Season of Migration to the North and *Heart of Darkness*
African Mimicry of European Stereotypes

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Abstract

This article examines Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North as it mimics Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. It looks at the North-South dynamics in terms of colonial-postcolonial asymmetrical power relations underlying these two representative literary narratives. The two novels are structured along two round trips taken by the narrators in a reverse order, yet the ensuing outcomes are quite compelling. As each of the two novels resolves itself in a self-challenging manner, it also addresses a more challenging public issue. Salih's Afro-Arab, Sudanese narrative moves from the egocentric to the polyphonic, from the dominance of a monolithic culture to the subordination of convergent cultures, and back to the starting point in the Sudan. Conrad's Euro-English narrative moves from the polyphonic to the egocentric, and back to the starting point in Europe. Along the two trips, deceptively distinct at face value, personal and collective memories are invariably recalled by the narrators to interpret and elevate the difficult situations the main characters of the two novels pass through. The stress on the spatial metaphors, as the texts place themselves in historical contexts, is so crucial for the notion of intertextuality. This raises the assumption whether Salih's model of intertextuality can be read as an explicit African attempt at writing back to the West or an implicit call for a dialogue through the sympathetic medium of literature. The article examines this assumption, in particular, through analyzing the forms of mimicry used by Salih to parody Conrad's text. Emphasis is placed on examining the issue of duplicity and/or complicity between characters and narrators. This is done in terms of Freudian and Jungian

interpretations of human psyche under alienation and stress. Language and linguistic discourse features are also examined as part of the narrative structure and the historical contexts shaping the flow of events in the two tales. These are looked at as linguistic devices addressing the issue of 'otherness' and therefore foregrounding the possibility of a dialogue implied by the ways Salih and Conrad orchestrate their essentially polyphonic texts.

Key-words: *polyphony, intertextuality, parody, dialogue analysis, literary study, Conrad, Salih, Europe, Africa, novel, colonial, postcolonial, discourse*

Introduction

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, all speech utterances are heteroglot and polyphonic in that they "partake of different languages and resonate with many voices" (Bakhtin, 1981: 428). Because of its emphasis on voices, Bakhtin's dialogic theory of literature presents particularly rich potential for the study of literary texts. His method of analyzing embedded voices or vocal orchestration to guide our interpretation of a literary text cannot only demonstrate polyphony and heteroglossia, but can also serve as a tool for uncovering new insights into the various levels of voices that populate a novel. For Bakhtin, the layering of voices within one voice is nowhere clearer than in the novel whose epic mode and discursive linguistic features of telling a complex story is unique. To this effect, the novel is a "vocal" text and novelistic writing, as discourse, cannot be dialogical if it is not accompanied by an additional effort to lend it a voice. Even internal dialogues are no more than the result of double-voicedness or, in a more powerful form, of polyphony. In this connection, comparative literature which invites a critical study of intertextual elements of two or more literary texts lies at the heart of polyphony and dialogue studies.

A comparative approach to literature is one that "crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries and presupposes the mutual

reinforcement of theory and interpretation without sacrificing the autonomy of the individual text" (Greene, 1993:148). In this sense, intertextuality as a style often used in producing postcolonial literature, may function as a fundamental criticism of the colonial hegemony claiming to possess the single, unitary truth permeating almost entirely all canonical works in Western literature (See also Thieme, 2001; Wodak, 1999; Harlow, 1979). Rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' the colonial era and its literary heritage, postcolonial literature is generally defined as that which critically and subversively scrutinizes the colonial discourse across various Western writings. It is meant, in one way or another, to resist colonialist one-sided perspectives as well as challenge existing power relations. In other words, postcolonial writers, and more particularly those who mimic and parody colonial literary masters, are simply there to tell their own side of the North-South story which has been hidden for long from the readers in the West (See Benjamin, 1969; Ashcroft, 2000). To give expressions to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported the claims of colonization – the myths of power and superiority, the race classifications, and the imagery of subordination. Whether viewed as a strategy for contesting the authority of the canon, or a counter-discursive practice of the original text, or even as a parody of the colonial "other", postcolonial literature undertakes to rework big issues misrepresented in the great tradition of Western representative fiction (See Kalu, 2007; Firchow, 2000; Said, 1994; Nazareth, 1982; Achebe, 1958).

This article is primarily concerned with the study of mimicry as a narrative device used by Tayeb Salih in his novel *Season of Migration to the North* as he parodies Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Salih admits the influence of Conrad in a lecture he gave at the American University of Beirut on May 19, 1980: "As far as form goes, I have been especially struck by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*" (Amyuni, 1985:15). The polyphonic nature of Salih's

postcolonial narrative, built around scenes in dialogue, on conversations, debates, arguments, and even monologues, insists on producing a multiplicity of voices among which the author's is hardly audible. However, polyphony does not literally refer to a number of voices but to the collective quality of an individual voice, thereby creating a dialogic relationship among distinct and independent voices (Bakhtin, 1979). The objectivity of the narrative method used by Salih to juxtapose the two antithetical cultures, North and South, lends itself yet to a quest for some meaning which intertextual and dialogue analysis can possibly grant due significance and worth. As the study of the two tales invite intertextual and dialogic analysis on more than one level, I will address the complexity of the narrative voice in each text and the layers of voices embedded therein. I will particularly focus on the last scene closing each text and betraying a call for a dialogue.

Intertextuality as an Approach to Literature

If the term 'intertextuality' implies the shaping of the meaning of a text in relation to another text or other texts, it can also refer to an author's borrowing and transformation of an earlier text or to a reader's referencing of one text in reading another. As the term itself has been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by post-structuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966, critic William Irwin raises doubts about the term having a specific meaning as an approach to understanding texts. He argues that the term "has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence" (Irwin, 2004: 227). Thus, intertextuality, like many terms in literary theory, is given different senses and ways of application. Its controversial nature owes to critics who try to use it as an approach to various studies including literature. In his book *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen (2000) argues that there are major controversies over the use of the term which critics employ as a model for the interpretation of literature. According to Allen, the different

senses and uses of the term, intertextuality, correspond to the different critical approaches to literature and the relation of literature to society or to its context (cf. Barthes, 1975; Derrida, 1976; Clayton, 1991; Friedman, 1991). As such, intertextuality is a means by which texts are interpreted as lacking fixed authorship and stable knowledge. Instead, texts embody the notions of pluralism, openness and change. It is egalitarian in that it is bound in a dynamic relationship to ongoing social and political transformation. To this effect, intertextuality demonstrates the limits of discourse and allows for a model by which it becomes possible to challenge and resist discourse – to open up the possibilities of becoming 'other' (See Barthes, 1977).

To Julia Kristeva, a text is "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (Kristeva, 1980: 36). She incorporates Bakhtin's dialogism in relation to the novel into her semiotics dealing with poetic language, but she adds a psychological dimension to her theory as she draws upon Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. She considers that intertextuality "encompasses that aspect of literary and other kinds of texts which struggle against and subverts reason, the belief in unity of meaning" (Kristeva, 1980: 41). It has to do "with desire and with the psychological drives of the subject split between the conscious and the unconscious, reason and desire, the rational and the irrational" (Kristeva, 1980: 47). As a form of challenge, interterxtuality involves, as Allen contends, transposition which means that "texts do not just utilize previous textual units but they transform them and give them new thetic positions" (Allen, 1981: 53). This psychological turn in Kristeva's theory distances her from Bakhtin's polyphony and dialogic theory but asserts the possibility that intertextuality is a participation in the discursive space of a culture. Thus, the study of intertextuality is not the investigation of sources and influences related to a certain text as traditionally conceived but the challenge to existing power relations and the stabilizing of the meaning of fossilized terms used in the literature produced during the

era of the European colonial rule of Africa and the Orient (See also Smith, 2007; Bivona, 1998; During, 1992). In this connection, examples abound when writers like Rudyard Kipling and the Social Darwinists brag about their being the voice of the empire during colonial hey day. In this article I will show how the intertextual threads in Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* in relation to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* render it a disturbing text that resists simple clear-cut interpretations. The reference to intertextuality, though undeniably true, lends much more meaning to Salih's text when polyphony and dialogue analysis invite a fuller understanding of the two texts in terms of a comparative literature study. A comparative approach to literature, according to Thomas Greene (1993), is one that "crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries, presupposes the mutual reinforcement of theory and interpretation, and transgresses disciplinary barriers without sacrificing the autonomy of the poetic text" (148). Bakhtin's critical interpretive theory of text offers a useful framework for the study of individual texts. To this effect, *Season of Migration to the North*, as a postcolonial narrative text cannot be fully apprehended outside the colonial context in which *Heart of Darkness* is purposely set to say something significant about the demise of the empire and the moral degeneration one of its representative envoys, Kurtz, undergoes while growing alien and monstrous in the darkness of the African jungle. Salih's text mimics that image of transformation when Mustafa Sa'eed, one of the African representative envoys to Europe, undergoes a similar fate of alienation and estrangement in London, the seat of civilization and enlightenment. Yet, as the two polyphonic texts resonate with a multiplicity of voices, other than those of Kurtz and Mustafa Sa'eed, the narrators of the two tales assume bigger roles as they gradually turn into full-blown characters in search of an existential meaning of their lives away from the hopeless pursuit of illusory dreams which are willfully dissipated and replaced by nightmarish visions. The parody used by Salih to mimic Conrad is not futile after all; it is postcolonial Africa writing back to colonial

Europe in an attempt to fill the wide gap between the two continents with a constructive dialogue if the message of intertextuality should mean anything at all.

Narrative Structure of the Tales: Polyphonic and Intertextual Elements

A comparative approach to *Heart of Darkness* and *Season of Migration to the North* in terms of the notions of intertextuality and polyphony would unerringly show a remarkable affinity between the two texts, albeit arguably complex and uneasy. The former, a literary product of the European colonial experience in Africa, can be considered as the original text, while the latter, an Afro-Arab literary product of the postcolonial and independence era, can be considered as the counterfoil copy. The two narratives have many intertextual and polyphonic elements in common, let alone the stylish mode of telling a story. The multiplicity of voices involved in each tale as well as the narrative structure framing the flow of events in each tale are substantial evidence that colonial and postcolonial literary texts are intertwined for reasons worthy of discussion.

The two narratives are structured along two round trips where departure and return create the pattern and rhythm of each narrative. At face value, the first tale takes a European maritime mission into the African continent. Among other crew members of the boat *Nellie*, Marlow, the narrator, is entrusted by his company to inquire about his fellow Kurtz, the ivory chief agent at the Inner Station, who for unknown reasons has stopped sending that raw material back home. However, as Marlow's African experience prompts him to insist on the 'unreality' of the whole mission, the tale assumes another turn: a journey within Marlow himself and an inquiry into "how strong the hold of civilization is on its members" (Berthoud, 1978: 45). The three stations Marlow stops at while navigating up River Congo to see Kurtz gradually parallel the conscious and unconscious forces acting upon the individual human psyche in various situations (See Freud, 1930).

On the other hand, *Season of Migration to the North* parodies the physical and psychological journey of *Heart of Darkness* but in a reverse order. It is the journey taken by Mustafa Sa'eed, the hero of the tale, but retold by the anonymous Sudanese narrator who also takes a similar journey. It is from the Sudan in the South to England in the North and the way back. The narrative technique using mimicry to tell the story cannot go unnoticed. While Marlow retells the story of Kurtz on his own, perhaps out of fidelity to his European compatriot, Mustafa Sa'eed pursues and entrusts the narrator in *Season* to retell Mustafa's story.

Both stories are, therefore, retold for publicity by narrators who have never undergone the same experiences of the heroes, but who are also chosen by the authors of the tales to relay their own versions of reality, thus striking a difference in tone, voice, and perception of the experiences they are compelled to relive. The two journeys patterning the narrative structure and rhythm of each tale yield more insight into the moral dilemmas shared by the heroes and the narrators when viewed as part of the historical context shaping colonial and postcolonial narratives. *Heart of Darkness* is essentially a statement of confession that condemns the atrocities of the empire against the African natives and the systematic looting of their natural wealth. *Season*, by contrast, is another statement of confession that condemns the futile attempt to redefine national identity through acts of blind revenge, exaggeration, and fabrication of lies. Both heroes, Kurtz and Mustafa, perish or disappear from the scene when they are no more able to sustain themselves in exile: Kurtz has allowed the dark forces of the African jungle to transform him into a monster thus sacrificing all the cultural values that bind him to his European civilization, and Mustafa has allowed his camouflaged basic instincts to take advantage of him and transform him into a killer thus sacrificing his traditional Islamic values and those of his tribe in the Sudan. The narrators, on the other hand, seem to have exchanged turns: Marlow insists on saving the face of Kurtz through a big lie, and the anonymous narrator of

Season, having identified himself with Mustafa, insists on making a clean start in life based on volition, not coercion. However, Marlow does this not through the transparency that a priestly presence entails but through a whisper; that is, by means of evasiveness adorned by an overuse of thick irony and an atmosphere of uneasiness. Marlow does this in the hope that he might contribute to the rescue of the remnants of the European civilization which in hey day has created the likes of Kurtz.

> I laid the ghost of his [Kurtz's] gifts with a lie (HD, 1981: 281).

The other narrator, in turn, makes a confession while being trapped in the middle of River Nile, between North and South, unable to recognize a specific direction to head for. Unlike Marlow who only whispers the truth to himself, the narrator of *Season* gives out a shrill shout, like a shriek, asking for help as he is struggling to survive the fate of Mustafa Sa'eed. He does this through an act of buffoonery.

> Like a comic actor shouting on a stage, I screamed with all my remaining strength, 'Help! Help!' (SMN, 1991: 169).

Marlow tries to evade his nightmarish, jungle experience as embodied in the physically and morally degenerate Kurtz, his second self, by dismissing the reality of that experience altogether. In fact, Marlow, for whom Kurtz has always been the dream of his life while in Europe, tries to escape the trial of the jungle where a civilized man is tested for ability to sublimate his basic instincts and primitive energies which can be easily provoked in the darkness of the African jungle and in the absence of a check constantly exercised by civilization upon the individual psyche of its adherents (See Freud, 1930). Dismissing his jungle experience as notorious and unreal, Marlow is seemingly trying to survive tragic knowledge without admitting self-deception. A civilized man must resist the temptation of the jungle, as he implies. By doing this, Marlow is taking the crux of

the experience away from its colonial context. It is an act of amelioration done by Marlow in the nick of time to save his face, although his last words clearly betray signs of embarrassment and discomfiture. Salih mimics and ridicules Marlow's ameliorating tone as he transforms it into the funny vision of a clownish narrator in *Season.*

Despite the funniness of the last scene in *Season*, the anonymous narrator chooses in earnest to dissociate himself from Mustafa Sa'eed by denying the latter's existence altogether, thus trying to rid himself of his second self once and for all. The clownish act the narrator performs while on the verge of drowning in the Nile is yet incomprehensible, for it is reduced to a personal level seeking a safe haven, away from the bad memories of the colonial period. Mustafa was born in a Sudan colonized by Britain, educated by the empire, and sent to England on a scholarship arranged by the colonizer to pursue his higher education there. The narrator was born in the independent Sudan whose national government has arranged to send him to England for higher education. The colonial experience is imposed on the narrator by Mustafa Sa'eed with whom the act of identification in Mustafa's triangular but somber room spins to full cycle towards self-awareness, only to reject that identification in the interest of self-indulgence when he runs away showing clean heels. After Mustafa Sa'eed has unexpectedly disappeared in the Nile, the narrator makes a choice: he must survive the nightmarish fate of Mustafa in any way possible.

> It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. If
> I am unable to forgive, then I shall try to forget. I shall
> live by force and cunning (SMN, 1991: 169).

Apart from the four audible voices that resonate with overtones and undertones which Conrad and Salih, each in his own way, try to pass the North-South dynamic in terms of an inward moral dilemma visited unevenly upon both characters and narrators, the two tales also

allow passage to a number of voices, some of which remain ironically silenced. In *Heart of Darkness*, the voices of other white men encountered in the company of Marlow or at the three stations up River Congo, also contribute to the wider scope of meaning despite the low profile they keep. At the coastal station, while Marlow is questioning the absurd shelling of the African continent by the French cruiser, only the accountant, who keeps a well-organized business ledger, proves that he is part of the calculating Europe. The Manager at the Central station will not accompany Marlow any further up River Congo, for he has given up hope in search of Kurtz.

> We have done all we could for him, haven't we? But
> there is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more
> harm than good to the Company (HD, 1981: 156).

However, the silent voices of the faceless, black African inhabitants who fill the physical space in the Congo remain outside the context of a possible encounter or confrontation with the new invader coming from the North. The blacks are described as beastly and savage or mistresses and servants; they have no voices; they even die in silence as they retreat back into the jungle. It is only Marlow's condescension and human dignity that can see them as fellow humans, for Kurtz has already transformed them into pagans worshipping him as their own almighty god. The polyphonic nature of the narrative as orchestrated by Conrad is meant to reflect the darkness of the colonial heart in Africa and other notorious acts related to colonization.

On the other hand, *Season* mimics the European stereotypes of African inhabitants by creating White characters superficially caricatured as either marginalized and hollow or arrogant and pretentious, yet Salih allows them all to voice themselves at ease. With those English characters, especially women whom Mustafa entices into his oriental bedroom then he discards them as scrap, the tale caricatures Mustafa as a sadistic character who deftly recalls personal and national memory to pay back the colonial Europeans for their long

exploitation of his country and Africa, thus justifying revenge (See Lachman, 1997; Harris, 1987). Like Kurts, Mustafa is transformed in the eyes of his White mistresses into a pagan god. Sexually potent and virile, as he claims he is, Mustafa is ironically caricatured as mixing up his own sexual exploits with an ambiguous desire for redefining his national identity. His phrase "I will liberate Africa with my penis" (HD, 1991: 108) is no more than a twisted thought calling for blind revenge which is mercilessly visited upon hopeless English women for crimes committed by the empire in its colonies including the Sudan. In the court, Mustafa denies having killed the three English women: Isabella Seymour, Ann Hammond, and Sheila Greenwood, but he admits killing Jean Morris, who seems to be sharing him similar neurosis. In his attempt to invite history into his personal whims and sexual triumphs, Mustafa also conjures up the love-hate relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, between master and slave. And this adds clarity to the lie of national independence about which the anonymous narrator knows little if any at all. The orchestration of conflicting voices brought into the opus of Salih's *Season* carries the complexity of the relationship between the North and the South to levels of suspicion, distrust and adversity, all of which eventually claim victims and lead to tragic consequences. Even Mustafa himself chooses to throw himself in the Nile and disappear some time after he has been jailed and deported from Britain to settle for a time in a remote village in the Sudan.

The Dialogic Nature of the Two Tales: Focus on the Last Scenes

The affinity between the last scenes in *Heart of Darkness* and *Season of Migration to the North* is so striking. No doubt the metaphor of darkness and gloom in Mustafa Sa'eed's private room, which was built and brick-capped after European models, is a place where the narrator relives the life story of Mustafa Sa'eed from childhood to disappearance or probably death. Mustafa's notes about his departure and return journey, his uneasy encounters with English men and

women, his scholarship as a distinguished student and professor of economics, his exaggerations about sexual exploits and their relationships with liberation and history – all these are almost entirely impressive enough to transform the narrator into another hulk like Mustafa. Had he not been awakened by the cold waters of the Nile as he blindly follows in the footsteps of Mustafa, he would have met the same fate. The narrator takes off all his clothes and plunges in the Nile naked as he was born for a suicidal attempt after he has failed to keep the trust Mustafa has assigned to him: taking care of Hosna, Mustafa's widow, and his two young children. Hosna is forced into a second marriage against her will; she eventually kills old Wad Rayyes, her second but very old husband, and herself on her wedding night in a violent scene showing her rebellion against her family, tribe and traditions. Finding himself in a desperate situation, the narrator, who is now involved more effectively in the tale, decides to possess the central scene.

> I do not have time to proceed further with this farce
> (SMN, 1991: 154).

Haunted by a feeling of unreality, like his counterfoil Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator throws himself in the Nile, naked, at the break of dawn, a metaphorical word implying rebirth and a new coming. However, the comic effect of the move he takes in that direction cannot go beyond an attempt to pass the buck and flee the drastic weight of the colonial-postcolonial complex dynamic and ambiguous relationship.

Marlow almost takes the same flight back home and ends the myth of Kurtz with a lie when he tells the Intended, Kurtz'z fiancée, about the greatness and glory of her betrothed in Africa. This is not the case when Marlow and Kurtz meet for the first and last time in the latter's dark cabin. Marlow's reflection on what he has seen here is quite piercing.

I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror, of an intense and hopeless despair… He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The Horror! The Horror!' (HD, 1981: 168).

There is no booming voice in the cabin, nor is there any rhetorical eloquence, just a transient vision in candle-light and a barely heard cry. It is a fair judgment passed by Kurtz on himself as well as other representatives of Europe and probably the human race. Only here does Marlow gain full insight into the reality of Kurtz and into himself at the same time. The identification which takes place between the two men in Kurtz's dark cabin is now complete, but the scene is too dim and dark.

Kurtz'z dark and dim cabin is similar to Mustafa's dark and dim room which the anonymous narrator of *Season* enters reluctantly and perhaps unconsciously. However, the gravity of the issue does not seem to be tackled by the narrator seriously at the conscious level. The insightful darkness elicited from that dark room is soon dismissed and dissipated into a farcical performance. Thus, the tale Salih weaves into a seemingly autonomous narrative text does not stand the artistic dimensions of great art. However, viewing the tale as mimicry of *Heart of Darkness* is the crux of the matter. Parody, which often invites funniness and most probably black humor, can also carry a strong message. In its broad scope, *Season* as a dark comedy also has its own catharsis, almost exactly like any great tragic work of art.

Concluding Remarks

Tayeb Salih, an Afro-Arab voice of postcolonial literature, does not only come out through the revision of a European literary classic of the colonial period, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but also through the engagement with the larger cultural context of that canonical text. The focus on the connection between literary texts and

a broader cultural or social context assumes that the notion of parody adopted as a narrative mode in postcolonial studies is actually linked to Bakhtin's literary theory of dialogism and the concepts of intertextuality which Kristeva and other theorists in the field of comparative literature have developed thenceforth. Accordingly, as Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* appropriates Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in both theme and form, a dialogic reading of the two texts is quite probable. This article has examined the meaning beneath and beyond the transformative dialogue between the literary text produced and its intertextual other. Writing his novel from that English canon, Salih must have meant to restructure some European colonial worldviews in postcolonial terms where a monolithic, authoritative colonial vision is challenged by a subversive yet dialogic postcolonial hybridity. The need for a two-way, communication traffic is essentially based on the interaction of a multiplicity of voices where adversity, misconception and misrepresentation can be negotiated through dialogue. Only from this theoretical perspective can we understand the role and function of great literary narratives like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. In this sense parody, used by Salih as a narrative device to write back to Europe, also carries a mocking message that calls for a dialogue through which human life can assume significance and the diverse cultural values endurance.

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