INTERVIEW

Writing Sudan: An Interview with Sudanese Writer Reem Gaafar on her Debut Novel "A Mouth Full of Salt"

by Ibrahim Fawzy



Reem Gaafar © Reem Gaafar

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Sudanese author Reem Gaafar won the 2023 Island Prize for her debut novel *A Mouth Full of Salt* (to be released 2024), becoming the first Sudanese writer to win the prize. The judges Karen Jennings, Rachel Edwards, and Hamza Koudri remarked in a press statement, "*A Mouth Full of Salt* is stylistically simple, insightful, and elegant; sharing truths like all best fiction, it is compelling, has a profound sense of place, and shows brilliance in the ways the destinies weave together."

Aside from writing, Reem is a public health physician and mother of three. She grew up between New Zealand, Oman, and Sudan, and lived and worked in the United Arab Emirates and Canada. She started off as an ER physician then transitioned into public health and health policy. She also made a few documentary films. She was shortlisted for the Miles Moreland Foundation Scholarship in 2020, and her works have appeared in *Teakisi Magazine*, *BMJ Blogs*, *Andariya*, *African Feminist*, *African Arguments*, *International Health Policies*, among others.

The fighting between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces, since April 15, has brought Sudan to its knees. Reem Gaafar received the news of her win with indifference amidst the distressing news coming through the media about Sudan. Sadly, her home in Khartoum was broken into and robbed like many Sudanese households.

Tint's Egyptian contributor Ibrahim Fawzy had this interview with Reem to talk about her debut novel *A Mouth Full of Salt,* and the situation in Sudan.

Ibrahim Fawzy: Your debut novel *A Mouth Full of Salt* won the Island Prize for a novel manuscript from Africa. *Alf Mabrouk.* Congratulations!. How do you feel about that? What are your feelings generally about literary prizes?

Reem Gaafar: I'm extremely happy to have won the prize, despite the challenges I faced in reaching this point due to the ongoing situation in Sudan. Also, the public reaction to my win has actually been quite overwhelming. I think literary prizes like all forms of validation are double-edged swords. Sometimes, factors beyond literary excellence come into play during the decision-making process, and losing can be discouraging for a writer, even to the point of giving up writing altogether. On the other hand, winning or being shortlisted for a prize can provide the motivation a writer needs to keep going. This has been the case for me, as I was shortlisted for the Miles Moreland Foundation scholarship in 2020, and now with The Island

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Prize. In reality, prizes like The Island Prize that offer opportunities to network and gain access to agents and publishers are incredibly valuable for helping emerging writers get published.

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Ibrahim: Let's talk about your novel. I know that the inspiration for *A Mouth Full of Salt* comes from a story that one of your friends shared with you a while back. She told you about her cousin who had gone away and left her three-year-old son with his grandparents. While playing outdoors, the child was hit by a car and died. At the funeral, the mother-in-law was crying and asking for forgiveness for not keeping the child safe. What was your creative writing process, and what were the struggles you encountered as you put your novel together? In structure, character, style?

Reem: My novel begins with the death of a child under the care of his grandparents, and that aspect of it remained constant throughout multiple drafts, despite almost everything else kept changing. My writing process is quite erratic; I visualize the scene in my mind and describe it, without outlining, planning, or plotting. Initially, the novel started off as a short story but it kept growing in length and complexity. After completing the first draft of the novel, I reviewed the manuscript and identified areas that needed further development in terms of structure and character development, while maintaining the same writing style throughout. To my surprise, after submitting the manuscript, I discovered that there were various commonalities between my novel and a well-known title published several years ago. Consequently, I withdrew the manuscript and rewrote almost 60% of it, completely changing the plot and ending. I am so pleased that I did so, because the final version was much more developed and superior.

Ibrahim: You wrote *A Mouth Full of Salt* in three or four sittings, right? So did you imagine the story in your head first, sketch it out, or did you just dive in and let the book happen as you went along?

Reem: I envisioned each segment on its own and kept elaborating it until it turned into a complete narrative. It wasn't planned, but that's the way it turned out. In most of my writing I rely heavily on freewriting and let the story develop organically.

Ibrahim: Once you wrote the whole text, what was your revision process like? Did you have any readers who you relied on for their opinion, or did you work completely on your own?

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Reem: Due to the tight deadline of the competition, I had limited time to revise my work. However, I usually have one of my sisters read anything that I plan to publish, as she has a keen eye and isn't afraid to provide honest feedback. She helps me to identify what works in my writings and what needs improvement.

Ibrahim: *A Mouth Full of Salt* seems like fantasy at first glance, but it's actually realistic, with dark themes of social stigma against outsiders and with gender and racial hierarchies. What is the reason behind your preference for a 'realistic' narrative approach instead of, for instance, 'magical realism' that has a prominent presence in contemporary Arabic literature?

Reem: I write about the ordinary things I observe in my surroundings, the mundane details of everyday life and the regular people going about their business. These simple details fascinate me, and I strive to describe them to myself first and then to my readers. Although I appreciate the allure of magical realism, I believe that, in reality, there are always logical explanations for things that may seem surreal.



Four fundamental African novels that inspire Reem Gaafar. Cover Collage © Ibrahim Fawzy

Ibrahim: We find *jinn* in Sudanese novelist Hammour Ziada's *The Longing of the Dervish* and in the prolific Sudanese writer Abdel Aziz Baraka Sakin's *The Jungo*. Also, in Tayed Salih's *The Wedding of Zain*, readers find Sufi sheikhs walking on water. In your novel, a strange woman with supernatural elements appears, during the search for a drowned boy in the North of Sudan. After her appearance, a series of strange and tragic events takes place: animals die of a mysterious illness; the date tree field catches fire and burns to the ground; a young girl dies. While these events all have perfectly logical explanations, the villagers believe they are a work of evil and their thoughts and anger turn to this woman who they believe is a witch. Can we say that *A Mouth Full of Salt* comes from the same distinctive Sudanese cultural world?

Reem: Sudan with all its diversity shares much of its local context with other African and Arab countries. So it's hard to tell a story about Sudan without some details overlapping with other Sudanese stories even if that is unintentional.

Ibrahim: African literature is rich. If you were to choose four titles that would represent, to you, the most interesting books (perhaps experimental, challenging, or influential in some way) written in English by African authors, what would they be?

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Reem: I love Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi's novel *Purple Hibiscus* which I think is quite underrated and is almost on par with *Half of a Yellow Sun.* Fatin Abbas's debut novel *Ghost Season* is a must-read, and the characters are completely seared into my mind. I'm a fan of Nobel Prize winner Abdulrazak Gurnah, but I love *Paradise* most. I also recommend *The Shadow King* by Maaza Mingeste.

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