

**Embodying Intersectional Narratives: Mobility, Postnationality
and Marginalised Masculinity in Jamal Mahjoub’s
*Travelling with Djinns***

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Abstract

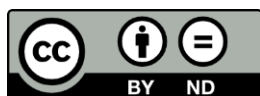
A remarkable body of instructive scholarship exists today on the subversive responses of postcolonial travel narratives to colonialist travel writing, branching into a trend of transcultural “mobile” stories foregrounding Europe(anness) as inescapably hybrid/transcultural/trans-local, thus rupturing the normative culturo-racial depiction of Europe as “White.” A critical silence however remains on how these postcolonial travel/mobile writings project the challenges of cultural citizenship involving male migrants framed in marginalised masculinity in Europe. Engaging Jamal Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinns*, I argue that some contemporary post/African novels unpack new ways of presenting postcolonial mobility by focusing on the challenges of subjectivity and sexual profiling in Europe, especially bordering on marginalised masculinity. This particularly unveils the weakness of Afropolitanism, a critical view that tends to present an unproblematic and straightforward idea of the European integration and citizenship of migrant/diasporic Africans, thus shedding further light on postcolonial African mobility and the politics of European (non-)belonging.

Keywords:

Colonialist travel writing, postcolonial travel/mobile writing, Afropolitanism, postnational(ism)/transnational(ism), marginalised masculinity.
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Introduction

It is perhaps incontestable to assert that *travel*, as a journey-specific signifier of the ageless drive of humans to explore the opportunities of foreign or not-too-distant neighbouring lands (either leisurely or obligatorily), has subtly or brazenly morphed into a set of metaphors articulating “colonial” or “postcolonial” sympathies in which geo-physical spaces and human identities are discursively implicated and problematised. While “travel,” in relation to “travel writing,” had been



conceptually and conservatively confined to a non-fictional exercise, especially informing *the travelogue* (Pratt 1992; Boehmer 1993; Rabassa 1997; Musgrove 1999; Edwards & Graulund 2011; Edwards 2018), it has, in present times, been more dynamically extended into a variety of written reflections, including fictional writing, that project acts and reasons for human journeys (Driss 2017). In this sense, Mary B. Campbell intones that travel is “a literary instrument of consciousness, a genre of cultural translation” (cited in Driss 2017, p. 6). This allows it an expanse to accommodate diverse ruminations on the imperatives, politics, intrigues and dimensions of modern human journeys in relation to empire and its current projections in the neoliberal world order. In this regard, reading travel in a literary text is not just (or perhaps, no longer) a mere enjoyment or imperative of getting involved with imagined group or subjectivist inclinations inspired by human mobility to alter the boring, limiting or endangering realities of familiar environments (as instanced in scenarios of holidays or tourism, curious adventures, economic migrations or diaspora informed by genocidal threats to life). It is, more engagingly, the (un)conscious consumption of narrativised discourses aligned to hegemonic/peripheral interests in the modern imperial world order inaugurated and maintained by imagined and actualised European colonialism, and presently reprocessed and circulated in the contemporary Western-run neoliberal cast of what Gayatri Spivak has aptly referred to as the global regime of “the internationally divided dominant” (2000, p. 328).

From the foregoing, travel writing as a literary genre has been particularly approached in criticism as oriented in the power-dialogue of coloniality and postcolonial/decolonial responses, but its critical beginnings were shaped by a focus on its colonialist initiative and institutionalisation (Pratt 1992; Boehmer 1993; Rabassa 1997; Musgrove 1999; Edwards & Graulund 2011; Edwards 2018). As Elleke Boehmer suggests, “[t]ravel meant imaginative anticipation, and the actual treasures and curiosities encountered on distant shores—gold and ivory, cinnamon and ginger, parrots, exotic beasts, human beings of very different cultures—could only embellish expectation” (1993, p. 15). Along this line, colonialist writers such as William Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (1623); Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899); Rudyard Kipling in *Kim* (1901), and Sir Henry Rider Haggard in *Ayesha* (1905), engaged in a

hegemonic discourse whose travel representation endeavoured to construct geo-cultural and existential imaginaries of “other spaces” and the Other, and depict their colonised realities as exotic, virgin and exploitable to the imperial, material and cosmic advantage of Europe. In this regard, colonialist travel writing, for instance, initiated and circulated Orientalist texts of “imaginary utopias, moral voyages, and scientific reporting” (Said, 1978, p. 117) that validated the view of a former Prime Minister of Britain, Benjamin Disraeli, that the East was “a career.” According to Edward Said, “[w]hen Disraeli said in his novel *Tancred* that the East was a career, he meant that to be interested in the East was something bright young Westerners would find to be an all-consuming passion...” (1978, p. 5). The aesthetic vision of colonialist travel writing (arguably along this line) began to project heterogeneous landscapes of experimentation such as evident in “the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality” (Raban, cited in Clark 1999, p. 1), allowing multiple creative platforms of quest and foreshadowed conquests.

Though the canonical male projection of colonialist writing has gone under attack by white feminist writings interrogating the genre as dominantly phallogocentric in excluding female agency and thematics (such as not inscribing narratives of women in relation to the colonial space or representing the private/home domain of the travelling female body, but rather celebrating colonial public matters privileging male travel-concerns which were discursively distant to the relatively non-imperialist gaze of white female travel writing) (Mills 1991; Pratt 1992; Locin 2014), an enduring and upturning challenge to the colonialist travel genre as a whole has been provided by postcolonial scholarship which has largely foregrounded an alternative “postcolonial travel writing” that orientationally subverts the tenure of “European(ised) travel” (Edwards and Graulund 2011, p. 2). In this context, postcolonial travel writing projects multiple interventions or issues that rupture the textual Eurocentrism of hegemonic white travel and the overt or implied objectification of colonial outposts, or (perhaps better signified in a contemporary idiom of neoliberal gesture), the humanity or spaces of the global Other. Postcolonial travel writing thus mobilises revisions of the “conquest narratives” of colonialist travel texts as a dominant subversive

strategy. A seminal input in this regard is Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), an African American counter-narrative to the self-celebratory imperialist account of Middle-Passage African slavery which, among other things, unveils the depraved capitalist and inhuman dimensions of the hegemonic European quest to travel. This is unfolded in a storyline that tends to reclaim the spirituality, orature, denied humanity, cultural agency and knowledge-capabilities of the transplanted black body. This type of interventionist literary travel statement is also richly demonstrated in Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014) which potentially resets the Atlantic-slavery stories and records of colonialist historians and "legends" like Christopher Columbus and Vasco Da Gama by projecting the silenced testimony of the Other, here signified in the "narrative witnessing" of a Moroccan slave, Estebanico (formerly Mustapha, but renamed by his Spanish captors), in the context of a failed Spanish expedition to the New World (in this case, Florida). This revisionist trend is also seen in "representation" accounts of canonical colonialist travel texts (in their overt or implied travel presentations) such as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "reworked" in Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969) and Esiaba Irobi's *Sycorax* (2013). Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) features within this bracket of revisionist travel writing since it interrogates the aesthetic/content representation of the Manichaeic colonialist travel narrative to the incendiary and metaphoric advantage of Mustapha Saeed, the Sudanese traveller-protagonist of the novel, who symbolically subverts the Occident as Sudan's (and by extension the "African Orient's") Other.

The postcolonial travel text is also preoccupied with highlighting the metropolitan multicultural challenges, attritions and compromises of the non-European migrant-traveller to Europe/the West, as in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) and Laila Lalami's *Conditional Citizens* (2020). This "Other" version of travel writing also proffers deconstructive readings, in certain contexts, of postcolonial resistance against Europe/the West, preferring rather to more seriously interrogate the embedded socio-political, systemic and moral failures of the postcolony, as reflected, for instance, in Ayi Kwei Armah's portrayal of the post-independence moral, socio-cultural and visionary decadence of Ghana in *Fragments* (1969). This is however subtly drawn as the legacy of colonialist cultural disintegration,

capitalist plunder and epistemic violence. This “low-keyed” attitude of postcolonial resistance is also projected in the elliptical drawing of “home” in the experiences of in-between migrant characters or personae in texts reflecting the latter’s multicultural and existential molestations in Europe or North America. An example of this is seen in the Caribbean Benjamin Zephaniah’s *Refugee Boy* (2002), a novel that chronicles the growing-up and traumatic experiences of its part-Ethiopian, part-Eritrean child protagonist, Alem Kelo, whose migration to Britain with his father records some of the most atrocious incidents of racism, institutional objectification of African/Black migrants with regard to policy formulations and executions, and the gradual/progressive dehumanisation of the migrant which provokes their toxicity and feelings of existential rootlessness.

The landscape of travel writing in current global literature may be argued to have become vastly redefined, providing a heterogeneity of mobility patterns that have revolutionised the textuality, trajectories and temperaments of travel. This “borderless” development largely occupies the concerns of mobility studies. As Hager Ben Driss suggests, “[t]he sweeping nature of travel writing defies the attempts at delimiting its contours” (2017, p. 4). Similarly, Carl Thomson proposes that “the term is a very loose generic label and has always embraced a bewildering diverse range of material” (cited in Driss 2017, p. 4). He goes on to contend that “the boundaries of travel writing genre are fuzzy, and there is little point in policing them too rigidly” (p. 4). In Peter Smethurst’s opinion along this line, the contemporary poststructuralist turn of engaging travel in travel writing yields a platform where “the ‘eye’ is no longer a stable site of observation, and secondly, the ‘I’ is no longer a stable site of reflection and judgement” (2009, p.4). He also posits that there is a critical trend of the deconstruction of form, “as in the relation between travel *writing* per se, and travel photography, cinema, video, and web sites” (p.4). In bell hooks’ rather radical view, travel may legitimately include conceptual or actual performances of mobility which include “rites of passage, immigration, enforced immigration, relocation, enslavement, homelessness” (cited in Driss 2017, p. 5). In this regard, contemporary ideas of travel incorporate several shades and appearances of mobility, which also acknowledge plural outlets such as the sea, rail lines, the road, the air, the imagination, or some embraced spiritual or “unconscious” channels such as trances or dreams. In

this regard, it is safe to say that the heterogeneity of travel in conceptions of travel writing today has informed a rather inclusive scholarship of what may be broadly described as *mobility studies* (Driss 2017), an academic trend which broadly accommodates all forms of intentional or coincidental travel, in non-fictional or fictional presentations, as dynamic incidents of human engagements.

In this article, I am interested in unpacking how postcolonial mobility (in this case, the post/African)¹ responds to the challenges of cultural citizenship involving diasporic Africans in Europe amidst roadblocks of multicultural relations which, to a great extent, produce diasporic otherness in sexualised terms. Engaging Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s, which I read as a generically layered postcolonial travel narrative ingeniously morphed into road-travel writing, I argue that some contemporary post/African travel novels negotiate new ways of looking at migrancy/diaspora in relation to the politics of "being European" via the lenses of subjectivity and sexuality (in this case, the trauma of marginalised masculinity). This stands in crucial conversation with the idea of fluid European citizenship or belonging of diasporic Africans as maintained by dominant Afropolitan scholarship (see Selasi 2005; 2013), a laudable idea which however seems to downplay the crucial discourses of systemic European marginalisation of individuals or groups of African affiliation notionally excluded from socio-cultural privileges of being European, despite their rich diasporic and hybrid links with Europe. Along this line, I also read the African postcolony and postcolonial identity as categories that are equally open to interrogation in contextual terms. Thus, I propose that the burdens of travel and marginalised masculinity as inscribed in this novel have new implications on reading the African postcolonial identity, mobility and diasporic condition, which has a promising potential of shedding further light on the diasporic African negotiations of "being European," or wider still, Western.

Hybrid Cultural Dialogues and Europe(anness)

Jamal Mahjoub's writings, within postcolonial imaginative corpus that contest Europe's assumptions of cultural homogeneity and myths of

civilisational self-arrival, have subversively highlighted depictions of European hybridity, transculturality, and the impossibility of Europe's imagined racial, cosmic and historical singularity. Jopi Nyman, along this line, posits that "[t]he fictions of the Sudanese British author Jamal Mahjoub explore contemporary and historical encounters between Europeans, Arabs, and their descendants, problematizing issues of belonging, history, and identity" (2017, p. 158). Yasmine Mohammad, in a similar vein, asserts that "Mahjoub contests a monologic understanding of history, cultural memory, and identity in all of his novels" (2015, p. 3). His novels, therefore, "thematise the complex experiences of travellers, migrants, and multicultural characters throughout the centuries, and portray their suffocating confrontations with essentialist identity politics. They explore the history of interactions and exchanges among European, North African and Middle Eastern societies" (p. 4). Mahjoub's writings may, thus, be said to estrange "official Europe" to itself by imaginatively inscribing its silenced and plural histories on a heterogenous memorial platform. His novel, *Travelling with Djinnns*, explicitly participates in and extends this artistic rewriting of Europe in a nuanced term that explores diverse narrative strategies which revolve around a road-travel motif. This, among other things, allows him to foreground Europeanness "in a transnational framework by showing the presence of global migration in allegedly homogenous nation-states" (Nyman 2017, p. 158).

The narrative emphasis of Europe's cultural plurality, hybridity, and trans-raciality occupies the dominant critique of *Travelling with Djinnns*. Michelle Stork, for instance, argues that the protagonist of this novel, Yasin Zahir, who undertakes a road journey across Europe with his son, Leo, in an old Peugeot car, discursively "struggles with existing, yet problematic categories, such as British and Sudanese as seemingly stable national signifiers" (2022, p. 241). To Stork, Mahjoub's narrative strategy of using road travel as a motif of not only physical mobility, but as a sequence of histo-cultural transition, "portrays the road as a space for overcoming static concepts and for reflecting on new notions of identity as a result of movement through and across space" (p. 241). This allows a series of unpremeditated encounters with diverse trans/cultural icons, symbols, elements and texts such as books written by some past transnational writers (the Persian Omar Khayyam, the German Berthold Brecht, the Japanese

poet Bashi, and the French writer Arthur Rimbaud), which portray Europe's multidimensional history. In this scenario, the figuration of the nineteenth-century Sudanese religious leader, Mahdi, also acts as a means of rupturing the Eurocentric imaginaries of "Christian Europe" and civilization. Depictions of the media, historical sites, street culture and Islam present Europe as a site inhabiting cultural and religious diversity, and the intertextual reference to film and music projects Europe as a continuously evolving hybrid and transcultural phenomenon. This ensemble creates a horizontalist, rhizomic cultural history of Europe in Deleuzian/Guattarian terms, interrogating the hierarchical, racist and supremacist portrayal of Europe as ontologically "White."

Stork's deconstructive approach of reading *Travelling with Djinn*s is premeditated in critical opinions on cultural mobility as a dynamic performance and continuous production. Cultures, according to Stephen Greenblatt, rather tend to be "nomadic" than "native" (2010, p. 5). In this regard, Greenblatt insists:

There is no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities. To write convincing and accurate cultural analyses - not only of the troubled present but of centuries past - requires, to paraphrase Hamlet, more a chronicle of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts than a story of inevitable progress from traceable origins. We need to understand colonisation, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of identity and language, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy (Greenblatt2010, p. 2).

Along the line of positing the potentially unpredictable and hybrid tendencies of cultures, *Travelling with Djinn*s has very popularly been read, in the bent of Stork's critique above, as a transcultural literary reflection of "postcolonial Europe" on account of its diverse multiethnic, multicultural

and diasporic population and interpenetration which makes the essentialist idea of White or Caucasian Europe(anness) integrally unscientific and unacceptable. Yasmine Mohammad (2015) intones that “[a]n important concern of *Travelling with Djinns* is to contest a homogenous understanding of national and civilization histories, which trigger competitive notions of cultural memory and hence clashing identity discourses” (p. 5). She pursues that “[t]he novel explores the ways in which the educational policies of European colonizers created an identity crisis in the colonized populations by indoctrinating them with a superior and progressive vision of European history (Mohammad 2015, p. 5). In the migrant/diasporic contexts of these erstwhile colonised peoples in Europe, they often experience the tortuous challenges of *cultural citizenship*. Aihwa Ong remarks that cultural citizenship relies on a dynamic field of social relationships that involve both formal and informal institutional, political, class and identitarian mechanisms that construct “*selfmaking and being made* by power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration” (1996, p. 17; emphasis mine). In the racialised scenario in which the diasporic subject in Europe negotiates European cultural citizenship, they are often denied the opportunities of independent “selfmaking” within the colonialist atmosphere and regulations of “being made.” In view of European transcultural history in this trying development, Nyman (2017) aptly observes that “[w]hile such a European space appears to be dominated by forms of racism and xenophobia and thus provides few possibilities for identification, it cannot exist without its migrant Others, especially Africans” (p. 164).

A major achievement of leading scholarship on *Travelling with Djinns* is the tendency to identify and inscribe Europe as “postcolonial” and integrally hybrid, illuminating its plural histories as interlocking diverse transcultural and transracial realities, both past and present. It has been able to do this in critical conversation with the mythic imaginaries of European racial/cultural homogeneity and supremacy, thus setting Europe as an imperial achievement involving the collaboration of its Others. However, research is lacking on how this novel unpacks the Manichaean cultural discourse of “White” Europe objectifying its diasporic Others, especially in sexualised and racialised terms by which it frames marginalised masculinity, despite evidence of its own internal disconnectedness. Critical

insights have also largely ignored how the marginality of diasporic Africans in the novel problematises the rather Utopian idea of Afropolitanism as a liberating discourse that presents migrant/diasporic Africans in Europe/the West as “Africans of the world” (Selasi 2005), suggesting a bourgeois, El Dorado integration of these diasporic subjects in their hostlands. To add to these lacunae, these critical reflections have rarely engaged the text’s liminal postcolonial vision which allows it to also interrogate the postcolony (in this case, Sudan) along some lines of its intra-national dysfunctions, failures and threatening evidence of collapse. This paper intervenes in these sets of gaps, providing an alternative reading that hopefully opens up an expanded dimension of the text’s transcultural and discursive tendency.

Cultural Nightmares in Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinns*

Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinns* may be read as a literary inscription on the existential tensions experienced by the diasporic postcolonial subject trapped in the complex reality of double national identity. This is eloquently portrayed in Yasin’s (2014) mixed-race identity, informed by a parentage composed of an Afrabian (Afro-Arab) father from Sudan and an English mother. Described by Jonny de Falbe as “a moving and thoughtful novel in which the condition of complex cultural confusion is eloquently dramatized” (p. 1), *Travelling with Djinns* reveals an imaginative tapestry of history, myth, culture and human complexity knitted in a network of journalistic and poetic language, historical reportage and personal self-confession. This helps in depicting the psychic and cultural challenges of Yasin before the bigotry of Orientalism and the short-sightedness of all essentialist modes of perception, including cultural ontologies and narcissisms of his ethnic Sudanese background. The novel, to a great extent, may be said to also expand the discursive terms of Sudanese Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, a novel whose boundary-fixated postcolonialism implicitly subverts Europe to being Sudan’s postcolonial Other in sexualised metaphoric depictions in which Europe becomes female and the Sudan male, inverting the male sexism of European colonial imagination and domination. Through *Travelling with Djinns*, we encounter in Mahjoub a younger-generation Sudanese writer whose liminal

postcolonial sensibilities are apparently more metropolitan, dialogic and realistically reflective of the intricate cultural and civilisational dialogues between Europe and its diasporic Others.

Mahjoub, in the novel in view, invokes a very sensitive dimension of discursive wanderlust by investing in Yasin the obligation to travel (arguably like Sindbad the Sailor in the pan-Oriental narrative legacy, *The Arabian Nights*), but informed by a number of compelling (or haunting) indices. These include the hunt for his “nebulous” cultural/national location, the pressure of a threatened and eventually aborted marriage to an English woman which leads to the quest to escape the emotional crisis of single fatherhood and a longing to find a world in which his seven-year-old son, Leo, could survive and thrive amidst the turmoil of a broken home and the imprecise tides of the present neoliberal global order. Yasin thus becomes a “contemporary Sindbad” on a course of quests subsuming the intra-personal, the familial, the cultural and the (post)modern.

The occasion of the sour trend of Yasin’s marriage to Ellen, an English lady with a part- Dutch bloodline, launches him into the compulsive experience of road travel. Left with the only treasure he cherishes most on earth, Leo, Yasin determines to escape the emotional pangs of his failed marriage, but most of all, to equip his son with the armoury of “containing” Europe:

I want him to learn about this place, this continent where so much of our fate has been forged, one way or another. Love it or loathe it he would have to learn to deal with it, this thing we call Europe. To assemble the facts into his own sense of who he is and where he comes from. Whether he decides to live his life here or not, this is where he was born. I was not (2003, p. 22).

Inscribed in Yasin’s vision to travel, as instanced above, is a dominant drive of the postcolonial, an engagement imbued with an interrogative assignment on empire’s history, metaphysics, mechanism(s) and othering ethics. His journeys through Europe, traversing Germany, Denmark, France and Spain betray the Orientalist bias against peripheral subjects with Arab

cultural leaning as other, his or her parental affiliation to Europe notwithstanding. As Yasin realises:

I am a stranger wherever I go. My history is not given, but has to be taken, reclaimed, piece by solitary piece, snatched from among the pillars of centuries, the shelves of ivory scholarship...My nation is a random list of places on the map that I have passed through, upon which I have no claim. Some might say that I have been assimilated, but they would be wrong. Others would say I am alienated and ought to be better integrated by now, but that too would be to miss the point. This is the way of things (p. 5).

Contrary to most readings of *Travelling with Djinns* that usually gloss over Yasin's cultural origin in Sudan as a narrative springboard for his inquiry of and transnational travels within Europe (Traseira 2012; Mohammad 2015; Nyman 2017; Stork 2022), Yasin's confessions hints at his implied experience of translocation from Sudan to Europe as a site of cultural and cosmic in-betweenness which must be engaged in the context of negotiating his cultural citizenship in Europe, along with that of Leo, particularly in the event of his traumatising marital crisis. His road travel may therefore be seen as not only an extension of an initial (but unnarrated) postcolonial travel from Sudan to Britain, but also as an expanded examination of the intricate and diverse conversations of Europe with its migrant/diasporic Others in relation to a problematic transcultural familyhood, heterogeneous identities, and the challenging imperatives of "selfmaking."

Yasin's knowledge of Ellen's Nordic relatives in the early years of their marriage convinces him that no matter how much a person with Arab affiliation, whether of Sudanese or Saudi roots, negotiates kinship with the European, there is bound to be an internal cultural friction. Despite the fact that Ellen exhibits an amazing intercultural understanding that makes Yasin feel that she could help him "penetrate the mystery of what Europe was" (p. 26), her family relate with him like a strange breed. This othering is given a "scholarly" anchorage by her father, Claus, an archaeologist, who reads Yasin's history, culture and person through the lenses of Eurocentric

anthropology. Claus' Orientalist discourse thus consigns Yasin, and by extension, the Arab(ised) world, to a past grossly unable to move beyond the space of a fossilised cultural consciousness. Yasin and his Arab kindred are referred to as "Bedouin" and are said to "...eat the liver of the camel raw" (p. 27). This demonising of the Arab(ised) subject endures in Claus' relationship with Yasin that the latter confesses:

In all the years of our time together I could not bring myself to break the news to him that I was an urban child, that I couldn't with any certainty tell one end of a camel from the other. I grew up in a suburban environment where the problem of survival involved power cuts that lasted for days and water pipes choking to a trickle one minute and gushing reddish-brown river water the next (p. 28).

As the plot progresses, Yasin encounters his Nordic in-laws again at the occasion of the one hundredth birthday anniversary of Sophus Mikkelbak, Ellen's paternal grandfather. This occasion, which witnesses the end of his marital relationship with Ellen on account of the latter's allegation of his secret sexual affairs with her best friend, reveals more of the fixed marginal categorisation of the Arab(ised) individual in Orientalist European thinking. Yasin suffers, aside from the subtle disapproval of the predominant European audience at Sophus' party, the haunting Orientalist debasement of his racial and cultural affiliation. In a dialogue with his fourth living wife, Sophus expresses shock at Yasin's modernity and metropolitanity, as in the following:

'He doesn't look like an oil sheikh, to me.'

'Not oil sheikh, his father was a political candidate, I think.'

'I didn't know they had elections.' (p. 33).

Here Mahjoub does not only depict the ugly prejudice inherent in the culturalist discourse of European Orientalism but, by extension, questions conservative Europe's claim of enlightened advancement over Oriental(ised) people and spaces, since its traditional self-enclosing view of the latter, and indeed, the humanity of its diasporic Others, betrays it as being fundamentally nativist and static.

Yasin's road travel with Leo progressively unravels the disconnectedness of homogenous European civility through his encounters with experiences that expose internal institutional weaknesses, silenced voices and evidence of rupture. These include the escapist tendencies of a number of White Europeans into alcohol as evidenced in Denmark; street subcultures and incidents of sex workers as rife in France; eccentric deviance from normative "cultured" ethics as portrayed by Boy Blue who pays "a big black guy" to have sex with a lady who is deeply in love with him right in his presence; and evidence of youth gangs, one of which Muk, his younger brother, gets entrapped in in Spain. These, together with incidents of information doctoring, drug addiction, spiritist activities and dissents by disgruntled intellectuals, subvert the assumptions of European cultural ascendancy according to Orientalist thought. Mahjoub thus deconstructs Europe and situates it as inhabiting "[a] history of transgressions, of frontiers and border lines being crossed and recrossed" (p. 173).

Travelling with Djinnns progresses in its liminal postcolonial intention not only to privilege the periphery over the Centre, but also to call the periphery to a symposium interrogating the idea of any imagined nativist self-accomplishment without the progressive/modernist input of the Centre. In this, Mahjoub adroitly identifies certain conflicting interests which thus argue the fact that, just as the Centre experiences internal decay because of its bigoted Eurocentricity, the periphery stands as much the descent if it was glued to a self-congratulatory, self-enclosing Manichaeian postcolonialism. Thus, Mahjoub highlights some sites of ideological regression in Sudan, his chosen site of the postcolony, where there are fixations to traditions and norms in the face of modernist challenges to progress. On this note, Haboba, Yasin's paternal grandmother, for instance, queries, on a fatalist Muslim ground, why her son (Yasin's father) should leave Sudan (during its pre-independence days) for a nationalist assignment in England. She wonders:

What made him want to go?...I'll tell you. I asked him what he thought he was going to do there. Who asked him to change the world? Why go and live there? What what for? *Things are the way they are because Allah put them that way* (emphasis mine) (p. 61).

Such inherent nativism as espoused by Haboba above finds a trans-generational and trans-spatial replication in incidents involving some "enlightened" diasporic subjects of Arab(ised)-African extraction in Europe. Yasmina, Yasin's elder sister, continually links Yasin's calamities to his "aimlessness" and cultural ambivalence which, to her, explains his ill-advised marriage to "a European" and "a Christian;" and Haya, an Arab lady he meets in France, laments why "Men like this...don't marry our kind of women..." (p. 163). Yasin's travel to Sudan with his family, among other things, exposes incidents of nepotism and official corruption inherent in post-independence Sudan. He is allowed entry into Sudan despite his invalid passport because his father (an avowed activist) has an acquaintance with Ali Hadeed, the questionable head of the immigration unit of the airport. This is a statement of the lamentable gulf between the ethical pretensions of the Sudanese nation-state and the internal institutional gaps within it, a mess that he himself embodies.

The lamentable incidents depicted above are, however, juxtaposed with certain commendable events that run counter to them. These include Haya's genuine feeling of cultural loss in France; Yasmina and Umar's shunning of Eurocentric redefinitions of their Islamic cultural values in England; and Yasin's father's loathing of the failures of the post-independence Sudanese socio-political climate laden with administrative backwardness, waste and religious bigotry. He protests to Yasin that "These people don't read...They want everyone to sit clutching their holy books all day. They want to blind people to the truth. They are doing for Islam what the Stalinists did for Socialism" (p. 205). The experiences encountered by Yasin in the course of his travel with his son increase his growing consciousness of the self-inadequacy of any discourse that seeks to construct a sign of its superior

righteousness. All systems and ways of life, however well illuminated, suffer their inherent lack. There is no real fixed point of arrival, as aptly captured in the metaphor of travel. Yasin's unresolved family tensions, heightened by the rifts-in-value between him and his immediate extended family, make the trying realities of his journeys particularly haunting and endless. He becomes a Sindbad "traveling with djinns" (demons/evil spirits), in this case, "the evil spirits" of existential quests, transcultural hyphenation, and loneliness.² Claus points out to him on an occasion that involves both traveling through the mountains of North Wales:

Travel is also a way of evading the world...It never solves anything. Not really...There is an old expression in Danish, about your troubles going with you wherever you travel. Something called a *nisse*, which is an imp-like creature (emphasis mine) (p. 179).

Claus' location of man's endless search for social utopia in the figure of the "nisse" coheres with not only Yasin's experience(s) but also with the endless beginnings of every civilisation's quest to master the world and to define it. In *Travelling with Djinns*, therefore, cultural essence is subverted in favour of existential subjectivity.

Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* succeeds as a major statement of a new-generation Sudanese literary output unpretentiously contextualising the Sudanese Afrabian experience within the multicultural emphasis of the contemporary global order. In this regard, the Arab(ised)/peripheral subject intricately participates in the metropolitan politics of inclusion and exclusion, negotiating the ocean and tempests of cultural nightmares. Mahjoub's postcolonial discourse, along this line, differs from Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* because it allows the Arab(ised) subject to live out their individuality in response to Orientalism rather than being a metaphor for "the contending community" as in the nationalist inclination of the latter. However, it is pertinent to note that *Travelling with Djinns* also presents a transnational/transcultural interrogation of what might be called the "utopian culturalist fantasia" of Afropolitanism.

Dominant Afropolitan discourse proudly celebrates the “fluid transnational embodiments” of migrant/diasporic African people in the West as the identity-marker of “the newest generation of African emigrants...not citizens, but Africans of the world” (Selasi 2005, pp. 1-2). This assertion can be seen as the summary of its exuberantly published position in “Bye Bye, Babar,” a 2005 essay by Taiye Selasi, a contemporary post/African writer believed by many, albeit controversially, to have inaugurated this borderless culturalist strand.³ Among other things within its fluid discursive inscription, Afropolitanism tends to present a post/African identity free from postcolonial engagements or nationalist indebtedness; it projects a triumphant, “unchallenged” and self-contained transcultural agency, especially within Western-dominated influences of neoliberal cultural relations. In its popular literary gaze, it allows a predominant Anglo-American atmosphere of literary capitalism in which Western publishing initiatives, production mechanisms, aesthetic effects, prize-reward structures, and audience-taste play a defining role.

Afropolitan culturalism is however read in several Africanist circles as reductively post-Afrocentric, espousing a rather apolitical and bourgeois agenda that is largely inconsistent with the lived experiences of several marginalised migrants/diasporans of African extraction, as projected in Yasin’s challenging plights in Mahjoub’s novel in focus. Despite its arguable tendency to inscribe protagonist upper-middle-class characters as narrative signposts of a new African embodiment of global neoliberal visibility, an Irish/Nigerian social historian, Emma Dabiri, for instance, proposes that Afropolitanism is discursively disoriented because “the insights on race, modernity and identity appear to be increasingly sidelined in sacrifice to the consumerism Mbembe also identifies as part of the Afropolitan assemblage” (2014, p. 1). Afropolitanism’s postnational/transnational gaze (at least in English-language produced texts) does not articulate the marginalised or subaltern concerns of characters of African affiliation due to the following reasons proffered by Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire:

...five hallmarks of the postnational-as-Afropolitan school emerge. These are the acceptance of the use of English and inheritance of Anglo-American aesthetics, the exploration of

upper- and middle-class lives that cross between the Anglo-American sphere and Africa, a transnational and continental geographical setting, production and acclaim by the Western publishing industrial complex, and the apolitical nature of the themes explored in the national sphere (2018, p. 107).

Apparently, Mahjoub's aim in *Travelling with Djinns* is not to map an Afropolitan site of fluid transcultural negotiation of African elitism and subjectivity in Europe/the West, but to present a series of transnational diasporic African experiences in dialogue with Europe/the West in which the pangs and pains of postcolonial identity are problematised and memorialised.

Mahjoub's road-travel novel in view also intersects the place of gender/sexuality in the politics of European transcultural negotiations involving diasporic Africans. This is particularly instanced in the social relations involving hegemonic and marginalised masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity can be described as a society's nominally-sanctioned idea of ideal maleness, popularly identified as being active, daring, iconic, influential, respectable, enviable, and "ultimate," with the dynamic quality of responding to spatial, temporal, and generational peculiarities and contexts (Connell 1993; 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Anderson & McCormack 2014; Glover 2019). Integrally, it defines the platform of patriarchy as well as constructs gender as a heteronormative initiative in which the female body is notionally and/or functionally othered and sets categorical hierarchies of maleness (Connell 1993; 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Anderson and McCormack 2014), which is conventional male identity expected in figures such as "role-model" male community leaders, influential male political activists, male celebrities or successful business moguls. It is also the gendered/sexualised stimuli that have driven discourses of dominance such as imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and socio-cultural control, not excluding counter-hegemonic responses such as displayed by Mustapha Saeed in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, but which in this case, becomes toxic.

In *Travelling with Djinns*, shades of hegemonic masculinity are displayed in racialised terms that depict Yasin as embodying marginalised masculinity, as the denigrating remarks and conducts of Claus and Sophus Mikkellbak reveal. Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack point out that “[m]arginalized masculinities are said to categorize men oppressed by the hegemonic form of masculinity because of their race or class” (2014, p. 4), a construct which particularly exposes Yasin to a harrowing in-between postnational/transnational venue of racist, classicist and (what we may call) “hegemonic feminine assault,” the latter ultimately unleashed by his wife who not only divorces him but also gains legal custody of Leo, their son. Thus, Yasin’s marginalised masculinity disables him from negotiating *cultural citizenship* in a privileged upper middle-class context because he lacks the bourgeois class affectations and opportunities of Afropolitan protagonists like the twin sisters Georgia and Bessi in Diana Evans’ *26a* (2005), Julius in Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) or Kweku Sai in Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013). In his postnational experience of marginalised masculinity in Europe, especially among his in-laws, Yasin lacks the agency of “selfmaking” inequitable relation to his “being made,” culminating in the existential imperatives that make him forever travel within Europe in a quest of postponed hopes and eventual loss. His fragmentation as the protagonist of the novel not only feeds into a narrative of denied male dominance in male travel/mobile writing, but also reveals woman as not a homogenous body, but equally variegated. Though the woman not only speaks resonantly but also attains major positions of familial and social visibility (as seen in Ellen, Yasmina and Haboba), she however lacks coherent socio-cultural or class self-protection. Even the Arab(ised) women in the plot are as subjectively detached from one another as they are spatially widespread. Michael Chaney offers that “[w]orking within British, central African, and Arabic traditions, Mahjoub’s diverse literary affiliations on the one hand reflect the specific multiculturalism of Sudan’s various classes, ethnic groups, and religions, and on the other, provide another instance of what Anthony Appiah terms a “shifting of canonical territories” (2014, p. 41), not only in post/colonial representations of mobility, but in the projections of embedded gender(ed) dynamics.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it stands to reason that postcolonial initiatives interrogating the European “Master Text” with regard to travel/mobile writing have seminally inaugurated new ways of challenging colonial discourse on the one hand, and re-inscribing travel through aesthetic networks of plural imaginative leanings, on the other. From the instance of Jamal Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinns*, the post/African travel text can be seen as exhibiting not only the tendency of expanding the terms of the revisionist assignment against colonialist travel representations or monolithic Europeanness but also reassessing the postnational claim of postcolonial non-involvement, as popular Afropolitan submissions would insist. Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinns* also shows the implications of marginalised masculinity in understanding the extended dynamics of gender and sexuality in the contemporary postcolonial travel/mobile text. It also narrates the intricate politics of multiculturalism and cultural citizenship in the contemporary realities and challenges of transnational migration, especially to Europe/the West. With the innumerable aesthetic possibilities and thematic arsenals that refresh new understandings of the literature of empire, the postcolonial travel/mobile text, such as *Travelling with Djinns*, promises to illuminate more insight into the postnational oeuvre of mobility writing.

Notes

1. The label “post/African” is adopted in this paper to signify the liminal situation in which some “African” writings may be argued as textually or temperamentally Afrocentric due to their indigenous cultural or cosmic frame of reference, while some others, especially written by several migrant authors, may be seen as “post,” being culturally, discursively and/or textually planetary or “in-between,” thus subverting the idea of being Afrocentric.
2. Yasmine Mohammed proposes that djinns “might derive from the Arabic root of janna, which means ‘those who are hidden,

mysterious' or 'covered' ... Djinns are portrayed in the Qur'an as invisible spirits that assume human and animal form and possess supernatural qualities. I contend that the djinns, which constantly haunt the present time frame of the novel, might stand for Yasin's and Europe's repressed sorrowful, troubling memories" (2015, p. 7).

3. While the term "Afropolitan" has been largely popularised by Taiye Selasi's "Bye bye, Babar" (2005), Bosch Santana argues to the effect that "Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe was the first to use the word, in an article published in February 2005, a month before Selasi's use of the term" (see Mwesigire 2018, pp. 107). Also in a published confession, Mbembe offers that "[i]t's a term that's part of a set of reflections, most of which originate from my location in South Africa. I started thinking in those terms when I moved to South Africa—those terms which came out of a preoccupation about the place of Africa in the world" (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016, p. 29). Afropolitanism has continued to be an engaged term with several inroads of thematic and imaginative orientations.

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