



**Dotawo ▶**  
**Monograph 5**

**Voices from Nubia:  
Critical Essays on Contemporary  
Nubian Literature from Egypt**  
edited by  
**Amal Mazhar,  
Faten I. Morsy, and  
Mona M. Radwan**





Voices from Nubia



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5

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*Series Editors*      Alexandros Tsakos  
                                 Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

*Editing*                Scott Barker, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, SAJ  
*Design*                 Hatim Eujayl  
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*To the memory of Idris Ali*



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# Foreword

Rasheed El-Enany

It gives me immense pleasure to write the foreword for this book, an anthology of scholarly essays on Nubian literature. This is not just because it is a much-needed contribution to an under-researched, if not neglected, subject area, but equally because I see studies like this one as transcending the normal academic pursuit of seeking originality on little-trodden grounds. Acknowledging all this in the current volume, I cannot but see in the very choice of subject a political statement and an act of resistance, conscious or unconscious. In an age of rising nationalism, right-wing politics, and totalizing discourses around the globe, turning scholarly attention to the study of a minority literature, to the study of expressions of cultural individuality, of “deviations” from the ambience of mainstream literature, underpinned by the dominant national narratives, is an instance of the confluence of scholarship and belief in human diversity and inclusivity.

I remember an occasion in 2006 at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter when a colleague of mine, Herman Bell, an expert on Nubian heritage, organized an exhibition titled “Paradise Lost: Nubia before the 1964 Exodus—A Photographic Tribute to a Traditional Way of Life.” Following is the text he wrote in the leaflet for the exhibition. I quote it in full for its relevance here.

The 1964 *hijra*, or exodus, was a traumatic event in the long history of Nubia. Floodwaters were already rising behind the High Dam near Aswan and would eventually cover almost 500 kilometres of riverbank. Many Nubians in southern Egypt and the northern Sudan were evacuated from their homes. Sudanese Nubians were resettled far away from the Nile Valley.

Nubian songs and Nubian poetry celebrate the old way of life. The past is still vividly alive. The original homelands are remembered as a Garden of Eden.

The sense of loss is strong. A link with the environment has been broken. Many Nubians left the river Nile with its rich cultural associations. They left their boats, their palm trees, their irrigated fields and their waterwheels. After the *hijra* many of their ancient rituals associated with the river seemed no longer relevant. Some of the Nubians had lived in villages in the shadow of ancient and mediaeval monuments. Some left houses covered with traditional decorations. They were no longer able to visit their ancestral graveyards and the shrines of their saints. Those who eventually moved to urban areas were shocked at the extent to which their children were losing the ability to speak the Nubian language.

Although Nubians who lived to the south of the flooded area were spared the acute trauma of the *hijra*, they also experienced a sense of loss as their people were drawn away to the cities. Nubian poems from the south similarly express a longing for a return to the traditional way of life along the river.

The year the exhibition was held, 2006, coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956 (the “Tripartite Aggression,” as it is known in Egypt’s history books, England and France along with Israel), in the aftermath of then President Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, itself an action that was a response to the withdrawal of international funding to finance the construction of the High Dam in Aswan. I recall saying a few words, as director at the time, by way of opening the exhibition. I referred to the old crisis that was being debated again in the media, half a century after its occurrence, and how the two events were connected, that is, the building of the High Dam in the years following the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the 1964 exodus of Nubians from their ancestral land and loss of much of their physical heritage and way of life. For Nubians it was indeed a paradise lost. But the High Dam was a national project with huge economic and developmental significance for Egypt as a whole. It was a classic example of conflict between grand national schemes and minority interests, with only one outcome possible. “Paradise Lost” is again a title symbolic in more than one way. Aptly invoking the title of John Milton’s famous epic poem to reflect the Nubians’ exodus or expulsion from their own paradise, the title inevitably invokes another — Milton’s sequel, *Paradise Regained*.

Are lost paradises ever regained? Perhaps. But only in poetry and other works of the imagination. Only in collective memory and its embodiment in the work of poets and writers who hang on to it. And also through the work of scholars, such as contributors to this volume, who celebrate their work and bring to it the wide attention it deserves.



# Introduction

Amal Mazhar, Faten I. Morsy, and Mona M. Radwan

These are all my pages; do not tear them up  
 This is my voice; do not silence it  
 This is I; do not curse me  
 For I have lived among you and eaten with you,  
 loved your culture, and still do. I am merely  
 conveying to you, with the sting of truth, some of  
 my sorrows, and those of my people.

— Idris Ali, *Dongola* (2006, n.p.)

These lines from Idris Ali's well-known novel can be read as an emblem of this collection of critical essays on Nubian literature by Egyptian Nubian writers. This book is an attempt to listen carefully to the Nubian voice, as Ali recommends, through an in-depth reading and analysis of some of the most conspicuous Nubian literary works.

The claim that Nubian writers wrote counternarratives to the canonical master narrative of the High Dam construction during Nasser's Egypt, though true in general, masks and, indeed, oversimplifies a lot of the intricacies of the issue. First, it ignores that Nubia was the victim of separation or partition between northern Sudan and southern Egypt long before the final blow in the early 1960s. Second, it overlooks that the Nubian move upward to the metropolitan north, as a real and metaphorical journey to the path of modernity, reflects the shifting of the course of the Nile River since the end of the nineteenth century. This has resulted in a situation whereby Egyptian Nubian writers find themselves in perpetual attempts to forge their Nubian community (real or imagined) as separate from yet part of Arab/Egyptian culture of the north.

Despite the obvious renewed sociopolitical interest in Nubia after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, we claim that art in general and lit-

erature in particular remain the domains in which the problematics of the Nubian issue have been primarily vocalized. We believe that only through a thorough reading and analysis of the literary output of Egyptian Nubians can the complexities of Nubia, its people, and its culture find full expression. To situate our academic endeavor within the framework of this renewed interest in Nubia, it is imperative to consider the history and political experience of Nubians.

### **Mapping Out Egyptian Nubian Cultural and Linguistic Heritage**

Nubians are among several ethnic groups in Egypt, along with the Bedouins (mainly situated in both the Eastern and Western Desert), the inhabitants of the Siwa Oasis, who are of Berber or Amazigh origins. Nubians have always had their unique culture, architecture, dress code, and languages, which make them rather different from the rest of the Egyptian population and with a conspicuous ethnic identification. However, there is evidence for the existence of several different groups of individuals who inhabited the land between modern Aswan in south Egypt and Khartoum in Sudan, all of whom are for convenience termed “Nubians.” Haggag Oddoul maintains that Nubia extends along the legendary Nile banks, showing that the borders of Nubia begin, in most historical periods, from the first cataract south of Aswan up till the sixth cataract. He adds that historical Nubia could be divided into two parts: Upper Nubia, which is best known by the name “Kush” and is approximately modern-day Sudanese Nubia and “Lower Nubia,” that is, Egyptian Nubia, which carries different names, including “Wawaat” and “Ta City” (Oddoul 2009, 13) This view has been reiterated in several introductions to Nubia and its history, notably Bianchi 2004 and Kennedy 2005.

Nubians belong to an African ethno-linguistic group that lived in the middle Nile valley, believed to be one of the earliest cradles of civilization. Ancient Nubia was home to some of Africa’s earliest kingdoms and one of the great civilizations of ancient Africa. Kings of Nubia ruled Egypt for almost a century during the twenty-fifth pharaonic dynasty. In his seminal book *Shakḥṣiyyat-Miṣr* (The personality of Egypt), the renowned Egyptian geographer Gamal Hamdan (2001) highlights the mutual relations between the Pharaonic and the Nubian civilizations: “Pharaonic Egypt since early times had close contacts with Nubia and is believed to have taken its name from — ‘nib’ [‘gold’]” (158). In his introduction to the Arabic translation of prominent Egyptologist Walter B. Emery, *Egypt in Nubia* (1965), Nubian writer Khalil Kalfet offers a detailed survey of the different cultures that existed in ancient Nubia. The book deals with the effect of the Egyptian civilization on Nubia in ancient times.

Moreover, it deals with independent Nubian civilizations, such as Kush in the kingdom of Karmah or Kerma, Napata, Meroe, the civilization of the unknown or unidentified Nubian group X, as well as an independent Nubian civilization, in the sense that it is ethnically and linguistically identical with present-day Nubia (Kalfet 2008, 10). Indeed, ancient Nubia has been the subject of several anthropological and ethnographical studies conducted by scholars from Egyptian universities (Kamal 1965; Youssef 1965; Hamdan 2001; Riad & Abdelrassoul 2007 and 2010).

According to Anne Jennings (2009), Nubia covers more than one thousand kilometers along the Nile and is home to several Nubian languages (27). It is thus clear that the Nubians cannot be essentialized or considered a homogenous group themselves. Western scholarly research varies from traditional scholarship in considering Nubians a specific or distinct ethnic and cultural group, as seen in such nineteenth-century European travelers as J.L. Burkhardt and Edward Lane, and also in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western debates over Nubian identity (Fernea 1973; Fogel 1997; Poeschke 1996; Jennings 2009).

The decade of the 1960s is considered a main historical juncture for the Nubians, and it witnessed the forced relocation or displacement of around 50,000 Egyptian Nubians to the Kom Ombo area south of Luxor, to villages built by the government after the construction of the High Dam in Aswan. Moreover, more than 50,000 Sudanese Nubians were moved even farther away from their original homeland, more than 1,000 kilometers away from the Egyptian borders to Sudan (Gohary 2005, 25). About forty-four Nubian villages were submerged under Lake Nasser so that the High Dam could provide water for the whole of the cultivated land in Egypt all year long. Consequently, Nubian land was ecologically destroyed for what the Egyptian authorities considered a worthy cause. It can hardly be disputed that the High Dam has prevented annual floods, famine, and drought and produced electricity for Egypt, but this should not blind us to the disasters, human and ecological, that have resulted from this mega-project. Apart from Nubians' devastating loss of their agricultural land and palm trees, on which they had depended for their primary source of income for centuries, the long-term effects were negative in Egypt too. Prominent geologist Rushdi Said points out that the High Dam resulted in an increase in soil salinity, coastal erosion, schistosomiasis (bilharzia), water logging, and siltation — all resulting in the lack of fertile soil in the whole country (Said 1993, 241–54).

The displacement, or exodus, of Nubians from one region to another resulted in many social changes in Nubia, as thousands of men

left their homes in search of making a living. Up to the mid-1960s, the men, who had previously worked mainly as farmers and fishermen, began to look for work in Cairo, Alexandria, or other cities as porters and waiters. The women were left behind to tend to children and the elderly, playing a crucial role in managing domestic, everyday lives, and their husbands came home only for short visits at long intervals (Gohary 2005, 22). The Nubians enjoyed an excellent reputation of being extremely reliable and honest, but their social conditions attest to the cultural and ethnic stereotyping they were subjected to even long before the 1960s. The elderly Nubian Abdel-Aziz Gaafar in Alaa Al Aswany's *Nādī al-sayyārāt* (The automobile club of Egypt, 2015) is an astute representation of the plight of a Nubian transformed from being a landowner in Nubia to a servant in one of Cairo's posh clubs, and eventually dying in humiliation. Such dominant historical stereotypes of Nubians, performing menial work as servants, drivers, and nannies and their representation in Egyptian classical cinema has dramatically changed over the years.

It is noteworthy that the question of nomenclature concerning the use of the term "Nubian literature" has been the subject of much controversy. To start with, modern and contemporary Nubian written literary production is entirely in Arabic. Old Nubian was not the only written language in medieval Nubia, in fact, both Greek and Coptic were also in regular use. However, the surviving literature in Coptic is almost exclusively religious, while Old Nubian was also used for administration and commerce" (Eissa 2012, 147–48). Oddoul states that although the Nubian language is ancient and well established, it has not been the language of expression in written Nubian literature. Oddoul explains that because of the infeasibility of writing narratives (in Nubian), everyone focused on oral puzzles, folkloric tales, legends, and other oral literary forms. He explains how songs, in particular, were the most convenient vehicle for Nubian creative art (Oddoul 2009b, 26–27). However, several attempts have been made to reintroduce a Nubian alphabet as a first step towards writing in it. Muhammad Motawalli Badr wrote the pioneering *Nobīn nog geri* (Reading in Nubian) in the 1950s, and it was published in 1976 by Khartoum University in Sudan. In 1997, Mukhtar Muhammad Khalil Kabbarah published a book in Arabic on the Nubian language and how to write it. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that most Nubian writers cannot and have not written in Nubian so far. Jacquemond (2008) argues that Nubian literature has its distinctive features, but it is still considered a subcategory of Arabic literature. He views such attempts by Nubian writers to save their heritage and culture as a kind of substitute for saving their language from extinction:

The Nubians, the largest non-Arabic speaking community in Egypt, have seen their ancestral homelands disappear beneath the waters of the Nile. The massive displacement of population that took place in 1964 accelerated the Arabization of Egypt's Nubian population to the point that today the Nubian languages are threatened with extinction. (181)

However, writing in Arabic has given Nubian writers a wider readership, because now millions of Egyptians and Arabs can have access to their literary works. Thus, modern and contemporary Nubian literature can be considered a subcategory of Arabic literature since the entire repertoire is written in Arabic. However, this point has been the subject of some disagreement even among Nubian writers themselves. Hassan Nour and Yasser Abdellatif, two Egyptian Nubian writers belonging to different generations, believe that there is no such thing as “Nubian literature,” which, according to them, is part of Arabic literature.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Oddoul (2006) strongly argues for the use of the term. He contends that “Nubian literature” is used to designate all literary production of writers who come from Nubia or any literary works that deal with Nubian issues. To this end, four chapters in this volume tackle the question of language in its relation to culture and identity politics (chapters 1, 2, 3, and 8).

### Reading Nubia through Its Literature

Despite serious critical strides made recently in studying Nubian literature,<sup>2</sup> more rigorous and intellectual attention is needed. Hence, one aim of this volume is to push these efforts forward through breaking new critical ground in studying and analyzing Nubian literature. Such an undertaking involves a conscious attempt to break through the dichotomy of assimilation and exclusion that has marked the relation between Nubia and the wider Egyptian nation. Our contributors share an interest in critical approaches based on postcolonial, identity politics, and cultural perspectives.

The term “Nubian literature,” Oddoul (1993) and Christine Gilmore (2015) point out, appeared in 1990 as a result of what was called “Al-Ṣaḥwa al-Nūbiya” (The Nubian awakening). Gilmore explains that the term was primarily articulated in terms of “the aspiration for Nubian writing to constitute a distinct form of literary regionalism within the broader field of Arabic literary production rather than a mere subsection of Egyptian literature” (Gilmore 2015, 57). In

1 For a thorough discussion of the issue, see Oddoul (2006).

2 According to the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) databases, Nubian literature has been a trending dissertation topic since 2011.

the same vein, Jacquemond comments on the distinctive features of Nubian literature, or what he describes as “Nubian Diaspora writers,” asserting that “this literature was born as a result of increased awareness, from 1964 onward, of the need to save the heritage of the Nubian community from oblivion and to preserve Nubian collective memory” (Jacquemond 2008, 181).

Oddoul (2007) and Mara Naaman (2011) have noted that there are three distinct waves in Nubian literature. The first wave contained only one poetry collection, *Zīlal al-Nakhīl* (Under the shade of the palm trees), written in 1948 by Muhammad Abdel Rahim Idris. The second wave, which emerged in 1968 is represented by Muhammad Khalil Qassim (1922–1968), Yehia Mokhtar (1936–), Idris Ali (1940–2010), Haggag Oddoul (1944–), Zeinab Alkordy (1936–2009), and Mohy El-Deen Saleh (1951–2018). Fatin Abbas (2011) refers to this generation of Nubian writers as “the post-dam generation” (151) in the sense that they witnessed life before and after the displacement. The third wave started in 1989 with Ibrahim Fahmy’s *Al-Qamar Bōbā* (Glittering Nubian earrings) and is represented in this book by Yasser Abdellatif (1969–), Sherief Abdelmeguid (1971–), and Samar Nour (1977–). Oddoul maintains that compared to the 1990s which witnessed a boom in Nubian literature, the literature in the new millennium lacks the rigor and richness of the works written by the most prominent writers, such as Idris Ali, Haggag Oddoul, Hassan Nour, Ibrahim Fahmy, Mohy El-Deen Saleh, and Yehia Mokhtar (Oddoul 2007). Oddoul explains that although the writers of the new generations still portray the plight of Nubians and represent continual attempts to preserve their collective memory, culture, and history, the fact remains that they are culturally distant from their parents as they belong to a new generation that could neither speak the language nor have reminiscences of Nubian ways of life prior to the displacement.

It must be noted that by and large, Egyptian Nubians’ literary works deal with the plight of Nubians as a result of the inundation of their homeland after the construction of the High Dam in Aswan in the 1960s. However, we should not be blinded to the fact that some literary works deal with other national issues and themes. As such, this volume tries to bring together scholarly research on literature about Nubia written against the background of national issues, such as Arab identity, the First Gulf War, the question of gender, and resisting dictatorships in the region. It also sets out to offer readings of some of the literary works through the critical and theoretical lens of border studies, where an Egyptian peripheral group struggles to find its place within the mainstream national tradition

of Egyptian letters, building on previous research (Gilmore 2016, 49; Elrefaei 2012, 9).

The idea of putting together an edited volume on Nubian literature arose from the need to focus critical attention on an area that is not only diverse and complex, but also the subject of debate around ethnic literature and culture in specific geographical and historical contexts, such as Egypt. This volume is an attempt to engage in the debate on Nubian literature and culture, which had been ignored or, at best, marginalized in Egypt's official literary history, which has traditionally valorized the Egyptian mainstream literary canon. Moreover, it is an attempt to go beyond the dichotomy between the activist Nubian writer who views the Nubian Question as a human rights issue and Arab/Egyptian nationalists who consider the discussion of Nubians as a distinct ethnic group or minority a threat to Egyptian society's social and cultural homogeneity, and hence consider it a national security issue. Between an exclusivist Nubian position and an assimilationist discourse that seeks to silence difference, this volume attempts an exploration of Nubian culture and history through studying its literary output. From this perspective, it could be considered an attempt to provide an alternative way of thinking about the Nubians and their literary production, and it offers guidance to reading "a culturally different text," to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's adage (1994), a reading that is done within the framework of a pluralistic discourse that allows for differences to be articulated freely.

The diversity of themes and tropes reflects a hallmark of Nubian literary output that is generally marked by a common feeling of solidarity around the Nubian cause. However, this solidarity by no means reduces styles, voices, and approaches to a flat or undifferentiated uniformity, as the following chapters will attempt to show. The array of critical approaches by the contributors in turn reflects this diversity, despite their common orientation as to how best to critically and theoretically tackle the Nubian Question. Torn between two identities, Nubian and Arab/Egyptian, Nubian writers find themselves struggling between the representation of the Nubian experience entrenched in feelings of nostalgia, loss, and memory of the pain of forced displacement on one hand, and the expression of the Nubian self as part of the Egyptian nation thus celebrating a more down-to-earth and inclusive sensibility on the other hand.

Most academic interest and work conducted on Nubia and the Nubians is of an anthropological or ethnographic nature. In this respect, Nicholas Hopkins and Soheir Mehanna's *Nubian Encounters: An Ethnological Survey 1961–1964* (2010) may be taken as one of

the most comprehensive projects presenting a picture of Nubian life in the last phase of the move and the early days of resettlement in their new “Nubia,” that is, the southern Egyptian city Kom Ombo. Interest in Nubian literature has witnessed a considerable resurgence in the last three decades; however, there were merely sporadic book reviews and occasional interviews with writers in newspapers, and serious critical attention to Nubian literature by no means matches the richness of this literary tradition. In fact, we can refer to only three books in Arabic on Nubian literature: *Al-Sard al-Nūbī al-mu‘āšir* (Contemporary Nubian narrative, 1994) by Medhat El-Gayar and *‘Āliyat al-sard fī al-riwāyah al-‘Arabiyah al-mu‘āširah: al-riwāyah al-Nūbiyah namūdhajan* (Narrative techniques in the contemporary Arabic novel: The Nubian novel as an example, 2000) by Mourad Abdelrahman Mabrouk. Also, Haggag Oddoul’s *Wanasa ma‘a al-adab al-Nūbī* (In company with Nubian literature, 2009b) is one of the main critical analyses our study relies on, but it is not scholarly enough. The first two books, however, fall short of offering any comprehensive view of Nubian literature. First, they both study narrative works, notably the novel, but other genres, such as poetry, drama, and the short story, are almost absent in their analyses. Moreover, they are by no means representative of the Nubian modern and contemporary literary scene. The first half of El-Gayar’s book, for instance, surveys Nubian history and its sociocultural and political reality since the beginning of the twentieth century. The second half offers critical readings of four novels by four of the most well-known Nubian writers to date.

Whatever the case may be, the Nubian Question has been the subject of contestation among Nubian writers themselves. Worthy of note is that we often see shifts in the same writer’s position, as in the case of Idris Ali, who asserted in an interview in *Al-Ahram Weekly* in 2006 that the Nubian Question is concerned with “problems common to all Egyptians.” (See M. Radwan’s discussion of this shift in chapter 5.)

Moreover, against the claim of oppression and marginalization of Nubian literature and culture, Nubian reporter/writer Abdel Meguid Hassan Khalil (2019) made the following statement:

Some Nubian writers who are endowed with a daring literary vision but whose writings imply that they are being oppressed and marginalized accuse critics of negligence by overlooking and marginalizing their creative literary production. This takes place on account of the specificity of the vision, the extent of oppression and agony that appear in their work. In this connection, a prominent Nubian writer [Oddoul] published a book



entitled *Nubian Writers and Racist Critics* [2006]. However, the reality is far from that accusation and that sharp, scathing title.  
(2)

Khalil (2019) argues by pointing to the works of Nubian writers examined by many prominent Egyptian critics, such as Gaber Asfour, Ali Elraii, and Ragaʾ Al Naqash, to name but three. He also refers to critical interest shown by prominent creative writer and journalist Sanaa El Bissy and the critic Farouq Abdel Qader, the latter of whom analyzed Nubian literary works, especially those by Haggag Oddoul, whom he labeled as the most distinguished Nubian writer. In his attempt to “exhonerate” mainstream Egyptian literary institutions from charges of marginalization of Nubian writers, Khalil enumerates the various literary awards Nubian writers have won in Egypt or abroad. First, he mentions Idris Ali’s *Dongola*, which, as a consequence of the deserved critical attention given to the novel, was translated into English, and won the Arkansas Arabic Translation Award in 1997. Khalil added that Oddoul has also won several literary awards, including the State Incentive Award in 1996 for his collection of short stories *Layālī al-misk al-ʿatīqah*; in English, *Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia* (2009a). In 2005, Oddoul was offered a literary award by Sawiris, which is a nongovernmental cultural institution, for his novel *Maʿtūq al-Khayr* (2002). In the same year, the young Nubian writer Yasser Abdellatif was given the same award for his novel *Qānūn al-wirāthah* (The law of inheritance, 2002). Over the years, many Nubian writers have received critical appreciation and won several awards. In 1987, Nubian writer Ibrahim Shaʿrawy won the State Incentive Award for Children’s Literature. In 1992, Yehia Mokhtar received the same award for his collection of short stories *ʿArūs al-Nīl* (The bride of the Nile, 2001). Moreover, Oddoul was chosen, as a Nubian representative, to be part of the committee on “Human Rights” provided for in the 2014 Egyptian Constitution (art. 236) which clearly endorsed the rights of Nubian to return to their ancestral areas. However, this “right to return” has not been implemented yet.

Besides literary awards won by Nubian writers, Abdel Meguid Hassan Khalil documents the publication of Nubian works by the mainstream Egyptian State Publishing House. These include Ibrahim Sahrawi’s *Al-Khurāfah wa al-uṣṭūrah fī bilād al-Nūbah* (Myth and legend in Nubia, 1984), and some collections of short stories by Ibrahim Fahmy, such as *Al-Qamar Bōbā* (1989) and *Baḥr al-Nīl* (The river Nile, 1990). It also published novels by Hassan Nour, including *Bayna al-nahr wa-al-jabal* (Between the Nile and the mountain, 1991), and collections of short stories, including *Khūr Raḥmah* (The

archipelago of mercy, 2008), ‘*Aynān zarqāwān* (Two blue eyes, 1995), and other writings. It published Idris Ali’s *Dunqula: Riwāya Nūbiya* (*Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*, 1993), and *Nās al-Nahr* (People of the river) by Oddoul (1993) was published in the theater series.

This change in Oddoul’s views shows that in a non-polarized political climate, like Egypt post the 2011 Revolution, a certain degree of flexibility and rethinking of political positions is likely to happen.

### About This Book

This volume tackles Egyptian Nubian prose, verse, and drama. There are six chapters on prose, one on drama, and one on poetry, all of which are arranged thematically. There are two chapters on *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy), which is the first groundbreaking novel to be written by an Egyptian Nubian writer — it has become a classic since its publication. Two chapters are on Nubian female writers who offer various perspectives on reconstructing identity and gender issues. The editors also interviewed three prominent Nubian writers to provide the readers with direct testimony and offer an in-depth view on some critical issues addressed in the book. It is regrettable that this book was unable to deal with many Nubian writers, such as Muhammad Abdelrahim Idris, Ibrahim Fahmy, Hassan Nour, and Sherif Abdel-Meguid, but given the impossibility of a comprehensive coverage, we chose to focus on a select group of writers and their individual works.

The first two chapters focus on the breaking of ethnic exclusivity in the works examined. Chapter 1, Faten Morsy’s “Cry, the Beloved Nubia: M.K. Qassim’s *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) and the Emergence of the Nubian Novel,” argues that Qassim’s 1968 novel, set in the 1930s, offers the possibility of breaking through forms of ethnic exclusivity while at the same time defying any notion of a singular narrative of the nation. Morsy examines different aspects of the text in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of the transformative potential of “minor” literature, which they conceive of as a process of deterritorialization. Morsy further highlights the role of Qassim’s novel in paving the way for the Nubian novel through its literary tropes, which capture life in Nubia through representations of the history and geography of the region.

Chapter 2, Sherine Mazloum’s “Reconsidering Cultural Identity in Zeinab Alkordy’s *Zahrat Al-Janūb* (Flower of the south), examines Alkordy’s 1997 collection of short stories from the perspective of the post-positivist realist theory of identity, with special reference to Satya Mohanty’s epistemic status of cultural identity. Noting the

need for alternatives to the conflicting definitions of identity provided by the postmodernist rejection of identity and the reductionism of essentialism, Mazloum presents a post-positivist reading of Alkordy's collection in which the female protagonists are shown to be shaped by, and integrated within, the larger social, economic, and political context of Egyptian and Arab realities in the 1990s. Mazloum, noting Alkordy's awareness that identities are changing social constructs that develop based on real-life events, provides an analysis of the engagement of the female protagonists with personal and political contexts, revealing women's concerns to be those of their country and the Arab world. Mazloum argues that Alkordy's text may reflect the ability to transgress the boundaries of ethnic and gender separation.

A similar link to the plurality of Nubian identity is found in the following two chapters. Chapter 3, Amal Mazhar's "Haggag Oddoul's *Tasābiḥ Nīliya* (Hymns to the Nile): A Celebration of Inclusionist Plurality," deals with a 2003 play by the short story writer, novelist, and political activist, Oddoul, who has been hit with allegations of separatism. Mazhar argues that Oddoul's play is mainly concerned with the renegotiation of a nonessentialist Nubian identity in a reworking of the myth of creation, blending different religious faiths, historical and political symbols, and mythological figures. Mazhar argues that Oddoul was concerned with minor literature's reterritorialization or recodification of Nubia by foregrounding it as the public sphere in order to renegotiate the Nubian identity as a culturally specific distinctive mosaic in the larger Egyptian context. She also examines Oddoul's play in the light of postdramatic theater to express "the politics of the text."

Chapter 4, Rasha Abboudy's "(In)Visible Borders in Nubian Poetry of Mohy el-Deen Saleh," examines the mutable borders of Nubian identity in selected poems from the volume of Saleh's complete works, *Nūḍītu min Wādī al-Nakhīl* (I was called from the "Valley of Palm Trees") published in 2011. Abboudy focuses on the main themes, images, and diction of the selected poems in connection with the historical, social, and political developments related to the Nubian cultural context, in the light of theories of identity, including those of Stuart Hall, Amin Maalouf, Avtar Brah, and Homi K. Bhabha. The themes of these poems range from collective reminiscences to individual concerns, and to Islamic mysticism. Abboudy highlights three major streams or phases in Saleh's poetry: the first deals with purely Nubian issues and allegiances, the second views Nubian identity as part of a wider Arab-Egyptian identity, while the third expresses wider human and global issues such as death.

Taking a different approach, chapter 5, Mona Radwan's "Ecological and Ecofeminist Issues in Idris Ali's *Dongola* and *al-La'b faouq Jibāl al-Nūba* (Playing on Nubian mountains)," deals with the lives of the Nubian female protagonists in both of Idris's novels and explores the close links between nature and Nubian cultural identity. Ecofeminist issues are also highlighted in exploring gender relations by drawing connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. Since nature was and still is of crucial importance to Nubians — their economy, agriculture, sociology, and culture have depended on it — such an eco-critical reading examines the complex relation between nature and the characters portrayed in the novels. This analysis enables the reader to come closer to the world in which Nubians live and to explore the continuous negotiations taking place between nature and the culture of the Nubians.

The following three chapters are closely connected, linking anxieties about the dissolution of Nubian identity with attempts to preserve it. The question of the extent to which Nubian identity has changed in a new urban world far from the old Nubia is the subject of chapter 6, which focuses on how this identity has overlapped with or been assimilated into the Egyptian identity — Hussein Hammouda's "The Dissolution of Nubian Identity in Yasser Abdellatif's *Qānūn Al-Wirātha* (The law of inheritance) and Samar Nour's *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate)." The authors of these novels are of Nubian origin but were born and raised in Cairo. Hammouda focuses on the role of memory in the formation of Nubian identity. The two novels are compared in an attempt to identify the changes in the identity of Nubian migrants who settled in Cairo in the early twentieth century and that of their descendants in the late twentieth century. *Qānūn Al-Wirātha* (2008) deals with the fading memories of ancestral Nubia in the minds of the protagonists and the effect of the new urban environment on their language, customs, and traditions, while *Maḥallak Sirr* (2013) focuses on the increasing disconnection between members of the Nubian community in the Egyptian metropolis in the late twentieth century and their ties to their old home of which only distant memories remain.

Chapter 7, Khalid Abou el-Lail's "A Folkloric Reading of Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) and Mokhtar's *Jibāl al-Kohl* (Mountains of kohl)," compares Qassim's early novel with Mokhtar's 2001 novel, adopting cultural criticism as its approach. Both novels seek to preserve Nubian identity through extensive use of the highly localized vernacular and the documentation of Nubian customs, traditions, beliefs, folklore, and architectural design. As opposed to Ahmad Abdel Mo'ety Hegazy in his introduction to Oddoul's controversial book *Udabā' Nūbiyyūn wa-Nuqqād 'Unṣuriyyūn* (Nubian writers and

racist critics) (2006, 7), who considers that writing on Nubian customs, traditions, and beliefs is tantamount to national separatism, Abou el-Lail views Oddoul's tendency as an attempt to integrate a "minor" Nubian identity within the larger Egyptian identity. As such, he finds a strong correlation between the elements of Nubian popular culture and folklore and their counterparts in remote Egyptian villages.

A different approach to the preservation of identity is taken in chapter 8 by Pervine Elrefaei's "The Egyptian Nubian Archival Discourse: Identity Politics in Yehia Mokhtar's *Indo Mando* (Here and there) and *Giddu Kāb*," which examines the appropriation of archival discourse as a rite of passage from the margin to the center. The two works, formed by historical political changes, articulate the Nubian predicament of displacement, and endorse the hybridity of Nubian local and national identity. In his 2009 collection of short stories, *Indo Mando* (Here and there), Mokhtar explores the identity, nationalism, and cultural positionality of the Egyptian Nubian. The final story in *Indo Mando* portrays the archival journey ending in a Sufist epiphany as a rite of passage empowering the Nubian self. The novel *Giddu Kāb* (2015) is presented as a biography of the archive of Mohamed Soliman, the current head of the Nubian Cultural Heritage Association in Cairo.

"Interviews with Three Nubian Writers" presents discussions with Yehia Mokhtar, Samar Nour, and Haggag Oddoul, conducted in Arabic but translated into English by the interviewers. The first and third interviews represent Nubian writers from the second generation; Nour represents the third generation. Their testimonial underline the cultural and linguistic nuances marking the diverse literary outputs of the writers. They also offer special insights into some of the literary debates and ideas discussed in the first eight chapters. We hope that the choice of the interviewees (belonging to different genders and different generations) will enrich the scholarly work undertaken in the previous chapters with contextual and interpretive information.

### Concluding Remarks

This book began as an idea proposed by Mona Radwan. Back in 2008, she was working on a research paper on *Dongola* by Idris Ali when she contacted the author and met him several times. Ali generously gave her most of the material on his work and showed her the Nubian Club, where she also met the Nubian poet Mohy el-Deen Saleh, among other Nubian writers and members of the Egyptian Nubian community. This visit was an eye-opener, after which she began to

read more Nubian works and was touched by their tragedy of forced deportation. While working on her contribution to this volume, she also noticed the scarcity of material written both in Arabic and English on such a rich field as Nubian literature. Ali's support and encouragement is the main reason why this volume is dedicated to him. His sudden death in 2010 and just before the January 2011 Revolution in Egypt made Radwan begin to consider working on an edited volume on Egyptian Nubian literature, but the project materialized a few years later.

All the chapters in this volume make reference to several Arabic texts and to Nubian lexical items. They are transliterated into the Latin alphabet accompanied by their English translation to allow non-Arabic speakers to follow the commentary or subject of analysis. In some cases, especially in names, transliterations that reflect Egyptian pronunciation have been prioritized over standard Arabic (e.g., "Yehia Mokhtar" rather than "Yahia Mukhtar"; "Mohy el-Deen" rather than "Al-Deen"). Almost all the translations from the Nubian texts are the authors' because most Nubian literature is still untranslated. However, as interest in Nubian literature has grown recently, a few Egyptian Nubian texts have been translated into English. These texts include Ali's *Dongola* (1993), considered the very first Egyptian Nubian text to be translated. The novel received the University of Arkansas Press Award for Arabic Literature in Translation in 1997. This was followed by a translation of Ali's *Taḥta Khaṭṭ al-Faqr* (2005), to be later translated as *Poor* in 2007. Oddoul's collection of short stories, *Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia*, was written in 1996 but was not translated until 2009. His novel *Khāli Jā'ahu al-Makhāḍ* was translated in 2008 by Ahmad Fathy as *My Uncle Is on Labor!* (see Oddoul's interview at the end of this book for a thorough discussion of the novel). It is also worth noting that despite the rich literary production of the Nubian writer Yehia Mokhtar, only one of his short stories, "Kawila," has been translated into English, by Nivin El-Asdouli (Mokhtar 2013). Needless to say, international recognition evidenced by such markers as literary awards can certainly play a crucial role in ensuring that Nubian literature would increasingly garner a wider reading public through conducting serious literary and scholarly work.

Finally, we should mention that this book focuses mostly on Nubian authors from Egypt. One writer discussed herein is of Sudanese Nubian origin, Zeinab Alkordy, who was born in Cairo and lived there throughout her life and obtained Egyptian nationality a few years before her death. Thus, it has been our objective from the beginning to highlight the work of Egyptian Nubian writers for the very pragmatic reason that their works are readily available

in Egypt. The consideration of Sudanese Nubian authors, such as Ahmed al-Malik, will remain work for other scholars.

By focusing on the literature, history, and culture of Nubians, the present collection seeks to fill a critical and intellectual gap. The synergies of the theoretical and critical perspectives of the papers included produce fresh looks and add to the previous sporadic studies on Nubian literature referred to above.

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# Cry, Beloved Nubia

## M.K. Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) and the Emergence of the Nubian Novel

Faten I. Morsy

I was fleeing, too: from old, familiar features; the faces of  
my father and uncles that haunted my own.

— Yasser Abdellatif, *The Law of Inheritance* (2018)

### Introduction

Struggles over the meaning of the nation and the dynamics of nation-building, the nature of citizenship, and the just management of diversity continue to influence contemporary politics in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> New definitions of the meaning and significance of ethnic versus national identities and the nature of borders and boundary-making have not ceased to be the subject of debate since 2011. In fact, the great wave of political consciousness that struck Egyptian society in the wake of the January 25 Revolution in 2011 surged over into an unprecedented interest in Egyptian Nubia, its history, culture, and literary output. This interest culminated in Article 236 of the 2014 Egyptian Constitution, which was regarded as an unprecedented move toward Nubian rights, granting Nubians the “right to return” and to resettle in their ancestral lands within ten years of the approval of the constitution. It also induced the state to carry out de-

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Arabic are mine. I would like to thank my former PhD students Hoda el Hadary and Amira Ali for their invaluable discussions and for providing me with useful material on Nubia, its culture, and its literature.

velopment plans and to foster the preservation of Nubian identity and culture. Unfortunately, such avowedly revolutionary gains were overridden by a series of presidential decrees in 2014 and 2016 that designated vast areas of ancestral Nubian lands as military zones while confiscating other areas for state mega-agricultural projects, thus rendering the Nubian “right to return” simply an unattainable dream.<sup>2</sup>

It is against this background that as literary scholars and intellectuals we increasingly find it necessary to take into account traditions found in the Egyptian novel outside the mainstream body of work of our national archive. We are still far from talking about a formalized study of Nubian literature, in the sense that it remains mostly a minority interest, an interesting but ultimately fairly insignificant addition to the central concerns of the Arabic/Egyptian literary canon.

This chapter is intended to offer a way into the study of contemporary Egyptian novels by Nubian writers through an analysis of the first novel written about Nubia and the traumatic experience of Nubians. It examines Muhammad Khalil Qassim’s novel *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) ([1968] 2016) as an early expression of the violent dynamics of uprootedness and displacement experienced by the Nubians in southern Egypt. Set in the 1930s, the novel depicts in detail the plight of Nubians in the wake of the second elevation of the Aswan Dam in 1933, when scores of their villages were wiped out after the floods caused by the works in and around the dam. The novel was published in 1968 during Qassim’s political detention in Nasser’s prisons and a few years after Nubians were tragically evicted for the fourth time from their lands and villages, giving way to the construction of the High Dam in 1963. It is also believed that Qassim wrote the entire text on cigarette paper in prison and managed to smuggle out its parts via his cellmate’s wife over several years.

Thus, several important questions pose themselves here. How can we best approach the novel? *Al-Shamandūra*, the first Nubian novel, explicitly presents itself as a novel concerned with Nubia: its history, culture, languages, anthropology, and political and social reality. Does the breadth of these inquiries serve to alienate readers or feed their curiosity? Can the reader engage meaningfully with the literary text without having a certain range of knowledge of the history of the Nubian cause? The challenge can seem further intensified when we consider the constellation of literary approaches the text lends itself to: historical, political, sociocultural, ecocritical, and allegorical, to mention but a few. Would we be giving the text

2 For a discussion of post-2011 developments on the Nubian question, see Maja Janmyr (2016). See also Amira Noshokaty (2013) and a number of articles that appeared in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, notably *Ahram Online* (2014).

its due if we merely read it in its historical context? Indeed, how can we prevent juxtaposing the historical events in the second migrations in the 1930s (the time and setting of *Al-Shamandūra*), the building of the High Dam, and the subsequent forced migration of Nubians to the villages of Kom Ombo in 1963? This is a novel embedded in the historical moment, as my analysis will show, so is it possible to maintain a neutral or impersonal voice when the text clearly advocates a political and even a human rights stance? As much as the previous considerations offer several methodological possibilities, they also constitute an important critical challenge in the sense that it becomes almost impossible to isolate a single critical approach that would allow us to fully explore the novel's textual power, which is ultimately the goal of any critical interest in the text. Central to the present critique of *Al-Shamandūra* is exploring the complex relationship between the text and its social and cultural context, tracing the many ways in which Qassim represents his own ethnic group's social and cultural realities in the hope of ultimately attaining a universally legitimate perspective of the Nubian cause. From this perspective, it would be tempting to confine this critical reading of *Al-Shamandūra* to the theoretical work on ethnicity and border studies. Yet, doing merely that would make the analysis fall short of grasping Qassim's attempt in this epic novel of Nubia to go beyond the confines of his ethnic allegiance and further infuse it into the wider national exigencies, thereby shaking the foundations of the meaning of "national" literature, while inviting a revision of the foundations of the "nation" itself.

Some critical writings have celebrated Nubian literature in general as "minor" works, in the sense used by Deleuze and Guattari (1986) in their famous *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Gilmore 2015, 53; Elrefaei 2016, 9; see also chapter 5 in this volume). This view stresses the Nubian writer's articulation of a distinctively Nubian voice and identity. However, considering the concepts of what Deleuze and Guattari term "deterritorialization/reterritorialization" and using these notions as defining features of the text, on both the literal and the figurative levels, can help push the argument further. Such considerations ascertain the transformative power of this "minor" text, while, at the same time, they highlight the nuances of the poetics of the text brought into play to overturn the official narrative of the High Dam in the 1960s as the country's overarching national project. Such a perspective goes beyond merely viewing Qassim's novel as an attempt to write the history of Nubia from the bottom up, or as a "counterhistory" representing an assault on the "master narrative" of the High Dam. Indeed, this reading attempts to go beyond adopting a binary approach in favor of a much subtler

and more interpretive approach to the complex relation between national history and ethnic “histories.” Thus, however culturally and politically charged *Al-Shamandūra* may be, my reading here will not lose sight of the formal aspects of the literary text, which stands out as a unique literary work with powerful narrative and aesthetic qualities. I hope the discussion of the formal aspects of the text in this chapter will not only empower the theoretically informed discussion of the cultural, social, and historical aspects of the novel, but will also amplify the political message of Qassim’s novel.

### **The Nubian Novel: A Self-Portrait**

Is the Egyptian Nubian novel destined to be a political novel? The answer tends toward yes. Most texts written by major Nubian writers from Egypt tend to describe and interpret the lives of the Nubian people. The novel as a genre seems to be the most popular form for Nubian writers because it allows them to construct and illuminate the nature of the individual, to characterize a people, and to treat the increasingly complex phenomenon of human activity, that is, to represent “politics” in the broad sense of the word. Moreover, the question of what qualifies as an “authentic” Nubian text has been the subject of debate, as Haggag Oddoul (2009) informs us in his important literary critique *Wanasa ma‘a al-adab al-Nūbi* (In the company of Nubian literature). Oddoul refuses to accept Yehia Mokhtar’s claims that the term “Nubian literature” should be confined to the literature written in the Nubian language. All other texts, in Mokhtar’s opinion, can be more appropriately designated as modern Arabic literature by Nubian writers. Oddoul strongly opposes this view, confirming that even if Arabic is the chosen language of the Nubian written text as opposed to the Nubian oral traditions of poetry and songs, this fact by no means strips this rich tradition of contemporary literature of its Nubian character:

Language is an important component of literature, but it is not the only one; in fact I believe that what is more important than language is the text’s main preoccupation; for if the text deals with South America, it is a Latin American text even if it is written in Spanish; another text is Algerian despite being written in French, and (*in our case*) it is still considered Nubian even if it is written in Arabic. (2009, 24)

This debate reminds one of the classical debate between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe on the use of English as the language of expression in post-independence literary texts. Thiong’o’s (1981)

project of “decolonizing” the mind has to start by rejecting the colonial language (English, in the case of Kenya), but Achebe (1996) maintains that writing in English is “a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language” (383). He further sees in the use of English a possibility for a creative practice that can best represent the African postcolonial reality.

Another contested view besides that of language is the role of the Nubian writer and intellectual. Here again, one can discern various if not opposing views about the question of representation in Nubian literature. Oddoul states that Idris Ali and Yehia Mohktar staunchly oppose converting the Nubian text to a political platform where the political takes precedence over the aesthetic, but Oddoul himself defends, if not overtly calls for, a political literature, viewing the primary role of the Nubian writer as a messenger to Nubia, its history and traditions:

One of the primary roles of the Nubian man of letters [...] is to shake fixed views and to tame the unruly. He should relate to his own people their great past and stress that their great history was never that of followers but of leaders and that their culture has never been marginal nor superficial[....] You are a *real* people, and your river is a *real* one. (2009, 49; emphasis added)

Thus *Al-Shamandūra*, as a political novel, invariably reveals the attitude of its author toward his Nubian ethnic group. The novel takes place in the 1930s from the perspective of the central character, the young boy/narrator Hamid, who was born in the village of Qata in the 1920s. The narrative moves from major Nubian cities and villages, such as Qata, Aneeba, and the regional capital al-Dur, to Cairo, Aswan, and Alexandria, where the various characters, mostly Nubian, give their views concerning the proposed dam project. The depiction of Nubia, the landscape, the villages, the Nile, the palm trees, and above all, the behavior of its people, amounts to a national portrait of Nubia and the Nubians with their peculiar characteristics, thus asserting their cultural differences from their fellow Egyptians. Referring to the inhabitants of Qata, Hamid comments on the villagers:

They were all born on this land, and before them their parents and their uncles. They all loved and adored the palm trees and their green lands, and the houses built of mud and green bricks. And they love the Nile by their village as they love their own wives [...] they always believed their land was the most beautiful and its people the best in the world [...] they were the only

people and all others a heap of rubbish[...] A Nubian leaves for far off capitals of big cities only to come back as he approaches his end. He comes back carrying all his savings to die amidst the palm trees and be buried in the vast cemetery near Haj Mek-kawi [...] in the shadow of His Blessings. (Qassim [1968] 2016, 67–68)

Indeed, the geography and the history of the place can by no means be treated as a monolithic background to the events of the novel; they are intrinsic to the fabric of the text and metaphorically act as central characters in the book. The buoy and the date palms are the central metaphors, and, in particular, are presented as characters of flesh and blood that play a vital role in the lives of the Nubians. Muhammad Khalil Qassim devotes entire passages and even chapters (notably chapter 8) to the season of gathering the dates: “The naked earth laid bathing in the sunlight despite the hundreds of drumming feet from the valley to the shore and then back to the valley, and the hustle and bustle everywhere. The great Season has begun; the Season of the Dates” (125).

Qassim’s representation of Qata with its landscape and the way of life of its inhabitants signifies his view of his culture as a complex system that merits interpretation rather than merely an object waiting to be gazed upon by the curious eye of an anthropologist. Fully aware that in order for an outsider to grasp the codes and signs of his culture, Qassim offers the reader a “thick description” or a “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures” (Geertz 1973, 7), which constitutes the signs and symbols of everyday life of Nubians: “Hundreds of men, women, and children head toward the shores with the rising sun having a rendezvous with tens of thousands of palms, tens of thousands of date bunches and millions of dates” (Qassim [1968] 2016, 133). Moreover, the date palms themselves are personified, thus intensifying their symbolic role in the collective consciousness of Nubians:

This is a tall palm, leaning toward the Nile. Her crown is unruly with yellowish leaves, shaking with the breeze, kindly embracing its fruits, leaning slightly then whispering to her neighbor:  
 — Do you know, little one, how old I am?  
 — How old, my grandma? Twenty years old?  
 — Count on your fingers[...] The Mamluks rested in my shade from [...]  
 — Mamluks?  
 — Yes, Mamluks[...] Don’t you know of them? They fled the massacre, passed by here; some of them left while others remained.



Saadeya is one of their daughters [...] white, beautiful and in her eyes traces of blue. (134)

However, Muhammad Khalil Qassim's love and nostalgia for Nubia are by no means represented as abstract emotions. He describes his deep feelings for his ancestral villages and traditions, but he is still able to see his people's faults. Throughout *Al-Shamandūra*, Qassim makes a conscious judgment on the Nubian national character. The following lines depict the feared destination of the young men after the makeshift tents they inhabited caught fire in the wake of the first displacement:

Then it was the turn of Bora'ii who, whispering to his parents, implored them to let him leave until they finally agreed. This is the same Bora'ii who a few months ago would swear never to serve in any house, preferring to starve in the village than to kneel before anyone in Misr. This is Bora'ii, the freedom fighter, who experienced imprisonment along with al-Ma'zun and Badr Afandi. He was so desperate that he gave up on all his political views and swallowed his dignity, all to travel to Misr in search of any kind of job. (691)

This is not to suggest that Qassim was oblivious to the plight of the Nubians or that he underestimated their calamity. In fact, he was very conscious of the historical process by which their ethnicity was long manipulated to aid in the incumbent regime's consolidation of power. The novel brilliantly portrays the tension between promises and betrayal through depicting individual emotions swinging between optimism about the future and nagging doubts and uncertainties emanating from the present reality of loss and displacement. The explicit attack on Ismail Sidky Pasha, prime minister of Egypt from 1930 to 1933, which culminated in an attempted assassination at the hands of Hussein Taha, and the doubts about the British envoy to Nubia alongside the officials in charge of Qata and al-Dor, did not make Qassim idealize Nubians or turn a blind eye to the villagers who succumbed to the power of the state and accepted scant compensation, thus jeopardizing the collective act of disobedience their members of the community had agreed upon. Moreover, there are a few references to forms of ethnocentrism the Nubians demonstrate toward outsiders, such as Zanouba, Gamal's white Cairene bride, and Darya Sakina and her daughter Sharifa, who are constantly referred to as *gurbatī*, that is, having non-Nubian blood.

Thus, praising the novel as a foundational text in Nubian literary history, Oddoul asserts: “*Al-Shamandūra* is a social and anthropological study of the Nubian community at its time” (2009, 144). It may seem that Qassim’s novel fits perfectly well with Oddoul’s expectations of the “true” Nubian text and the “ideal” Nubian writer. According to him, this writer should play an interventionist role in exposing and eventually changing the stereotypical image of Nubians that has long stigmatized the Nubian character in the social and cultural consciousness of the rest of the Egyptians. Speaking bitterly of this cultural trauma, Oddoul does not mince his words when he describes the situation:

What angers me is the image of Nubia in the eyes of the ordinary people and in the eyes of the minority who claim to be enlightened. For them, Nubia is a museum, an exhibition, and the Nubians are those kindhearted dark natives, the descendants of porters, butlers, and cooks. As such they are widely accepted, but once they attempt to break this caricaturist image by becoming real successful life stories and start talking boldly about their pains and aspirations [...] this becomes severely refuted, and especially by those cultural phonies and other one-track minded intellectuals; they are rejected by the racists whose only existence depends on the power they exercise over a subaltern group. Nubian literature has a role in setting the record straight through changing this erroneous caricaturist image and replacing it with the collective image of the true Nubian character. (2009, 49)

Oddoul’s words lay claim to an almost essentialist exclusivity and ironically invoke implicit comparisons with an Egyptian “mainstream” nationalism, which, like all nationalisms, is essentialist by nature. In fact, his position is clear when he urges Nubian writers to resist all forms of racism or “differential racialization,” to use Delgado and Stefancic’s terms (2001, 8). In other words, Nubian racial and ethnic consciousness is made to replace the dominant nationalist discourse that Oddoul himself sets forth to deconstruct.

Notwithstanding the affinities between Oddoul’s “ideal” Nubian text (2009) and Qassim’s novel, *Al-Shamandūra* seems to go far beyond representing a social and anthropological “authentic” study of Nubia. It is a reminder of the complexity of the issues around ethnicity, the relationship between the metropolis/center (the north in general, which according to the Old Nubia, started from Aswan way up to Cairo) and the idyllic Nubian villages in the deep south awaiting their destiny to be determined by the central government in Cai-

ro. It can be argued that what saves *Al-Shamandūra* from the destiny of just becoming a straightforward cultural and political text with a clear message, following Oddoul's recommendation, are the various narrative and aesthetic strategies deployed. Indeed, the structure, the use of metaphors and motifs in the novel, and the use of translated words in the last section of the book represent important decentering strategies from a narrative viewpoint. Moreover, such strategies are further employed to suggest fluid national boundaries. Thus, the novel goes beyond merely subverting the national when it highlights the ethnic and even tribal differences through presenting itself as a "minor" text. Such a strategy has a twofold effect: it liberates the text from the confines of tribalism, hence reducing the binary opposition with the "national," and the "minor" text, and enriches and widens the national boundaries themselves.

### **The Transformative Power of *Al-Shamandūra* as a Minor Text**

It might be argued that the earlier reference to the novel's textual and rhetorical power saved Qassim from falling into the trap of yet another narrow-minded nationalism, one that stresses "our great past" and "great history," to use some of Oddoul's own terms. To explore this question further, it is worth examining Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) and their seminal *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983). Probing the complex argument of Deleuze and Guattari on the perception of desire goes beyond the limits of this chapter, but for the purpose of my argument here it suffices to highlight their notion of how an "anti-Oedipus" position is maintained when the subject struggles against and rejects the fixed boundaries imposed by all forms of oppressive structures, be they social, political, or psychological. Classical psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud and even Jacques Lacan) saw one's desire as always mediated and prohibited by an external authority, but Deleuze and Guattari (2000) see desire as "a machine" and the object of desire as another machine connected to it (26). Moreover, they view desire as an energy with strong potential for transformations when connected to other bodies producing new formations or assemblages (18). As such, Deleuze and Guattari locate potential for transformation in what they term "minor literature," which they explain as acts of a "desiring-machine" (25-26) able to transform the authoritative and the canonical.

Based on their reconceptualization of desire, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) identify the two main characteristics of minor literature. The first is language they explain as "affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (16). The second characteristic of the minor

text and its “deterritorial” potentialities is derived from the collective value of “minor” texts, or its “collective assemblage of enunciation” (18), which finds in the collective voice of minorities a way to destabilize or deterritorialize fixed, stable, and single hegemonic powers. This second feature of minor texts gives them their political and even revolutionary possibilities (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, xvi). Michael Ryan succinctly puts the Deleuzo–Guattarian project of the minor text and its subversive influence in the following lines:

All such stabilizations or codings constitute territorialisations in that they establish boundaries of identity that restrain temporarily the movement of the flows and the lines of flight. They hold them in place (demarcate a territory), but deterritorialisation is a more powerful force, and everything eventually breaks apart and flows anew, only once again to be recaptured and reterritorialised by another social regime of signification, made useful and meaningful at the same time. (2008, 104)

In my discussion of the structure of Qassim’s novel and the buoy as its central metaphor together with its role in the text, we can highlight further the nuances of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory. My analysis will underscore the text’s creative ability to transform not only the authoritative and hegemonic canon but also the dominant social code and the Nubian ethnic “nation” itself. Thus, the novel performs a double transformation. Central to this process of transformation is the act of deterritorialization of the dominant and the national, and also the ethnic with its social and cultural codes. This is mainly manifested on the level of language and expression.

By looking at the narrative strategies employed in the text, its potential will be explored together with subjecting the standard forms of representations to serious revision, and hence the “deterritorial” potential of *Al-Shamandūra* will become clearer. I have singled out several narrative strategies to demonstrate the text’s transformative power, including the use of language, the structure of the narrative text, mythopoeic elements, the interplay between the individual, and the collective and the use of metaphors.

I have referred above to the debate in Nubian literary and critical circles over the question of language. To start with, in a Deleuzo–Guattarian sense, the appropriation of Arabic (the dominant language) seems to undermine the fixed structure of this dominant language and hence opens new trajectories of transformation. However, the situation is made even more complex when in the second half of the novel, and noticeably after the villagers’ immigration to their “new” homes, we read scattered words and phrases in

various Nubian languages. It is also interesting to note that at times the words or phrases are parenthetically translated immediately after the Arabic term, as in “*afialogo*” (goodbye) (691), or when the children were following Hamid crying, “*mashar kabaka, mashar kabaka*,” and one of them whispered to Hamid, “*Kabaka* means bread, Hamid. Don’t you have bread?” (698–99). Thus, the reader for the first time experiences the feeling of being a *gurbati*, a stranger or non-Nubian.

Various explanations could be offered to this form of language defamiliarization. It could be considered a form of defense mechanism against loss and displacement, an attempt to hold on to one’s roots against deracination.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, the use of the Nubian language can be considered a form of territorialization. However, the opposite seems more plausible. Qassim’s scant use of Nubian words and his choice of language transparency reflected in the translations he gives in the text to the Nubian terms are far from Thiong’o’s reclamation of Gikuyu. In fact, it has to be seen as part of his “deterritorialization” project. This language “contamination,” as it were, has a twofold function. It manifests in the oscillation at the level of narration between the diegetic mode (the narrator’s involvement in the story marked by using Standard Arabic in the text) and the mimetic mode (characters using direct Nubian words). As such, it produces the effect of defamiliarizing or “othering” not only the Arabic language (Gilmore 2015, 59) but also the Nubian language itself.

On another significant level, the uniqueness of the transformative nature of the text can be read as a form of critiquing the very realistic tradition of the Egyptian novel represented by the master of realism in Egyptian and Arab fiction, Naguib Mahfouz. I am referring to Mahfouz, in particular his “realistic” phase in the 1950s, as the most canonical figure in modern Egyptian narrative tradition. The comparison between a “major” canonical text, that is, Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy* (1956–1957) and Qassim’s “minor” text imposes itself. The former depicts in a linear view of history the conditions and the state of mind of a typical Egyptian middle-class family between 1919 and 1949; the latter infuses realistic historical narration with experimental narrative forms. In a significant scene in *Al-Shamandūra* depicting the villagers’ traditions during the month of Ramadan, the men gather to kill time throughout the night by telling stories and tales. Sheikh Taha hands Hamid an old volume, the tale of Sayf Ibn Dhi-Yazan. This is followed by a few pages in which

3 Attempts to salvage Nubian languages and preserve them from oblivion and cultural erasure can be found in Nubian Egyptologist Mukhtar Kabbara’s efforts to write the language using Nubian letters in 1997. For a detailed account of Kabbara’s project, see Tomoum (2014).

we read the enframed tale of this famous East African myth, which has a significant status in southern Egyptian and Nubian imaginary. The selected interpolated tale depicts the biblical story of Noah's curse and vow to transform his son Ham and all his descendants into Blacks and enslave them to his white son, Sam (Shem), and his descendants forever. On finishing this part of the tale, the voice of Hamid sadly states:

I stopped reading and neither Sheikh Fadl nor the other listeners implored me to go on. They all knew the rest of the tragedy. Didn't they all have black faces by a prophet's decree? By the decree of the Almighty God? Aren't our villagers truly the descendants of Ham? Whereas Sidky, the King, Barakat Affandi and Mr. Hess, aren't they all the children of Sam? As for Abdu Al-Faransawy and the rest of the villagers, aren't they all the descendants of Ham whom the prophet cursed with their black skin? (Qassim [1968] 2016, 274)

The significance of the scene lies in Qassim's ability to fuse the mythic and supernatural world with the realistic. Nowhere else in the novel do we clearly hear the "voice of color," to use Delgado and Stefancic's terms (2001, 9), as in this scene in the novel. However, one might contend that Qassim's intentions are not to merely write a text with an ideological agenda or to explore racial issues and the effects of racism on the characters in his book and on the Nubians in general. The mythopoeic significance of Sayf Ibn Dhi-Yazan's tale goes far beyond this episode in the whole collection of this folk epic. It is significant that in the epic, the hero Ibn-Yazan sets out on a quest in search of the book of the Nile; hence the significance of *sīra* ("biography") in the Nubian folk tradition. So, here again, I claim that the folktale is not used to consolidate Black essentialism as much as it is used as a transformative strategy to assert a non-essentialist form of racialization. To put it differently, though the articulated part of the folktale in Hamid's reading ostensibly represents the doomed tragic racial question, the untold part ironically presents Ibn-Yazan's main moral as a quest. Thus, the politics and poetics of the tale employed here help us appreciate Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra* and the position it occupies in Nubian literary history.<sup>4</sup>

On the level of structure, the novel is not divided into parts or sections, but has fifty-seven chapters. However, we can still divide the narrative into two main parts. From chapter 1 to chapter 25, the novel documents the daily lives of the villagers of Qata in Nubia,

4 For a thorough discussion of this enframed narrative in Qassim's text, see chapter 7 of this volume in which Khalid Abou el-Lail discusses *sīra* as an example of Qassim's representation and revisioning of Nubian folk traditions.

seen through the eyes of the narrator Hamid. Here, the prevalent mood is one of stability and calm. The narration seems to reflect a peaceful yet isolated atmosphere in the villages on the banks of the Nile in southern Egypt. The opening scene is quite indicative of this narrative mood and merits quotation in full:

The whole scene was calm. The palm trees shook not their trunks. The Nile lay still beneath our feet. The whirlpool visible between the riverbank and the green islet looked inert and motionless, as though it had lapsed into a deep sleep. Even the boatmen echoed heartfelt songs on their damsels, and on the cups of tea they had made before noon, tea that slowly brewed over burnt acacia wood. Hardly audible, their faint voices could only reach us as sad and vague resonances. Their boats were still far away whilst their beats on tambours were yonder muffled by the palm trees separating the north of the village, Qata, from Al-Durr, the capital town of the province, or by those on the slope separating the south of Ibrim, our village twin, from the casement and the orchard. (7)

The second part of the novel, from chapter 26 until the end, marks a significant shift in the tempo of the text as the Qata inhabitants start to live in the shadow of the long-awaited deluge and the much-feared displacement and subsequent forced migrations. This is reflected in the shifts in narrative perspectives from Hamid's personal world and the daily lives of Nubians to a more collective outlook. The following lines document this state of tension and uncertainty encroaching upon the lives of the Nubians in these hard times:

The men silently continued watching the ship depart and sail to the middle of the Nile. When it passed them, they started whispering then roared with laughter, blaming only themselves. Dozens of questions crossed their minds: When would the floods happen? Where would they go? What compensations would they receive? [...] lands in return for lands and houses for houses? And what about the palm dates and their seedlings? Would they be left to die? And how would they calculate the compensations for every tree, *feddan*, or house? (159)

The dramatic conflict in the text further manifests itself in the multivocality, especially in the second half of the narrative, where Hamid's voice recedes, giving way to an omniscient narrator and at times a merging of voices, thus submerging the clear and stable voice of the first part of the novel. Chapter 26 takes us from events

in Nubia to Cairo and the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Sidky Pasha by the Nubian activist Hussein Mohammed Taha. This part marks a shift between characters and locations, thus shattering Hamid's unitary perspective of the first-person narration that marks the first part of the novel to reflect the tension brought about by the state of displacement and resettlement that befell the Nubians. Yet central to the text's structure is the red buoy, whose presence throughout the text is felt physically and metaphorically. It is first introduced through Hamid's eyes: "This is nature putting an end to its wild dreams at night, giving way to a day bustling with crashing waves on the side of the immersed red buoy, perpetually struggling to get rid of her shackles, never giving up until the winds abate and the Nile calms down" (Qassim [1968] 2016, 78). Moreover, "the red buoy which kept struggling to overcome the thick chains pulling it to the seabed" becomes a recurrent refrain throughout the narrative.

In the same vein, the date palms act as characters of flesh and blood. Thus, their symbolic significance exemplified in their rootedness in the earth cannot be overlooked. It is interesting to note that both metaphors seem to reflect one another. The palms represent the roots and the steadfastness of Nubian existence on their land, but the buoy with its thick chains tied down to the bottom of the Nile has been regarded by a number of critics, including Oddoul, Salāh Al-Serwi, Youssef Al-Qa'eed, and El-Gayar, among others,<sup>5</sup> as a symbol of stability and the deep rootedness befitting the Nubian existential state. However, such readings have missed the subtleties of the role of the red buoy as a central metaphor in the text. They have pinned it down within the semantic order of meanings, viewing it as a symbol of Nubian identity. Such stabilization constitutes yet another form of "territorialization," which results in the fixing of the boundaries of identity, something Qassim himself sets out to subvert. It is also significant to note that the novel's publication coincided with the political upheaval in the aftermath of the 1967 June War defeat, when the "national question" was indeed under an existential threat, not only in Egypt but throughout the Arab world. It is my view that even if the red buoy is restrained in its movement by the force of the strong chains that tie it to the seabed, the buoy constantly attempts to break the chains to set itself free. It is significant that after the floods and the villagers' displacement, the red buoy is seen to have slipped its moorings and slid out into the Nile, sailing

5 The novel was celebrated by the Egyptian leftist party, Al-Tagamo, which published the entire novel in a special issue of *Adab wa Naqd* 4 (1994). The introduction featured the critical discussion of the novel by several leftist critics, notably Salah Al-Serwi, Youssef Al-Qa'eed, Farida Al-Naqqash, and Refaat Al-Saeed, among others. See also Medhat El-Gayar's (1994) study of the novel.



freely for a week until it was brought back and pinned down to its ordinary chains. The Egyptian literary critic Mahmoud Amin Al-‘Alem refers to this significant incident in the text, observing that it coincides with Hamid’s final admittance into Al-Durr School, his dream, concluding that Hamid’s long-awaited attempt to leave the family and the village may be read symbolically as an act of coming of age (Al-‘Alem 1997, 357). This reading seems plausible if we consider the very last scene in the narrative, where we see Hamid again moving out of the confines of the village to the vast world to seek an education, the only outlet from his dire present reality. Hamid’s last gaze on the Nile before his departure ends the narrative:

Before the camp disappeared at the bend, I could see the lights of a barge going up the Nile flicker. I glanced sideways to the red buoy only to find it violently bump against the chain mooring it to the bottom; it would rise and fall, and then remain, for a while, still, only to resume the tussle again. (736)

Thus, the novel’s closure ushers in the beginning of a new life for young Hamid. His future mission echoes that of the folk hero Sayf Ibn Dhi-Yazan, referred to earlier, who goes on a quest in search of the book of the Nile to break the powerful spell cast on the Nile. The novel thus ends on a note of hope, echoing the tale of the folk hero who managed to defeat the Abyssinians by diverting the Nile course and eventually ensuring the flow of the waters to the whole valley.

### **Subverting the National and the Tribal in *Al-Shamandūra***

In thinking of Qassim’s novel as one of the established Nubian allegories, it is useful to briefly consider Fredric Jameson’s well-known but controversial argument about “national allegories” in the post-colonial context. Jameson boldly claims:

All third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories [...] the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (1986, 69)

Even though Jameson’s claims have been the subject of controversy within postcolonial literary studies, nonetheless there could be significant areas of overlap with our present discussion. At the core of Jameson’s argument is his suggestion that the literature of the capitalist West is marked by a clear split between the individual and

the group, between the personal and the political. In contrast, he explains, “all of this is denied to third-world culture, which must be situational and materialist despite itself [...] where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (1986, 85–86). In other words, according to Jameson, reading “Third World” novels as documents of national struggles seems to be an inevitable undertaking. Aijaz Ahmad, in his attempt to “write back” to Jameson’s emphatic statement, offered one of the most famous and severe critiques of Jameson. He rejects what he views as its simplistic generalizations and dismisses the text and context debate altogether as a form of encouraging an unbridgeable gap between “Western” and “third-world texts” (1992, 103).

Notwithstanding the extent of the ensuing debates stirred by Jameson’s claim, my study here, in examining a seminal Nubian text, seems to agree with Jameson’s overall argument that stresses that Third World writers create national allegories “despite themselves” and by virtue of the political, economic, and cultural conditions that clearly encourage particular literary modes. Moreover, as I will show later in the discussion of the structure of the text, the novel as a cultural production aims to formulate and promote new levels and aspects of the nation itself.

On one level, *Al-Shamandūra* can be read as a coming-of-age story, as a tale of a young man coming to maturity during a key moment in Egypt’s national history in general and the history of the Nubian region in particular. However, the writer allows us to see how the actions of the main character and the other characters shaping the development of the plot intersect with the course of the broader story of Nubia. From this perspective, the novel can be read as a political novel, and Qassim, the novelist, can be considered a political historian of some sort. In the novel, Qassim weaves in the threads of history, recording not only the lives of his creations but also actual events in the lives of his macro-nation (Egypt) and his micro-nation (Nubia). The following are the headlines in the novel from *Al-Balāgh*, an evening daily established in 1923. Hussein Taha, the political activist in the novel, recalls the news in the paper:

*Al-Balāgh* discusses the crisis [...] al-Wafd demands a constitution in 1923 [...] Makram gives a speech in Tanta [...] The House of Representatives and the Senates discuss the compensations [...] Shafik Pasha refrains from answering [...] The last trials of the prison wards [...] The widows of the prison ward martyrs file complaints [...] People of El-Dor file complaints [...] A worker distributed leaflets and was arrested. “No” was the only

word he kept shouting [...] prison will be his only fate [...] Sabry Pasha visits the site of the dam [...] More land annexation [...] The Pullman is being made ready to transport the Prime Minister to the port. (Qassim [1968] 2016, 396)

Thus, the national question is a key theme in the first Nubian novel. However, in the case of Nubia, the question is impregnated with cultural, political, and indeed philosophical considerations and merits serious investigation. Although the events of the novel take place in the 1930s, the novel was written and published at a very important historical and political point in the history of modern Egypt. This was the time of post independence Egypt when the whole nation was summoned to pool efforts to maintain the new nation-state after the 1952 revolution. Thus, nationhood as the positive “expression” of a unique collective identity hovers over the events of the text. Indeed, a quick look at the literature and all other cultural manifestations of the 1950s and ’60s in Egypt testify to a very strong rhetoric of nationalism. This nationalist hegemonic discourse was summoned by the leaders of the nascent nation that had emerged as a strong political power, inspiring successful rallying and popular or even populist mobilization. Such ultranationalist sentiments suggest what Simon During defines as “the battery of discursive and representational practices which determine, legitimate, or valorize a specific nation-state or individuals as members of a nation-state” (1990, 138). Examining the production of great Egyptian literary figures of the 1950s and early 1960s will reveal a highly committed literary and artistic output that could never be divorced from the struggle of the nation. The novels, plays, and the entire repertoire of nationalist songs of the period reveal the degree to which the intellectuals of the time were politically engaged.<sup>6</sup>

However effective it was, this form of nationalism was itself marked by the mobilization of the nationalist spirit on all levels: first as a resistance to pre-revolutionary colonial conditions, and then as a strong combating force against neocolonial forces in the new Egypt of post-1952. However, the issue of what constitutes nationalism is far from simple, presenting a number of political and theoretical problematics. One of these difficulties manifests itself in the totalizing nature of nationalism, in the sense that in the name of Nasserite nationalism the totalizing of political resistance risked obscuring and even negating the rights or interests of ethnic or oth-

6 Scores of Egyptian writers allied themselves to state apparatuses strongly supporting Nasser’s Cultural Revolution. They became members of the Ministry of National Guidance in post-1952 Egypt and remained so throughout the 1950s and ’60s. The list includes the following writers having various ideological and political affiliations: Youssef El-Sebaai, Youssef Idris, Salah Abdel-Sabour, Salah Jaheen, and al-Abnoudi, among others.

er groups like the Nubians. Thus, a novel such as *Al-Shamandūra*, with its overt Nubian nationalist sentiments, triggers a discussion of such political and theoretical difficulties. The novel has clear references to what might be called “antihegemony,” a general mood whereby people refuse to identify with the programs of the ruling élites. The malaise, indeed the trauma, of Nubians as represented in *Al-Shamandūra* suggests that Qassim is “answering back” to one of the most conspicuous narrative works written by three major writers of the 1960s, *Insān Al-Sadd Al-‘Ali* (Human of the High Dam, 1967), in which three Egyptians, Son‘allah Ibrahim, Kamal al-Qilish, and Ra‘uf Mus‘ad, wrote an account of their visit to the High Dam, celebrating that brilliant national project as “the Fourth Pyramid” and documenting the overwhelming and extraordinary sacrifices Egyptians from all different ages and classes had offered to complete this monumental mega-project. It is as though Qassim, in a side glance, seems to be drawing attention to the human and environmental cost of building the High Dam, an issue entirely absent or at best sidelined amid the propaganda surrounding the dam during the 1960s.

Indeed, it is obvious throughout the novel that Nubians in the far south of Egypt had always felt alienated from a form of nationalist elitism they had always deplored, because they viewed it as exclusionary and chauvinistic — and not infrequently racist. In the following lines, the omniscient narrator offers us a glimpse of the class relations in pre-revolutionary Egypt:

The waiters kept coming and going, serving the Lady, His Highness, and his company soft drinks. They would come back with empty glasses and crockery with smiles that would not leave them if they were in service. These smiles may disappear later when they are with their children [...] but never while serving[....] Every one of them had been trained to do his job properly after a lot of back-breaking toil. Each had undergone several tests to know how to elegantly serve food and drink, and how to whisper words of thanks upon receiving the tips tucked into their palms. They got trained to keep away if they noticed any sign of anger or resentment on their masters’ faces and as soon as they sensed their masters’ good mood, they would rush enthusiastically to offer their services with the utmost precision and obedience, performing a carefully calculated bow. (Qassim [1968] 2016, 405)

The pangs of the social reality of the Nubians as expressed in the above citation from the novel remind us of Frantz Fanon’s (1967) il-

luminating remarks: “National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people [...] will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what might happen” (148). Such notions, Fanon adds, result in a situation where “the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state” (148–49). Fanon’s remark can be true to a large extent with regard to “angry” Nubian writers, such as Idris Ali, Yehia Mokhtar, and to some extent Haggag Oddoul, who have incessantly pointed to the exclusion and marginalization of Nubians as a feature of Egyptian nationalist practice. From this perspective, Nubian forms of cultural and artistic productions, such as the novel, have become sites where the writers and the reading public experience and mediate national politics. Indeed, what seems to mark most of the literary output of Nubians is a conscious attempt to subvert official discourses of the nation in the postrevolutionary eras in modern Egypt (1952 and 2011). This comes as no surprise, since these were times of political transition, a period necessarily marked by intense lobbying for democratic and political change.

Oddoul’s well-known critiques of state-controlled nationalism seek to disregard or even become hostile toward any form of subnational identity as a threat to nation-building (1990, 94–95). However, “nation” itself is a very complex and contested term. Ever since Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, critics have stressed the need for discourses of alternative categories, such as the minor or ethnic voices writing from the margins of state-sanctioned versions of the nation, for example, Homi Bhabha and his notion of “dissemination” (1999, 298), Anouar Abdel-Malek (1981), and Neil Lazarus’s notions of nationalitarian politics (2011). A common denominator in all these various interventions is a belief that civilizations are formed because of the major and complex integration of social categories derived from a multiplicity of sources. In this respect, the support of “nationalitarian” (all-inclusive) rather than a nationalist (centralized and exclusive) cultural system together with a state of citizenship based on equal rights of the citizens regardless of their religious, ethnic, or racial differences is the only guarantee for establishing a pluralistic and democratic system.

In the same vein, the relation between the “national” and the “minor” is not simply one of dominating/dominated power, but is made complex by virtue of the “contact zones,” to use Mary Louise Pratt’s key term, that help us understand the ways in which members of subordinated or marginal groups undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with the representations others have made of them. In this sense, the Nubian culture represented in Muhammad Khalil Qassim’s novel amounts to what Pratt again describes as

“autoethnography,” as a self-construction of the Nubian way of life in response to and, more importantly, in dialogue with the mainstream stereotypical representations of the Nubians in non-Nubian texts. From this perspective, the “contact zone” attempts to “invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjuncture, and whose trajectories now intersect” (1992, 6–7). As such, even when Qassim offers us a cultural lens by which we can see the Nubian way of life, he does so not as a mere representative of the Nubian character, as Oddoul (2009) recommends, nor as a messenger or mediator who conveys his minority’s view to the world. Indeed, by stretching the narrative and poetic possibilities of his work to its limits, Qassim’s “minor” text transforms the meaning and practice of the “national” itself taking it to new levels of consciousness.

### Conclusion

Reading and interpreting the first novel about Nubia, *Al-Shamandūra*, has been driven by a conviction that Muhammed Khalil Qassim attempted to consciously subvert official or mainstream discourses of the nation. It is believed that the entire text was written and smuggled out of prison during his five-year incarceration in the 1960s, at a time when Egyptian nationalism was at its height. The Nasserite era was also the time when Egyptian cultural production, including literature, became the site through which writers and the reading public engaged in national politics. Qassim’s novel stands out as a unique text that seriously attests to a multiplicity or diversity that defies a single narrative of the nation, be it ethnic (Nubian) or nationalist (Egyptian).

The intrinsic irony in *Al-Shamandūra* is that although it poses as a Nubian text dealing with the Nubians and their calamity in the 1930s, it increasingly attempts to decenter national boundaries, hence simultaneously transforming both narrow Nubian ethnic belonging and wider allegiance to the nation. By examining the role of Hamid, the narrator, and the central image of the red buoy, or *al-Shamandūra*, the transforming potential of the narrative as a “minor” text, in the Deleuzo–Guattarian conception, is represented as a process of deterritorialization.

Qassim’s narrative becomes a site of tension between the collective emotions of the Nubians swinging between the nagging doubts and uncertainties of their present dire reality and Hamid’s individual optimism about the future. Can we therefore conclude that Nubian literature does not necessarily have to be viewed through the lens of binarism? *Al-Shamandūra* does offer a possibility of breaking

through forms of ethnic exclusivity, but at the same time it defies any notion of a singular narrative of the nation. The last scene in the novel ushers in the transition from Hamid's ethnic consciousness to a wider national citizenship when he leaves his community to seek his education in the city. His decision to leave his family and community and move to Cairo points to his determination to create an independent existence liberated from the limiting pressures of his own people. Like Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hamid's frustration with the situation in his homeland induces him to depart to Cairo under the pretext of seeking education, but in reality he seems to be heading toward a future of unfettered freedom. The young Hamid, though an individual voice, represents the collective voice of minor literature that aims at creating "a people to come" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 90). Here the Nubian tradition is transformed and redefined as much as the foundations of the nation are transformed or deterritorialized.

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# Reconsidering Cultural Identity in Zeinab Alkordy's *Zahrat al- Janūb* (Flower of the south)

Sherine F. Mazloum

## Introduction

Nubia, located on the border between Sudan and Egypt, has been geographically divided into an Egyptian Nubia and a Sudanese one. It is the name of the area in the Nile valley south of Aswan in Egypt from the first cataract, extending to northern Sudan, to the third or fourth cataracts. Any attempt to study the Nubian question has to start by examining the geopolitics of the region, its history, geography, culture, and the political factors affecting the area. According to Leith Mullings, Nubian identities,

are forged in struggles to preserve cultural heritage lost to flooding caused by the High Dam at Aswan in the 1960s and, more recently, dams constructed in Sudanese Nubia at Kajbar and Hamdab. This compelled Kenuz Nubians to move elsewhere, especially the town of Kom Ombo. Sukkot, Mahas, and Halfawi Nubians were relocated to eastern towns such as New Halfa and Khashm al-Girba in Sudan. (2009, 314)

Nubia is made up of “the land of the ancient kingdoms of Kush and the various small ancient states such as Yam and Irteṭ” (Fluehr-Lobban & Lobban 2009, 313). Hence, migration and relocation affected Nubians’ experiences, resulting in the recurrent themes of loss, nostalgia, and lament in literature by Nubians.

One of the most recurrent themes in these writings is the issue of identity, where Nubian identity is often presented as an essentialized timeless notion. This essentialist identity is the result of losing the homeland and clinging to an idealized image of the past

that preserves a notion of being Nubian in the face of displacement and relocation. However, I argue here that the collection of five stories by the Egyptian/Sudanese-born Nubian writer Zeinab Alkordy, published under the title of *Zahrat al-Janūb* (Flower of the south) in 1997 presents a variety of Nubian characters living their everyday lives and experiencing the world as individuals rather than only as a cultural group marked by a timeless essence of a Nubian “self.” Identity studies is divided into two main areas: the first one builds on identity as a fixed given essence; the other asserts that identities are dynamic processes. This chapter argues that the characters in the selected stories are dynamic multifaceted identities “in the making,” to use the term of Stuart Hall, who argues that individuals interact with their daily surroundings from various positions and where “identities are constituted within, not outside representation” (1996, 4). Hence, Alkordy’s stories show identities “in the making” (Drew 1998, 173). *Zahrat al-Janūb* portrays Nubian characters as different, diverse individuals, and so contests traditional stereotyping of Nubians. In so doing, the aim of this chapter is to engage with the representation of Nubian identity and experience from the perspective of the postpositivist realist theory of identity with special reference to Satya Mohanty’s concept of the epistemic status of cultural identity.

Interest in Nubian literature has gained more prominence recently, as is clearly manifested in the rise of calls to reclaim Nubians’ right to return to Nubia. However, it would be fair to claim that there is currently limited research on Nubian literature. Moreover, there is hardly any research that acknowledges Alkordy as a creative Egyptian/Sudanese female writer. As with many of her Nubian male counterparts, it is very hard to get hold of her published work, whether in bookshops or even in libraries. It is worth noting that the manuscript of *Zahrat al-Janūb* is available only at the Egyptian National Library and Archive. It is currently out of print, and there are apparently no reviews or articles available, to date, that deal with *Zahrat al-Janūb* or with Alkordy’s life. To address the lack of critical works, I conducted an interview with Alkordy’s daughter, Rabab Hakem. The lack of resources concerning the writer and her text was not the only challenge in writing this chapter. For attempting to use critical notions that are the products of Western academia, even if they are produced by non-Western academics, presents further challenges concerning the appropriation of Western critical notions and whether they are fit to use as the lens through which to read the cultural-specific writing experience of a woman, a Nubian, and an Egyptian/Sudanese. Whatever the case may be, I believe that bringing a literary work to light that has been ignored

or neglected is in itself a risk worth taking. Worthy of mentioning is that *Zahrat al-Janūb*, Alkordy's most famous Arabic text, is considered by some to be one of the earliest books written by a Nubian woman (Oddoul 2009, 103).

A preliminary attempt to discuss the Nubian experience would necessarily focus on the issues of return and the deportation from Nubia — the result of a series of elevations of two dams and the inundation of the land caused by the High Dam. Nubia is mostly discussed from an archeological/historical perspective whereby emphasis is on distinguishing Nubians from Egyptians, or northern Nile inhabitants from Sudanese/lower Nile ones. Such studies that discuss cultural manifestations and material artifacts in this middle part of the Nile tend to ignore or overlook the fact that identity cannot be referred to as a homogenous timeless entity.

Recently, archeological research contests the reification of a Nubian identity. A consideration of archeological studies is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one example of such research is worth discussing to mark the shift in perspective. This shift marks a realization that the sentimental recreation of a pure Nubian kingdom in the past, like the one longed for by the character Awad Shalali in Idris Ali's novel *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1993; translated into English in 1998), is a construction that has misled many Egyptians of Nubian descent into thinking that they are alienated and different from other Egyptians. Hence, the recurrent theme of loss of identity and the nostalgia for an essence of Nubia that existed in the past. Indeed, earlier writings by Nubian writers, such as Ali and Qassim, echo this longing for a past Nubian essence that is preserved beyond time and space. Indeed, such notions were reinforced by archeology, which presented Nubia as an archeological fact. David Edwards points out that archeological studies in the twentieth century and earlier tended to "reify archeological 'cultures' as unproblematic, homogenous, bounded social units in a fashion which is difficult to reconcile with current approaches to the complex construction of social identities and ethnicities in archeology and social history" (2004, 34). Edwards further proves that Nubian and Nubia are but constructs by asserting that "as a recognisable ethnonym 'Nubian' only appears during the mid-first millennium BC when Classical sources inform us of Nubaei 'peoples' living west of the Nile, the Noba appearing in central Sudan by the end of the Meroitic period according to Ethiopian texts" (50–51). He further explains that "the Nobatai/Noubades in Lower Nubia during the post-Meroitic period and the Nuba occupying areas extending well beyond the confluence of the Niles during the medieval period, according to Arab sources" are diverse and different as proven by the remain-

ing artifacts (51–52). He doubts that “a meaningful relationship may be claimed between these ancient ‘Nubians’ and those of more recent times,” describing such relations as “speculative at best” (51). He draws attention to “the problems concerning the construction of Nubian cultural identities,” since “the largest areas of what constituted medieval ‘Nubia’ have been transformed by interlinking, if poorly understood, processes of Arabisation and Islamicisation” (52). Hence, recent archeological studies undermine the claim of a unified identity and argue for the multifaceted identities that account for the cultural turn.

Similarly, research in feminist and ethnic studies contests the notions that refer to women or to a minority group as timeless entities. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (explains in “Under Western Eyes” that the problem with essentialist thinking is that women are constituted before their entry to specific historical, social, and cultural contexts (1984, 337). Tessie Liu points out that racial thinking “is a way to imagine communities that assumes a common substance that unites [...] with intent to exclude in the process of including” (1991, 271). Mohanty, Liu, and others show how gender and race can fall in the trap of essentialism, especially with minorities. Moreover, there is an undeniable link between gender and race. Evelyn Higgenbotham argues that there is no way to “bifurcate race and gender into discrete categories as if ‘women’ could be isolated from contexts of race, class, and sexuality” (1992, 273). Indeed, feminists have often debated the issue of inclusion and exclusion when race, socioeconomic standards, cultural contexts, and historical backgrounds are examined. However, Deirdre Keenan asserts that though women are separated by race, sexuality, history, society, and values, there are always endless possibilities to transgress the boundaries and the borders that divide them (2008, 127). In light of the argument that women by virtue of their separation can offer possibilities of transgression, it can be claimed that Alkordy’s writing reflects this ability to transgress boundaries not only of gender separation but also of ethnic separation. Her presentation of Nubian characters breaks all the barriers created by essentialism, whether of race or of gender. Alkordy, rooted in a Nubian cultural heritage, articulates a positivist realist position of inclusion rather than an essentialist concept of emulation of a Nubian gendered image of transcendence. In doing this, she focuses on daily lived experiences of individuals in specific realistic locations.

### **Alkordy's Biography: A View from Within**

The ability to present the experience of Nubian inclusion is intrinsically related to Alkordy's personal experience. Although contemporary critical theory tends to downplay the role of the author in the interpretation of literary works, the focus being more directed toward the reader and emphasis laid on the ideological, rhetorical, cultural, or aesthetic structure of the text, it is my contention that both critical attitudes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, a consideration of Alkordy's biography goes beyond simply communicating the author's intention to offering us valuable insights into the complexities of the human experience she depicts. Moreover, since I do not have access to the work's reception by the public, and very scant references by critics to Alkordy's work, one way of shedding light on the writer's creativity is to examine her biographical data and explore the ways in which racial and cultural factors intersect with the gender issues represented in the text.

Alkordy, born on April 18, 1936, in Boulaq Abou El'ela (Beau Lac), lived a life of inclusion and exclusion until her death on April 9, 2009. According to her daughter, Rabab Hakem, she faced many challenges at an early age, which gave her an open-minded, down-to-earth approach to life. Alkordy's father worked as a sailor until he retired and decided to return to his home village in Halfa, leaving his three daughters and his wife in Cairo. Alkordy, who was fourteen years old at that time, decided to work as a telephonist to support her family, since she was the eldest daughter. Facing the world at such a young age in a household of women (her mother, grandmother, and sisters) made her a rebel who did not follow traditions. The beginning was with her mother's decision to stay in Cairo and to ensure that her daughters continued their education and did not return to Halfa with their father. Alkordy's rebellious, anticonformist attitude was later manifested in her decision to marry a non-Nubian Sudanese man. Despite harsh economic and social conditions, Alkordy pursued her education and was able to acquire three university degrees in three different disciplines: law, history, and literary criticism. Her experience enabled her to mingle with diverse individuals at work, at the university, and in the neighborhood, which further affected how she saw herself and her Nubian family as part of the larger community experiencing similar everyday lives. Her marriage was another decisive break with Nubian tradition. During her studies at Cairo University, she met and fell in love with Hassan Hakem, a Sudanese of Arab origin.<sup>1</sup> They mar-

1 Hassan Hakem, Zeinab's husband, was a famous cartoonist. His family descended from Al Hagana (camel riders) who were Sudanese emigrants of Arab ancestry brought to Egypt by Mohammed Ali Pasha. He spoke the Nubian language and understood their customs

ried in 1960 and remained together until he died in 1998. Although Hakem was also of Sudanese descent, he was not Nubian and was regarded by Zeinab's family as an outsider because of his Arab lineage. Alkordy's life underpins her embrace of cultural diversity, which is reflected in her writings. Born in Boulaq, a district of Cairo highly populated by Nubians, and then with the move to Shoubra as a child, she lived among diverse cultural and religious groups who interacted on a daily basis. Her husband would always refer to the family as "*misrwodany*," which is a hybrid word that groups together the first part of *misry* (Egyptian) with the last part of *sūdany* (Sudanese) to reflect their integrated identity. Zeinab also used to call herself "an Egyptian from Sudan" to denote this affiliation (Mazloun 2017). However, this integration, which seems to distinguish her writings from those produced by other writers from Nubia, has a double-edged effect. On the one hand, it could be a source of Alkordy's unique voice among her fellow Nubian writers who tend to assert their Nubian national identity over any other "identities." On the other hand, the writer's double consciousness or hyphenated identity (Sudanese-Egyptian; Nubian-Arab) has resulted in the difficulty of classifying her. Haggag Oddoul, one of Nubia's renowned writers and critics, in his famous critical work *Wanasa ma'a al-adab al-Nūbī* (2009) (In companionship with Nubian literature) mentions Alkordy and her work only in passing. In fact, he seems reluctant to classify Alkordy as a Nubian writer in the first place since, according to him, "her work is totally alien to Nubia and its problems" (103). By the same token, and because she is a Sudanese-born Nubian, Alkordy is not considered an Egyptian writer since her name and work are not considered part of Egyptian literary history. Thus, from a gynocritical perspective, I attempt to unearth the forgotten, or rather the "unknown," text of a Nubian woman writer to place it where it belongs in the women's literary tradition in our part of the world.

In any case, Alkordy's writings are deeply informed by her personal experience. The sudden death of her eldest daughter, Mona, who died at the age of twenty in 1980, resulted in her first literary work, *ʿUyūni Al-Layla La Tu ʿī Damʿa* (My eyes tonight are unable to cry). Her second publication, *Zahrat al-Janūb*, the collection of short stories under study here, was inspired by her residence with her family in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion. She also wrote satiri-

and traditions but was still considered an outsider by Zeinab's family. Both Hakem and Zeinab had a Sudanese nationality despite being born and raised in Egypt. Alkordy acquired Egyptian nationality a few years before her death.



cal articles for *Caricature*, an Egyptian magazine established in 1975, and published a weekly column in *Al Watan*, a Kuwaiti newspaper.<sup>2</sup>

Although she was of Sudanese nationality, Alkordy identified home with Egypt. She went to Sudan only twice in her life. The first time was during a visit there by Nikita Khrushchev, first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; both she and Hakem were part of a delegation preparing for this visit. The second time was after her husband's death to finish some paperwork related to her inheritance. Rabab Hakem recollects how her parents regarded their first experience in Sudan as a feeling of homesickness and wishing to return to Cairo. Both Hakem and Alkordy felt that their home was in Egypt and not in Sudan. In her second short story in *Zahrat al-Janūb*, "Laisa bi' aidinā" (Out of our hands), the narrator speaks of her feelings upon returning to live in Egypt: it is "my real sky under which I was born and where I spent my younger years among its allies" (Alkordy 1997, 81). She adds that after the invasion of Kuwait, the family dreaded that the Egyptian authorities might refuse to allow them back into Egypt and force them to be deported to Sudan (107–8). Underpinning Alkordy's embracing of her identity as a Nubian, Sudanese, Egyptian, Arab woman without denying her Nubian heritage is her choice of outfit, which reflected her multifaceted identity, as her daughter noted. On the one hand, she wore fashionable modern clothes, except on official occasions, where she insisted on wearing the traditional Nubian dress *thob*, which she had made from fabrics woven in Nubian villages. Alkordy did not believe that to be a modern woman she should sacrifice her traditions. Instead, she embraced the multiple components of her character and reflected this in the portrayal of the characters in her collection of short stories.

*Zahrat al-Janūb* highlights how Alkordy presents issues of female identity as shaped by ideological and cultural constructs. I will now turn to Satya Mohanty's concept of epistemic identity to analyze the engagement of each of the female characters in the stories within their personal and political contexts. This allows for reconsidering how Alkordy reworks the relationship between identity, gender, and nation. Indeed, Alkordy presents a wide array of female characters who echo the preoccupations of Arab/Egyptian/Nubian women in the 1990s. The fictional/realistic accounts that Alkordy creates portray female characters living in a Nubian village and in

2 All information related to Alkordy's life and works comes from her daughter, Rabab Hakem, whom I interviewed in Cairo on August 20, 2017. We should mention that Alkordy and her husband were influenced by Nasser's nationalist vision, which was informed by socialist values. K. Megahed and Omar A. Ghannam, "The Rocket in the Haystack: Between Nasser's Developmental Vision and the Neo-Imperialist Mission," *African Development* 47, no. 1 (2022): 59–104, sums up Nasser's vision and evaluates its pros and cons.

Alexandria, Cairo, and Kuwait to signal the diversified contexts of their experiences.

### **Postpositivism: Between Fixed and Fluid Identities**

Building on the postmodernist criticism of identity politics, it can be argued that because of the heterogeneity and instability of identity, it is impossible to unify different individuals under the signifier "Nubian." This inability to reflect an exemplary or authentic experience, whether Nubian per se or Nubian women, engenders an epistemological problem since it is difficult to conclude what an authentic Nubian experience is. The Nubian experience is repeatedly represented in many writings as timeless collective experiences of loss and migration regardless of the changes that happen across generations. Critics of identity politics warn of the impossibility of speaking for all women since this risks engaging in "the practice of ideological normalization and exclusion" (Moya 2000, 4). However, the basic problem with poststructuralism and the ensuing postmodernist argument that ties all concepts to the arbitrariness of language is that these advocates overlook that identity and experience are fundamentally social concepts about social relationships (5). Hence, advocates of poststructuralism argue that cultural identities are fictitious with no stable identified presence, that "identities are not simply fictitious, they are dangerously mystifying" (6). The indeterminacy and undecidability offered by poststructuralists and postmodernists fail to address the complexity of identity construction/representation of doubly marginalized experiences, such as those featured in Alkordy's short stories.

Essentialism expresses itself through its tendency to see one's social category (class, race, gender, sexuality) as the determining factor in individual and group identity (Moya 2000, 7). This approach would be limiting if adopted to analyze Alkordy's text. According to Oddoul, most of the literature written by Nubians draw on an essentialist Nubian identity where the experiences of sadness, loss, and marginality are foregrounded, denying any aspect of individual experience, and where nostalgia for the homeland predominates any individual concern. Another recurrent feature in writings that essentialize the Nubian identity is the recurrent portrayal of memory and the forging of an idealized past. A way out of the two extremes that deal with identity as an essentialist concept or an endlessly deferred process of signification is the concept proposed by postpositivist realist theorists. Moya describes the task of postpositivist realist critics: "Cultural identities are not only and always 'wounded attachments.' They can also be enabling, enlightening and

enriching structures of attachments and feelings” (2000, 8). Identity, Moya adds, is a significant mode by which people experience, understand, and know the world. Moreover, identity is also still a determining factor that governs distributions of goods and resources, chances of education, marriage, and getting jobs. Our everyday lives are determined by who we are and to whom we belong. Hence, these theorists attempt to reclaim identity from the two extremes of identity politics and poststructuralism. Postpositivist realists attempt to reclaim identity, asserting that identities are notions that “are evaluable theoretical claims that have epistemic consequences” (9). Hence, our understanding of who we are is linked to our experiences and the social structures in which we live (9). Since postpositivist realism deals with individual realistic identities acknowledging their different and particular aspects, I claim that Alkordy’s characters are better understood in light of this concept.

Postpositivist realism contends that identities are not simply products of structures of power, but are “assumed or chosen for complex subjective reasons” (Moya 2000, 10). The most important aspect of the postpositivist project is the need to identify and distinguish identities that provide promising perspectives that can positively affect the social structures of conflict. Not being able to account for internal heterogeneity among groups and the multiple and contradictory constitution of individuals and the possibility of change is a major drawback in essentialist theories of identity, while failing to come up with effective projects for change in the real world is a major drawback in postmodernists’ and poststructuralists’ notions of identity. The postpositivist realists with their emphasis on real and positive rendering of the world believe in the possibility of human beings to develop reliable knowledge about the world and about how to fit in that world (9–12). Postpositivist realists do not reclaim a sense of objective knowledge that reasserts certainty. On the contrary, they acknowledge that there is an undeniable link between linguistic structures and their referents in the real world. Their aim is to strive for embodied knowledge of individuals who exist not out there but in the real world: “Humans generate knowledge, and our abilities to do so are causally dependent on both our cognitive capacities and our historical and social locations” (18). It is my argument that Alkordy’s characters exist in the real world and mediate their individuality through the historical and social contexts, making the reader see Nubians as part of the larger Arab communities they live among. This allows readers new forms of seeing and knowing Nubians that integrate the real world, which is an alternative to the essentialist separatist type.

### Out of Our Hands: Embracing an Arab Cause

Alkordy's stories highlight embodied experiences of individuals, specifically women, showing the interplay of historical facts, social values, and personal feelings. Satya Mohanty points out that identities call for "a reexamination of the relationship between personal experience and public meanings, subjective choices and evaluations on the one hand and objective social location on the other" (1993, 42). In the story "Laisa bi'aidinā" (Out of our hands), Alkordy explores the traumatic experience of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, where the characters are herself, her husband, and her daughters, Yasmine and Rabab. This is not a fictional story like the first novella, *Zahrat al-Janūb*; instead, it is a flashback of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait where their personal experience of the days spent in Kuwait and on the road back to Egypt mingle with accounts of Iraqi soldiers searching houses and Kuwaiti youth staying behind to defend their homes. Alkordy highlights two basic aspects of her experience in Kuwait: temporality and the need for integration. However, she extends these aspects to others, indicating that all of those who worked there were "slaves to an illusionary master who promised to secure the future"<sup>3</sup> (Alkordy 1997, 86). In this sense, she is referring to financial reasons as a common factor shared by all individuals working in Kuwait, regardless of where they come from. They are all trying to earn money to secure their future. She adds that another basic feeling that they all share is loneliness, since Kuwaitis do not welcome strangers, probably because of their earlier isolated Bedouin desert life. The story of the Iraqi wife who has been married to a Kuwaiti for thirty-one years and has given birth to his children, but is still denied Kuwaiti nationality, shows the Kuwaitis' aversion to others (80). Moreover, the narrator/protagonist, Zeinab Alkordy, confirms that she and her husband, like other Arabs, Pakistanis, and Indians living in Kuwait, shared a feeling of estrangement, despite luxurious living conditions. However, Alkordy, who has spent thirty years in Kuwait, manages to befriend her daughters' three young Kuwaiti colleagues, Gohar, Khaled, and Aman, who shared the traumatic experience of the invasion. Trauma made them closer to her and her family, and she narrated how the three young men "stayed until [Kuwait] regained its freedom" (94). The invasion changed those Kuwaitis who gave up their luxurious life styles and remained in the country and worked to rebuild it. The narrator refers to the fact that "the experience must have shaken established concepts" in them (95). On the road out of Kuwait, the narrator shows how people from different backgrounds and social

3 I translated all of the titles and quotations from the original short stories.

positions are nothing but humans escaping “a plague” (89). Neither ethnicity nor class matters when one is escaping for one’s life: “These were really terrible days [...] a ‘rehearsal’ of doomsday” (89). Regardless of their nationalities, on the road from Kuwait to Aqaba and in Ruwaishid camp, they all experienced the need for food, shelter, safety, and medical aid. She speaks of “friends who bonded in crisis” and remembers how they shared “food, fear and hope” (82).

Narrating the experience of the invasion of Kuwait further reveals the complexity of human feelings and the intermingling of the personal and the political. After the invasion, citizens from all over the world sought help from their embassies in Kuwait. A major difference could be discerned between “first-world” and “third-world” countries in dealing with the matter. All the individuals in Kuwait at the time of the invasion were afraid, confused, and hungry, but the Western embassies made sure that most of their citizens were out of Kuwait within a few hours. On the other hand, “third-world” citizens who sought shelter and rescue in their embassies could not find safety regardless of their nationalities, simply because their embassies lacked the resources to care for all the refugees. The narrator/protagonist explains that “third-world embassies are for taxation not protection or salvation” (Alkordy 1997, 84). They all shared fear, hunger, and death regardless of gender or race or nationality. During times of traumatic experiences, it is impossible to isolate human concerns from those of gender and ethnicity. This story exemplifies how Alkordy weaves together historical accounts, sociopolitical conditions, and individual values. Narrating how the invasion deconstructed any notion of Arab nationalism and exposed the atrocities human beings can inflict on one another intermingles with the personal loss of their homes, photos, and personal belongings left behind in Kuwait. Memories of the invasion and the soldiers in the streets cannot be separated from the personal memories of fear and loss experienced by the family. One painful story involves engineer Abdel Ḥalim El Shewy, whose daughter was detained at one of the checkpoints and whose son was deported to Baghdad. He never knew what happened to either of them (99–100). Another incident involves Zeinab, the protagonist, begging a Jordanian woman for water during their stay in the camp and bursting into tears when the woman asked for ten dinars for half a bottle of water (87). The pain that continues to haunt the Hakem family back in Egypt does not separate the personal from the political — both are part of this family’s experience. Hassan, the character in the story, affirms to his friend Nabil that he never allows himself time to think or rest: “From the moment I returned my friend [to Egypt], I engrossed myself intentionally in my new life [...]. I do not allow my-

self one moment of leisure, otherwise I would not have been able to keep my psychological balance” (85). Moreover, this painful experience is not theirs alone; it is that of Nabil and Thoraya, their friends, and many others. Indeed, “the ghost of hunger, humiliation, murder, and rape” filled everyone with bitterness (91). The reader learns that despite Hassan’s support of the Kuwaiti stance during and after the invasion, he was not invited to the February commemoration of writers and artists who supported Kuwait that was held after the country’s liberation, because he was Sudanese and Sudan had supported Iraq in its invasion. The fact that Hassan painted a portrait that grouped together all Kuwaiti rulers and refused to paint a work that humiliated them, as ordered by Iraqi leaders, was overlooked because of his nationality (97). This detail is a vivid example of how identity is constantly shaped and reshaped by personal and political contexts, which cannot be analyzed separately.

Later, Zeinab speaks of her worst fear during this experience: her fear of dying in strange lands and not getting a proper burial. She recollects her wish to be buried in her small Nubian village, where her grave will be protected against gravediggers who sell corpses to medical students. She repeats her main wish, “I do not want my body to be defiled when I die; I want to rest in peace in my grave” (Alkordy 1997, 109). Zeinab refers to her existing village and not to the village that was flooded during the building of the High Dam. Unlike other writers who bewail the loss of villages and homes, both Zeinab the protagonist/narrator and Alkordy the writer choose to embrace the multiple aspects of her experience. Moreover, Zeinab’s identity in the story focuses on her emotional affiliation to Egypt rather than her official filiation to Sudan through papers. She perceives Egypt as her home and dreads the possibility of deportation to Sudan. This is evident in her appreciation of Thoraya’s paying USD \$200 to the authorities so that they are permitted to enter Egypt. In response to her daughter’s question about what would have happened if Auntie Thoraya had not paid, Zeinab replies, “They would have deported us to Sudan to face a real disaster” (121). Despite realizing that their Sudanese nationality is a fact in determining who they are, both Zeinab and Hassan in the story and Alkordy and Hakem in reality, as per Rabab’s account, felt at home in Egypt. Alkordy’s realization that belonging is determined by both personal feeling and political documents further illustrates the intermingling of the personal and the political as determining aspects in identity formation and representation. Reaching out to different characters without ignoring cultural differences, political ideologies, and class privileges is what makes Alkordy’s text a postpositivist realist construction of identity as multifaceted. She presents,

to use Satya Mohanty's idea, "the experience of social subjects" in ways that can be evaluated, showing "the variety of ways humans process information" (Mohanty 1993, 44). Mohanty explains, "It is on the basis of this revised understanding of experience that we can construct a realist theory of social and cultural identity, a theory in which experiences would not serve as foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but rather provide some of the raw material with which we can construct identities" (44-45). Alkordy's text provides the basis to construct diversified socially and politically contextualized individual identities. In this story, the narrator tries to make sense of her personal experience by explaining her and her family's feelings within the political framework of the invasion. In her attempt to make sense of her own experience, she creates new experiences the readers can use to better understand social meanings and individual values. Hence, trauma, loss, fear, hunger, hope, and resistance are all presented in the context of the story as part of the characters' experiences. Rather than the limitation of uniting with the minority social group of the Nubians, Alkordy shows alternative ways of organizing and interpreting the experience of threat, fear, loss, and brutality engendered by the Iraqi invasion as a shared human experience that has both cultural specific and universal significance. This rendering of Alkordy's personal experience, which remains unreliable and subjective in the view of post-structuralists, does explain significant features of her society.<sup>4</sup>

### **Flower of the South: Demystifying Nubian Women**

Satya Mohanty offers his notion of cultural identity as underpinning the relationship between experience and identity, yielding genuine and reliable knowledge and pinpointing "instances and sources of real mystification" (1993, 44). Mohanty's proposition is outlined as follows: "It is through a redefinition of questions of experience and identity, I suggest at the end, that we might be able to envision the outlines of a genuine multiculturalism, a nonrelativist, nonliberal understanding of cultural difference and its ethical claims on us" (42-43). Alkordy attempts to expose the possibility of erroneous representations in her first story in the collection, *Zahrat al-Janūb*, which echoes a recurrent motif in the Nubian experience where the Nubian son who is educated in Cairo is forced to marry his cousin in a Nubian village, sacrificing his Cairene beloved, since the family

4 It is difficult to determine whether or not the other characters referred to in the remaining four stories are based on real-life individuals Alkordy knew. However, I assume that only "Out of Our Hands" is based on her real-life experience because it includes references to Alkordy herself, her husband, and her daughters, and to specific details about their life in Kuwait, verified in the interview I conducted with her daughter Rabab.

will never approve of marriage to an outsider. Taher seeks forgiveness from his mother for proposing to Badria, the Cairene who is a complete stranger to Nubian family values and traditions: "Forgive me mum!... I could not help it. I love her and she loves me, she understands me more than I understand myself, she understands my ambitions, she speaks my language and embraces my madness." He asserts his sense of guilt, "I was never a prodigal son so I obeyed my father and married my cousin [...] but all I pray for is [...] that Badria does not know what I did" (Alkordy 1997, 7). Representing the never-ending conflict between following family traditions and following one's heart, Alkordy uses a narrative technique that oscillates between narration and dialogue and between flashbacks and present-time events to tell the story of Taher, the protagonist who marries his cousin Dahiba against his will to please his father. The main dilemma in the story is that Taher thinks that his cousin will not be able to understand him, so he leaves her in their village and settles in Cairo with his beloved Badria for three years. The portrayal of the Nubian woman as an obedient uneducated daughter who passively follows tradition is deconstructed by Alkordy's exposing the mystification referred to in Mohanty's previously quoted words. Dahiba's character is different from the traditional stereotype of Nubian women, for she is a graduate of the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University, and she writes in a newspaper under the pen name "Flower of the South." Taher mistakenly assumes that she is an uneducated villager who has nothing to offer him, unlike his sweetheart who engages in intellectual discussions and shares his passion for art and literature. He gradually starts to see Dahiba in a different way when he revisits his village to attend his father's funeral. After she handed him a piece of paper documenting all the relatives who came to pay their respects to his dead father and attend the funeral, he asks with surprise, "Did you receive any education? Any certificate [...] preparatory school or secondary school?" for "your handwriting is very neat" (9). This shows his misconception about her educational level, which is demystified/clarified as the story develops.

The narrator gradually reveals that when Dahiba obeys her father's decision to marry Taher, she is not the submissive woman who cannot defy her family's decisions. Instead, she is a strong individual whose acceptance of traditions allows her to be a more developed character capable of showing love and compassion for others, including Taher. This is highlighted in the scene when Taher visits her in Alexandria before they get married to tell her that he loves another woman and will not abandon the woman he loves. Dahiba calmly proposes a deal: "You marry the one you love and I will travel back to live with our family as your wife without any commitment



on your part. Our marriage will be only on paper” (Alkordy 1997, 13). In reversing roles in this story showing Dahiba as stronger and more mature than Taher, Alkordy is offering alternative forms of knowing traditional Nubian women, not as silent submissive females, but as intelligent, well-educated women who choose to follow tradition and obey rules out of respect rather than out of suppression. Taher starts to see Dahiba’s true self and acknowledges that she can speak “like Cairene intellectuals” (34). He remembers his mother’s comment, “A Nubian woman, my son, knows a man’s worth and fears shame” (15), and he starts comparing her to Badria. When he learns that Dahiba is the creative writer whose pen name is “Flower of the South,” he admits that he has perpetuated the traditional stereotyping of Nubian women and has failed to see his wife/cousin as the strong independent woman she is. The narrator marks this change in Taher, who “was surprised to find himself looking at her smiling face as if he is seeing it for the first time; it seemed like he was opening a shell and finding a shining pearl inside glowing in front of his eyes; he who had thought of her as an empty shell” (20). In this story, Alkordy is contesting the traditional stereotyping of Nubian women and Nubian traditions, offering the readers a new perspective. Thus, Dahiba is not “the young peasant whose knowledge of the outside world is limited to the kitchen and its utensils” (20). She is “well spoken, understands a lot of things, prudent and enlightened better even than girls living in Cairo” (22). Alkordy neither emulates nor idolizes Dahiba but presents her as a human being who faces hardships and trials and reconciles the social restraints imposed on her with her own choice to publish her creative writings. In this sense, Dahiba’s writing helps reveal a hidden perspective of herself to both Taher and the readers. This further supports my argument that Alkordy exposes any “mystification,” to use Mohanty’s word, associated with the Nubian woman’s identity in her representation of Dahiba, whose skills in writing and nursing are attributed to her college education and her volunteering as a nurse during the 1973 war (43). She volunteers to save fellow Egyptian soldiers during the war and returns to her village to nurse her Nubian relatives. Her diverse roles in the story reconcile any seeming antagonism between the Nubian and the Egyptian aspects of her identity.

A further example of Alkordy’s emphasis on integrating Nubians in the larger Egyptian/Arab socioeconomic fabric is the insistence that the village is not that far away from Cairo, geographically or culturally, and that its inhabitants have the same concerns as in other villages in Egypt. Hence, Taher, who represents the modern Egyptian intellectuals’ preoccupations, shares the same preferences as his cousin Merghany, the farmer. Merghany highlights their

affinities: “We care for newspapers and magazines more than you do[...] Besides, you yourself confessed that you read the same magazines and follow the work of the same writers as we do” (Alkordy 1997, 44). This shows that the inhabitants of the village are part of the larger social fabric of Egypt and that their calls for the provision of magazines and newspapers, medication and water pipes are similar to the calls of villagers in other areas of Egypt. The narrator states that the villagers’ requests are “simple and legitimate, [...] just medical centers, clean drinking water, regular boat trips to ensure they get food, clothes, soap, sugar and salt regularly” (25). Besides, the villagers feel “as if they are cut off from the heart of the nation” since newspapers arrive fifteen days after their publication (25). The narrator continues to assert that those who speak of separation are crazy: “What separation? Just the idea reveals ignorance and craziness. Sudanese Nubia has no alternative but to choose Sudanese identity and the same goes for Egyptian Nubia” (25).

Alkordy is aware of the complexity of the everyday events experienced by Nubians. She refers to Abbas, Taher’s university friend, who used to say “Berbers are the best people” in an attempt to ridicule Taher’s skin color and language (Alkordy 1997, 26), but she shows that this is but one example and not a general trend. Rafaat, Taher’s best friend, presents an alternative to the racist Abbas. The narration shows instances of ridicule as individual instances and presents positive and negative characters to highlight diversity. The narrator further shows that mystification comes from Nubians themselves, since Taher, an urbanized Nubian, is presented as someone who is ignorant of his village’s needs despite being a well-known journalist who has access to information. Taher angrily responds to his family’s pleas for help: “Please understand my situation. I am simply an artist who has nothing to do with the decision makers in the country. I do not know anyone who can help you” (27). Therefore, the story reveals that Nubians, like other Egyptians, encounter the same daily hardships and points out that these daily circumstances shape the identities of the Nubian villagers just as they shape other Egyptian identities.

Alkordy’s characters are realistic characters who live in familiar settings, experience love, marriage, racism, marginalization, and react to various circumstances as other individuals do.

### **A Moment of Interaction: Possibilities for Integration**

Alkordy’s representation of the integration of Nubians in realistic everyday life contexts is also reflected in her third story in the collection, “Līs bāidīnā” (A moment of interaction). The story focuses

on the gap between three generations as represented by grandfather, mother, and grandson. The narrator of the story is the grandson, and the story is set in the future, in the year 2010, but flashbacks are used to refer to the changes that happen along the passage of time and to the central event in the story: the soldiers who never returned from *al-thaghrāh* in 1973.<sup>5</sup> In this story, Alkordy refers to Yasser, the narrator's uncle, who is one of the 1973 war martyrs, to further indicate the integration of Nubians in the social and political realities of Egypt and the Arab world. The narrator explains that though he did not live during the war and only heard stories from his parents, he shares the same feeling of love for the land shared by his uncle and others who died in Port Said and Baḥr el-Baqr.<sup>6</sup> He explains that "it is as if this feeling has descended across thousands of years, as if it is inherited by blood" (Alkordy 1997, 150). Moreover, he shares with his grandfather a feeling of hatred of Israelis, for he cannot forget the martyrs who died for the sake of the country (149–50). Even though time changes and traditions change, the emphasis is on the connection to the land that binds together all generations. Reference to the 1973 war is symbolic of a collective memory that survives across generations. The young narrator realizes that people change circumstances and traditions change, but some attachments remain the same. The idea that change is inevitable is highlighted when the narrator's brother, who is studying law in France, writes to his parents expressing his wish to marry a fellow student. Alkordy contrasts the reaction of the grandfather, who rejects this wish as disrespectful to tradition, with the reaction of the mother, who accepts the inevitability of change. The mother explains to the grandfather: "Those were our traditions in the past [...] time changes! At least she is of the same religion and nationality" (145).<sup>7</sup> It is this realization that time changes and that identities also change as a result of ongoing interactions among complex factors that links identity and experience and represents identities as processes rather than products. In this story, Alkordy relates the personal, political, historical, and social experiences as inevitably interlinked and ongoing. However, tracing the three generations

- 5 *Al-thaghrāh* is also known as Operation Stouthearted Men or Operation Gazelle. It took place October 15–23, 1973, in the Suez Canal.
- 6 On April 8, 1970, the Israeli army bombed a primary school located in Baḥr al Baqr, a small village on the outskirts of Egypt's Sharqiya governate. At least thirty-four children died on that day, and the Israeli army explained that the school building was mistaken for a military base. Similarly, Port Said, a city extending 30 kilometers north of the Suez Canal, is often referred to as the martyr city since its civilians fought British, French, and Israeli troops in 1956. Al Kurdi refers to these two locations, known as sites of civilian martyrs and part of Egyptians' collective modern history.
- 7 It is worthy of mention that the customs that reject the marriage of a son to a "stranger" (nonfamily member) or restrict marriage to cousins within the same family are common among Egyptian Bedouin and upper Egyptian families, not only Nubian families.

of Nubian origin and their memories of the 1973 war and its martyrs, whether civilians or officers, shows that some things continue to be remembered despite the passage of time. Hence, Yasser, the war hero of the family, is always remembered alongside the martyrs of Port Said, Baḥr el-Baqr, and Al-Quds (Jerusalem). The personal and the political cannot be separated, and memories of the characters do not separate the past of Nubia from that of the war and the peace accord with Israel. However, even though change is inevitable, there is a sense of continuation among the three generations when it comes to the love of the land and the memory of those who sacrificed their lives for it.

**“Take Away” and “The Story of a Man Who Cared Too Much”:  
Alienation versus Integration**

The first three stories interweave autobiographical, political, and fictional anecdotes against the backdrop of realistic events. Alkordy creates her characters against real settings and refers to sociopolitical elements and events that contextualize her stories during the 1990s in Egypt and other Arab countries. On the other hand, the last two stories focus on the alienation of modern-day humans and how vulnerable and isolated they are. The fourth story, *Tīk awāi* (Take away), follows the modernist theme of human alienation and the inability to communicate with others. Instead of referring to past memories and specific historical events, as do the previous three stories, “Take Away” focuses on change in the individuals’ identities and the relationships among family members that have become cold without any interaction. Reference to the television set that absorbs their attention with football matches and drama series presents a new influence on individuals that makes them isolated. The story starts with the narrator on the verge of depression: “It was not an ordinary attack of depression; it was a destructive hurricane by all means” (Alkordy 1997, 152). The narrator seeks refuge in her childhood friend, Madiha, hoping that she will have a chance “to be herself” and vent her feelings (155). Through flashbacks, the narrator reveals the childhood bond with her friend that continued during their university years, which makes her the right person “to save [her] from this ditch [she is] sinking in” (157). She declares that Madiha “is the one I need” (157). Upon arriving at Madiha’s home, the narrator finds the family gathered around the TV set in the living room, as if it has enslaved them. She comments in surprise on the welcome she received from the children: “What happened to your family Madiha? What is this Scottish reception! No one stood up to greet me!” (158). Madiha apologizes that they are all following the

football match between the Ahly and Zamalek clubs: “Hope the day ends well” (158). The protagonist is unable to chat with her friend because of the loud tv set, so she drags her to the kitchen to make tea, hoping to be able to talk, but they are soon interrupted by visiting neighbors, Mona and Samira. The four female characters sit together to drink tea and eat cake, but the narrator neither drinks nor chats. Finally, the protagonist/narrator looks at her watch and realizes that two and half hours have passed without one meaningful word exchanged with her friend. Her visit to the latter’s apartment ends in feelings of emptiness and disillusionment with her final exclamation, “What has not gone cold in our lives now?” (162). The story uses the modern living room setting dominated by the tv to signal changes that happened to the society. Alkordy’s characters in her last two short stories are unable to connect with others because of the everyday realities of capitalism and consumerism predominating in modern life. The personal loneliness and disillusionment in this story could be seen as the outcome of the *infatih* policy in the 1980s,<sup>8</sup> which introduced a consumerist materialistic way of life among Egyptians and changed family and social values. The title is indicative of the quick-paced style of life that marked this phase in Egyptians’ life. The story focuses on two women friends sharing the predicament of alienation and disillusionment that many Egyptians felt after the collapse of the Pan-Arab national project.<sup>9</sup>

Loneliness, disillusionment, and materialism are also the themes of the fifth and final story, *Ḥikāyat Rajul Ahtam Jiddan*. (The story of a man who cared too much). Fathy is the victim of caring too much for others. His hopes of developing projects that would eliminate poverty in his neighborhood are thwarted. He had believed that his USD \$500 salary and the American organization he works for could make living conditions better. He is disillusioned by the failure of the Arab dream of unity and prosperity propagated by then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. He is further disillusioned when his father dies after forty years of working without fulfilling his wish to buy a new suit. Fathy shows signs of madness as he goes around saying, “Arab unity is the solution to all problems” (Alkordy 1997, 165). The nameless female narrator, who is also Fathy’s neigh-

8 *Infatih* was former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s policy of economic liberalization launched in 1974, which encouraged private and foreign capitalist investments. This policy widened economic disparities among social classes and was a disappointment to many Egyptians. It led to changes in social values and influenced not only the standard of living of most Egyptians but also their everyday habits.

9 Gamal Abdel Nasser is often referred to as the godfather of Pan-Arabism and the one who revived the dream of uniting the Arab nation. Many Arabs believed in this union until this belief gradually disintegrated after the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Zeinab Alkordy’s works echo the concerns of Egyptians who lived in that period and witnessed the collapse of this project. Many intellectuals have argued that a revival of this dream of Pan-Arabism is the solution to all the problems that the Arabs are facing.

bor, sympathizes with him but understands the vanity of his idealism. She remarks, "People's problems and pains made you dissatisfied as if you are responsible for all of them[....] Are you?" (168-69). The narrator recalls in a flashback Fathy's dream to be a millionaire so that he could eradicate poverty. Realizing that poverty can never be eradicated, she pities Fathy and hopes she can save him by getting him psychological help. However, she soon gives up, gets married, and travels abroad when she cannot convince his mother to take him to a psychiatrist. Again Alkordy uses flashbacks to reveal the backgrounds of Fathy and the narrator. The female narrator has always been more practical and down to earth than Fathy, and this has made her survive the decline in values brought about by *infitah*. The narrator had already realized that the society they lived in considered mental and psychological disorders a disgrace, and that it would be difficult for her to fight these social convictions and save Fathy. Her own mother even considered the cause of Fathy's madness to be "an evil eye envious of him" (170). However, in the present moment of the story, she meets Fathy again and she decides that she will help him. The story ends with Fathy's mother changing her mind about seeking professional help, which marks a change in her perspective. Years earlier, she had denied that her son suffered any mental disorders and moved from the neighborhood for fear of shame. She finally asks the narrator for help to save her son: "Do anything! Act! The most important thing now is that my lost son returns to us" (172). This shift in perspective marks the inevitability of change.

Similar to the fourth story, Alkordy is reflecting in the final story on the harsh economic realities resulting from the policies of the free open market economy, but she is also undermining Fathy's solution of resorting to a past Pan-Arab dream. This final story supports my argument that problems cannot be solved by reference to a past dream. Thus, neither the Nubians' problems nor Fathy's problem can be solved by referring to illusionary past hopes. Newly emerging realities that have affected these characters and fragmented their identities require new strategies of coping and resisting other than crying over lost hopes and shattered dreams. In fact, the personal, individual experiences in these two stories present the characters as human beings whose lives are entangled in the modern realities of alienation, consumerism, disillusionment, and poverty. There is no emphasis on the racial and ethnic nature of the characters in these final stories, where alienation and disillusionment do not seem to be the experience of one ethnic group but rather of postwar Egyptians as part of the modern world. This is the kind of knowledge presented by these two stories, a form of knowl-

edge that reflects the experiences of many Egyptians suffering from socioeconomic hardships in the 1990s. These new realities are part of the larger global conditions that changed social, economic, and cultural contexts and therefore changed identity constructions and perceptions. The female narrator in the final story possesses the knowledge of diagnosing why Fathy failed in achieving his dream. She foresees the possibility of hope in a better future where she and others can productively engage with their harsh realities and may attempt to change them.

## Conclusion

An analysis of Alkordy's short story collection shows us a writer who is aware that Nubians' problems and hardships are the outcome of changing modern realities, requiring new solutions rather than old ones that resort to an ideal past. Linda Martín Alcoff, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?" (2000), says that defending identity is a treacherous act not only because it is unwelcome in academia but also because it is a complex enterprise that can become stifling. Postpositivist realists show the possibility of working out embodied knowledges and identities that are politically, socially, and economically significant so as to further the possibility of progressive politics. Seen in this light, Alkordy's collection of short stories presents Nubians as individuals who possess heterogeneous identities that embrace their individual contradictions and acknowledge their complex situations. In presenting diverse stories of actual individual experiences with special focus on the value of such experiences to each individual, Alkordy's writing generates knowledge about Nubians as real human beings in the world who share a past but also have diverse presents. In this sense, she offers positive perceptions of possible lived realities that include Nubians, Arabs, Sudanese, and Egyptians, as men, women, mothers, daughters, writers, peasants, and employees. This is also reflected in the structure of the stories that mingles both flashbacks and flashforwards with present events to highlight the inevitability of change while asserting the continuity of heritage from the past. Therefore, this collection of stories offers the epistemic structure for an inclusive project for Nubian identity, a project that values individual differences without undermining the traditional aspects of Nubian cultural-specific identity. Such a project offers possibilities of change in the real world and in the cultural context of Nubian experience without denying Nubian cultural heritage. By showing her characters and herself as integrated in the larger contexts of Egyptian and Arab lived realities, Alkordy's work could be the nucleus for a project that

acknowledges that Nubians are diverse individuals integrated in the larger context, which includes Egyptians. By focusing on positive integration rather than reductive assimilation, Alkordy is offering new possibilities of finding practical solutions to changing conditions.

Therefore, reading Alkordy's collection from the perspective of postpositivist realists' notions on identity reinforces the argument that her characters are cultural constructions forged in everyday realities, who, despite their loneliness and disillusionment, possess endless possibilities of integration and productive refashioning of their realities and themselves. This imparts to the readers the knowledge that identities are engaged in endless processes to cope with this world's changing realities. Moreover, the collection can be read as Alkordy's alternative representation of the issue of Nubian identity where she presents diversified identities "always in the making," to use Hall's term. My reading of Alkordy's collection is an attempt to valorize an unknown text by a Sudanese/Egyptian woman writer through utilizing the postpositivist approach to identity. Such an approach regards social, ethnic, and cultural groups, Nubian society in our case, as heterogeneous, wherein individuals belong to multiple groups. Hence, this approach constitutes a challenge to the concept of group identity. The gender relations in the selected stories and the characters' individual or personal sense of self rather than belonging to a substantial social identity reflect Alkordy's own position as a writer in the Egyptian social, cultural, and literary milieu.

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# Haggag Oddoul's *Tasābiḥ Nīliya* (Hymns to the Nile) A Celebration of Inclusionist Plurality

Amal Aly Mazhar

## Introduction

Haggag Oddoul, a prominent, prolific, and highly controversial Nubian Egyptian writer, has primarily distinguished himself as a novelist among a galaxy of other Nubian writers, such as Muhammad Khalil Qassim, Idris Ali, Yehia Mokhtar, Samar Nour, Sherif Abdel Meguid, and others. He is the winner of the First Incentive State Award (1990) for his short story collection *Layālī al-misk al-‘atīqah* (Nights of musk) ([1989] 2009). In 2005, he won the prestigious Sawiris Cultural Award for literature, which further enhanced his literary reputation. As a writer of political tracts, he has been primarily concerned with the Nubian issue, as shown in *Al-Nūba tatanaffas taḥta al-mā’* (Nubia breathes from under the water) ([1992] 1994) and the highly controversial *Al-Ṣaḥwah al-Nūbiya* (The Nubian awakening), published in 2004.

To date, Oddoul is the only Egyptian Nubian writer who has written for the theater, the most direct form of communication in transmitting messages to the audience, hence its far-reaching influence. In the year 2000, his first play *Nās Al Nahr* (People of the river), based on an ancestral Nubian myth, was performed at the avant-garde Egyptian Ṭalī‘a Theater, directed by Nasser Abdel Mon‘eim with an all-Nubian cast. The play clearly shows his preoccupation with his ancestral Nubian roots, despite his permanent sojourn in Alexandria. It revolves round the Nubian myth of the benign, good-natured “people of the River” who live in the depths of the Nile, leading Nubians to feel it incumbent on them not to pollute the Nile so as not to cause harm to their fellow river creatures. When

asked “Despite your clear and notable excellence in the field of the novel, why do you write for the stage?”<sup>1</sup> Oddoul clarified in a 2004 interview: “I wrote for the stage before the short story, and the short story before the novel,” thus showing his early preference for a direct interaction with his audience through theatrical performances. In all forms of artistic expression, he has been totally preoccupied with depicting the themes, motifs, and concerns of his ancestral homeland, Nubia, despite the fact that he has spent most of his life away from it in what is usually termed the “Nubian diaspora.” The diaspora was caused by the inundation of old Nubia in 1902, then with the construction of Aswan Dam in 1933, and later the High Dam in 1964. The sense of displacement left its deep imprint on Nubians, who have consequently been engaged in a quest for identity.

Oddoul, who “lived his entire life in Alexandria, went with his mother (at the age of ten) for the first time to visit their native village” (2002), is perceived as an example of “the diversity which characterizes the hybrid Alexandrian culture” (Sallam 2008). However, Oddoul has remained Nubian at heart, which made him attempt to reconstruct an ideal “imagined” Nubian community. This view is also shared by Muhammad Abu Zeid, who asserts that “though [Oddoul] lives in Alexandria, Nubia is his favorite locale of action,” and he further explains this strong bond with his roots as “both out of a sense of nostalgia and as part of his literary project” (Oddoul 2004a). In yet another interview with Oddoul, Nour Amin reports that “although he [Oddoul] had only experienced the actual old Nubia for three months as a child, his heart and soul are inextricably bound to the ancient land of his ancestors” (Oddoul 2002, 1).

I argue that Oddoul does not regard both Nubian identity and Nubia from a realistic and factual perspective, but as constructs of his unique conceptualization of Nubia and Nubian identity. I further contend that, perceiving his homeland Nubia from a distance, Oddoul (2003) sought to reconstruct it through re-creating an imaginary, mythical public space or sphere, which encompasses not only a micro-Nubian identity but a macro-Egyptian identity and national character. My claim is that he perceives and represents the micro-Nubian identity as a rich, indispensable, and integral mosaic in the larger macro-Egyptian tapestry. In my view, the quests or need for identification on the micro and macro levels seem imperative at crucial historical turning points and conditions, such as those in which Oddoul was writing. Hence, when Stuart Hall (1996) poses the question, “Who needs identity?” the natural response would be seen in relation to Nubian identity and the incumbent perception of Nubia as a locale. Hall states that “identities are, as it were, the posi-

1 All translations from Arabic into English are mine unless otherwise stated.

tions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' [...] that they are representations" (1996, 5). Nikolas Rose, coining the term "genealogy of subjectification" (1996, 129), explains that it is a genealogy of what one might term, "following Michel Foucault, 'our relation to ourselves'" (129). Rose explains that "the focus of such a genealogy, therefore, is not 'the historical construction of the self' but the history of the relations which human beings have established with themselves" (130). I see this statement most pertinent to Oddoul's perception of Nubian identity in relation to the macro-Egyptian identity.

I argue that since Oddoul's concern was the representation of the inextricable bond between identity and "place"; it is of great importance to see how each functions and reflects the other in Oddoul's play (2003). Benedict Anderson's views in *Imagined Communities* (1991) are inspirational cases in point, for he clearly posits that it is essential for nationalism to have the capacity for imagining a whole community of individuals one could never meet but who were imagined as similar to oneself, in attitudes, ideas, and the practice of life. Defining a nation as "an imagined community," Anderson (1991, 6) further explains that a nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." I thus argue that Oddoul (2003) sought to represent his ideal "imagined community" through blending a collage of Egyptian mega-myths and figures from different historical epochs, religious faiths, and political inclinations, which are not restricted only to indigenous Nubians. This inclusionist act inevitably eschews the stigma of Nubian chauvinism and ultimately targets artistic "reterritorialization."

The term "reterritorialization" is used as one of the three defining terms characterizing "minority literature," as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari: "*Territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization* [are] terms which may be defined as the creation and perpetuation of a cultural space, the dissolution of that space, its recreation. Codification, decodification, and recodification can serve roughly as synonyms" (1983, 28). From this perspective, I argue that Oddoul (2003) was concerned with the reterritorialization or recodification of Nubia by foregrounding it as an inclusionist locale of action that acts as a public sphere. This is done to renegotiate the Nubian identity, not as a marginalized minority, but as a culturally specific, distinctive mosaic in the rich, pluralistic Egyptian tapestry or identity. This can be seen in his dedication of his play to the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, symbolic of Egypt, "The safe and warm embrace to all variations" (2003, front page). I also

seek to show how Oddoul manifests in his play those “variations,” which imply all races, ethnicities, religious faiths, and political affiliations that have existed on Egyptian soil since time immemorial. Furthermore, I base my argument on the fact that, far from being a controversial political activist and figure who advocates separatism of the ancient land of Nubia from the Egyptian mainland,<sup>2</sup> Oddoul (2003) presents in the play a “celebration of plurality,” which forms the core of my argument. Consequently, I wish to counterargue the basic premise of Hussein Hammouda’s “The Dissolution of Nubian Identity” (Chapter 6 in this volume) that the Nubian identity seems to have been assimilated into or contained within a larger identity. To put it more bluntly, I am proposing that the micro-Nubian identity is NOT lost in the bigger pattern of the macro-Egyptian identity, but it represents a major and culturally distinctive constituent in it.

The aforementioned view is corroborated by the facts, which re-nowned Egyptian geographer/anthropologist Gamal Hamdan mentions:

Though they [Nubians] represent a clear local pocket, they constitute a linguistic minority that lives at the fringes of the urban areas. Their numbers are not much, nearly 50,000 at present [1984]. Even so, *it is quite wrong to consider them a minority in any sense, for they are no more than a sort of distinct tribe in the big body.* If they have a specific language, it is internal which has something in common with the Arabic language[....] It is observed that since the great project of irrigation at the Barrage of Aswan and, particularly the High Dam, there has developed a process of expansion of the Nubians and their merging with the rest of the inhabitants. Thus, their concentration as a local community began to decrease, whereas the process of their being completely Egyptianized is becoming more rapid. (Hamdan 2001, 31; emphasis added)

- 2 In his highly controversial book *Al-Şaḥwah al-Nūbiya* [The Nubian awakening], Oddoul (2004b) expresses his views on the Nubian issue that caused much controversy over the separatism he is said to have propagated. In an interview with Oddoul (2004a), Muhammed Abu Zeid stated that Oddoul came under spotlight twice: the first time when he won the prestigious Sawiris Award, and the second time when he presented a paper entitled “Democracy in Egypt for Muslims and Christians” at the conference “Egyptian Christians in Exile” held in Washington, DC, in November 2003. It is reported that Oddoul advocated a separate Nubian state. He also talked about the anti-Nubian persecution in Egypt, after which the gates of hell opened far and wide in a campaign led by some prominent Nubian writers. Denying such charges, Oddoul clarified that they largely center on being denied “the Nubian right to return” to environmentally similar lands they had before forced evacuation from the ancestral homeland, since they were forced to evacuate the fertile Nile environment to an arid land as “the Nubians were squeezed inside houses made of concrete, very like torture cells,” contrary to their artistic “ancestral museum-like homes.” He described the anti-Nubian “persecution” as “ruthless and humiliating.” Oddoul (2004b) staunchly denied advocating a separate Nubian state. “Have you ever heard me advocating such things?” he asked, refuting such claims.

In my view, Hamdan's geo-ethnographic description of Nubians as a "tribe", rather than a "minority" is to accentuate their inclusionist, rather than their exclusionist, separatist status. Although it reflects a nationalistic and unitarian position, it seems to be in perfect harmony with the unique pluralistic nature of Egyptian culture, or the macro-Egyptian identity that hosts various ethnicities and religions within its fabric.

Critical theories related to this issue do not study the unique Egyptian case, hence, it is thus legitimate to question Oddoul's status as a Nubian writer in what is termed "minority literature." Deleuze and Guattari define "minority literature" as "not the literature of a minor language but the literature that a minority makes in a major language, but the primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 16). It is noteworthy that the Nubian language has been so far a spoken, not a written, language, so Nubians were not forced to abandon their language, but to write about the Nubian experience in Arabic to address and reach out to their Egyptian and Arab readership. However, Nubian literature as that of a long-engrained, integral micro-ethnic constituent in the Egyptian whole undeniably expresses its unique cultural specificity.

In *Wanasa ma'a al-adab al-Nūbī* (In company with Nubian literature), Oddoul expresses his belief in both the universality and locality of Nubian literature, thus denying that Nubian literature is parochial and limited. It is universal yet maintains its culturally specific Nubian features:

Whoever reads Nubian literature as one which solely expresses Nubian people, would be committing an act of ignorant injustice. For while Nubian literature expresses the Nubian people in a specific time and under specific conditions with their geographical, historical and psychological ramifications, it portrays a human sector which is common with all other human beings. By necessity, it portrays the Nubian people who share the same roots and traditions with the Egyptians, Sudanese, Africans, Arabs and Mediterranean peoples. Islamic faith, which constitutes one of its most important cultural tributaries, is deep-rooted in a large segment of the Nubians, while the Christian faith is another tributary for other Nubians, which constitutes a main factor in their culture. (2009, 22)

This significant passage stresses the different tributaries: ethnic, religious, and cultural in Nubian identity. My reading and analysis

of Oddoul's play (2003) will be done against the background of Oddoul's previous remarks (2009), which also find expression in Gilmore's insights into Oddoul's work:

Oddoul's view perfectly coincides with the one that far from embracing Nubian ethno-nationalism, Nubian literature fundamentally rejects rigid cultural essentialism or any kind of national chauvinism in favor of hybrid understanding of identity that acknowledges how Arab and African elements of Egyptian culture borrowed from, and enriched, each other, which is perhaps more subversive of the fiction of a unified "Arab" state insofar as it dissolves national categories and produces more cosmopolitan forms of identity. (2015, 71)

The following reading of the play is guided by the views of Deleuze and Guattari, who maintain that "the second characteristic of minor literature is that everything in them is political" (1983, 16), and that "the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of the language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance" (18). I, therefore, contend that in his play *Tasābīḥ Nīliya*, Oddoul (2003) is engaged in an act of reterritorialization and recodification of the Nubian identity. (For a discussion of the question of deterritorialization/reterritorialization in Khalil Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra*, see Morsy in this volume). Furthermore, Oddoul is engaged in asserting two conflicting features: the culturally specific micro-Nubian literature and its universal counterpart. On the one hand, Oddoul is concerned with the negotiation of the micro-Nubian self as an integral mosaic in the larger context of the macro-Egyptian identity by reconstructing an imagined Nubian cultural space through which he expresses his vision of Egypt as an all-encompassing crucible since the dawn of history. The politics of Oddoul's text is concerned with a total rethinking, and consequent representation of the Nubian self as a culturally distinctive constituent in the bigger Egyptian tapestry, one tersely and lucidly expressed by Ḥawwā's [Eve's] rejoicing words, after the temporary victory over evil, "The people of the land [delta people] and people of the Nile [Nubians] are in a state of never-ending amicability" and "people of the valley [delta people] and people of the Nile [Nubians] [...] from the source of the river to its mouth, will live in immortal and everlasting union forever and ever" (2003, 34).

Oddoul's act of reterritorialization and recodification and also his quest for an Egyptian Nubian identity urges him to do it through the reenactment of the mega-narrative of Genesis and creation,



those grand national narratives and the invocation of Egyptian gods and goddesses and great national icons as a frame through which he rethinks and renegotiates Nubian identity. This will be shown in my analysis through exploring the rationale behind the unique appropriation and collage of diverse Egyptian mythological and historical figures taken from different Egyptian historical epochs, who are framed by modern-day Nubian characters and life. Consequently, I will examine Oddoul's deployment of the "post-dramatic" technique, which has a twofold effect: first, it explains "the politics of the text," as Lehmann suggests in explaining this avant-garde technique in order to express a communal entity (quoted in Wood 2013, 255); and second, it helps us examine and fathom the rationale behind the collage of mythical representations of the figures from ancient Egyptian mythology prevalent throughout the play.

It is noteworthy that Oddoul's play (2003) has suffered from a lack of either critical recognition or a deep understanding of the play. In a brief online comment on the performance of the play at Aswan Cultural Palace on April 6, 2017, the performance is misinterpreted as "highlighting the role of woman since her childhood through movements and gestures which are blended with the Ancient Egyptian Nubian heritage"; it goes on to comment on the structure of the play, which "consists of different tableaux such as the Phoenix, the wedding, the Nubian wedding and the 7th day celebration after a baby's birth" (El Ghebeiri 2017). I contend that this is a faulty vision that distorts and mutilates the more important implications embedded in the original text, which, as I argue here deals with the macro-Egyptian identity combining different ethnicities, not only the micro-Nubian identity.

### **The Recodification of the Nubian Identity through a Mythical Public Sphere**

Skin color as a signifier has an important function in the play. A quick look at the cast of characters reveals that Oddoul's concern is not solely with Nubians: "Ḥawwā' is fair-skinned, she is Adam's wife, prophet Idris' mother, then plays the role of Nabra, wife of mayor Idris, then significantly, Goddess Isis" (2003, 5). Adam is "black-skinned, he is Idris' father, he plays different roles — Osiris, mayor Idris, then the military leader A" (1). Significantly, God Set, the icon of evil, is singled out as "red-skinned," thus implying his characteristic otherness, distinguishing him from Indigenous Egyptian characters. However, this difference of skin color, indicating an unacceptable otherness, carries a completely different significance in other characters; for the great military leader Ramses

It is “wheat-skinned,” and Nefertari, the icon of female beauty in all ages, is “dark-skinned,” two color signifiers that characterize indigenous Egyptians. Nor does Oddoul stop short at suggesting ethnic diversity, for he merges different religious faiths that have existed on Egyptian soil: “Ancient Egyptian priest,” “Christian priest,” and “Muslim Sheikh.” Similarly, national Egyptian icons are presented without any distinctions between them: “A select number of great Egyptian leaders” (2003, 5). Oddoul thus blends different national, cultural, and religious symbols and icons to imply his embedded message of the pluralistic nature of Egyptians. Mega-narratives represented in mythological figures, whether religious or national, serve as a sort of touchstone against which Oddoul’s concept of Nubian identity is disclosed, thus putting into effect Roland Barthes’s belief that “a myth is a speech stolen and restored. Only speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was stolen; when it was brought back, it was not put exactly in its place” (Barthes 1991, 124).

### **Nubia: The Public Sphere Signifying Harmony and Union**

The term “public sphere” is here used in its simplest, classical definition, suggested by Jürgen Habermas as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society” (quoted in Soules 2007). Gerard Hauser (1999, 21) offers a definition: a “discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement about them.” The question naturally poses itself. What could be more important or convenient as a public sphere or “a discursive space” to explore and scrutinize an issue of utmost importance such as the Nubian identity?

In my view, Oddoul (2003) manipulates the theater as the “public sphere,” which, according to Pamela Howard, “lies silent, empty and inert, waiting for release into the life of drama.” Moreover, “in whatever shape and proportion, space has to be conquered, harnessed and changed by its animateurs before it becomes what Ming Cho Lee has called ‘an arena where the great issues of values, of ethics, of courage of integrity and of humanism are encountered and wrestled with’” (Howard 2009, 1). Thus, scenographically, Oddoul fills the theatrical space wholly with a Nubian village to highlight it as the locale of action, the “arena” of “great issues,” while the “animateurs” are indigenous Nubians who harness and conquer space to express their values and ethics, not only “of courage,” “integrity,” and “humanism,” but a belief in their inclusionist position in the larger, macro-Egyptian fabric. Moreover, the focality of Nubia sug-

gests that it is not a marginalized space, but the center of action and, more importantly, the birthplace of creation.

The opening scene, which carries a highly potent dramatic force, sets the right key to perceive the visual, auditory, and verbal signs underlying Nubia as the public space connoting harmony. By foregrounding Nubia as the potential seat of Genesis and the cradle of humanity, Oddoul (2003) endows it with the prestigious place it occupies by the incarnation, metamorphosis, and blending of the mega-narrative of creation, which is reenacted through Nubian setting and characters, blended with other iconic Egyptian figures. To imply this Nubian ambiance, he deploys visual, kinetic, and auditory signs “a young man is singing a Nubian ballad [*mawwāl*], from one side a group of boys and girls emerges, running and laughing. They disperse on the bank of the Nile, and around the palm trees while performing a Nubian dance. The singer approaches them to lead this song and performance” (9). After the auditory and kinetic signs set the right key to the scene, the iconic figures implying creation are brought to the foreground.

The scene focuses on young Ḥawwā' and young Adam. The girls surrounding them wear the transparent Nubian *gergar* robe,” which reveals the colored dress they wear underneath it. They wear colored headdresses. The youths wear white *galabiyas* and turbans, some of them wear the blue working clothes and colored Nubian skullcaps [...]. A semi-concealed courtship between Ḥawwā' and Adam is expressed through song and dance” (Oddoul 2003, 9). The courtship is further expressed through a Nubian (and Sudanese) dance where the bride-to-be is chased by the bridegroom in what is known as “a hunting dance” to highlight the Nubian identity through presenting social and cultural traditions and atmosphere (10). The scene significantly culminates in seeking the blessings and paying homage to the sacred Nile, which constitutes a major component in the Nubian public space: “Adam and Ḥawwā' join hands, they are kneeling in front of the Nile. The humming of hymns is heard from the bystanders, birds chirrup and twitter. Nature's lights and sounds emerge particularly from the heavens. All these announce the blessings given to Adam and Ḥawwā''s marriage” (11). The characteristic Nubian architecture as a clear visual sign is deployed to assert Nubian cultural heritage and identity as a crucible of different tributaries, ancient Egyptian, Christian, and Islamic:

It is broad daylight. In the distance, stands the mountain with the Nubian village wholly at its foot. There are big houses built of clay, bearing the signs and influence of their *ancient traditions*, colored specifically white and blue, their gates bearing

resemblances to *Ancient Egyptian temples*; with upright triangles intertwined with triangles turned downwards, forming a repetitive pattern. *The empty spaces [in this pattern] are filled with crosses[...]* Trees and palm trees are scattered randomly and *a simple, middle-height minaret which shows its primitive nature can be seen.* (15; emphasis added)

Significantly, the renegotiation and representation of Nubian identity as a crucible of different faiths and cultural beliefs is further represented in a collage of mega-icons of motherhood as expressed in different religious faiths and mythical iconic figures that lived on Egyptian soil. Oddoul (2003) expresses this through a representation of the tangible Nubian culture in clear visual images. The stage directions for the backdrop of scene 3 states “an ancient Egyptian engraving of huge size of Isis breast-feeding Horus. A relevant picture of the same size of the Virgin Mary breast-feeding the infant Jesus [peace be upon him]. With the engraving and the picture, Ḥawwā’ appears while she is breast-feeding her son Idris” (19).

The forceful visuals of architecture and engraving are enhanced by sound and auditory effects. Harmony and union of the different religious faiths are manifested in the blessings showered on the newborn Idris. A Nubian song that hails the newborn is sung aloud; it has clear religious implications:

*Ir Māri Mārin tō*  
*Ya salaweh el nabī*  
*Min sekofī tālē*  
*Min kērafī tālē*

*The sounds of the chanters lower to be replaced by a narrator reciting the Arabic translation of this song:*

Oh son of the blessed Mary, blessed be thou!  
 Praise of the prophet Muhammad shower upon you  
*Ir Māri Mārin tō*  
*Ya salaweh el nabī*

Is he the one coming from afar?  
 Is he the one ascending to the top?  
 Oh son of the blessed Mary, blessed be thou!  
 (Oddoul 2003, 16–17)

Significantly, Oddoul uses the Nubian language to assert the important linguistic component in Nubian identity. However, in all scenes,

Oddoul asserts the integration of the different ancient Egyptian, Christian, and Islamic faiths. The representatives of these faiths chant their separate religious recitations in a symphonic collage: “The Ancient Egyptian priest, Christian priest and the sheikh, each one is standing in a separate place which is allotted to him, each under suitable lighting, each is reciting his holy psalms, hymns or sacred verses” (19–20).

The scene that depicts the harmony of these religious faiths, drawing no demarcation between prophets Jesus and Muhammad, is suddenly disrupted by the appearance of evil, which Ḥawwā’ (aka Isis or Virgin Mary) is conscious of (Oddoul 2003, 22). In a later scene, after performing the baptismal rite of the newborn, all those gathered join to chant, in a polyphonic manner, a hymn that blesses the newborn and brings together the icons of the three Abrahamic religious faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam: “All: Blessings of Youkabid, Moses’ mother, Blessings of the Virgin Mary, blessings of Amena (Prophet Muhammad’s mother)” (24). Unfortunately, harmony is again disrupted with the reappearance of the icon of evil, Set (30–32). The implicit message is that harmony and unity are threatened by one who is alienated from them.

In scene 2, visual signs are deployed to assert Nubian cultural identity through tangible cultural objects; costumes represent the Nubian identity, and the Nubian village with its culturally distinctive architecture becomes the public space that expresses Oddoul’s vision of the centrality of Nubia as the birthplace of creation. After this is established in scene 1, with the meeting and union of Adam and Eve [Ḥawwā], in scene 2

Adam ascends to the top of a house *in full Nubian dress*, carrying his naked infant child in his hands [...]. Adam comes forward holding his baby in the direction of the north, then in the three different directions. He cries in both Arabic and Nubian: *Allah Akbar* [God is almighty]. *Allah Akbar* [God is almighty]. *Yā nās ya hoi* [Oh, people of this land]. *Hoigū. Ambesgū. Anēngagū. Abunēngagū.* [Hey everyone! My sisters, my brothers, my paternal uncles] The Bountiful God has gifted me with a child. Oh, Adam’s offspring; *wō ādemirī*. Oh, God’s creatures from all species Rejoice! (13–14; emphasis added)

Though Oddoul focalizes Nubia, he shuns any chauvinism by asserting its status simply as a distinct mosaic in the macro-Egyptian fabric. This is clearly manifested in the frequent merging of the Nubian and Arabic languages in the play. Though Nubian scenery, language, rituals, and songs are presented, they are not the sole factors, for

they are just one major strand in a pluralistic image. Oddoul ingeniously reworks the myth of creation by situating it in a Nubian locale and by selecting the name of “Ḥawwā” pronounced according to the Nubian phonetic system, which does not include the Arabic letter [ح].

Significantly, the Nile occupies a most prominent central place in the Nubian scenery. One of the most prominent constituents of the Nubian public sphere that has shaped the Nubian, and indeed the Egyptian identity at large, is the Nile. Thus, in defining Nubian identity, Oddoul (2003) has found it imperative to recodify the Nile in positive terms. Entitling his play “Hymns to the Nile” is a clear indication of its focal significance as a sacred being, a natural continuation of the ancient Egyptians’ perception of the Nile god Habi. Thus, “history records that the Ancient Egyptian never polluted the Nile, nor violated the irrigation system, nor destroyed the land.” Akhenaten’s prayer (hymn) “was an expression of a deep sense of gratitude to God for the blessing of the Nile” (Fouad 1972, 31).<sup>3</sup>

Another aspect connected with the Nile is its abundance and fertility, thus the truthfulness of the often repeated adage, “Egypt is the gift of the Nile,” by fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus, attests to its indispensable presence in the lives of Egyptians. Oddoul states that “common to us all is the River’s impact on our lives. The Nile has flowed through our land and provided us with nourishment and water” (Oddoul 2002, 2). Understandably, one of the major grievances of the Nubians is that they were deprived of the Nile environment as their natural habitat, for “even more than the other peoples along its bank, the Nubians were forced into an intimate relationship with the all-important Nile, the source of their life sustenance” (Kennedy 1970, 439). However, I would point out here that Oddoul (2002) added a symbolic dimension to the Nile as a binding force, which is in perfect compliance with his embedded message in the play. The Nile in this play is not an inanimate object. It acts as a binding force of all Egyptians, and thus “the Nile binds them all” acts as a meaningful refrain throughout the play.

In an address at Cairo University on November 17, 2016, Oddoul described the Nile as “a vein of life and continuity, not separation.”

3 In Akhenaten’s prayer to the Almighty, he thanks Him for the blessings of the Nile:

You who offer life to all the distant lands  
 Because you created a Nile in the heavens  
 To shower over them, causing waves on the mountains  
 Like those of the sea waves,  
 To water their lands in their fields.  
 Oh, Everlasting God! How marvelous are Your deeds!  
 The Nile You created in the heavens is for strangers.  
 And all four-footed desert animal.  
 But the true Nile springs from the world beyond [...] for Egypt.  
 (quoted in Fouad 1972, 18; emphasis added).

In his earlier play *Nās al-Nahr* (People of the river) (1993), Nubians are defined in terms of their connection with the Nile. The play is a modern adaptation of the ancient Nubian myth that deals with “the people of the river” living in the depths of the sacred Nile, and with Nubians’ fear that they would threaten these creatures’ lives, because they never dared pollute the Nile. In ancient Egypt, the deceased makes “negative confessions” in self-defense on Judgment Day, one of which is admitting that “I never polluted the Nile,” which acts as a saving force (quoted in Ahmed, 2014, 31). Thus, two of the major features of the Nile are intertwined and highlighted in the play (Oddoul 1993), its sanctity and its unifying force: “The waters of the Nile in its different forms: canals, wells, lakes and waterways, have an importance in washing, cleansing and the performing of rituals. Ancient Egyptians worshipped a number of gods and goddesses among which is the River Nile” (Fouad 1972, 27). Critic Abu El Hassan Sallam (2008) notes the unchangeable sacredness of the Nile River in different religions as portrayed in the play, for “we notice that genuflection and bowing was never done except to the Nile, the provider of love, peace and stability. In all cases of religious conversions from paganism to Christianity to Islam, the Nile was held in high esteem, for the Nile is more ancient than all religions” (Sallam 2008).

In scene 3, Ḥawwā’ [Eve] performs the mandatory baptismal rites of her baby in the sacred waters of the Nile, a ritual that merges ancient Egyptian Nubian rites with Christian rites:

*Ḥawwā’ unfolds her baby’s diapers wrapped round his body. She takes a handful of the Nile water in the palm of her hands and washes the baby, holds him then dips him gently in the Nile.*

ALL: We all rejoice in Ḥawwā’'s son (repeatedly)!

MOTHER: In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate God!

GIRL A: The fair, propitious tidings of Eissa [Jesus]. (Oddoul 2003, 21)

Moreover, the reenactment of prophet Moses’s ritual and story enhances the inclusionist vision that integrates different faiths. It also clearly shows yet another feature of the Nile as a force of salvation, rather than one of threat or danger. It is noteworthy that the destructive dangers of flooding Nubia was exposed to, and that caused the Nubian diaspora, is never mentioned in connection with the Nile, probably because “[i]n the barren and rocky land of Nubia, the annual rise of the Nile did not inundate any appreciable amount of land” (Kennedy 1970, 439), but more importantly, because the Nile

has positive connotations. In a ritual-like performance, Girl B and Girl C approach, and the latter puts the wooden boat on the waters of the Nile as a safe refuge for the baby, in a ritual reenactment of prophet Moses 's salvage by the Nile water:

*Girl B takes from her straw plate a piece of woman's clothes and puts it on the model of a boat. This ritual takes place synchronically with the following dialogue:*

BOTH GIRLS: Prophet Moses's casket!

ALL: Peace be upon him!

BOTH GIRLS: And this is a piece of your mother's clothes, Idris. She was wearing it when she gave birth to you. A cloth which bears her sweat and her smell, her liquids, and her blood, while she was practising Almighty God's miracle by giving birth to you. (23-24)

Oddoul's reference to the evil creatures of the river that coexist with benign "people of the river" is done as an assertion of Nubian identity through recalling Nubian mythology connected with the vital role played by the Nile. This is clarified in the following statement: "With the close dependence upon the river, it is not surprising that the Nubian people evolved close spiritual relations with the river. The monster [...] is only one of the Nile beings believed in by these people" (Kennedy 1970, 440). The evil spirits, *amandogor* [ugly water beings] as Kennedy explains, "are described as black, ugly, animal-like, and masculine. They are wraithlike, but they are very tangible" (441). Amidst the celebration of the baby's birth, evil forces are to be avoided. The Nubian myth that benign underwater creatures exist is highlighted in the following:

ḤAWWĀ': Oh, people of the river! *Wō aman utu*. Our people in the bountiful river. Our water villages, our brethren the fish and sea creatures! Greetings to you! Greetings of the people of the land to the people of the river. We are brothers, and may God Almighty protect us all. We love you, so love us.

ḤAWWĀ': Evil creatures of the river! *Wō amandogor* [...] We are not hostile to you, so don't be hostile to us. (22-23)

Benign forces are mainly connected with the Nile, but evil may also reside therein (30).

However, the most important connotation of the Nile and one that enhances the embedded message of the play is that the Nile acts as a binding, unifying force:



THE THREE MEN OF RELIGION: *The Nile unites them!*

ALL: Isis of the Nile unites us all. *The Nile is our unifying umbilical cord.*

THE THREE MEN OF RELIGION: The Nile is Idris' vein of growth!

ALL: Osiris-Idris [...] Ramsis. (40; emphasis added)

As a variation in a musical composition, this scene is repeated later (44), a fact that adds to its forceful poetic feature, and nonverbally conveys the message.

In contrast, Set, the mayor's evil brother, is perceived as a threat since he causes a disruption to the socially accepted system of beliefs and culture of unification and harmony that characterizes the Nubian identity, and which Oddoul seeks to portray.

### **Postdramatic Technique in *Hymns to the Nile***

I argue in this section that Oddoul (2003) resorts to a postdramatic technique as a conscious act to avoid direct and overt didacticism in his recodification of micro-Nubian identity as an integral part of macro-Egyptian identity. Oddoul's play *Hymns to the Nile* is rightly applauded for "the dramatist's skill to turn his eyes into a camera which records for the reader and audience Nature's actions" (Sallam 2008), yet Sallam then asks, "But where is the drama, which is the basic constituent in drama and cinema?" He further critiques the play by asserting, "It is a well-known fact that there is no drama without human conflict between two humans or the conflict of two human will.s" Despite the previous rather negative comments, Sallam believes that "this text belongs to the category of disconnected texts, because it goes beyond the requirements of dramatic art, without violating them, forming a blend between it as dramatic art and the art of the scenario which is based on the visual and non-verbal effects, making the verbal effect merely a parallel language." In an attempt to respond to his query, I examine Oddoul's experimentation with dramatic form, indicating the Nubian artist's ability to keep abreast with, and deploy modern techniques in drama. The main concern here is to show the rationale behind using such a technique. I argue that Oddoul (2003), as a political and cultural activist, deploys this unique postdramatic technique in order to convey his unique vision of the inclusionist plurality of the Nubian identity. I contend that it is not a play proper in the traditional sense since it does not seek to dramatize or develop a plot, or to trace and analyze dramatic characters, but rather to fix an image of a multilayered, rich civilization, one developed over thousands of years,

and which Gamal Hamdan (2001) himself, among other thinkers, has referred to.

“Postdramatic” is a term coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann to describe the new theater aesthetics in relation to the needs of modern times. In *Postdramatic Theater*, Lehmann (2006) states that the theater existed even before the written text, and offers his definition of this relatively newly emerging form of drama, which has prevailed since the 1970s: “Narrative fragmentation, heterogeneity of style, hypernaturalist, grotesque and neo-expressionist elements [...] are all typical of postdramatic theatre” (24). In the introduction to the English translation of the book, Karen Jürs-Munby states:

It will hopefully become clear that “post” here is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a chronological “after” drama, a forgetting of the dramatic “past,” but rather a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and “anamnesis” of drama. To call theatre “postdramatic” involves subjecting the traditional relationships of theatre of drama to deconstruction and takes account of the numerous ways in which this relationship has been refigured in contemporary practice since the 1970’s. (Lehmann 2006, 2)

In an enlightening definition of the postdramatic, Lehmann further clarifies its features:

When it is obviously no longer simply a matter of broken dramatic illusion or epicising distance; when obviously neither plots, nor plastically shaped dramatis personae are needed; when neither dramatic dialectical collision of values, nor even identifiable figures are necessary to produce “theatre” [...] then the concept of drama, however differentiated, all-embracing and watered down it may retain so little substance that it loses its cognitive value. (2006, 34)

This form of theater, shunning the traditional hypnotizing dramatic and literary aspects, focuses on theater primarily as performance. Lehmann among other drama critics suggests that the rationale behind this form of theater is that it is in the service of urgent political and social issues. Lehmann (2006) further explains that “understandable as the desire to ‘thematize’ social and political issues may be, we must not forget that the truly social dimension of art is the form” (35). Lehmann highlights the relationship between postdramatic theater and political issues when he asserts that “postdramat-

ic strategies continue to be seen by many theater practitioners as more suited to dealing with social issues (unemployment, violence, social isolation, terrorism, issues of race and gender) than the traditional model of socially engaged drama" (36). Though the previous views are true, I argue that social issues cannot be severed from the political and cultural: Oddoul's play (2003) clearly shows that the negotiation of the Nubian identity is not only a social issue but also highly political and cultural one.

In an attempt to give the defining features of postdramatic theater, a number of characteristics can be cited, such as "the dedicated theatre building has long since been abandoned [...] with the action taking place for instance [...] on the streets" (Jürs-Munby, Carroll, & Giles 2013, 3). Moreover, characters are "without coherent psychological 'interiority'" (3). The authors further point to "character[s] who [...] through being surrounded by a chorus—have multiple or collective identities" (3). Oddoul's knowledge of modern developments in drama is clear in his incorporating some of these elements in his plays, such as breaking away from the "dedicated theatre building" to allow the interaction between performers and the audience. As for "the characters without coherent psychological interiority," this is dictated not by his interest in psychological examination of the character, but rather in its symbolic representation.

On the necessity of deploying this postdramatic theater, Michael Wood (2013) quotes Lehmann, in that "the politics of the text" rather than "the politics in the text" determines or necessitates this choice:

As Hans-Thies Lehmann writes in 1987, "the politics of a text is not determined by the theses it contains, *rather than by the manner in which it organizes these [theses] and itself*. Not the politics in the text, rather the politics of the text." To paraphrase Lehmann's statement: the political is formal. It can perhaps be taken for granted that the postdramatic theater text is a text which experiments with form, but it would be well worth taking a closer look at the role formal experimentation plays with regard to the politics of the theater. (quoted in Wood 2013, 255; emphasis original)

Wood's thesis is that this postdramatic theater focuses mainly on performing the collective. This is in perfect tune with Oddoul's play (2003), which highlights the collective identity and shuns "the plastically shaped dramatis personae" or "dialectical collision of values," to use Lehmann's definition. Thus, both the definition and rationale of postdramatic theater describe Oddoul's play (2003), for his main objective was not to narrate a plot, but rather to manipulate perfor-

mance elements to convey his vision concerning the renegotiation of the Nubian self, not as a rigid, fixed essentialist identity, but as a distinctive constituent in the larger mosaic of Egyptian identity. It is this type of content that requires such unconventional, avant-garde “postdramatic” technique. Totally avoiding a well-wrought plot, he resorts to the performance of disconnected tableaux to highlight his dominant theme. Collage and fragmentation, two postmodernist techniques, are prominent strategies utilized by Oddoul (2003) when he depicts two simultaneous scenes synchronizing and taking place at the same time, as a front scene and a back scene. The front scene portrays present-day life in Nubia, while the back scene shows different historical epochs in a flashy, cinematic technique. It is worth noting that the scene is performed in pantomime to allow for the front scene to be delivered aloud. Oddoul’s main technique in the back scene is deploying the nonverbal, acoustic/visual effect.

*Cinematic or regular slides of scenes from plays are shown in the background of this scene [scene 3]. This scene depicts crowds from all walks of Egyptian life, and from different historical epochs; The Ancient Egyptian priest, the Christian priest and the Sheikh are all present. All exchanges and dialogues in this scene are silent as in a pantomime.*

1. The Ancient Egyptian fleet making a show of power, while the Ancient Egyptian music is played majestically and loftily, then fades out.
2. The picture of Queen Hatshepsut’s expedition to the land of Pont [Somalia] appears in the same way as engraved in her temple [Northern Temple]. The picture becomes vibrant with life. *The members of the expedition bear all the characteristic Egyptian features whether from the South or North.* They move around, increasing in numbers. The ship sails, and behind it appears a map which indicates its sailing route in the Red Sea [...].
3. Muhammad Ali Pasha’s fleet appears, then disappears.
4. Ships, specifically those which carry earthenware vessels and pots from both Upper Egypt and the Delta appear, loaded with goods. The ships sail in the Nile alongside the small villages. The ships sail to the company of popular Egyptian songs. (26–27; emphasis added)

This hypernaturalist scene that highlights different manifestations of Egyptian glory blends the remote past with the recent present, and has an evident objective, for instance to assert the homogeneity

of Egyptian historical epochs and also different religious, national, and ethnic tendencies.

Another highly hypernaturalist scene focuses on the harmonious blend of different religious faiths when men of different religious faiths offer their blessings to the newlyweds, culminating in a highly hypernaturalist scene:

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN PRIEST: Your offspring is for all Egypt. May your offspring disperse in the Nile valley far and wide [in all directions]. May their colors vary, each one kneeling and worshipping God in his own way. But teach your offspring [...] that they are all brothers and sisters created by the same God, their homeland is the womb which encompasses them all. Never forget that they all drink from the same Nile.

*They are all in the same boat. They are all safe on it, if the boat sails safely. They will always say that whoever is embraced by the homeland, will not be separated by regions, tribes or different rites of worship.* (38; emphasis added)

Interestingly, this scene is repeated verbatim later on (59), adding force to the implicature embedded in the performance and showing that in such a postdramatic play focus is not on the plot, nor on “a coherent psychological interiority” as Jürs-Munby, Carroll, and Giles (2013) suggest, but rather on the message transmitted from the repeated performance. This scene culminates in a hypernaturalist scene that attests to the metamorphosis and unity of different generations of Egyptians and the harmony between different regions of Egypt. The groom’s turban, which “looks like the Ancient Egyptian crown of the North,” is removed from his head, and they take a skullcap from a delta villager, make some additions to it, so that it looks like “the Ancient Egyptian crown of the South” (Oddoul 2003, 39). When they place this double crown on his head, a process of metamorphosis takes place, whereby the groom becomes Ramses II, which is achieved through lighting effects and kinetic movements:

*Lighting from the side of the stage. Light shines on the double Abu Simbel Temple. [The statue of] Nefertari comes out of its place. Her tawny color is obvious. Ramsis the Second gets up from one of his statues. He is wheat-colored. They approach one another, first their fingers intertwine, then their arms. They stand behind the bride and groom.*

THE BOY: Ramsis from the North!

ALL: Ramsis from the Delta and Upper Egypt!

GIRL A: The fair, propitious tidings of Eissa [Jesus]. (21)

This hypernaturalist scene, which highlights different manifestations of Egyptian glory, blends the remote past with the recent present, and has an evident objective, for instance to assert the homogeneity of Egyptian historical epochs and also different religious, national, and ethnic tendencies:

*Lighting from the side of the stage. Light shines on the double Abu Simbel Temple. [The statue of] Nefertari comes out of its place. Her tawny color is obvious. Ramsis the Second gets up from one of his statues. He is wheat-colored. They approach one another, first their fingers intertwine, then their arms. They stand behind the bride and groom.*

THE BOY: Ramsis from the North!

ALL: Ramsis from the Delta and Upper Egypt!

GIRL 1: And Nefertari from the furthestmost South!

ALL: And Nubia! (39-40)

The performance of this tableau, which depicts the act of metamorphosis, signifies the comforting feeling of continuity and integration of different generations of Egyptians. This is further enhanced by another tableau that manipulates religious processions to imply the inextricable interrelatedness of different faiths, one of which is represented by African influence. Part of the Nubian identity is the Sudanese African side, which acts as a continuum to Egyptian Nubia which lies north of Sudan:

*From one side a religious sophist Mirghani procession belonging to a Sudanese religious sect with its South African effect, approaches. The people in the procession are beating their drums and tambourines, carrying their banners which bear slogans of monolithic faith and praise of prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The people in the procession represent the Nubian, Sudanese, and Sub-Saharan African sectors. Moreover, inside the procession there are individuals from different parts of Egypt.*

*Tribal Sub-Saharan African songs are chanted in different languages, then the song of Africa and Asia sung in Arabic and other African languages.*

*From another side comes a Christian procession chanting their hymns and carrying their crosses. This group is represented mostly by the garments worn by the people of the Nile Delta. It has among it*

*some tawny-colored and dark-skinned people, including the Nubians. The procession chants Christian hymns.*

*From a third side, comes an Ancient Egyptian procession, in the center of which are priests chanting their hymns. They carry their signs, most notably the Ancient Egyptian cross 'Ankh [عنخ]. They represent all colors. (41-42)*

The embedded message of the integration of the different faiths is seen in the culmination of the scene, which is enhanced in the polyphony of voices. Oddoul's perception of the Nubian identity does not stop short at the Egyptian, for the recodification of the Nubian identity is highlighted in incorporating the Sudanese and sub-Saharan, an undeniable historical fact Oddoul brings to light. A few lines later, it is added,

*The three groups share the same mood, each chanting what suits the advocacy of their faiths in the one monolithic God and the one nation. The three groups' chanting merges harmoniously, then each one chants individually, then they merge once more. (43)*

In another scene, different religious faiths are blended in a polyphony with Isis and the sacred Nile forming an integrated unity (40-42). Oddoul's intentional deployment of some postdramatic strategies, such as the "characters [who] have multiple identities," which is witnessed in the act of metamorphosis in different scenes, signifies an uninterrupted continuum, an everlasting presence.

## Conclusion

In an interview, Oddoul (2002) admitted that "for me as a Nubian the cup [of writing] will ever be abundant with dazzling ideas." This is true, for in the final analysis of the play Oddoul's conscious act of recodification or reterritorialization of the Nubian self is done by creating an imagined Nubian public space to define the Nubian politico/cultural identity. Nubia is not depicted as a threatened or submerged lost paradise, but is reconstructed in imaginary terms to celebrate the heterogeneity and plurality of all Egyptians, including Nubians, who represent a part in the macro-Egyptian tapestry. By invoking mega-narratives and major religious, mythical, and national icons, Oddoul (2003) confirms the specificity of the micro-Nubian identity, yet within the overall macro-Egyptian whole. Contrary to charges and allegations against Oddoul as a "separatist" Nubian writer, the play asserts the homogeneity and plurality of different "mosaics" of Egyptian identity, the Nubian mosaic forming

one of its most prominent, and confirms the view that “more plural, differentiated, and, ultimately, progressive concepts of national identity can, and, indeed do, emerge in an Egyptian literary sphere capable of absorbing minority identities into a pluralized national imaginary” (Gilmore 2015, 71). Hence, postdramatic technique is deployed by Oddoul (2003) to express the ideal, imagined community and to avoid any uncalled for, overt didacticism on such an issue that could by its very nature head in this direction. Moreover, Nubian writers, by adapting and deploying up-to-date artistic forms, attest to Nubian literature as a vibrant entity that expresses the living Nubian experience, which is neither marginalized nor fossilized.

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# (In)Visible Borders in Nubian Poetry of Mohy El-Deen Saleh

Rasha Mohamed Abboudy

## Introduction

The term “diaspora” has always been used in relation to the condition of Nubians. Egyptian Nubians’ forced migration and their subsequent separation from their original rural birthplaces along the Nile have produced a state of double consciousness that at times amounts to an almost unstable sense of self. Homi Bhabha has expressed this condition as a state of “unhomeliness” (1994, 2003). Some voices accusing Nubians of separatism and isolation, denying them the right to have political demands on the grounds that their movement was a form of relocation rather than forced displacement, seem to be unaware of Bhabha’s differentiation between the state of being “unhomed” versus being “homeless.” It is this state of cultural and psychological immigration that marks the Nubian diasporic condition.

Nowadays in the globalized youth culture, it is difficult to differentiate between young people of Nubian descent and other Egyptians, but when those youths come together with their elders, one can witness the instant revival of Nubian customs and traditions. This shows that Nubian identity is currently located in a place between the feeling of integration and of diaspora. In this sense, identity is transitory, and when a counterculture differs from the prevailing norms of a certain society, identity becomes visible.

Using a context-oriented approach, I will examine the choice of diction, themes, and images deployed in the poetry of Mohy El-Deen Saleh in relation to the historical, ethnic, social, and political developments of the Nubian cultural context. My study will reveal gradually the different layers of the (in)visible Nubian identity, in relation to the main topics of Saleh’s poetry, moving from a Nubian identity to an Arab identity, and eventually to a universalist kind of

identity, where individual and national commitments seem to vanish in favor of a more metropolitan sentiment.

As a contemporary example of border literature, the Arabic poetry of the Egyptian Nubian Saleh moves gradually from traditional to modern subjects and from collective reminiscences to individual concerns. One can recognize this shift in the titles of his four collections of poems I examine in this chapter: *al-Garḥ wa Ahlām al-ʿawda* (The wound and the dreams of returning); *Thawrat al-qawāfi* (The revolution of rhymes); *Fayḍ al-Mashāʿir* (The overflow of feelings); and *Yā Rīm, Mahlan* (Oh, gazelle! Wait). All four were compiled in one volume, *Nūḍit min Wādī al-Nakhīl* (I was called from the valley of palm trees, 2011), in which Saleh added more unedited poems and corrected some linguistic errors. My study here focuses on this latest edition to analyze the essence of his poetry with the aim of challenging the traditional approach to Nubian literature as an exclusively cultural product of an overlooked minority through an in-depth analysis of the mutable borders of Nubian identity as reflected in literature.

It is my contention that Saleh has not been given the recognition he deserves in the field of Nubian literature or in Egyptian or Arabic literature in general. I believe the main reason has to do with the tendency of the readers to associate Nubian literature with the “Nubian Awakening,” hence preferring narrative fiction to poetry. Thus, by translating and analyzing some of his poems, I focus on forgotten Nubian poetry, on the one hand, and calls for a shift of approach toward more varied themes than the typical ones, on the other. Therefore, I examine how Saleh plays with hybrid themes that deal with Nubian culture and legacy, the Arab world’s different crises, and his own mystic confessions of the soul.

Mohy El-Deen Saleh (1951–2018) was a Nubian writer and poet, born in Kastal, a Nubian village in the south of Aswan and on the border with Sudan. Saleh’s literary career started in the 1990s. At the beginning he was not interested in publishing his work because he wanted to follow in his father’s religious footsteps. His first book, published in 1988, had a religious subject, *Yā Qawmunā ʿAjībū Daʿī Allah* (Oh, my people! Come to Allah). Saleh then switched to political writing in a literary style. He published his writings in *al-Shaʿb* newspaper, which reflected the ideology of the Labor Party, known for its religious orientation. He published in such journals as *Tirhaḥa* in Aswan and *ʿIshrāqa Nūbiyya* in Cairo. He won the Nādi al-Qaṣid Prize (2005) in Cairo, and he was a member of the Writers League, the Nubian Culture Club, and the Nubian Heritage Association.

The main step that enhanced Saleh’s career as a poet came when he decided to collect the poems he wrote throughout the 1970s and

publish his first volume of poetry, *The Wound and The Dreams of Returning*, in 1996. In 1997, he joined the International Islamic Literature Organization to pursue literary and Islamic studies. Saleh continued writing poetry and later published his three remaining books separately, until he finally decided to collect the four books of poetry in one volume in 2011.

Saleh wrote about different issues, besides the well-known Nubian motifs related to diaspora and homesickness. The themes of his poetry are diverse, but one can point out three particularly important phases: (1) Nubia and the lament over a lost past; (2) commitment toward other Arab nations and the embracing of a hybrid present; and (3) asceticism in different forms. Those three topics encapsulate the full range of Saleh's themes, which are linked to the focus of my presentation here, "identity." I proceed in three sections: (1) "Nubian Identity and the Allegiance to the Self"; (2) "Arab-Egyptian Identity and the Abnegation of the Self"; and (3) "Beyond Identity and the Annihilation of the Self."

### **Nubian Identity and the Allegiance to the Self**

As time passes, one finds that Nubia "does not correspond to any of the actual political nor the administrative divisions. Nubia has a part in Egypt and another in Sudan, as it forms only a little part of the total extension of those countries" (Martinez 1983, 53). From this perspective, I contend that Nubia, the Egyptian border with Africa, should be regarded as a "place in between," a bridge that connects two cultures, bringing hybrid motifs together. Moreover, it has now become an uncontested fact that the continuous movement of clear and hidden frontiers of the Nubian culture through history was responsible for locating, dislocating, and relocating its identity.

In his seminal book *On Identity*, Amin Maalouf proposes "that deep down inside everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of 'fundamental truth' about each individual, an essence determined once and for all at birth, never to change therefore" (2011, 15). On the other hand, Maalouf alludes to the severe consequences of adopting a conflicting identity: "Anyone who claims a more complex identity is marginalized" (16). Maalouf's statement seems problematic in the case of Saleh. Although it could be true of many Nubian writers and poets, it is my contention that it is only applicable to Saleh's early phase in his career as a writer and poet. This deep allegiance is clearly expressed in such poems as "The Rhyme of Nubia," "The Story of the Migration," "Nubia's Lover," "The Elegy of Nubia," "The Dreams of Returning," "A Nubian

Cry,” and “The Last Testament” from his first collection of poems, *The Wound and the Dreams of Returning*.

From these titles of the Saleh’s early poems, one detects the main ideas of the Nubian narrative that Saleh seeks to highlight, such as the praxis of the forced migration of Nubians, the elegy over the loss of the Nubian lands, the hopeless dreams of returning, and his last testament to the future generations. It is noticeable that these ideas constitute a repeated pattern in the works of Nubian writers.

The first poem in Saleh’s first collection, “The Rhyme of Nubia” (appendix A), recounts the sad story of the forced migration of Nubians and the Nile erasing their traces.<sup>1</sup>

### The Rhyme of Nubia

Life and calamities manipulated me,  
 Fatal memories made my heart bleed,  
 Wandering with the memory of Nubia  
 Sorrow and plights pursued me indeed  
 I broke out crying, cursing my naivety  
 My weakness ... and optimism devastated me  
 My tears were shed in despair and regret  
 What curbed my tears was Takamul<sup>2</sup>  
 O Nile! Have mercy on us ... you over-submerged our homeland  
 A devastating torrent ... which collapsed our houses.

Here, Saleh is sending a desperate message of the impossibility of return; he finishes the stanza invoking the image of the collapsing houses and the submerged homeland. Moreover, despair and deceit are felt when he mentions the false promise of *al-Takāmul* project (economic integration), which reminds readers of the futile efforts to return. This nostalgic feeling of a lost home is a leitmotif in Nubian literature because, Avtar Brah emphasizes, “home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (1996, 192). The sad and painful metaphors of “fatal memories” and “heart bleed” suggest how the poet develops a sense of loss that he experiences along with his people. On the other hand, the personification of the Nile and its mighty annihilating force draws attention to the powerful influence of the High Dam on Nubian life. The construction of the dam has led to the destruction of a nation.

That is why a sense of forced alienation pervades Nubian existence, now shattered between Egypt and Sudan. “A Nubian Cry”

1 All translations of poems from Arabic to English in this chapter are mine, and were edited and rewritten by Amal Mazhar and Ahmed Elshamy.

2 *al-Takāmul* is the name of the project suggested by late Egyptian president Sadat, who promised the return of the Nubians to their lands, but this never happened.

(appendix B) reflects the sense of fragmentation to which Nubians are condemned after the construction of the High Dam.

### A Nubian Cry

When Egypt sought abundance ...  
 My Nubia became the scapegoat  
 When they constructed its High Dam ...  
 They threw us all into the wasteland  
 We slept on desert sands for years on end ...  
 Sheltered by the sky  
 Sudan following Egypt's steps ...  
 Made us suffer bitter hardship  
 Constructing a like Dam which condemns us to doom,  
 Scattering what is left from Nubian villages ...  
 In the land of survival  
 So why we — and only we — are doomed to sacrifice?

This is the story of the diaspora of the Nubians. Nubia is now fragmented, and Nubians are scattered with no possibility of return. Their birthplace has been converted into a place of no return. Thus “home becomes primarily a mental construction built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present,” says John McLeod (2000, 211). Thus, the perpetual condemnation of a divided existence between Egypt and Sudan intensifies the double life Nubians must live — their spatial division has led to the development of a more complex identity.

The line “My Nubia became the scapegoat” is a strong metaphor that carries symbolic and negative overtones that haunt Nubia still today. “Sheltered by the sky” emphasizes the main theme of the poem: the diaspora. Nubians are left out in the open — no roof, no houses, and no belongings. The rhetorical question in the last line in the poem confirms Nubian separation from the rest of the Egyptians and even suggests the multidimensional sacrifice of Nubians. Behind the symbolic power of “sacrifice” lies a triangular relationship of sacrifice, deity, and victim. Here, Saleh introduces the Nubians as victims. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss’s theory in *The Meaning of Sacrifice* clarifies “the intermediary role of a victim, that is to say, of a thing destroyed in the course of the ceremony” (Money-Kyrle 1965, 179). Both physical and psychological forms of destruction are revealed. This explains the permanent scar Nubians tend to reveal when they are accused of exaggeration.

At the end of the first collection, “The Last Testament” (appendix C) seeks to salvage the memory of Nubia, advising future generations to preserve their Nubian identity:

### **The Last Testament**

Do you recall my voice like an echo?  
 You will not hear it anymore ... never, ever!  
 I will die of deep wounds ... I will part with you tomorrow  
 My heart is too surfeited from what I came through ...  
 Chained ... handcuffed  
 My testament ... before I leave and get crushed by death and  
 swiped  
 You make Nubia your aim ... an eternal heritage

In the tension between the feelings of resignation and resistance through time, Saleh has one last wish, one last testament, as shown from the title of the poem, which is to save Nubia from oblivion. Images that emanate from the adjectives “chained,” “handcuffed,” “crushed,” and “swiped” vividly convey the ache caused by the lack of a potential and free-willed individual. And this sort of emotional arousal might not have an aesthetic appeal, but it paves the way to a clear emotional valence and reveals how “imagination has psychological, complex, dynamic and structural function,” states María Noel Lapoujade (2007), which strengthens the clear-cut idea of the poem.

As the poem unfolds, it shows the spatiotemporal significance of Nubia as a scattered land and a distant memory. Despite this, Saleh wants to rescue the glorious past of his nation, on the one hand, and to urge the next generations to hold on to it, on the other. His relation to the “nation” at this stage recalls Ernest Renan’s famous definition of “nation” as “a spiritual principal,” and it sheds light on the reason for Saleh’s last wish:

A Nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (Renan [1882] 2018, 261)

We can see the main thrust on which these confessional poems are based. In “The Rhyme of Nubia,” Saleh underlines the forced dis-



placement and the false promise of return for the Nubians. In “A Nubian Cry” he highlights the diaspora, despair, and sacrifice that Nubians have undergone. In “The Last Testament,” Saleh is eager to cry out loud his poetic manifestos to prove that Nubian heritage must not be lost. In these three poems, Saleh narrates in the first person — in a gradual and episodic way — the story of Nubia, the lost paradise. From the wide perspective of phenomenology, Karlheinz Stierle had always insisted on the auto-reflexive function of a poem that proposes that every poem reveals a meta-poetry (Combe 1999, 147). Thus, Saleh’s poetry, in this early phase, can be considered a perfect case of meta-poetry because of the continuous allegiance to his own self.

### Arab-Egyptian Identity and the Abnegation of the Self

Saleh’s poems written in the 1970s and published in 1996 in his first collection of poetry, *The Wound and the Dreams of Returning*, could be placed in the second wave of Nubian literature. According to Haggag Oddoul, this second wave, which lasted for almost twenty years, started in 1968, the date of the publication of the key novel *Al-Shamandūrah* (The buoy) by Muhammad Khalil Qassim. Oddoul indicates that during the second wave writers wrote with “a great deal of humanity of Nubian life and culture” (Naaman 2011, 114). In this sense, Saleh’s group of poems was written to draw attention to the Nubian cause, spirit, and culture, but from within the larger context of allegiance to Egyptian and Arab causes.

Thus one assumes that the Nubian narrative, as represented in this phase, seems to transcend the nostalgia of past experiences and in the present must guarantee its continuity in place and time. In this context, it seems that Saleh’s inclinations can be best read along those of one of the most important cultural studies theorists, Homi K. Bhabha and, notably, his concept of “newness.” Here, Bhabha explains, we should rely, in examining a “past/present” experience, on the question of border:

The border line work of culture demands an encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (1994, 10)

From this perspective, Bhabha seems to invite us to revise our understanding of identity. The old notion that identity is static, that we know who we are by going back to our roots or to one point of origin, ought to be abandoned altogether since, in reality, there is no pure, single source. Hence, according to Bhabha, all identities are hybrids, formed and enriched by new encounters in the “borderlands” where cultures meet and interact.

Thus, identity, after all, is not a static concept, but it has a solid and fixed core, “the bit of the self which remains always ‘the same,’ identical to itself across time” (Du Gay 2005, 17). But there is more to it than this one-dimensional meaning, because identity involves a multidimensional underlying essence that often blurs the core of the self. In this context, one would like to highlight the argument of Stuart Hall, expressed in his seminal article “Who Needs Identity?” regarding the complex structure of such a vivid concept as identity: “Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (Du Gay 2005, 17).

A collective sense of duty overwhelms the reader in different ways and drives us to praise our common cultural background. Arabic culture is often associated with Islamic heritage, and both have their mutual influence on the whole region. That is why there is another group of Saleh’s poems that highlight this idea, such as “Oh ... If We Were Men” (appendix D) from his second collection, *The Revolution of Rhymes*:

**Oh ... If We Were Men**

Oh, if we were men!  
Oh, Arab women, I lost track of my tribe  
In times when fear has become the sign of virtue  
I am not ashamed to hide behind you women, shaken  
Subverting the rules of the universe  
I ask you for a sheltering world  
So, I beg your pardon ...  
.....  
Oh, Arab males ... I do not call you men!  
I do not name you ... men!  
I do not see in you men!  
Where are you? When Zionists arrogantly  
crush our heads

Awaiting an answer, proclaiming the date of Arab's death  
 Man cannot but despair!

In this poem, Arab-Egyptian identity obviously intersects with Nubian identity. Here Saleh, outraged, criticizes Arabs for not standing against the unjust Zionist practices in Palestine. There is a dramatic emphasis on the sense of shame and disgrace, Saleh feels as an Arab-Egyptian, which parallels his sorrow and despair as a Nubian. This obvious change of his state of mind and choice of words mark a new phase in Saleh's writing. The message of the poem is shown through its main idea: the shame felt by the poet because of the Arab states' silence, Egypt included, toward inhumane Zionist policies. The message is delivered by different figures of speech, such as the key metaphor or personification in the "Arab's death" for its collective and collateral damage; the hyperbole in the opening line, "Oh, if we were men"; the contradiction of values expressed in the line, "In times when fear had become the sign of virtue"; and the irony reflected in "I don't claim you ... men." This is how the disappointed and sad mood of the poem is gradually confirmed. And the obvious repetition of the word "men" associated with all this desolation declares the despair felt before all mankind.

Saleh's sense of integration as an intellectual, a sense characterized by a deep commitment toward various Arab issues, is a strong feature in the poems belonging to this stage in his career. In fact, it can be read along the lines of other Nubian writers' positions toward the same issue. Oddoul, for instance, maintains that Nubians are not separatists because any ethnic group that tends to exclude itself from the rest of the community they live in is condemning itself to a rapid extinction.

In "The Moons of Kuwait" (appendix E), from his fourth collection, *Oh, Gazelle! Wait*, Saleh recalls the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and as an Arab he condemns the atrocities resulting from the invasion:

### **The Moons of Kuwait**

Noble Kuwaiti pillars ... are known for selflessness  
 Clear in what they do or perform ... whether in ease or plight  
 They nobly rise despite evil and hatred brought by their neighbor-invader  
 When invaders raged up ... and trespassed the neighbor's shrine  
 The wisdom (of al-Sabah) glowed for he is of good lineage  
 In dire times ... he did not fall for revenge

These lines are part of an epic poem that tells the story of Kuwait's sudden invasion and occupation by Iraq in 1990. It was one of the worst episodes in the modern history of Arab world because of its dire consequences in the region, which led to the so-called First Gulf War. In this poem, Saleh pays tribute to the wisdom and gracefulness of Kuwaiti intellectuals and the country's ruler, Emir Prince al-Sabah, in handling the crisis. It is, however, interesting to note that by doing this, Saleh seems to be partaking of an Arabic poetic tradition, where major poets would become the court's poets, praising the king, sultan, or emir. Whatever the case may be, Saleh attempts a political reading of the poem, taking sides by praising the Kuwaitis for not seeking revenge, therefore preventing a chain of regional conflicts between Arabs that could have lasted forever. The poet plays upon the pun in using the word "جار" at the end of the third and fourth lines, which means "invader" in the context of the third line, but "neighbor" in the fourth line. The rhyme thus served both a musical and a cognitive purpose, stimulating opposite reactions in the reader and connecting the image emotionally and meaningfully at the same time. Saleh uses this esoteric antithesis between "invader" and "neighbor" to highlight creative analogies.

Another suggestive poem with a similar theme is "Don't Excuse Me, Wissal" (appendix F), which Saleh dedicates to his daughter Wissal in *Oh, Gazelle! Wait*. It takes us back to the Iraqi crisis and the fall of Baghdad:

### **Don't Excuse Me, Wissal**

My heart breaks over Baghdad ... Ravaged as it is by heavy  
storms  
Evil ones destroyed it, and millions of arrows hurled down  
Then the petty rabble withdrew, lost in their madness  
Till flood prevailed, overcoming peaks, and soared high  
They threw a boat in mountain high waves  
They enjoyed the enemy's embrace; they swayed the way he  
liked  
Disgrace became near ... for something too disgraceful to be told.

In this context of massive destruction, threatening Baghdad and its civilization, Saleh openly expresses his shame when he asks Wissal not to try to find excuses for this new shameful Iraqi devastating reality, as shown directly in the title of the poem. As an Arab-Egyptian, he is worried about Baghdad. The poem emphasizes the increasingly disastrous situation in Iraq, and the choice of such words as "storms", "evil ones," "small rabble," "ruins," "flood,"

“enemy,” and “disgrace” clearly reveals the angry tone of the poet at the idea of the fall of Baghdad. The “hypercode” is defined by Antón Risco as “a group of signs, symbols, sensitive images, ideas that constitute a common stock of a cultural unity in a given moment of time and that gains an imaginative corporeality in its representation” (2004, 318). Thus, after interpreting the hypercode of poems of the same vocation, one finds a more intricately communal attitude and a prevailing sense of national commitment that Saleh as an Arab-Egyptian adopts, for he cannot bear the despair he feels over the fragmented and deteriorating Arab reality.

In this phase, Saleh continues to pursue his protest. This time he denounces the horrible episodes of modern Arab history, such as the unjust acts committed in the occupied Palestinian territories, the sudden invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, and the fall of Baghdad. In this way, Saleh downplays his Nubian identity and asserts his Arab-Egyptian identity. If we examine Saleh’s poems from the point of view of cultural identity, we will notice a more continuous expansion and a capacity of absorption that transcends ethnic identity, because when we view identity by “shifting from a focus on product to process, both minority and majority ethnic groups can be seen to be actively involved in the making and remaking of cultural identities” (Brah 1999, 4). If Arabic culture is taken into consideration, the dominant culture of the majority in the region, and the fact that Saleh chose to write his four books of poetry mainly in Arabic,<sup>3</sup> one will realize why he declares his commitment toward different Arab issues. Christine Gilmore suggests that “more plural and ultimately progressive concepts of national identity can, and indeed do, emerge in an Egyptian literary sphere capable of absorbing minority identities into a pluralized national imaginary” (2015, 70). Cultural hybridity expands the notion of national identity that turns out to be a dynamic, evolving, and transformative concept.

### **Beyond Identity and the Annihilation of the Self: Saleh’s “Late Style”**

In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah highlights the importance of the individual mark and the personal dimension as part of the tenuous concept of identity. Brah, therefore, reiterates the thesis of Erik Erikson, who perceives identity as “a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity [...] a unity of personal and cultural identity rooted in an ancient people’s fate; a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in

3 Saleh wrote only two poems in the Nubian language in his fourth book of poetry, *Ya Rim, Mahlan* (Oh, gazelle! Wait).

the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (1996, 20).

Oddoul goes a step further to emphasize his “three-dimensional” character: he regards himself as “an Egyptian citizen, a Nubian activist, and a creative writer” (Mahmoud 2013, 53). Therefore, beyond the Nubian origin and the Egyptian-Arab affiliation, we must not forget Saleh as a person and as a poet. Indeed, as an individual, Saleh seeks to imprint his own vision on his poems.

In his third collection, *The Overflow of Feelings*, “The Missing Planet” (appendix G) is enveloped in a personal mystic atmosphere:

### **The Missing Planet**

Watching Time’s doings ... I am shocked  
 The World hits me with what I shun  
 So I take the path of ascetics ... and maybe  
 I seek them ... afraid, watching  
 Whoever is a man of bounty ... in sooth  
 Will be taunted ... or ... to foolishness attributed  
 Who controls his arrogance ... his qualities?  
 Will be praised ... and will be pleased!

This poem marks a new phase in Saleh’s poetry, full of intimate reflections and lacking cultural reminiscences. The content is more about abstract concepts than an ascetic context. The reader’s role now becomes more challenging because one must interpret the meaning of these poems, which do not fit anymore within the traditional frame of Nubian literature, nor do they deal with the usual Arab themes and issues, but deliver a more collective message for a more integrated human project. The reader can best understand this shift in Saleh’s themes and position in terms of what Edward Said designates as “late style.” Said himself draws upon Theodor Adorno’s concept of “late style,” referring to the last works of artists or intellectuals that exhibit signs of alienation from their earlier works. In this sense, such “late” works demonstrate a degree of transformation in the writers’ convictions and approaches to the world with all the ensuing contradictions with what they have stood for throughout their careers. Said very clearly asserts that “what is appropriate to early life is not appropriate for later stages, and vice versa” (2006, 5).

Conceit, this potential literary device in poetry, is used to highlight the extended metaphor of our planet’s tyranny when we witness “Time’s doings” or when “The World hits.” Yet the poet, although feeling “afraid,” decided to take “the path of ascetics.”

There is no need for imaginative exuberance here; the poet declares openly his “emotional thought,” which is the essence of poetry, according to Dewitt H. Parker (2019, n.p.). In this phase, the poet calls for a humbler attitude because the one “who controls his arrogance [...] his qualities/will be praised [...] and will be pleased.” This is the road to “the path of ascetics,” which reminds the reader of Saleh’s early religious inclinations. He also uses the word “ascetics” to highlight his turn to Islamic mysticism, for, Mahmoud Ayoub notes, “the early ascetics were known as *zuhhād*, meaning those who shun the world and all its pleasures” (2012, 168).

Saleh is no longer preoccupied with what happened in Nubia or in Iraq, nor does he even evoke a specific place or a specific time, as he declares in the two opening verses. He regards “time” as a whole, and the entire “world” as a cruel place to be avoided. Consequently, he confesses, “I take the path of ascetics.” Therefore, instead of the nostalgic attitude of the poet to Nubian culture (as manifested in his first phase) and the angry tone in which he criticizes the passive and weak Arab positions nowadays (second phase), he is now simply “afraid, watching” (third phase). He decides to regard himself as an ordinary man who is losing his strength and spirit of resistance. It seems that as a “late” poet, Saleh almost perfectly fits Said’s first type of late artists and thinkers who managed to achieve, in Said’s words, an “unearthly wisdom” where “near the end of their lives their work and thought acquire a new idiom” (2006, 5–6).

“And Life Goes by ...” (appendix H) from *Oh, Gazelle! Wait!* conveys an even deeper sense of nihilism:

### **And Life Goes by ...**

Oh, you who watch the ebb ...  
 Now do you like the tide?  
 The sea in its double state ... is known for its treachery  
 If it over floods or runs dry, we suffer from its catastrophes  
 While our shores are invaded by erosion  
 Like an avalanche.... Does not tardy when it sweeps us  
 Into silt ... and there is no way out  
 How impossible it is to calm down ... as if it had  
 Stomach ... its beat almost consumed by age  
 Like life ... whose testament be  
 Fragile to the wind when it blows  
 And takes us away ... like the darkness of the night we watch  
 In which stars do not shine ... no ... nor the moon  
 Or like mirage ... that makes us desire it, yet we are cautious  
 Or avoid it ... or else loss will prevail

Peace ... becomes an illusion ... underneath it lies hope  
That we seek ... then our spirit is concealed by a grave.

Those spiritual ideas make an adequate epitaph to his poetry. From the perspective of phenomenology, one can trace a gradual descent to the “grave” suggested in this poem by evocative symbols of “catamorfos” or “symbols,” as per Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (1991), such as “catastrophes,” “tears,” “flowage,” “testament,” “fragile,” “darkness,” and “loss.” All these feelings of loss and defeat that fall within the same semantic field clearly usher the ultimate cataclysm for the poet. Once more, it is clear that the speaker’s voice is more universal because he is neither a Nubian emigrant nor an Arab-Egyptian man — he is simply a human being losing his grip on life as “life goes by.” In this poem, the poetic experience captures the personal one, which is gradually fading away.

The paradox between the themes and scenes of the two previous phases and the one witnessed in those verses is now more obvious. Here, Saleh makes an important turn/shift because he no longer stresses Nubian cultural details or worries about the current Arabic situation; he adopts a nihilist attitude as a person and a resigned tone as a poet. Instead of being *aesthetic* he becomes *ascetic*; in this new position his soul wanders and his poetic voice alters. Even spaces change drastically from the sweet and calm waters of the Nile to the salty and raging sea, because it turns out to be that “peace” is “an illusion,” which is dictated by our own extinction.

At the end, Saleh identifies himself as part of mankind and its inevitable condition of mortality. He underlines the final and common human destination, which is the “grave.” It is not about returning to the Nubian homeland anymore; it is about going back to the one and only destiny of mankind, death. Saleh in this third phase is mainly concerned with the fundamentals of human existence, which take his poetry to a more sublime level because “good poetry deals directly with the fundamentals of life” (Bassnett 2005, 34).

Saleh now perceives himself in modest terms as part of a totality. The usual sense of Nubian uniqueness he praised earlier (notably in the first phase) has now vanished in favor of a wider sense of human belonging. Identity here is represented as an unfinished product that will continue to take new forms forever. The meaning of identity, according to Saleh, is far beyond identification with the rest of Nubians, Egyptians, or the rest of Arabs; it has become an unnamed part of a human wholeness.

In this context, one recalls the significant point of view of Bhabha on the multilayered corporeality of identity, as understood by Brah



(1996): “The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity — never a self-fulfilled prophecy — it is always the production of an ‘image’ of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image [...] identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process to an ‘image’ of totality” (2).

Ultimately, in this phase, there is a new shift in Saleh’s poetic manifestations of the soul because his feelings switch from anxiety to calmness, from anger to placidity, from denial to acceptance as the readers may perceive in these last poems. The poems I have discussed in this section belong to his latest books chronologically, which means they were written by a more mature Saleh. In a more serene tone, he writes longer stanzas than before, probably because he is starting to dovetail the flow of life with the ongoing sense of the self. He now realizes it as an insignificant entity that merges gradually with the rest of humanity.

## Conclusion

In the three poetic experiences/phases weaved around the concept of identity, Saleh’s poems show that the voice is always that of the first person, which confirms the theory of the poem as an *Erlebnis* (“a lived experience”) in its two dimensions: the physical and the imaginative. The first theme is expressed in the revelation of a Nubian identity when Saleh writes about the different consequences that Nubians suffered after the construction of the High Dam. Here he confirms the theory of Käte Hamburger (1993, 234) that poetry is a “real enunciation” in which the poetic “I” is experimenting with a personal lived experience (*Erlebnis*). In the second phase, Saleh presents his Arab-Egyptian identity through a series of wider poetic manifestations that transcend the limits of biographical events to include other imaginative experiences, as phenomenology postulates, such as the Gulf War, the invasion of Kuwait, and the fall of Baghdad. Finally, in the third phase, Saleh’s poetry pushes the traditional limits of the “poetic subject” and transforms it to an “ethical subject,” to use Dominique Combe’s (1999) words, to take poetry to a whole different level beyond its ethnic, social, political, and psychological connotations, delivering it to the vast moral field that reveals different aspects of a common human experience such as death.

Locating and identifying the three phases related to the constant changing concept of identity is crucial to understanding the dominant ideas in Saleh’s poetry. Therefore, I have examined the explicit and implicit meanings emerging from the choice of words and images in his poems and found out that Saleh shifts his poems from

ethnic to national issues, and gradually ascends to a more sublime level. He moves from a nostalgic position, which claims the right to return to Old Nubia, to an angry nationalistic position of denunciation of different Arab issues, to a total state of asceticism before mortality. This path is clearly shown by tracing the flow of his main ideas and latent feelings reflected in his verses. He reveals a hybrid form of thinking, feeling, and being that is reflected in his life and art. In the light of Stuart Hall's argument that the concept of identity is not essentialist, but a strategic and positional one, identity in Saleh's poetry is perceived as a changing concept with mutable borders, which situate it inevitably in a position of interstice.

The key premise underlying the three phases of Saleh's poetry is that identity is gradually acquired, and is a multilayered concept that has different components: individual, ethnic, cultural, national, social. Therefore, the Nubian identity may be part of a wider Arab-Egyptian identity to affirm our commitment to diversity, tolerance, and cosmopolitanism. Nubian literature can be considered part of the Arab-Egyptian literature, which, in turn, is part of world literature, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once suggested, creating new strategies of recognition and new forms of identification for Nubian literature.

I hope to have contributed to a deepening awareness of the collective consciousness that Nubian literature, like every border literature, is not the literature of "the Other," but represents an essential part of Arabic literature.

## Appendix A

"لاميات النوبة"

تلاعبت الأيام بي، والنوازل  
وأدمت فؤادى الذكريات القوائل  
وطفت بذكرى هجرة النوبة التي  
يلاحقنى منها الأسى والمشاكل  
وأطرقت أبكى ساخطا لسذاجتى  
وضعفى... وما أجراه فينا التفاؤل  
فسالت دموعى حسرة وندامة  
فكفكف دمع العين منى التكامل  
حنانيك  
نيلا... غمرت بلادنا  
كسيل طغى... تنهار منه المنازل

## Appendix B

“صرخة نوبية”  
 ...حين شاءت مصر أن تنعم  
 كانت نوبتي كبش فداء  
 إذ أقاموا سدها العالى.. وألقونا جميعا في العراء  
 ...وافترشنا الأرض في الصحراء أعواما  
 تغطينا السماء  
 ...ورأى السودان أن يحدو خطى مصر  
 لنجتز العناء  
 بإقامة سد كجبار الذى يقضى علينا بالفناء  
 ...ويشتت ما تبقى من قرى النوبة  
 في أرض البقاء  
 !فلماذا نحن -دون الخلق- أهل التضحيات؟

## Appendix C

“الوصية الأخيرة”  
 هل تذكرون رجح صوتي كالصدي؟  
 لن نسمعه بعد هذا اليوم... أبدأ أبدا  
 سأموت بالجرح العميق... وراجل عنكم غدا  
 كفى فؤادي ما لقيت... مكبلا ... مصفدا  
 ووصيتي... قبل ارتحالي وانصياعى للردى  
 أن تجعلوا النوبة نصب العين... إرثا تالدا

## Appendix D

“أه... لو كنا رجالا”  
 أه... لو كنا رجالا  
 يا نساء العرب إني تهت عن ركب القبيلة  
 في زمان صار فيه الخوف عنوان الفضيلة  
 ...إنى لا أستحي أن أحتمي فيكن رعيدا  
 ...لأطوى سنة الكون  
 أسألكن عن دنيا ظليله,  
 ...فاعدروني  
 .....  
 يا ذكور العرب ... إنى لا أسميكم رجالا  
 لا أناديكم... رجالا  
 لا أرى فيكم رجالا  
 أين أنتم؟ وبنو صهيون يتعالون... يطنون الرؤوس  
 ...في انتظار الرد عن موعد إعلان وفاة العرب  
 والمرء يئوس

## Appendix E

“أقمار الكويت”  
وأعلام الكويت العُزُّ ... قد حُصوا بآيثار  
بدا في كل ما يأتون ... في يسروإعسار  
(تساموا رغم الكيد والأحقاد من (جار  
ولما أرجف الباغون... واجتاحوا حمى الجار  
تجلت حكمة (الصباح) وهو سليل أخيار  
فحين البأس... لم يشمت بنا الأعداء في ثار

## Appendix F

“لا تعذرني يا وصال”  
قلبي على بغداد... تُفنيها أعاصير ثقال  
أودى بها الطاغوت، فانهالت (ملايين) النصال  
ثم انزوى الأوباش أقزاما، وتاهوا في خبال  
حتى طغى الطوفان، واجتاح الأعالى واستطال  
ألقوا إليها قاربا يغشاه موج كالجبال  
واستمرأوا حضن الأعداى، ثم مالوا حيث مال  
والذل أضحى قاب قوسين... لأمر لا يقال

## Appendix G

“الكوكب الغائب”  
أراقب أحوال الزمان... فأعجب  
وتلفحنى الدنيا بما أتجنب  
فأسلك درب الزاهدين... ولرهما  
أويت إليهم... خائفا أترقب  
فمن يك من أهل السباحة... سائغ  
مذمته...أو... للبلاهة يُنسب  
ومن يتولى كبره ... فخصاله  
!!تنال ثناء المادحين ... ويطرب

## Appendix H

“...وتمضى الحياة”  
يا ناظر المد ... هلا راقك الجزر  
فالبحر في حالتيه... سمته الغدر  
إن فاض أو غاض، تغشانا بوائقه  
فيما يجور على شطآننا النحر  
كالسيل... لا يتوانا حين يجرفنا  
نحو الرغام... فلا كر ولا فر  
هيهات هيهات أن يصفو... كأن له  
كشحا... وإن كاد يُفنى نبضه العمرُ

مثل الحياة... وقد صارت وصيتها  
 كن للرياح هشيما عندما تذرو  
 تمضى بنا ... كهيم الليل نرقبه  
 لا النجم يسطح فيه... لا... ولا البدر  
 أو كالسراب... يُهيننا، فنحذره  
 أو نتقيه... وإلا عمنا الخسرُ  
 أما الوثام... فوهم... دونه أملُ  
 نرجوه... ثم يوارى وجدنا القبرُ

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# Ecological and Ecofeminist Issues in Idris Ali's *Dongola and Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba (Playing on Nubian mountains)*

Mona Radwan

## Introduction

The question of the construction of mega-dams has been the subject of scientific and environmental debates for decades. Maria Mies (1993, 306) debates the industrial and economic reasons behind their construction and the ensuing opposition by the communities affected in southern countries, and Jytte Nhanenge explains how economic profit is the main incentive behind the patriarchal communities' push to build dams (2011, 356). She states that disrupting the course of water dries the rivers up (357): "When humans interfere with nature by scientific management, they damage the ecological balance and negatively affect the water cycle." In her assessment, "This is the worst form of violence to nature" (357). Nhanenge asserts that these dams usually "eliminate historic sites" and displace communities (47). The World Commission on Dams concluded that although,

dams have an important and significant contribution to human development, in too many cases, communities [have paid] an unacceptable price[...] Dams have physically displaced 40–80 million people worldwide, and most of these people have never regained their former livelihoods. In many cases, dams have led to a significant and irreversible loss of species and ecosystems. (2008, 1)

Along the same lines, Anthony Calderbank writes: “The tragedy suffered by the Nubian people as a result of the construction of the High Dam at Aswan is one of the great untold stories of the twentieth century” (2008, vii). Calderbank’s remark is undoubtedly true, but it remains a fact that Nubian literature has never stopped to tell the story of Nubia and its loss. Fatin Abbas explains:

The [High] dam not only constituted an act of economic oppression — leading to mass displacement and the consequent migration to the north of a large number of Nubians who could no longer self-subsist by farming — it also constituted an act of cultural oppression: priceless monuments and artifacts of ancient Nubian civilization were drowned in Lake Nasser. (150–51)

Some of the monuments were salvaged by UNESCO in the 1960s, including Abou Simbel Temples, but many Nubian monuments were lost. The displacement, or diaspora, of Nubians from one region to another resulted in social changes in Nubia. As men migrated north to seek work, women were left behind to raise their children. It has also become commonplace for Nubian women to play an important role in domestic economy (Gohary 2005, 22). It is therefore clear that Nubian literature is a “bioregional” form of literature in the sense that it cannot be understood without examining both the cultural geography and the ecology of Nubia as a region.

This chapter examines two novels by Idris Ali, *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* ([1993] 2006) and *Al-La‘ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Playing on Nubian mountains) ([2002] 2010), from ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives. My choice of these two novels is based on several factors. First, ecofeminism looms large in both novels, and both are among his best work. Second, *Dongola* and *Al-La‘ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* represent two extremes within Ali’s personality and his fiction: his utmost bitterness against and his great admiration of the north and northerners (i.e., Egyptians). The theoretical approach I adopt here has not been attempted before. Since nature was and still is of supreme importance to Nubians for their economy, and agriculture, sociology, and culture have depended on it, such an ecocritical reading examines the complex relation between nature and the characters portrayed in the novels, thus enabling the reader to come closer to the world in which Nubians live and to explore the continuous negotiations taking place between nature and the culture of the Nubians. I also highlight ecofeminist issues in order to explore the gender relations represented in the texts, and I discuss various uses of metaphors and images in the Nubian imagination.



Thus we'll see why Nubian loss of land on the banks of the Nile was such a devastating blow.

The chapter focuses on the plight of the female protagonists, Hushia and Halima in *Dongola* and Ghada in *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba*, to highlight how the ecological effect of the building of the dams and their displacement was severely felt by the women and led to their tragic lives. Refai Abdelhafez states, "Nubian women are victims of the place just as place is the victim of authoritarian power and its developmental projects" (2011, 19).

This quote sums up the tragic fate of Nubian women because of the inundation of their land and loss of all their villages. I examine the following natural elements in Ali's selected novels: the Nile, animal imagery, mountains, and the wilderness, in connection with the women, children, and male characters, including people of color and the underclass. An ecofeminist reading of Ali's works will seek to show that women and natural elements share a common experience of oppression and exploitation. According to Karen Warren, "Ecofeminist analyses of the twin dominations of women and nature include considerations of the domination of people of color, children, and the underclass" (1994, 1). Defining the term, Warren notes that "ecological feminism" is,

an umbrella term which captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connections within social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature. First introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne [...] to describe women's potential to bring about an ecological revolution[...] "Ecofeminism" has come to refer to a variety of so-called "women-nature connections" [...] connections on how one treats women and the earth. (1)

It has been the tradition in most patriarchal communities on the planet to connect women with nature, while men have been linked to culture and reason. It was Simone de Beauvoir who first stated in 1952 that both women and nature are treated as "other" in patriarchal societies. The term "ecofeminism" was first conceived in the 1970s by d'Eaubonne, who argued that "the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male power" (quoted in Nhanenge 2011, 98). Beauvoir dreamt of a greener planet and a place where men and women would not be categorized according to their gender but treated as equal human beings (quoted in Nhanenge 2011, 112).

In 1975, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a feminist critic, argued that in a world ruled by the domination of certain sectors over others, there can be no freedom for women or a solution for the ecological problem. It is a world governed by sexism, classism, racism, heterosexuality, and anthropocentrism; these are what Warren and Cheney termed “isms of domination” (1996, 245), which they hoped ecofeminism could eliminate from the face of the earth. Ecofeminist ethics call for such elimination. According to ecofeminists, life is not a hierarchy; life is an egalitarian system where human beings, animals, and nature are equal.

By the late 1980s, it became clear that ecofeminism began to be divided into two main branches: radical and cultural. The former believes that “patriarchal society equates nature and women in order to degrade both” (Miles 2018, 2). The second contends that there is a strong bond between women and nature because women are family nurturers and food providers. I address cultural ecofeminism. Warren notes in *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* that there is a connection between feminism and the environment in cultural ecofeminism, which she names “the symbolic.” One of the connections ecofeminists have identified as crucial to the interrelationship between feminism and the environment is the symbolic where ecofeminists “explore the symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature in [...] literature” (1996, xiv). Some critics argue that “patriarchal conceptions of nature and women have justified ‘a two-pronged rape and domination of the earth and the women who live on it’” (xiv). Other ecofeminists explore the symbolic connections between “sexists and naturist language, i.e., language which inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature” (xv). For example, women are sometimes described in animal terms—cows, chicks, birds, serpents, bitches, cats—and nature is “often described in female and sexual terms: Nature is raped, mastered, conquered, controlled, [and] mined” (xv). Moreover, land is usually described as virgin, fertile, or barren, like a woman. Andrea Blair argues that “land is seen as the inviting concubine, waiting to be despoiled; as the chaste virgin, needing protection from rape; or as the all-forgiving, long-suffering Mother-Earth, who patiently tolerates abuse from her human children” (2002, 111).

This attests to the link between women and the environment. Most ecofeminist critics believe that the liberation of women cannot be achieved on its own but must be part of a larger struggle to end the exploitation and denigration of all human beings, including people of color, the poor, and homosexuals, to save the environment and the planet. Douglas J. Buege comments that some ecofeminists, such as Val Plumwood and Karen Warren, reject the idea of biologi-

cal determinism in ecofeminism by saying “that acceptance of the idea that women can be closer to nature than men presuppose[s] the very nature–culture dichotomy that ecofeminist philosophers are anxious to deny” (1994, 51). These are some ecofeminist critics who do not approve of gender inequalities, which may lead to further exploitation of women. But there are also positive links between women and nature according to the cultural symbolic perspective of ecofeminism, including beauty, fertility, and the inherent productivity in both. Sometimes such a link may empower women. For instance, in 1978 when Indian women rebelled against the destruction and felling of trees, each woman embraced a tree to prevent it from being cut down, hence forming what became known as the Chipko movement (Hindi for “embrace”). Thus, they saved the environment and saved themselves from the negative repercussions of deforestation.

On the socioeconomic level, male-dominated societies justify their exploitation of women as an extension to their “natural” exploitation of land, water, animals, and the whole environment. In her study on ecofeminism, Riane Eisler discusses how nature, which had been treated in prehistoric times as a goddess (1990, 23), became in the modern ages polluted, spoiled, destroyed, and abused. The exploitation of nature has become more apparent since the industrial age and the height of colonialism wherein the race for the exploitation of nature’s resources has become fiercer. The building of factories and dams, deforestation, the spread of all sorts of transportation, and nuclear and chemical weapons have polluted the whole ecosystem (air, marine life, animals, and the ozone layer). Thus, I explore the connections between women and nature in Ali’s two novels and the exploitation of both by a patriarchal society.

Ecological Nubian issues are among those that preoccupied Idris Ali (1940–2010), who has been recognized as one of the most distinguished Nubian-Egyptian novelists and short story writers. He was a Kanzi Nubian born in Aswan. He did not have a proper school education because his family could not afford it, and he had to work for a living, but he read widely and voraciously. According to Feisal Elmousali, Ali was influenced by Maxim Gorky, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ernest Hemingway, Naguib Mahfouz, Anton Chekov, El Tayeb Saleh, and Yusuf Idris (2011, 8–9; Siam 2021). Ali wrote eight novels and three short story collections. The novels *Dongola* (1993), *Al-Nūbi* (The Nubian) (2002) and *Al-La‘ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Playing on Nubian mountains) (2002) were turned into a stage adaptation entitled *Nūba.com* (Nubia.com) in 2003 at Al-Hanager Theater in Cairo (Elmousali 2011, 13). Ali volunteered in the Egyptian army from 1958 to 1971 and fought in the Yemen war and in the 1967 war. His person-

al life was as tragic as his novels — his son committed suicide, and he himself tried a few times. Ali's novels have been translated into English, French, Italian, and Spanish, and he was awarded several literary prizes, such as the best novel from the Cairo International Book Fair in 1999 for his novel *Infjār Jumjuma* (Explosion of a skull) (Elmousali 2011, 13–14).

Ali's *Dongola* was the first Nubian novel to be translated into English, by Peter Theroux, and was published by the American University Press in Cairo. It received an award for Arabic Literature in Translation from the University of Arkansas in 1997. Several critics considered it the Nubian version of *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), the classic work by the Sudanese novelist Al-Tayyib Salih (Jacquemond 2008, 183). The narrator himself in *Dongola* mentions Saleh's novel more than once (e.g., Ali 2006, 74). The similarities between the two novels manifests itself in the parallelism between Awad Shalali and Mustafa Sa' id, the main protagonists, notably regarding their fanaticism. In fact, *Dongola* is considered one of Ali's best-written novels. The narrative extends from the 1950s to 1970s; narration is in the third-person and is told from three characters' points of view: Awad, Hushia, and Halima.

When *Dongola* was published, it caused a wave of controversy and was described by one critic as a bomb (Elmousali 2011, 12). A French critic remarked that it was "certainly the strongest and most controversial expression yet published of the Nubian revival" (Jacquemond 2008, 183). Many Egyptian critics and Nubian readers attacked the novel because of its secessionist views (Elmousali 2011, 12), demanding an apology from the author and that his novel should be banned. On the other hand, some Egyptian critics praised the novel, including Ali El Ra'ei, Gaber Asfour, and Haggag Oddoul. One of those in favor of it is Fatin Abbas, a Sudanese/American author, who states that *Dongola* "deploys a powerful counter-narrative to Arab-Egyptian nationalism" during Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule (Abbas 2014, 152). The novel valorizes and glorifies, according to Abbas, the Afro-Nubian heritage as opposed to Arab-Egyptian nationalism.

Of the Nubian female characters in *Dongola* (Ali [1993] 2006), one contends that the two main women protagonists, Hushia and Halima, along with Ruhia (a minor character), relate to feminist and ecofeminist issues. Much of the narration is told from a feminine point of view. To clarify, chapter 1, "Separated Man," reflects a masculine point of view (1); the middle section of the book, "The Trial of Awad Shalali," portrays both masculine and feminine perspectives (60), and the last chapter, "The Sorrows of Hushia and Halima," is narrated from the two women's points of view (92). Thus, Ali con-

sciously deploys narrative multivocality to give women a voice in his text. Abbas remarks:

These pronounced and abrupt switches in point-of-view underscore a tension between a masculine Nubian narrative, on the one hand, and a feminine Nubian narrative, on the other. In essence, the juxtaposed feminine perspective comes to overtake the masculine one, commenting on and critiquing the masculine point-of-view. (2014, 160)

*Playing on Nubian Mountains* (2010) is Ali's fourth novel; it is not as popular as *Dongola* and has not yet been translated into English. This novel was made into a stimulating short film produced by the Egyptian Nile Thematic channels in 2004. The novel is narrated by Iblis (a nickname meaning "the devil"), a nine-year-old child who recounts his story with Ghada, a beautiful Cairene teenager who took his village by storm. *Dongola* is a more complex novel than *Playing on Nubian Mountains*. The first has multitemporal layers and is told from various points of view; the second unfolds the story chronologically and is told by one narrator.

I will analyze women and nature, the subaltern, the Nile, animal imagery, the mountain, and the wilderness within the Nubian community in these two novels.

### **Dystopian Nubia, Women, and Nature**

A dystopian society is one that has several characteristics: freedom and independent thought are restricted, and oppression, deprivation, and terror persist. Furthermore, civilians in a dystopia are under constant surveillance, they might also worship a leader, and there is the possibility of environmental destruction — all of these are prevalent in Nubian society. Conditions are even worse for Nubian women than for Nubian men because the former have more restrictions of movement, thought, and social and sexual relations. Women in Nubia have suffered from the loss of their land, and from sociological losses, including the absence or loss of their husbands, polygamy, misogyny, cultural restrictions, and female genital mutilation. Last, we will look at older women's complicity against younger Nubian women in reinforcing the patriarchal order.

In *Dongola* (2006), for instance, Hushia's husband leaves her two months after their wedding to work as a waiter in Cairo. Because of the construction of the High Dam and the resettlement, many Nubian men lost their jobs as farmers and were unemployed. He is then trapped in the web of Ruhia, the Cairene woman he marries,

never to return to his Nubian wife. Although polygamy is lawful and religiously accepted in Egypt, the restrictions imposed render it almost impossible to implement. One of the provisions of polygamy is insistence on total fairness to the wives, which is, practically speaking, impossible. The result is that polygamy is mostly detested by Muslim women. Margot Badran (1995) states, "Polygamy was insulting to contemporary women and psychologically damaging. Feminists also attacked polygamy as a threat to the family [...]. Huda Sha'rawi told al-Ahram that polygamy 'constitutes an attack on the dignity of the wife and mother and is an obstacle to [creating] a harmonious home'" (128).

In the text, Hushia's husband is not fair to both wives — he abandons the first one. That is why Hushia is so bitter and detests her husband and his second wife. Moreover, she is left to raise her son alone. According to Awad, who despises his stepmother, this northern woman has "colonized" the Nubian man, just as the north had colonized the south in ancient times (Ali, 2006, 8). Ruhia betrays Awad's father and poisons him when he discovers her infidelity. She bribes the northern officers and goes unpunished.

The women in the Kanz villages come to the support of Hushia when the police attempt to arrest Awad again after he calls for a meeting of young Nubians to discuss the problems of Nubia: "They came with pitchers of tea and sat down to cry and chat. Each of them had an experience with treacherous fate, the unruliness of children, the emigration of husbands, a scarcity of food, the meager allowance they were paid, which scarcely could have fed an infant" (Ali 2006, 63). This is a positive image of Nubian women supporting one another in time of need, since they stand together in the face of adversity.

Hushia lives on charity from the villagers while Awad is working in Europe; he does not support her financially, thinking that his uncle is supporting her. But his uncle has died after having spent all his money on his own medical treatment. Awad blames himself for neglecting his mother: "How had he given so much thought to his motherland and so little to his mother?" (Ali 2006, 82). Fatin Abbas says that "his neglect of his 'mother' frames his Nubian quest as fundamentally chauvinistic: while claiming to privilege a 'motherland,' it in fact privileges Nubian men" (2014, 161). According to Oddoul (2009), Hushia's loss of her eyesight while grieving over her son's absence is symbolic: she stands for old Nubia and is unable to see Nubia's dilemmas. Oddoul observes:

The mother [...] represents the original Nubia before the forced resettlement and the Dams. She represents old Nubia. She is

the actual mother and the symbolic one too. She fell ill, became weak, lost all her strength and lost her eyesight and therefore she cannot see the age in which she is living, cannot understand it and is unable to interact with it. The old mother kept pressuring and pressuring [Halima], the representative of the new generation, "The Nubian Diaspora Generation." (2009, 31)

Although her losses were grave because of the building of the dams, she neither rebels nor even objects, just like most Nubians of her generation. Awad seems critical of the mayor, and most people in the village believe that the Egyptian government has stood by them through their ordeal (Ali 2006, 45). Awad, however, is very disappointed with their blind acquiescence to Egyptian authority.

After nineteen years and one month, the narrator notes, the miracle occurred: "The earth opened and the fugitive [Hushia's son] appeared" (Ali 2006, 69). It is like a second birth or rebirth for Awad. Nature is feminized in the link made between the earth and a woman in labor. Nothing is more to the point than Beauvoir's famous lines in which she likens women to nature. Expressing her idea of the binary oppositional claims of women/men and nature/culture, Beauvoir asserts in *The Second Sex* (1988), "Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and his fellow being[...] He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will[...] Woman sums up Nature as Mother, Wife" (175-76).

Indeed, nowhere more than Nubia should women be regarded as participants in culture, since they raise the children and carry the traditions and customs of Nubia and abide by them. It is interesting to note that Ali in both novels seems to appropriate ecofeminist positions, by seeming to be very critical of the way men treat women and depicting women as belonging to both nature and culture.

The second female protagonist, who is a victim of an androcentric society and, indirectly, the building of the High Dam, is Halima. Awad marries her merely to make her his mother's maid/companion while he works abroad. From Awad's point of view, their society was "offering [Halima] for sale with a legal contract" (Ali 2006, 83). He "knew she was only an instrument with which he could win his freedom. Should he leave her a virgin or tell her the truth about the details of the bargain?" (87). Their marriage is consummated out of his fear that their community may think he is not a real man. He thinks Halima is his "slave" and he her "prince" (86). This metaphor is both chauvinistic and antifeminist. Moreover, Awad believes that according to tradition "he ought to take her against her will" (87) on their wedding night: "He became an animal. He attacked her and

bent her arm back. She could not move. He pulled her violently to him, which is what she had been hoping for" (88). "Animal," "attacked," and "violently" are but a few words that show how Nubian women are dealt with and suppressed by their husbands, and it also shows her acceptance and her submission to it. A month after their wedding, he abandons his wife, just as his father had done to his mother. Awad exploits Halima with the consensus of the patriarchal figures in the community, just as the north had taken advantage of their land to build the dam.

However, the novel goes a step further when it offers Halima's point of view concerning her husband's abandonment of her:

Halima waited and her waiting grew long because she was like the other forsaken women of Nubia, all of whom were waiting for men who had journeyed far away, to the cities of Egypt, the Arab lands, and overseas. They lost track of time; they got lost in its tracklessness and were dazzled by its passage. But Halima's marriage and her wait were unrivaled. She counted the days and then the months. Her misfortune was that she loved him. Life without him was empty. What kind of marriage was this? She had gone from being her father's wife's servant to being the servant of this bossy, senile old woman. (Ali 2006, 93)

To Halima, "her father was stupid, her husband was a tyrant, and no one understood her plight or the plight of all women in this land of waiting" (94). Both men have dominated her and ruined her life. One would agree with Abbas that "the structures of oppression imposed on Nubians by the Arab-Egyptian nation-state are repeated and replicated in the structures of oppression imposed on Nubian women by Nubian men" (2014, 152).

The agony of sexual frustration of the young, abandoned wives is described as follows:

At night, their suffering began with the slow passage of time, their frustrated desires, and their passion for their absent men. The fiery climate kindled their own heat, and they did not know how to overcome it except by beseeching God to keep Satan at bay, and praying for patience, patience, patience. Halima, like the other young, abandoned wives, was pursued by men, but few lost their modesty. (Ali 2006, 94-95)

Ironically (Halima's name in Arabic means "patient") she would be unable to wait endlessly. Halima was pursued by Hamad Tawfiq and the telegram operator Yazid Abd al-Wahab. Yet, "The shame was re-



served for women — the men were never blamed” (95), if they pursued married women. That is another injustice in this patriarchal society. She finds comfort only when she hears the sweet voice of Maadul, the upper Egyptian builder, singing his songs.

Another male figure that intensifies Halima’s suffering is her father, who is an oppressive and violent patriarchal figure. His cruelty is apparent whenever Halima complains of her husband’s long absence: her father “ran after her with a sickle, cursing her mother, the midwife who had presided at her birth, and the bridal assistant who had circumcised her. Some people got between them. Halima did not care whether she lived or died” (Ali 2006, 100). This aggressive father runs after her with a sickle, a tool connected with the harvest, but here its function is reversed to connote violence and death, not productivity and prosperity. Christine J. Cuomo states, “Women are devalued in nearly every society on the planet, and this devaluation is conceptually related to devaluation of the natural environment and its members” (1994, 96). When Halima goes weeping again to her father, her father dismisses her complaints on the grounds that she has a roof over her head, money, and food (Ali 2006, 94). In her marriage he is only concerned about materialistic issues.

“You don’t understand women.”

“What do you mean [...] [daughter of] Shaya?”

“We aren’t oxen, that turn a water wheel, and eat grass, and lie down to sleep!”

“What else?”

“You’ve all tricked me, but you’re brainless.”

“Another word, and I’ll cut your tongue out.”

“You’re always cutting out tongues or cutting off heads. You have no morals.”

“Shut up, you slut.” (102)

Halima believes that men think women are just like oxen that should only work hard, eat, and sleep. She understands now that she has been exploited by Awad and her society. Ironically, Awad betrays his wife with his mistress, with his mother’s knowledge, which shows that this is a hypocritical male-dominated society. The society also forbids Halima from having an extramarital affair, like her husband. It is ironic that according to the teachings of Islam, marriage is built on sentiments of love and tenderness, which her androcentric society seems to totally disregard. Halima’s father does not care that his daughter needs the love, compassion, and companionship of her husband. He resorts to violence, tries to beat his daughter,

and threatens to choke her because she wants a divorce, which is totally unacceptable in Nubia (100).

A further crime has been committed against Halima — female genital mutilation (FGM) (clitoridectomy and infibulations). It is one of the violations not just of human rights but also of the nature of women. It is noteworthy that there have been wide-scale local and international efforts to eliminate this practice. In fact, it was banned in Egypt in 1997, yet it is still performed in many urban and rural areas. Just as nature was disfigured in Nubia by the building of the dams, Nubian women's bodies were disfigured by FGM. Leila Ahmed (1992) remarks that such an operation is not an Islamic custom but rather an African one (176). However, Nubians, like other communities in Egypt, including Christians, who still practice this habit rely on only one controversial and not confirmed Hadith by Prophet Muhammad regarding this issue. Further proof can be discerned in the fact that no Arab country in the region practices female circumcision except Egypt and the Sudan. From North Africa to the Gulf, even in Saudi Arabia, the practice is practically unknown. According to Anne Jennings,

There is a passage in one of the hadiths that has been interpreted in this way by some. It recounts an occasion upon which Muhammad replied to a midwife who asked about genital cutting. He is reputed to have said, "Reduce, but do not destroy" [...] while others argue that Muhammad opposed the operation. (2009, 50)

It is worth noting that all Muslim boys are also circumcised in Egypt, but in Nubia a big party is held that lasts for several days in which the boy's family distributes dates and popcorn and slaughter a cow. The girl's circumcision ceremony is usually held on a smaller scale. According to Jennings, "In societies in which male honor is supremely important, clitoridectomy and infibulations blunts a woman's sexual feelings and thus prevents her from engaging in premarital affairs or extramarital infidelities" (2009, 51). Obviously, Halima's circumcision did not have the desired outcome, for Halima yearns for sexual intercourse (Ali 2006, 106). In fact, there is no scientific evidence that FGM diminishes sexual desire; it is simply a misconception in the Egyptian society among illiterate and semiliterate people. It is thus quite ironic that Awad's circumcised Nubian wife will betray him because of his long absence. Moreover, when Awad informs his mother that he is in love with a French woman, she is flabbergasted and says: "This is a disgrace, Awad! A foreign woman with a clitoris" (Ali 2006, 75). To appease her anger he re-

plies, “That’s no problem, Mama, we’ll circumcise her” (75). Both speak of Simone and treat her like an object with no emotions or mind of her own. To Awad and his mother, there is no difference between Western women or Nubian women — both must be circumcised.

According to Halima, “It was a man’s world. Everything was in their favor. They gave the orders and women had to obey” (Ali 2006, 105). Halima takes revenge against the whole patriarchal tribe first by daring to ask for a divorce and second by committing adultery. When her mother-in-law, Hushia, discovers her in the act and screams for help, Halima smothers her and frames her lover, Maadul, the northern Egyptian, for the murder. As Halima ponders her own plight, she determines to “strike a blow where no one expected it. She would insult them as they had insulted her” (109). Feisal Elmousli states, “For the first time in contemporary Nubian novels we find a stranger as a victim of a Nubian woman’s needs, a woman who has defied all customs” (2011, 18). She avenges herself both on her society and on the north by accusing Maadul of murder.

Nadia Youssef points out that in Muslim society male honor,

is realized critically and importantly through the chaste and discreet sexual behavior of womenfolk in a particular man’s life: premarital chastity of the daughter and sister, fidelity of the wife, and continence of the widowed and divorced daughter or sister. These are basic principles upon which a family’s reputation and status in the community depend. (1978, 77)

In the novel, Halima’s infidelity, if discovered, would tarnish her husband’s and father’s honor. Her murder of Hushia could symbolize the demise of Nubia with its old customs and traditions. It also represents the death and disappearance of the old land that was submerged and inundated by the building of the High Dam.

In *Al-La‘ib Fawqa Jjibāl al-Nūba* (Ali [2002] 2010), the strong bond between Nubian women and the natural world is clear. Despite the unbearable heat, Nubian women carry their shoes under their armpits, and “walk barefoot on the ground [...] without any complaints or objections. The women and the flaming ground; deal with each other with familiarity and affection” (29). The words “familiarity” and “affection” show the intimate connection between Nubian women and the land. The women have become acclimatized to their blistering hot and rough mountainous environment, unlike the Cairene Ghada, who cannot walk barefoot on the scorching hot ground in Nubia.

The beautiful girl Ghada, who is about eighteen years old, arrives in the village to live with her strict grandmother as a punishment by her Nubian father for daring to want to marry a northerner. Her mother was from Cairo and Ghada had lived all her life there, yet her Nubian father refuses her marriage to a young Cairene — she must wed a Nubian man. For a girl to marry a non-Nubian is against Nubian traditions, since they regard women as their “land,” which must not be cultivated by a stranger. Refai Abdelhafez notes:

Mixed marriages for Nubian men only are permitted while Nubian women are not permitted to. A Nubian woman is not allowed to marry a non-Nubian even if she spends her whole life being a spinster[...] They view women as Nubian land; where a stranger has no right to plow it or plant his seeds in. (2011, 48)

This connection between women and the land is clarified by the ecofeminist critic Victoria Davion: “There is an important link between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and [...] an understanding of one is aided by an understanding of the other” (1994, 8). A non-Nubian is not allowed to cultivate Nubian soil or marry a Nubian woman. Just as Ghada’s father dominates his daughter’s life, he dominates his wife too; Ghada’s mother commits suicide because of her husband’s jealous nature. Ghada reveals to her Nubian friends, Iblis and his sister, how unjust her father was to her mother, leading to her untimely death. This tragic incident also foreshadows Ghada’s gruesome fate in the future: “He [Ghada’s father] came home and found his wife’s male cousin visiting her. He went crazy and insulted her and spat on her. Mom had a nervous breakdown [...] and she threw gasoline on her clothes and set herself on fire[...]. We couldn’t save her and she died in the prime of her youth” (Ali 2010, 41).

Ghada undergoes another traumatic experience as an Egyptian-Nubian young woman living in this village when Ghada and Iblis are caught playing bride and bridegroom half naked, and the old Nubian women decide to make her one of them by circumcising her. Thus, they violate her biological nature, just like the case of Halima in *Dongola* (Ali 2006). They also braid her hair — which to them is more respectable for a woman — and pierce her nose like all Nubian women. But this does not make her a Nubian, according to Siham Fawzi (2012, 21). Iblis’s grandfather likes Ghada and defends her sexual escapade, dismissing it as normal, saying many children do this and that Shaya and he had done the same as children. Yet, he is the one who suggests that they circumcise her. He had lived in Cairo for more than fifty years and is more open-minded than Shaya and his

generation, yet he is still Nubian at heart. Thus, a patriarchal figure is the one who suggests this genital mutilation. The narrator — Iblis as a grownup — does not comment on this, nor does Ghada. In fact, it is through the voice of two male villagers that readers get a criticism of circumcised women by saying that they “are like the dead in bed” (Ali 2010, 110). Like many men in patriarchal societies, these two male villagers disapprove of the negative effects of FGM on the husbands, but not on the wives.

The cultures of the north and south collide with the arrival of Ghada in the primitive village. Iblis’s words when he compares his background with that of Ghada: “I am the Southern devil who has suffocated from the poisonous Southern wind, and you are the Northern dewy wind. You will either make me more alive, or you will suffocate from our poison” (Ali 2010, 32). Ghada is compared to an element in nature, and by the end of the novel the poisonous southern wind will unfortunately suffocate her. A conflict inevitably ensues between Ghada and Shaya, her Nubian grandmother. The latter wants her to cover her hair, lower her voice, and stop singing. But Ghada is a teenager full of *joie de vivre* and loves to sing and dance. Furthermore, she starts teaching illiterate Nubian girls to read and write, since Nubian boys go to school but most girls refuse to go because they are not interested (57). She succeeds in her endeavors at first, as when she uses songs and colloquial Arabic in class, which the Nubian girls find stimulating. The school inspector encourages her by sending her a blackboard, books, notebooks, and pens. But Shaya puts an end to these classes when she hears their loud and sometimes lewd songs. The old generation thus smothers any sort of change introduced by the young generation.

The analysis of the interaction between the characters, the binary opposition between the north and the south, modern “Cairene” way of life versus traditional Nubian culture, and intergenerational conflict, all invite us to ask about Idris Ali’s position vis-à-vis such issues: Does Ali uphold or condone a patriarchal ideology, or do his works expose the self-contradictions operational within this ideology itself? It is apparent that in both novels the patriarchal system seems to be dysfunctional, especially for the female characters. The society is unable to make any significant change, nor does it accept those who try to make changes. Warren (1997) perceives patriarchy as a dysfunctional system: “In a dysfunctional system, the rules tend to be confused and covert, rigid and unchanging. A high value tends to be placed on control[....] Furthermore, dysfunctional social systems often leave their members feeling powerless or helpless to make any significant changes” (quoted in Sessions 1997, 180).

It is the grandfather who tells his grandchild, Iblis, what a Nubian man needs in a wife and the qualities that should be present in any Nubian bride: "He does not need a female. He needs a hard-working donkey. A tough woman who is tougher and stronger than her husband. She should be like an ox running a wheel[....] A woman who can battle with wolves, hyenas, snakes, and scorpions. She should be able to bear the heat, hunger, and the torture of waiting for the travelling men" (Ali [2002] 2010, 64-65). This extract clearly "naturalizes" women—the grandfather links women to donkeys and oxen, which are patient and strong. Thus this could be interpreted in a positive light because women relate to a natural element, but such metaphors can be interpreted in the light of Warren's statement that such "terms [...] contribute to viewing women as inferior, not fully rational" (1994, 190). Ali's depiction of gender relations in Nubian culture manifests in showing that what a Nubian man wants is not a wife but a hard-working strong male animal. Ghada too is called by the grandfather "half a mule" (Ali [2002] 2010, 65) since she is half Nubian. This emphasizes how the men view women in this society and how unjust this reality is. On the other hand, the men may refer to women as oxen because they can tolerate the hard work required of them, especially since most of the men are not present. Moreover, women are not allowed to ride donkeys in this society, but donkeys are the only means of transportation (Ali 2010, 28); perhaps they will ride astride, which is unacceptable in such an androcentric and rigid society that has many restrictions against women.

In addition, it is a grave taboo for a Nubian woman to run away. Thus, when Ghada runs away, her grandmother "almost slits her throat" (Ali [2002] 2010, 111). On the other hand, the narrator's grandfather is very proud of his grandchild Iblis because he was able to survive with Ghada in the desert. Iblis illustrates this point by remarking, "Contrary to everybody's expectations my grandfather embraced me hard and congratulated me" (111). The different reaction of their grandparents toward the boy and girl is noticeable and points to its being a sexist society.

To add insult to injury, it is not only the men who exploit women and denigrate them, but women themselves, especially the older generation, help in reinforcing patriarchy. After Ghada's "scandalous" act, her grandmother wants to wed her to Mahrous, the village idiot, because no Nubian man will marry her now that she has run away. If this plan does not materialize, Shaya vows to bury her where another female sinner has been buried in a place called "Fana" where only sinners are buried. The young generation of Iblis's sister and Ghada's students plan to escort Ghada to the boat and make

her presents from beads and palm stalks, while Shaya and “the old guards,” Iblis remarks, “despise Ghada deeply and their hatred extends to her mother and the whole North” (Ali 2010, 120). The narrator’s grandfather warns Shaya numerous times not to hurt Ghada until he takes her back to her father. When Ghada suddenly disappears, Iblis and his grandfather search for her everywhere, but to no avail. They are almost certain that her grandmother has killed her in cold blood, but the novel has an open ending. Shaya, who stands for old Nubia and its traditions, most probably has murdered Ghada, who stands for the winds of change. The narrator notes the reaction of Shaya after Ghada disappears: “Shaya could not care less, as if this matter did not concern her and sits with a cynical smile on her face” (124).

The penultimate chapter opens with the grandfather waking at “dawn on the day of Ghada’s departure with a strange feeling of eminent disaster and he said that the moon was crying at night and disappeared before its due time” (Ali 2010, 122). This is pathetic fallacy at its best. It is noteworthy that Mahrous used to call Ghada “Onti,” which is Nubian for “as beautiful as the moon.” It is therefore not surprising that the writer makes use of pathetic fallacy to describe the vanishing moon in sympathy with Ghada’s disappearance. Moreover, the girls in the village sing her Egyptian songs, and they all burst out crying. Iblis then comments, “At that moment I had a strong urge to kill Shaya or scream as what happened was tremendous and weeping was not enough[...] It never will be enough” (128). Like in *Dongola* (Ali 2006), this open-ended narrative (Ali 2010) does not allow the reader to know what happened to Ghada, just as the reader in *Dongola* does not know what became of Halima after she murdered Hushia. It is thus clear from the gender roles in both novels and the patriarchal ideology of Nubian society as depicted in the novels that the works depict Nubian patriarchal ideology to criticize it and invite us to do the same. What at first sight seems to be the writer’s reinforcement of patriarchy turns out to be a subtle statement on the power dynamics of the sexes in Nubian society. The depiction of women as sites upon which men’s frustrations and anger are placed and the treatment of women as both victims and women of agency at the same time attest to the way in which Ali shows how cultural factors intersect with racial and gender issues.

### **Subalterns in the Nubian Society**

Given the effects of environmental damages to Nubia, Ali’s representation of various subaltern groups in Nubian society goes beyond

the depiction of women. The texts in question paint the picture of an almost dystopian world in which the abuse of children, people of color, and the underclass seems to echo the abuse of women and the environment.

Just like women, children in both novels suffer in such a male-dominated society. Iblis represents Idris Ali himself when he was a child, says Salah Siam (2021, 1). It is noteworthy that the literal meaning of the word "Iblis" is "Satan," and it rhymes with the writer's name "Idris" (1). As a child, Iblis can be in women's gatherings, thus he belongs to both worlds, male and female (Abouelnaga 2003, 20). Being extremely mischievous and inquisitive for his society, his own mother calls him "Iblis" and takes him to the wise man in the village, who talks to the boy, but the child dodges his questions. The wise man then recites Quranic verses into his ears, but to no avail. He declares the only thing left to do is to cauterize the boy. Therefore, his mother takes him to the village barber-cum-doctor, who declares Iblis's illness is in the head and that the only treatment is to drive a hot nail into the child's head. They tie him up as he tries to escape. The wound was very painful and took months to heal. But he becomes even more inquisitive and more mischievous. Iblis points out that his mother "disclaimed his many breakouts and indiscretions" (Ali 2010, 18).

From an ecofeminist perspective, the oppression of women and nature interconnects with other forms of oppression or exploitation. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai (1997) suggests that "children in adult-centered societies are subjected to forms of discrimination similar to those experienced by women under patriarchy — they are conceptually privatized, singularized, and stripped of their agency" (196). Iblis's society cannot accept that he is different and more inquisitive than other children, so they try to subdue him, just as their women are subdued. This is a negative aspect, according to ecofeminist criticism. That is why he becomes more rebellious. He adds that he began "to fight flies on his nose, as the saying goes [...] old people observed me cautiously, children avoided me [...] even insects used to run away from me in terror" (Ali 2010, 21). He once climbed a mountain, to speak to God like Moses, as he says, but nearly broke his neck. Iblis almost drowned once, was kicked by a donkey, stung by a scorpion, and almost devoured by a wolf (22).

Even at school he suffers from corporal punishment because his teacher does not accept his inquisitive and rebellious nature. For instance, Iblis refuses to memorize verses from the Quran because he does not understand them, explaining that classical Arabic is much more difficult than colloquial Arabic and very different from the Nubian language (Ali 2010, 23–24). He believes that the language of the



Quran, for other children and himself, is like “unsolvable riddles” (24). This makes his teacher, who is a northerner, look upon him as a heathen and repeatedly thrash him. Add corporal punishment to the oppressive acts committed against some school children.

Ecofeminism asserts the connection between women’s rights and human rights and the environment. It seeks to deconstruct a patriarchal world with its subjugation of women, but it also questions hierarchical paradigms that subjugate people of color and the underclass. Awad, the male protagonist in *Dongola*, is insulted and beaten up at the police station, and his cousin Bahr Jazuli is insulted for being dark-skinned and is beaten to death by an officer in Wahat Prison. Awad’s mother is also insulted by an officer and taken to the police station when Awad runs away to Sudan. In *Al-La’ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba*, Ghada and her mother deride Nubians for their dark skin. Fatin Abbas aptly describes the dire state of Nubians: “While prejudice toward Nubians was prevalent among Egyptians long before the rise of Nasserism as an ideological movement, the book [*Dongola*] depicts state nationalism during this period as reinforcing, rather than challenging, those historical structures of oppression. This, of course, was in direct contradiction to Nasserism’s anti-imperialist, antiracist, revolutionary agenda” (Ali 2010, 153).

The contradictions referred to by Abbas (2014) manifest in non-Nubian examples of underclass in Egyptian society at large, such as some Egyptians in Ghada’s family, on her mother’s side. One of her aunts was almost sold to her husband, a rich Saudi man. Her husband drove the aunt to insanity because he was a pedophile. Her other aunt could not be traced after she married an African man and moved to his country; Ghada conjectures that she was eaten by cannibals. However, the focus in both novels remains on the Nubians, who are mostly portrayed as dark-skinned subalterns.

### **The Nile: A Blessing or Curse?**

The Nile was a god in ancient Nubian culture. It is also a crucial part of Nubian identity since the people lived on the banks of the Nile from ancient times till the early 1960s. According to Fadwa al-Guindi (1978), “It is no overstatement to say that without the Nile sedentary life in the region would be impossible” (104). The river was the Egyptians’ only means of transportation, communication, commerce, and livelihood. Children were baptized in it during the Christian era in Nubia, and this continued during the Islamic age until the inhabitants were evacuated. Grooms used to bathe in the river on the wedding day before they donned their new white clothes. Traditionally the Nile has been considered a symbol of pu-

rification, salvation, and fertility. However, both novels ironically represent the other side of the Nile: that of death and destruction, especially in the twentieth century, before and after the dams were constructed. Nubians also believed in benevolent water angels and malevolent water monsters.<sup>1</sup> The river appears in many Nubian novels, plays, and poems, playing a tremendous role in such works before and after the dams were built — it constitutes the crux of Nubian lives. Even Nubian songs, legends, and popular ballads revolve around the Nile.

In *Dongola* (Ali 2006), Hushia al-Nur, Awad's mother, is one of the victims of both ecological hazards and a patriarchal Nubian society. As a result of the second elevation of the Aswan Dam, she, like all Nubians, experiences,

every detail of the catastrophe: the river that rose up, swallowing the houses and the small strip of land that had survived the first elevation, and flooding the greater part of their agricultural land. This time it encompassed the mountain and poured like a nightmare over the heart of the south, bringing its punishment upon them — they who had loved it, sung to it, and even deified it long ago. It did not aim its blow at the northerners[...] The people of Nubia opened their eyes one day and the river was before them, their villages in its belly, and the mountain behind them. They sat and counted the compensation money and sighed. Those who despaired emigrated north. (64)

In a powerful simile, the river is compared to a monstrous being that has “swallowed” their houses and lands and “poured like a nightmare” on Nubia, despite the fact that the Nubians loved the river to the point of worship. The excerpt sums up the ecological plight of Nubians. Moreover, Hushia lost her father to the river; he drowned while farming because the land was soft and unstable; it was “an open graveyard” (65); Hushia wept, “hating the reservoir and the people of the north” (66). His death may be read as “the revolt of nature against human domination” (King 1990, 117) after the building of the High Dam. However, nature is far from benign in this novel. In fact, Ali shows how nature rebelled against the human intervention in its course, and it did not differentiate between those who built the dams and their victims. David Dimeo (2015) points out that Hushia's father “was punished not by the hand of the state, but rather the revised natural environment, swallowed by the mud of the receding river that the Nubians had once ‘loved’” (77–78). Peo-

<sup>1</sup> Ali did not focus much on water spirits, but Oddoul (2006) incorporates supernatural elements in his novels, especially in *Al-Koshor*, which means “key” in Nubian.

ple in Qirshah village believed that “the same river demon which snatched [Awad’s] grandfather had also snatched him, but then released him out of pity for his poor mother” (Ali 2006, 69). This is animism at its best: many texts written by Nubian writers reveal that Nubians believe that both the river and the mountain have spirits, both benign and evil.

The floods caused by the dams affected Nubians’ lives for years and ruined their crops and houses. “The north had glory and leisure; the south, death and floods,” Awad points out (Ali 2006, 38). The narrator remarks from Hushia’s point of view:

The days passed and harvest approached; they woke up and found the river rumbling and heading for the mountain. A delegation of Arabic speakers went to Aswan to find out what the story was with the reservoir outlets which opened and closed with no warning, but they came home frustrated and defeated. When they took the compensation money, the land became state property, and by sowing in the summer they had committed an infraction. They had no right to do that. (64–65)

The villagers lost their land and one of the few sources of income they possess.

Moreover, the river becomes associated with disease and treachery. Hushia’s son Awad says, “His [own] body was anointed with Nile mud full of bilharzia parasites. Only chance kept him from death” (Ali 2006, 23–24). The spread of bilharzia was one of the drawbacks of the building of the dams on the Nile. On another note, Awad’s family name comes from the Arabic word “shalal,” which means “waterfall.” This connection with rivers and falls may link Awad’s traumatic story to the tragic story of the Nile in Nubia. When Awad “later learned that all the bounty of the North came from constant irrigation provided by the water held in reserve above the land of Nubia” (24), this made his heart full of sorrow and bitterness for the north: “He cursed the river that had surrendered to the dam, and he cursed the whole world, which had helped to save the temples, while leaving the people to their fate” (20). Early in the novel the narrator remarks from Awad’s point of view that “the river brought calamities that fit the north” (16). However, the rest of Egypt regards the Nile as a blessing. Even in Nubian songs in *Dongola* (Ali 2006), the singer Abdu Shindi “repeated the name of the river over and over and linked it with treason” (27). The Nile had become synonymous with treachery; especially that of the Egyptian authorities. One can visualize the disaster that befell Nubian lands when Nu-

bian villages lay in the Nile's "belly" after the construction of the second reservoir.

Rarely in *Dongola* is the river regarded as a blessing. Once when he was drunk, Awad "washed his face in the river water. He roused himself, dunked his head in the water, and felt totally recovered" (Ali 2006, 21). Here, in a rare instance, the river is made to revive Awad from the state of intoxication, after his release from many years in prison.

In a similar vein, in *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba*, the river is the main link between northern and southern Egypt. Ghada arrives by ship at her father's Nubian village. She describes the Nile as follows: "Even the Nile here in Nubia is bewitched and temperamental, sometimes it is high with clear water and we can see the fish glittering [...] and other times it is turbid and full of mud" (Ali [2002] 2010, 50–51). Those lines recall the description of the river in *Dongola* (Ali 2006) as treacherous and unstable. Later she longs to be rescued by her Cairene beloved by means of a ship on the Nile. Losing all hope at the end of the novel, she jumps into the river and tries to drown herself but is saved by Iblis's grandfather. Thus, the river is at once a blessing and a curse.

### Animal Imagery

Nubians cherish certain animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. Nubian homes are famous for their decorations with drawings of birds, sheep, fish, snakes, and crocodiles. Some drawings, especially of snakes and crocodiles, were meant to protect the dwellers from the evil eye and evil spirits. These creatures were part of their everyday life and appear in Nubian literature and art.

Wild and domestic animals are portrayed in both novels. It is significant that some characters are described in naturalistic terms. Hushia, for example, "was as patient as a camel and as steadfast as a mountain" (Ali 2006, 69). An ecofeminist aspect is present in the last extract, which is comparing a woman to a camel. In all Arab cultures, the camel is known for its perseverance and patience. She is also described in "natural terms" in being as strong as a mountain (Warren 1996, xv). These positive images reveal that Hushia is a tower of strength and endurance. On the other hand, Ruhia, Awad's stepmother, is described by Hushia as a "snake" and the north as "the land of that snake" (Ali 2006, 9). She is as slippery and deadly as a snake. This negative simile compares her to a poisonous reptile, which befits her since she poisoned Awad's father.

Another ecological issue par excellence, other than the loss of their land, was draught and famine, which hit the Nubians hard

when Awad was a child (Ali 2006, 23). They were forced to eat “sparrows, locusts, cranes, foxes, and dry bread” (23). Although it is quite unnatural for the Nubians, or for that matter any Egyptian, to eat such creatures, the text implies that Nubians had to in order to survive. In addition, Awad perceives Egypt, which is known to Egyptians as “Mother of the world,” as a mother “eating her children” (4). He says that “a cat eats its kittens,” if they are in danger, to show the irony in the brutality of the government of Egypt at that time. Having been a political prisoner for ten years, Awad believes Egypt imprisons and tortures some of her sons. This horrifying image defies the nature of motherhood.

In *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibal al-Nūba*, Iblis describes Ghada as “a sweet, beautiful dove flying amidst crows and falcons” (Ali [2002] 2010, 114). The contrast between this docile bird and the birds of prey is striking. The latter image refers to characters, such as Shaya, who represent the strict old generation as upholders of Nubian customs. This description foreshadows the ending of the novel where crows and falcons will devour the dove. Iblis describes his grandfather as an eagle, which is a positive image — the eagle is a symbol of sharp vision, strength, courage, leadership, and wisdom — because he is Iblis’s idol. In both novels, women are compared to oxen and they are expected to work as hard as this sturdy animal. All the above metaphors emphasize the link between women and children to nature. Ghada calls Iblis “little monkey” (in Arabic, *Nasaneso*) because he is quite mischievous, and it is used as a term of endearment. Iblis defies his society and his Nubian nature of “being a Nile creature like crocodiles and tilapia” (Ali [2002] 2010, 96), and he attempts to conquer the desert, which he is not familiar with. Indeed, Nubians regarded themselves as Nile creatures until they were forced to resettle. As for crocodiles, they were of great importance to Nubians’ natural environment. Nubian fishermen used to hunt crocodiles and stuff them with straw, hanging them over their doorways as talismans to protect them from the evil eye. Moreover, Iblis compares himself to the most common type of fish in the Nile, tilapia, which is quite significant because the Nubians are well known to be Nile creatures. In *Dongola* (Ali 2006), when Halima finally discovers the whereabouts of her runaway husband, she says, “At last the crocodile had stepped onto land” (102). She uses this metaphor because crocodiles have the cunning to conceal themselves, just as Awad has been hiding in Europe and never sent his mother and wife his address. Like Iblis in *Playing on Nubian Mountains*, Halima in *Dongola* is compared to a fish: “[She] tossed and turned like a fish just pulled from the water” (Ali 2006, 106). The image of the fish tossing and

turning intensifies the deadly effect of heat on her and links her with nature.

### The Mountain as a Motif

Oddoul (2009) remarks that the mountain is the third important element in Nubian ecology, after the Nile and the palm trees (64). There are very few references to palm trees in the two novels; most of the action takes place after the Nubian resettlement in places where there are hardly any palm trees. Oddoul asserts that Nubian villages on such mountains “are very poor as the agricultural land is rather small, which is the main source of income in Nubia” (63). He adds that the mountain is “the source of fear being inhabited by devils, demons, *erkabi* (ghouls), wolves, hyenas [...] and amongst its trails and paths a Nubian gets lost and becomes a meal for monsters and eagles” (64), as is shown in both novels under study. Thus, there is an element of the sublime as the mountain in Nubian culture is a source of awe.

It is quite natural that a Nubian woman such as Hushia is compared to a steadfast mountain (Ali [1993] 2006, 69). She is as sturdy as a mountain, which is a positive naturalistic image of a woman. Ironically, she is forced to live on a mountain. One of the plights Hushia faces is when the country’s most massive evacuation begins. She refuses to leave: “You can beat me and drag me away, but I won’t leave” (67). Ultimately, she gives in and takes a house in a resettlement camp on the mountain, but the houses, Awad says, were made of “tin [...] without a trace of beauty, with concrete roofs that reflected the heat” (26). These new houses were very unlike their old houses, which were spacious and had beautiful domes and decorations. The new place the Nubians were moved to is criticized by Hushia. Silsilah Mountain, which means “Chain Mountain,” is “a chain round our necks,” she tells her son (84). It is a suffocating, morbid place, unlike their old villages on the Nile. On the other hand, upon visiting Cairo for the first time, Awad is thunderstruck by the difference between his primitive Nubian village on the mountain and the metropolis. This is how he perceives Cairo upon his first visit:

He was sure this was the paradise the sheikh at the mosque talked about in his sermons: all kinds of fruit heaped up on handcarts, all kinds of meat hanging in front of butcher shops, clean white bread, pure water, and electricity. People wore ironed clothes; their skin was fair, and they had rosy cheeks and were hardly ever barefoot. Was this the same Egypt as his vil-

lage, hanging perilously onto a mountain, swimming invisibly in darkness, without a single green leaf all the winter long? (24)

The contrast between Awad's Nubian mountainous village and the capital is all too clear. The bounty of food in the north strikes Awad as he compares the meager quantities or even scarcity of food, water, and electricity in his village, even though both places belong to the same country. As Awad bewails the injustice of the system that left Nubia underdeveloped, the text clearly invites us to condemn the oppressive socioeconomic forces of the relation between the "affluent" north and the underdeveloped south.

Less clear-cut, but equally important to our understanding of the plight of the Nubians, are elements of the natural habitat and their symbolic uses in the texts. The "mountain" in the title of the novel *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (2010) plays a vital role in the lives of its characters. The word also appears in the title of Hassan Nour's Nubian novel *Bayna al-nahr wa al-jabal* (Between the river and the mountain), published in 1991. This mountain is a very rough and dangerous area, which adds to the misery of the Nubian villagers. The *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* opens with the adult narrator Iblis commenting on how the inhabitants of his village were forced to live on the mountains because the water of the High Dam had swallowed their homes (Ali [2002] 2010, 17). They now must live and be surrounded by wild and deadly beasts. Humans have invaded the natural habitat of such animals so, naturally, they are attacked by such animals. This is just one of the detrimental effects of the building of the dams. The narrator remarks that the villagers were living in a place with no electricity, with "no newspapers, no radio, no government representative. We were living on the fringe of the world" (17). The repetition of the word "no" emphasizes that they live in a primitive village. This village on the mountain is described by the narrator as "an exile" (25) and a "death trap" (27), and Ghada, the girl from northern Egypt, perceives it as "an oven and a cemetery" (27) because of its stifling heat. Thus, the mountain in both novels is associated with a state of imprisonment and even death.

### **The Wilderness: The Exodus Trope**

The idea of wilderness, from an ecocritical perspective, "signif[ies] nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization" and hence it becomes one of "the most potent construction[s] of nature" (Garrard 2004, 59). Indeed, this state of wilderness figures in the two novels. In *Dongola* (Ali 2006), Awad is forced to flee the country before he is arrested and imprisoned for the second time, so he travels through

the wilderness to Sudan. Luckily, he has an expert guide and tracker, yet it is still a journey full of challenges — arid desert, snakes, and police patrols. Awad describes the wilderness as a “vast wasteland to be bitten by a viper lurking below a layer of sand, to eat food made from camel milk and seasonal pigeons, and to sacrifice all the achievements of civilization” (53), which is quite impossible even for him. He adds that his journey was “an exodus of the vanquished” (59), just like the exodus story, in both the Bible and the Quran, designates the deliverance and liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. After almost two weeks in the wilderness, Awad and his group arrive safely in Sudan, and from there he flies to Europe with a Sudanese passport. He remains in exile for nine years until he receives a pardon from the Egyptian government.

Similarly, Ghada and Iblis, in *Al-La‘ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Ali [2002] 2010), plan their exodus from their village to Aswan; Ghada is suffocating from all the restrictions imposed on her in the village. It is a three-day ride on the back of a donkey in the wilderness where they could die of sunstroke or be devoured by wolves. The narrator accepts to undergo such a perilous journey in the scorching desert to win Ghada’s heart and her hand in marriage. He is naïve enough to think they can marry at his age (nine) and is unaware that she too is a minor. They travel for many hours under the scorching sun, where many telegraph workers had died from sunstroke when they were setting up the poles. On this dangerous journey they are attacked by wolves and hyenas, but they use a tambourine to frighten the animals away and set fire to their clothes one piece at a time to drive them away. Nature too, not just their society, is hostile to them; this is not their natural habitat. Iblis, who regards himself as a “Nile creature,” and Ghada, who is a town girl, do not belong in the wilderness. They sacrifice their dog and then their donkey to the wolves to stay alive. Iblis remarks, “Survival is for the cleverest not the strongest” (99). This sacrifice violates animal rights and ecofeminist beliefs, but the narrative seems to imply that they were compelled to do so to survive. The mythopoeic features in the novel allow us to consider Iblis’s journey an initiation passage from childhood to early manhood. As is the case in archetypal journeys, sacrificing animals can be one of the passage rites. Indeed, as the narrative proceeds, one discovers that the journey symbolizes the state of rebirth for both travelers. It is noteworthy that in both novels the reference to the exodus story is made clear, which intensifies the dystopian features of life in Nubia and the possibility of liberation and deliverance from tyranny.



## Conclusion

These two novels by Idris Ali ([1993] 2006, [2002] 2010) may revolve around a few binary oppositions that can be resolved from an eco-critical and/or ecofeminist perspective. The narrative in both, in various degrees, tries to breakthrough traditional binaries: male/female; nostalgia/future vision; Nubian/Egyptian; north/south; Nile/wilderness; and utopia/dystopia. Most of the tragic lives of the characters may stem from the building of the Aswan and the High Dam, but it is also clear that the oppressive androcentric communities in Nubia are behind the oppression of women there. *Dongola's* tone is more bitter concerning the Egyptian government's treatment of Nubians than *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba*, possibly because Idris Ali became more tolerant and more mature. Awad's fanaticism and secessionist ideas dominate *Dongola* (Ali [1993] 2006); in the second novel there are no such political extremism and bitterness. On the contrary, in *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Ali [2002] 2010), most of the characters are fascinated by Ghada, who represents Egyptian culture of the north or the metropolis.

There is a striking connection between several female characters and nature in both novels, as seen in the naturalization of these female characters. Readers have also seen the extent to which nature has been feminized, notably in *Dongola*. Ali's critique of Nubian society manifests itself in addressing wider issues of discrimination based on race, gender, and class and finds expression in one of the prominent female voices in the text, Halima: "This land was hell, and its women were abandoned" (Ali [1993] 2006, 106). Hushia, Halima, and Ghada in *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Ali [2002] 2010) are abandoned by their men. The endings of both novels are gruesomely tragic. In *Dongola*, after the murder of Hushia, the narrator declares "the silent desolate night of the land of Kanz was transformed into a grand funeral" (Ali 2006, 114). According to A.E. Kings. "the liberation of women cannot be achieved without the simultaneous liberation of nature from the clutches of exploitation" (2017, 67). However, nature in Nubia cannot be liberated from the clutches of exploitation after Nubian land has been inundated. Their land and villages cannot be saved, and the dams cannot be deconstructed. Therefore, Nubian women, children, and the underclass remain exploited and victimized in a Nubian society that perpetually seeks justice that amounts to a call for "the right to return."

Despite this dystopian reality in *Al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Ali [2002] 2010), Iblis starts singing one of Ghada's songs, and all the Nubian girls start weeping while the grandfather hides his tears and says, "God have mercy on us all and grant us patience to bear

this tribulation” (128). The Egyptian song that ends the novel praises Ghada. The Nubian girls even add her name a few times in the song, which shows how they admire and respect her as a symbol of change and honor for her arduous attempts to improve the status of Nubian women in that village.

Thus, an ecocritical and ecofeminist approach to Nubian literature enables us to appreciate the environmental and social trauma the Nubians underwent throughout their modern history. Such a reading of Ali’s works explores the possibilities of putting an end to various types of oppression, including gender and social inequality, and it recognizes that literature has a role and vocation to change the world.

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# The Dissolution of the Nubian Identity in Yasser Abdellatif's *Qānūn Al-Wirātha* (The law of inheritance) and Samar Nour's *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate)

Hussein Hammouda

## Introduction

This chapter was triggered by a number of queries that revolve around Nubian identity, its mobility across time, the link binding Nubian identity with the national identity, the extent that Nubians who migrated from Nubia to other towns and cities in different ages adhere to it and still uphold it.<sup>1</sup> I seek answers to these queries by examining and purposefully selecting two representative novels written by a Nubian male novelist and a Nubian female novelist. These novels portray two distinctly different time periods. As such, the chapter attempts to find answers to the following questions: How is the “Nubian identity” expressed in the works of writers of Nubian origin, who were born and lived far away from Nubia? How has the Nubian identity been constructed via distant, probably foggy, memories? How has the Nubian identity changed in a new urban world far from Nubia, and to what extent has it overlapped with, or been assimilated into, a larger identity? Is the worldview of Nubian ancestors still relevant to that of their posterity? How far do these worldviews converge or diverge?

To answer these and similar questions, I will examine two relatively recent novels by two novelists of Nubian origin, Samar Nour and Yasser Abdellatif. Both writers were born in Cairo, where Nour currently lives and writes; Abdellatif has been residing in Canada

<sup>1</sup> All Arabic references and extracts from the two novels were translated from Arabic by the translator of this chapter, Ahmed Hany Elshamy. Hussein Hammouda prefers Elshamy's translation to Robin Moger's in Yasser Abdellatif's *The Law of Inheritance* (2018).

for more than a decade. Thus Cairo is central to the formation and experience of both writers. I attempt a close reading of the two novels with the aim of identifying the changes in Nubian identity and consciousness from the early decades of the twentieth century to the 1980s and later, but my analysis will be guided by a number of critical propositions that help us problematize the question of identity and the working of memory. To this end, my analysis of identity representation in Abdellatif's *Qānūn Al-Wirātha* (The law of inheritance) ([2002] 2006) will be guided by the tenets of critical race theory, notably by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, who present identity as a product of intersectionality (2001, 51–52). On the other hand, the more recent novel by Nour, *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate) (2013), will concern the representation of the elements of space in the text that acquires a cultural-semiotic significance.

### Macro and Micro Identity in the Nubian Case

First of all, though, it is imperative to point out some preliminary notes with regard to the question of identity. In a very broad sense, the question of identity is always seen from a multidimensional perspective. There are various definitions and approaches to the issue; notably those involving the transformations of the dimensions of identity across history from one period to another. There is a significant body of literature on this issue in relation to different societies. One definition of “identity” is that it refers to “the sum total of cultural, social, national and religious legacies of a group, people or nation” (Abbas 2014, 48). Definitions that stress the historical dimension of identity and the possibility of its occasional transformation involve other natural, religious, economic, and military factors, as can be seen clearly in the Arab world (Al-Tall 2006, 350). Moreover, the macro identity of a country corresponds to micro identities within its territories whenever and wherever there are linguistic, cultural, or religious minorities. One particular interest to the purpose of both novels is to explore the relationship between the factors that have shaped and are shaping the macro Egyptian identity, on the one hand, and those that have shaped and are shaping the micro Nubian identity, on the other.

I will also accentuate the exploration of the transformations and ramifications of this relationship. Indeed, the question of diversity versus homogeneity within the Egyptian identity has been the subject of scores of studies and research. Most researchers on the topic have concluded that the Egyptian identity is “a multi-dimensional melting pot” (Al-Sayyed 2012, 25). Thus, in a sense, the Nubian identity as a component of this homogeneous multidimensional iden-



tity is reflective of unity-within-diversity. Unity and homogeneity, generally, “involve some kind of variety, even disparity, in the ethnic, linguistic and religious features of sub-groups, designated as ‘minorities’” (Abou Zeid 2014, 206). However, not all the previously mentioned features are necessarily relevant to account to the difference between the micro Nubian identity and the macro Egyptian identity. I start with the assumption that one of the main differences between ethnic Nubian and Egyptian identity is linguistic rather than religious.

Although many factors are involved in the question of identity, this chapter is mainly concerned with the cultural, social, and linguistic aspects that characterize a specific group — in this case the Nubians of Egypt — who have moved from their southern hometowns to Cairo. These aspects are related to customs, traditions, art, and skin color, as we find in the case of the writers Abdel Hafiz (2012) and Abou Khneiger (2016), besides other group or community bonds that motivate members of this group to behave as one body in the capital city. We will notice how, like many minorities, Egyptian Nubians tend to stick together in the face of the characteristic web of urban dynamics, which sometimes seems antipathetic to outsiders and newcomers. Such ghettoizing tendencies should not obscure from us, however, the fact that no one, Nubians included, has a simple or uncomplicated identity based on race alone. In fact, we take issue with Delgado and Stefancic, who maintain that “everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (2001, 9). From this perspective, Nubian identity in general, and as represented in these two novels, will be considered not an essentialist identity but rather an identity that was formulated as a result of the personal and the collective history of Nubians. Thus, Nubian identity must be read in terms of intersectionality, that is, it must be seen as a formation in which racial, historical, social, and gender factors intersect to form each Nubian’s complex identity.

Historically, there have been successive individual and mass migrations to Cairo/the metropolis in the public mind because it has always been a center of attraction to large numbers from the countryside (Hamdan 1984, 302). In others, successive waves of mass migration from Nubia in the twentieth-century migration were triggered by developments in Nubia itself: the building of the Aswan Reservoir in 1905; raising the barriers of the reservoir in 1912; raising the barriers once more in 1933; and the construction of the High Dam in 1964 (Gaweesh 2016; Nassif 2012). Therefore, the two novels, particularly *Qanūn Al-Wirātha*, cover several decades of the twentieth century.

Needless to say, even though the texts at hand reveal the problematics of the Nubian complex identity, including the relation between the personal and the cultural identity, together with such issues as Nubian double consciousness, the aesthetics of the narrative texts remain the beacon by which the meaning of the literary text is produced. In my investigation of the relationship between the fictional world of the narrative and its signified referents in the real world, I will explore the imaginative narrative representing historical facts. I will show how reality and facts, which appear in the literary work, are ultimately governed by the texts' creative laws, techniques, and specific use of language. In fact, real and factual events are filtered in both novels through a particular perspective that may be defined by the imagination, dreams, visions, and opinions of the creative individual and by the characters in the works themselves.

### **The Fictional World of the Two Novels: Remembrance of Things Past**

In Yasser Abdellatif's *Qanūn Al-Wirātha* ([2002] 2006), which won the Sawiris Cultural Award in 2005, the voice of the anonymous narrator intersects with that of the author, rendering certain events in the novel almost autobiographical. This is especially true of certain characters, such as the grandfather and others of his generation, who in the early twentieth century left Nubia to settle in Cairo, which has long been the nucleus or the locus of Egyptian identity. In retrospect, the narrator reminisces about the experiences of these elders in the past, and observes how their Nubian sense of belonging faded gradually and was influenced by new affiliations to Cairo. The narrator reveals how their relationship with Nubian language was severed and replaced by new connections with a new language (or languages), and how their old rural worldview, customs, and traditions merged with new urban worldview, customs, and traditions. The novel depicts these changes in a detailed manner that borders on the documentary, identifying in celebratory terms particular persons, times, and places.

On the other hand, the narrator of Samar Nour's *Maḥallak Sirr* (2013) portrays in a more explicit manner the changes that occurred to the identity of the Nubian community members in Cairo and the severed connections between them and their old hometowns. Nothing of the Nubian world or sense of belonging is to be found in Cairo except for a charity organization that used to be frequented by the central character, Lama, as a child. This narrator, far removed from her childhood, recalls with difficulty some of the vaguely remembered features of "dark-skinned" or "black" persons who used

to visit this charity organization. More significantly, the narrator specifies the address of the charity in Cairo without naming that organization. Links with the old world are thus established through distant memories, while carefully avoiding any definite reference to the present. Nubian identity in this novel seems to have almost been assimilated into, or rather contained within, the larger or dominant Egyptian identity.

### **Time and Space in *Qanūn Al-Wirātha***

The novel opens with a set of “introductory notes” provided by an anonymous narrator. Its method of narration is somewhat biographical, depicting the life of a person who is related to the author’s own experience or personal life, as pointed out by several studies of the novel (Al-Wardany and Mazen 2014). This method of narration emphasizes conciseness, and shuttles between different time frames. In the introductory notes, the reader learns about the experiences of a certain character (who will become the main narrator in later parts of the novel). These glimpses of his experience are situated in an earlier definitive time frame in the late twentieth century, which is connected to older reconstructed times reaching as far back as the lifetime of his Nubian grandfather, who left Nubia for Cairo after World War I. The experience of the narrator, who lives in Cairo’s suburb of Maadi at the time of the events, is interconnected with his life in other Cairo quarters, including Abdeen and Bab Al-Louq, where he first went to school and where his family used to live. The novel is divided into four parts: “Fascists,” “The Last War and Its Faint Shadows,” “A Table of Illogicalities, Or Maadi Summer 1988,” and “Ahmed Shaker, the Family’s Protégé.” The reader is introduced to various aspects, experiences, and changes in the lives of the narrator and his Nubian family in Cairo and the changing world around them.

The title of the novel, *Qānūn Al-Wirātha*, refers to an exploration of the genealogy of the Nubians across generations. At one point, the narrator asks his dentist: “Why do my teeth decay one after the other, although I take very good care of them?” She answers firmly: “It is due to heredity” (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 45). Later in the novel, he mentions Ahmed Shaker, who was known for his excellent eyesight, as opposed to the other grandchildren, the narrator’s father and uncles, who “inherited poor eyesight from their own father” (89). Elsewhere, the narrator points out the resemblance between his grandfather and his nephew, Faṭḥi: “Their facial features are basically the same, but while those features are sharp in the case of Faṭḥi, they are more softened in his uncle” (37). In the final lines

of the novel, the narrator refers to his own features as an extension of those of his family: "The features of my father and uncles will survive in my face" (92).

The narrative celebrates several spatio-temporalities, depicting various places belonging to different times. The narrator goes back to his school after a long separation in time and place, recalling memories with echoes from the past: "The walls of the school rise in a time and a place not far from our present time and place" (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 65). In this narrative flow of recollected times and places, the narrator contemplates the older world of his father and grandfather, together with his own contemporary world in Cairo where he lived in a central neighborhood before moving to the suburbs, which are linked to central Cairo by the Metro line (26).

The narrator names various streets and neighborhoods in Cairo, remembering what these places looked like in the past: "One early morning in the autumn of 1990, I came to this place [the building of his old nursery]" (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 38). He observes how that nursery had changed across time: "The building which used to be rose-colored had now become grey" (28). The coffee shop that used to be there is gone, even though it used to seem "timeless" (90, 100). He reflects on what changes time could make to places. As he stands in front of the building of his old school twenty years after he left it, he recalls memories of that place while reflecting on the future: "Which child sitting inside it right now will stand to contemplate it twenty years from now? What color will it be then?" (29).

The narrator who contemplates the interconnections between times and places recollects specific temporal landmarks. These include the generation of the 1960s (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 43), the graduation of his father from the Faculty of Engineering in 1961, and the "overwhelming defeat" in 1967 (43). He also remembers his father's departure to work in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s, the Gulf War in 1991, and the demonstrations of Cairo University students in the 1990s (49–52). The narrator then wryly comments on his exploration of the new developments in the underworld of drugs, "as new kinds of drugs were used by young people" (74), and in musical traditions, as new pop music was enjoyed by the young generation (76). Going beyond family and childhood reminiscences, the narrator names specific locations and closely describes streets, alleys, and buildings in the Cairo district of Abdeen and the surrounding areas, in what seems to be a perambulation: "At the end of Kawala Street, there is Abdeen Square[...] Along the southern wall of the Palace extends Sheikh Rihan Street which runs eastward toward Port Said Street" (33). Then he refers to "walking along Muhammed Mahmoud Street to the intersection with Nubar Street [...] and before

the intersection of Kawala and Muhammed Farid Streets” (29). In the course of this walk, the narrator notes the changes in the names of certain streets and buildings: “Muhammed Farid Street (formerly Emad El-Din), and Port Said Street (formerly Al-Khalij Al-Masry),” which reflect nationalistic sentiments and interest in a political leader, such as Muhammed Farid, and a war city, such as Port Said (29, 33). Thus, the description in the novel of Cairo and its districts and streets goes beyond merely describing a geographical place. Indeed, it represents a multifaceted notion of “home” that itself goes beyond any reductive view of home as a simple place of origin. Oscillating between the individual and the cultural perspectives and insights into what constitutes “home,” the affective relation and interaction between the subject (the narrator) and the space he inhabits is represented, albeit laconically, throughout the text.

At the heart of this spatio-temporal wandering movement, a clear dichotomy develops between Cairo and its suburbs, on the one hand, and between the past of the grandfather and the present of the narrator, on the other. This dichotomy reveals several changes that occurred in the community of Nubians living in Cairo, relations among them in the present, and in their relationship to their past in distant Nubia. It also shows how change has affected the bonds that used to preserve the identity of the Nubians living in Cairo, and how these bonds are gradually dissolving and disintegrating.

It is noteworthy that the juxtaposition between past and present Cairo reflects the disparity between the life of the older immigrant generation in Nubia and their life in Cairo. In the lifetime of the narrator’s grandfather, in the 1930s, Cairo was a more cosmopolitan city with a mixture of races, ethnicities, religions, and cultures. According to the narrator, it could be divided into two sections: *baladī* (authentic local) and *ifrangī* (European-styled) (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 37). Fathi, a family relative who comes to Cairo with his grandfather, must mix with people of several nationalities, and he falls in love with an Italian woman who returns his love. He learns Greek from his Greek colleagues in Cairo (38). The narrator’s old school at the neighborhood of Bab Al-Louq is a “mixed-race school” (40), where different “accents, colors, faces, and cultures mingled together” (41). But the suburb, to which the families of the second and third generation (the narrator’s father and later his own children) move, has only a single world of homogeneous social classes and cultures. Moving from Bab Al-Louq school to the school in Maadi suburb is a shift to a culturally unified life: “The shift from the mixed environment of the Bab Al-Louq School to the uniform environment of the Maadi School was tantamount to the soul’s exit from nature to a state of historical alienation” (41).

The narrator's grandfather had moved to Cairo, where he lived "with his family, in the early part of his life" (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 34) in a small alley near Abdeen Palace before they moved to Mostafa Kamel Street, off Sheikh Rihan Street. The grandfather came to Cairo to work as a barman in a club of one of the political parties at the time. At one point, he entered a conversation between a Pasha and another socially eminent person. The two men were impressed by the Nubian barman, and the Pasha decided to appoint him to a clerical job in his own political party. It was a shift up the social ladder. According to the narrator, "the liberal life skirted by [his grandfather] as a barman in the clubs of the social elite, then as a clerk in the offices of political parties, was not easily accepted back then [in the 1930s]; nor was the concept of a Nubian *effendi*" (35). Nubians were at that time only allowed to do menial jobs inferior to those of *effendis*, which shows how the Nubian community in the city lived under social pressures and restrictions.

Together with the narrator's grandfather, Faṭḥi (his grandfather's nephew was almost as old as the narrator) traveled on the same train from Nubia to Cairo. Like the narrator, he had received his elementary education certificate from the Nubian "Dorr" School on the eve of the outbreak of World War I. The two left school to work: "They worked in several of the menial jobs made available to Nubian migrants in Cairo" (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 37). In the mid 1930s, Faṭḥi had to flee from Cairo to Alexandria, then Rhodes and Wadi Halfa (Nubia's capital and major port city on the Nile) (39). He was being chased by a group of Italians who turned into fascists after their departure from Italy and were bent on killing "that black man who desecrated their Roman Honor" (38), having become the lover of a young Italian woman who worked with him at the same hotel. Another relative of the narrator's grandfather was Shaker, who came to Cairo from Nubia twenty years after they did. There, Shaker married and lived for some time before he had a spiritual Sufi experience, and later a traumatic, spiritual, and psychological crisis, which made him shun everybody. He was, therefore, helped by the narrator's grandfather to return to Nubia to find work and live there.

As a Nubian text, Abdellatif's novel ([2002] 2006) teaches us about the specifics of Nubian heritage, culture, and experience through revealing the disparity between life in the past and the present. In a way, as readers we discover that the history of Nubians is one of marginalization. Stereotypical and historical misrepresentations of Nubians in Egyptian cinema are laid bare as the characters, especially second- and third-generation immigrants, try to

break through the defined social roles set for Nubians that marked the older generation.

At the time when the narrator's grandfather lived in Cairo, there were bonds that brought Nubians together and made them relatively able to preserve their original identity, including the Nubian language. In the coffee shop opening onto Abdeen Square, the narrator's grandfather used to meet Shaker:

In this quiet area of Cairo [Abdeen] in the 1930's they would have long talks shuttling between Arabic and Nubian, with subtle smoothness, according to the level of privacy dictated by the subject of discussion[....] The Nubian language was reserved for the affairs of daily and family life, which call for intimacy and privacy when discussed in the presence of strangers. (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 82-83)

Notice the word "strangers" in reference to the coffee shop non-Nubian patrons, while Arabic was kept for topics of a more public nature.

The relationship between Shaker and the narrator's grandfather was governed by the values and traditions of the distant world of Nubia. According to the narrator, Shaker was a fourth- or fifth-degree relative of his grandfather. In Nubian villages, the degree of relatedness is decided by "both tribal affiliations and paternal/maternal lineages" (Abdellatif [2002] 2006, 81). Whatever the level of relatedness might be, Nubians who lived in Cairo in the lifetime of the narrator's grandfather were closely connected. The grandfather had land in Nubia to which Shaker returned after his living conditions in the city deteriorated. The grandfather began to treat him like a son, following the disappearance of Shaker's father. In this context, the narrator stresses a sense of communitarianism, which linked some of the Nubians in Cairo. One aspect of this communitarianism is what he calls the "Nubian ghetto culture," which is marked by "tolerance [in casual friendships] of class or educational differences based on ethnic or tribal affiliations" (83). Indeed, the narrator's grandfather and some others of his generation who lived in Cairo in that distant past lived as "clan members," rather than "individual citizens" in the city. The novel does not indicate the alienation of any of those individuals, but clearly reveals this sense of alienation in the narrator/grandson, even though he always acts as a member of a group of friends.

Thus, in an attempt to answer the stereotypical representation, or rather, misrepresentation of Nubians, Abdellatif ([2002] 2006) reveals the dark side of the Cairene world of the narrator, with its

clearly defined incidents and time frame and mainly overshadowed by despair and drug abuse. One of the novel's four parts is entirely devoted to this aspect of his life. However, he also depicts other significant events or activities in his life, including writing, his participation in protests as a detached observer, and his study of philosophy of the 1990s. The transformation of the Nubian situation from an age of strong bonds in the early twentieth century to one of alienation in the later decades of the century, especially after the death of the narrator's grandfather in the mid-1970s (90), seems to suggest that the features of Nubian identity have disappeared in Cairo, an observation that is noted by Shawqi Yehia (2014). Nubia, which used to be a refuge from urban pressures in the lifetime of the grandfather and others of his own generation, is in the mind of the narrator now, nothing more than a nostalgic feeling where distant memories of his late grandfather who left his posterity to face a completely new and turbulent world in Cairo (Yehia 2012).

### Rememorizing Nubia in *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate)

Unlike Abdellatif's *Qanūn Al-Wirātha*, Samar Nour's *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate, 2013) shows how the bonds between members of the Nubian community in Cairo have become blurred or even disappeared. Their sense of identity becomes even more removed, being reduced to a vague memory of a place that once held them together and that they only recollect when they meet in the offices of a charity organization in the capital city of Cairo. This process unfolds in Nour's text in the form of occasional incidents in the narrative, which trigger vague memories of certain events from early childhood, while consigning others to oblivion. What the memory does is to create an elusive "interstitial world" where reality and dreams coalesce, barriers separating the factual and the imaginative blur, and boundaries between the past and the present almost disappear.

The novel deals with the lives of two young women, Lama and Sofi, whose experience reflects a world of loss, disappointment, failure, fear of the world, and spiritual oppression. Moreover, their lives are marked by a vain search for a lost sense of security and a feeling of defeat that is almost "inherited like money and property" (Nour 2013, 43), and also a sense of incompleteness, the dissolution of spaces and times, an indeterminate ghost-like existence and the loss of faith.

The meaning of the title *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate) is explained by the voice of the narrator, Sofi, who states that, like her friend Lama, she is lost in their quest in life: "We move without moving ahead, as if we were walking on a treadmill" (Nour 2013, 10). Structural-



ly, the novel is divided into three main parts, and inside each part there are various chapters with titles such as “Balconies,” “Walls,” and “Door,” with each division having its own internal structure. The narrative seems to be free-roaming, ranging from reflections to dreams, contemplations of some of the novel’s characters, information about certain characters (like Saint Marina), places (like Bab Al-Louq in downtown Cairo), or phenomenon like that of madness. Thus, space plays a central role in the novel as it is incorporated within the events, character portrayal, and narrative vision. Nour utilizes space and spatial parameters in the text to create forms of spatial boundaries and oppositions between a distant past with its memories and a more outer and open space that seems “alien,” “hostile,” and “chaotic.” As such, the narration shifts from an external narrator to Loma and Sofi. This structure thus allows for transitions between several, sometimes remote, worlds.

Through this pattern of movement, “dissolution” emerges as a significant motif in the novel. Nothing remains stable. Boundaries between real events keep shifting. Borders and barriers are always questioned. The spheres of reality, dreams, sanity, and insanity overlap. In this context, dreams make up a large part of the novel’s world. Sofi is haunted by dreams that are to be realized later. She tries in vain to “kill those dreams by ignoring them” (Nour 2013, 47) and “she is unable to control the nightmares of her reality” (49). On the other hand, “Lama lives in an extended daydream which isolates her from the rest of the world” (48). As the boundaries between dream and reality disappear, the novel reveals that “there are things in life which could smother the most fantastical and wild dreams” (75).

Similarly, the boundaries between sanity and insanity disappear, too. Sayyed, the madman, has made his home in a waste ground. To him, “madness is a refuge” (Nour 2013, 15). A friend of Lama used to ask her when she was a child, “What would you like to be when you grow up, sweetie?” She would answer confidently, “A madwoman” (29). The novel explores from Lama’s point of view this “narrow space between sanity and insanity” (165). In the light of this dissolution, the line between certainty and uncertainty becomes blurred. For example, in certain situations, Lama wonders why she feels “suspended in midstream between two banks, without the certainty needed to find any anchoring point” (65). The line separating reality from fantasy also disappears. Lama wonders what “could possibly match fantasy, and whoever could create a reality like it?” (65).

In this world, the “balcony” becomes a platform from which to communicate with the world. From the balcony, one may have a view of the world and observe it at a distance without being involved. It

is significant that the word “shurfah” (balcony) is repeated many times in the novel in various situations: “Wherever she goes, [Lama] carries her own balcony with her, which acts as a barrier that does not let her become involved with the world” (Nour 2013, 67). Moreover, in the latter part of the novel, it becomes a hiding place from others and at the same time a post from which to watch them (135).

If we move from space to time, the narrative unfolds by moving along this process of dissolution across a variety of periods. Sometimes separate time frames are brought together in the same paragraph. Sometimes the narrative freezes certain points in time for their particular significance, such as the tv footage of the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, or the earthquake that struck parts of Egypt in 1992. Thus, the novel documents — sometimes indirectly — significant changes in the Egyptian and international scenes (Abdel Rahman 2013). Of these changes, the narrator contemplates the “the spread of the *hijāb* [women’s head cover]” (Nour 2013, 131), offering us an account of hairstyles before its spread in the Egyptian society (131). Other important social and political events include the assassination of Sadat, the global economic crisis, and the 2003 protests against the us-led invasion of Iraq (148). Some events go back further in time, such as the arrest of Lama’s father in 1959 for being a member of a communist organization.

Events and changes that occurred at different times are filtered through the same elusive memories. The significance of memory and its role in retrieving and shaping events is highlighted in many parts of the novel, and can be divided into two types: one that resembles a painting that could be frozen and carefully contemplated in detail, and one that flies by like the fast-moving frames of a film (Nour 2013, 48). This movement across time through recollection is manifested in the place Lama calls “the old people’s home.” Details of that “home” and its location make it clear that it is a Nubian charity organization. A whole chapter is devoted to a detailed portrayal of that place, without naming it, through Lama’s memory and her world of dissolving images. In the “old people’s home,” described as a “charity organization,” memories about a certain distant town from Cairo are recalled. The location of the home/charity organization is given with such precision that it can be easily identified in real life. The narrative explores the world of the elderly residents of the home who sit on the balcony, playing chess, dominoes, or backgammon. The flat where the charity organization is based — on the third floor of the building — is carefully described in the narrative. It is a spacious reception area leading to different rooms; the entrance leads to the kitchen and to a wide balcony. We are also introduced to ‘Amm Morgan, the old Nubian butler who served the resi-

dents, and made “tea with milk” for Lama, the narrator, when she was a child (39). The narrative, channeled through vague memories, offers a description of the features of the “black” men the narrator met there, in particular one black man who supported her right to feel free to “fool around as she liked,” taking her side and defending her when necessary. The man had the authority to do so, being the acting director in the absence of her father, the official head of the charity organization (39). The novel also depicts landmarks around the building, including the church tower whose old tinkling bells could be heard, and a house the narrator would visit at later only to discover that it was rented by the American University in Cairo to be used as a storage place. Thus, the description of the “old people’s home” or the Nubian charity organization offices shows how echoes of distant memories and dreams coalesce, while they still retain definitive points of reference. Like several other buildings in Cairo, especially those found on Mansour Street near Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo, the offices of the charity organization located on the third floor collapsed in the earthquake of 1992. We learn from Nour’s text that as a result of the earthquake, two entire floors had to be removed from the building on Mansour Street, including the offices of the organization (40).

These references, together with other factual details provided by the author, reveal that this “old people’s home” was in fact an identifiable Nubian charity organization in Cairo known as “The Garden and Window Society,” which had its offices on Mansour Street in downtown Cairo. The society, which was named after the famous Nubian village, *al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk* (literally, “the garden and the window”), used to provide social services to Nubians living in Cairo, including housing and other types of care. It is worth noting that the author’s father, Suleiman Gasser, was the head of the Nubian housing society, and was regarded as the real resident of the organization. After the floors containing the society offices were removed, the society had to be relocated. The important point here is that the details of distant memories in the novel have several intersections with definite points of reference in the present. Within the semiotic model of culture presented in the text the “old people’s home” or the headquarters of the Nubian society in Cairo represents a bond between the Nubians living in Cairo, similar to the bonds that unite the rural people who migrate to the capital city (Saber 1966, 121; Al-Husseiny 1985, 111). Thus, memories of place and space play an important role in highlighting the extent to which spatial analysis can yield insight into the affective and emotive relations people and the places they have lived in. The fact that the portrayal of this home is filtered through distant memories or sometimes fan-

tasies, with overlapping clear and unclear images, creates a sense of distancing. Yet it shows an attempt in the fictional world of the novel to preserve the integrity of the Nubian community in Cairo and the cooperative spirit among its members that seems to have dwindled recently.

### Conclusion

Based on my interpretation of the two novels and reiterating the initial queries posed at the outset of the chapter, I claim that the two novels highlight the life experiences of different Nubian generations who migrated to cities and towns. I also say that these experiences that reflect the Nubian identity have changed over time and from one generation to the next.

Memory in Abdellatif's *Qanūn Al-Wirātha* ([2002] 2006) captures clear images from the earlier life of the Nubian community in Cairo, but this recollection becomes much more distanced in Nour's *Maḥallak Sirr* (2013). In the latter work, the Nubian community appears to have been reduced to a group of elderly people with dark or black complexions, whose images are blurred with those of the people of Cairo. The Nubian identity, before the early 1980s (the time frame reconstructed in Nour's text), is no longer as clearly defined as it used to be in the early decades of the twentieth century (the time frame reconstructed in *Qanūn Al-Wirātha*). Nubian identity seems to have gradually dissolved, or is about to be, in the great Egyptian metropolis. Put differently, one may conclude from my analysis of the two Nubian texts by Abdellatif and Nour that many features of the micro Nubian identity have been assimilated into the macro Egyptian identity. The Nubian identity in the metropolitan city of Cairo has actually dissolved, or is about to dissolve with the passage of time. This fact becomes evident at least in the light of the portrayal of the Nubian identity in the fictional world of the two novels.

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# A Folkloric Reading of Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) and Mokhtar's *Jibāl al-Kuḥl* (Mountains of kohl)

Khalid Abou el-Lail

## Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the study of the preservation of the intangible Nubian cultural heritage in two novels by two prominent Nubian novelists, Muhammad Khalil Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) ([1968] 2011), and Yehia Mokhtar's *Jibāl al-Kuḥl* (Mountains of kohl); (2001). Qassim (1922–1968) was an Egyptian Nubian novelist, born in Nubia who witnessed the inundation of the fertile Nubian lands after the second raising of Aswan Dam in 1933, which had a lasting effect on him.<sup>1</sup> He portrayed in his novels the suffering and trauma of the Nubians who were forced to migrate from and abandon their fertile ancestral land and become what is termed the “Nubian diaspora.” *Al-Shamandūra* documents in a semi-autobiographical style the state of trauma Nubians suffered as a result of their forced migration. It has been described by the well-known Egyptian critic Khairy Shalaby “as one of the greatest 20th-century” novels, occupying a foremost position in the literature written in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> It did not attain its deserved recognition initially, but it did later. Qassim wrote short stories, poems, and political tracts. He produced a collection of short stories, *Khaltī ‘Aisha* (Auntie Aisha), which was followed by his masterpiece *Al-Shamandūra*, in which he depicted a crucial turning point in Nubian history. It is noteworthy that this novel was written while Qassim was in prison in the 1960s.

Yehia Mokhtar (1936–) was born in Old Nubia in a village called El-Geneina wa-el Shebbāk, which lies on the borders between Egypt

1 This chapter was translated from Arabic by Ahmed Hany Elshamy.

2 For a discussion of the novel and its status as a pioneering text in Nubian letters, see Morsy in this volume.

and Sudan. At the age of seven, his family moved to Cairo after the forced migration of Nubians after the construction of the High Dam. When he moved to Cairo, he only spoke the Nubian language, but acquired and mastered Arabic through attending *al-kuttab*, which is a form of religious education that focuses on teaching children in their early years the Arabic language and the Holy Quran, which later helped him immensely in writing and expressing himself fluently. Later, he joined Cairo University where he specialized in mass media studies, a good fit, given his engagement with public affairs and his passion for literature. Most of his works depict Nubian identity and are characterized by a sophist aura. He collected his short stories in ‘*Arūs el-Nīl* (Bride of the Nile) in 1990, for which he won the State Incentive Award; *Mā’ al-Ḥayāh* (Water of life) in 1992; *Kawila* in 2010; and *Ando-Mando* (“Here and there” in Nubian) in 2009. All these revolve, with varying degrees, around the question of Nubian identity. He published the novels: *Jibāl al-Kuḥl* (Mountains of kohl) in 2001; *Marāfi’ al-Rawḥ* (Harbours of the soul) in 2004; and *Gad Cap* in 2015. Interestingly, Mokhtar admits that “the world of Nubia can never be restored except through writing” (Mokhtar 2019).

A work of art that is truly original and timeless is often born out of suffering. In our modern age, the trauma of Nubian displacement has given rise to various works of fiction that not only portrayed the cataclysmic event, but also captured its sociopolitical implications in such fine detail that these works have come to reflect a full social and historical vision of this important chapter in the history of Nubia. In a sense, this fiction seems to have been instrumental in consolidating certain stereotypes of the Nubian people.

The migration, or rather displacement, of Nubians was not only geographical but, more importantly, psychological. It posed a threat to long-established Nubian customs, traditions, beliefs, lifestyle, weddings, funerals, eating and drinking habits, language exemplified in idioms and proverbs, and an array of social practices and beliefs that supported an essential spirit of communication and continuity in the society.

Here, I propose to explore the technical devices most prevalent in the Nubian novel, namely, the inclusion of Nubian folklore and popular technique of storytelling. This seems to be a trend in the Nubian novel as novelists tend to use various forms of Nubian folklore to preserve Nubian identity in the face of the threat of extinction. Mokhtar’s *Jibāl al-Kuḥl* (Mountains of kohl) and Qassim’s *Al-Shamandūra* (The buoy) are two cases in point.

One of the first books to examine the issue of Nubia and its customs and traditions in the modern age was *Description of Egypt* (first compiled between 1825 and 1828 but not published until 1869) by the



English Orientalist Edward Lane. It is a descriptive and very important study in which the writer dedicated some chapters to describing Nubia, its people, customs, traditions, beliefs, and antiquities. In most of the available critical literature on the Nubian novel, one area that remains fertile ground for further investigation is the use of folkloric traditions. An important study by Hashem Al-Koumy and Mariam Jala'iy (2016) has dealt with the way Nubian customs and habits are portrayed in the important Nubian novel *al-La'ib Fawqa Jibāl al-Nūba* (Playing on Nubian mountains) (73–94). Their study proceeds from assumptions that differ from those of mine. Al-Koumy and Jala'iy investigate the change that occurred in the customs and habits of Nubians as a result of the ever-increasing cultural interaction between north and south. This is achieved through a thorough analysis of the young Cairene woman's character, Ghada, who "invades" Nubian cultural traditions by traveling to the land of Nubia. However, the study that seems to have gained greater attention is a volume edited by John Kennedy, *Nubian Ceremonial Life*, first published in 1978 which discusses a number of important anthropological and cultural issues, including the historical and religious background of Nubia, rituals of Friday prayers in ancient Nubia, *dhikr* (communal cathartic religious chanting) rituals and cultural change, the phenomenon of *Mushāhara* in Nubia and a number of other Egyptian places, circumcision and excision ceremonies, and the changes in Nubian wedding ceremonies. The book ends by describing the Nubian *Zār*.

I attempt here a cultural/anthropological approach to the Nubian texts at hand. As such, I aim to raise awareness about marginalized Nubian people and culture. From a cultural-critical perspective, such a reading focuses attention on the Nubian as an ethnic and/or color minority to critique all forms of hegemony involved in its relation to the wider Egyptian society. As an exemplary cultural and anthropological reading of two major Nubian novels, my study "takes into account the perspective of the marginalised and oppressed; it nurtures cultural celebration and affirmation, and encourages fandom" (During 2005, 214) Thus, my aim is twofold. First, it offers a "thick description" of the daily lives of ordinary Nubians, before and during the period of displacement, thus "open(ing) the text up to areas that have been marginalized socially, temporally, spatially and culturally" (Abdel-Mottalib 2013, 18). Second, I examine and analyze Nubian folklore in the two novels as manifestations of Nubian popular culture with the aim of valorizing the overall cultural production of Nubians as an ethnic group capable of resisting and transforming the power structure in Egyptian culture at large.

### Nubian Identity vis-à-vis the Fear of Extinction

It was time to depart, and the final moment to take leave. Here, in this land, the end of an era was being written, an era in which humanity long ago took its first steps on a journey of human development and civilization for thousands of years. Finally, it was that cosmic moment when you had to pack up and plunge into the eternity of water. (Mokhtar 2001, 107)

The above passage reflects the anxiety of Nubians as the moment of departure is announced. They are not worried about the tragic life they will have to lead, or about their uncertain future in unknown lands, but about the past they used to be proud of, and also of maintaining it in spite of adversities. They are also concerned about the future of the new generations whose connections with their ancestral past may be severed forever. This double concern can be seen in the writings of most Nubian authors who have dealt with the issue. In *Al-Shamandūra* and *Mountains of Kohl*, Qassim and Mokhtar document the details of a past life that seems to establish a sense of Nubian identity, and seek at the same time to protect these elements against the threat of extinction or cultural erosion that comes with time.

I contend that it is the impending danger of displacement that threatened the culture more than the people of Nubia. Nubians knew that they would relocate and lead new lives as individuals rather than an intact community; individuals separated from their inherited cultural, social, and historical frameworks. In this sense, the two novels can be read as social and historical critiques related to the lives of the Nubian people. For example, *Mountains of Kohl* provides a lively historical account of this era in the life of Nubia. Its author admits that he follows in the footsteps of other leading writers and historians: "I saw myself as a memoirist in the tradition of great writers and thinkers rather than great historians, although I have always been fascinated by historical writings" (Mokhtar 2001, 12). What troubled the Nubian people was not anxiety about the present, which to them was an open-and-shut case, but rather about the future and the past. They worried about the uncertainties facing the new generations, the future of their language, and the future of their customs, traditions, and folklore. Mokhtar's text reflects this collective state of anxiety:

Speaking of roots, they began to talk about the fate of Nubia after the Dam, and how people could maintain the essential qualities they had developed so far: peace, togetherness, com-

passion, and security. We thought it was certainly not enough to resettle people in villages that carried the names of their old villages amid strangers, who nevertheless were their fellow countrymen. (97)

Thus, the major concern of the Nubian people was that the new generations could hold them responsible for their lot in life, which would make the older generation seem guilty of failing their own people and betraying their Nubian identity and heritage.

These Nubian anxieties, however, coincided with the appearance of the first issue of the *al-Funūn al-Sha‘biyya (Popular Arts)* journal in January 1965, published by the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. This issue of the journal had a complete section on Nubia, its people, weddings, folktales, architectural styles, and decorative patterns. It was an indication of the concern of the state about the future of this identity, and its desire to keep this heritage alive in the memory of Nubians by means of scientific projects commissioned by the Folkloric Arts Center. The section allotted to Nubia in the journal and other similar field projects showed the relative success of state-sponsored efforts in taking stock of and documenting a portion of Nubia's folkloric beliefs and creative output. At the same time, these efforts highlighted the common ground and objectives of the state and Nubian novelists, that is, a feeling of genuine concern and an attempt to identify, describe, and document Nubian culture. The articles in the Nubia section were illustrated with pictures of various aspects of the culture in question.

For their part, Nubian novelists have tried to make use of every possible bulwark against the threat of extinction. In *Mountains of Kohl*, the young man Jassir finds himself suddenly impelled to defend his identity and the image of Nubians. I quote the whole scene including the description with the words of the song and their effect on the audience; all move the listeners to Abdul Rahim Idris's recitation:

We do not really know what happened to young Bora‘ie Jassir. It was as if he were possessed by a jinnee. He jumped up to recite a poem without asking for permission first[...] Surprised and speechless, all of us felt relieved rather than inclined to scold him, for he answered a need deeply hidden within each one of us, one that was best articulated in the poetic lines of Abdul Rahim Idris. The youth's recitation was uplifting and spell-binding, his voice hoarse and deep, with a melodious tone of a professional singer, carrying a deeply felt sense of the meaning of words:

I am a Nubian; the recesses of my heart are filled with yearning for death, and the promises that come thereafter.

The burdens of the Dam I have carried on my shoulders, joyfully, unhesitatingly.

Sacrificing my fond memories, precious land, palm trees, shores, temple,

The legacy of my ancestors, the dream of my childhood,

The tombs of my forefathers, and the breeze that attended on my birth!

For the sake of the great revolution, my blood, and campsites, Have I offered, for the well-being and sovereignty of the homeland!

There was a deep, heavily charged silence. All circles fell silent and were immediately spellbound. (Mokhtar 2001, 114)

Nubians have experienced two contradictory feelings: a conviction that the High Dam had to be built, and that they had a national duty to make the sacrifice; and, a sense of dwindling into nothingness, extinction, and, indeed, a total cultural uprootedness. This existential dilemma, as it were, finds expression in the following words:

I had a bitter feeling of uprootedness, despite my personal convictions about the Dam. But the fact that we had to leave our birthplace, with all the fond memories associated with it, and a life we would never be able to retrieve — all this had nothing to do with these convictions [...] It is a wound I am trying to forget, but am always reminded of, by a persistent pain [...] My people are resisting in their own way [...] In spite of the apparent jubilation, and the numerous songs praising the Dam and its constructor, I can see that deeply set sorrow, every day, every moment, in their eyes and in their frantic, bereaved looks. (Mokhtar 2001, 93)

Whereas the collective voice of Nubia seemed to echo the national cry for making sacrifices for the sake of the nation's prosperity, various attempts to preserve the Nubian spirit in its purest form continued to emerge. The common denominator in all these attempts is "memory," which is tantamount to a reservoir of cultural traditions and treasures: "We would look intently at everything, to have it deeply engrained in our memories, and securely wrapped in our souls" (Mokhtar 2001, 103).

The displacement that followed the initial stages of building the High Dam was not the first threat to Nubian identity. Written from

within a specific cultural and historical moment, the text seems to offer a “thick description” of Nubian life with its social cultural changes at a given point in history. The term “thick description” is used here in terms of what the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz views as a system of inherited conceptions expressed symbolically. Moreover, Geertz asserts, “a good interpretation of anything — a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society — takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation” (1973, 18). The detailed or “thick” description of the feelings of threat born with the earlier appearance of small transistor-operated radios that spread in Nubian villages is a case in point:

(Transistor) radios brought a complete revolution to Egyptian villages in general, and to the villages of Nubia in particular. In my view, they had a far-reaching effect more than any other invention, before or after. They transformed villages completely by propelling them through time into an entirely new age with its own laws that they were totally unprepared to deal with[...] from total darkness, as if inside a tightly closed bottle, into an explosion of light that blew them far into an expanding limitless universe, with a blinding light that drowned one in its deep tumultuous seas where one found no boat, no oar, no skipper. (Mokhtar 2001, 59–60)

Mapping the interplay of both traditional and modern ways of life Nubian society experienced at this point in history, the narrator goes on to comment on the dynamics of personal and group adaptation to these changes: “Their only guide and savior was an inner compass, a cultural legacy deeply imprinted in their genes and handed over across generations, a hidden compass that allowed them a minimum of togetherness and the possibility of keeping their heads afloat” (Mokhtar 2001, 60).

### **Nubian Language and Identity**

It has become commonplace to regard language as having a decisive and constructive role in national culture and identity. In his seminal work, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o refers to the preservation of one’s “native” language against different forms of annihilation as a struggle for individual and collective identity. In fact, Thiong’o’s famous language debate around the use of English as a medium of expression in colonized and post independence nations finds resonance in the following passage:

An overwhelming high-pitched voice was heard predicting that history and tradition were dying out, and that Nubians were on the way to melting away. The voice asserted that in about a hundred years it would be noted in history books that we were a people who lived in the south of Egypt, and that we had our own language which was closely related to Ancient Egyptian, but that nobody knew anything about it any longer. It would have been a language that died out as its speakers melted away. Only a few recording tapes would have survived documenting songs of that human species which became extinct or was totally merged into others. (Mokhtar 2001, 124)

Since Nubian writers have been preoccupied with threats to Nubian identity, Qassim and Mokhtar adopt a variety of defense mechanisms, including the intentional use of the highly localized Nubian vernacular. They explicitly call for preserving the Nubian language, arguing that protecting the language amounts to protecting the Nubians themselves, no matter how intense their diaspora may be. As Mokhtar puts it “language is the key and the way” (Mokhtar 2001, 88). This preoccupation with the Nubian language as a means of preserving the Nubian identity takes the striking form of a main theme in *Mountains of Kohl*. It shows the level of concern about the future of the language, and the magnitude of reliance on it as a key with which the new generations can unlock the culture of the forefathers:

Now as I sat slightly calmer, I realized that the information he passed to us in the form of a few words will have far-reaching effects. In the first place, it will partly answer the question that Al-Mawardy threw at me one day like a lighted fuse: how could we possibly preserve our heritage? How could our generation avoid the imputation that they were responsible for destroying the roots of our ancient civilization that had remained alive for many centuries before it became extinct? Language is the key, and the way. (Mokhtar, 2001, 88)

Mokhtar believes that language is a vehicle that carries the values of its own culture: “The distinctive Nubian way of life, its unique linguistic tradition, and great cultural legacy all feed into the mainstream of the national fabric, as long as it is recognized for its uniqueness, rather than ignored or erased under false pretexts” (Mokhtar 2001, 97).

In this context, the two novels make extensive use of highly localized vernacular: ‘*angarēb* (traditional Nubian bed), *khamrīd* (fried

bread) (Qassim 2011, 39), *nibla* (sling), *fakh* (trap), *ruṭab mubakkira* (early picked, ripe dates), *basr aḥmar* (40), and *sabarouja, itterharifa* (45). The last three are traditional Nubian recipes, more dependent on local ingredients than elsewhere in the country, whereas *kubiya nahāssi* (brass cup) is the same as elsewhere in the country but pronounced with a heavy Nubian accent (50).

### Popular Literary Forms in Nubia

Using proverbs is one way of expressing Nubian identity, Nubian people tend to use certain proverbs repeatedly in their daily exchanges. Popular proverbs are used in the two novels with slight variations, and for different purposes based on the context, including, for example “A revolving grindstone will necessarily get chipped” (One can’t get away with everything) (Mokhtar 2001, 82); “A dog will always keep wagging its tail” (A leopard can’t change its spots) (Qassim 2011, 307); “To insist on milking a bull (rather than a cow)” (To be at cross-purposes) (Qassim 2011, 401); and “The smallest creature can be of the greatest help” (Mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow) (Qassim 2011, 484). An example of popular idioms is “A hurled missile will only hit an already rotten fruit” (To make things worse) (Qassim 2011, 484). Riddles are also used by the two novelists in the traditional playful question form of “Guess/guess what?” and the standard sequel if guessing fails, “Do you give up?” In this case, the questioner provides the answer, which is often something playful and a surprise. In *Al-Shamandūra*, we read something similar in this passage: “There was a man on board the ship with me. Guess who he was. If you do, I will give each of you a machine-produced cigarette. They tried to guess enthusiastically, but then they gave up, and asked who?” (Qassim 2011, 336)

Popular ballads or songs are noticeably used in different contexts in the two novels for different purposes. A case in point is a song sung by Nubian children, usually while they are engaged in some form of popular children’s games:

We saw a small circle of children forming, and in the middle stood Ashallah, chanting in a dance-like melody:

“Hurray, hurray, everyone, hurray!”

“Hurray, hurray, everyone, hurray!”

Men and women smiled. Children came jumping from everywhere to join the circle and chant the same song. (Qassim 2011, 125)

Another category of song invoked in *Al-Shamandūra* is *Huda' al-Ibil* (Songs to spur camels), which is chanted to the monotonous rhythmic sound of the movement of a camel by its handler. One such example is a well-known rhyme that celebrates the standard criteria of female beauty, such as never having to do household chores, having crescent-like eyebrows and luscious lips (Qassim 2011, 147). The category also includes ballads drawn from the *Hilāliyya* oral epic.

*Sīras*, oral popular tales of epic adventures, are also invoked in *Al-Shamandūra* in two main forms. The first is to incorporate the standard narrative technique of the *sīra*, which involves a *rawī* (narrator-bard) telling a story to an audience seated in a circle around him, listening attentively and interacting with him. At one point in the novel, the author provides a description of a *sīra* session, where people gather to hear the tales of adventure of the two heroes Abu Zeid al-Hilali and Antara Bin Shaddad: "From everywhere, from every *nag'*, people came over to Al-Halab Campmen, women and children bartering, purchasing, and holding dhikr and listening attentively to the *rawī* telling stories about Abu Zeid al-Hilali, Diab Bin Ghanim and dark-skinned Antara, accompanied by his *rabāba* (traditional bowed string instrument)" (Qassim 2011, 156).

Another form of integrating folkloric *sīras* is to describe the *rawī*'s recital of the Saif Ibn Zi-Yazan, which is particularly relevant to the Nubian people in the sense that it echoes unsettling questions in the collective Nubian consciousness:

"Where does the Nile come from?" "Whereto does it flow?"  
 "Why always to the North?" "Why doesn't it return South?" I  
 said to myself, maybe it will one day. Then I heard someone  
 say, "The Nile ends at Sheikh Shbeika, past the north bend," to  
 whom Ahmed Ouda my Uncle immediately retorted sarcastically  
 that the Nile does not end there, nor does it end anywhere!  
 Rather, it never does. It keeps flowing far away where no eye can  
 see it! (Qassim 2011, 58)

This issue is dealt with by the so-called Nile Episode in the *sīra* of Saif Ibn Zi-Yazan, which seems to suggest satisfactory answers to the Nubians who were always happy to listen to it. They would want the *rawī* to continue the narrative without stopping. The month of Ramadan was a particularly propitious time to listen to the story. By contrast, when the *rawī* reaches a point in the *sīra* that does not appeal to the Nubian audience, they immediately ask him to stop. One such situation is the part in the *sīra* that explains the root of the dark skin color. Because Nubians themselves are dark-skinned, they do not identify with that story, which attributes that color to



the curse placed by Noah on his son Ham and his offspring. It seems that the Nubian people approached this *sīra* as true history rather than fiction, and therefore did not want to hear that part. Interestingly, the *rawī* here does not quote verbatim from the popular *sīra* of Saif Ibn Zi-Yazan. Rather, he engages in an act of intertextuality. The relevant passage in the original *sīra* reads as follows:

One day, Noah (Peace Be Upon Him) took a nap in the afternoon, as his sons Sam and Ham sat near. Then, a wind blew and exposed his private parts. Sam hastened to cover his father, while Ham, laughingly, did not care to cover his father's private parts. Awakened from his sweet dreams, Noah found the two lads arguing and altercating, Ham sitting by his feet, and Sam by his head. Back then, men did not wear underpants. When Noah was fully awakened, he found that Ham was smiling while Sam was angry. He asked why they were arguing. Sam told him what his brother had done, how he laughed when he saw Noah's private parts and did not care to cover him up (the *rawī* added). So, Noah looked angrily at Ham and, being a man whose prayer was answered by God, he prayed that God would make the faces of Ham and his posterity black, and make them servants and slaves to the offspring of Sam, his own brother, son of his own father and mother. (*Sīra of Saif Ibn Zi-Yazan Zi-Yazan*, 29–30)

In addition to language as a main factor of preserving identity, another technique used is the documentation of important folkloric customs, traditions, and beliefs in the daily life of the Nubian people. In their attempt to raise interest in the Nubian identity, Mokhtar and Qassim stylistically monitor folkloric customs and habits in a way that almost amounts to the systematic observational methods of social and anthropological research. Each, in his own way, traces such customs and traditions in the full range of the Nubian life cycle from prenatal to posthumous stages, including birth, *subūʿ* (seventh-day baby shower), weddings, traditional forms of play and games, as well as eating and household habits. *Al-Shamandūra*, and for that matter *Mountains of Kohl*, also offers a full vision of the “cycle from birth, *subūʿ*, child playthings, to marriage and death. It paints an artistic account of various Nubian social customs covering a person's life, including a lively picture of the traditions that rule lifestyles, patterns of work, commercial transactions, people's relationship with the river and the land, as well as the relations between men and women” (Eliwa 2011, 17).

This interest in depicting cultural phenomena reveals the extent to which the authors appreciate the value of the human habitat,

as the narrator in *Mountains of Kohl* states: “They told me how they were torn away from everything they were used to, removed forcibly away from family and friends, places where they shared and discussed secrets, familiar places they developed particular attachment to, friendly streets, daily habits, strolls they took in the late afternoons, gatherings they enjoyed in the late evenings” (Mokhtar 2001, 10). This element in the two novels is perfectly natural since both novelists believe that such documentation helps preserve the sustainability and continuity of those patterns of life across new generations of Nubians despite their diaspora. It is therefore not unusual that a whole chapter, and sometimes more than one chapter, may be devoted to the detailed documentation of one aspect of Nubian popular culture. It is worth mentioning that the synergy between different elements — the ancient Egyptian, the Indigenous Nubian, and Arab/Islamic — can be detected in such customs, and attest to the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of marking a clear division between such influences. It attests to the very colorful tapestry of Nubian folk tradition where such influences enter the fabric of this very rich tradition.

### **Nubian/Pharaonic Cultural Traditions**

Indigenous Nubian traditions, which can be traced to various Pharaonic times, are manifested in detailed descriptions of several social customs, birth and wedding ceremonies, and death rituals. It is my contention that such descriptions amount to surveys or ethnological records of a people’s cultural way of life before it disappears. In *Al-Shamandūra*, Qassim portrays how Nubians receive a newborn. In this traditional Nubian community, a midwife replaces the physician (who would be a general practitioner of the national health system). An important figure in Nubian culture, the midwife is carefully portrayed in the novel, and in *Mountains of Kohl*, too, together with all the associated customs, traditions, and common lore. Once the midwife — usually a mature and experienced woman — has delivered the baby, a series of child-related and mother-related actions is set in motion. Kohl is applied to the baby’s eyelids. The baby is then placed in a large container, possibly a sieve full of maize, a practice believed to herald good fortune for the baby and his or her family in the future. If the baby is born to a Christian family, the midwife christens him or her, as depicted in the following passage:

As the midwife headed to the door, she bumped into Batta, who hurriedly said to her: “Come, Aunt; you’ve forgotten the maize.” Back they went into the court, where they poured a portion of

maize in a large basket made of colorful plaited straw. Then they brought the newly born and placed him on top of the maize, christening him, his mother carefully watching with partially closed eyelids. Batta stretched her hand to fetch the kohl vial. She twiddled with it for a while; then she brought the kohl dispenser close to the baby's forehead where with great care she drew a little cross. When she finished, she examined her work attentively, then gave the baby back to his mother. (Qassim 2011, 140-41)

Nubian births are also associated with a specific cultural tradition that celebrates *subū'*, the passage of seven days after the birth of the new baby. This takes the form of a ceremony marked with singing and dancing to the beats of *dufūf* (traditional tambourines) and serving traditional food. On *subū'* day, people from across the *nag'* (hamlet) come to the house of the celebrating family:

They sang to the rhythms of tambourines. After they finished their meal and drinks, they stood in two lines chanting solemn birth hymns and the *Mirghani Burda* (spiritual poem of praise). They went on until their feet became sore, so they started to recline on *angarēbs*, busying themselves with their small talk. As the day drew to a close, a man of the family stood up and proceeded to a palm tree, which he scaled up to reach the roof of the house. Choosing a prominent post on top, he raised his hands close to his ears, as though he would chant the call for prayers. Then, three times did he announce the name of my little brother, uttering it in a melodious tone which reverberated across the *nag'*, until it rebounded off the rock lodged up the mountain and finally faded away in between the palm trees: Mahmoud Amin. (Qassim 2011, 141)

Marriages and wedding ceremonies are another very rich ethnographic source manifesting the uniqueness of the Nubians. These two novels give an extensively detailed account of the popular rites and traditions related to Nubian marriages and weddings. Qassim devotes as many as four chapters (21-24) in *Al-Shamandūra* to this. The novel shows how the Nubian people who are about to be relocated insist on celebrating weddings, with all the related practices, more than at any other time, as if they were to stay in their land for a long time, rather than a few hours only. The wedding celebrations are, in effect, a form of bidding farewell to the land: "For some time now, they have had a wedding every single day; they marry couples in a hurry to capture the blessings of having the knot tied and the

wedding party celebrated on the ancestral land. I know they are suffering from the same agony of up rootedness after having been firmly established here for many centuries” (Mokhtar 2001, 93).

The detailed account of wedding rituals in *Al-Shamandūra* covers wedding day preparations, receiving guests, food preparations, arranging guest accommodation, the formal rituals of marriage, the exact phrases used, how *shuhūd* (witnesses) are chosen, gifts given to the groom by his parents and relatives, and all kinds of rites, songs, dances, and ululation, as illustrated in the quotes below. A wedding is, to the Nubian people, a chance to get together and show social togetherness and connectedness. It is also a popular carnival-like demonstration of rituals, beliefs, and arts, which runs the entire gamut of the marriage event, from the engagement to the religious rituals, the *henna* night (a traditional party on the eve of the wedding), the wedding day, and the *ṣabāḥiyya* (morning after the wedding night):

A Nubian wedding has characteristic traditions, features, songs, dances, costumes, and rituals. It is one of the most important occasions when the Nubian community exercises a mixture of long-established tradition and spontaneous creative expression, play, and value judgment, religious beliefs, and magic. People pour their feelings and imagination in all forms of artistic expression, including song, dance, rhythm, movement, drawing, and costumes. An entirety of life experience can be seen in the ring gatherings where people chat, or stories and mythical tales are told. It is a chance for all forms of common feelings and collective consciousness to take precedence over individual subjectivity. (Kamal 1965, 101)

*Al-Shamandūra* and *Mountains of Kohl* document a variety of such marriage-related events and practices, including the *galwa* (the night when the bride and the bridegroom are separately given a bath and a full beauty or grooming session ahead of the wedding), and *nuqūt* (money given as a present to the couple). Moreover, the text offers a very “thick description” of the gift offerings ceremony to describe, through a detailed and close examination, Nubian social conventions and cultural codes. As such, the writers seem to be translating the personal and the practical everyday lives of the Nubians to their fellow Egyptian audience, who are unaware of such practices. However, the bitter reminder of the dark future awaiting the newlyweds together with all Nubians is not to be overlooked in the text:

As Barakat Effendi listened to the gift declarations, he turned to his colleagues, and then looked bewildered at the men and women donors, whose faces brimmed with ecstatic joy. He wondered to himself: “What good are all these gifts? The fish will claim them all very shortly. I have entered every single one in my books. Everything will go to waste. You miserable people! It is a habit you cannot get rid of, a habit that has turned into a ritual that has to be observed just like any religious or formal rite of marriage.” (Qassim 2011, 242)

Part of the wedding traditions requires the groom to perform an ancient Egyptian ritualistic bath by taking a dive in the Nile accompanied by his friends. It is a fertility ritual that takes place amid jubilant cries, the sounds of tambourine beats, and lashing whips: “Their cries were heard, ‘Go down into the water; take the dive! Show us your guts!’ With the sharp noise of the whips filling his ears, he plunged into the cold water, without uttering a single exclamation of shock — which would have been an unforgivable disgrace!” (Qassim 2011, 254).

Another marriage ritual referred to in *Al-Shamandūra* involves the couple going to the Nile various times, after the wedding, particularly after the physical consummation of marriage marked by the rupturing of the woman’s hymen (Qassim 2011, 269). It is noteworthy that the novel also portrays the practice of *faḍ al-bakāra* (rupturing the woman’s hymen manually), which is considered proof of the bride’s premarital chastity. The event is attended by an elderly woman of the family. The groom carries a knife or dagger on him, and a cane with which he smashes a few plates. Tradition has it that this show makes the bride feel intimidated and consequently become subjugated thereafter (295–96). Qassim goes a step further to present to us the wedding ceremony featuring a miscellany of popular games, dances, and songs. The songs may be sung by the women attending the event or by a bard specially hired to lead the festivities. An indispensable part of the wedding is the advice given to the bride and the bridegroom separately by their elders, as illustrated in the following passage in which a female guest congratulates the bride:

Do not raise your voice as long as the man of the house is present. Do not let your voice be unrestrained. Be proudly demure and unattainable so that he may know you have high self-esteem. Treat your mother-in-law as you would treat your own mother. Your siblings should only visit you rarely. If they stay for dinner, they should not stay overnight and be still present

for breakfast the next morning. They should come with gifts: flour, butter, and foodstuffs that seem to your husband enough for a week's supply, but you should manage for ten days with the same amounts. And then laundry! Laundry is the most important thing. People will not criticize him, but you. When you have a meal together, you should be the first to feel full. If you become indisposed — may God protect you from illness — he should not realize that you are. Bind him unto you with a male child. Your husband is in effect a father, a mother, and a brother. Do not let go of him. His honor is your honor, my daughter. (Qassim 2011, 249)

Any reader familiar with ancient Egyptian culture and tradition would not lose sight of the influence of the ancient Egyptian wisdom scripts of teachings, morals, and ethics (known as *Maat*) passed down from a father to his son, or a ruler to his subjects. Thus, the two novels offer a carefully detailed picture of marriage-related customs and traditions, given the importance of marriage to the Nubian society, which “considers marriage the biggest occasion to celebrate and feel joy” (Kamal 1965, 101).

Now we come to the depiction of the funerary practices and the rituals and protocols of death and burial in both novels. It is noteworthy that the Nubian people, like their ancient Egyptian counterparts, have always taken special interest in life after death, an interest that is reflected in various practices and beliefs related to death, burial, and visiting the resting places of the dead. The deceased have always been present in the hearts and the minds of Nubians whose tombs and graveyards show how much they value their forefathers. They visit the dead regularly. When a Nubian person feels that they are approaching the end of life, they leave specific instructions where and with whom they would like to be buried. This is well illustrated in *Mountains of Kohl* in the words of the grandmother of Muhammad Al-Mawardy, who just after the release of her grandson from prison “said to my brother Zakariyya: ‘I never told him what weighs down on my heart. He is already heavy-hearted because of the time he spent in prison, and his concerns about the future. But I wish to be buried next to your grandfather’” (Mokhtar 2001, 78).

The scene that most reflects how the Nubian people venerate and relate to the dead is the farewell scene, which occurs on the extra night they manage to spend before they move away. Suddenly, without any previous agreement or arrangement, they head collectively to the village cemetery:

As more sirens were heard, signaling that we should move forward, something happened for which I have no explanation till this moment. Instead of proceeding to the shore where the barges were waiting, I found myself rushing with the locals up the hill toward the cemetery[....] It was an urge with no explanation or philosophy behind it. The expansive land and the sky above converged at the horizon where the tombstones did not end. There, life, and the afterlife merged. (Mokhtar 2001, 115)

*Mountains of Kohl* devotes considerable space to a detailed description of death and visiting the dead in Nubia. Before their displacement, Nubian people used to visit their departed ones regularly. Similarly, in *Al-Shamandūra*, chapter 49 is dedicated to a description of the daily life of the Nubian people, including habits and customs related to deaths and funerals (Qassim 2011, 469). In spite of the Nubian desire to keep these customs and beliefs alive, a recent anthropological study has concluded that Nubian customs and habits related to the cycle of daily life in general, and to death in particular, are undergoing fundamental changes. Urbanization in some Nubian cities has contributed to a shrinking in the communal demonstration of grief when a member of the group dies. Wailing or distraught cries are no longer heard unless the departed be young, or death be too sudden or the result of an accident. The length of communal mourning has also been shortened from the traditional forty to fifteen days, then to seven, then three. Eventually, as the field study showed, the mourning period is now reduced to only two days for women, and one day or even less, for men if the deceased happened to die far away in town, and the news of their death arrived late to the village (Abdel-Qadir 2017, 321).

### **Nubian/Islamic Cultural Traditions**

From the ancient Egyptian to the Arab/Islamic component of Nubian culture, the celebrations of the month of Ramadan as it draws to its end, and the Eid (feast) in the subsequent days are represented in full detail, amounting to a detailed ethnographic account of how Nubians celebrate this very important minor Bairam for the Moslems:

In the last few days of the blessed month of Ramadan, people begin to repeat chants of farewell: “Noah knocked at our door. He went about chanting the farewell song out in the streets: Wish to God we did not have to bid you farewell, month of fast-

ing. Wish to God we did not have to bid you farewell, Ramadan!" (Qassim 2011, 225).

Apart from mainstream Islamic forms of religious observation, the Islamic Sufi spirit runs deep in Nubian souls, as attested by the presence of multiple Sufi *ṭarīqas* (orders), *qutbs* (leading mentors and founders of Sufi sects), and shrines in the Nubian community. There are a large number of Nubians who are followers of Sufism, who visit Sufi shrines, and practice certain rites, including offering supplicant prayers to have a wish fulfilled, or bringing *nudhūr* (offerings) in fulfillment of a promise they had made. One of the popular Sufi *ṭarīqas*, which is referred to in ample detail in *Mountains of Kohl*, is the Mirghanī *ṭarīqa*. A representative figure of this *ṭarīqa* is Sheikh Hassan Kashef, who is described in the following passage as an accomplished disciple of Mirghanī, the great *qutb* himself:

He learnt the Quran by heart, as well as hundreds of Prophet Muhammad's *hadiths*. He was formally initiated into the *ṭarīqa* by its own *qutb*, Sidi Muhammad Othman Al-Mirghani, the high custodian of the Sufi seal of covenant. He (Kashef) was the sentinel of the Mirghanī shrine, and the tender of hospices scattered across various small hamlets, where desirous visitors and loving followers of Sidi Mirghanī sought accommodation. (Mokhtar 2001, 23)

There is also a host of *magazīb* (dervishes living in humble asceticism), who are believed by the common people to be spiritually gifted despite their similarity to the mentally disturbed. One *magzūb* is described in *Al-Shamandūra* in a passage that reflects how this category of people is maltreated by others, in this case by a group of recalcitrant children:

A man walks hurriedly by the shore, a strange man in both aspect and appearance. He is considerably of a large built, with a round face that is shiny black. His two big lips reveal shining white teeth. His hair is disheveled and scattered on his head like pepper seeds, falling long on his chest and reaching down between his thighs. He is stark naked. He looks kind. His mouth is dripping with saliva which runs down his neck, and is only intercepted by a few whispering words which he repeats with every step: "The One and Only; He has no peer; the One and Only!" Cries of children follow him until they form a circle around him. He is like one walking to his own death. He is a peculiar creature you may see for the first time in the alleys of



the *nag*‘, then the next moment he is not there. You may see him across the Nile, on the shore of the island. Before long, you may see him walking on the other bank! He appears for no obvious reason and disappears in the same manner. He knows everybody, knows all about them and foretells what will happen to them soon. (Qassim 2001, 126)

This description in *Al-Shamandūra* is compatible with the nature of the Nubian society, which “entertains a firm belief in the power of those *magazib* or dervishes” (Tamim 2017, 14). As is the case in most traditional Islamic societies that believe in the reverence of saints and Sufis, the description of the dancing and twirling dervishes reflects the degree to which the local culture has adapted Sufi popular practices. Such saints are considered a kind of good omen, “So, they treat them carefully, kindly, and compassionately. They deal with them generously. Some may consider them a source of *barakah* [divine blessing] and see them as a sign ushering good things in the future” (14–15).

Moreover, the *Dhikr* used to be one significant indicator of how Sufi *ṭarīqas* were widespread in Nubia. On happy occasions, or when an evil had been warded off, the Nubian people would pay a visit to a Sufi *qutb* or hold a *dhikr* night by way of showing gratitude. According to John Kennedy and Hussein Fahim (2005), “an important feature of the religious life of Egypt and Sudan is the *dhikr*, the most important ritual of the Sufi brotherhoods” (41).

When Muhammad Al-Mawardy is released by the authorities, his family holds a *dhikr*, to which they invite members of a Sufi *ṭarīqa* so that people may come and receive blessings. Indeed, the account of *dhikr* in the novel resembles Kennedy and Fahim’s description of *dhikr* in their important study “*Dhikr* Rituals and Culture Change,” which describes the performance of *dhikr* in the two Egyptian Nubian villages (2005, 41–59). This kind of *dhikr*, also referred to as *mūlid*, was associated with certain chants about a particular Sufi *qutb* or *wali* (Muslim saint) and dealt with the miracles performed by him. *Mūlids* were common in Nubia throughout the different months of the year, so much so that they had become a pattern of life:

Those who remained behind in the villages after the northward migration of others more capable of earning a living had to fill the nine months with singing, dancing and *mūlids* held in honor of their pious *wāliyyis*: Sidi Kabir, Sheikh Abdullah and Sidi Hassan Abou Jalabiyya. They chanted the *Safin*, in Praise of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Old women told stories to

audiences gathered by *kanūns* (traditional ovens) and on *mastabas*, while women and girls wove straw mats and colorful plates, and decorated the houses with drawings and ornamental motifs inspired by the murals of ancient temples and old churches. On the front walls of the houses, they hung elaborately decorated china plates. (Mokhtar 2001, 43)

### Food as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

Over the last two decades, there has been growing interest in the relation between culinary poetics and identity politics (Narayan 2010; Nun Halloran, 2016). The literary representations of food, dishes, and their ingredients, as well as eating habits and customs of groups and communities have become tools to assess a nostalgic past, negotiate the present, and resist all forms of cultural and physical erasure. From this perspective, the narrative “indulgence,” in the daily eating habits of Nubians as represented in the two novels goes beyond the gaze of the curious anthropologist to an engagement with food in its connections with the territorial material conditions of Nubians. Food items in the novels become cultural signifiers that define the local traditions of Nubia. As such it constitutes a major tool of resistance.

Various types of favorite food are referred to in the two novels, including *khamrīd* (fried bread), *rayīb* (sour curdled milk), *abarsūja*, and *ittirharifa*. In the morning, certain types of food are consumed: “My sister Jamila woke up, and proceeded gently to prepare our breakfast: slices of *khamrīd*, and a bowl of *rayīb* to which she added a splash of date syrup” (Qassim 2001,39). Other types of food are associated with other times: “They gorged on large slices of *khamrīd*, *sabarūja*, and *ittirharifa* spiced with red chili. They swallowed these whole, while taking bites of spring onion” (45).

Dates, however, are a common denominator in many traditional Nubian foods, either as part of a recipe or as an asset to fund basic staple purchases. Dates are the main crop in Nubia, and a source of income — indeed, an important element in the economy: “We relied mainly for livelihood on harvesting the dates of the remaining palm trees, in addition to the money transfer of seventy-five piasters which my uncle Hassanein Al-Mawardy sent us every month by post. On feast days, he would send us parcels containing clothes, tea packets, and sugar cones, with an additional bonus of about a whole pound. We were well taken care of” (Mokhtar 2001, 14, 17).

Since the date-harvesting season constitutes a focal event in Nubian culture, the Nubian novel keenly seeks to preserve the memories of the relevant festivities. The season starts with universal

celebrations: “The whole village moves to the palm tree land. The activity lasts for the whole months of August and September. Thanks to the harvest, the villagers repay their debts to the village merchants. They also sell part of the harvest to other merchants who arrive during the season especially for this purpose” (Abdel-Qadir 2013,40).

A culture of “buying on credit”<sup>3</sup> emerged and developed gradually into a cornerstone of the established norm of economic transactions in Nubia. The locals would buy from the merchants everything they needed throughout the year “on credit,” pending the harvest of their various crops, chiefly dates. That was the time when merchants were fully repaid the debts, which they carefully entered in special notebooks. Abdel-Hayy states that “ownership of the palm trees was shared by different families, based on their role in providing saplings or irrigation or their land equity” (2016, 143). Similarly, Mostafa Abdel-Qadir describes the harvest festivities, with their various socioeconomic dimensions:

Dates were the most important cash crop people relied on to repay their debts to merchants who supplied their needs all year long. Families and individuals shared the ownership of palm trees which covered a large area along the shores of the villages. The shares corresponded to people’s ownership of land and the amount of their efforts in irrigation or providing saplings. People who took part in grafting and harvesting also had their shares too. Those who did not own any palm trees did also receive part of the harvest, just as the case was with other agricultural crops. The date harvest was a cash product that was used to repay debts accumulating throughout the year. (Abdel-Qadir, 2017, 35)

### **Art, Architecture, and the Preservation of Memory**

The Nubian novel in the years of constructing the High Dam and the Nubian relocation was mainly preoccupied with consolidating an identity threatened with extinction. It therefore sought to plant every element of this identity into the memory of the Nubian people to help it survive in the minds and hearts of the new generations born in completely new territories. *Al-Shamandūra* and *Mountains of Kohl*, therefore, closely depict many physical elements of the Nubian culture, including the distinctive Nubian architectural style: “Traditional plastic arts in old Nubia had characteristic ornamental patterns drawn by folklore artists and ordinary people from their

3 Chapter 6 of *Al-Shamandūra* includes a description of this “credit” culture, pages 83–94.

daily lives and from the different aspects of their ordinary lifestyle” (Youssef 1965, 129). Mokhtar captures this spirit fully in the following passage:

Ornamental motifs on the façades are brightly and joyfully colored yellow, blue, and white. They provide light amidst ruins, fighting the surrounding ugliness which has encroached on everything that could be seen. Pointing to exquisite ornamental motifs, Al-Mawardy spoke about their beauty and glory which was reminiscent of the prosperity which the girls dreamt of and missed as they decorated the houses. While decorating, they were imagining that which they did not experience or see with their own eyes. By parading these joyful colors, they were resisting the hardships and poverty they were suffering from. Without the magnanimity, tolerance, and inner peace which illuminated their souls with an eternal light — so that they could see their surroundings thus filled with these singing colors — they wouldn’t have been able to do just that. (Mokhtar 2001, 104)

*Mountains of Kohl*, describes the Nubian architectural style, providing a verbal description<sup>4</sup> of this quasi-ancient Egyptian style:

The façades are clearly Ancient Egyptian in how the roofs slope backwards, in the form of an imperfect pyramid. He, Al-Mawardy, lowered his gaze and began to address us calmly as if his words issued from his memory: you know that our forefathers held their ancestors sacred. They buried them according to their beliefs in the olden times, in the courtyards of their own houses. The house front has geometrically shaped niches which resemble ornamental bas-reliefs; these are supposed to be the resting places of ancestral spirits. Seen at a distance in their proximity, the various elements of these ornamental motifs look like inscriptions in ancient languages. (Mokhtar 2001, 113)

The architectural style of the traditional Nubian house is, therefore, an amalgam of features inspired by the different civilizations witnessed by the Nubian land as well as the elements of nature found therein. The Nubian house was usually “painted with stucco. The walls carried drawings of natural elements, animals, the holy Kaaba, the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, or other geometrical motifs drawn from the Nubian environment” (Abdel-Hayy 2016, 137).

4 *Mountains of Kohl* also includes various pictorial representations of Nubian customs, habits, and architectural style (see Mokhtar 2001, 15, 25, 33, 39, 45, 67, 83, 89, 95, 101, 109, and 119).

## Nubian/Egyptian Popular Games

The intertwining of the local Nubian cultural way of life with the more general Egyptian one can be also discerned in the popular games practiced in Nubian villages and towns by both children and adults. *Al-Shamandūra* documents various popular games that Nubian children used to play, for example, the *ḥajla/handūkiyya* (hopscotch): “We left him embracing his bat and went away, having agreed to meet later after the night prayer in the arena, where we would play *ḥajla* till we become sleepy” (Qassim 2001, 33). Bride and Bridegroom is another game based on role-play, in which the stages of marriage in the Nubian tradition are reenacted in a playful form (164–67).

Games are not for children only; there are certain types of play reserved for adults, mainly dance and *siḡa* (a two-player game reminiscent of chess, where the board is replaced by holes dug in the earth, and the pieces by pebbles). On the final night allowed to the Nubians just before departure, unexpected as it may have been, they perform two important rites: visiting the tombs of the dead, and getting together in rings to dance and sing to the beat of tambourines:

The crowds divided into many circles near the hills and fine sand dunes located by the marina [...] The weather was magically refreshing, more like autumn nights, although it was March [...] Young women responded and willingly went to the arena in choreographed steps, gracefully marching to the rhythms of *aragid* (traditional Nubian dances). Ululations echoed over the surface of the river which reflected the lights of the lanterns and those of the barges moored by the shore, thus doubling the reflections. The dancing grew wilder accompanied by the melodious voice of Nubia’s best singer Abdullah Bata, singing his new song. They were like a wreath of flowers encircling the singer in the middle who was heard chanting: “Rejoice, brother [...] The High Dam will soon bring good fortune [...] A wish has come true. Pray for Gamal [Abdel Nasser] [...] and salute the new town. (Mokhtar 2001, 111–12)

To bid the village farewell by dancing that night shows what dance meant to the Nubian people. It is a practice and a rite related to all aspects of their life. Abdel-Hayy (2016) explains the centrality of the tradition to Nubian popular culture:

*Aragid* (a local Nubian term which refers to popular Nubian dancing) is associated with the *hinna* (bridal party and beauty session on the wedding eve) and the wedding night. Every person in the group may take part in these traditional popular dances. According to tradition, there are men-only, women-only, and joint categories of dancing. Popular dances are usually performed in celebration of regular yearly events that have to do with the economic life of the community, such as the phases of the agricultural year, fishing, seasonal changes, and landmarks in people's lives including birth, circumcision, and marriage, as well as national days. (82)

### Conclusion

I have proceeded from the assumption that the existential anxieties and the concerns that Nubian identity was becoming extinct continue to be fertile areas of investigation. These anxieties are represented in the Nubian novel and confronted by invoking various forms of Nubian folkloric traditions. Nubian people have suffered from anxiety and concern about their own identity, which is reflected in the novels written during, or just after, the Nubian displacement or relocation. *Al-Shamandūra* and *Mountains of Kohl* are two exemplary works in this respective; authors seek refuge in the different forms of folkloric traditions as a potential strategy to conserve the Nubian identity. The Nubian people and writers were not concerned about their immediate reality per se, as much as they feared the loss of their history, their inherited legacies, and their future. Most importantly, they were concerned that history might judge them harshly to the effect that they had negligently wasted away their long-established history. It is against this background that the two Nubian writers found in folklore an important tool with which to protect and preserve their own roots. They resorted to a variety of techniques to keep the folkloric traditions alive in their writings. These include the call to revive the Nubian language, the use of a highly localized vernacular in their writings, and the contextualization of customs, habits, and popular beliefs related to the Nubian daily lifestyle. Both writers revisited favorite popular texts found in different fields of Nubian life, such as proverbs, idioms, riddles, and *sīras*, and the detailed portrayal of Nubian cultural features, such as Sufism with its full range of *qutbs*, sheikhs, *tariqas*, *mūlids*, festivities, and beliefs. As such, the novels may be considered ethnographic archives of "the manners and customs" of Nubians. Investigation of the elements of Nubian popular and folkloric culture will clearly reveal strong correlations, on the one hand, be-

tween these Nubian elements and, on the other, their counterparts in Pharaonic, Arab/Islamic traditions practiced in remote Egyptian villages and *nag*'s throughout Egypt.

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# The Egyptian Nubian Archival Discourse

## Identity Politics in Yehia Mokhtar's *Indo Mando* (Here and there) and *Giddu Kāb*

Pervine Elrefaei

Archives and archival discourses have become of major concern in cultural studies in the last few decades. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have associated archives with power relations. Controlled and manipulated by those in authority, archives are seen as a hegemonic tool and a discourse of power based on exclusion (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 1, 3, 5, 13, 14; Carter 2006, 216). Sue Breakell states, "Any archive is a product of the social processes and systems of its time, and reflects the position and exclusions of different groups or individuals within those systems" (2008, 5). Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook argue that "archives — as records — wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies" (2002, 2).

Nevertheless, archives can be "a tool of resistance" (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 13). Propelled by the "quest for justice" (3), scholars and artists have started to revisit the archives, searching for the silenced voices of the marginalized or "the dynamics of silence in archives" (Carter 2006, 215). In this regard, I argue in this chapter that a number of Egyptian Nubian writers and activists have adamantly endeavored to compile their own archive as an empowering strategy geared toward preserving Nubian oral history, culture, identity, and rights. The archival narrative is therefore an important cultural production that appropriates the archival discourse as a rite of passage from the margin to the center. Such resistant attempts have escalated anxieties about Egypt's national security, during times of

political upheavals. I hereby scrutinize two archival works by the Egyptian Nubian writer Yehia Mokhtar (1936–), mainly the 2009 collection of short stories *Indo Mando* and the 2015 biographical novel *Giddu Kāb*. I contend that the ideology and tactics of resistance of these works represent Mokhtar in sharp contrast to other Egyptian Nubian writers. Mokhtar's archival discourse on identity, nationalism, the image, and cultural positionality of the Egyptian Nubian, and his attempt at appropriating the archival discourse as a space of intervention and empowerment are thus worthy of attention.

Some questions addressed here: What is the relation between the Egyptian official national archive and the local Nubian one? What is an archive from the Egyptian Nubian perspective? What is the role of Mokhtar as an archival writer? How far does Mokhtar differ from other Nubian writers? How far is the Egyptian Nubians' act of knowledge production shaped by their ongoing political reality and ideological perspectives? How far has Mokhtar succeeded in appropriating the archival discourse as a space of intervention and empowerment? To provide answers to these questions, I use Derrida's concept of the archive and his spatial definition of the archive as "house" (1995, 9, 10) beside Marco Codebo's (2010) definition of the archival novel as a hybrid literary genre.

### **Contextualizing the Egyptian Nubian Archival Discourse: The Ambivalence of the Official Archive**

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida investigates the meaning and dimension of the archive, highlighting the importance of archival time, archival space, and the role and status of the archivists themselves: "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory," says Derrida (1995, 4). The word "archive," he states, is basically derived from the Greek term *arkhē*, which has the double meaning of "commencement" (beginnings and origin) and "commandment" (power and authority) (9). Taken also from "the Greek *arkheion*," the archive is the "home" or "house" of the "archons," or archivists, who keep the records of the past, possess the power of legislation, and hence exercise a discourse of power (9–10). Narratives related to archives as "spaces of power" (Carter 2006, 216) are no longer "linear" (Jong 2016, 7). Derrida's argument suggests the blurred boundaries of the temporal archive where the past, present, and future intersect, since in preserving the past the archive has "a responsibility for tomorrow" (Derrida 1995, 36), setting hopes for utopian future possibilities.

Pierre Nora argues that "our whole society lives for archival production" (quoted in Breakell 2008, 1–2). The journey of Nubian

displacement after the construction of the Aswan Reservoir (1902, 1912, 1933), followed by the Aswan Dam (1961–1964), is documented differently in the official and Nubian archives. Egyptian Nubians have always occupied an ambivalent position in the official archive, oscillating between the margin and the center. Though the official archive has granted Nubians visibility at crucial moments of Egypt's history, it has, nonetheless, relegated them to the margin in stable times. Successive political leaders have propagated a discourse of inclusion that has acknowledged Nubians' sacrifices and rights as equal citizens, promising them a more fulfilling future. However, those promises and dreams have dissipated during other times of political stability.

During the reign of King Ahmed Fouad I, the National Bank of Egypt issued a one pound note in 1926, "as the first Egyptian currency with a watermark," with the image of "Idris," the Nubian peasant (Azab 2016, 56) and helper at King Fouad's palace, occupying a central position on the signifier of Egypt's economy. However, driven by dire economic conditions, Nubians constantly migrated to the north to support their families. Following the end of the monarchy and the beginning of the High Dam project, on January 11, 1960, President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956–1970) voiced his hopes for a better future for the Nubians, disseminating an inclusive discourse anchored in citizenship rights:

My brothers, people of Nubia,

[...] We feel that the benefits that will envelop the people of Nubia will be great, uniting its offspring on the right bases for building a strong proper society. You will no longer complain of isolation or fragmentation of families due to work between the North and the South[...] We believe that your migration and displacement will be well organized and comfortable for all of you to help you move from your villages to other parts where you will be happy, free, and will prosper. (Bashari 2010; my translation)

Moreover, on November 23, 1997, the International Museum of Nubia was inaugurated, commemorating Nubian culture and civilization (Nubian Museum). Similarly, in 2006, a conference was held in Abu Simbel village inaugurating the collaborative efforts of the Center for Documenting the Natural Heritage and Nubian activists, thinkers, and writers to preserve the Nubian cultural heritage. The conference announced the beginning of the digital age of archivization. The "Marghaniyyah" order, as the predominant Sufist culture of Nubia, was among the heritage collected and documented (Cult-

nat 2012). Nonetheless, totally ignored has been the injustice which the Nubians have suffered as a result of unfulfilled promises.

Such an ambivalent archival relation of attraction and repulsion has generated different tactics of resistance and ideological perspectives manifested by Egyptian Nubian writers and activists who represent two juxtaposed perspectives, the secular and the Sufist. On the one hand, Idris Ali and Haggag Oddoul, though different, represent the secular perspective where the religious dimension does not constitute a major anchor in their writings. In Idris Ali's 2005 exemplary novel, *Taḥta Khaṭṭ al-Faqr* (Poor, 2007), the protagonist/antagonist attacks the authority of all institutions, national and religious, expressing his feelings of aggression, bitterness, and rebellion against the official national discourse and archive. Ali's protagonist ends up ambivalently othering and dissociating himself from both the margin and the center, representing both as parts of the oppressed and oppressive African space (Elrefaei 2014a, 21). Oddoul also manifests an oppositional discourse. Corroborating his Egyptianness in several talks and interviews by highlighting his participation in building the High Dam and in the 1967 and 1973 wars (Khedr and Fekry 2010), Oddoul, nonetheless, has called at different moments for the necessity of internationalizing the Nubian issue.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, Sufist philosophy has been of great influence on another group of thinkers and activists. Members of the older generation, mainly the scholar Mohamed Khalil Kabbara and Mohamed Soliman Giddu Kāb, assumed the role of the archons/archivists, revitalizing and creating the awareness of the Nubian language as an indispensable constituent of the displaced younger generation's identity. The writers also aimed at consolidating their national identity as Egyptians. The term "Nubian writers" has become a provocative, controversial term, rejected by the official cultural discourse on the grounds of signifying a separatist agenda, and has likewise been criticized by a number of Nubian artists. In a 2015 interview with *Akhbār al-Adab* newspaper, following the publication of his archival novel *Giddu Kāb*, Yehia Mokhtar highlights his ideological perspective, stating that he basically writes to create aware-

1 In justifying his perspective in a 2008 interview, Oddoul refers to the late president G. Abdel Nasser, who had previously called for the intervention of UNESCO to save Nubian cultural heritage (Mahfouz and Elsayid 2009). Rejecting the accusation of separatism hurled at him by the official discourse, Oddoul in a 2010 interview dips into the colonial archive to clarify his perspective: "I am a Nubian, Egyptian, Arab, Muslim who cherishes the enlightened Islam, and not the arid tribal copy of Islam[...]. Separatism had been on the colonial agenda inscribed by Churchill to fragment Egypt [...] I have not asked for international intervention, I only asked for the intervention of human rights organizations that work inside Egypt" (Khedr and Fekry 2010; my translation). Oddoul states that his objective is to defend the legal rights of his people as equal citizens in need of the right of return to their space of origin to defend their cultural heritage. The land of Nubia, he believes, is an intrinsic part of Egypt but also the gateway to the Sudan and Africa with which it has had a long cross-cultural history (Khedr and Fekry 2010).

ness of Nubian culture, history, and predicament (*Akhbār al-Adab* 2015). Nonetheless, he elaborates, “There is nothing called Nubian literature[....] My writings are Egyptian; labeling them as Nubian literature generates a schism inside the homeland; this is a dangerous thing that one has to be conscious of” (see also Abdelrahman 2018; Mansour 2017). In a similar vein to Oddoul, Mokhtar consolidates the national role of the Nubians who participated in the 1956 war to defend Egypt against the tripartite imperial aggression.

In the tumultuous period of the 2011 revolution and its aftermath, both national and local archives were jeopardized. On December 17, 2011, the Cairo Scientific Institute, located close to Tahrir Square and home to thousands of historical cultural records and manuscripts, was set on fire, among many other buildings (*National Geographic* 2011; *The Guardian* 2011; Stock 2011). Besides, the increasing power of the Muslim Brotherhood generated anxieties about Egypt’s identity and future (Elrefaei 2014b, 683–751). The radical Katāla movement led by a number of young Nubian activists surfaced on the political stage and in the media, threatening to use armed force to realize its demands (*Sada Elbalad* 2013). The movement was criticized by the majority of Nubians, historically known for their peaceful nature. The marginalized south was also a space of conflict. In April 2014, violent clashes erupted between two major Nubian tribal families, the Bani Hilal and Daboud, culminating in the death of more than twenty-three Nubians from both families (Algamal 2014). Consequently, the Nubians were first addressed by Field Marshal M.H. Tantawi (of Nubian origin himself), head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, in the aftermath of 2011, followed by president-elect Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood leaders, whose ambivalent discourse enraged Nubian activists and the Katāla movement (*al-Ahram* 2013; *Sada Elbalad* 2013), and finally by President A.E. Elsisī (Abuldahab and Omran 2014).

The threat of destruction to which both archives were exposed can be comprehended in light of Derrida’s postulation on the “death drive.” Characterized by “aggression,” “the death drive” is geared toward destroying the archive through erasing memory and foregrounding forgetfulness (1995, 12). Robert Vosloo elaborates, “There is thus a battle between the death drive, which is archive destroying, and the archive-conserving drive[....] Memories can be suppressed. Documents can be lost[....] This reality incites a passion for memory and archiving, but it also confronts one with the reality of forces that aim to destroy these processes” (2005, 6).

More attempts at archivization were implemented by Nubian archons and official organizations. In 2013, a seminar entitled “Indo Mando” was held at the Nubian Cultural Heritage Association in

Cairo to subvert the prevalent fears about separatism and consolidate Nubian Egyptian identity. Mohamed Soliman Giddu Kāb, head of the association, shed light on the Nubian historical role in cross-cultural dialogue. Similarly, the writer Mohy El-Deen Saleh pointed out that Nubian culture is anchored in cohesion, inclusion, and integration, and not in egocentricity and exclusion. Communicating with the cultures of the Sudan and Africa in the south, the Arab culture in the Arabian Peninsula in the east, and the European culture in the west, the Egyptian Nubian culture has manifested a transnational spirit. The process of archivization and regeneration of the Nubian language, he declared, could be comprehended as an attempt at preserving local identity as part and parcel of the collective Egyptian national identity. To prove his argument, *Giddu Kāb* highlighted the previously mentioned joint effort of both archives represented by the Center for Documenting the Natural Heritage as an official organization, on the one hand, and the Nubian Heritage Association and Nubian Cultural Club, on the other. The fruitful communication culminated in the production of remarkable archival works, including *Nubia between Two Ages* by the late artist and photographer Anton Albir, and *Nubian Days* by the Bulgarian researcher D. Morin Heller (Cultnat 2012).

The discourse of inclusion manifested in the aftermath of June 30, 2013, was translated in the state's selection of Oddoul to represent Nubians in the Constitution Writing Committee. Oddoul's demands on behalf of Nubians triggered hopes for a more fulfilling future. Moreover, the Department of Morale Affairs of the Armed Forces produced and broadcast the 2013 documentary *The Code* in the media and inside parliament, giving voice to the Nubian soldier who played a pivotal role in the 1973 war. Given the position of centrality, the Nubian soldier narrated how he suggested using the Nubian language as a coded language in the 1973 war, a resistant tactic that was accepted by President Sadat and implemented on the spot (Al-tarabyly 2017; *Egypt Today* 2017; *Al-Youm Al-Sabi'* 2017). The documentary explicitly represented local Nubian identity and language as indispensable empowering constituents of the national discourse. Additionally, following the demands of Nubian activists, the governor of Aswan, Mustafa Alsayid Aly, called for the formation of a committee of twelve university scholars and experts to rewrite the history of Nubia as an archival project, aiming at revising the curriculum of the Ministry of Education to include Nubian culture and civilization (Abd Al-wahid and Abu Gam'e 2013; Radwan 2013). With the expansion of digital culture, documentaries, Facebook pages, and blogs by Nubians representing the Nubian awakening have proliferated, mobilizing and empowering the Nubian

archive. However, the struggle for actualizing their demand of the right of return to their place of origin is still maintained.

### **Yehia Mokhtar, the Writer/Archivist: A Study of Selected Archival Narratives**

Thus I argue that Mokhtar represents the archival writer whose literary production and ideological perspective have always been shaped by the ongoing political reality. As the Nubian archivist/protagonist of Mokhtar's biographical novel, Mohamed Soliman Giddu Kāb, put it in an interview, Mokhtar's narratives are major archival records to be stored in the Nubian Heritage Association (Al-Tayyar Al-Watani 2012). Born in 1936 in l-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk village in old Nubia, Mokhtar graduated from the Faculty of Arts, Department of Journalism, Cairo University, in 1963. A Marxist in his youth, for which he was incarcerated for some time, Mokhtar ideologically transferred to Sufism, following his father's footsteps (Mansour 2017). The land of Nubia and its people represent the crux of Mokhtar's writings. Mokhtar has four collections of short stories: *ʿArūs al-Nīl* (The bride of the Nile); *Maʿ al-Ḥayāh* (The elixir of life); *Quella*; and *Indo Mando*. He also has four novels, *Tabaddud*; *Jibāl al-Kuhl* (Mountains of kohl); *Marāfiʿ al-Rūḥ* (The harbors of the soul) (ʿAbdullah 2018, 35); and *Giddu Kāb*. The works I treat here, *Indo Mando* (2009) and *Giddu Kāb* (2015), represent hybrid, empowered, resistant, archive-conserving characters.<sup>2</sup> The storehouse, museums, cultural associations, and libraries are depicted as major archival spaces. The details of old Nubia and Nubian identity are meticulously excavated and skillfully organized, following a specific structural order.

The selected works can be scrutinized in light of Marco Codebo's argument on the archival narrative. Codebo (2010, 59) argues that one of the objectives of the archival novel is to narrate "the discourse that presides over a given society," adding that "the narration of a historical event coincides with the account of its archivization" (28). In defining the archival novel, he postulates that a fictional work can act as an archive "once documents and records are transcribed into" it (61). Archival themes of marginality and identity issues are tackled through "bureaucratic writing" that depends on "enumerating" "objects, persons and events" (128). The protagonists are usually "archivists, clerks, researchers in archives, analysts of

2 Mokhtar's hybrid empowered characters are contrasted with Idris Ali's frustrated "suicidal" antagonist in *Poor*, which opens with a sense of confinement and oppression, delineating a desperate, displaced, marginal Nubian writer in 1994 central Cairo attempting to commit suicide in the Nile. The antagonist's journey from childhood to maturity culminates in loss, marginalization, and condemnation of the national discourse (Elrefaei 2014a).

records and notaries or characters,” motivated by the quest for “legal” rights, “personal identity,” and genealogy (15). As “a hybrid” genre (19), the archival novel is characterized by its blurred boundaries that embrace different genres, including the “historical, realist, epistolary, and testimonial, as well as historiography, memoir, the law, and journalism” (16).

### ***Indo Mando* (2009): From Commandment to Commencement**

The title *Indo Mando* (Here and there) sets the tone for the hybrid Nubian identity to be the central archival theme historically and culturally explored. Mokhtar intricately interweaves in a mosaic-like structure the image of the house/home/archive as the major space where all the symbols of cultural specificity and identity are stored. The term “archival journey” will thus be used to describe the characters’ movement throughout the stories’ temporal and spatial structure. The first short story, “Indo Mando,” is followed by “Alkarj” (The wicker basket), “Shaj Farn” (The gateway), and “Mashn Moulih” (The mountain of the sun). Structurally, the journey begins horizontally from the interior space of the house, which occupies a position of centrality in the first two stories, to the gateway in the third story, which is both internally located, being inside the land of Nubia, and externally located to the north of al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk village, culminating in exterior space represented by the mountain of the sun.

Despite the nostalgia that permeates the whole collection, I argue that the change in style and tone from the factual and journalistic to the more spiritual Sufist exemplified by Quranic expressions sheds light on the progressive archival journey as a rite of passage, intrinsic for survival, authentication, documentation, and the empowerment of the Nubian self. Archival spaces are humanized all through, delineated as bodies suffering from archive fever. The mountain of the sun in the last story is depicted as a spatial archive that witnesses the birthplace of the transcultural soul. Propelled by the conserving drive, the local/national/transnational self is looking forward to a more fulfilling and brighter future from a present-day perspective that is deeply attached to past roots. Bordering between land and water, fluidity and rootedness, archival space is thus intrinsically intertwined with multitemporal archival time in a hybrid narrative that oscillates between the realistic and the nostalgic/romantic, the fictional and the testimonial, the historical and the mythical.

Codebo (2010, 121) states, “Understanding an individual means to refer him/her/it to a physical location, or, better, to the bureaucratic expression of this location.” The first short story, “Indo Mando,”



uses “the archival principle, apprehension through localization” in delineating the protagonists (121). The story opens with the sense of expansion created by the displaced protagonists’ meticulously selected substitute space, Al-Qalj, located in Al-Qalyubiyah governorate, far from the busy center. The story sets the Nubian man and woman on equal footing as archivists, where art as an archive is maintained throughout: a female painter who documents through her paintings all the details of the flooded Nubian village al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk, and a male writer who similarly records the heritage in his narratives. Mapping their present rural space, the detached omniscient third-person narrator demonstrates how the characters have seen in its topography an affinity with their village al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk. Though the cultural specificity of the new space has granted them a temporary safe haven, the space begins to lose its authenticity because of the encroachment of buildings. Mokhtar engages readers in the process of archivization when the narrator does not specify their date of displacement, leaving the reader to figure out the previously mentioned Nasserite period, 1963, mentioned just before the story’s end.

The protagonists’ identity is depicted as the product of both spaces, here and there. Constructing the Nubian archive is metaphorically signified by the protagonists’ regenerative act of building and decorating their substitute home/house with the studio and library as central archival spaces. The new house they describe as “global” (Mokhtar 2015, 6) is depicted in detail in a hybrid archival language. “Generic terms” (Codebo 2010, 123) of objects that foreground local identity are indicated by the list of artistic Nubian pieces of furniture and handicrafts in Nubian terminology. The reader is again driven to assume the role of the archivist by searching for the selected objects in the Nubian archive to imagine the visual scene’s “spatial structure” (124):

Mariam endeavored to transform the house to a Nubian home[....] She carved the walls and drew the graffiti she excelled in ever since her childhood[....] She decorated the windows and doors’ frames with vivid colors, and hung the china plates on the exterior walls of the house. Glowing under the sun rays, the plates seemed from a distance like eyes, peering at those coming to the house. She was careful to use “*al-‘angarēbāt*”<sup>3</sup> instead

3 *Al-‘angarēb* is a bed made of palm leaves. The Nubian Yehia Gufani (2012) comments on what he calls “the culture of the *angarib* and *shamandūra*,” a visual culture characteristic of Nubian artists, which he links to the nostalgia for the land of ancestors with all its old environmental and cultural aspects; noble morals, such as self-denial, compassion, and solidarity; and traditions, such as weddings and births, beautifully embodied in Mohamed Khalil Qassim’s first Nubian novel, *Al-Shamandūra*.

of beds; [...] “*al-‘ulaiqat*”<sup>4</sup> in the ceilings, besides “*al-kuntī*,”<sup>5</sup> “*al-karj*”<sup>6</sup> and all the things she made from the palm leaves. (Mokhtar 2009, 7)<sup>7</sup>

The above emphasis on performing identity through the aesthetics of vivid colors and primitive handicrafts as an act of archival resistance can be comprehended in light of Nahed Baba’s book *Nubian Motifs in Architecture and Wicker Baskets* (2010). Examining Nubian handicrafts created by women to decorate their homes (10–11, 39), Baba argues that Nubian motifs and architecture amalgamate consecutive historical periods, culminating in Nubia’s unique cultural specificity (9). Baba likewise highlights the influence of environmental and geographical factors in shaping the artistic and creative identity of Nubians, in general, and women, in particular (15). In a similar vein, Mokhtar’s opening story meticulously documents the indispensable role of Nubian women in archivizing the Nubian heritage.

The concept of fluidity that characterizes the whole collection takes the reader from the present house/archeion to the old space in Nubia and the centrally located “*diwānī room*” (guest room) where the protagonists have their wedding ceremony. The wedding night is cast in light of an authoritative archive that generates, legalizes, and authenticates identity. Terms such as “home,” “land,” “heart,” “certificate,” “contract,” and “record” (Mokhtar 2009, 11) are all interchangeably used by the archivist-protagonist, foregrounding the cultural specificity of the Nubian wedding night and ceremony. The process of archivization includes painful visual scenes of migrants mounting “*Al-busta*,” the ship that used to transfer the displaced from their homes to the new spaces. Evacuated homes are represented as tortured individuals screaming for help as their bodies/windows, doors, and roofs are dissected (12).

Through the testimonial narrative voice, Mokhtar documents a list of names of Nubian artists, writers, singers, and poets. As the story unfolds, “*Indo Mando*” is unveiled to be the title of an exhibition held by Nasr Eddin Taher, the late Nubian painter/archivist/guardian and role model. Son of “*Masmas*” village, located west of the Nile, Taher is perceived as a sacrificial artist who died of cancer caused by the long-term contact with the ingredients he used in painting/documenting the Nubian houses and people. The term “*Indo Mando*” has been used by other artists as an archive that signifies Nubian identity and embraces other archival documents, in-

4 *al-‘ulaiyyqat* are ornamental ceiling hangings made of woven reeds.

5 *al-kuntī* is a big bowl made of reeds used for storing raw food, such as flour and corn.

6 *al-karj* is a wicker basket made of reeds and palm leaves.

7 All translations from the selected works are mine.

cluding Mariam's paintings, Mokhtar's collection, and the seminar "Indo Mando" held at the Nubian Cultural Association.

Guided by Taher, the protagonists embark on an archival journey to the old homes that were deserted in 1933. The three artists recollect Faty Daria, the old Nubian storyteller, and her folk tales about *jinn*s enchanting Nubians to revisit their haunted homes (Mokhtar 2009, 14). Mariam's eyes meticulously record the spiritual dimension that characterizes the architecture of the Nubian houses. Moreover, Youssef points out that the geometric motifs that decorate the walls of the houses are deliberately drawn to be "the abiding space of the ancestors' souls in their eternal visits as birds, propelled by their regenerative yearning to observe their old space and former homes" (15). Mariam explains that the motifs are the living embodiment of historical cross-cultural communication that has produced the Nubian hybrid identity as they amalgamate different cultures and civilizations: "the Pharaonic, Roman, Ptolemaic, Christian, Byzantine and Islamic" (24). The role of the artist/archivist is singled out by Youssef, who reads everything in light of the concept of the archive. Addressing Mariam, he states, "Our homes are being resurrected in your paintings as you narrate the story of each and every one" (27). The omniscient narrator reiterates, "His major role in what he writes is to remind his people of their old villages, their homeland, their roots and their language that they should never forget" (29).

Interrogating the state's injustice, Mariam's counterarchival memory highlights the deplorable conditions of the substitute homes in the desert, compared to the privileges given to those in power at the center to invest in their homeland. The scene culminates in Mariam's realization of the mission she is destined to perform in mapping Nubian identity: "The maps of our homes are engraved in our soul" (Mokhtar, 2009, 37). As a space that speaks of identity politics, the exhibition comprises paintings that document Egypt's southern villages in Nubia and northern villages in the countryside (34). From her perspective, the hybrid collection aims at subverting the accusations of separatism and exclusivity lately launched at the Nubians in the newspapers.

The concept of home as an archive is similarly maintained through the character of Ibrahim Sha'rawy as another major Nubian poet the protagonist remembers. Youssef recollects how Sha'rawy deliberately documented his verse on the external walls of their home in Nubia before the 1963 displacement. The story ends with "archive fever." Wondering about their ambivalent position, the protagonists have to desert their new house, and, in so doing, destroy their archival space, in quest of a new hybrid house that intermingles both primitive nature and modernism: "Now, they only have to get rid

of this house [...] they will constantly embark on their journey and movement from one house to another till they find that home where the whole sky can substitute the roof. Only then will they likewise write at its door, ‘Indo Mando’” (Mokhtar 2009, 44). Nonetheless, the hope for utopian future possibilities is suggested through the quest for the home/archive. Derrida’s words on archive fever are illuminating in this respect:

It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, for searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there is too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a home sickness; a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (1995, 91)

Similarly, the second story, “Al-karj” (The wicker basket), begins with archive fever. The archive is ambivalently pulled apart between the conserving drive and the death drive through the juxtaposed perspectives of the members of the old and young generations on “heritage, language, roots, Nubia and history” (Mokhtar 2009, 48). The significance of the wicker basket as an archival symbol is highlighted by Nahed Baba. In her struggle to “preserve the Nubian identity” and create awareness in the younger “generations” of their “cultural heritage” (Baba 2010, 126), Baba dedicates a whole chapter to documenting the basket’s different sizes, uses, shapes and details (123–61). The story thus opens with the displaced Nubian father, burdened by anxiety about the destiny of the old wicker basket, which he finally decides to give to his friend Mohamed Soliman Giddu Kāab the head of the Nubian Heritage Association, as a major Nubian storehouse. Assuming his archival role, the father is depicted sitting at his desk, situated at the center of his office inside his house, gazing at his library with shelves stuffed with “books, journal and magazine clippings” (Mokhtar 2009, 46). The forty-year-old wicker basket that is centrally located manifests “a sense of loneliness and estrangement in the midst of the encircling shelves that seem like protective borders” (46). As a wedding gift he received from his sister five years before the 1963 displacement, the wicker basket becomes a Nubian counterarchival record that exudes the life and history of its people (47).

Explicitly interrogating the official archive and its identity politics, the father records the unjust living conditions and the unfulfilled promises of the state: “His people are even no longer the same;

their life has been transformed after being deracinated and buried in Kom Ombo's cement boxes" (Mokhtar 2009, 48). Deracination caused the loss of the Nubian language and consequently the loss of identity. Al-karj authenticates the people's utopian past of festivity and celebration in the old homes with the *diwani* room at the center. Made by his sister out of two palm trees that collapsed with the floods, the wicker basket is devalued by the son, whose negligence is translated by the father as a death drive threatening the archive. The story culminates in the conserving drive as the father embraces the wicker basket and heads toward the Nubian Heritage Association to store it there (50). However, archive fever remains as the storeroom in the association is described as a "hospice," "inhabited" by aged archival objects (46).

In a similar vein, the third story, "Shaj Farn," introduces the late Mohy Eddin Sherif as another archival figure in a fictional story. The reader is again invited to assume the role of the archivist and search in the Nubian archive for the sacrificial role Sherif played to save the Nubian identity. Born in the village of Abu Simbel in Nubia and graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Sherif was a founding member and vice president of the Nubian Heritage Association, a poet and painter in several magazines, including the renowned state children's magazine *Samir* and other Nubian journals, a member of the Supreme Coordination Committee of the Museums of Civilization, and the creator of the famous Nubian cartoon character "Bakkar," produced by national tv and broadcast for years on national and Arab tv stations (*Nubian Nights* 2016).

Sherif is depicted as a character that possesses agency. Despite having a very thin body, the athletic Sherif is known for his speed, which has granted him superiority in all races that start from Al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk village to Shaj Farn, the Pharaonic gateway located to the north of the village. The competitive journey he embarks upon is similarly described as an empowering archival journey: Sherif meticulously scrutinizes the engravings, letters, and graffiti that cover the walls of Shaj Farn, transferring them to poems sung by the Nubian people. The gateway is the archive through which Sherif excavates his people's genealogy and culture where he traces the Nubian women's beauty back to Nefertari, the mother of all Nubian beauties and the Egyptian queen and wife of Ramses the Great (Mokhtar 2009, 54). Shaj Farn is depicted as a transcultural/transnational gateway/temple that has witnessed historical cross-cultural dialogues. People from all over the world have embarked on "a pilgrimage" to that sacred space that has acted as "the artery," energizing people with "love" and life (53, 54).

However, the environmental, cultural, and political transformations that accompanied the second elevation of the Aswan Reservoir in 1933 had their effect on Nubian identity. Mokhtar records the transformation of the archival space through the fictional narrative of the great crocodile that emerged following the elevation of the Aswan Reservoir in 1933, blocking the gateway. Archive fever again prevails, signified by the conflict between the death drive and the conserving drive. In a sacrificial, mythical act that epitomizes the struggle for the survival of Nubian identity and the spirit of place, Sherif engages in a battle with the crocodile. The crocodile's dead body floats, granting visitors the joy of re-embarking on their archival pilgrimage, but Sherif's body disappears, submerged somewhere "between *Al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk* and the Aswan Dam" (Mokhtar 2009, 58).

Through the geospatial and temporal archives in "Mashn Moleh," the last story in the collection, the hybridity of identity, the blurring of the boundaries, and the intersection of the local, national, transnational, and humanist archives are consolidated. Archival space transfers from that of struggle and submergence with which the third story ends to the state of expansion, ascension, and emanation signified in the fourth story by the hierarchical structure of the mountain. The first-person narrator protagonist explains that the mountain of the sun is "an expansion of the Muqattam Mountain that heads southward from the outskirts of Cairo, penetrating the desert, till the borders of the Halfa Valley." The mountain is depicted as another cross-cultural space that connects both "north and south" (Mokhtar 2009, 60).

The term "Mashn Moleh" is decoded by the 125-year-old Nubian Sheikh Gamal Shafa, another real-life figure, who traces the name back to the Pharaonic language (Mokhtar 2009, 60–61). "The presence of Gamal Shafa negates the allegation that propagates the extinction of the ancient Pharaohs and Nubians," says the protagonist narrator (61). Sheikh Shafa is depicted as both an archon and a living archive driven by the conserving drive, yet, being so old, he also epitomizes the death drive. His words to his people represent the wisdom and essence of humanism and the Nubian identity and soul as transcultural/transnational/humanist: "This world carries a vital meaning that we should all thoroughly comprehend through a responsive and loving soul that generates joy and serenity[....] The link between the land that holds my body and the bodies of all creatures transcends the physical; it is a living being" (62). Consequently, listening to Sheikh Shafa's words while gazing at the two mountains standing gloriously erect, the narrator-protagonist achieves a moment of Sufist epiphany.

The third and fourth stories are interrelated through the spatial structure and the crocodile image. In the final story, the archival journey of Sufist ascension and purification is projected on “the two black burnt mountains”: “Yes, there, at that spot, where the first dialogue had been born [...] communion between the elements of being began[....] Ever since my feet stepped on that spot, serenity and peace have enveloped me[....] I feel liberated from all that is earthly[....] I realize that I am at the center of being [...] in quest of the power to delve deeper in the recesses of myself, propelled by the hope to see internal epiphanies epitomized” (Mokhtar 2009, 63–64).

The external geomorphology is intrinsically intertwined with the journey of metamorphosis, purification, and liberation of the archival self from its earthly bond to the original archeion as a more empowered and empowering horizon. “Fire” leads to “dawn,” “stability,” “serenity,” “peace,” and union with the origin of all beings. The meaning of the collection of short stories thus comes full circle. *Indo Mando* (Here and there) is an introspective journey, beginning from the mundane, the physical, social, and political, and culminating in the spiritual world of origins and reconciliation with the divine. The journey moves from the arid marginal self and the state of instability and flux that governs past and present, house and water, to the nourished stable, anchored soul, epitomized by the mountains, gazed at by the narrator-protagonist at dawn, signifying a new beginning.

The moment of transcendence, the narrator-protagonist foregrounds, is experienced by all who visit that archival space. The mystery of life as an archival journey is highlighted by the Sufi Sheikh, whom the protagonist meets at the end. Assuming the archivist’s role, the reader is again triggered to piece together the threads of the different stories to excavate the recurrent progressive meaning of the act of embrace. Mariam and Youssef, the protagonists of the first story, “*Indo Mando*,” embrace the key of their old home in the manner of displaced Palestinians (Mokhtar 2009, 42). The second story, “*Al-karj*,” ends with the father embracing the wicker basket on his way to the Nubian Heritage Association. The third story ends with Sherif, in battle, embracing the crocodile under water. In the final story, contrastingly, the narrator-protagonist comprehends the crux of Sufism deciphered by the Sheikh: “If you want to find what you are in quest of, you have to embrace everything; whoever feels eternal thirst will spontaneously seek the river” (Mokhtar 2009, 65). The story ends with the narrator awakening “at noon” from that “utopian dream” to meditate the miraculous scene of the sun that annually shines twice on the statue of Ramses II (67–68), wondering about the “mystery” of that “sacred spot” (68).

*Indo Mando* foregrounds inclusivity, cohesion, and wholeness through the archival journey as an intrinsic medium for agency and movement from the margin to the center, in this case the world of self-commandment and spiritual growth. Resistance in Mokhtar's collection of short stories is geared toward spiritual enlightenment, hence preserving not only the Nubian identity and archive but also the essence of the humanist spirit in communion with God as the only authoritative truth.

### **Giddu Kāb (2015) and the Personal/National/International Archive**

Codebo (2010, 45–46) argues “(auto)biographies” that depict the life of citizens as an “archival theme” (20) are records that subvert “marginality” (31). Mokhtar's 2015 novel *Giddu Kāb* is a biography or a personal archive that is intricately intertwined with the national and imperial archives. The novel chronicles the life and identity formation of the Egyptian Nubian Mohamed Soliman Giddu Kāb, authenticated by long pages from his diary. Shorbagy (2016) describes him as “head of the Nubian Heritage Association, Giddu Kāb to us, Nubians, is like the Vatican Pope to the Catholics of the world, and Einstein to the scholars of physics; [...] He is the great Nubian encyclopedia.” Giddu Kāb's village, Adindan, is “the spot where the borders of the Egyptian state ended in 1898” (my translation). Cherishing his Nubian identity, Giddu Kāb states, “One of God's blessings is that I excel in more than one language; but I only find myself when I express myself in the Nubian language, the dearest to my heart.”

Mokhtar (2015) titles his work “a novel,” but he points out its generic medium in its concluding words: “To the best of my ability, I wrote the biography of my friend Giddu Kāb. Shall I thus live long enough to witness this biography published in a book that I turn in my hand, or shall I meet the same destiny of my predecessors, Mohamed Khalil Qasim and Doctor Mokhtar Khalil Kabbarah?” (122). The fact that both Qasim, the writer of the first Nubian novel, *Al-Shamandūra* (1968), and Kabbarah, the archivist of the Nubian language, died before witnessing the publication of their works fills Mokhtar with anxiety about the destiny of his archival narrative.

*Giddu Kāb* delineates a progressive journey of Nubian self-actualization and social mobility. The narrative traces the growth and movement of Giddu Kāb from the margin to the center, through which he develops into the Egyptian Nubian archon/authorial guardian of both Nubian home/culture/history and the Egyptian state/nation. The novel is divided into two chapters, each marking an important stage in the protagonist's archival journey. Beginning



with the 1933 migration from Nubia, the journey is enveloped with hope generated by social, parental, and spiritual support. The first chapter ends with the grandfather's letter to Giddu Kāb, highlighting the Sufist archive and the divine messages of support and protection. Yusry Abdullah (2015) notes that the first chapter chronicles the psychological formation of the child that empowers him as a migrant to integrate into the new society. To this view I add that the second chapter that culminates in the 1961–1964 displacement aims at consolidating the national identity and sense of belonging, besides explicitly supporting Nasser and the construction of the High Dam as an indispensable national project, creating awareness of the imperial conspiracies. The intersection of the personal, national, and imperial archives is sustained as the consecutive acts of archivization of Nubian identity are implemented at first by Nubian activists and then supported by official institutions, disseminating a national discourse of cohesion and inclusion deliberately promulgated at a cataclysmic period of Egypt's history.

The narrative includes a multiplicity of voices and stories within stories. The blurred boundary between Giddu Kāb's and Mokhtar's voices is remarkable. Yusry Abdullah (2015) points out that Mokhtar's tone and style oscillate between the literary, religious/spiritual, and the bureaucratic official/journalistic.<sup>8</sup> *Giddu Kāb* starts with the process of archivization initiated by the third-person narrator/archivist. Based on the protagonist's diary, the novel records scenes of migration to the north from all the Nubian villages, including Giddu Kāb's village, Adindan, which was not affected by the second elevation of the Aswan Reservoir. At the end of 1935, the eleven-year-old boy, orphaned at the age of six, migrates to Cairo to join his sister and her husband.<sup>9</sup>

The land of Nubia, epitomized by its school life, family life, and festive life, is depicted as a protective zone that helps in constructing the boy's stable self. Migration, in his case, is inspired by his father's will. Perceiving his son's potential and promising future, before his death in 1925, the father dictates that the boy should be educated in Cairo. The boy is also supported by the village teacher and the grandfather, both assuming the role of the substitute father. Kindly patting his shoulder, the teacher smilingly states, "You are not only studious; you have something peculiar [...] a divine gift [...] your future lies in education[....] Don't you ever work as a servant,

8 Idris Ali's narrative, by contrast, daringly tackles sexual issues and is characterized by its indignant tone.

9 The father-son relationship is a common theme in Mokhtar's *Giddu Kāb* and Idris Ali's *Poor*. However, Ali's character migrates in an attempt to escape the oppressive condescending attitude of his racist village teacher, the sexual harassment of the Nubian fisherman he works for, and the desperate economic conditions his family suffers from. In Cairo, the boy is repelled by the father, who has an affair with a Cairene neighbor (Elrefaei 2014a, 9–33).

a waiter or a doorman[...] You will be a great man” (Mokhtar 2015, 7). The teacher’s tone, body language, and empowering reassuring words generate in the boy self-confidence and belief in the essential goodness of humanity. The teacher’s positive role is acknowledged by the grandfather, who sees him as “a great teacher with a living conscience” (8). Moreover, the third-person narrator reflects on the teacher’s role in instilling in the boy the love of the Arabic language, cultivating his archival consciousness and encouraging him to write his first diary (6). Moreover, the Sufist songs in praise of Prophet Muhammad, sung by Sufists in the *mūlids* of Nubia, shape the boy’s spiritual consciousness. Though the plot unfolds to foreground the importance of the Nubian language, the structural emphasis on the enchanting effect of the Arabic language in the novel’s opening, being the medium of the Quran, sets the tone for the religious and national perspectives that shape the protagonist’s identity.

Before migration, the Sheikh represents a preconceived image of Cairo, extracted from one of the Hadiths in Al-Bukhari’s archive: “What no eye has seen; no ear has heard” (Mokhtar 2015, 11). Cairo is the land of abundance, rich with “fruits, flesh of fowls and rivers of honey pure and clear” (11).<sup>10</sup> Excavating the archival file of migration to the north, the Sheikh states, “He has found out what his father has told him that [...] the Nile is scarce here, squeezed by the desert on both sides, suffocating the valley[...] Hence, flight to the north has been and is still ongoing.” The Sheikh’s constructive words to the students are significant: “Cairo is the mother of the world[...] Study and do not work as servants, waiters and door-men[...] Help in developing your village” (13, 14). Drawing upon the literary archive, the Sheikh recites poetry that enhances Cairo’s image as the ancient land of promise, fulfillment, and civilization. Ironically enough, the civilized image of the center indirectly reflects an image of the uncivilized, neglected margin. Driven by an inquisitive nature, the boy wonders, “Why are their villages devoid of those wonders? Aren’t we human beings like those in the land of Cairo? How come they have achieved all this and we have not?” (17) Though the boy uses “us versus them” discourse, the interrogative tone suggests a mobilizing call for self-introspection in quest of self-development and reflects a child who possesses a defiant spirit that perceives knowledge as power.

Nevertheless, the grandfather raises the issue of citizenship rights as he criticizes both the representatives of power at the center and his people, whom he sees in denial in the margin. The real

10 Egypt’s image as “the mother of the world” is demythologized by Idris Ali in Poor; Ali represents an antagonist controlled by an inferiority complex (Elrefaei 2014a).

cause of migration is revealed to be the loss of infrastructure and the basics of life:

Migration to the north has not stopped for hundreds of years, having begun before the construction and elevation of the reservoir[...] The Nubians have been ignored by the governments of the north; neglected, as if they are no longer citizens of this homeland[...] Nonetheless, what really perplexes him about his people is what they all say: “Had it not been for the Aswan reservoir and its elevations, we would never have left our villages!! What kind of apology would the Nubians offer to their forefathers?” (Mokhtar 2015, 19–20)

The land of abundance at the center is soon juxtaposed to the reality of poverty and desertification in the margin “where stagnation and death” have reached everything (20).

In the archival novel “an archival authority [...] uses his/her knowledge as a tool for structuring the receiver’s experience of the world” (Codebo 2010, 14). In this light, the grandfather’s anxiety about the archive’s death drive is signified by his realization of his being on the verge of death. Consequently, the old man educates the boy in the genealogy of the name “Giddu Kāb ” and the family’s identity and history excavated by Sheikh Hasan Shafa. Shafa, the oldest man in the village, is the people’s “pillar and anchor,” “the bearer of the ancient legacy, the ancient language, the forefathers’ tales and myths,” and “the genealogy of all families” (Mokhtar 2015, 24–25). A “researcher” (25) in archives, Sheikh Shafa has constantly embarked on journeys to the northern parts of southern Sudan in search of the remnants of ancient families and “ancient Nubian kingdoms.” His authenticity in archivizing the “roots and historical depth of Nubian existence” (25) has granted him the authority of “the archive.” He has been consulted by many foreign travelers, explorers, and archeologists in Qastal, Ballana, Fars, and Ashkyb. Shafa points out that “Giddu Kāb ” is the “offspring of the rulers of the Kingdom of Ancient Kosh” (25). A signifier of power and authority, the name highlights the novel as an archival text “committed to the search for truths” (Codebo 2010, 15). To reclaim identity, centrality and agency, the archival discourse is thus utilized as an empowering medium. Knowledge of origin empowers the boy and provides him with self-confidence, dignity, intertwined with modesty. Warning the boy against arrogance as a sin, the grandfather draws upon the religious archive by citing one of the Hadiths: “He who has in his heart an ant’s weight of arrogance will not enter paradise” (Mokhtar 2015, 26).

The blurred boundaries of the archival novel that interweaves the historical, epistolary, and fictional are a characteristic of *Giddu Kāb*. The narrator mentions real names of Nubian villages and figures, followed by lists of real colonial figures, archival imperial spaces, and dates that shed light on the interconnectedness of the personal, national, and imperial archives. The personal archive of Giddu Kāb's father narrated by the grandfather sheds light on the history of British imperialism in Egypt and Sudan as the roots of racism. A chef at the Semiramis Hotel in Cairo, the father, who was fluent in the French and English languages, was hired by Thomson, the secretary of Nevile Henderson, the British general in the English Protectorate that occupied the Sudan. The general, who at first expressed his love for Egyptian and oriental food, soon manifested a condescending, dehumanizing, colonial attitude following the assassination of the governor of British Sudan, Major-General Lee Stack in November 1924 (Mokhtar 2015, 27). The court, headed by Henderson, ruled the execution by hanging of the Egyptians involved in the assassination.

Dehumanizing all Egyptians in abusive terms, the enraged Thomson is depicted throwing his shoe at Giddu Kāb's father, while aggressively iterating the self/other discourse, "You are not Egyptian, you are a barbarian" (Mokhtar 2015, 28). In revenge, the father serves the general the shoe as oriental food after soaking it in water for a whole month and shredding it like meat. The father's resistant spirit is likewise highlighted through another narrative. Conscious of his inability to read as a disempowering oppressive state, the father positively rebels by joining a night school "at the age of fifty five" (30). The grandfather's narrative of the dignified history of the Nubian family is delineated as a stepping stone for Giddu Kāb and his coming of age as an archivist. Conflict in Mokhtar's novel is therefore represented as that with the British occupiers and colonial powers, on the one hand, and with the Nubian self that struggles for social mobility and spiritual empowerment, on the other.<sup>11</sup>

On the train to Cairo, Giddu Kāb recollects his being accompanied by his protective relative, who jokingly asks him to "bray" like donkeys for the train to depart. Rejecting dehumanization, the boy declares with dignity, "I'm not a donkey to bray; let any of those so many people on board bray if needed" (Mokhtar 2015, 38).<sup>12</sup> Patting

11 The indignation felt by Idris Ali's character toward Egyptians is contrastingly geared toward the oppressive colonizers in Mokhtar's narrative through his national discourse.

12 In *Poor*, Ali depicts a similar scene of the journey on the train to Cairo. However, the Nubian boy is perceived by the representatives of authority as the culturally inferior other. The ambivalent and passive resistance manifested by Ali's boy/antagonist, who seemingly submits yet latently resists, is contrasted with the positive dignified resistance of Mokhtar's protagonist. The two parallel scenes contrastingly foreshadow the identities of both characters and the endings of both novels (Elrefaei 2014a, 26).

his shoulder, Giddu Kāb's relative confidently states, "Good for you; we will not be worried about your being in Cairo" (38). The sister's home in Cairo provides Giddu Kāb with another protective enclosure, a safe haven of warmth and love. Upon his first arrival, he is generously served food, coupled with a warm embrace, a kiss, a pat on the shoulder, and the Quranic words that foreground compassion: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (40–41). Giddu Kāb's sense of alienation soon disappears as he gradually integrates into the new society and excels at school.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, following the death of the cousin, the family soon falls apart, and Giddu Kāb's dream of becoming an engineer dissipates. Compelled to leave school, he joins his uncle's home after his sister's return to Nubia, where he is mistreated by his uncle's Cairene wife and neglected by the submissive uncle. However, leaving school synchronizes with the act of archivization when Giddu Kāb documents his experience in his diary. As he puts it, frustrated by the oppressive conditions, the boy starts to question the credibility of the preconceived image of Cairo as "paradise" and "the mother of the world" (Mokhtar 2015, 56). However, letters as archival tools are described as therapeutic and empowering. In a letter to his grandfather and the Sheikh, the boy documents his experience of suffering. Their reassuring letter that draws upon the literary archive emphasizes perseverance and patience as important for a better future: "He admired the line of poetry and copied it in his diary, determined to endure the suffering no matter the difficulties he would face" (56).

Giddu Kāb embarks on a journey into the districts of Cairo and enumerates the details and names of specific streets, newspapers, and journals. In addition to the newspaper *al-Ahram*, the journalistic archive encompasses names of other publications, including *al-Balāgh*, *al-Zamān*, *al-Kutla*, *al-Masrī*, and *Riwayāt al-Jaib* (Mokhtar 2015, 57). Since the personal is political and the local is intertwined with the national and international, the job Giddu Kāb's uncle holds as a servant at the home of the "Debt Fund" (57) director sheds light on Egypt's history. The boy's inquisitive mind triggers him to question the dimensions and ideological perspective of that job: "I asked the clients I knew but received no satisfying answer! Who is the creditor and who is the debtor; does the debt have a fund? I leave the answer for time, perhaps!" (59) On the one hand, the inquisi-

13 Ali has a different scene in *Poor*. The remembering narrator/antagonist recollects himself as "the penniless transient" child suffering from hunger: "You hang around a fava beans cart. The smell of *ta'miyya* makes your stomach growl" (Ali 2005, 69). The image of a society that lacks compassion and manifests a master-slave relationship "where everything has a price in this city" is crystallized through the food scene. The seller grants him "a piece of bread and a few pieces of *ta'miyya*" in return for washing the dishes and sweeping the area around the cart (70).

tive tone suggests a national perspective manifested by an archivist who cares about Egypt's economic and political history and future. On the other hand, the questions foreshadow the development of his career and the job he later holds as a bank clerk, an expert in debit and credit, and a financial analyst of records. The inquisitive attitude is intrinsically intertwined with the novel's main archival theme of local/national identity and the effect of international relations and colonial history on that identity.

In the course of the narrative, Imbaba, Bulaq, and other neighborhoods are represented as positive archival spaces and points of departure to more knowledge, spiritual elevation, and social mobility.<sup>14</sup> Though dazzled by Cairo's streets and stores, the boy soon reflects on the imperial upheavals and the prevalent economic depression. Drawing on *al-Ahram* newspaper as an archival source, the boy records the contentious 1942 war in the Western Desert between the British occupying forces and the German army, negatively affecting Egypt's economy. The consequent departure of foreigners leads to what the inhabitants of Nubia called *Tarwasa*, signifying a compulsive return of migrant Nubians to their homeland because of unemployment (Mokhtar 2015, 64). The period witnessed the spread of *al-kimāma* (the mask), sold for twenty piasters, to protect the citizens from the poisonous gases of the German air raids (65). The meticulously documented cultural/political scene holds the imperial forces responsible for draining Egypt's resources, leading to the suffering of Egyptians in both the margin and the center.

Giddu Kāb's journey ends in Nubian grounds. "Toshka and Adindan Trade," the store owned by his late father's Nubian friend, introduces another positive image of the resistant Nubians assuming agency, visibility, and centrality. The boy declares, "Here they are, 'Toshka and Adindan,' manifesting their presence in the center of Cairo" (Mokhtar 2015, 67). Depicted as another archival space that authenticates his identity, the store he works in for three years is an energizing space and a rite of passage to the "Adindan Welfare Association, established in 1908." "No more loss in crowded, spacious Cairo[....] My presence in the land is entrenched; no more alienation; the Association holds the diasporic Nubians together," he writes in his diary (71).

As archival tools, exchanged letters between the boy and his grandfather and the Sheikh create consciousness of the Sufist belief in exile from the Creator as the only truth and objective of all wandering souls. In recording the crux of Sufism in his diary, Giddu Kāb documents his archival strategy, writes about himself, and

14 Contrastingly, in *Poor*, Ali represents Bulaq as "rock bottom," "hell," dehumanizing, and uncivilized. It is a filthy space where "shit and garbage and flies travel from garbage to human faces" (Elrefaei 2014a, 26, 27).

hence foreshadows his progressive journey. Nevertheless, agency and social mobility from the periphery to the center synchronize with World War II, the end of colonialism, the 1952 Revolution, and ongoing imperialism and neocolonialism. Because of the economic depression, on February 5, 1944, Giddu Kāb works as a servant at the age of twenty in the Greek hospital (Mokhtar 2015, 76). However, the spirit of the researcher/archivist transforms the hospital that is filled with wounded Greek, British, and French soldiers, employees, and visitors, to a fertile ground for cross-cultural communication. Attentively listening to and recording the Greek words and letters in his notebook, Giddu Kāb decodes them through the help of the hospital's Greek telephone operator. Utilizing the hospital as an empowering transcultural space, in a year and a half, to the amazement of the Greeks, he masters the language, followed by French and English. His excellent performance transfers him from a cleaning job to a night shift assistant, a telephone operator, and a tour guide for the Greek nurses. On December 8, 1951, Giddu Kāb leaves the hospital to work in the Eastern Bank as a bellboy (82, 83). His mobilizing ambition leads him to hold the bureaucratic jobs of a typist, then an employee in charge of the bank's postal services, statements, and papers. Recommended by a Lebanese bank client, in 1954 Giddu Kāb works as an employee in the Lebanese Bank's Supplies Department, and then in current and cheque accounts for a thirteen-pound salary. Motivated by his ambitions for career development, he finally finishes his studies and graduates from the Faculty of Commerce in 1968 at the age of forty-four.

Following President Nasser's 1961 speech to the Nubians, Giddu Kāb embarks on his first visit to his village to authenticate his family's legal right for compensations. The loss of the grandfather and Sheikh Shafa as major archival figures stirs his concern over the archive's death drive: "Giddu Kāb attributes Sheikh Shafa's death not to old age but to the news he has shockingly received about the construction of the High Dam[...] He realizes that if the inhabitants [...] emigrate [...] the Egyptian Nubia itself will die" (Mokhtar 2015, 86–87). The recorded multiple voices endeavor to reinscribe a resistant counterarchive to the state's official archive. Sheikh Shafa's resistance is translated into the construction of trade stores that sell different things in Arnara village. The objective is to provide the inhabitants with a variety of jobs, energize the whole space, and transform the village into a magnetic center of trade. Labeled as "the Houses of Hope," Arnara, to the satisfaction of Sheikh Shafa, temporarily entrenches the presence of its inhabitants and attracts the expelled Nubians following the postwar depression. Scenes of Nubians receiving those coming back with milk and dates, in-

cluding Giddu Kāb himself, suggest an image of a society based on compassion, hospitality, agency, and solidarity. Nonetheless, with the construction of the High Dam, people migrate, desertification spreads, and “death envelops everything” (90). The anguish Giddu Kāb experiences from the realization that all the forefathers’ and loved ones’ tombs are to be submerged is vividly recorded. Giddu Kāb enumerates a long list of houses named after their owners. The act of archivization suggests an archivist conscious of the death drive: “His return to Arnara increases his certainty of its being the last return, [...] an eternal farewell” (91) that sees no more gatherings except in dreams.

In Derridean terms, the 1962 journey back to the center is a journey from “commencement” to “commandment” and the authority of the official archive. Giddu Kāb records how that year witnessed the issuing of the “July Socialist Acts” and the displacement of the people of “Adindan, Qastal, and Balana, followed by the villages of Freig, Armena and Abu Simbel in 1963. By 1964, all the 44 villages along 350 kilometers” were evacuated (Mokhtar 2015, 93). However, displacement is intertwined with Giddu Kāb’s social mobility, hence his ambivalent, conflicting feelings. Supporting the political, cultural, and historical changes in a bureaucratic, national tone, Giddu Kāb records the nationalization of foreign banks and companies. A member of the “Bank of Egypt,” and “an employee in the personnel administration, supervising insurance and medical services” (92), Giddu Kāb becomes a representative of the official archive. Free education, he writes, has granted the poor people to whom he belongs privileges that were exclusive to the upper class. Additionally, the year 1968 witnesses his university graduation. Father of five, the archivist-protagonist defines himself using the media’s national discourse: “Within 15 years of marriage, I have been blessed with four girls and an officer” (92). These represent the title of a famous movie starring Anwar Wagdi playing the role of a conscientious officer who saves the girls in an orphanage from its oppressive head/ruler and implicitly signifies a national ideology in support of Nasser’s regime and the Free Officers.

Recording his transformed ideological stance that subverts Sheikh Shafa’s previously quoted perspective, Giddu Kāb states:

I have become enthusiastic about the construction of the High Dam, believing that seeking development and spreading social justice requires rebuilding Egypt. I regard this as the proper perspective [...] that is consistent with our being river people. Now, I believe one can speak about the new Egypt that can be “God’s paradise on earth” to verify the words of my Sheikh. The



July Socialist Acts that synchronize with the will to construct the dam and establish the public sector will accomplish that dream so that poached eggs soaked in butter will not be a dream or an inaccessible wish. Nonetheless, I harshly condemn those who chose Kom Ombo as the substitute space for displacement. (Mokhtar 2015, 94)

The national discourse is again fleshed out as the archivist-protagonist records another historical episode that intertwines local and national archives, suggesting a defensive endeavor to ward off the accusations of separatism brought against Nubians. Despite the ongoing predicament of the Nubian people, Egyptian Nubians in 1960 rejected the invitation offered by the Sudanese prime minister, Abdullah Khalil, to join the Sudanese Nubians in Wadi Halfa. Delegates from the Nubian tribes of Wadi Halfa arrived with the offer claiming to protect Egyptian Nubians from being fragmented between the Egyptian “Khashm El Girba” and “Kom Ombo” (96). Giddu Kāb notes that “the invitation” was “quietly rejected” by the “enlightened” Egyptian Nubians:

What Abdullah Khalil aims at is not for the good of both Sudan and Egypt[....] The peoples living on the sides of rivers all over the globe have been and are still exposed to the construction of dams and reservoirs for the development of their homelands. Their migration has to be inside their homelands; yes, inside their homelands and not outside; and they happily accept their contribution in developing their homelands, sacrificing everything for their progress, consequently, bid farewell to our beloved land where the first human congregations had been born and shaped [...] harboring the beginning of civilization in the world. I am likewise definite that the Return around the lake is inevitable. (96–97)

The spiral movement back and forth in both local and national archives, besides the spatial and temporal archives, is remarkable. The previously recorded scene suggests an archivist conscious of his archival authority, an expert in the legal rights of borders and migration, in addition to citizenship rights, duties, and obligations. The scene casts the archivist in light of a lawyer who exercises his legal skills to defend both his people and nation. The archival voice of commencement manifested earlier by Sheikh Shafa and Giddu Kāb himself is here juxtaposed to the archival voice of commandment, national authority, and law. The house as an archival metaphor is transformed from the local to the national archive that au-

thenticates the identity of the Nubian as Egyptian. However, the scene similarly suggests the ambivalence of the archival discourse that, as Derrida argues, is self-destructive, torn apart between its conflicting poles of the death drive and the conserving drive.

The structural development of events in this archival novel is worthy of note. Like his protagonist, the writer utilizes the skill of the archivist in meticulously selecting, storing, and organizing what he deems significant and worth consigning to both the historical/national and the personal/local archives. The ambivalent discourse of inclusion/exclusion manifested by the national archive in its relation with the margin similarly has its repercussions on the ideological perspective of the writer and his protagonist. Both writer and protagonist document their attraction to the discourse of inclusion through the explicit national scenes and narrative tone. However, both are likewise repelled by the state's discourse of exclusion. The protagonist points out toward the end of the novel that Nubia has always been "the neglected space, excluded from the concerns of northern governments" (Mokhtar 2015, 95). The sense of belonging to the land of Nubia as "Paradise Lost" sacrificed with its people by the center (95) is intertwined with the protagonist's emphasis on the privileges of free education and social mobility granted by the center. However, the protagonist documents the predicament of his people and his persistent attempts with the other activists at storing and disseminating the language, writers' names, and names of the ethnic organizations as archival spaces of resistance. Knowledge as power is therefore recorded when the protagonist's university graduation is intertwined with the education and university graduation of his five siblings.

The writer furthermore meticulously selects the protagonist's perspective on the 1967 defeat, driving the Nubian self to go beyond its predicament and embrace the overarching predicament of the nation: "Last June 5, the catastrophe that befell our cherished homeland has pushed me into a deep well of grief that I have never experienced" (Mokhtar 2015, 102). Utterly disempowered, the protagonist isolates himself at home for a whole week. The biographical novel thus archivizes the sense of defeat experienced by the Nubians as part and parcel of the feeling enveloping the whole nation: "I felt that the homeland" was in extreme danger. "Colonialism and Zionism have both conspired against Egypt and its leadership, being deeply conscious of the threat its revolutionary tide and leadership pose," he writes. The blurred temporal boundary of colonial aggression stretches from 1967 back to the 1956 imperial attack on Egypt, way back to the defeat of the Hyksos at the hands of Nubian leaders in Pharaonic times (102), and forward again to Nasser's abdication

from power, rejected by the Egyptian people on June 9 and 10, 1967. The archival tendency for utopian possibilities is translated in the protagonist's deciphering the people's rejection as a foreshadowing of "the liberation of Sinai" that he foresees will one day take place. Despite the defeat, Mokhtar casts Nasser in the mythical light of the victorious Pharaonic king Ahmose. The ideological perspective and motive beyond writing the archival narrative in the aftermath of the 2011 period is explicitly fleshed out: "The home front is solid; it is not fragmented and it will not collapse[...] Long live my cherished homeland; may you always remain free, independent, sovereign and unswerving from your revolutionary course" (102-3).

The narrative's archival role is manifest in the concluding pages that document lists of activists and their cumulative resistant acts. Burdened by the need to save the Nubian language threatened by forgetfulness, the conscious archivist records the use of art as an archival tool of resistance. Exercising archival authority, the protagonist digs up Nubian songs to revitalize the dying language. The conserving drive culminates in establishing the Adindan Association's first music band led by a number of professional Nubian musicians and song writers, whom he meticulously lists. Their musical performances synchronize with the issuing of the first Nubian novel, *Al-Shamandūra* by Muhammad Khalil Qassim, first in serial form in *Sabāḥ al-Khair* magazine illustrated by Hasan Fuad's paintings, and later published by the National House in 1968 (Mokhtar 2015, 100).

The national defeat and resistance are similarly followed by the death of a number of Nubian artists/archivists: novelist M.K. Qassim; M.K. Kabbarah, archivist of the Nubian language; Mahmoud Shorbagy, head of the Nubian Heritage Association; and Mohy Eddin Sherif, Nubian archivist and songwriter. However, the death drive is resisted by the conserving drive: Qassim's novel on Nubia is produced in a radio series; Nubian associations as archival spaces are constructed and enumerated; the Nubian academic Mostafa Abdel Qadir obtains his MA in 2010 and PhD in 2013 from the Arts Academy on Nubian culture; and "a Chair on Nubian Heritage" commemorating that ancient heritage is opened by the Academy (Mokhtar 2015, 120). The joint efforts of archivization are implemented by both the Nubian activists/archivists and "the Center for Documentation of the Cultural and Natural Heritage," affiliated with the Library of Alexandria (122). Giddu Kāb points out that "despite all pessimists, Nubia will not die" (122).

Nevertheless, in a similar vein to *Indo Mando's* ending, *Giddu Kāb* culminates in archive fever and the ambivalence of the archive. Giddu Kāb writes, "Remembering does not regenerate the dead" (Mokhtar 2015, 121). Meditating the mystery of death, he adds, "He

incessantly wonders about those edifices constructed ever since the first forefathers, the destiny of the ancient artist, and even the modern artist! What prevails at the end is the ultimate truth; death is the spot where life ends[...] What is the value of the artistic relic after the death of its creator?!" (122).

The novel's archival discourse thus can be comprehended in the light of Derrida's argument. Archivization is motivated by the anxiety about death and the need to be remembered. However, memory destroys the truth, because what is being remembered is not the thing or person but a re-creation of it. Derrida argues that the archive is self-destructive because archivization is intertwined with manipulation, which discredits the archive altogether because of the selection of the archived material.

### Conclusion

"No archive arises out of thin air," states Stuart Hall (2001, 89). Mokhtar appropriates the archival discourse as a discourse of power to subvert marginality and exclusion, voice the Nubian predicament, resist forgetfulness, and authenticate the hybridity of the local and national identity. Moreover, his discourse deconstructs the negative stereotypical representations of the marginal Nubian entrapped in lower social positions, highlighting the anxiety about separatism prevalent before and after 2011. *Indo Mando* and *Giddu Kāb* represent Mokhtar's changed perspective that is deeply shaped by different historical moments and escalated political transformations. Walter Benjamin's words are pertinent in this respect: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize back on a memory as it flashes in a moment of danger" (quoted in Hall 2001, 89).

Mokhtar's selected archival narratives hold him in contrast to other Egyptian Nubian writers through his Sufist perspective and journalistic national discourse. I have argued here that *Giddu Kāb's* archival discourse is revealed to be more ideologically impregnated, signified by the progression of the archival journey. *Indo Mando* progresses from the authority and commandment of the archive to commencement and origin, and from the journalistic and testimonial to the spiritual and Sufist. Contrastingly, *Giddu Kāb*, written in a tumultuous period, culminates in the commandment of the official national archive. The Arab world's tumultuous upheavals ever since the 2003 US military invasion of Iraq and the fragmentation of the Sudan, followed by the Arab revolutions that culminated in a fragmented, unstable Syria, Libya, and Yemen, have had their effect on knowledge production. Consequently, the cultural scene has been

dominated by fears about neocolonial and imperial intervention in the affairs of the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular under the imperial allegation of defending minority rights. Seen in this light, Mokhtar's *Giddu Kāb* is the product of such moments, anxieties, and fears. Hence, *Giddu Kāb*'s personal archive oscillates from the local/Nubian to the national and the international. The biographical novel exposes the colonial/imperial archive that has drained Egypt's resources, leading to the suffering of Egyptians in general and Nubians in particular. Representing the voice of Nubians themselves to corroborate their sense of belonging to their country, the narrative documents a completely different discourse than that disseminated by Ali in *Poor*. Schwartz and Cook's (2002) words can be illuminating in decoding the shift in *Giddu Kāb*'s archival discourse: "Control of the archive [...] means control of society and thus control of determining history's winners and losers" (4).

*Giddu Kāb* anxiety at the end signifies the ambivalence of the archive that is pulled apart between the conserving drive and the death drive. Speaking from within the authority and ambivalence of the official national archive, though at times lashing back at it, Mokhtar ends up ambivalently, burdened by archive fever. On the one hand, the conserving drive of the archivist propels him to cling to the nation's utopian future possibilities. On the other hand, the realization of the death drive that has sacrificed the Nubian villages suggests a subversion of the dream of a utopian future for the Nubian condition. The land of Nubia is presented as "Paradise Lost" (95). The selected archival narratives explicitly suggest that "whether conscious of it or not, archivists are major players in the business of identity politics." Identity is represented as socially constructed, "created culturally, for political, social and historical reasons" (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 16). Codebo's (2010, 15) words on the archival novel are worthy of note: "The archival novel engages the reader in a discussion concerning the truth-value of records and/or the reliability of the archive's procedures." The novel's ending leaves the reader to question the ideological perspective of the archival discourse and hence the credibility of the meticulously selected archive as "a politicized space" (Cary 2011, 703) of resistance and intervention.

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# Interviews with Three Nubian Writers

## 1. Interview with Yehia Mokhtar

By Amal Mazhar and Faten Morsy

Yehia Mokhtar, one of the leading Nubian novelists and short story writers, was born in the old Nubian village of El-Geneina Weshebak in 1936. Among his prominent works are his collection of short stories *Indo Mando* (Here and there, 2009), his novel *Jibāl al-Kuhl* (Mountains of Kohl, 2001), and the 2015 biographical novel *Giddu Kāb*. Mokhtar's works have been the subject of numerous academic studies and journal articles.

This interview took place in the Nubian Cultural Center, Abdeen, Cairo, on December 5, 2020. The editors would like to thank Alaa Eshaq, the president of the Nubian Cultural Center, and Omar Morsy for facilitating this meeting and the interview with Mokhtar. Among the attendees were Muhammed Omar, Nubian artist Galila Ameen, head of the Nubian organization Kendakah (derived from the Meroitic word *kdke*, "queen mother"), Salem Eloqaily, and Muhammad Ghafour from the Nubian Center.

**FATEN MORSY:** How do you explain the present interest in Nubian literature, and how would you account for the relative lack of interest in the literary production of Nubians until recently?

**YEHIA MOKHTAR:** Let me start by asserting that there is no such thing called "Nubian literature." There is Arabic literature written by Nubian writers, but since this literature is not written in the Nubian language(s), it should not be considered "Nubian." Of course, Nubian culture has its own specificities, and it stands out as different from other Egyptian/Arabic culture and its manifestations throughout Egypt. Nubians have their own his-

tory and their unique traditions, customs, and myths, which by and large form the main themes of the literature written by Nubian writers, but still all this does not justify calling it “Nubian literature,” for the reasons I’ve just mentioned.

F.M.: In other words, the conflict within Nubian literary circles, and the Nubian community at large, between the “separatists” and the “conformists” is still ongoing?

Y.M.: Well, I think the conflict has abated somewhat recently, and, I dare say, the January 25, 2011, revolution and the new 2014 Constitution are considered turning points in our history, despite the fact that we still have a long way to go.

F.M.: This brings me to my next question: Do you think that the new constitution seems to have put an end to the plight of the Nubians?

Y.M.: No, unfortunately, the truth is far from it. The constitution stated that we would finally be compensated for our lost lands, something we have been struggling to achieve for decades. However, nothing has happened on the ground so far. We are still waiting and hoping to see real changes in our lifetime and to see governments keep their promises.

F.M.: Do you think that Nubian writers have been treated unjustly by the academic circles in Egypt? Some Nubian writers, notably Haggag Oddoul and Idris Ali, have expressed on several occasions their disappointment with the mainstream academic and media circles in Egypt, which on certain occasions went so far as to dismiss the existence of a Nubian literature on purely nationalist grounds.

Y.M.: Well, even if this is true with regard to some writers, it is certainly not true in my case. The number of critical reviews written on my books in various newspapers and journals reflects the degree of critical acclaim my books have obtained throughout my writing career. I was delighted to know lately that a couple of postgraduate candidates in our national Egyptian universities are writing theses on my fictional works. In short, I am not sure if we can make such a claim on all Nubian writers; no, there are individual differences. You may consider me a maverick. There is no compromising on the basic Nubian issues, and I sincerely believe in an ethnically pluralist Egyptian

nation, but, having said that, I cannot claim that as a writer I am being deprived of expressing my views on Nubia, as other narrow-minded Nubian nationalists would like to claim.

AMAL MAZHAR: What are the most pressing issues that preoccupy the Nubian writer/intellectual?

Y.M.: Well, Nubian writers have a double role to play. On the one hand, like their fellow brothers and sisters, they share their aspirations and hopes to get “decent” compensations for losing their fathers’ and their grandfathers’ lands and hence they bear the responsibility of expressing in writing such justified aspirations. On the other hand, they also have a responsibility towards preserving and reviving their Nubian heritage, which is seriously threatened, since the new generations neither speak the language nor have any memories of Nubia, their lost land. I assure you, the young generations who were born in northern cities have lost contact even with the Nubian language spoken by their parents. Thus, it could be said that literature remains the best medium available for Nubians to express memories and future aspirations.

A.M.: Do you think this explains why the most common genres in Nubian literature seem to be the novel and the short story, while drama and poetry do not have the same important place?

Y.M.: I totally agree with this observation. Nubian literature and culture in general are entrenched in storytelling. Nubia had always been an agrarian society. The lives of its people depended solely on the Nile. Traditionally, Nubians would work very hard for three months preparing the soil and cultivating the land. They would then spend the other nine months waiting until the harvest season. They would gather to tell stories to kill time. Thus, storytelling became their main source of entertainment. With the early forms of Nubian literary writing, the novel became the most appropriate genre to represent the Nubian question: its history, social and cultural traditions, and the trauma of displacement.

A.M.: Thanks for bringing up this point, which brings me to my next question: What do you think of what is known as the “Nubian right to return,” which has been a defining feature of Nubian activism?

Y.M.: Well, as I mentioned earlier, my position has always been for inclusivity rather than separatism. Let me remind you: I was incarcerated during Nasser's times together with my friend, the renowned Nubian writer Muhammad Khalil Qassim, who spent almost ten years in prison before and after the 1952 Revolution. We were not imprisoned for advocating Nubian rights per se. We were an integral part of the Egyptian national movement for liberation before 1952, and we became part of the Egyptian left in post-Revolution Egypt, opposing Nasser's one-party regime. Our cause has been always part of the Egyptian people's national struggle for independence and social struggle for equality. It is worthy of note that Nubian youth, unlike other young men from the north, have never attempted to avoid compulsory conscription in the army, not least during Nasser's times. In fact, serving in the army, especially during the successive wars of 1956, '67 and '73, had always been a source of pride to the whole Nubian family.

A.M.: So, do you think a return to Old Nubia is not a viable solution or, for that matter, impossible?

Y.M.: Well, the answer is yes and no. On one hand, return is quite possible if there is the political will to do so. We have visited the land of our fathers, and we submitted to various governments' specific suggestions and plans for the logistics of such a move, explaining which villages can be revived, and how can this project be implemented. On the other hand, a substantial number of Nubians and their families who have been established in the north would find it very hard to return, but I assure you that the older generations who live with the dream of their return would not hesitate to go back to their villages. For the younger generations who do not even speak the language of their forefathers, their return can only be possible through literature; through memorizing the stories of their ancestors through reading them over and over.

## 2. Interview with Samar Nour

By Mona Radwan and Faten Morsy

Samar Nour (born in 1977 in Cairo) is an award-winning author. She is the author of three collections of short stories and two novels. Her collection of stories *Fī Bayt Maṣāṣ al-Dimā'* (In the house of the vampire, 2017) won the Naguib Sawiris Award for Literature in 2017. Her translated short story "The Daughter of the Coffin Maker"

was shortlisted for the Arab Literature story prize. Her two novels, *Maḥallak Sirr* (Stalemate, 2008) and *al-Sitt* (The lady, 2013) won considerable critical acclaim when they were published.

We caught up with Samar Nour to listen to her views on writing, the Nubian question, and her vocation as a woman writer. The interview took place on January 9, 2021.

MONA RADWAN: I am delighted you have accepted to talk to me today about your life and your writings.

SAMAR NOUR: Thank you very much. It is my pleasure.

M.R.: When did you first start writing?

S.N.: My first attempt at writing was made when I was 12 years old. This was a short story entitled “The Return.” It depicted the Nubian situation of forced migration and its consequences from the viewpoint of a child. Of course, I had not witnessed the events firsthand, but I heard stories from my parents and grandparents and all the Nubian friends who surrounded my family.

M.R.: Which themes do you consider the most important in your works?

S.N.: It is always difficult for a writer to talk about their themes. Born in Cairo, with an education and career as a journalist there and writing in the last decade of the previous century and the first decade of our new millennium, my themes expressed the degree of alienation urban young writers felt in the city. This was the main atmosphere of books such as *Barīq lā-Yuḥtamal* [Intolerable gleam] and my novel *Maḥallak Sirr* [Stalemate] published in 2013. However, my first visit to my father’s village, al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk (literally, “the garden and the window”), became a turning point in my writings. Nubia gradually became an important source of inspiration. What was totally absent from my writings started to take shape. Perhaps this form of deliberate absence was proof of an obsession with its overwhelming presence.

M.R.: How are you able to write about Nubia while being a Cairene?

s.n.: As I have just pointed out, I had always known Nubia through the eyes of others until I visited al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk. For me, there have always been two Nubias in my imagination. The first is Old Nubia, the Nubia of Muhammed Khalil Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra* with its Nile, palm trees, villages, and their villagers' songs and ways of life. In short, the Nubia of my father's birthplace, al-Junayna wa al-Shibbāk, as I've mentioned. The other Nubia is the New Nubia I visited a few years ago. It is the Nubia marked by its dry and arid land, a Nubia full of bitterness and pain with neither Nile nor palm trees, a mere desert. The contrast between the two Nubias is always at the back of my mind, and I find it surfacing in my recent writings.

M.R.: So, do you consider yourself a Nubian or an Arab writer?

s.n.: This is a very interesting and important question. I am Egyptian of Nubian descent. Arabic is the language I speak and write. So, my writings can be classified as modern Arabic or Egyptian literature. Even if the themes of my books are on Nubian issues and belong to Nubian writings, they fall under the larger umbrella of "Arabic literature" since they are written in Arabic. In creative writing, language plays a central role. When we say French literature, or English literature, we classify them according to the language in which they are written rather than the themes of the books. In addition to this, Nubian language is an oral language. Nubia has a very rich oral tradition of poetry and storytelling, but it remains an oral rather than a written language. Regarding attempts to write modern literature we are discussing modern and contemporary lit in particular — of course the alphabet has been there for millennia and oral literature, notably songs and poetry use various languages using the Nubian alphabet (but that's a different issue) — which are as recent as 1997 or a little bit earlier.

M.R.: So, you think that Nubian literature is an offshoot of Arabic literature?

s.n.: It is Arabic literature if it is written in Arabic.

M.R.: Which Nubian authors or books have influenced your writings most?

s.n.: Well, I must admit that I am indebted to three of the most conspicuous Nubian writers: Muhammed Khalil Qassim, Yehia



Mokhtar, and Idris Ali. I have always looked up to these three writers in particular. Mokhtar by virtue of his humanistic outlook to the world and to the Nubian question; Ali, for being realistic and indeed objective in representing Nubia and Nubians. Instead of depicting a romantic and idealistic Nubia, as other Nubian writers do, he sincerely reflected Nubia and Nubians with all their shortcomings and problems. However, it was Qassim's *Al-Shamandūra*, the magnum opus of Nubian texts, or for that matter Arabic fiction, that has affected me most as a young writer.

m.r.: Excellent. On another note, as a woman writer, can you comment on the role of women in the Nubian community? Has the role changed or developed over the years?

s.n.: Women have a special status in Nubian culture. Ancient Nubia was familiar with Nubian queens and their central role in social and political life. It is worth noting that the mother was the source of inheritance rather than the father. Moreover, children were named after their mothers. After the displacement, women became active in establishing co-ops as they became their means of supporting their families. Thus, women have always played a central role in keeping the family together and securing a decent education for their children to integrate in Egyptian society in the north. Long were the days when the first Nubian immigrants, who knew no job but farming, were forced after the displacement to work in Cairo and the big cities as porters and butlers. The following generations are mostly professionals who occupy all positions within society, thanks to the education their parents, and notably their mothers, insisted that they get. Thus, education is now spread in Nubian families, and Nubian women, at least in my mother's generation, are mostly educated.

m.r.: Do you consider yourself a feminist writer?

s.n.: I wouldn't say I'm a feminist writer in the full sense. I like what a critic once described my writing as having a "feminist sensation." When I wrote my piece "A Room of One's Own Patience," I was obviously playing on Virginia Woolf's famous lecture later turned into a book, *A Room of One's Own*. Needless to say, the story deploys the theme of the creative woman facing several social pressures that impede her chances to excel as a writer. The link with Woolf cannot be lost on any reader. In my

story, however, the young female journalist and her desire for independence is intertwined with the story of the painter who commits suicide because he fails to achieve his ambitions as an artist. Here, the “feminist’ issue is dealt with more as a human issue.

M.R.: Tell us something about your current and future writing projects.

S.N.: I am currently busy working on a narrative project that was also inspired by my visits to my father’s village. I would not say it is a novel, it is rather a writing project. I will write about a place I have not lived in, but I think I know it well through the stories and myths I heard from Nubians. I was told by friends of my parents that one of my great-grandfathers was a *Karam Bāsh*, an almost mythical figure from Old Nubia. When I went to the village in New Nubia, I wanted to trace this family line. Strange enough, no one had ever heard the name *Karam Bāsh*. However, I became totally obsessed and intrigued by the idea of searching for a lost ancestor, even if he were apocryphal and the product of a collective mind. This project then is about bringing together two worlds: the past and the present, myth and reality, the village and the city. This is an exciting project, and I hope my commitments as a journalist allow me the time to complete it soon.

### 3. Interview with Haggag Oddoul

By Mona Radwan

Haggag Oddoul (born in Alexandria in 1944) is one of the most prominent Nubian writers and political and human rights activists. He writes novels, plays, short stories, children’s literature, and non-fiction books. Like the prominent Nubian writer Idris Ali, Oddoul worked, ironically, as a construction worker in Aswan High Dam from 1963 to 1967. Both writers also served in the Egyptian army before and after the 1973 war. His expansive literary output includes such major works as *Layālī al-misk al-‘atīqa: Majmū‘a qīṣaṣīya* (Nights of musk: Stories from Old Nubia, [1989] 2005), *Al-Kushūr* (The key, 2019), and *Khālī Jā’ahu al-Makhād* (My uncle went into labor, 2019).

Because of Covid 19, this interview was conducted by phone on January 12, 2021.

M.R.: What are the issues or themes that you tackle most in your writings? And can you talk about the shifts or developments in themes that can be discerned in your recent writings?

H.O.: Being a human rights activist, my books deal with many issues, not least the Nubian issue. However, I always have an eye on human communication and respect for others. The settings of my early works were mostly upper Egypt, then I moved upward to the south [of Egypt] and further north toward the Mediterranean. Remember, I was born in Alexandria. However, all my characters move under the umbrella of humanity. I am a strong believer in the value of pluralism, and I think that the source of unity in our pluralistic society must come from a belief in our common human principles. I try to reflect such ideas in my writings.

M.R.: Several writers of Nubian descent have reservations about being described as “Nubian” writers. What is your take on such an issue, and do you consider Nubian literature part of Arabic literature?

H.O.: It goes without saying that Nubian literature is part of Egyptian literature, which is part of the literature written in Arabic. But first, let us agree that all literature should be based on the higher meaning of humanity. Now let us move to the question of language. Writing in Arabic should by no means deprive the text of its Nubian nature. In other words, you can be an Arab or Egyptian writer and a Nubian writer at the same time. Both are not mutually exclusive. Of course, any Nubian who writes about Nubia is a Nubian writer, regardless of the language they use. In my view, Yehia [Mokhtar] may be confused in his opinion when he claims that there is no such thing as Nubian literature as long as it is written in Arabic. If this is someone’s opinion, should it be engraved on a stone? Of course not, it can always be contested.

Would it be logical to say, for example, that Latin American literature is Spanish literature or Portuguese literature because it is written in these languages? We say it is Latin American literature in Spanish, but not Spanish literature. Then what would he (meaning Mokhtar) say about Algerian literature that is written in French? Should we say that it is French literature and deny the fact that it is Algerian although this literature deals with Algerian society and Algerian issues?

M.R.: When did this nomenclature “Nubian literature” emerge?

H.O.: The term “Nubian literature” first appeared in 1990, but it was met with some resentment. With the continuous use of this term “Nubian literature” the resentment increased, and there was strong opposition that soon escalated to rejection. This refusal became an accusation to those who use the term on the grounds that they are seeking to cause harm or damage to the unity of the Egyptian society. In fact, it was claimed that the Nubians who are using this term are not just racist, but they are also segregationists. However, these are totally unfounded accusations. Egypt is a resilient country, and there is no compromise on its national unity despite all the hardships it has been through across the ages.

All these special traits are a blessing for Egypt. Why do some consider it a curse? If we have common national roots, why the apprehension and accusations? We are quite aware that Egypt is a very stable country because of the limited number of minorities in Egypt. Moreover, and this is most important, Egyptians are homogeneous and peaceful.

Egypt embraced the Arabic language and accepted it, thus it became Egyptian. Accordingly, Egyptian literature is Egyptian even if it was written in the Arabic language. In the same context, Nubia accepted the Arabic language as its language, along with the Nubian languages, and wrote literature in Arabic. Therefore, any literary work written in Arabic is indeed Nubian literature, and we name it “Nubian-Egyptian literature”.

M.R.: Since the Nubian alphabet has been introduced to modern and contemporary Nubian forms of expression, do you intend to write in Nubian? And do you yourself speak Nubian fluently?

H.O.: Writing using Nubian letters is extremely complicated because it is still in its early years. My Nubian speaking skills are quite modest, so I cannot see myself writing in Nubian.

M.R.: Has oral Nubian literature been registered in books or other recorded forms?

H.O.: Actually, hardly any has been registered.

M.R.: Has there been any progress on the Nubian Cause after the revolution of January 25, 2011?

H.O.: No, nothing new, yet.

M.R.: What about the Nubian right to return to Nubia?

H.O.: There is yet a lot to be done in terms of efforts and time.

M.R.: Do you communicate with Sudanese-Nubian writers?

H.O.: Unfortunately, there has not been much communication, and even if we meet, it is very rare. I would like to point out that Sudanese-Nubian literature is mainly oral in nature.

M.R.: As one of the controversial themes in your novels in a largely conservative society like the Egyptian one, can you comment on the use of queerness and queer characters in your books?

H.O.: To begin with, the reader must know that I am only a writer, not a literary scholar, so please excuse me if I do not delve too much into theoretical issues. The novel you are referring to is *Khālī Jā'ahu al-Makhād* (My uncle went into labor). However, I added the subtitle "A Fictional Satire" on the cover to the third edition. The novel, or rather novella, makes use of caricature and satire as its narrative style in the sense that it amplifies and exaggerates the characters' traits for aesthetic purposes. We read in the introduction to the novel the following pronouncement: "I will tell you and explain how the predictions in the old Nubian fairy tale have come true in our bleak days." Those wicked ancestors had predicted that their Nubian lineage would witness one setback after another only to be watched shamefully by the *gurbatis* (non-Nubians). The main character in the novel became androgynous, combining masculinity and femininity. He is a person who is a mixture of both the Turkish governor and the Nubian woman. Queerness in the novel stands for the state of in-betweenness and "instability" — as conspicuous features of the Nubian society after displacement. However, it is celebrated since it helps expose the shortcomings in Nubian society, which avowedly seems "morally correct," while its lurking corruption is represented in the characters of the mayor, the woman "Kharība," and even Sheikh Ramly.

Although the events take place in a Nubian village, they represent the whole Arab region! That is, it is a model for the rest of the countries. I include references to the ridiculous Arab summits, failed parliaments, and the blind imitation of the

West, among other political and social issues. I wanted to stress the fact that if the flood of the Nile was in Nubia, the other countries in the region also suffered from their own internal inundations. In other words, Tomila, the main character, acts as a catalyst whereby the state of decadence in all societies and on all levels in the region is being exposed.

The second novel that depicts another queer, central character is *Ma' tūq al-Khayr* (Ma' tūq, the good, 2002). Here again we have the depiction of a very quiet and idyllic village on the river Nile and the seismic changes it witnesses as it transforms into a capitalist society. The village is in Old Nubia, but it can be any village anywhere in the world. Let me relate an interesting story about the main character in the book, Olowa. As I embarked on writing this novel, Olowa's character was the most tiresome and exhausting character in the book; in fact, its obscurity seemed to affect the flow of narration. It is only after seventy or eighty pages that I realized that Olowa was queer. Once the character "came out," as it were, things started to fall in place as his relation to the characters and events started to take a new turn. I myself had to rewrite this part of the manuscript all over again because of this new realization. Unfortunately, back then there were no PCs, so everything had to be typewritten, which was torture. The second realization that came to me was that after the death of the new Wali, *Ma' tūq al-Khayr*, to the surprise of the reader, and myself, Olowa became the new Wali. Now for a bisexual to become the Wali or governor and patron saint of the village is unusual in many societies around the world, let alone in Nubian society in southern Egypt where they are normally considered pariah, ridiculed and disdained by members of the community. Olowa becomes the victim but also the epitome of suffering and redemption. The situation is reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the priest bows before the Big Brother, who holds the contradiction, both good and evil inside him. Like him, Olowa stands for Everyman, for Adam who was neither an angel nor a saint, but a human being by virtue of his strengths and weaknesses, which are the source of his perils.

M.R.: Is it significant that in most of your novels the supernatural elements are fused with reality? Is it fair to claim that it is a feature of Nubian literature?

H.O.: Yes, I think this is true. As I've mentioned before, *Khāli Jā' ahū Al-Makhād* (My uncle went into labor) was originally

taken from a simple Nubian children's tale. It is about a wife who does not have children. Because some traditional societies believe in supernatural practices, the woman swallowed a magical potion and became pregnant. The woman's brother accidentally consumed the same potion and became pregnant in turn! The child of the sister who became pregnant was the one who shouted and exposed her uncle.

M.R.: How do you explain the absence of drama or theater in Nubian contemporary letters?

H.O.: Theater as we know it now is impossible to exist in primitive societies. However, different forms of performance have accompanied storytelling, the hallmark of Nubian culture and literature. Nubians naturally tell tales. The novel originated in narrating myths and legends while the people in these societies have been composing poetry while playing, dancing, and singing. There is a strong underlying presence of Nubian performative arts in all these literary forms. Group dances in primary societies tell a story, hence its theatricality. The village *gre*, who tells the tales of the ancestors, reenacts the most important battles and events in Nubian history. Remember the saga of *Sirat Banī Hilāl* sung passionately by village singers in the form of what can be described as primitive monodrama. Having said this, as a child, I attended performances of oral plays, that is oral tales performed rather than being based on written texts. An interesting detail is that the roles of women were performed by men. It is my contention that originally Nubian women used to play female roles in this type of "plays"; however, with the immigration of Nubians to the Gulf, Nubian society became more conservative and women were prevented from participating in such performances.

At any rate, the interaction between singers and audience could be associated with the so-called *Commedia dell'arte*, which characterizes the theater in the villages for example, Mahmoud Diab's "Maṣraḥ Al-Jurn" (Barn theater). The prominent writer Youssef Idris made similar attempts, by the way. Then came my role as the first Nubian playwright and my play *People of the River* as the first written Nubian play. I am sure more Nubian plays will be coming out in the future. As I told you, I am a writer not a researcher. It is not easy to talk about one's own writing. However, I tried my best.