NJAS
NORDIC JOURNAL OF AFRICAN STUDIES

The Educated African and Colonialist Myths in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

Lynda Chouiten
Department of English, University of Boumerdès, Boumerdès, Algeria
Centre for Intercultural Studies, Porto, Portugal
Institute for the Study of Literature and Tradition, Lisbon, Portugal
lyndachouiten@gmail.com

Abstract

Through the example of Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), this article argues that education as provided by the colonial school system is an "undecidable" (Derrida), at once empowering and disempowering the educated non-Westerner. On the one hand, the knowledge and language appropriated by Mustafa Sa'eed (Salih's African prodigy) enable him not only to belie, through his own academic success, the derogatory clichés regarding the Black man's intellectual inferiority, but also to denounce imperialism in the impressive number of books he has written. On the other hand, as a system which perpetuates traditional values and codes of thinking, rather than promoting originality and difference, the (Western) educational machine ensures that its products unconsciously absorb Western 'truths' about the passionate nature and sexual appetite of the native races. This article shows that Mustafa Sa'eed reproduces these 'truths' both in his lectures and in his lifestyle.

Keywords: African intellectuals; colonial education; colonialist myths; failure; resistance

DOI: 10.53228/njas.v33i1.1074

About the author

Lynda Chouiten is Professor of Literature in the Department of English of the University of Boumerdès (Algeria). Chouiten's research interests include colonial and postcolonial literature, travel writing, Orientalism, and women's literature. She is the editor of *Commanding Words: Essays on the Discursive Constructions, Manifestations, and Subversions of Authority* (2016) and the author of *Isabelle Eberhardt and North Africa: A Carnivalesque Mirage* (2015), as well as several academic articles. Chouiten is also a writer and a poet; so far, she has published two novels. *Le Roman des Pôv'Cheveux* (2017) was shortlisted for two prestigious prizes – le Prix Mohammed Dib and L'Escale d'Alger – and *Une Valse* (2019) won the Assia Djebar Prize (*le Grand Prix Assia Djebar*). Her first short story collection, *Des Rêves à leur portée*, was released in March 2022, while her first poetry collection (*J'ai Connu les déserts et autres poèmes*) was published in May 2023. In April 2022, Chouiten was selected for a writing residency at *Cité Internationale des Arts* (Paris), where she spent four months.

Introduction

Tayeb Salih's characters in *Season of Migration to the North* fail to resist Western domination because of their inability to break loose from the very colonial prejudices they want to dismantle. Taking this novel as a case study, this article argues that, although challenging Western discursive and territorial colonization has been a self-designated task for many educated natives,[1] the fact that what they have at their disposition is linguistic and epistemic tools inherited from the West confines them to an eternal role of *bricoleurs* (Derrida 1967, 417–418).[2] When this role goes unnoticed, the educated native is happily unaware of his/her inefficiency; however, insight into one's own impotence in the face of the power machine can be tragic, as illustrated by the case of Salih's hero, Mustafa Sa'eed.

Similarly ambivalent is the Western attitude towards the educated African – an ambivalence that relates to the contradictions inherent in colonialist discourse itself. In so far as the educative enterprise is part of the 'civilizing mission' used to legitimize the colonial occupation, natives who succeed in absorbing Western knowledge are welcomed as evidence of the usefulness of colonization. However, the educated native turns into an enemy when s/he threatens to belie the myths of the non-Westerner's inherent savageness and intellectual backwardness, in which case the West comes to the rescue, deploying its discourse to interpret the native's acts of resistance as lingering marks of these supposedly inherent features.

Love-me, love-me-not (I)

Challenging the myth of the non-Westerner's intellectual inferiority has been identified as one of the major concerns of *Season of Migration to the North*. Critics such as Saree Makdisi (1994, 535), Waïl Hassan (2003, 101–102), Edward Said (1993, 34), Uchechukwu Umezurike (2022, 50), and Lahcen Ait Idir (2019, 24) have pointed out the transposition that Salih's novel operates on one of the best-known samples of colonialist literature, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, arguing that what it aims at is a symbolic empowerment of the African/Oriental by substituting, for Conrad's charismatic and brilliant imperialist, a Sudanese genius who goes to the conquest of Europe.[3] An African Kurtz, Mustafa Sa'eed displays numerous talents that include reciting poetry, writing poetry, writing books (that denounce colonization), lecturing in literature and economics, and painting with remarkable skill.

Very early, Mustafa realizes that nothing is difficult for his amazing brain:

> My brain continued on, biting and cutting like the teeth of a plough. Words and sentences formed themselves before me as though they were mathematical equations; algebra and geometry as though they were verses of poetry. I viewed the vast world in the geography lessons

[1] I am aware that the use of the term 'native' is problematic both because it can be considered offensive and because it can equally refer to Africans or to non-Africans born on African land. However, I use it without any negative connotations, simply as a synonym for '(formerly) colonized African'.

[2] This term is used by Jacques Derrida in his analysis of Claude Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic writings in "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines" ("Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"). Lévi-Strauss is a 'bricoleur' because the only tools he can employ in his project of dismantling Eurocentrism are borrowed precisely from the Eurocentric tradition.

[3] However, Umezurike and Ait Idir offer a more sophisticated reading of this reversal: while Umezurike argues that Salih's unbridled sexuality in Europe shows this continent to be no less a land of dissolution and darkness than Africa, Ait Idir focuses on the common cultural hybridity of Kurtz and Mustafa, a hybridity which, in both cases, ends tragically.

as though it were a chess board. (22)

In this passage, the comparison between his mind and the teeth of a plough denotes simultaneously a vague association between this brain and a weapon – hence an instrument of power – and a still limited access to the Westerner's knowledge: the simile of the plough owes obviously less to this knowledge than to the Sudanese rural environment. However, with his quick (though so far virtual) access to the Western world, Mustafa moves to a more clearly affirmed desire to conquer, as the association between the geographical map and a game of chess suggests. This ambition starts to concretize as he leaves his native Sudan, deemed not to have "the scope for that brain of [his]" (23), and sets out first for Cairo, then for London. Arriving in that large European city as a self-proclaimed invader, Mustafa weighs his achievements against those of Shakespeare's Moor, who incarnates his dream of conquest not only by placing himself at the head of a Western army, but also by possessing white Desdemona; indeed, more than a game of chess, his geographical movement towards the West now starts to be metonymized as a sexual domination of its women. Ironically, however, and as Tomi Adeaga (2021, 245, 255) explains, this sexual exploitation of English women, which is meant to "liberate Africa", only succeeds in feeding the myth of the hypersexual Black man.

The intertwinement of academic and sexual prowess in Mustafa's revenge project takes effect when he makes use of the former to achieve the latter. It is on an artful deployment of his knowledge that he relies to satisfy his obsession of filling his bed each night with a new Western quarry. One of these quarries, young Ann Hammond, meets him as a student who comes to attend a lecture he gives on the Arab poet Abu Nuwas. The encounter is described in a hardly realistic scene where student and lecturer are involved in an improvised theatrical show. As the young woman moves towards him with effusive words of passion, Mustafa, evincing no surprise, reacts by immediately identifying her as his one-time lover Sausan. He asks her if she remembers their former days together, and "Sausan", readily taking the role, answers that she can never forget "[their] house in Karkh in Baghdad on the banks of the river Tigris in the days of El-Ma'Moun" (143).

The complicity between the Western girl and the African 'conqueror' stands, I argue, for the latter's complicity with the body of Africanist/Orientalist knowledge. It is obviously this knowledge, acquired by both characters in the seats of Western academia, which makes the complicity possible; but it is also this sort of knowledge that Mustafa needs to achieve his subjection of the West he has feminized. If Ann Hammond is brought to such an uncontrolled fit of emotion in the presence of the lecturer – a stranger – it is because the substance of his lecture intensifies the exoticism in which Westerners revel and with which his sheer presence arguably already fills the place. The choice of Abu Nuwas, a poet notoriously known for his celebration of drinking and unbridled sexuality, as the subject of his lecture itself betokens a desire to make his talk fit within the traditional Western discourse on the Orient of poetry, licentiousness, and excess. To ensure a successful reproduction of the Orientalist recipe, the lecturer also incorporates some humour and a zest of "Oriental spirituality", heedless of the fact that he is, in doing so, grossly departing from facts:

> I read them some of his [Abu Nuwas's] poetry 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. (143)

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Spivak argues that the construction of the Western episteme requires at once the involvement and the foreclosure of the Native Informant, who is required only as a blank to be filled in accordance with the European discursive tradition. The Abu Nuwas lecture illustrates that Mustafa is accepted in the West as a 'native informant' only inasmuch as the knowledge he proposes echoes that initially given to him by the West itself. Hence the undecidability of Mustafa's position: his conquest of the West can only be achieved at the expense of his submission to its discourse. His success both in academic circles (he is acknowledged as a brilliant lecturer) and on a sexual level (his prey are countless) is built on the perpetuation of Orientalist and Africanist myths – or lies, to use the word he recurrently employs. Mustafa's sharp mind allows him to fabricate, with astounding ease, extravagant stories about Africa. The lies he uses to seduce his female victims transform his quiet rural native place into an enthralling world of "golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals called out to one another" (38); his house, designed for the sole purpose of receiving these victims, is filled with the perfumes of incense and sandalwood and with mirrors which, in the presence of a single woman, make the place look like a harem.

Mustafa's Western education and his wide reading obviously hold a prominent role in this permanent role-playing, and this is not only because they provide him with ready-made descriptions to reproduce. By acquainting him both with Western 'truths' about the East and with the African's position (that of the dominated) within the West-Rest relation, education allows him to conclude that only the reproduction of such 'truths' – which he, of course, knows to be lies – can allow him to fulfil his symbolic conquest of the West. Placed in a position of weakness by history and by his visible racial identity, he is forced to adopt a stance of cunning and self-effacement, as he himself explains:

> [U]ntil the meek inherit the earth, until the armies are disbanded, the lamb grazes in peace beside the wolf and the child plays water-polo with the crocodile, until that time of happiness and love comes along, I for one shall continue to express myself in this twisted manner. And when, puffing, I reach the mountain peak and implant the banner, collect my breath and rest – that (…) is an ecstasy greater to me than love, than happiness. (41)

These words read as an allusion to Friedrich Nietzsche's (2007, 10–34) writings on what he called the 'morality of slaves'. In *The Genealogy of Morality* (2007), Nietzsche argues that the 'slaves', aspiring to power but prevented by their weakness from attaining it, dissimulate their envious hostility towards the powerful behind an appearance of benevolence. Preaching a fake morality based on compassion, renouncement, and meekness, they load the powerful with guilt and cause them to relinquish power, thus eventually allowing for the rise of the weak. However, while Nietzsche holds such morality in deep contempt, Mustafa agrees to play the role of the exotic (and therefore likeable) African and to preach love while seeking revenge.

Education is, of course, mobilized for the service of this typically 'slave-like' posture. Following his theatrical improvisation with Ann Hammond, Mustafa feeds the young

woman's "yearn[ing] for tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons" (30) by quoting abundantly from Abu Nuwas's poems, leaving until the end one which opposes the horrors of war to the universal love that festive wine drinking promotes:

> When fires of destruction rage and
> battles start
> We, using our hands as bows, with
> lilies as our darts
> Turn war to revelry, and still the
> best of friends we stay
> When on the drums they beat, we
> on our lutes do play. (145)

The irony about this syrupy celebration of peace and 'noble feelings' is not only that it is said by someone who has declared war on the West and who actually deploys warfare imagery even when referring to the most intimate moments of love, but that, used as a weapon in the project of the sexual conquest of Europe, it is itself part of the war. This 'stance of slaves', based on lies and dissimulated *ressentiment,* is not only dictated by an age-old schema which places the non-Westerner in a position of weakness; in other words, Mustafa does not simply find himself compelled to act as weak because the West wants him to be so. As Franz Fanon argues in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) (1993), the African's weakness and inferiority may start as a Western construction, but they become much more than that when the African internalizes them together with Western discourse. If the effect of such discourse is assumed to be more devastating when stamped as academic and, therefore, 'truthful', then Mustafa's weakness can be appraised not as a mere (im)posture but as a deep-rooted feeling that infects his psyche. Fanon's (1993) analyses of the manifestations of this feeling in the Black man's attitude towards Western language and Western women are very enlightening in this regard. Fanon (1993, 33–35, 61–79) explains that, because he sees in these two elements the culmination of his symbolic ascension towards coveted whiteness, the Black man is as obsessed with acquiring a native-like mastery (in particular, elocution) of the white man's language as he is with having sexual intercourse with, and possibly marrying, a white woman. Mustafa's obsession with English women thus reveals itself to be a desire for whiteness as much as the symbolic conquest of the white man's world it has so far seemed to be.

Mustafa also displays the other symptom – the language obsession. While his classmates only manage to produce an approximative pronunciation of English, he "would contort his mouth and thrust out his lips and the words would issue forth as though from the mouth of one whose mother tongue it was" (52–53). He thus succeeds, "through perseverance" (29), in being nicknamed "the Black Englishman" (53). The novel teems with other signs of Mustafa's yearning for whiteness. While defining himself in opposition to Europe, the prodigy invents for himself a European identity by acquiring British citizenship. More surprising still is the lingering of this fascination for the West long after his return to his home country, where he becomes an obscure farmer. Entering his house some time after his death, the narrator discovers a huge library that contains thousands of books in all disciplines, but not a single one in Arabic. The talk of Arabic literature and the reciting of Arabic poetry is meant for the West; for himself he only keeps the Western language and Western knowledge.

Love-me, love-me-not (II)

Because much of the contempt with which the white dominator treats 'inferior races' finds an explanation in his assumed intellectual superiority, Mustafa's ability to belie this assumption provides him with a strong 'immunity' against the Westerner's traditional condescension. Until his encounter with Jean Morris, who mocks his looks and constantly humiliates him,

the Black genius is universally met with (seeming) friendliness and admiration. Mustafa himself admits that he has had the chance to meet a great number of Westerners who were eager to offer their help. The headmaster of his school in Sudan, who makes his studies abroad possible by securing him a scholarship, the affectionate Robinson couple with whom he lives for three years in Cairo, and more strikingly, the indulgence with which his victims' families take his defence when he is convicted for the murder of Jean all present Westerners as unprejudiced and noble-minded, thus making Mustafa's violent feelings difficult to account for.

It is, however, this apparent absence of Western ill-will that needs to be explained. Why should Westerners be so much in love with one who, given his obvious intellectual superiority, threatens the racialist assumptions on which their power depends? The hypothesis that this might stem from a genuine support for the native's ascension through education is contradicted by the testimonies gathered by the narrator in *Season,* which make it obvious that the British provide the Sudanese with no more education than necessary to produce 'good' subordinates for colonial authority. A Ma'Mour the narrator meets while travelling to Khartoum explains that the English, who "used to behave like gods" and who "lived in (…) enormous palace[s] full of servants" (53), would assign to the native junior government officials "ungrateful tasks" like collecting taxes, thus making fellow Sudanese turn against their countrymen (53) and, ironically, making them request mercy from the ones on whose orders the junior officials have acted. Colonial education thus fulfils the double function of seemingly giving reality to the so-called civilizing mission while actually reinforcing the racialist hierarchy and the white man's power.

Worse than subjection that would be justified only by the white man's military power, the subjection of half-educated natives is legitimated by their own inability to go through the different stages of Western education, which, in turn, seems to confirm the thesis of their intellectual limitations. In *Season,* however, Sudanese pupils' poor academic results are shown to be the result not of inferior intellects but of a confluence of factors, one of these being natives' defiant attitudes towards Western school. The time when Mustafa first goes to school is one when "people would hide their sons – they thought of schools as being a great evil that had come to them with the armies of occupation" (20). Although they gradually agree to educate their children, they often ensure that they do not remain there long enough to be 'infected' with thoughts that would estrange them from their people. This is, for example, the choice of the narrator's childhood friend Mahjoub, who, having completed his primary education, decides that he has acquired enough knowledge to be a thriving farmer and a good representative for his fellow villagers.

Another factor is the epistemic gap between traditional Sudan and Western school. An example is given in the phonetic difference between English and the learners' native Arabic, a difference which causes all of them – with the exception of Mustafa – "to articulate English words as though they were Arabic and [to be] unable to pronounce two consonants together without putting a vowel in between" (52). Instead of helping their pupils through such difficulties, the educators choose to focus on the only child who encounters no obstacle to absorbing Western knowledge – Mustafa. As a former classmate witnesses, they seem to dispense their courses exclusively to the young prodigy, who thus becomes a pretext to ignore the other learners altogether. Yet, as one who "learnt to write in two weeks" (22) and in whose hands arithmetic intricacies "melted away (…) as though they were a piece of salt [he] had placed in water" (22), Mustafa obviously needs no extraordinary amount of attention to achieve the results expected from him. His amazing brain thus presents the colonial

educators with the advantage of allowing them to use its owner as a sample of their great 'achievements' while necessitating little effort on their part.

The examples of Mustafa and his academically less fortunate classmates are enlightening about the strategic colonial use of the natives involved in the process of education, depending on the degree of their success or failure. In the case of failure, the native is used to validate Western racialist assumptions and, by extension, as a pretext for his/her own subjection; in the case of success, the native, whose achievements could act as a threat to the myth of African inferiority, is also turned to the advantage of Western domination: s/he becomes evidence that the white man's presence in Africa is both noble and disinterested – in other words, another justification of colonization.

Mustafa fulfils a similar function in London. His acceptance by Westerners takes little more tolerance and dialogic effort on their part than the acceptance of an Englishman; he is himself an Englishman – albeit Black – who adopts the Western lifestyle, marries a Western woman, and appropriates the Englishman's language and knowledge. But in addition to being so accommodating a native, he is also, conveniently, one whose Africanness is visible. As such, he presents the advantage of allowing Westerners to satisfy their taste for exoticism, display their open-mindedness, and defend themselves against possible charges of racism, without needing to possess much of that claimed open-mindedness. This instrumentalization of the educated native is well summed up by Richard, an English character who denounces the hypocrisy of the Westerners eager to offer their friendship to the Black Englishman:

> It seems he [Mustafa Sa'eed] was a show-piece exhibited by members of the aristocracy who in the twenties and early thirties were affecting liberalism. It is said he was a friend of Lord-this and Lord-that. He was also one of the darlings of the English-left (…). Even his academic post – I don't know exactly what it was – I had the impression he got for reasons of this kind. It was as though they wanted to say: Look how tolerant and liberal we are! This African is just like one of us! He has married a daughter of ours and works with us on an equal footing! If you only knew, this sort of European is no less evil than the madmen who believe in the supremacy of the white man in Southern Africa and in the southern states of America. (58–59)

Despite the claims of such Europeans as those described by Richard, it is not as an equal that Mustafa is accepted in the West, but as a usable native; his intellectual prowess matters less for his Western 'friends' than his Blackness. But above all, what matters in Mustafa is the validity this Blackness gives to the Western myths he perpetuates. Because his conquest project passes through seduction – force, as we have seen, cannot be envisaged by one in his position of weakness – Mustafa has to displace the West's original hatred/contempt for the native. Aware that the native is loveable only inasmuch as s/he is both exotic and useful, Mustafa submits to this double obligation by reinforcing Africanist lies, as well as by accepting the role of a 'show-piece' designed for him by influential Westerners. Yet, for all Mustafa's efforts to perform the role of the 'good native' and for all the Westerners' seeming benevolence towards him, the idyll cannot but be mitigated by his two major transgressions of Western racial codes: his absorption of the West's know-how (both its knowledge and its civilization) and his marriage to an English woman. This unwitting penetration into spaces that Westerners consider exclusively their own unavoidably turns him in their eyes

into the invader (and therefore, an enemy) that he wants to be but that he takes great care not to seem. The natives are "fine fellows (…) in their place", as Marlow's famous quip goes in *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 2011, 50); they are less so when they seek to occupy places not meant for them.

To the West's relief, however, the African hero's intrusions into whiteness prove to be utter failures. His marriage with Jean Morris is a continual exchange of violence – slaps and blows and lies – which eventually culminates in murder. This relationship with Jean has sometimes been seen as the embodiment of the East/West relation, the West humiliating and stripping the East of its most precious material and cultural belongings, as indeed Jean does Mustafa in the novel (Hassan 2003, 102). While sharing this reading, I think that, in focusing solely on its violence, critics have ignored the dominating love-hate element in the Mustafa-Jean story. Jean incarnates the West's simultaneous love and aversion for the 'savage' native, as shown by the constant hide-and-seek game that she plays with Mustafa: a game which promises to come to an end as she asks Mustafa to marry her, but which only ceases with Jean's death. Interestingly, Jean's proposal, which, until her last gasp, is the sentence that goes the closest to an avowal of love, comes only after a due reminder of Mustafa's status as a savage: "You're a savage bull that does not weary of the chase (…). Marry me" (33). After the wedding, Jean displays nothing but contempt for Mustafa, who, as an English woman's husband, has turned into a Westerner, thus betraying his 'savage native' identity. It is only when he resumes this identity as he plunges a knife into her breast that Mustafa is entitled, at last, to her love and admiration:

> Slowly I pressed [the dagger] down. Slowly. She opened her eyes. What ecstasy there was in those eyes! She seemed more beautiful than anything in the world. "Darling," she said painfully, "I thought you would never do this. I almost gave up hope of you." I pressed down the dagger with my chest until it had all disappeared (…) "I love you," she said to me, and I believed her. "I love you," I said to her, and I spoke the truth. (164–165)

The obviously sincere words of love exchanged between the victim and her killer, who has himself long been the victim of his victim's violence and contempt, sums up the ambivalent relationship between the non-Westerner and the West that has been discussed so far. Despite the educated African's hatred for the West and the West's repulsion for the African, both retain an attraction to what they take their antagonist to represent. The native is fascinated by the West as a symbol of power; the Westerner by what he conceives of as a passionate and instinct-led savage.

At no moment is the Westerners' support for Mustafa as intense as when he is taken to court for his murder of Jean Morris. Lawyer Foster-Keen, the father of Ann Hammond, whom Mustafa causes to commit suicide, and the husband of Isabelle Seymour, whose marriage he ruins by leading her into unfaithfulness, all display a surprising eagerness to take the criminal's defence. Mr Seymour explains his wife's misconduct by the restlessness caused by the discovery of her cancer, Colonel Hammond expresses uncertainty about the cause of his daughter's suicide, which might well be the spiritual crisis she was passing through rather than Mustafa's deception, and Professor Foster-Keen even turns the criminal into a victim of "a conflict between two worlds" (33). The fact is that Mustafa has again become the loveable good native now that his crime gives evidence of the impossibility of a successful marriage between a native and a white woman – of which Mr Hammond says, almost triumphantly, that he "had seen that such a marriage would not work" (68). More

importantly, Mustafa's murder of Jean Morris shows the incapacity of education to erase the African's inherent savageness. Interestingly, the Foster-Keen who now expresses zealous sympathy for the Black criminal and takes such pains to defend him never concealed his dislike for Mustafa when he was still one of his students. Instead of acknowledging the brilliance of his intellect, he already preferred to (fore)see in Mustafa an unchangeable primitive: "You, Mr Sa'eed, are the best example 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" (93–94). No wonder that he later shows compassion for the one who proves him right.

Besides being sentenced to uncurable primitive savageness, the Black criminal is condemned to a seven-year imprisonment – an unusually merciful sanction for so many (direct or indirect) murders. For him, however, these white men's attempt to dismiss his responsibility for the deaths of what he proudly calls his preys is not mercy; it is a huge conspiracy aimed at wiping out the revenge he has accomplished. What he hoped for was a sentence that would grant him, as the narrator puts it, "the end of conquering invaders" (67): a heroic death in the unwelcoming land of ice, while fulfilling his dream of retaliation. But, once again, this is not the 'right role' for a native. Mustafa's passionate crime and imprisonment erase his achievements and take him back to the status of an uncivilized and enslaved creature which he had attempted to escape, thus confirming Western 'truths' and restoring the racial order of things.

The tragedy of knowing

Ironically, the violence that Westerners are wont to ascribe to the African is shown in Salih's novel as not being innate, but rather as the result of this particular African's Westernization. Far from being passionate, Mustafa rather insists that he used to be a cold, emotionless being who seemed equally incapable of laughing and crying. As Mrs Robinson notes, the only faculties which seemed to work in him were those of his amazing brain: "Can't you ever forget your intellect?" (28), she would gently reproach him. But that was before the journey to London, when Mustafa was still in a state of relative ignorance. It is from knowledge, whence he expected salvation, that his tragedy comes.

The Janus face of knowledge is analysed at length in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1993), of which the overall structure is founded on the now classical Dionysus-versus-Apollo dichotomy. Nietzsche explains how Apollonian knowledge relies on the principles of order, reason, and the mediation of words and images to construct a superficial world of light aimed at defeating the frightening abysses of the human condition and at creating illusory power and optimism, thus providing a justification for life. In opposition to this Apollonian impulse, which governs the creation of Mount Olympus, of the epic genre, and of Socratic wisdom, Dionysian wisdom goes beneath the Apollonian artifices and penetrates the horrors they seek to hide, uncovering an immutable world of darkness and suffering and condemning its owner to pessimism (Nietzsche 1993). Yet the Western knowledge acquired by Mustafa Sa'eed disrupts the poles of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy as it proves to be both the one and the other. In allowing him to transcend 'original darkness' (that of ignorance and that of his own skin, which has maintained him in a state of powerlessness), education obviously opens for the hero an Apollonian world of light – of academic radiance and social visibility – and a sense of power which convinces him of his ability to triumph over his subjection. But while seeming to raise him above his loathed condition, it is also education that confronts him more fully with the impossibility of escaping this condition. This confrontation comes through his academic initiation into colonialist

(Orientalist and Africanist) truths, as well as through direct contact with the West, which happens precisely through education, since it is as a student that he first arrives in London. What he gradually comes to see is, as analysed above, his inability to escape the role of the savage and meek native that has been constructed for him. The light and power prove to be a lie, and "knowledge turns against the wise" (Nietzsche 1993, 69) as, instead of Apollonian serenity, Mustafa experiences Dionysian suffering – the suffering of the one who knows.

Mustafa's pain-laden knowledge contrasts with that of the narrator, the only other educated character in the novel. Like Mustafa, the latter returns to Sudan after several years in England, where he completed a Doctorate in English Literature. However, sharing neither Mustafa's ambition to be acknowledged as a universal genius nor his revenge project, the narrator's sole ambition in furthering his education is to secure a comfortable living. Devoting his time to this project only, he spends his whole stay in the English capital city "delving into the life of an obscure English poet" (57) and showing as little interest in other academic subjects as in the lives of the real people around him. This is made obvious by his inability to answer Wad Rayyes's question about whether the common belief that "infidel women" give more pleasure is justified, or the other, more general questions his people shower on him on his return from the white man's land.

In the narrator's own words, his Western knowledge is superficial: "I too had lived with them [the English]. But I have lived with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them" (49). This superficiality keeps him estranged from both the solar and the Dionysian realms entered by Mustafa. While he is never given an opportunity to taste the glory and (momentary) victory Mustafa attains, he is also immune from the torments that accompany the prodigy's deeper knowledge. He returns home convinced that his native Sudan has not been altered by Western epistemic intrusion and, despite obvious marks of change – such as the replacement of water-wheels by pumps or of the locally-made *harraz* doors by more sophisticated ones – he naively congratulates himself that "life is good and the world as unchanged as ever" (2). Equally ironic is his blindness to the effect of this intrusion on his own perception of his people. Though obviously happy to go back to those about whom he often thought while abroad, several instances in the novel give evidence that his Western education not only distances him from the other villagers, but also makes him look down on them. When his childhood friend asks him whether, like them, Europeans lived on farming, he admits to having refrained from providing the philosophical answer that has come to his mind, according to which, in the face of the decisive moments of life, there is, ultimately, very little difference between people. "In [his] conceit" (4), he is afraid of not being understood.

The gap separating the narrator from the uneducated Sudanese first springs to his consciousness when the lewd, septuagenarian, and already married Wad Rayyes expresses the wish to marry Mustafa Sa'eed's young widow, Hosna. While the unanimous view in the village is that "women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's a decrepit" (99), he alone seems to find something shocking about this union. The narrator's protests that Wad Rayyes is forty years older than his "fiancée" and his fears that she will soon become the new object of her husband's ribald jokes are met by incomprehension: "Is that something to get angry about?" (87), his grandfather wonders with a laugh. Yet the very Westernization which makes him reject the traditional gender economy also prevents him from intervening in it. To alleviate his anger, his friend Mahjoub offers a solution: "Why don't you marry her? I'm certain she'd accept. (…) Don't tell me (…) that you're already a husband and a father. Every day men are taking second wives. You wouldn't be the first or the last" (103). The

solution is all the more convenient as the narrator has begun to realize that he is in love with the young widow, but his Westernized mind can only shrink from the very evocation of polygamy. Mahjoub's idea is rejected.

Uchechukwu Umezurike (2022, 56) reads the narrator's "passive agency" – that is, his abstaining from action although he knows that to act is necessary – as a mark of male privilege: as a man, this character knows that nothing will befall him by not intervening in the course of events. While I share this view, it seems to me to ignore the fact that it is, ironically, the narrator's Western education that makes itself the accomplice of patriarchal education. In refusing to participate in a polygamous act which could have rescued Hosna, the narrator abandons her to an even worse fate. Deprived of his support, she builds up her own resistance. A few days after the rejection of Mahjoub's idea, she boldly calls on the narrator's father to ask for a nominal marriage to the narrator. Unsurprisingly, the request is met with the shock and dismay of the villagers, who silence the audacious woman by labelling her "an impudent hussy" (123) and hastening her marriage to Wad Rayyes. Hosna resists first by refusing all physical contact with this husband, then, more tragically, by mutilating his body, before ultimately killing both him and herself.

Hosna's violent inscription of her revolt on her own body (and on that of Wad Rayyes) is reminiscent of Spivak's (1994, 103) description of the Indian woman who re-enacts the *sati* suicide ritual from a resistance perspective by killing herself for reasons other than those which traditionally dictate suicide as an imperative for female natives.[4] In both cases, a woman's attempt to write her revolt on her body is reduced to silence, as her strategy of resistance, seen as an abomination, is banished from the spheres of authorized discourse. Spivak's efforts to rescue the ill-fated Indian woman from muteness prove vain in the face of the rebel's acquaintances' distortion of, or refusal to tell her story (1994, 104). Similarly, the narrator's attempt to know more about Hosna's act of rebellion stumbles against the villagers' stubborn silence. The few witnesses who had seen the bodies bearing Hosna's tragic inscriptions shield the other villagers from the horrendous sight; the two corpses are hurriedly buried by night, and an uneasy silence falls on the village: "The thing done by Bint Mahmoud is not easily spoken of" (124).

Umezurike (2022, 51, 55) sees in Hosna's killing of her husband and herself an act of "radical agency" that "challenges patriarchal culture". Similarly, comparing Hosna to Antigone, Mohsen Maleki and Ali Salami (2016, 261) qualify her act as a revolutionary one in that it "subverts th[e] assumption that 'women belong to men'" (263). However, while Umezurike (2022, 58) assigns Hosna's bold deed to her sole strength of character, which she displayed even as a child, Maleki and Salami (2016, 268–269) argue that it is partly due to the Westernizing influence of Mustafa, her former husband. I take the latter view, also held by Hassan (2003, 86), Makdisi (1994, 546), and Ait Idir (2019, 26). Although Hosna's *is* an act of agency against patriarchy, Mustafa's influence on her is hinted at several times in the novel. Mahjoub observes that she had been utterly transformed by her first marriage and that she had become "like a city woman" (101); the narrator's mother refers to her sarcastically as a "modern wom[a]n" (123); and the narrator himself is convinced that "[s]he killed poor Wad Rayyes and killed herself because of Mustafa Sa'eed" (142). Although Hosna's murder and suicide may be considered not "just an action out of hopelessness but rather an act that aims to make a new social order possible" (Maleki and Salami 2016, 261), it

[4] These are often either the death of the woman's husband, that is, the *sati* proper, or pregnancy resulting from illegitimate passion. Young Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri's cause for suicide, however, was her reluctance to take part in a political assassination assigned to her by a group of independence fighters of which she was a member, and her simultaneous refusal to disappoint the trust placed in her by this group (Spivak 1994, 103).

also introduces crime and wild violence into a place "in which no one ever kill[ed] anyone" (140). By having a role, albeit slight, in this violence, Mustafa offers yet another argument to support the Orientalist myth of native savageness and makes himself, again, guilty of involuntary complicity with Western discourse.

Hosna and Mustafa share a Promethean fate[5] in that they are aware of the unjust domination of patriarchy and of the West respectively, undertake to defy it, and eventually meet a tragic death. Unlike these two characters, the narrator is rescued from tragedy by his superficial, and therefore optimistic, understanding of things. Although Mustafa's intrusion into his life disturbs the narrator's tranquillity of mind, he persists in refusing to see the aporia in which the native is placed by his positioning between Africa and the West:

> The fact that they [the English] came to our land, I don't know 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 will 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. (49–50)

For the narrator, Westerners have introduced no significant change; their intrusion is of no consequence. They will soon leave the country, leaving behind nothing but hope – as he chooses to name his daughter. It is only with Hosna's story that the narrator awakes from this naïve wishful thinking – a naivety brought to him twice, and in a most abrupt way, by his friend Mahjoub. Having made him acknowledge for the first time his own complicity in Hosna's tragic end by reminding him of his refusal to marry her, Mahjoub adds, as though by way of apology, that the outcome probably could not have been prevented anyway, given that it involved "a mad man [Wad Rayyes] and a mad woman [Hosna]" (132). As the narrator, outraged by the insult directed at the woman he loves, starts an emotional defence of her, his friend, with a guffaw, opens his eyes to another hitherto unseen effect of his education in the West: "Fancy you falling in love at your age! (…) Schooling and education have made you soft. You're crying like a woman. Good God, wonders never cease" (133).

Mahjoub's remarks reveal too much Westernization for someone convinced that he is a bird of one sky (49). Moreover, they show the impossibility, for the educated native, of either satisfaction with the *status quo* or effective action. While the other villagers are happy (or at least were, before they discovered its sinister dénouement) with perpetuating the patriarchal code by obliging Hosna to marry Wad Rayyes, the narrator's Westernized mind can neither applaud the project nor voice opposition to it. His 'softening' by means of Western education cannot cope with the cruelty of traditional gender codes, but an oppositional act would have involved either a courageous, outspoken challenge of these codes, which precisely his softening cannot permit, or polygamy, which would have been equally at odds with the precepts of the West's teachings.

The narrator's belated recognition of this

[5] Mustafa bears as much resemblance to Oedipus as to Prometheus, the difference between the two being, as Nietzsche explains in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1993, 46–51), that, unlike Prometheus's, Oedipus's transgressions of the Law are involuntary. Mustafa's defiance of the racial Law is Oedipal when his amazing mind allows him to provide quick answers to his white teachers – much as Oedipus solves the Sphinx's enigma – thus unwittingly intruding on the 'white gods" knowledge. However, his vow to conquer the West "in a twisted manner" and to empower Africa is obviously reminiscent of Prometheus's tricks against the gods and his commitment to the cause of powerless humans.

unsolvable dilemma eventually brings him close to Mustafa and Hosna – that is, to tragedy. An impulse towards violence pervades him as these hitherto unseen truths about himself are thrown into his face by his mocking friend. He suddenly finds himself taking hold of this friend's collar and attempting to strangle him, though he is rescued from criminality by an anonymous grasp of his hand and a knock on the head. Later, tragedy tempts him again as he enters the depths of the Nile River with the intention of drowning himself. However, two steps away from death, he suddenly starts shouting for help. He thinks of the few beloved people whom he would leave behind and finds in them enough reason to live on. While Umezurike (2022, 61) reads this "vow to stay alive" positively, stating that it "annuls [the narrator's] impulse to obliterate himself by drowning", my own reading is closer to that of Maleki and Salami (2016, 270), who argue that suicide would have been this character's last chance to atone for his inability to save Hosna, and that his ultimate choice of life is yet another manifestation of this character's impotence. As noted above, the narrator neither hankers after great achievements nor shares Mustafa's – and Hosna's – ambition to change the order of things. Unlike them, he refuses to linger on what is appalling in his condition and prefers to set his eyes on cheering consolations. Like his grandfather, he is one of those who "[defeat] death because they ask so little from life" (73).

"Can the subaltern speak?"

The three native characters trapped in Western education in Tayeb Salih's novel all end up in an aporia which in turns leads (or, in the narrator's case, goes very close to leading) to tragedy. This article supplements the Spivakian argument that double subalterns cannot speak because their voice is disregarded both by dominators at home (male/rich natives) and by the dominators of these dominators. While Hosna does manage to make herself heard, this requires turning her into a criminal and putting an end to her own life. More importantly, however, the most powerful among the subaltern are equally unable to make themselves heard. For all his eloquence, Mustafa Sa'eed does not speak; what he does is merely *recite* the Orientalist narratives that his Western education wanted him to reproduce and that he, ironically, knows to be lies. Mustafa's empowerment, which takes the shape of his acceptance in Western academic spheres and privileged social circles, remains fake because it rests on his agreeing to perform the role of the likeable exotic native, which he does indeed play for years. When he ultimately gives it up, it is only to fall into another 'authorized' native role – that of the passionate savage.

To escape these two roles, Mustafa has to take on a yet more ironic one. Severely defeated by the enemy he vowed to conquer, the highly educated, well-read prodigy now has to assume the identity of a modest and illiterate farmer. Although he actively contributes to the welfare of the villagers with his time and his money – particularly as a Member of the Agricultural Project Committee – thus gaining everybody's respect and affection, the anonymity into which he sinks erases the only one of his achievements that challenged Western myths. His final withdrawal from academic circles, both abroad and at home, sends into oblivion his former dismantling of the theory of Black intellectual inferiority, as well as his anti-colonial books.

What Tayeb Salih's novel seems to show is that education gets the native nowhere but to silence and/or tragedy, eventually leaving all the talking to be done by the Westerner. In the context of the narrator's lack of initiative and of the defeated Mustafa's fall into silence, the task of writing the story of the prodigy's failed struggle is taken up by a Westerner, Mrs Robinson. This fate calls to mind that of another defeated African hero – Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo, to whom the District

Commissioner intends to devote "a reasonable paragraph" in his book about "The Pacification of The Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger" (Achebe 1986, 150). Mrs Robinson's might be a much friendlier pen than the Commissioner's in Achebe's novel, but it is no less distorting of the educated native's resistance. This is made obvious by the letter she sends the narrator, in which she explains her intention to place Mustafa's struggle on an equal footing with the "splendid services [her Orientalist husband] rendered to Arabic culture" (148), thus maintaining the chain that binds the native to Western paternalistic 'benefactors'.

There seems to be no way out: educated or not, the native is condemned to be a Western construction. Those who, like Mustafa Sa'eed, go too far in their aspiration to empower the "Wretched of the Earth", are promised a tormented life and tragic defeat. Is there no alternative to such a grim perspective? The example of the narrator shows us that there is; but the secret of 'salvation' seems to lie either in passive meekness or in self-deception, so that no bright option is offered for the native. All the choice s/he seems to be given is between blissful ignorance and tragic knowledge – between either perpetuating the illusion that there is no need for struggle at all or pursuing a Quixotic struggle whose outcome is not victory.

References

Achebe, Chinua.1986. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.

Adeaga, Tomi. 2021. "Colonialism and Sexuality in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Peter Kimani's *Dance of the Jakaranda*." J*ournal of the African Literature Association* 15 (2): 245–256.

Ait Idir, Lahcen. 2019. "Hybridity and the Quest for Identity in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969)." *Athens Journal of Philology* 6 (1): 23–34.

Conrad, Joseph. 2011. *Heart of Darkness*, edited by Ross C. Murfin. Boston & New York: Bedford St. Martin's.

Derrida, Jacques. 1967. "La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines". In *L'Ecriture et la différence*, 409–428. Paris: Seuil.

Fanon, Frantz. 1993. *Peau noire, masques blancs* [Black skin, white masks]. Réghaïa: ENAG..

Hassan, Waïl S. 2003. *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Makdisi, Saree. 1994. "The Empire Renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the Reinvention of the Present". In *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 535–550. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Maleki, Mohsen, and Ali Salami. 2016. "Hosna as Bride of Desire and Revolutionary Par Excellence in Tayib Salih's *The Season of Migration to the North*." *Acta Philologica* 49: 261–272.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1993. *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. Trans. Michael Tanner. London: Penguin.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2007. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Trans. Carol Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Said, Edward W. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Salih, Tayeb. 1969. *Season of Migration to the North*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1994. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 66–111. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Umezurike, Uchechukwu Peter. 2022. "I Choose Life: Negation, Agency, an Utopian Hope in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*." *Metacritic Journal of Comparative Studies and Theory* 8 (2): 48–68.