

UPON LEAVING THE BRIDGE AND ENDINGS

A REDEMPTIVE JOURNEY

Maher Jarrar*

MUNIF: INTELLECTUAL AND WRITER

When Munif's fourth novel, *Hina tarakna al-jisr* (Upon Leaving the Bridge) was published in 1976, Munif had already been celebrated as a creative writer among Arab critics. His first two novels, *al-Ashjar wa 'ightiyal Marzuq* (The Trees and Marzuq's Murder, 1973) and *Qissat hubb majusiyya* (A Magian Love Story, 1974), were regarded as a breakthrough in modern Arab novelistic tradition. M. Badawi depicts his third novel, *Sharq al-Mutawassit* (East of the Mediterranean, 1975), "as a most powerful indictment of the methods of torture employed by a police state, a remarkably vivid account of the destructive effect of political tyranny on the lives of innocent human beings, while at the same time being an eloquent expression of man's unconquerable spirit."¹

Early in his life, when he was still a high school student in Amman/Jordan, 'Abd al-Rahman Munif joined the *Ba'th* party. In the fifties of the twentieth century, the pan-Arab, nationalist *Ba'th* party "excited the minds of a whole generation," as Patrick Seale puts it.² The *Ba'th* represented a call for Arab independence, unity and social revolution, ideas that attracted – together with *Nasserism* – hundreds of school students, intellectuals and other circles of the urban petite bourgeoisie in the Arab World.³ Later during his university life in Baghdad, Cairo, and Belgrade, Munif became an active member in the party and occupied high ranking positions. Nevertheless, he belonged to a faction in the party that advocated decentralization, more freedom and democratization. In 1963, the conflict between the various factions within the *Ba'th* party became very tense and Munif was expelled from the party. He gave up direct political engagement altogether in 1965, carrying within himself a deep feeling of bitterness and frustration towards the decadence, cruelty and tyranny that took hold of the political life, state institutions and regimes in the Arab world. This sense of resentment culminated in profound despair and disappointment after the disgraceful defeat of the 1967 war. Some time after 1965, Munif turned to the world of literature driven by an urge to speak up, lament and change.⁴

Munif's early novels convey an existential preoccupation, a concern with the victimized Arab individual living under the sways of decaying, totalitarian and oppressive regimes. His fourth novel, the one we are dealing with here, attempted a synthesis of the qualities of Munif's earlier writing. It explored the experiences of a lonely man, single-minded and defeated yet constantly struggling to distinguish some sign that would help him overcome this sense of failure – which turns out at the end of the novel to be a communal frustration (p. 213). This voice expressing defeat, loneliness and emasculation was to be heard in Munif's first novel, *al-Ashjar wa 'ightiyal Marzuq*; although it remained there confined to a few passages and did not become a soliloquy of self lament as in *East of the Mediterranean* and especially in

* **Maher Jarrar** is a professor in the Civilization Sequence Program and Arabic Department at the American University of Beirut. Special thanks are due to Professor Lina Choueri for her creative engagement in reading the final draft of this paper and also to Professor Ass'ad Khairallah for his comments and advice.

Hina tarakna al-jisr. More than once, Mansur ‘Abd al-Salam, the main protagonist in *al-Ashjar*, reproaches himself:

“How did the story start, oh Mansur? You leap now like a grasshopper, you rave, you want to destroy the world, yet you cannot destroy a fly... it is better for you to hold your tongue, to shut up.” (*al-Ashjar*, p. 192)

“I want to crucify myself on a palm tree. I want to seclude myself in a cave on the top of a mountain. I just want nothing.” (p. 196)

“You are only now a scabby rooster, whose feathers are plucked out, you are bankrupt... just equal to a fly.” (p. 210)

THE BRIDGE

A similar reprimanding tone ardently dominates the narrative in *Hina tarakna al-jisr*, creating an atmosphere of restlessness and bafflement. The protagonist Zaki al-Nadawi, an ‘I’-narrator, is immersed in the flow of memory events while seeking refuge in hunting - due to a thwarting experience. His refuge consisted of an open natural space, a desolate wilderness. His only companion was his three year old dog ‘Wardan’, with whom he shares a single shabby room situated at the periphery, east of the city.

The whole setting can be viewed from one spot at the novel’s opening, in a compact scene at dusk when only the howling of jackals fills the nightfall over the open country in self-contained, physically isolated surroundings by the marshes. The whole story, covering some two-hundred pages, is an example of a ‘stream of consciousness’ novel in which space reflects the sense of defeat and loss.

The focal point in the shift to the past is the obsessive memory of leaving “the bridge”. A bridge is a compelling symbol of contact, mediation and mobility, of crossing barriers, over-reaching, connectedness and passage.⁵ Constructing such a threshold that advocates union, re-union, and ‘bridging,’ a certain separation is usually associated with sacrifice.⁶

The narrative time and span could be concluded from the text. The “defeat of the bridge” happened some years prior to the narrative time: three years after the defeat, Zaki met, by coincidence, the senior officer who was in charge of them (p. 119). The narrative time stretches over some five months, between December and April (p. 12, 123, 147, 209, 211) of the year “1968”. This date is derived from a conversation between Zaki and an old hunter aged sixty-four, who tells Zaki that it has been twenty years now since he stopped hunting for ducks - from the time when Lake al-Hula fell (p. 169). Al-Hula fell to the Zionist troops in 1948 and was dried up completely by 1957.⁷ The lake used to be located in upper Galilee, where the Jordan River – which used to flow through the lake - formed a natural border with Syria. The marshes, where Zaki spends his time hunting are located somewhere east of al-Hula (p. 174). These specifications allude, immediately, to building up a bridge to cross over to the other shore, the occupied lands. One should keep in mind here that the simile of crossing the bridge over the Jordan River has found popularity in modern Arabic poetry and songs referring to the Crossover back to Palestine (*Jisr al-‘awda*).

At the beginning was the bridge: A metal bridge (p. 116) bolted together with solid screws (p. 98, 117) by nine soldiers (p. 185; on page 115 it is mentioned that the number was only seven): Zaki al-Nadawi, the ‘I’-narrator, mentions – besides himself – the names of six other soldiers: Hamid, Ra’if, Dhiyab, Ramzi, Ahmad and al-Kurdi nicknamed The “Camel” (p. 79-80, 98, 115-118, 125, 127, 135, 185, 187).

It must have been a remarkable time, that of the bridge! During the first month of a blind, sticky, dusty, and heavy summer, the seven men were building a ‘military’ bridge some four kilometers from the river – the border to be crossed.

They constructed a speckled, silver colored bridge (p. 79, 97), “happy and boastful like a child” (p. 137), and shining like a “festival of rainbow colors” (p. 97, 99). They set up a bridge “that represented the last image of joy,” they gave it a name and sang for it (p. 114, 117, 118, 187). However, when the moment arrived to move it to the river and cross over it, they left it there ‘alone on the ground’ for seven days and nights. The men spent the time perturbed, laying down in the ditches like scared rats, waiting for an order urging them to “move the bridge to the river, to set it up there, and to defend it until they die!” (p. 125). On the seventh day, the instructions were clear, “Retreat! Just retreat and let everyone manage his own way out.” (p. 78, 174)

The story line (*fabula*) is a concatenation of non-events. Feeling defeated, Zaki became too inward-looking and although he has the chance of roaming freely in the fenland, his thoughts have become a prison. There remains no escape for the reader/addressee from the grip of the narrator’s point of view and his obsessive lamentations. He fixates his sense of loss and devastation on chasing the ‘Queen of the Ducks’ (p. 42, 47, 48, 51, 53, 59, 101, 105-106, 131, 135, 201). He associates her with the bridge (p. 16, 17, 39, 94, 135), at times praising her beauty, and at others calling her a bitch (p. 14, 29-30, 34, 77, 200), a female demon (p. 62, 68, 95) and a sorceress (p. 9, 16). The story line flows in a ‘stream of consciousness’ mode, where the space of hunting and chasing - which triggers unfulfilled expectations and a variety of stimuli elicited by the succession of day and night, and by the change in weather - indicates a focus on the interior landscape of the narrator, whose internal preoccupations are interfering with his ability to match response to reality. The nature of the story demands a confined, unified setting and a specific timescale, an essentially wild landscape under a grim changing weather.

The bridge is an elemental force. It is significantly the visual focus that provokes memory, which takes here a pattern repeating itself by way of conceptual association with the Queen of the Ducks – which becomes an ‘icon’ functioning as a symbol that signifies something other than itself.⁸ The bridge becomes an obsession to which Zaki relates everything out there in the world that is not the bridge: even time becomes “outstretched in front of us like a bridge” (p. 23). Zaki asks for the memory traces of the ‘defeat of the bridge’ to be engraved within the soul of the Queen of the Ducks, the soul of his dog, and in nature, fearing all the while that such memory can be wrecked by the passage of time.

What al-Nadawi is actually seeking is a bridge of communication between himself and reality, a bridge which he can stretch out in order to open up a human dialogue with others, so as to rescue his self-worth. When he sees the old hunter for the first time, he addresses his dog, Wardan, telling it that he, Zaki, “should stretch out a bridge between himself and the man.” (p. 56) The bridge which was a symbol of traversing to victory becomes a source of failure and “lack” and a drive towards *delusion*.

Most significantly, Zaki refuses to acknowledge the death of his father, the same way he denies that the bridge is defunct (p. 43). In one of his soliloquies with his dog, he says “had my father been alive, then, we would have achieved a lot.” (p. 38) He carries deep love and respect for his father; he calls him “a sage” and longs for his company, especially during those moments just before sunset, when he used to sit with him to watch the swallows in the inner garden of their home open up to the sky under the grapevine (p. 22-29). The father figure is the only solid image and authority with which he can identify – although he feels towards the old hunter a kind of a filial bond - while he deems other authorities, “the big-ones up there,” as cowards and despondent; he hurls his scorn down on the leaders who have led to the defeat (p. 17, 46, 115).

The chase never ends; the Queen of the Ducks does not fall prey, but rather remains flying and, in its place, Zaki shoots down an owl (p. 195-205). The Queen of the Ducks, the hope for ‘revenge’ and for change that he carries within himself, will never fall prey. It is a hunt that would reveal the pattern of desire that

fuels a quest that can be quenched only when his spirit stops lamenting and finds its way to inner equilibrium and a reconstructed communal identity:

“During a night towards the end of March we sat together, three men who have a work at the same place. When I started telling them about the bridge, the telephone-operator – whom I had not seen for a long time, but whose voice I frequently heard every day – asked me to stop talking

- For the walls have ears, they will kill you!”

- I replied, “I am not mentioning any specific one; I am just talking about the bridge!”

- The bridge! Doesn’t it allude to a meaning?

The other man, my room-mate, smiled sadly and said:

- It is always possible to build bridges; what is difficult is to build human beings- new human beings!

.....

When I left the two men, many strange and confused ideas came to my mind. I thought about the words they uttered. They sounded full of hope (literally, it looked bright) and very near to things that I cherish.. I decided to act in a new way.” (p. 209-210)

The defeat has paralyzed Zaki and made him lose his sense of personal identity. Yet, to accept what has happened he should embark upon the search for a new moral system; something which he is not able to instigate, because– more than three years after the defeat of the bridge – he still feels impotent, and carries the scars and the ravages of an experience that bears within itself the residues of what actually represents a collective fright. In this sense, Zaki represents all the intellectuals *cum* “soldiers and common people” who have lost the sense of control over their lives, their trust in the state and its institutions, and still more damaging, a sense of their identity. After the sudden, accidental death of his dog Wardan, Zaki decides to quit his loneliness and join his community, “even before the sunset of the first day, I became lost amongst the jam of the crowds, I started realizing the sadness in their faces, and I became convinced that all the men knew much about the bridge and that they were only waiting... waiting to start something off.” (p. 213)

The critic Georges Tarabishi makes a comparison between Zaki al-Nadawi and Santiago in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, where both protagonists are fanatically chasing a prey. Yet Santiago, Tarabishi argues, shows a decisive will, a high sense of endurance, maneuvering, and strategic thinking. Zaki reveals passivity, pessimism, and lack of calculated acts. Tarabishi asserts that, “the core of Hemingway’s message is that man might be crushed, he might die, but he never surrenders. Whereas Munif’s message is that a defeated man is a crushed man even if he is still alive.”⁹ Tarabishi contends further that *The Old Man and the Sea* embodies a Promethean, Western spirit born from the determination of the Enlightenment and Modernity, whereas *Hina tarakna al-jisr* discloses a sense of defeatism that is so deterministic and pessimistic leaving no place for human reasoning and action.¹⁰

This comparison is in my opinion too far fetched and open to question. Firstly, whereas Santiago is a professional fisherman, who has spent all his life at sea, Zaki, to the contrary, is an amateur hunter and a frustrated intellectual. Contrary to what Faysal Darraj indicates, Zaki al-Nadawi is not a mere soldier.¹¹ Most probably, he is an engineer like his other colleagues who were given a task to set up a military bridge. He seems to have been a stern “leftist” who believes that both poetry and religion represent a downfall (p. 136-137). Secondly, the main theme in Hemingway’s novel is the act of struggle with the fish which indicates willpower and perseverance – to the extent that the image of the fish is tied to a specific figure whose story it constitutively defines, functioning thus as a theme,¹² while in *Hina tarakna al-jisr*, the Queen of the Ducks is an ‘icon’ representing the bridge which is a

symbol of defeat and lack of will. Thirdly, Hemingway wrote his novel at a later stage of his career; whereas Munif was still at the beginning of his career still probing with different voices and perspectives.

The novel is a symbolic redemptive journey, a voyage across an essentially terrifying, untamed land of renunciation and self-disdain, and at the same time it is a cry of protest against authoritarian Arab regimes. The self-indulgence of the 'I'-narrator is linked to an undertaking that the anti-hero assumes genuinely, namely, an outcry against the loss of personal freedom, autonomy and authenticity.

ENDINGS

In 1977, less than a year after the publication of *Hina tarakna al-jisr*, Munif's fifth novel *al-Nihayat* (*Endings*, 1988), appears. In *al-Nihayat*, the theme of a lost paradise and a lost past is a seminal one. The critic Salah Salih remarks, that "the events of this novel take place in a village called al-Tiba, located at the borderline with the desert. The desert demarcates the end of fertility, agriculture and security. Within this binary opposition between the idea of a beginning and that of an end, the events proceed emphasizing the existence of successive dearth seasons and their doggedness."¹³

Whereas *Upon Leaving the Bridge* is told in the "I-narrative form," *Endings* commences with the observation of an all-knowing narrator who from the first sentence announces the advent of hardship that prevails over the scene, "drought, drought again!" In this novel, Munif experiments further with voice and with time-space *chronotopes* that organize the centers of the narrative events.¹⁴ In *Endings*, Munif adopts a more "lyrical" approach, resulting from what Ralph Freedman describes as "the transformation of the perception into networks of images, designs or patterns of imagery portraying the halting of the flow of time within constellations of images or figures."¹⁵

Roger Allen, Professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a renowned authority on modern Arabic Novel, has translated the novel into English and devoted some nine pages to its study.¹⁶ Allen argues that "The omniscient narrator has a particular eye for detail; one might almost say that it is the eye of a social scientist, concerned with characteristics and models of usual behavior (noting, of course, variations from the norms as they have been described). From such an approach, readers inevitably find themselves drawn into the world created by a narrator who shares with them an immense concern with nature and the environment."

The main theme in *Endings* is that of upcoming changes to a different, unpredictable order: drought, madness, ruptures in human relations as well as in the cycle of nature, struggle between a generation that is withering out and a new generation that left its village at the edge of the desert in search of a more 'humane' life in the city. These massive somber changes have to be dealt with by the unsuspecting people of al-Tiba, who are overlooked by the state authorities and left to face their own fate. From one year to the other, the government postpones its promises to establish a new road and to construct a dam, which would irrigate their lands and produce electricity, (*Endings*, p. 32, 37-38).

The villagers are perplexed by the words of their sons living in the city who assert to that, "this land's only good for feeding rats. That's all. But you people keep hanging on here as though it's paradise on earth. Give it all up and move to the city! You'll find life there a thousand times better than it is here." The villagers were actually "quite prepared to accept whatever was sent out to them and distribute it with scrupulous fairness...They used to listen to this talk from the big city. They would hear all about the earth dam which was due to be built." After the death of 'Assaf, the villagers of al-Tiba were left deserted: the village mayor tells them, "You're on your own when it comes to fighting the government, the army, locusts and who knows what else" (*Endings*, p. 71).

The main protagonist 'Assaf, a loner, was "the great stallion, as beautiful as a cloud-burst of rain; foster-father of the poor... loved everyone and killed himself so that people could carry on... 'Assaf a giant among men" (*Endings*, p. 71). 'Assaf, unmarried, is somewhere between the forties and fifties, tall, with a slight bow, lean, yet endowed with a strong physique. Ever since the age of thirteen, after the death of both his parents, he abandoned the village to live in the mountains and valleys, sleeping in caves and struggling with wolves. With time, the villagers got used to 'Assaf and started to treat him as a fool. "No one felt alarmed or threatened by his scruffy clothes and taciturn demeanor, or even by the string of oaths he would unleash from time to time when someone pinned him down and started firing provocative questions at him. People initially regarded him with a leering kind of sarcasm, and that turned eventually into laughter" (*Endings*, p. 21-22). 'Assaf was filled with silence, he "was something of a mystery" – a man who lives on hunting together with his dog (*Endings*, p. 19-25).

'Assaf, who is an uneasy character, with an uncomfortable desert outlook, belonged to the old certainties of the desert as opposed to the different rigidities and aspirations of the invading city. In this sense, he can be seen as a marginal, *liminal* character, who leaves the network of social classification occupying thus an ambiguous, symbolic existence.¹⁷ Explaining types of *liminality*, Victor Turner argues that, "they consist of a confrontation between that domain which pertains to the person, that is, social structure and cultural order, and that which belongs to the individual, that is, the critical and potentially creative destruction of that order."¹⁸ *Liminality* is a threshold within rites of passage temporally located between and outside ordinary time.¹⁹

The story line is uncomplicated: During the seasons of drought, some of the village's young generation living in the city, arrive in al-Tiba together with friends from the city in order to organize a hunting trip for their city friends. The villagers, though worried about the situation, try to persuade 'Assaf – the son of the desert, hence a familiar with its secrets - to guide the company in their hunting trip. 'Assaf refuses vehemently out of great respect to the habitat and its environment; "All these people want to do is kill animals. They used to kill absolutely everything in sight," he argues (*Endings*, p. 47). 'Assaf surrenders grudgingly to the insistence of the villagers. The company, traveling with a four-wheel drive and a Volkswagen, pounces on their hunting trip. When they arrive to the hunting grounds, 'Assaf insists on hunting on foot away from the cars. A ghastly sand storm overshadows the whole scene, and when the storm is over 'Assaf is found dead with his dog trying to fervently dig him out of the massive sand that had covered his body.

'Assaf's body is brought to the house of the village mayor (Mukhtar), where it was laid out with the villagers gathered around it till the break of day. "The worst thing we did to 'Assaf, said the Mukhtar, was to let him fight on his own. Even his dog was better than us. At least it tried to save him. We did absolutely nothing." (*Endings*, p. 75) The villagers gather around 'Assaf's body, are plaintive of their passivity towards all the changes that were befalling them.

The death of the *liminal* 'Assaf becomes a sacrificial death undertaken by the community. R. Girard explains "the death of the individual has something of the quality of a tribute levied for the continued existence of the collectivity. A human being dies, and the solidarity of the survivors is enhanced by his death. The surrogate victim dies so that the entire community, threatened by the same fate, can be reborn in a new or renewed cultural order."²⁰

The villagers stayed awake that night, gathered around 'Assaf's body and "so began the incredible all-night session, something al-Tiba had never witnessed before. Almost everyone who was there said something. They talked of many things. The guests told stories too, but the people of al-Tiba did not understand them too well" (*Endings*, p. 77). With this scene starts the second part of the novel carrying the title, "Some of the Stories from that Remarkable Night." (*Endings*, p. 78-128) Roger

Allen notices that, “the villagers are masters at telling tales in a particular way, a very prevalent traditional craft in the Arab world, that of the *bakawati*.”²¹

There is something in the setting that invites a comparison with a similar scene that came to be known in Arabic tradition as “The Sayings of the Philosophers (or Wise Men) at Alexander’s Death-bed.” This is a collection attributed to the renowned Nestorian physician and translator from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 260/873).²² Fourteen philosophers gather around Alexander’s tomb to lament him and say wise, reflective thoughts about death and the futility of life. This tradition, which came to be connected to Alexander’s death, was translated into Hebrew in the first half of the thirteenth century and thence into Spanish and other European languages to become a part of the pseudo-Challisthenes *Alexander Romance*.²³ It enjoyed from an early time great popularity among Muslim writers, e.g., al-Ya‘qubi (d. 284/897) in his history book,²⁴ and al-Mas‘udi’s (d. 346/956) in his *Muruj al-dhbab*.²⁵ Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d. ca 412/1021) mentions that, upon the death of the Buyid ruler, ‘Adu al-Dawla (d. 372/983), some philosophers eulogized him in imitation of the “Sayings of the Philosophers at Alexander’s Death-bed.”²⁶

Munif borrows the same setting of the rite of mourning, where the men conducting a wake over ‘Assaf’s body tell fourteen tales all of which reveal episodes involving animals. By evoking these two scenes of the funeral oration genre, Munif iterates the ‘symbolic’ and ‘singular/fictional’ death of ‘Assaf in a *transtextual* relation to the ‘unique’ funeral oration of the wise conqueror, Alexander (bearing in mind that any comparison between ‘deaths’ remains inconceivable, taken from an external perspective, and superficial).²⁷ But, whereas Alexander represented the arrogance of power (which the official ‘funeral oration’ constitutes and consolidates),²⁸ ‘Assaf, remains a liminal loner, son of Mother Nature. Accordingly, the similarity between Alexander and ‘Assaf rests upon two common traits: wisdom and having a vision. ‘Assaf’s funeral oration is thus populated by simple villagers who realize in the deceased a wise hero that died for a ‘utopian’ vision of a better world of harmony and abundance.

Two of the tales, numbers 6 and 9, are taken from the memorable early Arabic *Kitab al-hayawan* (Book of Animals) by the celebrated al-Jahiz (d. 255/868). It is first with *Endings* that Munif starts leaning on the rich Arabic narrative heritage, employing the implicit weaving of stories inside one another, subsequently generating each other. But, whereas the philosophers in their laments reflect upon the theme of the futility of life (power, arrogance, wealth and human hopes) in the face of death, the anecdotes told by the villagers ruminate about the damage caused by man to his natural habitat and about his cruelty towards animal life.

Roger Allen rightly maintains that the main focus of the novel is not on individuals, but rather on the village itself, al-Tiba and the community as a whole. Allen argues that “this is very much a novel that focuses on community and environment, but readers are gradually – very gradually – led towards a specific series of events that underline the work’s environmental message.”²⁹ Peter Willows –who reads *Endings* from the approach of both Gestalt psychology and semiotics– maintains that these stories, “which follow the death of the messianic ‘Assaf [are] a sort of grieving process in the book, made whole beyond the sum of the parts of these many stories.” They contribute, moreover, “to the animal-man image of ‘Assaf who is one with nature.”³⁰

The death of the “messianic ‘Assaf” and the ensuing redemptive grieving process conclude a symbolic initiation rite, a fertility ritual endured by the community, where death brings forth rain,³¹ in order to close up the stages of the ritual process. Van Gennep calls them: rites of separation – rites of margin or *limen* and rites of reaggregation.³² The dead man’s procession turns into a wedding:

“As it wound its way from the Mukhtar’s house to the graveyard, the procession was guided by unseeing hands and voices. The Mukhtar himself had three weapons which he used to protect

his house, but he dispensed with all of them and chose instead to carry 'Assaf's old weapon. From time to time he loaded and fired it, it almost felt as though he were at a wedding... No one can remember how it all happened even at the very end. 'Assaf's body had just reached the grave when the women of al-Tiba gave him a welcome befitting such a man. Nothing was made to seem special or unusual. Yet no sooner had the coffin arrived and been lowered to the ground in preparation for burial than the women gathered in a circle and started a rhythmic, orderly dance with blended elements of sadness, joy, pleasure, insanity and anger." (*Endings*, p. 136-137)

Although rain is not made as a consequence of this ritual, yet, a substitute is in sight, the water-dam. The cars, loaded with men, set off for the city and the Mukhtar was heard saying, "I'll come back on top of a bulldozer and begin the job myself. Then al-Tiba will begin to appreciate the real meaning of life, instead of having to endure this living death it leads every single day." (*Endings*, p. 140)

The critic Faysal Darraj, concluding his short depiction of *al-Nihayat*,³³ maintains that "The overall structure of the novel formulates the hunt as an encircling metaphor that separates between beginnings and endings as well as between a wicked present and a future that would never come."

CONCLUSION

Both characters Zaki al-Nadawi in *Upon Leaving the Bridge* and 'Assaf in *Endings*, are gripped with their loneliness, both of them are solitary and "eccentric". Yet, their loneliness, in one of its facets, is an expression of a crisis within their society. It is the type of solitariness that Georg Lukács had delineated in the literature of "traditional realism," where "the fate of such individuals is characteristic of certain human types in specific social or historical circumstances. Beside and beyond their solitariness, the common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings, goes on as before."³⁴ Zaki left his loneliness in order to reunite with his community, wait with them and plan for a new start (*Upon leaving the bridge*, 209f.; p. 5 above). It seems as if this start were to be materialized through the redemptive death of 'Assaf, which brought forth a new hope in a better life, with water abundance and in harmony with the environment. The unfulfilled act of crossing the bridge in *Hina tarakna 'l-jisr* was symbolically achieved through the ceremonial *rites of passage* initiated through the death of 'Assaf. Yet, the redeemer is no more than a witness, a milestone on the road to change that should be endeavored by the society as a whole.

Although both novels, *The Bridge* and *Endings*, belong to Munif's earlier endeavors marked by their "traditional realism," one might sense that he was building on the rich experience he had already accumulated in his novelistic career and was breaking new grounds that would pave the way for his *Cities of Salt* quintet (1984-1989) and his trilogy, *Ard al-sawad*, 1999 (*Arable Land*).

The closure of both novels can be regarded as symbolic, where the signified reflects the drastic actuality of real victims of the disintegrated society. In this sense both novels stand as a protest against the evils of Arab societies; they carry at the same time a hope in positive change and a better future. More than once, Munif had asserted that for him, writing represented not only a 'catharsis', but a "tool for change."³⁵ He perceives the novel as a beautiful means of enlightenment; he says: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the novel flourishes and blooms whenever tragedy wins through, injustice becomes general and contradictions prevail in a certain society. In those vital historical moments, the novel becomes an agent expressing the people's condition and a mirror reflecting their miseries and hopes."³⁶ "The novel, as I understand it and as I conceive of it," says Munif, "is a beautiful tool that leads to knowledge and enjoyment at the same time. It makes us

more aware and more sensitive to the environment we live in and to our human condition.”³⁷

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mustafa M. Badawi, “Two Novelists from Iraq: Jabra and Munif,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23:2 (1992), p. 148. ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif as a prominent public writer cum intellectual has given this theme much of his attention. Cf. on the theme of Arabic novels of prison, Maher Jarrar, “The Arabic Novel Carries its Cross and Asks the Son of Man: Iconography of Jesus in some Modern Arabic Novels,” *Poetry’s Voice – Society’s Norms: Form of Interaction between Middle Eastern Writers and their Societies*, eds. Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winckler (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2006), p. 72-73.
- ² Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 30.
- ³ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 473-482; Hanna Batatu, *The Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi Revolutions: Some Observations on their Underlying Causes and Social Character* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1984), 1-22.
- ⁴ ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Katib wa ‘l-manja*, ed. Muhammad Dakrub (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘arabiyya lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 1994), 163.
- ⁵ Carl-Martin Edsman, “Bridge,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2., ed. Mircea Eliade (New York and London: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 310-314; Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meaning behind Them*, tr. James Hulbert (New York and London: A Meridian Book, 1994), p. 49-50.
- ⁶ Carl-Martin Edsman, “Bridge,” p. 310-314.
- ⁷ *al-Mawsu‘a al-Filastiniyya*, (Damascus: PLO, 1984), vol. 2, p. 284-294.
- ⁸ Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images. A Literary Iconology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 15.
- ⁹ Georges Tarabishi, *Ramziyyat al-mar‘a fi ‘l-riwaya al-‘arabiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 1981), p. 7
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8-12
- ¹¹ Faysal Darraj, *al-Riwaya wa ta‘wil ‘l-tarikh: Nazhariyyat al-riwaya wa ‘l-riwaya al-‘arabiyya* (Beirut: al-Marakaz al-thaqafi al-‘arabi, 2004), p. 216
- ¹² Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images*, p. 15.
- ¹³ Salah Salih, *al-Riwaya al-‘arabiyya wa ‘l-sabra’* (Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa, 1996), p. 224-25.
- ¹⁴ Michail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 84, 250.
- ¹⁵ Freedman, Ralph, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Herman Hesse, André Gide and Virginia Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).
- ¹⁶ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2nd ed., 1995), p. 222-230.
- ¹⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), p. 94.
- ¹⁸ Victor Turner, *Blazing the Trail: Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (Tucson and London: The University of Arizona Press, 1992), p. 148-163.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ²⁰ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 255.
- ²¹ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p. 226.
- ²² D.J.A. Ross, *Alexander Hinstoriatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature* (London: University of London, 1963), p. 9, 61-61; S.P. Brock, “The Laments of the Philosophers over Alexander in Syriac,” *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 25:2 (1970), 205-218; ‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Mas‘udi, *Muruj al-dhahab wa ma‘adin al-jawhar*, vol. 6, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de L’Université Libanaise, 1979), p. 148.
- ²³ D.J.A. Ross, *Alexander Hinstoriatus*; S.P. Brock, “The Laments”.
- ²⁴ Ahmad al-Ya‘qubi, *Tarikh*, vol. 1. (Beirut: Dar Sadir and Dar Bayrut, 1960), p. 143-145.
- ²⁵ ‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Mas‘udi, *Muruj al-dhahab wa ma‘adin al-jawhar*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de L’Université Libanaise, 1966), p. 10-13; S.P. Brock, “The Laments”, p. 207; Ihsan ‘Abbas, *Malamih Yunaniyya fi ‘l-adab al-‘arabi* (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘arabiyya lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 1993), p. 127-42.
- ²⁶ Ihsan ‘Abbas, *Malamih Yunaniyya*, p. 140.
- ²⁷ Thomas H. Macho, “Tod und Trauer im kulturwissenschaftlichen Vergleich,” *Der Tod als Thema der Kulturtheorie*, ed. Jan Assman (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), p. 91-95.

-
- ²⁸ Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Jacques Derrida (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 18, 19.
- ²⁹ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p. 226-227.
- ³⁰ Peter Willows, "Gestalt Psychology, Semiotics and the Modern Arabic Novel," *Applied Semiotics/Sémiotique appliquée* (www.chass.utoronto.ca/french/as-sa/ASSA-No15, 2005), p. 8.
- ³¹ James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, revised and edited by Theodor H. Gaster (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 76-78; Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane. Vom Wesen des Religiösen* (Frankfurt, a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1987), p. 114-115, 169f.
- ³² Victor Turner, *Blazing the Trail*, p. 133; but see the reservations of Thomas H. Macho, "Tod und Trauer", p. 91.
- ³³ Faysal Darraj, *al-Riwaya wa ta'wil 'l-tarikh*], p. 220-223.
- ³⁴ Georg Lukács, Georg, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, tr. from the German by John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1972), p. 20.
- ³⁵ 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Katib wa 'l-manfa*, p. 159, 163, 214-215; Maher Jarrar, *'Abd al-Rahman Munif wa 'l-Iraq: Sira wa dhikrayat* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-thaqafi al-'arabi, 2005), p. 33-34.
- ³⁶ 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Katib wa 'l-manfa*, p. 40.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.