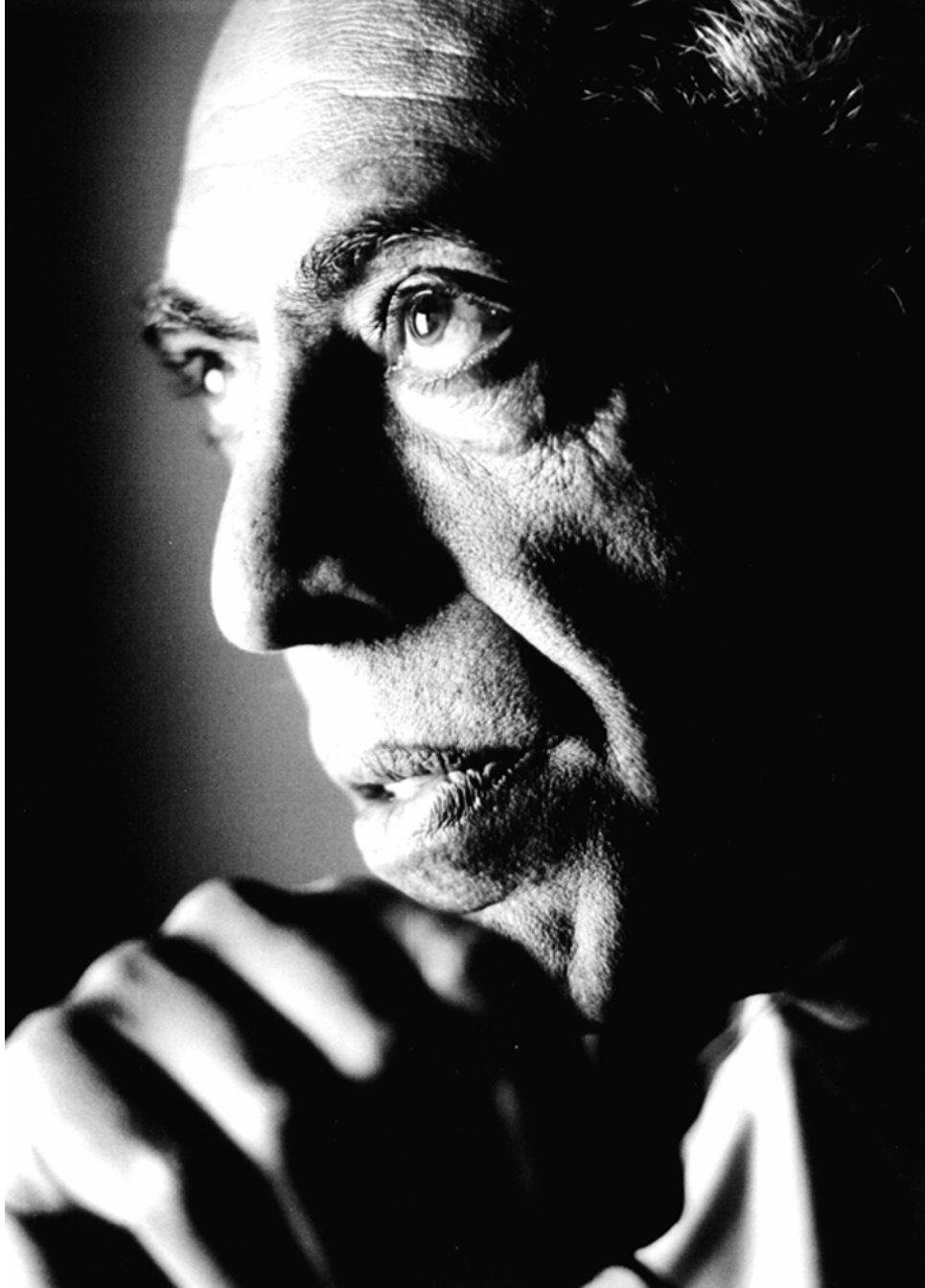


**WRITING: - A “TOOL FOR CHANGE”
‘ABD AL-RAHMAN MUNIF REMEMBERED**



Abdel Rahman Munif (Photograph courtesy of Munif's family)

WRITING: - A “TOOL FOR CHANGE” ‘ABD AL-RAHMAN MUNIF

AN INTRODUCTION

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi*

‘Abd al-Rahman Munif (1933-2004) not only described the second half of the 20th century as “the era of the novel” in Arabic literature,¹ he himself was one of the most renowned Arab novelists of the time. He published his first novel *al-Ashjar wal-ighbiyal Marzuq* (Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq) in Beirut in 1973. It opened a new world to him. Different from his previous political activism and far from political power, it – in his own words – presented a new and compelling means to contribute to the creation of “a more humane, free and just society.”² Writing turned into a “tool for change,” as Munif explains.³ Munif’s novels reclaim a past that has been subjugated to Western versions of history or neglected altogether. As Munif says in an essay with the telling title “al-Riwaya al-‘arabiyya: Tarikh man la tarikh lahum” (The Arabic Novel: The History of Those Who do not Have a History), the novel records history in a different yet truer way than do history books, because it focuses not on the big events that make history, so to say, but on everyday life.⁴

But Munif was not only an outstanding novelist. He was also a distinguished intellectual and the author of several studies on political, socio-economic and cultural issues. All his writings were grounded in lived experience.

Born in Amman in 1933 to a mother from Iraq and a father from Najd in today’s Saudi Arabia, Munif left for Baghdad to pursue his University studies in the early 1950s. It was a time of heightened political as well as cultural activity. A student of law but also a political activist (Munif was an early member of the Ba’th party which he left again in 1963, when the party seized power in Syria), Munif participated in the demonstrations against the Baghdad Pact and together with other likeminded students was expelled from Iraq. He continued his studies in Egypt where he graduated in 1958 from Cairo University. He subsequently went on to Belgrade, former Yugoslavia, where he obtained a Ph.D. in petroleum economics. In 1961, he returned to Beirut, then settling in Damascus to work as an expert in the Ministry of Petroleum. The Arab defeat in the June War of 1967 marked Munif significantly. The *hazima* [defeat] not only opened his eyes to the crisis facing the Arab Middle East; it played an important role in his taking up writing. The rise of the Arabic novel as a major form of expression in the second half of the twentieth century, writes Munif, has to be seen against the background of the Arab defeats since the *nakba* of 1948, notably the *hazima*.⁵ In 1973, he again left for Beirut, this time to work in journalism. He edited the cultural journal *al-Balaqh*. It was in Beirut – a city known for its socio-political as well as confessional

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diversity, freedom of the press and rich cultural life – that he started to pursue his interest in literature in a serious way. Due to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, he left Beirut to settle anew in Baghdad. He worked as consultant for the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and as editor in chief of the journal *al-Naft wal-tanmiya* (Petroleum and Development). The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the repressive political situation in Iraq under Saddam Husayn drove him away from Baghdad again. In 1981, he moved to Paris from thereon devoting himself entirely to writing. His magnum opus, the quintet *Mudun al-milb* (Cities of Salt, 1984-1989) was mainly written in Paris. Convinced that his and his family's place was in the Arab Middle East and not in Europe, he moved back to Damascus in 1986, frequently visiting Beirut, until his premature death in 2004.

Although Munif turned from political activism to literature, he remained outspoken about his political ideas to which he remained true throughout his life. In *al-Dimuqratiyya awwalan, al-dimuqratiyya da'iman* (Democracy First, Democracy Always) published in Beirut in 1992, he expresses his commitment to democracy – not as a magic key or a solution in itself but as a tool to face, deal with and solve the region's problems.⁶ During the so-called “Damascus Spring” (*rabi' Dimashq*) that followed the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000, the Syrian opposition openly voiced its discontent with al-Asad's dictatorial regime. Munif was one of the first to sign “The Petition of the Ninety-Nine” (*bayan al-tis'a wal-tis'in*) which called for political reform, democracy and human rights.⁷ In his last book published before his death, *al-Iraq: Hawamish min al-tarikh wal-muqawama* (Iraq: Side notes from History and Resistance, 2003), he describes Iraq's modern history as a national struggle against foreign rule, bringing to mind Iraq's will to independence in the light of the country's renewed occupation by foreign troops. Munif was a fierce critic of Saddam Husayn. At the same time, he condemned the war on Iraq which re-ignited his political radicalism of former days.⁸

The great extent of Munif's “symbolic capital”⁹ accumulated over the years in different cities, gave him a pre-eminent position as an Arab novelist and intellectual. His intellectual integrity gained him much respect, especially among the younger generations of Arab intellectuals. But it also caused him serious trouble. He was deprived of his Saudi citizenship in 1963. He subsequently held different passports but was not able to solve the problem of citizenship permanently – not only for his sake but also for that of his children. Having lived in various Arab cities (Amman, Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut and Damascus), Munif was at home in the Arab Middle East, at large. Nevertheless, he was aware of the severe loss caused by exile. He opens his essay “al-Katib wal-manfa” (The Writer and Exile) with the words: “To be exiled means, to begin with, that you stand accused.”¹⁰ Munif's literary oeuvre is of a transnational character. It can be described according to Georg Lukács' understanding of the novel as being grounded in a changing society (as compared to the classical epic in which cultural values are reinforced and celebrated as stable and unchanging) and giving voice to a “transcendental homelessness” (transzendentaler Obdachlosigkeit).¹¹ In its “transcendental homelessness” the novel came to stand for a new homeland in Munif's life and provided him with a new sense of identity and belonging.

Celebrated as the Arab novelist *par excellence*, Munif has not been awarded the critical attention he deserves, especially in the English language. His premature death on January 24, 2004 meant the loss of a great novelist but also the loss of an intellectual voice that made a difference in our lives, the loss of an individual ready to take positions irrespective of the difficulties he may face, and the loss of a man

who knew to enjoy life despite its hardships and spent time in creative seclusion as well as in joyful gatherings with friends and family. In paying homage to Munif, the aim of this issue is to make his voice heard anew, to contribute in bringing it back to life.

The first section is devoted to “NARRATIVE, HISTORY & POLITICS”. It starts with Ferial J. Ghazoul’s “*Ard al-sawad: A Novel Formulation of People’s History of Iraq*” in which Ghazoul examines Munif’s last novel *Ard al-sawad* (Land of Darkness, 1999), a trilogy of approximately 1500 pages, which takes the reader back in time to Daud Pasha’s rule as governor of Baghdad in the first half of the 19th century. Ghazoul focuses on the creative transformation of Iraq’s history through the daily struggles of the common people, into fiction. As she argues, *Ard al-sawad* is not only a historical novel but a narrative that brings to the fore the silenced voices of the dispossessed, deprived even of their history.

In “*Upon Leaving the Bridge & Endings: A Redemptive Journey*”, Maher Jarrar depicts the loneliness of the novels’ respective heroes, or better: anti-heroes, Zaki al-Nadawi and ‘Assaf, as expressing a crisis within their societies which both are eager to overcome. Whereas Zaki in *Hina tarakna al-jisr* (Upon Leaving the Bridge, 1976) accomplishes reunion with his community, ‘Assaf in *Nihayat* (Endings, 1979) is only fully accepted by his community after his death. In their protest resonates the outcry against the evils of Arab societies that *Sharq al-mutawassit* (East of the Mediterranean, 1975) came to stand for. The novel addresses the *non-dit*, or what remains unsaid, of political prisoners through which “writing as a tool for change” is made manifest. Munif returned to this theme more than fifteen years later in *al-An wa huna aw sharq al-mutawassit marra ukbra* (Now and Here or East of the Mediterranean Once Again, 1991), to dissect the manner in which political oppression and prisons have remained a harsh reality in the region. As Elias Khoury puts it in “Rewriting the Novel”, the prison in the Arab Middle East is “the first indication of the authority’s crisis and society’s anguish at the same time.”

In “De/Construction: Two Edges of a *Magian Love-Story*”, Nisrine Jaafar takes us back to one of Munif’s early novels. *Qissat hubb majusiyya* (Magian Love Story, 1974) is Munif’s only novel set solely in a European context. It deals with a perennial theme in modern Arabic literature: the relation between East and West, as seen through the eyes of an Arab student who falls in love with a European woman. Although the novel stands out within Munif’s literary oeuvre, its unnamed narrator has much in common with the more mature characters in Munif’s later novels and with the author himself, as Jaafar concludes, naming the experience of exile and loneliness and their readiness to resist political oppression as common features.

Eric Gautier’s “History and Fiction in *Mudun al-Milb* (Cities of Salt)” brings us back to the historical value of Munif’s novels. *Cities of Salt* deals with the transformation of the Arabian Peninsula triggered by the discovery of petroleum. Taking it as a case study, Gautier addresses far-reaching questions, such as: Can the novel fill the gap of history writing, especially with regards to a country like Saudi Arabia that has not been easily accessible to historians, or does blurring the lines between history and fiction bring to the fore a reality of its own that may shed new light on the reality we take for granted?

The second and third section “MUNIF ON ART” and “IN HIS OWN WORDS” show Munif not in his capacity as novelist but in a different light: as an art lover. My contribution, “Munif’s Interest in Modern Art: Friendship, Symbolic Exchange and the Art of the Book”, examines Munif’s rapport with modern visual art, especially painting. Munif was not only in close contact with artists, such as Dia

Azzawi and Marwan Qassab-Bachi, he also tried his own hand at drawing as the special edition of his autobiography *Sirat madina* (Story of a City) published in Beirut in 2001 shows. His own article about the late Iraqi artist and sculptor Jawad Salim (1919-1961) and the Monument of Freedom (*nash al-hurriyya*) gives evidence of his profound interest in modern art in the region. It is published for the first time in Arabic and in English translation with the kind permission of the Munif family.

In the fourth section “MUNIF: A BIO-HISTORY”, Sabry Hafez gives an insightful and comprehensive survey of Munif’s life, his political and intellectual engagement as well as his vast literary output which has brought Munif recognition beyond the Arab world as an outstanding figure in contemporary world literature. Hafez’ contribution “An Arabian Master” was originally published in the *New Left Review* 37, January-February 2006. It is republished with the kind permission of the author and the journal. The section also includes a review of Maher Jarrar’s *‘Abd al-Rahman Munif wal-Traq. Sira wa-dhikrayat* (‘Abd al-Rahman Munif and Iraq. Biography and Memories, Beirut 2005) which consists of a study on Munif’s novel *Ard al-sawad* and a series of interviews with the author. The interviews give insight into Munif’s life trajectory – so closely linked to political events in the Arab world – from his own personal perspective.

The fifth section “MUNIF: POETICS OF A LIFE” provides a biographical sketch and a list of Munif’s works, his literary texts as well as his political, socio-economic and cultural studies, in Arabic and in translation. It also includes a selection of letters (written by the Palestinian-Iraqi writer and intellectual Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and the Syrian artist Marwan Qassab-Bachi to Munif and by Munif) that give an idea of Munif’s extensive correspondence.

Munif’s oeuvre makes us discover ever new aspects as we engage in rereading and rewriting, as Khoury says in his contribution. Munif’s political engagement, his early involvement in the Ba’th party as well as his early call for democracy, and his reception in the Arab world and abroad are other interesting facets of Munif’s legacy that are to be addressed in future work. If this issue can encourage further research, it has fulfilled its aim. A helpful link for all interested to know more about Munif is the webpage www.munif.org which is currently under construction by his family. I would also like to mention Munif’s posthumous publications by his widow Su’ad al-Qawadiri. *Umm al-Nudbur* (Mother of Vows) was written in Damascus in 1970 and tells of Munif’s early childhood in a Qur’anic school (kuttab). It was published in Beirut in 2005. *Asma’ musta’ara* (Pseudonyms) and *al-Bab al-maftuh* (The Open Door) are collections of short stories, published in Beirut in 2006. Furthermore, I want to draw attention to the special issue edited by the cultural supplement of the Lebanese daily *Mulhaq al-Nahar* no. 621 (1 Feb, 2004) in homage to Munif.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Ferial J. Ghazoul, Maher Jarrar, Elias Khoury, Nisrine Jaafar, Eric Gautier and Sabry Hafez for their contributions, enthusiasm and patience. I also thank the *New Left Review* for the kind permission to republish Hafez’ article. Moreover, I would like to thank Karam Nachar, Zein Shoueiri and Jim Quilty for their translations and proof-reading as well as Maher Jarrar and Mohammad Ali Atassi for helpful comments and open ears. Regarding the visual material, I thank Marwan Qassab-Bachi, Dia Azzawi, Yusuf Abdelki and Loulouwa Al Rachid.

The issue would not have been possible without the Munif family: Su’ad, Hani, Azza, Yasser and Laila. I thank them for their interest in the issue, their help with written as well as with visual material and their friendship.

Last but not least, I would like to extend my gratitude to the editors of *MIT-EJMES*, Maha Yahya and Jens Hanssen, for their encouragement and support.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of Arabic names and book titles varies in English and French. Hence 'Abd al-Rahman Munif in English but 'Abdul Rahman Mounif in French.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Katib wal-manfa. Humum wa-afaq al-riwaya al-‘arabiyya* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya, 1992), p. 40.
- ² ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif in Robert B. Campbell, *A‘lam al-adab al-‘arabi al-mu‘asir. Siyar wa-siyar dhatiyya/Contemporary Arab Writers* (Beirut/Stuttgart: Orient-Institut der DMG/Steiner, 1996), p. 1274.
- ³ Munif, *al-Katib wal-manfa*, p. 163. Maher Jarrar addresses this issue in his contribution.
- ⁴ Munif, *al-Katib wal-manfa*, p. 43.
- ⁵ Nizar ‘Abidin, “Hiwar ma’a ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif”, *al-Ma‘rifa* no. 204 (1979), p. 195.
- ⁶ ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Dimuqratiyya awwalan, al-dimuqratiyya da‘iman*. Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya, 1992), p. 5.
- ⁷ See Muhammad Ali Atassi (2004). “Laysa ‘urdatan lil-bay’ wa-la lil-shira”, in: *Mulbaq al-Nahar* 01.02.2004 no. 621, p. 13-14. For the petition, see Samir Kassir, *Dimuqratiyyat Suriya wa-istiqlal Lubnan. al-babith ‘an rabi’ Dimashq* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2004), p. 209-211, and in English translation: Alan George, (2003). *Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (London/New York: Zed Books, 2003), p. 178-181.
- ⁸ See Maher Jarrar, *‘Abd al-Rahman Munif wal-Iraq. Sira wa-dhikrayat* (Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya, 2005).
- ⁹ The term is used according to Pierre Bourdieu as marking a degree of accumulated prestige, based on a dialectics of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*). See Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l’action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 116.
- ¹⁰ ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Katib wal-manfa*, p. 85.
- ¹¹ Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans. Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der großen Epik* (Munich: dtv, 1994 - first published in 1920), p. 32.