

Reinscribing Conrad: Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

R.S. Krishnan, North Dakota State University

In the works of postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe and others, one sees an attempt to resist and reinterpret the ideological underpinnings of imperialist writings, an effort in which not just the historical subject of colonial discourse but the discourse itself might be reversed. One such work is Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*.¹ Published in 1969, Salih's novel is significant, not only for its appropriation of the topoi—the journey into the unknown, the quest for self-identity—of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but also for its efforts to resist, reinterpret, and revise from the perspective of the colonized Other, the epistemology and language of discourse signified in Conrad's novel. In the process, Salih's work reclaims for itself both the fictive territory and the imagined topos of Conrad's Africa, and substitutes a postcolonial retelling, a new mythos for Africa, for a colonizing tale.

Season of Migration to the North focuses on the Marlow-like narrator's account of the story of the brilliant and promising Mustafa Sa'eed, whose journey north to the European "heart of light"—England—from his Sudanese village is a deliberate reversal of Kurtz's journey into the heart of darkness—the Congo. Sa'eed's experience in England, similar to Kurtz's in Africa, is marked by self-loathing, despair, and a desire for annihilation. Having spent seven years in jail for the murder of his English wife, Jean Morris, and having also been responsible for the suicide of three other women whom he had seduced and abandoned, Sa'eed retreats to a village near Khartoum in the Sudan where, before committing suicide, he befriends the Marlow-like narrator and makes him the guardian of his sons and wife, the keeper of his flame, and the repository of his enigmatic life.

Season explicitly evokes the ambiance, ambivalence, and ambiguity of Conrad's novel, but implicitly refers to the discrepancies evident in Conrad's attempts to criticize the culture of imperialism in his work. For all of Conrad's efforts to step outside of the framework of discourse, the rhetoric of his criticism is the result, as Edward Said notes, of "a self-conscious foreigner writing of

¹ Tayeb Salih (also transliterated as al-Tayyib Sâlih), *Season of Migration to the North* (Hanover, NH: Heinemann, 1969). The Arabic text of *Mawsim al-Hijrah ilâ al-Shamâl* appeared in 1966. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation S.

obscure experiences in an alien language";² Conrad perforce becomes a participant in the very ideology that he attempts to expose and destroy. This is not, however, to diminish Conrad's essential humanity, since "Conrad's prose is not the unearned prolixity of a careless writer, but rather the concrete and particular result of his immense struggle with himself. If at times he is too adjectival, it is because he failed to find a better way of making his experience clear."³ To suggest this is not to ignore Conrad's understanding and condemnation of the effects of colonialism; rather it is to indicate the contradictions and anomalies that exist in any postcolonial reading of *Heart of Darkness*.

Africa as a savage and primitive place, and darkness as the essential condition of its topos, form the ideological underpinning of Conrad's work, since he, inevitably, shares in the contemporary European discourse on Africa, manifest in the writings of explorers and travelers like Mungo Park and others.⁴ Thus contemporary ideology frames the apposition between savagery (Africa) and civilization (West), a sustained and insistent metaphor that informs *Heart of Darkness*. Since colonialism's self-righteous justification is that it is a process of "civilizing" savages, the "liberal homogeneity of a culture," as Wilson Harris notes, "becomes the ready-made cornerstone upon which to construct an order of conquest."⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that writers such as Chinua Achebe ascribe the diminution of Africa in Western discourse to Europe's need "to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest."⁶ Marlow's storytelling, after all, relies on his audience's acuity in recognizing, and validating, his claims regarding the European view of Africa and his particular concern for savage regression—potentially in himself and effectually in Kurtz. In this sense, in spite of his attempt to signify his ironic use of the conventional antinomies of dark and light, as Benita Parry notes, the anomalies in Conrad's fictional discourse persist: "Yet despite such momentous departures from traditional European usage which serve to question imperialism's informing suppositions and disclose its misrecognitions, the fiction gravitates back to established practice, registering the view of two incomparable orders within a manichean universe, and by this obliquely conferring a specious righteousness on an otherwise indefensible ethnic allegiance."⁷

² Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966) 4.

³ Said 4.

⁴ For a discussion of the ideological framework of Conrad's discourse, see Patrick Bratlinger, "Heart of Darkness: Anti-imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" *Criticism* 28 (Fall 1985): 363–85. See also Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

⁵ Wilson Harris, "The Frontiers on which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," *Research in African Literatures* 12.1 (1981): 88.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *Research in American Literatures* 9 (Spring 1978): 2.

⁷ Parry 7.

Conrad's representations of African landscape thus function in complex and contradictory ways, and in their overlap with other writings of the time, they suggest the work's imaginative affinities with the Western imperial ethos even as the novel criticizes that ethos. For instance, early on in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow gets explicit and confessional about the motive—profit—that drives the European desire to conquer the non-white world. The accumulation of profit, however, could only be realized if one dehumanized—and demonized—the conquered. Marlow's comment about the colonial agents is quite revealing: "They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only."⁸ Conrad's notion of avarice enveloped in an idea is neatly stood on its head by Salih.

Salih's approach in *Season* is to first transpose the setting and plot of *Heart of Darkness*: the forbidding, palpably ominous river in *Heart of Darkness* becomes the nourishing and life-affirming Nile in *Season*; Kurtz's regression and his gradual understanding of the "impenetrable darkness" and the "horror" of his lived life parallels Mustafa Sa'eed's violence and his recognition of the "impending tragedy" of his exiled life; Marlow's lie to preserve the romantic view of Kurtz by his Intended by keeping her from knowing the truth about Kurtz—"it would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (*HD* 8)—is here reinscribed to indicate the narrator's recognition of his own affinity to Sa'eed, but his refusal, in the end, to embrace Sa'eed's darker vision; Kurtz's black mistress is Sa'eed's English wife, Jean Morris, whose enigmatic portrait hangs in the secret library in his house in the village; the skull-topped fence of Kurtz's courtyard becomes Sa'eed's collection of books containing volumes of European works and his own, but without "a single Arabic book. A graveyard. A mausoleum. An insane idea" (*S* 137).

Beyond these mimetic reversals, however, Salih focuses on reinterpreting and recovering the territorial mapping in Conrad's novel. The various directional movements in *Heart of Darkness*—from Europe to the east, north to south, are transformed into Sa'eed's seemingly ritualistic migration to the north—to London, Europe—and his eventual return south to his land and his people, and the narrator's parallel journey north and back, both across and beyond the Sudan. This crisscrossing of the fictional map in *Season* is significant in that it

⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Norton, 1973) 4–5. All subsequent references to Conrad's novel are to this edition and will appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation *HD*.

reverses one of the important motifs in *Heart of Darkness*. For instance, Marlow's frequent use of "there" to distinguish the unfamiliar Other—Africa, darkness—from the "civilized" Europeans tacitly suggests both the geographical boundary and the rhetoric of colonial discourse. For the doctor whom Marlow visits before his journey, for Marlow himself, and, indeed, for most of the Europeans, Africa symbolizes the "there"—a "blank space" on the map—a hostile, dangerous, dark place, quite remarkable for its dissimilarity to "here" (Europe)—the land of civilization, culture, enlightenment. In *Season*, however, Salih transposes Conrad's invidious implication of the "blank space" that is Africa to Marlow, Kurtz, and the "pilgrims," to suggest that Sa'eed's encounter in England is precisely the same, but in reverse. Here, Sa'eed is the Kurtz-figure, coming face-to-face with the "horror" of his own spiritual and physical exile. Frederic Jameson describes such an interpretation as "the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that the 'subtext' is immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact." Thus the "paradox" of the "subtext," as Jameson puts it, "may be summed in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction."⁹

Sa'eed's intimations of his difference from others begins early: "I was like something rounded, made of rubber: you throw it in the water it doesn't get wet, you throw it on the ground and it bounces back" (S 20). This detachment, even dispassionate rationalization, marks Sa'eed's felt difference from others, a moral hollow at the core of his being. Indeed, as he notes, "This is a fact in my life: the way chance has placed people in my path who gave me a helping hand at every stage, people for whom I had no feelings of gratitude; I used to take their help as though it were some duty they were performing for me" (S 23). Sa'eed's misapprehension of his own inviolability is the first indication of the central consequence of his attempt at assimilation in the West, an attempt that correspondingly distances him from his own people and culture. As Frantz Fanon observes, "Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's standards."¹⁰

In England, Sa'eed realizes that no amount of schooling would make him one of "them," that fundamentally and culturally he was still the Other, one of

⁹ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981) 81.

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967) 18.

the colonized, a dark shadow in the land of "light": "The language, though, which I now heard for the first time is not like the language I had learnt at school. These are living voices and have another ring. My mind was like a keen knife. But the language is not my language; I had learnt to be eloquent in it through perseverance " (S 28–29). In spite of his education, as a non-white, he could not realistically hope to be accepted into the charmed circle of the dominant culture, except on sufferance, as a token. The English are bent on impressing on him how exceptional he is; in terms of their understanding, his gravitation from Africa to the West is a natural consequence of his having somehow outgrown the "primitivism" of his own culture. Thus, Sa'eed lives the paradox—as a would-be integrent, the road to assimilation distances him irretrievably from his culture and community, yet it never leads him to the destination—his acceptance by the English as an equal—to which his education has prepared him. As Abdul JanMohamed points out, "By choosing the apparently superior values of the European, the African implicitly rejects his own being, because it is a product of the culture he is abandoning, and therefore subjects himself to profound conflict and confusion."¹¹

Salih posits Sa'eed's methodical seduction and abandonment of the English women—Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, Isabella Seymore—and the murder of his wife, as acts of atonement for his moral exile, for his own preference for the West. For the women, Sa'eed represents a "curiosity," the fatal attraction of the mysterious East, the same attraction that provokes Marlow to explore the "blank space" on the map; the same enticement that finally devours Kurtz. It is an attraction formed from the very principles of the Eurocentric desire to conquer, control, and civilize other nations and cultures. When Isabella Seymore asks Sa'eed whether he is African or Asian, he responds: "'I'm like Othello—Arab-African,' I said to her. 'Yes,' she said, looking into my face. 'Your nose is like the noses of Arabs in pictures, but your hair isn't soft and jet black like that of Arabs.' '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'" (S 38). Isabella's frame of reference is the territorial map of England's colonies—in Africa and Asia—and Sa'eed's response is deliberately suggestive of his recognition of the English attitude toward its colonial subjects—children in need of discipline and guidance. Isabella, for instance, "would hear me out in silence, a Christian sympathy in her eyes, There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungle" (S 38). The ideological suppositions of colonialism, reiterated in the stereotypical image of himself that Sa'eed perceives in Isabella's response to his tall tales of Africa, insistently recalls Kurtz's lie. Kurtz, a product of European culture, had been writing—and believing in—his own lies about the great civilizing mission of

¹¹ Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983) 186.

Europe in Africa until, in a revealing moment of scathing honesty and self-loathing, he scribbles across his manifesto, "Exterminate the brutes!"—precisely the act he has been engaging in as the "great ivory agent" filling the coffers of Europe. Salih deliberately frames Sa'eed's violence to reflect his mirror-imaging of Kurtz. Conrad inscribes a double significance to Kurtz—he is at once the greatest exploiter of all, the arch-priest of rapacity; he is also the torchbearer for "truth" whose moral and mental degeneration is a result of his isolation amidst the "savagery" of Africa. Sa'eed's violence, in turn, is a reflection of his alienation, and Jean Morris represents to him, as Kurtz's black mistress does to Kurtz, the symbol of his desire and destruction. She is Sa'eed's kindred soul, his predator, one who instinctively recognizes his moral vacuity: "I have bedded the goddess of Death and gazed out upon Hell from the aperture of her eyes—it's a feeling no man can imagine" (S 153). At his trial, Sa'eed finally gives the lie to his Othello image: "Yes, my dear sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. I am no Othello. Othello was a lie" (S 95).

Sa'eed is defended by his former mentor and professor, Maxwell Foster-Keen, "one of the founders of the Moral Rearmament movement in Oxford, a Mason, and a member of the Supreme Committee for the Protestant Missionary Societies in Africa," the same Maxwell Foster-Keen who fails to hide his dislike of Sa'eed. "You, Mr. Sa'eed," Foster-Keen informs him, "are the best example of the fact that our civilizing 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" (S 93–94). His defense has less to do with Sa'eed's crime than rationalizing the colonial ideology that the African is either a depraved savage or a noble savage: "Mustafa Sa'eed, gentlemen of the jury, is a noble person whose mind was able to absorb Western civilization but it broke his heart. These girls were not killed by Mustafa Sa'eed but by the germ of the deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago" (S 33). This disease—political, economic, cultural—is the consequence of the colonial invasion of the body politic of the subject nation, and Sa'eed is a manifest failure of the "covert" aspect of colonialism, which JanMohamed describes as the process of "'civiliz[ing]' the savage, to introduce him to all the benefits of Western culture."¹² Sa'eed recognizes that he is not only an exile from his own culture but also an intruder in the West, for "Professor Foster-Keen turned the trial into a conflict between two worlds, a struggle of which I was one of the victims" (S 33). Sa'eed's detached mind registers the incongruity of the English attitude: "This is justice, the rules of the game, like the laws of combat and neutrality in war. This is cruelty that wears the mask of mercy . . ." (S 68). When he is sentenced to prison, "a mere seven years," he notes, "The jurors, too, were a varied bunch of people and included a labourer, a doctor, a farmer, a teacher, a businessman, and an undertaker, with

¹² "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Differences in Colonial Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985) 62.

nothing in common between them and me; had I asked one of them to rent me a room in his house he would as likely as not have refused, and 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. Yet each one of them in that court would rise above himself for the first time in his life, while I had a sort of feeling of superiority towards them, for the ritual was being held primarily because of me; and I, over and above everything else, am a colonizer, I am the intruder whose fate must be decided" (S 68, 94). In reversing Kurtz's (and Marlow's) sense of cultural superiority over the natives, Salih, however, extrapolates Sa'eed's experience as a historical reminder of his status as a colonial subject: "When Mahmoud Wad Ahmed 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" (S 94-95).

Like Kurtz, whose life and death Marlow casts in moral terms, Salih casts Sa'eed's exile, return, and death in terms both moral and ideological. Even though Sa'eed tells the narrator, "Whatever my life has been it contains no warning or lesson for anyone" (S 65), the narrator recognizes his affinity to Sa'eed. Like Sa'eed, he, too, has journeyed to the West, has studied in England. On his return he feels like an outsider in his own village, even though his reality is still rooted in his culture, sense of place, and the remembrance of his grandfather: "When I embrace him I breathe in his unique smell which is a combination of the smell of the large mausoleum in the cemetery and the smell of an infant child. And that thin tranquil voice sets up a bridge between me and the anxious moment that has not yet been formed, and between the moments the events of which have been assimilated and have passed on, have become bricks in an edifice with perspectives and dimensions. By the standards of the European industrial world we are poor peasants, but when I embrace my grandfather I experience a sense of richness as though I am a note in the heartbeats of the very universe" (S 73).

Unlike Marlow, however, who redeems Kurtz with a lie, Sa'eed's narrator refuses to embrace Sa'eed's vision of himself. Witnessing the growing legend of the "spoilt child of the English," the narrator, like Marlow, seeks to answer his own doubts: "Was it likely what had happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could have happened to me? He had said that he was a lie, so was I also a lie? I am from here—is not this reality enough? I too had lived with them. But I had lived with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them. I used to treasure within me the image of this little village, seeing it wherever I went with the eye of my imagination" (S 49). In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad illuminates Marlow's self-recognition in Kurtz's enlightenment before his death: "He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the

meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (*HD* 72). The narrator's epiphany in *Season*, however, is revealing in his recognition of his difference from Sa'eed. Unlocking the door to Sa'eed's library, the narrator's inspection of its contents is suddenly disrupted by his catching his face in a mirror: "The light exploded on my eyes and out of the darkness there emerged a frowning face with pursed lips that I knew but could not place. I moved towards it with hate in my heart. It was my adversary Mustafa Sa'eed. The face grew a neck, the neck two shoulders and a chest, then a trunk and two legs, and I found myself standing face to face with myself. This is not Mustafa Sa'eed—it's a picture of me frowning at my face from a mirror" (*S* 135). Unlike the closure to *Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow is at least a secret sharer in his lie to protect Kurtz's reputation, Salih concludes *Season* with the narrator's rejection of Sa'eed's vision of himself, to not let him "complete his story": "He wants to be discovered, like some historical object of value. There was no doubt of that, and I now know that it was me he had chosen for that role. It was no coincidence that he had left me a letter sealed with red wax to further sharpen my curiosity, and that he had made me the guardian of his two sons so as to commit me irrevocably, and that he had left me the key to this wax museum. There was no limit to his egoism and his conceit; despite everything, he wanted history to immortalize him. But I do not have time to proceed further with this farce. I must end it before the break of dawn and the time now was after two in the morning. At the break of dawn tongues of fire will devour these lies" (*S* 154).

The narrator's repudiation of Sa'eed's "lies" is also his commitment, unalterably, to his sense of belonging to his place and culture: "The fact that they came to our land, I know not why, does that mean that we should poison our present and our future? Sooner or later they will leave our country, just as many people throughout history left many countries. The railways, ships, hospitals, factories and schools will be ours and we'll speak their language without either a sense of guilt or a sense of gratitude. Once again we shall be as we were—ordinary people—and if we are lies we shall be lies of our own making" (*S* 49–50). It is this reiteration of a national and cultural identity, the need for the Empire's former colonies to shape their own future, that informs Salih's rejection of colonial ideology. As Edward Said puts it, the postcolonial writers in general "bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire."¹³

¹³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993) 31.

Midway through his narration, Marlow observes that man “must meet [the] truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won’t do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced” (*HD* 37). In *Season of Migration to the North*, Salih reinscribes the “truth” of colonial encounter from the perspective of the colonized, and in so doing, engages in a dialectic of cultural discourse that reverses the narrative and ideological conventions that inform Conrad’s dark fiction. In thus centering the narrative consciousness of the Other in reclaimed topoi, Salih, like Ngugi, Naipaul, and others, contributes to the appropriation and reshaping of Conrad’s fictive territory to draw new maps of reality, to throw some much needed light on the dark center of colonial discourse.