Nation-State Violence and the Practice of Freedom in Naguib Mahfouz's *Karnak Café*

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Introduction

The nation is a construct that operates, from its inception, with violence. This violence is implied in the nation's efforts to unite, synthesize and subsume experiences under its governing ideology on the basis of historical and sociocultural affinities. Consequently, those who are perceived as not belonging are differentiated and excluded. However, violence, in its crude form, erupts when the nation is associated with the state – the state being a coercive centralised authority imposed, in the case of African countries, over fragile national entities to consolidate

them. Anthony Bogues in *Empire of Liberty* asserts that "the defining feature of colonial sovereignty was 'might is right', the right of the sword" and was accompanied by "fundamental attempts to shape the consciousness of the so-called native" (Bogues 2010, 20). Perverted by colonisation, African nation-states are distorted replicas of their Western model as they have adopted the logic of sovereign colonial power. Hence, the nation-state in Africa perpetuates violence on the native, in the native and around the native.

Violence has been one of the most recurrent, yet most condemned, phenomenon in human societies. Its perpetuation even in so-called civilised and modern nations poses the ontological problem of the imperative of freedom for mankind's futures. If the urgency of freedom is felt in Western colonial societies, it is felt more so in the non-Western lands where peoples, cultures, psychologies and state institutions have been sullied by diverse forms of colonial brutality. Therefore, it is not surprising to read Achille Mbembe's submission, in "Fragile Freedom", that postcolonial theory has "devoted a great deal of energy to unmasking the languages and practices of freedom" (Mbembe 2011, 14). This concern with the unveiling of possible freedom strategies is a key hallmark of postcolonial literatures that target the dismantlement of tyrannical modes of power. With an imaginative power fuelled by the desire to indict and transform regimes of violence, postcolonial writers have depicted

colonially-informed violence in their works (Boehmer 2005, 221).

From a postcolonial perspective, violence inheres in the nation-state. As E. San Juan submits in "Postcolonialism and the Question of Nation-State Violence", postcolonial theory views the nation-state as arbitrary and artificial, as an illegitimate construction imposed by the Western colonial order and as an apparatus that takes recourse to violence and brutal discipline to rule its citizens (Juan 2001, 887-8). As Fanon indicates in "The Wretched of the Earth", the leaders of newly independent nations fall prey to a daft mimicry of the Western national model: instead of imitating the "dynamic, pioneer aspect" of the Western national bourgeoisie, these leaders rather follow "the Western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention" (Fanon 1963, 153). Therefore, the nation-states which these post-independence leaders inherit and whose destinies they preside become hubs of decadent, violent and de-humanising experiences. We use this postcolonial lens in this article to demonstrate that Mahfouz's *Karnak Café* represents nation-state violence and allegorically enacts freedom strategies. These freedom strategies are not only circumscribed to the Egyptian experience; they also speak to oppressed people suffering under the yoke of tyrannical regimes worldwide. As such, Mahfouz's novel addresses the operation of violence in a nation-state setting with the aim of proposing a solution.

Karnak Café is set in 1967, fifteen years after Egyptian independence. The historical context of the novel is the famous June war waged by Egypt against Israeli forces. Nonetheless, the violence depicted in the narrative is not the violence at the war fronts. What Mahfouz exposes is the despotic exercise of power by the Nasserite regime on powerless citizens whose ideas oppose the nationalist narrative imposed and misguided by the former. It is against this violence that freedom is performed in the novel. Mbembe in "Fragile Freedom" argues that "freedom is first and foremost a relational and contextual practice, that is, a practice that always take shape in opposition to whatever is locally conceived as un-freedom" (Mbembe 2011, 29). In Egypt represented in *Karnak Café*, the imperative of freedom is related with and opposed to the sadistic perpetration of violence in the minds, on the bodies and in the already-marginal environment occupied by citizens. Violence and the practice of freedom in the novel are mirrored by allegorical elements employed by the novelist. These elements are the opposite worlds, the liberation of speech and the cathartic encounter. The opposite worlds refer to the representation of settings that clearly create a divide between the leaders and the common people. The liberation of speech alludes to the narrative devices employed by the novelist to bring to the limelight the brutality of the ruling establishment and criticise it. The cathartic encounter relates to the meeting (the joint efforts) of both the oppressor and the oppressed to stop violence, dialogue and enact freedom avenues.

The Violent Construction of Polarities

Mahfouz's *Karnak Café* depicts two different spaces: a space occupied by the oppressed and another handled by the post-independence oppressor. The first world is the world of the café itself which is inhabited by the oppressed. As the narrator visits Al-Mahdi street, he stumbles across the café, which he describes as "small and off the main street" (Mahfouz 2008, 7). This description already indicates the secluded and marginal experience of those who visit attend the café. These people are outside the main national discourse; hence they find solace in the communal grace offered by the café. Talking about this café, the narrator adds that "the place was so small that they all seemed like a single family" (8). The simile comparing café attendants to a single family is pertinent in that it indicates a shared experience and a common vision. This unity is maintained in spite of the different age groups that mingle are found in the café. The old, the middle-aged and the young ones commune together. We are even told that the past, the present and eventually, the future, are in a warm embrace in the café ((Mahfouz 2008, 9). 9). It is in this familial atmosphere that the narrator penetrates and progressively connects with each of the café's customers.

This café is also distinguished by its authenticity and chasteness. The café is described as clean, the coffee it

serves is excellent (undiluted) and its water is pure (Mahfouz 2008, 9). What is more, the manageress of the café, Qurunfula, possesses an "enigmatic kind of beauty" and gives the assurance of "a carefully controlled inner strength" (Mahfouz 2008, 8). These are confirmed by an interesting detail provided by the narrator: Qurunfula is a former belly-dancer who has never yielded to the temptation of prostitution (Mahfouz 2008, 10). Thus, she has always preserved her dignity and the café she owns is the symbol of the values she advocates. In all, beauty, unity, dignity and relative peace characterise the café and give it the allures of a garden that ought to be extended to all parts of Egypt.

Nevertheless, one question needs to be asked: why does Mahfouz represent the café from the outset with attributes of a marginalised authenticity? The answer to this question is found in the perception that postcolonial writers have of the oppressed. Although the oppressed in postcolonial criticism is not ascribed pristine and flawless identities, he/she is recognised a humane and civilised character prior to Western violent incursion (Loomba 2005, 21). It is in this regard that Mahfouz's depiction of the café matches with the postcolonial vision of the oppressed.

The second world represented in *Karnak Café* is the underground prison cell that belongs to the oppressor. Not much information is given about this space in the novel.

However, the few hints that are given denote the psychological torture and physical violence inflicted by the post-independence oppressor on the citizens. Ismail al-Shaykh, a young university graduate and a regular visitor of the café, gives his impressions when he is kidnapped and thrown into the oppressor's world. In the novel, Ismail describes this space thus:

> The floor felt cold to my bare feet. The only thing I came into contact with was the walls; there was absolutely nothing in the room, no chairs, no rug, nothing standing at all. Darkness, emptiness, despair, terror, that was it. In a dark and silent environment like that, time stops altogether; … I had no idea when the darkness was supposed to disappear or when some form of life would emerge from this all-embracing corpse of a place. (Mahfouz 2008, 46)

The recurrent image of darkness and isolation pervading this space contrasts with the lively atmosphere of the Café. The absence of any form of life reveals the Machiavellian intention of the oppressor, notably; to let the oppressed understand that what awaits them is an anonymous death. The message is that as long as these oppressed ones criticise Nasser's regimes and policies, the disciplinary apparatus of the nation-state will crush them. The prison itself is configured to suffuse the minds of citizens with the imminence of death. By so doingdoing so, the oppressor's space diffuses fear.

Fear is a fundamental element in the economy of tyranny. The despotic establishment uses fear to induce submission in the minds of the governed. In *Karnak Café*, the sudden disappearance of the young folk from the café creates a general sense of fear. The use of fear by the repressive machinery is all the more efficient because the population of the café and its premises lives in apprehension of the unknown. There is no explanation, no information, and no spectacular action. Only rumours, a dreadful silence and the reality of the disappearances (Mahfouz 2008, 20). This spread of violence contributes to what Louis Althusser calls interpellation. In "Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts", we read that interpellation is a concept that describes "how the 'subject' is located and constructed by specific ideological and discursive operations" (Ashcroft et al. 2013, 249). These ideological operations are enforced and perpetuated by state apparatuses like the one represented in *Karnak Café*. When this apparatus uses fear, it actually constructs in individuals subjectivities and consciousnesses that will either resign desperately to tyranny or adopt the ideology of the apparatus. In both cases, the tyrant's power is maintained.

Evidence of this interpellation is found in the narrator's soliloquy. After the disappearances, the narrator tries to understand what is happening and he nearly falls in the trap of the apparatus. It is worth noting that for the Nasserite regime, the policy of Arab socialism and Egypt's

current war against Israel are indications that the nation is strong. Nasser's leadership is said to carry the promise of an authentic nationalist revival in a context of poverty and unemployment. The narrator, already falling in the trap of interpellation, starts reflecting: "should we [Egyptians] not be willing to endure a bit of pain and inconvenience in the process of turning our state, the most powerful in the Middle East, into a model of a scientific, socialist, and industrial nation?" (Mahfouz 2008, 20). With this kind of reasoning, the narrator imbibes the logic of the state apparatus to minimise, or worst, legitimise the atrocities committed by the regime.

Fortunately for the narrator, he realises the perfidy of his reasoning and tells admits to himself: "by applying such logic, I could even manage to convince myself that death itself had its own particular requirements and benefits" (Mahfouz 2008, 20). Thus, the narrator succeeds to resist interpellation but one cannot assert that the café visitors have donedo the same. In fact, Qurunfula, the manageress is paralysed by fear and falls into depression (Mahfouz 2008, 18). The violence of fear takes a heavy toll on her and spoils the serene atmosphere that had reigned in the café. The narrator reveals that "a new atmosphere of caution pervaded the place, rather like a peculiar smell whose source you cannot trace… in every innocent glance there was also a feeling of apprehension" (Mahfouz 2008, 21). Through fear, the space of the oppressor impinges on the elementary liberties

enjoyed by the oppressed. Consequently, a new order is imposed indirectly on the café.

In the novel, the second disappearance of the young café visitors creates total panic. Paralysed by fear, all those who attend the café unanimously agree "to steer clear of politics as far as possible" so that no one would accuse them (Mahfouz 2008, 29). Even in their facial expressions, one can read a suppressed anger caused by their interpellation (Mahfouz 2008, 30). Indeed, by avoiding political issues, the café visitors allow their consciousnesses to be directed by the tyrannical establishment. They progressively alienate themselves from society, hoping to preserve at least their lives. However, the reality of oppression is ever-present in their minds as they compare Egypt's apparent pan-Arabic strength with the crushing of personal rights and freedoms within the country.

The pertinent problem that Qurunfula and other characters pose here is one of the uses of power: is power measured by its ability to advocate ideals and oppress those who think differently or is it measured by its ability to secure difference and protect the downtrodden? (Mahfouz 2008, 26). Frantz Fanon in "The Wretched of the Earth" asserts that in post-independence Africa, the establishment "does not create a state that reassures the ordinary citizen, but rather one that arouses his anxiety" by displaying its strength, by bullying, by jostling and by

"intimating to the citizen that he is in continual danger" (Fanon 1963, 165).

The third disappearance of young café visitors is the signal of the regime's determination to discipline and punish its contradictors. This third disappearance is special because upon returning to the café, the young café visitors bring the news of the assassination of one of them: Hilmi Hamada. The news of this death intensifies fear and silence. Anthony Bogues in "Empire of Liberty" explains the link between violence, fear and ordering when he posits that "as a practice violence is about spectacle. To be effective as order, it must first awe and then create fear. Even though violence kills or maims, sometimes its logic is not about death per se but about its deployment in the production of order" (Bogues 2010, 90). Hilmi's death is used to impose silence as the new order of the café. In a bid to consolidate its vertical power, the nation-state employs violence (sometimes reaching the point of death) to instil fear in the minds of all those who have divergent views. For instance, when the news of Hilmi's murder is spread, the concern of café visitors is to protect themselves from unseen, potential terrors and keep quiet amidst the "generally oppressive social atmosphere" (Mahfouz 2008, 36). Therefore, those who attend the café are oppressed subjects whose consciousnesses are silenced by fear. Mahfouz's allegorical representation of two opposite settings (that of the oppressed and the oppressor) highlights the role of fear at the same

time as it exposes the fragmentation of individual and collective consciousnesses.

Witnessing against the Secrets of Violence

The second allegorical element used in Mahfouz's novel is the liberation of speech. *Karnak Café* is narrated by a persona who plays the role of an investigator. To understand what he is investigating, we need to go back to what pushes him to visit the café. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator enters Al-Mahdi Street to get his watch repaired and, while waiting for the technician to repair, he visits neighbouring stores, and comes across the Karnak café (Mahfouz 2008, 7). The fact that the narrator gives his watch for repair symbolises the decay of the present state of affairs in Egypt. Like the watch that has a problem and must be repaired, Egypt has a pending problem that needs to be addressed. The narrator does not like idleness; hence he keeps himself busy with an inspection or an investigation of his environment/society and stumbles across the main problem destroying the country. He finds this problem in the café. He notices that despite the café's relative peace, unity and beauty, there is a generalised sentiment of marginalisation and silencing pervading its visitors. Describing one of the secrets of the café, the narrator says: "it was – and still is – a gathering-place for people with extremely interesting and provocative viewpoints; whether they yell or speak softly, they are expressing the realities of living

history" (Mahfouz 2008, 13). Thus, the main activity in the café is speaking: indictments and non-conformist views are exposed daily in this café by Egyptians of all generations who re-write the national history. We learn that they sometimes discuss politics from leftist and Islamist perspectives, pointing at the loopholes of Nasser's regime (Mahfouz 2008, 13). The problem, therefore, is that these Egyptians feel oppressed and voice it in a context where state power is dictating everyone's support to Egyptian military forces. The regime regards this war against Israel as the golden opportunity for a first national victory.

Inversely, the Egyptian people represented by café visitors are suffering in their flesh under a despotic regime that has not been able to provide food, employment or health, but is rather concerned with national glorification through war. Hence, the utility of this war is questioned by the café visitors. The narrator expresses the dismay of oppressed Egyptians during this era when he says: "All the people sitting there inside the café had buried deep inside them some kind of bitter experience, whether humiliation, defeat, or failure" (Mahfouz 2008, 14). These bitter experiences refer to the silencing mechanisms employed by Nasser's regime – mechanisms that have pushed these revolutionary minds to meet only discreetly in a hidden coffee shop.

With thisese information in mind, we can infer that the narrating in *Karnak Café* is aimed at revealing the regime's

despotism and liberating the voices of oppressed Egyptians. Because to speak is to live and to live is to uphold justice, the liberation freedom of speech in this novel is very important. The narrator does that by enabling four main characters to express their opinions and predicaments. We have already discussed Qurunfula's sentiments. We are now considering two other characters: Ismail al-Shaykh and Zaynab Diyab. By interviewing them, the narrator tries to palpate oppression and foregrounds the agency of the oppressed, that is, his/her ability to denounce his/her interpellation by state power.

From his discussion with the narrator, we gather that Ismail originates from a poor family in Dabas Alley. His diploma in law is the fruit of both his hard work and his mother's sweet-selling activity (Mahfouz 2008, 39-40). The only jobs that are well-known and respected in his area are that of the policeman and public prosecutor (Mahfouz 2008, 40). This detail is important because it reveals that Nasser's regime focuses more on the disciplinary apparatus than anything. The neighbourhood has many schools but the level of unemployment is so high that education seems useless. The economy and other social welfare sectors are dysfunctional; only those who work as policemen and prosecutors are well off. From this poor background, Ismail can be said to live in the shadow of independent Egypt. His social marginalisation is deepened by the implications of Egypt's mad rush into war against Israel in June 1967.

In his denunciations, Ismail reveals the portrait of his oppressor, a man called Khalid Safwan. Safwan is described with features that evoke sadistic power. When describing Safwan, Ismail says: "his image is indelibly recorded deep inside me. Of medium height, he had a large, elongated face with bushy eyebrows that pointed upwards. He had big, sunken eyes and a broad, prominent forehead. His jaw was strong, but he managed to keep his expression totally neutral" (Mahfouz 2008, 47). Safwan's eyes give the image of a big, fixed camera that spies on the country; his forehead emphasizes his power and commandment; his strong jaws repress any gleeful emotion; his neutral expression reveals his coldness. The fact that Safwan's image is engraved in Ismail's mind is noteworthy because it shows how the oppressor maintains power: causing the oppressed to carry in his consciousness the omnipresence of terror. These details attest that Safwan is the very symbol of tyranny in the novel.

Ismail, who suffers from Safwan's coercive actions, relates his 'cross-examination' by this state prosecutor in a dark underground cell. What Ismail denounces are the ignominious tactics employed by this state prosecutor against him and his lover, Zaynab. For example, Safwan tells Ismail that if he refuses to confess that he is a communist – an accusation that is false in Ismail's case – he (Safwan) will torture Zaynab (Mahfouz 2008, 51-52). Evidently, Safwan knows that he is torturing innocent

individuals upon whom he has invented piles of lies. So what is the rationale behind this tyranny? In *Karnak Café* the narrator's reflections, which seem to echo the novelist's own voice, provide an interesting answer: "it seems that, whenever darkness envelops us, we are intoxicated by power and tempted to emulate the gods; with that, a savage and barbaric heritage is aroused deep within us and revives the spirit of ages long since past" (Mahfouz 2008, 22-23). Tyranny is irrational: it springs from the darkest emotions of those who, upon realising their privileged position in society, seize the opportunity to behave like gods, dictating lives and shattering futures. It is in this darkness that Safwan resides.

The novel represents what this darkness consists ofin. Following Safwan's directives, one of the guards shows Ismail the suspended corpse of Hilmi Hamada. Ismail sees Hilmi "hanging by his feet, silent and motionless" (Mahfouz 2008, 53). Hilmi has been assassinated for his communist ideas. This spectacle of torture is meant to push Ismail to submit to the dictates of the regime. The use of death by violent regimes is a well-known strategy. Anthony Bogues in "Empire of Liberty" posits that:

> A regime of violence has to enact regular practices of death because its purpose is the absolute negation of the human life-form in its plurality….**When power acts** upon the body, the primary aims of torture are to destroy the 'meaning-making capacity of

> the tortured and…to replace it with the meanings of the torturer'. Thus the body as animated life becomes an object to be seized and mastered. Regimes of extreme violence dominate through a form of power that operates in the flesh. (Bogues 2010, 74, emphasis added)

The despotic exercise of power has for its target the de-humanisation of the oppressed subject. This de-humanisation entails the withdrawal of the agency of the oppressed, the replacement of his subjectivity by the oppressor's own and the manipulation of his life in the oppressor's hands.

Hilmi's torture and assassination serve these purposes. Ismail, who was Hilmi's friend, imagines having the same end as Hilmi and is coerced into compromising with the establishment. Ismail's 'meaning-making' capacity is replaced by Safwan's when he becomes an informer for the regime. As an informer, Ismail has "a fixed salary and a tortured conscience" (Mahfouz 2008, 55). His mind and his flesh have been turned into sites for the operation of power.

Our discussion of state violence in post-independence African nations would be incomplete if we did not mention a contemporary event: the barbaric assassination of Cameroonian journalist, Martinez Zogo. Known as a virulent denouncer of flagrant embezzlements, corruptions and favouritism ongoing within the Camer-

oonian state apparatus, Martinez Zogo is abducted on the evening of 17 January 2023. Like Hilmi in *Karnak Café*, no news of Zogo is gotten till the discovery of his mutilated and sodomised corpse on 22 January 2023. According to a worldwide press-freedom organisation, Reporters Without Borders, Martinez Zogo's murder is "a state crime" involving "more than twenty members of Cameroon's General Directorate for External Investigations (DGRE)" as well as government ministers and a business tycoon (n. p). Like in Himi's case, the use of violence on Zogo is intimately related to the protection of a particular ruling establishment, regardless of the consent or not of the person who embodies that establishment. The reference to the contemporary case of Zogo testifies that the operation of power is obdurately vertical in many African nation-states and that there is an urgent need for horizontalisation of power dynamics.

If the operation of power is allegorised through a transgression of agency and life in the cases of Hilmi and Ismail, this transgression is moral in the case of Zaynab Diyab. As a young beautiful woman, her role in *Karnak Café* spurs the problematic of ethics/morality in the exercise of vertical power. Zaynab originates from a very poor family where her mother is a washerwoman cum broker, her father is an alcoholic and her brother is a plumber (Mahfouz 2008, 61-63). She therefore lives her childhood in sheer economic precariousness, endlessly having to survive daily. Her miseries are intensified by the

fact that she grows into a beautiful woman. The problem of morality and freedom starts posing itself because wealthy men want to transform her into a prostitute. She successfully undermines their manoeuvers. Even as the novel begins, we are told that she has never had sex with Ismail, her boyfriend, because she is attached to her honour. It is worth noting that her attachment to chastity is not prescribed by religion; it is a personal principle on which she builds her identity and self-esteem. One can deduce that as a woman, Zaynab represents the morality and dignity of the downtrodden. It is her long-preserved honour and chasteness that Khalid Safwan violates after imprisoning her (Mahfouz 2008, 67).

Seizing the opportunity offered to her by the narrator, Zaynab speaks. She defies the feeling of shame to tell what she has been subjected to. Firstly, Safwan humiliates Zaynab by obliging her to perform all her bodily functions (eating, sleeping, peeing, drinking, and defecating) in one and the same place (Mahfouz 2008, 67). This disgracing order aims at denying her humanness. Secondly, she explains exactly how Safwan robs her of her cherished chasteness. She explains: "he decided to put on a titillating and exciting spectacle for himself, something utterly beyond the bounds of normalcy and decency… Down to the last detail…right in front of him!" (68). In this excerpt, Zaynab expresses with disgust her rape by Safwan. Although the rape may not have been literal, Safwan's sadomasochist motives make it all the same

de-humanising. Zaynab's body, like Hilmi's, is used for the deployment of the spectacle of power. The fact that she is stripped naked before the naked eyes of the oppressor evokes the image of an all-powerful god before whom everything is unveiled and laid bare. Safwan, representing the god in this image, seems to inform Zaynab that her body has no secret for him and that her dignity belongs to him.

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resenting the god in this image, seems to inform Zaynab that her body has no secret for him and that her dignity belongs to him.

Also, Zaynab's symbolic rape is a means used by Safwan to bruise her ethical sense. This idea is important when discussing the relationship between oppressors and oppressed because the latter's humanness and dignity are enshrined in the values he/she upholds. When a colonial and/or despotic establishment attacks these values, it leaves the oppressed vulnerable and permeable to the oppressor's corrupt norms. It is with this logic that European colonialists perverted the cultural and ethical norms of indigenes round the globe. Caleb Simmons in "Subtle Subversions" submits that one of the major aims of colonising powers was the "reshaping [of] indigenous religious belief and practice while altering the related and intertwining social, political and cosmological structures by which they were upheld" (Simmons 2020, 191). The adulteration of moral and ethical values therefore lie at the core of colonial power. In the post-independence context portrayed in *Karnak Café,* this aspect of colonial power is used by Safwan when he dispossesses Zaynab of her dignity. After her rape, Zaynab feels she is dirty and useless. Consequently, she falls into the oppressor's trap by engaging in an amoral life, choosing to "behave like a dishonourable woman" than being the beautiful virtuous woman she has been (Mahfouz 2008, 70).

Expressing her dismay and resignation, Zaynab tells the narrator: "We seem to have turned into a nation of deviants. All the costs in terms of life – the defeat and anxiety – they have managed to demolish our sense of values" (Mahfouz 2008, 71). Zaynab stops seeing the need to preserve her dignity; she has been made to espouse the immoral values of her torturer. She is even transformed into an accomplice of oppression when she becomes an informer for the state police. Safwan instrumentalizes Zaynab's poverty to make her work for the despotic regime in order to earn her daily bread. We learn that she secretly reports Hilmi to the police, whence his arrest and eventual murder by the apparatus' hangmen (72). As the novel ends, Zaynab is in a complete loss: the regime has inflicted profound wounds in her psyche and moral constitution to the extent that she is no longer sure of who she is, of what she wants, and of which way to go. The narrator, reflecting on her state acknowledges that it will need time for Zaynab and for Egyptians as a whole to bandage these wounds and purify themselves (Mahfouz 2008, 74).

Freedom: A Possible End to Violence?

Mahfouz represents freedom as a practice that entails the participation of both the oppressor and his victims. Freedom is not necessarily an end in itself but a constant performance of what it could mean for individuals and the society. Annalisa Oboe and Shaul Bassi in "Experi-

ences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures" corroborate this view when they assert that:

> ....It is only when freedom is acted out and located, when it comes to circumscribe a set of essentials for the here and now of culture, an individual, a class, a society, that it can somehow 'speak'. What we can hear, then, is how freedom posits itself as an essential constituent of the human experience in its manifold declinations. So we need to confront freedom not so much as a grand scheme of liberation of humanity from falsehood and oppression but as an ensemble of multiple and varied attempts at performing what in fact it might mean, through experiences involving minorities, colonised and neo-colonised people,… but also an above all as an aesthetic commitment to its representation in the arts and, particularly, in writing. (Oboe and Bassi 2011, 6)

Mahfouz's commitment to the notion of freedom is noticeable in the way he allegorises it. He actually performs or practices freedom when he includes in the plot of *Karnak Café* a cathartic encounter between the oppressor and the oppressed. This encounter portrays the mutual freedom that both entities should work for: an inclusive transformation of power dynamics. This even entails reconceptualising power and fixing its new aims, boundaries and future. Through this cathartic encounter, Mahfouz foregrounds the imperative of freedom and proposes a way out.

The cathartic encounter in Mahfouz's novel involves three elements that appear chronologically: the oppressor's penitence, the rejection of rancour/blame theory by the oppressed, and their joint recourse to culture. Let us begin with the first of these elements. In our earlier discussion we discussed the two opposing worlds in the novel: the world of the oppressor (prison) which terrorises the world of the victims (the café). However, at the end of the novel, the oppressor finds himself in the café. Khalid Safwan is brought into the space he used to prey upon. His entrance in the café is signalled by a change, even in his physiognomy. Safwan is sick-looking, pale and feeble in contrast with his previous cold, lackadaisical posture (Mahfouz 2008, 78).

What has changed this representative of tyranny is the fact that he was imprisoned for three years and his goods were sequestered by the same regime that he served. In other words, he has felt in his mind and flesh the ignominies of despotism and has understood the necessity to repent so-to-speak. Even though this repentance is not a religious kind, it involves a complete transformation in the oppressor's mind-set. Such experience of freedom has been allegorised in Bole Butake's Family Saga in which Kamalo, the avid oppressor, is redeemed by the play that is staged by Kamala, the oppressed. Mahfouz makes a similar textualisation of freedom when 1) he makes Safwan experience the same dire conditions he

had inflicted on his compatriots, and 2) he draws Safwan in to the café, putting him in a position to engage an inclusive dialogue with those he had oppressed.

As Safwan encounters those he had oppressed in *Karnak Café,* Safwan emits this wish: "Perhaps the two broken fragments will come together again" (Mahfouz 2008, 79). The two broken fragments he refers to are the two main groups that the operation of power has divided: the oppressor and the oppressed. His wish is that these power-related identities be drowned in the merging of human values. This means letting one's humanity to rise above the Manichean divisions provoked by power abuses. For Safwan who was the oppressor, there is need for him to acknowledge his wrongs. He confesses: "We're all of us both criminals and victims" (Mahfouz 2008, 80). This assertion is not meant to minimise the sufferings he caused as oppressor and criminal; rather, it throws light on the reality that both the oppressor and the oppressed loseosse their humanity when power is mis-handled. Whether one is on the side of the oppressor or on that of the oppressed, his/her dignity and the moral values that accompany it are systematically trampled upon. Thus, Safwan recognises that he was a criminal who tortured other humans to preserve power, but that simultaneously, he was victimising himself in the process of de-humanising others.

Safwan's regret about his past conduct is evident in the poetic verses he recites at the end of his first encounter

with Café visitors. He describes "*A chair radiating limitless power, / A magic eye revealing the truth, / A living member dying, / An unseen microbe pulsating with life*" (Mahfouz 2008, 80, italicised in source). In the first line, Safwan refers to his authoritarian display of power. The second line evokes his malicious habit of spying people secretly in order to construct realities about them and use these fake truths against the people. In line three, Safwan (the persona) describes the use of torture and death to subdue the bodies of young dissenters. Then, in the fourth line, Safwan employs the ironical image of an unseen microbe to evoke the profound malady and the ensuing putrefaction that pervade individual and collective lives in the country. Obviously, Safwan realises that his vertical power has only had obnoxious consequences. He therefore starts freeing himself of his vices when he acknowledges that his display of violence was at best wrong, at worst inhuman.

The second element in the practice of freedom is the rejection of blame game by the oppressed. It is true that in the heat of violence and condemnations, blames are-blaming is inevitable and even normal. Nevertheless, in a configuration where there is a clear sign from the oppressor that he wants to help change the vertical paradigm of power into a horizontal one, sticking to blame theories and antagonisms is fruitless. Ali Oguz Dirioz in "A Word of Caution on Eurocentrism Critiques" states that "there is a trap of simply criticising without effectively providing any viable alternatives with universal

validity and adaptability" (Dirioz 2021, 94). The trap is that the oppressed keeps being reactionary rather than seeking workable solutions to the problem.

In postcolonial discourse, Bill Ashcroft has also warned against the preservation of antagonisms and binaries. In "Post-Colonial Transformation", he argues that essentialisms and distinctions between coloniser/colonised, oppressor/oppressed end up reifying political exploitation (Ashcroft 2001, 21). Hence, those who are or feel dominated ought to seize opportunities to reflect on possible solutions, especially with the (former) oppressor: the practice of freedom is more convincing and fruitful when there is interaction between and mutual liberation of both groups. This implies that while the oppressor takes decisive measures to dialogue inclusively with the oppressed, the latter seizes this opportunity to introduce horizontal/free (or to an extent, democratic) mechanisms in the structure of power. In this way, both oppressor and oppressed mutualise efforts toward practicing freedom.

In *Karnak Café*, the young visitors of the café, including Ismail and Zaynab, progressively loose hold of resentment against Safwan. They focus on his deep political knowledge on Egypt and tap from what he has as intellectual baggage. The narrator tells us that in just three months, people in the café stop avoiding Safwan, but

instead welcome him as everyone else (Mahfouz 2008, 82). He becomes a member of the café family and he regularly initiates conversations with the young ones. It becomes a habit that they discuss the nation's present and future together. At this stage, one can say that the opposing worlds and identities that existed at the beginning of the novel have been brought together to form a melting pot of constructive ideas.

Now that identities have been de-polarised, the people of Karnak café sit together and examine the potential of culture in relation to freedom. This is the third element in the practice of freedom. The recourse to culture has been experienced in other African texts as a pertinent way forward. For example, in John Nkemngong Nkengasong's "Black Caps and Red Feathers", the absolutism of president Ahidjo's regime is decried and the solution proposed by one of the characters (Creature) is a culturally anchored power. In his play, the clan (representing post-independence Cameroon) will be cleansed only when the leader's power "is linked with the umbilical cord of the gods and ancestors of the clan" (Nkengasong 2001, 57). A fluid connection between indigenous value systems and the nation-state establishment is indispensable for freedom to be experienced. Likewise, the reliance on culture is expressed by literary critics in "A Half-Ride toward the Radiant Sun" where they demonstrate that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Half of a Yellow Sun" hinges freedom (from the spiral of

civil war) "on the spiritual strength of native culture, on its power to reconcile the fragments of the postcolonial being" (Forbang-Looh and Caleb 2020, 67). Thus, both in postcolonial literature and criticism, the idea of culture as a springboard to freedom is recurrent.

In Mahfouz's *Karnak Café*, Safwan opines that instead of wasting much money for a useless war (that even ended with Egypt's woeful defeat), Egyptians should invest on culture. He says: "We should be spending every single penny we have making ourselves more advanced culturally" (Mahfouz 2008, 83). For him, the solution to autocratic power is that culture takes central stage and ceases to be a mere folkloric phenomenon. For him, when culture is at the core of societal structures, autocracy is disavowed, resorts to violence are rejected and the dignity of human beings is sacralised (Mahfouz 2008, 83). The advancement of culture is perceived by Safwan not to be nativist. Rather, he thinks that protecting the values of native culture does not preclude learning from positive values of Western civilisation. One of these values is "the value of science and the scientific method" (Mahfouz 2008, 83).

Furthermore, when we pay attention to the symbolism of Karnak in ancient Egypt, we understand why its setting is important for our understanding of *Karnak Café*. Actually, Karnak was one of the most sacred sites of ancient Egypt. Many temples were erected there including

that of god Amun, who was believed to interact directly with humans. By choosing Karnak as setting for his narrative, Mahfouz indicates that indigenous culture ought to serve as normative space for the regulation of societal forces in Egypt.

These discussions on culture tie with the postcolonial perspective which advocates hybridity: "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation [or despotic power in general]" (Ashcroft et al. 2013, 135). When the encounter between oppressor and oppressed occurs, the culture of tyranny and the culture of frontal resistance collapse to produce a hybrid culture: the culture of freedom. The culture of freedom is the practice of mutualising efforts, energies and ideas in a bid to horizontalise power and transform it from a chain to a guardrail. This transformation is a process that may not find an absolute end. Thus, freedom is a constant practice in which the future is always envisaged to be brighter than the present because it refines the experiences, struggles and hopes of the present. Discussing the link between freedom and the future, Oboe and Bassi in "Experiences of Freedom" say that "there is of necessity a utopian element in freedom, a moment of deferral in its experience which calls for belief and hope" (Oboe and Bassi 2011, 9). It is this hope that ends the narrating in *Karnak Café* as we observe the young generation preparing to take the lead of a freer tomorrow.

The representation of violence and freedom in Mahfouz's *Karnak Café* ties with David Jefferess's ideas on transformational resistance. According to him, resistance that constructs political freedom "must foreground concerns for social and cultural transformation in the form of social justice, popular political participation and non-antagonistic constructions of identity" (Jefferess 2003, 12). These elements clearly spark from our analysis of Mahfouz's text: social justice is obtained when Safwan serves a prison term and his money is confiscated; popular political participation occurs when both Safwan and the café visitors discuss and exchange political views; and their identities cease to be antagonistic when Safwan abandons tyranny and his victims abandon anger and blame theories. *Karnak Café* can therefore be read as a postcolonial novel that allegorically represents the horizontalisation of vertical power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has analysed the allegory of postcolonial power politics in Mahfouz's *Karnak Café*. Using setting, narrative point of view and plot, this article has examined the manner in which the novel allegorically captures the operation of violence and the practice of freedom. It has been demonstrated that freedom from violence and tyranny is sketched in a cathartic encounter between the oppressor and the oppressed. This encounter de-polarises identities and enables joint efforts to conceptualise new, humanised power dynamics.

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