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Space and time in the novels of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf

In his writings, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf introduces the reader right into the middle of the Arab desert, which he portrays with passion and mastery, and he is lavish in giving us the expressive pictures of everyday toil and few joys of the life in the desert. In his prose, the desert with its inertia which it owes to the primeval nature, opposes—and succumbs—to the town boiling over with joy, which is expanding faster and faster regardless of the obstacles and victims. The two types of space seem to make up a sort of a complementary entity; the desert nature is opposed to the urban culture, thanks to which the world presented in Munīf’s novels makes an impression of being full and complete. This has a definite peculiarity: the characters find it difficult to survive both in the endless desert areas and in the labyrinths of the towns; in both cases they get along better or worse, which gives rise to the stories and plots of the particular novels.

I have based this study on four novels written by ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf: *An-Nihāyāt* (The Ends), *At-Tayh* (The Wandering Life) of the cycle *Mudun al-milḥ* (The Salt Towns), *Šarq al-Mutawassiṭ* (To the East of the Mediterranean Sea) and *Qiṣṣat ḥubb mağūsiyya* (The Magic Love Story). In all of them, numerous characters of the town and desert dwellers cope with the problem of survival; nevertheless, the protagonists are "people of strong character", that is to say strong personalities. Each of the characters in Munīf’s novels is a unique and original personality; although they share similar concerns and problems with other people, each character experiences them in his own way giving vent to his own unique feelings and emotions. These characters prove that Munīf’s novels are characterised by realism.

Dynamics of Space

As Richard Van Leeuwen writes: “In modern Arabic literature there is a marked preoccupation with issues of space. The great dean of the Arabic novel Nağib Mağfūz, is well-known for his intimate portrayal of Cairo, where Yūsuf Idrīs, for instance, is associated more with the depiction of the Egyptian country side. (...) Another example is Palestinian literature, in which the manifold evocations of the homeland are central not merely in the work of prominent authors, but in literary writing as a whole”.¹

Space is the starting point for the unfolding of stories and plots in the literary writing of other famous novelists, such as Yağyā Ṭāhir ‘Abd Allāh, especially in his novel *A Necklace and a Bracelet* (*Ṭawq wa-iswirra*), of which the action takes place in a small village of southern Egypt, living a life of its own rhythm, like in the old times, in accordance with nature and Islam, where the muffled echoes of the war being waged somewhere in the world can hardly be heard. The fidelity to unchanging customs and laws ensures the feeling of identity and the ensuing possibility of coping with nature every day, the revolt leads to the tragedy; the girl that did not preserve sexual abstinence till the wedding is killed by her brother. Just as in the work of Yağyā Ṭāhir ‘Abd Allāh of Egypt, in the novels of the Sudanese author Aṭ-Tayyib Ṣāliḥ or the Iraqi writer Amğad Tawfiq, space constitutes an important category—if not a dominant feature of the composition of novels—which draws the reader into its labyrinth and he appreciates its importance and its consequences only from this position.²

Ibrahīm al-Konī (Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī) is a novelist who have placed almost all of his depicted world in the sands of the desert, where the protagonists have a feeling of nearly unlimited freedom of motion, which is accompanied by immense everyday suffering stemming from the struggle with nature: both with the nature of the desert and with own human nature. To read the novels of Al-Konī is to experience the desert, and to write about his prose is to write about space. Although in the novels of Al-Konī there appear the Tuaregs, the nomads of the desert who are reluctant to stop longer in one place, and in the writings of Munīf we can see how the sedentary population, dwellers of the desert villages cope with the cattle raising,

¹ Richard Van Leeuwen, *Cars in the desert: Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf and André Citroën*, “Oriente Moderno”, 1997, vol. 2-3, p. 59.

² See Ewa Machut-Mendecka, *Studies in Arab Theatre and Literature*, Academic Publishing House DIALOG, Warsaw 2000, p. 117, vol.2-3, p. 59.

farming, gardening or hunting, the world portrayed by both of them seems to be similar until the moment when the protagonists of the Jordanian author have been absorbed by the town.

Richard Van Leeuwen notices this similarity and points to the process of transformation of the desert life, which finds reflection, in the opinion of this researcher, in *Nazīf al-haġar* (The bleeding stone) by Al-Koni and *An-Nihāyāt* by Munīf.

“The desert is an overwhelming natural phenomenon, which not only adds to social and political problems, but which is also an imposing force by itself, inspiring awe and resuscitating symbols of nomad life and the struggle for survival in hostile natural conditions. It is this geographical peculiarity of the Arab world and its reflection in literature that will be the focus of this contribution. The desert is not treated merely as a natural phenomenon, though; as we will see, it is also part of socio-political structures. The desert is no ‘neutral’ space, it is embedded in a complex of regimentations which determines its political dimension”.³

In Al-Konī’s depicted world, the bulldozers seem to stop on the edge of the desert. It is only in some few early stories of this writer that we can see a town with its rules that absorbs the protagonists; in most of his works, including his greatest novels *Al-Maġūs* (The Magi) and *As-Saḥara* (The Witches), the desert is a fundamental environment of the characters and the space “defends itself” against limitations; it strives to preserve its age-long unchanging shape. Munīf crosses the boundaries of the two worlds: primeval and civilised and makes his space evolve in time.

Being still primeval, the space in Munīf’s prose is marked by a specific dynamics, which determines not only everyday activities, being in accordance with the natural temporal order, which is recurrent and cyclic, but it also creates the foundations for its evolution.

The Motif of Expectation

The motif of expectation permeates most of Munīf’s writings and it plays an important part in them as a form which joins the old and new order, the primitive and higher organisation of life.

The manifestation of a close relationship between people and nature is a desert village in the above-mentioned novel *An-Nihāyāt*, struggling with

³ R. Van Leeuwen, op.cit., p. 60.

heat and drought, especially during a hard and rainless year, where people die every day⁴. However, the visitors coming from the town pay no attention to this and want to hunt in the vicinity. During the hunt there dies the hunter who accompanies them and who is the protagonist of the novel, 'Assāf, who is a half-madman, eccentric, and recluse, yet he is entirely devoted to his village which he saves from hunger by bringing the hunted birds. His funeral is attended by all his neighbours. The villagers will struggle for the dam which they need for living and if the need arises, they will even resort to armed fighting.

In the poorly differentiated space, where not much happens apart from the struggle for survival, the motif of expectation manifests itself very clearly: people wait for the rain every day⁵, and at the same time they expect the hardest year⁶. This state of affairs is conducive to fatalistic attitudes: "In each season of the year people have what God will foreordain to them and what the bird will leave for them," they say at Aṭ-Ṭība, which is the name of a village in this novel.⁷

The motif of expectation links *An-Nihāyāt* with the contents of the novel *At-Tayh*, where the dwellers of poor villages scattered over the desert of the Arabian Peninsula, which are very similar in both novels, are preoccupied with waiting for the events.

Some events can be foreseen, and first of all people know that sooner or later a caravan will reach the villages situated somewhere on the edge of the desert and it will bring countless goods—which are otherwise unavailable—and news. Other events remain in the sphere of wishes—no one knows when and if they will occur at all, first of all the arrival of the family members from the town or simply the return from emigration.

The dramatic dimension is characteristic of the expectation of the villagers portrayed in *At-Tayh*, where it is accompanied by extreme uncertainty as nothing is known of the fate of those who left and why they do not send any messages.

All the men in the depicted village of Wādī al-'Uyūn, which is situated in the desert oasis, are overwhelmed at some time by their longing for the travels; the older men have usually made some trips and they have had

⁴ 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *An-Nihāyāt*, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Bayrūt 1991, 2nd. ed., p. 82.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 33, 37.

⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

such experiences. The travels are longer or shorter—from some months to some years and sometimes people do not come back at all.⁸

A happy family of Muṭ'ib of Wādī al-'Uyūn gives a warm welcome to the returning relatives, that is their son and uncle, from a distant country; they were in Egypt and Syria and brought some money and gifts so there is a good reason for joy (although villagers do not know yet that the future will be tragic and the whole village will have to emigrate). But not far from there, in one of the neighbouring houses of Wādī al-'Uyūn, an old woman Umm Ḥūš is still waiting anxiously for the return of her only son asking about him all those who return and all travellers going in caravans that pass the village. It is because of this need of expectation she will not agree to be displaced together with other people from the village and she will die and will not see her son who will return too late to his family already after her death.⁹ The motif of expectation, especially when this expectation lasts long, evokes the sense of fatalism overwhelming the depicted world. It indicates that the course of events is predetermined beforehand and the awaiting is a proper attitude which proves the acceptance of the preordained doom.

The wait, however, is not the way for living or the form that will lead to a solution as time goes by but also a kind of protection against impetuosity of human nature with its unpredictable ideas:

“If they were at variance regarding the assessment of certain persons and situations, someone would rise and say: ‘Don't be in a hurry; we have seen thousands of people and life has taught us a lesson; just wait, wait a little.’ This would put an end to discussions and only the unsaid bet was in the air, and only the coming days might show who was right and who was wrong.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, the wait serves one to settle one's relationships with the superior fate or destiny rather than to struggle with one's nature.

In *An-Nihāyāt*, the villagers remain in contact with their families in towns, to which during the period of good harvest they send baskets full of peaches, grapes and figs¹¹, and their sons who left Aṭ-Ṭība looking for jobs

⁸ 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *At-Tayh* in: *Mudun al-millḥ*, Beirut 1992, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, 4th ed., vol. I, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹ 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *An-Nihāyāt*, op.cit., p. 43.

or schools often pay visits to them, which seems to be natural—even though not completely natural—as sometimes the wait lasts too long.

“In that cruel and cursed year many sons came to Aṭ-Ṭība, though nobody asked them to come or made them come. Whenever one of them set foot in the village and swept his eyes over its houses, he felt very sad. The newcomers blamed themselves inwardly for having delayed their arrival, and they were filled with remorse when they compared the village life with their life in town.”¹²

The characters of the villagers in Munīf’s novels (both at *An-Nihāyāt* and *At-Tayh*) do not succumb totally to their destiny; the older ones bow to its decrees but younger people are active or even dynamic; the very decision to set out is a great challenge to the fate. Thus in the depicted world of this prose the generation gap can be seen on the groundwork of the motif of expectation.

The change of the way of approaching reality which takes place in the older and younger generation is tantamount to the passage from fatalistic to deterministic attitudes, which is accompanied by the faith in human possibilities and the belief that the plan may be realised and the wish may be fulfilled thanks to a determined action. The travels of Ša‘lān or Fawwāz coming from the families of Wādī al-‘Uyūn and many other villagers living there, who are portrayed in *At-Tayh* and who are usually illiterate herdsmen, stock-breeders or farmers, stem from their profound determination to get out of stagnancy and change their own fate by affecting also the lives of their relatives sunk in the passive wait.

Thanks to the dynamics of the motif of expectation in the world depicted in Munīf’s prose writings there is a more or less conspicuous struggle going on between fatalistic and deterministic attitudes and though the latter are prevalent, fatalism comes to be apparent again and again in *At-Tayh*.

Even in a dynamically developing town of Ḥarrān, to which the action of the novel is transferred from the Wādī al-‘Uyūn desert, the echoes of the desert happen to be heard. Just as in the old time in the desert settlements, the villagers of this place continue to crowd round the coming caravans looking at the goods and waiting for their relatives who sometimes return after many years. Just as in the oasis of Wādī al-‘Uyūn Umm Ḥūš, a woman who could not wait to see her son return went mad and died before he went back, at Ḥarrān, too, another woman waits for her son in a similar way.

¹² Ibid., p. 44.

To the traditions of the desert there yield the Bedouins transformed into oil workers upon whom modernity fell like the old-time sand storms and who—with their characteristic fatalism—listen to its decrees awaiting the favour of the fate. “Ḥarrān lives and waits”¹³—says the narrator in the novel. Nevertheless, both at *An-Nihāyāt* and *At-Tayh* after a hard and long-lasting struggle of the fatalistic and deterministic attitudes the scale of victory at the end of the action turns in favour of determined and rebellious actions. The dwellers of Aṭ-Ṭība in the first novel will stubbornly defend their dam. The oil workers of Ḥarrān, who were Bedouins until quite lately, many of whom come from Wādī al-‘Uyūn, get mobilised in defence of their rights and organise a strike which turns into bloody riots. As it often happens in realistic novels, the motif of expectation brings about a logical series of events: excessively exploited patience turns into impatience and it is no longer possible to wait in silence and be passive.

The motif of expectation also occurs in the two remaining novels which have been studied in this paper but it evolves in a different way than that in *An-Nihāyāt* and *At-Tayh*. Here, one awaits one’s own choice and adopts this subjective attitude under the pressure of ethical orders or as a result of affection or both. In the novel *Šarq al-Mutawassiṭ* the sister waits relentlessly and with confidence for the return of her brother from prison, and in *Qiṣṣat ḥubb maḡūsiyya*, somewhat over-sensitive student—holder of a scholarship—and later on a clerk waits for his beloved one and although it seems unattainable, he does his best to carry the date into effect. Here the motif of expectation is not related to fatalism but it evolves on the grounds of specific events—it puts life into the characters and encourages them to act.

Against a background of such a universal expectation in Munīf’s novels there evolve the fundamental forms of time in which the depicted world of the novels functions.

In Agreement with Nature and Religion: the Quality Time

The villages in Munīf’s novels which remain so close to nature make us associate them with the time distinguished by Jerzy Chłopecki as “quality time”.

¹³ Ibid., p. 185.

“This is the quality time as it were by nature because there is a better and worse time as well as definite time ascribed to the particular activities, determined by the sequence of those activities and relationships among them (...) The quality time is the time of nature but also of tradition, habit and religion”.¹⁴

The early forms of human life in the desert were determined by the time of nature; under the influence of Islam it acquired a religious tinge, so it was clearly contained within the categories of the above-mentioned quality time. It was just because of this time that nature in the village of Aṭ-Ṭība in the novel *an-Nihāyāt* seemed specially friendly and attractive:

“At Aṭ-Ṭība the sky is very close, it is very, very clear and one can hardly find such ravishing nights in any other corner of the world. Fruits, milk, cheese, just churned butter, hens and lambs frizzling on the fire are unparalleled.”¹⁵

At *At-Tayh* people live in harmony with the rhythm of nature and they are accustomed to the sight of ubiquitous palms and streams overflowing in winter, their animals, as well as other people that are equally tall and lean, and tradition. A dweller of a desert village shoots in the air when a son is born to him and he plants a palm which will grow together with him.¹⁶

There are no devices for time registering, as it is measured by way of one's own memory, and everybody notes selectively and subjectively more important events. That is why there are never-ending disputes how old everybody is. For example, some people say that Muqbil of the family of Muṭ'ib was born in the year in which the village was attacked by large clouds of locust, while other people hold that he came into the world in the time of great harvest when the springs overflowed in abundance and brought prosperity and wealth. Due to this difference in opinions the boy may be several years older or younger, which, however, is not important at Wādī al-'Uyūn “and there is no need to trouble one's memory to fix the date of Muqbil's birth”¹⁷.

The Bedouins observe ancient traditions; they are the people of honour and even after many years they try to pay the debt which has already fallen into oblivion.¹⁸

¹⁴ Jerzy Chłopecki, *Ciągłość, zmiana i powrót. Szkice z socjologii wychowania*. (Continuity, Change and Return, Studies in Sociology of Behaviour), Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, Rzeszów 1997, p. 12.

¹⁵ 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *An-Nihāyāt*, op.cit., p. 17.

¹⁶ See 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *At-Tayh*, op.cit. pp. 7,15,52,53.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

As the custom has it, they are very hospitable; they open their houses to visitors, hear their requests and do not deny anything regardless of the consequences. They invite visitors to gorgeous meals, let them see their customs and rituals, although the Americans who receive such a warm welcome by the Bedouins and villagers in *At-Tayh* will completely change the lives of the locals against their hosts' will.

Visitors are not denied anything; they are even allowed to hunt in the desert areas surrounding Aṭ-Ṭiba in *An-Nihāyāt* during the drought which threatens that the animals in the vicinity will die of hunger.

The Time of Culture and Transformation

The world portrayed in Munīf's novels changes very slowly but unyieldingly; modernity reaches it abruptly at *An-Nihāyāt*; violent changes take place at *At-Tayh*. When people live in a different way, this indicates that a different temporal order has prevailed; the rhythm of time has changed, and, first of all, its pace begins to increase.

This phenomenon has been observed in traditional culture areas by Edward Hall, who introduced the concept of "the polychronic time".

"Polychronic people, possibly because they are too much involved with each other, tend to keep several operations going at once, like jugglers. Therefore, the monochronic person often finds it easier to function if he can separate activities in space, whereas the polychronic person tends to collect activities."¹⁹

We can see how in the depicted world of Munīf's prose writings the polychronic time struggles with quality time extorting more and more space from it and penetrating the desert more and more deeply, and the clash of the two types of temporal order gives rise to the tension of action and dramaturgy of the novels.

The new lifestyles reach the villages in *At-Tayh* together with trade; merchants coming here already behave in a different manner and perceive time in a different way than the locals.

"The people of Wādī al-'Uyūn did not agree when they were told that price bargaining and discussions on goods quality were an inseparable part of trade, which is finally supposed to bring satisfaction and joy. After all,

¹⁹ Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York 1996, p. 173.

natural trade, like the air, is not a sin. It was useless to explain it to them; they would not listen and their faces expressed irony and compassion. And secretly they said to themselves: 'how can one compare somebody who works all the year round to earn his living with someone who earns more during one moment!?'²⁰

The time of merchants accelerates and gains pace; the farther from the desert the more valuable it is, which can be felt by the dwellers of Wādī al-'Uyūn in *At-Tayh* who move closer to the town:

"They bought everything they needed to start for their new flats at Al-Ḥadra and they spent all the money they had. They found out that other places and other people differed a great deal from the inhabitants of Wādī al-'Uyūn. Sellers used few words in a hurry, broke off and watched them with a dubious expression on their faces. Hadīb al-Ḥamd wanted to no avail to buy flour and sugar at lower prices; he visited many sellers and he bargained but to no purpose. Despairingly, he had to give up."²¹

Merchants with their trade value the time and they know its importance, with which their profession and work is connected. Yet they do not measure this time too exactly either; merchant's caravans arrive in different places sooner or later; when urban culture is in statu nascendi, it is still a long way to any precision.

The polychronic time in which people hurry—even though within their own space they have much freedom—determines the transformation of the depicted world of the entire nearly six-hundred page novel *At-Tayh* and the unfolding of its main plots. The first cars on uneven desert roads connecting the newly arising towns treat time like caravans; its flow dynamizes people and determines their activities, but they still handle it quite freely. Thus, drivers leave the particular places sooner or later depending on when a complete group of passengers will gather and what the state of the roads will be.

Munīf's novels show that the polychronic time is a transition stage between tradition and modernity in which the primeval life quality being in harmony with nature changes, thus entering the state of a kind of creative chaos in which culture evolves thanks to unrestrained human inventiveness which at this stage is not subject to categorisation and routine schemata. This time is characterised by the periods of delay and acceleration so the

²⁰ 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *At-Tayh*, op.cit., p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

characters may experience some discomfort, like for example at Aṭ-Ṭība in *An-Nihāyāt*, where modern facilities are needed like air.

Nevertheless, the pace of change in the space portrayed in *At-Tayh* seems to be even catastrophic, since in this novel people try to pass directly from the quality time to the monochronic time and they disregard the intermediate stage which the polychronic time seems to be. The Americans, who appear to be strangers in the eyes of the locals, arrive in the Arabian Peninsula and try to impose modern forms of life on it. They pull down villages as there is oil in the soil underlying them. Bedouins are transformed into oil workers and tradition—with all that it stands for—is to yield all at once to modernity. Obviously, too many things happen there and they happen too fast. The recent Bedouins cannot follow the rhythm of life imposed by the American oil companies, the adjustment time is indispensable, people try to change themselves and begin to live in the polychronic time feeling double discomfort as they are attacked by the patterns of the past and future.

“A few days after their arrival they began to form small groups consisting of three or four men, who, amid the frantic rush and roaring machines that were running like frenzied camels, felt very confused and uncertain not knowing what to do and how to become useful. They began to carry wooden plates, iron bars and concrete poles still feeling extremely uncertain, which caused that they fell again and again, ran into boxes and dropped what they held in their hands. The Americans looked at them inquiringly but with no special interest.”²²

From this moment on in the space presented in *At-Tayh* the polychronic time, a category of reality which has just been fixed in the minds of the former herdsmen, begins to struggle with the increasingly aggressive monochronic time. Under the influence of the construction of an oil pipeline at Ḥarrān, one of the desert villages turns all at once into a town which is being built from scratch extremely fast.

Workers are recruited from Bedouins living in the various parts of the Peninsula, they work hard on the building site and in the harbour and they live together in a camp, where they complain of heat, lack of space, where they long for their families and villages and are unable to grasp certain red tape rules (registering, inquiring, using documents) to which they are exposed.

²² Ibid., p. 189.

“Ḥarrān has changed (...), it makes them work and causes that they are galloping like a pack of hounds and they do not know where they are going to and why.”²³

Work is all that counts²⁴, which is hard to accept in the polychronic time of the Bedouin workers in which friendship and mutual contacts are so important.

“Although ships continue to arrive and it might possibly be worthwhile learning from where they are coming and where they are going, people are ready to drop with fatigue, they are unable to make a move, and they are not even able to have a sensible talk. Thus, when the night falls, they become overwhelmed by a deep sorrow. The sorrow increases and deepens as the traffic dies away so that nobody can be seen at last—when the sea roars more loudly and when a sudden gust of wind is approaching. People sink into silence and they are overwhelmed by bitterness, especially because many questions that might be answered in other places, do not find the answer here. They do not know how long they will stay here and what their life will look like in the coming days—in this rough place in which they have found themselves.”²⁵

There is a rush around them, people are coming and leaving, travel by land or by sea, bring in some things all the time, start running a household in a new place, go on business trips to Basra or Damascus. People are distressed, they do not know how their life will be shaped, they are afraid of the future; when they were recruited for work, they were promised wealth, but there are no signs that the promise will be kept, and everything is changing more and more, making surprises and bringing the feeling of menace, which they accept in silence and withdraw into themselves. They are upset by what is unknown, for example, a box from which voices and music are emitted since the majority of the Bedouin workers have never seen a radio set, which was given as a gift to a local Arab prince and which he enjoys and takes pleasure in playing with it. Possibly in the fact that people yield to their destiny in silence there are echoes of the old-time fatalism, but under the pressure of the town in which they live it soon turns out to be useless. The new life standards with which they must suddenly cope,

²³ Ibid., p. 361.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 386.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 184.

alien behavioural patterns do not only enhance their activity, but also provoke the impulse of protest and revolt, which leads to the conflict and struggle between the employers and the employees and with different forms of conceiving time.

The characters in *At-Tayh* acutely feel the excessive acceleration of the pace of living within the framework of the newly arising urban culture; the dwellers of the formerly set up stable urban centres marked by well-established customs in *Qiṣṣat ḥubb mağūsiyya* and *Šarq al-Mutawassiṭ* also suffer in their towns. These are modern cities the functioning of which is determined already by the monochronic time, which has brought here the modern means of transportation and forms of administration of the institutionalised life. In *Šarq* it takes the shape of a grotesque apparatus of justice acting in an indefinite Arab town by way of ruthless security and prison service, whose victim is Rağab, a young intellectual involved in the political struggle. The novel abounds in drastic details of brutal questioning and cruel tortures; the character dies and further invigilation is likely to follow. Here, we can see how the activities following the rhythm of the monochronic time lead to degeneration in the town, which—nameless as it is—seems to symbolise this whole type of relationships in the contemporary world.

Then, in a nameless western city in *Qiṣṣat ḥubb...* there accumulate problems of different nature; this urban centre—if one looks at Munīf's novels as a whole—is even shocking due to its modernity; the life, being in harmony with the requirements of the monochronic time, runs fast, people act quickly and precisely and succeed and achieve their goals. In this western metropolis which follows the material culture these are, first of all, consumption goals, there is a widespread hedonism, daily pleasure is the main thing that counts, modern morale allows one to derive it specially from an exuberant sexual life, for example in the course of a continuing change of partners. This habit is also followed by the novel's character, a holder of the scholarship, coming surely from an Arab country, who at some time rejects such an attitude in favour of an ideal and the Platonic love; its object is an European living in the same city, a married woman thanks to whom the protagonist actually remains within the sphere of the same cultural patterns.

Although the contents of *Qiṣṣat ḥubb...* substantially differ from other novels of Munīf, the world presented in this novel shows the most developed type of the world the transformation of which we have been observing starting from *An-Nihāyāt* and *At-Tayh* through *Šarq*. Although it crowns—in the structural sense or in terms of its technique—the presented

changes of the temporal order, it is not the best time as the novel shows. Possibly there is no such category in all the writings of this novelist since each of the kinds of time is presented in a critical approach. In the quality time people maintain close and friendly relationships but suffer because of the whims of nature; in the polychronic time they develop inventiveness but they are lost in a hasty search of the outlet for their activeness; in the monochronic time they lose their power and will because of the excess of comfort and proposals. In all those forms of time people keep waiting for something, but since they manifest (scanty as they are, but expressive) attitudes of enthusiasm; this is not the Becket's type of waiting which leads to nowhere. Munīf perceives time in the first place as a process in which it is important that something is taking place and will continue to take place, and sticking to one definite, even the most comfortable form of time leads to stagnancy and conformism. Munīf's world is continually emerging anew, and its realism retains bright and intense colours.