Title of Paper: **AT AN IMPASSE: THE DISCOURSE OF RECESSION IN TAYEB SALEH**

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Abstract: Tayeb Saleh captures the Sudanese and Arab consciousness and culture at a moment of recession and defeat when the identity rooted in the national history and celebrated in the nationalistic discourse of the 1950s and 1960s, became both untenable and unviable after the Arab defeat in 1967. His fiction expresses the significant but inadequate responses to the postcolonial condition.

Keywords: discourse, culture, impasse, recession

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In Tayeb Saleh’s fiction, a sense of belonging to the Sudan is expressed by realizing in character Muslim Arab values and by positioning oneself in the locale where those values assume visible material forms. But as this culture, in modern times, is practiced in the context of Western hegemony, it is continuously challenged and threatened to be negated by the postulations and practices of Western culture. The outcome of the challenge and the threat is a cultural discourse that is reactive and resistant expressing itself in narrow nationalistic terms. This discourse reaches an impasse by the end of the 1960s and gives way to a discourse that is aggressive and assertive in postulating the inevitability of its own hegemony. The trajectory of such a discourse may be historically traced in Sudanese (and for that matter in Arab) politics, culture and consciousness in the recession of nationalism and the emergence of forms of religious fundamentalism. Saleh mirrors in his fictions the first phase of this discursive development and expresses significant, albeit inadequate, responses to the postcolonial condition.

Saleh depicts the recession in consciousness and culture in his major novel, *Season of Migration to the North*. The novel comes after and what it postulates depends on an endorsement of a precolonial cultural condition projected into the Sudanese village by the Nile in Northern Sudan in the fiction that was written before that novel. Such an endorsement attempts to assert the village as a permanent, unchanging and unchangeable reality which exists as an alternative to the tasking rigours of the complexity and flux outside it. Saleh’s early work – the short stories and *Wedding of Zein* – may be seen as a sustained effort to shatter this sense. The village is presented as the locus of reality. Belonging or any form of allegiance to it guarantees a sure footing in the real world, a sense that Saleh shares with most Northern Sudanese. But as depicted in “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid,” the village presents reality in a rudimentary and basic sense in the way that the harshness of its life is brought out and emphasized. Saleh is also careful to stress that this physical harshness is not offset or in any way mitigated by possibilities of innocence and simplicity.

In another story, “A Handful of Dates,” the village is seen to go beyond the precapitalist stage of innocence and simple joy of living it is normally positioned in – and in the story only a boy and a loser can thus position it – and to deal directly and openly with practical economic realities, and when necessary give precedence to the economic and the practical over the moral. Ultimately, however, and in the whole context of Saleh’s work, this perception of the village simply amounts to a sense that the village is a concrete entity, defined by nature and history and therefore firmly rooted in accessible reality. The village’s participation in the actual world is ascertained from the very beginning because at the heart of this culture is the belief that concrete worldly reality continues into and is controlled by a reality beyond nature and history. This reality is given, fixed and permanent, and it resides at the core of the village’s consciousness, constituting the synchronic essence that enables it to be in experience but to rise above contingency and flux. But the important thing is that the village culture, unlike fundamentalist Islam, tends to give this reality conceivable and even visible forms and therefore make it more neatly accessible and organically part of concrete experience. The doum tree and the tomb are the visible representatives of the beyond and are resorted to when aid is desperately needed with the recalcitrance of worldly experience. Sought with great faith and certainty in its deliverance, aid comes readily, but it comes via dreams first, a phenomenon that is taken for granted by the villagers as is the connection between the visible and the invisible it incorporates. Hence the villagers’
representation of these realities is offered not as an effort to reduce the inconceivable
to simple perceptual categories but as a perception of experience as integral. This
perception of experience, however, does not entail that the village, and by implication
the culture it represents, is simple and impenetrable.

Saleh insists that the village possesses a capacity to accommodate disparate aspects of
experience, and that if it is not exactly a composite of worldly experiences, it is, at least,
a world amenable to complexity. The narrator of “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid”
concludes his account of the village with these words: “What all these people have
overlooked is that there’s plenty of room for all these things: the doum tree, the tomb,
the water-pump, and the steamer’s stopping-place” (Saleh, 1980, p. 19). But Saleh is
yet to bring that which is beyond more closely to the heart of actual experience. In “The
Doum Tree of Wad Hamid,” the other experience is signified by mute objects, the doum
tree and the tomb, and relation to it is established initially in the unconscious and
therefore a sense of a distance from the actual and a measure of abstraction of this
experience are inevitable outcomes in spite of all the insistence on the integrity of
village life.

In his novella, Wedding of Zein, Saleh brings the realities that make up the village
culture more closely to each other and closer to the actual life of the village. Although
allegory is the basic device through which the experience in the story is grasped and
reproduced, and parable is the outcome of this perception, and all this breeding a sense
of experience being contained in the mind, yet social reality has a marked presence
delineated and emphasized by the carnival which is the essence of the novella. In the
carnival the social reality of the village is galvanized by the fool, a figure that straddles
the beyond and the accessible and whose move to an exalted position in the community,
albeit only during the wedding ceremonies, is what the carnival celebrates. The fool
exists before society and its experience; the characterization of Zein makes this clear:

At first, as is well known, children meet life with screams. With Zein, however,
it is recounted – and the authorities for this are his mother and the women who
attended his birth – that no sooner did he come into this world than he burst out
laughing. And so it was throughout his life. (Saleh 1980, p. 33)

In this position the fool is connected to the sheikh, the representative of the other
experience, and who, in the carnivalization of this experience, is a living person, though
he does not share in and remains outside the life of people. Both of them are “blessed
of God” and the allegory of their names (Zein, the good one; Haneen, the kind one)
bring them out as embodiments of qualities and values perennially celebrated as the
safeguards of the humanity of the individual and community. However, while the
sheikh is not subject to experience but is in control of and can direct it, the fool can be
affected by contingency, as when he is hit and is hospitalized, although he can have a
limited and indirect, yet benign, influence on his context, as when he becomes
instrumental in bringing husbands for many of the village girls. The fool is evidently
manageable, because he is perceived as weaker, in mind if not in body, whereas the
sheikh is formidably beyond management; hence the fool is admitted into the
community while the sheikh remains outside it.

The important thing in all this is that the manageability and admissibility of the fool
into the world are actually the lubricants to smooth the smuggling of some agendas of
the beyond, of the other experience, into the worldly everyday life of the village. These agendas include values and qualities that reinforce the synchronic quality of consciousness, like those expressed by the names of the fool and the sheikh, as well as a perception that this world is a product, or at least a corollary, of the other experience, as when the people attribute the fortunate changes in their life, including the wedding of Zein, to the sheikh. Once these agendas are included in the village experience, then the village focuses again on the direct and the immediate, but with greater vitality. The sheikh dies, and the fool comes into the heart of experience. But this outcome of the allegory of the wedding of the fool cannot be read as the village settling for a simpleminded response to life and forfeiting a deeper and richer one because of a limited capacity for experience. The carnival and celebratory tone of the tale preclude the possibility of such a reading and instead elevate what is deemed to be a simpleminded response to the world, the villager’s simple outlook, to a significant perception of experience in which goodness and joy override the evil and misery in life.

In *Wedding of Zein*, Saleh deliberately makes excessive claims for Northern Sudanese folk culture, that is, for the Northern Sudanese folk version of Muslim Arab culture, bred and developed in the Northern Sudanese village, depicting it as totally wholesome and vital. But the village remains a pre-colonial experience in the context of the colonial or postcolonial condition, and therefore its relevance to this condition, in the sense of its ability to stand the challenges of Western hegemony, must necessarily be questioned. Retreat to it, celebration of it or making claims for it is an absurdly inadequate response to the colonial condition. Saleh deals with the question of the adequacy of the response of the village, of the Northern Sudanese version of Muslim Arab culture (of modern Arab culture), to the challenge of colonialism and the hegemony of the West, in *Season of Migration to the North* and in his last two-part novel, *Bandarshah*, distinguishing between two responses within this culture: the intellectual’s response which seeks to arrest this culture and the life it expresses at a certain point in the past and then exclude from it all that is other than it; and the simple folk response which is direct, immediate, alive and open to all experience and ready to interact and synthesize when necessary.

*Season of Migration to the North* brings out the absurdity in the situation of the Northern Sudanese (and Arab) intellectual produced by the sense that the opportunity of contact with the other does not enhance this intellectual’s consciousness but produces either self-effacement (making him a stereotype) or self-encapsulation (making him a conservative). The novel exposes a familiar position in modern Arab thought which stresses that in the face of Western domination and its effort to deprive Arabs not only of their material resources but also of their cultural identity, Arab culture must save itself by insulating itself from all Western influences. Exposing this discursive position constitutes not only the thought content of the novel, but it dictates its formal aspects.
At the very beginning of the novel the narrator establishes the basis of his familiar position using hackneyed natural images deliberately to stress his need to stabilize his world: “I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like the palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose.” (Saleh, 1980, p 2). “…I am not a stone into the water but a seed sown in a field…” (Saleh, 1980, p. 5). A defensive tone pervades the novel; the narrator throughout feels called upon to account for his position, and the drama of the novel is often punctuated by declaratory statements such as this:

I am from here – is this not reality enough? I too had lived with them [the British]. But I had lived with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them. I used to treasure with me the image of this little village, seeing it wherever I went with the eye of my imagination. (Saleh, 1980, p .49)

It is finally the familiarity of that cultural position and the difficulty of arguing it directly in an effective manner that makes it imperative to express it dramatically. In this sense the main story in Season of Migration to the North is the frame story of the narrator; the story framed by it, Mustafa Saeed’s London story, is a fable created by the narrator, not only to expound the possibilities of his predicament, but to do this in a manner that would ensure an impact on him and his audience. Mustafa Saeed has been seen as the alter ego or second self of the narrator (Abbas, 1980, p. 60), but I think that he is, like Sutpen in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom, more properly a character that exists only in the narrator’s mind, invented by him to enable him to face in an effective manner the implications of the actual and closer contact with the colonial experience that he had evaded during his stay in London. A Mustafa Saeed may have existed – although the combination of allegory and irony in his name makes it more reasonable to doubt his existence – but it is not the one whose London story is told by the narrator. The narrator’s Mustafa Saeed may have been derived from accounts of the character of the same name who, at one time, excelled academically and achieved a brief success and fame in his own country and in London and then went into obscurity, or he may have been inspired by the figure of a stranger who came to reside in the narrator’s village and start a new life there. That is, at best, Mustafa Seed can be a character that the narrator picked up from real life and fantasized about, projecting into him his anxieties and fears about possibilities beyond his control in his own situation after his sojourn in London. The narrator expresses this point directly and clearly when he says, “Was it likely that what had happened to Mustafa Saeed could have happened to me?” (Saleh, 1980, p. 49).

The same idea is expressed by common metaphors towards the end of the story when the narrator, as he goes into the room where the paraphernalia of Saeed’s past are kept, mistakes his own reflection in a mirror for Mustafa Saeed. Discovering his mistake he says, “This is not Mustafa Saeed – it is a picture of me frowning at my face from a mirror” (Saleh, 1980, p. 135). Significantly the narrator finds in that room a notebook which has in its first page the title “My Life Story–by Mustafa Saeed,” but when he flicks through the rest of the pages, he finds them blank. But more than anything the whole technique of telling Saeed’s story concomitantly with the narrator’s own predominantly undramatic story but in the form of recollections of conversations with Saeed while the narrator’s story is a direct transcription of actual events, brings out clearly the idea of Mustafa Saeed as a fabrication of the narrator.¹ The effect of this technique is not really to insinuate the narrator’s perception of the complexity of experience, which should be part of the intellectual equipment acquired from his
intellectual contact with the West, so much as to suggest emphatically that he moves
the encounter with colonialism and the West from the actual world into his mind where
its course and outcome are controlled. Saeed’s story becomes, in the narrator’s mind,
the story of an Arab Northern Sudanese, not only dehumanized by the colonial rule of
his country and the domination of colonial culture in the whole world, but robbed of
his soul because he attempts to resist dehumanization. But the important thing in the
story is that it is recounted in a hyperbolic manner – as in the accounts of Saeed’s
academic excellence, his sexual exploits and his later life in the village – designed to
impart to the experiences Saeed undergoes and which the narrator eschews a sense of
monstrosity that should make the insulation from the modern world the narrator
espouses not only plausible but imperative.

The tragedy of Mustafa Saeed – or, as the narrator designates it, the “melodrama” of
his life – is an offspring of his failure as a colonial stereotype. Indoctrinated in the
colonial ideology, he, unlike the figures of neocolonialism in the colonized world,
reneges on his contract with colonialism when he seeks to disrupt its ethos, instead of
realizing himself as the supreme colonial stereotype having had the best indoctrination
and showing at first the greatest promise of a spurious consciousness. But what Saeed
does at the source of the colonial experience, driving women to their death by bringing
them in touch with their own deep moral and spiritual sinisterness, which constitutes a
reitalatory effort to destroy colonialism by poisoning the source of life of the colonizers,
is an absurd effort because Saeed, unlike the colonizers in his country, is not in control
of anything here. The absurdity of Saeed’s effort becomes glaringly clear when he
declares to himself during his trial that he is “over and above everything else … a
colonizer” (Saleh, 1980, p. 94), and regards it not farfetched to liken himself to
Kitchener:

When Mahmoud Wad Ahmed was brought in shackles to Kitchener after his
defeat at the battle of Atbara, Kitchener said to him, “Why have you come to
my country to lay waste and plunder?” It was the intruder who said this to the
person whose land it was, and the owner of the land bowed his head and said
nothing. (Saleh, 1980, p. 94)

It is the scorching desire to return Kitchener’s insult and avenge Mahmoud Wad Ahmed
and the Sudan that breeds the fantasy of pushing English women to their death, for the
women pushed to death are really the limited images of English women in the
imagination of Arab students in Britain, like the narrator, rather than real women. The
truth of colonialism, concretized in Mustafa Saeed’s relation with Jean Morris and his
trial for her murder, not only defeats Mustafa Saeed but more importantly it
overwhelms the narrator and fixes itself permanently in his mind. Jean Morris, whose
relationship with Saeed is really the crux of his story, represents a perception of the
aspects of colonialism that cannot be controlled or even managed by the colonized. The
very moral and spiritual sinisterness that drive the other fantasy women to death, when
they presumably discover them in themselves, and that have been before only general
and vague concepts, are completely actualized in her. But the power of Jean Morris,
and that which makes her beyond Saeed’s or anyone’s effect, is her ability to reduce
experience to the incidental, the casual and the ephemeral and to make values and
meaning irrelevant to action. In luring Saeed to kill her, she virtually forces him to
abandon the fantasy of paying back colonialism with its own coin. The trial for her
murder, where forms of colonist civilization are impeccably maintained, is directed in
a way that would produce in Mustafa Saeed an augmented sense of the absurdity of being anything other than a colonial stereotype once one comes in contact with colonialism. Saeed is in the end “an intelligent fool” for trying to kill colonialism with its own poison. But the more frightening part of his “melodrama” is the finality of his fate, that of a moral and spiritual leper perpetually exiled from human intercourse. The village interlude is only that – an interlude which only brings forcefully home to him the sense of the irrevocability of his fate and the only option left him is to be cleansed of his infection by death, but not before he infects another woman with his poison, his wife.

Mustafa Saeed’s “melodrama” then, is a clever creation of the narrator to rationalize his insulation from the West, and it does not really go beyond that. The narrator does not develop an independent positive position but continues to be reactive as evidenced by his attempt to drown himself in order to cleanse himself of cultural contamination by something stronger than art. His last minute effort to save himself and his assertion of an allegiance to actual life only expose the despair at the heart of conservative Muslim Arab culture bred from its inability to face the challenge of the hegemonic West. It is important to stress again that Saleh, in Season of Migration to the North, attributes this inadequate response to the modern world to the intellectual but does not indicate that the unintellectual villagers respond in a similar way. The fate of the narrator suggests that the intellectual’s retreat into the village is based not only on an assumption of its cultural purity and simplicity and therefore its capability to provide an anchorage for his cultural identity but primarily and more importantly on a deeply-ingrained sense that it is a self-enclosed world and a domain of fixity and stasis, hence the ideal refuge from a world conceived of as perverse and predatory.

In Saleh’s last novel, Bandarshah, the grip that this sense of the village has on the kind of intellectual characterized in Season of Migration to the North and the difficulty, if not altogether the impossibility, of uprooting it, because uprooting it implies his demise, are really the focus of the novel. Although the absurdity of the idea, ironically demonstrated by the lives and fates of ordinary villagers, explodes in the face of the narrator, he resists it persistently by trying to offset and replace what he regards as the chaos of the present and the actual by his own fixed images of order and coherence. Bandarshah is the story of Mihemeed, the narrator who acquires a clearer and more solid identity by being given a name but a reduced moral stature indicated by this name, which is in fact a nickname. He denounces the metropolis and its power and returns to the village only to find the village invaded by the metropolitan ethos and not resisting it but coping with it. In the novel the metropolis and power become the means to expose the narrator’s extremely limited capacity for experience which does not take the form of direct responses to the metropolitan experience but of a fantasy that is used to negate it and replace it with its opposite, thus unwittingly acknowledging its solidity, inevitability and irreversibility. In desperately pitting fantasy against actuality, the narrator achieves a mystification which keeps actual experience at bay from him and from the reader. Hence the mystified language and landscape, the fragmentariness of the story and the general obscurantism in the novel are ploys of the narrator to offset actual experience. This ultimately senseless effort is prompted by the narrator’s realization of the futility of what he undertakes to accomplish in the village: to rewrite his relationship to his grandfather in his own terms as illustrated in the story of Bandarshah.
According to the story, Bandarshah is a man who has eleven sons but who favors his grandson over all his sons and makes him his shadow on earth. The grandson is a mirror image of his grandfather and often takes his place and carries out his will. The narrator aspires to be a replica of his grandfather, that is, not just to repeat the past but to duplicate it completely in the future. In this sense the present, the sphere of actual life, is subjugated to and imposed on by the past through the duplication of the past in the future, as Maryood, the grandson, carries out his grandfather’s will and beats and subdues his sons for him. The novel is appropriately subtitled “A topic for conversation on how the father is victimized by both his son and father.” Hence the narrator attempts absurdly to reduce experience to a perpetual and fixed past and in this manner produces the ultimate image of conservatism and traditionalism. Tragically, only within this extreme and impossible state and position can this intellectual survive.

Structurally, the idea is expressed by the repetition of the story of Bandarshah in some form or alluding to it before or after every account of a real experience and by running it through the two parts of the novel. Through this kind of structure the narrator attempts to produce a sense of the myth of the past unifying the fragmented and even chaotic present and its ability to produce a unified perception of experience. That this structure fails to produce a meaningful perception of experience is really an indication of the failure of the narrator to produce that perception and not a failure of the novel as a work of art. But the failure and absurdity of the narrator’s project to arrest experience in the past are brought out by the actual being solidly there, and more frequently, more dramatically and more effectively, by the logic of the actual asserting itself and overriding the narrator’s fantasy. The actual contradicts the narrator’s fantasy in the first part of the novel in the story of Teriffi’s rebellion against his uncle, overthrowing him from power and taking his place, thus asserting the power of motion and change over fixity and the degeneration that follows from it. And in the contrast between the narrator’s and Saeed Asha Albaitat’s visits to the castle of Bandarshah (both fantasies), the logic and form of actual experience overcome fantasy within the narrator’s mind. While the narrator goes to the castle to see his own beliefs confirmed and therefore is only a witness who emerges from that experience unchanged and perhaps a bit diminished, Saeed visits the castle and, as instructed by the Sheikh, goes through experiences and ordeals without succumbing to them and finally coming out materially enriched and with his social stature elevated.

Finally the story of Dawalbeit that concludes the first part of the novel deals the severest blow to the narrator’s whole perspective on experience by demonstrating in the clearest terms that the village is open to experience, however different and distant an experience might be, and that it accommodates the other and grafts him into its life without negating his otherness. The story continues in the second part of the novel to suggest the moral and spiritual demise of the narrator as a result of his fixed position. Maryam’s words in her deathbed at the end of the story, that Maryood is dead, and again her words in his final fantasy about her that close the novel, that he is nothing, “Maryood, you are nothing” (Saleh, 1996, p. 122), make clear that the narrator, like Mustafa Saeed, senses the irrevocability of his fate. Thus Saleh’s statement about recession and defeat as the condition of the culture and consciousness is categorical, even if it is not comprehensive since it includes only the aspects of the culture and consciousness that are tasked and challenged by the other. Yet the alternative of a pristine Muslim Arab culture, exemplified in the experience of the Northern Sudanese village freed of intellectual and fundamentalist assumptions that would root it in the past and in the abstract rather than
in the living present, cannot be maintained either, as Maryam’s last words in *Bandarshah* poignantly declare:

Maryood, you are nothing. You are a nobody. You have chosen your grandfather and your grandfather has chosen you in his turn because you are both high in worldly scales. But your father would outweigh the two of you put together on the scale of Heavenly Justice. (Saleh, 1996, p. 122)

Saleh’s final stance seems to be a desperate one as he consigns all the invigorating impulses in Arab culture, consciousness and society in the after-1967 condition to a “heavenly” realm, leaving the actual world barren and dead.

**Notes**

1. The existence of Mustafa Saeed has never been doubted. See discussions of the relation between Mustafa Saeed and the narrator in Abbas (Abbas, 1980, PP. 56-85) and Hassan (Hassan, 2003, PP. 91-128).

**References**


