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Prof. M. Amyuni

Civilization Sequence 204

Tayeb Salih

Season of Migration to the North

(1966)

“The goal was in front of me I must move forward” (p.167)

I. Introduction

Tayib Saleh at Assembly Hall, May 19, 1980

1. Born in the Sudan in 1929 of an “Arab, Nubian, and Negro ethnic ascendency”. “I believe that if I have contributed anything to modern Arabic Literature, it is in my constant plea for tolerance and this I owe entirely to being a Sudanese”.

2. The genesis of Season of Migration to the North: the need to break all romantic illusions about the South/North encounter. It is not a romantic encounter. It is one of confrontation and conflict. A Breakthrough in “orientalist” Literature.

II. Natural Harmony vs Human Confrontations

Two parallel movements create two basic layers in the novel:

1. The natural movement of the elements and animals in the universe: birds, vegetation, day and night, heat and cold etc...
   Presided over by the gigantic symbols which define the Sudan.

   Desert       Nile       Equator

   “Here things begin and things end... The voices of people, birds and animals expire weakly... And the river... flows northwards, pays heed to nothing,

   a mountain may stand in its way so it turns eastwards, it may happen upon a
deep depression so it turns westwards, but sooner or later it settles down in its
Irrevocable journey towards the sea in the north”. (p.69).

2. **Confrontations:**
   In contrast with the harmonious movement and countermovement of nature and in
nature, is a series of confrontations on the human scale which provoke *ruptures* of
the deepest sort in the souls of men and women who are torn apart between:
**South/North** or more precisely the Arab Muslim Black World and the Western
Christian White World.
A power game …...............................................................Colonization ......................... Dehumanization (p.58 for
ex.) Lies upon lies. Wanderlust... But also a love – hatred relationship:
“I am South that yearns for the North and ice” (p.30) ...
The Rape of Africa... (p.137).
The Rape of Europe? A “Fatal Attraction” (p.165).
Yes, things are not so simple in *Season*.................................................................

III. **Plot:** Broken down, syncopated, confusing, similar to the history of the Sudanese
under Colonialism. There is no chronology of events here.

IV. **Characters:** Three (3) generations interact:
A. The Oldest, the people who live in “that small village at the bend of the Nile” (p.1).
      - His house? An “extension of the field”, made of “rough sand, black mud and
animal dung”. (p.71).
      - Himself? “like the sayal bushes in the deserts of the Sudan, thick of bark and
sharp of thorn, defeating death because he asks so little of life. That was the
cause of wonder, that he was actually alive, despite plague and famines, wars
and the corruption of rules”. (p.73).
   b) **Bint Majzoub**: tremendous zest for life: Totally uninhibited, she remains a
   traditionalist at heart and cannot understand Hosna’s rebellion.
   c) **Wad Rayyes**: happy-go-lucky, boastful, changing women as he does donkeys! Yet
at 70, Hosna resists him, he turns mad and dies tragically.
   d) **Mustafa Sa’eed’s father**: he comes from a tribe living between Egypt and Sudan.
      - Unlike Hajj Ahmed, he’s been touched by wars and the corruption of rulers.
      - He helped Slatin Pacha escape during the Mahdist Revolution. (Slatin Pacha was
the Egyptian Governor of Darfour, an Austrian officer in the Egyptian service).
- His people were guides for Kitchener’s army when he reconquered the Sudan.
- A merchant of Camels, he dies before the birth of his son.
  e) **Mustafa Sa’eed’s Mother**: from a Southern tribe who sold slaves to the West, i.e. she, as well as the father, has been “infected” by the Colonizer.

B. **The Middle Generation**: grew up under Anglo-Egyptian colonialism in the Sudan and during two world wars in the West. Infected with a deadly disease.
   
   a). **Mustafa Sa’eed**: an orphan, a born outsider setting on a series of migrations to the North with 2 major halts on his way before coming back to the South: Khartoum, Cairo, London.

   - Who was he? the African God? The black Englishman? Economist, Fabian, Lecturer, Writer, President of the Society for the Struggle for African Freedom, a spy at the Service of the Foreign Office in the Sudan and the Middle East, or what?

   - The lover of a whole harem, Jean Morris’s husband and Hosna’s.

   - Who was he? a buffoon, a showpiece, a legend, an invader, a conqueror or the victim of the two worlds in conflict?

   - “I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie. Why don’t you sentence me to be hanged and so kill the lie?” (p.33)

   b. **Sa’eed’s European Contemporaries**: Summed up at court during his trial. Wearing the mask of justice and mercy, they reenact in the company of Saeed the ritual of colonization.

   c. **Sa’eed’s harem in London**: daughters of the icy cold, the girls seek in Saeed “tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons”, (p.30), to cure them perhaps of a thousand-year-old disease.

   - A cruel parody of colonization on the sexual level.

   d. **Sa’eed’s Sudanese Contemporary**: the embittered Mamur is sure the Colonizers will go on directing the affairs of Independent Sudan from afar. (p. 53).

   e. The “madness” of people: “How strange! How ironic! Just because a man has been created on the Equator some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god. Where lies the mean? Where the middle way?” (p.108).
C. The young Generation reached adulthood at the independence of Sudan.

a. The Narrator:

- Unlike Sa’eed he is “a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose.” Returning to the Village after seven years of studies in London, he feels integrated within the family, his heart flowing with love, his feeling of security being strengthened.

- Meeting Sa’eed, will he be infected with “germs” Sa’eed carries in his system? The ambiguity of the relationship: Is Sa’eed narrator’s double, his foil? (pp.49 & 135 for ex.)

- Will Sa’eed “Kill” the young man?

- No, the Narrator refuses to die, He calls his daughter “Hope” and looks forward to the future. (p.49).

- He returns to tell us his story in the light of Sa’eed’s. It is the story of the educated Arab man in the post-colonial epoch, of the civil servant, fully aware of the corruption of his rulers, his only non-passive gesture is to opt out for life. Will he find his place in “the scheme of things”? Will he be able to help his country? His personality is in the shaping, he bears no name yet.

b. Mahjoub: What the narrator would have been had he not left the village. Intelligent, powerful, respected; yet he is frustrated by rural life and dreams of city life. A realist, he accepts the old mentality of the village and does not sympathize with Hosna nor with the narrator’s breakdown.

c. Hosna: The playmate of the Narrator and Mahjoub when they were kids, she changed when she married Sa’eed becoming “like a city woman”. (p. 101).

- A stranger in her own village?

- Her fatal end.

- She is the only tragic figure in the novel. In dignity and with her own blood, she announces the birth of the new Arab woman.
V. The Ethos of Tayeb Salih
   - On man and men.
   - On the Universe.
   - On God.

   A poetic universal reconciliation in the desert (pp. 108-115)

Conclusion

The “Festival to nothingness” inserts powerfully Tayeb Salih in the main stream of world literature at the end of the twentieth century. It beautifully combines basic elements, from South and North, from Salih’s heritage and his world experience. Indeed, one’s heritage combined with “Wanderlust” constantly moulds the Artist’s sensibility and one may be richer with every “Season of Migration”.

A few important dates in the history of modern Sudan.

Before 1881: The Sudan, a province of Egypt.
   1881: The Mahdist rebellion starts.
   1882: The British occupy Egypt.
   1885: Egypt withdraws from the Sudan.
   1898: The Anglo-Egyptian army led by Kitchener destroys

   The Mahdist power. Invades Sudan in the summer

   That saw the birth of Mustafa Sa’eed (this needs interpretation).
   1899: Anglo-Egyptian Condominium or Sovereignty over the Sudan.
   1956: The Sudan becomes an independent republic under Abdel-Nasser.