

Spatiality in Sayf Al-Dīn Hasan Bābakir's *Al-Zaman al-Fadā al-M'iwaj*

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Abstract: *This article examines spatiality as an aesthetic expression of reality in Sayf al-Dīn Hasan Bābakir's novel, al-Zaman al-Fadā al-M'iwaj. The novel marks new trends in Sudanese literary writing in the postmodern period. The theoretical framework is drawn from Michael Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard. Beginning with the discussion of spatiality in Sudanese culture and an examination of Bābakir's technique the paper goes on to explore the inner, outer and spaces of emplacement in the novel as a strategy for the negotiation of the socio-cultural, political and historical realities of modern Sudan.*

1. Introduction

The intellectual and literary history of Sudan in the post-independence period has largely been over-shadowed by the increasing crises, wars and upheavals that have plagued the country to date. The origin of these crises, their cultural, political, and social impacts on the mass of Sudanese citizens have, however, served to sharpen the literary production of the Sudanese. Even though they still remain largely understudied, the works, by all standards, constitute an important storehouse of what could be termed the general Sudanese experience in the contemporary period. This study explores one of these works in which, in the Bakhtinian mode, the foregoing is "fictioned" (Foucault 1980: 193)). It uses *al-Zaman al-Fadā al-M'iwaj*, written by Sayf al-Dīn Hasan Bābakir, as an instrument with which it inquires into narrativity from a perspective in which the imaginary universe is manifested in aesthetic practice. In other words, the paper examines aesthetic practice as a process which entails the *uncanny* fusion of myth, tradition and imagination in their Eastern textures with western literary styles in the production of scales of space.

In order to achieve its objective the article unbounds the epistemological fountain from which Bābakir derives his creativity. Here a re-reading of Michael Foucault's *Heterotopias* (Foucault 1986: 26-27), Henry Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1991) and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1969) becomes imperative. I juxtapose the works produced by these writers and the trajectories and the dialectics in the Sudanese Afro-Arabic tradition and customs as a strategy for the appropriation of Bābakir's aesthetics and his theory of social action.

2. Spatiality in Western Thought

The emergence of space in the West has a history and this could be traced back to the middle ages when there existed, in Foucault's words, an "hierarchic ensemble of places" (Foucault 1986: 22). These are sacred/profane, private/open and urban/rural places all of which are derived from the reality of human life. In the contemporary period in which technologies now abound with which spaces could be appropriated, Foucault is of the view that space has taken a characteristic of duality: internal and external. The internal space, according to him, includes "space of our primary perception, of our dreams" (23). It features ethereal/encumbered and congealed/crystal spaces. External space, Foucault posits, finds characterization in the spaces in which we live. These spaces are neither homogenous nor empty; they are not utopias. This is because within them humanity is apprised with space both as materiality and ideology. Their interrogation yields knowledge about how power is constituted; about how agents in the physical world circumscribe and are circumscribed by space.

In Lefebvre's writing the nuanced notion of space becomes not an end but a means by which the dynamics, dialectics and disjunctures in social relationships are mirrored and analyzed. Beginning with his historical notion of space, Lefebvre identifies three basic axes: perceived space (*le perçu*), the conceived space (*le conçu*) and lived space (*le vécu*) (Lefebvre: 143). Soja, building on Lefebvre's theory, posits that the first space is the realm of structural objectivity and materiality (Soja 1995: 13-14). This is manifested in the realities of both the animate and inanimate objects. Here the link between humankind and the spaces that are external to them is as much like the link that binds inanimate objects like the spider to the web that issue forth from its body.

In other words humankind are producers/products of the physical and mental spaces that are external to them. We extend ourselves into space as much as a pregnant woman extends her wombs. The woman has to create a space from herself so that the child can exist and in order for her to become a mother (Rothman 2000)¹. This space is as much that of the child as it is of hers. She projects herself, in Lefebvre's words, into space and thus become "inscribed there and in the process produce that space itself" (Lefebvre: 129).

The second space is that of imaginary world of representation: the space of architecture and literature, while the third is that of politics where the real and the unreal are in constant conflict (Rusted 2002: 15). The lived space, in Lefebvre's analysis, is circumscribed by his criticism of the dominant social orders, the capitalists' hegemony which manifests itself in enforced iniquitous and unjust property ownership. This space, according to him, is that of "inhabitants" and "users"; it is the "dominated space which imagination seeks to change and appropriate..." (Lefebvre: 39).

Space theorists have, however, recognized the pioneering work of Gaston Bachelard in the contemporary studies on space either in architecture or literature. His work titled *The Poetics of Space*, has consequently occasioned a panoply of studies and reviews even as its impacts have been seen in the works of spatial

theorists including Foucault and Lefebvre². The *Poetics of Space* has been read as a search for (a) the protection of family house firmly anchored to the ground and (b) a place to escape from the storms outside and into which we can withdraw (Norberg-Schulz 1972: 15-16).

Bachelard's philosophical concern with the "oneiric space" (Bachelard 1972: 111) began as a critique and expose of the contradictions between Descartes and Newton's concepts of physical space as empirical, locational and stable on one hand and the abstract, counter experiential constructs of space-time being theorized by twentieth century microphysicists (112). Space, according to him, is not primarily a container of three-dimensional objects. Rather, it is the abode of human consciousness or the half-dreaming consciousness he calls "reverie" (16).

In the chapter titled "The Dialectic of Inside and Outside" Bachelard embarks on a metaphysical-cum-philosophical assessment of how this geometrical opposition shapes and restricts our experience of space. It is his opinion that the objective space of a house, its corners and corridors are far less important than what it is poetically endowed with. The inside of a house may acquire a sense of intimacy, secrecy and security because of the experience that seem appropriate to it. In other words, the inside of a house is useless in the absence of the imaginative or figurative value it has been inscribed with. While the inside of a house is inscribed with the feelings of intimacy the outside is coded with "immensity". The two, Bachelard contends, are always ready to be reversed" (218) and when this occurs humankind becomes susceptible to the changing experience of space and time.

3. Spatiality in Sudanese Culture

But how do the Sudanese view and relate to space? This question is pertinent especially when consideration is given to the fact that space is a human construct and as such it varies, in line with Rusted (2002: 17), from society to society. In other words spatiality in *al-Zaman* is already a referent in Sudanese culture before it is narrativized.

The phenomenon of space in Sudanese cultural hierarchy could be hinged, using Foucault's thesis, on two scales: internal and external. Both are sites, or in Helen Ligetts's reading "sights" of materiality and ideology (Ligetts 1995: 264). The "internal" in the spatial reality of the Sudanese is embodied in the family house which is traditionally referred to either as *al-Kūkh* or *al-Hūsh* - the hut or courtyard (Shuqayr 1967: 264). In Sudan's Arab-Islamic tradition the *Hūsh* is usually seen as an extension of the Ka'aba: it is sacred and inviolable. A man that comes of age and succeeds in establishing his own courtyard is deemed to enjoy the divine blessing of Allah (Ladislav 1974: 1-18).

The *hūsh* usually has one entry from outside which directly leads to its "external" space. This belongs to the man or *Şāhib al-Hūsh* - owner of the courtyard (44). This part of the *hūsh* is the masculine space; the public space. It is the space in which men's honour (*sharaf*) is determined and circumscribed by

their ability to protect the dignity and privacy of their wives. In traditional Sudanese societies the female's body embodies the sacredness (*hurma*) of the family honour. It images the hopes and aspirations, the fancies and fantasies of her community. It is the all-important "yoke" that the "external/outer" space of the *hūsh* - the egg shield must constantly keep under watch.

The female's space (the inner space) of the *hūsh* is, however, mapped or bounded by a wall which separates it from its "outer/masculine" space. The wall serves as a protective mechanism for the honour ('ird) of the *hūsh*. In order to facilitate the movement of the "*Ṣāhib al-Hūsh*" in-between the two spaces of the *Hūsh* however a small door is often erected in the wall for this purpose (Shuqayr: 261). Through its open space he connects his outer with the inner spaces of his wife/wives.

Thus the *hūsh* is the first scale of the Sudanese experience of spatiality. Very early in her/his life the young Sudanese learns to recognize the wall separating the courtyard into two as spheres of male/female authorities. Whereas the inner space is enclosed/sacred the outer space of the *hūsh*, on the other hand, maps the beginning of the spaces of authorities of men in Sudan. These include the political, economic, legal and religious spaces. In traditional Sudanese societies women are often not permitted to enter, for example, the mosque. This is because the female body is considered a threat: it exposes the mosque to impurity and profanity. The mosques, therefore, is in Bachelard's words, one of the "felicitous spaces" (Bachelard: 9) in Sudan. It has been inscribed with cultural, spiritual and patriarchal codes by men who, in Khalid Abou Fadl terms, "speak in God's name"(Abou El-Fadl 2001)³.

4. Narrative Strategies in *al-Zaman*

The portrayal of the politics underlying spatiality in Sudan, as has been mentioned above, appears to have influenced the narrative strategy employed by Babikir in *al-Zaman*. The strategy, when carefully examined, is reminiscent of Erik Satie's musical composition: *Trois Pieces en Forme de Poire* Three Pieces in a Pear Shape (Minha 1994: 119-51). It demands that the reader give the text a close reading and "...fill it with her/his own marks and markings so as to consign it to the meaningful and lay claim to it" (307). This is because the novel, which was published in 2001, is an hybrid in conception, characterization, structure and plot. It is un-wieldy in its portrayal of the real and the un-real in the Sudanese experience. The novel appears to affirm Edward Said's thesis that works of literature whose subject is empire "have an inherently untidy, even un-wieldy aspect in so fraught, so densely charged a political setting" (Said 1993: 69).

Our starting point might be the title: *al-Zaman al-Fadāi al-M'iwaj* (The Crooked Empty Time). This title treats the novel like a product or a commodity which must have a marker. It gestures to the path the author would probably want the reader to tread in unpacking the spatial gridlock that the novel inaugurates. The

title also performs, in Barthes' words, double function: "enunciating and deictic" (Barthes 1981: 172-94). The author seems desirous to create, in the manner of Walter Benjamin, an interchangeability of world spaces under a unitary discourse of "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin 1986: 263). The inscription of time, *al-Zaman* with the double adjective: spatial crookedness, (*al-Fadāi al M'iwaj*) amounts to a re-inscription of the text with the unfinished histories and legacies of the contests between the "north" and the "south" and the conflicts across cultures and civilizations. Crookedness of space might therefore, in De Certeau mode, refer to "the rift in time" (De Certeau 1988: 213) which humanity's struggle to apprehend life's mysteries exemplifies.

In other words the title, *al-Zaman al-Fadāi al-M'iwaji*, figures time in a trinity: visual, experiential, and historical. This is achieved in/through the reader of the text, the characters in the novel and in *time* as an agent of history. In the latter the past – yet so near/familiar and the present- yet so "distant/strange" are irrevocably "placed on a ...stream of time ..." (Fabian 1983: 17). The historical and cultural nexus between the North and the South is re-narrated in such a manner that no culture is privileged over the other but relies instead on the dynamics of human interactions and communication (24).

Side-stepping the title and in order to provide a summary of the plots in the novel I will employ the three techniques proposed by the Russian formalists in their analysis of narrative discourse namely *fabula*, *sjuzhet* and *skaz* (Bakhtin 1984)⁴. This is informed not because the text gestures toward Russian influence on the author but rather as a strategy to impose order on an otherwise complex and disorderly text.

The *fabula* of *al-Zaman*, the framed story, can be summarized in a few sentences notwithstanding the length of pages and the duration of time the discourse covers. *al-Zaman* is the story of As'ad Makī (the Sudanese hero) and his experience in Paris. As'ad goes to the French capital like other young Arab citizens in the early modern period in search of knowledge and education. There, together with his friends – Abdullah and Khalil- he is involved in romance with French ladies. They are constantly visited in their hostel by Rosario, Sharon and Madeline. During one of these visits the ladies, accompanied by the hero and his friends, emerge into the lobby of the hostel and are confronted by Mr Bernard Gerald, who upbraids the former for engaging in indecency with the slaves. Mr Gerald belongs to the group of French soldiers who came back to France with psychological ailments sequel to their participation in the war against Algerian independence fighters. The sight of an African usually reminds them of their humiliation in Algeria. They, therefore, constantly seek avenues for the redemption of their psychological and national dignity. Mr. Gerald goes on to advise the ladies to quickly get out of the hostel. He threatens to go for his gun in order to kill As'ad and his friends. Shortly thereafter he appears with a gun in hand and unleashes its bullets on the hero and his friends. Only the hero survives the attack as his two friends give up the ghost. When the case comes up in the court Mr Gerald is set free; he is found not culpable of first degree murder (Bābikir 2001: 16).

The order of the novel's *sjuzhet*, the enframed plots, however, defies linearity and sequentiality of the *fabula*. Whereas the latter is about the mono-dimensional encounter between the colonist and the colonized right there on the quicksand of the metropole, the enframed plots are cyclical and, in the existentialist parlance, "multi-dimensional" (Sartre 1978: 158). The multi-dimensionality of the enframed plots is, however, cotextual not contextual with the framed plot. Whereas the framed plot is about As'ad and the colonist in France, the enframed plots (stories-within-the-story) belongs to, while relying on As'ad's experience in Paris as springboard, the Sudanese villagers, the peasants, their myth, their experience of colonization and neo-colonization. This foregrounds the eclecticism of the *skaz* and the perspectival location and views of the characters in the novel. The discourse in *al-Zaman* is generated, as in a web, by the author, the narrator and the characters themselves. Through a technique of negative mirroring each of the characters - As'ad, Khalaf-Allah, Kinān, al-'Umdah, Sitt al-Nafar, and Banāt al-Shaykh see him/herself in the eye of his/her adversary and thereby accentuate the relativity of truth.

In other words, discourses in *al-Zaman* are polyphonic and intertextual. This is realized at least at three levels: the metropole which is imaged in the character of Mr Gerald, his attorney, the Judge and As'ad in the court; the traditional in the employment of the Qur'an/Islamic motifs/codes; and the popular in the mythological and cosmogonic beliefs of the ordinary Sudanese. Through the trajectories in the life of the hero in Paris the "modern" is positioned in a binary with the traditional while the latter, represented by the dialectics and paradoxes in his father's house is, in turn, situated in opposition to the popular, the communal life in the Sudanese village. Thus humanity, represented by the characters in the novel, appears forever engaged in a battle over identities and histories. It is locked in contest over the open and the hidden spaces of existence. Conversely humanity, represented by the reader of the text, becomes a witness; we watch, as in a theater, the contests over the inner, the outer and spaces of emplacement in our reality.

5. Inner Space

Inner spaces are realized in *al-Zaman* in two scales: the courtroom in Paris where Mr Gerald is arraigned for the murder of As'ad's friends and in Hāj'Ahmad's room. The inner space of the courtroom is mapped and bounded on one hand by the authority of the Judges "whose faces appear strange" (Bābakir: 15) and on the other by the seating arrangement of the attorneys of the plaintiff, their witness As'ad and the defendant, Mr. Gerald. As'ad is positioned directly opposite Mr. Gerald in the manner of the subject versus the settler. He is given the rare opportunity to place the white man where he belongs; to look the white man in the face. Here the inner space of the courtroom becomes a place for racial intersections; a place where blackness comes face to face with whiteness; where colour is of little or no significance.

The hero is, however, taken aback when the defense attorney begins by asking him to identify the accused. He consequently develops a momentary cessation of energy; an “unfamiliar weight” in Fanon's (1967: 110) phraseology, burdens his body. Seeing Mr Gerald stand in his front, he suffers nervous breakdown: “I feel as if my hand cannot move, as if a big chunk of stone is placed on it” (Bābikir: 20). He experiences a dialectic between his body and his world. When he eventually points at Mr Gerald, he could not look the latter in the face: “I said it and my hand points towards Mr Gerald while my face is directed toward the Judge” (20). As’ad is un-able to look Mr Gerald in the face probably out of fear; he is afraid of the violence Mr Gerald is capable of even inside the courtroom. Wherever the colonised finds him/herself s/he constantly remembers, in Fanon’s (1985: 73) words, “the practice of violence...” which binds her/him to the settler. Whereas it is, in Max Weber’s mode “Legitimate violence” (quoted in Arendt 1969: 35), which ensures and assures colonial authority “holy violence” (Perinbam 1982: 9-10) is, on the other hand, often employed by the subject as weapon against colonial injustice. It is the sieve with which the colonized purges him/herself of inferiority complex.

Thus by looking in the direction of the Judges the hero probably seeks an escape from the violence which the person of Mr. Gerald images to him. It is, however, ironically a move which affirms his inferior status and location in relation to the white man. Face to face with Mr. Gerald the hero feels a sense of diminution. His blackness crumbles under the intense whiteness of the Other. As if from a far distant he hears the defense attorney saying: “Mr. As’ad, does your religion permit you to have sex with a woman who is not your wife” (Bābikir: 24). This question figures the case over which the court would adjudicate as fornication not murder. As’ad, therefore, dramatically becomes the accused. His sin and that of his friends appear to inhere not only in their decision to come to Paris but also in going to bed with the Parisian ladies; in trying to renegotiate the colonial experience on the bodies of the white women.

But the hero’s affair with the French ladies could not have occurred without the cooperation of the French ladies. Unlike the colonist sexual despoilation and exploitation of the black women when a white woman accepts a black man, Fanon posits, “there is automatically a romantic aspect. It is a giving not a seizing” (Fanon 1967: 46). The French ladies, having considered the hero “a penis symbol” (159) could have “given” themselves to him. They could have done this in the belief that it is he who is capable of introducing them into a sexual universe which (their) father(s) do not have the key, the weapons or the attributes” (169). One of the ladies once contemplates his fantastic physique and in deep admiration of his sexual prowess exclaims thus: “if I were a black girl I won’t allow you to go” (Bābikir: 73).

Thus Mr. Gerald could have decided to murder As’ad’s friends as a sexual revenge or out of his “feeling of sexual inferiority” (Fanon 1967: 159). This eventually marks the climax in the tragedy that the hero’s encounters with the Parisian ladies have occasioned. A couple of days before the incident the hero had discovered he had lost his libido; he had become incapable of going to bed

with the opposite sex. He had exclaimed: "French ladies have...deprived me of my sexual drives" (Bābakir: 67). Here the narrator retrieves the dialectic in the claims for and against cultural contamination which JanMohamed explores in *Manichaen Aesthetics*. Whereas the hero could have, in JanMohamed's (1983: 4) word, tried to "contaminate" Paris with his colour - to blacken the white world, it is axiomatic that the Parisian ladies have conversely succeeded in "contaminating" his libido with their insatiable sexual urge. But the loss of his libido appears incomparable to the loss of dignity and respect that the "empire" suffers in his romance with the French ladies. By taking the French ladies to bed the hero appears to have inflicted a grave humiliation on the "empire" the like of which the death of his friends in the hands of Mr Gerald can hardly compensate for.

The court's decision, therefore, becomes predictable: "it is improbable to send monsieur Gerald Bernard to the guillotine because his offense is less than first degree murder" (Bābakir: 144). The Judge is unable to find Mr Gerald guilty of an offense he commits probably on behalf of the "empire". The inner space of the French court and the hallowed and catholic legal process of the French judiciary, therefore, become implicated in the transactions of racial prejudice and superiority. The judgement gives credence to the thesis that "there is no....(space) of civilization which is not at the same time a ... (space) of barbarism" (Benjamin 1986: 248).

Meanwhile we must necessarily return to the question of illicit or depredated sexual intercourse and its position in Islamic law which the attorney confronts As'ad with. The question is characterized not only by postcolonial politics and trajectories but indeed by the inconsistencies in the cultural milieu from which the hero emerges. By asking As'ad whether Islam sanctions illicit sexual intercourse the "inner" space of the courtroom in Paris is linked with the inner but profane spaces of Sudanese homes. As'ad, therefore, travels back in *time* in order to project it back into reality.

He returns from school one afternoon with his younger brother to find the door that separates the male's courtyard from that of the female's under lock contrary to the usual pattern. He gently knocks on the door before he bends down to peep through its small hole. He consequently sees his father, nude, trying to wear his clothes in confusion and fright. He sees a woman who quickly runs towards the women's door carrying her cloth in her hand (Bābakir: 25). The sight of his father, therefore, becomes a strange one: a "familiar (image) that becomes unfamiliar" (Bhabha 1994: 1-18). By going to bed with the wife of his neighbour the hero believes his father has desacralized the private space of his mother and by extension dishonoured the marital bed (*al-firāsh*) upon which he is conceived. The privacy, intimacy and security of his home is torn by the very entity which should normally preserve it. As the woman takes flight from the room, he feels the disappearance of the "unhomely": the horrific (Freud 1963: 19-60)⁵. The inner space of his father's *hush* consequently becomes a hidden one in which "the ...inadmissible ... (the) malefic or forbidden" (Lefebvre: 36) is given a free rein.

But the young As'ad also comes away with another experience: he becomes aware of the fact that the inner space is a sexualized space. It is the space in which humanity satisfies its biological needs. He looks at his father and the woman through the hole in the door-handle and becomes excited by what he sees. He quickly beckons on his younger brother to take a look. But he soon shoves his brother aside when he starts experiencing a "strange sexual urge" (Bābikir: 25) in his phallus; an urge which had hitherto remained latent in him. For the first time in his life he becomes conscious of his sexuality. He develops an instantaneous desire for the opposite sex. Through the instrumentality of his father's sexual incontinence he is introduced, via the inner space, into the orgiastic world of eroticism.

6. The Outer Space

The outer space in Foucault's words is that "in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves... the space that claws and gnaws at us ...a heterogeneous space" (Foucault: 23). In *al-Zaman* it is the space in which the real and the un-real, in Rusted's words, are entangled (Rusted: 15). The outer space in the novel is a counter-space of inner/closed and familial space of the *hush* the desacralization of which As'ad vehemently opposes. It is inscribed with the questions of identity and voice. It is a multivalent place in which masculinity, mythology and femininity are inextricably linked together. It is also a site of desire and lust. It mirrors the "crooked" (i'wījaj) and the paradoxes in the nature of space/place in human reality and by implication the incongruence of *time* in our world. In giving effect to this in the novel the point of view shifts from As'ad to Khalaf-Allah. Under the moonlight, he, emboldened by the alcohol which is being served by his wife Mastūrah, tells the story of his sexual escapades with a woman named Sitt al-Nafar to the hero. Khalaf-Allah and Sitt al-Nafar find each other in an open space where, unlike the inner space which is deemed to be circumscribed by law; sexual gratification is negotiated without inhibition. The place in which he finds himself with Sit al-Nafar is one in which the Sudanese usually dread: "They believe that a magician resides in it" (Bābikir: 32). Here she says to Khalaf Allah: "if you are alone with a woman, both of you alone, what are you going to do with her?"(32).

This question relies a great deal on cultural politics. Here women's identity is delimited to their sexually objectified bodies. They are seen as agents of the devil. By asking Khalaf-Allah what he would do with a woman in an open space, Sitt al-Nafar becomes a "made woman" (Minha: 264). She exemplifies the patriarchal notion that evil inheres in one of three things: "a horse, a black dog and a woman" (al-Asqalani: 10/159)⁶. Khalaf-Allah could also have considered her question, a feminine challenge to his masculine dignity/identity. This explains why he disagrees with As'ad who, after having been regaled by the eroticism of the story, exclaims: "but this is adultery, my uncle?" (Bābikir: 33). Khalaf-Allah quickly retorts: "O! boy you are spoilt. A woman invites you to herself in an *open space*. May I be divorced! Even if they cut my head I would not have left her" (33).

Thus Sitt al-Nafar exemplifies the claim in sexual politics that women, in Shashana Felman's mode, "are the objects of the question" (Felman 1981: 19). But contrary to Shershana's thesis Sitt emphasizes the possibility of women enunciating the question. She positions herself both as the object of the question and, paradoxically too, as the speaking subject of the "knowledge ...which the question seeks" (19). Sitt appears desirous of knowing herself. Khalaf-Allah, therefore, becomes a means towards an end. He becomes the instrument with which the feminine in her could be manifested. It is through his masculinity that her identity could be realized.

But the gendered politics and the transactions in male and female's identity which the encounter between Sitt al-Nafar and Khalaf-Allah embodies is only one perspective to the cultural and postcolonial codes which the outer spaces in *al-Zaman* inaugurates. The outer space in the narrative *topoi* of the novel is also inscribed with competitions between the neocolonialist and the Sudanese natives over the town's natural resources. It also expropriates the unceasing "battle" between the Sudanese natives and the river Nile to its widening but interesting geography.

The neocolonialist, in the novel, is represented by al-'Umdah (Bābikir: 86-91) who controls the *outer space*, the economic space of the community. He controls this space in the name of his master, the colonist. He considers it a boon, a treasure that he could pillage and plunder at will. The villagers are unable to confront him in the "open" because he enjoys the monopoly of the means of violence. But the destiny of the neocolonialist is often like that of his master. He is usually an object of his own weapon of violence. al-'Umdah's hegemony soon comes to an end: "He was found dead on the shore of river Nile and all efforts to find his killers ended up in vain" (103). The killers could not be found because their assignment is a communal one. Their task consists in relieving the town, and permanently too, of his oppression and exploitation.

While the death of the 'Umdah liberates the natives from his stranglehold they are, however, constantly under the mercy of the river Nile, which usually overflows its bank at least once a year and turns the "open" but austere economic space of the Sudanese to that of misery and tragedy (Najilah 1972: 102)⁷. In one of such occasions the natives begin to scamper for safety carrying as much as they can of their belongings. In the ensuing *mêlée* and confusion an eccentric by name Kinān is called upon to assist the natives. His response to the call is, however, instructive of the contradictions in the Sudanese socio-cultural set-up. It is also reminiscent of al-Zayn, the iconic character in Tayeb Salih's novella, *Urs al-Zayn* whose words and behaviours remind the people of the unthought, the unknown. Kinān paradoxically asks the people saying: "why is it that I preferred poverty? I preferred it because of a day like this" (Bābikir: 102). The moral in his rebuttal to the natives seems to be that s/he who covets nothing invariably has nothing to grieve for.

Kinān later mirrors the trajectory in humanity's experience of inner and outer spaces when he falls into a state of coma consequent upon his excessive intake of

alcohol. The natives, in line with Islamic traditions, quickly proceed to dig a grave and bury him thinking that he is dead. This is because in the village in which he lives the outer space is meant, not for the dead, but the living. The villagers are unaware of a possible point of equilibrium between life and death. It is either a man is alive or dead. Thus by the time wakefulness returns to him Kinān discovers he has left the “outer space” of the earth: “He began to cry and shout for help all to no avail” (Bābikir: 103). The natives refuse to rise up in his aid: “they thought that he is being dealt with by the angels in the grave” (Bābikir: 103). Even though he prefers, despite its challenges and deprivations, the outer space of life, death, however, soon intervenes to ensure his relocation to the space of solitude, the space of emplacement.

7. Space of Emplacement

The space of emplacement is, in Foucault’s words, a medieval one. It refers to places where things had been put because they had been violently displaced and then on the contrary places where things found their natural habitat and stability” (Foucault: 24). Emplacement, in *al-Zaman*, begins for the hero in his migration from Sudan to Paris: in his diasporic feelings of exile. It reaches its climax in the split, *in space*, between his “soul and body” (Bābikir: 73) after his death. In other words, As’ad, through whose views the reader is tossed, in the quintessence existentialist manner, between one “consciousness and the other” (Sartre: 158) - between the inner\outer space of life in Paris and the Sudanese village- has died before the beginning of the narrative. Emplacement for him consequently inheres in the location of his soul away from his body and the inability of the latter to find a place of tranquility. This has occurred, he contends, not through his own choice but by chance. In an interface between his spirit and body he addresses himself thus:

Chance (*al-Ṣadfah*) is that which brings you to Europe. It is chance that makes your father copulate with your mother that summer night so that you come out after nine months to existence like a puppy having neither power nor might for you in that” (Bābikir: 74).

It is chance, he posits again, that turns him into a *tarkhūn* (123): a dracula whose image runs through the narrative in a trialectic: as a victim, perpetrator and witness over the events as they unfold. In each of these stations he occupies the position of an inquirer, a wanderer, a searcher, as in Najib Nahfuz’s *al-Tarīq*, for the lost treasure: “I am looking for my essence, alone like a sword, free like a spectra, (like) a king of the aliens” (73). It is the search of the soul, in the “oneiric space”, for its body, for an abode, for its home.

In this state of “reverie” the hero finds himself in company of his dead grandmother who, together with her friends, *Banāt al-Shaykh* (120) takes him on a trip inside a shrine which is located “on a high hill at the feet of the ancient Nubian pyramid”(126). These women operate in the supra-sensory world: “vision cannot apprehend them”(120). Reference to them here, however, relies to a large

extent on the Sudanese myths and customs which, as it is in the Arab world, have proved highly useful in the hands of writers as strategies in depicting the uncanny in the life of the individual Arab or his/her society (Mandur 1955: 104) and in picturing the nexus of the “rational and irrational, myth and knowledge and life and death”(Hilal n.d: 257) in human societies. *Banāt al-Shaykh* is, therefore, symbolic of agents which are believed to operate above realms of human cognition and are capable of changing the destiny of humankind either for good or evil.

Reference to *banāt al-Shaykh* and the journey which they make the hero embark upon in the novel could also have been drawn from Islamic *weltanschauung* which emphasizes a state in between death and resurrection: the *barzakh* (Muhammad 1958: 17). This is a state in which the journey of the dead to the otherworldly continues *ad infinitum*. Thus consequent upon his death the hero finds himself in the midst of the “Sisters” (Bābakir: 130). He begins to walk in a narrow and dark lobby. Here he is struck by fear of the unknown but he soon derives confidence from one of the “sisters” who steps into his front and continues to run in an “un-usual manner among the women of this country” (131). *The lobby soon becomes a grave with “stones under my feet, stones above my head, stones to my left, stones to my right, in fact in all places”(132)*. When it dawns on him that the cave appears to have no end he queries in the manner of the existentialist: “where are we going? No ...I won’t complete the race ... before I know why I am here? To where I’m being driven? On whose authority? For how long ?” (132). In the space of emplacement where sunrays and moonlight combine together to “change time and space” (138) human choices/desires are super-intended by outside forces. The dead, represented by As’ad, becomes like a rod, totally helpless and in-capable of taking control of his own destiny in his hands. But this appears to be in consonance with the nature and destiny of humanity: “for you to be in the womb of your mother, or inside the cave or the grave, all these deprive you of your desires to make a choice” (131). The narrator, as if in order to put this argument beyond any reasonable doubt, retrieves the fate that befalls Kinān: “the people interred him when they chose, he died before he desired to live” (132).

Just before the women melt into one another and disappear, they hand a horse over to the hero. With it he unfurls, in Foucault’s words, the heterochtonies (Foucault: 26) which death occasions in human societies and its representations in narration. Less by his choice but more by the will of the women he rides the horse, *in space*, back to the courtyard of his deceased father. There he sees men in white *Jalabiyya* and others sitting on the ground with their backs against the walls of the house. He sees “others carrying axes and pails full of water going toward the cemetery” (Bābakir: 170). In Sudan, cemeteries constitute a *heterotopia*: a sacred space. It is the ultimate in the process which death often sets in motion. Death in the cultural hierarchy within which *al-Zaman* is situated is, in Albert Camus’s words, “the only reality” (Boisdefere 1971: 159); it is constantly feasted in the town “like a bride” (Bābakir: 170). From within this space he sees groups of women: “a group among them was wailing while others carried empty buckets

and walked towards the stream (171). He rides his horse into the midst of the people and on to the foyer of the house but nobody stops or asks him any question. There he sees a corpse on a bed: "I looked closely at the legs of the corpse on the bed I discovered it appeared like mine"(172). As'ad sees his own corpse as it is covered with a green blanket. Momentarily he chooses to disbelieve, in the manner of Oedipus, what he has just seen and therefore tries to enquire who it is that has died. But nobody seems to be aware of his existence. Eventually he hears 'Umar, son of al-Hasan, as he exclaims thus: "the Ever living is Allah ... As'ad, son of al-Makī, has gone to meet Allah"(172).

Thus the space of emplacement in *al-Zaman* occasions an inversion of the thesis, proposed by Bachelard that the eye cannot necessarily go beyond a description of surface and that "Being does not see itself" (Bachelard: 215). The hero, having found himself in *space of emplacement*, not only sees but also listens to himself. In the quintessential surrealist manner, he sees his own materiality in a material world. The reader is also privileged to witness the union, *in space*, of the binaries: soul and body, inner and outer, profane and sacred. We witness the union, in the persona of the hero, of the rational and irrational, the physical and the metaphysical, the real and the unreal worlds. The binaries appropriate, as in a synthesis, the hero's body in order to work together but in opposition. That which is *real* in the hero's past experiences, his love and hatred, happiness and sadness resonates in a poetic manner in the inner of his being while the un-real, the possibilities of the future, the un-known interpellates at the surface of his being in such a strong manner that a new being is created.

8. Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this paper is to provide a mirror of the Sudanese conception of space through a critical but interpretive analysis of Bābikir's *al-Zaman*. This has, however, been done through a careful reading of western discourses on spatiality and an excursus into how the Sudanese conception of space could have circumscribed its representation in fiction by the Sudanese writers. It is evident from this study that even though Bābikir's patronage of spatiality in narration could have been a function of his reading of Western critical/philosophical writing, it is nonetheless factual that the existence of space as a cultural and communal code in Sudan accentuated and reinvigorated its deployment as a motif in the novel.

Spaces in *al-Zaman* are not just empty, mute or uninhabited. They are full of categories which act, interact, overlap and intersect. This explains why the representation of such categories as masculinity, femininity, postcoloniality and even metaphysicality in Babikir's novel would have become impossible in the absence of social, political, economic, religious and spiritual spaces in which they are produced, nurtured and transformed. Thus spatiality in the novel, therefore, could be seen as a palimpsest. It is a strategy employed by Bābikir in order to disclose what the Sudanese culture values and deplores and by extension what the author, as a value-laden entity, also cherishes and abhors. It also mirrors the flux

in human history and the unceasing dynamics and conflicts in its cultures and civilization.

Notes

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1. For an in-depth discussion on motherhood and spatiality see K. B Rothman: *Recreating Motherhood* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000) --In Labor: Women and Power in the Birthplace. New York: Norton & Company, 1992.
2. On the influence of Bachelard on contemporary western philosophical discourse on the concept of space see: E. S. Casey: *The Fate of Place* (California: University of California, 1997)
3. This is paraphrasing the title of the critical work on Islamic tradition written by el Fadl. See: K. Abou El Fadl: *Speaking in God's Name* (Oxford: One World, 2001)
4. The term *Fabula* refers to the basic story or the total sum of events and materials for narrative construction as they occurred in their chronological order. The term *Sjuzhet* refers to the story as it unfolds or the way events are linked together. The *Skaz* denotes a technique or mode of narration that internalizes the discourse of an individual which merges the point of view, voice and tone of ration together into one dynamic unity in order to identify the role of the teller and infer his implied motivation from his production such as discourse. See: **Bakhtin, Mikhail.** (1984): *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* trans. C. Emerson (Manchester: University of Manchester)
5. For works on the "Unhomely" in Sudanese literature and culture see: Oladosu, Afis Ayinde (2005): "Children and the Unhomely in the Sudanese Novel" in *Hawwa* 3.3 p.233-254
6. On debates on these traditions among Muslim Scholars see: Ibn Hajar al-Asqalāni: *Fath al-Bārī* _____ 10;159 and 9: 137-138; Ibn Hanbal: *Musnad*_2: 381; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah "Awn al-Ma'bud 10:405-421
7. The river Nile, the desert and the date palm are important motifs in Sudanese literary writing and have influenced contemporary Sudanese writers including Tayeb Salih a great deal. For its role in Sudanese culture see H. Najīlah: *Malāmiḥun min al-Mujtama'i al-Sūdān* (Khartūm, 1958); for its role in Sudanese novel and short story: M. 'Ajūba: *al-Qiṣah al-Qaṣīrah fī al-Sūdān* (Khartūm, Dār al-Talīf wa Tarjamah, 1972) p. 102

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