

SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH: A DREAM OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN TRADITION AND LIBERALISM

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Abstract

The main thesis of this paper suggests that al-Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* is best read as an attempt, though so difficult and complex, to make reconciliation between the Arabic, Islamic tradition and between the Western liberalism on the one hand, and between the colonized (Arab Sudanese) and the colonizer (the British Empire) on the other hand. It is a portraying of the failure that usually faced and still facing the Arab intellectuals who try to bring liberalism and modernism to the Arab World. As one of those Arab intellectuals, Al-Tayyib Salih tries, through *Season of Migration to the North*, to give us an image of how difficult the mission of those intellectuals is.

Keywords:

The novel was composed around what was known as "Al-Nahda", which is the Arabic word for "awakening" or "renaissance" which began in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Egypt then moved to other Arab countries. Some looks at this "Nahda" or Arab Renaissance as the Arabic counterpart of the European Enlightenment era. But when did this "Nahda", or Arab modernism, begin? Arabs were always proud that they are the leaders of the Islamic world for a long time. However, this pride would not continue for ever. As he answers the questions "When did the Arab consciousness begin to connect with liberal theory, and how were liberal ideas originally received?" Tayeb Bouazza thinks that "Arab thought had an early exposure to Western liberal discourse" that goes back to the time of "Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the defeat of the Moroccan army by a French expeditionary force at Isly in 1844". After these defeats, "Arab intellectuals began to examine the reasons for their relative weakness compared to the strength they saw in the West. Upon scrutinizing Europe's cultural and social structures, they found liberal philosophy to be

pervasive"(Bouazza 61). This made many Arab intellectuals believe that liberalism is the main reason behind their enemy's strength, and the lack of it is the main reason behind their weakness. As a reaction to this discovery, they took different approaches to solve their own problems of weakness, ignorance, backwardness, etc. Some of them were so extreme by completely adopting Western thought of liberalism, secularism, and neoliberalism to get rid of the chains of tradition including religion. Bouazza calls such Arab Renaissance thinkers "authentic liberals" and mentioned Francis al-Marrash (1835-1874) and Adib Ishaq (1856-1885) to be the pioneers of this authentic liberalism.

However, other Arab Renaissance thinkers tried to approach the intellectual, social, and political problems of the Arab world by trying to create their own Arabic liberal thought. They even go far to say that our Islamic and Arabic heritage has most of the elements of liberalism. They tried to find an Arabic thought which is a combination of Western liberalism and the Islamic one. Such pioneers of this kind of Arab Renaissance thought are: Rifaat al-Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Abdul-Rahman al-Kawakibi. In his article "The Empire Renarrated: 'Season of Migration to the North' and the Reinvention of the Present", Saree S. Makdisi refers to the main arguments of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh saying that these two reformers, as one could say, "argued that Islam embodied the principles of modernity within its own doctrine and therefore that the confrontation between traditionalism and modernity was a false one since the latter is immanent in the former"(806).

As a writer and educational reformer, Rifaat al-Tahtawi argued for adopting Western sciences as the only way of modernism in the Arab world. As a religious man who was educated in al-Azhar, he was sent as the imam for the first student mission to Paris in 1826. This experience enabled him to study Western civilization. "His observations there were established as 'Takhlis al-ibliz fi Talkhis Pariz'"(Goldschmidt 205) which could be translated into English as: "an accurate summary of Paris". His goal was to bring to Egypt the main concepts of modernism and the liberal life he noticed there. Makdisi thinks that al-Tahtawi project is impossible because it means that "in order to 'be modern' one had somehow to 'to become' European"(Makdisi 806), an idea completely rejected by an Islamic society like Egypt. In other books, al-Tahtawi focused also in reforming the Egyptian educational system. "He focused his attention on modern education, as Egypt's education system had at that time been limited to Islamic law and religious studies"(El-Gemeiy).

However, we should not neglect the fact that there were other intellectual streams in the Arab world like "Marxism and anarchism (which

were both critical to the capitalist liberalism)" and "present in nineteenth century Europe"(Bouazza 62). Arab thinkers found that these schools were not as important as the liberal thought in Europe at that time. This made them give it priority upon other intellectuals and philosophical schools. But after the coming of the colonizer and the crimes it committed against Arab societies, Marxism was one of the alternative visions and philosophies adopted by some Arab countries to resist the Western colonizer. Thus, many political leaders exploited Marxism to control their people in a dictator way.

To conclude this coverage of the historical context of our novel "Season of Migration to the North", we can say that Arab liberal thinkers and intellectuals at that time were suffering from two difficulties, namely: the traditional Islamic school, and the dictator political leaders who appeared so powerfully during the post-colonial era. These two obstacles hindered, until now, any attempt of modernization and liberalization in the Arab societies. Bouazza concludes: " after more than 150 years of interaction with European liberal thought, critical scholarship fully absorbing liberalism in an Arab context is still absent"(ibid). He even thinks "it is not an exaggeration to say that liberalism in the Arab thought continues to take the form of a set of concepts, marketed primarily with propaganda and advertising slogans, rather than the logic of contemplation and rational deduction"(ibid). A project to create a kind of liberalism suitable to an Arab society was lost between three opposing visions: one says that there is no need for modernity since it is already embodied in Islam, another believes that the only way of modernism is to completely adopt the western example of liberalism without paying any attention to the Islamic, Arabic tradition of the society, and a third represented in a dictator leadership that prevents any attempt of liberal thinking which may criticize them and unveil their crimes.

As a result, some thinker found it possible and necessary to make reconciliation between Eastern traditional thought and Western liberalism. As one of those thinkers who were exposed to Western way of life, al-Tayyib Salih also tried to criticize not only the shortcomings of the traditional life of his society, but also the contradictory character of modern Arab thinkers who keep as a secret their admiration of a modern liberal life, like that of the Western one, without daring to do something to change the miserable situation of their people. He also criticize the contradictory character of the colonizer who make the colonized exposed to his liberal and modernized way of life, but at the same time prevents him from enjoying this kind of life back in his own society.

Salih also wants to say that it is almost a dream to make reconciliation between tradition and liberalism in an Arab society like Sudan. From the first moment of his arrival, we notice clearly his great love to his homeland. Although he " learnt much and much passed [him] by"(Salih 1),

yet he would not talk about this now since he wants to seize the opportunity to express his great love of the simple life he once lived, and feel so happy to live it again "after a long absence" of seven years "during which time [he] was studying in Europe"(ibid). Even when he was in Europe, he "longed for them, had dreamed of them" and "was extraordinary moment when at last found" himself "standing among them"(ibid). Unlike his feeling in the foreign land of the colonizer, "a land 'whose fish die of the cold'", now he enjoys the "life warmth of the tribe" and "felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose"(2). At this stage the narrator is still aware of the positive side of the tribal life; a cooperative and supportive life that is full of warmth. On the other side, we find the negative side of the liberal life in the land of the colonizer; a struggle-for-survival life where you feel cold and lonely. Any negative change happens to this kind of the simple life in his small village is unacceptable. After he notices that his father still practices his prayers, that he still recites the Koran, that his mother still serve the family and brings tea to them in the morning, the second day of his arrival he concludes: "yes, life is good and the world as unchanged as ever"(ibid).

But suddenly he recollects "having seen a face [he] did not know among those who had been there to meet [him]"(ibid). This man is Mustafa who, like the narrator, lived for a long time in England. From now on the narrator begins to notice that things changed by the coming of this stranger who brings with him the principles of Western modernism and liberalism. When the narrator begins to clarify the stereotypes his people make about Europe and does his best to tell them that they are exactly like us, Mustafa was silent. He is silent either because he knows the fact about what the narrator is saying, or because he regrets the fact that he does not do the same as the narrator in clarifying and eliminating the stereotypes and the unfair negative impressions taken by those simple people about life in Europe. However, like Mustafa, the narrator also does not say everything indicates that the Europeans are like us. He does not say that like us "they are born and die, and in the journey from the cradle to the grave they dream dreams some of which come true and some of which are frustrated; that they fear the unknown; search for love and seek contentment in wife and child..."(3). He has a strong desire to achieve this project; a project carried out by the Arab intellectuals who were exposed to Western civilization; a project that makes the West and the East look positively at each other. He prefers not to say everything about Europeans to his friend Mahjoub, although he wishes he had done so, because he "was afraid he would not understand". Although Mahjoub is intelligent, he would not understand how come the colonizers who killed thousands of his people, occupied his land, rape the women, and committed many other crimes against him are ordinary people like us?! If we

take into consideration the negative effect of tradition that considers anyone who is not like us is "infidel", as Bint Majzoub thinks when she said to the narrator: "we were afraid you would bring back with you an uncircumcised infidel for a wife"(4), and add that to the bloody history of colonization, we could imagine how difficult the mission of those intellectuals in making a compromise between the colonizing West and the colonized East is. Suha Kudsieh explains the dilemma of those Western-educated intellectuals represented by the narrator. She says:

The narrator's dilemma echoes the confusion of many Western-educated Arab men: they returned home equipped with the best educational certificates, bringing with them the gist of the European educational treasures only to find themselves helpless in a society that is still living under the yoke of tradition and myth. Instead of fighting back, they succumbed under weight of tradition, and become passive and inactive. (Kudsieh 210)

This passivity and inactivity referred to by Kudsieh are not so clear at the beginning of the arrival of the narrator. On the contrary, when he first arrives, he is so enthusiastic and wants to work hard to help his people progress. He express his enthusiasm saying that "I want to give lavishly, I want love to flow from my heart, to ripen and bear fruit"(Salih 5). However, it seems that the kind of change which the narrator wants to give has little to do with the technological side of modernism. This is because although he talks about his enthusiasm to give, yet he looks with an eye of suspicion at the technological devices brought to his small village. This introduction of materialism that makes one pump able to do "the work of a hundred water-wheel"(4), and causes "bank retreating year after year in front of the thrusting of the water, while on another part it was the water that retreated"(5). He sees these changes "from [his] position under the tree"(4) which could be a symbol of the virgin environment that is still uncorrupted by this technology. After noticing these changes, he express his suspicion about this when he says that "sometimes strange thoughts would come to my mind"(ibid). Because his yarning to his people is still fresh, he would not think about that now; he realizes this corruption caused to the environmental balance but with his "mind only"(5); he still misses his people and his "heart is optimistic"(ibid). Soon he will wake up from this overwhelming passion of yarning and will start comparing the life of his people in Sudan with the ideal life he experienced in Europe.

Although at first he felt that "something like fog rose between them and me the first instant I saw them", but he would convince himself that he is "from here just like the palm tree planted in the courtyard of our house, grew in the courtyard of our house and did not grow in someone else's"(49). He wants to say that sometimes a human is like a tree, if you change its proper environment, it will die. But what happens if that proper environment is

contaminated? It will also die. This healthy environment could be corrupted by the colonizer and the colonized. He continues to convince himself to stick to the peaceful traditional life in his small village and not to challenge that life saying:

And if they [the British] came to our villages, I do not know why, does this mean that we must poison our present and our future? They will leave our country sooner or later, just like other people have left other countries throughout history. The railways and the ships, the hospital and the factories, will be ours; and we will use their language without feeling guilt and gratitude. We shall be as we are: normal people; and if we shall be lies, we shall be lies of our own making. (Salih 49-50)

But later on he discovers that traces of colonization are deeply rooted in this life, and that his dream of the simple pre-colonial life would not come true. We may notice this dream through his great love to his grandfather. For him, his grandfather stands for the pre-colonial era when people were able to live a simple life; a life devoid of the complexities brought by the colonizer; a life when people were able to choose the way they want to live freely. He sees in him "something immutable in a dynamic world"(48). Whenever something irritates his calmness, the narrator would resort to his grandfather old stories. He refers to the effect of his grandfather stories about life many years ago saying: "I go to my grandfather and he talks to me about life forty years ago, fifty years ago, even eighty, and my feeling of security is strengthened"(5). When Mustafa tells him his strange stories in Europe and how he becomes a criminal there, the narrator is so depressed and afraid that in his way back from Mustafa's house late that night the unchanged village seems "suspended between earth and sky"(48). This means that Mustafa's stories threaten his dream of a stable life devoid of the traces of colonization. However, once he "reached the door of [his] grandfather" and hears his "voice praying"(ibid), he is reassured again. He expresses that feeling saying:

Suddenly I felt my spirits reinvigorated as sometimes happens after a long period of depression: my brain cleared and the black thoughts stirred up by the story of Mustafa Sa'eed were disappeared. Now the village was not suspended between sky and earth but was stable: the houses were houses, the trees trees, and the sky was clear and faraway. (48-49)

At this stage, the narrator is in a critical situation between two opposing forces: should he stick to his grandfather's old stories, and convince himself that life is as unchanged as before? Or should he face the truth that life changed especially after the coming of Mustafa Sa'eed to the village? He starts asking himself questions like: "was it likely that what have happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could have happened to me? He had said that he was a lie, so was I also a lie? As if he wants to say that if Mustafa was a lie in his

strange attempts to resist the colonizer, then I am also a lie in trying to make myself convinced that life still as it was before colonization.

Both the narrator and Mustafa do the wrong things. While he is studying poetry in England, the narrator separates himself from participating effectively in the life there. He "used to treasure with [him] the image of [his] little village, seeing it wherever [he] went with the eye of [his] imagination"(49). He carried with him the image of the simple life in his small village without trying to talk to the British about it, and without trying to integrate himself in their life. This will keep the West have the same ideas about the east. When he comes back to his village, he also does the same thing; he does not try to use the good education he got in Britain to resolve some of the traditional old habits that do not respect human rights; it could for example resolve the problem of women's alienation so clear in the story of Hosna with Wad Rayyis.

Mustafa, on the other hand, uses violence in his campaign against the colonizer. Unlike the narrator, he was born in a big city; the Sudanese capital Khartoum in 1898, the time when the Sudanese resistance to the British forces collapsed. This means that he is aware of the bloody history of the colonizer than the narrator who lives in a small village away from the battle field. In stead of passively accept the defeat, All his life, Mustafa symbolically tries to reverse modern colonization and the European imperialism. He begins his campaign by acquiring Western education in a local school in Sudan. As a clever student, he pursues his study in a university in England, and there he is appointed as a lecturer of economics at the University of London. Achieving his dreams, he begins his violent "campaign to throw colonialism back on the colonizer"(Makdisi 811). He tries to do this by inflicting physical and psychological suffering on British women. He wants to do this because already the British inflicted suffering and pain on the Sudanese. He refers to this saying: "yes, gentlemen, I have come to you as a conqueror within your very house, as a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history"(Salih 98). His violent treatment to the women makes two of them commits suicide and he murders the third.

Like the colonizer, Mustafa is full of contradictions. Although he loves the Western education and Western way of life that he absorbed quickly as a child, he goes to Britain to go through this savage trip of violence. He was "living with five women simultaneously", "gave each one the impression that [he] would marry her", "adopted a different name with each one", and yet "were writing and lecturing on a system of economic based on love not figures", and" made [his] name by [his] appeal for humanity in economics?"(35). His behaviors, which indicate his oriental nature of being driven by desires, contradict what he says about Othello

when he claims that "I am no Othello: Othello was a lie"(98). When Jean Morris discovers his oriental reality and start torturing him by sexual temptation, the only way to resist her was to kill her. By doing so, he enhances the European literary misrepresentation of the Arab in Shakespeare's "Othello".

When he decides to finish this violent life by living in the narrator's small village, he is also contradictory. Apparently, he lives as a simple Sudanese peasant, but in reality he is an English intellectual. The narrator is shocked when he opens Mustafa's secret room. He discovers that everything is English even the Koran:

Imagine it--an English fireplace with all its accessories, above it a brass hood, and in front of it a square area tiled in green marble, with the mantelpiece of blue marble; on either side of the fireplace were two Victorian chairs covered in silk material, and between them was a round table with books and notebooks on it. (137)

The story of Mustafa Sa'eed is the story of those who see things with one eye. The narrator finds out that his "Life Story" contains one line only: "To those who see with one eye, talk with one tongue, and see things either black or white, either Eastern or western"(152). In fact, there are many evidences indicate that Mustafa sees things with one eye during his stay in England. When he talks about his experience with Isabella Seymour, he imagines himself Tarik ibn-Ziyad, the leader of the Arab army that conquered Spain in the eighth century when he tells the narrator: "I imagined the Arab soldiers first meeting with Spain; Like me at this moment setting opposite Isabella Seymour, a southern thirst being quenched in the northern mountain passes of history"(46). In his violent campaign against those innocent women, he also refers to many terms taken from traditional Arab life and wars. Such words are: saddling the camels, tents, caravans, the desert, and so forth. This indicates that Mustafa still living in the past; a past that is full of hatred and violence between East and West. Mustafa Sa'eed one day disappears. This is the natural end of any ideology that sees things with one eye. To be like him, one should be either Eastern or Western. However, we cannot neglect the fact that his western education makes him an effective member in the village. When the narrator attends a meeting of the Agriculture Project Committee, he notices that Mustafa is the most important member of the committee, and those Members of the committee "listen to him with great respect"(12). His effect on his wife Hosna is so clear; from a simple child she becomes an adult woman who resists to be subjugated to tradition and the authority of man. When she is enforced to marry an old man, she prefers to kill him and commit suicide than to accept that.

After these strange events (the killing of Wad Rayyis, Hosna's suicide, and the discovery of Mustafa's secret room), the narrator starts a self-confrontation for the first time. He discovers that Mustafa Sa'eed is himself. In Mustafa's secret room he looks at what he thought was Mustafa's portrait to realize he faces a mirror and looking at himself: "this is not Mustafa Sa'eed-it's a picture of me frowning at my face from a mirror"(135). He also realizes that life has changed and it is time to participate positively in this changing life. But, as it is mentioned previously, the dilemma of any Arab intellectual from that time until now is that he needs to act within different opposing forces. "Season of Migration to the North" was written around the period when Arab countries began gaining their independencies; a time when Arab streets were charged with hatred against Western colonization. In her comment on the novel, Mona Amyuni says that the narrator not only stands for: the young Sudanese man at the dawn of independence, but also for the young, educated Arab man of the early sixties, of the waning Nasserite euphoria, the Algerian victory, the beginning of the Palestinian resistance movement, a period of great expectation and many question marks. (Amyuni 100)

At that time, many Arab intellectuals were so eager to adopt Western way of thinking. They wanted to do this in any way regardless of the many shortcomings of that way of thinking. Bouazza, for instance, blames Arab neo-liberals for "sanctifying liberalism to some degree, elevating it to the status of more than just a school of thought, and turning it into a cultural absolute, superior to all other philosophies and ideologies"(Bouazza 67). This led to the fact that "Arab neo-liberal thought leaves no room for alternative visions to rival liberalism's worldview and humanitarian values; neo-liberal rhetoric holds that liberalism has incorporated everything good that humanity has produced, and more"(ibid). Thus, we can say that the tragedy of the narrator is that he is suffering from two opposing poles: either he lives in a patriarchal society governed by a traditional Islamic discourse- a discourse strengthened by the long bloody history of colonization; a colonization that ended up with the creation of Israel in the heart of the Arab world, or to be completely Western and forgets about his own tradition; a tradition he seems to love so much. But why do not we make a compromise between the two and live a peaceful life in the West and in the East? What is the fault of the innocent women who were treated violently by Mustafa and be the victims of this struggle? What is the fault of Hosna to be the victim of tradition and obliged to marry an old man?

It seems that the narrator is asking the important question: is it necessary that there should be a conflict? Why do not we make a healthy interaction between West and East? In one of the scenes we see a peaceful discussion between two intellectuals: Mansour, a Sudanese, and Richard, a

British. Mansour says to Richard: "you transmitted to us the disease of your capitalist economy. What did you give us except for a handful of capitalist companies that drew off our blood – and still do?" Richard said to him, 'All this shows that you cannot manage to live without us.'"(Salih 60). The important thing here is that "they were not angry: they said such things to each other as they laughed."(ibid). Although he is Western educated, the narrator here criticizes some of the shortcomings of Western thought products like capitalism. In another scene we find him criticizing his own tradition. After the death of Hosna, the narrator questions his grandfather's attitude of what happened saying: "is he really as I asserted and as he appears to be? Is he above this chaos?"(108).

Unable to make a decision, the narrator enters the Nile, almost unconsciously, and finds himself swim northward, as if he wants to immigrate again to England. He enters the water naked to feel the water of the Nile, the river he loves. He wants to say I love my people, my tradition, my country, my grandfather, his prayers, and his recitation of the Koran, but yet I hate the tradition that subjugates women. He swims north to become completely Western and escape from his responsibilities toward his people, the responsibility that obliged him to teach them the good education he learned in Britain. At a point halfway between south and north, he finds himself exhausted, unable to return and unable to continue. He cannot live completely Western, and he cannot live completely Eastern. Suddenly, he decides to live with his people, and carry out his responsibilities towards them:

All my life I never chose or made decisions. Now I choose. I choose life. I shall live because there are a few people that I want to stay with for as long as possible, and because I have responsibilities to take care of. It does not matter for me whether life has meaning or not. If I cannot forgive, then I shall try to forget. I shall live by strength and cunning. And I moved my hands and feet violently and with difficulty, until my torso was above water. With all my strength remaining for me, I screamed, as if I was a comic actor acting on stage: "Help. Help." (171)

When he decides to return, it was too late; we do not know if somebody will hear him or not. This is the misery of a typical Arab intellectual who tries to reform, politically or traditionally, the life of his people. Until now the Arab attitude towards those reformers is that they are Westernized; they help the West against their own nations.

To conclude, we may say that al-Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* is an attempt to, though difficult, make a compromise between traditionalism and modernism; between the West and the East. It calls for an effective, constructive dialogue between the two ideologies where we can

meet at a point where each one could live peacefully away from the idea of struggle, conflict, or exclusionism.

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