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Talent and Torment: The Emotional Burden of Literary Genius in Modern Sudanese Writing

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Abstract

This article explores the emotional and psychological burden carried by literary genius in modern Sudanese writing, through the works and tragic lives of four highly gifted figures: Abdel Rahim Abu Zikra, Moawya Mohammad Nur, al-Tijani Yusuf Bashir, and Idris Jamma' whose paths ended in collapse, silence or early death. By interpreting their poetry, prose and personal histories against the political and cultural pressures of colonial and post-independence in Sudan, the article traces how exceptional intellectual sensitivity collided with exile, ideological fracture and the absence of sustained institutional support. Forces that proved pivotal in shaping their arduous journeys and were instrumental to their tragic outcomes. Rather than treating suffering as a romantic or inevitable feature of creativity, the discussion situates these lives within wider patterns of cultural dislocation and national disillusionment. Through textual engagement and historical reflection, the article foregrounds the human cost of literary production in contexts where belonging, stability, and fulfilment remained persistently out of reach.

Keywords: Sudanese literature; cultural dislocation; genius and suffering; postcolonial trauma; exile; intellectual alienation

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة العبء الوجداني والنفسي الذي لازم العديد من المواهب الأدبية المتفردة في السودان الحديث، من خلال النظر في المنتج الأدبي لأربعة من أبرز مبدعي السودان، وهم عبد الرحيم أبو ذكرى، ومعاوية محمد نور، والتيجاني يوسف بشير، وإدريس جماع، والمسار التراجمي الذي لازم رحلة حياتهم فألت بهم إلى الانهيار أو الصمت أو الرحيل المبكر. ومن خلال قراءة الأعمال الشعرية والنثرية لهؤلاء الأدباء وسيرهم الشخصية في ضوء الضغوط السياسية والثقافية التي سادت خلال حقبي الاستعمار وما بعد الاستقلال في السودان، تتقصى الدراسة كيف تأثرت حساسيتهم الفكرية المفرطة بعوامل المنفى والانقسام الأيديولوجي وغياب الحاضنة المؤسسية القادرة على رعاية إبداعهم. مما كان له أبلغ الأثر في الدفع بهم عبر مسارات شائكة انتهت بهم إلى مصائر مأساوية. ولا تنظر هذه الدراسة إلى المعاناة بوصفها ملمحاً رومانسياً أو قدراً ملازماً للإبداع، بل تضع تجارب هؤلاء الكتاب في سياقات الاغتراب الثقافي والخيبت الوطنية. ومن خلال الجمع بين التحليل النصي والتأمل التاريخي، تسلط الضوء على الكلفة الإنسانية للإنتاج الأدبي في بيئة ظل فيها الإحساس بالانتماء، والاستقرار، وتحقيق الذات، أهدافاً عصية المنال.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب السوداني; الانفصال الثقافي; العبقرية والمعاناة; صدمة ما بعد الاستعمار; المنفى; الاغتراب الفكري

Introduction:

Some lives are remembered for what they gave the world; others for what the world took from them. In Sudan's literary history, a few names stand out, not just for the brilliance of their words, but for the weight they carried in silence. Abu Zikra, Moawya Nur, al-Tijani Bashir, poets, and Jamma' thinkers, men of rare insight. Their writing shaped generations, but behind the verses lay lives marked by fatigue, estrangement, and a sorrow that rarely found expression beyond the page.

This paper is not an attempt to romanticise suffering. It is a reflection on the emotional and political pressures that shaped, and sometimes shattered, the lives of Sudan's most gifted literary minds. For much of the 20th century, Sudan's poets wrote in the shadow of colonial rule, fractured independence, and authoritarian regimes that alternately celebrated and silenced them. Their work became a vessel for national longing, but the cost of carrying that weight was often personal and profound.

Through fragments of memory, poetry, and historical context, the thread between brilliance and burden is traced, asking what gets lost when the work is celebrated while overlooking the human cost.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary interpretive approach combining literary analysis, historical contextualisation, and biographical reflection. Through close engagement with poetry, prose, memoirs, and secondary criticism, it examines the relationship between literary genius, psychological burden, and socio-political dislocation in modern Sudanese writing.

1. Precocious Brilliance:

In the early hours of November 5, 1989, Abdel Rahim Abu Zikra threw himself from the window of his room on the 13th floor of the Russian Academy of Sciences building, crashing onto the pavement of Ostravitianova Street.

He fell, diving into the grey hush, landing on the hard, frosty, unforgiving pavement below. But in truth, he had been falling for a long time. Not visibly, not physically, but deeper into an inner abyss formed by years of exhaustion, exile, and the unspoken pressure to keep going.

He was brilliant, by every conventional measure, academic awards, linguistic mastery, a mind that danced effortlessly between philosophy and poetry. But Abu Zikra's life was not merely a triumph of intellect over circumstance. Behind the scenes, beneath the accolades was a slow unravelling, marked by exile, isolation, and

a silence that grew heavier with time.

There was never any doubt about his genius, a celebrated poet, a scholar of rare agility, his words carried weight. Yet, somewhere in those verses, you can hear it: the longing to escape, the slow unravelling. His final act wasn't only despair. It read like the last line of a life shaped by brilliance, burden, and a kind of loneliness that rarely found space beyond the page.

Before Moscow, before the thirteenth floor, there was a meteoric rise. A wide-eyed, aspirational young man, with the world at his feet and an unshakable sense that "life had set aside a place for him that no one else could fill" (Elgizouli, 2006, p. 13).

That conviction was not unwarranted. His literary and academic talent had blossomed early, during his high school years in Khor Taggat, a school known for attracting the brightest minds from across Sudan. Even then, he stood apart, not just for his academic excellence, but for the clarity and conviction of his voice. He composed a poem that became the school's anthem, recited each morning by generations of students:

*From this radiant spot
In this stubborn African land,
From the great Taggat,
I proudly play this anthem.*
(Yahya, 2007, p. 45).

That early promise carried him to the University of Khartoum in 1963, a time when Sudan was still navigating the fragile possibilities of post-independence. The October 1964 uprising, which toppled the country's first dictatorship, ushered in a volatile era of ideological clashes. Abu Zikra, progressive and unflinching, stood at the heart of it. He lent his poetic voice to the hopes of a generation yearning for democracy and freedom. His words appeared in *al-Milad (Birth)*, a wall newspaper where existential questions and the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Colin Wilson were debated with urgency. He was also close to the *Apadamak movement* ⁽¹⁾, a cultural group reclaiming Nubian heritage as a cornerstone of Sudanese identity.

Escape to Moscow and Triumphant Return:

(¹) The Apadamak cultural group, established in Sudan during the late 1960s, drew inspiration from the ancient Nubian deity Apedemak—a lion-headed god revered in the Kingdom of Kush. Their formation reflects a broader movement to reclaim and celebrate Nubian heritage and identity during a time of cultural revival.

However, the same voice that inspired also provoked. He was caught in the left-right crossfire when he composed a controversial poem that antagonised the Islamists, who dismissed it as “an attack on Islam”. This was a key factor in prompting him to discontinue his studies and leave Khartoum for the former USSR in 1966. It was not just a departure from home, but a retreat from the ideological tensions that had once inspired him.

During his stay in Russia, from 1966 to 1973, he became fascinated with Russian literature and immersed himself into it. He obtained an M.A. in Russian language and literature from the Peoples’ Friendship University in Moscow, and a diploma in Russian–Arabic translation in 1971.

In 1973, Abu Zikra returned to Sudan and joined the Ministry of Culture and Information. In his absence Sudan witnessed a dramatic political shift, with the ascendancy of the left, following the May 1969 coup by Gaafar Nimeiri. The Communist Party, a dominant voice in the left, split over the coup, with a faction joining the new regime, while the mainstream party preferring cautious support from a distance. The tensions exploded into open conflict when Nimeiri purged his government from Communists starting from 1970, leading to a failed Communist-backed coup in July 1971. That was followed by a severe crackdown on the Communist Party and the execution of its leaders. A peace deal stopped the war in the South in March 1972, and Nimeiri endorsed a new constitution and declared himself a president in 1973.

Abu Zikra’s return coincided with apparent end to turmoil. That same year, his first poetry collection, *Departing at Night*, was published by Khartoum University Press. What followed was a period of remarkable literary productivity, as he became a prominent contributor to newspapers, and journals, publishing poetry, literary criticism, and translations. He held key editorial roles in *Al-Ayyam* newspapers’ Cultural Supplement, as well as *Sudanese Culture Magazine*, where he served as managing editor from 1976 to 1978. His work also appeared in leading Arab literary outlets such as *Lotus*, *Egyptian Poetry Magazine* and *Al-Hilal*.

He briefly taught as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Translation at the Faculty of Arts, University of Khartoum, before heading back to Moscow to pursue postgraduate studies. There, he enrolled at the Institute of Oriental Studies, part of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, where he earned a PhD in philology. His dissertation was on the characteristics of translation from the Russian language, with a focus on Anton Chekhov.

In addition to Chekhov, he translated extensively from the works of great Russian writers such as Mayakovsky, Pushkin, Sergey Yesenin, Pasternak, and

others. His academic performance was highly praised by his supervisor professor Vladimir Shagal, a distinguished Arabist and translator who taught at Moscow's Institute of Asia and Africa. Shagal was renowned for translating Arabic literary works into Russian, including masterpieces by Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih and Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz.

Shagal described his student as a man “of rare intellect and exceptional talent”. In appreciation of that talent, he even offered to work with him on translating a glossary of Russian literary terms to Arabic, commissioned to Abu Zikra by a Russian publisher.

Yet, despite his significant academic and literary success, Abu Zikra’s life in Russia was punctuated with intermittent bouts of depression and nervous exhaustion.

In a letter to his friend and fellow poet Kamal el-Gizouli, Abu Zikra vividly describes the fits of “this thing called nervous exhaustion”. From a periodic occurrence, it developed into a haunting visitor, he described as “wedging pegs into my soul”, that reduced him to an alienated figure. “When I sit with others, I feel stifled; when I sit alone, I feel drained. I read books and die of boredom and fatigue.” More chilling and serious in its implication, “Sometimes I got haunted by that terrifying thing Mayakovsky spoke of in his will.” (Elgizouli, 2006, pp. 13-14).

Abu Zikra was referring to Mayakovsky’s suicide. Before ending his life by pressing the muzzle of his revolver to his temple and pulling the trigger, the renowned Russian poet had written a brief final note:

*In case of misadventure –
do not blame anyone –
and please no gossip.
The deceased especially detested that.*

*Mama, sisters, comrades, forgive me –
this is not the way (I do not recommend it to others),
but there is no other way.*

(...)

*And, as they say, the incident is closed.
Love’s boat has smashed against the daily grind.*

(Mayakovsky, 2013, pp. 155–156).

No such note was found in Abu Zikra's room following his tragic jump from the top of the Soviet Science Academy building in Moscow. Determined to leave behind no clues, he had burned most of his papers and clippings. Yet, his poems carry many clues. His sole collection, *al-Raheel fil 'layl* (Parting at Night), is teeming with references to death, with verses that echo with silence, grief and the slow pull towards the abyss.

Death will come

It will have your eyes

This death is keeping our company

day and night

Sleepless, deaf

like a veteran grief

or a meaningless sin

Your eyes, then, will be meaningless words

a muffled cry, silence

Silently, we will sink to the abyss
(Babikir, 2019, p. xxii)

In that same letter to his friend, Abu Zikra elaborates on his dilemma:

“With little effort, I feel I could help solve my country's problems, and I am fully prepared to give my life for its sake. But if I continue down this path, I will meet nothing but a cheap death. One similar to Shakespeare's great heroes. They were courageous enough to confront all the forces of darkness, yet each carried a single flaw that sealed his fate: Othello, jealousy; Hamlet, hesitation; Lear, excessive kindness; Macbeth, doubt. Each bore within him his own Trojan horse, the hidden seed of his destruction”. (Elgizouli, 2006, p. 14). He saw himself in these renowned antiheroes, each undone by a flaw they carried within them

As Elgizouli notes, Abu Zikra was profoundly and spiritually drawn to the heights, which, for him, represented a yearning for liberation and an imagined, alternative existence. His works brimming with recurring references to stars, suns,

moons, clouds, birds, and windows throughout, form a rich symbolic lexicon of ascension, transcendence and escape. These elements serve as a persistent metaphor for his longing to break free from earthly confines (Elgizouli, 2006, p. 21).

Wait for me.

For I am traveling at night too,

alone, setting off on a long journey.

In the remote passageways wait for me.

In the desert highlands and by the sea

wait for me.

In the flapping of wings

and the routes of the migrating birds,

when the orbits collapse

and the sky grows gloomy and dark,

wait for me.

(Babikir, 2019, pp. 42-43)

Yet this profound longing for 'escape' and 'ascension' was not hopeful or romantic; it was rooted in a deep frustration as he watched his dreams of a better world slowly fall apart. Elgizouli believes that Abu Zikra's heart was not tied to any particular revolution, nor did it place hopes in any specific ideology. Rather, "it was the yearning for revolution per se, for the act of transformation and for an alternative existence, that propelled his poetry toward horizons of profound novelty and vast human possibility" (Elgizouli, 2006, p. 14).

Yesterday, after sunset,

I walked, seeking distant paths—

wandering through the dreadful world of the dead,

the world of the mute and the silent.

A mighty wing enfolded me,

through the paths of galaxies, among the stars.

(Assayha, 2022)

Although the notions of escape, frustration, and death featured prominently in most of Abu Zikra's poetry, critic Jabir Hussain refers to what he called two distinct voices. A highly optimistic, positive voice that marked his production during the 1960s, and a melancholic voice that started to hold sway over the poet from the 1970s, leading to his tragic death in 1989 (Babikir, 2019, pp. xxii-xxiii).

The first era presents a cheerful voice, full of life and hope.

*Light illuminated my window this morning
It spilled its luminous water and crystals under the door
It couldn't catch an inside view
except a sigh of longing
and me staring at the waking up windows
to hear chatters around breakfast tables
and at that point feel the bliss of life
soft and sweet, invading my ribs
In my rapture
I almost flew to embrace the buses, the pavement
swim in the green lake of a tree growing at my doorsteps
and drown in the dew of the eyes of a pretty girl.*

(Babikir, 2019, pp. xxii-xxiii)

In sharp contrast to the 1960s, according to Hussain, his '70s poems were replete with gloomy ideas and scepticism.

*Our old friends are pushing us towards suicide
They are no longer a source of inspiration*

for perseverance

We vainly try to deceive them with false smiles

and narrow eyes, distracted looks

They have grown helpless

When we push on the button, we get nothing but the same laugh

The same story

The same debacle!

(Babikir, 2019, pp. xxiii-xxiv)

Yet the boundary between these two periods, as outlined by Hussain, appears less sharply defined than it might first seem. Hussain himself admits that the poet's cheerful mood of the 1960's was by no means fanciful or dreamy. The poet remained sensitive to the people's needs and aspirations, closely attached to the poor, soothing their sufferings, and raising their morale.

If I owned this world

and if the powerful jinn soldiers of Solomon were still alive

I would order "Karima" to send me hills of fresh "gondaila" dates

I would order deliveries of ivory and beech

I would order the Kandakas [Kushite queens] to recall the legends of Meroe

I would run water springs for us to wash

And would weave a bracelet of yearning into a love poem

for a face shining with beauty like a bright moon.

("Hob al-Fuqaraa")

(Babikir, 2019, p. xxiii)

Furthermore, it is not difficult to discern a muted note of discontent beneath even the ostensibly cheerful mood of his 1960s poems. A case in point is *'The Night Girl'*: despite its jovial tone, the poem is imbued with a sense of unease that complicates its surface exuberance:

*When she turned in,
all the neon lights suddenly glowed.
Outside the café, the downpour stopped
and so did the chatting.
On the way to the cups, the tea jug froze.
Amid the utter silence, a glass exploded against the tile floor.
The waiter turned his head, but his eyes got stuck in transit:
A girl!
O my Lord!
Your protection,
for the blooming eyes
for the flowing braids.
What a beauty! What a vigor!
Blessed is the Creator!
Those eyes flew down,
tearing off the stillness of the place.
The clients darted under the overflowing braids,
coaching themselves on the fragrance of her rain-wet dress.
No. That's not the right way!*

The eyes nearly bruised her perplexed lids.
And her hair, running away from the wailing wind and rain,
was surprised to find the wind and the rain right here.
The wind was blowing on the café from all directions.
May the Lord who raised the heaven and fixed it in place
protect this captivating brilliance,
desperately seeking warmth despite the siege of these eyes!
And she slid back to the rain.
Silence reined for a minute
then the café regained its din and dust;
the waiter wiped off beads of sweat
and started to collect the broken glass fragments.
The jug came to its senses
and started anew pouring tea into cups.
Outside, it started to rain again!
(Babikir, 2019, pp. 44-45).

Yet it can be said that Abu Zikra's changing poetic voice mirrors, to some extent, the broader shifts from the idealistic fervour of the 1960s to the melancholy and fragmentation that came to define the 1970s and 1980s. Testimonies from those close to the poet speak of recurring bouts of depression that began in the 1970s and deepened over time, ultimately culminating in his suicide in 1989. Dr. Abdelgadir El-Rufai, a close friend, recalls how Abu Zikra became increasingly withdrawn in his later years, profoundly affected by the repression his people suffered under Nimeiri's dictatorship (1969–1985). Dr. Badawi el-Amin points to the Islamist coup of June 1989 as the immediate trigger that pushed him over the edge. Meanwhile, Mustafa Sirri, who was studying in Moscow at the time, highlights another source of

anguish: the stifling atmosphere that gripped the Soviet Union in the aftermath of perestroika, “which cast a dark shadow over him and may have contributed to his decision to end his life.”

It seems, though, that all the above factors had a stake in shaping the emotional and psychological burden that weighed heavily on Abu Zikra in his final years, culminating in a profound sense of disillusionment and despair. His writing was cerebral, layered, sometimes elusive but always searching. He wrote not to impress, but to understand. And in that search, he became increasingly estranged from institutions, from peers, perhaps even from himself. To read Abu Zikra is to enter a mind at war with itself: lucid, restless, and quietly breaking. His legacy is not just in what he wrote, but in what he could no longer say.

His death, by suicide, was not merely a personal tragedy. It was a rupture in Sudan’s literary consciousness, a reminder that genius does not shield one from despair, and that the cost of intellectual and emotional depth can be unbearable in a society that demands clarity, certainty, and resilience.

The dramatic end of Abu Zikra was by no means isolated. Many poets and writers across the world took that course, from Hemingway and Sylvia Plath in the United States, Virginia Woolf in England, Mayakovsky in Russia to Khalil Hawi in Beirut.

2. A Phenomenon? The Case of Moawya Mohammad Nur:

Abu Zikra’s life ended in despair, but his story was far from unique in Sudan’s literary landscape. Many of the country’s brightest minds navigated the delicate tension between personal genius and societal pressures, often with tragic consequences. Though others, like Moawya Mohammad Nur and al-Tijani Yousif Bashir, did not take the drastic step of suicide, they nonetheless died young at 37 and 25 respectively, leaving behind legacies marked by brilliance and sorrow.

Nur’s life, in particular, illustrates a different but equally haunting trajectory, revealing how recognition, exile, and societal misunderstanding shaped the fate of Sudanese visionaries

Nur (1904–1941) seemed destined for success, with everything going for him. Born into a wealthy, well-connected family, his academic promise was clear from the outset. Exceptional exam results earned him a place at Sudan’s only medical school, reserved for the country’s brightest students. Yet, even amid such opportunity, Nur’s heart belonged elsewhere. He found his “spiritual home” in English literature, which “had cast its spell over his mind” (Atiyeh, 1946, p. 144).

Before completing his second year at Kitchener Medical School, he boldly walked away, quietly but resolutely fleeing to Egypt. His family, alarmed by this decision, naturally thought him mad to abandon the splendid chance offered him of free medical training and a secure, lucrative government career.

Pulling a few strings, his family managed to bring their son back home. But Nur adamantly refused to go back to the medical school. His family eventually relented, and thanks to his mother's financial support, he was sent to the American University of Beirut (AUB) to study literature.

It was in Beirut that he found the greener pastures he had long sought. His time at AUB offered him a deep immersion in Western literature, an experience that would profoundly shape his literary career.

During his university years, and later in Cairo, he made a name for himself as a regular contributor to Egypt's leading publications of the time. Dozens of his literary essays, social critiques, and short stories appeared in *al-Muqtataf*, *al-Hilal*, *al-Risalah*, *al-Balagh*, and other papers and magazines.

His writings revealed a keen engagement with the works of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Edith Sitwell, T. E. Hulme, among others. He is widely credited with introducing these modernist writers to Arab readers. According to Dr. Muhammad Abdel Hai, Nur was the first Arab critic to write about that emerging modernist current in Western poetry, using it as a critical lens through which he evaluated the work of prominent Arab romantic poets such as Ali Mahmud Taha and Ibrahim Naji, at a time when their popularity was at its peak (Abdel Hai, qtd in Al-Fiya 30).

According to Abdel Hai, the first mention of T. S. Eliot in the Arab World appeared in an article by Nur analysing the structure of A. M. al- 'Aqqād's poetry. In this critique, published in al-Jihad newspaper on May 3, 1933, Nur examined selections from al- 'Aqqād's work through the lens of Eliot's newly introduced concepts, such as the "objective correlative," and the "music of poetry."

The second mention of Eliot was in an article that appeared on *al-Risala* magazine in two parts (15 & 22 October 1934) under the title: "My Poet Friends, This Leads Nowhere". In this article, Nur sharply criticised the Arab romantic poets of the time, for their "outdated styles and themes", and urged them to produce poetry that engages with the realities of modern life (Al-Fiya). To him, a poet who is not moved by the currents of contemporary thought, and is unable to hear, read, contemplate, and see the defects in our current life system cannot be regarded as a true poet. (El-Bashir, 1970, p. 257).

"An artist who has not been touched by a spark of a fully formed stream of consciousness—one that enables him to discern similarities in seemingly disparate things and appearances, or to identify the elements, forces, and ideas that work together to produce a (creative) idea or image out of our daily lives—lacks the sensibility and imaginative power that compel the reader to listen and attune to his voice." (El-Bashir, 1970, p. 257).

Al-Fiya describes this article as "a manifesto for Arab literary modernism, published well before its time" (Al-Fiya), noting that Arab poets and writers did not begin to seriously engage with modernism until well after the mid-twentieth century.

It was through the above-mentioned article that the term "stream of consciousness" reached the Arabic readers for the first time. This technique was one of the most significant stylistic characteristics introduced by T.S. Eliot to English poetry. Nur had previously elucidated the meaning of this term in an introduction to a short story he wrote under the title "The Place- an analytical story", which was published in *Misr* newspaper on November 11, 1931. In that introduction, Moawya wrote: "After I finished writing this story, I thought I should help the Arabic reader understand this type of narrative as it had just been introduced even in Europe itself. It is the latest manifestation of the analytical story, a new genre that gained currency in Europe only ten years ago in the hands of the French writer Marcel Proust, and also through the works of Catherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf." (El-Bashir, 1970, p. 370)

The short stories Nur wrote marked a clear departure from the dominant trends in short fiction at the time, which tended to revolve almost exclusively around love. In *His Cousin*, he tackles the issue of social disparity between the rich and the poor, and its troubling consequences, including deepening class resentment. In *Faith*, he explores how ideological and intellectual conflict can drive thinkers to the brink of madness. *The Space*, as previously noted, was ahead of its time: it was the first story in Arabic literature to employ the technique of internal monologue, or stream of consciousness.

In addition to writing fiction, Nur published several critical articles on the works of major fiction writers of the day, including Ibrahim al-Mazini, Mahmoud Taymour, Mohammed Taymour, Kamil Kilani, Mohammad Hussein Haykal, and others. His criticism was grounded in the emerging canons of literary criticism that were just beginning to take root in the West.

Edward Atiyeh, Nur's teacher at Gordon Memorial College, who later became a close friend of his, describes Nur's first years in Cairo as remarkable. He wrote: "The fragile young Sudanese, very dark in complexion, with inspiration in his flashing eyes and mirth in his flashing teeth, his fierce idealism and burning literary passion, his prodigious reading and over-flowing mind, was something new in Cairo literary circles. He attracted the attention of the distinguished Egyptian writer Abbas El Aqqad and was welcomed into his set. His literary articles applying European canons of criticisms to Arabic literature, rapidly gained him a name, and well-known writers came to value his opinions. For some time, he was intensely happy; happy in his spiritual triumphs, and happy in the ascetic rigours of his material life." (Atiyeh, 1946, p. 178)

Nur's articles found their way easily not only to Cairo's leading Arabic and English publications, such as *al-Jihad*, *al-Balagh*, *al-Siyasa Weekly*, *The Egyptian Mail*, and *The Egyptian Gazette*, but even found a place on pages of *The Times* of London. Egyptian intellectuals who had studied in England remarked with admiration at how *The Times* published Nur's work almost immediately on submission. In *al-Musawwar* magazine, Fikri Abaza marvelled at how a young Sudanese educated at Gordon Memorial College (GMC) in Khartoum could achieve that while many literary figures with Oxford and Cambridge pedigree—and years of residence in London—could not. Even Nur's former teacher at GMC, Edward Atiyeh, noted that he (Atiyeh) had been sending articles to *The Times* for thirty years without success, while Nur's pieces were readily accepted for publication (Al-Khalifa, 1988, pp. 119–120).

Although Nur rose to prominence quickly and became a star in Cairo's literary circles, the income from his articles was barely sufficient to meet his basic needs. He lived in a small room in Heliopolis "amid little furniture but stacks of books and papers in the disorder proper to the artistic temperament", living most days on bread and cheese in his garret (Atiyeh, 1946, p. 178). Before long, severe malnutrition, illness and depression took their toll on his health and he finally yielded to his uncle's insistence on taking him back to Sudan.

Nonetheless, back at home, his situation did not improve. He failed to secure a post that matched his qualifications. His application to join the teaching staff of Gordon Memorial College was turned down, and he was offered instead a minor post in the Ministry of Finance, a position that neither suited his abilities or interests. This led many observers to believe that the colonial authorities were not enthusiastic about Nur's stay in Sudan, apparently viewing him as a threat (mainly because of his Egyptian links). As a result, Nur grew so deeply disillusioned with Sudan's colonial government that he returned to Egypt once again.

According to Edward Atiyeh, however, Nur's return was motivated by more than just his failure to secure employment; it stemmed from a profound sense of estrangement in his own homeland. "The gulf between his mental life and his native environment had become immense. He no longer had an anchorage in Sudanese life, and his tragedy was that he had failed to find a new anchorage elsewhere." (Atiyeh, 1946, p. 180) No wonder he lost himself entirely in Western fiction, among the fictional worlds of Dostoevsky, Thomas Hardy, and Aldous Huxley." (Bannaga, n.d., p. 14).

On a more external level, Nur's fascination with Western culture revealed itself in various aspects of his life. As Bannaga notes, he wore a bow tie, stayed in hotels upon returning to Sudan, and spent his leisure time playing tennis at his uncle's court and billiards at the Omdurman Club. He also fell in love with a blonde girl who owned a phonograph.

Atiyeh, however, insists that despite Nur's deep attachment to Western culture, he was a nationalist, "but a new kind of nationalist in the Sudan, and very rare indeed in the whole of the Near East." To him, Nur was "a self-critical nationalist, a rational and constructive rationalist who repudiated not only the blind emotional upsurge of hostility to the West, but also the abstract purposeless craving for independence as an end in itself. He wanted nationalism to start by being a movement of internal creation, of economic development, cultural progress and social reform, before it became a revolt against external control. (Atiyeh, 1946, p. 179).

By the time Nur returned to Cairo, he was a broken man, his spirit crushed and his heart heavy with bitterness. A series of health crises had brought him to the brink of psychological collapse, a decline hastened by the loss of his mother. After a brief stay in a psychiatric hospital in Cairo, he was discharged in a pitiable state of disorientation and sent home. There, he withdrew completely, isolating himself in his room and refusing all interaction with others. Deprived of proper medical care, his condition rapidly worsened. Matters deteriorated further when his family turned to superstition. A healer, summoned in desperation, declared that a demon had possessed Nur's body. He subjected him to repeated whippings, (rituals meant to drive out the spirits) that left Nur physically and emotionally broken. In the end, it was this ordeal that precipitated his death.

3. Al-Tijani Yusuf Bashir: My Heart is Weighed down with Grief:

A case no less tragic was that of Sudanese poet al-Tijani Yusuf Bashir, another striking instance of brilliance that faded far too early. Al-Tijani's brief life (1912–1937) was marked by exceptional talent and profound personal suffering.

Born in Omdurman into a traditionally religious family, al-Tijani was educated in traditional Qur'anic schools, *khalwa*, and later at *al-Mahad al-Ilmi*, a religious educational institution. He exhibited an early poetic talent, drawing from both classical Arabic traditions and Sufism.

His life, however, was riddled with hardship, having struggled with poverty throughout his youth, which left him vulnerable to malnutrition and illness. He was known for his proud spirit and rebellious intellect, traits that often placed him at odds with the religious and social establishment. He was eventually expelled from the religious institute due to his perceived unorthodox views. An event that dealt a serious blow to both his livelihood and social standing. His attempt to break free from the siege and flee to Egypt, to which he had been emotionally attached, was instantly thwarted, plunging him into despair. He lived in obscurity and ill health, and his fragile body, ravaged by tuberculosis, eventually succumbed at the age of just twenty-five.

Yet in this brief span, he produced a body of poetry remarkable for its emotional depth, philosophical introspection, and vivid imagery. His only published collection, *Ishraqa* (Radiance), was released posthumously in 1946 and has been reprinted ten times since 2008, making it the most frequently reprinted volume of poetry in Sudan to date.

Many critics have drawn parallels between him and the Tunisian poet Abul Qacem el-Chabbi, as both poets infused their works with a profound sensitivity to suffering and a defiant spirit of hope. However, al-Tijani stands out for his reflections on the universe, and his wrestling with philosophical questions of existence and faith. His famous poem, "*The Tormented Sufi*" vividly describes the poet's journey in pursuit of the ultimate truth.

What secrets of the universe this atom holds?

within its tiny folds!

Examine it inside out and unite with its inner depth.

Fly around and explore its piety-laden realms.

Shuttle between big and small atoms.

You will see the whole universe in ceaseless prayer.

Smell the rose. See how aromatic it is.

Its roots running deep in the soil,

exposing a stem: dewy, full of bloom.

Ask the nightingale: who has created the flowers and roses inspiring its twitter?

Ask the flower: who endowed it with aroma and greenery?

You will see the soul in plain sight,

and hear something from within.

Everything in this universe,

in its alleys the Lord does stroll.

This tiny ant is His echo.

Within her folds He lives; on His soil she exists.

And when she yields her spirit,

onto His hands it will fall.

Alone, I was hearkening to the world's whisper.

I could hear the atoms' inner thoughts and senses,

and the melody of the turbulent light.

I could watch as baby roses are born,

and when they come to full bloom,

and when grapevines burst out fruits.

This world, my glorious Lord, surely can't stand on its own.

Out of Your fire you moulded the jinn.

And out of Your light You cast mankind.

From Your first light cast on Adam's clay,

countless nations are still in the womb of the unseen;

a whole world within the clay;

souls packing water and air passages.

All creatures supplicated to you, as did I.

I believed in you; so, did they.

I came out of the unseen and made my proclamation, and so did they.

And time is on a race, to which destination? I have no clue.

Then what?

After all that purity and serenity,

my soul plunged into darkness.

I can no longer see what I used to see.

My once clear sky is now engulfed

in a thick cloud of dust.

A gloomy fate is my hope; death is my pursuit.

O the end of my lunacy; O my doomsday,

*stop by, giant, and share some of my food and drinks
come to my rescue- my heart is weighed down with grief.*

*I see my bright blissful world falling apart.
Where my soul once blossomed and shed off her wrinkles,
dark doubts now invaded my nascent faith
and my longing recaptured the super bliss
I wonder who took away pleasure,
leaving me alone with my insanity.*

*Today my ear can only hear wails and moans.
My eyes are blind to all things tiny and big.
My soul can no longer see your splendour, the bright dawn.
All stream waters turned to stone.
All melodies ran back to their strings,
and took shelter in the darkness
of a feeble, sick lute.*

(Bashir, 2010, p. 20)

Nine decades since his departure, al-Tijani's legacy endures as a cornerstone of Sudanese literary heritage.

4. Escape into Silence:

A fourth Sudanese figure with a seemingly similar experience is the famous poet Idris Jamma' (1922-1980). Born in the North Khartoum town of Halfayat Al-Muluk (the Halfaya of Kings), it was so named because it served as the capital of the Sheikhdome of the Abdullab (1504-1820). The Abdullab tribe is of Arab origin, and its kings were allies of the Sinnar Kingdom which emerged in 1509 (Penn, 1934). Jamma' himself has the surname of the first Abdullab king but may not necessarily be a descendant.

After graduation from Bakht al-Rida teaching school in the early 1940s, he was rotated to many schools around Sudan, as was the norm at the time, and was teaching at a school in the Northern Province when he wrote his first poem.

It was while he was later working at Khartoum Secondary School that he entered into what was described as his "period of silence and isolation", possibly due to a trauma. His case was later described as "madness" or severe mental illness. Due to this silence, no one was ever able to truly know why or how he got there. (Abdel-Raziq, 2024)

Yet in some of his poems, such as *Al-Sha'ir* (the poet), he presents himself as an accomplished poet, both gentle and daring, a hedonist and pious Sufi:

A simple soul, easily charmed by a child's sweet smile,

but an invincible giant in battle

Standing in reverence before all beauty

Seeing the beauty in everything

A rebel who breaks all shackles

And a Sufi who worships in a trance

....

The wretched clay was molded and touched by the fire of love,

then decreed to be!

and the poet emerged, chiselling words into perfection

(Babikir, 2019, p. 5).

Sadly, all this exuberance fell into a sudden, total and mysterious silence.

The above note of confidence expressed in these verses could also be interpreted as a descent into gloomy affliction. The poet, fashioned from clay scorched by the fire of love, and endowed with divine power to chisel words, following the divine command “Be”, could be viewed as condemned to the suffering of a being doomed to utter words formed through pain, rather than the transcendence of a celestial sculptor of language.

Many pieces in his sole collection, *Lahazat Baqiya* (Lasting Moments), reflect an overriding feeling of despair. Love rarely settles into affirmation; moments of jubilation are fragile and short-lived, repeatedly giving way to darkness, loss, and emotional breakdown.

Seen across the collection, these poems illustrate a structural movement from exaltation to desolation, suggesting not a passing mood but a persistent condition of feeling. The poetry itself thus becomes the only available testimony to an inner life otherwise sealed off by silence.

An example of such a sharp descent into melancholy can be found in the poem, “In the Spring of Love”:

*In the spring of love, we used to savour,
and sing and whisper;
chasing birds from one branch to another.
Then I lost touch with the past,
and sorrow dwelled deep into my heart.
Two images in a heavenly stream, we cruised.
We sipped life's enchanting essence;
yet we are far from satiated.
That's love—never pose questions;*

never blame us.

To heaven we were heading,

but we lost our way.

My soul released long-held feelings.

I have dissolved my heart for you,

unto melodies and whimpering.

So have mercy on the oud,

when it sings me into a sad melody.

(Babikir, 2019, p. 6).

Conclusion:

The lack of resilience on the part of these brilliant literary figures, and extreme over-sensitivity, can be seen as the result of the apparent disparity between their ambitions and high expectations coupled with the awareness of their genius, and the disappointing lack of self-fulfilment. Their inner turmoil was intensified by the additional burden of national trauma and the unrealised dreams of the nation following the initial euphoria of independence.

Both Nur and Bashir were victims of the British Egyptian political struggle over Sudan, and its illusions. That conflict had a very strong cultural angle to it, as Sudanese nationalism celebrated Arabism as both its adopted identity, and the bond with Egypt. To this, Nur added a fascination with English literature and culture, engaging in modernist critiques of Egyptian poetry and fiction. This earned him high respect in Cairo but did not endear him to the subjects of sharp criticism. Both were severely disappointed by the reality of Egypt, where neither received the welcoming reception, they had imagined: no secure employment and no sustained support. Both suffered malnutrition, neglect and bitter disappointment.

Abu Zikra belongs to another era, finding welcome both in Moscow and Khartoum. However, he faced heartbreak and after heartbreak. The far-left socialism which he saw emerge in Khartoum soon met with tragic reversals, and even Moscow succumbed to reform. Being a committed radical, he deplored this shift as oppressive rather than welcoming it as freedom. This coincided with an Islamist coup in

Khartoum. So once again he found himself out of step with his environment.

While the cases of the other Sudanese literary figures discussed above each had an identifiable catalyst, Jamma's experience was unique in its marked individuality. There was no observable or external, demonstrable crisis with a strongly public, social, political, or religious dimension to it. At the time he entered his silence, records indicate that he was in an objectively successful stage of his career employed as a teacher at Khartoum secondary school, with a stable supportive family and home life, unlike the others who were navigating apparent intellectual, ideological or financial crises during times of great political upheaval.

These lives when considered together, suggest that the tragedies of Sudan's literary geniuses arose not solely from individual temperaments, but from the persistent tension between exceptional intellectual sensitivity and historical conditions that offered little space for professional stability and emotional security, or a true sense of belonging and sustained fulfilment. Whether influenced by political upheaval, cultural dislocation, or inward estrangement, each individual confronted pressures that tested the limits of endurance. Their stories remind us that literary brilliance does not insulate the bearer from despair, and that regardless of exceptional literary prowess or talent, the laborious path to achievement remains inseparable from the circumstances in which it is produced. In this context the cost of genius was tragically high.

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