

Food and Politics in Mahjoub's *The Fugitives*

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Abstract: Food has been the object of examination in literature, and hence, the current study seeks to study the symbolic, cultural, and political significance of food in Arab-British Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* (2021). In particular, this study shows that Mahjoub deploys culinary images to highlight how Rushdy, the protagonist, grows spiritually and intellectually in the course of the narrative by becoming increasingly aware of the significance of food as a sociopolitical marker. Additionally, Mahjoub's employment of culinary codes helps him criticize the political system which is held accountable for endless wars, the poverty and starvation of people in Sudan. In fact, Rushdy's development, one may argue, is instigated by his friend, Hisham, who opens his eyes to his compatriots' impoverished conditions and their dire need for food. As a member of the Kamanga Kings, a Sudanese musical band who are invited to perform in the US, Rushdy begins to construct a binary opposition between his country and the US vis-à-vis food accessibility. This realization is further strengthened when the band become fugitives because of their self-imposed agent's dishonesty and trickery. By doing so, the study highlights, through culinary images, the pains of Sudanese people who have been under US-imposed sanctions since 1997. In a country that has been witnessing continuous political and armed conflicts, the recent of which has erupted in April 2023, food shortages and starvations are chronic threats that Sudanese people must endure. Thus, by focusing on the character of Rushdy, the study uncovers the connectedness between Rushdy's being a restless fugitive in the US and his inability to enjoy food there despite its abundance.

Keywords: diasporic literature, food, Jamal Mahjoub, politics, Sudan, *The Fugitives*

1. Introduction

"If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food - it is endlessly interpretable - materialized emotion" (Eagleton 1998: 204)

The role of food is not restricted to providing the body with the nutrients it needs to build itself and to grow. A number of scholars have investigated the function of food in life, and they have found that food surpasses its mere existence, for it can insinuate indirect meanings and denote different connotations. For instance, Claude Lévi-Strauss's 'The Culinary Triangle' shows that most cultures categorize foodstuff into three phases: raw, cooked, and rotten, and hence, food is elaborated by both natural and cultural means. As illustrated in the epigraph above from Eagleton (1998), there is a hidden meaning in food that makes it more than simply being food, or strictly speaking, that makes it impossible for it to be simply food; it is there to connote and to say something, and there is an emotion in it that has to be interpreted and, essentially, felt. The need for deciphering the messages sent by food is also stressed in

'Deciphering a Meal' by Mary Douglas, who argues that food is a code and that 'the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed' (Douglas 1972: 61). In that sense, for Douglas, the symbolic significance of food is linked to a broader system. This is also stressed by Johanna Mäkelä, who sheds light on Douglas' approach of defining a meal in relation to social structures since food is 'a marker of social relations' that plays a role in everyday life (Mäkelä 1991: 91). Apparently, food carries a socio-related hidden message that has to be read and deciphered in order for the full image to be clear whenever it is used.

As such, this study assumes that one may not turn a blind eye to the significance of food in literary works. Food has been the object of examination in literature, and hence, the current study seeks to study the symbolic, cultural, and political significance of food in Arab-British Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* (2021). Reading Mahjoub's representation of food in his novel comes within the context of unveiling how internal political and armed conflicts in Sudan have strongly contributed to impoverishing the nation and starving Sudanese people. In fact, several rebellions, and protests took place in Sudan against the ruling parties on issues related to raising the price of food items. According to the Sudan profile on BBC, in 2018, during the presidency of Omar Bashir, protests against the rising cost of bread took place after the government removed subsidies, which escalated into mass protests (BBC). DW reported that the demonstrations and protests 'were triggered by a steep increase in the price of bread, a staple for most Sudanese, but are also related to ongoing food and fuel shortages'. These demonstrations even demanded that long-time President Bashir step down (DW). They were not the only ones of their kind; there have also been protests over bread and fuel prices in Sudan in the year 2020, which finally led to the ouster of Bashir and the formation of a new, transitional government that included pro-democracy leaders. During the writing of this paper, Sudan has been witnessing an armed conflict since April 2023 between Sudan's armed forces and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The conflict, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), displaced around 10 million people. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the UN hunger monitoring system, announced that 'Sudan is facing the worst food crisis in its history, with more than 755,000 people facing "catastrophe" in 10 out of 18 states, the most severe level of extreme hunger' (Al Jazeera). Thus, the issue of food shortage in Sudan is highly noteworthy as it has led to several political tensions and conflicts throughout the years.

Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* depicts how food intermingle with political conflicts in contemporary Sudan. Through portraying the difficulties of the Kamanga Kings, the musical band that Rushdy's father founded years ago along with his brother-in-law, Maher, Mahjoub vividly shows how Sudanese artists have been doubly jeopardized. On the one hand, they have been persecuted by an oppressive regime that pays little attention to artistic talents. On the other hand, artists, like millions of people in Sudan, have to regularly cope with food insecurity because of the continuous armed conflicts that frequently erupt in the country. Thus, Mahjoub's novel subtly highlights the historical link between the nation's political instability and the incessant starvations that Sudanese have suffered. This Catch-22 situation is clearly represented in a story told by Tiberius, a Sudanese person whom Rushdy knew

as a child and accidentally meets at one of the venues that the ensemble performs at while in the US. Tiberius, a Southerner by birth, tells Rushdy how he and his family endured famine at war time in Sudan. Indeed, Tiberius's story highlights how the political regime has ruthlessly used hunger to punish people in the south of Sudan:

They bombed us. I was ten years old. How we survived I don't know. We walked for weeks, living off berries and roots, anything we could find. Many of us died. Eventually we crossed the border to Ethiopia and for the next seven years that's where I stayed. Hell on earth. Then one day Ruben turns up. I didn't know who he was, but he's about to become my brother-in-law now' (Mahjoub 2021: 278).

In fact, Tiberius's description of his family's experience to survive by eating berries and roots as 'Hell on earth' conjures up what Northrop Frye introduces as 'demonic imagery.'^{*} The quotation vividly connects Sudan's chronic food shortages to relentless wars and armed conflicts that the country has been tragically engulfed in. It is a gruesome picture of the damage that northern politicians inflicted on people in the south of Sudan. Effectively, this story makes Rushdy more politicized as he becomes increasingly conscious of how politics and food are inseparable in Sudan. Thus, one may argue this is an epiphanic moment that opens Rushdy's eyes and helps him see how corrupt politicians have wasted the nation's natural resources and demoralized its workforce.

Focusing on the spiritual growth of Rushdy, this study focuses on the development in Rushdy's character through tracing the changes that take place in his perceptions of food. It also reveals the connectedness between Rushdy's being a restless fugitive in the US and his inability to enjoy food there. Just like other Arab diasporic writers who 'have increasingly portrayed the hardships and difficulties that Arab people endure as they flee raging wars and armed conflicts in their homelands' (Kailani and Abu Amrieh 2024: 127), Mahjoub's novel depicts sufferings of the Kamanga Kings as fugitives in the US. As a runaway, along with other members of the band in the US, Rushdy reflects on the causes of his country's impoverishment and begins to realize that food shortage is a recurrent theme that taints Sudan's history and curtails its progress. Mahjoub's critique of Sudan's ruling regime is relentless as it, the novelist seems to imply, heavy-handedly oppresses people and forces them to seek refuge abroad. Aesthetically, *The Fugitives* deploys culinary codes and symbols to reflect the protagonist's increasing politization, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, unveil Sudanese people's woes and anguishes.

2. The semiotics of food in literature

In 'Food and Literature: An Overview', Joan Fitzpatrick points out important developments in the field of literary criticism on food. Fitzpatrick argues that until recently, 'the subject of food has been somewhat neglected by literary scholars, many of whom considered it rather too ordinary an area of investigation' (Fitzpatrick 2013: 122). Yet, opposing these scholars, Fitzpatrick highlights the significant role which critics have recently been playing in showing the connotations of food in literary works. She illustrates:

Literary critics who write about food understand that the use of food in novels, plays, poems, and other works of literature can help explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity, and social structures regulating consumption. When authors refer to food, they are usually telling the reader something important about narrative, plot, characterization, motives, and so on (Fitzpatrick 2013: 122).

According to Fitzpatrick, understanding the semiotics of food in literary works helps readers develop a clearer picture of sociopolitical, cultural and historical conditions as well as the circumstances in which a literary text is produced and received. In other words, she argues that food can be used as a means to deliver a particular message which has to be exposed. To prove her point, Fitzpatrick draws on a number of studies conducted by food critics on various literary works where 'the psychology of eating has taken the place of historical analysis' (Fitzpatrick 2013: 127), such as a study on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where food and digestion are traced especially in relation to the movements of the characters in Dublin (Fitzpatrick 2013: 127) and a study on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the emphasis is on the interface between food and race (Fitzpatrick 2013: 128). Fitzpatrick asserts that paying attention to the way food is used in these works can help one gain a better understanding of the social contexts that frame such novels.

Similarly, in 'Literary Approaches to Food Studies: Eating the Other', Tompkins underlines the significance of paying attention to food in literature and of relating food to social locations as she manifests:

Studying food in literature is one mode of studying material history. Thus, it is particularly useful to pay attention to the food objects that are associated with particular social locations. In studying what kinds of food appear in literature we can trace the economic and cultural circuits that are in play during the moment of cultural production (Tompkins 2005: 245).

Tompkins elaborates on this by adding that the appearance of a particular kind of food in a literary work might evasively tell the reader about the historical period it appears in even if the author of the literary work does not intend to highlight this. She gives an example of a kind of alcohol that is frequently referred to in nineteenth century US literature and, because it is made from plantation sugar, can indirectly show how slavery might 'form part of the novel's political unconscious' (Tompkins 2005: 245). This alcohol yields naturally as a product of the political conditions of its time in that literary work, even when it does not seem to be the author's main concern to use it in such a way.

On the other hand, in some studies, food is explored in relation to issues of identity. Focusing on the representation of food in Asian American literature in *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, Xu explicates the relationship between food and identity, particularly in Asian American literature. Examining the writings of seven Asian American writers, Xu places a wide range of identity issues, such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, and diaspora in the spaces of food, cooking, hunger, consumption, and appetite (Xu 2007: 2). Xu treats the table narrative in Asian American literature as a dominant site of the economic, cultural,

and political struggle and broadens the issue of food and identity to gender, class, diaspora, and other issues (Xu 2007: 14). Pairing two works by two different authors together in one of the chapters of his book, Xu comes up with interesting results in relation to the way food is represented in each one of the two works. Comparing between John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1982), Xu concludes that the two works differ in their approaches to the maternal, a psychosocial space in which food and rituals operate as an index to racial/ethnic consciousness (Xu 2007: 14). He argues that the different treatment of the maternal in the two novels contributes to their protagonists' ethnic identification or disidentification (Xu 2007: 14). Hence, the significance of food in literary works is worth scrutinizing and analyzing, for it is certainly related to the subject presented in the work itself and can enhance one's grasp and comprehension of it.

Moreover, food is an important site in cross-cultural encounters as a visitor's appreciation and / or distaste of a community's local cuisine is indicative of this person's attitudes towards their culture, traditions and ideological beliefs. Gholi ((2023) reveals that while travel writers ingest local food on their journeys, they vary in their responses to their encountered food since '[s]ome exploit it to forge a boundary between 'Home/Identity' and 'Elsewhere/Difference' via depicting it in disapproving terms, while others employ it to interrogate the constructed food binary by appreciating it' (Gholi 2023: 241). Drawing on Swiss adventurer Ella Maillart's *The Cruel Way: Switzerland to Afghanistan in a Ford, 1939*, Gholi argues that in her journey to Afghanistan, Maillart 'neither denigrates the food practices nor deploys it as a cultural vehicle to bolster the East-West dichotomy' (Gholi 2023: 242). Gholi maintains that Maillart's reaction is 'appreciative, respectful, humanistic, and receptive which mirrors her genuine desire for the Islamic cultures, not the Orientalist desire which has the whiff of repulsive snobbery' (Gholi 2023: 242). Thus, Gholi commends Maillart for 'go[ing] beyond the cultural chauvinism of orientalism, form[ing] friendship, create[ing] a convivial ambiance, demonstrate[ing] her sympathy, and act[ing] humanistically' (Gholi 2023: 245). In fact, not only does Maillart's position sharply contrast with that of orientalists, but it also substantially differs from that of the colonizers who are, as Albert Memmi succinctly puts it, "unable to conceal the revulsions" they feel towards local cuisine (Memmi, 1965: 69).

Arab writers, whether at home or in the diaspora, have also depicted aesthetic and thematic significations of food and culinary images in their works. For instance, in 'Food as a Semiotic Code in Arabic Literature', Sabry Hafez analyzes how Arab authors use food to convey many-layered social and cultural meanings. For him, food can 'indicate social class, cultural background and even temporal changes in modes of behavior and taste' (Hafez 2000: 269). Citing examples from Najib Mahfouz's 'Cairo' trilogy, Hafez argues that food can be used as a 'social marker' (Hafez 2000: 269) and as a 'means of characterization in narrative' (Hafez 2000: 270). The description of a character's manners of eating, according to him, can give readers an insight into this character's personality and approach to life (Hafez 2000: 270). Moreover, Hafez explains that food plays a major role in marking the progression of the plot and the passage of time in a literary work. For example, in Yousuf Idris's *Bayt min Lahm* (1971), dinner proves to be the only meal the five characters of the story eat together, and so it is used by the author as 'a thermometer, to register any

change in the internal harmony and mark the progression of the plot' (Hafez 2000: 271). It starts by being dull as the characters having dinner are in mourning, and so they are eating sadly and silently. Yet, later on, as these characters' grief is replaced by laughter, dinner 'becomes a happy gathering for the family' (Hafez 2000: 271). Thus, Hafez infers that Idris seems to have significantly used food to deliver certain meanings that obviously serve the plot in his work.

Arab writers in diaspora have also used culinary codes for thematic and aesthetic purposes. The most obvious example is Jordanian American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) which depicts the daily experiences of an Arab American chef named Sirine who, at 39, struggles to come to terms with her hyphenated identity. Another example is Moroccan American novelist Laila Lalami's novel *Secret Son* (2009). In a study titled 'Food for Thought: Un/savoury Socio-economic Im/mobility in Laila Lalami's *Secret Son*', Yousef Awad explores the ways in which Lalami's novel 'deploys images of food to foreground the novel's thematic concern about socio-economic inequalities that shape the lives of millions of Moroccan citizens' (Awad 2015: 109). In the novel, Awad argues that 'food and culinary codes [...] become a prism to view the daily experiences of the characters that the novel depicts' (Awad 2015: 109). Viewing food as a marker of socio-economic differences among people in Morocco, Awad maintains that the novelist 'deploys images of food and culinary codes to express her concerns about the broadening gap between the nation's poor and rich as a consequence of the adoption of free trade policies advocated by the IMF and the World Bank' (Awad 2015: 109). Through a discussion of crucial events in the novel that take place around food tables, Awad shows how 'foodways and culinary codes ominously permeate the novel, reflecting a grim vision of the socio-economic situation in contemporary Morocco' (Awad 2015: 119). Through a series of food images, Awad concludes, Lalami relates her protagonist's misfortunes and portrays how his 'dreams of climbing up the social ladder remain as elusive and unattainable as the 'giant hamburgers' he fancies himself eating on the 'palm-lined beaches' of the United States' (Awad 2015: 119).

As can be deduced from the above discussion, culinary codes are frequently employed by novelists for thematic and aesthetic purposes. Whether set in Arab or diasporic spaces, some novels written by Arab writers utilize foodways to comment on sociopolitical, cultural and historical issues. Thus, one may convincingly argue that an Arab literary tradition of the representation of food does exist. It is truly enmeshed in Arabic and Arab diasporic novels, highlighting the unique in-betweenness that characterizes Arab culture in the world. Drawing on a tradition of border-crossing, human mobility and cultural hybridization, Mahjoub's novel deploys culinary codes to highlight the hardships that refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants encounter on daily basis. Written originally in English, *The Fugitives* is a hymn to non-linguistic codes that people from different national and cultural backgrounds rely on to communicate and narrate their tales. Food is the language that Mahjoub chooses to relate his protagonist's story of floating, albeit not without complications, between a famished Sudan and an overstuffed US.

3. Peregrinations, new perceptions, and food in *The Fugitives*

Just as Lalami draws on ‘food’s stark and gloomy connotations rather than on its frequently celebrated power to connect and nourish people’ to represent the harsh conditions that millions of Moroccan people endure under corrupt ruling regimes (Awad 2015: 119), so does Sudanese British novelist Jamal Mahjoub in *The Fugitives*. Mahjoub was born in London and grew up in Khartoum. Mahjoub’s ‘bicultural background’ enables him to depict ‘the adequate East/West intercultural narrative’, to use the words of Saleh, Saleh and Al-Shboul on Mahjoub’s compatriot Leila Aboulela (2024: 56). In other words, Mahjoub has ‘a contrapuntal vision of both the East and the West’ (Shalabi and Abu Amrieh: 2024a: 135). He wrote a number of novels, all of which are written in English and many of which revolve around Sudan. His oeuvres include *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989), *Wings of Dust* (1994), *In the Hour of Signs* (1996), *The Carrier* (1998), *Travelling With Djinn*s (2003), *The Drift Latitudes* (2006), and *The Fugitives* (2021). *The Fugitives* is about an old famous musical ensemble called the Kamanga Kings. The band had its heydays in the past in Sudan. People received this ensemble’s music with notable appreciation and joy. With the emergence of an oppressive ruling regime in Sudan, musicians were banned from performing their music, and the band came to an end. However, the sudden arrival of an official letter from the US inviting the Kamanga Kings to perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, awakens the band from its slumber.

The narrator in the novel is Rushdy, a disgruntled English language teacher who works at a private school in Sudan. He is the nephew of Maher, an old member of the Kamanga Kings who receives an invitation letter from the John Kennedy Center. The new members, along with some of the old ones, manage to bring the Kamanga Kings back to life. In the absence of state funding, they are offered financial help for their costumes and expenses by an old acquaintance of Maher, named Suleiman Gandoury, whom they assume would be the solution for their financial problem. Gandoury travels with the band as a financial manager, but, once in the US, he defrauds them of their money and runs away. As they start looking for him at the different venues, he ostensibly has planned to have them perform at in the US, they end up becoming illegal fugitives there.

Seen from this angle, Mahjoub’s novel is mainly about a musical band which finds itself on the run in the US during a period in which Trump’s administration has strictly implemented anti-immigration policies. As the band members seek a way out of the trap, they find themselves in, food emerges as a prevalent leitmotif that encapsulates their dilemma and reflects the discrepancy between their previous status as ‘kings’ and their precarious position in the US as ‘fugitives’. Thus, this study throws light on the semiotics of food in the novel by considering closely the change in the character of Rushdy. It illustrates how Rushdy’s psychological growth can be inferred by tracing his attentiveness to culinary codes in Sudan and in the US. In this sense, the novel records the protagonist’s growth, and depicts how political corruption, and continual armed conflicts have instigated and deepened food crises in Sudan.

At a certain point, Rushdy, whose name in Arabic implicates awareness and knowledge, comments on the change he finds himself undergoing in the US as he stipulates, 'Had I stayed at home, I realized, I might never have examined what I had taken for granted all my life' (Mahjoub 2021: 186). This emphasizes the importance of Rushdy's journey; he would not have grown in the same way had he not crossed the borders of his country and left to the US. Moreover, the study sheds light on how Rushdy's journey of psychological growth is reflected in his awareness of the way food can be looked at as a crucial marker of socioeconomic and political disparities between an impoverished and drained Sudan and a well-nourished and robust US. In fact, *The Fugitives* traces the spiritual development which Rushdy goes through with the guidance of other characters and which is marked by the change in his perception of food in particular in two spaces, Sudan and the US.

Rushdy's journey of growth takes place in two different spaces, the first of which is Sudan, where Rushdy starts to become aware of the kind of hunger people in Sudan suffer from. The second space is the US, where Rushdy comes face to face with a different food-related experience, and where the abundant amounts of food do not satiate his hunger. In this regard, the following paragraphs will explore Rushdy's journey of growth in its two phases. They will also highlight how politicized Rushdy becomes as he realizes that political corruption in his country is the main cause of starvation that people in Sudan suffer from.

4. Hunger, music, and escape from Sudan

Unmarried with a steady monthly income, Rushdy's lifestyle has previously curtailed him from seeing that food shortage is a constant threat to the masses in Sudan. Following the tragic death of his father, Rushdy and his mother move to the place of his unmarried uncle, Maher. Although Rushdy does not like his job as a teacher in one of the best private schools in the country, the fact that his mother is happy because her son has a steady job makes him reluctant to leave. He is grateful to the fact that being employed saves him and his mother from being bound to his uncle. He narrates, 'I brought home a salary each month, which meant that we weren't entirely in debt to my uncle' (Mahjoub 2021: 12). Apparently, Rushdy starts being aware of how critical their stay at his uncle's place would be in case he decides to quit his job. Nevertheless, accused of corrupting the minds of his pupils at school, he finally makes up his mind to quit. He is, then, 'seized by fierce anxiety' of what will become of him without a steady job (Mahjoub 2021: 82). As a matter of fact, one may notice that this incident makes Rushdy aware of their economic situation at home. He has never had to cook or to buy food for himself, for it has always been his mother who prepared food for him. Usually, he would go back home and find the food already cooked by her and ready to be served to him. He stipulates that his mother 'had the kitchen running like one of those old train engines at full steam' (Mahjoub 2021: 61). This exemplifies that Rushdy's life rhythm is dictated by the food his mother cooks for him as he is slumbered into a 'quasi' middle class life, which makes him totally oblivious of other people's poverty and hunger. In other words, his reliance on his mother to prepare food for him contributes to making him ignorant of the reality of the situation in both his uncle's house and in Sudan at large.

In the novel, Mahjoub brilliantly makes a subtle connection between Rushdy's political awakening and foodways. On the day Rushdy quits his job, he goes back home 'exhausted, too tired even to eat the lunch which [his] mother reminded [him] she had spent hours preparing' (Mahjoub 2021: 36). Rushdy's mother's words indicate that cooking is a tedious process that not only consumes one's money, but also devours one's energy. This is complemented by the fact that Rushdy returns home 'exhausted, too tired,' implying that he acquires his salary through a lot of effort. Thus, by not eating the food his mother cooked for him, Rushdy is wasting his hard-earned money. Apparently, Rushdy's behavior is emblematic of his unawareness of the scarcity of food in his country. As he tries to sleep, he is awakened by Hisham's furious knocks at his door. Within the context of the narrative, this incident shows how Hisham awakens Rushdy both literally and metaphorically. Rushdy's epiphanic moment, as these two events clearly show, is intricately linked to foodways. With an empty stomach, Rushdy accompanies Hisham to visit Al-Kanary, an old female member of the ensemble, to convince her help re-form the Kamanga Kings.

With time, Rushdy's worries increase. Having opened the door for people to audition for the selection of the new members of the Kamanga Kings, Rushdy, his mother, and his uncle start receiving scores of people at their place. They would devour the simple meals that Rushdy's mother usually prepares, making the financial situation of the family even worse. There is a need here to read this in relation to the overall economic situation in Sudan. Although Sudan is one of the richest countries in the world, most of its people are hungry. In this sense, the novel depicts Sudan's 'resource curse,' a term that political scientists and economists use to refer to the failure of many resource-rich countries to benefit fully from their natural resource wealth due to political instability, wars and authoritarianism. This is emphasized in a study titled 'Food Security in Sudan the Case of Kassala State' by Nour and Abdalla (2021). In this study, the researchers discuss the issue of food insecurity in Sudan by particularly focusing on Kassala State in Eastern Sudan. They also highlight food-related problems in Kassala State despite the abundance of natural resources in it. They illustrate:

[A]lthough Sudan is endowed with [a] vast and diverse agricultural resource base that provides various means of sustaining livelihood and despite the importance of the agricultural sector for Sudan economy and the potential opportunities for achieving food security in Sudan, Sudan suffers from a serious food insecurity problem and failure to achieve food and nutrition security for the whole population (Nour and Abdalla 2021: 275).

Nour and Abdalla maintain that this is due to a number of factors, such as poverty, lack of education, unsustainable livelihood activities, isolation, and cultural practices (Nour and Abdalla 2021: 275). Nour and Abdalla's argument highlights the ironic situation that people in Sudan experience, i. e. they suffer from food insecurity although they do have in their lands what would be ample to make them nutritionally secure.

Nour and Abdalla's argument invites the reader to view Mahjoub's representation of culinary scenes meticulously. Thus, the Rushdy-Hisham episode cited above becomes highly symbolic and metaphoric: Hisham disrupts Rushdy's

routine and prevents him from eating the food prepared by his mother, which he would have naturally eaten after waking up, by first knocking on his door and then 'dragging' him to meet Al-Kanary. It is not entirely illogical then to consider Hisham as Rushdy's eye-opener to the nation's stark reality and famishment as will be explained later. Mahjoub, thus, sets up a link, albeit tenuous at this stage, between culinary codes and Rushdy's political awakening. Aware of his compatriots' impoverished conditions, Rushdy's mother becomes particularly agitated by the uninvited guests' exceptional food consumption. She is anxious that their consumption will deprive them at home from the limited amounts of food which they possess. She thinks her brother, Maher, should put an end to this situation (Mahjoub 2021: 75). She starts blaming Rushdy: 'Allah preserve us. We're going to wind up destitute' (Mahjoub 2021: 81). Had they been rich at home, she would have, doubtlessly, been more hospitable and less disturbed by the guests' vast food consumption. The mother's anxiety about food is, thus, caused by the bad financial situation of the family and their inability to feed these people who come to their place for auditions.

While idealist Rushdy thinks that people who continued to turn up at their place 'wanted to honour the memory of the kings' (Mahjoub 2021: 74), Hisham insists that these people want to join the ensemble to run away from the dire conditions they endure in Sudan. In fact, Hisham is more realistic than Rushdy since he is fully aware of Sudan's miserable socioeconomic and political conditions that stand behind people's desire to leave their country at any cost. In a study titled 'The Structure of Labour Market and Unemployment in Sudan', Samia Nour discusses the economic situation in Sudan through linking it to the overall unstable political context in it. She stipulates:

The political context in Sudan is characterized by a long history of political instability, continuing civil wars and complex conflict between the north and the south. Even after the independence of Southern Sudan, Sudan still endures political instability, a lack of sound and systematic institutions and a lack of commitment to implementing long-run sustainable and balanced development plans and strategies. This implies that the interaction between these political, economic and institutional factors together have unfortunately continued to contribute to a low standard of economic development in Sudan (Nour 2014: 5-6).

According to Nour, what is political and what is economic seem to be strongly interconnected. Looked at from this angle, Hisham's words sound realistic. The reason why most of these people wish to run away from Sudan is that they do not feel economically secure, and this feeling is caused by the intensified political tensions and complexities they witness. Sudan, Hisham is adamant, has proven to be a place where dreams are killed: 'What they see is a way out of this mess, a way to leave this country. A ticket to the land of dreams' (Mahjoub 2021: 73). Food shortage, as the novel clearly shows, is an obvious correlate of deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions.

At one point, Hisham confesses to Rushdy that he wishes to go to the US to marry Zeina, their old acquaintance who migrated with her mother when she was a

child (Mahjoub 2021: 73). Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2024a) argue that Hisham is an example of Arab people ‘who have undeniably believed and adopted the notion that the first step to achieving the “American dream” is doing whatever it takes to marry an American woman even if it goes against one’s traditions, ethics, or religion’ (Shalabi and Abu Amrieh 2024a: 536). In other words, Hisham is the embodiment of the naïve Arab dreamer who strongly believes in the American dream as he assumes that travelling to the States will solve all his problems. He does his best to convince Rushdy of re-forming the ensemble to get out of Sudan. In his attempt to do so, he mainly focuses on hunger and the lack of opportunities as solid reasons for them to leave the country and start afresh. Hisham insists that people are ‘hungry for opportunity, any opportunity’ (Mahjoub 2021: 68). Hisham’s use of the word ‘hungry’ is both literal and metaphorical since it places food shortage at the heart of Sudan’s current sociopolitical crisis. Read in tandem with Rushdy’s mother’s complaints that the auditionees ““are eating us out of house and home”” (Mahjoub 2021: 75), one can clearly see how Mahjoub’s novel deploys culinary codes to reflect the dire conditions that Sudanese people suffer from. In that sense, in Sudan, both Rushdy’s mother and Hisham play a great role in Rushdy’s journey of growth. They contribute to widening his horizons as they help him observe the truth around him in relation to the condition of food in Sudan. They, thus, assist in moving him from the stage of unawareness to a new stage where he comes to realize that people around him are suffering from hunger for both food and opportunity.

5. Rushdy the fugitive and food in the US

As soon as the Kamanga Kings reach the US, Rushdy can sense the change that awaits him in this new country. He admits, ‘I felt that I was entering a new stage in my life, that I was growing into a man of the world, a globetrotter capable of adapting to foreign *customs* like a bird whose wings know only open skies’ (Mahjoub 2021: 115, emphasis added). It is unsurprising that the customs which Rushdy refers to are related to foodways since, as the previous section has showed, Rushdy’s awakening in Sudan is intricately linked to culinary codes and symbols. With this sensed growth, Rushdy’s perception towards food takes a new direction. In Sudan Rushdy started to look at the scarcity of food as an indicator of poverty; in the US, he views food differently, as something he simply cannot enjoy despite its abundance and availability. His initial attitude towards food in the US can be witnessed in his recognition that food is part of the American lifestyle. Although he tries to adapt to it in the beginning, he eventually rejects it with his growing awareness of how politicized it can be.

When Rushdy sees a buffet at the hotel life, he turns to Hisham and asks him, ‘What’s the idea?’ (Mahjoub 2021: 118). Apparently, Rushdy does not know what a buffet is as he has not seen one before. This speaks volumes about Rushdy’s economic situation, for he has never been invited to extravagant feasts by wealthy people in Sudan. He gets to know from Hisham that ‘a buffet means you can eat anything you want and as much as you want’ (Mahjoub 2021: 118). He does not know where to start from. Yet, he is willing to follow Hisham’s advice and to ‘adapt to the American lifestyle’ (Mahjoub 2021: 119) of which food is an integral component. In one way or another, food relates to the lives of people and tells a lot

about the way they live. It becomes a carrier of symbols after all, and its acceptance or rejection functions as an indication of one's acceptance or rejection of a particular lifestyle. Interestingly enough, in a study titled 'Food for Thought: A Study of Food Consumption in Postmodern US Culture' Kniazeva and Venkatesh (2007) draw on the way SJ Levy (1981-1999) explores food consumption in the US from a social-symbolic perspective through offering a comprehensive analysis of food in relation to the lives of people. According to Levy, social groups prescribe roles and their accompanying symbols, and consumers adopt the roles and symbols suited to their identities (qtd. in Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007: 421). So, the question is what happens if these symbols do not suit the consumers' identities?

Attempting to answer this question in reference to the way Rushdy deals with food in the US, it becomes noticeable that, having come from a country in which food is scarce, Rushdy does not care about whether the food he fills his plate with is halal or haram, i. e. whether or not it is compliant with Islamic guidelines of food consumption, at his first buffet in the US. He just wants to eat, and thus, he follows Hisham's steps:

There were mountains of pastries, fruit, cereals, there were wheels of cheese, there were eggs and cold meats, some of which I knew were haram, but when you are travelling as they say, all is permitted (and besides the others were not around). Hisham and I heaped out plates high. Our table looked like a maniac had been let loose (Mahjoub 2021: 118).

Being invited to a buffet seems to be a unique occasion for Rushdy. This is inferred from his use of the phrase 'heap out' to describe the way he and Hisham have filled their plates. Having come face to face with these abundant amounts of food, they decide to make the best out of this opportunity, and so they fill their plates with as much food as possible for them. Hisham and Rushdy, having come from a country where starvation and food shortages are chronic, considerably fill their plates with all kinds of food. Their behaviors may be viewed as an unconscious attempt to compensate for the lack of opportunity to eat a variety of foods.

Yet, it does not take Rushdy much time to feel uncomfortable and to recognize that he was out of place. On the very next morning, he expresses his uneasiness with the general atmosphere in the US by referring to the heaps of food which he consumed the night before as he explains,

I felt disoriented. It wasn't that I longed to go back. It was more as though something had been dislodged inside me. I was no longer certain of the world inside me or my place in it. Everything here seems new (Mahjoub 2021: 125).

On the literal level, these words indicate that Rushdy is referring to the heaps of food which he consumed the day before. On the other hand, metaphorically speaking, they connote that Rushdy feels psychologically uneasy and guilty as the heaps of food that have been dislodged inside of his body have led to his feeling of disorientation in the US, which is deepened by his sincere longing for Sudanese food, particularly for his mother's food (Mahjoub 2021: 127). From a psychoanalytical perspective, one may argue that when Rushdy faces unfamiliar lifestyles and cultural norms in the US, including food consumption habits, he wishes to mentally return to her mother's

arms/womb where he can enjoy his food. In other words, craving his mother's food is indicative of Rushdy's inability to easily settle in the US and cope with a totally different ambience where food is plentiful. Accordingly, one may say that this is where Rushdy's understanding of the disparity between impoverished Sudan and well-fed US becomes crystal clear.

On the day of the concert Rushdy and Hisham head for the buffet to have lunch. Yet, Rushdy sits glumly and stares at the heap of food he had piled onto his plate without touching. What first comes to his mind when offered lunch is the contrast between American food and his mother's food. He does not have the appetite to eat. He expresses, 'this American food was already beginning to depress me. Everything tasted the same. You might as well eat the plastic it came in. I longed for my mother's cooking' (Mahjoub 2021: 127). His dislike of the American food reflects his sense of displacement. Moreover, his rejection of this type of food continues to grow as he spends more time in the US; effectively, he never seems to be satisfied by its taste,

I looked at the piece of food I was holding, trying to work out what it was. Finally, I put it in my mouth and began to chew. It tasted of fish and had the strange consistency of melted plastic. It confirmed my conviction that all food in America tasted the same (Mahjoub 2021: 145).

Ironically, despite the tremendous amounts and kinds of food in the US, Rushdy's feeling of disorientation prevents him from enjoying American food. He finds himself thinking of simple food, such as 'small omelettes and thick slices of crumbly white cheese along with hot pastries and a bowl of fava beans drenched in olive oil and cumin and fried ta'miyya' (Mahjoub 2021: 61) prepared by his mother. In that sense, the presence of food in the US turns out to evoke memories and instigate reflections. Instead of enjoying the abundant amounts of food, he is reminded of how poor he and his people in Sudan are and of how displaced in this new country he is. In other words, Rushdy feels guilty because while he has the chance to eat various kinds of food in the US, he knows that his compatriots starve to death in Sudan.

After the successful performance held at the Kennedy Center in the US, Rushdy and the other ensemble members start to share the same food experience, which can be seen as an indicator of the great role the band members play in Rushdy's psychological growth. On the day following the performance, they find out that Suleiman Gandoury has robbed them of their money, so they start chasing him. As Gandoury has made sure to notify the hotel that the ensemble staying at the hotel is seeking political asylum in the US, which is not true, Rushdy and his friends turn into fugitives although their main aim is to find Gandoury and clear the band's name. They start looking for him at the venues they were supposed to perform at, and they keep stopping at restaurants to eat food every now and then. Surprisingly enough, whenever they stop at a restaurant to eat, they are interrupted and cannot enjoy their meals. Put differently, although there is plenty of food for them, the fact that they are on the run as restless fugitives makes it impossible for them to eat properly and to delight in the experience of having enough food.

While chasing Gandoury, the first place they perform at is a hospice for the elderly called Pearly Gables. After their successful performance at it, they head for a

restaurant to eat. They are asked to leave while eating French fries, eggs, and thick slabs of what Rushdy assumes to be ham (Mahjoub 2021: 212) because their photos show on TV and the presenter announces that they are seeking asylum in the US (Mahjoub 2021: 217). On their way to the second venue, they stop by another restaurant. They order some food:

'I'll take the grilled cheese sandwich,' Shadia said quickly. The others hummed and hawed, unable to make their minds up. 'This food is playing havoc with my digestion,' mumbled Uncle Maher. He wasn't the only one. The travelling and irregular hours seemed to be having a general effect. Everyone was tired and irritable. To prove the point, Wad Mazaj started voicing his doubts almost as soon as the waitress had left the table. 'What is happening to us?' he protested. 'I mean, what exactly are we doing, chasing around the country? For what?' (Mahjoub 2021: 251).

The cook then comes out to tell them that the waitress has already called the federales because she was suspicious of them (Mahjoub 2021: 254), so they leave the place immediately.

While eating at the third venue, which is a charity concert for asylum-seeking musicians, they are recognized by a little girl in a white dress, and so, they are forced to go on the run again: Waldo comes in and tells them they have to run:

'What is happening?' Uncle Maher asked, still holding a plate of food. I could already hear the sirens. The little girl in the white dress. I suspected she had managed to convince someone she had seen us before (Mahjoub 2021: 279).

All these incidents are significant because they reflect how uneasy the ensemble's relationship with food in the US is. In a certain sense, one may argue that the ensemble's troubled relationship with the food they order is used by Mahjoub as a means to comment on the position that refugees, illegal immigrants, and asylum-seekers occupies in Trump-led US. The fact that they cannot enjoy food, which is doubtlessly one of the main pleasures of life, tells the reader a lot about the type of life immigrants and asylum-seekers live and the rights they are denied in so many countries all over the world, especially after 9/11 as the immigrants in this novel are Arabs and Muslims. Having been tempted to leave their countries and to look for better living conditions somewhere else is internally a criticism of the political system and regime in Sudan which does not prioritize its people's needs and which has turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to their dreams and ambitions. As this study has illustrated, Rushdy's full recognition of the true conditions of people in Sudan has been tackled through tracing the change in his perceptions of food in Sudan and the US.

6. Conclusion

This study has tackled the development in Rushdy's character by tracing the change in his perception and consumption of food. Shedding light on how unexperienced Rushdy is in Sudan and highlighting how politicized he becomes in the US, the study has demonstrated how Rushdy's understanding of the things which he thought would never be shaken proves to take a new angle. By focusing on the way he perceives

food as a fugitive, the study has also shown that Rushdy's psychological growth has enabled him to look at issues of hunger, ambition, and the ruling system in Sudan in new ways. It has also illustrated that the transformation in Rushdy's perceptions of food can be read as a mark of his awakening and growth.

Rushdy's psychological growth can be clearly seen in the way he consumes food at home and abroad. In Sudan, Rushdy shares simple meals with his family that reflect his social status and the nation's impoverishment that primarily results from disastrous economic policies and strategies adopted by a corrupt regime. As Sudan sinks deeper into a relentless political conflict and a strangling economic embargo, millions of Sudanese people struggle to consume enough calories to keep them alive. It does not dawn on Rushdy that his compatriots are starving to death until he comes face to face with some of them at the auditions where they come for free food under several guises. Such an event opens Rushdy's eyes to a gruesome reality of which he has been ignorant.

Once in the US, Rushdy is fascinated to see an abundance of food, a sight that he has never seen in his native country. Yet, his discovery of the substantial discrepancy between what he is used to eat in Sudan and what is offered to him in the US simply shocks him and makes him think more critically about the world in which he lives. Defrauded by Gandoury of their share of box office returns, Rushdy and other members of the band are abandoned to their fate. Fugitives in the US, the Kamanga Kings are unable to enjoy widely available victuals. As *The Fugitives* narrates the protagonist's life story through culinary images, it simultaneously narrates the story of Sudan's downfall into the abyss of corruption, wars, and starvation. Hence, Mahjoub artistically relates Sudan's chronic and paradoxical dilemma of food shortage and, in effect, he solemnly, but hungrily, composes a requiem to the nation's fading musical talents.

Endnote

*For an elaborate discussion of 'demonic imagery,' see Frye's "Theory of Archetypal Meaning (2): Demonic Imagery."

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