

# Discursive Resistance to the Western Imperialism in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969)

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## Abstract

Post-colonial literature has always been aiming to refuting the orientalists' distortion of the East. The binary division of the West/East, Self/Other, and Centre/Margin has been heavily stereotyped and debated in colonial texts, but of course, has been attacked by post-colonial critiques and authors. However, this paper tries to shed light on an iconic way of writing back to the Western hegemony on the Orient and its peoples. Feminizing the East in colonial texts is represented and perpetuated in many colonial texts. Yet, the case study of this paper uses the same colonial discourses against the colonizer and deprives the West of the position of the Subject that is celebrated in all colonial texts.

**Keywords:** Post-colonialism, Feminizing the Orient, Hybridity, Cultural Contamination, Reorientalizing the Orient

## Introduction

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) has lots of issues to be discussed especially in relation to identity, hybridity, diaspora, post-colonialism, and many other topics related to cultural transition and politics. Yet, what seems to be of more significance in this literary work is the use of sexuality in avenging the colonizer. Feminizing the West through violent sexuality by an oriental is a way that Tayeb Salih uses this discourse to debunk the colonial discourses of sexualizing and feminizing the Orient and the oriental women and at the same time, he gives the superiority, the position of the Subject and power to an oriental character as will be discussed throughout the sections of this paper. Yet, this paper also investigates if being in diaspora influences the author's identity and psychology while representing his people while is in the colonizer's home and culture.

## A. Writing back to the Centre: Narrating the Conflictual Relationship between the Self and the Other in *Season of Migration to the North* (1969)

Central to *Season of Migration to the North* as a product of post-colonial literature (discourse) is the major conflictual relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, the East, and the West. The author is well conscious of the trauma that colonized countries were undergoing under the severe conditions created and enforced by the colonizer over the colonized. It is this discourse of power and powerlessness that Tayeb Salih aims to subvert through answering back to the Western colonialism that destroys the East and dehumanizes indigenous habitants.

In the text, the author deploys an Eastern character, Mustafa Sa'eed, who signifies the colonized East and who, at the same time seeks to take a defensive stance against the Western British colonizers. Mustafa Sa'eed, a native Sudanese character, goes to the heart of his home colonizers' city, London, to continue his studies. However, in England "his life is spent trying to symbolically 'reverse' the history of modern European colonialism ... he begins his campaign to throw colonialism back on the colonizer" (Saree S, 1994: 540). As a result, the Self and the Other's relationships are caught up in a struggle that is characterized by the oppressed and the oppressor's relationship.

Tayeb Salih's portrayal of this binary division between the Self and the Other appears more particularly in his victimization of Western British women who end up in tragic circumstances. Salih's representation of four British women as an object of revenge tends to bear different connotations both ideologically and culturally. Having experienced the effects of various forms of imperial dominance within his country. The author attempts implicitly or explicitly to reveal his tendency against the Western colonialism of the East. His major concern is, thus, to answer back to the Western hegemonic discourse and policy towards the Orient, the colonized through feminizing the West. His objectification of Western women through the character of Mustafa Sa'eed is but a way to launch his revenge against the Western domination of his country. That is, the idea to be stressed here is the fact that the text does display the traditional collusion between the two contradictory worlds, East and West. The author himself states:

Yet, obviously, one of the major themes of *Season* is the East/West confrontation, or to be more specific, the confrontation between the Arab Muslim world and the Western European one ... I redefined the so-called East/West relationship as essentially one of conflict. (Geesey, Vol. 28, Issue 3: 128)

Therefore, *Season of Migration to the North* narrates the story of an Eastern man's thirst to revenge for the Western distortion of his country, Sudan. His travel from the South to settle in the North is in itself an attempt to destabilize the Eurocentric belief of power and cultural superiority through dissolving the fixed colonial image of the Centre. Mustafa Sa'eed acts as a challenger champion who invests his mental and physical power to liberate the East. His answering back mission to the West is openly professed when he says, addressing the white men, "I have come to you as a conqueror" (120). Mustafa's urgent feelings to conquer and dominate are summed up in his attempt to make the white men pay for past humiliation in a way that resembles much more the previous colonial practices of violence and sexual dominance over the Oriental female beings in particular and the whole East in general.

White women are consequently, the ones who fall prey to his violence. They are sexually conquered and culturally oppressed. In his seduction of Western women, Mustafa finds an easy way to take revenge against the British imperialism that once oppressed his land, culture, and people. Thus, the discourse being upheld within the text is implicitly an answer back to the Western objectification of the Orient as a sexual commodity that should be exploited. That is, just like the colonial strategy of dominance, Mustafa uses sexualizing the West which is seen by Mustafa as feminine, as a powerful means to conquer the West. Moreover, Salih's victimization of Western English women revolves around the issue of cultural and political encounters between the South and the North. The South is symbolized by Mustafa Sa'eed

and the North is represented by four British women: Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, Isabelle Seymour, and Jean Morris.

Through this characterization of the East and the West, the major notice to be revealed is the masculinization of the East and the feminization of the West. The author's use of the powerful Eastern character is purposefully done to reverse the discourse of the master and the slave. Mustafa is the master and English women are his slaves. Besides, Western women, just like Oriental ones in the Orientalist discourses, are dehumanized and eroticized; as a result, they become sexually objectified creatures through which Mustafa displays his reaction to the Western assumed 'superior culture'.

Mustafa carries the mission of answering back to the West on his own personal level, attempting to destabilize the very biased Orientalist thinking towards the Orientals. He is portrayed as "a naked primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungle" (38). His engagement in sexual relationships with four British women is an attempt to subvert his colonizers' strategy which he learns from them by sexually colonizing and distorting Western females. Along with the same line of thought, Saree Makdisi argues that,

Mustafa carries out this self-appointed mission by inflicting pain and suffering on British women. Just as imperialism had violated its victims, Mustafa violates his, and his unwitting lovers become sacrifices in his violent campaign. (Makdisi, 1994: 540)

Above and beyond, his use of sexual domination is consciously practiced as an act to liberate the third world from the brutal Western colonialism, for he openly states "I'll liberate Africa with my penis (120) ... I, over and above everything else am the colonizer. I am the intruder whose fate must be decided" (94). Thus, his objectification of Western women reflects his revengeful feelings against Western colonialism and exploitation of the East in general and of his country in particular. Along with this thought, Evelyn Accad states that Mustafa treats all four women sadistically, relishing his power over white women as partial revenge for the power which white men hold over him and his people. His relationships with these women are really racial clashes in which sadism is returned for oppression. (Bill, 2004: 224)

Consequently, Mustafa exploits the love of the English women to implement his vengeance against British imperialism in particular. Their love paves the way to destroy them. He says, "My bedroom had become a theatre of war, my bed a patch of hell" (33, 34).

Significantly also, is the reversing of the East and West Orientalist constructed roles. Mustafa's sexual exploitation of white females is meant to subvert the image of the West as the master and the East as the slave. He proves to be himself the powerful, the colonizer, and the master. This is more clearly seen in his dominance over Western women. Susan, a British young female, admits "You are Mustafa my master and my lord ... and I am Susan, your slave girl" (146). Besides, the roles of the East as feminine and the West as masculine are again reversed and subverted. The Western land is effeminized and portrayed as a virgin that the Moor Mustafa later rapes and dominates.

More interestingly, the text does deconstruct the colonial tropes that perpetuate the powerless and mute Oriental subjects. Therefore, through the character of Mustafa Sa'eed, the author subverts the idea that,

The Oriental himself is reduced to a state of silence and powerlessness. He is available to European scrutiny and amenable to dominance and control. He can neither resist nor protest. (Bekkaoui, 1998: 29)

Mustafa Sa'eed, however, shows the West another face of the Oriental subject. He proves to be physically and mentally powerful within the center of Western society and before the eyes of his ex-colonizers. He invites the Westerners to rethink their minds that the Oriental subject can speak, resist and assert himself. Interestingly enough, Mustafa turns his gaze back upon "the eye of the power" (Bhabha, 1994: 112) reversing the traditional practices of the colonizer, communicating at the same time that the once colonized people are able to culturally represent themselves as real as they are.

### **B. Hybridity and Cultural Contamination**

Dealing with *Season of Migration to the North* as a related work leads to casting light upon the notions of purity and hybridity as crucial components in post-colonial studies. Indeed, the concepts of hybridity/contamination and identity/purity are to be among the major points that the text makes reference to. Salih's distinction of the Self and the Other urges him to reinforce his ties with his cultural roots. The text contains many instances that reflect the author's clinging to his pure Arab identity. For instance, writing the text into the Arabic language is a crucial sign of preserving his identity belonging. Though he masters the English language, Salih's use of his mother tongue does serve various cultural dimensions which center at the level of answering back to the Western misconceptions of Arab's intellect and identity. Besides, the use of the subject "I" also proves to stand for the writer's preservation of his identity as well as it works as an invitation to the West that the East can write, talk and defend itself.

More significantly, very early in the novel, the narrator makes an explicit declaration of his belonging to the East. He openly says, "I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose" (02). Nonetheless, the narrator's attachment to his identity does not last for long. His inclination to the Western culture gives rise to the emergence of hybridity and cultural contamination.

In fact, the concept of hybridity in this text does apply to Homi Bhabha's insightful analysis of the ways in which hybridity is an outcome as well as a response to the colonial hegemonic assumptions by the once perceived weak colonized subject. Accordingly, Salih's portrayal of Mustafa Sa'eed may well fit into Bhabha's analysis of hybridity. Thus, Mustafa Sa'eed as "a mixed figure implicitly rejects the passivity implied by the previously accepted notion of colonial "assumption"". (Geesey, Vol. 28. Issue 3: 1300). He is no longer seen in terms of powerless, silent and motionless, but rather proves to be able enough to deconstruct British colonial ideals about his people and country. This is then how a post-colonial hybrid may function in terms of Homi Bhabha's analysis of hybridity. Mustafa's mission is to adopt the colonizers' language and culture through which he can enter the circle of the colonizer, destabilize it and reverse the roles of the colonizer and the colonized. Thus, Mustafa's words "I have

come to you as a conqueror” (60) may well evoke the cultural and colonial contagion that affects his personality.

Mustafa, therefore, adopts an alien culture that is far away from his own. His murderous act in London is the result of a hybridized identity he assumes as a post-colonial subject seeking to redefine himself. Thus, his wearing of the colonizer’s mask is to be understood as a renewing of the self which inevitably leads to hybridity and the destabilization of the self-identity.

Another major sign of Mustafa’s western cultural contamination may explicitly lay in his sexual distortion of Western women. Such corrupted behavior is in fact a colonial contagious disease that pushes Mustafa to adopt alien and brutal thinking. His killing of British girls is seen by his lawyer as a product of colonial contagion. He says, “these girls were not killed by Mustafa Sa’eed but the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago” (33). Moreover, given that Mustafa’s most of his education is shaped in a foreign Western environment, his use of sexual distortion as a way to assert himself is, without doubt, an effect of Western cultural and colonial thinking.

Additionally, the notion of purity and hybridity are in a sense problematized by Mustafa’s personality. Consequently, his Sudanese classmates nicknamed him “the black English man” (53). Mustafa is then caught up in a middle way, neither Eastern nor Western character. Significantly; Makdisi goes so far to explain that both Mustafa and the narrator are hybrid characters. He remarks that,

Mustafa’s problem- and the narrator’s- is that they’re neither black nor white, but grey; neither wholly Eastern nor wholly Western, neither completely European nor completely Arab (furthermore, given that Sudan’s situation, neither entirely Arab nor entirely African). (Makdisi, 1994: 542)

Makdisi’s examination of, both characters Mustafa and the narrator, does clearly show the identity problem of the post-colonial and diasporic subject. He further adds that both are trapped between cultures (and here, as intellectuals, they are not exceptions to a social norm; rather the contradictions of the rest of society are made explicit and even brought to their logical extremes in Mustafa and the narrator). (Ibid)

Therefore, the narrator himself is to be in a sense of hybridized circle. He is deeply obsessed by Sa’eed’s life so much so he can’t define his sense of self as he constantly keeps questioning his identity. Even after his death, Sa’eed continues to haunt the narrator through accidental meetings with men of Sa’eed’s generation. In this respect, the narrator is caught up in an aura of self-doubt about his own “purity” and whether or not like Sa’eed, he is the victim of cultural contagion. He keeps asking,

was it likely that what happened to Mustafa Sa’eed could happen to me? He said he was a lie, so was I a lie too? I am from here is not reality enough? I too had lived with them superficially, neither loving them nor hating them. (49).

Consequently, the narrator's self in this sense is placed between two paradoxical notions, hybridity and purity.

### C. Re-Orientalizing the Orient

Tayeb Salih's portrayal of the Oriental protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, and the vision he nurtures towards his homeland/culture is consciously or unconsciously a reproduction of Orientalist tropes face to face with the Orient. Sa'eed's seduction of western women deliberately enacts the same erotic and ethnocentric stereotypes against the East. Mustafa Sa'eed uses his blackness with all the exotic and primitive fantasies he knows to wreak vengeance on the West. Accordingly, the text directs our attention to perceive Mustafa Sa'eed in terms of an Orientalist stock of stereotypes, reiterating the same clichés about the Orient. The most intriguing of these clichés are the references to the allusive trope of the signified/signifier dichotomy from Shakespeare's Othello. The first reference to Othello occurs in a dialogue between Mustafa and Isabella Seymour when Mustafa, in an answer to Isabella's question "what race are you? Are you Arab or African?" Mustafa says, assuming Othello's image, "I'm like Othello-Arab African" (38). The second allusion to Othello reoccurs during Mustafa's trial for the murder of his wife Jean Morris. In so doing, Mustafa Sa'eed is aware of re-enacting Othello's life. That is, such confession of resemblance to Othello is a reconfirmation of the Moor's constructed fatal culture and identity.

Furthermore, Mustafa Sa'eed's sexual distortion of Western women does nurture many of Orientalist traditional stereotypes targeting Eastern peoples. He is lustful, aggressive and heartless in dealing with his "Other". Thus, his yearning to sexually dominate English women represents Mustafa's human characteristics: "you are not a human being ... You are a heartless machine" (28). It follows that Mustafa's erotic behavior transcends and misrepresents Arabs and Muslims' cultural norms and true identities. Mustafa is mentally and spiritually portrayed as a weak character. During the trial of his distortion of Western women, Baily, the judge, openly says,

Mustafa Sa'eed, despite your academic prowess you are stupid man. In your spirituality make-up there is a dark spot, and thus it was that you squandered the noblest gift that God has bestowed upon people the gift of love (54).

It is in this sense, therefore, that Salih's representation of Mustafa does serve as a confirmation and consolidation of the basic Orientalist tropes about the Orientals as culturally and religiously weak creatures.

Another equally potential point that enhances the same preconceived notions of the sensual and sexual East is the frank eroticism that is explicitly revealed, especially in the long scene in which the narrator's pious grandfather Ahmed, Wad Rayyes as well as the much-married woman, Bint Mazjoub, speak bawdily about the joys of sex (pp, 77, 84, 96). Besides, Tayeb Salih's representation of particularly Wad Rayyes and Bint Mazjoub does fit explicitly into the Orientalist hegemonic discourse about the Orientals. Wad Rayyes is an emblem of the Eastern patriarchy whose sexual desires are overtly dominating his thinking. Despite his old age, Wad Rayyes is an erotic and lustful man. His aggressive desire to marry forcefully Hosna Bint Mahmoud, a widow of Mustafa Sa'eed, goes on the parallel way

with the racial stereotypes of patriarchy, oppression, and domination, targeting the Oriental culture, namely Arab and Muslim one. Being an egocentric and lustful man, “Wad Rayyes, had been much married and much divorced, taking no heed of a woman except that she’s a woman” (79). Thus, biased notions of Arab women’s negation of mentality and human characteristics are again nurtured: “Rayyes changed women as he changed donkeys” (96). Besides, addressing Rayyes, Bint Mzjoub notes that “Your whole brain is in the head of your penis and the head of your penis is as small as your brain” (84). It is such instances that allow the text to be interpreted as a piece of work that aims to please and satisfy the Western fantasies about the East. Moreover, the author’s style of misrepresentation does not only confine to men, but it also orientalizes Eastern women as well. Salih’s portrayal of Bint Mazjoub is a painful act against the very conservative culture of Arabs and Muslims. Bint Mazjoub is masculinized and belongs much more to the men’s category. Her inclination to men’s harsh behavior does misrepresent the true Arab and Muslim woman. Just like a man, Bint Mazjoub “She used to smoke, drink and swear on oath of divorce like a man” (16). Thus, describing Bint Mazjoub as such, the text does confirm the Orientalist constructed images about the Oriental woman.

Equally, the narrator’s vision of the homeland is another point that does problematize the interpretation of the text. The narrator’s representation of his country, Sudan, is similar to the Orientalist hegemonic representation of the East. Associating home with heat and a violent atmosphere, the narrator says, “in this land in which the sun has left no more killing to be done” (110). The narrator adds that in Sudan “the sun is the enemy” (111). More seriously, the narrator puts on an Orientalist mask to explicitly harm the Oriental, Arab and Muslim culture. This might be perceived when he adopts a superior position over his close brothers. Representing his people as lower and beggars, the narrator says “a man brought back to life and began thanking me for asking Allah to grant me long life, so I threw him the packet with the rest of the cigarettes” (109). The word “threw” does reflect the author’s influence or even persuasion of the Western style of representing Arabs, Muslims, and the like. The act of throwing tells us that the narrator assumes a position of power and a sense of cultural superiority which is undoubtedly a major characteristic of the Orientalist traditional discourse. Another image that enhances the author’s masking of Orientalism is his praise and valuation of the Western culture and people. The narrator explicitly says, “this is an ordered world, its houses, fields, and trees are ranged in accordance with a plan” (27), whereas his portrayal of his people lies in “such people are concerned only with their stomachs and their sensual pleasures” (120).

## Conclusion

The paper unveils the innate psychological reactions of the post-colonial writer against the colonial stereotypical construction of the colonized. Mustafa Sa’eed is an emblem of the Eastern once colonized people whose voices articulate both the colonizer’s oppression of the East and the power of the colonized to subvert the colonial preconceptions about the Orient and its inhabitants. the protagonist, Mustafa Sa’eed, does represent the colonized East who alone takes the mission of answering back to the Western colonial distortion of the Orient. His experience of being colonized serves as a disease that he later takes to the heart of his colonialism, London, attempting to replace colonial practices on the colonizer himself. It is in this Western particular space where Mustafa consciously reverses the roles of the East and West. His sexual conquest of British women emanates from his revengeful feelings against the Western colonial and distortion of his people and land.

Mustafa's domination and sexual exploitation of British women is deliberately done to deconstruct Orientalist notions of Western power and cultural superiority. That is, his oppression of Western females is an invitation to the West to rethink its notions of powerlessness and submissiveness of the Orient. Mustafa, instead, turns his gaze back on the colonizer and shows the West that the assumed Oriental weak has power, and knowledge and he is, therefore, able to take the colonizer's position.

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