

**Developing or Devouring: Modernity vs. Modernization in Wallace Stegner's *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil* and Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt, 'al-Tih'***

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to shed light on the problematics of handling modernization and modernity as synonymous. This conflation overlooks the importance of the transitional processes that pave the way for modernity to take place. The paper examines two Petro-fiction works: Wallace Stegner's *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil* and Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt, 'al-Tih*, which when studied contrapuntally, provide examples of the dichotomy between modernity and modernization. Furthermore, putting these two texts together opens up processes that are otherwise invisible. To show that, the paper uses Jacques Derrida's *sous rature* as a lens to expose the lies and exploitation behind the Westerngr and narratives of modernization and imperial benevolence. While Stegner crosses out and covers under the surface of his content the exasperating and disrupting components of his narrative, Munif unearths and reveals the truth behind them. The study draws upon various theoretical frameworks, such as Richard Peet, Rob Nixon, Robert Vitalis, and Irene L. Gendzier.*

**Keywords:** Abdelrahman Munif, modernity, modernization, petro-fiction, *sous rature*, Wallace Stegner

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two texts, which have not been studied together: one is historical and documentary, written by, the American Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner, Wallace Stegner on and about the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), entitled *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil* (I will refer to henceforth as *Discovery*). The other is literary by the Saudi writer Abdelrahman Munif, *'al-Tih*, the first part of *Cities of Salt* quintet. The paper focuses on *'al-Tih* because it is parallel to Stegner's *Discovery*. Both works are considered petro-fiction and talk about the same spatio-temporal Aramco experience in Saudi Arabia. Stegner's text, published in 1971, is non-fiction that focuses on the history of the oil company's pioneering years, tracing its transformation from California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC) in 1933, a small company, to Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in 1944, one of the largest oil companies in the world. Munif's novel published in 1984 also chronicles the coming of oil masters and the formation of Saudi Arabia as America's "oil colony" (Nixon 2011: 81).

The two texts could be considered twin texts, not identical twins, but rather obverse and reverse twins, which show the two opposite sides of the same coin. In Stegner, we read the official history of Aramco as one of the major modernizing

projects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Munif, we read about the drastic effects of the same project on the real inhabitants of the place. They present a clear example of *sous rature* (put under erasure). While Stegner is crossing out and burying under the surface of his text the disturbing and unsettling elements of his narrative, Munif is disinterring and shedding light on them. Stegner's text thus provides us with a grand narrative (to use Lyotard's terminology) of progress and modernization, what we might call development from above, which ignores ordinary people and puts them under erasure. Munif's text provides a counter narrative, which draws attention to ordinary people and their right to live a dignified life and establish their own modernity. Studying them contrapuntally allows us in Edward Said's words to see "intertwined and overlapping histories" (1994: 18) and to become simultaneously aware of both "the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (1994:51). In doing so, we address both the perspective of imperialism, dressed up as neo-imperialism, and the resistance to it (Said 1994:66). This perspective of imperialism and its resistance can be shown through the larger framework of modernity vs. modernization.

## **2. Modernity vs. modernization**

To understand the framework of modernity vis-à-vis modernization specifically in petro-fiction, one must place energy as the driving force of development. The discovery of petroleum in the Gulf, the Arab peninsula, has paved the way for the expansion of the agenda of industrial capitalism and has led to the neologism of petro-capitalism. Under the banner of modernization, petro-capitalism has fulfilled its ambitious motives of monopolizing the oil trade. With the emergence of the oil business, social stratification, imperial projects, and political, economic and social metamorphoses have struck the Gulf States. Petro-narrative situates petroleum under the lens of critical inquiry to reveal the major changes that face petro-culture communities. This interface between energy and culture has been discussed by a number of critics such as, Rob Nixon, Lucy Potter, Jennifer Wenzel, ImreSzeman, Graeme Macdonald, and Vineet Mehta, just to mention a few. Although, this interface is a significant aspect in both Stegner's and Munif's texts, studying them contrapuntally demonstrates the challenges of modernity and modernization for third world countries, developing, under-developed, or what might be referred to as traditional societies. When put together, these two texts will be understood better and will allow us to look critically at the challenges of modernization. Moreover, they will shed light on the various aspects of modernization taken for modernity, in which some people consider as synonymous, while they are not the same.

Modernity can be depicted "as the result of a series of basically continuous processes where political, economic, and intellectual transformations mutually reinforced and conditioned each other" (Wittrock 2000: 40). It accentuates "the autonomous participation of members of society in the constitution of the social and political order, on the autonomous access of all members of the society to

these orders and to their centers” (Eisenstadt 2000: 5). In this way modernization is a process within the framework of modernity that allows the political, economic, intellectual and human processes and transformations to come together and to integrate into the very fabric of society. While the West believe they were able due to many factors to go through these transformational processes, many countries from the rest of the world have been deprived of the opportunity to undergo their own transformational processes and under their own terms. Many of the Third World countries, in fact, were forced to jump to the Eurocentric idea of modernization rather than go through their own gradual processes of transformation.

This idea is clearly discussed and demonstrated in Irene L. Gendzier’s book *Managing Political Change: Social Scientists and the Third World*. She bluntly states the problematics of both development and modernization at the very beginning of her book, showing the tensions and the contradictions behind such notions:

*Development and Modernization* are terms that evoke powerful images. They speak to the collective aspirations of people throughout the world for a life of meaning and dignity. They inspire the hope that what the rich nations have achieved, the poor may one day obtain. They address the desire for social, political, and economic reforms that moves people in the most disparate of lands. Who can be against Development? Who can oppose what Modernization promises?

Reality has not matched the dream or the promise. Policies of Development have become suspect. Modernization has intensified poverty, social conflict, and the very conditions it was meant to alleviate. What does it mean, then, to speak of Development or Modernization? (1985: 1)

A direct answer to Gendzier’s question is that modernity with its modernization needs to come from within the society itself and not from outsiders coming with their own agenda under the pretense of modernization.

Therefore, in order for modernization to take place, there are preconditions that must be realized, such as technological and economic development, education, and cultural institutions that enrich experiences, and emerge simultaneously. They also require a political will and the needed infrastructure (Sztompka 2016:166). Otherwise, the price might be very high, especially when people skip steps. This might lead to suffering or what Piotr Sztompka calls “traumas of modernization” (2016: 168).

Modernization, therefore, “must involve both the reforms from above and the mobilization of the people” (Sztompka 2016:166). It must be, according to Sztompka,

linked with the traditions of a given society, its unique social memory, cultural heritage, religious or ideological creeds. These traditions provide intellectual and moral resources for modernizing action, both for the authorities using the wisdom of generations for rational reform and for the

people who, in the rootedness and continuity with the past, find existential security in the time of chaos and change (2016:166-167).

How close is the modernization project of Saudi Arabia to what Sztompka in the previous quotation proposes?

It seems that Saudi Arabia is far away from that. Historically speaking, the laboratory that carried the preliminary preparation for a new world order took place at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. According to Richard Peet, forty-four nations, led by America and Britain, met on the 1<sup>st</sup> till the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1944 to discuss economic plans for the post-war peace (2003: 27). The USA and UK, the new regime supplanting the old one, collaborated to form a world that matched their economic as well as political interests (2003: 40). In this context, Saudi Arabia can be seen as the guinea pig and eventually the most successful example of the new world order where the USA emerged as a super power with plans to reorder the global economy and become its center.

It is in this context that the two texts, Stegner's and Munif's, are studied. They allow us to investigate the poetics and politics of modernization as both of them narrate the beginnings of the modernizing project, Aramco. They also present us with a clear example of hegemony and counter-hegemony, a hegemony, which "is produced in power centres, based on well-established theories, backed by mighty institutions, with billions of dollars behind them" and counter-hegemony, which is triggered by people oppressed by hegemonic policies (Peet 2003: 219). Both works enable us to capture the world at a turning point. They situate what was taking place in Saudi Arabia in relation to what was happening in the rest of the world, especially in terms of the major political changes (the new world order) and economic developments that took place at that time. Therefore, they become a snapshot of this watershed moment in the history of Western imperial project, which mark the beginning of what Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson have suitably called "the imperialism of decolonization" (qtd. in Nixon 2011: 81).

I argue that both Stegner's and Munif's texts when put together enable us to see layers of meaning which are not seen when studied separately. They demonstrate clearly the tension between modernity and modernization by showing the way modernization becomes the new tool for political domination in the hands of many neo-imperial powers. These powers employ the discourse of modernization and imperial benevolence in order to carry their economic as well as political control and hegemony. By imperial benevolence, (imperial in its many senses, relating to empire, having supreme authority, outstanding in size and quality, etc.), I mean their hypocrisy which is exhibited in their alleged benevolence which is nothing but a sugar coating for their greedy and exploitive objectives. By utilizing the discourse of modernization, they also prevent developing countries from their chance to experience their own modernities and evolutions. In order to examine the various manifestations of imperial benevolence, I apply *sous rapture* as a lens and critical tool to allow us to deconstruct the texts and reveal the hidden meaning in each one. This paper

shows, on the one hand, how the discourse of modernization in an imperial text such as *Discovery* transforms history into fiction and a bunch of fabrications made by a certain powerful body to disseminate its lies and create the myth of a benevolent hand that presides over a utopian world where everybody shares the blessings and riches of the earth. On the other hand, it illustrates how literature, especially literature of resistance, with its “wordliness” and “complex affiliation” with reality (1994: 13), to borrow Said’s words, becomes more of an authentic historical document, chronicling the way people’s right to establish their modernity has been hijacked. It also draws our attention to the various traces put under erasure and brings them back to life.

### **3. Discovery: Modernization or monopolization?**

Wallace Stegner was literally asked by Aramco, based on its records and directions, to write *Discovery* as a story of the great success of Aramco, represented by the company’s humane, political free modernizing projects in Saudi Arabia. Even the title reflects this sense of generosity and luck; as if Saudi Arabia is an American discovery. Therefore, in his introduction, Stegner keeps lauding Aramco for its great performance and achievements on the East Coast of the kingdom. He refers to it as one of those ‘legendary institutions’” (1971: v), which “demonstrates us, in one direction, at our best” (1971: v). He insists that “Aramco can congratulate itself on a record that is a long way from being grossly exploitive or ‘imperialist’” (1971: vi). This intentional and quite explicit repetition becomes more justified when we know the reasons behind the writing up of the book. The owners and executives of Aramco wanted to counter attack the accusations of a number of politicians against Roosevelt administration’s support of Aramco, which, according to these opponents, was “seen as a return to the ‘old imperialism’ and ‘dollar diplomacy’ of the early twentieth century” (Vitalis 2007: 408). Hence, Aramco wanted to present America’s economic interventions in Saudi Arabia in modernizing terms.

Therefore, Stegner’s text is mainly a defense of Aramco rather than a panegyric. He tries to hide the defense in a subtle way by showing that Aramco is too good to be true. He idealizes its image as an altruistic agent of modernization “the range and frequent altruism of its activities made Aramco worthier of a man’s loyalty than companies which could claim only the colder justification of profits” (1971: ix). However, he couldn’t hide the accusations against Aramco. He admits in his book that many people describe the company “as a sinister force embroiling us, for dirty dollars, in the power struggles of the Middle East” (1971: v). Yet, he claims, these people did not represent the majority and were a number of “emotional nationalists” and “hostile propagandists” whose accusations were far away from the truth (1971: v). By mentioning this in his introduction, Stegner delineates his trajectory, doing two things simultaneously: providing a historical document that acts as a witness to the great philanthropic spirit of Aramco and presenting a work of propaganda that is trying to whitewash the exploitive nature of this firm whose contributions during WWII was the production of Arabian oil, which “stayed up to the maximum” and kept “feeding the Allied war effort”

(Stegner 1971: 167) to finance the war. By doing that, he blatantly disregards the Saudi human capital, putting the Saudi experience under erasure and defeating the purpose of the text that is supposed to highlight the cooperation and collaboration between Americans and Saudis.

In *Discovery*, therefore, the discovery of oil becomes synonymous with modernization and the exaltation of the legendary role of Aramco and its men, whose job, to borrow the words of the anthropologist Carleton Coon, is “one of the outstanding jobs of social engineering” (qtd. in Stegner xii). Such social engineering reflects the Americans' ability to transform primitive social agents, the Saudis, to “civilized” ones capable of carrying on the “white man’s burden”. Stegner highlights the Saudis’ primitiveness in his account of the way Aramco managed to create and transform Saudi Arabia. In this way, Stegner’s version of history corresponds neatly with the grand narratives of progress where, according to the historian Elliott West “History doesn’t really get going until Europeans show up and start changing things” (qtd. in Vitalis 2007: 410). He clearly demonstrates in his text how history begins with the coming of the West: “Aramco began to transform Arabia. . . . It *was* magical. . . that dizzy and dangerous leap from ‘camels to Cadillacs,’ to use the tiresome cliché that to this day writers seem compelled to employ, is quite impressive and probably every bit as important” (1971: v). Stegner could not depart from the typical Eurocentric orientalist narrative, which sees the non-European other as primitive, backward, half human. By emphasizing this, he exemplifies what Henryk Skolimowski’s states clearly in his succinct comment: “to join the West in its quest for progress is an imperative, an advancement, an almost necessary condition of being human”(43).

Moreover, Stegner reveals this Eurocentric discourse in his essentialist and orientalist references to Saudis. To him, Saudis were lazy and could not multitask like civilized people. He even goes to the extent to claim that this is “constitutional”, embedded in the very texture of their culture. Thus, the Saudis only created obstacles rather than facilitated things. In other words, they hampered progress. Stegner clearly illustrates this in his matter-of-fact tone as he talks about the way the American pioneers did not only have to accommodate the harsh geographic circumstances but also the inadequacy of Saudis:

[N]ot only did the government insist that the soldiers were necessary for their protection, but the Arabs were constitutionally and culturally inhibited from combining jobs. A driver drove, a mechanic repaired, a camel driver tended the camels, a cook would not be caught dead doing a houseboy’s job of serving, a houseboy would quit before he would remove a cook’s kettle from the fire. As a result, whenever any two geologists took off into the desert, there went with them an interpreter, a cook, a cook’s helper, a houseboy, a mechanic, a mechanic’s helper, a driver, anywhere from 15 to 30 soldiers, and four camel drivers” (1971: 30-1).

#### 4. Under erasure: Monopolization and the *sous rature*

Despite the frustrations and shortcomings that stem from such an encounter with under-skilled people, Stegner still points to some of the partnership aspects of the modernizing encounter between the Americans and the Saudis as another gesture of America's imperial benevolence. He presents this alliance as the main purpose behind writing the book. He states that *Discovery* attempts to shed light on "the earliest contacts between Americans and Saudi Arabs, and the earliest formulations, by necessity, of the partnership idea" (1071: vii). However, his narrative fails to show this partnership and succeeds only in showing the contradictions in his argument. For despite justifying the partnership in terms of mutual benefit, he manages only to talk about one side of it, the Americans, monopolizing the narrative to serve their agenda. His glorification of the Americans and overlooking of the Saudis is a clear example of *sous rature*, the discrepancy in his text between fabrications and reality.

*Sous rature*, the French translation for under erasure, was first introduced by Martin Heidegger and later broadened by Jacques Derrida to mean the literal crossing out of a word within a text, with the intentions of drawing attention to a specific meaning of a multifaceted word. To express it differently, it is "to write a word, cross it out, and then print both the word and its deletion. Because the word is inaccurate, or inadequate, it is crossed out; because the word is necessary, it remains legible" (Kaomea 2003: 16). Therefore, the technique of *sous rapture* crosses out the various possibilities the word carries and puts emphasis only on the meaning that fits the context.

The paper uses the term in a critical and analytic way to reveal how Stegner subtly glosses over the Saudis in his narrative. In *Discovery*, Stegner applies *sous rapture* not to cross out words, but rather to cross out Saudis, literally putting them under erasure, though keeping unwittingly traces of them, allowing the very thing he is crossing out to be seen. Stegner empties the baggage of Saudi existence within the modernization context and limits the meaning of their existence only to serve a Eurocentric imperial context. If this emptying shows anything, it shows that what counts in his alleged narrative of partnership is just "the agreements and contracts and transactions of the company, its negotiations with the Saudi Arab government and its balance sheets and its effect on the world oil market and the policy of nations" (Stegner 1971: 117). His narrative focuses only on economic and political projects and overlooks the human aspect.

This overlooking of human beings and the absence of the Saudis from the equation manage only to highlight the monstrous and greedy intentions of Aramco. Stegner expresses that in his draft of the 1970 introduction to the book, by stressing only the material aspect of Aramco "whose influence extended across the face of the earth, whose bank balances rival the resources of many complacent republics and whose authority is one of the great imponderables of modern affairs" (qtd. in Vitalis 2007: 431). Furthermore, in the original version of his book he portrays Aramco's negotiations with the Saudi government as "high stakes poker game," a phrase he was asked to omit by Aramco because it "made it look as though the oil companies were trying to reap maximum gains."

Nevertheless, the facts and archives show that Aramco had pursued and obtained “a monopoly of virtually all the potential oil lands in the Arabian Peninsula and the coastal regions south of it,” which was the main reason behind the anger and protests of Saudi nationalists in the 1950s (Vitalis 2007: 424).

Despite all of his literary ingenuity, Stegner could not hide the tension that was mounting by Saudis as they realized the extent of exploitation and daylight robbery they were facing. The monopolization of the narrative is heightened in Stegner’s comment at the end of the book about the great men who built “something new in the history of the world: not an empire made for plundering by the intruding power, but a modern nation in which American and Arab could work out fair contracts, produce in partnership, and profit mutually by their association” (1971: 173), serving only as an ironic conclusion to his partial and dismissive account of the Saudis. According to Robert Vitalis, although Stegner knows from the company’s record about the disturbed and conflictive nature between the Saudi workers and Aramco’s administration, he ends his narrative before July 1945, which signaled the first strike organized by Aramco’s Arab workers:

Two thousand workers joined this first strike by Arab labor before the amir of the oil province violently suppressed it. The strike so clearly punctured the fantasy of a uniquely fair and just American order that Stegner had to end the story when and how he did, only a step or two away from a fall over a cliff edge that his integrity could never have survived. (2007: 420)

This has been a calculated choice on Stegner’s part because he does not want to jeopardize Aramco’s reputation as an oppressive and undemocratic company that worked against the interests of its employees. At the same time, he does not want to contradict the rosy and positive claims he has been making about Aramco throughout his narrative. He has to do a lot of face-lifting to his manuscript to fit the narrative that the company wants to forge. He ends up deploying all the tropes his admirers claim he has dropped in his work on the American West (Vitalis 2007: 430), writing “a fable rather than grappl[ing] seriously with the course of empire, a concept he said did not fit the circumstances” (Vitalis 2007: 431).

It will be hard to realize fully the serious implications of what Stegner’s text is doing had we just read it on its own. Hence comes the importance of reading it against Munif’s *‘al-Tih*. If Stegner’s historical account is presenting to us Aramco as modernization from above, i.e., modernization as seen by the West and Saudi elites, Munif’s *‘al-Tih*, exposes the lies and hypocrisy of Aramco and its claims that what it offers is just “a technical, apolitical intervention based on expert knowledge that will benefit all members of society” (Ziai 2009: 198). Opposite to Stegner’s erasure of the Saudi citizens is Munif’s emphasis on their presence throughout his counter narrative. *‘Al-Tih*, the first part of *Cities of Salt*, attempts to answer Stegner’s long rhetorical question about the challenges that faced the American pioneers but this time from the perspective of Saudis:



How was it? [. . .] How did it feel to be thrown so completely on their own resources and their own decisions? How did they get along? (1971: 45)

### **5. Resource-cursed community and the exploitation of petro-capitalist imperialism: Challenges of modernity**

Munif's *al-Tih* is a story about loss and waste as its title signifies. It traces what Theodor Adorno calls, "the waste products and blind spots that have escaped" history, the things "which fell by the wayside" (1978: 151). Moreover, its narrative is the inverse side of Stegner's narrative, which when read vis-à-vis *Discovery* acts as a ghost text that haunts and destabilizes Stegner's. If, according to Stegner, Saudi history begins with the arrival of the Americans, to Munif the arrival of the Americans marks the beginning of violence, "The butchery of Wadi al-Uyoun" (1989: 106), and end of history for Saudis, "the tractors [...] attacked the orchards like ravenous wolves, tearing up the trees and throwing them to the earth one after another, and leveled all the orchards between the brook and the fields" (1989: 221). Stegner's claim that nothing existed before the coming of Americans, "no Dhahran existed, and no Abqaiq, no Ras Tanura, no al-Khobar (1971: 45) is challenged by Munif who demonstrates the falsehood of Stegner's claim by showing how Wadi al-Uyoun, the "earthly paradise" (1989: 2), epitomizes the long existence and rootedness of its inhabitants.

Wadi al-Uyoun with which Munif begins his narrative and chooses as his landmark means in Arabic "the Valley of Springs." However, the word "uyoun" in Arabic is polysemic and homographic and means also "eyes" and "the real sources of something." Such rich implication and spectrum of meaning shows how Munif perceives the place as "phenomenon, something of a miracle" (1989: 2). It is "an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert, as if it had burst from within the earth or fallen from the sky" (1989: 1). So, Wadi al-Uyoun becomes the eye-witness of the age long existence of its people. Moreover, it becomes the eyes that oversee the atrocities committed in the name of modernization and progression.

Right from the very beginning of his narrative, Munif establishes the identity of the place as nomadic yet rooted in the very texture of the desert:

But during the years of drought [. . .] the people of Wadi al-Uyoun behaved differently [. . .] if they asked anything from a caravan it was only to seek places for new passengers who had prepared and waited a long time to travel. After they had all left, the wadi felt relief and hope, for it was rid of burdens and yet could look forward to the good things to come from the day they returned, for all travelers came back sooner or later. Between the relief and the hope, with the steady supply of water and caravans, Wadi al-Uyoun continued to be strong, never fearing or wavering, for it always found a way to confront and overcome its misfortunes (1989: 4-5).

Munif is very much aware of the discourse of modernization and its claim that the Bedouins are wanderers and are almost non-existent. Therefore, he emphasizes

the rootedness of the Bedouins and distinguishes between the nomadic and rootless. In doing so, he shows, in Rob Nixon's words, how, "Nomadic Bedouin culture had been inscribed on the land through movement [. . .] a belonging-in-motion [. . .] But the deracinations of the oil age plummeted them into a rootlessness that was nomadism's opposite" (2011: 76). In other words, nomadic existence is not equivalent to rootlessness but has its own rootedness as Munif shows in his description of the inhabitants of the Wadi: "Before long the whole wadi was a hive of a special kind of activity, showing the will to stay and fight and creating the will to resist poverty and hardship" (1989: 9).

*'Al-Tih* thus chronicles the resiliency of its inhabitants in the face of these foreigners and conspiratorial strangers who collude with various Saudi princes to uproot the Wadi's people from their natural habitat and fix them in barracks, and throw them in a claustrophobic, absurd existence "pushed closer to death every minute" where "[t]he money they were given did not compensate for a single night under the roofs that dripped melted lead over their heads" (Munif 1989: 301). This metallic, bitter, and rancid taste permeates throughout Munif's narrative and shows the effect of technology and development from the perspective of Saudis and the way they perceive Americans. This acts in sharp contrast to what Stegner claims when he describes the arrival of the American pioneers in Chapter 3 entitled "Headbeach":

These were the days [the same days Munif is talking about], it seemed later, when Saudi Arabia's astonishing push toward modernization began, the days when a revolution of *things* began in eastern Saudi Arabia. For whatever they may think of the nations which produce and possess them, whatever distaste they have for their beliefs, their dress and their politics, no people in history has been able to resist for half an hour the *things* that people like this small contingent of geologists bring with them. The Saudis were no different. However odd they found these newcomers among them, the things this crowd of tinkerers, mechanics and gadgeteers brought with them, imported later or ingeniously improvised, were irresistible. (1971: 33)

To Saudis, these "irresistible" Americans "are godless. They are infidels. They know nothing but 'Work, work, work. Arabs are lazy, Arabs are liars, Arabs don't understand'" (Munif 1989: 415).

Munif further confronts these claims by disclosing the real intentions of the Americans; they've come to take over and have full control over the place. His narrative shows what Stegner's narrative attempts to hide, the *sous rature*, where the inhabitants of the place are erased or swept under the carpet by the advent of Americans. Munif is very much aware of the obliterating effect of these imperial projects on the place and its inhabitants. In *'al-Tih*, he introduces this idea concomitantly with the arrival of the Americans. He associates their presence with writing, which immediately brings to mind the encounter between orality and print culture. Through writing, he shows how slowly both their writing and their presence start to take over the space of the Wadi and other oil rich places: "they

never went to bed at night without doing some writing. . . Often they would stop writing, talk to each other and then go back to writing. The one who spoke no Arabic was the busiest one, always took charge of the sand they had brought in. He wrote on the boxes and drew a variety of strange symbols on them” (1989: 44). The implication of such writing, according to Rob Nixon, “is that in being written up, the place (and all the life forms that depend on it) is being written off.” Thus, “we can read their industrious writing as superimposing an ‘official landscape’ onto a ‘vernacular landscape’” (2011: 95). Although Nixon's analysis focuses on the slow violence of petro-capitalism, I use his reading to support my use of *sous rature* and the way Munif's narrative exposes the dubious nature of the Americans' claims. Munif shows simultaneously the way the Americans are crossing out the natives and the way his narrative is erasing the crossing out.

Munif also illustrates the very suspicious nature of the Americans' claims through the rejection and the ominous and apprehensive attitude of the inhabitants of Wadi al-Uyoun and their apprehensive rejection of the Americans. For example, in chapter four, a very illustrative chapter, he describes the Americans from the perspective of ordinary people who show their distrustful and undesirable feelings towards the presence of Americans. In this chapter Munif clearly deconstructs the American's discourse of development and exposes its lies. What he says about Americans acts as a clear contrast to Stegner's inflated claims about the entrepreneurship of these American pioneers presented in *Discovery*. Munif depicts them as monsters and *jinnis* who are totally rejected by Saudis. He subtly chooses to present the encounter and the suspicious remarks in free indirect discourse. He narrates it through the perspective of one of his characters, Miteb al-Hathal, who becomes the very incarnation of *sous rapture*; for despite his physical absence from the text, he becomes the very presence that haunts the narrative from the moment he disappears till the end of the novel:

They certainly didn't come for water – they want something else. But what could they possibly want? What is there in this dry desert besides dust, sand and starvation? They say they'll be here a long time? How will they live? They look like chickens when they eat. And the questions they asked were damned crafty. Saying they weren't like the ones who came before. “Have any foreigners besides us come?” “Have you heard about any foreigners, English or French coming here?” “Did they stay long? Did they do anything?” They're afraid – they've done something. You know very well that whoever does anything wicked is afraid of others. If they were honest people who came to look for water, why everybody knows where the water is. They don't want to stay here – they want to travel around, to go and then come back, and others will come after them. That's what they said. They said, “Wait, just be patient, and all of you will be rich!” But what do they want from us, and what does it concern them if we get rich or stay just as we are? Watch their eyes, watch what they do and say. They're devils, no one can trust them (1989: 29).

The dialogic nature of this quotation shows how much the presence of Americans causes problems and destabilizes the very structure and texture of the life of the

Wadi. It also sums up the whole history of the imperial project and chronicles the change from old imperialism, English and French, to American, i.e., from a political, militaristic upfront imperialism to economic, cultural low key one. Moreover, the whole chapter, from which the previous quotation is taken, also draws attention to the collusion that took place between the Americans and the Saudi government where both conspired against the place and its people. When Miteb al-Hathal asks Ibn Rashed, one of the government collaborators, about the government's reaction to what the Americans are doing, Ibn Rashed's answer dispels any doubts about the government's stance. According to Ibn Rashed, the Americans "had a certificate from the emir and had been his guests for a week" (1989: 31). However, despite the strong coalition between the Saudi government and the Americans, Munif subtly foreshadows the active and progressive presence of the inhabitants of the Wadi who will refuse to be pawns at the hands of the coalition and will resist this imperial project: "if prayer was a Muslim duty, then resisting oppression was a duty as well [. . .] as was the defense of truth and his land" (1989: 603-4). Thus, he picks up from where Stegner decides to stop his narrative. He dramatizes what Stegner puts under erasure: the Saudis resistance of the American's imperial presence in the shape of Aramco.

Munif depicts this resistance in the interplay between, on one side, the Saudi government's passivity to the needs of its people and the American's exploitation of the wealth of the nation and, on the other side, the Saudis' rejection and protest against this injustice. Saudi Arabia is one of the countries that falls under Nixon's term "resource curse [which] hinges on the paradox of plenty" (2011: 69). Such a state that depends on a single mineral resource is prone to be "undemocratic, militaristic, corruption riddled, and governed without transparency or accountability. Abundant resources are frequently coupled to rampant injustice, fragile economic growth, and low rankings in the United Nations Human Development Index" (Nixon 2011: 69-70). It is in such a configuration that despots and Western powers and developers collude. On the one hand, Western powers support oligarchs, dictators, and military regimes that cooperate with and accept their skewed terms of resource extraction. On the other hand, multinational oil corporations hire workers from other places rather than the locals to weaken and impede the emergence of any solid labor unions and civic organizations that might question or hold them accountable for what they do (Nixon 2011: 71). This collusion is clearly proposed in the recommendations of the National Security Council in 1952:

We should seek to use the social and economic tools available to us in ways that will reduce the explosive power of forces pressing for revolutionary change to the point where necessary changes can be accomplished without uncontrollable instability. This may often mean that we should work with and through the present ruling groups and, while bolstering their hold on power, use our influence to induce them to accommodate themselves as necessary to the new forces that are emerging. (qtd. in Gendzier 1985: 27)

This quotation clearly reveals the real intentions behind the modernizing and benevolent projects of the imperial West whose main objectives are to gain more access, power, and control.

### **6. Oil encounter vs. literary en-counter**

Munif uses literature not only to problematize the concept of modernization and challenge it by revealing its gaps, shortcomings, and hypocrisy, but also as a creative and proactive alternative. Despite the iron grip of the Saudi-American coalition, Munif succeeds in supplanting and sublimating the Saudi oil resource into a “literature as an alternative resource” (Nixon 2011: 78). The oil encounter becomes a literary en-counter, a counter reaction to combat such power and control. First, he writes a novel that is developing into a full-fledged form that has its own merit, identity, and voice and can compete with the Western novel. He even subtly uses the discourse of orientalism against the Americans who in the eyes of the Saudis “looked and behaved like small children” (1989: 262), not the other way around as expected, and who “look like chickens when they eat” (1989: 29). Then, he uses the evolutionary nature of the novel to present not only a counter narrative that refutes the official grand narrative of development, but a counter progressive approach that allows him to show the very destructive, exploitive, and conspiratorial nature of the joint American-Saudi modernizing project and enterprise, Aramco.

Moreover, Munif subtly uses the very structure of the wilderness, as a western literary genre, to talk about the ordeals of resource-cursed society. However, instead of making the inhabitants of the desert suffer from the cruelty of the place, he makes them suffer from the dislocation and barbarism of the so-called developed countries and their false promises that uprooted these people and thrust them in a refinery town, housed in barracks, in “tin cans that became suffocating ovens reeking of heat, sweat and sleep” (Munif 1989: 293). Munif turns the whole genre of wilderness upside down, summoning “to life a radically different kind of historical panorama, a violent conflict on a communal scale, as the uprooted Bedouin fought for ecological subsistence, cultural dignity, and scraps of power against an advancing petro-capitalist imperialism in league with an emergent oligarchic client state” (Nixon 2011: 92). In this case, he creates a novel that speaks to his own provincialism and breaks the myth that Third World writers only imitate the genres of the West. He creates his own parameters, his own horizons where his novel acts as a litmus paper, an index, of how far these fabricated narratives of the West deviate away from reality.

*Al-Tih* thus becomes a literary contact zone between the East and the West that depicts and brings to light the lies and the atrocities performed by the so-called developed world in their rabid race to carve as much as possible from the riches of the wretched world. He shows how the oasis which is depicted in Stegner’s official narrative as arid and barely populated by rootless Bedouins is full of life and promises. It is inhabited by people with a very long history who are far away from being homeless or miserable. The only misery they grapple with is the advent of Americans who turn out to be their worst nightmare. It is in this

confirmation and affirmation of the presence of the Saudis and their strong sense of belongingness that Munif's narrative mirrors and destabilizes Stegner's narrative.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper draws on the scholarship of two critics, Robert Vitalis and Rob Nixon, in their discussions of the American imperial projects in the two texts under discussion in this paper. However, each critic tackles one text separately and has not discussed the discrepancy between modernity and modernization and the various implications that are related to them.

By studying the two texts together and by focusing on the challenges of modernity and modernization in a third world country as Saudi Arabia, this paper analyzes the interplay between history and fiction. For history is always one's story and although it is concerned with the facts on the ground and with what takes place, one needs to read it with a grain of salt. Stegner's text provides a good example of how history, in Thomas Pynchon's words, "is not woven by innocent hands," for Stegner is busy crossing out disturbing elements in his text, including the Saudis to fit the narrative and discourse of modernization. However, he could not erase the whole thing and left a trace. It is here where Munif's fiction comes to brush and move away the dust to show that no matter how professional and efficient the "sandstorm" operations of the West, they can't completely free themselves or their narratives from the traces of the very thing they are trying to erase. The genuine mark of one's print is inedible.

Munif manages to demonstrate the inedibility of the print in his choice of *al-Tih*, the Arabic subtitle of the first part of *Cities of Salt*, which means wilderness in its literal as well as metaphorical sense. However, it also implies a wasteland and a state of loss and lostness, a very symbolic and appropriate concept for what Munif is attempting to capture and illustrate in his narrative: the pain and atrocities committed in the name of progress. He dramatizes the traumas and pains of modernization: "Pain reached the point of agony, and sorrow prevailed over everything" (1989: 265). He also ends his narrative with what Stegner removed out of it: the Saudis' demonstrations and will. Munif stresses the need of the Saudis to be in charge of their own life and presents such need through the chants of the Saudi workers while they demonstrate against Aramco's unjust treatment of them:

Stone by stone, we constructed,  
 Inch by inch, we built the pipe.  
 Now that we have built and raised,  
 What do we say, O company, O God!  
 God is our witness, you have no rights.  
 Our rights are everlasting, they are ours.  
 With our blood and sweat we will achieve them! (1989: 597)

By doing so, he empowers the Saudis and emphasizes their agency through their achievements and persistent demand for their own rights.

*Cities of Salt, al-Tih*, after all, seems to rhetorically ask who is really living in a state of *tih*, loss and lostness: is it the non-Western, barbarian other, or the civilized western who is deeply rooted in the barbarianism of his/her modernizing project? Yet, the sad and ugly side to such a realization is that conscientious people who attempt to disclose the exploitive and barbarian side of such modernizing projects pay a very high price for that. Munif, himself, suffered the same if not a worse lot than that of his most ill-fated characters. The Saudi authorities disowned him in 1963, and he lived and died in exile. He becomes one of those disposable people who are destined to live a rootless life yet very much rooted in their longing, belonging, and commitment.

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