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# Dusting the Past: Mapping the Politico-Historical Representation of Sudan in Jamal Mahjoub's *Wings of Dust*


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## *Abstract*

**Aim:** *This paper examines the fictional representation of Sudan's political and historical trajectories in Jamal Mahjoub's* Wings of Dust. *Mahjoub documents significant political events and historical shifts in Sudan through the narrative voice of his protagonist, Sharif.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *Employing the inductive method and close textual analysis, the study reflects on the burden of Sudan's historical traumas, rooted in colonial domination, postcolonial repercussions, ongoing civil wars, and the rise of religious fundamentalism.*

**Outcome:** *The research identifies Sharif as a symbolic victim of postcolonial* Othering, *reflecting the broader socio-political landscape of Sudan marked by corruption, internal conflict, identity crises, favouritism, racial discrimination, systemic inequality, political chaos, ethnic clashes, and persistent civil unrest.*

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** *The study unfolds the socio-political and historical realities of Sudan as represented in* Wings of Dust, *and suggests the need for further in-depth research into the ongoing conflicts and unrest in the region.*



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Documenting the history of a nation is an academic endeavor that involves the analysis and interpretation of evidence to construct narratives of past events. However, the fictional representation of these events often prove more engaging, as it connects with the emotional and psychological experiences of people, providing them a vivid portrayal of history. Jamal Mahjoub's *Wings of Dust* presents a subjective and emotional blend of historical accounts, capturing the complexities of a North African country, explicitly Sudan. Through the narrative portrayal of Sharif—a middle-aged exile residing in France and a first-generation émigré from an unnamed North East African nation—Jamal Mahjoub articulates the complex interplay between personal memory and the shifting political realities of his homeland. By critiquing Sharif's personal dislocation and inner turmoil, this paper seeks to map the politico-historical representation of Sudan in Jamal Mahjoub's *Wings of Dust.*

Jamal Mahjoub is an acclaimed and widely translated British-Sudanese writer, born in England in 1960 to a British mother and a Sudanese father. He began his literary career writing crime fiction under the pseudonym Parker Bilal. In addition to the Parker Bilal crime series, he has published nine novels. Most of his work engages with the socio-political and historical realities of Sudan. His first three novels, *Navigation of a Rainmaker, Wings of Dust,* and *In the Hour of Signs*, are loosely based on Sudan's history, illustrating how the present is shaped by the past. In *Wings of Dust*, Jamal Mahjoub tells "the story of the formation of the modern republic of Sudan," and claims that he was "ideally, even uniquely, placed to tell the story" (viii-ix). The narrator, Sharif, exiled in a foreign land and lost in his past memories, recalls "the story of a land very much like any other land, a place of contrasts and mistrust" (3). Sharif is disturbed by the present-day chaos in Africa, intensified by journalistic depictions of horror: "The famine and the terror; genocide; the torching of cattle cars filled with women and children" (6), and this is further compounded by the stark realization that they are victims of their own devices.

Cultural barriers, identity crises and racial discrimination, as remnants of the colonial past, obscure Sudanese youth from identifying a path towards a truly independent state. Racial oppression is a defining feature and one of the primary tools of colonial domination. This is reflected in *Wings of Dust,* particularly in the

conversation between Sharif and his lover's mother, Mrs. Hale, which reveals racial supremacy and subjects Sharif to severe humiliation due to his African origin. Mrs. Hale talks about her servants as slaves, referring to the supposed primitiveness of African culture. She sounds like a colonial master keeping the view that whipping is the most effective way to tame slaves. She says, "You just give them a sound whipping when they start acting up. That soon irons out any problems" (43). In response to this humiliation and the insult to his African identity, Sharif reminds that "more recently those barbaric practices have re-emerged, surfacing like a bad memory, cutting over time and space and making us once again the helpless victims, paralysed by our past" (44). Furthermore, Jamal Mahjoub critiques the occidental view of Third World countries as underprivileged, explicating Mrs. Hale's prejudiced perspective of Africa as merely a land of sand. While delivering a paper on the role of literature in the reconstruction of postcolonial identity at a conference in Paris, Sharif presents Shibshib's findings on native culture and European distortions. He asserts, "We cannot return to the traditions of our lands, but we must invoke them in order to assert that they exist as more than mere superstitions." He continues, "All cultures are equal, despite the European distortions. Culture does not travel well, being a product of a particular place" (130). Sharif's recollection of his cultural past aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of memory as "a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (63).

Amidst cultural disparities, Jamal Mahjoub focuses his attention on a broader concept of African identity—a shared sense of identity between Africans and African Americans. He intends to "highlight and strengthen the bonds between African nations and Afro-Americans . . . a search for common ground, the foundation for a claim to a shared identity" (152). As an academic and cultural response to racial discrimination, Rosa Parks—one of the participants in a conference on African identity—awakened the conscience of the majority through her act of defiance when she refused to give up "a seat designated for white people only" (153).

The immaculate influence of the power elite in political administration ultimately leads to favoritism and nepotism, causing systemic inequality and

eventually resulting in political and administrative failure. Abdul Farhan, a notorious opportunist, befriends Mungad, a police inspector, in order to establish contacts with persons in authority. There is no wonder, as Rushdy, a small time journalist, brings out "why the nephew of the president becomes the ambassador to New York, or is suddenly made minister of finance, or director of the state airlines?" (219)

It is evident in world history that colonial imprints persist in formerly colonized societies even after they gain independence. Although a nation may establish an autonomous governing system following liberation from imperial rule, it is often not entirely free in cultural terms. The dominant, hegemonic colonial culture continues to exert influence over the social and political spheres of the postcolonial state. Jamal Mahjoub discusses the British imperial influence on the prevailing education system in Sudan, which has proven insufficient in bringing about significant change in the socio-political structure of the post-independence nation. Mek Nimr, a university professor, expresses a lack of confidence in the country's prevailing education system. He believes it will not contribute to any meaningful change within the nation's social norms. According to him, following the British model of education will only lead to becoming "our own imperialists." He states, "[W]e are being groomed for the slaughter. We will inherit the land, but we will also be unable to cross the boundary left by the British; our education will see to that. We will become our own imperialists" (87).

Political unrest in Sudan reaches its peak, culminating in intense civil war. Jamal Mahjoub points out that the military intervention which has seized power from the civilian government has led to the further political deterioration of Sudan. He observes that it represents another form of dictatorship—another form of oppression—an extension of former colonial domination. Jamal Mahjoub refers to similarly poignant political upheavals in other African and global contexts, such as the FLN struggle in Algeria, the Soviet invasion of Budapest, and the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt.

It may not be out of place here to note that Sudan's political history has been deeply marked by persistent ethno-religious, cultural, and factional tensions. The country has endured ongoing conflict, driven by deep divisions along linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines. Since gaining independence in 1956, Sudan

has experienced prolonged instability, particularly due to the continuous struggle of the predominantly Christian and Animist South against the Arab Muslim-dominated North. Ethno-religious tensions escalated shortly after independence, culminating in the outbreak of the First Sudanese Civil War between the North and South over demands for greater regional autonomy from the southern region. South Sudanese resentment grew largely due to the implementation of stringent laws and military interventions by the northern Sudanese administration. Many in the South viewed successive northern governments as extensions of British colonial rule and responded with intensified violent resistance. South Sudanese political leader and diplomat Francis Deng, in his analysis of the root causes of the Sudanese civil war, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*, observes the growing schism between North and South: "the country was almost inexorably plunged into extreme violence that only deepened the identity cleavages between the two parts of the country and strengthened the image of northerners as colonialists in national garb" (101). The first cabinet, led by Ismail al-Azhari, was soon replaced by a coalition of conservative political forces. Following a period of economic hardship and political unrest, Chief of Staff Major General Ibrahim Abboud overthrew the parliamentary government. Public dissatisfaction with military rule led to the October Revolution, which forced the army to relinquish power.

Between 1966 and 1969, Sudan witnessed a series of unstable governments that were unable to reach consensus on a permanent constitution, largely due to ethnic tensions, economic crises, and factional disputes. In 1969, Colonel Gaafar Nimeiry staged a coup, abolished Parliament and political parties, and later introduced Sharia law in 1983. His repressive governance and the mounting ethno-religious tensions triggered the Second Sudanese Civil War between the central Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which ultimately led to the secession and independence of South Sudan in 2011. Following widespread popular unrest, Nimeiry was deposed by a Transitional Military Council, and a coalition government was formed after elections, with Sadiq al-Mahdi assuming the role of prime minister. However, in 1989, Colonel Omar al-Bashir carried out a military coup and appointed himself president in 1993. Amid the ongoing conflict between North and South Sudan, a

new and violent rebellion emerged in the western region of Darfur, led by the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which accused the government of marginalizing Darfur. Mass protests erupted against President Bashir after the government removed subsidies on bread, and he was ousted in 2019. A transitional government aiming for democratic governance was established under a three-year power-sharing agreement between the military, civilian representatives, and protest groups. However, more recently, Sudan has once again descended into turmoil due to a violent power struggle between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The machinations of the power elite turn the political wheels of Sudan towards a corrupt administration. During the time of great famine, a junior minister of the government grants control of the nation's grain silos to wealthy land barons whose sole motive is to amass personal wealth, indicating the deeply rooted systemic corruption in the country. Sharif holds the view that manipulations by the power elite, political intrigues and deep-seated corruption have lead the country to a miserable state:

> [T]he starvation and suffering in those regions had reached the level of pure genocide . . . the ageing of the land [was] in that accelerated self destructive way of this century . . . general health of the country began to fail; education atrophied, medical services were themselves in need of crutches, the railway lines became brittle as old bones, corruption spread like a cancer unchecked through the layers of society until there was no course of action open but amputation, most suitable at the neck. (203-204)

Corruption remains one of the fundamental obstacles to a country's development. Coubri Osman Delouka, codenamed COD, became a very successful private economist through his exploitative measures. He engaged in filthy trades and manipulative financial activities aimed at personal gain, which contributed to economic instability in the country. Corruption in the country "sprang up like tangled weeds, from the ministers who dreamed of Fifth Avenue penthouses and the numbered Swiss bank accounts to the junior civil servant who would slip you through the queue for a packet of cigarettes" (241).

With his international exposure, Sharif was appointed governor of his region and entrusted with the responsibility of bridging the gap between the past and the common future. In his capacity as governor, he implemented various developmental strategies and employed a significant number of young individuals to enrich both the community and the region. His official residence became a meeting place for like-minded people who gathered to discuss the possibilities of a better tomorrow. Sharif spearheaded many development projects in the region through public-private partnerships. He was instrumental in bringing electricity to the area, started a canning factory, weaving mills, pottery kiln, and constructed municipal gardens. His keen focus on infrastructure augmentation, expansion of transportation facilities and sales growth attracted foreign investments, particularly the Soviet investment in power stations, America's most modern factories, and Chinese investment in new roads, aimed at economic independence. However, his administrative success as the governor invited resistance from entrenched power groups, as it cast them in a darker shade. He was compelled to take a temporary leave of absence so that public attention would shift away from his initiatives. The unscrupulous interference of these power groups in Sudan's political administration ultimately undermined the country's developmental strategies and progress. Later on, Sharif was arrested and taken to a military barracks, accused of corruption during his tenure as governor. Witnesses—including his cousin Rushdy and others he had never met in his life—were produced to prove his guilt. After the trial, Sharif was declared guilty and ordered to pay a massive fine, an amount he could never hope to gather in his lifetime, which ultimately led to his exile. Sharif's unfortunate life trajectory is a living testament to the heinous manipulation of power politics.

While the Sudanese government proposed exporting gum arabic to help balance its foreign debt, there is growing anxiety about the country's future, as "debts are growing and results are not matching expectations. The cotton market has taken a turn for the worse and the price of oil is not making things easier" (282). Frustrated with the widespread corruption within the government, people began taking matters into their own hands Lufti, Sharif's former attendant, along with a group of junior officers from the air force, paratroops, infantry, and tank division sought his support in the mission. However, he immediately rejected

their plan, because it would do no good for the country. There was absolute commotion and unrest spread over the country:

> There were demonstrations at the university over the usual complaints; lack of accommodation, lack of teaching staff, insufficient food, corruption in the examination offices . . . . The riots spread, the crowds rushed headlong through the streets. Trees were ripped up by the roots, shops looted, cars overturned and set ablaze. Houses were ransacked. (302)

The corrupt administration and power politics infuriate the young men of Sudan, leading to intense and prolonged civil strife. When the incumbent oppressive government gives way to a more conservative and traditional fundamentalist regime, liberal values become conservative, modern and novel perspectives turn traditional, and where there was free speech, there is now silence. The lives of intellectuals are at stake under the fundamentalist rule. The fundamentalist despots persecute intellectuals and anyone capable of independent thought—lecturers from the university, teachers, civil servants, ex-diplomats, poets and writers, even popular singers. "They are creating an intellectual vacuum in which to work their evil. The country has been passed into the hands of illiterate thugs" (310).

Sharif's life journey, from Sudan to England and eventually back to Sudan in the hope of contributing to its reconstruction, foregrounds critical themes such as identity, racial affiliation, memory, diasporic exile, and Othering. His return, however, culminates in disillusionment and failure, illustrating the tensions inherent in negotiating cultural belonging and national loyalty in a postcolonial, transnational context. Sharif's hybrid identity as both Arab and English exemplifies "an identity that is fused and hybrid, straddling and subversively mixing together constructs that can no longer be imagined as monolithic" (Hassan 158). In an interview with Jean Sévry in April 2000, while responding to a question about the identity crisis experienced by Sharif and its collective repercussions in Sudan that was "struggling to find a place in the world" (225), Jamal Mahjoub reflects:

> But the map of the independent state pushed together people who had no relationship with one another whatsoever, and who in many cases did not

> know each other. So, you have this huge collection of people and somehow you are supposed to resolve the conflicts and to get balance and fairness out of this. But at the same time you have an elite which the British of course created as leaders to keep everything in order. So you have an impossible, no-win situation. (Sévry)

Sharif's diasporic exile deterritorializes his homeland as a source of cultural and ethnic identity, which Mahjoub encapsulates in Sharif's proclamation: "Today we are scattered like dust on the wind, silenced by our helplessness" (6). It is clearly evident that the political and historical events of Sudan are inextricably tied to its colonial past, postcolonial consequences, civil wars, and fundamentalist regimes. The colonial past laden with oppression and cultural domination carries over into postcolonial Sudan, now enmeshed in ethnic clashes, identity crises, political upheaval, and civil unrest. The independent Sudanese political and historical shifts are inevitably linked to the regional conflicts, particularly between the North and the South. Besides, an uprising from the Darfur region demanding regional autonomy further fuels the ongoing internal struggle. A country constantly undergoes administrative failures, military coups, top-down and bottom-up corruption, power elite manipulations, group conflicts, and ethnic clashes, Sudan remains on the brink of perpetual crisis. Carrying the burden of socio-political and historical realities, as reflected in Sharif's helplessness, Mahjoub deftly maps the politico-historical landscape of Sudan.

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