

Tayeb Salih and Modernism's Season of Migration to the South

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Abstract

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1967) is understandably one of the best-known Arabic novels, and its English translation is probably the most widely read Arabic novel in English. This paper demonstrates that *Season of Migration to the North* is in many ways a classic postcolonial novel, concerned both with the British colonization of Sudan and with the postcolonial legacy of British rule. It also engages in direct dialog with British literature. For example, it has been frequently seen as a sort of rejoinder to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But *Season of Migration to the North* is a sophisticated literary work that has much in common with works of European modernism, even as it writes back to them. In fact, Salih's novel has a particularly large number of points of contact with the work of James Joyce – perhaps the greatest of all European modernists but also a postcolonial writer in his own right.

Keywords: Arabic literature, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, modernism, postcolonial literature, Tayeb Salih

Introduction

Torn by coups and civil wars through much of its postcolonial history, Sudan is known in the West largely as a land of famine, war, human-rights abuses, and general misery and backwardness. And it is certainly the case that, on the whole, Sudan has remained on the margins of the modernizing impulses within Arab culture. On the other hand, the Sudanese novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1967), by Tayeb Salih, is one of the most widely admired novels ever written in the Arabic language. In 2001, for example, it was named by a panel of Arab writers and critics as the most important Arab novel of the twentieth century. Moreover, its English language version, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies in consultation with the author, is almost certainly the most widely known and read English translation of an Arabic novel, partly because the novel is so frequently taught in American and British universities.

There are a number of reasons for the popularity of this novel as an object of study in the West, including the very practical consideration that it is quite short. Probably the central reason for its popularity in Western literature classes is the fact that it has been so widely evoked as a sort of counter-text to Western Orientalist or colonialist literature. As a result, the text is often taught in dialogue with such colonialist narratives, presumably producing numerous opportunities for comparison and discussion. In addition, *Season of Migration* is a sophisticated text that resembles numerous texts of Western literary modernism in both its thematic concerns and its aesthetic strategies, making its literary merit easily recognizable to Western readers.

Season of Migration to the North as Postcolonial Text

Though Sudan as a whole has hardly been prominent among discussions of postcolonial literature in the West, *Season of Migration* is in many ways a classic postcolonial novel. For example, the novel specifically thematizes the encounter between England and Sudan, especially through the story of Mustafa Sa'eed, a young Sudanese who goes to London to complete his education, then undertakes a brilliant academic career as an economist, only to have it derailed when he kills his white English wife, Jean Morris, only one of a sequence of self-destructive white women with whom he has sexual liaisons that drive them to their ruin. Most critics have seen Mustafa's encounters with English women as a sort of postcolonial revenge for the damage wrought on Sudan by England during the period of British colonial domination there (1898–1956). At the same time, while the book's narrator (and, presumably, its author) acknowledges the damage done to Sudan by colonialism, he actually approaches this phenomenon dialectically, granting that the British also brought certain modernizing influences that have ultimately had a positive effect. The most obvious of these are the water pumps that chug away through the text, making irrigation from the Nile much easier for the local farmers. Similarly, we also learn that the British brought schools to the region, with Mustafa taking it upon himself to enter one such school at a young age, despite the lack of parental encouragement, his father having died before his birth and his mother seemingly having little interest in the boy. That Mustafa's self-motivated enrollment might be controversial, though, is made clear in his revelation to the narrator that many families in Sudan at the time were staunchly opposed to the notion of having their children attend British schools, which they saw as a "great evil" that threatened their traditional way of life as much as the "occupying armies" that brought them (Salih, 1969, p. 20).¹

¹ Henceforth cited in the text simply by page number.

Mustafa, though, is a brilliant student who soon finds that the academic life, however much an element of the British domination of Sudan it might be, is very much his element as well. His life, in fact, is intricately caught up in the phenomenon of British colonialism even from the time of his birth. The effective British colonial rule of Sudan, for example, began after the decisive Battle of Omdurman (near Khartoum) on September 2, 1898, roughly two weeks after Mustafa's birth in Khartoum. Mustafa has thus grown up a colonial subject, his life lived in the shadow of the colonization of Sudan. Indeed, the book's narrator is at one point told by a man he meets on a train that Mustafa's family belonged to a tribe that supplied guides for the British forces led by Herbert Kitchener in his recapture of Khartoum and the rest of Sudan, after much of the area had fallen to Mahdist rebels in 1885 (p. 54). Furthering this link, this same man tells the narrator that, as a young boy, Mustafa had begun his education as a star pupil at Gordon Memorial College (p. 52), named, of course, for the famed British colonial general Charles George Gordon, who was killed during the fall of the British garrison at Khartoum to the rebels in 1885.² This institution, in fact, was opened by Kitchener in Khartoum in 1902 to commemorate Gordon. Such a brilliant student that he quickly outstrips the ability of Gordon College to educate him properly, Mustafa soon moves on to Cairo and then to London, moving further and further into the heart of British hegemony with each stage of his impressive educational career. Apparently the first Sudanese to win a scholarship to study in England (and later the first Sudanese to marry a white Englishwoman), he ultimately earns a doctorate in economics there and becomes a successful academic, authoring books with such clearly anticolonial titles as *The Economics of Colonialism*, *Colonialism and Monopoly*, *The Cross and Gunpowder*, and *The Rape of Africa* (p. 137).

Mustafa is presented very clearly as the product of historical forces in his time, much like the "typical" characters associated by Georg Lukács with the greatest European realist writers, such as Balzac. Such characterization, per Lukács, helps realist writers to capture the process of historical change in a rapidly modernizing Europe. One might say the same of Salih, except that, while there is a clearly allegorical dimension to Lukács's notion of typification,³ the characterization of Mustafa is more overtly allegorical than the characterization of Balzac characters such as Eugène de Rastignac. Indeed, Mustafa is so symptomatic of the colonial history of Sudan that his characterization immediately recalls Fredric Jameson's controversial argument that it might be useful to try reading all "third-world" literary narratives as "national allegories": "All third-world texts are necessarily," Jameson argues, "allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (1991b, p. 86). In short, third-world texts, Jameson concludes, "necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of a private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (1991b, p. 86, his emphasis).

Jameson's logic here is based on the premise that, in the "third world," that is, the postcolonial world, public and private experience remain connected in organic and direct ways that have now been lost in the West. In other words, he is to an extent arguing that contemporary postcolonial texts retain a connection between private experience and political history of a kind

² Gordon's downfall is dramatized in the Hollywood film *Khartoum* (1966), which features Charlton Heston in the role of a heavily heroized Gordon. This film, perhaps the most prominent Western cultural product about Sudan, presents the Mahdist rebels essentially as bloodthirsty religious fanatics, though the Mahdi himself, played by distinguished British actor Sir Laurence Olivier in blackface, is presented as a rather dignified figure who becomes an admirer of Gordon.

³ On the allegorical nature of Lukács's notion of typification, see Jameson (1981, p. 33).

that was present in the high realist European texts of authors such as Balzac. Mustafa, on the other hand, is radically alienated from his roots in Sudan, to which he retains no real connection. He can therefore be seen as a national allegory, but of a kind that is virtually the reverse of that indicated by Jameson: he illustrates not the ongoing connection of private individuals with public communities in the colonial and postcolonial world but precisely the breakdown of this connection. The narrator, on the other hand, is a similarly allegorical figure who retains stronger roots in Sudan despite his own Western education and whose experience more directly reflects that of the Sudanese nation. To an extent, in fact, one can best appreciate the allegorical characterization of Mustafa and the narrator by seeing them as different, dialectically interrelated, aspects of the same character, showing both the importance of community in Sudanese society and the embattled nature of that community under the impact of colonialism.

In still another illustration of the dialectical treatment of colonialism in *Season of Migration*, Salih's narrator relays to us an overheard exchange between a young Sudanese university lecturer and an Englishman, Richard, employed in the postcolonial Sudanese Ministry of Finance. The Sudanese declares that "you transmitted to us the disease of your capitalist economy. What did you give us except a handful of capitalist companies that drew off our blood – and still do?" The Englishman then responds, "All this shows is that you cannot manage to live without us. You used to complain about colonialism and when we left you created the legend of neo-colonialism" (p. 60). For his own part, the narrator delivers an ambivalent judgment on the matter: "The white man, merely because he ruled us for a period of our history, will for a time continue to have for us that feeling of contempt the strong have for the weak." Noting that Mustafa reversed this power dynamic by coming to England as a "conqueror," he concludes that "their own coming too was not a tragedy as we imagine, nor yet a blessing as they imagine" (p. 60).

Meanwhile, the political commentary of *Season of Migration* is aimed not just at the colonial period, but also at the postcolonial period in Sudan. Indeed, the text conducts a critique of Sudan's postcolonial doldrums that might have virtually been lifted from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).⁴ For example, Fanon emphasizes that decolonization was only a first step toward true liberation, warning that no such liberation could be achieved in postcolonial African nations if those nations simply replaced the former ruling European colonial bourgeoisie by an indigenous African bourgeoisie, while leaving the basic class structure of the societies in place. In fact, Fanon argues that the African bourgeoisie might be even worse than their European predecessors, because the African bourgeoisie are mere imitators of their Western masters, who themselves had already become decadent by the time of their full-scale colonization of Africa in the late nineteenth century. According to Fanon, the African bourgeoisie thus

follows the Western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention. ... It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness, or the will to succeed of youth. (1968, p. 153)

⁴ The many echoes of Fanon in *Season of Migration* are probably no accident. In an interview available on Youtube (at <https://youtu.be/PK9of6f6qGw>, in Arabic), for example, Salih identifies Fanon as a great thinker who influenced his work, along with Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. In particular, he notes Fanon's pioneering theorization of the emasculating effects of colonialism on colonized men, a motif that is of great relevance to *Season of Migration*.

Salih, in *Season of Migration of the North*, criticizes the decadent behavior of the postcolonial African bourgeoisie in much the same terms, though this critique is complicated in this case because it is filtered through Salih's narrator, himself a European-educated (low-level) member of that bourgeois class who works as a civil servant in postcolonial Khartoum. He is nevertheless able, though not without a certain irony, to recognize the corruption and decadence of his own postcolonial ruling class. On a visit to his native village of Wad Hamid, he responds to his old friend Mahjoub's complaints about the estrangement of the new ruling class from the real problems of postcolonial Sudan with an account of a conference he recently attended of postcolonial rulers from all over Africa. These men, he says, are

smooth of face, lupine of mouth, their hands gleaming with rings of precious stones, exuding perfume from their cheeks, in white, blue, black and green suits of fine mohair and expensive silk rippling on their shoulders like the fur of Siamese cats. (p. 118)

The narrator then goes on with an extensive account of the luxury in which these postcolonial bourgeoisie live, mimicking their former European masters by erecting impressive edifices (designed in London and built of marble imported from Italy) in which to hold the conferences in which they seek to impress each other with their splendor while ignoring the poverty of the people. Granted, he notes, the typical postcolonial African leader gives lip service to overcoming the disease of bourgeois decadence among the people of postcolonial Africa, but only as he himself "escapes during the summer months from Africa to his villa on Lake Lucerne and his wife does her shopping in Harrods in London, from where the articles are flown to her in a private plane" (p. 120). "Such people," the narrator concludes, "are concerned only with their stomachs and their sensual pleasures" (p. 120).

Importantly, while the narrator is insightful in his diagnosis of the decadence of the postcolonial bourgeoisie in Sudan and elsewhere, he himself does nothing to correct the situation, protesting that he is merely a lowly functionary with no real power to change things (p. 121). This sort of inaction is, of course, typical of his character throughout the text, most obviously in his decision to do nothing to prevent the forced marriage of Mustafa's widow Hosna to the elderly Wad Rayyes, an inappropriate match that leads to the violent deaths of both partners. Salih thus subtly suggests that the travails of postcolonial Africa are due not merely to the shenanigans of corrupt leaders, but also to the inaction of those who recognize this corruption but do nothing to oppose it, choosing the more comfortable option of silence and inaction, while themselves profiting from the corrupt system.

Salih's Fanonian engagement with issues related to colonialism and postcolonialism resembles that to be found in numerous other colonial and postcolonial novels. One of Salih's key predecessors, for example, is René Maran, the French Guyanese writer whose somewhat autobiographical 1947 novel *Un Homme pareil aux autres* ("A Man Like Others") provides some of the key material for Fanon's discussion of the sexual dynamics between black men and white women in the third chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Maran's novel features the story of Jean Veneuse, a black intellectual from the French Antilles who comes to France at a young age and is educated there. Alienated from his white fellow students, he takes refuge in the world of books and becomes a successful scholar. In the meantime, his French upbringing and education alienate him from his colonial origins as well, origins that contribute to his feelings of inferiority and insecurity. He falls in love with and desires to marry a white French woman, musing to himself that black men "tend to marry in Europe not so much out of love as for the satisfaction of being the master of a European woman." Further, he wonders to himself

“whether I am attempting to revenge myself on a European woman for everything that her ancestors have inflicted on mine throughout the centuries” (as cited in Fanon, 2008, pp. 69–70).

The parallels between Jean Veneuse and Salih’s Mustafa Sa’eed are extensive and clear, both in terms of this motif of a vengeful assault on white women and in terms of their double alienation from both their indigenous cultures and the metropolitan cultures in which they have been educated. In England, for example, Mustafa compensates for his sense of not fitting in by outrageously playing up his exotic Africanness, building on a number of Orientalist stereotypes as a technique for seducing English women. Fabricating stories about his exotic African home – and at one point claiming that his house in Sudan was so close to the Nile that he could dangle his arm out his bedroom window and dip his fingers in the running water of the river (p. 39) – he burns incense and sandalwood in his room in London to enhance the exotic effect (p. 31). He also plays upon the ignorance and gullibility of the women he seduces, playing with them like a cat with a mouse while feeding them exotic stories that mix materials drawn from Arabian desert lore and the mysteries of the darkest African jungles, knowing that they are little able to distinguish one bit of exoticism from another.

In this way, Salih effectively dismantles Orientalist stereotyping a decade before Said’s *Orientalism*. Meanwhile, if in London Mustafa creates for himself a den of seduction decorated with exoticist stereotypes, in Wad Hamid he creates for himself a den of Britishness in which he can relax in bourgeois isolation, immersing himself in European cultural artifacts and in his impressive library of Western tomes that includes “not a single Arabic book” (p. 137). Even his copy of the Quran is an English translation, emphasizing his Westernization and estrangement from his native culture. Far from being a sophisticated hybrid who feels at home in both England and Sudan, he is a radically alienated outsider who feels at home in neither.

Season of Migration also resonates with a number of near-contemporary postcolonial novels in its Fanonian exploration of postcolonial decadence and corruption. For example, particularly relevant to the Muslim context of Salih’s novel is Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* (1973), whose protagonist, El Hadji, “undergoes experiences that make his personal story a sort of allegory of the history of the Third-World bourgeoisie, who are presented in *Xala* very much in the same terms as in Fanon” (Booker, 2000, p. 138). A formal anticolonial activist, El Hadji has turned, in the postcolonial era, to a ruthless pursuit of wealth that brings suffering on the very poor whom he once championed; he serves now as little more than an agent of Western capital⁵ and very much resembles the smooth-faced postcolonial bourgeoisie of Salih’s Sudan.

Season of Migration also anticipates the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) in its analysis of the African postcolonial condition. Published only one year after the publication of Salih’s book, *The Beautiful Ones* critiques the corruption of Nkrumah’s postcolonial Ghana in an overtly Fanonian mode.⁶ Armah’s novel even includes an alienated intellectual (“Teacher”) who is somewhat of a double of the book’s unnamed narrator (“the man”), thus replicating a key structural component of Salih’s novel. Like Mustafa, Teacher is an insightful thinker who understands the dynamics of colonialism in a very

⁵ For more on this aspect of the text, see Booker (2000, p. 139).

⁶ Armah has openly acknowledged the influence of Fanon on his work. In his essay “African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?” – which serves as a useful gloss on *The Beautiful Ones* – Armah specifically recommends the work of Fanon as an alternative to Nkrumah and other postcolonial African leaders and as example of the kind of revolutionary thought that true African socialism needs to draw upon (1967, pp. 29–30).

Fanonian mode. However, also like Mustafa, he essentially withdraws from the world and fails to follow Fanon's injunction for intellectuals to provide leadership in the liberation of the people of Africa.⁷

Finally, by making Mustafa an intellectual who engages in a concerted analysis of colonialist economics, Salih also places his novel in dialogue with nonfictional studies of colonialism. Fanon's work is the most obvious of these, but one might also note that, among the texts that the narrator finds in Mustafa's private room in Wad Hamid after the latter's death is *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, by Octave Mannoni, first published in French in 1950. Mannoni's pioneering text was one of the first seriously to consider the psychological consequences of colonialism (for both colonizer and colonized) and so is certainly appropriate reading for Mustafa as part of his scholarly work. It also resembles *Season of Migration* in its emphasis on the psychological effects of colonialism. However, its vision of the attitude of dependency effected by colonized subjects as mask for their resentment of the colonizer and their own innate sense of inferiority (which predates colonialism, essentially leaving them in anticipation of conquest, desiring to be dominated) is one to which Mustafa might be expected to object. Fanon raises a similar objection in the fourth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he insists that any sense of inferiority on the part of colonized subjects was a consequence of colonialism, not an anticipation of it. Indeed, Mustafa's campaign to master English women might be taken almost as a direct attempt to refute Mannoni's assertion, though of course one could also read this campaign (and Mustafa's overachievement as a student and scholar) as an attempt to compensate for his feelings of inferiority.

***Season of Migration to the North* as Modernist Novel**

Of course, the single text to which *Season of Migration to the North* has been most often compared is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a key work of colonialist fiction to which Salih's novel has often been seen as a sort of postcolonial response. Thematically, the juxtaposition of these two texts makes obvious sense. Conrad's text features a European, Marlow, who travels to colonial Africa and undergoes soul-searching experiences in the course of which he becomes fascinated with Kurtz, a European intellectual who preceded Marlow to Africa. Salih's text, meanwhile, features a Sudanese (the book's unnamed narrator), who has been educated in England and who becomes fascinated with the story of Mustafa Sa'eed, who preceded him in Europe. Put differently, Salih's narrative centrally involves an African narrator figure who undergoes a voyage of self discovery by seeking to understand an enigmatic African who travels to Britain and is there corrupted into savagery, partly through his exposure to the indigenous culture, much as Conrad's Kurtz seems to have his own most savage impulses activated by his exposure to Africa.

Season of Migration can thus be seen as a sort of mirror image of and critical reversal of *Heart of Darkness*, as numerous commentators have noted. Edward Said is typical of such critics when he concludes that Salih's Mustafa "does (and is) the reverse of what Kurtz does (and is): the Black man journeys north into white territory" (Said, 1993, p. 30).⁸ Indeed, the many ways in which Salih seems so intentionally to reverse Conrad would seem to make the relationship

⁷ See Booker (1998, p. 106)

⁸ On the other hand, Mohammad Shaheen (1985) has argued that Salih essentially attempts (but fails) to replicate Conrad's achievement in *Heart of Darkness*, a reading that entirely fails to comprehend the critical distance between the two novels. It is thus no surprise that Davidson has declared Shaheen's reading to be "naïve" and "woefully inadequate" (Davidson, 1989, p. 397).

between these texts quite obvious – were it not for the fact that this relationship is actually far more complex than it at first appears to be.

Structurally, for example, Salih's Mustafa might seem to be a counterpart to Conrad's Kurtz, while Salih's unnamed narrator is a counterpart to Conrad's Marlow. However, both *Season of Migration* and *Heart of Darkness* contain layers of rhetorical complexity in their narrative voicing that cannot be matched up in any table of simple one-to-one correspondence. For example, Marlow is *not*, in fact, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, but merely the conveyor of a nested narrative that is actually presented to us by another narrator, who is unnamed. At the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, we find Conrad's Marlow aboard the *Nellie*, a cruising yawl moored in the Thames. There, he tells the story of his venture into the heart of darkest Africa in search of the mysterious Kurtz to an audience composed of an allegorical who is who of London society, each identified only by his professional function within that society: a Director of Companies, a Lawyer, an Accountant. Interestingly, the actual narrator of Conrad's novel, the one who relates to *us* what Marlow related to *them* aboard the *Nellie*, is the only one of the group who remains entirely unidentified by either name or profession, a fact that further complicates the already complex rhetorical structure of this classic proto-modernist forerunner of high modernist fiction.

Salih's rhetorical structure is both more and less enigmatic than Conrad's. *Season of Migration* begins as the narrator addresses a completely unidentified audience: "It was, gentlemen, after a long absence – seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe – that I returned to my people" (1). Just who these gentlemen might be is unspecified in the text, and we are free to imagine, according to our preference, that he is simply addressing the readers of the novel, as might the narrator of a Western novel, or that, *hakiwati*-style, he is addressing an oral narrative to a live audience (perhaps composed of the village elders, in the mode of Marlow's audience). In any case, as Davidson notes, "as quickly as it is aroused, this question of audience fades, for the narrator moves directly into the story he has to relate" (1989, p. 386).

The identity of this audience is, in fact, only one of many questions that are left unanswered in *Season of Migration* – such as the ultimate fate of Mustafa Sa'eed, who disappears from Wad Hamid without a trace during flood season, leaving it as a matter of conjecture whether he drowned in the Nile by accident, drowned by suicidal design, or merely decided to take advantage of the flooded river to skip town, knowing most people will assume he must have drowned. The narrator himself is not only unnamed in the text but has an uncertain fate of his own, ending his narrative thrashing about in the river and yelling for help as the text ends. Even when we are given information, it is often indirect or unreliable. All we know of Mustafa's adventures in England, for example, is relayed to us through the narrator. We have no way of knowing whether Mustafa was truthful in the account he gave to the narrator or whether the narrator conveyed the information to us accurately – just as we know of Marlow's adventures in Africa only through the narrator's second-hand account of what Marlow told his audience on the *Nellie*. Meanwhile, the narrator also collects additional information about Mustafa from "third-party" sources, some of which is almost certainly unreliable, just as the additional information Marlow gets about Kurtz from sources such as a rag-tag Russian sailor seems to be of uncertain usefulness.

Hassan argues that, in *Season of Migration*, Salih "perfected" the use of the "unreliable narrator," a technique he had already begun to use in his early short stories, such as "So It Was, Gentlemen" ("Hakadha ya sadati"), the very title of which anticipates the beginning of *Season of Migration* (Hassan, 2003, p. 25). Indeed, once one realizes that the narrator is not entirely to

be trusted, a great deal of the meaning of *Season of Migration* becomes unstable. It is clear, for example, that the narrator to some extent envies and distrusts Mustafa, a man whose accomplishments as a student and scholar abroad in Europe dwarf the accomplishments of the narrator himself, who had formerly thought his acquisition of a doctorate in literature while studying in England to be a feat unparalleled in the history of the inhabitants of Wad Hamid. This being the case, one is tempted to wonder whether some of the negative depiction of Mustafa (as when he is portrayed as a vicious misogynist who seeks revenge against English women for the British colonization of Sudan) might be exaggerated. Similarly, one wonders whether there is a subtle agenda at stake in the way the narrator relays to us the opinion of the Englishman Richard that Mustafa had not been a “reliable economist” (p. 57). In addition, at least as conveyed to us by the narrator, Richard goes on to suggest that much of Mustafa’s academic and professional success had been due to the fact that he served as a sort of token for the left-leaning British intelligentsia, who could congratulate themselves on their tolerance and liberalism by treating him like one of their own (pp. 58–59). In this sense, the rhetorical structure of *Season of Migration* again resembles that of *Heart of Darkness* in that there are clear tensions between Marlow and the frame narrator that add an extra layer of uncertainty to the interpretation of the narrative with which we are presented.

But other rhetorical uncertainties abound in Salih’s text as well. For example, when Mustafa expresses a positive opinion of the narrator’s ninety-year-old grandfather, Hajj Ahmed, early in the novel, the narrator accepts the assessment as an obvious one: “And why not, seeing that my grandfather is a veritable miracle?” (p. 10). Through the remainder of the novel, the narrator offers nothing to contradict this verdict directly, though one can perhaps detect a certain ironic bitterness when he relates the grandfather’s outburst, late in the text, “God curse all women! Women are the sisters of the Devil” (p. 123). After all, the grandfather is here referring directly to Hosna, with whom the narrator had been in love and who now lies dead after a horrific encounter with her new husband, Wad Rayyes, who had violently attacked and attempted to rape her. In addition, the narrator’s characterization of his grandfather as a “miracle” is significantly ironized when *Season of Migration* is read through Salih’s early short story “A Handful of Dates.” As Hassan notes, it is clear from Salih’s later novel *Bandarshah* that the narrator of *Season of Migration* is actually named “Meheimeed” and that he is an older version of the same person as the boy protagonist of “A Handful of Dates.” Further, the grandfather who figures prominently in the story is Hajj Ahmed. Yet this story basically relates Meheimeed’s loss of innocence as he learns with disgust that the grandfather he had so admired can be selfish, ruthless, and cruel in his treatment of others. Meheimeed learned early on that his grandfather was not the “miracle” he had once thought him to be.

In short, *Season of Migration* is invested with many of the same kinds of ironic and interpretive uncertainties that we have come to associate with modernist narratives, and one of the most important things the novel has in common with *Heart of Darkness* is that Conrad’s novel displays some of the same modernist characteristics. Of course, Conrad’s novel, while perhaps itself not quite fully modernist, is a sort of transitional text that serves as a clear forerunner of later modernist novels. Indeed, one reason why *Season of Migration* and *Heart of Darkness* seem so much like companion novels is that both not only deal with similar cross-cultural encounters, but both are also written in a sort of eccentric modernist mode, resembling but not quite belonging to the canonical texts of European high modernism.

While Salih draws extensively upon traditions from Sudanese oral narratives, *Season of Migration* is clearly a key example of what Benita Parry has called “peripheral modernisms,” “understood as the aesthetic forms generated beyond capitalism’s cores” (p. 27). For Parry,

such modernisms arise from areas of the world that were “co-opted or coerced into capitalism’s world system,” generally via the experience of colonization (p. 30). Associating modernist cultural production specifically with the historical phenomenon of modernity, Parry argues that these areas of the world also participated in modernity, however unwillingly or in however subaltern a fashion, so that the aesthetic production from these areas might also be expected to show certain characteristics of modernism. *Season of Migration to the North* is, in fact, the principal example that Parry uses to illustrate her notion of peripheral modernisms. In particular, Parry notes that, while Salih’s novel is profoundly rooted in its specific real-world historical context, it goes well beyond that context in its style and in the excessive and “outlandish” fictional world created in the novel, thus defeating any attempt at a straightforward realist reading (p. 38).

Season of Migration is intensely engaged with a number of political issues related to colonialism and postcolonialism, and it is strongly embedded in its Sudanese historical context. It is therefore clearly important to recognize that the novel arises from a different cultural point of view (and from a different time period) than do the texts of European high modernism, which can be seen to end roughly with the deaths of Joyce and Woolf in 1941, but which reached its zenith in the 1920s. 1922, the year of publication of both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, is often seen as the *annus mirabilis* of modernist literature, thus placing the peak of that phenomenon nearly half a century before Salih’s novel – though one might note that 1922 was also apparently the peak year of Mustafa’s success in seducing English women, he having, at the end of that year, found himself living simultaneously with five of them (p. 35). It was also an important year in Arab history, marking the nominal end of British colonial rule in Egypt, though such rule would continue in Sudan until 1956. In any case, numerous formal and stylistic aspects of *Season of Migration* clearly resemble those typically associated with modernist fiction, including its complex, nonlinear narrative structure; the complex rhetoric of its narrative voice; and an overall texture of irony and ambiguity that defeats any attempt at final and authoritative interpretation.

It is little wonder then, that numerous critics, in addition to Parry, have identified *Season of Migration* as a modernist text. Susan Stanford Friedman describes *Season of Migration* as a key example of “postcolonial” modernism “within the canon of twentieth-century modernisms” (S.S. Friedman, 2006, p. 435). Comparing Salih’s novel with *Heart of Darkness*, she finds that the former is *more* modernist than the latter, that “Even more than Conrad’s novel, *Season of Migration to the North* is a narrative of indeterminacy, of mysteries, lies, and truths; of mediating events through the perspectives of multiple narrators, of complex tapestries of interlocking motifs and symbols; and of pervasive irony. Stylistically speaking, Salih’s novel is, for Friedman, “high modernist,” having moved even further than Conrad from the conventions of realism (S. S. Friedman, 2006, pp. 435–36).

Saree Makdisi similarly sees *Season of Migration* (along with Ghassan Kanifani’s 1963 novel *Men in the Sun*) as a key example of “Arab modernism,” while at the same time warning that “this is *by no means* to suggest that Arab “modernism” simply recapitulates an earlier European modernism; but there are certain similarities between these two political-cultural tendencies that suggest the existence of continuities as much as discontinuities between these radically different experiences of modernity as a crisis, continuities mediated through the violent dialogical process of imperialism itself” (Makdisi, 1995, p. 105). In particular, for Makdisi, *Season of Migration* and other texts of Arab modernism demand a new way of conceptualizing modernity as something not that the Arab world is moving toward, but as something that has already arrived; however, Makdisi continues, due to the impact of colonialism and neo-

colonialism, Arab modernity arrived differently from European modernity and must be grappled with on its own terms (1995, p. 105). Thematically, even the engagement of *Season of Migration* with issues so clearly related to colonialism and postcolonialism does not necessarily set it apart from the texts of European modernism. *Heart of Darkness* is the most obvious example, though E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* also comes to mind, and of course we should remember that Joyce's *Ulysses*, often seen as the central text of modernist fiction, was itself produced by a colonial subject of the British Empire and that the British colonial domination of Ireland is a crucial topic of *Ulysses*.

Beyond the obvious political issues dealt with in *Season of Migration*, Salih's novel also deals centrally with the topic of alienation, which is probably the most common experiential motif in modernist literature, in which characters such as T. S. Eliot's Prufrock so frequently lament their sense of estrangement from others and even from any authentic version of themselves. As Jameson has noted, it is in fact the ability to experience alienation – thanks to the vestigial holdover of a more stable and autonomous subjectivity from earlier periods – that provides a key distinction between the subjective texture of modernism and postmodernism, when those older forms of subjectivity have been swept away entirely. For Jameson, “alienation is, first of all, not merely a modernist concept but also a modernist *experience* (something I cannot argue further here, except to say that “psychic fragmentation” is a better term for what ails us today)” (Jameson, 1991a, p. 90).

Moreover, the modernist characters who struggle most fiercely with alienation as an experience tend to be intellectuals (or at least would-be intellectuals), whose attempts to live the life of the mind make it all the harder for them to adjust to conditions in a rapidly changing material world. Such alienated intellectuals, as Jameson has noted in his discussion of Sidney Kirkwood of George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889), arose in Gissing's later work to provide a distanced (but sympathetic) perspective from which to witness the problems of the working class. Such figures, however, thus undergo, according to Jameson, a special sort of alienation that he labels “*déclassement*”: Not really members of the working class, their sympathy with that class leaves them estranged from their own bourgeois origins and therefore classless, drifting through the confusions of the modern world as members of no well-established social group (Jameson, 1981, p. 195). In this sense, of course, Kirkwood reverses the trajectory of Hardy's Jude Fawley, whose intellectual aspirations estrange him from his working-class origins, but who can never be fully welcomed as a member of the educated bourgeois class no matter how great his intellectual talents might be.

If the alienation of such proto-modernist intellectuals as Kirkwood and Fawley is thus largely a matter of class (and one might also place in this class-based predicament the more modernist Leonard Bast of Forster's *Howards End*), we should remember that Joyce's Stephen Dedalus provides us with a key example of a modernist intellectual whose alienation is closely tied to the doubly colonized condition of his native Ireland. Intensely aware that, as an Irishman, he is the “servant of two masters,” Dedalus attempts (unsuccessfully) to escape the bitter realization of his subaltern status as a colonized subject of both the British Empire and the Catholic Church by fleeing, at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to the intellectual Mecca of Paris. But, by the beginning of *Ulysses*, he has already returned after only a short time abroad, the mortal illness of his mother having called him home. Still rejecting both capitalism-dominated Britishness and Catholic-dominated Irishness, Stephen is, by the end of *Ulysses*, left adrift and homeless, both symbolically and literally.

It is certainly the case that *Ulysses* occupies a special position as a modernist text that is both intensely postcolonial in its sensibilities and strongly European in its cultural background.⁹ And, while Joyce's masterpiece has frequently been adduced as the epitome of modernist formal technique, it is also the case that *Ulysses* exemplifies another of Jameson's key distinctions between modernism and postmodernism – the fact that, in modernist texts, vestiges of older cultural and social forms are still able to assert themselves in opposition to the modernizing tendencies of capitalism. For Jameson, “the keen sense of the New in the modern period was only possible because of the mixed, uneven, transitional nature of that period, in which the old coexisted with what was then coming into being” (1991a, p. 311). Further, “one way of telling the story of the transition from the modern to the postmodern lies then in showing how at length modernization triumphs and wipes the old completely out: nature is abolished along with the traditional countryside and traditional agriculture. ... Now everything is new; but by the same token, the very category of the new then loses its meaning and becomes itself something of a modernist survival” (1991a, p. 311).

Joyce's extremely modern work nevertheless contains clear vestiges of older Irish culture and social customs (just as Joyce's famously high-tech literary style contains echoes of Irish oral narrative traditions¹⁰), no doubt partly because of Joyce's dual background in colonial Dublin and metropolitan Paris. Importantly, though, Joyce himself is absolutely unsentimental about the loss of Irish tradition as a result of the onslaught of British-driven modernity, despite his strongly critical attitude toward the British themselves. In the same way, Salih – with his own dual background in Sudan and London – refuses to idealize the traditional Islamic culture of Sudan, especially through the story of Hosna, which indicates the sometimes horrifying treatment of women in this culture.¹¹ Still, Salih presents an even more pointed critique of the negative impact of colonialism in his native country than does Joyce. *Season of Migration* is also more overt than *Ulysses* in its inclusion of a variety of cultural energies. Thus, while all of *Ulysses* is set in Dublin (and on a single day in 1904), the main action of Salih's novel occurs partly in the cosmopolitan center of interwar London and partly in Sudan – the latter events roughly covering the more than half a century of British colonial rule in the region and thus reflecting a considerable amount of modernization. Most of the Sudanese action is set in the village of Wad Hamid, which remains relatively traditional but also contains constant reminders of encroaching modernity – such as the mechanical water pumps that irrigate the local farmland and the trains that regularly come back and forth from the capital of Khartoum, where the narrator lives and works during the present-day action of the novel, whence he relates the novel's earlier action through a series of flashback narratives that are interspersed with his accounts of the more contemporary action.

As Hassan notes, Salih's Wad Hamid is reminiscent of the strong sense of place that can be found in the work of a number of other modern authors, resembling the Yoknapatawpha County of William Faulkner, the Macondo of Gabriel García Márquez, and the Cairo of Naguib Mahfouz (2003, p. 15). In particular, for Hassan, Wad Hamid takes on a special vividness because of its recurrent use as a setting in almost all of Salih's fiction. But of course the same can also be said of Joyce's Dublin, and in many ways the recurrent use of Wad Hamid by Salih structurally resembles Joyce's use of Dublin quite strongly, especially in the way both fictional

⁹ For an extended discussion of *Ulysses* in this sense, see Booker (2000).

¹⁰ On orality in Joyce, see, for example, A. W. Friedman (2007).

¹¹ According to Hassan, for example, the narrator's “indecisiveness and failure to take action” in saving Hosna from her ultimate fate “can be seen as Salih's indictment of the Arab intelligentsia's failure to struggle for the implementation of a vital part of the *Nahda's* social reform project,” that is, the liberation of women (Hassan, 2003, p. 115).

settings are first explored through a series of short stories, then further elaborated in novels, with many characters appearing in multiple narratives. Dublin, of course, is more modern and more urban than is Wad Hamid, but it is still a colonial setting that is informed by the convergence of competing cultures, one colonizing and one colonized.

Indeed, if both Joyce and Salih engage in extensive dialogues with their own earlier works in their successive ones, one of the things they have in common with each other and with other modernist texts is the way in which they engage in dialogue with any number of other texts as well. Joyce certainly engages in such dialogues in a more overt and spectacular way, but such dialogues are also crucial to *Season of Migration*. Indeed, the already complex rhetorical structure of *Season of Migration* is also significantly complicated by the text's dialogue with any number of literary predecessors. While *Heart of Darkness* is the most prominent of these, at least from a Western perspective, there are in fact a number of other important predecessors. Johnson-Davies, for example, has noted that Salih also read extensively from other British writers, though perhaps not learning as much from them as some might think:

If Tayeb Salih has taken anything from his wide reading of such writers as E. M. Forster, Ford Madox Ford, and Joseph Conrad, it is an awareness of the importance of how to tell a story, of such technical problems in the art of writing fiction as the point of view. As for assistance with his material, of new ideas, he is in no need; one is ever conscious that he is in full control of it, that he speaks with complete authority. (2014, n.p.)

Though he is unmentioned by name in the text, Ford plays a key role in *Season of Migration* because the narrator first becomes truly fascinated by Mustafa when he hears the latter (after a bit too much imbibing) suddenly begin reciting a poem in English at a village gathering in Wad Hamid. Several lines of the poem are included in the text, though the narrator identifies the poem only as one he later found in an anthology of poems about World War I (p. 18). The poem, as it turns out, is Ford's 1915 "Antwerp," which deals with the carnage of World War I, a phenomenon that (in a very Fanonian vein) figures elsewhere in *Season of Migration* as an image of European brutality and as a sign of the European disease of violence that colonialism brought to Africa and elsewhere in the colonial world.¹²

Joyce is well known for the frequency with which he refers to texts by any number of canonical European authors.¹³ Shakespeare is probably the most important of these, though many readers have not appreciated the extent to which Joyce's extensive dialogue with Shakespeare is a subversive attempt to undermine Shakespeare's status as an icon of the British Empire. Booker thus notes that

Shakespeare functioned in the nineteenth century as the central icon of a British cultural heritage that itself served as one of the central justifications for British rule over the "primitive" cultures encountered in places like Africa and India. Shakespeare is thus understandably a crucial figure in Joyce's dialogue in *Ulysses* with British culture as an arm of British imperialism. (Booker, 2000, p. 93)

¹² Though *Season* stipulates that Mustafa recites the poem in English, it is conveyed in Arabic in the original novel. The English version of the poem that appears in the English translation of the novel seems to have been translated back from the Arabic and does not match the text of Ford's original exactly, though it is close enough to identify the poem without question.

¹³ See Booker (1996) for a detailed discussion of Joyce's dialogue with such authors as Homer, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Goethe.

Among other things, Joyce sometimes treats Shakespeare's plays as emblems of British colonial violence. In "Scylla and Charybdis," for example, Stephen clearly suggests that the mass killings in Act 5 of *Hamlet* are informed by the same ideology of violence that also underlay the bloodbath in South Africa during the Boer War (which occurred at about the same time as the British conquest of Sudan): "Khaki Hamlets don't hesitate to shoot. The bloodboltered shambles in act five is a forecast of the concentration camp sung by Mr Swinburne" (Joyce, 1996, l. 9.133–35).

In *Season of Migration to the North*, Mustafa repeatedly compares himself to Shakespeare's Othello in his status as an Oriental who becomes tragically involved with a white European woman. Several critics have commented on the role of *Othello* in *Season of Migration*, including Barbara Harlow, who goes so far as to characterize Salih's novel as "a rereading of Shakespeare's Othello, a restatement of the tragedy, a reshaping of the tragic figure of the Moor" (1979, p. 163). Soon after Mustafa begins his seduction of the English woman Isabella Seymour, for example, she expresses confusion about his ethnic identity, since the Orientalist stereotypes he trots out to impress her seem both Arab and African. "I'm like Othello," he tells her, "Arab-African" (p. 38). Thus, Mustafa employs Shakespeare's character as one of the numerous European preconceptions about Arabs, Africans, and Muslims that he uses to his advantage in seducing English women – suggesting, among other things, that *Othello* deserves to take its place among the myriad of Orientalist misrepresentations that have contributed to the evolution of these preconceptions over the centuries.

Interestingly, only a few pages earlier, the narrator relates Mustafa's account to him of his trial for the killing of Jean Morris, during which Mustafa's lawyer had attempted to paint him as "a noble person whose mind was able to absorb Western civilization but it broke his heart" (p. 33). In short, he paints Mustafa as an Othello-like victim of a clash between cultures, at which Mustafa, not wishing to take advantage of this defense, had thought to himself that he should rise and declare, "I am no Othello. I am a lie" then ask them to hang him (p. 33). Later, the narrator repeats this same account, though (in keeping with the modernist ambiguity of the text) Mustafa's thoughts are now intertwined with what was actually said in court and, apparently, with the narrator's own embellishments, including many more details about Mustafa's status as a victim of colonial history. It is impossible to say at this point, amid the extremely complex voicing of the text, just which words emanate from where. The narrator now imagines Mustafa's voice comparing the latter's invasion of England with Kitchener's invasion of Sudan (p. 94). The voice goes on, in a bitter denunciation of colonialism:

Their ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were first set up to transport troops; the schools were started so as to teach us to say "Yes" in their language. They imported to us the germ of the greatest European violence, as seen on the Somme and at Verdun, the like of which the world has never previously known, the germ of a deadly disease that struck them more than a thousand years ago. (p. 95)

Mustafa's imagined voice then declares that he reversed this dynamic through his own "invasion" of England, concluding with the repeated declaration that, "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie" (p. 95). The shift from "I am a lie" to "Othello was a lie" is not insignificant here, though, suggesting once again that Shakespeare's representation of the Moorish general, however seemingly sympathetic, was also an inaccurate Orientalist depiction of the Other. In addition, the repetition of Mustafa's denial of being an Othello figure amid a trenchant critique

of British colonialism in Sudan potentially implicates Shakespeare (and British culture in general) in this critique.

Joyce's dialogue with Shakespeare (and with the entire Western literary tradition) is certainly richer and more extensive than is Salih's, though Joyce's engagement with Arab culture and literature (consisting of little more than an occasional gesture toward *One Thousand and One Nights* and an Orientalist dream image or two) is rather skimpy. Salih does not engage very extensively with Arab literature in any direct sense, either, other than slight nods such as a mention of the fact that Mustafa once gave a heavily embroidered lecture on the Abbasid classical Arab poet Abu Nuwas, assuring his British audience that Abu Nuwas was a far greater poet than Omar Khayyam (pp. 142–143).

However, despite the paucity of direct allusions, *Season of Migration* engages in a subtle dialogue with other texts of Arabic literature, especially those that also involve encounters with the West. For example, Hassan deploys the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin to argue that Salih parodies such Arab texts about voyages to Europe as Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Usfur min al-Sharq* (A Bird from the East), Yahya Haqqi's *Qindil Umm Hashim* (The Lamp of Umm Hashim), and Suhayl Idris's *Al hay al-latini* (The Latin Quarter) (2003, p. 83). In addition, Anouar Majid notes that "a dominant motif of canonical postcolonial works by Africans of Muslim descent is the young educated protagonist's wrenching deracination from his or her indigenous culture, followed by catastrophic, even suicidal, journeys to the Northern metropolis" (2000, p. 78). Majid then goes on to cite Salih, along with the Senegalese writers Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Ken Bugul as key practitioners of this motif.

Conclusion

Salih and Joyce are very different writers, but the very fact that such different writers nevertheless have so many things in common suggests the extent to which *Season of Migration to the North* can fruitfully be read within the context of global modernist literature. The categories of postcolonial and modernist need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, Joyce's spectacular modernist writing can be seen partly as a postcolonial attempt to demonstrate that a mere Irishman can construct literary texts that are at least as sophisticated as those of Shakespeare – thus undermining stereotypes about Irish backwardness. But it is also the case that Salih's writing demonstrates that modernizing tendencies were already strong in Arab literature in the 1960s and that the gap behind Arab and Western culture has long been much more narrow than some would have us believe.

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