

HEALING WITH CULTURE:
THE CASE OF
ṬAYYIB ṢĀLIḤ'S MUṢṬAFĀ SA'EEED

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*Season of Migration to the North*¹ exhibits outstanding thematic and technical artistry. On the thematic level the dual central character technique employed by Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ has stimulated continuous discussion among critics as to who is the real hero in the book, the narrator or Muṣṭafā Sa'eed. Those few critics who consider the narrator as the hero view *Season*² primarily as the tale of his rebirth.³ Others, who think of Muṣṭafā Sa'eed as the hero, argue about his individual plight, trying to determine its essence, nature and origins. Indeed, the ongoing literary debate on this issue has rendered both *Season* and its central character (Muṣṭafā Sa'eed) the most controversial literary creations ever produced in Arabic fiction.

It might be argued that Sa'eed's crisis of cultural identity is directly caused by historical circumstance: the colonial environment in which he involuntarily finds himself. *Season* itself offers some evidence to support this view. Sa'eed's entire education in Sudan, Egypt and Britain was made pos-

¹ Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davis, 6 rep. (London: Heinemann, 1985), 53-54. All further page references are to this edition.

² Henceforth, *Season of Migration to the North* will be referred to as *Season*.

³ See, for example, As'ad Khairallah's article, "The Travelling Theater or the Art of Entertaining a Doomed Caravan with Amusing Stories," in *Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North: A Casebook*, ed. Mona T. Amyuni (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1985), 95-111.

sible through the moral and financial support of the British, whose aim was to assimilate him into colonial culture so that he could act—later on—as an agent of colonial dominance in the name of his people. The colonial administration has certainly made use of Sa'eed's family situation. The story tells of his lack of true Sudanese roots. His father, we are told, belonged to a tribe that lives between the Sudan and Egypt, belonging to neither country. It was this tribe that collaborated with the British invading army led by Kitchener at the end of the 19th century to destroy the first truly indigenous Sudanese rule established by the Mahdi and his Khalifa. Sa'eed's mother had an obscure "slave" origin. It was people "without origin" like Sa'eed who could be used by the colonialists, since people with authentic Sudanese roots always rejected colonial education from the outset.⁴

Some critics admit the socio-economic damage of colonialism but argue that both the narrator and Sa'eed use the colonial historical domination as a cloak to hide their personal and moral failures. Sa'eed uses British atrocities in the Sudan to justify his crimes in the West, and the narrator, out of his indecisiveness, is about to follow Sa'eed's example.⁵ To these critics the two protagonists' personal conflict in *Season* is caused mainly by Sa'eed's and the narrator's individual failures to encounter their intrinsic inadequacies.⁶

Perhaps a better understanding of Muṣṭafā Sa'eed's crisis can be achieved if we determine whether he functions as a representative or illustrative character to achieve a work with maximum meaning. Indeed, as Scholes and Kellogg have observed, illustration and representation in narrative

⁴ *Season*, 53–54.

⁵ This, for example, is the view held by Nabīl Matar in his article, "Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*: Circles of Deceit," in *Casebook*, 113–122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.