

Postcolonial Journeying in Tayeb Salih's Works: Overveiw**Received date:07/01/2025 Accepted date:24/04/2025 Published date:11/06/2025****Asma CHERIET¹, Ramdane MEHIRI ²**¹University of Biskra, Algeria, **Email:** asma.cheriet@univ-biskra.dz² University of Biskra, Algeria,**Email:** ramdane.mehiri@univ-biskra.dz**Abstract:**

This article tackles a brief overview of the postcolonial notion of journeying in the works of the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih through the exploration of the main characters and narrators of stories based in the village called Wad Hamid. This overview is conducted from a postcolonial lense inorder to delineate the workouts of the notion of journeying within the Wad Hamid Cycle and trace back the way it mirrors the Postcolonial condition of Sudan. The present overview revealed that the notion of journeying within the Wad Hamid Cycle does not only take different forms ranging from physical to psychological; but it also reflects the issue of identity clash, and the postcolonial condition of Sudanese society.

Key Words: Journeying, Wad Hamid Cycle Fiction, Identity clash, Mirroring, Postcolonial Condition,

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tayeb Salih has written different types of fiction ranging from short stories to novels. His beginnings as a writer marked the use of foreign countries as setting of his early short stories then a shift towards traditional village life of Wad Hamid. According to Wail Hassan (2003), the collection of short stories titled *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid: Seven Short Stories* can be divided into two groups; the first group includes *Preliminaries*, *A Letter to Eileen*, *So It Was Gentlemen* and *If She Comes*. This group is set outside of Sudan whether in Europe, Egypt or Lebanon. (p. 16) What is noticed about these stories is that their characters are not repeated in any of the subsequent works; they seem to be written only to set the tone of the upcoming stories in a way to prepare the reader psychologically for a broader understanding of an extraordinary experience that the author wants to convey to the world.

The second group of stories comprises *A Date Palm by the Stream*, *A Handful of Dates* and *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid*. This group circumscribes the cycle's overall interest put forward by Hassan (2003) as follows: "spirituality, colonialism, resistance, tradition, modernization, patriarchy and authority." (p32). They also set the tone of the overall cycle by determining all political, social and psychological atmospheres of the collection and of the following stories *Season of Migration to the North*, *Bandersha* (*Daw elBayt* and *Maryoud*), *The Wedding of Zein*, and *The Cypriot Man*. The characters of the second group experience different ways of journeying ranging from internal, psychological journeying to actual physical one. The portrayal of the notion of journeying is inherent in the main characters or the

narrators of the Wad Hamid stories; which are believed to mirror the different phases that constitute postcolonial Sudan. To this end, it is compulsory to have a profound understanding of the surroundings of this cycle as well as its subtleties in order to trace back those conditions that shape it, the way it impacts and gets impacted.

2. Exploration of the Notion of Journeying in the Wad Hamid Cycle Fiction

The Wad Hamid Cycle Fiction is the label given to the aforementioned stories taking place in the fictional village of Wad Hamid and constituting episodes of the same narrative that extends throughout the cycle and develops following its events (Hassan, 2003, X). This cycle witnesses development and change in relation to modernity and identity, a fact that affects characters' development throughout the course of the stories. This cycle also involves the notion of journeying which is a common theme usually represented by African writers in order to portray the displacement and the sense of loss prevailing their communities. It portrays the nostalgic mood they hold and the identity clash they encounter later on which leads to the sense of identity loss that drives the characters to grow and develop an entirely new, different stance towards their societies as well as themselves. For instance, in Tayeb Salih's work *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* the narrator anticipates the imminent departure of the stranger, presenting this expectation with a sense of resigned certainty. He emphasizes the distinctive cultural resilience of the community, highlighting their robust adaptability to challenging

environmental and socioeconomic conditions. Unlike other populations, these individuals have developed a profound psychological accommodation to adversarial circumstances, to the extent that they have not only endured but internalized hardship as a fundamental aspect of their collective identity.

The narrator proceeds to invite the stranger to witness a unique cultural artifact—a repository of communal memory that parallels the metropolitan museum paradigm. This local manifestation of historical preservation represents a source of collective pride and serves as a pivotal point of cultural significance that the community considers essential for visitors to experience and comprehend. (*The Wedding of Zein*, 1999, P.2)

In this case, Tayeb Salih uses the term “depart” which alludes to the movement experienced by the stranger; as if journeying is inevitable for the visitor who came from abroad, and movement and change are mandatory. This view affects the buildup of identity which is altered with time and which mirrors, in a way or another, the socio-political atmosphere of postcolonial communities.

3. Identity Clash and Journeying in the Wad Hamid Cycle Fiction

The stories set in Wad Hamid set the tone of postcolonial communities experiencing identity loss and clash of cultures. For instance, in *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid*, the man who describes the village to the visitor implies that the village was found in the same state it is now “unchanged”. The passage describes a village that exists outside traditional patterns of

settlement development. The community appears to be uniquely detached from its geographical origins, emerging in a fully formed state rather than developing incrementally over time. The narrator challenges the credibility of anyone claiming to know the village's precise history, emphasizing its mysterious and sudden appearance.

Unlike most settlements that gradually expand and change, this village presents a remarkable constancy. Its population remains stable, and its physical landscape appears frozen in time, resisting the typical processes of urban growth and demographic shift. This static nature suggests the village operates outside conventional spatial and temporal frameworks, presenting itself as an anomalous social and geographical entity (*The Wedding of Zein*, 1999, P.14). The description implies a sense of the village as a self-contained and immutable community, distinct from the typical narrative of human settlement progression.

Later on, the old man gives a different description of the village that drives the reader to feel as if villagers are on their way of accepting change brought up by the many attempts to modernize society, in a way to explore community development through a conversation about potential infrastructure changes. He asks about introducing a water pump, agricultural improvements, and a steamer stop in the village of Wad Hamid.

The old man suggests that meaningful progress depends on generational change. He speaks about his son studying in town, hoping the son will not return, and implies that new ideas will come from younger people who think differently from their parents. Instead of seeing tradition and progress as opposing forces, the man believes they can exist together. He argues that there is room for both old and new elements—the doum tree, the



local tomb, the water pump, and the steamer stop can coexist without destroying each other. (*The Wedding of Zein*, 1999, P.19)

The conversation between the old man and the stranger reveals thoughtful perspective on social change. It is not about sudden replacement, but about slow, careful integration of new ideas while respecting existing cultural practices. In a way to say that villagers in the beginning remained the same, unchanged and stable, keeping their lifestyle intact, until some people of their own started moving from inside the village out and vice versa; bringing the experiences of their journeys to their people, affecting them and getting affected also, through altering their way of thinking which led to identity clash that resulted in the acceptance of change eventually.

4. The Narrator of the Cycle's Own Journeys

It is believed that the main narrator of the cycle is the same person on the basis that the different characters and places that determine the cycle are similar in terms of names, characteristics, and sometimes even the course of events that shape the narrative structure of each story. This narrator may sometimes be the protagonist. It is noticed that the majority of the protagonists live in the same traditional space then move to unusual places only to return to their original space; in a form of mirroring the postcolonial feature of the country, where the processes of change, coming back, and identity issue are put forward into question.

The processes of change and coming back that lead to the sense of loss of identity fall under what is called the process of journeying that is explored in most postcolonial works. This idea can be exemplified through the character of Mustapha Said

in *Season of Migration to the North* and the narrator when the latter describes their position of uncertainty as being an illusion (*Season*, 1991, p. 14-15).

Tayeb Salih generally describes his characters in a pivotal position, their life events range from east to west, between their hometown Sudan and Western countries, an in-between situation that mirrors the reality of postcolonial societies. For instance, these characters cross a river or refer to it recurrently in a way that foreshadows the intercultural nature of these people represented by the blend of the river's currents, and sometimes to symbolize the binary role of that river that may encompass two ends, a life giving one, and a deadly one.

As example, the unnamed narrator in the short story *A Handful of Dates*, who is usually referred to as "the boy" and who is believed to be young "Meheimeed", faces a psychological journey where the river represents the milestone of change that the boy experiences throughout the story. In the beginning of the story, the boy feels like the river is part of his soul, something pure and kind that represents the happiest childhood memories he gets when after returning from the mosque and having a quick breakfast he rushes to swim in the river then sit at its bank to let loose his imagination; Salih writes: "The mosque, the river, and the fields - these were the landmarks in our life" (*The Wedding of Zein*, 1999, p.23), he mentions that he used to love the mosque and the river (*The Wedding of Zein*, 1999, p. 23). Here the use of the verb used to is an allusion to the process of change that follows which is a consequence of the psychological journeying the boy experiences.

5. Journeying, a Postcolonial Experience



The exploration of the notion of journeying is an attempt by the author to preach the respect of the resulting new identity imposed by the postcolonial condition of Sudan and is mirrored by the stories set in Wad Hamid. Meheimeed is thought to be the main narrator of the Wad Hamid Cycle where he sometimes happens to be the protagonist also. He grows, evolves, and develops throughout its stories. He begins as a child in *A Handful of Dates*, grows up a young man in *Season of Migration to the North* then an adult in the coming stories like *Bandarshah* and *The Cypriot man*. This development echoes the change of Sudanese society through time and history through mirroring the different phases that mark any postcolonial society; precolonial, colonial and postcolonial phases.

In the *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies* (2001), the editors refer to Meheimeed as the “main narrator” of the Wad Hamid cycle fiction even though in some stories the name of the narrator is never mentioned; where this narrator echoes the postcolonial condition of Sudan. There is also a brief statement that the Wad Hamid stories represent Sudanese history stretching from pre-colonial to post-colonial periods giving reference to the Doum tree of Wad Hamid as a symbol of colonial and postcolonial attempts to modernize the village (398).

Wail Hassan (2003) adds that Salih hybridized his fiction that is considered as a mixture between Arab and European cultures, resulting from the journeys his main characters go through which leads them to blend cultures in order to survive the identity dilemma they face. In the first chapter of his book Hassan identifies Meheimeed as the main narrator of the Wad Hamid cycle adding that this character sheds light on the different

historical events that foreground and affect people's traditional life, mainly colonization (15). For Hassan, Meheimeed is the narrator of *A Handful of Dates*, *Season of Migration to the North*, *Bandar Shah*, and *The Cypriot Man* (33).

In his textual reading of Salih's works, Ba-ali Hifnawi (2018) through his book *Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ wa-al-ibdā' al-kitābī, al-ru'yah al-jamālīyah wa-aṭyāf alwān al-riwāyah* investigates Tayeb Salih's novels in order to highlight Salih's personal vision together with his artistic and aesthetic vision (8). His work focus ranges from colonialism and postcolonialism issues to the issue of migration and the conflict between east and west. It also deals with the semiology of characters and its reflection on the life of Tayeb Salih focusing on the manifestation of the narrator's voices in the stories and texts' layers (9).

As a matter of fact, Hifnawi refers to the teller of *Season of Migration to the North* as the "narrator" without determining his identity; however, he mentions the mirroring of the narrator and the main characters of these stories on Salih's life and on Sudanese different historical phases, mainly colonial and postcolonial periods. As for the concept of mirroring itself, Hifnaoui states that Salih's novels represent his life stages, ideology and artistry; and as example, he claims that Salih's early writings "*The Wedding of Zein*" and "*Bandarshah*" represent his youth (10). He tackles the narrator's voice through Salih's novels without going into details or mentioning that Meheimeed is the main narrator in any of the works he studied. He refers to Mustapha Sa'eed for instance, in *Season of*

Migration to the North, as the voice of Salih sometimes, and to the narrator as his voice other times.

Moreover, Dr. AlOurood (2007) in his article titled *Legendary Sense in Building Novel Character in Al-Tayyib Salih* writes that Tayeb Salih constructs his characters in a way that he comes out in the end with an epic story and epic characters where he constantly repeats time, space and characters in most of his stories. According to him, Salih reflects Sudanese historical changes at all levels and domains through the repetition of the aforementioned elements and through the use of the village named Wad Hamid as a central setting (181).

Dr. Al-Ourood carries on saying that Salih, through his attempt to create mythical characters that echo reality, repeated the same building and structure of character through his different stories but with different names. That is to say, the names of characters and the events surrounding them are different, but the mythical structure is the same, which led the researcher to say that they represent the same character at different levels. He referred mainly to Zein, Mustafa Sa'eed, Bandarshah and Maryoud; he asserted that these characters are like facets of the same coin (184).

However, by no means does Dr. Al-Ourood state that the main characters are the mirror or double of each other, of the narrators of the stories, or of the author himself. He does not also mention the possibility of the sameness of the narrator of Wad Hamid cycle; neither does he give him a name. Dr. Al-Ourood does not also focus on the echoes of Sudanese society through

the different historical stages it went through by means of describing the build up of the main characters or the narrators.

On the other hand, Solveig Soliville Kaktus (2015) in her essay by the title of *Doubles: Myths, Imagery and Selfhood in Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North* argues using Julia Kristeva's thought concerning the issue of "doubleness" that this latter is found at different levels in Tayeb Salih's novel; starting from words to stories themselves. Even the main characters are doubles which represent the duality and binarity that haunt the identity of postcolonial societies (4). Kaktus also states the fact that Tayeb Salih used mirroring through the example of Mustafa Sa'eed and Bint Majzoub. The researcher assumes that these two characters mirror one another at different levels. For instance, they are both accepted in societies with which they share different cultural traits and where they are seen as foreigners. She also gives the example of Sir Arthur Higgins and Wad Rayyes who both share their love for women, and whom she calls "womanizers" (6).

Adding to that, in her Ph.D dissertation with the title of *Non Standard Space: Tayeb Salih, Fantasy, and World Literature*, Sofia Samatar (2013) focused on the idea that Wad Hamid is the setting of most of Tayeb Salih's works. Samatar refers to the main characters of the novel *Season of Migration to the North* as "the narrator" and "Mustafa Sa'eed"; but later on in her dissertation, and while discussing the significance of what she calls "Space" and "Out of space" in postcolonial works, she refers to "Meheimeed" as "the protagonist of *Season of Migration to the North* and *Bandarshah*, who strives to move



from the strange, liminal “outside-of-place” into a community imagined afresh” (30). This movement represents the notion of journeying explored by most postcolonial works. Samatar states that it is believed that the character of Meheimeed (given a name in Bandarshah) is actually the narrator of *Season of Migration to the North* who is often times called the “unnamed narrator”, without concentrating on this point or trying to give evidence and trace back this relationship in the previously mentioned works, or in the works written by Salih before and after.

Moreover, in her discussion of the novella “*The Wedding of Zein*”, Samatar focuses on Sufi elements and mysticism, and deals with change as related to spirituality. These elements represent the psychological journeying most of Salih's main characters go through and which leads them to imagine communities they may fit in and sometimes strive to actually build up those communities on ground through bringing change and bending their societies to accept it. Samatar neither compares the novella to Sudanese postcolonial society's change, nor does she give a name to the narrator of the story. She rather focuses on setting in itself. In the following sections of her dissertation, Samatar mentions that the setting of *Season of Migration to the North* is not given a name but she assumes that it is Wad Hamid village. She thinks that there is a doubling of setting where she writes: “the doubling of place is echoed doubled literary parentage” (88).

In addition, Samatar calls the narrator of *Season of Migration to the North* “the unnamed narrator”, but she points out later on that he has been associated with Meheimeed saying that “the narrator has been identified with Meheimeed, the main character

in Salih's final long work, *Bandarshah* (Hassan 15), but he is not named in *Season*, a form of silence in keeping with his passive and repressed character: he embodied the "unspoken" (90). But she carries on calling him the "unnamed narrator" or simply "the narrator" and in no way does she try to investigate whether they are the same person or not; or to compare their state and development at any levels to the development of Sudanese society.

Nevertheless, Samatar states that Mustafa Sa'eed may act as a double to the narrator, in the form of what she calls an "uncanny double" giving arguments related to their supposedly shared experience and similarity in the events they went through during their life span (94), taking into consideration that they both were given western education and lived sometime in Britain then came back holding western values and looking for their position in the aftermath, mainly the in-between state of those characters and the process of hybridization resulting from the journey they experienced out of that movement.

The notion of journeying itself relays the sense of loss entailed by the postcolonial generation to move from their original space to outer spaces, be it the city in the same country or a completely different country; in this case either Egypt or a European country. Sometimes the movement is spiritual where the characters use their imagination to escape the real world and create a parallel world that accepts their new self.

For instance, Eiman Abbas Hassan El-Nour (2016), in her article *Home is Where the Date Palm is*, states that *The Wedding*

of *Zein* can be considered as an allegory to the Sudanese nation where Sudan is portrayed as a marginalized entity poised to reclaim its strength through its inherent capacity for love and spiritual vitality, supplemented by a few miraculous elements. Additionally, some degree of modernization, exemplified by Zein's transformation in the hospital, is suggested as a contributing factor to this resurgence (p 17). Although, it may be seen that the world of Zein is Salih's psychological journey from the real world to an imagined community so as to reconcile an identity lost.

Another example may be given to illustrate the process of journeying but this time an actual movement from the village to a foreign country and back, the character of Mustafa Saeed in *Season of Migration to the North*. Saeed moves to Britain where he gets a British education and experiences life in the west at length ; however, when he decides to move back to Sudan, he chooses the village of Wad Hamid where no one knows him, lives a quiet life there, and blends in village life to the extent that villagers like him and consider him as one of them through marrying one of their daughters to him.

To put it forward, Eiman Abbas Hassan el-Nour (2016) states that the village demonstrates a remarkable ability to maintain its unity by using its internal resources. It actively resists outside influences, choosing to accept modernization only on its own specific terms. External influences are carefully absorbed into the existing community structure.

He argues that this pattern of selective integration becomes even more pronounced in later contexts. For instance, Mustafa

Sa'eed must suppress or disregard his Western knowledge to integrate into the village. Similarly, Daw El Bait, a non-Muslim outsider, is fully incorporated through a process of cultural transformation—being introduced to Islam, undergoing circumcision, receiving a local identity, acquiring a new name, and being given a wife from within the village community (p 17). The passage illustrates how the village preserves its cultural integrity while strategically managing external interactions and potential changes .

Adding to that, Joseph John and Yosif Tarawneh and Yosif Tawarneh (1986) stress the fact that the psychological journeying experienced by the narrator is an attempt of self-discovery when the narrator realises that he suffers of an identity clash; he is no longer certain where he actually belongs and where he finds himself in an in-between position again resulting from his physical and psychological journeying resulting from his encounter with Mustafa Said and his movement from outside the village in and vice versa. (Quest for Identity, 173)

4. CONCLUSION

In the works of Salih, even after experiencing the West, characters like Saeed or Meheimeed tend to embrace village life traits in a way of coming back from a long journey, where they have to blend in at the same time hold on to some western traits they cannot tear apart, but they are somehow accepted as they are by villagers. In earlier stories there is little sign of embracing modernity, then from one story to another signs of modernity start emerging, and villagers start accepting change as long as it



does not alter their traditional principals. Characters that experience journeying start finding a meeting point and begin determining their status in their societies; and a new potential of social status-quo is established, just to meet obstacles later on that drive them to hold the feeling of non-belongingness and identity loss; a situation that may even push some character to reconsider journeying in a quest to find a stable meeting point somewhere and solve the complicated identity dilemma.

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