

Colonialism and
character
development in
season of migration
to the north



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Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* was first published in 1969, and has come to be regarded as outstanding in its genre. Originally written in Arabic, the book features notable parallels to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which it is considered by many to be a response to. However, *Season of Migration to the North* does not seek to define itself by other pieces of literature, but rather by providing unique commentary on the colonial experience in Africa. Written about Sudan by a Sudanese author, it offers extraordinary insight into the world it seeks to describe. To provide this insight, Salih uses the character of Mustafa Sa'eed (henceforth referred to as MS), in conjunction with the unnamed narrator, to demonstrate how colonialism disturbed the balance, albeit imperfect, present in Africa before European involvement, and how he hopes it will come to be restored.

The story of MS, who takes center stage as the narrative begins, commences in his childhood years, when he is still a blank slate, or "tabula rasa", upon which life and the prejudices of the world have written nothing yet. From a young age, MS displayed none of the personality or charm typical of a child, and interacted with his mother as if they were "stranger[s] on the road", brought together by little more than circumstance (Salih 19). This sense of isolation further contributes to the lack of definition in his character, and is an important feature of colonialism, which expertly divides people and sets them apart internally, leaving them incapable of resistance or opposition. Instead, the colonized (and MS) are solitary and "rounded, [like they were] made of rubber", so as not to be further damaged by the trauma inflicted upon the world as they knew it (20). MS soon leaves to attend school in

Cairo, which he considers an escape from the intellectual imprisonment of his home village, and a true “ turning point in [his] life” (21).

Essentially, MS rejects his own experiences of Africa, untainted by the reaches of colonization, it seems, in favor of Anglicized unknowns. This desire for aloneness, both physically and culturally, is particularly apparent as MS continues his journey, this time departing from Cairo for England. He finds undeniable peace when “ the blue horizon encircle[s]” his ship and “ the sea swallow[s] up the shore”, leaving him perfectly alone in every way (26). MS “ savour[s] that feeling of being nowhere...before and behind [him] either eternity or nothingness” (27). As suggested by Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, the colonial system unintentionally fosters such feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction, as if the way things used to be is no longer good enough. It leaves the colonized with a desire for more—it education, health care, or infrastructure for instance—and then refuses to provide these things. MS finds himself lucky in that he is presented with an opportunity to satisfy these desires. However, he finds that his thirsts are never truly quenched.

In pursuit of these unnamed, and perhaps indefinable desires, MS becomes something other than himself, as if practicing manipulating his own identity before he irrevocably and detrimentally changes that of others. Rather than presenting an authentic self to those he encounters in England, he invents a persona intended to appeal to the Western desire for the exotic and different. In this way, he indelibly alters the slate of his life, defining himself through the cosmopolitan fantasy of “ Africa” and rejecting the value of the simple life, rooted in truth (although he comes to appreciate its value later in <https://assignbuster.com/colonialism-and-character-development-in-season-of-migration-to-the-north/>

life) in favor of serving as “ a symbol of all of [the Europeans’] hankerings”, a representation of “ tropical climes, cruel suns, [and] purple horizons” (30).

However, the assignation of such stereotypical images to MS is little more than a perpetuation of these symbols, albeit one that MS embraces. It turns the reader’s focus towards the sadly still present Western objectification of the concept of “ Africa”, a treatment of it not as an entire continent, full of diverse and unique cultures, but rather as a single entity with the allure of the unknown and different. “ Mustafa the African” is a construct of Western imagination, a conscious manipulation of European expectations strategically employed in order to insinuate himself within English society without challenging its tropes. Salih uses MS’s actions and characterization in England to demonstrate how “ the interaction between the Arab Islamic world and Western European civilization is determined by illusions” (Shaheen 162). MS embodies these “ falsehood[s] and fantas[ies]”, and attracts English women effortlessly with this purposeful primitiveness (Shaheen 169).

To the women MS encounters and becomes involved with, he presents himself as Othello, a character imbued with archaic ideas of race and immense tragedy, but perhaps more importantly, marked connotations of sexual vitality (Salih 38). His choice of Othello, and the fact that he shares this choice as a means of emotional manipulation, ironically foreshadows his own self-inflicted demise. He mimics Othello in life, as both are overwhelmed by lies, and ultimately in death as well.

MS’s various relationships with English women are relevant beyond Shakespearean parallels, though. Before his eventual downfall, he attracts

many with “ his world...of burning sandalwood and incense”, primitive and raw and unapologetically sexual (35). MS makes these relationships into a form of revenge, as “ colonization is embodied in [him] as a germ originated by European violence...a thousand years ago”, part of a cycle he believes must complete and balance by inflicting “ violent retaliation” upon these English women (Shaheen 160). He enters into destructive, abusive relationships with them in a strange continuation of colonial history in which the roles are reversed. Instead of allowing himself to be subsumed into his new environment, MS chooses the role of the colonizer, truly acting as a “ black Englishman” by forcing the women with whom he has sexual relationships to conform to his own preferences and choices (Salih 53). He attempts to turn the tables on them, and by extension, British imperialists, by exerting physical and emotional dominance in each relationship. This practice, however, unhealthy it might be, meets with little resistance from the women involved for some time. It is only when Jean Morris comes into his life that he begins to question this life of self-gratification, lived by a person who is less than real.

Jean Morris, with whom MS falls in love with “ against [his] will”, subjects him to degradation, much like he had made previous women slaves to his will (156). She challenges his dominance, which had never faced resistance before, and forces him to acknowledge emotion, something “ Mustafa the African” does not do. Experiencing “ ignominy, loneliness, and loss” is not natural for MS, and begins a conflict of identity that marriage to Jean Morris only exacerbates (159). He finds himself in her, and it follows, his own ruination in her too. The identity MS has created cannot withstand tests to

his sense of dominance, and so Jean Morris is made subservient with “ the blade-edge...of [a] dagger” (164).

This moment is a turning point for MS, as his constructed self is shattered by this senseless violence. He realizes that he has become entrenched in “ darkness...thick, deep and basic”, and struggles to escape the evil that he willingly embraced in the past (Salih 93). In an attempt to create a more sustainable life, or one of value, he leaves Europe in favor of the simplicity of “ settl[ing] in [a] village” (9). However, he cannot undo the violence he perpetuated, nor lose the knowledge associated with his experiences. The MS that his contemporaries know “ does not exist. He’s “ an illusion, a lie” and desperately desires “ that the lie be killed” (32). However, in acting out the European fantasy of an evil, bewitching Africa, he internalizes the evil he pretends until, in a sense, he is no longer pretending. Despite his efforts to become part of the Sudanese community in which he lives—he “ bought...a farm, built a house, and married” a local woman—MS cannot reconcile the two halves of himself, so to speak (2). The only way for him to purge this falsehood he has cultivated within himself, and cope with the knowledge of colonialism that he possesses, is death, and he seems to embrace it with relief, as “ the forces lying in the river-bed” claim him (167).

True reconciliation of these two aspects of the colonial world—that of the colonizer and the colonized—comes in the form of the narrator, who is a part of both without artifice. While he spent “ years...studying in Europe”, his return to Sudan comes with the knowledge that he was coming back to “[his] people”, and a sense of longing for “ that small village at the bend of the Nile” (1). It is clear that he cherishes this village life, but at the same time
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appreciates his position as “ the outstanding young man in the village”, exalted because he has been educated abroad (8). A great deal of his narrative has an external focus, as MS’s story takes center stage. However, as the tale progresses, the narrator’s sense of right and wrong is challenged, as Bint Mahmoud is forced into societally-condoned rape, and kills herself (and her rapist) because of it. It is this horrific, and yet utterly preventable event that causes the narrator to realize that he cannot continue to walk the fine line between worlds that he has previously trod. He cannot remain “ half-way between north and south”, but must truly invest himself in one, bringing the other within himself, an inextricable part of his identity.

This sense of purpose as the novel concludes contributes to the story’s identity as a response to the vestiges of colonialism still remaining in the Africa experienced by the author. Salih’s use of the narrator as a member of each world allows him to comment on both. In this way, he provides a sense of balance in the narrative. While both European and African cultures may have problems, the solutions to these problems must come from within. African nations have no need for a civilizer, let alone one who “ becomes a colonizer, and a savage one” at that (Shaheen 163). It is Salih’s hope, and that of his narrator, that colonized nations will one day be able to speak “[their colonizers’] language without a sense of guilt or a sense of gratitude”, and perpetuate only “ lies of [their] own making (Salih 49-50).