

From Disengagement to Gerotranscendence: A Gerontological Reading of Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives*

Yaqin Adileh ^{1*}

¹ Mutah University, Faculty of Arts, yaqeenadaileh@yahoo.com

HOW TO CITE:

Yaqin Adileh (2026). From Disengagement to Gerotranscendence: A Gerontological Reading of Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* International Journal of Special Education, 41(19s), 1424 - 1436

ABSTRACT

This study explores how ageing is depicted in Jamal Mahjoub's novel *The Fugitives* (2021) and how the novel questions the stereotypical understanding of ageing through the meeting of the legendary Kamanga Kings jazz band in Sudan. The study is based on literature on gerontology, such as disengagement theory, activity theory, socioemotional selectivity theory, Erik Erikson's theory of integrity versus despair, postcolonial memory theory, and psychoanalytical theory of ageing. It investigates how, in the novel, Mahjoub redefines ageing as a process of reclaiming identity, of holding on to cultural memory, of handing over legacy from one generation to the next, and of spiritual renewal instead of an inevitable transition marked by physical and psychological decay. The results show that music, memory and storytelling are effective in countering marginalization and ensuring continuity between past and present. Moreover, the novel highlights the importance of intergenerational communication in supporting meaningful aging, and presents later life as a relational phenomenon, one that is primarily based on connectivity, resilience and shared culture. The study concludes that, rather than the dominant Western narrative, *The Fugitives* offers an alternative view of old age and offers a more expanded view of literary depictions of old age and later life.

Keywords: ageing, music, Jamal Mahjoub, *The Fugitives*, psychoanalytical theory.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

"There are many clouds, and life is short" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 9). With this Sudanese proverb, Jamal Mahjoub opens his 2021 novel *The Fugitives*. He quickly makes the issues of growing old, death, and the short lifespan of human accomplishments the central themes of

his novel. The epigraph, which comes from Al Hussein al-Hassan (Habibat Oumri), pervades the entire story, which seems to revolve around the epigraph's take on the brevity of life and the limited opportunities available to people outside of their own control. The legendary soundtrack of a nation, The Kamanga Kings, has been dusted down to memory. Their vinyl records lie warped

and charred in a forgotten room, and their remaining members are waiting for an inevitable and undeserved end. Throughout this novel, Rushdy, the narrator, muses on the subject since the beginning of the novel: “The only religion I have ever had any faith in is music” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 10). This assertion ultimately becomes the novel’s theological heart, and it seems as if music has what traditional religion lacks. It’s a way to move beyond time, to find the selves you’ve lost, to pull meaning from the fleetingness of life.

Thus, the novel follows the unlikely reformation of this Sudanese jazz band decades after their prime. When an unexpected invitation arrives from the Kennedy Centre in Washington D.C., the surviving members, including Uncle Maher, the embittered former bandleader; Alkanary, the legendary “Golden Bird” who has retreated into alcoholism and seclusion; and the younger narrator Rushdy, who mediates between past and present, are forced to confront their past and reimagine their future. What follows is a chaotic fugitive road trip across America, from a hospice for the dying in rural Pennsylvania, to a snowbound mountain hotel, from a shopping mall confrontation with their fraudulent manager to a climactic star-studded benefit concert at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Therefore, Mahjoub’s *The Fugitives* is not merely about a road-trip adventure or a celebration of Sudanese musical heritage. However, it is a profound meditation on what it means to grow old, to face the end of one’s story, and how the final chapter of each story might still be rewritten.

During this process of reading and analysing, I have come across a few pieces of research to tackle this critical lack. On a personal level, I have seen this as a very important issue because these novel puts ageing at the core of its dramatic and emotional fabric. The reformation of the Kamanga Kings is not a nostalgic act; it is actually a desperate act of late-life reformation. Rushdy reflects on his uncle and Alkanary at the very moment they start to entertain the idea of a reunion; he says, “Listen to yourselves. You sound like a couple of old people... Look at you, both of you. You’ve come alive. I’ve never seen

anything like it” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 54). In this, his observation reflects the novel’s central thesis, which argues against the inevitability of ageing as a process of decline, to assert that ageing is a dialectical process of despair and integrity, withdrawal and re-engagement, memory and action.

To put it simply, this paper wants to suggest that the concept of ageing, in *The Fugitives*, is not just physical deterioration; it is a process of recollection, reappropriation and intergenerational transmission, as older characters seek redemption in the recall of their own glory days, while simultaneously grappling with the prospect of mortality and legacy. Moreover, the novel argues that the old can experience meaning during their old years when they take part in cultural activities such as music and can “snatch eternity from a brief encounter” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 281). In contrast, ageing is recognised within the novel as a price to be paid. Alkanary dies, Uncle Maher’s body collapses on him, and Wad Mazaj is exhausted. However, it says nothing about these expenses cancelling out the flourishing in late life. “When life begins to fade, it’s the bright moments that stand out” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 178), says Maxwell while he is at the Pearly Gables hospice. It continues to explain how this brilliant moment is not a coincidence but a product of courage, community, and a commitment to play one more time.

Finally, in this section, there is a three-part analysis that follows. Firstly, the researcher builds a more developed theoretical framework, whereby gerontological theories of ageing are combined with postcolonial and psychoanalytical theories of memory and identity. Secondly, the researcher performs a close reading of the main elderly protagonists (Uncle Maher, Alkanary and the intergenerational bond with Rushdy) as they move from despair to integrity. Third, the researcher reflects on the significance of particular events that illustrate ageing as renewal: the Kamanga Kings concert at Pearly Gables with the dying. The snow-covered mountain hotel where the band finds its sound again, Alkanary’s demise at a dingy bar – a loss, not a triumph –

and the epilogue that places the band's legacy in the context of a larger national revolution and the emergence of a new generation. Lastly, the conclusion examines how the novel contributes to the theme of age studies in postcolonial literature and proposes that *The Fugitives* presents an alternate perspective to the notion of ageing as withdrawal in the West: music and collective memory are the keys to a life lived fully.

2. Literature Review

Despite critical recognition of the novel's political and musical dimensions, its engagement with Sudanese history, the persecution of artists under Islamist regimes, and the immigrant experience in post-9/11 America, its sophisticated treatment of ageing has received little scholarly attention. According to Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, in her book *Aging and Gender in Literature* (2017): "Literature offers a singular opportunity to examine the cultural construction of aging" (Wyatt-Brown, 2017, p. 4). Rather than defining old age solely as a biological or medical state, Wyatt-Brown argues that the representations of such age in literary works demonstrate the cultural construction of old age based on social values, historical period, and personal relationships. This view is more important in *The Fugitives*, which is free from the traditional idea of the inevitability of aging in the form of decline. Rather, he describes later life as a process whereby identity, memory and cultural affiliation are constantly negotiated. The elderly members of the Kamanga Kings are not mere victims of the epidemic waiting to die, but active agents of Sudanese cultural memory who, through their meeting, experience a reinvigorated old age, an artistic renewal and an emotional reconciliation. The ageing is thus an experience of collective narration, and of music, not of chronological age, as Mahjoub makes evident. Thus, the novel reinforces Wyatt-Brown's thesis that literature can not only engage with cultural messages about ageing, but can also provide a means of contesting prevailing stereotypes with alternative representations of later life that rely on resilience, creativity and human connection (Wyatt-Brown, 2017). In addition, Roberta Maierhofer (2000) claims that literature also serves an important

function in opposing a dominant story that equates ageing with decline and devaluation in society. Literary works can challenge old stereotypes of aging bodies and their need for aid and redefine older age as a time of continued development, agency, and self-determination. This viewpoint offers a valuable lens for analysing Mahjoub's book, *The Fugitives*, which departs from the stereotype and caricature of older adults as victims and helplessly passive in the process of reconstructing their personal and collective identity. So, the Kamanga Kings reuniting is not just about a throwback; it's a gesture toward drawing a line in the sand against the culture's invisible barriers that silence and make older people feel like they don't belong. In Mahjoub's music, memory, and intergenerational relationships, it is clear that ageing is a fluid process of creativity, resilience, and cultural transmission. The novel therefore demonstrates the ability of literary narratives to reshape the image of ageing that is dominated by notions of loss, a perspective that is succinctly summarized by Maierhofer's claim that stories of ageing can be used to "redefine ageing beyond the inability to be simply a different kind of story" (Maierhofer, 2000) and to represent later life as a place of renewal, dignity and meaningful social engagement. Existing readings and research papers often focus on the "band on the run" narrative, postcolonial exile, or the revival of cultural memory, giving little attention to examining how Mahjoub represents later life.

To provide a fruitful analysis of this representation of ageing, this paper draws on several complementary theoretical frameworks from gerontology and memory studies. First, the analysis focuses on Activity theory that is associated with Robert J. Havighurst (1963). He posits that successful ageing requires continued social engagement and meaningful activity. In the novel, the reformation of the band exemplifies this principle, as Uncle Maher and Alkanary emerge from decades of isolation only when they have a collective purpose. Then, the paper addresses the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, pioneered by Laura L. Carstensen (1999). This theory offers another lens for understanding how

older adults prioritise emotional satisfaction over future-oriented goals. It suggests that older adults prioritise emotionally meaningful goals and relationships over acquiring new knowledge. For example, Alkanary's decision to join the tour, despite her frailty, reflects her deep prioritisation of emotional fulfilment over physical safety.

Moreover, another lens is presented by Erik Erikson (1982), who described integrity versus despair as the final crisis of the life cycle, which is the most appropriate lens for Mahjoub's portrayal of late-life reflection. The novel's older characters must either attain a sense of coherence and meaning in their lives ("integrity") or feel regret, bitterness and fear of death ("despair"). This is evident in Uncle Maher's transition from claiming that he is a 'foolish old man... You cannot play a concert with ghosts' (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34) to his 'tearful' embrace of the band's newfound purpose, which is just such a transition. Furthermore, Alkanary is not just a trip to alcoholic self-obliteration, but also the phenomenon of waking up from the experience. The narrator says, "She had a fragile heart that longed to be young again, to play in the light, to shine one last time. The narrator says, "She had a fragile soul that wanted to be young again, to play in the light, to shine one more time." (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 45). It's her last defiant stroke of self-determination.

Moreover, this paper focuses on postcolonial memory studies, which include the concept of cultural memory developed by Jan Assmann (2008). This will aid the reader in understanding the novel's placement of the aged musicians as keepers of a national heritage eroded by political repression. While thinking of his inheritance from his father and his uncle, Rushdy admits, "the only history I had, etched into my skin like the blue tattoo my grandmother wore on her lip" (2021, p. 12). History is inscribed on the body and passed down through generations, and this is a striking image, showing the elderly as the living embodiments of the past. Their old bodies are the memory of a nation that has forgotten itself. Bringing back that memory is not nostalgic, but of resistance.

Literature is a unique area for exploring the cultural construction of aging, as Anne M. Wyatt-Brown states in her book on Aging and Gender in Literature (2017): "Literature provides an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the cultural construction of aging" (Wyatt-Brown, 2017, p. 4). Rather than defining old age solely as a biological or medical state, Wyatt-Brown argues that the representations of such age in literary works demonstrate the cultural construction of old age based on social values, historical period, and personal relationships. This view is more important in *The Fugitives*, which is free from the traditional idea of the inevitability of aging in the form of decline. Instead, he sees later life as a process in which identities, memories, and cultural affiliations are negotiated at all times. The elderly Kamanga Kings are not just victims of the epidemic waiting to die, but active participants in Sudanese cultural memory whose encounter is an old age reinvigorated, an artistic awakening, and a reconciliation of emotions. The ageing is thus an experience of collective narration, and of music, not of chronological age, as Mahjoub makes evident. The novel thus confirms Wyatt-Brown's argument that literature does not only reframe the messages around ageing as communicated in a culture, but can also serve as a way to challenge dominant images with alternative depictions of older adulthood that focus on resilience, creativity and human connection (Wyatt-Brown, 2017). In addition, Roberta Maierhofer (2000) argues that literature also can play an important role in challenging the dominant story that makes ageing aging is a period of decline and devaluation in society. The books can deconstruct outdated notions of the ageing body that requires help and support and make older age synonymous with ongoing growth, empowerment and autonomy. This viewpoint offers a valuable lens for analysing Mahjoub's book, *The Fugitives*, which departs from the stereotype and caricature of older adults as victims and helplessly passive in the process of reconstructing their personal and collective identity. The Kamanga kings coming back together is not only a throwback, but it's also a statement of letting the culture know that its

barriers are not visible - it silences, and it differentiates. For Mahjoub, the aging process is a constant one of creativity, resilience and cultural transmission in the music, memory and intergenerational relationships. It thus shows literary narratives can transform the image of ageing, which tends to focus on loss, and portrays ageing as a place of renewal, dignity and meaningful social participation, as Maierhofer succinctly states: "Stories of ageing can be used to 'redefine ageing beyond the inability to be simply a different kind of story'" (Maierhofer, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

The analysis in *The Fugitives* is based primarily on three related scholarly and literary traditions, as stated above. These are the theories of ageing in gerontology, post-colonial and memory studies, and psychoanalysis of ageing. These structures form the basis for a reading that is sensitive to the novel's literary complexity and a serious reading of the social and psychological aspects of becoming old.

Gerontological Theories of Ageing

Disengagement Theory

The disengagement theory is the first formal theory in the social sciences regarding ageing. It was proposed by Elaine Cumming and Warren Earl Henry. Cumming and Henry (1961) proposed the notion of "ageing is an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the ageing person and others in the social system he belongs to," which they termed age withdrawal, or disengagement. Withdrawal, as described in the above quote, is not a failure, but rather a normal and even healthy part of the life of the individual and society. Cumming and Henry went so far as to say, "When disengagement is complete, he is free to die" (Cumming & Henry, 1961, p. 211). The former statement is the logical conclusion of the disengagement theory. It says that the only thing that comes in between withdrawal and the liberation of the mind is socially useful. In this perspective, death is not a loss but an eventuality. But Mahjoub doesn't buy into this. When

purpose returns, for example, Uncle Maher's room becomes a "tomb" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34), but he is reborn. Furthermore, the novel criticises the inevitability and desirability of disengagement. But it is not a natural preparation for death; it is a reversible condition which is imposed on us by neglect.

In the *Fugitives*, Mahjoub makes a low-key but persistent critique of this framework. After being neglected for years, Rushdy enters into Uncle Maher's room, and he notices that "over the years we had all allowed this room to become a tomb in which the old man had been slowly burying himself" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34). The term "allowed" is very important to a certain extent. As the novel implies, disengagement isn't just a personal tendency to withdraw; it's a form of social facilitation and even coercion from family and community. In addition, the dusty records and the broken photograph of his youth in Uncle Maher's newspaper cubbyhole could suggest that Cumming and Henry are correct in their theory. However, upon receiving the Kennedy Centre invitation, "the same man is suddenly reborn" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 67). In his novel, Mahjoub states that his withdrawal was never a foregone conclusion, but was instead a reflection of a sense of meaninglessness and lack of opportunity. In the same vein, Kathleen Woodward believes that old age is a cultural experience rather than a medical state, highlighting that society actively defines its meanings (Woodward, 1991). This perspective strengthens Mahjoub's critique of disengagement theory by suggesting that Uncle Maher's isolation is caused by socially constructed expectations of old age. His retirement from music and public life reflects ageist beliefs that old age is irrelevant, dependent, and declining. Mahjoub uses Uncle Maher's dramatic shift after the *Kamanga Kings'* reunion to disrupt these notions. His confidence, purpose, and emotional vigor return when he performs again, proving that his disengagement was cultural rather than biological. Thus, *The Fugitives* undermines Cumming and Henry's deterministic assumptions by showing that the ageing body and social myths about older people shape later life. Mahjoub reimagines ageing as a

socially negotiated and culturally relevant period of life when artistic expression, collective memory, and social participation can reclaim identity. Woodward (1991)

Activity Theory

The second theoretical framework that the analysis in this paper relies on is Activity Theory. Robert J. Havighurst developed activity theory as a direct counter-argument to disengagement theory. He proposed that “successful ageing occurs when older adults stay active and maintain social interactions” and that elderly persons must “substitute new roles for those lost in old age” in order “to maintain a positive sense of self” (Havighurst, 1963, p. 309). Havighurst’s theory assumes that ageing focuses on replacing lost roles, like retirement, widowhood, and empty nests, with new forms of participation. This is precisely what *The Fugitives* explores. This is exemplified through Uncle Maher, who had lost his role as a musician and bandleader, and finds himself reborn when the Kamanga Kings reform. Additionally, the novel also complicates Havighurst’s optimism. Wad Mazaj eventually returns to his taxi, suggesting that not every elderly person finds or wants a substitute role. In the novel, Mahjoub implies that activity is a powerful tool but not a universal prescription.

The Fugitives is the entire narrative, a fictional interpretation of activity theory. On the suggestion of the reform of the Kamanga Kings, Uncle Maher is initially reluctant: “You think the Americans would fly us around the world just to watch us expire in front of them?” (Mahjoub, 2021, pp. 34–35). The word ‘expire’ here has two meanings. It means both to breathe out and to die. How much he’s absorbed the message that old bodies are only good for decay. Therefore, the changeover is spectacular when rehearsals start. “In the chaos, Uncle Maher seemed in his element. No longer a bowed old man but reborn” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 67). Not to mention that the narrator’s rhetorical question “Where had all this energy come from?” indicates that activity theory is a good approach, but not the whole story—what has happened is something miraculous. Purposeful engagement isn’t just about keeping

the elderly alive; it can bring them back to life, for Mahjoub.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

Moreover, Laura L. Carstensen’s socioemotional selectivity theory provides a more complex understanding of age motivation. “The perception of time plays a fundamental role in the selection and pursuit of social goals (Carstensen, 1999, p. 172). When time is felt to be open-ended, persons focus on knowledge-related goals (Carstensen. At the same time, emotional goals are predominant when time is limited (Carstensen, 1999, p. 173). As time slips away, older adults begin to value emotionally significant relationships and experiences more than future-oriented activities.

It is represented by Alkanary’s last journey in the novel. She is found in a rough bar after a disappearance from Birchaven, and tells Rushdy: “What’s the point? We are all lost. Still, I want to thank you, my boy. [...] I thought my life was over, but it turned out there was still one more journey in me” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 251). Her priorities have changed. She no longer cares about social conventions,” should an old woman be drinking in a bar?” Nor about her professional success, (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 251), nor about her professional success. Rather, she dreams of a last adventure with her fellow musicians, one that will be both emotional and meaningful. Her death in the van, as described by her niece as “flying” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 255), indicates that she had attained exactly the sorts of emotional goals that Carstensen speaks of as adaptive in late life.

Postcolonial and Memory Studies Perspectives:

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory is defined by Jan Assmann as “the reusable and available texts, images and rites of each society, with the preservation of which it stabilises and spreads its self-image; a collective shared knowledge, preferably (but not necessarily) of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based” (Assmann, 2011, p. 15). Cultural memory is the repository of symbolic materials through which a community

maintains its identity across generations. Cultural memory is a storehouse of symbolic materials that enable a community to retain its identity over the centuries.

The Kamanga Kings are this ideal. Their songs are prohibited by the government, which is trying to wipe out the Sudanese identity that their music has preserved. The band's reuniting isn't just about rehashing old tunes; it's about retrieving a collective memory that has been suppressed. This is expressed in a perfect way in the reflection on his father's legacy by Rushdy: "the only history I had, etched into my skin like the blue tattoo my grandmother wore on her lip" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 12). For him, history is not something that is memorised from books, but rather is written into the body, like a traditional mark, handed down from generation to generation. These are ageing musicians who are living bearers of that memory; their voyage to America is a cultural restitution.

Narrative Identity Theory

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose work on narrative identity has shaped scholarship across the social sciences and humanities, proposed that people come to know themselves through the stories they tell about their lives. He proposed the argument that identity is constructed through narrative when he says that "Self-knowledge is an interpretation; the interpretation of oneself, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 114). Working in a similar tradition, Dan P. McAdams suggested that people "construct and internalise integrative life stories to provide their lives with a sense of coherence and purpose" (McAdams, 2008, p. 242). In this view, ageing well requires the ability to re-narrate one's life, integrating past successes and failures into a meaningful whole.

The elderly characters in Mahjoub's book are unable to free themselves from the burden of trying to relive their pasts if they want to find peace in their present lives. For example, Uncle Maher has told himself a story of decay and irrelevancy, and the Kennedy Centre invitation calls him to rewrite that story. Her life review,

through Alkanary, reframes her life as a sequence of missed opportunities as a way to prepare for an additional journey. Even Mr Siegel, who lives in the hospice, does this: "In the end, it's the small things. The little moments when you feel alive are the ones that stick with you" (Mahjoub, 2021, pp. 177–178). His gentle embrace of this life narrative indicates a life that's been integrated well.

Psychoanalytic Approaches to Later Life

The eighth and final psychosocial crisis in Erikson's 1982 work *The Life Cycle Completed* is described as an "integrity versus despair" conflict that comes in late life. He described integrity as "the acceptance of one's only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (Erikson, 1982, p. 65). Despair, by contrast, is "the feeling that the time is short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try alternate roads to integrity" (Erikson, 1982, p. 65). The successful resolution of this crisis yields wisdom.

In *The Fugitives*, Uncle Maher initially tilts toward despair, believing that his musical life is over and he becomes useless to the world. By contrast, Alkanary achieves something closer to integrity. Her final words, "I thought my life was over, but it turned out there was still one more journey in me" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 251), suggest that she has accepted her life as a whole, including its losses, while still finding meaning in its final chapter. The novel, thus, dramatises Erikson's insight that the last stage of life is not about avoiding death but about making peace with the life one has lived. In his work on object relations, D. W. Winnicott (1971) described the transitional object as something "both invented and found a symbol of union and separation" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 14). Such objects serve as repositories of self-history, especially when other forms of continuity are threatened.

Music is an important transitional object in the novel. Not only are the battered trumpet that Rushdy inherits from his father, Uncle Maher's old Kamanga (violin), Kadugli's saxophone, and even Alkanary's fur coat, which she wears on

stage and clutches in her last days, all regarded as tools or clothes, but they also serve as evidence of a worldview and a soul. They are extensions of yourself; they remember older you, your colleagues who are gone, past performances. Years of neglect have left Uncle Maher's violin forgotten in his case, and Rushdy notices, "I reached into the case and lifted the instrument delicately with both hands, holding it up towards the light. [...] His long, slender fingers stretched and folded around the lacquered wood, remembering the shape of it, the way it fitted to his body" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34). The violin recalls, like the old man. The things that these objects represent connect identity through time, politics, and exile, helping the characters who are getting older to find a sense of identity, both past and future.

3. Methodology

Textual Analysis

With a few exceptions, the previous theoretical framework is the lens through which I examine *The Fugitives*. The upcoming analysis follows the main characters and plot of the novel, showing how Mahjoub portrays ageing and challenges as well as reinforces gerontological theory. I don't write about each character individually, but how their stories intersect as they each respond differently to the challenge of growing old in a world that has forgotten them.

4. Results

First of all, this novel follows the coming of age and the rebirth of old people. From our initial meeting with Uncle Maher, he seems to be a textbook example of disengagement theory. Cumming and Henry (1961) defined ageing as "an inevitable, mutual withdrawal" between the person and the society (p.14). Uncle Maher has definitely gone into the woodwork. Rushdy notes that his room is "a tomb in which the old man was slowly burying himself" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34). The author, the novelist, is clever in selecting the word "tomb". Uncle Maher isn't really dead, but he acts like it is. Importantly, "we had all allowed" this to occur" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34), says Rushdy. The passivity of the building

evokes the isolation at the hands of family and society. Disengagement is a socially accepted process rather than an individual one, Mahjoub argues. It's even a mandated process. The Kennedy Centre invites him, and at first, he is not rejecting the invitation because he's contented, but because of the ageism he harbours within himself. He asks Rushdy: "You think the Americans would fly us around the world just to watch us expire in front of them? (Mahjoub, 2021, pp. 34-35). The word "expire" can mean either "to breathe out" or "to die". Uncle Maher mixes up performing with dying. This is what society has taught him: that old bodies are nothing but for decay. It is learned helplessness and not helplessness. Cumming and Henry (1961) even asserted, "When disengagement is complete, he is free to die" (p. 211). So, Uncle Maher is almost there, by this reasoning.

The novel, however, does not go with this ending. The transformation is dramatic as the band starts rehearsing. Rushdy marvels: "In the midst of this chaos, Uncle Maher seemed in his element. No longer a bowed old man but reborn. What he used to do with his life, I wondered. Where had all this energy come from?" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 67). Havighurst (1963) had envisioned successful ageing as active ageing with the development of new roles for those that are no longer performed. The Kamanga Kings are just that role of Uncle Maher. But the novel is more. The word for reborn, "reborn," suggests something more than successful adaptation. It suggests resurrection. It is a resurrection quality that is captured by critic Camilla Delhanty, who writes that Mahjoub's "skill positions the Kings' playing as a practice that, as well as being magical, is a bridge, a form of profound resistance" (Delhanty, 2021). This observation is an aid to understanding the nature of Uncle Maher's rebirth: it is not only a return to activity but a "magical" recovery of lost selfhood; it is a "bridge" to his former glory; and it is an act of "resistance" against the ageist and political forces that had silenced him. The orderly tomb was killing him; the chaotic rehearsal hall brings him back to life. Delhanty's description of music as "profound resistance" does not only illustrate

this personal rejuvenation, however, as Uncle Maher's youth is being seized by a world that pronounced him irrelevant.

The orderly tomb was killing Uncle Maher; the chaotic rehearsal hall brings him back to life. When the purpose returns, so does disengagement, Mahjoub says, but it's reversible. Yet, this individual change does not happen in isolation. According to Shalabi and Amrieh (2024), the band's journey is one of an "opportunistic asylum seekers" (p. 533) stigma in America. The importance of this observation is that it shows that Uncle Maher's rebirth is not simply a personal victory over the ageist assumption, but a political battle against the outside influences that would pull them down to their immigrant status. The Kamanga Kings are seen as artists in the Kennedy Centre and are seen as suspicious at the same time—their old age is seen as a cultural treasure, and at the same time, it is thought of as a burden to the American system. By denying the existence of a straightforward triumphant narrative, Mahjoub's work poses a challenge to the activity theory approach: purposeful engagement required for the renewal of late life is always subject to political and cultural factors beyond the individual's control. Their "quest to preserve their integrity" is therefore a battle on two fronts: one against ageism that is internalized and one against the stigmatisation that is external.

Also, Alkanary's arc turns from weak denial to what Erikson (1982) termed 'integrity', which is "the acceptance of one's only life cycle as something that had to be" (p. 65). The first time that she visits him with her husband, Rushdy and Hisham find her physically weak. "She carried herself as though her bones were made of glass" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 43). This is not just frailty; it's a physical symptom of psychological decline. But this vulnerability masks a sense in Rushdy that "a vulnerable soul yearning to be young again, to play in the light, to shine one last time" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 45). This emotional goal prioritisation is the one Carstensen (1999) refers to as the emotional goal prioritisation of late life. In the face of perceived scarcity of time, people feel compelled to work on "emotionally

significant objectives and relationships" (p. 173), Carstensen said. Alkanary is not in search of success; they're searching for one last glory. Furthermore, she remembers times of band glory, and she doesn't only remember—a lot of it is true. She recalls the good old times to the young men: "We played as if our lives depended on it. We created a kind of sorcery. I don't know where it went, but it must be there yet, up in the air somewhere" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 45). Butler (1963) suggested that the life review is a natural and necessary experience and a way for the elderly to remember events of the past to resolve any conflicts and to make sense of their life. Alkanary's memory is doing this work and is generative. The question "Can that magic be recovered?" propels her ahead, instead of retreating to resignation.

She disappears from Birchaven to be discovered in a rough bar in chapter 36, where she is drinking. She says to Rushdy: "What's the point? We are all lost. Still, I want to thank you, my boy. For what? For this great adventure. I thought my life was over, but it turned out there was still one more journey in me" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 251). Gerotranscendental sentence: we're all lost. According to Tornstam (2005), gerotranscendence is a transition in late life to a cosmic, meditative worldview, rather than being concerned about social norms and material goods. Now Alkanary is no longer comparing herself to social standards. She embraces the notion that disorientation is universal to all humanity. It is her niece who says later on: "I've never seen her happier, though. She was flying, as she liked to say" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 255). Flying here implies being free from gravity, the weight of the body, of social pressures, of time. Alkanary is an integrity that is alive despite her death. Her death occurs during the trip, not before or after the trip. Death does not diminish meaning for Mahjoub; it is just a complement.

The fur coat used throughout the latter chapters also serves as what Winnicott (1971) referred to as a transitional object. A transitional object, for Winnicott, is "something that is both invented and found, a symbol of union and separation" (p. 14). Alkanary wears it on stage, clutches it in

the bar. The coat is a link to her past glory, to the younger self that once swayed crowds. It has material weight and warmth, but is not purely real, for she cannot perform in it forever, and it is not purely imaginary. It is in the space between – it holds her to the place where her identity is breaking apart. It's not that the novel is simply about the concept of ageing. It's a matter of inter-generational relationships, though. Rushdy helps his uncle to be reborn. After the long midnight session of planning, Rushdy is pondering over what he has seen in Chapter 8: "Where did this come from? Where had this been buried all these years?" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 56). Here are some questions that explore an underlying principle: The energy required for renewal does not come only from the ageing person. It needs an external spark to ignite. A young man does not allow his uncle to be buried within the Fugitives.

Furthermore, there is a change in Rushdy's relationship with Alkanary. On their initial meeting, she says to him: "Your flame is weak" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 43). She is comparing him unfavourably to his dead father. By the end of the novel, however, her assessment has changed entirely. In the bar scene, she says: "You gave me back something I thought I'd lost forever" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 205). The previous excerpt captures the novel's central argument about intergenerational exchange. Erikson (1982) argued that despair is "the feeling that the time is short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try alternate roads to integrity" (p. 65). Alkanary had been living in despair. Rushdy's insistence on reforming the band offers her an alternate road that not only leads to a different life, which she is too old for, but also to a different ending. She will die flying rather than waiting. The phrase "I thought I'd lost forever" is also significant. Alkanary does not name what she lost. She always keeps wondering about her losses. Was it her voice? Her sense of self? The magic of performance? The reader must supply the missing noun, and in doing so, recognises that what was lost is ultimately unnameable. It is something like the feeling of being fully alive. Rushdy, a young man who never heard the Kamanga Kings in their prime, nevertheless

restores that feeling. The novel suggests that the capacity to give back what is lost does not require having witnessed the loss. It requires only faith that the loss can be repaired.

5. Discussion

Throughout the novel, the concepts of memory, nostalgia, and the recovery of the self are thoroughly presented. The novel portrays what Assmann (2011) called cultural memory. For Assmann, cultural memory is "a collective shared knowledge, preferably of the past, on which a group's sense of unity and individuality is based" (p. 15). However, Mahjoub's cultural memory includes Sudanese material life as well as music. Amal Al-Khayyat and Abu Amrieh's food symbolism study notes that "Mahjoub deploys culinary images to highlight how Rushdy, the protagonist, grows spiritually and intellectually in the course of the narrative by becoming increasingly aware of the significance of food as a sociopolitical marker" (p.7). This shows that Rushdy's development is about reading the world's tangible realities—hunger, scarcity, and political neglect—as much as personal growth. His intellectual maturation is tied to his understanding of political violence in everyday life, such as hunger. The work depicts spiritual progress as a deeper interaction with the material world, not transcendence.

The study goes on to say that "Mahjoub's employment of culinary codes helps him criticize the political system which is held accountable for endless wars, the poverty and starvation of people in Sudan. (Al-Khayyat & Abu Amrieh, p.13)." This political aspect enhances our comprehension of how the novel handles aging: the Kamanga Kings are not only getting older as individuals; they are also experiencing the deterioration of their country. Similar to Sudan's food shortage, their aging bodies are signs of a governmental regime that has failed its citizens. Therefore, the band's reunion is about more than just artistic revitalization; it's about restoring a national narrative that has been shattered by political repression, poverty, and war. The band's reunification and Rushdy's increasing knowledge of food politics both include regaining identity

and memory against erasing forces. In the same way that Rushdy learns to see food as a “sociopolitical marker,” the older musicians learn to interpret their own aging as both individual deterioration and societal anguish. The novel’s alternative perspective on aging is based on this dual awareness of the tangible and the spiritual, the political and the personal.

The original photo of the young members of the band, the albums, and the instruments themselves evoke identity through time and political repression. The old black-and-white photograph in Uncle Maher’s room is especially important, too. Rushdy describes it: “The two young men full of hope and dreams. He was tall and slim, proud in his sharp clothes. His eyes, reflecting the fierce lights of the photographer’s studio, gleamed with hope” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 34). The photo was a catalyst for action as well as a visual memory of lost youth. Uncle Maher glares at it, and a change occurs. The photograph does not confine him to his former self, but reminds him of who he was and who he can be. Chapter 12 is Kadugli’s dream and a lens to understand ageing. He is telling Rushdy, “I came because I had a dream. A dream that told me to come and speak to you, to urge you not to give up” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 81). Then, he describes the dream in detail as it is written in the novel. In the dream, the band is playing on an enormous stage, dressed in fine clothes, the audience holding lights in their hands. It is not important if the dream is actually true or not, but rather its role. It presents a story where the decline of age is not linear but circular. It’s not the end of the band’s glory days; it’s the beginning of the next one. Gerotranscendence in prophecy.

The novel also does not distinguish between physical decay and spiritual regeneration. Alkanary’s alcoholism is part of the despair and paradoxically life-affirming. She drinks in the bar not to run away from life, but to live it. She drinks to feel warm, to come to know strangers, to feel something real before she dies. Uncle Maher’s body is stiff, while his music is fluid. After he starts playing, his body will recall what he lost in his mind. Age also bows down to Wad Mazaj, who says, “I just want to go home” (Mahjoub,

2021, p. 214), and John Wau, who was a doctor but also a musician, finds his strength exactly because he’s learned to live with multiple identities. In the novel, the journey across America moves to what can be called a pilgrimage. This geographical movement results in psychological advancement. The band flees from Washington, but they come to New York as something different; not quite innocent, but vindicated. Indeed, in the epilogue, Rushdy states, “We were lost, and America helped us to find ourselves” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 280). The phrase “helped us to find ourselves” implies that ageing is not an individual affair. It needs others, chance encounters, letters that come from nowhere, and dreams that call us to not give up.

The novel’s formal hybridity reflects this inability to present a clear story of victory or failure. “The novel’s treatment of such political mobility figures erodes the power of neat classification suggested by these categories,” notes Michelle Stork. At the same time, it emphasizes how the road narrative’s intersection with modern satire is a type of “genre travel” (Stork, 2024, p. 65). This finding is important because it shows how Mahjoub’s opposition to categorization functions on a formal, political, and thematic level. The book refuses to fit into a single genre (road fiction, satire, meditation on mortality), just as it refuses to classify the Kamanga Kings into a single group (musicians, fugitives, asylum seekers, old). The characters’ physical and psychological journeys are mirrored in this “genre travel”; they are neither quite triumphant nor wholly tragic, just as the book is neither wholly comical nor wholly solemn.

Throughout the narration, Rushdy reflects: “There are moments, some of them recorded in history books, but many of them not, which remind us that miracles are possible. They come and go in the blink of an eye. We snatch eternity from a brief encounter that allows us to rise together to the heavens, lifting our spirits into the deep, dark, unfathomable night that eventually will cover us all. If that is not the essence of music, I don’t know what is” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 281).

Here's where Mahjoub explains what he understands about ageing the clearest. But in the novel, Rushdy does not lie to himself about the existence of the end, nor does he romanticise old age and pretend that it is another form of youth. What he gives us in his novel is more profound. For the old-aged characters in the novel, the dark, deep, incomprehensible nights loom over each of them for eternity, and the seconds they can spend together in music, in love, in a shared purpose are precious because of their impermanence. They don't kill death; they steal eternity from fleeting encounters. That's what Mahjoub called the true definition of how to live well as an old man, and it's also the soul of music.

6. Conclusion

Finally, *The Fugitives* is not a disjunction between music and the ageing bodies which create it. Mahjoub believes it isn't a tragedy for the Kamanga Kings to not have the same playing style they did in their young days; it's just what it is to grow old. I have demonstrated in this paper that the novel does not merely represent gerontological theory but challenges it. The idea that "withdrawal is natural and permanent" is what is challenged when Uncle Maher changes from dead in his tomb to reborn. Alkanary's final days, when she says, "I thought my life was over, but it turned out there was still one more journey in me" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 251), dramatise Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory while also achieving Eriksonian integrity.

But the novel contains no easy promises. Wad Mazaj gets back into his taxi. Alkanary dies anyway. Instead, Mahjoub provides us with something harder and more honest. He offers the concept that time - though fleeting - can be meaningful. The closer to death, the greater the

value. The residents of the hospice are not pathetic; they are the most authentic of an audience, and they have nothing to lose. As the novel concludes, "We snatch eternity from a brief encounter ... up into the deep, dark unfathomable night that sooner or later will cover us all. If that is not the essence of music, I don't know what is" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 281). If the essence of music isn't that, I don't know what is. Thomas Cole believes that old age is not the end of physical decay but an opportunity for further moral and spiritual growth (Cole, 1992). In *The Fugitives*, later life is depicted as a process of self-discovery, reconciliation, and even cultural renewal in this humanistic perspective that mirrors Mahjoub's own view of ageing. Instead of portraying his old-age characters as victims of time, Mahjoub portrays them as characters who evolve through memory, artistic creativity, and interpersonal relationships. So, it would seem that wisdom comes from finding one's purpose, allowing Alkanary to come to terms with death, and the community of the Kamanga Kings, which has come together again. In this regard, the novel surpasses traditional gerontological approaches which view ageing as a period of decline and instead depicts elderly people as a time of moral reflection, spiritual completion and cultural continuity. This is an affirmation of Cole's humanistic vision in that the final years of life can be a time of growth and of a redefined sense of identity, bound up in memories, creativity and the continuity of community (Cole, 1992).

Music or any common goal can make that journey worthwhile, even at the end of the road. The paper suggests that ageing is not a problem to be overcome; it is a process.

7. References

- Al-Khayyat, A., & Abu Amrieh, Y. (forthcoming). Food and politics in Mahjoub's *The Fugitives*. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes962>
- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, R. N. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26(1), 65-76.
- Carstensen, L. L., Isaacowitz, D. M., & Charles, S. T. (1999). Taking time seriously: A theory of socioemotional

selectivity. *American psychologist*, 54(3), 165.

- Cole, T. R. (1992). *The journey of life: A cultural history of aging in America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cumming, E., & HENRY, W. (1961). Growing old: the process of disengagement.
- Delhanty, C. (2021). Review: "What language is he speaking?" – Musicians abroad in Jamal Mahjoub's 'The Fugitives'. *Africa in Words*. <https://africainwords.com>
- Erikson, E. H., & Erikson, J. M. (2013). *The life cycle completed*. WW Norton & Company.
- GHEZIEL, M. (2024). *Investigating father-son relationship in Arab diasporic literature: The Fugitives by Jamal Mahjoub (2021)* [Master's thesis, University of Mohamed Khider, Biskra, Algeria]. University of Biskra Repository.
- Havighurst, R. J. (1963). Successful aging. *Processes of aging: Social and psychological perspectives*, 1(1963), 299-320.
- Mahjoub, J. (2021). *The Fugitives*. Canongate Books.
- Maierhofer, R. (2000). *Twentieth-century literature and aging*. Universitätsverlag Winter.
- McAdams, D. P. (2008). Personal narratives and the life story.
- Patterson, O. S., & Death, S. (1982). A Comparative Study. *Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Patterson, Rachelle 1971 Instead of Jail Terms, Work Proposed for Offenders. Boston Globe, May 20, 29.*
- Ricoeur, P. (1990). Oneself as another (K. Blamey, Trans.) University of Chicago Press. *Original work published.*
- Shalabi, A., & Abu Amrieh, Y. (2024). The three-dimensional panoramic picture of the Occident in Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* and Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *15*(2), 532-539.
- Stork, M. (2024). Para-nomadic mobilities in the 21st-century Anglophone road novel. *Anglistik*, *35*(1), 59-73.
- Tornstam, L. (2005). *Gerotranscendence: A developmental theory of positive aging*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971). Playing and reality. Tavistock.
- Woodward, K. (1991). *Aging and its discontents: Freud and other fictions*. Indiana University Press.
- Wyatt-Brown, A. M. (2017). *Aging and gender in literature: Studies in creativity*. University Press of Virginia.

8. Author Declaration

The author confirms that this work is original and declares no conflicts of interest.