

The Geography of Identity

‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf’s *Sīrat madīna: ‘Ammān fī ‘l-arba‘īnāt*

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Abstract

This study treats the masterpiece *Sīrat madīna: ‘Ammān fī ‘l-arba‘īnāt* (1994; translated into English as *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*, 1996) by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf. I read it through its unconventional and original formal and aesthetic choices in which the story of the city and the protagonist are narrated relationally in terms of each other. The goal of the present study is to deconstruct its multifaceted relational strategies, pinpointing the formal choices and thematic proclivities which situate the autobiographical subject in a particular social, cultural, temporal and historic sphere, and in constant tension with these same elements. It also pinpoints the text’s paradoxically obverse tendency to dissociate and distance the autobiographical subject by way of formal narrative techniques and content, ostensibly favoring the city as the focus of the text over the “self” of the protagonist. Under the surface, the autobiographical subject is *constantly present*, and is discursively constituted through the historical, cultural and communal accounts of the city. Finally, this study reveals that in *Sīrat madīna*, both the porousness of geographical boundaries as well as the traversing of personal boundaries are expressed through metaphors and accounts of death.

Key words: Abd al-Rahman Munif, relational autobiography, modern Arabic literature, Arabic autobiography, diaspora autobiography, exile literature

Introduction

This study treats the masterpiece *Sīrat madīna: ‘Ammān fī ‘l-arba‘īnāt* (1994; translated into English as *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*, 1996) by celebrated novelist ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf (1933-2004).¹ Munīf’s personal affiliations with places outside of Amman are expressed, paradoxically, by this text whose ostensible focus is Amman. The implied timeframe of the narrative encompasses the protagonist’s childhood through age nineteen, when he migrates from his native Amman. *Sīrat madīna* is unfolded through the narrative perception of a child, as filtered through the cognizance of an adult writer

1 Munīf was born in 1933 in Amman, where he lived until 1952, when he moved to Baghdad to study law. He subsequently lived in Egypt, Serbia, France, and Syria. In addition to *Sīrat madīna*, he wrote two volumes of short stories, fifteen novels, and non-fiction works on history, politics and literature. For a literary biography of Munīf sketched through his fictional oeuvre, see HAFEZ 2006. Notably, Hafez refers to Munīf as “an eternal exile, whose independent mind, deep-rooted values, self-doubt and constant questioning would be an anathema to party discipline” (7).

who organizes and structures the child's observations. Yet, significantly, this text is portrayed as the *sīra*—life or biography—of a city, although its third-person narration sticks firmly with the consciousness of the “child” witness whose personal experience of the city guides these chronicles. This raises the question of how to approach this text, which seems to merge the biography of a place with autobiography (inasmuch as it unfolds the story of the narrator-author-self), or, inversely, to submerge the autobiographical subject in the annals of a city. I suggest reading it as unusual approach to relational life writing, characterized by unconventional and original formal and aesthetic choices in which the story of the city and the protagonist are narrated relationally in terms of each other.² This entangling of self in his environment can be seen in light of Munīf's broader tendency in his writings, as encapsulated by Susanne Enderwitz: “he was less interested in the inner life of the individual than in the inner life of the society this individual lived in;”³ Munīf's writings indicate a preoccupation with how a community thinks and acts, moreso than a focus on a single individual.

Sīrat madīna's depictions of Amman as multicultural and cosmopolitan not only portray the atmosphere and geography in which the young protagonist grows up, but also embody the foundations of the protagonist's own complex identity. As this study shows, Amman is portrayed in constant reference to other places, and conversely, those other places actually penetrate Amman through its communities of immigrants and exiles, through its multitude of accents, religions, and customs, and through memories of distant locales, such that Amman as a singular, clearly defined entity is obscured in its pluralities of identification. The protagonist himself is narrated as an amalgam of the city, and hence this text not only unfolds his—and the city's—chronological development, but the multicultural construction of Amman as a reflection and expression of his own personal identity. This is crucial for understanding this piece of self-writing, and for understanding this text *as* self-writing.

The goal of the present study is to deconstruct the multifaceted relational strategies of *Sīrat madīna*, pinpointing the formal choices and thematic proclivities which situate the autobiographical subject in a particular social, cultural, temporal and historic sphere, and in constant tension with these same elements. It also pinpoints the text's paradoxically obverse tendency to dissociate and distance the autobiographical subject by way of formal narrative techniques and content, ostensibly favoring the city as the focus of the text over the “self” of the protagonist.⁴ Yet, as this study shows, under the surface, the autobiograph-

2 The English translation was carried out with the support of the European translation project “Mémoires de la Méditerranée” which operated until 2001 and focused on Arabic autobiographical texts which give pride of place to the role of the city in the text. This calls attention to the phenomenon of Arabic autobiographical texts in which the chronicles of the city dominate. *Sīrat madīna* can be read in light of other such texts, noting differences and similarities in how the protagonist and city are portrayed.

3 ENDERWITZ 2010: 137.

4 It should be noted that in referring briefly to this text, scholar of Arabic autobiography Tetz ROOKE (2004: 47-48) calls these childhood memories “a twin story about personal growth and development and about urban growth and development about the surrounding city of Amman. The boy-protagonist is depicted at the start of an identity-building process, his creation of himself, and so is the Jordanian capital whose lack of historical roots and quest for identity makes it a perfect metaphor of Arab modernity and uncertainty about belonging.”

ical subject is *constantly present*, and is discursively constituted through the historical, cultural and communal accounts of the city. I argue that personal identity is embedded in that of the city, and is narratologically constituted through it. This study also reveals that in *Sīrat madīna*, both the porousness of geographical boundaries as well as the traversing of personal boundaries are expressed through metaphors and accounts of death.

Articulating the Autobiographical Subject through a Geographical "Other"

Theories positing the relational dimension of autobiography emphasize the dynamics of intersubjectivity in autobiographical texts. Critical works on the theory of relational autobiography tend to be dominated by a focus on the relation between the autobiographical subject and other individuals, especially one favored other person.⁵ Such theories foreground relationality both thematically and by investigating how they inculcate dialogic relationships into the narrative strategy of the text. Along this vein, autobiography scholar Paul Eakin emphasizes narratives "constructed through the story told of and by someone else" in which the text contains not only the autobiography of the self "but the biography *and* the autobiography of the other."⁶ This same focus tends to dominate the autobiographical texts themselves through texts which are written in relation to a "proximate other," that is, in relation to another person, to one degree or another, whether they participate in writing the text, or whose voices penetrate the text through the anfractuosity of the narrative strategy.⁷ Eakin notes that this is "the most common form of the relational life" in which the self's story is "viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person."⁸ Indeed, *Sīrat madīna* is also marked by such relational terms, as the text is infused with the voice of the protagonist's grandmother, and the protagonist is represented through his continual interaction with her. However, this is secondary to the primary "proximate other" of the text, namely the geographical-cultural entity of Amman itself.

Eakin acknowledges two manifestations of the "relational dimension" in autobiographical texts, and applies this label

to those autobiographies that feature the decisive impact on the autobiographer of either (1) an entire social environment (a particular kind of family, or a community and its social institutions—schools, churches, and so forth) or (2) key other individuals, usually family members, especially parents.⁹

5 See, for example, Rocio G. DAVIS remarks that "relational approaches to life writing complicate notions of self-representation by privileging the intersubjective over the individual" (2007b: 491). There is a "consciousness that the stories of one's relatives are constitutive of one's own story" (2007b: 493).

6 EAKIN 1999: 58.

7 For example, *Ḥikāyatī sharḥun yaḥūl* (2005) by Ḥanān AL-SHAYKH in which the "proximate other" is the author's mother; *Rujū' ilā 'l-ṭufūla* (1993) by Laylā ABŪ ZAYD in which the voices of her mother and less so, her grandmother, punctuate the text; *'Irāqī fī Bārīs* (2005) by Samū'īl SHIM'ŪN in which the distant, mute father's presence permeates the text.

8 EAKIN 1999: 86.

9 EAKIN 1999: 69.

The relational dimension of *Sīrat madīna* is anomalous in that it does not adhere to such an either-or division, but rather features both “an entire social environment,” namely Amman in the 1940’s, alongside “key other individuals,” namely, the protagonist’s grandmother whose voice and point of view are invariably inculcated into the text. As such, it “expands the structures and forms through which personal experience may be narratologically enacted”¹⁰ by generating the protagonist’s personal story *through* a composite of the components of the broader community in which he grows up, whether geographical, historical, social or cultural.

This impregnable association is stronger here than in other relational Arabic autobiographies to the extent that the individual autobiographical voice is consumed by its association with Amman. Film critic Hamid Naficy points out with regard to autobiographical films, also applicable here, that

[E]xilic autobiographical films are not concerned solely with the self and with the individual. Rather they tend simultaneously to highlight elements on which group affiliation or division are based, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, and political belief.¹¹

Such cinema, he argues, is therefore highly social at the same time that it is intensely personal.¹² *Sīrat madīna* embodies these characteristics of exilic autobiography. Despite its focus on a single place, it recounts a dialectic, exilic existence inherited from the protagonist’s forebears, and which contribute to the paradoxical sense that Amman is both exile and home, or *exile at home*, stemming from the awareness that his familial roots lie elsewhere, and from the fact that the author writes of his native city from the physical and temporal distance of exile. This generates a sense of “double alienation,” as has been discussed with regard to the writings of Samīr Naqqāsh.¹³ It is productive in this context also to mention the concept of “alienated nearness” in which “a daily lived distance dims the gaze.”¹⁴ This is narratively reinforced by the protagonist’s departure from Amman at the end of the text, which asserts the exilic foundations of self which arises out of this autobiography, a self on the cusp of a life of exilic wanderings, and which situates the gaze upon Amman as distant and exilic, hence “alienated nearness.” Ironically, despite its focus on a geographical place, this text ultimately resists monologic national affiliation, by constructing place—and here also the self—as unstable, ever-changing composites of multiple affiliations. There is a tension in this text between “reclaiming” a connection with place and leaving it, symbolically rejecting national affiliation with place,¹⁵ and the complex interplay between continuity and discontinuity which characterizes the diasporic subject.

Sīrat madīna is punctuated by discontinuities of identity and encodes tensions of locational ambivalence and diversity, of exile, diaspora and transnationalism, rather than specificity, despite its focus on a singular place. Munīf inherited his father’s Saudi citizenship

10 See DAVIS 2007: 136.

11 NAFICY 2006: 95.

12 For a similar phenomenon (though not exilic) in Turkish autobiography/memoires, cf. GLASSEN 2007.

13 HAJJAR 2010: 285.

14 KEIL-SAGAWA 2010: 253.

15 Contravailing such texts as Muḥammad SHUKRĪ’s *al-Khubz al-ḥāfī* (1982) which Tetz Rooke reads as a national allegory. See ROOKE 1997.

but was born and brought up in Amman. Because his father died several years after his birth, his affinity with Saudi Arabia was in name only, and the intentions of returning there faded. It nevertheless complicates an unmitigated identity with a single location. His trans-cultural identity was further entrenched by his Iraqi mother and grandmother. In *Sīrat madīna*, Amman is shaped as an agglomeration of liminalities, reflecting the inscription of hybridity, interstices, and otherness within the protagonist's own identity.

The strong, nearly indissoluble, association between self-identity and geographical-cultural positioning—relationality taken to its exilic extreme in this text—is further asserted by the textual strategy of obscuring the presence of the protagonist both as a character in the text and in the narrative strategies of voice and text. Not only is the autobiographical voice ("I") itself distanced through third-person narration, but the protagonist himself is largely absent, fused into broader communal and geographical entities, such that his own individual presence cannot always be discerned. This defamiliarizing technique, exemplified and discussed below, adds immediacy to the relational proclivity of the subject, which can be described from its milieu only with difficulty, when scrutinized through relational strategies. This study treats the implications of contextualizing the autobiographical subject narratologically so intricately within geographical and cultural structures, with special emphasis on liminal configurations and the diasporic, multicultural identity such a positioning fosters.

First Person Oblique

The purpose of this section is to expose *Sīrat madīna*'s inscriptions of individual identity, the "first voice" of an autobiographical text, to appropriate anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer's typology of autobiographical voices.¹⁶ He distinguishes between the first voice which represents the "processes of identity formation"; the second voice which comprises the various "cross-historical and cross-cultural others" which resonate in the text through double-voicing; and the third voice which comprises the text's "multiple perspectival positioning."¹⁷ Usually the first voice is that which is most unambiguously foregrounded in an autobiographical text, but in the case of *Sīrat madīna*, this voice, and indeed, the first-person protagonist himself, needs to be unearthed. To this end, this section first treats how the voice and character of the protagonist are obscured in the text, and then how the protagonist can nevertheless be located and revealed.

Before investigating this text's relational configurations, that is, the text's relation to various "others," the oblique nature of the self in this text must necessarily be noted. This is because the autobiographical subject is embedded in a web of "others," and hence its very obscurity is a product of the text's marked relationality. First of all, there is no first-person voice in the text. The child-protagonist, who represents the autobiographical narrator during his childhood years, is unnamed and disembodied. The tone of the text reflects an attempt to eclipse both his personal feelings and his voice to a great extent. References to the protagonist of these textual memories are generally relayed in a distant, impersonal tenor.

16 FISCHER 1994: 79.

17 Ibid.: 92.

This is executed not only through voice but by minimizing reportage of intimate details, and by conveying personal anecdotes in a detached manner. The autobiographical subject is referred to alternately as “*al-ṭifl*,” “*al-ṣaghīr*,” (both recalling the designation “*al-ṣabī*” in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s monumental *al-Ayyām*, 1929), as well as “*al-ḥafīd*” (the grandson) in relation to the grandmother, and, towards the end of the text, “*al-ṭālib*” (the student). He is also implicated through third person verbs without a specific designation, for example: “it still echoes in one’s memory.”¹⁸ He is also further insinuated as one of a group of children, “*al-awlād*,” “*al-atfāl*”¹⁹ and “*al-ṣighār*”.²⁰ In most cases, from the context, it is inferred that this refers to the boy-protagonist in association with his siblings,²¹ although, it also is used to refer to the boy-protagonist in association with his friends or compatriots. For example, “as the children went home”²² refers to the protagonist and his siblings, and a more general statement about “children” in Amman during the period at hand refers to children in general, including the protagonist. An example of this is the anecdote at the end of the first chapter in which he describes a “dervish” who uses his powers to practice medicine and discover the identity of thieves.²³ One day, as he conducts the rituals necessary for divining the identity of the thieves, “children (*al-ṣighār*) peeked in on him,”²⁴ and when the dervish becomes aware of their presence this greatly annoys him. This anecdote exemplifies the “pact,” to borrow Lejeune’s term with regard to autobiography,²⁵ which is valid for this text, namely, that “the children” implies the personal view of the narrator, establishing his role as witness.²⁶ Although the term “the children” downplays the individuality of the protagonist by fusing his presence into the collective “children,” this tactic nevertheless—ironically—lends a personal quality to the text.

The narrative strategy of employing the third-person voice in an autobiographical text is employed in other prominent Arabic texts, most prominent among them *al-Ayyām* by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, with which Munīf was surely acquainted.²⁷ Narrating an autobiographical text in the third-person voice in itself is not sufficient to throw the reader off of the autobiographical trail. The autobiographical sense of such texts lies in the chronological unfolding of

18 MUNĪF 1994: 114. All translations of *Sīrat madīna* are mine (A.Sh.).

19 MUNĪF 1994: 107.

20 MUNĪF 1994: 129.

21 For example on snowy days, the grandmother would tell “the children” (*al-ṣighār*) the good news, the context indicating that “the children” here refers to her grandchildren, the protagonist and his siblings, and is not a general reference to the generation of children in Amman, or to the protagonist amongst his friends. See MUNĪF 1994:129.

22 MUNĪF 1994: 118.

23 MUNĪF 1994: 72.

24 Ibid.: 73.

25 LEJEUNE 1982: 193.

26 Another evocative example of this is in the last chapter (eighteen), which is the most historically-minded chapter in the text. As the text describes the colorful characters of Amman, it focuses on “the miracles” of one particular shaykh: “The boys (*al-fityān*) who were keeping track of Shaykh Sāliḥ’s ‘miracles’ would say that...” This excerpt exemplifies the first-person point of view of the text, in which the narrator is one of “the boys,” and underscores its testimonial, not merely historical, ethos. MUNĪF 1994: 415.

27 Other autobiographies narrated in the third-person voice include *Zill al-ghayma* (The Cloud’s Shadow) by Palestinian poet Hannā ABŪ HANNĀ (1997), and *Ṭifl min al-qarya* (A Child from the Village) by Egyptian thinker and activist Sayyid QUTB (1946).

seminal developments in the life of the writer which molded his identity, albeit not in the first-person voice. In such texts, the third-person voice is employed as a narrative strategy, but this notwithstanding, their autobiographical nature is evidently manifest. The third-person voice is more of a narrative ruse or stratagem employed for a variety of effects, but it obscures neither the autobiographical intent of the text, nor the foregrounding of the autobiographical subject. In Ḥannā Abū Ḥannā's autobiographical trilogy, this device in fact becomes noticeably clumsy in the second and third volumes when the text describes encounters between the fictionalized narrator "Mīkhā'īl" and well-known people.²⁸ Similarly, in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-Ayyām*, it is interesting to note that the translator into English of the third volume took the liberty of making the narrator "speak with the pronoun 'I'".²⁹ This exemplifies that for Abū Ḥannā and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, this narrative technique does not entail much more than a "switching" of voices, which informs the distancing, among other repercussions of this technique.³⁰ In *Sīrat madīna*, the third-person voice conspicuously evokes the perspective of the autobiographical subject, from a distanced perspective of a writer describing his younger "self," and with the caveat that this "self" is usually located in a group of other children, not individually. A repercussion of this technique in this text (as has also been argued for the use of the technique in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-Ayyām*³¹) is that it causes the individual self to appear representative of a whole generation. At times, however, in this text, the third-person voice seems no more than a mask for an extremely personal self-narrative. This is the case when the narrative recounts the wording of the song "I am Coffee" which "the child" learns in his first year of primary school: "Over fifty years have passed since that song was learned, but its echo still reverberates..."³² This wording is so personal, and links the third-person protagonist to the writer-self so unequivocally as to render the third-person voice maladroit and inappropriate, a risk this narrative strategy can entail. It is in such passages that the autobiographical self is most conspicuously revealed.

Narrative point-of-view, whether first- or third-person, is not an indicator of the autobiographical caliber of a text. Inversely, novels often employ the first-person voice to express that of an imagined character. Moreover, first-person narration in a work of non-fiction, even a personal one, is not always an indicator of autobiographical text. An example of such a phenomenon is *Baṣrayāthā: sūrat madīna* (1993) by the Iraqi writer Muḥammad Khuḍayyir. This text, recounted in the first-person voice, relates the author's personal reflections and musings on his beloved city of Basra. It comprises a range of reflections, including personal memories, local tales, and historical anecdotes. There is no single protagonist in this text in which each chapter reads like a discrete essay on various aspects of Basra, its history and characteristics. Although it unabashedly represents the author's personal

28 *Khamīrat al-ramād* (The Yeast of the Ashes) and *Mahr al-būma* (The Dowry of the Owl) both 2004.

29 HUSAYN 1997: 242.

30 This is not meant to downplay possible ramifications of this technique, which, as Susanne Enderwitz points out in her discussion of the third-person voice in *al-Ayyām*, "can be highly ironic in its effect; but it is difficult to decide whether the adult perceives the boy once he was as in the meantime estranged from him or the experience of the boy has been widened into the experience of a whole generation"—ENDERWITZ 1998: 11-12. She also points out that the use of the third-person voice in this text "adds to the novelistic mode of his autobiography" (ibid.: 11).

31 As noted in JUBRĀN 2006: 204.

32 MUNĪF 1994: 114.

point of view in first-person voice, the focus is exclusively on the city from a variety of perspectives and not on a protagonist's personal change and development, nor does the text comprise any continuous period of the narrator's life. Contrasting *Sīrat madīna* with *Baṣrayāthā* serves to bring out the focus of Munīf's *Sīrat madīna* on the boy-protagonist's "history of becoming," to cite Nancy K. Miller's propitious delineation of autobiography.³³ She avers that autobiography is "how you pass on the story that you think expresses you,"³⁴ and, as I argue in this study, by what means Munīf casts the development of his personal identity within the social, cultural and geographic setting of his childhood. Whereas *Baṣrayāthā* is personal, but not autobiographical, Munīf's text unfolds the narrative through the perspective of a protagonist who matures over the course of the chronological continuum of the text. Munīf could have chosen to avoid mention of intimate details of his child-self in this text other than the context in which he grew up; the text would then comprise a personal perspective, but would not comprise a personal history of the author himself. It should be noted that pages 395-406 of the eighteenth chapter of *Sīrat madīna* provide a more detached rendering of the chronicles of Amman, including excerpts from two medieval travel accounts and six modern travel accounts which invoke Amman. The detached point of view stands out from the rest of the text, but it turns back into the personal testimonial point of view, and the chapter continues through page 430 with the first-person voice paradoxically present and obscured, as it is throughout the rest of the text, with the testimonial presence of "the children" punctuating the descriptions of Amman.

The text's autobiographical nature is obfuscated by its ostensible, stated focus on the city of Amman, as the element which propels the narrative. The first sentence of the introduction states: "This book conveys the story of a city, namely Amman (*sīra li-madīna hiya 'Ammān*), and it is not an autobiography of its author (*wa-laysa sīra dhātīyya li-kātibihi*), even if both stories overlap... at certain points" (45). Classifying one's text as not-an-autobiography is not the same as denying autobiographical elements therein. Autobiographical disclaimers are not uncommon in modern Arabic self-writing: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn who neither denies nor affirms the autobiographical nature of *al-Ayyām*;³⁵ Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī, in *Ibrāhīm al-kātib* (1931) bequeaths his protagonist with his own name and profession, but professes to be the opposite of him; Muḥammad Shukrī's *al-Khubz al-ḥāfi* (1982) self-identifies as a novelistic autobiography (*sīra dhātīyya riwā'iyya*); and Idwār al-Kharrāt who categorically denies that his *Turābuhā za'farān* (1986) is autobiographical in the first sentence, highlighting the role of "artifice" therein.³⁶ Writing on fiction in Arabic autobiog-

33 MILLER 2000 [1996]: 53.

34 Ibid.: 165.

35 Regarding *al-Ayyām*, the author signs his name at the end of the letter to his daughter at the end of the first volume, and in the third volume, his name occurs in the body of the text. See Fedwa MALTI-DOUGLAS' discussion of the letter to his daughter at the end of the text in Chapter One of *Blindness and Autobiography* (MALTI-DOUGLAS 1988: 19-31). Although critics are not agreed as to whether this text should be read as a novel or an autobiography, it is indubitably an autobiographical narrative, even if cast in a novelistic style.

36 In his preface, al-Kharrāt writes, "These writings are not an autobiography, nor anything like; the flights of fancy, the artifice herein, bear them far beyond such bounds"—KHARRAT 1989: xiv. On this text which also features a "remembered city" see, e.g., GUTH 1999.

raphy, Susanne Enderwitz suggests reading the latter disclaimer as “an offer for a fictional pact.”³⁷ She suggests that this text is

perhaps the first Eastern Arabic autobiographical example for the postmodern proclamation of the ‘death of a subject’. Seen on a larger scale, however, it fits well into a general trend within autobiographical literature over the past thirty years, which consists in constantly widening the gap with biographical literature by the means of fictionalization.³⁸

This exemplifies the spectrum of possibilities in a text self-described as a not-an-autobiography. This is helpful in stressing the point that in *Sīrat madīna*, what is at stake in its disavowal is not fictionalization of the text per se, but rather, the dissolution of the subject, one facet of the fictionalization of autobiographies.

In *Sīrat madīna*, the author eschews categorizing his text as an autobiography in the same breath as he asserts that it is a “biography” of a city incorporating autobiographical elements.³⁹ This statement is followed by additional controversions with regard to genre. The introduction states that it is also not a novel, being as it is not a work of the imagination (“*li-anna ’l-khayāl fīhi mawjūd*”),⁴⁰ and despite employing novelistic techniques.

In contemplating Munīf’s disavowal of the autobiographical genre of his text, I wonder whether he would have maintained this assertion were he aware of the possibilities opened up by theories of relational autobiography. For his stated focus, Munīf chooses place over self, despite the fact that the content and form of the text both point to a constant association between both. The theories underlying the concept of “relational autobiography” help unravel the tension and connection between these two elements.

The figure of the protagonist is obfuscated not only by the third-person narrative voice, but also by the text’s generally impersonal, disinterested tone which deflects the emphasis away from the protagonist and decenters his presence. This tone is manifest in the fact that the text eschews noting personal biographical details from the life of the protagonist; and circumvents overt expressions of his personal feelings. This tone distinguishes it from such a text as Tāhā Ḥusayn’s *al-Ayyām*, which, although also narrated in the third-person voice, expresses the life story of the autobiographical subject in a subjective, personal, and pathos-filled narrative. In contrast, in *Sīrat madīna*, the protagonist dissolves into the background or into a collective—of siblings, children, or the city inhabitants in general (“*ahl ’Ammān*”).⁴¹ The very first sentence of the text foregrounds the paradox of the objective

37 ENDERWITZ 1998: 18.

38 Ibid.: 19.

39 It is important to emphasize that the issue here is not non-fiction versus fiction, as the text itself does not claim fictionality, as opposed to al-KHARRĀT’s *Turābuhā za’farān* (1986), nor does it claim that the memories recounted therein are not those of the author. On the contrary, he affirms the text’s autobiographical predilection. The point of the reservations proffered in the introduction, as I see it, is the issue of emphasis, namely that the text mainly concerns a city, not a person. This is despite the fact that the text is narrated throughout with constant reference to the point of view of the boy-protagonist. His experiences through time, as well as his likes, dislikes, and thoughts, guide the trajectory of the text.

40 MUNĪF 1994: 45.

41 Ibid.: 82.

and subjective point of view characteristic of the text. On the one hand, the text itself, as well as the town-city it describes, spawns from the memory of the protagonist. On the other hand, the protagonist is referred to through synecdoche, as assumed possessor of the “memory” containing the recollections which vivify Amman. This implied protagonist in whose memory resides “the first image of the town-city of Amman” coalesces textually into the bevy of children: “Before that day, the boundaries of the town, as the children (*atfāl*) perceived them...”⁴² Shortly thereafter, the protagonist-child is singled out for the first time, but only inasmuch as he finds a friend and then merges into the dual frame of reference: “When the street emptied of people, and silence prevailed, the child (*al-ṣaghīr*) found no one his age other than Mu‘ādh Shuqayr...” This narrative strategy of weaving the autobiographical protagonist in and out of individual and collective identity, simultaneously muted and asserted, characterizes his narrative presence throughout. He is at once the eyes, ears, and memory of the narrative and yet distanced through both narrative content and strategy.

This enigma of subjectivity is compounded by the dispassionate narration of personal details. For example, the text never unambiguously indicates the configuration of the protagonist’s family. The protagonist has *implied* siblings: from context it emerges that “the children” refers alternately to children in Amman in general, to the protagonist’s group of friends, or to the protagonist amongst his siblings. Only in the sixth chapter is there a passing reference to “the three brothers.”⁴³

A case in point exemplifying the detached and dispassionate narration of the protagonist’s personal history—which, paradoxically, reveals the protagonist—is the account of the protagonist’s father’s death. This is related in a chapter whose general theme is death, as “The revelation of Amman the city-the people (*al-madīna-al-bashar*) took place through the shock of death. The child (*al-tifl*) would later look back and wonder about those who had ‘passed on’ (*dhahabū*)...”⁴⁴ The theme of death includes a depiction of a professional mourner; funeral processions; graveyards and cemeteries; avoiding death; and deaths of specific people, including classmates, a notable, and also the protagonist’s father. Remarkably, this is couched in the tone in which the other deaths are reported:

A few last words about the shock of death, which has not disappeared from memory. Its beginning resembles a dream, and blends with other things,⁴⁵ including: disbelief; suddenly being plunged into a green forest; the inability to be happy or to play. When the children (*al-ṣighār*) return from that compulsory outing, they discover that their father has died and has been buried in their absence, and when they start to cry, they are again whisked away to the house of one of the relatives in order to stay for a few days... It became the first connection to personal death...⁴⁶

42 Ibid.

43 MUNĪF 1994: 170.

44 Ibid.: 75.

45 This recalls Jabrā Ibrāhīm JABRĀ’s introduction to his autobiographical work *al-Bi’r al-ūlā* (The First Well) in which he describes his childhood stories as an amalgam of memories and dreams, rationality and irrationality, existentialism and poetry—JABRĀ 1987: 14.

46 MUNĪF 1994: 84-85.

This depiction is jarring. On the one hand, it reveals the personal experience of the protagonist. On the other hand, it embeds this intimate anecdote within a sequence of death-related anecdotes. This is the only place where the text mentions that the protagonist grows up without a father, and, ironically, “confirms” that the text is narrated not only from a subjective perspective, but from a subjective personal one, that of the orphaned protagonist. If, as it asserts, it is the first connection to “personal death,” then the reader is wont to ask: “personal” for whom? The personal minutiae in the narrative form a puzzle which must be pieced together. As this excerpt shows, the personal is embedded in the collective, and yet it constitutes the perspective from which the collective is perceived. This excerpt evokes a reaction similar to Enderwitz’s with regard to a passage in Yūsuf Haykal’s *Ayyām al-ṣibā* (Days of Youth, 1988) which describes how the author nearly drowned in a disinterested, distant first-person voice. Of this, she writes that the “the monologue of the drowning boy, thoroughly rational and uttered in high-standard Arabic, adds an intriguingly ‘unreal’ or even ‘imaginary’ flavor to the scene.”⁴⁷

Locating the autobiographical subject

Although obfuscated and obscured, the autobiographical protagonist is nevertheless the central axis around which the text pivots. The story of the city is refracted through subjective experience, and conversely, the identity of the autobiographical subject is articulated through the city chronicles. In spite of foregrounding the collective over the self, personal emerges out of the collective as the following shows: “Another sudden death Amman remembers in disbelief was the death of Mājīd al-‘Udwān...”⁴⁸ Amman itself personified, employed as synecdoche for the people of Amman—perhaps—or, in the end, speaking perhaps only for himself, as a referent back to the adult writer-self looking back and remembering.

Yet, this text is more than a chronicle of Amman from a personal perspective, but also comprises the coming-of-age of the autobiographical subject. In other words, his is not a static position from which he describes change occurring around him, but rather, the text encompasses the ontogenesis of the autobiographical subject. His growth is elicited by the following trajectory: the first two chapters invoke the protagonist’s earliest memories. The text then treats his schooling, narrated in chronological order according to the protagonist’s progression from one Quran school to another (chapter 3), to the government primary school (chapter 4), to secondary school (chapter 13), and finally to the Scientific College (chapters 14 and 17). The narrative thrust is impelled by the protagonist’s chronological development. Chapters five through twelve are organized topically, but with a chronological undercurrent: The fact that they are couched between the protagonist’s move from primary school to secondary school imputes them into the sphere of his primary school experiences.

In *Sīrat madīna*, identity is constructed rhetorically in terms of relation to geographical location and cultural context. Critic Nancy K. Miller’s statement (in a footnote), that the

47 ENDERWITZ 1998: 10.

48 MUNĪF 1994: 86-89.

other “provides the map of the self”⁴⁹ certainly applies to this text. In this case, the map in question is not merely metaphorical, but has actual geographic implications, as *setting* plays the role of primary object of relation. By “Amman,” the text implicates an intricate conglomeration of spatial with social aspects, including institutions, but also illuminating characteristics of an entire community by describing its individual members, and major events it endures, and the cultural transformations it undergoes in the period coeval with the subject’s childhood. The geographical and spatial elements of the city constitute a background for its social, institutional, and historical vicissitudes.

The first chapter epitomizes that Amman unfolds textually through the boy-protagonist’s perspective, which delimits the textual boundaries of the city. In turn, the cadences of Amman define the realm of his childhood experience, and corresponding identity formation. The boundaries of the city are determined through the protagonist’s perception of them, and the reverse is also true, namely that the protagonist is conjured up inasmuch as he is a catalyst for the memories of the city. This is exemplified in the following lines: “Before that day, the boundaries of the town, as the children (*atfāl*) perceived them, had not extended beyond the neighborhoods in which they lived. If they had crossed them, it was only to go to nearby places, accompanied by adults. Life before that day had been ordinary and slow, as if the world (*ālam*) had begun and ended within each neighborhood,⁵⁰ or at its boundaries...”⁵¹ The world of the city takes shape through the child’s awareness of it:

This was the first time he became aware of the length and breadth of the neighborhood, both in terms of a [geographical] place and in terms of its people (*bashar*). [He became aware] that it extended beyond the house of Abū Shām and Ḥājja Anīsa, and the houses on that bend parallel to Fayṣal Street. [He also became aware that] they were separated from Baghdad by distance and accent, but at the same time, it was also extremely close. That, then, was the first real discovery of the city, which happened to coincide and collide with death!⁵²

These paragraphs show that Amman’s contours are contrived through the protagonist’s burgeoning awareness, and construed in relation to his evolving perspective. Thus Amman metamorphoses as his geographical awareness broadens. In fact, the map of the Middle East is subjective, molded by the protagonist’s vacillating perspective, according to which Amman and Baghdad are either distant or contiguous.⁵³ The Ammani community’s unexpected interest in the death of King Ghāzī of Baghdad alters the child’s perception of the distance between Amman and Baghdad, causing him to realize that Baghdad is relevant not only to his family, and thus that it is “closer” to Amman than he had previously imagined.

49 MILLER 1992: 14.

50 Compare this to the initial description of the fence in *al-Ayyām* which delimits the world of the protagonist, stretching “to the end of the world” (*ākhir al-dunyā*). *Al-Ayyām*, 4.

51 MUNĪF 1994: 51.

52 MUNĪF 1994: 52.

53 Cf. ḤUSAYN 1997: 12 (*The Days*, English translation): “He was convinced that the world ended to his right at the canal...” The protagonist construes the world in terms of his immediate perception of it.

These paragraphs recall the initial chapter of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-Ayyām*, which *Sīrat madīna* invokes through its peculiarities of style and content.⁵⁴ There, too, the boundaries of the protagonist's world are conjured through the protean perspective of a child's mindset further confounded by the passage of time. Both texts reject absolute geographical boundaries, evoking instead the shifting boundaries of the protagonist's world, and establishing his milieu in relation to his perception of it. The blindness of the protagonist of *al-Ayyām* can be assigned metaphorically to that of *Sīrat madīna* as an expression of the subjectivity of perception,⁵⁵ which blinds one to an objective geographical reality.⁵⁶ The perception of geography in *Sīrat madīna* undergoes multiple transformations over the course of the text. An important example of this can be found in the references to World War I which joins Amman to a broader international conglomeration of geographical points; and also to the references to Palestine in chapter seventeen, which, through emotional identification at the time of the 1948 war, becomes "closer" to Amman.

By melding the protagonist's personal development into the chronicle of Amman, the protagonist is emplaced within the narrative's social, geographic and geopolitical locations. The protagonist of *Sīrat madīna* becomes a narratively "situated self"⁵⁷ who identifies both through and against the environment depicted in the text. This intermingling of self and milieu reveals the narrator's quest for origins. He reconstructs his childhood world, as an account of his own identity. Ironically, these chronicles communicate and expose the inner world of the obscured, dissolved subject, the "evolution of his nature" (*takwīn al-tab'*) in the words of Arab litterateur Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm,⁵⁸ whose own *Sijn al-ʿumr* (The Prison of Life) can be read in terms of a relational autobiography in which his focus is explaining what he has inherited from others, portraying himself as a prisoner of this inheritance.⁵⁹

Although "the city" is the proclaimed focus of the text, the city issues from the consciousness of the protagonist. This stated focus comprises an aspect of the text's narrative strategy, and I read it as an example of what critic Susanna Egan calls "convoluted self reflection,"⁶⁰ for which she proffers *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) by Gertrude Stein as prototypical. In Stein's autobiography, the stated focus of the text is Toklas, and in the case of *Sīrat madīna*, it is the city. Such declarations are a textual artifice through whose agency the actual autobiographical subject emanates. Like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *Sīrat madīna* is also concerned with "authenticating the process of discovery and re-cognition. These autobiographies, in other words, do not reflect life so much as they reflect (upon) their own processes of making meaning of life."⁶¹ The narra-

54 Note thematic similarities between both texts in their description of the Quran school (*kuttāb*), especially in the role of the prefect (*'arif*)—MUNIF 1994: 96. Also note reference to Ṭāhā ḤUSAYN's *al-Adab al-jāhili* (1926), on p. 361.

55 In this opening section, the protagonist's friend's "eyes were asking" as to where the people had gone (MUNIF 1994: 51). In light of the thematic similarities, perhaps this is meant to invoke *al-Ayyām*.

56 In the first chapter of *al-Ayyām*, the trope of "not remembering" is a kind of metaphorical blindness which obscures the acumen of the child-protagonist.

57 EAKIN 1999: 85.

58 al-ḤAKĪM 1990 [1964]: 228.

59 See *ibid.*: 220.

60 EGAN 1999: 8.

61 *Ibid.*: 7-8.

tive strategy of *Sīrat madīna* refracts the story of the autobiographical self *through* the chronicles of a city in order to articulate the communal process of self-making, thereby creating, in the words of critic Rocio G. Davis, an “itinerary of subjectivity.”⁶² This narrative strategy also reveals the multiplicity at the base of the protagonist’s identity. *Sīrat madīna*’s challenge to the notion of the individual as prime subject illustrates Munīf’s conception of the first-person in autobiography, as according to Eakin, the self is “truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation” as it addresses “the extent to which the self is defined by –and lives in terms of—its relation with others.”⁶³ The protagonist is narrated through his interaction with others, fused into the pulsating vividness of life in Amman, and is thus indistinct and inscrutable. Noted critic of Arabic literature Sabry Hafez epitomizes the continual interaction (*al-tafā’ul al-mustamirr*) between self and its contexts (*siyāqāt*) in autobiography, both of which are subject to evolve.⁶⁴ The metamorphosis of a place, Hafez asserts, can be channeled to reflect personal change, and the boundaries of identity can be expressed in terms of the boundaries of a particular place and context through the manipulation of narrative technique.

Subjective experience, is, in fact, what vivifies the city. The growth and change of the “witness” through whose eyes the city is rendered creates a focal point of attention not only on the story of the city but also on the story of the storyteller. In this sense, this text can be viewed as incorporating, in Eakin’s terms, “the story of a story,” and the autobiographical subject can be revealed in terms of “a proximate other” proposed by Eakin; or perhaps, this should be posed as an open-ended question: is the city the “proximate other” of the autobiographical protagonist, or is the autobiographical protagonist the “proximate other” of the city? The difficulty in answering this question underscores the multiplicity of readings which the text engenders.

Negotiating Personal and Geographical Boundaries through Death

Feminist critic Leigh Gilmore underscores the positioning of a self in relation to a particular milieu:

Every autobiography is ... an assembly of theories ... of personal identity and one’s relation to a family, a region, a nation; and of citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion). How to situate the self within these theories is the task of autobiography which entails the larger organizational question of how selves and milieus ought to be understood *in relation to each other*.⁶⁵

In the same textual breath, Gilmore notes the seeming opposite, “the autobiographical self who is cut off from others, even as it stands for them... Once separated conceptually from a nation, a family, a place, and a branching set of contingencies, how does the individual

62 DAVIS 2005: 44.

63 EAKIN 1999: 43.

64 HĀFĪZ 2002: 18.

65 GILMORE 2001: 12.

recognize this disestablished self?"⁶⁶ These questions articulate both the spectrum and limits of relationality in self-writing, in other words, that tension inherent in self-identifying relationally, while at the same time delimiting oneself from that same relational focus. *Sīrat madīna* is haunted by such a tension through its dual tendencies to accentuate the affinities between the autobiographical "self" and its milieu, on the one hand, and, on the other, to delimit boundaries separating self from its geographical and cultural environment. In other words, the autobiographical self here constantly defines and re-defines the quality and degree of its relation to its surroundings. The protagonist conceives of himself through the city and against it, and is therefore an example of the "contradictory discourses" which characterize autobiographies in general, and ethnic autobiographies in particular.⁶⁷

In *Sīrat madīna*, the theme of liminality is brought out by a focus on actual borders, such as the primordial marking of boundaries discussed above with regard to the first chapter, and similarly, the protagonist's eventual leave-taking from Amman in the final chapter, in which the autobiographical subject dissociates himself from the milieu in which he has until now been both historically and textually embedded. This final departure is narrated in the context of the death of the protagonist's grandmother, whose voice has invigorated the text. The text cannot continue without her voice; her death comprises the textual denouement as well as the demarcation of the end of childhood. Moreover, the finality of the protagonist's departure from Amman and its juxtaposition with the grandmother's death locates it almost in terms of the irrevocability of death.⁶⁸ Death captures the finality of this departure, this moment in which exile ceases to lurk in the background (in Amman's migrant communities, the protagonist's own post-memory and familial essence), but becomes the protagonist's existential condition.

The theme of death is prominent in the first and last chapters, those in which the most dramatic renegotiations of boundaries occur, the first the broadening of local boundaries, and the last, the leave-taking from within these limits. This establishes a textual connection between death and the traversing and shifting of boundaries. In the first chapter, the death of King Ghazi represents, or causes, the broadening of the protagonist's conception of the perimeter of his imagined community, stretching not only into other neighborhoods, but also as far as Baghdad. In contrast with this, the final textual death in the last chapter, that of his grandmother, symbolizes the breakdown of the Ammani community as it once was, its irreversible transformation, and the protagonist's own transformed locus of identification. The grandmother dies in Baghdad, her native city, whence the protagonist has already relocated, and barely ten mourners attend her funeral.⁶⁹ The textual beginnings of memory and awareness are delineated through death, and the breakdown of geographical, communal, and familial association is also expressed in terms of death.

Importantly, both deaths link the protagonist to Baghdad, the first through his awareness and imagination, but which establishes an undercurrent of his identity maintained throughout the text. The final death, then, can be read as a realization of this connection; this death does not broaden the theoretical horizons of his identity, as does the first, but

66 Ibid.

67 BERGLAND 1994: 134, and FISCHER 1994.

68 See GULLESTAD 2004.

69 MUNĪF 1994: 435.

actually locates the protagonist in Baghdad, which until now only been imagined and felt through the accents, memories, and longings of others. This statement can be broadened to a role of death in general throughout the text, which includes the mention of his father's death (another link to an alternate geographical belonging), and the deaths of the "mad" who wander the streets of Amman (which exemplify Amman's liminal characters). In *Sīrat madīna*, death destabilizes boundaries, and links the protagonist to places beyond the borders of Amman. Death symbolizes the textual focus away from Amman as a geographical center, constructing it as marginal and relational to other places, particularly, but not only, as a periphery to Baghdad.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the protagonist's final leave-taking of his own native city with the grandmother's death casts the departure in terms of a death-like rupture. The overall narrative absence expressed through the narrative choices of the third-person voice, and of blending the protagonist into an almost invisible entity can be read in terms of an expression of "the impossibility of return"⁷⁰ imbuing the text with the finality of this rupture: while vivifying his childhood world, the text distances the protagonist from it decisively. Moreover, to draw from Nancy K. Miller, through this text, Munif writes "against death, the other's and one's own."⁷¹ That is, this text perhaps writes against his grandmother's death and the "death" of an era by vivifying both human and city life through the written word.

Conclusion: The Self between Home and Exile

As discussed above, *Sīrat madīna* embodies a dialectic, exilic existence constructing Amman as both exile and home, or *exile at home*, and also generates a sense of "alienated nearness" since the place which was once home is described from a spatial and temporal distance. Moreover, the text's preoccupation death and consequent penchant for "shifting or blurring distinctions between centers and margins"⁷² correspond to characteristics of diasporic autobiography. The protagonist who is doubly, or multiply diasporic, in Egan's words, "a kind of diaspora person in diaspora,"⁷³ is dislocated, ultimately a foreigner in his native land, which in itself is constructed as an agglomeration of diaspora identities. Along these terms, the protagonist of *Sīrat madīna* is flanked by markers of otherness, and especially by the allusions to Baghdad. In addition, this is carried out through the emphasis on the cosmopolitan, multicultural, and generally multifarious characterization of the Ammani community in itself characterized by margins and interstices. Moreover, this text "enacts one distinguishing feature of diasporic autobiography in its creation of strategic spaces for a network of people rather than linear time or a singular story."⁷⁴ The multiple narrative foci of the text, rather than following a singular narrative trajectory, underlie its diasporic identification from the perspective of narrative strategy.

70 EGAN 1999: 125.

71 MILLER 1994: 12.

72 EGAN 1999: 123.

73 Ibid.: 126.

74 Ibid.: 123.

This quintessence of multiplicity and relationality of self-identity is one of the ways in which *Sīrat madīna* encodes the tensions of exile, diaspora and transnationalism. As critic Hamid Naficy points out, "In exile, personal identity is enmeshed more than ever with identities of other sorts."⁷⁵ Diasporic autobiography is not concerned solely with the self and the individual, and is by definition deeply relational, highlighting elements in which group affiliation or division is based, such as ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, and so forth. The boundaries between the personal and the collective are *constantly* blurred. While outwardly a reconstruction of a particular era, place and community, self-identity is articulated through the chronicles of the city. The autobiographical self is decentered, appearing in the text obliquely, in relation to other characters, and especially to the city. Narrative content and strategies enact the autobiographical subject's liminal positioning. *Sīrat madīna* draws deeply from discourses of diaspora, exile and displacement, ultimately shaping the protagonist as an exilic subject, in constant flux and transition, constantly negotiating past loss and longing and present search for a home and for belonging. In this sense, the text is not merely an articulation of a childhood but an expression of broader exilic identity, and how this identity came to be. Like the narrative itself, Munīf's life story is a trajectory of transition and movement, from his pre-natal roots in Baghdad and the Najd, to his childhood in Amman, to his studies in Baghdad, from which he was exiled. Ironically, *Sīrat madīna* narrates the years of Munīf's life in which he was most sedentary, attached to one particular place. Yet, the poetics of this narrative articulate a diasporic state. As an expression of profound belonging juxtaposed with a diasporic sense of liminality and otherness, this text can be read as a poetic articulation of the exilic sensibility of constant transition and movement which was to characterize the rest of Munīf's life, beyond his childhood years.

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