



## ■ Book Review ■

### *Son of Elsewhere: A Memoir in Pieces*

Elamin Abdelmahmoud  
Ballantine Books, New York

*Yuk-kuen Annie Cheung*

Elamin Abdelmahmoud's *Son of Elsewhere – A Memoir in Pieces* is a beautifully written recollection of the author's emigration to Canada while still a preteen. He begins by describing his upbringing in Sudan, his birthplace, through a child's mind's eye, meandering through streets and familiar homes in his middle class Khartoum neighborhood. Just like that, the author leads you through the pages of his personal milestones, and various stages of chaotic transformations and introspection as he follows his parents to embark on a life changing adventure with a one-way ticket out of Sudan to a new country. Upon arriving in Canada, touching down at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, the journey to the new family home in Kingston, Ontario, to this preteen, was a never-ending journey on a highway. Indeed, the lengthy highway is a metaphor for what was to come. Throughout the pages, Abdelmahmoud adopts a cinematic, split-screen, narrative style that tells stories and events in multiple places in Sudan and Canada over a span of several decades. The collection of stories of his growing up offers a moving tribute to his dotting parents for the sacrifices they made, leaving behind family and friends to offer better opportunities for their child's future.

The book is made up of episodes, told, with wit and humor, centring on the author's own life as a young newcomer. The personal lens provides a colorful, and emotionally impactful foil for the many broader issues

of multiculturalism that are latent in his stories. A nagging feeling of dislocation, and “*how much of yourself to allot to each homeland, and how you navigate the anguish that comes with giving one of them less*”—these are emotions quite commonly held by all immigrants, and anyone who shares an uprooting experience along one’s journey in pursuit of dreams.

In 1989, a Francis Fukuyama article entitled, “*The End of History?*” was published, and it was given much attention, especially by polemicists. The article extols the end of the twentieth century as the breakthrough moment when Western social political organizing principles were becoming universal, and when free-wheeling capitalism took precedence over ideological and geopolitical motivations. Abdelmahmoud’s parents might, indeed, also count themselves converts to this globalized consciousness.

In the meantime, history was still very much in the making, in fact quite forcefully in some parts of the world. In Sudan, where Abdelmahmoud and his family resided, a struggling ruler from a noted political dynasty was overtaken by a military coup. The elected Sadiq al-Mahdi was removed by Brigadier General Omar al-Bashir, whose anachronistic regime went on to rule Sudan for 30 years until 2019.

Against this background, the middle class comfort of young Abdelmahmoud’s family in Khartoum was unravelling. It was about to be interrupted by steps that his parents were to take to leave Sudan, migrating to the West.

According to the author, young Abdelmahmoud’s journey out of Sudan took place not long after the 1998 American bombing of a newly built pharmaceutical manufacturing plant in his neighborhood. The plant, from Abdelmahmoud’s account, produced much needed, more affordable malaria drugs for the domestic market, and was a crucial piece in the country’s capacity to deliver public health. For the author and his family, this certainly burst the bubble of an unadulterated positive perception of the West. The local population understandably felt unfairly targeted. Nonetheless, this did not have an impact on young Abdelmahmoud’s and his mother’s travel plans to reunite with his father in Canada.

Adaption to a new life takes many forms, but it always starts with an awareness of something that does not quite fit. In Abdelmahmoud's case, it was his skin color. When he arrived in Kingston Ontario, with a population of 110,000 in 1998, and 85% white, he and his small Sudan community stood out as "Black" (a word choice that the author uses throughout.) This awareness of how he was perceived was disorienting. In his first visit to Toronto (Year 2000 Census Metropolitan Area of Toronto population: 4,607,000), his cool metropolitan cousin gave this sermon: *"I don't know why your Baba chose Kingston for your family ... Over here, we're Black. And being Black in Canada is way harder in a place like your city. You'll see."* As a remedy, to signify another identifier – of "cool", the author took to wearing "a hat with Chinese lettering", an insignia of the early-aughts hip hop scene. He admitted that his need to look cool had preceded his ability to speak the predominant language of Ontario, which is English.

The author's desire to "belong" and the efforts that he made to adapt are the overarching themes in all his stories. Abdelmahmoud's remarkable reflexive consciousness, precocious self-awareness, and curiosity put him on a fast-track for successful adaptation, or "assimilation". He later struggled with this, when reconciling his memories of childhood and his coming of age in Canada.

What the author reveals in his stories are the challenges that come with being transported, physically across oceans and continents, and more significantly, socially and culturally. Besides, soon after he arrived in Canada, growing pains of puberty begin to intrude and complicate life's everyday trials and uncertainties. You will notice, chapter by chapter, that the author's articulation of pop culture and current affairs is expansive. These anecdotes bring real liveliness to the prose. Any child of the "90s and early 2000s" will certainly nod knowingly at the multiple references, while older readers may find them a bit obscure.

Abdelmahmoud's own growing up and adaptation are also juxtaposed with his parents' efforts in trying to make sense of the push and pull forces of change in the household, in the society around them, and

how these manifested in tensions in their relationship with their young son.

At 15, Abdelmahmoud attended an out-of-town “nu metal” band concert, chaperoned by two adults, the precocious young man who worked in his father’s convenience store and Abdelmahmoud’s hijab wearing mother. He recounts that his mother stood waiting the whole time among “well-mohawked and aggressively pierced and heavily eyelinered people”. When he re-emerged gleefully from the crowd, his mother reached into her handbag, took out cookies and a drinks that she had packed for him. Mortified, despite the fact that he was soaked through in sweat and spilled beer, was dehydrated and slightly wounded with a scratch on his face, he decided to walk back to the “mosh pit” with the young man and the source of the inadvertent injury.

Old customs are overtaken gradually, yet reluctantly, by new norms in the new country and realities of the situation. For instance, to purists, Ramadan fasting in Canada is not long enough to generate that special feeling and sensation in the stomach, because sunset comes earlier. During the month of Ramadan, according to Abdelmahmoud, family visits were confined to Saturdays only, not every day, as was the norm in the old country. As well, the usual all-out extravaganza of gift giving and treats, that came with the Eid celebration at the end of Ramadan, was noticeably much scaled down among Sudanese Canadian communities. The author observes the toll on his parents – even physically, recounting that his mother attributed her medically diagnosed depression to the lack of a proper mourning for her cousin’s passing. In Sudan, it is customary for all mourners to grieve openly, loudly and collectively. Wailing culminates in “a symphony of devastation” in a designated house, called the “House of Tears”. The event would go on for days, and even street traffic would take a detour out of respect. In Canada, however, funerals are generally a matter of the individual’s introspective grieving.

Elamin Abdelmahmoud’s coming of age is a tale of overcoming cultural, linguistic, and societal barriers and differences, and the author

emerges triumphantly as a well-educated, successful Canadian writer, cultural (including “pop”) and political commentator, and host of a podcast out of Toronto, the most populous city of Canada (Year 2022 Census Metropolitan Area of Toronto population: 6,313,000). His stories in *Son of Elsewhere – A Memoir in Pieces* also belong to his parents, and their journeys and adaptations to living in Canada. His courtship with a non-Sudanese woman, now his wife, brings to particular focus how the older generation struggles, at different paces, to adapt to the realities of the country they choose to call home. Abdelmahmoud’s mother attended his wedding, but his father did not. Years later, his father made amends and has since reunited with the author’s young family.

As a country of immigrants, Canada prides itself on its multiculturalism. The strength of the Canadian identity relies on achieving commonalities that are not unlike achieving the elusive Hegelian goal, as discussed in the Fukuyama article, “*The End of History?*” As long as the goal remains an aspiration, the Canada project will need to continue to tussle with this question: “How do we support all cultures to make everyone feel welcome and included in Canada?” Abdelmahmoud’s journey offers a positive story, but to sustain this social project called Canada, we need plenty of these good stories, we need to hear about them and keep them coming.

### Reference

Fukuyama, F. (1989). “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, 16, 3-18.

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## Biographical Note

**Yuk-kuen Annie** Cheung Ph.D., RPP is herself an immigrant. Having been born in British Hong Kong, she has lived in Canada for over 30 years. Dr. Cheung is a registered professional urban and regional planner. She has published extensively on principles and practices of sustainable development and has broad experience in non-governmental organizations, both in an executive capacity and serving on boards. Dr. Cheung's current research focus is on the human dimension of sustainable development and politics. She resides in Ottawa, Canada.

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