

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**Reconstructing Masculinity: Gender and Displacement in Tayeb  
Salih's *Season of Migration to the North***



**<sup>1</sup>Dr. Imran Ali Khan**

**<sup>2</sup>Behishat Malook**

**<sup>3</sup>Mehak Sana**

**<sup>4</sup>Wajeeha Ahmed**

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Qurtuba University of Science and Information  
Technology Peshawar.

Email: [imran\\_khattak@hotmail.com](mailto:imran_khattak@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English Qurtuba  
University of Science and Information  
Technology Peshawar.

Email: [behishatkhattak@gmail.com](mailto:behishatkhattak@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of English, Kohat  
University of Science and Technology Kohat.

<sup>4</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of English Qurtuba  
University of Science and Information  
Technology Peshawar.

Email : [wajeehaahmed13579@gmail.com](mailto:wajeehaahmed13579@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This paper examines the ways in which the *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih challenges the creation of masculinity in the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial displacement. The novel provides such critical outlook on the redefinition of the gender identities via the experience with the imperial power, migration and culture hybridity. Although the current body of work has focused on the ways in which Salih criticizes colonialism and orientalism, a little effort has been directed at how masculinity per se is destabilized, fragmented, and re-built throughout the narrative. This paper considers postcolonial and gender theories in relation to the protagonist Mustafa Sa'eed and the unnamed narrator who could be negotiating masculine identity between Sudan and Britain. By close reading and discourse analysis, the paper shows how masculinity is not produced as an essential but a contentious performance constructed through displacement, memory and power. Through the presentation of the results, it becomes apparent that Salih dismantles colonial binaries of East and West by ambivalence the male subjectivity in exile. The article will also be part of the larger discussion of gender in postcolonial literature by demonstrating how the text by Salih can help us learn more about masculinity as a hybrid and unstable construction.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Displacement, Postcolonialism, Gender, Hybridity, Tayeb Salih

**Introduction**

*Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih is one of the most influential works in the postcolonial literature because it challenges the cultural, political, and psychological impact of colonial experiences. It is generally accepted as one of the most essential works of Arabic literature of the twentieth century, becoming known because of its critical approach towards the topics of the empire, the cultural confrontation, and the difficulties of the postcolonial identity. The novel can be interpreted as such a retaliation against Joseph Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*; the novel reverses the journey of travel by sending a Sudanese intellectual, Mustafa Sa'eed, to the colonial metropole. Such reversal prefigures the skewed power dynamics between colonizer and colonized and at the same time disrupts the accepted literary

canons.

The treatment of East-West relations, cultural hybridity and empire legacies have been the subject of much scholarship on Salih. The novel was placed by Edward Said (1994) as a prime illustration of postcolonial literature that challenges orientalism, and by critics of Makdisi (1992) and Hassan (2003) as addressing the text in terms of its relation to historical memory and cultural negotiation. Nonetheless, masculinity as one of the main dimensions of the identity and power used in the story needs to be expanded. Gender is not a second topic in this novel but it is a constituent subject of postcolonial subjectivity. The relationships that Mustafa Sa'eed maintains with European women, his intellectual competitions and his eventual migration into silence all serve to underscore the ways of how masculinity is a contested and unstable category in situations of migration and displacement.

Salih does not simply refer to the colonial violence in political or economic aspects, but he also reveals how the male identity is fragmented and even into crisis because of the psychological burden of displacement. Masculinity within the novel is set out as a straddling construct, between assertion and vulnerability, agency and disempowerment. Mustafa is full of both mastery and insecurity: his sexual conquests and academic achievements can be compared to colonial power, but his profound feeling of alienation speaks of the emptiness of such performances. Likewise, the unnamed narrator also has to face his own fears of belonging, masculinity, and to be responsible to his community. His hesitation about Mustafa is an indication of the hardships of bargaining a masculine identity that does not make the mistake of trying to become a colonial imitator but not fall in the traps of patriarchal subjugation.

Concentrating on masculinity, the present paper emphasizes a neglected aspect of Salih work. The subjectivity of the male in the novel cannot be discussed outside the context of migration, exile and hybridity, which echo through the wider postcolonial discourse. The discussion of masculinity would help us in realizing that colonialism was not only politically and culturally subjugating but it also transformed personal spheres of identity, desire, and power. This conflict between the public and the personal, the gaze of the colonizer and the self image of the colonized man is repeated throughout the work and constitutes a fertile space in exploring the

intersection of gender and displacement.

What this inquiry is important to note is that the critique that Salih offers goes beyond a critique of imperialism to a more profound critique of patriarchal values and gender hierarchies of power. Placing Mustafa Sa'eed and the narrator in the framework of a cultural dislocation, Salih emphasizes the instability of masculinity in the conditions of colonial modernity. This paper thus attempts to reconstruct masculinity in *Season of Migration to the North* in order to determine how the novel disrupts the essentialist conceptions about gender, and advances a more dynamic, heterogeneous and contentious concept of masculinity. The given approach does not only enhance the readings of the text by Salih, but also leads to more extensive discussions in postcolonial gender studies.

### **Literature Review**

The study of the works by Tayeb Salih on *Season of Migration to the North* has been intensive as the novel has been at the center of postcolonial studies and Arabic literature. The initial critical commentaries centered on its narrative inversion of the *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad where the work of Salih was viewed as a counter-text of European colonial discourse (Said, 1994). Edward Said emphasized the rewriting of colonial representations that is achieved by Salih through the voice of the colonized subject and placing the postcolonial experience within the context of the daily life of Sudan. The reading, which led to later interpretations that explored how the novel deconstructed orientalist binaries and imperial legacies, opened the door to the novel.

Among the main lines of inquiry has been the fact that the text critiques orientalism. Ghandour (2003) examined the ways Mustafa Sa'eed is both an enactor and a defier of orientalist fantasies of the hypersexualized "Oriental man." Salih dramatizes the devastating nature of orientalist stereotypes through the relationships that Mustafa shares with European women, in which they end up confining both the colonizer and the colonized in violent fantasies. On the same note, Amal Amireh (2000) suggested that the gendering process of orientalism is staged in the text, and the fascination of European women with Mustafa replicates the racialized politics of desire. These researches emphasize the role of Salih in revealing that orientalism is not an ideology but is a reality that defines intimacy, sexuality, and power.

The other main field of study has concerned the novel with the aspect of hybridity and identity within cultures. Kandil (2010) read the text as an exploration of the issue of hybridity by stating that both Mustafa and the narrator exist in a liminal place in between cultures. In the case of Kandil, the issue of hybridity in the story of Salih does not dissolve the tensions but rather increases the level of contradiction, which places characters in a constant state of displacement. The theories of hybridity and ambivalence proposed by Bhabha (1994), have been extensively used to interpret the novel as enacting a third space, in which the identities of colonial and postcolonial collide and restructure themselves. Makdisi (1992) also focused on the textual renarration of empire that anticipates the irreversible nature of the process of writing. This was further elaborated by Hassan (2003) who observed that Salih was successful in dramatizing ideological tensions through literary form especially using the alternation between oral storytelling traditions and modernist narrative techniques.

Violence and trauma has also been a question that has been followed. Amoko (2001) reviewed the way in which the novel reveals the symbolic violence of colonial encounters when she writes that Salih shows that imperialism not only upsets the political structures but also psychic and interpersonal relations. El-Ariss (2013) contextualizes the novel in terms of the modernity and affect debate and postulates that the silence of Mustafa and eventual disappearance are indications of rejection of the conditions of subjectivity inherent in colonial modernity. In the same manner, Sharabi (1988) has used the idea of neopatriarchy to contextualize the struggle by the narrator with the inheritance of patriarchal expectations and demonstrate how colonialism compounds contradictions in the gender construct of the natives.

Another group of critical engagement is memory, exile, and belonging. Ahmed (2012) has highlighted the importance of Salih anticipating the politics of memory especially in the way the narrator tries to harmonize his or her own past, with the community trauma.

Mekki (2004) examined the identity search as one of the motifs recurring and observed that the novel places displacement not just in the geographical dimension but also in the psychological dimension as the characters struggle to find their fractured identities.

According to Morey and Yaqin (2011), the identity crisis described by the text is associated with the modern problem of Muslim representation in the world discourses and thus, the ambivalence narrated in the story by Salih is not relevant to the post-9/11 setting.

The issue of masculinity has not been very explored despite all this wealth of scholarship. The theme of gender has been mentioned by a number of critics; however, there are not many who have strategically studied the aspect of masculinity as a postcolonial construct. This was touched upon by Amal Amireh (2000) who examined the dynamics of the relationships of Mustafa with the women of Europe in the context of the encounter within gendered and racialized power. Majed (2015) furthered this line of questioning to state that the Arab masculinity in postcolonial texts is typically depicted as in crisis, torn between imitative practices of colonial masculinity and constraining practices of local patriarchy. Ouzgane and Morrell (2005) have also pointed out that African masculinities should be interpreted as historically constitutive and colonial encounter influenced. The two views indicate that masculinity in the text of Salih cannot be perceived as a fixed subject matter but should be examined as a dynamic process that is affected by displacement, hybridity, and historical violence.

### **Significance**

This paper can be seen as a contribution to the intersecting disciplines of postcolonial literature and gender studies in that it anticipates the future topic of masculinity in Salih's novel. It shows that masculinity in *Season of Migration to the North* is not a fixed category or simply statement of patriarchal dominance but a fractured hybrid object that is a product of migration, displacement and cultural negotiation. The work highlights the importance of Salih questioning colonial and local patriarchies and providing information that is of great importance to the modern arguments on gender and postcolonial identity.

### **Research Objectives**

- 1.To examine the masculinity as portrayed in the *Season of Migration to the North* by Salih.
- 2.To investigate how the displacement and migration contribute to the development of male subjectivity.

3.To place the restructuring of masculinity that Salih constructs in the context of wider postcolonial and gender discourse.

### **Research Questions**

1. What forms of masculinity are constructed and destabilized in *Season of Migration to the North*?
2. How does displacement shape male identity and its contradictions in the novel?
3. Why does Salih depict masculinity as a site of ambivalence rather than stability in the postcolonial condition?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is based on the theory of postcolonialism, as well as gender studies (the works of Homi Bhabha, 1994, on hybridity and ambivalence, and of R.W. Connell, 2005, on hegemonic masculinity). The concept of the third space by Bhabha assists in the conceptualization of the way the characters of Salih mediate between the colonialist and the colonized identities, whereas the model of Connell allows one to understand techniques of reproduction and disruption of the gender hierarchy. The concept of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler (1990) also reinforces the importance of the fact that masculinity in the novel appears as an unstable act and not an essential quality.

### **Methodology**

Employing a qualitative design rooted in close reading, textual analysis and critical discourse analysis, this study interrogates the portrayal of masculinity in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* by tracing how language, metaphor, plot structure, irony and symbolism dramatize negotiations of masculine identity between power and vulnerability in key episodes (Mustafa's European seductions, his trial, confessions and the narrator's communal reflections), while discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995) maps the novel's simultaneous deployment and destabilization of colonial-patriarchal tropes of conquest, possession and Orientalism; the interpretive frame is further thickened by postcolonial and gender theory (Said 1994, Spivak 1999, Connell 2005) to situate masculinity within colonial domination and cultural displacement, using the widely-circulated English text as primary data, peer-reviewed scholarship as secondary context, and cross-validation against existing literature to temper the

subjectivity inherent in textual interpretation and the inevitable loss of Arabic nuance in translation.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The novel *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih dismays traditional concept of masculinity in that the male identity is portrayed as the fragmented and unstable state amidst the colonial and postcolonial displacement. In the novel, masculinity is not shown as coherent and stable formation but a disputed and conflicting formation that is formed under the forge of colonialism, migration and cultural hybridity. Both Mustafa Sa'eed and the unnamed narrator can be seen as great examples of how postcolonial men can negotiate the question of gender identity in manners both empowering and alienating, as well as agency and vulnerability.

Mustafa Sa'eed is an epitome of the colonial man. He is trained in the institutions of British education and learns the intellectual and linguistic instruments of the colonizer, acquiring a cosmopolitan identity, which lets him access elite European societies. Meanwhile, he inherits colonial discourse, especially the orientalist images of the hypersexualized Oriental man (Said, 1994). This performance of masculinity in him is dramatized by his sexual conquests of women in Europe, in which seduction is a form of resistance and imitation of imperial power. However, as Amireh (2000) observes, such relations lead to the tragedy, implying that the idea of Mustafa reclaiming agency by means of sexuality only repeats the violence and destructiveness of the colonial rule. The fact that women like Ann Hammond and Isabella Seymour died shows the coyness of erotic desire and imperial conquest, in which masculinity cannot be disconnected with the concept of power and destruction.

The alienation and trauma are the main center of the masculinity of Mustafa. Although his success in the academic world and seduction seem to be claims on dominance, his inner being shows great dislocation. The feeling that he belongs neither entirely to Sudanese nor European worlds haunts him, an ambivalence that is indicative of what Bhabha (1994) describes as the third space of hybridity. This middle zone disrupts the fixed identities creating subjectivities that are disjointed and fragmented. Instead of referring to masculinity as a mark of strength, the masculinity of Mustafa acquires the qualities of displacement and existential discontinuity.



Conversely, the unnamed narrator presents another, yet not less complicated, notion of the postcolonial masculinity. His experiences with Mustafa are divided into admiration and fear, which can be interpreted as the ambivalence of the narrator himself towards the models of masculinity based on the colonial imitation. The vacillation of the narrator is associated with the ambiguities of the postcolonial intelligentsia that need to adjust to the legacies of the empire along with inherited traditions, as Hassan (2003) notes. There is a sense of masculinity being never fixed but perpetually negotiated in the changing cultural and historical circumstances in the role of the narrator as a viewer and as an actor. His reluctance to become the heir of Mustafa is a demonstration of non-adoption of patriarchal dominance despite his inability to formulate an alternative male model.

Placing manhood in the context of displacement, Salih criticizes the construction of colonial identities, as well as traditional Arab masculinity. The hypersexualized Arab or African figure, as the colonial archetype, is ridiculed by researchers like Said (1994) and Fanon (1967), and in the tragic story of Mustafa it is dismantled. At the same time, the novel criticizes local patriarchal regimes by preempting suffering and silences of women, especially figures like Hosna Bint Mahmoud, forcefully married and violently resisting as an indication of the devastating effects of strict gender order (Sharabi, 1988). Here, Salih locates masculinity as a place of power, but in the sense of vulnerability, fragmentation and crisis.

This instability is most aptly realized through the final scene of the novel in the Nile. When the narrator is lost between the two worlds of life and death, his scream of help is an endeavor to align with the various parts of his self. The river, which is used as a commonly repeated symbol of continuity and rebirth, gives an opportunity to recreate masculinity in a way that does not coincide with binary oppositions of East/West or colonizer/colonized. The denial of the narrative closure, however, is also a sign that this reconfiguration is an open and continuing process. According to Makdisi (1992), Salih does not want to provide a certain solution, thus underlining the instability of the postcolonial subjectivity that never stops.

The consequences of this analysis are not restricted to this novel. Salih shows that the

colonialism not only reconstituted political and cultural institutions but also personal aspects of gender identity. Instead of being a category of nature, of being universal, masculinity is historically specific and heavily invested in domination and displacement systems. This knowledge echoes the idea presented by Connell (2005) of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is focused on the reproduction of dominant manifestations of manhood in specific social situations. Hegemonic models, be it colonial or patriarchal, in Salih novel are revealed to be destructive and new models of masculine identity are required, which are fluid, relational and self-critical.

Overall, the dynamics between Mustafa and the narrator show how masculinity in *Season of Migration to the North* is not an undivided nature but a piece-meal and competing imagination. Salih predicts the crisis of male identity in the postcolonial world through displacement, hybridity and cultural negotiation. The novel emphasizes the instability of masculinity itself by rejecting closure, and making the reconstruction of it a project that is necessary and yet unfinished.

The case of the analysis of the theme of masculinity as constructed, destabilized, and re-imagined in the context of the interrelations of colonialism, displacement and cultural hybridity has led to a number of important conclusions concerning the manner in which masculinity is framed in the authoritative location of the case study, *Season of Migration to the North*. The results are arranged in the major thematic patterns that took shape as a result of the textual and discourse analysis.

The novel depicts masculinity as something that was not an unchanging and consistent structure but as something, which was influenced by the historical processes, especially colonialism and its consequences. Salih shows that the postcolonial Sudan man cannot be discussed out of the context of migration, the exchange of culture, and displacement. It is this that is in line with the discussion by Connell (2005) that explains that masculinity is never biologically determined but is historically and socially constructed. The narrator and Mustafa Saeed possess fractured and contingent masculinities that lie between the Sudanese traditions and Western modernity. Their struggle shows that colonialism did not only tear the political sovereignty but also re-patterned intimate and personal aspects of gender identity (Fanon, 1967).

Mustafa Sa'eed embodies the fatal power of the assimilation to colonial masculinity. His studies in Britain and later sexual affairs with women in Europe are a symbol of a parody of imperial dominance whereby masculinity is practiced in the form of conquest and domination. As demonstrated by scholars like Amireh (2000) the seductions by Mustafa reflect the orientalist notions of the hypersexualized Arab man. But Salih makes this show far more difficult by associating it with trauma and alienation. The suicides and deaths of the women in Mustafa life reveal the violence in these gendered acts and the emptiness in his own emotions reveals the worthlessness of such imitation. In this way, Mustafa depicts the seductive and self-destructive nature of colonial masculinity that creates men who are powerful, but still suffer displacement and loss (Makdisi, 1992).

By contrast, the nameless narrator represents ambivalence and the quest of a third masculine identity. His friendship with Mustafa is characterized by fascination and fear as he is cognizant of the risks of emulating colonial masculinity and at the same time he struggles with its attractiveness (Hassan, 2003). The narrator tries to forge a novel direction that strikes a balance between hybridity and avoids falling prey to colonial apeship or hostile patriarchal rule. The uncertainty-based masculinity he exhibits in his reflective tone, his hesitation to take charge of things, and his constant questioning indicate a masculinity based on doubt instead of control. Instead of being a weakness, this instability signifies the reconfiguring of manhood, as a domain of ethical responsibility and receptiveness to self-examination by Salih (Bhabha, 1994).

Another interesting finding is that Salih associates masculinity to the larger institutions of patriarchy in the Sudanese society. The destiny of Hosna Bint Mahmoud, who is forced into marriage and ends up becoming a violent person, highlights the destructive effect of the patriarchal demands of male dominance on women and disruption of society. Her opposition throws up the previously assumed ideas of gender in the narrator and makes the readers think of the masculinity as involved in the mechanisms of domination not limited to colonial influence (Sharabi, 1988). The inability of the narrator to take action in the situation of Hosna puts more emphasis on his own complicity, which makes it even more difficult to negotiate his

identity. By so doing Salih is challenging both the colonial construction of masculinity but also the localised traditions of patriarchy which reproduces oppression.

One of the main conclusions of this paper is that Salih reinvents masculinity as a place of vulnerability and challenge instead of the place of surety and authority. The insecurity of male identity in the situations of displacement is revealed through Mustafa's confession, the indecisiveness of the narrator and the repetitive symbolism of the Nile. According to Said (1994) and Ahmed (2012) postcolonial subjectivity is characterized by inconstancy and fragmentation and Salih adds this argument to gendered identity. The last part of the novel when the narrator fights in the river, the precariousness of masculinity is dramatized: in the water the narrator faces the threat of drowning and survival or remaining silent or speaking, resign or renewing. This tension is not resolved and it cannot be closed meaning that postcolonial masculinity cannot be smoothed into definite binaries of East and West, robustness and frailty.

Donation to Postcolonial Gender Studies.

Combined, these results add to the literature on postcolonial gender studies, in that masculinity in *Season of Migration to the North* is a personal and political issue. Salih brings out the fact that colonialism did not only redefine external apparatus of governance and culture but also the close-up landscape of male subjectivity. With the destabilization of binaries and foregrounding weakness, the novel is (anticipated by) the modern-day feminist and postcolonial theories that challenge the hegemonic modes of gender (Connell, 2005; Spivak, 1999). The work by Salih therefore creates a space to rethink masculinity as being relational, self critical and historically specific. Overall, the depiction of a man, Mustafa Saed, and the narrator in the novel reflects the insecurity of masculinity in the conditions of colonialism and postcolonialism. Salih, both criticizes colonial talk and native patriarchy through their fights, and at the same time proposes the necessity of finding other modes of masculinity that will welcome vulnerability, hybridity and moral accountability.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

*Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih provides a deep contemplation on masculinity as disrupted, conflicted and hybrid in post colonialist circumstances. The

novel challenges the essentialist belief about gender by placing the male subjectivity into the confusions of colonial past, displacement and cultural mixture. As seen in the present study, masculinity is not a marginal theme in the text by Salih and, on the contrary, a central area of postcolonial negotiation. The annihilating adoption of colonial masculinity by Mustafa Sa'eed and the ambivalent desire of the narrator to seek a different identity demonstrate the multi-layered struggles between men and the legacies of empire, patriarchy and modernity.

The text is disruptive to the hegemonic masculinities through the foregrounding of vulnerability, instability, and relationality. We can only remember that masculinities are plural and historically positing, which has been influenced by the interaction of both global and local forces (Connell, 2005). Salih focalizes such plurality, by contrasting Western models of patriarchal supremacy with Sudanese customs indicating that either the former or the latter may be repressive. The story, then, undermines binary East/West, power/weakness and reveals masculinity as a process of negotiation negotiated through trauma, memory and desire (Fanon, 1967; Bhabha, 1994).

One of the significant contributions of the novel is its criticism of patriarchy as a colonial and at the same time, a localized form of control. Hosna Bint Mahmoud and other female characters break male-dominated stories by revealing the way in which patriarchal issues contribute to violence against women. This focus highlights the importance of focusing on masculinity not singly but in connection to larger frames of gendered power (Sharabi, 1988; Spivak, 1999).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of the present research leave the doors to further research. First, it is possible that in the future research we can examine masculinity intersections with other factors, such as class, nation, and religion in Sudanese and Arab literature, in general. This would enlighten us on how social structures and cultural systems complicate even more the negotiation of the male identity in postcolonial situations (Ahmed, 2012). Second, a comparative analysis with other writers like Chinua Achebe or Ngugi wa Thiong can deepen the knowledge on how masculinity is redefined in other African literatures which have encountered up to now the same

colonial backgrounds. Such comparisons would show convergences and divergences in the ways male subjectivity is re-created through histories of empire and opposition (Said, 1994).

Finally, the text Salih creates questions both readers and scholars to reevaluate masculinity as not a given, but as a dynamic and destabilizing, constructive process of displacement, of hybridity, and of historical memory. It thereby offers some contribution to broader arguments in the study of postcolonialism, as well as to gender studies, in terms of how literature can reveal and renegotiate gendered identity.

### **References**

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- Amireh, A. (2000). Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab feminism in a transnational world. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26(1), 215–249.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. Grove Press.
- Hassan, W. S. (2003). Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the craft of fiction. *World Literature Today*, 77(1), 22–26.
- Makdisi, S. (1992). The empire renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the reinvention of the present. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(4), 804–820.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.
- Sharabi, H. (1988). *Neopatriarchy: A theory of distorted change in Arab society*. Oxford University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Harvard University Press.