Dünya Dilleri, Edebiyatları ve Çeviri Çalışmaları Dergisi (DEÇ)
Journal of Academic Studies in World Languages, Literatures and Translation (WOLLT)

WOLLT, 2024; 5 (2), 151-169

A POST-COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF AN AUTHENTIC AND DIGNIFIED IDENTITY: TAYEB SALIH'S *SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH*

Tahsin ÇULHAOĞLU*

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze Tayeb Salih's classic novel Season of Migration to the North in terms of and as a post-colonial construction of an authentic and dignified identity. Post-colonial literature at large tries to re-read and re-write the history of colonialism and imperialism through the perspective of the colonized who was almost entirely silenced in the Western version of history. Refusing the silencing and misrepresentation of the colonized peoples by the colonizers in accordance with their interests, post-colonial literature enables the colonized to speak and to construct an authentic and dignified self. In this respect, post-colonial literature is a project of self-understanding, self-representation, and self-construction. As a post-colonial novel, Salih's Season of Migration to the North deals with the biased construction of the identities of both the colonized and the colonizer as the heritage of the 19th and 20th century British imperialism and demonstrates that those identities constructed by the imperialist culture are misrepresentations that have devastating effects on the relationships between cultures and people. Telling the story of two well-read Sudanese men who were educated and lived in Britain for long years, the novel shows how the imperialist culture has negatively impacted the lives and souls of both the colonized and the colonizer. As a meaningful response to this culture, Salih's novel examines the question of how people and cultures should interact in a disinterested manner and how the colonized can construct an authentic and dignified self in opposition to the imposed colonial identities and representations.

Keywords: *Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North, post-colonial literature, authentic, identity*

Araştırma Makalesi
Date Received (Geliş Tarihi): 16.10.2024
Date Accepted (Kabul Tarihi): 01.12.2024
DOI: 10.58306/wollt.1568677
* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Adıyaman Üniversitesi (Adıyaman, Türkiye), e-posta: tahsinculhaoglu@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-3166-581X

Dünya Dilleri, Edebiyatları ve Çeviri Çalışmaları Dergisi (DEÇ)
Journal of Academic Studies in World Languages, Literatures and Translation (WOLLT)

WOLLT, 2024; 5 (2), 151-169

OTANTİK VE İTİBARLI POST-KOLONYAL BİR KİMLİK İNŞASI: TAYEB SALİH'İN *KUZEY'E GÖÇ MEVSİMİ* ROMANI

Öz

Bu makale, Tayeb Salih'in klasik romanı Kuzeye Göç Mevsimi'ni, post-kolonyal otantik ve itibarlı bir kimliğin inşası bağlamında ve böyle bir kimliğin inşası olarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Post-kolonyal edebiyat genel olarak sömürgecilik ve emperyalizmin tarihini, Batılı tarih versiyonunda neredeyse tamamen susturulmuş olan sömürgeleştirilmiş insanların bakış açısıyla yeniden okumaya ve yeniden yazmaya çalışır. Sömürgeleştirilmiş halkların sömürgeciler tarafından kendi çıkarları doğrultusunda susturulmalarını ve yanlış temsil edilmelerini reddeden post-kolonyal edebiyat, sömürgeleştirilmişlerin konuşmasını ve otantik ve itibarlı bir benlik inşa etmesini sağlar. Bu bakımdan post-kolonyal edebiyat, bir kendini anlama, kendini temsil etme ve kendini inşa etme projesidir. Post-kolonyal bir roman olarak Salih'in Kuzeye Göç Mevsimi, hem sömürgeleştirilenin hem sömürgecinin kimliklerinin önyargılı bir şekilde inşa edilmesini 19. ve 20. yüzyıl İngiliz emperyalizminin mirası olarak ele alır ve emperyalist kültür tarafından inşa edilen bu kimliklerin kültürler ve insanlar arasındaki ilişkiler üzerinde yıkıcı etkileri olan yanlış temsiller olduğunu ortaya koyar. Uzun yıllar İngiltere'de eğitim görmüş ve yaşamış iki iyi eğitimli Sudanlı adamın hikayesini anlatan roman, emperyalist kültürün hem sömürgeleştirilenlerin hem de sömürgecilerin hayatlarını ve ruhlarını nasıl olumsuz etkilediğini gösterir. Bu kültüre anlamlı bir yanıt olarak Salih'in romanı, insanların ve kültürlerin önyargısız bir şekilde nasıl etkileşime girmesi gerektiği ve sömürgeleştirilenlerin dayatılan sömürgeci kimliklere ve temsillere karşı nasıl otantik ve itibarlı bir benlik inşa edebileceği sorusunu inceler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tayeb Salih, Kuzeye Göç Mevsimi, post-kolonyal edebiyat, otantik, kimlik*

1. Introduction

Tayeb Salih, one of the most eminent and acclaimed writers of modern Arabic literature, was born in Northern Sudan in 1929 and educated at Khartoum University. He went to London in 1952 "as part of the first generation of Sudanese educated in Britain in preparation for independence," which occurred in 1956 (Mahjoub, 2009). He spent most of his life abroad, and London was the place where he lived until his death

in 2009. His embracing an intercultural and multicultural perspective seems to have made the "theme of the meeting of cultures" (Tresilian, 2008: 79) a significant aspect of his works, and "His life, like his work, reflected the cadences and discords of bridging the gap between east and west" (Mahjoub, 2009). As a matter of fact, his Sudanese background is also intercultural and multicultural because "he came from a liminal place where the Arab world merges with black Africa" (Hassan, 2003: ix). With his distinguished literary output, Salih was considered to be a "genius of the Arabic novel" (Hassan, 2003: ix),

Salih's masterpiece, *Season of Migration to the North*, first published in 1966, has been translated from Arabic into many languages and has become a classic of world literature. It has been considered as "a turning point in the history of the modern Arabic novel" because it "illustrates Salih's artistic maturity, his perfect assimilation of Arabic and Western cultures, and a technical mastery of his material that is quite unique in the Arab world" (Takieddine-Amyuni, 1980: 2). It was commended by Edward Said as one of the six best novels of modern Arabic literature, and it was proclaimed to be the most important Arabic novel of the 20th century by the Arab Literary Academy in Damascus in 2011 (Mahjoub, 2009).

Season of Migration to the North is a post-colonial novel dealing with many issues and themes arising from the colonial relationship between Sudan and the British Empire. What seems a tremendously significant theme among these is the way the novel problematizes the subject of identity and representation in a colonial and postcolonial context. What is more, the question of how people and cultures should connect and interact is at the heart of the novel. In this respect, *Season of Migration to the North* seems to declare that all human beings are equal regardless of their inborn differences such as skin color, race, class, sex, geography, etc. As Ngugi wa Thiongo declares, "No man or woman can choose their biological nationality. The conflicts between peoples cannot be explained in terms of that which is fixed (the invariables)" (wa Thiongo, 1986: 1). On the contrary, the existence of these natural differences, i.e. of these invariables, is a factor that enriches our lives. People can reach true peace and happiness only by establishing disinterested relationships that do not hierarchize these fixed identities and that assume absolute equality between all human beings on the basis of a common human identity. Of course, the same is true for unfixed, mutable identities, namely identities constructed by a culture (Said, 2003: 333).

Accordingly, this paper aims to analyze Tayeb Salih's masterpiece *Season of Migration to the North* in terms of and as a post-colonial construction of an authentic and dignified identity. In this respect, the paper demonstrates that *Season of Migration to the North* embodies the desire of post-colonial characters to repudiate imposed colonial identities and representations and to construct authentic and dignified selves.

This is a way of resistance that at the same time embodies the desire of the post-colonial author to resist the empire. There are different ways of resistance to the empire, but all of them boil down to the endeavor of understanding the painful colonial experience and of subverting the imperialist culture and discourse so as to decolonize the minds of both the colonized and the colonizer and to reconstruct non-hierarchized dignified identities. As Edward Said points out,

> [Many] post-colonial writers bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire" (1994: 31).

In this regard, Salih's novel embodies such a speech and action of the formerly silent native. In other words, through this novel the subaltern (colonized) speaks, and the empire writes back.

2. Rejecting Silencing and Misrepresentation, Constructing Authentic and Dignified Identities

Post-colonial literature in general tries to re-read and re-write the history of colonialism and imperialism through the perspective of the colonized who was almost entirely silenced in the Western version of history. As Ashis Nandy affirms, "by defining what is "immutable" and "universal", the West silences the visions of other cultures to ensure the continuity of its own linear projections of the past and the present on to the future" (Sardar and Van Loon, 1998: 88). As imperialism was an object of "mind and representation, as well as a matter of military and political power and the extraction of profit" (Boehmer, 2005: 23), resisting and subverting it through thoughts and representations in support of the colonized was a strategy adopted by post-colonial literature. In this regard, refusing the silencing and misrepresentation of the colonized peoples by the colonizers in accordance with their interests, post-colonial literature enables the colonized to speak and to construct an authentic and dignified self. In this respect, post-colonial literature is a project of self-understanding, self-representation, and self-construction.

As a post-colonial novel, Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* examines the biased construction of the identities of both the colonized and the colonizer as the heritage of the 19th and 20th century British imperialism and demonstrates that those identities constructed by the imperialist culture are misrepresentations that have devastating effects on the relationships between cultures and people. According to Ngugi wa Thiongo, the biggest weapon of imperialism is the "cultural bomb" which "annihilate[s] a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves," and which "makes them see their

past as one wasteland of non-achievement" (wa Thiongo, 1986: 3). As a powerful textual response to the cultural bomb of imperialism, *Season* depicts the struggle of post-colonial characters to regain their self-confidence and construct themselves dignified and authentic identities.

As part of that response, *Season of Migration to the North* abounds in intertextual elements alluding to some canonical colonialist texts. One of these texts is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and the textual evidence in *Season* indicates that Salih in a way deconstructs and rewrites *Heart of Darkness*. As a literary critic who has focused on this aspect of *Season* and come up with interesting findings and arguments, Edward Said points out the reverse parallelism between *Heart of Darkness* and *Season of Migration to the North*:

> Salih's hero in *Season of Migration to the North* does (and is) the reverse of what Kurtz does (and is): the Black man journeys north into white territory. […] Conrad's river is now the Nile, whose waters rejuvenate its peoples, and Conrad's first-person British narrative style and European protagonists are in a sense reversed, first through the use of Arabic; second in that Salih's novel concerns the northward voyage of a Sudanese to Europe; and third, because the narrator speaks from a Sudanese village. A voyage into the heart of darkness is thus converted into a sacralized *hegira* from the Sudanese countryside … into the heart of Europe[.] (Said, 1994: 30, 211)

As previously mentioned, misrepresentations and essentializations constructed by the imperialist culture have poisoned the lives and souls of both the colonized and the colonizer. As a meaningful response to this culture, Salih's novel examines the question of how people and cultures should interact in a disinterested manner and how the colonized can construct an authentic and dignified self in opposition to the imposed colonial identities and representations. The human conscience inexorably, constantly and disturbingly reminds people that to dehumanize and other a person only because he or she is biologically or culturally different is morally unacceptable. The following excerpt from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a good example that verifies this idea:

> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there--there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity-- like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild

> and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you--you so remote from the night of first ages--could comprehend. (Conrad, 1999: 64)

Obviously, there *are* colonialist, imperialist and racist assumptions behind this discourse of Marlow, the second narrator and protagonist of Conrad's narrative. The assumption that the people of Congo were primitive, in "the night of first ages," compared to Europeans, the so-called most evolved form of civilization, is one of these. As the title of Conrad's novel suggests, "Africa, in the western imagination, was refracted as the very 'heart of darkness' as opposed to Europe which was constituted as the land of light and enlightenment" in accordance with "the colonial and imperial ideology" (Tsaaior, 2009: 223).

As previously pointed out, one of the aims of this paper is to discuss the damage that misrepresentations about other human beings may cause in their souls and lives. The cause of the stifling sense of melancholy and pessimism throughout *Heart of Darkness* is precisely that damage. To illustrate, when Kurtz and Marlow first arrived in Congo, because their identity, character and thinking were shaped by the imperialist culture and ideology, they were shocked to learn that their preconceived notions about the people of Congo were completely wrong. In other words, when they see that the reality they witness in Africa is different from the pejorative representation of the Other imposed on them by the empire, they are baffled and horrified. That's why Marlow says, "the men were--No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it--this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity-- like yours--the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar." He becomes aware that all that they were told and taught about non-Europeans were grand imperialist lies. Kurtz, who perpetrated many atrocities in Congo, becomes cognizant of these lies as well, and that's why he cries "The horror! The horror!" in his last breath (Conrad, 1999: 130). Again, that is the reason why so many Europeans who go to Africa become mad in *Heart of Darkness* and some even commit suicide. One naturally thinks: would they have been so unhappy if they had discarded that poisonous culture of empire and contacted African people as fellow humans in a disinterested manner, i.e. without othering them as imposed by the imperialist ideology? Certainly, not.

As a post-colonial novel rewriting *Heart of Darkness* in the context of the 19th and 20th century British imperialism and colonialism, *Season of Migration to the North* tells the story of two cultured Sudanese men who were educated and lived in Britain for long years. The first of these characters is the

unnamed narrator-protagonist who, at the beginning of the novel, returns home from England after a period of seven years, during which he attended university and completed his doctorate on the life and work of an obscure British poet. Even though the narrator is unnamed in the novel, according to Waïl S. Hassan, he has a name: "Meheimeed":

> Most of Salih's texts are episodes in a continuous narrative that I have called the Wad Hamid Cycle (after the fictional village of Wad Hamid which is the principal setting). Although critics have studied them as self-contained texts, the continuities among these novels and short stories run deeper than the circumstances of identical setting and characters suggest and are rooted actually in the development of Salih's craft and in the unfolding of contemporary Arab history and intellectual discourse. […] Meheimeed, identified by name in [a later novel of Salih entitled] *Bandarshah*, [is] the main narrator of the Wad Hamid Cycle. (Hassan, 2003: x, 15)

Thus, as the novel *Season* is an episode in the Wad Hamid Cycle, its setting is Wad Hamid, a small village at the bend of the Nile, and its narrator is Meheimeed, who in many ways resembles and echoes Tayeb Salih himself.

The year the narrator went to England is 1946, when he was 18 years old. Apparently, like Tayeb Salih himself, Meheimeed was sent there by the Sudanese government on a scholarship. Meheimeed returns to Sudan in 1953 as a 25-year old man to be employed in a governmental post. He first works as a teacher of Pre-Islamic literature at secondary schools; then he is appointed as an inspector of primary education in Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan. In other words, he becomes a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Education. The year 1953 is also the time when the Sudanese Parliament was formed. The narrative time of the novel ends in 1956, when Sudan gains its independence.

The other main character of the novel is Mustafa Sa'eed, who went to England on a scholarship in 1913 (at the age of 15) to receive university education. Like the narrator Meheimeed, he received a doctorate, but his was in economics. Then he worked at London University as a lecturer in economics. He lived in England for more than 30 years and then had to leave due to some reasons explained below. After his departure from England, he spent some more years abroad traveling in Europe and Asia before he eventually settled in 1948 (at the age of 50) in Wad Hamid, the main setting of the novel. His story is narrated inside the story of Meheimeed. Thus, *Season of Migration to the North* narrates a story within a story.

At the beginning of the novel, Meheimeed cheerfully tells us that he has finally returned to his beloved village after a long stay in England:

> 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. I learned much and much passed me by – but that's another story. The important thing is that I returned with a great yearning for my people in that small village at the bend of the Nile. (Salih, 2005: 1)

He is reluctant to mention his personal life and experiences in England even at the beginning of his tale and consistently sticks to this attitude till the end of the novel. This seems to have a connection with the main theme this paper is focusing on. To repeat his words, he has "learned much and much [has] passed [him] by – but that's another story." Anyway, he is extremely happy to have returned to his village and country where he feels he is real and has roots:

> I heard the cooing of the turtle-dove, and I looked through the window at the palm tree standing in the courtyard of our house and I knew that all was still well with life. I looked at its strong straight trunk, at its roots that strike down into the ground, at the green branches hanging down loosely over its top, and I experienced a feeling of assurance. I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose. (Salih, 2005: 2)

Although he does not directly mention it, it can be inferred that he may not have felt himself at home in England. The way he emphasizes his identity and sense of belonging indicates that something in England made him feel unimportant while he was there. In his village, he feels that he has "a sense of stability," that he is "important, … continuous and integral," and that he is "not a stone thrown into the water but seed sown in a field" (Salih, 2005: 5).

On the second day of his arrival, after waking up, he does not leave his bed right away but takes his time lying on the bed and reminiscing the first day of his arrival. Suddenly he recollects that there was an unfamiliar face among the many people who had come to welcome him on that day. This stranger is Mustafa Sa'eed. Meheimeed describes Mustafa's physical features to his family and asks them questions about him. Through his description, they identify Mustafa and tell him that Mustafa is a stranger who came to the village 5 years ago, bought himself a farm, married a local woman called Hosna Bint Mahmoud, and had two sons. Meheimeed's curiosity increases as he continues to remember the scene of his arrival. For instance, he recalls that all the villagers had asked him questions about Europe and Europeans but Mustafa Sa'eed had all that time kept silent.

As he continues his investigation about Mustafa, he finds out that not much is known about him because he has not shared much about himself with the inhabitants of the village, including even his wife and his two little sons. He is a mysterious man full of secrets. He seems to be hiding his past, and this attracts the narrator's attention. On the other hand, although Mustafa Sa'eed is an enigmatic stranger, he is an intelligent and wise man who has devotedly put his knowledge and skills in the service of the people of the village. For instance, he initiates some successful projects which benefit the village immensely. Therefore, almost all the villagers like him and always praise him when asked. The narrator finds out that Mustafa Sa'eed has done nothing offensive in the village so far, but "he was always ready to give of his labor and his means in glad times and sad," as Meheimeed's grandfather declares (Salih, 2005: 9).

One night Mahjoub, Meheimeed's childhood friend, invites Meheimeed to a drinking feast at his home. While they are enjoying themselves, Sa'eed comes to ask something about an agricultural project, and Mahjoub invites him to join them and offers him a drink. Afterwards, as time passes, he offers Sa'eed more and more drinks until a moment comes when Sa'eed suddenly begins to ardently recite an English poem about the First World War "in a clear voice and with an impeccable accent" (Salih, 2005: 14). This shocks Meheimeed:

> I tell you had the earth suddenly split open and revealed an afreet standing before me, his eyes shooting out flames, I would not have been more terrified. All of a sudden there came to me the ghastly nightmarish feeling that we – the men grouped together – were not a reality but merely some illusion. Leaping up, I stood above the man and shouted at him: 'What's this you're saying? What's this you're saying?' (Salih, 2005: 14-15)

Why is Meheimeed so terrified? Why does he have "the ghastly nightmarish feeling that we – the men grouped together – were not a reality but merely some illusion"? What they heard was only a simple English poem about the First World War. This extreme reaction has some profound meaning that is closely connected with the main theme this paper is dealing with, namely the issue of rejecting imperialist misrepresentations of the colonized and constructing authentic and dignified identities. It seems that the way Meheimeed was treated while he was in England was based on the representations shaped by the imperialist culture, which has invariably considered the colonized as essentially unreal, primitive, childish, uncivilized, irrational, lazy, and so forth. It is the imperial metropolis which gives the colonized the "sense of reality" and "meaning". Monopolization and manipulation of knowledge and truth is in the hands of the power which has control over "the means of communication" (Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1993: 38). Thus, even hearing a poem in the language of the colonizer makes Meheimeed feel terrified and unreal. Apparently, let

alone the trauma of colonization, even the imperialist representations of the colonized suffice to cause trauma in their psyche.

When Meheimeed visits Sa'eed in his field the following day, he asks him why he had recited English poetry the night before and adds: "'It's clear you're someone other than the person you claim to be,' I said to him. 'Wouldn't it be better if you told me the truth?'" (Salih, 2005: 15) Sa'eed's answer to this is that his words were just those of a man who had drunk too much at an instance, and therefore, what had slipped out of his mouth that night could not be taken seriously. He further refuses the accusation that he is hiding something about himself or that he has a different identity. But Meheimeed is entirely convinced that Sa'eed is someone with a different story he is keeping secret. An interesting scene in Sa'eed's garden is when he shows a tree of his to Meheimeed: "Some of the branches of this tree produce lemons, others oranges" (Salih, 2005: 15). This hybrid lemon-orange tree "contains within it a singular clue about the novel's message" concerning hybrid identities (Geesey, 1997: 133). Evidently, this is "a positive message of bicultural, or cultural, grafting as an antidote to the "germ" of cultural contagion that may be a negative by-product of European colonial endeavors in Africa" (Geesey, 1997:139). In addition to the more obvious textual evidence in the novel, this symbolism also indicates that the novel embraces multiculturalism and hybridity as decent elements of an authentic and dignified identity.

Sa'eed, born in 1898, the year Sudan was conquered by the British-Egyptian colonial army, and having spent his whole life in the land of the colonizer or that of the colonized, is a child of the empire. We learn that his father had died before he was born and his mother had to raise him alone because they had no other relatives. During his childhood, he attended schools opened by the colonial administration where there were English headmasters and teachers. He was a very intelligent student who performed perfectly well in all subjects. Finishing the intermediate school (which was the furthest stage of education in Sudan at the time) earlier than the normal period, he accepted the headmaster's offer to go to Cairo for his later studies. The headmaster sent him there on a scholarship from the government. The people who met him at the train station in Cairo and took care of him during his stay there were Mr. and Mrs. Robinson.

After completing his secondary school education in Cairo, he went to England for higher education. After graduating from university and completing his Ph. D. studies, he began to work at London University teaching economics. The year of his appointment as a lecturer at London University was 1922. This was also the year The League of Nations granted a mandate to Britain and France over the Arab World. After this, he started a relentless "sexual crusade" against British women (Hassan, 2003: 92). He introduced

himself with five different names and lived with five women simultaneously, giving them all hope that he would marry each of them. According to Mahjoub, “In a form of revenge for the colonial "taking" of his country, Sa'eed devotes himself to seducing English women by posing as the fulfilment of their Orientalist fantasies” (2009).

Then one day he met Jean Morris, whom he married three years later in 1926, when he was 28 years old. Three women who had a passionate and obsessive affair with Mustafa Sa’eed committed suicide in the end, with the suggestion that whoever became Sa’eed’s lover was destined to have destruction. In 1928, Sa’eed killed Jean and was sentenced to 7 years in prison. After getting out of prison in 1935, he continued to live in England for a while until he left in 1942 to travel in Europe and Asia. In 1948, he settled in Wad Hamid as a 50-year-old man. In 1953, he disappeared in a flood that had occurred in the riverbed of the Nile and had swept all over the many fields around the river. His body was not found anywhere.

Every year Meheimeed spends his two-month summer vacation with his family in Wad Hamid. While in the village, he ponders the idea of visiting Sa’eed’s private room to complete the mysterious puzzle. The year is 1956, i.e. three years after Mustafa Sa’eed’s disappearance. At a night he goes to Mustafa Sa’eed’s house and enters his private room. He sees that the room is full of books written in English. There is “not a single Arabic book” (Salih, 2005: 137). He begins to tell us the titles of many books he sees on the shelves, including some written by Mustafa Sa’eed himself: “*The Economics of Colonialism* Mustafa Sa’eed. *Colonialism and Monopoly* Mustafa Sa’eed. *The Cross and Gunpowder* Mustafa Sa’eed. *The Rape of Africa* Mustafa Sa’eed” (Salih, 2005: 137). This is the portrait of a man called “the Black Englishman” by his friends (Salih, 2005: 53). The identity imposed on him by the colonialist ideology is that of a “mimic man” who “is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English” (Bhabha, 1994: 87). The titles of his books show that Mustafa Sa’eed was highly conscious, knowledgeable and sensitive about colonialism, the most disastrous fact of his times. Then Meheimeed finds photographs of Ann Hammond, Sheela Greenwood, Isabella Seymour and Jean Morris in the room and relates what Sa’eed had told him about his affair with each of these women.

In the last chapter of the novel, Meheimeed enters the Nile and tries to swim towards the north shore, but when he reaches the middle of the river, he cannot move anymore. It appears as though he also wants to commit suicide. The chapter begins with this sentence: “I entered the water as naked as when my mother bore me” (Salih, 2005: 166). That sentence seems to be implying death because, needless to say, the dead are as naked as the newly born. In the end, however, he chooses life:

> All my life I had not chosen, had not decided. Now I am making a decision. I choose life. I shall live because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge. It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. If I am unable to forgive, then I shall try to forget. I shall live by force and cunning. I moved my feet and arms, violently and with difficulty, until the upper part of my body was above water. Like a comic actor shouting on a stage, I screamed with all my remaining strength, "Help! Help!" (Salih, 2005: 168-169)

His choosing life instead of death shows that Meheimeed ultimately comes to grips with the painful colonial history of his country and accepts his hybrid and multicultural identity unlike the many other victims of colonialism who committed suicide under the influence of its toxic culture.

As his daughter's name Amal (Hope) also suggests, Meheimeed is hopeful about the future. His remarkable rationalization about colonialism, which echoes Tayeb Salih himself, indicates his meaningful and strong sense of hope:

> Over there is like here, neither better nor worse. But I am from here, just as the date palm standing in the courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else's. The fact that they came to our land I know not why, does that mean that we should poison our present and *our* future? Sooner or later they will leave our country, just as many people throughout history left many countries. The railways, ships, hospitals, factories, and schools will be ours and we'll speak their language without either a sense of guilt or a sense of gratitude. Once again we shall be as we were—ordinary people—and if we are lies we shall be lies of our own making. (Salih, 2005: 49-50)

He seems to be saying that the rational way of coming to grips with the reality of colonialism is to construct an authentic and dignified identity that embraces the hybridity and multiculturalism it has brought instead of "poisoning our present and our future". Evidently, through his novel Salih proposes "a hybrid ethos which enables a critical appreciation of the good in all cultures" and "a multicultural consciousness among the peoples of all races for peace and harmony in the world" (Tsaaior, 2009: 221).

3. "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie": Refusing to be Read as a Colonial and Oriental Text

As mentioned above, Ann Hammond, Sheela Greenwood, Isabella Seymour are the women who committed suicide after their affairs with Mustafa Sa'eed, and Jean Morris, his wife, was killed by him. The stereotypical and biased representations of the non-Westerners by the empire seems to be the cause of their destruction. What the imperialists and colonizers cannot achieve is to accept Sa'eed as an ordinary human

fellow like themselves. They ""read" him as an African, Oriental "text"", and Sa'eed, accordingly, entraps himself in "self-orientalizing and self-exoticization" (Hassan, 2003: 100, 19).

Ann Hammond, for instance, exoticizes Sa'eed in such a manner: "She would tell me that in my eyes she saw the shimmer of mirages in hot deserts, that in my voice she heard the screams of ferocious beasts in the jungles" (Salih, 2005: 145). Similarly, Sheila Greenwood expresses her admiration for him using exotic terms: "Each time she would gaze at me as though discovering something new. "How marvellous your black colour is!" She would say to me – "the colour of magic and mystery and obscenities"" (Salih, 2005: 139). Furthermore, Isabella Seymour exoticizes him exaggeratedly using the discourse of the European colonizers of Africa: "In what manner used Isabella Seymour to whisper caressingly to him? 'Ravish me, you African demon. Burn me in the fire of your temple, you black god. Let me twist and turn in your wild and impassioned rites'" (Salih, 2005: 106). Sa'eed is conscious that Isabella Seymour sees him "as a symbol rather than reality" (Salih, 2005: 43). In her eyes, Sa'eed is not an ordinary human being like herself, but a symbol of Africa or the colonized constructed by the colonialist and imperialist culture. Obviously, the same is true for the other British women Sa'eed had an affair with.

The following passage, in which Sa'eed relates his first meeting with Isabella Seymour, clearly shows how constructed stereotypical misrepresentations of the colonialist discourse prevent people from connecting and interacting in a simply disinterested and human manner:

> There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles. […] "What race are you?" She asked me. "Are you African or Asian?"
>
> "I'm like Othello – Arab-African," I said to her. "Yes," she said, looking into my face. "Your nose is like the noses of Arabs in pictures, but your hair isn't soft and jet black like that of Arabs."
>
> "Yes, that's me. My face is Arab like the desert of the Empty Quarter, while my head is African and teems with a mischievous childishness." (Salih, 2005: 38)

Thus, Sa'eed's image as "a naked, primitive creature," as someone "like Othello – Arab-African," and as an African whose head "teems with a mischievous childishness," that is to say, as a constructed colonial and Oriental text, is what attracts Isabella Seymour to him. However, the racist Orientalist discourse that objectifies Sa'eed as an Other gives him profound pain and causes him to use a language full of irony. As Albert Memmi emphasizes, the "mythical portrait of the colonized" constructed in the colonial context

is an ineradicable myth (Memmi, 1991: 126). *Season of Migration to the North* shows that this myth continues to contaminate the relationships between cultures and people even in the postcolonial period.

When Sa'eed describes his bedroom and his affairs with those women, he utters enigmatic remarks: "My bedroom was a spring-well of sorrow, the germ of a fatal disease. The infection had stricken these women a thousand years ago, but I had stirred up the latent depths of the disease until it had got out of control and had killed" (Salih, 2005: 34). According to Hassan, this fatal disease is "Mustafa's metaphor for the danger lurking in the "depths" of a collective identity constructed in opposition to exotic, primitive, oversexed, irrational, uncivilized, non-European Others" (Hassan, 2003: 101). The clause "The infection had stricken these women a thousand years ago" seems to be alluding to the colonization of the East by the West long time ago. The imperialist and colonialist ideology shaping the colonization process invented a "hierarchy of spaces" (Said, 1994: 58) that turned the East and the West into essentialized imaginary constructions of the Western epistemology. This ideology, which also contrived the illusion that identities and races are immutable essences, has invariably used these imaginary constructions and illusions to legitimize the colonization and exploitation of other peoples. The implication in the above excerpt from the novel is that these essentializations are still shaping and poisoning intercultural relations.

His wife Jean Morris also treats Sa'eed as a colonial and Oriental "text". She behaves in accordance with the biased representation of the non-Westerner constructed by the Western imperialist culture. She tries to play the role of Desdemona and forces Mustafa to act as Othello by provoking him. She succeeds, as Sa'eed tells us:

> But I knew there was nothing I could do about it and that the tragedy had to happen. I knew she was being unfaithful to me; the whole house was impregnated with the smell of infidelity. Once I found a man's handkerchief which wasn't mine. "It's yours," she said when I asked her. "This handkerchief isn't mine," I told her. "Assuming it's not your handkerchief," she said, "what are you going to do about it?" On another occasion, I found a cigarette case, then a pen. "You're being unfaithful to me," I said to her. "Suppose I am being unfaithful to you," she said. "I swear I'll kill you," I shouted at her. "You only say that," she said with a jeering smile. "What's stopping you from killing me? What are you waiting for? Perhaps you're waiting till you find a man lying on top of me? And even then I don't think you'd do anything. You'd sit on the edge of the bed and cry." (Salih, 2005: 162)

Like the other women who had love affairs with Mustafa Sa'eed, she cannot set up a relationship with him based on their common human identity, and this ultimately leads to her murder by him. On the other hand, there is Mrs. Robinson, the woman who had looked after Mustafa when he was a secondary school student in Cairo. She seems to be like the antithesis of these women. Mrs. Robinson's relationship with Mustafa is based on real love and understanding without any biases. Evidently, it is based on their common human identity. She treats her "Moozie" like a mother, like a real friend. That's why, throughout the whole process of the trial at the court, she sits beside Mustafa in the courtroom to support him.

As mentioned before, after killing his wife, Sa'eed is brought to the court, and at the end of the trial, he is sentenced to a period of seven-year imprisonment. While he is at the court, he constantly thinks about the constructed imperialist misrepresentations and lies about his identity and ardently repudiates them in his mind and heart:

> Once it occurred to me in my stupor, as I sat there listening to my former teacher, Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen, trying to save me from the gallows, that I should stand up and shout at the court: "This Mustafa Sa'eed does not exist. He is an illusion, a lie. I ask of you to rule that the lie be killed." But I remained as lifeless as a heap of ashes. (Salih, 2005: 32)

As Hassan rightly points out, ""killing the lie" cannot simply mean sentencing Mustafa to death; it must also mean condemning the process by which imperialist Europe has defined itself in opposition to its Others" (Hassan, 2003: 110). It seems that what Mustafa Sa'eed desires is the killing of the colonialist misrepresentations and lies about himself as an African. Tayeb Salih himself names these lies *awham* (illusions), which is the plural form of the Arabic word *wahm* (illusion) (Hassan, 2003: 16), and manifests how significant this notion was for his novel while he was writing it:

> I was pondering … [the] illusory relationship between our Arab Islamic world and Western European civilization specifically. This relationship seems to me, from my readings and studies, to be based on illusions [*awham*] on our side and on theirs. Illusion colors our self-perception, what we think of our relationship with them, and their view of us as well. Western Europe has imposed itself and its civilization on us … for a long time and become part of our cultural and psychological makeup whether we like it or not. (Hassan, 2003: 88)

Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen, having a mindset and discourse shaped by the imperialist culture, declares at the court that Sa'eed was a savage who had some capacity to be illuminated by the light of

Western civilization but he could not be fully civilized because of an essential ontological deficiency in him:

> "Mustafa Sa'eed, gentlemen of the jury, is a noble person whose mind was able to absorb Western civilization but it broke his heart. These girls were not killed by Mustafa Sa'eed but by the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago." It occurred to me that I should stand up and say to them: "This is untrue, a fabrication. It was I who killed them. I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie. Why don't you sentence me to be hanged and so kill the lie?" But Professor Foster-Keen turned the trial into a conflict between two worlds, a struggle of which I was one of the victims. (Salih, 2005: 33)

It is obvious that Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen cannot simply see Sa'eed as an ordinary human being like himself but as an Oriental and colonial text representing the collective identity of Africans or non-Europeans. Interestingly, Sa'eed later sounds like having accepted the assumptions behind Professor Maxwell's attempt at turning the trial into "a conflict between two worlds":

> In that court I hear the rattle of swords in Carthage and the clatter of the hooves of Allenby's horses desecrating the ground of Jerusalem. The ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were originally set up to transport troops; the schools were started so as to teach us how 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. Yes, my dear sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. 'I am no Othello. Othello was a lie.' (Salih, 2005: 94-95)

Referring to the bloody colonial history of Sudan, Africa, and the Middle East, the horrendous World War I and the horrible last Punic War of more than two thousand years ago when Carthage was destroyed by the Romans, Sa'eed shows that he cannot so easily rid himself of the discourse of the imperialist culture. Nevertheless, there is, of course, much truth in his words. When he says, "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie", he refers to the fact that the identity of Othello constructed by Shakespeare in his great tragedy was based on the European colonialist and Orientalist discourse. All in all, Sa'eed refuses the constructed colonial identity imposed on him by the European imperialist ideology and manifests his desire to have an authentic and dignified identity.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated that the way identities and representations are constructed and manipulated in colonial and post-colonial cultures is a central theme in Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*. Analyzing the novel in terms of this theme, the paper shows that the misrepresentations constructed by the colonialist and imperialist culture are big lies that have devastating effects on relationships between cultures and people. This is such a toxic culture that prevents the colonizers and their descendants from seeing the colonized as fellow human beings. In other words, this colonialist culture dehumanizes and others people who are biologically or culturally different and poisons the souls of both the colonized and the colonizer by colonizing and orientalizing their minds. Thus, colonialism and imperialism corrupt both the colonizer and the colonized immensely. Undoubtedly, the experience of the colonized is profoundly traumatic and the novel also examines the trauma colonization has caused as a significant theme. Moreover, the novel seems to ask and answer the question "what is the solution?".

The solution primarily lies in getting rid of all the misrepresentations that are poisoning people's minds, souls, lives and relationships. In this sense, *Season of Migration to the North* embodies the post-colonial desire to destroy all the misrepresentations constructed by imperialism and to construct authentic and dignified identities. The way to realize this desire is to decolonize the mind. In other words, the minds of people from both cultures must be decolonized. This must continue to the point that all minds begin to see all humans, civilizations and cultures as different in nature, but equal in value, without any hierarchization of identities and spaces and without any coercion in relationships. Taking this perspective as the criterion of relationships, people and cultures should freely interact with each other and break the shackles of all biases and stereotypes; otherwise, it will not be possible for them to establish healthy relationships. Only relationships based on non-coercion, non-hierarchization, mutual respect, love and understanding can bring true peace and happiness to humanity.

Otherwise, the moment people deviate from this way of connecting with other human beings and cultures, they would have injustice, oppression, slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and so on. Their relationships would be based on power, and they would hallow their fixed or mutable differences from others and construct glorified identities for themselves and degrading representations for others, without ever listening to them or letting them speak. Then they would transform these constructed representations into essentializations. Ultimately, these essentializations would become the basis of justification for

dehumanizing, exploiting, enslaving, oppressing and colonizing others. In other words, just for the sake of their own interests and insatiable greed, people would invent lies about themselves and others and use these lies to turn life into hell for others and unavoidably for themselves as well. Inevitably, the culture and epistemology created on such inhuman foundations will be disastrous for the oppressed. The history of Western colonialism and imperialism in the last 500 years is a witness to this undeniable fact, and as this paper has demonstrated, *Season of Migration to the North* has abundant textual evidence to validate this idea.

This study has investigated how the protagonists of *Season of Migration to the North* have tried to construct authentic and dignified identities in the face of the colonial representations imposed on them by imperialism. Coping with the trauma the colonization of Sudan has created in their psyche, they have willingly gone through a process of self-understanding, self-representation, and self-construction. Eventually, they have accepted multiculturalism and hybridity as inevitable elements of their authentic and dignified identity in a post-colonial context. Evidently, *Season of Migration to the North* endorses this outlook as a rational way of coping with the painful reality and legacy of colonialism and imperialism, which have created a toxic culture that still poisons the relationships between cultures and people. Thus, *Season of Migration to the North* is ultimately a strong rational response to the immensely destructive culture of imperialism due to its way of dealing with the question of how people and cultures should interact in a disinterested manner and how the post-colonial individual can construct an authentic and dignified self in opposition to the imposed colonial identities and representations.

References

Aschcroft, B.; Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H. (1991). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bhabha, H. (1994). "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse." *The Location of Culture.* London and New York: Routledge.

Boehmer, E. (2005). *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford University Press: New York.

Conrad, J. (1999). *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Penguin.

Geesey, P. (1997). "Cultural Hybridity and Contamination in Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-hijra ila al-Shamal* (*Season of Migration to the North*)". Research in African Literatures, Vol. 28, No. 3, Arabic Writing in Africa, pp. 128-140. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3820998. Accessed 2 October 2018.

Hassan, W. S. (2003). *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

Mahjoub, J. (20 February 2009). "Acclaimed author of *Season of Migration to the North*," *The Guardian*. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/feb/20/obituary-tayeb-salih. Accessed 16 October 2024.

Memmi, A. (1991). *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Ngũgĩ, w. T. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Heinemann.

Said, E. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Classics.

Salih, T. (2003). *Season of Migration to the North*, Trans. Denys Johnson-Davies. London: Penguin.

Sardar, Z. & Van Loon, B. (1998). *Introducing Cultural Studies*. New York: Totem.

Takieddine-Amyuni, M. (1980). "Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*: An Interpretation." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1-18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857525. Accessed 16 October 2024.

Tresilian, D. (2008). *A Brief Introduction to Modern Arabic Literature*. London: Saqi.

Tsaaior, J. T. (2009). "Geo-spatial politics and the trope of migration in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*." *The Journal of North African Studies*, 14:2, 221-234, DOI: 10.1080/13629380802507814. Accessed 2 October 2018.