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Ecofeminism and Translation: A Critical Reading of Abdel Rahman Munif's Cities of Salt

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Abstract
The complexities of language, society, and artistic expressions make literary works like novels difficult to translate. Translators encounter several problems such as cultural subtleties, colloquial idioms, distinctive writing styles, and other poetic aspects. Literary translation is a challenging process that necessitates a profound comprehension of the cultural and contextual nuances of the source material in addition to language proficiency. The Arabic novel *Cities of Salt* was written by Abdelrahman Munif, and was successfully translated into several languages, including English. Peter Theroux completed the English translation that was initially released in 1987, and he is the one who paved the way for opening up Munif's writing to a wider English-speaking community. The translated version preserves the novel's exploration of the impact of the oil industry on an unnamed Arab Gulf state and its reflection on the profound social, economic, and cultural changes brought about by rapid industrialization. *Cities of Salt* by Abdul Rahman Munif is a rich exploration of environmental exploitation and gender dynamics in the context of the Arab Gulf region's transformation due to the oil industry. The novel offers a nuanced portrayal of the interconnected challenges faced by communities grappling with rapid industrialization and its far-reaching consequences on both the environment and societal structures, including gender roles. Moreover, this research paper reveals how the exploitation of land mirrors the exploitation of women. The destruction of the environment echoes the silencing and erasure of women's voices and agency. Through an eco-feminist lens, the paper exposes the interconnectedness between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women, both subjected to exploitation, commodification, and dispossession. Because this novel is a quintet, this paper examines excerpts from the first volume, *Al-Teeh*, which better fit the study's argument.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Environmental Ethics, Exploitation Of Women, Gender And Nature, Translation*

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INTRODUCTION

Nature is Man's closest companion. It brings great comfort to society. Nature is feminised because it embodies female characteristics. Women are the family nurturers and have close connections with the natural world. The term "ecofeminism" was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, which was published in 1974. It is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. Ecofeminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to analyse the relationships between humans and the natural world.

Ecology is the scientific study of how living things interact with their surroundings (Frantzeskaki et al., 2024). The interactions that occur between organisms and the biotic and abiotic factors of their environment are covered by this multidisciplinary field. Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the genders. However, in a world coping with rising environmental problems and ongoing gender disparities, the resounding appeal for a healthy cohabitation between nature and humanity finds its intellectual and activist grounding in the compelling rhetoric of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism is fundamentally a socio-ecological framework that investigates the relationship between gender, nature, and power structures. Ecofeminism, which is based on the concept that women's exploitation and environmental exploitation are inextricably linked, seeks a comprehensive understanding of our world and advocates for sustainable and equitable solutions. Translation studies, on the other hand, investigate the complexity of linguistic mediation, namely how ideas, cultures, and knowledge are transferred across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Sarmila et al., 2023; Sujarwo et al., 2020; 2024). Through this interdisciplinary lens, the study will shed light on the transformative potential of ecofeminist ideas in translation, fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate connections between language, gender, and the environment (AlRaddadi, 2018; Alidmat, & Manjet, 2020). There were various studies and critical analyses conducted on Munif's novel *Cities of Salt*. This epic work has been widely praised for its rich narrative and poignant exploration of socio-political issues in the Arabian Peninsula during the discovery of oil. Scholars have delved into themes such as modernization, cultural clash, environmental degradation, and the impact of rapid industrialization on traditional societies. However, this study intends to show how the exploitation of land mirrors the exploitation of women and the impact of the cultural and linguistic variations on the reception of ecofeminist elements. The researchers aim to investigate the influence of cultural and linguistic variations on the reception of ecofeminist elements, as well as the impact of oil exploration on the exploitation of Bedouin women in the novel.

METHOD

The study addresses the following research questions in relation to these themes:

1. What are the repercussions of oil-exploration on Bedouin Women?
2. How do cultural and linguistic variations between the original Arabic text and its translated version impact the reception and interpretation of thematic elements in the novel?

To achieve so, a comparative discourse analysis will be conducted to scrutinize linguistic nuances and cultural context differences between the original Arabic text and its translated version, aiming to unveil how these variations shape the reception and interpretation of ecofeminist themes. To investigate the extent to which oil exploration contributes to the exploitation of Bedouin women in the novel, a textual-analysis will be employed to identify and examine narrative instances explicitly depicting the exploitation of Bedouin women in connection with oil exploration.

Decoding Nature's Narrative: A Critical Ecofeminist Perspective On Munif's *Al-Teeh:*

Abdel Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* is a novel that portrays the socio-political and environmental transformations in the Arabian Peninsula due to the discovery of oil. An eco-feminist reading of this novel could explore the intersections between environmental degradation, capitalism, patriarchy, and the exploitation of both nature and women. Through the lens of ecofeminism, this study engages in a comprehensive analysis of Munif's narrative, dissecting characters, themes, and narrative intricacies to unveil the profound connections between the exploitation of women and the ecological degradation depicted in the novel.

The narrator begins the story by giving a vivid description of Wadi Al-Uyoun, which is the central location of the first volume, *Al-Teeh*, *of Cities of Salt*. Bedouins, who inhabit the Valley, appear to have lived the life of contentment. Even though the Valley is in a harsh desert, the palm trees and the pouring brooks seem to give it prominent standing not only among its inhabitants, but also among travelers. To show how the Valley is a marvel in the eyes people, the author writes:

> Wadi al-Uyoun was a phenomenon, something of a miracle, unbelievable to those who saw it for the first time and unforgettable forever after. The wadi's name was repeated at all stages of a journey, in setting out and returning: "How much longer to Wadi al- Uyoun?" "If we make it to Wadi al-Uyoun, we'll rest up for a few days before going on," and "Where are you, Wadi al-Uyoun, earthly paradise. (p.2)

Even though the Valley suffers difficult times when the only food available are dry dates, milk, and stale bread, people are happy and peaceful and fortunate as they have been blessed with the life they have lived. In presenting the character of Um Saad, Um Khosh, and Wadha, the author attempts to provide insights into the challenges, resilience, and societal roles of women amidst the

larger backdrop of societal and environmental changes brought about by the discovery of oil. Their stories offer glimpses into the complexities of gender dynamics and the impact of modernisation on traditional societies in the novel.

Munif further reinforces the presentation of the environment as a humanised character that has been colonised by Oil by portraying its human-like resistance in the face of Oil's colonisation. In fact, it is important to note that the first act of colonisation was not evacuating the people but rather it was the uprooting of the palm trees. The Oil took over the place of the oasis's soil and water. Because the palm trees were the first to be destructed by Oil; they were the first to resist in face of the Oil extraction machines. Munif describes the scene of uprooting of the palm trees as "butchery" (p.106), and crazy massacre performed on humans and where the palm trees also resisted in a human-like manner. He states that that "trees shook violently and groaned before falling, cried for help, wailed, panicked, called out in helpless pain and then fell entreatingly to the ground, as if trying to snuggle into the earth to grow and spring forth alive again" (p.106). This scene also reinforces the previous point of the humanising the Wadi and its earth as a "mother-figure" where both plants and people alike "snuggle into" its belly "to grow and spring forth alive" (p.106).

Cities of Salt by Abdel Rahman Munif explores gender relations and environmental exploitation in a complex way inside the Arab Gulf region, which is rapidly industrialising because of oil discovery. It offers a comprehensive examination of gender dynamics and environmental exploitation within the framework of the Arab Gulf region's oil industry-driven change. The novel presents a complex picture of the interrelated problems that communities dealing with fast industrialisation are facing, as well as the wide-ranging effects these developments are having on the environment and social structures, such as gender roles.

Umm Khosh is a mother of a long-traveling son. She has kept her faith in waiting for her son's return to Wadi despite mocking from kids and others. The poor woman died after being forced to leave the Wadi for oil exploration and constructions. This heartbreaking incident sheds a critical light on the profound repercussions of oil exploration on women. The author writes:

> Abdallah al-Masoud pointed at Umm Khosh. "What about the old woman?" he asked. "She's coming with us. " Several people repeated these words approvingly. "And if she doesn't want to come?" "Whether she wants to or not, " said Muhammad al-Med-awwar. "We'll take her with us and go. " "Fine. See for yourself. Ask her. " Muhammad al-Medawwar strode over and put his hand gently on her shoulder. "Umm Khosh ... Umm Khosh." She did not reply or move. "It's nearly noon ... Umm Khosh. " She did not reply… In less than an hour a grave was dug and Umm Khosh was buried. No one wanted to touch her belongings, so the wind scattered them and the sand buried all that she had left behind. (pp.123-24)

Women like Wadha also spoke out and "the sounds that came out from her mouth were more like animal sounds or the groans of mourning, exactly like the

clash of branches or the echo of a narrow valley. Like a strangled cat, she tried to talk" (130). So, not only did Wadha looked "like an old camel" (124), but other Wadi's wounded animals and broken branch trees wanted to talk and resist through her voice. From an ecofeminist perspective, these lines illustrate a poignant connection between women, nature, and resistance. The portrayal of Wadha expressing herself with sounds reminiscent of animals or the groans of mourning suggests a deep intertwining of the human and natural world. The comparison of her speech to the clash of branches or the echo of a narrow valley reinforces the idea that her voice is not only a personal expression but also a reflection of the broader environmental and cultural upheavals in Wadi. The portrayal of Wadha physically resembling an "old camel" indicates a collective voice of resistance against environmental degradation and societal upheaval.

Echoes In Translation: Exploring Cultural And Linguistic Influence On The Ecofeminist Themes:

Literary translation is a complex process that involves navigating cultural differences, idiomatic expressions, style, tone, poetry, rhythm, untranslatable words, cultural sensitivity, puns, wordplay, length discrepancies, slang, dialects, temporal and geographic references, and ensuring clarity in translation. Cultural nuances are often present in literary works, and translators must navigate these differences to preserve the intended meaning and impact. Idiomatic expressions and wordplay are common, but literal translations may not capture the intended nuances or humour. Each author has a distinct writing style and tone, and translators must strive to capture the author's voice while maintaining the same level of formality, humour, or emotional intensity in the target language. Poetry and rhythm are particularly challenging, as maintaining poetic elements while preserving meaning is a delicate task. Untranslatable words can lead to approximations, resulting in a loss of the original language's richness or specificity. Cultural sensitivity requires adaptation to suit the target audience's sensibilities, balancing authenticity with cultural relevance. Literary translators play a vital role in preserving the essence, style, and cultural richness of the original text for a new audience.

Translation loss is frequently unavoidable due to phrase structures, language variances, and other causes. The most obvious example of translation loss occurs when something that is mentioned in the source language is simply left out of the target text. Omission in translations from English to Arabic or the other way around shows how these two languages relate distinct parts of the text. *Cities of Salt* (Al-Teeh) is written in Bedouin Arabic and translated into English by native English speaker, Peter Theroux. The work *Cities of Salt* was written in a Bedouin dialect by Munif in 1983 and translated into English by Peter Theroux in 1987. This work was chosen because it was translated by a translator whose cultural background is different from the novelist's, raising the possibility of cultural clash in the translation. Alidmat and Manjet (2020, p.360) give many examples from Theroux's translation to highlight some omissions in the translated texts and justify the reasons behind such omissions, e.g., "اربط الدهما تحت ذيك الشجرة" (Munif, 1983,

p. 77), which is translated as "Tie the horse under that tree" (Theroux, 1987, p. 57). Theroux's translation appears to have followed the deletion process in order to avoid translating the highly emotive and evaluative word "الدهما" *dahma*. In order to show their appreciation for the beauty of their horses and to establish a connection with their surroundings, the Bedouins used to give their horses unique names that were inspired by their surroundings. Dahma's name means "darkness" or "deep black."

" لا تخاف، نمشي، نمشي، بس وكل الله" (Munif, 1983, p. 280) is another example given by Alidmat and Manjet (2020, p.363) in which Theroux deletes the first four words in Arabic and translates only the last part of the sentence literally as "Trust in God" (Theroux, 1987, p.292). Theroux appears to have misunderstood this phrase and interpreted it literally as "trust in God," which is not what the original language intended. An appropriate translation of this phrase in this particular circumstance.

Many Arab writers still view Arabic writing as being under siege by Western literature, which they see as a barrier, from a post-colonial perspective. As long as Arabic writers wish to publish their works outside of the Arab world, no one can halt the flow of Arabic literature. As English is a worldwide language, more literary texts translated into it will almost certainly lead to spread and interaction with other global cultures. Translated Arabic books, such as Abdurahman Munif's Cities of Salt (1987) and Tayp Salih's Season of Migration to the North (1966), have gained popularity among Western readers and helped to break the isolation (Alheshami & Sha'ar, 2018).

According Alidmat and Manjet (2020), since the translator is merely a conduit and a link between the audience of the target language and the source language, they should consider the connotative meanings and cultural context of the original text in addition to the literal translation when translating a text. This study also discovered that for the target message to have the same impact as the source message, a dialect must be translated into another dialect rather than into standard language. When a translator encounters names like those of places or animals found in the desert, transliteration is a useful tactic. Additionally, it establishes a relationship between the translator's native tongue and the translation equivalency chosen, indicating that the latter will not have the same impact as the original message (Sasabone et al., 2023; Samangun et al., 2024). Theroux faced additional difficulties when it came to Bedouin common nouns because they were culturally distinctive terminology that needed to be understood in the TLT before being transcribed into English. Due to his ignorance of Bedouin culture, Theroux was unable to accurately translate most of these words.

Despite the post-colonial perspective, many Arab writers still see Arabic literature as being under siege by Western literature, which they see as a barrier. As long as Arabic writers wish to publish their works outside of the Arab world, no one can halt the flow of Arabic literature. The potential for spread and

interaction with other global cultures is nearly certain if more literary books are translated into English, given its status as a worldwide language.

The novel's examination of the effects of the oil business on an unidentified Arab Gulf state and its analysis of the significant social, economic, and cultural shifts brought about by fast industrialization are retained in the translated version. The English translation keeps the title Cities of Salt in order to preserve the metaphorical meaning of the ephemeral and fragile character of the newly discovered wealth and development linked to the oil sector.

CONCLUSION

In Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, the exploration of oil significantly contributes to the exploitation of Bedouin women through the multifaceted upheavals brought about by rapid modernization. The novel depicts the displacement of traditional Bedouin communities due to oil-related activities, forcing women to navigate unfamiliar urban environments. The character Wadha, for instance, symbolises the challenges faced by Bedouin women as she grapples with the erosion of her traditional way of life. Economic changes associated with oil exploration often lead to exploitative labour conditions, exemplified when Bedouin women are compelled to adapt to unfamiliar employment opportunities, facing economic inequality. Another character is Umm Khosh when she was forced to leave *Wadi-Al-Uyoun*. The disregard for the old woman's agency reflects a patriarchal mindset that perceives nature and women as passive entities, subject to domination. In an ecofeminist lens, the old woman becomes a metaphor for the earth, both vulnerable to exploitation and disruption by external forces. The insistence on taking her, even against her will, mirrors the exploitative relationship between dominant industrial forces and the environment.

It is important to remember that translation is more than just translating words from one language to another—it also entails interpreting the original author's subtleties, cultural background, and distinctive writing style. The experience of reading a translated text can alter depending on the translator's decisions and interpretation because different translators may approach the assignment in slightly different ways. Regarding *Cities of Salt*, English-speaking readers have largely praised Peter Theroux's translation for successfully capturing the spirit of Munif's original work.

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