

A Critical Exploration of Abbas Ali Aboud's Novel *Rites of Departure*

Al Tayeb Al Nasri Mohammed Ahmed Abu Al Ghasim

Mukhwah Science and Arts College
Al Baha University, Al Baha, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This study focuses on the novel '*Rites of Departure*' by the Sudanese *Abbas Ali Aboud* (2009), most of the events took place at '*Alkawa*' town. The study discusses the notion of vision, the impact of provincial towns on characters; events and human folklore highlighted in the novel. It deals with the novel in terms of prosaic and poetic content. The study concentrates on the relative analysis of events and the interrelations between characters and their controversial adventures, which are consistent historical philosophical and behavioral schools. This study attention primary and secondary characters within the novel, equally, factual and fictitious together with the sequence of incidents and its simultaneity with the denouement of this work. This critical study considers the chronological order of events with respect to the plot and the writer's conceptualization of the spatial, temporal backdrops and the nature of the dramatic that builds up the writer's unique world. This study employs the intertextuality approach in order to unveil the interstices and ambiguities of myth-laden utterances and sentences for a better explanation of their multiple meanings. The study concludes that regarding techniques, the novelist has in his evolving and multi-layered narrative innovatively appropriated some characteristics of Islamic mystic scholars in their enchantment with the mythical town. His descriptions are replete with verbal imagery that testify to an emotionless and a colorlessness which is linguistically reminiscent of mystical redemption. The novelist managed to merge a variety of artistic genres, including poetry, prose, and dramatic techniques that open new vistas as linguistic strategies.

Keywords: Abbas Ali Aboud, Alkawa, critical exploration, Rites of Departure

Cites as: Abu Al Ghasim, A. A. M. A. (2019). A Critical Exploration of Abbas Ali Aboud's Novel *Rites of Departure*. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*3 (4) 155- 162

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no4.13>

1. Introduction

Most of the events of the novel '*Rites of Departure*' took place in a small town called *Alice* (formerly as *AlKawa*). This town lies on the banks of the *White Nile*, south of *Khartoum*, the Capital city of Sudan. Archaeological surveys and excavations have indicated that this area was populated since the third millennium B.C. Many stone artifacts dating to The Paleolithic, The Mesolithic and Neolithic Ages were found as historical evidence. Moreover, cemeteries form cumulative strata indicated a perennial use throughout different historical eras. Also, many buildings in this town resemble the well-known Pharaonic architectural sample that extended along *The Nile Valley* during the periods of *Meroitic*, *Kushite* and *Napata* civilizations. This historical continuity has manifested itself in a well-consolidated civilizational, cultural and social heritage that helped in molding the general traits of the denizens of this area.

The novel discusses some traditions and customs that had been assimilated in people's daily lives. Therefore, it necessary to take into account those beliefs revolving round the cycles of birth and death, for example, ceremonies, wedding rites, lip tattooing, children circumcision and celebration of Ashura Day "the tenth day of the Islamic calendar. Inhabitants of this town unthinkingly and avowedly immerse themselves in many ancient traditions whose origins have not fathomed; this much better illustrated by the frequenting of *The Nile* mentioned in the novel. The issue is a common denominator among all the riverine civilizations, including *The Tigris*, *Euphrates* or Pharaonic Egypt. The writer alludes to some rites that are traceable to *The Christian Era*, the area that believed to witness the construction of some brick churches in the tenth century A.D. There were other remains which have hitherto not excavated and which archaeologists believe in having been monasteries.

Alkawa, this mythical town is regarded as an essential trading center that links Southern and Northern Sudan and, in fact, it is one of the most vital river port on the bank of *The White Nile*, where goods are exchanged, particularly those coming from overseas across *The Red Sea* such as silk, flax, and other textiles. These are exchanged by African products like ivory, ostrich feathers, and eggs, gold, among other products. A large number of dealers in trade and related professions settled in this area. These settlers had come from the various parts of ancient Sudan as well as West and North Africa and southern Egypt. This racial assimilation and harmony culminated in a subsequent generation with diverse roots and whose reconciled cultures, resulting in a highly civilized and a tolerant society which peacefully co-existed and interacted with the divergent dominant cultures and civilizations that flourished at the time. These elements combined with the racially distant marriage norms and the early establishment of educational institutions was embodied in the traits of self-reliance, self-respect, and dignity that characterize the people of the town.

2. Literature Review

The novelist *Abbas Ali Aboud* was born in *Al Kawa* town, *The White Nile Province, Sudan*, while receiving his primary, intermediate and higher secondary education in *Sennar; Sudan*. Subsequently, he completed his bachelor degree in computing in *Russia* before devoting himself to writing. He was influenced by the Sudanese cultural heritage, its religious dimension with the Sufi tradition and its dilemma in particular. This is because *Sufism* played a formative influence on Sudanese culture identity. Among his novels are *Intimations of a Mysterious Dawn*, *Embers of the Tropic of Memory*, *Chapters of Birth* and the current novels, all of which works were published and reprinted in Egypt and the Arabic Language. He also has two collections of poetry, namely *Myths of Rivers and Fragments of Dreams (2013)*. The critic *Mustafa Tayseer* describes him in *Sudaneseonline* website 13/12/2007 as a novelist and poet with an erudite lexicon and a powerful imagination and a writer who dexterously manipulates his texts and weaves intricate thematic and narrative patterns. The critic *Mu'tazz Jaafar* equally describes him in *sudanyat.com* 10/3/2003 as "a creative writer who is endowed with a rare capacity to describe nature and characters. His novel '*Rites of Departure*' is a masterpiece. He is likewise a poet with high sensibilities and exhibits high artistic mastery and versatility". Mr. Aboud belongs to the second generation of writers that built on the achievement of the great writer *Al Tayeb Salih*. Indeed, a high degree of similarity is found between the two novelists regarding their ability to impart universal magnitude to local incidents.

The novelist populates his town with endless tales and reminiscences that are vividly and tenderly structured to harken back to abysmal times where today has 'accepted norms and conventions had their genesis. The characters also find consolation in the kaleidoscope of forgotten and invisible images representing the mythical nature of this place. These symptoms are seemed as caprice of groups and adventures of individuals in their constant and colorful historical flux. Allegorical and mythical characters who are significance and connect the past and the present are *Maryam*, *Nada*, *Issam*, *Tariq*, *Umm Suksuk*, *Hajar Al Saqa*, *Gabor*, *Al Baloula*, the town's barber, *Bakheit of Morocco* and *Bakheit, the Crocodile* and the woman soothsayer. Equally, the old North and Southern Sudan and, last but not least, all different social classes and tribal allegiances and, hence, obliterating racial preconceptions and nuances entertained by some people in Sudan. Moreover, the novel is a significant chronicle of some entities of deep symbolic and meaningful nature to the people of the town such as the palm tree, *The Dawra Valley Khor*, *The Sunut Forest*, *The Fallata area* and *The Sorghum Tree*, among others. Meticulous attention to detail the flow and the reflection of the sun rays at dusk are described as vividly as the calls, invocations, and songs of loss and departure that enacted on the river banks.

Reality is transformed magically into approximate fiction, and there is a flow of free association that culminates in a tragic ending and eternal death. The novel centers on four students: *Assim*, *Maryam*, *Tariq* and *Nada* who loved their country and town and faced the

future unabashedly. They vanquished poverty and fear and dedicated themselves to their dream of freedom. The writer subjects these protagonists to numerous accidents and incidents, thus experientially broadening their horizons and accentuating their self-awareness so that a whole nation could be revived. The novel hosts both old traditions and praiseworthy acts, as enunciated by the narrator of the tale. In this novel, the writer unequivocally devotes all his creative energy, thoughts, and poetry to women. It is in the town that the intimations of this narrative that is marked by adoration, departure, and nature take place. The River that has evolved to be an unalterable fact of life. Where in its bowels of life had their origins in molded clay clots. Life here was nurtured in a fashion identical to that of Adam, who was created and inspired by God's spirit before being miraculously made omniscient about all objects and sciences. The first Genesis of this town was as boisterous as the first cries of a new-born baby, only to be followed by the enactment of love, harmful practices, bloodshed, and destruction. Some set their minds to overcome adversity while others sought refuge in the jungle. People of this town conceive of life as unceasing struggle and travail that consumes the bulk of humanity. However, equally, the same individual learned to light the Promethean fire and fight through massacres and conflagration inevitably ensued. Later, people settled on the River, learning to mold things out of clay through burning to manufacture pottery that they can engrave. The lives of these people are enshrouded in spirits and specters and, equally, competing commotions of consternation and hope. Finally, the writer indicates that these denizens had once had their hazardous and unpredictable domiciles in the forest before settling in the welcoming and safe refuge of this town.

Assim, the protagonist of this novel, was born on one gloomy morning. As customary, they slaughtered the fattest sheep on his naming ceremony, which was a week after his birth. Al Mubarak, his grandfather, recited some Koranic verses and placed a white cloth beneath him as a magic spell. Forty days after his birth, a delegation advanced to the palm tree where sweets, dates, and grain were thrown at the tree. Then, after dusk, a procession accompanied Assim's mother to the soothsayer and then to the river (She washed her hands, took off her dress and shook it off, saying "I have now shaken off evil and goodness"). She then straightened up and prayed twice. Assim's grandfather, Al Mubarak, used to work in the Market which extended from Khuar Daura to Hillat Fallata, while Makawi, Assim's uncle, used to recite The Koran and a regular destination of people seeking treatment against spells of evil spirits. He used to write inscriptions and incantations that protect people from malevolent eyes and spirits. Also, in his small stall, he used to sell a variety of medicinal herbs.

As a birth ritual, the new mother should keep a perennially lighted small lamp for several days and, equally, she should on no account leave her baby unattended lest the spirits exchange it for another with satanical tendencies. Maryam Bint Al Shoul used to take care of the baby and to aid the mother in meeting her needs. It was she who helped the birth of Al

Mubarak on one summer day before his mother died shortly after. Her mother was a female slave captured on a green hilltop where she lived before being sold to Al Bashir Wad Ahmed, who had three wives in addition to his concubine. Her primary occupation was sorghum grain using grinding stones.

Assim received all his schooling in the town before joining The University of Khartoum where he met his compatriots, including Tariq Abdelmajeed and Nada Al Haj Saeed who entertained a love and admiration for Assim. Of about him, she used to say. He is a courteous, wonderful, considerate young man. Their relationship deepened, and they returned to the town practicing that emotion. On the other hand, the town was home to a multitude of marginalized people who excelled in dancing with spears yet who led a bleak life and died as destitute. Of these were Ganbour and Malual, while A'isha Umm Suksuk was tried at court and consequently whipped, imprisoned and fined as she used to make and sell traditional spirit drinks. As a culmination, Assim, the protagonist in the novel, was captured during demonstrations against the repressive regime. He played a pivotal role in political activism in his town and at university, calling for freedom and alleviation of the suffering sustained by poor and marginalized people. Though Assim died, no one divulged to his friend Tariq the cause of this fatality despite taking part in the funeral rituals of the deceased. This rises an enigmatic and open-ended question regarding the death and absence of Assim Baderelddin: who killed the hero? How did he die? Did he drown in the river or did he commit suicide when he could no longer bear oppression and injustice? The tragic fall of this protagonist compelled Nada to marry a wealthy man of her father's age when the former was in detention. Assim's untimely death had equally put an abrupt end to his parents' aspirations that one day, he would be a famous lawyer championing the cause of the poor and the downtrodden people.

3. Materials and Methodology

As a novelistic technique, the novelist frequently employs the technique of intertextuality, slowly tapping into the rich mystical heritage in Sudan. At times, this quest aided through the utilization of the concept of intertextuality to uncover the fabulous duality of rites and reality in terms of fictional form and content. As for free association, it has helped revealed the novelist's narrative ingenuity while giving him free rein to lavish his adoration and enchantment with this mythological town in language that is redolent of nostalgia and estrangement. Indeed, his verbal repertoire strongly influenced by the self-annihilation characteristic of Sufi contemplation. On the other hand, the complex narrative web resists all attempts at textual closure, and its polytonality and centripetal nature defy all manners of interpretation customary in Sudanese fiction written in Arabic. Concerning techniques, the writer innovatively utilizes faction, since he blends imaginative and personal rendering of history and concrete historical accounts revolving around the spatial axis of the novel.

The novel presents poetic and prosaic perspectives, and the novelist successfully fuses a pastiche of other literary genres, in terms of language, poetic rhetoric, prolific imagination and the intricate web of relations between characters and the adventures and sacrifices they made. The novel also appropriates some scientific and philosophical texts that seen through the prism of historicism. The current study will utilize the theory of intertextuality, an offshoot of postmodernism, while incorporating other structural approaches such as meta-fiction and, indeed, all tools that fit the novelistic form and content regarding the relative merit of events and the mythical evolution of the town. Thereby, we will be able to illuminate the type and nature of narrative layers, their relation to modernity, and the events. Hence, the aesthetics of the text could be unveiled using a dynamic approach which is consistent with the particular traits and world of the novelist, Abbas Ali Aboud. This critical study also endeavors to pinpoint the role and contribution of the novel in molding new social bonds that supersede and overcome conventions rooted in the Sudanese society as well as the fate of modernist enterprise that attempts to import enlightenment to these anachronistic societies. An endeavor was also made to trace the writer's use of symbolism, his narrative techniques, and his mythopoetic world, and language.

4. Synopsis and Methods

The novelist Abbas Ali Aboud has experimented with the arts of poetry, fiction, and drama in his work *The Rites of Departure*, blending these genres so seamlessly as to constitute an unshakeable proof of the writer's originality and depth of the modernist horizon. In this Aboud conforms to the proposition put by the Sudanese writer Eissa Al Hilo .The prose poem is the legitimate offspring of the novel because the inter-textual transfusion and interaction between the forms of literature as poetry, drama, fiction, among others, are hallmarks of postmodernism. It is also noted that Mr. Aboud espouses an open-ended and fluid mode of discourse and that his narrative has a multitude of perspectives, none of which has the interpretive dominance and vantage point. Also, the writer eschews any form of personal commitment and, equally, the strict chronological sequencing of events. He was also concerned with chronicling the insignificant and localized incidents in mundane daily life, striving to strike a balance between ideological commitment and his independence, and between artistic individuality and the inherited literary convention to create a novel and uncharted fictionalized world. In a sense, the novel is an overt gesture to champion the cause of racial minorities and those subject to economic, political, racial, social and gender discrimination and oppression. He endeavor to present a new vision for a free life in which all people, regardless of their ethnicities, geographical locations, cultures, or heritage, shall lead a balanced and dignified life.

5. Conclusion

In molding his thematic patterning, the novelist allusively refers to Koranic verses and phrases, as seen in the context of the Sufi mystical tradition which inspired this technique of

free association. It must be stressed that despite these tendencies, the text is autonomous, and these influences are only implicit. For instance, the writer appropriates the Sufi notion of “epiphany” where the soul of the devout achieve ascendancy and merge with the infinite and achieve union with the ultimate Goodness. (*Rites of the Departure*) Is a modernist novel, but it heavily draws on Ibn Arabi's experience in narrative and transmigration of the imaginative world. The narrator-writer deliberately enmeshes the text in a web of ineluctable symbolism that is beyond the ken of ordinary readers. Equally, animistic writer refers to the ferocity and its pervasive influence on human affairs. While the writer resorts to the *dues ex machine* of Fate to resolve many questions, he sarcastically attacks many anachronistic traditions such as female circumcision, sorcery, bliss-seeking, and residual apostasy.

The writer's imaginative power is immense, but it is invariably inspired by the realities and history of the town of Al Kawa, such as the flooding of Khor Dura during the rainy season and its drying up in summer. Other topical allusions include the story of Abu Al Qana'an and the murder of Mr. Ismael, holder of the Drum which all vindicate Al Kawa's place to which people from all Sudan and, indeed, some Egyptians, Turks and Britons gravitated. The reference to the beads, rings, and bone fossils in these areas might have been under the dominion of The Shilluk Kingdom, one of the most famous tribes in Christian Southern Sudan. However, this remains a historical claim that requires substantiation through archaeological surveys, and other historical evidence. Finally, the novelist incorporates mythological elements from ancient Sudan in the form of wars, bloodshed, anachronistic traditions, and customs that inextricably interwoven with specific social and political contexts. The novelist firmly rejects such habituation in his neatly crafted and intertextuality intertwined narrative whose every line and sentence serves the overarching propose of social change. The study has also concluded that the historical controversy in the novel emanates from the novelist's imagination or some disputed historical facts.

About the Author:

Dr. Al Tayeb Al Nasri Mohammed Ahmed Abu Al Ghasim, Ph.D. in English literature, teaches English literature at Mukhwah Science and Arts College, Al Baha University KSA. He is interested in literature both in Arabic and English languages.

References

Aboud, A. A. (2005). *Taqouse Al Raheel*, Sudan Commercial Print ltd, 2005/704, which has translated into *Rites of Departure*.

- Arkell, A. J. (1974). *The History of Sudan from Earliest Time A. D. 1821*. Jan 7. Oxford University Press, London.
- Derrida, Jacques Destruction (1982). *Destruction Positions*. University of Chicago Press. ISBN 9780226143316. Francis Deng - The Dinka of Sudan, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1972) Published by: Boston University African Studies Center
DOI: 10.2307/216825, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/216825>.
- Jovani Fantini Christianity on Old Nubian Kingdoms in Modern Sudan - Italy 1970: *Editrice Missionaria Italiana*, Via Roncati 32, 40134 Bologna, Italy.
- Kristeva, Julia (1980). *Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mu'tazz Jaafar - Post about the author Abbas Ali Aboud - Sudanyat.com (10/3/2003). [SudaneseOnline.com is a Phoenix-Arizona-USA].
- Mustafa Tyseer - Article about Abbas Ali Aboud. Sudaneseonline.com (13/12/2007). [SudaneseOnline.com is a Phoenix-Arizona-USA].
- Shinnie, P.L. (1978). "Christian Nubia.". In J.D. Fage (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Africa. Volume 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.