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Representing Conflict, Imagining Consensus:
Race, Gender and Nation in Khālid Ibrāhīm
'Uways's *Dance under the Rain*

THIS paper examines the category of conflict in Khālid Ibrāhīm 'Uways's novel *al-Ruqs taht al-Matar* (*Dance under the Rain*, 2001). Unlike Tayyeb Şālih whose forte largely inheres in his iconic portrayal of the interface between the Sudanese and the colonialist, 'Uways novel is *sui generis* in its attention to the inner schisms in the post-independence Sudanese society particularly the seemingly unending North-South interface, the violent racial conflict between the black- and Arab-Sudanese, the inscription and circumscription of gender by nationalism and the overall shifting identities of postcolonial Sudanese modernities. Central to this study is the exploration of how inter-racial/cultural and intra-racial/cultural trajectories in Sudan have served as an impulse for creativity and how the latter, in turn, hacks back to the very reality from which it derives its origin and strength. In searching for “meaning” in 'Uways's novel, therefore, this paper pays attention to a combination of African, Eastern and Western critical styles including Abdul Qāhir al-Jurjāni, Adonis, Edward Said, Jean-Paul Sartre, Chinua Achebe and

Frantz Fanon. How have the dialectics and the plethora of conflicts in Sudan impacted Sudanese literature and what knowledge do they vouchsafe for Africa in its attempt to make sense of itself and its future? How has the Sudanese literature mirror the racial, gender and national fissures and frictions in contemporary Sudan and what cultural cue(s) does it yield for the country in its effort at building consensus among its citizen? What other perspectives, aside from the sociological and political, could characters we read about in Sudanese literature, particularly in 'Uways *al-Ruqs*, furnish with reference to intra-Sudanese conflicts and how might we, using al-Jurjāni's thesis on "intellectual" (al-ilmī) and "imaginative" (al-takhayulī) meanings in literature, describe them?

To talk about the category of conflict in the Sudanese novel might not satisfy Edward Said's thesis to the effect that "every novel is a form of discovery" (82). This is because conflict, with respect to al-Sūdān, is the *Zeitgeist* the spirit of the age. As a historical construct, the Sudan, since the medieval to the modern period, has been a locale for contests and conflicts between and among disparate ethnic communities and, in the words of Ali Mazrui, "the multiple marginalities" (240-255) that inhabit its rigid terrain. As a post-modern/colonial site, the geographies of the Sudanese landscape is presently being shaped, no more by "multiple marginalities" but "multiple complexities" (Ahmed 71) of the Sudanese subjectivities. As a cultural problematic, the category of conflict in the Sudan continues to defy the simplistic binary between good and evil and between Northern and Southern Sudan. Rather the country has the enviable (?) record, at least with reference to Africa, of being one in which conflict exists, on the one hand, between the

'black' and the 'white', and, on the other, among the 'white,' the 'black' and the neither 'white' nor 'black' As if by compulsion, the Sudan celebrates the uncanny union of the real, the farcical and the absurd; it is a site where conflict is the *nodus* of being; it is a space where conflict is the driving force of existence.

Now, if the subject matter of conflict has become so intertwined, quite paradoxically, with the very essence of the Sudanese nation, then its appropriation by imagination must necessarily be for purposes other than mere re-presentation of its dynamics. In other words, in order for the novel to be relevant in postcolonial Sudan, it should most likely set for itself the task of, in the words of Chinua Achebe, “re-educating” the complex Sudanese subjectivities and “regenerating” (103) the Sudanese cultural values. Put differently, the Sudanese novel that would titillate the Sudanese literary appetite and, therefore, merit our attention, should be such as would satisfy, in line with Edward Said, the urge in humanity “to modify reality” (82a). Ahmad Muhammad al-Mahjūb graphically pictures this when, while writing in the 1930s in Sudan, he says: “what's the essence of literature if it does not assist people on revolution and change in life ...and in propelling ...(the people) on to the current of progress and development” (Insert Page No. Only)

Thus in reading Uways's *al-Ruqs taht al-Matar* (*Dance under the Rain* --hereafter, *Dance*), we shall examine how the novel attempts “to modify reality” in Sudan through its representation of the *topoi* of conflict in the country. In order to achieve the foregoing, however, it is important for this paper to examine intra-Sudanese existential/historical/cultural valences that accentuate conflict in Sudan before its appropriation by Sudanese writers. In other words, the starting point of an inquiry into the category of conflict in the Sudanese novel, and one in

which the motifs of race, gender and nationalism are embedded, should be an investigation, albeit briefly, of the extremely charged field which spawned racial, gender and national consciousness in Sudan before its appropriation by the Sudanese writers. Thus, the following question becomes extremely urgent: what could be the fountain(s) for the conflictual identities of the Sudanese in the contemporary period and how might it be useful in our attempt to understand the problematics of race, gender and nationalism in the Sudanese novel? In answering these questions the probing statements of the renowned Sudanese writer, al-Tayyib Ṣālih, compels our contemplation. Writing in *al-Majallah* close two decades ago, al-Tayyib Ṣālih says:

One of the reasons why this country is always in turmoil could be attributed to the fact that its name means nothing to its people. What is Sudan? Egypt is Egypt, Yemen Yemen, Iraq Iraq and Lebanon Lebanon. But what is the Sudan? We have continued to trundle on with this hollow colonial legacy. (Insert Page No. Only)

These statements from al-Tayyib Ṣālih are of high importance to any analyses of the problematic of conflict in Sudanese culture. The statements essay a reasoned gulf between the Sudanese and his/her nation. They portray the former in a state of angst, utterly disoriented with him/herself and completely disenchanted with the very first element that defines his/her identity: *al-Sūdān*. Specifically the question, 'what is Sudan' mirrors the Arab-Sudanese's rejection of *al-Sūdān*. The name is rejected probably because it effaces, in line with Ibn

Khaldun's thesis, "the historicity" of the Arab-Sudanese "as an historical group" (qtd by A. Al-Azmeh 38). *al-Sūdān* 'inflicts' 'blackness' on the latter; with it, the most important critical factor for national cohesion and identity formation in Sudan becomes circumscribed by colour: blackness².

The rejection, by the Arab-Sudanese, of *al-Sūdān* does not, however, mean the celebration of the name by the black-Sudanese. This is because the circumscription of nation by colour and the inscription of Sudan with the black identity have not, since the early modern period, led to any improvement in the socio-political and economic realities of the black-subjects in Sudan. Throughout the period of the British hegemony over the Nile Valley and years after Sudanese political independence extreme and, perhaps, deliberate under-development of the Southern and Western parts of the Sudan, both of which represent the bastion of black identities in the country, has continued³. For example during the British rule "only four government primary schools" (Prunier 26) could be found in the whole of Dar Fur. Schools and other educational facilities were and have not been provided in these areas probably based on the fact that, in line with George Antonius, "without school or book" (Antonius 40) the yearning for a nation by the black-Sudanese would be inconceivable. Thus while the Arab-Sudanese is in conflict with *al-Sūdān* because of 'race'/colour, the black-Sudanese, on the other hand, rejects it because of its empty promises as a 'nation'.

But the foregoing only represents a perspective. In other words, it is not only colour/race and nation that have informed the epistemology of conflict in postcolonial Sudan, lack of consensus over gender role(s) has also served as an important

fountain for conflict, frictions and fissures among Sudanese citizens. From the farthest regions of southern Sudan to its northern peripheries, arguments abound not only over the essence of the male or female in nature but also what socio-cultural and political space(s) could be yielded to each in the Sudanese construction of its identity. Within this gender spectrum, however, the Sudanese woman is usually at the receiving end. She has no independent identity. She usually watches as her body is, in the words of Muhsin al-Musawi, “confiscated, sold out, drawn upon, mapped and deprived of its own identity” (al-Musawi 223). During the pre-independence era⁴ her body was a contested site between the colonist and the colonized. In the post-independence period, her identity has again been appropriated and invaded by the conflictual subjectivities in Sudan in their inter-racial and intra-national and cultural transactions; on her body the North and the South violently intersect. She is the “necessary allegorical ground for the transaction in national history” (Radhakrishnan 77).

Contrasting the figure of the woman with the man in Sudanese culture yields interesting images for us behold. Without attempting to explore, in-depth, how he has been “produced” culturally⁵, the male in Sudan may be categorized into three: *al-rajul* (the male), *nisfu al-rajul* (half male, read the effeminate), and *al-rajul al-kāmil* (complete male). The complete male in Sudanese Arab-Islamic culture, for example, is not only the opposite of the female but is the quintessential “spermatic animal per excellence” (Foucault 112). It is with reference to him that the patriarchates have divided authorities in nature into two: the one in heaven and the other on earth; “to God belongs the powers in the heaven; to the ... (complete

male) belongs the power on earth” (Wadi 271). At the inter-gender level the complete male is a warrior: the conqueror of the female. At the intra-gender level, men in Sudanese cultural hierarchy acquiesce, either by choice or compulsion, to his authority. Thus the gender problematic, in addition to that of race and nation, could, therefore, be seen as the *doxa* --the dominant issues in contemporary Sudanese life. They constitute, in a contrapuntal manner, “the ideas, the concepts and the experience” (Edward Said(b) 73) from which the Sudanese novel draws support. It is to its portrayal and the representation of its trajectories in Sudanese culture that 'Uways novel, *Dance*, is dedicated.

Narrated by the author, *Dance* tells the story of Stephen Michael Donato, the hero, J'afar, 'Umar, Nafisah, Robert John Kolant and Tony. Even though the hero and Robert are from Southern Sudan, they are friends to J'afar, Umar, Abdul Gani, Nafisah, all of whom are Arab-Sudanese. Both J'afar and Nafisah are children of a medical doctor by name Muhammad Ahmad while Tony, the Southerner, is their house-servant. Apparently born after the attainment of independence by Sudan, all the characters, excepting Robert and Nafisah --both of whom are students in the law of school-- became friends when they met in the Sudanese Military College. Their parents wanted them to pursue such fields of human endeavour as medicine and law but they chose to go for military training probably to mirror the condition of the postcolonial Sudanese nation: a nation at war itself; a nation constantly on the brink of an implosion. Aside from these characters there is Muhammad Şālih, the Arab-Sudanese elderly house-assistant to the hero, Stephen Michael Donato.

Dance has two beginnings: one in the South and the other in

the North of Sudan. The first conduces to the metaphysical patrimonies and cosmogonic sensibilities of the hero, the second images post-independence Sudanese socio-political landscape; the first attend to the hero's Southern origin, identity and reminiscences, the second patronizes his trials and travails in northern Sudan; the first patronizes symbols and traditional cues in Southern Sudan, the second is *sui generis* in its portrayal of the rigid realities of modern Sudanese life in the North; the first mirrors how the hero, as a young village-boy, goes out into the bush very early in the morning only for him to "return as a grown-up child in his twenties" (8) the second is picaresque of how he departs Northern Sudan as a nationalist in search of his "nation". We shall delay the engagement with the symbolic in our reading of Uways's novel for the pragmatic, in line with the Arab axiom that every ending naturally returns to its beginning.

The pragmatic and the mimetic in *Dance* begin when the hero, Stephen Michael Donato, the Southerner, decides to go for a wedding feast organized by his friend in Umdurmān. Walking steadily as if on a mission, his hands in his pocket, he is seen by a group of young boys who had been playing on the street under the shining moonlight. His appearance immediately catches the attention of the boys. One of them exclaims, "Look at this black slave!!" (8). When a Southerner is seen in the northern parts of Sudan, his/her presence occasions an inner conflict in the xenophobic Northerner; the racist alarm in the psyche of the latter automatically rings. His emotion is full of contempt and hatred for the black subject. The boys, three in all, thereafter walk up to the hero. One of them confronts him thus: "We are in need of a servant who will take care of our house!!". The second says: "Would you accept to work with us...The work is not difficult...cleaning of the house and utensils and laundry...we

shall give you money that suits your service” (9). These statements are reminiscent of a perspective in the dialectic image of the black-African as constructed both by the Arab-African writers and their counterparts in sub-Sahara Africa⁶ which essays the black subject as an entity whose essence inheres in slavery and servitude. The statements made by the boys also call attention to the possibility of the continued incidence of slavery in the post-independence Sudan; the possibility, in line with John Eibner, that the “Sudan is the only place (in the contemporary period) where chattel slavery is not just surviving but experiencing a great survival” (Eibner 6). Instead of responding to these inflammatory comments, the hero decides to keep his calm. But his silence and sturdy posture only infuriates the boys the more. The hero, therefore, calmly says: “I have a job already, can I go please?” But the boys appear unprepared to let him have things his way. One of them then says: “Bring your mother instead!” (10).

By saying “Bring your mother instead” the boys, who, in the words of Bakhtin, could be referred to as “centrepetal forces” operating in the midst of Sudanese “heteroglosia” (272) want to infuriate the hero; they desire to transform the texture of the conflict from the verbal to the violent. This is because in typical African societies, mothers are sacred entities --they are revered as the source of life and living⁷. Thus in instances when mothers are ridiculed, it is expected that their children should rise up and defend their honour. But rather than trying to redeem his mother's honour, the hero pleads with the boys once again to let him go saying: “I'm on my way to a wedding party, please let me go” (Uways 10). But the boys would not let him have things his way probably because the North-South interface thrives only

when it becomes violent. Thus the hero seeks recourse to his professional training: he engages the three in physical combat. Violence occurs in the text as an effect, the cause being the refusal of the black subject to remain where he is put by the Other; the refusal of the Southerner to carry the can of guilt; the sturdy refusal of the black subject to profess and confess his inferiority. A police officer soon emerges unto the scene. He asks the boys what went wrong. In unison they chorus: "It is this hopeless Southerner...he is trying to rob us" (10). The policeman does not think twice before saying: "O! these Southerners would cause nothing but trouble...follow me to the station" (10). Here reference to the hero, neither as a black man nor a slave but a Southerner means the word is the third variable in the polyglot; the third in the panoply of adjectives usually employed by the Northerners in reference to their compatriots from the South. The employment of the word "Southerner" enjoys plausibility not only because it is a racial concept but also because it affirms the political binary in Sudan: the North/South, Muslim/Christian and Arab/non-Arab divide. In the reckoning of the Northerner, the Southerner is "primarily a non-Northerner" (al-Effendi 372) the same way the Northerner is primarily a non-Southerner. This political game denies the possibility and in fact the reality that not all Southerners are Christians nor are all Northerners Muslims. It also refuses to instantiate the fact that not all Northerners are Arab (white) and that not all Southerners are black. When it becomes clear to the hero that he is being seen as the perpetrator, not the victim of racialism by the agent of government --the police, he reaches for the inner chest of his pocket and brings out his identity card. This achieves the desired result. The police officer discovers that the hero is an officer in the military and begins to plead out

of fear and humiliation saying “sorry sir! You can go” (Uways 10). The hero eventually arrives J'afar's house. There he meets his friends and associates all of whom seek to know the reason for his late arrival to the party. The hero's response is brisk and terse: “a small problem on the way” (11).

A couple of days thereafter the hero pays Robert a visit on campus. He enters a canteen, requests for a hot cup of tea and awaits the arrival of Robert who joins him. A short while thereafter, the hero catches sight of Nafīṣah, the younger sister of his friend, J'afar, who is also engaged in a conversation with her colleague by name Rashid. A short while after the exchange of pleasantries between the two, the hero goes back to his friend, Robert. He has hardly taken his leave when he hears Rashid whisper to Nafīṣah: “Who could this slave be?” Nafīṣah replies: “He is one of the friends of J'afar!” Rashid then says coldly: “Is it that your brother can't find the free born he could pick as friend?” (21)

Although Rashid says this silently he fails to reckon with the possibility that in the conflictual terrain which Sudan has become, in the racist spaces of Khartūm and Umdurmān and one in which the black subject is, in the words of Frantz Fanon, “over-determined from without...dissected under the white eyes” (*The Wretched* 116), the hero's “antennae” would “pick up the catch phrases”(116) of racialism as soon as they are let loose by the racist. In other words, apart from the guilt complex, conflict ensues in and outside the text in Sudan for “psycho-affective” (40) factor --a factor which operates in the temporal spaces occupied by the racist and the racialized subject in the country. In other words, the affectivity of the racist and racialized subjects in Sudan is constantly on “edge like a running sore flinching from a caustic agent” (50). The hero

would not let such derision and demeaning comments from Rashid pass without seeking redress. He goes back to the spot where Nafisah and her friend are sitting but only finds Nafisah who is completely engrossed in a book. He then goes on to confront her thus:

“I regret the fact that you are reading law!” (Uways 23). Nafisah opens her eyes wide in utter confusion and humiliation especially when she realizes that the statement is directed to no other person other than herself. The two characters, thereafter, engage each other in a confrontation:

“Nafisah! Have you learnt in law that human beings are in categories based on their colour and skin? What kind of law would that be?

Nafisah looks the hero straight in the face and retorts saying:

“Listen Sergeant Michael, you have your world and we have ours! I'm not a slave to anybody, Nafisah! I was created black by God, but he has not left in me any seed of stupidity and insignificance...my ears caught the conversation between you and your friend a while ago and I felt blood rush to my veins. I nearly returned to slap his bad face...” (24) (Check correctness of textual quotation)

Days after the confrontation between the two, Nafisah's mind remains fixed on the encounter. In the night she stays awake. Image of the hero and their hot exchanges occupies her heart. She is particularly disturbed by the challenges the hero posed to her and his interrogation of her identity and world-view. Being an Arab-Sudanese and daughter of the rich she shares the anti-South/black sentiments of the North. She sees

the black-Sudanese as an evil. She says to herself: "...nothing is worse than these (black) people!!" (25). She begins to contemplate the ideals that the hero stands for: "Stephen desires to change the order of nature! Never! Perhaps he thinks...he could (in reality) be counted as one of us..." (27). Here "the order of nature" references the privilege which the 'white' enjoys in ruling and running over the 'black'. By saying "...he thinks...he could be counted as one of us..." Nafisah also invites reminiscences of Frantz Fanon's sharp analyses of life in the colony: "...what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to" (xx). Thus post-independence Sudan becomes a replica of the British-Sudan. In the former the Sudanese authorities become postmodern colonialists; the black subjects become postmodern colonized subjects. But the encounter between the hero and Nafisah dramatically function in establishing a relationship between the two. Both characters eventually move from conflictual/adversarial postures to that of consensus and mutual respect; from mutual respect to affection. Nafisah begins to adore the hero's masculinity, intellectuality and uncanny perspectives to life; the latter, in return, starts to appreciate her preparedness to rediscover herself; her preparedness to discover the solemn and profound knowledge of the world wherever it may be found. Thus gender-racial conflict, in *Dance*, is conceived.

In Aristotle's thesis conflicts sometimes ensues in human societies based on, among others, disproportionate growth of one part of a city in comparison to the other, the adversarial interface between the poor and the rich and the contest between justice and injustice (Bickford 398-421)⁸. Tony, the house

servant, the hero and other Southern Sudanese would probably have remained in Southern Sudan had it been the case that basic necessities of life have been more equitably distributed by the authorities. Thus when the Southerner comes to the north, s/he does that not as a tourist but in search of living; in search of, in Aristotelian parlance, 'profit'. Once s/he arrives the North, the latter ceases to belong only to the Northerners. Rather the North becomes, de facto, a no-man's land.

Thus the hero derives confidence in protecting the young Tony. In doing that, however, he achieves two things in the text: the establishment of black consciousness in the face of white affirmation, not the creation, of an uncanny solidarity between the working class as a counterpoise for the oppression of the ruling class. The solidarity that exists among the working class, the oppressed and the poor in Sudan is instantaneous; it precedes the oppression of the oppressors; it is innate and immanent, not acquired and contingent like that among the rich. By saying "You aren't god by virtue of your being white", the hero is affirming the truth of black consciousness which gains strength in the same way that "the truth of the ruling-class consciousness", in line with Fredric Jameson's thesis, "is to be found in working-class consciousness" (Jameson 290). Yet the statement "You aren't god by virtue of being white" still raises a number of questions. What makes an Arab-Sudanese "white" in relation to the Black-Sudanese but "black" in relation to the British? Is reference to the Arab-Sudanese as "white" either by the Arab- or the black-Sudanese valid? Is the "white" subject truly white like snow or common salt? These questions are pertinent not only for their relevance to any discourse which concerns itself with the categories of race and nation, but also for our attempt to make sense of postcolonial intra-African

relations. Thus by saying “you aren't god by virtue of being white”, the hero appears to be desirous of separating colour from status; he seeks to deconstruct the age-long notion which equates blackness with evil and whiteness with goodness and virtue. The hero seeks to establish the humanity of all Sudanese in order to dismantle the “modern day colonialism” (Uways 28) in his country; in order to place the Sudanese on a socio-political and social spectrum where equality and justice would be the touchstone of intra-social and inter-communal relations.

But the hero would soon discover the reality and the elasticity of racialism in Sudan. He is accused of being responsible for Nafisah's refusal to marry Rida, the choice of her family. He is visited by his friend J'afar who asks him: “Sergeant Michael, tell me what's between you and Nafisah.” The hero contemplates his friend and says: “Nafisah is my friend and sister O! J'afar. I have great feelings of respect and honor for her...I haven't entered your house with the intention to dishonor it”(59). But J'afar has ceased being a friend to the hero. He retorts: “Dog...you dishonorable negro, if you go near her, I would shatter your head with bullets, listen ...She is going to marry Rida in a weeks time...do you hear me? (59). By calling the hero a dog, J'afar employs what is known in Arabic rhetoric as *Kināya*. *Kināya* is a rhetorical trope which, according to the medieval Arab critic, Abdul Qāhir al-Jurjāni, references “a meaning which you comprehend not by way of the word(s) used, but by way of the meaning expressed” (*Dalā'il al-'Ijāz* 330). Thus the description of the hero as a dog is with a purpose: J'afar desires to attribute to him the notions of bestiality and inhumanity that are ordinarily inherent in a dog. Dogs, in Arab-Islamic culture, are not fit as human companions; at best they are employed in games and hunting. His reference to the hero as

a 'dog' also travels the familiar track in modern Sudanese narrative discourse in which the black subject is given series of names and adjectives all of which portray him as deprived and an irrational being. Thus when reference is made to the black subjects such as *Kilāb al-Mas'ūrah* (Mad Dogs), *Adawāt mawt al-Sawdāh* (Black Instruments of Death), *Thīran Āijah* (Violent Bulls) and *Dhamāu li al-Dimā* (Blood Thirsty)⁹ we are awakened to racial politics in the text; we are reminded of the politics and poetics of colour in Sudanese culture; we feel impelled to engage the problematic of race as it appertained to Sudan in earnest. Thus we begin our return journey to the beginning in Dance.

Racial Conflict

In reading specifically for "race" we begin with the symbolic: the role of blood in the construction of the epistemology of race in Sudan. The hero remembers having asked his father once: "My father do you hate the Arabs?" But the old man refrains from offering an immediate answer to the hero's question. Rather he picks up a broken bottle and makes an incision on his arm. Then the following dialogue ensues between the two:

"What's this Stephen?"

"Blood"

"What's its colour?"

"Red"

Then the old man says as follows: "Every child of Adam is created by God with a red blood, this is the origin, then he created for them different colours." (20)

Here blood becomes a signifier: the signified being the primordial equal status of the human race. Here, again, colour becomes secondary and arbitrary: its employment as a standard in measuring human quality and in bestowing honour and privileges becomes arcane, invalid and an infringement on divine wisdom. In Southern parts of Sudan, the human blood is held to be sacred. To share the same blood group is to share the same racial identity; to share the same cultural traits; to carry the same genetic codes from which proceeds evil and good. There in Southern Sudan, the Arab-Sudanese are seen to be as bad as the blood that runs in their veins. Thus the ordinary Southerner has the notion that the possibility of a union between the North and the South of the country is as remote as the union of the heaven and earth. Deng quotes one of them as saying as follows: “The Northerner is a person you cannot say will one day mix with the Southerner to the point where the blood of the Southerner and the blood of the Northerner will become one” (Deng 191- 227). But Dance imagines this very possibility.

When the hero is accidentally shot in a military parade in the barrack and consequently hospitalized, he is told he would need blood transfusion for him to survive. Muhammad Ṣālih, his Arab servant could not, because of his old age, be of help. The latter, therefore, goes from the east to the west of Umdurmān in search of blood donors all to no avail. Nobody is willing to come forward and save the life of the hero who is already in a state of coma. Eventually Nafisah steps forward. She offers to provide the blood that would save the hero in return probably for the latter's effort in assisting her in her “search for self-validation” (Black Skin 213). When the hero regains his consciousness, the first person he sees by his side is Nafisah. She gets hold of his hand, places it in her palm and with a voice laden with love and

compassion says: "I nearly died of fear over you!" The hero looks her straight in the face and exclaims thus: "Your blood is running in my veins!" (Uways 63).

Thus Nafisah, the Arab-Sudanese and, the hero, from the South of Sudan, achieve that which is deemed ordinarily impossible by the Sudanese. Both characters overcome the cultural, not primordial, barriers between the 'white' and the 'black' in order to open new vistas in inter-racial space in Sudan. Both characters migrate from their 'whiteness' and 'blackness' in order to chart new directions for Sudan's fortune and destiny. The character of Muhammad Şālih further accentuates this perspective. Muhammad Şālih, the elderly servant to the hero is a Muslim and from the farthest parts of northern Sudan. He had previously served the Egyptian Pashas before coming to Sudan to work in the houses of the Sudanese notables. He even worked briefly for Nafisah's family before he is asked to leave sequel to his old age. At the beginning, he refused to work for the hero. The latter once asked him:

"Why did you refuse to work for me initially?"

Muhammad Şālih responds thus:

"When my people ask me for whom are you working... I would say: a Southerner..!"

They would then burst into laughter and say: he has become a slave to a slave (13)

But Şālih, the figure of the North --the image of the oppressor and the postcolonial racialist tendencies in Sudan, eventually agrees to work as a servant to the hero, the Southerner- the figure of the racialized and oppressed subjects in Sudan. This reversal of roles appears to partake of the contrarities and paradoxes in

the Sudanese cultural landscape. Sudan is the place where “the moon appears in the afternoon and the sun rises in the night; it is the place where the heavens send showers of fish and the fish in the ocean develop wings with which they fly in the skies” (‘Uways 29).

Perhaps more importantly, the characters of Muhammad Ṣālih, the hero and Nafīṣah throw up the third category of race in Sudan for our contemplation: the Afrabians. The Afrabians, according to Ali Mazrui, represent that category in African culture which emphasizes the “interaction between Africanity and Arab identity and the possibility of a fusion between the two”. (Mazrui 8). The Afrabians among the Sudanese, in line with Tayyeb Ṣālih, prefer to see things “with three eyes, talk with three tongues” (*Season* 151) and relate to things as neither ‘white’, ‘black’ nor negroid. The characters of Muhammad Ṣālih, the hero and Nafīṣah, therefore, function in awakening the Sudanese imagination to the possibilities of the emergence of a consensus on the country’s identities. They also serve in preventing our reading of race in Sudan from, in the manner of the postmodern, “being conclusive or teleological” (Hutcheon 8).

Gender Conflict

What knowledge(s) about gender does *Dance* furnish and how does it accentuate the conflictual spaces of the narration? How does the female see herself and the Other? The female in this novel is represented by Nafīṣah and the prostitute. Both provide two conflicting perspectives of gender for our contemplation. Nafīṣah sees herself as a traditional woman who, even though she belongs to the upper class of the Sudanese society, believes her essence ontologically lies in her

procreative ability. One night, before her relationship with the hero begins, she contemplates her own image and destiny and rhetorically asks herself: “when shall I finish studying law so that I can marry Rashid who will take me on a journey to London or Paris? What's the essence of university education? An opportunity to look for a suitable suitor...my certificate will surely adorn the courtyard of my marital home”. Nafisah's notion of herself conforms to tradition: that women's place is in the home; not necessarily in the school nor in the offices¹⁰. The female in Nafisah also considers herself incomplete in the absence of the male. This gives credence to Wadi's thesis to the effect that “everything is easy in the life of a woman except the man: he is the source of her conflicts and tribulations; he is the fountain of her happiness and sadness...” (Wadi 50)

But how do women see men in Sudan? The quintessential male, according to Nafisah, is he with dreams and “means”. The male of her choice is he with “good looks, lots of money and a beautiful car such that the hearts of the ladies should skip each time they see him” (Uways 26). In other words, the male of her dream should be materially comfortable. He should be such whose presence, as we have it in early Sudanese short stories, should lead to conflicts among the ladies over who should be his lover¹¹. This is, however, not the only perspective to heterosexual politics in Sudanese culture that we read of in the novel. The prostitute in one of the brothels in Umdurmān provides another perspective.

One night the hero pays a visit to the brothel. He meets the prostitute who welcomes him with excessive joy and happiness. She walks coquettishly in front him and, within a twinkle of an eye, begins to remove her

night gown. As she does this she whispers lustfully thus:

“O! I'm lucky tonight!! The female teacher, Safiyyah, used to say that Negroes are the most capable of all men on earth, I detest men who are soft!” (page No.?)

This statement reminds us of men's identity as constructed by Bint Majdhub in Tayyeb Ṣālih's *Season of Migration to the North*. According to her, a man's worth lies not in his ability to provide material comforts for his woman but in his ability to satisfy her in bed. In the presence of her son-in-law, Bint Majdhub confronts her daughter thus:

"O! Amīnah this man has not denied you of any of your rights...your house is beautiful, your cloth is beautiful. He has also stuffed your hands and neck with gold. But it appears from his face that he is incapable of satisfying you on bed. Should you desire real sexual satisfaction I can introduce a man to you, if he comes to you he would not leave you until your soul breaks." (al-Tayyib(b) 80)

Women who share this notion of men see themselves as men's sexual plaything; as objects in the hands of men; as "the impalpable gate that opens into the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations" (*Black Skin* 177). They are also active bearers of the “look”; they look at men as sexual objects in the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle.

But the foregoing does not necessarily lead to conflict in *Dance*. Gender conflict ensues in the text when Nafīсах begins to assert her agency through her refusal to marry the man her family has picked as her husband. She is immediately

confronted by J'afar, her brother. The latter is the figure of the traditional Sudanese Afro-Arab culture which sees the woman as an estate that belongs to the male. When he hears about her refusal to marry Rida, the choice of her family, blood rushes to his face. He considers her a threat: a threat against his masculinity. He also considers her refusal an affront against the patriarchal authorities as represented by his father. He therefore insists her sister would marry nobody else except Rida. Thus Nafisah finds herself in conflict with her family when she decides to migrate, in the manner of Hassanah bint Mahmud in *Season of Migration to the North*, from the locale of the “female” to that of the “feminist”¹²; when she ceases being, in the words of Trinh Minha, the “made woman” (264) in order to become a woman in the making. Nafisah refuses the marital contract her family enters into with the family of Rida sequel to her discovery of the “new Nafisah” (63); she rejects Rida after having discarded the old Nafisah: the Nafisah “who has a veil on her heart and a covering on her intellect” (63). Her refusal to accept Rida implies an elaboration of oppositional discourse by the female; her rejection of the society's tradition which defines her as a thing to be possessed, a spoil of war. Thus the marriage is dissolved as soon as it is solemnized.

National Conflict

Still in the pursuit of the geographies of conflict in *Dance*, we come to the third in the categories we have identified, namely nation. What elements are constitutive of a nation? Using the theory of *natio* as evidence, Homi Bhabha proposes “the condition of belonging” (45) as fundamental to the emergence of the political entity known as a nation. But close to a century

ago, the Arab congress, in 1913, made the following proposition: “In the view of political theorists, groups are entitled to the rights of a nation if they possess unity of language and of race according to the German school; unity of history and of tradition according to the Italian school; and unity of political aspiration according to the French. If we are to consider the case of the Arabs in the light of these three schools, we will find that they have unity of language, unity of history and of traditions, and unity political aspirations. The right of the Arabs to nationhood, therefore, finds endorsement in all schools of political theory” (qtd. in H. Z. Nuseibah 49).

What the Arab Congress probably failed to take into consideration is the problematic known as *al-Sūdān*- a state which simultaneously and paradoxically enjoys that which it lacks: unity of history and tradition, unity of race, and unity of political aspiration. *Al-Sūdān* is like a magical pot. It constantly boils with Africanity, Arabicity and Arabfricanity. None of these Sudanese identities fathoms what the word nation means to the Other. It is with reference to this problematic that the hero, the black-Sudanese, asks Nafisah, the Arab-Sudanese, thus: “What's the idea of the nation with you?” ('Uways 22). Nafisah looks the hero in the face without offering a response. She offers no response probably on the assumption that the hero is aware of the fact that as far as the ordinary Arab-Sudanese is concerned, the word "nation" means the Arab-Sudanese at war with the black-Sudanese. But in waging war against the black-Sudanese both the Arab- and black-Sudanese subjects are employed by the 'nation' in Sudan. This is represented by characters like 'Uthmān, a black-Sudanese and 'Umar and Mahmūd, the Arab-Sudanese. Despite the years he has put into the 'service' of his 'nation', 'Uthmān is arrested by the authorities on trumped

charges of sedition and treason. He is accused of cooperating with insurgents in western parts of Sudan, probably Dar Fur, where new Sudanese subjectivities have emerged to redefine what it does mean to refer to Sudan as a nation and, perhaps more importantly, what it does mean to be a Sudanese. 'Uthmān is consequently “put in solitary confinement, then summarily executed” (Uways 39). Upon his death, his children become orphans; his family is forced to return “to their village in Western Sudan” (39).

The circumstance of the Arab-Sudanese in the Sudanese army is equally not better. 'Umar, returns from the war front and goes straight to the hero's house. Suddenly, he bursts into hot tears; his body starts to shake as if under a spell. The hero, assisted by Muhammad Ṣālīh, carries him into the inner room. After a while he stutters thus: “O! Stephen...scattered corpses...even flies wouldn't do what we did...my friend it was at the White Nile, we destroyed thousands without mercy, we slaughtered old men and women, including children ...(42)”.

The hero and Muhammad Ṣālīh begin to mourn the unfortunate Sudanese who have suffered the fate 'Umar has just painted. But the latter is not done yet. As if he is purging himself of his sins, he goes on to paint more pathetic details of the operation. 'Umar thereafter proceeds to resign from the army. He could not do what Mahmūd did at the battle front. The latter goes mad upon seeing the extent of the bloodshed and savagery the soldiers perpetrated. When he eventually regains his senses, he turns his gun on his forehead and shot himself dead (44).

'Umar's story reminds the hero of the night in which his father was killed, sequel to the invasion of his village by the government forces. The story also brings images of his lost friends and close relations all of whom have either died in the

violent conflict between the North and the South or have been permanently displaced. A couple of days after this incident, he also tenders his resignation from the army. The hero disengages from the army probably out of fear of losing, like 'Umar, his humanity; he disengages from the army as a nationalist in search of the 'nation' (73).

Conclusion

What has been done thus far is to grapple with meaning in *Dance*. Meanings, according to al-Jurjāni, are of two types: intellectual (*aqlī*) and imaginative --*takhayilī* (*al-Balāghah* 241). Intellectual meanings are “realized by reason and it is true for all people in all generations... Imaginative meanings, on the other hand, are those which cannot be said to be either true or false, nor can what it asserts be taken to be true or what it negates be taken as truly negative” (*ibid*)¹³. Using this proposition as our guide, and having the contours on the Sudanese political and cultural landscape under our focus, it could be argued that the meaning we derive from *Dance* is true, intellectual and objective. If, however, the characters and the conflicts in the novel are seen to be poetic and imaginary, the meanings we discern from the novel would then straddle the shifting *topoi* of truthfulness and falsehood. Whatever perspective we choose, it is axiomatic from this study that the Sudanese novel is, in the words of Jean Paul-Sartre, “in the midst of action fully engaged in ...(its) epoch” (*Les Temps* 1954)¹⁴. Its vocation includes the deracination of the Sudanese subjectivities, the promotion of more gender friendly society, and the construction of a nation where consensus would be the touchstone of intra/inter-national/communal relations.

NOTES

¹This is taken from: *al-Adīb al-Sūdānī: Ahmad al-Mubārak 'Isā* (ed) A. M. Ahmad ((Khartūm: Dār Izza, 2007) p. 47

²The Arab-Sudanese “considered the word “Sudani” as a synonym for “Black Slave” and felt insulted when they were so called. Many of them refused, after independence, to apply for passports because they had to register themselves as Sudanese nationals before they could get a passport,” For more on this see: Muhammad Khalafalla Abdulla “Mustafa's Migration from the Said: An Odyssey in search of identity” in *Middle Eastern Literature* vol. 10. 43-61 (1998)

³For criticism of the British hegemony in Sudan and the origins of contemporary conflicts in Sudan see: A. Muhammad: *Nafathāt al-Yarā' fil Adab wa tārikh wa' Ijtimā'* (Khartūm; 1958); For North-South dialectics in modern Sudanese history see: Ahmed: “Multiple Complexity and Prospects for Reconciliation and Unity”; see F. M. Deng: *Africans of Two Worlds: The Dinka in the Afro-Arab Sudan* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1978); --- “Scramble for Souls: Religious Intervention among the Dinka in Sudan” in *Proselytization and Communal Self Determination in Africa* (ed) A. Na'im (New York: MaryKnoll 1999)

⁴On the dialectics which attend the woman's body and image in the pre-independence period see: A. A. Oladosu: “Authority Versus Sexuality: Dialectics in Woman's Image in Modern Sudanese Narrative Discourse” in *Hawwa* 2.1 (2004) p. 113-139

⁵On the male in Sudanese culture see: R.M. Osman: “The “Gender” of Accounting with Reference to different Concepts of Masculinity and Feminism” in *The Ahfad Journal: Women and Change* (ed) G. Badri Vol. 15 No. 1 1998 (Umdurmān) 25-47

⁶On the figure of the black subject in African fiction see: A. A Oladosu: “*al-Sud*” in African Fiction: Rethinking Ayi Kwei Armah and Ihsan Abdul Quddus” in *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* Vol. 40 (2005) p. 211-230.

⁷On the sacred mother see: L. C. Birnbaum,; *dark mother: African Origins and godmothers* (San Jose: Universe, 2002)

⁸For a study of Aristotle's theory on conflict see: S. Bickford: “Beyond Friendship: Aristotle on Conflict, Deliberation and Attention” in *Journal*

of Politics Vol. 28 No. 2. (1996) 398-421

⁹On this trend in Modern Sudanese narrative discourse. See: 'Ajūba. Mukhtar: *al-Qissah al-Qasīrah fī al-Sūdān* (Khartūm: Dār al-Tālif wa Tarjamah, 1972); In English: A. A. Oladosu: "Themes and Styles in Arabic Short Stories in Sudan 1930-2000" (Unpublished Ph. D thesis in University of Ibadan, 2001) p. 60

¹⁰Recent studies on the image of and challenges confronting the Sudanese women include: T. U. al-Hajj: *Tatawur al-Mar-ah al-Sūdāniyyah wa Khusūsiyatiah* (Khartūm, 2007); M. M. al-Amīn: "Is-ām al-Mar-ah al-Sūdāniyah fī majālat al-Ilmī wal 'Amal" in *al-Mar'ah wa al-Ibdā' fī al-Sūdān* (Khartūm: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Sūdāniyah al-Dawliyah, 2001). In English see: *Women and Law in Sudan: Women's seclusion in Private and Public life* (Sudan, Women and Law Project, 1999).

¹¹For a study of intra-gender dynamics in Sudanese culture see: Oladosu: "Themes and Styles" p. 60

¹²On the female, the feminine and the feminist in Sudanese culture see: Oladosu, Afis A: "The Female, the Feminist and the Feminine: Re-Reading Tayyeb Ṣālih's Season of Migration to the North" in *Studies in the Humanities* Pennsylvania, (Forthcoming)

¹³Here I have relied on the translation and important analysis of al-Jurjāni's work by Kamal Abu Deeb. For further reading see: K. Abu-Deeb: *al-Jurjāni's Theory of Poetic Imagery* (England: Aris and Phillips Ltd; 1979)

¹⁴This is quoted by M. T. Amyuni: "The Arab Artist's Role in the Society: The Three Case Studies: Naguib Mahfouz, Tayeb Salih and Elias Khoury" *Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 2 No. 2 1999 p. 203-222

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