

The Politics of Space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Jamal Mahjoub's *A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory*

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Abstract: The preoccupation with architecture, geography, and borders in the work of Anglo-Sudanese writers Leila Aboulela and Jamal Mahjoub is to a large extent tied to the postcolonial mindset the two authors share and the minority status of the Anglophone Arab literary tradition. This tradition aims, among other things, at rewriting space to negotiate questions of identity, power, and resistance. Drawing on recent research on the intersections between the postcolonial field and the field of space studies, this paper argues that, although Aboulela and Mahjoub both seek to expose the spatial organization of social reality, that is to say the ways in which space is both conceived and shaped to reinforce existing power differentials, they diverge on the esthetic and political strategies to challenge this power configuration. Therefore, by comparing Aboulela's *Minaret* (2006) and Mahjoub's *A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory* (2018), it will be argued that, while Aboulela displaces the larger geographies of the nation and the city in favor of urban microstructures that become the site of dissent and empowerment for the alienated migrant subject, Mahjoub embraces the geography of the nation as holding the key both to the collective project of nation-building and the more personal task of coming to terms with the plurality of postcolonial identity.

Keyword: Anglophone Arabic fiction, Jamal Mahjoub, Leila Aboulela, postcolonial fiction, space studies

1. Introduction

Writing in the wake of Foucault's (1980) seminal discussion of the interrelation between space and politics¹, political geographer Edward Soja (2003: 6) observed that "relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life [...] human geographies [are] filled with politics and ideology". These remarks echo the spatial orientation of the contemporary age and highlight the so-called 'spatial turn' that has occurred in the humanities and social sciences, following the pioneering work of theorists such as Michel de Certeau, and Henri Lefebvre. In the case of literary studies, the postcolonial field has been particularly responsive to this new emphasis on space, grounded as it is in what Edward Said famously called "the struggle over geography" (1994: 7). Said's statement has a particular significance for Anglophone Arab literature, a tradition that despite its relative novelty, has had a long-standing engagement with the categories of borders, maps, migration, and the constant search for alternative spaces of agency and empowerment.

This engagement, in addition to showing the spatial and geographical dimension of social order, also reasserts Foucault's notion of the political nature of spatial organization – the idea that “space is a political category and politics a spatialized phenomenon” (Walton and Suárez 2016: 3). Awareness of this spatial-political dimension is accordingly present in the works of several Anglophone Arab writers, notably Anglo-Sudanese writers Leila Aboulela and Jamal Mahjoub. Writing from the complex position of hyphenated individuals who have had to deal not only with the dilemmas of displacement and migration, but also the marginalization that results from power dynamics, Aboulela and Mahjoub predictably exhibit a persistent concern with the spatially charged nature of power differentials. At the same time, they seek to challenge dominant social, political, and aesthetic regimes through the creation of alternative spaces of resistance. The spatial/geographical determination can be seen in a number of works by the aforementioned authors but I will argue that it is in *Minaret* (2006) and *A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory* (2018), respectively, that the full scope of the authors' engagement with space as a vital, dynamic, and especially subversive category is shown. At the level of discursive resistance, these works, manipulate spatial configurations to negotiate what Edward Soja (2011: ix) calls the “fundamental and egalitarian rights to inhabit space”. In other words, what is at stake in this rewriting of space, is the attempt to negotiate issues of identity, belonging, and power relationships.

Yet despite the authors' constant engagement with borders, territories and the political ramifications of spatial organization, relatively little research has been conducted on the spatial politics of these two works. In *Minaret's* case, for instance, the abundant scholarship on the important issues of hybridity, identity, migrancy, and faith has for the most part fallen short of establishing crucial connections with the concept of space. In fact, even research on the political themes of feminism and empowerment has tended to overlook the spatial dimension of the negotiation of various gender and social power structures in the novel. One exception to this is Marta Cariello (2012) who has pointed to Aboulela's rejection of traditional temporal narrative in favour of a structure of ‘spatial dislocation’ that foregrounds a number of physical and psychological spaces. Cristina Alonso (2017) focuses on the ways in which Aboulela connects the themes of identity and emotions to urban space, but her analysis is restricted to the author's short fiction and does not even allude to *Minaret*. The most focused attempt to engage with the spatial dimension of the novel to date is Sara Upstone's *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), which situates *Minaret* within a strand of postcolonial novels that propose an alternative conception of the city as providing a solution to the alienation of the postcolonial subject. My own approach to *Minaret* draws substantially on Upstone's argument that the novel foregrounds an alternative conception of space as fluid and chaotic in an attempt to subvert totalizing myths of order and uniformity.

Similarly, the treatment of space in *A line in the River* has not received the attention it deserves. In fact, research on the novel is remarkably scarce, and is for the most part limited to a few reviews. In one such review, Elizabeth Hodgkin

(2018) emphasizes the autobiographical dimension of the novel and briefly alludes to the ways in which it presents us with a new understanding of the categories of time and space. In another review, Peter Whittaker (2018) observes that the novel explores a ‘sense of place’ and the meaning of belonging. Mahjoub’s other novels, on the other hand, have received relatively more critical attention, with the focus generally being on the themes of migration, (Jopi Nyman: 2017), hybridity (Sten Pultz Moslund: 2010), and displacement (Jaqueline Jondot: 2015). Caroline A. Mohsen’s study ‘Narrating Identity and Conflict’ (2000) stands out among other critical interpretations of Mahjoub’s work in that it stresses the importance of the interrelated categories of history politics, and geography to Mahjoub’s literary project.

As can be seen in this brief literature survey, the issue of space in *Minaret* and *A Line in the River* has received little critical attention, which is surprising given the geo-political awareness and engagement of these novels as well as of the Anglophone Arab novel in general. This paper proposes to address this research gap by establishing connections between the postcolonial themes that have been discussed by the existing literature and their spatial expressions. In other words, I will approach the novels in question from a perspective that synthesizes insights from the postcolonial field, particularly those regarding the politics of resistance to colonial and neo-colonial discourses, and findings from the relatively more recent field of space studies. As such, the focus of this paper will be on the ways in which these postcolonial texts engage in a discursive subversion of dominant ideologies by mobilizing spatial tropes to show precisely the spatially charged nature of the contemporary situation. I will also be using Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘carnival’ to explain the ‘chaotic’ propensity of this politics of resistance, that is to say the ways in which it destabilizes notions of order and control by advocating carnivalesque chaos. I use the word ‘politics’ here to denote not the traditional activities involved in managing a state or a government, but what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004: 8) refers to as ‘the distribution of the sensible’, defined as a complex system of practices that determine what is allowed to be discussed publicly and therefore achieves discursive articulation and visibility, and what is excluded from public scrutiny and is consequently confined to the invisible margins. The literary politics of Aboulela and Mahjoub is, in this regard, an attempt to unsettle and redirect ‘the distribution of the sensible’ in ways that would allow the emergence into the public domain of precisely those discourses and positions that have been excluded based on power differentials. And since domination, as has been shown, is in many cases achieved through the control and organization of space, strategies of resistance often involve the mobilization of spatial tropes of spaces, centers, peripheries, and borders.

In Aboulela’s case, the hegemony of borders as “the primary figures in the ordering of social life” (Walton et al. 2016: 6) is suggested in the prevalence within the contemporary scene of the colonial myth that space could be ordered by eradicating existing diversity in the name of national unity. The metropolitan city becomes the site of this homogenizing impulse, as boundaries and partitions are systematically drawn and re-drawn to marginalize discordant elements. However,

these boundaries are constantly traversed by subversive connections (religious, cultural, and otherwise) that undercut the discourse of national cohesion. Resistance is achieved, I argue following Sara Upstone, by strategies of displacement and carnivalisation. Upstone (2016: 104) observes that resistance to the colonial legacy that persists in the contemporary organization of the city “does not mean taking over an entire city, but rather involves celebrating difference at the level of the public buildings and certain open spaces which construct the city”. For this to take place, a process of displacement is needed, one through which “the city gradually shifts out of focus in deference to its microstructures” (104). This process of displacement is evident in *Minaret*, where the city of London fades in the background to allow attention to be focused on some of its otherwise inconspicuous sites, such as the home and the Mosque. The latter become sites where the process of resistance is completed through carnivalisation – the celebration of chaos. Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival, particularly through its “creative energy of chaos” (Mazour-Matusevict 2010: 268) represents a response to the dominant regime’s desire for the imposition of order. Moreover, the reversal of roles and of power dynamics that are associated with the carnival, what Brian Edwards (1998: 24) calls its “exuberant heterogeneity and transgression” allows for the suspension of hierarchies and the dissolution of social barriers. In *Minaret*, carnivalization is applied to the public space (the mosque), which is traditionally the space of political negotiation, with the result that public social life is redefined to give voice and agency to previously voiceless and alienated groups.

In Mahjoub’s *A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory*, a similar process of displacement is underway, except that it occurs in the opposite direction, as the narrator turns away from the microstructures of urbanity to the larger geography of the nation both to understand his native country’s problems and to find anchorage for his rootless, hybrid self. Traveling through the immensely rich topography of Sudan and its multiethnic and densely populated cities, the narrator in Mahjoub’s book interrogates the landscape and, in doing so, is faced with a number of discoveries that are at once shocking and surprising obvious: that the key to unlocking the enigma of the country’s persistent dilemmas lies in its extraordinary geography; that if there is a lesson to be learned from this geography, it is precisely the need to embrace diversity and multiplicity; and finally, that in the image of the country’s varied but ultimately confluent topography, the self needs to come to terms with its disparate components and celebrate “diversity, plurality and the potential of unity” (*A Line in the River* 305-6).

2. “Laughter and chaos” at the mosque: carnivalesque resistance in *Minaret* *Minaret* (2006), Leila Aboulela’s second novel, tells the story of a westernized Sudanese woman’s forced migration from her native city of Khartoum to London. Najwa, the novel’s protagonist, is the daughter of a wealthy government official who enjoyed a life of ease before the coup of 1985 and the tragic death of her father forced her and her family to leave Sudan and flee to England. In England, Najwa leads a difficult and humble life working as a servant and nanny for an Arab family of Sudanese-Egyptian origins. She is both spurned by her overbearing employer

and alienated by prejudiced mainstream British society. It is not until she has integrated a Muslim community based in Regent's Park Mosque that Najwa is finally able to come to terms with her migrant alienation and embrace the position of cross-cultural margin.

It is noteworthy that most of the action following Najwa's relocation to England occurs between two divergent 'places' or locations, the house where she works as a servant and the mosque where she blends in with London's Muslim migrant community. In contrast to the intimate nature of the domestic space to which Najwa is confined throughout most of the narrative, the mosque's status as a public place gives it a more politically charged resonance. Marta Cariello (2009: 349) has pointed the ways in which the domestic space in *Minaret* operates "as scene of an intimate negotiation", a possible heterotopia within an asymmetrical power structure. I will argue that this negotiation attains a clearer expression in the case of the mosque space, and is textually achieved through the deployment of the carnival mode. In a much-quoted passage from his classic study *Rabelais and His World* (1984: 10), Bakhtin defines the carnival as "a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order: it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions...[carnival] was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed". This contestatory mode is observable in connection to mosque space, where the performance of carnivalesque chaos allows for the momentary² dismantling of the dominant style and the celebration of underlying diversity.

The centrality of the Regent's Park Mosque to the narrative partly derives from its significant geographical location. Situated at the center of the city of London, and equipped with a towering minaret, the mosque is visible from several locations. The mosque's discernibility is emphasized from the outset as Najwa tells us that she can see it even at daybreak: "I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park Mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light" (Aboulela 2006: 5). Aside from the lofty minaret, the mosque's dome is equally imposing: "[a]bove the tree tops I can see the dome of the mosque with the chandeliers bright through the glass" (69). The Mosque's impressive physical presence makes it an important landmark for those who, like Najwa, are new to the city and are struggling to find their ways through its intricate maze of streets and locations. "We never get lost", says Najwa with confidence, "because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head towards it" (128). For Sara Upstone (2016), our understanding of the significance of the mosque must extend beyond geographical positioning to involve a sense of psychological anchoring, an imposition of order and structure on the menacingly chaotic landscape of migrant alienation. This is undoubtedly true for those moments in the narrative when, confronted with confusion and uncertainty, Najwa almost impulsively starts searching for the mosque and its minaret. Yet, while the sight of mosque clearly has this guiding effect, the *experience* of the mosque appears to work in an entirely different way. Rather than striving for order and stability, I argue that the mosque provides an appropriate stage for the performance of carnivalesque chaos that allows for a reconfiguration of established social order.

One of the important characteristics of the mosque is that it is meeting place for a sizeable community of migrants who come from all walks of life. Najwa's narrative frequently stresses the ethnic, cultural, and professional diversity of this community. Ostensibly, what brings these dissimilar individuals together is their adherence to Islamic faith – after all the mosque is essentially a place of worship. Najwa's encounter with the mosque community does indeed represent a decisive turning-point in her experience as a migrant in London. Following this encounter, Najwa's spiritual reawakening will provide a much-needed protection against what Nash (2007: 136) calls “unmediated assault on the immigrant's values and identity.” It should also be noted, however, that Najwa and the other mosque visitors are equally connected via their migrant status, in other words, their otherness vis-à-vis mainstream English society. The mosque becomes, in this sense, not only a place of worship but, as Wafaa Sorour (2021: 158) points out, a space of “eventual identity development” where this otherness is suspended, as individuals who are otherwise marginalized have a chance to experience the momentary dissolution of social hierarchies. This is achieved by a release of the kind of subversively anarchic energy that is associated with the carnival mode.

This idea becomes evident when we pay attention to the set of dualities that the narrative uses to convey the experience of the mosque. These dualities often revolve around the contrast between an apparent formal exterior and a more enigmatic, private ‘reality’. Shanti Elliot (1999) observes that within the context of recent attention to ethnic, class, and gender ostracism, the carnival mode has acquired an added significance particularly through its focus on “the dichotomy between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ culture”. In *Minaret*, this dichotomy is suggested in the contrast between an official, public self and private, unspoken aspirations. Najwa tells us early in the novel that “[f]ew people are themselves in mosques. They are subdued, taken over by a fragile, neglected part of themselves” (Aboulela 2006: 6). That the mosque is capable of stirring such hidden instincts is expressed in a subsequent passage where Najwa meditates on the effect that the Azan, the call for prayer, has on her: “I still could hear the Azan. It went on and on and now, from far away, I could hear another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness, like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them” (21).

Another duality with respect to the mosque has a more direct spatial aspect as it involves distinguishing between the inside and the outside of the mosque. Such comparison can be seen, for instance, when the pleasant, almost familial ambience that reigns in the mosque during the Tajweed class is juxtaposed to the unsympathetic world outside: “[o]utside the mosque, the night air is clod and crisp” (Aboulela 2006: 51). Elsewhere, Najwa observes that “[w]hat I was hearing, I would never hear outside, I would never hear on TV or read in a magazine. I found an echo of me; I understood it (148). The mosque becomes for Najwa a space of knowledge of understanding, and island of hope and faith within the larger and harsher space of the city.

The reinvigorating aspect of the mosque is also shown in the frequent associations that Najwa establishes between the emotional experience of being in

the mosque and her life back in Khartoum. During one of her mosque reveries, Najwa blot outs all suggestions of the outside world as she delightedly attempts to take in the details of the mosque interior and, in doing, so she finds herself transported to a treasured region of her past:

I close my eyes and smell the smells of mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze in and in my dream I am small and back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room, wanting to get up and go to my parents' room. (Aboulela 2006: 48)

It is noteworthy that Najwa's longing for an alternative order takes a spatial form (a room) much in the same way that her disaffection with her condition prior to her integration within mosque community is rendered in spatial terms: "I've come down in the world", Najwa says in the opening section of the novel. "I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move" (5). Equally significant is the fact that the mosque atmosphere takes her back to her childhood, the period when she is at her most vulnerable state and in need of parental care and protection. This is an indication both that she is currently experiencing the same vulnerability and that the experience of the mosque is potentially capable of providing the emotional and mental comfort needed to alleviate this vulnerability.

As has been noted, the transformative aspect of the mosque space is predicated specifically on the ways it represents a radical departure from the space outside. Here again, the peculiarity of this alternative space is conveyed through a language that unmistakably suggests the carnival. This is particularly the case for the lengthy passages that describe "Eid al-Fitr" (the day that marks the end of fasting for Muslims in Ramadan), which Najwa refers to as the 'Eid party'. What is striking about this description is that it disrupts our expectations regarding what is fundamentally a religious event, and points instead to a setting that is of an entirely different nature: "they [the women] chat and laugh and their children squeal and run about...around us the mood is silky, tousled, non-linear; there is tinkling laughter, colours, that mixture of sensitivity and waywardness which the absence of men highlights (113). Words like 'tousled', 'non-linear', together with the laughter³ and colours, create an effect that exceeds the structured form of spiritual rituals, to conjure up the festive and chaotic mood of the carnival. Thus, instead of the expected rites associated with a sacred event, 'the program' as it is called, includes 'short play' and a dance that reminds Najwa that "when we Arabs dance it is all laughter and chaos, nothing ordered" (115).

Yet, perhaps the part that is most suggestive of the carnival is the one which describes how the members of the mosque community experience the Eid event. In lengthy descriptive passages, the narrative dwells on the unconventional appearance and behavior of individuals that are otherwise seamlessly assimilated into the fabric of mainstream society:

... the surprise – I almost squeal – of seeing a friend for the first time without her hijab. This one is all peaches and cream, this one is like a model, this one is mumsy with or without her hijab, this one in her smart jacket kooks like she wants to chair a board meeting. This one with glasses

and unruly hair looks like a student and she is one, but this one looks like a belly dancer and she is definitely not. She is the staid wife of a lucky doctor with four daughters kept well under control. This one looks like a tomboy. I can imagine her, when she was young, playing football with her brothers, now she is a nursery teacher (Aboulela 2006: 114-5).

This passage suggests the dichotomy between an apparent version of the self that is in harmony with the official discourse of the public space, and a more secretive persona that is unveiled in the mosque space. That it takes movement from one space to another for this private self to unfold is a testament to the political nature of the mapping of space, the ways in which the division of space is saturated with power differentials. Equally significant about this transformation is the fact that it is signaled by the physical act of taking off the ‘hijab’ – the headscarf that the female members of this community wear as a sign of religiosity. “[I]t is as if the hijab is a uniform”, Najwa meditates, “the official, outdoor version of us. Without it our nature is exposed” (Aboulela 2006: 115).

The hijab’s role as a threshold permitting entry into the liberating space of the carnival is in line with its status as an object that is culturally and discursively overdetermined. In the context of female Muslim migrants, the hijab could be seen as a complex symbol condensing the multifaceted nature of western perception of Muslim migrants in general and Muslim women in particular. For Lindsey Moore (2008: 137), veiling in contemporary Britain can be interpreted as a sign of “defiant difference”. Moore specifically evokes to the passage in *Minaret* in which Njawa is insulted and attacked on the bus by an unknown assailant. In fact, Najwa and the other members of the mosque community must contend with a set of stereotypes that often govern Britain’s relationship with its Muslim community. Sarah Ilott (2015: 10) argues that in the wake of 9/11, narratives of Britishness have been strikingly characterized by “an increasing level of Islamophobia manifesting itself in policing, racist attacks, and selectively distorting media coverage”. Muslims are routinely framed as ‘the nightmare Other’ who represents a major threat to Western values. Within the context of this discrimination that has shifted from race to religion, the displacement toward the micro-space of the mosque allows for a deconstruction of the binaries that govern the dominant discourse of western supremacy, and the negotiation of postcolonial migrant identity that is grounded in religious faith.

3. From the ‘geography of necessity’ to the lessons of geography: Nationhood and postcolonial subjectivity in *A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory*

Whereas for Aboulela, the negotiation of postcolonial identity involves the displacement of the larger geographies of the nation and the city in favor of their more intimate microstructures, where the energies of the carnival could be released, Jamal Mahjoub seems to locate the potential for chaos in the reverse destination. Part Four of *A Line in the River* begins with an epigraph from Philip Roth’s 1998 novel *I married a Communist* which reads “Not to erase the contradiction, not to deny the contradiction, but to see where, within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being. To allow for the chaos, to let it in” (Mahjoub 2018: 404). The terms

of the epigraph encapsulate, I would suggest, Mahjoub's political strategy in *A line in the River*, which consists in allowing 'contradiction' and diversity to rise from within the ashes of colonial uniformity through the release of the energy of chaos. To unlock the potential for chaos, 'to let in', *A Line in the River* effects a flight maneuver in space to displace the city and capture instead the totality of the country, as the narrator attempts to find in the geography of the nation the answer to the most pressing question – "the greatest mystery of all", as he calls it – "how we make sense of ourselves in the world" (Mahjoub 2018: 534). Making sense of ourselves in the world, for a postcolonial author like Mahjoub, involves primarily coming to terms with what Nash (2007: 90) calls a "discordant hybridity that has dogged him from the beginning" as an Anglo-Arab/African writer. Like Tanner, the protagonist in his first novel *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989), Mahjoub decides to go back to Sudan "to find out if he had a home [t]here" (Mahjoub 1989: 69). What he discovers there proves to be more than he bargained for, as he finds in the geography of the country the long-sought solution both to his country's current dilemmas, and his own kaleidoscopic identity. The solution proves to be quite simple: he, like his native country, "was born out of opposites, the coming together of difference" and both should therefore understand that "integration [was] the only solution" (*Navigation* 162).

When in 1956 Sudan gained independence from Britain, it was believed that a country with such vastness of space and wealth of resources could only be heading toward a promising future. Instead, the country descended into civil war and chaos that culminated in the Darfur crisis which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and saw even more people displaced from their homes. Things further deteriorated when, in 1989, a radical Islamist regime seized power following a coup, forcing more people to flee including Jamal Mahjoub's own family. Almost two decades later, Mahjoub returns to Sudan to find a country virtually in ruins, and to face the inevitable question: what caused "the tragedy of a nation never achieved"? (Mahjoub 2018: 65).

It is important to comment on the book's form, which defies easy categorization. Most commentators have argued, with reason, that it is an interesting blend of personal memoir, travelogue, literary non-fiction, and history. Yet, while Mahjoub seems to be aware of these intersecting styles, he also emphasized the fictional dimension of his book. In the prologue, he compares *A Line in the River* to his first novel *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989) a project, he says, that was aimed at achieving a kind of closure regarding his own relation to his country, but that ended up leading him "inwards and backwards in time over successive novels that sought to understand the nature of this vast, little-known country" (Mahjoub 1989: 44). In the same way, he observes, *A Line in the River* was originally meant to be a reportage that "deal[s] in cold clear facts", but as soon as he "put pen to paper, as it were, I found the account bending itself to fit my narrative, much as a work of fiction might" (Mahjoub 2018: 44). Based on the author's comments, therefore, and the lyrical nature of the writing, I propose to see the book as a work of fiction that represents the latest attempt on Mahjoub's part,

perhaps even the most ‘ambitious’ one as James Copnall (2019) would have it, “to explain Sudan”.

It is interesting that the narrator explains from the outset that the purpose of his journey was personal discovery. Recalling Najwa’s own rejection of politics, the narrator tells us that the reason he came back to Sudan “was to discover what this place still means to me. Nothing so grand as a country, nor so ambitious as a nation. Both concepts seem too vast to mesh with my memories of this house, these walls and rooms, the peace and security I felt here as a child” (Mahjoub 2018: 536). As he sets foot in Sudan, however, he is struck with the realization that his entire writing career was “this country, trying to understand it, to unravel the mystery that was buried in its history, in its pain” (537). To solve ‘the mystery’, the narrator focuses attention on the country’s geography and its changing urban landscape. The drastic nature of the changes that he sees everywhere leaves him both surprised and perplexed:

[n]ew apartment blocks mushroom out of the rough sand left, right and centre with no apparent coordination between them, no grid on which to relate to one another. Every few blocks or so a shiny new mosque looms to provide spiritual consolation. Some of these take rather innovative, even bizarre, shapes (Mahjoub 2018: 289-90).

Everywhere he goes, the narrator is met with disturbing instances of the ‘pathological urbanisation’ that has plagued the city of Khartoum to the point where the “word city is almost too grand for this jumble of intersections and gaudy lights” (Mahjoub 2018: 61). He calls this ‘the geography of necessity’, “the urgent creation of occupied spaces out of the void” (228). Even a visit to his grandmother’s house, “the house where [his] father grew up” fails to produce the expected emotional effect, since the renovated structure now stands almost unrecognizable to the disappointed narrator: “[t]he adobe walls have gradually been replaced with brick, the yard used to be covered simply with earth, which I recall was neatly swept every morning. It has now been paved with a random pattern of broken tiles” (Mahjoub 2018: 42). Visits to other once popular landmarks in the city gradually persuade the narrator that there is a pattern of deliberate neglect of the past and history, and that this neglect was perhaps among the principal reasons for the country’s present quandary. This impression is made even more potent during another disappointing visit to an edifice that is meant to be a sanctuary of history – the National Museum. Here again, the obliteration of the past becomes a political act, the legacy of the Islamist regime:

the upper galleries were chained shut, barring centuries of Christian Nubia from public view. This was Islam at its most inward-looking and intolerant, in denial of history. Anything that came before the word of Muhammed was worthless. Closing a wing of the museum illustrated the level of pious hysteria that reigned at the time” (Mahjoub 2018: 167).

The fact that this ‘denial of history’ and adoption of modern architecture have been instrumental in leading the country to the impasse in which it now finds itself is suggested through a series of spatial tropes that are governed by a set of binaries including narrowness/openness, limits/freedom. Within the economy of

these binaries, the present moment is frequently associated with the impression of narrowness, lack of space. The Plaza Hotel, for instance, is considered as an emblem of the new ‘ultra-modern’ city, and yet for all its pioneering architecture, it “feels like a narrow, enclosed space, cut off from the world by smoked glass that sits awkwardly in warped aluminium frames” (Mahjoub 2018: 145). Inside the hotel, the lobby space is so limited that somebody saw the need to fix “a mirror that runs the length of one wall [...] to give the impression of space” (145). The streets outside the hotel are no better and, if anything, they convey a sense that the city space is shrinking: “It takes no time at all to walk from one place to another. The streets are narrower. When you bend down to look more closely you notice that the old downtown area occupies only a fraction of the city. It also appears to have been abandoned” (91). This sense of being in a cramped environment strikes the narrator as being particularly ironic given the vastness of Sudan – “a country of limitless open space” (33).

Another recurrent dichotomy in the text involves the contrast between space and kinetic motion on the one hand, and inertia on the other. Again, whereas the country’s geography is associated with freedom of movement, the current urban situation is characterized by the imposition of boundaries and the consequent hindering of movement. Once again, the contrast is nowhere more visible as in the Plaza hotel, where the inside and outside of the hotel represent a sharp contrast: “Outside, the street is noisy and crowded. People mill around, minibuses, auto-rickshaws and donkey carts bump past one another along the hot, uneven streets”. Inside the hotel, however, “the lobby is limpid and motionless. Nothing moves” (Mahjoub 2018: 145). Yet, even the bustle outside is extremely precarious as it can become subject to a sudden interruption with the slightest disturbance. An accident, for instance, no matter how minor, often “brings the world to a halt. Everything stops” (Mahjoub 2018: 36). For the narrator, this vulnerability stems from the fact that the city’s architecture has not had time to absorb new developments such as the staggering rise in the number of people and cars, and therefore “the notion of traffic is a novel one.” (36)

In contrast to the orderly yet paradoxically jammed modern the city, the country’s geography offers a ‘fractured’ and ‘unforgiving’ landscape that “makes movement a matter of life and death; access to fertile land, to grazing pastures, to water. It’s all about freedom of movement” (Mahjoub 2018: 206). For Mahjoub, whose development both as a person and a writer largely rested on what Michelle Stork (2022: 241) describes as the perception of “the road as a space for overcoming static concepts and for reflecting on new notions of identity as a result of movement through and across space”, and for whom “the issue of mobility as a characteristic of [collective] post-colonial [...] identity” (Nyman: 173), this obsessive concern with limiting movement was both senseless and perilous. It is at this moment that it dawns upon the perplexed narrator that one of the troubles that his country has had to deal with was its absurd obsession “with imposing restrictions, creating boundaries” (Mahjoub 2018: 206).

Geographical boundaries are symptomatic of other types of boundaries including ethnic and racial boundaries. The narrator is struck by the extent to which

the category of race is key in modern Sudan. When he tells the inquisitive Ethiopian waiter at his hotel in Khartoum that he is Sudanese, the incredulous waiter looks astounded because, the narrator says, “I don’t look Sudanese. I am too light-skinned. I must be Egyptian. No, I tell him. I am not, I insist” (Mahjoub 2018: 134). The waiter then “vanishes to inform the others working in the kitchen. One by one they appear in the doorway to take a look at me.” (134) This “obsession with placing people, and belonging” (218) is endemic to Khartoum, a city where “the fear of the incursion of outsiders, the so-called ‘Black Belt’ of refugees, dates back more than twenty years” (309). This xenophobia has turned the lives of Southern migrants into a daily nightmare: “to be Southern in Khartoum is to suffer prejudice and racism at the hands of Northerners who look down on them as *abeed* – the old term for slaves. They live the homeless, stateless existence of the internally displaced” (226). This racial dissonance is a legacy of the colonial mindset with its aspiration “to divide and rule, creating the conditions for subordination” (207). To Sudanese people, however, this fixation on ethnic division would transform Sudan’s complex diversity from a valuable resource to a persistent hurdle in the path toward a stable, prosperous future. It will find its most appalling expression in the Darfour crisis that would claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, displace more people from their homes, and leave others with only “a strip of canvas in the middle of nowhere” (Mahjoub 2018: 241).

To these physical and racial boundaries is juxtaposed the image of flood as a metaphor for movement, which is intrinsic both to the people and geography of Sudan. Thus, despite prejudice and racism, the narrator sees that “[p]eople are draining away from the rural areas and flooding into the cities” (Mahjoub 2018: 255). What is more the city, as the symbolic bastion of division between south and north, native and foreign, pure and hybrid, finds itself completely submerged by the flood of displaced people who will simply not be stopped. The result is that instead of “the migrants adapting to the city, what happened was the opposite; the new immigrants ruralised the city, bringing with them networks and community self-help systems to allow them to adapt to their new urban lives” (257). This transgression of the boundaries of the city will become the master trope of the reaction of country’s geography to the systematic imposition of borders that has characterized its recent history.

To highlight this transgression, the narrative perspective conducts a movement in space by leaving the labyrinthine streets of the cities and towns and flying high in the sky to offer us an aerial view of the country. The view that offers itself turns out to be not only breathtaking but also and perhaps more importantly, extremely enlightening about the country’s current dilemmas:

Seen from the air, or on a map, the outline of the city illustrates the origins of its name. The Arabic word *khartoum* signifies ‘trunk’, and that is what the city resembles... When you trace the lines backwards, around the head, watching as they lose themselves in ever more complex abstractions, geometries that defy tangible form, you begin to glimpse the enigma that is this country (Mahjoub 2018: 59-60).

The ‘complex abstractions’ and defiance of tangible forms are nowhere more noticeable than in the most extraordinary of the country’s geographical miracles – the confluence of the two great rivers that give it life: “[t]he Blue Nile, having tumbled down from the highlands of Ethiopia, meets the patient, sullen tug of the ponderous White Nile that has laced a sinuous course through the southern marshlands” (62). Yet, unlike the petty politics of humans, these two great elemental powers of nature have managed to come together and form this life-sustaining force. They are a living testimony to a transgressive diversity that is based on the “subduction of difference, [and the] blending of contrasts” (62). The city of Khartoum, the site where the two rivers meet, is the best example of this vital diversity, divided as it is by this natural force into three sections:

Even as the Blue and White Niles come together, merging into the main artery that flows north from here, the capital seems to splinter, fragmenting around the point of confluence. By nature this city is plural, a conglomerate of three towns: Khartoum, Khartoum North (or Bahry) and Omdurman. Al Asima al-Muthalatha – the triple capital. This multiplicity hangs over the city as a stark reminder of the country’s nature: diversity, plurality and the potential of unity. This is geography as metaphor (Mahjoub 2018: 305-6).

Geography becomes a metaphor for an inclusionary politics, one that is based on the reconciliation of differences for the sake of peaceful and harmonious and coexistence. It is also a metaphor for the failure of what Upstone (2016: 6) refers to as the project of colonial overwriting, “the sense in which colonial treatments of space attempt to obscure an existing diversity with order”.

The lessons of geography will have implications not only for the narrator’s perception of his country, but also for his self-understanding. Interestingly and perhaps also inevitably, the process of self-knowledge, too, is placed in relation to space. In a moment of reflection on his life, the narrator tells us that before he left Sudan, he had experienced a sense of completeness that stemmed from the fact that “I knew my place in the world, I understood where I was and why I belonged there. From the moment I left, it seems to me, I have been explaining myself, one way or another” (Mahjoub 2018: 533). If the unity of the self is grounded in space, in this case national space, then it would follow that the act of departure will splinter the self, resulting in the condition of incompleteness: “once you leave a place, part of you is left behind and from then on you exist in fractions. You find temporary homes in people and places, but it feels incomplete (533). The problem of incompleteness and the dream of becoming ‘complete’ again seem to account, to a large extent, for Mahjoub’s literary project as he explained in the prologue: “I began my first novel thinking that I was going to write about a young man seeking to discover the part of his background that he doesn’t know. He thinks this will complete him, resolve all his doubts, make him whole” (Mahjoub 2018: X). Yet, as suggested in the last sentence of the above quote (“He thinks this will complete him”), the promise of regained completeness will turn out to be based on a set of false assumptions regarding the position of postcolonial subjectivity and what Lavie and Swedenburg (1996: 1) call “the inseparability of identity from place”. In the wake of the large waves of migration and displacement that have occurred over the

last few decades, Lavie and Swedenburg argue, “spatially conceived hierarchical dualities [such as] ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, the West and the Orient, the center and the margin” have become increasingly difficult to sustain (1). The dismantling of these binaries has led to the fracture of the Eurocentric homogeneous and superior self and the emergence of what Homi Bhabha (1994: 312) terms ‘differential identities’, resulting in a situation where

the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently opening out, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race. Such assignments of social differences – where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between (312)...

In *A line in the River*, the narrator seems to be aware of these shifting paradigms, as he announces early in the book that the contemporary situation is an “age of uncertainties [...] of transgressing boundaries” (Mahjoub 2018: 5). The uncertainty surrounding diasporic identity has already been suggested by Mahjoub in *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989) through the novel’s central character Tanner who, like Mahjoub, is of mixed Sundanese and British descent and goes to Sudan on “an existential epiphany” (Nash 2007: 90) to find out if he can break out of his unwanted hybrid identity. It is when he meets the Rainmaker of the title, a mythic prophet who is “a split direction [...] both North and South at the same time” (Mahjoub 1989: 158) that he begins to perceive his condition of hybridity differently. In *A Line in the River*, it will take an encounter with a similarly mystic force – that of geography – to make the narrator realize that “as the world grows smaller and more crowded, the notion of stable, impermeable frontiers retreats into myth” (Mahjoub 2018: 321). The encounter occurs in that “one spot in the city that seems emblematic of the elusive enigma of nationhood” (62) – the tip of the horn in the Morgan, the only place where “the magical line produced by the two rivers folding into one another is made visible” (63). Thus, in the image of this geographical plurality, the decentered self needs to come to terms with its own multiplicity and, ultimately, with the “indeterminacy of diasporic identity” (Bhabha 322). Reflecting on his double journey to the heart of his country and inside the innermost recesses of hybrid self, the narrator concludes that he has finally learned “to accept alienation as part of who I am (Mahjoub 2018: 17).

4. Conclusion: The abstraction of space

Minaret (2006) and *A Line in the River* (2018) appear at first sight to be starkly dissimilar texts that are operating out of different terrains. While *Minaret* is concerned with the role of faith in negotiating the migrant subject’s identity within an alienating cross-cultural context, *A Line in the River* is more interested in diagnosing the contradictions that exist within the nation as a means of coming to terms with the postcolonial subject’s hybridity. What brings the two texts together, however, is the conviction that the project of addressing the postcolonial condition necessarily involves contending with a set of totalizing colonial narratives of space as ‘place’, that is to say as physical locations that are ‘natural’ and capable of being controlled and ordered. What they propose, instead, is to expand the definition of

space by claiming what Upstone (2016: 3) calls ‘the abstraction of space’ – the idea that space “encapsulates not only physical location, but also abstract conceptual space”. To acknowledge the abstraction of space is become aware of the extent which space is intrinsic to issues of identity, power, and resistance, and it is to uncover this spatial determination that the two novels in questions set out to demythologize narratives of order and control. And although the strategies employed by both texts are different, they ultimately gesture toward the same objective – namely to foreground an alternative, more fluid conception of space that recognizes the contingency and plurality that characterize contemporary reality.

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Notes

¹ Anticipating contemporary culture's spatial orientation, Foucault famously wrote: "A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which would at the same time be the history of powers (both these terms in the plural) - from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations... Anchorage in space is an economico-political form which needs to be studied in detail" (1980:149).

² The temporary nature of the kind of liberation that is achieved through the carnival mode has been emphasized by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984). Similarly, Kim Dovey (2016) observes that while during the carnival "[e]veryday alienation evaporates in a sense of freedom, equality, and social equality", the resulting sense of liberation is temporary: "we return to former identities, behaviors, and masks" (62). Kim Dovey, *Urban Design Thinking: A Conceptual Toolkit*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

³ Laughter is at the center of Bakhtin's theorization of the carnival. Grant Julin identifies three primary qualities in carnival laughter. First, it is festive in nature, meaning that unlike private laughter, it is "shared, organic [...] and representative of all the people". Second, it is 'universal in scope', being "directed at all and everyone". The third quality is ambivalence: "unlike the dogmatic certitude and seriousness of the official world, carnival laughter is nature ambiguous and equivocal" (180).

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