

Migration, Exile, and the Unhomely: A Transcultural Reading of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

K. SHAKILA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, JAMAL MOHAMED COLLEGE, TIRUCHIRAPPALLI,
TAMILNADU, INDIA.

Abstract: This paper presents a transcultural analysis of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, examining how the novel articulates migration, exile, and the condition of the "unhomely" within postcolonial modernity. Drawing on postcolonial theory particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, the study explores how Salih destabilizes rigid binaries such as North and South, self and other, home and exile. The narrative trajectories of the unnamed narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed reveal migration not merely as geographic movement but as a deeply psychological and cultural dislocation that fractures identity. By situating *Season of Migration to the North* within a transcultural and transnational framework, this study challenges Eurocentric narratives of migration and identity formation. It argues that Salih reimagines exile as a permanent condition of postcolonial existence, where belonging is continually negotiated across shifting cultural boundaries. The paper contributes to global discussions on migration, postcolonial literature, and the ethics of cross-cultural encounters in contemporary literary studies.

Keywords: Migration, Exile, Trans-culturalism, Postcolonial Literature, Unhomely, Identity, Colonial Discourse, Tayeb Salih.

Postcolonial literature consistently engages with the intricate processes through which identity is shaped, reshaped, and often destabilized by the historical experiences of colonial domination, migration, and cultural displacement. Writers working within this tradition frequently explore how individuals and societies negotiate the lasting psychological, linguistic, and cultural effects of imperial rule long after the formal end of colonial administrations. Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* stands as one of the most influential works in this literary field, offering a profound and nuanced response to colonial narratives that historically portrayed Africa and the Middle East through Eurocentric perspectives. Rather than accepting inherited representations, Salih's novel reclaims narrative authority by presenting complex characters whose lives reflect the continuing tensions between colonial history and postcolonial realities.

Emerging in the decades following political independence in many African and Arab nations, the novel reflects a historical moment marked by both optimism and uncertainty. While the end of colonial governance promised the possibility of national self-definition and cultural renewal, it also exposed societies to new forms of ideological, economic, and cultural influence that complicated the process of constructing independent identities. Salih's narrative captures this transitional moment by examining how colonial structures continue to operate within the consciousness of individuals and communities, shaping their aspirations, relationships, and sense of belonging even after the official withdrawal of imperial power. In this way, the novel reveals that political independence does not automatically erase the psychological and cultural imprints left by colonial encounters.

Central to the narrative is the theme of migration, which functions not merely as physical movement across geographical borders but as a transformative experience that profoundly alters the inner lives of the characters. The story of Mustafa Sa'eed, a brilliant Sudanese intellectual who travels to Britain for education and later achieves professional recognition there, serves as a key lens through which the novel examines the complexities of cross-cultural interaction. His journey initially

appears to embody the promise of intellectual advancement and global mobility, suggesting that migration might provide opportunities for empowerment and personal success. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that his experiences in the colonial metropolis are deeply entangled with racialized perceptions, cultural misunderstandings, and the lingering power dynamics of imperial history. Mustafa's life demonstrates how migration can simultaneously open doors to new possibilities while intensifying feelings of alienation and cultural fragmentation.

Parallel to Mustafa Sa'eed's story is that of the unnamed narrator, who returns to Sudan after completing his studies abroad. His return initially seems to represent a movement toward cultural reconnection and the recovery of a stable sense of identity rooted in homeland and tradition. Yet his experiences reveal that the idea of returning to an unchanged or pure cultural origin is largely illusory. The Sudanese village to which he comes back is itself shaped by the historical forces of colonialism, modernization, and social transformation. As he interacts with members of the community and gradually uncovers the hidden dimensions of Mustafa Sa'eed's past, the narrator begins to recognize the extent to which colonial encounters have reshaped both individual lives and collective cultural realities. His sense of belonging becomes increasingly uncertain, reflecting the broader postcolonial condition in which individuals often find themselves suspended between multiple cultural frameworks without fully identifying with any single one.

Through the intertwined narratives of these two figures, Salih challenges simplistic assumptions that migration necessarily leads to liberation, progress, or cultural enrichment. Instead, the novel presents migration as a deeply ambivalent process that can generate psychological tension, identity crises, and unresolved cultural conflicts. Characters who move between regions shaped by colonial relationships often discover that they are unable to return unchanged to their original communities, yet they also remain outsiders in the societies they temporarily inhabit. This dual sense of estrangement produces a condition in which belonging becomes uncertain and constantly negotiated, rather than stable or predetermined.

The novel thus suggests that the postcolonial experience is fundamentally characterized by what may be described as an "unhomely" condition—a state in which neither the homeland nor the foreign environment offers a complete sense of comfort or security. Individuals shaped by colonial histories frequently inhabit cultural spaces that are marked by hybridity, contradiction, and ongoing negotiation between inherited traditions and external influences. In *Season of Migration to the North*, this condition is not presented merely as a personal dilemma affecting a few characters but as a broader historical reality experienced by societies emerging from colonial rule. By portraying the emotional and psychological consequences of living between cultures, Salih highlights the enduring impact of colonial encounters on the formation of identity in the modern world.

Rather than interpreting migration simply as a movement from one geographical location to another, Bhabha emphasizes the unsettling transformation that occurs when individuals discover that the familiar spaces traditionally associated with belonging—home, nation, community, and cultural identity—no longer provide a stable or reassuring sense of continuity. The "unhomely," in this context, does not merely signify homelessness or exile in a literal sense; instead, it refers to a deeper condition in which the distinctions between what is perceived as private and public, domestic and foreign, or local and global become blurred. When these boundaries collapse, individuals often experience an enduring sense of estrangement, even when they remain physically present in places that once represented comfort and familiarity. This theoretical perspective allows readers to understand displacement not only as a political or historical phenomenon but also as an ongoing psychological state shaped by the lingering effects of colonial encounters.

Bhabha's theory further suggests that colonial histories disrupt the assumption that national or cultural identities are fixed, coherent, and internally unified. Colonial rule, by imposing foreign

systems of governance, education, language, and cultural values, introduces new frameworks through which colonized societies are compelled to interpret themselves. Even after formal independence, these frameworks continue to shape everyday practices, social institutions, and intellectual traditions, producing identities that are neither entirely indigenous nor wholly foreign. Instead, individuals inhabit hybrid cultural positions that require constant negotiation between inherited traditions and external influences. The experience of hybridity is not necessarily liberating; it frequently generates tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties, as individuals attempt to reconcile multiple cultural affiliations that do not always harmonize. In such circumstances, the sense of “home” becomes unstable, because the cultural foundations that once seemed secure are revealed to be historically constructed and subject to transformation.

Within this conceptual framework, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* provides a compelling narrative illustration of the unhomey condition. The novel portrays both England and Sudan as spaces marked by estrangement, demonstrating that displacement cannot be resolved simply by returning to one’s place of origin. For Mustafa Sa’eed, England initially represents the promise of intellectual recognition, social mobility, and participation in global modernity. His academic achievements and professional success suggest that he has mastered the linguistic and cultural codes necessary for acceptance within British society. However, this apparent integration remains fragile, because his presence is continually interpreted through racialized assumptions and colonial stereotypes that position him as an outsider. Despite his accomplishments, he is never fully liberated from the gaze that defines him as different, exotic, or threatening. His experience reveals how colonial power relations continue to operate within social interactions, preventing the possibility of genuine belonging.

At the same time, Mustafa Sa’eed’s eventual return to Sudan does not provide the restoration of identity or emotional stability that might traditionally be associated with the idea of homecoming. Instead of reintegrating seamlessly into the local community, he remains psychologically distant, carrying with him the complex memories and contradictions produced by his life abroad. His identity, shaped by prolonged exposure to different cultural environments, cannot easily be reconciled with the expectations of the society to which he returns. The homeland, rather than functioning as a space of resolution, becomes another site of dislocation, where the past and the present, tradition and modernity, intersect in ways that make a coherent sense of belonging difficult to sustain. This dual experience—alienation abroad and estrangement at home—captures the essence of the unhomey condition described by Bhabha, where individuals find themselves unable to inhabit any single cultural space without experiencing some degree of fragmentation.

A similar dynamic is evident in the experiences of the unnamed narrator, whose return to Sudan after studying in Europe initially appears to promise the recovery of a stable cultural identity. Yet as he re-engages with village life, he gradually realizes that the community itself has undergone significant transformations influenced by colonial history, modernization, and shifting social relations. The village is no longer the timeless and unchanging environment he had imagined during his years abroad. Instead, it bears the marks of historical processes that have reshaped cultural practices, economic structures, and interpersonal relationships. This recognition challenges the romanticized notion of an untouched homeland that exists outside the forces of global change. The narrator’s growing awareness of these transformations leads him to confront the unsettling realization that the sense of belonging he had hoped to rediscover cannot be fully restored, because both he and the society to which he returns have been irrevocably altered.

At first glance, Mustafa’s academic brilliance and remarkable achievements in Britain appear to confirm the belief that migration can provide access to opportunity, recognition, and upward mobility. His success within prestigious academic institutions suggests that the colonial subject,

through intelligence and determination, can enter the intellectual spaces once reserved exclusively for the colonizer. Yet, as the narrative gradually unfolds, it becomes evident that this apparent triumph is deeply entangled with the expectations and stereotypes imposed by colonial ideology.

Although Mustafa excels within British academic and social circles, the admiration he receives is often filtered through a lens of exotic fascination rather than genuine acceptance. His presence is perceived as unusual, intriguing, and at times threatening, revealing that colonial attitudes continue to structure the ways in which individuals from colonized societies are recognized within Western contexts. In this sense, his achievements do not entirely liberate him from the constraints of racialized perception; instead, they situate him within a system that simultaneously celebrates and objectifies him. The novel suggests that colonial discourse constructs the migrant intellectual as both a subject of admiration and an object of curiosity, thereby limiting the possibility of true equality. Mustafa's experience illustrates how success within the colonial center can remain conditioned by the lingering dynamics of power that define the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

This tension becomes especially evident in Mustafa's personal relationships, particularly his interactions with English women, which the novel portrays as symbolic reenactments of colonial encounters. These relationships do not operate solely at the level of personal desire but also reflect deeper historical patterns of domination, fascination, and resistance. Mustafa's attempts to assert control within these relationships can be interpreted as an effort to reverse the colonial gaze that historically positioned non-European subjects as passive objects of observation. By presenting himself as both intellectual and mysterious, he engages with the stereotypes projected onto him while simultaneously seeking to manipulate them. However, the emotional and psychological consequences of these interactions reveal that such attempts at reversal do not fully dismantle the underlying structures of colonial power. Instead, they intensify the conflicts within his identity, producing a state of inner fragmentation that ultimately leads to destructive outcomes.

Migration, therefore, emerges in the novel as a complex site where identity is simultaneously shaped and destabilized. Mustafa's life in England demonstrates that crossing geographical boundaries does not automatically result in cultural integration or psychological coherence. Rather, the encounter with new social environments often exposes individuals to competing expectations that make the formation of a unified sense of self increasingly difficult. Mustafa's efforts to negotiate his position between Sudanese cultural heritage and British intellectual life highlight the challenges faced by individuals who inhabit multiple cultural frameworks. His inability to reconcile these dimensions of his identity reflects the broader condition of the postcolonial subject, whose experiences are shaped by overlapping histories that resist easy synthesis. The tragic trajectory of his life underscores the novel's suggestion that colonial encounters frequently produce identities marked by tension, contradiction, and unresolved conflict.

This realization leads the narrator to question the possibility of recovering an authentic cultural origin untouched by historical change. The village, once imagined as a secure and stable cultural environment, appears increasingly complex and unfamiliar, reflecting the broader processes of modernization and global influence that have affected postcolonial societies. The narrator's growing awareness that both he and his community have been transformed by historical forces highlights the difficulty of returning to a fixed or original sense of identity. His experience demonstrates that migration does not end when individuals physically return to their homeland; rather, the psychological and cultural transformations produced by living between different worlds continue to shape their perceptions and relationships.

Through the parallel experiences of Mustafa Sa'eed and the unnamed narrator, the novel presents migration as an ongoing process that reshapes identity in multiple and often contradictory

ways. While Mustafa's life illustrates the dangers of attempting to confront colonial power through personal domination and symbolic reversal, the narrator's reflections reveal the quieter yet equally profound challenges of negotiating belonging in a world marked by historical change. Both characters ultimately confront the realization that neither the foreign land nor the homeland can offer a completely stable cultural foundation. Their experiences reflect the broader postcolonial condition in which traditional notions of home, identity, and cultural continuity are disrupted by the enduring legacies of colonial history and the transformative pressures of global modernity.

In Conclusion Season of Migration to the North presents a profound and compelling examination of migration, exile, and the formation of identity within the broader framework of postcolonial modernity. Through the interconnected life stories of Mustafa Sa'eed and the unnamed narrator, Tayeb Salih illustrates how the legacy of colonial rule generates identities marked by hybridity, internal division, and a continuing sense of displacement often described as the "unhomely." In the novel, migration is portrayed not simply as the act of moving from one place to another but as a deeply psychological experience that unsettles the possibility of achieving a stable and unified sense of belonging.

Salih's narrative strategy further reinforces these themes by combining elements of indigenous oral storytelling traditions with modern literary techniques, thereby reshaping the conventions of the novel and challenging Eurocentric models of representing the postcolonial world. This blending of narrative forms reflects the cultural hybridity that defines the characters' experiences, demonstrating how literary expression itself becomes a site of transcultural negotiation. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the search for identity in an increasingly interconnected world requires an acknowledgment of cultural plurality and the acceptance that the idea of "home" can no longer be understood as a fixed geographical space or a singular cultural origin. Through this transcultural vision, Salih's work continues to hold significant relevance for contemporary debates surrounding migration, globalization, and intercultural dialogue within international literary studies.

Works Cited

1. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, 1978.
4. Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, Heinemann, 1969.