

Tayeb Salih's Mustafa Sa'eed:
The Southern
Invader in Icy Battlefield

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ABSTRACT

Mustafa Sa'eed says that he is an invader in icy battlefield. This implies that he is already aware of the destined battle he is fighting. What makes the battle interesting is the energy with which Mustafa Sa'eed fights despite his pre-ordained awareness of the doomed defeat in perspective. It is apparently this awareness of the discrepancy between action and consequence which leads Mustafa Sa'eed to realise that he is a lie himself in the sense that he is not known to the public (first in the north, then later in the south after his return to his homeland) as a man wearing a fighting mask.

Like Othello, Mustafa Sa'eed is an Arab African who fights a battle in the north; yet the motive for their fighting is different. Tayeb Salih remarks in an interview that the conflict in *Othello* is comparatively groundless because Othello was warmly received in the court of Sicilia and his merits were not denied in the north. Mustafa Sa'eed, on the other hand, fights a battle whose origin lies in the confrontation between the north and the south, and this battle is deeply rooted in the western history of colonisation and imperialism, which seems to breed a kind of infection in Mustafa Sa'eed, and with this infection, he invades the north.

The lack of a political dimension in *Othello* makes the conflict limited enough to call Othello a lie; yet Mustafa Sa'eed calls himself a lie as well because of the discrepancy he always realizes between the desire and achievement in his invasion. Tayeb Salih believes that Othello is a lie because he is not aware of his limitation, but Mustafa Sa'eed calls himself a lie because he is quite aware of his limitation and its show he plays with great energy.

Also, Mustafa Sa'eed knows that his fight in the north is a seasonal migration. On his return home, he carries the infection with him, and as he finds no battlefield for the show, he fights himself.

It is here that Tayeb Salih differs from his fellow Arab writers, who lead the protagonists of their novels home to settle and start afresh with a perspective (characterised by sentimentality) which counters the negation of reality in the north.

However, the point-of-view in *The Season of Migration to the North* is confused as well as confusing, because the reader doesn't know whether to sympathize with or withdraw his sympathy from the invader. This is, I believe, a major flaw in the novel which I have studied in some detail in a forthcoming publication.

“‘I’m like Othello - Arab-African’”, Mustafa Sa’eed says to Isabella Seymour in response to her question about his race being African or Asian. In agreement she comments, “‘Your nose is like the noses of Arabs in pictures, but your hair isn’t soft and yet black like that of Arabs.’” He further replies: “‘Yes, that’s me. My face is Arab like the desert of the Empty Quarter, while my head is African and teems with a mischievous childishness.’” (p. 38)¹

This is the self-portrait of the adventurer as a new young Arab-African. The story of this portrait is not only articulated by the background: the exceptional location of the Sudan in Africa and the flow of the “sacred river” from the heart of the Continent to the edge of the Sea but also by the human archetype of Othello.

Later in the novel Mustafa says “‘I am no Othello. Othello is a lie.’” (p. 95) References to Othello in *Migration* have been overlooked and often dismissed as casual, even after Tayeb himself betrayed his intention by viewing conflict in Shakespeare’s Othello as being comparatively limited.² Tayeb makes his purpose rather clear by pointing out that the origin of conflict in *Othello* is in Othello himself who creates the conflict with Desdemona. He further remarks that Othello was most welcome in Europe and he was appointed in a high military rank in Venice (Subhi Al-Sham’ah 1976: 132-133). When Mustafa Sa’eed says that he is like Othello, he intends to show that a parallel between him and Othello exists but only in the overt part of the story, and the covert pattern develops in almost a parallel contrast. This explains the discrepancy between the early reference to Othello and the later one, and justifies the writer’s design to present Mustafa Sa’eed as a multidimensional character.

Mustafa Sa’eed arrives in England with a complex background of emotional and intellectual history. This background seems to generate in him and his fellowmen “the germ of the greatest European violence”. He seems to catch this germ from a long history of European colonisation and imperialism in the Arab world and Africa. It is a history which is too well-known to need elaboration, and it comes to Mustafa Sa’eed’s mind in a flash-back. In the court Mustafa Sa’eed bursts out in a soliloquy of great eloquence, the history of which extends over a thousand years: “When Mahmoud Wad Ahmad was brought in shackles to Kitchener after his defeat at the Battle of Atbara, Kitchener said to him, “Why have you come to my country to lay waste and plunder?” It was the intruder who said this to the person whose land it was, and the owner of the

land bowed his head and said nothing. So let it be with me. In that court I hear the rattle of swords in Carthage and the clatter of hooves of Allenby's horses desecrating the ground of Jerusalem. The ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were originally set up to transport troops; the schools were started as to teach us how to say 'Yes' in their language. They imported to us the germ of the greatest European violence as seen on the Somme and at Verdun, the like of which the world had never previously known, the germ of a deadly disease that struck them more than a thousand years ago." (p. 95)

It is at this moment of emotional intensity that Mustafa Sa'eed contemplates himself as "invader", and that he revises his earlier identification with Othello: "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie." (p. 95)

At the time of Mustafa Sa'eed's arrival, Britain was just emerging from World War I, and the memories of the betrayal of Sherrif Hussein of Mecca by the British must have been quite fresh in his mind. Mustafa Sa'eed belongs to a generation who witnessed the division of the Arab world into small states, where Britain more than France had the lion's share; and Britain did not only break her promise of giving the Arab world independence from the Turks but also maintained her sovereignty over Egypt and the Sudan which were denied self-determination. These memories would have been fostered by the pictures of individual colonisers in Africa late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century. History records the atrocities of people like Eduard Schnitzer who "went native" and called himself Emin Pasha, and who was appointed by General Gordon as a governor in one of the provinces of the Sudan; Major Edmund Musgrave is another example of the savagery committed against the natives. A more notorious coloniser is Stanley, the founder of the Congo Free State, whose ruthless destruction of life in Africa brought about public protest in England.³

This is how Mustafa Sa'eed arrives with "a drop of the poison... injected into the veins of history," and how he sets the discrepancy between himself and Othello, where one arrives with poisonous resentment and another with affectionate passion for life until something goes wrong.

During his stay in England Mustafa Sa'eed's sense of history is promoted in a way which activated the poison in him and makes it fatal for all those who come close to him. History with Mustafa Sa'eed does not survive, then, as abstract force. Ironically speaking, it is enacted further

by its own originators, this time in their homeland. A most revealing remark in this context is made by Mustafa Sa'eed's tutor Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen, a founder of the Moral Rearmament movement in Oxford, a Mason, and a member of the Supreme Committee for the Protestant Missionary Societies in Africa. This is what he says: "You, Mr. Sa'eed, are the best example of the fact that our civilising mission in Africa is of no avail. After all the efforts we've made to educate you, it's as if you'd come out of the jungle for the first time." (pp. 93-4) Professor Foster-Keen's attitude typifies the pretension and hypocrisy of imperialists and colonisers who justified their presence in Africa and other parts of the world with the ideal of spreading Western civilisation the practice of which resulted in falsehood and degradation. It also shows that individual colonisers, though often free and independent of their home state, had some support for their fellowmen. His attitude also demonstrates that freelance attempts at colonisation and imperialism proved to be more useful to the colonizing state, simply because they gave it freedom to implement its purpose without being committed to official policy.

Mustafa Sa'eed's invasion is further articulated by the ordinary English citizen as represented by the jurors who included a labourer, a doctor, a farmer, a teacher, a businessman and an undertaker. Mustafa Sa'eed expresses his awareness of the existent prejudice by remarking that he would be refused as a tenant in the house of any of the jurors, and that "were his daughter to tell him she was going to marry this African, he'd have felt that the world was collapsing under his feet." (p. 94) Sheila Greenwood of Hull used to tell Mustafa Sa'eed that her mother would go mad and her father would kill her if they knew that she was in love with a black man. (p. 139)

Yet Mustafa Sa'eed's invasion is mainly articulated through his affairs with women who are attracted to him mainly, if not wholly, because of the exotic element in him, whether it is the wilderness of Africa or the desert of Arabia. Being aware of those women's cravings for fantasy, Mustafa Sa'eed allows himself to become a bait, without surrendering altogether, to be caught merely by fantasy. So the invasion turns out to be reciprocal: women invade him with the desire for the fantastic (a motivation which often stood behind colonisation and imperialism) and he invades them by responding to this desire, but with restraint. Once they are caught by the fantastic, they are in trouble because they can find

no way out of the dilemma of torture and agony, usually brought about by fantasy. In practical terms, Mustafa Sa'eed's invasion is the passive resistance with which he meets the invader and this is in fact what eventually defeated European colonisers and imperialists.

Mustafa Sa'eed responds with great restraint to sexual desire because he is fully aware of the ambivalence which determines the attraction of those women to him. For example, Ann Hammond, a student of Oriental languages at Oxford saw in him "a dark twilight like a false dawn" and "she yearned for tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons." (p.30) Similarly Sheila Greenwood, a waitress in a Soho restaurant was attracted to Mustafa Sa'eed's world because it was "so novel to her" and "The smell of burning sandalwood and incense made her dizzy; she stood for a long time laughing at her image in the mirror as she fondled the ivory necklace I had placed like a noose round her beautiful neck." (p. 35)

However Mustafa Sa'eed's involvement with Ann Hammond, Shella Greenwood and other women forms only a prelude to his involvement with Jean Morris and the world they ferociously shape together. This is how the story begins in brief:

"'You're a savage bull that does not weary of the chase,'" she said to me one day. "I am tired of your pursuing me and of my running before you. Marry me." So I married her.' (p. 33) Jean Morris asks Mustafa Sa'eed to marry her despite the fact that she says to him on the second occasion they meet that he is ugly, and that she has never seen an uglier face than his. (p. 30) Yet the crisis begins to shape itself after three years of war between the two.

For three months Jean Morris would not sleep with him, and she always enjoyed, while with him in public, flirting with Englishmen, wishing she could get from them the satisfaction she could get from him. This evidently tortured him, as he felt both frustrated and unable to wage war against her. The result is that his sense of invasion is dramatically intensified and goes out of balance. Mustafa Sa'eed expresses the situation in images which make a smooth transition from the private to the public state and effectively link them together:

"When I grasped her it was like grasping at clouds, like bedding a shooting-star, like mounting the back of a Prussian military march. That bitter smile was continually on her mouth. I would stay awake all night warring with bow and sword and spear and arrows, and in the morning I

would see the smile unchanged and would know that once again I had lost the combat. It was as though I were a slave Shahrayar you buy in the market for a dinar encountering a Scheherazade begging amidst the rubble of a city destroyed by plague. By day I lived with the theories of Keynes and Tawney and at night I resumed the war with bow and sword and spear and arrows. I saw the troops returning, filled with terror, from the war of trenches, of lice and epidemics. I saw them sowing the seeds of the next war in the Treaty of Versailles, and I saw Lloyd George lay the foundations of a public welfare state. The city was transformed into an extraordinary woman, with her symbols and her mysterious calls, towards whom I drove my camels till their entrails ached and I myself almost died of yearning for her. My bedroom was a spring-well of sorrow, the germ of a fatal disease. The infection had stricken these women a thousand years ago, but I had stirred up the latent depths of the disease until it had got out of control and had killed. The theatres of Leicester Square echoed with songs of love and gaiety, but my heart did not beat in time with them." (p. 34)

Jean Morris's death culminates the life of the germ in Mustafa Sa'eed. It is by no means a typical melodramatic event, for the germ is usually infectious enough to bring about death. The germ of violence is expected to breed violence and death, and those who survive with it die with it too, as we see in Mustafa Sa'eed's death itself. Being infectious, it kills the invaded as well as the invader, and this is what happened to many colonisers who killed the indigenous population and then got killed directly or indirectly by the same dark force.⁴

Mustafa Sa'eed is not in the least apologetic for his murderous act, and he confesses it in the court without any reluctance. His persistent confession all the way through the case's progress in the court may be considered as an indication of his honesty in comparison with the hypocrisy of other invaders, such as the colonisers or supporters of colonisation like his tutor Foster-Keen.

On one occasion Tayeb describes Mustafa Sa'eed as energy.⁵ The description would be too general and vague without a careful reading into Mustafa Sa'eed's character. Mustafa Sa'eed's invasion is colonisation and imperialism in reverse. He brings to the north what was sent to the south, acting out a similar role to that of those who earlier invaded his south. He shows that the destructive germ in the south is equally destruc-

tive in the north irrespective of the difference in time, place and agent of action. Despite the difference in climate and geography between the north and the south, the environment which breeds the germ is the same, and it is the environment of fantasy which originally launched those invaders to the south. Like Pip, the child in **Great Expectations**, when he responds to the curious questioning of the adults (his sister and Mr. Pumblechook) about Miss Havisham's surroundings, and invents a surrounding which is existent only in their fantasy (Miss Havisham feeds the dogs with veal cutlets and serves food in silver platesⁱⁱ) Mustafa Sa'eed responds to his women with the fantasy they want to have. The scene with Isabella Seymour is a good example where Mustafa Sa'eed tells her how he lost his family. First she cries for his mischief then things change as he tells her that the members of his family drowned in a boat in the Nile:

"Here something occurred which was better than expressions of pity; pity in such instances is an emotion with uncertain consequences. Her eyes brightened and she cried out ecstatically:

"The Nile."

"Yes, the Nile."

"Then you live on the banks of the Nile?"

"Yes. Our house is right on the bank of the Nile, so that when I'm lying on my bed at night I put my hand out of the window and idly play with the Nile waters till sleep overtakes me." (p.39)

Isabella Seymour is particularly amused by the story Mustafa Sa'eed fantasises about his Arab African grandfather meeting her Spanish grandmother, with him and her as the offspring of the cross marriage (p.42)

Mustafa Sa'eed's bedroom has the atmosphere of the **Arabian Nights** where the smell of burning sandalwood and incense is enticing but deadly, and as soon as a woman is caught in it, Mustafa Sa'eed begins fantasising at ease. Yet fantasising for Mustafa Sa'eed is not an easy game which he plays skilfully or mechanically to satisfy a limited desire in his life. It is rather a functional role whose internal force is originally derived from external circumstances. It is like the life process of the germ.

The narrative shows that truth has no place in the interaction between the southerner and the northerner, because the individuality and history of the one are denied by the other, and what is left for communication between the two is a fake truth which develops into a form of fantasy.

The difference between Professor Foster-Keen's conception of Mustafa Sa'eed as a jungle beast and that of those women as an exotic beast is not a difference in quality. Professor Foster-Keen's false truth is rational because of his strong conviction in the civilising mission; the women's, on the other hand, is irrational; yet this irrational is probably a residue of the rationalised but distorted conception of contemporary history as adopted by people like Foster-Keen.

In a sense it must be appealing for Mustafa himself to see his distorted life history acted on the stage, and his responsibility here is to play the role with competence to realise the full effect of the play on the other side. This is how Mustafa Sa'eed plays his role until the face and the mask become one. The scene after Mustafa Sa'eed delivers his lecture on Abu-Nuwas at Oxford highlights the effect of this intriguing interplay.

"I told them that Omar Khayyam was nothing in comparison with Abu Nuwas. I read them some of his poetry about wine in a comic oratorical style which I claimed was how Arabic poetry used to be recited in the Abbasid era. In the lecture I said that Abu-Nuwas was a Sufi mystic and that he had made of wine a symbol with which to express all his spiritual yearnings, that the longing for wine in his poetry was really a longing for self-obliteration in the Divine - all arrant nonsense with no basis of fact. However, I was inspired that evening and found the lies tripping off my tongue like sublime truths. Feeling that my elation was communicating itself to my audience, I lied more and more extravagantly." (p.143)

The audience who crowded around him after the lecture were mostly civil servants with working experience in the Arab world, men who fought with Kitchener and Allenby, and officials in the Colonial Office and the Middle East section of the Foreign Office Ann Hammond was in the audience. She dashed to Mustafa Sa'eed to express her passionate love rather than her deep appreciation. Mustafa Sa'eed was first taken by surprise, and when he recovered he responded to her, and the two started fantasising history and romanticising everything as if they were singing happily in a chorus. Mustafa Sa'eed must have surprised himself, and he comments:

"It was as if she and I were on a stage surrounded by actors who were performing minor roles. I was the hero and she was the heroine." (p.144)

Further he goes on to comment:

"Though I realized I was lying, I felt that somehow I meant what I was

saying and that she too, despite her lying, was telling the truth.” (p.144)

It is here that Mustafa Sa'eed's self-portrait as a lie can be seen as an integral part of the total narrative effect. At court Mustafa Sa'eed thinks for a moment that he should stand up and shout: “This Mustafa Sa'eed does not exist. He's an illusion, a lie. I ask of you to rule that the lie be killed.” (p.32) But in what sense is Mustafa Sa'eed a lie?

A man on the stage with a role to play is never the real man. Perhaps the real Mustafa Sa'eed is the Sudanese villager who lost his innocence after migrating to the north and who feels he can never regain it because of his long span of acting. Here it is worthwhile remembering that this vision of himself disturbs the anonymous narrator who begins to look at himself as a lie, too, and struggles with this vision (or division) until the end, where he concludes the narrative with the scream of “a comic actor shouting on the stage.”

Mustafa Sa'eed's imagined statement at court can be read as part of his awareness of the discrepancy between the reality of invasion, which he knows well, and its imitation on the stage. He would call himself a false invader in comparison with the satanic European invaders who massacred infinite numbers of Africans under a variety of false pretexts.⁶ His invasion is, after all, seasonal in the sense that its flow is limited and its ebbing is inevitable, unlike the European invasion which went on for decades. So migration to the north cannot be a real invasion, and the discrepancy is great between migration to the north and invasion into the south. It is the discrepancy between art and life which normally produces tension.

Mustafa Sa'eed is caught in a grim situation; but the novel has altogether a serious tone. Tayeb has presented his character with a dimension different, for example, in purpose from that of other characters in similar attempts by fellow Arab writers of fiction. Before Tayeb Salih, some outstanding Arab writers who were exposed to the West wrote works of fiction whose main characters made similar journeys to the north, as we find in Tawfiq al-Hakim's **A Bird from the East**, Yahya Haqqi's **Kindil Umm-Hashim**, and Suhail Idris's **The Latin Quarter**. The typical plot in the works of these writers centres around the confrontation (a word Tayeb favours) between the protagonist and the alien environment. Yet the presentation of the crisis is comparatively different. The north in those works, and it is Paris here, is romanticised

to suit the emotional formula created by those writers for their protagonists. Al-Hakim's Muhsin, Haqqi's Mustafa, as well as Idris's subhi, are all fascinated by the advanced science of the north which is highly personalized to emphasize the romantic Arab mind; while in actuality that science and all its material progress has no romance. Sooner or later protagonists get disillusioned with what allures them, and go home with a new vision of reality which emerges out of what they freshly see and cherish in their own environment.⁷ Consequently the mystic power of heritage which those protagonists dig up in their place of origin becomes overdominant leaving the scientific power, once alluring, behind in the north. Yet this shift of vision is sentimental, as it lacks the ferocious confrontation between the north and the south.

In comparison Tayeb invades the realm of cross-culture with a character whose presentation goes far beyond the easy story of romance and sentimentality.⁸ Mustafa Sa'eed arrives in London with a serious issue which has been the attraction of many serious modern writers in the last few years. He arrives and survives as a different Othello and a new invader who persistently fights a battle with little or no hope of victory.

NOTES:

- 1) Tayeb Salih, **Season of Migration to the North. The Wedding of Zein**, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Quartet Books, 1980). References are made to page number and integrated into the text in parenthesis.
- 2) "Tayeb Salih as a Novelist and Critic, an Interview" in **Tayeb Salih, the Genius of the Arabic Novel** (Beirut: Dar-al-Awdah, 1976), pp. 132-3.
- 3) "In February 1904, there was a wave of shock from Westminster, as the damning Casement Report on the Congo was released by the British Government." Richard Hall, **Stanley: An Adventurer Explored** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) p.353.
- 4) E.M. Forster's comment on T.L. Lawrence saying that he fled from the progress of industrialism" into the deserts of Arabia and the last of the romantic wars, in the search of oldtime adventure, and later on into the deserts of his own heart."
E.M.Forster, "English Prose between 1918-1939" in **Two Cheers for**

Democracy (London: Edward Arnold, 1972)

- 5) "Muhyi-al-Din Subhi and Khaldoun al-Sham'ah, "Tayeb Salih as a Novelist and Critic: an Interview" in **Tayeb Salih, Genius of the Arabic Novel** ed. Ahmad Sa'eed Mohammadiyyah (Beirut: Dar al-Awdah, 1976), p. 128.
- 6) In **Heart of Darkness**, Kurtz slaughters whole villages of Congolese and the pilgrims (ironically called so by Conrad) rejoice in "the glorious slaughter" carried out by his followers. Marlow is shocked to learn from the Russian, Kurtz's follower that the African heads outside the master's hut are those of rebels. He also remarks that further reference beside rebels would be enemies and the like in order to justify that natives be killed. Joseph Conrad, **Youth, Heart of Darkness and the End of the Tether** (1902; rpt. London: J.M. Dent 1967), p. 66.
- 7) For example, we find that Isma'il's foreign tutor points out to him that the spirit of a pharo, a sage as well as a physician, is embodied in him (Isma'il) and that his backward homecountry is urgently in need of his talents. Also Muhsin is reminded by Evan that the great architecture of the Pyramids demonstrate the ability of the old Egyptians to see the interrelationship between theoretical and applied science.
- 8) Romance is used here mainly to show the fascination which the European background (metaphorically the north) exercises on those protagonists. Sentimentality is related more to the attitude those protagonists develop towards their own culture and heritage in the aftermath of the crisis, as they return home.

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