Dams, Displacement and Development in Narratives of the Nubian Awakening

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

School of English

February 2016

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandfather, Dr William Henry Thompson Shepherd, who opened my eyes to the world and gave me the confidence to go out and explore it. It is also dedicated to the late Dr. Anthony Carrigan of Leeds University who, both personally and professionally, was a great inspiration to me. Finally, to my daughter Shilan, in the hope that she may be inspired to go on her own learning journey one day.

Abstract

Entitled 'Dams, Displacement and Development in Narratives of the Nubian Awakening', this thesis is explicitly interdisciplinary and straddles the fields of literary, postcolonial, and critical development studies. It demonstrates how a literary approach to the study of Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement (DIDR) can enhance our understanding of the long-term impact of forced displacement and resettlement on communities like the Nubian people of Egypt, whose historical homeland was flooded to make way for the Aswan High Dam in 1964. It examines how contemporary Egyptian Nubian fiction written between 1968 and the present day, particularly that associated with the revivalist movement known as the 'Nubian Awakening', has responded to, and represented, the legacy of dam-building on the Nile over the course of the twentieth century on Nubian culture and society. Speaking through the silences within hegemonic development discourses that celebrate large dams as symbols of economic, scientific and social progress while glossing over their local costs, I argue that the fiction of Muhammad Khalil Qasim, Yahya Mukhtar, Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Idris 'Ali rewrites the postcolonial history of the Aswan High Dam from a subaltern perspective and constitutes a form of transnational cultural advocacy for Nubian rights. Moreover, by highlighting Egypt's African identity, Nubian literature challenges hegemonic understandings of Egyptian national culture as Arab, thereby creating a more democratic space in which marginalised minority groups can claim a place for their subjectivities, political aspirations and cultural practices within the national imaginary.

Note on Transcription

When transcribing words and phrases from Arabic I use the transliteration method used in the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES). When citing individual authors, I adopt the spelling of their names used in English language publications (eg: Haggag Hassan Oddoul) even if these deviate from standard transliteration. The same is true of citations from texts available in English translation. All other English citations in this thesis are my own translations from Arabic and French sources, unless otherwise stated.

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List of Abbreviations

CIHRS – The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

DIDR – Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement

ECHR – Egyptian Center for Housing Rights

ENAL – Egyptian Nubian Association for Lawyers

IRN – International Rivers Network

IRR – Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction

MENA – Middle East News Agency

NDYU – Nubian Democratic Youth Union

NGO – Non Governmental Organisation

PAPs – Project Affected Peoples

PSC – Psycho-Social-Cultural

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

WCD – World Commission on Dams

Introduction

There is far more important information about the history of hydroelectric construction in the USSR in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* than in all the textbooks on hydraulic engineering.

(Zeyev Volfson, *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union*, 1973)

Today the vast majority of Dam-Induced Displacement and Resettlement (DIDR) schemes carried out in the name of national development continue to end in failure, just as they did fifty years ago in 1964 when the Aswan High Dam was first built. According to the ground-breaking World Commission on Dams (WCD) report *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making* (2000), which surveyed the human and environmental impact of fifty large dams built over the course of the twentieth century, although dams have "made an important and significant contribution to human development, and the benefits derived from them have been considerable, in too many cases an unacceptable and often unnecessary price has been paid to secure those benefits, especially in social and environmental terms, by people displaced, by communities downstream, by taxpayers and by the natural environment" (World Commission on Dams 2000, 7). As a result, there is growing recognition that large dams constitute a "flawed development paradigm that causes an increasing disconnection between the necessary environmental health of river basins and the current needs of people and government for the provision of water, energy and food" (Scudder 2006, 16–18).

Established in response to the anti-dam struggles waged from the mid-1980s onwards, the World Commission on Dams was the first international body to take actively on board the criticism of displaced communities and the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which worked with them about the failings of the DIDR planning process. It was also the first major international agency to endorse a growing body of research calling for a 'risks and rights' approach to resettlement. This centres on the question of how the rights of Project Affected Peoples (PAPs) – whether constitutional, customary and property rights or less quantifiable rights like "the right

to livelihood, survival, cultural integrity and sustainable development and even the right to veto either projects that displace people or settlement schemes that are inadequate" (Morvaridi 2008, 29) – can be protected and strengthened at local and national level. More radically, the WCD report also questions the legitimacy of DIDR on human rights grounds, citing the extensive abuses associated with forced resettlement over the course of the twentieth century and the growth of grassroots resistance movements through which "oustees are realising their rights" in the face of monumental power imbalances between their communities, development agencies and the state as reasons why a moratorium on large dam construction should be imposed (Morvaridi 2008, 30).

Even though it is widely acknowledged that the cooperation of displaced peoples is a key factor in achieving a positive long-term outcome to involuntary resettlement operations (World Commission on Dams 2000; Morvaridi 2008; Bennett and MacDowell 2012), the World Bank's statutory requirement for planners to undertake "meaningful community consultation" (World Bank 2001) is too often treated as a box-ticking exercise. Communities are rarely questioned about their own development priorities and application of the principle of "free, prior and informed consent" is restricted in practice to cases dealing with the rights of indigenous peoples (World Commission on Dams 2000, 112). Moreover, many communities affected by DIDR are marginalised minorities not often considered by governments and development planners to have "the social and cultural tools necessary for executive or even advisory forms of decision-making, planning and execution that pertain to development projects" (Scott 1998, 346–48; Oliver-Smith 2011, 97), resulting in their exclusion from the development debate.

The lack of participation by affected communities in decisions to build large dams has led a number of critics to define development-induced displacement and resettlement as "development induced *involuntary* displacement" because the "free and informed consent of project affected peoples is not obtained in advance" (McCully 2001; Morvaridi 2008; Oliver-Smith 2009; Oliver-Smith 2011; Bennett and MacDowell 2012). Indeed, Anthony Oliver-Smith argues that where states have forced development schemes through without the participation and consent of affected communities, DIDR should be considered as a form of structural violence because it externalises the costs of development onto the environment and marginalised minority groups, violating their right to self-determination (Oliver-Smith 2011, 12).

That the perspectives and priorities of peoples slated for displacement are routinely marginalised within the development planning process is one of the reasons that such communities have increasingly come to perceive major development projects such as megadams, mines and oil pipelines as an existential risk to be resisted at all costs, particularly in the absence of democratic checks and balances (McCully 2001, 77). As a result, recent decades have witnessed a spike in what Rob Nixon terms "resource rebellions" whereby communities have sought to resist both existing large-scale development projects and those still at the planning stage through site-specific struggles and transnational activism (Nixon 2011, 17–19). With tactics varying from violent insurrection, civil disobedience and public protest to "everyday acts of resistance" such as foot-dragging, disrespect and non-compliance, resistance to development is typically incremental, turning violent primarily when more peaceful strategies to resolve the concerns of communities through debate and negotiation have failed (Oliver-Smith 2011).

At a symbolic level, discursive opposition to development typically emerges from the clandestinely expressed complaints and grievances that constitute what James Scott describes as a society's "hidden transcript". This is rarely articulated openly for fear of retribution, particularly in political contexts where freedom of speech and political association are curtailed (Scott 1992, 4–8). However, on those occasions when the hidden transcript enters the public domain, be it through writing, music, art, folk culture, polemic or political speech, it can constitute a powerful form of resistance against hegemonic political and development discourse (Scott 1992, 8). Once culture is mobilised as an axis of resistance, the literary sphere may become one of the key battle grounds for resisting symbolic domination by providing a public platform for challenging hegemonic discourses equating big development with modernity, expressing dissenting perspectives and priorities and articulating political demands that ordinary individuals may be afraid of voicing publicly.

The overarching aim of this thesis will be to explore how a literary approach to DIDR studies can help improve our understanding of why communities come to resist large dams and explain why so many resettlement sites fail to succeed in the eyes of their inhabitants. Focusing attention back onto the perspectives and priorities of members of displaced communities which have too often been excluded by governments and development agencies, it will first outline some of the problems and limitations of mainstream approaches to resettlement theory and practice. It well then

move on to examine how literary texts penned by three generations of Egyptian Nubian writers from 1968 to the present day make what Anthony Carrigan calls a "productive intervention" in the field by "confronting some of the exploitative, normalising, exclusionary practices that accompany dominant technocratic approaches to resettlement and reconstruction" (Carrigan 2015, 133).

As I shall argue in the chapters that follow, contemporary Nubian fiction constitutes a form of what Barbara Harlow terms "resistance literature": one which elaborates a subversive counter-narrative to hegemonic development discourses celebrating large dams as symbols of economic, scientific and social progress, and which illustrates how communities slated for resettlement have sought – materially and symbolically – to resist development-induced displacement and resettlement (Harlow 1987, 78). Indeed, fifty years after the Aswan High Dam flooded all of the land of Nubia on either side of the Egyptian/Sudanese border, displacing an estimated 120,000 Nubians from their homeland, the fiction of writers such as Muhammad Khalil Qasim, Yahya Mukhtar, Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Idris 'Ali constitutes one of the most diverse bodies of material charting the long-term legacy of dam-building and forced displacement on the human and natural environment available within any academic discipline.

Dams, Displacement and Development

For over a century, large dams were pushed as a development strategy by a powerful coalition of politicians, financial institutions and development theorists. According to the WCD report, more than forty-five thousand large dams have now been built around the world, irrigating about forty percent of its agricultural land and generating around twenty percent of its electricity – a trend which peaked in the 1970s when two to three large dams were commissioned per day (World Commission on Dams 2000, xxix). However, by the year 2000 it was clear that the economic benefits of large dams had been grossly overstated while their significant environmental and social costs were systematically underestimated, leading to inequitable development and ecological degradation. Evidence collected by the WCD reveals that their estimated power generation and contribution to world food production fell well short

of targets. Moreover, it indicated that large dams were not proving economically viable in the long term due to cost overruns and shortfalls in technical, financial and economic performance in a majority of cases (World Commission on Dams 2000, xxxi).

Michael Cernea, Patrick McCully and the WCD have independently estimated that by the year 2000 over sixty percent of the worlds' river basins were fragmented by dams, causing the rapid degradation of the world's freshwater supplies and diverse wildlife habitats, while the involuntary resettlement schemes that accompanied these projects had created around one hundred million "oustees", more than all the refugees displaced by war and environmental catastrophes (M. Cernea 1999, 34). The figure now stands at fifteen million per year, and is growing (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 10). As Oliver-Smith observes: "dam construction stands accused of the destruction of entire environments, including flora, fauna, landscapes, river systems, water quality, and shorelines as well as resultant mercury contamination, greenhouse gases, water quality deterioration, downriver hydrological change [and] reservoir sedimentation" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 118), not to mention lowered ground water tables and soil exhaustion and salinity (McCully 2001, 29–64).

The severe ecological degradation caused by large dams has led to calls for a moratorium on construction in all but exceptional cases and the decommissioning of many existing dam projects. No less damning are recent evaluations about the human costs of dam-building on the people displaced to make way for the reservoir and those, downriver, who lose access to clean water, fish, game, grazing land, timber, firewood and wild produce but are rarely defined as project-affected peoples (McCully 2001, 58). When communities are resettled they lose not only their homes, livelihoods and access to the commons which provides them with clean water, fish and game, grazing land and fodder, timber and fuel-wood, wild fruits and vegetables and natural medicines, but the cultural sites, social structures, networks and ties, cultural identity and mutual help mechanisms that help communities cope with change (McCully 2001, 66; Oliver-Smith 2009, 226).

Within the command-and-control model of development theory nature is treated as a commodity to be exploited for the maximum benefit, economically defined, of the highest number. This reinforces the nature/culture binary, focusing on those aspects of the natural world that can be appropriated for human use at the expense of other considerations, such as the intrinsic value of biodiversity, the non-

monetary value of nature to indigenous communities, and the importance of the (home)land as a locus of cultural and spiritual practices ranging from magic to worship and rituals involving birth, death and marriage (Scott 1998, 13). Thus, "from its complex, multifaceted identities, in which land is the birthplace of the gods, the abode of the ancestors, the source of spiritual as well as material sustenance, the context of historical tradition, and a provider of a sense of continuity through time, [it] reduces the identity of land to a single characteristic, its value as a resource" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 89).

Similarly, Behrooz Morvaridi and James Scott have condemned dam-induced displacement and resettlement as a "classic social-engineering exercise" in which the people displaced are viewed as "problems or victims ... without agency" (Morvaridi 2008, 1) and questions about what "adequate protection or resettlement and rehabilitation mean to the refugee or oustee are seldom asked" (Morvaridi 2008, 8). As Scott argues, large-scale development projects like megadams provide national governments with a rare opportunity to refashion the physical and social environment from scratch according to "state maps of legibility" (Scott 1998, 3) by harnessing the modernising force of social liquidity in the service of economic and social progress. Central to this approach is the idea that the cultures of 'backward' peoples who stand in the way of development projects can be sacrificed in the name of progress, both for the 'greater good' of the nation and that of their own communities.

Not only are such peoples often deemed to be 'under-utilising' the land they inhabit, thus paving the way for governments to exercise 'eminent domain' rights over local landowners and users (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 213), but resettlement itself is often perceived by postcolonial administrations as a means of furthering the nation-building project by replacing the "welter of incommensurable small communities, familiar to their inhabitants but mystifying to outsiders … with a single national society perfectly legible from the centre" (Scott 1998, 32). However, recent studies indicate that this drive for social modernisation "radically simplifies and standardises what are complex and diverse social structures and fails to capture local dynamics and perspectives" (Scott 1998, 30), treating the displaced as if they have interchangeable needs and wants, with "no gender, no tastes, no history, no values, no opinions or original ideas, no traditions, and no distinctive personalities ... [i.e.] none of the particular, situated, and contextual attributes that one would expect of any population" (Scott 1998, 346).

One consequence of this approach is that resettled communities rarely thrive. Not only are they characterised by severe economic impoverishment due to the overwhelming failure of resettlement schemes to restore lost livelihoods, but they are marked by a phenomenon which has been variously termed the "resettlement effect", "community disarticulation" or "social disarticulation". This is manifested by collective "trauma, psycho-social loss [and] a reduction in well-being and health" (Morvaridi 2008, 16). As vital social networks and systems of authority are weakened, groups lose a capacity to self-manage and the society suffers a demonstrable reduction in its ability to cope with uncertainty due to a temporary or permanent loss of behavioural patterns, economic practices, institutions, and symbols (Downing 1996, 34). Art Hansen and Oliver-Smith have also noted that social disarticulation "tends to be most serious when oustees are moved as a community to a dissimilar habitat where they must coexist with unfamiliar hosts" (Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982, 271). As a result, for many displaced peoples the brave new world of the resettlement site comes to be seen not as a land of opportunity but a "nightmarish postmodern landscape of homelessness" (Shami and Center for Migration Studies (U.S.) 1994, 2) in which they, as outsiders, do not have the resources to survive.

Due to the widespread environmental and social costs of large dams on the communities they displace and the overwhelming failure of development agencies to mitigate these, the debate over large dams – both those in place and those still on the drawing board – has become "one of the most hotly contested issues in sustainable development today" (World Commission on Dams 2000, 6). Whereas the socialist and neo-liberal schools of development have championed large dam projects as a means of promoting economic growth, modernisation and social 'progress', theorists writing from a political-ecological perspective contend that the pain and loss experienced by displaced communities should not be written off as the acceptable cost of national development. They also argue that "water can be provided for drought-prone areas much more quickly, cheaply and equitably with the use of small-scale schemes" (McCully 2001, 24) using simple technologies like rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge and water recycling, as well as investing in renewable energy (Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982; Downing and Kushner 1988; Scott 1998; McCully 2001; Scudder 2006; Oliver-Smith 2009; Oliver-Smith 2011).

While traditional ecology remained largely apolitical, and Marxist political economy and development studies assumed a high amount of structural determinacy regarding the expected impact of development projects on local communities and the environment, political ecology straddles these two approaches by analysing how power relations mediate human-environment relations through the lens of political economy. Moreover, political ecology is rooted in a critique of modernity that questions the top-down assumptions of world systems theory and its faith in the scientific management of nature and the dichotomisation of nature and culture, while remaining materialist in its orientation (Biersack and Greenberg 2006, 3–40). Because political ecologists posit that nature is not external to culture but humanly produced (both conceptually and physically), they argue that development conflicts should be viewed as taking place at the interface of culture and politics, and that struggles for rights and economic and political-institutional power are therefore entangled with struggles over meanings and representations.

Citing the "irreversible impacts" of large dams on the human and physical environment (World Commission on Dams 2000, 25), such critics deem large dams both unsustainable and incompatible with the doctrine of 'development as freedom' adopted in the 1986 United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution on the Right to Development (Resolution 41/128), which replaced the economic bias of the Washington Consensus with a commitment to prioritising social justice and benefits-sharing as well as the emerging legal concept of indigenous rights. Arguing that the benefits of large dams "have been exaggerated and could often have been produced by other less destructive and more equitable means" (McCully 2001, xv), they oppose the continued promotion of large dam projects by development economists, the World Bank and governments like India, China, Turkey and Spain which reject the World Commission on Dams recommendation that large dam construction be considered a last resort. In their place, they advocate alternative conceptions of development that produce greater local benefits, reduce costs to local people, respect the principles of social justice and democratic consent, and promote environmental sustainability and human and civil rights.

Towards a Literary Approach to DIDR Studies

While cognitive gains have been made in understanding the long-term economic consequences for communities displaced by large dams and other major infrastructure schemes, there has been a marked lack of attention to the negative social consequences of forced displacement and the structural relationship between development and history, identity and marginalisation within the field of DIDR studies. This has led to claims from theorists writing from a political ecological perspective like Theodore Downing, Thayer Scudder and Anthony Oliver-Smith that DIDR studies, like cognate disciplines such as Disaster Studies which evolved during the Cold War as "an interdisciplinary field concerned with 'managing' crisis situations amongst vulnerable communities still grappling with the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonial practices" (Carrigan 2015, 120), lacks a basis in sound social theory and is "culturally unsophisticated" (Downing and Garcia Downing 2009, 225–320; Scott 1998, 348).

Political ecology developed as a post-disciplinary "meeting space of power/ history/ culture" (Biersack and Greenberg 2006, 5). It emphasises the importance of collaborating across disciplines to discuss questions such as how representations of the human and physical environment are formed and whose knowledge counts in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the causes, effects and local impacts of development-induced displacement and resettlement (Selby 2003, 46). By contrast, prevailing technical, political and ecological discourses on water conflicts generally minimise the importance of cultural questions such as identity, social geometry, resettlement stresses and symbolism of space and time (Selby 2003, 45–46). Similarly, the dominant managerial and technocratic approach to DIDR theory and practice stands accused of failing to define adequately what it means by the 'social costs' and 'social impacts' of forced resettlement.

For example, Michael Cernea's 'Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction' (IRR) model, which has formed the basis of the World Bank guidelines for dealing with development induced displacement and resettlement since 1979, posits that when economic growth is restored and the impoverishment risks facing displaced populations – namely landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality, loss of access to common property and social disarticulation – are mitigated (M. Cernea 1999, 18), the resettlement site will

succeed in the eyes of its inhabitants. However, it focuses on the economic dimensions of displacement and resettlement at the expense of what Cernea terms psycho-social-cultural (PSC) considerations such as loss of place, identity, language and cultural heritage, all of which may affect how displaced peoples respond to their new environment and which, by Cernea's own admission, are best explored using disciplines other than economics (M. Cernea 1999, 14).

Although it may seem obvious that "displacement and the impoverishment it entails would have severe consequences for a community's cultural and social well-being" (McCully 2001, 81), the technocratic management strategies favoured by DIDR practitioners too often fail to go beyond addressing the physical needs of the displaced, assuming that "social recovery occurs when the material needs – such as income, housing, livelihood, productive systems, jobs, compensation and social infrastructure – are met" (Oliver-Smith 2009, 225). While the material risks associated with forced resettlement have been identified, theorised and, to a certain extent, mitigated by restoring losses, recovering livelihoods and in rare instances, sharing project benefits (M. Cernea 1999; M. Cernea and Mathur 2008) the psycho-social problems experienced by many communities resettled to make way for large dams such as economic and social marginalisation, human rights abuses, intergenerational breakdown and loss of language and cultural traditions remain under-theorised.

Indeed, the social consequences of resettlement are widely considered to be the most "conceptually intractable" part of the displacement and reconstruction process, yet are "the most neglected, the most difficult to study, and the least likely to be mitigated" in practice (Downing and Garcia Downing 2009, 227). This is due in part to a culture of denial by theorists and development practitioners about the levels of trauma forced displacement inflicts on resettled communities. Too often, Scudder argues, oustees are perceived as whinging, incompetent or even indulging in a victim complex (Scudder 2006, 20) while the psycho-social problems that typically accompany resettlement are often identified as "the consequences, rather than the cause, of their failure to take advantage of opportunities offered to them" in their new environment (Downing and Garcia Downing 2009, 226).

Because the dominant needs-based model of resettlement planning fails to acknowledge either the psycho-social relationship between space, place and history or the importance of local practices, priorities and principles, its claims to be able to

manage the rapid social change brought about by displacement and resettlement have proven illusory. Scott, McDowell, Morvaridi and Downing ascribe this failure to the unanticipated second and third-order consequences, contingencies and complexities lying beyond the grasp of development planners who have a tendency to focus on mitigating the short-term material and economic risks associated with DIDR at the expense of more complex, yet subtle, psycho-social considerations (McDowell 1996, 35; Scott 1998, 344; Downing and Garcia Downing 2009, 227–228). These include "the loss of livelihood strategies, common property assets, changes in socio-cultural identity and geographical space that are crucial for a community's sense of well-being" (Morvaridi 2008, 20).

However, whereas restoration of lost income or property in the resettlement site is a feasible goal, the same does not necessarily hold true in the psycho-social realm where "Humpty-dumpty cannot be put back together again" so easily (Downing and Garcia Downing 2009, 236). Scudder posits that because risks are socially constructed they are perceived differently by different categories of people, such as men and women, young and old, rich and poor and, indeed, so-called development 'experts' and threatened communities (Scudder 2006, 19). Consequently, there is often a clear lack of agreement between project authorities and project-affected peoples over the purpose, objectives and benefits of the proposed development scheme, with insufficient weight given to the value communities place on their (home)lands, livelihoods and social and cultural heritage above and beyond the proposed local economic benefits of the project – a perceived lack which can be linked in turn to the growth of the global anti-dam movement in the 1980s and 1990s.

Due to the success of grassroots resistance movements, in alliance with international NGOs, in preventing or stalling high-profile large dam projects such as the *Sardar Sarovar* dam in Gujarat, India and the *Pak Mun* dam at the confluence of the Mun and Mekong rivers in Thailand, development theorists have been forced to question "not only their right to define development ... but also the very epistemological grounding that their definitions and formulations are based on" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 17). This has been accompanied by recognition of the need for "alternative conceptualisations [of development] that produce local benefits and reduce costs to local people, particularly amongst those affected by 'big development' or 'development aggression' which ... favour national or global interests over those of people at local level" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 17). Not least amongst the reasons for this

is because "the central problem of displacement and resettlement is essentially the uprooting of people and the destruction of homes and communities in the name of progress" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 3), which runs counter to the principle of 'development as freedom'.

Informed by the powerful critique of dam building which emerged at the end of the twentieth century, a consensus is now emerging within the academy and amongst development practitioners that a bottom-up, people-centred approach is needed to enhance our understanding of the long-term legacy of resettlement on involuntarily displaced communities (McCully 2001; Oliver-Smith 2009; Downing and Garcia Downing 2009; Oliver-Smith 2011; Bennett and MacDowell 2012). Given that the managerial model of resettlement planning radically oversimplifies the complexity of socio-cultural responses to development-induced displacement and resettlement and that policy makers do not possess a winning formula to guarantee the success of resettlement projects, critics writing from a political ecological perspective have argued that DIDR studies must take greater account of subjective experience and emphasise a more people-centred, discursive approach to understanding the social dynamics of displacement and its inter-generational impact.

The process of recovering ordinary peoples' stories and experiences started with the collection and analysis of oral testimonies by those who had experienced dam-induced displacement, notably Olivia Bennett and Christopher MacDowell's ground-breaking study *Displaced: The Human Cost of Development and Resettlement* (2012). Whereas most forms of community consultation about large dam schemes are carried out prior to displacement, they argue, oral testimony captures the perspectives and experiences of oustees generations after resettlement has taken place. Indeed, they contend that it can provide "important new knowledge about intergenerational consequences of land alienation and relocation" (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 3) and increase our understanding of the impact of development-induced displacement on displaced peoples, "especially its less visible and quantifiable aspects" (Bennett and McDowell, Preface, xii). Moreover, because those most negatively affected by DIDR are often the poorest and most marginalised, oral testimonies amplify the voices of those least heard in the development debate and balance them against the 'objective' analyses of international experts who have consistently failed to "represent [them] and their concerns as they would wish themselves to be represented" (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 25).

Notwithstanding, this attention to the perspectives and priorities of displaced peoples has not yet been matched by an acknowledgement of the added value that literary and cultural studies can bring to our understanding of the legacy of forced displacement resettlement. This is in spite of the fact that literary texts, from the slave narratives which bolstered the politics of abolitionism to the 'stolen generations' narratives that brought public attention to bear on the forced removal of indigenous children from their birth families by the Australian government, have been key sites for articulating the communal traumas of displaced peoples in their own terms. As Chumbo Maraka, a member of the San minority displaced to make way for commercial farms, cattle ranches and national parks in the Okavango delta in Botswana, observes, resettlement left his people without a voice, dependent on others, and with no power over their own lives. More than anything, he states, the people "should be allowed to speak for themselves" (McDowell 1996, 110).

It is my contention in this thesis that a literary approach to understanding development-induced displacement and resettlement has an important role to play in highlighting the "power of language, imaginative writing, literary criticism, and narrative form" (Carrigan 2015, 119) to represent the experience of forced resettlement from within displaced communities, challenging hegemonic discourses of 'modernisation as development' which have for so long monopolised the development agenda. Literature's capacity to make "the unapparent appear … accessible and tangible by humanising drawn out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses … challenging perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bringing into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory collaboration" (Nixon 2011, 15) allows it to articulate the deep psychological and social trauma that 'big development' projects such as the Aswan High Dam leave in their wake in ways that are difficult to capture using the quantitative methodologies favoured by DIDR theorists.

As Bennett and MacDowell observe, "most lives are in reality far more ambiguous, problematic and chaotic than most social science research acknowledges" (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 33–34). As a result of literature's long lens and the multiple perspectives it encapsulates, it is capable of articulating the complex, contradictory and often shifting responses to displacement and resettlement within communities across ethnic, class and gender lines, and showing how these evolve over time in a way that project-centred approaches, whether they are interview-based or

ethnographic, cannot. Moreover, literature is capable of 'humanising' DIDR studies by placing identity politics, personal stories, and a more nuanced approach to human-environmental relations at the core of our understanding of how development-forced displacement affects communities over a period of generations (Carrigan 2015, 131).

Beyond its role in bringing the threats posed by DIDR emotionally to life by communicating and humanising the fears and apprehensions of the displaced, literature also amplifies marginalised voices by providing a platform from which communities can "speak to and for others and themselves" (Chaturvedi 2000, 200). For example, writers such as Abdulrahman Munif, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Indra Sinha and Arundhati Roy – the latter of whom acted as unofficial porte-parole for the 'Save the Narmada' movement founded in opposition to construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat, India – have deployed their cultural capital and iterative authority to raise awareness of the human and environmental impact of issues ranging from petroleum extraction, construction of oil pipelines and outsourced toxicity to megadams amongst global audiences (Nixon 2011, 6).

In acting as figureheads for social movements and communities under threat from big development, such writers have become 'lightning rods' for controversy by deflecting the political repercussions for oustees of voicing dissent to government policy (Nixon 2011, 23–30). Partially shielded by their elevated public status, writer-activists typically enjoy greater discursive freedom to intervene in the public sphere and to articulate the views and demands of displaced communities. However, in some cases, notably that of the Ogoni author Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed by the Nigerian military for his role in highlighting what he called the "genocide against the Ogoni" people by petroleum companies polluting the Niger delta, this strategy exposes writers to tragic risks. Simultaneously, however, Saro-Wiwa's plight has ensured that the struggles he highlights in his literature remain firmly on the world map today, keeping up the pressure on the oil company Shell and the Nigerian government and military to be held to account for their actions and abuses (Vidal 2015).

Such literature clearly has more than simple aesthetic value: it has also proven to be a potent vehicle for advancing human rights claims across the world. In her study of testimonial narratives, Gillian Whitlock suggests that there is something "dynamic and interactive about testimonial discourse, which is generically rhetorical and dialogic: [and which involves] an appeal to an addressee, a text in search of a

witness, a desire to invoke witnessing publics" (Whitlock 2015, 8–9) that "demands recognition and response in terms of social action and social justice" (Whitlock 2015, 169). Indeed, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub observe in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991), "testimony must be literary" if it is to engage the reader in the work of the belated witness and trigger "the imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – in one's own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate involvement" (Felman and Laub 1991, 108).

Unlike history or oral testimony projects which are largely restricted to the 'objective' recording of events, testimonial literature has the power to elicit an emotional and ethical response on the part of the reader by putting a "human face to suffering" (Whitlock 2007, 149) and enabling the creation of an empathetic bridge between cultures and disparate historical experiences whereby [the act of] listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and the creation of new forms of community (Craps 2013, 2). As in South Africa, where texts such as Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948) and Mark Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy* (1986) drew the attention of the reading public to human rights violations in a manner that prefigured the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Whitlock 2007, 144–48), testimonial life writing has the capacity to become a powerful agent of consciousness-raising and social change in its own right, as I shall explore in my analysis of the writing of three generations of Nubian writers in the chapters that follow.

Likewise, as Stef Craps has shown in his ground-breaking analysis of postcolonial trauma narratives *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (2013), literature, however ambivalent and indirect its references, "need not lead us away from history but can afford unique access to [it]" (Craps 2013, 11). What distinguishes memory from history, as the trauma theorist Marianne Hirsch has argued, is the presence of "an affective link to the past or a material living connection' with the collective history" (Hirsch 2012, 33). Consequently, memory – powerfully mediated through the lens of literature, photography and testimony – can deliver insights into understanding traumatised identities and communal responses to trauma that "exceed the bounds of traditional historical archives and methodologies" (Hirsch 2012, 3, 33).

In particular, as Michael Rothberg argues in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), memory is capable of articulating, transmitting and memorialising traumatic events and thus allowing us to comprehend "the relationship victimised groups establish between their past and present circumstances" (Rothberg 2009, 2). As such, it could be argued that literary accounts of forced displacement "complement, supplement, dialogue with, and critically interrupt testimonial and historical frames of storytelling" through discourses that are typically more complex, ambivalent and multi-perspectival than either individual testimonies, 'official' histories or politicised discourses on displacement (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xiii).

The role of literature is particularly salient when it comes to analysing the long-term, inter-generational legacy of forced displacement on communities such as the Egyptian Nubians, forcibly resettled from their ancestral homeland over fifty years ago. Understanding why this historical trauma continues to resonate so intensely amongst the descendants of Nubian oustees requires a focus on what Hirsch and Eva Hoffman have termed the 'hinge' or 'post' generation of people who, although they have not experienced historic communal trauma directly, nevertheless maintain a "sense of living connection … and guardianship of a traumatic personal and generational past" (Hirsch 2012, 1). As such, they are intimately involved in the transmission of 'knowledge' of such events to subsequent generations through the creation or circulation of narratives, often in the form of survivors' testimonies or tales of dispersal. These are validated by recirculation until they achieve a totemic status and enter into the society's collective memory: a process which goes beyond private or familial recollections to encompass mediated public and communal structures of memorialisation and identity (re)construction (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 37).

In *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012), Hirsch argues that the concept of postmemory is central to explaining the complex relationship between the generation which physically lived through a traumatic communal experience like the Holocaust, slavery, genocide or forced displacement, and the generations that succeed them. She defines it as:

> the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and
> cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember'

only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to this past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness ... These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation. (Hirsch 2012, 5)

As we can see from this description, narrative and discursive practices are closely implicated in transmitting the experience of communal trauma from one generation to the next. For Hirsch, "second generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma" (Hirsch 2012, 34), and they do so by uncovering and retelling the life experiences of displaced peoples that might otherwise be absent from the historical archive. The notion of postmemory may thus explain why Nubian authors writing decades after their community had been displaced by the Aswan High Dam felt it was so important to remember and recreate the events of the past, particularly given that its traumatic legacy remains largely unacknowledged by the Egyptian state and in dominant discourses.

Social scientists have often been dismissive of the value of testimony as an historical resource on the basis that human memory "bears the imprint of bias, distortion and even exaggeration" (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xiii) and tends to mythologise the past in such a manner that the "history of exile and dispossession assumes heroic proportions" (Chatty 2010, 283). Certainly, the use of memory as a means of understanding historical events raises methodological and conceptual questions like "What shapes a narrative of displacement decades after the events recalled? How is memory constructed by the passage of time, by the particular character of 'exile' and by interactions between researcher and interviewee/participant?" (Marfleet 2013, 308). However, as Anjali Roy and Nandi Bhatia observe, literary texts, unlike purely political discourses, can also "shatter and

rupture romantic affiliations or idealisations of 'home' that diasporic communities construct in the face of loss or trauma" (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xxiv).

> Thus, although memory may indeed be biased, exaggerated and subjective: what people believe to be true can be as important as what may be true in a more factual sense, in terms of exerting influence upon their hopes, fears, priorities and choices ... People don't think or act in the neat sectors in which specialists work. They don't make economic decisions in a vacuum, so taking account of personal and collective memories and history can illuminate the values and past experiences that underpin social and economic structures, relationships and patterns of decision-making. (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 29)

As a result, testimonial narratives, whether factually 'correct' or otherwise, can help reveal the complex and shifting perceptions of forced displacement and resettlement within communities that are key factors in determining the long-term success or failure of resettlement sites in the eyes of their inhabitants.

It is important to stress that memory is a dynamic and performative process of creation rather than a secure, stable process of historical recollection or re-enactment. Consequently, even though memory refers to the past it is ultimately a profoundly contemporary phenomenon which seeks to "build new worlds out of the material of older ones" (Rothberg 2009, 5). While the Nubian literature examined over the course of this study is certainly characterised by what Hirsch and Miller call 'rites' of displacement and return that centre on past experiences of loss and trauma through an aesthetics of remembrance, this is articulated less through a desire for the physical recovery of Old Nubia, transformed beyond recognition by the lenses of memory and time as much as by the rising flood waters, than by the need to "witness, record and repair a history of injury" (Hirsch and Miller 2011a, 2), as mediated through shared memories of homeland, displacement and exile (Anderson 1991, 6–7).

That the experience of historical trauma can be generative as well as destructive is a factor often overlooked by DIDR theorists whose emphasis on the social disarticulation which so often follows resettlement masks the extent to which acts of cultural creation are often reparative in nature, particularly in a diasporic context characterised by "the search for identity [and] the reconstruction of identity

as a bricolage after the rupture" (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 37). Similarly, as I shall argue in the chapters that follow, contemporary Nubian literature is overwhelmingly absorbed by the task of recreating a diasporic Nubian identity in the absence of a shared geographic or linguistic space which is capable of being integrated into a more plural and accommodating Egyptian national imaginary.

Egyptian Nubians and the Aswan High Dam Case

The legacy of dam building on the Nile at Aswan over the course of the twentieth century is no exception to the litany of environmental, economic and human failure outlined above. First constructed in 1902 and subsequently raised in 1912 and 1933 respectively, the Aswan Low Dam had displaced eleven Egyptian Nubian villages within a relatively small geographical area. By contrast, the Aswan High Dam, which was erected in 1964, operated on an altogether different scale. It displaced Egypt's estimated fifty thousand Nubians from forty-four towns and villages to the area known as Kom Ombo north of Aswan, which was later to become known as 'New Nubia'. Simultaneously, around seventy thousand Sudanese Nubians were sent to the 'New Halfa' Irrigation Scheme situated at Khashim el-Girba on the Sudanese border with Ethiopia (Dafalla and Nordiska afrikainstitutet 1975; Fahim 1980).

All that remained of ancient Nubia, a land traditionally falling along the Nile between the first and sixth cataracts south of Aswan and north of Khartoum, was subsequently submerged under Lake Nasser. Construction of this "potent symbol of postcolonial power etched onto the landscape" (Dimeo 2015, 80) followed what David Dimeo terms "the cartographic amputation of Nubia" by the British colonial administration. "In 1899 for the first time", he writes, "Sudanese Nubia was cut off from Egyptian Nubia, setting in motion a process of differential cultural, political and economic development for the peoples living on either side of the frontier over the course of the twentieth century" (Dimeo 2015, 77). Unmarked for most of its length, this new border, which largely followed the twenty second parallel, was created in response to local revolts in order to "facilitate control over desert populations by delineating policing responsibilities for the puppet regimes in Cairo and Khartoum"

(Dimeo 2015, 77), and by dissecting Nubian tribal territories and family groups, placing them under two separate spheres of influence.

The British Mandate's division of the region into two separate administrative entities also suited the postcolonial nationalist administrations of Egypt and Sudan. Now that central governments had acquired the bureaucratic and technological capacity to control every inch of their territories (Mitchell 1991), Presidents Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt and Ibrahim Abboud of Sudan embarked upon a series of projects aimed at harnessing the hydrological power of the Nile river to their national advantage, subjecting the physical environment to the will of the political centre. In 1959, Nasser and Abboud unilaterally signed an agreement to construct the Aswan High Dam without adequately consulting the estimated one hundred and twenty thousand Nubians whose ancestors had inhabited the area since 3700BC but were soon to be permanently "erased from the map" ('Ali 1998, 24), transformed into what Nixon has termed 'virtual uninhabitants' (Nixon 2011, 153).

For a people interconnected by kinship and trade, the High Dam effectively severed age-old regional ties. Hussein Dafalla describes the scene at Faras East, near the Sudanese border with Egypt, on the day of departure when the whole village congregated in the local cemetery carrying branches of date palms to say farewell to the dead and pay their last respects to the village saint Fakki Uthman. He recounts how he saw:

> a young girl in her twenties embracing an old woman and each passionately hugging the other and weeping hot tears ... I was told that they were mother and daughter; the girl and her husband were living in Adindan village, next to Faras East, on the Egyptian border. As they were emigrating to Kom Ombo, near Aswan, she had come to say good-bye to her father and mother, who were taking the train to Khashim el-Girba. They might never see each other again. (Dafalla 1975, 241)

The Nubians were then moved hundreds of kilometres away to dry, sparsely vegetated, savannah regions which shared little, whether in terms of physical or human ecology, with the land they had left behind which were unable to support the date palms that constituted the Nubians' only cash crop, or the lentils, beans, chickpeas, lupins and peas which sustained their traditional diet (Dafalla 1975, 71–

85). Furthermore, both areas were home to tribes whose language and ways of life were markedly different from those of the Nubian people. Tensions were exacerbated by insensitive policy-making, which dispersed families between different settlements (Dafalla 1975, 278–300) and made few provisions to preserve Nubian culture. As a result, children were schooled exclusively in Arabic and many site-specific customs, such as rituals pertaining to births, marriages and deaths, died out (Hägg 1987, 411).

Most noticeable of all these changes observed by anthropologists was the loss of the Nile, which had sustained their crops, animals and livelihoods and "around which an entire cultural orientation and way of life was developed" (H. Fahim 1983, 51). As Hussein Fahim argues in his ethnography of the resettled Nubians, *Egyptian Nubians: Resettlement and Years of Coping* (1983), Nubian culture and society had been "constantly in tune with the Nile's flow" for millennia. Consequently, its absence caused "a depression which goes far deeper than that related to the loss of a homeland and which has affected their attitude toward the quality of life in the new land" (H. Fahim 1983, 116). Similarly, according to Peter Geiser in his study of Nubian migration to Cairo over the course of the twentieth century, the sudden loss of "their" Nile caused the displaced Nubians to perceive themselves as *mankubīn* or "afflicted people" (Geiser 1986, 31).

These sentiments of loss and alienation are voiced in the testimony of Muhammad Tahir, which constitutes one of the few extant historical sources articulating the impact of forced resettlement on the Nubian community in their own words and is quoted by Tomas Hägg in a paper given at the International Conference for Nubian Studies in Uppsala in 1986. When asked whether he would ever voluntarily leave his land, Tahir states:

> We said we would not leave here. I was born here on this earth, and it has engraved itself on my mind. The dust of this earth is better than the wheat of new Halfa. We are accustomed to the cold, the Nile and the Mountains here. This is our way of life, this is what we are used to. To those who emigrated to Khashim el-Girba the environment does no good. (Hägg 1987, 407–12, 407)

Based on the conviction that without the Nile, Nubia was 'gone' and with it the Nubian culture, language and way of life, the inhabitants of the town of Wadi Halfa in Sudanese Nubia who were slated for displacement had coined the slogan 'the sand of

Wadi Halfa is better than the wheat of Khashim el-Girba'. This epithet aimed to "nullify the main argument of the government – namely that the Nubians could enjoy a much higher standard of living in their new habitat, because the area of arable land in Khashim el-Girba would be considerably larger than in the Nile valley" – by drawing attention to the Nubian peoples' enduring cultural and emotional ties to ancient Nubia (Hägg 1987, 403).

Similarly, studies analysing the long-term environmental and social legacy of the Aswan High Dam have condemned the "ecological ignorance and short-sightedness" (H. Fahim 1983, 51–52) which led to the rapid sedimentation of Lake Nasser and the loss of the 9.5 million tonnes of Nile sediment that had once fertilised the flood plain and delta upon which Egyptian agriculture depended (McCully 2001, 34). Cut off from the annual flood which would trigger "signals for reproduction and growth as well as providing soil nutrients from the silt" (McCully 29-47), Egypt's agricultural lands lost productivity while perennial irrigation systems, touted as the saviour of modern agribusiness, contributed to falling groundwater tables, reduced downstream flow, and caused the rapid erosion of the Nile Delta. Lake Nasser also created the conditions for water-borne parasites to thrive, causing a significant increase in incidences of malaria, onchocerciasis (river blindness), and schistosomiasis (bilharzia) (Jobin 1999).

Moreover, in keeping with the findings of the 2000 WCD report, which showed that large dams have had a particularly severe impact on the livelihoods and cultures of marginalised minority groups due to structural inequalities and economic, cultural and political marginalisation (World Commission on Dams 2000, xxxi, 110), recent ethnographic research reveals that Nubian oustees have been left "economically, culturally and emotionally devastated" (McCully 2001, 66) fifty years after they were displaced. This evidence directly contradicts the prevailing assumption amongst DIDR practitioners that economic development and technocratic 'quick fixes' could kick-start community regeneration and that, within five to ten years, the Egyptian Nubian community would have adapted to the new environment (Scudder 1968, Adams 1977, Agouba 1979; Fernea and Gerster, 1991; Scudder 2006).

In addition to inadequate community consultation; the breakdown of neighbourhood, family and kinship ties; disappointment about unfulfilled government promises; feelings of cultural and environmental dislocation; and the limited economic resources and opportunities available in New Nubia, leading to increased

labour migration to the north (Fahim 1983, 111–161) many displaced Nubians have still not received any formal title deeds to their land which formed part of the originally agreed compensation package on the pretext that "the state's budget did not allow it" (Mikhail 2016). Indeed, the ECHR has estimated that, as of 2010, the number of Nubian families who had still not been compensated for their confiscated homes was a "staggering" 5221 out of a total of the around 8000 displaced in 1964 (Janmyr 2016, 6).

This factor apparently caused many of the inhabitants of 'New Nubia' to "shy away from too great investment" in their new community (Shami and Center for Migration Studies (U.S.) 1994, 157), leading in turn to a lack of long-term economic opportunity and increased labour migration to the cities of northern Egypt and further afield, both in the Gulf and Europe. It was precisely this tendency on the part of many Nubians to look beyond the resettlement site which led Fahim to conclude, in 1983, that "the Kom Ombo settlement failed, in the eyes of most Nubians to become a viable community that could provide a promising future" (H. Fahim 1983, 111).

By the mid-1980s, therefore, it was clear to many observers that the "transitional" stage of the resettlement process, in which the Nubians felt "at home" in their new surroundings and were actively establishing a future there, was unlikely to be reached (Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982, 267–87; Scudder 2006). For as Fahim rightly asks, "how can the transitional period be considered over while the Nubians have not yet adjusted and, as of 1980, were returning, although in limited numbers, to their original homeland [namely new settlements on Lake Nasser at Abu Simbel, Tushka, and New Wadi Halfa] and at the same time expanding the scale of their traditional pattern of labour migration?" (H. Fahim 1983, 109). This tendency to look beyond the resettlement area, whether couched in terms of dreams of return or labour migration to the cities, meant that by the early 1980s the viability of New Nubia was seriously open to question. As Khalil Shifa opined in *Nubia News* in 1977*:* "living in New Nubia in the hope that things might get better is no more than a mirage" (Shifa 1977, cited in H. Fahim 119).

These assessments about the failure of the resettlement site at Kom Ombo fly in the face of hegemonic governmental and development discourses of the period which stressed how the lives of members of the Nubian community were to be 'improved' in accordance with supposedly 'rational' development criteria, including the replacement of the barter with a monetary economy; subsistence farming with

commercial agriculture; and traditional agricultural methods with new technology designed to increase productivity and income. Indeed, Nasser and his ministers promised the Egyptian Nubians who had assembled at Abu Simbel in 1962 to hear him speak that "if the Nubian people are leaving their smaller home of Nubia for the prosperity of the republic ... they will find stability, prosperity and a decent life" in Kom Ombo, where they would have better access to health care and education as well as utilities such as piped water and electricity for the first time ·(H. Fahim 1983, 36).

Such rhetoric was accompanied by a strong tendency on the part of the Egyptian government to regard the Nubians as 'collateral damage', a people whose culture and way of life were worth sacrificing in the name of development and progress. This mind-set can be linked in turn to a blind adherence by governments of the day to the doctrine of what Scott terms 'High Modernism'. Defined, for the purposes of this study, as "a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature) and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws" (Scott 1998, 4), the High Modernist approach to development adopted by successive Egyptian leaders, from the time of the British colonial administration through to the premierships of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, was nevertheless "uncritical, un-sceptical, and thus unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production" (Scott 1998, 4).

The decision to resettle the Nubians away from their ancestral homeland was driven by the belief that the benefits of state-sponsored economic and agricultural development projects and greater integration into the nation would far outweigh the 'minor' costs of the processes of resettlement and readjustment which, as argued previously, were considered as means of speeding up the modernisation process and permitting the extension of state control over the people and land. As Timothy Mitchell notes in his seminal examination of the creation of the modern Egyptian state, *Colonising Egypt* (1991), institutions such as schools and the army, along with new developments in urban planning, communication and transportation grids, were designed to organise the urban and rural masses and unassimilated minorities "into an organised and disciplined whole. It was this obedient and regulated whole that was

to be imagined under the name of the 'nation' that was to be constructed as Egyptian society" (Mitchell 1991, 119).

In order to achieve this end, the Nubians' distinctive language, culture and way of life were systematically "uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory" through a process of what Nixon terms 'national amnesia' (Nixon 2011, 151) that effectively erased Nubia from the national imaginary just as Lake Nasser had erased it from the map. As a result, the long-term impact of dam building on Nubian culture and society can be characterised as a form of what Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), has termed "slow violence"(Nixon 2011). Unlike the notion of structural violence, which has static connotations, slow violence is defined as a form of violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 3) because of its invisibility and long time span, and the fact that its casualties may be postponed for generations.

As well as foregrounding questions of time, movement and change, however gradual, slow violence is marked by both the physical and imaginative displacement of so-called "disposable" people in a process whereby the direct violence of eviction is coupled with the indirect violence of exclusion from the national imaginary (Nixon 2011, 151). Slow violence can thus be linked to the symbolic violence of forgetting and non-recognition at the level of the state. Too often, Nixon argues, "the developmental fantasy of a benign, redemptive dam" has resulted in national amnesia towards the experience of dispossession and displacement of liminal segments of the population whose homes and histories have been drowned beneath the 'submergence zone' and go un-mourned and un-memorialised within the national imaginary (Nixon 2011, 161–62). Similarly, through a deliberate process of cultural, linguistic and geographical erasure, the Egyptian state has exacerbated the historic exclusion of the Nubians under colonial rule by refusing to recognise them as a national minority with a distinct language, culture and identity.

Whereas Nubians in Sudan came to occupy a relatively favoured position in the social hierarchy after 1964, the Egyptian Nubian community continues to occupy a subordinate social position within the nation (Naaman 2011, 112; Smith 2006, 400). Discrimination is manifested both in class terms, through the structural inequalities that keep many Nubians within the lowest socio-economic bracket, and in racial terms

through forms of social exclusion that effectively ghettoise Nubians within distinct neighbourhoods or within certain, mostly menial, occupations (Kronenberg 1987, 390–91). Haggag Hassan Oddoul has drawn attention in his writing and public appearances to two ongoing issues of concern for Nubians in particular, namely the near total exclusion of dark-skinned people from the Egyptian media, and the tendency amongst the Egyptian establishment to accuse Nubians of separatism merely because they wish to revive their ancient language as an official language of the Egyptian state (Smith 2006, 402–3).

The roots of this discrimination lie partly in the unitary fiction of Egypt's Arab identity which was cultivated in the postcolonial nationalist period by the governments of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, all of whom subscribed to the doctrine of *al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya* or Arab nationalism. Celebrating the glories of Arab culture and civilization. Arab nationalism's central premise is that the peoples of the Arab world, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea, constitute one nation bound together by common linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical heritage (Sela 2002, 151–55). Just as in other north African nations like Algeria and Morocco with significant non-Arab minorities, e.g. the Berber and Touareg peoples, Egypt continues to be popularly understood by its inhabitants as an Arab nation which is culturally and civilisationally distinct from Sub-Saharan Africa. In such a context, as the anthropologist Elizabeth Smith has argued in her recent study of Egyptian Nubians in Cairo and Alexandria, black skin operates as a 'boundary marker' differentiating Nubians – widely perceived as African 'others' or second-class citizens, in accordance with dominant historical stereotypes of Nubians as servants and slaves – from their fellow Egyptians (Smith 2006, 400–401).

Dimeo has argued that the unitary fiction of Egypt's Arab identity was intentionally cultivated during the *naḥḍa* (Renaissance) period as a means of creating a cohesive Egyptian identity based not on religion but shared national belonging (Dimeo 2015, 72). Under the postcolonial regimes of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, a policy of non-recognition of ethnic or tribal identities at national level was accompanied by explicit policies of sedentarization, assimilation and Arabization which accelerated the decline of Nubia's distinctive language, culture and history. Not only did the Nubians' sacrifice of their homeland to make way for a succession of dams on the Nile in 1902, 1912, 1933 and 1964 respectively, go largely un-

remembered and un-mourned, but their very identity and history were effectively erased and excluded from Egypt's national memory.

Despite its geographical location on the African continent and the longstanding presence of communities such as the Nubians and Berbers who speak languages distinct from Arabic, official discourse continues to insist that Egypt "does not 'have' racism, ethnicities, or minorities in such terms" (Smith 2006, 401). It is precisely this exclusion of minority identities that has enabled the Egyptian state to deny the Nubian people national minority status, with all the rights and legal protection this would imply under the terms of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which was ratified in 2007. This sets out the "minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world" (Article 43) and protects their collective rights in ways not addressed in other human rights charters that emphasize individual rights (Hanson 2012).

By contrast, anthropologists such as Andreas Kronenberg, William Adams and Robert Fernea agree that the Nubian people constitute a distinct ethnic group descended from one of Africa's earliest and most powerful ancient civilisations, which existed from 3700BC to 350CE and traditionally inhabited the region between the first cataract of the Nile at Aswan in Egypt and the third cataract at Dongola in Sudan (Kronenberg 1987, 389–92). Upper Nubia was home to the celebrated ancient kingdom of Kush or Napata. Lower Nubia, the area where the kingdom of Meroe flourished and which corresponds with modern-day Egyptian Nubia, became known as the 'the gateway to Africa' due to high levels of contact and cultural exchange between groups as diverse as Nubians, Egyptians, Greeks, Assyrians, Romans, Arabs and Turks over the course of millennia (Adams 1984, 44–65).

Although ninety-nine percent of Nubians are considered to be Muslim, their culture and social structure has been described as a mosaic of Nubian and Arab-Islamic cultural patterns which borrows from and synthesises Islamic, Arabic, Christian and other, much older, beliefs into a single system of values and normative model of behaviour that is qualitatively distinct from that of other social groups in Egypt or Sudan (Kennedy and Fernea 2005, iv–ix). Moreover, Nubians on either side of the border self-identify as sharing many common aspects of identity based on language, social structures, cultural practices, beliefs and folklore which, Kronenberg

argues, create a feeling that "We are like ourselves and others are not like us" (Kronenberg 1987, 389).

Because they constitute a self-identifying transnational community like the Kurds or Amazigh, Nubians have long been regarded as a potential threat to the national unity of Egypt by the nationalist administration. This fear has been reinforced in recent years by the appearance of the *Katala* Movement in 2012 (whose name means 'brave warrior' in the Nubian language) as a result of widespread frustration about the lack of political progress on the proposed 'resettlement law' to relocate the forty four Nubian villages from Kom Ombo to the banks of Lake Nasser. Although *Katala* does not enjoy widespread support amongst the Nubian population, it is popular amongst the youth and its president, Osama Farouk has publicly announced that he is ready to use violence to "separate Nubia" from Egypt completely (Gehad 2013) and to declare the area stretching from Esna, south of Luxor, to Wadi Halfa on the Egyptian border with Sudan, an autonomous Nubian region (Hamed 2014).

Estimates of the numbers of Nubians living in Egypt vary widely, from independent studies suggesting there are between three and four million Egyptian Nubians settled primarily around Kom Ombo, Aswan, Abu Simbel, Cairo and Alexandria who make up four to five percent of the total population of Egypt (Begg 2011; Salah 2013) to official figures which put that number much lower at less than one percent of the Egyptian population (Helen Chapin Metz 1990). In Egypt and Sudan, an estimated 1.7 million people are estimated to be speakers of Nubian dialects such as Nobiin (previously known as Mahas or Fadicca), Midob, Hill Nubian and Kenzi-Dongolawi, which is the largest language group with over one million speakers scattered across northern Sudan and southern Egypt (Salah 2013).

Although they still constitute "the largest non-Arabic speaking community in Egypt" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 181), widespread Arabisation has meant that a shared language is no longer one of the defining features of contemporary Nubian identity. Rather, 'Nubianness' is increasingly defined more in terms of shared cultural memory and political aspirations in which their displacement and resettlement to make way for the High Dam and ongoing injustices surrounding compensation and the denial of cultural and linguistic rights to the Nubian people, have together become a rallying symbol for Nubian unity in the diaspora in the absence of a shared geographic or linguistic axis.

Ironically, it is precisely the erasure of the Nubian question from Egyptian collective consciousness which has contributed to its importance to the formation of Nubian identity politics today and the development of the Nubian Awakening movement which, from the 1980s to the present day, has advocated for greater Nubian political, economic and social rights (Naaman 2011, 113). In February 2010, the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights (ECHR) and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) petitioned the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights for improved government housing for those Nubians displaced to Kom Ombo in 1964 and for the Nubian community in Egypt to be granted international legal status as an indigenous population. The ultimate goal of bringing the Nubian cause to the attention of the international community, said Manal al Tibi, the ECHR's executive director, was that their complaints should be included in the next UN human rights commission's Universal Periodic Review of Egypt – a study that the UN body completes for its member states every four years (Bradley 2010). If the UN were to agree with al-Tibi's assertion that the Egyptian Nubians constitute an indigenous population, this would give the added force of international law to Nubian rights claims.

Whereas detailed records have been kept of the dam construction process and the UNESCO-led campaign to save Nubia's ancient monuments, "accounts of the deep psychological and social trauma that this project left in its wake are more difficult to come by" (Calderbank 2008, vii). This is in no small part because the perspectives and priorities of the oustees were rarely recorded in official narratives that, in any case, did not recognise the existence of a distinct Nubian people on Egyptian territory. Consequently, as Anthony Calderbank argues, "the tragedy suffered by the Nubian people as a result of the construction of the High Dam at Aswan is one of the great untold stories of the twentieth century" (Calderbank 2008, vii). In a context in which long-standing demands for equitable compensation, cultural recognition and the right to return to their home territories have been socially and politically marginalised, the importance of Nubian literature as a form of 'resistance narrative' that rewrites the history of the Aswan High Dam and Nubian displacement from a minority perspective is paramount (Harlow 1987, 2).

Defining a Nubian Literature

Speaking through this silence are a number of Nubian writers whose work has engaged with the long-term legacy of the Aswan High Dam on Nubian culture and society, which has been described by Yahya Mukhtar as "a deep collective wound that remains raw and does not heal" with the passage of time (Mukhtār 2001, p.141). As I will go on to show, Nubian literary texts such as Muhammad Khalil Qasim's *al-Shamandūra*, 1968 (*The Buoy*), Yahya Mukhtar's *Jibāl al-Kohl: Riwāya men al-Nūba*, 2001 (*Kohl Mountains: a Novel of Nubia*), Haggag Hassan Oddoul's *Layāli al-Misk al-'Atiqa: Qisas*, 2002 (*Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia*, 2005) and Idris Ali's novels *Dunqula: Riwāya Nubiyya*, 1993 (*Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*, 1998) and *Taḥt Khaṭ al-Faqr*, 2001 (*Poor*, 2007), all of which are examined in the chapters that follow, help recover what Vinayak Chaturvedi has termed "another kind of history" (Chaturvedi 2000, 284) written from a subaltern perspective. As such, they provide a valuable counter-balance to monolithic Egyptian nationalist discourses that stress the national benefits of the High Dam project at the expense of its sometimes catastrophic local costs.

As Mukhtar observes, although "the water took away our villages, with their distinguished Nubian architecture, many monuments were flooded away [and] people immigrated leaving their homes ... these tragedies were only documented in literature, never in history books", or indeed the numerous academic studies that have evaluated the link between dams, development and involuntary displacement and resettlement (Saad 2012). This cannot simply be put down to individual oversight but to the fact that:

> any critical discussions of the dam's potential dangers were often taken as an act of national treason. Although the [Egyptian] government was quite aware of certain adverse ecological effects, the general tendency was to emphasise, and sometimes dramatize, the project's assumed positive contribution to the realisation of the country's national aspirations, especially in the areas of agricultural and industrial development. Within this conceptual framework of the dam, the resettlement component of the Aswan project was conceived as a sizable and manageable social cost. (H. M. Fahim 1980, 29–30)

Because criticism of the Aswan High Dam's environmental and human impacts was actively discouraged, the analysis that was sanctioned by the regime has tended to minimise its negative effects vis-à-vis the 'positive' goal of national development (see, eg, White, 1988; Biswas and el-Habr, 1993; Sobhy, 1993; Abu Zeid and El-Shibini, 1997), and to ignore the social costs to the Nubians in their entirety.

Similarly, the dam industry continues to discourage both prospective and retrospective criticism of large dam projects because it does not want to imperil future contracts and also because the consultants hired to carry out such research are often engineers and hydrologists closely linked to the sector. As Patrick McCully, head of the International Rivers Network (IRN), reported in 2001: "the industry has never carried out a credible and comprehensive retrospective assessment of the ecological, economic and social effects of a representative sample of large dams – or even of a single project" (McCully 2001, 24). Since reviews of environmental impact assessments are normally carried out before dam construction has been completed, no formal system exists for monitoring the long-term environmental and social impacts of large dams in over sixty percent of cases (McCully 2001, 57), meaning that until the publication of the fifty-dam report by the World Commission on Dams in 2000, little attempt had been made to gauge the long-term human impacts of large dam projects.

These gaps in the literature came to be filled by authors affiliated with the revivalist political and cultural movement known as the *Ṣaḥwa Nubiyya* or 'Nubian Awakening', which advocated for Nubian rights and castigated the Egyptian intelligentsia for wilfully ignoring the impact of the Aswan Dam on Nubian society and culture. In their radical critique of successive Egyptian nationalist administrations from Nasser to Mubarak for sacrificing Nubian culture and society on the altar of national development, writers such as Yahya Mukhtar, Ibrahim Fahmi, Hassan Nur, Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Idris 'Ali have made use of the relative freedom accorded to the Egyptian literary sphere (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 35) to mobilise culture as an axis of resistance against official discourses that downplay the long-term legacy of the Aswan High Dam on the Nubian community of Egypt.

Just as critical theorists associated with the Indian-based 'subaltern studies collective' (e.g. Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey) have attempted to reconstitute the history of India from the ground up through their analysis of folk songs, ballads, proverbs, myths, legends, rumours, pamphlets, religious

symbols and leaders, not to mention political protests, rebellions and riots (Krishna 2009, 82–84), so too must we apprehend the material and symbolic violence brought about by the High Dam's construction through Nubian articulations of that experience. It is my contention that analysis of contemporary Nubian literature written between 1968 and the present day has the potential to revise our understanding of how marginalised groups conceive of the threats large-scale development projects pose to their communities in their own terms and within the parameters of their own symbolic universe rather than through the eyes of 'expert' others. This revisionist process, I shall argue, can provide important new insights into the intergenerational consequences of displacement and resettlement that the more qualitative, empirical and time-limited surveys typical of DIDR studies struggle to come to grips with.

This study also aims to fill a gap in the literature in terms of the critical analysis of contemporary Nubian writing which has been conspicuous by its absence, both in Arabic or the major European languages. There are a few rare exceptions to this lack of engagement with Nubian literature within the academy. These include a book chapter in the Egyptian literary critic Mara Naaman's monograph *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature : Portraits of Cairo* (2011), entitled 'The Proletarian Revolution that Never Was: Idris 'Ali's Nubian Perspective'. Within the last year there have also been two articles by Fatin Abbas and David Dimeo, entitled 'Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and Nubian Diasporic Identity in Idris Ali's Dongola: A Novel of Nubia' (Abbas 2014), and 'Unimaginable Community: The Failure of Nubian Nationalism in Idris Ali's Dongola' (Dimeo 2015) respectively, both of which appeared in the journal *Research in African Literatures*. However, with the exception of these three studies, no other significant analysis of Nubian literary texts has been published in English to date.

Nor has there been much in the way of critical discussion about the significance of Nubian literature to the wider Egyptian literary field, save for fleeting references to the Nubian Awakening in Richard Jacquemond's *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt* (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 181–84) and Elizabeth Smith's *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East* (Smith 2006, 399–413). This is despite the fact that several Nubian authors have been awarded prestigious literary prizes in recent decades, with Oddoul and Mukhtar winning the State Encouragement Award for Fiction in 1990 and 1991, respectively, and Oddoul being awarded the 2005

Sawiris Cultural Foundation's prize for his novel *Ma'tuq al-Khayr* (2004). Helping to plug this gap in the literary criticism of Nubia by undertaking a comparative analysis of five texts spanning all three waves of contemporary Nubian literature from 1968 to the present day constitutes one of the primary motivations for this thesis.

One of the reasons for the paucity of critical studies on Nubian literature is that, until recently, Nubian literature was not recognised as a distinct literary category. The majority of Nubian literature has historically fallen within the oral tradition, consisting primarily of poetry composed and recited in Nubian and folktales passed on from generation to generation. It emerged in written form only in the mid twentieth century when the first generation of Nubian writers such as Muhammad Khalil Qasim and Zaki Murad came to prominence. Much contemporary Nubian writing continues to echo mainstream Egyptian literature stylistically, thematically and formally. However, since the 1980s many Nubian writers have increasingly "insisted on a separate identity for themselves" (Abbas 2014, 151). Arguing that a broad category was required under which all literature sharing the "various unique particularities of Nubian society" could fall that might in turn reflect the distinctiveness of Nubian writing a form of literary regionalism (Aboul-Ela 2005), writers associated with the 'Nubian Awakening' felt that it was important to reject dominant classifications of Nubian writing as a sub-field of Egyptian Literature, coining the term 'Nubian Literature' in 1990.

The classification of Nubian literature as a body of work based on ethnicity rather than language or nationality has proved highly incendiary with the Egyptian literary establishment – so much so that it has led to allegations from the renowned literary critic Ahmed Abdel Muti Hegazi, amongst others, that advocates of Nubian Literature are linked to a 'separatist' or 'racist' agenda aimed at weakening the unity of the Egyptian state (Aboul-Ela 2005; Naaman 2011, 111–16). Oddoul's controversial statement that the forced displacement of the Nubian people at the hands of the Egyptian state was nothing less than a 'crime against humanity' equal to the *tashrīd* (making homeless) of the Palestinians in 1948 (Oddoul 2007, 8), which was made in his capacity as the Nubian representative at the Second International Coptic Annual Conference in Washington DC in 2005 (which he attended in the hope of generating intercommunal solidarity amongst Egypt's minorities for the Nubian cause) would appear to corroborate this view. Certainly, it made him the target of

what he describes as a campaign of 'moral assassination' in the Egyptian press which sensationalised his claims (Naaman 2011, 114).

However, Oddoul's remarks are by no means representative of the standpoint of all Nubian authors aligned with the 'Nubian Awakening' movement. Others, such as Mukhtar and 'Ali, emphasise that while the marginalisation experienced by their community in the period following the construction of the Aswan High Dam should be challenged in the realm of Egyptian public discourse, Nubians have always formed an integral part of Egyptian civilisation. Moreover, 'Ali has categorically stated that "compensation is not enough of an issue to justify accusations of ethnic cleansing and war crimes" and that the Nubian question is primarily an issue of social justice rather than separatism, while Mukhtar has accused Oddoul of "betraying his Egyptian identity" (Khallaf 2006). For his part, Oddoul insists that "there is no conflict between being Nubian and Egyptian" (Aboul-Ela 2005), arguing in favour of a pluralist vision of Egyptian national culture that embraces rather than elides its minority identities such as those of the Amazigh, Nubians and Bedouin (el-Refaei 2012).

The development of Nubian literature has been divided by Mara Naaman into three distinct waves (Naaman 2011, 114). The first of these waves starts with the publication, in 1948, of the first self-consciously Nubian text by a Nubian author, namely a collection of poetry or *dīwan* written in Arabic entitled *Zilāl al-Nakhīl*, 1948 (*Under the Shade of the Palms*) by Muhammad Abdel Rahim Idriss, and lasts until the mid-1960s, when two literary works were published that "put Nubian literature on the map" (Aboul-Ela 2005). These were an anthology of Nubian poetry entitled *Sirb al-Balshun*, 1966 (*A Flock of Pelicans*) which showcased the work of Zaki Murad, Abdul-Dayem Taha, Ibrahim Sharawi and Mahmoud Shindi and was published by the Ministry of Culture; and Muhammad Khalil Qasim's influential social-realist novel *al-Shamandūra*, 1968 (*The Buoy*) which is credited with being both the first novel by a Nubian writer and the first literary text about the Nubian people (Ashaq 2010, 97).

First published in the journal *Ṣabaḥ al-Kheyr* and subsequently serialised on *Ṣawt al-'Arab* radio ('Aleywa 2011, 10–11) *The Buoy* remained the single most important contribution to Nubian literature up until the late 1980s, though, as Jacquemond remarks, it would probably have been forgotten had it not been for Qasim's symbolic importance as the 'father' of contemporary Nubian literature to writers and intellectuals such as Haggag Hassan Oddoul, Hassan Nur, Ibrahim Fahmi and Idris 'Ali who pressed the General Authority for Cultural Palaces in Cairo to

reprint a third edition to the text in 2011, sixteen years after it had fallen out of circulation (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 181). These diasporic writers drew inspiration from earlier Nubian writers such as Muhammad Khalil Qasim, Zaki Murad and Khalil Kulfat as well as mainstream Egyptian literature, and, indeed, World Literature which can be broadly defined as texts which, because of their exemplary artistic value and transnational influence, are able to move beyond the national literary sphere through the process of international distribution and translation (Damrosch 2003; Hamilton 2014).

The writing of Mukhtar, Oddoul and 'Ali, in particular, is highly inflected with the influences of Third World – notably African-American, African and Latin American – fiction, which circulated widely both in their original languages and in translation within Egyptian literary circles in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Oddoul has explicitly drawn attention to the thematic and stylistic similarities between Nubian writing and that of African American and Palestinian authors, whose treatment he equates to that of the Nubian people, thereby connecting the Nubian experience of displacement and exile with that of other dispossessed groups around the world (Oddoul 2007, 7). Consequently, it would appear that intercultural borrowing constitutes one of the strategies through which Nubian authors attempt to differentiate their literary output from that of the Egyptian mainstream and to create affective links between the Nubian experience of forced displacement and that of other marginalised peoples.

From 1989 onwards, authors associated with the 'Nubian Awakening' have produced a body of literary work described as "more differentiated than that of any other region of Egypt" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 181). Notable examples of recent Nubian fiction include two collections of short stories, namely Ibrahim Fahmi's *al-Qamar Bouba*, 1989 (*The Medallion*); Haggag Hassan Oddoul's *Layāli al-Misk al-'Atiqa*, 2002 (*Nights of Musk: Stories From Old Nubia*, 2005); and Sherif 'Abd al-Magid's *Tāksi Abyaḍ*, 2014 (*White Taxi*). Also included are a number of influential novels such as Oddoul's *Ma'tuq al-Khayr*, 2004; Yahya Mukhtar's *'Arūs al-Nīl*, 1989 (*Bride of the Nile*), *Ma' al-Hayāt*, 1992 (*Water of Life*) and *Jibāl al-Kohl: Riwāya men al-Nūba*, 2001 (*Kohl Mountains: a Novel of Nubia*); and Hasan Nur's *Beyn al-Nahr w-al-Jabal*, 1991 (*Between River and Mountain*). Of all these authors, Idris 'Ali is probably the most prolific, publishing *Dunqula: Riwāya Nubiyya* in 1993 (*Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*, 1998); *Taḥt Khaṭ al-Faqr* in 2001 (*Poor*, 2007); *al-Lu'ab Fawq*

Jibāl al-Nūba, in 2002 (*Playing Atop the Nubian Mountains*) which won second prize in the Supreme Council for Culture's Naguib Mahfouz Prize in 2004; and his latest novel *al-Nūbi* in 2008 (*The Nubian*) within the space of ten years.

Establishing a connection with the earlier waves of Nubian literature, several of these titles including *Bride of the Nile* and *Nights of Musk* were dedicated to "the Dean of Modern Nubian Literature, to the creator of *al-Shamandura* ... to Muhammad Khalil Qasim", signifying the ongoing thematic and stylistic influences that link Nubian writers across the generations (Radwan 2007, 120). With the sole exception of Fahmi, who is not ethnically Nubian, these authors emerged from a single generation of the Nubian diaspora whose parents had emigrated to the cities of the north following the second raising of the Aswan barrage in 1933. Their distinctly Nubian themes are often bracketed off by use of a subtitle like *riwāya* or *hikāya nubiyya* (Nubian novel/narrative) as in Idris Ali's *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*. Use of this subtitle explicitly markets a work as an example of a distinctively Nubian, rather than simply Egyptian, literature (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 182).

The 'second wave' of Nubian writers writing between the early 1960s and early 1980s were markedly more committed to the national liberation struggle and questions of social justice than to the questions of Nubian identity and rights which came to preoccupy writers of the 'third wave' authors linked to the Nubian Awakening such as Mukhtar, Oddoul and 'Ali, whose fiction will be explored in detail in Chapters Two and Three. Concomitantly, they were less nostalgic about the loss of Old Nubia and more credulous about the redemptive promise of large dams, and Nasser's development agenda more broadly, than such authors have been. This is perhaps because, at the time authors like Muhammad Khalil Qasim were writing, Nubia had not yet been completely submerged and the nostalgic trope of the homeland as "a lost paradise" had yet to emerge as the main thematic focus of the Nubian novel (Naaman 2011, 115).

In reference to this fact, the literary critic Fatin Abbas prefers to define the different waves of Nubian literature in terms of 'pre-dam' and 'post-dam' literature (Abbas 2014). While this may seem counter-intuitive given that the majority of early Nubian literary texts were penned immediately after the dam's construction in the late 1960s, she argues that it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that the full force of the trauma inflicted by dam-induced displacement came to be registered in Nubian literature (Abbas 2014, 151). She regards 'pre-dam' literature as that written by the

earlier generation of Nubian writers whose work is characterised by certain leitmotifs that recur across Nubian literature as a whole, such as an emphasis on Nubia's distinctive landscape, cultural practices and ancient history. Stylistically, she distinguishes the literature of the pre-dam generation by its reliance on a formal realism and linear narrative structure, and by a tendency to be politically engaged, if not stridently Nasserist in orientation. By contrast, 'post-dam' literature is characterised by a more experimental and fragmented aesthetic which reflects the disillusionment amongst many Nubian authors such as Mukhtar and 'Ali who had formerly backed the Egyptian national liberation movement.

Furthermore, Abbas argues that 'post-dam' literature can be distinguished from that of the pre-dam generation by "the experience of loss and displacement occasioned by the Aswan High Dam [which] had huge consequences for the emergent tradition", but whose full impact did not register in Nubian writing until the late 1980s and early 1990s, causing them to think and write in terms of a "lost Nubia" (Abbas 2014, 151). That themes such as loss, alienation and marginalisation are so central to these later writers is a response, she suggests, to a growing diasporic consciousness amongst the Nubian minority in northern Egypt, in line with Paul Zeleza's definition of diaspora as the "consciousness, sometimes diffuse and sometimes concentrated, of a 'here' separate from a 'there', a 'here' that is often characterised by a regime of marginalisation, and a 'there' that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to 'here' differently" (Zeleza 2005, 41).

It may seem odd to gloss Egyptian Nubians as diasporic, since the majority of Nubians currently reside in the nation states which contain their geographic and ancestral homeland, namely Egypt and Sudan. However, the shared experience of successive waves of dam-induced displacement and the dispersion, alienation and sense of exile this produced has arguably caused a diasporic consciousness to emerge amongst them, a factor reinforced by the increase in secondary labour migration amongst Nubian oustees to the cities of the north during the latter half of the twentieth century. Moreover, what distinguishes diasporic communities from other migrant groups is the "involuntary and traumatic uprooting of an identified and self-identifying group to multiple sites of dispersion, sustained over generations", accompanied by a conception of a collective ancestral or imagined 'homeland'. a sense of collective trauma and loss, and the corresponding desire to return to the lost 'home' (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 20).

However, such displacement need not only occur between nation states but also within them, particularly in cases where minorities are displaced from their ancestral lands and thus from the locus of their history, language and communal self-identity. For example, as Anjali Gera Roy and Nandi Bhatia observe in their study *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement, and Resettlement* (2008), many communities within the Indian subcontinent displaced by Partition imagined home through a local lens "as a small place, a village or a town, rather than as a nation or country" (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xviii). In this particular instance, "the primacy of regional over religious affiliation also significantly destroyed the link between space, place and identity. To be placed involves not only being embedded in the geography but also in the linguistic, social and cultural practices that emerged in relation to the place" (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xviii).

As such, forced displacement – even within the confines of the larger nation state – can result in feelings of exile, estrangement and nostalgia for the lost ancestral homeland and way of life. Consequently, as Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser and Yolande Jansen argue, "being diasporic and being indigenous need not be an oxymoron", particularly in cases when a community's experience of displacement and dispossession leaves them feeling alienated, marginalised and invisible in their home state (such as the Herero in Namibia or the Armenians in Istanbul), or when displaced minorities are unable to return to dwell in their ancestral homelands even when these are contained within the boundaries of the modern-day nation state (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 34).

Classifying communities such as Egyptian Nubians who are displaced and resettled within the confines of the contemporary nation state as diasporic requires us to conceive of community as an imagined concept which exists in the minds of its members and the meanings they attach to it. As the social anthropologist Dawn Chatty contends in her monograph *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (2010), diasporic identity "is most often expressed symbolically", in the absence of a homeland, through culture, language, myth and customs rather than as a structural or geographic 'fact' (Chatty 2010, 33–34). Since memory and nostalgia play a key role in the creation and maintenance of communal identity and collective memory in a diasporic context, literature can facilitate the re-creation of community, encouraging greater internal cohesion and promoting the survival of minority cultures through a

process of integration without assimilation that Chatty terms 'local cosmopolitanism' or 'cosmopolitanism from below' (Chatty 2010, 289).

A 'Minor' Literature in a 'Major' Voice

Exploring such weighty themes as displacement, exile, poverty, racism, patriarchy and injustice, contemporary Nubian literature portrays the diasporic Nubian experience of economic and social marginalisation as the starting point for a broader critique of the failure of postcolonial Egyptian nationalism to live up to its promises to bring about transformative social change and end the colonial legacy of discrimination and marginalisation against the Nubian people, in a manner reminiscent of what the Ghanaian critic and philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah terms the disenchanted African novel, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Three. Such 'disenchanted' texts are characterised by the repudiation and de-legitimation of the nationalist project of the postcolonial bourgeoisie, foregrounding a subaltern counter-narrative that highlights the voices and viewpoints of the downtrodden who have been systematically excluded from the nation's history and imaginary (Appiah 1992, 221–54). Thus, although Nubian literature has historically been regarded as a subfield of Egyptian literature (Naaman 2011, 113), it may be more useful to view it as an example of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have termed a 'minor' literature written in the 'major' voice of Arabic (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) – one which rewrites the history of dams, displacement and development on the Nile from a distinctively regional perspective.

As Naaman argues, "viewing Egypt as a site of difference across ethnic, geographic, religious, class and gender lines necessarily means calling into question the entire rhetorical architecture of the nationalist movement which is predicated on unity and the eliding of difference" (Naaman 2011, 110). Although essential in the struggle against colonialism, the continued emphasis on a homogenous and hegemonic national culture undivided by what Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* terms 'regressive tribalism' or African 'culturalism' (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 172) in postcolonial Egyptian discourse, resulted in the marginalisation and exclusion of regional identities and cultural forms from the national imaginary

where they were derided as 'primitive' compared to the 'high culture' of the élite. Indeed, recognition that regional writing and culture had been systematically marginalised within the Egyptian national imaginary prompted Oddoul to remark that "the map of literature in Egypt is merely a lie, a fabrication" (Oddoul 2006, 13) since it fails to make space for minority identities and cultural forms.

Because the interpretative authority of national elites was long privileged at the expense of "other voices and other 'truths' that might once have been heard" (Chaturvedi 2000, 284), the right to speak (or more explicitly, be heard) in Egyptian society was progressively restricted to holders of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), describes as "legitimate language" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 146). These include politicians, journalists and the liberal intelligentsia who are tasked with the creation of "legitimate [national] culture" which operates as a form of symbolic violence that arbitrarily imposes the values and aesthetics of the dominant social group on society and "casts every other way of living into arbitrariness" (Grenfell 2010, 101–17). By contrast, Nubian literature exemplifies a recent trend within modern Egyptian writing, discussed further in Chapter Three, which is known as 'border literature'. This is closely associated with Walter Mignolo's concept of 'border thinking' (Mignolo 2000, 736–743), whereby the marginalisation of Sinai, Nubia and Siwa within the Egyptian national imaginary is given centre stage.

As the Egyptian literary critic Pervine El-Refaei contends, border literature encourages the reader to scrutinise the plight of peripheral groups within Egyptian society "whose displacement and marginalisation envelop them with a fragmented liminal identity that underscores the fissures in Egyptian national identity", thereby destabilising hegemonic nationalist narratives while creating space for their distinctive cultures within an expanded and pluralised national imaginary (el-Refaei 2012, 9). Indeed, the clash between city and country and the link between rurality and political critique in which peasant wisdom, practices and modes of thought confront those of the centre to present an alternative paradigm of the nation grounded in authentic popular culture, is central to the concerns of border literature, just as it was to the genre of the Egyptian 'village novel' which became synonymous with the national(ist) struggle against colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s to which both the urban elite and the rural poor laid claim.

Samah Selim has stated that in much the same way that the narrating self in the Arabic novel was the locus of a conflict between the consciousness and interests of an emerging urban middle class and "the simultaneous emergence of a politically conscious and insurgent mass of urban and rural poor ... that have laid powerful claim to the same history" (Selim 2004, p.14), early pioneers of the 'village novel' like Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim treated the peasant as a recalcitrant 'other' in need of reform or a romanticised figure that symbolised 'authentic' Egyptian identity. By contrast, leftist writers such as Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi narrated a collective, specifically rural, history by giving voice to an insubordinate subaltern subjectivity "constructed in a dialectical opposition to the languages of the modern subject … [which] represent radically different epistemologies and thus relationships to power" (Selim 2004, 231).

A focus on border literatures such as narratives of the 'Nubian Awakening' challenges the tendency amongst the Egyptian literary establishment to overlook regional writing by recasting peripheral or border areas as the centre and creating "counter-cartographies" that foreground the liminal identities of communities like the Nubian and Sinai people as essential components of what it means to 'be' Egyptian. As Naaman observes, "here it is the subaltern Nubian who is writing the national narrative, and doing so as a revision to the primarily urban, pro-nationalist and postcolonial fictions, where the notion of an essential (or unproblematised) 'Egyptian people' is left unquestioned" (Naaman 2011, 110). Thus, although Nubian literature has traditionally been treated as a subfield within contemporary Egyptian literature (Naaman 2011, 113), we should be wary of studying it within the conventional parameters of postcolonial literature in which, as Brennan has noted, "the nationalist mood is strongly felt" (Brennan 1989, 1). Rather, it may be more useful to view Nubian literature as what Deleuze and Guattari have termed a 'minor' literature written in the 'major' voice of Arabic (Deleuze & Guattari 1983).

Writing not in the "language and syntax of national consciousness" (Lazarus 1999, 112) but in strident opposition to it, contemporary Nubian literature exposes the exclusions on which nationalism is based and promotes a broader conception of Egyptian identity that celebrates rather than silences Egypt's inherent ethnic and religious pluralism. Characterised by the feeling of being "a stranger *in* one's own language" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 24), minor literatures tend to deconstruct the fiction of a unified national culture by highlighting difference, though without lapsing

into separatist and chauvinistic discourses that fracture the concept of the nation completely. As such, defining Nubian literature in Arabic as a minor literature highlights the enduring linkages between Arab and Afro-Nubian culture and the complex ways in which these inform each other without imposing an artificial separation between Nubian and mainstream Egyptian culture as the Nubian separatist movement has done, a move which risks segueing into yet another exclusive form of ethno-nationalism.

Deleuze and Guattari have argued that minor literatures share three main features, namely the "deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual and the political, [and] the collective arrangement of utterance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 18). Taken together, these give the 'minor voice' the revolutionary power to break down the seemingly organic connection between the dominant language and its symbolic associations by endowing it with new meanings and "creative lines of escape" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 27). Much as African American fiction denatures the connection between English and the values of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, Nubian writing hybridises the Arabic language by introducing 'foreign' elements that push both language and form to their creative limits while fracturing the illusion of cultural and linguistic homogeneity found in mainstream Egyptian literature.

Writing in colloquial *'āmiyya* instead of classical *fuṣḥa* or standard Arabic, and favouring polyphonic perspectives in place of an omniscient first-person narrator, contemporary Nubian writers challenge the language of the modern (implicitly urban) subject of mainstream Egyptian literature by employing an Afro-Nubian setting and emphasising magical realist or allegorical narrative forms such as the *haddutah* (folk tale) which draw heavily on the Nubian oral tradition and mythology, thus situating these texts firmly within an alternative imaginative reality. Breaking with the linguistic and stylistic conventions of the postcolonial Egyptian novel allows Nubian literature to contest the symbolic violence of Arabisation which threatens the legitimacy and legibility of Nubian collective identity. By privileging what Henri Gobard has called the mythic and vernacular Nubian dialect over Arabic, the vehicular and referential tongue of the state and Arab culture (Deleuze and Guattari 1975, 24), contemporary Nubian writing hybridises the Arabic language in a way that renders it distinctively Nubian, as does the inclusion of segments of Nubian poetry, ballads and dance which make Nubian culture highly visible, even tangible, to the reader.

When taken together these elements arguably constitute an explicitly Nubian form of literary expression, suggesting that Nubian literature should not simply be considered a subfield of mainstream Egyptian literature, as it has tended to be defined by the Cairene literary establishment. Instead, it is better viewed as existing in a subaltern relationship to mainstream Egyptian literature (Naaman 2011, 113). As Ranajit Guha and David Arnold have noted, radical criticism of bourgeois nationalism (which conceives of the rural masses "as an inert populace to be mobilised at the service of elite objectives" (Chaturvedi 2000, 39) and at the command of elite decision makers) cannot originate from within the indigenous literary class, since the writer's ideological parameters tend to be identical to dominant modes of reasoning. Rather, such critiques must be written at a cultural or paradigmatic distance from "the universe of dominance which provides the critique with its object, indeed from another and historically antagonistic universe" (Guha 1989, 221).

Although the Nubian literary class is predominantly urban, educated, male and diasporic (so thus cannot properly be described as subaltern in comparison with the majority of Nubians and does not reflect a gender balance), the fact that it took so many years for Nubian writers to leave their mark is itself a reflection on the difficulties they faced breaking onto the Cairene cultural scene, which tended to denigrate or exclude writers from 'border regions' (Saad 2012). Their literal and figurative distance from the centre places Nubian writers in a prime position to undertake a trenchant critique of the long-term human and environmental legacy of the Aswan High Dam and, in the process, to "establish the centrality of subaltern aspirations and actions" (Chaturvedi 2000, 38) which had largely been written out of dominant nationalist narratives. Indeed, the extent to which Nubian literature serves as an alternative form of historical record for documenting the collective experience and culture of a people virtually obliterated by the construction of the Aswan High Dam is paramount. The importance of Nubian literature is therefore "as much cultural and political as it is literary" (Naaman 2011, 114) since it aims, both explicitly and implicitly, to draw public attention to the long-marginalised Nubian question and open it up for debate for the first time in modern Egyptian history.

Nubian Self-Representation, Agency and Influence

Although Richard Jacquemond insists that this renewed interest in the 'Nubian story' of late is the result of a "compassion effect for a human community that has been the victim of history" (Jacquemond 2008, p.183), his analysis seems somewhat cynical and short-sighted given the continued critical success enjoyed by certain Nubian authors at both the domestic and global level. As mentioned previously, Nubian literature has received increasing critical recognition both domestically and internationally in recent years, with Oddoul and Mukhtar winning the State Encouragement Award for Fiction in 1990 and 1991 respectively, and Oddoul being awarded the 2005 Sawiris Cultural Foundation's prize for his novel *Ma'tuq al-Khayr*, which significantly enhanced the cultural capital and authority of Nubian authors within the Egyptian literary establishment. Moreover, theatrical adaptations of Oddoul's *People of the River*, and *Nubia.com*, a play based on three novels by Idris 'Ali that represent "three generations of Nubians before and after the Dam" (Khallaf 02 05 07), were performed in Cairo in 2007 to popular acclaim. These changes indicate how the Nubian question is now receiving mainstream recognition amongst domestic audiences.

At the international level, the translation of a number of contemporary Nubian texts into English, most notably Oddoul's *Nights of Musk* (2005) translated by Anthony Calderbank and 'Ali's novels *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1998), translated by Paul Theroux, which received the University of Arkansas Press Award for Translation in 1997, and *Poor*, 2007 translated by Elliot Colla, has made Nubian literature available to a global readership for the first time. As the literary critic Pascale Casanova has argued, English language literary publishers can play a significant role in 'liberating' minor or peripheral literatures from domestic restrictions or taboos by re-centring their work within the more autonomous realm of 'World Literature', particularly in the case of writers who find themselves "at odds with the norms of their native literary space" and who wish to transcend the limitations and restrictions of their respective national literary spheres (Casanova and DeBevoise 2007, 109–10).

This is certainly true of Oddoul whose writing was – as we have seen above – considered highly controversial in Egypt, yet was welcomed and 'consecrated' by

Western audiences: a factor which, over time, considerably enhanced the visibility and acceptability of his views back in Egypt. Indeed, it is precisely by locating Nubian life writing within global networks of what Rothberg terms 'multidirectional memory', in which proximate readings of particularistic discourses of memory can enable others to create new forms of solidarity and visions of justice (Rothberg 2009, 7), that such literature can "become a transformative speech act that connects human rights and narrated lives, touches hearts and changes minds, and demands and affective and political response" (Whitlock 2015, 143). Similarly, writing from a more sociological perspective, Rosemary McGee cites "the crucial importance of the personal dimensions of displacement narratives to ensuring that those in power are more realistically informed and persuasively influenced" about the impact of their policies on project-affected peoples (McGee 2002, p.153).

Through the affective pull of their imaginative testimony, combined with growing recognition at national and international level of the political legitimacy of Nubian rights claims, the fiction of Muhammad Khalil Qasim, Yahya Mukhtar, Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Idris 'Ali resists symbolic domination by hegemonic state discourses equating 'big development' with modernity and nation-building. It also helps generate political change by enhancing the visibility and effectiveness of those campaigning for Nubian rights and recognition, bringing the ecological, socio-cultural and psychological legacy of dam-building on their community emotionally to life and providing an intimate insight into individual and collective histories, experiences and perspectives that typically remain unrecorded or hidden from the public domain.

Although Timothy Brennan cautions that "trends in book markets are not equitable with decisions made in corporate boardrooms or with speeches by the American president in the White House" (Brennan 1997, 3), the growing domestic popularity and transnational reach of contemporary Nubian literature has led it to occupy a privileged position from which to advocate more effectively for Nubian political demands. Nubian authors such as Oddoul and 'Ali have come to act as the symbolic representatives or figureheads of the Nubian revivalist movement by intervening in the public sphere in order to articulate the marginalised views and demands of their community. Similarly, texts showing solidarity with the Nubian people written by foreign writers have also played an important role in raising global public awareness about the short- and long-term impacts of the Aswan High Dam on the Nubian people of Egypt.

Most notable perhaps is the Canadian author Anne Michaels' acclaimed novel *The Winter Vault* (2010) which interrogates the motives of the UNESCO team striving to save the monuments of ancient Nubia at the expense of the displaced villagers whose livelihoods, villages and customs have been 'lost' to posterity. By comparatively situating the legacy of the Aswan High Dam with that of other major dam projects such as the construction, in 1957, of the Saint Lawrence Seaway and Moses-Saunders Power Dam, and by focusing on the common themes of grief, memory and loss that affected the inhabitants of both 'submergence zones', the novel can be read as a literary contribution to the broader political-ecological critique of big dams that maps the common effects of dam-induced displacement across continents. As Michaels writes, "history was crammed with precisely such scenes" (Michaels 2010, 110) as those described at Aswan and Long Sault, encouraging the reader to reflect upon the broader costs of big dam projects from the perspective of their human casualties.

Partly as a result of this growing public pressure, and partly owing to the more democratic and pluralist aspirations unleashed first by the Bread Riots of 2008 and subsequently by the January 25th Revolution of 2011, there are now signs that the hyper-nationalist position on the High Dam project, which precluded all criticism of its environmental and human costs, is shifting, perhaps because "in Egypt's current political climate, no politician will want to be seen to ignore wholesale the grievances of an entire people" (Begg 14 07 11). The democratisation of the public sphere is reflected by the establishment, in recent years, of a number of Nubian civil society groups such as the Egyptian Nubian Association of Lawyers (ENAL) and the Nubian Democratic Youth Union (NDYU) which have lobbied the government openly on Nubian rights issues (Janmyr 2016, 8–13).

That Nubian demands for rights and recognition have not been stonewalled by the Egyptian state after the 2011 Revolution as was the case under the administrations of Mubarak, Sadat and Nasser is illustrated by the fact that the Cairo International Book Fair and Egyptian Ministry of Culture held seminars on the impact of Nubian literature on Egyptian culture for the first time in late 2011 (Masress, 2011). Similarly, in April 2011 a major conference entitled 'The Problem of Nubian Rights before and after the January 25th Revolution' brought together prominent writers, intellectuals and political activists who reiterated long-standing political demands for compensation, Nubian cultural and language rights and guaranteed electoral

representation, as well as the so-called 'right of return' to their home-territories on the shore of Lake Nasser, all of which was widely reported in the press (Begg 14 07 11).

Policy developments quickly followed. In July 2011 the Egyptian authorities announced their "full support" for Nubian calls to resettle the shores of Lake Nasser and it was reported that they had given the go-ahead to rebuild some Nubian villages closer to Old Nubia, in the area known as the Toshka Depression (Begg 14/07/11). Little concrete action was taken to implement this decree until July 2013 when the prominent Nubian writer-activist Haggag Hassan Oddoul was appointed to the 'Rights and Freedoms subcommittee' in the fifty-member Assembly charged with amending the Egyptian Constitution in 2013, shortly after the ouster of President Morsi and the coup that brought General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power. Oddoul's role in the Constitutional Assembly was not just to ensure that the amended constitution included suitable guarantees of minority culture and language rights, but also to negotiate major long-standing Nubian political demands for cultural and language rights and their 'right of return' (Salah 2013).

These aspirations were fulfilled – on paper at least – in January 2014 when Article 236 of the new Egyptian constitution was signed into law, guaranteeing the Nubian community cultural rights and recognition as a national minority for the first time as well as legally enshrining their right to develop settlements on the shores of Lake Nasser within 10 years (Al-Nubi 2013). Equally, Articles 47 and 50 also affirm the preservation of different identities within the Egyptian heritage, marking a step change from Article 1 of the 1971 Constitution which stated categorically: "Egyptian people are part of the Arab nation", thus nullifying the existence of non-Arab minorities within its territory (Janmyr 2016, 4–5). Representing the fruition of hard-fought Nubian resistance and activism ever since construction of the Aswan High Dam in 1964, it is my contention that these significant constitutional rights could never have been achieved without the cumulative pressure of voices like those of Oddoul, 'Ali, Mukhtar and Qasim, which helped change public perceptions of the legitimacy of the Nubian cause and to generate the political leverage necessary to pave the way for political reform.

As Oddoul has argued, the affective power of storytelling lies in its capacity to humanise experiences of displacement and generate an emotional reaction to injustice in order to "influence professional politicians, no matter how much they would prefer to ignore it" (Aboul-Ela 2005). By highlighting the intergenerational

impacts of a century of dam-induced displacement to a wide readership, narratives of the Nubian Awakening have significantly influenced public opinion and debate at both domestic and international level. Without wishing to overstate the case, I would argue that the growing readership and increasing critical esteem in which Nubian literature has been held both at home and abroad over the course of the last twenty years may help explain why long-standing Nubian demands for social and economic justice, cultural recognition and the 'right to return' to Nubia finally became matters of government concern after decades of inaction by Presidents Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak.

Certainly, the growing influence of Nubian writers within the Egyptian establishment in recent decades is testament to the power of social and cultural capital in influencing public opinion and in helping to effect a shift in the balance of power in favour of marginalised minority groups, underlining "the crucial importance of the personal dimensions of displacement narratives to ensuring that those in power are more realistically informed and persuasively influenced" about the justice of the Nubian cause (McGee 2002, 153). Recent negative political developments notwithstanding (most notably the Egyptian parliament's decision, in January 2016, to approve Presidential Decree 444, which denotes a zone along the Egyptian-Sudanese border, including eighteen Nubian villages, as a militarised "no-man's land", in blatant contravention of their constitutional right to return (Hisham 2016)), the fact that the so-called 'Nubian Question' is now discussed in the political mainstream is testament to the role played by the literary *avant-garde* in preparing the ground for grassroots activists and civil society groups to continue the fight for Nubian rights and social justice.

The Structure of the Thesis

Spanning three generations of writers whose work touches on the effects of dams, displacement and development from a multiplicity of often contradictory subject positions, this thesis considers how contemporary Nubian literature written between 1964 and the present day sheds light on the immediate and long-term legacy of the Aswan High Dam from a subaltern standpoint instead of through the lens of

government officials, development experts, historians and academics who have tended to articulate the dam's national benefits over its significant local costs. As I will go on to argue in the chapters that follow, by intervening directly in the public sphere Nubian writer-activists connected to the revivalist cultural movement known as *Ṣaḥwa Nubiyya* or 'Nubian Awakening' have come to represent the 'collective voice', or, perhaps better, voices, of the Nubian community in such a way that highlights experiences and perceptions long occluded from public discourse that can generate momentum for reform and redress (Whitlock 2015; Whitlock 2007).

Chapter One, entitled 'The Aswan Dam: Site of Symbolic Struggle', discusses how the Aswan High Dam became a site of what Bourdieu terms "symbolic struggle" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 174) between Nubians and the state in which the promises and deceptions of postcolonial Egypt are played out. While the High Dam's redemptive symbolism as a reflection of the power, prosperity and progress of the postcolonial nation proved highly popular amongst the Egyptian public who flocked to the Egyptian parliament crying "Nasser, Nasser, we come to salute you: after the Dam our land will be paradise!" (Nixon 2011, 116), I argue that this was accompanied by a willed amnesia about the fate of the Nubian inhabitants of the so-called 'submergence zone', whose very name suggests "the drowning out of developmental refugee voices, voices rendered inaudible by the floodwaters of gung-ho developmental rhetoric" (Nixon 2011, p.161).

With this in mind, two texts written by the same author, yet from contrasting ideological perspectives, are put in conversation with each other. Whereas *Insān as-Sadd al-'Ali*, 1967 [*Man of the High Dam*], a piece of reportage commissioned by the Middle East News Agency [MENA] and written by the journalists Son'allah Ibrahim, Kamal al-Qilish, and Ra'uf Mus'ad, has been described as "the national epic of the Nasser years *par excellence*" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 36), Son'allah Ibrahim's novel *Najmat Aghustus*, 1976 [*Star of August*] critically reflects on the portrayal of the High Dam in his earlier work. In so doing, Ibrahim's fiction reveals how the High Dam's 'symbolic power' as a means to impress the Egyptian public and legitimate Nasser's rule was both discursively generated and contested.

However, both texts ultimately euphemise the suffering and sacrifice of the Nubian people in what could be construed as a form of symbolic violence. By contrast, Muhammad Khalil Qasim's novel *al-Shamandūra*, 1968 (*The Buoy*), which is credited with being both the first novel by a Nubian writer and the first literary text

about the Nubian people (Ashaq 2010, 97), re-centres the Nubian experience of dam-induced displacement and resettlement at the heart of the debate over the Aswan High Dam's contested legacy. In a political context where freedom of speech and action were tightly curtailed, *The Buoy* constitutes a major intervention in the ongoing 'symbolic struggle' over the legacy of dam building on the Nile which deserves belated recognition as the first text to articulate Nubian resistance to forced displacement and resettlement, rewriting the historical record from a subaltern perspective.

Even though *The Buoy* chronicles the Nubian community's fight for equitable compensation and social justice in the face of a neglectful and high-handed Egyptian administration, it stops short of critiquing hegemonic notions of mega-dams as engines for national development and social progress, buying into the rationale shared by nationalists and communists of the period alike that the dam's economic and social benefits were bound to outweigh its costs. By contrast, Chapter Two, entitled 'National Development, Nubian Disaster? The Legacy of the Aswan High Dam in Contemporary Nubian Fiction' will reveal how Yahya Mukhtar's fictional memoir *Jibāl al-kohl: Riwāya men al-Nūba*, 2001 (*Kohl Mountains: a Novel of Nubia*), which narrates the immediate physical and emotional impacts of forced displacement and resettlement, and Haggag Hassan Oddoul's collection of short stories *Layāli al-Misk al-'Atiqa*, 2002 (*Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia*, 2005), which examines the longer-term legacy of the Aswan High Dam through the prisms of history, memory and nostalgia, are considerably more critical.

Not only do these texts subvert the symbolic power of the Aswan High Dam in the nationalist imagination and appropriate it for their own ends, but they also play a mediating role in countering what Nixon calls the "layered invisibility" of the Nubian people in postcolonial Egypt whose voices and perspectives were systematically silenced in mainstream popular and political discourses (Nixon 2011, 16). As I shall demonstrate, *Kohl Mountains* does not simply attempt to rewrite or 're-right' nationalist history in the conventional sense. Rather, the text constitutes a powerful form of postcolonial life writing which not only documents the past but seeks to "bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying", thus enabling processes of cultural regeneration and national reconciliation to unfold (Whitlock 2015, 138).

For Mukhtar, literature plays a vital role in giving imaginative reality to a homeland that now existed only in individual and collective memory whereby it

becomes a key site for creating affective links to the past amongst a diasporic Nubian community held together not so much by a shared language, culture or sense of place as by shared memory (Hirsch and Miller 2011b; Hirsch 2012). Moreover, this literature has the capacity to go beyond recording or relaying the events of the past to allow the reader imaginatively to inhabit them (Felman and Laub 1991, 108), and, in the process, to foster what Craps terms "cross cultural solidarity and the formation of new forms of community" (Craps 2013, 2). As such, Mukhtar's writing helps develop affective bonds between Egyptian citizens by stressing the historical place of the Nubian people within Egypt's civilizational heritage and creating the conditions necessary to reshape the national imaginary in a more plural image (Whitlock 2007, 141).

By contrast, Oddoul's collection of short stories *Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia* (2005) draws attention to the longer-term impact of dam-building on Nubian culture over the course of the twentieth century, suggesting the existence of an autonomous Nubian history and consciousness distinct from that of the wider Egyptian nation. In keeping with Oddoul's stated intention for his work to "turn the world's attention to Nubian culture and to provoke the world to recognise and promote its renaissance" (Aboul-Ela 2005), the stories in this volume constitute a powerful Nubian counter-narrative to the unitary fiction of Arab nationalism which effectively excluded Nubia from Egypt's national imaginary. On the contrary, they situate Nubia as the centre of a distinct civilisation and history rather than at the periphery of Egyptian national consciousness through an aesthetics of restoration that constitutes a politicised affirmation of Nubia's distinctive identity, culture, history, mythology and language.

Oddoul responds to the 'othering' of Nubia in Egyptian popular and nationalist discourse by articulating a powerful Nubian counter-narrative framed in terms of a shared collective history, memory and culture distinct from that of the wider Egyptian nation. By contrast, Chapter Three, which is entitled 'Beyond Nubia? The 'Post-Aswan' Generation and the Fiction of Idris 'Ali', will explore the emergence of a diasporic consciousness amongst Egyptian Nubians of the 'post-Aswan' generation living in Cairo and Alexandria through the fiction of Idris 'Ali. In many ways his work exemplifies a wider trend within modern Egyptian writing known as 'border literature' – a term closely associated with Mignolo's concept of 'border thinking', which he explicitly defines as the "alternative to separatism" (Mignolo 2000, 736–

743) – whereby the marginalisation of peripheral regions within the Egyptian national imaginary is given centre stage by writers of Bedouin, Nubian and Berber origin.

Idris 'Ali's fiction has been widely interpreted as "the strongest and most controversial expression yet published of the Nubian revival" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 183), not least because it posits the controversial question of the extent to which Nubians 'belong' to the Egyptian nation and even raises the spectre of a united Nubia seceding from both Egypt and Sudan. However, far from endorsing Nubian ethno-nationalism, as some critics have argued, this chapter will demonstrate how all attempts at fashioning a collective Nubian identity in *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1998) and *Poor* (2007) ultimately fail, revealing the limitations of Nubian separatism as a viable or progressive alternative to Egyptian nationalism. Reflecting the cynicism about nation-building of the disenchanted African postcolonial novel (Appiah 1992, 221–54), 'Ali's writing reveals Nubian nationalism to be little more than an inverted form of the Egyptian national chauvinism it is reacting against. It thus echoes Fanon's observation that all forms of nationalism have a tendency to morph from "nationalism to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism, and finally to racism" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 125).

A close reading of these two texts reveals how 'Ali's writing can be read as a critique of the nativist leanings of the Nubian revivalist movement. Instead of the nostalgic affirmation of Nubian culture and traditions that we find in the work of Mukhtar and Oddoul for example, 'Ali's fiction suggests that the post-Aswan generation of diasporic Nubians who grew up in the cities of northern Egypt were more concerned in seeking solutions to broader issues facing all Egyptians such as social exclusion, poverty and unemployment, than in Nubian ethno-nationalism. Moving beyond the binary logic of 'black' and 'white', Arab and Nubian, 'Ali's writing expresses an ethic of trans-racial and religious solidarity with Egypt's poor whom, he suggests, are victims of the postcolonial state every bit as much as the Nubian community whose experiences animate these novels.

This, I would suggest, indicates a desire for a more inclusive and progressive form of Egyptian national culture grounded in what Walter Mignolo and Julian Go have respectively termed a "critical" (Mignolo 2000) or "postcolonial" (Go 2013) cosmopolitanism which celebrates rather than silences Egypt's plurality of religious, ethnic and social identities, yet still locates Nubian identity and politics firmly within the Egyptian nation. Whereas the immediate postcolonial period following the Free

Officers Coup in 1952 may have favoured a homogenous, unitary conception of Egyptian identity as a decisive site for anti-imperial struggle, this chapter suggests that more plural, differentiated and ultimately progressive concepts of national identity can, and indeed are, emerging within the Egyptian literary sphere that are capable of absorbing minority identities into the national imaginary by situating Nubian identity and culture at the heart of what it means to be an Egyptian.

Chapter One: The Aswan High Dam As A Site of Symbolic Struggle

In 1965 three journalists from the state-sponsored news agency MENA, Son'allah Ibrahim, Kamal al-Qilish and Ra'uf Mus'ad, were sent to Aswan to research and write a piece about construction of the High Dam. Described as "the national epic of the Nasser years *par excellence*" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 36), their report *Insān as-Sadd al-'Ali*, 1967 [*Man of the High Dam*] claims to provide "*ṣafḥāt tuṣādiq"*, that is, a truthful and objective attestation of the transformations occurring at Aswan that would allow the Egyptian public to apprehend the national, not to mention international, importance of the High Dam project (Ibrahim, al-Qilish and Ra'uf 1967, 7). Nearly ten years after that initial visit, however, Son'allah Ibrahim published the novel upon which he had been working since his initial stint in Aswan entitled *Najmat Aghustus*, 1976 [*Star of August*], which appeared in French as *Etoile d'août* in 1987. His novel reflexively 'writes back' against *Man of the High Dam* (to borrow a term which denotes how postcolonial literatures critique Eurocentric notions of literature and language and respond to the literary canon of the colonial centre (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002)) by contesting the mystification of the dam in the service of state power.

In putting two texts written by the same author, yet from contrasting ideological perspectives, in conversation with each other, I intend to show how *Star of August* proffers an alternative reading of the Aswan High Dam's social and environmental legacy to that found in hegemonic discourses of the period. I will also reflect on how its huge symbolic power as a means to impress the Egyptian public and legitimate Nasser's rule was discursively generated and subsequently came to be contested. As Jean Kérisel has argued in her study of the symbolism of the Aswan High Dam, *The Nile and its masters: past, present, future* (2001), the dam project came to function, both materially and metaphorically, as a monument to Nasser's grandiose ambitions. Far from being a rational hydrological engineering project, the High Dam "was in fact a hydro-political scheme" (Kérisel 2001, 130) whose gigantism marked a break with past traditions of water management on the Nile which had favoured a series of smaller dams, both to mitigate the risks posed by a breach of

its walls to Egyptians living downstream in the floodplain and to reduce evaporation from the reservoir.

Nasser's rush to construct a megadam reflected a race for technological supremacy and leadership of the emerging Third World bloc of 'non-aligned' nations in the 1950s and 1960s when leaders such as Nasser, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana were "seduced by the symbolism of epic dams" which "assumed a national psychological significance over and above their pragmatic promise" as acts of national self-assertion during the decolonisation process (Nixon 2011, 166; Harlow 1987, 6). The Aswan High Dam's redemptive symbolism as a reflection of the power, prosperity and progress of the postcolonial nation proved highly popular amongst the Egyptian public who flocked *en masse* to the Egyptian parliament crying "Nasser, Nasser, we come to salute you: after the Dam our land will be paradise!" (Nixon 2011, 116). However, this wave of support was accompanied by a willed amnesia on the part of the Egyptian authorities and the general public about the fate of the displaced Nubians.

Not only was the Nubian community not adequately consulted about the planned dam project by the Egyptian authorities, but the sacrifice of their ancient homeland for the sake of national development was, ironically, all but forgotten in the public discourse of the period. Instead, Nubians were relegated to the status of what Nixon has termed a 'ghost community' – one that is both physically and imaginatively displaced yet continues to haunt the visible nation from the margins (Nixon 2011, 151–61). As a result of the dominance of Arab nationalist discourses emphasising the Aswan High Dam's collective benefits at the expense of its local costs and of the manner in which these discourses effectively wrote the Nubian people and their history out of the landscape, the dam has become a key site of what Bourdieu terms "symbolic struggle" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 174) between Nubians and the state in which the promises and deceptions of postcolonial Egypt are played out.

Although *Star of August*'s trenchant critique of the Aswan High Dam's symbolic power succeeds in puncturing the myths that had grown up around the project, it fails to acknowledge the dam's catastrophic impact on those most affected by its construction, namely the estimated one hundred and twenty thousand Nubians who were forcibly resettled to the area known as New Nubia around Kom Ombo, seventy kilometres north of Aswan, and Khashim el-Girba, on the Sudanese border with Ethiopia, in 1964. While both *Man of the High Dam* and *Star of August*

euphemise the suffering experienced by the Nubian people in what could be construed as a form of symbolic violence, Muhammad Khalil Qasim's novel *al-Shamandūra*, 1968 (*The Buoy*), which is credited with being both the first novel by a Nubian writer and the first literary text about the Nubian people (Ashaq 2010, 97), re-centre the Nubian experience of dam-induced displacement and resettlement at the heart of the national debate over dams and development. In a political context in which freedom of speech was tightly curtailed, *The Buoy* deserves belated recognition as the first literary text to articulate Nubian resistance to a century of dam building on the Nile and its human and environmental consequences which have been systematically 'written out' of official accounts.

The Aswan High Dam: Site of Symbolic Power

In Son'allah Ibrahim, Kamal al-Qilish and Ra'uf Mus'ad's elegiac piece of reportage *Man of the High Dam* (1967), the sheer scale of the Aswan High Dam as a physical object and its symbolic value as an embodiment of the prosperity and progress of the postcolonial Egyptian state and Jamal Abdul Nasser's inspired leadership are intertwined. As Céza Kassem-Draz observes, in hegemonic discourses of the period "the 'text' of the High Dam, the mythical discourse that had been woven around it and which the builders helped weave, was a means of mystification. The ideology of the 1952 Revolution informed such texts. Side by side, for over twenty years, and standing in opposition, were the High Dam and the text of the High Dam" (Kassem-Draz 1982, 37). Similarly, in *Man of the High Dam*, the development project's predicted national benefits – from hydro-electricity generation to perennial irrigation – come to symbolise the material rewards of socialist struggle that would chase away the "darkness" of poverty and ignorance from the Egyptian countryside and enable the decolonising nation not just to emulate, but to surpass, the achievements of the 'First World' (Ibrahim, al-Qilish and Ra'uf 1967, 66).

Egypt's emerging leadership role within the 'Third World' bloc is implicitly suggested in passages describing the High Dam as "that new pyramid of Egypt, which rises higher day after day there in Aswan, which tomorrow will be a symbol of the

African battle against colonialism and for survival; of the loyal cooperation between peoples and international friendship; and a symbol of a fruitful tomorrow anticipated by millions" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish and Ra'uf 1967, 5). In light of Nasser's achievements in opposing the 'tripartite aggression' of the French, British and Israeli forces at Suez in 1956 and out-manoeuvring the Americans by acquiring Soviet financing for the High Dam, the Egyptian president is equated with being a modern pharaoh who is endowed with the god-like qualities necessary to "guide the world" and redeem his people (Ibrahim, al-Qilish and Ra'uf 1967, 8). This is indicated by comparisons of the dam site "to a battle by the simple Egyptian people to cut through rock, defeat the mountains, guide the world and build a new era for a new Egypt, under the banner of his inspired and genius leadership" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 8).

Repeated references throughout the text to Nasser's pharaonic qualities are reflective of a national obsession with the legacy of the pharaohs in the postcolonial period and a concomitant belief that Egypt's future lay in emulating, rather than merely admiring, their achievements. This might explain why, under Nasser, "the country allowed itself to be carried away by a wave of large scale projects" like the Union of Egypt with Syria in 1958 and construction of the Aswan High Dam in 1964 (Kérisel 2001, 121–23). By equating Nasser with the pharaohs, and the High Dam with the great pyramids they had built, *Man of the High Dam* implies that the postcolonial era will be as glorious as that of ancient Egypt, surpassing the technical achievements of the British colonial administration. Not only is the High Dam "seventeen times bigger than the pyramids and thirty times bigger than the Aswan Low Dam [constructed by the British in 1902]" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 22), but we learn that Nasser alone has succeeded in taming the Nile – a feat which neither the pharaohs nor the colonial powers had achieved.

Accordingly, the text boasts that for the first time in history "the course of the mighty Nile was interrupted and Nasser [was the] first to traverse the land bridge across the Nile" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 27). For the author, this symbolises nothing short of the fact that the "race against time with nature had ended in May 1964" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 8). Man and machine are effectively elided in this section, which emphasises the importance of harnessing technological power and technical prowess as symbols of Nasser's 'new Egypt' which is being built over the decaying remnants of the colonial order. Here, the diggers and lorries which break down and are taken to the garages to be repaired are personified

as wounded soldiers who are rushed to hospital and operated on before returning, heroically, to battle (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 29).

Described as "that other city that never sleeps" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 16), the dam site operates within the text both as a microcosm of the modern Egyptian nation as it develops from an agricultural to an industrialised society, and as an embodiment of society's revolutionary transformation in the image of the prototypal 'new man' depicted in the socialist realist novel (Robin 1992, 233) – a genre that thrived in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. The principles and methods of socialist realism were set out by Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in his speech at the 1934 party congress entitled "Soviet Literature – the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature". This advanced the thesis that socialist realist literature "depicts reality in its revolutionary development" (Beaumont 2007, 143) and helps "reshape people's psychological and emotional dispositions" in the image of the so-called "harmonious" Soviet man (Beaumont 2007, 145).

Holding mind and will, ideology and instincts, in "perfect balance", the 'new man' of the Soviet imagination is exemplified by the persona of the 'positive hero' of socialist realist literature who is typically given "a task (e.g. putting a factory back in service, constructing a dam, collectivizing the land, infusing [his comrades] with the energy to build a factory, unifying forces to bring about the accomplishment of a plan") that is achieved only with the help of his allies such as "poor but enlightened peasants, engineers devoted to the cause of the proletariat … [and] non-careerist Party members)" (Robin 1992, 264). So closely does *Man of the High Dam* follow this template in its depiction of how members of Egypt's different social classes, from engineers to bureaucrats, peasants and labourers, unite to build the dam and, by extension, the modern Egyptian nation, that the text should actually be read as a highly stylised form of ideological propaganda which mimics the form of the socialist realist novel.

One interviewee reportedly tells the journalists researching *Man of the High Dam* that personal and public endeavour have become fused and "my work and my life and my expertise and my profession have become entangled with the enormous projects of the modern age, both … for the Suez canal and Nasser's High Dam" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 42). Another recounts how the workers, described by huge billboards displayed around the dam site as 'Children of the Dam',

are driven by a strong sense of national purpose and dedication to a project they loved "because it doesn't belong to any individual or group but to Egypt and all Egyptians" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 44). Indeed, the text narrates the process through which ordinary men are symbolically re-born at Aswan as model citizens, charged with the mission of changing the course of the Nile, and with it, Egyptian history (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 8)

Not only does *Man of the High Dam* encapsulate the nationalist fervour that gripped the Egyptian public during the Nasser era, but its emphasis on Egyptian-Soviet collaboration also indicates the superiority of the socialist economic model over that of capitalism – as exemplified by Egypt's old colonial power, Britain. The sense of one-upmanship this generates explains the comparison drawn in the text between English workers, who are described as "lazy and unmotivated", and their Egyptian and Russian counterparts who routinely work more than eighteen hours a day (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 38–39). This comparison purportedly prompts an English overseer to predict that, within a couple of decades, Egyptian and Russian youth would be at the forefront of world civilisation (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 39).

In addition to its stylised ideological frame, the text trots out a generic range of stock characters such as "engineers devoted to the cause of the proletariat" who are given a platform as the 'authentic voice' of the revolutionary dam project. An engineer responsible for the Euphrates project in Syria, for example, describes how Soviet funding encouraged exchange and cooperation between like-minded countries to build socialism, and that it was vitally important to emulate the Russian workers and their economic model if Egypt was to modernise and develop (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 47–49). Similarly, a doctor interviewed by the three journalists emphasises the revolutionary mentality prevalent amongst the workers he encounters in Aswan in comparison with those he encounters elsewhere in Egypt. Unlike in his regular job in Cairo, he recounts, "when I order a sick worker [at the dam site] to stop work he refuses to take leave and carries on working" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 51).

That the Aswan High Dam is truly a 'national project' built by, and for, the people is embodied by depictions of Nasser as the 'People's Friend' and by the strong alliance established between the workers and the local villagers – the "poor but enlightened peasants" of socialist realist tradition, without whom, one interviewee

reports, "we would have been unable to accomplish anything" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 90). Because electricity generated by the High Dam would "light the houses of the workers and peasants and change their lives entirely" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 89), once power lines stretching nine hundred kilometres from Aswan to Cairo had been constructed to reach over four thousand Egyptian villages for the first time, the *fellahīn* or rural poor are reported as feeling that "this dam was for them" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 91–92), spontaneously dubbing the project "*Maṣabīh Nasser"* or "Nasser's lights" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 89).

Although the authors insist that local people coined this term, the fact that it directly echoes the term 'Lenin's lights' which was first used by the Soviet peasantry after the electrification of rural Russia. This suggests that the epithet is nothing more than a rhetorical tool employed in the text to burnish Nasser's socialist credentials. Such ideological didacticism is reinforced by passages like "by the time the dam is complete in 1970 Egypt will have more electricity than it needs and more electricity lines than any other country in the world except the Soviet Union, exceeding Egypt's demand" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 90) which reveal how the High Dam has come to occupy a totemic position within Egyptian society as a symbol for the victory of socialist economics over western capitalism.

Inevitably, perhaps, the text's high panegyric style ends up undermining the reality it purports to represent. This gulf between representation and reality in *Man of the High Dam* is indicated by phrases such as "just as Egyptians have a new life the river doesn't stick to its old course but chooses a new one, its waters will know a new body of land ... so that the earth will become like the land of milk and honey as the river moves from Aswan to Alexandria, from the old city of the pharaohs to the Mediterranean sea in a festival of light, civilisation and happiness" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 66). Here, the use of hyperbolic vocabulary casts open doubt on the objectivity and veracity of the reporting. What is being presented here, as elsewhere in this text, is little more than the equation of the Nasserist revolution with the establishment of a technological utopia where, as Kassem-Draz observes, "man and machine live happily ever after", (Kassem-Draz 1982, 42). Certainly, it is a far cry from the realistic portrayal of a hubristic development project which, crucially, entailed losers as well as winners, costs as well as benefits.

By contrast, as the Egyptian literary critic Samia Mehrez argues in her monograph *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Son'allah Ibrahim, and Gamal al-Ghitani* (2005), Son'allah Ibrahim's novel *Nejmat Aghustus* [*Star of August*] "represents a complex structure that critically reflects on and re-reads the stages of the revolutionary process as it consolidated itself in the physical presence of the High Dam ... and constructs an alternative reality, countering the revolution's own representation of that same moment in history" (Mehrez 2005, 126). Employing what has been variously described as a "mechanical" (Starkey 2006), "telegraphic" (Stone 2010) or "transparent" (Kassem-Draz 1982) narrative style stripped of all ornamentation, the text – which records the journalist-narrator's journey from Cairo to Aswan and on to Abu Simbel chronologically, "with little regard to the relative value of events or to their logical, as opposed to their temporal, dependence on one another" (Starkey 2006, 148) – is stripped of the stylistic embellishment found in *Man of the High Dam*.

This sparse narrative technique undermines the mystification of the High Dam in the earlier text by eroding its symbolic power as a metaphor for modernity and national(ist) progress and re-establishing the dam as a material object as opposed to a signifier. Moreover, by incorporating official documents, statistics, outside sources, tourist brochures and press-clippings into the text, *Star of August* deliberately draws the readers' attention to the dangers of taking 'objective' language at face value. By contrasting the information found in official sources with the reality on the ground, which the journalist is unable to report in print for fear of censorship or state reprisal, *Star of August* reveals the extent to which reality is shaped by coercion and the obscuring of power relations behind purportedly 'objective facts' (Kassem-Draz 1982).

Thus, an informant tells the journalist-narrator that an epidemic killing the Upper Egyptian workers has been knowingly covered up in the press as isolated cases of "sunstroke" in order not to alarm the workers at the dam site. Similarly, even something as banal as the weather forecast is open to manipulation by state media. Since workers are legally entitled to take the day off if the temperature exceeds forty-five degrees, the informant tells him that it is the editor's job to ensure that it is never reported as reaching above forty-four (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 142). That these deliberate distortions of reality posing as 'facts' are explicitly flagged up within the novel suggest that the external documentary sources should not be read as transparent

reflections of reality. Instead, they are better viewed as examples of what Mehrez terms 'docu-fictions' that manipulate reality in the service of dominant agendas (Mehrez 2005, 140). Here, inclusion of elements such as statistics and newspaper clippings alongside the commentary provided 'off the record' by both the narrator and other informants interrupts this illusion of objectivity by exposing and undermining their role in creating and maintaining the illusion of national progress in the face of all anecdotal evidence to the contrary.

A desire to unmask power by exposing the origins of the narrating voice which seeks "to see without being seen" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 26) not only explains the self-reflexivity of the authorial presence in *Star of August*, but also informs Ibrahim's otherwise odd choice to pen a second text on the same subject. Ibrahim expressly indicates that *Star of August* (first published in Damascus rather than Cairo in order to evade the censor) provides a more accurate representation of the High Dam and its legacy than the supposedly objective journalistic text which masquerades as a transparent representation of reality. Commenting on the context in which *Man of the High Dam* was produced, Ibrahim states:

> From the title of the book alone it is clear that neither in its language nor in its construction does it differ from the exalted propaganda of the time. Yet, I didn't have the impression that I was lying in the book. I was simply doing what I considered to be my duty, telling myself that later I would take the time to find out the truth and find an opportunity to express myself more freely. (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 37)

That two such opposing representations of the Aswan High Dam and its significance derive from the same authorial experience testifies to what Timothy Brennan calls "the commercial and governmental pre-forming of the imagination" (Brennan 1989, 19) in postcolonial Egypt and the concomitant importance of literary texts such as *Star of August* in challenging the impartiality of official discourses which purport "to represent reality as it is but in fact attempt to create familiarisation and acceptance ... using processes similar to fiction that hide the reality of the dam behind its opaque style" (Kassem-Draz 1982, 41). This includes the mystification or misrepresentation of the Aswan High Dam in hegemonic nationalist discourses of the period which could be described, following Bourdieu, as a form of symbolic violence

that marginalises or suppresses 'heterodox' accounts of the dam's long-term legacy on affected communities as articulated in the counter-narratives of the 'Nubian Awakening' which be explored in more detail in the chapters that follow.

The Aswan High Dam: Site of Symbolic Struggle

According to Bourdieu in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (1990), cultural producers wield "the properly symbolic power of showing things and making people believe in them, of revealing, in an explicit, objectified way the more or less confused, vague, unformulated, even unformulable experiences of the natural world and the social world, and of thereby bringing them into existence" (Bourdieu 1990, 147). While culture is often deployed as an instrument of symbolic domination by the powerful, it may also be put at service of the dominated on the basis that "if worlds are [discursively] constructed, then they can be re-constructed in other ways and in other words" (Grenfell 2010, 184).

In his insistence that language is as much a tool of power as it is of communication, Bourdieu remains cautiously optimistic about the subversive and liberating potential of heterodox literature to effect social change. This takes place, he argues, through a process of 'symbolic struggle', particularly at times of *hysteresis* (social or ideological crisis resulting in generational change) when the supposedly 'natural' alignment between *habitus* (social behaviour or subjectivity) and different social fields is disrupted, permitting greater public discussion of, and challenges to, normative ways of thinking and behaving that are conditioned by hegemony (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 140–75; Grenfell 2010, 131–47).

Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis is certainly applicable to the historical moment at which Ibrahim was writing. Following the Free Officers' Coup in 1952, symbolic capital in Egypt was in flux and remained 'up for grabs' for many years as the institutions and symbols of the *ancien régime* were swept away but had yet to nationalist discourse was still struggling to embed itself within Egyptian society. Indeed, *Star of August's* strident critique of the liberationist rhetoric of revolutionary Arab nationalism by exposing the reality that it masks reflects the widespread crisis of confidence in Nasser amongst Egyptian writers and intellectuals following the

shock defeat of the Arab armies to Israeli forces during the Six Day War in 1967 that resulted in the occupation of the Egyptian Sinai (an event known as the *naksah* or setback in Arabic). These events prompted renewed criticism of the Nasser regime by many within the Egyptian establishment who, like Ibrahim and Mukhtar, had at one time had been broadly supportive of his vision to reform and modernise the postcolonial nation on socialist-nationalist principles.

Consequently, when *Star of August* was published in 1975, Nasser's postcolonial nationalist regime had failed to exercise discursive hegemony over Egyptian state which would allow it to rule through symbolic, rather than actual, violence - a strategy which functions only, as Bourdieu makes clear, when dominant discourses have been internalised and treated as the 'natural' order of things by the public at large (Grenfell 2010, 109). Despite the repressive political conditions in Egypt during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s which stymied freedom of expression and association, literary texts from this period, when read both against each other and extra-textually, can reveal the conditions under which hegemonic power-structures are discursively constituted (Mehrez 2005, 11). Thus, when *Man of the High Dam* is read alongside *Star of August* its deliberate distortions and silences are exposed, revealing the pressures writers like Ibrahim faced at the time to conform to sanctioned state discourses and propaganda, which resulted in a "doubling" of the writer's role to produce "not only stories but the 'story behind the story'" – that is to say, why certain things are sayable while others remain unsaid (Mehrez 2005, 8).

In both texts the journalist-narrator collects testimonies from the workers encountered at the site of the dam. For example, the section of *Man of the High Dam* entitled 'The Dam is my Country' is made up of snippets from interviews conducted with site workers and their families (many of whom were peasants or students in their past lives who left what they were doing just to come and work on the dam). Presented in the text as transparent reflections of their lived reality, the views they express closely echo the discourse of stock characters of socialist realist fiction and, far from reflecting a multiplicity of viewpoints, uniformly stress their happiness and satisfaction at being involved in the completion of this important project and their joy at learning new skills that would equip them to succeed in the modern world (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 37–51). As such, they serve to reinforce government propaganda about the role of the High Dam in shaping the physical and psychological

contours of the new Egyptian nation in a manner that is immune to criticism and nuance.

By contrast, *Star of August* self-reflexively meditates on the political pressures influencing the writer's selection and rejection of material for inclusion in the text. The explicit and subconscious pressure to self-censor the facts he uncovers is demonstrated during an interview conducted with an official who states: "I'm going to tell you something that must remain between us: today a cement plaque fell on a Soviet worker – the unfortunate man was crushed beneath it. It's probably one of our boys who did it" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 202). This episode suggests the manner in which any criticism of the dam project was buried in a public discourse which deliberately foregrounded only 'good news stories'.

In another example, the narrator learns from an official that a mysterious haemorrhagic disease is spreading amongst the workers at the dam site, causing people "to drop like flies", in probable reference to an outbreak of Rift Valley fever in Aswan that killed six hundred people carried by wind-blown mosquitoes and labourers migrating to from the Sudan to work on the dam site (McCully 2001, 93). This is deliberately misreported in the media as sun-stroke so as not to create panic, partly on the basis that those affected are 'mere' labourers and not cadres (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 140). Similarly, the head of military transportation reveals that the successful progression of the High Dam project was due not to the exceptional personal commitment of the site workers but to active coercion on the part of their superiors instilled by "order and discipline, both founded on fear" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 74).

After taking down this information the journalist-narrator is explicitly told it was "unnecessary to mention the word 'fear'. It's better to formulate it differently: order and discipline, based on persuasion. That way, there won't be any misunderstanding!" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 75). Here, he is issued with a clear order to censor his words, which is accompanied by the implicit threat of sanction should he refuse to do so. This episode suggests the "claustrophobic oppressiveness" of state control and surveillance during the Nasser era (Harlow 1987, 169). Self-censorship is equally insidious and is exercised by officials and writers alike in the interests of self-preservation. This is illustrated in a conversation between a disillusioned engineer who critiques the dam and his colleagues' before telling the journalist: "keep that to yourself, will you? That's off the record", to which Said responds ironically: "Don't

worry ... I've no wish to be labelled a communist or of having an [inferiority] complex when faced with foreigners, nor that anyone reproach me for being insensible to the Egyptian miracle!" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 63).

Here, the reporter alludes to the accusations of treachery typically brought by the state against dissenting writers and also to his own personal experience of being caught up in Nasser's purge of the left in the 1950s. Indeed, the veiled threats from authority figures about the repercussions of reporting honestly on his conversations causes the narrator to endure vivid flashbacks to his detention when, stripped naked, trembling with fear and covered with their own excrement, he is forced to listen to the national(ist) anthem *Waṭanī* ('My Country') while being pushed into a van and taken away to be tortured (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 117). Here, the contradictions in the text between the conscious representation of a utopian socialist reality and the subconscious fear which exists amongst Egypt's citizens unmasks the symbolic and actual violence imposed by Egyptian nationalism on those who dare oppose it, whether materially or discursively.

Similarly, whereas the interviews in *Man of the High Dam* typically extoll the benefits of the High Dam, the protagonist of *Star of August* encounters an employee willing to put his negative views on the record. The incident is worth citing in full because it indicates both the existence of opposition to the project and the ways in which dissent is routinely silenced in a political context where "everything conspires to make the press the end point of, and the essential means towards, struggles for symbolic domination in the literary field" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 77). As a result, many authors, including Ibrahim himself, had little choice but to establish their literary reputations through writing for state-sponsored newspapers whose 'official' discourse they were charged with disseminating:

> And according to what they've been telling you, everyone is delighted to be here, in this hell...
> - Nobody has told me they want to leave.
> - And what would happen if someone told you that they were here under duress? Could you publish that sort of thing?
> - The case hasn't presented itself.
> - And if it did?
> - I don't know. I don't think anyone would tell me that.

He leaned over the table striking his chest with his hand.

\- Well me, I'm telling you that ... If I could, I wouldn't stay here a second longer.

...

\- Are you going to publish what I've told you?

\- I don't think so. (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 216–17)

That such incidents exposing the reality of state censorship appear in *Star of August* at all is testament to the fact that literature enjoyed comparably greater freedom to critique the regime than other mass-market cultural forms.   As Jacquemond has illustrated, authors of what Bourdieu calls 'legitimate literature' (Grenfell 2010, 67) (that is, literary fiction circulated in small print runs and destined primarily for an elite readership) was generally granted greater critical latitude than mass-market visual or print media considered by the censors to be potentially 'destabilising', and thus kept on a short leash (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 35–85).

Thus, although the 'right to speak' in postcolonial Egypt had largely been usurped by the state, impeding the development of related fields such as history, social science and philosophy, the literary realm remained relatively autonomous, enabling writers such as Ibrahim to "bring struggles and debates that could not take place freely in the political field into the cultural field under a different guise" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 35–36).   Literature thus became a privileged space for dissenting voices to proliferate, challenging the regime and playing a self-consciously contestatory role in retrieving silenced voices and forming alternative standpoints on matters of collective importance (Selim 2004, 3).

Egyptian narrative history was overwhelmingly mediated throughout the twentieth century by the state apparatus and elites who functioned as guardians of official discourse, proffering authoritative 'national' accounts of events (such as the lectures on 'Challenges in Building the Aswan Dam' and 'The Aswan Dam and the National Project' given by the writer, journalist, politician and erstwhile editor of *al-Ahram* newspaper Muhammad Hasanayn Haikal, who is widely regarded as Nasser's mouthpiece (Al Jazeera Lecture Series, 2007)).   Consequently, writers such as Ibrahim came to be seen as 'underground historians' or 'parallel sociologists' of their society. As Mehrez states:

Regarding the Third World in general and, for our purposes, Egypt in particular, the question of authority (the state) in its relation to narrativity and its position vis-a-vis both the historical and literary records, as narratives of society, is of paramount importance. Depending on the power (or weakness) of the state, its presence or absence ... and the extent to which it intervenes to construct the narratives which represent society and moralise 'reality' the contemporary writer will bear equally, with the historian, the responsibility of producing a counter-record, an alternative discourse. His or her task will be to make speak the silences in the narrative produced by that authority. (Mehrez 2005, 6)

The emergence of the ideal of the 'engaged author' as a mouthpiece for expressing matters of social concern directly contributed to the politicisation of Egyptian literature during the second half of the century, which was marked by a tension between *iltizām* [commitment] to the ideals of social justice and equality that galvanised postcolonial Egyptian politics and *ightirāb* [alienation] as a result of the failure of the national liberation movement to deliver on its promises to transform social reality (Hafez 1976). Ibrahim himself was widely regarded by the authorities as a "*kātib mushākis*" or "troublemaking writer" because of his radical critique of Nasserism from exile in Moscow and his refusal to bow to censorship (Mehrez 2003). Thus, while the state ban on publishing *Star of August* hindered the text's distribution in Egypt, it paradoxically enhanced the author's integrity and authority (Mostafa 2011, 422), which were further augmented by his refusal to accept a literary award from the Egyptian Higher Council for Culture on the basis that "it is awarded by a government that, in my opinion, lacks the credibility of bestowing it" (Mehrez 2003).

Yet although Son'allah Ibrahim, critic of the failures of the Nasser regime *par excellence*, explicitly sets out to demolish the nationalist myths that had grown up around the Aswan High Dam in Star *of August*, he fails to engage adequately with its negative local impacts on those most directly affected – namely the estimated 120,000 strong Nubian population of Egypt whose homeland, history and way of life had been obliterated when Lake Nasser swallowed all of ancient Nubia on either side of the Egyptian/Sudanese border. Arguably, his failure to tackle the Nubian question head on is indicative of a more generalised 'difference blindness' on the part of the Egyptian literary elite to "tackle national questions from a perspective of social

pluralism" (Naaman 2011, 110). This blindness, it is argued, has resulted in the near-invisibility of minorities such as Nubians within the Egyptian national imaginary which implicitly privileges an educated, urban subjectivity over narratives of rural, peripheral and peasant origins.

The Aswan High Dam: Site of Symbolic Violence

That the Nubian experience of dam-induced displacement was systematically misrepresented in, or written out of, both *Man of the High Dam* and *Star of August* can be viewed as a form of symbolic violence expressed in terms of the denigration, misrecognition or total non-recognition of alternative world views – which collectively "produces and protects dominant interests while inflicting suffering on the dominated" (Grenfell 2010, 184). Nevertheless, as Michael Grenfell argues, "it is in the very constructedness of such hierarchies that political action becomes possible [since] if worlds are constructed, then they can be re-constructed in other ways and in other words" (Grenfell 2010, 196). Nubian resistance to symbolic domination then becomes possible through the process of discursive struggle which has the potential to subvert dominant narratives and contest the hegemony of nationalist discourses about the dam and its legacy (Bourdieu 1991a, 277).

Although an entire chapter of *Man of the High Dam* is dedicated to the Nubians displaced by the High Dam, it is tellingly entitled *al-S'aūd* which can be translated as 'Rising', 'Ascent' or 'Embarkation'. The positivism inherent in all three meanings of this word suggests the text's ideological debt to what Scott has termed Nasser's 'High Modernist' development agenda (Scott 1998, 4)). This aimed to bring about structural changes in the habits, living patterns and social consciousness of so-called 'primitive' peoples (as Egypt's Nubians were classified) through sedenterization and resettlement. In practice, however, such projects led more often than not to development fiascos like 'The Great Leap Forward' in China and collectivisation in Russia. (Scott 1998, 6). As history has shown, however, what often resulted from these schemes was the creation of "impoverished and unsustainable" eco and social systems (Scott 1998, 348) of the sort depicted in Muhammad Khalil Qasim's novel *The Buoy* (1968) which, as I will explore later in this chapter, describes the long-term

costs of displacement and resettlement on the Nubian population displaced by the raising of the Aswan Low Dam in 1933.

As Mitchell argues, the principle of *tanẓīm* (often translated from the Arabic as modernisation, but which more literally refers to organisation or regulation) aimed to organise the urban crowds, rural masses and unassimilated minorities "into an organised and disciplined whole … that was to be constructed as Egyptian 'society'" (Mitchell 1991, 119) through diverse mechanisms like schools and the army, urban planning, and communication and transportation grids in order to enhance government control of the land and integrate its people into the modern centralised nation state. As such, *Man of the High Dam* does not dwell on the cultural costs of dam-induced displacement on the Nubian people, preferring instead to focus on the benefits that modernisation (in terms of electrification, access to clean water, health care and education, and so on) will bring to their community after they move to Kom Ombo.

A clear distinction is drawn between the "privileged" treatment that the Nubians received following construction of the High Dam in comparison with previous raisings of the Aswan Low Dam under the British colonial administration in 1912 and 1933 when many lost their homes and livelihoods with little in the way of rehabilitation. At that time, we are told, the Nubians "were really victims of the Nile. Nobody paid any attention and the compensation which was awarded to them was totally insufficient. And the tragedy was repeated at each rising" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 121). Moreover, the text carries the implication that life in Old Nubia was, to paraphrase the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, 'nasty, brutish and short' and that poverty and isolation had plagued the Nubian population for centuries, forcing the men to move north to Cairo and Alexandria to work, leaving the women behind in the villages (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 121).

Because of their geographic isolation, we are told, the people who remained in the villages after the menfolk had emigrated "never saw a car or electricity except from the ships that passed by their villages at night. These steamships, which came once a week, were their only window on the world. They would run to the banks to wait for them and the news and the letters from the men who never came" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 121). By way of contrast, the journalists are taken around the new school and hospital in 'New Ballana' and shown other signs of social progress such as the cooperatives, shops, bakery, post office, telegraph and bank which are pointed out to them precisely "because the old villages didn't have them" (Ibrahim,

al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 122). Moreover, we are told that the young men had now returned to the villages to work and were no longer to be found in Cairo but "working in the nearby fields or in the factories or at the dam" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 122).

The implication in these paragraphs is that these material improvements in the lives of the Nubian people following their resettlement to the area around Kom Ombo are an objective measure of social progress that more than justifies the pain of displacement. Yet this narrow focus on economic and material indicators of progress obscures the extensive cultural costs that leaving Old Nubia held for those displaced which could not be compensated for in monetary terms. As the Norwegian Geographer and Professor of Global History Terje Tvedt has argued, Nasser's approach to hydrological planning on the Nile assumed that the river was simply a resource or commodity to be managed rather than a site of extensive cultural meanings for the peoples living along its banks who, throughout history, had created different 'Nile Worlds' within the context of interactions between society and the river environment (Tvedt 2004, 12).

The historical connections between the Nubians and their Nile World are only fleetingly acknowledged in *Man of the High* Dam, and even then alluded to more as a folk memory than a vital component of contemporary Nubian identity and cultural life. Reference is made to lost traditions such as the marriage ritual whereby young men would go to the river alone to bathe carrying a sword, a whip and a knife to protect them, which, now that the Nile was gone, had been substituted with the symbolism of the groom carrying a sword on his wedding night (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 123). Similarly, the text records how, upon leaving their villages for the last time, the oustees "carried with them bags full of soil from the old country and its stones" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 122) to their villages in New Nubia which bore the same names as those they had left behind, and scattered them as a way of providing a symbolic link to the old world they had left behind.

Although the nostalgia felt by the elderly for their lost homeland is acknowledged, it is presented as a fleeting sentiment rather than a chronic condition, or as Oddoul has put it, "a splinter planted in each Nubian's heart stirring pangs of yearning for that natural environment that was an essential part of their being [and]... a sense of depression at having been thrown into an artificial environment that neither accepted them nor was accepted by them" (Aboul-Ela 2005). Rather, the text

describes how the sadness that overcame them when they thought of their old villages "quickly dissipated" as they "saw the men coming from the dam where they were working on their weekly visit to their wives and children" (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 123). This episode suggests a community whose members are focused squarely on their future in the resettlement site rather than on mourning the passing of their lost Nile World.

Such a sentiment is reinforced by the fact that the journalists' visit to New Ibrim at the end of the chapter ends in a tone of unequivocal Nubian support for the High Dam. This reaches its apogee in a song which the villagers sing for the reporters the lyrics of which go as follows:

> We came to New Ibrim
> For the sake of the High Dam
> And for the sake of the people of Egypt, for the sake of Jamal.
> Abdul Nasser went to Russia, and brought men and machines.
> The Marshal Abdul Hakim Amir went with him
> And brought weapons.
> The red-faced Russians in Aswan
> Were building the dam with our sons in the heat of the sun.
> Our sons were with them
> And the weapons with our sons,
> Fighting colonialism, Israel and the English! (Ibrahim, al-Qilish, and Ra'uf 1967, 128)

Heavily laden with symbolism, this song combines all the key thematic elements of state propaganda found in the remainder of the text, highlighting to the reader the importance of the dam as a symbol of national power, prosperity and progress, and of the superiority of a socialist system of cooperation capable of defeating the former colonisers and capitalist powers. Integral to its message, moreover, is the notion that the Nubians' sacrifice of their homeland was willingly undertaken for the sake of the Egyptian nation.

Given that Nasserism (as a socialist and Arab nationalist political ideology) considered Egyptian citizens as one people without reference to their tribe, ethnicity, or religion, the absence of any references to the legacy of dam-induced displacement

on the Nubian people in *Man of the High Dam* is hardly surprising, since their identity was not officially recognised by the state. What is more difficult to understand is how a self-consciously contestatory novel such as *Star of August* fails to register its impact either on Nubian culture and society, particularly since the novel was written as a self-reflexive critique of the earlier text's unequivocal support for the dam project. Moreover, Nubians generally appear in *Star of August* as waiters, servants, or labourers: objects of the writer's gaze whose subjectivity remains largely unexamined and unvoiced, providing little critical space for a Nubian perspective on the dam and its legacy to emerge in the text.

Initially, we are told, Nubians are hard for the journalist-narrator to distinguish from the *Sayyīdi* (Upper Egyptian) labourers in Aswan since they dress the same way, speak a similar dialect of Arabic, and, indeed, say very little save for proffering the protagonist goods and services. However at certain points in the text the anonymity of the Nubian subjects gives way to descriptions of their 'otherness', as indicated when the captain and his mate symbolically cast off their anonymising 'Egyptianness' by exchanging their *gallabiyas* or loose Egyptian-style cloak typically worn by the poorer classes for "a splendid black robe with a white turban wrapped tightly around their heads multiple times" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 232) and greeting each other with the Nubian phrase "*Massa kadjirou*" rather than the Arabic *marḥaban* (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 229).

Snippets of conversations with and between the Nubians the narrator encounters are also recorded in the text, from which we hear the merest hints of the adverse effects that construction of the High Dam has had on the people and their culture. As the journalist narrator is waiting to board the steamer at Aswan *en route* to Abu Simbel his Nubian driver points to a small flotilla of sunken boats. These, it transpires, are Nubian fishing vessels. According to the driver, state officials "don't give a toss" about recovering them, and when the Nubians went to complain about this treatment they were told that they "should just leave them to rot" since they had already received government compensation for their lost assets (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 225). This brief passage suggests the injustice felt by the displaced Nubians about the Egyptian state's wilful disregard towards their persons, possessions and interests.

Similarly, Fakir, the bell boy at the hotel in Aswan, watches while the narrator packs his suitcase to journey up-river to Abu Simbel. Refuting the reporter's

assumptions that life in the resettlement site is automatically better than that in the old villages because it is more 'modern', he muses on the impact that the loss of the Nile has had on his community, stating:

> \- You will pass by our village, Balanah ...
>
> \- Maybe. And I will see where you lived.
>
> \- You won't see a thing, the water has covered everything, he says, shaking his head.
>
> Sensing a note of sadness in his voice I raised my eyes towards him, and, after a short silence, said:
>
> \- But in the new villages life is easier than before, no? That's what they say...
>
> \- And the Nile? They've placed the new houses a hundred leagues away. We've lost it, the Nile, and we'll never see it again. (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 223–24)

This lament of loss for the Nile, which gave life not only to Nubian crops, but also its customs, beliefs and even its language, constitutes a rare moment of affective connectivity that gives voice to Nubian perspective on the High Dam and its legacy in a text otherwise devoid of empathy and emotion. A momentary glimpse of subconscious nostalgia, or even regret, for the outcome of the dam project also occurs in *Man of the High Dam* when the journalists describe the moment that the world's greatest river became "sad and broken and miserable" after it was "diverted into channels thousands of kilometres long, until it buried itself in the faraway sea" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 56). However, such instances of pathos in Ibrahim's writing are never followed up or commented upon, perhaps due to what Paul Starkey calls the protagonist's almost mechanical relationship to his environment in both texts (Starkey 2006, 148).

The paucity of detail about the impact that the flooding of Old Nubia has had on the Nubian characters in *Star of August* may also reflect the suspicion with which journalists were regarded at the time, since they were generally regarded as agents of the state and there was an unspoken awareness amongst the public that answering their questions directly could have potentially dangerous consequences for the informer. Thus, when the narrator asks the Nubian boatman Girgis to tell him about the flooding

of his home village, he demurs, saying "Why? Wouldn't it be better if I told you a story?" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 250). The well-known folktale about Shater Hassan which he goes on to recount, describing a sultan who promises to reign with equity in consultation with the people but whose country falls victim to misrule because he fails to heed them, does however provide the opportunity for an implicit critique of Nasser and the cult of personality which had grown up around him (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 251).

As this fiction within a fiction implies, the impact of the High Dam on Nubian culture cannot solely be observed at the objective level at which the text purports to function, but also operates at a symbolic level which must be elicited and interpreted both by the journalist-narrator, during the course of his interviews, and by the reader who is faced with the challenge of gauging the veracity of what is said against what remains unsaid. One consequence of acknowledging the multi-layered levels of meaning that exist both in the text and in its silences is that the narrator's perspective is revealed to be partial rather than omniscient. Thus, when the Nubian boatmen disagree about the names of the villages submerged beneath Lake Nasser, confusing Kalabsha with Dandour, the protagonist has no definitive answer. The facts escape him so he merely observes, as any ignorant outsider might, "the Nubian villages, like the temples, all resembled each other" (Ibrahim and Fourcade 1987, 252), indicating the extent to which his understanding of his surroundings is both impressionistic and partial.

With the exception of certain subtle allusions to the negative impacts of the High Dam on the Nubian population such as those flagged up above, both *Man of the High Dam* and *Star of August* minimise the symbolic and actual violence it inflicted upon the Nubian people. That its legacy was not more widely explored by even the most radical of critical writers like Son'allah Ibrahim, is deeply ironic, emphasising the extent to which mainstream Egyptian literature fails to 'speak for the nation' because it marginalises or outright excludes minority voices (Chaturvedi 2000, 5). Resituating this insight from the Indian-based Subaltern Studies Collective (which sought to articulate a new narrative about the history of South Asia from below by focusing on non-elite groups as agents of political and social change (see eg. Guha 1989; Guha and Spivak 1988) within the Egyptian context leads me to focus 'off-centre' in the section that follows. There I will analyse a lesser known text in which

the Nubian experience of the legacy of dam-building on the Nile is explicitly articulated for the first time.

Contested Histories: Nubian Writing and Resistance

The Nubian author Muhammad Khalil Qasim's long social realist novel *al-Shamandūra*, 1968 [*The Buoy*] describes Nubian life in the village of Qata in the years leading up to, and immediately following, the second raising of the Aswan Low Dam in 1933. The novel constitutes a major intervention in the ongoing 'symbolic struggle' over the dam and its legacy by resisting hegemonic narratives that articulate its national benefits over its local costs and by rewriting the historical record from a subaltern perspective. Although it presents as a work of historical fiction, the political censorship that prevailed when Qasim was writing, whereby any overt criticism of the Aswan Dam was deemed subversive or even treacherous (H. M. Fahim 1980, 29; Kérisel 2001, 120–142), along with the fact that it was completed in 1964, the year Nubians were displaced from their lands to Kom Ombo, suggests that the text should be read as a contemporary critique of dam-building from a Nubian perspective as much as a reflection on the submergence of Nubia under the British colonial mandate and its puppet administration in Cairo.

Popular and intellectual dissatisfaction with the Nasser regime, which exercised virtually hegemonic control over the power-knowledge nexus, was palpable within Egyptian society throughout the 1960s. The Egyptian literary critic Sabry Hafez describes this period as

> a decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition
> of almost all political activities; massive industrialisation and the absolute
> absence of freedom; the construction of the High Dam and the destruction of
> the spirit of opposition; the expansion of free education and the collective
> arrest of the intellectuals; severe censorship and the emergence of evasive
> jargon among the intellectuals; the deformation of social values and the
> pervasive growth of corruption. During this decade, there was no public
> activity not subject to official control, everywhere one encountered not living

but official beings concealing their individual personalities beneath a carapace of conformity, people who acted out social roles and repeated, automatically, slogans that were often contrary to their real hidden fortunes. (Hafez 1976, 73–74)

In order to undertake socio-political criticism many writers including Ibrahim and Mahfouz resorted not merely to "evasive language" but to the use of historical or mythic settings, allegory, metaphor, symbolism and satire in order to circumvent the censor (Mehrez 2005, 28). Similarly, couching opposition to the High Dam project in the medium of a fictional autobiography of childhood set not in the present but at the time of the raising of the Aswan Low Dam by the British administration in 1933, may have given Qasim an element of protective cover in articulating Nubian resistance to Nasser's hydro-political agenda which threatened to repeat the mistakes of the past on a more gargantuan scale.

Because it discusses the long-term legacy of dam-building on the Nubian population of Egypt and reveals their "constant feelings of isolation, persecution, suffering and exploitation due to the repressive methods practised by the central government in Cairo to subdue and neglect them" (Ashaq 2010, 99), which had previously been off-limits, *The Buoy* can be viewed as an example of what Harlow terms *muqāwama* or "resistance" literature. First employed by the writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani to describe the role played by literature in the Palestinian resistance movement, resistance literature is defined as a particular category of fiction that emerged primarily out of the organised national liberation struggles in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East under conditions of occupation [*iḥtilāl*] and exile [*manfa*] as an explicitly politicised, counter-hegemonic challenge to dominant forms of ideological and cultural production epitomised by texts such as *Man of the High Dam* (Harlow 1987, 29).

As a genre, resistance literature presupposes "a people's collective relationship to a common land, a common identity, or a common cause … [and] an 'occupying power' which has either exiled or subjugated a given population and has in addition significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the people it has dispossessed and whose land it has occupied" (Harlow 1987, 2). Although it is highly controversial to regard Egypt as an occupying force in Nubian lands, the term nevertheless reflects both the enduring connection Nubians continue

to have with their lost homeland and the authoritarian manner in which the British colonial administration, and subsequently the postcolonial Egyptian state, forced through a series of large dam projects on the Nile without the participation or consent of the indigenous population who had inhabited the area for millennia.

Muhammad Khalil Qasim was himself an Egyptian nationalist who had actively opposed the nascent Nubian separatist movement since 1947 ('Aleywa 2011, 8), and who did not, strictly speaking, see the Nubian community as distinct from the wider Egyptian people. Rather, he viewed Nubia's history, language and culture as an integral part of what it means to be Egyptian. However, as Qasim Mohammad 'Aleywa has noted in his critical introduction to the novel, Qasim's recognition that Nubian society was facing a grave "existential threat" as the result of high-handed decisions made by bureaucrats in Cairo galvanised him to pen an alternative history of the legacy of dam-building on the Nile that placed Nubia at the centre, rather than at the periphery of, national consciousness ('Aleywa 2011, 13). Indeed, the novel's daring exposé of the treachery of the Egyptian ruling class in its dealings with the Nubian community is indicative of the failure of the postcolonial bourgeoisie as a class to 'speak for the nation' (Chaturvedi 2000, 296; Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001).

Reflecting Neil Lazarus' observation that "local struggles and everyday forms of peasant resistance were often entirely divorced from and inassimilable to the 'vertical' political concerns of (elite) anti-colonial nationalists" (Lazarus 1999, 111), *The Buoy* should be read as an example of resistance literature that narrates the legacy of dam-building on the Nile from a subaltern perspective and seeks to recover marginal subjectivities which are almost completely obscured in dominant historical narratives. This is suggested by the fact that the novel reflects extensively on relations of domination within the Egyptian state, particularly by native elites such as the Egyptian Prime Minister Isma'il Sidqi, who ruled from 1930 to 1933, or Ghitas Bey, the head of the compensation committee, who reproduce and mimic the repressive colonial order in their dealings with the Nubian community. It also articulates Nubian resistance to the "tyranny" (Qasim 2011, 386) of the Egyptian authorities in Cairo and efforts by the Nubian villagers to oppose attempts to forcibly displace them from their lands to make way for the dam (Harlow 1987, 85–86).

That the novel is also a prison narrative which was penned during the years that Qasim was incarcerated in the infamous *m'ataqal al-wāhāt* (or Wahat political

prison in which Son'allah Ibrahim was also incarcerated during the same period) further suggests its importance in articulating subaltern viewpoints normally denied expression in the Egyptian public sphere. Having first joined the communist party in 1944, Qasim was detained in 1959 during Nasser's purge of Egypt's left-wing opposition as one of the leaders of the Communist-affiliated *al-Ḥizb al-Demoqrāti li-Taḥrīr al-Waṭan* [The Democratic National Liberation Party]. He was finally released five years later in 1964 after refusing parole in return for recanting his political opinions ('Aleywa 2011, 9). While imprisoned, Qasim not only translated books about political theory, philosophy and contemporary liberation movements, but also penned *The Buoy* which – since writing materials were forbidden to the detainees – was copied onto cigarette papers which were then smuggled through visitors to Leila Shal, who guarded Qasim's "treasure" until his release in 1964 ('Aleywa 2011, 10–11).

Although Qasim is reported as stating that the novel constituted his "only legacy" ('Aleywa 2011, 10) because he never married or had children, *The Buoy* can be distinguished from a conventional personal memoir or autobiography by the fact that it reflects a collective, rather than individual, consciousness (Harlow 1987, 120). Although the text certainly contains autobiographical elements (such as the fact that Qasim, like the boy-narrator Hamid, was born in the village of Qata in the 1920s and was sent to primary school in Aneeba after the raising of the Aswan Low Dam in 1933 ('Aleywa 2011, 7–8)), it is polyphonic in structure. Because the perspectives of so many different characters and viewpoints are included in the text, both in favour of and in opposition to, the planned dam project, the first-person narrator's perspective does not dominate the text. Instead, the narrative moves continually between characters and locations, encompassing Cairo, Alexandria and Aswan as well as the regional capital of al-Dur and a variety of local villages, allowing multiple subject positions to emerge that shed light on the implications of the dam project for Nubian society and their responses to it.

A collective approach to organising his material is revealed by the fact that, as 'Aleywa reports, the *The Buoy* was not solely, or even primarily, the product of Qasim's childhood recollections and subjective imagination, but was informed by the memories, observations and critical interventions of a number of other Nubian detainees in *Wahat* prison, including the writers Sayeed Ishaq, Salah Hafez and Alfred Faraj, and the artists Hassan Fu'ad and 'Ali al-Shalqani, all of whom who assisted in

the elaboration of the narrative ('Aleywa 2011, p.10). This suggests a desire on Qasim's part for the novel to reflect the 'collective voice' of the Nubian people, with the village of Qata functioning as a microcosm of Nubian society that documents "the 'collective I' which seeks to confirm itself and its particular existence and to confront attempts to ignore or forget it" (Ashaq 2010, 98).

We first hear about the planned raising of the Aswan Low Dam from Hamid's uncle who has just returned from Cairo to the village of Qata. Excluded from the official decision-making process, the Nubian villagers therefore learn about the proposed dam project only indirectly, through rumours emanating from the colonial centre passed on by word of mouth from "the guards and the butlers and the cooks who worked in the houses of the civil servants in the Irrigation Ministry, both English and Egyptians, and the servants of Pashas and decision makers and the butlers and cooks in the royal palaces" (Qasim 2011, 69).

On hearing that the Nubian villages were to be submerged for the third time in only thirty years, some of the residents adopt a fatalistic approach, reasoning that the dam is "a necessity for their bigger homeland Egypt" (Qasim 2011, 71); or, more pragmatically, that "it would be only a year or two until they finished and then would come the flood", so resistance was useless (Qasim 2011, 69). Others represent Nubian resistance to the dam project as illogical and reactionary, as when the local MP berates the villagers for refusing to leave when the government had promised them acres of better quality, irrigated land in Radisiyya, Tawd, Deraw and Kom Ombo (Qasim 2011, 380). Similarly, a character called Hassaneyn (who is a Nubian immigrant recently returned from the north) ridicules his family's protests about losing their ancestral lands, arguing that their individual shares were "no bigger than the ears of a donkey!" (Qasim 2011, 392). Hassaneyn duly tries to convince them to emigrate from Qata on the basis that "this town is boring and kills people. It brings misery" (Qasim 2011, 392) and that much greater wealth and opportunity is available to them in the resettlement sites and the cities of the north.

By contrast, the majority of the characters in the novel who are affected by the proposed dam consider resistance to be an existential imperative for the Nubian people, one ethically justified on the basis that "even sheep do something *en route* to the slaughter house!" (Qasim 2011, 71). This stance is given explicit religious backing when the local Imam, Sheikh Sabir, endorses Nubian opposition to the dam in his Friday sermons at the mosque and encourages the congregation to mount a

challenge to government policy, citing examples from the life of Abu Bakr and various Qur'anic references (Qasim 2011, 365). In response, Badr Effendi and his circle of activists go from village to village urging the people to "resist and to awake their consciences to the miserable fate that awaited them" (Qasim 2011, 344), while educated Nubians start lobbying MPs and members of the Nubian club in Cairo (Qasim 2011, 290) and writing petitions that are circulated amongst the villages expressing collective anger at the injustice of the proposed compensation arrangements (Qasim 2011, 287)**.**

However, this campaign of non-violent resistance proves ultimately fruitless. Instead of being read and acted upon, Nubian complaints about the proposed dam project urging the government to reconsider its decision are "thrown immediately upon arrival into the rubbish bin" by the authorities, who "let the people vent their anger in statements and grievances" that are, ironically, burned by the Nubians working as runners for the officials without realising what they are doing (Qasim 2011, 397). Realising that the institutional complaints mechanism merely acts as a 'safety valve' for citizens to vent their anger rather than providing a meaningful platform for political redress and that all they can do is "wait for mercy from on high" (Qasim 2011, 370), the villagers start to explore other, less peaceful, avenues of resistance.

The reader is then invited to 'listen in' on the Nubian community's clandestine elaboration of tactics for blocking the dam project, which ultimately goes beyond strategies of non-violent resistance to encompass violent insurrection. Whereas petitions and complaints fail to have any demonstrable effect on the authorities, violence initially proves more effective, as illustrated when Ghitas Bey and his compensation committee are forced to flee the village due to the anger of the crowd at the "pittance" they have been offered for each palm tree and piece of land (Qasim 2011, 120). Likewise, the Nubian separatist Taha Hussein calls on his comrades to "take decisive action" and "deliver a fatal blow" (Qasim 2011, 300) to the Egyptian state by assassinating the sitting Prime Minister Isma'il Sidqi, who is accused of "abusing the Nubian people" (Qasim 2011, 344).

In a passage reminiscent of Fanon's defence of violence as a means of political liberation and communal catharsis in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 27–84), Taha justifies his plan to assassinate the Prime Minister by infiltrating his retinue and impersonating one of his Nubian body-guards on the basis

of retribution for the violence inflicted on Nubia's land and culture by the Egyptian state, whose policy of approving successive waves of dam-building on the Nile in order to feed Egyptian industry and cotton exports has reproduced the colonial practice of exploiting the periphery for the benefit of the centre. Just before plunging his axe into Sidqi's chest, he glances out of the train window to see a vista of "wide irrigated fields" fed by "the waters that separated at Khartoum in that place where the Blue Nile and the White Nile mix, coming down from the Habasha plateau, the country of his people" that put "a lot of money in the pockets of those damn pashas" (Qasim 2011, 309).

This passage reflects how the Nile, which had once been considered a local river or rivers by the people living along its banks, was now conceived of by the Egyptian authorities as a single, hydrologically unified, river basin or water system (Tvedt 2004, 74). Its primary role now lay in acting as what Idris 'Ali terms "the reservoir of the north" ('Ali 1998, 10) that many Nubians perceived as benefiting the Arab majority at the expense of the Nubian minority whose homes and livelihoods, not to mention their culture and way of life, were threatened with destruction. Thus Taha remarks on how the Nile that flowed by his own village, Kroskow, was "about to dry up … its flow obstructed by the Aswan barrage, retreating when they [the northern Egyptians] wanted it ... to return in a thunderous flood destroying everything in front of it" (Qasim 2011, 308–9) – a flood that could only be stopped, according to his reasoning, by an attack on the symbolic heart of the Egyptian state, the Prime Minister himself.

However, although Taha is built up as a hero of the Nubian resistance over the first half of the novel, it is notable that he ultimately fails in his mission to assassinate the Prime Minister and is actively prevented from completing it - ironically enough - by none other than his loyal Nubian servants. So pervasive is the stereotype of the 'loyal Nubian' in Egyptian public discourse that the wounded Prime Minister finds it almost impossible to comprehend how or why one a member of his Nubian retinue could commit such a crime, concluding that Taha must have been "crazy" (Qasim 2011, 311). It is only later, when he recalls the innumerable petitions and letters of complaint sent to the ministry from the remote Nubian villages that went unanswered, that Sidqi entertains the possibility that the attack may have been politically motivated. In this way we come to see how Nubian attempts to regain voice and agency are systematically misrecognised by those in positions of power.

More successful in attracting the attention of the authorities is the grassroots campaign led by Badr Effendi and Boray to boycott the compensation scheme being rolled out across the villages by the Compensation Committee on account of the fact that it has significantly undervalued their homes and land as a form of collective punishment against the Nubian people following Taha's failed assassination attempt (Qasim 2011, 345). Whereas the villagers had mutually agreed that "two guineas for one date palm was an acceptable level of compensation" (Qasim 2011, 337) the committee has calculated the worth of each date palm at only twenty *qurshan* [pennies]; a room within a house at four guineas; and a whole *feddan* of land at forty guineas (Qasim 2011, 353).

Whereas the head of the committee Ghitas Bey defends the total to be awarded to the villagers as "a large amount even though the government is suffering from a financial crisis and budget deficit", Wabbour calculates that the 800,000 guineas allocated would barely pay for their date palms, let alone their "houses and the land and the graves of our forefathers", concluding that "the government is stealing from us!" (Qasim 2011, 378). His realisation of the scale of the injustice galvanises both individual and collective action across the affected Nubian villages. Militias staffed by local volunteers are established in each village which set up a permanent cordon around the *omda* [headman's] house, manned day and night to prevent anyone tempted to receive their allocated compensation from entering and the Compensation Committee representatives from leaving, holding them hostage with the express aim of extracting a more advantageous compensation arrangement (Qasim 2011, 348–98).

However, as poverty, hunger and internal divisions start to mount within the Nubian community, the controversy about what would constitute equitable compensation is gradually replaced by "a desire for any compensation at all [as] their empty bellies started to prepare them to accept whatever fate would bring them" (Qasim 2011, 344). Lured by the prospect of the "crisp green guineas glistening attractively like the leaves of a tree" that lie within their grasp and with which it appears "they could buy the whole world" (Qasim 2011, 377), many of the villagers start to waver in their convictions. Finally, after Abdullah sneaks in to the *omda's* house to receive his allocated compensation alongside an additional fifty guineas by way of incentive, a flood of claimants crosses the picket line to receive and months of Nubian resistance are brought to an ignominious end.

Thus, although the novel is implicitly structured as a resistance narrative, *The Buoy* ultimately depicts the failure of the Nubian resistance movement to attain its political objectives. This leaves the villagers feeling "as if they were sinking into an enormous whirlpool without any straw to cling to" (Qasim 2011, 370) – a disorientation compounded by shock as the gates of the dam suddenly close without warning and they are forced to scramble to disassemble and transport their possessions to the far bank of the Nile before the "grim-faced Nile" swallows everything in its path (Qasim 2011, 426). Although the novel narrates the failure of grassroots resistance to prevent the raising of the Aswan Low Dam or to achieve an equitable compensation agreement, the very act of articulating Nubian opposition to the project within the public domain constitutes an important act of symbolic resistance for a community which had been systematically marginalised from the national imaginary over the course of the twentieth century.

Narrating a Nubian 'Nile World'

James Scott has argued in his theorisation of everyday forms of resistance developed by the powerless, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1992), that when latent communal resentment is expressed publicly, be it through fiction, music, art or direct political action, this "hidden transcript" of dissent has the revolutionary potential to subvert hegemonic discourses and, ultimately, reform oppressive practices (Scott 1992, 115). By articulating opposition to large dams and foregrounding the catastrophic impact of a century of dam-building on Nubian culture and identity for the first time, *The Buoy* – which is recognised both as the first novel about Nubia as an entity distinct from either Egypt or the Sudan and the first literary text by a Nubian writer (Ashaq 2010, 97) – rewrites the history of the Aswan dam from a subaltern perspective, drawing attention to alternative subjectivities, histories and political priorities.

In particular, whereas the Egyptian state at the time conceived of Nile water primarily as an economic resource to be exploited for industrial and agricultural development, and Nubia itself as an arid, isolated wasteland ripe for exploitation as a

giant reservoir to feed modern Egypt's increasing demand for water (Tvedt 2004, 11–19), *The Buoy* highlights an alternative conception of the Nile as the symbolic and material locus of a distinctive Nubian Nile World. As McCully has argued, although peripheral regions like Nubia often "seem remote and sparsely populated to planners in the cities, the strips of riverside farmland and forest which are flooded by dams are usually the best lands in their region and so much more economically and culturally important than their size suggests" (McCully 2001, 71).

Similarly, *The Buoy's* detailed depiction of the distinctive landscapes, customs and dialect of Old Nubia mediates, or even constructs, the reader's relationship with an unknown and (following the construction of the High Dam) unknowable landscape (Beaumont 2007, 50), drawing attention to the imbrication of Nubian society with the river environment. The text is studded with references to local places and geographical features, such as the yellow sands of the Western desert, the blue of the Nile, and the green of the palm groves which together constitute the colours of the unofficial Nubian 'national' flag in the popular imagination (Hamed 2014) and which face an existential threat from the Egyptian state's dam-building programme.

Moreover, the introduction of distinctively Nubian expressions such as *Wannour* instead of the Arabic *Allah* or God (Qasim 2011, 446) and the "broken Arabic mixed with many Nubian words" by many of the characters locates Nubia, as opposed to the wider Egyptian nation, at the heart of the novel (Qasim 2011, 57). References to distinctively Nubian cultural practices such as the ceremonial use of the *karbīj* [whip] at weddings and funerals or the ritual of the bride and groom bathing in the Nile, or aspects of Nubian village life such as the villagers lying down to rest on the *masāṭib* [traditional Nubian porches] after filling their bellies with delicacies such as *khamrid*, *sabrouja* and *atarharifa* [Nubian bread, dates and spring onions] on the occasion of the annual date harvest (Qasim 2011, 45), further reinforce the *sui generis* nature of the Nubian Nile World vis-à-vis mainstream Egyptian culture and traditions.

Through descriptions of the synchronicity of Nubian life with the Nile's seasons we learn that the love the villagers hold for the river which waters their crops and date palms, and from whose mud they build their houses, "was as strong as the love of a man for his wife" and that, in their eyes, the land of their ancestors "was the most beautiful in the world" (Qasim 2011, 70). This is despite the fact that, in the eyes of development planners sent from Cairo to penetrate and exploit the landscape, the area was considered at the time to be nothing more than a *sud* or barrier which, when in

flood, was often described by the British as the useless 'bog' (Tvedt 2004, 12). By highlighting alternative conceptions of the value of this landscape in the Nubian imagination, then, Nubia itself is posited as a contested terrain – geographically, culturally and politically – where state interests and perspectives conflict with those of the local people.

In a passage which merits being quoted in full because it so aptly illustrates the symbiotic relationship between Nubian society and the Nile, the narrator observes how, for his people:

> The Nile is life, tumultuous at times yet continually calm and soft. The Nile and the wind and the sun ... the sweat of the brow transforming the barren yellow earth into a rich vibrant green. On its banks in our village the people would pray to their God, the creator of the heavens and the earth but at the same time they worshipped the Nile with love when it satisfied them; approached it with fear when it overpowered them with its strength, and chanted psalms to it when it breathed life. I was unable to believe that there were people able to live in those remote parts where the Nile didn't flow next to their villages, nor could I imagine that people in the desert could get married without the Nile to cleanse them from their sins. Since that time my mind has retained a sacred belief that there is nothing lovelier than the Nile which would wash the girls of our village with tenderness in its warm or cool waters the evening before they got married to their husbands. There is nothing lovelier in this world than a young Nubian girl on the night of her wedding when she bathes in the Nile naked as the day she was born ... no there is nothing lovelier, save the Nile which glides slowly by after baptising her into her new life. (Qasim 2011, 253)

Here, acknowledgement that "the Nile is life" signals its importance as the symbolic and material locus of the Nubian Nile World. It is the source of local livelihoods, from farming to fishing; the site of all major life rituals from birth to marriage and death; and an object worthy of being worshipped in its own right alongside the 'Creator God' of the Judeo, Christian and Islamic traditions – a factor which signals the syncretic nature of Nubian belief systems which meld the rigours of contemporary Islam with other much older traditions dating back to Coptic, and even

pharaonic, times. So central is the Nile to the life of the people of Qata that the narrator cannot imagine how it was possible for human beings to survive, let alone prosper, far from the banks of the river. Indeed the death of the Nubian community once separated from the Nile is metaphorically suggested within the text by descriptions of how, the moment the floodwaters from the dam surge into the village and uproot their homes, coffins from the nearby cemetery float to the surface of the water, their sides symbolically splattered with blood-red mud (Qasim 2011, 456).

Perhaps for this reason, the notion that a man-made dam capable of destroying the Nile world they know and love, and whose absence they cannot begin to imagine, proves incomprehensible for many of the Nubian villagers, even after government plans to relocate them to Upper Egypt have been confirmed. Rather than confront the reality awaiting them, some of the characters within the novel cling to false hopes that protests in the capital will topple Sidqi's government and halt the dam project. Others invoke popular superstitions as proof that "the flood won't dare to sink al Hajj Makawi shrine. We are in his lands and our village is situated high up ... [T]he flood won't come here. Not even Noah's flood could!" (Qasim 2011, 70) or simply go into denial, continuing their daily lives as before. As such, a mere matter of days before the waters in the reservoir start to rise, we learn that their cows are "still turning the *sāqiya* [lever basket] and the *shawādīf* [water wheels] were still rising and falling [to irrigate the land]. Nothing here had changed" (Qasim 2011, 410).

Emphasis on the interconnectedness between the Nubians and their 'Nile World' in the first, more ethnographic, section of the novel permits the reader to grasp the enormity of the impact of dam-induced displacement and resettlement on the community later in the text. It also helps explain why involuntary removal from a familiar spatial and symbolic environment can incite people to resist large-scale development schemes, despite the odds being stacked against them (Altman and Low, 1992; Malkki, 1992; Rodman, 1992). As the threat posed by the rising waters of the reservoir becomes imminent, the novel describes how the Nubian villagers

> started to wake up and realise that their lives, and the land which they adored since they were children and the palm trees and the houses were no longer theirs … They all started walking along the road which went through the fields along the banks of the river to the eastern promontory and they were looking at the soil on the surface of the earth. They were moaning like a man who has

lost his only son on his deathbed and was counting on his fingers how much the annual harvest had brought as well as from every palm tree they owned. They compared this invaluable blessing with the government estimates and they felt the injustice and felt both the need for revolution and paralysis at the same time. (Qasim 2011, 363)

Here, the Egyptian government's utilitarian calculations about the relatively low value of Nubian lands compared to that of Nile water for the nation's domestic and industrial use is turned on its head by descriptions of the villagers mourning for their lost land as if for the death of an only son, which is a symbol of supreme value in the Arab-Islamic imagination. This simile suggests that for the Nubian villagers their environment represents something priceless and irreplaceable, no matter the levels of compensation involved. This reading is reinforced by later descriptions of how, as the inhabitants of Qata "walked with heavy steps and ... stopped to see everything for the last time: the strips of land, the water wheels, the wells and the palm trees", they encounter similar processions of people from other nearby villages doing the same thing – a form of collective behaviour reminiscent of a funeral cortege "carrying a heavy corpse [here a metaphor for Old Nubia] to the public cemetery" (Qasim 2011, 432).

Although such motifs stressing the intimate, almost familial, connection between the Nubian people and the Nilotic environment they inhabit might appear essentialist, it is clear from the text that, as is the case with many other indigenous cultures displaced by major development schemes, Nubian identity is firmly interlocked with the local environment precisely because it does not recognise a strict separation between "the biophysical, human and supernatural worlds but [rather] posits a continuity among the three established through ritual and symbol and embedded in social relations" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 107). Similarly, the latter half of the novel illustrates how the experience of forced displacement and resettlement leaves the Nubian people "economically, culturally and emotionally devastated" (McCully 2001, 70). This is due to material factors such as the loss of common resources like clean water, fish, game, grazing lands, timber, firewood, wild fruits and vegetables which help sustain their daily life, and also to the weakening of people's bond with the land as spiritual ties to specific places are broken and many of the

cultural practices associated with their 'Nile World', such as rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death, are lost.

However, it is not necessary to regard the symbiotic relationship between the Nubian people and the land sketched out in the text as strictly literal or realist in character. As Chadwick Allen argues in his ground-breaking work on 'Fourth World' literatures *Blood Narrative Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (2002), leitmotifs of memory, blood and land "blur distinctions between racial identity (blood) and narrative (memory)" (Allen 2002, 1). This they achieve by juxtaposing "'real' and 'imagined' genealogies, physical and metaphorical ancestral land bases, and narratives of 'real' and 'invented' histories in their constructions of viable contemporary indigenous identities" (Allen 2002, 16).

Although such motifs may appear essentialist, Allen argues that invoking the memory of specific lands is a performative device which produces, appropriates and re-values indigenous discourses and cultural memories for contemporary purposes. These include revitalising devalued minority identities and claiming rights to land which has been lost or occupied, as in the Nubian case. This process leverages the symbolic power of the ancient homeland to challenge hegemonic 'national myths' which marginalise indigenous peoples, exposing both the unequal power relations that determine whose version of history and whose forms of knowledge are considered legitimate in popular, academic and legal contexts, and placing the marginalised at the centre of a history from which they have been excluded.

Similarly, *The Buoy* "seeks to represent and commemorate the trauma of dispossession and bring that experience into visibility" (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 21; Hirsch and Miller 2011a, 10) by articulating a subaltern history of injustice which is too often excluded from the national narrative. Instead of the utopian vision of Egypt as a technological paradise proposed in dominant narratives equating development-induced displacement and resettlement with national progress, the second half of the novel focuses on the dystopian reality of life as the Nubian villagers struggle to regain a semblance of economic and cultural self-sufficiency after the reservoir submerges their homes and destroys their livelihoods.

As the narrative moves to the barren west bank of the Nile, it is clear that the losses endured as the Nubian oustees struggle to adjust to their new environment are psychological as well as material, causing the narrator to observe that although the inhabitants remained the same, "the village was no longer our village" (Qasim 2011,

495) as its character had changed beyond recognition. As the sun comes up over the resettlement site, we are told how "a shudder emanated from our hearts" (Qasim 2011, 465) as they survey this "strange, new country" in which not a single blade of grass can grow, leaving them wondering how to farm the land and feed their livestock as they are convinced that "any land without water is like a cemetery, a funeral for a body without a soul" (Qasim 2011, 392).

Physically mirroring their psychological apprehensions about the new environment, the people crowd their tents together "cheek by jowl as if they were afraid of the menacing plateau and the dunes and the hills" (Qasim 2011, 463). Ironically, this instinct to huddle together for protection ultimately causes a fire to spread, destroying their makeshift dwellings and consuming what is left of their belongings, livestock, food supplies and compensation money. As a result, "misery gripped the hearts of the people and they lived in the open air and didn't even think about erecting new tents" causing the community to sink into even greater poverty (Qasim 2011, 463–98). Consumed by listlessness, anger and despair, the villagers stop observing key cultural rites such as weddings and religious festivals, mirroring the process of 'social disarticulation' outlined in the Introduction whereby structures of social organisation and support are dismantled, impoverishing and disempowering oustees (M. Cernea 1999, 18; Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 11).

Instead of preparing for the Eid in their customary manner, with elaborate and time-consuming religious and culinary rituals, we are told that the villagers do nothing except for "playing *sija* [a form of gambling], lying on the ground or staring at the east bank of the Nile which had turned into a huge lake, grieving for their lost home" (Qasim 2011, 469). However, the novel also makes clear that this overwhelming sense of sorrow and alienation has not only affected those who remained on the West Bank of the Nile at Karan Nawj, but is replicated amongst the Nubian oustees who resettled further afield in Upper Egypt. Thus, when Hamid's father expresses a wish to move away in search of a better life there he is told by Fadel that Nubians elsewhere are facing the same challenges. Flourishing Sheikh Saber's letter, he states "It's all the same Amin. Here you have got nothing but stones but in Upper Egypt there is only barren land with no water", reading aloud an extract by way of example that indicates how the oustees at Tawd "haven't seen the Nile since we arrived. The land in front of our eyes seems dead and people are not welcoming. They regard us as strangers",

signing off "Eid al Fitr Mubarak from this strange country. We wish you a happier Eid in our country" (Qasim 2011, 470).

However, rather than descend into a chronic state of hopelessness or 'cultural involution' – the process by which previously open and dynamic communities act as closed cultural systems to avoid risks and hence increased levels of stress (Hansen and Oliver-Smith 1982, 274) – the novel suggests how the principles of self-reliance and mutual help derived from the experience of resisting the dam project enable the community to improvise solutions to problems they encounter in the resettlement site, in the absence of government assistance. Thus, after the initial material and psychological setback they experience following the fire, when the people sit around "licking their wounds … like the remnants of an army lost in the desert sands" (Qasim 2011, 481), we learn how they become determined to rebuild their lives and struggle against the current to regain their dignity and achieve social and economic progress like the eponymous *shamandūra* of the title which stands firm against the roaring floodwaters and remains attached doggedly to the bottom of the river (Qasim 2011, 480).

A word of Greek origin that came into the Egyptian language via Turkish, *shamandūra* literally means a marker buoy secured to the bottom of the river by a rope and chain which serves to guide navigation (Jacquemond 2008, p.320; 'Aleywa 2011, p.12). Materially speaking, its presence warns sailors of the dangerous whirlpools and currents as they chart their course down the river. Its stability allows boats to secure themselves to it to prevent themselves from drifting while it also serves as a metaphor for the tenacity with which the Nubians cling to their native land and to their river, despite the best attempts of the Egyptian authorities to break down this connection and convince them to relocate voluntarily.

At first the circular movements of the buoy anchored to the bottom of the river, mirroring the familiar pattern of life in the Nubian villages, is stable and constant. Later, "bouncing violently on its chain which was pulling it down to the bottom and striking it then calming before it struggled to the surface to resist again" (Qasim 2011, 527), its movement reflects the prevailing mood of uncertainty as the villagers confront first the flood that sweeps their homes away and threatens to eradicate their specific way of life. As the novel progresses, the buoy is pushed down to the bottom of the river by the force of the flood water, yet rises again to the surface to struggle against the current. This metaphor reflects the remarkable resilience of the Nubian

people in the face of adversity who, despite the suffering they endure, continue the fight for justice and rights started by historical figures such as Badr Effendi and Hussein Taha, as described in this second, more explicitly politicised, half of the novel.

Despite the initial absence of government aid, the villagers manage to replace their canvas tents with orderly rows of stone houses and to devise novel irrigation techniques such as digging deep wells in the mountainside to access groundwater and constructing a system of waterwheels to lift the river water up the steep slope of the river bank to their fields (Qasim 2011, pp. 482, 507). These efforts mark the realisation of their dream to "turn the yellow land green" through irrigation and cultivation – an idealistic and ideologically charged expression that recalls the nascent Israeli state's desire to 'make the desert bloom' through the application of modern science and technology (Qasim 2011, p. 402). Moreover, learning lessons from their earlier campaign of resistance against the dam project, the villagers launch new petitions using the same slogan they devised years earlier, namely '*Nahnū mankubūn al-t'alīa al-thānia'* ('We are those afflicted by the second rising [of the barrage]') (Qasim 2011, 481), calling on the government to provide them with irrigation pumps and access to healthcare and education for their children.

Yet just as the people forget about the pain of the flood "in the smiling greenness with the luxuriant ears of corn and the palm trees covered in red dates and the Nile and the island which was like a green bouquet floating in its midst [which] consoled their hearts" (Qasim 2011, 490) and start to look with hope towards the future, the water levels in the reservoir start to rise once again "with a strange speed", and the floodgates of the dam open before they are able to harvest their crops (Qasim 2011, 491). Despair grips them as they face another winter of deprivation without adequate food or the means to make a living in Old Nubia. Consequently, even as it describes the tentative process of social re-articulation discussed in the Introduction, the novel swiftly forecloses this possibility by forcing the community to confront the reality that a traditional Nubian life based on subsistence farming and the bounty of the Nile is no longer sustainable in the modern world.

Dams as Development? Competing Perceptions of Modernity in the Fiction of Muhammad Khalil Qasim

Although the threats to traditional Nubian life from the raising of the Aswan Low Dam are not fully articulated at the start of the novel, which is set in the 1920s, about a decade before the raising of the Aswan Low Dam, a tension about the challenges and opportunities posed by modernity nevertheless permeates these early pages. The novel's representation of the seemingly timeless and unchanging nature of life in 'Old Nubia', metaphorically represented in a passage where "the leaves of the palm trees were not rustling and the Nile lying motionless beneath our feet was not moving and the whirlpools between the shores and the green island were slumbering in a profound sleep" (Qasim 2011, 29), are disturbed by portents of impending change. This is symbolised by the steamship which appears on the horizon at the start of the novel carrying not only returnees, news, and rare commodities from the north, that the villagers await with anticipation, but government officials from Cairo wearing their menacing red *tarboushes* or fez hats (soon associated in Nubian minds with authority and danger) to carry out a survey of the area in preparation for the impending dam project.

However, unlike some later Nubian literature, notably the fiction of Haggag Hassan Oddoul which has a tendency to fetishize tradition, Qasim's representation of life in Old Nubia is not simply "an expression of a nostalgic longing for a lost world in the context of demographic and social change" (Beaumont 2007, 51) but rather embraces, in many respects, the state's modernisation and development agenda. This may be because at the time the novel was first published in 1968, Nubia had not been completely flooded and, as such, as Naaman observes, "the idea of the homeland as a lost paradise was yet to emerge" as the main thematic focus of the Nubian novel (Naaman 2011, 115). Instead, the novel is pragmatic and, at times, even idealistic in its presentation of the benefits of modernisation to the Nubian community.

Long isolated from the authorities in Cairo, Nubia was coming under increasing central control during the early twentieth century, a fact which generates hope and consternation amongst the villagers in the novel in almost equal measure. That the arrival of the "effendis with white faces wearing red *tarboushes* and strange clothes" (Qasim 2011, 29) causes concern to some villagers can be linked to the emergence of

the bureaucratic state as an entity synonymous with social control and the assimilation of hitherto quasi-autonomous minority groups such as the Nubians into the wider nation through the spread of disciplinary mechanisms such as educational and military institutions (Mitchell 1991; Scott 1998). The state's ideological incursions are exemplified by descriptions of how the village school or *kutāb* systematically inculcates its Nubian students with nationalist rhetoric while the prefect, whip in hand to enforce discipline as a representative of this central authority, forces the boys to repeat "in stumbling song" the anthem 'Our Dear Egypt is our Homeland' (Qasim 2011, 42).

At times, the perils of modernisation are highlighted, as symbolised by the story of the bat that perches on the electricity lines and immediately drops dead before the children's eyes without them understanding why (Qasim 2011, 33). At others its benefits, epitomised by the steamer festooned with electric chandeliers which would arrive every week from Cairo carrying letters and parcels from the Nubian diaspora, are celebrated (Qasim 2011, 29). Thus, when the telegraph pole (the mainstay of communication between the migrants in the cities and their families at home as well as the main source of news from the outside world) is hit by a bolt of lightning and destroyed, the villagers voice their fear that "Cairo was no longer in contact with our village", indicating a concern not to be 'forgotten' by the central authorities and consigned once again to the margins of the nation and national progress (Qasim 2011, 435).

Many believe that the advent of new technologies, modern public services and improved transport networks will help the community to develop and prosper within the wider Egyptian nation, as symbolised when the local children glue their ears to the new telegraph poles linking the village to the rest of the country and scream "Egypt calling Abreem! Egypt calling al-Dur!" (Qasim 2011, 33). The night the officials from Cairo arrive on the steamer Boray shouts out: "Egypt calling our country!" while Hamid, the narrator, reflects "who knew? Maybe Egypt was really calling our country that night of the red *tarboushes* and the white faces" (Qasim 2011, 33). His question, which throws into relief the advantages and disadvantages of coming into sustained contact with the state and its representatives, neatly summarises the villagers' ambivalence about the impact of modernisation and development on their community, the ramifications of which are explored throughout the novel.

As Harlow argues, one danger of resistance narratives is that "the oppressed are sanctified and every aspect of their actions, their culture, their past, present and future behaviour is presented as admirable. Direct or indirect narcissism takes over" (Harlow 1987, 29). Rather than romanticise traditional Nubian village life, as later Nubian literature – such as the fiction of Mukhtar and Oddoul – has a tendency to do (see Chapter Two), *The Buoy* emphasises the need for the Nubian community to overcome its ignorance and superstition in order to bring about social progress. Just as Fanon warns against the fetishization of tradition in the task of (re)constructing a progressive national culture in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 166–99), so too does the text mock local superstitions, such as the widespread conviction that a *jinn* delivers the mail between the cities and must be appeased so that the letters do not go missing (Qasim 2011, 333).

At other points, however, the novel explicitly attacks beliefs or practices that are perceived as discriminatory or regressive, such as when Sheikh Madbouli mistakes Hamid's fever for demonic possession and administers a concoction made of vine leaves and the eggs of a black chicken that goes putrid and almost kills him (Qasim 2011, 486). Similarly, it condemns the Nubian community for its treatment of Hamid's mother, an epileptic, who is shunned by her peers, forbidden from sharing food with her family or communicating directly with her son, out of the belief that she is cursed and could harm the boy, leaving her in a state of "eternal isolation" (Qasim 2011, 34–35). The fact that Hamid directly criticises his father's disrespectful and cruel treatment of his wife as a "crazy woman" (Qasim 2011, 36) when she demands that the house be registered in her son's name to protect her rights and those of her children, also alludes to the need to reform entrenched patriarchal attitudes within Nubian village life which stand in stark opposition to Qasim's reformist politics.

Confronted with ignorance, superstition, discrimination and powerlessness, education is portrayed as the main route to individual and communal empowerment within the symbolic economy of the novel, much as it was for Qasim himself, who left his village to pursue his studies in Aneeba and, subsequently, at Fuad I University in Cairo, never to return to Nubia. Indeed, *The Buoy* can be read as an expression of an individual yet metonymic character and collective identity (Selim 2010, 121). Not only does it portray the coming-of-age of the child-narrator Hamid who, in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, leaves the familiarity and traditions of his village behind in order to gain the knowledge and skills needed to survive and prosper in a

time of uncertainty and change, but it allegorically represents the confrontation of Nubian society as a whole with the modern world. Thus, the loaded image of the schoolboy leaving his village for the last time with which the novel concludes not only implies a teleological movement from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment on the part of the individual but also suggests that in order to prosper Nubian society must leave behind the anachronistic epistemological, geographical and cultural confines of Nubian village life and embrace the wider Egyptian nation.

Rather than reflecting nostalgically on past traditions and ways of life, as symbolised by the movement away from the collective 'we' of the earlier ethnographic section of the novel towards the individuated 'I' of the maturing narrator as the text draws to a close, the latter section of the novel describes how the Nubian villagers gradually leave the resettlement site in search of work or education in the cities of the north. As such, unlike in later Nubian literature, there is no implication that a return to Nubia (whether in terms of re-settling the lake shore or revalorising traditional Nubian cultural practices marginalised by the Egyptian state) is either practicable or desirable for the displaced Nubians. Rather, the novel tends to reinforce the hegemonic notion that accelerating Nubian integration into the modern Egyptian nation will facilitate social and economic progress for members of the community.

Similarly, despite its critique of the means through which the state has implemented its development agenda, the text ultimately buys into the utilitarian myth propagated by the government of the day that traditional ways of life and social organisation should be sacrificed on the altar of national(ist) development goals if the Nubian community is to embrace the 'modern' world. As such, while it never shies away from criticising the injustice and oppression to which the Nubian community is subject as a result of the high-handedness and tyranny of Sidqi's government in its dealings with the people, it stops short of critiquing megadams as vital engines for Egypt's economic and social development. Even Hussein Taha, the hero of the Nubian resistance movement, does not condemn the dam project outright but remarks: "I understand the importance and necessity of the barrage but I also understand the importance of completing all of this in the shade of the government and the constitution, a people's government, and the importance of improving the condition of the people especially if those people sacrificed everything they owned" (Qasim 2011, 309).

Given Qasim's political stance as a member of the Egyptian Communist party it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Buoy* subscribes to this teleology of social, economic and industrial progress typical of socialist realist literature. Unlike the genre of social realism which, through the techniques of critical or descriptive realism, seeks to draw attention to the everyday conditions of the working class, *socialist* realism attempts to "depict reality in its revolutionary development" (Beaumont 2007, 143). As the literary critic Matthew Beaumont argues, in order to further its ideological ends, such literature employs a measure of psychological realism to illustrate to the reader how their everyday reality could be transformed by the benefits of socialist policies and priorities such as electrification or the industrialisation of agriculture. (Beaumont 2007, 147).

In a similar vein, the novel's idealistic portrayal of knowledge as the key to communal empowerment through its depiction of the struggle of Nubian youths to get a modern education creates a final connection between Hamid's destiny and that of the *shamandūra* of the title which represents the Nubian people and which, after "struggling morning, noon and night to free itself and run as it liked in the Nile without that damn chain pulling it to the bottom" (Qasim 2011, 102) finally breaks free from its moorings. Moving symbolically towards the north, we learn how it "clashes with the gates of the barrage" (Qasim 2011, 518) once more in a final act of resistance. This metaphor suggests how, while Nubian resistance may have failed to prevent the raising of the Aswan Low Dam, the fight for Nubian rights will continue through the creation of an educated class of Nubian doctors, engineers, lawyers and cadres dedicated to the betterment of their community, a central trope of the socialist realist novel (Hafez 1976).

What we are left with is an ambivalent text which, while detailing the resistance and suffering of the Nubian people due to the state's unjust compensation arrangements, subscribes to the same teleology of social and scientific progress that underpins the rationale behind big-development schemes like the Aswan High Dam. Thus, while *The Buoy* can be read as an example of resistance literature that details the historic injustices suffered by the Nubian people by a violent and repressive state apparatus, it ultimately subscribes to the hegemonic notion stressed by dominant state discourses that 'big' dams are as essential for the Nubian community's economic and social development as they are for the wider Egyptian nation of which they are a part. As I will go on to argue in the next chapter, this conviction sets early Nubian literary

texts like *The Buoy* apart from the more contemporary accounts of the long-term legacy of the Aswan Dam on the Nubian community found in the fiction of Yahya Mukhtar and Haggag Hassan Oddoul, which are significantly more sceptical about the dam's predicted benefits and critical of its significant local costs than texts written at the highpoint of modernisation theory in the 1960s.

Chapter Two: National Development, Nubian Disaster? The Legacy of the Aswan High Dam in Contemporary Nubian Fiction

As we saw in the previous chapter, although Muhammad Khalil Qasim's novel *The Buoy* chronicles the Nubian community's fight for equitable compensation, social justice and political recognition in the face of a neglectful and high-handed Egyptian administration, it stops short of critiquing dominant nationalist discourses about mega-dams as engines for national development and social progress. Instead, it buys into the rationale shared by nationalists and communists of the period alike, that the dam marked an important step in the teleology of national progress. Moreover, while the marginalisation suffered by the Nubian people at the hands of the administration in Cairo is given centre stage in the text, signalling a 'return of the repressed' from the margins of national consciousness, the novel's narrative arc (whereby the child-narrator Hamid casts off his narrow Nubian identity and the traditions of village life in favour of a modern education and integration into the wider Egyptian national community) suggests it should ultimately be considered an example of Egyptian *national allegory* (Jameson 1986) rather than regional, or what el-Refaei and Mignolo have termed 'border', writing (el-Refaei 2012; Mignolo 2000).

By contrast, Yahya Mukhtar's fictional displacement memoir *Jibāl al-Kohl: Riwāya men al-Nūba*, 2001 (*Kohl Mountains: a Novel of Nubia*) and Haggag Hassan Oddoul's collection of short stories *Layāli al-Misk al-ʿAtiqa*, 2002 (*Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia*, 2005) subvert the symbolic power of the Aswan High Dam in the nationalist imagination and appropriate it for their own ends by highlighting the forgotten social, cultural and environmental costs of 'big' development. In much the same way that writer-activists such as Abdulrahman Munif, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Indra Sinha and Arundhati Roy have tapped into global audiences to expose the catastrophic human and environmental impacts of large-scale development schemes (Nixon 2011, 23–30), Mukhtar and Oddoul's fiction counteracts what Nixon calls the 'layered

invisibility' of Nubian victims of forced resettlement by articulating marginalised Nubian perspectives on the High Dam and its legacy (Nixon 2011, 16).

Equally, however, the writing of Mukhtar and Oddoul reflects a more widespread disenchantment with the failure of postcolonial nationalism to live up to its promise to act as a vehicle for transformative social change. This preoccupation suggests their writing should be considered examples of what Kwame Anthony Appiah has termed the disenchanted African novel, sitting alongside works like Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir du violence* [*The Necessity of Violence*] (1968) which repudiate and de-legitimate the nationalist project of the postcolonial bourgeoisie (Appiah 1992, 221–254; see also Chapter Three).

Whereas the Egyptian novel of the 1950s and 1960s was epitomised by a focus on major national issues, like the loss of the Sinai peninsula to Israel in 1967, coupled with the social upheaval and political repression brought about mass disillusionment with the empty promises of the postcolonial nation state, generating profound internal conflict of the kind narrated in *Kohl Mountains* (Hafez 1976, 73–74). In a political context in which freedom of speech was significantly curtailed Nubian writers would use literature as a privileged medium to "bring struggles and debates that could not take place freely in the political field into the cultural field under a different guise" without falling foul of censorship laws (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 35–36), thereby blurring the distinction between history, autobiography and fiction.

In the tradition of *iltizām* (or 'committed' literature) discussed in the previous chapter whereby Egyptian writers came to be seen as 'underground historians' or 'parallel sociologists' of their society because official narratives were widely distrusted by writers and intellectuals (Mehrez 2005, 79; Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 35–68), Mukhtar and Oddoul undertake the task of historical reconstruction and analysis of the legacy of the Aswan High Dam from a subaltern perspective. This allows the reader to assess the gulf between the redemptive government rhetoric surrounding the dam's benefits and its catastrophic local costs, which continue to impact the Nubian community generations on. However, even though both writers are "known for their nostalgia for their roots, past and land" (el-Refaei 2012, 19) and critique the failure of postcolonial nationalism to end the marginalisation of the Nubian people, they do so from very different, and at times antagonistic, standpoints as I will now show.

Whereas Mukhtar holds that the Nubian people have "a unique place in the fabric of the [Egyptian] nation of which they form one of the basic constituents" (Mukhtar 148) and (like Qasim before him) had participated in the Egyptian nationalist struggle (Khallaf 2006), Oddoul's calls to unify Egyptian and Sudanese Nubians and his controversial equation of the forced resettlement of the Nubian people with the *tashrīd* (making homeless) of the Palestinians in 1948 have resulted in him being branded a fanatical Nubian nationalist by many within the Egyptian establishment at the time (Khallaf 2006). In short, when read both against each other and extra-textually, their fiction conveys multiple and often opposing perspectives regarding the High Dam and its legacy that complicate Deleuze and Guattari's notion of minority literature as a form of collective utterance (Deleuze and Guattari 1983).

Rewriting and 'Re-Righting' Nubian History in Yahya Mukhtar's *Kohl Mountains: A Novel of Nubia*

Written in 1975, but not published until 2001, presumably because of its strident critique of Nasser's hydro-political agenda, Yahya Mukhtar's novel *Kohl Mountains: a Novel of Nubia* can be read as a subaltern counter-narrative to hegemonic nationalist development discourses that characterises the long-term legacy of dam building on the Nubian people over the course of the twentieth century as "the disaster that befell us" (Mukhtar 2001, 17). Although Mukhtar was a disciple of Muhammad Khalil Qasim and shared his political views (Aboul-Ela 2005), his writing is markedly more sceptical about the High Dam's human and environmental legacy than *The Buoy*, stressing "the neglect and bureaucracy and lack of feelings of responsibility for the people of Nubia" (Mukhtar 2001, 158) by Nasser's administration. Indeed, the title of the novel itself derives from a cryptic message sent to the narrator's uncle Mohammad al-Mawardi a decade prior to the dam's construction, stating that "the Mountains of Kohl will be destroyed by disaster" (Mukhtar 2001, 6–7): a phrase which is highly suggestive of the 'slow violence' of dam-induced displacement on the Nubian community of Egypt.

Defined as a form of violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 3) because of its invisibility and long time span, slow violence is marked by both the physical and imaginative displacement of communities in a process whereby the direct violence of eviction is coupled with the indirect violence of exclusion from the national imaginary (Nixon 2011, 151). Too often, as Nixon argues, "the developmental fantasy of a benign, redemptive dam" (Nixon 2011, 161) results in national amnesia towards liminal segments of the population, like the Nubian population of Egypt whose homes and histories have long gone un-mourned and un-memorialised within the national imaginary.

The concept of slow violence can thus be linked directly with the symbolic violence of non-consultation and non-recognition suffered by the Nubian people at the hands of the Egyptian state. This is highlighted in the novel both by the fact that the Nubian inhabitants were never consulted directly about the dam project but "heard about what was going on in the north only obliquely, incompletely and imprecisely" (Mukhtar 2001, 13) and that, following displacement, the Egyptian people also quickly forgot the sacrifices made by Egyptian Nubians for the sake of the nation. The value of this particular novel, then, lies – according to Mukhtar himself – in "presenting another perspective on the events of the construction of the dam, a perspective which presents the social and human features to a large portion of the Egyptian people, including their suffering and acceptance of a lot of problems that have been interiorised over the years" (Mukhtar 2001, 158).

In contrast to Fredric Jameson's assertion that all Third World texts are necessarily forms of national allegory since "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (Jameson 1986, 69), *Kohl Mountains* fits more obviously into the category of regional literature due to its Nubian setting and subject matter. Whereas his critics argue that Jameson's formulation overvalues nationalist ideology and glosses over the fact that regional literatures are "often so removed from the national consciousness that they seldom acknowledge nationalism as an issue" (Palakeel 1996, 99; Ahmad 2008, 23), Mukhtar's text designates Cairo – with its intense noise, heat, smoke and crowds – as a foreign country, endowed with foreign customs and a foreign language (Mukhtar 2001, 144). Consequently, the novel places Nubia's marginalised culture

at the centre of an alternative social imaginary which is, nevertheless, allegorical. This is indicated by the fact that the afterword is entitled "Nubia is Janeena w-al Shubak" (Mukhtar 2001, 143) which suggests that Mukhtar intended his novel to be read as an expression of Nubian collective consciousness.

Set between 1954, ten years before the High Dam was completed, when the residents of the village of Janina w-al Shubak first become aware of plans to build a new dam that would submerge all of ancient Nubia on either side of the Egyptian/Sudanese border, and 1964 when they are resettled to the area around Kom Ombo, the text charts both the physical journey from 'Old' to 'New' Nubia and the villagers' parallel psychological shift from a state of acquiescence towards the High Dam project to one of despair at its costs to their community. Far from presenting a didactic portrait of a community united in resistance to the dam from the get-go, however, what *Kohl Mountains* depicts is a gradual process of disillusionment amongst the Nubian villagers with the utopian rhetoric of Egyptian nationalism and Nasser's hydro-political agenda in particular. One of the novel's aims is thus to show how, having been both physically and imaginatively displaced, local people were relegated to the status of a 'ghost community which nevertheless continues to haunt the visible nation from the margins through acts of resistance (Nixon 2011, 151–61).

However, unlike in didactic political literature, the novel stresses multiple perspectives and 'truths' about development rather than simply presenting an artificially homogenous portrait of a community united in resistance to the High Dam from the outset. Early on in the novel we learn how "views and positions differed in all of the villages ... There were opinions and positions in favour of the dam and the necessity of its construction in order to eliminate isolation and neglect and poverty and others against its construction who even talked about tearing down the barrage as well so that we could return to our old life" (Mukhtar 2001, 40). Moreover, even the elderly survivors of previous raisings of the Aswan barrage like the narrator's uncle Jaffar Janina, who have been most badly affected by the legacy of dam-induced displacement, acknowledge the harsh reality of life in the Nubian villages. This is indicated when he recalls the poverty, disease and unemployment which stalk their inhabitants and have contributed to labour migration, as Nubians "knew they could find shelter and work and food in the north" (Mukhtar 2001, 29).

Nevertheless, despite the state's utilitarian calculation that the Nubian community will abandon their lands in exchange for the fruits of modernisation such

as electricity and running water and better access to health and educational services, the novel depicts a concomitant awareness amongst the villagers that in accepting to be resettled they risk exchanging a place endowed with history and cultural meaning for a 'placeless' existence in the resettlement site and that, as a result, "this slow pace of life would finish and all this history sink into the lake" (Mukhtar 2001, 29). Putting their initial misgivings aside, many ultimately embrace the nationalist logic that the dam is necessary for Egypt's social and economic progress as well as that of their own community, not least because of the lure of the material benefits of modernity (Mukhtar 2001, 31–36,40); as the narrator observes, "their memories, their birth place, the paradise lost, their heritage, ancestors and ruins are not in their minds now but in the minds of cultured people ... our families were more interested in living" (Mukhtar 2001, 70).

The text also suggests that Nasser's appeals to nationalist sentiments proved a powerful mechanism for generating consent for the High Dam project amongst the Nubian community. The balance of debate about its pros and cons is tipped decisively in favour of the dam by two factors in particular. The first of these is the Suez Crisis of 1956 when Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt in an attempt to regain Western control of the Suez Canal and to remove Nasser from power. During this time, the narrator tells us, "all differences ceased", at least publicly, and "the idea of building the dam was desired by all" as the Nubian villagers embraced the nationalist cause (Mukhtar 2001, 40). Similarly, nationalist propaganda "stirred deep desires to share and sacrifice" for the nation, which the villagers respond to by agreeing to send their sons to fight in the war and, ultimately, by sacrificing their homeland for the sake of the wider nation in the belief that, in doing so, the "dignity and glory" of Nubia will be restored and "there in Kom Ombo, a new, better life would flourish where we would live in dignity" (Mukhtar 2001, 55).

Nasser's visit to Abu Simbel in 1961 appears to win over the last of the doubters, like the narrator's uncle Jaffar Janina, who had previously been conflicted about the dam project. Choreographed with grand rhetorical and visual symbolism, Nasser's appearance at the temple is designed to reinforce the redemptive symbolism of his rule and by extension that of the dam itself, by portraying him as a modern pharaoh and modernisation as the new religion of the state which alone has the power to make the nation great again. Not only does Nasser's rousing rhetoric and charisma, which contribute to his incarnation as "that irresistible presence from which we were

all under the influence and which flowed inside us like blood, as we remained like orbits turning in the universe of his strong presence", dazzle the assembled crowd, but, as "his deep voice flew above our heads like a promise of prophecy" (Mukhtar 2001, 32) it seems to the Nubian observers to be endowed with divine power and authority.

Standing before the statue of Ramses the Great in front of the very hall where the pharaoh had given his victory speech after the battle of Kadesh in 1274BC, which was pivotal for securing Egypt's frontiers and confronting its foreign enemies much as Suez had been for Nasser ('Military History Monthly – Ramesses II – the Greatest Leader of All Time?' 2015), his presence is transformed from that of a man to a living God. Indeed, Nasser's resonant voice echoing from the depths of the "holy of holies" itself, makes it appear to the onlookers as if he and the statue have changed places and it is Ramses himself who is actually speaking (Mukhtar 2001, 32). Tying together notions of political, divine and imperial authority, this symbolism clearly equates Nasser's rule with that of the resurgent Egyptian nation whose peerless strength would be confirmed by the completion of that great pyramid of modern times, the Aswan High Dam, which was both the world's largest dam and whose reservoir – Lake Nasser – constituted the largest ever man-made body of water.

Aside from its symbolic power, Nasser's visit had enormous political significance for the Nubian villagers since this was the first time that an incumbent leader had addressed them personally. In the eyes of many, therefore, this gesture is interpreted as a sign that, for the first time, Nubians were being treated as equal citizens of Egypt. As Janina observes: "No-one before him ever spoke to us about anything … They never visited us at any time throughout our lives, we never saw anyone of a higher rank than the man responsible for the village centres. No-one asked where we are or who we are. We only floated into their sphere of interest when they built the barrage and raised it, and then only for a short time, until they finished building it and we sunk into the depths of forgetfulness once again, like our land and our villages" (Mukhtar 2001, 36). Nasser, by contrast, promises the villagers that the dam will eliminate long-standing Nubian complaints of isolation and neglect (Mukhtar 2001, 31).

However, it would be unwise to take the villagers' public statements of national loyalty and assent to the dam project, which extend to "chanting for the revolution and its leaders" and "singing songs in praise of the dam and the revolution",

entirely at face value (Mukhtar 2001, 57). Bearing in mind the context of political repression, surveillance and censorship in Nasser's Egypt, in which people "routinely concealed their individual personalities beneath a carapace of conformity" and "acted out their social roles and repeated, automatically, slogans that were often contrary to their real hidden opinions" (Hafez 1976, 68), any assumption that public pronouncements and actions might mirror the inner beliefs of the characters risks overlooking the extent to which self-censorship was widely practised, even within the restricted public sphere of the Nubian village, for fear of surveillance and retribution.

As argued in the previous chapter, although Nubian resentment towards the dam was widespread prior to 1968, its expression was largely restricted to the private realm or what James Scott has called the community's 'hidden transcript', and thus only communicated furtively amongst those undergoing the same experience of oppression and marginalisation (Scott 1992, 4). While dissenting discourse is rarely articulated openly in the novel there nevertheless exists, both in the narrator's internal reflections and in dialogues with intellectuals and members of his inner circle, a significant amount of scepticism concerning the redemptive qualities of the dam. Thus we learn how the writer Khalil Kulfat confides his doubts about the government's development agenda and the twin prospects of Nubian assimilation and cultural dissolution in a "passionate whisper" to the narrator aboard the barge transporting them to the resettlement site (Mukhtar 2001, 131).

Similarly, Mahmud is aware of the impact that the "raucous media campaign which filled all of their personal space" and "surrounded them" with propaganda has had in terms of convincing the reluctant villagers of the benefits of the dam project. In particular, he draws attention to the role that the advent of the transistor radio has had on his community, accelerating the encounter with modernity to such an extent that, unable to fully understand its implications on their way of life, they "drown in the deep collisions of its seas, without any boat or oars or captain" to guide them to safety (Mukhtar 2001, 59). Here, the use of metaphors of blindness and drowning emphasises the powerlessness of the villagers *vis-à-vis* the changes taking place around them, and acting upon them. These metaphors suggest that, as a community, Egyptian Nubians at that time lacked the economic, social and capital to adapt to life in a new location due to the near total mismatch between their life skills cultural codes and the cultural, social and economic capital required to succeed in their new surroundings (Grenfell 2010, 312–15).

As Hafez has argued, the sixties generation in Egypt was unique in the sense that it was surrounded with "potent and deceptive propaganda, brought up on a diet of illusive slogans and statements, and asked to sacrifice its freedom for a fragile and corrupt establishment" (Hafez 1976, 77). While some of the villagers like Mawardi and the narrator, are more sceptical about state propaganda, describing it as "false" and "dishonest" and stating that they "smelt a rat" (Mukhtar 2001, 66), others such as Jaffar Janina are far more credulous about the promises of Nasser's government which was still surfing a wave of national popularity following Egypt's victory against the former imperial powers at Suez in 1956.

This is due in no small part to the combined effect of state propaganda, from Nasser's visit to Abu Simbel, to the glossy propaganda leaflets distributed by the Ministry of Social Affairs whose cover depicts a smiling Nubian family in 'New Nubia' with totemic symbols of modernity such as a school, factory and hospital in the background accompanied by the motto "You all have an appointment with happiness and luxury in New Nubia" (Mukhtar 2001, 65–66). Whereas Jaffar had once feared that construction of the new dam would cause "history to repeat itself once again" (Mukhtar 2001, 36), we learn how this propaganda causes his mind to become "inoculated" to doubt (Mukhtar 2001, 31). He duly becomes one of the scheme's most enthusiastic supporters, convinced that "we should bear everything for the sake of arriving there [in New Nubia]" (Mukhtar 2001, 70).

Although doubts about the High Dam project remain "in the minds of cultured people and some educated people" like Mawardi and Mahmud, the combination of religious, socialist and utopian rhetoric espoused by the government's propaganda campaign in a bid to avoid the pitfalls of direct resistance that had occurred during the second raising of the Aswan Barrage in 1933 – as illustrated in *The Buoy* – appears to succeed in generating consent amongst the villagers about the benefits of resettlement. Not only do many of the characters publicly agree that the model houses "fulfilled the promise and the dream" laid out in Nasser's speech and "exceeded what they were hoping for" in terms of modern convenience (Mukhtar 2001, 59) but clues reveal that they have also internalised nationalist discourse at a personal, psychic level. Thus Janina's eyes are described as "light with rest and trust" as he hands the narrator the pamphlet, exclaiming "read it ... in it you will find beautiful words!" (Mukhtar 2001, 65), while others state that what they have read in the newspapers and heard on the radio "confirmed one meaning": certainty concerning their "future happiness in those

amazing houses which would have electricity, like the houses of Cairo" (Mukhtar 2001, 70).

Midway through the novel, however, the novel's narrative arc moves from articulating a generalised acceptance of the High Dam project amongst the villagers to a blistering political critique of Nasser's hydro-political agenda and an expression of Nubian disillusionment and despair at the "calamitous deception ... that was the outcome of that loud, fake propaganda" (Mukhtar 2001, 121). Illustrating the gulf between the redemptive promises found in glossy government pamphlets and speeches about life in the resettlement site and the reality that awaited them there, the second half of the novel depicts how the Nubian community come to realise that government propaganda regarding life in New Nubia is nothing more than "a lie" (Mukhtar 2001, 70).

Although the resettlement operation had been proclaimed in the press as "the greatest … ever to have occurred in the twentieth century", with the authorities boasting that "the ultimate human care was taken to give them a comfortable trip", the novel describes how the Nubian oustees are forced into barges designed to transport livestock to and from the Sudan without adequate food, water or medical care. Conditions during the week-long journey to Aswan prove so harsh that several passengers fall ill and die, including Hajar – the first baby born *en route* to 'New Nubia' and its promises of a better life – whose name literally means 'emigrant' (Mukhtar 2001, 127–28) and connotes the *hijra* [migration] undertaken by the prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD.

State propaganda explicitly encourages the Nubian emigrants to have the same faith in the dam project as the followers of the prophet Mohammad, with the exception that the new society they are building is grounded not in Islamic principles but rather on "achieving eternal socialism" as members of the modern Egyptian nation (Mukhtar 2001, 66). However, unlike in the Islamic narrative when the Meccan emigrants are greeted warmly by the people of Medina, there is no welcoming party to meet the Nubian oustees when they arrive in Aswan as media reports had led them to believe. Whereas the people of Ibrim, the first village to be resettled, had been received by armies of dignitaries wielding "flowers and songs of praise and speeches and ice cold water and dry foods" for the sake of the assembled reporters with their cameras (Mukhtar 2001, 135) the residents of Janina w-al Shubak disembark from the barges

under the gaze of a group of policemen and soldiers like "lines of captives or refugees" (Mukhtar 2001, 136).

The imagery deployed in this scene also symbolically associates the forced displacement of the Nubian people with other master-signifiers of persecution such as the transportation of Jewish detainees in cattle-trucks to the Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust or the lines of Africans disembarking slave ships after crossing the Black Atlantic which the narrator has reportedly "seen in some films" (Mukhtar 2001, 136). As Rothberg argues, appeals to "multidirectional memory" enable the articulation of unacknowledged histories of suffering, such as that experienced by Egyptian Nubians over the course of the twentieth century, by encouraging the reader to explore the parallels between different histories of oppression (Rothberg 2009, 5).

Kohl Mountains also draws the reader's attention to the human casualties obscured by the redemptive symbolic presence of the mega-dam which "deflects attention away from the undertow of violent underdevelopment that follows in its wake" (Nixon 2011, 162). The novel reveals the cultural costs of resettlement to be far greater than the sum of material factors such as "the area of land that will be drowned ... or the number of palm trees nor the cattle and sheep that will be sacrificed, nor the houses we will get in exchange for our [old] houses" which could be compensated for monetarily (Mukhtar 2001, 50). At stake, Mukhtar seems to suggest, is no less than the continued viability of Nubian society as a result of the "waves of erosion gnawing at the roots of their existence" following the community's resettlement to Kom Ombo (Mukhtar 2001, 124).

Not only is assimilation, Arabization and inter-marriage a threat to the future viability of Nubian culture in the diaspora, but the very roots sustaining Nubian culture have been lost beneath Lake Nasser. This includes important historical sources about the "mysteries" of Nubian civilisation which are mentioned in the text, such as the lost meaning of the ancient Marwi scrolls written in the Nubian language, without whose presence, as Mawardi warns, "Egyptian history itself will remain incomplete" (Mukhtar 2001, 51). The lack of respect for Nubian heritage shown by the UNESCO team and the Egyptian government leads him to accuse them of being more concerned with rescuing bricks and mortar than Nubia's traditions which stretch back to Coptic, and even pharaonic, times (Mukhtar 2001, 18, 42).

Many of these traditions, like marriage and death rituals, are intimately connected with the river Nile which is identified in the text as the locus of Nubia's

cultural life. In contrast to the modern Egyptian state's utilitarian development discourse that conceives of Nile water as a commodity to be extracted and exploited, (Tvedt 2004, 12) elegiac descriptions of the Nile as *"al-nahr al-nūbi"* or the "Nubian River" (Mukhtar 2001, 143), suggest the existence of a symbiotic relationship between the human and non-human worlds more like kinship than commodity. This is indicated by the following passage: "the Nubians lived a life integrated with their river: they loved it and feared it and did not pollute it and the river reciprocated and gave love in exchange for love, and friendship in exchange for friendship, until the day came when they were forcibly removed from it and sent far from their land and their river" (Mukhtar 2001, 158).

It is precisely the loss of this home-ground which provided the "ontological grounding of [Nubian] culture" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 165), that leads the novel to draw attention to the fact that "development is not an automated, mechanical process" (Mukhtar 2001, 130) but a profoundly human one, the success or failure of which is dependent on myriad environmental, psycho-social and cultural factors. Even before the move to Kom Ombo we learn how the villagers cease decorating their houses in the traditional manner and stop observing traditions such as welcoming homecoming travellers with jugs of milk or woven plates, prompting Mawardi to exclaim: "I didn't imagine that resettlement would influence our customs and traditions so fast! What will happen when we go there? Will we be able to retain them as they are or will the winds of change blow everything away?" (Mukhtar 2001, 75). Far from slowing down, however, this pattern of socio-cultural change accelerates markedly after the villagers are resettled "far from the banks of the Nile for the first time in our nation's history" (Mukhtar 2001, 21) to an area where "the great Nile did not grant its gifts and its generosity [and] was stingy with the people and the earth" (Mukhtar 2001, 28).

Thus we learn that disillusionment, apathy and withdrawal characteristic of the process of social disarticulation quickly take hold after the "promised paradise" of 'New Nubia' is revealed to be little more than an inhospitable desert environment in which their community struggles to put down new roots (Mukhtar 2001, 139–42). Not only are the modern houses for which the villagers have exchanged their spacious courtyard homes so small that they are compared to "sardine cans" made of "stones and cement, with low ceilings, and hot as hell", but many have not even been completed at the time of their arrival, their location marked only by piles of stones and sacks of cement (Mukhtar 2001, 139–40). These unbuilt homes come to

symbolise the high-handed neglect with which the Nubian community has been treated by successive Egyptian postcolonial nationalist administrations, like that of the British colonisers before them, and the manner in which Nubian culture and society has been sacrificed at the altar of a narrow vision of economic and social development that brings them few, if any, tangible benefits as I argued in the Introduction.

However, as Scott argues, when the 'hidden transcript' of clandestine opposition to hegemonic discourses enters the public domain it can constitute a powerful form of discursive resistance that can attain the iterative force of "a symbolic declaration of war" against the state and its agents (Scott 1992, 8). Disillusionment and despair at "the demented [nationalist] regime which had destroyed the whole meaning of villages" (Mukhtar 2001, 123) gives some of the Nubian characters in the novel such as Ilish the courage to utter public criticisms they had previously only dared say privately. Overcoming his fear of speaking out openly against the dam after the trauma of the journey to New Nubia and the realisation that the resettlement site bears little resemblance to the model village they have been shown by the Ministry, Ilish declares in front of the assembled villagers and dignitaries "the lying government ... it's a catastrophe!" (Mukhtar 2001, 140).

In much the same way, Jaffar Janina's campaign of non-violent resistance against the broken promises of the nationalist regime represents a form of subaltern agency in the face of radical power imbalances. Refusing to enter his own house on the basis that it embodies the government's broken promises to the Nubian people, he insists on sleeping outside for months on end as an act of protest. Emboldened by "a power and a spiritual energy" which the villagers have never seen in him before, his decision to pursue this strike "unto death" transforms a personal act of resistance into a powerful symbol of popular resentment against the government that catches the community's imagination. Proclaimed the first "martyr" of the resettlement scheme, his actions are not only recorded for posterity in Mahmud's memoirs but, as word is passed from village to village, they are immortalised in Nubia's collective memory as a resource for future acts of contestation against the state (Mukhtar 2001, 142).

Life Writing and the Reconstruction of Nubian Identity

Kohl Mountains does not simply attempt to rewrite or "re-right" nationalist history in the conventional sense; rather, the text constitutes a powerful form of postcolonial life writing which not only documents the past but seeks to "bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying", thereby enabling processes of cultural regeneration and national reconciliation (Whitlock 2015, 138). Following the forced displacement of the Nubian community in 1964 there was widespread acknowledgement amongst Nubian writers and intellectuals of the need to "save the heritage of the Nubian community from oblivion and to preserve Nubian collective memory" in the face of the twin pressures of modernisation and assimilation or 'De-Nubianisation' (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 181). Relegated to what Benedict Anderson calls "the weird subcategory of Others" (Anderson 1991, 166), Nubians, like Egypt's other marginalised minority groups, were systematically "uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory" through a process of what Nixon terms 'national amnesia', which effectively erased their distinctive language, culture and history from the national imaginary (Nixon 2011, 151).

Since it was now impossible for exiled Nubians to return to their ancient villages submerged under Lake Nasser, Mukhtar reasons that it is "of especial importance [for writers] to rescue Nubian memories" (Mukhtar 2001, 148). As such, he argues, literature plays a vital role in giving imaginative reality to a homeland that existed only in individual and collective memory making it a key site for creating affective links to the past amongst a diasporic Nubian community held together not by a shared language, culture or sense of place but rather by shared memory (Hirsch and Miller 2011b; Hirsch 2012).

References to the importance of publishing 'Ali Mahmud's journal before "the number of people below ground exceeds those above" in the hope that "some readers might find something important therein that they had been searching for" (Mukhtar 2001, 6) suggest that Mukhtar's target readership at the time of writing was Nubians who had either experienced the trauma of dam-induced displacement directly or their descendants. This is reinforced when one of the characters calls upon Qasim to write a sequel to *The Buoy* to "serve as a reminder to our descendants that there was once a Nubian people whose culture, language and identity have now dissolved" and live on only in cultural artefacts like literature, songs or poetry (Mukhtar 2001, 124).

Written in the form of a diary by local schoolteacher 'Ali Mahmud, who returns to Nubia after completing his studies in Cairo, the novel can be viewed as an example of postcolonial life writing which, unlike canonical Western auto/biography, does not merely reflect individual subjectivities, but is predicated upon decentred and relational conceptions of personhood, whereby the individual and community are connected by a sense of shared place that is constitutive in the formation of collective identity. Unlike a typical personal diary, no dates are recorded in the novel "except when something happened that appeared to him important, as if he had underlined them" (Mukhtar 2001, 6). This suggests that the narrator's role lies both in acting as an embedded witness to the events he is recording and as an amanuensis who gathers and transcribes the oral testimonies of other members of his community.

That Mukhtar should have chosen the genre of a fictional memoir as a vehicle for recording Nubian memories of displacement and resettlement is surely no coincidence. As critics have noted, modes of postcolonial life writing such as auto/biography, memoir and testimony are often adopted by marginalised groups to express emergent racial, ethnic and gender consciousness and represent the collective views of the community, rather than simply that of the individual (Moore-Gilbert 2009, xi–xxvi; Ostle, Moor, and Wild 1998, 18–23). In such cases, as Bart Moore-Gilbert observes, "the author may seek to make himself representative of, or spokesman for, the collective to which he belongs – even as he characteristically stresses his 'unique' personal qualifications for doing so" (Moore-Gilbert 2009, xx).

Similarly, while Mahmud initially associates the act of writing a diary with "great writers and thinkers" rather than ordinary men like himself (Mukhtar 2001, 9), it is only when he learns of proposals to construct the Aswan High Dam in 1954 that, in his symbolic role as the village educator, he feels compelled to record events for posterity. The imperative to transmit a collective account of this crucial moment in the history of the Nubian community rather than simply record his personal observations also explains his insistence that the manuscript be delivered posthumously to his cousin Muhammad al-Mawardi in Cairo for publication (Mukhtar 2001, 9). However, unlike the salvage ethnography practised by European ethnographers who sought primarily to "preserve what was already lost" (Lazarus 2011, 117), *Kohl Mountains* also affirms the importance of memory as a resource for recovering and reconstructing a viable contemporary Nubian identity in the present.

For marginalised minority groups like the Egyptian Nubians, testimonial life writing can be viewed as an emancipatory process that helps recover lost agency by offering the opportunity for the community to "transform themselves from objects of representation to Subjects of self-representation" (Moore-Gilbert 2009, 111). Following Fanon, this process can release the psycho-affective sense of crushing objectification and self-division which is the consequence of long-term, systematic domination (Fanon 2008, 82–108; see also Chapter Three). However, on occasion (as with the 'stolen generation' narratives which garnered enough public momentum to elicit an official apology on behalf of the Australian state in 2008 for its policy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their birth families) testimonial life writing can go beyond altering the consciousness of the oppressed to become a powerful agent of consciousness-raising and social change within the wider nation (Whitlock 2007, 141; Whitlock 2015, 150).

Indeed, literature has the capacity to go beyond recording or relaying the events of the past by triggering what Felman and Laub term "the imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – in one's own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate involvement" in a given event (Felman and Laub 1991, 108). As the text suggests, not only does the act of writing a diary function as a reparative strategy for "letting out the bad blood" (Mukhtar 2001, 141) that had festered between the Nubian and Egyptian communities following the botched resettlement operation, but the reader is encouraged to empathise with the Nubian perspective towards the High Dam and its legacy in order to foster what Craps terms "cross cultural solidarity and the formation of new forms of community" (Craps 2013, 2).

Similarly, at points *Kohl Mountains* emphasises the shared pain of alienation experienced by Nubian oustees in the north and the northern Egyptian teachers and civil servants who had been "forcibly removed from their normal lives" (Mukhtar 2001, 10) and sent south by the government to an area where they understood neither the people, the customs, nor indeed the local language (Mukhtar 2001, 10). Although northern Egyptian characters like Ahmad Rizq are typically 'othered' and referred to as 'they' (just as they designate Nubians and Nubia as 'your people' or 'your country') they are also depicted empathetically, bridging the experiential gap that often separates the Nubian history of displacement from the wider Egyptian nation through reference to the shared pain of exile. As such, literary life writing helps develop

affective bonds between citizens from different ethnic, sociological or religious backgrounds by creating the conditions necessary to reshape the national imaginary (Whitlock 2007, 141).

In chronicling the events surrounding the displacement and resettlement of the village of Janina w-al Shubak the text situates itself as an auto/biographical narrative when, in fact, it is an act of imaginative projection from the present onto the events of the past that draws upon the symbolic framework of cultural memory, blurring the boundaries between the truth value of the seemingly non-fictional diary form versus the fictional novel. In this sense, we should be wary of attributing too close a connection between author and narrator and thus the 'truth' of the seemingly first-hand witness testimony being presented to us in the text. This is particularly the case since overlaps in the novel between Mukhtar's own life and that of Ali Mahmud, who declares "I believe in the path to development our country is taking in building the dam is imperative and that this is the right approach at the right time which walks with us as people of the river and gives top priority to our … life source in the nation" (Mukhtar 2001, 60), suggests that it is reflective of his own personal trajectory from revolutionary nationalist to defender of Nubian rights.

Although the narrator's testimony is presented within the text as that of a first-hand witness who experiences the second raising of the Aswan Low Dam as an eight-year-old boy and the displacement and resettlement following the construction of the High Dam as a thirty-nine-year old man, Mukhtar himself was born in 1936, emigrating to Cairo at the age of seven, never to return to Nubia. As such, he only ever experienced the trauma of DIDR second-hand as a member of what Hirsch has termed the 'post-generation' of Nubians whose understanding of events is transmitted and refracted through the testimonial narratives, memories and behaviours of survivors passed down from generation to generation as a form of cultural memory (Hirsch 2012). Once first-hand witnesses are dead and buried, the past is no longer mediated by personal experience and recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation, making literature a key site for narrating a shared cultural memory and creating affective links to the past amongst descendants of survivors of historical trauma.

This in turn raises uneasy questions about the use of memory and testimony as a means of understanding the past. While a strong connection existed between the novel and social criticism in Egypt throughout the latter half of the twentieth century,

"a conscious effort to avoid the naïve error of using novels as documentary sources for illustrating the contemporary scene [was] necessary" (Hafez 1976, 68). Since memory elicits specific kinds of recall that may reflect critical bias and distortion, many historians, anthropologists and social scientists tend to dismiss its value as an historical resource (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xiii; Chatty 2010, 283). However, memory (be it the individual memory of personal experience, the cultural or collective memory of a shared historical moment, or the trans-generational 'post-memory' passed on from generation to generation) should not be understood as a transparent process of recovery or retrieval of the past. Rather, it is better perceived as an appropriation and invention staged to subvert dominant national narratives and pursue contemporary insights and imperatives (Lazarus 2011, 123-124).

Since memories themselves may be "modified and invented as they are remembered" (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 11), the 'truth' value of testimonial narratives like *Kohl Mountains* lies not in the transmission of objective facts, but in their performative recreation of Nubian identity in a contemporary context. As Baronian, Besser and Jansen have argued, memory forms one of the most important internal boundaries of diasporic identities, which tend to be characterised by "a triple sense of belonging: to the other members of a distinctive local diasporic community, to diasporic groups in other locations around the world; and, finally, to the point of origin, the actual or imagined homeland that binds these groups together" (Baronian, Besser, and Jansen 2007, 11). In a context where Nubians from Cairo to Kom Ombo were no longer connected primarily by a shared place, language, or way of life, *Kohl Mountains* succeeds in re-embodying the lost Nubian Nile World as an imaginary homeland for the diasporic community to inhabit by bringing to life the 'vernacular landscapes' of Old Nubia which had been overwritten over the course of the twentieth century by externalising 'official landscapes' that paid scant attention to Nubia as a repository of communal history and memory (Nixon 2011, 17).

Moreover, recent oral testimony projects conducted amongst members of displaced groups reveal that "what people believe to be true can be as important as what may be true in a more factual sense, in terms of exerting influence upon their hopes, fears, priorities and choices … so taking account of personal and collective memories and history can illuminate the values and past experiences that underpin social and economic structures, relationships and patterns of decision-making" (Bennett and MacDowell 2012, 29). Similarly, *Kohl Mountains* depicts the

importance of memory in conditioning behavioural patterns in the present, through reference to the traumatic memory of the raising of the Aswan Barrage in 1933 which continues to influence the behaviour of the villagers in the present and initially leads them to oppose construction of the Aswan High Dam.

As the narrator recalls:

> Remembrance of the second raising of the Aswan barrage came to everyone's mind. This occurred when I was 8 years old, and the memory of those days still remains with me and causes me nightmares ... I cannot forget how the water gushed out and rose quickly and insistently in uneven lines. Nothing could stop it. It surrounded the high ground from all directions, and kept rising and rising until it swallowed it all and continued on its way with the force of destiny. It swept away the animals and their bleating was lost in its din. The walls of the houses collapsed with a loud bang like thunder. People were calling out and shrieking, slapping their faces and rending their clothes, struggling in the middle of the current, running around and yelling amidst the din of the water. These sounds are still ringing in my ears. (Mukhtar 2001, 14)

Here, it is clear that the narrator's childhood memories are still viscerally present to him, as they are to his great-uncle who continues to relive the traumatic events that took place as if "they had only happened a few days ago" (Mukhtar 2001, 49). As such, the novel reflects a collective consciousness of past traumas that continues to haunt the Nubian community into the present which – factually 'correct' or otherwise – is a key factor in determining their decision-making in the present.

In order to prevent a situation whereby Nubia's distinct culture and way of life remained intact only in "mummified" form (Mukhtar 2001, 43), Mukhtar presents his memories in the form of what he terms an embodied painting [*al-mashad al-lawha*] (Mukhtar 2001, 20). This invites the reader, through the act of imaginative investment, to experience life in Old Nubia and the realities of forced displacement for themselves. As Lazarus has argued, literary narratives are capable of reflecting and representing social truths in a way that the "cold rigor" of conventional history cannot, precisely because they appeal to human senses and emotions (Lazarus 2011, 125). In this way, although the structure of *Kohl Mountains* depicts the cultural loss

sustained by the Nubian community of Egypt in the wake of construction of the High Dam, it also provides a glimmer of hope about how Nubian culture and identity can be sustained and nurtured in the future.

For Mawardi and Khalil Kulfat, reviving the Nubian language is key to the flourishing of diasporic Nubian culture. One of their greatest dreams is for Nubian to be revived, standardised and taught as an official language of the state to both Nubians and Egyptians so that all people are able to read their shared civilisational history, as represented by the ancient Coptic scrolls Kulfat clutches *en route* to the resettlement site, in its original language (Mukhtar 2001, 131). This represents a psychic attempt to overcome the threat of assimilation and extinction and thus save Nubian identity from "disappearing and drowning" (Mukhtar 2001, 131–32) in a sea of Arabic. Ultimately, however, the novel suggests that the act of writing Nubian literature is vital for constituting and consolidating a viable contemporary Nubian identity in the diaspora by re-embodying the lost Nubian Nile World as an imaginary homeland for Nubians to inhabit in the absence of shared geographical space, and by transmitting collective memories of Old Nubia and the shared history of dam-induced displacement to future generations.

The Long Term Legacy of the Aswan High Dam in the Fiction of Haggag Hassan Oddoul

Whereas Mukhtar's writing stresses the immediate social, economic and cultural implications of the abrupt rupture which transformed the Nubian people from emplaced inhabitants of the Nubian Nile World into what Nixon terms "uninhabitants" (Nixon 2011, 153), scattered amidst the resettlement villages near Kom Ombo and the poorer quarters of Cairo and Alexandria, Oddoul's collection of short stories *Layāli al-Misk al-'Atiqa: Qiṣas*, (2002) translated by Anthony Calderbank as *Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia* (2005), draws attention to the long-term impact of dam-building on Nubian culture over the course of the twentieth century. Although Oddoul was born in Alexandria in 1944 into a generation of the Nubian diaspora whose parents had resettled in northern Egypt following the second

raising of the Aswan Barrage in 1933, he had been employed as a construction worker at the Aswan High Dam from 1963-67, and had seen first-hand its impact on the Nubian community both in the resettlement sites and the cities of northern Egypt.

Moreover, while *Kohl Mountains* stresses the historical place of the Nubian people within the wider Egyptian nation, Oddoul's writing suggests the existence of an autonomous Nubian history and consciousness distinct from that of Egypt whose roots stretch back millennia and continue to demarcate Nubians and Egyptians to the present day. In an interview with Hosam Aboul-Ela, Oddoul recounts how he first became aware of "the complex ways in which we as Nubians were entrapped on a lower rung of the social ladder" as an adolescent, when he was routinely called *barbarī* (a disparaging term for a black person that suggests racial inferiority) in the streets of Alexandria (Aboul-Ela 2005).

Despite having spent twenty years defending the Nubian cause as a human rights activist, Oddoul did not begin his literary career until 1984 when he was forty years old. Driven to write in order to bring the "broken people" whose stories and voices were rarely brought to the world's attention (Aboul-Ela 2005), his fiction favours the nostalgic affirmation of Nubian culture and traditions and the nativist logic of Nubian ethno-nationalism, if not explicitly its political agenda. As previously noted in the Introduction, this has been disputed by some critics such as Ahmed Abdel Muti Higazi who accused him of harbouring a 'separatist' or 'racist' agenda aimed at weakening the unity of the Egyptian state (Aboul-Ela 2005; Naaman 2011, 111–16).

Although Oddoul is best known for his collection of short stories *Layāli al-Misk al-'Atiqa*, (2002) which won the State Prize for Short Stories in 1990 and the novel *Ma'tūq al-Kheyr* (2004) which won the Sawiris Cultural Award for best novel in 2005, he has also authored thirteen other fictional texts ranging from short stories and novels to drama and several highly politicised tracts (Aboul-Ela 2005). The first of these is the only extant volume of Nubian literary criticism entitled *Udaba' Nubiyun wa Nuqqād 'Unsuriyun*, 2006 (*Nubian Writers and Racist Critics*) which openly criticises Egyptian intellectuals for their exclusion of Nubian writers, artists and intellectuals in the name of what he calls a "racist national ideal" (Naaman 2011, 111–12).

This was followed by a short, yet controversial, booklet entitled *Al-Ṣaḥwa al-Nubiyya: Ṣayhat Oddoul fee Washinṭun wa Tawabi'ha* in 2007 (*The Nubian Awakening: Oddoul's Cry from Washington and its Reverberations*). A self-styled

"foundational manifesto for the Nubian Awakening" (Oddoul 2007, 3), this tract outlines the movement's key demands. These include proposals for a resettlement law allowing the displaced Nubians to return to the shores of Lake Nasser, which would be re-named Lake Nubia, as well as recognition of the Nubian people as a national minority with guaranteed cultural and language rights. Oddoul's claims that institutional racism lies at the heart of the Egyptian establishment have sparked "a long-overdue debate about racial identity and the plight of the Nubians in Egypt" (Naaman 2011, 112), specifically around whether Nubians should be considered a culturally and ethnically distinct group and thus given protected minority status.

In terms of his literary fiction, Oddoul's affirmation of Nubia's distinctive history, mythology, folktales, setting and language places his work in direct counterpoint to Arab-Egyptian narratives of self, identity, and nationhood. Moreover, it represents a change in the formal characteristics of Nubian literature from a realist to a more experimental, modernist aesthetic characterised by "disjointed and chaotic narrative structure and frequent time lapsing between past and present" (Oddoul 2006, 36) and by greater use of Nubian dialect and expressions which remould the Arabic language to suit local conditions. Taken together, these innovations create a creolised text that gives precedence to the Nubian mother tongue over Arabic, the 'major voice' of high culture (Miller 1986, 133).

Although *Nights of Musk* is made up of four discrete short stories, set in different times and places, ranging from the resettlement site at Kom Ombo to the villages of Old Nubia prior to the dam's construction and even Nubia's mythical past, it "may also be seen as a novella composed of texts connected by common symbolic threads that present a collective vision of Nubia's history, geography, culture and language. that, while they can be read individually, acquire additional grafts of meaning when read in conjunction with each other" (Halim 2005). Moving from the present to the past back to the present again, the four tales reinforce the ongoing connection between 'Old' and 'New' Nubia, highlighting the cyclical nature of Nubian life which oscillates between joy and disaster, life and death.

The menace of the dam – "that unseen destroyer of people's lives" (anonymous 2005) – is ever-present in these stories. It is mentioned explicitly as in 'Adila, Grandmother' and 'The River People', which deal with the long-term legacy of a century of dam-induced displacement which is depicted as a form of slow, and at times almost imperceptible, violence. This has resulted in the 'long-dying' of the Nubian

community which, as Oddoul has argued, found itself "stuck between the hammer of the majority that surrounds them and commits itself to dissolving their uniqueness, and the anvil of the inner brokenness as a result of the loss of the land of origin" (Aboul-Ela 2005). It is also implicitly present in 'Nights of Musk' and 'Zeinab Uburty', which, although they are set prior to the dam's construction in an idealised, almost mythic environment which depicts the customs and traditions of Old Nubia in vivid detail, symbolically illustrate the dangers of upsetting the fine balance between humans and nature and are infused with premonitions of future disaster.

The first story in the collection, 'Adila, Grandmother', is set in the present and stresses the ambivalence and dislocation of Nubian youth, growing up between the impoverished resettlement villages of New Nubia and the cities of the north, who are faced with the challenge of negotiating their Nubian identity in a context where it is marginalised and denigrated by the majority culture. Known colloquially as "the exile's village", the resettlement site is represented as "a mangy scalp with patches of hair amidst its baldness" (Oddoul 2008, 12), surrounded by a barren desert which "yielded only rocks and stones" (Oddoul 2008, 11). The text goes on to describe how the land the Nubian oustees have been given to farm in compensation for the loss of their old homes in the fertile river valley is uncultivable without the aid of promised irrigation techniques, which the state has abjectly failed to deliver. Indeed, the false promises of modernisation and progress are symbolised by the fact that the cement irrigation channels installed by the authorities to 'make the desert bloom' have already cracked from lack of moisture before the villagers are even able to start planting, so that the land remains dusty and uncultivable many years after resettlement had occurred (Oddoul 2008, 12).

What Oddoul calls the "barren poverty of their lives in a strange land" (Oddoul 2008, 12) is not restricted to material and physical factors, but is also manifested in social breakdown and even a form of schizophrenia (*infiṣām*) whereby characters like the grandmother, although physically resident in the resettlement village, feel so alienated from their new environment that they psychologically inhabit the old Nubian Nile world of their memories instead of the present. In his writing, Old Nubia is imagined nostalgically as the repository of all that is 'good', with images such as its "sweet and kind" river, "the village of Bahjura in the feast" and the "dancing buoy" (Oddoul 2008, 25) conjuring up a festive, communal atmosphere that contrasts

markedly with the gloom and alienation of life in the resettlement site where the narrator's grandmother now lives.

Populated almost exclusively by women, children and the elderly (whose funerals occur with alarming regularity), most of whom have become economically and socially dependent on male labour migration to the north due to the lack of economic opportunities available in New Nubia, the resettlement site is portrayed as an unbalanced environment characterised by material, cultural and psychological brokenness. The many unmarried women who cannot rely for support on remittances sent home by husbands and sons, such as Awada who is forced to endure the cultural shame of going to the market alone to sell eggs simply in order to feed herself, are at constant risk of starvation and disease. Indeed, so many such men have shirked their financial responsibilities to their families or have failed to return to their villages to get married and have children that the boy narrator Mohamed, whose father is Nubian and mother is Arab Egyptian, is led to wonder "how these people avoided becoming extinct" (Oddoul 2008, 6).

Cultural shame is depicted as the direct consequence of the denigration and marginalisation of Nubian culture by the majority. When the grandmother learns that her grand-daughter is to marry a *gorbati* (northern Egyptian man) and starts to perform the dance of the bereaved in a train on the way to Alexandria, she is both mocked and misunderstood by the other passengers. Screaming *ibiyuuuu, ibiyu* [woe is me] and beating the monotonous rhythm on the floor of the carriage with her feet as she moves up and down, waving her black headscarf in the air, some of the passengers start to laugh at her, while others are terrified and cower in their seats, convinced that she is mad (Oddoul 2008, 16). Although perceived as backward and anachronistic in today's Egypt, such rituals held a central place in the old Nubian 'Nile World', where they performed vital symbolic and sacred functions.

This is illustrated in the third story in the volume 'Zeinab Uburty', when local women dance the dance of the bereaved in recognition of the compound disasters that afflict their village after the eponymous protagonist makes a Faustian pact with the devil. Although *uburty* in the Nubian language literally refers to the ashes that gather at the bottom of the household oven, we learn that "whenever the word '*uburty*' was spoken, it was not taken to mean the remains of firewood, but rather everything that was evil and wicked and awful" (Oddoul 2008, 50). Thus, every time a catastrophe occurred in their village, the women would dig their hands into the *uburty* and smear

their faces and heads with ash before wailing and dancing the dance of the bereaved. It is precisely such intertextual references between the stories in this volume that suggest that the dance of the bereaved performed by the grandmother on the train is intended to symbolise the disaster incurred by meddling with the balance between humans and nature, whose repercussions are played out over a long temporal scale.

In a passage worth citing in full because of the compound ecological, economic and cultural catastrophe it portrays as being endemic to the resettlement sites, the grandmother laments:

> Why have they driven us to this arid, God-forsaken place? Where is our old village? Where is our Nile? Where are our palm trees and our spacious houses? And the waterwheel? And the wedding parties full of food and drink and the beat of the tambourine? Where are the days of the flood and the days of the harvest? Where's our old village ... the village of Bahjura?". Then she looked at my father, full of grief as she rebuked him. "They've pulled us up by our roots, and we've become brushwood. Our sons went off all over the place to work as servants in the land of plenty. They feed our grandchildren leftovers from foreigners and beys. And we here, they have thrown us into the valley of the demons. They gave us this land. Nothing grows on it but evil plants with bitter fruits that even the animals loathe. They've killed us, my son, the gorbatis have killed us! (Oddoul 2008, 13–14)

As this extract suggests, the grandmother's attachment to her village of origin is perceived as a form of symbiosis. Due to the interwoven symbolic, spiritual, cultural, economic and linguistic connections which have developed between Nubian society and its physical geography over millennia the land is considered, to use Oddoul's term, "their Bible" (Aboul-Ela 2005). As a result, cutting the people off from the river is portrayed as being akin to cutting them off from her roots, which will wither and die without the nourishment of the Nile waters. Thus what had once been a "complete life-cycle with its own culture, sense of humanity and tastes" was supplanted, after the resettlement of 1964, with "a splinter planted in each Nubian's heart stirring pans of yearning for that natural environment that was an essential part of their being both as individuals and as a community … a sense of depression at

having been thrown into an artificial environment that neither accepted them nor was accepted by them" (Aboul-Ela 2005).

Gorbati/ya is a Nubian word that recurs repeatedly throughout the text. Literally it means foreigner, but tellingly it is used almost exclusively in 'Adila, Grandmother' to refer to lighter-skinned Arab Egyptians whom the villagers consider "white" (Oddoul 2008, 5). In particular, the term is used to refer to the phenomenon of Arab-Egyptian women marrying Nubian men working in the North, condemning local women like Awada whose fiancés have left and never returned to a life as childless spinsters, unable to continue the family line and traditions. The desire of men like the narrator's father to marry a *gorbatiya* can be read, following Fanon's arguments in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) about the common tendency amongst many colonial subjects educated in the metropole to mimic white culture and pursue relationships with white women, as evidence of a "clear wish to be white" or at least to ensure that their children can 'pass' as such (Fanon 2008, 6). Thus we learn that the narrator's sister who "looked just like my mother, and, unlike myself, had taken none of my father's colour" does just that, marrying an Arab-Egyptian and looking down on her Nubian relatives (Oddoul 2008, 17).

However, inter-marriage between Nubians and outsiders is considered disastrous by the community at large because of the very real threat of assimilation with the Arab majority that it brings, particularly in a diasporic context where the new generation is being born and brought up outside the villages of New Nubia. Products of this generation, like the boy narrator Mohammad whose father is Nubian and whose mother is a northern Egyptian, do not speak the Nubian language or practise its traditions, threatening the continued viability of Nubian culture in the diaspora. A sense of alienation and shame towards his cultural origins explains Mohammad's self-hatred when he visits his father's ancestral village for the first time and feels like "an outsider ... actually frightened by the dark faces" (Oddoul 2008, 1). Echoing the unspoken prejudices of Egyptian society, he considers the Nubian village dirty, its way of life backward, and its dark-skinned inhabitants "ugly" and "stupid", reserving a particular hatred for his grandmother whom he "detested" and whose wrinkled and shrivelled appearance make him feel "sick" (Oddoul 2008, 2–6).

Unlike his assimilated sister who attempts to avoid 'slipping back' into blackness by renouncing all connections with her Nubian heritage, Mohamed gradually comes to embrace his Nubian identity by learning the Nubian language and

adopting village dress and customs out of "love for everything that was southern" (Oddoul 2008, 22). Whereas his understanding of Nubian culture had come mainly from his grandmother's tales, told in pidgin Arabic, learning the Nubian language proves a vital step towards conquering the self-alienation that afflicts him and integrating into village life since, as Fanon has argued, "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon 2008, 25). At this defining point in the story, Mohamed stops referring to the village and its inhabitants in the third person, talking instead about "*our* [my emphasis] new land that spewed stones and choked palm shoots" and how to improve it (Oddoul 2008, 22). He eventually seals his Nubian identity by marrying Zeinab, a Nubian girl from the village, in order to "bring forth a flood of life after Awada [who symbolises the suffering of the displaced generation] had grown old and barren and endured an arid age" (Oddoul 2008, 23).

The act of passing on Nubia's distinctive language, identity and traditions on to new generations in the diaspora, like the rituals surrounding the birth of a baby in 'Nights of Musk' where the father tells his daughter to name her own future daughter after her mother as a way of preserving intergenerational links with the past, suggests that the cyclical nature of Nubian life, which had appeared fatally undermined by the destruction of their lands and the scattering of their people, may one day be re-established. Just as the stories in this volume oscillate between joy and despair and the repetition of the key life events of birth, marriage and death, so too does the slow yet constant renewal observed in 'Adila, Grandmother' suggest that the violent legacy of dam-induced displacement on the Nubian community is not chronic or irreparable. Rather, the Nubian dream of return to the homeland, submerged under Lake Nasser, is simply deferred until a future generation (Radwan, 120).

Similarly, although the opening lines of 'The River People' are narrated shortly after construction of the Aswan Low Dam in 1902 before Old Nubia had been completely submerged, they contain an ominous prediction that the construction of the High Dam will constitute the final chapter of Nubian history. These state "beware of the deluge. It will engulf you for an eternity in one final season … the season of grief" (Oddoul 2008, 89). Indeed, the story as a whole ultimately suggests that all hubristic attempts by humankind to tame the mighty Nile through the scientific management of nature will prove futile in the context of deeper, geological time. It indicates that the river will break through the High Dam's walls and flood the plains below, re-establishing its dominance over the valley once again. Although the

villagers had not yet been entirely displaced from their homeland at this stage of the text, the story suggests that social breakdown in Nubian society did not occur only as the result of a single catastrophic event, namely the flooding of Nubia in 1964 by the Aswan High Dam, but was caused by the cumulative social consequences of successive waves of dam-building on the Nile over a period of generations.

Early in the text, the emphasis is on the immediate ecological and human catastrophe caused by the flash-floods which occur when the gates of the barrage are closed, inundating the *farky* or depression along the edge of the river that has the most fertile ground for several months of the year, 'fouling' the valley and destroying their crops. Although the raising of the Aswan barrage in 1933 did not displace them completely from the area, the text explains that it forced the villagers to abandon the fertile valley floor and their "cool spacious houses for cramped sweltering ones that hung on the side of the mountain like carbuncles" where the soil was barren and "brought forth neither a stalk of corn nor a clump of green" (Oddoul 2008, 96), thereby preventing them from making a living from the land. Henceforth, we are told, the earth supported only subsistence agriculture in small plots around the houses yet, as the narrator laments, "sometimes the water reached even these consumptive scraps of land and swallowed them up, bit by bit", and they would go hungry (Oddoul 2008, 99).

Thus, from being a largely self-sustaining community, anchored in the rhythms and seasons of the Nubian Nile World, the villagers are cast into a state of dependency by the dam. Consequently the men – deprived of employment at home – have to rely on the economy of the north for work. The women, meanwhile, remain in the village, dependent in turn on their absent men for sporadic material and emotional support, and are left alone to contend with poverty and isolation. The dangers of such extreme dependency are exemplified in the story of Asha Ashry, the protagonist of 'The River People', which reflects the plight of many Nubian women of her generation, whether mothers such as Daraya Sakina in Qasim's *The Buoy* (1968) or wives such as Halima in 'Ali's *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1998), who are abandoned by their menfolk to confront poverty, isolation and neglect.

Engaged to her childhood sweetheart Siyam, Asha waits faithfully for him to return and marry her after he goes to work as a servant in the northern city of Alexandria. Yet despite turning down all her other suitors in the village over the course of a decade, Siyam is seduced by life in the north and acquires a Greek

girlfriend leaving Asha – once the belle of the village and the envy of the other women – a childless spinster. Like her namesake great-aunt Asha who was accused of "disturbing the moral fibre of the village" (Oddoul 2008, 92) and confined to her home after her husband, the Ottoman Turkish governor, had abandoned her, the unmarried protagonist is considered a source of *fitna* or temptation to the men of the village and is threatened with sequestration by her father and uncles who are concerned about preserving their family honour (Oddoul 2008, 98). Literally and metaphorically suffocated by the oppressive gender dynamics imposed upon them both women ultimately choose death (by drowning in the Nile) over a life of passivity. This disrupts the neat binary constructed in 'Adila, Grandmother' between Old and New Nubia, whereby the former is idealised and the latter demonised, and opens up a tension between modernist and traditional viewpoints and values which remains unresolved in the text.

Asha's life is both illustrative of the gendered nature of the oppression facing the village women and the speed with which a community can unravel and cease to reproduce itself within the space of a single generation. The extent to which the women of the village feel an affiliation with her tragic fate, and the degree to which it is allegorical of their own, is indicated by their reaction to Siyam's death. Not only do they weep for the dead man as tradition dictates, but for:

> the fate of their husbands and sons in exile. Terrified of an unknown future, they bemoaned their lot, the migration of the men to the north, to the painted white women of the north, and the danger of seduction. They were left with the burning heat of the sun and the parched earth of their drowned land and their own inevitable destiny, one day to migrate in the wake of their menfolk toward the salty sea once the big dam has been completed and the rest of their land is swallowed up. (Oddoul 2008, 112)

As this passage suggests, the women feel powerless to resist the changes confronting them as the result of displacement, modernisation and assimilation which had already corroded the attachment of their menfolk to their families in Nubia. This is symbolised in the text by the metaphor of the salt water of the Mediterranean coast

which threatens to corrode Nubian language, customs and identity in the same way that salt water pollutes fresh water.

However, the social transformations brought about by modernisation and centralisation of the Egyptian state does not pave the way for Nubian assimilation into the wider Arab-Egyptian community as Nasser had promised them at Abu Simbel since, to the racial gaze of the northern Egyptian population, black skin is always 'other', and hence a de facto barrier to belonging to the 'white' world of Cairo and Alexandria. The effect of this colour barrier is that, however arabized they may be, Nubians will never be perceived as Egyptians by the wider society. This is suggested in an episode when Asha's erstwhile suitor Mahjoub disembarks from the steamer from Cairo "with a great show that the water might wet his clothes", having swapped his *gallabiya* and turban for "a northern suit … [and] a fez the colour of a monkey's backside" (Oddoul 2008, 106). He then addresses the assembled crowd in Arabic rather than Nubian, indicating an element of dislocation or separation from his culture of origin.

By embracing the customs and culture of the north and casting off his Nubian identity, clothing and language, Mahjoub considers himself superior to the Nubian villagers and expects to be "deified" by them after his return from the metropole. However, the villagers themselves can be seen to resist such assimilation. Despite his best efforts to embody an Egyptian gentleman, Mahjoub instead appears a "ridiculous sight" to the crowd who perceive him as "neither a southerner nor a northerner, neither one of us nor one of them" (Oddoul 2008, 106) – as neither Nubian nor Egyptian. That educated diasporic Nubians should choose to emulate dominant Arab-Egyptian cultural, linguistic and sartorial norms in an attempt to elevate their social status points to a dependency complex amongst the Nubian population of Egypt and the self-alienation caused by what Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) describes as the constant effort of the man of colour to "run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence" by donning a white mask (Fanon 2008, 43).

Although Fanon's writing glosses 'white' to refer to persons of Caucasian origin, Oddoul reconfigures the term here to encompass the *gorbatis* of northern Egypt, while Nubians are reframed as a colonised people who suffer from an internalised inferiority complex which is manifested in the denigration of their culture and language of origin. Since, according to Fanon's logic, lack of recognition and reciprocity on the part of the dominant culture ties all action to imitation of the 'other'

(Gibson 2003, 30), Mahjoub's attempt to 'turn white' by adopting northern Egyptian language, dress and customs signifies a form of totalising cultural submission to Egypt's Arab identity, whose victim is both the individual's dignity and authenticity and the wider Nubian indigenous culture which has been relegated to an inferior status.

Given that the choice available for Nubians is essentially either to attempt to 'become white' by casting off their identity and beliefs or, in holding onto these, to invite ridicule, Asha's conscious decision to drown herself in the river and re-join the realm of the supernatural inhabitants of the Nile known as the river people should not be read simply as a reflection of her inability to come to terms with the frustrations of her daily life and the tragedy of Siyam's death, but as a rare manifestation of Nubian agency and self-actualisation within the text. This is made clear by the analogy between Asha throwing the perch that the fishermen have caught back into the river to save them from suffocating and dying, and being saved in turn from the "suffocation of her four walls" by escaping the gendered confines of human life into the playful realm of the River People which offers greater possibilities and freedoms – of movement, thought and action – that are denied her by the human world. As her sister Korty remarks: "She's happy with them now, in bliss among people whose waters know no end of joy; their tambourines are never silent; they are untroubled by fear of a future that will drive them away; their constant ululations surge with the perch dance and never end" (Oddoul 2008, 89).

Water – whether sweet or salty, clear or muddy, clean or polluted, still or torrential – plays an important symbolic role in the text, coming to signify both the rupture and the continuity between past and present, north and the south, and the cyclical force of nature over the *longue durée*. The symbiotic relationship between the natural and supernatural realms, and the degree to which riverine mythology continues to influence Nubian belief and practices are evident in Oddoul's symbolic economy, in which river water is associated with Nubia and tradition while sea water is associated with northern Egypt and the corrosive effects of modernity on Nubian's ecology, culture and society. Thus, the salty waters of the Mediterranean cities where many Nubian men are temporarily 'anchored' in their search for work, are contrasted with the sweet, pure river water of the Nile in the south, with the implication that the women of the north "cannot quench their thirst" and will ultimately poison them, transforming erstwhile strong and resolute Nubian men like Siyam into sickly and

dependent creatures, weakening Nubian society as a whole (Oddoul 2008, 97). Similarly, we learn that northern Egyptian interference with the Nile has polluted it, as sea water would fresh water.

As Asha observes, "the river is good like the people but the dam confined the water in a huge lake. The water swelled up like boiling milk, and as it rose it swallowed up half the green valley and destroyed it. It drowned lines of palm trees and polluted the sweet water. It ruined the time of peace and purity" (Oddoul 2008, 96). Thus, whereas the floodwaters at the time before the barrage was built are described as life-giving and enriching, "pouring gently into the sprawling water course … full of fertile silt, seeping into the life-giving earth" and causing the valley to "bring forth billions of tiny green shoots" (Oddoul 2008, 100), the man-made flood caused by the rising waters of the dam is associated instead with death and disease, suggesting the long-term dangers of disturbing the fine balance between humans and nature. Not only do its waters, devoid of life-giving silt, cause the crops to wither but they are also associated with several uncanny effects, causing the fish to propel themselves onto land where they "writhed and suffocated" (Oddoul 2008, 99). Meanwhile, poisonous creatures such as scorpions and snakes are chased up the valley into the villages so that "incidents of stinging and death from poisoning increased" (Oddoul 2008, 94) before the water level falls once again in early summer.

However, although the immediate future predicted for the Nubian community in this story is bleak, there are suggestions that in the longer term nature, specifically the majestic, sacred Nile blessed by God and inhabited by the River People of Nubian mythology, is both more powerful and resilient than the human schemes devised to tame it, just as the Nile is a source, according to pharaonic wisdom, of both benediction and doom (Kérisel 2001, 132–33). Thus, although Asha perceives the Aswan barrage as having destroyed her own life and that of the river Nile by blocking and contaminating "the life-flow of water" and disrupting its "solemn timeless melody" the text depicts the river as bruised, rather than broken, by the dam hurled into its midst (Oddoul 2008, 96). Instructing the River People to "flex your muscles in anger [and] bring forth an invincible flood, not around the sides but headlong into the high [dam] wall" Asha calls upon the supernatural world to smash the dam to pieces and submerge the whole of the flood plain below as far as the Mediterranean Sea, thereby exacting retribution against the northerners who have destroyed Nubia and its way of life (Oddoul 2008, 106).

Mixing the fantastical with the real, the text suggests that the High Dam's destruction may come about through the wild and untamed power of the supernatural which can be harnessed, as in the tale of 'Zeinab Uburty', through certain rituals endowed with the power of subjugating nature and influencing the course of human events. Far from being something extraordinary, the text illustrates how the natural and the supernatural worlds exist side by side as part of normal life within the Nubian Nile World just as they do in many contemporary African societies whose cultural systems, beliefs, rituals and narratives are considered no less 'real' than the materialist approach to reality privileged in realist narratives (Zamora and Faris 1995, 3; Osore 2013, 132). The normalisation of the supernatural that we see within 'The River People' is ontologically disruptive in the sense that it encourages the reader to look beyond the instrumentalist approach to understanding the natural and social world favoured by hegemonic, euro-centric development discourse, and to discern alternative ways of viewing 'reality' that stand in opposition to the logic of scientific rationalism and its defence of dam-building on the Nile and encourage the fusion, or coexistence, of different world views within the context of the nation.

Far from being a fanciful suggestion that belongs to the realm of the supernatural, the idea that the High Dam might be breached as a result of a natural catastrophe such as a flood or earthquake was actually considered very real at the time by the Egyptian authorities. As Kérisel notes, the danger inherent in all earthen embankment dams is that "they are constructed of loose – and hence erodible – materials, in many cases in ignorance of the amplitude of the most violent floods" (Kérisel 2001, 124), which had the capacity to breach their walls. The catastrophic scale of the risk posed to Egypt if the dam were to fail and its waters released like a cannon onto the floodplain below where the majority of Egypt's population lived belatedly caused the Soviets to build a spillway into the dam to channel any excess flood waters into the Toshka Depression below as a result of expert advice stating that "if the immense mass of water it contained were to be released … the whole of Egypt would be drowned" (Kérisel 2001, 127). Nevertheless, the worry that the High Dam might be breached continued to "terrify" both Sadat and Mubarak over the decades that followed, not least because the Libyan leader, Colonel Gaddafi, amongst others, repeatedly threatened to bomb the dam as an act of war.

The fragility of an edifice that had been designed to appear impregnable to the Egyptian populace draws attention to the irony of comparing Nasser, the man, with

an immortal pharaoh God, as he was in much public discourse of the period. Whereas the comparison with Ramses II is intended to convey Nasser's exceptional leadership, strength and vision in *Kohl Mountains*, the same image is subverted in 'The River People' to suggest, instead, the impermanence of all things. Thus, when the villagers pass by the temple of Abu Simbel we learn that they stare mockingly as monkeys climb over, and desecrate, the statue of Ramses, "mighty conqueror from the north" (Oddoul 2008, 97) – an image which aptly symbolises how the mighty have fallen. In the context of the *longue durée*, then, the moral of 'The River People' implies that Nasser - Egypt's modern day pharaoh, so often equated with Ramses - and his great pyramid the Aswan High Dam will one day crumble just like the statue of Ramses, conqueror of Nubia, which now lies in ruins.

The Folk Tale as a Frame for Nubian Identity in *Nights of Musk: Stories From Old Nubia*

In contrast to the relative discretion of Yahya Mukhtar's *Kohl Mountains*, in which the portrayal of Nubian village customs and traditions maintains close links to the stylistic and aesthetic conventions of mainstream Egyptian literature of the period in which the 'village novel' was synonymous with the national(ist) struggle against colonialism in the 1950s, as exemplified in the writing of Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim (Selim 2004, 14), the stories contained in *Nights of Musk* constitute a more politicised affirmation of diasporic Nubian identity through repeated references to Old Nubia's culture, history, memory, mythology and language. This is in keeping with Oddoul's stated intention in a recent interview with Hosam Aboul-Ela for his work to "turn the world's attention to Nubian culture and to provoke the world to recognise and promote its renaissance" as a culture distinct from that of the wider Egyptian nation (Aboul-Ela 2005). Indeed, all of the stories in this volume distance themselves to varying degrees from the parameters of mainstream Arab-Egyptian postcolonial writing.

For example, inclusion of words and phrases taken from the Nubian language such as *adila* (farewell) *gorbati/ya* (northern Egyptian man/woman) and *ibiya* (*ya wayli*, or 'woe is me') render Nubian culture highly visible, even tangible, to the reader and give a distinctively Nubian flavour to texts otherwise written in the 'major' language of Arabic. By privileging the vernacular tongue of the Nubian people over the vehicular and referential tongue of the state and Arab culture, the stories included in *Nights of Musk* contest the symbolic violence of Arabisation which threatens the legitimacy and even the legibility of Nubian cultural identity. Moreover, in introducing 'foreign' elements that push both language and form to their creative limits, the stories break down the seemingly organic connection between the language of the majority and its symbolic associations by hybridising the Arabic text, endowing it with new meanings and "creative lines of escape" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 27).

Oddoul's writing also challenges the language of the modern (implicitly urban) subject of mainstream Egyptian literature by emphasising popular mythic and allegoric narrative modes like the *haddutah* (folk tale) that draw from Nubian collective memory and suffuse the everyday with fantastical elements, blurring the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds. That the stories in *Nights of Musk* move back and forth between historical and mythic modes suggests some kind of conscious or unconscious debt on Oddoul's part to the techniques of international magical realism, a form which, despite reaching its apotheosis in Latin American literature, influenced several Middle Eastern writers of his generation such as the Syrian-Kurdish writer Salim Barakat and the Palestinian novelist Emile Habibi (Meyer 2001, 60,87). As the literary critics Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris have argued, magical realist narratives operate as "enabling catalysts for the development of new national and regional literatures" (Zamora and Faris 1995, 2) due to the fact that the genre allows authors to reconnect with the autochthonous folk traditions that had largely been marginalised by the mimetic constraints of narrative realism, which dominated the first phase of postcolonial literary production.

Due to its widespread global popularity in a context where magical realist writers read and responded to each other across national and linguistic borders, the genre has since acquired a reputation as an 'international commodity' which "encodes the strengths of communities even more than the struggles of individuals" (Zamora and Faris 1995, 5–10). As a result, it is tempting to view the transcultural popularity of postcolonial magical realism as an example of national, or even regional, allegory

(Jameson 1986, 69). Although magical realist texts tend to critique colonial power structures from local perspectives, Jameson and Lazarus regard these local differences as mere variations on a global theme of resistance to colonialism and the neo-imperialism of the capitalist world system whose narrative arc remains constant from Columbia to Cairo and Calcutta.

While admitting that the category of 'Third World Literature' to which Jameson refers is ideologically rather than normatively grounded, Lazarus argues that 'Third-Worldness' is born of the shared experience of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggle and "gestures towards a world in which autonomy and self-determination will be politically meaningful concepts" (Lazarus 2011, 106). Similarly, in the sense that the stories featured in *Nights of Musk* voice a self-consciously collective Nubian consciousness and culture, Oddoul's fiction may be said to allegorise a community united in resistance to hegemonic forces of domination and assimilation that menace its existence.

Whereas 'Adila, Grandmother' and 'The River People' are narrated after the first Aswan barrage had been constructed, and focus on the desolation and dislocation of life in the resettlement site following dam-induced displacement, 'Nights of Musk' and 'Zeinab Uburty' are set in Nubia's distant, even mythic, past and, in drawing on Nubia's rich folk tradition of oral literature, evoke instead a nostalgic vision of Old Nubia which highlights the cyclical nature of Nubian life through the ages. Indeed, 'Nights of Musk' can itself be read as a life cycle. Although the narration commences when the narrator's wife Salha is about to give birth, it is followed by flashbacks to his childhood and adolescence in the village, when he started to woo her, through to their wedding night and the rituals surrounding it when their child was conceived, before ending where it began with the birth of a child and the promise that his children, in turn, will marry and repeat the cycle.

The endless repetition of this story down through the ages and generations is suggested by the fact that the narrator names his daughter Zibeyda after his mother and instructs his nephew Habboub to do the same. After betrothing the small boy to his new-born daughter, he picks both children up in his arms to whisper blessings for their future union, telling Habboub to woo Zibeyda with the same song he would sing to Salha – 'Your breasts are firm like oranges' – suggesting the extent to which Nubian culture has remained unchanged by the passage of time (Oddoul 2008, 40). It is precisely such acts of repetition that contribute to the continuity of Nubian culture

across the generations. Ritual and symbolism, linked to key rites such as birth, marriage and death play a vitally important role in this text, suggesting both the comprehensive and cohesive social identity of Old Nubia and the degree to which this has been undermined by modernity.

Many such rites have their origins in nature. For example, the practice of the bride and groom bathing in the "celestial Nile" on their wedding night in order to purify themselves in its "pure and holy water" (Oddoul 2008, 39) draws attention to the river's importance as the primary locus of Nubian spiritual and social life. Not only is this a form of religious symbolism associated with the Islamic requirement to clean oneself from impurities after sex, but it is explicitly associated with myths linking the Nile to fecundity, as suggested by a passage describing how the fertile silt "seeps inside until it rests in the womb, enfolding the tiny beginning, giving it colour" (Oddoul 2008, 39–40) just as it brings life to the land after the flood season. Moreover, in the Nubian Nile World described in both 'Nights of Musk' and 'Zeinab Uburty', the natural and supernatural coexist and interact freely.

In the former story we learn that everyone in the village is present to witness the narrator's wedding: men, women, children, the elderly, the souls of their grandparents watching from the cemetery and even the river people who inhabit the Nile but "emerge dripping alone and in groups" to sit amongst the branches and fronds of the palm trees and partake of the celebrations while their young sit in the ears of corn making them dance (Oddoul 2008, 35). While the rustling of the palm fronds and corn stalks clearly have a more rational, natural explanation like the wind, the fact that they are acknowledged as real beings and anthropomorphised by the wedding party indicates the extent to which the living and the dead, the natural and supernatural, exist side by side and influence each other. These coexistent worlds assert an alternative to the instrumental logic of scientific rationalism used by the Egyptian state to reduce the costs and benefits of the dam to purely economic considerations, thus overlooking the social and spiritual value of what would be lost to Lake Nasser.

In contrast, 'Nights of Musk' reframes the "pure and holy water" of the river as the mystical source of human, ecological and even cosmic life which is said to flow from the "springs of Salsabeel in paradise" (Oddoul 2008, 39), a Quranic reference which relates to the mystical fountain described in Surat al-Insān from which all of life is said to flow (Qur'an, Sura 76 vs 17-18). In attributing the Nubians' dark complexions to the brown mud of the Nile and the hot sun that beats down upon his

wife's swelling belly, described as "a soft round sand dune" like those which dominate the landscape (Oddoul 2008, 40), the text suggests that a symbiotic relationship exists between the land and the people who inhabit it.

The cultural anthropologist Robert Fernea has observed that one of the reasons the integrity of Nubian culture was threatened by resettlement was because it created a rupture between the people and the landscape in which such rituals and beliefs originated, causing many practices like that of the bride and groom bathing in the Nile on their wedding night to die out within a matter of decades (Kennedy and Fernea 2005). By reframing the concept of disaster to include the compound and cumulative impact of the loss of such customs, Oddoul succeeds in articulating the long-term socio-cultural legacy of dam-building on the Nubian community which social scientists studying the impact of DIDR have found so difficult to capture.

In keeping with Oddoul's stated intention that his work aimed to "turn the world's attention to Nubian culture and to provoke the world to recognise and promote its renaissance" (Aboul-Ela 2005), the stories in this volume constitute a powerful Nubian counter-narrative that situates Nubia at the centre rather than at the periphery of national consciousness through an aesthetics of restoration. Thus, in 'Zeinab Uburty', Nubia's distinctive worldview is evoked through a relegation of the Arabic language to the margins as when the characters greet each other in the original text with *'maskagru'* instead of the Arabic *'marḥaban'* and the narrator refers to a woman called "*Hajija* (that is to say, Khadija as you pronounce it nowadays with your queer way of speaking)" (Oddoul 2008, 51). The first of these represents the Nubian pronunciation of the name while the second is the more widely recognised standard Arabic version.

Moreover, the short stories collected in *Nights of Musk* are counter-narratives which "assert a cultural alternative" whereby innovations in narrative, language and form are indebted to indigenous cultural forms, which then become the very means of political engagement (Meyer 2001, 72). Whereas realist texts tend to privilege a linear narrative structure and an omniscient first-person narrator whose subjectivity and interpretative authority dominates the text, popular folk narratives of the sort found in *Nights of Musk* are rooted in an oral tradition of 'collective performance'. Consequently, "the narrator situates himself as a physically present interlocutor between the narrative and the audience, who participate in turn in the unfolding of the narrative through their comments and interjections" – as if the story was being

performed in their physical presence by a *hakawāti* or traditional storyteller (Selim 2010, 117).

Similarly, in 'Nights of Musk' the narrator's use of onomatopoeia, repetition and vivid exclamations such as *waaah waaah* to signify the sounds made by a baby and *duum-taka dum-tak duuma-taka dum tak* for the beat of the drum, give the impression that the story is being performed in the physical presence of an audience of listeners rather than readers, as if the words have been "freed from the written page and spoken into the air", to be responded to and repeated back (Oddoul 2008, viii). Here the narrator performs the dual role common to many folk narratives of both speaking to and for the group he claims to represent, as suggested by the repeated use of the plural pronouns "we", "us" and "our". This implies that the experiences of courtship, marriage and birth being recounted are not merely individual but common to all members of a community described in inclusive terms as "our people, the people of the south" (Oddoul 2008, 35).

As such, there is little evidence of individual consciousness or character development in the story. Rather, sweeping statements such as "there isn't a Nubian on earth who would miss a wedding" (Oddoul 2008, 35); "dancing and singing are in our blood" (Oddoul 2008, 38); and "our colours are primary and well defined" (Oddoul 2008, 34), are employed to suggest the essential sameness of all members of the Nubian community and to evoke a social reality common to all members of "one harmonious group" (Oddoul 2008, 33). Artificial and homogenising as this may seem, Deleuze and Guattari define the "collective arrangement of utterance" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975, p.18) as a typical characteristic of 'minor' and indigenous literatures' which tend to blur distinctions between cultural identity, memory and nature through the juxtaposition of real and imagined geographies, genealogies and histories. This is turn becomes a way of reasserting a contemporary Nubian identity in a diasporic context and staking a prior historical claim to the land (Allen 2002, 16).

Jacquemond has interpreted the mythic character of the four short stories included in *Nights of Musk* as evidence that Oddoul "tended to separate his political views from his literary work" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 183), but I would disagree. In keeping with the tradition of magical realism as a form of social critique (Zamora and Faris 1995, 6), 'Zeinab Uburty' like 'The River People' employs mythic and magical modes not just as a means of expressing a distinctly Nubian sensibility but of articulating dissenting ideas in a symbolic and allegorical manner that is at

times more radical than that expressed in many realist texts of the period, such as *Kohl Mountains*. Without wishing to reduce these stories to straightforward political critique, tropes such as the social and ecological disaster brought about by tampering with the natural order in 'Zeinab Uburty' can be read as attempts to demystify the High Dam's symbolic power as a talisman of Egypt's social and economic progress, and to expose instead the unequal power relations that determine whose version of history and forms of knowledge were considered legitimate at the time.

This endeavour begins with a redefinition of what it means to 'write history' that privileges traditional forms of historical narrative over those inspired by Western scholarly practices. Narrated by an old man called Hulla who was "one hundred and ten floods old" (Oddoul 2008, 43), the tale of 'Zeinab Uburty' is told to the young boys of the village, one of whom, as an adult, relates it to the reader. While the story itself, with its cast of witches, wizards and demons seems straight out of Nubian mythology, its structure is typical of traditional Arabic narrative history which was written in the form of fiction – a factor enabled by the blurred etymological boundaries between fiction and history, which are connected in Arabic by the root h-k-a (to narrate/tell). Although the term *hikāya* as it is used today has a meaning more closely akin to literature and relates primarily to the creative aspects of storytelling, literature and history were historically perceived as cognate modes of narrating 'knowledge' which fell under the rubric of *adab*, or the humanities.

As Stefan Meyer has argued in his study *The experimental Arabic novel: postcolonial literary modernism in the Levant* (2001), "the idea that material of dubious authenticity can help to construct a true historical picture is a modernist idea in Western literature, but a traditional one in Arabic literature" where it draws on the tradition of authenticating the *hadīth* (the sayings of the prophet Mohammed) which were traditionally verified by establishing a chain of narration directly back to the prophet (Meyer 2001, 85). Situating the story within this narrative tradition, Hulla claims that the mysterious and seemingly mythical events he describes are matters of historical fact that he witnessed as a boy during the last days of Ottoman rule, insisting that "the following events took place in our land, the land of Nubia, land of gold, near to the valley of Kallik at the foot of the mountain chain of Wawaat, where our village nestled peacefully, exactly in the middle of that vast distance between the first and second rapids on the mighty river of the world, the River Nile" (Oddoul 2008, 42).

Tellingly, however, the storyteller registers an awareness that his audience may perceive reality through a different lens.

For all that, it is not easy to distinguish myth from fact in this story, which problematizes claims about the ability of scientific rationalism to provide an unmediated and universal representation of reality. By articulating a specifically Nubian historical perspective grounded in mythic and magical modes the text emphasises the value of alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world which, although they cannot be measured empirically, are as real to the Nubian villagers as those phenomena given the status of scientific fact in Western scholarship. Thus whereas the villagers believe unquestioningly in mythical beings like the River People and the devil Kakoky "entrusted by Iblees ... with bedeviling and leading astray the people of Nubia" (Oddoul 2008, 55), they are both mystified and terrified by the ice that forms over the Nile during the cold winter nights, which they interpret as a punishment from the devil. Similarly, the River People are portrayed in quite neutral, everyday language as an accepted part of the villagers' reality, while the sight of the Nile "clothed in that translucent glass layer, which we have neither seen nor heard of before or since" is considered so extraordinary and outside the boundaries of their lived experience that the narrator has to reassure his listeners "by Almighty God it really happened" (Oddoul 2008, 44).

The tale of 'Zeinab Uburty' turns the premises of scientific rationalism on their head by suggesting the superiority of traditional forms of knowledge grounded in the symbiosis between humans, nature and the supernatural, which were largely dismissed as superstitions in modern Egypt. In the Nubian 'Nile World', whose belief systems involve a syncretic blend of Islamic and animist thought, all living things were divided into three: the *adamir*, or mankind; the inhabitants of the river bottom known as *amon nutto* (River People) and *amon dugur* (River Trolls); and the People of the Current, whom we learn are "truly evil" and whose "malice towards the *adamir* is terrifying" (Oddoul 2008, 41). Crucially, all three categories of being coexist harmoniously as long as the boundaries between their kingdoms are respected. However, when Zeinab Uburty disrupts this fine balance between man and nature by summoning the People of the Current, the villagers, "helpless in the face of their wicked powers" (Oddoul 2008, 41), are struck by a series of disasters including plague, famine, poverty, disease and drought, as well as the scourge of communal

discord which prevents them from working together to reconstruct their broken society and cleanse it of evil.

As this last phrase suggests, human beings do not possess absolute power over nature, but must respect the natural balance between competing forces in order to preserve the conditions for human existence and prevent future disaster. Once a "naïve human" has crossed the barrier between the natural and the supernatural in the hope of gain "the end is always the same", resulting in the death and destruction of the individual and the wider community. Consequently we learn that "the *adamir* are struck by a terrible plague as are the two branches of the river people, and even the beasts and the insects and the crops as well" (Oddoul 2008, 42). Although the language used here is suggestive of a biblical plague, it is striking that the environmental disasters which beset the villagers are highly reminiscent of contemporary threats. The unexpected disruption of the seasons can thus be read as a premonition of the effects of climate change while the reference to "the tragedy of their shrinking river, the river Nile" (Oddoul 2008, 84) suggests the disastrous impact of the Aswan dam on the local ecology and the drastic reduction in the water table brought about by rampant industrialisation and ever-growing demands for fresh water in Egypt.

Although the natural balance is finally restored at the end of the story when Zeinab Uburty rips up her contract with the devil, the narrator concludes his cautionary tale with the suggestion that future generations may yet repeat the same mistake by attempting to harness knowledge from the "evil" book in an attempt to acquire mastery over nature, asking balefully whether "any of you young men will think someday about looking for [the evil book of magic], in order to cross over to the other side and enter into a pact with the devil Kakoky" (Oddoul 2008, 88). Although this warning appears directed towards the younger generation of Nubians, the text also implies that the danger of undermining the balance between humans and nature is not only restricted to the villagers around which the story revolves, but is also a universal lesson that concerns people everywhere, irrespective of time or place, as indicated by remarks such as "we were people like any other people" (Oddoul 2008, 43).

As Oddoul has emphasised,

> the forced exile of an ancient people from their natural environment means the
> destruction of a vital system particular to that place, since that environment is

inevitably a basic element of that system. The other three elements [culture, language and history] cannot flourish without it. Such ancient peoples cannot really live and practice their natural life outside of this environment. Therefore, of course, all exiled peoples suffer miserably and in order to deaden their pain somewhat, they hold fast to their hopes and are nourished by their traditions. (Aboul-Ela 2005)

Equally, the stories in this volume suggest that it is only through the act of return – be it a physical return to Nubia, as desired by the grandmother in 'Adila, Grandmother', a return to community and tradition as in 'Nights of Musk', or a return to the natural balance between humans and nature, as in 'Zeinab Uburty' and 'The River People'- that "a part of the ancient times can be transported towards the future" (Aboul-Ela 2005). Although the stories in *Nights of Musk* "are born out of a tragedy that can never be undone" (Oddoul 2008, viii), clues within the text indicate that Nubian culture and history have not "disappeared for ever under the water behind the dam" (Radwan 2007, p.119), as literary critics such as Noha Radwan have argued, but can be resurrected discursively.

Oddoul's fiction does not simply memorialise the lost Nubian 'Nile World' that had gone unmourned in the wider Egyptian national imaginary, as a literary form of what Halim has called 'salvage ethnography' whereby the text aims to nostalgically recreate the lost Nubian 'Nile World' (Halim 2005). Rather, while strongly infused with the myths and legends of life in Old Nubia, *Nights of Musk* redefines Nubian-ness less in terms of a shared language or place and more in terms of shared symbols, cultural forms and memories. These, as opposed to the material homeland, act as foundational referents for the construction of a new, diasporic Nubian culture capable of resisting the threat of assimilation and Arabisation in contemporary Egypt. As such, his writing is not rooted only in nostalgia, a mode criticised for being "a longing for a home that no longer exists, or has never existed" and which can tend towards the fossilisation of cultural forms. (Hirsch and Miller 2011b, 16). Instead, it creates new ways of being Nubian by legitimising and making 'legible' a distinct Nubian identity independent of geographic space. Unlike *Kohl Mountains*, which emphasises Nubia's place in the wider Egyptian nation by highlighting the historical linkages between Nubian and Egyptian civilisation, and which shares Muhammad Khalil's Qasim's premise that the Nubian cause was motivated primarily by economic and social justice

rather than the politics of ethno-nationalism, *Nights of Musk* disavows the cultural, political and historical connections between Nubia and Egypt in favour of a discourse that emphasises Nubia's distinct history, language and cultural traditions.

Chapter Three: Beyond Nubia? The Literature of Idris 'Ali and the 'Post-Aswan' Generation

As discussed in Chapter Two, the politicisation of contemporary Nubian literature was born out of an increased awareness on the part of writers and intellectuals to save the heritage of the Nubian community from oblivion after the Aswan High Dam had flooded all of ancient Nubia on either side of the Egyptian and Sudanese border (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 181). Not only did authors such as Mukhtar and Oddoul employ literature as a vehicle to dramatize what Nixon has termed the slow violence of the Aswan High Dam's delayed effects on Nubian economic, social and cultural life (Nixon 2011, 3), but they also affirmed a distinctive Afro-Nubian identity in response to the marginalisation suffered by their community in post-independence Egypt, which denied Nubians a place in the collective imagination through a deliberate process of historical, cultural and geographic erasure (Dimeo 2015, 72).

Rejecting the unitary fiction of Egypt's Arab identity, Idris 'Ali, who authored six novels and three short story collections prior to his death in 2010, responds to the 'othering' of Nubia in Egyptian popular and nationalist discourse by articulating a powerful Nubian counter-narrative to Arab-Egyptian nationalism which frames Nubian identity in terms of a shared history, memory and culture distinct from that of the wider Egyptian nation. Moreover, 'Ali's novels *Dunqula: Riwāya Nubiyya* (1993) [*Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*, 1998] – significant for being the first Nubian novel translated into English – and *Taḥt Khaṭ al-Faqr: Riwāya* (2006) [*Poor*, 2007] move beyond discussing the immediate legacy of the Aswan High Dam, which has been the focus of much contemporary Nubian fiction.

Instead, they focus more on exploring the emergence of a diasporic consciousness amongst Egyptian Nubians of the 'post-Aswan' generation living in the cities of the north such as Cairo and Alexandria. As I argued in the Introduction, defining Egyptian Nubians as diasporic even though they were displaced and resettled within the confines of their nation state of origin requires us to conceive of community as an imagined concept which exists in the minds of its members rather than as a

structural or geographic 'fact'. This is in line with Paul Zeleza's definition of diaspora as the "consciousness, sometimes diffuse and sometimes concentrated, of a 'here' separate from a 'there', a 'here' that is often characterised by a regime of marginalisation, and a 'there' that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to 'here' differently" (Zeleza 2005, 41).

Similarly, 'Ali's fiction portrays the diasporic Nubian experience of economic and social marginalisation that characterises the 'here and now' for many contemporary Nubians living in the cities of the north and the resettlement villages surrounding Kom Ombo as the starting point for a broader critique of the failure of postcolonial Egyptian nationalism to live up to its promises to bring about transformative social change and end the colonial legacy of discrimination and marginalisation against the Nubian people. Consequently, it has been widely interpreted as "the strongest and most controversial expression yet published of the Nubian revival" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 183) in that it raises both the question of the nature and extent of Nubian belonging to the Egyptian nation and the spectre of secession from it, by way of promoting the union of Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia.

Far from endorsing Nubian ethno-nationalism, however, this chapter will show how all attempts to fashion a collective Nubian identity in *Dongola* and *Poor* ultimately fail. Indeed, 'Ali's writing reveals Nubian nationalist thought itself to be little more than an inverted form of the Egyptian nationalist chauvinism it is reacting against, revealing the theoretical as well as practical limitations of Nubian ethno-nationalist thought as a vehicle for the formation of a progressive, humanist vision of national culture. This echoes Fanon's critique of the *négritude* movement which was developed by Francophone African intellectuals, writers, and politicians living in France during the 1930s such as the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and the future Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor, namely that its uncritical endorsement of African consciousness was premised upon a form of reverse racism (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 125) and tended to reify and reinforce "negative traditions" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 172).

In this chapter I will argue that *Dongola* and *Poor* should ultimately be read as critiques both of postcolonial Egyptian nationalism *and* of the nostalgic affirmation of Nubian culture and traditions by many authors associated with the Nubian Awakening movement such as Oddoul and Mukhtar, an affirmation which reinforces

the nativist logic of Nubian ethno-nationalism. Moving beyond the binary logic of 'black' and 'white', Arab and Nubian, 'Ali's writing expresses an ethic of trans-racial and religious solidarity with Egypt's poor whom, the novels suggest, are victims of the postcolonial state every bit as much as the Nubian community whose particularistic experiences animate these novels. It thus suggests the need for a more inclusive and progressive form of Egyptian national culture grounded not in ethnic identity but in what Mignolo and Go have respectively termed a "critical" (Mignolo 2000) or "postcolonial" (Go 2013) cosmopolitanism that celebrates rather than silences Egypt's plurality of religious, ethnic and social identities.

The Drivers of Nubian Nationalism in the Fiction of Idris 'Ali

Set between the mid-1960s, roughly ten years after the Free Officers' coup which brought Nasser to power and the early 1990s when it was first published, *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1993) tells the story of Awad Shalali and his mother Hushia and wife Halima, with the first two sections reflecting a dominant male narrative perspective and the latter a critical feminine voice. Charting the transition from an Egyptian-Nubian to a Nubian-Egyptian conception of self through the psychological development of its protagonist Awad Shalali, *Dongola* can be read as an antidote to the assimilationist rhetoric of successive nationalist administrations under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, which sought to exclude minority identities from the national imaginary by affirming a Nubian consciousness distinct from that of the wider Egyptian nation.

However, although the title of the novel invokes Dongola, the ancient capital of Nubia, as a symbol of Nubian unity and strength, Awad's bold declaration of Nubian separatism in Part I is eventually revealed to be impotent in the sections that follow where his attempts to get the people to rally around a Nubian nationalist agenda are met with rejection and incomprehension. Entitled 'The Trial of Awad Shalali' and 'The Sorrows of Hushia and Halima' respectively, Parts II and III of the novel actively critique Awad's affirmation of Nubian ethno-nationalism by revealing the extent to which the "cruelty" of the traditions and taboos of Nubian village life fatally

undermine the potential of Nubian revivalism to act as a vehicle for progressive politics ('Ali 1998, 72).

The first section of the novel is preoccupied with the degree to which successive Egyptian nationalist regimes – despite their anti-imperialist, anti-racist rhetoric – actively reinforced the historic marginalisation of the Nubian people by pursuing a policy of assimilation and Arabisation that pressured them to discard their traditional ethnic, linguistic and cultural affiliations in favour of a unitary Egyptian identity. Concomitantly, however, it reveals the extent to which, as black-skinned Africans in a nominally 'Arab' state, Nubians in Egypt's northern cities were popularly classified as second-class citizens or foreigners in what Smith terms "a dual exclusion and inclusion of Nubians vis-à-vis dominant discourses of what it means to be Egyptian" (Smith 2006, 400).

Echoing Fanon's observation that the colonial division of Africa into 'white' north Africa and 'black' sub-Saharan Africa was perpetuated by many postcolonial nationalist regimes, with the effect that "a citizen of Black Africa hears himself called a 'Negro' by the children when walking in the streets of a big town in White Africa, or finds that civil servants address him in pidgin English" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 130–31), *Dongola* reveals the latent prejudice of many Arab Egyptians towards black-skinned Nubians. This prejudice is based both on a sense of ethnic superiority and self-interest by both members of the public and representatives of the Egyptian state who explicitly mimic the racial violence of colonial discourse.

Although the economic situation of Nubians, Upper Egyptians and the urban poor in Cairo does not differ much in material terms in the novel, it depicts how they come to occupy different rungs on the social hierarchy. Thus, poor northerners are able to assert their relative superiority in this pecking order by denigrating the Nubian protagonist Awad al-Shalali through discourses that link him to his blackness and perceived African origin through insults such as "*zanjī*" ("darkie"), "*hamjī*" ("savage") "*barbarī*" (black/barbarian), "*khādim/a*" ("servant") and "*'abd*"/ "*jāriyya*" ("slave"/ "odalisque"), all of which are indicative of the extent to which Egyptian nationalism is racially framed and how the transracial class solidarity preached by Awad's Communist comrades has failed to materialise.

Although Awad initially buys into the promises of Egyptian nationalism to put an end to injustice and inequality, all attempts to embrace his Egyptian identity in the years following the 1952 revolution are systematically thwarted due to his skin colour,

which constantly marks him out as 'other' and leads him to be systematically misrecognised as Sudanese by his compatriots. Recognising that, to cite Fanon, "wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro" (Fanon 2008, 133) and that the aspiration of Egyptian Nubians to be recognised as equals within the nation is essentially futile, leads Awad, like his cousin Bahr Jazuli, to lose faith in Egypt's national liberation movement. As Awad says of Jazuli, though he was "born an Egyptian, he died a Nubian", due to his experience of marginalisation, degradation and even torture at the hands of the Egyptian state ('Ali 1998, 25).

In its searing critique of Egyptian nationalism, the text suggests that the Arabisation of Egyptian culture under Nasser's presidency signalled the creation of a neo-colonial social system, based on retrogressive ethnic, tribal, religious and class hierarchies and the persecution of foreigners, which undercut the nationalist vision of forging an inclusive and egalitarian Egyptian national culture in the post-independence era. Similarly, Awad and Jazuli's Nubian nationalist sentiments emerge in response to their feelings of rejection by the wider Egyptian nation, be it in the infamous Wahat political prison where Jazuli is detained during Nasser's purge of the opposition in 1954 and his "extreme secessionist ideas had germinated" ('Ali 1998, 25), or in the systemic marginalisation and racism they encounter in daily life which leave Awad frustrated, angry and intent on exacting revenge.

'Ali does not dwell on the economic, ecological and psycho-social legacy of the Aswan High Dam on the Nubian people as much as other writers like Oddoul or Mukhtar have done. However, *Dongola* does portray the dire economic and social conditions in his now "monstrous homeland" ('Ali 1998, 26) as the direct consequence of ongoing structural inequalities between north and south. Thus, we learn that until he moved to Cairo and saw the "fruits piled up in handcarts, all kinds of meat hanging in front of the butcher shops, clean white bread, pure water, electricity" ('Ali 1998, 24), Awad thought that all of Egypt suffered the same plight as his village in Nubia. The sudden realisation that "the people of the capital [were] blessed with plenty while others died of illness and starved" ('Ali 1998, 23) shatters his illusions of a common national destiny and leads him to regard "the whole north as corrupt" ('Ali 1998, 9).

Similarly, marrying outside of the community is implicitly viewed as a form of colonisation of the black Nubian body and mind. Such an interpretation is explicitly suggested in descriptions of the relationship between Awad's father and his second

wife Ruhia as a form of racial exploitation akin to the historic plundering of Nubia for gold, slaves and water at the hands of its colonisers from the ancient Egyptian pharaohs to the Ottoman sultans and, ultimately, the postcolonial Egyptian state. Indeed Awad explicitly accuses Ruhia of having "colonised" his father and "bled him dry" before poisoning him once his money and resources had finally run out ('Ali 1998, 8) – a symbolic parallel, perhaps, to the final destruction of Nubia and its submersion under Lake Nasser.

This sentiment of injustice is reinforced by Awad's perception "that all the bounty of the North came from constant irrigation provided by the water held in reserve above the land of Nubia" by Lake Nasser while New Nubia itself remained a "forgotten land" ('Ali 1998, 24) plagued by death, disease and poverty. Here, 'Ali's unsentimental portrayal of his homeland clearly sets his writing apart from Oddoul and Mukhtar who, as discussed in the previous chapter, are both "known for their nostalgia for their roots, past and land" (el-Refaei 2012, 19). Even the river Nile, sacred in much Nubian literature where it comes to symbolise the origins of life and the cradle of Nubian civilisation, is described as being "full of bilharzia parasites" which "anointed" his skin not with blessings but disease ('Ali 1998, 24). Nevertheless, his unshakeable sense that the High Dam has benefited the Arab majority at the expense of the Nubian minority who sacrificed their homeland for the sake of an ungrateful nation contributes markedly to Awad's perception of Nubia as a political community whose interests are distinct from that of Egypt as a whole.

Renouncing his Egyptian identity, Awad adopts "a fanatical view of the south" ('Ali 1998, 10) and turns towards an exclusionary Nubian ethno-nationalism, animated by fantasies about a new 'Revolt of the Zanj', in reference to a rebellion led by slaves of East African descent against the Abbasid Caliphate in 9AD in Mesopotamia ('Ali 1998, 33). While the word *zanj* was used by medieval Arab geographers to refer to both a certain portion of Southeast Africa, primarily the Swahili Coast, and its inhabitants, in colloquial Egyptian Arabic it refers to black skin and is commonly used as a gloss for people of African descent in contradistinction to 'white' Arab Egyptians. As Abbas has argued, "by framing a projected Nubian rebellion against the Egyptian state within the context of the Mahdi Revolt and the Revolt of the Zanj … Awad essentially frames Nubian resistance within a framework of African/black resistance to Arab, Ottoman and European colonisation" (Abbas 2014, 156).

According to Fanon's logic, lack of recognition and reciprocity on the part of the dominant culture ties all action to imitation of the 'other' (Gibson 2003, 30). Similarly, when Awad confronts an officer from the Directorate of Security in Aswan he disavows his Arab name, as printed on his identity card, and demands respect and recognition for his Nubian identity. On being asked for his personal details, his retort: "My historical name is Taharqah. My homeland is the land of Nubia, which has been consumed by the pages of history. We were, but you made us not to be" ('Ali 1998, 31), is suggestive of the historical conquest of Nubia by Egypt. It also connotes ethnic cleansing – a term controversially employed by Oddoul during his speech at the Coptic Conference in Washington DC in 2005 in which he called for the trial of the officials responsible for the "displacement and disinheritance of Nubians" who had lost their lands and livelihoods to the High Dam (Khallaf 2006).

Unlike in Mukhtar's *Kohl Mountains,* 2001, which seeks to portray the mutual interconnection between Nubian and Egyptian history down the ages, Awad's Nubian nationalist discourse disavows Egyptian history as his own, replacing it with a counter-narrative grounded in the affirmation of an Afro-Nubian black consciousness. He also subverts the *firauniyya* of the post-independence period, which depicted the pharaohs as potent symbols of Egyptian unity and strength by portraying Ramses II (with whom Nasser himself is symbolically associated in *Poor* and *Kohl Mountains*) as a conqueror of Nubia and harnessing the word's Qur'anic connotations of tyranny to subvert its symbolic power, for example Surat al-Qasas 28:4, Surat Taha 20:24 and Surat Yunus 10:83.

In contrast to the history of exploitation and plunder of Nubia's human and natural resources such as slaves and gold by the Egyptian pharaohs and, subsequently, the Arab-Islamic invaders, Awad posits a Nubian counter-narrative that celebrates the historical achievements of Nubian civilisation. These include the reign of Taharqah, a Nubian pharaoh of the twenty-fifth dynasty who ruled all of Egypt, and the fearless "bowmen of the glance" who come to symbolise Nubian resistance to the Arabs and Islam in Awad's imagination ('Ali 1998, 1), and who represent a time when "a power center like Dongola could be allowed to exist beside the mightiest empire of the day in a relationship of mutual respect" (Dimeo 2015, 76). The historical glory of Nubian civilisation is thus explicitly linked to the contemporary political aims of Nubian nationalism in a manner reminiscent of writers affiliated with the *négritude* movement such as Senghor, Birago Diop and Léon-Gontran Damas whose work was intended

not only to inspire pride in the heritage of African civilisations, but also to incite the renewal of Africa as a political force in the post-independence climate.

Having deployed an historical counter-narrative that labels the Egyptian state an occupying force in Nubian lands, Awad's rhetoric swiftly turns toward Nubian separatism. He advocates both non-violent political action by way of international human rights law to prosecute "the builders of the dam and the reservoir" and violent resistance to overthrow the state itself and "establish a provisional government" contiguous to the borders of the ancient Nubian kingdom from Aswan to Dongola whose flag would be black "with the pupil of an eye in the middle, and arrows" ('Ali 1998, 31) – an apparent reference to the famed "bowmen of the glance" as a form of indirect encouragement to armed insurrection.

Awad's somewhat fanciful notion that Nubian tribes on either side of the Egyptian/Sudanese border might be incited to rise up and create a unified state contiguous with Nubia's historical boundaries from Aswan to Dongola is based upon his re-reading of ancient history, which "posits Nubia geographically and historically as a coherent entity, independent and distinct both from ancient Egypt and the modern Egyptian nation-state" (Abbas 2014, 159). Repeated references to Dongola, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Nubia, occur throughout the text, symbolising the centre of an imagined Nubian national community. By employing a counter-cartography which repositions Nubia's peripheral culture and history at the centre of the text, Awad's Nubian nationalism operates as a means of confronting both the Arabisation (of history, as much as of identity) inherent in Egyptian and Sudanese nationalism, and the marginalisation of Egypt's African heritage from the national imaginary.

Similarly, Awad and Jazuli attempt to redefine the negative connotations of blackness by affirming an Afro-Nubian consciousness in the face of a racialized discourse which systematically excludes the civilizational achievements of the Nubian people from the Egyptian national imaginary. Thus, when a policeman tells Bahr Jazuli "your heart is as black as your face", he responds: "my blackness is a fact – I know where it comes from! Not you – I think you'd better ask your grandmother where those blue eyes of yours came from" ('Ali 1998, 25–26). In associating white skin, which has long symbolised beauty, high class and cultural superiority in the Egyptian imagination, with the shame of contamination by European or Turkish blood, while black skin is glossed as pure, this passage undermines the racially

inflected claims of Arab nationalism that, since the *naḥḍa*, had linked Egyptian nationality with Arab ethnicity and denied Nubians entry into Egypt's symbolic economy on account of their 'African' blood.

Nubian Nationalism and its Limits in *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia*

Whereas Part I of *Dongola* reveals the main drivers of Nubian nationalism to be the narrator's chronic sense of rejection, humiliation and discrimination based on negative racial stereotyping of blackness in the popular Egyptian imagination, Parts II and III, by contrast, focus on the practical and theoretical limitations of Nubian nationalism as a progressive alternative to hegemonic Egyptian nationalism. Echoing Fanon's observation that colonialism obliterates the cultural life of a conquered people by convincing them of the absolute inferiority of their culture and traditions and the concomitant superiority of the occupying power (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 190), the text reveals how the Nubian villagers whose views Awad claims to represent fail to embrace his Nubian ethno-nationalism.

Not only has the collective memory of waves of invasion, conquest and oppression led the Nubian people to practise an outward show of "obedience to the government, whether it was tyrannical or just" ('Ali 1998, 45), but we also learn that many of the Nubian villagers have internalised their affiliation to Egypt, thereby preventing the spread of Awad's message of Nubian revival. In much the same manner that the black Antilleans described in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) look down on the Senegalese slaves and psychically differentiate themselves from them by identifying with the French metropole (Fanon 2008, 114–15), the *omda* (mayor of the village) regards the Sudanese Nubians (whom Awad considers "brothers") as strangers while maintaining that the people of Egypt are "our people" ('Ali 1998, 45).

Drawing a kinship link between his tribe, the Kanzi, and Nasser, whose father was an Upper Egyptian, the mayor calls Awad "mad" for inciting the villagers against a "people who share our faith" and "a government that moved us from the mountains and saved us from starvation, which gave us ready-made houses and compensation …

celebrated our coming and built us schools and hospitals" ('Ali 1998, 45). The mayor's unfavourable comparison of Nubian culture and society with that of the dominant Arab-Egyptian civilisation is, as Fanon notes, typical of many black men from the colonies who are educated in the metropole and go on to adopt a critical attitude towards their compatriots (Fanon 2008, 13). Consequently, many villagers reject Awad's Nubian revivalist message out of hand as "nonsense" ('Ali 1998, 43).

Thus, although *Dongola* asserts a cultural and political alternative to the unitary Egyptian identity promoted by the nationalist administration, Awad's embryonic vision of a Nubian imagined community fails to win popular support and ultimately remains, even for its chief architects, an "impossible dream" ('Ali 1998, 11). As a result, the text conveys "the difficulty of anyone, even a child of Nubia … speaking for a voiceless population lacking the grammar to understand its own liminal existence in the refashioned imagination of postcolonial Egypt" (Dimeo 2015, 73). Although *Dongola* is structured as a novel that represents the voiceless Nubian people, critics such as Dimeo have questioned the degree to which the novel should be read as an example of collective utterance, since Awad's grand vision of a united Nubia straddling Egypt and Sudan is unimaginable, even offensive, to many of the villagers he attempts to recruit to the cause "who have yet to develop, much less comprehend, the modern grammar of nationalism" (Dimeo 2015, 73).

Nevertheless, elements of resistance to the dam and the Egyptian authorities are present in the text, such as the folk singer Abdu Shindi's ironic and playful comments of "*hanwa dol*" ("big jackass" in Nubian) ('Ali 1998, 41) directed at visiting officials, or Demerdash's curses towards the Egyptian police in language deemed "so obscene that had the officer understood, he would have ordered him shot on the spot" ('Ali 1998, 47). Expressed in the Nubian language, which cannot be understood by those in authority, these incidents suggest the existence of what Fanon calls a "clandestine culture" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 191), or what James Scott terms a 'hidden transcript' of resistance amongst the Nubian villagers – a social space in which "offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced" that cannot be spoken directly in the face of power (Scott 1992, p.xi).

Within the more private sphere of the village, Demerdash feels free to dismiss the *omda's* speech as little more than political propaganda, subverting his authority with the mocking statement, "I feel like we're listening to 'Voice of the Arabs' from Cairo" ('Ali 1998, 46). This defiance tests the limits of power through a show of

disrespect, highlighting the extent to which the Nubian elite – its mayors, sheikhs and officials – have aligned with representatives of the Egyptian state at the expense of the people they claim to represent. Nevertheless, this is still very much an individual act of rebellion restricted to the private realm, which fails to have wider social consequences.

By contrast, what had started as an "ordinary celebration" of Awad and Jazuli's homecoming morphs into a symbolic and politically charged ceremony of "nationalist mourning to grieve over drowned Nubia" ('Ali 1998, 28). Harnessing the collective emotions and memories of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages, Abdu Shindi's extemporised folk songs about Old Nubia and the villages lost to the floodwaters, as his "wounded voice … repeats the name of the river over and over, linking it with treason" ('Ali 1998, 27), bring back the villagers' repressed memories of loss and reveal "the truth of their condition" in the "monstrous homeland" of New Nubia. Incidents like this one act as an axis of veiled symbolic resistance against authority which, it is hinted, may be activated for broader political ends and is indicative of the extent – to paraphrase Fanon – to which the oppressed 'black' Nubian exhibits different dimensions in his interactions with his fellows compared to his interactions with the 'white' Egyptian authorities (Fanon 2008, 8).

Consider the lyrics to the ballad which Shindi sings:

> My land, my homeland, my abode,
>
> land of my fathers, my palm trees, O Nubia
>
> You are one, you are one, you are one. ('Ali 1998, 27)

These words have clear secessionist overtones, signifying how oneness of Nubia had been arbitrarily divided into two ostensibly Arab states, Egypt and Sudan, by the British colonial power in 1899. Not only do they inspire subconscious revolt in the people present, who start to cry and scream *biyu, biyu* (woe is me) while the women perform the dance of the bereaved, rending their clothes and rubbing dirt on their faces, but it is memorised, repeated and passed amongst the neighbouring villages in the days that follow as news of the ceremony becomes widespread. Shindi's song, in particular, "became the talk of the villages of Nubia" ('Ali 1998, 28), mirroring the process through which popular dissent and insubordination move from the private to

the public realm and are expressed openly, albeit in disguised form, through such vehicles as rumour, gossip, folktales and song.

Taken together, these contain a kernel of discursive resistance against authority that later transmutes into political action as truth is spoken in the face of power (Scott 1992, xii–xiii). That the authorities are fully aware of its potential to transmute into direct rebellion is indicated by the fact that what occurred at the 'mourning festival' is swiftly reported back to the security directorate in Aswan through its network of *misi kol* (informers) who pose as peddlers and traders within the community. Awad is duly brought in and detained because of his perceived role in inciting revolt, even though he attributes its escalation not to any instigation on his part but rather to an organic process brought on by repressed memories of trauma triggered by Shindi's songs. Nevertheless, the text suggests that such isolated outbursts alone are incapable of bringing about sustained resistance to authority and represent little more than a safety valve that permits the marginalised to 'let off steam'. As Awad observes, the peoples' "sorrows, tears, and songs … [will] never restore the land that had been drowned [or] the identity obliterated" ('Ali 1998, 29).

Despite Awad's best efforts to promote a Nubian revival in the villages of Egypt and Sudan, hegemonic Egyptian nationalism proves to have been so naturalised over the generations that it is impossible to overwrite with a new Nubian nationalist narrative. As Awad himself observes, this is partly due to Nasser's policy of assimilating minority groups in the name of forging a common national identity as a result of which the concept of Nubia as a distinct cultural and identitarian space "was disappearing … and vanishing from existence" ('Ali 1998, 38). Indeed, by the time another generation has passed and first-hand memories of life in Nubia have been lost, Awad worries that "archaeologists and others would come and write lies" ('Ali 1998, 38). Here, he alludes both to the importance of Nubian literature and the Nubian revivalist movement more broadly as resistance narratives geared towards recovering "Nubia's wilfully obliterated history" ('Ali 1998, 25) and affirming a particularistic Nubian identity and world view distinct from that of the broader Egyptian nation.

While invocation of Nubian history, civilisation and consciousness can be understood as a form of psychological rehabilitation in a context where Nubian-ness had previously been marginalised and denigrated under conditions of colonial and postcolonial domination (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 168–69), it should also be viewed as the nostalgic "desire to coincide again, to bring the past back" rather

than to look towards the future (Miller 1986, 128). Echoing Fanon's critique of *négritude* in *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Dongola* ultimately reveals the theoretical as well as practical limitations of Nubian ethno-nationalist thought as a vehicle for the formation of a progressive, humanist vision of national culture.

As Abbas has argued, the movement from a masculine to feminine perspective in Part III, which is narrated by Awad's estranged wife Halima, can be read as a feminine, if not necessarily feminist, critique of Nubian nationalism's gender dynamics, which the novel reveals to be "as exclusionary and oppressive as the Arab-Egyptian nationalist ideology it critiques" (Abbas 2014, 152). Indeed, the final section of the novel can be read as a searing critique of alterity or "the construction and celebration of oneself as Other" (Appiah 1992, 251). This is apparent in the fetishization of Nubian tradition in the work of Oddoul, Mukhtar and others, the "cruelty" of which ('Ali 1998, 72) reveals a darker side to the nostalgia for Nubia around which Nubian nationalist discourse is constructed.

In a society where, by Awad's own account, "being a man meant power: crudity, a moustache, a voice [and] a stick" to enforce female obedience ('Ali 1998, 88), the role of women is acknowledged to be primarily reproductive: biologically, as mothers to the Nubian nation; and culturally, as the carriers of Nubian tradition and customs which they transmit to new generations (McClintock et al. 1997, 89–90). Consequently, women are not considered active participants in the process of political and social contestation so central to Awad's emancipatory political platform, but are required to take a back seat to the activities of men who speak about, and for, them. Even Awad's own personal conduct reinforces hierarchical gender stereotypes that both silence and instrumentalize women while denying them voice and agency, a factor which fatally undercuts the liberating rhetoric of the Nubian nationalism he espouses.

Fully aware of the injustice of his marriage to Halima, acknowledging that it is merely an "instrument with which he could win his freedom" ('Ali 1998, 87) and a "primitive deal" ('Ali 1998, 84) that permits him to secure a servant for his ailing mother, Awad nevertheless goes through with it and exerts the authority granted to him by patriarchal norms to further his own interests, namely to return to Europe and his lover Simone. Similarly, the binaries used to invoke the oppression of Nubian by Egyptian men earlier in the novel, e.g. master and slave, pasha and servant, find their echoes in Awad and Halima's marriage. Whereas Awad is described in the text,

sometimes ironically, as *ẓālim* (tyrant) and *amīr* (prince) Halima is associated with the epithets *khādima* (servant) and *jāriyya* (slave), indicating the extent to which Nubian society is undercut by regressive gender dynamics which silence the voices and perspectives of Nubian women.

Awad's assumption that Halima will passively accept her fate while he returns to Europe and his life with Simone reflects the patriarchal hypocrisy at the heart of many postcolonial nationalisms. As Deniz Kandiyoti, Anne McClintock and Hoda El-Sadda have argued in their studies on gender and nationalism, this configures the male as the subject, to whom rights and agency accrue, while women are largely objectified and deployed as symbols or markers for traditional (male) values (Kandiyoti 1996; McClintock et al. 1997; El-Sadda 2007). Similarly, *Dongola* suggests that, psychically speaking, the emasculation of Nubian men at the hands of the Egyptian state can only be countered by ensuring that Nubian women remain firmly under their control, resulting in what McClintock calls a Janus-like stance towards modernity, whereby men like Awad self-identify as carriers of progressive ideas while women remain bound to traditional behavioural norms (McClintock et al. 1997, 92).

By situating women as subjects, rather than objects, of discourse, Part III of the novel, narrated by Halima, voices a female perspective that demythologises the customs and traditions of Nubian society while subverting its patriarchal norms in practice. Depicted by Awad and the village elders as a faceless, voiceless creature lacking in agency, Part III of the novel – which is narrated in her own voice – reveals Halima to be a feisty female foil to Awad, while revealing that many women in the village also indirectly struggle against the customary restrictions imposed upon them by patriarchal tradition. This is illustrated in the novel by the fact that the Kanzi women (who are confined, by tradition, to their homes and allowed to leave only "to offer condolences or congratulations") turn banal occurrences into compelling reasons for meeting together, discursively transforming "a scorpion sting into a funeral or the return of a migrant into a lavish celebration" ('Ali 1998, 63). Such forms of women's solidarity and creative resistance, however, never openly challenge the patriarchal structure of Nubian village life but rather push indirectly at its boundaries.

By contrast, realising that "her father was stupid, her husband was a tyrant, and no one understood her plight or the plight of all the women in this land" ('Ali 1998, 94), Halima is not afraid to speak out and mounts a direct campaign of resistance

on behalf of the "forsaken women" of Nubia ('Ali 1998, 92) against the dominance of what she regards as man-made laws and customs of Nubia, which are so central to Nubian collective identity but are maintained at a heavy cost for its female members. Upon hearing that Awad has married his foreign lover Simone she decides to take her future into her own hands by divorcing him and marrying a young man of her choice, thereby administering a symbolic slap in the face of "the law all men lived by and at the traditions of the south" ('Ali 1998, 103).

Her attempts to subvert the established order are thwarted, however: firstly by her father, who calls her a "slut" and threatens to kill her when she voices her wish to divorce Awad; secondly by the village post-master, who refuses to transmit her demands to Awad, on the basis that it was "unheard of" for a Nubian woman to make such a request without her father's permission; and ultimately by Awad himself who simply ignores her demands. Notwithstanding, Halima persists in her defiance and refuses to accept the authority of the village elders who insist that she remain married to Awad even though he has effectively abandoned her for his European girlfriend. Protesting against their argument that the Qur'an permits a man to take two wives, she retorts: "you men always say what suits you best", a phrase which verges on blasphemy since it suggests not only that men use religion to their advantage but that they, rather than God, are the creators of the laws laid down in the holy book ('Ali 1998, 96).

Finally, realising that Awad has no intention of returning, and seeing no prospect of redemption from these oppressive Nubian traditions that demand she remain chaste and loyal to her absent husband, Halima vows to cause a "catastrophe" so great "that future generations would remember her" ('Ali 1998, 108). She contemplates setting the entire village on fire on the basis that it is filled with "the disgusting faces of heartless men ('Ali 1998, 102). However, she finally settles on committing a sexual transgression with Maadul, an Upper Egyptian worker in the village, with a view to satisfying her frustrated desires as well as emasculating the men of the village by sullying their collective honour ('Ali 1998, 109). In a man's world where "they gave the orders and women had to obey" ('Ali 1998, 105), Halima's rebellion speaks both to the possibility of female agency and its limitations in traditional Nubian society.

Beyond Nubian Nationalism: Idris 'Ali's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism

Far from being a paean to Nubian nationalism, then, *Dongola* is actually a "novel of despair for Nubia" (Oddoul 2006, 38). It narrates the practical and ideological failure of Nubian nationalism to provide a progressive alternative to the racist and exclusive discourse of Arab-Egyptian nationalism it critiques, cloaking its own racist and sexist paradigms and practices behind a rhetoric of liberation. Indeed, the Nubian nationalist movement's chief messenger, Awad Shalali, is revealed to be little more than a male chauvinist whose own relations with Nubian women in his personal life mirrors the oppression exacted by the Egyptian state on Nubian men. In the final analysis, the text suggests that nationalisms – be they Arab, African or Nubian – have nothing essentially progressive about them.

To cite Fanon, "the desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing [the interests of] one's own people" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 180) by deifying cultural practices or beliefs that are ultimately retrogressive. Rejecting ethno-nationalism of all stripes, *Dongola* posits an embryonic defence of the principle of what Go and Mignolo have respectively termed "postcolonial cosmopolitanism" (Go 2013) and "critical cosmopolitanism" (Mignolo 2000). This principle reconceives cosmopolitanism from the perspective of coloniality and, in its critique of Arab and Nubian nationalism and religious and ideological extremism, provides "a critical perspective … on fundamentalist projects that originated and justified themselves in local histories, both national and religious" (Mignolo 2000, 724).

Whereas religious, national, ideological and ethnic exclusion all "identify frontiers of exteriority for which there is a racial component" (Mignolo 2000, 741), cosmopolitanism – which is derived from the Latin word *cosmos* (meaning world) and *polis* (meaning political community) – endeavours to foster conviviality rather than racial division and exclusion. Based on the principles of human rights and global citizenship, the concept of critical or postcolonial cosmopolitanism implies the

existence of a common human identity that transcends locality in the form of tribe, religion, culture, race or nation (Go 2013, 211), and which is grounded in openness to the other rather than in ethnocentrism or xenophobia. As such, it acknowledges the diversity of the postcolonial nation in which people of different ethnicities, races, and religions are put in situations of sustained interaction with each other, positing a theoretical alternative to both the separatism and Afro-Nubian consciousness articulated in the early sections of *Dongola*.

Glimpses of a more critical cosmopolitan perspective can be traced throughout the novel, exposing a more multifaceted dimension to life in contemporary Egypt that breaks down the simplistic binaries of black and white, self and other which characterise the earlier sections of the text. When Awad goes south to the Dongola of his dreams to proselytise his vision of Nubian revival he discovers that the people there "thought he might be an agent of northern intelligence who had come to subvert the unity of Sudan" ('Ali 1998, 71), resulting in his near imprisonment at the hands of those he considers to be his 'brothers'. This absurd incident suggests the discrepancy between Awad's exclusive, Arab-phobic world view, the product of years of incarceration at the hands of the Egyptian authorities, and the more complex political realities that make Sudanese Nubians identify more with their Arab co-citizens in Khartoum than Nubians across the border in Egypt.

The text portrays how Arabs and Nubians (who are connected by social, political and even kinship ties) often show solidarity and friendship towards each other, complicating the neat ethnic boundary between Nubians and Arabs erected in Awad's paranoid fantasies which are predicated on division and enmity between the two peoples. Indeed, by drawing the reader's attention to the gap between Awad's representation of reality and the characters' lived reality itself, the 'truth value' of the narrating voice is placed under renewed scrutiny, much as the novel itself – 'writing back' against official sanctioned histories of the legacy of the High Dam – critiques the pretence of objectivity at the heart of dominant discourses. What we are left with is a post-modern distrust of grand narratives and unitary voices, hinting instead at the importance of paying attention to what is unsaid or stated only at the margins of the text.

This is aptly illustrated in the episode when Awad encounters the Egyptian sergeant Sirr al-Khatim, who is patrolling the border for smugglers. Despite his racist conviction that this "dirty Arab" cannot possibly wish him well, we learn that the

sergeant first addresses Awad in Nubian and calls him 'brother' before revealing that he is from "the Arabs of your country" who had intermarried with his tribe and whose houses "are mingled with those of the resettlement" ('Ali 1998, 55) – a revelation which alludes to the complex network of historical, family and cultural ties that bind the Arabs and Nubians of the region together. Even more astonishingly, given that al-Khatim is the de-facto ruler of "this tiny corner of the world" with the power of life or death over Awad ('Ali 1998, 54), the sergeant – who recognises Awad's name from the wanted list he has received from the Sudanese authorities – lets him go free out of respect for his grandfather, whom he recalls as a great Nubian sheikh.

Similarly, coming to his senses after a long alcohol-fuelled rant in which he imagines the people of Cairo to be "soldiers marching south, to destroy the south and return with booty and plunder, and thousands of what they call slaves, though they were actually citizens of that country" ('Ali 1998, 20), Awad admits to the reader that the figures walking through Tahrir Square are simply weary northerners returning home after a long day's work who have "no hand in the destruction of the south or the enslavement of its valiant people" and are "full of goodness and tolerance" ('Ali 1998, 21). In this passage, Awad acknowledges that many ordinary Egyptians have also been adversely affected by the high prices, regional war and political repression that characterised Nasser's rule, noting the "scowling faces, pursed lips, cold smiles and bad jokes" ('Ali 1998, 4) on the faces of the people he passes. This episode provides a rare glimpse of a more plural vision of Egyptian society grounded in what Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) calls a "new humanism" (Fanon 2008, 1) that transcends particularistic attachments to race or religion.

Notwithstanding his fantasies about the rebirth of Nubia as a separate nation and statements to the effect that villages as far south as Halfa and Dongola in Sudan are "all my country" ('Ali 1998, 15), important questions are raised in the text about the depth of Awad's attachment to the Nubian nationalist cause in both the ideological and the practical sense. This is made apparent during an episode when Awad is detained and interrogated at the at the Aswan Directorate of Security about his involvement with the "mourning festival" which had stirred up the passions of the Nubian villagers upon his return. After a long political rant during which he sketches out his vision for an independent Nubia, the whole thrust of his separatist argument is undermined by the admission that, "we [Nubians] have no objection to union with the north, and we will put that on the table for negotiation" ('Ali 1998, 31). In the interior

monologue that follows, Awad reveals to the reader that his endgame is not Nubian independence, but rather the conclusion of a peace deal between Nubia and Egypt "on top of the High Dam" ('Ali 1998, 33), whereby the loaded symbolism of the High Dam as a metaphor for Egyptian power is inverted so that this ceremony comes to represent a new era of equality and respect between the Arab and Nubian peoples of Egypt.

Similarly, the practical limits of Nubian nationalism as a political project are underscored when, upon being advised by his uncle to go to "our people in Haifa and Dongola", two cities that play an important symbolic role in the text as emblems of Nubian national pride and strength, Awad's response is simply to ask himself "Where was Dongola? Where was Halfa? What city was populated?" ('Ali 1998, 52). This episode exposes the lack of any concrete basis for the narrator's political vision of an independent Nubian state with Dongola as its capital. As such, what initially appears to be an endorsement of Nubian separatism within the text should instead be read as a plea for respect and recognition of Egyptian Nubians and their distinct history, culture and identity by the Egyptian state to which, Awad acknowledges, he had once felt a strong sense of belonging before it "turned on him [and] he had pulled away, crazed" ('Ali 1998, 5).

This admission, and the concurrent revelation that "I have loved your culture, and still do", highlight the ambivalence of his subconscious identification with Nubia and the contradictions within his own thought processes. Particularly ambivalent is Awad's response to Egypt's capital city Cairo – 'Mother of the World' – which is personified in the white women of northern Egypt that he desires, yet who consistently reject him. As argued in Chapter Two, the desire of men like the narrator and his father to marry a *gorbatiya* can be read as evidence of a "clear wish to be white" on the part of many Nubians, and thus to disavow their blackness in order to assimilate into white society (Fanon 2008, 6) – a factor which is clearly at odds with the affirmation of black consciousness that Awad's ideology of Nubian nationalism implies.

As Fanon observes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the educated black man living in the colonial centre often experiences this fundamental psychic conflict since, as a result of his identification with the metropole, "he does not understand his own race and the whites do not understand him" (Fanon 2008, 46). In a context where the black man is rejected by white society on account of the colour of his skin and by his own

people on account of his upbringing and education, Fanon argues that a relationship with a white woman not only proves to the black man that he is 'worthy' of love, but also acts as a form of validation that the colonial world routinely denies him (Fanon 2008, 45). This is certainly the case in *Dongola* where Awad's relationship with Simone, a French professor whom he meets while working in the liminal, cosmopolitan space of a cruise-ship which criss-crosses the Mediterranean, enacts a form of revenge on a society that had assumed mastery over him, as is explicitly acknowledged in Awad's sensation that he had "enslaved her" ('Ali 1998, 74).

The symbolic reversal of the relationship between coloniser and colonised within the novel is highly reminiscent of the relationship between Mustapha Saeed, the protagonist of Sudanese novelist Tayyeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila-l Shimāl* (*Season of Migration to the North*, 1966), and his British lover, which is explicitly referenced in 'Ali's text ('Ali 1998, 74). Indeed, Naaman and Jacquemond have gone so far as to characterise Dongola as "a Nubian version" of *Season of Migration to the North* which controversially compares the coloniser/colonised dynamic of the black man in Europe to the relationship between Nubians and Arabs within postcolonial Egypt (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 183; Naaman 2011, 115). However, unlike Mustapha Saeed who succeeds in re-integrating into Sudanese village life after a prolonged period in Europe, Awad continues to define himself in opposition to many of Nubia's beliefs, traditions and taboos and privately regards his time in the south as an enforced state of "exile" from which he is happy, ultimately, to escape ('Ali 1998, 31).

This has the effect of re-framing the novel away from the nostalgic celebration of Nubian culture and tradition which, as we saw in the previous chapter, is the focus of much contemporary Nubian fiction, towards a critique of many aspects of traditional village life. Although Awad views himself as a modern-day saviour come to kindle a renewed sense of dignity amongst the Nubian people by inciting rebellion against the repressive Egyptian regime, his ideas of civilisation and progress are drawn from European, particularly socialist, thinkers such as Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Vladimir Lenin ('Ali 1998, 3). The teleological approach to human progress that Awad subscribes to reflects an essentially European development paradigm, causing him to regard many aspects of Nubian culture and tradition as backward and in need of reform.

Ironically, this leads him to adopt the position of an outsider vis-à-vis Nubian society whom he considers, rhetorically at least, to be 'his people'. Awad is alienated from the wider Nubian community both by virtue of having lived in the north of Egypt since childhood and by having psychically integrated its culture and ideology. Unable to reintegrate successfully into his community after leaving Cairo, we learn that he first considers his presence in Nubia as a form of "civilising mission" ('Ali 1998, 53). Before long, however, he decides that "to stay in this vast wasteland to be bitten by a viper lurking below a layer of sand, to eat food made from camel milk and seasonal pigeons, and to sacrifice all the achievements of civilisation, would be too much even for a saint" ('Ali 1998, 53), and he duly flees to Europe.

Like the narrator of *Dongola*, although 'Ali retained an active interest in Nubian issues while resident in the diaspora he felt rejected by his community, lamenting "I was expecting praise and appreciation for my stance on Nubia, not this treatment" (Dimeo 2015, 73). In this sense, as El-Refaei observes, 'Ali not only sets himself apart from Nubian writers such as Oddoul and Mukhtar who are "known for their nostalgia for their roots, past and land", but also from Nubians as a collective group (el-Refaei 2012, 19). This suggests that under the veneer of separatist rhetoric there lurks an affiliation with Egypt that is near-impossible to shake off. Indeed, throughout his time in Europe, Awad is never nostalgic for the Old Nubia of Oddoul's fiction, which he describes as a "primitive" wasteland filled with "sun, restrictions, and stubborn traditions" ('Ali 1998, 89), but rather for Cairo, for which he acknowledges "an addict's love" ('Ali 1998, 4).

His ambivalence about his Nubian roots are also arguably reflective of the broader concerns of a new generation of Nubians amongst whom a diasporic consciousness has been activated in response to the collective experience of loss, displacement and marginalisation that followed the construction of the Aswan High Dam, yet who do not see a nostalgic return to the past as a solution to their everyday problems (Abbas 2014, 150). As Christopher Miller has argued in his critique of the *négritude* movement *Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology* (1986), the tendency of many African writers and intellectuals to uncritically valorise African culture is indicative of "the desire to coincide again, to bring the past back" rather than to look towards the future or acknowledge the more complex social realities of the present (Miller 1986, 128).

Dongola hints at a similar critique of the Nubian revivalist movement by suggesting that the post-Aswan generation who grew up in the cities of northern Egypt is more concerned in seeking solutions to broader issues facing all Egyptians such as social exclusion, poverty and unemployment, than in Nubian ethno-nationalism or nostalgia for the Old Country found in much Nubian cultural production of the period. This is indicated, paradoxically, in the midst of Awad's nationalist rant at the security directorate at Aswan during which he calls for the Egyptian government to give the Nubian people "land fit for planting", to invest in factories, to generate employment opportunities, to award equitable compensation for lost land and property, and to treat Nubians as equals ('Ali 1998, 34). The material nature of these demands feasibly signals not a desire to return to the homeland but rather for Nubians to be given the tools to survive and prosper as an integral part of the Egyptian nation.

Central to this aspiration for Nubian inclusion in the nation is the demand, voiced in the Prologue, that the "People of the North" – the Nubian term for all of Egypt which is not Nubia – recognise the author's particularistic Nubian identity and actively acknowledge both the historic wrongs Egypt has done to the Nubian people and the discrimination and exclusion they currently face in Egyptian society. Since, to paraphrase Fanon, subjecthood cannot be obtained until the oppressed have imposed their existence on the oppressor and received recognition in return (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 169–79), the injunction "These are all my pages; do not tear them up. This is my voice; do not silence it" ('Ali 1998, Prologue) challenges, in a very public manner, the institutional amnesia surrounding the Nubian case within the Egyptian establishment as well as in the wider national imaginary.

Indeed, the very fact that the Prologue is dedicated to 'the people of the north' suggests that the novel is not aimed exclusively, or even primarily, at a Nubian readership but rather at the Egyptian public whose validation the narrator Awad Shalali actively seeks. That *Dongola* is essentially a novel of recrimination directed at the oppressor, rather than a novel of resistance directed at a Nubian readership, is a sure sign that 'Ali's writing – despite its Nubian nationalist theme – is still strongly anchored in a dialectic with hegemonic Egyptian discourses, from which it cannot break free (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 193).

This reading is reinforced by the author's choice to cite two eminent Egyptian historians at the start of the novel: Dr Muhammad Husayn Haykal – a writer, journalist, politician and former Minister of Education who penned the first modern

Egyptian novel, *Zeinab* in 1914; and Dr Mahmud Muhammad al-Hariri, author of *Aswan in the Middle Ages*. Highlighting Nubian bravery in battle against the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khatib and the slavery and trafficking of Nubians by Egyptians in the early centuries of Islam, the extracts selected are designed to harness the interpretative authority of these figures in the eyes of the Egyptian public in order to reinforce the validity of the narrator's claims about the marginalisation and oppression of the Egyptian Nubian community.

As I have attempted to show in this section, *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* depicts Nubian nationalism as primarily the product of decades of anger and frustration over ongoing political repression, inequality and racial discrimination rather than stemming from a fully-fledged desire to separate from the Egyptian nation. Far from embracing a Nubian separatist agenda, *Dongola* reveals how the affirmation of 'traditional' Nubian values, beliefs and practices tends to reinforce discourses of ethnic exclusivity and gender hierarchy. Ultimately, it challenges the Egyptian establishment to replace the exclusionary and racist form of nationalism that had flourished post-independence with a form of national consciousness grounded not in ethnic, linguistic or religious particularism but in the universal values of Fanon's "new humanism" (Fanon 2008, 1; Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 198) which celebrates rather than silences Egypt's already-existing plurality of religious, ethnic and social identities.

A Literature of Disenchantment

Whereas *Dongola* can be characterised as a novel that sets out the limitations of Nubian ethno-nationalism, 'Ali's second novel *Poor* (2003) moves beyond the Nubian question to emphasise themes of social justice and class inequality that concern the totality of poor Egyptians, whom, the narrator argues, have also been failed by the false promises of the postcolonial state. Indeed, 'Ali himself has always insisted that Nubians constitute an integral part of the Egyptian people and that the Nubian question "should never be thought of as a political issue comparable to that of Southern Sudan", but is rather concerned with "problems common to all Egyptians" such as unemployment and lack of housing (Khallaf 2006).

The later novel thus privileges the idea of a shared humanity over the racialized and exclusive conceptions of Arab or Nubian nationalism discussed in *Dongola*, explicitly reacting against the abuse of the discourse of indigeneity by the postcolonial elite so as to appropriate national resources for themselves. *Poor* thus fits squarely into the genre of what Appiah terms the disenchanted postcolonial African novel which, as noted in Chapter Two, repudiates and de-legitimates the nationalist project of the postcolonial bourgeoisie. In its place, the novel foregrounds a subaltern counter-narrative that highlights the voices and viewpoints of the downtrodden who have been systematically excluded from the nation's history and imaginary in a manner that is both explicitly post-nativist and post-nationalist (Appiah 1992, 221–54).

This mood of disenchantment and despair is alluded to both by the terse English title *Poor*, and by the Prologue to the novel which warns that its content is for 'Adults Only', advising: "if you suffer from even mild high blood pressure, do not read this novel" ('Ali 2007, prologue). While the Arabic edition was entitled *Taḥt Khaṭ al-Faqr*, which translates as 'Below the Poverty Line', this phrase was regarded by the translator Elliott Colla as "too narrowly sociological" to capture the "unadorned harshness" of the text which depicts a life of what he terms "economic and moral deprivation" – conditions better encapsulated, he argued, by the title *Poor* ('Ali 2007, 197). Indeed, Naaman describes the novel as "one of the most severe attacks on the nationalist project" ever produced in Egypt due to its depiction of the glaring economic and social inequalities that developed between the postcolonial elite, specifically the military and the merchant class, and the masses between the 1950s and early 1990s (Naaman 2011, 106).

Even though the novel is set at the height of Egypt's nationalist fervour in the 1950s, the *Poor's* narrator displays none of the enthusiasm for the nation one might expect of the post-independence period. Rather, as the novel progresses, he explicitly repudiates national(ist) history in favour of a narrative that highlights the failures of successive postcolonial nationalist regimes to speak for the nation. 'Ali's fiction is thus typical of what Appiah calls 'second stage' postcolonial literary production in Africa since it is not written by an author who is either comfortable with, or accepted by, the new elite. Located outside the charmed circle of the Egyptian establishment, he voices an insubordinate subaltern subjectivity "constructed in a dialectical

opposition to the languages of the modern subject [which] represent radically different epistemologies and thus relationships to power" (Selim 2004, 231).

Unlike other contemporary Egyptian novels like Gamil 'Attiya Ibrahim's *Down to the Sea* (1986) which also describes dystopian city life, the poor are not 'othered' in 'Ali's fiction but rather considered 'one of us' (Naaman 2011, 120). The 'other', by contrast, is portrayed as the members of the bourgeois elite who are depicted as inhabiting a radically different world to that of the Egyptian everyman of his novels. Indeed, it is precisely 'Ali's understanding of, and focus on, the multiple layers of disadvantage facing members of the Nubian diaspora in Cairo that speaks to the suffering of the nation, which is one of the main themes of the disenchanted postcolonial novel (Appiah 1992, 250). As Naaman contends, "here it is the subaltern Nubian who is writing the national narrative, and doing so as a revision to the primarily urban, pro-nationalist and postcolonial fictions, where the notion of an essential (or unproblematised) 'Egyptian people' is left unquestioned" (Naaman 2011, 110).

Far from constituting a celebration of the postcolonial nation, *Poor* is a novel of de-legitimation which rejects both Western colonialism *and* the postcolonial nationalist project to portray the poverty, fear and corruption that attended the post-independence moment, which signalled "a form of violence and ongoing trauma inflicted on the Egyptian people equal in its effects to the injustices perpetrated on behalf of the British" (Naaman 2011, 109). This focus on the postcolonial nation and its abuses rather than those of the colonial power suggests that 'Ali's fiction should be viewed as an example of what Deleuze and Guattari have termed a minor literature written in the 'major' voice of Arabic.

Characterised by "the connection of the individual and the political, [and] the collective arrangement of utterance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 18), minor literatures tend to be produced in the dominant language of the state, yet to undercut its hegemonic symbolic associations by voicing perspectives that are rarely heard. Similarly, modes of postcolonial life writing such as autobiography, memoir and testimony are often adopted by marginalised groups to express emergent racial, ethnic and gender consciousness and to represent the collective views of the community, rather than simply that of the individual author (Moore-Gilbert 2009, xi–xxvi; Ostle, Moor, and Wild 1998, 18–23), in an effort to enable processes of cultural regeneration and national reconciliation (Whitlock 2015, 138).

That 'Ali may have felt a responsibility to transmit a communal rather than merely individual perspective on the situation of Nubians in Egypt goes some way to explaining the degree to which one senses that "his protagonists, while multiple, are but one character grappling repeatedly with the trauma of losing a homeland and the social inequities in Egyptian society" (Naaman 2011, 116). This is also reflected in the cross-overs between the poverty, humiliation and exclusion 'Ali himself experienced during his own lifetime and the experiences of the nameless Nubian narrator of *Poor* who has been described by critics as 'Ali's 'fictional double' (Hamam and El-Wardani 2005; Naaman 2011, 106). Born in 1940 into a village community that had already been relocated once due to the raising of the Aswan Dam in 1933 'Ali, like the fictional protagonist, spent most of his life in poverty in northern Egypt where he lived in the working-class district of Bulaq, commencing his studies at Al-Azhar institute for religious studies before dropping out and doing casual work in *wusaṭ al-balad* (downtown).

Similarly, with the exception of the first chapter (which is set in the mid-1990s when the novel was first published) the narration develops chronologically, as in conventional autobiography, from the floods of 1948, through to the building of the Aswan Dam, the 1952 Revolution, and the Suez crisis of 1954. *Poor* is narrated primarily through use of direct voice, with little use of figurative language. However, it is far from being a straightforwardly autobiographical text, even though it has been widely interpreted as such by critics such as Iman Hamam and Mahmoud El-Wardani (Hamam and El-Wardani 2005). Rather, it may be more useful to view it as an example of what Naaman calls a "proletarian" novel which draws on the author's own experiences and that of his community to portray a subaltern underclass "that has long been oppressed racially, economically and politically" ('Ali 2007, 198) yet lacks a voice with which to speak out.

The opening lines of the novel suggest that the protagonist and the author are not self-identical. In fact, they warn the reader, on the author's behalf, to be wary of the interpretative authority of the narrator, by stating "I need to be frank with you: I lost control of the narrator of this story". "He slipped out of my hands", the quotation continues, "and began to rant about forbidden things", refusing to respect either the authority of the state or of religion, and airing Egypt's dirty laundry "for all to see" ('Ali 2007, 1). However, Ali's explicit distancing of himself from the narrator's voice could be viewed as a tactic to avoid recrimination for the radical views expressed by

Awad throughout the course of the text. The fact that it is expressly subtitled "*riwāya*" (novel), therefore, may be viewed as a strategic device designed to "bring struggles and debates that could not take place freely in the political field into the cultural field under a [literary] guise" (Jacquemond and Tresilian 2008, 35–36) by blurring the distinction between autobiography and fiction, and thus getting around Egypt's strict censorship laws during this period.

Moreover, as Colla has argued in his Translator's Note, there is a strong intertextual element to *Poor* that draws explicitly on the tradition of the Egyptian national romance novel with which many of Egypt's great novelists such as Muhammad Husayn Haikal, Tawfik al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz, Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi, Ihsan Abdel Quddus and Sonallah Ibrahim have experimented. These novels are characterised by young protagonists who struggle (sometimes hopelessly) to "create their identity as modern Egyptians while attempting to court young peasant or working class women" who come to symbolise Egypt itself ('Ali 2007, 198–99). *Poor's* use of stock characters from this tradition, such as the narrator's love interests Dina Tantaai and Umm Sonya, indicates the fictive, rather than autobiographical, nature of the text ('Ali 2007, 198).

Repeated references to writers such as Maxim Gorky (namechecked several times in the text as the narrator's favourite author), Leo Tolstoy, Feodor Dostoevsky and Karl Marx reveal the extent to which the novel looks beyond the Nubian question to examine issues addressed in European literary and political thought. As Colla argues, these "help to concretize and define the literary aspirations of the protagonist" ('Ali 2007, 199). The influence of European ideas is most apparent in the narrator's extended perorations on themes such as the condition of the urban proletariat and class relations in Cairo, which are couched in the language of international socialism. They also draw attention to the novel's indebtedness to the twentieth-century European social realist tradition, which used culture to highlight the everyday conditions of the poor and to criticise the social structures that maintained these conditions.

However, unlike classic social realist texts that emphasise the ability of human beings to transform their reality as well as documenting its gritty conditions, *Poor* — like *Dongola* — is highly cynical about the idea that collective political action can bring about radical social change any more than literature can. At one point the narrator, who, like 'Ali, has devoted his life to writing, remarks "only belatedly did you discover that what you and others writer is nothing but ink on the page. Nothing

changes because of it" ('Ali 2007, 23). This reflects a profoundly dystopian world view which presents the written word as incapable of transcending life or articulating a coherent platform of resistance or escape. Indeed, as Colla remarks, "the vitriol of *Poor* pours forth" from the outset of the novel, "outlining a deep and abiding sense of disappointment, a less-than-noble preoccupation with personal scores, and a general scepticism towards all collective projects" ('Ali 2007, 201) – all of which mark it out as one of the first Egyptian forays into the literature of *ressentiment*.

First introduced as a philosophical concept by Søren Kierkegaard and subsequently developed by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler (Meltzer and Musolf 2002), *ressentiment* is defined in Scheler's 1913 book of the same title as "a self-poisoning of the mind [and] … lasting mental attitude" which is characterised by delusions of "revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite" (Scheler and Frings 1994, 45–46). Similarly, throughout the novel, the narrator wanders the streets of Cairo venting his resentments, sexual frustrations and hostility towards all those whom he considers to be the source of his misery: his father who betrayed his family and left them penniless; the Cairene society which discriminates against him on the basis of his colour; the 'Big Shots' who exploit his labour and are considered above the law; the Egyptian state which has dispossessed and persecuted his people; and the Nubian community itself from which he feels alienated.

Unlike Muhammad Khalil Qasim's early Nubian novel *The Buoy*, which allegorically depicts the narrator's path towards gaining a modern education as akin to the development of the Nubian community within the wider Egyptian nation, the narrator of *Poor* sees no remedy to the grinding poverty and oppression which constitute daily life for the majority of the Egyptian population. Indeed, the only way Awad Shalali can conceive of to break the cycle of despair which afflicts him is suicide, which he attempts twice in the novel. First, as a young man despairing at being unable to find a dignified job or to marry the woman he loves, he ingests 100 aspirin pills. Subsequently, plagued by disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless and absurd world, which leads him to recognise that he himself is "fluid, shapeless" and rootless, alienated from both the Nubian people and Egyptian society at large ('Ali 2007, 19), he jumps off the Qasr al-Nil bridge in Cairo.

According to Naaman, it is the narrator's sense of existential despair which causes him to attempt to take his own life, echoing the final scenes of *Season of Migration to the North* where Mustapha Saeed attempts to drown himself in the Nile

after failing to reconcile the opposing parts of his own personality, split by love and revulsion for both south and north (Naaman 2011, 108). However, it is also a very public protest against the "impossible" situation in which he, like many Egyptians, finds himself, which in many ways prefigures the symbolic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia that sparked the Arab Spring (Day 2011).

Ironically the symbolic power of this act of resistance is critically undermined by the fact that suicide has become a banal "cliché" in modern Egypt. As we learn from the fishermen who pull Awad from the river, complaining that they catch more humans than fish, "everyday someone jumps into the Nile" ('Ali 2007, 33). This suggests that the problems which afflict Awad are not unique to him, or even the Nubian community of Egypt at large with its multiple indices of deprivation, but are common to most Egyptian citizens. It is this insight, more than any other, that undercuts the theme of Nubian exceptionalism and historical disadvantage which runs through much contemporary Nubian fiction to emphasise the common struggle of the Egyptian everyman against a corrupt and kleptocratic state apparatus.

Poor and the Critique of Nationalism(s)

Whereas Lisa Kaaki has argued that *Poor* leaves the reader frustrated by the narrator's repeated failure to overcome his misfortunes because he "squanders all the opportunities that present themselves and becomes a being without a purpose or plans for the future" (Kaaki 2007), I would counter that this reflects not individual failure but rather the structural inequalities that prevent social mobility within the postcolonial Egyptian state. Indeed, with Cairo represented as a dystopic, decaying space where the urban poor are reduced to thievery and prostitution merely in order to survive, there is little indication in the novel that the utopian rhetorical promises of postcolonial nationalism proffer any genuine economic or political hope for Egypt's poor.

This cynicism, reflective of what Appiah has termed "a condition of pessimism, a kind of post-optimism to balance the earlier enthusiasm for independence" (Appiah 1992, 250), is suggested in a passage which appears to prefigure the civil unrest brought about by the *Kefāya* [Enough] protests and workers' strikes of the noughties,

which culminated in the January 2011 revolution against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Analysing the anger and frustration of the Cairene poor in comparative perspective by reflecting back on the 'Revolt of the Poor' in 1952 that led to the burning and looting of downtown Cairo, the narrator asks:

> Will the rich and powerful pay attention … before it's too late? Once upon a time, they succeeded in repressing the revolt of the starving with battalions of Central Security conscripts. Then they repressed the revolt of those conscripts with the regular armed forces. The next time, not even the Marines will come to save them. A fierce storm will come down one day, devouring in its path all living and dead things. It won't stop until a new tank rider comes along. And he'll bring you all back to the beginning. ('Ali 2007, 33)

However, what initially appears to be an endorsement of the revolutionary rhetoric of socialism is undercut by the final remark: "it won't stop until a new tank rider [military leader] comes along" to bring Egypt "back to the beginning" of its democratic experiment. This remark registers an uncanny premonition about the state of post-revolutionary Egypt today where Sisi's crackdowns on freedom of expression, assembly and association within the public sphere have replaced the relatively benign dictatorship of Mubarak. Thus although, as Elliott argues, *Poor* "seems to embody a genuinely rare instance in which the subaltern does speak" ('Ali 2007, 198), it is also a situation where nobody hears his screams, indicating a level of cynicism about the ability of collective movements to effect real social change for the betterment of the people that is typical of the disenchanted postcolonial novel.

Appiah schematically describes the first stage of literary production in Africa as being grounded in anti-colonial sentiment and "the imaginative recreation of a common national past" as a means of legitimising the nascent nationalist movement (Appiah 1992, 242). This was then succeeded by a post-realist wave of literature written in the decades after independence, which was marked by a profound sense of disappointment at the failure of the postcolonial state to deliver on its promises to the people. More specifically, such disenchanted texts seek to expose the abuse of power in many African nations by what Appiah, like Fanon before him, has described as a corrupt and parasitic indigenous middle class "that took on the baton of rationalisation, industrialisation, bureaucratisation in the name of nationalism [but]

turned out to be a kleptocracy" (Appiah 1992, 242): one that appropriated national resources for its own interests rather than those of the nation as a whole.

Since this indigenous bourgeoisie often "simply take over from the settlers, not governing the state according to a more equal model of social relations" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 122), Fanon has described them as the "new colonists" who "corner the positions formerly occupied by foreigners" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 124). This appellation is interesting in the context of 'Ali's writing because whereas *Dongola* casts Egyptian rule as an Arab-Islamic occupation of Nubian lands as a means of delegitimising the Egyptian state, the concept of 'new colonialism' in *Poor* is predicated less upon notions of ethnic conquest than on the economic subjugation of the Egyptian masses – the 'Poor' of the title – by a corrupt and self-serving elite. Thus, we learn from the crowd assembled at Qasr-al Nil bridge in Cairo that "everybody's sick of it all" and "we're all fed up like you" ('Ali 2007, 31), which is suggestive of a degree of solidarity in suffering that is largely absent from 'Ali's earlier novel and indeed the fiction of other Nubian writers such as Mukhtar and Oddoul.

Set in Cairo in the year 1994, yet reflecting back on formative personal and political events in the narrator's life over the second half of the twentieth century, the novel charts the birth of the independent Egyptian state through the lens of its nameless Nubian narrator who moves from Nubia to Cairo in 1948 after a "catastrophic" flood destroys both the villagers' crops and their long-term livelihoods. He angrily recounts to the reader the interconnections between the raising of the Aswan barrage, the mass exodus of Nubian farmers to the cities of the north in search of work, and the 'revolt of the poor' in 1952, making a direct and controversial link between "the flood, the dam and bread – not to mention the dreadful locusts that sometimes appeared" ('Ali 2007, 43).

He also reflects on how the deteriorating political situation in Egypt from the Mubarak era back to the time of the Free Officers' coup of 1952 and the Suez crisis of 1956 with which the novel ends has contributed to the overwhelming sense of depression and despair which is "colonizing" him ('Ali 2007, 3). That the narrator should use the word "colonizing" in this context is highly ironic since the "Revolt of the Poor" that preceded the coup (described in vivid detail in the chapter entitled 'January 1952 Fires and Conflagrations' as the crowd loot and burn foreign-owned businesses in downtown Cairo) was explicitly sparked by a desire to restore to the

Egyptian people what they perceived had been stolen from them by the British occupation, foreign capital and the *pashas* and *beys* whom they term "imperialist collaborators" ('Ali 2007, 124).

However, unlike in Mukhtar or Qasim's work, there is no sense of 'Ali's narrator being caught up in the public's nationalist fervour, not even during the height of the 1952 revolution which is recast not as a moment of liberation and progress but rather one of greed, depravity and chaos. The casual violence and horror of the revolutionary moment is epitomised in a dystopian scene which "terrorizes" the narrator. Here as the businesses and homes of foreign nationals are being razed to the ground by an enraged crowd of arsonists, he catches sight of the so-called revolutionaries "throwing one of the looters into the fire along with what he'd stolen" while self-righteously proclaiming "whoever steals, burns" ('Ali 2007, 119). The irony of the inhumanity of this revolutionary morality is not lost on the narrator: even though he acknowledges that "these are not your streets, nor are these your shops" he professes to be highly "disturbed", at a human level, by what he has witnessed.

His father, for whom the fires symbolise class war and a popular revolution against the bourgeoisie, shows the narrator a different side to this destruction, explaining that it was always likely to happen because the poor were angry about exploitation by the *pashas* (the bourgeois class, many of whom were foreign and whose shops were explicitly targeted) ('Ali 2007, 121–22). However, he rushes to the defence of the Egyptian-owned building in which he works, on the basis that Fouad al-Shami, the owner, is qualitatively different from the privileged class the rioters are attempting to overthrow. By contrast, as the narrator emphasises with his searching question "And the Egyptians? Don't they own anything?" ('Ali 2007, 122), the president of the company and his partners are in fact complicit in the wholescale exploitation of the Egyptian poor, which not only continues into the postcolonial period but accelerates as they take over the businesses and properties of the expelled foreigners.

However, any hopes the narrator's father may have had that the revolutionary slogans of "Homeland! Resistance! Land!" ('Ali 2007, 5), repeated by the leaders of the national liberation movement, will translate into justice, equality and opportunity for Egypt's citizens are crushed by the fact that ordinary men find themselves "stuck between the army and the police, and between them there's no place for the people to exist" ('Ali 2007, 163). Even though the nationalist movement had promised to

delivering a utopian social modernity in which "there will be food in every mouth, a job for every citizen … [and] eventually Egypt will become heaven" ('Ali 2007, 134), the novel represents the 1952 revolution not as a moment of national liberation but, in keeping with the tradition of the disenchanted novel, as a moment of national deception whereby one ruling group simply took over from another and continued to monopolise the nation's resources while the poor continued to struggle.

The urban underclass of Cairo swiftly become aware of the "unutterable treason of their leaders" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 134), who are described by the narrator as "idiots" who "sold the homeland along with everything else they could sell, including "The Cause", "The Land!" and their depleted bases of operations" ('Ali 2007, 5), while ordinary men and even women had to debase themselves simply in order to survive. Similarly, while the leaders keep reminding the people of the woes of the colonial era and the glorious struggle for independence, nothing changes in the daily life of the masses who remain hungry, poor and unemployed despite the symbols of national pride on display. As a result, as Fanon predicted in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "the masses begin to sulk; they turn away from this nation in which they have been given no place and begin to lose interest in it" (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 136), mirroring the trajectory of the African disenchanted novel from enthusiasm to disillusionment with the nationalist cause.

Not only do we learn that the members of the new military elite and their families have simply taken the place of the foreigners whom the revolution had displaced, but they have done so at the expense of the Egyptian people who are consistently asked to make sacrifices to build the nation, yet whose condition never objectively improves. Echoing Fanon's fears that nationalism, as opposed to national consciousness, was simply a pretext for power on the part of the indigenous elite whose tendency to rally behind a one-party state post-independence would result in the crushing of dissident voices and the establishment of a dictatorial police state (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 119–65), *Poor* depicts how "foxes [the Free Officers] stole into Egypt's vineyards while the night watchmen slept", in the allegorical words of the epigraph on the first page of the novel, and robbed the country of its riches and resources.

Rather than issuing in a new era of opportunity, equality and progress for the Egyptian people, then, the novel reveals how the military ends up governing as if the Egyptians were "still ruled by Mamluks even if they've traded their swords for tanks" ('Ali 2007, 24), in reference to the military caste that rose from the ranks of slave

soldiers of foreign origin who governed Egypt from 1250-1517. In a scathing critique of the nationalist regime ('Ali 2007, 25), *Poor* portrays how dissent is crushed and political opponents, like the narrator's bookseller friend, are rounded up and imprisoned during the purges of 1954 for what amount to 'thought crimes' ('Ali 2007, 141).

Moreover, it depicts how justice and the rule of law are effectively suspended, suggested by the repeated use of the phrase "Don't you know who I am?" ('Ali 2007, 140) by members of the military elite and their families. Not only does this expression signify the extent to which these "big shots" regard themselves as above the law, but its use as a threat is also intended to show that they "show no mercy to anyone" ('Ali 2007, 162). This even includes young boys like the narrator who unwittingly harasses the son of a top-ranking official making out with his girlfriend in his car, and is subsequently abducted, interrogated and jailed for several nights on fabricated charges of protesting against the regime by way of revenge ('Ali 2007, 163).

The fact that the 'men in tanks' – 'Ali's short hand for the Free Officers who overthrew King Farouk in 1952, who are also referred to as members of a criminal "gang in possession of stolen money" ('Ali 2007, 22) – simply replicate the repressive behaviour of the old elite, to the extent of occupying their houses and jobs as well as taking over their businesses, reveals the self-interest at the heart of Nasser's new regime. As the narrator observes, "by theft and ruin your beautiful country has slipped into the hands of that fraction of its inhabitants who are members of the party of the fortunate, who pillage and wander through the provinces at their leisure" ('Ali 2007, 25). Here, invocation of Egypt, rather than Nubia, as the narrator's country exemplifies the differences between the rhetoric of disillusionment and despair in *Dongola*, which targets "northerners" or Arab-Egyptians as a *people* as responsible for the problems of contemporary Nubians, and *Poor*. The latter text focuses to a far greater extent on issues of *class*, in the sense of "a system of ordering society whereby people are divided into sets based on perceived social or economic status" ('Class - Definition of Class in English from the Oxford Dictionary' 2015).

Although the novel depicts the particular situation of the Nubian diaspora eking out a living in the slums of Cairo (such as the narrator, his father and their neighbours and those left starving and penniless in the under-developed resettlement villages of 'New Nubia', such as his mother and siblings), its vivid descriptions of life in the squalid alleys of Bulaq reveal the extent to which, for most ordinary people, "just to

live in this country – to barely subsist – is a miracle" ('Ali 2007, 25) due to the deteriorating economic situation. Thus, it is the poor of the title – that catch-all category which encompasses Egypt's urban and rural masses of all religions and ethnicities, rather than simply the Nubian minority, who are depicted by the novel as the primary victims of an increasingly corrupt and self-serving nationalist project which delivers only ever greater inequality, misery and humiliation.

Urban space in Cairo comes to symbolise the structural inequalities that define Egyptian society whose social hierarchies are spatially inscribed on the landscape (Naaman 2011, 107). Downtown – first perceived as a place of arrival, promise, work, wages and salvation for rural migrants like the narrator whose illusions are progressively shattered as the novel progresses – signifies all that the poor are denied by the elite. The decadence of Cairo's *Wusaṭ al-Balad* is encapsulated in the abundant and exotic foodstuffs on display behind the glass windows of the shops and restaurants, which people like the narrator and his father can see and salivate over but neither touch nor taste ('Ali 2007, 91).

The poor, meanwhile, inhabit downtown only in their capacity as doormen, janitors, drivers, gardeners, construction workers, conscripts and travellers whose role is to serve the rich and tend to their property. Their daily lives, by contrast, are segregated in "disgusting" slum ghettoes like Ma'ruf and Bulaq to which the Nubian diaspora has traditionally migrated since the raising of the Aswan barrage in 1933, the others being 'Abideen, east of Wust al-Balad and Bab al-Sha'riyya, in northeast Cairo behind the Fatimid district of al-Gamaliyya (Naaman 2011, 122) in which "humans [are] packed in like beasts" ('Ali 2007, 81). Described as "the lowest spot you've ever seen in your life" ('Ali 2007, 81), the "relative poverty" of Bulaq is depicted as worse than the "absolute poverty" of the Nubian village he left behind. This is not only because of the squalor and stench in the narrow streets in comparison with the countryside where "the sun is strong, the air is pure and the houses are roomy and clean" ('Ali 2007, 81), but also because of the extreme inequality the narrator encounters in the city and the lack of mutual aid between its inhabitants, which he interprets as a form of neglect towards her children by *Umm al-Dunya*, or 'Mother of the World' as Cairo is fondly known in Arabic.

The urban centre of Cairo is also depicted as a place where social identity – particularly rural or peripheral consciousness – is crushed by the overwhelming alienation that constitutes the dark underside of modernity. This is suggested by the

image of Cairo as a "big flesh-eating demon [that] swallows people without mercy" ('Ali 2007, 59). In contrast to traditional Nubian social norms where human value is derived from being "a somebody who's the son of a somebody in the clan that's known" ('Ali 2007, 59) the life of a Nubian in Cairo is worthless. As the narrator observes, his beloved father, who works as a doorman, is worth about as much to society as "the bench he sits on in front of the company headquarters", jumping up with an exaggerated salute whenever someone passes by, regardless of their age, which makes him recognise for the first time that "people are not equal to one another in Cairo. There are classes and hierarchies" ('Ali 2007, 87).

Through its depiction of the extreme inequality and brutalisation of the poor that exists in the capital, *Poor* demythologises Cairo – which in much Egyptian literature, notably the work of nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, symbolises the nation in miniature – focusing instead on the dystopian, destructive character of modernity in a manner characteristic of the disenchanted postcolonial text. In this sense, 'Ali's writing can be read as a response to the Egyptian writer and critic Khairy Shalaby's nostalgic celebration of the life and culture of the Cairo underworld in novels such as *Ṣaliḥ Hayṣa* (2000) [*The Hashish Waiter*, 2011] and *Wikālat 'Atiya* (2003) [*The Lodging House*, 2007], which depict districts such as Bulaq and Ma'ruf as repositories of a rural way of life. By contrast, *Poor* presents these districts in sometime shocking language as squalid slums full of "shit and garbage and flies that travel from garbage to human faces" ('Ali 2007, 81), inhabited by coarse and brutalised individuals who fight each other over scraps of food and meagre tips.

As Naaman has argued, the juxtaposition of the decadence and luxury of downtown Cairo with everyday life for the poor in Bulaq and Ma'ruf shatters the mythology of the city as a place of opportunity and social mobility for Nubian and rural migrants (Naaman 2011, 107). It is the inequality he witnesses that is the cause of much of the narrator's deep-seated resentment against the nationalist regime, coupled with the fact that, as he comes to realise, modern Egypt offers few opportunities for self-betterment, trapping the underclass in a cycle of poverty, with Nubians and other rural migrants regarded as "a zero amongst zeros" competing for "shitty jobs, the worst of which swallow up the likes of us" ('Ali 2007, 59). Even an education offers little prospect for advancement since, as the narrator discovers, it is only through having the right connections that a man of little means can get ahead in a new order riddled with cronyism and corruption.

The narrator's own life trajectory mirrors this vicious cycle of poverty, which exemplifies the underside of modernity. Arriving in Cairo with dreams of an education and career prospects, his father effectively sells him to a broker to work as a servant for a middle-class Coptic family as a young boy before he moves on to act as an errand boy for the local grocer and then as an assistant to the chef in a local Nubian restaurant. Despite struggling valiantly to learn in his free time at the "two millieme" school, populated by "flunkies, delinquents and kids who'd been expelled from public schools", in which his father eventually enrols him ('Ali 2007, 118), none of the pupils at al-Bustan Elementary School ever sit their exams. Yet even with a diploma in hand, he concedes that his prospects would remain bleak since even educated people barely earn enough to scrape by – a factor acknowledged in the novel as one of the main causes of the 'Revolt of Poor' that preceded the 1952 Free Officers' coup.

However, even after the revolutionaries, with their utopian promises of equality and human dignity, take over the country the narrator realises to his bitter surprise that "nothing changes. You remain as you are, eating nothing but fava beans all day and night, living in the same shitty room with its disgusting bathroom. Sharbat still suffers from life's adversities" ('Ali 2007, 136). Ironically, the only demonstrable difference between the *anciens* and *nouveaux régimes* that he perceives is the increasingly prevalence of violence and intimidation of Egypt's citizens by agents of the state such as soldiers, the police and security services, and their native informants, as a result of which "the average citizen is now terrified" of voicing opposition to injustice ('Ali 2007, 25).

Here, 'Ali forces his readers – used to hegemonic narratives of colonial violence and national resistance – to consider instead the uncanny parallels between colonial and postcolonial forms of irrational violence. In so doing, he "displaces the colonial experience as the most lasting and significant form of injustice experienced by a people to point to the traumas and contradictions the legacy of 'liberation' left behind" (Naaman 2011, 115). In this sense, *Poor's* pessimism about the state of the postcolonial nation is typical of writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ahmadou Kourouma and Yambo Ouologuem, all of whom challenge the legitimating narratives of first-wave national literature "in the name of the suffering victims of the new republics – the citizens" (Appiah 1992, 250). Just as their writing identified with '*la négraille*' (niggertrash) of all nations who were marginalised and downtrodden, (Appiah 1992,

246–47), *Poor*'s critique of bourgeois nationalism, as I shall go on to show in the next section, is fuelled by an empathy for human suffering that transcends the boundaries of colour, caste and creed.

Class Consciousness and Solidarity in *Poor*

Although *Poor* constitutes a scathing attack on the Egyptian nationalist project from a quintessentially Nubian perspective, the Nubian narrative, as Naaman has argued, "serves more as a symbol for the collective experience of disenfranchisement experienced by the Egyptian underclasses than as the articulation of a unique experience of ethnic or racial marginalisation" (Naaman 2011, 134). Indeed the novel – which could be described, in Appiah's terminology, as "postcolonially post-nationalist" as well as "anti-nativist" (Appiah 1992, 245) – does not challenge the oppressive legacy of Egyptian nationalism in the name of a purely Nubian ethno-national conception of community, as did *Dongola*. Rather, it appeals to a principle of class consciousness and solidarity with, and amongst, Egypt's poor that cuts across ethnic, geographic, religious, class and gender lines.

This ethic of solidarity is not manifested at the start of the novel, however. It develops alongside its nameless narrator's political consciousness as he moves from early childhood, when he experiences first-hand the discrimination and marginalisation facing the Nubian community, to adulthood, when his ethic of transracial solidarity with Egypt's poor is fostered through recognition of the shared suffering of subaltern groups at the hands of the bourgeois nationalist elite. Hence the narrative of Nubian exceptionalism grounded in the experiences of a generation directly affected by successive waves of dam-induced displacement progressively gives way to a more materialist and humanist critique of the postcolonial Egyptian state. This is grounded in the diasporic experience of the 'post-Aswan' generation of Nubians living in the cities of northern Egypt, who are more concerned with issues of social justice and class inequality that concern poor Egyptians as whole ('Ali 2007, 35).

The crystallisation of the narrator's Nubian consciousness is the result, first and foremost, of the childhood trauma of the "catastrophic" floods that accompanied the

raising of the Aswan barrage which is engrained in his personal, and indeed the community's collective, memory ('Ali 2007, 37). His vivid recollections of how the water rose quickly around him after the flood gates of the dam were opened without warning as he and his grandmother were seated on a palm frond bed in the fields, instantly destroying their crops and sweeping away their houses and livestock, sets a precedent for how the Nubian villagers perceive their dealings with the distant Egyptian authorities. Regarded as "a nation of white tyrants, the same people as Moses' pharaoh" ('Ali 2007, 44) who enslaved the Hebrews in Biblical times, the exploitative north is deemed responsible for reducing a proud "nation of farmers", who had lived autonomously on their ancestral lands for millennia, to a state of semi-slavery as the "servants and doormen" for their palaces and villas ('Ali 2007, 35).

As the narrator observes: "there was a direct link between the flood, the dam and bread – not to mention the dreadful locusts that sometimes appeared" ('Ali 2007, 43), responsibility for which is laid directly at the feet of the distant government in Cairo which "doesn't consult with its subjects. It issues commands" ('Ali 2007, 40). The decision to open the flood gates of the dam early has the immediate effect of destroying the villagers' summer crops, which caused them to go hungry that winter. However, the novel depicts how it also set off a chain reaction whose legacy of 'slow violence' has endured until the present day (Nixon 2011, 3). Thus, the restrictions on farming caused by the centrally imposed flood schedule deprives the community of self-sufficiency, forcing most remaining Nubian men to emigrate to the north in search of work, where they come to occupy the lowest rung in the social hierarchy, trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty from which, the text suggests, there is little chance of escape ('Ali 2007, 36–37).

The widely shared belief that the Egyptian state is fundamentally predatory and exploitative is reinforced by the villagers' perception that the state has unjustly confiscated Nubian land and water resources, access to which they regard as their inalienable right, giving rise to an ongoing dispute over ownership that simmers throughout the text. Not only are they unaware that they have forfeited their right to farm their ancestral lands by accepting the paltry compensation on offer from the government, so that they are now deemed to be "trespassing on state property" ('Ali 2007, 41), but they are also angered by the commodification and over-exploitation of Nile water by the north.

Exemplified by the private clubs built along the riverbank for the exclusive use of the new elite, so that ordinary people like the narrator are denied access to and separated from "this historic Nile that is yours" ('Ali 2007, 4), *Poor* implies that what Scott terms the state's "High Modernist" development agenda (Scott 1998, 4) is being pursued unevenly and unfairly, with the rich north benefiting at the expense of the poor south and the elite at the expense of Egypt's masses. Indeed the novel reveals how the ideology of 'big' development has irreversibly upset the fragile balance of the local ecology, impacting most harshly on the vulnerable Nubians scraping a living along the river's banks.

Thus, we learn how dam construction on the Nile has transformed the riverine environment, initially depicted by idyllic images of peace, fertility and plenty, into a "monstrous" landscape beset by extreme droughts and floods, where the "depraved" river" alternately "swallows planted fields like a whale" ('Ali 2007, 38) and dries up completely as the water is siphoned off for use in the fields and cities of the Nile delta. As the narrator remarks, "they take all the water … the people of the north are never sated" ('Ali 2007, 65). This phrase strongly implies that, far from benefiting all sections of society, national development in general, and the dam-project in particular, is a zero-sum game, in which northern Egypt gains resources, power and money at Nubia's expense.

This sentiment of injustice is reinforced by the relative isolation of Nubia – whether in geographic, political or cultural terms – from the rest of Egypt, as suggested by the image of Aswan as the 'Gateway to Africa' where all transport lines symbolically stop, marking out a boundary between Egypt and its African 'other' from which the Nubian people originate ('Ali 1998, 26). Here, the demarcation line separating the centre from the periphery effectively creates what El-Refaei has described as a "hierarchical, superior-inferior, racist relation between the people of the same nation", whereby Nubians are not popularly recognised as part of Egypt proper (el-Refaei 2012, 24). The dehumanisation and objectification of the Nubian community by agents of the state is apparent in the behaviour of the Egyptian schoolteacher in the narrator's village who calls the pupils "*barabra*" (blacks/savages), ridicules their customs and language, and even makes a show of "holding a handkerchief over his nose" as if the Nubians were dirty and diseased and he was afraid of catching something from them ('Ali 2007, 55–56). That the narrator's first encounters with Egypt are riven with humiliation, prejudice and deprivation

reinforces his general sense of Nubia's exceptionalism and victimisation at the hands of the north.

This is symbolically reinforced by the fact that the man-made flood which led to the dispersal of his community occurred in 1948, the same year as the Palestinian *nakba*, a factor that associates the exile of the Palestinians with that of the Nubians in the reader's mind. The parallels between their collective historical experiences of trauma are made explicit during a confrontation between the Nubian villagers and Egyptian officials over lack of proper compensation for their lost land, when someone exclaims:

> "The Jews do it there and you people do it here!"
> In a rage, the clerk said, "There is no comparison! This is Egyptian land".
> "Actually, it's Nubian land."
> "And exactly who are you then?"
> "We're Nubians."
> "No. Actually you're Egyptians. Just like me."
> "If we were really Egyptians would you have treated us this way?"
> ('Ali 2007, 42)

Here the disagreement over land ownership and sovereignty is depicted in explicitly ethno-nationalist terms, with the implication being that Egypt, like Israel, has occupied Nubian lands to exploit for its own benefit and not, as nationalist ideology holds, for the benefit of the nation as a whole, of which the Nubian people are part. As the narrator states, "It's no good to talk about working together in solidarity – about us making a sacrifice for the good of the greater national projects – if you're not going to pay us the compensation that we're owed!" ('Ali 2007, 36). Importantly, this episode defines citizenship of the postcolonial nation as being founded on equal rights and responsibilities for all, not merely as a legal category, the absence of which marks the state out as an illegitimate, occupying force.

However, even though it is couched in terms of Nubian and Arab, 'us' and 'them', this passage does not descend into the nativist trap of defending an exclusivist vision of Nubian identity defined against that of Egypt. Rather, it exemplifies the frustration felt by the narrator that "the impossible north" has failed in its duties to the Nubian citizens of Egypt. In what amounts to a public accusation directed towards

the nationalist elite, the narrator protests: "People of Egypt! What have you done to this country? This country that is also your country! Why did you dam up the Nile over Nubian lands? Why do your trains stop at Aswan? Why did you draw the border at Aswan, and with it, all the government and public services and development schemes?". He then ends his interior monologue with an emphatic "People of Egypt, we're sick and tired of you" ('Ali 2007, 35).

As El-Refaei argues, "the 1952 revolution which aimed at social justice and ameliorating the predicament of the poor ended in escalating the suffering of the Nubians, adding to their dire poverty and fragmentation" (el-Refaei 2012, 10). However, unlike in *Dongola*, the narrator's critique of the Egyptian state in *Poor* is ultimately centred not in a nativist logic of cultural difference but in the materialist logic of class, within whose hierarchies Nubians – whether in the rural setting of the resettlement site at Kom Ombo or in the diasporic milieu of contemporary Cairo – constitute a subaltern underclass within Egyptian society. What the novel attempts, then, is a robust materialist critique of the social, cultural and economic barriers that keep the Nubian community trapped in a cycle of poverty and despair as modern-day slaves toiling as doormen, servants, bellboys and concierges to the modern-day pashas, the "men in tanks".

Indeed, *Poor* explicitly invokes the discourse of class warfare by portraying the root of social conflict in contemporary Egypt, not in racial divisions between Arabs and Nubians, but between the masses and the nationalist elite whose "real dream", we are told, is to "get rid of those annoying poor people" ('Ali 2007, 26) and transform the inner city slums into "playgrounds and villages and golf courses" for the rich ('Ali 2007, 26). This emphasis on class can be linked to the narrator's avowed socialism, which is first fostered while working as a servant in the house of a Coptic businessman whose wife gives him access to their library, including the works of Marx and Gorky whose ideological influence can be traced throughout the text. His nascent class-consciousness is subsequently bolstered by his Communist friend, the bookseller, who suggests he meet the "comrades" and join the party ('Ali 2007, 131).

Whereas *Nights of Musk* and even parts of *Dongola* can be read as a celebration of an idealised, Afro-Nubian identity, *Poor* disavows such nativist sensibilities by declaring "murderous Africa, home of the sun and oppression and homicidal rulers" to be "a damned, desperate continent" ('Ali 2007, 3) whose leaders have no solutions to the collective misery faced by its peoples, regardless of race or

religion. This glaring disavowal of the core principles of pan-Africanism – namely that all African peoples "share not merely a common history, but a common destiny", and that economic, social and political progress is dependent on African unity (Makalani, n.d.), indicates the existence in the novel of what Appiah terms a state of "post-optimism" regarding the ability of populist African independence movements (of the kind advocated by Awad Shalali) in *Dongola* to deliver justice and equality for the suffering victims of these new republics (Appiah 1992, 250).

The narrator's arrival in Cairo constitutes an important moment of revelation in the text since, until that moment, he had believed that the city epitomised only wealth and opportunity for migrants in comparison with the miserable conditions of the people living in Nubia. Shocked by "how many poor people there are!" on the streets of the capital, the narrator reflects:

> You Nubians are not alone in your starvation. Cairo is a train straining under the weight of so many miserable people. Poverty. Wretched poverty. You're stunned by the glaring disparities of wealth. One is a richly dressed dandy, the next is dirty with oozing wounds, walking like the dead. Are they born of the same mother? ('Ali 2007, 77)

Just as the train to the capital is filled with people of all castes and classes, the choice of this metaphor to describe Cairo signifies an embryonic form of class-consciousness and awareness of a shared humanity in the young boy's mind – one which expresses the predicament of the Egyptian urban and rural poor in general, rather than speaking to a purely Nubian experience. It also directly echoes a passage at the start of *Dongola* in which the collective marginalisation of rural Egypt is embodied in the image of the slow train going south from Cairo, "its strange third class" comprised of Upper Egyptians, Nubians, and Sudanese passing through "the wretched country inhabited by the people of the inner and outer regions of Upper Egypt" until it reached Aswan ('Ali 1998, 22).

Moreover, *Poor* – which is written in a testimonial, 'confessional' style which exhibits an intimacy and empathy for the Cairene poor – emphasises the shared human experiences that link the Nubian and Egyptian characters in the novel in a manner that is largely absent from *Dongola*. Although the narrator is in initially disgusted by life in Bulaq, the text reveals that he quickly adapts and becomes 'one of them'. While

his first experience of Cairo is one of his difference and alienation, this "is soon eclipsed by his deeper sense of identification with members of the working classes with whom he lives and works in Cairo" (Naaman 2011, 135), who are often revealed to be as hospitable and generous as his Nubian compatriots, if not more so.

Thus, it his father's Cairene lover Sharbat, upon whom he lavishes all his money, who ultimately volunteers to help the narrator's starving mother and siblings back in Nubia, all of whom his father ignores. When he refuses to send them food and clothing, claiming he lacks the means, she intervenes and "attacks him with unexpected severity" for his stance, saying "I'm on the side of what's right, Ali … Get your money out. You just got paid" ('Ali 2007, 102). As the narrator remarks, "that day she shows herself to you to be kind and noble despite her embarrassing circumstances" ('Ali 2007, 103), in reference to the fact that, since her husband was imprisoned, Sharbat has been forced to prostitute herself to survive.

Although Sharbat is struggling to make ends meet, she nevertheless exhibits a high level of concern and care for the narrator. Even though she is technically competing against the narrator's mother for his father's affections, she takes the boy shopping to purchase clothes, canned food and medicine from Bulaq Street to send to his relatives in Nubia out of her own money on the basis that his own father is not doing his familial duty – a form of solidarity that comes before all other considerations. Thus although the narrator is often disappointed by the lack of solidarity offered in practical terms from the brutalised people of Cairo, incidents such as these are still a clarion call for the importance of class unity and mutual aid in the daily struggle of the poor to survive.

A similar ethic of human solidarity is evident amongst the crowd that surrounds the narrator after he is plucked from the river after attempting suicide from the Qasr al-Nil bridge, who are all in agreement that "this isn't the Egypt that *we* [my emphasis] used to know" ('Ali 2007, 28). As he is told in a passage which reflects the collective voice of the capital's poor, in microcosm:

 - We're all fed up like you … but do you see us trying to die apostates?
- Frankly, everybody's sick of it all
- So what? You want us all to commit suicide?
- Fine. So what's the solution?
- Get angry! Burn it down!

- Patience everybody. This tribulation will pass. ('Ali 2007, 31)

This is a key passage in the text because it reveals the existence of a common feeling of disillusionment and despair that has gripped the nation after four decades of military rule. It is also highly democratic in that it depicts how the despair that led the narrator to attempt suicide is perceived by different segments of the Egyptian population. Thus we are presented with a religious perspective, from someone who believes that suicide is a sin against God's grace; a pragmatist's perspective showing the futility of mass suicide; and a revolutionary perspective that incites the people to rise up against their rulers and "burn" the country, as happened during the so-called 'Revolt of the Poor' in 1952 when angry mobs targeted the shops, businesses and hotels of downtown Cairo which symbolised the bounty of the nation from which they were excluded ('Ali 2007, 119–31).

It is this emphasis upon the cross-cutting nature of social and economic disadvantage in contemporary Egypt that connects different members of the Cairene poor, whether Nubian or Arab, manual workers or state employees, under the bourgeois nationalist regimes of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, which suggests the existence of a profoundly humanist ethic in the text that transcends the Nubian question. Like many novelists anxious to escape the trap of neo-colonial ethnic division, 'Ali' is committed not to the idea of the nation or a traditionalist vision of Africa, but rather to the people regardless of the borders drawn between them (Appiah 1992, 246).

While it despairs of the postcolonial state, *Poor* still retains a measure of hope in humanity and, indeed, in the prospect of a more inclusive and progressive form of Egyptian national culture grounded not in ethnic identity but in critical forms of cosmopolitanism that celebrate rather than silence Egypt's plurality of religious, ethnic and social identities. Indeed, the social value of this novel lies in part in bringing silenced and marginalised voices into the national conversation, a factor which in and of itself Mignolo sees as a reformative, potentially transformative, political project operating through the "recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions", and which he defines as "border thinking" (Mignolo 2000, 736–37).

Whereas the postcolonial period may have favoured a unitary conception of Egyptian identity as a decisive site for the creation of the modern nation, 'Ali's

writing presents Egypt itself as a site of difference – a factor which necessarily means "calling into question the entire rhetorical architecture of the nationalist movement, which is predicated on unity and the eliding of difference" (Naaman 2011, 110). In many ways *Poor* exemplifies the growth of a wider trend within modern Egyptian writing known as "border literature" – a term closely associated with Mignolo's concept of "border thinking", which he explicitly defines as the "alternative to separatism" (Mignolo 2000, 736–743), whereby the marginalisation of Sinai, Nubia and Siwa within the Egyptian national imaginary is given centre stage by writers of Bedouin, Nubian and Berber origin.

While underscoring the fissures in Egyptian national identity, novels such as *Poor* also highlight the interconnectedness between the periphery and the centre, promoting minority identities as constitutive of what it means to be an Egyptian (el-Refaei 2012). Although *Poor* portrays a high degree of disenchantment with the state of the nation, its empathy with the urban and rural poor indirectly intimates how a more pluri-centric understanding of the nation and its identity may be able to overcome entrenched ethno-national divisions and to advance human rights, social justice and democracy for all Egypt's citizens, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity.

As we have seen, both *Dongola* and *Poor* constitute damning critiques of the failure of Egypt's national liberation movement to live up to its promise to develop the state for the benefit for all its citizens. Yet although both novels offer a harsh critique of Egyptian nationalism from a specifically Nubian perspective, they by no means promote "racism and separatism" as some critics have suggested (Naaman 2011, 111). Indeed, 'Ali's fiction identifies no fundamental conflict between being Nubian and Egyptian. Rather, the main hurdle to the national inclusion of minority identities that it highlights is a unitary conception of Egypt as an 'Arab' nation promulgated by the ruling elite which, as Fanon has argued, can translate into exclusionary forms of racism that simply recreate the divisive social hierarchies of colonial rule the revolution was intended to overcome (Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 125).

Although the rhetoric of Nubian separatism is a central theme in *Dongola*, it is only raised in order for its practical and ethical limitations to be exposed, revealing Nubian ethno-nationalism to be little better than a reverse form of racism to the oppressive and exclusionary Egyptian nationalism it is reacting against. Moreover, whereas *Dongola* revolves around a nativist defence of Nubia's distinctive history,

culture and traditions, which have been marginalised by the postcolonial nationalist state, and in so doing depicts the victimisation of the Nubian people *qua* people by the north, *Poor* provides a more robust materialist critique of class relations in contemporary Egypt which expresses greater trans-ethnic and trans-religious solidarity with other members of the urban and rural proletariat.

However disillusioned these texts may be with the postcolonial nation state, their rejection of both bourgeois nationalism and the short-sighted nativism of Nubian ethno-nationalism in favour of a more inclusive, humanist ethic based on an acknowledgement of solidarity in suffering dissolves national categories and produces more cosmopolitan forms of identity grounded in the universal values of Fanon's "new humanism" (Fanon 2008, 1; Fanon, Farrington, and Sartre 2001, 198). In such a context, 'Ali's writing might be said to endorse what Aijaz Ahmad has termed a more "progressive" and pluralist nationalist project, which celebrates rather than silences Egypt's ethnic and religious diversity (Ahmad 2008, 38).

Conclusion

One of the main drivers behind this study, which formed part of the White Rose University Consortium Hydropolitics Research Network, was the need to examine how local communities are addressing social and political issues of global significance such as struggles over water, which is likely to be one of the defining conflicts of the twenty-first century. Using an interdisciplinary approach which combines insights from the fields of literary and cultural studies, political ecology and critical development studies, this thesis has explored how the successive waves of forced displacement and resettlement undergone by the Nubian people between 1902 and 1964 to make way for a series of large dams on the Nile had, paradoxically, brought their community, whose perspectives and priorities were typically excluded from mainstream development debates, into conflict and conversation with the state and development agencies who have tended to promote the dam's national benefits over its significant local costs.

Addressing such questions as 'How has the Aswan High Dam been represented in literary texts as a site of symbolic struggle?', 'To what extent does Egyptian literature engage with the impact of the dam and displacement on the Nubian people?' and 'how does inclusion of Nubian perspectives on dams and development revise the postcolonial historiography of the Aswan High Dam?', this thesis has shown how analysis of contemporary Nubian literature written between 1968 and the present day can radically revise our understanding of how the displaced and their descendants conceive of the threats and opportunities large-scale development projects pose to their community *in their own terms* instead of through the eyes of development 'experts'. As such, the literature of displaced communities it is argued, may provide important new insights into the intergenerational consequences of development forced displacement and resettlement that the more qualitative, empirical and time-limited studies typically carried out by development practitioners struggle to come to grips with.

One of the original contributions of this study, therefore, is to demonstrate the specific interdisciplinary benefits that a 'literary approach' can bring to the field of Development Induced Displacement and Resettlement studies. This it has done by focusing on the imaginative processes through which Egyptian Nubians have been

able to voice their perspectives on development and political demands in the face of radical power imbalances between their community and the state and forge a diasporic Nubian identity out of the adversity of forced displacement. Not only does the fiction of authors such as Muhammad Khalil Qasim, Yahya Mukhtar, Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Idris 'Ali look to the past and attempt to creatively recapture the lost Nubian Nile World now submerged beneath Lake Nasser for posterity, but the ongoing legacy of development induced displacement and resettlement has also inspired them to look to the future and to imagine an alternative vision of Egyptian society in which the principles of cultural and ecological diversity are upheld.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One, entitled 'The Aswan Dam: Site of Symbolic Struggle', focuses on the broad theme of departures. The contextual point of departure for this study was the Egyptian state's myopic belief in 'modernisation as development' which, as a discourse, obscured the significant long-term costs of large dams on local people, and the government's stated assumptions that the Nubian people would "find stability, prosperity and a decent life" in the resettlement site at Kom Ombo. (Fahim 1983, 36). In this context, the chapter shows how the Aswan High Dam became a site of what Bourdieu terms a 'symbolic struggle' played out between hegemonic discourses celebrating the dam's perceived national benefits and a Nubian counter-narrative highlighting its significant human and environmental costs.

While the 'official' discourse on the High Dam is represented by Sonallah Ibrahim's *Insān as-Sadd al-'Ali*, 1967 [*Man of the High Dam*] which was directly commissioned by the Egyptian state's media agency MENA, this chapter argues that even critical portrayals of the High Dam written from a mainstream Egyptian perspective such as Ibrahim's later novel *Najmat Aghustus*, 1976 [*Star of August*] have tended to overlook the perspectives and priorities of the Nubian community most affected by it, in what could be construed as a form of symbolic violence. By contrast, Muhammad Khalil Qasim's novel *al-Shamandūra*, 1968 [*The Buoy*] constitutes a major intervention in the ongoing symbolic struggle over the High Dam by placing

Nubian voices at the heart of the narrative and articulating both the community's initial resistance to dam building on the Nile and the subsequent fight for social and economic justice in the face of the high-handed Egyptian administration, thus rewriting the historical record from a subaltern perspective. Despite its sympathy for the disenfranchised Nubian oustees, however, *The Buoy* stops short of critiquing hegemonic development discourses which construe large dams as engines for national development and social progress.

By contrast, Yahya Mukhtar and Haggag Hassan Oddoul – two Nubian authors closely associated with the revivalist movement known as the Nubian Awakening – are significantly more critical of the High Dam's legacy, which they view as disenfranchising and dispossessing generations of Nubians over both the shorter and longer term. Entitled 'National Development, Nubian Disaster? The Legacy of the Aswan High Dam in Contemporary Nubian Fiction', Chapter Two analyses the diverse ways in which Mukhtar's novel *Jibāl al-Kohl: Riwāya men al-Nūba*, 2001 (*Kohl Mountains: a Novel of Nubia*) and Haggag Hassan Oddoul's collection of short stories *Layāli al-Misk al-'Atiqa*, 2002 (*Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia*, 2005) subvert the symbolic power of the Aswan High Dam to counter the 'layered invisibility' of the Nubian people in postcolonial Egypt by recasting their lost Nubian Nile World at the centre of a revived Nubian national(ist) imaginary. Central to this chapter, therefore, is the theme of 'returning' to Nubia, be that through dreams of a physical return to the land which animate much of Oddoul's work or the importance of imaginative responses to displacement in articulating a psychic 'return' to Nubia through the construction of collective memory and the creation of an 'imaginary' Nubian homeland in the diasporic context.

Whereas Oddoul's fiction responds to the 'othering' of Nubia in Egyptian popular and nationalist discourse by articulating a powerful Nubian counter-narrative framed in terms of a shared collective history, memory and culture distinct from that of the wider Egyptian nation, Chapter Three, entitled 'Beyond Nubia? The 'Post-Aswan' Generation and the Fiction of Idris 'Ali', explores how 'Ali's fiction reflects the emergence of a diasporic consciousness amongst Egyptian Nubians of the 'post-Aswan' generation. While texts such as *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1998) and *Poor* (2007) still place the particularistic experience of the Nubian people at the heart of the national narrative – a tactic which reflects its associations with the broader trend within modern Egyptian writing known as 'border literature', whereby the cultures

and societies of Egypt's minorities, normally treated as peripheral, are brought centre-stage – they do not embrace Nubian ethno-nationalism, as some critics have suggested.

Rather, this chapter reveals how 'Ali's writing succeeds in moving the parameters of Nubian fiction beyond recurrent representations of the trauma of dam-forced displacement and its long term impacts on Nubian culture and society. Instead, it shines a spotlight on the shared experience of oppression that unites Nubians with other subaltern groups within Egyptian society who continue to fight for rights, recognition and social justice today. Examining the extent to which narratives of the Nubian Awakening situate Nubia within the wider Egyptian national culture, this chapter suggests that Nubian literature has been instrumental in the gradual emergence of a more inclusive and progressive form of Egyptian national culture grounded in what Mignolo and Go have respectively termed a "critical" (Mignolo 2000) or "postcolonial" (Go 2013) cosmopolitanism, which celebrates rather than silences Egypt's plurality of religious, ethnic and social identities yet locates Nubian identity and politics firmly within the Egyptian nation.

Original Contributions of the Thesis

The original contributions of this study are twofold. Firstly, the overall purpose of the thesis is to make the case for the added value that a humanities, particularly literary, approach can bring to the field of DIDR studies. Informed by the powerful critique of dam building and its human and environmental consequences that developed in the 1980s and 90s, a consensus is now emerging within the academy and amongst development practitioners that "the central problem of displacement and resettlement is essentially the uprooting of people and the destruction of homes and communities in the name of progress" (Oliver-Smith 2011, 3). Furthermore, if the legacy of resettlement failure is to be reversed, a bottom-up, people-centred approach to understanding the long-term legacy of resettlement on displaced communities is required (McCully 2001; Oliver-Smith 2009; Downing and Garcia Downing 2009; Oliver-Smith 2011; Bennett and MacDowell 2012).

The current state of research indicates that the effects of involuntary displacement and resettlement should not only be studied in the macrocosmic terms favoured by environmental science and public policy analysis, but in microcosmic terms that pay particular attention to the socio-cultural impact of development projects, an approach which Michael Cernea has called "putting people first" on the basis that "resettlers are the key resource for achieving a positive outcome" to large dam projects (Scudder 2006, 22). However, this attention to the perspectives and priorities of displaced peoples has not yet been matched by an acknowledgement of the value that literary and cultural studies can bring to our understanding of the long-term impacts of forced resettlement on affected communities like the Egyptian Nubians displaced to make way for the Aswan High Dam in 1964. This is despite the fact that literary texts have historically been key sites for representing the stories and experiences of peoples subjected to collective traumas such as slavery, the Holocaust and Apartheid.

As I argue in the Introduction, literature's capacity to make "the unapparent appear … accessible and tangible by humanising drawn out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses … challenging perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bringing into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory collaboration" (Nixon 2011, 15), can correct the biases of top-down, macroscopic analyses of the environmental and human consequences of large dams which dominate the field of DIDR studies. Moreover, literature's 'long lens' has an important role to play in articulating the complex, contradictory and often shifting effects of involuntary displacement within displaced communities over time which DIDR theorists, using more quantitative methodologies and a project-based approach, often struggle to grasp.

By representing the changing perspectives and priorities of those whose voices are typically excluded from the development debate, therefore, Nubian literature has an important role to play in breaking down hegemonic development discourses equating the Aswan High Dam with economic, technological and social progress. It does so by drawing attention to the dam's unacknowledged long-term costs for the estimated fifty thousand Egyptian Nubians displaced to the area known as 'New Nubia' near Kom Ombo, north of Aswan, and their descendants which can be characterised, following Rob Nixon, as a form of 'slow violence'.

Moreover, literature is capable of 'humanising' DIDR studies by placing identity politics, personal stories, and a more nuanced approach to human-environmental relations at the core of our understanding of how development-forced displacement affects communities over a period of generations (Carrigan 2015, 131). It also has the potential, when taken in comparative perspective, to reveal the relationship between different cultural experiences of development-induced displacement and resettlement across the globe (Carrigan 2015, 119). Through the affective pull of their imaginative testimony, Nubian authors such as Muhammad Khalil Qasim, Yahya Mukhtar, Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Idris 'Ali have enhanced public awareness of the negative long-term consequences of dam building on the Nubian community over the course of the twentieth century through their fiction, thus bolstering the legitimacy of Nubian rights claims at both national and international levels.

Although some social scientists have questioned the value of literary testimony as an historical resource on the basis that human memory "bears the imprint of bias, distortion and even exaggeration" (Roy and Bhatia 2008, xiii), I have argued that literature "need not lead us away from history but can afford unique access to [it]" (Craps 2013, 11) by articulating otherwise inexpressible and inaccessible intergenerational traumas. Indeed, as Hirsch has argued, what distinguishes literature from history is its ability to mediate an affective link to, a sense of living connection with, the past on the part of the reader (Hirsch 2012, 33). Consequently, literature has the capacity to deliver human insights into communal traumas such as forced displacement and resettlement, mediating "the relationship victimised groups establish between their past and present circumstances" (Rothberg 2009, 2). This is particularly relevant to our understanding of why Nubian authors who did not directly experience the trauma of dam-induced displacement are intimately involved in its discursive transmission and memorialisation as a form of collective memory, in a context where the High Dam's traumatic legacy remained largely unacknowledged by the Egyptian state.

Secondly, in terms of its broader contribution to literary studies, this study has argued that Nubian Literature should be viewed in a relation of subalterneity to the broader field of postcolonial Egyptian literature, as a 'minor' literature written in the 'major' voice of Arabic, rather than as a subsection of it. Grounding my analysis in the insights and methods of critics as diverse as Barbara Harlow, Gillian Whitlock,

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari amongst others, I explore how Nubian authors have constituted the Aswan High Dam as a site of what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic struggle' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 174). Their subversive interventions in the Egyptian literary field, I argue, speak through the silence at the heart of the Egyptian establishment about the ongoing physical and symbolic violence of forced displacement on the Nubian community. Moreover, by drawing attention to Egypt's rural, African identities, narratives of the Nubian Awakening challenge unitary and exclusivist representations of Egyptian national culture as essentially urban, northern and Arab, thus creating a more democratic space in which marginalised groups can claim a place for their subjectivities, and thus political aspirations and cultural practices, within the national imaginary.

My close reading of five major Nubian novels and collections of short stories, from Muhammad Khalil Qasim's *The Buoy* (1968), which is widely regarded as the first Nubian novel, to Yahya Mukhtar's fictional displacement memoir *Kohl Mountains* (2001), Haggag Hassan Oddoul's ground-breaking collection of short stories *Nights of Musk: Stories From Old Nubia* (2002) and Idris 'Ali's novels *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (1998) and *Poor* (2007) which were amongst the first Nubian literary texts to be translated into English, also aims to fill a major gap in the literary criticism of Egypt, which has largely side-lined the emerging genre of Nubian Literature to date.

With the exception of a book chapter entitled 'The Proletarian Revolution that Never Was: Idris 'Ali's Nubian Perspective', included in Mara Naaman's monograph *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature : Portraits of Cairo* (2011), and two recent journal articles about the fiction of Idris 'Ali written by Fatin Abbas and David Dimeo, namely 'Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and Nubian Diasporic Identity in Idris Ali's Dongola: A Novel of Nubia' (Abbas 2014) and 'Unimaginable Community: The Failure of Nubian Nationalism in Idris Ali's Dongola' (Dimeo 2015), both of which appeared in the journal *Research in African Literatures*, no significant analysis of Nubian literary texts or their wider contribution to the Egyptian literary sphere has yet been published in English.

Limitations of this Study

Although my thesis analyses literary texts written by three generations of Nubian writers from 1968 to the present day, its scope is inevitably limited by linguistic and time constraints. The fact that no contemporary Nubian writing, with the exception of Idris Ali's novels *Dongola* and *Poor* and Haggag Hassan Oddoul's collection of short stories *Nights of Musk: Stories from Old Nubia*, has yet appeared in English or French translation meant that the vast majority of the primary, and much of the secondary, reading had to be conducted in Arabic. While it is hoped that my analysis of the Arabic-language fiction and related critical commentary will help make Nubian literature more accessible to a wider international readership, it is important to note the time it took to read and transcribe these texts necessitated an approach to the material which was selective rather than comprehensive in nature.

Consequently, this thesis does not fully explore other relevant works by the same authors, such as Yahya Mukhtar's novels *'Arūs al-Nīl*, 1989 (*Bride of the Nile*) and *Ma' al-Ḥayāt*, 1992 (*Water of Life*) or Idris 'Ali's works *al-Luʻab Fawq Jibāl al-Nūba* , 2002 (*Playing atop the Nubian Mountains*) and *al-Nūbi*, 2008 (*The Nubian*), all of which touch on the short and long term legacy of forced displacement on the Nubian people in the wake of the High Dam's construction. Similarly, time constraints also prevented me from widening the scope of the thesis by bringing in other notable Nubian authors such as Hassan Nur whose novel *Beyn al-Nahr w-al-Jabal*, 1991 (*Between River and Mountain*) directly addresses the question of forced displacement and resettlement on the Nubian people.

The same holds true for new Nubian voices such as Sherif Abd al-Magid whose collection of short stories *Tāksi Abyaḍ*, 2014 (*White Taxi*) has been described as a Kafkaesque take on the turbulent years following the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 from the perspective of Egypt's middle class, mocking reality through its use of fantasy (al-Sarwy 2014). Like Idris 'Ali's fiction, 'Abd al-Magid's work focuses explicitly on the current situation of Nubians within the metropolises of Cairo and Alexandria rather than on their past way of life, suggesting how future research might look beyond the immediate issue of the Aswan High Dam to how a modern, diasporic Nubian identity is being constructed within literary fiction.

Another limiting factor encountered when researching and writing this thesis was the lack of available literature written by Nubian women writers. Indeed, to the

best of my knowledge and belief, based on extensive bibliographic research and after making extensive enquiries in the publishing centres of Cairo and Beirut, as well as with senior members of the Nubian Cultural Club based in Abideen, Cairo (which is a well-known location for Nubian writers and intellectuals to meet and mingle), no work of literary fiction written by a Nubian woman has yet to be published commercially. As a result, this study focuses exclusively on the work of male authors, raising considerable issues relating to gender balance and collective representation.

This lack of female voices is particularly problematic when it comes to assessing the extent to which male Nubian authors, who have tended to take on the role of porte-parole for their community at large (see the Introduction), succeed in representing the views and concerns of Nubian women. In a socio-political context in which Nubian women are typically depicted as the carriers of traditional values at threat from Arabisation and assimilation, the nostalgic glorification of life in Old Nubia by some of the Nubian literature assessed in the chapters above may have the effect of reinforcing patriarchal oppression. This is true even with regards to writers such as Idris 'Ali, whose depiction of 'The Sorrows of Hushia and Halima' in Part III of *Dongola*, as analysed in Chapter Three, is critical of aspects of the treatment of women within Nubian society.

Reflections and Recommendations

This study deliberately adopted a chronological approach to the topic, based on the three 'waves' of Nubian writing identified in the Introduction, as a means of teasing out how it has evolved stylistically and thematically from 1968 to the present day. Building on this scholarly foundation, future research might, with advantage, focus to a greater extent on the 'Post-Dam' generation of Nubian authors who did not experience the trauma of dam-induced displacement and resettlement directly. Whereas the fiction of writers such as Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Yahya Mukhtar is backward-looking, engaging in the nostalgic remembrance and recreation of life in Old Nubia and the effects of forced displacement on the Nubian community in the years immediately following construction of the High Dam, the fiction of Idris 'Ali and Sharif Abd al-Magid, amongst others, actively explores new ways of being

Nubian fifty years after Nubia was submerged under Lake Nasser and the community had been resettled multiple times. As a result, their writing tends to focus less on the dam's construction and its immediate aftermath and more on the project of recreating Nubian identity in a diasporic context where shared geography and language no longer apply.

Nubian literature had, until recently, been almost entirely neglected by literary critics working in both Arabic and the European languages. This is despite the fact that Nubian authors such as Haggag Hassan Oddoul and Yahya Mukhtar have been awarded a number of prestigious literary prizes, with Oddoul and Mukhtar winning the State Encouragement Award for Fiction in 1990 and 1991 respectively and Oddoul being awarded the 2005 Sawiris Cultural Foundation's prize for his novel *Ma'tuq al-Khayr* (2004). In terms of future research, a more in-depth study of the literary development of influential authors such as Oddoul, whose output over the last twenty years has been prolific and has gained significant national and international recognition, would also be worthwhile in terms of plugging this significant gap in the literary criticism of Nubia and in delineating Nubian literature as a field distinct from mainstream Egyptian literature.

Going forward, if no Nubian women's writing appears commercially researchers may wish to seek out and interview female authors whose work is self-published or which appears in blogs or on social media in order to gain a more nuanced insight into gendered perspectives on the effects of dam-induced displacement and resettlement on the livelihoods and identities of Nubian women. It would also be worth placing the narratives of the 'Nubian Awakening' examined in this thesis in comparative perspective by examining the personal and imaginative responses to DIDR of other peoples who have been forcibly displaced from their home-places to make way for big development projects, much as the historian Peter Read has done in his study *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Read 1996).

Such an approach could enhance our understanding of the long term psycho-social and cultural effects of dam building on successive generations of oustees in different locations across the globe in both universal and relative terms. This has the potential to tease out the similarities and differences between particularistic experiences of development-induced displacement and resettlement at the local level and the wider parallels at a global level, as has been demonstrated in recent research that advocates taking a literary approach to Disaster Studies (Carrigan 2015, 119). It

would also place the assumptions, values and priorities of development planners in conversation with those of communities most affected by 'big development' schemes, as a means of determining to what extent dams do, in fact, equal development, in the eyes of the "people in the way" (McCully 2001, li).

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