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## A Critical Appreciation of Al-Tayyeb Salih's Novel: Seasons of Migration to the North

Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohd Yusri Mohamad Noor<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang,  
Kampus Jengka, 26400 Bandar Tun Razak Jengka, Pahang, Malaysia  
intansuzila@pahang.uitm.edu.my, mohdyusri@pahang.uitm.edu.my

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** This novel is about a human crossroad between the East and the West culture. Al-Tayyeb Salih's *Seasons of Migration to the North* is an interesting novel that can be analyzed from several points of view. This is a convenient sampling, which suits the theme of Islamization and cultural adaptation. The focus of this paper are firstly religion and assimilation; and secondly, culture and adaptation. The central character - Mustaffa Sa'eed's development and growth are set under the microscope for analysis. Thus, the appearance of the matters are coded accordingly. Each coding is then elaborated. A discourse analysis enables the growth of character to be discussed. Firstly, findings suggest that one's ability to adapt to change while adhering to faith is vital. Secondly, challenges in life are always lurking to test one's faith. In short, this paper will suggest that faith is significant in promoting assimilation and adaptation to cultural and religious challenging environment.

**Keywords:** Culture and Adaption, Religion and Assimilation

### 1. Introduction

An unnamed narrator (although one may suggest Salih, the newly returned Sudani) tells the audience the story of Mustaffa Sa'eed. The story is depicted from one who studied in London and has returned to work as a civil servant. Written by a Sudani author, the novel is suitable for a post-colonial study. There is some shaming or labelling made in the novel, which suggest the complexity of the novel. The narrator describes Mustaffa as "the black Englishman". This sets the tone of the novel.

Al-Tayyeb Salih's novel *Seasons of Migration to the North* is about a human at a crossroad between eastern and western cultures. This novel can be analyzed from several points of view which include political and colonial impact (Al-halool, 2008) and individualization (Muhammed Siddiq 1978).

#### 1.1 Objective of The Study

The objectives of this paper are:

- 1.1.1 To unfold the main character's personal conflict and development
- 1.1.2 To discuss themes of religion and assimilation, culture and adaptation in light of the main character.

### 2. Literature Review

Written four years after Sudan's independence from British colonization, on the micro-level, the author focused on the impact of colonization on self-image, self-worthiness and self-sense of belonging. The main character, Mustaffa Sa'eed, underwent these troublesome conflicts in finding himself. Al-halool (2008:31) felt the author 'dramatized the colonial past' through the narrator, Salih, through examples like 'imagines from a detached vantage the sexual

responses of a misguided intellectual towards colonizers'. Cultural theme is predominantly highlighted throughout the novel.

This novel has also often been discussed through the main character. The impact of colonization on Mustaffa Sa'eed is deep. Mustaffa Sa'eed led the suicide of three British women and the murder of the fourth. These women represent colonial rape on him and his revenge. Muhammed Siddiq (1978) blamed Mustaffa Sa'eed's mother who failed to develop him as a well-rounded Muslim man. Mustaffa Sa'eed's childhood was without a masculine figure. So his father's abandonment was to be blamed. Mustaffa Sa'eed's resentment of the female principle is strong as the mother was cold, absent of emotion and burdened him with responsibilities upon his request to study in Cairo. This made Muhammed Siddiq (1978) blame the mother rather than the absent father. This biased overview led to further critique on feminism rather than the poor masculine example.

### **3. Methodology**

The novel is conveniently sampled to suit the theme of Islamization and cultural adaptation. A discourse analysis of the novel is made and a critical analysis of the main character is presented in the discussion.

#### **3.1 Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is a method of analyzing documents of communication. It can be adopted to analyze transcript communication and texts. The critical analysis of the text can be executed to unfold targeted matters. Here, the coding is pre-selected to enable the objective of the study to be achieved.

##### **3.1.1 Selection of Codes**

The codes below are some of the themes of the novel. Thus, they are selected for discussion in the present paper. Although abuse in many aspects and misapprehension of religion are also highlighted, only the two selected themes are necessary for the present discussion.

###### **3.1.1.1 Religion and Assimilation**

The struggle between religious standards and personal faith is often portrayed in the novel. The challenges are real and the main character had to endure this while adhering to religious standards.

###### **3.1.1.2 Culture and Adaptation**

Metaphors of cultural materials are complex and presented in an intertwined series of events. The arrogant colonization of the British onto his homeland and the British people whom later became the main character's adult social circle, have pressured and pushed Mustaffa Sa'eed to the brink.

### **4. Findings and Discussions**

The findings are presented along with the discussions. This is to enable the objectives of the paper to be achieved.

#### 4.1 Critical Analysis of the Main Character

The central character Mustaffa Sa'eed, suffered from his own ambiguity of his personal perceptions of his own culture and the tenure that he endured from living in Sudan, then studied in Cairo and then London. His reaction towards these newly encountered cultures are discussed.

Mustaffa Sa'eed was never really acquainted with the culture of his homeland. His rebellious streak enabled him to attend school at a very young age. This was unthinkable by other children of similar age group. Failure to adhere to religious customs and cultural norms was his first sign of challenges in life. A person without solid cultural and religious foundation can easily be puppetized by the colonizing cultural.

Mustaffa Sa'eed's curiosity about schooling and education was the beginning of the tragic events in his life. Labelled as 'some stranger' by his own mother, Mustaffa Sa'eed received minimal parental security and guidance. As a single parent, the mother failed to feed Mustaffa Sa'eed with cultural and religious values. This vacant idea of cultural and religious essence, served as a driving force of curiosity and exploration.

In London, Mustaffa Sa'eed was well-adapted and portrayed high acceptance of the western culture and virtues. This assimilation in culture was significantly led by his feeble grasp of his local culture and religious customs. Thus, this was one of his climatic events that drove him to future downfall. He viewed the new world as a culture that used to dominate his childhood culture. This inner conflict commanded his struggles in differentiating right and wrong. Only later, he apprehended that his new world is a lie. He arrived at a conclusion where there was no superior culture, no positive impact of colonization and there was no benefit in him to continue flourishing his knowledge in London. For the second time, he rebelled.

The moment he related to the illness of the western culture, he reacted. Ann Hammond was his first victim. His next victims were Isabella Seymond and Sheila Greenwood. Purely physical, domineering, puppeteering and enforcing the continuous flow of superficial power are the core of these relationships. His victims' blind affection was imposed by the color of his skin and manly spicy body odor. This reflected his initial superficial blind affection towards colonization and his revenge against it. He sees these women as 'the germs,' the similar 'germs' that deserve punishment. His self-guilt was paid by driving these women to suicide. This suggests his thoughts that the illness of the western culture should kill their own people in its homeland.

Despite all this, Mustaffa Sa'eed's anger was still untamed. It was still burning wild in his chase for Jean Morris. This was the downfall of Mustaffa Sa'eed. This lady was not the same as the previous ladies. She was the ultimate challenge for his rebelliousness. She was the western culture and again, it dominated him. Mustaffa Sa'eed's weak soul could not overcome the challenge. He fell hard for Jean Morris that he finally allowed himself to marry Jean Morris. Sa'eed thought that the marriage would allow him to gain the power he once had but it actually sped his downfall. Jean Morris twisted him with her physical luscious body that Sa'eed could not resist. And to it, he accepted Jean Morris' challenge to kill her. She is actually the mark in his weak character – a character that failed to adapt to new knowledge, control his own emotion and life.

The second chance he received to lead a good life was also destroyed by him. This time he chose to live in a small village in Sudan. Shutting up all his past, he married a girl called Hosna binti Mahmoud. Perhaps, now he was trying to feel, learn and practice his own culture that once neglected him. But he cannot stop himself from educating and influencing his wife Hosna to the culture he was once exposed to. Hosna turned into a lady with self-determination, rebellious and claiming her rights from the old tradition. Her new character was taught by Mustaffa Sa'eed. She adored independence and self-control of her life. When Sa'eed died, she was forced to marry Wan Rayyed, an old man in his 70s. She rebelled and failed the first time, but succeeded the second time. She killed him and this was supported by Rayyed's first wife. She was influenced by Sa'eed's lifestyle and way of thinking and now she too has turned into a semi-western lady who possessed self-determination and courage.

In short, Sa'eed's reaction to the western culture can be seen in both his character and Hosna's character. The author brilliantly assimilated the idea in both characters' events of life. The whole theme of the story, perhaps simply about a man, who managed to see the new horizon in life, failed to adapt to it and "*the germ that infected him and left him broken-hearted*", it actually left him broken-hearted and anger that made him a rebellious man. However, part of his goodness was praised in the narrator's character.

#### 4.2 Religion and Assimilation; Culture and Adaptation

It is vital for one to be educated in local culture and customs. The advancement in life and living accelerate the failure to appreciate culture and religious customs. These elements should not be viewed as a drag to life and living. Mustafa has been distrustful in carrying this burden.

*"Then, four years ago, Mahmoud had given him one of his daughters in marriage. "Which daughter?" I asked my grandfather. "I think it was Hosna," he said. Then he shook his head and said, "That tribe doesn't mind to whom they marry their daughters." However, he added, as though by way of apology, that Mustafa during his whole stay in the village had never done anything which could cause offense, that he regularly attended the mosque for Friday prayers, and that he was "always ready to give of his labor and his means in glad times and sad"-this was the way in which my grandfather expressed himself."*

Mustafa seems knowledgeable of his local customs. Yet this is just on the surface as "*that tribe doesn't mind to whom they marry their daughters*" and the grandfather described him "*by way of apology.*" Although the significance towards assimilation is stressed in the novel, Allah mentioned in (أنساء سورة ال, An-Nisaa, 4:26):

*"Allah wishes to make clear (what is lawful and what is unlawful) to you, and to show you the ways of those before you, and accept your repentance, and Allah is All-Knower, All-Wise."*

(An-Nisaa 4:26)

Although education is deemed as one of the catalysts to the downfall of the main character, the propaganda is to encourage the ability to adapt to a new cultural environment. Mustafa is seen as a person who cannot adapt to the foreign culture that he could not keep to his birth culture. This lack of trust from the elders has again led to Mustafa's own conflict.

*"I did not say this to Mahjoub, though I wish I had done so, for he was intelligent; in my conceit I was afraid he would not understand. Bint Majzoub laughed. "We were afraid," she said, "you'd bring back with you an uncircumcised infidel for a wife." But Mustafa had said nothing. He had listened in silence, sometimes smiling; a smile which, I now remember, was mysterious, like someone talking to himself. "*

Despite this, Allah mentioned in (سورة المائدة, Al-Maaida, 5:16):

*“Wherewith Allah guides all those who seek His Good Pleasure to ways of peace, and He brings them out of darkness by His Will unto light and guides them to the Straight Way (Islamic Monotheism).”*

(Al-Maaida 5:16)

One may feel even without strong faith, nothing is a mist, yet religious behaviors may not be adhered. This to the eye of a non-believer is lame, but every Muslim should practice the ways of the Sunnah.

Most Muslim mothers would distant their relationship with their sons upon puberty. Mustaffa Sa’eed’s mother’s coldness was liberated when he arrived in Cairo. Mrs Robinson’s gentle hugs and warmth made Mustaffa Sa’eed rebel.

*“That was our farewell: no tears, no kisses, no fuss. Two human beings had walked along apart of the road together, each had gone his way....When I arrived in Cairo I found Mr Robinson and his wife awaiting me...I felt the woman’s arms embracing me and her lips on my cheek...her breast touching my chest, I felt- I, a boy of twelve – a vague sexual yearning I had never previously experienced. “Don’t cry, dear child,’ she had said to me, patting my head.”*

This has been viewed as among the reasons for the main character’s poor behavior. The lack of strong parental relationship has led to poor religious attitudes. Parents need to first embed the religious culture into their children in order to allow good religious practices throughout their life.

#### 4.3 Postcolonialism and Islam

Generally, discussions of fiction theory have always used western concepts such as postcolonialism, imperialism, and others. Islam and imperialism have largely been left uninvestigated by the western critics due to two reasons. Firstly, Grunebaum believed that “Muslim civilization’s greatest contribution to man’s spiritual life were [sic] offered on the verbal level. ...literature bespeaks the concept Islamic civilization formed of man” (1946: 258). Islamic literature is considered as literature written with an Islamic perspective i.e. propagating *adab*. Secondly, “by 1900, three out of four Muslims were living in European empires, while there were only four significant polities – the Ottoman domains, Persia, Morocco and Afghanistan – outside of European control” (Schulze 2000: 23). Due to the sheer number, postcolonialism has always been represented as subjugation to imperialism. Even in this narrative, the protagonist feels imperialism as benevolent and the subaltern as needful of western regulation. This is also prevalent in the current Muslim society whose physical appearance is becoming increasingly colonised. Legislations banning headscarves, for example, is a sign of such tyranny. However, postcolonial theory is also built around the concept of resistance, subversion, or opposition and resistance brings to play two opposing forces: it can be a two-edged sword. Using the Holy Qur’an such as سورة النساء , An-Nisaa, 4:26 and الاماظة سورة , Al-Maaida, 5:16, clashes between imperialism and Islam can be analysed as human folly when lacking religious fortitude. There is a lesson to be taught regarding temptation and how a simple matter such as having a different perspective may easily lead one to end with apostasy.

#### 5. Conclusion

The study of the novel’s main character enables one to explore the impact of unguided foreign culture and thoughts that may ruin one’s outlook and perspectives on life. The bedrock

of one's behavior is their knowledge of their birth culture and religion. Without a strong faith in religion and culture, one may divert from the path.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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