

al-Taib Saleh and the Contemporary Sudanese Novel

The population of Sudan (a sovereign republic since 1956) is a mixture of Arab Moslems, pagan Nilotic, and Christian Negroes. Although it has been regarded as part of the Arab world (Arabic is the official language since 1956), its contribution to Arabic literature is very minimal. Aside from a few stories of different lengths,¹ the narrative literature of this nation is scarce and hardly known outside Sudan.

It is therefore understandable that when a Sudanese writer like al-Taib Saleh publishes short stories and novels that deal with the Sudanese life and environment and uses modernistic devices and experimental techniques, he is highly acclaimed—in spite of some obvious literary and artistic shortcomings—as a real pioneer and a true innovator.² There is no doubt that Mr. Saleh's writings have been instrumental in introducing the life of his people, especially those who live in rural areas, to the Arabic reader, and that as an educated and well-trained writer he has succeeded in injecting new themes, motifs, and techniques into the literature of this young nation. But these positive achievements should not tempt us to overstate the sociological, anthropological, or historical significance of his works and thus overlook any artistic deficiencies we might find in them.

al-Taib Saleh's first novel *'Ors al-Zein*, 1964, is a short novel which immediately strikes the reader with its unconventional theme and its modernistic extrinsic structure.³ In a realistic style the author depicts the many amorous adventures of a feeble-minded man and his marriage to the most beautiful girl in the village. al-Zein, the protagonist, is known among the inhabitants of the village as an idiot who indulges in mad freaks and funny tricks, but above all, he is known for his keen eye for beautiful young girls. Most of the mothers in the village seek him, invite him, and reward him for falling in love with their daughters knowing that later, when they reject him as a future son-in-law, his sorrowful songs and lamentable outcries about his lost love will call the attention of rich young men to their daughters. After being misused and exploited by many families, al-Zein marries his cousin (a reversal of the very old Arabic theme of Laila and the Madman).

The fact that this "perfect" (p. 89) girl rejects many suitors in order to marry the village's idiot, is what perplexes everyone. For lack of reasonable explanation, the inhabitants of the village decide to regard this incident as one of the many miracles which they have been witnessing lately, like the falling of snow in this tropical region, or the building of a hospital in their forsaken village.

Had he followed the traditional and straightforward manner of narration, the author could have easily told his story in twenty or thirty pages. But instead, he starts by depicting three separate short scenes which involve six marginal characters and thus he uses various styles and different narrative points of view. The several episodes which introduce the secondary characters and the many discussions that take place among marginal figures (which are recorded in Sudanese dialect) are masterfully used by the author to project a realistic picture of the village and its people. Unfortunately, some of these scenes and dialogues are of little relevance to the main plot, and a sophisticated reader might feel—in spite of the interesting sociological and anthropological information he would glean from them—that they do not constitute an organic

part of the novel. Nevertheless, scholars, critics, and the general reader will undoubtedly admit that this short novel compares very favorably with many Arabic novels of the last two decades.

al-Taib Saleh's second novel *Mausim al-Hijra ela al-Shamal*, 1966 (Season for Migration to the North),⁴ is—intrinsically as well as extrinsically—more complex than his first one. As in *'Ors al-Zein* and his short stories,⁵ life in a small Sudanese village is at the background of this novel. In *Mausim al-Hijra* . . . Mr. Saleh describes the impact of Western civilization on the vulnerable Orientals who spend years in Europe in search of knowledge and experience. This subject matter has been treated many times before and after Mr. Saleh's novel, so that it could be regarded now as one of the traditional themes in Arabic fiction.⁶

The narrator and the protagonist of *Mausim al-Hijra* . . . have spent many years in England, and both are back home searching for their roots. The shocking and abhorrent story of Mostafa Sa'id is narrated by a younger friend who gets gradually involved in the protagonist's past and present. An important part of the protagonist's satanic past is revealed by himself or by the documents and pictures he leaves behind; the rest is investigated and narrated by his friend.

The story is constantly interrupted by domestic scenes and different episodes that deal with the village and its people. But, due to the ingenious use of motifs and leitmotifs, the author succeeds in keeping his book one tight unit. At the end, the reader gets the complete story of this fiendish character which could be summarized as follows: A Sudanese Wunderkind leaves home at the age of twelve to join the secondary school in Cairo. Three years later he leaves for England for further studies. In London he amazes everyone with his intelligence and adaptability, and thus finds his way to the upper classes. Deep inside, this young man is egoistic, cruel, and unscrupulous. In spite of his academic success, he is only interested in exploiting the people around him. The color of his skin does not inhibit him in any way; and within a short time this new—and corrupted—version of Othello is accepted and admired by everyone and especially those of the opposite sex. Three of the many women who loved him kill themselves out of hopelessness and desperation. The only woman whom he could love enough to marry, is a vulgar and psychopathic girl who pushes him to kill her while they are making love. After spending seven years in prison he leaves England and wanders aimlessly in Asia and Europe before returning to Sudan where he marries a Sudanese girl and settles down as a simple farmer. But the memory of his diabolical past keeps haunting him and at the end drives him out of the village. Although his body was never found, his new friends believe that he drowned in the river. Apparently this sad ending does not completely quench the author's thirst for blood, for he turns now to the protagonist's widow and ends her life in a very pathetic manner.

No doubt the author has an unlimited imagination, but failing to control it is what makes his story tiresomely melodramatic. It is also clear that Mr. Saleh is aware of the modern narrative techniques and neoteric artistic devices, but his insistence on using an excessive number of them in one short novel like this, is the reason for its cumbersome, pedantic, and pretentious nature. Also his wish to appear liberal and progressive has misled him into using obscene expressions and depicting situations that are—not only by Moslem norms—offensive to good taste and refined feelings (pp. 79-87). But this

should, by no means, imply that this novel is nothing more than a vulgar and crude work; we are only questioning the function of these coarse and unrefined passages within a novel whose style is, in general, elevated, graceful, and poetic.

In spite of these shortcomings, one has to admit that Mr. Saleh is a very talented storyteller and a skillful writer; but one cannot rid himself of the feeling that here is a gifted man who wants, by all means and in the shortest time possible, to impress the reader, the critic, and the scholar. And this makes Mr. Saleh look like someone who puts on all his new clothes at the same time regardless of weather, occasion, or fashion.

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NOTES

¹See Mokhtar Ibrahim 'Ogobah, "al-Qissah al-Qasirah wa Tataworihah fi al-Adab al-Sudani al-Hadith" (The Development of the Short Story in the Contemporary Sudanese Literature), MA-Diss. Cairo, n.d.

²See Fatma Moussa, *Fi al-Riwaiah al-'Arabiah al-Mo'asarah* (On the Contemporary Arabic Novel); (Cairo: Maktabet al-Anglo, 1972), pp. 231-51.

³al-Taib Saleh, *'Ors al-Zein* (al-Zein's Wedding); (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, 1970).

⁴al-Taib Saleh, *Mausim al-Hijra ela al-Shamal* (Season for Migration to the North); (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, 1972).

⁵al-Taib Saleh, *Daumah Widd Hamid* (a collection of seven short stories which were published between 1956-1966 in different magazines and journals); (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, n.d.).

⁶Other Arab writers who have dealt with this theme are Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Beiram al-Tunisi, Tawfik al-Hakim, Yehia Haqqi, and Saad Elkhadem. See Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, *The Arabic Novel in Egypt: 1914-1970* (Cairo: The Egyptian General Book Organization, 1973), pp. 31-38; also Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, "A New Oriental Bird with Leaden Wings: On Saad Elkhadem's *Ajniha Min Rasas*," *International Fiction Review*, 2 (1975), 69-70; and Fatma Moussa, *Fi al-Riwaiah* . . . , p. 232.

Quiet Manifesto: Carol Shields's *Small Ceremonies*

At a time when some Canadian writers are getting on cultural bandwagons, or are partially blinded by the myths which they have created for themselves, it is refreshing to come across a novel like *Small Ceremonies* by Carol Shields. Her novel, as the title suggests, concerns itself with the small acts of a quiet family in a relatively peaceful Canadian academic community. Very little happens in the novel, yet subtly and with considerable skill Mrs. Shields unfolds the character of the narrator, Judith Gill, her English professor husband, Martin, and their two children, Meredith and Richard.

The problems for the family arise after their return from a sabbatical year in England. The Canadian experience of the characters is portrayed against a wider, multi-cultural background which highlights both the more general humanity and the peculiarly Canadian quality of their responses. The "small