

The Subject and the Nile: A Vision of Emancipatory Possibility in *Season of Migration to the North*

By Charles Pearson

Charles Pearson is a graduate of West Texas A&M University, attaining a BA in English with minors in Spanish and Philosophy. During his time at WTAMU, he was involved in Philosophy Club and POEMAS. He grew up in Spearman, Texas, a small town north of Amarillo. Currently, he lives and works in Amarillo, Texas. In the future, he hopes to enter law school, with a focus on Immigration Law or a similar practice. Alongside his other pursuits, he likes to spend his time reading and playing musical instruments.

This essay looks at postcolonial experience, as treated in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. Through a focused analysis on the character of Mustafa Sa'eed and the Nile River, I explore the way in which the narrator depicts a possibility for freedom in the protagonist's suicide attempt. In particular, the paper looks to Sa'eed's relation to Europe, and his use of personal narrative and sexual violence (and personal narrative *within* sexual violence) as a reaction to colonial subjugation. The paper concludes with a comparative analysis of Sa'eed and the protagonist through their respective portrayals of the Nile River, contrasting the former's admiration with the river's destructive properties with the latter's view of its liminality.

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* presents a world in the midst of confusion. The work's fictionalization of Sudan—never explicitly named, though Khartoum is mentioned—exemplifies the shattered experience of the postcolonial crisis, the aftermath of Europe's invasion, and “gift” of emancipation. The text begins with the return of the narrator, who studied poetry in England and attempts to make a permanent home in the village of his birth, and his encounter with Mustafa Sa'eed, a new resident of the village that initially refuses to reveal anything of his past. The novel follows the narrator's growing familiarity with Sa'eed, alongside his determination to help rebuild his country—and an eventual disillusion with both. Following the attempt to locate identity in the aftermath of imperialist rule, the setting shifts between the narrator's own experiences and the stories of Sa'eed he learns from the new resident's own retelling. Sa'eed's self-description—recalled by the narrator—focuses on his time in England and particularly on

his sexual experiences with European women, often leading to violent ends—three suicides and a murder—for his partners. During the process of seduction, the character creates narratives of an overly exotic and often primitive Africa, alongside viewing the sexual act as a sort of political vengeance. Depicting the violence of Sa'eed's fatalism and the narrator's reaction, Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* explores possibilities of rejecting—or creating—identity for the postcolonial subject. The novel envisions, through the narrator's own attempt at suicide by drowning in the Nile (an act committed previously by Sa'eed), a possibility for emancipation in a space of hopelessness.

Sa'eed's relation to Europe appears to stem from a total lack of relation toward his homeland, or a lack of attraction to it. In the beginning of an extended oration to the narrator, Sa'eed describes himself as a child who “wasn't affected by anything” (Salih 18). While living alone with his mother, he explains his relationship to her as one of acting “as relatives to each other” (Salih 18). He places an emotional distance between them, more as extended family than mother and son. Sa'eed remembers her as similar to a natural phenomenon, her “thick mask” like “the surface of the sea”; he furthers the simile in describing her face as containing “not a single colour but a multitude,” with the colors “appearing and disappearing and intermingling” (Salih 18). The comparison creates an

image of his mother as something both in constant flux—the visible surface ever shifting—and also so stable in its presence as to remain unnoticeable. The disassociated acceptance toward his mother manifests in all his actions: his reading, play, school, and fights with other children. His mother embodies what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls in her essay “Diasporas old and new: women in the transnational world” the “homeworking,” a class of women lowered to ignorable by turning “unpaid domestic labour (‘nurturing’)” into “feminine ethics” (246). By turning the labor of homeworking women into an ethical expectation, their place in political struggle and social life as whole becomes silent, creating Sa'eed's apathy to his own homeworking mother. He returns to the aquatic image, describing his childhood self as “made of rubber: you throw it in water and it doesn't get wet” (Salih 19). A waterproof existence seems to encompass the memories of his youth, with the young Sa'eed viewing the world as he views his mother—an ever-moving surface that even in its changes fails to attract him.

Within the childhood of Sa'eed, a break in the character's disassociation occurs in the encounter with Mrs. Robinson. Instead of creating an Oedipal relation to Sa'eed's actual mother, the text turns to “a surrogate mother,” connecting his first memory of desire, or feeling in general, with the foreign (John

and Tarawneh 331). Instead of the sea in the face of his birth mother, he imagines Mrs. Robinson as Cairo, the city where Sa'eed met the Robinson's, which in turn he imagines as a "large mountain" (Salih 23). Cairo, however, holds little importance as a particular place; Egypt in itself fails to make an impression, except within a larger whole. The city, with its European influence, introduces Sa'eed to foreign cities, a sort of stepping stone on his path to London: "another mountain, larger than Cairo" (Salih 24). The encounter with Mrs. Robinson functions similarly, inspiring the desire for European women. While Cairo embodies a sample of the Western polis, Mrs. Robinson serves as an exemplar of the Western woman—demonstrating the features that Sa'eed searches for in his sexual conquests.

Although typically read as less important to the novel than other instances of Sa'eed's conquests, the initial seduction of Isabella Seymour exemplifies his Oedipal desire for the European woman and the multi-dimensional function of his fantasies. Sa'eed's narration leaves little room for speculation in the connection between Isabella Seymour and Mrs. Robinson, revealing that in approaching her, he smelled "that odour with which Mrs. Robinson had met me on the platform of Cairo's railway station" (Salih 32). Opposed to Mrs. Robinson, Sa'eed refers to Seymour as one of "many of her type

in Europe," denying any particularity and reinforcing the Oedipal attraction he finds in her qualities (Salih 32). The scene also introduces the narrativization of Africa in the seduction of European women and the explicitly political imagining of sexual violence in the "complex staging of intercultural encounters" (Friedman 435).

In the seduction of Seymour, Sa'eed begins his imagining his sexual acts as revenge against imperial Europe. He relates "fabricated stories" with "golden sands and jungles" containing "non-existent animals" (Salih 32-33). Through his narratives of Africa, he transforms himself "into a naked primitive creature," in order to turn the pitying sentiments of Seymour to his own advantage (Salih 33). Calling back to his initial encounter with Mrs. Robinson, Sa'eed once again pulls from the metaphors of the city and the mountain in reference to desire. Whereas the comparison of Mrs. Robinson relates her to Cairo, while relating the city itself to a mountain, the character depicts Seymour as London "changed into a woman" and the predicted conquest as a "tent peg" driven "into the mountain summit" (Salih 34). He makes the metaphor more directly political in a rewording: instead of setting up a tent, he plants a "banner" on the mountain, declaring the act "an ecstasy greater to me than love" (Salih 35). Sa'eed's imagination of the connection between imperialism and sexual conquest is not limited to his

own acts. The confluence of sexuality and political power seems to inspire the acts more than arise as consequence of them. Through Sa'eed, "colonialism is reconfigured as a sexual encounter," a metaphor of conquest that he literalizes with Seymour (Parry 81). For both Sa'eed and the colonizer, sexual attraction is driven by conquest, the drive itself aims toward the subjugation of the Other. Here, drive refers to the Lacanian sense, the sexual yearning for the "aim" (Lacan 165). While the aim of both the Sa'eed and the colonizer is thwarted, both received the "satisfaction of the drive" through "sublimation," a missing of the aim that nonetheless fulfills the drive. Despite the impossibility of Sa'eed's aim to the conquest of the European Woman—and imperial England's attempt at the thorough conquest of Africa—both figures satisfy the drive in another, only slightly less violent manner.

Within the seduction of Seymour, Sa'eed persistently refers to the Nile and reveals a preoccupation with simplicity, woven into his narratives of Africa, that serves to inform his own desires, not only directing those of his victim. The first mention of the Nile in the scene elicits a reaction of fascination from Seymour, who "cried out ecstatically," inspiring Sa'eed's continued talk of the river. The more obvious function of the Nile is one of signaling and justifying the exoticism of Sa'eed, with his intimate talk about the river helping to bring a geographical

feature familiar to his audience into the more outrageously fictional of his stories of an unknown, and moreover non-existent, setting. However, the function of the reference shifts when Sa'eed begins talking to himself, in congratulations of finding such an effective cultural signifier. He addresses himself as "Mr. Mustafa" and declares that the "Nile, that snake god, has gained a new victim," playing with the river as signaling a natural phenomenon—behaving with disregard to human sentiment—and identifying it and himself with a non-European, non-Christian Otherness. The portrayal of the indifference of the river is a method found in the justification of himself and a fantasy of a natural simplicity that feeds his actions. He attempts to present himself as a non-agent, relinquishing to the "secret" of a natural order through which a "tree grows simply" and, he imagines to the narrator, "your grandfather has lived and will die simply" (Salih 35). However, the Nile also moves beyond the fatalistic vision of Sa'eed, signifying a more radical place of decision for the narrator.

In "Reflections on the Excess of Empire in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*," Benita Parry studies the novel as representative of a modernity outside of the European tradition, claiming that the repercussions of the postcolonial crisis within the novel resemble those of the modernism in the West. The author uses literary theorist Frederic

Jameson's definition of modernity as "the coexistence of realities from radically different moments in history" (James, qtd. in Parry at 73). Among a passage on the significance of geographical features in the novel, Parry explores the "multiple functions" of the Nile: as "a real river" and necessary "source of life for the villages," "a metaphor for an indifferent universe," and a transitional area "from equatorial Africa to England" (Parry 78). While the article claims to analyze the image in relation to both Sa'eed and the narrator, its short exploration tends to focus more on the relation of the river to the former. The preference for exploring the river in relation to Sa'eed certainly makes sense, given his interest in the river as both a geographical place and signifier of his own self-perception as an actor of indifferent simplicity. Parry acknowledges a significance of the river for the narrator, in relation to "the torsions of its course" and eventual "northwards" direction (Parry 78). In this way, the article posits the function of the Nile as one held in common for both Sa'eed and the narrator, avoiding exploring a significance it holds for the narrator alone. However, the latter's attempted suicide gives it another dimension of meaning, which the text never reveals in relation to Sa'eed.

In the last scene of the novel, the text uses the river as space in which the narrator deals with and ultimately rejects the fatalism of Sa'eed. For Sa'eed,

the Nile represents an inevitability, an un-choosing part of a larger deterministic structure, a partial explanation for his choosing it for the mechanism of his own suicide. The narrator enters the water for reasons similar to those of Sa'eed and the transitional function described by Parry. The initial attraction to the river stems from a feeling of needing "to do something," and he intends to swim to "the northern shore" (Salih 137). Furthering the resignation to fate, the narrator describes a "restful harmony," a simplicity of a "no longer thinking" existence recalling that which Sa'eed attributes to his grandfather (Salih 137). When the swimmer tires himself, however, the river becomes a space for decision. In the middle of the Nile, "half-way between north and south," the narrator finds himself unable to accept "the river's destructive forces," Sa'eed's vision of admirable indifference (Salih 138). The moment of incoming death inspires in the narrator a feeling of not only separation from the water, but a desire to act against it, throwing off the cynicism of his predecessor. Instead of dying "without any volition of mine," the narrator gestures, however hopelessly, for help—comparing himself to "a comic actor shouting on stage" (Salih 139). For the narrator, the Nile's indifference, or connection of North and South ultimately hold little value. Instead, the very indifference of the river allows him to express his own difference,

an expression of freedom despite the overwhelmingly chance of its futility.

In Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, the crisis of the postcolonial becomes a stage both for fatalism—expressed through Sa'eed's sexual violence—and for the emancipatory possibilities within hopelessness. The work posits the narrator, particularly in the last scene, as a character attempting to assert the human subject, despite the temptation to renounce it. Demonstrating the dangers of succumbing to fatalism and the fantasies of a pre-colonial simplicity, Salih presents a possibility for growth in the postcolonial world, an acceptance of the both the value of life and the attempt to better it.

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