

## **Part 1**

# **The Fallouts of the Pains of the Player with the Golden Feet and Head**

***The Fallouts of the Pains of the Player with Golden Feet and Head***

A PhD novella accompanying the exegesis:

*Displace or Be Displaced: Narratives of Multiple Exile in the Sudanese Communities in Australia*

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[Examiners: To encourage freedom of interpretation it is suggested this novella be read first, before reading the thesis abstract contained in the exegesis volume]

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts

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2015

## **The Novella's characters, voices, as they appear in the subsequent chapters**

**Chapter One:** The voice of Hassan al-Mitairif, a seventyish male who is descended from a northern Sudanese background, the dominant culture of which is influenced by Arab-Islamic culture. He approaches ‘the narrator’ asking for his mediation to solve a problem, a problem which involves most of the novella’s characters.

**Chapter Two:** The voice of ‘the narrator’—the intercessor—immersed in a monologue. He is in his mid-forties. He comes from a northern Sudanese background, the governing culture of which is influenced by Arab-Islamic culture.

**Chapter Three:** The voice of al-Dungul, a male in his early sixties, who has also sprung from a northern Sudanese background, the dominant culture of which is influenced by Arabic-Islamic culture.

**Chapter Four:** The voice of William, a male in his mid-fifties, who comes from a southern Sudanese Christian background, although his own culture is influenced overwhelmingly by the northern Sudanese Arabic culture; for he was brought up in a northern Sudanese town.

**Chapter Five:** The voice of Christina, William’s 25 year old daughter, who left Sudan as a child to spend a few years in Egypt before she and her family resettled in Australia.

**Chapter Six:** The voice of Ibrahim, a male in his late-forties, who is descended from an indigenous ethnic (Nubian-Christian) Sudanese background. His native culture is influenced by the dominant northern Sudanese Arabic culture.

**Chapter Seven:** The voice of Milad, a male who is in his mid-forties, who comes from a Coptic (Christian) Sudanese background.

**Chapter Eight:** The voice of Shahinda, a 28 year old female, who is descended from a northern Sudanese background, the prevailing culture of which is influenced by Arab-Islamic culture.

**Chapter Nine:** The voice of Jamal, the owner of the Café, who is in his early forties, and who has also sprung from a northern Sudanese background, the dominant culture of which is influenced by Arabic-Islamic culture.

**Chapter Ten:** The voice of the narrator/intercessor, a male in his mid-forties, who derives from a northern Sudanese background, the predominant culture of which is influenced by Arab-Islamic culture. He is a close friend of Milad and Shahinda.

## Al-Mitairif

Enough is enough, oh dear sir, it's unbearable! Our folks have left behind all of their pressing, and non-pressing, businesses to wallow into the narratives and privacies of one another. It does not matter whether those narratives and privacies are factual or not. For it is indeed a sorry state that each one of us would strive in such a way that he would pick a tongue-clicking subject which would eventually cause embarrassment, or even outright dishonour, to his fellow brother's social standing. The story—at least as it has presently been told—is about something that befell al-Dungul, or indeed something that al-Dungul made happen because of what had happened to him, or, more specifically, because of his eldest son's, Mazin al-Dungul's, choice. What has come to pass, and is still in the process of passing, should now have, eventually, passed on even to your ears. For the matter has gone so far beyond its place of unfolding—which was in this Café—that it has now been metamorphosed into a favourite subject for gossips in the town's cafés, restaurants, homes and other places. Mobile and home phones have been busying themselves full-time with the subject and it has been transported to other towns, cities and states. But the most morbid thing has been its reaching out beyond the bounds of this country and into Sudan! By Jove, Tilal Abd Qadir, who was, for that matter, a distant relative of al-Dungul, has already attested—to me—to that; though he is, exactly like your dear self, a chap of few words and, most importantly, no one contests his unsullied honesty and evident piety. He said to me that an aunt of his had asked him—during his last visit to Sudan—whether the rumours flying around about al-Dungul's beating of his wife and his son, Mazin, were really true. Mazin, the rumours had it, had consequently abandoned his parents' home, fully etched his body with tattoos, grown long and loose hair like a woman and joined a club for effeminate gays and drag queens! And though not a single word of that disgusting chattering has anything to do with the facts, it would, if it should reach al-Dungul's ears, stop his heart beating, noting that he has recently been diagnosed with high blood pressure. This happens because some men's mouths have delivered the matter to women's tongues. Is there anything in this world more gluttonous than women's tongues? We—you and me—would sit together for more than an hour; have you ever then noticed each of our

mobile phones ringing, even just once? Would that be so if a woman had been with us? Far from it! For if a woman's phone is not to ring within a few minutes of silence she would then – definitely – ring out herself. Perhaps you would agree with me that we—men—would forget our mobile phones at home, or for that matter, at any place. That would often, more or less, happen to me, but it would never happen to a woman. A woman is an enemy of silence. And if she is ever to keep silent that would only come to pass either in sleep or in... death. And women's inexhaustible capacity for chattering and gossiping is what makes many of us, men, particularly married men, take resort to cafés such as this one, which, instead of being a place of escape and relief—as it has always been—is now becoming a Mecca for any Ahmad or Muhammad who is fond of hearing, propagating or even inventing hearsay and rumours. It is my view that al-Dungul's rage, the most pained victims of which were Ibrahim, William and Jamal—the Café's owner, has presented a golden windfall for both the regular and irregular chatterboxes of this café's clientele. Al-Dungul's annoyance and rage would be quite justifiable, given his son has disappointed him in one of his dearest hopes and dreams., but what couldn't be swallowed or accepted, is, indeed, the idiocy and foolhardiness which were associated with his hastiness and—even—his misunderstanding. That is my opinion, anyway—I do not necessarily wish you to adopt it—perhaps it has not been appropriate for me to spell it out. Your benevolence should—then—make you forgive me. But al-Dungul—apart from that—is, indeed, a good man. He is a person not one of us—including yourself, I think—would ever doubt for his bigheartedness, gallantry, bounteousness and charitable passions. I have said before that you are a good man, oh dear Salih,<sup>1</sup> just as your name indicates. But your chronic weakness resides in your being not quite able to master the hasty reactions of your actions. And they do, sometimes, turn into an awfully harmful folly, not to others alone, but to yourself above all. That was some of what I reiterated to him when I went to see him for a quiet chat. I had intended to so relieve the shock he had experienced that he would be able to remedy some of the negative consequences his hasty reactions had brought about. For such reactions were not, in fact, supported by any proof<sup>2</sup> but rather they were built on an impulsive interpretation of what William had said. You would better off to ask William himself to repeat to you what he has already related to others. Also there, beside myself, was Ibrahim who, like myself, would testify to the fact that William did not say what

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<sup>1</sup> **Salih** means good in Arabic.

has been understood by al-Dungul's ear. At the end of my talk, with al-Dungul, I appealed to him to reconsider his son's choice, even if he would prefer not to do so. It is clear that we—contrary to what we would do back home—do not have any final say here; not only in our sons', but even also in our women's, education. This is a reality which is not just regretful, but it's painful as well. Looking from this side of things, one can appreciate al-Dungul's agony. Nonetheless, I do consider al-Dungul—despite this fatal shock and frustration—better in luck than others amongst us. (I do not hereby wish to name names). For Mazin, his son, has not only been successful in his school studies but he is also an athletic boy. He has merely got involved with a line of sport his father doesn't like. We also, to tell the truth, were, and are, not so enthusiastic or appreciative of such a line. We would, that is to say, be happier and prouder if Mazin could have been the successor of his father on the sports field. But winds do not always fulfil the wishes of sea captains. I kept reiterating to him such kind of talk which was punctuated by appeals rather than advice. But it was all to no avail. Moreover, he—instead of even politely, or just courteously, thanking me—eventually proceeded to accuse me – though he should have put me, for the sake of our age difference, if nothing else, in the place of his respected older brother. But no he accused me of standing against him via the mere repeating of what others were saying of him —those others, who were, in his own estimation, no more than just a bunch of envious people! But that wasn't the first well-intentioned endeavour, and, I hope, it will not be the last one. Still it is saddening that such endeavours haven't born better fruits than this one. For all our individual and social endeavours have largely ended in disappointment, if not in hurt to someone far sharper than the hurt I suffered. I am, thereby, greatly confused and disoriented. For, given that he is now quite alone and ripe in age, our endeavours, instead of mellowing, al-Dungul's heart and mind, have rather left him more, and more hardened and stiffened. In addition to him having deserted this café, going instead to a somewhat distant Turkish Kebab House, he has even stopped performing the Friday Prayer in the mosque we were want of go to, just so he would not thereby meet us. He has strictly isolated himself from almost everyone and everybody. And I have lately heard that he has been attending the Friday Prayer in a mosque which none of his acquaintances would go to. Also, and worst of all, we have learnt that he was admitted to hospital for a day because of extremely high blood pressure. Most, if not all, of us now feel tremendously sorry for him. Even Ibrahim, William and Jamal, though he has continuously flooded them with curses and insults, are not, contrary to what he

imagines, holding any ill feeling towards him. Those three are (what irony of Fate!) the most inclined of all towards him. They are all, as you might have known, supporters of the famous Sudanese football team, al-Mirikh.<sup>2</sup> Even more, they were—as they have often restated—the mightiest fans of al-Dungul amongst all the supporters of al-Mirikh, when Al-Dungul was a shining football star. That was when al-Dungul was the spearhead of the al-Mirikh squad: a brilliant striker with utterly fearsome feet and head. On top of that, William and Ibrahim have even been staunch defenders of his extreme political views! But in all of this, I was located at the opposite extreme. I did not give a fig for their political opinions and I have been a constant and unwavering fan of the other great Sudanese football team: al-Hilal.<sup>3</sup> Be this as it may, it has not obliged me, in any way whatsoever, to deny al-Dungul's astounding and peerless skills, not only measured against the players of his own day, but also against the players of today. By Jove! If the truth should be told, when al-Mirikh was playing against our team, I would - as would all the mighty hundreds of al-Hilal's fans - miss a heart's beat when al-Dungul was to be found planted at the centre of al-Mirikh's attacking squad! Also, I do confess to recognising that his football analysis, particularly when the subject was the English Premier League or the European Champions League or even the World's Cup, was often correct. And it can't go without mention that I miss him right now. I do miss his company and our heated argumentation as the Champions League competition reaches boiling point. And it is not me alone who is missing his presence and the heated fray over football or football extra. It is the same for all the café's punters. There is now a feeling of sadness over his absence. Actually this café has been thrown into depression since al-Dungul abandoned it. Even Farouq Ali himself said to me this morning that he is missing not only the disputes and comments of al-Dungul but also his follies. So, it is clear that this matter shouldn't have gone this far. And that is why I am resorting to you. In fact, I have been delegated for the job by some do-gooders. They place all of their hopes (after God, of course) unto you, and they are very optimistic that good results will be achieved through your mediation, given that you have welcomed the suggestion

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<sup>2</sup> **Al-Mirikh** is one of the most ancient and strongest football clubs in Sudan. It was founded as Sport Club of al-Masalma in late 1908, mostly by pupils from al-Masalma district in Omdurman (an iconic city that constitutes, together with Khartoum and Khartoum Bahri, the national capital of Sudan. Therefore, Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan, is labelled as ‘The Triangular Capital City’). Later, in 1927, al-Masalma Football Club was renamed as al- Mirikh Football Club.

<sup>3</sup> **Al-Hilal** is the equivalent of al-Merriekh football team/club in terms of pedigree, strength and popularity. It was founded in 1930 in the city of Omdurman, and has ever since been the fierce historical rival of al- Mirikh.

involved. For they do all respect you, admire your forbearance, your high-quality education, your chaste tongue and speech and your nobility and generosity. It is true that you so rarely attend this café of ours that many of us do not know a lot about you, except for what I have just related, which is the most important. If truth be attested to, we have not heard a word that would suggest that anyone else could carry out this mission better than you. Indeed, the one who has most commended you with warmth and respect is Salih al-Dungul himself. It was he who one day explained to me - in response to being asked why he used to refer to you as "his cousin" - explained that you were, in fact, a distant relative to him. I hope that will help your talks with him. But what is most positive is al-Dungul's avowed respect and regard for you. We, ultimately, wish that you will not fail in what we expect of you in this enterprise. For this nonsense talk must cease immediately, having wandered far beyond the crux of the matter to wade into inconsequential trivialities and petty babbling. We will indeed appreciate it immensely if you can lend us a hand in gagging the chattering traps of women and those men with the mouths of women. How I wish I could find a word other than 'men' to nail them with! Women, and their likes, never miss something to chew on. But we should now wrest from out of their nagging traps all the nasty talk about al-Dungul, Ibrahim, Jamal, William and their folks. What would be ideal for a start is to get al-Dungul, William, Ibrahim and Jamal back on positive terms. For the latter three are the most deserving of regaining social honour and respect. The insults were, for them, as Ibrahim put it, more harmful than downright physical violence and hurt. Thus you - the wise and prudent one - need to speak with those three. Their attentive hearts, I am certain, shall be open to you wherever, and whenever, you may choose to talk to them. I do, hereby, ask for your forgiveness. For such phrases as I have just uttered are not at all intended to impose upon you the way which you must resolve this problem. It's obviously up to you, I am hereby simply saying, to choose carefully the right way or ways of dealing with such a case. And I again do beg your pardon for getting ahead of myself in addressing you in this manner even before gaining your consent to be involved in the matter in question. I should, after all, be patient and hear your due response, before entering these depths of blabbing. But what is egging me on into all of this, is nothing more than my unadulterated eagerness - and the eagerness of all of us - to extract us all from such a stinking burrow.

## The Intercessor

How smart it is of you to devise such a distance between yourself and them! Thus you—often—thought. And how you—at each rotten gathering where your meagre, and very occasional, frequenting of this café involves you with them—ever so wished for that distance to remain stagnantly flat and bereft of memories! Is there, therefore, any need there more than a bite, each of which you would deliberately take at odd times so you may, with that opportunity, shield it with aloneness and silence? And is there, as well, anything that could thereby be done beyond sipping a cup of coffee, smoking a fag, two, or at most, three fags, punctuated by ungracious worthless babble? So what went wrong? Is it that you—keenly—do not wish them to smell a rat within the bounds of the distance so conceived? For you have never failed to respond positively to a select few public and private occasions, though mostly with the thinnest sentiment and presence. Hence your vocal responses, as well as your convincingly affected business-like matter-of-factness, remain—on view of the many impromptu demands—ever inexhaustible and expansive. Never would you, nor will you, meet a casual request, such as explaining a letter, writing a message, interpreting a document, filling a form, acting as interpreter in businesses relating to Centrelink, the Office of Housing or banks, with a blunt refusal, but nothing beyond that. No trips to the mosque for prayers; no presence at Ramadan *iftar*<sup>1</sup>, be they social or private; no pally involvement in sessions of dominoes, billiards, drinking, ganja-smoking or sitting about chewing *khat*. No expression of passion, or snubbing, or hate, either, towards any of them. That is dead plain, absolutely certain. Yet you, for certain, know that hate in absence does not necessarily mean a bond that deeply rests on inmost passion and lyrical candidness. No one then is thus for you, except for Milad Tadrus. (As sure as rain, you and Milad, though part of them, are often not with them). But that perhaps was what you meant when saying that no one knows anything significant about you. You told Milad that, although you know him to be more austere even than you in social bonding, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> **Iftar** is a meal served at the end of the day to break the day's fast, throughout the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. In many Muslim societies, Ramadan iftar can often be an occasion for social gathering.

more sceptical, when it comes to your distance it is impregnable. Nothing—you said—beyond some innocuous data: Omdurmanian<sup>2</sup> descent; tribally rooted in central and northern Sudan; a former teacher of geography at a Sudanese high school; a victim of unfair dismissal from the public service; single although almost forty-nine years of age; no known relatives abroad; a clerk at Jet Star Airways.

These details were bound to be revealed. There is perhaps no harm in casting light on them. And if you, or any acquaintance of yours, would not do it, someone else would, for good or ill, accomplish it. So could it be that the cutting, omitting, or curt agreeing is responsible for fanning the fiery lust for telling tales and the inventing of parts missing from them? Has not Bakri, or that busy tongued man, Rabraba<sup>3</sup>, quoting someone quoting someone else quoting yet someone else quoting an eyewitness, not imparted to you that the slight limp in that walk of yours (so they said) was undoubtedly an effect of torture to which you were subjected when arrested? But, though you have, in fact, been detained and tortured (something you, surprisingly, neither ever mentioned nor ever drew attention to), the slight hobble, which no one has ever inquired of you, wasn't anything but the impact of a traffic accident that befell you when you were only sixteen years of age. Rabraba will surely be of great help should you wish to know more about what is so woven around you. Nevertheless, he presumably does know only insubstantial bits about you. Yes, he could be partially right about the particular case in question. But what is generally perceived about you can hardly pass beyond the line which Uncle Hassan al-Mitairif has already marked around you in stating that many of them can hardly know a lot about you. Thus no one, for instance, knows where you exactly live. For no one, except for your confederate Milad, and Shahinda, has ever chanced upon you, within the whole range of those eight years, at any of the pubs, bars or nightclubs which Milad, and then Shahinda, have so cautiously helped you in choosing in order that you would be at a safe distance from any unwanted encounters. What then (with all of that pseudo-public presence of yours to which Milad has, recurrently and aptly referred) has egged on this all-seasons seventyish man, Uncle

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<sup>2</sup> **Omdurmanian** is a term used to describe a person or thing that belongs to or is a product of Omdurman—the largest city in Khartoum state. Omdurman has widely been considered to be the ‘national capital of Sudan’ for it was the capital city of the Mahdist State (1881-1898) after a revolution that put an end to the Turko-Egyptian ruling of Sudan. It has also made other significant contributions to the development of different aspects of the cultural, political and sporting life of Sudan.

<sup>3</sup> **Rabraba** means talkative, in the colloquial Arabic of Northern Sudan.

Hassan al-Mitairif, to push for you to be their mediator? Why chose you for a social mediation role for which you are hardly well-versed, and in which you are definitely the least qualified? Was that out of respect for the distance in question, belief in its impartiality; an appreciation of factual or imagined soundness of judgment? Was it a genuine endeavour towards familiarly getting you close to them? Or was it just a sly scheme to trap you to get to know you more? But you, in the first place, weren't a friend of al-Dungul's, and certainly not the closest person to him; indeed he wouldn't count you as such, save through your feeble contact with other embroiled parties. It is not sensible (granting good intentions) that you should then be considered the most intensely influential party upon al-Dungul. For example, you are not the only fan in this city whose personal history was filled with admiration for al-Dungul's footballing, nor are you anymore even a football aficionado. Furthermore, you are known for your social austerity, as you visit this café only unseasonably and intermittently. Shouldn't that be considered a deficiency in a person who is to undertake such a social mission, and not an asset?

And what note does it strike, that supposed affiliation with al-Dungul, the effectiveness of which al-Mitairif has fixed upon. For all that happened was a word rolled off your tongue that had no purpose other than to fill an empty lapse in the conversation. This was when it was let slip that your maternal mother's great-grandmother was originally from the Danagla<sup>4</sup> tribe, to which al-Dungul belongs. Nothing more had you added. You were then sitting, alone, in the café's front yard. Presumably you felt uncomfortable then because there were no other punters sitting around the table al-Dungul and you shared—contrary to what would usually be the case—and but for their not being in attendance there would never have been that gap requiring your initiative. More than that, you felt, upon spelling it out, a gush of embarrassment, even regret that this might suggest a hypocritical wish to appear near to him. And you do now recall that your embarrassment was—then—far more pressing than your regret or sorrow, for you thereby failed to remember the name of that great-grandmother of yours when he asked about her with such a marked longing. Such an embarrassment had led you, at the end of another semi-seasonal occasion, to hurriedly murmur into his ear, with a tone close to

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<sup>4</sup> **Danagla** is a large ethnic group who are concentrated in the city of Dungula, a renowned town in Northern Sudan. There is no evidence of a Sudanese tribe called Danagla, but the widely held idea associates them with tribal reference more than the geographical location of Dungula.

whispering and apology the glorified name while bidding him a goodbye, without any tremor of embarrassment or regret, but tinged with sorrow.

But he soon disquiet to that sorrow when, on yet another semi-seasonal day, he announced in a sunny tenor of joy bordering on thrilled excitement, that he has inquired, in a telephone call to his mother in Omdurman, about Umm al-Kiram, your mother's grandmother's mother. He found out that Umm al-Kiram's mother, who left her place of birth, the Island of Labab,<sup>5</sup> and even abandoned her Manasirian<sup>6</sup> husband, the singer, the liquor addict, the snuff eater, from whom she hadn't begotten, to join al-Mahdi,<sup>7</sup> the Imam, in Qadir. The latter eventually wedded her to a cousin of Prince Mahmud Muhammad<sup>8</sup> from whom she duly begot a daughter whom the Imam named Umm al-Kiram. But that cousin was martyred later in the Battle of Tushki<sup>9</sup> while fighting with Prince Abd Rahman al-Nujumi's<sup>10</sup> army against the Anglo-Egyptian forces. Umm al-Kiram's mother—who was a stunning beauty—remarried again a livestock trader from al-Butana<sup>11</sup> country whom al-Mahdi's Caliph, Abd Allah al-Ta'ayshi,<sup>12</sup> incarcerated and expelled, amongst others, to a distant area in Southern Sudan for supporting the Caliph Muhammad Sharif,<sup>13</sup> cousin of al-Mahdi who contested the former's right of ascension

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<sup>5</sup> **The Island of Labab** (or Labab Island) is an island located on the Nile in Dungula where Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, the founder of the Mahdist Revolution and State (1881-1898) was born.

<sup>6</sup> **Manasirian** is a term used to identify a person who is a member of al-Manasir which is one of the Sudanese ethnic groups of northern Sudan.

<sup>7</sup> **Al-Mahdi** al-Mahdi's original name was Muhammad Ahmad Ibn As-sayyid Abd Allah. He was a descendant of an Afro-Arab ethnic group from Dungula in northern Sudan, where he was born in the nearby island of Labab in 1844 and died in Omdurman in 1885. He proclaimed to be 'al Mahdi al-Muntazar' ('The Awaited Guide,' who, it was believed, would come to re-direct misdirected people to the true path of Islam). His religious-political-military movement, al-Mahdiyyah, ended the Turko-Egyptian colonisation of Sudan in 1885 and created a vast Islamic state (the Mahdist State) which extended from the Red Sea to Central Africa and lasted until the Anglo-Egyptian invasion to Sudan in 1898.

<sup>8</sup> **Mahmud Muhammad** was a Mahdist Prince (Amir) who was sent by al-Mahdi to Dungula to oppose and rout the Turko-Egyptian Condominium forces and replace, in case of victory, the Turkish governor of Dungula. But Mahmud Muhammad was killed at the Battle of Korti in 1884 while fighting.

<sup>9</sup> **The Battle of Tushki** took place in 1889 in Egypt between the Anglo-Egyptian forces and the Mahdist Sudanese army, where the latter were defeated.

<sup>10</sup> **Abd Rahman al-Nujumi** was one of the most famous military leaders of the Mahdist revolution and state. He was called the Prince of Princes for his high quality leadership and military skills. He died in 1889 in the Battle of Toshki, in the south of Egypt, while he was leading his Mahdist army against the Anglo-Egyptian forces.

<sup>11</sup> **Al-Butana country** (or al-Butana Plain) is an undulating land between Khartoum and Kassala in eastern Sudan that provides good grazing for cattle, sheep, and goats.

<sup>12</sup> **Abd Allah al-Ta'ayshi** was the most prominent political, religious and military leader who was appointed by al-Mahdi himself to be the first successor of his as head of the religious movement and state within the Sudan. He was born in 1846 and died in 1899 in Kurdufan at the Battle of Umm Dibaikrat, the last encounter with the Anglo-Egyptian troops that put an end to the Mahdist State.

<sup>13</sup> **Muhammad Sharif** was a cousin of al-Mahdi who was appointed by the latter to be the Fourth Caliph. Nevertheless, he protested against the First Caliph, Abd Allah al-Ta'ayshi, for he thought he deserves to be the First Caliph's position because he was next of kin to al-Mahdi. However, there was in fact no

to the Caliphate's seat of power. A son of Umm-al Kiram's mother was born, to the al-Butana livestock trader, who died later while imprisoned or cast out (and it was said that he was persecuted), but the son, as well as his mother, died of chicken pox three days after arriving on the Island of Labab, where they had gone so that the son—and his maternal sister who was saved, or so the folks believed, only by the grace of he who named her Umm al-Kiram—would be acquainted with their maternal roots in the Northern Province of Sudan.

Despite the attractive skills with which Al-Dungul narrated that tale—and the enjoyment you felt as was usual with his other narratives—you felt sensations of shyness, worry and confusion intermingled with the joy you felt as you listened. But the cause of those feelings was not your certainty that the Umm al-Kiram whom al-Dungul talked about was not your mother's great-grandmother, although both did share a name, tribe, sect, and perhaps even province. Nonetheless, you didn't wish to pour water upon his delight. That which provoked those sensations was in the main not al-Dungul's conjuring of such an effusive tale in the company of two of that café's frequent visitors, discounting some sneaking ears at neighbouring tables, but, furthermore, that sudden and sharp, or rather blatant and shocking, conclusion that was then intended for those very adjoining tables: "Don't you see?! Here we are: origins and subdivisions! Danagla and dauntless heroes! Mirikhians and historic sagas! Fans of the red team and red inspired revolutionaries!" Your raw laugh, tailed with a bogus cough, which you had slipped into guffaws from nearby observers, flatly failed, indeed, to disperse your feelings of shyness, worry and confusion. Thus you begged your leave from them. You then stepped out of the café with feet that were eager to run.

You took a whole week before recounting the whole incident to Milad, wanting first to cure your self-mortification.

"Did the stock of gratuitous comments disappear into the earth? Couldn't you find anyone else the mother of your grandmother's mother—may they all rest in peace!—to invite to sit with both of you at your café table? And who suggested those words of yours would be received in the innocuous manner which characterised the way they

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further successor of al-Mahdi for the Mahdist State was destroyed by the Anglo-Egyptian invasion during the rule of the First Caliph, Abd Allah al-Ta'ayshi. Muhammad Sharif was killed, alongside two of al-Mahdi's sons and a handful of their supporters, by an Anglo-Egyptian action in November 1899.

were verbalised? What about other safer themes: the English Premier League; the African Nations' Cup; the Sudan's Premiership Cup? Have exchange currency rates suddenly ceased to rise and fall? Has the Palestinian crisis been resolved? Have wars forsaken the fates of Asia and Africa? Have natural and unnatural disasters vanished from the face of the globe? Wasn't Melbourne's weather, on that date and at that time, worthy of comment? It is the atmosphere, the social climate which draws you towards this café; not food, not coffee, as you would wish to believe. I buy nothing of that! For if good meals are what you seek, we do better at home. Damned good cook myself! That you know for certain. Damned good cook you are too; even better than I in a range of our cuisines, and even not of ours. Far more skilful, we, than all of these café cooks and chefs! Why should you not just eat good home-cooked meals? And if you — justifiably—feel like a change; if you must—for that matter—prefer only this café, why shouldn't you just order a takeaway? You have the phone. Just do that! Another thing: your excuse is that you go there intermittently, occasionally or rarely. I do not deny the truth of it; even I would vouch for it. Also you prefer to have your meal alone, when the place is rather deserted. But that is something relative. That café's locality, days and hours of opening, the quality of service, the quality of clientele and reasons why any one of them would set foot in there—all of these are the factors which are decisive in whether the café is crowded or not. Do you, for instance, think that coffee, tea, juices and fizzy drinks should be taken at particular times? Furthermore, most of that café's clientele, whose largest part is folks of ours, do not ever wish, by thereby calling, more or less, for food or coffee or tea. For what, in the first place, forever delivers them there is a dire need for chattering, on and on, and on! In that—you know damned well!—is a primal need for social connectedness and cultural bonds. Believe me, your irregular visits to that café are far more agreeable to them than more regular ones would be—except, perhaps, for the café's owner and al-Dungul—for they give them the chance to see an irregular face, to hear something new, to relate to you something unpeated, of which they have bored talking about, to enjoy a fresh wonder from you. Even more, your fleeting visit should leave behind it a new theme for talk; a topic that will—in your physical absence—surely be recurrent among them for days and days on end. And those regular faces, whom you are ever quick to assist—and I am positively not against that decent deed—where do you chance upon them? Where do you—actually—find them: At a train station? A public park? A cinema? A footy ground? A Vietnamese restaurant, or an Italian café?! They are some of that café's clients, regular or rather not regular;

that is not important. For what is necessary to them is to find, thereby or via-by, someone who would be of help. They are indeed entitled to that. So which hand it is—yours or someone else's—that bestows that upon them is not of singular significance. Blameless they are, even if a word of thanks has not emerged from their mouths. Nay, it is upon them we should heap all thanks and praise, for who else but they could so publicise the location of the café as a place for assistance? Thanks—as well—should go to the café' for this gratis service. Besides that, let me—for sake of meaningful comparison—ask you something: Who did show you the way to that café? Was he anyone else but he who is now asking you the question? If so, what then makes my presence there apparently far less savoury than yours? The reason for this, I bet, was that—at least within the last few years—I wouldn't go there except for food and never the social environment. I thereby did—and can still do that now—take my meals in silence, exchange a few greetings, then leave to have coffee and fag somewhere else. For in such intermittent, lightning visits as mine I would have, in such a café so frequented by folks of yours and mine, to at most have a word or two with this guy or that. But since Hassouna—the fabulous cook upon whom the reputation of the café's food was solidly built —abandoned the place, I ceased my visits, though mostly intermittent and fleeting, to it. As you know, I have always cooked my meals at home, for myself, even in the café's glorious Hassouna heyday, and I will persist in doing just that. As for the *kisra*,<sup>14</sup> which is my essential point of weakness, I am now in the habit of buying it, whenever I like, over the phone, if not through requesting you to purchase some for me whenever I am made aware you intend to go there. Bottom line: you will be deluded if you think that your involvement (though sparing and never protracted) into that café's social realm would not have its price, at any cost. Do you remember Shahinda's reaction on discovering—and that was your wish not mine—that we were, in fact, Sudanese and not Caribbean folk? Three months' assumption was shattered in that instant. Do you remember how the expression on her face darkened? How the tranquillity of her heart did fade? More indicative yet is that when we finally re-instilled, back in her, some measure of calm, you yourself said that such calm and ease would never be as great as the repose she had already once enjoyed—at least not in the first weeks following that damned revelation? Don't you recall that declaration of hers,

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<sup>14</sup> **Kisra** is popular Sudanese thin pancake-like leavened bread made from whole sorghum flour.

so packed with agitation, misgiving, loathing, and sheer disgust? “The issue is that I have no trust at all not only in any Sudanese man as such, whatever his religion, but also in any Muslim man as such, whatever his nationality. All of them Sudanese, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, and all Muslim men as such, have their share, their air, of obscene curiosity and spiteful gossiping. It is only the women, such as I who pay the price of them simply doing what they feel entitled to do.” “Imagine”—she was then addressing you—“if I came to that café of yours, asked for you. Say I pretended—hid under the pretext of—needing your assistance with filling a certain form or something; how would they then perceive my tale? Of course as following: “There must certainly be more to it than just filling a form.” Or else, I went in—alone—to have a meal or a cup of coffee; then it would go like: “How bold is she? Why did she come here? Is she out to hunt passing men?” And thus you see: even a simple, harmless—or so one would think—entering, as anyone else may, to have a meal or drink, should cost me dearly and lastingly!”

And what price will you now pay for the fragility of your detachment; for the trap you set yourself for yourself? And is this requested mediation the price—and no more—you would pay or is it only a deposit? Most importantly, would this requested mediation be the last social mission you would be asked to undertake—no matter the outcome be positive or negative? And what if you have successfully accomplished this mission? Would you then become an agent for mediation and other social issues?

Perhaps it is better if you just give them an apology. Yes, go and see Uncle al-Mitairif. Say unto him that you have swallowed your man-measuring tongue! Or rather—and this would be more a show of mercy to yourself—just phone him so that you avoid the sear of his disappointed and accusing looks. And henceforth there will be no opportunity for such looks again, not from his eyes or others’, for you would chop the path to that café from your feet, particularly as al-Dungul himself has already uprooted his feet from the path to that café.

But you didn’t say how should you uproot your thankfulness, gratitude and liking for al-Dungul himself? The man, who gave to you, more than you ever gave to him, is now traumatised by a shattered dream, obsessed with his diagnosis and pierced by the nail of loneliness.

Rarely did you meet anyone who expresses for your semi-seasonal, abrupt and short-lived, presence in that café, as celebrating and pure a welcome as al-Dungul's countenance would do. Rarely did anyone, in those eight years, restore that chuckle to your throat that is so broad; so precious; so youthful. Those fruitful chuckles that leave a smile or even sometimes condensed and shy laughter that your mouth recalls during moments in the days after your departure from the Café. Rarely did your soul so applaud a yarn as that of al-Dungul's. For to al-Dungul's yarns listened not only thy ears but thy entire soul. No doubt he knew—you were sensing that—that you were the one to whom the greater part of his memory's legacy was to be entrusted. How skilful, deft, is he, in narrating and recalling the days of lyrical delight! Never did dew and scent ever desert his throat as he recalled metropolitan, particularly Omdurmanian, anecdotes and jokes relating to football stars, managers, referees; songwriters; dramatists; melodious singers; radio presenters; newspaper men and women; adventurers and fortune-hunters; gays and charming prostitutes; pimps and madams; spinners of humorous tales and maxims; technocrats; conventionally rich folks; politicians; currency traders and black marketeers. He was, and is, a man of no dried heart. But you often smelt, as his voice soared with garden colours and hues, a scent of sorrow, a scent of ancient wistfulness in his narrative's weave and tone. Perhaps because of that, and besides, you once said, to Milad, in a whisper, that you feel an age-old ease when al-Dungul is present at the café whenever you are unseasonably, and fitfully, there. But—you whispered to Milad—you didn't wish this feeling to grow, notwithstanding the intimate moral, pure, and deep goodwill that al-Dungul has provided you with. Yet—could this be a source of atonement for you?—your heart hasn't been unresponsive nor without pangs of searing pain. There is no doubt—your whispering were to nourish yourself more than Milad—with those days of lyrical delight—when you were yet a boy of tender age fond of al-Dungul, the player with the golden feet and head, as he was described by the popular media—having an essential role in it.

You weren't, nay you aren't, in accord with a variety of his views. Some have even annoyed you, sometimes embarrassed you. Nevertheless, you steadfastly resisted being involved in any serious talk with him, with all the contest and challenge that would incur. Your third eye saw that such a contest would serve no purpose but to spoil that blooming spontaneity of narrative, and therefore ruin those rebellious longings more than nourish them.

How would his heart, feet and tongue respond if you were to be afflicted with that high blood pressure of his? How lonely, how sorrowful, how writhing in anguish is he now?

Not that that goddamned mediation is now, nor ever should be, your concern. Not severing your feet from the path to that café—though it shall soon be done—is now the direction you are thinking. Only shall you say, on meeting him, with honest and earnest choice of words, that you have only come to be reassured about his health.

## Al-Dungul

All of them are now saying that I am making, out of Mazin's tale, a mountain out of a molehill. But the issue is far beyond such a simplification, one that implies an accusation that I am being childish.

I was born in a Danaglan,<sup>1</sup> Ansarian,<sup>2</sup> Omdurmanian and Mirikhian family. Of that it could be said, it is tribally extensively Nubian-Danaglan, with Ansarian allegiances, Omdurmanian birth and upbringing, Mirikhian commitment not only involving simple loyalty to that great football club but, furthermore, contributing to the founding of its early features even before it had assumed the name in question: al-Mirikh.

We were then living in the Omdurmanian suburb of al-Souq, nearby to al-Masalma district—from where your friend Milad descended—where the majority of the populace were then Copts, and where a number of them initiated, in 1908, a football club to which they gave the name of al-Masalma. Some of those were then students at Gordon Memorial College<sup>3</sup>. Two of my father's grandfathers, al-Zaki and Nugd Allah, who were not only cousins, but they were twins, were the first to join that club in 1910. From that time on, no one in either our immediate or extended families have failed to be involved with the al-Masalma Club's activities. My father's immediate grandfather, Sharfi Nugd Allah—who was a member in the White Flag League,<sup>4</sup> the political actions of which duly led the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium authorities to ban the playing of

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<sup>1</sup> **Dangalan** used to identify a person or item that is associated with the Danagla tribe (and sometimes to the town of Dungula).

<sup>2</sup> **Ansarian** (or Ansari) is a term used to identify a person who belongs to al-Ansar or the Ansar ("the supporters," in Arabic); religious disciples or followers of al-Mahdi.

<sup>3</sup> **Gordon Memorial College** was an educational institution in Sudan. It was built between 1899 and 1902 as part of wide-ranging educational projects that were initiated by Lord Horatio Kitchener as soon as the Anglo-Egyptian forces he was leading destroyed the Mahdist State. The college was named for General Charles George Gordon of the British army, who was appointed by the Turkish khedive (ruler) of Egypt, and subsequently by the British government as Governor-General of Sudan. Charles George Gordon was killed during the Mahdist Revolution in 1885. The college was officially opened on 8 November 1902 by Kitchener himself. Following the independence of Sudan, in 1956, Gordon Memorial College became the University of Khartoum.

<sup>4</sup> **The White Flag League** (or **The White Flag Society** or **The White Brigade Movement/Association**) was the first Sudanese political organisation to be founded on a modern nationalist basis. It was established between 1923 and 1924 by Sudanese military officers. It put up tangible resistance against the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium ruling in Sudan. It endeavoured to seek the independence of Sudan from British rule and called for unity with Egypt.

sport for a time—was the first to hold a managing post in the club, in 1927, after it resumed sporting activities under the name of al-Mirikh. As to my paternal grandfather, Salih, in honour of whom I was named, who was a legendary figure of the times for being so swift and skilful at headers that he was renowned by the admirable title of ‘The Flying Salih’. And my father, a matchless striker, worked as a coach’s assistant, then as a secretary for the club after being forced by a fracture of his left leg to retire. As to myself—may God forgive my self-pride!—sure you know the story: a man who was suckled at football’s breast, and weaned on it too!

The colour red, the colour of the al-Mirikh shirts, shadowed, and is still shadowing me, through my entire life. A devout supporter I was, and still am, of foreign football teams with red shirts, or at worst yellow, such as Arsenal, Bayern Munich and Barcelona. I wanted to wear a red suit—given to me (as well as to the other members of our team) as a present on an al-Mirikh visit to China—on my wedding day. But the home folks strongly objected, particularly my wife’s folks. So I reconciled myself to wearing a black suit but insisted on donning a yellow shirt and red tie.

Because of my fondness for red, I have, from an early age, and even before grasping anything tangible about politics, been accused of being a communist. True, I have supported communists in our country and in other countries such as the former USSR, China, Cuba, together with national liberation movements in Africa and Asia. I also supported a number of leftist guerrilla movements in Latin America as well as some armed leftist organisations in the West, such the Irish Republican Army, Red Brigades and Baader-Meinhof Group. I have offered such moral support without ever being a member in any leftist political organisation. My outspoken red sympathies even resulted in my being pestered by security forces. Following the 1985 Uprising,<sup>5</sup> I joined the Chinese and Cuban Friendship Societies. My room was in the old family home, in the al-Souq suburb, and it was crowded with Arabic editions of magazines such as *Sputnik*, *People’s China* and *Bulgaria Today*. In the 1986’s parliamentary elections, I did not only vote for the Communist Party of Sudan’s candidate but, furthermore, was active in helping him in his election campaign.

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<sup>5</sup> **The 1985 Uprising** was a popular political action accompanied by general civil disobedience which led to the overthrow of a military dictatorship (1969-1985), ousting then President General Ja'far Nimairi.

When Mazin came into the world, I planned to give him either of two names: *Al-Ihaimir*<sup>6</sup> or Socrates! Socrates I chose in honour of, and affection for, Socrates, the Brazilian midfield player who was a medical doctor and revolutionary as well, and, importantly, the former architect of the Brazilian attacking squad, but not Socrates the philosopher. But his mother swiftly determined the course of naming him through a vision of hers meeting al-Mahdi whilst sleeping. He admonished—she claimed—that she should name the boy *Mazin* in devotion to the name of the cloud that shielded the Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—from the scorching lashing of the sun during the Migration to Madina. What made me believe her is that she didn’t even know that a certain type of cloud is given, in Arabic, the name of *muzun*.

In raising Mazin I surrounded him with a love of football. I filled his memory with our football pitch’s deep-rooted family history. I packed his heart with zealous love for al-Mirikh and Brazilian football. For him I spared no effort in buying and borrowing CDs, videos, magazines and books the focus of which was football, pure and simple: Sudanese and international football histories but, of course, with a preference for Brazilian football. I watched those CDs and videos together with him; read with him or helped him to read the papers, magazines and books. I plied his thoughts with Sudanese, regional and international footballer tales and legends, particularly Brazilian ones. The Earth alone could not contain all that he could inherit of that awesome passion of mine for football, for al-Mirikh and Brazil!

Oh Brazil! The Brazilian football has always been my measure of excellence. I always boasted that if an international quiz was held for the selection of who (not Brazilian, of course!) was upmost in their fondness for Brazilian football, I would definitely claim the premier spot. Which reminds me of when the Brazilian football team, Santos, the team of the Black Jewel, Pele, who was then at the zenith of his fame and eminence, landed at Khartoum, and I was a tender youth with only big football dreams. I told that tale to Mazin too. And I now recall how my heart was then filled with anger and resentment against Shawatin,<sup>7</sup> al-Hilal’s team’s defence player, when his extreme man-to-man marking of Pele virtually denied us any display of his masterful art and charm for which we had so long awaited. The matchless gifts of Pele were thereby wasted and spoiled for us. In fact, I didn’t go to the match with any intention to support al-Hilal

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<sup>6</sup> **Al-Ihaimir** means “The Dear Little Red One”, in the Sudanese colloquial Arabic.

<sup>7</sup> **Shawatin** was a well-known football player of the Sudanese FC of al-Hilal during the 1970s.

against the team-from-abroad though all of the media were busy haranguing us about the national need for that! I never responded positively to that sort of so-called national imperative! And even if the scene is to be revisited this very day, I will, as well, feel enraged and resentful against Shawatin and still not support al-Hilal, although it is a great team! Yes. I say this now with such full-fledged conviction that you will find no excuse from me that it was due purely to the excesses of a young man's tribal zeal. You could hereby probably brand me out as someone devoid of national feelings. But the only thing I wish to say, in this context, is that I am ready to give my life in defence of this beloved country of mine, Sudan, even if it was to be attacked by the Federative Republic of Brazil itself. I was actually about to take arms besides the Sudan's Peoples Liberation Movement and Army's<sup>8</sup> fighters more than once if not for circumstances relating to my exceptional conditions of work and family in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. So I settled for moral allegiance. Words—even stylish, elegant, dazzling words—will never help me depicting that attitude of mine, nay, that passion of mine, towards Brazilian Football.

If this story of Santos and al-Hilal happened to me when I was only a young 'and still in my country, what then about me now here, in this foreign country, to which I do not feel a strong connection tying me to it? Surprised, you would be though, to know that I didn't support Australia in its World Cup game against Brazil. More than that, I have never felt a passion to stand by Australian lads in contests against South American teams such as Argentina, Uruguay and Peru, let alone teams from Africa! By the way, I am not at all alone in this. And I do not know how you would see it, for we have never before discussed it. Believe me! I am certain that the numbers of those who feel the same as me are not small, not only within our Sudanese community but within other foreign communities as well. It is just that many of those who hold such feelings would—understandably—either not reveal them in public or speak of them in shy whispers only to those they trust. Do you remember that friendly the Turkish team played here? I watched that match, from inside the stadium, together with Mazin, who was then twelve years old. Most of the Turks, if not all, supported the Turkish team. It was evident in the Turkish banners, flying high, fanning the roars and rowdiness.

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<sup>8</sup> **Sudan's Peoples Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/SPLA)** was a Sudanese political organization with an armed wing established 1983-1984 in the former Southern region of Sudan (now the Republic of South Sudan). It was founded, theoretically and ideologically, on a Marxist standpoint, calling for the establishment of what it called "New Sudan" on socialist grounds.

Perhaps that was the message of the *Herald Sun*'s headline, when the following morning it read *What a Shame!* I do feel that such a stance—at least for some Italians, Greeks, and Vietnamese, for example—would be reflected in parallel cases. That Turk stand, or at least the stand of the oldest amongst them, has been verified to me by my Turkish friend who owned this Kebab House in which we are now taking a meal. If you wish me to ask her to repeat what she related to me, I will not hesitate. All the same, she is now too busy with serving clients to have any business talking to us. And that talkative nature of hers would hinder easy escape. Her comments were: “What do you expect from people mostly ancient just like my dear old self who weren’t born or brought up here, but through life’s pressures and strains were just shoved ashore here; pulled away of home and lyrical memories? What people do is just an apologetic loyalty in honour of that same memory.”

Obviously, this is not limited to within the football stadium. For when I have inquired of the same Turkish friend about the Battle of Gallipoli, she retorted: “Gallipoli was, and is, Turkish land. We didn’t invade it but defended it, and many martyrs thereby fell. We are, indeed, sorry for the deaths of those who fought us there, but yet undoubtedly proud of victory and more saddened by those martyred sons of ours.”

Almost similar sentiments, and thoughts, occurred to me while I was gazing at Charles George Gordon’s<sup>9</sup> statue in Spring Street. For that man, that Pasha, that army Major-General, that Governor-General whose deeds make people of Britain, Australia, and perhaps other nations, once, and still, so proud and pompous, was none but an uninvited foreign invader and colonial ruler of our country. So of what should I be proud of then? Of those deeds of that man whose atrocities perpetuated under that arrogant nose and name of his in Sudan, South Africa, Mauritius, India, China when he was a potent symbol of aggression and colonisation? Or should I be proud of those grandfathers of mine whose assassination of this Pasha Charles George Gordon pulled the final curtains over a hideous era of colonial rule and built a totally sovereign national state? Therefore, I didn’t hesitate for a moment and up to that face of his I raised my finger so, saying: “What kind of glorious deeds did you achieve in this land the soil of which has never hugged your feet? What splendid accomplishments have you that brought your

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<sup>9</sup> **Charles George Gordon** 1833-1885 (was also nicknamed as Chinese Gordon) was a British General whose last mission was when he reappointed as Governor-General of Sudan in 1884. By that time Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan, was under severe siege of the Mahdists fighters (the Ansars) who succeed in capturing the city after defeating its defenders and killing Gordon in 1885.

statue in front of me, again, after all these years? Fuck you!” I am bluntly certain that thousands of Chinese, Indians, Mauritians, South Africans, not to say Sudanese, and surely others in Africa and Asia, are all feeling just as passionate as I.

Nevertheless, I have never been bereft of loyalty and gratitude towards this Australian land. For what it bestowed upon me, and my progeny, are so many precious deeds, most of which are materialistic of course, worthy of my most humble appreciation and thankfulness. I said “I have never been” because some other sensations are now so germinating and diffusing within that I fear they will someday overwhelm all feeling of loyalty and gratitude. This is happening because there are here such insidious forces that make our sons and daughters swallow things that gradually eliminate their parents’ sentiments from theirs. This country’s education system, media and entertainment culture take our offspring with their real soul but they are returned to us with a rather different soul. What is the use of returning them with that rather different soul? And what kind of a soul is it which they would then have?! It is, in virtual fact, a machine, a tool or a simply high, or low, technology’s gadget! And if tempting, and spoiling, children are so easy here, then what about women who came into this country at the age of reason? Who would imagine that Hassan al-Mitairif’s daughter—a former Mayor’s daughter!—can drag her husband’s legs into the courts like that so she would wrest off him his sons and daughters, forcing him into homelessness only to pursue the status of a single parent and mother and thereby that temporary, though long-lasting, Government allowance? And if Ahmed Abd Karim, the divorcee of al-Mitairif’s daughter, is now a full-fledged homeless person, what about William’s brother, Nyal, who crushed his wife’s jaw when she kicked him out like Ahmed, and whose home address is now prison? The frightening thing is that such kinds of models—apart from boys whose minds were sucked bone dry by drugs—are gaining more and more ground. But street and prison—I say—are less cruel and humiliating to me than the Aged Care Residence where Fath al-Rahman has been deposited in the wake of a stitch-up conspired between his wife and two mature sons. Should I then infer what may remain, for me, of dignity and thus return back to the Omdurmanian suburb of al-Souq, or back even further to the Sudanese northern province, before I might be legally forced to sign an order banning me from standing between Mazin, who has just turned eighteen years of age, and his stubbornly chosen game of footy?

And why the footy, Mazin—I asked him—why should it be that type of sport—if that's what it is—that belongs to the age of hunting and gathering? Why charging and fighting like a bull? Can't you find anything more elegant and musical? Football—I repeatedly bid him—is the sister of music, the peer of dancing. Your father—I reminded him—used to be called the “dancing choreographer”, for I was so expert in tackling and dodging rival teams' defenders. How I could make them twist and spin for the ball to no avail, all while my feet and body coolly manoeuvred the ball. Often I would make them crumple to the ground without touching them a jot! If you do not like football anymore, Mazin, why not take up basketball, volleyball, tennis or swimming? How humiliating, tormenting, it was for me to offer these alternative suggestions to him. Those brands of games, I argued, were widely followed and admired, with very attractive and tangible skills, awe-inspiring and astonishing strategies and techniques—but not footy! All of the world—I thus reiterated—stands up to watch the splendours of the football World Cup's and never sits down again until the curtain is at last drawn on the final match. Does the world do that for footy, rugby or cricket? Millions have never heard of the World Cups for games like footy or rugby or cricket. Play—then—football, son; a star shall you be in that heaven of hers—so I promised. If you so oblige my wish—him I thus beseeched—you shall not only fulfil a cherished wish of your dear old father and family—immediate and extended—but you, more even than that, would fulfil the hopes and joys not only of numberless al-Mirikh fans, but also bestow upon me—you shall—an irrefutable reason to become an Australian national football team fan, at least when it competes with a team from Africa, or South America, as William admitted to me before he smeared everything with the stench of shame and accused me of being lax in my family affairs, hurling the stone of homosexuality at my son.

## William

I never said that. I never said to him that his son is gay. What I literally said to him—and Uncle al-Mitairif, and Ibrahim, are all prepared to confirm it—was: “You should have been prepared for such surprises, oh Dungul. Probably it’s better not to be—in a country such as this one—pulled up by surprises, even if you were, one day, to learn that your son was gay!” As one who is perceptive, you could easily see that this sentence doesn’t relate any news or statement as to whether Mazin is actually gay or not. I do not, of course, wish him such misfortune. Neither did I, in saying it, mean to be spiteful. On the contrary, that sentence was very much, and is still, laden with sympathy and concern for him, notwithstanding what he cast upon myself, and my daughter, in terms of insults and accusations. Nay, that comment, on the contrary, only intended to help him with expecting—but not desiring for—the worst, given that we are living in this country, and in view of his belief that his son’s choice was so extremely bad. Yet it seems that al-Dungul’s typical intelligence and stunning precision in playing football regrettably haven’t helped him a lot in appreciating the import of my comment. For al-Dungul, of all people, ought to have been aware of what this country can dish out, not only upon sons and daughters, but even upon mothers. Yes, he was assumed to have realised that much! Was he not the one who once announced, or bemoaned, in a public Sudanese Community symposium, that “The noble humane intention behind which asylum and immigration policies of this country, and other Western countries, hide is nothing but a fairy-tale. That is to say, everything hereby is looked upon in terms of profit and non-profit, gain and loss. Therefore, this country hasn’t granted us asylum out of sheer love for our eyes’ blackness or brownness but for an investment in our sons and daughters. As for us—the fathers who can’t be re-educated—it is nothing at all, as far as this country is concerned, if we die from depression or heartbreak or if we carry on living as miserable, torn-up souls unto the Day of Reckoning because of them” Did what has befallen—and is yet to befall—Mazin and his likes, as well as the likes of my daughter, Christina, upon whom al-Dungul verbally heaped untruthful depictions, consist of anything but one, or another, form of investment? He had to realise that our sons and daughters do not resemble us except biologically. For their inner or particular

qualities are bred, and grown, from, and within, a different reality. Mazin and his likes have indeed been thus forcibly driven, and are yet further to be driven, blindfolded, towards footy, footy and the never ending list of cuisines, liquors, audios, videos, magazines and outfits. Al-Dungul should have thereby also known that the “freedom of choice” maxim is nothing but a fairy-tale as well. For how can you ask you me to choose something or other when you are overwhelming me with a particular commodity? That’s how things go! That’s how things go! Thus how on earth could Mazin’s heart, let alone his feet, hit upon football while football was, and yet is, subjected to scorn and derision and completely denied any public attention or media hype? Al-Dungul should certainly be mistaken if he would assume that his anguish and grievance over the marginalised and doomed status of football here should be any more intense than felt by me. For he—more than anyone else and inasmuch as he over the years had been my sporting ideal even after I was acclaimed in my own right a first-rate footballer in the Medani town team of al-Nil<sup>1</sup>—must know that footy is not something I could ever swallow! He—as well—should know that I am overwhelmed by the same feelings—even ire, too—towards footy! Do not misunderstand me, please! These feelings aren’t basically because of footy’s presiding position in this country. Nor is it due to the official and public media’s lavish pampering which footy enjoys, relishing official and public media scorn for football. No, what infuriates me most is footy’s audacious stripping of the name of the ‘football’ from its rightful owner which now is labelled ‘Soccer’. What unqualified impudence! Tell me, sir: Do you sense any logic in terming a game ‘football’ when its players hold the ball in their hands for most of the game? Doesn’t that show the twisted and tedious character of such a game’s premise? Indeed, I struggle to understand how footy and rugby can even be categorised as sporting games. And I do agree with al-Dungul’s suggestion that they must have been invented by people with very modest mental abilities. Perhaps it would be more appropriate if they were classed instead as combat training. As for cricket, I appreciate that it does have in its favour a rejection of violence. But I am afraid even that does not help it, as with certain TV’s programs, to stop being for me not only hard to swallow but even a clear cause of heartburn!

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<sup>1</sup> **Al-Nil FC** is an old and famous football club in the town of Medani, the capital city of al-Jazira State in central Sudan.

Is it really possible for someone saturated with such feelings towards footy and its cousin—rugby—to gloat over al-Dungul’s miseries? Mazin and the like’s attraction to footy and its likes is not simply inconvenient for me, but something far more alarming! It—that is to say—increasingly highlights the discredited worth of football in this land, something which doesn’t only leave us with a slim chance of enhancing its credit, but also evaporates any desire within us to transmit to our descendants things more profound than our mere physical features. Is it then fair that al-Dungul should thereby reward my talk with an interpretation that was not only unpleasant and shocking but as well unjust and humiliating?

But what shocked me most wasn’t al-Dungul’s misinterpretation of the comment I repeated for you at the start of our chat. No, that wasn’t a big surprise to me, given his haste, and perhaps excessiveness, in sometimes judging for, or against, this or that of comments, affairs or persons. For what terrified and stunned me most was his branding me an agent of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, and my daughter with the smear of prostitution, not to note down the horrific insults he swiftly heaped upon Ibrahim, and later upon Jamal, when they interceded to lighten the brunt of that ire of his toward me, as well as my sore response towards all of that. But I shall not now poke into Ibrahim’s and Jamal’s business since you wish to talk with them. I shall, that is, not bore you with a tale you are probably about to hear. Better then you hear the song from the singer’s gullet.

Still I hope that you would bear with me as I sum up for you what al-Dungul has meant to me, not only in the Sudanese past but also here in this present land. I shall tell what I shall tell, so you can be clear as to the extent of the shock, nay the calamity that has befallen me because of him.

I have already said that al-Dungul was my highest idol in football. But that characterisation, I am telling you, doesn’t quite capture my true sentiment towards him—that legendary being amongst Sudanese football strikers! He was precisely the God of football for me. For legendary figures could be duplicated, but no, not Gods! There was, I say, hardly any player, any past striker, who has been so gifted with the mastery of ball-control, manoeuvring and ducking, in and out, as himself. “A striker who reduces opposing defenders to cabaret dancers!” as he was described by a football commentator some time ago. Lots of similar narratives were told of him. He certainly

could, yet he wouldn't, though his shots were very powerful, shoot a ball from a distance. Once—as a friend and fan—I inquired of him about that peculiar style of his. “To shoot from a distance is a cowardly way of shooting!” he answered. “While a goal from a distance has its own taste and beauty”, he continued, “it is no real measure for a striker’s skill. For a defender, or even a goal-keeper, with basic skills such as having a good or powerful kick, can surely aspire to it. No, that is not the decisive test for a striker’s distinction. For the competent striker is the one who is a master to perfection at skilfully entering the rival’s den! The more you are confident at that, the more you terrify, confuse and shatter the opponent’s defending devices. That is particularly what distinguishes the Brazilian striker from any other striker. As to Sudan, I have never seen anyone as matchless in that as al-Mirikh’s earlier spearhead, Kamal Abd Wahab<sup>2</sup>, who in fact predated me in initiating such an impressive style.” Indeed, it is to nothing except music that al-Dungul’s ways of dodging rivals may be compared. And no acts were more ultimately enchanting to me than his style of manoeuvring. Not only that, but also his barely rivalled skill at heading goals. He thus aptly merited the illustrious title of the “player with golden foot and head.” The might in his left foot was equal to the might in the right one, something which would rarely distinguish a football striker. Also he was too deceptively swift and quick to be held down by any defensive techniques. And he was, on top of that, an untiring striker from any front position you would imagine! Though he was the incontestable al-Mirikh’s frontline striker, he would, sometimes, shift himself deep into the midfield if he felt a need to re-orchestrate the striking line. Helpful—as well—he was to the wings if he spotted any vulnerability in them. In short, he was a perfect player in all of these senses. Is the Deity’s attributes anything else but perfection?

What triumphantly made me into chief striker in the Sudanese town of Medani’s football team of al-Nil was certainly this impact of al-Dungul’s upon myself, which had me almost impersonating him. I was then—but for the Sudanese Security Forces’ painful habitual detention on race based charges against Southern Sudanese guys as myself and my father as “fifth column” agents, and notwithstanding al-Hilal’s significantly better offer—about to sign up for the leading Sudanese football team of al-Mirikh. That I have been born, raised, and schooled, formally and informally, in a renowned northern Sudanese township such as Medani didn’t at all protect me from

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<sup>2</sup> **Kamal Abd al-Wahab** was a prominent player of al-Mirikh FC.

persecution. Thus nothing remained, for me and my family, particularly after the death of my father, except the option of leaving Sudan.

If al-Dungul, as a football legend, so profoundly impressed me, you can then imagine how my inmost depths were enthralled when I got personally to meet him, here in this land, and how my soul danced for his friendship? Why not, as my ecstasy was multiplied with the revelation of a new dimension of his: that is, of intelligent theoretical analysis of football matches. I once commented on this skill, saying to him that he clearly has a “third skilful foot”. Not only that but, furthermore, his passionate infatuation with football would make it quite possible for his listener to savour the relishing tenor of his voice’s undulations. That is if your good fortune would reward you with attending one of his football conversations, particularly when he talks about a favourite match or a player whose skills would arouse his fondness. Other delightfully humane dimensions, some of which were probably controversial, have effectively been opened up to me from within al-Dungul’s personality. I have been overwhelmingly delighted about that. He was neither haughty, nor vainglorious, though many celebrities continuously contrive to remain self-conceited, even though they were no longer in the limelight. And what is more significant, particularly for Southerners like myself, is that al-Dungul was not into the negative practice of treating us, the Southerners, with the painfully customary belittling prevalent amongst the Arabized Northerners. For he was indeed a rainbow-like human being: abundantly open and sociable. One of his inspiring social traditions was his invitation, of myself and Ibrahim and—sometimes—my brother Nyal, to the Ramadan Feast that he would habitually arrange at his own home once in every month of Ramadan. That is notwithstanding the fact that the three of us were principally Christians. When, in the first instance, I have called his attention to this distinction he simply justified the invitation by emphasizing that “what is most important in Ramadan is not its religious but its social dimension”. But what surprised me most—me, believe it or not, who has, in some certain sense or another, also often been a “Ramadan’s boy”!—was his whispering into my ear, just after breaking fasting: “Food was plenty, but I am sorry that I cannot now offer you a wine that would help your belly to digest it. But I promise to invite you to wine with me, even probably to have something stronger than wine, once this month turns its back upon us!” Presumably it was his vast love and affection, his cheerfulness and gentle irony, that inclined my brother, Nyal, to say to me, just a day before his furious fists smashed his

wife's lower jawbone and set flying two teeth from her upper jawbone, that which mostly pulls one towards coming to that café—apart from its solid food—was, precisely, Uncle al-Dungul himself! And what further gained him ever increased popularity amongst the Southern Sudanese, the people of the Nuba Mountains<sup>3</sup> and Darfur, was his political stand which had, particularly and consistently, been in support of the Sudanese People Liberation Movement's perspectives and actions while generally holding in respect the Sudanese Leftist groups which were—what a striking surprise!—not, in any way or another affiliated towards Arabism and Arab Nationalism. That is notwithstanding his flagrant allegiance to the Sudanese religious sect the Ansar! Indeed his unprecedented synthesis between such contradictory positions has been a source of great bewilderment to me, inasmuch as—inevitably—to other persons, that I once asked him to explain to me the 'mystery' behind such "strange and indigestibly incompatible allegiances". "Nothing thereby is strikingly strange", he said, "for all of these movements—the Mahdist Revolution; the Communist Party of Sudan; the SPLM/A—do involve a call for radical and substantial change. And the best that bond them together is their consciousness of national dignity and independence and their simplicity in dealing with the common folk". But his excessive animosity towards the West remained a subject of continuous contention between the two of us. One of my thereby relevant contentions was reiterating, to him, in a rather heated conversation, that his extremism against the West blinds him from discriminating what is good about the same Western countries. "For apart from the history of colonization, and the footy and the rugby, anything that comes from such countries shouldn't be condemned ahead as bad or evil," I said to him, and then carried on, "For the very West that has colonized, brutally exploited, and is still exploiting, the resources of the peoples who were, and are, less developed than its own peoples, craftily devised weapons of mass destruction and ever renewed fashions of manipulations is, however, the same West that has invented penicillin, antidotes against chicken pox, plague, tuberculosis and other ailments and epidemics," I argued. "The West has surely invented all of that and more, only with the intent of protecting its own peoples, not ours", he retorted, "and is still manufacturing all of those balms—and furthermore—even when its peoples no longer suffer from such ailments and epidemics. That is, of course, not for the love of our eyes blackness or brownness, but for malignant monopoly and marketing, for such things, as

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<sup>3</sup> **Nuba Mountains** (also known as **Southern Kurdufan**) is a region, in the Sudanese western State of Kurdufan. It is predominantly inhabited by the indigenous people of Nuba.

well as guns, cars, cleaning materials and cosmetics, are merely merchandises for the West. And what matters most, for the very same West, is certainly the material gain from those, not their ethical dimensions.” He argued. “Even what the West would, in times of disaster, hasten to offer us as aid and relief”, he continued, “is only all out of an act of superficial ‘ethical cosmetic surgery,’ for the benefit of, firstly, its self-image, secondly, its own peoples, and only thirdly, the rest of the world; ours presumably.” “The West”, he emphasized, “only does all of that because its countries and systems well know that what they would present to us with the right hand would eventually be taken again, from us, much multiplied, with the other hand.” And, in sharply dramatic notes, he finally maintained that “No countries in the world would be as happy and enthralled by our ruin as the Western countries! That is inasmuch as then we cannot possibly threaten the safety and the welfare of their own peoples and insofar as we then stand in incessant need for their services. The West, my dear friend, doesn’t only export medications to us; it also invents diseases for us! If not, then who creates our rulers, civil or military? Who has innovated microbial weapons and where were, and are, those weapons being tested? Were those testing backyards not our African countries and their like? Not only this, but also that that same West has, tragically, sold such arms and weapons to our very rulers to use against us. Should I, then, be more specific and ask you about where the Americans have buried, in Nimairi’s<sup>4</sup> era, their nuclear waste? Wasn’t that anywhere else but some of our Sudanese western and northern deserts?”

I also remember that, as his mighty questions reached their crescendo, he insistently warned me against the effects of what he has conceived as “my growing Western dispositions”, which, in his own characterization, would never get me onto the same saddle with the “White Man”. Of course this could now be retrospectively linked to his later stigmatization of me and Christina.

It never occurred to me before that al-Dungul would imagine that my present civil—par-excellence—profession of settling immigrants could only be conceived of as a camouflage for another ‘real’ business of mine: spying for Australian Security Intelligence Organisation! He thus interpreted the purpose of a working trip on which I

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<sup>4</sup> **Ja'far Muhammad Nimairi** (01/01/1930 – 30/05/2009) was an army colonel who led a military coup that ended a civil democratic ruling in Sudan in 1969. During most of his 16 year dictatorship, he was renowned as one of the USA allies in the region. A popular uprising put an end to his regime in 1985. Nimairi was also known as one of the USA allies in the region.

had to assume responsibility for accompanying a small team of Australian police officers to the Nuer region of South Sudan as being a mission providing fresh information for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation so the Australian Government, alongside the USA, Israel and other Western countries, would thereby find a foothold. What a far-fetched conspiracy theory, by Jove?

Undoubtedly you do remember the heated media discussions that have been initiated in the aftermath of scattered violent incidents which have, not so long ago, taken place here, at some Melbournian suburbs, and for which some Southern Sudanese youths have been both victims and perpetrators. The questions raised then revolved around the difficulties associated with the alleged inability of Sudanese immigrants to adapt to the common ways of living in Australia. What has thereby constituted the fundamental failing? Is it a sort of a supposedly intrinsic inability of the Sudanese immigrants to respond to the conditions encouraging integration within Australian society? Or is the whole disposition on the contrary mostly attributable to some, or other, defects in the very Australian administrative systems and policies that were initially meant to encourage and develop that very integration and adaptation?

The Australian police force and a number of print and visual media institutions—primarily sensationalist and commercialized—have been firmly castigated and chastised for not only generating distorted stereotypical images within the Australian public of Sudanese migrants and refugees, images that were so misleading that certain enlightened Australian organisations, departments and institutions, decided to hold internal reviews to identify their level of understanding or knowledge of the cultures and traditions of newly arrived Sudanese migrants and refugees. Australian police forces were naturally included in that re-evaluation. Hence their requesting the resettlement and rehabilitation organisations, one of which I was employed in, to let me assist them, in my capacity as a settlement worker with a Sudanese cultural background, with appreciating the general cultural background of a section of new settlers whose ethnic origins were from a Southern Sudanese tribe, the Nuer. As a descendent of that tribe, I, as well as another settlement worker from the Dinka tribe, have presented to these circles papers on such ethnic cultures. The two papers were well received and it was decided a team of police officers be sent to the original Southern Sudanese homelands of these tribes, in order that the formative social and cultural climate of the

newcomers from these tribes in Australia, could be better comprehended. So, as a guide, I went with the white Australians to major centres of Nuer population such as the cities of Malakal, Waw, and al-Nasir,<sup>5</sup> only to discover thereby that I, myself, was most in need of a guide in those lands—a guide who would go beyond the touristic level of the whole matter to function as a mediator and help me, a boy from the central Sudanese town of Wad Medani, to appreciate my own tribe as well as helping my tribe to appreciate me. In other words, through the experience I realized that I have all along been a ‘Northern Nuerian’. That was the first statement about myself—after mentioning it to my wife and sons and daughters—that I related to al-Dungul once I returned back from that mission. I said then to al-Dungul: “The only difference between me and my Australian companions was then that they were whites while I was black who claimed he could speak the Nuerian tongue. Apart from that, all of us were foreigners there”. I said “who claimed” because I sensed, though otherwise certainly received—and the other guests—with genuine warmth and hospitality, that my way of speaking the Nuer language had been a source for pity amongst the elders of the tribe, open-mouthed shock and surprise amongst the youngsters, and embarrassed, smiling whispering amongst the women. I was, for them, no one but a person whose affective allegiances have been so deformed by the negative influences of the Arab culture and language of Northern Sudan that his Nuerian tongue has unfortunately been left permanently lame. But luckily that did not dispose them towards denuding me out of my belonging to them, though it may implicitly relegated me, on their view, to the degree of a second class Nuerian boy. This positioning has indeed further complicated the crisis of my compounded identity. For the North, in which I have been born and brought up, has also habitually conceived of me as only being a second class person or, as it was formerly stated, citizen. But now, as the Sudanese South achieved its independence, this very Northern Sudan of mine does now conceive of me as a foreigner with no statutory right of being accepted as a Sudanese citizen! Hereby, my standing is, of course, not a lot better, notwithstanding all of the Australian political establishment’s theoretical affectations and rather florid maxims. Thus I would, consequently, like you to let al-Dungul know that I am—really—very sorry for his diagnosis of high blood pressure, and that I have never sought to ride on the same saddle with any person, be they white or a purple! For I should have indeed learned from my past experience as a victim of

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<sup>5</sup> **Malakal, Waw, and al-Nasir** are well-known towns in Southern Sudan.

social and political intimidation, incarceration, torture throughout a long litany of successive Sudanese ruling regimes and security bureaus, something which has eventually bequeathed me a certified ethical invincibility that has assuredly put me off any involvement or contribution in any business associated with intelligence agencies whatever their nationalities or ideological perspectives. This is manifested in some of what I have once confided to al-Dungul himself: that I have actually turned down a serious offer of an employment with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. Obviously al-Dungul hasn't then believed my news! The offered post's responsibilities were not associated with any direct military or espionage tasks. Nay! They have had only been about translating certain spoken, visual and written documents and records (likely acquired through snooping) from Arabic tongues to the English language. My moral sensitivity was the decisive motive behind turning down such a highly tempting and financially rewarding offer which greatly exceeded the provisions, benefits and allocations of my present post, even if they are all added up together!

It is clear that al-Dungul has been excessively affected by some of the more fanatical maniac obsessions of 'the Cold War Era Communists', something which would make him conceive of anyone who would associate himself with any Western institution, or organisation, as a downright traitor! Mostly those same obsessions have lurked behind his classification of Christina's profession as a model as constituting only a form of "bourgeois decadence"! That is despite modelling not exclusively having been a Western profession. But my last description has only been a polite rendering of what al-Dungul has actually been insinuating into his talk about my daughter Christina. For the literal expression that al-Dungul has applied to my daughter's case was that she "has been avowedly selling her flesh to the whites!" What could that indicate, in your own estimation, forgetting mine, but that my daughter has, for him, been, all along, merely a stinking prostitute?

But my own viewpoint (which I have later expressed to both of Christina and al-Dungul) still wonders at what seems to me an inherent ridiculousness association with the profession in question. In fact, I could not help audibly laughing when firstly (and lastly of course!) I have brought myself on to watch Christina, and her mates, theatrically moving to and fro in strange dresses, wearing some vague smiles! I also could not stop myself from laughing at the overwhelming seriousness with which their

spectators were then staring at them! Thus, at the end of that show, I instantly asked her: “Do they really give you money only for such theatrical going and coming and vague smiling?” But what I haven’t said to her (but just to al-Dungul) was my belief that such a profession is indeed redundant and superfluous, and that there is no sense in it inasmuch as one can otherwise simply gaze and gawk at fashions and dresses while they are put on mannequins’ bodies. Indeed I did not then say to him that there was anything that would relate such a profession to prostitution, for certainly that wasn’t, and isn’t, my view. Hence Christina’s immediate shock, rage and anger once she learned, from me—and I shouldn’t have transmitted it—al-Dungul’s view of her profession. She used greatly to honour and respect him. Yes, I shouldn’t have done so; and I am now truly regretting the act. But I was then very angry and in a dire need for someone to share, with me, the extremely heavy burden of such a grieving calamity. So I have chosen to divulge all of that to Christina, particularly as she, unlike her mother, has always been a good listener and a genuinely sympathetic soother and counsellor, though I do not agree with her fondness with Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai and Japanese food.

## Christina

I hope you won't mind the dominance of English over my chat with you. My Arabic is not as excellent as my father's. I had only a few childhood years in Egypt, when I used to speak Arabic. But here, in Australia, I only get to speak Arabic intermittently, or even scarcely. If it was not for that I might even be a far worse talker in Arabic. But that does not at all mean that I have any horror of the Arabic language. It only indicates that I have not been through circumstances predisposed towards continuously learning, and dealing in, and with, the Arabic language as perfectly as my father. I also wish that you would not be bored as I repeat for you the same matters I have related to my father once he acquainted me with your wish to speak to me over al-Dungul's issue with him, for I already discussed it with you on the phone when you contacted me about it the first time. Nevertheless, I must rehearse that same matter with you again so you may be emphatically assured that I, all along the way, haven't been in any position to perform any role which may help you to bring together all of the incompatible parties. I certainly do not stand against such an endeavour, though I honestly can't say I'm enthusiastic about it, yet I express that opinion only because I'm surely not the one to decide the success or failure of such an arduous endeavour. So my answer to my father was as follows: "Part of this problem lies with you. Another part lies with Uncle Ibrahim. The same for al-Dungul. That is, surely, besides other parties. But definitely I wasn't part of it. My name was there in it... that is true. My name was thereby used to add more fuel to the fire... that is also true. But none of that is enough to expect me to be concerned with this problem. The fire is already raging, and I was neither the one who lit it, nor the one for whom it was lit. And if al-Dungul hadn't brought the name of my profession into it, he would definitely not have failed to invent some other slander against me or any other of my loved ones. Hasn't he managed to turn you into a spy?"

The good thing is you have sought me out just to see and meet me, and not for anything else, though my father thinks otherwise. He would suggest that you were here only to console and soothe me... to mitigate the effect of al-Dungul's insult upon me. Of course—as I have already conveyed to you over the phone—I do not mind at all being

acquainted with a person like yourself, particularly as my father has a positive impression of you. Moreover, our meeting will at least represent a chance for me to express my opinion of what has happened. That is inasmuch as my dearest person in this life, who is my father, has been made into a part of this battle and the fireworks have failed to spare me. As for al-Dungul, I assure you that I am not at all anymore resentful towards him. That is not because I have forgiven him for his hurtful allusions, but basically because I do now think that he was too ridiculous in what he said to deserve any attention, let alone getting anxious or stressed.

If there was anything to provoke my rage in the first place, it was, in reality, what my father, even before my dear self, has had to encounter of accusations and hurt. As he is, or rather we should say he was, a friend of al-Dungul's, it was he who was shocked or shattered or even afflicted by what the latter had nonchalantly visited upon him, for I haven't seen al-Dungul my whole of life, except for two times. All I knew of him was just tales and hearsay from my father. The first time I saw him was when my father invited me to have dinner at that restaurant whereby you habitually gather. My father was an unrelenting devotee of traditional Sudanese cuisines, particularly the *Bamia*,<sup>1</sup> the *Mulukhiyya*,<sup>2</sup> the *Ful*,<sup>3</sup> the Falafel, the fried fish, the *Fasikh*<sup>4</sup> and *Kawari'*<sup>5</sup> which that restaurant or Café amicably offers. The reason for the invitation, he pronounced, was to let my tongue embrace "real food", as he put it, and not those darling bites of mine which he would rather call "unintelligible" or "too snobbish to naturalize"! Al-Dungul just happened to be there when we were in. Or so it seemed. But I do not now rule out that my father could have wanted him there so that he could have introduced us to one another. That he did in a jovial frame of mind. And though al-Dungul has chosen not to join us in eating, yet he sat with us in a welcoming gesture to me, as he said, for about fifteen minutes during which—I do truthfully tell you—I felt at ease with him. As to my second, and presumably last, encounter with him, it did come about when my father invited him home in responsive appreciation of certain invitations he has advanced to him at different times some of which were occasioned by the Muslim fasting month of

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<sup>1</sup> **Bamia** is the Arabic equivalent of Okra.

<sup>2</sup> **Mulukhiyya** is the Arabic equivalent of Jews mallow. The scientific or Latin equivalent is Crochorus olitorius.

<sup>3</sup> **Ful** is the Arabic equivalent of Vicia faba (also known Broad bean, Fava beans, Faba bean, Field bean).

<sup>4</sup> **Fasikh** is a popular, originally Egyptian, cuisine which commonly made of fermented, salted and desiccated fish. In Sudan, it is usually cooked with onion, tomato or salsa, peanut butter and some spices.

<sup>5</sup> **Kawari'** is a soup that is usually made, in Sudan, by boiling calf's or lamb's legs with very few vegetables like onion, carrot and potato and some spices (*Kawari'* is also known, in English, as Trotter).

Ramadan, something that had left a profound impression upon my father. This formed my father's sense of gratitude—which had become a constant melody on his lips that no one in our family could avoid to listen to at both suitable and non-suitable moments—and perhaps some of his relatives' and friends' ears were also subject to similar repetition.

It was discernible that al-Dungul's presence, on that day, did bring with it to our home a lot of laughter and joy. Indeed it was a presence which was steeped with humour and tales that have revived the Arabic language in my memory, as well as my tongue. It was quite memorable and moving of him then to enquire about my Uncle Nyal, who at the time had only completed two months of his two year prison sentence. I remember being immensely touched to the rim by his considerateness, particularly when he proposed that he should go with my father to him at his next visit. But the most distinct thing for all of the family was the jubilance and dancing joy which marked my father's feelings that day, which was for my father, we felt, truly exceptional. My father was overflowing with excitement, jovial like we had never seen before, and we were all irresistibly caught up in the gay mood, particularly when we weren't in a position to grasp a tale's ingredients or the joke of a long past incident. Their past, which seemed to us so shared to the point of awe and wonder, was abounding with memoirs, events, episodes, persons, anecdotes on arts, sports, politics, social life and cronies. It was simply apparent there was a lot to get my father and al-Dungul together. We were so engrossed in the recollection of those anecdotes, jokes and tales, of al-Dungul's charming visit, that we were hooked on them and chuckling for days. My father thus threw in the comment that it was rarely that anybody could have crammed his heart with such joy as was bestowed to him, that day, by al-Dungul. These words of his were spoken to Uncle Ibrahim, on an occasion when he was staying with us for a short time. I then felt that such a phrase of my father's, so genially recollected at that occasional presence of Uncle Ibrahim, was interposed with a flicker of a wistfulness which was also addressed to us... his homefolks. At that my mum, struggling to suppress her jealousy, remarked on it saying: "Perhaps you would have done better to be a husband of al-Dungul, not of me".

At that time it gave me such a sense of ease to witness my father enjoying such a bond with al-Dungul. That feeling was doubled, and blended with a certain gladness, when I

remembered a phrase my father once said to me at the end of a response to one of my questions about his past: “You and your like are lucky. You, and those, contrarily to the likes of me, are not forced into leaving behind your pasts: you are living life here-and-now. The likes of me recall their lives from other places; other times. You live the present and the future; I, and my likes, live the past and the past.”

I remember that I told one of my friends, with a mouth filled with celebration, about what had so lifted my spirits. That tale of friendship won the admiration of my friend too. But she took care to point out what she described as the “exceptional character” of such a relationship and said: “Regrettably such a friendship cannot be generalized, for most of those to whom al-Dungul belongs do not make friends with our folks”!

Recalling my friend’s observation, I can now imagine that al-Dungul’s recent hostility toward my father, as well as Uncle Ibrahim, was only because he tired of continuously maintaining such an “exceptional role”.

I did not say that to my father for fear it would sound insulting. But I said to him, in a tone eager not to gloat at his misfortune, something along the lines that he had better revise his faith in the prospect of Northerners and Southerners sharing a single roof. My father not only had that apparently credible faith but he, furthermore, has had seemingly good reasons to work towards actually realizing such a promising faith. But the dilemma of such a faith was that its grounds, though attractive and rather admirable, weren’t realistic. Forgive me, if you smell a touch of cruelty in those words. I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, if you were agreeing with my father, nor, for that matter, my father’s. It is just my often repeated viewpoint which reality has in the event not only supported but also highlighted the belief of the majority of our peoples in it. That much, at least, was indicated in the outcome of the self-determination referendum. I should hereby instantly assure you that I don’t hold any grudges against those to whom you and al-Dungul belong. For if I had such feelings I would have declined to see you. And at least there was nothing to force me to welcome your proposal to introduce each other and sit for. Even my father, who, just before our telephone conversation, has already conveyed your proposal to me, hasn’t exercised upon me any kind of pressure to respond positively to such a proposal. On the contrary, he insisted that only my own inner wish should be the condition to accept or reject such an invitation. It is good that my father, in contrast to many parents of his own generation, is distinguished with an

excellent willingness to discuss and appreciate, understand and, hence, agree or just “accept”. He never imposed any decision on me. I remember that he once said to me:

“Many things do not appeal to me in this land. I have had neither hand in making it, nor have any power to change it. I should certainly enjoy the heights of contentment, even happiness, if my sons and daughters should not be engaged with all that doesn’t please me. But this, of course, is not possible. Thus I would agreeably settle for the wish that they should, at least, avoid the worst of that which wouldn’t appeal to me. For what is now most necessary within such a reality isn’t that you do, or you do not do, something agreeable, or not agreeable, to me, but that you choose or do something that doesn’t hurt me.” Can you imagine what joy would befall my father if all, or some, of my brothers turned out, at last, to be footballers? But he surely would not erect a wailing wall if all, or some, of them have finally grown into cricket, or footy or rugby players.

Al-Dungul should have better enjoyed the same style of thinking as my father’s. He should have—instead of howling loud around the city—held a party in celebration of his son’s success in joining a footy team with such a bright history and powerful present. Yet he did not only do so but went further, directing blame and curses towards this country which has provided him and his family with a lot of things which he could never have been provided, not only in his own homeland, but also in other countries where he had to make a life. Let us leave aside his undeniable troubles in Sudan: what have the other three, or four, countries, in which he and his family lived, offered him to compare to Australia? Did they give his son, for whom he has now lost everything and everybody, access to any situation or education whereby he could have achieved and excelled as he has surely done here? If Australia, as he sees it, is such a rotten place, why not the hell take the family and pack off to his homeland or any other more generous land than this one whereby his son could have per chance been a footballer? Indeed, his hands are not tied to this place. But nonetheless he would not dare leave it behind. And if he dared, the rest of the family would not do his bidding or, at least, they would not agree to act on any move to return. What that leaves him with—apart from the option of returning—is either rethinking the issue, or accepting reality, or continuing to spout insults, recriminations and blame upon whoever he would imagine to be the cause of his son’s descent into footy playing, myself and the bloody catwalk business no exception, for it looks—so to speak—as if it prevented his son from getting involved in

the sport of football! Though I have not once been privileged to know or even see that son of his. Al-Dungul has—perhaps intentionally—overlooked the fact that a fashion show is one thing, and a body show is something entirely different... for the former is certainly a profession, while the latter is a different profession entirely. And none of our opinions, including mine, my father's and al-Dungul's, can strip either of them of being specialized professions with their own theatres, display techniques, and male and female employees, clients and audience. In the second profession the body is the subject of the show, while in the first it is the garment that is the subject of the show. The focus of the body show's profession is the act of nakedness while the core of the fashion show is the act of dressing up. Briefly those two professions are completely at odds with one another. The other thing that both of al-Dungul and my father, as well as many others, have, indeed, overlooked was that my posture, distinguished demeanour and other virtues of my physique were what all in all brought me to be enviably admitted into working in such a profession from which I am now about to resign, not because of al-Dungul's loathing but basically for reaching an age that doesn't furnish all of the desired ideal conditions which the specialized firms require. I could have failed to heed all of that if it wasn't for the fact that for the last fifteen out of my twenty-five years I have lived in a country such as Australia. For in contrast to the enthusiasm with which many here have welcomed my singular physical qualities, I now remember how my Egyptian female classmates in Cairo used to tease me, bully me, about the slenderness of my bearing. Probably the same would have happened had the school been in Khartoum, together with Northern female students.

I should draw your attention to the fact that my admiration for Australia doesn't necessarily mean that I approve of all of what it represents. Endless looks and gestures persist in offensively drumming into you that you do not quite belong to this Australian country just because you are an immigrant of different type, and different colour. I assure you that I do not at all feel ashamed or browbeaten because of my colour or features or my racial ancestry. And I am so thankful and indebted to my father who has instilled in me histories, narratives, tales, realities, opinions and cultural foundations that make me proud of my heritage, content and happy with who and what I am now. Nonetheless I do, sometimes, feel disturbed and angered by other people, who are from immigrant backgrounds as well, for seeing my shape and colour as exotic or weird. Something happened to me once in the first two or three years of my stay in Australia

which now makes me laugh. But yet I now recollect this incident with a touch of sorrow. A white child, whose mother had sat on the bus-seat next to me, stretched her finger toward me to touch a bare spot on my arm. She prodded it lightly and cautiously. Then she studied the tip of her finger, then my arm, then the tip of her finger again, and then at the rest of my body, just to make sure that I was not painted black! Uncle Ibrahim—to whom you should, as my father told me, talk, and who would be more helpful with your task than I—has once recounted to me that a white female caseworker at one of the employment agencies with which he used to deal had, in a chance meeting outside her workplace—which he complained to her about being recurrently frustrated with the agency's slackness in helping him finding work—explained to him, in a low but unmistakable tone of voice, that “Our agency, and unfortunately many other similar agencies, does not consider, in the first place, the individual’s personal and technical skills, references, experience or qualifications, but rather the individual’s racial and cultural background, his or her colour or appearance, and whether those are, or not, compatible with the leading trends in labour market. That is the sad truth, my dear Ibrahim!” She confided to him gently as she finished.

## Ibrahim

That's true. But that caseworker—whom, it is rumoured, is of Christian Lebanese descendent—did not just say that. She further suggested that I should change, or at least adjust, the usual way in which my name is spoken or written in Arabic, in such a manner that it should be swiftly converted into the name “Abraham”. She also confided to me that it would be better for me to find a given name that has no affiliation with names that have Islamic resonance, or those names that are characterised by being long or combined or complicated. That means, in other words, that my substitute name should bear the same kind of what she labelled familiarity that the name “Abraham” exhibits. At this stage, I asked her:

- But who will do the job: me or my name? And I am Christian, if that is the trouble. And ‘Ibrahim’ is the father of all of the prophets, be their followers Christians, Muslims or Jews.
- Granted. But the way it is written on your application or the commonly accepted verbal and written forms within your community are, nonetheless, not commonly viewed as Christian names in Western societies.
- Suppose I change it, what should I then do with my appearance and skin colour?
- The new name will lessen their burden. I am hereby speaking about the initial acceptance of the application, how your recorded personal details are looked at, not your appearance. Also you shouldn't forget that being forty-eight doesn't help much either. The appropriate job from your CV is that of a labourer. But bosses generally prefer youthful labourers: teenagers, in their twenties, or at the limit, thirties. Those are the current age expectations for a labourer. Nevertheless it isn't exactly ruled out that you may find a job. Only you should try to start the process with

something—let's say a strategy—which would mitigate any aspects that would make it more difficult; hence the advice of revising your name.

Believe me: you wouldn't be the first to do that, for there have been many transformed Muhammads and Ahmads before yourself!

Contrary to what I had been hoping, the chat with her only increased my depression, in addition to saddling me with a perverse puzzlement.

I have never imagined that a person's name's significance could surpass the significance of the name's bearer himself. In fact it was the first time I had ever had to confront such a disconcerting, frustrating experience. My name has never before been conspicuous to such a degree, not even in the three countries I passed through, lived and worked in before my arrival in Australia. It's true that I went through a good deal of trouble and suffering in those countries, at the centre of which was my lack of secure employment.

The first comforting place I thought of seeking refuge, after my conversation with the caseworker, was the Café, where I could find someone who would lighten the sharpness of sorrow and frustration which that bloody chance meeting caused me. To be honest with you, I was hoping to find al-Dungul among the attendees. For I was certain that his proverbial inborn exasperation with this country should instantly elicit solidarity with me. That was before Mazin's choice of sport compounded all that rage and pushed him out into territories which we thought were at a safe distance from the embers glowing in his mouth.

I did luckily find him, sitting right over there. He was, in fact, the only good thing that happened to me that day, following my random meeting with that caseworker of harmful frankness and explanations. As soon as I had greeted him, with a mixture of an ailing smile and not so elegantly formed words, I blurted out my account of the incident. And so long as I continued to enter deeper into the narrative's details, so his face was glowing with boiling anger while his teeth squeaked—not because he was striving not to interrupt my tale—but from his inability to find any expression to match the enormity of his emotional response at what he was hearing. So once I had finished recalling the incident, his tongue was ablaze with curses directed at that caseworker, at those who facilitated her, her fathers', and her grandfathers' immigration to this country in order to insult non-whites. He also directed his curses at the employment agencies and the

workings of a nation that is so unable to reconcile what it had committed against the indigenous peoples of this land that its racist fist continued to strike out, left and right, at those who are not white. His still incendiary tirade continued to mount until it had spread to a bunch of the Café’s clients who came to my support by joining al-Dungul’s and my table, and out of a number of their mouths came confirmation of like incidents, on top of which alternative suggestions—the feasibility of which was doubtful—came along, in addition to which the tongues of the majority of them flowed with criticism, curses, and insults, some of which were far more crude than what poured from al-Dungul’s mouth.

In fact, all of that contributed, together with the subsequent joyful chats, to bring me relief from the sadness, rage, malaise and frustration that were eroding my heart and mind. At the end of that gathering, I proposed to al-Dungul to give him a lift home, particularly as I was already planning to drive to pick up my wife who was visiting some relatives who lived not so far from where he was. When I got him home he, as he left the car, inquired of me, in a protective tone, just before he got down:

- Tell me, what are you going to do with this business of finding a job?

I replied:

- I haven’t yet decided; but what I am certain of is that if I do not have a job soon, the situation of our four groups of relatives and friends will only get worse. At the top of them is that of my younger brother, who was recently married; and another is that of my widowed younger sister and her six children—of whom I lately related to you that I have succeeded in moving out of the town of al-Dalanj,<sup>1</sup> where my sister’s late husband used to live and work, and straight to the capital city of Khartoum; and another is that of my other two brothers who are living in Port Sudan;<sup>2</sup> the third group are the friends and relatives scattered between Kadugli<sup>3</sup> and Khartoum; and the fourth group—so as not to say the last—is the family of an old friend—who is in fact a peer from childhood—now living in Cairo and refusing to return to Sudan even though their immigration application to Australia has already

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<sup>1</sup> **Al-Dalanj** is a well-known town in the State of Kurdufan.

<sup>2</sup> **Port Sudan** is a well-known city in the State of Red Sea. It is also the main port of the country.

<sup>3</sup> **Kadugli** is a well-known town in the State of Kurdufan.

been denied. Although I had neither commitment nor ability in relation to remitting regular financial allowances to the latter two groups when I was working, yet this doesn't mean that their situation would not be affected by the ceasing of my intermittent remittances to them. But it is the group of my younger sister and brother which remains in most dire need of my regular financial aid. I really don't know what I can do if all doors leading to getting a job were shut against me. By God! Could that caseworker's suggestion I change my name be the only way to get a job? Do you think I should take that suggestion of her seriously?

I remember, he uttered, when bidding me goodbye, in answer to this:

- You will definitely find a job without doing that. And remember, these days unemployment is high, so you are not alone in that respect. Just keep trying and you will get a job, and never give up on Allah's help.

Since then I have not seen him for over a month, for I have now been too busy juggling two jobs at once, one of them is permanent, the other casual. By some stroke of luck I got both before needing to change my name. Yet it has reached my ears that the Café's clients were spreading the word that I was only successful in finding a job because I had changed my name to "Abraham". I even heard that someone claimed that I was particularly pleased with the new name because it was the name of one of the great American presidents. But what was most wonderfully ironic of all was that the very day I went, in the company of William, to sit with al-Dungul at the Café, driven ever so much to cheer him up in the face of his disappointment at Mazin's choice to play footy, was the same day in which his blazing tongue unleashed its flame upon us.

It is likely that William has told you the tale, or at least I hope he did, so you are assured that my keenness to mediate between he and al-Dungul wasn't, as the latter understood, driven by any desire, on my part, to side with the former. I have tried—motivated by an attempt at reconciliation—to explain to al-Dungul that the English phrase that William said doesn't imply any accusation of homosexuality against Mazin, or even wishing it on him. And I kept repeating it, for his ears, over and over, as I noticed he was not paying any attention to what I was saying. And as he continued to receive my repeated attempts to say those words by not taking any notice, I then said to him, in a tone closer

to objection than anger: “Oh, al-Dungul, my brother, try to understand; try to understand...”

But, even before I could finish my sentence, he bombarded me with words filled with irritation, misunderstanding, irrelevance, anger and insult. His attack then started to round and circle—while his tongue acquired an accent the arrogance of which dumbfounded me—with diverse phrases but which boiled down to things like: “How dare I say that he is daft”; and that his son “though he chose to play footy, he is yet far better, in thought and action, than all of my sons who—with their buttock-revealing trousers, their weirdly shaved and coloured hair—were nothing but perverse imitations of degenerate Black American youngsters!”; that I have been rendered without dignity since submitting to the “will of the Masters” and “changed my name, from ‘Ibrahim’, to ‘Abraham’”; and that this “will not make me better in English than him, and I therefore can’t change the insult and injury that William directed at him and his son”. He finished this insulting tirade with a phrase so hurtful that I instantly had to leave the Café, not by my own volition but rather because Uncle al-Mitairif and Jamal pulled me away having rightfully perceived that I was towering over al-Dungul with the posture of someone who was about to commit an act the consequences of which no one in their right mind would desire: “It seems to me you are one of those whom Allah has thrown down among the lowest. And those whom Allah throws down among the lowest shall never rise again!”

My own opinion aside, sir, should anyone, on your own reckoning, who understands where we are and what is now befalling us and our sons and daughters and wives ever emit this type of phrase?

I hope that if you see him you pass on that I want to inform him that Allah is innocent from throwing anyone down low. For human beings often reduce fellow human beings to the lowest, but not Allah. And if I have wished for my homeland’s former “lower” status of mine not to change, he wouldn’t have found me here. Also if his own thereby “higher” status happened to make him “better” than me, then it doesn’t do so here. All of us in this land are in the same boat, and sit in the same compartment. Also I wish you to say to him that I do not see that his son is better than my sons, nor are my sons better than his, but they all the same in going against our wishes, something which makes me, him, William, and other fathers, share the same sorrow, the same ordeal. It is true that

my sons have been Americanized. I was the first to judge them so in a chat with al-Dungul. Thus he was merely reiterating a charge of my own. But that Americanization was not abnormal. For none of the youth—sons of immigrants or non-immigrants, footy players or football players, fans of another sports or no sport at all, students or not students—seem to escape such a fate. That Mazin—say to him this, please—has chosen to play footy, means he is now an Australian bloke. And his being an Australian bloke means also his being an American guy. This is confirmed by a comment William made on a similar point which goes as follows: “It is no longer easy to find anything un-Americanized in the life of Australians!”

I haven’t changed my name, man, simply because I did not want to do so. Even if it happened—supposedly, forcibly, I mean—that I changed my name, would that be because of an alleged love to that ancient American president or for the purpose of feeding my family? And would this—if it supposedly forcibly happened—let me turn my back on the Café, our food and songs, my friends, my kith and kin, my salaam and chatting? I would also say, if it happened that some of our people changed their name for the reason given—and this has likely occurred to a few of us—I would not condemn it.

But al-Dungul would condemn it, irrespective of the cause. Unlike some of us, al-Dungul does not suffer—at any rate—from the kind of pressure that anguishes us.

His problem, I think, is mainly that he equates his living reality with the living realities of others before he, unfairly of course, imposes his judgment on them. If al-Dungul hadn’t, for instance, travelled to Australia, worked before in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for some time, he, nor anyone else in his family, still wouldn’t suffer any want of food and shelter. He—and this information I have extracted directly from his own mouth—is in possession of three houses: two in the district of al-Souq in Omdurman, a third in the Danagla quarters in Khartoum Bahri.<sup>4</sup> And all are family inheritance. The first two houses are rented while in the third one lives his mother—may Allah gives her a long lease of life—from whom he inherited a date palm farm and a house in the Northern region of Sudan. Also, to the three houses in the capital are

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<sup>4</sup> **Khartoum Bahri** is the third geographical site (city) that composes, together with the first geographical site (city), Omdurman, and the second geographical site (city), Khartoum, what is known as **The Triangle Capital City** of Sudan, Khartoum.

appended three rented grocers. The only thing that may get him into slight trouble, if he should choose to live in Sudan, is the tongue which has twice landed him in jail. But even then he was detained only for a few days—less than the sum total of fingers on one hand! And, due to his fame as a former football star in the Sudanese club of al-Mirikh with all those influential friends and acquaintances and contacts in many places of power, such as the Sudanese Security Forces' quarters, the Police and the Army, he had virtually been spared the agony of physical torture. As to his wife, who is a relative of his—and whose father's trading house later went downhill because of, as you well know, the Sudanese Government's loathing of all of those traders who do not belong to the ruling party—it is enough that her father's trading house is still in possession of assets in Egypt, as well as in the Northern region of Sudan, and consist, in Egypt, of two rented flats and in the Northern region of Sudan, of a single date palm farm and other small farming projects, all with good old and solid royalties and revenues, something which is quite sufficient to provide for all of her family's wants in Sudan.

My family, from the other side of the tracks, hasn't tasted the comfort of shelter—as my late father proverbially used to say—except in the suburbs of the area of al-Buram<sup>5</sup> to the south of the Southern Kurdufanian city of Kadugli. Our home in the suburbs of al-Buram wasn't anything but a cottage of stone and straw. But we left that, when I was at the six year of age, for a shanty town at the outskirts of Kadugli, where my family was tempted to move by the lure of my father's finding a semi-regular job in the centre of the city. He worked as a porter, carrying loads of goods for some Coptic merchant in the city. A few years passed and that job helped him to be promoted to the status of a cleaner, then to that of a guard, at the administrative offices of the Coptic Church in Kadugli. The man who helped him to get that position was, by the way, Tadrus, the father of your friend, Milad, who used to trade about between the cities of Khartoum, al-Obayyid,<sup>6</sup> Kadugli and al-Dalanj.

But three of my father's acquaintances, who were of the same tribe as ours, joined the forces of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army at the Nuba Mountains, something which made him a victim of a series of manhunts, detention and threats all directed at him by the Security Forces and Military Intelligence. That forced us to migrate, once again, this time to a shanty town in the city of al-Dalanj. But we lasted there only two

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<sup>5</sup> **Al-Buram** is a town in the State of Kurdufan.

<sup>6</sup> **Al-Obayyid** is the capital city of the State of Kurdufan.

years, moved again to another shanty town in Khartoum, then to a fourth shanty town in Khartoum, then to a fifth, then to a sixth, all in tandem with urban planning's latest program drives! In other words, the Government was constantly compelling us to move from the quarters where we lived, using planning to sell them typically to wealthy landowners who weren't, of course, any of the region's original dwellers.

My father died in one of those slums. In another slum, my mother followed him. Three younger brothers, and a sister who is the youngest of us, were then left behind under my sole responsibility and care. While in the third slum, one of my brothers moved to the city of Port Sudan whereby nothing was heard of him for a few years except his marriage to a Dinka's woman whose folks were from Sinnar.<sup>7</sup> In the fourth slum, my youngest sister married and moved, with her husband, to al-Dalanj where the latter had found work. At the fifth slum, my other brother joined the one who earlier left for Port Sudan. As for myself, the Sudanese Army Forces kidnapped me from one of the local markets and forcibly sent me to fight in the ranks of the Sudanese Popular Defense Forces just as I, and my remaining brother, were about to march onward to the sixth slum.

On the truck which was taking us to one of the Sudanese Popular Defense Forces camps, I got acquainted with Nyal, a brother of William who had been abducted at a friend's wedding in Khartoum. Soon I and Nyal became close companions, not only from the camaraderie in military training sessions but, furthermore, the proximity of our bunks in that camp, being sent to the same military battalion on the first military push into the Upper Nile, falling captives to the hands of the SPLA's fighters and, finally, being able to escape together during the chaotic violence which broke out amongst the SPLA's fighters themselves after a split over the SPLA's political leadership.

We raced towards Southern Kurdufan, on-foot six days, hid at one of the villages at the south of Kadugli for more than six months, when Nyal decided to venture a return to Medani and I went into South Darfur, then to North Darfur whereby I hadn't heard of or from him for several years until I ran into him here. It was Nyal who first introduced me to William, and not the other way round, as some think.

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<sup>7</sup> **Sinnar** is a Sudanese state, located on the south-east of the country.

Nyal didn't succeed in getting to Medani. That much I learned when I met him here for the second time. William phoned and warned him that his return to Medani may pose a threat to his life, he said. He remained in hiding in one of Khartoum's slums even after William was forced, for security reasons, to leave Sudan for Egypt without directly bidding him farewell. Nyal had then kept slipping from one Khartoum slum to another, for a number of years, until some of William's friends were able to sneak him out to the east of Sudan into Eritrea. William was hoping that Nyal would join one of the armed Sudanese political opposition groups that had just begun using Eritrea as a base for its political activities as well as a starting point for its armed struggle, but he chose to stay at a refugee camp in Eritrea and not follow his brother's proposal, because of the tribal, racial and ethnic sensitivities which he said dominate the Sudanese opposition factions there. Before leaving Cairo, with his family, William succeeded in getting Nyal there and eventually got him to Australia.

As for myself, I spent some months in Zalinji.<sup>8</sup> Then I travelled to Chad to work in the cotton fields in the south of N'djamena<sup>9</sup> as I heard that earnings there were good. I was also hoping to make a passage to Libya, given that I had saved the money required for the journey to northern Chad to creep over the border. I eventually worked in the cotton fields for a short period, and then more briefly at a millet farm. Then it came to pass that I lived, for two months, the worst times of need, homelessness and hunger in my life when I used to roam about churches, sometimes mosques, in search of food and shelter. The best I hoped for then was gaining enough money to get back to any point inside Sudan! I voiced this wish to a Protestant priest who said that he couldn't help me with money but probably with a job that would get me sufficient money to pay for my return. He was true to his word, for he got me a job as an assistant to a woodcutter who would bring and sell firewood to some of the city's bakeries, but the wage was the meanest in my life. However my rounds with him to the bakeries landed me a precarious job which lasted for seven months. My errands then alternated between taking daily provisions to professional labourers such as food, coffee, tea and tobacco, cutting the biggest chunks of firewood and throwing them, when required, into the oven, and guarding the premises.

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<sup>8</sup> **Zalinji** is a well-known town in the western region of Darfur.

<sup>9</sup> **N'djamena** is the capital city of the Republic of Chad.

That was, in fact, the last and best job I had in Chad. And though earnings weren't any better than any of my other jobs, I was better off in that job with its semi-free meals, a ration of bread, free of charge, shelter within the premises of the bakery, and it enabled me to get to meet Soulagne.

Soulagne was around twenty years of age when I first became acquainted with her. I was her senior by about eleven years. She was a descendent of a poor Catholic family, a regular buyer of bread at the bakery where I was working. It wasn't so probable that I should get into any bond with her if not for a steaming hot late afternoon's chance meeting outside the bakery. I wasn't then paying any special attention to her passing by with an elderly woman—who was, later I knew, her granny—for I was walking hurriedly to lighten the sun's sting upon my head and back. Then a voice as cooling as the shade said:

- Salaam, my brother. Aren't you one of the workers at the bakery?
- Salaam, my sister. Yes, I am one of the workers at the bakery.

Then she asked me, in a tone brimming with tenderness, if I could share her burden of food and non-food supplies—of which I detected flour, oil, sugar, rice, macaroni, red lentils, beans, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, as well as tin cans, small tissue boxes and clothes, some of which seemed to resemble bed sheets. Most of those supplies, Soulagne explained without me asking, were only gifts bestowed upon the family from the Catholic Church on the approach of the commemoration of Our Saviour's Good Friday. I, of course, carried the heaviest of the bags, and walked beside her, and not beside her granny. I felt, while walking, no weight of load nor weight of heat, for wafts of femininity blew from her to me on the breeze. Her conversation with me, while we were walking, was marked with tender and caring interest to know who I was, from where I came, what brought me to the town and if, or not, I have family or relatives here. But, notwithstanding the sweet sentimental tang which passed through me, sweetness was soon mixed with little sorrow, which later on grew tense, particularly as I headed back bearing, on the back of my right hand, the tingle of the light touch of her fingertip when she took back the cup of cool water she insisted I drink while standing on the verge of her family's doorstep.

The eight days that followed upon that afternoon were marked by the eagerness of each of us to sow panicky looks of yearning into the eyes of the other whenever she arrived, at a time which became exact, to buy bread. Although in my soul I perceived with dancing exultation how deliberately she came at that exact time, it also caused me a great deal of worry and stress whenever I was not able at that moment to be near the counter. The reason for that inability was that of all my various tasks at the bakery, none required I sell bread. So I tried to settle—compelled, of course—for a stealthy presence, mostly by dint of invented reasons. Until the day came when I by chance left the bakery to buy a tin of tobacco for one of the labourers just as she was coming in to get her bread. I waited until she was done and followed her for a while. Then, after a safe distance, I asked her:

- Isn't there any way to have more time together?
- It isn't possible to rely on my family's tolerance. I have a dead mother, a father afflicted with paralysis, a grandmother who is almost deaf, two crazy brothers, two talkative sisters and a third one quite mad. Out of all of them I am the only one of whom it can be said is the least crazy. If it had been anyone other than my grandmother with me that day, with her uncurious ears and sparsely talking tongue, I would never have asked for your help. Do not walk beside me beyond this point. We have three days and then Good Friday. The bakery shall be completely deserted that day. Ensure that you do not venture out, and make sure you refuse all invitations. Wait there for me! I will come in the morning, earlier in the morning, I reckon, through the backdoor of the bakery. Make sure you are awake!

She didn't come in the morning. She came at dawn. I was awakened by the knocking on the backdoor at an hour when most of the night's darkness was yet to dissolve. She demanded, in a semi-commanding tone, that I should do something to chase away the remains of sleep. When I returned from the tank I found her lying, barely dressed, on the bed. She said when she saw me standing still staring at her body in the full flower of femininity:

- Hurry, we haven't got all day. In less than an hour I must leave.

She did leave in less than an hour.

And while fragrant thoughts were still wafting over my heart, soul and mind, I heard knocking on the backdoor. She was, once more, there! She swiftly let herself in and began removing her clothes before even reaching the bed.

- Again, we have less than an hour.

She said.

Again we had an hour. Then she returned at noon. Then she returned in the afternoon. Then she returned in the evening, not leaving this time until the dawning of the following day.

That dawn was the dawn of the last day I ever saw her. For she didn't come again, the next day before noon, as she was accustomed, to buy her order of bread. That next day was my last day at the bakery as I was dismissed from the job, without any explanation.

The evening I was sacked I roamed around the street of her family's home. I neither saw her, nor any person leaving the house or entering into it.

In the evening, I went to the marketplace. I sat in a café and ordered tea. But before sipping, a young man I had never seen before drew near to me and stood, without ever looking at me, as if he was talking to someone else but not to me, and he said:

- If you hold your life dear, then leave this country! I shouldn't have said this to you, but I have!

I looked around to make sure his words did not refer to me. But there was no one else nearby to whom such a phrase could have been directed. Nor did there appear to be any other stranger in the café except for me. I turned my head back, but there was no sign of him.

Somewhat absent-mindedly I stared, for a rather long time, at the cup of tea. I found no desire to sip one more single drop of it. Forlorn and nervous steps led me to a truck station. I had to wait for seven hours to board the first truck leaving for the nearest town on the Chadian-Sudanese border.

I went to Northern Darfur this time, and hung around in the city of al-Fashir<sup>10</sup> for six months working as a coolie, a blacksmith's assistant and a construction labourer. From there I moved to Malit,<sup>11</sup> from where I rode on a truck that got me to Libya after nine nights of traveling. Night travel was necessary, claimed the driver, to avoid the roasting sands of the summer.

In Libya I remained over two years, the greater part of which I was unable hold a job of any substance. And then the Libyan government decided to divest Libyan territory of the bulk of its Sudanese immigrants. I was one of the deportees. So I hit it, with others, to Egypt whereby I lived for two years. Those two years would not have been bearable if not for the help of Suzan, whom I met only a few months after my arrival in Cairo. It was Suzan who guided me through the corridors of Caritas and the office of the UN High Commission for Refugees in Cairo. It was also she who took me—and this was of most significance—towards her family's home in a slum quarter in Cairo where I was provided with much more than food and shelter.

Before the UN High Commission for Refugees notified Suzan that she has been selected into the UN Resettlement Program to Australia, she was pregnant with our second child. When traveling arrangements were finished Suzan gave birth to the baby, a pretty girl, whom I thought for a moment to suggest the name Soulagne, but I feared that this may distress Suzan, so I supported her suggestion to name the baby Mary—in memory of Suzan's cousin who was killed, along with others, in an air raid by the Sudanese government air force in a village in the Nuba Mountains.

On the flight to Australia, a guy from Southern Sudan happened to take up the seat next to me. He was heading back to Australia after a holiday in Egypt. He was a disconcertingly heavy-eyed guy, sleeping a lot. But in his waking moments he was humorous and generous with respect to providing me with useful information on life in Australia. I remember his last words to me as the plane was about to land at Melbourne Airport:

- I want to tell you one more thing, and I hope you won't be alarmed by it.  
The original inhabitants of this country were, as I have already mentioned to

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<sup>10</sup> **Al-Fashir** is the capital city of the State of Darfur.

<sup>11</sup> **Malit** is town in Darfur.

you, blacks—by the way, I think that there are a lot of resemblances between them and you, the natives of the Nuba Mountains—but you will not see them except in the occasional book or poster, or sometimes featured in the news or publicity material. That is why the presence of blacks, like us, walking upright on the city streets, in the early years, caused astonishment, and even amazed looks. Now some of those looks have been converted into feelings, and sometimes acts, that weren't, and aren't, so friendly. You should not be surprised by that. Like me, you have lived in Northern Sudan most of your life. Remember that there you suffered a lack of food, shelter and racial segregation. Here you will find food and shelter and the latter practice.

And as if he felt the depressing effect these words might have left on me, he promptly added:

- On the other hand, what can play a comforting or morally compensating role is that you will find among the white Australians examples of outstanding people you can consider descendants of angels.

My personal experience has confirmed the verity of his words. I have truly met some white Australians—although not so many—for whom the portrayal “descendants of angles” is mild, for they are angles themselves! On the other hand, my many years of living here, and particularly my experience of working in factories, have eventually revealed to me that the persecution under which we became victims isn't so widespread amongst white Australians of English descent as much as it extends in circles of other groups of immigrants that have been, and maybe still are, suffering persecution. The list of those, for instance, includes Turks, Eastern Europeans, Maltese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabs and Indians. In fact, I was shocked and hurt by the arrogant looks and rude treatment received from so many Indians, which reverses the handsome, ideal image I had of them in my mind—an image which took root in my sentiments as a result of my addiction, especially during the years of my adolescence and youth, to watching Indian films, all of which depicted Indians as a passionate people, susceptible to tears, inherently aligned with love, song and dance. Although the attitudes of such groups, and others of course, are certainly harmful, they weren't as surprising and hurtful as the surprise and hurt which al-Dungul's humiliating insult has caused me. By the way, I suggest you try to convince him that it's not really something bad if he lets the boy play footy. However, despite the hurt he made me feel, I no longer feel anger

toward him. Rather, I feel sorrow. Sorrow that could, in a way, feels the same as the cold response with which your friend, Milad, showed me when once, upon meeting him by chance, I related to him, with a jubilant heart, that I had learned that his father was Tadrus—the very same Coptic trader who has crucially enabled my father to find work in Kadugli.

## Milad

What Ibrahim believes is untrue. Perhaps it would be better if I said inaccurate. I do remember when he stopped me at the end of the street leading to the Café, which I had just left to catch an appointment with Tatiana Hernandez who wished me to accompany her to inspect a used car she was thinking of buying. I didn't, of course, explain that to him. I only assured him, with smiling tongue, "Yes, I am indeed the son of Tadrus Michael who had a long history of trading with the cities and towns of Sudan's western regions, particularly the city of Kadugli." "But such a story", I continued, "can't be just recalled in a rushed manner supported by restless legs. Let's set up another opportunity, right now I am in a hurry."

I never suspected that my words, nor the manner in which they were said, could ever have suggested unwillingness, on my part, to chat. But thinking back now, the bright joy that was on his face and in his voice when he brought to me the happy tidings of his discovery that I had been fathered by my father, I do realise that at that moment his desire to talk was more earnest than my response, something which would confirm your perception that he was more excited about the news and, therefore, much more desiring to talk about my father than myself. That surely makes your suggestion reasonable. Perhaps my response should have conveyed a higher degree of welcoming what he told me, as well as a more earnest desire to talk about it. Indeed, something like "Forgive me, I am in a rush to catch an appointment for which I am already running late. Please let me know when you would like to catch up and talk about this matter?" would have left a far better impression on him, particularly if we just then have already exchanged our telephone numbers. Perhaps a phrase along those lines would have been better received, too, had it been said after uttering three or four phrases of light, or brief, talk about the issue in question, even if it would have left Tatiana waiting another few minutes. Such behaviour would imply more appropriate respect and consideration for his feelings. And if I had, along such lines, contacted him, suggested a date and time to meet, and eventually met him—that could have undoubtedly been wonderful. Yes, I think I should have done that. That could have been not only to his own benefit, or even

that of his father, but to my benefit as well. Such a meeting—had it taken place—would have flowed smoothly, and would have brought me great comfort. For it is rare that one meets someone—obviously apart from yourself, Tatiana and Shahinda—who feels such an intimate and genuine desire to celebrate aspects of one's father's story.

To my mother, I said, ten days after his passing:

- He was angry with me when he passed away.
- Not quite true, she answered, “but this does not mean that he hasn’t left this world exhausted and pained because of you.
- Did he tell you anything specific before passing?
- He said you are the brightest of his boys.
- Did he sound sad when he said that?
- Yes.
- Did he mean anything in particular?
- Yes. He always thought you had the ability more than the others to be the best in this family. But you didn’t choose to be so.
- But why didn’t I choose to be so?
- Because you have allowed Satan to dwell within yourself.
- Do you think that is right?
- What makes it not right? He did so much for you. You could have done a little for him.
- For Satan?
- No, for your father, of course.

I don't regret any of the thoughts and deeds I have committed, whether they pleased my family or not. But if I could be given another chance to communicate with my father, I would then affect a less shocking method. Yet this doesn't mean that I have turned my back on a certain idea I once told you about: that it would be good if some of our fathers would allow us to give them a new birth! My father was one of those fathers for whom I wished a second birth. My love makes me wish that for them.

How much I loved my father! How much had I been attached to him! But it is peculiar that so much love and affection didn't—as it is usually the case, and as both of my father and mother desired—lead me to become an image of him. I do say that to you because I, same as him, had always been keen to go with him to some of his workplaces while I was not yet even a primary school child. His places of work were a joint office for import and export at al-Souq al-Aarabi<sup>1</sup> in Khartoum and two clothes' shops, one of them was in Khartoum Bahri, and the other was in Omdurman, where the family used to live. The joint office was the reason behind his few travels outside of the country and his roaming a lot around regional Sudanese cities and towns such as Kadugli and its likes. And because the Omdurmanian shop was close to home, I found myself frequenting it recurrently even after my enrolling at the ranks of primary, intermediate and secondary schools. No wonder that I have, since earlier in life, been very much acquainted with makes of fabric, names of factories that used to make them locally and those countries from which other makes used to be imported. I also mastered not only just the skills of measuring and cutting fabric to size, but, furthermore, of estimating—by eye—in meters, the sum of what a bolt, or the remains of a bolt of cloth, would amount to. That is besides my maturing into an ever ready and dependable bookkeeping wizard.

But other interests, equal—if not in opposed—to that, have also been budding within me. At the top of those were my inclinations towards philosophy, art and reflection. My years of studying—in fulfilment of my father's wish—in the University of Khartoum's Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences were what bestowed upon such interests other vast and different dimensions, opening new horizons before me, in the end spreading my cultural, intellectual, social, professional, and political, options upon a roadmap which manifestly resembled the antithesis of the roadmap that my father had

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<sup>1</sup> **Al-Souq al-Aarabi** (= The Arabian Market) is a renowned commercial district in the capital city of Sudan, Khartoum.

painstakingly drawn for me. He was hoping that my academic qualifications would confer upon his trading business a certain scientific and modern quality. But the knowledge to which the science of Economics introduced me had—in contrast to the methodological intentions of those who set out its curriculum and teaching methods—a vital role in disheartening the expectations of my father, of our family and of our social strata. And the more I was associated with any of those nonconformist options of mine—such as my involvement in democratically-oriented student activities—the more my links with my father’s business and its social climate were diluted.

Once I graduated, I chose a line of profession to which my father strongly objected. But I persisted on. It was my job as a secondary school teacher whereby—I should say—I met you for the first time, got acquainted with, but not befriended you for a heaviness I imagined to own your soul at that time. As for the activities and associations which followed—such as my engagement in organised clandestine political work and semi-clandestine trade union work with the Association of Progressive Teachers—they didn’t only fail in reducing the gap between me and my father’s businesses but, ultimately, cut me off from the arenas whereby such business was usually carried out.

But it was my relationship with Hajir, with all of its dramatic turns and complexities, that was the ultimate cause prompting my father, as well as a significant number of relatives and acquaintances, towards eventually cutting off all ties with me. Most of the rest of my relatives, not excluding my brothers, kept only a vague and diminished connection. The only person with whom my relationship was not severely damaged was my mother, though she didn’t escape a great deal of sorrow.

I got to know Hajir when we were both working for the cause of the Sudanese Union of Secondary Schools Teachers and the Association of Progressive Teachers. Hajir was fashioned out of a wonderful blend of beauty, intelligence, elegance, vivacity, skilfulness, courage and rebelliousness. We were unaware of any rational explanation for the speed which marked the growth and blossoming and spreading fragrance of our relationship except that all things within, and around, us were surely waiting for such a relationship to ignite! The only ones who were apparently not waiting for it were her folks and mine. She was from a conservative Arabised Muslim family, while I was correspondingly from an Arabised Christian family, which pretended to be liberal. Openly declaring our bond and intention to marry was what sent both of the families

behind the shutters of their fanatic legacies. A formal, socially recognised marriage, was of no significance for either of us, but a mere procedural undertaking. For we had never perceived it as the only possible strategy or an unavoidable guarantee for the completion of our bonding with one another, a bond which was at once—before and after the formal marriage—emotional, spiritual and physical. But that mere procedural undertaking had—unfortunately—a certain unbearable symbolic significance for both of us at that time, particularly with regard not only to the relations of the Copts with the dominant mainstream in the urban centre of Sudan but also with respect to the relationship of this dominant mainstream with the rest of what are inaccurately, and often even derogatively, referred to as “Sudanese ethnic and religious minorities.”

Our challenge was definitely a daunting one. My own family’s refusal left no margin at all for negotiation, despite its liberal pretensions. Her family’s stand was, on the other hand, bluntly summed up in a phrase from her thought-to-be-most-flexible middle brother: “If one of my brothers, a male, wished to marry a Christian, the family would never agree. What, then, would be the case if one of our women sought to marry a Christian?!”

Such old-fashioned refusals could have no effect other than to increase our commitment to each other and cement our tenacious adherence to atheism!

Only two choices thus lay before us: either abandoning the Sudanese land for a foreign country where blessings issued from religious ideologies weren’t either socially or culturally required for marriage, or pretending, on my part, that I had embraced the Islamic faith. But at that moment we felt that both of the choices were indeed very humiliating to both of us. The first solution we repudiated for its representing, to us, young progressive politicians of the day, what was clearly an escape from the objectively-characterised battlefield inside the country. As to my pretending to be converted to Islam, that was, particularly for me, the proud atheist, cruelly humiliating, for I was then reading into it an abandonment of one of the substantial pillars of my philosophic identity. That is besides its stripping our marriage out of much of its distinction, poetic and symbolic dimensions. That compromise wouldn’t be easy for a relationship that many of our friends and comrades in life and politics looked to as a statement against stagnant minds and stifling practices. And again, certainly that wouldn’t be easy for a relationship that became a source for not only consolation but

hope and optimism, for many of the day's youth. It had already inspired the literary creations and paintings of a number of poets, writers and artists.

Yet convoluted conversations with comrades in the political organisation and trade union finally persuaded me to give in to the second of the two solutions. Some of those were such close friends to both of us that they had formed something of a support group for our relationship. I now clearly recall how grumbly I performed the conversion's ceremony. That wasn't—believe me—out of hatred for Islam. For, at the end of the day, I hadn't been, for that matter—as many may have surmised—a Christian. No, my feelings were merely an outcome of my being disgusted with myself. My mood, for the rest of that day, was so ill-humoured that I, for the first time, found myself strangely compelled to request from Hajir, when she met me that evening, permission for me to leave her far earlier than the time at which I normally used to bid her farewell.

Before going home, I passed by a liquor house, where I impatiently, neurotically, wolfed down a whole bottle of *Aragi*,<sup>2</sup> and took another one home. My stomach was empty. I scoffed down my dinner, swigging, less hurriedly, but just as restlessly, the second bottle. I spewed the entire contents of my stomach before stretching on my bed and falling asleep, without changing any of my clothes.

But I regained half of my emotional sanity the next day, the rest having to await my full immersion, with Hajir, in the task of preparing for our wedding. The seven years that followed were filled with fun and joy, despite being interrupted by difficulties and challenges like Hajir's inability to conceive, my dismissal from work, the gradual narrowing of our professional opportunities, the Sudanese Security Forces' shadowing our every step and the recurrent detentions of us both. But the regularity of such acts of harassment soon compelled us to leave Khartoum, defying, in that, the ban on internal travel imposed on us by the Sudanese Security Forces. Five months passed by and we were still in the eastern Sudanese city of al-Gadarif,<sup>3</sup> tepidly idle and without work. Then we crossed the border to Ethiopia where we spent the first week in a small hotel in Addis Ababa.<sup>4</sup> Then, in compliance with an al-Gadarif friend's advice, we rented a small room in some poor district of the capital. The room had none of the usual

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<sup>2</sup> **Aragi** is a local Sudanese alcoholic drink traditionally made of dates.

<sup>3</sup> **Al-Gadarif** is a Sudanese state (and city), located in the eastern part of the country.

<sup>4</sup> **Addis Ababa** is the capital city of Ethiopia.

amenities, so we had to share use of the kitchen and the bathroom with other lodgers. Four months went by and we felt the need to move to an even a poorer district, renting an even cheaper room which consisted of a reception, kitchen and bedroom, all in one room. The bathroom was shared as before. There was no choice. Our savings, being not supported by work, started to shrink with frightening speed. We would then eat two meals a day. Meals that were only made of the cheapest stuff: potatoes, red lentils, foul, zucchini, *shiro*<sup>5</sup>, and whatever salad ingredients that were going cheaply. Even cheap local fruits would then only exceptionally visit our table. A month passed and I had to sell my watch, my leather coat, a suit, shoes and a golden necklace my mother presented me when I was admitted to university.

At the beginning of our second year in that room, luck smiled upon Hajir and she found an irregular job with an Eritrean journalist who was working as the Addis Ababa's correspondent for an Arabian Gulf newspaper. She was translating documents and interviews from English to Arabic. A few months went by and I, myself, got an irregular job with the same correspondent. My job was to type journalistic, and sometimes non-journalistic articles on the computer. Then I discovered that I was visited with a reasonable talent for writing journalistic essays. So I wrote an essay about the economics of the countries of the Horn of Africa and the prospects of regional alliances. The correspondent liked the essay. When it was published I got scant recompense. Then he asked me to write other essays on regional affairs. I wrote them. The next task was to write essays about the region's history. I fulfilled it. But just on reception of the payment for the third essay war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia. And Eritrean citizens, amongst the first of which was our journalist, were driven out of Ethiopia. Things tended to go from bad to worse with us. Hajir was forced into selling every piece of gold she used to own, except for our wedding ring.

Eventually, nothing remained for us save the last recourse—appealing for succor from a few friends of ours, some of whom were working in some Arab countries affluent with the wealth of oil, while others were living in Western countries. Speedy and generous were the responses to the appeal. But our experience of living in Ethiopia told us that we should make use of the money collected from friends' donations to head for another

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<sup>5</sup> **Shiro** is a traditional Ethiopian-Eritrean dish, the main ingredient of which is powdered chickpeas (and sometimes powdered broad beans) usually cooked with a small amount of oil, minced onion, diced tomatoes and garlic.

country; for Egypt, perhaps, particularly as we had gathered, from a telephone call from one of our charitable friends, that conditions of living there, though work opportunities were rare, nonetheless appeared to be less cruel than those prevalent in Ethiopia. More than that, the same friend, as well as another two friends, said to us, in an awfully encouraging tone of voice, that the likelihood of immigrating from Egypt to the West should always entice people with the lure of another adventure.

Cairo, as you well know, was actually different to Addis Ababa in relation to a number of things of importance for refugees of our kind. One of those was that the northern Sudanese folks' numbers there weren't only huge but ever increasing. That was desirable in lightening the weight of social and cultural alienation for many of us. Cairo was also a dynamic centre for communications and work relationships with the rest of the world. That aspect allowed me to continue writing journalistic essays and publishing them in Arab and Sudanese newspapers and magazines. It also enabled Hajir to take up a rewarding post with the Cairo branch of a Sudanese human rights organisation, besides seeing some medical professionals and specialists for a second opinion for her problems with conception. (That defect had started to cause her occasional, but not acute, bouts of depression.) A preferred destination, Cairo was, as well, for spending holidays for some of the Sudanese expatriates in other Arab countries, chiefly those who were working in Arab oil-producing countries. Some of those who live in Western countries and do not wish to spend their holidays in Sudan, or intend to see relatives or friends, would also choose Cairo as a favoured destination. No wonder that we met up in Cairo with some of our old friends, through certain arrangements or just accidentally. But more importantly than that the UN High Commission for Refugees in Cairo then used to include a lot of Sudanese within its resettlement programme for refugees to a number of Western countries. That was in addition to some of them making use of other emigrational devices. Me, and Hajir, were of the category that made use of one of those other emigrational devices. We managed, finally, to immigrate to Australia through the sponsorship of an old friend whom I had accidentally met while spending a holiday in Cairo. That friend (who moved, a few years after our arrival in Melbourne to work and live in Sydney) was one of the earliest Sudanese emigrants to this country. He was originally a Coptic Sudanese. Immigrants weren't so many then as nowadays. Hence we had to wait for a half decade's interval before we saw their expatriating waves swell and flow.

Just when our hearts were jubilant with the increased presence of the Sudanese immigrants, Hajir began to suffer from mounting fits of depression. It seemed to me that what she was then enduring was going beyond a simple struggle with the inability to conceive. Inwardly she was battered; her soul exhausted. So I'd felt strongly. She stopped drinking wine and beer with me. She ceased keeping appointments with her psychiatrist. She also refrained from taking her tranquilizers. She started to read the Quran and other religious books, such as Prophet Mohammed's and his Caliphs' biographies, and on Islamic *fiqh*<sup>6</sup> literature. She decided to sleep in a different room. She declared that she had completely stopped eating meat! She began to avoid sharing food with me, particularly any that I would cook! A day came and she asked for a divorce. She said she didn't hate me, nor could she. But she added that it would be good for both of us to go our separate ways. She said she would appreciate it if I didn't ask her reasons for separation and her decision to return to Sudan, for good!

I complied, with an unsurpassable pain, with all that she wished.

I tried, in the first months that followed, to increase the level of my social engagements with Sudanese groups could—somehow—help with alleviating the impact and shock of her leaving. I turned up the frequency of my presence at the Café. Then I tried to initiate voluntary work for one of the northern Sudanese community organisations. I also tried to form a football team from some under-age Sudanese boys. Do you know what happened? All shunned these initiatives. I suspected that was because of the usual Sudanese social and cultural lethargy. But I learned, from Rabraba, that it was—at least in the main—associated with a rumour going about that I was a “professional corrupter,” and that I posed a danger of corrupting whatever and whomever I got involved with, and especially the boys. And why wouldn’t it be the case—Rabraba now explaining to me—when it is evident that I corrupted my own wife until she—the Muslim—was cursed by Allah for being wedded to me—me, “the Christian”—violating both *Shari'a* and natural laws! But Allah—Rabraba conveys—instantly delivered her into salvation and righteousness by the well-timed coming of her Sudanese folks to Australia.

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<sup>6</sup> **Fiqh**, which means ‘understanding’ or ‘knowledge’, is technically the science of Islamic jurisprudence in Islam.

Do you get the picture? I was attempting to survive one shock and what I got in return was a shock of even greater impact. Could you then blame me for shrinking from any association with the social and cultural activities of our community, or for scarcely ever going to the Café? Believe me! I am not angry—at least for now—with any one of them. It is only that I am sorry for them inasmuch as I am sorry for myself. So, where to go?

Most Copts in Sudan, I am saying, weren't in any way fond of me for I was, from their perspective, a betrayer of religious faith and identity. As to the minority of the Sudanese Copts who live here, most of them are now withdrawn from associations with the other Sudanese. They are too historically and inwardly traumatised to bond, with any ease, with the majority. So we cannot blame them inasmuch as they have represented a minority pushed against the wall of arrogance that is northern self-centred Sudanese, something which has made them into a vulnerable target for the latter's efforts towards eradicating their already fragile presence. But what warrants my keeping my sensibly maintained distance from them is that their collective protection strategies run counter to my passion's longings. Hence I have enacted a relative distance between myself and them so I wouldn't upset their poignant attempts to heal their collective trauma for the sake of moving toward communal integration. What helped me in that was that my reputation—as a communally notorious dissenter—had reached them before my coming to Australia. But, paradoxically, this last issue had nothing to do with my decision to keep a relative distance from them.

As to the bulk of the rest of the Sudanese people, those progeny of cock-sure and arrogant northern Sudanese chauvinism which was insidiously practiced back there and is lamentably repeating itself out here, those do recoil from me—as it is understood from Rabraba's report—because they see me as a messenger of delinquency. Don't you see that all of their groups, though each distinct in motives, are equal in dealing with me from a spectrum of feelings ranging between animosity, repulsion, tepidness, mockery, besides flaccid—but yet not quite false—pity on the part of a few of them? That's what makes me feel sorry for them, for they don't embrace whoever is different from them. And I'm sorry for myself because I failed to succeed in making my nonconformity with them into something that urges them not to be attracted to me (for I do not wish to have disciples at the end of the day!) but rather towards accepting me and thus being

reassured in, and at, my presence. Isn't it sad, and hurtful, and certainly humiliating, that one of us should, for the fear of the eyes and tongues of the descendants of that very northern self-centred Sudanese, be compelled to act out an authentic part of his convictions, rights, and even self-evident truths, under cover or semi-cover? And where exactly, after all? In a country like Australia where whoever does away with any of his rights is considered either a daft idiot or lunatic?!

Our tragedy (and you should be very familiar with it) is that the majority of us has transported the Sudan, with all of its details, to Australia. If the ultimate rationale of our immigration is to transport all of our past country, with all of its pros and cons, into our new place of dwelling, why then did we, in the first place, immigrate? In other words, haven't we all—each with his or her own reasons—been coerced in common into migration because we weren't in accord with all of that which had historically taken place in our country of origin? That doesn't mean that we should take Australia without any misgivings or a pinch of salt. In fact—as you yourself have said before to Shahinda—it would neither be beneficial nor possible for us and Australia to take up each other entirely. But then Shahinda responded to you with her usual outrage: "Yes. That is true," she said. But she added, "Our people were ever intent on bringing every single bad detail from there to here without thinking of bringing across what is bright in us. If not, then why is that which is dominant over them now is nothing but a collection of every vile habit or practice, hypocrisy, pretension, lying—to themselves before to others—lying to each other; lying to the rest of society; lying to their folks in Sudan; lacking in self-confidence; fear of the new; stagnation of social relationships that are shot through with selfishness and superficiality... etc... etc? Believe me! For a society such as them there is no hope of change."

My semi-total agreement with Shahinda does not, however, make me agree with her in what she conceives of as the eternally gloomy fate that circumscribes our collective presence here. I say that in the face of the recurrent shocks that I have personally suffered, and despite my successive disappointments and the stinking sourness of our present communal quagmire.

Your interpretation—then—of how my opinion on your "predicament"—and that term was your own characterisation of the case—involving descriptive observations on the common reality of the Caf 's clients, taken to be contemptuous in judgement, does not,

in fact, accord with my real feelings towards them. You should be, therefore, assured that I do love them. My love for them was, in reality, what brought upon me all those shocks and frustrations. It also makes me—as I have just revealed to you—sad for them as much as sad for myself. It is true that I am still holding a certain degree of inescapable resentment towards their lukewarm, or dry, or even sometimes bluntly harsh, reactions towards my initiatives and suggestions. But that hold hasn't been, and won't be, pushed at all to the point of being blown up into a full-fledged stand of disgust or shunning or arrogance. If my passion and attitude was so inflamed with disgust or resentment or haughtiness, I wouldn't be at all keen on coming to this Café. That is notwithstanding my thinner or more concealed or ghostly—than your presence there. It was those agonies, frustrations, repulsions, though relative, yet perhaps justified, that led me to what I once characterised as amounting to maintaining a relative distance from them, something which I do judge as being necessary and healthy, for me and for them. But, hang on a minute! Aren't you, as well, a relative withdrawer from them?! Isn't Shahinda, as well?! The three of us, to certain varying degrees of course, are, therefore, relatively socially withdrawn figures. Yet these degrees of withdrawal have in common motives. For the bond that unites the three of us is that we are practically 'the minority of the minority'. And that status of ours is what has brought me to a particular suggestion that I could have proposed to you—if it was not that your questions which later developed into almost interrogation—forced me to postpone it. Let me—then, and before going deeper into your investigation of me—put forth to you the idea of going to one of the footy matches where Mazin's team is playing, especially if he himself is a player. For the boy does indeed deserve to feel that some familiar hands—though very a few—are being clapped for him. Now I beg your pardon to let me go. I am almost late for an appointment with the barber. After that I should go to see Tatiana and, hopefully, return with a heart tender with dew, and a throat irrigated for more talk. By the way, if you see Shahinda, or phone her or otherwise she phones you before I phone her, do not forget to convey to her the proposal I have just presented to you.

## **Shahinda**

It is a great idea. I don't mind going with you to help Mazin and his team at the next game. I have another suggestion, too. We should, may I say, head over before the next match to see Mazin train with his team. That would give us an informal opportunity to introduce ourselves to this young man. It might be good for us to consider this opportunity a practical step towards reducing our footy sport illiteracy. I will also try to follow your initiative by reading up on it. That Milad has, indeed, a blooming heart! You have undoubtedly been too hard on him by disparaging his reasonably convincing choice—for me, at least—to distance himself from Sudanese groups associations and social engagements here. The man is suffused with his sincere effort to help, as well as with his frustrations, and the suspicions held and fabrications plotted against him. He is a martyr to exclusion. Yet the odd-one-out is, contrary to the common opinion—as I once said with a mouth full of applause for his personal history—is not always the looser. For no other communities are in more dire need for Milad's expansive passion, persistent heart, liberated mind, intelligent planning and skilful practice, than our Sudanese communities. Otherwise tell me, my goodness, who else should be holding their hands out for his green suggestions, particularly those associated with the "micro-economic strategies for recent immigrant communities" or the "smart cooperatives for marginalised communities", which are ripe for planting, gestation and generation right here in our Sudanese communities? Didn't he say to us, in a moment of sorrow, that the idea behind those projects—which I regard as exemplary educational—and which fell flat merely through indifference and sick suspicion—wasn't only about getting high-rise housing estate youth together to form a football team, or shielding them from falling prey to aimlessness which would, for instance, lead them to sink into the pit of drug and alcohol abuse (as it is actually somehow happening!) rather, it was that he wished, by that project, to link them with their fathers' football legacies. Such a project, as he explained, could have contributed to enlivening the fathers' passion while at the same time carefully preparing the ground—in sports fields—for new generations to stand for us, so lacking in representation, in the arena of Australian public life. More than this, as he so clearly laid out, that project could have gotten off to a fine start by involving the

supervision of distinguished footballers from amongst the fathers, such as al-Dungul and William, who, with State Government funding, could have been appointed as professional trainers, something which would present them, and their likes, with modern training courses as well as opportunities to be acquainted with modern methods of sports management. The project application “*What we have?* Or: *What we have brought with us?*” wasn’t restricted to Sudanese community groups, though those were its starting point, but was open to broad African involvement. It was, in fact, designed to constitute a club for social and cultural relationship building between diverse African communities who share similar pains and shortcomings, worries and hopes. How old was Mazin—our athletic orphan—I wonder, when such a suggestion was proposed? Five, seven, ten years? And what career would he have followed in sport if that project had been met with the appraisal and support it deserved? Was then have had to suffer being an orphan in the sporting world? Would his father, and father’s friends, be then vulnerable to the hold of the claws of emptiness, repetition, chewing dry each other’s tales and gossip and sowing seeds of division? Was it not then possible for Mazin, and others, to become shining stars on the heavens of Australian football? Wouldn’t it have then happened that al-Dungul and William and the rest begot many more than a single Mazin for the football fields here? Wouldn’t they then have been lauded as founding forefathers?

My heart is with you, oh Milad! And may the Latin American community, particularly the Salvadorian, now enjoy the fruits of your ideas, suggestions and initiatives! Thanks and appreciation to Tatiana Hernandez who has endowed those ideas and suggestions and initiatives with all they needed to be realised: enchantment, enthusiasm, mobilization and practice. Also thanks and gratitude goes to her because, through her, I became acquainted with Milad and you.

Perhaps I should have thanked Jason Fleming—whom I knew through Michael O’Mahoney—first. He was, in fact, the person who, three years ago, has introduced me to that wonderful human being, Tatiana, at a charity event of which she was one of the organisers and which was intended to raise funds for a cooperative investing in agricultural and animal products of the farmers in Salvadorian villages. Were you there? Presumably you were there amongst the audience and donors—and, perhaps, the organisers?—For Tatiana was a friend of you and Milad before being mine also. Ah

yes, now I remember that, when it was unavoidable that she should introduce both of you to me, knowing that both of you are keen—as I also am—to keep any Sudanese out of your private space and affairs, she was forced to introduce you to me as Caribbean migrants!

Though we didn't talk a lot when we first met, only briefly and intermittently, basically because of Tatiana being busy with organising and supervising the event, those moments of spontaneous and relaxed exchanges were enough for me to be attracted to her. Tatiana's hybrid features, her tranquil beauty, her dewy voice, all highlighted no accidental intimacy. And as to our discovery, at some brief instant of the talk, that we were both born on a Tuesday in March—but different dates—in 1984, that was adequate reason for us to exchange telephone numbers, email addresses and a firm promise of seeing each other again at a more leisurely time.

It was as if Fate was scolding us for not contacting each other for a whole two weeks! Thus chance profited us with a second meeting at Saint Vincent's Hospital. Tatiana came there to visit a patient while I had just passed my fourth month working as a nurse at that hospital after finishing a similar period of final placement to be awarded the Bachelor of Nursing, and a stint of voluntary work. But as chance would have it, it too was brief and interrupted. Yet good! For we succeeded, at the confused end of it, not only with accentuating the need to see each other soon, but also emphasising it be voluminous as well as soon, agreeing on Wednesday the following week.

That Wednesday started with lunch at a Mexican restaurant and ended up with drinking tea in the evening at her home and relishing her play a marvellous tune on the pan flute.

Tatiana has germinated my sensibility with free horizons and with relationships with people which open up new vistas. My vague and raw and parentless rebellion was in need for persons like Tatiana and her worlds—as well as it was earlier for the likes of Michael O' Mahoney and later for you and Milad—to mature and become more rounded. Also I was in need of someone to being soaked up—out of loneliness, at least—into a world the day of which is set in sticky recalling of the past and which usually ends up with naïve and idle dreams. Hence my soul was only ready to respond to the wings of temptation provided by friendship with Tatiana, as well as many other unique individuals I knew and befriended, if not directly through her, then by some

cause of hers. Amongst those were personalities such as Melissa, Amy, Kevin, Huang, Eduardo, Liam, Venusius, Macarena, Belinda, Amanda, Jose, Fernando, Sue, Mia, Alex, Craig, Nam, Isabella, Alicia, Ann, Adriano, Sirish, Nicolas, Cecelia, Eva, Larisa and Misha.

With those—and others some of whom you know—my body liberated from the rest of its chains’ phantoms with dancing. My veins expanded with music; my arteries were watered with songs. My tongue and nose embraced a variety of new tastes and flavours. Within me grew and unfolded a different sensitivity for individual expression and collective action. Thus the campaigns of solidarity with the victims of racial persecution, inside and outside of Australia; female victims of sexism; victims of natural and non-natural disasters; the victims of unfair relationships of labour and production; those threatened with further marginalisation and loss because of the ever spreading tentacles of the machinery of globalization; prisoners of conscience; Human Rights’ activists and environmentalists.

But knowing you, and Milad, through Tatiana, was a particularly significant turn. For I was, and perhaps still am, enjoying at the time I met you, a rebellion both lyrical yet somewhat sad. Relatively the sadness was due to the fact that I was a lonesome player of rebellious tunes. It pained me that I was the only Sudanese, nay African, who would step out and support groups who are suffering issues—such as those I mentioned a few moments ago—the brunt of which do not only distress our Sudanese and African groups and communities but they—and certainly others problems—remain at the centre of all our sufferings, back in Sudan or here.

How often my heart was perturbed, my mind paralyzed, when an activist requested I invite a few individuals—you may forget groups, of course—from our communities to join a solidarity rally for better wages or against workplace bullying. Or when an activist suggested I distribute tickets for a charity to relieve the drought-afflicted or those who were displaced because of a civil war in an African country!

All I could do was bite my tongue to stop myself replying with the proverbial phrase which says “An empty hand has nothing to give”! Once I have answered the call of a rally organised by the Australian Left Coalition. The gathering was aimed at condemning violent racist acts—including murder—that was supported by complicit

media and investing political desire, the victims of which were immigrants from Sudanese backgrounds. The square where that rally took place wasn't separated from Sudanese and other African cafes and restaurants by anything but a few hundred meters. And as the speakers—who were mostly white Australians, of course—condemned such crimes, naming and shaming the complicities and prejudices, the Sudanese and other African clients in the cafes and restaurants did nothing but go on leisurely chatting in their seats with a slackness that have undoubtedly amazed of the participants in the rally but which stung me with shame and nausea and I wondered whether those crimes must have been committed against the Martian populace of Mars! What is that which held them back from responding to that event, I wonder? I do not think that the reason for this, as you once argued, lies only in their relative lack of awareness, but, more primarily I guess, in a certain degree of lack of a human instinct.

My father was, indeed, shown to be more honest—with himself before anyone else—and courageous, than any of those taking part in professional yawning sessions. For he decided to, and did, return to Sudan to stay there, for good, with his first wife and the rest of his children without formally being separated from his second wife, who is my mother, and without also completely denying our ears—particularly my ears—the sound of his own voice on the telephone.

My father wasn't initially at all interested in immigrating to Australia or any other Western country. The decision germinated first in the mind of my mother for whom the idea of immigrating to Egypt and then on to Australia was the result of meeting—accidently—a former neighbour of hers, in the district of al-Mazad in Khartoum Bahri, who used also to be her classmate in intermediary and secondary school and whom she ran into on a few months holiday in Sudan. That former neighbour and colleague's name was Ilham. She migrated to Australia, with her husband and children, from Egypt, and stayed here, in Melbourne, for three years, before returning to Sudan for holiday. My mother couldn't believe the change immigration has caused in Ilham. She claimed that she, before enjoying the experience of living abroad, was neither as beautiful nor as educated and socially elegant as she and her family were. My mother even claimed that she was the one who, during the years of intermediate and secondary school, was in the habit of helping Ilham not only in solving math problems and physics quizzes and

explaining English lessons but, furthermore, she would then lend her some of her stylish dresses when she was, for instance, going to a wedding party or for a date.

My mother swore to us, by Allah, and to other women folks and neighbours, that Ilham returned from Australia with a light and tender skin, with new dresses, with a variety of luxurious shoes and handbags, with golden bracelets, rings, earrings and necklaces, with elements of classic Indian and Malayan incense, with modern and precious French perfumes, with chic cooking utensils and bed sheets, all brought from Dubai. That is besides plenty of American dollars she—my mother asserted—was throwing around left and right with the accompaniment of affected English phrases. The evidence of this—as my mother told us—was that her share thirty dollars donated by Ilham at the end of a second meeting, which was set up for a house-warming feast hosted by Ilham on the occasion of acquiring the new house she—as she said—bought for the rest of her family members in another borough of Khartoum Bahri.

At that second, and not the last, meeting, Ilham tantalised my mother with the idea of travelling to Cairo, which is, as she stressed, worthy in the first place of being honoured with a visit whereby she would meet—as happened to her—Egyptian actors and actresses, sipping coffee with them and take photographs, also with them. Then Ilham dramatically went on to suggest that after having her fill, to the brim, from the ever enchanting city of Cairo, my mother should then seek one of the many immigration agencies for Australia, America, Canada, Britain, Holland, Switzerland, or Belgium. The gates of Western embassies in Cairo, she boldly claimed, “are wide open before particularly the Sudanese people, who were especially favoured in those countries for their dedication to work, intelligence, sincerity, and generous spirit that they have shown in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.”

My mother claimed that the third meeting, and perhaps the last, with Ilham not only afforded the chance for relaxed and detailed talk about Ilham and her family’s experience with immigration to Australia, but also an opportunity to substantiate the truth of her tales. The first evidence of the truth of what Ilham was recounting resides, for my mother, in her watching a video tape which documented not just every corner of the luxurious and high-rise Housing Commission flat which the Australian Government had allocated Ilham and her family for a handful of dollars but, moreover, Ilham’s fantastic travels in different places, and different times: she, at varying occasions and in

smart dresses in Cairo and Alexandria; then she, in times and sites and dresses and different occasions at the Australian city in which she lives whereby some scenes presented her playing with her children at a public children's playground; then she in an English language class; then she enjoying a barbecue in a public park; then she as she was about to drive her car; then she in a Turkish Kebab restaurant; then she while bidding farewell to a friend at Melbourne Airport; then she while her hand and feet were being beautified with henna; then she as she was dancing in a Sudanese wedding party in an elegant hall.

The second reputed evidence was my mother's eyes casting over 366 normal-sized photographs, and twenty-three variably-sized photographs which her eyes were enchanted by, along with the other female guests at the house-warming party. Ilham didn't only stop at plying my mother full of ideas to gather together her little family's folks and head towards Egypt, but also obliged herself by sending her a sponsorship form to help her with immigrating to Australia, reassuring her, in this respect, that the Australian authorities' approval of her application will be so swift that it will take no more than a single year at most. As to the evidence of the Australian authorities' quick and positive response to my mother's immigration's application, Ilham emphasized, it consisted in my mother being blessed with children who are: myself, with my then nearly-sixteen years; my sister who is younger than me by three years and my brother and his seven years. More pertinent still, Ilham emphasised, was that the children's presence wouldn't only come to the fore as support in evidence in pursuit of the speediness of the immigration's procedures, but it shall also be a source of steady and secure income to the whole of the family, particularly the mother, from the date of the arrival in this lavish country. Ilham consequently revealed to my mother that she wouldn't be able to buy the new house for her family and a modern car for herself, apart from other things, if she hasn't, in the first place, enjoyed giving birth to five children. Now—she then appended—she is trying conceiving the sixth child, even if she has to consult a *faki*<sup>1</sup> for that and recommended that my mother should do just the same!

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<sup>1</sup> **Faki** is a title given to an Islamic religious devotee from whom some locals seek to consult in order to help them, for example, to locate stolen properties, or heal mental/physical ailments, or to solve psychological problems believed to be caused to the seeker by an opponent. **Faki** should not be confused with **fagir/fakir/faqir** who is a Muslim religious ascetic who depends on donations to live. The **faki** is widely known in Sudan as well as in a number of west-African Muslim societies.

Ilham didn't forget, at the end of that meeting, to give my mother her telephone number in Australia, as well as the number of a distant relative of hers who had lived in Cairo for about three decades. Her intention of insinuating my mother with that man was getting him to help us find a low-rent flat in Cairo and in a neighbourhood that wouldn't be too far away from the city centre, as well assisting us with filling in the immigration application form with the fine English he gained through his dedication to that particular profession of his. Ilham said that he wouldn't only fill the application form or just accompany the nominated émigré to the Australian Embassy in Cairo, but he would also—for a small sum of money—provide any such forms as habitually required as supporting documents such as letters from Cairo-based Sudanese political opposition organisations or Sudanese civil society organisations. Moreover, he would also be able to provide summons for interrogation issued and stamped by the Sudanese Security Forces and anything else possible that would highlight the grievousness of the suffering that the applicant for immigration had been long afflicted by and which he, or she, or any of each family's members, would yet be endangered by if any of them should have to return to Sudan.

My mother didn't forget to beg Ilham's permission to take some of her photographs so that they would help her in wining my father to the idea of immigration. Thus my mother bombarded us—on top of her dancing spirits, ecstatic steps and thrill-struck expression—with a no less than twenty two photographs, half representing Ilham's times in Egypt, the other half conveying certain aspects of her life in Australia.

Though the eleven photographic images which covered different occasions, stages and places Ilham has had passed by and through Cairo and Alexandria were all bereft of any photo that would resemble her sitting—or, for that matter, standing—beside a single Egyptian actor or actress; yet that wouldn't constitute, for my mother, nor for me and my younger sister, sufficient reason to perceive any cracks in Ilham's tall tales. This is to say that that wouldn't, in my mother's and her two too-eager-for-Cairo daughters' opinion, consist of any certified and indubitable justification which would support my father's several rational doubts about the truthfulness of Ilham's claims about the ease and attractiveness of life, in Cairo, at least. But my mother wouldn't see his point. Thus the only remaining would-be-valid point which she had to employ against him was her argument about the excellent opportunities for the children's education abroad. As with

the other strategies she applied to convince my father, she exhausted him with this repeated prattling—instead of logical reasoning—and always supported by our childish squeals and cheers.

Those strategies were also enhanced with my mother's faking an illness which she pretended that no doctor can sufficiently treat it but an Egyptian one. Those strategies similarly included her coquettish sulking and sometimes tantrums, particularly as she was blessed with the status of the second wife who was younger and more beautiful than the first one whom all my mother's endeavours towards formally separating him from her haven't succeeded though she was practically able to turn him away from spending the nights, and most of the week's afternoons, with his first wife whose gain from his Saudi Arabian years of service were mainly getting her older son a job thereby and a public transport vehicle.

Though my father didn't hide from my mother, when proposing marriage to her, that he was already a married man with four children from whom he did not desire to be separated; yet she tends to justify her acceptance of him as a husband by saying that he was then so smashingly charming that she had forgotten all about his first wife! But most of the knowing ladies, particularly those relatives and friends who have had witnessed the settings of that breathless "Yes" of hers in response to his offer of marriage, said that the main reason for her rush towards him wasn't—though unquestionably true—that he was charming but rather that he was then working as a private driver for a Saudi Princess. She had smelt—obviously—the pecuniary effects of his job in the air of his comfy home which was supplemented by a not-yet-used shop and a public transport vehicle. Also those effects were conspicuous in his impeccable connections with influential Saudi personages, something which has endowed him with opportunities of "equipping" a number of his relatives and friends and even acquaintances with good work contracts in Saudi Arabia. One of those was the middle brother of my mother, who was one of the first to agree to the marriage.

My mother suffered, after joining my father in Saudi Arabia, the loss of the fruits of two conceptions before conceiving me. Yet once she was in her fourth month of pregnancy she left Saudi Arabia in compliance with the call of a dream she claimed that I have visited upon her to tell her that she should at once go back to Sudan if she would wish not to lose me as well through miscarriage. She was in the habit of saying that my

rebellion, since I was a child, against the traditional upbringing norms and religious observances is attributable to my resistance to coming into this world through the gates of the Holy Lands.

My mother hadn't returned at all to Saudi Arabia after giving birth to me. Not because she didn't wish to return, but because of the Princess for whom my father worked suddenly made him redundant and he thus had to return to Sudan. Two tales were advanced to explain that. One of them said that the Princess (whose name, some women whispered around, was Shahinda) let my father go and forced him finally to leave the Kingdom because one of her maids insinuated that my father's cuteness and virility had excited a number of other Saudi princesses who were all younger and more beautiful than the one with whom my father was working that they were made to squabble over requesting him to drive their private cars, especially when that Princess wasn't around or not in immediate need of him.

As to the other tale, it suggested that the Princess was so infatuated with my father that she fired him on the spot and ordered his immediate departure from the country when she surprised him kissing—some say having sex with—an Ethiopian maid who was younger and more distinguished with beauty than the Princess.

But my mother—who once favoured me with a semi-indulgent chat within which she related to me the ancient circumstances of my father's work in Saudi Arabia and her rebellion and girlish love adventures and affairs before being engaged to my father, things of which we had, of course, been oblivious—had it otherwise. She thereby told me that my father utterly denied the truth of such tales and rumours and strongly stressed—without any evidence of course—that he has got the sack—as a retired Sudanese army officer who was then working at the Saudi Ministry of Internal Affairs has passed on to him—on the grounds of a certain American advisory proffered within the Gulf States in the wake of the end of the Second Gulf War. That advice was thought to say that the high-ranking officers in the Kingdom—of which the Princess's husband was one—should discharge any foreign workers whose employment conditions would deem it that they should be in regular touch with them so as to not allow them to be susceptible or predisposed to being recruited by hostile Islamic states' intelligence agencies or extremist Islamic organisations.

My father was thus afflicted by years of semi-regular economic, social and psychological decline. He wasn't compensated by the Saudis for the loss of his job. His ever diminishing sources of revenue compelled him to make do without the driver of his public transport vehicle whom he, anyway, thought of as being a crook. But he soon sold off the vehicle. My mother suggested the sale after a driving accident which has almost taken away his life. He furnished the shop with cheap and inferior products which he tried to sell himself. But growth in trade was not his lot. There was an older and better logically located shop neighbouring his. That shop's supplies were more varied and it was blessed with a lot of committed customers. My father's trading ventures were, therefore, not simply slow, or sluggish, but pitifully futile.

These were details of life which my mother manipulated to the utmost in order to promote the idea of travelling to Egypt. She sold an empty piece of residential land my father bought a few months before being forced to leave Saudi Arabia. She also persuaded my father to rent the shop to a blacksmith and entrust her older brother with the matter of renting the house after we leave and monthly remitting to us in Cairo all of the revenues from it and the shop.

But my family had to postpone travelling—under pressure from my father—for a little more than two months until the end of the secondary school exams which I was then preparing to sit. We left Sudan immediately after my last exam. Months later, my mothers' older brother sent me the exam results in Cairo. My grades—as my father had predicted—were outstanding in Mathematics and Physics and English Language—the same three subjects in which my mother failed to gain average grades. That failure had not only caused her not to be admitted into the university, but also not to succeed in gaining the lowest grades that could help her getting the Sudanese Secondary School Certificate.

Contrary to Ilham's assurances—from whom it took a whole eleven months before the application form for immigration was received by us—our stay in Cairo not only extended beyond a single year but stretched on to two years and few weeks, during which time we were never honoured with the sight of a single Egyptian actor or actress save through the familiar means by which we used to watch them in Sudan, which was the television. However she was right about the beauty and attractiveness of Cairo, as well as about the decisive help that her distant relative and long-lasting tenant of Cairo

was able to offer us, although we didn't locate him for about a year, as his home telephone number—which Ilham had provided—kept changing along with his regular change in lodgings.

The financial burden of renting the flat and of other daily supplies forced my mother, within those two years and a few weeks, to resort to begging money from her middle brother who was then still working in Saudi Arabia. She also convinced my father to ask for money from his older son, who is our brother from another mother, who left Saudi Arabia—it was rumoured—because of feeling embarrassed about the almost general transmission of the tale about the Princess's firing my father and moved to work in Qatar. But after my mother had to sell four of her six golden bracelets nothing was left for her but trying to win my father over to the more radical solution to which she hoped for his response, particularly after the Australian authorities' approval, notwithstanding the long wait, of our application to immigrate to their land. That solution said that my father should go back to Sudan to sell the only Sudanese home of ours and return back to us with the sale's revenues as swiftly as possible. My mother justified her position by arguing that such an act had indeed become necessary for saving the costs of our tickets to Australia as well covering the pre-immigration expenses in Cairo. The irregular lease and rent income were too scanty to cover a third of our daily needs in Cairo. Also, the blacksmith who rented the shop was so financially weak that he couldn't pay us except intermittent monies for only three months, something which compelled him, under my uncle's pressure, to leave the place that has never been rented again.

My mother later learned from my father that his giving in, under persistent harrowing and tenacious pressure, to the idea of selling the house wasn't at all because of the soundness of such an idea but only because he wished to get rid of her that he could be a wholly dedicated Sufi disciple to one of the Sudanese holy gurus of the al-Ejaimiyya's Sufi Tariqa<sup>2</sup> who, every year, would come to reside for several months, thereby securing not only a trading business but also a handful of disciples and devotees. My father didn't agree to leave with us before that Sufi guru agreed to his leaving with us after supplicating, to Allah, on his behalf, counsel about the anticipated benefits of such a leaving.

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<sup>2</sup> **Al-Ejaimiyya Sufi Tariqa** is an Islamic Sudanese Sufi Order, which was founded in the northern region of Sudan.

In the Cairo Airport's Departure Hall, I met a Somali-Sudanese young woman whose name was Fawziyya. She spoke Arabic with an unpretentious Egyptian accent while, between now and then, injecting her conversation with luscious English phrases. She was at a similar age to mine, and returning, with her mother, to Melbourne. The building complex where her family's Housing Commission flat was happened to be neighbouring the very building in which Ilham's family's flat was a part. At the airport Ilham and her husband met us and took us to their home. The blazing chatter irritated me as if I was roasting over coals, as did the ever repeated identical greetings and congratulations on our safe arrival, the rapid-fire busy-body questions about the home country and the fate of joint acquaintances, which went on as we nonchalantly ate the bland food. A polite proposal from Ilham's husband to postpone the chitchat to the next day was thus deemed a welcomed relief. The husband finished his proposal with asking us to allow him to take my father to another Housing Commission flat whereby they would spend the night. That flat belonged to two Sudanese single guys who ended up having to supply shelter for those two grown-up men for the following seventeen nights!

Fawziyya visited me the day after my arrival. She invited me—after staying for about an hour at Ilham's flat—to go out and explore the nearby sights of the area. I was very happy with her company and invitation for I was then really in dire need to embrace new faces, smell new flavours, and taste new talk, anything that was not all stale and dull.

Fawziyya was a balm for my youthful yearning. For once we left the building we met two of her female friends; one a Somali-Sudanese whose name was Hayat, and the other an Eritrean-Sudanese whose name was Salma. The delight and excitement and clamour of our four hour wander, which was aptly concluded with gassing over a meal at KFC, proved to be a fitting beginning to my friendship with that trio. That friendship did not cease even when the Department of Housing offered my family, after nearly three weeks, an independent house which was situated in a suburb that lied too far away from where they lived. I continued meet the trio more or less regularly until I have gained the Fourth Level certificate in English Language—the certificate that qualified me to enrol in the nursing course that demanded my whole focus in turn—beside living too far

away—decisively contributed to transforming my attachment to them into semi-seasonal gatherings.

From my friendship with those young women, I acquired the sensitivity and inclination to keep myself at a distance from befriending the Somalis, the Eritreans and the Sudanese. That sensitivity wasn't at all owing to skin colour. But it was—as the three young women so explained to me—rather associated with those communities' endless gossip which was—particularly in relation to matters connected with women's lives—heavily shot-through with Islamic religious injunctions. Salma advised me, in this context, not to turn my back on my studies which would constitute, in the cases of girls descending from inhibitive backgrounds like ours, the only chance for making friendships with white boys and girls without the fear of anyone or permission from anybody. She later generously, and intimately, told me that in a former relationship she was compelled to so disguise her person under the so-called Muslim costume of the *Abaya*<sup>3</sup> so she could safely meet her white Australian boyfriend. As for Hayat, she said to me that Salma was quite right in what she said, and that my English wouldn't improve at the rate I hoped unless I would succeed, as she did, in initiating friendships with white Australian men and women.

My liberated feelings and lyrical boldness never hesitated in adopting that sensible suggestion. I did not permit my youthful yearnings and aspirations any vacillation. Nor did I allow my body to speak untruly to dresses and the open air. Thus came to pass my hobbled-English relationships, while I was a Level Three student of English at an Australian adult migrant English education school, with CALD people as varied as the Polish Anna, the Ukrainian Dasha, the Russian Vadim, the Serbian Bozidar, the Vietnamese Kam, the Chinese Bao, the Japanese Akeme, the Macedonian Zarko, the Slovenian Brunko, the Brazilian Leticia, the Ecuadorian Jolieta, the Ethiopian Abrahait and the Namibian Serio.

At Level Four my association with a few of my former classmates from Level Three—who have had also been marched on to Level Four—continued. I was promoted to Level Four and rewarded with a scholarship because of my outstanding achievement in Level

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<sup>3</sup> **Abaya** is a sort of loose-over cloth, robe-like, commonly black, used by a wide range of Muslim women, especially in the Arabian Peninsula and Northern Africa Arabian countries, and considered to be a popular kind of Islamic women's dress.

Three. Of course I also had new chatty relationships—enhanced by a more fluent speaking tongue of English this time—with many of my classmates at Level Four. But most of such relationships—as I now retrospectively see them—were not typically informed by passions as intense as before. We were all then newcomers to Australia, and our passions were confused, our minds still caught up in the dizziness of transition.

But my deep gratitude to the adult English education school remains pure and unmitigated. And if I have to describe that school in a one phrase I would readily say that it was the out-and-out antithesis of any school I happened to pass through during all of my phases of formal education in Sudan. For what I was taught in Sudanese schools I didn't find, in most situations, outside of them, whereas I did not once feel the same estrangement in what I learned here. The contrast was so great that I once asked myself whether what our minds had been stuffed with could at all be called *an education!* What kind of education does it amount to if it doesn't develop our ways of thinking, improve our daily conduct, and transform—for the better, of course—our common reality? Doesn't the primary cause of our ills consist of this absence of clarity, logic and deduction, truthfulness and acknowledgment in our public life in contrast to the overwhelming and premeditated presence of ambiguity, lying, hypocrisy and pretentiousness? If not, then what is it that would, in a manner of speaking, make one plus one equal two in a country like Australia, while it would equal in our country of origin—and among our communities here—one and a half or one and three quarters?! In other words, what is it which would make that which we have learned, and are still learning, hereby refer us to the world we live in or indicate our belonging to reality while that which we have been mentally stuffed with thereby—and among our communities here—would refer or lead us only to decay and death?! Hereby is the fire of creation; thereby is the chill of appropriation. Creation evinces originality and solicitude. Appropriation evinces incapacity and indifference.

The first motive that drove me to school in Sudan was a desire for disengagement from the routines and limitedness of the house to embrace the spaces of the school days' anarchy and the temptations of the common street.

In this sense, education wasn't then the ultimate end for me. That is despite, educationally, not being an underachiever at all. In other words, education was only means I thereby used to realize another ambition. As to our home here, my folks were

so keen on holding it down with the same ancient claws of repetitiveness and in the same deep pit of narrowness that I had been seeking every way out of. No doubt the primary thing that urged me to go to school, and later to higher education, was my authentic wish for learning. Yet the motivation to get up and leave the corrosiveness of home behind, as well as escaping its stagnant atmosphere—which was characterised by depressing, formulaic exchange of talk, shared by it and other similar Sudanese homes in our motherland and here—wasn’t a secondary or lesser motive. It was integral to my primary motive. This means that the social milieu is therefore inseparably involved in education—not just supplying or assisting the learning incentive—and it is in fact a source of learning as well as a source of life.

That was what coloured my English studies at the Levels Three and Four, my opening up to the worlds of the city. This had of course been much influenced in the first place by incorporation of touristic motivations into the teaching curriculum, as well as initiatives taken by classmates of mine and by me. But, contrary to what someone might imagine, whenever my social relations widened, whenever my roaming expanded, my commitment to school was reinforced and my desire for learning flamed up more fiercely. That commitment and ambition bore fruits in the school’s awarding me a new scholarship for studying a Bachelor of Nursing.

In answering a journalist’s question the supervisor of our class said that the hasn’t offered to me just for gaining excellent grades but also for my being socially and culturally open and because I know how to celebrate and share life. Each quality of yours is hereby met by the deserved appreciation. But back in Sudan, and within our Sudanese communities here, if your mouth, for instance, would spontaneously generate the blast of a laugh or impulsively respond to it, you would be swiftly branded dissolute!

Thousands thanks, then, to my mother who insisted on leaving for Australia. One day, I said to her with a tongue laden with gratitude, that the only thing about which she was authentically right—while endeavouring to win my father over to the notion of migrating to Australia—was her argument that Australia would provide us, we her children, with ideal prospects for continuing our learning.

Those same prospects weren't ideal only for learning. They also presented, and still present, occasions for practicing living. That is so in spite of we the three of us have agreed, and not agreed, in relation to shortcomings, or, in your description "structural deficits," that would hold down many of the longings and actions that should have added up to life fulfilment more humane and generous and thriving. Opportunities to practice life surrounded my affections with intimate and authentic and enriching bonds with people, places, histories and colourful existences which I wouldn't have experienced had my longings been still bereft of wings as they were, or would be so fated, in Sudan.

In contrast—without this being a failing—the floating relations that distinguished my stages of learning English, my varied relationships during academic learning at the university—enjoyed more deep-rooted and sprawling dimensions, despite some of them being short-lived. One of those was my relationship with Michael O' Mahoney initiated during the second half of my first year at the School of Nursing and Midwifery.

My first association with Michael was brought about by a nursing workshop at the School. I was still struggling with biological science, pathology and psychology. Michael was well-versed in those subjects and others as well. He provided me with unforgettable academic assistance. But my increasing demands for his academic assistance—which he met with generous and charming responses—soon transmuted our fellowship into friendship. That was the real dawn of my entering a world of discoveries, perceptions, intimations, involvements, festivities, fiestas, thriving laughter and other arenas suffused with joy.

Michael was my rainbow messenger.

He was fond of history, novels, music, cinema, swimming and travel. He was an excellent cook, skilful dancer and a quantitatively and qualitatively developed social being.

He was the first to initiate me into a white Australian world full of happy lovers and good-humoured friends. From my deep connection with them I have learned that white Australians, males and females, are characterised with an uncomplicated concept and practice of human relationships. Relationships with them—unlike many of our Sudanese relationships—are not exhausted by ambiguity, affectation and confusion.

Inasmuch as I have been acquainted with the alphabet of daily living practices of Michael and his friends and his family, with all their Irish roots and open-heartedness, as well as many others I was later associated with, so were my common shortcomings and failings made blindingly obvious to me.

What a shock—and delight—to rediscover the alphabet of life!

All of such associations with Michael's, and later other social circles as well, revealed to me that we are professionals at divesting ourselves from self-evident truths and practices. For me, at least, the issue here isn't inherently linked with that material progress of which the West is commonly taken to be the model, but, more fundamentally, its responsiveness to the call of cultural instincts. For there are peoples—Sudanese of the kind never historically polluted and complicated like us, and non-Sudanese—who are less materially developed than us but their obvious relationship with nature and their bodies are wholesome and creative.

Michael was so surprised when one day I told him that I was born and brought up in a house not four hundred meters' distance from the River Nile, yet not only haven't I learned at all to swim but what is more was deprived from just walking along its bank!

What an impetus my relationship with him had been for my mind to be liberated from some of its hidden, and not-so-hidden, coverings; my passions from remnants of its deep-seated repressions; and my body from many of its restraining shackles!

He taught me that clarity, precision and deduction are the basis of reason. And that diverse tastes in food, drink, music, as well as liberty, adventure, vastness, are the basis of the body and passion.

The first experience of discovering my body I had in my life was when he taught me swimming, in a response to a suggestion of mine.

The first time I was allowed to banish my body's muteness was when I allowed his body to truly immerse in my body—after dumb and despondent attempts at sex which ended up physically and emotionally painful for both of us—following my decision—me “the messenger of health” at the time—to reinstitute the dignity of my female genitalia which had been for so long neglected and numb.

That was the first time I truly got to know my body, rejoiced into it when our bodies were combined in the lively joy that no other joy could match.

I remember that once I left Michael on that day, I whispered to myself with a reflection redolent with the scent of embrace: “How could you allow your femininity to become false and inert, you damned fool!”

The first face to compete with Michael’s face’s place in my memory was that of Salma, the friend from my first arrival in Australia! I decided to give her a ring. Her voice reached me cloaked in remnants of a burst of laughter she strove to scatter away with her words of welcome with little success. I asked her, while resisting a furious impulse to let her in on the background to my own good spirits, to tell me what she was laughing about. She said, in a voice the hushed tone of which still didn’t completely succeed in diffusing the laughter: “Do you know what I am laughing about? Well, listen to this: I have just learned the real reason why Ahmad Abd al-Karim, the ex-husband of Suad, the daughter of al-Mitairif, suddenly decided to divorce her. It was that she wished, during foreplay, to suck his mouth-watering cock. But he kicked her face so hard with his foot that blood blew from her mouth. This was followed by immediate interrogation: ‘Answer me! Where did you pick that up? Who taught you such vulgar acts?’ And you are of course familiar with the rest.”

I immediately dropped my wish to confide in Salma. I concentrated my efforts, as a far as I could, in making short of the call. I wasn’t particularly annoyed by what she said. I just fear that an inconvenient sadness might have slipped through my soul at that instant. But once memory of her voice faded away, my steps regained their smile, my passions their carnival and my thoughts their lyricism.

I hoped as I entered our family home to find them all sleeping, particularly my mother. I wasn’t afraid of her at all, but I didn’t wish, while the evening was yet to turn to full-fledged night, for my ecstasy to be adulterated with phrases such as: “You should seriously think about marriage. Only a year ahead and you will be thirty!” or, “You should go back to Sudan and return with a husband. Your vanity—which is now renowned here—would not tempt any Sudanese who is a resident here to propose to you.”

Luckily, I found her fast asleep while my sister and younger brother engaged in watching TV. I prepared a supper, *Ful* crowned with Bulgarian feta, dried ground cumin and sesame oil. With humming steps, I entered my room. I changed my clothes. Before putting on my nightwear I ran my hands down my bodily contours, palms brim-full with congratulation. I took my supper with a dancing appetite accompanied with a song from the Sudanese band of *Igd al-Jalad*.<sup>4</sup> I lay on the bed. I gathered my body into a ball. I didn't feel any desire in me to push it down under the duvet, in spite of the cold of that night. So I covered it with a smile. I felt an unprecedented yearning for my father. I decided to phone him the next day, after sending him the money which I had put aside for him and which I had determined to raise to three hundred dollars instead of two. I got up and searched for the ancient *lalawb*<sup>5</sup> rosary he gifted me before his final return to Sudan. I sniffed it long and deep, and hugged it and surrounded my neck with it while returning my body to its rounded ball. A single tear dropped from of my eye. It didn't belong to either fear or regret. And, before drifting down into a tender sleep, soothed with another song of *Igd al-Jalad*, again Salma's face competed Michael's face in my mind. I said to myself, with a sigh that did not dismiss the remains of a smile from my mouth, "What a poor soul Suad was!"

Next morning—a Saturday morning—a dialogue ensued between me and my mother. It wasn't very different from the talk which we exchanged earlier this afternoon. That day she started the talk with a topic suggested, given her affected look of disapproval, by nightwear which was then a T shirt and shorts.

- You are, every day, increasingly leaving behind your Sudanese identity.
- I haven't left it behind. Only I am trying to uproot those elements of it I don't like. On top of which I am adding new facets and dimensions.
- Aren't you aware that you have become a freak?
- A freak?! In comparison to whom?
- With the Sudanese girls here, and the Sudanese girls there.

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<sup>4</sup> **Igd al-Jalad** is a famous and distinguished Sudanese modern singing band.

<sup>5</sup> **Lalawb** (also known as Desert Dates in English) is the Sudanese name for the fruits of the Balanites Aegyptiaca tree. Out of the kernel of the laloub some Sudanese make rosaries as religious/Sufi symbols to help worshipers recite the names of God.

- No, I am not—rest assured—at all a freak. There are Sudanese like me here, as well as Sudanese like me there. The problem is there are two few of us, here or back there.
- So all you need to do now is go drinking coffee at Jamal’s cafe!
- Certainly I will, if it could be guaranteed that no unpleasant glances from the male clients injure either the relaxation needed to drink a coffee or that which is produced by it.

Strange that my mother who spoke in this way—unlike others, including his father of course—would not see anything wrong with Mazin playing in a footy team. Also she wouldn’t, as some other women would, judge Mazin’s actions as just a mere diversion. On the contrary, she believes that his father should allow him to do it. Her argument was that it is better for our sons to learn some of the “tricks” of the Australian white society, particularly those who would thereby financially enhance their families’ standing. Thus—as you see—we have won another fan of Mazin from the older generations, in addition to Jamal, who confided unto you a similar opinion to that of my mother as who was the first in that, in an initiative to indicate his willingness to sit and talk with you. Hopefully you wouldn’t forget to bring us some of his *mazza*:<sup>6</sup> falafel, *mish*, or pickles, for example.

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<sup>6</sup> **Mazza** is an Arabic name for appetizers or starters that are usually eaten while drinking alcohol, wine or beer.

## Jamal

Requests from you I accept as commands, oh, yes Sir! And since what you request honours this humble café of mine, I will prepare the pickles and *mish* myself. As for the falafel, I should, for it to remain fresh as long as possible, fry it only ten or fifteen minutes prior to your taking your leave from here. That will allow you to sit awhile after we have finished the chat, which, as I have suggested to you on the phone, will be best had in the empty room upstairs to avoid any interruptions. But rest assured this pause will only double my happiness at your coming. Chance, that is to say, because of your other engagements of course, rarely bestows upon us such delightful visits. I do assure you about my reminding you, on my part, of taking all that you wish to have. And I hope that you would pardon me if I should add, to your orders, a little of *fasikh*. For the latter—in the same vein as the *mish* and the pickles and the falafel—is also a home-made food. My wife cooks it all at home, and I will not tolerate you this time paying even a single cent for anything. I have sworn to divorce my wife on that! How I do wish it was all, or at least most, of my Sudanese customers should enjoy your refined manners, your abundant humbleness, and your magnanimous soul. If that was so, we wouldn't have witnessed—or in some cases been victimised by—those follies which would do nothing but keep our community's people—notwithstanding their being only a few souls in this country—apart, begetting and aggravating grudges amongst them. What, for instance, has that al-Dungul gained from abusing William, Ibrahim, and the very one talking to you now, though to a lesser degree than those two, and even his later extending insult and injury even to our dignified sheikh, Uncle al-Mitairif—though, again, to a lesser degree than the lot that has befallen me from him?!

One day—in the wake of a squabble which had broken out between two young Sudanese boys at the Café where al-Dungul intervened as peacemaker and succeeded, not just in resolving it but, furthermore, in agreeably reconciling the two contending parties with each other—I said to al-Dungul that two guys carrying on like that would harm the civilised image of this place which every Sudanese frequenter should consider a home or a public place for the Sudanese community, particularly as successive

Sudanese Community Executive Committees in time failed to provide us permanent accommodation. It made me want every Sudanese who enters this Café to be able to feel that this is his home. He applauded what I said without hesitation.

So tell me, what has he himself done a few months later?

He has, in fact, to be fair and accurate, however you look at it, committed something far more egregious than the adolescent behaviour—and the description was his—with which he labelled the dispute between those two boys who were actually adolescents! How else do you describe the words which he divulged to me when I intervened—as a do-gooder, no more or less—to temper his rage against William, saying to him only what others had said to him before, which was that he, al-Dungul, had invested William's comment with much more that it should carry: "You, *Halabi*,<sup>1</sup> should keep out of this. I know exactly what he meant. And that devious appeasement and mollification practiced by your *halabi* Egyptian relatives, who are peddlers of talk and equivocation, will not manage to hoodwink me!"

Al-Dungul—whom I have always held up as a father—had in the past sometimes informally referred to me with this word *halabi* in the past. But it was then good-natured banter to which I would never object, notwithstanding the derogatory associations such a word carries socially. But his impaling me with that word in the context of that mêlée reveals the superiority it afforded him—in spite of the very different contexts wherein he previously hurled it at me—and which he had entertained toward me all along, were, in fact, his real feelings. Not only has he detested me, he also seeks to put my Sudanese identity under suspicion.

Who dares claim the right to issue deeds conferring Sudanese identity of this person or that? He sometimes would say that he is a descendent of the original inhabitants of Sudan who were the Nubians. Other times he would take pride in the claim that half of him does belong to the descendants of al-Abbas, uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. And from where did the descendants of that Abbas, with whose name he would sometimes fill his mouth, come from? Did they come from Ghana? Did they come from Japan? Didn't they immigrate from the Arabian Peninsula, as well as my grand-fathers who

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<sup>1</sup> **Halabi** is a word that is commonly used, in Sudan, to identify a person who belongs to a gipsy ethnic group.

emigrated from Egypt, mixed with the original inhabitants, and settled in the region of Berber in northern Sudan two centuries ago?

My paternal grandfather's tribe was that of the *Ababda*.<sup>2</sup> My wife, who is a relative, had a grandfather from the tribe of the *Mairafab*.<sup>3</sup> My mother's origins were, more clearly, Egyptian and Turkish. So what is wrong with that? It is true that I do not hide my admiration for the Egyptians. And I also do not deny their possible sway upon me. But who—even amongst those who, as al-Dungul, would roar with ridicule towards the Egyptians—is the single Sudanese who hasn't admired, or been affected, to this or that degree, with Egyptian culture? Would the Sudanese know how to prepare or cook, or at least how to improve the preparing and cooking, of dishes such as the *Mulukhiya*, the okra, the *ful* (the common name of which, in Sudan, is “*the Egyptian ful!*”), the *fasikh*, the *kawari'*, the beans, the lentils, the rice, the macaroni, the *kammouniyya*,<sup>4</sup> the lasagna, the yogurt, the *mish*, the falafel, the cheese, the *basta*,<sup>5</sup> the *baglawa*,<sup>6</sup> the *kunafa*,<sup>7</sup> the cake, the *ka'ak*,<sup>8</sup> the jelly, the custard, the *khushaf*,<sup>9</sup> and a long, long list of other specialties and meals and sweets and drinks, if it wasn't for the effects of the Egyptian kitchen upon the Sudanese kitchen?

Millions like al-Dungul are rushing about to watch Egyptian soap operas, movies, plays, and football games; naming their new-borns with Egyptian names; swinging ecstatically while listening to Egyptian songs; modelling their daughters' dresses into the Egyptian styles and wedding many of their brides to their bridegrooms the Egyptian way! Even a few of the wealthy guys amongst them brought, and are still bringing, Egyptian singers to Sudan to brighten up the wedding feasts of their sons and daughters!

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<sup>2</sup> The **Ababda** is a large Arabian ethnic group that inhabits an area which stretches from Sinai in Egypt to a Northern Sudanese region that is spread between the Red sea and the Nile.

<sup>3</sup> **Mairafab** is a renowned ethnic faction which derives from the Ja'allyin, a large Sudanese ethnic group that claims an ancestry that goes back to Prophet Muhammad tribe.

<sup>4</sup> **Kammouniyya** is a popular dish in, for example, Sudan, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria and Lebanon. It is usually made of

<sup>5</sup> **Basta** is a kind of Baklava.

<sup>6</sup> **Baglawa** equals Baklava.

<sup>7</sup> **Kunafa** is a dessert that is very famous in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. In Sudan, it is usually made of fine liquid stripes of flour paste (similar to those used to create pasta) to make several interwoven layers saturated—to an extent that does not make it runny—with syrup.

<sup>8</sup> **Ka'ak** is a specific sort of cookies and cakes, usually baked of the mixture of flour, yeasts, butter and sugar. In the Arabian World, including, Sudan, it is associated with Eid al-Fitr (which occurs at end of Ramadan Holy Month) and Eid al-Adha (which occurs during the Haj Season).

<sup>9</sup> **Khushaf** is a dessert which is made of sultanas and small pieces of dried figs all dipped in syrup.

And if the Egyptians are all that bad, what then drove millions of Sudanese guys (amongst whom is counted, of course, al-Dungul himself), and is still driving them, to seek refuge in the Egyptian cities as a result of fleeing the blazing hellfire of Sudanese political and economic crises?

I am no hypocrite. And I will never be. And my unhidden admiration for Egyptian culture hasn't and shouldn't, in one way or another, diminish, if not adding to, my Sudanese identity.

And what about this al-Dungul's blabbering about the Egyptians being peddlers of talk? Are there, in this world, any greater lip-servers than the Sudanese? And if we were not the worst in the entire world, would our country, as witnessed by the whole planet, be so swiftly stepping backwardly? Egyptians, Australians, as well as other sensible peoples of the Earth, talk while they labour and work. But the most we do is chatter while hurling everything down the drain!

Did al-Dungul really expect Mazin carry on his football legacy while he sat around blabbing on about his and al-Merriekh team's aged glory or the awesome splendour of the Brazilian Football? Did he trust that Mazin should become a brilliant footballer in a brilliant Australian football team while he incessantly jabbered on about—while reclining on the sofa in whoever's home—about the heroisms, feats and precision of al-Merriekh's and other wonderful football teams' players?

Australians didn't just tell Mazin—or anyone else for that matter—about footy or rugby or other of their popular games. They actually got him out to the stadium to watch real footy, to take in the grass on the ground, shake hands with its players, hear the boom as its devotees roared, don on shirt or hat adorned with footy's mottoes and ultimately to play it. What could be more fruitful for al-Dungul—with his entire Sudanese football legendary legacy—than to form a Sudanese youth team, including his son of course, and lovingly watch over their training, with all of his experience, skill, knowledge and abundant spare time?

That was, for instance, what I did personally, in another setting, when I advised my older son, my cooking-assistant, to enrol in a catering course, particularly as each profession in this country requires some scientific qualification. But scientific qualifications aren't terribly welcome among the majority of our Sudanese community.

Unfortunately those educational qualifications are not welcome among most Sudanese here, though abundantly available for those who would pursue them. That's despite the majority of them resenting complaining that what they earn in their jobs hardly covers their daily needs, let alone leaving enough to assist relatives and friends in Sudan. But still they refuse to face the question of their own accountability for imprisoning themselves, in the first place, into straightjacket jobs that don't better their conditions here or help their relatives and friends there.

But I am just the opposite of them. All during my first three months in Australia, I never stopped asking myself about what I can do with my thirty three years and wife and son and daughter—later I was to be blessed with another daughter and another son—in a place like Australia?

I knew full well, even before the Australian Immigration Department accepted our application for asylum in Australia, that my University of Cairo Khartoum Branch's Accounting Diploma—which should be a reminder to al-Dungul of the Egyptians' kindness to us—as well as my four years working as an accountant in Khartoum, which ended with my dismissal for the so-called “common good”, would not count for a fig in Australia, let alone guarantee my family's survival or improved living conditions.. My children—I said to myself—would nevertheless be provided by the care and generosity of the Australian state until they grew into full-fledged men and women. As for myself, should I just fall back upon—as many do here—Centrelink's charity and endlessly chew over my aged memories as a Khartoum civil servant? Or is there anything, or indeed things, that I can take responsibility for and thus benefit myself and other people along with me? These are what I asked myself.

All of this made me very grateful to my mother, to tell the truth. For, although she had but very little formal education, she was privileged with a wisdom many of our university degree holders were, and are, in want of. I owe my act of self-searching largely to her. Furthermore, if it wasn't for her attentive, inquiring, and encouraging suggestions and proposals over the phone, I and my family wouldn't have got where we are now. She played the decisive role in the making of us. Much thanks to God for his blessing upon my family! One of her suggestions was that I should think of taking up an independent business of the kind that no one among my folks here has initiated before, or, otherwise, one had tried to do so but without any perfection. Also she, at the tail of

one of our phone conversations, didn't forget to draw my attention to the idea that the real investor is the mind, and that I should seek the opinions of those whose affection is for me and not what I own. So she spurred me toward firstly focusing my thoughts on a distinctive and commercially viable enterprise before thinking of the different ways it could be funded.

So the idea of this project, this Café, was born of observations I accumulated as I regularly frequented an older Sudanese restaurant, comparing its standing with the standing of other restaurants or cafes, all non-Sudanese. Those observations could be summed up in the proprietor, or manager, of the restaurant lacking in a number of qualities which are at the heart of the success of any such business. The owner or manager of that old Sudanese restaurant didn't care for the cleanliness and hygiene of his place, its serving tables, or even its staff! His restaurant's walls were painted in a dark, dingy colour that doesn't promote an appetite for his food. His restaurant's culinary standards were poor and the cooking itself was inconsistent. If, for instance, you have eaten today a dish of *ful* at his restaurant, you wouldn't tomorrow find the same authentic taste of the dish you enjoyed yesterday. Furthermore, you will find that not all of what is listed on the menu is available. And the waiters were male, whereas it is always better that, where most of the customers are Sudanese, they are female—beautiful, of course!—and even better if they are Indian, Sri Lankan or Ethiopian girls.

Although I had no experience in running a business like this, my wife, who was then pregnant with our third child, not only encouraged me to explore this field of enterprise but, furthermore, suggested that I should employ a lady whose name was Hassouna, whose fame as a brilliant cook was very highly regarded among Sudanese community women. My wife did not, in order to persuade me of Hassouna's unprecedented talent in cooking, omit to remind that the latter was the one who prepared most of the dishes at the naming-ceremony of our new-born child. My wife also insisted that I should, after finding and preparing the place, leave to her the matter of convincing Hassouna to work as a head cook at the restaurant. She did just that.

But Hassouna's kidneys, worn down by diabetes, soon compelled her to resign. She worked with me for a little more than two years. And she, with her proficient hands and intelligent heart, provided me with enormous help in making a good name for this cafe,

at the same time imparting me and my wife with many of her exquisite culinary skills. We owe her our profound thankfulness and gratitude!

But I also carefully observed what was going on in other restaurants and cafes, particularly the foreign ones. This led me to make improvements and renewals associated with many elements such as the external façade, seats, tables, display windows, menu design and coffee and cooking machines. These comparisons urged me to pursue modernisation and renovation. Besides that, I listened attentively to customers' comments and suggestions. I especially listened to what the white Australians said, though their presence at the café was not as frequent as the presence of Sudanese, and other African, clients. Nevertheless, when a white Australian came into the place, I would adjust the cooking to his or her taste, which normally meant being not as heavy on the spices or flavour as our African clients liked.

Living in Australia bestows upon you the merit of being flexible, open and up-to-date, not only with what is happening here but, as well, with what is going on all around the world. If you can get used to that, you would then be able to live here as happy and contented as myself. For that reason you would find me here feeling not a little gratitude towards Australia. For its accessible resources, and the flexibility as well as the exactness and accuracy of its system, which have all helped me enormously in launching and improving and making a success of this project. Tell me, honestly, sir: would it be possible for a junior accounts officer such as I was, to achieve what I have achieved here, if he was still held captive in that gloomy and prospect-less post in Sudan? Could he manage to open—with concessional loans from the state—a café-restaurant such as this one, with these virtues? Could he do there as I did here, with the help of such a project, and other concessions: buy a home as comfortable as the one I have here for about four hundred thousand dollars? Could his family in this manner enjoy health care and excellent education as mine here? Could he there ever be assured of the future prospects of his sons and daughters after departing this life? Perhaps it was for all these reasons that I once said, in jest of course, to al-Dungul, responding to a remark he made on the improvement in my general fortunes here, that the despotic government in Sudan did me a favour kicking me out of the Sudanese public service!

But I do regret that some of us—including those who are bemoaning the lowness of their wages—are in need of thanking God, and also in need of thanking this country for

what they receive, for instance and not inclusively, accommodation, social welfare, health services, opportunities for working and studying. If they should just compare their conditions here-and-now with their former conditions, either in Sudan or any other of the countries to which they were forced to migrate, the logical and alphabetical principles of comparison alone would then make them a laughingstock!

And what astounds one more is that some, or some of that some, most of the time drown their complaining and grumbling with idle wishes and dreary hopes of permanently going back home. Some of us did return to Sudan. That is true. But they were fewer than a handful. And half of that few did actually return to Sudan after succeeding—thanks to the chances this country has offered them—in accumulating a capital that would enable each of them to invest in a field that would get them still more profit. The other half of that few returned only because they lack the perseverance to live here.

But one could—or should—respect the choice of each of these two types. For the first category deserve recognition for their grit and intelligence, while the second type deserve understanding for their courage to acknowledge their incapacity to confront, or deal with, the challenges of living here.

What is not digestible, in this context, I say, is that some of us do complain to the rim of the earth of the bitterness, cruelty, corruption and meaninglessness of life here while they swear, with the bulkiest of the oaths, that those who live in Sudan are—despite dire want and hardship—enjoying a peace of mind of which those grumblers are bereft. Ok, then, you, moaner and grumbler: have you ever seen someone enjoying peace of mind while lacking the means of subsistence? If that was so, then why did you come here? Do not tell me, oh you, the “New Australian”, and oh you, the “Ancient Sudanese”, that your taking refuge in Australia was just a mistake! If that was the case, then why you do not just correct that mistake by returning to that land which promises you peace of mind?!

One of those who refuses to turn off the tap of his mouth to stop the rushing stream of complaining and grumbling—laced with curses and insults—heaped with or without reason—upon this country, is al-Dungul himself. Let him sing as long as he likes all the eulogies to his golden sporting, social and political past. No one will stop or oppose or even interrupt him. In fact, I am one of those who do find benefit and joy in listening to

the tales of that past which was really golden. Only I am saying here that it is not proper for such a generous person as himself to respond to the generosity of this country with such thanklessness and ingratitude. It is true that some things aren't to the liking of some of us here. And I am one of those. But the absence of such a past, its nostalgically distant presence, and eventually the longing for it here, do not, and should not, at all justify and excuse the persistence on overlooking all of the good, indeed excellent, things in this country which are non-existent in so many other countries and which outnumber the otherwise negative things which some of us would see in this land.

Only politeness and modesty—because of the age difference, of course—stops me from bluntly saying to al-Dungul: “If this country has brought to you all that suffering, why then don’t you go back to Sudan, particularly as your circumstances there wouldn’t be so bad, and even better than the many millions of people who would wish to have a little of which you have already enjoyed, and may further enjoy, here or there?” But I am certain that advancing in age has caused him and some of his likes certain chronic ailments that were, more often than not, presumed either to worsen or to be joined by other new ailments—which of course I do not wish for him or others—as age marches on further. How could someone with such chronic ailments return back to Sudan while perfectly aware of the hole into which health conditions and the health system back there have descended? The seats of this café—if they would be able to talk—would provide testimony to many of the real-life stories which are almost every day heaped one on top of another, and all of which declare that many of the cases there of—unexpected, of course—death have in fact claimed, and are still claiming, the souls of persons whose sicknesses weren’t that complicated—the kinds of sicknesses that could in the past easily be treated by a nurse in a GP’s clinic. This, in other terms, is explained by negligence in diagnosis, absence of sterilization, inappropriate prescribing, on top of which you have medications at exorbitant prices, all of which rule the day over there.

Would it then be possible for al-Dungul, if he would return to such a disheartening reality in Sudan, to continue buying his high blood pressure medication—which he must use for the rest of his life—if he could even get a hold of it there—without being pressed into selling his possessions, one by one? As to the cost of high blood pressure medication here, it doesn’t amount to more than the sum of six dollars, let alone of

course the merits of the accessible, accurate, specialised, responsible and advanced free medical care and follow-up.

No, al-Dungul—and his likes—would never go back to Sudan except as visitors, which he has done before and will do again. But—even as a visitor—he wouldn't venture to return without first rebuilding and improving the plumbing in his Omdurman's home. He will certainly do the renovations before his next visit to Sudan. He once told me it was necessary so that the new and modern replacement for that ancient squat toilet in the Omdurman's home would suit his habit—i.e., his newly-gained feeling of comfort—of sitting on a raised porcelain toilet which lets the user adopt the posture of sitting on a chair. He would no longer be able—as he then confirmed to me—to sit on the locally invented and designed ancient Sudanese toilet where one would have no other support but his own feet. That—he said—was demonstrated on his last visit to Sudan. Of course I didn't then ask him—just out of modesty and courteousness—about what would become of him if he should need to use the toilet while visiting one of his friends or acquaintances or any of his many relatives in Khartoum, or even further up in the northern region of Sudan!

But one is here inspired to ask: what has al-Dungul got used to benefitting from here which he would in the event miss on his next visit to Sudan? Would he, one wonders, once there, as can comfortably happen here, be able to heap insults and curses upon the government of *that* country, wherever and whenever he likes, with or without any occasion—and occasions there are abundant, of course!—without being damned and coming to grief?

How do I wish that al-Dungul should have the wisdom—or just a little of the wisdom—of Uncle Hassan al-Mitairif! That Uncle has once acknowledged—in a session in this Café where there were gathered a number of people amongst whom was that very al-Dungul—that for someone his age there is nothing but one of two options: sacrificing either some of his past or most of his children's future! Then he added, not by way of explanation but as a warning, that “whoever should return with his children to Sudan while dominated by all of its present ugly realities would be committing a great sin against them. It is a must then for the fathers of our circle to do justice to their children by just silently suffering the pains of memory.”

Ibrahim—who unhesitatingly assented to the truth of what Uncle al-Mitairif said—added to that: “Our children do not only receive good education here, they also act as educators for us, their fathers, particularly those fathers who, like myself, out of complicated life circumstances, were formerly deprived of the grace of formal education. I, for one, am much indebted to my children for helping me to learn English in quicker—if not better—steps than those Adult English Education Schools which I left before finishing. For their insistence on speaking English whenever answering my questions—which were mostly put to them either in Arabic or in a native Nuba tongue, which they do understand but avoid using when they talk—or asking something of me or commenting on some matter or another helped me a lot to improve my English language, something which encouraged me to refer back to them, from time to time, to explain an English word or phrase I couldn’t understand.”

Our children do here teach us more than that. I am certain that Ibrahim will agree with me on this. William and Ahmad Abdul Karim (the ex-husband of Uncle al-Mitairif’s daughter) subscribed to it. They both certified that they have passed through traineeship similar to the traineeship I have passed through, and still am, under the guidance of my ten year old daughter. For I, without her effective help, wouldn’t—with all of my professional history which was armed-to-the-teeth with the heritage of the typewriter—be able to make head nor tail of computer programs and technical advantages, where I might now even boast a score of fifty percent.

As to her brother, who is two years older than her, and whose persistent lectures on the harms of smoking were the reason for me to quit the habit, he has taught me—me, the graduate of accounting studies—the necessity of applying logical method in debate, even in our informal family discussion. His grilling me about why I couldn’t, contrary to the fathers of his classmates, share with him his swimming exercises, was the motive behind my learning how to swim. That wasn’t only beneficial to my body and mind and soul but, furthermore, it opened me up toward good social relationships with a few of his colleagues’ fathers, particularly those of his friends, those who practice swimming exercises with him. Actually, I even began to meet some of them on occasions that have nothing to do with our children. And two of them have even honoured me, at different times, with accompanying members of their families to visit this Café and enjoying eating our Sudanese food.

“You should open your mind, if you want to learn.” This is not my phrase, for it has been spelled out by that son of mine who isn’t yet thirteen years of age. He said to me with a not so well-hidden resentful tone and in answer to my poor appreciation of the fine points of the game of cricket which he was venturing to train me to play in his desperate attempt to replace his older brother, who wasn’t interested at that moment in playing, with my poor dear old self.

That phrase became my motto. It served me well in opening a variety of horizons which were associated, for instance, with the requirements of advancing the work in this Café, with the social relationships with the Sudanese and the non-Sudanese, with understanding the goings-on of Australian public life, or again with the enjoyment of the multicultural venues of eating, musical, singing, sporting and dressing. I haven’t at all limited my wife, daughters and sons to dress in any particular manner, and I will never do so.

Putting that motto before his heart and mind was what al-Dungul denied himself. He could have learned, and still can learn, many things from his life here. He could have honoured and be honoured with, and still can honour and be honoured with, his son, Mazin, whom everybody including myself attests to his sophisticated manners and his keenness to accompany his father to Friday Prayers at the mosque, by allowing him to augment his legacy—which is without doubt honourable—in football with another kind of sport. For the footy, I say, would not diminish his fondness of football or his legacy in it, but it would rather enrich them. And al-Dungul should know—if he doesn’t—that those who brought the footy, rugby and cricket to Australia and made them into two different popular forms of sports were the same who brought football to Sudan and then caused it to be the premier popular sport there. Those—whether al-Dungul likes it or not—were the British colonialists. He should also realise that it was said of the very team to which he belongs, which is al-Merriekh, that it was the team of the British colonialists who founded and sponsored it whereas al-Hilal was said to be the team of the nationalists. The same characterisation is applicable to the circumstances within which the popular Egyptian football teams of al-Zamalik and al-Ahli<sup>10</sup> were formed.

I am not, in all what I have said so far, seeking verbal revenge against al-Dungul, nor am I gloating over what he thinks of as his own grief or even bellowing out loud my

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<sup>10</sup> **Al-Zamalik** and **al-Ahli** are the most prominent football clubs in Egypt.

merits over him. No, no, my business with him doesn't involve any of that, for my previous account of him was only derived by my love for him, my appreciation and pride in his legacy as a football player—though I am a fan of al-Hilal. His legacy, in fact, calls for the pride of every Sudanese on the planet! Those four pictures of him which are decorating the walls of this Café of mine do testify to that. Your keen eye will have noticed them. Half of them reflect different skills of his in matches played with his illustrious team of al-Merriekh, while the rest are showing his deftness and agility as a striker in the National Sudanese Football Team.

Nonetheless, I ask your forgiveness if you have sensed any feel of cruelty in any of my words about him. I only said what I said about al-Dungul to you because I trusted that my conversation with a person with good intentions as yourself would not, by any means, misconstrue these criticisms of mine which only decorum and modesty put me off saying straight to his face. And though he has caused me such harm by transmitting what he transmitted about me, I do not bear any grudge against him even in view of the humiliating insult he threw at me, for he is still retains the status of a father for me. The proof of this (as the other sufferers of his wounding remarks have indeed related to you) is that I am still ready to forgive and welcome him back in this Café whenever he wishes to come. For this place is a home for him as well. In fact, it is in visible need for the sociable and kind and humorous spirit of al-Dungul. I hope that—until I am able to see him personally—you will soon convey to him my sorrow and sadness at his suffering from high blood pressure. The friendliness and intimacy that exists between he and I shouldn't be simply lost in the wake of angry and hasty reactions. And if you happened to be a maternal relation to him—as he once told us, with an unmistakable pride you both deserve to be privileged with—he also once told me that your paternal father was originally from the northern Sudanese town of Berber. By God I wish that you would tell me about that grandfather in your next visit. For over there is a dear town that lies between us! And who knows? Probably we would then discover that there is another family bond that associates me with you too!

As to the provisions you should take away with you, not to forget particularly the fresh falafel, they will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Let me then, while you are waiting downstairs in the common hall of the Café, prepare another cup of tea with fresh mint for you—just as you usually like it. I will soon finish making ready your favourite

delicacies. For God's sake, convey my greetings to your friend, Milad, that refined human being whom sadly others—al-Dungul wasn't, honestly, one of them—would label with the stigma of *halabi*, or *nagadi*<sup>11</sup>, as well. I haven't had a chance of having a conversation with him, maybe because his visits to the Cafe are becoming so rare and quick. But for now I hope I won't bore you by repeating my wish for you to tell me—in a future, different, sitting of course—about your Berberian<sup>12</sup> grandfather!

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<sup>11</sup> **Nagadi** is a term used in Sudan as equal to the term **Copt**; and **Nagada** equals **Copts**. However, the origin of the term goes back to the Egyptian regional town of **Naqada** from which a group of Copts migrated and settled in Sudan where they had likely identified themselves, or identified by other Coptic groups, as Nagada (= the Copts of Naqada).

<sup>12</sup> **Berberian** is a term used identify or discriminate a person, an animal or thing that belongs to the northern Sudanese town of **Berber** (not to be equated with the Berbers or the Amazighs, the large groups of indigenous people inhabit North Africa west of the Nile Valley).

## The Intercessor

As soon as the elderly woman in a winter coat and wide hat next to you on the bus receives your answer to her casual, spur-of-the-moment, affable question about which country you are from, she says to you, with a merriment that appeared to you unexpected, considering her age, that her originally British grandfather, who never took up Australian citizenship despite living in Australia till the day he died, related to her that he had been a soldier in the British army in Sudan from eight years before the Second World War to two years after it. She says to you that her grandfather told her that he contributed to the training of dozens of Sudanese army recruits, preparing them to fight in the battles that led to the routing of Italian forces from a Sudanese border town—the name of which she doesn’t now remember—and thus to their defeat and expulsion from Eritrea. However, reconsidering, she says to you that if you say the name of that town she will recognise it. “Kassala,”<sup>1</sup> you say to her, “is the name of that town”. Youthful joy returns across her face as she verifies the correctness of the name. Then she asks you to spell out the letters of the town’s name so that she can write them down in a little notebook she carries. She writes it down without the aid of any reading lenses. She then adds, before she leaves the bus, while holding your hand in a youthful gesture of both greeting and parting, that her grandfather—and she, as well—has always been proud of her inheriting from him some of his distinct habits and his personal approach to life.

As for you yourself, your father says that you, as well, look very much like your Berberian grandfather. He says that you represent him more in his inner, rather than outer, features. Some of his peculiarities, your father says, were that he was a man of few words, much given to absentmindedness; that he was ever precise, extremely meticulous in attending to minute details; that his footsteps were so silent that some of his close friends called him “walker on air”; that he was so patient that none ever heard him moaning or complaining, even when awfully ill. The single rare moments he might show unmistakable irritation were those moments when his eyes fell upon the civil

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<sup>1</sup> **Kassala** is a prominent town in the eastern region of Sudan.

servants of the Turkish-Egyptian Administration stationed in the Sudanese town of Berber. Then he wouldn't, your father reminiscences, utter any word, only grinding his teeth such that they were plainly heard to squeak by anyone sitting or walking nearby. The only occasion in which his habitual gravity deserted him occurred when he heard news about the triumph of a rebellious Sudanese militia, under the command of one named "al-Mahdi," over a Turkish force on the Sudanese Island of Aba. This caused him to go about the neighbourhood streets, skipping for joy, shouting "God is Great! God is Great!" making his homefolks worry that the town's authorities might arrest him. Some uncles later apprehended and bundled him into one of their houses whereby he was forced to keep silent. Silence—which was one of his qualities—never upset him so much as that one time, no doubt because he also learned at the same time of his not-too-distant relationship to that very same Mahdi.

From then on, with an external gravity that did not reflect his inner excitement, he developed a keen interest in news of that Mahdi and his followers. And on one occasion when some of that sporadic and sometimes contradictory news of theirs reached Berber—which is not near the Island of Aba—he swiftly decided to travel south to the town of Shandi<sup>2</sup> on the back of a camel, armed with a sword, an axe, and a cane, as well as a knife lashed to his left arm. He was, by that time, about to hit his mid-twenties.

In Shandi he stayed for a few weeks with one of his uncles. During his days there he befriended a man called Zain al-Abdin, who came at the head of a group of people from a village near Khartoum to offer condolences to relations of theirs upon the death of a chieftain and holy sheikh. Your grandfather learned from that man about people passing on talk about miracles performed by that Mahdi. Such miracles that are not only manifested in the triumph of his small militia over the mighty Turkish army, but also in that he and his followers defeated their armed-to-the-teeth enemy in the battle of the Island of Aba with only swords made of the dried wood of the Calotropis procera trees! It was also noted that the battle was fought in the month of Ramadan, which was the same month in which, in the Battle of Badr,<sup>3</sup> a handful of the Prophet Muhammad's army overpowered the numerically superior and well-equipped army of non-believers from the Arabian tribe Qureish. In addition to that, his ongoing talks with Zain al-Abdin

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<sup>2</sup> Shandi is a well-known town in northern Sudan.

<sup>3</sup> The Battle of Badr was a pivotal battle in the course of the initial era of Islam in which Prophet Muhammad's few proponents achieved a resounding victory against their opponents who were large in quantity and well-equipped. Thus it was a critical juncture for Prophet Muhammad and his Islamic Call.

confirmed his intuition that the further he ventured towards the south the more the volume of such news and its reliability increased. He thus decided to accompany the latter and his group on their imminent return to their village.

Zain al-Abdin persuaded him as they headed south and closer to the centre of news and events to stay in their village a few days. He and his camel may by that way have rest and, with any luck, probably find—if not a guide to the shortest and fastest way—a companion to keep him company for the rest of his journey to Omdurman.

He chose Omdurman—which was then only a small dingy hamlet—in view of advice from Zain al-Abdin that there he would more likely find more frequent updates on al-Mahdi and his followers from the White Nile's<sup>4</sup> villages and towns. Zain al-Abdin, as he suggested, had relations in Omdurman with whom your Berberian grandfather would lodge and who would be able to help him if he—as he disclosed to Zain al-Abdin—wished to carry on with his decision to persist heading south, along the White Nile, towards the Island of Aba.

Not only did Zain al-Abdin's folks honour him with their welcome, they also dedicated three young men to accompany him in his journey to the furthest and freest of bandits, and also nearest to the Island of Aba.

The three young escorts returned to the village after a few days, leaving him slightly less than half of the remaining journey.

And then, as he neared his destination, he learned of the move of al-Mahdi and his militia, which had grown into army, westward. Disappointment wrung his heart, puzzled his mind. But he resolved to continue the journey to the Island of Aba where he would likely learn about the circumstances of al-Mahdi's departure from the Island with his militia, as well as further details of their destination and how one might catch up with them.

Once on the Island of Aba, camping there two nights, but heard little news about when al-Mahdi and his army had left the Island. What he did discover there were individuals of other seekers from different places who were all—as that Berberian grandfather of

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<sup>4</sup> **The White Nile** is an African river that emerges from Lake Victoria in Uganda, goes through the Republic of Southern Sudan, reaches the capital city of Sudan, Khartoum, where it joins the Blue Nile and form the renowned River Nile.

yours—hoping to be followers of al-Mahdi. Among those seekers there was—fortunately—one who experienced travelling on the same road al-Mahdi and his army travelled on towards Mount Qadir<sup>5</sup>. It was also said, to the Berberian, that his tracking skills—which they had noticed from the outset of the journey—would probably turn out to be useful during the journey.

I would have not escaped the hail of bullets from Hicks Pasha's<sup>6</sup> army if I was not, as I am now, taking shelter behind this lone rocky outcrop in the forest of Shaikan.<sup>7</sup> But Katherine Hepburn,<sup>8</sup> who is wearing a winter coat stained with oil from the engine of Humphrey Bogart's<sup>9</sup> steamer and the mud of the Ulanga River,<sup>10</sup> is trying to persuade me that what will save me from bullets is not the large rock which I took it to be but a huge tortoise, the feet of which are sunk down into earth while its head remains between its upper and lower carapaces. My Berberian grandfather, whose facial features I do not recognise but only sense, and who appears to be intent on tracing the tracks of some folks who stole our camels at that moment draws my attention to a point out that the tortoise—which is actually succeeding in repelling the bullets away from me—was not hiding its feet in the earth but it had—in fact—acquired them from the earth. In the very same way, so he proclaims, in which all tortoises, rocks, rhinoceroses and trees grow from the earth! As for Milad, he alerts me to a hole a bullet had made through the palm of my right hand. He asks me to stretch the palm of that hand before his eyes so that he can be certain that its recent aperture was not the dawn star that he thought of as I waved to greet him in the distance. At the same time, I now find myself almost not

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<sup>5</sup> **The Mount of Qadir** is a mountain located in the Sudanese western region of Kurdufan, where al-Mahdi and his first followers took refuge and prepared themselves for the upcoming confrontation with their opponents during the initial stage of the Mahdist Revolution. In regards to this particular move, al-Mahdi was inspired by the early move from Mecca to Medina undertaken by the Prophet Muhammad and his first followers.

<sup>6</sup> **Hicks Pasha** is William Hicks who was a British colonel who served, following his retirement from the British army, with the Khedive (ruler) of Egypt. The Khedive employed him in the beginning of 1883 as chief of staff of the Anglo-Egyptian army in Sudan to lead a punitive expedition to conquer the Mahdist revolution. However, he was killed in his first confrontation with the Mahdist army in **the Battle of al-Obayyid** in November 1883.

<sup>7</sup> **The Forest of Shaikan** is a forest located close to al-Obayyid, the capital city of the Sudanese western region of Kurdufan. It is exactly in this **Forest of Shaikan** that al-Mahdi's army confronted and defeated the Anglo-Egyptian's army led by colonel William Hicks (Pasha) in 1883 in what has become known as **the Battle of al-Obayyid**. In Sudan this battle is also known as **the Battle of Shaikan**.

<sup>8</sup> **Katherine Hepburn** was a leading American actress.

<sup>9</sup> **Humphrey Bogart** was an iconic American actor.

<sup>10</sup> **The Ulanga River** is a Tanzanian river in which a famous American film called *The African Queen*, the two major stars of which are Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart, was shot during early 1950's.

recognising Shahinda, not because she massaged her breasts and thighs with *mish*<sup>11</sup> but because the giraffe she rides is distinguished by a tallness that is peculiar to the rest of the giraffes, something which overshadows the laugh that I usually do recognise before she pushes open the door, when I am not at the reception room, and complains about something or other that happened to her that day, just as Belinda Kilner, my colleague at Jet Star Ltd., is now doing while we have lunch in the company's lunchroom. So I then draw her attention towards the exceptional tallness of Shahinda's giraffe—tallness that assists her with the task of plucking the falafel fruits that grow alongside dates in the palm plantation of my Berberian grandfather. Then I respond hurriedly to Hamdan Abu Anja's<sup>12</sup> order to wrap the hot barrel of the Gatling gun that we obtained as booty after the conquest of Khartoum with my turban. Abd al-Rahman al-Nujumi<sup>13</sup> says, in justification, that my turban is the only turban that, for through being wet with the waters of the Ulanga River, has not been burnt by the fires with which Nero burnt Rome. Now that is me, carrying out Abu Anja's order with the precision I have inherited from my Berberian grandfather, but only after I make sure that the crook of Shahinda's left knee is quite free of the *mish*. So Shahinda wished. Fernando Sancho's<sup>14</sup> laugh then rents the trunk of the Moringa tree asunder, which I am clasping with one hand while clasping the waist of Tatiana Hernandez with the other, dividing it into roughly equal halves, obliging me to allow the half of the Moringa tree trunk that is not adjacent to my left side fall to the ground for I am keener to keep Tatiana's waist in the crook of my left arm, particularly as that laugh of Fernando, in turn, awakens the tortoise on the back of which Tatiana is now standing while the tortoise begins to move towards the right. That is more precisely what prompts me to leave the left half of the Moringa tree trunk to fall to the ground. Nevertheless, the primary motive for my left arm holding keenly on to the left half of the Moringa tree trunk is that I wish for myself, Tatiana, and Fellini<sup>15</sup> to ascertain whether the crook of the Moringa tree trunk is blessed with the same charming, non-astringent aroma that distinguishes the flavour of its leaves. Soon Tatiana tries, swiftly and gently, to wiggle her waist free of my right arm. She succeeds in that and stands before me, gazing with the delightful little eyes she inherited from her native American half at the blood that slowly begins, without me

<sup>11</sup> **Mish** is the Arabic equivalent of pickled cottage (soft) cheese.

<sup>12</sup> **Hamdan Abu Anja** was an eminent *Amir* (Prince-Commander) in the Mahdist movement.

<sup>13</sup> **Abd al-Rahman al-Nujumi** was a prominent *Amir* (Prince-Commander) in the Mahdist movement.

<sup>14</sup> **Fernando Sancho** was a Spanish actor who was renowned, in the American Western series of movies, for performing a Mexican bandit commander.

<sup>15</sup> **Federico Fellini** was a distinguished Italian and international film director.

feeling either pain or concern, drips from one of the fingers of my left hand, drawing a long undeviating line in the light ghee-coloured crook of the Moringa tree. She asks Fernando and Anthony Quinn<sup>16</sup> to help her release the half of the Moringa tree trunk from my hands and she lays it down with love worthy of a martyr tree. Shahinda and Christina and Abdullah al-Ta'ayshi hurry to assist. But, blinded by the immensity of Fernando's bulk and laboured breathing, I cannot see Milad, Jamal and Rabraba. He—Fernando—now says to me that he came a little late to the half of the Moringa tree trunk with its undeviating inner red line. He had first to put his broad-brimmed hat and high-topped hat on the tortoise's back for fear it may be covered by dust produced by the fall of the half of the Moringa tree trunk. That is in spite of Tatiana alerting him they would gently put the half of the Moringa tree trunk on a ground lush with grass and with a climate distinct from that of the Mediterranean. As the half of the Moringa tree trunk settles on the grass, I feel excruciating pain in my hand, my Berberian grandfather, whose facial features I do not discern but feel, shoots me a glance I understand to say I should not cry or moan from pain. So I now make great effort to ensure, notwithstanding the severity of the pain, I shall not show that signs. I surmise, from a tender move of Tatiana's hands, that she—just like my Berberian grandfather—has become aware of my unspoken suffering from cutting pain that is being emitted—to the astonishment of each of Rabraba and Tarzan—from a little wound in the middle finger of my left hand. The manner with which Tatiana's blessed hands then softly embrace my left hand—something which she has learned from her love-informed traditions and from rearing pigeons—little by little eases the pain until it is extinguished, particularly when she, while temporarily closing her eyes and reciting unfathomable words that seem to be a prayer. At the same time she is saying to Fernando, al-Dungul, Pele<sup>17</sup> and Jason Fleming that the taste of my blood is similar to the taste of Guevara's blood, as she licks, with tip of her tongue, the wound at the tip of my left hand middle finger. Milad then comments that he was convinced the Devil is residing in my right hand—that hand with the hole which appeared to him as a star. Meryl Streep<sup>18</sup> was running beside me after snatching Katherine Hepburn's winter coat from Akira Kurosawa's<sup>19</sup> scowling face and took it to cover the rear of the Gatling gun which my turban soaked

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<sup>16</sup> **Anthony Quinn** was a Mexican-American actor, painter and writer.

<sup>17</sup> **Pele** was a legendary Brazilian and international football player during the 1960s and 1970s. He was also known as **The Black Pearl**.

<sup>18</sup> **Meryl Streep** is an outstanding American actress.

<sup>19</sup> **Akira Kurosawa** was an illustrious Japanese and international filmmaker.

with the waters of the Ulanga River fails to cover, before Meryl initiates her attempt to run after me. I run beside Viviane Leigh<sup>20</sup> and Christina, who wore a medium length dress studded with smiles, one of which belongs to Denzel Washington,<sup>21</sup> in an effort to catch up with the Commer truck—into the metal box of which the faded-khaki attired policemen had thrown William—the squeak of its metal box assaulting Shahinda’s giraffe’s molar teeth with brutal pain. A student of mine, carrying an atlas, draws my attention to a vertical wound in William’s forehead, and to a white cap that has fallen from Uncle al-Mitairif’s head. But running with the utmost power isn’t easy for the four of us as our way is then blocked by the carnival of the beautiful, laughing, tipsy and barefooted Melbourne Cup women with flowing dresses and hats inspired by a variety of roses. As for the rear of the Commer truck, it has been totally hidden by the crowd of my workmates in the office at Star Ltd. in Spring Street, where we now gather to watch the manager of the National Gallery of Victoria burn Aboriginal herbs at the foot of a statue of Charles Gordon Pasha which is promptly surrounded by a group composed of black and white men stained with white ochre playing didgeridoos while my friend Jose Rojas, the player of the maracas and zambonas,<sup>22</sup> with whom I sit in a Mexican restaurant in the Queen Victoria Market, drags me by my hand to draw my attention to Ibrahim whose face oozes sweat as he has now stopped dancing the Kambala<sup>23</sup> to wipe the blood that was surging out of the William’s forehead wound, which he explained to me wasn’t due to William’s forehead clashing with the edge of the metal box of the Commer truck, as I may think, but from its colliding with the edge of the rim of an *aragi*-brewing pot that belongs to Regina who lived in Hammamat al-Qubba,<sup>24</sup> that pot which she has devoted—following a suggestion from Ibrahim and Nyal—to distilling the *aragi* of guava and not that of dates, or oranges, or grapefruit. My face then oozes sweat with shame at my failure to find the Commer truck that was taking William, and Cabo, my colleague in the Geography Department in Omdurman Higher Secondary School and in the Progressive Association of Teachers, to interrogate with them, or rather torture them, on the cement roof of the Sudanese Armed Forces’ building.

However, Meryl Streep has mitigated this feeling by saying that she, Christina and Jane

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<sup>20</sup> **Viviane Leigh** was an acclaimed British actress between the 1930s and 1960s.

<sup>21</sup> **Denzel Washington** is a remarkable American actor.

<sup>22</sup> **Maracas and zambonas** are traditional South American musical instruments.

<sup>23</sup> **Kambala** is the most renowned dance in the Nuba Mountains in the Sudanese region of Southern Kurdufan.

<sup>24</sup> **Hammamat al-Qubba** is a suburban area in Cairo, Egypt.

Fonda,<sup>25</sup> along with my colleague from Jet Star Ltd., Belinda Kilner—who says she desires more than just repeatedly dining with me—they were all certain that I am not to blame for the lameness of my right leg which was caused by the crash of a minibus carrying me and my father from Medani to Khartoum to attend the festivities of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. But the security men haven’t chosen the foot of that very same leg to suspend my body upside down by tying it to a roof fan in the *ghost house* which Marshal Horatio Kitchener<sup>26</sup> ordered to be built on the day he laid the foundation stone for the Gordon Memorial College building in 1899. It is this very college which I’m now hearing the hubbub of its recently graduated students who are eager to find job opportunities via the Public Service Selection Committee. Amongst those graduates was Nuha who nestles with me in a dim corner of the University’s Geography Department where she feverishly kisses me in agitation, while asking me, as I hold the head of the zipper of her jeans, to shave her pubic hair with my Brut shaving paste, and to leave a little of the paste at the opening of her vulva to allow my penis to enter smoothly into her; yet I am continuing to say to Octavio Paz<sup>27</sup> that the least cruel of the diverse instruments of torture which had crushingly been working on my body are the whips and thick black water hoses. My grandfather, Muhammad Sharif is meanwhile trying to build a wooden boat by the west bank of the Blue Nile under the sycamore in al-Shukkaba.<sup>28</sup> But my aunt Mariam, who with a body of a child and a face of a woman has been swimming nearby, jests with him that his imitation of his cousin Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi’s style of building boats is not precise. As bullets from the Gatling gun strafed one side of the boat, my mother rebukes her for saying that, while she wipes, with the edge of her blue mantle, the shards of wood that have stuck to my grandfather Muhammad Sharif’s beard. At the same time, I am trying, with my turban that was soaked with the Ulanga River’s waters, to patch the side of my

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<sup>25</sup> **Jane Fonda** is an American actress, who was an anti-war activist against the American-Vietnamese war, during the 1970s.

<sup>26</sup> **Horatio Kitchener** was an English Field Marshal, also known as 1<sup>st</sup> Earl, and Lord, Horatio Herbert Kitchener. He commanded a huge armed British campaign to avenge the killing of Charles Gordon Pasha, destroy the Mahdist State and establish a sole British rule, which has nevertheless come to be known as the Anglo-Egyptian, or Condominium, rule in Sudan. He did achieve that in 1898.

<sup>27</sup> **Octavio Paz** was a renowned Mexican poet, writer and diplomat.

<sup>28</sup> **Al-Shukkaba** is a village located on the west bank of the Blue Nile, in central Sudan, to which a few of al-Mahdi’s relatives and proponents (the Ansar) retreated after the collapse of Khartoum. Although the whole country was now under the control of the British forces, Horatio Kitchener insisted on uprooting any source that might, in future, help the resurgence of the Mahdist Movement. Therefore, he sent a battalion to al-Shukkaba where the last British victorious battle took place. During the campaign, most of the rest of al-Mahdi’s followers were killed off, including his cousin, Muhammad Sharif, and his two sons, Bushra and al-Fadil. The author of this novella was born in this al-Shukkaba.

grandfather Muhammad Sharif's boat as it is being assaulted by the bullets that are continually raining from Humphrey Bogart's barge. One of which ran a hole through the palm of my right hand. My mother, meanwhile, is ordering my aunt Mariam—who is still watching with the part of her face un-soaked with water, al-Dungul and al-Mitairif while they are eating *shaworma*<sup>29</sup>—to come out of the water before being bitten by chalazion fish.

The sudden breaking of the bus awakens you. Your body is shoved towards the seat facing yours. The elderly woman, with her winter coat, wide hat and grandfather's memories, has already vacated it. You, by pressing, at the right moment, both of the palms of your hands against its edge, succeed in avoiding bumping your face into the backrest. Yet the transparent plastic bag, with its three transparent but tough plastic boxes of *mish*, falafel and pickles, could not be prevented from falling to the floor of the bus. The bus driver apologises profusely to you, the few remaining passengers, while hurling contempt at the driver of the car whose careless driving a car whose careless driver has almost caused his car to crash into the bus.

The fall of the shopping bag has caused the lids of the food containers to become dislodged and their contents pour into the bag, mix with each other, and infuse the smell of their pungent flavours and spices through the bus.

Hajir had already shared with Cabo and you, the *mish*, falafel, pickles and *fasikh* that Milad had brought for her from his parents' home. You said to yourself that nothing is more appropriate than this authentic Coptic homemade creation for dissolving the rust of our last formal meeting! You then rewarded what remained for you of the evening by spraying the courtyard of your home, henna and jasmine trees not neglected, with generous gifts of water. Alone, as you have lately been inclined, you then sat, sipping cups of *aragi*, leisurely snacking on pickles while delaying relishing the *mish*, falafel and *fasikh*—that you shall supplement with boiled eggs spiced with ground black pepper—until dinnertime.

No time was more appropriate than that moment for reviewing the draft of your letter of resignation from political organisational activism. You, delicately and sadly, contemplated this statement: “*Not only do such political practices, which are mostly dry*

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<sup>29</sup> **Shaworma** is another Turkish name for Kebab (widely known by this name in Egypt and Sudan).

*and repetitive, exhaust my authentic, inner identity—the difference, rather than sameness, of which my common, external identity lacks—but they have, furthermore, grown into a danger that threatens this very authentic, inner identity with depletion, and my common, external identity with curdling. The effect, in both cases, is barrenness and rot!"*

At that moment, you had been pricked by an inner shiver resulting from the probability that such an articulation would be interpreted as reeking with haughtiness.

- I can no more bear supplicating history. For the one who begs the past, particularly the past of someone else, shall reap nothing but a yawning day and a null and void tomorrow. No longer do I have the energy to bear yesterday's sourness.

That was your unanticipated answer to the casual question, which was at the same time not devoid of some portion of truthfulness and intimacy, that Milad yearningly directed at you when he saw you, with his inner, third eye, sitting, alone and surly, in a desolate corner of the rearmost passage in the dreary garden of the Union of Secondary School Teachers in Khartoum:

- May Allah will the best for you. What's up, mate?

Without raising your semi-tearful eyes to him, you gave him a more than shallow reply, despite you did not at the time share with him any deeper bond than a common camaraderie that goes with belonging to the same political organisation and trade union activities. You primarily said that because you were, and still is, bearing a special hidden rose for his non-replicable and uncommon inner features. As to himself, he has shown only a formal affection. Moreover, his impression—though not insistent—that you were not gifted with a sense of humour did not help in the otherwise probable metamorphosis of that formal affection into a bond that is characterised by intimate dimensions. Still, his friendliness was not lacking a curiosity—though not insistent—that is keen to perceive your inner face.

The motive for such a curiosity had not only been associated with your rather reticent character—that your father asserts to be a legacy from your Berberian grandfather—but it as well had a lot to do with his admiration for your graceful and precise style in conversation, in discussion, or in summing up the themes, or conclusions, of a meeting,

when you are responsible for chairing it. He was of the view that the sensibility and sensitivity, from which such a style originates, are not only different, but they are also uncommon.

- I—from the position suggested by my difference—can offer contributions that many cannot.

As to this last statement, which sprung from you—as if you were addressing another person—without looking at him too, had enabled him to complete his intuition about the source of your predicament.

Then he put his brim-full-with-solidarity palms over your shoulders, saying, while directing towards your face a caring look:

- Let's, if you do not mind, leave this dismal place and make something contrasting of this evening, which fortunately is still not yet late.

With a thrill of a child, he perceived the clumsy rising of body—which was caused by an inner weariness rather than reluctance—as a response to his proposal; then he said with cheerful tone:

- Luckily, I have also availed myself today two bottles of Vodka, from the Bulgarian Embassy. I will be happy, indeed honoured, to chat with you over one, or even over both of them need it be, at your home or mine, all the same.

You bought, from a restaurant he proposed, a roasted chicken, falafel and pickles, and then left together, in his Niva car, to your place.

That evening was an evening for revelations, free associations, inner, unreserved, and an unapprehensive mutual healing between the two of you. It was an evening in which a friendship was founded between you and him. However, both of you were puzzled by the circumstances that led to the delaying in the initiation, flourishing and consolidation of such a relationship, notwithstanding how close at hand the elements needed for this were.

It was an evening for reciting your resignation script to him. He even, from the first sentence, refrained from taking a drink or snack, fearing any interruption would interfere with his communion with it. He even closed his eyes to listen. And when you finished reciting, he remained silent for a little while. Then, in an expression of fully concentrated cheer he extended the palm of his right hand, shook your right hand, and said:

- The least I can—just right now—say is this: This is a perceptive, eloquent and unusual testimony that goes against emotional and intellectual cloning that is unfortunately widespread in our political organisational reality. If you present it to the Organisation, you shall—no doubt—be responded to with mostly shallow criticism; some will probably heap blame on you, others will possibly demonise you, once the resignation is accepted. But, if I was to be in the place of those who manage our affairs in the Organisation, I would then so publish your statement publicly in order for it to become an occasion for dialogues, indeed confrontations that we have been evading for too long. And if I was in the position of those who make our strategies in the Organisation, I would suggest teaching this testimony to the new members, alongside the materials used for intellectual and cultural and political preparation. I do agree with you that there is a need for a radical revision—which would motivate cadres to cling on—and guarantee them—the principle of free, critical thinking. Present it to the Organisation. Do not hesitate. I am with you, whether you move “outside” or remain “within”. But fortunately I am certain that you shall—in either case—remain far more within than lots of others “who are presumed to be within”.

But you didn't present that resignation. You, instead, postponed presenting it because you feared that this radical landmark of yours would be interpreted as being prompted by a fear of the consequences of the confrontation with the military junta who—less than two days after that session with Milad—pounced upon the seat of power in Khartoum.

The word ‘Footy’ attracts you towards a short conversation between a commuter about to get off the bus and its driver:

- Did you watch the Footy match between St Kilda and Hawthorn?
- Ooooh, no, unfortunately. I was—damn it!—working at that time.
- The Hawthorn guys were heroic. But had no luck.
- Really? Who do you reckon will win the AFL final?
- Geelong, mostly, if Collingwood doesn't beat Essendon, which is unlikely. Our Victorian teams weren't—altogether—in a good form this year.

The driver senses, by means of a mechanical glance at your face through the mirror, your interest in his short exchange with the commuter who had just left the bus. So he addresses to you, who aren't then sitting far behind him, a question:

- Do you like Footy?
- I do not bear any negative feelings towards it. But football—I mean soccer—takes first place for me.
- Maybe that has something to do with your background.
- That's true. My background is loaded with soccer.
- I notice it has been developing here lately. I'm sure that will please your community.
- That's true; and I hope this may make a difference for us.

A new passenger climbs onto the bus. He requests a top-up of his ticket. This distracts the driver momentarily; but he swiftly returns to you:

- How do you make a living?
- I work in Jet Star Ltd.

- I dreamt of flying, of studying aviation. But I ended up studying a modest course in carpentry. And now—as you can see—I am working as a bus driver!
- My dream wasn't far from that. I wanted to study film direction, but I studied agriculture. I then worked, in my country of origin, as a geography teacher. Now I am working in the Human Resources' Department of a company specialising in air transportation!
- Do you have any regrets, then?
- To some extent, yes.
- Sometimes our families deal with us unfairly.
- And other times institutions, with the authority of the family, or presumably more than that, do treat us unjustly.

Your mobile phone rings. Shahinda, with a smiling voice, imitating a radio announcement, is on the other end: “And so, Milad here suggests you buy, on your way home, a bottle of Vodka, for what remains of the vodka at home shall not be sufficient for this evening’s gathering. This is Shahinda broadcasting from your prosperous home: aka the escapee towards the front!” You, laughingly and quietly, answer her that you shall bring, with you, a bottle of Tequila.

The smile that your laughing reply to her has left on your face, and which you have endeavoured to hide from the driver’s mirror, does not fade away but rather intensifies in brightness, particularly as you imagine the deliciously humorous look on her face as she spoke to you. Your memory ventures to recollect some features of an active Friday that began with the weather, which was very rainy, then stormy, then colder. The three of you, Milad, Shahinda and you, tried to warm yourselves with a few cups of wine; then Vodka, jokes, guffaws, and a dinner which was consisted of a fish cooked packed in spices in an Indian restaurant. And so that Friday concluded mostly marked-with-conflicting-and-varying-opinions on the topic of public duty. At some boiling point in that contest, bearing in mind particular turning points of the voluminously discussed

case of Hajir who is now seven years returned to Sudan, you addressed Shahinda, saying: “The two of you represent two radical and contrasting cases that have eventually ended in basically one result: Hajir has escaped towards the back while you have escaped towards the front.”

From that evening on, Milad had developed the habit, whenever he wished to humour Shahinda, of addressing her as “the escapee towards the front”. The “in joke” bound your triangle, recurring amongst the three of you with humour, ease and intimacy, without ever causing her any embarrassment or annoyance.

But the emergence of a certain reflection, both serious and sorrowful, begins to force that smile into retreat and to fade, particularly as you have decided today to tell her: “I should have then also stamped both myself and Milad with the label ‘escaping towards the front.’ For neither the recurring frustrations, nor the blows with which the genuine endeavours of Milad were rewarded; nor my misgivings in relation to my former political-trade-unionist-social-and-intellectual engagements, (many of the flaws of which I now wish to avoid replicating), not even our apprehensions that our close attachment to our community would render our personal lives vulnerable to no small number of malicious eyes, ears and tongues; none nor all of these are enough to justify the resistance, shared by both of us, to making the relationship between us and that community thrive. Even you, Shahinda, some softness could have trickled into your stance had you touched a bridge in us.”

The driver cuts your far-flung reflections short:

- Have you ever watched a live footy game—I mean not on the TV but directly?

You good-naturedly answer:

- Not at all, but I have watched a game of cricket.
- Perhaps you should try it. There is nothing more thrilling than directly watching a live footy game.

- I will be doing that very soon. I will begin with watching my cousin—who recently joined the Hawthorn Football Club squad—when he trains with that side.
- Really? Your cousin plays for the Hawks? Tremendous! I wish him a brilliant career.
- Thank you.

The bus halts at a stop. The driver moves from his seat to help an elderly man lift down a shopping basket full of groceries.

Should you have—with the same surge of joy that had poured into you at that very moment, bringing a glint of tears to your eyes—added to your last words on your mobile conversation with Shahinda that al-Dungul has promised you, in your second meeting with him, to accompany the three of you to the imminent training session? Had you added it, though, would she have been able to receive the news with quite the same unalloyed gladness she showed when she received the news of al-Dungul’s readiness to settle all of his problems with all of the parties?

You examine, through the bus’s window, features of the street along which the bus is moving. Soon you realise that you have missed alerting the driver to halt at your stop. You gently tell the driver. He thus responds:

- Ooooh, do you wish me to drop you at the next stop, or would you prefer to go with me to the last stop, then we can come back to your stop? Anyway, there are now only four stops before the last stop, and I don’t know why I thought you live. Perhaps that is because you look—to me—like another customer who usually takes this bus from there.
- I think it’s better for me to get off at the next stop. I will walk a little till I get to my stop which I do not think is that far away. Oh, no, I do not live up there. I have never lived before, near or at, a last stop, and I do not think I will do so. I have enjoyed chatting with you. Thank you very much. I wish you a good night.

And as you stride down the street, in the opposite direction to the bus, your eyes search for a shop whereby you can buy a bottle of Tequila, just as you also sweetly remember al-Dungul's promise to share with you his four bottles of date *aragi* which Regina, who happened to come with him on the same flight from Cairo to Melbourne, will make especially for the two of you. Al-Dungul also promised you he will prepare, by himself, cooked *kawari'* soup for dinner. You think of phoning him today, or tomorrow, to suggest he makes a larger amount of the *kawari'* soup because you would like to take some of it as a gift—for which he will be delighted—to a friend the name of whom you will not mention: Shahinda, whom your and Milad's babblings about *aragi* and *kawari'* soup have long made her yearn to embrace their flavours and tastes.

Your spirit will be revived, on that day, by his narratives. You will not omit to let him know that you are in accord with his view on the structural exploitation intrinsic to the rise of the West and its various forms of domination—many of which are so insidious as to be invisible—this exploitation operates, not only where it was most devastating in the former colonies—assuming “former” actually applies—but at its centre as well. You will also hope that he, together with William, will respond positively to your suggestion to reconsider Milad's proposal to establish a football team for young Africans, an idea that you will do your best to convince yourself, Milad and Shahinda to be part of. At the same time, you must keep an eye out for an opportunity to slip in, from time to time at least, your opposition to some of his generalisations and judgements, an opposition you have long held back from him. In the case of the governing West—and you will note that the non-governing West is a minuscule slice—such generalisations and judgements of his, may—you will suggest—alienate him from the undeniable rainbow challenge and change we must become a part of, including challenging and changing ourselves. Importantly, what you are really keen to disclose is that you shall proudly tell him, on this imminent day, the full tale of your Berberian grandfather, from the day of his birth, on which the Nile broke its banks in flood, to the moment of his entering, at the head of a military division of the *Ansar*, the Governor-General's Palace, General Charles Gordon Pasha's Palace, in Khartoum.

## **Part 2**

### **An Exegesis:**

#### **Displace or Be Displaced: Narratives of Multiple Exile in the Sudanese Communities in Australia**

## **Displace or Be Displaced**

*Narratives of Multiple Exile in the Sudanese Communities in Australia*

A PhD exegesis accompanying the novella:

*The Fallouts of the Pains of the Player with Golden Feet and Head*

Adil al-Qassas

[Examiners: To encourage freedom of interpretation it is suggested the novella be read first, after reading the thesis abstract contained in this volume]

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

College of Arts

Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

2015

## **Thesis Abstract**

This thesis consists of two parts. Both parts navigate the experience of displacement, in both realist and metaphorical modes, of a number of Sudanese expatriates to Australia. The first part, a fictional account in the form of a novella, employs different points of view to explore a range of diasporic encounters undergone by diverse Sudanese migrants and refugees prior to and during resettlement in Australia. Taking the events of the author's life as its focus, the second part delves into narratives of personal, inner displacement that have deep roots in the history of Sudan and the question of a common national identity.

The exegesis also examines the dynamics of his dualistic relationship with the Sudanese communities in Australia while sharing many of the same challenges and crises. His perspective, which can be understood in different ways as being partly inside and partly outside in relation to those communities and the wider Australian community, provides a position from which to view a series of Otherings and exclusions that challenge and displace identity while also contributing to the 'forming' of it.

The novella, centred on a café in an inner suburb of Melbourne, portrays different responses, narrated in the protagonists own voices, to a conflict that erupts from a simple remark to which a renowned retired Sudanese football (soccer) player takes offence. Their responses, revealed to the narrator in private, allow the reader to listen to the diversity of personal histories and views that are able to exist and collide within larger national and postcolonial histories, the signs of which act in unexpected ways.

“I, Adil al-Qassas, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ‘Displace or Be Displaced: Narratives of Multiple Exile in the Sudanese Communities in Australia’ is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work”.

Signature

Date: 4 September 2015

*I'm one of you. A wanderer,  
singing in one tongue, praying in another*

Muhammad Abd al-Hai, Sudanese poet (1944–1989)

## **Dedication**

To the memory of my father, a poor farmer, whose wealthy heart and hands believed in land.

To my mother, an illiterate woman, who believes in educational advancement, and who spared no effort to enable us, her children, to get the maximum from it.

To my elder brother, Sayyid, who saved no strength to make decisive change in our family's past impoverished reality.

To Mohamed Mahmoud and Abd Allah Bola, Sudanese scholars and friends, whose ongoing support and trust in my creative and intellectual capacity, has been a great source of aspiration and inspiration.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would not have reached this stage of educational advancement without the crucial encouragement and support of my previous teacher and supervisor, Dr Russell Wright: Firstly, for his acknowledgement of my creative, cultural and journalistic contributions—within a cultural and linguistic context other than English—and his support for my application for a Victoria University Postgraduate Research Scholarship to carry out a Masters of Social Sciences. Secondly, I thank Dr Wright for becoming my first principal supervisor for the Masters. Thirdly, I thank Dr Wright for nominating Dr Leslie Terry to replace him in supervising me when he decided (for personal and health reasons) to quit his formal position at the University. Fourthly, for he accepted to be my co-supervisor when Dr Terry became the principal supervisor. Fifthly, for the support he and his wife, Dr Regina Quiazon, provided to me and my little family throughout a significant stage of my postgraduate study journey.

I would also not inhabit this phase of scholastic progression—which had significantly been expressed in the conversion of my thesis, in the initial stage, from a Masters to a PhD—without the vital support of my former principal supervisor Dr Leslie Terry. Before and after that, Dr Terry had also been of tremendous and complex assistance. Professionally, he helped me navigate a range of methodological possibilities through which my academic endeavour could be explored. He opened my mind to a wide range of resources which have been of invaluable academic and intellectual benefit. He also strengthened my relationship with an outstanding scholar and academic, Dr Mark Stevenson, who would become my co-supervisor, and later on my principal supervisor, after Dr Terry took up a position at another university. Creatively, as a novelist, Dr Terry stimulated my creative writing skills and emboldened me to deploy them in my academic project. Personally, he, his wife, Annabel Wilson, and other members of his family, including his daughter and her boyfriend, provided me and my little family with generous support.

My thesis would have lacked key insights and defining dimensions without the genuine enthusiasm to the project, the benevolent systematic professional and priceless discussions and the enriching suggestions of readings from Dr Stevenson. It is worthy to note that when Dr Stevenson welcomed supervising me, I had been going through a stressful time with respect to my study as well as family issues in Australia and overseas. His enthusiasm and support has played crucial multidimensional role that has helped me overcoming such a difficult period. Our discussions have not only been a motivating platform for developing my thesis but they have also been playing a uniquely informative and stimulating cultural, and even therapeutic, role, beyond the thesis. In addition to the professional and culturally sensitive editing of the thesis, Dr Stevenson has also bestowed upon me and my little family sincere and open-handed social and cultural backing. I am, therefore, so indebted to him.

There have as well been supportive contributions that have been of central help to my project from a wide range of friends inside and outside Australia.

Of these friends, who are overseas, there is Dr Mohamed Mahmoud, who works in the area of the critique of religion, with special reference to Islam, a former associate professor of religion at Tufts University in the USA and founder and director of the UK-based Centre for Critical Studies of Religion. Dr Mahmoud has provided me with ongoing support throughout most of my diaspora, including helping me gain a Victoria University Postgraduate Research Scholarship award that enabled me to undertake this academic project. He also advised me on and offered practical assistance with transliteration associated with my thesis.

There is Dr Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, a prominent Sudanese writer, a leading scholar in areas of weighty pertinence to ‘Sudanese identity’, an emeritus professor at the Department of History at the University of Missouri in the USA. Dr Ibrahim has provided me with historical and contemporary resources, in addition to insightful discussion and suggestions, all of whom have been of great significance to my project.

There is Ibrahim Jaffer, a Sudanese poet, short story and novel writer, critic, professional translator and a former lecturer of philosophy at the University of Khartoum. Jaffer, who currently lives and works in the UK, was the translator of my Novella from Arabic to English. There is Adil Osman, a Sudanese professional translator in the UK, and a member of the Democratic Forum of the Sudanese Society

for Research in Arts and the Humanities. Mr Osman helped me with searching for and locating significant Arabic references. He also assisted me with the translation of a personal reflection on my creative/cultural relationship/tension with the Arabic/English languages which originally written in Arabic for the Democratic Forum of the Sudanese Society for Research in Arts and the Humanities. There is Hafiz Kheir, a Sudanese poet and broadcast journalist, who now lives and works in Washington D.C., who helped with translating an excerpt of an interview originally conducted with me in Arabic. There is Muhammad Khalaf Allah Sulaiman, a Sudanese short story writer and novelist who presently lives in Sudan, who sought out a number of works in Arabic I needed. There is Mustafa Adam, a professional translator, who currently works and lives in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, who translated to English a pivotal Sudanese poem, from which I borrowed a verse to serve as a prefix to the Exegesis. There is Dr Aidan Moore, a former colleague in the Postgraduate Work Station in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology of Victoria University. Dr Moore, now in Ireland, has spared no effort in his encouragement of my project including correction for the Novella. Appreciation also to Dr Ali Hapsah, a former colleague in the Postgraduate Work Station in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology of Victoria University, now returned to Indonesia, for his technical assistance. Similarly, my thankfulness to Rukn al-Din Yonis, an Iraqi poet and friend, who provided me with important information about two Iraqi short story writers.

Phillip Moore, a former manager of Concurrent Assistance and the Study Lab at Victoria University, not only offered me and my family English Language support, but also a great deal of culturally and socially sensitive backing, to which his wife Cathy Thomas also contributed. In addition to his close following up with me on the progress of my thesis, and the initial editing of two early chapters of the Exegesis as well as corrections and suggestions for the Novella, Phillip recently provided me with some critical insights and suggestions some of which convinced me to make a significant change to one of the Novella's ideas. There is also Bruno Lettieri, a former teacher at the department of Professional Writing and Editing TAFE as well as a teacher in the Study Lab of Victoria University. Mr Lettieri has also been closely following up with me the development of my academic project; and he has been a continuing source of professional, cultural and socially sensitive and multifaceted support for me and my family.

There is my former TAFE teacher at Victoria University, Anne Attard, and her husband, Maurice Fowler, who have provided me and my family with multidimensional constant support from that learning stage to the current learning. There is Jose Ramos, my former teacher of Research during my undergraduate study at Victoria University. Jose Ramos, and his wife, De Chantal Hillis, have been sympathetic and supportive for me and my family. There is Abd al-Raman Hassan, an old Eritrean-Sudanese friend whose rich social and cultural experience, within the Eritrean and Sudanese communities, and beyond them, in Australia, as well as his reflections and insights on issues that later became pertinent to some aspects of my thesis, have inspired a defining element of it.

I am grateful to the Victoria University Graduate Research Centre, in particular Dr Lesley Birch, Senior Coordinator of Admissions and Scholarships, and Grace Schirripa, college support officer, for their ongoing support and understanding throughout all phases of my postgraduate study.

My gratitude also to Mahjub Dirar, Yosif Diri', Lyn Hannah, Zoe Krupka, Marg Lesser, Ahmad Sayyid, Tedros Girmai Tasfo, Abd al-Aziz Marir and Abd al-Rahim Jimi', Felicity Reynolds, Tammy Barker, Maree Jones, Amy Sinclair, Osman Hamid, Muhammad Khalaf Allah Abd Allah, Ahmad Adam and Darir Muhammad for encouraging me to arrive at the end of this journey. I am also appreciative of my colleagues in the Postgraduate Work Station in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology of Victoria University, for their support.

Lastly, but not least, I am so grateful to Limya Eisa, my wife, and my two children, Safiya and Wereefa. Limya for her continuing patience, understanding and the diverse support she has been bestowing upon me through all the stages of study at Victoria University; and Safiya and Wereefa for their pure and genuine love which has been emotionally supportive and also inspiring.

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## **Rim 1**

(1)

Pursuing my education in Australia, which was disrupted in my country of origin, Sudan, has always been one of my precious dreams. I have been seeking to engage in a genre of academic study that broadly belongs to the humanities and social sciences. Given the fact that I am a published short story writer and a former journalist, I looked forward to build on these skills. When I became increasingly aware of the actuality that narrative is a recognised research tool in the fields of humanities and social sciences, I sought to employ this method in my own research.

Undertaking postgraduate studies in the social sciences, under the supervision of a thoughtful scholar and creative writer, was a great opportunity for me to realise my narrative yearning. Yet, as things turned out, this would be far less straightforward than I initially anticipated. My postgraduate research project endeavours to give details of ‘unfolding identities within the Sudanese communities in Australia’ through ‘navigation into the diasporic experience’ of a number of Sudanese expatriates to Australia. I believe that the general nature of such a topic recommends revelation through narrative. I also have a faith in the idea that the interminable journey that leads to the ‘constitution’ of identity, any identity, is characterised by narrative. Identity is formed, in my view, in the course of narrative. With this understanding, I look at the diasporic experience (of anybody, of any group, in general) as a sequence of life-narratives.

Hence, the first set of methodological options proposed to carry out the study entailed and valued the narrative component. A ‘fictocritical’ framework, utilising an interdisciplinary approach, was suggested. This interdisciplinary approach should have been composed of ethnographic and narrative research strategies, such as in-depth interviews, social interaction, inter-subjective dialogue, participant observation, field notes, storytelling or life-narratives. These strategies were believed to be capable of

generating or forming six case studies. Yet the ‘cases’ were supposed to be ‘separated’ from the ‘studies’. To be precise, the six cases were proposed to be presented in narrative form, to become namely six short stories, while the studies would be explicated in one study, an exegesis.

However, a fundamental modification has befallen this approach. The employment of the ‘fictocritical’ framework as well as the application of the interdisciplinary research approach and strategies has been replaced with ‘pure’ imaginative work. That is to say, I decided, as a researcher who has a background of writing short stories, to employ my ‘own’ imagination in order to create a novella which would replace the case studies. The novella is composed of ten chapters. Each chapter encompasses a voice, a life-narrative approaching an autobiography of an imagined immigrant or refugee, who descends from one or another of a number of Sudanese backgrounds; whilst the idea of, or the need to, producing a theoretical exegesis remains without alteration, retaining much the same shape and covering much the same content.

Yet what were the reasons necessitating such a drastic amendment?

Even before resorting to this radical change in my research framework, I was convinced that the interviewing—though ‘in-depth’—would not prove to be very successful in capturing the ‘whole’ story. I believed that many interviewees or storytellers would self-censor their accounts in a way that would make them withhold significant details of their lives. These, I believe, would not be incidental minutiae, but crucial features of their identities.

These concerns sprung not from my lack of interviewing skills, but rather from my understanding of how people from these communities deal with culturally and socially sensitive issues. For instance, for some subdivisions of the Islamic Sudanese communities living in Australia, who hold conventional, predominant conservative outlooks, there are some very sensitive topics that are very rarely talked about open-heartedly, open-mindedly or truthfully. Disclosing unconventional experiences and/or free-thinking views are customarily avoided. Such subjects include sex and sexuality, drinking alcohol, and criticising overriding traditional Islamic perceptions. Women, in particular, must be less open about unconventional experiences (specifically those associated with sex and sexuality) and free-thinking interpretations. This is because, as

Khawaja (2007) points out, ‘Self-disclosure is difficult as it is often perceived as risking damage to their family honour.’

In countless cases of Muslim Sudanese women and men, self-concealment, or self-censorship, is commonly adhered to. Many research participants in the community are ‘brief in narrating and d[o] not open up in a way that a phenomenological researcher would have expected, which limited the information obtained’ (Hawamdeh and Raigangar (2014). Consequently, as Lee and Renzetti warn, ‘This, in turn, has obvious detrimental effects on levels of reliability and validity [of the research]’ (Lee and Renzetti 1993, p. 5). On the one hand, self-concealment and self-censorship reveal fear of the perilous or humiliating consequences of investigating a wide range of sensitive topics (Adler and Adler, cited in Lee and Renzetti 1993, pp. 249-150). On the other hand, self-concealment and self-censorship reinforce what Fromm (1949) describes as the ‘market orientation’, the tendency to present one’s self as being perfect (in the eyes of the prevailing attitudes of his/her community). In the end, the two possibilities would probably jeopardise the reliability and validity of the research.

A common example of the evasion of self-revelation within the Sudanese Muslim and non-Muslim communities is the avoidance of seeking professional counselling or psychological assistance. Apparently, self-disclosure is a fundamental requirement for the process of psychological treatment. While allowance must be made for questions of cultural familiarity, avoidance of self-disclosure in this instance relates to the prevention of stigmatisation (Ciftci et al. 2013; Fabrega 1991; Gorman et al. 2003, Khawaja 2007; Lam and Zane 2004; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003).

Furthermore, in some situations, there is also a tendency to produce an invented self in an image or ideation that differs, sometimes slightly and other times considerably, from the real image. This attitude was conceptualised by Riesman et al. (1961) as the ‘other-oriented’ approach, the predisposition to present one’s self as he or she thinks other people would ideally expect him/her to be.

Two undergraduate qualitative research experiences increased my doubts of gaining genuine self-disclosure. The aim of the first project was to explore the common reasons that cause the disruption of systematic education amongst young people from African backgrounds in Melbourne. The second attempt’s focus was to investigate intergenerational conflict within the African Muslim communities in Melbourne.

Conducting interviews was the major method of both projects. Talking about familial relations was a common theme in both projects.

My personal reflective thinking drawn from these experiences (besides other formal and informal experiences) could be summarised in the following points:

- The interviewee becomes cautious and begins to self-censor when told about the ‘official objective’ of the interview.
- This cautiousness and self-censorship are intensified when the interviewee responds to sensitive questions that include issues related to love, sex, religion and hierachal familial relations.
- The degree of openness varies from older people to young males to young females, that is to say, with variables such as age and gender.
- A Muslim male interviewer investigating a Muslim female’s sexual experiences is likely to result unreliable information.
- A Muslim female interviewer investigating a Muslim female’s sexual experience and views is likely to result in a similar outcome.
- Some information and views expressed by my interviewees are at odds either with what they said to me in informal conversational contexts or with what I already knew, and to an extent that made me question the value of the information for the task of thinking through the issues faced by the community.

Gender, sex, sexuality, religious influences, and familial relations are some of the major concerns of this research project. How could I investigate the question of cultural change and identity formation without attempting to explore and examine these subjects?

(2)

Self-disclosure is a key source for self-presentation. In work completed over three decades ago, social psychologist Roy Baumeister and psychologist Debora Hutton (1987) identified two types of self-presentation and their motives: presentation meant to match one’s own self-image; and presentation meant to match audience expectations

and preferences. In my limited professional experience and more abundant informal experience and observation, the second type is the one prevalent among Sudanese communities. In regarding this to be the case, I do not intend to present these communities as entirely ‘untrue selves’; I am merely endeavouring to make clear that I understand the structures and historical processes that engender self-censoring strategies within them. As for any other community, such self-censorship is always necessitated by a particular context. With this in mind, the context that I assumed would make my supposed Sudanese interviewees self-censor themselves would be the professional one I intended to undertake, where the main potential audience (and the social milieu) was to be the Sudanese community. In such an intended context, I anticipated a kind of self-construction that might probably be influenced by what Baumeister and Hutton describe as ‘audience-pleasing self-presentational motivations’ (1987, p. 71).

In my view, one of the major factors associated with the structures and historical processes shaping this orientation lies in part in our collective lack of effective professional roles for intellectual analysis (including professional therapy)—not that I am an enthusiastic exponent of Western forms of professional analysis without critical examination and appropriation. For instance, the therapeutic culture that is known in our communities consists of revelation to close or intimate persons and rarely to professionals and even rarer still, if at all, in public. Related to this non-professional, non-public orientation is a lack of self-questioning, the principal requirement of which is self-disclosure (to the self, or self-confrontation with the self).

I decided, naturally in my own way, to give myself to the public. This I did while quite aware of the fact confirmed by historian James Clifford that ‘The personal does not yield to the general without loss’ (1986, p. 104). It can be said that I have personally tried to set out an unprecedented pattern. I was precisely motivated by an idea with which I challenged myself in terms equivalent to asking ‘If you are so critical of the people of your community(s), why don’t you pioneer by presenting your true self, in contradistinction to the leading communal one?’

Correspondingly, I have ventured to make sense of my own life by recognising it in narrative, as was also suggested by philosopher Charles Taylor in his extensive exploration *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1992, pp. 47-52). I have done this by using a cognitive strategy in a way that is likely associated with the

‘fever model of disclosure’ proposed by psychotherapist William Stiles (1987). Stiles portrays the ‘fever model of disclosure’ with the colloquial utterance: ‘I have to talk to somebody.’ He suggests that with the intensity of a person’s distress, their need to disclose stressful subjective concerns also intensifies, explaining that ‘disclosure’s relation to psychological distress is analogous to a fever’s relation to physical infection: both are a sign of disturbance and part of a restorative process’ (1987, p. 257).

Narrative, even when it is reflexive or inward, is experienced as externalisation.

I believe I am a taciturn, distressed, manifoldly displaced, person. The reader shall grasp some illustrations of my manifold displacement in a number of subsequent chapters of the exegesis. A fever model of disclosure suits my situation for it basically relies on the internal frame of reference, which *is*, to some extent at least, a definition of the self, according to Stiles (1987). In or through this exposure, I not only gain to benefit from the consequent catharsis, but I will also be fundamentally searching for meaning in the experiences and/or elements that contributed significantly to the ‘constitution’ of my identity, including my understanding of the socio-cultural contexts I have passed through (i.e. integration rather than rejection or separation).

Realising the meaning of my experiences requires a cognitive standpoint which has a bearing on the growth of my self-understanding and self-awareness. Here my thinking is in line with sociologist Richard Sennett (1992, pp. 29–30) in identifying ‘self-disclosure [a]s a universal measure of believability and truth.’ Therefore, I had to avoid the common self-understanding and self-awareness that have been hampered, or distorted, by self-censorship.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz criticises a ‘selective’ concept of culture as constituting ‘eclecticism,’ which he construes as ‘self-defeating not because there is only one direction in which it is useful to move, but because there are so many: it is necessary [and presumably healthy] to choose’ (1973, p. 311). In my interpretation, this critical conception of Geertz can also be applied on the sort of self-censorship I am criticising—as a form of ‘self-defeating’ attitude that ‘chooses’ to exclude particular elements of representation of the self while ‘selecting’ to include other elements.

An essential part of our common predicament, inside and outside our country of origin, is that we, to a large extent, are obstinate societies. Obstinacies have been dominating and defining significant facets of our social, cultural and political lives. There is no

tradition of confession. Confession is taken as an index or attestation of weakness which would bring shame to the confessor. In the final chapter, I highlight this characteristic as established in the realm of politics (and beyond it) as illustrative of a major feature of our predicament. Many, especially those whom I will identify later in the exegesis as belonging to the Central North of Sudan (CNS), attribute a range of our central ‘national’ crisis—such as the renowned division between Southern and Northern Sudan—to both the old and new forms of colonialism. This is true only in part, for I believe that if these two forms of colonialism had not been encouraged by domestic dynamics—which colonisers were ready to exploit and develop—they would not have succeeded in furthering, or taking advantage of, our internal crisis.

In the social arena, if we look at the case of the domestic couple’s life, i.e. marriage, we might not be surprised by the widespread ‘parallel lives’ that mark marital relationships. A broad range of husbands and wives do not really know each other. That is to say, such ‘intimate relationships’ do not provide a genuine space for self-disclosure. That is why the pervasive form of marital relationships—there and here—has been ‘the arranged marriage,’ under which ‘parallel lives’ has become widely preferred.

Our Sudanese communities *in* and not—thus far at least—*of* Australia occupy the most subordinated position compared to other non-White and non-European communities. To change this current actuality, we need a real conceptual, or cultural, revolution. Although I am used to being protective of my individuality (and this has sometimes been a source of conflicting emotions), my political history and other collective involvements and yearnings indicate that I am a community development-oriented person. This means I am an empowerment-oriented and transformation-oriented person. Yet, because my community development approach is relatively radical, the ideal means to community empowerment and community transformation in my outlook is the conceptual or cultural revolution (which I understand as a process, not as an event). In/through this process, we primarily need to acknowledge that self-deception has never been unusual for many of us. We need to recognise that the fragmented self (in a meaning that goes beyond clinical connotations) is not unfamiliar to many of us. To put it another way, the unavoidable starting point, I suggest, should be (on individual or communal levels) the confrontation with ourselves, and there is no self-confrontation without self-revelation, self-disclosure, both in the individual and collective case.

(3)

In addition to the problems already outlined, during the complicated process of meeting the requirements and exhaustive demands of the Ethics Application Form, my supervisor and I were becoming increasingly frustrated. He recommended sending a copy of the application to an academic who had been a former member of the Ethics Committee, before reaching the step of lodging the application. Our intention was to consult his experience in order to assist us to improve the prospects of gaining the Ethics Committee's approval.

The academic identified a number of aspects he thought the Ethics Committee would reject. With enormous support from my supervisor, I tried to amend those aspects to become consistent with the Ethics Committee's standards. While undertaking the amendments, I came to feel my work would lose key components if I modified some of the areas that would be problematic in the ethics application process. Furthermore, I felt that the creative dimension of the project would be constrained and 'humiliated' if I allowed myself to make these further concessions.

A thoughtful discussion with my supervisor made it possible to rework the first part of the research project. Initially it had been proposed to have narratives constructed from real case study interviews. Now, however, the narratives would be created through the researcher's imagination, but would be informed and inspired by some facets of the Sudanese diasporic realities, prior to, and after, their relocation in Australia.

(4)

This reliance on the strategies of imagination and inventiveness has come to dominate the theoretical reframing of the first part of the research project, which takes a fictional approach in the form of a novella. My thoughts turned to inventing a situation of conflict or disagreement which would trigger a range of responses. To be exact, this conflict situation would have the following two major characteristics and capabilities:

- This situation has to be influenced in some way by Australian mainstream (i.e. Western) culture.
- The situation has the potential to bring about a range of issues and encounters. These include: intergenerational and gender-based conflicts; controversial or

contradictory outlooks; an array of living tensions; feelings of, and memories from, lost worlds; displacement anecdotes; models of cultural resistance; trials of cultural transformation; and illustrations of discrimination and racism within mainstream Australian society, as well as in the Sudanese communities.

### **The trigger**

In the novella, a sixtyish man whose name is al-Dungul, who, together with his family, has been re-settled in Australia for ten years, is shocked, distraught and enraged when his 17-years-old son decides to enlist in a Melbourne footy team. This decision has particular distressing impact on the father for the reason that he considers such a ‘move’ to be an insult to his long and glorious personal and familial history of playing and supporting football (soccer) in their country of origin. Al-Dungul, who himself was a legendary soccer player with a prominent soccer team in Sudan, had been preparing this son to play soccer in Australia. By achieving this, the son would have carried on the family’s proud sporting tradition.

Full of rage, al-Dungul goes to a Sudanese café in a Melbourne suburb where he meets a group of Sudanese acquaintances who have descended from a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. By going to the café, al-Dungul hopes to find support as he discloses his distressing matter. While the group chat, a misunderstanding occurs between al-Dungul and one of the acquaintances, whose name is William, with whom al-Dungul has a good relationship. The misunderstanding erupts when al-Dungul interprets a phrase uttered by William as ‘accusing’ al-Dungul’s son of being gay. This results in a dispute between al-Dungul and William. Al-Dungul also gets involved in a similar row with the rest of his acquaintances who try to unravel or pacify the problematic argument between the two. This incident ends with al-Dungul losing everybody, and becoming isolated from the Sudanese community.

Later, a number of individuals from the Sudanese community attempt to reconcile al-Dungul and the former acquaintances with whom he quarrelled. The attempts at reconciliation are unsuccessful, mainly because of al-Dungul’s stubborn attitude.

One of these individuals is a seventyish man who doesn’t want to give up on al-Dungul. This man tries, following the failure of his and other acquaintances’ reconciling

endeavours, to recruit an intercessor, a negotiator, who is from a Sudanese background as well, and who seems to be neutral and respected by everybody in the community.

The intercessor initiates his mediation effort by talking to everyone who was a direct participant in the incident. During the course of the negotiation, he also converses with other people, one of whom played a significant role in the incident even though she was not present at the time. The intercessor as well chats, in a casual, intimate and semi-consultative discussion and reviewing, with two other persons, who were not parties of the occurrence, but close friends of him.

The intercessor speaks with eight people of different age, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, and length of residence in Australia. The intercessor, and everyone he converses with, deals with his part in the negotiation's setting as a platform to express their own thoughts and feelings, not only on this problem in particular, but also on a wide range of subjects; and in the process, secrets are revealed, memories come flooding out and views are tossed about.

### **Technique and style**

There are eight chapters; one for each of the people the intercessor speaks with. The negotiated party or the dweller of each chapter is the narrator of the chapter he or she inhabits. The intercessor—who plays the role of a ‘facilitating narrator’—would occupy two chapters: the second and final (tenth) chapter, where he becomes the narrator of the chapters he resides in. The ten chapters would combine to form a novella.

The governing technique of the eight chapters (the voices of the persons the narrator converses with) is the first-person voice. The overriding technique of the two chapters, which are assigned to the intercessor/negotiator/narrator, is the second voice as if he is conducting a conversation with himself, a sort of subjective dialogue, a monologue.

The intercessor/negotiator is the narrator, a facilitator, who allows the reader to know what is going on; but his presence seems to be invisible throughout eight chapters of the ten chapters. This suggests that the narrator's primary concern is not to provide the reader with what he himself is saying to the person with whom he converses, but to engage the reader in what the negotiated party is telling him. The narrator's questions,

comments and descriptions are intentionally omitted by utilising what can metaphorically be described as film editing or montage technique. Other techniques and strategies that are employed across the chapters ‘stream of consciousness’ and ‘free association’.

The ten chapters are connected to one another, not by the conventional descriptive intervention of the narrator, but by the last paragraph or phrase stated by the negotiated person at the end of each chapter. Worded another way, what is said at the end of each chapter refers the reader to the chapter that follows.

The novella’s writing style ranges between the literary, the journalistic and the reportive.

(5)

### **The Exegesis**

The Exegesis has undergone developmental stages comparable not only to those experienced in my conceiving and writing the Novella, but also corresponding to them. The Exegesis has therefore evolved in response to adopting a creative approach in the form of a novella, perhaps most fundamentally through what are a writer’s creative sensitivity and theoretical sensibility and the apprehensiveness these bring, at least for me, to both aspects of the thesis. The reason for this apprehensiveness was my axiomatic antipathy to explain, or even interpret, my creative work. I also have distaste for the imperious outlook that does not allow room for the reader’s role in and capacity for interpretation. On the other hand, I am also aware, after many years of some critics using labels such as mystification, that authors of creative compositions must be permitted to pursue the kinds of complexity that might position them ‘above’ ordinary works; a complexity essential to the creativity of the work. This is the challenge of genuine creative works, which is to raise their audiences, and not to speak down to them. In doing so, creative works must provoke a response from their audience. This was precisely what shaped Abu Tammam’s<sup>1</sup> response to a reader (or, maybe, a listener, or both) who asked him: “Why don’t you say what can be comprehensible [poetry]?”

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Tammam (788-845) was a prominent poet and ancient Arab poems compiler. His poems were distinct for their stylistic and conceptual renovations of Arabic poetry.

To which Abu Tammam but replied: “Why don’t you comprehend what is said?” (cited in Adonis 2005).

Thus, with such creative sensitivity and theoretical sensibility, I have conceived a mode of exegesis that could compliment the Novella in a different way, a way that is characterised by the capability of standing alone—which is an identifying trait of the latter—while it does not disregard the significant affinity with it. That is to say, while the Exegesis is suggested to exist parallel to the Novella, and to correlate with it, this sense of correlation is not proposed to endeavour to explain or interpret the Novella. Rather, this correlationality is suggested to bear the capacity of raising a wide range of elements that could help make better sense of, or interpreting, the Novella, particularly with regard to the academic purpose of the whole thesis, focusing on what has motivated me rather than instructing the reader on how the novella should be interpreted. Beyond the academic purpose, this means that a better sense of the Novella, as well as of the Exegesis, cannot be realised without relying on the elements both make available individually.

On the other hand, I have also aimed to create an exegesis which could enable me to say what the internal structural conditions, or the artistic requirements, of the Novella have not allowed me to say. I wanted to throw light on some aspects of my own displacement, my own diaspora, a number of constituents of which are shared in common, to varying degree, among Sudanese-Australians and their communities, but which in some cases also alienate me from them.

Finally, I have attempted to make the Exegesis a vehicle which reveals my common, shared human predicament, but at the same time traces elements of my own inner identity, the creative writer’s identity, through a certain amount of inventive technique and style. The overall aim of the Exegesis has been to produce an academic *and* personal project which aspires to the fruitfulness, fertility and insight that are attributes of creativity and intellectual endeavour.

## Rim 2

One of my cherished dreams, years before thinking of expatriating to Australia, was to study anthropology. This dream had become even more desirable when the Australian Embassy in Cairo granted me a permanent visa to enter and stay in the country on a humanitarian basis, as an initial step in the process of becoming an Australian citizen. I longed to study anthropology despite the fact that my knowledge about this discipline was limited. I knew that anthropology is “the science of human beings”, and through chance exposure to fashions circulating at the time I knew the names and works of short texts written by or about anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). Aside from this, my understanding of anthropology was that it is the field where social and cultural knowledge can be conveyed through narratives. This means that the anthropologist was a kind of narrator. At this point, I was not even able to distinguish between the anthropologist and the ethnographer.

The idea behind such a dream or choice was to get involved in an academic line of study that would not just enable me to pursue my formal learning, but that would allow me to acquire, and enjoy, a different type of knowledge (other than literature, for I thought that I could gain enjoyment and knowledge of the latter via a lifelong pursuit, as I have been doing). For me, anthropology was the ideal academic discipline in that it would not merely respond to those desires, but that it could be a field through which my narrative skills, as a short story writer, are utilised and enhanced.

The only blockade that stood between me and achieving that dream was the persuasive argument (at that time) of my English class education consultant at the Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) in which I was studying English as a new immigrant whose English was not sufficient for study in Australia. The education consultant—who in fact did not know what anthropology was—assured me that if I studied anthropology, there would be no job for me upon graduation. She instead

advised me to study community welfare work, arguing that this line of study would help me find a job through which I could help my community with settlement-related issues.

It is likely that the education consultant did not recognise how, by diverting me away from my dream of studying anthropology, she contributed to the protraction of my sense of displacement in Australia. While I pursued the field that she recommended, and even went further with it, I did not give up my old yearning to put my narrative skills to use in an academic study should the opportunity emerge. However, I did not know how and when I might be able to achieve this. This explains why my yearning was characterised by ambiguity or vagueness.

That yearning remained ambiguous or vague until the initial stages of my master degree in the social sciences. At some point in the brainstorming between me and my former principal supervisor, Les Terry, about how my project could be approached methodologically, Les identified my equivocal aspiration to produce an academic thesis in an unconventional form. Here the employment of my short story writing skills surfaced.

The idea was to produce between eight and ten short stories that depict a diversity of diasporic representations. This developed into a scheme to become a novella consisting of ten chapters. The ten chapters are linked with each other; but they also demonstrate separate and individual diasporic experiences. Seven out of the ten chapters represent seven different voices, each voice embodied in a chapter to exhibit an individual personal reflection on a particular conflict. This conflict involves, to varying degrees, seven Sudanese individuals, six of whom are regular patrons of a Sudanese café in an inner-city Melbourne suburb. What differentiates the seven chapters is that each chapter is an outcome of a discrete, face-to-face, interview, as a form of investigative endeavour, between a narrator/investigator/reconciler and an individual interviewee who is involved in the conflict. Still whereas the seven chapters depict each party's own reflection on the conflict, the ten chapters—including the above-mentioned seven—narrate and reflect on other issues as well through what appear to be autobiographical accounts.

I wondered why I moved from the idea of producing a number of discrete short stories, in which I had reliable experience, to the venture of the novella which I had not practiced before? Did this reflect an old, wished-for and persistent, craving to write a

novel? This longing is even older and more tenacious than my longing to study in an academic field that might respond to the yearning of my narrative dreams. Finding an opportunity to pursue both passions would no doubt bring pleasure, but not without a certain amount of obsession, if not eeriness, without which a real artistic adventure cannot be undertaken.

Apart from these original dreams, what also persuaded me of not only the advantage and feasibility of this methodological choice, compared with more conventional research methods, was a belief that a more traditional approach would not lead to an accurate or credible outcome.

### Why?

It is, ironically, because of my positionality as an insider researcher. The advantages of being an insider researcher have been widely acknowledged within both the qualitative and quantitative research domains. Most common of these advantages are: proximate relationship and recognised community contacts (Blythe et al. 2012; Bonner and Tolhurst 2002; Griffith 1998; Unluer 2012); easy access to the research subjects (Griffith 1998; Kerstetter 2012; Unluer 2012,; Zinn 1979); the research subjects are likely to feel more at ease, thus prompting higher degree of openness (Rooney 2005; Tierney 1994; Unluer 2012,); and the broad experience and tacit knowledge the researcher brings to his or her research (Griffith 1998; Rooney 2005; Teddlock 2000; Zinn 1979).

These advantages could have greatly benefited my thesis if my research focus had been different. That is to say, my study project might have enjoyed these traits if it explored less sensitive dimensions. These dimensions, which are mostly interlinked with each other, and which are essential contributors to the formation of identity as such, include, as mentioned in the former chapter, issues associated with religion, gender relations and, in particular, sex and sexuality.

I generally belong to a Sudanese-Australian ethnic minority whose worldview has overwhelmingly been shaped by a prevailing conservative version of Islamic-Arabic culture. I say ‘generally belong’ because I do not necessarily believe in and support all of the outlooks and practices that stem from that version of Islamic-Arabic culture. In this community, despite the shift in gender roles that women have gained from being in

Australia, masculinist ideologies pertaining to women still dominate and cripple large number of them in many ways. For instance, a young woman who smokes cigarettes and drinks alcohol (and a minority do) cannot practice these habits publicly. Further, having pre-marital sex can lead to disastrous, and maybe tragic, consequences, which may include murder. This means that a young, unmarried, woman is not allowed to have a boyfriend (though some, nevertheless, do). Similar restrictions are applied to homosexual women and men.

That is to say, women who have gone through these kinds of experiences would not allow an insider researcher such as myself, or even an outsider researcher, to access these experiences. Any sort of deep disclosure associated with such experiences could lead to profound and lasting damage to the reputation not only of her, but her (or his) entire family. Any assurance from the researcher/interviewer to anonymity would not dispel such apprehension.

The recognition of my insider status would, it is true, permit me to have in-depth access to some experiences, but not all of them, and especially not those experiences relating to sex, sexuality and other personal or defiant perspectives and practices that do not conform to traditional or conservative version(s) of Islam.

The bulk of the dilemma I was confronted with, when I thought of undertaking this project employing conventional research methods, was that I was aware of a few cases, in reality, of women who smoke cigarettes, others who drink alcohol, other who are lesbians. I was aware of women and men who are frustrated by the religious restrictions and do not seem to be keen to abide to them. My relationships with almost all of these individuals have been positive, which would allow me to conduct in-depth interviews with them. Yet despite this, they would never let me pry into the range of sensitive experiences listed above.

I wondered what kind of exploration into identity I would be pursuing, if I would not be granted access to such experiences and views? When that methodological predicament met with the ever present desire to make use of my short story-writing skills, the resolution, for some time, was to write a number of separate ‘case studies’ in the form of short stories. However, since my thinking came to be centred on narrative method, my longing to write a novel took shape. At that juncture, the idea of creating a novella, instead of a collection of short stories, came to be my final methodical choice.

This choice has brought along with it a degree of comfort, as well an unavoidable and necessary degree of worry, the worry that is associated with questions such as: How am I going to make it? Will it be something new, something different? Will it be successful?

Most crucially: Would my current grasp of the English language and my style of writing be sufficient to produce a convincing creative work in this language?

To respond to the last question, it is worth referring the reader to a passage<sup>1</sup> which was originally written in Arabic as part of a personal reflection associated with analogous issue/context:

Despite my belief that my English language has improved due to the fact that I have been living in Australia, in general, and as a result of my gradual enrolment in formal education in particular, through which systematic language improvement occurs. But I think that it has just been a horizontal, that is, superficial, linear, formal or reportive, not a vertical, deep and bodily ‘ideal’ or desired improvement. In other words, it is not that sort of improvement which has the capacity of engendering perceptible difference or uniqueness of style of writing. This difference/uniqueness is usually the consequence of profound engagement with a language. It is that engagement that does include fundamental elements, at the top of which, in my own view, the poetic and literary heritage and present creative productions of a language. It is that profound engagement that helps, as many bright cases demonstrate, a style of creative writing which (in my own sense of linguistic taste/inclination) should be characterised with poetic and stylistic distinctiveness. I claim, and some friends and critics do so, that this poetic and stylistic distinctiveness is substantiated in my creative writings in Arabic.

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<sup>1</sup> This extract was translated by a professional translator and friend whose name is Adil Osman. In order to make some concepts clearer, I have made some changes to his translated version. I have also added some discursive ideas and concepts, and omitted some details, for the same purpose.

My own assessment of my proficiency in English (with which some friends and teachers do not agree) has made me feel not to be confident enough about my capability for self-expression in English. This subjective feeling of linguistic inadequacy has burdened me with another distressing feeling that I am unable to create my own literary persona in the English language, unlike my accomplished voice in Arabic. I am even not very optimistic that one day I will have my own creative writing voice and/or persona in English. This situation is a personal cultural crisis and a permanent source of anxiety and tension for me. Certainly this subjective feeling of inadequacy is the main reason for seeking help and practical suggestions from my close friends in regard to translating some texts, phrases or expressions especially those which have complexity and/or poetic resonance from English into Arabic and vice versa. These friends have included Adil Osman, Hafiz Kheir, Ibrahim Jaffar and Mohamed Khalafalla Abdalla.

This lack of confidence in my capacity for self-expression in English, at a decisive stage in the development of my current academic project, caused me to suffer from an ‘academic dilemma’ of a peculiar nature. This occurred as a result of a dramatic methodological change to the first part of my thesis pertaining to a form of narrative. I abandoned or discarded a plan, for this first part, to carry out interviews and questionnaires with diverse members of the Sudanese communities living in Australia (males and females who reside in Melbourne). So I decided to compensate for that by using my imagination. This decision had rational reasons, which I might explain later on in this or another context. Accordingly, my imagination suggested that I write narratives resembling short and independent autobiographies, yet interrelated to one another, using stream of consciousness strategy or technique. This means that I chose to write a body of creative narratives which could be considered among the genre of novella, despite the infusion of some aspects of reportive and journalistic writing. This also means that I need to have my own linguistic and stylistic voice impregnated with poetry and other artistic genres, as a writer of short stories and other types of narratives. This, in

my own judgment, would not be possible by using my horizontal, superficial, linear, formal or reportive capability in English. This kind of personal English writing style would help me achieve the second part of my thesis, that is, the Exegesis, which has to be reviewed and approved by a language editor, as has been the case with my writings in English in the past, at present and mostly in the future.

Put simply, if I had to ‘invent’ the first part, the creative account, depending on my current heritage or capacity for expression in English (which is possible from a theoretical perspective, yet practically demanding and emotionally painful) this would definitely mean that I would demeaning and betraying my style and/or my creative narrative legacy in Arabic.

The only solution for this dilemma came from Les Terry, who is a novelist. He suggested that I write the first part (the Novella) in Arabic, and then I should look for a professional translator who has the capabilities and characteristics that I favour. I had insufficient funds to pay a professional translator at market prices. Thus I had to find an old and close friend who had the same cultural background as I do, and who understood my complex situation including—but not limited to—meagre finances. Ibrahim Jaffar was the translator I chose to undertake this task (Al-Qassas 2014).

## **Chapter One**

### **Writing Identity Features**

I haven't yearned to avoid identifying as a poet, and at any rate, doing that may not be possible. For such a sentimental identity was natural for a person like me who was nurtured within an Arabic-Islamic culture where poetry plays such an important role. Amongst the Afro-Arab Islamic Sudanese communities, in one of which I was born and brought up, many aspects of the social and cultural lives are either belong to the Arabic heritage of poetry, including the Sudanese one, or influenced by it. This heritage contains features such as love, war, intertribal war and plunder, joyful and sorrowful occasions, and popular myths and folktales. Even the overriding, widespread mode of Islam in Sudan, which is known as 'popular Islam' or 'Sufism' (as opposed to 'orthodox' or Salafi Islam) could have not taken this popular or Sufi form, I believe, without the stimulus of the poetic dimension, together with other religious, cultural and artistic constituents.

My father's lineage is attractively poetic. My mother assures that my father descends from an ethnic group that was distinguished by the men being knights and/or poets. For example, my father's great grandmother was a renowned poet. My father himself and his twin brother had been poetizing at particular times in their lives. A third uncle of mine was a singer. Another uncle was a poet as well as a researcher into Sufi poetry in Sudan. My older brother started his mature life with writing poetry. Two cousins of mine were poets. A third cousin was a singer. A fourth cousin was a poetry reciter. I was also known, within our extended family, and the circles I mixed in during my teenage years and my twenties, as a poetry rhetorician and reciter. My sense of belonging to poetry is, therefore, instinctive. If there is something that winds about in my veins, besides blood, it would be poetry. That is why the first creative expressions I undertook, alongside attempts in drawing and calligraphy, were poems.

Though there were another creative genres flowing through the veins as well, captivating and setting free my young imagination, such as listening to radio drama, watching TV drama series, movies, theatrical plays, in conjunction with reading narratives and narrative-like forms. Even still, I was still craving to be a poet. Furthermore, my early attempts at writing narratives seemed to me, by my standards at the time, more impressive. I could, in other words, see them as qualified rivals to—if not better than—my poems of the same period. Notwithstanding, I still longed to become a poet.

Without knowing that at that time, it now seems to me that my accelerating fascination with creative genres other than poetry had been shaking the ground of the inherited poet identity I was endeavouring to build. The first moment, or experiment to be accurate, that freshly revealed to me a possibility of practicing an ambiguous, but poignant and poetic, type of narrative writing was when I transformed the subject of a poem, which had a dramatic or story telling scope, to a piece of narrative model. I actually considered that poem to be one of the best I had ever written, but I was, therewith, feeling that it did not fully express the emotional state of affairs I wanted to convey. Another uncomfortable trait, not only of that particular poem but also of a few comparable poems, was that I wrote them in concurrence with outmoded Arabic form of poetry. In the same way, the other, modern style of the rest of my poems, was—to a lesser degree—causing me to feel discontented as a consequence of the influence left on them by two well-known modern Arabic poets, the Syrian Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998) and the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish (1942–2008).

After the transformation, to my surprise, and pleasure, the narrative form was much more impressive than the original structure. Even the mode and imageries of poeticism spread across it were affectingly distinct from those of the poem. I felt that I was going to be rescued from the clutches of conventionality and sameness, in relation to technique and style, by the capacious mood, not only of narrative, but of free-ranging texts in general.

I learned from that experiment that I could write a poem without actually writing a poem. By this, I mean that if I desired to create an artistic structure (for example, a short story or a novel, or even a film or a painting) that has the spirit of poetry, I could do so by approaching them as if I intended to write a poem. In other words, I realised that I

could infuse my artistic capacity with the sensitivity of poetry, with its endless aptitude to revolutionise the language, to astound us with unique imageries, with striking visionaries and arresting rhythms.

That was the time during which the question of the creative genre became less stressful for me. I realised that I had to uphold myself with the capability of the poet, and then write my text. This is not to say that being in the state of a poet is a mechanical requirement or automated device to be recalled at given times. Being in the state of a poet is, rather, a natural, instinctive, constitutive, indispensable element of the artist that exists throughout all sides of his/her creative activities, if not for the duration of his/her daily life. This view was developed or confirmed to me by the reading of some type of trans-genre texts that employ the spirit or sensitivity of poetry and narrative ability, in consort with other varying techniques, I came across in pages which were mostly devoted to unconventional styles of creative writing. Those pages had their place in two weekly Sudanese local magazines, besides a weekly Egyptian magazine. At this stage, I said to myself: ‘Hey man, you could write like these texts and send them to publicity.’

At that moment, I did not have to write a new text. I was ready with one text or two. I mailed a text—but not without fear and uncertainty—to a literary editor at one of those two Sudanese magazines. The text, entitled ‘Period Zero Fever’ (nd), was based on actual letters I wrote and sent, when I was a year eleven or twelve student, to a close Sudanese friend of mine who had been sent to study in Cairo. But the text could not find its way to publicity. This was not due to any artistic deficiency—as the literary editor assured me later on. Rather, it was because this editor was sacked from his job—along with other leftist and liberal writers, artists, journalists and officials who held governmental posts—while he was preparing that text to be published. These sackings were administered by an Islamic fundamentalist political coalition which made use of its alliance with the governing military regime of that time to permeate most decisive positions in the civil and military services of the state.

The literary editor, who was also a poet, and who soon became a friend of mine, invited me to have a drink at his house and meet with a group of his friends. Two of his friends were literary critics, two were short story writers, one was a poet, and two were good readers. I remember one of the critics asked me, after I was introduced by my friend as a ‘new, young creative voice’:

- What sort of creative writing you produce?

I gave him an answer that was full of actuality, shyness and quivering:

- I don't know.

This was the conceptual frame of the theoretical reference and/or of the creative sensibility of mine, when I wrote, during the early 1980s, another text that went on to become my very first 'short story', according to the definition of accredited Sudanese critics and short story writers who preceded me into dealing with the sphere of creative writing and arts. The title of the story was 'Think Nothing of It; I Was Just Performing My Love of You' (2002). It was a love story that took the shape of two parallel, and contradictory—but complimentary—letters, which were written in the view point of a male narrator who addresses a woman with whom he was in love. The first letter was written to the woman when the narrator's relationship with her, in his own judgment, was intact. The second letter was written when he decided to confront the woman with a series of events that certified her disloyalty to the relationship, which led the narrator putting an end to it.

That short story introduced me, following its publicity, in a dramatic fashion. The story was received positively by a wide range of interested readers, critics and creative writers and artists of diverse disciplinary and creative backgrounds. What was stupendous about that short story was not its subject, but the way in which that subject was processed and handled: the artistic structure which was not exclusive to the poetic, new style of narrative, but included some verses of 'pure poetry'. I did not control or fabricate any component of that story. The verses, like the narrative, had instinctively found their way onto the page.

The reason for coalescing narrative and poetry, I later tried to interpret for a Sudanese poet and friend, who preceded me in migrating to Australia.<sup>1</sup> That interpretation was a response to his introductory comment on my descent from poetry to short story telling in a successful interview which has been widely republished:

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<sup>1</sup> Atif Khiery is a Sudanese poet who writes in Arabic, and who is widely renowned in Sudan. He migrated to Australia in 2002. The passage reproduced here was translated from Arabic to English by Hafiz Kheir, a Sudanese poet, broadcaster and friend (of mine and Khiery), who lives and works in the USA.

If I were not to be a writer of the short story, I would probably have morphed into a poet whose poetry is somewhat focused on storytelling. This could have happened, maybe, in a fashion similar to that achieved in some of poet Salim Barakat<sup>2</sup>'s poems. Poetry was indeed the creative form that seemed much more natural to me, since the early configuring of my literary sensibilities. If you look at the very first short story I wrote, this would be quite evident, not just in the poetic narrating voice, but there are actually a few lines of verse within the web of the storytelling, which somehow insisted on keeping their identity and genre as verse. Perhaps I wrote that story with the intention of writing a poem.

I think the fact that some of my friends celebrated this text as a short story, even before it was published, had me steered more precisely towards writing narratives. So I forged ahead, making my stories while blending, into my writing style, the most important qualities that poetry offers: a versatile imagination and a freer soul. By this, I mean the energy in poetry that helps a writer to defy sameness, in the stylistic sense, and strive for originality in his/her writing. It's a mode of writing that drives you away from dry compositions, as if a rainbow is waving its colours towards you, setting you up, in the perfect mode, for a season of dew... a mode of writing that somehow protects your style from dead imageries and prepares you for the festivity of the storytelling (interviewed in Khiery 2005).

I can now add another analytical dimension to the issue of merging poetry and narrative, in that text in particular at that very beginning, and turning, stage of my journey towards short story writing. When I wrote that very first short story, I was unable to set myself entirely free from the yearning to be a poet and, at the same time, I could not resist the lure of narrative of which I was, still am, very fond. What I am trying to say, by suggesting this view, is to indicate a kind of 'personal inability', in a healthy sense, that bestowed upon me such an unplanned opportunity that allowed that piece of writing to take such a distinctive shape, in which it has been recognised as a short story.

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<sup>2</sup> Salim Barakat is a Kurdish-Syrian poet and novelist.

A significant, related, question can also be posed: how could a person, who created a number of undistinctive poems, change quickly to a creator of distinctive short stories that placed him in a significant position within the Sudanese modern short story scene?

The question is simple. The answer is not.

I would have diverted myself from saying one of the truths if I testified that my engagement in reading varying forms of Arabic and less translated poetry was much more zealous than my engrossment in reading different genres of Arabic and translated narrative. In fact, I can now venture that the opposite is correct, the enjoyment was the same, while my prior longing was to become a poet. Another motive for becoming a poet had been, in addition to the central position of the poet in our Arabic culture, my own aspiration to inherit what I believed to be a vital constituent of my father's ancestral identity. Such a creative identity would also play a crucial role in connecting me with the larger Arabian lineage to which I was made to believe that my father's great grandfather have descended from: one of the legendary Arabian ethnic groups, to which the Prophet Muhammad belongs, in the Arabian Peninsula. The wish of becoming a poet was also tempted by my early personal experiences of love. Here, I should point out that the creative person most associated with love, throughout most, if not all, the cultural and creative heritage worldwide, is the poet.

On the other hand, if poetry was occupying such a central, or axiomatic, dimension in my sentiment, to the extent that suggests it as an instinctive ingredient of my inner identity, narrative did by no means inhabit similar, if not stronger, length. Riessman (2008) argues that the narrative impulse is common across the globe. This statement affirms the natural and creative basis and functions of narrative desire.

I can, thus, metaphorically compare the existence of poetry and narrative in my life, from the outset, with the idea that my mother has two nipples, from one I suckled poetry and from the other one I breastfed narrative. This comparison can find confirmation in the fact that I was, like billions of other people worldwide were, rocked with songs during my early childhood, and my sleep was coaxed by tales that were frequently infiltrated with verse. Nelson (1989) suggests that narrative emerges very early in the course of human development. Thus, narrative existed through all phases of my life, sometimes infused with poetry, sometimes told through it, and sometimes touched in a language that has been fertilised with it.

‘The Religion of Islam’ was a compulsory subject all the way through the educational stages prior to university in Sudan. But this subject could have not been bearable, particularly during the course of the earlier or elementary steps of education, if it didn’t embrace narrative methods. A large number of people, especially young people, believe that the most attractive chapters of The Qur’an are those which cover long tales that are narrated through poetic style. For similar reasons, great numbers of people, of different convictional and cultural backgrounds, prefer The Old Testament over The New Testament.

I was born and grew up in a community that was established by and through narratives. That is, narratives saturate every aspect of our social, cultural and religious lives. My manifest preoccupation of reading narratives was so evident in my father’s resentment of this habit, since my early years of official learning. He feared that such an obsession would distract me from concentrating on my formal learning. As my formal and informal learning steps were advancing, my father’s resentment and fear, and also those of my older brother, together with my mother’s irrational and rational defensive justifications, grew along with them.

Yet my passion for informal learning methods and artistic interests was striding forward. Nonetheless, my artistic interests did not include, up until I wrote that very first short story, a focus on reading short stories for they were not at the top of my favourite readings. My concentration was, in the field of readings, on novels, plays, historical narratives, investigative journalism, literary film reviews and travel literature. I certainly came across some short stories but not to the extent that allow me to recall any Sudanese or Arabic or international figure in this territory except some translated short stories written by Alberto Moravia (1907–1990). Even this exception was not deliberate for those short stories were published in a serialized routine in an Egyptian variety weekly magazine I was habituated to purchase primarily for other literary interests. I also remember that I liked reading some of the reproduction of an Egyptian contemporary writer, whose name is Muhammad al-Mansi Qindil (1946–), of a series of

ancient Arabian tales that were originally written by an olden Arabian writer whose name is Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani.<sup>3</sup>

I, too, reminisce that I repeated reading specific poems several times, to the level that kept some segments of them in my mind until this moment. I watched particular movies and read certain novels a number of times, but I do not recall reading a short story at that time. I can now call up that I have read short stories written by international, Sudanese and Arabic icons such Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893), Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), Franz Kafka (1883–1924), Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), William Saroyan (1908–1981), Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927–2014), al-Tayyeb Salih (1929–2009) , Ali al-Mak's (1937–1992), Eisa al-Hilo (1944–), Bushra al-Fadil (1952), Zakariyya Tamir (1931–), Abd al-Salam al-Ojaili (1917–2006), Yusuf Idris (1927–1991), Jamal al-Ghaitani (1945–2015), Ibrahim Aslan (1935–2012), al-Habib al-Salimi (1951–) and Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubai'i (1939–). Yet I almost did so only after I wrote two short stories; that is, once the production of short stories was becoming the most vital component of my creative identity.

Such a course of personal creative history makes it difficult for me to nominate specific short story symbols as they have influence on my writing in this artistic terrain. Furthermore, I sometimes used to feel embarrassed when a question entails, in a formal discussion, obligation to elaborate on this issue. This means that the readers or audience expect me to mention examples of writers whose stories might have left an impact on me. Even more, I sometimes used to feel as if I am an exceptional writer, not as a merit, but in some type of undesirable sense. This is because I could see that most, if not all, the creative writers and artists to and/or about whom I read some accounts, seem to have clear ideas of their effective frame of references. What I can re-confirm here is that I also used to provide my readers/audience with an honest elaborative endeavour that is not far from the ideas I have been discussing here.

The first theme that I am accustomed to convey to readers or audiences is that I came to write short stories by accident. By stating this, I refer to the two critical incidents in the

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<sup>3</sup> Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (897-967) was an acclaimed historian who was notable for documenting ancient Arabic poems and songs as well for narrating stories about their poets and singers and their associated milieus.

context of the development of my creative writing which I mentioned in earlier paragraphs in this presentation: the experiment of transforming a poem to a narrative version; and the first ‘short story’ of mine of which I had no conclusive idea it was a short story.

The second theme has been the asset of what I understand as the ‘qualitative effect’ of artistic genres other than short stories on me as a short story writer. Here, I can say that the favour of poetry to my style of writing is apparent in the poetic mode of expression, wording and imageries. There are also other effective sources of literary, stylistic and technical significance. At the top of these was my reading a broad array of novels. Here, I draw attention to the fact that I was not occupied with reading Sudanese novels. I even believed that Sudanese authors could not write novels similar to those written by European, Russian, American and Arabian novelists. Undeniably this was my understanding as a subaltern (of that time) whose artistic perception and inspiration were shaped by two dominant ideologies: the protracted, potent remnants of the idealised social and cultural standards of the British colonialism and the obstinate, controversial belongingness to the Arabic ethnicity.

As a gesture of gratefulness, I have to recall early and romantic novels such as *Sous les Tilleuls* (1832) of Alphonse Karr (1808–1890) which was translated liberally into Arabic by the Egyptian writer and poet Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti (1876–1924). This novel was coupled with the Arabic version of *Broken Wings* (1912/nd) of Jibran Khalil Jibran (1883–1931). Those two novels paved my way to a marvellous and incessant river of novels that were gradually and necessarily more advanced in regards to thoughts, writing style and literary techniques. What was also significant about those two novels is that they gave me a taste for poeticism in narrative. (This dimension can be traced back to my earlier, naïve attempts in writing poetic narratives.)

On the other hand, and with respect to the period stretching from the early 1980s to the current day, there were a number of novels that were so dear to me I read most of them more than once, sometimes many times. Examples of these are the Arabic versions of *A Hero of Our Time* (1841/1984) of Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841); *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) of Tayyib Salih; *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq* (1973) and *The Eastern of the Mediterranean Sea* (1975) of Abd al-Rahman Munif (1933–2004); *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967/1991), *Chronicle of a Death*

*Foretold* (1981/1991) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985/1991) of Gabriel Garcia Marquez; *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1967/1980) of Edmundo Desnoes (1930–); *El Señor Presidente* (1946/1985) of Miguel Angel Asturias (1899–1974).

My enthrallment in the meadows of narration, the novels, have built, and strengthened, the disposition to narrate in my sentiment in a way that has not been done by other genres the primary artistic strategy of which is narration. This array of narrative styles has expanded my imagination and nurtured my narrative skills. These styles have also augmented my own narrative style with a variety of voices, techniques, dialogues and monologues.

Another field of narrative, which has some common characteristics with novels and short stories, encompassed the travel accounts and the literary reviews of feature films. Most of these narratives were created by Egyptian journalists who were either novelists or short story writers themselves.

My older brother left me with a literary treasure composed of a few translated plays and various Arabic weekly, fortnightly and monthly magazines. Plays such as *The Misanthrope* (1670/1966) of Molière (1622–1673); *The Marriage of Figaro* (1778/1968) of Pierre Beaumarchais (1732–1799); *All My Sons* (1947/1977) of Arthur Miller (1915–2005) did not only bring another source of enjoyment to me but they also laid the first stone for me to further my engagement with this remarkable creative domain. I adored Shakespeare (1564–1616), Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), August Strindberg (1849–1912) and Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), to name just a few.

Plays have also opened my way to benefit, in a methodological sense, from the richness of the techniques on which the written (and performed) plays are grounded: the dialogue and the scene. The value of these techniques is particularly palpable in a short story of mine named ‘Zincographic Images of a Normal Day’ (2002). I will soon import a conversation, excerpted from that short story, as an illustration of what I think of as a major inspiration of the plays. Yet the way I constructed this dialogue differs from the preponderant style that is made use of in most, if not all, the written plays with respect to the resort to words (typically written between two brackets) that indicate a physical move or change in the mood of the part/s being played. Before providing that passage of

dialogue, a short glossary (not originally published) is needed to ensure a number of terms in the dialogue are understood.

### **Glossary:**

Dabash, Shaish, Jihar, Baish, Saih, Yak: These are some terms used to name some of the domino pieces.

Jala is a domino term that means, in domino playing context, “I’m stuck” or “I have no option of move.”

Dumana is a concluding domino term that means “I achieved it” or “I conquered you”.

### **Dialogue:**

While they are playing dominoes, Uncle Jabir said:

- Nawal, my daughter, wants to enrol in a school of drawing but I told her to get rid of such an idea... (Dabash).
- You mean the College of Fine Arts. I’m aware that Nawal is fond of drawing. Why have you denied her such a choice? (Shaish).
- (Jihar) ...What kind of a person she would be, after graduating from this college? Portraitist?
- She could, for example, work as... (Baish) ...a fine arts teacher at the secondary schools.
- I think it’s better for her, as she’s already got reasonable education, is to wait for a husband... (Saih).
- Until such a person comes to her, let her continue the education journey. Education is a decisive weapon in these days... (Jala).
- (Yak) ...is this what you suggest?
- I hope you wouldn’t mind to let her carry on her education. Such an allowance would cause you to loose nothing. (Jala).

- What you suggest is sensible. However, the girls of these days tend to be headstrong... And, as I'm a representative of the old fashioned school of Domino, I have just defeated you! (Dumana!)
- Good luck. You have defeated me because I was busy with talking.
- Was my mouth shut? Sit down; wouldn't you like to play another round?
- No, for I have an appointment with some friends. Let it be in another chance, Uncle Jabir (Al-Qassas 2002).

Having discussed the influence of creative genres united by strategies of writing, I should turn to the influence of the art of cinema, the creative strategy of which is the scene. I have been infatuated with feature films. I cannot count the number of movies that I have watched more than 10 times. These are likely more than 50 films that fall into this category. I have probably watched a total of 100 films around 5 times. And there would be 500 movies I have watched on two occasions. Could such an occupation with film not leave a mark on the way I technically handle my short stories, or at least some of them? The answer is no. Two Sudanese literary critics have pointed out that my style of writing short stories has employed cinematic techniques. One of them says about a particular short story, the title of which is "A Condition", that it has a 'movielike rhythm.' A prominent Sudanese short story figure, Bushra al-Fadil, in a cover blurb appearing on my first collection of short stories (published in Arabic in 2002) describes me as 'the cinematographer of the modern short story in Sudan.' I can also conclude that most of my short stories employ flashback, and others montage.

There are also other artistic genres which I feel they have impacted on my short story writing in an entirely mysterious and unidentifiable way. These would include singing, music and painting. The latter are a reminder of the complicated journey any artistic genre undergoes. This is because a genre does not entirely originate from the historical development of its broader artistic form. A genre's internal historical development is never a simple, unilinear process, and always entails contributions from other art forms. In the interview with Khiery (2005) mentioned above, I said that the relationship between different creative genres with each other is not oppositional. This relationship is, rather, adjoining and dialogical. It is a give-and-take relationship. Even when a

particular creative genre seems to be achieving celebrated prosperity, this can stand as an approval of its high capacity, its great flexibility, to make use of its contact and dialogue with other creative genres so as to develop itself, on the one hand, and to contribute to the development of the attendant, neighbouring artistic forms, on the other.

When I became interested in the short story genre, I found a form of expression, a creative system, which through its modern development had achieved an enormous capacity, through its flexibility, to give to other art forms and receive from them as well. The short stories that I have enjoyed reading are devoid of a number of what we nowadays perceive as imperfections which characterise some older short stories, most noticeably its moralising disposition, excessive literariness, and a reportive mode of presentation.

As explained earlier, reading short stories was not the focus of my interest until some Sudanese short story writers and literary critics categorised a text of mine as a short story. Since then, reading short stories has turned out to be one of the most rewarding forms of reading and writing for me. In fact, getting in touch with these short story writers and literary critics, most of whom became friends, was of pivotal benefit to me, with respect to the development of my social, political, cultural and artistic sensibilities. In regards to the short story, they provided me with reading materials, including their own short stories and critical essays, as well as short story-associated discussions, suggestions of readings and their insights on my own short stories. In a brief period of time, I found myself accumulating qualitative local, regional and international short story-related readings.

The short story writers I came to like best include William Saroyan (USA), Julio Cortázar (Argentina), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), Ali al-Mack, Abd al-Salam Hassan Abd al-Salam (1953–2010), Ahmad Sharif (195–), Ahmad al-Mustafa al-Haj (1951–), Bushra al-Fadil (1952–), Muhammad Osman Abd al-Nabi (1948–), Muhammad Khalaf Allah Sulaiman (1955–) (Sudan), Jamal al-Ghaitani and Ibrahim Aslan (Egypt), Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rubai'i and Muhammad Abd al-Majid (1942–, Iraq), al-Habib al-Salimi (Morocco).

With their inspiration I could begin to experiment with essential techniques of the short story narrative, including its constituent elements (for example, character, voice, events, conditions, place), daring technical inventions, coherent narration, agile rhythm and

original, poetic imagery. While I do not remember consciously copying any of their virtues, several stories by Julio Cortázar (Argentina), Ali al-Mack (Sudan) and Muhammad Abdul Majid (Iraq) helped hone my dexterity in the use of second-person narration, as a narrative mode that has characterised, to varying levels from short story to another, all my short stories.

I use the second-person mode of narration, mostly within the employment of the stream of consciousness. I regard it as a cunning version of the first-person mode of narration. It is brave, unashamed, honest, generous, conducive, intimate, cordial and, above all, lyrical. And I am not alone in my attraction to it or in the impetus behind that attraction. In a conservative society, such as the Afro-Arabic-Islamic one I was born and brought up in, it is not rare that art is subject to moral, that is, unartistic or non-aesthetic judgement, and likewise, especially where they are related to love and sex, the content of works and events are often conflated with the creator of the work.<sup>4</sup> Hence, until recently, I suspect some creative writers tend to avoid using the first-person mode of narrative by employing the third-person mode, evading the likelihood of such judgement and/or interpretation.

For me, utilising the second-person mode of narration was ‘natural’, particularly during the initial phase of writing short stories. What I mean by ‘natural’ in this context is that this methodological choice had not (at that stage) been theoretically or critically rationalised. Nonetheless, I could now associate that ‘naturalness’, in the light of the governing conservativeness of the society, with the reticent nature of my personality, especially in the course of that early phase of writing, as well as with my personal interest in the inner worlds of the human being rather than the exterior.

The latter focus may place me, I speculate, within the category of the creative writers who Cixous (1993, p. 5) identifies as the ‘descenders, explorers of the lowest and deepest.’ Stylistically, the accretion of reading varieties of short stories, as well as writing them, has contributed significantly to sharpen my narrative skills in regard, notably, to the intensity and consistency of the text. One of the key characteristics of a brilliant short story lies, I believe, in its density.

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<sup>4</sup> A notable example of this has been that many readers—including literary critics—tend to equate Mustafa Sa'id, the major character of the eminent novel ‘Season of Migration to the North’, or at least some aspects of his life, with the life, or at least some aspects of it, of the author, Tayyib Salih.

My immersion in reading and writing short stories led me to discard writing poetry. But I have not turned down reading it while opening up to other artistic meadows of reading, besides spreading out and exploring other creative visual spaces, including cinema and visual arts. These became possible mostly as a result of my engagement in my new socio-cultural circle which composed—in addition to the short story writers and literary critics—of increasing numbers of similar and dissimilar artists, containing, for example, poets, painters, filmmakers and film critics.

These involvements helped me to displace my dogmatic desire to become a ‘forthright poet’. They also assisted me to further my poetry and poetry-related readings as well as other artistic connections. Furthermore, they enabled me to ‘kill my former models of poetry and poets’, to borrow another of Cixous’ concept. Cixous (2005) uses the metaphor of *killing* an author to indicate the success of a new artist to uproot the clout of other artists who predominantly belong to the same genre of art the new artist tends to produce. This concept is similar to the ‘concept of forgetfulness’ which was generated by the Arabian classical poet, Abu Tammam (788-845). Abu Tammam was a distinguished poet, who recommended that aspiring poets memorise as many admirable and unique poems as he or she could bear, enjoy them, and then forget them before creating their own poetry.

I reached this realisation, not merely through the new poetic style and imagery that differentiate most of my short stories (and other texts beyond the short story genre), but also by dint of writing two poems after a decade of abandoning writing ‘forthright poetry’. I could recognise the difference of these poems, in relation to style, technique and imagery, from my previous poems and those of other Sudanese poets. The identification of these two poems as poetry might be controversial. This is even despite the fact that there is no question of their (different or atypical) poeticity. When I finished writing the second, I thought I heard a whisper: ‘poetry has been missing you, even though you have not betrayed it.’

## **Chapter Two**

### **From Cultural Alienation to Cultural, Social and Political Unconformity**

I cannot recall how old I was when some impressions and thoughts—which I will elaborate on and discuss below—entered my mind after I finished reading a remarkable book. I can only estimate that I might have been between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years when I found a book in a big, common rubbish bin located close to my family's house in the Sudanese capital city of Khartoum. The book was stripped of the front and back covers. It was also bare of the two or three first pages that usually encompass recurrent and additional details of the book such as its author, title and publishing information. Nevertheless, the content of the book, which was a novel, as I realised later on, was intact. That is to say, it was complete from the first chapter to the last, yet without a title or author:

*The narrator, who is nameless, comes back to his northern Sudanese village after he spent seven years in London doing further study in English poetry. His return is a source of pleasure for him and for the village's inhabitants especially those of proximity to him who cheerfully come to embrace it. Amid the jovial welcome, he notices an unfamiliar face among the familiar faces of the greeting relatives, friends and acquaintances. This face belongs to Mustafa Sa'id, an enigmatic middle-aged man. Upon curious queries about the latter, the narrator is told that this Mustafa Sa'id's roots go back to Khartoum, from which he arrived to reside in this village five years ago, attained a farm, and married a young woman from the village whose name is Husna bint Mahmud.*

*Those details do not assuage the narrator's inquisitiveness to know more about Mustafa Sa'id. Such inquisitiveness becomes even much more demanding than before when the narrator heard Mustafa Sa'id reciting poetry in English in a drinking setting that involves him with the narrator and Mahjub who is an old friend of the latter. This leads the stunned narrator—who was thinking that he is the only person who can speak*

*English in the entire village—to visit Mustafa Sa'id the day after. The reason behind the visit is to ask Mustafa Sa'id where he learned English. But Mustafa Sa'id holds on a justification that his reciting of English poetry should be received as drivel caused by drunkenness. Even so, he goes, the next day, to visit the narrator to provide him with an incomplete—but enthralling—narrative about his past:*

*Mustafa Sa'id was a poor, fatherless young boy who was grown up in Khartoum when Sudan was under the British governance. He showed, since his early years of schooling, unprecedented intelligence and faculties. Therefore, he was sent to Cairo to acquire secondary schooling where his intellectual capacities and aptitudes were further demonstrated and advanced. As a result, he was awarded a scholarship to attain university study in England where he became a celebrated bohemian leftist and intellectual who later on became a professor of economics.*

*Mustafa Sa'id was also obsessed with seducing British women by inventing and presenting himself as an “Orientalist African”. He was accustomed to attract some of these women by telling them stories about living in African jungle interacting with its creatures such as lions, elephants and snakes. When these women ended up having sex with him in his apartment—and this had in fact been constituting his ultimate intention—they further became fascinated by the “Orientalist African” environment provided through traditional symbols and artefacts. What also made these women even much more captivated was Mustafa Sa'id's avowal to marry them. But he had eventually been turning his back on his promises to look for novel ‘preys’. This led some of these broken hearted women, such as Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood and Isabella Seymour to commit suicide.*

*Mustafa Sa'id's stormy sentiment in England concluded with him killing his English wife, Jean Morris, in a sexualised ritual. In consequence, a British court found him guilty, not only for murdering his wife, but also for being responsible for three women killing themselves. As a result, he was jailed for seven years. Upon release, he returned to Sudan where he chose to live a humble, rustic life.*

*The mystery that was associated with Mustafa Sa'id's life persisted at the end of his life in the village. In fact, nobody knows exactly what happened to him. According to the narrator, the villagers believe Mustafa Sa'id vanished in the course of the flooding*

*season. The villagers speculate that he was wiped out by the flood. But the narrator conjectures to himself that Mustafa Sa'id had committed suicide.*

*For the remaining years, the narrator continues to be haunted by Mustafa Sa'id's story. Such an obsession accompanies the narrator even after he moves to Khartoum to take up an appointment as a civil servant in the Ministry of Education. He keeps trying to locate information about Mustafa Sa'id's past from a number of individuals who have some knowledge about the latter.*

*At some stage, following the enigmatic death of Mustafa Sa'id, the narrator discloses that he has been assigned as a custodian of the former's wife and children. Thus, he becomes accustomed, whenever he goes to the village, to visit them.*

*During one such sojourn to the village, the narrator is approached, through his grandfather, that a friend of the latter, whose name is Wad Rayyis, is looking forward to obtaining the narrator's accord to marry Mustafa Sa'id's widow, Husna. The narrator asks Husna whether she wants to marry the man or not. Husna casts off the offer, affirming that she will never get married again. She also asserts obstinately that if she is to be forced to accept this offer, she will kill the new husband as well as herself. Wad Rayyis feels humiliated by such a rebuff and insists that he will marry her particularly as Husna's father and brothers have already provided him with their approval.*

*Eventually, Husna's father coerces her to wed Wad Rayyis. The result is she does not agree to have sex with him. One night, when he tries to compel her to do so, she kills him and herself in an act of violence that shocks the whole village.*

*The narrator, who comes back to the village to become aware of what has happened, feels sad and frustrated not only because of the way Husna has put an end to her life, but also for the incomplete past of Mustafa Sa'id. Grappling with such feelings, the narrator goes to swim in the Nile. He decides to let himself drown. However, he suddenly changes his mind and starts to call for help.*

The overall narrative atmosphere and details of this novel would, of course, leave no option for any other young reader—who has found this novel without the informing pages that convey the national identity of its author—to relate this narrative to any ‘nationality’ other than Sudanese. Nonetheless, I, a teenager during that time, have ruled out the possibility that the author of this novel is Sudanese. Instead, I said to myself,

amongst feelings of jubilation, excitement and admiration: ‘The author of this novel is likely to be an Egyptian or English writer who has known Sudan very well or has lived inside it for a significant time.’

I discovered, some years later, that this novel is *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), which has been translated into more than twenty languages. I discovered that its creator is Tayyib Salih (1929–2009), a prominent Sudanese writer, who has a meritorious national, regional and international literary reputation. I proudly reread the original Arabic version of this novel at least three times and the English translation twice. I enthusiastically attended three lectures delivered by Salih himself, two of which were held in Khartoum and the third in Cairo. At the end of the third lecture, I met him briefly. I shook his hands and introduced myself to him as a Sudanese short story writer.

But why did I assume that the author of *Season of Migration to the North* should either be an Egyptian or English writer? In other words, why had I regarded the creation of that novel as too much for a Sudanese writer? To be precise, what were the reference points that led me to reach such a speculation, notwithstanding the phase of development I was at does not recommend the young man I was, who is fond of literary reading, as too naïve?

When I found my way to read with the assistance of my own, and I did this so hastily at some early stage of my elementary schooling, the most attractive and enjoyable readings for me were those of non-Sudanese origins. *Al-Sibyan* (The Young Boys, 1946–1995), which was a popular Sudanese comic magazine, was not looking as appealing as the Arabic versions of American comic magazines such as *Superman* (1938–), *Batman* (1938–), *Tarzan* (1912–), and *Mickey Mouse* (1930–). For the young boy I was, the latter were absorbingly written narratives while the former I found tedious, or at best, ordinary stories with unattractive illustrations.

My ‘foreign’ literary sense of taste had ever since been growing and expanding throughout the subsequent chapters of my schooling in my country of origin, Sudan. In a semi-conjunction with those comic magazines, I found myself immersing so zealously in an ‘Egyptian’ series of young readers’ novels, *Qassus Policyya lil Awlad* (Detective Stories for Young Boys) or *Silsilat al-Mughamirin al-Khamsa* (1943/1968–1972) (the Five Find-Outers’ Series), which were almost a sort of ‘Egyptianisation’ of Enid Blyton

(1897–1968)’s *Five Find-Outers* or the *Enid Blyton Mystery Series* or *Five Find-Outers and Dog*.

The ‘Detective Stories for Young Boys’ were taking place in the Cairo well-known suburb of al-Ma’adi to which those ‘Five Find-Outers’ and the dog Zingir’ belong. I had been dreaming to visit this beautiful suburb and meet my dear friends, the ‘Five Find-Outers’ and the dog Zingir’. Even when my diasporic sojourns directed me to Cairo more than once, as an adult who has become a renowned short story writer in Sudan, who happened to be residing in al-Ma’adi for considerable length of time, I could not resist saying to myself in a cheery feeling, during the first layover: “So here you are dear al-Ma’adi!”

Tempted by the vast popularity of the ‘Detective Stories for Young Boys’, the same Egyptian producer, whose name is Mahmud Salim (1929–2013), produced another popular series the title of which was *Series for Youth* or *Majmu’at Al-Shayatin al-Thalathata Ashar* (1978, The Group of Thirteen Demons). A supreme ideological purpose of this series was nurturing and highlighting Arab Nationalism in youth all over the Arab World in which Sudan has been occupying peripheral position. Such a position has been causing it to be looked down upon by other central (and semi-central) Arab countries because of the official Sudan’s complicated (stubborn?) belonging to Arabism. This sort of complicated belonging is the consequence of the majority of Sudanese ethnic groups descends from black African backgrounds. The ostensible black African appearance of most of Sudan’s dwellers—including the bulk of those who derive from Afro-Arab synthesis—have made it impossible for the officially and, to some extent, the publicly desired image of Sudan to fit into the popular or conventional (white-skinned) category of Arabism. This prompts Deng (1995) to write that ‘Clearly, the attempt to assimilate the country into Arab-Muslim model has not succeeded, at least not in the intended form.’ Hence, the downgraded status is palpable.

‘The Group of Thirteen Demons’ series was not capable of accompanying me for so long as I discovered another series of fictional crime/detective treasures. These included the Arabic versions of Maurice Leblanc (1864–1941)’s *Arsene Lupin* (1907/1964), *Leslie Charteris* (1907–1993)’s *Simon Templar*, also known as *The Saint*, (1928–1963/nd), Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930)’s *Sherlock Holmes* (1887–1914/nd), Agatha Christie (1890–1976)’s *Hercule Poirot* (1920–1975/nd), in addition to the

Arabic version of an American TV drama series which was known as *The Fugitive* (1963–1967/nd), which was transformed into an Arabic book series with the same title.

*Arsene Lupin* and *Simon Templar or the Saint*, each of whom was also known as ‘the Gentleman Thief’, were even much more imagination capturers, to me, than the ‘straightforward’ detective of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. The portraits of ‘the Gentlemen Thieves’, in addition to Robin Hood’s, had merits of their own. Yet on the other hand, they were at times bestowing on me an honourable sensation of originating—in the part of my father’s lineages—from great ancestors some of whom—I was told by my mother—were *firsan* (knights), or *hambata* (camel robbers) who used to be benevolent and altruistic as well. Most important in the midst of this honourable sensation was my endeavour to persuade myself that those knight forebears of mine were somehow passed down to us from some of *al-Shu'ara al-Sa'aleek* (The Tramp Poets)<sup>1</sup> of the ancient or pre-Islam Arabs.

At that time, and soon after, my ‘foreign’ literary sense of taste came to be captivated by a variety of Arab novelists, poets and writers. These novelists, poets and writers were mainly Egyptians and Lebanese most of whom could be pigeon-holed within the Arab romantic literary and lyrical movement. Examples of these novelists, poets and writers are Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti (1876–1924), Muhammad Abd al-Halim Abd Allah (1913–1970), Yosif al-Siba'i (1917–1978), Jibran Khalil Jibran (1883–1931), Elia Abu Madi (1889/1890–1957), Mikha'il Na'imah (1889–1988), Ahmad Shawqi (1868–1932), Wafiq al-Alaili (twentieth century), the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (1923–1998), and the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish (1942–2008). The latter two left an apparent impact on the lyrical style I employed in my initial ‘creative attempts’ which were poems. In addition, there were also attempts at literary writing, infused with a poetic style.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Shu'ara al-Sa'aleek (The Tramp Poets) were a group of mostly young men, some whom were poets, who were known in pre-Islamic Arabian societies in the Arabian Peninsula for their defiant behaviour. They were outcast from these societies as a result. They hence became bandits. Some of these poet-bandits had a strong sense of social justice and thus they were supporting poor people. Some of them were also famed and dignified for their illustrious poems. The Sudanese classical socio-cultural equivalent, within large section of those communities that were heavily influenced by the Arabic-Islamic culture, was Hambata which means bandits.

While al-Manfaluti, for instance, fascinated me with his adaptation of novels and plays generally categorised within the European romantic literary and lyrical movement, he also intensified the allure of European literature. Al-Manfaluti's bewitching work incorporated literary writings by Alphonse Karr, François Coppée, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and Edmond Rostan.

Thus, it seemed 'natural' for the young literary sensitivity that was nurtured by al-Manfaluti and other writers example of whom were listed in a prior paragraph, to hand the young and eager sentiment and imagination of mine to the Arabic versions of Michel Zevaco (1860–1918), Victor Hugo (1802–1885), Emile Zola (1840–1902), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Fyodor Dostoevsky (182–1881), Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), William Shakespeare (1564–1616), George Bernard Shaw (1856–1850), Pierre Beaumarchais (1732–1799), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), Henrik Ibsen (1828–106), Molière (1622–1673), Jane Austen (1775–1817), Charlotte Bronte (1816–1855), Emily Bronte (1818–1848), Margaret Mitchell (1900–1949), Alberto Moravia (1907–1990) and others.

I was enamoured by the boldness, braveness and adventurousness of the character Rhett Butler in *Gone with Wind*, of whom I became convinced, after I supplied my reading of the novel with watching the film that appeared with the same title, that he cannot be looking, in my own imagination, like anybody else but Clark Gable. I was astonished at, and troubled by, the escalating desire of vengeance that took such a primary position in the heart of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Nonetheless, I, at least, did not hate him. Mustafa Sa'id was a marvellous and intriguing idol to me. He was, though, as I sensed at that time, an outcome of 'foreign creation'.

I was mesmerized by Molière's Alceste. Could it be that Alceste, the 'Enemy of the People', who hated the hypocrites of seventeenth-century French aristocratic society, is one of the catalysts that led me, at an early stage of my maturity, to correspond (albeit briefly) to the 'Islamic choice'? For my passionate attachment with Egyptian writers had directed me to be engrossed in two Egyptian Islamic preachers. One of these preachers was Muhammad Mutwalli al-Sha'rawi whose Islamic point of view was grounded on a conventional interpretation of Islam. The second preacher was Mustafa Mahmud, whose frame of reference was established on 'modernising' Islam through his attempts to find links between modern scientific discoveries and The Qur'an. Mahmud,

who was a medical doctor, traveller, journalist and creative writer, had also been trying to employ these fields and activities to support his Islamic views. Mahmud's influence on me was much more than that of al-Sha'rawi's for his utilisation (manipulation?) of scientific and creative fields.

Interestingly, the same motivation that guided me to be captivated by Mahmud's Islamic interpretations, particularly those associated with creative writing, has also set me free from his influence. Reading diverse forms of creative writing enabled me to discover what I have seen as some sort of 'literary fabrication' in his creative writings. This is because his 'Islamic creative writings' were purposefully designed to substantiate what he sees as 'Islamic facts' and/or Qur'anic miracles created by God since time immemorial.

Significantly, my liberation from the clutches of Muhammad Mutwalli al-Sha'rawi and Mustafa Mahmud can be construed as 'an exceptional transformation'. This has, in fact, always been the case when a young public school student succeeds in escaping the authoritative cultural attitude and its discursive creative formulas. The principal teaching curricula have, in this context, been devised to render students as easily conscripted by conservative agents such as al-Sha'rawi and Mahmud and their counterparts.

For a young student like me, who was yearning to participate in Arabic<sup>2</sup> cultural, lyrical and literary life, all roads to non-conformity appeared impassable. The general cultural orientation that has at all times governed the consecutive teaching curricula prepared for public schools in Sudan, along with the overriding orientation of the communal and political culture or system, have always contributed, directly and indirectly, to the modelling of the Arab conservative cultural (and social) outlook, classical aesthetic paradigms, and traditional lyrical and literary conventions.

In fact, the birthplace of that modelling goes back to the childhood of millions of children (such as I was) who belong to the Afro-Arab-Islamic society in Sudan. As children, we were brought up in ways that standardised a range of cultural (and social) outlooks and values that are common within traditional Arab societies. These outlooks

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<sup>2</sup> It should be clear by this stage in my discussion that for some communities in Sudan it has been important to differentiate between Arab identity, on the one hand, and the diverse cultures and communities that have been shaped by the far-reaching influence of Arab and then Arab-Islamic culture, on the other. It is a distinction that at times is made highly controversial, particularly in the case of Sudan.

and values embrace, for example, some archetypal images of a beautiful woman. These images include features such as white skin, dark black fine long hair, and wide black eyes. These images, which are not common in the Afro-Arab-Islamic society of Sudan, have been implanted into our imaginations through childhood fairy tales. These images have grown with us as we grow and are deepened by way of complex structures of feeling (with Raymond Williams' sense in mind), the sources and means of which consist largely of a common set of perceptions and values of the majority—if not all—of the Afro-Arab-Islamic ethnic groups (who regularly avoid attaching the term “Afro” to the term “Arab”) in Sudan, founded upon a belief that their ancestors descend from prominent ancient Arabian origins that are usually (or preferably) connected to the same ancestry as that from which the Prophet Muhammad is descended. These same sources and means also subsume the large and deep-rooted Arabic poetry; songs; oral and written forms of narrative; and the media, which has always screened Arabic, predominantly Egyptian, TV drama series and films. From and through these sources and means, the classical and traditional Arabic cultural attitudes and creative sensibilities have dominated the cultural and creative scene in Sudan.

The prevailing teaching curricula are, again, some of the paramount and powerful sites on and/or by the agency of which the conventional Arabic cultural outlooks and creative sensitivities have been fortifying, regenerating, expanding and/or perpetuating their influence. Such vantage points have been present throughout successive periods of time irrespective of the political bedrock or standpoint of the governing system. This is true even within the current political regime (1989–present day), the ideological backbone and mind-set of which is acutely affected by Islamic fundamentalist aspirations and ideas that yearn to redeem an Islamic past which has long been depicted as a model recovered from a perfect, happy ancient Islamic society.

The prevalent imprint of the traditional Arabic culture has ironically been paired with the structures that arrived with a variety of Western cultural and creative products and apparatus, and in a manner that continues to be unorchestrated but at the same time profoundly effective. Some of these apparatus were associated with the direct or physical presence of the British colonisation in Sudan. These involve establishing educational and training systems for the purpose of producing managerial and executive staff from the locals to help govern them (as opposing to governing themselves). Even when the direct or physical occupation of the coloniser has ended, its cultural (and

political) influence would keep existing through various means such as educational and training heritage and agreements, technical consultations, cultural exchange, scholarships along with what is facilitated through the media and entertaining methods. Notwithstanding the cultural contacts with Western (and beyond Western) cultural and creative apparatus have not always been overseen by the colonial enterprise. Institutional and private translation initiatives and schemes exist, some of which are celebrated, but others remain unwanted, even resisted or fought against, by the major colonial players and their agents.

As a young student, I had been exposed to many Western and non-Western cultural and creative products and apparatus. I would dare to say that the total number of the Arabic version of *Superman*, *Batman*, *Tarzan*, *Mickey Mouse* and *Flash Comics* (1940)—let alone the ‘Egyptianised versions’ of *Five Find-Outers*—I read throughout elementary school would exceed the total number of the textbooks I read, during the whole same and the following period, hundreds of times. Therefore, my father was repeatedly saying to my mother, in a voice full of resentment: “As long as this boy gazes at these magazines that depict nothing but satanic pictures, he will never gain success in his schooling.”

I believe those comic magazines were the foundation for my interest in ‘foreign worlds.’ As I was growing up, these worlds were always at hand, in school and beyond. In school, these worlds were available by virtue of the Arabic language teaching subjects some of which were prepared by Egyptian educators and writers. Connected to the Arabic language teaching subjects, there was an incomplete project for instituting an ‘Arabic literary library’ in our school. Utilising this library’s reading materials was optional. This ‘cultural project’ was an initiative from a brilliant teacher of mine. This teacher, who was fascinated by the Arabic language and with teaching its related subjects, considered me to be one his very promising students in this subject. He thus chose me, besides two or three other students, to assist him in establishing this project. He asked this ‘representative committee’ to arrange a list containing examples of what we see as apposite readings to students of our age in order for him to ask the school management to provide us with the money to purchase them. I remember that I succeeded in imposing my ‘foreign’ literary taste on my fellow students, and later purchased an assorted collection of mostly literary books most of the themes of which were relating to a variety of backgrounds except Sudanese. The ‘cultural market’, in

terms of the availability of literary books in Sudan, has always been overwhelmed with non-Sudanese items.

As to the subject of History, I remember I was thrilled by the historical narratives of the Arab World, the Ottoman Empire and Europe more than the historical narratives of Sudan. But what was really significant to a young student like me at the beginning of the intermediate schooling is the introduction of the English language subject. I was excited and filled with hubris feeling that we could learn how to speak and write this advantageous language, which will enable me to have the merit of ‘bending my tongue’ as a folk expression says. I was not one of the best students in the English language class, but nor was I one of the worst. I was charmed by the stories available through the starting series of the *New Method Readers* (1929). I was also enthralled by the simplified copies of *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), *Treasure Island* (1883), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Little Women* (1868/1869), *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Great Expectations* (1861). But then again, I was still more fancying with reading the translated version of foreign novels which were readily obtainable outside school.

At home, I was able to read most—if not all—of the Arabic version of literary works that were brought by my elder brother for his own interest. I devoured *The Marriage of Figaro* (1778/1968), *The Misanthrope or The Enemy of the People* (1670/1966), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898/nd). In addition, my elder brother was a systematic reader of a wide range of Egyptian and other Arabic newspapers and magazines. These included the Egyptian daily newspapers *al-Akhbar* (1952–) and *Akhbar al-Yom* (1944–), Egyptian weekly magazines of *Akhir Sa'a* (1946–), *al-Musawar* (1924–) and *October* (1976–), Egyptian monthly magazines of *al-Hilal* (1892–) and *al-Mukhtar* (1922–), Kuwaiti magazine of *al-Arabi* (1958–), and the Qatari magazine of *al-Doha* (1969–); so I became interested in sharing his reading. Further, he was also a regular purchaser of Arabic literary and non-literary comic books, some of which were translated from other languages, and which were issued monthly. In short, it can be said that I inherited the reading map and dispositions of my elder brother who would, some years later, turn his back on those types of reading, as well as giving up his attempts at writing modern poetry. He did so in favour of the devotional and constrained attitude and practice associated with the Islamic fundamentalist outlook, whereas I was furthering my engagement with Arabic and translated fictional, poetic and non-fictional readings.

Other than the handiness of fictional and non-fictional books beyond school and home, for they were accessible through friendly exchange and purchase, I was also developing an intimate audio-visual affiliation with the radio, television and cinema. These three methods of communication have also contributed to enhance my appreciation to non-Sudanese artistic forms of transmission. The cinema has overwhelmingly been a very influential source of ‘foreign arts’, and has predominantly been made up of American, Indian and Egyptian films. Television and radio have mainly been platforms for local programs, but they have also presented significant platforms for non-Sudanese arts and cultures. Television drama, which includes drama series and films, was chiefly Egyptian and American. The infrequent and fragmented Sudanese drama on television had been looking to me poor in almost all facets and consequently not artistically convincing. Only the Sudanese radio drama absorbed my attention and admiration. Even so, the radio was a source for imported Arabic drama, songs and cultural programs.

Until this stage, which might be the stage of departing the intermediate school or entering the secondary school, where the curriculums combine a wide range of Sudanese short narratives, literary texts and poems, I do not recall reading a novel written by a Sudanese author until I read Salih’s novel. I had ‘instinctively’ been listening to, reading and enjoying copious Sudanese poetry, together with Arabic poetry, but not a Sudanese single novel.

At the stage of my secondary schooling, while the English language subject was expanding, as well as other subjects, the French language subject was introduced. Even though that subject was not listed amongst the compulsory subjects for the final, pre-university exams, I found myself attracted to it for the striking resonance of the French novels and plays in my sentiment. I would attempt to confirm this attraction three times later on, particularly after I left school, by getting involved in French language courses at Lumumba Institute for Teaching Languages, then at the French Cultural Centre and finally, at the Unit of French Language at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Khartoum.

Despite the fact that I was excellent at some subjects, such as French language and History, my overall academic performance was deteriorating. In fact, it started to decline from the final year of my intermediate schooling during which my dislike to

subjects such as Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry began to grow and intensified throughout the following years of secondary schooling.

The downturn of my academic performance was also associated with the development of my adolescence at which I started to develop rebellious senses and actions. It was the juncture of romantic love, naïve lyrics, smoking cigarette, drinking alcohol, crashing suburban wedding night parties, gambling, sneaking home and into bed late at night, getting up late for school, skipping some of what I considered to be tough classes, disputes with my father and elder brother, and gradually escaping fasting during Ramadan. But my relationship with literary and poetic readings, and beyond these genres, ahead of school, kept developing.

Eventually, I refused to sit for the last tests of the secondary schooling's third year, the pre-university examinations. Before taking this dramatic step, I wrote three literary texts. The first of them was regarded by a notable Sudanese poet and cultural and literary editor as being a striking trans-genre text. The other two were regarded by some professional writers and critics as indicators of new trend in the modern Sudanese short story with regard to innovative technique and poetic writing style of narrative.

By that time, my strained relationship with my elder brother, who has in fact been the 'acting father' of the family, had reached its maximum intensity. He acquired a patriarchal position even during my father's life for he had been the family's primary breadwinner, while my father became the secondary one. My elder brother has fulfilled the 'acting father's' role, when I was a child, since our family's impoverished circumstances necessitated him putting an end to his excellent schooling before reaching secondary school. He had done this to get a low income job in order to help my father secure food and rent, and other living expenses including the schooling costs of both nuclear and extended family children, the number of which, in relation to the latter, kept increasing. My father, on the other hand, was an almost illiterate farmhand, and his low income was not only seasonal but also depended customarily on luck. That is, in agricultural conditions governed by the natural irrigation of rain, the fruitfulness or vice versa of a season is determined by the generosity or suitability of the amount of rains and their timing as well as by other surroundings such as infestation, other natural disasters, and the amount of the crop and market fluctuations.

What helped postpone domestic clashes between myself and my elder brother, whose attitude to disciplining was stiffer than my father, was his migration, for the purpose of work, to Saudi Arabia. Living in Saudi Arabia for over ten years completed his radical religious transformation. Meanwhile, my creative writing had to delay publication because at the time there was a military dictatorship that had recently employed an influential extremist Islamic political body. This political body initiated and masterminded a fierce campaign against what it considered to be communist, leftist and secular factions in the civil service. These locations contained within media and cultural sites and positions. Thus, the three short stories, I wrote at the time, remained unpublished for a few years, until a popular uprising overturned that dictatorship and brought about a civil, but shaky, regime.

Though those three short stories were not published for a few years, they had individually or casually been disseminated and celebrated within limited cultural and creative circles. Such dissemination put me in touch with a number of renowned Sudanese professional writers, critics, poets, dramatists and short story writers, most of whom were Marxists, and some of whom would later become close friends of mine. Through these friends, I became familiar with the work of Marx (1818–1883), Engels (1820–1895), Lenin (1870–1924), as well as Trotsky (1879–1940), Franz Fanon (1925–1961), Che Guevara (1928–1967), Samir Amin (1930–), Mahdi Amil (1936–1987). I also became familiar with the political outlook of the leftist armed liberation movements in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Those friends, amongst whom I was apparently the youngest, have not only extended my reading map with so different philosophical and political thoughts but they also furnished it with unique creative and critical worlds, Sudanese and non-Sudanese. In terms of my personal political standpoint, as I was not yet a member of any political organisation, I rapidly developed a radical political viewpoint. That viewpoint, which went beyond criticising the flexible leading political approach of the Communist Party of Sudan, was based on the armed revolution that inspired largely by the Cuban revolutionary model of Fidel Castro (1926–) and Che Guevara and the criticism of Samir Amin to the Soviet Marxism. I believed that there would be no place in Sudan for the classic Marxist method that counts on the working class as primary force for social and political change. This is true, I was arguing, for there is no clear and established working class in Sudan, unlike that which existed in Western industrial societies. Since

the prevalent mode of economic production in Sudan is unmodernised pastoral and agricultural, I considered the approach of the Communist Party of Sudan an ahistorical import, influenced by the model promoted and approved by the Soviet Marxism. That model relies, in my view, on postponing the act of social and political change until the industrial mode of economic production is established and developed in Sudan. That is to say, this model actually encourages the development and accumulation of Western capitalism in Sudan for the sake of establishing and developing a large working-class that might make progressive social and political change possible.

Even though that extreme political perspective of mine may sound sensible and acceptable, I, currently think of its extremity as having stemmed (to some degree at least) from fundamentalist sensibilities, thoughts and reactions associated with my upbringing.

I was born and brought up in a familial and communal environment that has been committed to radical sectarian heritage that goes back to the Mahdist Movement/Revolution in Sudan. The Mahdist Movement was a religious and political movement founded in 1881 by a religious scholar called Muhammad Ahmad Abd Allah (1844–1885). Just before the establishment of his religious-political movement, Muhammad Ahmad Abd Allah named himself al-Mahdi, which means ‘The Divinely Inspired One’, for he believed he was sent by divine force to liberate Sudan from the Turko-Egyptian rule as well as restoring Islam to the idealised state of the Prophet Muhammad’s era. The Mahdist Movement had led a revolutionary armed struggle against the Turko-Egyptian colonial administration. That struggle ended up with the first overthrowing the latter and establishing, as a result, the Mahdist State in Sudan in 1885. The Mahdist State was destroyed in 1898 by the British-Egyptian (re)conquest of Sudan.

Some years after World War 1, when Sudan was still under British occupation, al-Mahdi’s son, whose name is Abd al-Rahman, started to ‘set about organizing a revival of Mahdism, but not one which would attempt a revolt against the all-conquering British, rather it would be a peaceful movement whose influence would be such that the authorities would have to collaborate with it’ (Karsani, 1987). This organisation, which has become one of the two largest and powerful right-wing political bodies in Sudan, before and after the independence of the country, is currently known as *Hizb al-Umma*

*al-Qawmi* (The National Umma Party). The current party leader is a great-grandson of al-Mahdi.

My family has not only been faithful to the sectarian past and present of the Mahdism because of its ideology but also for we have—through my mother and father—blood linkage with al-Mahdi. For example, my mother is a great granddaughter of al-Mahdi’s cousin who was killed (together with two of al-Mahdi’s sons) at the end of the destruction of the Mahdist State by a British legion as a final act of deracinating any possible resurgence of a similar radical movement in Sudan.

For much of my childhood, my mother and grandmother told me almost mythical stories about the Mahdist Revolution and its leading figures. They said, for instance, that al-Mahdi defeated the British armies by fighting only with a sword made of a branch of the local tree of *Osher* (*Calotropis procera*), the wood of which is extremely light, especially when it gets dried. That is to say, al-Mahdi had, in their interpretation and in the interpretation of many other disciples, been reliant (just like the Prophet Muhammad) on his divine abilities. The holiness of al-Mahdi has also been depicted by them, as well as by large number of other followers, as undeniably inherited by his former and current familial successors. I remember my family was enjoying such privilege of belonging when we were still living in a Blue Nile village, called al-Shukkaba, in which I was born, and in which, six decades before my birth, my mother’s grand grandfather was killed by a British legion. At the time I was born, the religious-sectarian head of al-Shukkaba was my mother’s father. He was a Shaikh (holy man and master) whose divine abilities were believed to include curing mental illnesses. I also recall that some of villagers used to kiss our hands to show their special respect as they have faith in what they believed to be holiness of our ancestry who supposed to be handing it on to us.

My family moved to the capital city of Khartoum when I was about five years of age. This relocation contributed significantly to the diminishment of our privileged status, which had at any rate been more moral than economic. For, on the one hand, my family was not enjoying the economic, social and political prestige that the direct progeny of al-Mahdi were luxuriating in Khartoum. We experienced poverty in Khartoum, where the significance of a family’s social status is essentially decided by their economic

wealth. Consequently, it has been difficult for my family to endure not only the lack of economic capital but also the plunge in our stocks of Mahdist symbolic capital.

That endurance had been even harder when we moved to live in a bare plot of land in a new suburb. I found that outcast copy of Salih's novel in the big, common rubbish bin there. Our piece of land had no fence, no rooms, no kitchen, no proper bathroom, no electricity, and no running water. The only shelter we had had was an improvised shed. Living in such situation had, pathetically or mockingly, motivated many of the surrounding residents, whose houses were appropriate in that urban locale, to call us 'people of the shed'.

When my father succeeded in acquiring that piece of land, through a government housing plan, he was not able to legalize his ownership of it without paying an amount of 31 pounds. That was a huge amount of money for my poor family. My mother obtained the money from one of her Khartoum-based, affluent Mahdist relatives, a direct offspring of al-Mahdi whose name is al-Sadiq, then in his first term as prime minister. Nevertheless, some of my family members, including my elder brother and later I, were convinced that he—and other similar Mahdist wealthy relatives—could do more than make that donation. As long as the adversity was distressing our family, this conviction swayed my elder brother—and later myself—to resent those relatives. The augmentation of this feeling would afterward contribute fairly to my elder brother joining a right-wing political organisation that employs an extreme Islamic attitude and a chauvinist ethnic outlook. This would also be one of the driving forces that would influence my becoming involved in a far left political organisation, the ideological foundation of which is Marxism.

I still appreciate the historical political anti-imperialism role the Mahdist Movement/Revolution undertook against the Turko-Egyptian-British occupation of Sudan. Yet conversely, I believe that life experiences, including the hardship my family experienced and the conspicuous regressive social, cultural, economic and political contributions al-Mahdi's direct beneficiaries foisted on Sudan, encouraged me to take a nonconformist theoretical and practical stance. That stance stood in opposition to the leading Mahdist politicians of the time.

My stance has, I believe, blocked the unfolding of the inborn 'Mahdist person' in myself, the growth of whom would have made significant members of my family

(including my parents) proud of me. Such a conformist evolution would also be a source of pleasure and gratification to bulky number of ‘my’ sectarian community’s members, at the top of whom is my mother’s brother who is now the Shaikh of the Blue Nile village of al-Shukkaba in which I was born, and in which, six decades before my birth, the British legion executed a number of the Mahdists. These included my mother’s great grandfather and his two nephews, who were the young sons of al-Mahdi, though that British legion would save the life of the latter’s youngest and final son, the wounded Abd al-Rahman, who was thirteen years old at the time, and who would, a few decades later, form what is currently known as the National Umma Party. This Party’s establishment was preceded, nearly two decades earlier, by its founder, the same Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, handing his father’s legendary sword—which, unlike my mother and grandmother’s and their likes’ conviction, was not made of the *Osher* wood—to King George VI as a symbolic signature, a token of the time and future submissiveness.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Contradictions and Tensions**

In two short stories of mine, both written during the 1980s, different characters express their denunciation of the expatriation of Sudanese intellectuals and artists from their motherland. In fact, that feeling of denunciation arose from my own outlook.

Accordingly, I used to view an action or choice, such as the immigration of Sudanese intellectuals and artists, irrespective of the causes behind it, as exemplifying unfaithfulness to the revolutionary process of change I dreamt of for Sudan. It's important to note that I did not belong to any of the Sudanese political organisations at the time I wrote those two short stories. But I fancied enlisting in a radical leftist organisation about which I wasn't so certain.

This outlook accompanied me for some years to come. However, objective and subjective circumstances around me changed, and soon I felt 'compelled' to leave the country. Those circumstances derived from the sudden emergence of a new oppressive political regime in Sudan, abrupt dismissal from my job, and unforeseen detention during which I was subjected to diverse forms of physical and psychological torture.

When I look back at the multiple circumstances that contributed to my decision to leave Sudan, I can pinpoint a number of other, crucial, components that influenced this decision. Those dynamics involve the disappointment caused by the procrastination of the Communist Party of Sudan in approving my request to become a member. In fact, the Party had rejected my request but did not want me to be aware of this decision. This became clear to me just a few months after my submission. I was also able, twenty-five years later, to substantiate my suspicions directly from two prominent ex- Party members. Indeed, I asked each of them, separately, to confirm it. Those two ex-members would not have confirmed this information for me if they were still active members in the Party, as they had been at the time I submitted, through one of them, my original application. Their testimonies have also revealed what I additionally felt and

guessed: my request had embarrassed the most intelligent and creative unit in the Party through which I had chosen to claim the Party's membership: The Bureau of Writers and Artists of the Communist Party of Sudan. My request embarrassed them for it tested the Party's ability to accommodate divergent interpretations of Marxism. So my application had positioned the Party's Bureau of Writers and Artists in a difficult situation, as both of the ex-members confirmed: granting me the Party's membership would threaten ideological conformity given that I had already made it clear in my submission that my interpretation of Marxism differs from the one that has governed the Party's outlook. I also noted that I would not hesitate to call for this view via the Party's official channels and regulations. Apparently, this was an unbearable concession for a conventional Marxist organisation which had undergone no defining theoretical, structural or cultural reorientation.

On the other hand, if the Party had provided me with a direct and clear statement of repudiation that would have caused me to publicly critique or condemn the decision. And if such a critique or condemnation came from a creative writer who by then was a well-known and celebrated leftist, this would have opened the lid on the undemocratic constituent in the founding of the Party, an image that the Party has been struggling to deny. It's also imperative to remark that I had deliberately chosen to approach the Party, through its most intellectual and creative unit, hoping this initiative would communicate my keenness to maintain and sustain my cultural, creative identity, as well as dissimilarity. Yet the bottom line is that the Party's Bureau of Writers and Artists was troubled by my difference.

That experience, in addition to subsequent personal and political involvements—especially as emerged later out of practical engagement with the Sudan's Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) as well as with the broad Sudanese national opposition political coalition known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—caused me to generate a general sense that all political bodies, by their very nature, are unable to fully accommodate the dreams and critical insights of free artists and intellectuals. Free artists and intellectuals are, by definition, non-conformists.

Another component that affected my choice to leave Sudan was a series of departures of several close friends. Their departures followed my detention in an unknown place. The new regime has an antagonistic attitude to cultural and artistic freedom and to

intellectuals and artists and their supporters. This translated into ruthless ideological attacks on them, along with widespread removal of intellectuals and artists from their jobs, as well as arrests. These dismissals and arrests sent an alarming message to my close friends and associates. This message expressed the imminent possibility that any one of them might eventually face a similar fate. Even for some of those friends who remained inside the country, appearing in public with me following my release was not advisable. For it was believed that the security agents of the authoritarian regime were watching my every movement, and would regard everybody I came into contact with as a suspect.

In addition, I myself was forced to sign a declaration that prohibited me from departing Khartoum, let alone leave the country. A number of my fellow detainees, who were not yet released, warned me to find a way to disappear as a security agent had apparently expressed the belief that my release was a ‘mistake.’ That implied my impending re-arrest.

It was, then, time for me to leave my mother land. That decision was not made without considerable feelings of pain, guilt and shame. Leaving Sudan, at the time, made me feel as though I was *betraying* my semi-avowed commitment not to escape the *battlefield*. This feeling was even more painful afterwards, when I discovered that there had been some fellow intellectuals and artists who underwent similar—and sometimes even worse—treatment than I, and who remained in the country.

But what were the reference points that motivated my two interrelated extreme standpoints: denouncing the emigration of intellectuals and artists, and the desire to practice politics within a radical leftist/Marxist organisation, preferably armed?

The ideological and political heritage to which my nuclear and extended family belongs was known for radicalism; a radicalism that had its origins in the family’s close connection with the Mahdist Movement or the Mahdist Revolution. When this movement/revolution succeeded in expelling the Turko-Egyptian colonial rule from Sudan in 1881, it established what has come to be known as the Mahdist State, the legal framework of which was largely inspired by Shari'a.

I grew up hearing the incidents, stories and myths of that Mahdist Movement/Revolution and State as well as with those of a contemporary political and

sectarian body, known as *Hizb al-Umma al-Qawmi* (the National Umma Party) that has inherited their political and religious heritage. Yet I later discovered that the consecutive spiritual and political leaders of that Party had manipulated this heritage by modifying it into sectarian system of belief and ideology in order to maintain power before and immediately after the independence of the country from British colonialism.

When I exposed the opportunist and exploitative nature of the National Umma Party's contemporary leaders, I decided not to belong to it, spiritually at least. But the spiritual alternative available to me at the time, when I was in my twenties, was a religious one as well. Hence I became influenced for a short time by two prominent Egyptian preachers. Both preachers were calling for the belief in the 'Miracle of the Qur'an.' The first preacher, whose name was Muhammad Mutwalli al-Sha'rawi (1911–1998), did so through a literary *and* vernacular interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an. The second one, whose name was Mustafa Mahmud (1921–2009), was a medical doctor striving to find scientific evidence to prove that the Qur'an had made scientific discoveries many years before the formation of the modern (Western) sciences.

But the grip of those preachers on my personal and political outlook would soon be progressively relaxed by the assistance of my growing interest in liberal and leftist ideas, arts/culture and knowledge. These gradually enabled me to conclude that Islam cannot, in isolation, play any decisive role in bringing about progressive social, cultural and political change. I thought I had succeeded in framing religion, particularly Islam, as a category of sentiment rather than a religious faith.

My diasporic experience recently allowed me to recall this period afresh and contemplate the reasons behind my adoption of such extreme leftist position. I came to see that at that time I was perhaps being influenced by what Octavio Paz (1914–1998) once pointed to as one of the twists of the religious instinct (interviewed in Gibert 1985, p.130). I arrived at this conclusion when I revisited the context in which I assumed my extreme political stance, which involved joining a radical leftist and armed organisation. This revisit, or revision, has helped me realise the fact that I wasn't adequately equipped intellectually to adopt this position. That is to say, a significant component of that *Marxist* background relied largely on a few selective and unsystematic readings of classical Marxism and non-traditional leftist views, particularly those associated with the Latin American leftist armed movements. Another significant component of that

background was dependent on a sentimental, youthful sense of rebellion. Because my dissidence was closely intertwined with my desire to build an individual identity *within* my family, there was still a place for my radical familial-sectarian-religious heritage to influence my imagined *new* political outlook. Here, I can also say that my inherited radical sectarian standpoint was replaced—but not very successfully—by a leftist radical attitude. Thus, it was ‘natural’ for such an outlook to embrace a radical stance against, for example, the expatriation of Sudanese intellectuals and artists at that juncture.

At the same time, I was criticising the principal theoretical ground that determines the political attitude and practice of the Communist Party of Sudan, branding it an orthodox ideological and political body. Concomitantly, I was marking myself as unorthodox; that is, non-dogmatic, open-minded, and democratic.

It is true that the question of democracy has always been the most critical challenge for conventional and unconventional Marxist political movements, organisations and political regimes, as well as to a wide range of Marxist individuals. However, it has also been a source of discomfit to me. This state of mind can be summarised thus: despite having faith in the necessity of social equality, as translated in socialism, I simply couldn’t—and still cannot—imagine any form of socialism without a genuine, that is, organic, democratic constituent. Hence, I have always felt bothered and embarrassed by the sheer lack of democratic backbone from the dominant authoritarian socialist regimes, particularly those which earned my support, such as the Cuban regime.

Dialogical communication with artistic, cultural and intellectual pursuits has imbued me with cultural and political sensitivity and sensibility. This cultural and political sensitivity and sensibility have differed from those prevalent in both the Communist Party of Sudan and its Sudanese Marxist rival organisations. I am here reminded of a short statement uttered by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927–2014) when a journalist asked him about the political commitment of the writer. ‘The writer’s [political] commitment is to tell a good story’ (Marquez, cited by Williams 2010). Marquez’s reply was consistent with a number of other statements asserting his recognition of the crippling role that ‘bad art’ plays in the process of achieving socialism.

As I interpret this statement, Marquez was calling for arts that are essentially produced by artistic conditions. It was a call for the arts to be protected from the intrusion of

politics, as is obvious in the case of Socialist Realism. But had that cultural and political sensitivity and sensibility—nurtured by my reading of Marquez and others, at least up until that time—permeated every facet of my state of mind? I don't think so. For if this had been the case, then my belief in the precondition and/or indispensability of the democratic constituent of socialism should have—for that reason—engendered tolerance in my sentiment and mind with respect to the choices of the Sudanese intellectuals and artists. But it hadn't. That means my anti-authoritarian outlook was holding, because of an underlying twist of religious-sectarian instinct, an authoritarian portion.

## **Chapter Four**

### **A Traumatised Diasporic Subject**

I was still incarcerated in an anonymous detention facility, which was widely known as ‘the ghost house’<sup>1</sup> in Khartoum, when a close friend of mine paid a supportive visit to my family. She then asked them to provide her with my passport. She took it, renewed it, as it had already expired, and succeeded in having an entry visa to the United Kingdom attached to it. This kind of achievement was almost impossible to bring about. That is why I was considered exceptionally fortunate.

Even so, I decided not to go (initially at least) to the UK, favouring Morocco or Syria instead. I justified this decision by saying that I preferred to travel to a ‘nearby location’ until our dictatorship collapses soon. I anticipated that the breakdown of the current Sudanese oppressive political regime would occur in a little while. I was also thinking that getting used to living in a country such as the UK would not make the return easy.

For the first six months, I resided between Syria and Egypt, before moving to Eritrea for eight years. At the end of those first six months, the entry visa that would authorise me to go to the UK was terminated. It didn’t cause me any regret at the time. I was still dreaming of, and expecting, imminent return. Nothing was more agonising to me than that tangible absence of Sudan. During that time, the poet within me resurfaced, and I wrote two poems, and my prose became infused with a poetic dimension far more than before.

Also during that period, the idea to write a book began. “How Sudanese I Am!” suggested itself to me as the title. The idea was to praise ‘the matchlessness of

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<sup>1</sup> This facility is one of several covert detention premises, called Ghost Houses, created by the security forces of the current Sudanese political regime principally for the purpose of imprisoning and interrogating its political opponents. These interrogations involve a wide range of torturing instruments. The locations of these facilities are usually unknown to the public and their existence is consistently denied by the Sudanese authorities.

Sudaneness,’ to be explored through a variety of forms such as autobiographical narratives, short stories, poems, articles, personal correspondences, interviews, different types of documents, paintings, drawings and photographs.

That project accompanied me, with the same content but with an expanding scope, for nearly seven years. After that it underwent a radical shift in content, which changed to ‘documenting the conditions of my exile’. The title was also changed: “The Book of Exile: Texts, Documents and Testimonies of Displacement”. To date I haven’t completed this project, but I have set myself the goal of accomplishing it in due course. Yet it’s important to consider that such a fundamental alteration occurred as a consequence of my further displacement through diaspora. As a diasporic subject, I have experienced distress and anguish, but my mind has been enriched by experiences and knowledge that I doubt would have been available to me if I was still in my motherland. I could at least know myself and my country of origin better since the geographical remoteness has made it possible for me to see, as Juan Goytisolo (see interview in *Jihad* 1986, p. 200) once reflected, matters which physical and emotional proximity had been preventing me to see and make better sense of.

It is hard to think of a greater contrast than that existing between the stance which informed the nationalistic first title of my book—“How Sudanese I Am!”—and my earlier stance claiming a difference, in my progressive and open-minded outlook, that was beyond the nationalistic horizons of the orthodox Sudanese Marxists. Those ‘nationalistic horizons’ were easily unmasked by that early phase of diaspora. In the course of that phase, I found myself measuring my common national entity, Sudaneness, not as distinct from other national entities, such as those of Egyptian and Syrian (and Eritrean afterward), but against them. I had therefore been ‘otherising’ these entities.

That ‘otherisation’ was manifested in my choice to live outside these societies, not within them. The only exceptions to this rule were the social and cultural interactions that occurred between me and very limited intellectual, creative and individual circles in Syria and Egypt. Even those interactions took place only because of the ardent socio-cultural activism of some close Sudanese friends, and not by my own initiative.

Wasn't that behaviour strange, for a person who has been portrayed as being open-hearted, open-minded and socially and culturally active? I think part of the answer can be found in my 'solitary character'.

At some stage of my high-secondary schooling I responded to an English composition lesson, in which each student was asked to write about his own regular day. I truthfully stated the facts that were relevant to my standard day. One of these facts was captured in the following phrase: 'Although our school is far away from my family's house, I usually prefer to go there by walking alone; and this is not because I do not have a bicycle, but for the reason that I like to walk alone for I like to do thinking in the morning.'

That phrase still reflects a great deal of existing and defining characteristics of my personality, in both a realistic and metaphorical sense. For instance, I still favour walking as well as travelling, in the morning and at other times, alone. I remember some close friends of mine once complained that they could barely recall some intimate details in my life, despite their recognition of me as a highly sociable person. These two attributes (walking alone and being private) are sources of discomfort for my wife.

Could the last three paragraphs explain the dominance of stream of consciousness as a narrative method in my short stories? I think so. But again, how could an open-hearted, open-minded and socially and culturally active person, inside his native country and among the Sudanese and the Eritreans of Sudan in the diaspora—indeed, wherever he is—be socially and culturally detached from non-Sudanese communities?

I suggest that we can start to answer that question by discussing the covert motives behind my decision to not move to the UK. That discussion could also shed significant light on a defining and ongoing chapter of my life in Australia.

I had chosen to reside in Arabic countries (Egypt, Syria, and a significant socio-cultural constituent and dimension of Eritrea), as opposed to moving to the UK. This was the case not primarily because my homecoming would not be trouble-free, following the predicted downfall of the dictatorship, but because I felt that my dwelling in the latter would not be socially and culturally uncomplicated. Put simply, I was very apprehensive about living in the UK. Thus, I opted to involve myself in a type of socially and culturally secured residence. This second, favoured, residence can also be

described as a ‘shy dwelling’, which has eventually become a ‘shy expatriation’. This shy expatriation later became ‘shy settlement’. This shy settlement, which can also be succinctly described as unsettling settlement, has, shamefully and painfully, been contradicting not only my genuine, heartfelt thoughts, but also my creative writing. This writing has been praised for its bold content and adventurous formal innovation.

Wasn’t it strange, for a person who admired Shakespeare (1564–1616), Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), Emily Brontë (1818–1848), Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1841) not to be attracted to live in their motherland? The reverse is true. I had long wanted to see the UK and touch the environments and places connected to the writers I admired. But I didn’t dare to live in that country because I was (and remain) a deeply shy person, in spite of having a reputation as someone who is extremely sociable.

There have been a number of elements that helped construct my reputation for being sociable. I have been a celebrated writer in my country of origin (and later on in a number of circles within the Sudanese diasporic communities). I was known as an open-hearted person and loved for it; but usually it wasn’t I who went to see others—not because of any arrogance, but from my deep-rooted shyness—but others who mostly came to see me.

In addition, the apprehension attached to the possibility of living (albeit temporarily) in the UK was exacerbated by my limited grasp of the English language. I felt apprehensive about residing in an Arabic country such as Syria, but to a much lesser degree—at least I thought so—as I shared language and common cultural sentiment with the people.

Then again, in Syria, and later on in Egypt, my apprehensiveness was associated not just with my shyness but also with my skin colour, as well as other body features that I have probably inherited from my African ancestry. As to the latter point, I was aware of the fact that Sudanese have in general been looked at by many Arabs (particularly the white-skinned Arabs) as not being Arab. Being so starkly at odds with the common perception of many Sudanese of themselves this has caused considerable emotional and intellectual discomfort among many Sudanese people, as well as rendering Sudan, in Deng’s formulation, as ‘the country [that] is confused in its sense of identity and vision of its destiny’ (Deng, 1995, p. 60).

In Syria, my uneasiness was largely dispersed because I was accompanied by a Sudanese artist, who was going to Syria for business. I shared a flat with this artist for three months after our arrival in Damascus, along with various aspects of daily life. As a result, we have become friends. He was popular within a number of artistic and cultural Syrian circles, as he had exhibited his artworks in some galleries there. He was also a Sudan-based correspondent for a Syrian literary journal in which I published—through him—a short story before the idea of going to Syria had even crossed my mind. That short story was praised by the journal’s editorial team. He also helped me to get in touch with some Sudanese and Eritrean individuals, who were living in Damascus, and from whom I received considerable social and emotional support.

I left Syria for Egypt only because I was promised a job in a Sudanese cultural centre in Cairo. After a few days of my arrival in Cairo, however, I discovered that that promise was insincere.

Egypt has been considered to be the classic haven for the Sudanese migrants, students, tourists and business investors. Hence, and on account of the emergence of an oppressive political regime in Sudan, Egypt has a sizeable Sudanese population. Among those Sudanese residents, I found old friends who had left the country for reasons similar to mine. I also made a few new Sudanese friends.

The enormous and diverse Sudanese communities living in Egypt were mostly based in Cairo. For me connecting with Egyptian social and cultural life was limited largely to the media and a few scattered cultural events. Apart from that, interaction was quite limited, and when it did take place it was facilitated by the initiative of Sudanese friends, not mine.

Notwithstanding, I was unhappy in Cairo. Egypt did not prove to be the intimate and attractive place that I encountered in the media, books, journals, magazines and newspapers. I lacked some of the very basic settlement needs there. For example, I had no secure and comfortable accommodation, no work, and no financial resources. I was feeling displaced even within the Sudanese communities there. I wished I could return to Syria. But who could guarantee a better situation would await me there?

My entry visa to the UK had expired; and even if it hadn’t, I wouldn’t have gone there for I was certain that my feeling of being displaced would not improve. No decision of

going back home could be made for the dictatorship hasn't collapsed. Where to go, then?

To Eritrea, the recently liberated country, seems promising. Yes, the solution lies there. In Eritrea you would feel less displaced. Nobody would distinguish you from the people of Eritrea on the basis of your skin colour or facial features. In general, the people of Eritrea hold great feelings to the people of Sudan. They do not belittle your natives like the Arabian countries do. There is much more kinships tying your compatriots to the Eritreans than the affinities that connect your country to the Arab World, though most of your compatriots favour the latter. Your skin colour, like most Eritreans, is brown while many Arabs have white skin. The common musical scale between Sudan and Eritrea is the pentatonic musical scale, while the common Arab musical scale is the heptatonic musical scale. That explains why Eritreans are generally fond of Sudanese music and songs. If you are looking for a place where the Arabic culture can be available, a historically large component of the Eritrean national identity has stemmed from, and is still influenced by, Arabic-Islamic culture. So don't worry, the Arabic-Islamic culture and the Arabic language will be there. On the other hand, and for the sake of your own interest, you will be amongst a large number of Eritrean-Sudanese as a supporter of the all-purpose Eritrean struggle to attain independence from Ethiopia. Eritrea has at this moment just conquered the Ethiopian regime that had been preventing her self-determination. Some of your Eritrean-Sudanese friends, who were amongst political and armed fighters, are right now enjoying liberation of their country. They will definitely welcome your arrival. They will without doubt help you during your stay. Some will be in a position to happily find you a job, or help you find one. Moreover, some of them will unquestionably support you should you think of getting involved—and this is likely to happen—in political activities against the current regime oppressing Sudan. Even more, you might be able to meet your first Eritrean girlfriend there. She is the one who had introduced you, via a lovingly passionate letter, to the Eritrean community in Damascus. She gave you tremendous emotional and material support, and was an amazing girlfriend. Didn't you say to her verbally, and in a letter, that you will meet her in her country of origin, Eritrea, if she moves to live there?

I had, thus, undergone a social and cultural relocation. It would later be confirmed by eight years spent living in Eritrea mainly in the fold of an Eritrean Arabic-Islamic community located in the predominantly non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking capital

city, Asmara. This Eritrean Arabic-Islamic community has mostly been influenced by Sudan's Arabic-Islamic culture<sup>2</sup>. Sudanese songs, foods and dialects were always there. I had also become accustomed to uniquely Eritrean foods when I was still living in Sudan. Adjusting to the more heavily spiced food was easier because some Sudanese cooking shared similar spices.

I hadn't learned to speak the principal language of Asmara and other vast regions in Eritrea, the Tigrinya, which has eventually become the official language of the State of Eritrea. I depended heavily on my bilingual Eritrean friends and acquaintances to interpret or translate for me. Otherwise, I could easily manage my communication either by using the few practical sentences of Tigrinya, which I had saved for such situations, or by utilising my limited English.

Not all my expectations were met in Eritrea. It's true that I was warmly welcomed by my new and old Sudanese and Eritrean-Sudanese friends. It's also true that I initially felt relief on my arrival in Asmara. Yet despite this, a feeling of being displaced similar to the feeling that overwhelmed me in Damascus and Cairo gradually started to creep in and occupy my soul. I can now relate this feeling to a number of factors.

Asmara had been recently liberated from the Ethiopian occupation. The city appeared confused, in that transitional period, and was confusing to many people. The reason for this disorientation was twofold. Symbolically, on the one hand, the city was undergoing a radical change in its formal collective belongingness, its national identity.

Existentially, on the other hand, it was confusing not only for a 'formal stranger' like me, but also for a wide range of those Eritreans who entered it as either conquerors or as returnees, particularly those who were not born or raised in 'their formal country of origin', Eritrea.

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<sup>2</sup> This influence can be traced in part to the large number of Eritreans (many of whom identified as Muslim) who sought refuge in Sudanese cities and towns as a result of fleeing political oppression and war. Many of those refugees, particularly those who are Muslim and who lived in Sudan for decades, have become Sudanese, officially and/or socially and culturally. In the current era, following the period of stability that followed the independence of Eritrea in 1991, the consequences of another war sprang in 1998 between Eritrea and Ethiopia, in addition to poverty and the oppression associated with the first national Eritrean political governing regime, have also compelled a wide range of Eritreans to seek refuge in Sudan.

One reason for my own feeling of displacement was the general cultural and creative environment, including the Arabic cultural and creative environment, which was under-resourced and historically neglected under the dominance of the political. I had been a celebrated creative writer in Sudan, and despite the welcome I was given by Eritrean-Sudanese and Sudanese friends there, I still felt I was gradually losing the nourishment I had been privileged to enjoy through my celebrity in Sudan. It was even feebler than in Damascus and in Cairo. This was not due to any deficiency in the support and warmth I received from my old and new friends, but because of the paucity of active cultural and creative life and the small number of people—including my friends—who might enrich life there, and my sentiment and mind along with it.

I was not able find a regular job, and therefore did not have crucial financial resources. Moreover, my second Eritrean girlfriend, who I met in Damascus, and who arrived a few months following my arrival in Eritrea, had preferred to engage in other intimate relationships. She kept me (sincerely, I nevertheless, believe) as a close friend.

On top of these, my arrival in Eritrea was very much tied up with a voluntary political mission. That mission endeavoured to facilitate a welcome from the newborn Eritrean government to the Sudanese semi-united political forces that was opposing the oppressive Sudanese political regime. The main purpose of the mission was to convince the Eritrean government to host Sudanese forces and permit them to implement an armed struggle strategy, the aim of which was to overthrow the Sudanese government.

My involvement in politics intensified my feeling of being displaced. This was primarily because I was (and I remain) a creative writer who has achieved political awareness and concern, but not the other way around. I was, therefore, practicing politics using the political principles as seen, and/or desired, by an artist: ethics, honesty, transparency, democracy and openness. I knew that what I was doing would not be recognised and appreciated by conventional politicians anywhere. Even so, had I practised politics the conventional way, I believe I would have ceased to be a creative writer.

With varying degrees, periodically and in and outside Sudan, I felt that politics would be a source of infelicity to me. This feeling became very tangible throughout the eight years I spent in Eritrea. I soon realised that there are no significant differences between most of the Sudanese contemporary political leaders, be they rightists or leftists, in

government or in opposition, with respect to their attitudes. Nearly all of them are authoritarian and patriarchal, with little to no imagination and dry discourses. “Oh, my God, I categorically do not belong to these people, including the majority of those I’m working closely with!” I groaned in realisation one day.

Most importantly, a shy person, let alone a sensitive artist, is not suited to work in politics, because one of the defining characteristics of being a politician is loud self-assurance, if not impudence and rudeness. Yet at the same time my shyness has not led me to endorse conservative outlooks with respect to social, cultural and political concerns. Conversely, my three brothers are not shy, and their political views are conservative. Unlike them, in my nuclear and extended family I am the one regarded as creative, liberal and a supporter of gender equality.

I have often been known as different. This difference brought me admiration more than condemnation. Nevertheless, in the realm of Sudanese politics my difference brought me more condemnation than admiration. The Sudanese government demonstrated its dislike of such difference by pushing me and others into diasporic exile.

Despite the fact I practiced a politics that mirrored my inner sense of identity, the creative writer identity, by encouraging the politics of culture and arts to contribute to the process of change, but I hadn’t been protected from the vulgar intrusion of the prevailing political players. They have always demanded culture and arts be at the service of their political agenda. In their eyes, there is nothing called ‘the relative independence of culture and arts’. Art is given no dignity, and must serve political propaganda—which is not art at all. The general consequence is that culture and art are given no alternative outside displacement.

If you want peace of mind and some material privileges, shift your identity. Displace the creative writer and insert the politician. Otherwise, quit politics, that is, ‘their politics,’ to save the creative writer. Eight years of exile, of actual and metaphorical displacement, in Eritrea, is more than enough. But where can you go, again? The only accessible, semi-familiar, semi-safeguarded destination is Egypt. So it’s Cairo, for the fourth time. There you can, at least, revive your soul and update your mind with fresh cultural and artistic possibilities. In Cairo, you will, at least, meet the few old friends who haven’t yet moved to the West. Do you realise, now, the crime you enacted against yourself when you turned your back on residence in the UK?

But the injuries to your soul were deeper than the cultural, artistic and social capacities that were available in Cairo. Moreover, most of the old friends with whom you were reunited for a while gradually left Egypt and resettled in the West. The Cairo UNHCR Office legalised your residential status in Egypt by recognising you as a refugee who deserved to be resettled in a western country. Yet the waiting period for the actual resettlement process to be started is lengthy. You still lack the basics, for example, employment and secure accommodation. In the face of these adversities, your first Eritrean girlfriend, who has been resettled in Australia for some years, contacted you by phone. She sponsored you to come to Australia on humanitarian grounds.

I tried to dissipate my apprehension about the idea of heading for Australia, to think of it positively. To think that life may be making up for my frittering away my chance to move to the UK. Australia could be an opportunity to make up for my disrupted formal educational journey; an opportunity that would allow me to improve my English, and also equip me with academic and cultural qualifications and knowledge. Most importantly, this move would be an opportunity to combat, if not to cure, my chronic shyness. I comforted myself with the idea that Australia is not a typical western country. That is to say, I viewed Australia as a ‘second-world country that is centrally pro-West.’ This made it in my mind a country with a ‘third-world’ history that may render it bearable for a person who is most comfortable living casually. The latter characteristic would allow me to interact with the Australian people more easily than interacting with citizens of the ‘first world’. In the end, I settled on the vague conviction that an open-minded person like me deserves a life in a liberal country, and that my open-mindedness would protect me from culture shock.

But Australia has also presented me with a number of cultural predicaments. First, I would have to struggle with English. The problem isn’t technical so much as sentimental and cultural. Having a complex personal style of speaking and writing Arabic was bound up with so many things that meant not only meaning and satisfaction, but a distinct artistic identity. My dilemma has been that—while I’m endeavouring to improve my English language—I cannot help comparing it with my unique personal style of speaking and writing Arabic. That is why I haven’t been able to accept another, independent, and maybe immature, tongue of mine which is in need of development, a shameful reminder of personal cultural incompetence. Once again, my deep-seated shyness has contributed to this quandary. By this I mean, in Australia, I haven’t

interacted with people from English-speaking backgrounds. Socially and linguistically, I have socialised predominantly within limited circles in the Sudanese and Eritrean communities. Consequently, I have encountered difficulties in mastering the English language.

More troublingly, the work I have put into improving my English leads to a neglect of my Arabic, especially my written style, leaving it in danger of stagnation. Furthermore, the resettlement requirements, particularly those related to culture, education and language, have also distanced me from what I consider the most decisive component of my creative identity: short story writing. It's really painful when I confront the fact that I have not written a single short story since I arrived in Australia. The last short story I wrote was in Eritrea nearly twenty years ago. During my sojourns in Syria, Egypt and Eritrea the satisfaction and inspiration that came from celebrity were diminished. But if there were in those places circles that recognised me as a distinguished Sudanese short story writer, Australia was an entirely different story.

Still another thread in my diasporic predicament in Australia, and one that has contributed to my enduring episodic depression, is being constantly confronted by racist attitudes. These have taken various forms, and occur on almost a daily basis. They have been displayed by a public transport ticket inspector, a receptionist, a dentist, a police officer, a librarian, an employment case worker, a teacher, a pharmacist, a labourer, a medical doctor, a politician, a cashier, a journalist, a nurse, a university professor, a housing or Centrelink officer, to cover just a few. Specifically Australian racist attitudes are pervasive, and have been taken up by the Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Turkish, Lebanese communities, to cover just a few. And those communities, ironically, remember their own pain as victims of the same attitudes.

Thus, the question you sometimes ask yourself is: why 'us' (the Sudanese/Africans)? Is it really the 'racial and cultural visibility' that has been proposed by Colic-Peisker (2009)? But shouldn't the 'racial and cultural visibility' of blackness be something normal and every day, having been a prominent feature, one might say 'visible representative component,' of Australia's 'national identity'? Are you endeavouring (for this is nothing new in the Australian administrative landscape) to extract consolation from the horrific displacement and decimation of the Australian Aboriginal people? Though you suspect you know the answer, you nevertheless ask yourself: Why you?

You were never one of those who abused, mistreated or excised the indigenous inhabitants of your country of origin? On the contrary, you have been one of the few in your community to defend them. So why should it be you, now, who is subject to punishment for the sins your community has been committing against aboriginal dwellers of your homeland?

These ongoing historical (i.e. social, cultural and political) predicaments uncovered some underlying dilemmas which seem destined to complicate my trauma and diasporic displacement, increasing my emotional, psychological and social distress, and impacting on my self-perception and sense of belonging.

In my country of origin, I was considered a handsome and attractive person to women. I enjoyed and was inspired by being surrounded by beautiful, sexy and smart women. This privilege was drastically diminished in Syria, Egypt and Eritrea, where I was quite lonely—until in Syria, where such deprivation was less severe, I met and fell in love with my second Eritrean girlfriend. In Eritrea and Egypt the lack of a loving relationship left me depressed.

In Australia, I have been shocked to find over time that I'm no longer regarded as handsome. I have gradually realised that the core ingredient of my perceived ugliness lies in my nose. The size of my nose wasn't a problem for me in my homeland. I don't even recall having looked at my nose in the mirror in Sudan to see whether it was in the 'normal' range or not, simply because it was regarded as being normal there. So what makes its flat profile ordinary in Sudan and extraordinary, a marker of strangeness, in Australia? How can a geographical shift contribute to such a radical, hurtful assumption? Conceptions of beauty, the standardisation of external features, of superficial signs, operate to determine the degree to which inclusion or exclusion—as well as of other benefits and rights—are made.

Similar regimes of standardisation are also at work, to varying degrees from one country to another, in the mainstream societies of Syria, Egypt and Eritrea. But in Syria and Egypt, because I lived in Sudanese and Eritrean-Sudanese communities, I did not go through the heightened shock experienced in Australia. In addition, in both Syria and Egypt I spent my time largely with intellectual and artistic groups and individuals where the decisive image of a person is derived from his or her intellectual or creative portrait. In Eritrea, on the other hand, life for me in mainstream Asmara (generally Tigrinya

speaking and Christian-Orthodox) held out greater possibilities than in Syria and Egypt, because I was privileged to share in its Africanness<sup>3</sup> despite the dislike there of flat noses, and despite a tendency to admire fairer skin and hair.

In Australia, the situation would be different, given the expanded duration of my stay. The processes and requirements for resettlement forced me to fight my chronic shyness and encounter the wider social world, efforts that were nonetheless regularly crippled by my preference for isolation. Eventually, despite what was often a personally traumatic process, I was able to utilise over a period of ten years' limited interaction with the Australian mainstream—and sometimes non-mainstream and non-Australian—to learn about and adapt to its social, educational, cultural and political milieu.

Most importantly, the process dislodged former concretizations of my ‘self’ as an inherited, essential identity that was maintained in spite of all its disparate, imagined and decrepit classical elements. I was confronted with the fact, as articulated by Hall (1996, p. 118), that ‘the ‘grand narratives’ which constituted the language of the self as an integral entity don’t hold.’ I could then see that the concept “How Sudanese I Am!” was produced out of that inherited, essential subject, that integral entity, with all of its disturbing, rupturing historical constituents. Facing a similar feeling to that which is enunciated by Éigeartaigh (2010, p. 46) in recognising that as a migrant in Australia ‘[my] identity will never again be a taken-for-granted birthright as it would had [I] stayed in [Sudan],’ I have come to be able to displace that essential subject, that integral entity. In other words, I have come to be able to perceive myself not as a given truth, fixed and eternal essence, but as a process (Hall, 1996). I have also come to dwell in my displacement.

My intuitions about the cultural development living in Australia would provide me with proved to be correct. It was particularly true that academic studies here would contribute significantly to this cultural development, although I wasn’t expecting to grapple so profoundly with conceptions of identity. Yet this development is not entirely the consequence of the diasporic experience in Australia. If identity, or cultural identity, is best examined as processes, then there must be other contributors. Those include, for instance, the diasporic experiences in Sudan, experiences of internal displacement, and

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<sup>3</sup> Although Egypt is located in Africa, she loudly aligns her national, cultural, ideological and linguistic identity with the Arab World.

the disorientation I underwent in Syria, Egypt and Eritrea. However, Australia would be the conceptual turning point, the radical geographical location with all its social, cultural and political consequences that has allowed me to make sense of former and current diasporic experiences.

While these experiences have enabled me to make better sense of myself and my country of origin, Sudan, and no doubt other issues, it also permitted me to make better sense of my country of resettlement, Australia; despite the struggle to displace my shyness and return to a life of social, cultural and political engagement.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Inherited Infirmities, Unfolded Horizons**

A year or so ago, I was invited by a group of Sudanese-Australian political activists to participate in a panel discussion which focused on assessing the political practice of the Sudanese-Australian opposition against the current political regime in Sudan. At the discussion's beginning, I responded to a question about whether this political practice has been inadequate, and if so, why? My standpoint was that the political practice has been ineffectual. As to why it is the case, my argument started with acknowledging that the Sudanese political opposition, in Australia or elsewhere outside Sudan, has primarily sought refuge in these hosting countries to pursue political oppositional activism. Yet it has done so by insisting, I debated, on carrying with it what I labelled as 'the domestic chronic political ailments' that have been producing and reproducing what I see as a protracted state of political ineffectiveness outside the country. These domestic chronic political ailments involve, for instance, a deficiency of self-questioning, the absence of internal democracy, a lack of cultural and political openness and an unwillingness to bring about a genuine shift in thought and praxis at both organisational and individual levels. These chronic domestic political ailments have continued to cause the diasporic political opposition to practice politics in an ineffectual way.

I would argue that the problems I have identified above as plaguing the diasporic political arena are also repeated more generally through the broader diasporic experience to include the social and cultural domains, and that the three domains are interconnected. This has also had implications for the Sudanese communities' relocation within Australian society, which is to say that, not unexpectedly, a number of ongoing social and cultural problems were homemade in Sudan and limit the communities' ability to reinterpret their own cultural and social resources in terms of the Australian context. Some examples may be taken from the experience of Sudanese communities

that belong to the ‘Central North of Sudan (CNS)’,<sup>1</sup> particularly those who have overwhelmingly been brought up (and here I include myself) as the ‘standard subjects’ of the country. Despite these communities being well aware of the fact that they are not the indigenous inhabitants of Sudan, they nonetheless regard themselves as the ‘best’ in Sudan, or as exemplary Sudanese<sup>2</sup>. In fact, they are historically the product of intermarriage between Arab migrants, who were predominantly male, and female natives of the country. Some of those migrants from the Arabian Peninsula entered Sudan through the Red Sea and others came via Egypt, before the emergence of Islam, but most, again predominantly male, arrived later from North Africa, including Morocco (for this history see the data and arguments which trace through Deng 1995, Hasan 1967, and McMichael 1922).

Yet the descendants of these Afro-Arab intermarriages have chosen, as Francis Deng (1995) repeatedly points out, to vigorously repudiate the aboriginal African element of their identity. They have instead identified themselves as Arabs. The ironic consequence of such self-identification has been that Afro-Arab descendants tend to disdain Sudanese ethnic groups who are recognised as indigenous black Africans of Sudan (IBAS), such as Dinka, Nuer, Nuba and Angassana.<sup>3</sup> This disdain became structural

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<sup>1</sup> I suggest and use this term, Central North of Sudan (CNS), which is fraught with geopolitical connotations, to denote the juxtaposition of ‘race’, racism, ideology, culture(s), power and geographical site(s) within the North of Sudan. I use this term for the fact that the North itself is not a unified, homogenous entity, as the common employment of the term ‘North’ indicates. For there are different *Norths* within the North in regard to each *North*’s position in the hierarchy of proximity to (or marginality from) the centre of the political and ‘racial’ power in Khartoum and its ‘racial’, namely the Afro-Arab ethnic (and ideological), resources in the North, especially those located, for instance, around the Nile to the north of Khartoum. For example, regions that are occupied by large numbers of indigenous black Africans of Sudan (IBAS), such as Nuba Mountains (Southern Kurdufan, part of the greater west of Sudan) and Southern Blue Nile (part of the greater east of Sudan) have been subject to ongoing complex marginalisation, persecution and racism, just as the former Southern region of Sudan was. Similarly, the largest ethnic group in the Darfur region of western Sudan, the Fur, suffer from a comparably complex marginalisation, persecution and racism from most of a number of *Norths*.

<sup>2</sup> This influence guided my sentiments when years ago imagining my unwritten book, “How Sudanese I Am!,” which I am now very glad I did not write then, and which I hope I am prepared to revisit and write, with the provisional title “The Book of Exile,” in the near future.

<sup>3</sup> Dinka is considered to be the largest ethnic group of Southern Sudan, and accommodates various subgroups, which occupy vast areas in the savannah region, around the Nile Basin, in South Sudan. Nuer is regarded as the second most prominent ethnic indigenous ethnic group, and includes different

with the rise of wealthy Afro-Arab elites into a position of political leadership. This they consolidated through developing particular sites and locations as key support bases in a regional power strategy. The same process marginalised—with varying degrees of harshness—other regions in Sudan. The marginalisation of the regions that were largely inhabited by the IBAS, for example, was much more comprehensive and severe.

Put another way, marginalised peoples from IBAS backgrounds (who include traditional animist religions believers, Christians and Muslims) have been denigrated even by CNS Afro-Arabs who are themselves economically exploited and socially marginalised. Even for those IBAS who converted to Islam, conversion did not bring any significant ‘improvement’ that could positively transform their image in the eyes of CNS.

Aggravated by structural inequality, there has never been a genuine social contact between CNS Afro-Arabs and the IBAS. Apart from the state’s widespread and repeated disregard of all claims to equality from the marginalised IBAS communities, there is no basis for genuine relationships—except for a few ad hoc and disparate efforts—that might contribute to the facilitation of mutual awareness, knowledge and understanding, let alone solidarity. The broad effect has been that the two different communities (the CNS and the IBAS) do not know each other. They are strangers to each other. In a word, each community has been the Other to the other community, despite the fact that they live in the same country.

With the emergence of a ‘new’ Sudanese political regime (1989 – present day) unprecedented in its use of absolutist power, no community—except those selected or co-opted into its own ranks—has not been comprehensively damaged in economic, social, cultural and legal terms. That shared multidimensional injustice is what has led millions of Sudanese people, of diverse backgrounds, to resort to diaspora. A diaspora unparalleled, quantitatively and qualitatively, in the history of Sudan.

Vast numbers of the Sudanese diaspora assembled in a second country, such as Egypt, to facilitate resettlement in another (third) country such as Australia. The majority have

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subgroups, in South Sudan. Nuer people reside in the savannah along the two banks of the Nile in South Sudan. Nuba is a large indigenous ethnic group, which contains a variety of subgroups, which live in the Southern area of the western State of Kurdufan in Sudan. Their region is also known as Nuba Mountains. Angassana is an indigenous ethnic group that encompasses a range of subgroups, which dwell the region of Southern Blue Nile in Sudan.

shared common defining circumstances which they experienced while seeking refuge in a second or transitional country. Some of these circumstances continued to exist in the third or settlement country, such as a ‘non-resident status’,<sup>4</sup> lack of employment opportunities, social and cultural marginalisation and racism. Yet these common defining circumstances, which can be summarised as a ‘collective diasporic predicament,’ have not been taken up as an opportunity to revisit and change each community’s attitudes towards each other. This failure occurs because each community has brought the same chronic domestic divisions with it. Thus, the avoidance, strangeness and otherness have remained the same.

In Australia, two significant alterations have occurred to the public image of the two major communities, namely the IBAS (the largest percentage of whom are Christian) and the CNS (the majority of whom are Muslim), with respect to one another as well as in relation to each community’s own communal self-image. The first alteration concerns the quantitative status in which the IBAS has become the majority. This implies that the IBAS has become the primary face and image of the whole Sudanese community in Australia, regardless of its subdivisions. Conversely, the ‘quantitative majority’ of Sudanese population was considered in our homeland to be the CNS<sup>5</sup> whose privileged ruling elites have chosen ‘to define the national character [of Sudan] along the lines of their self-perception [which is Arab-and-Muslim], itself a distortion of their composite identity as a mixed Arab-African race’ (Deng, 1995, p.484). Thus, the CNS has been the country’s chief representative.

The second alteration relates to the qualitative status which makes known the fact that the IBAS have currently, in Australia, the same rights, on theoretical and practical grounds, that the CNS have. Previously, and ironically, such equity was only ever theoretical in our native country. That is to say, in Sudan, every Sudanese citizen is

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Egyptian authorities required Sudanese people who entered the country after 1995 to apply for legal residency for a specific period of time, subject to renewal.

<sup>5</sup> The CNS’s serving intelligentsia have produced and deployed the misinforming term ‘ethnic minorities [of Sudan]’ in order to categorise all the IBAS’s groups in Sudan. This term also implies that the ‘the ethnic majority’ of Sudan is all the Afro-Arab-and-Muslim groups of Sudan. It is apparent that the latter term intentionally confuse ‘race’ with Islam. That is to say, the purpose of this serving intelligentsia is to consider non-Arab ethnic groups, who are Muslim, such as the Fur, people of ancient Nubia (far north of Sudan), the Angassana and the Bija as part of the Afro-Arab Muslim groups of Sudan.

equal, in theory, to another Sudanese citizen irrespective of his/her ethnic, religious and cultural background; but the evidence is abundant that the situation is not so in reality. This has been the key reason for civil war in Sudan.

For the IBAS the significance of these two radical transpositions has been a kind of elevating reappraisal, though it takes place outside our country of origin. Additionally, for a community that is chiefly Christian to be hosted by a country in which Christianity is the prevailing faith of the population may be beneficial, especially during a period in which Islam has come under heightened suspicion in the non-Islamic world.

However, these two important shifts do not necessarily indicate less diasporic agony for the members of the IBAS compared to CNS. In fact, the massive and prolonged displacement that is brought about by protracted civil war, as well as other war-effects such as loss of loved ones and property, took place predominantly in areas which are the native lands of the IBAS. These regions are traditionally located in Southern Sudan, and expanded to encompass southern Kurdufan, or the Nuba Mountains and the Southern Blue Nile, or the Angassana territory. These three areas are fundamentally inhabited by the IBAS (and of course these areas have recently extended to take account of the large range of the western region of Darfur where the Fur, the largest non-Arab ethnic group in the region, lives).

Additionally, in the course of fleeing the country, the means of transport which facilitated the movement of enormous number of IBAS people from the war zones to secure places inside and outside Sudan was walking. People would walk long distances, mostly through unsafe environments, and with a lack of food and other necessities. Whereas many CNS people who escaped the political oppressiveness and economic insecurity in Sudan travelled by aeroplane, truck, bus, train and ship. Needless to say, diasporic experience prior to resettlement was more agonising and complex for the IBAS than for the CNS.

As for the impact of the two fundamental shifts on the CNS, they signify most vividly the loss of the CNS sovereign position on entry into diasporic life in Australia. As a result, these two vital repositionings have been experienced as punitive marks (morally, at least) that have contributed significantly to the collective trauma of the CNS in Australia.

A number of other components are undeniably common features of the two distinct communities. They include the loss of social status which was acquired at home by virtue of gender division, career or professional identity, local community leadership, many being deprived of all three at once.

Yet, the most common, recognisable, and impactful loss of social status has been that which relates to gender division in Sudan. Both the IBAS and the CNS, have descended from patriarchal societies; that is, where men habitually occupy dominant social positions while women occupy socially subordinate positions. In Australia considerable numbers of Sudanese women, from both the IBAS and the CNS, have achieved economic independence supported by legal frameworks largely alien to social experience in Sudan.

The shift in the gender role of women has traumatised many diasporic Sudanese men in these two communities in Australia. Perhaps for this reason, as well as for other related losses, homesickness and nostalgia seem to be more evident in men (and this area requires further investigation) than in women in these communities.

Another consequence of the IBAS and the CNS men being not able to tolerate such a radical reformation has been the breakdown of relationships. There have been cases of domestic violence that have led to women divorcing their husbands, and the men being incarcerated. This area requires further research, but in some cases men, while never overcoming a sense of loss, submitted to the new reality; in other cases men accommodated this profound change with graciousness, perhaps reflecting a socio-cultural sensitivity and behaviour which was a feature of their relationships with women prior to immigrating to Australia.

The majority of men and women from the IBAS and the CNS in the first refugee/migrant generation are othering Australian society and they are othered by this society. This othering is manifested, for example, in the term this generation employ to denote a person from White Australian background. For instance, instead of choosing a differentiating term such as ‘White Australian’, they select the term ‘Australian’, which they use in contrast to their own common national identification which is ‘Sudanese’. This communal use of the term ‘Australian’ indicates that the IBAS and the CNS look at themselves as strangers to the mainstream Australian society which, in fact, regards them in the same way.

The strangeness and otherness generally applied by mainstream Australian society to these two communities are evident in a wide range of discriminative, racist and scapegoating attitudes. Some of these attitudes have been demonstrated in media reports (see Ndhlovu 2009; Windle 2008). This complex attitude has also been shared, or rather inherited, by other Australian sub-communities, including the Indian, Vietnamese and Middle Eastern communities. Such a complex attitude could, in this context at least, be nothing but a validation of primal prejudice summarised by Derrida as ‘A certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality’ (2000, p. 55). This unwelcoming outlook has contributed significantly to the isolation of these two Sudanese communities, leading in turn to the intensification of homesickness and nostalgia. Put another way, what makes it so hard for at least the larger part of the first generation of Sudanese expatriates to call Australia home is not itself merely the outcome of the resistance prior to resettlement that usually accompanies early phases of migration.

Against this backdrop of homesickness and nostalgia, sizable numbers of people (mostly men) from the IBAS and the CNS have established separate forms of socialisation that turn out to be quite similar in the limited sociality they make available. This largely shallow socialization regularly takes place in African (typically Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean—and Turkish) restaurants and cafés. By contrast substantial and strong socialisation is still developing separately within the two communities as an expression of intra-community identification. The distinct ethnic groups, and many of their subgroups, have fostered and expanded their own social and cultural networks. That is why we tend to see a group from the IBAS, for example, gather in particular restaurants or cafés. Comparable practices can also be witnessed amongst groups and subgroup from CNS (and from the Darfurian community, to some extent).

I have also observed (and am often caught up in) a tendency—when it comes to having food in restaurants and cafés—for groups to go to specific restaurants or cafés in order to enjoy having local Sudanese cuisine, usually recipes invented or developed within the CNS back home. And groups at cafés mostly prefer listening to songs and music originally formulated in or transmitted through the CNS back home. Sadly, the sharing of food and music that should potentially inspire integration has not so far been able to play a unifying role. Yet this role that food and music play and could play, the possibility of which that sharing speaks, simply highlights the irony of our dragging,

from our native home to our adopted home, the same chronic domestic divisive ailments, an irony (and tragedy) for which the first generation of both communities is responsible.

On the one hand, what makes these ailments continue to exist and thrive is the fact that there has been very little change in the conceptualisation or framing of social, cultural and political issues among members of the first generation. On the other hand, the influence of mainstream Australian popular culture (which is itself influenced by or imitative of American popular culture) on the second generation is glaring. Yet the extent of this influence varies between those who descend from IBAS backgrounds and those who originate from CNS upbringings. Here it is also perceptible that the take up of the mainstream Australian popular culture is higher among young people from IBAS origins—a complex process that is not unrelated to their communities' historical use of Western culture to support a narrative of cultural difference in contradistinction to CNS while still in Sudan. While in Australia this is certainly related to a desire to share in mainstream cultural life, it at the same time continues an older narrative that relates to their relationship with the CNS. Likewise, we cannot say that the CNS ambivalence regarding the cultural mainstream in Australia is not caught up in the same politics of difference.

As with other communities before them, the impact of mainstream popular culture can only be expected to increase within, and beyond, the third generation of the two communities. Most likely, the diverse aspects of the local (Sudanese) culture(s) of the IBAS and the CNS will carry on among the second generation and beyond, which will happen alongside the persistent and growing influence of mainstream popular culture. The interaction between these cultures, therefore, can be expected to result in the emergence of a new pattern of identification in future generations over the course of time. This ‘emergence’ is actually a process which has already begun, and is not ‘an occurrence’ or ‘event’, but an evolution. The manifestations of this emergence should also be expected to differ quantitatively and qualitatively among the two communities, and most likely to be seen in the IBAS future generations. This is so because the CNS identity is formed in contradistinction to the West, expressed in a kind of reverse Orientalism, or an ‘Occidentalism.’ This can affect the kind of control exerted over subsequent generations within the CNS communities in Australia, and so for those

communities the process of change will most likely emerge with isolated individuals before it can begin to catch on more widely.

While this emergent identity is most commonly associated with future generations, it is not limited to young people. A critical or even curious social and cultural sensitivity and sensibility may give rise to a different or unconventional sense of identity in some individuals. These individuals are likely to be very few, or classified as ‘exceptions to the rule,’ but they can nevertheless be pigeonholed, with respect to age, as belonging to the older generation. Then again, and speaking generally, the initial features of this anticipated different or dissimilar identity can be introduced, with varying degrees of enunciation, within the second generation. Its enunciation continues to be more widespread among the third generation and beyond. This emergent identity, as predicted by Hall in a similar context, ‘is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities’ (1987, p. 46). This kind of new identity involves the Third Space, the notion of cultural hybridity proposed by Bhabha (1994, p. 54) as the new, different space of articulation, ‘an intervention [which] quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.’ Re-appropriating this idea of the Third Space here allows us to view it as a dynamic field where Bhabha foresees ‘[t]he process of hybridity [that] gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’ (interviewed in Rutherford 1990, p. 211). This way of conceptualising the Third Space is close to that space/time in which Hall envisages ‘the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject,’<sup>6</sup> (1996, pp.165-166) where he forecasts the birth of a ‘new ethnicity’ (1996, pp.163-172). This ‘new ethnicity’ is an evolution that derives from ‘a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity’ (Hall 1987, p. 46). This is an actualisation that would be evident, according to Hall, in identities ‘which [are not] founded on the notion of some absolute, integral self and which clearly can’t arise from some fully closed narrative of the self’ (1996, p. 118).

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<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that a large number of the CNS do not consider themselves ‘essentially black’ but rather, as ‘essentially Arabs’. This is a belief that encompasses historical inexactness and/or obstinacy. However, in all cases, it is the concept of ‘the end of essentialism’ that is our focus here.

Hall's (2000) work on hybridity focuses on black British society, especially its Caribbean division, and it is worth noting that within the 'new ethnicity' of black British society Hall identified a process which is also gradually occurring, with differing levels of enunciation, in the second generations of both the IBAS and the CNS in Australia: the perceptible impact of the African-American popular culture.

Hall also argues that:

the term 'ethnicity' acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time (1996, p. 168).

Hall's insight helps us understand how the connection between the second generation and domestic Australian politics, for example, would be stronger than their connection with the local politics of Sudan. The future history of 'their' ethnicity will in all likelihood occur as a consequence of living in 'a particular space and time' within the Australian context. That second generation's attachment to Sudanese history, including Sudanese politics, would be governed by the mediation of their parents and grandparents, and not be contingent on direct connection and/or living experience.

Conversely, the lived experience of the future generations of both the IBAS and the CNS, who are projected to contribute to the formation of a 'new ethnicity,' does not look like it will be a 'totally happy experience'. A defining constituent and dynamic of the 'new ethnicity' will not only be their sense of difference, but will also be the collective experience of a range of encounters, most prominent of which would continue to be racism. For, as Bhabha argues, 'in societies where multiculturalism is encouraged racism is still rampant in various forms. This is because the universalism that paradoxically permits diversity masks ethnocentric norms, values and interests' (interviewed in Rutherford 1990, p.208).

That is to say, an enduring part of the experience of the 'new ethnicity', described by Hall as 'the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery' (1996, p.169), could be, among

other dynamics, a site of resistance as well as a space of cultural significance to Australia, and to the Sudanese communities in Australia and even in the two Sudans.

It is probably clear by now that I locate myself in just such a kind of new space. Or, equally, I have been located through displacement/s in that space. Looking back at this last chapter I am struck by how little I use ‘I’ or ‘we’ in my description of what I observe taking place in ‘my’ community/s. And also how often I employ ‘they/them.’ This could be interpreted as my ‘Othering’ of those I am critical of, and I can see entirely how such a reading could be made. But might it not also reflect the position of enunciation of someone who has been displaced, who is no longer included, and who has reached a point where he is no longer able to include himself or if he wants to? That is precisely, in a nutshell, what I am struggling with, or where I am left struggling.

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