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EAST WEST CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AS WAR OF THE SEXES

2. Tayeb Salih’s novel “Season of Migration…” traveling to Theatre in the North

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When the Empire Writes Back, taking up Edward Said’s challenge to renarrate their cultural heritage and domesticate Western forms, authors of former British colonies can choose from several already proven positions:

1. writing adaptations of Western canonical texts;
2. writing stories from their own culture within a framework of conventional Western literary forms;
3. experimenting with those conventions;
4. forsaking any sort of exogenous influence in the form and methods of writing.

All these writers are involved in a critical dialogue between coloniser and colonized while expressing their point of view in their literature. Timothy Brennan, in his exciting article The National Longing for Form, offers us an ideological framework of these third world-novels where authors are either driven by nostalgia “outright attacks on independence” (V.S.Naipaul), possess a vigorously anti-colonial attitude “works emphasizing native culture” (Tayeb Salih and Ngugi wa Thiong’o), or present their work in “a cosmopolitan style and perspective” (Garcia Marquez, Wole Soyinka and Salman Rushdie.)

This mentioning in passing of Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih and his Season of Migration to the North is surprising. The author marks, not without reason, as intertextual influences both Shakespeare (King Lear and Richard III) and Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. The novel is furthermore very subtle in its writing strategies, its East-West points of view often are conflicting or at least ambivalent and its reception-history is complicated. Politically criticized in Sudan and banned in Egypt and the Gulf States for its sexual frankness when the book was publicized in Arabic in 1966, it later sold millions of copies throughout Arabic countries and the rest of the world. The Motherland seemed not so pleased either when the English translation appeared a year later. Critics ignored the novel, and one even dismissed it as badly written and too episodic, “a common weakness in all Arabic writing”.

Colonial Humiliation

Colonial Humiliation

Marked as a turning point in 20th century travel-narratives that focus on East-West encounters, Season of Migration to the North was the first example of a non-Western novel dealing with the experience of exile and colonial humiliation, but above all with the loss of identity of a ‘native outsider’, both in the European diaspora and the homeland. Although the writer himself acknowledged in his foreword to the English edition “the underlying sense of desperation and gloom in the novel”, coinciding with political upheavals in Sudan after the country became independent in 1955, the novel can hardly be called a vigorously anti-colonial work and the emphasizing of native culture against the old colonial powers seems an understandable strategy within the creation of the idea of a nationhood. Binding together disparate time and space elements, Tayeb Salih not only provides in his text a plurality of perspectives and voices but also a dialectic of various temporalities leading to a profound experience of being located in a space of the in-between for the different characters and the readers.

It so happened that last year after more than thirty years, the Motherland took up a promising dialogue, when it came back to Tayeb Salih’s novel and its intriguing forms and themes.

Director William Galinsky of the National Theatre traveled to Sudan to discuss a stage-adaptation of Season of Migration to the North on which he was working together with Nigerian author Biyi Bandele. He stayed for three weeks, filmed the villages, the desert and, I guess, the Nile, and wrote and showed the first of three parts in London. Writing to me about the problems of the adaptation, he mentioned the village scenes from the sixties which could “almost be lifted from the novel and put on stage” in contrast with the story in London in the 1920s where the black hero of the novel seduces one white English woman after the other and in the end kills the (English) wife he married.

When I confronted my Sudanese students with his problem, during a workshop last December in Khartoum, they were hardly interested. Galinsky himself had chosen as a starting point and perspective the narrator who reconstructs the story of the hero Mustafa Sa’eed, first in London and later in his village in the North of Sudan. Years after the events in the late 1950s that comprises the death of the hero and that of his Sudanese wife Hosna, the narrator tries to understand what happened to all of them.
Asked where they would start the adaptation, the female students focused mostly on the killing of Hosna, the village girl that refused to adapt again to traditional village life after her husband had disappeared; one opted for the narrator lost in a drunken wild desert party.

Some others, males, chose the hero’s swimming in the Nile, the river of no return, as their focal point; others again chose the hilarious village scenes with the elderly talking sex or the couple of male friends getting drunk. Only two considered scenes from the ‘English’ life of the hero. In a spontaneous manner they took what they knew and recognized as belonging to reality and daily life practice in Sudan.

In the English part of the novel the hero is very faraway indeed. But even more important, this same hero has chosen for himself to live the role of the stereotyped black in what I like to call, if one can say such things about literary characters, a hysterical process of Self-Orientalization: living out the Western clichés of the wild tiger in the dark jungle. This role-playing must have created ambivalence among the Sudanese students: it was probably either too literary, too artificial or too touchy and too painful one way or the other. Sudanese society lives in all shades of white and black but is still very much aware of ethnic differences, contained in the identity-mix of Arabic/Islam/African/Christian background but sustained by the North-South division: Arab-African.

In this article I want to offer some theoretical outlines that in het end helped me to understand the construction of the novel and explain, hopefully, Galinsky’s problem with the dramaturgy of the English scenes.

I concentrate on:
1. Nation and exile as topos in the novel
2. Identities / mimicry and localized positions
3. Orientalization and sexual desire

Nation as Construction

“How could the most universally legitimate political ideology of our time, nationalism, fail to become a topos in postwar fiction? And how could its existence be ignored or replaced by the topos of exile, nationalism’s opposite,” Timothy Brennan asks himself. 3
It seems more of a rhetoric question when we think about exile no longer described by Western artists looking for different surroundings, but as that position lived by those displaced for political and economic reasons. Away from home, memories and longing shape ‘the nation’ both as ‘the lived and living locality of a culture’ to use terms of Homi Bhabha, and in “geographies created by desire”, producing documents “with multiple myriad components” of national consciousness.

In the case of Tayeb Salih’s novel, the Sudanese scholar Abuelgassim Gor pointed to the dimensions of the writing style in which “Sudanese latent culture, norms, customs and behaviour rises bottom up from the community to the surface.”

Brennan offers us another important notion, when he writes about language, style and the “the many words in the exile family that divide themselves between an archaic and literary sense and a modern political one: for example émigré versus immigrant, wanderer versus refugee, exodus versus flight etc.”

This apparently historical division, repeating itself also in tragic and comic modalities, gives a lead to the double ‘realities’ and ‘realisms’ which Tayeb Salih created in his novel: one of the emigré, the wanderer (Wanderlust) within an archaic, more tragic sense, and one in a political modern mood: the world of the postwar immigrant, the temporary refugee, the ex-student. Both modalities literally belong in different kinds of narration: that of the epic-heroic dimension of the wanderer - like the biblical lost son, and that of its parody in the genre of the novel, as Michael Bakhtin puts it, describing in a ‘journalistic’ way the ups and downs of the immigrant worker, the student, leaving and returning, and the problems of relocation in the homeland.

In Tayeb Salih’s book both modalities and types of character are present and named properly: Mustafa Sa’eed and The (nameless) Narrator. The first reigns in a ‘heroic narrative’, as Edward Said called the ‘romantic tales of the nation’ with (reinvented) origins and telos, the other in a postcolonial domain of ‘sorting things out’ with an open ended present and a useable past, in a situation of not this/not that, which creates uncertainty and invisibility: the experience of the world of the in-between.

The combination of the two sorts of narration leads in Season not only to this exciting and experimental, and ultimately postmodern way of episodic writing, it also offers two styles of self-reflection, two life-styles one would like to say,
which find their identity both in the “movement of the solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the text with the world outside” as Benedict Anderson states.

But where the epic style concentrates on “beginning”, “first”, “founder”, “that which occurred earlier”, the novelistic approach, reflecting the “one, yet many” of national life directed itself to an ‘open ended present’, not so much as representing national identity but trying to create one.8

It seems clear that the movement through the landscape of Mustafa Sa’eed offers a classic case of a heroic route, a rite of passage through the liminal phase, here structured by contemporary, colonial conditions of male and sexual humiliation and revenge. His goal of liberating Africa with his penis succeeds splendidly, the women in London fall for him the moment they set eyes on him: “An African Giant in the English scene”, notes the narrator.

Mustafa Sa’eed, in post-Victorian pre-war London, offers an erotic dedication to his lovers that transgresses the boundaries of the white domain of sexual possibilities. But the Wagnerian Liebestod, the narrator speaks about the Freudian duality between Eros and Thanatos, that his wife forces from him through his knife, should warn us. The heroic dimension of the love-life of Mustafa Sa’eed takes the shape of a literary construct, a constructed male phantasmagoria offered by the author and presumably highly effective to the (male) readers. (That they are European or Arabic does not matter much, I suppose.)

Compared with this passionate hero, the position of the narrator is emotionally an empty one. In a way he is a double of the hero, but also his shadow in the heroic narrative. For another, a post-war generation his stay in England was already more matter of fact and apparently without adventures or strong memories. Writing a dissertation on an unknown English poet did not help much to explore and fix an identity after coming home. If he is something, he is a poet celebrating the happy landscape of his youth. His social position as a bureaucrat in Khartoum is dismissed in his village as useless; as useless as he is as an intellectual who in the eyes of the village males cannot decide on anything. The return of the native carries the potential ambiguous position of the ‘native outsider’: we are all tourists, says Homi Bhabha.

The narration about exile and identity develops thus along two lines: the romantic epic narrative of Mustafa Sa’eed is a story driven to a tragic end, both
archaic and not-real; the modern story of the narrator is one of a circular stagnation, of experienced ambivalence and hybridity.

**Identity/Mimicry**

Intellectuals in Sudan in the time of independence, in the middle of the 20th Century, lived in a devastating position of post colonial embarrassment losing their inner wisdom and often becoming native outsiders. From this oppressive climate the character of Tayib Saleh was borne: the native stranger who comes back from Europe where fishes die of the cold, looking for the heat in the desert and the sun in the North, not sure if the native population was going to accept him them.

Abuelgassim Gor is speaking, not without a romantic impetus, of Mustafa Sa’eed, who returned to Sudan and lived as a farmer, while the narrator studied in England and wrote his dissertation.

Gor’s opposing of intellectuals and farmers, as ‘fishes dying of the cold’ against those living for ‘the heat of the desert and the sun’, touches upon a typical ideological problem of just those intellectuals: how to deal with a double past after returning to the homeland, the nation?

In search of a national identity, nationalism is most of all an urban movement, Bruce King points out, but “it identifies with the rural areas as a source of authenticity, finding in the “folk” the attitudes, beliefs, customs and language to create a sense of national unity among people who have other loyalties. Nationalism aims at (…) rejection of the cosmopolitan upper classes, intellectuals and others likely to be influenced by foreign ideas.”

In the book Mustafa Sa’eed adopts this same attitude. Life in the village must offer salvation. Not only does the hero hides his history, it has also indeed become his story only, a past that functions as a mirror for the narrator who has to find his way in the present in the process of opening and evaluating *the story of my live by Mustafa Sa’eed*. Two intellectuals much influenced by ‘foreign ideas’ are lost near the river Nile-flowing from South to North.

In the end it is *Nature* (the desert, the river, the family-house, the friendships) that triumphs over *Mind*. It seems remarkable that the author does not allow the two intellectuals a form of exchange about the political situation in their home-country or, at least, their comments on the traditional way of life in the village.
Their main topic is not the hero’s flamboyant intellectual career, but his erotic life in London and his pointed profiling as the ‘Oriental lover’ with all the attributes he and the women can imagine, in a fantastic scenario of sex and lust. In an at first shocking way, the self-representation assembles the Western imaginary around male blackness, including the positions of Western women in its scenario as part of the collective literary memory: the slave-girl, the Christian housewife, the arrogant wife of the colonizer and the lower-class servant-girl. They speak in a language of sexual stereotypes, which the author calls hilarious but which nevertheless is still at work between the North/West and South/East as recent Sudanese novels on the same themes of migration, and blackness and sexuality prove.

Long before feminist and postcolonial theory re-invented the term mimicry as a willful play with gender and intercultural positions, the writer offered them already in his novel. In a form of excessive mimicry, the character of Mustafa Sa’eed occupies an aggressive and transgressive position. When postcolonial mimicry as a concept aims at a “copying of the colonizing culture, behaviour, manners and values by the colonized containing both mockery and a certain ‘menace’, a blurred copy”¹⁰, then it must be clear that this black man mimics and plays at the same time with the expectations and values about the black man in a white and colonizing culture.

Like the concept mimicry that Luce Irigaray developed for Feminist Theory, postcolonial mimicry is not, Bhabha tells us, the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification with the gaze of the white man (Frantz Fanon), nor a form of colonization-thingification (Aimé Césaire and the ‘presence Africaine’.)¹¹ (noot Alif, 210 Said on Bhabha)

Both Irigaray and Bhabha work with Jacques Lacan’s description of mimicry as a camouflage technique in the human warfare, where an escape is offered and agency is still existing. Another theoretical position would accentuate a more dependent, but no less active, role described by the Freudian concept of hysteria as an over-acceptance of the socially prescribed sexual role turning into excessive sexe/sexual behaviour by those considering themselves dependent on the power of the white males: women and black men. Lost in the in-between of social realities and cultures, Tayeb Salih’s novel offers a hero who, at least in the relation with his wife, disappears in the void between playing and being, losing agency and self-consciousness. “I am Othello, Othello, a lie….”
Orientalism and Sexual Desire

“The process of Orientalization is based on fetishism, on the ‘scopic drive’ (the desire to see what is forbidden), in order to render visible for pleasure and erotic domestication. (...) The colonial/postcolonial site is not ravaged exclusively by fixity, immobility, but by the interzonal shuttle of fixity and fantasy, fear and desire,” writes Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture.* Against Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism*, we see that Bhabha makes a strategic claim that in stead of the binary oppositions West/East and Male/Female, there is a fundamental interiority of splitting within these binary oppositions, a process which interrupts the calculated partition, intrinsic to colonial discourse. Fixity and fantasy, fear and desire, they change positions, are both part of the process of looking. The cultural cross-over as represented in the character of Musafa Sa’eed, is mirrored in that of all the female figures in the novel, who function as lovers and wives.

There is however a fundamental cultural and gendered difference between the two sexes. “As in most Arabic travel narratives the cultural clash between East and West poses itself as a gendered clash, as a gendered geography where the male tries to know and understand the new culture by ‘knowing’ in a biblical sense the women who belong to that culture.” Where these novels depict Eastern women as inviolable, protected fortresses, Western females are confronted with violence and annihilation.

The authorial exposure by Tayeb Salih of the Western females as both white and passive bodies on the bed of the hero, reminiscent of the classic pictures of Orientalist availability, ends eventually in a splitting up of legs, limbs, bellies and breasts prepared for pleasure, domestication and killing. And over their heads the black male triumphantly returns the gaze, which used to turn him into an object. European women in Arabic literature, states Evelyn Accad in the 1985 Casebook on *Season*...that appeared in Libanon, exhibit the double cultural standards: exploiting misconceptions of European women (she always wants sex) the African male will always desert her for the virgin back home. As if they were polluted, Western values must be eradicated before the East can find itself. From a cultural locating in the West, the male relocates in his own culture through a local woman.

This local “unwelcome, circumcised, uneducated woman in Arabic society” itself is further no topic for any Arabic novelist, writes Suha Kudsieh. There is a big difference between literature and reality, which we find reflected in the figure of Hosna, the village girl that outgrew her farmer’s background in
something of a “noble deportment, a foreign type of beauty.” Only then does the writer allow her to stand up against the traditions and fight for herself, although she will be killed. She is allowed some freedom, but in subordination.

**Reality and the Reel**

At the end of the workshop in Khartoum on *Season of Migration to the North* of last December 2005, a young female director created a scene about what she interpreted as a ritualistic seducing and killing by Mustafa Sa’eed of the four English women-lovers in the novel. In short repetitive movements they were slaughtered like goats and put down on the floor side by side. Its rather grimly character was juxtaposed by a heartbreaking scene of the Sudanese widow Hosna imploring her father not to force marriage on her with old Wad Rayyes, crying that she will kill him and herself if he persists. The crying lingers on in the silent village that has to listen to the rape, mutilation and murder of the two newlyweds by each other’s hands.

I suppose the performance hinted to a solution of William Galinsky’s problem on stage. The two created worlds are not both true or cannot be true next to each other, realities are, as we know, constructed and the romantic heroic story has fallen out of time and space and is totally dislocated. And that must be mirrored in the theatre-space.

**NOTES**

3. Brennan, in Bhabha, 1990, p. 60
5. Brennan, in Bhabha, 1990, p. 61
6. Lecture Abuelgassim Gor, College of Music and Drama, Khartoum, December 2005
7. Brennan, in Bhabha, 1990, p. 61
8. Bhabha, 1990, p.50
9. Bhabha, 1990, p.50
11 Alif, Journal of Comparative Poetics 25, Cairo AUC Press, 2005, p 210
12 Bhabha, 1994, p. 74
15 Kudsieh, 2003, p. 209