

Gendering the West: Cultural Anxiety in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

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Abstract: *Tayeb Salih's 1966 novel Season of Migration to the North narrates the story of a Western-educated Sudanese man and his sexual relationships with several Western women of whom he ultimately kills one. This paper proposes to discuss how the novel conceptualizes the South-North/East-West conflict through the realm of sexuality and how this conceptualization reflects cultural anxiety. The novel's gendered discourse is originated from a prevailing pattern of the earlier Middle Eastern fiction and although it has largely been discussed in postcolonial context, Salih's work provides a broader ground to explore cultural encounters between the Orient and the Occident. With reference to Foucault's distinction between scientia sexualis and ars erotica, I discuss the essential difference between Western and Eastern treatments of sex. After examining gender prototypes in the novel and analyzing the protagonist's perception of the West through sexual symbolism, I explore how gender representations are linked to the notion of anxiety.*

Keywords: colonialism, Orientalism, sexuality, anxiety, Tayeb Salih

1. Introduction

Sudanese author Tayeb Salih's (1929-2009) *Season of Migration to the North* is one of the most influential and original works of the twentieth-century Arabic fiction. First serialized in *Hiwar* magazine in 1966, it was published in book form a year later with the title of *Mawsim al-Hijrah ilā al-Shamāl*. The English translation by Denys Johnson-Davies came out in 1969. Since then, the novel has been examined from several aspects: Edward Said read the novel as a response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and showed how Salih reversed Conrad's narrative (1993, 30), Shaheen proposed that Salih's protagonist is based on Conradian notion of secret sharing (1985, 156), Saree Makdisi argued that the novel rewrites imperialism (1992, 804-20), Alexandra W. Schultheis explored the notion of university and politics of postcoloniality in Salih's work (187-216), Thomas Cartelli analyzed the book as a response to Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Muhammed Siddiq discussed it in the context of Jungian

psychology (1999, 67-104). The present paper aims to situate the novel in the gendered discourse of the East-West conflict.

Season of Migration to the North, an early postcolonial work, belongs to a period when Arab nationalism had already reached its peak. Deconstructing the relationship between the East (i.e., the Muslim world and the Middle East) and the West, the novel narrates the story of Mustafa Sa'eed, a Sudanese man, who was educated in London where he had sexual relationships with several Western women, married one of them, and finally killed his British wife. This paper proposes to discuss how *Season of Migration to the North* conceptualizes the East-West conflict through the realm of sexuality and how this conceptualization reflects a certain cultural anxiety. I argue that the novel's gendered discourse is originated from a prevailing pattern in the earlier Middle Eastern fiction and although it has largely been discussed in postcolonial context, Salih's work provides a broader ground to explore cultural encounters between the East and the West. After examining gender prototypes in the novel and analyzing the protagonist's perception of the West through sexual symbolism, I discuss how gender representations are linked to the notion of anxiety.

2. A journey to the West

Season of Migration to the North is constructed around the theme of return. The story begins with the unnamed narrator's journey back home from a Western country. (The return motif in the frame story intersects with the protagonist's return to his village from Europe in flashback sections.) At the welcome gathering to honor him, the narrator meets a mysterious man who turns out to be Mustafa Sa'eed. Impressed and curious, the narrator wants to learn more about him, but Sa'eed is reluctant to talk. One night, while the two men are chatting, after a few drinks Sa'eed begins to recite poems in English. Astonished, the narrator insists Sa'eed talk about his past. Finally giving in, the strange man reluctantly tells his story: Born in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, Mustafa Sa'eed grew up as a fatherless boy and had a strange relationship with his taciturn mother. After his elementary education, without telling his mother, he moved to Cairo where he attended high school. Following graduation, Sa'eed left Cairo for London to study economics. In his Western life, while earning an economics degree at Oxford, he seduced several white women and pursued sexual adventures with them. When he finally met Jean Morris –a British woman–, Sa'eed was amazed by the girl and decided to marry her. Shortly after the wedding, one night he killed his wife in bed as a result of bizarre erotic fantasies. After serving seven years in a British prison, Sa'eed returns to Sudan where he restarts, marries another woman, and leads a quiet life as a father of two children.

Not long after telling his story, one day Sa'eed mysteriously disappears in flood. The narrator, whom Sa'eed named as his trustee, undertakes the

responsibility of protecting his family. Later on, the narrator moves to Khartoum where he works as a civil servant. On a visit to the village, he finds out that Sa'eed's widow is being pressured to marry an old man. Consequently, the woman marries the man, kills her new husband and commits suicide.

The protagonist's confessions about sex, which constitutes a major part of the narrative, marks the significance of sexuality regarding cultural contrast between the East and the West. Michel Foucault notes that "Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything" concerning sex and Western society imposed silence on this topic (1980, 23). In *Season of Migration to the North* one can immediately detect a different cultural formation: people of the small Sudanese village talk openly about sex, they even give details of their fantasies and secrets. For example, men of the village ask Bint Majzoub, an older woman who has divorced six times, that which one of her husbands was the best at sex, the woman talks about her intimate relationship with a late husband frankly: "He'd lift up my legs after the evening prayer and I'd remain splayed open till the call to prayers at dawn. When he had his climax he'd shout like an ox being slaughtered, and always when moving from on top of me he would say, 'Praise to be God, Bint Majzoub'" (Salih 2009, 63). On the other hand, Western-influenced characters, the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed, are not as excited about sharing the details of their sexual experience. Only upon the narrator's insistence, Sa'eed tells his story in the manner of confessing: "I shall say things to you I've said to no one before" (16). Confession is a term that Foucault employs to distinguish Eastern and Western conceptualizations of sexuality. In the history of sexuality, according to Foucault, confession became "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truths" (1980, 59). In this context, Salih's novel provides ground to observe how Eastern formulations of sex differ from Western perspective and shape the lives of individuals.

3. Cultural encounters and sex symbolism

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the East-West / South-North cultural encounter is encoded in sexual symbolism. The story begins with Sa'eed's leaving his hometown for Cairo after finishing the local school. At the Cairo train station, he finds Mr. Robinson (a friend of Sa'eed's headmaster in Khartoum) and his wife waiting for him. It is Sa'eed's first encounter with a Western woman: "All of a sudden I felt the woman's arms embracing me and her lips on my cheek" (Salih 2009, 22). He instantly feels "the smell of her body – a strange, European smell" (23) and identifies Western world with female attraction.¹ This identification becomes more evident when Sa'eed arrives in London: "The smell of the place is strange, like that of Mrs. Robinson's body" (24).

The protagonist's prominent feature, as described by the narrator, is insensitivity: Sa'eed seems unfeeling and dull to everybody. Mrs. Robinson

constantly tells him: “You’re a heartless machine” (25). Mustafa Sa’eed’s portrait as an unfeeling man is significant regarding his cultural encounter with the West. As Edward Said points out, Salih reverses Joseph Conrad’s narrative in *Heart of Darkness*: while in Conrad’s novella the protagonist’s journey is from the rational to the emotional, in *Season of Migration to the North* Mustafa Sa’eed’s journey is towards being unemotional. Sa’eed as a heartless but extremely rational man reflects Tayeb Salih’s attempt to deconstruct Conrad’s colonialist approach. I argue that to rewrite the mainstream colonialist and Orientalist discourse the author employs a counter-discourse which Sadik Jalal al-’Azm defines as “Orientalism in reverse” (1980, 5). In contrast to the classical Orientalist adventure hero, in his journey to the West, Sa’eed leaves his emotions behind and becomes a man of pure rationality. However, discovering poems among his manuscripts at the end of the novel, the narrator implies that Sa’eed’s insensitivity is a cover-up for his fragility and cultural anxiety. One can argue that the protagonist’s extreme but simultaneously vulnerable masculinity serves the same function. On the other hand, while his portrayal reverses Orientalist stereotypes, Sa’eed presents himself to Western women the way they want to see him: a slave of his desires and a man of nature. I propose that the coexistence of counter-Orientalist discourse and self-Orientalism in the novel perfectly reflects the author’s cultural dilemma and makes *Season of Migration to the North* a genuine literary work instead of an ideological remedy.

4. Gender representations in the novel

In the very beginning of the novel, the narrator describes Sudanese people’s perception of Western women. The villagers occasionally express their astonishment about European women’s being unveiled. They also utter their fear that the narrator might bring an “infidel” as a wife. At the same time, the village people treat marrying a European woman as a prestigious affair. Their hesitancy between fear and admiration resonates well with the pattern of cultural dilemma and anxiety.

While the distinction between Eastern and Western cultures is exposed through symbols of gender and sexuality, the major difference is about polygamy. Whereas in the West respect towards heterosexual monogamy has emerged since a certain time (Foucault 1980, 38), in the Sudanese village being monogamous is considered something strange and implies sexual disability or defective masculinity: “We were in fact known in the village for not divorcing our wives and for not having more than one. The villagers used to joke about us and say that we were afraid of our women” (Salih 2009, 67). Being a “one-woman man” is seen as “isn’t any good” by the village people. Remarkably, the narrator depicts local women not repressed but as free subjects who are happy with their husbands, even friendly with the husband’s other wives. The women openly joke about their sex life and are not jealous of each other in the same household. While this depiction of the village life fits into the eroticized image

of the Orientalist discourse, it also implies an essential difference between Eastern and Western cultures.

The only troubled local woman is Hosna Bint Mahmoud, Mustafa Sa'eed's widow. Sadness mingles with shyness in the woman's eyes who possesses "a foreign type of beauty" (75). Hosna, the only female in the village who had a sexual relationship with Sa'eed, is portrayed as an unhappy woman. While Sa'eed carries the deadly 'germ' back to the West, he cannot succeed escaping from it completely. As Sara Ahmed suggests, in *Orientalism* the Orient is not only imagined as "being" distant but also is "brought home" (Ahmed 2006, 120-1). This is the price Hosna –the victim– pays for the war against the West.

Other Sudanese women, however, represent opposing features. Sa'eed's mother, for example, represents silence and docility: when leaving home for school, Sa'eed says "she did not say anything. This was a turning point in my life" (Salih 2009, 21). Bint Majzoub represents shamelessness and sexual desire. Significantly, the women who manage to stay safe and away from the Western influence are happy and self-confident. In contrast to the colonialist and Orientalist discourse, they are not repressed and do not need to be saved.

The sole noteworthy Western male character in the novel, Mrs. Robinson's husband, is portrayed as a weak man who surrenders to Oriental culture and "embraces Islam" (122). Sudanese men, on the other hand, are described as virile males with strong masculine features: Sa'eed cannot satisfy his sexual hunger in London; Wad Rayyes, an elderly man, constantly divorces his wives and marries younger women for new sexual adventures; the narrator's uncle Abdul Karem is still a womanizer at an old age. Even the shy and timid narrator is expected to accomplish his masculinity when his grandfather tells him that he believes the narrator would come back with a woman from West (68).

The emblematic Western female character is Jean Morris. Her address to Sa'eed can be read as a metaphor of Western/colonialist discourse: "You're ugly, I have never seen an uglier face than yours" (26-7). Sa'eed swears that one day he will make her pay for this insult and his response is a never-ending attempt to conquer females; for him, all Western women are preys, and he is the chaser. He attempts to create a hegemony over the West through his sexual dominance: "I would do everything possible to entice a woman to my bed. Then I would go after some new prey" (27). Sa'eed clarifies his aim with an analogy. He makes a comparison between his relationship with Isabella Seymour, whose mother is from Spain, and the Muslim commander Tarik ibn Ziyad's army who conquered Spain: "I imagined to myself the Arab soldiers' first meeting with Spain" (36). He reverses the classical Orientalist notion of the fertile/female East by depicting Andalusia as a fertile land.

In Tayeb Salih's imagination, the West is identified with femaleness and the characters that have been affected by Western culture display feminine features. For example, the narrator describes Mustafa Sa'eed as a "handsome" man whose eyes have a "feminine beauty." Being torn between the East and the West is articulated through the symbols of sexuality. This is where cultural anxiety meets gender anxiety: extreme masculinity and feminine tendencies come together in the same character. On the other hand, the novel once again reverses Orientalist discourse by describing Western women as exotic subjects. While in mainstream Orientalist literature the Orient is described as a female unity with exotic qualities, in *Season of Migration to the North* same features are attributed to Western female characters.

All of Sa'eed's preys, namely Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, and Isabella Seymour, one by one commit suicide. What makes these women choose death while they are happy and content is the key to the narrative. The narrator's explanation is "the germ of fatal disease" which is carried by Sa'eed. When a girl enters Sa'eed's bedroom as a chaste virgin, she leaves with the germ of self-destruction. A British colleague of Sa'eed remembers him saying: "I have come to you as a conqueror" (50). Admittedly, by contaminating the germ, he accomplishes the conquest. But why does the novel describe the carrying of germ through sexual symbolism, as if it is a sexually transmitted disease?

Erotic fantasies have been an essential component of Western imagination about the Orient (Massad 2007, 9). As Said points out, Orientalism describes the East "as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic –but curiously– ruler" (Said 1985, 103). It is an imagined and a man-made Orient. The protagonist in *Season of Migration to the North* responds to Orientalist stereotypes by employing sex symbolism. For him, sexual conquests are not separate from cultural defense. Sa'eed ultimately brings the virus back to West which was contaminated centuries before, but he carries it as a "pre-modern creature," an image that fits the classical Orientalist definition of the Middle Eastern and black man. That is why Sa'eed's response to Western culture is not outside the realm of Orientalist discourse.

Considering Foucault's distinction between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* (i.e., the difference between Western and Eastern treatments of sex), description of Sa'eed's bedroom indicates how the author uses classical Orientalist notions to describe the conquest of the West. While the protagonist conquers the West sexually, his bedroom functions as a "war of theatre":²

My bedroom was a graveyard that looked on to a garden; its curtains were pink and had been chosen with care, the carpeting was of a warm greenness, the bed spacious, with swansdown cushions. There were small electric lights, red, blue, and violet, placed in certain corners; on the walls were large mirrors so that when I slept with a woman, it was as if I slept with a whole harem simultaneously. The room was heavy with the smell of burning sandalwood and incense, and in the bathroom were pungent Eastern perfumes, lotions, unguents, powders, and pills (Salih 2009, 27).

Speaking of the West, Foucault notes: “Our civilization possesses no *ars erotica*” (Foucault 1980, 70). So, in contrast to Arab-Muslim societies which experience sex chiefly as a subject of pleasure, beginning from a certain time, it has been treated in a different and more fundamental manner in the West. Foucault further argues that sexual extremity has been an object of collective intolerance and judicial action in Western culture (31). Sa’eed’s trial at a British court, as a sexual predator and murderer, is a remarkable scene that implies a cultural difference between the East and the West in treating sexual behavior. Whereas modern Western society has consigned sex to a shadow existence (35), the protagonist exposes its secrets. Thus, the repressed returns and speaks about sex which is a fundamental subject in Western civilization concerning “truth.”

5. The anxiety of the author

After the protagonist’s disappearance, the narrator discovers a secret room in his house: “Four walls from floor to ceiling were filled, shelf upon shelf, with books and more books and yet more books” (Salih 2009, 112). The most significant aspect of the room is its decoration: it has a real English fireplace, Victorian chairs, and silk materials. A British-style room in the middle of a poor Sudanese village is a powerful image to reflect the cultural dilemma of a Western-educated Afro-Arab man. The narrator counts books in the library and their authors one by one: Toynbee, the complete works of Bernard Shaw, Keynes, Thomas Mann, Thomas Moore, Virginia Woolf, Wittgenstein, Einstein, Kipling, volumes of poetry books, *Lectures on the French Revolution*, huge volumes the size of tombstones, small pocket books, Ford Madox Ford, Stefan Zweig, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Prospero and Caliban*, significantly Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, *Colonialism and Monopoly* (by Mustafa Sa’eed), the Bible in English and the Quran (not in the original but in English). Shockingly, there is “not a single Arabic book” in the entire library (114).

The library recalls the massive *bibliothèque* of the modern Western civilization. The narrator’s discovery implies, on the one hand, how the West intellectually and culturally besieges the world. On the other hand, the library reflects the protagonist’s anxiety and alienation from his indigenous culture. I argue that Sa’eed’s effort to keep the room as a secret indicates the level of his anxiousness. Being “tamed through translation” was a common concern of the twentieth century Middle Eastern writers and many of them tried to dissipate or hide their anxiety by attributing masculine features to the Muslim/Middle Eastern characters and feminine features to their Western counterparts (Gürbilek 2004, 78). *Season of Migration to the North* perfectly fits into this pattern.

Incidentally, Sa’eed’s reticence evokes the term “anxiety of influence” which gained broad reception in literary criticism with Harold Bloom’s groundbreaking 1973 work. In his book, Bloom lays out the artistic relationship between emerging poets (*ephebes*) and their precursors. The “anxiety of influence” is decisive in the process of the young poet’s struggle to display his

literary self. In Bloom's theory, the young poet's primary struggle is against the old masters he seeks to overthrow. Bloom describes "misreading" as a way of overcoming the precursor. A successful misreading of works of the past, he argues, allows young poets to construct their own poetical identities. Bloom also notes that Freud used anxiety as *angst vor etwas*, "fear before something" (Bloom 1973, 57); in Bloom's theory, anxiety indicates the poet's fear of the precursor's influence. However, the precursor's influence is never consciously admitted; doing so would threaten to erase the young poet's self-confidence.³

Similarly, in *Season of Migration to the North* the protagonist struggles against Western influence. His simultaneous external rejection and internal acceptance of Western values create a certain amount of anxiety, which surfaces in the discovery of the library. Like an *ephebe*, Sa'eed has an adversarial relationship with his Western precursors, and in an Oedipal rebellion,⁴ he attempts to create his own literary identity. While cultural anxiety is analogous to later castration anxiety, it intersects with masculinity. I argue that feminization of Western and Westernized characters in the novel is the key of Salih's gendered novelistic response to the West.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the protagonist's sexual superiority over the West functions as a cure for anxiety of Western influence. Sa'eed's masculine strength implies that the Oriental man can survive the influence of Western civilization as long as he keeps his virility and manly power. On the other hand, it is obvious that Mustafa Sa'eed is deeply influenced by Western culture: his library indicates how he sees the world. The sharp portrayal of the protagonist's dilemma makes *Season of Migration to the North* an original work of fiction. Although the gendered representation of this cultural hesitation has its roots in earlier Middle Eastern fiction, Salih's work departs from its predecessors by not offering an ideological remedy but only genuinely depicting the hero's tragedy.

When he proudly tells his sexual adventures with Western women, Sa'eed asserts that he took revenge for thousand years and "liberate[d] Africa with his penis" (Salih 2009, 100).⁵ Regarding the protagonist's sexual adventures in the West, one final question remains: After several sexual conquests, why did Mustafa Sa'eed choose to marry Jean Morris? The answer can be found in the tradition of Middle Eastern fiction. Salih employs a pattern which is used by several Middle Eastern novelists in the early twentieth century who constructed East/West discourse on the metaphor of marriage. Marriage is the prevailing solution for the East-West conflict in the early Middle Eastern fiction. For example, as Parla points out, marriage was a major theme in early Turkish novels. In this marriage scheme, the male always represents the East whereas the West is feminine. This scheme implies a male-hegemonic unity between the matured thoughts of the Islamic civilization and the new soul of the West (Parla 1990, 15). In this pattern, the marriage makes the conquest of the West a success. It is not only an issue of sexual relationship but a badge of

glory. A confession by the narrator's grandfather when he returns from London summarizes the expectations from the local people: "I believe you'd come back with a woman [from West]." Despite his extreme sexual behavior, Sa'eed's ending up with marriage indicates that *Season of Migration to the North* is a follower of this tradition.

The fact that Mustafa Sa'eed is the first Sudanese man to marry a European woman earns him prestige among his fellow villagers in Khartoum. He is a "conqueror," thanks to his sexual power, and is respected by his fellow Sudanese men. This reception also earns Sa'eed trust: regarding any issue, people feel "certain that Mustafa Sa'eed would make his mark" (Salih 2009, 45). Sa'eed's portrait as a conqueror, in fact, is not regarded as offensive by the narrator as well. At some point, the Western-educated narrator begins to see Sa'eed's story as an achievement, and "the disturbing thought" occurs to him that "Mustafa Sa'eed never happened" (39). This is a remarkable symbolism of the glory over the West: hard to say whether it is real or not.

6. Conclusion

Season of Migration to the North is a novel nourished by cultural anxiety. This anxiety is originated from the East/West rhetoric in Arabic literature and displays itself in the symbols of sexuality. The protagonist's understanding of the West is shaped by sexual experience and described largely in gendered terms. While the author creates a multilayered narrative in a beautifully rendered prose, he is also indebted to his precursors.⁶ I argue that there is dual anxiety in the novel: the writer's anxiety towards Western culture and anxiety towards his precursors.⁷

The portrayal of the West by the twentieth-century novelists from the global south deserves a broader survey to reach more conclusive arguments. In this context, *Season of Migration to the North* should be analyzed in the vast tradition of gender symbolism in Middle Eastern fiction. Comparative readings between *Season of Migration to the North* and other mid-twentieth century canonical novels from the region like Sadegh Hedayat's *Blind Owl* and Sabahattin Ali's *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, which are also featuring a protagonist's affairs with Western women, may open up some interesting and fresh aspects to approach the intersection of cultural and gender anxieties in modern Middle Eastern fiction.

Notes

- ¹ It is important to note that city names in the Arabic language are feminine nouns. This seems a noteworthy detail since other place names, like country names, differ.
- ² It is sobering to remember that the prominent Turkish writer and critic Cemil Meriç explains the loss against the West as a defeat took place “in the bedrooms, not in the war fields” [*cenk meydanlarında değil, yatak odalarında*] (Gürbilek 2004, 80). Such a view was popular during the late-Ottoman period and the early twentieth-century Middle East.
- ³ It should be noted that Bloom’s model of influence does not work well for pre-modern literature, where poets freely acknowledge their predecessors.
- ⁴ Parla links the emergence of the Turkish novel to the epistemological problem of the lack of a father figure. Parla’s point of origin is Bloom’s theory (1990, 9-22).
- ⁵ In his memoir, translator Johnson-Davies says, in the Arabic original edition the word “penis” is elided but as a result of collaboration with the author it is used in the English translation (Salih 2009, xviii). It is remarkable that Salih chose this word when it comes to address the Western audience.
- ⁶ For Salih’s hidden polemic against the earlier Arab novelists see Hassan 2003, 84-90.
- ⁷ In contemporary literary criticism, it is debatable to search parallels between the protagonist and the author’s biography. In an interview, Salih says: “I believe that identification is also present in what I write” (Berkley and Ahmad 1982, 2). It is sobering to remember that like the narrator and the protagonist, Tayeb Salih is also educated in London. So that, the criticism of the West, in fact, can be read as a self-criticism. This is where the protagonist’s cultural anxiety intertwines with the author’s anxiety.

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