

Tayeb Salih and Wad Hamid: An Alternation of Vision

Mohammad Shaheen*

*** Ph. D. in English Literature from Cambridge University - England.
Professor in the Department of English - Jordan University.**

abstract

Interaction between character and background is a main characteristic of Tayeb Salih's fiction. This is how the village of Wad Hamid - the origin of all Tayeb Salih's fiction plays an integral role in the narration.

Life in Wad Hamid seems to be mainly shaped by the irrational existence which the village exercises on its community. The interplay between village and community results in a unified structure of feeling where the life of one simultaneously enters into that of the other. On the whole people in Wad Hamid are happy despite the harsh circumstances of living which they inevitably experience, and their happiness is mainly rooted in the unified communal spirit they face life with. **The Wedding of Zein** makes us see how people enjoy life in Wad Hamid as a mystic rhythm.

But this is only one side of Tayeb Salih's vision; and, once life in Wad Hamid is disrupted by an external element, the joyful spirit becomes no longer dominant. Mustafa Sa'eed is evidently an intruder who disrupts the rhythmic life in Wad Hamid, and consequently enacts the other side of the author's vision. It is here in **The Season of Migration to the North** with its ironic vision, where one can see that the reality of life in Wad Hamid is not as static as its community believed it to be. One wonders whether Tayeb Salih directs his irony at the irrationality which seems to determine life in Wad Hamid or at the sentimentality which characterizes the picture of migration given by his fellow Arab writers (or both).

Speaking of his loyalty to the community of Wad Hamid, at the point of writing **The Wedding of Zein**, Tayeb Salih says:

"I wanted to write with the purpose of celebrating a community that I knew and loved. I wanted to express my gratitude to that community by celebrating it in a narrative; a narrative actually based on the fact that life is a kind of pageant." (Subhi, Al-Sham'ah, 1972: 123)

This authorial voice is evidently illuminating for an analytical reading of **The Wedding of Zein**. It certainly tells us that the village of Wad Hamid and its community form an integral part of all Tayeb Salih's fiction.

Early in his literary career Tayeb Salih wrote a short narrative which tells the story of the village and the life of its people. From this narrative, the Doum Tree of Wad Hamid, we learn about the origin of the village. Wad Hamid, a saint called **walli** in Arabic, was the slave of a pagan. In anticipation of being caught while practicing his prayers (**ibadah**) and consequently killed by his pagan master, Wad Hamid decided to escape. He put his prayer mat on the Nile and squatted on it until it landed at a place where the village of Wad Hamid is now. Ever since, the life of the village has been dominated by the spirit of this **walli**, and that of other **wallis** who emerge in the village every now and then. The tomb of Wad Hamid is erected in the village with the Doum Tree (which becomes as sacred as Wad Hamid himself) casting its shadow on the tomb and (metaphorically, of course) over the whole village. Wherever the people of Wad Hamid go, they take with them the spirit of the **walli** which casts its blessing on them even in dreams. In all their troubles and sorrows they turn to Wad Hamid.

The story tells us of the failing attempts by successive governments to remove the tree so that alanding place for a steamer or a water pump would be erected in its place. In every attempt villagers stand as one man in the face of what they consider a threat to the only sacred tree and shrine of the village, and in one of these attempts the situation becomes so critical that it leads to the fall of the government altogether.

When the visitor to the village asks the narrator (who lives in the village whether the tree would ever be removed, the answer is that there would be no need for its removal because there is always room for all: the tree, the steamer and the water pump Together. Thus the story concludes, with the compromising tone of reconciliation which seems to distract the villagers from the harsh reality they actually experience. This tone is characteristic of the religious belief in Tayeb Salih's fiction. It is a fusion of the secular and the sacred. One may possibly envisage it as a mixture of the mystic and the popular elements in religion and life whose interplay yields a special code of communication between villagers. In general terms the code is marked by tolerance and affection which may not be found in

traditional belief.

The Wedding of Zein shows an extended picture of this background where the life of mystic Islam gains expansion. It has a living **walli**, al-Haneen, who is believed by the villagers to be Allah's **walli**. The most intimate villager to Al-Haneen is Al-Zein, who, in his way, is Semi-Walli. Between the two lies the blessing which **embraces** the whole village with a kind of grace called in Arabic **barakah** 1.

On one occasion al-Haneen suddenly appears in a fatal row between al-Zein and Seif-al-Din, and he saves the life of one if not the lives of both. It is al-Haneen's intimacy with al-Zein which makes the villagers tolerate much of the buffoonery of al-Zein, and with the same intimacy al-Haneen tames much of al-Zein's occasional extravagance. al-Haneen's blessing is further extended to those young men who represent the negative forces of life in the village like Seif-al-Din and Mahjub, who gradually become sensible, and consequently reconcile themselves to the communal spirit of the village. More important is al-Haneen's prediction that the village will have a prosperous year and that al-Zein will marry the most beautiful girl in the village. The realization of the two predictions intensifies the mystic spirit of this belief, which is only partly religious.

In contrast to this picture is that of the traditional belief as represented by the Imam who, like most Imams, is a graduate of al-Azhar. The Imam's place is limited to the mosque from whose pulpit he, perhaps unconsciously, can let his retaliation (for being alienated) fall over the villagers on Friday, enacting certain scenes of punishment from the Koran. This is demonstrated by the effect the Imam's preaching (**khutbah**) leaves on villagers:

"Each would leave the mosque after Friday prayers boggle-eyed, feeling all of a sudden that the flow of life had come to a stop. Each looking at his field with its date palms, its trees and crops, would experience no feeling of joy within himself. Everything, he would feel, was incidental, transitory, the life he was leading with its joy and sorrows merely a bridge to another world, and he would stop for a while to ask himself what preparations he had made for that other world" 2.

Outside the mosque, the Imam has little or nothing to do with the villagers; and, unlike al-Haneen who is a kind of catalyst in the village, the Imam has no spiritual dominion over the life of the community. Most of al-Haneen's worship and devotion are made not in the mosque, but outside the village altogether, when he retreats for six months, allowing to know his whereabouts. al-Zein shuns the Imam as much as possible, and when he comes across him, he turns aside from him, and we know that al-Zein does not go to the mosque,.

The only occasion the Imam and the villagers are in full congregation is

at the wedding of al-Zein, where the Imam ironically reads the verses from the Koran relevant to the miracle of the Virgin Mary:

“‘And shake toward thee the trunk of the palm tree, it will drop upon thee fresh dates fit to gather.’” (pp. 219-20)

It is worthwhile noting here that the way the Imam approaches religion, in contradiction to orthodox religion, is what determines the degree of intimacy between him and the villagers. The Imam is evidently aware of the fact that the flux of life in the village is stronger than his vindictive preaching, and his silence over what happens around him implies that he finds no alternative but to become part of the jubilee where there is enough room even for him. This is shown from the scene in the background of the wedding:

“The girls of ‘the Oasis’ sang and danced in the hearing and under the very eyes of the Imam. The Sheiks were reading the Koran in one house, the girls danced and sang in another; the professional chanters rapped their tambourines in one house, the young men drank in another...” (p. 257)

This recalls what the villager narrator in the *Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* says about the availability of room for all, where contraries are reconciled in harmony.

However, mystic Islam is treated differently in Tayeb Salih's major work of fiction: **Season of Migration to the North**. Its picture goes beyond the usual rhythmic life experienced by the community of the village normally. It is the other side of the picture brought about as a result of having this rhythmic life disrupted by an external element. This can be demonstrated by examining in retrospect the tragic event which befalls the village, in order to see how the tragedy is obliquely caused by the intrusion of a foreign element into the village; and in the absence of the mystic power of resistance, the village finds itself vulnerable to external forces of evil.

In **Season of Migration to the North** the main characteristics of life in Wad Hamid still prevail. For example, Sheikh Ahmad is pious and gentle. Wad Rayyes and Bint Majzoub are voluptuous, yet they are friendly with Sheikh Ahmad and the other villagers. Bint Majzoub and Wad Rayyes discuss sex and frivolous matters in front of the most serious man in the village, Sheikh Ahmad, without any reservation; and the gaiety of the scene is so overwhelming that no ill-feelings are aroused in the Sheikh, who is obviously a good Muslim. When Bint Majzoub talks about Sheikh Ahmad in his absence she does so with reverence and affection. Similarly Sheikh Ahmad and Wad Rayyes have mutual respect for each other, and Sheikh Ahmad believes that Wad Rayyes is a helpful and sincere member of the community. In brief the villagers relate to each

other by the blessing force which seems to assimilate all differences. The result is a rhythm of communal life which does not, unfortunately, prevail for long.

Mustafa Sa'eed's intrusion into the life of Wad Hamid is obliquely responsible for the tragedy. The villagers, from Sheikh Ahmad to Bint Majzoub, intuitively feel that Mustafa Sa'eed is a stranger to them. All their references to him are an irrational evasion of what they feel about him but cannot explicitly express in concrete terms. Mahjoub says to the narrator that Mustafa is a deep one, a description which is too general to have any specific reference. Sheikh Ahmad expresses great appreciation for Mustafa Sa'eed's co-operative spirit and his fulfillment of religious duties, but obviously has reservation towards Husna Mahmoud's family, who have no objection (by implication have loose morality) for marrying their daughters to strangers like Mustafa Sa'eed. Bint Majzoub refers to Mustafa Sa'eed as a stranger, and this is how he is known among the villagers.

Mustafa Sa'eed goes to Friday prayers every week, but this leads him nowhere in the way of being accepted by the villagers as one of them. Duty is something and faith is something else, and the gap between them is the same as the gap between Mustafa Sa'eed and the villagers who sense the strangeness in him, despite the fact that he appears to them free from the impact of the foreign background he had been previously exposed to before coming to live in their Wad Hamid.

When the narrator goes back to Wad Hamid the rhythm between him and the villagers catches immediately, and this is shown in his answers to their questions about the England he left behind; his over-simplification is not only deliberate but spontaneous also, as if the span of time between his departure and return makes little or no disruption in this rhythm. The villagers feel that their fellow villager has not changed. Yet they do not feel the same about Mustafa Sa'eed when he comes to live among them. The villagers give the narrator a warm reception not only because he originally belongs to their village but also for making them believe that he is free from any foreign influence that might be lurking in the background of his mind. Mustafa Sa'eed, on the other hand, enters the village with the heavy burden of the past which he tries to suppress from the villagers for convenience, as Tayeb surely wants us to believe.

Watching the sense of estrangement between Mustafa Sa'eed and the villagers, the narrator oscillates between melancholy and fascination, and this is how the tension in the novel begins and develops. In this scene the narrator watches in silence his other self which has been duly submerged in order to maintain the rhythm between him and the villagers. This self begins to emerge with the narrator's gradual involvement in Mustafa Sa'eed's story. Eventually the rhythm in the narrator is disrupted with the

death of Husna and Wad Rayyes. For example, the narrator is rebuked by his mother who believes that he came from khartoum not because of his concern for the children, as he tells her, but rather out of his concern for Husna. Similarly he is estranged by his lifelong friend Mahjouab with whom the fight leaves him at one point unconscious. Also the affection between him and his grandfather is never the same. Meanwhile this disruption of rhythm in the narrator's life is further articulated by the whole disruption of rhythm in the village life which inevitably follows. How does Mustafa Sa'eed disrupt the rhythm of life in Wad Hamid? In an interview Tayeb Salih says that Mustafa Sa'eed is an external element in the life of the village, and if one happens to view him in reverse (to see his character upsidedown) one realizes that he comes to the village as a colonialist. (Subhi, Al-Sham'ah, 1972: 126) Tayeb Salih, however, makes no elaboration on this clue which is as enigmatic as the narrator's character itself.

Mustafa Sa'eed goes to England with the European germ of colonisation in him which is, to use his own words, a thousand years old. He voluntarily gives himself the role of fighting this germ which he sees alive in those women he involves himself with, in his Oxford Professor Foster-Keen, and even in the jury and witnesses in the court. He is evidently exhausted with the fight and its consequences. After he serves his term of imprisonment he travels around the world presumably in quest of peace. He comes to Wad Hamid to seek peace as he himself explicitly puts it, but with the germ still alive in him. In appearance he attempts to integrate himself into the village, in actuality he is cut off from its communal consciousness. He builds himself a house whose design and luxurious furniture make it distinguished from any house in Wad Hamid and even in the Sudan. He lives with his secrets locked up in a room until he comes across the narrator and inflicts those secrets upon him.

The contradiction between Mustafa Sa'eed and the Wad Hamid villagers can be always traced to the discrepancy between his rational personality and the irrational existence of the village. Mrs. Robinson notices that he is humourless and always preoccupied with intellectual matters (p. 25). He confesses to the narrator that within his breast "was a hard, cold feeling - as if it had been cast in rock" (p. 26). A fellow female student who fell in love with him while he was an undergraduate in Cairo told him when she knew him better that he was "not a human being" but rather "a heartless machine" (p. 28). And before passing sentence on him, the judge remarks "He is an intelligent fool" (p. 111). With all these qualities in Mustafa Sa'eed it is not expected that a harmonious contact with the villagers would be in view.

Like the 'Umdah and the Imam in Tayeb Salih's fiction, Mustafa Sa'eed remains marginal to the life of the village community. The three are in the community but not of it. They are there because there is room

for all. Mustafa Sa'eed is, however, distinguished from them on the basis of his vitality. Tayeb Salih comments on Mustafa Sa'eed outside the novel as energy, and he identifies him with energy in nature which is transformed rather than annihilated. (Subhi, Al-Sham'ah, 1972; 128)

This energy in Mustafa Sa'eed is extended to the two closest people to him, his wife and his friend, the narrator. For Husna, marriage ought to be based on understanding, and this is supposedly the rational aspect she acquired from her husband, but it is not the same for Wad Rayyes, who looks at marriage as irrational animalism. Husna is probably the first woman in Wad Hamid to achieve such a degree of emancipation by resisting her father's wish and fighting marriage by force with such violence.

Mustafa Sa'eed's story, with its gripping eventful life, generates in the narrator a new sensibility. On one occasion he confesses:

"And thus too I experience a remote feeling of fear, fear that it is just conceivable that simplicity is not everything" (p. 50).

"That simplicity is not everything" can be taken as a clue for a fresh reading of *Season of Migration to the North*. Tayeb Salih's emphasis in this novel is presumably on a complex vision rather than on the usual reality of the central background of his previous works of fiction. This vision may be simply described as the negation of reality in Wad Hamid. It is as if Tayeb Salih was, at the time of writing this novel, questioning the effect of this simplicity and its permanent validity. One question which the novel implies early in the narrative is whether simplicity protects Wad Hamid this time! Another question, obviously relevant to the previous one, is whether Mustafa Sa'eed, his energy and his wife are wholly responsible for the tragic event brought upon the village as it is often believed.

The villagers are equally responsible for what happens, and they share a collective rather than individual responsibility. Wad Rayyes would not possibly have opted to go through the trouble of marrying Husna had he not taken the villagers' moral support for granted; and though Sheikh Ahmad, for example, advises Wad Rayyes against the marriage he cries at his death and curses women (indirectly Husna) who cause such evil as Wad Rayyes's death. The villagers unanimously shift the blame on Husna as they have a collective irrational conscience. Even Bint Majzoub, the most emancipated woman in the village, holds a typical villager's view on the situation when she remarks that Husna had no reason for rejecting Wad Rayyes since she had accepted a foreigner as husband (Mustafa). The fact that Wad Rayyes changes women as he changes donkeys seems to have no effect on the villagers so as to make them see the whole situation from an objective point of view. The only voice which expresses antipathy for Wad Rayyes and indifference to his

death is that of his eldest wife, Mabrouka. Her voice implicitly stands for the point of view articulated by the narrator in criticism of Wad Rayyes's habit of changing women. The account of Mabrouka's response to the situation is given by Bint Majzoub with such disbelieving humour as to make the reader overlook the seriousness of the situation. This is how the scene is presented:

"She wept long and bitterly; then, smiling through her tears, she said, 'The strange thing about it is that his eldest wife Mabrouka didn't wake up at all, despite all the shouting that brought people right from the far end of the village. When I went to her and shook her, she raised her head and said, 'Bint Majzoub, what's brought you at this hour?' 'Get up,' I said to her. 'There's been a murder in your house.' 'Whose murder?' she said. 'Bint Mahmoud has killed Wad Rayyes and then killed herself,' I said to her. 'Good riddance!' she said and went back to sleep, and we could hear her snoring while we were busy preparing Bint Mahmoud for burial. When the people returned from the burial, we found Mabrouka sitting drinking her morning coffee. When some of the women wanted to commiserate with her she yelled, 'Women, let everyone of you go about her business. Wad Rayyes dug his grave with his own hands, and Bint Mahmoud, God's blessings be upon her, paid him out in full.'"

The name Mabrouka is not, I think, accidental. al-Zein is called by al-Haneen Mabrouk, of which the nearest translation in English is "the blessed one." Mabrouka and Mabrouk are derived from one source *baraka* whose literal translation from Arabic into English is nearer to grace. *Baraka* is a manifestation of the sainthood of the *walli* in mystic Islam. J. Spencer Trimingham comments on this point:

"The saints (*wallis*) are people 'honoured' by God with His special favour, and the way in which this honour is manifested is through their possession of *baraka*, whereby miracles (*karamat*) are performed on their behalf. A miracle (*karama*) is an honour." (Trimingham, 1965: 127)

This, of course, applies to al-Haneen, whose *baraka* is bestowed on the village one year, and who saves the village a tragedy which would be similar to that of Wad Rayyes and Husna, when he suddenly appears to stop the fight between Seif-el-Din and al-Zein. also al-Zein receives the *baraka* indirectly through al-Haneen, and the villagers call him God's Prophet al-Khidr. However *baraka*, as Trimingham remarks "was not only used to do good but could be used destructively to punish evil-doers." Assuming Mabrouka had been in possession of *baraka*, she must have used it against Wad Rayyes.

In *Season of Migration to the North* Wad Hamid seems to have no *baraka* of a living *walli* to protect it from evil and the dead *walli* equally seems to be indifferent this time. Sheikh Ahmad is only a pious Muslim

with no **baraka** to prevent the marriage between Wad Rayyes and Husna from happening. Yet the villagers would expect the miracle to have happened (so that the couple would be saved) had any of them been awake to prevent the murder. Abdul-Karim quarrels with Bakri and says to him.

"A murder happens next door to you... and you sleep right through it? It was the same thing with the whole village that night - it was as though they'd been visited by devils" (p. 129).

When the narrator from the village tells the visitor to Wad Hamid that there is room for all in the village, he probably implies that **baraka** would look after all, but without realizing perhaps that it may not be there all the time to do so, or if it is there at the time of evil-doing, it may be used to punish the evil-doer rather than to save him. Like all irrational phenomena **baraka** is suspended, as it is released, suddenly, and only simple people can take it for granted. At least this is realized by Tayeb Salih and his narrator in *Season of Migration to the North* if not by the villagers.

Viewing Tayeb Salih's major work of fiction in this perspective, one would suggest that neither the narrator nor his creator see Wad Hamid (even with the evil inflicted upon it) as being wholly void of any **baraka**. The villagers' unified irrational response at the time of evil (though it is wrong if judged from a rational moral point of view) is in itself a **baraka** or a residue of a **baraka**. Speaking of this novel as a later achievement in his fiction, Tayeb Salih would say that it is a different celebration of a community he further knew and loved. Perhaps he would leave his narrator in Wad Hamid to wait for the return of the **barak** from its seasonal migration.

Notes

1. For details about **baraka** see J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan* (London, 1965), p. 128. Trimingham's study is obviously informative, but his general description of Islam in the Sudan being mainly what he calls popular Islam lacks certain validity, for there is no such division as popular and orthodox Islam. Also such division can not be confined to the Sudan or Africa. Trimingham's popular Islam may be viewed as a practice of religion limited by circumstances of living, and it is a lower performance of religion dominated by "irrationality of behaviour. In a recent study Ahmad A. Nasr adopts the same division, but no sooner does he establish his argument than he lapses into a different division of characters altogether, where he views them as religious and irreligious, and detects a causal relationship between irreligiosity and disastrous ends which befall characters. "Popular Islam in Tayeb Salih", *JOURNAL OF ARABIC LITERATURE*, 22 (1981), 88-103, 99.
2. Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North and the Wedding of Zein*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Quartet Books, 1980). p. 233. Further references from the two novels are taken from this edition. Page Number follows the reference in parenthesis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Nasr, Ahmad A. "Popular Islam in Tayeb Salih", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 22 (1981), 88-103, 99.
 2. Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North and The Wedding of Zein*. (trans. Denys Johnson Davies, London: Quartet Books, 1980.
 3. Subhi, Muhyi-al-Din and al-Sham'ah, Mohammadiyyah (ed.) *Tayeb Salih: Abqary Al-Riwayah Al-Arabiyyah* (Tayeb Salih - Genius of the Arabic Novel) Beirut: Dar Al-Awdah, 1972.
 4. Trimingham, Spencer J. *Islam in the Sudan*. London: 1965.
-