world that was fast disappearing.<sup>17</sup>

It has been said that autobiography is uncommon in Arabic literature. But Arab intellectuals are, more and more, becoming aware of the importance of autobiography. Some have begun to write their memories of a lost or forgotten world, especially when faced with serious illness or looming death. The late Edward Said (1935-2003) began his memoir after he was diagnosed with cancer. He felt it was important to leave behind a subjective account of his life in several cities in the Arab world, where he was born and spent his formative years, and in the United States, where he obtained his higher education and pursued his career.<sup>19</sup> Said considered the fact that the Arab world as he "had grown up in it, had completely changed" as his "autobiographical impetus, to rethink the whole question of what it means to start again, to begin".<sup>20</sup> Another prominent Palestinian-American scholar and intellectual, Hisham Sharabi (1927-2004), began his memoir, literally, in the operating theatre. In two books, he vividly recorded details of the years he lived in several Arab cities, especially in Palestine and Lebanon (1927-1949). Some of these cities have irreversibly changed. Others, such as Acre and Jaffa, have lost their Arab identity forever.<sup>21</sup> The same could be said about the creative writer and critic, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-1994), a Palestinian who became a refugee in 1948, and a close friend of Munif with whom he co-authored a novel.<sup>22</sup> Jabra wrote his childhood and youth memories in Jerusalem and Bethlehem at an advanced age when he feared the passing of time.<sup>23</sup> Is it of significance that these

writers wrote about their childhood and youth in Arab cities to which they could no longer return?

Abd al-Rahman Munif died in Damascus in 2004, aged seventy-one, after a protracted illness. Perhaps he too felt the urgent need to write his "autobiography" before it was too late. But why the city of Amman? Munif was born in Amman, although his father was Saudi and his mother was Iraqi. He grew up in the city amidst his immediate family including his Iraqi grandmother and a number of siblings. We are unenlightened as to why the Munifs moved to, and lived in, Amman for all these years, during which the city experienced a number of natural disasters and epidemics and two wars: the Second World War and the first Arab-Israeli war (1948).

Munif spent the first eighteen years of his life, uninterrupted, in Amman where he received his primary and secondary education before going to Baghdad to study law, and then, expelled, to Cairo where he completed his degree. For the rest of his life, Munif worked and lived in several cities in the Arab world and abroad, often as an exile, especially after he was stripped of his Saudi citizenship (1963) because of his political ideas.

Munif is now acknowledged as a "patriarch of Arab literature" and a pillar of the modern Arabic novel.<sup>24</sup> His reputation is especially due to his multi-volume novel *Cities of Salt*, which depicts the disturbing modernisation of Arab cities. Apart from a very brief return to Amman shortly after he left it,<sup>25</sup> it took Munif another thirty-seven years to revisit the city of his birth, childhood and adolescent years. Upon his return, the author of *Cities of Salt* takes it upon himself to write the personal story of his own first, and perhaps only real city. Thus he embarks upon writing to "repay" his debt to the city before time erodes the memory of people and places.<sup>26</sup>

But Munif's *Biography of a City* is not only a word of thanks to an intimate place. It is essentially an attempt to recapture the author's childhood and that of his childhood city. It is the author's struggle against oblivion and absence; an endeavour "to stop time for a while", to use his own words, in order to recapture, not only images of places, things and people, but also the pulse of life of that time.<sup>27</sup> To realise this aim, Munif consciously uses his skills of novelistic narration, history and aesthetic sensibility,<sup>28</sup> in a combination that makes *Biography of a City* "an extended memory" to re-read the beginnings of modern Amman, and re-think the question of what she was and why she turned into what she is now.

Replying retrospectively to a question about his auto/biographical drive, Munif complained of the absence of an “urban vision” in modern Arabic literature. He lamented the scarcity of Arabic writings about life in Arab cities in the past fifty or sixty years, insisting that available accounts were either written by foreigners, or consisted of blurred images and imprecise details. He admired Naguib Mahfuz whose *Cairo Trilogy* kept details of many aspects of Arab life that would have disappeared otherwise.<sup>29</sup> From this perspective, Munif himself wrote about his own childhood in Amman and urged other Arab authors to do the same for their cities. Perhaps it was with this vision in mind that he also wrote the biography of his friend, Muhammad al-Bahi, in the context of the cities where this Arab intellectual lived.<sup>30</sup> Munif was adamant that if Arab intellectuals recorded their impressions and memories, a “modern Arab urban vision” would become possible.<sup>31</sup>

Munif speculates on the reasons why modern Arab authors avoid writing about their own lives, and therefore about their cities. “We don’t see the closest things to us”, he says, “perhaps because they are familiar and ordinary things that are not worthy of recording”.<sup>32</sup> And when time passes, and lucid memories of things, places and people are lost forever, it becomes difficult to re-create a distinct, recognisable image of the city as a real place. Obviously this is significant, but I think the reasons are more complex.

First, it is possible to argue that modern Arab authors prefer not to write about their own life, or “travel within the self”, as Nizar Qabbani has expressed it. In the seventies, writing about the influences on his poetry of his home city, Damascus, Qabbani pointed out that writing about the “self” is often seen in Arabic culture as a “kind of arrogance and narcissism”.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, it could be that modern Arab writers have generally shunned writing about real cities because this means writing about ordinary places and people and everyday life and things. It is true a number of Arab novelists (like Najib Mahfuz, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad, Hanan al-Shaykh, Ghada al-Samman, Ahlam Mosteghanemi and Munif himself) wrote about life in the cities addressing a broad-based readership. But apart from this, the majority of modern Arab writers, at least until the 1990s, remained isolated from the experience, vision, and even language of the ordinary people. This has prompted the Egyptian Arab literary critic, Ghali Shukri, to describe “Arab literary modernity” as an “elitist modernity”.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps modern Arab authors also avoid writing about memories of the past because they are preoccupied with modernity itself, "the issue of the moment", to use Edward Said's words.<sup>35</sup> Thus writing about the self or the city in the recent past may be seen as outmoded, irrelevant, or even reactionary, especially when confronted with the present and future challenges of modernity. It seems that the preoccupation with the "battle" for "modernity" and the "Arab future",<sup>36</sup> has distracted Arab intellectuals from writing about their memories of city life, which they (perhaps) associate with the pre-modern world.

This is not to say that Munif's biography of Amman in the forties is an evasive exercise by a writer haunted by the effects of modernisation on Arab cities, or even a nostalgic attempt to "resurrect" the past. Although a staunch nationalist, Munif was conscious that any such attempt is doomed to failure. Not only because the past is gone forever, but also because it may distract efforts from the pressing issues of the present and the future.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, in *Biography of a City*, Munif's aim was to rethink the question of what the past meant to the future of Amman,<sup>38</sup> especially as he later expressed the hope that she could be "a model" for the "human" Arab city (*al-madina al-insaniyya*) of the future.<sup>39</sup>

Four years after the publication of his biography of Amman, Munif asserted that, in all his writings about the cities, real and fictional, his intention was to "re-read history" in order to "highlight the true course of events", and to "carefully look at the beginnings" because of their influence on the present and the future.<sup>40</sup> Like other progressive nationalists before him (for example Ameen Rihani),<sup>41</sup> Munif believed that the Arabs could learn from the lessons of their past for the sake of their future.<sup>42</sup> It is in this light that I read Munif's discourse on modernism and the Arab city. In this context we can also understand his concern about preserving the memories of Arab cities through creative literature, history, autobiography, or other means, as he believed that such "historical" records are invaluable for future generations.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, Munif's views about modernism and Arabic literature, especially with reference to cities, are not entirely divorced from his appreciation of classical Arabic literature. He particularly valued the works of classical Arab geographers who wrote a great deal about the cities they lived in, travelled to, or even heard about from other travellers. And he argued that it was time that modern Arab writers reclaimed this tradition. Certainly as a fiction writer, Munif advanced a new genre of Arabic literature that explores life in Arab cities trans-

formed by modernisation. But I would like to pose the question: did he as an auto/biographer, aim to modernise an Arabic literary tradition that went out of fashion because of the concern with modernity?

In *Biography of a City*, Munif combines the skills of the traditional arts of autobiography and historiography, with insights from the modern sciences of sociology, psychology and urban anthropology, as well as the visual arts, and certainly, the “novel” techniques of fiction writing. However, it is important to emphasise that as someone who is deeply conscious of the role of “historical memory”,<sup>45</sup> in this and his other biographical works, Munif records memories of ordinary people, places, and aspects of ordinary daily life, rather than abstract national concepts. In the story of Amman in the forties, the auto/biographer integrates the memories of his own childhood and other people within the tale of the city; and the historian tells the story of the city and her people in the context of events at the levels of the nation, the region and the world at large. For this reason, I see *Biography of a City*, not just as a “modern” work of literature, but also as a text “about modernism” in the Saidian sense. Munif’s work certainly meets Edward Said’s criterion of “writing about modernism” as “a mode of reflection and meditation”, where the work of art/literature is put “in a larger perspective”, and connected “not just to a cultural and political situation, but also to the privacy of the writer’s life”.<sup>46</sup>

The story of Amman is re-constructed from flashes of Munif’s own childhood memories, narrated in the third person as if the narrator is talking about a child he knew long time ago but about whom he does not want to reveal everything. So he just pauses at some stations where the child’s life overlaps with that of Amman. The story begins with the day the child awoke to the city. This was associated with the news of the death of Ghazi, the Iraqi Hashimite monarch in Baghdad (1939). Having an Iraqi mother and a proud Baghdadi grandmother, the child assumed that the king’s “killing” concerned only him. The event that deeply moved the city (due to the dynastic connections between Iraq and Jordan at the time) awoke the six-year-old child to the idea of death. Its impact made the child discover the wider space of the city.<sup>47</sup> Beginning the story with death is rather intriguing. Perhaps Munif, who in his later writings expressed admiration for Ghazi, considered his death—or “assassination”—not just a personal grief, but also an Arab national loss.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly the story of the city ends with another death that affects the author, even more personally. This time, it is the death of

his grandmother, who not only is a main character in the story, but also the window through which the child sees the city. It is through her eyes and voice that we learn so much about Amman in the forties. By the beginning of the following decade, the author's personal connection to the city comes to an end with the departure of the grandmother, and shortly after that of the child—now a young man—from Amman to Baghdad. She returns to die in her old city, and he begins a new life in the “cruel” but “compassionate” Baghdad.<sup>49</sup>

In the years between the death of the Iraqi king and that of the beloved grandmother, the story of the city of Amman is brought to life. We learn about the close ties Amman has always had with her sister city, Baghdad. Both were then the only remaining Arab cities ruled by the Hashimite family. A significant Iraqi community was then established in Amman and, together with other Arab communities, particularly Syrian and Palestinian, contributed to the diverse population of the city and to her growth and development.

The trauma that the Iraqi king's death caused the child is the juncture at which the author highlights the state of health services in Amman. Owing to the child's painful experience on that day, we find out details about the availability and quality of health service providers, about patients and attitudes to disease, prevention and treatment. Later, witnessing one of his siblings being taken to the shrine of a holy man for cure, he contrasts the different alternatives, including popular traditional remedies that were prevalent at the time.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the author has, at the back of his mind, the great developments in health care which Amman witnessed in the decades between his memories and the time of writing.

The story of education in the city is another important station in her biography. We can follow its evolution through the child's first experience of schooling in *al-maktab*, the Qur'anic pre-school where children learned the basics of literacy and numeracy. The child's vivid and dramatic memories of *al-maktab*, described as “the first prison”,<sup>51</sup> tell us a good deal about this traditional educational institution that almost all Arab cities and villages have known, and most Arabs of Munif's generation could relate to.<sup>52</sup>

The child's journey from *al-maktab* to primary and secondary levels leads to the story of the earliest schools, and the establishment of modern ones in the young city. One of these is the Islamic Scientific College where the author finished his secondary education, and where a number of the future political leaders, including the late King Husayn



of Jordan, were educated.<sup>53</sup> The author's memories of his teenage youth are more precise and detailed. His recollections of the teachers, students and curricula, as well as the cultural and political activities and events, highlight the importance of such a centre in the capital city, and reflect the situation in the whole of Jordan at the time. These memories also hint at the young high school student's involvement in the activities organised by the various cultural societies and political parties at the Islamic College, and other schools and forums. The author documents, and in some instances analyses, the activities of the nascent Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Fahrir al-Islami), the Ba'ath Party, and the Muslim Brothers, all of which were to influence the state and society in Jordan and other Arab countries in the future.<sup>54</sup>

From Munif's narrative we learn that the forties in Amman were "long, severe and grim" as the city struggled to survive the hardships of two wars: the Second World War and the first Arab-Israeli war.<sup>55</sup> These passages offer the author's personal observations of how people (including his family and neighbours), endured the hardships of these two wars, on top of natural disasters (flood and locust invasion, 1943, 1949), and epidemics (typhus and cholera, 1946-1947).<sup>56</sup> Although the city did not suffer any destruction, the seemingly endless World War II transformed people's attitudes towards each other and towards their city. Poverty, food rationing, unemployment, and the emergence of a class of *nouveaux riches*, forced people to become more careful with the basic necessities of life; some lost their compassion, others left the city for a brighter and more secure life in the countryside or abroad.<sup>57</sup>

The author's memories, especially of the Iraqi army unit going via Amman to the war in Palestine, present a clear and lively record of the expectations and disappointment of the people of the city during this crucial period of her life. His personal account of ordinary people (his grandmother, relatives and neighbours), debating the strategies and outcomes of the two wars, reveals the city's struggle to grasp the intricacies of domestic politics and of the foreign intervention in the region.<sup>58</sup> The dreams and ambitions of the people of Jordan on Independence Day (1946), and their scepticism about its authenticity, were captured in his grandmother's critical observation that there would be no real independence without getting rid of Abu Hnayk, nickname of the then British commander of the Jordanian army, Glubb Pasha.<sup>59</sup>

Munif follows the evolution of the city as aspects of material modernity were introduced into her social fabric, and the remarkable transformation, which she experienced after the war (radio, cinema, and

the increasing use of private cars).<sup>60</sup> Of the child's amusing memories of the war years for example, the author recalls the precautionary measures that the very few people who had a radio would take to protect their treasured means of information.<sup>61</sup> But among the happiest moments in the life of the author and the city were the sporting and outdoor activities. It all began with homemade toys for little children (since parents could not afford to buy real toys during the war): a wooden spinning-top, a stick for bike or horse riding, and a wheel-game for racing!<sup>62</sup> Here is also an opportunity to record that soccer, even with a ball made of cloth rags, was an important chapter in the history of Amman! We follow the games to the finals, from empty streets to the official playgrounds, which in the late forties were equally used for horse racing and other unforgettable city festivals.<sup>63</sup>

Lively scenes of other activities are recorded in great detail. We share the little child's passion for marbles, despite his grandmother's irritation with these "devilish" beads, and his great amusement at the flying kites' tournament (at which one of his own brothers was a professional competitor).<sup>64</sup> And we accompany the boys on their various seasonal adventures: fishing and swimming in the river, catching birds, even raiding neighbouring orchards; playing in the snow (a rare opportunity for girls to get involved and for some boys to show their chivalrous manners!); picnicking and promenading (to exercise yes! but also to gaze on the beautiful dresses of the young women!).<sup>65</sup> Children also had some special tasks to perform. For example in summer, they would help the adults in the preparation of provisions for the coming winter, during which they would take on other duties: chopping firewood or invoking rain in ceremonial performances that add to the colourful ethnic and cultural make-up of the city. And when God responds, the river would give the children the most exciting experience of their life.<sup>66</sup>

Munif highlights the role of Amman's river, popularly known as al-Sayl (Stream) both as the lifeblood of the city—since its source (the powerful Ras al-'Ayn spring) provided the nascent city with drinking water—and as a danger. During severe winters the river would break its banks and flood the main street of Amman, threatening many houses and shops. Amman's 1943 great flood, which Munif remembered as a ten-year old boy, has been immortalised in his *Biography of a City*: the sense of urgency and the civil spirit of cooperation and solidarity, the concern of the teachers for their pupils, and the curiosity of the children in exploring dangerous areas. But during the

spring season, the stream becomes a lively and friendly environment for swimming, fishing, playing and picnicking.<sup>67</sup> This and later floods led to drastic changes in the landscape of the city (including covering the whole course of the river), but the river has continued to inspire modern poets and folkloric songs to the present day.

The author reminds us that modern Amman was known in the past not only as “the city of fraternal love” (*Philadelphia*), but also as “the city of water”. And water was one of the reasons for her re-building in the modern age.<sup>68</sup> He traces the city’s path and activities along the living water body, paying special attention to certain places for their public significance: al-Husayni Mosque (the city’s centre), the Roman Amphitheatre (the people’s assembly space known as al-Midan), the public bath (used by women in the morning and men in the afternoon), and the fresh produce market, which “united” the diverse people of Amman in the forties.<sup>69</sup>

Munif underlines the important features of Amman’s life as a commercial centre including the various markets, second-hand clothing shops, and the role of outside merchants, particularly Damascene, but also American and local Protestant missionaries. He emphasises the role of outsiders from diverse backgrounds in the growth of Amman as a city: Arabs (settled and Bedouins), Armenians and Circasians (Çerkese), Christians and Muslims, from the Jordanian towns and countryside, and from the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and others.<sup>70</sup>

The diversity of Amman society is the focal point of Munif’s description of almost all aspects of life in the city: political, literary and cultural activities, jobs and livelihoods, celebrations and social connections. He shows in great detail how people’s diverse backgrounds, and social classes, are reflected in the way they dress and talk, the way they joke and laugh, and how they mourn and bury their dead.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, though, he says little about weddings or rites of passage.

Munif’s narrative reveals that diversity is what gives the city her identity and makes her so much alive. It is the main dynamic that makes Amman the city she was in the forties: tolerant and open to a multitude of ideas, attitudes, customs, cultural traditions, languages and dialects. Munif highlights the integration of Amman’s diverse population in a relaxed blend that makes the whole city “a festival of colours, fashions and dialects”.<sup>72</sup> He even argues that the dynamic and harmonious relations of Christians and Muslims, Circasians and Arabs—including Bedouins—in the same neighbourhoods, education and workplace, has

made the city exceptionally tolerant. More than any other Arab city, Amman was ready to accept women's unveiling and their presence and work in the public space.<sup>73</sup> Munif's emphasis on the positive outcomes of social and cultural integration in Amman is such that we can safely say that diversity is the very distinct characteristic that makes the city "human" and "humane".

While diversity is a running theme in *Biography of a City* and deserves study in its own right, it is the human dimension of this diversity that is striking. Munif, who defines the city as "the people",<sup>74</sup> refers to Amman as "the city of people"—just as she was the "city of water". His narrative gives a dazzling picture of the city's array of people who are brought to life as individuals and as groups: men and women, old, young and children. He makes Amman so alive with a broad spectrum of ordinary people, politicians, intellectuals, professionals, artisans as well as merchants and peasants, even charlatans, beggars and kids who sell lollies. All are real people and have real names, but their tale is so captivating it could be easily turned into a fascinating feature movie.

Among the leading characters that would be worthy of a novel, or at least a short story in her own right, Munif's maternal grandmother stands out: the sharp witted and observant old woman, distinguished by her Iraqi 'Abaya and her Baghdadi dialect, and by whom Amman seems to be always judged by the higher standards of Baghdad and is usually found wanting. She is typical of the non-Ammani who enjoys life in the city but cannot help being critical of it. But she shares in the characteristic Ammani tolerance towards others. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that she is often the real narrator of the story of Amman. Munif has often been accused of not giving enough scope to female characters in his fictional cities.<sup>75</sup> In *Biography of a City*, the grandmother is quite a central figure, who speaks her mind, criticises what she considers as unacceptable political and social attitudes, and is a strong influence on the outlook of the children and the young people in the house and the wider neighbourhood.

Munif's story of Amman is crowded with other colourful novelistic characters that we observe in various situations: at work, in the classroom, in the nearby fields, on the playgrounds, in demonstrations and at the cemetery. All are brought to life in a narrative that clearly shows Amman in the forties as a city still open to the countryside and not in conflict with rural life. Against this background, we understand why life in this city was not alienating or dehumanising in contrast with images of larger or artificially "modernised" cities as depicted in his

novels. In addition, Munif demonstrates the humanity of Amman in more than one sense. He shows that the problems of life in Amman were more a result of natural or worldwide forces than being intrinsic to the city herself; and that it is the degree of community resilience in the face of disaster, adversity and change that enables the people to live without being overwhelmed by misfortunes.

Some modern anthropological studies have considered such aspects of the humanity of cities. What distinguishes Munif's story from such studies, and from other biographies and historical accounts of cities,<sup>76</sup> is not only his positive urban vision, but also the place of memory in his narrative. There is no doubt that Munif's rich experience of life in various cities and professions, and his absence from Amman for almost four decades, have sharpened his memory. This enabled him to present an analytical—but affectionate and intimate—portrait of the emerging Jordanian capital, not only as an insider returning to his city, but also as a participating observer. His novelistic skills have brought these observations and memories to life again. While the author re-lives his memories of the city as one of her people, with the skills of the seasoned novelist he portrays the intimate details of her life. Munif's narrative conveys the story of a real, but modern and human Arab city. It is a story of a city no less fascinating than any of his fictional cities.

#### NOTES

- 1 Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Sirat Madina: 'Amman fi al-Arba'inat* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1994), p. 245.
- 2 An English version has been published as *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*, trans. Samira Kawar (London: Quartet Books, 1996). Here, I use the Arabic text (referred to as *Biography of a City*) for page references.
- 3 Munif, *Mudun al-Milh*, 5 volumes (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1984-1989). Three volumes have appeared in English translations by Peter Theroux, *Cities of Salt, The Trench, Variations on Night and Day*.
- 4 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 356. See also "Novelist Abd al-Rahman Munif Mourned", in *al-Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Art*, vol. 8, no. 38 (Winter 2002), available online at <http://www.aljadid.com/features/NovelistAbdal-RahmanMourned.html/>.
- 5 Tariq Ali, "The Kingdom of Corruption: The Saudi Connection", in ZNET (9/23/01), <http://www.zmag.org/alisaudi.htm/>, p. 2.
- 6 *Biography of a City*, p. 5.
- 7 Nizar Qabbani, *La'ibtu bi-Itqan waha Hiya Mafatih*, second edition (Beirut: Qabbani, 2000), pp. 196-197, *Ila Bayrut al-Untha ma' Hubbi*, complete works, vol. 2, seventh edition (Beirut: Qabbani, 1993), pp. 286-379.
- 8 Munif, *Urwat al-Zaman al-Bahi* (Beirut: Bissan, 1997), p. 37.
- 9 Munif, *Sibaq al-Masafat al-Tawila* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1983).
- 10 On the concept of space in Munif's novels, see *Shakir al-Nabulsi, Madar al-Sahra': Dirasa fi Adab 'Abd al-Rahman Munif* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1991), pp. 232-283.

- 11 Cited in al-Nabulsi, *Madar al-Sahra*, p. 244.
- 12 John Gulick, *The Humanity of Cities: An Introduction to Urban Societies* (New York & London: Bergin & Garvey, 1989).
- 13 Munif quoted in Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*, second edition (London: Verso, 2005), p. 58.
- 14 See in particular his *Urwat al-Zaman al-Bahi*.
- 15 John Gulick, *The Humanity of Cities*, p. xv.
- 16 Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 1997), *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, edited and with an introduction by Gauri Viswanathan (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 421.
- 17 *Biography of a City*, pp. 7-9.
- 18 Edward W. Said, *Beginnings*, p. 81.
- 19 Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta Books, 1999), p. xi.
- 20 Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 257.
- 21 Hisham Sharabi, *Suwar al-Madi: Sira Dhatiyya*, third edition (Sweden: Nelson, 1998), *al-Jamr wal-Ramad: Dhikrayat Muthaqqaf 'Arabi*, third edition (Sweden: Nelson, 1998).
- 22 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra & Abd al-Rahman Munif, *'Alam bila Khara'it*, second edition (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1992).
- 23 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *al-Bi'r al-Ula: Fusul min Sira Dhatiyya* (London: El-Rayyes, 1987). See also his *Mu'ayashat al-Namira wa Awraq Ukhra* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1992), and *Shari' al-Amirat: Fusul min Sira Dhatiyya* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 1994).
- 24 Tariq Ali, "Farewell to Munif: A Patriarch of Arab Literature", in *Counterpunch* (31 January - 1 February 2004), <http://www.counterpunch.org/ali01312004.html>; Halim Barakat, *al-Mujtama' al-'Arabi fi al-Qarn al-'Ishrin: Bahth fi Taghayyur al-Ahwal wal-'Aqaf* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 2000), pp. 716, pp. 781-86; Shakir al-Nabulsi, *Madar al-Sahra*.
- 25 Munif, *Urwat al-Zaman al-Bahi*, p. 13.
- 26 *Biography of a City*, pp. 7-9.
- 27 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, second edition (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 2000), pp. 229-230.
- 28 See for example Munif's critical assessment of the leading Syrian painter, Marwan Qassab Bashi: "Min al-Basit ila al-Ishkali", in *Mawakif*, (no. 70-71, 1993), pp. 118-127.
- 29 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, p. 230.
- 30 Munif, *Urwat al-Zaman al-Bahi*.
- 31 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, p. 231.
- 32 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, p. 230.
- 33 Nizar Qabbani, *Qissati ma' al-Shi'r* (Beirut: Qabbani, 1973), p. 15.
- 34 Ghali Shukri, *Burj Babil: al-Naqd wal-Hadatha al-Sharida* (London: El-Rayyes, 1989), p. 129.
- 35 Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 259.
- 36 See in particular the prestigious *al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi* (*The Arab Future*), published by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut.
- 37 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, pp. 200-201.
- 38 *Biography of a City*, pp. 245-257.
- 39 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, p. 177.
- 40 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, pp. 198, pp. 200-201.

- 41 See Nijmeh Hajjar, "Ameen Rihani's Humanist Vision of Arab Nationalism", in Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West: A Pioneering Call for Arab-American Understanding, Nathan Funk and Betty Sitka (eds) (Lanham & Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), pp. 134-147.
- 42 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, pp. 198-201.
- 43 Munif, *Urwat al-Zaman al-Bahi*, pp. 7-11.
- 44 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, p. 230.
- 45 Munif, *Al-'Iraq: Hawamish min al-Tarikh wal-Muqawama* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2003), p. 7.
- 46 Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics and Culture*, p. 421.
- 47 *Biography of a City*, pp. 11-25.
- 48 Munif, *Al-'Iraq*, pp. 105-118.
- 49 *Biography of a City*, p. 272.
- 50 *Biography of a City*, pp. 13-24.
- 51 *Biography of a City*, p. 38.
- 52 See Hisham Sharabi, *Muqaddimat li-Dirasat al-Mujtama' al-'Arabi*, sixth edition (Sweden: Nelson, 1999), p. 156.
- 53 *Biography of a City*, p. 193.
- 54 *Biography of a City*, pp. 51-69, pp. 181-198, pp. 211-224, pp. 228-233.
- 55 *Biography of a City*, p. 270.
- 56 *Biography of a City*, pp. 71-78, pp. 135-144, pp. 199-210, pp. 225-243.
- 57 *Biography of a City*, pp. 199-210.
- 58 *Biography of a City*, pp. 202-204, pp. 222-243.
- 59 *Biography of a City*, pp. 205-206.
- 60 *Biography of a City*, p. 73, p. 151, p. 197.
- 61 *Biography of a City*, p. 73.
- 62 *Biography of a City*, p. 101.
- 63 *Biography of a City*, pp. 120-123.
- 64 *Biography of a City*, pp. 103-106.
- 65 *Biography of a City*, p. 65, p. 113, p. 116, p. 150.
- 66 *Biography of a City*, p. 170, pp. 130-136.
- 67 *Biography of a City*, pp. 127-161.
- 68 *Biography of a City*, p. 127.
- 69 *Biography of a City*, pp. 127-130, pp. 248-151.
- 70 *Biography of a City*, p. 43, pp. 76-79, p. 83, p. 128, pp. 181-183.
- 71 *Biography of a City*, pp. 25-28, pp. 87-99, pp. 130-132, pp. 150-180, pp. 211-224, pp. 250-269.
- 72 *Biography of a City*, p. 94.
- 73 *Biography of a City*, p. 92, p. 254.
- 74 *Biography of a City*, pp. 5-6, p. 25.
- 75 Munif, *Bayn al-Thaqafa wal-Siyasa*, p. 149. See also Shakir al-Nabulsi, *Madar al-Sahra'*, p. 444.
- 76 For example, Khaled Ziadé, *Friday, Sunday: Chapters from a Biography of a City on the Mediterranean*, trans. Raghdid Nahhas (Sydney: Kalimat, 2005).