THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MUSTAFA SA'EED:
RIDDLES, PARADOXES, AND AMBIGUITIES

JOSEPH JOHN
Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan

Abstract

Not the least among the artistic triumphs of Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* is his masterly presentation of the Mustafa Sa’eed story within the overall frame of the Narrator’s autobiographical narrative. The story of Mustafa Sa’eed is a complex mosaic of disparate elements simultaneously constituting a sleazy odyssey of sexual misadventures and a dazzling career of brilliant academic feats. Variety, paradox, ambiguity, and “enigmaticity” mark the character and career of Mustafa Sa’eed as presented in the novel.

What emerges from Sa’eed’s “story within the story” is the paradoxical fact that the grand alliance of pseudo-inspirational poetry and “inspired” immorality in Sa’eed’s confessional narrative confers on his story a “privileged” status of indubitable aesthetic distinction within the overall frame of the novel. Both Sa’eed and his women victims rise to dizzy heights of poetic impiety in their passionate utterances. The exotic imagery of Sa’eed’s flamboyant recounting of his sexual exploits as a Sudanese seducer-at-large is richly matched by the pseudo-devotional Oriental terminology of his bemused “devotees.” The strangely salutary result is that what would otherwise be nothing more than a sordid tale of lust, hate, and victimization is rendered delictable by an aesthetic tonality greatly augmented by the complementary rhythms of the mutual voices of victim and victimizer.

Not the least among the artistic triumphs of Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* is his masterly presentation of the Mustafa Sa’eed story within the overall frame of the Narrator’s autobiographical narrative. The excellence of this “embedding” of one story within another consists in the breathtaking virtuosity of Salih’s presentational technique which, within the austere limits of a relatively diminutive novel, gives the Mustafa Sa’eed story something like the thematic amplitude of a veritable epic phenomenon. Quite an important part of this achievement is in the way the author creates in Mustafa Sa’eed a malefic personage of gigantic proportions—possibly one of the most brilliant fictional incarnations of self-conscious and self-complacent malevolence in modern literature—and invests the seedy yet spectacular phenomenon of his life and death with a baleful incandescence that exemplifies the proverbial ambiguity of evil.

Presented as a confidential self-revelation to the Narrator by Mustafa Sa’eed in the form of an oral narrative and, posthumously, in the form of letters and diaries, the Mustafa Sa’eed story is a complex mosaic of disparate elements simultaneously constituting a sleazy odyssey of sexual misadventures and a dazzling career of brilliant academic feats. Mustafa Sa’eed bestrides his world like a colossus, at once forbidding and fascinating—forbidding because of the enormity of his remorseless
depravities and fascinating because of the rare sheen of rhetoric and poetry that irradiates the narrative account of his scandalous career. Variety, paradox, ambiguity, and "enigmaticity" mark the character and career of Mustafa Sa'eed as presented in the novel.

"Was this, then, the phoenix that has ravished the ghoul?" (p. 155), asks the Narrator upon seeing Sa'eed's picture of Jean Morris in the "rectangular room" that was, so to speak, a museum of mementos from Sa'eed's dissolute past. While "phoenix" as a metaphor for Jean Morris would seem appropriate it is doubtful whether "ghoul" as a metaphor for Mustafa Sa'eed is inclusive enough in its connotations to represent the protean enigmaticity of Sa'eed's character and career. Sa'eed, in fact, is less like a ghoul than like a sphinx.

To begin with, Sa'eed is a man of bewildering paradoxicalness. He is a person whose reputation ranges precariously between "African nationalist" and "British stooge." He is at once a versatile scholar and an indefatigable fornicator. He is a victimizer of many women who becomes a helpless victim of one. In him we see a "liberator" enslaved, a "conqueror" conquered. He is a fatalist who, as it were, overtakes his own fate. He is a man with many names --"Hassan and Charles and Amin and Mustafa and Richard" (p. 35) -- who somehow shapes up more as a phenomenon than as a person, more as a principle of evil (like Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth in The Scarlet Letter) than as a flesh-and-blood individual. He is a man who, while "writing and lecturing on a system of economics based on love" (p. 35), indulges in a series of seductions motivated by hate and revenge. Starting out as a young intellectual imbued with racial and cultural pride, he ends up as a "rebel without a cause," a chaser of mirages eventually chased by a mirage, a lapsed champion of the South selling his soul for a mess of pottage, a squanderer of his high destiny in the fleshepots of the North.

Quite in keeping with his ambiguous nature and ambivalent career, he happens to be different things to different people. To the Narrator, Sa'eed is at once his alter ego and his antagonist. To Hosna Bint Mahmoud, he is a "generous husband" who nevertheless is secretive and not above "hiding something" (p. 91). In the opinion of the retired Mamour, Sa'eed "was the most brilliant student of our day" (p. 51), while according to the judge who passed sentence on Sa'eed at the Old Bailey, he was, despite his academic brilliance, "a stupid man" because he "squandered the noblest gift that God has bestowed upon people -- the gift of love" (p. 54). To Sir Arthur Higgins, he is "a scoundrel" (p. 94), whereas to Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen, he is "a noble person whose mind was able to absorb Western civilization" (p. 33). To Mrs. Robinson, he is "dear Moozie" who brought "boundless happiness to the hearts of my husband and me" (p. 147), while to Ann Hammond he is eventually the hated seducer to be dismissed with the pre-suicide curse: "Mr Sa'eed, may God damn you" (p. 31). Sa'eed himself adds to the reader's bewildered awareness of his enigmatic nature by making contradictory statements such as: "I am not Othello. I am a lie" (p. 33) and "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie" (p. 95). Even the manner of his end remains a riddle. Did he drown in the Nile flood, as generally believed, or did he, as the Narrator at one point wonders, commit suicide? (p. 52).

Right from the beginning Sa'eed is presented as a dichotomous figure. Ambiguity
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MUSTAFA SA'EED

haunts his existence from early childhood. He was, as he tells us, a child of remarkable self-sufficiency and of admirable independence; yet he was singularly subnormal in his emotional life. Of the relationship between himself and his mother he says: "She and I acted as relatives to each other. It was as if she were some stranger on the road with whom circumstances had chanced to bring me" (p. 19). A total absence of filial affection marks his relation to his mother, and this lacuna is symptomatic of the general emotional aridity that characterizes his psychic life. As he puts it:

I used to have...a warm feeling of being free, that there was not a human being...to tie me down as a tent peg to a particular spot, a particular domain. I would read and sleep, go out and come in, play outside the house, loaf around the streets, and there would be no one to order me about. Yet I had felt from childhood that I -- that I was different -- I mean that I was not like other children of my age; I wasn't affected by anything, I didn't cry when hit, wasn't glad if the teacher praised me in class, didn't suffer from the things the rest did. I was like something rounded, made of rubber; you throw it in the water and it doesn't get wet, you throw it on the ground and it bounces back (pp. 19-20).

The above passage indicates an emotional insulation utterly unconducive to a normal affective life.

In contrast to this manifestation of an acute emotional underdevelopment, Sa'eed as a child reveals exceptional intelligence. At his school in Khartoum, he is soon recognized as a child prodigy, and he is awarded a scholarship for study at a school in Cairo. He himself becomes conscious of his intellectual powers. His mind, as he puts it, was "like a sharp knife, cutting with cold effectiveness" (p. 22). However, this combination of an overdeveloped intellect with an underdeveloped heart hardly makes for all round normal development in the child. Mrs. Robinson's question, "Can't you ever forget your intellect?" (p. 25) denotes as much exasperation as admiration; it obviously is more than a compliment to his intellect—it is also a wise pointer to a serious imbalance in Sa'eed's psychic make-up. For all her "maternal" affection for the brilliant boy, she is not too imperceptive to discern what ails his burgeoning manhood. Indeed, she lays her finger on the nerve-center of Sa'eed's arrested affective life. His mind incessantly busy cutting through facts, he is utterly incapable of human sympathy.

Salih's view of the dangers of excessive intellectuality as reflected in Mrs. Robinson's concern over its possible consequences for Sa'eed is similar to Conrad's view of the intellect's blind reckoning of "facts" in contrast to the heart's intuitive apprehension of "truth" which transcends facts. In "The Secret Sharer," for instance, the young captain, intuitively sympathetic toward the renegade Leggatt, speaks disparagingly of his mate whose approach to life is determined by the fact-sifting, analyzing proclivity of the intellect: "After a quick exchange of dates a silence fell; and I thought suddenly of my absurd mate with his terrific whiskers and the 'Bless my soul-- you don't say so' type of intellect." What the captain means is that he is skeptical of the mate's capacity for sympathy toward Leggatt because the mate, his intellect ruling his perception, will only see the "fact" of Leggatt's having killed a man on the Sephora. Sympathy comes from the heart; the intellect only sees "facts". For Sa'eed, humans do not matter; they are only a means to an end, the
end being the fulfillment of his vaulting ambition. His intellect, sharp as a knife, and his ambition, knowing no limits, are the only facts that count. It is this 'heartless' attitude that is condemned in the verdict pronounced on him by one of his fellow students in Cairo: "My knowledge had increased and several minor incidents had happened to me; a fellow student had fallen in love with me and had then hated me. 'You're not a human being,' she had said to me, 'You're a heartless machine'" (pp. 27-28). In fact, Sa'eed's personality reveals an appalling disc equilibrium between mind and heart -- the former overly developed and the latter nearly atrophied.

Compounding this imbalance in his teenage personality are his oversized ego and his precocious sexuality. Driven inexorably by his ambition, he imagines himself specially favored by destiny and considers others as having been ordained to be of service to him. He says: "This is a fact in my life: the way chance has placed in my path people who gave me a helping hand at every stage, people for whom I had no feelings of gratitude; I used to take their help as though it were some duty they were performing for me" (p. 23). This egotistic self-regard is accompanied by a sexual precocity that reveals itself in a most unlikely context. Speaking of his first meeting with the Robinsons in Cairo, he says:

When I arrived in Cairo I found Mr. Robinson and his wife waiting me... Then the man introduced me to his wife, and all of a sudden I felt the woman's arms embracing me and her lips on my cheek. At that moment, as I stood on the station platform amidst a welter of sounds and sensations, with the woman's arms round my neck, her mouth on my cheek, the smell of her body -- a strange European smell -- tickling my nose, her breast touching my chest, I felt -- I, a boy of twelve -- a vague sexual yearning I had never previously experienced (pp. 24-25).

Young Sa'eed is thus seen as being possessed of attributes that are at once attractive and repulsive. Endowed with a dazzling intellect and abundant self-reliance, he is at the same time abnormally egotistic and erotic. His emotional alienation from his mother, his stark ingratitude toward those who helped him, and his sexual precocity mark him out as a youngster whose future holds unpredictable possibilities. At any rate, driven by a trio of inner forces -- intellect, ego, and libido --, he is a person of baffling ambiguity, with qualities that are at once admirable and deplorable.

One thing, however, that adds a welcome glamour to Sa'eed's being is his evolvement into an embodiment of renascent Arab nationalism coupled with an obsessive drive to avenge the wrongs suffered by the South at the hands of the Imperialist North. Calling himself a "conqueror," carrying within himself memories of the glorious epoch of Arab rule over Spain, he dedicates himself to vengeance. But how is he to achieve this goal and what are his qualifications? As he himself puts it, "Though I was then fifteen, I looked nearer twenty, for I was as taut and firm-looking as an inflated waterskin. Behind me was a story of spectacular success at school, my sole weapon being that sharp knife inside my skull, while within my breast was a hard, cold feeling -- as if it had been cast in rock" (p. 26). The young Sa'eed who voyages to England declaring, "I have come to you as a conqueror" (p. 60), is thus a person with a divided self polarized between head and heart -- the head containing the "sharp knife" that is his brain and the heart holding nothing but
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MUSTAFA SA'EED

a "hard, cold feeling." He will use his brain, so he determines, to excel the colonizer. He will dazzle and humble the enemy by demonstrating his intellectual prowess through academic triumphs.

Such triumphs, however, will not be enough -- he must have other conquests, other victories. His brain, in fact, is not to be his "sole weapon." He will use his phallus too in his war against the colonizer. "I'll liberate Africa with my penis" (p. 120), he declares. He hardly realizes that the method of liberation he proposes to himself is a quixotic one, that this way of liberating Africa will only make him a slave to his own lusts. The collusion of ego and libido within his mind blinds him altogether to the self-destructive nature of his proposed mode of liberation and revenge, and so he launches himself on a career of Jekyll-and-Hyde duality, seeking by day to win academic laurels on the citadels of the white man's intellectual pride and by night scoring sexual "victories" over white women enticed to his bed by means of the most ingenious seductive stratagems. "By day," he says, "I lived with the theories of Keynes and Tawney and at night I resumed the war with bow and sword and spear and arrows" (p. 34). The "war," of course, is the war of sex in which, with his exotic virility symbolized by the primitive weapons of "bow and sword and spear and arrows," he will "conquer" as many white women as he can.

There is, of course, no love in all this--only lust and hate. Images of death and disease and conflict abound in Sa'eed's accounts of his "conquests" in his London bedroom adorned with rare oriental curios and scented with the fabulous perfumes of storied Araby. Of Ann Hammond, one of his victims, he says: "In my bed I transformed her into a harlot. My bedroom was a graveyard that looked on to a garden" (p. 30). Of the ivory necklace he gave Sheila Greenwood he says that it was "like a noose round her neck" (p. 35). Speaking of his bedroom in connection with Jean Morris, he says: "My bedroom was a spring-well of sorrow, the germ of a fatal disease" (p. 34). Recalling his seduction of Isabella Seymour, he says: "I knew that the short road along which we walked together to the bedroom was, for her, a road of light redolent with the aroma of magnanimity and devotion, but which to me was the last step before attaining the peak of selfishness" (p. 43). While she, in the weet but forbidden ecstasy of illicit love, "in an imploring voice of surrender" whispers to him, "I love you" (p. 43), he soars to horrendous heights of egotistic gratification accruing from his easy victory over a female representative of the race of imperialists who colonized his country. Love is thus most heinously travestied in Sa'eed's macabre love-bed. In the language used by Sa'eed to describe his mindless seductions, metaphors abound that subordinate love to lust and rationalize cruelty in terms of the amoral ineluctability of natural calamities: "And when, puffing, I reach the mountain peak and implant the banner, collect my breath and rest--that, my lady, is an ecstasy greater to me than love, than happiness. Thus I mean you no harm, except to the extent that the sea is harmful when ships are wrecked against its rocks, and to the extent that the lightning is harmful when it rends a tree in two" (p. 41). For Sa'eed, the heavy exhilaration of sexual conquest is sweeter than love, than even happiness, and his miscreant acts of loveless seduction are no more culpable than the ruthless automaticity of shipwrecking oceans and tree-splitting lightnings.

The psychology behind these "politico-egotistic" seductions is worth looking into. Sex as an equalizer is not what Sa'eed is after; he wants to use sex as an
instrument of aggression and conquest, as a means of gratifying his racial and cultural ego. He rejected the girl student who fell in love with him in Cairo because he had no use for love and because there would be no "political" victory in "having" her, since she was not a white woman. In order for him to have a sense of victory, it is important that there be no love in him, that he maintain the "hard, cold feeling" in his heart of which he has always been intensely aware. His white women must love and yearn and suffer, while he will be their heartless victimizer, doing himself proud by "preying" on them--even as the white colonizer preyed upon his country and his continent with infinite contumely. Not for him, then, the egalitarian formula of love-for-love; he prefers a different equation. For him, the proper ratio is hate for love, revenge for love, even death for love. His victory is in this unequal equation whereby he wins, they lose; he triumphs, they surrender. For him it means a personal and political ego-trip; for them the trauma of being befuddled, betrayed, seduced, and deprived of the will to live.

Such, then, is the psychological profile of Sa'eed's death-dealing liaisons with Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, Isabella Seymour, and others among his unlisted victims. Even as he conquers them one by one, however, he sinks deeper and deeper in the morass of self-indulgence. The self-proclaimed "liberator" of Africa becomes a slave to his own lust; he becomes a sex-addict irretrievably gravitating toward humiliation and ultimate perdition at the hands of Jean Morris--his nemesis, his "goddess of Death" (p. 153), his "shore of destruction" (p. 160). With Jean Morris the old ratio is reversed. Now it is Sa'eed's turn to receive hate for love. Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, and Isabella Seymour were infatuated with Sa'eed; now Sa'eed becomes infatuated with Jean Morris. Whereas other women "fell for him like flies" (p. 120), now it is he who falls for Jean Morris. He begins as a hunter, chasing her, but he ends up being her quarry. He is the victim, she the victimizer. Unlike Julius Caesar who said, "I came, I saw, I conquered," Sa'eed, the self-proclaimed "conqueror" might truly say, "I came, I saw, I was conquered," for such is the disastrous effect of his encounter with this femme fatale.

Not surprisingly, their relationship begins in an ominous manner. At their first meeting at a party in Chelsea, they react to each other with mutual fascination and animosity. At their second meeting, she bluntly tells him: "You're ugly. I've never seen an uglier face than yours" (p. 30). Sa'eed's response to this insult is characteristic. "At that instant," he says, "drunk as I was, I swore I would one day make her pay for that" (p. 30). So he pursues her relentlessly for three years, and then one day "Marry me," she says suddenly and peremptorily, and he obeys. Thus begins their troubled married life riddled with headlong clashes between two bloodless egotisms.

After the marriage, Jean puts him through a harrowing spell of sexual starvation "My bedroom", says Sa'eed, "became a theatre of war, my bed a patch of hell. When I grasped her it was like grasping at clouds, like bedding a shooting-star, like mounting the back of a Prussian military march.... It was as though I were a slave Shahrayar you buy in the market for a dinar encountering a Scheherazade begging amidst the rubble of a city destroyed by plague" (pp. 34). While tantalizing him with her capricious elusiveness in bed, Jean torments him with her flagrant infidelities. After the first "defeat", Sa'eed feels like a permanent loser. The warm sense of mastery he once had in his relationships with other women is gone. The self-
ordained avenger of his country's wrongs is held in thrall by a female representative of the ruling race. (Here is an ironic reversal of the sultan-slave role-playing practised by Sa'eed and Ann Hammond in their hot romance of heady poetry and heavy deception). The abject ignominy of it all paralyzes him. He no longer feels the "satanic warmth under [his] diaphragm" (p. 40) that used to be, for him, a sure sign of his being in control. Teetering incessantly on the brink of mutual destruction, they continue to live together in a love-hate relationship which leads on to a macabre merger of love and death in the ritual killing of Jean Morris by Mustafa Sa'eed, she ecstatically receiving his piercing dagger between her breasts while cooing "Please darling" and he, with matching ecstasy, whispering in her dying ears "I love you, my darling" until "the universe, with its past, present and future, was gathered together into a single point before and after which nothing existed" (p. 165).

It is one of the great paradoxes of Salih's novel that a major share of its artistic excellence manifests itself in the nightmarish narrative of Mustafa Sa'eed's immoralities in England. What is it that makes the story of Sa'eed's lengthy English interlude so absorbing to the reader no less than to the Narrator despite the fact that it constitutes, in the main, nothing but a gruesome parade of vice, lust, revenge, suicide, and ritual murder? The answer is to be found in the seductive quality of the poetry that illumines, however luridly, the dismal story of Sa'eed's life in England. It is, to be sure, a poetry of perversity, but it is poetry nonetheless, and poetry of a very high order at that. Geography, history, politics, economics, psychology, culture, religion, mysticism, idolatry, exotic, current events, perfumery, literature, tradition, modernity, homespun philosophy, archery, the art of lying, role playing, the art of war, ritual sex, ritual murder—all are made to subscribe to the purple poetry of Mustafa Sa'eed's egomania and its aberrant sexual manifestations. A dusky lyricism pervades Sa'eed's recounting of his sexual exploits. The powerful drives that operate within him are spoken of in terms of irresistible urges, immemorial longings, and insatiable thirsts suggestive of the ultimate in ultra-sensual aspiration. "I am the desert of thirst" (p. 33), he says, and again, "I am South that yearns for the North and the ice" (p. 30). The language used by him to describe his sexual misadventures scintillates with exotic imagery replete with deserts, mirages, jungles, tropical sunsets, mountains, mountain passes, camels, caravans, sandalwood and incense, bow and arrow, sword and spear, phoenix and ghoul, a fret and genic, and above all, the river of rivers—the Nile.

What is involved here is a linguistic transmogriﬁcation of seamy sexual sequences into highly poetized extravaganzas of seduction and ravishment. A good part of this linguistic feat consists in Sa'eed's use of highly suggestive (even provocative) sensual metaphors to feminize and "eroticize" geographical places, especially cities like Cairo and London, in an unconscious projection of his inner state. Thus in the wake of his frank reference to the precocious sexual excitement he experienced on being embraced by Mrs. Robinson at the Cairo railway station, he says: "I felt as though Cairo, that large mountain to which my camel had carried me, was a European woman Just like Mrs. Robinson, its arms embracing me, its perfume and the odor of its body ﬁlling my nostrils. In my mind her eyes were the colour of Cairo: grey-green turning at night to a twinkling like that of a ﬁrefly" (p. 25). Not surprisingly, Sa'eed's feminizations of landscape frequently refer back voluptuously to Mrs. Robinson. Thus, speaking of the English landscape on his way to London, he says, "I look to right and left, at the greenness, at the Saxon villages
standing on the fringes of hills. The red roofs of houses vaulted like the backs of cows. A transparent veil of mist is spread above the valleys. What a great amount of water there is here, how vast the greenness! And all those colours! The smell of the place is strange, like that of Mrs. Robinson's body" (p. 27). Here, as in other instances of this kind, the related traits of egotism and eroticism that constitute the dominant psychic forces in Sa'eed's make-up, are given a seductive appeal that is apt to subvert the moral susceptibilities of the Narrator who is Sa'eed's sole auditor.

An allied aspect of Sa'eed's mode of narration is to be found in the way he sheds an oriental hue of high romance and semi-mythical enchantment on the grim episodes of his sex-life in England. Referring, for instance, to Ann Hammond, one of the most colorful of his women victims, he speaks in terms of insatiable longings and unquenchable thirsts. "In her eyes," he says, "I was a symbol of all her yearnings. I am South that yearns for the North and the ice" (p. 30). North and South here become symbols that transform the lovers into trans-individual embodiments of mythic yearnings that straddle the centuries. The highly charged imagery of Sa'eed's celebration of forbidden love recurs again and again in a manner grotesquely echoic of the soul's inefable longing for God in a canticle of mystic love: "Unlike me, she yearned for tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons. In her eyes I was a symbol of all these hankerings of hers. I am South that yearns for the North and the ice" (p. 142). Invoking again the aid of high poetry and exotic imagery, he goes on to say: "She would tell me that in my eyes she saw the shimmer of mirages in hot deserts, that in my voice she heard the screams of ferocious beasts in the jungles. And I would tell her that in the blueeness of her eyes I saw the far away shoreless seas of the North" (pp. 146-47).

Infatuated with each other at first sight, Sa'eed and Ann Hammond beguile each other with poetic hyperboles involving Marvellian extensions of their imagined quest for each other across centuries, across oceans and continents:

She put her arms around me and kissed me. "You are beautiful beyond description," she said, speaking in Arabic, "and the love I have for you is beyond description." With an emotion the violence of which frightened me, I said: "At last I have found you, Sausan. I searched everywhere for you and was afraid I would never find you. Do you remember?" "How can I forget our house in Karkh in Baghdad on the banks of the river Tigris in the days of El-Ma'moun," she said with an emotion no less intense than mine. "I too have followed your footsteps across the centuries, but I was certain we would find each other--and here you are, my darling Mustafa, unchanged since we parted" (pp. 143-44).

It is as though the bygone centuries of the golden age of Islam and of Arabic poetry had benignly "conspired" to bring them together. They seem to see themselves as reincarnations of lovers from a golden past bound together by silken threads of love and longing woven into the many-splendored tapestry of Arab history. Of the poetic lies with which the "lovers" flatter each other, Sa'eed, with a rueful ruthlessness, tells the dubious truth: "Though I realized I was lying, I felt that somehow I meant what I was saying and that she too, despite her lying, was telling the truth. It was one of those rare moments of ecstasy for which I would sell my
whole life; a moment in which, before your very eyes, lies are turned into truths, history becomes a pimp, and the jester is turned into a sultan" (p. 144).

The seduction of Isabella Seymour, like that of Ann Hammond, is also rich in celebratory evocations of the golden periods of Arab history. However, a tenderer mode of poetic transmutation of illicit love is at work in Sa’eed’s account of his cruel romance with Isabella. Here is Sa’eed’s account of the beginning of their relationship: “I left my house on a Saturday, sniffing the air, feeling I was about to start upon a great hunt. I reached the Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park. It was packed with people... Suddenly my eyes came to rest on a woman who was craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the speaker so that her dress was lifted above her knees exposing two shapely, bronzed legs. Yes, this was my prey. I walked up to her, like a boat heading towards the rapids” (pp. 36-37). The heavy accent on the deterministic nature of the forces that brought them together is typical of Sa’eed, and so is the sensual invocation of Mrs. Robinson that ensues: “I breathed in the odour of her body, that odour with which Mrs. Robinson had met me on the platform of Cairo’s railway station” (p. 37). Lust speaks with a silver tongue as Mustafa Sa’eed admires the “redness of [Isabella’s] tongue when she laughed, the fullness of her lips and the secrets lurking in the abyss of her mouth” (p. 41).

Sa’eed and his “prey” hit off quite well. Soon there comes the moment when, says Sa’eed, “I felt that she and I had become like a mare and foal running in harmony side by side” (p. 37). Sa’eed’s Muse of seduction breaks into song over Isabella’s “glittering figure of bronze under the July sun, a city of secrets and rapture” (p. 37). The poetry of exotic geography and of archetypal symbolism is invoked again to glamorize forbidden love: “Such a woman—there are many of her type in Europe—knows no fear; they accept life with gaiety and curiosity. And I am a thirsty desert, a wilderness of Southern desires” (pp. 37-38). Not geography alone, but history too is made tributary to the dark lyricism of Sa’eed’s tale of unbridled licentiousness: “For a moment I imagined to myself the Arab soldiers’ first meeting with Spain: like me at this instant sitting opposite Isabella Seymour, a southern thirst being dissipated in the mountain passes of history in the north” (p. 42). Despite his assertion, “I seek not glory, for the likes of me do not seek glory,” it is quite likely that it is precisely the nostalgic memories of past Arab power and glory revived in his mind by his easy “victory” over Isabella Seymour (whose mother was Spanish) that are epitomized with exquisite metaphoric suggestiveness in his description of her as “a fertile Andalusia” (p. 42).

A brooding note of puzzled fatalism informs Sa’eed’s recounting of his strife-ridden and tragic relationship with Jean Morris. There is also a subtle undertone of regret in his account of the sad story. The Narrator’s comment on this unexpected breach in Sa’eed’s wonted hardness of heart is revealing: “That night [i.e. the night Sa’eed told his story to the Narrator] his voice had been wounded, sad, tinged with regret. Was it because he had lost her? Or was it because she had made him swallow such degradations?” (p. 155). None of Sa’eed’s tragic sexual encounters seems to have had such a lasting effect on him as did his internecine involvement with Jean Morris. Like a plaintive refrain in a ballad of exceptional tragic poignancy, Sa’eed’s words, “And the train carried me to Victoria Station and to the world of Jean Morris” (pp. 29, 31, 33), repeated thrice with stoic deliberateness, are heavy with a somber awareness of the mystery of fate.
JOSEPH JOHN

The doleful music of an enduring anguish is audible in Sa‘eed’s account of his calamitous infatuation for Jean Morris. The excruciating intensity of his longing for her after she rebuffed him with contempt is expressed in language that bristles with the poetry of sexual frustration: “I went on pursuing her for three years. Every day the bow string became more taut. My caravans were parched with thirst and the mirage glimmered in front of me in the desert of longing” (pp. 91-92). Speaking of the agony he suffered on account of Jean’s sexual recalcitrance after their marriage, he says: “The city was transformed into an extraordinary woman, with her symbols and her mysterious calls, towards whom I drove my camels till their entrails ached and I myself almost died of yearning for her” (p. 34). On what he calls “the night of truth and of tragedy” (p. 163), comparing himself to the myriads of sailors lured to their deaths by the Sirens in Greek mythology, he says: “Here are my ships, my darling, sailing towards the shores of destruction” (p. 164). The final act of macabre love-play with its sanguinary climax in the strangely ecstatic ending of Jean’s life and the beginning of Sa‘eed’s life-in-death is made to glow with a solemn luminosity that normally attends deeds or events of great moment in history, legend, or mythology. Here is the summit of Sa‘eed’s capacity for transmuting gruesome sex into pseudo-mystical and semi-mythical poetry.

Mustafa Sa‘eed flair for making poetry out of his sexual misdeeds is not without its counterpart in his women victims. In fact, in moments of high passion, they break out in wild erotic utterances in praise of their African paramour. “I love your sweat,” says Ann Hammond to him, “I want to have the smell of you in full—the smell of rotted leaves in the jungles of Africa, the smell of the mango and the pawpaw and tropical spices, the smell of rains in the deserts of Arabia” (p. 142). The intensity of her craving for the exotic makes her go into raptures as much over the sweat of his body as she does over the rank luxuriance of the African jungle. Licking his face with her tongue, Sheila Greenwood, another victim, says: “Your tongue’s as crimson as a tropic sunset” and, with more erotic abandon: “How marvellous your black colour is! the colour of magic and mystery and obscenities” (p. 139). The daringly perverse juxtaposition of “obscenities” with “magic and mystery” is in line with Ann Hammond’s erotic predilection for the decadently exotic. An Impassioned note of pseudo-mystical self-surrender is heard in Isabella Seymour’s delirious prayer to her black deity: “Ravish me, you African demon. Burn me in the fire of your temple, you black god. Let me twist and turn in your wild and impassioned rites” (p. 106). “Whoring after strange gods,” as T.S. Eliot has said in a different context, Isabella Seymour makes sacrilegious use of the terminology of mystic love to articulate her adulterous passion for Mustafa Sa‘eed. In language clearly reminiscent of John Donne’s sonnet “Batter my heart, three-personed God” where he prays God to “break, blow, burn, and make me new” and to ravish him because he will not ever be chaste “except You ravish me,” she soars on wings of blasphemous “poesy” to dreadful heights of erotic diablerie.

What emerges from the above discussion of Mustafa Sa‘eed’s “story within the story” is the paradoxical fact that the grand alliance of pseudo-inspirational poetry and “inspired” immorality in Sa‘eed’s confessional narrative confers on his story a “privileged” status of indubtable aesthetic distinction within the overall frame of the novel. Both Sa‘eed and his women victims rise to dizzy heights of poetic impiety in their passionate utterances. The exotic imagery of Sa‘eed’s flamboyant recoun-
ting of his sexual exploits as a Sudanese seducer-at-large is richly matched by the pseudo-devotional Oriental terminology of his bemused "devotees." The strangely salutary result is that what would otherwise be nothing more than a sordid tale of lust, hate, and victimization is rendered delectable by an aesthetic tonality greatly augmented, in each case of seduction, by the complementary rhythms of the mutual voices of victim and victimizer.

Endowed though it is with an aesthetic distinction all its own, the Mustafa Sa'eed story nevertheless pretends to no thematic ascendancy within the novel. For all its meteoric luminosity, the story of Sa'eed's strange career in England is a thematically subordinate subplot functioning adventitiously as a negative simulacrum of the Narrator-Protagonist's moral evolution. Considered in this light, Sa'eed will be seen simply as the Narrator's alter ego acknowledged as such by the Narrator himself at a certain stage in their mutual encounter. The embedding of Sa'eed's spasmodic confessions within the larger frame of the Narrator's unwavering quest for identity is in itself paradigmatic of a purposive subordination of the Sa'eedian phenomenon to the larger theme of the Narrator's psycho-spiritual evolution through a deliberate departure from the primrose path of his quondam alter ego eventually recognized as his "adversary" (p. 135).

It should be interesting, however, to consider the Mustafa story on its own merits—and demerits. What, we might ask, is its intrinsic significance? The answer is not simple. To say that it has little moral import, that it is no more than a dismal tale of sin and corruption, would be much too simplistic. The facts of Sa'eed's life can easily be touted up, but the truth about him, as with Jim in Conrad's Lord Jim, involves "enigmas of motivation and implication." Whatever be the verdict passed on Mustafa Sa'eed, one thing is sure: He did not live and die in vain. In itself a disaster—a tragedy of vaulting ambition self-defeated—Sa'eed's life nevertheless holds up an unmistakable lesson for the reader no less than for the Narrator—that the misalliance of idealism and egotism that renders him such an enigmatic personage is as perilous as it is subtle and surreptitious. Idealism and egotism make uneasy bedfellows, and it is not unusual for the former to be absorbed by the latter. Sa'eed internalizes the historical conflict, and, in the process, Africa, for him, comes to mean himself. Hence his slogan, "I'll liberate Africa with my penis" more or less means self-liberation, though the mode of liberation he adopts makes a travesty of the word "liberation." Seduction and debauchery become the Sa'eedian version of political retaliation—a personal vendetta that serves as an ironic and pathetic substitute for national liberation.

Any attempt, however, to assess Sa'eed's life story must tentatively take into account the plausibility of four different judgments—the judgment passed at the Old Bailey, Sa'eed's own self-judgment, the judgment of the Narrator and, finally, the reader's post-perusal assessment of the Sa'eedian phenomenon in light of the author's moral-philosophical vision as projected in the novel. There is no doubt that the sentence passed on Sa'eed at the Old Bailey cannot be construed as the only possible verdict on him, for a juridical judgment is at best no more than a partial verdict on one whose career patently is much more than the sum of his criminalities. Sa'eed's self-judgment, for all its refreshing candor, stands disqualified by its obvious solipsism: his eagerness to be sentenced to death and be summarily done away with for the murder of Jean Morris seems motivated less by repentance than by a nihilistic, yet strangely narcissistic, disgust with life. The Narrator's Judgment
of Sa‘eed, implied in his naming of Sa‘eed as his adversary from whose posthumous clutches he in the end disentangles himself, is indeed a valid one in terms of the exigencies of his traumatic moral evolution resulting from the dire interpenetration of their dialectical moral careers. Even this judgment, however, must ultimately yield to a corrective re-evaluation by the reader who, with the “omniscent” perspective that accrues to him from his panoptic hindsight, is capable of a verdict not vitiated by the narrow legalism of the Old Bailey, nor by the solipsism of Sa‘eed, nor even by the subjectivity of the Narrator.

Sa‘eed is a man who, like Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, starts out in good faith. As Kurtz intends to civilize the “savages” in the Congo, so Sa‘eed intends to liberate his country and his continent, to reinstate the lost honor of his country and his people. As Kurtz, his spirit subverted by the dark forces he seeks to overcome, ends up being more savage than the savages, so Sa‘eed, expressing himself in his “twisted manner” (p. 41), becomes corrupted by the worst aspects of the system he sets out to overcome. Aping the British, striving to become more British than the British themselves, abusing the sexual freedom to be found in British society, he proceeds, with something like the nihilistic abandon of the egomaniacal Kurtz, to annex new territories of unmitigated iniquity to the dark domain of his apotheosized ego, reveling in the “sacrificial” demise of the victims of his vindictive lust. The story of Mustafa Sa‘eed constitutes, in a way, a perverse “Song of Myself,” a sinister “passage to England,” and, ultimately, a “passage to less than England”—a passage to the “igloo” of his self-chosen solitude in the obscure village “at the bend of the Nile” (p. 1).

And yet the reader cannot quite forget that Sa‘eed like Kurtz, is “a good man gone wrong.” In fact, as Marlow finds Kurtz hard to bless and hard to damn, so the reader of *Season* finds Sa‘eed hard to condone and yet harder to condemn. This is because in the “plot” of Sa‘eed’s life story, the end is not as bad as the beginning or the middle. True, the end is not heroic, but what a graceful exit he makes! At least he knew when to move on and how. And what a benign “epistle” he penned for the Narrator before moving on to “death’s other kingdom” or to some new “incognito” in some other obscure place on earth! His letter is full of concern for others and none for himself. How concerned he is about his wife and children, and with what benignity he releases the Narrator from his pledge of silence and invites him to quench his curiosity by reading his private papers! “I leave you,” he says, “the key of my private room where you will perhaps find what you are looking for. I know you to be suffering from undue curiosity where I am concerned—something for which I can find no justification” (p. 65). He is marvelously trustful of the man whose “undue curiosity” has been for him a source of anxiety, a threat to the life he had chosen for himself in that village. Says he: “I leave my wife, two sons, and all my worldly goods in your care, knowing that you will act honourably in every respect” (p. 65). His concern for his sons’ welfare goes with a genuine concern for truth: “It is important to me that they should know what sort of person their father was—if that is at all possible. I am not concerned that they should think well of me. To be thought well of is the last thing I’m after; but perhaps it would help them to know the truth about themselves, at a time when such knowledge would not be dangerous” (p. 66). He adds:

If they grow up imbued with the air of this village, its smells and colours and history, the faces of its inhabitants and the memories of its floods
and harvestings and sowings, then my life will acquire its true perspective as something meaningful alongside many other meanings of deeper significance. I don't know how they will think of me then. They may feel pity for me or they may, in their imagination, transform me into a hero. That is not important. The important thing is that my life should not emerge from behind the unknown like an evil spirit and cause them harm. How I would have liked to stay on with them, watching them grow up before my eyes and at least constituting some justification for my existence. I do not know which of the two courses would be the more selfish, to stay on or to depart. In any event I have no choice... (p. 66).

If he had no choice but to "depart", was it due entirely to the Narrator's nosiness that threatened to uncover his secret, or was it, partly at least, due to his "wanderlust," the itch to obey the "distant call" (p. 66) that still rang in his ears? The answer is couched in words which, although they are heavy with Sa'eed's innate fatalism, are not without the unmistakable accents of a valiant fealty to the mysterious forces within him whose imperious behest must be obeyed. "Rationally," he says, "I know what is right: my attempt at living in this village with these happy people. But mysterious things in my soul and in my blood impel me towards far away parts that loom up before me and cannot be ignored...I don't know when I shall go, my friend, but I sense that the hour of departure has drawn nigh, so good-bye" (p. 67).

Sa'eed's words as he bids farewell to his chosen "trustee" in his carefully composed letter (which is also, in a way, his "letter to the world"),10 throb with a deep but resigned sense of the inexorable play of the irrational and the inevitable in his life. They bespeak the inscrutable residuum of a life lived recklessly in London and re-lived vicariously (and furtively) in the "rectangular room" of his soul's inalienable solitude. They bear the "burthen of the mystery,"11 the dark and heavy burden of an all too fervent "faith" in an imponderable power (not necessarily the "divinity") that "shapes our ends,"12 a faith that constitutes the pitiable "sumnum bonum" of his ill-fated sojourn on earth.

An important question suggests itself as a possible corrective to the above attribution of an altogether unredeemed fatalism to Mustafa Sa'eed. Did Sa'eed in the end see the light beyond the dark circle of self? That he perhaps did so is fairly hinted at in his letter. His eagerness to choose the less selfish of the two alternatives before him--"to stay on or to depart"--implies an affirmation of moral choice that belies total belief in an inescapable determinism. There is indeed more here than a rejection of selfishness; there is also a brave recognition of the folly of self-deception. "It's futile," he says, "to deceive oneself" (p. 66). Is this his repudiation of the lie that was his life? And does the glimpse he has of the "mysterious things in [his] soul and in [his] blood" constitute "an affirmation, a moral victory"13 less dubious and less ambivalent than Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!"14

"Art," says Albert J. Guerard, "induces greater sympathies (but also stern judgments) than most of us are capable of in the daily conduct of our lives..."15 Art in Salih's Season seems to function differently. The aesthetic of the novel is deeply committed to the obviation of a stern condemnation of Sa'eed by the reader even as
it is dedicated to the inducing of a sympathetic involvement of the reader in the Narrator’s eventual moral enlightenment. The content of Sa’eed’s letter, with its hints about glimpses into mysteries and “meanings of deeper significance,” contributes as much to the reader’s ambivalent attitude toward Sa’eed as does the grand poetic mode employed by him in presenting his aberrant activities as veritable enactments of the decrees of destiny. An equally significant factor in the reader’s mitigated judgment of Sa’eed is the extenuating circumstance of his having been a pawn in the power-play of conflicting global forces, a hapless ideologist caught up in the maelstrom of history, pitted against the powers that be in the East-West confrontation at a time when “things fall apart” and “the centre cannot hold.”

Like the protagonist of Conrad’s Lord Jim and like Michael Henchard in Hardy’s The Mayor Of Casterbridge, Sa’eed is one of “those great fictional characters whose crime... makes as well as breaks him.” If Sa’eed is the great fictional character that he is, if he is capable of evoking in the reader “a rich conflict of sympathy and judgment,” it is precisely because, by taking his destiny into his own hands, he seals his fate, thereby conferring on himself a sable grandeur that adds its baleful meed of splendor to the sublunary chiaroscuro of the novel’s multiplex moral theme. Against the pellucid poetry of the Narrator’s quest for identity, the opaque but opulent lyricism of Sa’eed’s strange narrative echoes with multiple resonances that orchestrate the ironies, the ambiguities, and the paradoxes that riddle his tragic career.
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MUSTAFA SA'EED

Footnotes

For other studies of Mustafa Sa'eed, see the following articles:
The Sudanese Psychological Society, "Immigration Without Season" in Ahmad Sa'eed Mohamadiah, et al., Tayeb Salih, the Genius of the Arabic Novel (Beirut: Dar Al Aoudah, 1976), pp. 144-51. (Title translated from the Arabic)

1 Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Quartet Books, 1980). All textual quotations used in this paper are from this edition.


5 Cf. Mona Takieddine-Amyuni, "Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North: An Interpretation, Arab Studies Quarterly, 2 (Winter 1980), 1-18. In this excellent article, particularly remarkable for its rare insights, the author highlights the fact that the "hero" of Season is not Mustafa Sa'eed, but the Narrator himself. See also Joseph John and Yosif Tarawneh, "Quest for Identity: The I-Thou Imbroglio in Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North," Arab Studies Quarterly, 2 (Spring 1986), 161-77 and Ali Abdallah Abbas, "The Strangled Impulse: The Role of the Narrator in Tayeb Salih’s Season" in Sudan Notes and Records, 60 (1979).


7 Cf. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" and "Passage to India" in Leaves of Grass, Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, n.d.). Whitman's phrases, "passage to India," and "passage to more than India" have been altered here to suit the context.


JOSEPH JOHN


11 In citing this phrase from Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" in order to indicate Sa'eed's awareness of mysteries beyond the reach of his "intellect," due cognizance is taken of the utter dissimilarity between the Wordsworthian and Sa'eedian contexts.


13 Conrad, P. 149.

14 Conrad p. 147.


17 Guerard, p. 391.

18 Guerard, P. 390.