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Imagining New Politics: Geography and Sexuality in *Wedding in Galilee* and *Season of Migration to the North*

Introduction

Wedding in Galilee (1987) and *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) exemplify the use of geography and sexuality as aesthetic expressions of political conditions. In order to imagine new politics—in this case, in Sudan and Palestine—one must be in between the remembered past and the imagined future. In this film and novel, geography and sexuality are used to explore what it is like to be-in-between, and thereby they help show the process of imagining new politics. In other words, geography and sexuality comment on the process of political remembering and imagining in each work through the theme of liminality.

Here, I will use the term liminality to evoke a phenomenology of political imagination—what it is like to be-in-between a remembered past and imagined future. The characters in *Wedding* and *Season* are embodying liminality. For this argument, it is important to emphasize embodiment and the vocabulary of phenomenology, because geography and sexuality in these works are not only aesthetic statements; they are aesthetic expressions of political conditions, and those political conditions are a lived experience. What-it-is-like for these characters (the phenomenology of liminality) is shown through geography and sexuality, and those expressions make conclusions about a political condition—specifically, what it is like to imagine political conditions otherwise.

Reading these works through geography and sexuality is productive because each illuminates what it is like to live liminally. Geography and sexuality are opportunities for negotiating place. In both works, the characters engage in subversive cartography; they remap national and sexual boundaries and by doing so demonstrate the possibility for imagining new politics. The lived experience of that negotiation is liminal; it is postcolonial. It reveals that existing boundaries (i.e. geographical and sexual) are not the only way of experiencing, and furthermore explicitly shows the lived experience of those who are imagining new boundaries.

The lived experience of national and sexual boundaries for the characters in these stories is deeply affected by the colonial struggle. Postcolonial projects are an effort to remap political situations like the one described here: “nation states came to be seen as the natural embodiments of history, territory, and society. The establishment and maintenance of these nation states depended upon determining, codifying, controlling, and representing the past.”¹ This postcolonial film and novel are commentaries on the political conditions of colonized Sudan and Palestine as well as creative ways of remaking the remembrance and imagining of those spaces, beyond the nation-state paradigm and beyond colonial oppression.

My focus is on expressions of political conditions in these works, but it is also important to keep in mind another element: memory. Memory is liminal—what is shown through the characters is a process of remembrance, where remembering itself is a being-in-between an individual and collective past and an imaginary future. What is already a complex approach to political change in these works becomes richer when layered with the process of remembering.

¹ Cohn, 3.

In *Wedding and Season*, remembering is both a liminal process and that which implies liminal space; in this way, remembering and imagining are tools of spatial transformation. This is especially relevant when reading these works in the context of postcoloniality, because from this perspective, the aesthetics of postcolonial film and novel are seen as political techniques.

Geography

Wedding in Galilee is an opportunity for horizontal dialogue on and about the hilly topography of Palestine, mostly importantly between the occupier and the occupied. The film insists on showing the occupied as having not only its own voice, but its own multiplicity of voices. As Ball argues, “the power of Khleifi’s vision of nationhood lay in its recognition of the multiple conflicts that exist *within* Palestinian society.”² The film explores how space and border must be continually negotiated by the many Palestinian voices under these conditions.

Remembering and imagining new politics for Palestinian space happens in a situation wherein it is not only the national boundary that must be negotiated, but the psychological effects of how that boundary has been drawn. Hedges notes that

The Palestinian experience in the occupied territories today is one of spatial fragmentation (checkpoints, roads that are open only to Israelis, settlements that intrude on Palestinian land, and now the separation fence/wall/border) and temporal disjunction: without the ability to travel freely in their own country or even get routine access to educational and medical facilities, time is interrupted and even the idea of “the future” is in suspension. This places a special burden on memory, which, paradoxically, has to be

² Ball, 2.

oriented toward the future in order to be meaningful—
performative memory is instrumental and forward-looking.³

The process of remembering is crucial to imagining a new way of ordering Palestinian experience. A poignant example of Palestinian “geographies of fragmentation” comes when the old man’s horse escapes and he goes to rescue her.⁴ The horse wanders without bound over the topography of Palestinian land, undermining the strictly observed borders foisted upon her owner. Even she tires of the land available to her—she travels as far as she can, which is directly into a border area full of hidden dangers. She did not jump a wall or bypass a checkpoint, but she is in danger of the mine-boundaries embedded in the land itself. The Israeli soldiers cannot manipulate her to come out of this area, and must allow the old man to communicate with her. He is “petrified that his lovely mare will either be blown up or driven stir-crazy, [he] takes over, and coaxes her out, but he is forced to do so of course under the Israelis’ thumb, between their mines and their maps.”⁵ Luring the horse out of the minefield can only be done by the acceptance of preexisting, dangerous, colonial geography, the knowledge of which is, significantly, hidden. Only the military complex of the colonial power has the tool (map) which provides for safe passage across the land. This scene does not subvert the colonial landscape, but it does necessitate a new way of traversing it. The secret language used between the old man and his horse (parallel to the secret language of the colonial map) has an almost mystical ability to negotiate the space in a new and productive way. It asserts a Palestinian geography, distinctly liminal and brought about as a response to the colonized condition.

³ Hedges, Accessed via <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/HedgesPalestine/text.html>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Said, 134.

Both *Wedding* and *Season* experiment with re-making space. In *Season*, nonlinear storytelling highlights the perceived differences between the European north and African south, and the reader must use clues of place to order the narrative. When the certainty of place, of its distinction from other places (i.e. of England from the Sudan) is undermined, nonlinear storytelling becomes a way of remaking place. “It is rather built on shifting, cumulative images, modulations, and inner echoes. It dispenses with chronology, subtly plays with fluid time and space elements,” and thereby highlights both the narrator’s and Mustafa Sa’eed’s experiences as liminal, a matrix of points within the story’s frame.⁶ These points are related to one another as commentaries on the way they have been remembered—that is, the process of remembering those points and imagining them otherwise:

And points of memory are also *arguments* about memory – objects or images that have remained from the past, containing “points” about the work of memory and transmission. Points of memory produce piercing insights that traverse temporal, spatial and experiential divides. As points multiply, they can convey the overlay of different temporalities and interpretive frames, resisting straightforward readings or any lure of authenticity.⁷

Merging the uncertainty of spatial and temporal elements in the story emphasizes being-in-between places over the narrative continuity of geographical organization and provides for the imagining of new possibilities.

The narrator tells of how he and Mustafa Sa’eed navigate their internalized colonial geography; they journey between England and the Sudan together, as Sa’eed lives in the narrator’s remembering him. The narrator speaks about place in the voice of Sa’eed speaking

⁶ Takieddine-Amyuni, 26.

⁷ Hirsch, 141.

through himself, echoing his own lived experience—it is like “The river was reverberating with its old familiar voice, moving yet having the appearance of being still.”⁸ For all they have done, they both carry with them the continuity of this place called Sudan, and the land itself has not changed despite the changes they underwent. Their presence imposing neocolonial geographies on this place must be tragic, as they cannot possibly remain as impositions upon that place—“every alien and illusionary element which imposes itself upon a certain environment will in the long run end in ruin and tragedy.”⁹ To survive in their home community, they must rid themselves of that which poisons them from within, “that is to say that the settler which is in every one of us is being savagely rooted out.”¹⁰ Perhaps what Sa’eed brought with him and the narrator must root out is the colonial library, carried physically and psychologically from the empire to the Sudanese village.

Sa’eed is perpetually in transit, running to or from the (women) trappings of his life in England. The “refrain ‘The train carried me to Victoria Station and to the world of Jean Morris’...reveals his obsession with the woman he married because, in her resistance to his advances, she merges more fully than the other women with the city as a psychic function and a trope of empire.”¹¹ Jean Morris’ manipulative spirit and white body are the space on which Sa’eed struggles with his own understanding of himself. Her body is a way of grounding him; if he can conquer her body, then he can settle into that place and embody it himself, fully embody it, as he can embody neither England nor the Sudan fully with the colonial library in his heart. And his attraction to Jean Morris is just that, the desire imprinted on him by the colonial

⁸ Salih, *Season*, 137.

⁹ Salih, *Tayeb Salih Speaks*, 16.

¹⁰ Fanon, 24. Via Srivastava, 308.

¹¹ Hassan, 318.

library. Still, he says, “I went on pursuing her for three years. Every day the bow string became more taut. My caravans were parched with thirst and the mirage glimmered in front of me in the desert of longing.”¹²

This desert of longing is an example of asserting new geographies over existing ones. In this case, the place (desert) lacks distinction. It is effectively blank. The moment of collectivity which arises in the desert demonstrates the liminality of space, and the meaninglessness of boundaries and maps and empires when there are moments such as this, creative, dynamic, liminal. People came together and created “A feast without a meaning, a mere desperate act that had sprung up impromptu like the small whirlwinds that rise up in the desert and then die.”¹³ There, what was a little spot of desert delineated by far-away and deeply internalized empires became a site of liberation. They danced and sang and experienced the geography of this place in a way that was meaningful and deliberate and ultimately transitory. The next morning, “The engines revved up and the headlights veered away from the place which moments before had been an intimate stage and which now returned to its former state—a tract of desert.”¹⁴ By collectively experiencing the space in a different way, they negotiated a new geography.

The negotiation of geography that takes place in *Wedding* and *Season* presumes an approach characterized by liminality. The characters understand their lived experience as

¹² Salih, *Season*, 77.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

being-in-between, and use that as an interpretive model for imagining a new geography. In each instance, this new geography brings with it an imagination for different politics.

Sexuality

In *Wedding*, sexuality is an expression of the Palestinian political condition. The men of the village engage in ineffective armed struggle, and are impotent to negotiate political change through the violent use of their bodies. In this context, “visions of authentic nationhood become no more than bedtime stories passed on from father to son in [a] subtly subversive scene.”¹⁵ The women, then, must be the ones to express and effect change in the political sphere:

In *Wedding in Galilee*, while Umm Adel, the maternal figure in the rural community, defends the unity of the family, she has no role in deciding the outcome of events. Sumaya, on the other hand, asserts her freedom, even at one stage assuming the male role by trying on her father’s headdress. Samia, the bride, passive until faced with her husband’s impotence, plainly symbolizes the land of Palestine.¹⁶

Unlike *Season*, wherein Jean Morris’ body is the site which must be navigated by Sa’eed, in *Wedding*, the bride’s body is the site and the bride is the actor. The bride’s body is the most important space in the film, in which “idealized images and real bodies of women serve as national boundaries. Nira Yuval-Davis sums up the intimate relation between gender and nationalism when she says that women reproduce the nation biologically, culturally, and

¹⁵ Ball, 7.

¹⁶ Kennedy, 43.

symbolically.”¹⁷ Women’s bodies are in this film not hard boundaries, like walls across land, but rather opportunities for negotiating the space around them. A woman’s body experiences the world in terms of liminality: “Indeed, for a woman to survive the (physical or identity) borderland often means to exist *sin fronteras*, without borders of self and other, subject and object, or without the binary oppositions that patriarchy asserts so well.”¹⁸ These women’s bodies are the interpreters of national lived experience, and their bodies have the power to remember and re-imagine that story.

Wedding goes beyond an assertion of cognitive asymmetry—it is not that the colonizer sees the colonized without the burden of being seen itself. Rather, the colonized must inhabit and express the episteme of the colonizer in order to have access to negotiation at all. The bride must see the impotence of her husband, of her nation, and confront it within herself, by herself, as the only actor with the ability to reproduce the national story, and hence to re-produce it. The bride takes her own virginity; by doing so, she has created (almost literally, with the production of the bedsheet) a flag upon which to negotiate national identity. Internalizing colonization is only one part of her action. She does inhabit the body of the colonizer and make herself analogous to colonized, violated Palestine, but she does so to be able to negotiate political terms. The event of Samia’s wedding has brought two people, two families, and two nations into the same space. If she had not consummated the wedding, then the spinning wheels of every other character would have been for naught. Her action is the catalyst for the film because it is the catalyst for negotiating Palestinian national identity.

¹⁷ Amireh, 748.

¹⁸ Naaman, 337.

The bride's act is a feminine expression of *sumud* (steadfastness), through which Samia embodies a vision of Palestinian nationalism in a way that exaggerates the femininity of her bodily experience. *Sumud* is here an aesthetic project—she is performing (colonial) violation of her (national) body in order to give evidence of the virility (political efficacy) of her groom's only remaining (social) power and create an aesthetic statement; the community must see the bedsheet and find a site of resistance because of its aesthetic power. As the film progresses, the community waits and waits while the passing time piles on the shame of the groom's inability to consummate the marriage. In the end, he is unable to perform *sumud* for himself or participate in a unifying Palestinian *sumud* with Samia, so she performs her resistance without him.

Samia expresses a liminality on the part of the colonized—recreating herself and her possible actions (opportunities for *sumud*) from this perspective. Tali, the Israeli soldier, acts liminally from the vantage point of the oppressor. In both cases, it is not only the lived experience of their bodies, but also their explicitly gendered bodies which are a precondition for action. Tali shifts the existing political structure, in which she is a participant and manufacturer of oppression, by connecting to Palestinian women in specifically gendered spaces. She faints in the heat of the day during the wedding, and the Palestinian women whisk her away to a safe, dark, sensual, feminine hideaway. In this space, the women are able to subvert the oppressed/oppressor paradigm.

In this scene, Khleifi's "vision of Palestinian femininity appears to offer a realm of connectivity and of transcultural gendered alliance that effectively dissolves the power

structures between oppressor and oppressed.”¹⁹ Khleifi may be appealing to an essentialist, masculine-centered view of gender through this scene. In my reading, these opportunities for engaging in liminal behavior are made possible through Samia’s biologically female body and Tali’s apparent feminine presentation, which gives her access to the women-only Palestinian space. Ball suggests that Khelifi’s work teeters

between a commitment to a radical vision of a postcolonial Palestine and the allure of a traditionally feminized nation. This precarious position may yet prove productive in postcolonial feminist terms. For as long as Khleifi...remain[s] creatively attuned to the liminal conditions of negation, division, and inequality of the Palestinian condition, the hope remains that [he] may come to recognize sites of gendered absence and division in [his] own representations of the nation.²⁰

In *Season*, the sexuality of Mustafa Sa’eed expresses the way he navigates his self-conception and thereby his means of remapping the colonial experience. Sa’eed exaggerates the way white women stereotype his sexuality in order to seduce them and then, through the sex act, to re-imagine his own body. “Such masquerade involves the performance of two specific forms of masculinity associated in Western imaginary with non-Western men: the despotic, misogynist Oriental and the uncontrollably jealous and violent African,” both of which Sa’eed uses in order to exploit the women he has seduced.²¹ Sa’eed acts out his misogyny on the bodies of these women through sex, and in doing so recreates the epistemic violence of colonialism against the colonized male to be against women who, to him, represent the bodily presence of empire in

¹⁹ Ball, 12-3.

²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²¹ Hassan, *Gender*, 315.

the colony. In other words, Sa'eed commits violence against these women in a quest to, as he puts it, "liberate Africa with my penis."²²

Sa'eed seductions hinge on a conscious self-fetishization, which can be read (like Samia) as necessarily internalizing the colonial episteme in order to imagine other possible selves. For example, Sa'eed recounts that he "led her across the short passageway to the bedroom where the smell of burning sandalwood and incense assailed her, filling her lungs with a perfume she little knew was deadly,"²³ then "She gazed hard and long at me as though seeing me as a symbol rather than reality."²⁴ Finally, "There came a moment when I felt that I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungle. This was fine."²⁵ Sa'eed's self-fetishization makes it easy for him to seduce and conquer the bodies of women and thereby enact the violence he has internalized through the colonial process, at which point he is free from the colonial episteme to reimagine himself.

Significantly, Sa'eed carries these women with him as a part of his (colonial) library, which is "formed by writings and images: mementoes of himself and his vain sexual conquests."²⁶ The bodies of women in Sa'eed past and the sex that he makes a site of political negotiation are texts—collected as textual fragments of a imaginary self-narrative and kept in his secluded library. "In addition to being a metaphor for conquest, as Said (1978) pointed out, the sexual possession of the woman works as a form of textual, discursive, and specifically

²² Salih, *Season*, 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁶ Gibson, 6.

masculine knowledge,” through which Sa’eed can reimagine his own body, having already performed the Orientalist expectations of his body and collected the textual evidence of that performance.²⁷

Sa’eed ultimately encounters Jean Morris, whose violent behavior and merciless taunting is attractive and tempting for him, since this invites him to perform the extreme version of her Orientalist (and his self-fetishized) fantasy. Through this tension, Sa’eed is “dephallicized, or epistemically castrated, at the same time that [his] Western mistresses are endowed with phallic colonial power.”²⁸ He participates in this fetishization and ultimately murders her, during which “the intense psychosexual fulfillment they experience in it announces the consummation of their relationship: she kisses the knife that plunges into her heart as a final assertion of the phallogentricity of colonial discourse and the various levels of violence it propagates—physical, psychological, epistemic, discursive.”²⁹ Unlike the previous women, who have all been conquered, defeated, by Sa’eed’s conscious and subversive performance of their fantasy, Jean Morris incites Sa’eed to fantasize about this fantasy himself—not only does he internalize the colonial episteme which makes this fantasy real for her by acting it out, but he inhabits the same desire himself and thus finds fulfillment in the act of murder/penetration. During this moment, Sa’eed is uniquely desirous and desirable as a result of his ability to be-in-between the colonizer and colonized, violent space and erotic space, north and south:

²⁷ Hassan, *Gender*, 317.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

Here are my ships, my darling, sailing towards the shores of destruction. I leant over and kissed her. I put the blade-edge between her breasts and twined her legs round my back. Slowly I pressed down. Slowly...I pressed down the dagger with my chest until it had all disappeared between her breasts. I could feel the hot blood gushing from her chest. I began crushing my chest against her as she called out imploringly: 'Come with me. Come with me. Don't let me go alone.'

'I love you,' she said to me, and I believed her. 'I love you,' I said to her, and I spoke the truth. We were a torch of flame, the edges of the bed tongues of Hell-fire. The smell of smoke was in my nostrils as she said to me 'I love you, my darling,' and as I said to her 'I love you, my darling,' and the universe, with its past, present and future, was gathered together into a single point before and after which nothing existed."³⁰

Conclusions

Liminality in *Wedding* is shown partly through the old man and his horse's dangerous journey, but mostly through the women: they are between families, between political powers, between the sentimental desperation of the grandfather and the militant desperation of male peers. Between Samia and her groom is his torturous impotence—physical and political. The men (grandfather, cousins, officers) are stagnant; they do not create, only persist stubbornly in their helpless places. Samia resists the impotence of her groom's political condition—the bride, with one act of self-inflicted, deliberate, passing violation, bridges two families, and hence two nations. The occasion of her wedding has brought these Israeli soldiers, one of whom is a woman, into Palestinian cultural space. When the female soldier faints, she is separated from the military complex which forces her to accept the accoutrements of masculinity, and can (through a liminal way of being), experience the Palestinian women as compassionate,

³⁰ Salih, *Season*, 136.

intelligent, sexual—in short, human. What is represented as female weakness (blood on the sheet and fainting from summer heat) is experienced by the characters as the key moments of connection between intractable extremes.

Liminality in *Season* is shown through the character of Sa'eed: he is a man in between England and the Sudan, his own body and a fantasy of it, and his own memories and the narrator he relies on to remember them. The narrator places the images of Sa'eed's memories and his own in the same story, bending the boundaries of one man's imagination into another's. Sa'eed yearns for the power of the narrator to remake place and sex into the expressions of political transformation that he wanted them to be. The narrator's position is a postcolonial reflection on the possibility of re-imagining a colonial past from within the memories of a colonized mind.

Sexuality expresses a political condition; geography expresses a political condition. The negotiation and remaking of geographical and sexual expressions—being-in-between the present condition and that which is imagined differently—are ways of negotiating and remaking political conditions, because through a shift in the expression of sexuality and geography, new (changed, possible, hoped-for) politics can be imagined.

Future Research

Though beyond the scope of this paper, there is rich potential for expansion on this topic regarding politics of the body, especially mapping the body and the lived experience of sexuality. I would be interested in using this approach to geography and sexuality to talk more about the ways in which aesthetics of the body influence the political environments—which

simultaneously creates and is created by sexuality. For example, the totalizing methodology of an aesthetic political project like Negritude could be fruitfully analyzed in this way.

Additionally, the idea of nostalgia—re-encountering the past and imagining the future—could be a helpful approach to imagination. Nostalgia sees the future as potential memory, and perhaps sentimentalization of the future serves as a way of re-imagining difficult political conditions. Salih exclaims, “There are those who say that literature is, in essence, a longing for a lost world. It is nostalgia!”³¹

³¹ Salih, *Tayeb Salih Speaks*, 29.

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