

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

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

**<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20142793>**

**Temporal Dislocations: Non-linear Time, and Postcolonial Anxiety in Tayeb Salih's  
*Season of Migration to the North***



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**Abstract**

The study attempts to analyse the significance of Tayeb Salih's novel '*Season of Migration to the North*' by examining its non-linear temporality, highlighting temporal displacement as a tool for depicting the anxiety and disjuncture of identity associated with the postcolonial experience. Through a qualitative analysis of the novel within the paradigms of postcolonialism and narrative theory, it becomes clear how memories, flashbacks, and circular distortions have disrupted the linearity of time. The analysis reveals that the novel employs temporal cycles and interruptions in which past and present merge, reflecting the psychological turmoil of postcolonial individuals. Memory proves to be the key tool for blurring the boundaries of time, through which colonial history invades the characters' present experience. Using the characterisations of Mustafa Sa'eed and an anonymous narrator, this study demonstrates how disrupted temporality reflects inner conflicts, culture shock, and historical trauma. Overall, it is argued that non-linear temporality is not only a structural technique but a means by which linear historiography associated with imperialism can be critiqued. In this way, the study makes an important contribution to scholarship on postcolonial literature by exploring how form and theme intersect within a postcolonial context.

**Keywords:** non-linear temporality; postcolonial anxiety; hybridity; identity fragmentation; narrative dislocation

**1. Introduction**

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* can be considered an integral part of postcolonial literature as it addresses important issues related to identity, culture, and history in the context of the consequences of colonisation. This work is based on the experiences of the characters who move between Sudan and England as they experience the impacts of imperial rule and explore their identities in light of the past. The scholars stress the interrelation between indigenous and imperial discourses in Salih's novel, as he examines the dynamics of cultural encounters (Hussein et al., 2025). Moreover, one of the most distinctive features of this novel is its undermining of linear temporal logic through narrative fragmentation, shifting perspectives, and memory.

It unfolds non-linearly through the anonymous narrators; the biography of Mustafa Sa'eed is portrayed erratically rather than in chronological order. Past and present events are mixed in the novel, creating confusion about time. This suggests that both time and memories within the novel do not flow linearly but instead return to intersect with life. Such disruptions in time imply that history does not lie buried in the past but constantly continues to affect the present. The novel demonstrates the colonised state of mind, bearing the imprint of their colonial past (Muhaidat and Waleed, 2018).

Furthermore, the novel's chronological arrangement reflects the psychological disintegration of its characters. The narrative of Mustafa Sa'eed, unfolded through embedded tales and flashbacks, illustrates how individual memories become interwoven with the colonial past. Through his back-and-forth movement between Sudan and Britain, Mustafa Sa'eed illustrates the conflict involved in hybridity. At the same time, the difficulty faced by the narrator in decoding Sa'eed's experiences also indicates a more general concern for identity and alienation. Previous scholars have connected this problem of identity to the ambivalent feelings and hybridity engendered by the colonial encounter, in which individuals are pulled

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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between opposing cultural paradigms (Zohdi, 2017). However, more recent scholarship has broadened this discussion through analysing how spatial and ecological elements shape postcolonial identity (Alkhaldeh, 2024).

Temporal dislocation in the *Season of Migration to the North* acts as an important aspect of postcolonial criticism. Rather than providing a linear timeline of events, Salih subverts the historical approach that seeks to construct order and certainty from the chaos of the colonial experience. Instead, he focuses on the multiplicity, ambiguity, and repetition of the postcolonial experience, stating that postcolonial identity is defined by its complex temporal and historical dimensions. Apart from the above points of view, there are many other aspects of postcolonial literature to consider when examining this issue. Postcolonial theories emphasise the importance of narrative experimentation in resisting the dominant episteme of imperialism (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Moreover, cultural theories of hybridity explain the complexity of identity construction in postcolonial societies (Bhabha, 1994).

## 1.1 Significance of the Research

The proposed study will contribute to postcolonial literary criticism by drawing attention to the significance of non-linear time in Tayeb Salih's postcolonial narrative, *Season of Migration to the North*. In recent years, most scholars have focused on issues related to hybridity, identity crisis, and colonial discourse in the novel. The significance of temporal dislocation in the construction of the abovementioned themes remains underexplored; thus, this paper aims to fill this gap. Moreover, the research will contribute to narrative theory by focusing on the issue of non-linear time and its relation to the psychological and cultural dislocation of postcolonial individuals. The use of time can be regarded as a means of depicting the lived experience of postcolonial subjects shaped by their history and colonial past. The study contributes to literary criticism by helping analyse the novel from a different angle and inspiring other researchers to examine similar aspects in other works of literature.

## 2. Literature Review

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* has been extensively analysed in postcolonial literary scholarship, especially in connection to concepts such as hybridity, identity, and colonial discourse. Early scholarship considers the book as a part of postcolonial literature, which functions as a means of "writing back" to the imperial discourse by giving voice to the colonised (Ashcroft et al., 2002). The critics agree that Tayeb Salih's novel is a response to imperial discourse, highlighting the conflict between the coloniser and the colonised, thereby challenging the Western perception of African and Arab cultures (Hussein et al., 2025).

Among the most prevalent critical approaches when analysing Tayeb Salih's novel is the application of the theory of hybridity and fragmented identity in accordance with the premises suggested by Bhabha (1994). As shown in some studies, Mustafa Sa'eed represents a hybrid condition, as he struggles to identify himself as either Sudanese or British, leading to a divided self (Zohdi, 2017). Das (2020) asserts that hybridity in the novel is not limited to themes but is also expressed formally, influencing the story's structure and fostering self-reflection, thereby fostering a self-reflective storytelling mode that questions linear identity formation. Comparative studies further support this argument, revealing the postcolonial protagonist's inability to resolve conflicting identities, leading to a perpetual identity crisis (Bakir, 2025).

Another research direction concerns the psychological aspects of colonisation, especially the colonised's adoption of power structures within colonial rule. According to scholars,

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

colonialism results in a mental crisis among the colonised who show signs of alienation, mimicry, and self-division (Muhaidat & Waleed, 2018). The experiences of Mustafa Sa'eed during his stay in England depict such conditions where he tries to dominate Western women while also showing resistance to their culture. Such contradictory behaviours support other postcolonial readings of identity construction as unstable and continuously negotiated by oppositional cultures (Guswantoro, 2023).

Identity-based approaches have examined the novel in relation to its engagement with colonial discourse and power dynamics. According to Hussein et al., the novel is contrapuntally characterised, with various voices from the indigenous and imperial worlds colliding and challenging one another. Such an approach is akin to Edward Said's contrapuntal reading, which emphasises multiple perspectives within a text (Said, 1993). Furthermore, El-Hussari (2019) considers the novel in relation to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, noting that it subverts colonialist discourses and uncovers the inherent violence in imperial texts. These intertextual readings critique and respond to Eurocentric portrayals.

Recent studies have moved away from examining the narrative in terms of identity formation and have introduced new perspectives. For instance, Alkhawaldeh (2024) uses the lens of bio regionality to analyse the connection between characters and their environment and to examine how such an understanding of the environment corresponds to the broader theme of displacement in postcolonial contexts. Similarly, Çulhaoğlu (2024) explores the development of postcolonial identity in the novel, focusing on the struggle for cultural reclamation and indigenous representation.

Despite the abundance of existing research, there has been insufficient focus on narrative temporality and, more specifically, on the impact of non-linear time in constructing the postcolonial experience. Although it is recognised that the novel has a fragmented structure, very few studies consider the significance of non-linearity as the technique that creates the anxiety experienced by the postcolonial person. The lack of such research underscores the need to conduct a study of the role of non-linear temporality in narration. Through an investigation of how switches from the past to the present interrupt chronology, this work aims to add to current scholarly research by demonstrating that non-linearity plays an integral part in the construction of postcolonial identity.

### 3. Research Methodology

To explore the phenomenon of temporal dislocation and its connection to postcolonial anxiety, the current study uses a qualitative research methodology by analysing Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. As the central theme of the current study involves the analysis of narrative structure and ideological issues, a qualitative research method is better suited to this project.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The methodology used in the current research can be described as interpretive textual analysis, as two approaches are used to analyse the selected piece of literature: postcolonial theory and narrative theory. The current research is both exploratory and analytical, examining the role of temporal dislocation in the novel and its contribution to postcolonial subjectivity.

#### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

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Among the most widely used critical methods in the literary analysis of Tayeb Salih's novel, one may mention the application of hybridity and the idea of identity fragmentation, both grounded in theoretical assumptions. Bhabha (1994). The theoretical basis of the analysis includes, first of all, postcolonial theory, with a focus on hybridity, ambivalence, and identity constructions, as argued by Bhabha (1994). The significance of using cultural and imperial discourse, as Said (1993) argues, should also be noted here. In addition, narrative theory, specifically Genette's (1980) narrative temporality, is applied here. This helps analyse the effect of temporal displacement within the novel on the generation of meaning. By employing both these theoretical perspectives, a connection between form and postcolonial content is established.

### **3.3 Data Sources**

The main source of data for this study is the book *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. Excerpts and parts of the story are intentionally selected, as are characters whose stories feature elements of shifting time and flashbacks. For the secondary data, articles and scholarly works on postcolonialism, narrative, and the author's work are used in this study to aid the interpretation of the results and to situate them within scholarly literature.

### **3.4 Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection in this study was conducted using the close-reading method, in which excerpts from the primary text that illustrate temporal shifts were collected. On postcolonialism, narrative, and the author's work are used in this study to aid the interpretation of the results and to situate.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Procedure**

In the study, thematic and narrative analyses were used. The procedure begins by identifying textual instances of temporal disturbance, including flashbacks, embedded stories, and narrative perspective shifts. We then present a thematic interpretation of temporal disruption and its significance for issues of identity, memory, and colonisation.

The research was conducted in two stages:

- Narrative Analysis – analysis of temporal structures in the novel following Genette's scheme (order, duration, frequency).
- Thematic Interpretation – analysis of the above-mentioned temporal structures within the framework of postcolonial themes (hybridity, dislocation, etc.).

This approach guarantees that both formal and thematic aspects are considered during analysis.

### **3.6 Research Approach**

The study uses an inductive approach, with themes and interpretations emerging from the text itself rather than being imposed on it. Even though the study is grounded in a theoretical framework, it allows for an open interpretation of the text.

### **3.7 Delimitations of the Study**

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The research examines only one novel – *Season of Migration to the North*, focusing only on time disturbances and postcolonial anxiety in it. Factors such as gender, sexuality, and other aspects of language use are not discussed in the study.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1 Overview

The present section provides a detailed analysis of the theme of temporal non-linearity in Tayeb Salih’s novel “*Season of Migration to the North*”. The analysis is based on textual readings that address the issue of time in relation to the postcolonial condition of anxiety.

The analysis follows a thematic order in which time functions through memory, narration, characters, and spatial movements between Sudan and Europe.

**Table 4.1**

#### Focus of Analysis

Analytical Aspect	Description	Relation to Research Topic
<b>Narrative Structure</b>	Fragmented and non-linear narration	Reflects temporal instability
<b>Memory</b>	Recollection and retrospective narration	Collapses past and present
<b>Characterization</b>	Mustafa Sa’eed and narrator	Represents identity fragmentation
<b>Spatial Movement</b>	Sudan and Europe	Intensifies postcolonial anxiety
<b>Repetition</b>	Recurring memories and images	Suggests cyclical temporality

### 4.2 Non-linear narrative structure and temporal dislocation

Firstly, the novel does not follow a conventional progression and is characterised by a non-linear narrative in which memories continually disrupt the present. The narrator’s journey back to Sudan is not portrayed as a stable present but as one filled with disruptions of memories and reflections.

At the outset, the narrator provides the following description of his arrival: “I returned with a great yearning for my people... I felt as though a piece of ice were melting inside of me” (Salih, 1969, p. 1). Although this appears to be a solid description of the present, the narrator disrupts his narrative by recollecting his past experiences, thereby undermining the sense of stability. For example, the image of “melting ice” implies a transformation not only in space but also in time, in which past experiences melt away to become the present identity. Temporal dislocation occurs as the narrative proceeds in an unexpected fashion, where events do not follow any logical sequence and emerge as memories of certain occurrences in the narrator’s life: “certain incidents recall certain other ones” (Salih, 1969, p. 24).

**Table 4.2**

#### Features of Non-linear Narrative

<b>Narrative Technique</b>	<b>Example from Text</b>	<b>Effect</b>
<b>Flashbacks</b>	Mustafa's recollections	Disrupt chronology
<b>Associative Memory</b>	One event recalling another	Creates cyclical temporality
<b>Fragmented Storytelling</b>	Non-sequential life narrative	Reflects unstable identity
<b>Narrative Interruptions</b>	Sudden shifts in time	Produces psychological tension

### 4.3 Memory as a Site of Temporal Dislocation

Memories become the primary form of temporal displacement. The narrator's memories bring together the past and the present, creating a multi-layered story. "That thin tranquil voice sets up a bridge between me and the anxious moment that has not yet been formed, and between the moments... which have passed on" (Salih, 1969, p. 5). When remembering his grandfather, the narrator states: "Here, temporal boundaries are definitely blurred." Memory makes the past and the future coexist in the present. The coexistence of different times is characteristic of postcolonial anxiety, in which identity is formed amid unassimilated histories.

**Table 4.3**

#### Memory and Temporal Collapse

<b>Memory Pattern</b>	<b>Textual Evidence</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>Past entering present</b>	Recollections of Europe	Colonial past remains active
<b>Future anxiety</b>	"moment not yet formed."	Fear of uncertain identity
<b>Layered narration</b>	Simultaneous timelines	Destabilises temporal order
<b>Emotional reconstruction</b>	Memory shaping identity	Reflects postcolonial tension

### 4.4 Mustafa Sa'eed and Disrupted Temporal Identity

The character of Mustafa Sa'eed embodies the highest levels of temporal dislocation. The narration of his life unfolds in fragments rather than in chronological order. Information about Mustafa's past emerges in fragments, leading to dislocation. At a certain point, the author raises questions regarding the authenticity of Mustafa: "Mustafa Sa'eed never existed; that he was, in fact, an illusion, a phantom, a dream or a nightmare" (Salih, 1969, p. 19). Undoubtedly, this is a clear representation of temporal dislocation. Mustafa is an entity that fluctuates between memories, imagination, and storytelling. The life of Mustafa unfolds in fragments: "These events happened a long time ago... certain incidents recall certain other ones" (Salih, 1969, p. 24).

**Table 4.4**

#### Mustafa Sa'eed's Fragmented Identity

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Analytical Significance</b>
<b>Retrospective narration</b>	Childhood memories	Identity formed through recollection
<b>Temporal fragmentation</b>	Disconnected life episodes	Psychological instability
<b>Phantom-like existence</b>	"a lie, a phantom"	Unstable subjectivity
<b>Hybrid identity</b>	Sudan and England	Postcolonial dislocation

### 4.5 Temporal Disruption and Colonial Trauma

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

The disruption of time in the novel is tightly associated with colonial trauma. The past is not distant; it intrudes on the present. Mustafa's life experience in Europe takes the form of fragmented memories rather than linear ones. Mustafa's romance with Jean Morris ends with the dissolution of time: "the universe, with its past, present and future, was gathered together into a single point" (Salih, 1969, p. 147). These words illustrate psychological and existential crises. The courtroom episodes combine personal memory with colonial memory, thus positioning Mustafa as a symbol of the struggle between East and West.

Table 4.5

## Colonial Trauma and Temporal Collapse

Traumatic Element	Example	Result
Colonial encounter	Mustafa in England	Identity crisis
Psychological rupture	Collapse of temporal boundaries	Anxiety and alienation
Trial scenes	East-West conflict	Historical burden
Violent memory	Jean Morris episode	Emotional fragmentation

## 4.6 Spatial Movement and Temporal Instability

The movement from Sudan to Europe becomes more dislocated temporally. Both spaces exist on the same plane within the characters' consciousness. The author tries to combine both experiences: "exactly like them... marrying and bringing up their children" (Salih, 1969, p. 1). However, despite all his efforts, Europe is still seen as a colonised space of the past, and Sudan as homeland and origin. However, it happens quite often. An especially significant moment is when Mustafa suddenly starts reciting poems in English: "Suddenly I heard him reciting English poetry in a clear voice and with an impeccable accent" (Salih, 1969, p. 19).

Table 4.6

## Space and Temporal Dislocation

Space	Symbolic Meaning	Temporal Association
Sudan	Roots and belonging	Present and memory
England	Colonial influence	Past trauma
Cairo	Transitional identity	Movement between cultures
Sea journey	Existential uncertainty	Timeless displacement

## 4.7 Repetition, Cyclicity, and the Continuity of the Past

Repetitions and cyclicity are recurrent motifs throughout the book. The author consistently reflects on the appearance of Mustafa: "Mustafa Sa'eed's face springs clearly to my mind... then is lost" (Salih, 1969, p. 54). This repetition implies that the past has not yet been settled and keeps repeating itself. Journeys, deserts, and mirrors continue to recur, creating cyclical structures. Instead of reaching any conclusion, the story keeps circling back to memories and past worries.

Table 4.7

## Cyclical Patterns in the Novel

Repeated Element	Function	Effect
Mustafa's image	Recurring memory	Persistence of the past
Journeys	Repeated displacement	Endless search for identity
Mirrors and reflections	Self-examination	Fragmented consciousness
Recurrent narration	Circular storytelling	Rejects linear history

## 4.8 Temporal Dislocation and Identity Crisis

Time disruption plays a central role in creating identity crises because both the narrator and Mustafa struggle to fit into their temporal and cultural milieus. At first, the narrator was very sure of his identity, saying "I felt...like that palm tree – a being with a background, with roots" (Salih, 1969, p. 1). However, his meeting with Mustafa destroys any confidence in his identity. Mustafa can be described as a symbol of the total disintegration of temporal and cultural aspects.

Table 4.8

### Temporal Dislocation and Identity Formation

Character	Temporal Condition	Identity Outcome
Narrator	Conflict between past and present	Gradual instability
Mustafa Sa'eed	Fragmented temporality	Psychological disintegration
Grandfather	Stable connection to tradition	Cultural continuity
Jean Morris	Symbol of colonial tension	Destructive interaction

## 5. Findings

The current paper examines non-linear temporality as a literary device in the author's *Season of Migration to the North*, reflecting postcolonial anxiety and identity uncertainty. As a result of the analysis carried out, it is possible to make the following major conclusions:

### 5.1 Non-linear temporality is an inherent feature of the narrative of the novel

The events in the novel do not develop chronologically. Rather, their chronology is being disrupted, which makes it evident that time in the novel does not flow linearly but rather comes full circle.

### 5.2 Memory acts as a temporal displacement tool

In fact, memory plays an essential role in the plot's development. The reason for this is that memories of both the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed combine multiple temporalities. These necessarily overlap because a postcolonial subject cannot dissociate itself from its colonising experience.

### 5.3 Temporal disintegration as a reflection of psychological tension and anxiety

Temporal disintegration concerns the characters' psyches. To illustrate the above-mentioned concept, consider the fragmentation of Mustafa Sa'eed's story and the narrator's perspective of it. Temporal disintegration reflects the severe postcolonial trauma that cannot be healed and impacts consciousness.

## 5.4 The past keeps recurring in the present

Another important point about this phenomenon is that the colonial past never stays in the past and keeps repeating itself in the present. It shows how unhealed history plays an influential role in the development of the postcolonial identity. This way, history repeats itself, becoming an obstacle to getting closure.

## 5.5 Spatial mobility contributes to temporal disintegration

Spatial mobility from Sudan to Europe becomes the reason for temporal disintegration in the book. Those are the spaces that have different time frames but still overlap in the characters' perception.

## 5.6 Distorted time causes identity fragmentation

Time distortion, according to the analysis, ultimately causes identity issues. The inability to form a cohesive identity stems from getting stuck within the multiple layers of the narrator's and Mustafa Sa'eed's past and present experiences. In fact, one discovers that identity is not static but constantly reinvented.

## 5.7 Non-linearity emerges as postcolonial resistance

Lastly, one can argue that Salih's adoption of a non-linear time frame constitutes a form of postcolonial resistance to the colonial historical narrative. By opting for a non-linear timeline, the author deliberately deviates from the colonial narrative framework, demonstrating that time need not progress in a straight line.

**Table 5.1**

### Major Findings of the Study

No.	Findings	Description
1	Non-linear temporality	<b>The novel employs a disrupted chronology through flashbacks.</b> <b>Memory mixes the past and present, causing temporal dislocation.</b> <b>Temporal disruption symbolises anxiety and the scars of colonialism.</b> Past events keep recurring in the present.
2	Memory and time	
3	Psychological instability	
4	Persistence of the past	Colonial history continuously intrudes upon the present.
5	Spatial dislocation	Movement between Sudan and Europe intensifies temporal instability.
6	Identity fragmentation	Disrupted temporality contributes to unstable postcolonial identities.
7	Postcolonial critique	Non-linear time challenges imperial and linear historical narratives.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to analyse the significance of non-linear temporality in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and to demonstrate that fragmented narratives effectively represent postcolonial anxiety, displacement, and identity instability. As a result of detailed textual analysis, it was found that the novel employs memory changes, flashbacks, and recursion, which are typical of psychological disorders and reflect the fragmentation experienced by postcolonial subjects. In addition, it was identified that the constant intrusion of the colonial era into the modern world prevents a sense of completion and leads to the hybrid identities of Mustafa Sa'eed and the nameless narrator. The limitations of the study stem from analysing a single literary work that addresses only temporal issues and postcolonial anxiety. The research is based on qualitative textual analysis, while quantitative and comparative approaches were not utilised. Hence, further research may be carried out by analysing temporality in postcolonial literature or by applying an interdisciplinary approach such as psychoanalytic criticism and ecocriticism.

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## **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

Muhaidat, F., & Waleed, L. (2018). The psychological plight of the colonised in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 14(1), 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.3968/10123>

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