

A Postcolonial Analysis of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

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Abstract

From the turmoil of colonial and postcolonial African landscapes have risen many outstanding novels that are worthy of continuous research interest and academic scrutiny. One of such grand narratives from the heart land of the Muslim society in North Africa is Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. The novel is unique for its philosophical and counter-narrative structure that literary scholars and critics are yet to explore to the fullest. The literary allusions in the novel are potentially endless; hence, there is enough in *Season of Migration to the North* to keep scholars of postcolonial literature busy for a long time. The objective of the study is to examine the variegated social, political and cultural aspects of contemporary Afro-Arab community as re-configured by colonial history and imperialism in the text under study. The postcolonial theory is deployed for analysis with a view to establishing how the narrative constitutes an instance of counter-discourse to colonial literature.

Introduction

The Arab Literary Academy describes Tayeb Salih's narrative as the most important Arab novel of the twentieth century principally for its mode of engaging the Western culture and the counter narrative it bequeaths to postcolonial discourse (Hassan, 2001). The author creates a hero who grapples with the intellectual and political dynamics of colonial politics, thereby

immeasurably expanding the corpus of African narratives with postcolonial consciousness. In his critical review of the novel, Said, cited in Hassan (2001, p. 1), equates Salih's narrative to that of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* within their respective literary traditions. Said argues that "just as *Heart of Darkness* is a masterpiece of English literature, so is *Season of Migration to the North* an equally great classic of modern Arabic literature". The reason for this similarity is that

If Conrad's story of European colonialism in Africa describes the protagonist's voyage South to the Congo, and along the way projects European's fears, desires and moral dilemmas upon what they called Dark Continent; Salih's novel depicts the journey north from Sudan, another place in Africa, to the colonial metropolis of London, and voices the colonised's fascination with, and anger at, the colonizer. Both voyages involve the violent conquest of one place by the natives of another. Kurtz is the unscrupulous white man who exploits Africa in the name of civilizing mission, while Mustapha Sa'eed is the opportunist black man who destroys European women in the name of freedom fight...This way of reading novels from former European colonies as counter-narrative to colonial texts is one of the strategies of postcolonial literary criticism (Said cited in Hassan (2001, p. 2)

The argument considers the effects of colonial and neo-colonial adventures as reflected in the novel. *Season of Migration to the North* was originally written in Arabic in 1966 but translated into English by Dennys Johnson Davies and published in 1969. From the biographical note provided by the translator, Salih was born in 1929 in the Northern Province of Sudan. He spent most of his life time outside his place of birth. He studied at the University of Khartoum before migrating to England where he started a career in journalism at the British Broadcasting Corporation as Head of Drama in Arabic. He later served as Director-General of Information in Qatar in the Arabian Gulf. He also worked with UNESCO in Paris and subsequently UNESCO's representative in Qatar.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory is an extrinsically motivated criticism that studies literature written in former colonial territories from the perspective of counter discourse. This theory, basically, examines how literature from the colonising culture distorts the experience and heritage of the colonised people. Echeruo (1973, p. 7) maintains that

The European fictional exploration of the idea of Africa, has also led it into grave errors and indiscretions. Two of these may be mentioned by way of illustration. The first is the temptation to represent Africa merely as a manifestation of these habits of barbarism beyond which the European mind had progressed. The novelists, accordingly, fall back on the conclusion of

European anthropologists on the place of myth and sacrifice in primitive societies.

In view of the Western distorted portrayal of Africa and Africans in their fictional narratives, the postcolonial criticism, thus, focuses on the literature produced in contemporary societies of Africa and its attempt to re-articulate distorted identity and in doing so reclaim the lost value and heritage. The problem of defining postcolonial theory rests majorly on the prefix 'post', which implies that a particular phenomenon is over or completed. Critics are divided in their conceptualisations of what the term connotes. The prevailing argument is that if the vestiges of colonialism are still alive, it is premature to speak of the post in the sense of aftermath. Fanon's description of postcolonial theory cited in Talib (2002, p. 19) says "postcolonial is never a specific moment but an on-going struggle, a continual emergence". Hence, there is the understanding that the 'post' does not refer to after in the temporal or conceptual sense. Talib argues further that (2002, p. 20)

if colonialism is defined as the way in which unequal international relations of economic, political, military and cultural power are maintained, it cannot be argued that the colonial era is really over. Indeed, colonialism may exist side by side with postcolonialism.

Another controversial issue that is being frequently discussed in postcolonial theory "is the rigid division of the world into two categories: the West and the East, the North and the South, the developed and the

underdeveloped, the First and the Third worlds, the English and the non-English” (Talib 2002, p. 18). There is also such a classification as the centre and the periphery. This binary categorization of the world has some positive aspects, though; in actual fact such a division is not realistic. Talib argues that evidence abounds to prove that some parts of the so-called Third World nations cannot be called postcolonial because they were never touched by colonisation. Yet, the binary cannot be completely rejected for the purpose of clarity required in the discussion of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Okunoye (2008, p. 79) posits that the

Postcolonial studies deal with the political, economic and cultural interaction during the colonial era and after. He affirms that postcolonial theory takes for granted the fact that literary form and content are shaped by factors that transcend the idiosyncratic choices of individual writers, acknowledging the fact that choices that writers make are inevitably informed and in most cases, limited by factors rooted in context-cultural, political and social within which they operate, which are in turn determined by their colonial history.

Thus, the postcolonial studies examine the way in which colonialism affects and continues to affect the colonized societies. Bill, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature* maintain that postcolonialism deals with the effect of colonisation on cultures and societies. It was argued that from the second half of the Twentieth

century, literary historians and critics have consistently employed the term to describe the various cultural effects of colonisation and the moral depravity of emergent African leaders. In their similar argument in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* (2007) the trio affirms that postcolonialism is used in a diverse way to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operation of empire, the subtleties of subject construction and the resistance of those subjects, and most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursion and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre and post-independent nations.

The postcolonialism, as a theoretical discourse in literature, seeks to unravel the social, political, cultural and psychology of colonialist and anti-colonial ideologies in relation to the theme of disillusionment and the struggle for individual and collective identity in the morass of alienation, migration, diaspora, exile and hybridity. One of the tenets of the theory, according to Tyson in his *Critical Theory* (1999) is that postcolonialism recognises the ways a text is scrutinized to reinforce or resist colonialism and oppressive ideologies. “It also examines the experience and literary production of people whose history is characterised by extreme political, social and psychological oppression” (p. 31). From a similar perspective, Balogun (2007) posits that one of the interesting features of the postcolonial theory is its attempt to reveal and discuss what independent nations make of themselves even after the demise of colonialism. Some of the subjects that have become apparent in postcolonial studies are corruption, dictatorship, exile, political oppression, economic exploitation, alienation, neo-colonialism, poverty and leadership among others.

This paper studies Salih's novel using a postcolonial theory to depict the salient postcolonial discourse and social transformation of Arab society as embedded in the novel.

Colonial History in the Arab World

Nnolim (2008, p. 1) describes African literature as an art of defeated people. He posits that "having lost pride through slavery and colonialism, African writers developed a literary expression from the ashes of the inglorious past." Thus, every flash point of colonial history in Africa attracts the writing of fiction and definitely the postcolonial Arab societies have equally had their fair share of cultural conflict, political transformation, economic exploitation, leadership crisis and unbridled corruption as evident in *Season of Migration to the North*. The effect of colonial history in the Arab world of North Africa as accounted for by Talahite (2014) reveals that the transformation of the Arab world as a result of colonialism brought about changes in its literature. Arab societies at the start of the nineteenth century were confronted with the desire to reassess the heritage of Arab culture, incorporating technological and social change as well as making sense of the increasing contact of Arab culture with the West. A generation of writers, scholars and politicians began to formulate a discussion about their society by exploring the intricacies of cultural transformation, the significance of religion in the face of scientific development and political implication of social change. The response to the increasing cultural and political impact of Europe on the Arab world was to re-define Arab culture and create a new form of self-expression. As a result of the increasing impact of European culture on the Arab societies through the

presence of traders, explorers, technicians and educationalist, a new class of Arab intellectuals emerged, most having received an education in the schools established by the colonial authorities. The writers who contributed to cultural awakening of social change were scholars who were in close contact with European ideas and who had studied in European universities where they had been acquainted with European philosophy and literature. This form of contact with European culture and the internal dynamics of change that Arab people experienced becomes the subject matter of the postcolonial discourse. This is what Olaniyan (2008, p. 660) refers to as the post-coloniality when he argues that:

Post-coloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western styled, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the west, they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the west they present to Africa and through an African they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa.

Historically, Arabs blossomed buoyantly in the spheres of scientific and human development in the medieval period. This was long before the Europeans started claiming territories. Thus, Salih's novel tells so much about the intellectual achievements of the Arabs. The narrative shows that Arabs were not barbaric. On the contrary, they had been able to make several

breakthroughs in scholarship by measure of their holy book, the Quran. So what form of civilisation could the Westerners have brought to them other than lies? European colonialism strips the Arab world of its glorious civilization, heritage and inventions and replaces them with English language and Christianity. The narrator says “[t]he white man, merely because he has ruled us for a period of our history, will for a long time continue to have for us that feeling of contempt the strong have for the weak” (p. 52). The postcolonial novels occupy an important position in the search for ways of re-defining the individual relation to the past. New perception of reality as well as influences from colonial tradition has led Arabic fictions away from their inner reality to a new way of portraying the fragmentation of today’s world. Writers often turned to psychological experience as a way of understanding social reality. Salih’s novel explores the violence of inner conflicts brought about by confrontation between the West and East through the theme of the relationship between European women and the Arab emigrant (Talahite, 2014, p. 44).

The Counter-Discourse in Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*

Through the use of a first person narrator, *Season of Migration to the North* tells the story of Mustapha Sa’eed, a Sudanese emigrant in London who sets a goal of liberating Africa in a unique way. The novelist presents a narrator whose name is not disclosed throughout the story to take us through the events in the lives of the protagonist. The narrator returns back to his village after spending seven years studying in London. The course of events in the novel builds towards the narrator’s development as a character. Through the narrator we see

Mustapha Sa'eed's journey through intellectualism. It also reveals how his scholarship builds him into the kind of person he eventually becomes. Salih wholesomely captures Mustapha's brilliance in a way that symbolically reveals the depth exposure of the Arab world to a viable scholarship prior to the advent of Western colonization. Mustapha experiences the direct impacts of colonialism and his swift Arab mind grasps the knowledge of English man so much so that his furtherance in education is sponsored by European scholarship. He is nicknamed "the black English man" (p. 42). The narrator says

Mustapha Sa'eed covered his period of education in the Sudan at one bound-as if he were having a race with time. While we remained on at Gordon College, he was sent on a scholarship to Cairo and later to London. He was the first Sudanese to be sent on a scholarship abroad. He was the spoilt child of English and we all envied him and expected he would achieve great things. (p. 41)

Mustapha moves from Sudan to Cairo, leaving behind his mother, whom he leaves without an iota of feeling. On arrival at Cairo, he meets the Robinsons, white couple who shows acute affection about Africa. The Robinsons speak Arabic and practice Islam. For the first time ever, Mustapha feels sexual emotion when Mrs Robinson hugs him. So brilliant he is that from Cairo he is sent to London to advance his study. In the British society, he becomes a strong intellectual force and sexual predator to be reckoned with. Mustapha gains so much ground that almost everyone knows something (truth,

rumour or mixture of both) about him and wallows in this height of fame. Mustapha is promoted to the rank of lecturer in Economics at the University of London. At a point in his career, he narrows his intellectualism and genius to seduction of English women. He ropes in several numbers of them into his apartment designs for the act of seduction with ersatz African paraphernalia. The narrator says:

One of those Ministers said...You remind me of a dear friend with whom I was in very close terms in London-Dr. Mustapha Sa'eed. He used to be my teacher. In 1928, he was the President of the Society for the Struggle for African freedom, of which I was a Committee member. What a man he was. He's one of the greatest Africans I've known. He had made contacts. Heavens, that man, women fell for him like flies. He used to say "I'll liberate Africa with my penis".

Linked appropriately to the title, Salih's novel speaks of migrating to the north, as the north from Sudan is Europe. This is a redirection of sight to where the loss triggered in the wake of colonisation. Mustapha pursues his mission of decolonising Africa by having tumultuous affairs with different white ladies. The colonisation of the English women begins when Mustapha starts his exploitation of these women's fascination with oriental culture. Through the narrator, Mustapha says

London was emerging from the war and the oppressive atmosphere of the Victorian era.

I got to know the pubs of Chelsea, the club of Hampstead, and the gatherings of Bloomsbury. I would read poetry, talk of religion and philosophy, discuss paintings, and say things about the spirituality of the East. I would do everything possible to entice a woman to my bed. Then I would go after some new prey. My soul contains not a drop of fun-just as Mrs Robinson had said. The women I enticed to my bed included girls from the Salvation Army, Quaker societies and Fabian gatherings (p. 24).

Ann Hammond is less than twenty when Mustapha meets her. Through the narrator, Mustapha says “Ann spent her childhood at Convent school. Her aunt was a wife of a member of parliament. In my bed I transformed her into a harlot” (p. 24). Indeed, many European women of a wide range of status and age easily succumb to his sweet tongue and promise of marriage. He realises early that over blowing the Eastern elements of his personality attracts attention of English women. Each of his English mistresses is fascinated by oriental culture and they love Mustapha for being a representative of that culture. He befriends Jean Morris, Ann Hammond, Isabella Seymoud and Sheila Greenwood. He entices each of the ladies to his Orientals. The trio of Hammond, Seymoud and Greenwood kill themselves because Mustapha refuses to marry them. In doing so, they immortalize themselves in his memory. The narrator says Mustapha has other mistresses, but they are not mentioned because they did not kill themselves. Mustapha eventually murders Jean Morris, the only women among them he marries, and of course, the most

provocative of them. This affair and similar others make Mustapha see himself like a coloniser who avenges for the manner in which the Africans had been brutally and inhumanly treated by the Whites in the hey days of colonialism. Mustapha said to them, I have come to you as conqueror” (p. 47). This outburst is in consonance with Fanon’s (1980, p. 35) critical argument that

The native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler’s skin is not in any more value than a native’s skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner. All the new, revolutionary assurance of the natives stem from it. For it, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. I am no longer on tenterhooks on his presence; in fact, I don’t give a damn for him. Not only does his presence no longer trouble me, but I am already preparing much efficient ambushes for him that soon there will be no way out but out by that of fight.

Mustapha sexually conquers European women physically and psychologically. He refers to himself as ‘Arab-African Othello’ (p. 30). To Hammond, Seymoud and Greenwood, Mustapha is a conqueror having emerged successful in his motive to treat them as ‘others’, a term employs by the Whites to describe Africans as the inferior race. As for Jean Morris, she proves extremely difficult for

Mustapha to handle. She humiliates and haunts him in the course of their stormy marriage. In his several attempts to consummate the marriage, she destroys many valuable things and makes Mustapha do many things he would not have thought of. Their marriage is not about romance but a battle for the centre. The union eventually ends in chaos. Fanon (1980, p. 31) goes further in his argument that

The violence which has ruled over the ordering of colonial world, which has ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms and broken up without reserve the system of reference of the economy, the customs of dress and external life, that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the natives at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters. To wreck the colonial world is henceforth a mental picture for action, which is very clear, very easy to understand and which may be assumed by each one of the individuals which constitutes the colonized people.

Mustapha is arraigned for killing Jean Morris and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He shows no remorse. It appears he feels triumph as a colonizer because he sees himself as an invader "who had come from the South and this was icy battlefield from which he would not make a safe return" (p. 160). In his remark about Mustapha's exploit in Europe, Morris's father

posits in the court that “You, Mr Sa’eed, are the best example of the fact that our civilising mission in Africa is to no avail. After all the efforts to educate you, it’s as if you’d come out of the jungle for the first time” (p. 74). The judge also describes Mustapha as an intellectual fool who does not appreciate the supreme gift of God to the world, love. Jean Morris is the symbol of western culture. Her murder by Mustapha translates to the destruction of western ethos. Afterward, Mustapha yearns to die as he insists in the court that “This Mustapha Sa’eed does not exist. He’s an illusion, a lie. I asked you to rule that the lie be killed... I am no Othello. I am a lie. Why don’t you sentence me to be hanged and so kill the lie?” (p. 32). Mustapha’s yearning for death should not be seen from a physical point of view. In actual fact, he yearns to be killed of the European culture in him as purification ritual for the centripetal leap. In *Portrait of the Self in Modern African Literature*, Ibitokun (1998) links Mustapha to a patient who suffers from foetal-searching virus after what he calls “a wasteful centrifugal saga” (p. 87). His brilliance is the source of his predicament. Mustapha sees his native land, Sudan, as myopic and claustrophobic for his sharp brain. His headmaster tells him, according to the narrator, “[t]his country hasn’t got the scope for that brain of yours, so take yourself off. Go to Egypt or Lebanon or England. We have nothing further to give you” (p.23). Eventually, he arrives in London making efforts to blend the Eastern culture in him with the White’s (North of Europe). His sojourn in London is marked by sexual adventures that often end in calamity until he finally discovers North to be a lie. His persistent attempts at cultural hybridization are a failure. In consonance with the situation depicted in the narration, Okunoye (2008, p. 77) argues that

The postcolonial works are those which dramatise the corrupting influence of the colonial engagement on the Africans, works that project a conscious resistance to the colonial presence by subverting imperialist distortion in the in the perception of Africa and Africans, and works that excavate pre-contact indigenous literary practice in order to assert cultural identity, accounting in the process for the prevalence of specific forms of postcolonial consciousness within poetic traditions in Africa.

After the marriage is consummated by violence and jail term, Mustapha returns to Sudan, settles in a small village on the Nile, Wad Hamid, from where he later marries Hosna Bint Mahmoud and has two children. Wad Hamid boasts one of scholar, the narrator, who eventually becomes the trustee of Mustapha's asset and household. Mustapha mysteriously disappears in a flood after he had revealed who he is to the narrator. With the sudden disappearance of Mustapha, his wife is forcefully married to Wad Rayyes. The marriage ends up in a serious calamity. Hosna's suicide is incredibly loud and gruesome. She does not only kill Wad Rayyes but express her anger at being forced to marry a man against her wish in the first instance. Hosna prefers the narrator as a substitute to her deceased husband, but the wish never came to pass. The narrator is not comfortable making decision for Hosna such that he refuses to intervene in her marriage, even when not intervening means she will be forced to marry someone she hates.

The narrator, at last, enters a secret room that Mustapha builds next to his apartment- a replica of a British gentleman's drawing room. The room contains many books, paintings, portraits, photographs and decorations. An exposition of the collections shows that it lacks any book in Arabic. Mustapha writes, reads and sketches and attempts many artistic means of creativity. He appears to have championed all, even death for because he prepares for his death and disappears without a trace. The novel, being a counter-discourse to a European's colonisation of Africa, Salih presents Mustapha in isolation and as part of the village, Wad Hamid. The setting of the story is located between the Nile Valley and desert that significantly stands for the Arab world. The river Nile has a great importance in the novel. "The Nile flows north, birds and animals migrate north and Mustapha travels in the same direction to further his education. He returns to this river and dies in it". Similarly, the imposing image of the river resembles the river Congo in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Vienne, 2017, p. 2).

The Arabs had heritage and culture. They excelled in science, arts, Islamic religion and many other facets of human endeavours prior to the advent of coloniser. Salih employs the visual dictate and even political irony to discuss how the West actually broke the precious ornaments of the Arab world as opposed to how Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* speaks of the West bringing light and civilization to the Dark Continent. *Season of Migration to the North*, according to UK Essay (<https://www.ukessay.com>, 2017, p. 1)

is complex in its framing, its episodic style,
in its use of metaphor, and in the variety of

material it canvasses. It touches on colonial arrogance, sexual mores and the status of women. There are lyrical fragments with no direct connection to the story, describing the night references to European novels about the exotic in Africa and Middle East.

Salih's novel, as rightly observed by UK essay, is one of the most structurally complex narratives on postcolonial discourse in Arab literature. The story is characterised by aesthetic qualities of complex structure, skilful narration and ebullient style which reveal the wide range of emotions embedded in the characters. The narration also takes on a more vehement tone by castigating corruption and inefficiency in the public service. It equally takes a swipe on western educated intellectuals who fail to account for imperialism in their vision of cultural synthesis. It condemns corruption of postcolonial government and conservative elements, represented by village elders, who are hostile to reform. Mustapha berates the attitude of emerging intellectuals who thought rightly about the philosophy of nation building but remain corrupt in their respective offices. The narrator echoes the thought of one the serving minister who insists that:

No contradiction must occur between what the student learns at school and between the reality of the life of the people. Everyone who is educated today wants to sit at a comfortable desk under a fan and live in an air-conditioned house surrounded by a garden, coming and going in an American car as wide as the street. If we do not tear

out this disease by the roots we shall have with us a bourgeoisie that is no way connected with the reality of our life, which is more dangerous to the future of Africa than imperialism itself? (p. 94)

As lofty as this philosophy is, its advocates are apparently corrupt and live in affluence to the detriment of the African masses. The minister who thought wisely as this takes bribe, acquires vast estates, sets up businesses and amasses properties. “He has created a vast fortune from the sweat dripping from the brows of wretched, half-naked people in the jungle? Such people are concerned only with their stomachs and sensual pleasures. There is no justice or moderation in the world. Mustapha Sa’eed said.” (p.95). This stigmatized view of corruption and self-abasement is common among literature written after most independent African nations have attained self-rule. The focus of accusation changed from the colonial overlord to African political leaders, who aside from corruption, nepotism and inefficiency, fail to provide basic amenities like shelter, health services, water and electricity to the suffering masses.

Mustapha Sa’eed and Mahjoub discuss the responsibilities that educated people must saddle to make the fledging independent African states a better place. The narrator works for the Ministry of Education, though, he is shown to be inefficient because he is content to serve in the office only and fails to expose the rampant corruption among his co-workers. In contrast, Mahjoub, though the less educated, helps people directly to spearhead the Agricultural Cooperative Committee and later becomes the leader of the village. Through his service and that of Mustapha Sa’eed, a lot of reliefs come

in the ways of the villagers in the commerce of essential commodities. Through this portrait of public service, Salih observes that the best way to serve one's country is to speak against injustice and be active in one's own community.

Conclusion

This essay studies how Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* can be analysed and understood against the background of postcolonial criticism. It examines how the novelist aesthetically engages in counter-narrative with a view to deconstructing the colonial history of the Arab world. African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ferdinand Oyono and numerous others have written a corpus of narrative fiction to deconstruct colonialism on the continent. Nonetheless, Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* is also remarkable for its aesthetic deconstruction of colonial hegemony. The novel is a grand narrative of counter-discourse that is artistically modelled in a kind of narrative that bears semblance with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, whom Achebe describes as a bloody racist.

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