

Warring Images in the Struggle for Sudan: Between the Image of Reality and the Reality of the Image

Hassan Musa

DURING ANY CONFLICT, or all-out war, all images fight. They don't hang passively on walls, on billboards, on the sides of buses, on cleaning products and other everyday items, and in the case of Sudan, on luxury goods, like perfume bottles. When an image, a piece of literature, or any act of performance or musical work captures people's attention, it becomes a political lever; it picks sides. As the Prussian officer and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz said, "War is a continuation of politics by other means." In a similar fashion, all artistic practice becomes a battleground between opposing factions, where aesthetic, ideological, and cultural conflicts are waged not with weapons, but with forms, ideas, and expressions.

Art works like Picasso's "Guernica," Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People," or Alberto Korda's portrait of Che Guevara are easily recognizable as political propaganda. But art like Paul Gauguin's series of Tahitian women, or Vincent Van Gogh's flowers, deploy their politics in more discreet ways. After all, they have been deemed "Master" pieces by the gaze of the dominant class—he who pays the piper, in this case, calling the tune. The concept of a masterpiece of art, in itself, immediately establishes a hierarchy of categories between Art and Non-Art. Pop Art explodes this binary by introducing ordinary images. Andy Warhol turned "ordinary" images of Campbell's Soup or Coca-Cola ads into extraordinary art works, giving European Art new life. Warhol may have been acting directly on Marcel Duchamp's concept of "le regardeur"—one who creates the artwork through his gaze. So much of that gaze has been through the eyes of the dominant class; no piece of European art has escaped this power dynamic. Not least because every work is influenced by Christianity and puts forth that point of view. Early in my studies, I discovered that it is almost impossible to understand

European painting without studying the Bible. For example, to understand a contemporary work such as Wim Delvoye's "Cloaca", it is important to see it as a Christian meditation on the destiny of humanity, as a treatment of Matthew 11:15: "A man is not defiled by what enters his mouth, but by what comes out of it." The iconic images that have arisen in Sudan may not openly refer to the Christian world, but even they are sometimes touched by it, colonialism being what it was and is. What is beyond doubt is that seeing itself has always been a battleground of great intensity; iconoclasts and iconolaters (*biconolates*) meet there to do battle.

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The Colonial Portrait of al-Mahdi

The portrait of Mohammad Ahmed al-Mahdi (1844–1885), the revered revolutionary leader who shook the foundations of Anglo-Egyptian rule, is the very first national icon; it is *the* graphic representation of the father of the Sudanese national revolution and, as such, recognized and embraced by all Sudanese people. Despite its stature among the Sudanese people, this portrait was not created by a Sudanese artist. It was made in Britain, by an unknown British visual artist, who had never seen al-Mahdi in person and, moreover, couldn't help but see him through a nineteenth-century European Orientalist lens. Fake or not, this image of Al-Madhi served the British narrative at the time. General Charles Gordon (1833–1885), the governor of Sudan, had found himself besieged by Madhist rebels in Khartoum, and this image of Al-Madhi helped lend support to the campaign to rescue him. Rescuing Gordon was Britain's outward goal. Its underlying aim, however, was to reclaim Sudan from the Mahdist state, so that it could serve the interests of colonial capitalist circles.

As part of Britain's multi-pronged campaign against Sudan, Gordon was portrayed as a Christian hero on a mission to civilize Sudan, a humanitarian warrior fighting against the slave trade. In this colonial version of the general, Gordon Pasha is not a crusader for the Holy Land, but a crusader of nineteenth-century capitalism. In his Ottoman military uniform (Image 1), he evokes the iconic image of "Richard the Lionheart" (1157–1199), while the portrait of Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi is framed as Saladin (c. 1137–1193), the leader of the Muslim forces who victoriously fought against the Europeans during the Crusades.

After the fall of the Mahdist state and the establishment of the "Anglo-Egyptian Condominium," (1899–1955) in which Britain



Gordon Pasha, Charles Gordon.



Al Mahdi by unknown British artist.



Portrait of Al Madhi on Sudanese stamp.



Giha / Musa Qism al-Din's Madhi.

regained power, the British sought to tame the Mahdists, who had rebelled against them. They succeeded in winning over al-Mahdi's son, Abdul Rahman, grooming him to be a businessman, so that he found himself at the forefront of Sudanese capitalism. He eventually turned into Britain's strongest political ally in Sudan. Abdul Rahman al-Mahdi founded what is known as "Neo-Mahdism," a modern venture

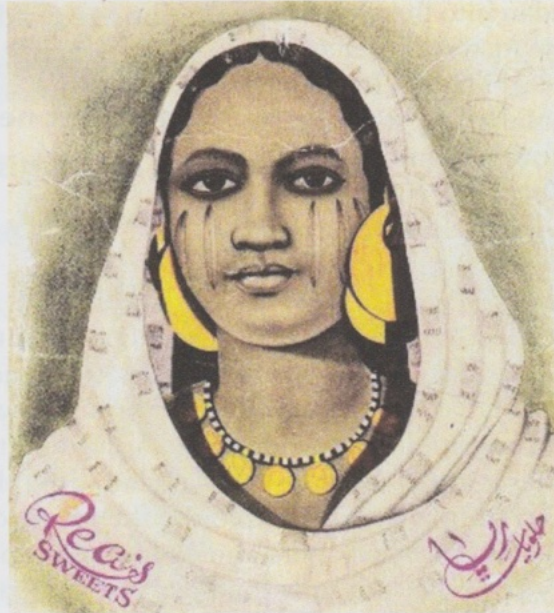
to integrate Sudan into the global capitalist economy. At the center of this venture was the Al-Mahadi Incorporation (Da'rat al-Mahadi), established as a family business that mixed money, faith, and politics. After the Madhist rebellion, its fighters flocked around Al-Madhi's son, awaiting the leader's

Sudanese traditional society is in a state of permanent negotiation with modernist cultural propositions.

"signal" to resume the jihad against the infidels. Instead, Abdul Rahman al-Mahdi converted his inherited spiritual power into capitalist power and then, eventually, political power. His Al-Mahadi Incorporation (Da'rat al-Mahadi) transformed Al-Madhi's followers into an army of agricultural employees, who worked according to capitalist labour laws under a wage labour system wangled with religious allegiance. The heirs of Imam Mahdi exploited the image of al-Mahdi in publications such as newspapers and books, monopolizing the national history of Sudan not only for their vast company, but for the benefit of their political-religious organization, the Umma Party. Since the 1950s, that false British image of al-Madhi has been plastered everywhere and, as a result, has become entrenched in the minds of all Sudanese people as the iconic representation of Imam Mahdi.

The "New Icon Imperative"

In essence, the fabricated image of al-Mahdi was a highly effective political tool as it filled a need in Sudanese traditional society. Wide segments of the Sudanese urban public had modernized, and what I call a "new imperative for icons" had arisen. The genesis of this new imperative can be attributed to the fact that the nascent urban society—brought about through the insistent destruction of the traditional society—no longer recognized itself in the old images of the now-defunct traditional community. Sudanese traditional society is in a state of permanent negotiation with modernist cultural propositions. One Sudanese art that reconciled the Islam of the Arab migration with the indigenous practice of writing on the surface of the skin was that of painting the body with henna. But even a syncretic practice such as this did not speak to a modern capitalist society. As a result, the urban public was compelled to contrive new iconic symbols that would capture their newly acquired modern identity. To meet this pressing need, the urban communities witnessed the emergence of self-made artists (such as Ali Osman, Jiha, Al-Arifi the Elder, and others) whose artwork offered the people of the urban centers new images, which were exhibited in modern urban spaces, such as cafes, public forums,



Jiha Gism al-Seed, Candy packaging for Raya Sweets, featuring the Sweets' pinup girls. Courtesy Hassan Musa.

and on new media platforms, like shops and buses. In the works of these urban artists, people were given the chance to contemplate nostalgic depictions of idyllic rural landscapes, serene villages, or scenes of daily life in modern cities, including portraits of sports stars and urban beauties, which borrowed from the well-known genre of the “pin-up girl.”

Spiritual-Political Branding on a Bottle of Perfume

Since the 1930s, Sudanese urban communities have gotten used to the widespread presence of popular icons acting as symbols of social life in Sudan. Following the urge of this “new imperative for icons,” the custodians of the “Neo-Mahdist” movement developed a modern political discourse targeting a semi-literate audience—one that could nevertheless immediately recognize the image of the spiritual and political leader, an image thoroughly publicised and spread among them through modern material media, from print publications, like *Ratib al-Mahdi*, and written litanies or invocations, to quotidian household goods. Not to be outdone, the Mahdi family’s political rivals, whose disciples rallied behind the family of the Khatmiyya sect leader, Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani, sought to benefit from the dissemination of their own images on everyday objects to consolidate their political and religious identity.

These images have reached the most private of domestic spaces. Urban dwellers have imported bottles of perfumes from Egypt, such



Perfume label with Sayyid Abdul Rahman El-Mahdi. (From al-Shibrawishi Perfumes in Sudan). Courtesy Salah Elmur.



Perfume label with Sayyid Ali Al Merghani. (From al-Shibrawishi Perfumes in Sudan). Courtesy Salah Elmur.



Perfume label with Sayyid Ali Al Mahdi. (From *al-Shibrawishi Perfumes in Sudan*). Courtesy Salah Elmur.

as *Bint al-Sudan* perfume, which bore the name and image of one of the two sectarian leaders, Sayyid Abdul Rahman El-Mahdi or Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani. Occasionally, you could even find perfume bottles that combined symbols of the two rival sects in a spirit of “ecumenical” tolerance that transcended the religious rivalry and doctrinal differences between the two sects, as was the case with *Sayyid Ali El-Mahdi* perfume.

The Poet Revolutionary

From the 1920s to the 1930s, several associations, from reading clubs to theatrical groups, emerged on the Sudanese political scene—mainly in urban centers such as Khartoum, Omdurman, Wad Madani, Senner, and Atbara. The first educated generation of the urban middle class—those that graduated from modern schools—led this cultural movement. This urban vanguard organized activities—poetry readings, literary nights, and theatrical performances—with the simple goal to entertain the residents of the main Sudanese cities (such as Khartoum, Madani, Al-Obeid, Port Sudan, and Wadi Halfa). However, most of these educated people harboured anti-colonial political sentiments—and eventually evolved into an elite political vanguard, which led all political action in Sudan. Founded in 1921, the secret anti-colonialist group active in Omdurman



Hassan Musa, *Portrait of Khalil Farah*, 1977. Ink on paper. Courtesy Hassan Musa.

known as *Foz Salon* operated under the cover of a literary salon. The association of Al-Liwaa Al-Abiyad, founded as a cultural association soon became the political group Unity of the Nile Valley, which supported a federation between Sudan and Egypt under the Egyptian crown. The literary association of Al-Hashmab, founded in Omdurman as a reading

club, was also driven by strong anti-colonialist sensibility. In addition to these groups, the magazine *Alfajr* also served as a forum for nationalist poets and political commentators active during the thirties. The pioneering poet and singer Khalil Farah was a member of the Sudanese Union Society, which pushed for Sudanese independence and a unique Sudanese identity. Most of the members of this society were poets who left their mark on the nation's literature. Among these now-canonical poets were Al-Amin Ali Madani and Tawfiq Salih Jibril.

One of the most prominent and influential among these pioneers was Khalil Farah, who nourished the national sentiments of his generation with his poetry and patriotic songs. Khalil Farah epitomized the figure of a staunch dissenter and anti-colonial poet; with a number of his contemporaries following in his footsteps. In his poem "Azza, In Your Love" he used the common female name "Azza" to symbolize the homeland. Under the cover of a love poem, he wrote a nationalist poem, which inspired the movement toward independence:

If you reflect, O one of great virtue
Or if you grasp a bit of wisdom
Know that Azza is not a woman
Azza, O Faw, is the homeland

*Faw is vernacular Sudanese Arabic
that describes an innocent naive person

Among the heirs of the national poet al-Khalil, there was Mahjoub Sharif, who continued al-Khalil's legacy by using vernacular poetic expressions of love for the homeland. These poems have been embraced and chanted aloud by the masses whenever a new tyrant jumps to power. It is no wonder that Mahjoub's words in defense of the homeland—expansive and vast—have continued to fuel the popular movement against tyranny. Throughout modern Sudanese political uprisings against the military dictatorship—regimes that succeeded one another in Sudan from 1958 to 2024—the masses have sung the following poem:

A homeland that is expansive and vast
We do not build it alone
Nor with the noise on the radio
Nor with passionate speeches
A homeland where we are equal
We dream, we read, we heal

Houses with electricity and water
 Beneath us, darkness collapses
 We greet the dawn with our caps

Mahjoub Sharif's poem, which draws upon the sentiments of angry protestors as well as tender expressive popular rhetoric, exposes the



Hassan Musa, *Portrait of Mahgoub Sharif*, 2011. Acrylics on printed paper. Courtesy Hassan Musa.

traditional figure of the “ignorant ruler-dictator,” without any circumlocution—much like a child addresses the public “Look! Here comes our stark-naked king.” During General Nimeiri’s rule (1969–1985), Mahjoub Sharif spent ten years in prisons as a political detainee. During the reign of the Islamists under General Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019), Mahjoub Sharif spent six further years in the regime’s prisons and its horrendous “ghost houses”—the secret prisons to which many disappeared, sometimes never to be seen again. His heroic path gave his simple words added authority, and Sudanese fighters for democracy and justice have adopted them as a vital tool. His songs have been embraced by political opposition fighters, chanted during detention, in the isolation of exile, or while launching protest rallies in the streets amidst the crowds:

Your prisoners, yes, we are your prisoners,
We chirp in your dungeons,
Birds wounded by your knives,
We sing in your jail cells,
While you shake and tremble in your palace,
Yes, we are your prisoners.

Mahjoub Sharif paved the way for younger opposition poets, such as Mohamed Taha al-Qaddal (1951–2021), who expressed his gratitude to Mahjoub in an ode to his life’s work:

You neither give vent to irksome pain—secreted deep
in your heart,
Nor, in meekness, bow down your head, or rant
arrogantly.
Neither imprisonment have bent your high stature,
nor did the dungeons or prison wards.
To the weak and downtrodden, your welcoming spacious
path is laid out,
to the unjust, your words are but open graves.
You are an open classroom to teach the love of a homeland,
imperilled, yet stoutly forbearing.

Lines from another younger poet, Mohammed Hassan Salim Hummaid (1956–2012) fearlessly accuse the dictators of brazen murder and serve as a warning—the people will have their vengeance:

And you’ll fall, with no regret, nor forgiveness will ever
be of benefit,
You will meet, O manslayer, your just retribution,
You’ll face the reckoning, sooner than you think,

The day we say enough to vengeance
vengeance would bellow: Not enough yet!

And here is Azhari Mohamed Ali's poem:

A hail of bullets direct to the head
Fired by thugs of a corrupt state,
Shall not break the willpower of the people,
Even though the targeted goal is hard to reach.
Under the grip of a despotic state,
How many more funeral tents are to be set up?
The president's private guard is under its protection.
A young lad, content, and entertaining,
is counted on to bear the burden,
In your nightmarish night, a witness to Soba's destruction
yet a blindfolded witness to a homeland downtrodden,
on a day of severe distress when the world is turned
upside down.

The Enduring Figure of Azza

Poetry was at the heart of the peaceful popular uprising at the outset of the December 2018 revolution. Sudanese youth—many inspired by the same poems written by Farrah, Sharif, and Hummaid—rose to topple decades of dictatorship. It was enough for a clique of only ten lads, who had learned the same poem by heart, to come together and start singing it in chorus; others would soon join, sharing in the uproarious chants and staging a sort of joyful “happening” or performance all the while standing in fierce opposition to the government. This scene would then morph into massive ear-splitting demonstrations and parades as the youth rallied through the streets of cities and towns, across the country.

As a young boy during the October 1964 Revolution, I followed the demonstrations with great passion, following the protestors who roamed the streets and squares of our provincial city, El-Obeid. The city had, overnight, transformed into a vast stage, teeming with demonstrators from all segments of society, opposed to the rule of General Ibrahim Abboud (1958–1964). Those demonstrations were an unforgettable experience.

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However, the parades and rallies of the December 2018 revolution were different; they had a new theatrical and visual dimension. Unlike previous demonstrations, this one was marked by the overwhelming presence of women of all ages. Demonstrators also occupied public space in a different way, staging it with guarded barricades and sometimes digging trenches to prevent security cars from entering the demonstration zone, thus ensuring the continuity of the collective protest. They would sometimes set this stage alight with the flames and the smoke of burning used car tires. Around the barricades, the scenes of this “theatrical performance” unfolded, in which the destinies of the actors and actresses intersected in a movement of solidarity and spontaneous exchange—all to express their rejection of the military rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

One image captured the soul of the December Revolution: a woman in a white toub who had climbed atop a car, arms raised, reciting revolutionary poetry to tens of thousands of protestors. That woman was Alaa Salah, an engineering student who, at that moment, became the face of the revolution, a symbol of defiance and hope:

We are the ones who fed the Nile... with our wrathful
boiling blood,
We don't opt for silence... in the face of a tyrant's agent,
Fear is without roots...
And I am the grandchild of Taharqa,
A descendant of a Kandake and Abd al-Fadil al-Mahz.
The warriors who kept their heads uplifted.
Oh Mother, the youth will prevail

When it was first posted on social media, the photo, taken by Lana Haroun, went viral in hours. The video remains online on YouTube, testament to the revolution. She was dubbed the “Icon of the Revolution.” Though she rejected the title, the symbolic resonance of the image of the Sudanese girl in her traditional dress could not be stopped. The image and title stuck because the opposition's masses

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were in dire need of a new image to embody this rebellious popular movement—in which women had taken on an unprecedented role. Few people will fail to recognize the iconic logic of Alaa Salah's image. Unsurprisingly, the BBC chose it as a photo of the year because of its worldwide impact. The truth was the world was responding to much more than the (impact) of Alaa Salah's image alone.



Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Images endure in our collective memory because they reinforce each other. For example, the image of Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi was constructed within the colonial framework of European Orientalism, which was founded on vestiges of the Crusader narrative that pitted the Muslim East against the Christian West. René Magritte speaks to this phenomenon, commenting on his painting *The Son of Man* (*Le fils de l'homme*) (1964), in which a green apple veils the face of a person standing in front of a wall: "Every image before our eyes hides other masked images."

The image of Alaa Salah disguises a series of images of revolutionary figures throughout European art history. These images helped prepare our collective consciousness to immediately understand the image of Alaa Salah as the face of the Sudanese revolution. First and foremost among those revolutionary images was that of "Liberty Leading the People" (1830) by the French artist Eugène Delacroix. The Delacroix painting of a Parisian revolutionary woman holding the French flag high over the barricades somehow appears, in many variations, in images of popular uprisings in the world, including "Occupy Wall Street"; "Indignados Madrid"; the Arab Spring uprisings in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Tunisia, and the Algerian movement; Bahrain, Yemen, and so on. This presence is, in fact, a spontaneous adherence to the tradition of European images, which has been solidified through centuries of Christian iconographic practice, beginning with the image of the crucifixion.



Hassan Musa. *The Bird on the bottom says: "I don't understand! Are you a pyromaniac or a fire-man?" The cat says : "Nobody is perfect!"* 2025. Courtesy Hassan Musa. (In May 2025, Nada Al Qalaa appeared in a video with firemen trying to stop the fire in Port Sudan. In the same video, the artist performed songs glorifying the military regime of general Al-Burhan. Ink, pen and collage on paper. Courtesy Hassan Musa.

The motif of the crucifixion of Christ positions the hero's body at the center of the frame, in such a way that the eye of the beholder cannot brush it aside.

Since the dawn of the European colonial invasion, we—that is, the Arabised-Islamised Sudanese masses—have found ourselves bound not only to the cycle of the capitalist economy but also to the cycle of the economy of European images. This imagery has taught us how to view ourselves through a European lens. Within the framework of this European perspective, our perceptions—whether Sudanese or foreigner (Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, secularists, etc.)—all converge on this “Alaa” standing in the position of the crucified Christ in the square of the revolutionary sit-in, in front of the gates of the Army headquarters.

The photo of Alaa hides the painting of *La Liberté*, which in turn hides the many images of the crucifixion we have become familiar with. However, the pursuit of creating images is not limited to the act of concealment alone, because images, when introduced into contexts of social disparity, behave like living beings. They have the power to support or oppose other images. The pastiched image of Alaa Salah positions itself as an icon in contrast to another icon that has recently

gone viral, the image of the popular singer Nada Mohamed Osman, known as Nada Al-Qala'a. As part of her media campaign in support of the policies of Islamist General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's regime, she purposely flooded social media with her image.

Nada Al-Qala'a is, in the final analysis, an icon of a peculiar misrepresentation of civilization—or distortion of it—into which present-day Arab-Islamic youth have been plunged. In an attempt to localize the modernity of the globalized market so that it makes sense to the Sudanese, Islamist forces have saturated the youth in bygone tradition. (The aim of Al-Qala is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the Sudanese Arab-Islamic distortion, or misrepresentation, of modernity.) This young woman, who is probably the age of the daughters of *Al-Balabel* (a trio of a sister singers) did not emerge from the rural (Bedouin) areas to take up the stage and sing to the masses, as she leads her audience to believe. Rather, she is a product of modern urban culture, nurtured by a behavioural, lyrical, and performance tradition that ironically owes much to the popular democratic movement and the urban feminist movement. The natural progression for an artist from the generation of Nada Al-Qala'a would have been to embrace the type of stage presence—both performative and musical—that picks up from where Al-Balabil left off. However, the “natural progression” of things in Sudan is a rare occurrence, as rare as the existence of the ghoul, the phoenix, and the loyal friend.

Nada Al-Qala'a is a genuine product of the contradictions within Sudanese Arab-Islamic urban society—which has been stranded at the crossroads of various modernities. One of those being the disfigurement of the Enlightenment project as it was translated into the civilizing project of colonialism, and another being a more authentic modernity as captured by the colonized society fighting for that elusive Enlightenment ideal, equality. Instead of going forward, this society has regressed into a corrupt version of a pre-capitalist rural cultural tradition, concocting for itself a system of ethical values that claim to internalize the morals of the Arab-Islamic “happy village.” These values are invoked in popular songs that idolize the values of courage, generosity, chastity, and the protection of the meek and the wretched, as represented by a very popular song:

I urge you to lend a helping hand to the neighbour in
need,

I urge you to bridle who trespasses the accepted norms,

I urge you to keep your cutting-edge sword whetted.

I urge you to maintain the household protected and
spacious.

I urge you to treat and give shelter to the unexpected
night guest.



Faiz Abubakr, A protester throws back a tear-gas canister that had been fired by security forces, 2021. Photography: Courtesy Faiz Abubakr. Taken during a march demanding an end to military rule, in Khartoum, Sudan.

However, at the same time, Nada Al-Qala'a's songs exude moral degradation, which has been legitimized by the permeating parasitic culture of Sudanese Arab-Islamic society. Her song glorifies egomaniacal behaviour, particularly the social phenomenon known as *Shalib* (a vernacular Sudanese word which refers to a woman who cunningly seduces and consummates a relationship with a married man), undermining all the ethical principles of traditional Arab-Islamic society. The lyrics epitomize literary vulgarity, openly promoting behavioural attitudes that contradict the very ideals of honour, respect, and family integrity central to a community's moral fabric:

Tonight's hoax . . . a married man; he's so sweet
The neighbourhood's men assembled, swearing by
God's name.

A hoax; a married man, he's so sweet
I swore by God, any married man should be lured,
So eminent... his elder co-wife is so pretty, his younger
one is too ugly
So eminent... the old, senile woman rubs herself with
cream Diana

A hoax; a married man, he's so sweet

She applies beauty cream Diana though her face is worn
out
A hoax; a married man, he's so sweet
Oh, co-wife, you conniver, are you awake or asleep?
A hoax; a married man, he's so sweet

While Nada Al-Qalaa was disseminating moral decadence in song, girls of her generation were redefining revolution in a freshly coined "calling" chant: "Hey Girls, stay steadfast. This revolution is a girls' revolution." Nada Al-Qalaa turned a blind eye to the sight of girls guarding the streets and throwing burning teargas canisters back at the security forces in the streets of Sudanese cities.

Contemptuous of the image of Nada Al-Qalaa standing on the political stage, the embodiment of lewd vulgarity, the Sudanese people have taken refuge in the image of Alaa Salah, who stands as a feminine, Christ-like saviour. Her iconic image is the contemporary replica of the metaphoric figure celebrated by Khalil Farah in his words "*And 'Azza', O fool, is the homeland.*" The Sudanese, who yearned for freedom, peace, and justice, saw in Alaa Salah's image a new Azza, a symbol reviving hope in the hearts of the people who patiently endure suffering.

The Ever-Changing Image

It is not easy to ascribe a permanent meaning to a cultural object in a constant state of metamorphosis. The meaning of an image can only occur when the image-maker and the viewer of the image negotiate an agreement with each other and, at the same time, with the long history of the image itself—these three elements are always in flux. Take the supposed fatwa of Jihad al-Nikah, an incident that illuminates the status of women in ISIS history.

In 2015, dozens of young male and female students of the "Medical Sciences University Mamoun Hummeida" left Khartoum to join Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Political opponents of the Islamist regime spread rumours that presented the young women as prostitutes sent to entertain the desires of ISIS male fighters. Could arranged marriage be seen as a sacrifice to support the Good Cause? The rumours took place amidst a debate on the jurisprudence of the matter. In response to the accusation of Jihad al-Nikah, pro-Islamist media disseminated a photo showing young female fighters in elegant combat outfits. The young, armed females in the photo were actually Palestinians—and not Sudanese. They in fact belonged to the Palestine Army.

The photo of the Palestinian fighters was falsified by a simple lie, but today AI technology has completely changed the definition of what we used to call visual "reality." Images are, by nature, intended to be false.



REUTERS/Ammar Awad. Members of the Palestinian security forces take part in a training session in Jericho, 2014.

Visual images never stop changing. The singularity of the act of seeing puts the object of seeing in a state of infinite metamorphosis. Even when one contemplates the same image, one can feel it changing in step with the permanent change in one's state of mind. How would St. Thomas, that famous skeptic, "verify" his belief within the maze of the "Deep Fake?" It seems that the only way out of our seeing troubles is through religious faith: "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Our inability to pin down the significance, or "truth," of an image, brings us back to the religious mistrust of the use of the image, which pervades the Judeo-Christian tradition ("You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath,") (Exodus 20:4–5) as well as the Islamic tradition ("He who creates pictures in this world will be ordered to breathe life into them on the day of judgement, but he will be unable to do so." (Sahih Muslim, 818–875). Why would God mistrust image makers? Only God knows. ●

Safia Elhillo

In Memory of Eltayeb El-Kogali

“وطن النجوم أنا هنا/ حدّق اتذكر من أنا؟”

—Iliya Abu Madi

Where are you, poet?

Do you remember me, poet?

The house is gone & the war has eaten
all our together places, all your books & papers

I will never be glad that you are gone
but I am grateful you didn't have to see this

Don't come back, poet. The world is crueler
than you left it, dark with the colors of blood

I miss you, poet
I miss our country

Its clay & volcanic rock, its car radios
City of smoke & paint

I want you back & the war gone
& here instead is the cruel opposite

Our gone homeland, the stars, long dead
by the time anyone looks up

There are bullets in your bookshelves, poet, broken dishes
& windows, our family fleeing into the desert

Don't come back. There are horrors I have no language for
numbers larger than my mind can hold

& it feels like the end of the world
I don't know how else to put it

Maybe I'll still see you there, in our homeland, its stars
& maybe you'll both remember me

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In Arabic

In a hookah bar in a new city I smile.
I order tea, bright mint leaves stuffed into a glass cup.
I am tired of telling this story though it continues to repeat itself.
It arrives, boiling water poured up to the rim, the glass conducting heat.
I stir in the spoonfuls of sugar.
I smile and ask my question. In Arabic.
The water pipe arrives, sweet blue smell of its smoke.
I answer the question and smile. In Arabic.
Sudan, Safia, born far away, stayed gone.
The glass still too hot to touch.
Smoke opaque in my mouth. In Arabic.
He brings me all the things I ask for.
Bottled water, a tumbler full of ice.
Blue lights of the dark room glinting against his teeth.
Ya samara, he calls me. Ya samar.
I smile. Your eyes. Your skin. I smile. In Arabic.
I neaten my pile of papers, click open the red pen.
For a few moments I work in quiet.
He returns to place new coals onto the foil.
I thank him. In Arabic.
I reach for the glass cup and still I cannot lift it.
Still it burns my touch.
I am tired of this story and it is not tired of me.
Ya asmar. I smile.
My teeth wet and blue in the light. In Arabic.
The check please. In Arabic.
I gather my bills to pay him and he asks his question. In Arabic.

Where did I learn to speak so beautifully.
To speak it. Sudan, I remind him. In Arabic.
He shakes his head. So beautifully, he asks.
Not like the Sudanese.
The cup ignites in my hand.
Tea scalding the roof of my mouth. In Arabic.