

“The Question of Identity in Abdulrahman Munif’s *When We Left The Bridge*”

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Abstract: This article examines Abdulrahman Munif’s novel *When We Left the Bridge* (*Indama Tarakna Al-Jisr*) the agonizing life of the defeated soldier, Zeki Nadawi the protagonist, and the constant process of re-defining and re-thinking his identity. Zeki is

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depicted as trapped in a world of self-loathing and futility in a Darwinian existential naturalistic context. The author takes upon him the task of translating the quotations cited from the Arabic text into English to facilitate the task of the English reader. The article further highlights the similarities between Munif's novel and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men", Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Jack London's "To Build A Fire" in order to establish the modern aspects of Munif's novel and the probable influence these works could've had upon Munif's fiction.

Keywords: Identity; Futility; Modernism; Comparative Lit.

Abdulrahman Munif is considered one of the most important Arab novelists in the 20th Century who best reflects the socio-political Arab status. He was born in Amman – Jordan in 1933 to a Saudi father and an Iraqi mother. He studied in Iraq until he was expelled from it after signing the *Baghdad Alliance* in 1955. He obtained his Ph.D. in oil economics from Belgrade. He lived most of his life in exile and spent his last days in Damascus – Syria. He remained a strong opponent to Imperialism and to Arab tyrannical regimes until his death in 24/01/2004. Most of his fiction can be considered a protest against the practices of tyrannical governments in Arab countries that propagate a culture of fear and defeat among their citizens by locking political prisoners behind bars and exposing them to different kinds of physical torture or by intimidating citizens and scaring them into submission, thus making them metaphorically prisoners in a large jail. Munif published several novels among which: *The Land of Darkness (Ard Assawad)*, *Cities of Salt (Modon Al-Milh)*, *The Trees and the Assassination of Marzouq (Al-Ashjaar wa Igthiyal Marzouq)*, *A World Without Maps (Aalam Bila Kharaet)*, and *When We Left the Bridge (Indama Tarakna Al-Jisr)*.

This article provides a close reading of Abdulrahman Munif's *When We Left the Bridge* (1976) as it aims to introduce it to the English reader who does not have access to this novel in Arabic and to familiarise him/her with it by translating several quotations cited from the Arabic text into English. It is hoped that after reading this article, probably the only criticism of the novel in English, the reader would feel as if he/she read the novel, understood and appreciated it. On the back cover of Munif's novel, George Tarabishi, a famous Syrian critic and translator, notes the similarity between Munif's novel and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man & The Sea* in terms of subject matter as both literary works depict a hunter struggling to catch his precious prey. According to the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, Munif's "*Cities of Salt* quintet create an entire history of a broad region, evoking comparison's to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County" (Wikipedia). Such comparisons prove that Munif was influenced by Western English Literature. This article, however, compares/contrasts Munif's novel to other English literary texts such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1948), Jack London's "To Build a Fire" (1908), T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) – a comparison that has never been done before to the author's best knowledge, and one that proves the influence of these texts upon Munif's fiction as well as its modernity.

When We Crossed The Bridge is a novel about the human in the Arab world. It reveals, just like several other novels by Munif, the way the Arab citizen has lost freedom and self-respect because of a strong culture of defeat that is propagated through systems of education and a culture of fear from oppressive regimes. The article traces the agonizing life of a defeated soldier trapped in a world of self-loathing and futility who struggles to find freedom from the tyranny of the past and to find truth about himself and his nation. Zeki Nadawi, the protagonist, is constantly trying to re-define and re-think his identity. Now, it would be wise to attempt a definition of 'identity' to provide an understanding of its complexities before moving ahead in the analysis of the novel.

Identity is a multi-layered embodiment of a person's concept of who they are, where they belong, their beliefs and gender. Identity is part of a discourse that governs and organizes relationships with others. Some of its aspects are almost fixed and require a long period of time to change while other aspects are continually subjected to change and redefinition. Indeed, identity is being constantly defined and re-defined as well as being constructed and deconstructed, especially in a globalised world. Madan Sarup considers identity as "fragmented full of contradictions and ambiguities" and maintains that "[t]he task of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises" is what "makes the

question of truth ... central to the formation of the ethical subject" (Sarup, P.81). He defines "truth" as "the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing" (Sarup, P.81). Mikaël Elbaz and Denise Helly observe that "citizens have to rewrite and rethink their identities" (Elbaz). Defeat in war, in Zeki's case, has a similar effect as it causes him to redefine his personal and national identities. In Munif's novel, Zeki struggles to understand the "truth" about what happened on the fateful bridge day, the truth about himself, and the truth about his nation, and then to shape his concept of identity accordingly. Zeki is tormented because he knows that he and his fellow soldiers were capable of doing many things instead of just abandoning the bridge.

Mercer claims that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (McCrone, P.581). Zeki's identity is subjected to a "crisis" because of what happened on the bridge. He experiences "doubt and uncertainty" about his identity, hunting, his nation, God, etc. – a problem that constantly makes his spirit drift into that historical bridge moment. Like Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Zeki struggles to understand his past (in)actions in retrospect by reliving the bridge experience repeatedly. Munif challenges a culture based upon lies and deception, as shall be explained later, by shrouding his novel with doubts and uncertainties as manifested by the many questions that torment Zeki about the bridge issue.

Munif's modern novel, in a similar way to modern English and American literature, embodies existential questions about the identity of a person, his mission on earth, and the existence of God. Such questions are clearly manifested in Zeki's relationship with God. Zeki claims that "irony is God's way" (P.189). He asks, "Didn't God mock humans, whom he created, when he tempted them to eat the apples, which he created, then cast the humans and apples out of heaven?" (P.189), and he adds, "When God wants to take away human souls, he does it cunningly so that they don't feel it" (P.54). In effect, Zeki's conception of God is totally negative as God is depicted as a cruel sinister force that enjoys torturing people and tempting them only to exile them from heaven.

In addition, Zeki speaks to "an unknown god" for whom he does not "acknowledge any dominance" (P.14) and invokes him by saying, "In the past you ruled everything, and now, I will rule. Create as much as you want, and I will kill" (P.15). He defies God by stating that "when we meet and our eyes face each other, then you will know that the human is stronger than all creatures, not only is he the strongest but the most ferocious" (P.15). Of course, the statement is ironic since Zeki is totally incapable of action and insignificant, and he did not have the courage to fight the enemy and disobey the retreat orders. Zeki does not have the stamina to fight or to defy anyone let alone God. Hence, his words remain as he describes them "dumb words that are torn by the wind, and in end they look like a pile of shameful pollution" (P.46), and as "lazy words" cast "into the air" by "a mouth with a hole through which the wind gets in and lets out mummified words" (P.46).

Zeki wavers between belief and disbelief in God. While hunting, he wishes to invoke Allah's help in his hunt, but he defiantly concludes with "let me leave Allah faraway, I shouldn't involve him in my personal affairs" (P.16) and with "hunting is hunting and Allah has other business" (P.17). He later asks Wardan, his dog, to "raise [his] hands to the Lord, to Nature, I don't know" (P.190) thus suggesting the uncertainty about the presence of God – a characteristic of the modern text, and the absurd literature in particular, which denies the reader any sense of certainty. Kathryn Hume maintains that the way "a reader can be robbed of assurances is by unresolved contradictions, where interpretation of reality clashes with another internal interpretation". She explains that "[t]he author creates worlds that are skewed, worlds we know to be distorted, but which are so cleverly twisted that we cannot say 'this is an exaggeration, but that is true'". She adds, "[t]he author usually demonstrates these inescapable weaknesses [as uncertainty and confusion] to his protagonists and expects us to apply the message to ourselves and our own blindness" (Hume, P.125). Zeki's countless attempts to understand his meaningless life, his (dis)belief in God, his responsibility in the national defeat results in such "unresolved contradictions" and embody the "inescapable weaknesses" that Hume refers to. Reading this novel leads to the realization that blindness is a universal human condition especially in the Arab world.

Gaston Bachelard observes that "immensity" is internal and "is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when are alone." He adds, "As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense" (Bachelard, P.184). Whenever Zeki Nadawi is hunting, he sinks into the immensity of the bridge historical moment and redefines his

personal and national identities simultaneously. In fact, the bridge experience was to him more like a nightmare which is “the result of a sudden doubt as to the certainty of inside and the distinctness of outside” and in such an “ambiguous space, the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting” (Bachelard, P.218). Thus, whenever Zeki is alone, he finds himself drifting and daydreaming about the bridge incident. Zeki is incapable of action, and therefore, daydreaming is the only thing he is capable of doing. Bachelard explains this incapability by noting that “immensity is the movement of motionless man” (Bachelard, P.184). Zeki is, in fact, similar to Eliot’s hollow men – a poem that is influenced by existentialism and, like Munif’s novel, reflects the insignificance and entrapment of the modern man as well as the futility and meaninglessness of his existence.

The bridge incident defines Zeki’s life as it metaphorically kills him since he remains caught in its web and cannot forgive himself or his superiors for issuing the retreat command and forcing him to abandon his post. Zeki states, “my mind burns with thousands of ideas, but the bridge made my ideas intermingle to an extent that I don’t know how to react” (P.32), and “I thought of a thousand things but the bridge jumped like a black cloud in my face. I couldn’t see anything anymore” (P.47). The bridge blocks his understanding and makes him incapable of any reaction as if it curses him for his inaction on that terrible day. Zeki desires to build a “wall” to protect his “soul from melting” (P.41), and this indicates that his identity is being gradually but surely eroded by doubt and uncertainty, and the only thing that holds it together is, ironically, the bridge. By reliving the bridge experience constantly, Zeki maintains a point of departure that protects his memory from oblivion but simultaneously blocks him from thinking of anything else. Further, the bridge becomes a barrier that stops Zeki from interacting with his present, thus he remains imprisoned in the past like Conrad’s Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* which offers similar motifs of self-discovery, human insignificance, emptiness, entrapment, and hostility of Nature. Munif’s novel has also a similar method of narration relying on the stream of consciousness technique and death of plot.

Zeki informs Wardan that “time is still in front of us stretched like a bridge, do you know the meaning of a bridge? Hear this word really well and never forget it” (P.25). The word ‘bridge’ is obviously a centre that commands all of Zeki’s attention. One can understand the importance of the bridge to Zeki by realizing that Zeki thinks of it in human terms. Zeki explains that the soldiers “used to hug it, sing by it, and wait for it to turn into a man” and imagine that “if only it did turn into a man, it would’ve become the most beautiful song” (Pp.115-116). He also claims that singing to the bridge would make it “stronger and more supported, just like a mother who sings her baby to sleep” (P.121). Zeki’s appreciation of the bridge is, in fact, greater; he imagines it “a god that deserves a sacrifice” (P.117) – a view that is in sharp contrast with that of the leaders who, according to him, “do not understand the spirit of bridges; they imagine them as a chunks of iron” (Pp.117-118). With this realization in mind, one can appreciate the strong traumatic effect abandoning the bridge must have had upon Zeki’s psyche. Zeki states, “the bridge is stronger than the men, and smarter, because it never leaves its place, but the men when they leave the bridge, they are finished” (P.45). He metaphorically dies/is finished because he left the bridge on that day.

Zeki is tormented by his inaction. He feels he should have disobeyed the retreat orders and opened fire upon the enemy. “If only my lungs were filled with gunpowder that day I would have been a different person” (P.36) and “everything would have changed because all men will open fire” (P.49), and then “the big ones (leaders) cannot rule the little ones (masses)” and the “little ones in those hours are the ones who rule and make everything” (P.49). To him, “the big ones, they are the ones who create defeats, and the little ones, they are the ones who die”² (P.20). Hence, Zeki blames leaders who cast these men into battle and cause their defeat with their cowardly decisions. Leaders, then, are afraid of the enemy just like masses are afraid of leaders. Consequently, everyone is living in fear in a cowardly nation.

It is fear that makes Zeki obey the retreat orders. “They said, don’t do anything, retreat, we did, and left bridge” (P.36). He protests, “They told us, ‘leave everything, and save your souls’. Our souls? What does

² It is always the masses who pay the price for the mistakes of their leaders – a theme that is found in war poetry such as Wilfred Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” in which he protests against the meaningless killing of many soldiers who are slaughtered like cattle. For further information on this point, please refer to my articles “Poems on ‘The Great War’: Sadness, Anger, Repression, Healing” *Interactions*, Vol. 16.1, Spring 2007, pp.1-13 & “The Theme of ‘Futility’ in War Poetry” *Nebula: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship*, Issue 4.3, September 2007, pp.125-140.

'souls' mean? Oh! I wish I died that day" (P.81). Even death would have been considered an action instead of the futile waiting by a bridge which the soldiers built and never used and never defended or blasted. Zeki is also suggesting that his soul which he lost that day is insignificant. Further, Zeki protests, "The Lord, after he builds his bridge, when the little clouds cross it to a faraway place ... doesn't he destroy it? Doesn't he blow it?" (P.100). Clearly, he wishes he could have done the same to the bridge. He explains, "If we blew the bridge, that would've been a symbol of some kind of heroism" (P.130). To him, such an action would have made their meaningless waiting by the bridge meaningful. As in *Heart of Darkness*, the realisation of the absurdity of life comes too late, yet it is, nevertheless, a "moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats" (Conrad, P.107).

Following the retreat, Zeki thinks all soldiers deserve to die "with bullets in [their] backs", and that he deserves to "be beaten to death with shoes" and not "to be shot to death ... in the chest" because such an honourable death is an "impossible" dream (P.49). He considers himself "the closest of all people to embodying the spirit of defeat" simply because "he couldn't blow the bridge" (P.142). In addition, he claims, "will dissolves from hopelessness just like a mud rock decomposes under the impact of rain" (P.11) and wonders why his "will dissolves and scatters in the air?" (P.69). Hopelessness has destroyed his will to live, to fight, or to believe in himself or in his nation again. Ever since that moment, Zeki feels like a castrated impotent man as if he lost his manhood due to the cowardly act of abandoning the bridge. He declares, "I am a castrated man, castrated thoroughly and completely" (P.20), and that his "incapability runs through the blood" (P.20). Zeki, in this respect is similar to T. S. Eliot's hollow men who describe themselves as a "Paralysed force" (Kermode, P.1999, L.12).

Zeki predicts that "there will come a day in which the men of this nation will breed dwarfs and deformed children who do not know anything except to die cheap" (P.20) by "Extinction" (P.212). Zeki Nadawi is a miniature of Arab citizens who are imprisoned in an open jail and who can only feel defeat, sadness, uncertainty, and futility in addition to loss of identity, self-respect, manhood, and freedom. Hence, "Despair begins at the hour of birth, from the first days, and with milk it lazily moves, then grows in the alleys, and on school desks, and walks like a shadow in the streets" (P.187). The grim reality and despair of the Arab world is going to be passed on from one generation to another and that explains why their children will be "dwarfs" suggesting their incapability of great feats and "deformed" like their psyches, like Zeki's psyche. These children will also be gutless like their parents because they will die "cheap".

Munif's novel, being a modern text, exemplifies Terry Eagleton's definition of Modernism which "signifies a portentous, confused yet curiously heightened self-consciousness of one's own historical moment" which simultaneously evoke "an arresting and denial of history in the violent shock of the immediate present" (Eagleton, P.367). Zeki's experience of the bridge clearly embodies "the denial of history" as he refuses to accept the reality of what took place in that "historical moment" which completely suffocates him with feelings of defeat, frustration, and impotency. He declares, "I am suffocated. Suffocated by frustration. My soul is filled with it until I can see nothing else besides it" (P.72). In Zeki's world, everything is suffocating such as failing to shoot the mythical duck (P.77), or the sky which "was gradually suffocating with pale red" (P.14), or Zeki's complaint of a "suffocating patience that floats inside [him] like small waves and must destroy everything" (P.52). Zeki's soul is living in "hell" since he is constantly tormented by an internal battle with defeat and futility. He tries "to pull out that thick crust of sadness" upon his chest, talks with "despair, sadness, and frustration" (P.41) and wishes for "a drop of blood to wash the rust that wraps [his] soul" (P.104). The bridge experience shatters his soul and leaves him a hollow man who is spiritually dead.

In addition, Zeki tormented by an external battle with natural objects such as the water that "slaps" him (P.19) or the rain which tries "to colonize his face" (P.89) thus suggesting the hostility of nature, with Wardan whom he fails to control, as shall be explained later, and with people who "do not know anything, that's why they will die in that cheap way. Extinction" (P.212). These people annoy Zeki because they are safe in their ignorance just like the people who are "common place individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety" (Conrad, P.108) annoy Marlow. Indeed, ignorance is bliss. Zeki also has a battle with birds – a battle that functions as wishful fulfilment of the war he wished to engage in.

Zeki maintains that he is "not smart" but only "a psycho" (P.32) – a statement that reflects his confused psychological state. The bridge experience has left him defeated, ruined, and spiritually dead. Sadly, he recognizes that he is "defeated" (P.67) and realises that his sickness is psychological. He announces,

“Defeat is the sickness” (P.80) and explains that “disease is not an organic condition; it lies there, inside the psyche” (P.80). His internal disease is caused by defeat which makes him see his entire life as one saga of despair. Zeki extends his bleak vision upon the entire human race. He claims that despair “doesn’t leave a human on this earth, it lives in his flesh and bones” (P.187). Kathryn Hume explains that “an author can lay the blame for our warped perspectives on our membership in the human species” (Hume, P.125). With Hume’s explanation in mind, Despair, then, becomes a universal human condition. Thus, Zeki’s case becomes representative of all Arabs living under similar conditions and can be extended universally.

Zeki’s internal sickness causes his senses to be confused. For instance, he declares, “I saw the water slap me” (P.19) which suggests that he is incapable of feeling and simultaneously reflects his confusion of the senses. Similarly, Wardan “will remain barking like a cockroach” (P.39) and “the rain was still falling softly and deliciously like dust” (P.93) serve as other examples of this point. According to Gaston Bachelard, “[t]he dreamer sends waves of unreality over what was formerly the real world” (Bachelard, P.157). Hume also argues that “[w]e are taught how fallible our senses are through exposure to visions of reality that contradict the senses: dreams, psychotic experience, and drugs” (Hume, P.125). Zeki is a dreamer who is haunted by the bridge nightmare which changes his real world into an unreal one whenever he thinks about it.

Zeki becomes a hunter to achieve a kind of catharsis for his repressed desire to open fire on the enemy on that fateful bridge day. He exacts his revenge upon the birds and views each encounter with a bird as a small battle. He declares, “Oh you hybrid birds ... I want to revenge” (P.112) and compares himself and Wardan to “soldiers who await another battle” (P.14). The novel’s preoccupation with Zeki’s hunting turns its context into a Darwinian one in which life is “an endless slaughter party. The big kills the small. The strong murders the weak. The brave kills the coward” (P.138). Living in a nation of cowards in such a Darwinian context guarantees that Zeki will be one of “the small”, “the weak”, or “the coward” who are killed.

As a hunter, Zeki lives alone and enjoys a precarious relationship with his dog Wardan. He has a problem controlling Wardan which is evident when he asks him to “learn obedience” (P.32) and screams “to remain in control of Wardan” (P.21). Zeki “carries fear inside him” and struggles “to convince himself, before he convinces Wardan with his strength and worthiness” (P.38). He seems afraid of Wardan whose “old eyes were saying bad words” about him and “sometimes thinking of killing [him]” (P.24). Zeki feels inferior to Wardan whom he regards as “a very smart animal, maybe smarter than many humans” and “sensitive” (P.21) and considers him a “thousand times” better than him (P.67). Wardan is “smarter than Zeki Nadawi” because he constantly “has something to do” (P.181). Wardan has a sense of purpose unlike Wardan who is only chasing a mythical bird. Furthermore, Zeki describes Wardan as the “solid universe” (P.83) in contrast to his crumbling psyche.

Zeki and Wardan’s relationship is similar to that of Jack London’s protagonist and his dog in “To Build A Fire”. Both literary works are shrouded with gloom and darkness and have a naturalistic context in which nature is indifferent to man who appears totally insignificant. Like Zeki, London’s protagonist is a spiritually dead man “without imagination” (London, P.118). Both protagonists constantly keep spitting (Munif, P.24, London, P.119). London’s protagonist has a “big native husky, the proper wolf dog” (London, P.119). Similarly, Zeki’s dog is depicted as having a “wolf for a mother” (P.38). London’s protagonist is totally alienated and isolated; “There was nobody to talk to” (London, P.120). Similarly, Zeki’s loneliness makes him regard Wardan “as a man, as a human” (P.71), as “a brother” (P.71), as “a friend” (P.25), and as a “beloved woman” (P.137). In a (post)colonial text women are marginalized and Munif’s novel is not an exception.

Kathryn Hume explains that “the inadequacy of our means of communication” would result in the inability to “escape the solipsistic prison of our individuality” (Hume, P.125). Zeki, hence, remains trapped in his own world. His loneliness is emphasised when he states, “no one can help me. This hand alone can. It is the bridge” (P.65), and wonders “what kind of a man is Zeki Nadawi, he talks to trees and stones. Talks to the river and the bridge, and considers Wardan his only friend and waits” (P.193). His loneliness invokes what Joseph Conrad’s Marlow declares in *Heart of Darkness*, “We live, as we dream—alone” (Conrad, P.38).

More to the point, both protagonists travel through snow to get to their destination, run the risk of walking into thin ice, and fall into frozen water (London P.122, Munif, P.135). When London’s protagonist fails to build the fire, he thinks of killing the dog, but the dog senses the danger and keeps a safe distance

(London, P.126). Similarly, after Zeki beats Wardan with a dry stick (P.151), Wardan approaches him but keeps “a safe distance” (Munif, P.153). In London’s short story, the dog survives whereas the protagonist freezes to death to reveal his insignificance. In contrast, in Munif’s novel, Wardan dies when his head “collides with a rock sleeping among the plants” (P.217), and Zeki almost freezes to death, but he remains alive. Munif does not allow his protagonist to die but keeps him tormented and trapped in his situation without offering him an exit through death – an action that is similar to what Samuel Beckett does with Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*.

Zeki ironically declares, “We are alive now. We didn’t die. *Nor can we die*” (P.180, my italics). Death to Zeki is a “state of eternal rest. An eternal silence that resembles stones and remains of shells and tree trunks” (P.158). However, death does not come easy to a man like Zeki. He claims, “We do not deserve death. Death is larger than us and we can not reach it easily” (P.158), and explains that “Death is a state of constant movement” whereas Zeki and others like him are “being drained internally without movement, without action, like water that leaks into the earth; it does nothing; it is forced to leak; it doesn’t resist, protest, or *wait*” (Pp.158-59, my italics). Zeki, in this respect, is similar to Eliot’s hollow men or Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon who are incapable of action.

Zeki describes himself as “the legs of a green fly” who are “dead people’s flies” (P.83), thus suggesting his dehumanization and spiritual death. Indeed, Zeki is totally dehumanized. He compares himself to “a dog” (P.56), a “blind worm” (P.58) “an ant” (P.63), and “a colourful ridiculous monkey” (P.63). He “turns like an elephant” (P.53) and sits “like a wounded wolf” (P.43). He is “a rat that moves from one toilet to another, and it is about time he suffocates in one of the toilets” (Pp.211-12). The reference to the rat emphasises the existential context in which humans are depicted as rats in a maze without exit. Zeki sinks into self-loathing when he describes himself as a “moving dumpster” (P.79) and when he spits grudgingly and declares, “I am Zeki Nadawi stupidity is in my blood, and I don’t deserve anything” (P.20). Obviously, the defeat makes him lose his self-respect and his feelings of manhood and can now only feel the negative feelings of defeat, self-loathing and despair which are due to the historical bridge moment. He explains, “The bridge is a beginning and I am defected since the day of the bridge” (P.42). That day shatters his psyche just like Marlow’s experience shatters him in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Zeki becomes obsessed with hunting a mythical duck that he calls a “Queen” (P.98). He waits for her anxiously and contemplates and rethinks his identity in relation to the bridge incident while he is at it. Sometimes, he confuses the duck with the bridge. “She looked like a rainbow, no, she looks more like the bridge” (P.115). He also asks Wardan, “Do you know the meaning of a bridge? What did I say to you? The duck or the bridge?” (P.25). He wishes for a chance to prove himself worthy of respect by hunting her, as if by doing so, he would regain or recapture his lost honour and manhood that were wasted on that day.

Hunting the Queen can only take place in the darkness “in a moony night” (P.172) as an old hunter, probably a representation of Zeki’s older wiser self, suggests to him – a condition that validates the connection between Munif’s novel and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as Marlow can only have a close encounter with Kurtz (his alter-ego or id) at night (Conrad, P.99). Thus, hunting at night becomes symbolic of the soul’s struggle to find a realization that adds meaning to what appears to be a meaningless universe – an aspect that is also evident in Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” in which the hollow men state, “Our dried voices, when/ We whisper together/ Are quiet and meaningless” (Kermode, P.1999, Ll.5-7). Futility and meaninglessness characterize the modern context and Munif’s novel is not an exception.

Zeki goes through a wild goose chase. Finally, when he sees the mythical duck approaching, he shoots her and raises her to the moon light to look at her and discovers that what he shot dead is “the ugliest owl that his eyes have ever seen” (P.210). The ugly owl could be the “inner truth” of the mythical duck which should remain “hidden” as Conrad’s Marlow advises (Conrad, P.49). Another similarity between the two literary works is Zeki’s description of himself as having a “shaved head” (P.31) which is similar to Conrad’s Kurtz who “was impressively bald” (Conrad, P.71). Zeki also describes himself as “a dry fountain” (P.69) and “an empty sack” that daily “gets filled with something, gets filled with heroics, false modesty, the tyrannical Queen” (P.98) thus suggesting his emptiness, hollowness and loss of essence as in the following lines from Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”: “Between the essence/ And the descent/ falls the Shadow” (Kermode, P.2001, Ll. 88-90).

The shocking result of the hunt invokes Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” which best explain how one starts hunting an amazingly beautiful mythical duck and ends up hunting instead the ugliest owl ever seen:

“Between the idea/ And the reality/ Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow” (Kermode, P.2001, Ll.72-76). Eliot’s persona here establishes the difference between theory/practice and the ideal/real. This idea is also evident in Zeki’s claim that his skin is “stuffed with wisdom” except that “the rules that wander in [his] head like wild horses, they turn into rusty clumsy horns, when [he] begin[s] to implement them” (P.70).

Munif’s Zeki is similar to Eliot’s hollow men who lead a life of passivity and inaction, for they wish to cross the river and be in “death’s other kingdom” (Kermode, P.1999, L.46), but their passivity keeps them in “death’s dream kingdom” (Kermode, P.1999, L.30). Similarly, Zeki is trapped in “a *waste land*” (P.179, my italics), a nation whose “life since the hour of birth and to the last moment is a state of idleness and yawning and nothing more” (P.181). He compares between the human in his country who suffers from “looseness, stupidity, and laziness” and the human elsewhere who “is more capable of adapting to nature” (P.179). Hence, social change, according to Munif, is a collective responsibility. Escape and salvation does not come by running away to the forest to hunt birds or isolating oneself from society as Zeki does, but rather, by taking a positive action and learning from the humans who are living “elsewhere” and are free from tyranny.

Munif is clearly criticising society for its “stupidity and laziness” and totally refusing its inaction and passivity. The individualistic vision, according to Stephen Spender, constitutes the creative element of modern literature that is “the individual vision of the writer who realizes in his work the decline of modern values while isolating his own individual values from the context of society” (Spender, P.11). Spender claims that the modern writer “never forgets the modern context ... [but] is always stating it” in order to “create the more forcibly the visions of his isolation” (Spender, P.11). Munif must have felt isolated from his social context which he rejected and from which he was exiled and expressed his feelings through Zeki’s words especially when he considers “poetry and religion” as “the defeat” (P.140). Zeki explains, “It is not poetry that defeats humans. The humans defeat poetry when they leave it alone to fight, if they fought with it, they would’ve been victorious” (P.140).

Apparently, Munif criticizes Arab nations because their reaction in times of war is merely verbal criticism of Israeli aggressions as suggested by the reference to “Al-Hulah” (P.173), a lake in the occupied lands of Palestine which was dried by the Israeli authorities. The old hunter informs Zeki, “Ever since Al-Hulah was lost [i.e. occupied], I decided not to hunt ducks anymore” (P.173). This reference to Al-Hulah is the only one in the novel to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it is quite indirect. Verbal criticism, however, amounts to nothing. Hence, Zeki states “let all big words be murdered” (P.18) and “let the scabby ideas be murdered because they led us to defeat” (P.17). Literature can also lead to defeat. Zeki states, “Books are piles of drugging words. The books we read lead us to the path of defeat. Lies, Lies, Lies and nothing but lies” (P.141). Thus, defeat becomes a culture that is passed on from one generation to another through the educational system that teaches such books and records such a false “drugging” history. Hence, Zeki complains that “Despair ... grows ... on school desks” (P.187).

Further, Zeki compares between people who fought “in ancient wars” and “used to do many things with simplicity, without fear, without big words, and a large number of them would not die” and when they win, “they talk in that way as if they were not victorious or they didn’t do anything dangerous” and the people “these days [who] do not think of victory anymore, and imagine that their words are so big that no one dares to use them without being considered a liar” (P.184). The comparison reveals the difference between a nation of deeds and a nation of words that amount to nothing. Munif faces a culture of fear, lies, “scabby ideas” (P.17), and books full of “lies” (P.141) that lead to defeat with the countless doubts and uncertainties such as the ones that torment Zeki for failing to fight on the day of the bridge and sends him on a quest to find the truth about himself, his nation, and about history that is printed in books full of lies. Munif hopes unveil to Arabs the truth of their situation which masks itself as the mythical beautiful duck but is in reality a very ugly owl like the one Zeki ends up hunting. To Munif, big words are nothing but lies that aim to hide the incapability and paralysis of these nations who only *wait* for something to happen that would change their grim reality.

In fact, *When We Left The Bridge* contains plenty of references to waiting. Zeki compares himself to “a god full of patience” that “wait[s] for the right moment” (P.33), and to “a wounded wolf” that “wait[s] endlessly, tirelessly” (P.43). He states, “I will wait, I never get bored of waiting. Surely, the one who triumphs is the one who doesn’t get tired of waiting” (P.45). When he remembers “waiting by the bridge”,

he screams “waiting isn’t everything. What I need is a cursed waiting, a waiting that knows how to explode” (P.45). Further, he believes that “the bridge is still waiting, it doesn’t get tired of waiting” (P.45), and imagines being shot in the chest as “a dream that will kill you from waiting. It is the impossible” (P.49). The novel ends with Zeki’s discovery of the “sadness” in people’s faces and his realization “that all men know a lot about the bridge, and that they are waiting, waiting to do something” (P.217).

The many aforementioned references to “waiting” echo Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* which is about waiting and is concerned with the theme of futility and absurdity of life. In fact, there are many similarities between the two works. For instance, Zeki waits for many days for a mythical duck to come, but she does not come just like Vladimir and Estragon keep waiting for Godot but he never comes, thus representing the absurdity and futility of waiting. Vladimir and Estragon struggle to make sense out of their nonsensical situation, and Zeki struggles to do the same. In addition, there are also mechanical puppets in both works. Pozzo controls Lucky as a machine by commanding him to “stop”, to “move forward”, to go “back” and to “think” (Beckett, P.38), just like Zeki complains that he found his “head shaking like artificial dogs in cars do” (P.186) i.e. like a toy placed on a car’s dashboard.

Further, Pozzo has trouble controlling Lucky just like Zeki has trouble controlling Wardan to the extent that in both literary works the master/slave roles get confused. Characters in both literary works attempt to commit suicide by hanging themselves. Zeki states, “I will hang myself on a chestnut tree” (P.77). Similarly, Estragon suggests to Vladimir “Why don’t we hang ourselves?” (Beckett, P.89). Zeki seems to be tied up by his waiting; he describes “waiting is like a tight rope that binds [him] from every corner” (P.77). Similarly, Vladimir and Estragon appear tied up to the tree under which they wait for Godot. Like that of Vladimir and Estragon, Zeki’s life is “full of futility” (P.99); he complains that Wardan makes him “feel the futility” (P.80). Munif is sending a message to Arab citizens that they have not done anything to change their grim reality. All they do is wait, and waiting will not change a thing as embodied in the case of Zeki who only waits, questions, doubts in a completely futile context. Munif is trying to provoke the Arab citizens to take control of their lives which are controlled completely by their governments through fear, torture, and intimidation and not just wait endlessly and meaninglessly for a promise of freedom and change that will never come just like the mythical duck will never come.

In a nutshell, Munif’s novel is preoccupied with the question of identity which is being constantly redefined as long as it is in crisis. It embodies the modern writer’s dilemma in which the artist is forced to exist in a society which he rebels against and refuses, and in Munif’s case gets exiled from, yet is forced to write to in order to stimulate it to bring about change and reform and to save it from despair and defeat. Caught in its webs, the reader and the critic find themselves struggling to make sense out of nonsense. Apparently, the insignificance of man and his inability to grasp/comprehend reality doom all his experiences to nothingness like Zeki who remains trapped and frustrated in an existential context characterised by futility, meaninglessness, suffocation, and defeat without any satisfaction or fulfilment. He remains a castrated hollow man incapable of any action especially after the death of Wardan which makes him stop his search for the mythical duck. The duck becomes another wasted dream like victory and freedom which were lost the day Zeki and his fellow soldiers left the bridge.

Upon close examination, one notices the amazing similarities between the aforementioned modern English literary works and Munif’s *When We Left Bridge* which is also modern and is abundant with contradictions, frustrations, feelings of futility, entrapment, emptiness that are typically found in modern English existential naturalistic texts. These similarities can not simply be coincidental especially when one realises that all the aforementioned English literary texts were published prior to Munif’s text, and that he could have had access to them as he did to Faulkner’s. Although some critics might not deem this information proof enough to Munif’s influence by the aforementioned English literary texts, but considered along with the textual similarities that are abundant in Munif’s novel such a claim would be valid enough even for the skeptic and a stimulus that motivates other researchers to seek further proofs of this influence.

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