The Text
An International Peer Reviewed Online Journal of Language, Literature and Critical Theory
ISSN:2581-9526

"Other Echoes Inhabit the Garden": Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* as a World Literary Palimpsest

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the intertextual synergies animating the renowned Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), originally published in Arabic as *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shimāl* in 1966. As a critical paradigm for illuminating literary and cultural relations and transformations, intertextuality has increasingly been marshalled to study wide-ranging works of literature beyond national borders, which are often subsumed under a master rubric, "World Literature". The article argues that it is not just that Salih's novel is a classic work of world literature, understood as a dynamic "mode of circulation and of reading." It is also important to tap the world literature permeating Salih's novel that is already part and parcel of world literature in its own right (world literature within world literature, as it were). In other words, an attempt is made to read *Season of Migration to the North* as a palimpsest of world literary echoes, resonances, appropriations, and traces by navigating the rich intertextual resources it mobilises and focalises. The article will show how the novel draws on both Western classics and classical Arabic literature, which form the two parallel streams running through its narrative edifice. Among its English intertexts, William Shakespeare's *Othello* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are well-known. Also significant, albeit largely overlooked, is the English poem "Antwerp," originally published in 1914 by Ford Madox Ford. Among its Arabic intertexts are the legendary *Arabian Nights* and the poetry of Abu Nuwas, the eighth-century Arab poet best known for his *khamriyyat* (wine poems). On the whole, the article foregrounds how Salih's novel draws attention to its own formation as a novel, to the intertextuality of that formation and to the complications and possibilities thereof, thereby exemplifying how world literatures co-produce one another.

Keywords: Intertextual synergies; World Literature; palimpsest; Tayeb Salih; Season of Migration to the North

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Introduction: Intertextual Synergies and World Literatures

That texts are intertexts—a tissue/network of several texts and the web/weave of relations so spun—has become a commonplace in contemporary literary criticism, after M. M. Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes *et al.* Accordingly, reading and writing have increasingly come to be seen as acts of moving between/across texts, of mapping relations and entanglements, rather than focusing exclusively and obsessively on "words on the page" in the manner of New Criticism, for which a literary text is, following Cleanth Brooks's well-known Donnean metaphor, like the "Well Wrought Urn"—an autotelic, self-contained artistic object which does not entertain any telos beyond itself. In contrast to *formal fetishism,* intertextuality illuminates "notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence" in our cultural life (Allen 5). Text, as Barthes (146) puts it, is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings…blend and clash." It is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture." To put a sociological spin on this, texts—and cultures—do unfold as a series of syntagms in time and space, and these spatio-temporal coordinates help accentuate and amplify the texts' social tone and life. After all, the words on the page are in the world, and consequently, the "worldliness" of the word is unmistakable and paramount (Said 35).

As a sociology of textuality, intertextuality is "dialogic" through and through, to follow Bakhtin (276-291), and foregrounds the fundamental character of "the otherness" of language—an idea best embodied by Bakhtin's term "*heteroglossia,*" that is, "language's ability to contain within it many voices, one's own and other voices" (Allen 28). Kristeva takes her cues from Bakhtin's dialogism and combines it with the Saussurean concept of the relationality of the sign to introduce "intertextuality" as a category of analysis. As she suggests, a text is "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text," wherein "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another" (36). In its not-so-long career as critical terminology, intertextuality oscillates between a Bakhtinian sociological heft that spotlights how actual human subjects use language in specific social situations, and a Kristevan-Barthesian (poststructuralist) focus on the rather abstract notions of text and textuality, in which the question of the "human subject" is supplanted by the motif of "the loss of the subject in language in general." Kristeva, who values Bakhtin's insight that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of

quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another," brings up the notion of intertextuality, which replaces the notion of intersubjectivity, and suggests that "poetic language is read as at least double" (66), the word invariably being itself *plus* something else. As she dissolves Bakhtin's dialogism (and his idea of the sociality and double-voicedness of language) into a semiotics of intertextuality with all its poststructuralist moorings, Kristeva insists that the intertextual dimensions of a text cannot be relegated to mere "sources" or "influences" indexing "background" or "context" (36-37). Thus, bearing in mind the polysemic charge of the term, one may consider "intertextuality" as a whole ensemble of synergies that animate texts as they draw on one another and emerge from specific histories, ideological structures and socialities.

As a critical paradigm for illuminating literary and cultural relations and transformations, intertextuality—rather than its cousin "influence"—has increasingly been marshalled to study wide-ranging works of literature beyond national borders, which are often subsumed under a master rubric "World Literature"—a putatively global republic of letters whose traffic predominantly occurs through/in English, however (cf. Mufti 14-19; Dabashi xi-xii). Unlike influence, which invokes a *fluvial* metaphor (from Latin *influere,* from *in-* "into" + *fluere* "to flow") and therefore suggests unidirectional streams— "natural" and "spontaneous," intertextuality mobilises a *textile* trope (from Latin *text-*, *texere* "weave") to signify creative and imaginative production "by design with multidirectional interweaving of threads" (Juvan 3). World Literature, which turns on the ideas and practices of circulation, transmission, and translation, urges us to view literature as an international phenomenon, dialogically constituted by an interplay of numerous texts in the world that are dialectically singular and universal at once, although the bias of a Euro-American "core" against a Global South "periphery" still haunts the career of this disciplinary apparatus. In the searing words of Iranian-American cultural critic Hamid Dabashi (xii), World Literature is "the imperial wet dream of European literature." Questioning the Eurocentric location and logistics of the "world" in "World Literature," Dabashi wants to posit "another world,"

> a world ravaged by European colonialism and now rising from the enduring conditions of its postcoloniality to claim a dignity of place for itself, including a claim on world literature beyond the limited imagination of "World Literature" … (xii)

It is more than imperative to keep reimagining and recalibrating the burden of the world(s) in world literature from a postcolonial/Global South perspective and forge a "planetary conception of world literature" that will liberate the very ideas of "worlds" and "literatures" into far more "emancipatory literary and moral horizons" (Dabashi xiii). In this endeavour, or act of *ab-use* ("use from below"), perhaps the intertextual energies of literature allow us to trouble the Euro-American bias of World Literature and call attention to the international and intercultural origins and intersections of artistic productions worldwide—West and East alike. As Rebecca C. Johnson *et al* (278) point out, when we try to read literary works "within the frame of the world," we are rewarded with "the discovery of links that make possible the meaningfulness, and the liveliness, of literature." Intertextuality appeals to the frame of the world in question and helps accentuate the dynamic and capacious forces at work in the literary.

It is against this backdrop that, in what follows, this article seeks to read a postcolonial classic novel from Sudan, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North,* as a world literary palimpsest whose intertextual synergies graft layers of worlds, voices and stories onto one another with real finesse. It is not just that Salih's novel is a classic work of world literature, understood as a dynamic "mode of circulation and of reading" (Damrosch 5). As David Damrosch notes,

> A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. (5) [As] a mode of reading, [it is] a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time. (281)

As an Arabic novel translated into scores of languages, including the "global" English, Salih's novel has travelled far and wide beyond its North African Arabic home base, inviting a mode of reading beyond its place and time that encourages dialogue with the work in a manner which is marked by "the discipline of distance and of difference" (Damrosch 300). One need hardly ventriloquize Damrosch's definition of world literature as paradigmatic and decisive; his remarks far from exhaust the term's definitional latitude. Yet by the very matrices of circulation and reading that Damrosch identifies, *Season of Migration to the North* qualifies for membership in the pantheon of so-called world literature. However, it is also important to tap the world literature permeating Salih's novel that is already part and parcel of world literature in its own

right (*world literature within world literature*, as it were). In other words, to read Salih's novel as a palimpsest of world literary echoes, resonances, appropriations, and traces by navigating the rich intertextual resources it mobilises and focalises. To this end, invoking T.S. Eliot's line "Other echoes, Inhabit the garden" from his poem "Burnt Norton," the first of his *Four Quartets* (7), could not be more apposite. Several literary echoes, archetypes and intertextualities animate and drive *Season of Migration to the North* as a modern *world literature* classic from the postcolonial world, and it is to the explication of this central theme that we now turn.

Words and Worlds: *Season* in/as World Literature

Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih's (1929-2009) classic novel *Season of Migration to the North* (hereafter *Season*) is a critically acclaimed postcolonial novel whose recognition as one of the world-literary masterpieces from the Global South can hardly be overstated. Originally written in Arabic in 1966 with the title *Mawsim al-hijra ilā al-shimāl*, the novel has been translated into over twenty languages, although its reception as a world literary classic is mainly due to its celebrated 1969 English translation—the novel's first ever translation from the Arabic—as *Season of Migration to The North* by renowned Arabic-English translator Denys Johnson-Davies (1922-2017), published by Heinemann under the African Writers' series. Salih himself feels that the English translation enjoyed "a cool reception" when it first appeared in London, although it attracted dismissive reviews for being "episodic" (*Season* ix). A French translation with an introduction by the distinguished Arabist Jacques Berque (d. 1995) soon followed the English and it generated rave reviews in Paris. In both Russian and Hebrew, the novel was a bestseller, and the German translation was also very well received—to mention a few representative translations. Thus, it appears that the muses of circulation, transmission and translation (the Muses of "World Literature" indeed!) have blessed *Mawsim* good enough. Noting how the novel has brought him great pleasure in surprising ways, Salih reminisces:

> A nice French lady told me once that she picked up the book quite by chance in a Parish bookshop. She started to read it on the métro and became so engrossed that she missed her stop… (x)

However, Salih was neither insensitive nor indifferent to the politics of World Literature. When asked by Amina Sabry in a radio interview in 1976/1977 about the Arab novel not finding its place in the "international world," Salih responded perceptively:

> This question is based upon a very erroneous assumption. When they say the Arab novel is not *international*, they mean that it is not read in English and French. It means that the Western world, the European world, does not recognize it. I personally do not care for that, because the *Arab world* is a *separate world.* It is a *large world,* populated by over a hundred and fifty million people. If the Arab writer, like Naguib Mahfouz, could reach even the frontiers of that broad world, it would mean he has become *international.* This is a question of standards and criteria. Although I was a bit luckier than others because my work has been translated into other languages, I honestly don't think that that is a good measure for judging whether my work is good or bad. If we suppose that the Arab region is a *world,* then, obviously Arabic literature is a *world literature.* (*Tayeb Salih Speaks,* 10; emphasis added).

Salih's reply here anticipates the thrust of recent Global South critiques of World Literature, which challenge its tendency to privilege the ideas of (global) circulation and translation in Western, ethnocentric terms—critiques of which Aamir Mufti and Hamid Dabashi's works cited above are cases in point. Salih's insights especially invite attention to what Shu-mei Shih (17) calls the "technologies of recognition"—that is, 'the mechanisms in the discursive (un)conscious…that produce "the West" as the agent of recognition and "the rest" as the object of recognition, in representation.'

Equally important, the success of *Season* as a modern Arab classic is also borne out by the critical attention it has received from international literary scholars who have brought a range of perspectives, including "postcolonial," "feminist," and "psychoanalytic," to bear on their readings of the novel. Pioneering postcolonial critics such as Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism,* 1993) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*Death of a Discipline*, 2003) have admired the transgressive cultural energy the novel exudes. Considered Salih's best-known work, it was declared "the most important novel of the twentieth century" by the Arab Academy in Damascus in 2004, and adorns university curricula in a number of countries. The global interest in *Season* stems from the novel's "globally-oriented" themes and expression for in contrast to Salih's other long works of fiction, *The Wedding of Zein* (1962) and *Bandarshah* (1996), *Season* stands out both for its use of classical Arabic in both narration and dialogue, and for its intertextual relationships with other works, including the Western classics (Samatar, *Nonstandard Space* 87).

For this reason, texts like *Season* in all its intertextual synergies might be best approached through neither traditional close reading nor "distant reading" but through what Sofia Samatar (*Nonstandard Space* ii) calls "a scalar reading, one that attends to shifts in scalar perspective to trace the formation of textual worlds." As she explains in her study of the fantastic in Salih's fiction, the scalar mode of reading "involves turning inward and outward at the same time: always into the language of the text at hand, and always outward in order to trace the contours of the world according to the text" (13).

Before proceeding further, it would be useful to outline the plot of *Season.* The novel shuttles between the colonial years between World Wars I and II and the post-independence period after 1956 in Sudan. As it opens, we see a young man, the unnamed narrator, return to his Sudanese village, Wad Hamid, at the bend of the Nile, after seven years of studying British poetry in London. He is bursting to reconnect with his people and his roots, and to help his country through its tumultuous life after decolonisation:

> They rejoiced at having me back and made a great fuss, and it was not long before I felt as though a piece of ice were melting inside of me, as though I were some frozen substance on which the sun had shone - that life warmth of the tribe which I had lost for a time in a land 'whose fishes die of the cold' … (1)

Soon after his arrival, he meets a stranger among the familiar faces: the enigmatic Mustafa Sa'eed, who now lives in the village with his wife, Hosna bint Mahmoud, a local woman. One evening, during a drinking party, the narrator is stupefied by a drunken Mustafa reciting English poetry with great aplomb, giving away a secret past. Subsequently, the narrator eggs Mustafa on, and he brings his life story to light through a long flashback that unfolds in fragments: "'It's a long story, but I won't tell you everything…'" (19). Mustafa was a child "prodigy" who breezed through colonial schools in Khartoum and was sent to study in Cairo and, finally, in London—the three cities forming what Shaden M. Tageldin (2) calls "the concentric circles of empire that frame the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan." In Mustafa's own words,

> I learnt to write in two weeks, after which I surged forward, nothing stopping me. My mind was like a sharp knife, cutting with cold effectiveness … I discovered other mysteries, amongst which was the English language. My brain continued on, biting and cutting like the teeth of a plough... (22)

In London, he rose to become a brilliant academic, but his private life was spoiled by seducing English women by playing into their own orientalist fantasies of an "exotic" Arab and African—conquests he saw as a form of reverse-colonial revenge. As a student of Mustafa's in England—an African Minister—puts it,

> What a man he was! ... Heavens, that man - women fell for him like flies. He used to say "I'll liberate Africa with my penis" [notably, the word "penis" is in ellipsis in the Arabic original] (120).

These "sexual" conquests led to three of his lovers committing suicide. Ultimately, his wife Jean Morris, a woman who took great pleasure in defying him, proved to be his "nemesis." Their turbulent marriage culminated in Mustafa stabbing his wife to death during sex, at her own taunting provocations. As the fatal act was completed, Mustafa recollects,

> We were a torch of flame, the edges of the bed tongues of Hell-fire. The smell of smoke was in my nostrils…and the universe, with its past, present and future, was gathered together into a single point before and after which nothing existed. (165)

Subsequently, Mustafa spent seven years in a British prison, and then sneaked into Wad Hamid, apparently trying to turn over a new leaf.

During a severe Nile flood, Mustafa mysteriously vanishes, leaving his wife, Hosna, and their two sons in the narrator's custody. Mustafa's widow is forced into marriage with a lecherous old man, Wad Rayyes. Tragedy befalls when Hosna murders Wad Rayyes as he is trying to consummate their marriage madly and violently, and then takes her own life. The village struggles to come to grips with the full consequences of this unprecedented development. As Tageldin (2) observes, Husna's double act of murder of Wad Rayyes and her subsequent suicide "inverts the gender dynamics of the plot" wherein Mustafa earlier killed Jean Morris and later (perhaps) took his own life. "If Mustafa embodies an alchemy of power and subjection in the novel's first theater of colonization – the domination of Africa and Asia by Europe – Hosna embodies an amalgam of agency and victimhood in its second: the domination of women by men" (2). Following the second murder-suicide, the narrator, who is now gripped by a deep sense of despair and alienation, enters Mustafa's secret room—a thoughtfully and tastefully recreated English study that boasts Western books and portraits of Mustafa's English lovers, among other things—all the "lies" with which the enigmatic Mustafa "wanted history to

immortalize him" (154). At last, unable to withstand the farce unfolding before him and completely overwhelmed, the narrator enters the waters of the Nile: "My feet led me to the river bank as the first glimmerings of dawn made their appearance in the east. I would dispel my rage by swimming…" (166). He swims and swims, letting himself be swept midstream by the forces of the river. Torn between a desire to drown and a desire to live, he finally chooses life and screams for help.

> All my life I had not chosen, had not decided. Now I am making a decision. I choose life…It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. If I am unable to forgive, then I shall try to forget. (168-69)

The novel, which began with the narrator returning from London to his home village at the bend of the Nile, thus ends with him struggling out of the river in an ambiguous pursuit of life.

A Literary Hall of Mirrors: A Topography of Intertextual Traffic in *Season*

A literary hall of mirrors, *Season* is abuzz with intertextual synergies as world-literary echoes, motifs, counterpoints and appropriations permeate the novel in covert ways, drawing on both Western classics and classical Arabic literature, which form the two parallel streams running through its narrative edifice. Among its English intertexts, William Shakespeare's *Othello* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have attracted considerable critical attention. Also significant, albeit largely overlooked, is the English poem "Antwerp," written in 1914 by Ford Madox Hueffer (who changed his name later to "Ford")—a poem that T.S. Eliot (610) describes as "the only good poem I have met with on the subject of the war." Among its Arabic intertexts, one cannot miss the legendary *Arabian Nights* and the poetry of Abu Nuwas, the eighth-century Arab poet best known for his *khamriyyat* (wine poems). Let us explore each of these intertexts in some detail.

1. ***Heart of Darkness***

There is seldom any scholarship on *Season* that does not either mention or foreground the novel's intertextuality with Joseph Conrad's classic modern English novel *Heart of Darkness.* This includes the works of such trailblazing postcolonial critics as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, who read *Season* as a "reinscription" or a "transgressive reading" of *Heart of Darkness* in their *Culture and Imperialism* (30, 210-12) and *Death of a Discipline* (56-66), respectively. *Season's* intertextuality with *Heart of Darkness* in such postcolonial work is couched in terms of

"writing back," staged from a postcolonial subject position, for obvious reasons. Also, Said's disciple Aamir R. Mufti (149) regards Salih's novel as "an inversion ... of *Heart of Darkness,*" thereby lending a further fillip of critical tenacity to this tradition of reading *Season.*

What does the trope of "reinscription"/ "transgression" / "inversion" signify in the context of *Season*'s intertextuality with *Heart of Darkness*? The presence of *Heart of Darkness* in *Season* is unmistakable, and Salih himself admits as much: ". . . as far as form goes, I have been especially struck by . . . Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo*" (as quoted in Amyuni 15). Even as it draws on the Arabic oral and literary sources and traditions, it is equally indebted to European modernist novels such as *Heart of Darkness*, not just formally but also in terms of themes and motifs. *Season* appropriates the *topoi* of the journey into the unknown and the quest for self-identity that drive *Heart of Darkness*, and writes back to the epistemological and discursive underpinnings of Conrad's novel. In so doing, Salih's novel recuperates for itself both the "fictive territory" and the imaginative formula of Conrad's Africa, thereby transforming a colonial imaginary into a postcolonial retelling, which imbues Africa with a new mythos and a rich set of (ambi)valences (Said 211).

In *Season,* the narrator plays a "Marlowesque" role, relating the life of the "Kurtz-like figure" Mustafa—a Sudanese prodigy whose journey north (*al-hijra ilā al-shimāl*) to England deliberately mirrors and overturns Kurtz's voyage into the "heart of darkness"—the Congo. Just as Kurtz's experience in Africa, Mustafa's life in the imperial metropole—London—spiralled into a cycle of self-loathing, despair, and a yearning for self-destruction. As Mohammad Shaheen (1) notes, the interplay between the narrator and his double, Mustafa, in *Season* draws on "the Conradian notion of secret-sharing, where the narrator secretly but irresistibly extends his sympathy to his sharer; and this is what forms the whole basis of narration" in Salih's novel.

Beyond the affinities between Marlow and Season's narrator, the correspondence between the protagonists, Kurtz and Mustafa, is also very striking. For instance, just as Kurtz in the Congo is a coloniser and invader, Mustafa presents himself in England as a conqueror and invader, both unleashing violence in the land they invade. Kurtz hanging chopped heads outside his hut, and Mustafa murdering his wife, Jean Morris, in his own bedroom, are a case in point. Also, both invaders enjoy sexual liaisons in the foreign land they invaded. Both protagonists leave poverty behind as they embark on their journeys, and their exceptional intelligence is

tempered by the hollowness of the heart, which ultimately leads to a tragic end. Intriguingly enough, the journey itself is pursued with a dark yearning for the distant, notwithstanding its original motives. Mustafa (142) declares: "I am South that yearns for the North and the ice," and as we are told in the fragmentary flashback towards the end of the novel, "I was the invader who had come from the South, and this was the icy battlefield from which I would not make a safe return" (*Season* 160). Similarly, Kurtz invades the "heart of darkness" in the remote Congo, which proves a catalyst that destroys him, transforming a "universal genius" on a civilising mission into a reckless, power-hungry despot. Thus, at the levels of narrative strategies, themes and motifs, narrators, protagonists, and the relationships among them, *Season* intertextually reinscribes *Heart of Darkness* from a postcolonial vantage point that combines a searing critique of colonialism with a damning indictment of the ills of the Sudanese state and society post-independence.

2. *Othello*

Season's intertextuality with Shakespeare's *Othello* has also received critical attention, although not to the same extent as *Season-Heart of Darkness* affinities have been explored. Mustafa, *Season*'s central character, is the pivot on which the novel's intertextuality with Othello turns. Mustafa makes contradictory statements about his relationship with the character of Othello, thus:

> I'm like Othello -- Arab-African. (38)
>
> I am no Othello; Othello was a lie. (95)
>
> I am no Othello. I am a lie. (33)

Mustafa vicariously plays on the figure of Othello as he says: he is like Othello, but he is not Othello; Othello was a lie; and Mustafa himself is a lie. As they meet at Speaker's Corner in London's Hyde Park, Isabella Seymour asks Mustafa about his race—specifically whether he is African or Asian—and he answers, "I am like Othello—Arab-African … My face is Arab like the desert of the Empty Quarter, while my head is African and teems with a mischievous childishness" (38). Much like Othello, who charmed Desdemona with tales of his past, Mustafa exploits Othello's exoticism and amplifies it to seduce Isabella, thereby playing into the very stereotype she harbours about him and flattening his complex Sudanese identity into a singular, romanticised image. In *Othello,* Shakespeare exploits his audience's perceptions of the "Moor

Othello" and expectations of what the Moor will do, in tune with an orientalist discourse of racial difference, driven by feelings of love and hatred, fear and curiosity, which resulted largely from Ottoman victories in the 16th century, and travellers' tales of the exotic, uncanny East (Samatar, *Intertextuality* 38). The character of Mustafa plays with the Occidental stereotypes of the Orient as "exotic, ornate, and mysterious," and to further his mission to conquer "British Desdemonas," he arranges his bedroom in London as an exotic den teeming with orientalist imagery in an attempt to fulfil the fantasies of his British lovers through "lethal lies that I had deliberately built up, lie upon lie" (Season 146).

Yet the novel's exploitation of the orientalism of Othello does not deter it from rewriting Shakespeare's play itself and exposing what Barbara Harlow has called the "sentimentalism of orientalism" (as quoted in Samatar, *Intertextuality* 38). Accordingly, when Mustafa says, in a London courtroom during his trial for the murder of his English wife, Jean Morris, that "I am no Othello; Othello was a lie (95)," he not only disavows any relation of similitude between himself and Othello, but also rejects the figure of Othello as a "lie"—a fabricated, European colonial stereotype, not an innocent, "true" representation of Black subjectivity. This entails a rejection of both the image of 'the villainous Moor, wicked, bloodthirsty and cruel,' and that of 'the romanticised, "anthropologized" Othello, the half-civilised savage driven to madness' (Samatar, *Intertextuality* 43). *Season* also features a "handkerchief scene" that presents an inverted allusion to *Othello,* bringing into relief the psychological warfare between Mustafa and his English wife, Jean Morris.

> Once I found a man's handkerchief which wasn't mine. "It's yours," she said when I asked her. "This handkerchief isn't mine," I told her. "Assuming it's not your handkerchief," she said, "what are you going to do about it?" On another occasion, I found a cigarette case, then a pen. "You're being unfaithful to me," I said to her. "Suppose I am being unfaithful to you," she said. "I swear I'll kill you," I shouted at her. "You only say that," she said with a jeering smile. "What's stopping you from killing me? What are you waiting for? Perhaps you're waiting till you find a man lying on top of me, and even then I don't think you'd do anything. You'd sit on the edge of the bed and cry." (162)

In the turbulent build-up to Mustafa's tragic killing of his wife on their marriage bed, she activates the Othello archetype through the Shakespearean device of the "handkerchief," deeply provoking him into being like Othello by killing her and then killing himself in a ritual reenactment of Othello's killing of Desdemona and his subsequent act of stabbing himself to death. Mustafa kills his wife, but is incapable of killing himself; he therefore fails to play the tragic role that Jean Morris provokes him into taking up by not killing himself as Othello does. He is *like* and *unlike* Othello at once—as he himself is so fond of declaring.

Admittedly, following Ato Quayson (158), it is instructive to suggest that Mustafa's "motivation in life" is primarily driven by "self-authorship"— "the ability to fashion his own identity autonomously and in complete control both of its contingent processes and of their final product." Quayson identifies two "modes of action" through which Mustafa seeks to fulfil the drive towards self-authorship: "immersion in a purely libidinal sexual economy" (162–63) and "the total affirmation of his intellect as autonomous from the domain of ethics" (166). The limits of his self-authorship are brought into relief in moments such as Mustafa's failure to "complete the tragic morphology of Othello" (173) by undoing his wife and himself in a murder-suicide, so that Mustafa becomes Othello and Jean Morris Desdemona. The intertextual relationship between *Season* and *Othello* is not one of mere imitation but also of appropriation and complication, according to which Mustafa both *is* and *is not* Othello. In the final analysis, such intertextuality illuminates how porous and co-constitutive the putative absolute categories or binary oppositions are, be it colonialism/postcolonialism, tradition/modernity, or male/female—all of which Salih's novel seeks to destabilise and resignify from an ambivalent subject-position.

3. "Antwerp"

While *Season*'s intertextuality with *Heart of Darkness* and *Othello* has been discussed at length in the scholarship on the novel, largely overlooked yet no less significant is its intertextual relationship with the English poem "Antwerp," originally published in 1914 by Ford Madox Ford (earlier "Hueffer") as "In October 1914." In *Season,* during a drinking session with the narrator and other villagers like Mahjoub, Mustafa, now drunk, with his eyes giving the impression of "wandering in far-away horizons," recites passages from "Antwerp"— "in a clear

voice and with an impeccable accent" (14). The relevant extract, which the narrator says he later found in a poetry anthology about the First World War, goes thus:

Those women of Flanders
Await the lost,
Await the lost who never will leave the harbour
They await the lost whom the train never will bring.
To the embrace of those women with dead faces,
They await the lost, who lie dead in the trenches,
the barricade and the mud.
In the darkness of night,
This is Charing Cross Station, the hour's past one,
There was a faint light,
There was a great pain. (*Season* 14)

This moment in the novel is both disruptive and revealing. It may be recalled that the narrator returns to his Sudanese village after studying in England and tries to wrap himself in a sense of familiarity, continuity, and confidence, knowing that life there is still fine. Upon his return home, looking through the window at the palm tree standing in the courtyard of his house, the narrator says,

> I looked at its strong straight trunk, at its roots that strike down into the ground, at the green branches hanging down loosely over its top, and I experienced a feeling of assurance. I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose. (2)

But this desired sense of assurance and continuity is immediately and repeatedly disrupted, most tenaciously by the enigmatic character Mustafa, whom the narrator has just begun to befriend. His recitation of verses from "Antwerp" gives the lie to his discreetly maintained persona among the villagers as a humble local peasant-farmer, revealing his hidden, sophisticated, and macabre past in London to the narrator, who, after this crucial moment, begins to piece together the enigma and lie that is Mustafa, his "double." The narrator takes refuge in the fantastic to articulate the impact of this moment on him, thus:

> I tell you that had the ground suddenly split open and revealed an afreet standing before me, his eyes shooting out flames, I would not have been more terrified. All of a sudden there came to me the ghastly, nightmarish feeling that we…were not a reality but merely some illusion. (14-15)

This "ghastly, nightmarish feeling" stems from, as Sofia Samatar's ("Verticality and Vertigo" 21) insightful reading puts it,

> … the narrator's confrontation with his "European ghost" in the form of Mustafa, from the sinister perfection of Mustafa's English accent, and from the intrusion of the narrator's partially repressed studies of English poetry into Sudan through Mustafa's recitation, so jarringly out of place that it makes the narrator doubt his own reality.

Torn between allure and repulsion, the narrator picks up the threads of Mustafa's life from Mustafa's own words and the "secret room" that he enters after Mustafa's mysterious disappearance, but feels at last utterly overwhelmed by the "farce" and "lies" that Mustafa has become for him.

Why does Salih put Ford's *English* poem in Mustafa's mouth to fashion a work of Arabic *literature* (*Season*) whose core narrative (Mustafa's story) unfolds in the form of *orature*? "Antwerp" is an early modernist poem eulogising Belgian resistance against German invasion in 1914. Books stacked in Mustafa's secret library feature the name "Ford Madox Ford"—in the Arabic, mentioned as just "Fūrd," among a host of others (*Season* 137; *Mawsim* 164), which makes Mustafa's recitation from "Antwerp" into something that is more than fortuitous. As Tageldin (3) argues in her incisive reading of the poem as one of *Season*'s seminal intertexts, "Antwerp" flips the novel's "economies of race and history" and its "economies of orature and literature." She goes to the extent of positing that Salih anchors Mustafa's "critical postcoloniality" not so much in "an inversion" of Conrad's *Heart* [*of Darkness*] as in "an inversion of that inversion through the poetry of … Ford." By praising Belgian resistance to the Germans during WWI, Ford's poem reframes the Belgians as victims of intra-European occupation rather than as perpetrators of atrocities in the Congo, thereby effectively redeeming them from local suffering and obscuring their own brutal colonial history (Tageldin 3). Also, in Mustafa's library, the narrator comes across two handwritten fragments in Arabic: his life story, blank pages with only a title and a dedication, and an unfinished poem ending in an ellipsis—a

"very poor poem," according to the narrator (*Season* 153). Notably, oral recitation to the narrator constitutes Mustafa's only sustained literary engagement. Thus, as Tageldin (3) points out, against the unfinished poem Mustafa writes in Arabic, we are treated to the self-contained fragment from "Antwerp" he recites in English, and against his blank life story, we are offered "the realised (if elusive) life story" he narrates in Arabic— "an oral narrative the narrator elicits" just after Mustafa recites to him from "Antwerp." Focalising these dimensions, Tageldin (3) concludes that, in *Season,* then, "modern Arabic literature enters the world via the medium of English"—via Ford's "Antwerp."

4. *The Arabian Nights*

The intertextual synergies animating *Season* are not confined to the classics of English literature such as *Heart of Darkness, Othello* and "Antwerp." They are equally enhanced by the indelible presence of classical Arabic literature within the novel's structural and thematic arc. In this regard, what deserves special mention are the structural and thematic echoes in *Season* of the legendary *Arabian Nights*— a splendid collection of ancient tales told by Queen Shahrazad to her envious and deadly husband, King Shahrayar, so as to keep him entertained, while saving her own life. These tales were drawn from the Indian, Persian, Baghdadi and Cairene oral traditions and recorded during the Abbasid period (750-1258 CE) and later during the era of the Mamluk Sultans (1250-1517 CE) in Syria and Egypt. The most common technique in *Nights* is embedding, or placing stories within stories, and storytelling is the most frequent and celebrated activity, exemplified by none other than Shahrazad throughout the larger frame story of the collection, which in turn propels the proliferation of stories. Also, these tales are intended to save lives: by regaling King Shahrayar with stories each night, Shahrazad saves not only her own life but also the lives of the women of the kingdom.

It is in form that the intertextuality of *Season* with *Nights* is first and foremost noticeable. In creating stories within stories, freighted with moral lessons and infused with lyrical ebullience, Salih's novel establishes a structural relationship with *Nights*. So far as embedding goes, the frame story of the narrator's return to Wad Hamid after spending time in London and the embedded story of Mustafa are co-constitutive; while differing greatly in plot, the narrator's and Mustafa's stories are intricately related in theme and motif. There are two direct references in which the embedded story of Mustafa invokes *Nights'* frame story. First, noting Jean Morris' gift

for "amazing and incredible stories," Mustafa likens her to "some mendicant Scheherezade" (155). Second, following his marriage with Jean Morris, Mustafa says, "My bedroom became a theatre of war; my bed a patch of hell" (33-34), and goes on to compare himself to "a slave Shahrayar you buy in the market for a dinar encountering a Scheherazade begging amidst the rubble of a city destroyed by plague" (34).

In mobilising these well-known images from *Nights*, Mustafa also marks the difference between the Shahrazad (Jean Morris, a "mendicant Scheherezade") and Shahrayar (Mustafa, "a slave Shahrayar") of *Season* and the Queen Shahrazad and King Shahrayar of *Nights*. Similarly, while Shahrazad is on a mission to save her life, using storytelling as a bulwark against her death to come, Jean Morris, in contrast, seeks her own death relentlessly, with deep provocations such as "What's stopping you from killing me? What are you waiting for?" (162) and with beseeching words such as "Please, my sweet, … "Come — I'm ready now" (164), before Mustafa finally presses the dagger down between her breasts. On a broader level, *Season* shares with *Nights* the power of storytelling: like Shahrazad, Mustafa is a highly gifted storyteller who uses language to dominate and captivate. However, his tales are poisonous, creating a "hall of mirrors" that confuses, seduces, and destroys—in sharp contrast to Shahrazad's, which are life-giving as they seek to preserve and redeem life through storytelling. This is by no means an exhaustive catalogue of *Season*'s rich intertextual relationships with *Nights* in terms of theme and motif, but these examples, however, show how Salih uses and rewrites *Nights,* itself a deeply intertextual artistic event, to suit the exigencies of his own storytelling in *Season*.

5. Abu Nuwas

The poetry of Abu Nuwas (747-813), the classical Arabic poet from the Abbasid period, also finds its way to Salih's novel. Abu Nuwas, who ranks among the greatest of the Abbasid *muḥdathūn* ("modernisers")—the poets of the first centuries of the Abbasid age credited with introducing the new style of poetry known as *badī'*—is renowned for having established a subgenre of poetry known as *khamriyya*t ("wine poems"). He also appears in several tales of *Nights* alongside the Caliph Harun al-Rashid. In *Season*, Abu Nuwas is invoked in two important moments, one involving the narrator and the other, Mustafa. First, leaving his family behind in the village, the narrator returns to Khartoum via the desert road in a lorry under the scorching sky, "which is like the lid of Hell-fire," and "haphazard thoughts" flood through his head

(*Season* 105-106). He turns to poets to come to terms with the experience at hand. He quotes Abu Nuwas: 'We drank as deeply as a people athirst since the age of Aad,' and avers that "This is the land of despair and poetry but there is nobody to sing." But soon he would describe the night feast in the desert, where men and women join the circle, singing, dancing, and partying.

Second, as Mustafa seduces English women by activating and fulfilling their oriental fantasies, the poetry of Abu Nuwas comes to play a constitutive role in such a seductive enterprise. Mustafa recites two poems of Abu Nuwas during his seduction of Ann Hamond, one of the several young women whom he drives to suicide. Mustafa had met her after a lecture he gave in Oxford on Abu Nuwas—a lecture which saw lies tripping off Mustafa's tongue "like sublime truths," and as he puts it:

> I told them that Omar Khayyam was nothing in comparison with Abu Nuwas. I read them some of his poetry about wine in a comic oratorical style which I claimed was how Arabic poetry used to be recited in the Abbasid era…I said that Abu Nuwas was a Sufi mystic and that he had made of wine a symbol with which to express all his spiritual yearnings, that the longing for wine in his poetry was really a longing for self-obliteration in the Divine - all arrant nonsense with no basis of fact. (143)

Ann Hammond came under Mustafa's spell, eventually becoming his "slave girl." During their tour in London, Mustafa quotes to her from the poetry of Abu Nuwas:

> Does it not please you the earth is awaking,
> That old virgin wine is there for the taking?
> Let's have no excuse, come enjoy this delight;
> Its mother is green, its sire black as night… (*Season* 144)
>
> `***
>
> Full many a glass clear as the lamp of Heaven did I drink
> Over a kiss or in promise of a tryst we'd keep;
> So matured it was by time that you would think
> Beams of light out of the sky did seep. (*Season* 145)
>
> ***
>
> This is true war, not a war that between man and man
> brings strife;

In it with wine we kill and our dead with wine we bring to life… (*Season* 145)

Thus, intoxicated by verse and wine, Ann fed Mustafa sweet illusions, while he spun for her a web of intricate, terrifying fantasy. As Samatar ("Verticality and Vertigo" 26) observes, for both Mustafa and Ann Hammond, "the literature of the other holds a dangerous power." Just as Arabic literature has a lethal impact on Ann Hammond through a fatal inversion, English literature and culture have a catastrophic effect on Mustafa. While Mustafa plays a parody of *Heart of Darkness* and degenerates into an Othello-like caricature, haunted by that same tragedy while in England, Ann Hammond is transformed by alcohol and Abu Nuwas's seductive poetry into a submissive, orientalised fantasy figure, ultimately killing herself when Mustafa abandons her and the illusion dissolves. Thus, whether from the East or the West, the language of the other is both seductive and disruptive, and "every intertext is interference" (Samatar, "Verticality and Vertigo" 26).

Beyond the rich intertextual resources in the *Season* discussed so far, the novel also presents its formal aporias. As a novel, it draws heavily on the generic conventions of modern European literature, but this aspect is tempered by the old *hakawati* style of Arabic oral tradition with which it opens. "It was, gentlemen, after a long absence—seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe—that I returned to my people" is how *Season* begins, and this style reverberates in the subsequent course of the novel. Yet, like the European modernist novels, *Season* has an indeterminate ending. As in the Arabic literary technique of *mu'arada* ("opposition" or "contradiction"), which involves the reworking and undoing of existing poetic forms and themes, Salih's novel, is and is not a novel—much like its protagonist Mustafa, who is and is not Othello—presenting ultimately what Saree S. Makdisi (815) calls "an unstable synthesis of European and Arabic forms and traditions."

Creative Contamination: Text as Palimpsest

In the final analysis, it may be reiterated that *Season* is an intertextual palimpsest (from the Greek *palimpsēstos,* meaning "scraped again")—an overlay of several texts and subtexts, of textual infrastructures and ideological superstructures, of literary echoes from near and far. A rewriting bearing visible and invisible traces and patches of earlier texts, *Season* demonstrates how intertextual synergies help texts make and unmake worlds, thereby complicating our

understanding of world literature informed by the putative centre-periphery dyad. Each text of world literature contains within it a network that reworks the literatures of the world through a process of creative contamination. In other words, it is possible as well as useful to talk about "world literature within world literature."

It would be instructive to return to Mustafa's secret room with its library and the countless books adorning it:

> Books on economics, history and literature. Zoology. Geology. Mathematics. Astronomy. The Encyclopaedia Britannica. Gibbon. Macaulay. Toynbee. The complete works of Bernard Shaw. Keynes…Hobson *Imperialism.* Robinson *An Essay on Marxian Economics.* Sociology. Anthropology. Psychology. Thomas Hardy. Thomas Mann. E. G. Moore. Thomas Moore. Virginia Woolf. Wittgenstein. Einstein…*The Journals of Gordon. Gulliver's Travels.* Kipling. Housman. *The History of the French Revolution* Thomas Carlyle…Owen. Ford Madox Ford… Hazlitt. *Alice in Wonderland.* Richards. *The Qur'an* in English. *The Bible* in English…Plato… Not a single Arabic book. A graveyard. A mausoleum. An insane idea. A prison. A huge joke. A treasure chamber. (137-138)

The intertextual ramifications of Mustafa's library and the books it features could not be more telling, as they speak volumes about the intertextual synergies underlying Salih's novel itself. However, this is not to overlook the politics undergirding such an arrangement: what a library holds, how it selects its holdings and who do the selecting are all crucial questions. As Mufti (152) indicates, Mustafa's library stands for "the immense library that is the humanistic culture of the modern West and the fate within it specifically of those forms of historical difference that come marked with the non-Western or non-European origins of the languages in which they are produced." Consequently, we can access the non-Western text only within this immense library— "in English," "in translation" … 'assigned its place as "Oriental" text-object within the architecture of the Western "universal" library' (Mufti 152).

However, intertextuality can undercut the supposed "stability" of text and discourse in subtle and intriguing ways. As the presence of *English* in *Season* illuminates, using "other" texts as intertexts "makes foreign," via English, "a domestic (Arabic) textual practice" (Tageldin 9). Mustafa's recitation of English poetry— "a textual citation within the extradiegetic frame" of

Season—is also, "at the intradiegetic level of the narrative itself," an oral recitation. It therefore "domesticates the foreign (English) to Arab and African traditions of oral performance" (Tageldin 9). This insight, as Tageldin perceptively remarks, suggests that world literature is, for Salih, not "the English-dominated space" Mufti decries but "a stereoscopic space in which texts cannot be written, read, or heard without the mediation of one language by another" (10). Finally, *Season*—a novel that confronts issues of origins, returns, and authenticity—draws attention to its own formation as a novel, to the intertextuality of that formation and to the complications and possibilities thereof, and in so doing, it exemplifies how world literatures co-produce one another.

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