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## Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North: From Interculturality to Introspection

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### Abstract

Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North constitutes a masterpiece of Arabic modern fiction. It revolves around many themes such as British-Sudanese interculturality, Sudanese women's status in postcolonial Sudan. Interculturality is seen by many critics as a thematic landmark of this novel. However, this paper argues that Tayeb Salih juxtaposes the past with the present and makes of interculturality a secondary theme in the postcolonial period in order to pinpoint the necessity to come to terms with the past colonial fractures due to the British colonization of the Sudan. Such a message is composed via a peculiar Mustafa Sa'eed - Narrator frame which favors the narrator's centrality over Mustafa Sa'eed's simply because the postcolonial generation needs to go beyond the violence inherited from the colonial era. Tayeb Salih's message in this paper is uncovered by the recourse to Gérard Genette's and Jahn Manfred's narrative theories.

**Keywords:** Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North, Gérard Genette, Jahn Manfred, interculturality

### Introduction:

One of Tayeb Salih's novels is Season of Migration to the North. It was written in Arabic and first published in 1969. Season of Migration to the North has been translated not only into English but also into other languages. Indeed, these translations 'are a proof of the esteem in which our writers are held and bear witness to the remarkable vitality of their work'<sup>1</sup>

Season of Migration to the North is considered by some critics, like Edward Said<sup>2</sup>, as a landmark in Arabic and modern literature. In this novel, the intercultural encounter between the educated African and Western civilization is an issue brought to the fore by an African young man's sojourn in Britain for some years and his eventual homecoming after having been adversely affected by this experience. This theme is recurrent in Arabic literature such as in the two masterpieces Tawfik Al Hakim's *Usfur Min Al-Shark* (published in 1938 and

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translated later as *Bird from the East*) and Yahia Haqqi's *Quindil Umm Hashim* (published in 1944 and translated later as *The Saint's Lamp*). However, in Tayeb Saleh's novel, the intercultural encounter with the West (i.e. Britain) is highly dramatized: the cultural shock is absorbed in a cynical manner by too brilliant an initiate, indeed, the protagonist adopts the same philosophy of callousness which, as is implied, has allowed Europe 'to seduce' and submit Africa.

What constitutes a common remark about this novel is that the character of Mustafa Sa'eed of this novel is remembered by most readers the way a hero is. But if it is the case, why does the author opt for his disappearance -or death- in the middle of the narrative? If Mustafa Sa'eed is not the hero of this narrative, who is then? The hypothesis this article puts forward is that the narrator is the hero of the narrative though centrality is tightly attributed to Mustafa Sa'eed. It will be reinforced on the basis of Gérard Genette's theory on narrative structure and Jahn Manfred's focalization. The latter will be the tools to use in order to argue that this novel thematically moves from interculturality to introspection and the appeal to change.

### **1-Interculturality, an apparent theme:**

The novel opens with the narrator's return to his native Sudan after spending seven years preparing a doctorate in poetry. In his village he notices a man that he has never met before. To feed his curiosity, he asks his grandfather about him. He learns that his name is Mustafa Sa'eed and nicknamed 'the stranger'. During the night celebrating the narrator's homecoming, drunk Mustafa Sa'eed declaims poetry in English. As a result, the day after, the narrator starts investigating into Mustafa Sa'eed's background.

We discover then that Mustafa Sa'eed was born in 1898, the year in which the invading British army defeated the army of the Mahdist state and added Sudan to the colonial possessions of the British Empire. In his adolescence, Mustafa Sa'eed showed early signs of unusual intelligence and academic brilliance, which allowed him to travel to Egypt then to Britain in pursuit of more education. Mustafa Sa'eed's busy academic career leads him to high lecturing position in British universities.

But then, Mustafa Sa'eed develops psychic problems. While in Britain he indulges in 'hunting' British women to satisfy his whims. After a happy period lived with Mustafa Sa'eed, each of the three 'conquered' women commit suicide as a result of being victimized by him. The encounter with the fourth woman leads to a dramatic climax. Though he marries her, he never manages to approach her. After a 'long battle', he kills her and is subsequently imprisoned for seven years, after which time he returns home and settles in a small village in Sudan (the narrator's homeland) where he starts a new life. He marries a Sudanese woman, Hasna Bint Mohamed, and begets two children. Apart from farming, he participates in the implementation of projects for the development of the village.

Some days after learning Mustafa Sa'eed's story, a storm ravages the village, and Mustafa Sa'eed is lost. Rumor says that he has drowned in the Nile river. The narrator learns that before his death, Mustafa Sa'eed left a letter for him and the keys of his secret house. In the letter Mustafa Sa'eed entrusts the narrator with his wife and children. Perplexed, the narrator opens the room and discovers Mustafa Sa'eed's letters and photos, an indisputable proof of the credibility of the story he told him.

For Tayeb Salih, Mustafa Sa'eed's reaction must not last, because the Suadnese 'produced' by interculturality are culturally torn apart. In Britain Mustafa Sa'eed is not assimilated to the culture of the North ; he is only on a mission so long and difficult that he cannot avoid feeling nostalgia for his country. It leads him to make his house a microcosm of his home country., full with 'eastern perfumes, lotions, unguents, powders and pills' (p.31). Nonetheless, he remains a stranger after coming back home. Most of the time, he stays alone in a private room near his house in the village. This room is important to Mustafa Sa'eed's well-being. It is in that room that Mustafa Sa'eed finds his peace of mind, which in its turn suggests his alienation from the people around him. It both underlines the fatal and perpetual split in his character and 'testifies to the strength of European culture's hold over him within the very space he has chosen to effect his decolonization' 3.

The outcome of the experience of interculturality is also well understood by Mustafa Sa'eed himself. In his letter to the narrator he entrusts the care of his children to the latter hoping that they will grow up 'imbued with the air of his village, its smells and colours and history, the faces of its inhabitants and the memories of its floods and harvestings and sowings' (p.66). He chooses the narrator because he knows that the narrator is from the second generation of Suadnese intellectual immigrants who do not suffer from 'the germ of infection' (p.67) as Mustafa Sa'eed's generation did. Besides, he does not want to pass down to his children the cultural schizophrenia that has afflicted him and that has eventually destroyed him. As a result, Mustafa Sa'eed leaves the stage by means of death. The latter implies that after the Sudanese independence, another type of the ex-colonized, different from that of the colonized, is needed. This type should dismiss Mustafa Sa'eed's attitude based on resentment. This task is attributed to the narrator who, moreover, has a solid relationship with Mustafa Sa'eed.

The main elements of the plot, as noted, show that *Season of Migration to the North* is mostly about interculturality between the colonized and the colonizer (Mustafa Sa'eed and the British) and about the impact of such interculturality on the relationships between the colonized and the ex-colonized (Mustafa Sa'eed and the narrator). Besides these issues, the novel questions also internal cultural precepts in Sudan, notably the patriarchal social organization which leaves to women little room for expression and share in power.

### **Season of Migration to the North under G.Genette's and J.Manfred's narrative theories : A map of introspection:**

Before starting the analysis of the narrative structure let us first of all report Gérard Genette's definitions of diegetic and metadiegetic narratives, the narrator and the narratee and Jahn Manfred's definition of focalization, important keywords for our argument. Gérard Genette defines diegetic and metadiegetic narratives and writes :

any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed[...]the events are inside this first narrative we will describe them as diegetic [...]the events in a narrative in the second degree we will call metadiegetic<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the content of a narrative includes another story called a metanarrative. The narrative bears primariness whereas the metanarrative secondariness. The narrative and the metanarrative are related to each other by different links :

The first type of relationship is direct causality between the events of metadiegesis and those of the diegesis, conferring on the second narrative an explanatory function[...] The second type consists of a purely thematic relationship therefore implying no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis :a relationship of contrast or of analogy[...] The third type involves no explicit relationship between the two story levels :it is the act of narrating itself that fulfils a function in the diegesis independently of the metadiegetic content

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**And in both there is a producer of narration, a narrator whose characteristics identify him :**

We will distinguish two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from its story he tells[...] the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells[...] I call the first type heterodiegetic, and the second homodiegetic

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The narrator may narrate his story to a person listening to him called a narratee. 'He is necessarily at the same diegetic level'<sup>7</sup> as the narrator's to share with him information.

The narrative information given is controlled and manipulated by means of focalization. 'Focalization is a means of selecting and restricting narrative information, of seeing events, states of affairs from somebody's point of view'<sup>8</sup>. This somebody is called a focalizer

A focalizer is somebody who focuses his/her attention and perception on something.[He] is the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text. A text is anchored on a focalizer's point of view when it presents... the focalizer's thoughts ;reflections and knowledge, his/her actual imaginary perceptions, as well as his/her cultural and ideological orientation.<sup>9</sup>

An examination of Tayeb Salih's novel can also be undertaken in the light of these theoretical definitions. The narrator's story is a diegetic narrative including Mustafa Sa'eed's story, a metanarrative, or a metadiegetic narrative. The link between the two is of causality having an explanatory function. Mustafa Sa'eed's past story leads him to behave in a suspicious way hiding his educational background and commenting about the narrator who in the end comes to befriend after being acquainted with his story.

The link is also thematic; both narratives are about interculturality between the centre and the periphery. Indeed, Mustafa Sa'eed's and the narrator's stories highlight the cultural relationships that exist between the British colonizer and the colonized Sudanese, epitomized by Mustafa Sa'eed. Moreover, both the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed are homodiegetic; i.e. they narrate themselves the experiences they live. It is to give their stories weight and authenticity.

Furthermore, if we concentrate on the narrator's diegetic narrative, we will find that it emphasizes the narrator's process of identification in order to restore his identity so as to feel rootedness in his homeland. The narrator 'experience[s] a feeling of assurance.[he feels] not like a storm-swept feather but like that a palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a

purpose' ( p.2). His purpose of identification is interrupted by his meeting with Mustafa Sa'eed's face. 'Suddenly,[he] recollect[s] having seen a face I did not know among those who had been there to meet [him]'(p.2 ).But soon the process of identification is restored, he 'renew[s] [his] relationship with people and things in the village.[he is ] happy ...like a child that sees its face in the mirror for the first time'( p.4).He 'feel[s] a sense of stability[...][he is] not a stone thrown into the water but seed sown in a field' ( p.5). But suddenly, once again, he remembers Mustafa Sa'eed and asks his grandfather about him.After learning his story , he becomes shaken and doubts the possibility of (re)-belonging to his country

[Mustapha Said] had said that he was a lie, so was I also a lie ?I am from here –is not this reality enough ?I too had lived with them.But I had lived with them superficially,neither loving them nor hating them (p.5)

In what he says, there is a self-defence as if he is accused of becoming an Englishman.he fears that similarities with Mustafa Sa'eed will condemn himl and sentence him to estrangement and alienation.Stimulated by a mimetic desire to 'belong',he subsequently claims he deeply belongs to his country.

but I am from here, just as the date palm standing in the courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else's(p.49).

From that time on, 'Mustafa Sa'eed has, against [his] will, become a part of [his] world,a thought in [his] brain'(p.49).

The stream of events in the diegetic narrative allows us to say that the metadiegetic narrative 'permeates' the diegetic one and causes a change of the focalizer and the focalized. Indeed, at the beginning the narrator focalized himself celebrating his feelings of stability. His challenge with Mustafa Sa'eed leads him to focalize the latter to learn his story ; subsequently he becomes a narratee. Then, he refocalizes himself. Ultimately, the narrator, when experiencing the process of identification , is drawn to that of disidentification because of his meeting with Mustafa Sa'eed ; he is endangered by a loss of identity which itself urges him to redefine himself. Due to his willingness to keep his identity, he resumes the process of identification and reconstitutes his identity<sup>10</sup>.

All these details back up the idea that the narrative structure is the site from where Tayeb Salih conveys his message to the reader. The diegetic narrative is 'disturbed' by the metadiegetic narrative. The latter penetrates the diegetic narrative because of the importance of its message. Tayeb Salih through Mustafa Sa'eed's story depicts one of the postcolonial reactions to a British colonizing enterprise, shown in a problematic interculturality between Britain and his country.

The Sudanese-British interculturality is the first idea that Tayeb Salih treats but not the most important one. This explains why Mustafa Sa'eed's story is embedded in the narrator's.The jumbled narrative structure goes against some critics'assertion that Mustafa Sa'eed is the hero. If this is the case, how can we explain his death before the end of the narrative which in its wake leaves the predicament of Hasna to be solved by the narrator ?.

Indeed, with the narrator's story Tayeb Salih does not totally agree with another postcolonial reaction which the narrator sums up in 'neither loving [the British] nor hating them'(p.49). In

this way, Tayeb Salih focalizes on the hybridity of the narrator, and he streamlines the notion of hybridity to make it fulfill its objectives. He points out the fact that even with a readiness to penetrate the third space of enunciation, the Sudanese must remain culturally close to his country. This idea comes into view when we consider the change of focalization. The change explains the jealousy the narrator feels towards Mustafa Sa'eed and underlines the fact that between Mustafa Sa'eed and the narrator there is a difference in the love to possess the land<sup>11</sup>.

It is not Mustafa Sa'eed who is a 'a phantom that does not want to take itself off' (p.50). The phantom is what Mustafa Sa'eed represents ; i.e belonging becomes for the narrator a new and necessary horizon to reach. Thus, the narrator's disturbance is justified by the fact that his hybridity is incomplete, having placed him 'half-way, between north and south...unable to continue, unable to return' (p.167) yet able to see the Nile :

The Nile represents fluidity, change, and continuity. It is also a symbol intertwined with the (mother)land :a symbol of birth, renewal and destruction. Hence it symbolizes the ability to forge two binaries, renewal and destruction into one single force. Moreover, the Nile connects the South (Africa) with the North (Europe). It begins to flow from the heart of Africa to join the Mediterranean where Europe lies...he is baptized, is absolved of his guilt, and of his apathy<sup>12</sup>

Our concluding remarks here will stress the point that the protagonist is not Mustafa Sa'eed; the protagonist is the narrator as a man who must learn from Mustafa Sa'eed's experience and must have Mustafa Sa'eed's quality of a concrete belonging to the land. This quality lacking in the narrator explains why his status changes -before the change in focalization- from the narrator to a narratee. The aim behind both changes is that the narrator must learn from Mustafa Sa'eed and his experience in order to alter 'the germ of destruction' to a grain of construction.

The alteration is urged mainly since a season, a metaphor for the temporal distance between Mustafa Sa'eed's generation and the narrator's, has elapsed. Obviously, this grain of construction must bring to the fore not only hybrid cultural relationships but also a concrete sense of belonging to the land. The latter moreover implies a commitment to help the country progress. This indeed is well understood by the narrator:

I shall live because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge (p.49)

One of these duties is to prompt people to get rid of obsolete obstructive practices such as the traditional unfair treatment of Sudanese women well pictured in the novel through Hasna's predicament. Her predicament results from, according to Tayeb Salih, men's colonization of women. In the postcolonial independent era, African women are still colonized. Tayeb Salih's assessment is that as long as women are reduced to being sexual possessions and men's servants, the country will never progress. That is the reason why the old traditionalist generation represented by Wad Rayyes should pass away and forever.

In summation, Tayeb Salih's hybridity is threefold : productive cultural relationships, a self-correction and a deep sense of belonging to the homeland. Tayeb Salih's hybridity, which is

eloquently displayed in the novel, constitutes an answer to the narrator's stream of 'Help !Help'(p.169).Tayeb Salih concretely practises it himself .He defends a productive cultural exchange with everyone even with the colonizer of yesterday and at the same time he shows a concrete and a deep sense of belonging to his country through his use of the modern Arabic language,the official language of teh Sudan.Undoubtedly, Tayeb Salih seems to transcend the language issue by opting for Arabic as his writing medium. Tayeb Salih does not use the colonial language that the colonizer leaves behind. Perhaps this is the way for him to debunk the authoritative Eurocentric discourse which maintains that the European languages are superior to the African languages just like the European and his culture is superior to the African and his culture. Mohamed Benhaddou after analyzing two articles by Jonhston Koch in 1983 and Christian Abdul Ghani in 1985 about the Arabic language concludes that :

Arabic [...] is not viewed as a language entity, independent in its use and usage of any other linguistic system, neither is it considered as a means of communication workable and intelligible within its own environment. It is rather analytically processed against a "more important and infallible" background, i.e., the English language [...] Arabic, accordingly, has to be contrasted to English as an illogical, and indirect language devoid of any content<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, Tayeb Salih by writing in Arabic breaks down this tradition. Instead, he reinvigorates Arabic to imply that it is not inferior to English or French ; it is also an independent language and can suscite creativity. Season of Migration to the North and the French, the English, the German and the Norwegian translations it stimulates testify to this position.

### **Conclusion:**

Change is what Tayeb Salih wants to shed light on. Indeed, this is what makes his novel postcolonial.In narrating Mustafa Sa'eed's story, Tayeb Salih describes the conditions of an African country which undergoes a historical fracture after its colonization and analyzes the colonizer's discourse that goes with it. He moreover explains the source of violence that masters the colonized man's behaviour. Tayeb Salih seems understanding towards Mustafa Sa'eed's reaction of vengeance However, he goes against a lasting vindicative reaction from the colonized, for revenge is no better than colonization. There is an underlying authorial argument that Mustafa Sa'eed's reaction though relatively legitimate is destructive. Furthermore, it nourishes the idea that relationships between cultures must be limited only to interculturality, and thus based only on violence and hatred due to the heritage of colonialism. Tayeb Salih's position explains why he makes Mustafa Sa'eed's story a component of a wider message, the narrator's. In fact, the choice of this narrative structure is justified by the meassage the author wants to convey.

Tayeb Salih's position towards interculturality is in our opinion hidden behind the choice of a specific narrative structure for the novel and the manipulation of the device of focalization. In the main, narrative structure and focalization are selected to show why the author defends the idea of cultural hybridity and what conditions he seems to indicate so that his compatriots can benefit from it and still avoid the pitfall of depersonalization.Besides, his choice of writing in modern standard Arabic classifies him as a 'hybrid' author who celebrates his official language but condemns enmity with others, even with colonizers or ex-colonizers.

**Notes:**

1-Mohammadou Kane, 'The African writer and his public', in G.D.Killam,ed., African writers on African writing (London :Heinmann,1973),p.72.

2- Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism(London :Vintage ,1994),p.72.

3-Thomas Cartelli, Repositioning Shakespeare -nationalformations,postcolonial appropriations (London :Routledge),p.146.

4-Gérard Genette, , Narrative Discourse :An Essay in Method,trans.,Jane E.Lewin(New Yor :Cornell University,1983),p228.

5-Ibid.,p.233.

6-Ibid.,p.244.

7-Ibid.,p.259.

8-ahn, Manfred. Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative. English Department, University of Cologne,2005.

Idem.

In this respect Malek Chabel writes : 'la perte d'identité [...] devient [...] une désindentification qui[...]entraîne une réaction (ou une prise de conscience)provoquant ainsi une redéfinition de soi,autrement dit, une tentative de ré-identifier de nouveau. Si ce processus arrive àterme ...cela signifie qu'une autre identité s'est constituée, née des cendres de la première'LA formation de l'Identité Politique (Paris :EditionsPAyot & Rivages,1998),p.31

See Yumna El Eid,

Suha Kudsieh, '(be)longing, (re)location,and gendered geographies in modern Arabic travel narratives',Inge E.Boer,ed.,After Orientalism: Critical Entanglements ,Productive Looks(New York :Rododpi,2003),p.231.

13-Mohamed Benhaddou, 'A Postcolonial Textualization of Arabic', Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetuan, Morocco  
<http://www.thecore.nus.edu.sg/post/poldiscourse/casablanca/benhaddou2.htm>