

## **THEATRE OF THE DISPLACED: SUDANESE RESISTANCE IN IDP CAMPS.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper delves into Sudanese theatre, with a specific focus on the text and performance aspects within internal displacement camps in Wad Madani, particularly the play "Matarees." The analysis centers on the goals of displaced dramatists, specifically how they utilize theatre to address community issues, including conveying war-related information to children, reflecting the experience of displacement, and providing nuanced takes on gender roles under displacement. Additionally, the theatre in displacement camps serves as a physical space of solidarity, offering entertainment and centering narratives on the displaced to position them as main characters and survivors.

The paper aims to counter global and local marginalization of the 10 million internally displaced Sudanese citizens and demystify Sudanese resistance and survival through theater. It involves a close reading of the play, along with interviews with the writers and performers, exploring their expression of identity as Sudanese dramatists and their ability to reclaim spaces despite constant displacement. After initiating this project, the city of Wad Madani was attacked by the terrorist militia, the RSF, displacing the theatre group once again. Now situated in the city of Port Sudan, the conclusion will discuss the ideas of hope within constant displacement, artistic expression as a tool of financial survival during wartime, and the unique perspective of Sudanese local resistance.

## **Introduction**

In 2019, the Sudanese popular revolution swept through the country as cities revolted one after another. This peaceful uprising, characterized by numerous instances of civil disobedience and a sit-in at the military headquarters, was dubbed a "revolution of knowledge." It adopted various anti-racist slogans with the aim of transforming Sudan into an equitable country for its citizens. However, the revolution met a tragic end with the massacre of June 2019.

Following the revolution, Sudan entered a transitional period marked by a military coup. Despite these challenges, the Sudanese people continued to protest in pursuit of civilian rule, adamantly rejecting any partnership with militarized regimes. The Sudanese Neighbourhood Resistance Committees from every state played a pivotal role in this resistance movement by publishing the *Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power*. This document elucidates the historical necessity for resistance and exposes the oppressive practices of Sudanese militarized institutions. It highlights issues in rural development, the theft of resources by armed forces, involvement in the illegal slave trade, and campaigns of ethnic cleansing in South Sudan, Darfur, and the Nuba Mountains (SNRC, *Revolutionary Charter*, 2020). This Charter stands as one of the many educational tools produced by Sudanese resistance movements on the ground.

The Sudan War, which erupted in April 2023, may appear as a conflict between two generals with only physical consequences. However, it has profoundly disrupted and dismantled civilian organizations. In December of the same year, Radio Dabanga reported that “The Minister of Federal Governance in Port Sudan issued a decree banning all civil society groups in Sudan that have been set up during the revolution or later, during the war, to

help out people in need” (Radio Dabnga). These policies have effectively stifled intellectual resistance at the grassroots level, -and even spaces such as civilian led emergency rooms, orphanages and group kitchens-perpetuating a long legacy of government intervention in communal knowledge production and civilian comradeship. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have historically employed various tactics, including state of emergency laws, curfews, destruction of universities in Darfur, and withholding funding from communal spaces such as mosques, community centers, and theaters, to suppress revolutionary activities.

After the destruction of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, most people were displaced, either fleeing the country or relocating to other, relatively more stable major cities within Sudan. In these cities, schools and hospitals transformed into internal displacement camps, where amidst fear and instability, resistance continued to flourish. Rabiee Youssif, a playwright and director, found himself displaced to Wad Madani, where he penned and directed the play “*Matarees*” a Sudanese Arabic term meaning roadblocks. This production, performed before a displaced audience, mirrors their experiences, depicting the journey to displacement camps. However, in December of the same year, the Rapid Support Forces

(RSF) invaded Wad Madani, forcing the dispersion of these displacement camps, and Youssif and his theater colleagues were compelled to flee to different cities.

Youssif articulates that their objective in creating and staging these plays is to represent themselves and to preserve their identity as actors and artists. He emphasizes that theater has historically embodied revolutionary ideals, and their plays retain their revolutionary essence even in a transitional period. In a 2021 interview with Sudanese radio PRO 106 FM, Youssif discussed his role as a playwright and the plays performed during the revolution at the Military Headquarters sit in. He stressed the importance of continuing to engage dialectically in revolutionary action through dialogue and art, asserting, “We have many issues, and unless we are able to intellectually confront and take ownership of them, we cannot move beyond the past, nor can we transform our obstacles into opportunities for development” (Youssif, 2021). Like many other grassroots revolutionaries, Youssif highlights a dangerous disconnect between those who led the revolution and the elite figures in the transitional council. He argues that the revolution was an existential necessity for him and his fellow playwrights, as it was for numerous Sudanese. However, he expresses uncertainty regarding whether “the revolution acknowledges us.” By this, he suggests that while actively

participating in revolutionary activities, the revolution remained in its resistance phase. Yet, in post-revolution Sudan, the new executive branches, purportedly representing people's aspirations, show little interest in investing in cultural production or protecting it (Youssif, 2021).

When I first learned about Youssif's work, I became deeply intrigued by the opportunity to speak with him and gain insights into his perspective as both a playwright and a grassroots revolutionary. As I delved further into his work, I found it evocative of post-Holocaust theatre, compelling me to reach out to him and embark on a journey of analysis and theorization of his contributions to Sudanese theatre. This study seeks to analyze the play "*Matarees*" while contextualizing it within the broader context of Sudanese theatre and its enduring legacy of communal resistance. Additionally, bolstered by interviews I've conducted with Youssif, this paper posits that the intellectual engagement of displaced communities with these plays serves as a form of counter-education and pedagogy for an oppressed population.

To grasp the significance of theatre as a local of communal knowledge production, it is imperative to examine the historical trajectory of knowledge production in Sudan. Despite gaining independence from colonial

rule in 1956, the newly formed state has failed to shed the vestiges of its colonial past. This pattern is mirrored across the African continent, where colonial institutions persist in perpetuating economic subjugation and stifling developmental initiatives among indigenous populations. *The Revolutionary Charter* underscores one of the core issues plaguing Sudan: "The modern Sudanese state is built on monopolizing power in certain institutions such as the army and the police, and centralizing development based on ethnicity and creed" (SNRC, *Revolutionary Charter*, 2020). Indeed, the contemporary state, characterized by racial, ethnic, and tribal divisions, epitomizes the deleterious consequences of a "divide and conquer" strategy.

The post-independence Sudanese state is predominantly governed by Arab, Muslim militarized men, whose narratives dominate official government histories and media discourse. Sudan has witnessed a succession of military regimes, and the highest number of coups attempts in the continent. Supremacist knowledge production in Sudan extends beyond the realms of media, communication, and education, manifesting glaringly in the neglect of peripheral regions (Al-Aqaleem) and the selective allocation of infrastructure and development projects. The SRC observes that "The Native administration system is a remnant of the colonial

system's decentralized control," wherein the populace is segregated along ethnic lines and governed indirectly by local leaders under a distinct legal and administrative framework (The Sudanese Neighbourhood Resistance Committee, 2022). This decentralized control perpetuates regional disparities, rendering development contingent upon the exploitation and subjugation of marginalized communities. Moreover, the military apparatus in Sudan serves to perpetuate violence and maintain control over the people, thereby impeding the transition from a rentier state economy to a diversified one (The Sudanese Neighbourhood Resistance committee, 2022). Sudanese revolutionaries identify these challenges as deliberate mechanisms employed by the state to foster division among the population, advocating for their dismantlement to pave the way for collective prosperity.

Knowledge production is a fundamental aspect of modern states, enabling them to shape and disseminate their interests to their citizens. Within the sphere of knowledge production, the deliberate promotion of ignorance and the perpetuation of illiteracy play crucial roles in maintaining intellectual control over the masses. Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, clarifies how dominant elites utilize the banking concept of education to foster passivity in the oppressed, exploiting this passivity to instill slogans that



further entrench fear of freedom (Freire, 95). In Sudan, where 45% of the population was illiterate even before the onset of war, these statistics are not incidental but rather indicative of government policies. As of 2023, UNICEF reported that "20 million children in Sudan are unable to return to classrooms, making it one of the worst education crises in the world." (UNICEF, 2023) *The Revolutionary Charter* endeavors to challenge this status quo by advocating for the creation of curricula that embrace the plurality of identity and culture (SNRC, Revolutionary Charter, 2020, 13). This initiative is intrinsically linked to the physical necessity of providing resources and educational spaces in underdeveloped areas. In our discussion, Youssif argued that illiteracy is not the only challenge saying that the production of false consciousness through the propaganda of the regimes is one of the biggest obstacles for dialogue, and revolutionary action.

Throughout Sudan's history, spanning from the colonial era to the modern Sudanese state, theatre has served as a space of resistance, reflecting the harsh realities of division, underdevelopment, and oppression. Theatre, inherently political in its reflection of reality, has unsettled both colonial occupiers and subsequent militarized regimes. The history of theatre in Sudan is intertwined with the evolution of education in the country.

Sheikh Babakir Badri, a prominent Sudanese scholar and revolutionary and the pioneer of Female literacy, played a pivotal role in advocating for education in Sudan. He successfully lobbied British authorities to establish schools in Sudan, initially exclusively for boys, but later inclusive of female education. Central to Badri's educational philosophy was the power of dialectic education, which encompassed theatre. In 1903, prior to the establishment of the first school, Badri presented a theatrical performance in Ru'faa (Al Said, 2021). Such plays, along with others during British rule, underscored the significance of education in Sudanese society, not just for the people's development but also resistance. The purpose of these plays was to help subjugated communities to seek education and to find it an existential necessity and a way to counter colonialism.

The role of art in Sudan is intricately intertwined with its material reality, as evidenced by the rich history of Sudanese theatre and its thematic focus. Sudanese theatre serves as a vehicle for education, shedding light on societal realities and challenging them. An illustrative example is the group "Abad Amak," which dedicated itself to portraying Sudanese social realities. Adil, a Sudanese critic and historian, reflects on their legacy, citing their renowned play "Anbar Jouda." This production depicted a harrowing incident where farmers

refused to provide cotton to feudal authorities, leading to a violent crackdown by heavily armed police forces. Over 100 peasant leaders were subsequently captured, confined to a small storage room with pesticides for three days without sustenance or air, resulting in 12 tragic fatalities (Adil, 2017). Such plays, documenting atrocities of militarized regimes, often faced censorship and violent suppression.

In my interview with Youssif, he told me that he produced the play *Anbar Jouda* in 2002 twice, once in Khartoum and again in Port Sudan. He highlighted the importance of this play, he expressed that other Sudanese authors have written multiple plays and poems about this particular incident, and it was one of the key events represented in resistance theatre (R. Youssif, personal communication, April 2024). Furthermore, he fondly recalled the historical role of theatre during his upbringing in Sudan. He remarked, “The theatre and the outdoor cinema were spaces for illiterate people to observe the world and reflect on others and themselves” (R. Youssif, personal communication, April 2024). Sudanese theatre provided a platform for individuals, in their own language, to contemplate their material circumstances and societal divisions. Sudanese anthropologist Khalid Mustafa expounds on the educational function of theatre in Sudan, spotlighting playwright Hamadnallah Abdul

Qadir, a member of the National Theatre. Mustafa notes that Abdul Qadir's plays, often originally crafted for radio or adapted for broadcasting, catered to a predominantly illiterate populace, reaching them in their own vernacular (Mustafa, 2004).

By its very nature, theatre is dialectical, inviting the audience to actively engage in discourse. Given the underdevelopment in Sudan, theatre emerged as a grassroots institution, serving as an art form accessible to the masses. Freire emphasizes the transformative potential of such educational “When an illiterate peasant participates in this sort of educational experience, he or she comes to a new awareness of self, has a new sense of dignity, and is stirred by a new hope” (Freire, 33). Sudanese theatre epitomizes a society that thrives on dialogue, evident in the physical interaction between performers and audience members, as well as the diverse interpretations and improvisations by actors, including revolutionaries and the inclusion of the audience in interactive theatre. This dynamic process underscores the presence of education and discourse within theatrical performances.

Despite harsh restrictions, theatre persisted as a space of intellectual resistance and a dialectical reflection of reality in Sudan. When the Sudan war erupted in April

2023, Youssif and his family sought refuge in the city of Wad Madani and settled there. Youssif recounted the story of why he and fellow theatre players staged the play "*Matarees*" in an interview with the Sudanese social media channel Nas Shagala. Witnessing that video restored my faith in the Sudanese revolution. I became convinced that, against all odds, the Sudanese public possessed a profound understanding of their material conditions. Analyzing and showcasing the texts of Sudanese authors in this almost apocalyptic context, I believed, could truly unveil a wealth of knowledge about the material and intellectual reality of Sudanese communal spaces.

The play "*Matarees*" portrays a group striving to navigate a journey amidst displacement, with characters representing various facets of Sudanese society: Rifaat, the antagonist militant man who disrupts the journey; Ibrahim, symbolizing the Sudanese center and nostalgia for military order; Omnia, embodying youth and revolutionaries; Mahmoud, representing ethnic minorities from East Sudan; and Sara, pregnant and symbolic of Sudan's future. The term "*Matarees*" carries a dual significance, referring not only to roadblocks but also to protective barriers erected by neighborhood committees to prevent police incursions and facilitate escapes during attempts to disperse revolutionary gatherings. In this way,

Matarees can function both as obstacles and protectors, offering time and safety.

The play begins with the characters debating which path to take. Ibrahim advocates for the familiar route, adopting a military stance and asserting, "The road traveled in Kabak (military boots) is not like that trodden in slippers or barefoot." (Youssif, 2023) On the other hand, Omnia advocates for embracing new ideas and technologies such as GPS, suggesting exploration of different routes and fostering discussion, while emphasizing the need for youth leadership. Ibrahim vehemently opposes this, dominating the space physically and arguing against it. This leads to a confrontation, with Rifaat intervening by expressing frustration, "You've annoyed us, every time you come up with a new cause you're burning tires and you filled the roads with matarees. Why do we have to deal with this every day? Everyday teargas, teargas, teargas?! If you think we'll let a girl lead us, take that thought out of your head!" (Youssif, 2023). These scenes reflect the generational disparity and highlight the importance of youth involvement in decision-making. Youssif, through his female characters, challenges patriarchy and traditional thought. In our interview, Youssif explained that these characters represent contrasting leadership styles: the tried path of military dictatorships that feign peace and the

path of discovery and discussion (R. Youssif, personal communication, April 2024). The Sudanese audience, having been engaged in revolutionary action, even if just by proximity to it, can grasp the moral implications of each approach and recognize the stifling effect of authoritarian speech on dialogue on a social and political level.

The character of Rifaat embodies the archetype of military authoritarian rule and serves as the antagonist in the play. Throughout the narrative, Rifaat consistently disrupts dialogue and incites conflict, reflecting the chaos and cultural domination perpetuated by the state. He asserts his dominance by talking over others, whispering, and sowing discord based on gender and tribal divisions. Rifaat's objective is to cause division and chaos among the characters, obstructing their journey. The characters decide to vote on the path to take in the aforementioned scene, and in the following one we see Rifaat going to the older characters and saying “You can't vote without asking our elders” and then goes to Mahmoud and says they want to exclude you as a man from the East and finally whispering to Omnia saying and “elders can't vote without the other half of society” Sara, the character who represents the future of Sudan says “Stop trying to confuse people and causing friction” Omnia interjects that they don't need authoritarian leadership, she says she knows

the road and they can overcome its dangers together. She eventually convinces them to lead but the Rifaat and Ibrahim continue to cause conflict in the journey. Rifaat's authoritarian speech and discriminatory actions mirror the false consciousness propagated by the state, stifling dialogue and perpetuating societal fractures. Even during a pivotal voting scene, Rifaat manipulates traditional values and tribal loyalties to sow dissent among the characters, highlighting the insidious nature of cultural domination in Sudanese society.

Mahmoud, a character from East Sudan, represents marginalized communities and rural development issues. Youssif intentionally introduces linguistic diversity through Mahmoud, acknowledging Sudan's rich tapestry of languages. Youssif expressed "it was very important for me to introduce linguistic diversity in the play, Sudan has over a hundred spoken language and not even 10% of that is represented in theatre and no other language than Arabic is used in official communication" (R. Youssif, personal communication, April 2024). In the play, Ibrahim and Rifaat, speak to each other under their breath and make deals about the journey. Mahmoud confronts Ibrahim asking why he is walking ahead of them He does this by speaking his native language Badawit "Do you want us to stay at the bottom of the mountain while you keep walking ahead of us" (



Youssif, 2023). Rifaat tries to translate this sentence while not speaking the language, finally another male character disrupts this conflict translating to both the audience and characters Mohamoud's perspective. There is another conflict point that is ethnically driven in this plot, one of the characters Nasr who is dark skinned wants to marry Omnia, Ibrahim and Rifaat whisper saying that his skin color is different from theirs, and in their tradition, proper girls don't marry outside of the tribe. Those whispers create much conflict to come to the surface, with the other characters denouncing their speech. Mahmoud's interactions with other characters, particularly Ibrahim, underscore the struggles of ethnic minorities and challenge the dominance of traditional power structures. The conflict escalates when ethnic differences and discriminatory attitudes surface among the characters, highlighting the pervasive nature of cultural conquest and the need for critical thinking and solidarity among marginalized groups.

In the final scene of "*Matarees*," the characters confront societal challenges symbolized by "dirt", Sara, claiming to have been pregnant for ten months, implores everyone to clean their surroundings, stating that her child refuses to be born until the space is clean and tidy, meaning organized and without strife. Initially, the male characters refuse to assist, insisting on traditional gender

roles saying “men’s role is not child care nor cleaning”. However, as the dirt becomes overwhelming, the characters start scratching and getting physically sick from their surroundings. Through collective action (cleaning) led by Omnia, the characters embark on a transformative journey of cleansing and renewal, shedding symbolic burdens and expressing hopes for a more equitable future. They say they hope the child grows up in a world where “she is not my color nor yours” We hope that she grows up in a world where “there is a school and a hospital under every mountain” and “with brothers who don’t assert their power through hurting their sisters”(Youssif 2023).

The play demonstrates a profound grasp of Sudanese political structures and their pervasive cultural dominance. This domination trickles down into community spaces and disallows different communities to interact with each other. Freire argued that "Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders. In their passion to dominate, to mold others to their patterns and their way of life." (Freire, 153). This idea resonates throughout the narrative, particularly in the character of Ibrahim, who epitomizes this inauthenticity with his references to military boots and his domineering presence. Through

Ibrahim, the audience is confronted with the symbolic representation of militarized patriarchal domination, compelling them to confront these archetypal figures. While the conclusions drawn from these interactions are left to the audience, the mere act of confrontation prompts individuals in displacement to confront their own material reality—a crucial step towards progress.

Youssif emphasizes the broader purpose of his work beyond revolutionary aims, highlighting his role as a concerned citizen of Sudan striving for the well-being of his compatriots. He stresses that his creations serve not only as artistic endeavors but also as vehicles for healing and empowerment within his community. In addition to staging "*Matarees*," Youssif and his fellow performers extended their efforts to fifteen internal displacement camps in Aljazeera state, where they presented a variety of plays to uplift and engage audiences. Collaborating with organizations like UNICEF and Save The Children, they developed puppet theater productions specifically tailored to support children's mental health, offering a therapeutic outlet for coping with the trauma of displacement and conflict. A defining aspect of Youssif's work is interactive theater, allowing audiences to actively participate in storytelling and dialogue, fostering a sense of agency and community engagement. Through these multifaceted initiatives, Youssif demonstrates a

commitment to using art as a tool for social healing, resistance, and empowerment in the face of militarized rule.

Youssif's work showcases the power of community spaces in educating and dismantling cultural hegemony, in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he argues that education gives people the ability to see themselves as agents against power "If (the oppressed) are drawn into the process as ambiguous beings, partly themselves and partly the oppressors housed within them—and if they come to power still embodying that ambiguity imposed on them by the situation of oppression they may aspire to revolution as a means of domination, rather than as a road to liberation" Through active participation and discussion, people cultivate critical awareness and solidarity in their struggle against oppression. Youssif envisions these spaces as hubs for social change and liberation. Amid escalating ethnic tensions in Sudan, this play serves as a crucial reminder to displaced communities of their shared humanity, emphasizing unity over division.

Amid ongoing recruitment and forced enlistment campaigns by both the RSF and SAF, it is paramount for Sudanese people to not fall into the false consciousness of division and counter revolutionary work. Mohamad Osman, a Sudan researcher for Human Rights Watch

(HRW), in a report for Al Jazeera network, expressed that the army's decision to arm civilians could lead to more ethnic-based killings, he says "the army is fueling ethnic divisions to drive recruitment, giving the RSF a pretext to retaliate along ethnic lines" (Nashed, 2024). For the people of Sudan, who endure the brunt of conflict, the play serves as a poignant reminder that there are nowinners in this war. The pervasive militarization and dictatorship offer no path to peace or progress.

Tragically, the conclusion of Youssif's efforts in Wad Madani ended with the RSF militia torching the city killing thousands and conscripting hundreds. Despite initial protection by the Sudanese Army, their abrupt withdrawal left Wad Madani vulnerable. An investigation into the army's retreat has been initiated (Reuters, 2023). In Al-Jazeera state, millions of people, including most of my family, are currently under siege by the RSF. They are enduring mass starvation, forced conscription into the militia, and numerous heinous war crimes. In this incredibly challenging reality, I aim for my contribution to highlight the unwavering Sudanese dedication to resistance, rooted in both intellectual and historical traditions. I hope that the global community will embrace more Sudanese literature and art, enabling a deeper understanding of Sudanese perspectives from grassroots revolutionaries rather than the ruling elite. Through this, I

hope people will be inspired to show solidarity with Sudan.

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