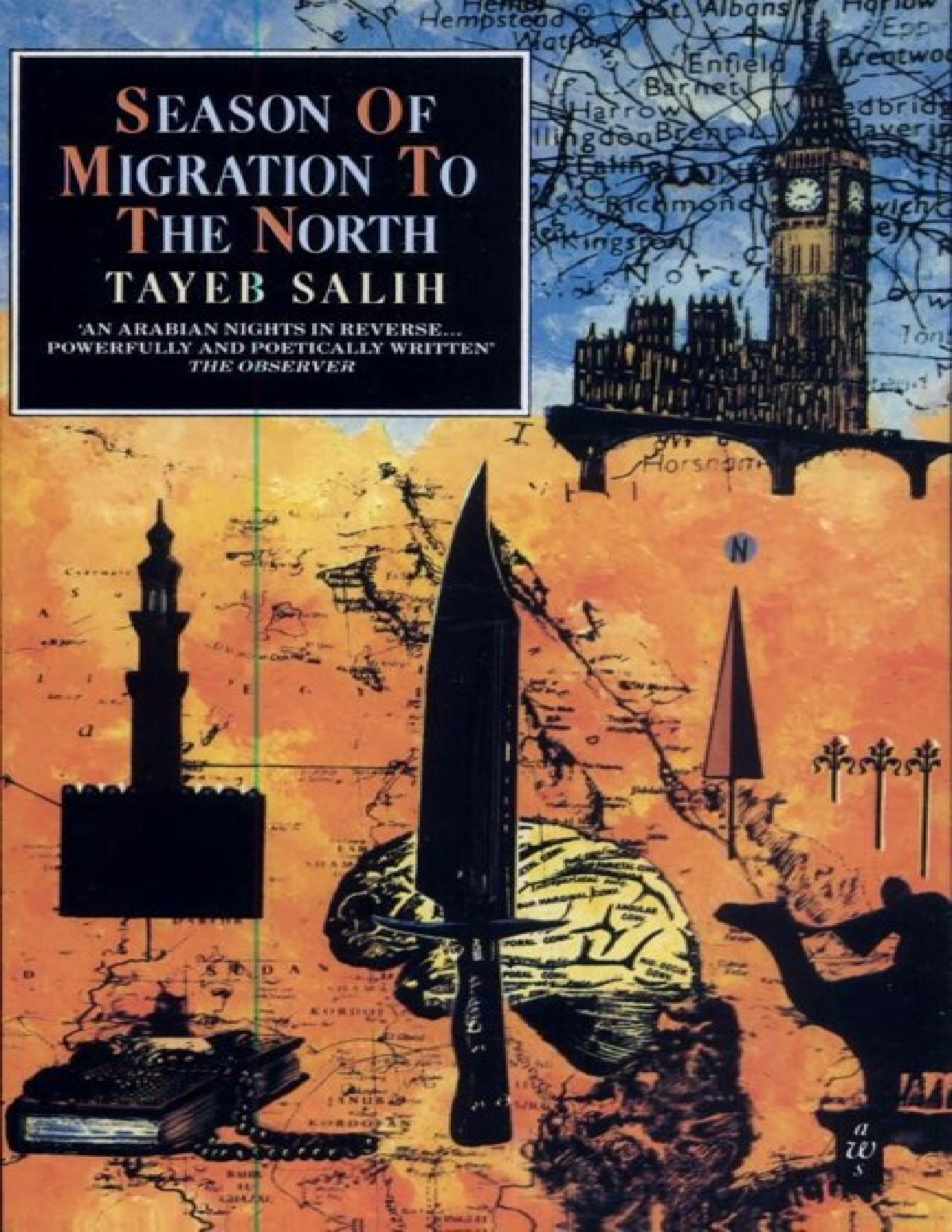
SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH

TAYEB SALIH

'AN ARABIAN NIGHTS IN REVERSE... POWERFULLY AND POETICALLY WRITTEN'
THE OBSERVER



TAYEB SALIH was born in 1929 in the Northern Province of Sudan, and has spent most of his life outside the land of his birth. He studied at Khartoum University before going to England to work at the British Broadcasting Corporation as Head of Drama in the Arabic Service. He later worked as Director-General of Information in Qatar in the Arabian Gulf; with UNESCO in Paris and as UNESCO's representative in Qatar. Culturally, as well as geographically, Tayeb Salih lives astride Europe and the Arab world. In addition to being well read in European literature, his reading embraces the wide range to be found in classical and modern Arabic literature as well as the rich tradition of Islam and Sufism. Before writing *Season of Migration to the North*, Tayeb Salih published the novella *The Wedding of Zein*, which was made into an Arabic film that won an award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1976. He has also written several short stories, some of which are among the best to be found in modern Arabic literature, and the novel *Bandarshah*.

DENYS JOHNSON-DAVIES is the leading translator of Arabic fiction into English. Born in Canada, he studied Arabic at the Universities of London and Cambridge. He has to date published some twenty volumes of novels, short stories, plays and poetry from modern Arabic literature. He is a Visiting Professor at the American University in Cairo.

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SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH
TRANSLATED BY DENYS JOHNSON-DAVIES
INTRODUCTION BY WAIL S. HASSAN

INTRODUCTION

The back cover of the first Heinemann edition of this novel, published in English translation in 1969, featured the following statement by Edward W Said, one of the most influential literary and cultural critics of the second half of the twentieth century:

'*Season of Migration to the North* is among the six finest novels to be written in modern Arabic literature.' Almost two decades earlier, another critic, Albert Guerard, wrote in his introduction to the 1950 New American Library edition of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that it was 'among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language'. In praising Salih's novel, Said was quoting almost verbatim Guerard's famous appraisal of Conrad's classic. Said was himself an expert on Conrad, having published a book on him in 1966, so what he wrote about Salih's novel was calculated to equate its importance to that of Conrad's within their respective literary traditions: just as *Heart of Darkness* is a masterpieces of English literature, so is *Season of Migration to the North* an equally great classic of modern Arabic literature.

Later on, in his major book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said argued that Salih's novel reverses the trajectory of *Heart of Darkness* and in effect rewrites it from an Arab African perspective. If Conrad's story of European colonialism in Africa describes the protagonist's voyage south to the Congo, and along the way projects Europeans' fears, desires, and moral dilemmas upon what they called the 'Dark Continent', Salih's novel depicts the journey north from Sudan, another place in Africa, to the colonial metropolis of London, and voices the colonised's fascination with, and anger at, the coloniser. Both voyages involve the violent conquest of one place by the natives of another: Kurtz is the unscrupulous white man who exploits Africa in the name of the civilising mission, while Mustafa Sa'eed is the opportunist black man who destroys European women in the name of the freedom fight. Both novels also depict a 'secret sharer' or a double — Marlow in Conrad's tale and the unnamed narrator in Salih's — who are at once obsessed and repulsed by Kurtz and Mustafa Sa'eed, respectively.

This way of reading novels from former European colonies as counter-narratives to colonial texts is one of the strategies of postcolonial literary

criticism. Postcolonial critics have argued that narratives of conquest by writers such as Daniel Defoe, Rudyard Kipling, Ryder Haggard, Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, Joyce Cary and others are crucial to understanding British culture. Even the seemingly insular and domestic world of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* depends for its sustenance, according to Said, on the existence of the British Empire in general, and on slave labour in Antigua in particular. Postcolonial critics also emphasise those literary texts from formerly colonised countries that portray the ravages of imperialism and directly challenge the authority and the claims of colonial discourse. In some instances, postcolonial writers have done so by rewriting canonical texts of conquest. In *A Tempest*, for example, Aimé Césaire rewrote Shakespeare's *The Tempest* from the perspective of Caliban; J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* is an alternative version to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; and several writers, including Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, V.S. Naipaul and Tayeb Salih have responded in various ways to Conrad's novels, especially *Heart of Darkness*, which has emerged as the single most important, controversial and influential narrative of empire, in addition to being a key text of British modernist fiction. Of the novels that rewrite *Heart of Darkness*, *Season of Migration to the North* is the most structurally and thematically complex, and the most haunting.

If postcolonial criticism, a phenomenon that emerged in American and British universities in the 1980s, has enhanced the reputation of Salih's novel in its English translation, the Arabic original, *Mawsim al-hijira ila al-shamal*, became an instant classic as soon as it was published in Beirut in 1966. Although this was not Salih's first novel, he was still relatively unknown at the time. The impact of the novel on the Arab literary field was such that in 1976, a group of leading critics compiled a collection of essays in which they hailed Salih as *abqari al-riwayya al-rabiyya* (genius of the Arabic novel). The novel appealed to its Arab readers, first of all, because of its aesthetic qualities — its complex structure, skilful narration, unforgettable cast of characters, and its spellbinding style which evokes the wide range of intense emotions displayed by the characters as it moves gracefully from lyricism to bawdy humor to searing naturalism and the uncanny horror of nightmares, and from the rhythms of everyday Sudanese speech (captured in literary Arabic rather than in the Sudanese dialect as in some of Salih's other works) to poetic condensation, and from popular song to classical poetry and the lofty idiom of the Qur'an. Indeed, Salih remains

one of the best Arabic stylists today, a quality inevitably lost to non-Arabic speakers, although Denys Johnson-Davies's English translation is outstanding.

The second reason for which the novel created such a stir on the Arabic literary scene in the mid-sixties was the radical way in which it responded to Arab liberal discourse on Europe. That discourse began with a movement called the *Nahda* (revival or renaissance) that sought, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, to rebuild Arab civilisation after centuries of decay under the Ottoman Empire and to confront the threat of European imperialism. The *Nahda* attempted to weld together two elements: Arab Islamic heritage on the one hand, and modern European civilisation, especially its scientific and technological achievements, on the other. Far from conceiving the two as contradictory or incompatible, the second seemed to *Nahda* intellectuals to be the natural extension of the first, in view of the great advances in scientific and humanistic knowledge that medieval Arab civilisation had produced, and which contributed in no small measure to the European renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Therefore, the project of the *Nahda* consisted in selectively synthesising the material advances of modern Europe and the spiritual and moral world view of Islam.

However, this conciliatory vision became more difficult to sustain as Europe began to colonise parts of the Arab world in the late nineteenth century and especially after the First World War. Arabs had joined forces with the Allies against the Ottomans in exchange for the promise of independence, a promise that was broken after the war. Moreover, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 promising the establishment of a jewish national home on Arab land and European support for the State of Israel deepened Arab resentment. Thus by the 1950s, the secular ideology of pan-Arab nationalism became dominant, and the *Nahda*'s vision of cultural synthesis gave way to an antagonistic stance toward the West. The collapse of that ideology in the 1967 war with Israel spelled a profound identity crisis that resonated at all levels of Arab consciousness and called for new ways of conceptualising the past, present, and future, even while it further solidified essentialised notions of Self and Other, East and West. Not surprisingly it was during the following decade that the militant ideology of Islamic fundamentalism emerged to fill the void.

Begun in 1962 and published in 1966, the novel diagnosed the Arab predicament during that turbulent decade by stressing the violence of the colonial past, of which Mustafa Sa'eed is a product; announcing the demise of the liberal project of the *Nahda*, championed by Western-educated intellectuals like the narrator who failed to account for imperialism in their vision of cultural synthesis; condemning the corruption of postcolonial governments; and declaring the bankruptcy of traditionalist conservatism hostile to reform, represented by the village elders. The final scene of the novel, and especially its last words, forecasts the state of existential loss and ideological confusion that many in the Arab world would feel in the wake of the 1967 war.

Tayeb Salih was born in 1929 in the village of Debba in northern Sudan. He attended schools in Debba, Port Sudan, and Umm Durman, before going to Khartoum University to study biology. He then taught at an intermediate school in Rafa'a and a teacher training college in Bakht al-Rida. In 1953, he went to London to work in the Arabic section of the BBC, and during the 1970s he worked in Qatar's Ministry of Information, then at UNESCO in Paris. Since then, he has lived in London.

Salih's enormous reputation rests on relatively few works of fiction. In addition to *Season of Migration to the North*, he has written a novella, *'Urs al-Zayn* (1962, in English *The Wedding of Zein*), another novel, *Bandarshah* (first published in Arabic in two parts, *Dau al-Beit* in 1971 and *Meryoud* in 1976), and nine short stories, two of which appear in the Heinemann edition of *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories* (1969). In 1988, he began writing a column in the London-based Arabic weekly magazine *Al-Majallah*; those articles on literary cultural and political topics were collected under the title of *Mukhtarat* (Selections) and published in nine volumes in Beirut in 2004-05.

As a Sudanese, Salih came from a liminal place where the Arab world merges with black Africa, and he wrote as an immigrant in London. His fictional village of Wad Hamid in northern Sudan represents the complexities of that location: situated between the fertile Nile valley and the desert, inhabited by peasants but a frequent stop for nomadic tribes, it is a meeting place for several cultures. Its religion, 'popu1ar Islam', is a mixture of orthodox Islamic, Sufi, and animist beliefs. The village is beset by tensions that have defined Arab modernity since the nineteenth century: between old and new, science and faith, tradition and innovation. Because

he was an immigrant, Salih could write about the colonial metropolis from a vantage point inaccessible to Levantine Arab intellectuals of his and earlier generations, even those among them who had studied in Europe for a while then returned home, often dazzled. He also felt the predicament of the native there more intensely than they did, both as an African and as an Arab. Such a unique perspective ensured that his enormous talent would produce the most powerful representation of colonial relations yet in Arabic literature.

Most of Salih's novels and short stories are set in the fictional village of Wad Hamid in northern Sudan and form a continuous narrative cycle — the Wad Hamid Cycle — which spans the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s. The main narrator of the Wad Hamid Cycle appears as a child in the early short story *'A Handful of Dates'*, then again as the narrator in *Season of Migration to the North*, a young man who has just returned from England with a Ph.D. in English literature shortly after Sudanese Independence in 1956. He does not appear in *The Wedding of Zein*, which has a third- person omniscient narrator, but returns as a middle-aged man in Salih's 1976 short story *'The Cypriot Man'*, and as a disenchanted and nostalgic old man in *Bandarshah*. He is identified as Meheimeed in that novel, but remains unnamed in the other works.

Like *Season of Migration to the North*, several of Salih's fictions deal with the impact of colonialism and modernity on rural Sudanese society in particular and Arab culture in general. In his highly acclaimed short story *'The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid'*, the attempts of both colonial and postcolonial governments to impose modernisation programmes threaten to sever the villagers' ties to their spiritual world. Set a few years after Sudanese Independence and narrated by an elderly villager, the story registers the bitterness and resignation of the elders who find themselves unable to preserve their way of life as their children, educated in modern schools, eagerly set the village on an irreversible course of modernisation. Members of this younger generation become the village leaders in *The Wedding of Zein*. They oversee the introduction of modern schools, hospitals and irrigation schemes into the village and manage most of its other affairs. They present themselves as benign, responsible, yet shrewd politicians who are capable of harmoniously integrating traditional culture with 'progress', as they conceive it. They befriend and protect the protagonist, Zein, a village idiot regarded as a saintly fool in the tradition of

Sufi dervishes. Zein's marriage to the most desirable girl in the village represents the spiritual unification of the community as well as the leaders' ability to bring together the sometimes contentious factions within the village. As such, the novella constructs a utopia in which, despite the shortcomings of the central government, the new nation succeeds at the local level in fulfilling its material and spiritual potential.

Such idealism is shattered, however, in Salih's next novel, *Season of Migration to the North*, which depicts the violent history of colonialism as shaping the reality of contemporary Arab and African societies. A naively optimistic, British-educated Meheimeed confronts his double, Mustafa Sa'eed, a Kurtz-like figure who uses the power of racist stereotypes of Africans as hyper-sexual and of Arabia's exotic appeal to Europeans to seduce and manipulate English women, who for him stands in metonymic relationship to the British Empire, ruled over as it was in its heyday by a mighty woman, Queen Victoria. One source of the novel's power is its dramatisation of the ways in which colonial hegemony is inextricably mixed with racial and gender hierarchies, an explosive mix the destructiveness of which is graphically illustrated in the novel. As the story continues in Wad Hamid, an unprecedented murder-suicide shocks and enrages the villagers and unveils the violence of traditional patriarch); linking it in kind to sexualised colonial violence. In this way the novel shows that the synthesis of traditional culture and modern ideas envisioned in the liberal discourse of the Nahda and given such poetic expression in *The Wedding of Zein* cannot succeed in the shadow of colonial and patriarchal hegemony.

The crisis of Arab consciousness, ideology and leadership in the late 1960s and 1970s and which led to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is the subtext in Salih's third novel, *Bandarshah*, which centres on the relationship between past, present and future; or, in the mythical-allegorical scheme of the novel, grand-fathers, fathers and grandsons. This problematic relationship is depicted as a vicious cycle in which the past repeats itself: grand-sons are ever in conspiracy with grandfathers (of whom they are the split image and whose first name they always bear) against fathers. The novel suggests that the vicious cycle can be broken only when the rigid patriarchal order reflected in the novel's central allegory is broken.

In the turbulent decades that give the Wad Hamid Cycle its temporal frame, the contours of personal, cultural and national identity shift,

sometimes violently within a complex matrix of values, traditions, institutions, power relations, new ideas and social and international pressures. Colonisation and decolonisation involve the redrawing of boundaries, within and across which human beings suffer the traumas of continuity and discontinuity In tackling the questions of cultural memory and identity the impact of colonialism on Arab and African societies, the relationship between modernisation and traditional belief systems, social reform, political authority and the status of women, Salih's fiction vividly portrays those dislocations and enables a vision of human community based on greater justice, peace and understanding, rather than rigid boundaries jealously guarded by antagonistic communities.

Wail S. Hassan
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