



Research article

Tayeb Salih and Sudanese Fiction: Negotiating Nationalism, Modernity and Realism

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT



Keywords:

Tayeb Salih, Sudanese novel, postcolonial identity, social realism, modernity

Article History:

Received: 01-05-2024

Accepted: 10-07-2024

Published: 28-07-2024

This study examines the development of the Sudanese novel from its early nationalist narratives to the later social realist works that have come to dominate. A qualitative analysis of Salih's principal works, especially *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Wedding of Zein*, reveals the transition in Sudanese literature from the nationalistic narratives to a mature social realism. An analysis of the thematic preoccupations of Salih's fiction—postcolonial identity, colonial legacy, intercultural ambiguity gender bias, and political disillusionment—reveals a critical engagement with socio-political shifts in postcolonial Sudan. Salih's stories reveal the contradictions of the nationalist rhetoric expose the contradictory impacts of modernity and highlight the experiences of the voiceless. The research demonstrates that Salih was instrumental in the development of Sudanese and Arab fiction because, through his writings, he links Sudan's historical memory to contemporary realities. The study takes the form of literary realism on the one hand, and postcolonial theory on the other.

Cite this Article:

Uddin, J. (2024). Tayeb Salih and Sudanese Fiction: Negotiating Nationalism, Modernity and Realism. *Sprin Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 3(02), 14–17. Retrieved from <https://ae.sprinpub.com/sjaes/article/view/45>

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview and Importance of the Study.

Sudanese literature refers to the literature of Sudan and, more generally, to literature on the Sudanese experience. Sudanese literature has a diverse collection of poems, short stories and novels.

Tayeb Salih was one of Sudan's greatest writers and has a prominent significance in this literature. His writings, most notably *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), integrate the existential crises of a person and nation. This is because of Sudan's colonial past and post-independence experience. This paper seeks to examine the development of the Sudanese novel revealing how the works of Salih link nationalist struggles and social realism and reflect on the changing nature of Sudanese society.

1.2 Literature Review

Scholars have long acknowledged Salih's seminal role in moulding Sudanese and Arab literary modernism. Wail S. Hassan (2003) identifies *Season of Migration to the North* by Salih as a postcolonial literary pillar, for its departure from the triumphalistic voice of early nationalist fiction. Abdelrahman and Karrar (2010) similarly discuss the ways Salih employed symbolism and allegory to critique the evolving Sudanese society.

Edward places Salih within a larger context of postcolonial writers who deconstruct the binary oppositions between East

and West, citing Salih's capacity to occupy both sides but endorsing neither. Koster (2011) understands Salih's writing as representative of the capacity for literary realism to bring to light the socio-political tensions and to lay bare the psychological effects of the colonial and postcolonial experience.

Additionally, theorists like Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon have presented frameworks for explaining the hybrid identities and internalized traumas that characterize Salih's characters, especially the characters featured in *Season of Migration to the North*. This reading enhances the understanding of Salih's fiction as a complex negotiation of identity, history, and resistance.

1.3 Thesis Statement

This research explores how the Sudanese novel has been shaped by its journey from becoming a vehicle of resistance to nationalism to one that has been modelled on social realism. Of specific interest in this analysis are the writings of Tayeb Salih, whose works not only voice the shared consciousness of Sudan but also probe the very complex socio-political life of the country. Through an in-depth look at Salih's body of work, this study highlights how his writing connects Sudan's nationalist roots with the nuanced social realities of its postcolonial era.

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1.4 Research Objectives

This research aims to:

Uncover how early Sudanese literature used nationalist storytelling as a foundation, and trace how these narratives gradually gave way to a more socially realistic lens.

Examine the ways in which Tayeb Salih's writing both mirrors and shapes this literary transformation.

Explore the central themes in Salih's work—such as identity, colonial history, and the changing political and social landscape of Sudan.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study provides a detailed and thoughtful exploration of how the Sudanese novel has evolved—tracing its journey from nationalistic roots to more socially realistic storytelling. By centering on Tayeb Salih, a key voice in Sudanese literature, the research highlights how literature not only captures the nation's struggles with identity and postcolonial challenges but also plays a role in shaping how those realities are understood and addressed.

1.6 Methodology Overview

Using a qualitative research approach, this study looks closely at Tayeb Salih's novels, placing them within their wider historical and cultural backdrop. It draws on detailed textual analysis of his key works, alongside secondary sources that help frame Sudan's literary and political shifts. The study also uses comparative analysis to situate Salih's impact within both Sudanese literature and the broader Arab literary scene.

1.7 Rationale for the Research

This research stems from a desire to closely examine Sudan's postcolonial journey through the lens of one of its most influential writers. As a trailblazer in Sudanese literature, Tayeb Salih provides powerful insights into the shift from nationalist storytelling to narratives that grapple with the real-life social challenges facing modern Sudan. Through his work, this study sheds light on how literature both reflects and helps shape a nation's evolving sense of identity.

3. Data Collection Methods

The study encompasses close reading of major texts like *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Wedding of Zein*. These are examined in reference to how these texts deal with identity, colonial heritage, and socio-political frameworks. Secondary sources like literary criticisms and history works complement the analysis by providing critique and historical context.

3.1 Ethical Considerations

All sources used in this study will be properly cited in line with academic standards to maintain scholarly integrity. The research respects the intellectual contributions of previous scholars and avoids speculation, focusing instead on textual evidence and established critical perspectives. Salih's works will be consistently referred to by their titles, and honorifics will be omitted in keeping with academic conventions.

4. Results and Discussion

The Sudanese novel, especially through the lens of Tayeb Salih's work, transitioned from early nationalist narratives to a deeper engagement with social realism. In *Season of Migration to the North*, Salih critiques the post-colonial confrontation between Sudan and Western modernity, delving into themes of

alienation, displacement, and cultural dislocation. His protagonists grapple with existential dilemmas, caught between the pull of tradition and the promises of modern life—mirroring Sudan's own journey as a nation shaped by British colonial rule. (W. S. Hassan)

Through his characters, Salih gives voice to the psychological conflicts of post-colonial identity. His fiction reflects a society negotiating the tension between reclaiming nationalist autonomy and grappling with the pervasive influence of the West. Salih's narratives thus move beyond simplistic portrayals of nationhood, offering a more layered, personal view of self-determination in a globalized world. (Koster, *Realism and Representation in Tayeb Salih's Work*)

In his later works, Salih turns more explicitly toward social realism. Novels like *The Wedding of Zein* shift away from symbolic nationalism, instead examining the everyday effects of economic change and class dynamics. His characters, who are frequently marginalized or subordinated, grapple with post-colonial Sudan's contradictions, which are abetted by poverty, class conflict, and urbanization. (Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*)

Through rich characterizations and imagery, Salih bases his critique in experience. He focuses on the human in larger historical and political trends, yet emphasizes the individual's struggles and shows ordinary people as active agents. This shift to social realism not just criticizes structures in society but also guarantees the dignity and agency of his subjects. (Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*)

4.1 Salih's Engagement with Nationalism and Modernity

Tayeb Salih's preoccupation with nationalism and modernity is the leitmotif of any literary work, especially in *Season of Migration to the North*. He reflects upon the conflict among traditional Sudanese identity, represented by nationalism, and the power of modernity, represented by the West, challenging postcolonial societies with their conflicted inclinations. Salih scrutinizes colonialist history while investigating the cultural and psychological effects of modernization upon individuals with bi-cultural loyalties. His characters often make their way through the thorns of national identity, individual liberty, and societal expectation. Through rich symbolism and multi-layered narration, Salih questions the significance of progress and the price of foreign-inspired emulation. Through the subtle plot, Salih presents an enduring reflection of an anxiety towards conserving tradition in times of quick transformation. Thus, Salih leaves behind an impassioned critique of the postcolonial state, presenting neither nationalism nor modernity as an exclusive choice but as an aspiration after authentic self-description in an ever-changing world. (Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*)

4.1.1 Nationalist Foundations in Early Sudanese Fiction

During the 1950s and 1960s, the novels of the Sudanese nation were wedded to the nationalist passion surrounding the country's independence in 1956 from Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule. Novelists such as Salih were committed to fiction as an act of nation-building—to reclaiming the past, claiming political independence, and constructing collective identity. (W. S. Hassan)

Early novels were characterized by: Cultural Reclamation – Accepting local customs, oral narrative, and Islamic values as an efficacious means of paying tribute to heritage and resisting colonial hegemony. Idealized Rural Landscapes - Villages represented genuine Sudanese existence in opposition to colonial modernity. Glorification of Resistance - Narratives

centred on historical resistance to imperialism. Calls for National Unity - Ethnic, gender, and class differences were downplayed in favor of a singular Sudanese identity.

Salih's early fiction reflected these ideals, often set in pastoral locations like Wad Hamid, emphasizing community resilience and dignity. Yet, beneath the surface, Salih introduced tensions between modernity and tradition, village and city—foreshadowing the complexity of his later work. (Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*)

4.1.2 The Shift toward Social Realism

As Sudan's post-independence reality began to diverge from its nationalist ideals, Tayeb Salih's fiction reflected this disillusionment. Moving beyond romanticized portrayals of national unity, Salih adopted a mode of social realism—a narrative approach grounded in the complexities of everyday life and the structural critique of both colonial and post-colonial power. (Koster, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*)

In *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Salih departs from idealized nationalist heroes and instead introduces morally ambiguous and psychologically intricate characters. The protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, embodies the fractured identity produced by colonial encounter, straddling cultural boundaries and reflecting the inner trauma of post-colonial subjectivity. (Koster, *Realism and Representation in Tayeb Salih's Work*)

4.1.3 Modernity and the Post-Colonial Condition in Season of Migration to the North

Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North* presents an intensive critique of modernity, not as a linear, progressive path but as an unstable force that subverts personal and collective identity. Mustafa Sa'eed, the novel's anti-hero, personifies the ambivalence of the post-colonial subject. His trajectory to the West—filled with academic success, travel, and romantic relations—ends not in epiphany but in existential alienation and psychic fragmentation. (Aboulela)

Mustafa's education in Oxford and eventual return to Sudan emphasize the psychic wounds inflicted through colonial education systems. Instead of ensuring assimilation, his proficiency in the language and tradition of the colonizer heightens both alienation from Western and Sudanese societies. This is reflective of Homi Bhabha's theory of "hybridity," wherein the subject of colonization finds himself or herself in an in-between place, with an attendant fractured identity. (Bhabha 113). Furthermore, Mustafa's destructive relationships with Western women reflect the eroticized and violent dimensions of colonial power dynamics, illustrating what Frantz Fanon describes as the internalization of colonial violence by the colonized. (Fanon 42). Salih utilizes Mustafa's tragic narrative to critique Sudan's broader social transformation. In his work, modernity emerges as a double-edged sword—offering the promise of liberation while simultaneously threatening the erosion of indigenous identity and cultural coherence. (W. S. Hassan 78).

4.2 The Nile as a Metaphor for Identity and Change

The Nile River stands as one of Salih's most potent symbols, operating on multiple levels within the narrative. It serves as a symbol of generational continuity, connecting the past with the present and anchoring the community in a shared history. The river also functions as a cultural link, bridging Sudan's rich heritage with its contemporary dilemmas. Moreover, the Nile represents a liminal space—a boundary between tradition and modernity, home and the wider world. (Said 91-95).

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the Nile becomes a space of reckoning. It witnesses confessions, acts of violence, and moments of transformation, offering a metaphorical site where Sudan's future is negotiated. As Wail S. Hassan notes, the river embodies the tension between continuity and change, serving as a backdrop against which the characters grapple with their identities (Hassan 102).

4.3 Disillusionment with the Post-Independence State

By the 1960s and 1970s, Salih's writing reflects a growing disillusionment with Sudan's post-independence reality. His narrative voices frustration with social stagnation, highlighting the failure to escape feudal and patriarchal norms. The novel critiques the betrayal of nationalist dreams by political elites, illustrating how cities become sites of disillusionment and decay. Women remain marginalized despite the egalitarian rhetoric of nationalist movements, exemplified by the tragic fate of characters like Hosna Bint Mahmoud. (W. S. Hassan 112-118).

Salih's critique is diagnostic rather than cynical. He exposes the contradictions within Sudanese nationalism, calling for its evolution toward justice and inclusivity. As Edward Said observes, Salih's work challenges the simplistic binaries of East and West, urging a more nuanced understanding of post-colonial identities. (Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*).

4.4 Legacy and Influence on Sudanese Fiction

Tayeb Salih's contribution to Sudanese literature is monumental. His shift from idealized nationalism to social realism reshaped literary discourse in the Arab world. Salih opened space for critique, enabling writers to tackle taboo issues like trauma, sexuality, and identity. His blending of Arabic prose, oral storytelling, and European modernism created a unique narrative style that resonated globally (W. S. Hassan).

Salih's influence extends to contemporary writers like Leila Aboulela and Hammour Ziada, who expand on his themes by exploring gender, conflict, and diaspora. Aboulela's works, such as *Minaret* and *The Translator*, delve into the complexities of Muslim identity in the West, reflecting the enduring relevance of Salih's literary legacy. (Aboulela 56)

5. Conclusion

Tayeb Salih's treatment of nationalism and modernity encapsulates the larger transformation of Sudanese fiction, which progressed, in both content and style, from romanticized depictions of a homogeneous national identity to critiques of fragmentation, hybridity, and social contradiction. Salih's characters bear the psychological burden of history, and his stories compel readers to deal with the intricacies of the post-colonial condition. Finally, Salih's persistent genius is in the fact that he is able to contain several truths simultaneously: pride in cultural heritage and suspicion of its constraints; criticism of colonialism and discomfort with uncritical nationalism; admiration of tradition and recognition of its oppressions. He thereby created a literary journey that is firmly planted in Sudanese soil and resonating with universal quests of identity, modernity, and belonging.

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