

# Fantasy and fear: examining the narrator's reality



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The mind tends to remain at a stasis, neither consumed by pure ecstasy nor ridden with fearful anxiety. However, there may come a point in time when thoughts fluctuate between the two extremes until we are jolted back to reality's state of neutrality, perhaps this time with a new perspective. In Tayeb Salih's Sudanese novel *Season of Migration to the North*, the narrator undergoes a similar mental conflict when he returns from his studies in Europe to what he remembers to be a collective and civilized home in Khartoum. His expectations are soon met by the village's ever-changing and harsh circumstances provoked by colonialism, as well as the mysterious narrative confession of Mustafa Sa'eed. When Mustafa suddenly dies and disappears, his trace of existence allows the narrator to ruminate and familiarize himself with the more nightmarish events that Mustafa had undergone in his lifetime. Mustafa's looming presence as a mental personification of hostility and violence feared by the narrator is a necessary haunting of the mind that challenges his false idealizations of the village with a pungent dose of reality. Thus, his transcendence into Mustafa's own dark and horrifying identity positions the narrator in a middle ground that rests between utopian fantasy and paralyzing fear: reality. Such recurring convergences of fantasy and fear into a single reality are what force the narrator to fully confront the changes, uncertainties, and controversies of postcolonial life that await him.

For the narrator, the village comes to represent the heart of two polarizing periods in his life: childhood and postcolonial adulthood. We learn from the start of the novel that the narrator holds an excitement and "great yearning for [his] people," in Khartoum, almost to the brink of obsession. He goes on

to say that despite his time spent studying in London, he did not simply miss his people, but “longed for them...dreamed of them” (3). The narrator’s awe and appreciation for the villagers’ humble way of life is the ultimate foreshadowing of his tendency to glorify Khartoum. Drawing only from the memories of his childhood, in actuality, the narrator possesses limited knowledge of the people and places which he thinks are most familiar. In a sense, the village moves beyond the realm of simply existing as a setting and instead, behaves as the narrator’s awe-inspiring symbol of utopian fantasy. Just as his return is underway, he compares his at-home stability to that of a palm tree, “a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose” (4). The mentioning of ‘purpose’ holds great significance when considering his higher level of education in contrast to that of his people. His strong attraction to home cannot only be attributed to its supposed familiarity, but also the narrator’s perception of the villagers’ admiration for his newly acquired abundance of knowledge. Therefore, submersing himself in a what he thinks is a rudimentary environment in terms of education helps him to feel “important.. continuous and integral” (6). His educated background then becomes quite ironic in the sense that although he is likely the most intelligent inhabitant, he is also most ignorant of cruelty and oppression carried out by his people.

Eventually, the narrator’s once positive outlook on the village shifts to a burdening perspective of postcolonial life, however, the shift does not occur until after the death of Mustafa. For us readers, we might begin to consider how Mustafa’s accounts of suicidal lovers, murderous activities, and all-around sociopathic tendencies are starting to weigh down on the narrator,

thus pushing him away from his idyllic notions and towards a darker, more disturbed state of mind. Such darkness is then reflected in his encounter with the village during the night. Although he observed the scope of the terrain many times, he had yet to “open[ ] [his] eyes on life” and see the village “at such a late hour of the night” (40). In this instance, night is working as a multilayered symbol, perhaps most noticeably as a representation of the village’s dark and depressed postcolonial state. Simultaneously, night refers to the narrator’s growing perspective of his home as a place infested by maltreatment of its own people in relation to one another, particularly among men and women.

Lastly, the shadows of night are possibly symbolic of the uncertainty of the future, both for the narrator’s personal life and the village’s overall well-being. It is not until much later, when the narrator is overwhelmed by the sheer violence and misogynistic treatment of women, that he expresses anger for Wad Rayyes’ forced marriage and eventual murder of Hosna Mahmoud. His frustration and disgust to the village’s practices grow more evident when he calls Hosna “the sanest woman in the village” (109) while those who think of her as an object are truly mad. Therefore, we see an obvious contrast between the narrator’s earlier stages of fabricated idealization of the village and his later transition into an appalled inhabitant.

Though the narrator is increasingly portrayed as being consumed by horrendous acts closely surrounding him, it is ultimately Mustafa’s mental personification and physical takeover of the narrator that ignite the utmost fear. When discussing his brief encounter with Mustafa, the narrator likens his presence to that of “a nightmare” (39). Once again, we find the insertion

of night, but this time in the form of dread-inducing images. The narrator describes Mustafa's arrival as having taken place on "one suffocatingly dark night" (39), a moment that forever shook and unsettled the village's people. Although the narrator does not specifically point to himself as a victim of Mustafa's stories, he certainly becomes overwhelmed by what he has heard. It is almost as if Mustafa himself is the unnerving and inescapable nightmare, one that the narrator associates with influences of violence. He even admits that Mustafa is becoming "an obsession that [is] ever with [him] in [his] coming and goings" (51). His compulsive thoughts about Mustafa, along with a growing hostility towards his people, is what ultimately leads the narrator to the crucial exposure of Mustafa's private room. An unmatched fury swelling inside from the "adversary...within" (111), he opens the door to books, photographs, and undoubtedly the most terrifying and thought-provoking image, a portrait of Jean Morris. For the narrator, her picture conjures up a more descriptive account of Mustafa's murder of Jean in which he stabbed her with a dagger. The narrator's decision to reveal the disturbing image later on is likely related to his frustration with the corruptness of the village in that by unleashing the darkest memories of Mustafa's life, he is somehow committing an act of vengeance against such corruptness.

At the same time, we are reminded of the narrator's adoption of Mustafa's vicious influence. While inside the room, he is both inflicted and consumed by violence, so much so that we see his identity and Mustafa's identity in the process of merging. Although the room scene might appear to push the narrator even further down a spiral of violence, strangely enough, his

connectedness to Mustafa's memories inadvertently causes him to pave a new life that is neither ignorantly ideal nor disturbingly aggressive. His decision is manifested in the form of a double, which Mustafa becomes for the narrator. We do take notice of their merging identities leading up to the room, at times, nearly forgetting whether Mustafa or the narrator is speaking. However, one particular moment stands out as pivotal when the narrator himself loses track of his own identity. After catching a glimpse of an image, yet again out of darkness, of " a frowning face with pursed lips" (112) that he knows but cannot place, he moves towards it with " hate in [his] heart" (112). Unbeknownst to the narrator, the image is that of himself, a much changed man who now displays anger on the outside. This very image also stands in contrast to an earlier reference to his happier life in the village, " like a child that sees its face in the mirror for the first time" (5). He then goes on to mistake the image for Mustafa, only to realize that it is indeed his own frowning face. In terms of the double, the mirror is acting as a symbol for convergence, not merely of the narrator and Mustafa's appearances, but more importantly, their similar ties to frustration.

Solely for the narrator, there also exists a merging of his previous ignorance with his new understanding of corruptness. Rather than being drawn to one or the other, he chooses to take identity into his hands. In this exact moment, the narrator discovers where his own reality lies. It exists neither in the fantasy of idealization nor in the nightmares of violence. Instead, reality is uncontrollable and must be faced with a sense of rationality. In the end, the narrator's encounter with reality brings him to the same place where he began his journey, the Nile. Up until this point, the Nile had been tainted by

the possible suicide of Mustafa and the occurrence of floods. However, while he continuously swims in the river, all thoughts of Mustafa are completely abandoned, and eventually, his efforts of swimming gradually turn into a quiet transportation of his body through the water. The river's movement is a prominent representation, not only of the ebb and flow of time and narrative structure, but the narrator's wavering between wanting to love his people and seeing them for who they truly are. At one point, he finds himself caught "half-way between...life and death" (137), and furthermore, between helping his people and leaving them stranded. In fact, just as the river's movement and flooding cannot be controlled, the narrator has no control over the uncertainties of reality. However, he also recognizes his potential to choose life and experience the time spent with his friends and family, including the sons that Mustafa has left behind. As a result of such realization, his "relationship to the river [is] determined" (139), just as his relationship to the village is solidified. In the midst of his cries for help, we are unsure of whether or not he will survive the river's flow. Nevertheless, we are at least certain that he is better equipped to finally face reality.

Throughout his recollection, the narrator's initial depiction of an idealized village is subverted by the harshness of its corruption. The only way in which the narrator is able to combat such idyllic fabrications is through the horrors of Mustafa's own memories of murder and violence. While the narrator continues to be overwhelmed by Mustafa's narrative, simultaneously, he gains the capacity to recognize the violence and maltreatment happening in his own presence. It then becomes more obvious that his people are not necessarily a community bound together by simplicity, but are fully capable

of committing acts of cruelty. To a certain extent, the narrator's fantasies about returning to his village are quite reminiscent of colonial methods of thinking in that colonialism was indeed built on fabrication, along with the fantasy of nurturing and guiding the natives. Yet, his movement away from delusion and towards fear is a crucial development in his quest for reality. Ultimately, he reaches a realm of reality in which change is embraced and life is considered valuable.